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IRAQ'S SECTARIAN WAR*

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As the U.S. debates the merits both of the surge and of various withdrawal proposals, it is critical to understand the reality of the dynamics at play on the ground. Three factors are central in this respect: one is that the Sunni-Shiite strife was not pre-ordained but rather the outcome of specific policy choices; the second, related factor, is that the Iraqi political class that currently dominates is encouraging a community-based political system that has polarized the country and that it is using to advance its parochial agenda; and the third is that the state apparatus has utterly collapsed and is being filled by autonomous, violent actors. Each has an impact on what ought to be U.S. policy.

I. An Avoidable Civil War?

Like all societies in which adherents to two or more religions, or branches of the same religion, live together, Iraq has not been free of sectarianism during its modern history. For the most part, however, this has been of a social and cultural sort, endemic but relatively benign. Sectarianism became virulent only when it was politicized by actors who sought to exploit religious and ethnic identities for political gain, and only rarely to the extent of triggering significant violence, much less civil war.

When the Baath party seized power in 1968, its ideology was self-professedly secular. Whatever else can be said about Saddam Hussein's regime, it was an equal opportunity

killer at most times, its principal criterion being Iraqis' loyalty to the regime, not their ethnic or religious background. Although Shiites and Kurds were routinely underrepresented in the most senior executive positions, and the very core of Saddam Hussein's security apparatus was drawn from Sunni Arab tribesmen, the primary basis for cooptation was blind loyalty to the president. This could lead to impressive careers regardless of ethnic or confessional background; some Shiites reached high rank while Saddam ordered the execution even of some members of his own tribe and family.

At times of intense national crisis, repression assumed a more sectarian hue. Shiites became prime targets, first during the Iran-Iraq war and then after the 1991 defeat in Kuwait, when an uprising assumed Shiite overtones. In the Shiites' collective memory, the perpetrators of the bloody repression that followed were seen as a Sunni Arab regime.

What this means is that, while Iraq's confessional divisions and Saddam Hussein's policies contributed to today's wide-scale sectarian strife, neither directly nor automatically led to it. Saddam Hussein's violently repressive authoritarianism eradicated old (non sectarian) social forces and their political representatives, generating new ones based on pre-existing religious and tribal identities. But nothing suggested a sectarian civil war would be the inevitable result of the regime's removal. This required that political actors with express ethnic and sectarian agendas acquire the ability to operate in a permissive environment.

Note: This essay incorporates analyses of the situation in Iraq by various speakers at the Annual Meeting of the International Board of the U.S./Middle East Project in Washington, D.C. on February 22, 2007. It is also based on research of ICG analysts in the region.

This is precisely what followed the arrival of coalition forces that inadvertently promoted the evolution toward sectarian politics in several ways:

- Backing exiled groups that adhered either to an Islamist Shiite, sectarian view or a Kurdish one; these parties based themselves on ethnic and confessional identities and began to pursue similarly based policies, such as building security forces dominated by Shiites and Kurds. In its rush to give the occupation an Iraqi face, the Coalition fell to default mode, empowering ethnic and sectarian groups whose presence accorded with and reinforced simplistic views of a society neatly divided into three.
- Establishing in July 2003 a ruling body, the Interim Governing Council (IGC), on a sectarian-based quota system. The Council's purported inclusiveness and representativity was a problem in several respects. First, since selection was supposed to mirror Iraq's amalgam of communities, for the first time in the country's history sectarianism and ethnicity became the formal organizing principle of politics. Moreover, the IGC's composition was neither inclusive in a true political sense, nor representative. It was heavily weighted toward existing political parties – those of former exiles – which in most cases (Kurds excepted) enjoyed little indigenous support. Most importantly, it represented Sunni Arabs inadequately since it chose former exiles who lacked any significant constituency. Again, the parties that were favored almost invariably had overtly ethnic (Kurds) or sectarian (Shiite religious) agendas.
- Banning the Baath party and abolishing the security apparatus. While neither was exclusively a Sunni Arab preserve, both decisions hurt Sunni Arabs hardest. Even if the army was essentially non-sectarian, its dismissal meant to Sunni Arabs the loss of their principal protector, as well as its guarantor/protector for the future. Likewise, although the Baath party included Sunnis and Shiites, de-baathification – whose implementation was in Shiite hands – was viewed by Sunni Arabs as a blunt weapon wielded by the new Shiite-led government to exorcise its demons – not the former regime alone, but Sunnis as such.

- Using harsh counter-insurgency methods in Sunni Arab areas. The insurgency, once started, took on increasing, though not exclusive, Sunni Arab overtones. This reinforced U.S. notions that Sunni Arabs were the problem that ought to be isolated and fought rather than included through negotiation and persuasion. The heavy-handed counter insurgency effort created a self-fulfilling prophecy: raids on towns and villages alienated the Sunni Arab community that then began to express growing sympathy with the insurgents. This was not pre-ordained. In fact, U.S. forces arguably found less resistance in Sunni Arab areas than elsewhere during the invasion. Senior army officers could have been brought into the new army early on and political and tribal leaders could have been actively courted. This was not done.

The Coalition and its Iraqi allies hardened latent ethnic and sectarian tendencies, so much so that by the time of the January 2005 elections, the perception of sharply delineated and homogenous communities took hold. Elections and referenda lent this ethno-sectarian logic political legitimacy. The result was a Shiite/Kurdish government that promptly intensified its anti-insurgency campaign, at the same time waging a dirty war with units operating with evident governmental impunity.

II. A New Political Class

The exiled parties (in particular the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, and Dawa) to which the U.S. gave precedence had little support and limited constituencies within Iraq. As a result, they used religion and sectarian loyalties to consolidate and protect political privilege at the expense of national reconciliation. Because they thrive on communal differences, the dominant political parties tend to accentuate them by employing a brand of identity-based politics and promoting a political system in which positions are allocated according to communal identities.

The emphasis on identity politics in turn raised the stock of both Sunni and Shiite clerics and, over time, the more radical among them, all at the expense of secular-minded forces. The Kurds aside, the parties wielding power today are not just based in the Sunni and Shiite communities but represent their

most militantly religious elements who have adopted a stridently sectarian discourse, encouraged by a pattern of violence involving attacks on Shiites that are promptly avenged, vendetta-like, by attacks on Sunnis.

The end-result has been a new class of politicians who are treating the country as their party or personal entitlement rather than as national patrimony, encouraging the appearance of a community-based political system that has polarized the country, and in some cases advancing separatist agendas that threaten to tear the country apart. In the process, they helped transform Iraq's secular tradition beyond recognition. They played on U.S. ignorance of Iraq; the U.S. thought it was pursuing one agenda, while they were pursuing another.

III. The State's Deconstruction

The overriding result of coalition and Iraqi policies has been the utter collapse of the state apparatus. This has created both a security and a managerial vacuum that has been filled by autonomous, violent actors – sectarian based parties, militias, criminal gangs, and the like. The picture of an Iraq neatly divided into three is far more myth than reality. Instead, there is generalized chaos, whose most salient features are:

- A weakening/retreat of state, superseded by the parochial agenda of community-based parties. With only a handful of exceptions, ministries have become little more than partisan fiefdoms. Hiring of civil servants is done almost exclusively on the basis of letters of recommendation that are provided by the political movement controlling the ministry in question. In turn, resources are channeled to specific clienteles;
- A failure to deliver security, provide services or meet economic needs;
- Rising and fragmented, decentralized violence. The violence is self-sustaining insofar as the armed groups' and militias' most important source of legitimacy has become the conflict's very radicalization; the more the situation deteriorates, the easier it is for these groups to command loyalty and mobilize support. The violence is

many-sided and multi-layered. In other words, the situation is very different from the neat schemes that are regularly imagined or portrayed. It is not a struggle with clear battle lines but a far more diffuse one in which violent battles are taking place for local control. But that dichotomy weakens the further one goes from Baghdad; there, it is a free for all: in Najaf, Maysan, Nassiriyah and Basra, there is competition within groups, in an increasingly volatile competition for resources where the state is virtually absent, has lost monopoly over the use of force and enjoys little administrative capacity. The result – exacerbated by a constitution that gives power to the regions that they are incapable of exercising -- is an anarchic decentralization of violence;

- Increased corruption;
- The politicization of security forces.

IV. What Can Be Done?

A better understanding of current Iraqi dynamics leads, at a minimum, to the exclusion of certain ready-made solutions. The tendency to see the crisis as strictly and inevitably sectarian in nature is what prompted so many ill-conceived steps -- sectarian quotas in the governing council; heavy-handed counter-insurgency in Sunni Arab areas; and empowerment of exiles' parties with communitarian agendas. It is what blinded the U.S. to the fact that it was enabling and providing cover to the self-serving agendas of groups that were never committed to the American vision of a federal, reconciled, united Iraq. And it is what lies behind current, equally ill-conceived solutions -- a three-way hard or soft partition.

The difficulties with the various proposals to either partition Iraq or encourage its division into three autonomous regions are many. Despite significant population displacement, much of the country's population still lives in areas that at least until recently were profoundly inter mixed, due to labor migration, forced resettlement under past regimes and widespread inter-marriage. No simple line can be drawn to distinguish one community from another, at least not without major

violence between groups, within groups and often within families. No break up – clear or implicit -- could possibly be peaceful. It would come at terrifying human cost given the country's many areas of mixed population, including its three largest cities, and given the Kurds' and Shiites' ambitions to expand their presence into areas in which they are a minority. Moreover, this would do nothing to alleviate decentralized, intra-sectarian tensions given the collapse of state institutions at all levels – central and regional. All of which would lead to countless disputes, resolution of which would necessarily involve far greater and more savage levels of violence than currently is occurring. By further exacerbating tensions, any such outcome will create greater opportunities for regional powers to increase their influence.

Based on the above-analysis, the most likely scenario for the future includes:

- A protracted violent insurgency that, in light of precedent, could last a decade;
- Increased localization of battles;
- Increased involvement by outside countries, which will seek both to contain the battles in Iraq and to enlist proxies just in case;

Arguably, at this point nothing but time – and the exhaustion it will bring – can work to put Iraq back together again. The parties, alas, may need to battle themselves to a point where they become convinced that compromise is in their best interest. Still, several guiding principles can be suggested:

- The need for a forceful, multilateral approach that puts real pressure on all Iraqi parties. Its purpose cannot be

to support the Iraqi government – which has become another actor in a dirty conflict – but Iraq. That means pressing the government, along with all other Iraqi constituents, to make the necessary compromises. This in turn requires a new U.S. regional strategy that includes engagement with Syria and Iran.

- The need for a new, broadly inclusive national compact agreed upon by all relevant actors, including militias and insurgent groups, on issues such as federalism, the scope of the amnesty, and a timetable for a U.S. withdrawal. Federalism in particular must be redefined as decentralization at the governorate level to prevent the emergence of multi-governorate regions;
- The imperative of passage of a new oil law in which the government, checked by an independent supervisory agency, will allocate oil income equitably across governorates. This is a key to holding the nation together;
- The need to create a functioning central state. The absence of such a state means there are no peaceful means of redistributing resources, which means violence becomes the means of acquiring them.

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