

Winners and Losers Regarding Iraq

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January 14, 2011

If one were keeping a scorecard of the geopolitical competition to influence the destiny of post-Saddam Iraq, the identity of the winners and losers is becoming rather clear. And the outcome is not very pleasant.

The two big losers are Saudi Arabia and the United States. For the Saudis, the results of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq are little short of a disaster. True, Saudi leaders were hardly fond of Saddam Hussein. Even before his attempted forcible annexation of Kuwait in 1990, Riyadh worried about the extent of his territorial ambitions. Even so, the Saudi elite seem even less happy about the “new Iraq,” where Iranian-influenced Shiites are now the dominant political players in Baghdad. Among other concerns, Saudi leaders fret about the possible impact on their country’s own restless Shiite minority.

Developments in Iraq should be almost as unsatisfying to the United States—especially to the neoconservatives who so enthusiastically lobbied for the overthrow of Saddam. Their expectations that Iraqis would greet the American invaders as liberators were quickly discredited, as many foreign policy realists warned that they would be. Now, their other major expectation—that Iraq would become a stable, pro-Western democracy—lies in ruins as well. When sectarian violence continues to simmer, when it took months following national elections for the country’s fractious political system to produce a new government, and when the radical cleric Moqtada Sadr emerges as the key political player—essentially the kingmaker that enabled Nouri al Maliki to stay on as prime minister—it is a real stretch to portray Iraq as a stable, friendly, pro-Western democracy.

By intervening in Iraq, the United States in essence traded an authoritarian, staunchly anti-Iranian, Sunni-dominated regime for a quasi-democratic, generally pro-Iranian, Shiite-dominated regime. Even Pollyanna would have difficulty portraying that outcome as anything other than a defeat for U.S. objectives.

Iran is the biggest winner in the contest for influence in Iraq. The Bush administration did Tehran a huge geostrategic favor by ousting Iraq’s Sunni government and effectively removing the country as a strategic counterweight to Iranian power in the region. Since then, Iranian influence has grown steadily. Although it would be too much to portray the Maliki government as an Iranian puppet (the long-standing tensions between Persians and Arabs make that result unlikely), there is little doubt that Maliki and other Iraqi Shiite figures always take Tehran’s views into account and tread very carefully. Among other indications are the emphatic statements from Iraqi leaders that they absolutely will not allow their territory to be used as a staging area for possible military action against Iran to stymie that country’s nuclear program.

It also was no coincidence that during the period of political stalemate between the elections and the formation of a new government, both Maliki and his principal rival, Ayad Allawi, courted Iran in a bid to gain the clerical regime's backing. Such supplications suggested a sober calculation of the regional political realities. As the United States continues to draw down its military forces in Iraq, it is likely that Washington's influence will wane and Iran's will grow even stronger.

The only bright spot in all of this is that Iran's internal economic problems limit the country's ability to augment its political clout in Iraq with an equal degree of economic influence. That deficiency creates the opportunity for another regional actor, Turkey, to emerge as at least a secondary winner in the contest for geopolitical advantage in Iraq.

It certainly did not look that way during the early years of the U.S.-led mission in Iraq. Indeed, Washington's policies created serious problems for Turkey. That was especially true with the establishment of the "semi-autonomous" Kurdish region in northern Iraq. That region became a de facto independent state and increased the restlessness of Turkey's own Kurdish inhabitants. Until recently, Ankara displayed open animosity toward Iraq's Kurdish regional administration, even conducting several military incursions to attack sanctuaries being used by rebels who were waging an insurgency against the Turkish government.

But there are now some interesting signs of a shift in Turkey's policy. As worries mounted about both the stability of Iraq beyond the Kurdish region and about Iranian influence in Baghdad, some members of Ankara's policy community began to see a quasi-independent Iraqi Kurdistan as a potential geographic buffer against those worrisome developments. Consequently, Turkey is pursuing a more conciliatory policy toward the Kurdish regional government and is eagerly pursuing economic opportunities in that territory. Indeed, Turkey seems to be trying to enhance its economic influence throughout Iraq. It remains to be seen how far these policy changes will go, but at a minimum they demonstrate Ankara's intention not to let Iran become the dominant player in Iraq without at least mounting a challenge to that development.

In terms of the broader picture, it is clear that events pertaining to Iraq have not turned out the way U.S. policy makers had hoped—and which a few incurable optimists continue to hope. An Iraq in which democracy is—at best—a highly flawed and frail sapling, an Iraq where neighboring Iran exercises the greatest political influence, and an Iraq that could still become a cockpit for vicious regional rivalries is hardly what U.S. leaders had in mind when they decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein. That troubling outcome should at least chasten would-be interventionists and nation builders in the future.