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Accepting Realities in Iraq

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The Al-Askari Shrine, Samara, after the bombing of 22 February 2006

Summary

- Iraq has fractured into regional power bases. Political, security and economic power has devolved to local sectarian, ethnic or tribal political groupings. The Iraqi government is only one of several 'state-like' actors. The regionalization of Iraqi political life needs to be recognized as a defining feature of Iraq's political structure.
- There is not 'a' civil war in Iraq, but many civil wars and insurgencies involving a number of communities and organizations struggling for power. The surge is not curbing the high level of violence, and improvements in security cannot happen in a matter of months.
- The conflicts have become internalized between Iraqis as the polarization of sectarian and ethnic identities reaches ever deeper into Iraqi society and causes the breakdown of social cohesion.
- Critical destabilizing issues will come to the fore in 2007–8. Federalism, the control of oil and control of disputed territories need to be resolved.
- Each of Iraq's three major neighbouring states, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, has different reasons for seeing the instability there continue, and each uses different methods to influence developments.
- These current harsh realities need to be accepted if new strategies are to have any chance of preventing the failure and collapse of Iraq. A political solution will require engagement with organizations possessing popular legitimacy and needs to be an Iraqi accommodation, rather than a regional or US-imposed approach.

Introduction: appreciating the scale of the problem

A critical time has now arrived for the future of Iraq. The situation continues to deteriorate markedly, not just in terms of the numbers of bombs exploding and corpses being found on the streets, but in terms of the nature of the violence – including the brutality of Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence. This internecine fighting is perhaps the greatest threat to the preservation of some social cohesion upon which a future can be built.

Some analysts contend that the level of violence in Iraq has in fact declined, particularly since the onset of the US-led military surge designed to improve the security situation in Baghdad.¹ However, if numbers of bomb attacks can be used as an indicator, then it can reasonably be assumed that the security situation remains as perilous as before the surge. The number of multiple fatality bombings in Iraq remained constant in March and April 2007 and, according to the Iraqi authorities, 1,500 civilians were killed in April alone.²

Although the number of civilian deaths in Baghdad has declined since the surge, the continued activities of Al-Qaeda and other groups have ensured that overall fatality rates across the rest of Iraq have, if anything, increased.³ In addition, the number of US soldiers killed in Iraq since January 2007 also rose, with 104 deaths in April alone, and 25 in the first week of May.⁴ Furthermore, it should be noted that the major Shi'a militias, including the *Jaish al-Mahdi*, have adopted a low profile during the surge but are very likely to re-emerge as a military force.⁵ The surge also may have been responsible for two other dynamics – the evacuation of significant numbers of *Jaish al-Mahdi* members from Sadr City, making it more insecure and allowing Sunni Arab insurgents to increase their attacks, and the refocusing of insurgent activity away from Baghdad to other urban centres, including Kirkuk and Mosul.

It is time for a full appraisal of the realities in Iraq. On current evidence these realities are very disturbing and it can no longer be assumed that Iraq will ultimately survive as a united entity. The four years since the removal of Saddam's regime have been deeply unsuccessful for the Multinational Force in Iraq and the new Iraqi government. Iraq's attempted transition from dictatorship to democracy has been harrowing and multi-faceted violence appears likely to continue and intensify. It can be argued that Iraq is on the verge of being a failed state which faces the distinct possibility of collapse and fragmentation.

The governments of the US and the UK, and the wider international community, continue to struggle with their analysis of Iraq, in particular of the

country's political and social structures. This analytical failing has led to the pursuit of strategies that suit ideal depictions of how Iraq *should* look, but are often unrepresentative of the current situation. Different strategies are required which build upon an understanding of the following realities:

- The social fabric of Iraq has been torn apart.
- There is not 'one' civil war, nor 'one' insurgency, but several civil wars and insurgencies between different communities and organizations; there is also a range of actors seeking to undermine, overthrow or take control of the Iraqi government.
- Iraqi nationalisms exist, but one distinct 'Iraqi' nationalism does not. Iraq has fractured into regions dominated by sectarian, ethnic or tribal political groupings that have gained further strength from their control of informal local economies.
- Al-Qaeda has a very real presence in Iraq that has spread to the major cities of the centre and north of the country, including Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul. Although Al-Qaeda's position is challenged by local actors, it is a mistake to exaggerate the ability of tribal groups and other insurgents to stop the momentum building behind its operations in Iraq.
- Regional powers have a greater capacity than either the US or the UK to influence events in Iraq. This arises from a historical legacy of social interaction and religious association that exists irrespective of modern international state boundaries.
- The Iraqi government is not able to exert authority evenly or effectively over the country. Across huge swathes of territory, it is largely irrelevant in terms of ordering social, economic, and political life. At best, it is merely one of several 'state-like actors' that now exist in Iraq.
- Security in Iraq cannot be 'normalized' in a matter of months but instead should be considered within a timeframe of many years. If the Multinational Force is withdrawn, Iraq's nascent security services would not be able to cope with the current levels of insecurity.

Arguably, developments in the next year will influence Iraq's future political direction and character in a way that has not been equalled since the invasion in 2003. Every year since 2003 has been depicted as being of formative importance, but 2007–8 will be a particularly crucial period because many of the most destabilizing issues that need to be resolved (including federalism, oil and disputed territories) are expected or required to be addressed. This, combined with the evidence that sectarian tensions have reached new heights while US public and political opinion is

increasingly critical of the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq, suggests that revised or fresh policies and strategies will be sought that reflect the new realities both in Iraq and in the US.

The choices available to the US and to the Iraqi government are now severely limited and, particularly for the US, distinctly unpalatable as they would require an acceptance of Anthony Cordesman's suggestion that 'it is more than possible that a failed President and a failed administration will preside over a failed war for the second time since Vietnam'.⁶ This briefing paper focuses upon Iraq from late 2006 to the end of 2008. It addresses the most critical aspects of the realities in today's Iraq, emphasizing the great scale of the problems and exploring the options for their alleviation.

The realities

It is interesting to note the recent change in language regarding Iraq, particularly in the US. This began in the second half of 2006, as observers, senior military figures and politicians alike came to see the outlook as increasingly bleak. Previously confident declarations of victory began to be replaced with more cautious, even ominous, warnings of 'hard times ahead' and an even more stark claim that 'victory is *still* possible'⁷ – worrying words for the US as failure in Iraq would undermine its claim to be the main power broker in the Middle East region.

While the Bush administration is still clinging to the hope that the situation in Iraq can be turned around, the tasks that lie ahead do not inspire great optimism. There are five critical realities to be recognized and addressed in 2007–8:

- *Conflict and security*: the management and eventual resolution of the numerous civil wars, followed by the normalization of political, social and economic life throughout the country.
- *Breakdown of social cohesion*: the emergence of identity-based politics as the primary means of social and political self-definition in Iraq.
- *Federalism*: the negotiations over the federal structure of the state.
- *Oil*: the wording of the Petroleum Law; how do the centre and the regions interact with international oil companies and distribute subsequent revenue?
- *Flashpoints*: the status of 'disputed territories' including those contested between Shi'a and Sunnis around Baghdad in addition to the towns and regions coveted by Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds in the north, particularly Kirkuk.

Finding a path to security through the plurality of conflicts

While it is clear that Iraq is racked by conflicts, there remains considerable confusion regarding the causes and who is involved. Some observers – mainly diaspora-based Iraqis with a romanticized view of a unifying Iraqi nationalism – contend that the violence stems from the fact that Iraq is under occupation, and that what is being seen is either nationalist attacks against occupying forces and a puppet government, or sectarian-based attacks born out of perfidious occupation policies.⁸ Others contend that violence between communities in Iraq has always remained a possibility, and that identity-based politics have been a common feature of Iraqi life but were kept in abeyance by dictatorship.⁹ In some ways, trying to determine the causes of these conflicts is now merely an academic exercise. A more practical view is to recognize that these conflicts represent a struggle for political power, being waged in different places between a range of actors and at a variety of levels.

Between the summer of 2006 and the end of the year, violence in Iraq reached appallingly high new levels. The Multinational Force was not the principal target although it continued to suffer losses. Rather, the conflict became internalized between Iraqis themselves as the polarization of sectarian identities reached ever deeper into Iraqi society. The problem is more complex than many imagine. In particular, it is essential to realize that there is not merely 'a' civil war in Iraq, but that there are several overlapping conflict dynamics, including:

- a struggle over the control of the state between Shi'a and Sunnis, with Kurds involving themselves as potential 'king-makers'. The result of this is a vicious Shi'a–Sunni civil war in Baghdad and its environs in which the security institutions of the Iraqi government are involved.
- a struggle for control over the design of the state, and whether it will be unitary or federal. This is bringing Kurds into direct confrontation with Sunnis and supporters of Muqtada Sadr, and causing conflict between Sadrists and other Shi'a organizations.
- a rapidly emerging conflict between Kurds and non-Kurds in Kirkuk, which has every possibility of being mirrored in Mosul.
- a Sunni–US conflict in the centre and north of the country.
- a Shi'a (Sadrist)–US/UK conflict in the centre and south of the country.
- a Sunni–Sunni conflict in the governorates of Anbar, Nineva and Diyala between tribal forces and

those associated with Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist movements.

- a conflict caused by the spreading and strengthening of the Islamic State of Iraq in Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle, including rifts between Al-Qaeda and home-grown Iraqi movements such as *Ansar al-Sunna*.¹⁰
- a Shi'a–Shi'a conflict in Najaf and Basra, mainly between Sadrists and Badr forces.¹¹
- rampant criminality across the entire country.

The existence of so many cross-cutting conflicts – some of which involve state forces – makes it exceptionally difficult to promote some form of security normalization without becoming implicated in one or more of the conflicts. However, if the US and UK continue to work towards ending these conflicts in cooperation with the Iraqi government (and this is only one option – another would be to leave Iraqis to resolve their own differences), then a new strategy that recognizes the current situation in Iraq, the relative power of different actors (including insurgents and Sadrists) and the aims and agendas of these actors needs to be built into the new generation of scenarios. With this in mind, the following three issues need to be factored into policy-planning for Iraq's future:

- Bring a meaningful Sunni presence back into the political process. This needs to be deemed legitimate by the non-Al-Qaeda groups of the Sunni insurgencies.
- Recognize the importance of Muqtada al-Sadr's broad-based populist movement. Targeting the Sadrists causes more problems than it resolves.
- Treat the existence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a benefit rather than an anomaly. Kurdish demands for autonomy need to be more publicly recognized as legitimate rather than seen as a destabilizing dynamic.

Bringing the Sunnis in

It is unlikely that the Sunni insurgency will overthrow the Shi'a-led government. Some prominent Sunni leaders, both religious and secular, recognize this clearly. There are also obvious divisions within the Sunni insurgency between home-grown Islamists and Al-Qaeda affiliates, and also between Islamists and Ba'thists. This presents an opportunity to pursue a strategy which reaches out to those components of the Sunni insurgency that are opposed to the emergence of the Al-Qaeda-driven Islamic State of Iraq, and that fear the growth in Shi'a resentment

against Sunnis for the unremitting and devastating attacks taking place. The price for bringing the Sunnis into the political process will involve constitutional bargains, including a reconsideration of federalism and mechanisms employed for the distribution of Iraq's oil wealth. While the Kurds (and arguably some Shi'a) would not allow a fundamental alteration of the articles relating to federal organization, there is clearly an opportunity for negotiating the distribution of revenue to Sunni areas.

Muqtada al-Sadr cannot be ignored

A strategy of 'reaching out' to current members of the Sunni Arab insurgencies would be grounded in an acceptance that the insurgency is not monolithic, and that political deals can still be achieved. A similar strategy could calm the second threat to Iraq's security – the increasing radicalization of the Sadr Movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr.

The Sadr Movement has had an exceptionally bad press in the West. Often labelled 'insurgents' in the same breath as Al-Qaeda groups, its military wing, the *Jaish al-Mahdi*, has been targeted by US, British, and Iraqi government forces as an illegal militia which is under the control of shadowy Iranian elements working to destabilize Iraq and kill American and British troops. The *Jaish al-Mahdi* has clearly been a highly destabilizing force in Iraq, and has committed a range of attacks against Iraqi and coalition forces. However, Muqtada al-Sadr has substantial popular support and therefore political legitimacy. He is not merely the leader of an armed rabble that can be ignored. Furthermore, although he is a charismatic leader, his organization could exist without him. Muqtada is an Iraqi nationalist, albeit of a distinctly Shi'a hue, and his relationship with Iran has been notably awkward. If he is now increasingly falling under Iran's influence, it is not by choice but by necessity: he is being pushed into relying on Iranian security elements for logistical and financial support as the Multinational Force targets his organization.

Muqtada has become, against the odds, a figure of profound political importance. This is because he is viewed by many Iraqis as being 'one of them', unlike the leadership of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which is seen to be heavily influenced by Iran.¹² In this context, 'Iraqi' nationalism is working in favour of the 'home-grown' Sadr, as opposed to the 'Made in Iran' label that haunts SCIRI. If the US and UK wish to maintain Shi'a moderation in the face of devastating terrorist attacks, then the Sadr Movement needs to be recognized as a key and enduring feature of Iraq's political landscape which should be brought further into the political process.

Supporting the Kurds

The third set of conflict-causing factors that needs to be addressed relates to the organization of the state and the 'ownership' of territory. Of particular importance is the situation of the Kurds and their desire to formalize the existence of the Kurdistan Region in the north of the country. The Kurds have suffered in the past from being perceived to be politically weak and militarily inconsequential. However, times have changed and it is now clear that Iraq must become federal if it is to survive, quite simply because there is no other way to ensure that the Kurds will peacefully remain within the state. (See p. 6 for further discussion of the federal question.) The city of Kirkuk is a flashpoint that has to be managed in order to avoid the dissolution of the Kurdish–Shi'a alliance in the Iraqi government, and to prevent what is already a highly unstable situation spiralling out of control. Mosul is also a potential flashpoint, as are scores of other towns with a sizeable Kurdish population.

The scale of the problem

These conflicts are driven by a number of problems involving the struggle for power, competing narratives of what it means to 'be' Iraqi, deeply held sectarian hatreds among some extremists in both the Sunni and Shi'a camps, intra-communal rivalries between groups with differing political and ideological objectives, the reworking of administrative structures, the drawing or redrawing of boundaries between peoples, and, perhaps most pertinently, the control of resources. It is, of course, very easy to argue that the Sunnis need to be included, Sadr needs to be recognized, and the Kurds need to be embraced. But it is far more difficult to engineer this in the knowledge that each of these groups has a political agenda which is often unacceptable to the others, that each group has powerful internal dynamics which make matters infinitely more complex, and that the legacy of four years of instability may present insurmountable obstacles to any process of promoting meaningful political inclusion.

The breakdown of social cohesion

Iraqi society has now been transformed by violence. The cumulative effect of bomb attacks, kidnappings, killings, threats and intimidation has unravelled the fragile ties that held society together, resulting in displaced populations. The effect on Iraq's youth is particularly striking. While it is extremely difficult for outsiders to undertake research on this subject in Baghdad, the writings of a range of Baghdad-based

'bloggers', both Sunni and Shi'a, give a useful – and worrying – indication of the nature of political identity in Baghdad, how the unremitting level of atrocities affects daily life, how 'others' are viewed, and the manner in which security of neighbourhoods falls into the hands of those best placed to project power locally.

The change in the content of these blogs is remarkable. Barely a year ago, young Iraqis commonly talked about their desires to see the Americans leave and for a genuinely Iraqi political process to emerge. Now, bloggers tend to fall into one of two categories: they either wish the US to stay in order to prevent the final collapse into a 'total' civil war; or they wish the US to leave in order to allow the civil war to erupt fully – such is the level of sectarian-based hatred in Baghdad today.

The generation of Iraqi 15–25-year-olds not only had the greatest expectations following the removal of Saddam Hussein, but was to become the major recruiting base for militias and insurgents. One blogger, 'Iraqi Konfused Kid', noted that

it's a known fact today that while US soldiers do occasionally rape 15-year-olds ..., they are still infinitely more trustworthy than any Iraqi soldier from anywhere. When an American soldier knocks on your door for a search, you go 'oh thank god' but when Iraqis do the same, you are instantly on your toes. Forget about all those Iraqis and Arab bloggers who live outside or have never been in there recently, they don't know what it is like – Iraq is dead – we are living in a newfound, and very real, age of sect.¹³

A further outlet for Iraqi sectarianism now exists on *YouTube*. Postings by both Shi'a and Sunnis, calling for a whole range of barbarous acts to be committed against the other exist alongside a video catalogue of the worst atrocities inflicted upon Shi'a by Saddam's regime and the murderous activities of Shi'a government-backed 'death squads'.¹⁴

When the scale of everyday brutality in Iraq is appreciated, it becomes more appropriate to view Iraq's future in relation to other examples of communally based conflict that led to atrocities as in Rwanda and Bosnia, than to try to recall the half-century-old memories of the halcyon secular nationalist period. Indeed, *history*, or more accurately *twentieth-century history*, is increasingly irrelevant when discussing Iraq's future, owing to the profoundly transformative effects of violence since 2003.¹⁵

Iraq has already, in effect, become 'regionalized' – i.e. political power has devolved from Baghdad and

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local leaders have now adopted the roles commonly associated with the state, engaging directly in local security, economic control and interaction with coalition forces. In 2007 alone, the following pattern can be observed:

- In Basra, the offices of the city governor are under the control of the locally powerful *Fadilah* (Virtue Party) and SCIRI.
- In the Sadr City area of Baghdad, the *Jaish al-Mahdi* acts as the state authority.
- In the north, the authority of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), exercised through the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), is absolute.
- The Islamic State of Iraq seems to be emerging as an institutionalized entity in areas of Anbar and the Sunni triangle.

The result of this fracturing of state and society has been the devolution of power to localities and militias and the hardening of communal identities. The problem for policy-makers wishing to promote a centralized state is that, once political power has devolved to localities and local political structures have become empowered and entrenched, it is exceptionally difficult to promote a voluntary 'recentralizing' of that power. Rather, a more proactive way forward could be:

- to recognize the divisions that now exist within Iraq's society as at least being semi-permanent; and
- instead of promoting the formation of a strong and centralized Iraqi government (which would result in a zero-sum competition for power as has tended to happen until now), to formalize the emerging regional arrangements through the constitutional articles that enshrine federalism.

Federal or unitary?

The debate over the future structure of the Iraqi state has been raging ever since the removal of Saddam. The Kurds insist upon Iraq becoming federal and the Kurdistan Region being enshrined in law as an autonomous entity, given that the region has been in existence since 1991, and that they cannot be forced into any arrangement against their wishes. The strength of the Kurds was illustrated during the drafting of the Transitional Administrative Law and the draft Constitution of Iraq, when federal articles were included. However, neither the precise character of federalism nor the manner in which the power of the regions would be allocated with respect to the power of the centre was resolved. This is of fundamental

importance in deciding whether Iraq will truly be federal – where constituent states have real power that cannot be challenged by the centre – or whether it will be federal merely in name, with ultimate authority still resting in Baghdad.

The Kurds spent a great deal of diplomatic effort attempting to convince their Shi'a counterparts of the benefits of pursuing the formation of federal units in the centre and south of the country. These attempts opened a chasm between different Shi'a parties: SCIRI wished to establish one 'super-province' stretching from Baghdad to Basra; *Fadilah* envisaged a region based solely on the governorate of Basra; and the Sadr Movement rejected outright any federal model on the grounds that it would be the first step in allowing Kurdistan, and perhaps even Basra, to secede from Iraq.

The disagreement is, in effect, not related to any ideological issue regarding federalism (although Muqtada al-Sadr's line can be interpreted as wishing to defend the territorial integrity of Iraq and therefore as Iraqi nationalist), but is driven by political and economic considerations. The dispute between *Fadilah* and SCIRI, for example, can be traced to Shi'a political geography. With its stronghold in Basra, *Fadilah* would be the undisputed political power in a small 'Region of the South' and also be in charge of the immense oil industry in that part of the country. Conversely, with relatively limited support in Basra, but larger support in Nasiriyya, Najaf and Kerbala, SCIRI would be the leading force in a much wider entity that encompassed the Shi'a-dominated region south of Baghdad. Muqtada al-Sadr, with his power-base in Baghdad, would be unlikely to garner enough support to win power in either the 'Region of the South' or the 'Region of the Centre and the South', but his popularity in Baghdad alone could see him emerge as the leading Shi'a political leader in a unitary state.¹⁶

It is this power struggle over the federal future of Iraq that has led to an upsurge in violence in Basra and the south, and between SCIRI, *Fadilah* and Sadr, over the last year. The violence is also fuelled by the fact that Sadrist militias and, increasingly, Messianic cults in the south of Iraq, are targeting SCIRI as an 'Iranian' party doing the bidding of Tehran.¹⁷

Sunnis tend to view federalism as a Kurdish mechanism to achieve secession from Iraq. As such, it has received virtually no support from Sunni Arab politicians. Yet there is an interesting element to their position that perhaps will play out in 2007. While they generally remain totally opposed to the notion of a Shi'a federal region, Sunnis are coming to see the existence of the Kurdistan Region as something that cannot be challenged. Sunni Arabs, with some Shi'a support, are increasingly suggesting, therefore, that

the Kurds should be allowed to go their own way, but that they should not be included within the budgetary distribution of the Iraqi state.

The budget of the KRG is in no way autonomous from that of Iraq. Indeed, it is almost wholly dependent upon the continued existence of the Iraqi government as its sizeable running costs need to be met almost totally by Iraqi government transfers. Without these transfers, the KRG would quickly need to find other sources of revenue. Without agreement on the federal structure, the Kurdish negotiating position over the Petroleum Law and the status of Kirkuk will necessarily be uncompromising as Kurdish politicians will see their financial security coming not from agreement through Baghdad, but from exploitation of their own natural resources in Kirkuk, and elsewhere.

The Petroleum Law

Drafting an effective Petroleum Law is, perhaps, the key to ensuring Iraq's survival as it will be oil revenue that keeps the state together rather than any attempt to build a coherent national project in the short term. However, the Petroleum Law is tied closely to the future of federalism. In the absence of an agreement over the nature of federalism, the negotiations over the Petroleum Law have been characterized by mistrust, brinkmanship and, ultimately, failure. For the Sunni Arab negotiators, the situation is very simple: the oil resources of Iraq are for the benefit of all Iraqis and, as such, should be administered by the Ministry of Oil in Baghdad, with the revenue also distributed centrally. In this model, there is no room for the involvement of regional governments such as the KRG, or a Basra-centred entity. This tension has led the Ministry of Oil, on several occasions, to announce the passing of a centralized Petroleum Law, only for the announcement to be dismissed by the Ministry of Oil and Natural Resources in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurdish position follows quite closely the stipulations outlined in the Constitution of Iraq. Central government is to maintain responsibility for administering the resources already established (including the Kirkuk and Basra fields), and also for distributing revenue across the state. However, according to the Kurdish interpretation of the constitution, regional governments are responsible for the management and administering of 'new' fields within their territory, and for then undertaking the distribution of revenue within the region and, by agreement, to the Iraqi government.

However, the details of how this will work have not been agreed and Sunni negotiators remain

adamant that the Petroleum Law is one area of the Constitution that has to be renegotiated in order to ensure their cooperation in the National Assembly. Emphasizing their strength, the Kurds have proceeded to negotiate exploration contracts with international oil companies. Several have already been signed, with small, risk-taking companies, much to the consternation of Baghdad.

Disagreements over the Petroleum Law have broken out regularly in 2007. In January, Iraqi Oil Minister Hussein Shahrahstani announced that a law had been passed requiring all Iraqi oil operations to be administered by the Ministry in Baghdad, irrespective of what region they happened to be located in. The response from the office of KRG Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani was predictably swift. It rejected Shahrahstani's announcement and stated that the Constitution gave the Kurds the right to administer their own fields. Barzani also raised the subject of utmost sensitivity to all Iraqis – the future of Kirkuk. While this conflict appeared to have been resolved, further disagreements broke out in early May, with Kurdish and Sunni officials objecting to the law for different reasons (the former objecting to the detail of the important annexes, and the latter objecting outright to the existence of the law) and threatening to derail the entire process.

Kirkuk and the disputed territories

The future of Kirkuk can be closely related to the overall future of Iraq. If compromises and solutions can be found in this most archetypal of divided cities, so the argument goes, then power-sharing and conflict-management solutions can be found for the rest of Iraq's problems. There is, perhaps, reason to be optimistic that Kirkuk's future will be resolved relatively peacefully (in an Iraqi sense). There is, after all, a designated process to follow (Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution) and, contrary to the direst of predictions about Kirkuk being where the Iraqi civil war would first break out (this occurred instead in Baghdad), its divided population has not as yet engaged in wholesale slaughter, even following waves of bombings.

It is possible that the reason why fighting has not yet taken hold in Kirkuk as it has in Baghdad, and even in Mosul, is that the decision regarding Kirkuk's future has been put off ever since 2003. But it cannot be put off any longer. The political process stipulated by Article 140 outlines a three-stage process involving 'normalization' (i.e. the removal of Arab families and the return of Kurdish, Assyrian and Turkmen exiles); 'census', whereby the demographic characteristics of Kirkuk will be taken following normalization; and,

finally, a 'referendum' that will ask whether the population of Kirkuk governorate wishes to merge with the Kurdistan Region or remain outside it. This year is likely to see the tide of violence rise in Kirkuk as the Kurds are determined that the Article 140 process will be followed and that a referendum will be held by December 2007, whereas non-Kurds are determined to prevent the referendum from taking place. Without a referendum, there is serious risk of Kurdish-initiated violence; with one, there is a serious risk of non-Kurdish-initiated violence.

Kirkuk, federalism and oil, combined with the security concerns, the targeting of Iran and the implementation of US policy in Iraq and the wider region, all come together in 2007, creating the likelihood that the situation in Iraq will get much worse before it can get better. Many different agendas, processes and forces will converge in the near future, making it more likely that Iraq will lurch from crisis to crisis in 2007 than enjoy improved security and follow a constructive political process involving dialogue among its communities. Feeding into these developments will be the regional powers of the Middle East, and particularly Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Regional concerns

The continuation of instability in Iraq is not necessarily contrary to the interests of the three major neighbouring states. Each of these states has different reasons for seeing the status quo maintained, and each uses different methods to influence developments in Iraq.

Iran

Iran has an extensive security presence in Iraq. It has always been intrinsically involved in Iraq's affairs, whether through the religious networks that span the Shi'a world, or through the shady world of paramilitary organizations such as the *Basij* or the *Pasdaran* and their links into various Iraqi Shi'a militias. These links exist at the highest levels of the Iraqi government and include not only Shi'a political personalities but also Kurds and even some Sunnis. The most capable foreign power in Iraq, in terms of influencing future events, is not the US. It is Iran.

From Iran's geopolitical perspective, Iraq, and particularly southern Iraq, is its 'backyard'. But there is also a more immediate geopolitical aspect to Iran's involvement in Iraq, beyond the ties of history, kin and creed: it is now a theatre in which Iran can 'fight' the US without doing so openly. Since the end of the

Iran-Iraq War, Tehran has been building itself into the hegemon of the Gulf region, with only the presence of the US in the Arab Gulf states standing in its way. This presence has quite often taken on threatening dimensions and has acted as a barrier to Iran's aspirations in the Gulf. The latest confrontation over Tehran's nuclear programme has the potential to lead to the US taking military action.

The Iranian government can now use events in Iraq to weaken the US resolve, at least in terms of domestic public opinion, to target Iran directly. With US forces dragged into a seemingly unending conflict in Iraq's towns and cities, suffering casualties but with little to show in terms of achieving democratization, or even stabilization, it becomes more difficult for the US to countenance an attack on Iran. An alternative reading of the situation suggests that Iran is deliberately provoking a US attack, since the government, being hydra-like in nature, would almost certainly survive and perhaps be empowered by a consolidation of support in the face of what will be called Zionist-imperialist aggression. Either way, Iran's influence in Iraq is working in such a way as to benefit the Iranian strategy.

Saudi Arabia

The potential emergence of a Shi'a crescent centred on Iraq and Iran undoubtedly influences the actions of some Arab Gulf states in their attempts to shape the direction of events in Iraq. For 2007, however, the prospect of a Sunni-Shi'a war in the Middle East remains distant. Despite this, it is certainly a concern for Arab Sunni states that the former bastion of Arab nationalism, Iraq, is now firmly in the hands of the Shi'a, and that the most influential foreign state in the country is Iran. This has caused considerable consternation, particularly in the Gulf states, and with good reason. In Saudi Arabia the oil-rich areas of Hasa province are predominantly Shi'a-populated. Even though the local leadership declares its loyalty to the Saudi state, the Shi'a here are tribally linked with the Shi'a of southern Iraq, and most choose to identify Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (a Persian) as their *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation).

Any victory of the Shi'a in Iraq over their Sunni countrymen, or any partition of the state into a Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'a state, would greatly trouble the Saudi leadership. Saudi Arabia might not stand by if the US now withdrew from Iraq, principally because such an action would herald the commencement of a full-scale Sunni-Shi'a civil war in Iraq, with the possibility of Iran and Saudi Arabia fighting each other through proxies in Iraq.

Turkey and the Kurds

The orthodox academic view of Turkey's policy towards Iraq is that it is driven by an overwhelming need to prevent Iraq's collapse and the emergence of a Kurdish state. There is some credibility in this view, particularly as the Turkish military establishment – which is of fundamental importance in the political life of Turkey – remains distinctly opposed to anything 'Kurdish' in Iraq, and the influence of Iraqi Kurds in encouraging the Kurds in Turkey to also seek greater autonomy. For Turkey, the further consolidation of the KRG in Iraq is something that needs to be carefully scrutinized, if not stopped outright, and Kurdish attempts to secure Kirkuk and control of its own oil resources should be prevented. In order to achieve this, Turkey has chosen to follow a range of policies, including direct threats against the Kurdistan Region (in February, for example, some 60–70,000 troops were moved to the border), and holding conferences to highlight the plight of the Turkmen in Kirkuk. These policies have not been particularly successful as the Iraqi government – itself influenced heavily by prominent Kurdish politicians – and the US administration are unwilling to force the Kurds to back down on their demands, and there is certainly no attempt to dismantle the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and forcibly reintegrate it into Iraq.

There is also policy disagreement within Ankara itself; the AK Party is caught between promoting Turkey's accession to the European Union and satisfying the demands of its generals. Until 2007, the government had succeeded in managing the military and keeping it under close control. But, with EU accession talks turning more problematic, the strength of the military establishment has again increased to the extent that a Turkish military occupation of at least the border territories of Kurdistan-Iraq's border with Turkey looks likely. Such action would be undertaken ostensibly to remove from the border the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) presence based at Qandil, but it would also serve to threaten the KRG and the two Iraqi Kurdish parties.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to believe that the political forces in Iraq are weak and can be reorganized, perhaps by the US, perhaps by the international community. While no single party exercises authority over the state as did the deposed Ba'th, it is an underestimation to describe the current power-holders in Iraq as merely ethnic-sectarian entrepreneurs keen to exploit the situation for their own communal, even personal, benefit. The parties are now, without

exception, sophisticated organizations with segmented political and military structures, highly developed ties with neighbouring states and ever-deepening roots in Iraqi society.

The government of Nouri al-Maliki has struggled to bring control to the streets of the cities of Iraq. Many of these, including Kirkuk, Mosul, Baqubah, Samara, Ramadi and Basra, have become lawless theatres of inter- and intra-sectarian and inter-ethnic violent conflict. They have fallen out of the orbit of the Iraqi government's control and instead succumbed to the power gained from the barrels of the guns of whichever group manages to dominate a particular area. Only the Kurdistan Region remains unaffected by the civil wars gripping the rest of the country, but it remains threatened by violence as disagreements in the 'disputed territories' of Sinjar, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Mandali all bring Kurds into conflict with their neighbours. Contrary to the initial hopes of policy planners in Washington DC and London, it seems likely that the reality of the regionalization of Iraqi political life – which is in effect a manifestation of identity-based politics – will have to be accepted as a defining feature of Iraq's political structure. It will need to be worked with rather than opposed.

In pursuing such a strategy, military force in the form of surges cannot deliver the critical political accommodation. Only by engaging with leaders and organizations that possess some degree of credibility and legitimacy among local populations can there be any chance that a political solution built upon negotiations between communities can provide a basis for a strategy resulting in the stabilization of Iraq. This recognition and 'bringing in' of such leaders can be undertaken by foreign interlocutors but would have a much greater chance of succeeding if prominent Iraqi leaders were seen to be involved. Many of them already are, but in a 'behind-the-scenes' way. The process of engagement now needs to be public and transparent.

The three aspects of this approach are simple enough: find Sunni Arab representatives to participate in government; recognize Muqtada al-Sadr as a legitimate political partner; be more responsive to Kurdish concerns. These approaches should colour any actions taken either by the US or by the Iraqi government as policies are formulated and specific actions planned. Meetings such as at Sharm al-Sheikh in early May 2007 proved that the solution to Iraq is to be found inside Iraq itself.¹⁸ While it is obvious that neighbouring powers have interests in and take actions inside Iraq, their support for any particular approach can only assist the stabilizing of Iraq if Iraqis themselves come to some form of accommodation with each other. In effect, Iraqi solutions will need to

be found to Iraqi problems. These solutions will then need to be supported by regional powers and the US. Devising US or regional solutions according to the

players' own interests, and imposing them upon Iraq, has been tried and has only served to destabilize the situation further.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Frederick Kagan, 'Plan B? Let's give Plan A some time first', *New York Times*, 6 May 2007.
- ² *Iraq Index. Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution), 7 May 2007; Chris Kraul, 'Iraq's civilian toll grows', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 May 2007.
- ³ *Iraq Index. Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*.
- ⁴ Sudarsan Raghavan and Karin Brulliard, 'US military suffers costly month in Iraq as 104 troops killed', *The Boston Globe*, 1 May 2007; Tina Susman, 'U.S. expects rise in troop casualties', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 2007.
- ⁵ The *Jaish al-Mahdi* (Mahdi Army) is a Shi'a militant group formed in 2003 by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the Sadr City district of Baghdad. The group rose to prominence in April 2004 during the Shi'a uprising against the US presence in Iraq.
- ⁶ Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq's Troubled Future: The Uncertain Way Ahead* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies), 13 April 2007.
- ⁷ See, for example, President Bush's speech on 20 December 2006, reported by Sheryl Stolberg and John Holusha, 'Bush: Iraq victory still possible', *International Herald Tribune*, 20 December 2006.
- ⁸ See, for example, Zaid Al-Ali, 'Iraq: A Wall to Conquer Us', *Open Democracy*, 8 May 2007.
- ⁹ See Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy or Division?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edn, 2005).
- ¹⁰ The establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq was announced on 6 November 2006 after an agreement was reached between several Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist groups operating in Iraq, including the Mujahideen Shura Council. The ISI has succeeded in building a strong presence in areas of Anbar, Diyala and Nineva, with reports indicating that its influence in Baghdad itself is now so strong that it is succeeding in driving out non-Sunni inhabitants of parts of Baghdad. *Ansar al-Sunna* is an Iraqi Islamist militant group which opposes the US forces and the Iraqi government. The group, based in northern and central Iraq, is composed of Kurdish and Sunni Arab religious radicals as well as some foreign elements.
- ¹¹ The Badr Organization is the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Originally composed of Iraqi Shi'a exiles who sought refuge in Iran during the rule of Saddam Hussein, the organization returned to Iraq after the 2003 invasion and participated in the 2005 elections as part of the United Iraqi Alliance coalition.
- ¹² In May 2007, SCIRI changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, reflecting its sensitivity to accusations of Iranian revolutionary influence.
- ¹³ <http://ejektiraqikk.blogspot.com/2007/02/iraqi-resistance-and-us-plan.html>, posted 12 February 2007.
- ¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com>.
- ¹⁵ For further discussion about this point see Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 202–4.
- ¹⁶ Reidar Visser, 'Ottoman Provincial Boundaries, Shiite Federalism, and Energy Conflict in Iraq', *www.historiae.org*, November 2006.
- ¹⁷ For more information on these Messianic cults, see Reidar Visser, 'Ashura in Iraq: Enter Mahdism?', *www.historiae.org*, 29 January 2007.
- ¹⁸ On 3 May 2007, the UN-sponsored International Compact for Iraq (ICI) was launched at an international conference in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. The ICI is a five-year national plan aiming to consolidate peace, sound governance and economic reconstruction in Iraq in partnership with the international community.

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