

Middle East in Transition

LESSON 2: THE PERSIAN GULF WAR AND ITS CONTINUING AFTERMATH

As discussed in *The Middle East in Transition*, throughout the 1990s, Iraqi relations with the UN and the United States were difficult, with recurrent crises. Then, soon after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Iraq became a focus in the U.S.-led “war on terrorism.” This update focuses on events since the beginning of the second war in Iraq.

THE SECOND WAR IN IRAQ

On March 20, 2003, the United States led a “coalition of the willing” in a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The United States stated that Saddam’s pursuit of WMD and alleged connections with al Qaeda constituted an imminent threat to the U.S. and global security (see the update for Lesson 1, “U.S. Interests in the Middle East,” for more on this issue). The coalition, comprised mainly of U.S. and British forces, moved through the country with lightning speed. British forces quickly took control of the southern port of Basra as U.S. forces raced on to Baghdad. In less than a month, allied forces had captured Tikrit, the last stronghold of Saddam’s regime. By mid-April, the United States had installed an administration in Baghdad, later named the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The CPA was to oversee the transition to an interim Iraqi government.

The job of restoring stability to Iraq has been much more difficult than defeating Saddam’s army. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow, rioting was widespread, and U.S. forces were unprepared to serve as policemen. They watched as looters ransacked government buildings, businesses, utility companies, warehouses, hospitals, and even museums. For many Iraqis, awe at the ease with which the United States defeated Iraq’s military quickly turned to anger over its inability to provide security or restore order.

REBUILDING IRAQ

The CPA had to maintain a delicate balancing act. It wanted to transfer power and authority to the Iraqis as quickly as possible. At the same time, it wanted to maintain security and set the groundwork for democracy and economic development.

Politics. In July 2003, the CPA, under the leadership of U.S. Administrator Paul Bremmer, appointed a twenty-five-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). Bremmer argued that appointing the IGC was the best way to bring Iraqis into government leadership positions as soon as possible. The CPA took care to make sure the IGC reflected the country’s different groups. It included thirteen Shias, five Sunnis, five Kurds, one Assyrian Christian, and one Turkmen. Nine of those appointed to the IGC were Iraqis who had been living outside the country. Several of these emigrant Iraqis had advised the Bush administration before the U.S. invasion.

Originally, the IGC was established simply as an advisory council; over time, however, it acquired some power. Still, the IGC was undermined by the competing ideas the country’s different groups had about what a democratic Iraq should look like. Key questions surrounded the amount of regional autonomy, the role of religion in state affairs, control over oil resources, and how the constitutional process should move forward.

In early 2004, after difficult political negotiations and increasing attacks against American troops, the CPA and IGC drafted an interim constitution. This interim constitution was called the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL). In addition to containing a bill of rights, the TAL created a road map for Iraq's transition to democracy. However, the TAL did not resolve any of the key questions facing the country.

On June 28, 2004, sovereignty was formally transferred from the CPA to an interim Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Having been appointed by the UN and the United States, rather than elected, this interim government had to convince Iraqis that it was not simply a puppet of the United States. In August, a National Council Conference of about 1,000 delegates was held to select a 100-member interim parliament. This parliament was chosen to help hold the interim government accountable for its actions. Even though the process was criticized for not being entirely democratic, it allowed the country's various groups to use the political process rather than violence to voice their grievances.

The interim government's main task was to prepare the country for national elections. These elections would determine the makeup of the transitional government that would in turn be charged with drafting a permanent constitution. The permanent constitution would pave the way for national elections and a permanent government.

The first phase of the plan was completed on January 30, 2005, when elections were held for a transitional National Assembly, provincial councils, and a Kurdish regional assembly. Turnout was high in Shia and Kurdish areas, but was low in Sunni areas because of insurgent activity and opposition to the process. As a result, the Shiites and Kurds were the main winners, and Sunnis were significantly underrepresented in the transitional government.

After much debate, the Shiites and Kurds came to an agreement in which Shiite leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari became prime minister. The transitional government was not fully installed until mid-May 2005, leaving it only three months to write a constitution before the August 15 deadline set out in the TAL. Even more, the constitutional process was slowed by efforts to increase Sunni involvement. While Sunnis were not well represented in the national assembly, their support was seen as necessary to complete a legitimate constitution.

At the end of August 2005, nearly two weeks after the deadline, the government completed a draft constitution. This draft was endorsed by Shiite and Kurdish negotiators, but not by Sunni representatives. However, days before the referendum was held on October 15, a compromise was reached. This compromise allowed constitutional amendments to be offered within the first four months of the new parliament. It won the approval of some Sunni factions. The country's new constitution was approved in the referendum, mostly through support from Shiites and Kurds.

Elections for a full-term parliament took place on December 15, 2005. There was little violence on election day, and participation was high for all of Iraq's different groups. Iraq's Shiite parties won the most seats, but other groups won enough seats to counter Shiite power. For several months after the election, the country faced a sharp increase in violence, as talks on forming the

new government stagnated. Then, in April 2006, Jawad al-Maliki was named Iraqi prime minister.

The Maliki government has faced tremendous challenges as it has tried to bring stability to the troubled country, including: slowing the country's unrelenting and multifaceted violence, which at times has resembled a civil war; holding together a diverse coalition government; finding a path to reconciliation with Sunni insurgent forces and former members of Saddam's Baath Party; reining in the country's Shiite militias, some of whom have infiltrated Iraqi police and security forces; rebuilding Iraqi police and security forces; working with an unpopular American occupation; engaging Iraq's neighbors, such as Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, some of whom have been accused of meddling in Iraqi affairs and helping to foster the violence; adopting a plan which distributes the country's oil wealth among its key factions; curbing widespread corruption and bringing legitimacy to Iraq's nascent political institutions; and improving public services and prospects for economic development.

By 2008, most progress was in the areas of economics and security, with political progress being frustrated by the continuing inability of the country's factions to compromise on the most difficult issues. For example, no oil law has been passed, and agreement on provincial elections scheduled for the fall of 2008 has been stymied by gridlock over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which is claimed and controlled by Kurds but is also home to Arabs and Turkmen. In another sign of the political challenges ahead, Iraq was rated one of the most corrupt countries in the world, ahead of Myanmar and Somalia, in the 2007 rankings by Transparency International.¹

Economics. When the CPA and Iraqi Governing Council took power in mid-2003, they inherited an economy that was severely damaged by war, a decade of international sanctions, and years of mismanagement by Saddam Hussein's regime. In the years since, the U.S. Congress has authorized over \$45 billion to rebuild Iraq, and other countries have pledged over \$17 billion. As of March 2008, the United States had spent \$30 billion of its assistance, while other international donors had disbursed \$7 billion.² The U.S. government has also tried to convince other states to forgive much of Iraq's debt, which amounted to about \$125 billion in 2003. By 2008, Iraq's external debt had been reduced to approximately \$74 billion, even though Iraq's Persian Gulf neighbors have been hesitant to forgive their portion of the debt, which totals about \$55 billion and largely dates from the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.³ As oil prices soared in 2007 and 2008, and the security situation in Iraq somewhat improved (see below), Iraqi oil revenues have expanded, reaching \$46 billion in July 2008.⁴ It is expected that with these added monies, the Iraqis will be able to fund more of the reconstruction costs.

With the ongoing U.S.-led financing and other efforts, roads, schools, health clinics, railways, ports, and sewage, irrigation, and communications systems have been built or rebuilt. While up to half the workforce remains unemployed, those who can find work, especially civil service employees and those with higher education degrees, earn more than their prewar wages.⁵ Water and electricity supplies, though still erratic, are approaching prewar levels.⁶ Nonetheless, the process of rebuilding Iraq is monumental, and persistent violence, rampant crime, and a weak legal system continue to greatly discourage both local economic development and foreign investment. Another challenge is that a significant portion of the funds earmarked for

reconstruction is being spent on efforts to address security challenges, rather than on rebuilding infrastructure.

Security. Since 2003, the United States and its allies have achieved some successes on the security front, for example, in their attempts to stamp out the remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime. Saddam himself was captured in December 2003, and was put on trial for crimes against humanity. After his conviction, he was hanged on December 30, 2006. Steps have also been taken to rebuild the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and, by July 2008, over 500,000 Iraqis had been trained.⁷ However, many are incapable of fighting entirely on their own. Other challenges with respect to the security forces have included their involvement in sectarian violence, and their infiltration by insurgents. Nevertheless, the police and army continue to attract recruits, in part because many Iraqis want to defend their country, but also because the security forces earn good pay.

A significant increase in factional fighting throughout 2006 and into 2007 led many to believe the country had entered a civil war. Then, in early 2007, the declining security situation in Iraq, and the growing unpopularity of the war in the United States, led President Bush to unveil a new security strategy. Beginning in January, the United States deployed an additional 28,500 troops to Iraq with the primary goal of establishing security, especially in Baghdad. The hope was that the country would then have the "breathing space" to strengthen Iraqi security forces and make political and economic progress. The troop "surge" has largely met its security goal, as violence has declined significantly. Critics, however, argue that the short-term gains of the surge may be lost when the additional troops are withdrawn, and that the country's politicians have not used the improved security situation to make needed compromises on key issues (outlined above).

Coalition troops face an Iraqi insurgency that is both complicated and changing. Some of the insurgents are Sunni nationalists who fear a Shiite-led government. Sunni nationalists also include former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. Upon taking power, the CPA stripped some 30,000 Baathists of their jobs and worked to block them from participating in reconstruction efforts. The CPA also disbanded the Iraqi military. These steps are thought to have undermined reconciliation and provided recruitment for Sunni nationalist insurgents.

The occupation of Iraq has also drawn radical Islamists from across the world to the country, many tied to the terrorist group al Qaeda. These militants seek to carry out a war against the West and its Middle Eastern allies. Many Iraqi insurgents, particularly those tied to Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime, used to view Islamist militants as adversaries. However, the two groups initially found some common cause in trying to disrupt coalition efforts, though the extent to which they collaborated is unclear.

Then, in 2007, a growing rift emerged between Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda, tied to al Qaeda's brutal tactics and violent power struggles with Sunni factional leaders. The rift sparked an "Awakening," in which Sunni factions began realigning themselves with coalition forces. These former militants, numbering roughly 91,000, comprise the Concerned Local Citizens, also known as the Sons of Iraq. U.S. commanders have turned over informal security responsibilities to the Sons of Iraq in return for an end to anti-American activity. In addition, in 2008, the Maliki government passed a De-Baathification reform law, allowing thousands of Baathists to return to

their jobs or be compensated. Despite progress with Sunni groups, fears persist that Sunni factions could turn back to insurgent activity, or engage in sectarian violence.

A third source of insurgency, Shiite radicals, has also been a major concern, particularly those led by Moqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr's militia battled with coalition forces in 2004. While he later joined the political process, he then pulled his ministers out of the government in April 2007. Although al-Sadr instituted a ceasefire with coalition forces beginning in August 2007, Shiite-against-Shiite violence grew as a result of power struggles between al-Sadr, other Shiite militias, and the Maliki government. In March 2008, the government launched an offensive against Shiite militias in Basra, a key city in the country's south. Despite serious problems during the operation, the ISF was able to reduce the activities of the Sadr militia and other militias in the city with the assistance of U.S. and British forces. Coalition and Iraqi forces also gained control of the Sadr City section of Baghdad. These security offensives strengthened Maliki politically, and demonstrated to Sunni and Kurdish factions the government's willingness to take on Shiite insurgencies as well as those of other sects.

Finally, popular discontent with coalition military actions has helped generate resistance among ordinary Iraqis who were not previously against the occupation. This resistance is driven by the accidental killing of civilians, humiliating searches and detentions, and criminal activity (such as the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison and several murder charges).

By the spring of 2008, between 80,000 and 790,000 Iraqis had lost their lives.⁸ Over 4,100 American troops had been killed.⁹ The United States had spent over \$525 billion on the second Iraq war.¹⁰ At the end of 2008, the UN Mandate governing the coalition presence in Iraq expires. The United States and Iraq are negotiating a "status of forces" agreement to replace the mandate. One major issue is the duration of the U.S. presence in Iraq and a date for withdrawal. Other difficult issues include the extent of Iraqi control over U.S. military operations, as well as the right of U.S. soldiers to hold suspects without the approval of Iraqi authorities. Progress was made in July 2008, as both parties agreed to a "general time horizon" for the reduction of U.S. troops as long as the security situation continues to improve.

Christopher L. Brown and Alyssa Smith
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¹ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index," Table, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007 (accessed August 25, 2008).

² Curt Tarnoff, "Iraq: Reconstruction Assistance," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Library of Congress: March 24, 2008), Summary, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/104733.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2008); and Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," April 30, 2008, p. 35, http://www.sigir.mil/reports/quarterlyreports/Apr08/pdf/Section2_-_April_2008.pdf (accessed July 15, 2008).

³ SIGIR, "Quarterly Report," Appendix M, p. M-5, http://www.sigir.mil/reports/quarterlyreports/Apr08/pdf/App_M_-_April_2008.pdf, op cit; and Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Library of Congress: June 4, 2008), p. 28, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/106174.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2008).

⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Iraq Weekly Status Report," August 13, 2008, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/107285.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2008).

⁵ Michael E. O’Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, “Iraq Index,” The Brookings Institution, July 17, 2008, p. 41, <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2008); and Ashraf Khalil, “Iraq’s Public-Sector Employees Get a Salary Boost,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2008.

⁶ Michael E. O’Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, “Iraq Index,” The Brookings Institution, April 26, 2007, <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf> (accessed April 30, 2007); and Michael E. O’Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, “Iraq Index,” July 17, 2008, p. 40, op cit.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Iraq Weekly Status Report, op cit.

⁸ Estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties vary greatly by source, and are controversial. Please see Hannah Fischer, “Iraqi Civilian Casualties Estimates,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Library of Congress: May 16, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22537.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2008).

⁹ Michael E. O’Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, “Iraq Index,” July 17, 2008, op cit.

¹⁰ Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Library of Congress: June 23, 2008), p. 18, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/107235.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2008).