

"How the War Will End in Iraq"

All eyes are on the U.S. presidential campaign, in which the candidates have taken quite different positions concerning the war in Iraq. This is the wrong place to look. I believe it is fairly certain that Barack Obama will be the next president of the United States. And his views of the war in Iraq are almost the polar opposite of those of his rival, John McCain. Obama was opposed to the U.S. invasion from the outset. He believes continuing the war is harmful to everyone - to the United States, to Iraq, to the rest of the world. And he says he will seek to withdraw all U.S. troops in sixteen months.

Once in office, Obama will no doubt find that the definition of withdrawing troops will be a matter of great controversy in the United States, and that it will be less easy than he claims to achieve his objective, were it a matter only of the internal politics of the United States. However, ending the war in Iraq will not be up to Obama, or up to the United States. The key to ending the war in Iraq is what happens in Iraqi politics, not in U.S. politics.

I shall make the rash prediction that sometime in 2009 (or 2010 at the very latest), the Prime Minister of Iraq will be Muqtada al-Sadr, and that al-Sadr will bring the war to an end. Here is what is most likely to happen. The world media remind us each day of what are now seen as definitive cleavages in the Iraqi body politic. There are three main ethnic groups - the Shi'a, the Sunni Arabs, and the Kurds. Each of them is primarily located in a specific geographic zone. The main exception is the capital city of Baghdad, which has mixed Sunni-Shi'a population, although even here they are geographically concentrated in specific parts of the city.

In addition, as we all seem to know by now, each of these zones has internal divisions. There are multiple Shi'a parties, who each seem to have a militia at its disposal, and have long-standing antagonisms. The two principal ones are the group led by al-Sadr and the one known as SCIRI, led by Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim. The Sunni areas have a less clearcut picture. There are the sheikhs and the ex-Baathists, connected with various politicians in the Iraqi legislature. And there is also a small but important group of jihadists, largely non-Iraqi, linked somehow to al-Qaeda. And in the Kurdish zone, there are two competing parties, plus Christian and Turkmen minorities.

Actually, this kind of complicated array is no more diverse than one finds in many countries all around the world. Think of how one would describe the array of groups involved in U.S. politics. So, if we are to understand what is likely to happen in Iraq, we have to cut through this diversity to get at the most salient issue or issues.

It seems to me that the most salient issue in Iraq today for Iraqis is whether or not Iraq will survive as a unified state and as one that will be able to recover its strong position, economically and geopolitically, in the region. Who is against this? Actually, there are only two groups who are seriously hostile to a renewed and revived Iraqi nationalism - the Kurds and the Shi'a forces led by al-Hakim. The latter dream of an autonomous, indeed independent, southern Iraq, which they would dominate and within which there are rich oil resources. They want to cut all ties to the Sunni regions. And they want to weaken seriously the al-Sadr camp which, although it is strong in that region, is virtually uncontested in Baghdad. Were Baghdad cut off from that region, the al-Hakim camp believe they could eventually destroy the al-Sadr camp.

The Kurds of course dream of an independent Kurdish state. But they are eminently pragmatic people. They know that a landlocked Kurdish state would find it hard to survive. Turkey would probably invade, and so might Iran. The United States would probably do very little, and would be quite embarrassed by it all. And Israel would be irrelevant. So the Kurds are clearly ready to settle for continuing de facto autonomy within a unified Iraq. To be sure, they are still quarreling with the others over who would control Kirkuk. I doubt that they will get Kirkuk, and I suspect that the most that they will do about it is to grumble loudly.

Now let us look at the others. The Sunni Arab forces are also, by and large, quite realistic. They realize that it is impossible to return to an Iraq that they govern unilaterally. What they really want now is their fair share of the state political machinery and of its resources (since their zone has virtually no oil, at least up to now). While they cannot hope to have a Sunni-dominated Iraq, they can hope to have an Iraq restored to its former prominent role in the Arab world, and they would clearly benefit, individually and collectively, from such a restoration.

So, in the end, the key group is the Shi'a. Muqtada al-Sadr has been quite clear from the beginning that he wants a unified Iraq. For one thing, this is the only way his people in Baghdad can survive and flourish. For another, he believes in Iraq. To be sure, he and his followers suffered mightily under the Baathists. But he is open to dealing with reformed and much weakened Baathists. And he has demonstrated this clearly over the last two years. He gave moral support to the people of Falluja when they were under assault by the U.S. forces two years ago. And they reciprocated in the recent fighting in Baghdad, when his forces were under assault by the same U.S. forces.

That leaves one major player, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most important spiritual leader of the Shi'a in Iraq. Al-Sistani has played a careful political game ever since the U.S. invasion. His priority has been to hold the Shi'a together. Most of the time he says nothing. But at crucial moments he is ready to intervene. When the U.S. proconsul of yesteryear, L. Paul Bremer, wanted to create an Iraqi government more or less by his fiat, al-Sistani insisted on elections, and the United States had to back down. As a result, he got a government dominated by the Shi'a. When too much fighting occurred between the al-Hakim camp and the al-Sadr camp, he brokered a calm.

What does al-Sistani want? Theologically, he wants Najaf, his site, to become once again the theological center of the Shi'a religious world, as opposed to Qom in Iran, which has come to assume this role, especially since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Geopolitically, this requires a strong Iraq, capable of relating to Iran as an equal. And to get a strong Iraq, he needs a united Iraq, and essentially one that gets the U.S. invaders out.

Currently, the United States is trying to get Iraq to sign a long-term military accord that would guarantee U.S. bases indefinitely. The current prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, is trying to maneuver this without a vote even by parliament. Muqtada al-Sadr is calling for a referendum. And so, it seems, is al-Sistani. A referendum, of course, guarantees a defeat for the accord.

So, in 2009, it would seem logical that al-Sadr, al-Sistani, the Sunni, and even the Kurds will come together on a plank of national unity and U.S. total withdrawal without long-term bases. Muqtada al-Sadr will implement this as Prime Minister. Al-Hakim will be unhappy, but kept in line by al-Sistani. The Iranians will be ambivalent. The U.S. public and pundits will be amazed at the relative calm in Iraq. And President Obama and the Pentagon won't have too much choice. They will graciously assent. They may even proclaim "victory."

by Immanuel Wallerstein