

COMMENTARY

Iraq in Hindsight: Views on the U.S. Withdrawal

By Emma Sky

A year ago, all U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq, bringing to an end the nation's "American era" that began in 2003. Iraq rarely even makes the Western news these days. During the presidential campaign, both President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney skirted quickly over the subject. Obama boasted about how he had ended the war in Iraq, and the only point of contention between the two candidates was over whether the United States should have kept troops in Iraq beyond 2011.

Wars of intervention have essentially become wars of domestic communication. The real victims are elsewhere – and seem not to count in the public discourse. The Iraq war had unintended consequences that left over 100,000 Iraqis dead, enabled the resurgence of Iran and tarnished the reputation of U.S. democracy promotion. Yet there is now a temptation to assign the experience to history. The American public exhibits no appetite for holding officials accountable for the decision to go to war or for the mismanagement of the occupation. However, now that the American era in Iraq has ended, the time is ripe for a bipartisan effort to learn the right lessons about intervention. The nation owes it to those Americans who volunteered to serve there – and to the 4,488 service members who gave their lives.

After almost a decade of war, it is America's civilian leaders who have the most to learn about setting realistic goals, about the capabilities of the different instruments of national power and about the limitations of external actors in foreign lands. America's experiences in Iraq suggest that it is critical to have an overall strategy, to broker an inclusive peace settlement, to build long-term relationships, to have patience and to work regionally and with allies. Furthermore, U.S. military leaders could learn to respectfully tell their civilian masters that counterinsurgency tactics cannot bring sustainable success in the absence of an overall political solution.

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

The Iraq that was Left Behind

So what sort of Iraq did the United States and its allies leave behind, and how do Iraqis remember the United States? Having worked for more than four years as an advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority and then later as an advisor to General Raymond Odierno, I returned to Iraq as a tourist a couple of times this past year in search of the answers. From the mountains of Kurdistan to the marshes in the south, I was humbled by the deep affection of friends

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who were happy that I had returned to see them. I was struck by the warmth and generosity of strangers who were genuinely delighted to share their food with a foreign visitor, serving with their fingers the choicest picking from the sheep or barbecued fish and seeking my view on their customs and practices and how they differed from those in my country. The memories are vivid: the old Sheikh in the south who lent me his cloak to keep me warm and snuck a kiss on my cheek to the raucous laughter all around, the Sufi who invited me

to return so that I could whirl with the dervishes, the Kurdish taxi driver in the north who told me his life story before hurrying home to watch his favorite Korean soap opera. In Iraq, relationships are everything. Iraqis like foreigners – just not when the foreigners are occupiers.

Judging by the new cars in the streets, the electronic goods being imported and the quantities of meat and fish being consumed, the standard of living across the country was rising and the middle class re-emerging. The media was flourishing, with a diversity of opinions represented (although some criticized it as a mouthpiece for various groups to speak against each other). Kurdistan, in particular, was booming.

The resilience of Iraqis never ceases to amaze me. Despite the threat of terrorism, Iraqis defiantly frequented cafes, shopped in markets and sent their kids to school. In the south, I drove past thousands of Shia making the pilgrimage to Karbala on foot. I happened to be in Nasiriyah when a suicide bomber detonated himself, killing 45 pilgrims. Visiting the injured survivors in hospital, I was told by one that it was part of his faith as a Shia to suffer. Another described how he had witnessed a young Sunni Army officer sacrifice his own life attempting to drag the suicide bomber away from the pilgrims. There were no angry calls for revenge – only expressions of sadness and sorrow.

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

As ever, Iraqis were not slow to voice their complaints about the “situation” in Iraq, which fell short of their expectations. In Kirkuk, Iraqis of different backgrounds expressed their fear that Iraq was disintegrating as a nation state. They complained bitterly about the new political class, blaming America for giving it power. They lamented that no leaders promoted the national interest or a sense of “Iraqi-ness.” Instead, the politicians sought to further their personal interests and the interests of their factions, using fear and sectarianism to mobilize their bases. The elites were separated from most of society: They drove fancy cars, employed large security details and had electricity generators. They maintained the dysfunctional status quo because they benefitted from it. I frequently heard the complaint, “Before we had one Saddam; now we have lots of Saddams.”

Tales of corruption were legendary. Returning Iraqi expatriates had siphoned off much of Iraq’s wealth, some buying mansions in London, where they had once lived off state benefits. Iraqis complained of the incompetence of government officials and their inability to run the country. For ordinary Iraqis, the electricity was off more often than it was on, and unemployment was high. Only 2 percent of the nation had access to the Internet. Oil was increasing the wealth of the elites – but not providing jobs for the masses. There was little investment in agriculture and industry. Ministries had become personal fiefdoms, allocated among political parties. Iraqis lamented that their best and brightest had remained in the diaspora, with only those expatriates who had not succeeded abroad returning to Iraq to make their fortunes after 2003. These people did not have qualifications or experience. Furthermore, “internals” – those who had stayed in Iraq during Saddam’s rule – who did have the requisite skills had been replaced by Iraqis whose only credentials were their connections.

Meanwhile, the “rule of law” was applied in a most Machiavellian way. While the biggest crooks were left to operate with impunity, the Integrity Commission brought charges of corruption against some of the most respected officials, including the governor of the Central Bank of Iraq and the head of the Independent Higher Electoral Commission. This was widely viewed as part of an intimidation campaign to bring these independent institutions under the control of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Despite the influence of the Arab Spring, I did not find Iraqis rushing to overthrow the new order. Over the past decade, they have been through hell, and they have no illusions about democracy or Islamic parties providing a solution. Unlike the Tunisians and Egyptians, Iraqis had not replaced the old regime themselves and did not feel empowered. Rather, they complained that their destiny was

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

controlled by outside powers and that the fate of their country would be determined by the outcome of the struggle in Syria.

Supporters of Maliki claimed that he was consolidating power to prevent the country from disintegrating under the weight of regional interference, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Turkey. They said Maliki feared that Sunni extremists would overthrow the Shia-led regime in Syria and then seek to do the same in Iraq. He worried that the move of Syrian Kurds toward autonomy would further encourage Iraq's Kurds to push for independence. He suspected the neo-Ottoman ambitions of Turkey, which had shifted in the wake of the Arab Spring to pursue a sectarian policy to expand its influence across the region.

Recognizing behavioral patterns from previous leaders in Iraq's history, Maliki's rivals protested that he was emerging as a dictator. In the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. forces, Maliki rounded up "Baathists" in a preemptive measure to prevent a coup; sacked Deputy Prime Minister Salah Mutlak, who had accused Maliki of being a dictator (in response to Obama's glowing praise of Iraq's democracy); and instigated a warrant against Vice President Tareq el-Hashimi on charges of terrorism. Hashimi's bodyguards gave televised "confessions," and at least one died in custody. The vice president took refuge in Turkey prior to receiving four death sentences. Although the truth of the matter may never be known, the politicization of the case was undeniable. Many of Iraq's politicians have blood on their hands from the civil war. The handling of the Hashimi affair further polarized relations among the elites. Fearful of what allegations might be leveled against them, they moved further away from reconciliation and existed in an atmosphere of mistrust and recrimination. Meanwhile, also nervous about Maliki's tendencies, Massoud Barzani, president of Iraq's Kurdish region, looked to Ankara as the guarantor of Kurdish autonomy – something unthinkable only a few years ago.

On my visit to Baghdad at the beginning of the year, I was invited to stay with one of Iraq's most respected ministers. Parked outside was a tank, with the turret pointing toward the house. (I took some consolation that it was a Russian tank – not an American one.) It took a phone call to the four-star general in the prime minister's office to get the tank commander to allow me to pass. On a previous occasion, I had stayed with an Iraqi general and his family in Baghdad. A return visit was not possible, as he was one of those who had been "purged," suspected of being too close to Americans. Having spent his whole life in Iraq, he had now gone into exile. The former minister of defense, having survived Saddam Hussein's Iraq, had also moved to live abroad for the first time in his life. His aide, whom I had known for years, was killed this summer – and no one blamed al Qaeda.

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

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Despite fears of a general deterioration in Iraq’s security following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, violence remained at levels similar to that of the three preceding years, with around 4,000 civilians killed.¹ However, there has been a resurgence in al Qaeda activity, inspired by the opposition in Syria, the perceived exclusion of Sunnis from power and Iraq’s increasing closeness to Iran. At the same time,

Maliki is consolidating his control over the security sector, using “temporary” appointments to ensure the presence of loyalists in key positions within the military and security ministries. With the withdrawal of U.S. oversight of the security sector, politicization and corruption have increased.

From north to south, Iraqis informed me that the United States had “lost” Iraq to Iran. The United States had failed to broker the formation of a government in 2010 and a follow-on security agreement in 2011 to keep troops in Iraq. Kurds and Sunnis claimed that the Iranians had kicked the Americans out of Iraq. The Dawa party credited Maliki with getting rid of the United States.

The Sadrists and Asaib Ahl al-Haq claimed that their acts of resistance had driven out the U.S. forces. The political elites had become so convinced of Iran’s influence over the country that they frequented Tehran to lobby for “permission” to replace Maliki. They all reported that the leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps’ al-Quds force – responsible for Iran’s Iraq policy – insisted on maintaining Maliki as prime minister because Iran was consumed with trying to maintain Assad’s regime in Syria and could not deal with more instability. Hence, intense efforts by Maliki’s rivals to bring a no-confidence vote against him did not even make it onto the agenda of the parliament. However, the efforts of the Iranian minister of defense to push for a security agreement have not yielded results. As Maliki sought to strengthen relations with Russia and China – and to maintain the Syrian regime – critics viewed his foreign policy as being aligned with Iran, whereas supporters strove to emphasize Iraq’s neutrality and the need to balance the struggle between the United States and Iran.

1. According to the Iraq Body Count, 4,918 civilians were killed in Iraq in 2009, 4,068 were killed in 2010, and 4,131 were killed in 2011. As of this writing, the estimated number of civilians killed in 2012 was 4,149. See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>.

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

As I traveled around Iraq, I tried to get a sense of how the American era was remembered in its immediate aftermath – keeping in mind that this view may change as time passes. With the exception of the support to the Iraqi security forces, there did not seem to be much to show from the billions of dollars of American taxpayers' money invested in the country over almost a decade. Tales of uncompleted projects, fraud on contracts and misspending of money abounded. When I asked Iraqis about the U.S. legacy, they typically acknowledged the removal of Saddam Hussein but then blamed America for the sectarian division of Iraq, the restoring of dictatorship and the presentation of Iraq to Iran on a silver platter. It was only in Kurdistan that I met people who openly expressed gratitude to America. Kurdistan had progressed in leaps and bounds after 2003, and its leaders believed that their independence might emerge out of Iraq's disintegration.

Could the United States have Left Iraq a Better State?

President George W. Bush bears the lion's share of responsibility for what happened in Iraq, having brought the United States into the war – without the support of the U.N. Security Council – based on the erroneous belief that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (a massive intelligence failure) and links to al Qaeda (a ridiculous claim promulgated by war-mongering neoconservatives). Furthermore, it was the Bush administration that decided to occupy Iraq, to collapse the state through the disbanding of the Baath party and the dissolving of the military, and to institutionalize sectarianism – decisions which led to insurgencies, the inflow of *jihadis* into Iraq to fight the “infidel” and civil war.

President Obama campaigned on the pledge to end the war in Iraq. He has done so. Some analysts will argue that given all the mistakes made from the outset in Iraq, the United States departed Iraq as responsibly as possible. I disagree.

Obama assumed power in 2009, after the surge of U.S. forces into Iraq had helped bring about a dramatic decline in violence and created a new narrative that the United States was not defeated. Unlike his predecessor, Obama did not invest time and energy in building relations with Iraqis. He delegated responsibility to Vice President Joe Biden, who would forever be associated in the Iraqi consciousness with the plan to partition Iraq that bears his name. In addition, Obama appointed an ambassador, Christopher Hill, who had no experience in the region.

Driven by the imperative to end the war, the U.S. strategy for Iraq became lost in the transition, as America disengaged rather than

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

changing the basis of the U.S.-Iraq relationship to a nonmilitary one. In the 2009 provincial elections and the 2010 national elections, Iraqis turned out in high numbers to vote. Even those who had formerly been insurgents and members of militias ran for public office. Coalitions were formed that specifically ran on nonsectarian platforms. The United States failed to see the opportunity created by the significant shift in public opinion away from identity politics, preferring instead to maintain the status quo. There was little focus on facilitating an inclusive elite pact, generating consensus for a grand bargain or strengthening democratic processes and institutions. Convinced that Maliki would agree to a follow-on security agreement that would keep U.S. forces in Iraq, the United States pressured all sides to accept a Maliki-led “unity government” – even though Maliki did not win the elections.

At the same time, the United States did not pressure Maliki to share real power and continued to strengthen him by building up the security forces, which remained outside a framework of democratic control (nearly a million Iraqis are now within the armed forces). It was Iran that actually secured Maliki’s second premiership by pressuring the Sadrist to support him. Iran’s influence surged as U.S. missteps enabled Iran to maintain the sectarian construct of the government, upon which the prime minister and president depend for their positions. The half-hearted U.S. efforts to negotiate a security agreement for a troop presence after 2011 were never going to succeed.

Maliki’s response to perceived threats has not been to push for national reconciliation or to strengthen democracy but to consolidate power. However, Iraq’s internal disputes make it prey to the machinations of its neighbors as they fight their proxy wars.

Critics of Obama’s handling of Iraq are wrong to focus simply on the failure to negotiate an agreement to maintain a contingent of U.S. forces in Iraq. The critical issue was not the U.S. troop presence but the U.S. commitment to Iraq – and the building of a relationship that went beyond military support and lip service to supporting democracy and a strategic partnership. Now, the relationship between the United States and Iraq is reverting back to a familiar pattern based on arms deals and oil flows. In the years following the surge, Iraq came close to providing the region with a model of an inclusive system of government and a peaceful transfer of power through a political process. Today, the “new Iraq” is rapidly reconnecting to its past as a rentier state, using its oil rents to extend patronage and to build up its security forces to crush opposition.

DECEMBER 14, 2012

COMMENTARY

CNAS.ORG

Conclusion

America's experiences in Iraq should be a lesson about the nature of peace settlements: that if they are not inclusive, those who are excluded are likely to reject the new order; that the legitimacy of government does not derive exclusively from elections and delivery of public services; that the economy needs to be diversified to prevent elites from capturing the state and manipulating it for their own private benefit; and that without the regular peaceful transfer of power through elections, democratic institutions will be subverted.

The United States should also learn that without an overarching political strategy, even the most successful counterinsurgency tactics cannot deliver sustainable change or irreversible momentum. It should learn how the development industry creates perverse incentives in attempts to "nation build," how there is no mythical cadre of civilians who can be parachuted into developing countries to "fix" them, how interactions with elites can unintentionally encourage kleptocracy and how security assistance can facilitate a return to authoritarianism if not combined with reform of the security sector. Critically, America could learn that money can't buy love, that relationships are key, that strategic patience is needed, that allies should not be ignored and that a regional approach is needed as well as a bilateral one.

If the United States can internalize these lessons from Iraq, it will better match its ambitions to its capabilities. If not, America will continue to make incorrect assumptions when intervening elsewhere in the future.

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