

Is Iraq Back?

SAM PARKER

Iraq is approaching a major point of transition. In January 2010 Iraqis head to the polls for the country's second parliamentary elections under the new constitutional order. Following these elections, the United States plans to draw down its forces from roughly 120,000 troops to 50,000 by August 2010. The challenges after the elections will be for Iraqi leaders to form a government quickly and peaceably and for the Americans and Iraqis to manage the troop drawdown in a way that does not trigger instability.

Enabling these significant milestones is a broader Iraqi transition, one in the making since the Sunni Awakening of 2006 and the US troop surge of 2007. Iraq is evolving from a state in crisis—characterized by a bankrupt political order and engulfed in civil war—to a sovereign nation that has a broadly accepted political process and is an independent actor on the international stage. Although a few foundational issues remain unresolved, many of the major characteristics of the new Iraqi politics have come into view. The role that the new Iraq will play in the region, on the other hand, is still a mostly open question.

POINTS OF PROGRESS

The area in which Iraq has most clearly made progress is in the development of its army. Admittedly for years to come the Iraqi military will remain dependent on American assistance, such as air support. Even so, since the implementation of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in January of this year and the withdrawal of US forces from Iraqi cities in June, the Iraqi government has increasingly taken the lead in security operations.

Even as responsibility has shifted, violence has remained at relatively low levels compared to the post-invasion period of mid-2003. And although questions remain about professionalism and chain of command in the Iraqi army, Sunnis and

Shiites alike now view the military as a largely neutral force, and one loyal to the state. (Kurds in the north, of course, are still uneasy about a central government that is strong militarily.) The army's development has played a key role in legitimizing and buttressing the formerly bankrupt political process.

Political progress, meanwhile, has been just as profound in some ways as the progress in security. Iraqi Sunnis in 2006 made the calculation that participating in the new political order was better than continuing to fight, eventually losing, and then becoming subjects of a hostile central government. This calculation, combined with successful US-Iraqi security operations against the hardest-core antigovernment militants (Sunni and Shiite alike), has resulted in a political process that nearly all Iraqis accept as the forum in which questions of power and the distribution of resources will be resolved.

The free, fair, and broadly contested provincial elections of January 2009 cemented this trend. The upcoming national elections will likely do the same. An October 25 bomb attack that targeted government buildings in Baghdad and killed at least 160 people demonstrated that terrorists can still wreak havoc. But barring an even bigger unforeseen shock to the system, it is hard to see the new order coming apart and Iraqi actors resorting to violence on a wide scale to achieve their aims.

THE BAD AND UGLY

Beyond this significant shift, however, the political picture in Iraq is not pretty. Iraqi politics is halting, messy, and factionalized in ways that seem unlikely to change any time soon. Moreover, aside from the security sector, the government has not delivered for the people. Iraq remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world and suffers from weak legal and administrative institutions.

Iraq's educated middle class has mostly fled the country, and the youngest generation knows

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little but conflict, misery, and isolation. The Iraqi government is inconsistent at best in its respect for civil rights and due process. Civil society is nascent but weak. Poverty is endemic. These problems will likely be as intractable and long-term in Iraq as they are in other third world countries.

Sectarian political mobilization of a certain kind has ebbed—Iraqis are fed up with politicians exploiting Islam for political gain, and politicians have responded with an emphasis on bread-and-butter concerns. Yet sectarian identity remains elemental in Iraqi politics, in a way that is more communitarian than religious. The important political blocs are still uniformly Kurdish, Sunni, or Shiite. Likewise, Iraqis tend to vote only within their own group.

Any power sharing among these blocs, whether it takes the form of government formation or the distribution of contracts and jobs, amounts to a de facto confessional arrangement. Although the Sunni-Shiite divide may not again find violent expression, it will nonetheless continue for the foreseeable future to be an organizing principle of the country's politics.

THE KURDISH PROBLEM

As conflict has diminished and the state has grown stronger, the dispute over territory and oil between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government has worsened proportionally. But the conflict is not intractable. Kurdish leaders recognize their long-term dependence on Baghdad. The 17 percent of the federal budget that the KRG receives constitutes the vast majority of its income. The KRG is landlocked and surrounded by states hostile to its independence. And the United States has made it plain that it has no interest in maintaining a long-term presence in Kurdistan.

At the same time, while Arabs may reject Kurdish territorial claims (especially over the oil-rich Kirkuk province) and object to some of the KRG's more maximalist positions on oil sector management, few are committed to denying Kurds the right mostly to manage their affairs, per the Iraqi constitution.

Ample middle ground thus exists for the two sides to make a deal. The key window for such a deal will be after the January elections, when a new government is in place and while Americans are still in Iraq in sufficient numbers to act as

peacekeepers and mediators. But even if a deal were not made before the United States withdraws, it is unlikely that the Arab-Kurd conflict would descend into open war, which neither side sees as in its interest. More likely is low-level, sporadic violence and continued local-level tensions that give third party militant groups like Al Qaeda space to operate. Rather than instability, the more strategically critical consequence of failing to make a deal would be political stagnation. Arab-Kurd problems would sap the focus and attention of Iraqi leaders, and the Kurds would continue to play an obstructionist role from their position in the central government. All of this would impede efforts to improve governance and promote economic development.

WHO'S YOUR ALLY?

While internal political trends in Iraq have begun to take their long-term shape, Iraq's regional role is as yet undefined. This is because the new Iraq is only now emerging as a sovereign international actor, since Iraqis have spent most of the past six years focused on internal struggles for power. Nonetheless, a few broad contours are becoming clear.

Since 2003, Iraq has been a source of instability in the region primarily on account of its weakness. It has exported sectarianism, extremism, refugees, and other social ills. As the Iraqi state returns, so do old concerns among the country's neighbors about a bellicose Iraq with a strong military—that is, an Iraq that is a source of instability because it is too strong. This threat will be mitigated by Iraq's continuing internal divisions, its limited governmental competence, and a restraining role played by the United States.

Another key factor affecting the role that Iraq will play in the region is the proven endurance of Iraqi nationalism among Shiites. Although many of the Shiite leaders once lived in exile in Iran, now that they are in power, most have embraced the idea—which they formerly rejected—of a strong, independent Iraqi state. Iranian support for Iraqi militants in 2007–2008 inspired a backlash among the Shiite leaders and provoked them to take a harder anti-Iranian line than they otherwise might have.

Iraqi leaders are aware of their dependence on outside support for the medium term, par-

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ticularly when it comes to security and economics. However, they intend to seek support from the United States and other Western countries and use it to balance Iranian influence. Heavy Iranian support for Iraq would come with strings attached and would cause innumerable domestic and international political headaches. Iran will still play a larger role in Iraq than it did before 2003, but not the dominant one that many have feared.

A TURN TOWARD THE WEST

The biggest change on the regional level is the long-term US-Iraq alliance. Although some anti-American posturing by Iraqi leaders accompanied the signing of the SOFA, those same Iraqi leaders also signed a “Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation,” a document that outlines the economic, cultural, diplomatic, and security components of “long-term” bilateral ties. And many Iraqi leaders,

including Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, have indicated their openness to extending the US military presence beyond the SOFA’s deadline of December 31, 2011.

Such a close relationship will be problematic for Iraqi leaders, given the country’s history and the region’s political dynamics. The temptation will always exist for Iraqi leaders and regional actors to whip up anti-American sentiment to achieve specific aims. Indeed, such pressures may eventually prove the undoing of the US-Iraq alliance, especially as Iraq grows more independent.

Nonetheless, the Iraqi parliament’s recent passage of a naval support agreement with the British government—Iraq’s former colonial occupier—is a sign of Iraq’s turn toward the West. Should Iraq and the United States succeed in maintaining a strong relationship, the potential impact on the regional balance of power and on a range of US interests in the region—from counterterrorism to oil to Israel—could be profound. ■