After the Surge: Political Mobilisation and Statebuilding in Iraq since 2007

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MATT MALONE, SEP 5 2008

Approaching the record of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq since 2003 has often been an exercise in reconciling (or attempting to reconcile) seemingly contradictory interpretations and dynamics. The key point on which such interpretations implicitly or explicitly diverge is on the role of the state in Iraqi history, particularly its strength and weakness in the exercise of political authority. On the one hand, there is an understanding of Iraqi history which sees its main communal and political actors as irrevocably divided along ethno-sectarian or religious lines, although the distinction between ethnicity and religion (and its impact on the shaping of political identity) is never made clear. Toby Dodge has dubbed this narrative the "primordialisation" of Iraq, whereby its main communities are "deeply divided and mutually hostile."[1] Iraqi statehood is largely a fictitious creation, struggling to direct political action towards its orbit in view of far more persuasive communal narratives, the boundaries of which seem to have oscillated between the poles of ethnicity and religion. Charles Tripp however, in his history of Iraq, has articulated a much more interactive dynamic between state and society, in which the role of the state has largely been shaped by "accounts people have given of themselves and others in relation to the state, as well as to their efforts to make the history of that state conform to their self-image."[2]

The creation of Iraq from the three former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul did shape a new political order which was by and large contingent upon external (in this case British) patronage. The autonomy of the state, and its ability to penetrate society effectively as a necessary actor of socio-political life was thus highly circumscribed by the dynamics of this external relationship. However, the inter and intra-communal fissures which so often constrained state autonomy were not necessarily fixed along ethnic or religious lines, but often by the means of securing patronage for whichever group of rulers' were in power.[3] As Tripp argues, "in Iraq, as elsewhere, power can create its own pragmatic as well as normative grounds for acceptance, despite reservations about its legitimacy."[4] The exigencies of state power for instance imparted significant change on the narratives employed by the Ba'ath Party to enforce social and political order. From transnational pan-Arabism, their narrative mutated into one which exalted the social position of the 'tribal sheikh' in Iraqi history, as well as the central political role of family and clan. This of course, was a normative mechanism which was employed to reinforce the political authority and autonomy of Saddam Hussein and his intimate al-Tikriti circle. The very split exemplified by volumes of contemporary political commentary between 'Sunni', 'Shia' and 'Kurd' is suggestive of the fluid interchangeable dynamics between communal categories. The majority of Iraqi Kurds are Sunnis and large segments of Iraqi Shia have historically been crucial to the mobilisation of mass secular politics, in contrast to the clerically-oriented narratives which have emerged since 2003.[5]

The purpose of briefly highlighting these historical trends and processes is to provide an effective signpost for an examination of the role of those social and political forces which have emerged in the wake of the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime, and particularly since the American-led surge of 2007. The means particular actors have used to compete for shares of state power (including the narratives key actors have employed, as well as their willingness to use violence) are key points of focus. As will be explored further in this paper, the role of Muqtadr al-Sadr is an intriguing case study, not only for exploring the new forms of political organisation which have emerged since 2003, but also for investigating the meaning of the surge for the contours of statebuilding and political mobilisation in post-Saddam Iraq. International Crisis Group has argued that the surge, in not only reinforcing U.S.

troop numbers, but also bolstering the relative position of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI – formerly SCIRI) "helps account for a dramatic drop in violence" and for increasing the Iraqi government's leverage against the previously unruly al- Sadr.[6] Contemporary political competition may therefore, be said to reflect Tripp's conclusion that "the state has often been captured by distinct groups of Iraqis, but it has also reconstituted social identities through the logic of state power. In neither case has the process been complete."[7] A result of this relationship, and one which has impacted heavily upon the conduct and behaviour of the Iraqi state throughout its political existence has been what Tripp has called "the grammar of violence" and the "securitisation of Iraqi politics".[8] The Iraqi state came to reinforce processes of fragmentation and atomisation, not because such divisions were primordial, but because they became the most readily accessible means of political survival to those elites in power. For the population at large, such lines of division became a means of ensuring access to patronage and thus upholding basic, everyday existence.

This is not to say that present developments and processes can be extrapolated back into the past, as if they are simply reproductions of previous trends. As Halliday has argued, outlining the methodological contributions of historical sociology, "elements that are often presented as separate, or timeless, features of Middle Eastern politics, be they nationalism or religious fundamentalism, may turn out to be much more closely formed or transformed by their association with the state."[9] Looking at the relationships between social forces and the state, and the emergent and changing patterns, this paper intends to provide an examination of the statebuilding process in Iraq, accounting for the impact and changes (if any) precipitated by the American-led surge of 2007. Given that the dynamics of the statebuilding process begun in 2003 remain ongoing to say nothing of those initiated by the surge, any interpretations presented in this paper cannot be conclusive. Moreover, these impingements mean that any predictions made below can only be tentative and highly circumscribed. Part of the assessment of the impact of the surge includes investigations into how such social forces as the Sadrists and various Sunni tribes have shifted alliances in response to new improvements in physical security. The factor of physical security is also more than likely to be the outcome of overlapping rather than isolated dynamics. Cleavages within the insurgency, shifting public attitudes towards the role of the state, pressure from external actors (e.g. Iran, Turkey) and the coercive capacity of militias all impinge upon political action.

The Role of Muqtadr al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army

The rise of Muqtadr al-Sadr illustrates the fluidity of political identity in Iraq and the changing role played by religion in the shaping of narratives within an Iraqi polity now unrestrained by Ba'ath Party hegemony. What sets al-Sadr's role in the process of political mobilisation apart from his peer competitors (e.g. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim) in the ISCI is his apparent exclusion from the historically-tested pyramidal client-patron relationship which has largely underpinned the social bases of the more 'established' political actors. As Crisis Group notes:

"He does not enjoy the backing of a party apparatus. He has few religious credentials. By most accounts, even his material assets are scanty: by and large, he is excluded from the financial networks controlled by the Shiite clerical class and is not truly aligned with any foreign sponsor, receiving at best limited material support from Iran."[10]

His is a narrative that has been shaped more than most by changing forms of association with the state. He has frequently resorted to playing the nationalist card in political competition with rivals such as al-Hakim, either emphasising their dependence on foreign patronage or their prolonged absence from Iraqi prior to the overthrow of Saddam. Alongside this, he has attacked the Shia *hawza 'ilmiyya* ("territory of learning") for its stated quietism (associated largely with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) in relation Iraq's evolving political dynamics.[11] Sistani's hierarchically-secured influence among Iraqi Shia however, made it increasingly difficult for him to play a merely passive role, when most Iraqi Shia believed the Ba'ath regime's collapse was the opportunity to right several generations of political wrongs. Into this emerging cleavage stepped al-Sadr, with a narrative which fused "militant Iraqi nationalism with a commitment to Islamic radicalism."[12] The level of divergence between the expectations – of political enfranchisement and economic advancement – of Iraqi Shias and the final outcomes of the processes of statebuilding and reconstruction enhanced the appeal of al-Sadr's narrative particularly amongst poorer Shias. In addition to this normative penetration of Iraqi Shia, al-Sadr was able to reinforce a pragmatic base for his political advances, enhancing through the network of charities established by his father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the

impression (at the very least) of the economic lifeline which successive Iraqi governments seemed unable to provide.[13]

His fusion of nationalist and Islamist narratives seemed to capture, in the short-term at least, the mixture of resentment and frustration which accompanied each setback in Iraq's political reconstruction, particularly the increasingly sectarian character of emergent ministries, institutions and especially security forces. The fragmented nature of the security forces was a major factor in the brutalisation of political competition in Iraq. Intra-Shia rivalry, which placed al-Sadr at odds with the ISCI-affiliated Badr Organisation, was frequently reproduced within the rank-and-file of the Iraqi police, to the point where it became a collaborator in the spiralling dynamics of sectarian violence. "Officers are afraid of mere cops" commented one police colonel in 2007 "fearful they might be Sadrists". Another stated that "Sadr City police do virtually nothing. What happens defies all logic: Mahdi Army members punish the police, not the other way around."[14] It was arguably at this point, from mid-2006 to early 2007, that the Iraqi state was most visibly a creature of competing social forces, each of which was encouraged – by the fragmentation of the security forces – to create through escalating/spiralling violence their own 'single hegemonic principle'[15] for the new Iraqi polity.

Michael Mann's distinction between 'despotic' and 'infrastructural' power is a useful signpost from which to assess the autonomy of the new Iraqi state in relation to emergent post-Saddam social dynamics. Infrastructural power is defined as "the capacity of the state to … penetrate civil society and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm",[16] and can be read as advancement upon 'despotic power', which is defined as the ability of the state to impose its will – often through the use of force – independently of any segment of civil society.[17] The ability of the state to make and apply policy 'logistically' is arguably the key indicator of its legitimacy, of the acceptance by the wider population of the "necessity" of the direction of society by state institutions.[18] During the period under discussion, the 'necessity' of the state was highly circumscribed, if not non-existent, as a consequence of the fragmentation of the security forces and their penetration by competing political militias. In this context, what may account for the drop in violence since the autumn of 2007 is not necessarily the consolidation of the means of 'despotic' power from Baghdad, but the "overreaching" of the protagonists in Iraq's civil war:

"The self-confidence proved misplaced. Buoyed by their military success and accumulation of resources and police complicity, the Sadrists overreached, engaging in self-destructive behaviour."[19]

Moreover, having entrenched themselves at the top of multi-layered local politics, militias such as the Mahdi Army were able to implement their stringent, inflexible socio-religious codes on Iraqi citizens. A Basran woman commented, on the rule in her city of the Mahdi Army that "as a woman I cannot feel safe. Maybe this is because of old fears of what we have endured. I pray to God that this is the case."[20] Iraqi politics was once again subject to the process of securitisation, only this time it was embodied in more fragmentary dynamics, symbolising the coercive weakness, rather than strength, of the political centre in Baghdad. The American-led surge, and moreover the coercive capacity of the New Iraqi Army, was broadly accepted as necessary, in spite of its clear deficiencies, as immeasurably preferable to rule by militias.

The role of Muqtadr al-Sadr is arguably illustrative of the divergence between the dynamics of power and those of opposition. His playing of the nationalist card was his greatest leverage against his rivals in the ISCI, whose historical role as the long arm of Iranian penetration in Iraq could be taken as base for accusations of sectarianism. As Shia politics fragmented however, and as this fragmentation became reproduced within the Iraqi security forces, al-Sadr showed little compunction about integrating the dynamics of sectarian cleansing into his bid to undercut the political role of al-Hakim. The ground which underpinned his legitimacy shifted once he captured a mode of political authority, and this in turn affected his ability to induce effective political mobilisation. In short, the Mahdi Army's role in brutalising intra-Shia political competition obscured previous efforts to forge for themselves the role of protectors and socio-economic providers in the absence of governmental infrastructural power.

The Dynamics of the Sunni Awakening

In much the same way as Muqtadr al-Sadr's overreaching forced him into a tactical retreat, thereby amplifying to

contribution of the American-led surge to physical security, so the shifting attitudes of Sunni insurgent groups towards political authority created niches for the Iraqi government and the Americans to effectively exploit. The first indicator – if not necessarily the first catalyst – of change was Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's 24-point peace plan and the varied response towards it of insurgent groups. Gareth Stansfield writes:

"Organizations such as the 1920 Brigades, Mohammed's Army, Abtal al-Iraq (Heroes of Iraq), 9 April Group, Al-Fatah Brigades and the Brigades of the General Command of the Armed Forces could be characterized as being composed of ex-regime and former Iraqi military elements, and expressed their cautious support for Maliki's initiative."[21]

This response was not necessarily indicative of a strict division within the insurgency between 'nationalists' and 'Islamists', but it did demonstrate that the reasons behind, and the magnitude of, opposition to the statebuilding process varied widely between insurgent actors. The pragmatic bases for co-operation between such actors and *Tandhim al-Qaeda fi'l Iraq* (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) as each became more aware of how their narratives for Iraq – and what this meant for their means of accruing legitimacy from local populations – diverged rather than dovetailed. According to Crisis Group interviews, al-Qaeda viewed Iraq "as a battleground in a broader struggle",[22] a narrative which contradicted the stated intentions of many insurgent actors.[23] Moreover, not all insurgents operated under the banner of an organisation with a specific ideological anchor, and al-Qaeda's bid for hegemony within the insurgency had the effect of merely inducing greater fragmentation. The manner in which the bid was made – through blanket accusations of treachery and brutalisation – further convinced those actors with more limited national-political goals of al-Qaeda's transformation from ad hoc asset to tactical and strategic liability.[24] Al-Qaeda was often resentful of the role played by tribal leaders in facilitating recruitment into the insurgency, acting as they subsequently did as an obstacle to greater al-Qaeda penetration of individual Sunni Arab localities.[25]

Tribal actors however, could not operate outside of a series of pyramidal client-patron social relationships which had become embedded in Iraqi political life during the sanctions years, and whose significance was amplified in the diffusion of political authority from the centre following Saddam's downfall. Tribal actors had little capacity to direct popular attitudinal shifts towards either the statebuilding process or the insurgency, as was demonstrated by the low-key reception given to their "numerous associations, federations, fronts and unions" immediately following the collapse of Ba'athist rule.[26] The so-called *Sahwa* (Awakening) was facilitated by the social and political shifts outlined above, the dynamics of which gave a supplemented U.S. military presence the opportunity to exploit specific niches within intra-insurgency feuds and the deteriorating relationships between Iraqis and those militias who had emerged victorious from an incrementally brutalised politico-military competition.

It is this contemporary reproduction of the pyramidal dynamics which underpinned the final years of Saddam's rule that arguably presents the most uneasy spectacle for the future contours of Iraqi political life. Crisis Group has asserted that "devoid of any traditional sources of power, having built their authority on the basis of the former regime's patronage, the sheiks' fate remained utterly dependent on the emergence of a new benefactor."[27] Through shifting public attitudes, tribal actors have become useful means of leverage in a wider U.S. counter-insurgency strategy which has thus far, with some success, been able to gradually squeeze resistant segments of the insurgency from one Iraqi locality after another.[28] At the same time however, political authority has become increasingly localised, to the point where such dynamics operate in contradiction with those being nurtured in Baghdad. In the long-term, such trends may challenge the accrual of infrastructural power on the part of the Maliki government, undermining the necessity which the errors of the insurgency and militias had, for the time being at least, granted the state.[29] Tripp has argued that the U.S. "had no choice but to work with those who could command force on the ground, provide intelligence in specific localities and willingly accept the sponsorship and patronage of the real power in Baghdad, as they had always accepted it from the predecessors of the U.S. in the republican or royal palace."[30]

Conclusions

It is not the place of this paper to make hard and fast predictions about the future contours of political competition in Iraq, only to outline some of the possibilities which may result from the changing socio-political dynamics on the

ground, and how they have interacted with and influenced trends in statebuilding and political mobilisation. Among both Sunni and Shia Arabs, actors who had previously occupied critical and catalytic roles in respective patterns of political mobilisation have had to contend with temporary tactical defeats as public attitudes shifted against their increasingly brutal methods. The behaviour in particular of Muqtadr al-Sadr's foot-soldiers has removed much of the political leverage he was able to previously deploy in competition with al-Hakim and the ISCI. Moreover, whilst the Sunni Awakening Councils may be symptomatic of a more nuanced engagement with local political dynamics (at least in the ability to capitalise upon shifting public attitudes) on the part of external actors, a political role for them within the central state apparatus remains undefined. Indeed, their mandates may turn out to be in contradiction with one another.

There has as yet been no political breakthrough to match the tentative improvements in physical security generated by the surge and the overreaching of the Mahdi Army and al-Qaeda. Both Sunni and Shia Arabs appear reconciled, however reluctantly, to the permanence of the autonomous region in Kurdistan.[31] Kurdish actors moreover, however frequently they play their nationalist card (such as flying the flag of Kurdistan whilst refusing to fly that of Iraq) remain conscious at the same time of agitating too loudly for independence. As President of Iraq and President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, both Talabani and Barzani respectively have wedded their political fortunes and those of their parties to the parliamentary apparatus in Baghdad, and whilst this reality may encourage caution, what acts as a greater deterrent is the prospect (of which both can be certain) of forcible Turkish intervention should the voices for independence be matched with tangible political action. As Francke argues, Shia Arabs remain too divided on the issue of federalism for the South, an idea advanced by al-Hakim and the ISCI. Furthermore, the prospective dynamics of power-sharing between ISCI, al-Da'wa, Fadhila and al-Sadr necessary to make such a federated region workable are far more complex and fragile than those between the PUK and the KDP in Kurdistan. Sunni Arab actors are likely to match Kurdish and Shia calls for autonomy as long as sectarianism continues to be perceived as an unresolved issue within the security forces.[32] In short, the prospects for a neat federation along ethno-religious lines remain unlikely. Narratives of autonomy operate at the level of tribe, province and council as well as sect and ethnicity, meaning that any diffusion of political authority is likely to be far more fluid and complex. Ensuring that elections are carried out at local council level is therefore the best way for international arbitrators to determine the dynamics of political diffusion and more importantly, the legitimacy accrued by the most important political actors. Rencke for instance has argued that in breaking down the electoral list system, which encouraged the creation of sectarian blocs, it may be possible to integrate the Sunni Awakening Councils into a national political framework.[33]

Ensuring the consolidation of political authority at the local council level, and encouraging individual Iraqi politicians to actively seek constituencies and legitimise their platforms may be the best way of breaking down the sectarian barriers which the list system helped erect, although until such biases are removed from ministries and the security forces, such a process will not yield quick results. In encouraging such actors as al-Sadr to make a tactical retreat, the surge has to an extent forced them to consider the political option, and concomitantly helped to de-legitimise rule by militia. Enough actors have a stake in the national political apparatus to militate against collapse, but the Iraqi government needs to respond to such localised improvements, such as ensuring non-sectarian recruitment patterns for the army and police and repeating the process for civil administration.

[1] Toby Dodge, "Iraq's Future: the Aftermath of Regime Change" *Adelphi Papers* No. 372 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005), p. 44.

[2] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 3rd edition, 2007), p. 1.

[3] Ibid, p. 2.

[4] Ibid, p. 2.

[5] Dodge, "Iraq's Future", p. 48.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 4.

[8] Charles Tripp, "Militias, Vigilantes, Death Squads" *London Review of Books*, 25th January 2007, p. 30.

[9] Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press, 2005), p. 36.

[10] International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Muqtadr al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" *ICG Middle East Report* No. 55, 11th July 2006.

[11] Dodge, "State Collapse and the Rise of Identity Politics" in Markus E. Bouillon, David M. Malone and Ben Roswell eds., *Iraq: Preventing a New Generation of Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), p. 31.

[12] Dodge, "Iraq's Future", p. 49.

[13] Ibid, pp. 48-49.

[14] Crisis Group, "Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge", p. 5.

[15] Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 7.

[16] Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State" in *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (London: Blackwell, 1988).

[17] Ibid. See also Dodge, "Iraq: the Contradictions of Exogenous State-Building in Historical Perspective" *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 27 No. 1 (2006), pp. 190-191.

[18] Dodge, "Iraq's Future", p. 27.

[19] Crisis Group, "Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge", p. 6.

[20] "Basra people relieved, still fear militia return" *The Times*, August 5th 2008.

[21] Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 200.

[22] Crisis Group, "Iraq after the Surge I: the New Sunni Landscape" *ICG Middle East Report* No. 74, 30th April 2008, p. 4.

[23] Ibid, p. 4. "We used to successfully undertake joint operations with al-Qaeda. But it has strayed from the right path by announcing the establishment of an Islamic state. Other armed groups see this state as highly divisive, an instrument of a sectarian agenda. Our goal is Iraq's unity and freedom. The Islamic state has no reality on our soil and no popular backing."

[24] Ibid, pp. 4-6.

[25] Ibid, pp. 6-7. "Long before the surge, neither the killings of tribal leaders by al-Qaeda in Iraq nor the ensuing retaliatory cycles were uncommon."

[26] Ibid, p. 10.

[27] Ibid, p. 11.

[28] Ibid, p. 12.

[29] Charles Tripp, "Iraq: the Politics of the Local" *openDemocracy*, 25th January 2008: http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/middle_east/iraq_the_politics_of_the_local.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Rend al-Rahim Francke, "Seven Months into the Surge: What does it mean for Iraqis?"*United States Institute of Peace Working Papers* (WashingtonD.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), pp. 31-33.

[32] Ibid, p. 33.

[33] Ibid, p. 36.

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Written by: Matt Malone
Written at: University of Exeter
Written for: Professor Gerd Nonneman
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