

The U.S. Role in Iraq's Sectarian Violence

By Stephen Zunes | March 6, 2006

The sectarian violence which has swept across Iraq following last month's terrorist bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samara is yet another example of the tragic consequences of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Until the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation, Iraq had maintained a long-standing history of secularism and a strong national identity among its Arab population despite its sectarian differences.

Not only has the United States failed to bring a functional democracy to Iraq, neither U.S. forces nor the U.S.-backed Iraqi government in Baghdad have been able to provide the Iraqi people with basic security. This has led many ordinary citizens to turn to extremist sectarian groups for protection, further undermining the Bush administration's insistence that American forces must remain in Iraq in order to prevent a civil war.

Top analysts in the CIA and State Department, as well as large numbers of Middle East experts, warned that a U.S. invasion of Iraq could result in a violent ethnic and sectarian conflict. Even some of the war's intellectual architects acknowledged as much: In a 1997 paper, prior to becoming major figures in the Bush foreign policy team, David Wurmser, Richard Perle, and Douglas Feith predicted that a post-Saddam Iraq would likely be "ripped apart" by sectarianism and other cleavages but called on the United States to "expedite" such a collapse anyway.

As a result, the tendency in the United States to blame "sectarian conflict" and "long-simmering hatreds" for the Sunni-Shiite violence in Iraq is, in effect, blaming the victim.

Fostering Fragmentation and Conflict

One of the longstanding goals of such neoconservative intellectuals has been to see the Middle East broken up into smaller ethnic or sectarian mini-states,

which would include not only large stateless nationalities like the Kurds, but Maronite Christians, Druze, Arab Shiites, and others. Such a policy comes not out of respect for the right of self-determination—indeed, the neocons have been steadfast opponents of the Palestinians' desire for statehood, even alongside a secure Israel—but out of an imperial quest for divide-and-rule. The division of the Middle East has long been seen as a means of countering the threat of pan-Arab nationalism and, more recently, pan-Islamist movements. Given the mosaic of ethnicities and sects in the Middle East, with various groupings having mixed together within both urban and rural settings for many generations, the establishment of such ethnic or sectarian mini-states would almost certainly result in forced population transfers, ethnic cleansing, and other human suffering.

The risk of Iraq breaking up into a Sunni Kurdish state, a Sunni Arab state, and a Shiite Arab state is now very real. And, given the intermixing of these populations in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and scores of other cities, the potential exists for the most violent breakup of a country since the partition of India sixty years ago. Recent weeks have shown ominous signs of what may be yet to come on a massive scale, as scores of Shiite families were forced to flee what were once mixed neighborhoods in and around Baghdad.

Even barring a formal breakup of the country, the prospects of a stable unified country look bleak. As



the *Los Angeles Times* reported on February 26, “The outlines of a future Iraq are emerging: a nation where power is scattered among clerics turned warlords; control over schools, hospitals, railroads, and roads is divided along sectarian lines; graft and corruption subvert good governance; and foreign powers exert influence only over a weak central government.”

Much of Iraq’s current divisions can be traced to the decision of U.S. occupation authorities immediately following the conquest to abolish the Iraqi army and purge the government bureaucracy—both bastions of secularism—thereby creating a vacuum which was soon filled by sectarian parties and militias. In addition, the U.S. occupation authorities—in an apparent effort of divide-and-rule—encouraged sectarianism by dividing up authority based not on technical skills or ideological affiliation but ethnic and religious identity. As with Lebanon, however, such efforts have actually exacerbated divisions, with virtually every political question debated not on its merits, but on which group it potentially benefits or harms. This has led to great instability, with political parties, parliamentary blocs, and government ministries breaking down along sectarian lines.

Even army divisions are separated, with parts of western Baghdad being patrolled by army units dominated by Sunnis while eastern Baghdad is being patrolled by Shiite-dominated units. Without unifying national institutions, the breakup of the country remains a real possibility.

Sectarian Conflicts

Theologically, there are fewer differences between Sunnis and Shiites than there are between Catholics and Protestants. In small Iraqi towns of mixed populations with only one mosque, Sunnis and Shiites worship together. Inter-marriage is not uncommon. This harmony is now threatening to unravel.

Shiite Muslims, unlike the Sunni Muslims, have a clear hierarchy. (Ayatollahs, for example, are essentially the equivalent of Catholic cardinals.) As a

result, the already-existing clerical-based social structures in the Shiite community were among the few organizations to survive Saddam’s totalitarian regime and were therefore more easily capable of organizing themselves politically when U.S. forces overthrew the government in Baghdad in 2003. Sunni and secular groupings, then, found themselves at a relative disadvantage when they suddenly found themselves free to organize.

As a result, the United States initially insisted on indefinite rule by Iraqis picked directly or indirectly by Washington. However, when hundreds of thousands of Shiites took to the streets in January 2004 demanding the right to choose their country’s leaders, the Bush administration reluctantly agreed to hold direct elections. Having been dominated by Sunnis under the Baathists, the Hashemites, and the Ottomans, the Shiite majority was eager to rule. Not surprisingly, elections have brought Shiite religious parties to power which have since marginalized other groups and imposed their repressive and misogynist version of Islamic law in parts of Iraq where they dominate, particularly in the south of the country.

Sunni opposition to Shiite dominance does not just stem from resentment at losing their privileged position in Iraqi political life under the former dictatorship. Indeed, Saddam Hussein suppressed his fellow Sunni Arabs along with Sunni Kurds and Shiite Arabs.

What U.S. officials have failed to recognize is that Iraq’s Sunni Arab minority, regardless of its feelings about Saddam Hussein’s regime, has long identified with Arab nationalism. Not surprisingly, the armed resistance which emerged following Saddam’s removal from power three years ago by U.S. forces has come largely from the Sunni Arab community. The insurgency has also targeted the U.S.-backed Shiite-dominated Iraqi government, which came to power as a result of the U.S. invasion and which many see as being puppets of the U.S. occupation. They also fear that the Iraqi government may identify more with

their fellow Shiites of Iran than with other Arabs. More radical Sunni chauvinists, many of whom are foreign Salafi extremists like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have engaged in widespread terrorist attacks against Shiite civilians and their holy places.

Despite its dependence on the United States and ties to Iran, however, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government has its own agenda. Culturally and linguistically, Iraq's Shiites are every bit as Arab as the Sunnis. Yet while the vast majority of the country's Shiite Arab majority has no desire to be pawns of either Iran or the United States, the response by the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and Shiite militias has done little to lessen Sunni fears and hostility. Seeing their government faced with a growing insurgency and their community falling victim to terrorist violence, the Shiites have responded with aggressive counter-insurgency and counter-terrorist operations against the Sunni community. Human rights abuses by Shiites against the Sunni minority have increased dramatically, polarizing the country still further.

Even before the latest upsurge in sectarian violence, the Baghdad morgue was reporting that dozens of bodies of Sunni men with gunshot wounds to the back of the head would arrive at the same time every week, including scores of corpses with wrists bound by police handcuffs.

Death Squads

John Pace, the outgoing head of the United Nations' human rights monitoring group in Iraq, has reported that hundreds of Sunnis are being subjected to summary execution and death from torture every month by Iraqi government death squads, primarily controlled by the Ministry of the Interior.

High-ranking American officers have reported that radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Al-Mahdi Army maintains a strong presence in the regular police force, including up to 90% of the 35,000 officers currently working in the northeastern part of Baghdad. In addition, the Iranian-trained Badr

Brigade dominates police commando units. A police unit known as the Punishment Committee goes after civilians believed to be flouting Islamic laws or the authority of Shiite militia leaders, particularly Sunnis.

The Shiite government of Iran, long cited for its human rights abuses by both the Bush administration and reputable human rights organizations, has actively supported Shiite militias within the Iraqi government and security forces. (Despite this, the Bush administration and its supporters—including many prominent Democrats—have been putting forth the ludicrous theory that Iran is actually supporting the anti-Shiite and anti-American Sunni insurgency.) Iraqi Interior Minister Bayan Jabr was trained by Iran's infamous Revolutionary Guards and later served as a leader of the Badr Brigade, the militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Americans have also trained Interior Ministry police and commandoes, though—unlike some notorious cases in recent Latin American history—there is little evidence to suggest that U.S. trainers have actively encouraged death squad activity. Still, there is little question that actions by U.S. occupation troops over the past three years—such as the torture of detainees, the hair-trigger response at checkpoints, the liberal use of force in heavily-populated civilian neighborhoods, and the targeted assassinations of suspected insurgent leaders—have contributed to the climate of impunity exhibited by forces of the Iraqi government.

Mr. Pace has also observed how U.S. troops are making things worse by rounding up large numbers of innocent young Sunni men and detaining them for months. Noting how such “Military intervention causes serious human rights and humanitarian problems to large numbers of innocent civilians,” he lamented at the fact that many of these detainees, in reaction to their maltreatment, later joined Sunni terrorist groups following their release.

Despite last month's terrorist bombing of the Shiite shrine and the tragic killings that followed, however,

there were also impressive signs of unity. In cities throughout Iraq, Sunnis and Shiites mobilized to protect each other's mosques and neighborhoods.

Even the young firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr emphasized to his followers, "It was not the Sunnis who attacked the shrine ... but rather the occupation [forces] and Ba'athists." He called on his followers not to attack Sunni mosques and ordered his Al-Mahdi Army to "protect both Shia and Sunni shrines." He went on to say, "My message to the Iraqi people is to stand united and bonded, and not to fall into the Western trap. The West is trying to divide the Iraqi people." In a later interview, Sadr claimed, "We say that the occupiers are responsible for such crisis [Golden Mosque bombing] ... there is only one enemy. The occupier."

Similarly, Sunnis were quick to express their solidarity with Shias in a series of demonstrations in Samara and elsewhere. Anti-American signs and slogans permeated these marches. Indeed, there is a widespread belief that it was the United States, not fellow Muslims or Iraqis, which bears responsibility for the

tragedy. Even Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi claimed the United States was responsible for the bombing of the Golden Mosque, "especially since occupation forces did not comply with curfew orders imposed by the Iraqi government." He added, "Evidence indicates that the occupation may be trying to undermine and weaken the Iraqi government."

Though charges of a U.S. conspiracy are presumably groundless, it does underscore the growing opposition by both communities to the ongoing U.S. military presence in their country and how the United States has little credibility left with either community as a mediator, peacekeeper, overseer, or anything else.

And it underscores the urgency for the United States to withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible.

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