

## **NO EASY EXIT**

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By **Ofra Bengio**

The latest war in Iraq may be as important for reshaping the country as World War I was. In the early 20th century, European powers redrew the borders in the region, creating a new political framework. At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States is seeking to redraw the internal political reality in Iraq, in order to create a domino effect of democracy in the Mideast.

That task, however, is more difficult than the American administration has accounted for. The attempt to shape the future will face immense obstacles from the past - many of them the problems that Britain created after World War I and which then led to the failure of British designs in Iraq.

There are at least four major obstacles to the U.S. bid to remake Iraq. The first is the product of the country's physical location and resources: Iraq sits on an immense pool of oil but - as a result of the borders set by Britain after World War I - possesses only a very narrow outlet to the sea. Oil is the key to the country's wealth and development, but in exporting petroleum, it finds itself the captive of its neighbors. Key pipelines pass through Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia; another runs close to the Iranian border. The only options are confrontation or accommodation, both of which have high prices. Saddam Hussein's wars with Iran and Kuwait were extreme responses to this problem. But whoever rules Iraq will face the same difficulty. Unlike Japan, where the U.S. could act as it pleases, Iraq is no island. If the new regime angers its neighbors by giving too much autonomy to the Kurds, restricting Islam or serving as too strong an example of democracy, it may find the faucets closed.

The second problem is the Shi'ite majority, which has been excluded from real power since the days of the Ottomans. Two years after Britain conquered the country, the Shi'ites initiated what they called "the Great Iraqi Revolution," led by the clergy and tribal leaders and eventually involving Sunnis as well, against the occupation. Once the British put down that revolt, they were caught in a paradox: They wanted to create a parliamentary democracy, but without the Shi'ite troublemakers. The result was a facade of democracy, with only symbolic Shi'ite representation.

The first weeks after the American conquest indicate that the U.S. may well face the same paradox. Destruction of the old regime and the promise of democracy have freed the Shi'ites to organize and seek power. But the Americans fear the way that the Shi'ites might shape the new state. The U.S. would like to involve secularized Shi'ites, and exclude the clergy. One religious leader, expressing a more widely held attitude, recently said on Al-Jazeera that the Americans are "a virus, like SARS" that must be eradicated. The Americans will find it nearly impossible to work with extremist Shi'ites, but excluding them could make democracy a farce once again.

Then there's the Kurdish dilemma. The British promised the Kurds autonomy - and then retracted. To give Iraq more oil, in line with British interests, the Kurdish region was put under Baghdad's full control. The result has been internal warfare ever since. Now the Americans have used the Kurds as allies to overthrow Saddam. As their payoff, the Kurds want a federated Iraq, in which their de facto autonomy of the past decade would become recognized and legal, and in which they'd have a role in the central government. Iraq's neighbors - particularly Turkey, America's main ally in the area - fear such an arrangement would stir Kurdish rebellions in their own territory. If the U.S. does right by the Kurds, it will antagonize the Turks; if it satisfies the Turks, it will double-cross the Kurds. There's no good way out.

In a country so divided, the only force able to maintain a central regime was for years the army. The army became the sole true arbiter in Iraqi politics, and every change of power was military - until the Ba'ath Party took over via a coup and then subjugated the military to its own violence. In the end, only an outside army was able to get rid of the Ba'ath regime. That method of change does not bode well for creating democracy, which should sprout slowly from the populace. Once again, ironically, a military force is trying to shape the politics of the country - by imposing democracy from without. The Americans will either have to create a rebuilt Iraqi army committed to enforcing democracy, as in Turkey - or will have to remain in Iraq themselves. Either option is less than democratic.

And here lies the final irony: Having already conquered Iraq, the U.S. cannot pull out quickly. That would leave chaos, destabilizing the entire region. Yet the longer American troops remain, the more they will face local resistance, and the more their presence will radicalize the populace. Already, Sunni and Shi'ite theocrats have begun working together against the Americans.

In seeking to shape Iraq's future, therefore, the U.S. needs to pay far more attention to its past. A blueprint drawn in Washington won't work. The Americans will need to reach arrangements with their potential opponents - including religious and tribal leaders and the once-Ba'athist bureaucrats - in order to create a functioning regime. The outcome, in the best case, may be something resembling Lebanon in its best days, before the civil war - in which democracy exists, but is limited by arrangements between competing communities. Otherwise, in America's bid to create the Japan of the Middle East, it risks giving birth to Yugoslavia on the Tigris.

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