

IRAQ AND THE HISTORY OF OCCUPATION

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This is a war of occupation. And a striking fact about wars of occupation is that while they were often successful until 1945, they have seldom succeeded in the years since. Until the end of World War II, occupations, also called empires, were routine. Today, they are very rare (the last really big one, in Eastern Europe, ended in 1989 with no fight). And so one must ask, what is changed about the world in the past 60 years? Let me suggest six things that have changed irreversibly.

1. Urbanization.

A century ago, the industrial world was urbanized, but the colonial countries for the most part were not. A dispersed, impoverished rural population is much easier to control than a packed-in, urban middle class. This is partly architecture: Cityscapes favor the defender; so the Germans learned at Stalingrad. When, in *The New Yorker* in early February, Seymour Hersh quoted an intelligence source responding to his telephone call, "Welcome to Stalingrad," that was the meaning of the reference.

2. "Correlation of forces."

Around 1898, following the battle of Omdurman, Hilaire Belloc immortally wrote, "Whatever happens, we have got/The Maxim Gun. And they have not." Now they have got it, along with the booby trap, the car bomb, and most recently the suicide attacker. These weapons are simple but effective. They impose, at a minimum, a focus on force protection that gets in the way of everything else.

3. Self-government is the political norm.

In the age of empire, successful imperialists governed through local rulers, and the costs of administration were accordingly small. Today, people everywhere expect sovereignty, an expectation more universal and stronger than that of democracy or freedom in most cases. Why is there no terrorism in Kurdistan? Because the Kurds are self-governing, under a government formed under our protection but without our physical presence. The insurgency is effective in central Iraq in part because government there lacks the people's confidence. They may actually dislike it. Or perhaps they might actually like it to succeed, but reasonably fear that it won't. Either way, we are denied the most important instrument of governance, the active cooperation of the governed.

4. The worldwide media and the attention it gives to atrocity.

A century ago one could massacre with impunity. Well into the 20th century, terror and torture were accepted features of conquest and occupation. For example, the British killed 20,000 in Iraq in the early 1920s and few complained. A few decades earlier the Belgians had killed some ten million in the Congo, and almost no one even knew about it; similarly our Indian wars in the 1870s were wars of extermination. But the horrors of World War II, in particular, changed perceptions, as the French learned in Algeria and we in Vietnam. Since that time television has radically raised the visibility of violence, and the political price associated with it.

5. War and the free market.

When our troops went in, Iraq lost control of its frontiers. The resulting flood of imported cars clogged the streets, making security patrols difficult while it has become easy for insurgents to move around and to conceal bombs. Meanwhile a flood of electrical appliances drains the power grid, so that even heroic measures to increase electrical capacity cannot keep pace with demand. Subsidized fuel is now easily exported, so fuel is short. Yet if subsidies are reduced or eliminated, popular tolerance for the occupation falls. And all the imports destroy local jobs, creating a pool of frustrated and angry unemployed.

6. Today's occupation is a rotating force.

Soldiers come and go, because jet aircraft make that possible. This is necessary, under modern conditions, for the survival of a volunteer army. But it is corrosive to stable intelligence relationships in the theater of operations; every new rotation of forces must relearn local conditions and rebuild trust in the local population.

These are facts that one has to deal with, and the question, of course, is this: Is there a strategy that can deal with them under the present circumstances in Iraq?

The answer lies, if anywhere, with Iraqi self-government and the development of an effective permanent local national security force. This is obvious to everyone; and the recognition of this fact has already produced a government that - in its alignment with Tehran in particular - may prove quite different from the reliable diplomatic ally our neo-conservative visionaries had hoped for. Will this government be capable to muster an army and police capable of defeating the insurgency and bringing the population into cooperation? Perhaps. It is prudent nevertheless to remain skeptical.

Yes, the news on Iraq's election day, January 30, 2005, was encouraging - the insurgency failed to affect voting outside of the Sunni regions. But does it mean success is now within reach? Are we in position to set a realistic deadline - perhaps the 18 months recently named by interim Interior Minister Falah Al-Naqib - to finish the job? And, especially, would a timetable help or hurt in the pursuit of that goal?

This is truly a difficult question. Eighteen months is not a long time. Make it one year after the next elections - that is, December 2006 - and you buy a little more. The advantage is that a timetable might force the hand of the Iraqi leaders now in place. They might be able to bring into being, in that time, a successful security force. Previous timetables - for sovereignty, and for the elections - were apparently quite effective in forcing decisions and action. Perhaps a timetable for Iraqi takeover of internal security would be equally so.

As a timetable is implemented, the security of Kurdistan can be guaranteed. A clear authority - religious, to be sure - can take power in the South. Iraq, like Gaul, can be divided in three parts. It's in the center, as the world knows, that the hard problem is.

In Central Iraq, it is possible that military success could be made more likely by making it known that we intend to get out. The choice facing Iraqis will be stark. They can either support the government just elected, or face the possibility of life under the insurgents. Perhaps this will concentrate minds, improve military efficiency and the intelligence flow. Perhaps it will reduce the fatal temptation for the government to rely indefinitely on US forces to do the hard fighting and take the blame for the serious damage.

Objections to a timetable

But it is also possible that a timetable would not have this effect. Two objections would have to be weighed very carefully. The first is that a timetable could cause the collapse of existing intelligence channels on insurgent activity. The second is the risk that a timetable for our withdrawal might also become a timetable for the de facto independence of Kurdistan, implying eventual Kurdish withdrawal from the Iraqi security forces. Since Kurds form the backbone of the New Iraqi Army right now, the question is whether, without them, Shiite Arabs alone can possibly construct an effective counter-insurgent force.

Countering what?

The informed view of our forces in Iraq is that we are not actually fighting merely a loose confederation of remnants, dead-enders, criminals and jihadis. The “insurgency” is at its heart the work of Saddam Hussein’s internal security force, the Mukhabarat - the “very effective armed gang” that governed Iraq for 35 years. And it is pursuing a campaign planned, equipped and financed well in advance of our invasion.

That’s a tough opponent. It can’t prevail against us, surely. But it may be also that it can’t be defeated by our Iraqi allies, or by us with the level of violence we are prepared to inflict. And if that’s so, what is our real choice? Is it between a war continuing for ten or twenty years, with a thousand or more American dead every year and no assurance of success, and on the other side of the coin the return of the secret police and a massacre of tens of thousands of Shi’ites, Kurds and unreliable Sunni in Central Iraq? If that is the choice, which alternative would you pick? And if you set a timetable in order to discover the truth - something that may still, in spite of the horrific character of this dilemma, be a sensible idea - what do you do if the timetable fails?

The best result

Morally, we are committed to protect the Iraqi Arabs from the return of their old tormentors. (The Kurds, mercifully, can protect themselves.) Ideally, we’d like a military victory against Saddam’s secret police, followed by a political reconciliation between the Sunni and Shi’a in the Arab areas of Iraq. Practically, the pursuit of that goal will cost us our present deployment, and present rate of losses, for the indefinite future. And the best result will be a weak, theocratic Shi’ite government in Arab Iraq, rendered unstable indefinitely by Sunni Arab opposition.

Comparison with Vietnam

After we left Vietnam, tens of thousands fled that country, and many more were imprisoned, or worse, for a long period of time. The same could happen in Iraq. In Iraq, however, it may be worse. For Iraq, unlike Vietnam, has a recent history of mass murder, bordering on genocide. In Iraq, whole populations could be at risk.

It’s possible that things will work out. So long as we are present, the insurgency does not have an unlimited capacity to inflict damage, as its failure to disrupt the elections showed. Perhaps, under some level of pressure, it will collapse. But, as the low turnout of Sunni Arabs also showed, this is not something the population expects to happen soon. Thus it may develop that the issue facing the American policymakers will become, merely, how long do you want to delay the ending? And at what price in American blood? At what cost, as well, to the effectiveness of the United States Army and the National Guard?

These are questions for those who chose this war.

Let them explain how it happened that the prevention of genocidal chaos in Iraq came to require the sacrifice of a thousand American lives a year, indefinitely. Let them remember that the risk of genocidal chaos in Iraq was being contained successfully, two years ago, by the inspections, oil-for-food program and no-fly zones, at no cost in American life.

This they gave up. One can admit freely that good things have come out of the war, that we chose the side of the Iraqi people, that the government now in place is vastly preferable to what was there before.

And yet it is still pertinent to ask: would we have taken on this mission if we'd had a full and honest appraisal, in advance, of the cost? Our method, as we think through the choices before us, should be one of intense scrutiny of the worst cases, and effort to discover the course of action best calculated to avoid them. We should not underpin plans for action - any action, including contemplation of withdrawal - with favorable assumptions that are not strongly supported by evidence. Nor should we reject unfavorable possibilities until we can convince ourselves they are wrong.

It's true that we would never have launched this war. It's true that our goal is to bring it to an end. It's true that in our view no compelling national interest requires an indefinite US presence in Iraq. But strategic interests are not the only considerations here. Having made the potentially catastrophic mistake of going in, we are not free to leave until the potential for a true catastrophe on our exit is plausibly contained. That is, of course, plainly not the case right now, and for all we know, it may not be the case for many years.

And here's a question for our future. Will Iraq teach us anything, finally, about the usefulness of diplomacy, the value of patience, and the need for the most extreme caution in using U.S. military force? Will the press permit this question to be discussed in front of the American people?

The President in Brussels [on Feb 21, 2005 - ed.] stated that our basic values were a "vibrant opposition, a free press, shared power and the rule of law." Could we start behaving in this country as though that were true? Can those of us who opposed this war - for what have now turned out to be exactly sensible reasons - discuss it, and not as fringe-end dissidents but in the mainstream of public discourse? Will this happen in time to change the balance of the debate over Iran?

Let's hope so. For real security will elude us all, so long as reckless men and women can stampede the country into reckless wars.

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<http://www.epsusa.org/newsletter/march2005/galbraith.htm>