

# IRAQ AFTER THE US WITHDRAWAL: STARING INTO THE ABYSS

When the US pulled out of Iraq at the end of 2011, it could hardly hide the fact that its intervention had failed and that it was leaving behind an unstable country. The recent deepening of sectarian and ethnic cleavages, however, must also be seen as a failure of Iraqi politics. A new explosion of violence is no longer off the cards, especially since the regional power struggle between Iran on the one hand and the Sunni Gulf monarchies and Turkey on the other is exacerbating centrifugal forces in Iraq. The crises in Syria and Iraq are increasingly overlapping.



Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki at a ceremony in Baghdad, 6 January 2012.

Reuters / Saad Shalash

In the past two decades, Iraq has almost constantly been in the focus of international security policy. After the Gulf War of 1990/91, which was triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and brought to an end by the military counter-strike of a UN-mandated, US-led coalition, the debates largely centred on economic sanctions, no-fly zones, and disarmament and arms control measures. After the inauguration of US President George W. Bush in 2001 and the shift in the US Iraq strategy from containment to regime change, the discussion was dominated by the Iraq War of 2003, the subsequent US occupation policy, and the deteriorating security situation in the country.

In recent years, however, Iraq has moved to the sidelines of international security de-

bates. After years of agitated controversy, the country now only features occasionally in the media, and usually as a parenthetical issue. Since the withdrawal of occupation forces, initiated in 2008, and the US reorientation towards Afghanistan in the war against al-Qaida, Middle Eastern security is now mainly discussed in the light of the Iranian nuclear programme and the Arab revolts and revolutions. On the global level, the security agenda has also moved beyond the 9/11 paradigm, the current spotlight being on issues such as the repercussions of the continuing global power shifts, the stability of the Pacific region, or the handling of the debt crisis.

It is unlikely, however, that Iraq will move towards an era of stability anytime soon. The US has left behind an extremely frag-

ile and deeply divided country, with religious and ethnic rifts having once more deepened since the withdrawal of the last US troops in December 2011. This polarisation within Iraq is further aggravated by the growing antagonism between Sunnis and Shi'ites across the region. There is a real danger that the increasing geopolitical, sectarian, and occasionally also ethnic tensions in the wider Middle East will set off new outbreaks of violence in Iraq.

## Taking stock of the US intervention

The nearly nine years of US occupation have had a strong impact on Iraq. Seen from the US perspective, the results are overwhelmingly negative. US society paid a much higher price for the Iraq intervention than initially expected. Of the more than 1.5 million US troops deployed to Iraq (including many with multiple tours of duty), 4,488 were killed and 32,335 injured. The US Congress has approved over US\$800 billion in direct appropriations for the war. Added to these are hidden costs and additional long-term expenditures that, according to expert assessments, may result in total costs of more than US\$3 trillion. The Iraq policy of the Bush administration has thus contributed significantly to the enormous increase of the US national debt.

Compared to the great effort undertaken in Iraq, the US has little to show in terms of achieving the – volatile – goals of its intervention. The allegations that served to justify the war, i.e., Saddam Hussein's sup-

posedly ongoing WMD programme and his alleged contacts with al-Qaida, turned out to be baseless. The vision of spreading democracy from Iraq across the region has rapidly taken a backseat to counterterrorism cooperation between the US and authoritarian regimes. Only diehard neo-conservatives would argue that the current Arab upheavals are related to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Plans for a permanent military presence in Iraq have been scuppered by Iraqi resistance. What remains is a gigantic US embassy with 16,000 US staff, including 2,000 diplomats, 150 military advisers, and up to 8,000 contractors.

However, Washington has only limited influence on political developments in Iraq today, which is why the State Department is already considering a significant reduction of its embassy staff in Iraq. Much as in the cases of Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, the US will most likely retain a certain degree of control over the Iraqi armed forces due to the country's current dependence on US arms supplies. Also, the 50,000 US troops which are currently deployed in the region give the US some flexibility in its future Iraq policy. Still, Iraq has not become a hub of US interests in the Middle East.

To the extent that energy considerations also played a role in the US decision to go to war, such expectations have at least partially been fulfilled. Although US oil firms are currently not poised to dominate in Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has created an opportunity to open up the country's giant untapped oil reserves to the international market. The strength of this argument, however, pales in view of the far-reaching negative consequences of the Iraq war for the US. They include a massive international loss of credibility, a neglect of the stabilisation of Afghanistan, at least a temporary weakening of NATO and the UN, and a diminished acceptance of multinational arms control and disarmament regimes. Furthermore, in dramatically weakening Iraq, the war has undermined the regional balance of power in the Persian Gulf. Iran's regional influence and leadership ambition have increased in this context, leading to growing tensions with Tehran's Sunni Arab neighbours as well as with the US and Israel.

Seen from the Iraqi perspective, any stock-taking of the US intervention can only be

preliminary. Clearly, the approximately 60 per cent Shi'ites and 15–20 per cent Kurds have benefited from the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, while the no more than 20 per cent Sunnis have suffered a loss of influence. Neither is there any doubt that the externally imposed transformation of Iraq has resulted in great human suffering, with more than 100'000 dead and approximately four million displaced persons. In 2007, a protracted civil war was prevented through a US troop surge, stepped-up operations against Shi'ite militias (especially the Mehdi Army of the Sadr movement), successful negotiations with Sunni rebels, and efforts by Sunni tribal militias ("Awakening Councils") to counter radical Islamist insurgents. However, the US never managed to move from there to building a stable post-war order.

Iraq's future remains very uncertain, therefore. The country's unresolved power and resource conflicts have once more become accentuated in recent months. The claim made by US President Obama at the end of 2011 that the US leaves behind a "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant" Iraq was all too soon exposed as wishful thinking.

### Failed politics in Iraq

Iraq today is a case in point that elections and a constitution do not, by themselves, make for a democracy. The country's new pluralist political system is in danger of breaking apart under the pressure of growing domestic polarisation. Only two years ago, there were signs that a democratic process might establish itself, as the parliamentary elections of March 2010 met with a high turnout among all sectarian and ethnic groups and a surprisingly good showing of moderate forces proclaiming national unity. The political elites, however, have since failed to meet voters' hopes for intra-Iraqi reconciliation, with the Iraqi population rapidly losing confidence in the political institutions as a result.

Initially, a nine-month struggle over the formation of a new government paralysed politics in Baghdad. Due to an agreement with pro-Iranian cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite incumbent al-Maliki beat out the election winner Iyad Allawi and his national-secular Iraqiyya List, which is supported by many Sunnis. Based on a power-sharing arrangement, al-Maliki was finally able at the end of 2010 to form a unity

government that also included Iraqiyya. But the new cabinet, which comprises more than 40 ministers, has largely remained incapable of action due to its heterogeneous composition.

Instead, the past year has been marked by a centralisation of power in the hands of al-Maliki, who is accused by various sides of authoritarian behaviour. For instance, he did not, as agreed, give key portfolios such as the defence and interior ministries to representatives of Iraqiyya, but occupied them himself ad interim or nominated his own adherents. At the same time, he has tied control of the security institutions to his prime minister's office, handed key posts in the armed forces to loyal supporters, and expanded his influence to previously independent institutions like the electoral commission, the central bank, and the anti-corruption commission.

Against the backdrop of the US withdrawal, the Iraqi power struggle has intensified in recent months. In the process, the sectarian and ethnic fault lines that run through Iraqi politics have become more pronounced. This is evinced by two Sunni-dominated provinces and a third, mixed province in central Iraq which have all demanded to hold a referendum on becoming federal regions with greater autonomous powers, a right granted by Iraq's constitution of 2005. The tendency of Iraqi Sunnis to turn away from their traditional advocacy of a strong central state is a danger both for al-Maliki and for the territorial unity of the country. In response, the prime minister has since had several hundred Sunnis in these provinces arrested in the name of de-Ba'athification. He has also targeted the top leadership of Iraqiyya. A warrant was issued for the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, Iraq's highest ranking Sunni politician, on terrorism charges. At the same time, al-Maliki urged the Iraqi parliament to pass a vote of no confidence against his own deputy prime minister, the Sunni politician Saleh al-Mutlaq – so far without success.

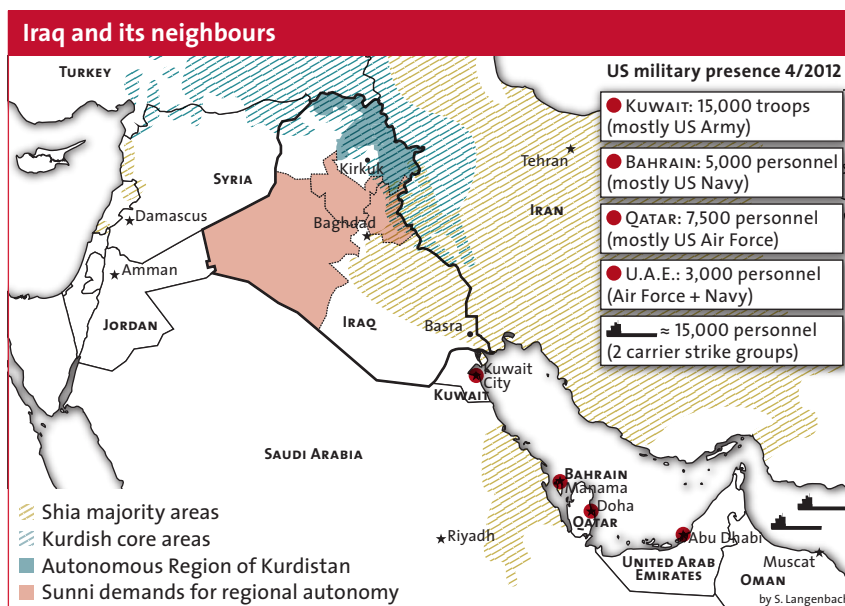
By now, the Kurds too feel threatened by the concentration of power in al-Maliki's hands. They have participated constructively in the central government in recent years, but at the same time have made efforts to maximise their autonomy under the aegis of the US. Relations with al-Maliki have deteriorated greatly since the Kurds' refusal to extradite al-Hashemi following his flight to the autonomous

region of Kurdistan. However, the real sticking points are more profound: Iraq's Kurds and Arabs have so far failed to reach agreement on either the extent of Kurdish autonomy or on the territorial boundaries of an autonomous Kurdistan.

Recurrent conflicts have flared up over the question of oil resources, which are of essential importance for the entire country, as 90 per cent of the government's revenues are derived from the oil sector. From the central government's point of view, the increasingly independent Kurdish oil policy is a stumbling block to the development of an effective Iraqi energy strategy. The fact that the Kurdish regional government has already concluded more than 40 agreements with international oil companies is viewed extremely critically in Baghdad. Some of these agreements – including a recent deal with ExxonMobil – even concern disputed border areas outside of the autonomous region, which has caused a major stir. The oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which many Kurds regard as their traditional capital, is also located in these contested areas.

In April 2012, tensions with the al-Maliki government reached the point where the Kurds stopped their oil exports, creating substantial revenue losses for the central government. In return, Baghdad threatened to reduce the transfer of funds to Kurdistan. If the Kurds should be able from 2014 onwards to transport their oil to Turkey via their own pipeline and thus expand their financial independence, Kurdish secessionist tendencies are likely to increase. However, if plans to upgrade the armaments of the Iraqi armed forces (including with US F-16 fighters) go ahead, the current superiority of the Kurdish security forces (*peshmerga*) may soon be a thing of the past. Taken together, these two trends aggravate the existing potential for escalation.

It is worth noting that it is not just the sectarian and ethnic divides that are growing in Iraq. In the Shi'ite provinces of southern Iraq, too, calls for autonomy have recently been heard, reflecting a growing dissatisfaction with the centre in Baghdad across the country. The failure of Iraqi politics has led to a situation where the country's reconstruction has stalled, with the state still unable to meet even the most basic requirements such as electricity supply. While Iraq has the world's fifth-largest proven oil reserves, its economic recovery is painfully slow, and unemployment and poverty lev-



els are very high by regional comparison. In terms of per-capita income, Iraq today is ranked 161<sup>st</sup> globally. According to Transparency International, it is the world's eighth most corrupt country. As for security, the situation markedly improved in 2011 compared to previous years. But the country still suffers more casualties (dead and wounded) from attacks than Afghanistan – and more violence is looming. Considering the continually bad living conditions as well as the political impasse and infighting, it is no wonder that recent surveys show a rapidly growing sense of discontent in the population.

**The vortex of regional polarisation**

The situation in Iraq looks particularly troublesome because the current polarisation within the country is aggravated by similar developments on the regional level. Even more than before, Iraq's internal stability will suffer from the fact that the country's heterogeneous domestic composition reflects religious and ethnic cleavages across the Middle East. The country itself will not figure as a regional power for the foreseeable future. Rather, there is the danger of neighbouring states increasingly meddling in Iraq's internal affairs, seeking to tilt the balance in the domestic power struggle in their favour.

Of all the current regional fissures, the geopolitical conflict between Iran and the US (and Israel) has the least impact on the domestic situation of Iraq. So far, al-Maliki has carried out quite a successful balancing act between the Shi'ites in Tehran on the one hand and Washington on the other. How-

ever, if the ongoing nuclear crisis should lead to air strikes against Iran (and for the Israeli Air Force in particular, the conditions for such a strike have improved with the withdrawal of US troops), other scenarios are conceivable, including a stronger involvement of the Shi'ite Sadrist on behalf of Iran or retaliatory measures by Tehran against pro-US actors in Iraq.

A much more acute challenge to Iraqi cohesion today stems from the escalating cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To some extent, this fault line is also shaped by geopolitics, with the additional ethnic element of an Iranian-Arab rivalry. However, in the context of the Arab revolts and revolutions, there is also a sectarian polarisation of a scale hitherto rarely witnessed in the inter-state relations of the Middle East.

In the process of the ongoing Arab upheavals, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf monarchies such as Qatar are aiming to shift the regional balance of power in their favour. In Egypt and Tunisia, conservative Sunni actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups have gained influence. In Bahrain, on the other hand, Riyadh has used military means to suppress protests of the Shi'ite majority population against political discrimination. The most important power struggle, however, is taking place in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are advocating arming the Syrian opposition in order to both eliminate al-Assad as Iran's most important regional ally and boost the influence of conservative Sunni forces in a successor regime in Damascus.

Al-Maliki has taken a visible stand against overthrowing al-Assad, as a Sunni-dominated government in Syria would not be in the interest of Iraq's Shi'ites. From the perspective of the Sunni Gulf monarchies, his stance is further confirmation that al-Maliki is a proxy for Iranian interests. In this situation, the reintegration of Iraq into Arab politics is extremely difficult. While the fact that the Arab League summit in March 2012 was held in Baghdad can be seen as a success for al-Maliki, the low representation of most Gulf neighbours at the conference is an indicator of their continuing distrust of the Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad, as is the reluctance of Saudi Arabia to open an embassy in Baghdad.

The interactions between Iraq's domestic sectarian polarisation and the one taking place on the regional level have increased in recent months. For Iraq, this poses challenges in both domestic and foreign policy. Vice President al-Hashimi's visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey despite an arrest warrant has triggered a diplomatic spat especially between Baghdad and Ankara. When Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan criticised the concentration of power in Iraq, al-Maliki responded by declaring Turkey a "hostile state". The growing tensions between Iraq and its Sunni neighbours could prompt the Gulf monarchies in particular to support a drive for regional autonomy among Iraqi Sunnis. Should the situation in Syria escalate further, it is even conceivable that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey will work to overthrow al-Maliki in order to increase the chances of ending the Assad regime, the latter goal now being also pursued by Ankara. There are already signs of increasing overlaps between the crises in Syria and Iraq. A likely consequence of this trend is that al-Maliki and significant parts of Iraq's Shi'ite population will increasingly lean towards Iran.

In this context, the danger of a new outburst of sectarian violence in Iraq is increasing. The potential for violence looks even higher than a few years ago, since Iraq's neighbours are more closely involved this time and the US as a stabilising factor is no longer present. On the other hand, the fear of being sucked into a civil war in Iraq may also have a moderating effect on the neighbouring countries. Saudi Arabia, for instance, will always have to take into account potential repercussions for its own Shi'ite minority, some of whom live in major oil-producing areas.

Measured against the strong sectarian polarisation of the region, the ethnic fault line between Arabs and Kurds currently seems less virulent. But the Kurdish question, too, could become a precarious issue should the situation in Syria escalate further. At this point, the Syrian National Council – the opposition's umbrella organisation – does not support the Kurdish demands for autonomy, which is why the Kurdish parties have distanced themselves from it. Should this stance change, however, and should the Iraqi Kurds push for ever more autonomy, the Kurdish question would likely also gain new traction in neighbouring Turkey and turn into a major regional issue again. The effects of such a

development on the sectarian polarisation in the region – and in particular in Iraq – are unpredictable at this point. The current situation is simply too complex, and too volatile.

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