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Civilians gather at the site of a car bomb attack in Amara, southeast of Baghdad, July 2, 2013. | Reuters

THE FALL AND RISE AND FALL OF IRAQ

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Iraq has been rekindled. Whether it will merely be singed or immolated entirely remains to be seen, but the fire is burning again.

Most Americans stopped caring about Iraq long ago. That's an inescapable reality but also an unfortunate mistake. Iraq is not just a painful and divisive memory or a cudgel to take up against one's political rival, it is a very real interest. Today, Iraq has surpassed Iran to claim the spot as the second largest oil exporter in OPEC, behind only Saudi Arabia. Iraq's steadily climbing oil production has been critical to reducing oil prices, and its collapse into renewed civil war would endanger our fragile economic recovery.

Moreover, just as spillover from the Syrian civil war is helping to re-ignite the Iraqi civil war, so renewed chaos and strife in Iraq could once again threaten other important oil producers like Kuwait, Iran and even Saudi Arabia. As it has in the past, Iraq is again becoming a hub for al-Qa'ida's regional presence.

Just as unfortunately, the problems of Iraq will not be easily healed. They are not the product of ancient hatreds, a canard that resurfaces with the outbreak of each such civil war. Instead they are principally the products of our own mistakes. We caused the Iraqi civil war, we healed it briefly, and then we left it to fester all over again. It is not that Iraqis had no say in the matter, no free will. Only that they were acting within circumstances that we created and those circumstances have driven their actions.

Thus, understanding where the Iraqis may end up requires understanding how we brought them to where they are. And here again, America's determination to turn its back on the experience of Iraq is a dangerous hindrance. The problems sucking Iraq back into the vortex of civil war are merely the latest manifestation of the powerful forces that the United States unleashed as a result of our botched occupation from 2003 to 2006. Minor adjustments and small fixes are highly unlikely to be able to cope with them. Averting a relapse of the civil war may require a combination of moves akin to those that the United States and Iraqis engineered between 2007 and 2009, and that is exceptionally unlikely.

This essay traces the course of Iraq's fortunes from the American invasion in 2003 through the civil war of 2005-2008 and the endangered effort at reconstruction that followed. Only by seeing the full course of Iraq's narrative arc during this period is it possible to understand both Iraq's present, and its likely future—as well as what would probably be needed to produce a better outcome than those that currently seem most plausible.

It is not a hopeful story, but it is an important one. It is the critical piece to understanding the possibilities for Iraq as we fret over its renewed downward course. And it is a warning about what would likely be required to address the analogous Syrian civil war raging next door, as well as the dangers of allowing that war to rage unchecked.



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The Descent

After the rout of the Taliban and the fall of Kabul in 2001, the leading figures of the Bush 43 Administration all agreed on two things: they wanted to invade Iraq and they did not want to be saddled with an onerous reconstruction of the country. There was much more that they could not agree upon.

In particular, they all came to these conclusions for very different reasons. For some American officials, invading Iraq was a means of breaking any link (real, imagined or potential) between Saddam Husayn and al-Qa'ida. For others it was a chance to employ American power to remove what they perceived to be the single greatest cause of all of the problems of the Middle East (including, remarkably, the Arab-Israeli impasse). Still others saw Saddam as one of many autocratic American enemies—rogue actors—who needed to be eliminated as obstacles to the creation of a new, post-Cold War order that served American interests. There were even those who believed that the rapid destruction of Saddam's army by a small, advanced American expeditionary force would serve as a useful warning to China and other potential American adversaries regarding the military preponderance of the United States. All of these ideas fed into a unified notion that Saddam should be eliminated, but none seemed to require a diligent process of reconstruction. In fact, many of these theories argued for exactly the opposite.

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Of course, that's when it all fell apart.

From those two American decisions and the discordant strains that lay behind them, the problems of Iraq unfolded. Washington resolved to invade Iraq, to strike while the ardor aroused by the 9/11 attacks remained hot, and to do so whether international opinion was with us or against us. The Administration decided on a minimalist approach to the invasion itself, using as few forces as it could get away with.

As for what came after Saddam's fall, that would be left to Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress (INC). The Administration assumed that Saddam's state would remain intact even after he and his senior cronies had been removed. They assumed that the Iraqi security services would maintain order and that the Iraqi bureaucracy would continue to run a state that three decades of Saddam's totalitarianism and a dozen years of crippling sanctions had left as virtually the only provider for 23 million Iraqis.

So we invaded in March 2003. We crushed the driblets and drabs of the Iraqi army that dared resist us and made ourselves masters of Baghdad in less than a



month.

Of course, that's when it all fell apart. Washington quickly learned that Chalabi was hated and the INC had no support in the country. Worse still, Saddam's state collapsed. The security services deserted. Yet American forces had not been issued orders to provide security for the country, and there were too few of them to do so properly in any event.

Once the Bush Administration recognized that its critical prewar assumptions about postwar Iraq were all wrong, they panicked. They tried anything and everything and this panic—and the haphazard decisions it yielded—produced numberless mistakes. In turn, these mistakes would give rise to four basic problems, the factors that would push Iraq into civil war by 2006.

The Security Vacuum. The first and by far the most important of these problems, was the creation of a security vacuum. From 2003 till early 2007, there were no Iraqi security forces capable of maintaining law and order and the Americans weren't trying. During that period, the U.S. military focused on chasing terrorists and insurgents around the deserts of western Iraq rather than securing the vast bulk of the population concentrated in Iraq's cities along the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys.

Without adequate forces maintaining law and order, Iraq descended into a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all. First came unorganized crime—rampant looting, burglary, kidnapping, revenge killings—that quickly became organized as malign entrepreneurs saw the opportunities and muscled out the amateurs. But the lawless world brought out even worse elements in Iraqi society; the haters, the bigots, the ethnic and sectarian chauvinists. People eager to kill others simply for not being one of their own. In many cases, they did so because stoking ethnic and religious fears brought political and military power, and eventually wealth as well. Building a militia to kill the “others” and protect your own is a time-honored path to power in situations such as these where the breakdown of law and order creates a plague of fear. Muqtada as-Sadr saw that opportunity and grabbed for it, creating his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) to help him stake his claim as a leader of Iraq's Shi'a. Other spiteful, ambitious figures created sectarian militias too, and by fear-mongering and bullying many of the smaller militias to join them, built their own into larger cohorts.

Outsiders also joined the fray. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a militant Shi'a group sheltering in Iran since the 1980s, re-entered Iraq almost immediately, with its Iranian-trained Badr brigades leading the way. On the Sunni side, a grab-bag of jihadists from across the region, many affiliated with al-Qa'ida, flooded the country. They came to kill Americans, to kill Shi'a and just to take part in the cause of the moment.

Sunni Alienation. By early 2006, Iraq was a maelstrom of graft and violence with all of these different groups preying on the Iraqi people and slaughtering one



another as best they could. For average Iraqis, the greatest problems were the crime and the ethnic cleansing campaigns by the sectarian militias. However, as Americans, we concentrated on what affected us most directly: the insurgency.

There *was* an insurgency in Iraq, but in retrospect, it was a much smaller part of the problem than we made it out to be. The insurgency was an armed effort on the part of Iraq's Sunni community to drive the American forces out of the country. It was aided, abetted and eventually dominated by al-Qa'ida, but it was only part of something bigger, the alienation of Iraq's Sunni community.

Under Saddam, the Sunnis had done relatively well. As his ethno-sectarian base, they enjoyed disproportionately greater economic benefits and political power than Iraq's other communities. They had also been the instrument of Saddam's repression of the Shi'a and the Kurds.

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Inevitably, the American invasion was a threat to the Sunnis. The United States was determined to see Iraq more equitable than it had been under Saddam, and that meant reducing the Sunni share of the pie to match their real numbers. But in another of our endless mistakes, Washington went much too far, turning over the new Iraq to the worst elements among the Shi'a and then standing by as they used their new power against the Sunnis, just as Saddam had done to them in his time.

Thus, among Iraq's Sunnis, the American invasion was seen as an effort to crush them and put the Shi'a and Kurds in their place. The Americans became the supporters and enablers of Shi'a (and Kurdish) oppression of the Sunnis. In such circumstances, the Sunni community felt they had to fight back as best they could, relying on whatever allies would help them. Al-Qa'ida and other jihadists were eager and willing, and they brought skills, weapons, money and experience from past conflicts. The Sunni tribal shaykhs were reluctant to accept these overzealous foreigners at first, but as their situation worsened, they gave in. They embraced the Salafists, waged a guerrilla campaign to try to evict the Americans and formed militias to battle the Shi'a.

The Failed State. Another piece of the chaos America created was the collapse of Saddam's state and our ham-fisted efforts to build something new to take its place.

As the militias grew, they sought not just military might, but political power and economic wealth too. In the areas they conquered, they took over generators, controlled transportation routes and established protection rackets. Residents from the wrong denomination were expelled or executed. Those from the right denominations were given a choice: support the militia and receive food, housing, money, jobs, medical care and protection from the other side's thugs, or refuse and



get beaten or killed.

Then, the United States made matters worse by handing control of Iraq's new governmental organs over to the warlords. At first we did so in the mistaken belief that while we did not like the militias, the heads of the larger ones represented the de facto leaders of their communities. Later, the United States held elections in 2004 and again in 2005, ignoring the disastrous experience of premature elections in other post-conflict societies. Many Sunnis refused to participate in these elections because they assumed that they were rigged against them. Among the Shi'a, however, the militias' control over the people meant that the results were foreordained. The Shi'a militias demanded that the people they "protected" vote for them and, unsurprisingly, they won.

Once in charge of government, the Shi'a militias and various corrupt individuals willing to work with them quickly set out to gain control of the apparatus of the state and use it for their own personal benefit. They siphoned off Iraq's oil wealth into their own coffers and often purposely hindered the rebuilding of governmental capacity to ensure that the people remained dependent on them. Worse still, they took over the security services and used them as camouflage for their war against the Sunni populace.

Neighborly Intervention. At first, all of Iraq's neighbors kept a healthy distance from the American occupation. Although the Arab states hated Saddam and wanted him gone, they mostly opposed the invasion for fear that the United States would not do what was necessary to stabilize the country. The Turks shared this sentiment, and were experiencing a wave of anti-Americanism that soured them on all uses of U.S. power.

As Iraq descended into civil war, Tehran concluded that it should back as many groups as possible to ensure that whoever won, they would be beholden to Iran.

As always, Iran's involvement was more complicated. The Iranians were eager to see Saddam gone. However, they were also terrified that Washington intended them as its next victim, something many Bush Administration officials and sympathizers boasted about in private. In fact, the Iranians were so frightened that they agreed to suspend uranium enrichment (only to resume it in 2005, when the threat had passed). However, Tehran also appears to have initially concluded that if the United States succeeded in building a stable democracy in Iraq, as it proclaimed, this would be adequate for Iran. Such a state would inevitably be dominated by Iraq's majority Shi'a, and they would probably want to retain decent ties with Iran, if only because the Sunni world was bound to be hostile to them. So at first, Iran urged all of its Iraqi allies to go along with the American project and refrain from attacking the Americans.

But as the other three problems worsened, they sucked the neighbors into the



vortex of Iraq's violence. The Iranians saw Iraq's democracy evaporating. As Iraq descended into civil war, Tehran concluded that it should back as many groups as possible to ensure that whoever won, they would be beholden to Iran. A common expression among Iraqis and Americans in Baghdad at the time was that, "the Iranians are putting money on every number on the roulette wheel." Of course, Iran put the most money on various Shi'a groups—particularly the three strongest Shi'a militias, JAM, Badr, and Fadhila. Since all three were fighting for their lives and for mastery of Iraq, none was in a position to refuse Iranian support. Moreover, since the United States was hated by some of these groups—and was clearly in the way of their victory—the Iranians shifted from avoiding violence against Americans to encouraging it.

Inevitably, Iran's growing support for various Iraqi militias, particularly the Shi'a, brought Iraq's Sunni neighbors in to support their co-religionists. All were suffering from the typical problems of spillover from a civil war: refugees, terrorism, the radicalization of their own populations, economic dislocation and the danger of secessionist movements.¹ But Iran's active participation made things much worse in their eyes. They feared that Iranian support would ensure both a Shi'a victory and Iranian domination of Iraq. They were determined to prevent this and so began to provide support to the various Sunni insurgents and militias. And so the civil war got worse and worse..

The Kurdish Predicament. The one dog that did not bark throughout this period was Iraq's Kurdish minority. They might have been a fifth cause of instability, one that would have accelerated Iraq's implosion, but that did not prove to be the case. Handling the Kurds was one of the only things that the Bush Administration got right in those tragic, early days.

The Kurds are a separate nation with their own history, language, culture, ethnicity and all of the other attributes of nationality. Yet the cruelties of history left them divided among Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran. They never wanted to be part of Iraq and had tried repeatedly since 1918 to secure autonomy, if not outright independence. From 1991 till 2003, the Kurds had ruled what was virtually an independent state in northern Iraq under the (illusory) protection of the United States. They had hoped that the American invasion would be the vehicle by which they would finally realize the dream of independence.

It was not to be. Having invaded against the wishes of the region and much of the rest of the world, the Bush Administration was eager to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity to avoid a messy break-up that could de-legitimize the invasion and spark a civil war. Now, as it struggled to dampen just such a civil war, Washington insisted that the Kurds remain a part of Iraq and not add to the turmoil by seceding.

¹ On the quintessential patterns of spillover, and their manifestations in Iraq during this period, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from a Syrian Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2007).



With no choice in the matter, the Kurds acceded to American wishes. But they were never happy about it. They were prepared to make a federal democratic system work and Kurdish politicians were often the most constructive in achieving the slight victories for peace, prosperity and pluralism accomplished in the early years of the occupation. Still, the Kurdish question remained unaddressed, and as the Kurds watched Arab Iraq sink into internecine combat, independence looked better and better to them.

The Surge

The Bush 43 Administration deserves every bit of the condemnation it receives for its mishandling of the reconstruction of Iraq. Far too many Iraqis and Americans died for their ignorant arrogance.

Nevertheless, if we are going to excoriate the Bush Administration for its conduct in 2003-2006, it is only fair to praise them for their change of heart in 2007-2009. President Bush made a remarkable decision to stick with Iraq, but to reverse course. In the face of fierce opposition from the Democrats, a number of his top generals and even some in his own party, he chose to deploy 30,000 additional troops for one year, to give his new commanders the strength to try to pull Iraq back from the brink. He approved a very different set of tactics and strategy. It was a rare act of enormous courage in American politics. And it worked.

Given the complex interaction among the four salient problems that arose in Iraq in 2003-2006, any effort to address them was going to have to be equally complex and multifaceted. Ultimately, what gets referred to by the shorthand term of the “Surge” comprised over a dozen different changes and developments, although seven stand out as the most critical to its ultimate success. All mattered, although some had a greater impact than others, and the effect of each varied across Iraq. But only the combination of all of these different factors enabled the United States to stop Iraq’s slide into the abyss.

Securing the Iraqi People. Of all the changes made in 2007, the most important was the change in strategy and tactics.² The key shift was to focus on securing the Iraqi populace itself. American troops were deployed in the villages and neighborhoods of central and western Iraq. They lived in small bivouacs with Iraqi formations, and cheek by jowl with the civilian populace. They got to know the people, patrolled the streets and fought the militias, insurgents and terrorists face-to-face. They emphasized protecting good guys over killing bad guys. In so doing, In a little more than a year, they shut down the fighting in Baghdad, its many satellite towns, and much of western Iraq. They made the streets safe again

² Both at the time and since, the new approach was typically referred to as a “counterinsurgency” (COIN) strategy, but it is more appropriate to think of it as “low-intensity conflict” (LIC) operations because what the U.S. military was doing in Iraq was primarily shutting down an intercommunal civil war, not eradicating an insurgency.



and drove the militias underground or into the wilderness where they lost their sway over the Iraqi people. Virtually everything else that happened afterwards flowed from this foundational shift, and nothing else could have had the same impact had it not been for this new focus on securing the people of Iraq.

Increased Troop Numbers. If the change in strategy and tactics was the first among equals in turning the tide, the increase in troop numbers was probably least among equals. It is particularly ironic then that it was this “surge” in forces that gave the name to President Bush’s dramatic turnabout. Still, the larger contingent of American forces made it possible to employ the population security tactics in a larger area than in the past. Since such a strategy always relies on the proverbial “spreading oil stain” approach, it was likely that those areas covered by the augmented forces would have been addressed eventually, but the higher troop strength meant that more territory could be secured initially, speeding the entire process. In particular, the greater numbers of American troops meant that far more could be partnered with Iraqi formations, which was critical to the development of Iraq’s own military and its ability to play a constructive role in its country’s security. Had there been no literal “surge” in American troops, the other six changes likely would have succeeded on their own, but would have taken longer.

The United States had tried twice before to build a new Iraqi military, but the same absence of adequate planning, panic, haste, waste and misunderstanding of Iraq that hamstrung the reconstruction more generally scuttled both of these prior efforts as well. In 2007-2008 we finally began to get it right.

Iraqi Security Force Reform. A more important change in the numbers game came from Iraq’s own security forces—its army, special forces, and various police organizations, collectively referred to as the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The United States had tried twice before to build a new Iraqi military, but the same absence of adequate planning, panic, haste, waste and misunderstanding of Iraq that hamstrung the reconstruction more generally scuttled both of these prior efforts as well. In 2007-2008 we finally began to get it right.

Again, it required a different approach to the entire problem. Of greatest importance, it required that American units partner with Iraqi units 24/7. This constant partnership enabled American personnel to watch their Iraqi counterparts and remove the bad apples—the corrupt, the incompetent, the sectarians—and promote the competent and the professional. It enabled American units to provide on the job training to the Iraqis. It also reassured the Iraqi people that the ISF units were going to protect them, not harm them. Although in general, the American presence was resented, in an immediate sense, Iraqis were relieved to see American units because they knew that the Americans would prevent any violence



against them, whether by the militias, the insurgents or their own, politicized troops. As a result, Iraq was finally able to start deploying large numbers of reasonably competent and reliable formations that could be counted on to fight the militias and insurgents, keep the peace, and maintain law and order.

Historically, it takes about 20 security personnel per 1,000 civilians to secure a populace against the violence of low-intensity conflicts. Setting aside the Kurdish areas (which were defended by their own Peshmerga fighters), there were 23 million Iraqis to be protected, requiring roughly 460,000 security personnel. Even at the height of the “Surge,” the United States only had 163,000 troops, another 50,000 security contractors, and about 11,000 allied troops. Consequently, only when the United States could count on upwards of 200,000 competent, trustworthy ISF was real security possible in Iraq. That finally happened in 2007-2008.

The Battle of Baghdad. Throughout 2006, under the noses of U.S. forces, Sunni and Shi’a militias waged a knock-down drag-out fight for control over the capital and the many towns and villages that surrounded it. It was some of the worst combat in Iraq, and the source of many of its deaths—from terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing and widespread conventional firefights between Sunni and Shi’a militias.

By early 2007, the battle for Baghdad was approaching its denouement, and the Sunnis were losing badly. Tens of thousands had been slaughtered, hundreds of thousands driven from their homes and neighborhoods, and their forces were hanging on to only a small enclave in the Mansur district. In the eyes of many Sunnis, the impending fall of Baghdad demonstrated that the civil war had been a mistake and if it were allowed to continue, could end with Shi’a militias driving into the Sunni tribal homelands, conquering and cleansing them as well. It gave them a compelling motive to want to end the civil war as fast as possible.

Sunni Reintegration. Few of the dramatic events of 2007 have been more misunderstood than the Sunni Awakening, or *Sahwa*. This is not the place for a full explication of this complex set of events, but it is critical to understand its broad contours to appreciate both why it happened and how that history relates to current developments in Iraq.

The partnership between the Salafi jihadists and the Sunni tribal community of Iraq was never an easy one. The Sunni tribes were never as religious as the Salafist zealots, and they mostly detested the fundamentalist version of Sharia imposed by their new allies on the parts of Iraq that came under al-Qa’ida’s control. Arguably of greater importance, al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) had turned the traditional tribal hierarchy upside down. When they entered the country, their first recruits were the dispossessed of Sunni society—the misfits, the outsiders, the lowest men on the totem poles. As al-Qa’ida grew in power, these were the men who benefitted most in power, wealth and prestige. They lorded it over the shaykhs, subverting the traditional hierarchy of the region. Moreover, while the Battle of Baghdad had convinced the traditional Sunni hierarchy that the civil war needed to end, al-



Qa'ida and the other violent fanatics were determined to fight on to the last, even if that meant the extermination of Iraq's Sunni community.

Not surprisingly, by 2006, many Sunni tribesmen had had it with AQI. They tried to evict the terrorists on their own but failed.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Marines, charged with the pacification of Anbar since 2004, had already been trying to apply population security tactics for years, as well as reaching out to the tribal shaykhs to try to reconcile with them, offering them protection, services, resources, even bribes if they would break with the terrorists. For the Sunni shaykhs, it was that combination of threat and opportunity that moved them. They increasingly recognized that the longer AQI and other Salafi groups were able to hold sway in the Sunni tribal lands, the harder it would be to evict them and the more that they would transform tribal society to suit themselves, to the detriment of its traditional power structure. And by observing the Marines, seeing the consistency of their behavior and their determination to reach out to the Sunni community, the shaykhs concluded that they finally had a partner they could rely on to help them root out al-Qa'ida and restore their age-old status. Thus was born the Anbar Awakening which started in late 2006 but gathered tremendous steam from the further application of the new American strategy to the rest of the country.

However, It was not just that the Marines (and later, the entire American mission) promised to protect and aid the Sunni tribes against al-Qa'ida and the other zealots. It was also that the Americans promised to protect the Sunni community against the Shi'a as well.

Consequently, one of the most important shifts that occurred as part of the "Surge" was that the United States went from being the enablers of the Shi'a to the defenders of the Sunnis. In the past, American forces had done little while Shi'a militias and death squads slaughtered the Sunnis, drove them from Baghdad and other towns—often under the camouflage of the government's own security services. As a result of America's shift to population security, the Sunnis saw American troops stop the Shi'a conquests cold. In particular, the United States prevented the Shi'a militias from consummating their victory in the Battle of Baghdad with a final slaughter of the Sunnis in Mansur.

More than that, we promised—and then made good on those promises—to force the Shi'a and Kurdish leaders to give the Sunnis a place at Iraq's table again. Sunni political leaders were given cabinet posts and other high-ranking jobs. Sunni fighters were re-integrated into Iraq's security forces, most notably as the "Sons of Iraq" but more importantly as ordinary soldiers and commanders in Iraqi field units as part of the reform of the ISF. Indeed, some units composed largely of Sunni troops and officers from Anbar would later play key roles in the government campaigns to break the power of JAM. The United States also brought goods and services to a Sunni community that had been denied them by the Shi'a (and Kurdish) warlords and chauvinists running the new Iraqi government since 2003.



At first, these were furnished by American military forces themselves, but later, as Sunni leaders regained their political influence, by Iraq's nascent government. Suddenly, the Sunnis had a reason to cooperate with the government of Iraq and to try to build a new state, rather than tear it down.

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Iraqi Government Reform. A group of remarkable military commanders led by David Petraeus, Ray Odierno, Lloyd Austin, James Dubik and others get well-deserved credit for the military side of the surge. No less a success was achieved by Ryan Crocker, Robert Ford, Charles Ries, and an equally remarkable civilian team. Their achievement was fourfold.

First, they forged the power-sharing arrangement among Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds that translated military gains into a potentially enduring political settlement. Because a civil war is a contest for power among various elements within a society, it can only end with the total victory of one side, or by a new power-sharing arrangement among the groups. In the case of the latter, that power-sharing arrangement can only last if it is more or less respected by all of the parties and they all trust one another not to resort to violence once again to try to overturn it. (This latter requirement, spawned by the fear inherent in any such conflict, is typically why some supra-national entity—a charismatic leader, a universally-respected institution or an impartial military force—is typically needed to allow a new power-sharing arrangement to take root and establish lasting peace). Only in 2007-2008 was the United States finally able to implement a new power sharing arrangement by ousting many of the most corrupt and blood-stained Shi'a leaders, bringing in more moderate Shi'as and apportioning positions, resources and patronage to the Sunnis in a more equitable distribution of power and resources.

Second, the Americans—both military and civilian—made a major effort to diminish corruption, establish the rule of law and deliver services to the Iraqi people. In truth, this effort met with very mixed results and had little long-term impact. In the short-term, however, it was important for two reasons. Long-suffering Iraqis finally saw the Americans make a determined effort to do what they had always wanted, and it bought additional time for the American presence. In addition, it complemented the population security tactics in undermining the hold of the militias on the Iraqi people. If the government (read: the United States) was finally providing basic services, Iraqis did not have to depend on the militias for them.

Third, just as the U.S. military had finally learned enough about Iraq's officer corps to promote the good ones and get rid of the bad ones, so too had the U.S. embassy learned enough about Iraq's political cadre to do the same. Crocker and



his team did what they could to remove, or at least sideline, the worst of Iraq's leaders and to promote its best. As part of this effort, the Americans made a major effort to push Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to become the great man that Iraq desperately needed. And for at least a brief time, he rose to the occasion.

Maliki had been weak and vacillating. Indeed, that is why the more powerful Shi'a leaders and warlords selected him as prime minister, believing that he would not be a threat to any of them. But in 2008, riding on the successes of the Surge, Maliki found his footing and suddenly stepped up as a non-sectarian, nationalist leader. His finest hour was in the spring of 2008, when he backed into a major offensive in Basra against JAM, then the most powerful remaining Shi'a militia and Iran's last ally in Iraq. Maliki, himself a Shi'a Islamist, ordered an all-out offensive—Operation Charge of the Knights—by the reformed ISF, which (with a lot of American assistance) smashed the JAM, and cleared it from Basra. He then followed this with similar operations against the JAM strongholds in Sadr City, Amarah, Qurnah and other Shi'a cities. By the end of the year, JAM had been driven from Iraq and the civil war seemed over. At that moment, Nuri al-Maliki was widely seen as the champion of a new, secular Iraq free from the warlords, the militias and their civil war.

The last and most important aspect of the reform of Iraqi politics was a by-product of all of the other American efforts, rather than a specific initiative of it. This was the shift in the incentives of Iraq's own leaders. During the worst days of the civil war, the militias held the Iraqi people at their mercy. Without the militias, the average Iraqi might be killed, raped, abducted. He or she might starve to death, have no electricity, no job, no money, no house, no medical care. As a result, the people were forced to vote for the militias, granting them political legitimacy to crown their military and economic power.

Once the new American military approach severed the links between the militias and the populace, and American efforts began to improve Iraq's infrastructure and provide services, the people were freed. They did not have to depend on the militias. They did not have to fear the militias. They did not have to vote for the militias. And when they went to the polls in 2009 and again in 2010, they didn't.

Suddenly, Iraq's leaders no longer controlled Iraq's people. Instead the people could control their leaders. That meant that Iraq's leaders now had to win the support of the people, by delivering the good governance, prosperity and peace that the people demanded. This was one of the subtlest but most profound changes in Iraq produced by the "Surge." As a result of it, for the first time, Iraq began a slow, haphazard (but determined) lurch toward real democracy.

Ousting the Foreigners. The sudden reemergence of a unified Iraq was good news for the Iraqis and bad news for the foreign elements helping to tear it apart. As always, when Iraqis felt that they could trust one another and live in peace, they had no reason to seek foreign assistance against one another. At this



point, Iraqis still did not really trust one another, but they all trusted the Americans—even those who resented us—and trusted that we would prevent their rivals from deviating from the democratic rules and using force to advance their own selfish agendas.

As a result of it, for the first time, Iraq began a slow, haphazard (but determined) lurch toward real democracy.

The impact of this transformation was stunning in its speed and completeness. The “Surge” and the Anbar Awakening routed al-Qa’ida and other Salafi groups, to the point where in 2009, they had been reduced to a few small cells struggling to survive and unable to mount more than token attacks. Operation Charge of the Knights and its follow-on offensives had evicted JAM, and in so doing had all-but eliminated the last vestiges of Iranian influence in Iraq. Only the Turks benefitted from this state of affairs, and only because the Turks came seeking trade and investment rather than domination.

Together, these seven factors—and many others—solved the four problems that had driven Iraq into chaos and civil war. The emphasis on protecting the Iraqi people coupled with the increase in American and Iraqi forces finally filled Iraq’s security vacuum. The Battle of Baghdad, the reintegration of the Sunnis into the Iraqi power structure and the new power-sharing agreements reversed the alienation of the Sunni community. The reform of Iraq’s government, the provision of services—no matter how ephemeral—and the dramatic change in Iraq’s political incentive structure addressed the problems of the failed state and began to build a new structure in its place. Finally, the Anbar Awakening, Sunni reintegration, the new power-sharing arrangements and the new security environment all combined to shut out the many pernicious foreign influences.

The Unraveling

By early 2009, Iraq was still a long way from stability, tranquility, prosperity or true democracy. In an absolute sense, it was still a battered nation. But in a relative sense, it had made enormous progress. It was finally headed in the right direction. And it had taken some remarkable steps forward, steps that had seemed impossible even a few years before.

In 2009 Iraq held provincial elections, and in 2010 national elections, that resulted in stunning victories for those parties considered the most secular, the most vested in improving governance and services, the least tied to the militias and the least sectarian. They handed equally stunning defeats to the parties most closely tied to the militias and the civil war. The militias—Sunni and Shi’a—were withering, as were the vast majority of terrorist groups. Violence and deaths were way down from the dark days of 2006. Secular, pragmatic, nationalistic Iraqi



leaders (including Sunnis like Osama al-Nujayfi and Rafe al-Issawi) were emerging and becoming key figures in government. There was a widespread feeling that everyone had to play by the democratic rules and no one could get caught subverting the will of the Iraqi people or even being too corrupt.

All of this progress was very real, but it was also very fragile. Like a limb that had been shattered but was now mending, it needed a cast to protect it, hold it, and allow the bones to knit together and become strong. That role was played by the United States, in particular by American military forces in Iraq. Over time, it became an increasingly symbolic and primarily psychological role as the drawdown in troop strength meant that we did less and less of the actual provision of security for Iraqis, but it was critical nevertheless.

As long as American forces remained in Iraq, the Iraqis did not fear the re-emergence of the four problems (or the Kurdish issue). It also meant that the new incentive structure remained in place. Iraqis had to play by the democratic rules, and that enabled good Iraqis to act constructively, and prevented the bad ones from acting too destructively. Iraqis could assume that the future would be better, not worse, and make decisions based on their hopes, not their fears. As they have elsewhere, these forces created a benevolent cycle of self-reinforcing expectations of progress and willingness to abide by the rules, which in turn built trust and further diminished the threat of violence.

The problems reemerged after Iraq's 2010 national elections. Ayad Allawi's mostly-Sunni Iraqiyya garnered slightly more votes than Maliki's overwhelmingly Shi'a State of Law coalition. But Maliki refused to believe that he had lost, and refused to allow Allawi to take the first shot at forming a government. He pressured Iraq's high court to rule that he could get the first chance to form a government. Rather than insist that Allawi be given the first chance, as is customary in most democracies and was clearly what was best for Iraqi democracy, the United States (and the United Nations) did nothing. Ten months of bickering, backstabbing and political deadlock followed. In the end, the Iranians forced Muqtada as-Sadr to back Maliki, uniting the Shi'a behind him. At that point, the Kurds fell into place, believing that the prime minister had to be a Shi'a, and Iraqiyya's goose was cooked.

But so too was Iraqi democracy. The message that it sent to Iraq's people and politicians alike was that the United States under the new Obama Administration was no longer going to enforce the rules of the democratic road. We were not going to insist that the will of the people win out. We were willing to step aside and allow Iraq's bad, old political culture of pay-offs, log-rolling, threats and violence to re-emerge to determine who would rule the country—the same political culture that the U.S. had worked so hard to bury. It undermined the reform of Iraqi politics and resurrected the specter of the failed state and the civil war.

Having backed Maliki for prime minister if only to end the embarrassing



political stalemate, the Administration compounded its mistake by lashing itself uncritically to his government. Whether out of fear of being criticized for allowing him to remain in office in the first place, or sheer lack of interest and a desire to do what required the least effort on the part of the United States, the Administration backed Maliki no matter what he did—good, bad or indifferent. He was not all bad. He certainly did some good and his opposition weren't quite the angels they often made themselves out to be. But Maliki also did some very problematic things—things that badly compromised Iraqi democracy even if that was not his intent. Among the most unhelpful was to re-politicize the ISF, ousting many of the competent, apolitical officers the United States had worked so hard to put in place—and replacing them with people loyal to himself regardless of their credentials. Very quickly, the ISF went from an apolitical force that most Iraqis trusted, to a servant of the Maliki government deeply distrusted by those outside the prime minister's constituency.

Anything that had power and was beyond Maliki's control was undermined and coopted.

Iraq's judiciary suffered the same fate, along with numerous other previously independent institutions: various government oversight offices, the central bank, the election committee and others. Anything that had power and was beyond Maliki's control was undermined and coopted.

In 2011, with U.S. elections in sight and the president's popularity flagging, the Obama Administration decided to ditch its military commitment to Iraq. Technically speaking, the Administration offered to keep roughly 3,000 troops, and technically it was the Iraqis who were unwilling to meet our legal needs to stay. But these are technicalities that do not bear up on closer examination; if we had gotten what we wanted, it would not have made a difference because we did not want enough. The 3,000 troops were to be nothing but trainers confined to a few remote bases. They would have had little to no ability to oversee Iraq's continuing political development or reassure the populace against violence or abuses of power. They were a far cry from the 20-25,000 troops that the U.S. military felt were still needed for several more years to do those jobs. Few Iraqi politicians were willing to fight for such a meaningless presence. There were other ways that Washington might have handled the legal issues as well, but the White House made clear it was uninterested. The President had promised in his campaign platform to get our troops out of Iraq and he was determined to do so, regardless of how little it mattered to most Americans by then and how much it still mattered to Iraq.

The withdrawal of the last U.S. troops in December 2011 re-opened Iraq's security vacuum. Just by a crack at first, but it was enough. Over the next two years the strength of that problem wrenched the doors open wider and wider. It



wasn't so much that when the United States left there was nothing that could enforce law and order, it was the fear of all Iraqis that the American departure would mean that violence was once again an option—including by the government against its rivals. And as it always does, that fear drove the parties to pre-empt one another to gain the advantages of surprise and striking the first blow.

It was the prime minister who acted first. Starting in December 2011, as he returned from a trip to Washington and before the last American soldier had departed, Maliki moved against the Sunni leaders of Iraqiyya. His cronies told him that the Sunnis were planning to mount a coup against him as soon as the Americans were gone, and so he moved—with troops and tanks and hundreds of arrests, followed by televised “confessions,” trials in absentia and death sentences.

Although his opponents insist that Maliki had always intended to make himself the new despot of Iraq, the evidence suggests something different, although perhaps no less dangerous. Maliki was probably driven by genuine fear. Fear that all of his rivals were out to get him. He wasn't necessarily wrong about that. For many of them, if they could have unseated his government, overthrown him (or in some cases, even killed him), they probably would have. But because he was the prime minister, the head of the government itself, Maliki's intentions were meaningless. All that mattered were his actions and the dangerous precedents that they set. These were deeply subversive of Iraqi democracy, undermined all of the factors that had brought about Iraq's resurrection in 2007-2009, revived the four problems that had produced the descent into civil war, and enflamed the Kurdish issue to boot.

Over the next 18 months, Maliki employed a wide range of similarly dictatorial methods to crush the Sunni leadership. Between his attacks and their counterattacks, many Sunni leaders were arrested or driven from politics, including some of the most non-sectarian, non-violent, practical and technocratic, like former Finance Minister Rafe al-Issawi. They lost their government positions and their patronage networks. Many promises to the Sunni community were never honored. The Iraqi military ceased to be apolitical guardians of the people and became instead loyal executors of the prime minister's partisan agenda.

To the Sunnis, Maliki was tearing up all of the promises that they had won from the Americans and from the Shi'a. They felt they were again being deprived of their fair share of political power and economic resources. They felt that once again, Shi'a chauvinists were in charge of the government and were using its apparatus, particularly the security services, to wage a sectarian war against them. They increasingly came to believe that they had no peaceful, political recourse to address their grievances, let alone secure their legitimate aspirations. Once again, they felt that they had no choice but to fight.

And so, various Sunnis began to discreetly reach out to their old terrorist friends again or simply provide passive support by not reporting their activities to



the authorities. These terrorist friends could once again claim that they were simply defending Sunnis against the treacherous Shi'a. By 2012, al-Qa'ida in Iraq was back from the dead, regularly conducting coordinated nation-wide bombings, contesting control of parts of Diyala province, killing scores or even hundreds at a time. Nevertheless, many Iraqi Sunnis remembered the bad old days of al-Qa'ida's ascendance and instead turned to other groups, particularly Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa Naqshbandia (JRTN), a Sufi group that had grown into a Sunni ultra-nationalist movement more palatable as a front for violent resistance to the Maliki government.

For many in the Arab world, the Syrian civil war and the Iraqi civil war are merely two fronts in the same conflict, a Sunni-Shi'a struggle for the Islamic heartland.

The last thing holding back renewed internal conflict in Iraq, the last piece of the changes of 2007-2009, was the memory of the Battle of Baghdad. Even throughout 2011 and 2012, Sunni leaders were fearful of a return to civil war. When pressed, in private, many would admit that they were fearful because they had come within a hair's breadth of disaster in 2007. That had the Americans not stepped in, shut down the Shi'a militias, brought them back into the government, protected their community and forced the Shi'a to give them a seat at Iraq's table, they would have lost Baghdad and possibly the whole country—and vast numbers of Sunnis would have been massacred.

That's where the Syrian civil war became important. It provided an answer to that dilemma and further brought unhelpful foreign powers back into Iraq's internal politics. For many in the Arab world, the Syrian civil war and the Iraqi civil war are merely two fronts in the same conflict, a Sunni-Shi'a struggle for the Arab heartland. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Jordan and other Sunni states have been funneling money, supplies, weapons and Jihadist fighters to the opposition in Syria, who are overwhelmingly Sunnis, fighting a regime coalition built around Asad's own Alawi (Shi'a) community. One of the ways that they have been doing so is to use the Sunni tribes of Western Iraq, which span both the Saudi-Iraqi and Syrian-Iraqi borders. Inevitably, the Iraqi tribes have been keeping a certain amount of this largesse for use against their own Shi'a oppressors, something that many in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Jordan seem to encourage. Likewise, opposition fighters from Syria and Iraq flow back and forth across the border, just as AQI aids the Nusra front in Syria.

Thus, although Iraq's Sunnis no longer have the Americans to protect them, they now increasingly believe that they have the entire Sunni world to support them. In their minds, their struggle against Maliki has gone from one in which they were the underdogs in a fight against a much larger Iraqi Shi'a community, to one in which they are part of a vast Sunni majority mobilizing to crush the puny



Shi'a apostasy. It is a heady brew, and has removed the last piece of the complex set of factors that brought about the remarkable transformation of Iraq under the "surge." It has also fed the fears of the Shi'a (and the Shi'a-led government) that a militant Sunni world was arising in arms to crush the Shi'a in Syria, Bahrain and Iraq too. Iraq's vicious cycle, already set spinning by the premature American withdrawal, careened faster from the push of spillover from Syria.

The Whimper or the Bang?

In the spring of 2013, in the face of more violent and arbitrary moves by the government, and egged on by other militant Sunnis in Syria and elsewhere in the region, Iraq's Sunni shaykhs began to openly form militias to defend their community. This was the last red flag warning of impending civil war. Indeed violence is already worsening: 2012 saw a 10 percent increase in Iraqi deaths (from 4,100 in 2011 to nearly 4,600 in 2012), the first annual increase since 2006.³ This year is shaping up to be even worse. Iraq could experience as much as a 100 percent increase in violent deaths over 2012, with roughly 3,000 killed in the first six months of 2013 already—roughly 1,000 in May alone—according to the United Nations.⁴

The Obama Administration has excused the prime minister's misdeeds and refused to take a public stance against him.

Through it all, the United States has continued to do little. The U.S. Ambassador to Baghdad, Steve Beecroft, and several other mid-level officials have tirelessly implored all sides to do the right thing, but they have been given painfully little to work with. Washington made no effort to build up new sources of leverage with Baghdad when the troops departed. Some of Obama's seniormost aides recognized the importance of translating the U.S.-Iraqi Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) into a wide-ranging set of programs by which Iraq would receive American assistance for its political, economic, military, educational and social development as a way of giving average Iraqis and their leaders a continuing stake in the relationship with the United States. This, in turn, would have preserved a considerable amount of U.S. government influence in Baghdad. Yet it never happened.

Instead, or perhaps because of this failure, the Obama Administration has excused the prime minister's misdeeds and refused to take a public stance against

³ The Iraq Body Count, available at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>, accessed June 28, 2013.

⁴ "Iraq Records Highest Monthly Death Toll in Years," The Associated Press, June 1, 2013; "Attacks Across Iraq Kill 6," Agence France Presse, June 30, 2013; Sameer N. Yacoub, "Bombs in Iraq Kill 19," The Associated Press, June 28, 2013.



him. They have tried quiet diplomacy, but without leverage it has had little effect. Instead, they have loudly blamed the various opposition groups—the Sunnis, Kurds, and others. None of them are blameless. All of them share in Iraq's dismantling. But in fixing on them, the Obama Administration has reminded many Iraqis, particularly many Sunnis, of the early years of the Bush occupation, when Washington turned a blind eye to Shi'a warlords using the government as a weapon against the Sunni community. And the Kurds fear that they will be next.

At this point, there is no reason to believe that Iraq is going to get better any time soon. All of the evidence indicates that it is going to get worse. The real questions now are how bad will it get and how quickly? Will the new Iraq end with a whimper or a bang? A long, slow burn or a sudden crash? Will the remnants of the newly repoliticized ISF prove strong enough to allow the prime minister to hold the country together and keep the opposition down by force? Or will they become just another sectarian militia fighting for their side in another civil war, like the Syrian armed forces in their ongoing struggle, or the Lebanese armed forces in their prior civil war. Will residual fears of the horrors of 2005-2007 keep the violence to a dull roar, or will the country burst back into flames, perhaps encompassing the Kurds this time as well.

Perversely, one of the greatest brakes on Iraq's further descent has been Iran, which fears that any alternative to the status quo will leave Iraq's Shi'a, its allies, worse off than they are at present. Moreover, Iran appears to feel that it has its hands full with Sunni-Shi'a civil wars burning in Syria and Lebanon, and does not want another one even closer to home in Iraq. Yet Iran has done so much to help exacerbate Iraq's problems and the Syrian civil war shows no sign of abating any time soon, that it seems unlikely that Tehran alone will prove up to the challenge over the long run.

A Last American Role?

Iraq is now back on its downward path although it is unclear just how steep or how long that path will prove.

What can the United States do about it? Unfortunately at this point, not much.

In an alternative universe, the United States might re-intervene in Iraq, redeploying tens of thousands of soldiers to restore everyone's sense of safety and allowing the political process to heal again. In *this* universe, the United States is never going to intervene in Iraq again, nor will the Maliki government ever request that we do so.

Another answer would be to intervene in Syria to shut down that civil war so that it stops exacerbating the problems of Iraq. But there are too many 'buts' that must accompany that statement. Intervening in Syria to bring that conflict to an end would be a massive undertaking on its own—as big as intervening in Iraq



because the problems are so similar. Moreover, the problems of Iraq have been intensified by spillover from Syria, but they exist separately from it, and at this late date there is no reason to believe that even if we could somehow snuff out the Syrian blaze that it would extinguish the fires of Iraq.

So what's left? A few things, all small but perhaps enough to bolster Iraq's own internal restraints.

First, it may still be possible for the United States to begin to rebuild its influence in Iraq. It will be a slow and arduous process, and it will require the Obama Administration to do the one thing it has absolutely refused to do all along: treat Iraq as an important element of American vital interests, one deserving of time, energy and even resources (albeit far, far less than had been the case at the height of the U.S. occupation). If Washington is willing to do that, we might find an Iraqi government still desirous of working together to turn the SFA from an idea to a program. Indeed, on its own, the Iraqi government has again begun to signal that it wants to rebuild ties to Washington, including by resuscitating the SFA. It is exactly the opening we need.⁵

There are, moreover, any number of ways in which the United States could deliver tangible assistance to Iraq at a relatively low financial cost. For instance, under the rubric of the SFA, we might establish a joint economic commission to serve as a central oversight body to coordinate, monitor, and provide technical expertise for reconstruction and capital investment projects initiated with Iraqi funds. The U.S. could provide technical advice, knowledge sharing, and technology transfer to vital areas of the Iraqi economy and society such as improved domestic water efficiency and management and agricultural development and productivity. Washington could continue to assist Iraq's provincial governments in obtaining and properly spending their annual investment budget allocations. The Administration could help Iraq to create a business environment that encourages Western business investments. All of this would create programs that Iraqis and their leaders would want to preserve, even if they were paying for most of it themselves, and that would begin to restore American leverage in Baghdad.

Second, Washington could shift from a devotion to quiet diplomacy favoring the Maliki government to the occasional embrace of public diplomacy that chastised it for its misbehavior along with that of its rivals. The Administration is right that Maliki's opposition has not covered itself in glory, but they are wrong to claim that Maliki's actions have not been harmful too—or have been less harmful. Simply as the government, their actions are inevitably much more damaging than anything the opposition might do because of the precedent they set and the fear they sow. It would be a dramatic move if this Administration—which has

⁵ Ambassador Lukman Faily, "Opening a New Era in U.S.-Iraq Relations," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2013.



endlessly looked the other way and even apologized for the Iraqi government's misdeeds—were to publicly castigate the actions of *all* Iraqi parties that threatened Iraq's democracy and its peace.

Doing so might also give Washington some leverage to use with both the Sunnis and the Kurds, both of whom have written off this Administration as blind adherents to Maliki's cause.

Third, although taking the steps necessary to end the Syrian civil war seem far beyond what this Administration is willing even to imagine, lesser steps there might have benefit for Iraq. In particular, providing greater aid to the Syrian opposition might give Washington more cards to play with both Turkey and the Sunni Arab states—all of whom want to see a greater American role in Syria. The United States might then trade its moves in Syria for help in Iraq.

Indeed, the conference that Washington is so desperate to hold on Syria has almost no chance of having any meaningful impact on that conflict. However, if it were focused instead on Iraq—bringing together Iraq's neighbors and its various internal factions—it might be able to reaffirm the 2010 Erbil Agreement (which established the second Maliki government) and see it at least partially implemented. And that might be just enough.

Iraq seems headed back down the path of internal conflict, but it is important to note that it has walked that road relatively slowly. There are forces pushing back. Among the most important of these is the residual fear of so many Iraqis, including its leaders, of a rekindled civil war. That may not be enough to keep Iraq from sliding back into the inferno on its own, but it might be something that the United States could build on if only we remember that we care about Iraq.

