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Trading Places

by [David Pollock](#)

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Articles & Testimony

After two decades of direct U.S. involvement, what went so wrong in Afghanistan compared to the relative successes seen in Iraq?

One striking foreign policy irony so far this century is the American failure in Afghanistan but relative success in Iraq. The Afghanistan war was once widely viewed as “the good war of necessity”; Iraq, as “the bad war of choice.” Yet our involvement in Afghanistan ended in abject withdrawal and with its government in complete collapse, while the Iraqi government has kept muddling through, with U.S.-led coalition support, and with improving prospects to survive if not to thrive.

This is not to deny that Afghanistan was a war of necessity. Four months before 9/11, I had already penned a memo to the late Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose opening line was simply this: “The U.S. can no longer live with Taliban support for terrorism.” Afterward, given the Taliban’s insistence on protecting al-Qaeda, direct military intervention was required to remove that intolerable threat. Nevertheless, two decades and trillions of dollars later, it’s the United States that is gone and the Taliban that is back in power.

Up until 2021, that was not a foregone conclusion. For much of the initial decade and more of the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the former was generally a much calmer arena than the latter, and with a much smaller U.S. troop presence. That impression of easier manageability, however, has clearly turned out to be shortsighted.

What went so wrong in Afghanistan, by comparison with what is finally going right in Iraq? The contributing factors are many, though the ones usually cited are not necessarily to blame. For example, the common claim that Iraq rapidly and fatally distracted our focus from Afghanistan is unconvincing, simply because the latter arena fared reasonably well for several years after the massive American intervention in Iraq. Rather, ironically, the sheer volume of American money thrown at Afghanistan was problematic, because the ready cash flow rendered the country and its government so corrupt, dysfunctional, and dependent that it could not stand without us.

Then there was neighboring Pakistan, which supported the Taliban effectively almost throughout the two decades. Another, more debatable reason for failure was the American effort to construct unified Afghan security forces instead of working more heavily with ethnic or local warlord militias, who were more fragmented (and often more brutal) but more motivated. Finally—and decisively—is the deliberate American decision to negotiate a surrender with the Taliban over the heads of the Afghan government we were supposedly supporting.

In each of these ways, Iraq is very different. It has considerable indigenous oil, gas, and other resources, so from the beginning direct U.S. aid has been on a lower and less disruptive scale. For all its malign interference, Iran, its most powerful neighbor, has generally striven to keep Iraq's friendly, Shi'a-majority government in place, and to defeat ISIS there. The United States wisely decided to partner separately with the relatively loyal and effective Kurdish peshmerga militia and later with other local militias, rather than trying to coerce them all into a "unified" national force. Finally, and again decisively, the total U.S. military withdrawal in late 2011 was soon followed, in response to the near-fatal rise of ISIS, by a limited yet sustained return of U.S. forces. Imagine the outcome if instead we had offered, a la Afghanistan, to remove all our troops in exchange for some imaginary "power-sharing" agreement with the Islamic State.

Fast forward to the latest Iraqi national election last October. Electoral turnout remained at a disappointing 40 percent—but this election was more peaceful, and freer of fraud or intimidation, than every previous election. Furthermore, the most violent, extreme, anti-American, and pro-Iran parties suffered heavy electoral losses. The precise nature of Iraq's next governing coalition remains to be seen, and it will likely be fairly weak, internally divided, and vulnerable to Iranian pressures. But even the mercurial Shi'a militia warlord/politician and power broker Muqtada al-Sadr is now signaling that he wants U.S. troops to remain in Iraq as military "advisers," now that their "combat" operations have officially ended, to help keep the country safe and stable.

Consider also the case of Kurdish autonomy as another instance of relative U.S.-Iraqi success. Ever since 1991, Iraq's Kurdistan region has enjoyed a large measure of self-government and freedom from Baghdad's control thanks to American protection from the air. This was a contentious yet generally peaceful arrangement, first de facto under Saddam and then de jure after his overthrow by American troops in 2003. In October 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held a referendum on independence, meaning secession from Iraq. The proposition passed overwhelmingly; but this was followed immediately by a brief, bitter Arab-Kurdish armed conflict in which the latter lost about a third of the territory and half the oil previously in their possession.

The man who helped organize this referendum, as chief of staff to then-KRG President Masoud Barzani, was a veteran Kurdish politician named Fuad Hussein. Immediately after the dust settled on this conflict, he was neither forced into exile nor imprisoned for treason—as happened, for instance, in the parallel case of officials from Catalonia, which held its own "illegal" referendum on independence at almost exactly the same time. Instead, Fuad Hussein was appointed finance minister of Iraq's central government and now serves as its foreign minister. More broadly, Kurdish autonomy remains in force, even as arguments with Baghdad over budgets and borders persist.

In short, then, Iraq has managed a deep ethnic divide within its borders with creative compromises, and punctuated only occasionally by major confrontations. Its comparatively successful formula of regional autonomy, for all its complications and deficiencies, could be a model for others in the Middle East and beyond. In fact, Iraq, not long ago

considered a hopelessly divided and very nearly failed state, is today avidly hosting meetings and brokering tentative understandings among other archrivals in the region, including Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

Even more surprisingly, something similar can be said about the trajectory of relations between Iraqi Arab Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. For well over a decade, and until quite recently, Iraq was a practical synonym for sectarian strife. But for the past few years, the country's Sunnis and Shi'a, while hardly a model of harmony, are mostly feuding politically rather than fighting a vicious civil war.

Overall, then, the prospects are surprisingly promising for the emergence of Iraq as a fairly stable, self-sufficient, non-belligerent, and even democratic country that is able to balance decent working relations with the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Arab neighbors alike. The startling inclusion of Iraq alongside Israel as the only two Mideast states invited to the Biden administration's "Summit for Democracy" symbolizes recognition of this unexpected reality.

To be sure, Iraq's success remains incomplete, fragile, and contingent. The latest vivid evidence for that was the failed drone assassination attempt against Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November, almost certainly carried out by a pro-Iran militia, though perhaps not on direct orders from Tehran. The outcome in Iraq therefore depends, in significant part, on the depth of the U.S. commitment to engage with Baghdad in the security, diplomatic, and economic spheres.

The stakes for the United States in preserving these gains are high, while the costs in blood, treasure, or political capital are now very low. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq has vast energy reserves. For the next few decades at least, unless and until the world truly transitions away from fossil fuels, these resources will remain important to all the major global economic powers (especially China), and therefore ultimately to the United States.

Moreover, again in sharp contrast with Afghanistan, Iraq shares long and busy borders with major U.S. allies and adversaries: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, and Iran. Its stability and cooperation are therefore important to major U.S. interests in the region as a whole, and to strengthening American credibility more broadly. Iraq remains a key player in preventing the reemergence of ISIS or other global terrorist threats, and potentially in containing Iran, both by negotiations and by deterrence.

The broader lessons of these ironic comparisons are twin twists on the old Latin maxims about "jus ad bellum." First, a "good war" provides no guarantee of victory. Second, even a "bad war" may yield an outcome worth defending. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was an unforced error—yet now we should stay engaged there. In a final irony, the domestic political price of the Afghanistan withdrawal debacle makes it much more likely that we will do exactly that.

David Pollock, the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, formerly served on the secretary of state's Policy Planning Staff from 1996 to 2001. This article was originally published [on the American Purpose website](#). ❖



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