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Iraq as Lebanon

Fears for the Future

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In fact, as recent events have shown, a rather different but equally authentic version of "Iraq-as-Lebanon" has been emerging. The rise to prominence of sectarian and ethnic leaders, intra-communal struggles for power and influence, the emergence of communally-based militias, sectarian murders and acts of terror, the abduction of foreigners as bargaining tools, the involvement of outside powers in the country for their own strategic advantage—all of this looks horribly familiar to those who had watched Lebanon's torment in the 1970s and the 1980s.

The turmoil has presented the US and its coalition allies with their greatest challenge since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but these developments are a direct consequence of policies pursued by the US in Iraq. They come out of a reading of Iraqi political society which has emphasized the communal at the expense of the national, a reading reinforced by a range of Iraqis who either think this is indeed the way in which power should be handled, or who fear the reconstruction of the powerful central state apparatus which had ruled so brutally for so long.¹

Initially, the coalition forces encouraged local forms of power to help restore order in the vacuum created by the collapse of central government. For many local elites long used to positioning themselves in order to serve the central authorities, it was natural to gravitate towards the source of patronage—and to present themselves for recognition as representatives of their communities. In the absence of electoral processes, there were few to gainsay them and they rapidly became the interlocutors of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

Under Bremer's direction, however, this also became the principle on which the emerging national Iraqi politics was based. The occupation authorities consistently treated sectarian, ethnic, and tribal features of Iraqi society as if they were the only framework for social and political order, as demonstrated by the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) and the Iraqi Council of Ministers.

Security vacuum

Equally importantly, and ominously for the future, the CPA's dismissal of the Iraqi security forces and the dispersal and disintegration of the Iraqi police, left a security vacuum which the over-stretched allied forces were unable to fill. In response, local militias, some better organised than others, emerged to restore some modicum of security in the lawlessness that followed the invasion. In doing so, of course, they became potential assets in a developing political game. Officially the militias were condemned by the CPA. In fact, many have been tolerated, even encouraged by the CPA as it seeks local allies to help keep order.

Most obviously, this has applied to the largest indigenous armed force in Iraq, the 40,000 or so Kurdish *peshmerga* (fighters) of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Popular Union of Kurdistan. It has also extended to the Badr Brigade of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and to units affiliated to the Shia al-Da'wa (The Call) party, one of the oldest Islamist movements in Iraq. Since all of these organizations had been recognized by the CPA and brought into the IGC, they were regarded as "forces for order." More surprisingly perhaps, until March 2004 US forces shied away from taking on the Jaish al-Mahdi (Army of the Rightly Guided One), the militia of the radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. They too had been able to organise as neighbourhood security units in Baghdad and in towns across southern Iraq—and given the license granted to other CPA-approved militias, saw no reason not to do so. Meanwhile, in many parts of the coun-

The US Vice-President Dick Cheney and some of those close to him in Washington have been very taken with the "Lebanese model" for Iraq. Presumably, this conjures up the vision of a pluralist republic, open to free enterprise and foreign capital, presided over by an elite of *zu'ama* (notables and local leaders), with sufficient common interest in the status quo to keep the whole thing going. This comes either from a selective reading of pre-1967 Lebanese political history, or from a heavily edited version of the post-Ta'if era.

try, tribal sheikhs have been allowed to raise their own armed retinues. These developments inevitably led to the emergence of counter-militias in the so-called "Sunni triangle."

force; it accelerated the rebuilding of the Iraqi armed forces, essentially as an internal policing force; it established the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, as well as the Border Force and the Facilities Protection Force. Faced by dissent and then insurgency, the CPA deployed the familiar tactics of forcible detention, collective punishment, and military repression. They found, however, that the Iraqi security forces fell apart when ordered into action and the US forces took on the task themselves. The consequence is that the US is desperately trying to stiffen the resolve of the Iraqi security forces by bringing back senior officers of the former army more familiar with this style of internal security work.²

These developments are not reassuring. It is not simply the inconsistency of the CPA's direction. It is also the probability that the future Iraqi government will preside over a state in which there is an inbuilt tension between the temptation to farm out security and economic resources to provincial, communal elites, and the impulse to assert the central government's monopoly of violence and of oil revenues. As things threaten to fall apart and economic reconstruction is stalled, there are many Iraqis who may find the reassertion of strong central state leadership the lesser of two evils.³

However, such a trend will be resisted by those Iraqis who have tasted a degree of autonomy during the past year—and, in the Kurdish case, during the past thirteen years. It will be a test for those who take charge in Iraq. Historically, Iraqi governing elites, when confronted by social unrest or provincial resentment, have all too often lost their nerve and responded forcefully, hoping that coercion will impose the order that has failed to emerge from consent. In the coming battleground of Iraqi politics, one can only hope that these very experiences will steer them away from a form of rule that has exacted such a terrible toll in Iraqi history.

Notes

1. C. Tripp, "Iraq: Political Recognition and Social Action," *SSRC – Items and Issues* 4, no.1 (Winter 2002-3): 9-15.
2. Reuters, "U.S. to reinstate some Baathists in Iraq," 22 April 2004, <http://www.reuters.com/news/jhtml>; BBC News, "Iraqi forces turn on coalition," 22 April 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3648489.stm.
3. See Oxford Research International – National Survey of Iraq, February 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3514504.stm.

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