



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

January 2007
07-01

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

Center for International Studies
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

web.mit.edu/cis/
web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html

Iraq's Political Factions: The Last Chance to Build a Governing Coalition?

Barry R. Posen

MIT Center for International Studies

President Bush is renewing his effort to create an Iraq that can govern, sustain, and defend itself, and is throwing more resources at the project. The first priority must be governance, however, as administration and defense cannot happen without a functioning government. And government cannot function without a legitimate, broad-based, political consensus. Such a consensus has eluded Iraqis since March 2003, and the President's new strategy includes no political program to create such a consensus. Instead, he counts on creating a coalition of existing "moderates," which do not exist, as the intense violence within Iraq clearly demonstrates. Thus, the President's troop increases, economic assistance, and intensified training will likely prove futile.

Iraqi politics is presently at a stalemate. There are four main political factions in the country, and only two can agree on anything. This is not enough to govern. At least one of the other factions must change its position, and it will be a tall order to bring that about.

Four Factions and Their Interests

Iraqis divide along the issue of whether there should be a strong central state and weak regions, or strong regions and a weak central state. The United States should support the "strong regions" solution, but without encouraging or allowing a complete break-up of the Iraqi state. This outcome is best because none of the contending factions is strong enough to impose its authority on all of the others (as a strong central state would

continued on page 2

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Barry R. Posen is Ford International Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Security Studies Program in the Center for International Studies at MIT.

citation

Barry Posen. "Iraq's Political Factions: The Last Chance to Build a Governing Coalition?" MIT Center for International Studies Audit of the Conventional Wisdom, 07-01 (January 2007).

require), and because allowing Iraq to dissolve entirely will invite outside intervention and the risk of a wider war.

Those who agree on a strong central state, the Iraqi Sunni Arabs and the Shiites around the coalition of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party, and Moqtada al-Sadr's parliamentary followers and his Mahdi Army militia, themselves disagree on who should run that state. The Sunni Arabs oppose the notion that the Shia should run the new state and dominate its institutions. Without disproportionate weight in these institutions, the Sunni Arabs would be both unsafe and poor. Therefore, Sunni groups fight to prevent the consolidation of the current government's power, which they see as permanent Shia hegemony.

President Bush hopes that the Maliki government will appeal to Sunnis by offering them a share of the country's oil wealth, allowing more former Sunni Arab Baath party members the right to serve in government, and accelerating local elections, which would permit Sunni Arabs to govern their own communities. These changes are a step in the right direction, but they may not happen, and even if they do, they may not put real power in the hands of Sunni Arabs, and are thus unlikely to reduce significantly their support for the insurgency.

The Shia parties, having been repressed by the Sunni minority for decades, are not about to share power with them fairly, much less grant them a bonus for their minority status. At the same time, Sadr's supporters—who mostly inhabit the Shia slums of Baghdad—do not support a decentralized Iraq, because this outcome would permit the oil-rich northern and southern provinces to control the oil revenues, leaving the Shia in Baghdad as beggars in their own land. Maliki's Dawa Party will not abandon its alliance with Sadr, because Sadr can call on thousands of street soldiers, and Dawa lacks a party militia.

Sadr may also oppose decentralization because it leaves the Shia of Baghdad and central Iraq in the middle of the country mixed with a roughly equal number of Sunni Arabs. Though it seems implausible at this moment, they may fear that the Sunni Arabs might then be able to defeat them. It is noteworthy that the Shia-dominated Iraqi Army typically must call on U.S. support whenever the Sunni Arab insurgents choose to stand and fight. Why would Shia brothers come north to help in this fight, if they are comfortable and prosperous in their own oil-rich region?

The Kurds, and the Shia SCIRI party, with its competent and well-organized Badr Corps militia, both want a weak central state, and decentralized power. SCIRI wishes to form a southern nine-province region, similar to the Kurdish region in the north. SCIRI is very close to Iran, which also does not want the re-emergence of a strong Iraqi central state. Both factions favor the current provisions in the Iraqi constitution that permit regionalization, and permit the regions to control oil revenues from future exploration.

What duties these parties would leave to the central government are unclear. The Iraqi Kurds need to maintain the appearance of an Iraqi central state to reduce the fears of Syria, Iran, and Turkey that an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would prove an irresistible magnet to their own Kurdish minorities. Turkey might well try to crush a fully independent Iraqi Kurdistan. It is unlikely, however, that either the Kurds or SCIRI wants a strong, centrally controlled, Iraqi national army that could be turned against them. And their opposition may account for the fact that even after years of work, and millions of dollars, the Iraqi Army remains a weak force, unable to move its divisions around the country as needed, because in

"The path of least resistance to a political accommodation that can underpin any kind of working government in Iraq, however weak, is an agreement on the decentralization of power."

fact most divisions owe their loyalty to local political forces and not to the central state. The Kurds and SCIRI ought to be able to align to help produce the decentralization outcome, as decentralization leaves both of them wealthy and strong, and requires only limited active cooperation thereafter. Nevertheless, though the Iraqi constitution now permits a very high level of decentralization, in practice this cannot now be achieved without endless violence from the Sunni Arabs and the Shia of Baghdad—who believe that present decentralization plans leave them poor and insecure.

The Decentralization Option

Given this constellation of forces, it should be clear that the path of least resistance is decentralization of power. The Kurds have made it abundantly clear that they will fight any effort to erode their autonomy, as their dismissive reaction to the recentralization plans of the Baker commission demonstrates. It is unlikely that SCIRI will give up its preference for an autonomous south, which it can probably dominate. A strong central state in Baghdad is too easily dominated by the political organization that holds the allegiance of the city's Shias—Sadr, his Mahdi Army militia, and his political supporters in parliament.

The problem, however, is getting either the Sadr/Dawa Baghdad coalition or the disparate constellation of Sunni Arab resistance fighters and legal political parties, to reverse course and actively support decentralization. Sadr's political appeal is based in part on his own appropriation of Iraqi nationalism, and his commitment to a strong, autonomous state. To change position is to lose his principal ideological source of power. And Sadr and his movement are probably too strong for the U.S. to destroy, even if the man himself were eliminated. Changing the position of the Sunni Arab groups, however difficult this may be, is the better bet. Once this occurs, Iraq's laws can probably be rewritten, and the weight of internal forces will leave Dawa and Sadr little room for maneuver.

The Sunni Arab insurgent groups are fighting for honor, power, and money. Is there a way to give them enough of each in the context of a weak central government to get most of them to support it? It must be admitted that thus far, efforts to woo the Sunnis have failed, so the difficulties here ought not to be underestimated. To address honor, the easiest thing the U.S. can do is tacitly admit that the Sunni Arabs have fought the U.S. to a standstill. The stain to their honor of the defeat of 2003 has been expunged. The U.S. should set a date to disengage its forces from Iraq, a date that is soon enough to matter to the Sunni insurgents, and to focus their attention and that of other key Iraqi players on the need for compromise, but distant enough to permit some planning, diplomacy, and organization—eighteen months. The U.S. should offer to release the thousands of Iraqi prisoners (most of them Sunni) that it now holds, and to do it on a reasonable, graduated timetable. U.S. senior officers and political officials should meet with Sunni Arab leaders to institute a ceasefire. These things need not happen all at once, but they are critical to neutralizing the honor question.

The power question has to do with security. How can security be promised to the Sunni Arabs? This might be an issue that a

regional diplomacy could address. But we should also accept that some part of the extant Iraqi security forces, especially Sunni Arab officers, could be allowed to organize local self-defense units in majority Sunni Arab areas. Extant self-defense militias should not be treated as insurgents, but should be co-opted. The U.S. could subsidize this to a limited extent. U.S. intelligence people now know a lot about the local Sunni notables, and the insurgent political leaders, and should be willing to make private deals with the more pragmatic among them to help them with local security. News reports suggest that this is tentatively under way in Anbar province. More should be done.

Finally there is the issue of money. If the Kurds and SCIRI see an interest in drawing the support of the Sunni Arabs—and this is a big if—they should be willing to rewrite the oil law of Iraq to ensure an equitable distribution of the revenues, as they are said to have promised President Bush. The promise of a date certain for the disengagement of U.S. forces may help them to see that compromise is a reasonable alternative to an escalation of the civil war that will likely follow the U.S. departure. Indeed, agreeing to rewrite the oil law in this way would send a powerful signal to the Sunnis that the Kurds and SCIRI might be willing to accommodate their other concerns. The three factions ought to have enough votes to rewrite this law. To guarantee this equitable distribution against cheating, a virtual U.N. trusteeship over Iraq oil revenues could be established. This trusteeship would collect the proceeds of Iraqi oil sales abroad, and write checks to the various parties in Iraq.

If this solution proves unachievable, a simpler one suggests itself. The oil-rich, Sunni-dominated Arab states could simply write their own checks to the Iraqi Sunni Arabs. At this time Iraq pumps about two million barrels a day, which at \$60 a barrel could earn perhaps \$40 billion a year. The Sunni Arabs represent about one-fifth of Iraq's population, so a fair deal would give them \$8 billion a year. The Arab oil producers ought to be able to find this kind of money to buy a little peace, especially if they understand that America is leaving Iraq—and one way or the other they will have to pay something to deal with the mess.

The Bush Administration has been unwilling to embrace clearly and publicly the decentralization of power as the desired end state in Iraq. It has offered no plausible strategy for how to achieve a political consensus in Iraq, and in particular how to elicit the cooperation of the Sunni Arabs. The path of least resistance to a political accommodation that can underpin any kind of working government in Iraq, however weak, is an agreement on the decentralization of power. The Sunni Arabs are the key party that must be drawn to alter its current position and support this solution. This is no easy task, because the Sunni Arabs appear to remain fixated on the fantasy of their return to power over a unified Iraq. This cannot happen, but a unified Iraq with a strong central state where they do not rule is a grave threat to their well-being, and some of them are beginning to understand this. In the end, only a true decentralization of power and an enforceable plan to ensure them a fair share of Iraq's wealth can practically serve their interests. If the Bush Administration wishes to stay in Iraq in pursuit of something that looks like success, then this is the only practical path.



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

January 2007

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Iraq's Political Factions: The Last Chance to Build a Governing Coalition?

Barry R. Posen

MIT Center for International Studies

PSB 07-01-0050



Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

