

PERSPECTIVE

What Should Be Done About Iraq?

MARINA OTTAWAY

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION has finally admitted that the situation in Iraq can no longer be addressed by “staying the course.” Both the visible deterioration of the situation on the ground, amply demonstrated by the horrifying violence in Baghdad and other important cities, and the American voters’ rejection of the Republican Party and its policies in the midterm congressional elections make it imperative for the administration to announce a new course. But the options are limited.

Iraq today sits at the intersection of two clusters of conflict. The first is internal to Iraq, a result of the vacuum of power left by Washington’s success in overthrowing Saddam Hussein and its subsequent failure to restore security and governance. The second is regional, caused by the rise of Shiite power in Iran and affecting the entire area from Iran to the Arabian peninsula and the Levant. As a result, any new policy on Iraq needs to address both domestic and regional issues.

Iraq is a broken country without central authority. The government of “national unity” is divided and weak, not because of the poor leadership provided by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, but because no government made up of factions violently at odds with each other could possibly be strong. The administrative system has never recovered from the post-invasion collapse. The police are simply a conglomeration of militias taking orders from various factions. The Iraqi army appears somewhat closer to being a national institution, but only because US troops are embedded in its units.

In this vacuum of power, conflicts are proliferating. There is an increasingly vicious civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Shiites, encouraged by the ouster of Hussein and the United States’ insistence on a formal democratic process that in a divided country favors the large

est confessional group or ethnic faction, feel entitled to rule. Sunnis are refusing to accept their minority status and are determined to prevent the Shiites from governing. There are also conflicts among competing Shiite factions and their militias. And there are intersecting conflicts between Kurds and Arabs, among Iraqi Sunni political and tribal groups, and between Iraqi Sunnis and jihadists associated with Al Qaeda in Iraq.

The Bush administration has sought to address these conflicts by forming a government of national reconciliation. The strategy has failed. Two completely different approaches are now being discussed. One is the formation of a strong government, less democratic and inclusive than the present one, but capable of imposing order. The second is the de facto partition of Iraq into autonomous regions. The strong government idea is a chimera, because in a country plagued by armed groups a government cannot be strong without security forces that can overwhelm all opponents, and such security forces simply do not exist in Iraq.

The de facto partition of Iraq into largely autonomous regions is a real possibility; in fact, it may be impossible to prevent at this point. To be sure, the multiple and poorly understood conflicts that stand in the way of strengthening central authority in Iraq will also make it difficult to make the separate regions stable and violence-free. The difference is that central authority would require addressing all problems at the same time and in the same process, whereas regional solutions could be worked out to some extent one region at a time.

NEIGHBORS ON EDGE

In any solution based on regionalization, however, the cluster of domestic Iraqi conflicts would intersect with the emerging regional conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. In a decentralized Iraq, a Sunni region would inevitably look first and foremost to Saudi Arabia, the rich Sunni country with which it shares a long border. Facing the growing Shiite influence in the area, Saudi Arabia would have no choice but to support an Iraqi Sunni region. Other predominantly Sunni and oil-

MARINA OTTAWAY is director of the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment. She serves as an adviser to the Iraq Study Group, headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. Her most recent book, co-edited with Thomas Carothers, is *Uncharted Journey: Democracy Promotion in the Middle East* (Carnegie, 2005).

rich countries in the Gulf would also be important to Iraqi Sunnis, but Saudi Arabia is key. Syria, on which the Bush administration has focused much attention and on which it has heaped much blame for the chaos in Iraq, is a much less important actor. It cannot compete with Saudi Arabia for influence on the Sunnis, and it does not have a role to play in the Shiite areas.

A Shiite semi-autonomous region in the south of Iraq would be less dependent on external financing, because most Iraqi oil is produced there. But it would still need political backing, with Iran the obvious candidate. Iran has supported and continues to support Shiite militias, particularly the Badr Brigades of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. It will continue to be involved in Iraq no matter what the United States says or does. But it will not be able to dominate a Shiite region, let alone the rest of Iraq, because of the line historically dividing the Persians of Iran from the Arabs of Iraq.

The mounting tensions between

Sunnis and Shiites in the region guarantee that neighboring countries, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran, will be central actors in any solution in Iraq. The question is whether they will use the Iraqi factions in a proxy war between Shiites and Sunnis in the entire region, adding to the carnage and destruction in Iraq, or whether they will find a way to cooperate in order to avoid what would benefit neither country, namely utter chaos on their borders. (The Kurdish region in the north of Iraq, already largely self-governing, could also pull other nations, such as Turkey, into a regional conflict.)

What is certain is that Iraq cannot be insulated from the interests and thus intervention of neighboring countries, because its domestic conflicts

have an impact on all of them. This means that any policy the Bush administration decides to pursue in Iraq must also take the neighboring countries into account. The administration may choose not to deal directly with the most troublesome of Iraq's neighbors, Iran and Syria, and simply continue to denounce their policies. But it cannot avoid dealing with the consequences of their actions, which are now part of Iraq's domestic conflicts.

Because Iraq is at the intersection of two clusters of conflicts, the solution to a situation that has spun out of control is beyond the capacity of the United States to devise and above all to implement on its own. The United States has tried to impose its own solution to the domestic problem of forging a new Iraqi state through a democratic process and the rebuilding of Iraqi security forces, and it has failed. It has tried to keep regional actors

out of the conflict, threatening Syria, warning Iran, even keeping Saudi Arabia at a distance, and it has failed. It has tried to enlist other countries to support its efforts

The solution to a situation that has spun out of control is beyond the capacity of the United States to devise and above all to implement on its own.

in Iraq, and even the few that responded, in most cases providing only symbolic help, have now withdrawn or are withdrawing their troops.

The solution in Iraq can only come from the people who have no choice but to be involved: mainly the Iraqis themselves, of course, but also the neighboring countries for which engagement with Iraq is an absolute necessity, rather than an option. As an outside actor, the United States has the option of staying in Iraq or pulling out. No matter what the Bush administration chooses to do, it is clear that its role in Iraq will be as one of the many actors trying to protect their interests amid clusters of conflict, rather than as the dominant force that can reshape the region to suit its goals. ■