Chapter 10: Chapter exercises

Middle East Security: The Politics of Violence after the 2003 war

In her chapter, Marina Calculli describes the set of events following the toppling of Saddam Hussein which led to the construction of a reconfigured state structure during the US-led occupation (or that of the Coalition Provisional Authority). In many respects, this process sowed the seeds for a decade of instability in the 'new' Iraqi political system, causing a rise in violent sectarianism and a series of major challenges to the emerging democratic institutions from Shia militias, disaffected Sunni groups, and more extreme Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State. Was this pattern foreordained from the outset, or were there opportunities to consolidate the 'New Iraq' which were missed during the war?

As Calculli notes, there were a number of actions taken in the first year of the occupation which exposed divisions in Iraqi society and encouraged resistance to the new US-imposed order, including the de-Baathification process and the sectarian quota system to be used for Iraqi elections. CPA Order Number 2, which disbanded the Iraqi Army, further alienated a large group of former regime elements, many of whom had worked under Saddam out of pragmatism, not ideological or personal loyalty to the deposed dictator. In addition, the CPA's plans to transfer sovereignty earlier than planned to an unelected group of Iraqis—many of whom held no constituency inside Iraq having spent years abroad in exile—evoked further resistance from many moderate Iraqis, especially after a prominent Shia religious leader, Ayatollah Sistani, issued a fatwa insisting on a fully elected constitutional convention.

By 2006, sectarian conflict had plunged the country into a crisis that threatened the future of the Iraqi state, as the US-led coalition stood on the brink of defeat. The bombing of the Samarra mosque in February of that year sparked a spiral of violence while the government in Baghdad seemed paralysed at best, and arguably complicit in aiding the numerous Shia 'death squads' now roaming the streets. Yet, at the same time, a process of reconciliation was underway between disaffected Sunnis and pro-government forces. During the course of 2006 and into 2007, the so-called 'Anbar Awakening' spread from Sunni areas in the west, and within a year or so more extreme resistance groups like al-Qaeda had been significantly weakened across the country. Combined with a new military strategy—the 'surge'—which put US troops in the lead of counterinsurgency operations once more, Iraq survived and some semblance of stability began to emerge (Biddle et al. 2012).

Another turning point may be identified in 2010, after the parliamentary elections in March generated a prolonged period of uncertainty while efforts to form a government faltered throughout the summer. The political impasse ultimately stemmed from Prime Minister Maliki's desire to retain office despite rival Ayad Allawi having gained more votes in the election. The Iraqi judicial system declared the constitution—drafted back in 2005—to be ambiguous on the terms under which a leader could form a government. By late 2010, Maliki, who had spent all summer lobbying other Shia groups to support him, was returned to office under a US-orchestrated agreement, which exposed the propensity of the American-designed constitution to generate political competition and deadlock based on rival sectarian identities.

A final pivot point was arguably the decision not to leave US troops in Iraq after 2011. Though Iraqi public sentiment remained against perceived foreign occupation, critics have noted that an agreement to keep US forces on key advise-and-assist missions was possible, and indeed favoured at the highest levels of the Iraqi government (O'Sullivan 2011). After US troops left, Prime Minister Maliki's security blanket had been removed, and he continued along the path to increased sectarianism, doubling down on his Shia base and once more isolating Sunnis, purging them from his government and doing little to restrain their perceived persecution at the hands of Shia-dominated police forces and militias. As in 2003 and 2006, Sunni disenfranchisement bred conditions for resistance groups to grow and challenge Baghdad for control over the future of Iraq, ultimately leading to the rise of the Islamic State.

How far is the United States to blame for the political instability of Iraq since 2003?

How has sectarianism contributed to security challenges in the 'New Iraq'? Was/is a secular path forward possible?

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