



## The Consequences of Failure in Iraq

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What would be the consequences of an American withdrawal from Iraq? Trying to wrap one's mind around the ramifications of a failed Iraq--of an enormous, quite possibly genocidal, Sunni-Shiite clash exploding around American convoys fleeing south--is daunting. In part, this is why few have spent much time talking about what might happen to Iraq, the region, and the United States if the government in Baghdad and its army collapsed into Sunni and Shiite militias waging a battle to the death. Among its many omissions, the Iraq Study Group's still-born report lacked any sustained description of the probable and possible consequences of a shattered Iraq.

Before embarking on such an inquiry, a few remarks are in order about American attitudes and about the continuing reasons for hope in

Iraq. Americans, for whom foreign policy has always been loaded with moral imperatives and ethical restraints, don't like staring into a bloody moral abyss that we largely dug. The growing bipartisan endeavor to blame the mess in Iraq on the Iraqis is, among other things, a human reaction to screen out all ugly incoming data. For most of Washington, if not the country, Iraq is already Vietnam--no possibility of success, thousands of wasted lives, a grim conviction that it would be best to let the ungrateful, pitiless foreigners take their country back. As the pro-war *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote recently: "Adding more troops makes sense only if it's to buy more time for positive trends that have already begun to appear on the horizon. I don't see them."

In other words, if one can't envision victory--a political solution where Sunni and Shiite Arabs in Iraq live peacefully with each other--then trying to forestall the ghastly consequences of an American flight from Iraq isn't necessary. If we don't have a workable definition of "success," then we don't have a moral obligation to prevent a catastrophe, even one that is largely our fault. The morality of this reasoning is precarious: Should we never try to stop massive slaughters, or try to stop them only when we didn't provoke them, or try to stop them only when we can't get hurt in the effort? Seeing positive trends is difficult when physical security in Baghdad has been declining, primarily because then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his generals John Abizaid and George Casey didn't see this elementary duty of an occupying power as their mission.

But the quintessential American pragmatism of Friedman's reasoning is beyond doubt. And the Bush administration has been remiss in neglecting to describe what's probably over the horizon if we win, and if we lose. Senior administration officials have remained largely quiet about the good, the bad, and the truly calamitous possibilities, allowing the president almost alone to sally forth in Churchillian speeches. And those speeches have usually lacked what Churchill's had in spades: acute appreciation of the hardships and vivid descriptions of what failure would mean. Rhetorically, Iraq has become too difficult to handle.

Iraq overwhelms. Yet it shouldn't. Even a pessimist can still look at the place and believe it isn't beyond hope. The counterinsurgency plan proffered by retired four-star General Jack Keane and the military historian Frederick Kagan offers a decent chance of success--probably the last one the Bush administration will have before Iraq cracks up. If the president commits the necessary resources along the lines recommended by Keane-Kagan, the radicalization of Iraq can likely be reversed. The political and democratic possibilities in Mesopotamia remain greater than most in Washington's foreign policy establishment imagine. Post-Saddam Iraq was never going to be a liberal democratic country dominated by Westernized, secular Iraqis. The great Iraqi accomplishment will not be the establishment of a model for peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. That possibility died in the autumn of 2003. But the odds of Iraq's becoming a profoundly imperfect yet functioning democracy, where power changes hands through elections, remain at least as good as those favoring the birth of a Shiite dictatorship--provided the United States adopts the right tactics.

Post-Saddam Iraq has become for us and the Iraqis an act of tenacity. It is overwhelmingly the story of one community, the Shia, endeavoring to adopt a democratic political arrangement while being bombarded by Sunni Arab insurgents and holy warriors, and dismissed as disloyal Arab Muslims by the Middle East's Sunni Arab intellectual and reli-

gious classes. The Arabic satellite channel Al Jazeera has its virtues--watching Arab religious fundamentalists and pan-Arab nationalists scream at each other is an unalloyed good in the Middle East--but its coverage and commentary on the Iraqi Shia have been on the whole disgraceful, a nonstop apologia for murderous anti-Shiite bigotry.

With little American appreciation, Iraq's Shiite leadership, particularly the traditional clergy behind Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, has endeavored to keep its own from imploding into hostile, warring militias. A Shiite dictatorship, the only other possible outcome in Iraq, is still a verboten subject among the Shia. By comparison, it's not hard to find Sunni Arabs pining for the return of a Sunni strongman; since its early love affair with Ayad Allawi, much of Washington would have gladly compromised democratic principle for dictatorial strength.

The Iraqi Shia still seem to know that they cannot go down the dictatorial road without provoking internecine strife. As Sistani and his followers have tried to point out, democracy for the Shia is first a matter of communal survival. And as long as this conviction holds, the compromises necessary to keep the Shiites together offer Iraq's Sunni Arabs a way out of insurgency and holy war. This will be neither easy nor pretty. Even in the best of circumstances--even if a successful American-led counterinsurgency takes hold and Iraqi politics slowly becomes more normal--Shiites wanting revenge for Sunni atrocities, and

Sunnis wanting revenge against Shiite death squads, will seek opportunities to strike. If Westerners reflected on the violence of their own democratic evolution, they might be more appreciative of the distance the Iraqis have come under ghastly circumstances.

The miracle in Iraq is that the Iraqi government, feeble and sectarian as it is, hasn't given up trying to play by the rules and hasn't forsaken completely its imperfect constitution. The presence and power of Americans is undoubtedly the primary reason the worst hasn't happened. But only the blind, deaf, dumb, or politically malicious cannot see that the Iraqis themselves, especially the Shia, are still trying desperately to avoid the abyss. Having seen, then, that there is still sufficient political hope on the Iraqi horizon, let us return to the matter of what will likely happen in Mesopotamia and the Middle East if the United States departs.

Certainly the most damning consequence of failure in Iraq is the likelihood that an American withdrawal would provoke a take-no-prisoners civil war between the Sunni and Shiite Arabs, which could easily reach genocidal intensity. The historical parallel to have in mind is the battle between subcontinent Hindus and Muslims that came with the independence of India. Although of differing faiths, the pre-1947 Hindus and Muslims were often indistinguishable culturally, linguistically, and physically. Yet they "ethnically cleansed" their respective new nations, India and Pakistan, with exu-

berance. Somewhere between 500,000 and one million Muslims and Hindus perished, tens of thousands of women were raped, and more than ten million people were forced to flee their homes. This level of barbarism, scaled down to Iraq's population, could quickly happen in Mesopotamia, long before American forces could withdraw from the country. (And it's worth recalling that few British officials anticipated the communal ferocity that came with the end of the Raj.)

Certain Western observers of Iraq, and many Arab commentators, have suggested that it is the American presence in Mesopotamia that aggravates the differences between Shiite and Sunni. If the Americans were to leave, then a modus vivendi would be reached before massive slaughter ensued. Shared Arabism and the Prophet's faith would helpfully reassert themselves. Yet, this seems unlikely. Iraq since 2003 strongly suggests a different outcome. Violence in both the Shiite and Sunni zones has gone up, not down, whenever American and British forces have decreased their physical presence in the streets and their intrusion in government affairs. Sunnis and Shiites who see no Americans are killing each other in greater numbers than Sunnis and Shiites who do see Yanks patrolling their neighborhoods.

Although it would be very difficult for either Sunni or Shiite Baghdadis to say so, they probably both look back nostalgically to those days in 2004 when anxious, trigger-happy American military convoys posed

the greatest risk to life and property on the roads.

There are, fortunately, still many places in Iraq where Shiite and Sunni Arabs are not killing each other. In Baghdad, this is less the case precisely because Baghdad is the center of power. The Iraqi Sunni identity as it has developed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire is in many ways all about Baghdad. The centripetal eminence of the city for them is far greater than for the Shiites--even for the Shiites of the "Sadr City" ghetto, who have provided the manpower for the worst of the capital's Shiite militias. The Sunni insurgency and holy war have always been more about maintaining Sunni power than about repelling infidel invaders. They stand in sharp contrast to the great Shiite rebellion of 1920, which was a reaction against the religiously intolerable dominion of the British in Mesopotamia, not a Shiite assertion of power among the Arab denizens of what soon became Iraq.

Breaking the back of the Sunni insurgency has always meant denying the rejectionist Sunni Arab camp (possibly a pretty large slice of the city's Sunni population) any hope of dominating Baghdad and thus the country. If the Americans undertake this task, the Sunni Arab population, especially those who don't back the insurgents and the holy warriors, will sustain relatively little damage. We know how to clear Sunni neighborhoods in the capital--we've just never had the American manpower to hold what we've cleared. However, if the Shiites end up doing this (and it will be the Shiite

militias that do it, not the Iraqi army, which would likely fall apart pretty quickly once U.S. military forces started withdrawing from the capital), the Sunni Arab population of Baghdad is going to get pulverized. The Sunni and Shiite migration we've so far seen from Baghdad is just a trickle compared with the exodus when these two communities battle en masse for the city and the country's new identity.

If we leave Iraq any time soon, the battle for Baghdad will probably lead to a conflagration that consumes all of Arab Iraq, and quite possibly Kurdistan, too. Once the Shia become both badly bloodied and victorious, raw nationalist and religious passions will grow. A horrific fight with the Sunni Arabs will inevitably draw in support from the ferociously anti-Shiite Sunni religious establishments in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and on the Shiite side from Iran. It will probably destroy most of central Iraq and whet the appetite of Shiite Arab warlords, who will by then dominate their community, for a conflict with the Kurds. If the Americans stabilize Arab Iraq, which means occupying the Sunni triangle, this won't happen.

A strong, aggressive American military presence in Iraq can probably halt the radicalization of the Shiite community. Imagine an Iraq modeled on the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The worst elements in the Iranian regime are heavily concentrated in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Ministry of Intelli-

gence, the two organizations most active inside Iraq. The Lebanese Hezbollah is also present giving tutorials. These forces need increasing strife to prosper. Imagine Iraqi Shiites, battle-hardened in a vicious war with Iraq's Arab Sunnis, spiritually and operationally linking up with a revitalized and aggressive clerical dictatorship in Iran. Imagine the Iraqi Sunni Islamic militants, driven from Iraq, joining up with groups like al Qaeda, living to die killing Americans. Imagine the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan overwhelmed with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Sunni Arab refugees. The Hashemites have been lucky and clever since World War II. They've escaped extinction several times. Does anyone want to take bets that the monarchy can survive the implantation of an army of militant, angry Iraqi Sunni Arabs? For those who believe that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is the epicenter of the Middle East, the mass migration of Iraq's Sunni Arabs into Jordan will bury what small chances remain that the Israelis and Palestinians will find an accommodation. With Jordan in trouble, overflowing with viciously anti-American and anti-Israeli Iraqis, peaceful Palestinian evolution on the West Bank of the Jordan river is about as likely as the discovery of the Holy Grail.

The repercussions throughout the Middle East of the Sunni-Shiite clash in Iraq are potentially so large it's difficult to digest. Sunni Arabs in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will certainly view a hard-won and bloody Shiite triumph in Iraq as an enormous Iranian victory. The

Egyptians or the Saudis or both will go for their own nukes. What little chance remains for the Americans and the Europeans to corral peacefully the clerical regime's nuclear-weapons aspirations will end with a Shiite-Sunni death struggle in Mesopotamia, which the Shia will inevitably win. The Israelis, who are increasingly likely to strike preemptively the major Iranian nuclear sites before the end of George Bush's presidency, will feel even more threatened, especially when the Iranian regime underscores its struggle against the Zionist enemy as a means of compensating for its support to the bloody Shiite conquest in Iraq. With America in full retreat from Iraq, the clerical regime, which has often viewed terrorism as a tool of statecraft, could well revert to the mentality and tactics that produced the bombing of Khobar Towers in 1996. If the Americans are retreating, hit them.

That would not be just a radical Shiite view; it was the learned estimation of Osama bin Laden and his kind before 9/11. It's questionable to argue that the war in Iraq has advanced the radical Sunni holy war against the United States. There should be no question, however, that an American defeat in Mesopotamia would be the greatest psychological triumph ever for anti-American jihadists. Al Qaeda and its militant Iraqi allies could dominate western Iraq for years--it could take awhile for the Shiites to drive them out. How in the world could the United States destroy these devils when it no longer had forces on the ground in Anbar? Air power?

Would we helicopter Special Forces from aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf into a distant war zone when our intelligence information on this desert region was--as it would surely be--somewhere between poor and nonexistent? Images of Desert One in 1980 come to mind. Neither Jordan nor Kuwait may be eager to lend its airfields for American operations that intend to kill Sunnis who are killing Shiites.

What successes we've had in both Iraq and Afghanistan have come from our having boots on the ground. There is simply no way in hell the CIA or military intelligence will have reliable collection programs once the United States significantly draws down. Are we going to reinvade Western Iraq? Senators John Kerry and Barack Obama say they would've been tougher on al Qaeda than the Bush administration. One wonders how they would prove that in Iraq after the Americans leave. Give weaponry to a radicalized Shiite army slaughtering Sunnis on its western march toward the Jordanian border?

All of this may be too abstract for most Democrats and many Republicans. Americans are particularly weak when it comes to understanding and empathizing with folks who express their love of God through death. But these things matter to Islamic holy warriors and those who have the psychological profile of would-be martyrs. We had better hope that America's counterterrorist measures are sufficient to block the likely substantial increase in jihadist recruits. Rest assured that with

America in retreat, and the Iraqi Shia slowly grinding the Sunni Arabs into the dust, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are unlikely to be helpful in the war on terrorism. The Egyptian and Saudi reflex to support militant fundamentalists in times of stress (even as they also repress them) will surely shift into hyperdrive as Cairo and Riyadh grow ever more fearful of an Iranian-led Shiite offensive. The Egyptians and the Saudis, the two intellectual powerhouses for Arab jihadism against the United States, are likely to view a Shiite conquest of Iraq that creates hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Sunni Arab refugees in the same light as Iran's Islamic revolution.

More than any other event, that revolution provoked a global Wahhabi and Salafi missionary movement to counter the spread of Iranian-led radical Islam, which in turn set the stage for the rise of bin Ladenism. Combine a Shiite triumph in Iraq with a resurgent hard core in Iran who may soon acquire nuclear weaponry, and the provocative possibilities of a shattered Iraq could be even greater than those of the Islamic revolution in 1979. And with a U.S. defeat in Mesopotamia, the re-born Taliban movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, too, will gain ground.

It is hard to imagine any event that could give the virulently anti-American Islamists in these two countries more inspiration and hope. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf is already cutting deals with al Qaeda-supporting tribes along the border with Afghanistan.

Is it really reasonable to imagine, as many Democrats apparently do, that the United States, its European allies, and the Afghans and Pakistanis who like us will become stauncher in the defense of Afghanistan after the Americans abandon Iraq? Isn't it much more likely that the Taliban, al Qaeda, and General Musharraf will see things just the other way round? Will the Russians and Chinese, who increasingly are engaging in nefarious practices in the Middle East and elsewhere, be so gracious as to not exploit America's flight from Iraq? Russia has already become an assassination-happy rogue state that sells anti-aircraft missiles, which could only be used against the United States and Israel, to Tehran. Soviet patterns in the Middle East are returning.

It is in our power to prevent these awful scenarios. We should have taken great hope in the recent refusal of Grand Ayatollah Sistani to bless a "unity" government that might well have led to violent strife among the Shia--a surefire recipe for destroying the country. Sistani's refusal to endorse this plan effectively killed it. The good and indispensable news: Sistani's power isn't dead. Even Sadr's men are still making pilgrimages to see the old man. Almost politically neutered after Sunni militants blew up the Golden Shrine at Samarra in February 2006, the cleric and the peaceful Shiite consensus he represents are still alive. On the Shiite side, men of moderation still have the power of moral suasion and tradition.

No one on the Shiite side has publicly challenged Sistani's support for democracy. There are certainly many men in the dominant Shiite political parties who would privately prefer some kind of religiously oriented dictatorship. But as Thomas Friedman once insightfully remarked, it's what people say publicly in the Muslim Middle East that matters. In public, Shiite support for democratic government appears as strong today as it was before the attack on the Golden Shrine, the event that caused Shiite forbearance against Sunni Arab depredations to run out.

By contrast, the question that remains open is whether the United States can take the pounding from the Sunni insurgents and holy warriors and stay true to its original mission. Despite his mistakes and his poor choices in personnel, President Bush has kept faith with the Iraqi people. He has fought the good and honorable fight. He has clearly seen the future if we falter. We can only hope that in America's coming great battle for Baghdad, both he and Sistani prove victorious.

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