

DAILY EXPRESS

Paper Over

by Joseph Braude

Only at **TNR Online**

Post date: 2.2.05

This past Sunday must have been a rough day at the office for editors of the Arab world's pro-government newspapers. How do you spin democratic elections in Iraq when your boss is an authoritarian ruler with a restive population?

First option: Pretend those elections never happened. I scoured this Monday's major Libyan papers online for any evidence that Iraqis voted the day before and found nothing. Well, almost nothing: The Tripoli daily *Al Zahf al Akhdar* buried--under reports of momentous African conferences and ambassador meet-and-greets--a piece titled, *27 People Killed in Iraq*. The article noted that "Police sources in Iraq said that no less than 27 people were killed in attacks targeting voting centers in sundry parts of the country." Voting centers? Whatever for? It seems unwise for a government-run propaganda sheet to print stories that create more questions than they answer--advice apparently heeded by the Sudanese daily *Al Ra'i al Am*, which in contrast to its Libyan counterpart, simply printed nothing about Iraq in its Monday edition.

The other tactic--and the more popular one--takes into account the fact that most Arab majorities have alternative sources of information, making a news blackout on the Iraqi elections infeasible. In these countries, the role of the pro-government press isn't to hide facts, but rather to spin them to the benefit of the ruling regime. Which explains why so many Arab newspapers dwelled on the negative Monday in their pieces on the Iraqi election. In Tunisia, *Al Sabah* led with the headline, *Bloody Election Day: A Giant British Plane Crash, Nine American Soldiers Killed, and Explosions in Voting Centers Leave 36 Iraqis Dead*. The coverage is in keeping with a trope routinely expressed by apologists for the Tunisian regime: that full-blown Arab democracy stands to yield full-blown violence. (For example, in an *Al-Jazeera* debate on democratization two months ago, the Tunisian writer Burhan Bsaiyis asked: "Do you want us to embark on a democratic experiment that could result in 100,000 dead, like in Algeria? Do you want us to allow a freedom of the press that could result in vituperation and calumny that could pit the society against the state and result in violent conflict--civil war?")

Other Arab papers sought to use the Shia-Sunni division in Iraq for maximum political benefit at home. That's why coverage in Syria's establishment daily Teshreen emphasized Sunni disenfranchisement. The paper reported "a great disparity in participation from one region to another; thus while turnout was extremely high in some regions, there was no election process at all in Ramadi, for example, and four municipalities in Mosul were not able to vote because they had not received their ballot boxes." Such coverage encourages readers in Syria, a Sunni majority country ruled by a minority Alawite clique, to associate Iraqi democracy with Sunni marginalization--and to therefore see it as no better than Syria's status quo.

What about in countries where pressure for democratic reform is coming not only from restive populations but also from a powerful patron--the United States? That's the dilemma now confronting Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, America's most populous Arab allies. Their solution? Play up the threat of Iranian regional dominance posed by a Shia victory in Iraq's elections--and, in doing so, appease their Sunni populations and appear concerned for the welfare of their patrons in Washington, all at the same time. Jordan's King Abdullah blazed the trail recently when he warned The Washington Post of a "Shia crescent" running through Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Egypt's semi-official daily Al Ahram echoed this sentiment more softly on Monday, writing in an editorial about "the difficulty of denying the role of regional intervention, direct or indirect, in the electoral process, beginning with the role of regional powers functioning as role models ... and ending in their direct support for Iraqi factions." Egyptian readers understand that "regional power" refers to Iran and that "role model" is an allusion to Khomeini-style governance. (Relations between Iran and Egypt remain strained; it's only been a year since the mullahs took down a street sign in Tehran that had named a busy intersection after the man who killed Anwar Sadat.) Meanwhile, a post-election editorial in the Saudi daily Al Riyadh similarly laments "regional and international interventions" in the Iraqi vote. The piece invites the conclusion that Iraqi democracy is hopelessly marred by the meddling of Iran, Syria, and Al Qaeda.

Finally there is the backhanded congratulatory approach, most visible in the Gulf press. Little oil-rich monarchies staunchly aligned with the U.S. for the most part hailed the Iraqi elections--but not as an historic first in a region of autocrats. They called it instead an historic first step on the long road to real democracy--a road, needless to say, that they all claim to be traversing themselves. Thus Qatar's Gulf Times asserted in an opinion piece that "Qatar is a staunch supporter of democratic ideals and elections." It added that "even though the elections in Iraq may be flawed and controversial, they are an important first step on the road to democracy." Meanwhile, Bahrain's Akhbar al Khaleej led with a front-page report of a congratulatory telegram dispatched by the country's king to his

counterpart, Iraqi Interim President Ghazi Al Yawar. Gulf papers' front pages often print congratulatory telegrams between emirs--birthdays, national holidays, and so on--so the story makes the Iraqi elections appear equally momentous, that is, equally trivial.

If there is a common thread running through all these takes on the news from Iraq, it is that each state mouthpiece treated the election in a way especially tailored to deflect domestic pressure for reform. Then again, cleverly manipulative reporting of the news will only get you so far, which is why some editors also resorted to an old standby: outright invective. The same paper in which Bahrain's king offered warm congratulations to the Iraqi president also included a ferocious diatribe against "the imperialist attack of ideas ... the reinvention of all values, principles, and intellectual foundations which form the foundation of the Arab intellect and Arabic culture." This onslaught, it continued, "is beautified with resplendent ideas and principles of liberal thought about democracy, freedoms, and human rights, but in reality it is merely a deceptive show window for an American imperialist scheme." If it seems hard to reconcile such sentiments with the king's congratulatory note, welcome to the Arab status quo.

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