Iraq Four Years After the U.S.-led Invasion

Assessing the Crisis and Searching for a Way Forward

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Well after the fourth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraq is stalemated between two trends: one bent on escalating sectarian violence into full-fledged civil war; the other on transforming the conflict into peaceful institutional politics. The U.S. strategy announced on January 10, 2007 was a last-ditch attempt to break out of the stalemate, stopping further escalation of the conflict and moving the country decisively toward a political solution. This Policy Outlook examines the viability of the current U.S. strategy in the context of domestic (Iraqi), regional, and international factors.

Since the bombing of the Shi'i holy shrines in Samarra in February 2006, Iraq has effectively descended into a medium-level sectarian civil war centered mainly on Baghdad. Violence directed at the coalition forces continues and criminal lawlessness is no less rampant; however, the main source of violence is a Shi'i–Sunni fight for supremacy in Baghdad and its environs. This sectarian conflict has blocked the progress of the positive political process that characterized 2005, eroded confidence in the central authorities and their international backers, and strengthened radical and militant tendencies in both Sunni and Shi'i camps. In human terms, it has driven tens of thousands of families out of Baghdad and over two million people out of the country in general. This conflict represents the largest displacement and refugee crisis in the region since 1948. The continuation of the sectarian conflict has weakened centrist tendencies and reversed the political progress of 2005, undermining the nascent institutions of power and inviting aggressive regional intervention.

Many of the causes of the current conflicts predate the U.S. invasion, but were exacerbated by the dynamics set in train by the mismanagement of the

occupation and flawed transitional policies. The occupation has been characterized since 2005 by a *de facto* Shi'i and Kurd monopoly of the process and the marginalization of Sunni Arabs. The various Iraqi actors have been and will continue to vie for control over both the distribution of resources and the levers of political authority in post-Saddam Iraq.

The escalating violence has weakened moderates in society at large as well as within the major political parties. The massive exodus of middle class professionals, businessmen, and intellectuals into neighboring countries weakened the social groups that oppose the politics of brutal coercion and long for security and the assertion of a common Iraqi nationalism. Within many of the current parties, the centrist leaders and factions have lost ground to more radical and militant voices (Sadr's Mahdi army, for example, which had initially trumpeted a strong pan-Iraqi nationalist discourse, has shifted to a discourse of sectarian Shi'i revenge); and the Badr and Mahdi armies seem now in contest to prove their worthiness as anti-Sunni militias. Sunni groups also have had to respond to rising sectarian tensions by shoring up their sectarian credentials and taking extreme positions. The rise of militant Islamism among both Shi'a and Sunna has exacerbated the situation. In addition, the inclusion of extremists in government (e.g. the Mahdi Army) has brought extremist and sectarian outlooks into both the army and the police forces. This shift undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of these agencies. The shock waves of sectarian conflict have also reverberated around the region, nearly resulting in Sunni–Shi'i violence in Lebanon in the winter of 2007 and raising fears of sectarian trouble in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states.

Faced with this situation, in January 2007 President George W. Bush announced a new policy for Iraq.[1] The plan was based on the principle of raising the number of U.S. troops, particularly in Baghdad, in order to break the momentum of the insurgency and establish security at least in the capital, while at the same time increasing training and equipment for the Iraqi army and police forces and bringing them more directly into security operations. Bush also announced that "the Iraqi government plans to take responsibility for security in all of Iraq's provinces by November 2007." The policy shift included much tougher rhetoric against Iran and Syria, accusing them of supporting terrorists and aiding forces that were attacking U.S. troops. The policy not only signaled a drive to prevent a Somali-type collapse, but also carried the ambition to reverse the decline of the past year. The fate of this strategy is contingent on the constraints put in place by the interconnectivity of domestic, regional, and international factors. Indeed, the strategy continues to face a maze of conflict drivers.

The Transitional Process:
Dilemmas and Blunders

The invasion and occupation of Iraq constituted the greatest nation-building challenge the United States has faced since World War II. With sparse planning and a flawed understanding of Iraq's political and cultural intricacies, the United States undertook the colossal task of invading Iraq, dismantling the old power structures, and reforming Iraq's polity, economy, and society along the lines of a liberal market-based democracy. Iraq's realities, however, proved far more challenging. Iraq's totalitarian system had rested on oil revenues, a command economy, coercive mass mobilization, and kinship politics. Wars and sanctions had only exacerbated inherent stresses and tensions. Political power structures were personalized, and economic and social institutions were in crisis. There were no social forces to act as agents of change, and no regional environment supportive of such change.

Iraq was emerging from half a century of authoritarian-military rule, with a thorny legacy of devastating wars, crippling sanctions, misrule, mismanagement of the oil-based command economy, and all-pervasive nepotism and corruption. These conditions drained much of the nation's resources, destroyed its once vibrant civil society, personalized institutions of power, and left the nation severely divided. Following the demise of the Baathist regime, a plethora of social, political, institutional, and cultural forces were unleashed. The various factions sought to reshape the political order and redefine national institutions in their favor to redress grievances or regain privileges. In other words, the conditions for the natural emergence of stable democratic politics did not exist.

The post-conflict transition had been envisaged by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) along liberal free-market and democratic lines, with federal and decentralized structures. While this transition opened up a historical opportunity to restructure the Iraqi polity, both in its system of governance and as a nation-state, it has also laid bare pre-existing fracture lines and unleashed a large number of previously dormant forces of conflict. The American understanding of the challenges of transition was based on a very limited comprehension of the workings of Iraq's previous totalitarian regime. The lack of postwar planning and the unpreparedness of U.S. forces to deal with the post-war situation only made matters worse. The ad hoc reforms undertaken by the CPA under Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, particularly the summary dismissal of the army and virtually the entire Baathist state, have been singled out as perhaps the largest blunders; however, a disregard for the regional impact of the invasion was another serious gap. Indeed the transition process, which has gone through three phases and is now in its fourth, has moved forward and backward in fits and starts and has proven to be far from smooth or unidirectional.

Phases of Transition

Phase One: Bremer and the U.S.-Controlled CPA
The first phase of transition was that of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which replaced the Iraqi authorities after the fall of Saddam and governed Iraq between May 2003 and June 2004. The CPA was under the complete authority of the coalition forces and was headed by Paul Bremer. As one of his first acts in office, Bremer dissolved the Iraqi army and other entities of the Baathist state. This was followed in June 2003 by the naming of an Iraqi Governing Council composed of hand-picked Iraqi leaders close to the United States to advise and assist the CPA. This Council was upgraded in September to a government in which ministers were appointed to head the various ministries; this government still had no independent authority but was subordinate to the CPA. In March of 2004 a provisional Iraqi constitution, drawn up jointly by the CPA and friendly Iraqi leaders, was announced. On the basis of this provisional constitution, political authority was formally handed in June of 2004 from the CPA to an Iraqi interim government.

The CPA phase was characterized by a number of radical decisions that had the multiple objectives of dismantling the old regime (dissolution of the defense and security agencies and the information ministry, and massive de-Baathification purges), decentralizing the state, and liberalizing the economy. These drastic and controversial measures created a political and power vacuum. Prior to the war, the ratio of security forces to the civilian population was in the region of 34 per 1000; afterwards, it dropped to less than 3 per 1000—at a moment when the new conditions had opened a Pandora's box of dangerous and uncontrollable forces. Intelligence capacities were also suddenly down to zero. Unprepared either to keep domestic security or protect the porous borders, the CPA destroyed Iraqi sovereignty but failed to set up adequate instruments for securing and administering the occupied country.

The sense of Iraqi disempowerment was felt across the political spectrum, embittering even those who were supportive of the removal of the old regime. Hostile forces, drawn mainly from the dismantled ruling party, domestic Islamists, and foreign fundamentalist groups (such as al-Qaeda), initiated an armed campaign to dislodge the occupation forces and block any smooth U.S.-managed transition. Amidst the chaos, the CPA phenomenally failed to deliver security and basic public services. Plans to create a new army faltered and attempts to build freely elected provincial local governments stumbled in the face of mounting violence.

The country grew rapidly polarized between those reluctantly cooperating with the U.S.-managed transition those working against it. While the bulk of society was—and continues to be—more inclined toward peaceful and institutional transition, violent segments escalated their armed activities. Public support for the CPA-led transition process ebbed and flowed in

response to the blunders or successes of coalition forces as well as the popularity or unpopularity of the actions of the various insurgencies.

The CPA managed to dismantle the old structures quite easily, but it was unable to create new ones, let alone stabilize them and strengthen them. The original plan to purge and reform came to naught. The transfer of sovereignty in 2004 was the first major mid-course correction taken in the hope of dampening opposition, weakening support for the insurgency, and forging a new way forward. Its main objective was the Iraqization and legitimization of the process. Perhaps the only solid change was the drafting of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which was the basis of the subsequent elections and constitution-writing process.

Phase Two: The Interim Government of Iyad Allawi
Phase two of the transition was that of the interim government headed by Iyad Allawi, which remained in place from June 2004 to April 2005. The main achievement of this period was the holding of general elections in January 2005, the first concrete step toward the re-establishment of Iraqi legitimacy. Because of low Sunni participation in the vote, the Shi'i and Kurdish blocs ended up being overrepresented in the new assembly. Parallel to these political developments, the insurgency that had begun with bombings of the Jordanian embassy and UN headquarters in August 2003 steadily gained momentum. The war that President Bush had declared over in May 2003 had apparently just begun. As coalition forces struggled to neutralize it, the insurgency took an increasingly large toll on coalition troops, on Iraqi government personnel and institutions, and on civilians. The interim government phase, in other words, was one of political progress but security decline.

The appointment of the Allawi government in June 2004 was mediated by the UN through the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi in order to lend it regional and international legitimacy. Nevertheless, the transfer of sovereignty was still problematic. The new government's domestic legitimacy hinged on holding fair elections and delivering security. It held elections, but failed to deliver security. With 8.5 million voters defying the insecurity and participating in the January 2005 elections, the electoral feat dealt a significant political blow to the logic of violence; however the elections also had less positive results: they marginalized Sunnis and over-represented the Shi'i bloc (especially the United Iraqi Alliance). This strengthened the rejectionist and militant Islamist groups among the Sunni Arab community, delegitimized the democratic process as one that would provide fair power-sharing, and reinforced the logic of using force to respond to perceived institutional injustices. In April 2005, the elected assembly chose the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as president and endorsed a new coalition government headed by Ibrahim al Jaafari as prime minister.

Phase Three: Constituent Elections and the Legacy of Jaafari

Phase three of the transition was that of the Jaafari government, which lasted from April 2005 to May 2006. During this period the assembly established a committee to draft a new permanent constitution for Iraq. The draft constitution was approved in a national referendum in October of that year, followed by new legislative elections in December. During this period, however, the insurgency and insecurity only intensified. The conflict took a dramatic new turn in February 2006 with the bombing of the Shi'i holy shrines at Samarra. What had begun as an anti-occupation conflict developed into an increasingly uncontrollable sectarian Sunni–Shi'i civil war, with militias and death squads engaged in escalating anti-civilian violence and sectarian cleansing.

The government of Ibrahim al Jaafari, the first to result from free elections, was inclined toward the principle and practice of majoritarian rule. In addition, Jaafari's authoritarian style and his relations with Iran won him the opposition of both Kurds and Shi'i centrists, as well as moderate Sunnis. The inclusion of the faction of radical cleric Muqtada al Sadr in the Jaafari government was also problematic; it gave the faction a double voice, one in the street through its militia, and one in the government and undermined the credibility of the government and the state.

The process of drafting and approving the new constitution did not enjoy national consensus. Many Sunni groups and leaderships felt that they were not adequately represented in the drafting process. In terms of content, they opposed the thoroughgoing federalism written into the new constitution and the lack of clarity in terms of oil-revenue sharing. In Sunni provinces, the no vote against the constitution was extremely high, reaching over 81 percent in Salhuddin and 96 percent in Anbar. The majority of Sunnis expressed their commitment to the political process by participating in the referendum, but their rejection of the proposed constitution by voting no. A powerful minority of the Sunnis, particularly the Salafi insurgents, opposed the process altogether and continued to wage sectarian war.

Insurgents showed that they had the intention and capacity to continue to use extreme violence with the aim of disrupting the post-election consolidation of the new political status quo. They aimed to undermine the constitutional process and the follow-up elections. The bombing of the holy shrines in Samarra in February 2006 helped turn events toward sectarian conflict. Sadr's faction reacted to the bombing of the holy shrines in Samarra by responding to the sectarian challenge in kind, launching sectarian counter-attacks and causing institutional politics to slip into a competition of extra-legal vengeance, thus serving the very ends of their adversaries.

The new escalation of conflict dealt a heavy blow to the hopes pinned in the 2004–2005 drive to seek legitimization through the ballot box and the

Iraqization of security functions. This eroded an already weak centrism, degenerated into widespread lawlessness and violence, and triggered mass migration.

The legacy of the Jaafari government consists of two contradictory outcomes. On the positive side, the political process was moved forward and Sunni centrist forces were encouraged to participate in the government and the constitutional process, followed by a referendum and general elections. On the negative side, however, the drafting of the constitution was dominated by a Shi'i–Kurdish alliance, spurring the Sunna to vote against it and playing into the hands of the radical Sunni rejectionists.

If 2004 was the year of the transfer of sovereignty and 2005 was the year of legitimization through voting, 2006 was the year of regression into armed civil conflict.

Phase Four: Political and Security Stalemate Under the Maliki Government
Phase four began with the handover of power, after long negotiations, to the coalition government headed by Nuri al Maliki. This handover took place in May 2006 and the Maliki government was the first government to take office in the new Iraq on the basis of the nationally vetted constitution and fresh elections. Maliki inherited a difficult situation in which the political process was stalemated because large cross-sections of the Sunni community did not approve of the constitution nor of the institutions and power arrangements it had brought about; and the security situation had deteriorated dramatically with militias and death squads wreaking havoc in the nation's capital and other major cities. The government was unable to act effectively on the security front, not only because its armed forces were not yet fully ready, but more significantly because many of the militias on the ground, such as the Mahdi army, for example, had ministers in the government. Hence the government was not seen as neutral but rather a party to the conflict or, at best, unable to control its own factions.

The situation for the government was further exacerbated by the growing troubles of the Bush administration at home in the run up to the November 2006 elections and the release of the Baker–Hamilton Report. The insurgency felt that its strategy was winning and effectively shaking U.S. political resolve, while the pro-government factions realized that the U.S. commitment to fighting the mainly Sunni insurgency was not open ended. Some reacted to this situation by activating their own militias and taking things into their own hands.

Prime Minister Maliki himself proved unable to effectively manage these contradictions and move the political and security situations forward. By the end of 2006, the situation in Iraq seemed indeed bleak. It was within this context that President Bush announced his "surge" policy.

A Redirection of Policy

Bush's announcement of the surge on January 10, 2007, included an admission of partial failure and implied that a number of assumptions that been initially made had proven erroneous. These assumptions were:

- The primary challenge was an undifferentiated Sunni insurgency; but the real challenge turned out to be Sunni and Shi'i extremism, foreign terrorism, and a mafia underworld.

- The political process would dampen the insurgency; but with the flawed constitutional process and a majoritarian hegemony, the process exacerbated conflict, causing the moderate centre to erode.

- The electoral process would attract a critical Sunni mass, but this mass was disappointed with the results of the process, and the insurgents managed to gain ground by discrediting the political process and advancing their sectarian strategy.

- It could train and equip a national army and police force in time to deal with emerging threats; however, the threats turned out to be much larger than anticipated, the training and equipping proceeded sluggishly, and the new forces were compromised by infiltration, corruption and sectarian agendas.

- Iraqi enthusiasm for "liberation" and "democracy" would overshadow security and reconstruction concerns; however, liberation quickly turned in people's perception to occupation, democracy's results were welcomed by some and rejected by others, but security concerns soon overshadowed all else.

- National reconciliation and the writing of a new constitution would be difficult but manageable; in reality the constitution writing process failed to achieve national reconciliation, and the Iraqi nation began to fall apart into its ethnic and sectarian subcomponents.

- The coalition forces and a rebuilt Iraqi state would be able to contain the influence of regional powers, especially Iran and Syria; in reality, a monopoly of military force was never achieved, and Iranian and Syrian influence in Iraq grew through powerful proxies and clients.

This list is not exhaustive; it reveals, however, a sober recognition of how far assumption, and consequently strategy, was removed from hard realities. The Baker-Hamilton report forced a rethinking of U.S. strategy. It also forced a public recognition of what many, even within the Bush administration, were

already admitting in private. The surge policy was indirectly the result of such rethinking and a recognition of previous failures.

The Contours of the Surge Strategy

When Bush announced the surge plan in January 2007, the attention of the press and the public focused mostly on the military aspect—the committing of additional troops to the counterinsurgency effort. In full, the plan had political, constitutional, legal, and regional components as well.

The military campaign focuses on Baghdad and its environs, as well as on the Anbar province, which constitutes, in the words of the U.S. president, "the home base" of al-Qaeda. This campaign includes:

- A deployment of an extra 20,000 U.S. troops to Iraq, most of which work alongside the Iraqi armed forces in order to penetrate Baghdad's ten military sectors and a 30 mile circle around the capital, to conduct door-to-door searches, to directly protect citizens, and to end forcible sectarian cleansing.

- An active search and destroy campaign in Anbar province to subdue the insurgency there.

- Rules of Engagement (ROEs) that allow troops to engage militia forces regardless of their sectarian or political affiliation.

- The embedding of U.S. units within Iraqi formations—one U.S. brigade within each Iraqi division.

- The inclusion of the police force in the operation.

- "Interrupting the flow of support" from Iran and Syria to extra-governmental forces in the Iraq.

The objective is to bring a halt to the sectarian war and cleansing that plagued the capital, to achieve an acceptable level of security, to regain thereby some public confidence in the central authorities and the United States, and to encourage local communities to participate with the authorities in establishing security.

The military action represents an attempt to provide breathing space to help the government resuscitate national reconciliation, which is the basic political condition for security and stability. The success of national reconciliation is contingent on a number of political and constitutional conditions:

- Reaching agreement on the long-overdue amendments to the constitution.

- Reforming the de-Baathification law in order to reinstate in their jobs or at least compensate former party members who were not part of the top leadership and were not guilty of crimes.

- Passing legislation to share oil revenues equitably among all Iraqis.

The plan also calls for the allocation of $10 billion by the Iraqi government toward reconstruction and infrastructure work in order to reduce unemployment in beleaguered communities. Finally, provincial elections are scheduled for late 2007 to empower local leaders in an environment which would be, hopefully by then, less threatening.

The Regional Dimension
Contrary to the recommendations of the Baker–Hamilton report, the centerpiece of the strategy launched in early 2007 was the old policy of rallying pro-U.S. "moderates" in the region against Iran and Syria. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice initiated the diplomatic effort to build a region-wide anti-Iranian axis (comprised of Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jordan, and Egypt) and build support for the U.S. strategy in Iraq (the new unity government). The Bush administration was trying to capitalize on regional concerns over growing Iranian influence, and "sectarian" fears relating to Sunni–Shi'i tensions. Indeed, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Jordanian monarch King Abdullah, and other regional leaders had voiced concern over Iran's growing influence and the fate of Sunnis. Religious leaders, like the Egyptian Sheikh M. Qaradawi, took a similar position. Even in countries like Syria and Sudan, there was some backlash against reports alleging attempts to spread Shiism among the population. Despite this widespread concern about the rise of the Shi'a and Iranian intentions, the U.S. attempt to create a common front failed, because no country in the region wanted a direct confrontation with Iran.

Furthermore, the administration received a clear message that it would not get cooperation in the region if it made no attempt to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process. As a result, the secretary of state tried to demonstrate greater involvement in the peace process. Most importantly, by May 2007 it was holding direct talks with both Syria and Iran.

Limitations and Challenges

On the surface, the strategy launched by Bush in early 2007 seemed neat, interconnected, and plausible; however, it contained loopholes and uncertainties, and soon encountered major challenges.

Military Challenges

The centerpiece of this strategy revolves around a security-first approach. The other pieces in the jigsaw-puzzle will not fit unless the security drive achieves tangible results. The new campaign has several military and security problems:

Soft Targets, Redeployment, and Spreading Thin: The prime target for insurgents has shifted from hard targets, such as the heavily guarded facilities and leaders, to "soft targets," i.e. ordinary citizens. The protection of "soft targets" requires concentration of troops and holding of territory; hence the massive deployment of some 30 mixed brigades in Baghdad and Anbar. But this concentration cannot be effected across the entire country. Consequently, soft targets were left unprotected in other communally mixed regions such as Diyala, Kirkuk, Mosul, and Basra. This limitation did not escape the attention of the insurgents. Overstretched coalition forces could not cope with violence both in Baghdad and other regions.

Time Constraints: Facing domestic pressure, the Bush administration needs to show progress in handing over security tasks to the Iraqi defense and security forces; Bush's speech itself mentions November 2007 as a date by which "the Iraqi government plans to take responsibility for security in all of Iraq's provinces." Although the Bush administration has made it clear that it rejects any firm timetable, serious slippage in such a timeline has the potential of backlash, triggering a further collapse of support for the war in the United States and thus a political reversal for the Baghdad government as well.

Capacity Building: The training and equipping of the new Iraqi army is behind schedule. Iraqi forces are nowhere near being ready to take over national security duties in the near future. The new Iraqi army is largely an infantry-based corps, with numerous training, commitment, and esprit de corps problems, and its transformation into an effective force could take much longer than anticipated.

Problematic Police: Another weakness is the deployment of the much mistrusted police force, notably its commando-style special units infiltrated by insurgents, militias, death squads, and mafias. In their training of the Iraqi police force, the U.S. military focused on the "commando" units to help confront the insurgency, and the U.S. Justice Department concentrated on combating crime; this duality deformed the police force, and created a duality of army-police missions. With Baghdad divided between the two sectors, the unchecked police units had a free hand to carry out their own private vendettas.

Political Challenges

Leadership: It is doubtful that Prime Minister Maliki can hold on. Maliki's party is squeezed between two powerful Shi'i allies, the resource-abundant

SCIRI, and the popular and populist Sadr. In addition to this weakness, Maliki inherited a party divided over his own candidacy for the premiership. The execution of the deposed president Saddam Hussein at the end of 2006 bolstered Maliki's status among Shi'a, Sadr included, but drew the ire of many Sunnis. In the campaign to retake control of Baghdad, Maliki had to surrender operational control, and thus suffer a loss in nationalist credibility, putting all his bets on the success of the operations. At another level, the political uncertainties involved in President Talabani's ill health and succession, may add to the leadership challenges. His passing would not only trigger a succession crisis in Kurdistan and the PUK, but also at the Iraqi federal level.

Parliament: Building and maintaining parliamentary support for the current security plan is a necessary but extremely difficult task. Much of the consensus building is contingent on winning the support of large swaths of the Kurdish, Shi'i, and Sunni parliamentary blocs and several months into the surge, there was no evidence that this was happening. Consensus would be facilitated by success in the "battle for Baghdad," and if the U.S. and the Iraqi governments were perceived to be acting impartially. In any case, consensus cannot be secured once and for all; rather, it will require a constant effort at rallying forces behind every military, political, economic, and constitutional aspect of the process.

Dissolving the Militias: Dealing with the Mahdi army, the Badr brigades and other militias will be arduous, piecemeal, and long-term, with possible setbacks and blowback effects. The Mahdi army, for example, adjusted to the "surge" by reducing its visible presence in Baghdad and lying low in order to avoid a frontal confrontation, while the insurgency militias have defied the security plan by stepping up their car-bomb attacks.

Sovereignty Challenges
The operational and decision-making freedom given to the multi-national forces in the current security operation may weaken the government's national credentials if drastic measures or indiscriminate raids are carried out without adequate political consideration. In addition, the national credentials of the government could erode further, since security has proved elusive.

In the short and medium run, the secondary role the new Iraqi army is, or will be, playing could also be politically damaging. Prime Minister Maliki had already voiced his displeasure at the American reluctance to allow the Iraqi army to procure heavy armor and other sophisticated weaponry,[2] echoing a similar criticism by his predecessor, interim Prime Minister Allawi. While the weakness of the Iraqi army provides some justification for the U.S. presence and even the increase of forces and the extension of their stay in Iraq, it has also engendered nationalist demands for full Iraqi monopoly of its own legitimate means of coercion, i.e. full Iraqi sovereignty.

The U.S. argument that infantry is most suited for counter-insurgency operations cannot hold for long; it will deepen misgivings among the political class in Iraq who already fear American hidden agendas and intentions. Shi'i leaders are already blaming the United States for the security failure, and assert that if Iraqis had security matters in their own hands, the balance would have tipped in favor of stability.

Moderate Sunni leaders seem more in favor of a prolonged U.S. presence to offset what they see as an Iranian-backed Shi'i offensive to weaken and marginalize Sunnis, beginning with the "Shiification" of Baghdad. Most Sunni leaders refer to such sectarian cleansing as "Safavid plots," a reference to the 16th century Iranian invasion of Ottoman Iraq. Sunni and Baathist extremists still hold to the view that the withdrawal of coalition forces would bring an end to the "Shi'i–Islamic" government.

The open-ended presence of the MNF is a major problem: A clear cut commitment to withdrawal linked to the combat-readiness of the Iraqi forces could be politically very helpful. Britain's declaration of the partial withdrawal of troops in February was an appeasing signal but far from enough. A clear U.S. commitment to staggered withdrawal could bolster Maliki's position and meet some of the major demands of the armed groups.

Reconciliation Challenges
Reconciliation, particularly between the dominant Shi'i–Kurdish alliance and the Sunni opposition and insurgency, is the political pre-condition for restoring normality. A staggered approach with workable phased agendas and clear timelines is required. This approach would have to involve the setting of general principles, a mechanism for organized and sustained dialogue, the offering of amnesty, the discussion of resource- and power-sharing formulas, and the eventual inclusion in government. At the culmination of such a process, agreeing on constitutional amendments would be an easier and final step.

Reconciliation: The government has not decided how inclusive it wants the reconciliation process to be. Will it include all parties? All parties except al-Qaeda and similar foreign-based ultra-radicals? All parties except the aforementioned and the domestic radical Salafis? Maliki himself needs to settle on one consistent approach, and the government must build a national consensus regarding the principles of inclusivity. In the insurgency, three groups with three different strategies also exist: the Sunni fundamentalist "holy" warriors (al-Qaeda and native Salafis), institutional and Baathist forces, and moderate Sunnis. A self-differentiation between "honest resistance" (muqawama sharifa) and "dishonest resistance" is already part of the insurgents' jargon. The U.S. terminology is now differentiating "insurgents" from "terrorists." Together with the Kurds, Vice President Tariq Hashimi echoes this differentiation between "terrorists and the rest." This is a

feasible starting point if a clear-cut position is adopted by a workable Shi'a majority: i.e. to engage all save al-Qaeda. This might be harder than it seems: Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi is in charge of the reconciliation dossier. His pragmatism may prove crucial for success, but his limited jurisdiction could prove the undoing of the process.

Dialogue: A process of national dialogue needs to begin as soon as possible; it can begin with a sub-set of groups but must grow quickly. Among the insurgency, the largest group is al-Jaish al-Islami; the second largest is Jaysh Muhamad (Baath); and the third is Jaysh Thawrat al-Ishreen (of Harith al-Dhari). A number of smaller marginal groups exist. If the process works and inclusion proves effective and appealing, the large groups can influence or neutralize the smaller groups.

Amnesty: The Iraqi government has not yet developed the necessary terminology, sophistication, and legal groundwork to effectively use the tool of amnesty. The word amnesty itself is too harsh from the perspective of the armed groups, but too lenient from the perspective of Shi'i leaders. A new terminology could and should be developed: this could be something like "dropping of charges," "suspension of legal procedures," or "closure of indictment cases," etc., in return for "apologies" or "denunciation of past atrocities." It is not at all clear, nor has it been adequately discussed, how, to whom, and under what conditions amnesty would be offered. Nor has there been serious discussion of a Truth and Reconciliation process, such as the process undertaken in South Africa or, more recently, in Morocco. These are important post-conflict strategies that require concerted attention and effort.

De-Baathification: Dialogue and amnesty should culminate in or be part of a pact to amend the de-Baathification statutes toward a legal common ground targeting only top leaders indicted for crimes against humanity and genocide. The judicial branch, which should be in charge of the vetting process for this, is also itself in need of strengthening and more transparency in order to increase its credibility and reinforce its shaky impartiality. Almost all political and armed groups on both sides of the communal divide have admitted ex-Baathists into their ranks, showing a self-serving pragmatism, believing that it is better to regain the majority of ex-Baathists to the national cause.

Inclusion: A broad-based national unity government can and must be one of the main results of the national reconciliation process. It needs to be perceived as fair and empowering and must represent a new beginning for the state-building process in post-liberation, post-occupation Iraq. This inclusive coalitional approach can also then be reflected in the make up of the Constitutional Court and the yet-to-be-established Union Assembly.

Provincial Elections: Provincial elections, scheduled for the end of 2007, offer an important opportunity to broaden this inclusion, particularly in

beleaguered Sunni provinces. Local elections would help create more of a differentiation between provincial elites and moderate armed groups on the one hand, and radical al-Qaeda fundamentalists on the other. In the 2005 referendum and general elections, the former proved strong enough to impose a total suspension of armed attacks in their regions. A political breakthrough could encourage a similar attitude in late 2007. It would be important to provide support to moderate elites and groups in such elections in order to enhance their chances in such a contest. Local elections in other conflict areas around the world have often had the reverse effect of favoring radicals.

Constitutional Challenges
The current constitution has failed to secure national consensus. Not only Sunnis, but also Shi'i factions and Iraqi centrist nationalists have objections. The major contentious issues revolve around the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq, the distribution of resources, and fear of marginalization. These concerns are aggravated by the institutional and legislative void. More than sixty laws are pending legislation, and such institutions as the Union Assembly and the Constitutional High Court, among many others, have yet to be established. Federalism (ethnic for the Kurds and sectarian for the nine Shi'i provinces) is causing fear among Sunni leaders and centralist groups. The status of Kirkuk is another explosive issue. The principle of simple majority rule is also a source of concern: The constitution stipulates the end of the consociational presidential council, causing alarm among smaller groups in parliament. Local provincial governance is a more generally accepted principle, despite some Sunni reservations about the wide range of powers provincial governments are constitutionally granted, such as their control over border guards and their right to federation. Provincial governance, however, will reduce centralist-authoritarian tendencies and may prove acceptable even to centralist forces.

Regional Challenges
The Middle East is embroiled in a number of major crises over and above the Iraq crisis itself, all of which only make the Iraqi crisis more intractable. These include the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which the United States and Iran/Syria are on opposite sides; the U.S.-Iranian standoff over the Iranian nuclear program; and the U.S./Saudi-Syrian/Iranian standoff in Lebanon. Saudi diplomacy has been active in a series of diplomatic initiatives: the Mecca conference for Iraq (late 2006), the Mecca Fateh-Hamas agreement, attempts to resolve the Lebanese impasse, and the Arab summit of late March 2007. The United States has failed to rally a "moderate" Sunni alliance against Iran and Syria, and has accepted the need to talk directly to Iran and Syria. However, it remains uncertain about its goals in those talks.

The Maliki government is inclined to appease Syria and develop good relations with Iran. A conflict of policy is apparent. Furthermore, the danger of the sectarian polarization of regional politics has the potential, if

exacerbated, to disrupt the Iraqi transition even more. The Maliki government is painfully aware of this danger. Appeasing and winning over Saudi Arabia and Syria may please Iraqi Sunnis but does not in the least guarantee that Riyadh or Damascus will stop funding and supporting armed Sunni groups. Also, if endorsed by the Maliki government, the appeasement of Syria and/or Saudi Arabia would divide the Shi'i bloc at a critical moment in the political process. Moving closer to Iran, on the other hand, deepens Sunni fears of Shi'i domination.

The international conference held in Baghdad in early March 2007, followed by the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting of early May, both confirmed a regional and international recognition of the Iraqi government and created the possibility of U.S. contact with Iran and Syria, but the meetings failed to come up with any common agreement or cooperation over the crisis in Iraq. Nevertheless, these meetings constitute inevitable first steps and must be built on to work out more agreement on regional and international cooperation, on reinforcing the political and security process in Iraq, and on strengthening the nascent civil war.

Of course, progress on other conflict axes, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear showdown, and the Syrian UN Tribunal crisis would help calm regional tensions and make it easier for Iraq to move forward. Any decoupling of Syria from its tight Iranian alliance and its reintegration into mainstream Arab politics would also help.

Conclusion

The resolution of the Iraqi crisis can only come about through the construction of an inclusive, pluralistic, and federal polity with broad participation and strong political and security institutions. The crucial social basis for such a polity is the establishment of a strong middle class, freed from state patronage and embedded in a market economy, and consequently delivered from the narrow confines of particularistic identity politics. In the short term, the Iraqi government must wean itself from reliance on U.S. military support, reinforce its own institutional and law-enforcement capacities, and take seriously the necessity to have much more inclusive representational and decision-making institutions. The process will be troubled and long; but there is no other viable alternative.

Notes

[1] For the full text of the U.S. president's speech, see http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/print/200070110-7html.

[2] See Maliki's interview with the *Times*, London, January 18, 2007.

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