



In Iraq, signs of regression after US pullout

By [HEATH DRUZIN](#)

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Four months after the last U.S. troops left Iraq, the country is back in the news for the wrong reasons as the U.S. begins what will likely be the long, tortuous process of determining the legacy of America's controversial eight-year war.

Iraq experts say that recent developments in Iraq and a growing Iranian influence are signs that America's hopes are dimming for Iraq to become the "beacon of hope" that President George W. Bush had envisioned in a 2005 speech.

In a four-day span last week, Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish government cut off oil shipments to Baghdad, Sunni-majority Qatar refused to hand over Iraq's fugitive Sunni vice president to the country's Shiite-dominated authorities, and Iran hinted they might favor moving nuclear talks to Baghdad.

One U.S. goal of the Iraq War that seems to have gone quickly by the wayside was having an ally in the Middle East. Instead, U.S. influence in Baghdad seems to be minimal, and Iran's influence is growing.

On Wednesday, an Iranian official proposed moving the April 13-14 talks on Iran's nuclear intentions from Istanbul to Baghdad, given Turkey's criticism of Syrian President Bashar Assad, a close Iranian ally. The Iraqi government has been tacitly — some say more than tacitly — supporting Assad during his brutal crackdown on protesters, even rejecting international calls to assist the Syrian rebels, a priority for the United States.

This has not only alienated the U.S. but neighboring Gulf states, which have overwhelmingly supported Assad's ouster.

"Despite our huge embassy and the number of private contractors running around, it certainly indicates that U.S. influence is on the wane and is declining very rapidly," said Cato Institute senior defense and foreign policy fellow Ted Galen Carpenter.

America's legacy in Iraq will take years, not months, to fully sort out, but the early returns have been troubling, and even the most optimistic outlooks among observers are far from the lofty early goals of the war.

“A fairly stable country that doesn’t support terrorism, massacre its minorities, attack its neighbors or build [weapons of mass destruction],” said Michael O’Hanlon, one of the foremost experts on the Iraq War at the Brookings Institution, when asked what the U.S. can hope for in postwar Iraq. “Those have always been the core goals, and they are still probably attainable.”

Carpenter takes a much dimmer view, saying the chances for resumption of religious and ethnic violence is quickly growing. He has few hopes for a stable Iraq down the road.

“At this point,” he said, “I would say the odds are pointing toward the worst-case scenario, rather than the best-case scenario.”

In a case that has severely strained fragile Sunni-Shiite relations in Iraq, Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi traveled to Qatar and was welcomed there by government officials, who ignored Baghdad’s warnings that al-Hashemi is “wanted,” and “not supposed to be received as a vice president, which is a violation of the nature of the international relations.”

In December, al-Hashemi was hit with terrorism charges for allegedly running death squads, accusations he vigorously denies. He took refuge in Iraq’s Kurdish region, where authorities refused to hand him over to Baghdad.

The vice president railed against hard-line Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom he accused of stoking religious tension.

Qatari authorities refused an Iraqi request to extradite him, the latest in a series of dustups Iraq has had with its Sunni-majority neighbors.

Al-Hashemi then turned up in Saudi Arabia, with Saudi officials claiming that he would not return to Iraq until al-Maliki left office. An al-Hashemi aide said the vice president would indeed return to Iraq, but only to the Kurdish north.

“Obviously, [the Sunni-Shiite divide] is troubling,” said O’Hanlon. “But it is also slightly reassuring that it has not further escalated in the last three months, that it has not apparently brought down (Finance Minister Rafi Hiyad) al-Issawi or other Sunni leaders and, in a strange way, that tension is as bad within the [Shiite] community as in [Sunni-Shiite] terms.”

Perhaps as combustible as the Shiite-Sunni tensions, which broke out into a bloody sectarian civil war in 2006, is the ongoing sparring between the Arab-dominated Baghdad government and Kurdish authorities in the north, who cut off oil shipments to the South on Sunday. The move came amid Kurdish charges that Baghdad was delinquent on oil payments and countercharges that the Kurds had illegally negotiated their own oil contracts without Baghdad’s approval.

O’Hanlon called the development “worrisome.”

“The key,” O’Hanlon said, “is for nothing irreversible to be done while tempers are still hot.”