

Sudan's Lessons for Iraq

July 17, 2011 By [Ivan Eland](#)



Remember the forgotten U.S. war in Iraq? In the Vietnam War, after the start of the “Vietnamization” program, which trained South Vietnamese forces to replace leaving U.S. forces, the world lost interest; people thought “problem solved.” That is, they thought that until the discovery of President Nixon’s escalation of the war in nearby Cambodia while he was winding down operations in Vietnam. Similarly, in Iraq, after the U.S. drew down to 46,000 troops and signed an agreement with the Iraqi government to completely withdraw all U.S. forces by the end of 2011, the American people began to think “war over.”

Yet as the deadline for total withdrawal nears, violence against U.S. forces is again increasing. More U.S. service personnel died in Iraq last month than in any other month since 2008. Although it admits that it has scant evidence, the United States has accused Iran of funding attacks by Shi’ite militias against U.S. forces.

In guerrilla wars, a stated intention by a foreign power to withdraw and an increase in violence often go hand-in-hand. The guerrillas want to make everyone think that their force of arms sent the foreign invader packing. For example, in Yemen during the 1960s, after the British announced their intention to withdraw forces, the Yemeni guerrillas stepped up attacks against British troops. The British withdrawal signal also notified the guerrillas that it was time to eliminate potential local rivals for power in a post-British Yemen. The same is undoubtedly happening in anticipation of a post-U.S. Iraq.

But will there be a post-U.S. Iraq? The U.S. rarely leaves countries, even long after any threat is eliminated or becomes manageable—for example, Europe after the demise of the

Soviet Union and Korea after South Korea became rich compared to its impoverished North Korean foe. Predictably, the United States is putting the screws to the Iraqi government to get it to request U.S. troops to stay beyond the end-of-the-year deadline. Many in the Iraqi government, fearing a descent into chaos and civil war after the U.S. troops leave, are privately receptive to this very bad idea. The only thing that may save the U.S. government from a terrible mistake is the Iraqi public. The U.S. occupation has grown so unpopular in Iraq that those same receptive Iraqi politicians, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, are scared to publicly advocate a long-term U.S. military presence. If such paralysis continues within the Iraqi government or unless some sleight-of-hand solution can be devised to retain U.S. forces, they will thankfully have to exit the country.

But if U.S. troops are forced to withdraw, won't all the "progress" be abandoned and Iraq put on a path to renewed mayhem or even civil war? That progress in reducing violence has masked continuing deep ethno-sectarian fissures in Iraq that are likely to boil over after U.S. troops leave. Unfortunately, a major reason for the reduction in violence has been the separation of the various ethno-sectarian factions via ethnic cleansing. Yet, now that such ethnic cleansing has already occurred, perhaps Iraq could take a lesson from the new nation of South Sudan.

Sudan recently ended a five-decade ethno-sectarian civil war (resulting in 2 million casualties) by partitioning the country. This outcome was phased in slowly and voted on by a referendum in South Sudan rather than imposed by an outside power or by internally coerced apartheid (an unequal, involuntary separation of groups enforced using intimidation or brute force). The partition of Sudan is not yet out of the woods, with the contentious drawing of borders and sharing of oil revenues still to be addressed—issues that would also be crucial and difficult in any decentralization of governmental authority in or partition of Iraq.

In any decentralization or partition, academic research shows that creativity is needed in adjusting borders so that a large minority group is not left on the wrong side of a border to threaten the majority group. History shows, however, that borders don't have to be drawn perfectly: a small minority group left on the wrong side of a border is less threatening to the majority and thus less likely to cause violence. Both outcomes can be seen in the partitioning of Ireland in the early 1920s. When Catholic-dominated Ireland



(the population was more than 90 percent Catholic) separated from the United Kingdom, leaving the northern part (two-thirds Protestant and one-third Catholic) with Britain, decades of violence resulted in the north, but very little was seen in the south.

In sum, even if U.S. troops were compelled to withdraw completely from Iraq, Iraqis still would have a chance of avoiding severe ethno-sectarian strife or a civil war by a voluntarily negotiated decentralization or partition along the lines reached in Sudan. Then there would be no strong, potentially oppressive central government over which rival groups could fight for control. Also, the Iraqis would be doing the American people a favor by forcing the U.S. government to abandon a dangerous and costly outpost in an empire that America can no longer afford.

[Ivan Eland](#)
[The Independent](#)