



Lebanonization of Iraq

ON AUGUST 31, THE US MILITARY FORMALLY ENDED its combat operations in Iraq, and its 50,000 remaining troops will assume a training and advisory role for the Iraqi army. While the US presence will remain formidable for the time being and include counter-insurgency activities, President Barack Obama has pledged to withdraw all US forces by the end of 2011 (although a considerable civilian and security contractor presence will undoubtedly remain).

Iraq is clearly entering a new and uncertain phase in which a mix of internal and regional geopolitical factors promise to produce a bewildering and volatile brew, one which bears more than a passing resemblance to Lebanon.

To be sure, Lebanon and Iraq were traditionally at opposite ends of the power quotient in Arab politics, with Lebanon seeking only to survive in a rough neighborhood, while ruling elites in Baghdad sought to carve out a leading regional role for their country. From the moment of its creation by Great Britain after World War I, Iraq was deemed to have many of the essential features necessary for success: size, water, fertile land, oil, and a legacy of urban civilization and empire.

However, Iraq's communal fractiousness – Sunni Arab, Shi'ite Arab, Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrian and other Christians – and tribal underpinnings made the forging of a modern state with durable political legitimacy a hopelessly impossible task.

Only strong men could maintain a semblance of order – and at great cost in lives and resources. In this regard, Saddam Hussein's 24 years of totalitarian rule were a logical, if not inevitable, outcome of the entire Iraqi state-building experience.

America's intended "gift" to the people of Iraq in 2003 was a brand new democratic political system, one which would mark a fundamental departure from Iraqi history, enable the building of a shared Iraqi citizenship and serve as a model for Iraq's neighbors. In doing so, the US would strengthen its own geopolitical and economic interests.

The outcome, of course, has been far different. The recent week-long wave of bombing attacks across Iraq, which killed more than 150 people, mostly police recruits, sent a clear message that the Sunni insurgency, partly fueled by al-Qaeda affiliates, could strike at will against nascent Iraqi state institutions. Reliable estimates of civilian fatalities from violence since the Americans overthrew Hussein place the number at approximately 100,000, with the monthly average during the last 18 months declining to approximately 300, after having spiked at 2,100 in 2007.

Were the Iraqi political elites making serious progress in fashioning a viable social contract and building legitimate state institutions, then the body counts, however sobering, could be interpreted as evidence of the insurgency's ultimate failure. However, by all accounts, including their own, Iraqi politicians have been concerned primarily with their own personal interests and those of their particular constituencies – at the expense of any overarching Iraqi national interest. As a result, the processes of institution-building which were established under American



guidance – rule of law under a new constitution, multi-party parliamentary elections, reconstituted and reliable security forces, accountable and transparent government ministries – have produced mixed results at best.

Five months after Iraq's parliamentary elections, the country remains without a new government, as neither the current prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, nor his rival, former prime minister Iyad Allawi, have been able to muster the majority that would confirm them in power. Up to now, all efforts to broker a power-sharing compromise, including those by US Vice President Joseph Biden, have come up empty-handed.

Hussein's former foreign minister, Tariq Aziz (now in an Iraqi jail), was recently quoted as saying that in its eagerness to get out of Iraq, the US was "leaving it to the wolves." As Aziz is well aware, politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and all of Iraq's neighbors are paying close attention to Iraqi developments in this time of transition.

Of course, the main geopolitical beneficiary of the US's efforts to remake Iraq has been, ironically, neighboring Iran. Tehran's patronage over a portion of the Iraqi Shi'ite community and political leadership resembles Syria's domination of the Lebanese political system.

Another prime beneficiary, from a very different direction, has been the Iraqi Kurds, the US's most reliable ally in Mesopotamia, who have systematically fashioned a quasi-independent entity in northern Iraq and are on the verge of fulfilling a long-held dream of independence. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have viewed with horror the rise of Shi'ite-dominated and Iranian-influenced Iraq, with a separatist Kurdish entity to boot; Turkey is extremely concerned about growing Kurdish confidence and the impact it will have on its own Kurdish community, as is Syria.

The picture, then, as the US draws down its forces and moves more into the background, is Lebanon writ large: a fractured polity with a weak central government and armed militias in which competing elites jostle for advantage without the ability to gain a decisive victory, while neighboring countries maneuver through proxies to influence Iraqi affairs and limit the gains of their regional rivals.

Perhaps this muddled picture, while hardly portending a well-functioning Iraqi state, will in the long run actually promote greater stability in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin than the US's grandiose adventure. ●

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