

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Can Iraq Survive?



The explosion of fighting in Iraq's Anbar province is creating consternation in U.S. foreign policy circles, as worries increase about the possibility of civil war and the final collapse of Washington's once-fond hopes for a stable, democratic, pro-Western country. Recriminations are especially loud among the usual neoconservative suspects, including Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who argue that the Obama administration's fecklessness has opened Iraq to an Al Qaeda offensive that could unravel all that Washington achieved, at great cost in blood and treasure, with and following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

But the fighting in Anbar does not simply constitute an Al Qaeda initiative. That explanation is as dangerously simplistic as the tendency of U.S. hawks during the initial years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq to attribute all armed resistance to "[Saddam dead ends](#) [3]." The roots of the latest conflict are far deeper and more complex than a case of Al Qaeda troublemaking; they reflect Iraq's bitter ethno-religious divisions and weak national cohesion. Indeed, the new turmoil in Anbar is merely the most recent development that raises serious questions about whether Iraq is a viable country. Overall violence there during 2013 was the worst since 2008, most of it political or sectarian in nature.

The events that have taken place since the initial stunning victories by insurgents, who took control of most of Fallujah and portions of Ramadi, confirm the complexity of the power struggle in Iraq. Anbar, Iraq's Sunni heartland, has seethed for years against the policies of prime minister Nouri al Maliki's Shiite-dominated government. Nevertheless, some Sunni tribes have

demanded that Al Qaeda forces withdraw from their positions, and some fighting has occurred between more moderate elements and the Islamic militants.

It is even an oversimplification to attribute the latest struggle in Iraq solely to Sunni-Shiite sectarian animosity. Long-standing religious differences are indeed a major factor, as they are next door in Syria, Bahrain, and other areas of the Middle East. But as in those other countries, the ancient Sunni-Shiite religious feud is not the only relevant source of Iraq's violence. Sunni anger at the Maliki government is also fueled by a generalized resentment of their group's loss of power and perks. During the British colonial period, Sunnis dominated the ruling elite in Iraq, even though they constituted barely 20 percent of the population, and their domination continued after Iraq became independent. The majority Shiites, as well as the Kurds, were decidedly second-class citizens. The rise of the ruling Ba'ath Party, especially once Saddam became the supreme leader, increased the Sunni stranglehold in both the political and economic arenas.

The U.S. invasion and occupation upended that social order, elevating the Shiites and their Kurdish allies to pre-eminence. A generous policy by the new ruling elite, with the goal of national reconciliation, might have placated the displaced Sunnis, but the Maliki government has been anything but generous. The regime rivals its Ba'ath predecessor in terms of corruption, and its increasingly repressive policies are largely directed against Sunni critics and political opponents. That conduct has fed the resentment in Anbar and other areas, and what is emerging now appears to be a full-blown insurgency aimed at either restoring Sunni dominance on a national level, or more likely, achieving extensive autonomy (perhaps even independence) for the majority Sunni portion of Iraq.

If that is the case, it does not bode well for the notion of Iraq as a unified country. Indeed, that notion is already more fiction than reality. The Kurdish population in the north successfully used Washington's blood feud with Saddam Hussein to establish an independent country in all but name. Iraqi Kurdistan not only has its own government, but its own military (the Peshmerga), flag, and currency. Despite the continuing complaints from the national government in Baghdad, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil routinely bypasses that authority and concludes lucrative agreements with foreign corporations, especially in the energy field. Indeed, Kurdish oil has [begun to flow](#) [4] through a major pipeline to Turkey, giving the KRG yet another source of independent revenue. It is a major stretch of the truth to contend that the Baghdad government exercises any meaningful authority in Kurdistan. Indeed, the Peshmerga openly confronted Iraqi military forces last year when the Maliki government moved those forces northward, supposedly to repel terrorist elements infiltrating Iraq from the fighting in Syria.

If Baghdad now loses control of the Sunni heartland, U.S. and other Western governments may need to accept that "Iraq" is increasingly a geopolitical fiction. At a minimum, Washington ought to ponder that scenario and not be blindsided. As a hedging strategy, U.S. officials at least should evaluate how to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with the KRG. It is probably not too early even to establish productive contacts with Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar and its environs, rather than ignoring them or dismissing them as Al Qaeda fronts.

That sort of advance planning is more fruitful than a knee-jerk reaction of providing U.S. military hardware, intelligence, and other assistance to help the Maliki government suppress the insurgents. Even without U.S. aid, the Baghdad regime may be able to survive this latest challenge to its authority, but the long-term prospects for the country's unity are not encouraging. The overall rise in the level of violence in Iraq over the past year, Kurdistan's increasingly blatant de facto independence, and now the Anbar insurgency, all suggest that no one should assume Iraq's continuing survival as a country. Wise policymakers prepare for contingencies, including undesired contingencies, before events spiral out of control. U.S. leaders need to adopt that approach now with regard to Iraq.