Sitting on Bayonets

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Articles & Testimony

Wars are ill-judged by their military outcomes or by the political repercussions that may follow in their wake. They often unleash social and political forces the ultimate impact of which can only be discerned years on. And they frequently produce unintended consequences that can pose complex and vexing challenges of their own that may contain within them the seeds of future conflicts. Those pondering the implications of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) one year on would do well to keep that in mind.

To a great extent, OIF was supposed to take care of the unfinished business of the Gulf War. It was intended to eliminate, once and for all, the regime of Saddam Hussein and the threat it posed to regional stability, and to set the stage for the emergence of a stable, peaceful Iraq, free of weapons of mass destruction, with a legitimate, representative government on the path to democracy.

The Iraq War had several additional objectives: leveraging regime change in Iraq to deter Iranian and Syrian support for terror; enabling the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia, thereby eliminating a source of friction with the kingdom and a pretext for the jihadist's war on America; establishing conditions conducive to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and clearing the way for political reform and democratization in the region-the putative cure for the dysfunctional Arab politics that led to 9/11.

The initial phase of OIF was an outstanding success. Coalition forces took Baghdad and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in three weeks, immediately yielding substantial benefits: the Iraqi people were liberated from a tyrant, the Middle East was freed from the threat posed by an aggressive regime and the United States was able to pull its troops out of Saudi Arabia. But the occupation of Iraq has been beset by troubles.

Efforts to restore basic services, quash violent insurgencies in Sunni and Shi'i regions, and establish a legitimate Iraqi government, have encountered numerous difficulties. Instability and violence in Iraq will pose a new set of challenges for the people of that country, for the Middle East and for the United States. Meanwhile, efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have foundered.

While it is still too soon to judge how all this will end, or to assess the historical significance of this war, it is possible to discern some of its near-term consequences, and to speculate about their long-term impact on the United States, Iraq and the region.

Imperiled Transition

The nature of the war and the way in which it was fought had a direct impact on the character of its aftermath—particularly the emergence of the insurgency centered in the so-called "Sunni triangle", and the transformation of Iraq into a major battleground in the jihadists' war on the West.

Although the coalition quickly took Baghdad and rapidly occupied the rest of the country, it failed to achieve a key precondition for postwar stability: ensuring that Saddam's hardcore supporters were either killed or captured and that those who survived the war emerged from it broken and defeated. This was in part a function of the decision by U.S. commanders and policymakers to favor a small force employing speed and overwhelming precision fire to bring

about the rapid collapse of the regime in place of a larger, slower force designed to defeat the enemy methodically. The military planners made the right decision. The latter option would have produced higher casualties, provided opponents of the war with more time to press for a halt to the fighting before America's war aims were met, and given Baghdad time to wage a "scorched earth" campaign. This outcome was also a function of Baghdad's reliance on Saddam's Fedayeen and Quds Army thugs as cannon fodder, enabling large numbers of hardcore members of the sec-rity services, the Special Republican Guard and the Ba'ath Party to survive the war unscathed.

The United States, moreover, did not prepare adequately for "the war after the war." Insufficient effort and resources were devoted, at least initially, to the pursuit of many of the second- and third-tier regime personalities who went on to play key roles in the postwar insurgency.

Likewise, because the coalition went in "light" in order to ensure surprise, it lacked (and still does) the numbers needed to secure large expanses of Iraq's borders against foreign jihadists entering the country from abroad, or to ensure security, law and order in the so-called "Sunni triangle" and elsewhere. As a result, local, tribal and party militias have proliferated to fill the security void.

The coalition now faces terrorist challenges from foreign and home-grown jihadists, and threats to stability from the militias. While the number of foreign jihadists may not be great, they often bring to bear expertise, experience, a perceptive grasp of how to cause mayhem and a commitment to die a martyr's death, all of which enable them to have an impact out of all proportion to their numbers. To their ranks should be added thousands of Iraqi salafists from the villages and towns of the "Sunni triangle", whose numbers swelled in the past decade as a result of official encouragement of religion (Saddam Hussein's so-called "faith campaign") and infusions of money and religious propaganda from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The existence of the militias will likewise create a heightened potential for violence as Iraqis jostle for political advantage as the transfer of sovereignty and elections draw near.

The attitude of many Iraqis toward the coalition has been a major complicating factor. While some Iraqis are indeed staunchly pro-American (especially the Kurds), the attitudes of most range from ambivalence to open hostility, due to past betrayals, recent and ongoing humiliations and U.S. support for Israel.

Shi'a in particular remember the failure of the United States to come to their rescue after encouraging them to revolt in 1991, while many Iraqis, particularly Sunnis, were humiliated by the defeat and dissolution of the Iraqi army and the heavy-handed tactics sometimes used by American occupation forces. Many Iraqis are apprehensive about U.S. plans for democracy; some Shi'a believe that the United States might eventually install a new Sunni strongman to ensure stability (the recent rehabilitation of former Ba'ath Party members have fed these fears), while many Sunnis believe that democracy will lead to their marginalization.

These suspicions have been compounded by the perception that the failure to halt looting after the fall of the old regime and delays in restoring basic services are an American tactic to keep Iraqis down while it exploits Iraq's oil wealth. Recent revelations concerning abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees by American personnel deepened the hatred some Iraqis feel for the United States. Such resentments and the fear of retribution by former regime elements have almost certainly deterred many Iraqis from assisting the coalition.

The new Iraqi interim government will inherit the insurgency, the foreign terrorist threat and, most likely, the challenge of dealing with the militias, but will lack the means to deal with these problems on its own. For this reason, Coalition forces will almost certainly remain in Iraq for the foreseeable future, though this will likely be a source of friction between the Coalition and the Iraqi interim government, which will probably seek to limit the Coalition military's freedom of action. Populist politicians and extremists will likely use the issue to discredit political rivals, and the longer Coalition forces stay, the more the resentment against them is likely to grow.

Ties between Washington and Baghdad will likely be tense and difficult. A pro-American Iraq is not in the cards; the

best that can be hoped for now is an uneasy partnership based on an unsentimental assessment of shared interests. Moreover, it is not impossible that an elected Iraqi government will seek the early departure of coalition forces-through peaceful or violent means. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the country's security problems will stress its fragile new institutions of governance and greatly complicate the transition from dictatorship to democracy in a country that faces numerous other problems.

American Credibility in the Aftermath

The image of American power and competence evinced by the rapid coalition military victory has been badly tarnished by the failure of the coalition rapidly to halt postwar looting, restore order, repair the country's crumbling infrastruc-ture, face down anti-coalition insurgents and halt terror attacks. This might affect the credibility of future American deterrent and coercive threats. Likewise, flawed pre-war claims regarding Iraq's WMD have raised questions about the credibility of American intelligence.

Ironically, while the coalition has not yet found WMD in Iraq, the war may have implications for proliferation elsewhere. There are persistent reports that Iraq transferred WMD or related equipment to Syria prior to the war and that some Iraqi weapons scientists may have left the country, finding refuge and, in some cases employment, in other states of former or current proliferation concern, like Libya, Syria and Iran. For now, it remains unclear whether the WMD programs of neighboring states benefited from regime change in Baghdad, although for Iran and North Korea, the war probably confirmed the importance of a nuclear deterrent when dealing with the United States. North Korea's apparent decision to expand its nuclear arsenal in the aftermath of OIF probably reflects this concern.

Conversely, by inducing Libya to dismantle its WMD programs and Iran to reveal nuclear procurement data in order to avert international pressure or U.S. military action, the war may have helped U.S. intelligence to grasp better the scope of the international supplier network run by Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan.

Finally, the invasion of Iraq has undoubtedly complicated the War on Terror. The invasion and events connected with it (such as the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. personnel) deeply humiliated many Iraqis and Arabs, and for many, confirmed Osama bin Laden's image of the West. The Iraq War will likely provide a new crop of recruits for jihadist groups in the Middle East, Europe and Asia.

Due to a lack of border controls and a functioning central government, Iraq has emerged as a principle arena of operations for jihadist groups committed to the fight against the United States and the establishment of democracy in Iraq, and a staging ground for attacks against neighboring states such as Turkey and Jordan. Re-establishing control over Iraq's borders and halting the activities of such groups will pose major challenges to a new Iraqi government.

Reshaping the Middle East

The United States went into Iraq with the declared intention of transforming it into a democracy that could serve as a model for the region. However, developments in Iraq since the war have served to underscore the formidable obstacles facing such an undertaking in a deeply divided society that continues to be wracked by communal tensions and political violence.

The influential role played by Shi'i and Sunni clerics in post-Saddam Iraq has raised concerns that Iraq may be on the way to becoming an Islamic republic. Because Saddam Hussein tolerated—and after the Gulf War encouraged—religious observance, while ruthlessly suppressing secular parties other than the ruling Ba'ath, the mosque networks and the Islamists were the best-organized entities in Iraq after his fall. These groups and their associated militias moved quickly to fill the void of authority in Iraq that followed the demise of the Ba'ath regime. The coalition's willingness to treat clerics as authority figures has likewise reinforced the role of religion and the clergy in post-Saddam Iraq (although the Islamists among them remain wary of the coalition's perceived commitment to secular

democracy.)

For now, however, an "Islamic Republic" of Iraq seems an unlikely outcome. What is more certain is that Islam and Islamists are likely to play a greater role in public life in post-Saddam Iraq than at any other time in the modern history of the country, adding another layer of complexity to efforts to build a stable democracy based on cooperation and compromise among Iraqi's disparate sects and ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the unprecedented participation of Kurdish and Shi'a personalities and political parties in Iraq's cultural and political life is generating pressures for political change in neighboring states. This is likely to have dramatic implications for Iraq and the region. The enfranchisement of Iraq's Kurds has engendered concern by other Iraqis (particularly Turkomen and Shi'a) who fear that Kurdish gains will come at their expense, and may embolden Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iran to demand greater political freedoms. The Shi'a revival has likewise alarmed many Iraqi Sunnis who fear marginalization and a loss of privilege and has apparently prompted foreign jihadists in Iraq to attack Shi'a worshippers and religious shrines in an effort to foment civil war. The rise of the Shi'a as a political force has also produced tensions with the Kurds con-cerning the role of religion in public life and the issue of federalism.

At the same time, there have been countervailing tendencies. In April 2004, Sunni and Shi'a insurgents fighting coalition forces made common cause, at least on a rhetorical and symbolic level. It remains to be seen whether a shared interest in fighting and expelling coalition forces can provide the basis for a military alliance.

The ascendancy of the Shi'a in Iraq has major implications for Iran. The re-emergence of Najaf and Karbala as centers of Shi'i religious learning and bas-tions of the dominant quietistic tradition within Shi'i Islam could undermine the preeminent status that Qom (in Iran) has enjoyed in the Shi'i world since the 1920s, further delegitimizing Iran's doctrine of clerical rule.

On the other hand, the rise of the Shi'a could lay the groundwork for the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq. During the war and after, operatives of Lebanese Hizballah were reportedly sent to southern Iraq to gather intelligence concerning coalition forces—likely at the behest of Tehran. Likewise, the Badr Organization (formerly the Badr Corps militia) of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which enjoys strong ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has established a significant presence in southern Iraq and Baghdad, potentially giving Tehran a degree of leverage over developments in Iraq. As a result, the Islamic Republic could, through its agents and allies, do great harm to coalition forces in Iraq, should it desire to do so. The ironic result is that the coalition military presence in Iraq limits, rather than enhances, Washington's ability to pressure Tehran regarding support for terror and its nuclear program.

As to the future, an Iraq in which Kurds and Shi'a hold senior government positions is unlikely to consider Iran a significant threat and is apt to have normal, if not cordial, relations with Tehran—an outcome that might not be completely to Washington's liking.

Finally, the rise of Iraq's Shi'a could embolden Shi'a communities in the Gulf to press for greater political rights. While in some places this might generate momentum for change, in others it might engender a backlash by Sunnis who view Shi'a political aspirations with trepidation. The United States may well be blamed by both friends and enemies in the Arab-Islamic world for any social and political tensions generated by such demands, just as it has been accused of conspiring with the Shi'a to corrupt and undermine orthodox (Sunni) Islam by some Al-Qaeda types. In this way, U.S. policy in Iraq could affect relations with allies in the Middle East and efforts to encourage political reform throughout the region.

In response to U.S. efforts to democratize Iraq, several Arab regimes have announced their intention to pursue reforms or have introduced what are in many cases token measures calculated to accommodate popular demands

for change and deflect American pressure for reform (though some of these steps had long been contemplated).

American calls for democracy have, however, been greeted with skepticism by some Iraqis, and by the numerous critics of U.S. policy in the Arab world. These critics suspect U.S. motives, reject the neo-imperial aspects of the "imposition" of democracy from without, and fear that political reform will empower Islamists. Despite these qualms, 9/11 and OIF have placed the issue of political reform and democratization front and center on the Arab political agenda, fueling demands for reform and change.

The opposition of autocratic elites to this new strand in American Middle East policy is not surprising. They have much to lose should democracy take root. The United States, however, has to find ways to continue to work with its autocratic allies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf—while prodding and pressing them to engage gradually in real reform and to open up their political systems without fomenting instability. Failure to do so will only ensure the perpetuation of a status quo that does not serve the long-term interests of the United States, its allies or the peoples of the region, deepening cynicism toward the United States. Having come this far, Washington cannot back off without doing additional harm to its interests in the Middle East, though recent revelations concerning the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. military personnel will further complicate these efforts.

The Way Ahead

The epochal events of the past year have already had a profound effect on the Arab-Islamic world. The long-term impact of these events, however, will be influenced, more than anything else, by whether the Coalition and the UN succeed in overseeing the formation of a legitimate (that is, elected) Iraqi government in the coming months.

The prospects for such an outcome are at best uncertain, and it seems likely that for the foreseeable future, Iraq will have a weak and divided central government. The demise of strong central government, in conjunction with the rise of local politics, may in fact prove to be Iraq's political salvation by providing a more healthy basis on which to build a viable, humane polity—if Iraq can avoid a descent into rampant political violence or civil war in the meantime.

Such an outcome will not, however, happen on its own. Coalition forces will continue to play a key role in preventing the political transition from being derailed by violence or hijacked by extremists. For this reason, they should stay in Iraq as long as they are needed and welcome. Growing impatience with the coalition presence, however, has already begun to limit its political and military influence (which was never as great as coalition officials liked to think.) Iraqis should be encouraged, when feasible, to find Iraqi solutions to their problems, and when coalition forces are needed, they should be used only after consulting with local and national Iraqi leaders. Care should be taken to avoid political collateral damage that could undermine the ability of the coalition to continue to play a critical role in shepherding the transition. Failure to do so could render the coalition presence untenable before the necessary Iraqi political and security structures have been put in place.

The Bush Administration must reconcile itself to its diminishing influence in Iraq and its inability to control or master the forces unleashed by its war there. But if the Administration acts with a realistic grasp of what is possible and intervenes only when and where essential, it may yet succeed in helping to create a new Iraq that may be far from a model democracy but still worthy of America's support.

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