

Does U.S. Occupation Prevent Civil War in Iraq? Think Again.

By Gareth Porter | January 19, 2005

As the U.S. occupation of Iraq heads toward its third year, there is a remarkable absence of debate over withdrawal, despite the evidence that a clear majority of the American people want out. Many conservatives are uneasy about the occupation but they are unwilling to challenge the administration publicly. Most liberals in politics and the media appear to believe that invading Iraq was a major blunder, but that withdrawal anytime in the foreseeable future would lead to civil war and chaos.

The premise of this fear is that the Shiite majority and the Sunni minority in Iraq have the same tendencies toward violence that have led to bloody ethnic and religious wars in Lebanon, Kosovo, and elsewhere, and that only the U.S. occupation restrains such violence. But U.S. forces are not, in fact, helping Sunnis and Shiites reach a new accommodation, and Iraq need not plunge into sectarian violence after a U.S. withdrawal.

Neither Sunni nor Shia Islam in Iraq has any tradition of hostility toward the other. The only force for sectarian violence in the country now is the few hundred foreign terrorists of the Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam, which regards all Shiites as apostates and as enemies of Islam. They have killed more than 200 Shiite worshippers and injured many more in mosque bombings alone.

In a country deeply divided along religious lines, such terrorist attacks could have brought it to the brink of sectarian bloodshed. In Iraq, however, the strong anti-sectarian standpoint of both Sunni and Shia leaders has been a powerful brake on any such tendency. The leading organization of Sunni Clerics, the Association of Muslim Scholars, with oversight over several thousand mosques across the country, has supported the resistance to the occupation, but has also strongly condemned foreign terrorists for trying to foment war between Sunnis and Shiites. And Shiites have identified their enemy as the foreign Wahhabis, not Sunnis in general. At the funeral

procession following the mosque bombing in Baghdad, thousands of Shiite mourners did not call for vengeance against the Sunni. Instead they chanted slogans accusing the United States of being complicit in the bombing.

Both the leadership and the vast majority of the insurgents strongly disapprove of the sectarian views of the Wahhabis and their terrorism against Shiites. In Fallujah, where the foreign terrorists had their own enclave in one neighborhood last summer, the leader of the resistance declared publicly that, after the occupation was defeated, the main task would be to fight "internal strife," a clear reference to the foreign jihadists.

The real threat of civil war in Iraq comes not from Sunni-Shia conflict but from the Kurdish-Arab tensions that have been stoked by the U.S. strategy of "Iraqification." For the past year, the U.S. military has been trying to get Sunnis and Shiites to fight the insurgents along with U.S. troops. But the only Iraqi troops willing to participate in the war in any numbers have been the Kurds.

Reliance on the Kurds as auxiliaries to the U.S. occupation is a dangerous strategy. Neither Sunnis nor Shiites have forgotten that the Kurds supported Iran in the war between Iraq and Iran in the early 1980s. Arab animosity toward the Kurds has been deepened by Kurdish demands for autonomy and control over the oil wealth of Northern Iraq. Nevertheless, the U.S. command decided in



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September to rely even more heavily on Kurdish troops to keep order in several major cities. Kurdish units who were given control over the Eastern sector of Mosul openly continued to wear their Kurdish militia uniforms. Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, the top U.S. commander in the North, has concluded that ethnic war is possible there.

The United States is not playing the role of disinterested trustee in Iraq, allowing Sunnis and Shiites or Arabs and Kurds to work out their differences. Instead, the counterinsurgency war prevents the Sunnis and Shiites from negotiating a new arrangement for power sharing. Such negotiations will only happen if and when it is clear to Iraqis that the United States is on its way out. Americans who are worried that an early withdrawal would be irresponsible should reexamine the question of which course is most likely to contribute to violence, and which one has the best chance of minimizing it.

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