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Causes and Consequences

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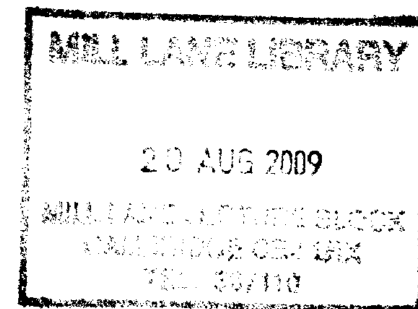

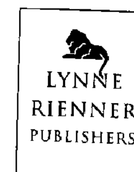

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War and Resistance in Iraq: From Regime Change to Collapsed State

Toby Dodge

> People say to me, you [the Iraqis] are not the Vietnamese, you have no jungles and swamps to hide in. I reply let our cities be our swamps and buildings our jungles.
>
> Former deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz[1]

Why, despite the overwhelming military defeat of the Iraqi army, has the United States failed to secure its ostensible goal in Iraq, a stable pro-US regime? The removal of Saddam Hussein has proved to be the beginning, not the culmination, of a long and very uncertain process of occupation and state building. The lawlessness and looting that greeted the US force's seizure of Baghdad on 9 April 2003 have evolved into a self-sustaining dynamic that combines violence, instability, and profound uncertainty. US troops and the nascent Iraqi security services now face an insurgency that has managed to extend its geographic scope, while increasing the level of violence and the capacity for destruction and instability.

The Roots of Instability in Iraq

The chaos and violence that greeted regime change have their roots in the legacies that Saddam's government bequeathed to Iraq. Iraqi regimes, because of their perceived domestic and international vulnerability, have sought to maximize their autonomy from society. This process reached its apex under the Baathist regime, built by Hasan al-Bakr from 1968 and consolidated under Saddam after 1979. They built a powerful set of state institutions through the 1970s and 1980s that managed to reshape society, breaking organized resistance to their rule, effectively atomizing the population.[2] It was not possible to talk of a functioning civil society in Iraq before 2003. The regime had broken, co-opted, or reconstructed all intermediate institutions that would have shielded society from the force of the state.

However, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War (1990–1991), and finally the imposition of draconian sanctions changed the Iraqi state and with it Saddam's strategy of rule. From their application in 1990 until 1997, when UN-supervised oil revenues began to arrive, sanctions on Iraq effectively curbed the government's access to large-scale funding, with deleterious consequences for state and society. From 1991 until 2003 the effects of government policy and the sanctions regime led to hyperinflation, widespread poverty, and malnutrition. The historically generous state welfare provision that had been central to the regime's governing strategy disappeared overnight. The large and well-educated middle class that had grown in the years of plenty to form the bedrock of Iraqi society was impoverished. The story of Iraq from 1991 until 2003 is of a country suffering a profound macroeconomic shock.[3]

As sanctions began to take effect after 1991, there was a rapid decline in the official and visible institutions of the state. The government in Baghdad was forced to cut back on the resources it could devote to the armed forces and police. Before 1990, the bureaucracy of the Iraqi state had been complex and all-pervasive. During the 1990s the effects of "self-financing" meant these institutions were hollowed out. Bribery was commonplace, as civil servants' official wages became at times almost valueless. The 1990s saw many professionals leaving the public service, to take their chances in the private sector or flee into exile.

It was the supposed power of Iraq's state institutions that the US forces assumed they would inherit once they reached Baghdad. To quote Condoleezza Rice, "The concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces."[4] However, these state institutions were by April 2003 on the verge of collapse. The third war in twenty years and three weeks of looting in its aftermath pushed them over the edge. Civil servants did not return to work after the cease-fire, instead opting to protect their families and property as best they could. Their offices across the country, but especially in Baghdad, were stripped by looters and burned.[5] The combination of war, sanctions fatigue, and rampant criminality led to a complete state breakdown. The subsequent extended exercise in state building has been far more costly and has required much greater expertise and resources than the Pentagon had anticipated. State institutions still remain to be built, and their relationship with society renegotiated. This will have to be done in the face of increasing resentment while meeting demands for Iraqi participation.

War and Invasion

The difficulties in establishing law and order in the aftermath of the war also have roots in the type of campaign that US planners thought they were

going to fight and the type of resistance that the Baathist regime attempted to organize. There is strong evidence that those planning the invasion underestimated the resistance they would face, most importantly by sections of the mainstream army and irregular forces, notably the Fedayeen Saddam. In February 2003, in the run-up to war, US Army chief of staff Eric Shinseki in a Senate hearing called for "something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" to guarantee order. Other assessments concluded that occupying forces would need twenty security personnel, both police and troops, per thousand people to control the country. This compares to the forty-three per thousand that sustained Saddam in power.[6] This means coalition forces should have had between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers to impose order on Iraq.[7] However, senior civilians at the Pentagon played a key role in limiting the number of troops available to US commanders on the ground in Iraq. They were working on the assumption that at the advent of the air war or in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, a coup would remove Saddam from power and leave governing structures largely in place.[8] President George W. Bush himself, in an eve-of-war speech, actively encouraged the Iraqi armed forces to move against their leaders.[9] If a coup failed to materialize, then the supposition was that Iraqi forces would implode or simply refuse to fight in a fashion similar to that in the Gulf War, with thousands surrendering to allied forces.[10] In addition, US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, as part of his commitment to a "revolution in military affairs," put great emphasis on the use of precision bombing and technological advantage and encouraged General Tommy Franks, the man responsible for drawing up the plans for the invasion, to keep troop numbers as low as possible. The result was that in the middle of the invasion, the United States had 116,000 soldiers in Iraq with 310,000 personnel in the theater as a whole, compared with the 500,000 anticipated by the Pentagon's planners before Franks's revision of their plans.[11]

Faced with the overwhelming military superiority of the US Army and US Air Force, the Iraqi government had very few options when planning the defense of the country. With the reliability of the mainstream army in doubt, plans focused on the security services, Special and Republican Guards, and on 30,000 irregular forces, the Fedayeen Saddam and the Arab fighters who came to Iraq before the invasion to do battle with US forces. The regime also appears to have learned from the mistakes its military made in both the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, when units had no ability to act on their own initiative.[12] In an attempt to counter this, Baghdad decentralized army command and control down to the lowest level possible. By giving local control to a senior military officer, resistance could continue after Baghdad was cut off from its hinterland while the large arms dumps spread around the country supplied the postwar insurgency.[13]

The reality of the war and its aftermath differed from the assumptions of US planners. The optimistic prognosis of Washington-based analysts that

the Baathist government in Baghdad would be removed by a coup proved to be incorrect. Sections of the mainstream army fought more tenaciously than many had expected. The level of Iraqi resistance in the south of the country, especially around Umm Qasr and Nasiriya, surprised US Central Command.[14] In motivational terms, this resistance reflected a factor that continues to dominate Iraq: nationalism. There is no doubt that ordinary conscript soldiers, 80 percent of whom were Shia, hated Saddam Hussein, but there still exists in the country a militant Iraqi nationalism, born of three wars in the past two decades, and over a decade of punishing sanctions known to be engineered by the United States. This was rallied during the war to motivate troops fighting against US forces that were widely seen to be out to grab Iraq's oil, not to benefit its people.

Occupation and Insurgency

The Conditions of Insurgency

The US occupation itself has facilitated insurgency. Previous best practice from post–Cold War peacekeeping operations stresses that establishing law and order within the first six to twelve weeks of any occupation is crucial for the credibility and legitimacy of the occupiers.[15] For military occupation to be successful, the population has to be overawed by both the scale and the commitment of the occupiers. The speed with which US and coalition forces removed Saddam's regime certainly impressed the Iraqi population, and US military superiority initially appeared absolute. However, what began in April 2003 as a lawless celebration of the demise of Saddam's regime grew into three weeks of uncontrolled looting and violence. To Baghdad's residents, coalition forces appeared unable or unwilling to curtail the violence that swept across the city, encouraging the perception among would-be insurgents that the United States could not control the country.[16] At the same time, with the collapse of Saddam's regime, thousands of Iraqi troops simply merged back into their own communities while the stockpiling of weapons by the Baathist regime in numerous dumps across the country provided supplies of small arms and explosives for those who wanted to use them. Historically, there has been a high rate of private automatic-weapon ownership in Iraq, as the regime never tried to disarm the general population. The rapid collapse of the regime allowed munitions to become widely available at very low prices.

The security vacuum that came to dominate Iraq did a great deal to undermine the initial impression of US omnipotence and helped turn criminal violence and looting into an organized and politically motivated insurgency. The initial goodwill that greeted the liberation of Baghdad quickly turned into popular disenchantment with the occupation's failure to establish order, and into increased nationalist resentment of it. To this extent the insurgency has fed off the mistakes of the occupation, utilizing the anger and alienation felt among sections of society.

Finally, in this vacuum, it was easy to resurrect the long tradition of Iraqi political discourse, which historically was strongly shaped by the ideological influences of Islam, Arab nationalism, and the increasingly Iraqi specific nationalism.[17] Those fighting are mobilized by these influences to see their mission as ridding their country of a foreign invader and its collaborators.

The Forces of Insurgency

The evolving insurgency, involving diverse tactics and different targets, springs from several separate sources and a multitude of causes. The first identifiable group of insurgents are the "industrial-scale" criminal gangs operating in the urban centers of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. It is organized crime that constitutes 80 percent of violence in Iraq and makes the lives of the population miserable.[18] The organized criminal groups predate regime change, having come to prominence in the mid-1990s at the peak of the social and economic suffering and state weakening caused by sanctions. These groups have been revitalized by the lawlessness of present-day Iraq, capitalizing on readily available weapons, the lack of an efficient police force, and the US occupation's paucity of intelligence. They terrorize the remnants of middle-class Iraq, car-jacking, house-breaking, and kidnapping, largely with impunity. It is groups like these that make the roads leading from Baghdad so dangerous, regularly kidnapping and killing foreign workers and Iraqis alike. In many cases these gangs are better armed and organized than the Iraqi police trying to stop them. Their continued capacity to operate is the most visible sign of state weakness.

A second group involved in violence comprises the remnants of the Baath regime's security services, party loyalists, and Saddam's clientage network. This group is estimated to be responsible for up to 60 percent of the politically motivated violence.[19] Sensing both the vulnerability and the incoherence of the occupation, they began launching hit-and-run attacks on US troops in May 2003 and have increased the frequency, skill, and geographic scope of their operations. The speed with which Saddam Hussein's government collapsed in the face of invasion and the chaos that caused meant that the beginning of the insurgency was reactive and highly localized. Interviews that I conducted with various levels of former regime loyalists in Baghdad in spring and summer 2003 paint a picture of a fractured and spontaneous rebellion against the United States.[20] However, the dissolution of the army and de-Baathification in May 2003 put an estimated 750,000 people out of work and available for the insurgency.[21] Against this background it was a small step for the Baath Party, an organization with a

long history of covert operations, to move from reactively organizing for self-defense to proactively moving to offensive action. By November 2003 the Baathist arm of the resistance had begun to cohere. Documents seized by the US military when it took Saddam into custody in December 2003 indicated that he had been in regular contact with those organizing the resistance. By 2004 a new politburo at the head of the Iraqi Baath Party had been formed, with representation of both the civilian and military wings of the party, and with personnel resident in the country and outside.[22]

Another source of violence is certainly the most worrying for the new Iraqi government and the hardest to deal with. This can be usefully characterized as Iraqi Islamism, with both Sunni and Shia variations. After the Gulf War and the imposition of sanctions, Saddam infused the Baath Party's long-established, secular, broadly socialist rhetoric with an Islamism that reflected the Iraqi population's return to religion in the face of economic collapse and social dislocation.[23] The strong nationalist and Islamic currents running through the Iraqi polity have combined to create a political ideology that preaches the defense of the *Watan*, the Iraqi homeland, against foreign and non-Muslim invaders. The battalions of the 1920 revolution are a good example of this dynamic. Formed in the suburban hinterland of Baghdad, they have, as their name suggests, merged an Iraqi nationalism with an Islamic radicalism. This potent combination meant that in 2004, groups like this were the fastest-growing wing of the insurgency, responsible for up to 20 percent of the violence against the US military and Iraqi security forces. This ideological aspect to the resistance movement is not going to disappear.

An early indication of the cause and effect behind the mobilization of political violence in Iraq can be seen in the case of Fallujah, a market city of some 300,000 people, thirty-five miles west of Baghdad. Notwithstanding Paul Wolfowitz's incorrect assertions, far from being a "hotbed of Ba'thist activity,"[24] Fallujah was known in Iraq as the "Medinat al-Masajid," the City of Mosques, highlighting its deeply conservative reputation, famed for its adherence to Sunni Islam and,[25] along with Ramadi, as a city where the secular government's influence was at its weakest, and where the state found it difficult to impose law and order.

It was two weeks after the fall of Baghdad before US troops entered Fallujah. In the interim, Iraqi troops and Baath Party leaders left the town. Imams from the local mosques stepped into the sociopolitical vacuum, bringing an end to the looting, even managing to return some of the stolen property.[26] Fallujah became a center of violent opposition to US occupation so soon after liberation because of a series of heavy-handed missions by US troops searching for leading members of the old regime.[27] Resentment escalated when two local imams were arrested. Events reached a climax when US troops broke up a demonstration with gunfire, resulting in seventeen

Iraq fatalities and seventy wounded. This caused a spiral of violence and revenge that has destabilized the area and overshadowed the US military's attempts to impose order on the whole northwestern region of Iraq. The result was the killing of four private security guards at the end of March 2004 and a bloody retaking of the city by US Marines.

The political organizations that emerged from Fallujan society to control the town and negotiate an end to the siege, the Mujahideen Shura (Resistance Council) and the Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin (Muslim Scholars Council), are indicative of the diversity of ideological trends within the opposition. Members of both groups claim to represent the variety of Islamic trends found in the northwestern region of Iraq. These include the Sufi tradition, which is influential in Fallujah, but also the much more austere and radical Salafi approach to Islam.[28]

Muqtada al-Sadr has been the political figure who has successfully rallied the nationalist and radical Islamic trends among Shia sections of the population. Sadr's support originates in the poorest and most disadvantaged sections of the Shia population. Capitalizing on a large charitable network set up by his late father, Sadr has used radical anti-US rhetoric to rally the disaffected to his organization. As the occupation failed to deliver significant improvements to people's lives, Sadr's popularity began to increase. In the run-up to the handover of power on 28 June 2004, Sadr's rhetoric and actions became more extreme in an attempt to convince the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that he could not be excluded from the postoccupation political settlement, as the CPA intended. Sadr deployed his own militia, the Mahdi Army, to increase his power in the large Shia slum of Baghdad, Al-Tharwa (renamed "Sadr City" following the war, after his dead father), and across the south of the country.

This game of cat and mouse, with Sadr upping his rhetorical radicalism while highlighting his military capacity, meant that strategically the CPA could not ignore him. But it proved ill-judged to confront his organization at the same time that US Marines were trying to contain the Fallujan uprising. The CPA, by closing down Sadr's newspaper and arresting Sheikh Mustafa al-Yacoubi, one of Sadr's key deputies in Najaf, drew him into open conflict. The resulting revolts in key towns across the south of Iraq—Basra, Amara, Kut, Nasiriya, Najaf, Kufa, and Karbala—as well as in Baghdad itself, highlighted two things. First, Sadr's organization had been preparing for just such a confrontation since the invasion at least, organizing the Mahdi Army with this in mind. Second, even with this lead time, the geographic scale of the southern uprising indicated a bandwagoning effect; other smaller militias and local armed groups used the cover of Sadr's confrontation to launch their own preemptive strikes against coalitions forces.

In twice confronting the superior military forces of the occupation, Sadr's Mahdi Army clearly overreached itself. The full force of US air

power used against the rebellion in Sadr City and Najaf broke it. However, the constituency that Sadr aspires to represent, the economically disadvantaged and politically alienated, will not disappear. The widespread casualties resulting from the suppression of the revolt, particularly in Baghdad, have created a wellspring of resentment that will take years to diffuse. Sadr or politicians like him will have continued access to a constituency large enough to fuel radical political mobilization.

The final contributing factor to the insurgency is the most controversial and difficult to judge: the role played by Arab fighters from neighboring countries, and behind them the organizing capacity of Al-Qaida in Iraq. The US occupation has presented the actions of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born Islamist, as evidence of a sustained Al-Qaida presence in Iraq. There is clear evidence of foreign fighters playing a role in the insurgency and the suicide bombings that have plagued the country. Mobilized through diffuse and informal networks across the Middle East, they have been making their way to Iraq in an uncoordinated fashion. However, their numbers appear to be comparatively low, estimated by the US Army to be between 500 and 2,000. In March 2004 less than 150 of the 10,000 security prisoners held by the US military in Iraq were non-Iraqi Arabs.[29] Although it may be politically expedient for US and Iraqi politicians to stress the non-Iraqi aspects of the insurgency, the revolt is very much a homegrown phenomenon.

The Course of Insurgency

The insurgency is diffuse in command and control, in personnel and in strategy. Clearly, US troops initially formed the main target. In a classic case of asymmetrical warfare, small bands of highly mobile assailants, making use of their local knowledge, inflicted increasing fatalities on US troops. With its genesis in late May 2003, by July the insurgents were beginning to show signs of greater professionalism, deploying organized reconnaissance to perfect a modus operandi that used small groups of ten to fifteen fighters to attack with maximum efficiency and minimum loss of life.[30] Capitalizing on the lack of US armored transportation, the insurgents used rocket-propelled grenades and improvised roadside bombs to great effect. By early summer 2003, road travel for US convoys had become very dangerous. By the autumn, US forces recognized the increased geographical spread of the insurgency, the improved coordination between the different groups, but also their use of a wider range of arms, including mortars and mines.[31] The downing of several US Army helicopters with heavy loss of life, in the first two weeks of November 2003, further indicated the vulnerability of US forces on the move. This gave rise to a negative dynamic in which increasing US casualties gave the impression that the insurgents could strike with impunity. In addition, the increasing violence spread a deep sense of insecurity across the population of Iraq, in turn increasing resentment of the occupation.

As US troops have increasingly been redeployed to more secure bases outside urban areas, to reduce their vulnerability and political visibility, the insurgents have sought out more accessible targets. A small minority of those perpetrating the violence have deliberately targeted international institutions, specifically foreign embassies, the United Nations and the Red Cross, signaling that they would try to make any multilateralization of the occupation both costly and unworkable. Second, they began to target the nascent institutions and personnel of the new Iraqi state. This change in tactics was heralded by the attack on three police stations in Baghdad on the same day in October 2003. Since then, this method has broadened in its geographical scope and ferocity, with the use of car bombs to target police stations and army recruiting centers across the country. These attacks are designed not only to discourage Iraqis from working for the new state but also to stop the growth of its institutions. They undermine attempts to deliver to the Iraqi population what they have been demanding since the fall of the Baath regime: law and order.

The final tactic adopted by radical Sunni jihadis was to target high-profile Shia and Kurdish political figures in an attempt to fracture and destabilize the Iraqi polity. This has the potential to be most damaging to Iraq's long-term stability. The first indication of this was in August 2003, when a massive explosion outside the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf (one of the holiest shrines of Shia Islam) not only cost the lives of a hundred innocent civilians but also killed Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a group that the UK and US governments had been assiduously courting to form the cornerstone of a new political order in post-Saddam Iraq. This bombing not only signaled the high cost of becoming involved in the governance of Iraq but also hinted at the increasingly sectarian nature of targeting. In February 2004, the tactic was extended to the Kurdish areas of Iraq when two suicide bombers killed 101 people in Arbil at the offices of the main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In a series of attacks on 2 March, by targeting the large crowds who gathered to commemorate the Shia festival of Ashura in Baghdad and Karbala, the perpetrators were clearly attempting to trigger a civil war between Iraq's different communities. This assumption was strengthened by the discovery in Baghdad of a letter allegedly written by a senior Islamist figure, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who argued that the only way to "prolong the duration of the fight between the infidels and us" is by "dragging them into a sectarian war, this will awaken the sleepy Sunnis who are fearful of destruction and death at the hands of the Shia."[32] US officials and Iraqi politicians have been keen to blame the use of suicide bombers and the rise

in sectarian violence on outside forces,[33] but the speed, number, and efficiency of these attacks point to a large amount of Iraqi involvement and direction. Such jihadis seek to create a new brand of radical sectarianism and mobilize Sunni fears of Shia and Kurdish domination. Although the use of indiscriminate violence has alienated the majority of Iraqi public opinion across all sections of society, the carnage it has produced has been a major setback for state building and stability. Those deploying this form of violence believe that the resulting chaos will further delegitimize the Iraqi government and hasten the departure of US troops. These groups hope that they would be best placed to exploit and eventually control the resulting political and security vacuum.

The Creation of Postwar Political Structures

US planners anticipated a limited exercise in regime change and easily managed state reform in the aftermath of the war. However, once the institutions of government had collapsed, the task facing the occupation became complex and potentially contradictory: the building of a new political order that would be stable and legitimate yet also in broad agreement with US foreign policy aims.

Toward this end, the role of former Baathists in the government had to be minimized, but other political forces that might destabilize a pro-US agenda also had to be identified and marginalized, not least in order to create a space within which a new, pro-US ruling elite could be nurtured. However, this policy objective clashed with the needs and demands of the Iraqi population. De-Baathification, the dissolution of the army and expulsion of 40,000 former administrators from the civil service, greatly hindered the restoration of government services and law and order. And the United States faced a highly mobilized society vocally expressing its newfound political freedom. Legitimizing a new government both internationally and even more importantly, domestically, had to involve, at some stage, handing power over to an Iraqi governing elite that was either popularly elected or could at least mobilize a significant section of Iraqi popular opinion to support its rule. Reactive US policy measures to meet these contradictory demands and interests were largely short-term, paying little attention to the medium- to long-term consequences of each new initiative.

Apart from the collapse of the state itself, the central problem that hampered the occupation was an acute lack of knowledge about the country. The occupation authorities took up residence in the old seat of government, the Republican Palace, at the heart of the secure "green zone" in the center of Baghdad. It was dependent upon a small group of Iraqi exiles, long absent from the country. They returned with the invaders to act as a conduit

between US forces and the Iraqi population, helping them to understand an unfamiliar society. Most important, it was hoped that these exiles would become the basis of Iraq's new governing class.

However, this reliance created distinct problems. The main organization formed in exile, Iraqi National Congress and its allies, brought back to the country a view of Iraqi society as irrevocably divided between sectarian groupings and mobilized by deep communal antipathy, a view that bore little resemblance to the real state of Iraqi society in 2003–2004.[34] This "primordialization" of Iraq clearly influenced the way the Iraqi Governing Council (ICG) was formed in July 2003, after negotiations between the US authorities and seven exiled parties. The United States promoted the IGC as "the most representative body in Iraq's history," but this could not come from the undemocratic method of its formation; instead it reflected the supposed religio-ethnic divisions in the country: thirteen Shias, five Sunnis, five Kurds, a Turkman, and a Christian. The forced and rather bizarre nature of this arrangement was highlighted by the inclusion of Hamid Majid Mousa, the Iraqi Communist Party's representative in the "Shia block" of thirteen. Such sectarian mathematics was also used to expand the number of cabinet portfolios to twenty-five, so that the spoils of office could be divided up in a similar fashion. The manner of the IGC selection caused a great deal of consternation across Iraqi opinion. Criticism focused on the fostering of an overt sectarianism that had previously not been central to Iraqi political discourse,[35] and on the damage that selection on the basis of sectarian or religious affiliations, rather than competence, would do to the restoration of government. Indeed, senior US officials themselves became rapidly disillusioned with its ability to deliver either leadership or legitimacy, noting that "at least half the council is out of the country at any given time and that at some meetings, only four or five members show up." A new governing structure was needed to cope with the rising insurgency but, as a senior occupation official said at the time, "it is unlikely that we will want to make a provisional government out of a council that has been feckless."[36]

Faced with increasing pressure from the UN Security Council for real sovereign power to be delegated to an Iraq governing body, the increasing alienation of the Iraq population, and a rising tide of political violence, the Bush administration set 30 June 2004 as the deadline for transferring sovereignty to Iraq. But it was the intervention of the most senior religious figure in the country, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, that forced the democratization of this hasty process. Sistani has continually pressed for early elections as the only way to reduce violence, guarantee Iraq's progress to democracy, and lessen the influence of the United States in running the country. His ability to influence events was highlighted by the hundred thousand people who demonstrated in Baghdad in January 2004 in support of his demands for nationwide elections. The transitional law finally agreed to by the Iraqi

Governing Council in March 2004 reflected this demand and set a clear timetable for progress toward democracy, stating that national elections must be held no later than 30 January 2005. Ayatollah Sistani then encouraged the formation of a "Shia list" to fight the elections, a disparate group of 228 candidates and parties brought together and vetted by Sistani's advisers.

The voting of 8.5 million Iraqis in the 30 January 2005 elections was certainly a historic moment. Despite nine suicide bombings in Baghdad and 260 attacks across the whole of the country, 58 percent of those eligible to vote did so. The elections, held under US occupation, were certainly not flawless; however, it would be churlish not to recognize the bravery and hope that propelled the majority of the Iraqi electorate to the ballot box. The Shia list, the United Iraqi Alliance, won 48 percent of the vote and 140 seats in the 275-member assembly. The Kurdish Alliance, formed by the two main Kurdish parties, won 75 seats, with the list of US-appointed interim prime minister Ayad Allawi winning 13 percent.

Elections, by themselves, however, leave unresolved broader issues of political reconstruction. Iraq at the time of the elections was a country still lacking effective institutions, military, administrative, or political. The two political parties at the core of the victorious United Iraqi Alliance, the Al-Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, were swept to power not by their own organization, canvassing, or legitimacy, but by their association with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The danger is that they will not solidify the societal mobilization of the election by building mass party organizations and will instead lose the political momentum they have achieved and revert to a neopatrimonial strategy of using state resources to buy political loyalty. The Iraqi population would then come to experience politics not as citizens but as subjects, whose votes and political participation would become meaningless, causing them to revert to the cynicism and mistrust that has dominated postwar Iraqi politics.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 1920, Iraq has never had a stable functioning democracy. The legacies that Saddam Hussein has left the country will make building a sustainable democracy extremely difficult. With ruthless efficiency the Baath Party co-opted or broke civil society through violence and patronage, forcing people to interact with the institutions of the state on an individual basis. For the Iraqi population, additionally traumatized by three wars in twenty years and the lawlessness and violence that have come to typify regime change, the legitimate expression of overt political opinion has only just begun. Most of the political parties now being used as the cornerstone

of the new Iraqi government were imported into the country after regime change and have had a short period of time to gain the attention of the population, much less win their trust or allegiance. Attempting to build organized, institutionalized party politics in Iraq is certainly possible, but it will take both time and effort. Those who run the state may feel they have neither the resources nor the support to take this route.

Notes

1. Author interview carried out in the cabinet complex, Baghdad, 11 September 2002, in the run-up to regime change.
2. See Isam al-Khafaji, "The Myth of Iraqi Exceptionalism," p. 68.
3. See Peter Boone, Haris Gazdar, and Athar Hussain, "Sanctions Against Iraq: Costs of Failure," paper presented at the conference "Frustrated Development: The Iraqi Economy in War and in Peace," University of Exeter Centre for Gulf Studies, in collaboration with the Iraqi Economic Forum, 9–11 July 1997.
4. Quoted in Michael Gordon, "'Catastrophic Success': The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War," *New York Times*, 19 October 2004.
5. "So massive was the looting that, just three days after the US secured the capital, computers were selling for as little as $35 in the thieves market." Mark Fineman, Robin Wright, and Doyle McManus, "Washington's Battle Plans: Preparing for War, Stumbling to Peace," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 2003.
6. See Faleh A. Jabar, "Postconflict Iraq," p. 6.
7. See James Dobbins et. al., *America's Role in Nation-Building*.
8. See Lawrence Freedman's comments in Alan George, Raymond Whitaker, and Andy McSmith, "Revealed: The Meeting That Could Have Changed the History of Iraq," *The Independent of Sunday*, 17 October 2004.
9. "Its not too late for the Iraqi military to act with honor and protect their country." George W. Bush, address to the American people, 19 March 2003.
10. See Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, p. 307.
11. See Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 8, 36, 406.
12. Author interview with Tariq Aziz, deputy prime minister, Baghdad, 11 September 2002.
13. "In Nasiriyah Iraqi paramilitaries and elements of the 11th Regular Army division waged a week-long urban battle against the Marine Corps' Task Force Tarawa, a reinforced three-battalion regimental-scale formation. In Samawah, Iraqi paramilitaries fought for a week against the Army's 3–7 Cavalry, the 3rd Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division, and the 2nd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division in turn. In Najaf, urban warfare in and around the city center continued for more than a week, tying down in series multiple brigades of American infantry." Stephen Biddle et al., *Toppling Saddam*, p. 9.
14. See Biddle et al., *Toppling Saddam*, pp. 6, 9, 10.
15. See Simon Chesterman, *You, the People*, pp. 100, 112.
16. US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld was quoted at the time as saying, "Freedom's untidy. Free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things."
17. See Isam al-Khafaji, "War as a Vehicle for the Rise and Decline of a State-Controlled Society."
18. The US military's own figures estimate that 80 percent of all violence in

Iraq is "criminal in nature." See Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "US Says Resistance in Iraq Up to 20,000," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2004.

19. Estimates taken from author interviews with Iraqis politically active in the antioccupation movement in spring 2005.

20. Author interviews. This conclusion is supported by other work on the insurgency. See, for example, Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Sunni Insurgency," p. 3.

21. See the CPA's own estimates, cited in Phillis Bennis et al., *A Failed "Transition,"* p. 37. On the influence of de-Baathification on the intensity of the insurgency, see Jon Lee Anderson, "Out on the Street. The United States' de-Ba'thification program fuelled the insurgency. Is it too late for Bush to change course?" *New Yorker*, 15 November 2004.

22. This section is based on extensive author interviews in winter 2004 and spring 2005.

23. Based on interviews carried out with senior Baath Party officials charged with supervising the Islamic education of party cadres.

24. See Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 22 May 2003.

25. Author interviews in Baghdad, May 2003.

26. See Jonathan Steele, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2003.

27. Based on author interviews in Baghdad, 2003.

28. See Nicolas Pelham, "'Political Arm' of Falluja Militants Claims Key Role," *Financial Times*, 26 April 2004.

29. See James Drummond, "A Year After the Invasion the Specter of Murderous Civil War Still Hangs over Iraq," *Financial Times*, 20 March 2004.

30. See Hashim, "The Sunni Insurgency," p. 10.

31. See, for example, military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel George Krivo, quoted in Patrick E. Tyler and Ian Fisher, "Occupiers, Villagers, and an Ambush's Rubble," *International Herald Tribune*, 1 October 2003.

32. For analysis of the text and its authenticity, see Dexter Filkins, "Memo Urges Qaeda to Wage War in Iraq," *International Herald Tribune*, 10 February 2004; Justin Huggler, "Is This Man the Mastermind of the Massacres?" *Independent on Sunday*, 7 March 2004.

33. See, for example, Abel Abdul Mehdi, an Iraq Governing Council spokesman quoted in Rod Nordland, "Thousands Attend the Funeral of Dozens Killed in the Karbala Explosions on March 2," *Newsweek*, 7 March 2004.

34. See Isam al-Khafaji, "A Few Days After."

35. See Rend Rahim Francke, "On the Situation in Iraq," pp. 8–9.

36. Daniel Williams, "Iraqi Warns of Delay on Constitution Vote," *Washington Post*, 10 November 2003.

18

From Sanctions to Occupation: The US Impact on Iraq

John Gee

The US government's policies have had a profound effect on Iraq, from its insistence on the maintenance of a punishing sanctions regime to its invasion and occupation of the country. Their damaging impact has obstructed Washington's ability to achieve its ostensible goal in Iraq, a stable but pro-US regime.

Iraq Under Sanctions

Whatever ambitions Saddam Hussein had earlier entertained, following the catastrophic defeat of 1991 his first imperative was the survival of his regime. With good reason, their enemies portrayed Saddam and his Baathist colleagues as a group who would stop at nothing to retain power, but few took this to its logical conclusion. To survive, the regime habitually reacted with brutality toward those suspected of disloyalty, but survival also meant being ready to bow to superior force even at the expense of abandoning supposedly fundamental principles. This meant that sanctions could be effective in securing their declared aim of stripping Iraq of the weaponry with which it might pose a threat to other states in the region, but they were a blunt instrument in Washington's campaign for regime change, since the regime could adapt to the conditions they created, while inflicting the costs on the general population.[1]

Saddam had never relied purely on force to retain power. Those employed in the institutional pillars of the regime, notably the secret police forces, the elite Republican Guard and other special forces, as well as the administrative elite, were well paid. Large-scale planned investment had raised Iraq's standards of literacy and health and its level of overall economic development to a place among the region's best by the time of the 1990–1991 Gulf War: almost all children attended school, affordable health-