

Yes, Iraq Is Unraveling

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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Loosening the ties that bind Iraq together is a risk, but holding too tightly is the greater danger.

As American troops were pulling out of Iraq in 2010, the U.S. effort to stabilize the country resembled the task of an exhausted man who had just pushed a huge boulder up a steep hill. Momentum had been painstakingly built up and the crest approached. Was it safe to stop pushing and hope that the momentum would take the boulder over the top? Or would the boulder grind to a halt and then slowly, frighteningly roll back toward us?

Now we know -- and to be honest, the answer is hardly a surprise. Iraq is a basket case these days, and none of its problems came out of the blue. In the latest bout of sectarian and ethnic bloodletting, coordinated bomb attacks ripped through Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad and also northern Iraq, killing more than 30 people. The spasm of violence followed clashes between the Iraqi army and Sunni protesters and insurgents last month, where the federal government temporarily lost control of some town centers and urban neighborhoods in Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala provinces.

Negative indicators abound: Armed civilian militias are reactivating, tit-for-tat bombings are targeting Sunni and Shiite mosques, and some Iraqi military forces are breaking down into ethnic-sectarian components or suffering from chronic absenteeism. Numerous segments of Iraq's body politic -- Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and Shia -- are exasperated over the government's inability to address political or economic inequities, and are talking seriously about partition.

On April 23, the federal military miscalculated when its raid on a protest site in the northern town of Hawija turned into a bloody firefight, and scores of civilians were killed. This event has the potential to become an iconic rallying call for insurgent groups such as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the neo-Baathist Naqshbandi movement, which can fit it into its calls for ongoing resistance against a "Safavid occupation" of Iraq -- a reference to the Persian dynasty that

evokes Sunni Arab fears of the Shia-led government in Baghdad.

The resurgence of violence since 2010 is shown very clearly in the metrics used to gauge the strength of the insurgency. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Iraq Violence Database has tracked violence since 2004, drawing on both open-source and privileged information provided by security forces in Iraq. In the first quarter of 2011, monthly attacks bottomed out at an average of 358 reported incidents -- the lowest quarterly average since 2004. By the first quarter of 2012, the average monthly attacks had risen to 539. By the first quarter of 2013, it was 804. These figures not only provide evidence of an increasingly active insurgency, but one that has more than replaced anti-U.S. targeting with Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence.

So what happens next? Some veteran observers, like former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, view the current period as a return to the conditions of 2006 and 2007, when Iraq plunged into civil war-like violence. But there is an alternative comparison that may hold at least as much weight -- namely, the period beginning in 2003, when the international coalition's mistakes created the opening for Iraq's insurgent groups to grow in the first place. The Iraqi government is now making many of the same mistakes the United States made back then: It is alienating the Sunnis and occupying their communities with a heavy-handed, military-led approach that doesn't differentiate between diehard militants and the mass of peaceable civilians.

The Iraqi government has tried to deflect blame for its own failing on the Syrian uprising, arguing that it was suffering from the spillover of violence next door. But that excuse doesn't hold weight -- security improvements had already ground to a halt before the Syrian crisis began in spring 2011. Nor can the upswing in violence be ascribed solely to ancient Sunni-Shia hatreds: The embers of sectarianism were stoked back into life by the Baghdad government's unwillingness to meet demands for an end to the collective punishment of Sunnis for the crimes of the Baathist regime.

But the real driver of violence in Iraq is arguably Baghdad's over-centralization of power, which came too soon and was infused with sectarian paranoia. The United States was initially wary of this danger: The formula of all-inclusive power sharing -- *muhāsasa* in Arabic -- was a cornerstone of U.S.-led policy in Iraq until 2008, and the United States also made sure that the principle of administrative decentralization was baked into the Iraqi Constitution. This policy reflected a powerful truth -- that post-Saddam Iraq was not ready for a political system with absolute winners and absolute losers.

But starting in 2008, Maliki re-centralized power, leaning on an increasingly narrow circle of Shia opponents of the previous dictatorship. And like all successful revolutionaries, this clique is paranoid about counterrevolution and has set about rebuilding a version of the authoritarian system it sought for decades to overthrow. Maliki's inner circle dominates the selection of military commanders down to brigade level, controls the federal court, and has seized control of the central bank. The executive branch is rapidly eclipsing all checks and balances that were put in place to guarantee a new autocracy did not emerge.

The root of Iraq's violence is thus not ancient hatreds between Sunni and Shia or Kurd and Arab, but between decentralizers and recentralizers -- and between those who wish to put Iraq's violent past behind them, and those determined to continually refight it. The demands that have been consistently stated by the Kurdish and Sunni Arab anti-Maliki opposition could not be clearer. First, the opposition demands devolution of fiscal authority to the Kurdistan Regional Government and the provinces, encapsulated in a revenue-sharing law that will provide a formula for the proportion of the budget allocated to the KRG and provinces. Second, it demands the implementation of the system of checks and balances on the executive branch -- particularly by empowering parliament and ensuring an independent judiciary. Third, it calls for a comprehensive truth and reconciliation process that provides justice for those damaged by Saddam's regime, but stops short of collectively punishing Sunnis.

The United States laid the foundations for these democratic traditions and can still be a powerful voice in getting Iraq back on track. There are some encouraging signs on this front. Secretary of State John Kerry has begun engaging directly and firmly with Maliki, and puts Iraq in the top tier of challenges to be addressed. Washington has been active in bringing Iraqi and Turkish officials together to discuss their long-term energy interests, encapsulated in the prospect of a strategic pipeline corridor that could see more Iraqi oil flowing through Turkey and less through the chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz close to Iran. Facing Sunni militancy and growing internal challenges from within his own Shiite community -- as shown by unimpressive provincial election results -- Maliki may be unusually open to taking conciliatory steps to mend his relations with the Kurds, the Sunni Arabs, and the Turks.

Violence in Iraq is likely to continue to worsen as long as the recentralization of power is taken to extremes. The Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities now need a compelling reason to stay inside the unraveling framework that is today's Iraq. The 2014 national elections offer a potential restart button for this nation-building process, but replacing Maliki cannot be the precondition for a new strategy for saving Iraq. The premier could very well win: He holds many advantages heading into the polls, including control of most key ministries, the security and intelligence apparatus, and the federal courts. The key is to ensure that whoever rules Iraq after the 2014 elections feels maximum pressure from the international community and Iraq's factions to return to a looser, freer national construct.

If Washington chooses to back Iraq's decentralizers, it will not be alone. For their own diverse reasons, almost every actor working in Iraq today -- the opposition, the Turks, even the Iranians -- would welcome a less divisive government in Baghdad. In other words, the effort stands a chance of success.

The experiment of building a new strongman in Baghdad has not yielded a more stable Iraq. Loosening the ties that bind Iraq together is a risk, but holding too tightly is the greater danger.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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