



IRAQ'S FUTURE: A CONCEPT PAPER

Patrick Clawson*

This article is part of a paper originally written for a project and conference on "Stability, Crises, and Democratization: The Arab World's Direction and the European Interests," co-sponsored by the GLORIA Center and The Military Centre for Strategic Studies (CeMiSS) of Italy.

Iraq is most likely to see a protracted internal war and economic difficulties for years to come. A mildly optimistic scenario is possible but so are some outcomes that would be destabilizing for the region, unpleasant for Iraq, and detrimental for U.S. interests.

Iraq's difficulties are disappointing to the Iraqi people, who so hoped that the American invasion would at least mean a return to peace after 23 years of war and near-war. The violent insurgency now raging is not likely to end any time soon; neither the government nor the insurgents are strong enough to win a decisive victory. Instead, the war is likely to continue for some years, and—especially if the forces behind the current government prevail—the fighting is likely to phase down rather than to end abruptly.

The interesting question to ask is what will be the situation five to ten years from now, for that is a time frame long enough that one or the other side could have become strong enough to prevail. It is possible that by then, modest democratic forces will have prevailed. Yet the most likely future is that Iraq will remain a weak and fragile society challenged by an insurgency. However, it is also possible that an Islamist state will emerge. Also, there is always the outside chance Iraq will split apart.

A MODERATELY DEMOCRATIC

REGIME

It is inevitable that Iraq will remain a weak and fragile society well past 2015. Saddam's twenty-year war—first with Iran, then with the West—and his brutal rule destroyed the country's human infrastructure as well as its physical infrastructure. As a result, there simply is not the human capital with which to build well-functioning ministries any time soon. The widespread pre-2003 view—which this author accepted, as did many experts on Iraq—that Iraq had a well-educated middle class that could provide the technocracy to make a post-Saddam government run well turned out to be badly out of date. The institutions of society will have to be slowly built up, with all the problems encountered in other barely functioning countries. The international community's experience with weak and fragile societies, from Haiti to Congo to Belarus and Central Asia, is that they generally function poorly and rarely advance quickly.

While Iraq will remain a troubled society for the next decade, if things go well, it could have a reasonably stable government able to provide

adequate security throughout all but isolated pockets of the country. That said, even if all goes well, it is unlikely the insurgency will come to a dramatic end. Unsuccessful insurgencies usually peter out rather than ending in some grand surrender ceremony. It seems likely that the Iraqi insurgency will continue to be a factor in the "Sunni triangle" long after the rest of the country is quite peaceful. Indeed, already, the security situation in the Kurdish north is relatively normal, and in the south, political violence is mostly a matter of clashes with and among militias, rather than insurgent attacks on coalition forces or on the new Iraqi government. It is quite possible that the south will come to look like the Kurdish north, with a reasonable security situation guaranteed by warlord-run governments.

In order to achieve a reasonably peaceful situation in nearly all of the country, Iraq would have to have well-functioning security forces. Iraq seems on track to having rather effective and numerous light infantry units by the 2007-08 time frame. With the same time scale, it is possible that Iraq will have a relatively well-functioning constabulary force, rather like the gendarmeries of Italy, France, and Spain—meaning, units that combine some aspects of both the police and the military. Note that would leave Iraq well short of having a fully functioning military or police: it would only have light infantry forces, rather than the full range of military capabilities, and it would only have a gendarmerie rather than a comprehensive police force. The realistic time frame for a fully functioning army and police is more likely 2009-10 than 2007. It will take some years to bring up

to speed armored and artillery units, intelligence services, and the full range of logistical and support services essential for a modern military, such as transportation, supply, and medical services, and even then, Iraq will not have much of an air force. An unappreciated facet of the current Iraq conflict is how U.S. domination of the air puts the insurgents on the defensive, unable to operate in numbers for more than brief intervals. It would be extraordinarily optimistic to think that by 2010 Iraq would have an air force capable of close air support operations; indeed, it seems unlikely Iraq will have such a force by 2015. An essential part of this scenario of a relatively stable Iraq, therefore, is that the United States continues to provide important security support, especially air cover but also including intensive training and in-the-field advice, for years to come.

The key test for these security forces will be whether they are effective enough to convince Sunni Arabs that they cannot take power, and that, therefore, they must accommodate to the new realities by abandoning the insurgents (with whom the Sunni Arabs still sympathize). So long as the U.S.-led coalition forces are seen to be providing the real muscle, insurgents are likely to hold on to the belief that if only they outwait the United States, they will one day achieve victory. Only if the insurgents see that their Iraqi opponents are strong enough to defeat the insurgency on their own are the insurgents as a whole likely to reconcile themselves to the bitter reality that they cannot win power through force of arms.

Simultaneous with a better security situation,

there would have to be broader participation in the new political arrangements if Iraq is to become a modest success. There would almost certainly be a considerable role for Islam in public life, and the Kurdish region would retain a very large degree of autonomy. Also important will be how much Iraqi political forces are prepared to compromise with each other. To be sure, even under the best circumstances, in the next decade Iraq will have more than imperfectly democratic institutions. Iraq—indeed, the entire region—has little experience with compromise, power-sharing, respect for minority rights, and all the other elements necessary to make a democratic government work. The concept of a loyal opposition which alternates in power with the current ruling parties has not been part of the Iraqis' political experience; consider how the Kurds since 1991 have carefully crafted power-sharing arrangements between their two main parties rather than accepting that one of the parties might rule and the other be a loyal opposition.

Even in this optimistic case, the economy is one problem that will continue to plague Iraq. Even if the security situation were to sharply improve in the near future, continuing deadlocks and long delays in making decisions have been the norm in modern Iraqi history—its oil potential has several times been held up by decades-long bitter disputes, and its oil income has often accumulated unspent as the government was unable to mobilize itself to carry out development projects. It is hard to see the new Iraqi government being able to agree any time soon on how to develop the country's oil potential; it is almost certain to be sharp disagreement about what should be the role of the international oil

companies. Nor is the new Iraqi government likely to make effective use of the resources available to it; there remains much support among the elite for the state-run, inwardly-oriented economic policies so popular in the 1970s and so strongly implemented by Saddam. Consider how difficult it has been for the new Iraqi government to begin phasing out the subsidies which eat up more than half of GDP (the fuel subsidy alone is 30 percent of GDP). Furthermore, at a time when Iraq has pressing investment needs, the government accumulated more than \$6 billion in foreign exchange reserves in 2004, rather than investing the money in reconstruction projects.

Such an Iraq is highly likely to be inwardly focused rather than seeking to be a major actor on the regional stage. That is, Iraq would not be a major inter-Arab player, active in shaping an Arab consensus on regional or world issues. For decades pan-Arabism has been a major theme for Iraqi governments and intellectuals, and the Sunni-dominated governments saw fellow Sunni-dominated Arab governments as their natural point of reference. All of that would change under a more democratic Iraq emerging from the long wars (which in many ways date back to the start of the Kurdish insurgency in 1961). The natural impulse of the Kurds will be to look at Kurdish communities in Turkey and Iran as well as Syria as their point of reference, while the Shi'a are likely to place high priority on good relations with Iran. Neither of these two communities are likely to place much emphasis on good relations with Arab governments all but one (Lebanon) dominated by Sunnis.

That said, under this scenario of improved security and modest success for the new

institutions, Iraq could provide an impetus for democratic reform. If Iraq with all its problems is able to conduct truly contested elections and to develop a culture of democracy—rule of law, informed debate about policies, accountability, and transparency—that will influence Arab opinion. The same flourishing of regional media, which so worked to inflame anti-American sentiment earlier this decade, will spread the news of the debates inside Iraq. The obvious question which elites and ordinary people alike will pose will be: If Iraq can do that, why cannot we?

There are decent prospects for this scenario, but it would be overly optimistic to say it is the most likely. More probable is that some aspects of this scenario will be achieved but not all of it.

THE STATUS QUO: WEAK AND FRAGILE STATE CHALLENGED BY INSURGENCY

The most likely scenario for Iraq over the next decade is the violent insurgency will persist even as the new government gains strength. The insurgency has sunk deep roots in the Sunni Arab community. It would be optimistic to predict that violence will have petered out by 2010, and Sunni/jihadist/Ba'thist violence—at least at a low level—could well become a persistent feature of the Iraqi landscape, lasting past 2015.

Given the fundamental disagreements among the different communities about such basic issues as the role of religion in public life and the relative distribution of power between central and regional government, the new political institutions will face serious challenges to their very

legitimacy. These issues are after all so basic that differences about them are not easy to paper over. It is to be expected that those who believe the government should act in accordance with God's laws as they understand them will regard as illegitimate a government which does not meet the religious test they set. Similarly, those who believe that a government must be based on universal principles and the consent of the governed may well reject the legitimacy of a government based on one sect's religious principles. Likewise, differences about the role of the central state compared to that of regional governments can be so basic as to tear apart a country. It would be optimistic to predict that within a decade, a durable compromise will have been found for both of these profoundly basic issues—the role of religion in public life and the distribution of power between central and regional governments. After all, it took the United States at least sixty years, from the Compromise of 1820 to the end of Reconstruction, punctuated by a bitter civil war, to settle just one of those issues (namely, the relative powers of the federal and state governments). For Iraq, the most likely scenario is that much of the Arab Sunni community continues to reject the legitimacy of a government which does not fit their image of Iraq as a leader of the Arab nation—an image which requires a strong unitary state in which Shi'a principles are subordinate to some mixture of pan-Arabism and Sunni Islamism.

These disagreements about basic principles could contribute to a scenario in which the insurgency remains an active threat. The main factors which would lead to the insurgency

remaining strong would be:

* Political deadlock in the new institutions. The political representatives of each community may well resist compromise. The Sunni community continues to cling to unrealistic expectations that they will direct the country; indeed, many Sunnis seem to sincerely believe that Arab Sunnis are as numerous as Shiites—which shows how ignorant about the realities of their own country Saddam kept the Iraqis. Kurdish popular sentiment favors independence, and only grudgingly accepts the realpolitik logic of the Kurdish leadership which dictates that autonomy within a federal Iraq is the best Kurdish defense against blockade or attack by powerful and hostile neighboring states. It would not take much to push the Kurdish region to effectively cut itself off from the rest of Iraq, barely participating in federal institutions. Without the Kurds, Iraqi politics would be reduced to two very unequal players. In that situation, those in the Shi'a community who wish to impose Shi'a sensibilities on the entire country would be strengthened. Yet the Sunni community could see little prospect for themselves within democratic politics, reinforcing the conviction that violence is the only way to advance their interests.

* Better political sense by the insurgents. To date, the insurgents have been remarkably ineffective at developing a political vision. The insurgents have presented themselves as being sectarian (Sunni) rather than religious (Islamic) and as being communitarian (Arab Sunni) rather than nationalistic (Iraqi). While an appeal to 20 percent of the population is sufficient to create a strong insurgency, targeting the other 80 percent of the population is not a smart strategy for winning a war. Their political ineptness—

especially their inability to forge an alliance with the strong radical anti-Western Shi'a religious sentiment into which Muqtada Sadr taps—is what dooms the insurgency to probable defeat. The differences among the insurgents between the nationalist-cum-Sunni-communitarian wing (the neo-Ba'th, so to speak) and the jihadist wing seem to be growing. The former group supports participating in the new political institutions at the same time as fighting, while the latter group rejects any cooperation with the new political institutions. In short, the insurgents are not likely to succeed in no small part because of their own weaknesses. Their chances would improve sharply if they could overcome their differences, better articulate their political strategy, and appeal to radical Shi'a.

* Politicized and not particularly competent Iraqi security services. The new army could face continuing problems forming a communally-integrated, well-functioning fighting force; it would in practice be a Shi'a-dominated, Kurdish-assisted occupation army in the Sunni regions. The police force is particularly likely to face a problem of politicization. By the very nature of their job, police have to live in the local community, rather than in army-style garrisons, which makes them and their families exceptionally vulnerable to pressure from local thugs. In addition, the police have to develop a dense network of interrelationships with local residents if they are to protect locals from rapes and robberies. All this makes the police subject to pressure from local warlords. The experience from weak and fragile societies around the world is that the police are likely to fall under the influence of local power figures. It would be optimistic to think that Iraq is going to escape this

pattern.

* Lukewarm international support. If the new Iraqi government has limited international legitimacy, that could encourage the insurgents. More important, however, is how much support they get from Syria and Iran. If those two governments continue to allow arms and militants to flow across their territory into Iraq, that will make a major contribution to the insurgency's prospects. Presumably the main reasons which could lead Syria and Iran to allow such support for the insurgents would be the perception that they would pay little price to do so and furthermore that this could be a good way to pressure the United States to lay off them.

*Wavering U.S. support. If insurgents believe that they can outlast the U.S. commitment, they will have an incentive to continue, even if they lay low so long as the U.S. forces remain. Similarly, if politicians in the new Iraqi institutions are uncertain about continuing U.S. support until the new security forces can function on their own, those politicians may hedge their bets by compromising with insurgent sympathizers. A particularly sensitive issue here is how much will the next U.S. president be committed to aiding the Iraqi security services. As explained above, Iraq will almost certainly need substantial U.S. air support after George W. Bush leaves office in January 2009. The next U.S. president will have little incentive to continue what is likely to be an unpopular war; after all, success in that war will rebound to the glory of his predecessor while failure would also be ascribed to Bush rather than to his successor. There will be a considerable temptation to abandon the effort,

even if the results for the new Iraq are catastrophic.

In this scenario of continuing insurgency, the central region of Iraq is likely to suffer considerably relative to the rest of the country. Baghdad could be a central battleground between the insurgency and the government, depriving Iraq of stability at the vital center for its politics and economy. Meanwhile, the Kurdish north would likely become significantly more prosperous and stable than the rest of the country. This would only feed separatist sentiment there as well as feeding Kurdish pride across the region, with the minorities in Iran, Syria, and Turkey being more likely to want autonomy for themselves. At the same time, the southern part of Iraq may also do much better than the center, reversing the trend of recent decades and reinforcing the Sunni Arab sense of grievance. As the north and the south do better relative to the center, Baghdad's power will weaken. That will be true not only in politics but in every sphere of society. For instance, trading networks centered on Basra, Irbil, and Sulaimaniyeh will weaken the central role of Baghdad. Gradually, the glue holding Iraq together will become weaker. While Iraq would not in this scenario break up, the country would become weak relative to the regions—less a centralized state a la Saudi Arabia and more a federation a la UAE.

Furthermore, if the insurgency remains active, Iraq will be a running challenge to regional stability. At the least, Iraq's fragility will remain a cause of concern for neighbors, worried that the country will split up or descend into chaos. In

addition, it is distinctly possible that the insurgency will continue to attract young radicals from throughout the region to come to Iraq, gaining expertise in jihad and making contacts useful for causing problems at home.

A long-lasting, high-intensity insurgency would leave Iraq in an even sorer state than it is today. Saddam's twenty-year war—eight years against Iran, twelve years against the U.S.-led coalition—left the country's human and physical infrastructure in poor state. Another decade of war will wear down much of what is left of both those infrastructures. Today, the weak human infrastructure forces Iraqis to rely on elemental ethno-religious communities for their security. Further damage could lead to wide-scale revenge-taking across communal lines—that is, with blood-letting which makes the current isolated revenge deaths look minor. If, as seems most likely, the Shi'a's greater numbers and the arms and training they get from the Americans make them the victors, their wrath could be terrible: they nurse deep historical grudges, and they would have the demographic weight. Sunni Iraqis might flee the country in large numbers. Even if that did not occur, deep internal hatreds could become the central factor in the country's politics for decades if not generations.

ISLAMIST TAKEOVER

There are two sharply different ways in which Islamists could effectively take over power in Iraq: victory by the insurgency, or Islamist takeover of the new government institutions.

Insurgent Victory

An insurgent victory would entail a collapse of the new government institutions, an abandonment of the new constitution and of free elections, and an end to the close ties with the United States. This is a highly unlikely scenario unless the insurgents were to sharply change their hostility towards the Shi'a community, which seems implausible. In fact, the logic of political developments in Iraq is driving Shi'a and Sunni further apart. At first, anti-Americanism brought the extremists in both camps together; in March/April 2004, there was tacit cooperation between radical elements in the two communities in the simultaneous uprisings in Fallujah and Najaf. Yet as the Shi'a community took more and more ownership over government institutions including the security forces—allowing Shi'a extremists to play an increasing role in the new security forces—and as the insurgency fought the new Iraqi government more and more directly, the relationship between Sunni and Shi'a extremists became strained at best. The February 2006 bombing of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra was a telling moment, with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army leading vicious attacks on Sunni mosques in response to the audacious destruction of one of the holiest Shi'a shrines. Perhaps the Sunni insurgency could have achieved victory over Shi'a forces had the U.S.-led coalition withdrawn in 2004, but by 2006, the largely Shi'a new Iraqi security services and the increasingly organized Shi'a militias have become powerful enough that a clear insurgent victory looks chancy even in the unlikely event of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal. In the more likely scenario of continued substantial U.S. presence through 2008—with a gradual reduction of ground combat forces, but continued strong

involvement of U.S. trainers, logistic forces, and air support—the Iraqi security forces should be in a good position to ensure that even if the next U.S. president ends U.S. involvement, the Shi'a south could defend itself against an insurgent victory. In other words, the best the insurgents could hope for is probably to control central Iraq, not the whole country.

If despite all the obstacles, the insurgents were to control all of Iraq, the vast bulk of the victorious forces would be Sunni Arabs rather than foreign jihadists. They would need to have a ruling ideology. Even if they incorporate important elements of the Ba'th approach such as leftist economic policies and anti-imperialist and pan-Arabist rhetoric, the new authorities would almost certainly implement a largely Islamist agenda, claiming they were doing God's work. They would face many barriers putting such an agenda into effect. Most Kurds would bitterly resist what they would see as an Arabization campaign under the cover of Islamism. Perhaps the new authorities would allow a defacto Kurdish autonomy, as Saddam did. However, that would leave the problem of Shi'a attitudes. It would not be easy for a Ba'thist/jihadist/Sunni extremist government to work with radically anti-Western Shi'a Islamists of the Muqtada Sadr sort, and even harder for it to work with the Shi'a clerical leadership. In brief, the new authorities would be very busy at home, which would limit the attention they could devote to foreign affairs.

That said, a Ba'thist/jihadist/Sunni extremist government would likely be a base for global Islamism. Inevitably, an insurgent victory would

encourage radical Islamist forces in the Gulf monarchies and the Arab republics. The insurgents would then face great domestic pressure to support radical Islamists elsewhere. After all, victory in Iraq would create such self-confidence in the Islamist cause that the mood would be that the tides of history are with them. At least initially, ideology is likely to trump interests of state, with strong support being provided to terrorists who can present themselves as liberation fighters and clandestine support being given to anti-Western terrorists generally. Perhaps over time the new government might evolve to being more cautious in the immediate neighborhood while more supportive of radicalism further away—which has been the general pattern of the Iranian Revolution—but the initial phase would be particularly destabilizing for the region.

Islamist Takeover of the New Government Institutions.

A more likely route to an Islamist takeover would be for radical Shi'a forces to infiltrate and then dominate the new Iraqi institutions. Their triumph would convert the democratic structure of the new institutions into empty shells. This scenario is most likely under two circumstances. The first would be substantial, well-orchestrated support from Iran. The second and more difficult would be if Muqtada Sadr is able to press the senior clergy—the *hawza*—into silent acquiescence to a takeover by political activist forces claiming to act in the name of Islam. This may not be easy, given the evident strong

resentment by the hawza towards what they see as a charlatan lacking the necessary religious credentials to lead the community.

Were Islamists to takeover the new institutions, they would face serious problems in relations with Kurds and Sunni Arabs. It is hard to see how the Kurds could be reconciled to a government which is not only Islamist but Shi'a to boot. Indeed, the Islamist takeover would be most likely to succeed if it allowed the Kurds great autonomy to the point of de facto independence. More complicated would be relations with Sunni radicals. While there would be some basis for cooperation on an anti-American agenda, still the souring of Sunni-Shi'a relations evident in the February 2006 bombing of the Askiriya Shrine suggests that the two groups would have grave difficulties working together. Sorting out these domestic problems could absorb much of the attention of a new government.

As so many in the global jihadist movement are suspicious of—or hostile to—Shi'ism, a Shi'a Islamist state would face serious problems positioning itself as a leader of that movement. To be sure, a Shi'a Islamist Iraq would provide support for radical Islamists throughout the Muslim world, but that support is not likely to be as massive or as central to the self-identity of the new Iraqi state as would be the case for a Sunni Islamist Iraq.

Indeed, the principal destabilizing impact of a Shi'a Islamist state might not be its support for global jihadists, but its encouragement to extreme elements in Shi'a Arab communities throughout the Arab Gulf states. Almost certainly there would be much nervousness on this score among the authorities in at least Bahrain, Kuwait, and

Saudi Arabia. This could cause serious tension in the region, with much ill-will directed at the United States for having brought about this state of affairs.

A Shi'a Islamic Iraq would have complex relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian leaders simply assume that they would be the big brother, that their Supreme Leader would be the de facto ultimate authority for victorious Iraqi Shi'a Islamists—and this attitude would only be reinforced by what would have been considerable Iranian assistance for the victorious Iraqi Shi'a forces. This Iranian attitude is not likely to sit well with the Iraqi Shi'a. While the latter have learned from the many years of persecution that they need every friend they can get—and so they are not likely to openly antagonize Iran—they have no desire to exchange one overlord (Iraqi Sunnis) for another (Iranian Shi'a). Indeed, the more secure from domestic and foreign enemies an Iraqi Shi'a Islamist state feels, the more distant it is likely to be from Iran.

A DIVIDED IRAQ

Some of the scenarios above would have a less powerful central government in Iraq. At the extreme, central authority could largely collapse. That would leave political power in Iraq somewhat similar to medieval France or the Holy Roman Empire, in which local lords rule while nominally respecting the power of the monarch with whom in fact they are at times at war. However, another possibility is that Iraq would formally split apart.

Scenarios for Iraq Splitting Up

One possibility would be for the Kurds to decide to establish their own state. The main determinant of whether the Kurds declare independence will not be Kurdish public opinion but instead the attitude of the world community. The Kurds are unlikely to declare independence unless they secure international acquiescence, however reluctantly given, that an independent Kurdistan has to be accepted. Probably the key international actor is the European Union, in that its stance could drive the decisions of a Turkey eager to join the EU. In addition, the European stance would be a major factor in shaping Syrian and Iranian reaction, in that those governments continue to rely on European reluctance to join with an American program to change their regimes. The forces which would drive the world community to acquiesce to an independent Kurdistan are the same as those which would lead the Kurds to want to split off, namely, continuing chaos in the rest of Iraq and growing Islamic religious influence over public policy there.

In the event that the world community acquiesces to a Kurdish decision to split off, the rest of Iraq would be in little position to object. Almost certainly the division would be messy; rather than the Czech-Slovak divorce, the division would resemble more Slovenia leaving Yugoslavia—possibly including the same sort of short war disastrous for the central government, but certainly including the lengthy and acrimonious wrangling about how to divide the assets and debts of the central government.

A second and less likely case for formal division of Iraq would be if the insurgency is

increasingly powerful in the Sunni triangle, and so the Shi'a and the Kurds together decide to split the country so that each of them can have political power in their area. Presumably SCIRI's last-minute push for constitutional provisions allowing for a nine-province autonomous region were designed to preserve this as an option. Yet the controversy in the Shi'a community created by SCIRI's actions shows how reluctant many Shi'a would be to go this route. Most Shi'a seem to believe that they can take control of all of Iraq, or at least of all Arab Iraq, so there is no reason to confine their ambitions to just the nine-province south. After all, such an autonomous zone would exclude at least a third of Iraqi Shi'a, especially the millions in Baghdad.

No matter how Iraq divides up, the new entities would be unlikely to be stable, functioning democracies. They are much more likely to be warlord-run. Consider that in practice, there is no Kurdish region; there is a PUK-istan and a KDP-istan, and the relations between the two remain tense in 2006.

Impact on U.S. Interests

A formally divided Iraq or an Iraq without a functioning central government would be a source of regional instability troubling to many in the region as well as to the United States.

If Iraq were to divide up or fall apart, its neighbors would meddle in Iraqi affairs. Much has been made of the prospect that a formally divided Iraq could create a Shi'a mini-state that would ally closely with Iran. Yet the problem of foreign meddling would probably be worse in the

case of a de facto division, because in that case, the local warlords would each be searching for allies. The temptation would be great for many foreign governments to join in the game. In many cases, they would act through surrogates, such as Syria allying with neo-Ba'athists, Saudi Arabia with Salafists, and Iran with hardline Shi'a clerics.

The United States would almost certainly be drawn into this game. For instance, Kurdish leaders would offer their services in ways that would sound attractive to Washington (credibly promising to respect human rights and hold elections, offering security cooperation with a well-trained and well-disciplined *peshmerga* militia). On the more negative side, U.S. concern about the foreign jihadists helping some of the Arab warlords and about Iranian influence with some of the Shi'a power figures would almost certainly lead the United States to throw its weight to their local opponents. While Washington could hardly avoid being drawn in, this game is not one the United States plays well: subtle maneuvering among backstabbing potentates is not an American strength. In other words, this scenario would be unpromising for U.S. interests.

An additional impact would be heightened concern in many regional states about community identity among Kurds and Shi'a, combined with the perception that the United States was responsible for creating a problem. It seems hardly coincidental that the prosperity and power of the Kurdish community in post-Saddam Iraq has occurred at the same time as unprecedented Kurdish riots in Syria, a surge of Kurdish ethnic violence in Iran (including rioting in which at least eight police were killed in late 2005), and a

resurgence of the PKK. It would hardly be surprising if a successful and powerful Iraqi Kurdish region created concerns in Turkey, Iran, and Syria which led them to cooperate among each other—a development which would not be in U.S. interests, especially since the three would probably regard the United States as sympathetic to Kurdish power (although admittedly, U.S. interests would be well served if Damascus and Tehran were more preoccupied by domestic difficulties and therefore had fewer resources to devote to their problematic foreign and security policies). In addition to the Kurdish issue, there is the Shi'a question in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. While none of those governments would like to see Iraq with a strong central government dominated by Shi'a, they would even less like to see a Shi'a ministate—and they would see the United States as responsible for this development.

A divided Iraq would lead many in the region to conclude that the alternative to authoritarian rule is chaos. This would be a serious setback to the U.S. democracy agenda for the region. For instance, the impression that overthrowing a dictatorship brings chaos would discourage many in Iran who might otherwise contemplate civil disobedience against the Islamic Republic.

A divided Iraq could well be a haven for terrorists, especially in the interstices among the various competing warlords. A past illustration of how this could work was Ansar-e Islam's ability to find operating space during the Saddam-Kurdish conflict, with the Ansar leadership playing one side off against the other and taking advantage of confused authority on the ground in semi-contested areas. Moreover, there would be room for jihadists to claim they were bringing

order. Consider how the Taliban initially gained the support of many Afghan nationalists who were prepared to work with the odious Taliban government out of the conviction that it alone offered the prospect of restoring stability and preventing de facto partition of the country. The grave danger would be that, like in the Taliban case, the most effective warriors in the battles against local warlords would be foreign jihadists, who would then come to have an influence all out of proportion to their numbers.

A side effect of a divided Iraq would be that development of oil resources outside the south could be complicated by the need to reach agreement on how the oil would reach the outside world (this would not be an issue in the south, where the oil could directly go to ports). For instance, it is not hard to imagine the Turkish government using control over the existing oil pipeline as a leverage point with a Kurdish government. Any slowdown in the development of Iraqi oil resources would be adverse for U.S. interests, which are well served by having a multiplicity of potential suppliers of oil to the world market. The problem is made worse by the simultaneous difficulties expanding output in so many countries with rich oil reserves, such as Nigeria, Russia, and Venezuela.

IRAQ'S NEW PROBLEMS—AND ITS OLD ONES

In our concern about the instability from a weak central government in Iraq, we would do well to bear in mind that the alternative of a strong central government has been the main problem in

modern Iraqi history. The Saddam era demonstrated the grave danger from too powerful a central government. That problem is a product of Iraq's extraordinary oil resources, which provide untold riches to whomever controls the bank account into which the oil income flows. The oil income allows a ruler to create a powerful state bureaucracy—including security services that repress the people and an army that threatens regional stability. Political economists like to write about “the curse of oil riches,” and fewer countries illustrate the problem better than does Iraq.

When Iraq is so weak and divided, it may seem perverse to worry about the old problem of too powerful a central state, but consider the implications of a successful suppression of the current insurgency. Such success will come only if the United States trains and equips an Iraqi military that is incomparably stronger than that of other Arab states or Iran—a military hardened by battle, well versed in American military ethos. Once the insurgency is subdued, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers will have nothing to do and few prospects of jobs in the civilian sector that are anywhere near as attractive as their army posts. A powerful, underemployed army in a country that sees itself as the natural leader of the region, surrounded by weaker neighbors, this is not a recipe for regional stability. No wonder some of Iraq's neighbors would not mind if Iraq's central government were threatened by separatist forces that kept Iraq preoccupied.

The challenge is to find a way for Iraq to function well with a weak central government,

presumably through a federal system with powerful regional and local governments. It would be a grave error to embrace some new savior on horseback who promises to bring stability by restoring all power to Baghdad. That might solve our current concerns, but at the expense of bringing a worse future for Iraqis, who would be the first victims of totalitarian tendencies, and for the region, which would suffer from the overweening ambitions of any Iraqi strongman.

CONCLUSION

The prospects for Iraq are not particularly attractive. The most likely attainable outcomes would still leave a weak and divided society, not just a fragile government. As a rough rule of thumb, reconstructing a society after a major war takes fully as long as the war did; for instance, Germany's recovery from the six years of war from 1939 to 1945 took until the middle 1950s. Saddam led Iraq into twenty years of war, first against Iran and then against the U.S.-led coalition. It therefore would be optimistic to expect that Iraq could recover for some decades. Moreover, pre-Saddam Iraq was no paradise. It was at best a middle-income country with serious tensions among the ethnic communities. Meanwhile, some of Iraq's neighbors—especially the Arab monarchies and Turkey—have made great economic, social, and yes, even political advances. Even the regional laggards—namely, Syria under Assad, father and son, and the Islamic Republic of Iran—have done remarkably better than Saddam's Iraq. As a result, there is little prospect that for many, many decades to come Iraq will be able to recover the same position relative to its neighbors

that it had when Saddam came to power. His rule effectively ruined Iraq's chances for regional leadership for a century.

That is the best case. Much worse cases are quite possible. Most troubling for the international community is the situation in which Iraq becomes once again a source of regional instability, this time due to unrest, terrorism, and communitarian violence spilling over from Iraq onto its neighbors. It is striking how little Iraq's neighbors are doing to counter such a threat. Indeed, Syria and most especially Iran are feeding the flames that may one day engulf them.

The difficult situation in Iraq was almost certainly made worse by errors in the U.S.-led occupation. That said, the fundamental cause of the problems is the social destruction during Saddam's days, which drove Iraqis to seek security in elemental communal structures of sect and ethnic group. Saddam hollowed the government and the other social institutions of the Iraqi middle class. He empowered radicals of many sorts, including in his last decade intolerant Islamists. No matter how his rule ended, Iraq would have been a mess afterwards.

**Patrick Clawson is Deputy Director for Research at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*