The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End
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General Overview:
Iraq is in the midst of a bloody civil war. Iraqis are not a unified nation, but a collection of peoples with incompatible religious views and political aims. A main shortcoming of U.S. policy has been going into the war (and operating since) without an adequate understanding of the country’s internal divisions. U.S. ineptitude in planning for post-war occupation and reconstruction has exacerbated the civil unrest and discontent.

Galbraith explains why U.S. force imposing unity has failed and will continue to fail. He asserts that in order to facilitate true Iraqi independence and our withdrawal, the U.S. should accept and support what is already occurring; the separation of Iraq into independent ethnic and religious regions.

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Previous U.S. Policy on Iraq
American missteps towards Iraq date back to Reagan. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which began in 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran over a border conflict, Reagan first courted Saddam as the preferred alternative to the revolutionary Iranian Shiite Islamic state. The U.S. aided Saddam significantly in the war and turned a blind eye to his use of chemical weapons against Iran, even sharing battlefield intelligence that helped Saddam target Iranian troops. Even after Iraq’s chemical weapon attacks on its own Kurdish people became public in 1988, the administration blocked the congressionally proposed Prevention of Genocide Act and sanctions against Iraq, for it was the largest importer of U.S. rice and an important market for other grains.

U.S. favor to Iraq changed when Saddam invaded Kuwait, ostensibly for drilling Iraqi oil and raising Kuwaiti production, thereby lowering oil prices at a time when Iraq was desperate for money to repay its war debt. The U.S. went to war under George H. W. Bush, though unlike the current war, it was with the full support of the international community.

The First Gulf War: Unfinished Business
The U.S. didn’t finish the job during the first gulf war, leaving Saddam in power and the Republican Guard intact. During a political speech, Bush called for the uprising of the Iraqi people against their dictator. Though he described this moment in his memoir as an “impulsive ad lib,” the Kurds and Shiites took him seriously, with tragic results.

The Shiites in the south rebelled against Saddam’s ruling Ba’ath party and Saddam squelched the uprising with his Republican Guard while American troops looked on. Between March and September 1991, Iraqi forces killed 300,000 Shiites. Embittered, Shiites believed that Bush “encouraged the uprising and intentionally allowed Saddam to crush it because Bush wanted Shiites to be killed.”

The Kurds began their rebellion by attacking Ba’ath party headquarters and eventually took over all of Kurdistan, the Kurdish ethnic region. The uprising collapsed when Iraqi troops retook the region and 500,000 Kurds fled Iraqi retribution by crossing the mountains into Turkey, where many died due to cold weather and a lack of food and shelter. Their plight drew world attention when it was televised and the U.S. and Britain responded by sending troops to secure a safe area and establishing a no-fly zone that continued through the second gulf war.

Bush Sr. administration officials explained that they didn’t want to support the uprisings because they were concerned about the long-term balance of power in the oil-rich Gulf. They wanted a stable Iraqi state and the Shiite and Kurdish rebellions threatened to break it up. But the U.S. failure to support these uprisings created the fractures that have helped lead to the breakup of Iraq today. The Kurds have created a de facto separate state and Saddam’s slaughter of Iraq’s Shiites drove them into the embrace of Iran. “In the
The Least of the Axis of Evil
During the Clinton years, Iraq became a secondary foreign policy concern, though still subject to sanctions. All this would change when in the aftermath of September 11, Bush gave a speech on January 29, 2002 criticizing the WMD capabilities of North Korea, Iran and Iraq. He called the three countries an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world,” and he claimed that America would take any necessary means to ensure our security. The way this phrase, “the axis of evil,” was inserted into the speech, by a speechwriter, without approval by Powell or those responsible for foreign policy, is indicative of the current Bush White House’s approach to policy. “The Bush speech, the process by which it was produced, and the actions that followed underscore the absence of coherent strategy that has characterized the U.S. intervention in Iraq.”

Bush’s desire for war with Iraq paradoxically targeted the least dangerous of these three nations. Having been under sanctions for 11 years, Iraq’s maximum possible threat derived from older chemical weapons, for intelligence showed that it didn’t have any significant nuclear programs or large-scale production of chemical weapons. “By contrast, both Iran and North Korea had active nuclear programs.” The current U.S. quagmire in Iraq has not deterred, but rather emboldened, the nuclear attempts of North Korea and Iran, who now present a graver nuclear threat to the world.

Ignorance and Pre-War Planning
The Bush administration’s errors in going to war with Iraq are manifold. The administration pursued war with Iraq based on what are now widely accepted as wrongful claims about both the presence of WMDs and Saddam’s relationship with Al Qaeda. But the Bush administration’s worst mistake has been failing to understand the ethnic and religious differences that permeated the country.

At a meeting with three Iraqi Americans, while planning for the war, Bush was clearly unfamiliar with the terms “Sunni” and “Shiite,” as well as the differences between them. “Two months before he ordered U.S. troops into the country, the president of the United States did not appear to know about the division among Iraqis that has defined the country’s history and politics. He would not have understood why non-Arab Iran might gain a foothold in post-Saddam Iraq. He could not have anticipated U.S. troops getting caught in the middle of a civil war between two sects he did not know existed.”

The Bush administration exhibited an incredible culture of arrogance in viewing Iraq as a blank slate onto which they could impose their will. The most enduring misconception that still reigns is that there is such a thing as a single Iraq. “Insurgency, civil war, Iranian strategic triumph, the breakup of Iraq, an independent Kurdistan, military quagmire. These are all consequences of the American invasion of Iraq that the Bush administration failed to anticipate.”
A crucial administration error in planning for post-war Iraq was assuming that it would be easy. Certain military views about requiring more forces than the administration desired were rejected and even banned. For example, “when Army chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he thought it would take several hundred thousand troops to occupy Iraq…Wolfowitz delivered a very public rebuke.”

“The administration prepared so little for post-war Iraq that it had no idea of what it didn’t know.” They didn’t even consider the likely scenario that all order and authority would collapse. Many predicted rapid collapse, uprisings and the inability to maintain civil order, but because those views were out of line with the “Pentagon neo-conservatives’ rosy assumptions,” the administration did not heed such warnings.

The planning that did take place was inadequate and driven by politics rather than expertise. The retired Army General Jay Garner, who was to head the post-war Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, had less than two months to prepare for the job. The administration chose “political appointees long on ideological commitments and short on credentials” as staff, while State Department Arab experts were unwelcome because they took a dim view of Iraq’s democratic prospects.

**Post-Invasion Mistakes**

In addition to the lack of post-war planning, military decisions immediately following the invasion had detrimental repercussions to the stability of the country. The administration planned no security for Saddam’s many arms storage facilities. Consequently, many tons of explosives were looted and are undoubtedly still fuelling the insurgency. U.S. troops allowed the Iraqi ministries to be looted because the administration had issued no orders to protect them. Gutted of their copiers, computers and even office furniture, the ministries were left with no infrastructure with which to administer the country. The U.S. administration displayed its priorities when it assigned troops to protect Iraq’s oil ministry, but not its Ministry of Irrigation, which burned nearby, “destroying the plans and blueprints for Iraq’s dams, barrages, pumping stations, and thousands of kilometers of canals. The implications were obvious. Oil was a priority, but the water on which millions of Iraqis depended was not. Many Iraqis had the same thought.”

Iraqis viewed the widespread looting and American lack of effort to thwart it in one of two equally damaging ways; either the U.S. was too incompetent to prevent looting or it maliciously desired Iraq’s destruction and permitted it.
Coalition Provisional Authority: CPA = Can’t Provide Anything

After Washington recalled General Jay Garner, Rumsfeld appointed Paul Bremer as his replacement, giving him only two weeks to prepare for the administrative post of heading the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority. Bremer and most of his senior staff did not speak Arabic and had never been to Iraq. Many lacked area expertise as well as post-conflict experience. The Bush Administration was so disorganized that it failed to inform Bremer of the State Department’s 15-volume study on governing Iraq after a war, before granting him authority to exercise “all executive, legislative and judicial functions in Iraq.” Though Garner had promised to form a new Iraqi government immediately following the invasion, Bremer immediately assumed authority and announced there would be no interim Iraqi state. He dismantled the remaining Iraqi state by dismissing the military and banning the top four levels of Ba’ath party officials from holding any positions of power.

“For eighty years, Sunni Arabs were the guardians of Iraqi unity, keeping the country together by force. The American invasion ended Sunni Arab rule. Now, in a few strokes of a pen, Bremer completed Iraq’s revolution by destroying the pillars on which Sunni Arabs had relied to rule Iraq – the military, the security services, and the Ba’ath Party.” Bremer had ended Iraq’s fate as a unitary nation. The CPA’s incompetence to provide security and the restoration of general services like water and electricity also fueled the post-war chaos in Iraq. His delay in forming a government allowed any potential Iraqi unity in the wake of Saddam to disintegrate into sectarian violence.

Separate Peoples: The Kurds

The Kurds have been the group most plagued under Saddam and they are currently the least integrated into the Iraqi nation, existing as a virtual independent state within a state. “Winston Churchill included the Kurds in Arab Iraq in 1921” and they have resisted this inclusion for most of the ensuing century. For years, Saddam repressed the Kurds with genocidal policies to further his aims of Arab nationalism. By 1990, Iraq had demolished approximately 4,500 Kurdish villages. Saddam also used chemical weapons against the Kurds. All told, an estimated 182,000 died between 1987 and 1990.

After the first Gulf War, under the continued protection of the no-fly zone and benefiting from the oil-for-food program, Kurdistan has flourished in near independence and it is currently the most stable region. “Every Kurd…wants an independent Kurdistan.” In a January 2005 referendum, 98% voted for independence. However, the Kurds have made valiant efforts to work with the Americans. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces were a key U.S. supporter during the war and as one of the only well-trained militias within Iraq, they continue to help with security during the insurgency. Indeed, the break-up of the Iraqi government and military benefits the Kurds enormously, for Iraq has been their only enemy.
Kurdish political leaders have written their own constitution that essentially gives the Kurds full self-determination and grants Iraq only the most limited powers under a federalist system that gives Kurdish law precedence. Kurds have their own border checkpoints, military and police power, as well as determination over their oil. Though they are currently participating in Iraq’s nascent government, with Jalal Talabani elected Iraq’s president in 2005, when the time becomes ripe, there is no doubt that they will claim their independence.

**Shiite and Sunni Divisions**

Though long repressed by Saddam, Shiites have always been in the majority in Iraq and they are now poised to become the dominant force in Iraq’s military and government. Shiites have begun to influence Iraq’s state radio and television programming and they have made Shiite religious holidays national events. Shiites are tied closely to Iran, who sheltered their leaders during Saddam’s reign and funded its religious parties, including the largest Shiite party known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Iraqi Shiites view Iran as a model Islamic state.

The Sunni, however, view the Shiites as apostates because of the sects' religious differences. Sunnis also consider Shiites to be traitors to Iraq, both for siding with the Americans and because of their proximity to Iran.

The depth of Iraq’s religious and ethnic differences can be illustrated by a religious attack that spilled out into violence on both sides. In February 2006, terrorists attacked the Askariya Shrine. This shrine dated back to the ninth century and was known as the resting place of the 12th and last imam, whom Shiites believe will return, bringing judgment day. In the week following this attack, 184 Sunni mosques were attacked or destroyed in retaliation, and sectarian violence killed over 1,000 Sunnis and Shiites. The violence extends beyond terrorist attacks and reprisals, for in the first four months of 2006, more than 100,000 Sunnis and Shiites have fled neighborhoods where the other group was the majority. And in November of 2005, American troops discovered a secret prison run by the Ministry of the Interior that held “169 half starved Sunnis Arab prisoners, some showing physical marks from torture.” Religious violence and political opposition thoroughly divide these two groups.

**Iraqi Constitution and Federal Government**

Iraqis share no common vision of what a unified Iraq will look like. The government that the Iraqis have finally formed is ill-equipped to resolve these differences, but it does outline a decentralized federalist system that could support the division of Iraq into regions of comparative independence.

The Iraqi Constitution has been essentially formulated by Shiites and Kurds, for Sunnis largely opted to boycott the elections for the assembly that wrote the constitution. The Iraqi Constitution, as finally written, was influenced considerably by Bush’s Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalizid, also the former ambassador to Afghanistan and a staunch
Republican. Though possessing little background in Iraqi affairs, he quickly learned about the factional divisions involved and approached writing the constitution as a “tripartite peace treaty.” Because of the Sunni boycott, and because Americans so dominated the constitution writing process, the constitution’s legitimacy has been undermined in many Iraqi eyes, and with it the Shiite-led government.

What the constitution does provide for is a federalist system and a “relatively mild Islamic state.” Islam is the official religion and “a” (though not “the”) main source for legislation. Iraq’s laws, however, may not contradict Islam and Islamic courts must review them, representing a system similar to Iran’s. Sunnis and secularists were opposed to this, but the agreement surrounding it illustrates the current configuration of Iraqi power. In exchange for supporting the Shiites’ desire for Islamic law, Kurds insisted on a constitution that would not prevail over regional laws, thus protecting their own autonomy. Human rights and women’s rights are included in the constitution, but they are not exclusive federal powers and can likewise be superseded by regional laws. Federal powers are limited and include foreign affairs, defense, money and fiscal policies. Overall, the constitution paves the way for a federal arrangement of regional governments.

The constitution promotes shared power by requiring a super majority of two-thirds of the Council of Representatives to choose the prime minister, the president and the two vice presidents. The vice presidents can veto any presidential act, requiring the Presidency Council to work together and their unanimity is necessary to nominate the prime minister. The intention is to spread the top posts across ethnic identities, forcing groups to work together and resulting in the Shiite-Kurdish coalition that has come to dominate Iraqi politics in 2005 and 2006.

In April of 2006, Talabani, a Kurd, was elected president; Maliki, a hard-line Shiite, was chosen as prime minister; Hashimi, the Sunni head of the Iraqi Islamic Party, received one vice presidential post; and Mehdi, a moderate Shiite, was elected to the other vice presidency. Not all have experience with leadership and compromise. The governing council has diametrically opposed views and will likely not function well.

Iraq at Civil War

The Iraq that these men preside over, however, is already fractured into regional entities and poses a vast challenge to any federal oversight. Kurdistan is already nearly independent, with constitutional authority to run its own region. “The Shiite south...is run by a patchwork of municipal and governorate officials who front for the clerics, religious parties, and militias who are the real power in the south.” And Sunni Iraq is a battleground, where “the American military, assisted by Shiite troops, are at war with insurgents and foreign terrorists.” Furthermore, Sunnis will resist a Shiite-dominated government they consider to be propped up by American power and influenced by Iran.
Solutions for a Regionally Divided Iraq

Holding Iraq together by force is what has been and will continue to be destabilizing. The U.S. should help Iraq’s various regions achieve stability, their own government solutions and militias, instead of the imposing U.S. will and trying to remake the world in a limited image. Regionalism has major drawbacks, certainly, mainly the problem of sharing oil resources and the difficulties posed by Baghdad, a huge mixed city of 5 million that counts for almost a quarter of the country. It is a “city of armed camps” and outside the green zone, violence runs rampant. Baghdad is a thorny issue and tragic situation that will plague any governing force, Iraqi or American, for years to come. But trying to unify Iraq will result in a situation similar to Yugoslavia in 1991, when wrong-headed efforts by Europeans and the U.S. to keep the country together doomed 200,000 people to die in the ensuing ethnic war.

Most American views currently oppose the break-up of Iraq. “Few Americans would have supported an invasion of a WMD-less Iraq in order to have half the country [the Shiites] become an Iranian satellite with a theocratic government.” But this option is better than having a national Shiite government allied with Iran and trying to impose its version of a Shiite theocracy on all of Iraq, and a Shiite-dominated military whom the Sunni’s view as “alien and treasonous.” Regionalism will benefit the interests of the most Iraqi people, whether Shiite, Sunni or Kurdish. It is the most democratic option, and it will allow for the soonest U.S. withdrawal.

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