

WOULD SADDAM HAVE BEEN BETTER? THREE DISASTROUS YEARS IN IRAQ

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"Iraq has passed through three years that are the worst in its history."
- Baghdad resident Munthir Rasheed

President Bush has predicted that 75 percent of Iraq will soon be controlled by Iraqi forces. What he does not tell us is that the loyalty of these police and army units is uncertain because of ethnic and religious divisions.

In his war anniversary speech Bush lauded the progress of a town called Tall Afar. Last month reporter Laurence Kaplan was coming into Tall Afar with an U.S. Army convoy when he witnessed heavy gun fire. He assumed that it was an insurgent attack, but it turned out that it was a skirmish between the local police, mostly Sunnis, and the Iraqi Army, primarily Shias and Kurds.

The Kurds in North, 90 percent of whom recently voted for an independent state, still hold their Peshmarga forces (at least 50,000) under their own command, and it is only a matter of time before they take over the largest oil fields in the country.

Even more troublesome are the Shia militias, who, with close ties to Iran, control many areas of Iraq. Moqtada al-Sadr, with whom the U.S. fought pitched battles in 2004, recently returned from a trip to Tehran where his Iranian sponsors promised continued support for his 10,000-man Mahdi Army. (It was only about 600 men in 2003.) Al-Sadr has made his loyalties clear: "The Madhi Army is beyond the Iraqi Army. It was established to defend Islam."

It is not unusual for Iraqi patrols in Sadr City, Baghdad's largest slum, to be greeted by children who hand them pictures of their hero. Although the soldiers defend themselves by saying that they do so under duress, they always hold up the photos to tremendous cheer and applause.

We need to understand that al-Sadr is not just some fringe element. "The New Republic" has called him Iraq's Dick Cheney, and his followers are expected to get up to five cabinet posts in the new government. He is a major player in the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which just won the December 2005 election. The UIA is headed by Aziz Al Hakim, a conservative cleric with close ties to Iran. The UIA also contains the Dawa Party, whose leader lived in Iranian exile for many years.

Another member of the UIA is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. This group has its own militia, the 12,000-man Badr Corps, which is also financed by Iranians. Iraq's current Interior Minister, Bayn Jabr, used to be the head of Badr Corps. The Sunnis have very good reasons to suspect that the Interior Ministry favors the Shia militias. In December, 2004, U. S. troops found 173 prisoners, mostly Sunnis, in an

interrogation center run by the Interior Ministry. Bayn Jabr rejected accusations that this was a torture chamber, even though many showed clear signs of abuse, including missing fingernails.

Basra, Iraq's third largest city, is essentially under the control of Shia paramilitary units. The head of Basra's police estimates that half of his force has been infiltrated by Shia militants. Last fall three women at Basra University were killed because they were unveiled in public.

Quite apart from these extreme actions, the new constitution could very well remove many rights that women enjoyed under the former regime. Although Article 14 guarantees equality for Iraqi women it also states that no legislation can contradict Islamic law. This means that Iraqi women could lose their freedom to choose their own husbands and lose their inheritance rights.

Basra is headquarters for 8,500 British soldiers, who, like most Americans, are usually confined to their bases have learned not to intervene against the militias. One Iraqi human rights activist complained that "the British army handed the city to the Islamist groups as a gift." Many observers predict that southern Iraq could easily become a satellite state of Iran and take with it the second largest source of Iraqi oil.

The insurgents have also infiltrated Baghdad's security forces. The most serious threat was a recent attempt by militants, disguised as security personnel, to penetrate the Green Zone. It was later discovered that a high official in the Interior Ministry was involved. If the plan had not been nipped in the bud, it could have led to hostage crisis similar to the one at the American embassy in Tehran in 1979-80.

"The New Republic" reports that as recent as a year ago Iraqis polled favored a secular state, but now 70 percent want an Islamic state and the new constitution gives them legal grounds to have it. The disastrous situation in Iraq evidently has forced many former secularists to seek refuge what used to be only nominal religious affiliations.

On March 19, 2006, former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi confirmed what many have feared: "It is unfortunate that we are in civil war. We are losing each day, as an average, 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more. If this is not civil war, then [only] God knows what civil war is."

The Bush administration's original goals in Iraq were focused on our own interests, not Iraqi interests. Bush manufactured a case for war based on he claimed were direct threats to the United States. Building a democratic Iraq was an afterthought to the invasion, and Rumsfeld threw out a well reasoned State Department plan for Iraqi nation building.

Even if Saddam had kicked out the second group of UN inspectors, we still could have contained him. The no-fly zone in the north would have continued to protect the Kurds

and the one in the south would have shielded the Shias from attack. The second round of inspections was thorough enough to show that Saddam had not rearmed and possessed no WMDs.

There was a ruthless logic in the Reagan administration's policy of supporting a secular Iraq against a radically religious Iran. Ironically, a much younger Rumsfeld, overlooking Saddam's gassing of the Kurds and other atrocities, was a willing agent in executing that policy. The Iranians have just elected a president far more radical than previous executives, and we have pushed for Iraqi elections that resulted in the victory of pro-Iranian parties. Bush's war in Iraq has produced the worst possible outcome for our interests in the Middle East.

Iraq's oil production is half what it was before the war and basic utilities such as water, electricity, heating oil, and sewer are also worse. I wonder how many Iraqis agree with this professor from Basra University who had this to say on the third anniversary of the war: "All in all, our life is worse than when we used to live under Saddam because now we are under fire. Now we can be killed any time on the streets."

See my "Deceptions of War" at <http://users.adelphia.net/~nickgier/deceptions.htm>.