

Democratic Peacebuilding in Iraq

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MATTHEW SAAYMAN, FEB 20 2012

Is a combination of democracy and inclusiveness the key to bringing peace and stability to Iraq? This raises another question: is a combination of democracy and inclusiveness feasible, in the long term, in Iraq? This paper will ultimately make the argument that one, the opportunity to develop a lasting liberal democracy in Iraq has passed, and two, what might guarantee lasting peace in the region is a manipulation of different sects. Firstly, in providing an overview of the history of Iraq, the origins of religious and ethnic antagonisms will be revealed. Second, the paper will demonstrate how a security dilemma was created and perpetuated, due in part to the actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi government. The security dilemma will be situated within the theoretical framework of Snyder and Jervis, whose security-predatory model will help to explain the on-going violence in Iraq. Third, the paper will show that there is little hope for power-sharing or power-dividing to bring peace to Iraq.

To understand the unthinkable horrors that have befallen the Iraqi people, one must examine first the origins of the Iraqi state. In doing so, the origins of ethnic and religious divisions will be revealed. Originally created as the British Mandate of Mesopotamia following World War I, the new country, in the words of Margaret MacMillan, “threw together peoples” (MacMillan, 2003, p. 493). A diverse country, Iraq includes not only ethnic groups such as Kurds and Arabs, but also religious groups such as the Shi’a, Sunnis, and Christians. To increase the size of the state of Iraq and to balance non-Shi’a against the Shi’a majority, Kurdistan was included as part of the new state (Galbraith, 2006, p. 151). Additionally, the British ensured Sunni Arabs retained high-level positions in governmental and military institutions (Gritten, 2006).

The monarchy in Iraq ruled until 1968, when a coup d’état brought the Arab nationalist Ba’th Party to power. Eleven years later, Saddam Hussein assumed power. Let the reader make no mistake: the regime of Saddam Hussein was a brutal one to say the least. New York Times reporter Elaine Sciolino described Iraq in 1985 as being a place of fear that “deadens the senses” (SM16). Indeed, as Michael Bell (October 1st, 2009) writes, the US-led invasion brought an end to a terrible regime but “released” destructive forces (p. A19).

The forces to which Bell refers are ethnic and religious cleavages between the various sects in Iraq. As Stephen Biddle (2006) argues, the Iraqi insurgency has not simply been one of armed factions revolting against the government; it is a “communal civil war” (p. 2). Biddle highlights the fact that 85% of the insurgent attacks have taken place in the provinces making up the so-called “Sunni Triangle” (p. 6). The motivations of insurgents are varied. Kurdish insurgents desire their own state; the Shi’a seek to assert themselves and gain primacy in the new political environment; Sunni Arabs, fearful that they will be vulnerable as a minority in the post-Saddam environment, have been no less peaceful. Similarly, amidst the growing chaos, fundamentalists and criminals alike have carried out violent acts. While most bombing attacks have been carried out by Sunnis, Shi’a insurgents have attacked Sunni civilians (Pirnie and O’Connell, 2008, p. 2).

The origins of this violence therefore lie, in part, in the creation of the state of Iraq by the British government. By including the area of Kurdistan as part of Iraq, as was described above, the British government essentially forced the Kurds into a state to which they did not belong; Kurdish insurgents are revolting because they still feel no belonging to the state. By giving Sunni Iraqis preferential treatment, the British ensured the growth of animosity between the Shi’a and Sunnis; as Ahmed Hasim (2006) writes, Sunnis are today paying the price for regimes over the past eighty years which oppressed the majority, the Shi’a (p.80). The state of Iraq forced a variety of ethnic and religious groups

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to live together; understanding this is necessary to perceive the origins of the on-going violence, but it is not sufficient to explain why Iraq entered a period of “communal civil war.” The following sections of the paper will show that since ethnic and religious cleavages have been “released,” as Bell writes, sustaining a democracy in Iraq will be difficult.

The communal civil war in Iraq has emerged due to a security dilemma. This is a situation in which the attempts of one actor to increase its own security decrease the security of others. In such situations, resorting to violence is perceived as advantageous (Snyder and Jervis, 1999, p.15). Within a state the dilemma is avoided because the state acts as a hegemonic authority; as Thomas Hobbes argued, the state is able to protect individuals from one another because it is hegemonic (p. 15). As an example, the regime of Saddam Hussein was terrifying for many of those who lived under it, and yet, in the absence of this regime, the state of Iraq has gone to the brink of what Biddle calls a communal civil war. Although ethnic conflict can cause the breakdown of state authority, the reverse can also happen: the breakdown of state authority leads to strife as ethnic and religious groups feel insecure (Snyder and Jervis, 1999, 17). As will be described below, Coalition Forces toppled a brutal regime but failed to guarantee the security of Iraqis.

A security dilemma developed in Iraq due to the decisions of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi government. First, the Coalition Provisional Authority officials antagonized former members of the armed forces. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, disbanded the Iraqi army on May 23rd, 2003. According to Bremer, the decision was made, at least in part, because for most Iraqis the army was a symbol of the monstrous regime of Saddam Hussein. In actuality, as Colin Powell has said, disbanding the army was a grave error (Gordon, 2008). Following the decision, thousands of former Iraqi officers took to the streets. One officer exclaimed that “if they [the Coalition authorities] don’t pay us, we’ll start problems. We have guns at home. If they don’t pay us, if they make our children suffer, they’ll hear from us” (Hashim, 2006, p. 96). Frustrated with the decision, members of an institution which could have been a stabilizing factor in Iraq joined insurgent elements.

Second, the Iraqi government has contributed to antagonism among the Sunnis. There has been scepticism of the new Iraqi government, as seen in the decision of many Sunnis to boycott the past two elections. In early February 2010, over one-hundred candidates were disqualified from the election, ostensibly as a concern that such candidates were former members of the Ba’th Party under Saddam. The decision has reinforced the wide-spread fear among the minority Sunnis that the new government has always been working against them (Myers, February 14, 2010). This is an example of how the security dilemma has played out in Iraq. The end of the regime of Saddam has, to use the language of Snyder and Jervis, awakened security fears among the major religious and ethnic groups (p. 22). As Ahmed Hashim (2006) writes, in the aftermath of the 2003 Invasion, Sunnis contemplated two choices: either accept political extinction and “ignominy,” or fight. The Sunnis chose the latter option (p. 81).

In antagonizing Sunni Iraqis and members of the armed forces, the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi government have created a security dilemma. This violence has served to perpetuate the security dilemma. In 2006, a bomb destroyed the Askariya Shrine in Samarra, among one of the most sacred sites for Shi’a Muslims. As a response to the offense, mobs of Shi’a attacked Sunni mosques across Samarra. Sunni Iraqi leaders, while criticizing the bombing of the Askariya Shrine, expressed their anger at attacks on Sunni mosques. Some argued that the attacks on Sunni mosques had been planned long in advance and were “part of a broader vendetta against Sunnis” (Worth, 2006, p. A8). Whatever group carried out the bombing, the perpetrators no doubt realized the benefit of perpetuating religious antagonisms (Hashim, 2006, p. 85). In fact, their motives were not necessarily driven entirely by security concerns, as is described below.

The decision of sects to resort to violence against one another, whether they be the Sunnis, the Shi’a, the Kurds, or former officers in the army, may be explained by the predatory-security model of Snyder and Jervis (1999). At one end of the model is the “overriding” motive of an actor to feel secure; actors, by this standard, favour an end to the anarchy of their environment. At the opposite end of the model is a “predatory” motive: actors will seek to expand, to exploit or to dominate other parties in the hopes of guaranteeing their own future security (p. 20). Since there is an interaction of predatory and security motives, it is difficult to distinguish when an actor is behaving either way.

Violence in Iraq, then, may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, actors strike out at one another in response

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to attacks. So, Sunni Iraqis perceived that they would be vulnerable in the new Iraq, and resorted to violence as a form in defence. On the other hand, actors behave as predators to severely weaken or destroy a potential or former enemy. For example, Shi'a insurgents and former Ba'th Party members have collaborated to attack Iraqi Kurds (Hashim, 2006, p.223). Iraqi Kurds have not played as large a role in the insurgency as other groups (p. 220). Kurds, who are apparently not a direct threat to the Sunnis or the Shi'a, have nevertheless been attacked. There is an element of opportunism here: the geographical area for which some Kurds desire an independent state is rich in oil. One might hypothesize that other sects are interested in maintaining access to such a resource. This is an example of predatory motives. While former Ba'th Party members or Shi'a are not directly threatened by Iraqi Kurds, they stand to benefit from weakening that group. In sum, as Jervis and Snyder (1999) write, "in spirals of conflict, actors may come to believe that the other is such a menace that they can be secure only if it [the enemy] is crippled, if not destroyed" (p. 22).

So far the paper has examined the roots of ongoing conflict in Iraq. The creation of the British Mandate of Mesopotamia "threw together peoples" (MacMillan, 2003 p. 493). Additionally, the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi government created a security dilemma through disbanding the Iraqi army and antagonizing the Sunni minority. Different groups felt vulnerable and began pursuing both security-driven and predatory-driven motives. Now the paper will demonstrate why a combination of democracy and inclusiveness cannot be relied upon to guarantee peace in Iraq. It will examine perspectives on power-sharing and power-dividing and refer to the earlier sections on the history of Iraq and the security dilemma.

First, consider the perspective of Paul Collier. He has argued that (1) rebel movements resort to violence out of self-interest, and that societies which are fractured along religious or ethnic lines are safer and more stable than homogenous societies; additionally, (2) "full democratic rights" can help to reduce conflict in a fractionalized society; finally, (3) rebels in civil wars resort to violence out of self-interest (p 108). Indeed, he argues that rapid transition is necessary to avoid conflict. For Collier, competition through markets and democracy can reduce incentives to resort to violence (p. 107). While ethnic and religious differences may not be the direct cause of the violence in Iraq—indeed, it has been shown that groups sometimes resort to self-interest and that "predatory" motives explain the violence—it is clear that such fractionalization has made the situation worse. Furthermore, while the argument of Collier may be applicable to other conflicts, the implementation of democracy in Iraq has had destabilizing, rather than stabilizing, effects.

According to Arend Lijphart (1995), *consociationalism*, a form of power-sharing, is a way to bring stability to a society divided along ethnic lines (p.242). It calls for a "grand coalition" to form the government, a "mutual veto," proportional voting, and the ability of each ethnic group to have some degree of autonomy over its populace (p. 243). A mutual veto would ensure each group could feel some degree of protection against the larger majority. Lijphart writes that each group will come to realize the possibility for deadlock. He therefore assumes that once given the right of mutual veto, groups will exercise restraint in using it (p. 245). These recommendations are, at least for Iraq, problematic. First, he is assuming that groups will exercise restraint in using a mutual veto. One should keep in mind Snyder and Jervis (1999) who said that actors will not always prefer to end an anarchic situation (p. 21, 22). In the case of a legislature, ethnic groups could very well prefer to exercise their mutual veto and prevent government from moving forward on any issues. An additional criticism is one which Lijphart himself points out: this form of democracy aims to create equality *between* ethnic groups, as opposed to within them. In other words, it does not guarantee liberty for individual citizens (p. 252). An individual may find their sect or ethnic group "oppressively homogenous" (p. 252). While one could argue that Saddam Hussein was, to say the least, oppressive and yet effective at maintaining peace, consociationalism will not provide long-term peace in Iraq.

Donald Rothchild and Philip G Roeder (2005) are critical of power-sharing. While it can bring stability in the short-term, it can have ill effects in the long term (p. 13). In formerly autocratic states, ethnic groups are often fearful of the largest ethnic group. Leaders of ethnic groups want to ensure protections of the "tyranny of the majority" (p.2). The dilemma faced by policy makers in such a situation is that the majority, in this case the Shi'a, will be enraged if special privileges are granted to minorities such as the Sunnis (p.5). Such conflict occurs in what they describe as the two phases marking the transition from civil war, the initiation phase and the consolidation phase (p.12). During the initiation phase, warring parties accept a common ruler. In the case of Iraq, one can see that the initiation phase

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was marked by the Coalition Provisional Authority governing with the advice of the Governing Council of Iraq. As this phase comes to an end elections are held. The consolidation phase involves the continual evolution of the new democracy as the government coalesces (p. 12). It culminates with an end of the power sharing agreement (p.13). For Roeder and Rothchild, it is difficult to convince government actors to end the power sharing agreement later on (p. 13). They point out that proportional representation makes the link between legislatures and constituents difficult to develop, and that, additionally, members of a legislature may well continue to use a mutual veto even as a power sharing agreement is intended to end (p. 13). In short, power-sharing stresses ethnic cleavages.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Iraq. Elections were held in March 2010 and yet a government was only formed in early November. In addition, before the first session of Parliament had ended, supporters of former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi walked out (Myers, November 12, 2010). A secular Shiite who has garnered support mostly from Sunnis, Allawi left the parliamentary session over Sunni-related issues. As a New York Times article writes, “the government — if it holds together — will be fractured and unwieldy, rife with suspicion, hobbled by a shaky grasp of the rule of law and prone to collapse, or at least chaos” (New York Times, November 11th). At the very least, this incident highlights the extraordinary difficulty that a power-sharing regime faces. At the very worst, the failure of political parties to work together serves to re-awaken security-driven fears: Sunnis interviewed after the walk-out expressed their fear that the extraordinary violence of the previous years will return.

Regardless, the call for a grand coalition in Iraq has been made by governments such as the Obama Administration and think tanks, including the International Crisis Group (October 26, 2010). According to the International Crisis Group, the Coalition Provisional Authority has been moving the creation of the army too quickly. The same destabilizing forces of ethnic and sectarian divide which were discussed above have come to permeate the new Iraqi army. The International Crisis Group warns that any sectarian division at the level of government will inevitably carry over to and destabilize the armed forces (p. ii). Their report of October 26th, 2010 states that “competing ethnic, sectarian and political forces” affect the armed forces as much as other institutions of the state. The report favours a coalition government (p ii).

Rothchild and Roeder would likely criticize the Obama Administration and the International Crisis Group. They have warned against the use of a coalition government, writing that empowering elites of different groups only works to further divide an already fractured society. They instead recommend “power-dividing” for ensuring stability in such societies. In the same way that the United States features checks and balances to protect people from the government, ethnically divided societies need not empower group elites. What is needed is a separation of executive and legislature powers (p. 15-19). Doing so will keep elites in check and empower individuals.

Unfortunately, the recommendations of Rothchild and Roeder are also problematic for Iraq. As the authors point out, before a power-dividing regime can emerge there must be a national identity. They write that there “must be a consensus among most of the leaders of the main ethnic groups that together their diverse populations constitute a nation” (p. 18). Members of an ethnically divided society must first realize that they are a people with significant commonalities. As this paper has already demonstrated, however, the idea of an Iraqi “nation” is virtually unattainable. Kurdish insurgents are fighting for an independent Kurdistan and evidently do not perceive themselves as “Iraqi.” In addition, there is a clear mistrust and contempt between members of the major factions in Iraq. On his opinion of Shiites, one Sunni Arab has said that “these people with turbans [the Shi’a] are going to run the country. What do they know? Iraq needs people like us” (Hashim, 2006, p. 70). Indeed, as Ahmed Hashim writes, for many Sunnis there is “something ineluctably” alien about the Shi’a (p. 70). While the Sunnis may perceive a nation of Iraq, it appears that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis do not.

In addition, a security dilemma will only exacerbate the fears of ethnic or religious groups (Snyder and Jervis, 1999, p.22). In the war in Yugoslavia, for example, those who saw themselves as Yugoslavian before the conflict began, probably identified themselves more strongly as Muslim, or Croatian, or Serb, during the conflict. In situations of extreme uncertainty, a common identity may not develop, or if it exists, will be weakened (p. 22-23). Recall that these religious and ethnic divisions can be traced back to the creation of the British Mandate of Mesopotamia. Such cleavages add to the security dilemma and can immobilize a coalition government.

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A final criticism of Rothchild and Roeder is that Iraq has not developed civil society to sustain a power-dividing regime. As Bruce Edward Moon argues, the Iraqi people have not been able to develop democratic attitudes or democratic-minded politicians (p 130). Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that poorer countries dependent on a single natural resource, like Iraq, tend to be autocratic (p.137). Finally, since Iraq has been an autocratic state for so long, the chances of sustaining its current democracy are low. In the past century, only 23% of the states that made the transition from autocracy to democracy succeeded in maintaining that form of government (p. 147). While Moon is writing in 2009, before the “Arab Spring” of 2011, successful transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, one could argue, are an exception, rather than a norm. Similarly, former governor of the Wasit province Mark Etherington (2005) has argued that the concerns of most Iraqis have been local, as opposed to national. To use democracy as a “theme” in rallying Iraqis, he says, is ineffective.

Contrary to the argument of Paul Collier, it is unwise to have such a rapid transition to democracy. At the very least, it has been a mistake to have such transition in Iraq. Larry Diamond (January 2005), a former adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority, points out that it was erroneous to hold national elections so soon after the invasion. In his words, “ill-timed or ill-prepared elections do not produce a democracy” (p. 18). On the contrary, such action may serve as a tool for elites to mobilize people on ethnic grounds, thereby increasing violence. This point coincides directly with the views of Roland Paris (Fall, 1997) who writes that liberal democratization in “war-shattered” countries can have disastrous consequences (p.56). Democracies encourage competition between citizens and public groups and, ironically, lead to conflict. Paris writes that national elections encourage the public expression of differences and conflicting goals (p. 75). Thus, to return to the language of Snyder and Jervis, the security and predatory concerns of the Sunnis, the Shi’a and the Kurds materialized during elections and continue to be manifest in the new coalition government and the new army. A more constructive way to implement democracy is to provide a more controlled form of liberalization, delaying national elections until “passions have cooled” (Paris, p. 58). In other words, liberal democracy must not be implemented until after the security dilemma is resolved.

This raises the question, how can one resolve the security dilemma in Iraq? The previous section of the paper sought to address the question “is a combination of democracy and inclusiveness feasible, in the long-term, in Iraq?” From the evidence presented, the answer is no. In doing so, the paper has addressed the original question, “is a combination of democracy and inclusiveness the key to peace and stability in Iraq?” While democratic institutions could have been implemented more effectively—holding off national elections until the cooling of passions as Paris and Diamond write—the chances of democracy sustaining itself in the years to come are slim. It is therefore too late for policy makers to rely on democracy—through power-dividing or power-sharing—to guarantee peace. Evidence of a deteriorating situation include members of the “Sunni Awakening”—Sunnis militias which were co-opted by the American government to stabilize parts of Iraq—rejoining the insurgency (Williams, October 2010).

An alternative form of conflict resolution was described by Stephen Biddle in 2006: the manipulation of different groups to encourage good behaviour. By threatening to empower the Sunnis, the American forces could have convinced the Shi’a to terminate violent activities. Alternatively, threatening to end all military aid could have reminded the Sunnis of their vulnerability and force a change in their behaviour. The International Crisis Group (October 2010) advised that the American government could withhold or supply military aid in order to encourage the next Iraqi government to respect human rights and regulate the army (p. iii).

This paper has traced the development of the sectarian violence in Iraq. First it provided an overview of the history of Iraq. Second, it described how Coalition policy in the aftermath of the invasion has allowed for a security dilemma to develop. In particular, the antagonizing of the Sunnis and former members of the army were examined as providing fuel for the insurgency. Third, the paper examined the idea of using democracy in conflict-ridden societies, such as power-dividing and power-sharing. Neither are likely to bring stability to Iraq. Indeed, the chances of Iraq sustaining its fragile democracy are grim. Manipulating religious and ethnic groups into favourable behaviour, while not a panacea for conflict, may lead to peace. Of course, as Snyder and Jervis write, peace and justice are not always synonymous. Coercion and manipulation of sects are not ethical policy options.

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