Weak Authoritarianism and Iraqi State Building

Graeme P Herd

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Key Points

*   The nature of the insurgency, factionalism within and between Shia, Sunni and Kurds and oil production and export capacity are the key internal dynamics that shape Iraqi stability in the short and medium term.

*   These internal dynamics point to the emergence of a weak federal centre dominated by Shia and Kurdish regional blocs, whose governance structures display stronger and more authoritarian tendencies.

*   The failure of the Sunnis to block the Constitutional Referendum on 15 October 2005 ensures that the insurgency will gather strength, with the prospect that the current low intensity conflict will become civil war in 2006.

*   This outcome is in the strategic interest of Saudi Arabia and Iran. It reduces pressure on the reform process, weakens the prospect of Iraq emerging as a united strategic competitor, keeps the US engaged in the region but with reduced leverage and not focused primarily on Iran, Saudi reform or Syria and it limits the threat that home-grown but exported jihadis pose for these status-quo regimes.

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Introduction: Possible Outcomes

It is difficult to characterize the current nature and progress made towards sustainable state building in Iraq as well as the impact that these efforts will have on the wider region. Some analysts argue that Iraq is on a slide towards sectarianism, civil war, anarchy and Vietnam-style debacle, marked by growing international criticism of US action, uncertain prospects for stable self-governance and security, and a concurrent debilitating increase in domestic US opposition (the military's strategic centre of gravity) to the war effort. Others have maintained that the strategic implication of democratic regime change in Iraq will precipitate domino democratization throughout the Middle East region. Some argue that the capacity for compromise demonstrated in the formation of the Iraqi government in April 2005 following the 'Purple Revolution' (the 30 January 2005 elections in Iraq) represents the unleashing of a democratic ethic, a democratic spirit throughout the Middle East. The 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon, improvements in women's rights in Gulf States (appointment of a Cabinet Minister in Kuwait in June 2005), reforms in Egypt under President Mubarak, the February-April 2005 municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August-September 2005 are all cited in support of this contention.[1]

Prior to intervention, the expected outcome predicted by the White House and US Department of Defense (DoD) was that Iraq would eventually emerge as a strong, democratic state. However, since April 2003 senior US administration officials have gradually lowered their stated expectations and ambitions associated with the likely end state outcome, its cost, and the timeframe (particularly for a robust sustainable economy and the standing up of Iraqi forces, a likely necessary precondition for the standing down of US and other coalition troops). They have also backed off on claims that the invasion of Iraq has had a positive influence on the prosecution of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The Bush administration argues that the more the insurgents kill, the more desperate they are becoming; their apparent success only hastens their defeat and the emergence of a strong and stable Iraq. The insurgency is in inevitable decline – in the words of Vice President Cheney, it is in its 'last throes'.[2] According to this perspective, upsurges or spikes in violence are natural and a good indicator of success and occur as milestones in state reconstruction and stabilization are reached. By contrast, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has stated that defeating the insurgency would be a 'long, hard slog' and that the process could take 'five, six, eight, ten, twelve years'.

Within Iraqi governing circles the message is also mixed. When on 28 June 2004 the US occupation authority handed over power to an interim government, Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi stated: 'In a few days, Iraq will radiate with stability.' Since that date the insurgency has grown in size, scope and sophistication, despite the advancement of a political process in Iraq. By mid-August 2005, as the new Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, argued that a delay in agreeing to the Constitution would only lead to a stronger Iraqi federal system, Sunni appointed representatives predicted civil unrest, a low intensity conflict and even civil war in response to their marginalization from politics in the new Iraq.

With such a wide spectrum of possibilities, from market-democratic to failed state, what is a likely state outcome? Have two years of insurgency pushed the Iraqi people towards civil conflict, or do moderation, compromise and a desire to build a stable future prevail? This article argues that a weak authoritarian federal state is the most probable outcome due to the influence of internal and external dynamics.

Key Internal and External Drivers in Iraq

On 30 January 2005 a nation-wide parliamentary election took place in Iraq to determine the composition of the 275-seat National Assembly. Three months later on 28 April 2005 a new government was approved by the parliament. By 7 May the Assembly agreed portfolios for government ministers (30 ministerial and six other). The new Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, stated that the new government 'has religious, ethnic, political, and geographical variety, in addition to the participation of women'. This Assembly planned to elaborate a permanent Constitution by 15 August (delayed until the end of August), which is then to be ratified by popular referendum on 15 October 2005 (unless two thirds of the voters in three provinces reject it), allowing for national elections to take place in December 2005. This would allow, by early 2006, the establishment of the first democratically legitimate independent Iraq government and parliament for 50 years.

The ability of the government to maintain momentum in the political process towards the creation of a legitimate national government is critical and progress towards that end is self-reinforcing. Indeed, many argue, if a Constitution can be agreed and supported by the vast majority of the Iraqi people, the insurgency will be delegitimised and diminished to levels that allow substantial numbers of US/coalition troops to be withdrawn. Sectarianism will lessen and the government will rebuild the Iraqi oil industry and so fuel the economy. However, should the insurgency continue to disrupt state-building efforts in Iraq, exploit sectarian differences and delegitimise political leaders and the political roadmap, the less stability there will be, the longer US/coalition troops will remain and the more likelihood the low-intensity conflict spills over into civil war in the Sunni triangle and Iraq, if not the region, implodes. It is therefore important to look to the Constitutional vote and recognise the impulses behind it and so understand the significance of the result.

- **Insurgency/al-Qa'idah trends and trajectories**

The strength of the insurgency in Iraq is reflected in growth in the number and sophistication (particularly in targeting and the deployment of new technologies) of the insurgency/terrorist acts.[3] By 2005 insurgent attacks were more targeted at Iraqi police and army officers than at coalition forces and a number of selected assassinations suggested insurgent groups had the ability to gather accurate intelligence on key officers in these organizations. The insurgency has exacerbated identity politics, with Iraqis increasingly identifying themselves by ethnic and religious backgrounds, and displaying greater distrust and hatred, particularly between Sunni-Shia and Sunni-Kurdish groups. The insurgency is characterized by four key trends: its growth in size; the nature of its ideological legitimacy; its growing financial sustainability; and the power of its political impact.

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The insurgency is robust, it has staying power and it is rising. Although it was at first dismissed by the US Department of Defense as a sporadic and marginal affair (Rumsfeld's 'dead enders'), it is now considered the key destabilizing dynamic in Iraq. The insurgency has benefited from exclusion of old regime commanders, officers and technocrats from the new post-Saddam order, as well as the political and security vacuum that followed the US-led occupation of Iraq in March-April 2003. From July 2003 numbers and estimates of the insurgents have been continually increased, from around 1,000 to 20,000 according to US military intelligence – though some argue that even this is may be low. The US has 140,000 troops in Iraq, of whom 40-50,000 are combat-capable.

Roughly five insurgent strata are considered to take part in the insurgency. The backbone of the insurgency is a mixture of former Baathist regime loyalists (military, intelligence and security officers) and a new generation of Sunni loyalists. They have ideological ties, kinship bonds and economic interest to defend and not much to lose. They hide behind the other groups and want to retain old privileges. The second consists of Sunni Salafi and Wahabi militant groups with ideological crusade on their mind – they denounce all Shia (not just Americans) as infidels. They gain inspiration from the actions of Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which forced Israel to relinquish control of South Lebanon. This action is a model to be emulated to oust coalition soldiers from Iraq. A third group consists of tribal warlords who came to prominence in the 1990s as Saddam sought to widen his power-base, a fourth mafia and organized criminal gangs which carry out kidnappings and assassinations. These four groups are indigenous to Iraq and make up over 95% of the insurgents. The fifth group consists of international Jihaddists (from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria) and few are captured: they constitute 90% of suicide bombers and are prepared to fight to the death.

Not just the jihaddists, but the Iraqi insurgency more broadly appears to be gaining ideological support from *al-Qa'idah*. The ideological, though not operational, merger of *al-Qa'idah* and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in late 2003 represented an ideological breakthrough for the insurgency. Initially after the fall of Saddam in April 2003, Osama bin Laden did not legitimize the killing of Shia in Iraq by insurgents or terrorist groups, though al-Zarqawi did. After al-Zarqawi gave allegiance (*beyaa*) to bin Laden in late 2003, bin Laden told al-Zarqawi that all those who cooperate with the US/coalition forces, be they Christian, Jew, Sunni, or Shia, could be killed and all westerners who found themselves in an Islamic area became enemy combatants.[1]   This ideological merger of al-Zarqawi with *al-Qa'idah* linked Iraq and the insurgency to global jihad – Iraq became: 'the land of Jihad in the country of the Tigris and the Euphrates'. Iraq is now playing the role of Afghanistan in the 1980s and, albeit to a lesser extent, Chechnya in the 1990s – it is a recruiting, training and breeding ground for jihadists. General Taluto, head of the 42nd Infantry Division, has stated that 99.9% of captured insurgents are Iraqi and that within Iraqi society there is considerable sympathy for insurgents – the idea of a 'good' insurgent or 'acceptable insurgent' is prevalent. Iraqis are not therefore immunized from insurgent propaganda.[5]

The insurgents and the insurgency are also becoming more financially sustainable, thanks in part to the merger of terrorists and militants and criminals, in part to the looting of National Bank, the prevalence after the fall of Saddam of lots of cash in Iraq and the low cost of terrorist attacks. In addition, a reinterpretation of the Koran by *al-Qa'idah* to sanction kidnappings signaled *al-Qa'idah's* long-term strategy to merge and politicize the struggle of common criminals and combatants, to Islamize the actions of criminals through association with global jihad.

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Smuggling and activities within the illegal economy, as well as strong links to Saudi Arabia (and other Sunni monarchies), Syria and Iran all serve to provide the insurgents with access to cash, providing for economic independence and financial autonomy. This dynamic pushes Iraq towards a criminal state.

The mainly Sunni insurgents focus their attacks and operations against mainly Shia officials, military, security and police personnel and appear determined to push the country towards civil war, paralyze the political process and drive foreigners out of Iraq. Their acts of violence make it harder for moderate and unifying national leaders to emerge, the Iraqi equivalent of President Karzai in Afghanistan. Insurgent attacks maintain and exacerbate sectarianism in Iraq, making compromises more difficult. Insurgents also appear able to infiltrate cells into new political power and institutional structures within Iraq (as do the Shia in the south), which are considered easily permeable, partly because the de-Baathificatiion process has been discredited. The insurgents can also manipulate the electorate. In short, the insurgents play a key role in shaping the political process in Iraq and are central to an understanding of the politics of ethnic and religious identity.

- **The Politics of Ethnic and Religious Identity**: **Sunni, Shia and Kurds**

The political process in Iraq involves setting up an elected government that is representative of the 27 million Iraqis and so has popular legitimacy. This allows for a calibrated withdrawal of US/coalition forces, so undercutting the appeal and purpose of insurgents, and consolidating peace and stability in Iraq. This process is predicated on the notion that moderate forces will hold power in Iraqi politics, the inevitability of the rationality and pragmatism of the Iraqi people and the enduring appeal of material benefits in Iraqi society. However: "communal hatred, a political culture extolling violence and extremism, leaders with soaring political ambitions, and a lack of an alternative ideology to Islamism with any real leadership or popularity" also exist in Iraq and are "not conducive to a moderate post war future characterized by compromise and negotiation."[6] If we consider religious and ethnic groups in Iraq to be unified, pragmatic and rational actors then a democratic state outcome would maximize the interests and opportunities for the Kurds and Shia, but not necessarily the Sunni as the smallest of the three groups. For that reason it is particularly important to understand the nature of the factionalism within each group and the stated aims and objectives of each group.

The five million Iraqi Sunnis constitute approximately 20% of the population, live in central and western Iraq, and are now the core of the insurgency. Historically, the Sunni Arab minority has ruled Iraq (under Ottoman and then British imperial control), but under Baathism this rule turned despotic. They dominated the elite under Saddam, forming the warrior class within the military and security services.[7] According to Ghassan Salame, a Lebanese politician who served in 2003 as a senior political advisor to the UN in Baghdad: "Sunnis don't see themselves as one among many factions. They consider themselves the inheritors of the Ottoman Empire. This is not going to change."[8] Currently they are the dispossessed of Iraq; the clear losers of regime change and appear firm believers in zero-sum politics. They constitute a majority in 4 of the 18 provinces where 50% of them live and 90% of the insurgent attacks occur (the so-called Sunni triangle) – the other 50% in big mixed cities such as Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk.

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The major Sunni groups - the Sunni Waqf (religious endowment), Islamic Party, and hard-line Sunni Association of Religious Scholars (AMS) – all argue that the US should immediately withdraw troops from Iraq. Sunnis are angry at loss of power and consider the de-Baathification process failed to distinguish between Baathists and Sunnis, just as the counter-insurgency operation in the 'Sunni triangle' fails to distinguish between civilian and military targets.[9] Sunni Arab clerics argue that the Badr Brigade carries out assassinations in the Sunni triangle and as far north as Kirkuk, terrorizing their communities, settling old scores, and attempting to exacerbate sectarian splits.[10] They fear Iraqi Shia domination of the security services and shadow militias (Badr Brigade), argue that the US is giving the country to the Shia and Iran (by facilitating the emergence of a pro-Iranian state), and demand the immediate US/coalition withdrawal from Iraq and the right to rebuild a 'New Baathist Party'. In short, the Sunnis are rejectionists who will not accept their diminished status in Iraq. Although Sunnis must realize that a return to power is not possible, 'denial' is not just a river in Egypt.

The Islamic Party boycotted the 30 January 2005 election. This gave the Sunnis a weak negotiating position and the low turnout in Sunni areas accentuated their lack of representation in the new legislature. Because of the destabilizing impact of their political marginalization, in the post-election period a process of 'soothing Sunnis' (*yuhada al Sunnah*) has become a key strategic element in Iraq.[11] In May 2005 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, called on Iraq to expand Sunni participation as exclusion and marginalization of Sunni Arabs only adds to sectarian tensions and the insurgency. The Sunnis were given a Vice Presidency (Ghazi Al Yawar), Speaker of the Parliament (Hajim Al Hassani, who is religious and therefore unappealing to secular Sunnis) and six of the 30 ministries, including the Defence Ministry. Saadoun al-Dulami, a Sunni Arab, is Defence Minister. He was an officer (Lt. Col.) in Saddam's army, went into exile and joined the anti-Saddam opposition movement, and belongs to a major tribe that backs the insurgency.[12] But not clear if he can bring Sunni insurgents back into the fold, and this depends in part on the extent to which he is considered compromised by association with the occupation.

Most importantly, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani agreed to appoint Sunni Arabs to 15 seats on the constitution-drafting committee in response to a request they made to increase their representation on the 55-member Constitutional Committee.[13] The 15 members (two of whom were subsequently assassinated by insurgents to inhibit broad Sunni support for this process) had full powers, just like the members who were elected by parliament. However, the Sunnis did not endorse the Constitution and rejected it as illegitimate, fearing that federalism could lead to the break-up of the country and that they as Sunnis would be deprived of Iraq's oil revenues.

The 17 million Shia were formerly Iraq's historical losers and are now the clear winners of regime change. They constitute 60% of the population and secured 48% of the popular vote in the 30 January 2005 elections. The most influential and respected Shia figure is Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. He opposes the direct involvement of Shia clergy in politics but supports an Islamic republic, though not a theocracy as in Iran. He issued a fatwa instructing all Iraqis, including women, that it was their religious duty to vote in the January 2005 elections.[14] Into this mix we can add the violent firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr, traditional Shia sheiks, and Iranian influence. Amongst the Shia communities no Hamid Karzai has emerged around which all factions unite: al-Sistani is not interested in this role.

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The Shia are newly assertive, though they are factionalised and do not represent a homogenous bloc. The main umbrella organization is the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). It consists of the Dawa Islamic Party led by Prime Minister al-Jaafari. Although this is a lay rather than clerical Shia party, it aims to create a Shia republic in which Islamic cannon law (Sharia) operates and an economy that is ordered according to Islamic codes and principles. It has pushed for the replacement of the uniform civil code with a personal status law to govern marriage, divorce, inheritance, burial and other such issues, though with an opt out for non-Shia areas of Iraq. The other main party in this alliance is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). This organization was trained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and fought Saddam Hussein's Sunni dominated Baath party and regime from exile in Iran during and after the Iraq-Iran war. It is headed by the clerical leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakkim and runs the local government in Basra. The stated goal of this party is for a timetabled US/coalition withdrawal from Iraq and is perceived by some as having carpetbagger status.[15] Shia power is reflected in their control of the key Interior Ministry, which directs the police, border guards and internal intelligence services. The Interior Minister formerly headed the Badr Brigade, the military wing of SCIRI. This ministry is under Iranian influence and the police and other ministry bodies have been infiltrated by Shia militias. It is however hard to ascertain the extent of the influence or, indeed, control that Iran does or can exert through local militias

The Kurds of Iraq formed the core opposition group to Saddam's regime. Their leaders have greater political and administrative experience than returning Shia exiles. They have enjoyed de facto independence for 14 years with sanctions and no-fly zone and Kurdish areas are largely stable, secular and function like a separate country. Short of independence the Kurds have three strategic objectives that essentially represent the institutionalization of gains on the ground made after the fall of Saddam: Kirkuk as the capital of a self-governing province in a Federal Iraq; control over revenues from the province's oil fields; command and control over the 100,000 strong Kurdish *peshmerga* (militia) which they have refused to disband and do not allow federal troops on their soil.

As with the Shia, the Kurds are not naturally unified - they are split between two key groups and a Kurdish civil war in the 1990s killed 3000. However, they unified for the 30 January 2005 elections to maximize their voice in the new Iraq. With 25% of the seats on the National Assembly they are able to block the introduction of Sharia law into the Constitution (at least the prospect that it could be applied to Kurdish regions in Iraq). They are the only constituency that supports outright the US-led occupation. The Kurds want to redraw the provincial map of Iraq and make the three northern Kurdish provinces where they predominate one, and detach parts of three others that neighbour to create a single ethnically based province of Kurdistan.[16]

Over 95% of Kurds want independence but realizing pressing for complete autonomy carries dangers, as neighbours Turkey and Iran, with Kurdish minorities, fear this. A key factor now is the status of Kirkuk (Kurdish identity – 'Kurdifization of Kirkuk' following an Arabization policy in the 1970s) and control of the oil fields in the north – if Kurdish leaders control Kirkuk then they control the oil production and are therefore not economically dependent on the rest of Iraq. Under such conditions the case for independence is much stronger. Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani talks of peaceful coexistence and at the same time argues that Article 58 of the State Administrative Law (interim Iraqi law) provides an 'adequate political and ideological base to resolve the issue'. As the Kurds gained 50%+ of the

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vote in Kirkuk in the January election, and as Article 58 of the draft Constitution states that the status of Kirkuk is to be decided by referendum in Kirkuk, then Kirkuk will become Kurdish, creating an important precondition for Kurdish independence.[17]

- ## Oil Production: anchoring the political process?

Oil production in Iraq is another important internal driver that will shape the nature and extent of stability. It is the potential engine of the new Iraqi economy. The sooner Iraq can increase production capacity and sustain exports the greater state revenues and so the more money that can be spent on stability projects in Iraq. The US is investing heavily in this sector, but Iran has signed import and export agreements with Iraq (whose Oil Ministry is run by Ahmed Chalabi) and receives Iraqi crude to refine. But a key question remains unanswered: what will be the nature of the political economy that emerges – who controls the resource flows, who benefits and can a wealth sharing formula be agreed?

Oil production is low as lack of security has led to sabotage and this has been compounded by technical problems due to the age and maintenance of the infrastructure, the lack of electricity and poor logistics.[18] The Iraqi Oil Ministry states that $8bn was lost through sabotage and $6bn in 2004 alone. Sabotage is especially prevalent in northern areas around the key refinery at Beiji and Kirkuk, which is the start point for the main export pipeline to Turkey. This reflects rising ethnic tensions and increasingly coordinated opposition to government in and around the Sunni heartlands.[19] Production is better in the south, though Rumaila suffers from poorly maintained infrastructure with only 25% of the necessary reconstruction of Iraqi oil infrastructure completed.[20] In April 2005 Iraq exported 1.5m/barrels per day (bd), with production at 2.2m/bd. Iraqi oil production is thus below capacity levels of 2004 and pre-war levels where 2.8m/bd were pumped, 2m/bd exported.[21] It will not be until the establishment of a permanent government in 2006 that the award of long term, large-scale projects can take place. It is expected that oil production and export will generate revenue for stability in 2007-08 at the earliest.

Increasing attacks on oil production and transport infrastructure in and around Kirkuk and in the south will provide a clear metric for the widening of the insurgency and the increasing likelihood of the current low intensity conflict becoming a civil war. If the Sunnis feel robbed of their share of the oil wealth it would prove remarkably easy to target and shut down production in Kurdish and Shia controlled provinces.

- ## Iran and Saudi Arabia: strategic interests in end-state outcomes?

Iran has a legitimate state interest in the religious/secular nature of the Iraqi state. Will the constitution make Islam *a* source or *the* source of law? Will Iraq be Tehran-*lite* or secular (Turkey)? It is very hard to assess the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq (money, weapons and intelligence agents) and some analysts suggest that the US tends to overplay the influence with talk of an Iranian stranglehold over Shia parties in Iraq. But the Arab Shia of Iraq are different entities from the Persian Shia of Iran and support different models of Shism. The holy cities of Kerbala and Najaf are considered the holiest Shia sites and Shism in

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Iraq has more authority and legitimacy than that in Iran. Thus Iraq is not religiously or ideologically subordinated to Iran, but is it politically?

It is easier to predict which end-state outcome is in Iran's interest than the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq, not least because of the high levels of suspicion and resentment of Iran amongst Iraq's population. Iran has scored two strategic victories without having to fire a shot. Firstly, Saddam's regime has been removed and Iraq has emerged greatly weakened and unable to balance Iran as a military, economic or ideological strategic competitor. Secondly, Iranian influence has increased dramatically in Iraq - electoral democracy in Iraq has produced a friendly Shia-dominated government. Hardliners in Iran may now believe the US and British troops are de facto Iranian hostages, providing Iran with potential military leverage against the US and UK should the US decide to use military force to disrupt Iranian nuclear ambitions.

A primary and stated Iranian foreign policy goal is for the US to leave Iraq. Failing that, Iran does not want an attrition war between the US and the Iranian Shia communities, but rather a low intensity conflict between Kurds and Sunni Arab populations with US and coalition troops bogged down in policing and counter-insurgency roles in the Sunni triangle. While preserving Iraq's territorial integrity and avoiding all-out instability, Iran could give considerable support to Sunni and *al-Qa'idah* fighters in the Sunni triangle to bring about a Bosnia-Herzegovina style effort against the US and increase support to the Badr Brigade and Ansar al-Islam. Safa Rasul, chief of staff of Iraq's National Security Council has noted: 'There is a real concern that the interference we are seeing from Iran at the moment is just the beginning, and that Baghdad could be slowly slipping into the orbit of Tehran.'[22]

Hardliners are in the ascendancy in Iran and with oil prices so high have little need to reform the economy, are less dependent on the West, and freer to develop the Iranian nuclear programme. It is therefore in Iran's strategic interest to have a weak authoritarian and Shia dominated or failed state in Iraq. This gives Iran maximum leverage over Iraq and the US minimum leverage over Iran. It weakens US regional influence, undercuts the strategic viability of US-sponsored regime change and discourages citizens in the Middle East to push for reform and democratization.

Saudi Arabia also has an interest in Iraq, not least because 20% of the Saudi population is Shia and they live on top of 75% of Saudi oil wealth in the east. They are discriminated against in the military, civil service, diplomatic corps and oil production sector. However, the Saudi state policy of marginalising domestic Shia is harder to sustain if Shia dominate both Iran and Iraq and if a democratic and stable Iraq emerges. There are two sources of instability in the kingdom: violent jihadis and liberal reformers. Saudi Arabia appears more frightened of the liberal reformers as their ideas and the ideology of democracy represents a greater threat to the regime. By jailing and suppressing liberal reformers the populace have only two choices: support the status quo or support the violent jihadis, the only group that look as if they can deliver change. Iraq highlights two destabilising trends for Saudi Arabia. Firstly, the rise of transnational forces of Arabism and Islam (the imagined community of Arabs and Moslems) that supersedes the state which Shia majority rule represents. Secondly, the proliferation of sub-national tribal/ethnic dynamics that are being strengthened by the insurgency in Iraq. It raises a fundamental question concerning the nature of peoples' identity in the Middle East and the ability of that identity to be contained within state structures. If democratic reform does take place in Iraq and amongst the Gulf states, then the need for Saudi

regional hegemony is undercut and pressure is placed on Saudi Arabia to reform itself from the region.

Weak Authoritarianism: Back to the Future?

Two outcomes are possible in the 15 October 2005 referendum: the Sunnis receive two thirds in three provinces and reject the Constitution or they do not and the Constitution is passed. If the Sunnis block the constitution then some argue that it would derail the political roadmap and represent an insurmountable political and constitutional crisis. However, in order to gain the necessary majority they would first have had to undertake a voter registration drive, which could then be used to increase their representation, when fresh elections occur – currently, and as a consequence of their boycott, Sunnis have 17 seats in a 275-seat parliament. It is possible that the Sunnis, having voted to block the Constitution, would vote in rather than boycott the December 2005 mandated parliamentary elections. If they could duplicate the same high turnout they would receive between 50 and 60 seats (approximately 20% of the vote), and so be able to renegotiate the terms of the constitution without the Shia and Kurds steamrolling them.

The political road map is delayed 6-12 months but the Sunnis buy into the political process and this leads to an increase in the legitimacy of the Iraqi government (and a decentralized rather than federal system), a diminution of the insurgency and greater stability in Iraq. This allows for the coalition exit strategy to take effect after the delay. The assumption underlying this outcome is that in the Sunni triangle the hardliners (the international jihadists, wahabists etc.) will never buy into the political process and will have to be hunted down and killed - preferably by Iraqi rather than coalition forces. The real battle is to get the Sunni mainstream to see the hardliners as a disruptive and dangerous force contrary to their interests and safety, turn against them and provide the intelligence to the Iraqi security forces - a prerequisite for taking down this hardcore portion of the insurgency.

The downside of this outcome is twofold. Firstly, this result places pressure on US (with mid-term elections in November 2006) and UK policy-makers as such delay is easy to portray as failure – indeed, most analysts argue that political stability can only be maintained if the Sunni fail in their effort to block the Constitution. Secondly, in the zero sum world of Iraqi security politics, a strengthened Sunni position weakens that of the Shia and Kurdish authorities. However, the appearance of sort-term political instability and delay makes less likely longer-term structural and systemic state failure and would be in the interests of the Iraqi people and the integrity of the Iraqi state.

If the Sunnis vote overwhelmingly against the Constitution but fail to receive two-thirds in three provinces (perhaps in two with the third province result heavily contested, with allegations of vote rigging etc.), then there are two further possibilities. Mainstream Sunnis accept the result and their now politically sanctioned loser status, but are determined to make the best of a bad job by voting in the December elections to at least gain greater representation in Iraqi politics, even though this means living within a federal Iraq, purged of Baathists and the oil wealth sharing process not to the advantage of the resource-poor Sunni heartlands. The insurgency is partially disheartened and some elements are persuaded to enter mainstream politics. This is an inconceivable response.

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Much more likely would be the opposite reaction: the mainstream Sunni leadership is radicalized further by the failure to oppose the constitution successfully, and insurgent propaganda persuades sympathizers to become supporters and a determined effort to disrupt the elections in December is mounted. The draft constitution will have served to cement differences between the Sunni Arabs and the Shia and Kurds; it is likely to fuel rather than dampen the insurgency by encouraging ethnic and sectarian violence. The low intensity conflict heats up as zero sum politics is reinforced and sectarianism increases. Thus the passing of the constitution will, paradoxically, represent a strategic failure for the political roadmap as it strengthens the insurgency and weakens the Iraqi state.

As of 20 October 2005 it appears that the Constitution would pass narrowly, though the result is likely to be called into question. Iraqi election officials are investigating "unusually high" vote totals in 12 Shiite and Kurdish provinces, where up to 99% of the voters were reported to have cast ballots in favour of Iraq's new constitution. Around 10 million Iraqis cast ballots in the election (64% of registered voters) and preliminary results shows that the constitution was approved by about 65% of Iraq's voters.

Both internal and external drivers point to the emergence of a weak authoritarian Iraqi state as the most probable outcome, unless a civil war intervenes to create a failed state. Short of a full scale civil war, it is hard to see how the insurgency can be sustained once 'Iraqification' of security and political structures is complete and legitimacy of the post-Saddam order entrenched: the discourse moves towards framing the issue as patriots versus terrorists, or rather than Jihadis versus occupiers. Under these conditions oil production will slowly come on line and exports increase, consolidating the Shia and Kurdish autonomy through control of the energy sector and political economy.

Hence, it is likely that a weak but functioning federal state will emerge, with real power devolved down to entity level. Strong leaders within these fractious entities are likely to come to the fore, adding a more authoritarian flavour to the state, though a governing federal coalition gives it a democratic facade. Turkey and Iran will attempt to weaken Kurdish unity to undercut a push for independence and their policies will mirror Russia's promotion of controlled instability and managed chaos in its near neighbourhood. Iran will also likely be pulled further into to the Shia south, particularly in the battle for ascendancy that the death of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani will inevitably promote.

Stability in Iraq could mean instability in the Middle East as the nature of Iraqi stability - a Shia democracy/Shia Islamic theocracy or indeed a democratic Iraq in which the principles of accountability, transparency, rule of law, equity, and participation – could erode the authority and legitimacy of neighbouring states and the nature of their governance. Bahrain has a 75% Shia population but is ruled by Sunnis. Of the 22 states in the Arab world, not one has a liberal democratic opposition group and so even limited Iraqi democracy could be destabilising. Were Iraq to fail then the example of polarisation and violent conflict between opposing factions could lead to the splitting of states in the region. Iraq basically emerges as a state with some pockets of stability, civil war, criminalized regions and Khomeini-type principalities.

It is thus in the interests of status-quo regimes in the Middle East, of which Saudi Arabia and Iran are prime examples, to foster a weak but authoritarian Iraq. Such an end state outcome has multiple benefits for these two states. It reduces

pressure on the reform process, weakens the prospect of Iraq emerging as a united strategic competitor, keeps the US engaged in the region but with reduced leverage and not focused primarily on Iran, Saudi reform or Syria and it limits the power of home-grown but exported jihadis for these status-quo regimes. If a weak authoritarian end-state outcome occurs, then the intervention and its consequences will have weakened the US's position in the region and its freedom of action to manage global security threats unilaterally.

Endnotes

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Dr Graeme P Herd is Faculty Director of Research at the *George C. Marshall Center for European Security Studies* (GCMC), Garmisch-Partenkirchen Germany, and Associate Fellow, 'International Security Programme,' Chatham House, London. Email: herdg@marhsallcenter.org. From 14 November 2005 he is a faculty member at the *Geneva Centre for Security Policy* (GCSP): g.herd@gcsp.ch The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the George C Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC), the United States Department of Defense or the German Ministry of Defence.

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See: Phyllis Bennis, 'The Iraqi Constitution: A Referendum for Disaster', *Institute for Policy Studies*, 13 October 2005: http://www.ips-dc.org/comment/Bennis/tp34constitution.htm

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