

On the Eve of the Iraqi Referendum: Two Contrasting Views

By [Jacob Thomas](#)

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On October 14, the eve of the Referendum regarding the Iraqi Constitution, PBS devoted a segment of Jim Lehrer's **NewsHour**, for a discussion of the subject. Four Middle East experts were invited to "debate the referendum's importance to peace and stability in Iraq."

The experts were: Dr. Najmaldin Karim, president of the Washington Kurdish Institute; Juan Cole, professor of history at the University of Michigan; Judith Yaphe, a senior fellow at the National Defense University; and Adeed Dawisha, a professor of political science at Miami University of Ohio. Both Najmaldin Karim and Adeed Dawisha, were born in Iraq, and are now US citizens.

Professor Dawisha dwelt on the importance of the political process. This event, as well as last January elections, involved millions of Iraqis in a process that differed radically from the many "elections" that took place under Saddam.

Professor Yaphe agreed and added, "I think what Iraqis need is the process, which is very important, which leads them to the next election and a more permanent government, then they can work out the differences."

Dr. Najmaldin was very hopeful about the outcome of the referendum. "I believe that you will see that after this referendum in the election in December that you will see greater participation by the Sunnis, and they will come to realize that federalism is actually a way for them to guarantee that they will have self-rule in their area and that there are safeguards as far as getting a share of the national resources."

Ray Suarez of PBS turned to Professor Cole and asked, "What's your view?" His answer was basically at odds with the other three participants. "I'm a pessimist on this process, and I'm a severe critic of this constitution. [It] is full of trapdoors. There will be a provision that says revenues will be shared between the provinces and the federal government. In what way will they be shared? Well, there will be a law passed by subsequent parliament that will determine that."

"So in many instances the people who are voting for this constitution have no idea what exactly it is, the substance that they're voting for. The constitution allows provincial confederations which have claims on resources and perhaps on enormous resources.

And then 20 percent of the population, the Sunni-Arab population, seems to be pretty diehard against this constitution; that's going to weaken its legitimacy."

So much for the opinions of the experts that were consulted by PBS on Friday, 14 October 2005 . As I was eager to read something on this subject that came from the Middle East itself, I turned to the online daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. One op-ed article attracted my attention right away. It dealt with the coming referendum in Iraq and had this hard-hitting headline:

“It’s the Constitution’s Opponents who are the People of Discord”

It was written by *Abdel-Rahman al-Rashed*, a frequent contributor to the newspaper. I would like to quote several parts of his article, and hope that you will notice the stark difference between his tone, and that of *Juan Cole*.

“The “**Opponents**” [Iraqi Sunnis] asked that the Constitution should differentiate between ordinary *Ba’ath* party members and the hardened ones; and they got their wish. In order to make them feel quite comfortable, a constitutional committee was appointed to supervise the application of this decision. And when it came to Kurdistan , they asked specifically for Arabic and Kurdish, rather than the vague expression “two languages.” These are the languages of the region; and they got their wish. They demanded that the Constitution affirm that Iraq is an *Arab* country, and a member of the *Arab League*; so they got their wish. They asked for an affirmation of the unity of Iraq , so the Constitution stipulates that Iraq is “a unitary state,” exactly as they wanted. They requested that the nationality law should insist that an Iraqi is a person whose father **and** mother are Iraqis, not merely as one whose mother is Iraqi; so the law was amended to grant them what they wanted. Furthermore, as they did not appreciate the current composition of the Government and the Parliament, they requested that the remaining disputed articles, be dealt with in the future, and they got their wish.”

“A week before the Referendum, all these demands appeared impossible to grant; but in order to please the “**Opponents**” and help them join the democratic process, their wishes were granted. The question remains: what was the reason behind all the Opponents’ tactics?”

“Actually, they belonged to two different groups. One was an *anarchist faction* whose sole aim was the destruction of the political process, in order to proceed with their destruction of the country. They imagined that they could obtain further concessions by resorting to terrorist acts, and by loudly asking for more concessions, rather than achieve them through the ballot. They obtained those last minute concessions, and thus were emboldened to ask for more.”

“The second group among the **Opposition** belongs to an ignorant faction that is leading its people into more problems. Quite likely, should the members of this group persist in their negative stance; they will lose the opportunity to join the total political process which is actually to their advantage. Being a minority [Sunni Arabs are around 20% of the country’s population,] should their vote on the Referendum be ‘**no**’ they would be spurning the good will of the international community, as well as any United Nations’ protection. These two privileges may not be available to them later on.”

“Until a few days ago, both these opposition groups kept on advancing more conditions for their participation [in the Referendum]; and when these conditions were accepted, they presented new ones. While I may understand the attitude of those who sought changes by resorting to armed conflict, I am very surprised by the naiveté of the other group who kept on manifesting a negative stance vis-à-vis the proposed Constitution. What do they hope to achieve by their persistent refusal to accept this Constitution?”

“To continue on such a hazardous road will lead ultimately to one certain outcome: **namely the inevitable partition of Iraq**. Such a partition would satisfy the needs of some of the southern [Shi’ite] politicians, as well as the majority of the Kurdish politicians. Certainly, it would not benefit the people in the middle [of the country, i.e., the Sunnis]. Why then, do they persist in that direction?”

“Simply stated, it is another manifestation of that Arabs’ predicament, namely, in their **inability to face the political facts as they exist in the real world, so they engage in denial**. A concrete form of that attitude manifested itself in the way Arabs have mishandled the Palestinian cause. We are still paying dearly for such mistakes.”

“Those Sunni Arabs who oppose the Constitution have been deceived by the activities of their supporters [outside Iraq]. So they fool themselves in imagining that they will always be receiving this support in the future; however this is nothing but a grandiose illusion!”

“Today, the **Opposition to the Constitution** is definitely leading Iraq on the road to partition. Should the result of the Referendum be negative, as they hope it will be, there remains only one solution: **partition**. That prospect is dismal, for then they [Iraqi Sunnis living in the middle of the country] would be left to live with a barren desert, an area that is even less favorable than Somalia !”

While the PBS program mentioned above presented four perspectives regarding the Referendum in Iraq, Professor Cole’s negative one attracted my attention. His resume is quite impressive. Besides being professor of modern Middle East and South Asian history at the University of Michigan, he heads the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), and edits the [International Journal of Middle East Studies](#). These positions give him ample opportunity to influence young students who are specializing in the history of the Middle East at Ann Arbor.

On 7 December 2004, Jonathan C. Harris contributed an article for FrontPageMagazine on the ideology of Professor Cole. He entitled it: “Juan Cole, Media – and MESA – Darling.”

“So why have so many media outlets turned to such an obviously perverse source? Seeing half the American public as beneath contempt may explain in part why Cole resonates with liberal media, even as they try in vain to understand the presidential election results. Perhaps also because Cole’s anti-Israel rhetoric is accompanied by anti-Bush tirades.”

“Bush’s domestic policies are ‘Draconian,’ and he ‘has rampaged around the world alienating allies and ignoring vital conflicts.’ Anything Bush does Cole abominates. He dismisses the transfer of sovereignty to Iraqis, for example, as ‘public relations and manipulation of journalists.’ The Bush administration came into the White House ‘obsessed with Iraq ’ while Clinton ‘tried and tried hard” to get Bin Laden.”

I have watched Juan Cole several times on Jim Lehrer’s **NewsHour**, and have come to the conclusion that his ideology is not that different from the one popularized by Edward Said’s “*Orientalism*.” His lectures and his public assessments of Middle Eastern subjects do not reflect the real world of the Middle East . Rather, it is based on a warped historiography whose presuppositional stance is a loathing of the West. This may be considered chic in the ivory towers of some of our prestigious universities. I’d rather get my views of the Middle East in general and of the Iraqi Referendum from a national living in that area of the world, such as the objective and brutally honest, Mr. *Al-Rashed*.