

The Causes of US Failure in Iraq

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During the last quarter of 2006, perceptions in Washington DC about the civil war in Iraq drastically changed. In September, President George W. Bush was finally persuaded that things were not going well and agreed to a review of his administration's policy.¹ In early December this mood of pessimism was augmented by the publication of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report, co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. The report did not mince its words: 'The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating. There is no path that can guarantee success.' In case there were any lingering doubts about the message he was delivering, James Baker stated at its launch: 'we do not know if it can be turned around'.² This in turn forced Bush to admit 'it's bad in Iraq'. 'I understand how tough it is and have been telling the American people how tough it is. And they know how tough it is.'³ Finally, in January, after the devastating November mid-term congressional election results, Bush announced that 'the situation in Iraq was unacceptable', 'we need to change our strategy'.⁴

This new-found unanimity of pessimism did not lead to a united approach to solving the Iraq problem. The Baker–Hamilton report advocated giving much greater power to Iraq's new ruling elite in the hope that they could succeed where the US government and military have so far failed. This, it was hoped, would allow for a reduction of US troops and hence American battlefield casualties. Bush remained committed to 'staying the course', focusing on victory, because, he argued, 'it's a word the American people understand'.⁵ For the president this victory will be delivered by 'surging' US troop numbers, increasing those deployed to Iraq by 21,500. They will be involved in an attempt to impose

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order on the nation's capital and Anbar province. Beyond the opposing positions of Baker–Hamilton and the administration there are two other options doing the rounds in Washington. The first, promoted by Senator Joseph Biden and Leslie Gelb, suggests a radical decentralisation of government power in Iraq. This, they argued, would counteract the sectarian nature of the violence, giving as much administrative, financial and coercive power as possible, to smaller ethnically purer, local governments.⁶ To date it has been left to Democratic Congressman John Murtha to propose the most drastic solution of all; that the national interests of the United States (as opposed to Iraq) would be best served by withdrawing US troops as quickly as possible.⁷ Bush quite rightly concluded this course of action would simply 'force a collapse of the Iraqi government, tear the country apart, and result in mass killings on an unimaginable scale'.⁸

The acceptance in Washington of a clear-eyed, realistic and necessarily pessimistic assessment of Iraq is to be welcomed, even though it took nearly four years to become conventional wisdom. However, acknowledgement that the situation is dire and getting worse conceals confusion and a profound but common set of misunderstandings about the underlying causes of the violent civil war that now dominates Iraq. In January 2007 Bush finally accepted the need for more troops, but he sees the problem as purely one of coercion. 'Our past efforts to secure Baghdad failed for two principal reasons: there were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighborhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents. And there were too many restrictions on the troops we did have.'⁹ Biden and Gelb, on the other hand, have succumbed to the temptations of primordialism, seeing Iraq's different religious and ethnic communities as irrevocably divided and trans-historically hostile to each other.¹⁰ The civil war between the two Kurdish parties that dominate the north of Iraq in the mid-1990s and the struggle that erupted between Shia militias in Basra in April–May 2006 and then again in Amarah in October show the causes of violence go well beyond sectarian differences. Decentralising power, as Biden and Gelb recommend, would simply localise the violent struggle for control across the whole of Iraq. Murtha and the Baker–Hamilton report have placed their hopes on incentives for Iraq's new ruling elite. For Murtha, 'the longer we stay, the harder it becomes for the Iraqis to find their own destiny'.¹¹ For Baker–Hamilton,

an open-ended commitment of American forces would not provide the Iraqi government with the incentive it needs to take the political actions that give Iraq the best chance of quelling sectarian violence. In the absence of such an incentive, the Iraqi government might continue to delay taking those difficult actions.¹²

None of the four proposals for extracting the United States from the debacle that Iraq has become recognise the root causes of the violence and instability that has plagued the country since April 2003. The origins of the Iraqi civil war lie in the complete collapse of both the administrative and coercive capacity of the state. The Iraqi state, its ministries, their civil servants, police force and army ceased to exist in a meaningful way in the aftermath of regime change. It is the United States' inability to reconstruct them that lies at the heart of the Iraq problem. Until the state's capacity is substantially rebuilt – if ever – Iraq will continue to be violently unstable, with the population suffering the Hobbesian nightmare of lives that are nasty, brutish and short. Unless the United States can commit to the generation-long project of rebuilding the Iraqi state – and this seems highly unlikely – then Iraq will continue to be a place of misery for its population and instability for its region. This clearly is a defeat of historic proportions for US foreign policy.

State failure in Iraq

To explain the evolution of violent instability in the wake of regime change, the collapse of the state is of greater significance than the ineptitude of Iraq's new ruling elite or the supposedly trans-historical existence of communal antipathies. As William Zartman has put it, 'State collapse is a deeper phenomenon than mere rebellion, coup, or riot. It refers to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new.'¹³ In the aftermath of state failure, authoritative institutions, both societal and governmental, quickly lose their capacity and legitimacy.¹⁴ The geographic boundaries within which national politics and economics have been historically enacted simultaneously expand and contract. On one level, because the state has lost its administrative and coercive capacity, the country's borders become increasingly meaningless. Decision-making power leaks out across the boundaries of the country to neighbouring capitals – in Iraq's case, Amman, Damascus and Tehran. As this process accelerates, regional and international actors are drawn into the conflict for good or ill. More damaging, however, power drains into what is left of society, away from the state capital, down to a local level, where limited organisational capacity begins to be rebuilt. The dynamics associated with state collapse mean politics become both international and highly local.¹⁵ In the aftermath of state failure, individuals struggle to find public goods, services, economic subsistence and physical survival any way they can. Usually these are found through ad hoc and informal channels:

When state authority crumbles, individuals not only lose the protection normally supplied by public offices, but are also freed from institutional restraints. In response, they often seek safety, profit or both. Their motives become more complex than when they could depend on the state.¹⁶

The entrance of US troops into Baghdad in the first weeks of April 2003 destroyed the Iraqi state. Governmental capacity had been hollowed out by 13 years of sanctions. The regime of Saddam Hussein diverted resources from the official institutions of the state to the flexible networks of patronage that kept it in power.¹⁷ Faced with the widespread lawlessness that is common after violent regime change, the United States did not have the numbers of troops

needed to control the situation. After three weeks of violence and looting the state's administrative capacity was destroyed. Seventeen of Baghdad's 23 ministry buildings were completely gutted.¹⁸ Looters first took portable items of value such as computers, then furniture and fittings. By the time I reached Baghdad, a month after US forces, looters were systematically stripping the electric wiring from the walls of former government buildings, to sell for scrap. Following the destruction of government infrastructure across the

country, de-Ba'athification purged the civil service of its top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed, removing its institutional memory.¹⁹

In line with Baker-Hamilton, Bush argues that 'only Iraqis can end the sectarian violence and secure their people'.²⁰ However, once state capacity has collapsed, civil society's ability to positively influence events quickly disappears.²¹ The end of a state's institutional capacity not only means the loss of national authority but also the removal of a central focus for identity formation. In these circumstances, people will look to whatever grouping, militia or identity offers them the best chance of survival in times of profound uncertainty.²² The result is a speedy and unpredictable fracturing of the polity. This unstable and violent process will be shaped by path dependencies built up before the collapse of the state and political entrepreneurs active afterwards. Local, sub-state and ethnic identities will emerge from the wreckage to provide channels for mobilisation and the immediate basis for political organisation.²³

For communalistic identities to triumph as an organising principle in this fluid and unpredictable situation, there needs to be a certain type of sub-national elite. These entrepreneurs have to supply what the wider community

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desperately needs, a degree of stability and certainty. They can then legitimise their role in terms of communalistic identity and the competition for scarce resources.²⁴ However, when this process has been set in motion, once ethnic entrepreneurs, in the face of state failure, have mobilised a significant section of the population on the basis of communalistic identity, this dynamic quickly solidifies.²⁵ Previously 'fuzzy' or secondary identity traits become politicised and 'enumerated'.²⁶ Survival, or a degree of predictability for yourself and your family, becomes obtainable through the increasingly militant deployment of ethnic or sectarian identity. There is nothing inevitable about the unfolding of this process; the primary cause is the collapse of the state and the subsequent security vacuum, not the communalistic conflict that emerges in its wake.

Instability in Iraq is driven by two interlinked problems. The complete collapse of state capacity and the US disbanding of the Iraqi army created an acute security vacuum.²⁷ This was seized upon by myriad groups deploying violence for their own gain. Organised crime became a dominant source of insecurity for ordinary Iraqis. Diffuse groups fighting the insurgency in the name of Iraqi nationalism, increasingly fused with a militant Islamism, have caused the highest loss of life among coalition and Iraqi security forces. But in early 2006, a new crisis arose with even greater potential for destabilisation: civil war. The explosion that destroyed the al-Askariyya Mosque in the Iraqi city of Samarra, on 22 February 2006, marked a watershed, exacerbating already mounting sectarian violence and the resultant population transfers. The second problem is how to find Iraqis, after 35 years of dictatorship, with both the technical capacity and national legitimacy to rule over a country of 26 million people. 2005 was dominated by the struggle to build a representative government that could act as a rallying point for the country, allowing the population to invest hope and legitimacy in a new ruling elite that could stabilise the nation and move towards rebuilding the state.

State collapse leads to civil war

In both British and American government circles there has been a marked unwillingness to describe the escalating violence in Iraq as a 'civil war'.²⁸ This semantic reluctance is primarily shaped by the fear that public tolerance of British and, especially, American casualties will disappear once the real nature of the Iraqi conflict is recognised. There is a standard and accepted academic definition of civil war, developed by the Correlates of War Project. It places the casualty threshold at 1,000 battlefield deaths per year in a 'primarily internal' conflict, 'pitting central government forces against an insurgent force capable of effective resistance'.²⁹ The number of Iraqis who have died violent deaths since

the US-led invasion is controversial and disputed. Figures released by the Iraqi government at the beginning of 2007 estimate that 13,896 Iraqi civilians, police officers and soldiers died during 2006. The United Nations in Baghdad, which also collates casualty figures, has put a much higher number on the death toll for 2006. In mid-January it calculated that 34,452 civilians had been killed in 2006.³⁰ In the aftermath of the destruction of the al-Askariyya Mosque, military sources estimated that Baghdad's homicide rate tripled from 11 to 33 deaths a day.³¹ A team from John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health writing in *The Lancet* estimated that as of July 2006, **654,965 more Iraqis have been killed** than if the invasion had not taken place.³² If there were any doubts that these figures amounted to a civil war, the nature of the violence and the associated population transfers should have put paid to that. After al-Askariyya, estimates based on anecdotal evidence placed the number of Sunnis murdered in extra-judicial killings in Baghdad at 1,000 per month, with 365,000 Iraqis being forced from their homes.³³

The collapse of the state and resultant security vacuum that has driven Iraq into civil war has created, or at least empowered, three distinct sets of groups deploying violence for their own ends. The first are the 'industrial-strength' criminal gangs that terrorise what is left of Iraq's middle class. Although there is clear overlap between simple criminality and politically motivated violence, especially where kidnapping is concerned, the continuing crime wave is a glaring example of state incapacity. The persistent reports that crime is as big a problem for the citizens of Basra as Baghdad indicate that the state's inability to impose and guarantee order is a general problem across large swathes of southern and central Iraq. The high levels of criminal activity indicate that violence is driven primarily by opportunity springing from state weakness, not the antipathy of competing groups within Iraqi society. Crime is instrumentally driven, primarily non-communal and a key factor de-legitimising the new Iraqi ruling elite. Going well beyond the government's inability to increase electrical output or stimulate the job market, the continued freedom of criminal gangs to operate is indicative of a failed state.

The second type of organisation comprises the myriad groups making up the Iraqi insurgency. The insurgency was born in a reactive and highly localised fashion, as the US military's inability to control Iraq became apparent.³⁴ This saw the creation of a number of small fighting groups built around personal ties of trust, cemented by family, locality or many years of friendship. Disparate groups, formed to rid the country of US forces, are estimated to comprised between 50 and 74 separate autonomous units, with 20,000–50,000 fighters in their ranks.³⁵ Over the past three years they have been innovative in the technol-

ogy they deploy and the tactics they use. Since 2005, however, the insurgency has to some degree consolidated around four or five main groups: the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Partisans of the Sunna Army, the Mujahadeen's Army, Muhammad's Army and Islamic Resistance Movement in Iraq.³⁶ As the names suggest, political violence has been increasingly justified in religious terms. Over the last year these main insurgent groups have found ideological coherence by fusing a powerful appeal to Iraqi nationalism with an austere and extreme Salafism. The attraction of the Salafist doctrine for the insurgents is that it allows a distinction to be drawn between those involved in the jihad or struggle (the true believers), and those who are not. Those not backing the struggle can be branded non-believers and as such be killed. This approach has also lent itself to the increased use of sectarian violence. Shi'ites can be murdered both because they do not follow the 'true path of Islam' and because they form the majority of those staffing the security forces against whom the violence is directed.³⁷

Arabs from neighbouring countries are estimated by the US military to comprise between 5–10% of the insurgents.³⁸ These foreign fighters have played a disproportionately large role in the insurgency's ideological coherence. The group al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has driven the rising influence of Salafist doctrine and claimed responsibility or been blamed for the majority of the violence that has increased sectarian tensions in the country. This dynamic reached its peak with al-Askariyya. Although the city of Samarra has long been dominated by the insurgency, the destruction of the mosque, one of Shia Islam's most important shrines, was an act calculated to outrage Shia opinion.

The violence that erupted following the Samarra bombing saw the insurgency combine with a third type of organisation to drive violence forward. The plethora of independent militias are estimated to total 60,000–102,000 fighters.³⁹ They have overtly organised and legitimised themselves by reference to sectarian ideology. Their existence is testament to the inability of the Iraqi government to guarantee the personal safety of Iraqis on the basis of equal citizenship, not sectarian identity.

The militias themselves can be divided into three broad groups, depending on their organisational coherence and relationship to national politics. The first and most disciplined consists of the Kurdish militias of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The second includes those created in exile and brought back to Iraq in the wake of Saddam's fall. The most powerful of these is the Badr Brigade, the military arm of Supreme Council

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for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), estimated at 15,000 fighters. The Badr Brigade, along with SCIRI itself, was set up as a foreign-policy vehicle for the Iranian government. Indeed, the Badr Brigade was trained and officered by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, at least until its return to Iraq. It remains comparatively disciplined and responsive to its senior commanders.⁴⁰ But the Badr Brigade's colonisation of large swathes of the security forces, notably the police and paramilitary units associated with the Ministry of Interior, has done much to de-legitimise the already limited power of the state-controlled forces of law and order. The brigade's dominance of the Ministry of Interior reached its peak when one of its former commanders, Bayan Jabr, served as minister in Ibrahim al-Jaafari's government. The Ministry's Wolf Brigade commandos were repeatedly accused of acting as a death squad, frequently resorting to extra-judicial execution and torture.⁴¹ Complaints reached their peak in November 2005, when US forces raided a Ministry of Interior detention facility and found 170 detainees 'who had been held in appalling conditions'.⁴² SCIRI's dominance of government, though, was such that Jabr was not removed until the end of May 2006. His replacement, Jawad al-Bolani, a non-aligned politician, has struggled to reform the ministry. He has reportedly sacked more than 3,000 employees, but the ministry is dogged by repeated allegations that its forces and prisons are still using murder and torture with impunity.⁴³

The third group comprises militias created in Iraq since regime change. They vary in size, organisation and discipline, from a few thugs with guns controlling a street or a neighbourhood to militias capable of running whole towns. The largest and most coherent is the 50,000-strong Jaish al-Mahdi, set up by Moqtada al-Sadr. The core of the Mahdi Army is organised around the offices of al-Sadr's religious charity, the Martyr al-Sadr. Each office is run by a cleric appointed by Sadr's headquarters in Najaf, with full-time fighters paid as much as \$300 a week.⁴⁴ However, the speed with which the militia was built after regime change and the two prolonged conflicts with the US military have taken a toll on its organisational coherence. Mahdi Army commanders have become more financially independent of Najaf through hostage-taking, ransom and the smuggling of antiquities and petroleum. Al-Sadr has repeatedly tried to instil discipline but, as one of his own commanders admitted, 'even when Sadr fires the brigade commanders, their soldiers follow them and not Sadr. Now Sadr fires commanders every month, so their fighters will not become too loyal to them.'⁴⁵ In spite of al-Sadr's repeated calls for calm, the Mahdi Army was blamed for the majority of violence in and around Baghdad following the al-Askariyya bombing.

The Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army both claim to represent the same constituency, urban Iraqi Shi'ites. They have both tried to legitimise their coercive

role in terms of defending this section of the population against violence and instability. The instrumental basis of their actions, capitalising on the absence of the state as opposed to their alleged position as protectors of the Shia population, is highlighted by the low-level civil war they have been fighting against each other. This struggle erupted in Basra in April–May 2006 and then again in Amara in October. Basra has a very small Sunni population; the fighting in April responsible for the deaths of 174 Iraqis was not caused by religious or ideological differences, but by money.⁴⁶ Basra is the centre of Iraq's oil export trade and the conflict was primarily concerned with the division of the spoils.⁴⁷ The fighting in Amara in October was again about the dominance of the town once British forces had left.⁴⁸ In each case, none of the groups involved were strong enough to win outright and so the conflict simmers on, erupting periodically, triggered by rival machinations and Iranian interference.

Once a state has failed, the population has to seek new, local ways to survive, to gain some degree of day-to-day predictability. This quest has haunted the majority of Iraq's population since regime change. The quality of an individual Iraqi's life depends on the discipline, organisational coherence and central control of the militias that dominate their streets, neighbourhoods and towns. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish militias of the KDP and PUK have centralised and largely institutionalised their military forces since fighting a civil war against each other in the mid 1990s.⁴⁹ Elsewhere in Iraq, the militias that arose after regime change are far more unstable, prone to criminality and divided loyalties. Although they were formed as a response to the security vacuum, they have attempted to legitimise themselves by the deployment of hybrid ideologies – sectarian, religious and nationalist. This has caused ethnic and religious cleansing across the country from Kirkuk in the north to Basra in the south, but most notably in Baghdad. This was not an inevitable result of regime change but a direct response to the collapse of the state. If Iraq is to be stabilised, a central government with a monopoly on coercion must be rebuilt with administrative capacity to give it legitimacy. There is, sadly, no shortcut to this end state; if it is possible, it will take many years and a great deal of resources to achieve.

Iraq's new political elite: part of the problem

In 2003 Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, signed the 'November 15 Agreement' subcontracting the complex job of rebuilding the state to a small group of inexperienced, formerly exiled Iraqis long absent from the country.⁵⁰ Their task was to erect a sustainable and legitimate political order. This was hampered by the legacy of 35 years of Ba'athist rule. Before the imposition of sanctions in 1990, Saddam Hussein used oil wealth and hitherto

unheard of levels of state violence to break any organising capacity within Iraqi society. Those active in anti-regime politics were murdered, imprisoned, tortured or driven into exile. Those who stayed in the country increasingly realised that survival and economic well-being were directly linked to complete political passivity. Indigenous political organisation beyond the Ba'ath Party did not exist in any measurable form. There was no civil society in Iraq before the US military reached Baghdad; Iraqi politics began from scratch in April 2003.

The Iraqi politicians subcontracted by the Americans to rebuild the state have been active in indigenous politics for under four years. They have had to battle against indigenous hostility and suspicion since their return.⁵¹ The popular mistrust of the new elite has been exacerbated because the system they run was established under US occupation. Those active in constitutional politics after 2003 had to make an overt accommodation with the US occupation, in the form of the Coalition Provisional Authority. After the *de jure* handover of sovereignty to an Iraqi government in June 2004, politicians continued to operate in a country heavily financed by the American taxpayer and patrolled by over 100,000 US troops. The continued existence of the Iraqi government and parliament and the majority of Iraqi politicians is dependent upon US largesse and force of arms.

The intense political process that stretched across 2005 was meant to overcome these hurdles, anointing Iraq's new political elite with the legitimacy of two electoral mandates and a constitution approved by popular referendum. But the nature of the chosen electoral system, the way the parties decided to fight the elections and the constitutional position of the prime minister combined to

break the political coherence and administrative efficiency of the resulting government.

Al-Sistani lent his moral weight to mobilising Shia voters on the basis of religious identity alone

The democratic process was inaugurated by the elections of 30 January 2005. Because of organisational and security concerns, the vote itself was held with one nationwide electoral constituency.⁵² This removed local issues and personalities from the campaign; marshalling many politicians and parties into large coalitions,⁵³ most of which played to the lowest common denominator, deploying ethno-sectarian rhetoric. This process was heralded in October 2004 when the head of the Shia

religious establishment in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, encouraged the formation of a 'Shia List' for the elections. Parties and individuals could join this list if they agreed to vote as a bloc in the new parliament, uphold the 'Islamic character' of the Iraqi people and refuse to back any legislation that ran counter

to sharia law.⁵⁴ Al-Sistani, in effect, lent his considerable moral weight to the creation of an electoral machine for mobilising Shia voters on the basis of their religious identity alone.⁵⁵ The KDP and the PUK, dominant in the north of Iraq, followed suit and formed a 'Kurdish List' designed to maximise the Kurdish vote and hence their influence over the drafting of the new constitution. It was left to incumbent Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and his 'Iraqi List' to try to rally the secular middle class vote on the basis of law, order and Iraqi nationalism.

The Sunni community, lacking the hierarchal religious organisation of Shia Islam or the two dominant parties of the Kurdish community, found it difficult to organise. In the end it was a coalition of mosques, the Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin (Association of Muslim Scholars, AMS), who first emerged to give voice to their fears and post-regime-change insecurities.⁵⁶ The AMS channelled the widespread outrage against the US military assault on the town of Falluja in April 2004. It was joined by the more moderate Iraqi Islamic Party which, in the wake of the Falluja assault, felt unable to participate in the elections.⁵⁷

Eight and half million Iraqis voted, 58% of those eligible.⁵⁸ Turnout varied dramatically across the country and amongst Iraq's different ethnic and religious communities. In the northern areas dominated by the Kurdish population, turnout was 82–92%. In the southern districts, where the majority of the population is Shia, 61–71% voted. In Anbar province, an area of northwestern Iraq with a high concentration of Sunnis, only 2% voted. The United Iraqi Alliance, the Shia List anointed by al-Sistani, won 48% of the vote and 140 seats in the 275-member assembly. The Kurdish Alliance took 27% and 77 seats. Allawi and his nationalist and secular Iraqi List, damaged by his decision to authorise the attack on Falluja and the military confrontation with Moqtada al-Sadr, only managed to secure 14.5% of the vote and 40 seats.

This process to legitimise the new ruling elite in the face of state failure reached its peak with a second nationwide ballot for a full-term government on 15 December 2005. Following on from the legacy of the first elections, this poll was again dominated by three broad coalitions, attempting to maximise their electoral power by deploying ethno-sectarian ideologies. This time voter turnout reached 76%. The most important of the coalitions remained the United Iraqi Alliance, with 46.5% of the vote and 128 candidates elected to parliament. SCIRI and the Dawa Islamic Party dominated the alliance, but it widened its appeal by joining forces with al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army had twice led uprisings against the American occupation. The Kurdish Alliance won 19.27% of the vote and took 53 seats. The increased voter turnout indicated that the Sunni section of the electorate had also been mobilised in terms of identity politics. The coalition gaining the majority of the Sunni vote was the Accord Front, with

16% of the vote and 44 seats. A more radical grouping, the Iraqi Dialogue Front, took 4% and 11 seats. Once again the main losers were those attempting to rally a secular nationalist vote. This time Allawi built an even wider coalition to form the National Iraqi List, but it only managed to secure 9.09% of the vote and 25 seats.⁵⁹

It took over five months of talks before Iraq's newly elected governing elite could reach an agreement on a cabinet. Negotiations were carried out between parties within each electoral coalition. Once rough and ready internal agreement had been reached, the coalitions began negotiations on forming a national government. Much of the delay was caused by disputes within the victorious but unwieldy UIA concerning who should be prime minister. In the wake of the January elections al-Jaafari had been elected prime minister. As head of the Islamic Dawa Party, one of the two main parties in the UIA, al-Jaafari had good cause to assume that he would be reappointed to the post in December. During his year as premier, though, al-Jaafari had alienated a number of Iraq's key politicians as well as the British and American governments. He lacked the personal dynamism and diplomacy needed to weld the various political factions into a coherent coalition government. In April 2006, the UIA nominated al-Jaafari's deputy, Nuri al-Maliki, as prime minister.⁶⁰ It then took al-Maliki a further month to cobble a cabinet together.

Iraq's new electoral system, based on large multi-party coalitions, is one of the main problems dominating the politics of government. Whilst the president has a mainly ceremonial role, the office of prime minister has become the main vehicle for delivering governmental coherence. But the prime minister is in a weak position both constitutionally and electorally. Real political power is vested in the parties who fight the elections. For them electoral success within larger coalitions is rewarded by dividing up the spoils of government: cabinet portfolios and the jobs and resources they bring. The prime minister does not dominate the cabinet as first among equals. Instead al-Jaafari and al-Maliki have acted as brokers, facilitating negotiations within their own coalition, the UIA, and between it, the American ambassador and the other coalitions. The prime minister's decisions are based on the comparative power of the parties and coalitions he is negotiating with, not his own political vision or agenda for rebuilding the Iraqi state. Al-Jaafari was unsuitable for the delicate and diplomatically nuanced job, but al-Maliki has likewise failed to bring governing coherence to this position and 'his' cabinet.⁶¹

After the second election al-Maliki's task was to build a government of national unity, rewarding the main coalitions while seeking to balance electoral achievement with the identity politics the main parties claim to personify. In

addition, he had to move ministers who were too inefficient, scandal ridden or controversial under al-Jaafari to continue in office. The cabinet created sacrificed the needs of a population traumatised by the invasion, occupation, collapse of the state, a crime wave and a growing civil war at the altar of party politics and electoral outcomes. An unintended consequence of the system was to prevent the prime minister from sacking incompetent or corrupt ministers without the agreement of their party bosses. Even when this was possible, party, coalition and sectarian mathematics meant that other senior party figures replaced them.

The acceptance of sectarian politics was confirmed when the PUK's Jalal Talabani was reappointed as president. This not only put a Kurdish politician at the centre of politics in Baghdad, it also allowed Talabani's long-time rival, KDP boss Masoud Barazani, to dominate the politics of the Kurdish regional government. Sectarian logic was furthered by the appointment of a Sunni and a Shi'ite, Tareq al-Hashemi and Adel Abdul Mahdi, as vice presidents and a Kurd and a Sunni, Barham Salih and Salam al-Zobaie, as deputy prime ministers.

The limitations on the prime minister's powers of appointment were exemplified by his relations with Bayan Jabr. Jabr is a key member of SCIRI and a former commander in the Badr Brigade. As minister of interior in the al-Jaafari government, he was the focus of sustained criticism for politicising the Ministry of Interior, sacking long-standing members of staff to replace them with loyal lieutenants from his own militia and party. Al-Maliki eventually succeeded in moving Jabr from the Interior Ministry, replacing him with the non-aligned Jawad al-Bolani. The weakness of the prime minister's position meant that Jabr could not simply be sacked from the cabinet, but was instead moved sideways, to become minister of finance. In his new job Jabr has been accused of obstructing reconstruction initiatives, designed to rebuild support for the government in the Sunni neighbourhoods of Baghdad following the counter-insurgency operation *Together Forward II* in summer and autumn 2006.

The government and cabinet the new electoral process delivered are unfit for the purpose of rebuilding the Iraqi state. The weakness of a prime minister in a system dominated by parties has directly undermined the coherence of the government. The cabinet, instead of acting as a vehicle for national unity and state building, has become a mechanism for dividing up the spoils. If the ministers that al-Maliki appointed are answerable to anyone, it is to their party bosses, not the prime minister or the electorate. The ministries these politicians now run have become

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personal and party fiefdoms. At best, scarce government resources are diverted to build party constituencies, with each minister clearing out the payrolls of their ministries to appoint friends, followers and faction members. At worst, with little or no cabinet responsibility or administrative oversight, this system encourages both personal and political corruption.

The way that electoral mandate was delivered in 2005 has directly hindered the government's main and crucial task: the rebuilding of the Iraqi state. Instead the cabinet has become highly fractured. Locked away within the fortified Green Zone in the centre of Baghdad, politicians quickly became removed from the everyday concerns of a population struggling to survive in the midst of an increasingly bloody civil war. The new government has followed the path of its predecessor and become mired in the incestuous politics of zero-sum party competition. The state, both coercively and administratively, is still largely irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Iraqis, hastening Iraq's further descent into inter-communal strife and collapse.

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Faced with a failed state and a deeply divided and ineffective Iraqi political elite what options does the Bush administration have? The Iraq Study Group was an attempt to find new answers. The report's main suggestion was a dramatic empowerment of Iraq's current governing elite. They would be forced to be the new state builders by the application of both carrots and sticks; greater and speedier devolution of power, increased funding but also the threat of reduced aid or complete US withdrawal. Under these policy proposals the United States would exercise influence over the Iraqi government in two ways. It would make Iraq's rulers understand America's commitment to the country was not open ended.⁶² US troop levels would be reduced and troops eventually withdrawn from Iraq, irrespective of the progress made on the ground. The minds of those in the Iraqi government would be focused by a clear and unambiguous time limit placed upon US support for the country. They would have no American safety net. If the current ruling elite failed it would be their own lives that would be put at risk. More immediately, the Iraq Study Group suggested the imposition of strict conditionality on further US aid. If specific milestones were not reached by the Iraqi government over the next two years, then US troops and money would be reduced incrementally, until Iraqi government policy was changed for the better.

Given that the Iraqi governing elite play such a central role in the Baker-Hamilton recommendations, their response was instructive. Talabani offered

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the government's most sustained and detailed reaction: 'as a whole I reject this report'. He damned the Baker–Hamilton Report's suggestion that aspects of de-Ba'athification should be reversed to aid national reconciliation. 'We can smell in it the attitude of James Baker', he said. Baker was secretary of state during the first US invasion of Iraq and Talabani explicitly blamed him for not removing Saddam Hussein in 1991. He went on to refute the report's second major initiative, the embedding of up to 17,000 US instructors across the Iraqi army and police force. This he claimed, 'is not respecting the desire of the Iraqi people to control its army and to be able to rearm and train Iraqi forces under the leadership of the Iraqi government'. Finally, Talabani minimised the potential for aid conditionality to influence the government. Overall, Iraq's president saw the recommendations as a negation of Iraq's hard-won sovereignty, and thus unacceptable to his government.⁶³

The Baker–Hamilton report is right to conclude that US public opinion is slowly but surely turning against a continued large-scale troop presence in Iraq. This change in attitude has been driven by the continued attrition of American forces, but also by a perception that the US presence is not delivering a sustainable solution. Against this background the Iraq Study Group selected the ruling elite of Iraq as the only tool available to America to shape events on the ground. But the logic of two nationwide elections and a constitutional referendum since the invasion works against this strategy. It means that Iraqi politicians like Talabani feel they have developed a large degree of autonomy from the US government that put them in power. This explains why Baker–Hamilton's call for conditionality was rejected in the name of Iraqi sovereignty and the government's electoral mandate. Amongst both American diplomats and Iraqi politicians working in the Green Zone there is a recognition that the consequences of a precipitous US withdrawal from Iraq would be as great for the US government as it would be for the Iraqi ruling elite, many of whom are very lightly attached to their country.⁶⁴ This gives Iraqi politicians a good deal of leverage over their American colleagues. Their response to Baker–Hamilton has been to call America's bluff. Iraqi politicians will continue to squabble amongst themselves, directly undermining the coherence of the government and the rebuilding of the state. Even if Baker–Hamilton's suggested leverage could change behaviour, the current Iraqi government is not coherent enough to fulfil this role. It does not act with anything approaching unity and Prime Minister Maliki's position is not strong enough to impose his will on this disparate group of squabbling politicians.

Having all but rejected Baker–Hamilton's recommendations, Bush himself favours a dramatic increase in US troops to impose some order on Baghdad and

northwest Iraq, adding a further 21,500 troops to the 132,000 currently in the country.⁶⁵ His desire for greater numbers of US troops in Iraq has been shaped by the military and political failure of the most recent attempt to control Baghdad, *Operation Together Forward II*, in August 2006 with plans to deploy 7,000 extra US troops and a similar number of Iraqis. The Iraqi government found itself unable or unwilling to deliver the troops or reconstruction assistance it had promised. Several battalions refused orders to deploy to Baghdad.⁶⁶ US commanders also had to counter sustained political interference in their operations from the highest levels of the Iraqi government.⁶⁷

Bush's new proposals for a 'surge' in troops may also suffer from logistical and strategic shortcomings. Even a new total of 153,500 US troops would be far short of the numbers needed to impose order on the country. A technocratic study on state-building published just after the invasion concluded that occupying forces would need 20 security personnel (both police and troops) per thousand people.⁶⁸ It estimated that coalition forces should have had between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers to impose order on Iraq. Even this figure compares unfavourably to the estimated 43 per 1,000 that sustained Saddam in power.⁶⁹ Bush's new approach would see a new total of 32,500 US troops in Baghdad, a city of 6m people.⁷⁰ This gives commanders one American soldier for every 184 Baghdadis. This new enlarged number of US troops is still well below even the 50 per 1,000 that the new army and marine field manual on counter-insurgency recommends.⁷¹

In addition, simply flooding one area of Iraq, in this case parts of Baghdad, with troops neglects the subtler aspects of counter-insurgency doctrine. A surge

in troops to Baghdad may be understood as the beginning of an 'oil spot' or 'tache d'huile' strategy.⁷² But to be sustainable this has to be married with the second stage of the process. After areas have been cleared of insurgents the government needs to reconstitute security (particularly police forces), build up its administrative capacity, establish the rule of law and transform its despotic capacity for violence into an infrastructural power for governance.⁷³ The Iraqi government is neither willing nor able to follow up the clear phase of counter-insurgency with the infrastructural build stage. In the aftermath of a successful US counter-insurgency operation to gain control of the northern city of Tel

Afar, the Iraqi government proved remarkably reluctant to secure this victory by deploying enhanced government resources.⁷⁴ US forces found themselves

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US forces found themselves cajoling the Iraqi government to get funds released for the Sunni-populated area

overtly cajoling the Iraqi government in an effort to get funds released for the Sunni-populated area, while trying to stop covert attempts at undermining the whole operation. Even if there was the political will, in a country dominated by a collapsed state, the ability of the government to build up its capacity across a sustained geographical area is very limited.⁷⁵

Given that both major policy alternatives for America's role in Iraq have serious shortcomings, how is the US relationship with the country likely to evolve? The comparative historical study of military interventions divides them into three broad phases. As with the US invasion of Iraq, the initial decision to intervene is marked by two commonplace misperceptions: that the conflict would be 'relatively short in duration' and that 'military force would enable them to achieve, in a durable way, their political objectives'.⁷⁶ The 'middle game' or 'the staying-in stage' tends to be dominated by politicians 'gambling for resurrection' – 'the phenomenon whereby individuals engage in increasingly high payoffs, low probability wagers to salvage past losses'.⁷⁷ This phenomenon may well explain Bush's desire to increase US troops in Baghdad.⁷⁸ This stage comes to an end with the decision to disengage, driven by increasingly acrimonious politics at home. Interestingly, 'in every case, disengagements were preceded by a change in the administration of the intervening state'.⁷⁹ If this comparative historical approach is correct, then the current US administration will find it too hard, personally, politically and reputationally, to take the decision to pull out. That painful decision, driven by increasing domestic political strife, will be taken by a new president sometime after 2009. If things have not dramatically improved by then – and it is difficult to see how they will improve – then a US withdrawal, as George Bush recognised in January 2007, will leave Iraq as a collapsed state dominated by civil war.⁸⁰

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Steven Simon for his extended input into this essay. I would also like to thank Raad Alkadiri, Dana Allin, Juan Cole, Clare Day, Jeffrey Mazo, H.R. McMaster, Reidar Visser and Marilyn Young for taking the time to read drafts of this essay and offer their constructive criticism. Earlier drafts were presented at the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut; the Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin; the Council on Foreign Relations, New York; INSEAD, Singapore; London Middle Eastern Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies; the Politics Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London; and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention, Jordan Institute of Diplomacy. I would like to thank the audience at each institution for the feedback they provided. That said, the views expressed in this paper are entirely my responsibility.

Notes

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- ³⁷ For this point see the excellent chapter by Roel Meijer, 'The Sunni Resistance and the "Political Process"', in Markus Bouillon, David Malone and Ben Rowsell (eds), *Preventing Another Generation of Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, in press).
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- 50 See Dodge, 'How Iraq Was Lost', p. 169. On the negative effects of this decision see Mark Etherington, *Revolt on the Tigris. The al-Sadr Uprising and the Governing of Iraq* (London: Hurst & Co.: 2005), pp. 124–5. Phebe Marr estimates that 'some 38 percent of Iraq's leaders since 2003 are outsiders, 19 percent are Kurds or others from the "free" zone in northern Iraq, and only 26.8 percent are insiders' 'Among the exiles the largest group, 62 percent, were working either full-time or part-time in opposition activities designed to replace the Saddam government.' See Phebe Marr, 'Who are Iraq's New Leaders? What do they Want?', *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, March 2006, p. 8.
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