

Anatomy of a Civil War: a Lebanese Perspective on Iraq

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An analysis of the potential of a civil war in Iraq based on experiences from the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and historic facts from the days of the European mandate after the fall of the Ottoman empire.

A nation does not wake up one morning with thoughts of launching a civil war.

A civil war, not only pits total strangers against each other but often neighbors, cousins, and sometimes members of an immediate family; a civil war is ultimately a last resort and never a deliberate choice; it just happens.

A civil war does not take place unless differences within well-defined segments of a society reach the irreconcilable stage and preserving the status quo can only lead to the total loss of any rights, power, or privileges, universally accepted or simply perceived, that a segment might have.

In order to have a civil war, you need to have at least one segment that is about to lose not just some but the majority of these rights. Such a segment is invariably a minority. Such a loss is obviously not by choice and usually is the result of actions undertaken directly or indirectly by others.

The Ottoman Empire, through its 500-year domination of the Middle East, had perfected the use of minorities to control its vast territories and had come down on unruly ones through practices such as mass relocations and deportations that were later adopted by Tsarist Russia.

Colonialist Europe capitalized on the abuses of minorities by the Ottomans prior to World War One in order to intervene in the Empire's internal affairs, and after it, during the mandate, gave those minorities powers beyond their political weight in some of the countries they created, while in others they used the Ottoman-cultivated ruling minorities to propagate their colonialist policies.

Certain countries were more susceptible to civil wars because of the nature of their social make-up and political structure; Lebanon is a perfect example. Through its mandate over Lebanon after the First World War, France left a quasi democracy controlled by a minority that proved to be the perfect recipe for civil strife with a back door open wide to foreign intervention.

The first mini civil war took place in 1958, a little more than a decade after independence

from France. The second full-blown civil war started in 1975 and lasted through the early 90's.

Is Lebanon out of the woods now?

Hardly, since civil wars rarely resolve differences, usually end with no winner or loser, and when they stop, it is mainly due to war fatigue. The system of governance is retained with minor changes while the street fighters and the warlords replace the politicians who stayed on the sideline. As a proof, the majority of newspapers after the assassination of Hariri were full of speculations regarding the potential of yet another civil war in Lebanon.

The only way to erase 600 years of Ottoman and Colonial opportunism and promote healthy democracies in the Middle East, the most colorful mosaic of ethnicities and religions, is through a conscientious and deliberate effort by the majorities and the regimes to be inclusive, and to nurture and protect all minorities. I will keep this in my wishful thinking folder and promise not to hold my breath.

Prior to Saddam, Iraq as a country experienced what resembles a democracy for a very short period of time for it to impact its historic memory. Still, at all times the Iraqis shared with the rest of the world: the universal yearning for peace, prosperity, and freedom. They also shared the ability to discern who was preventing them from reaching such goals; the country was united in viewing the regime of Saddam Hussein as the obstacle, not the neighbor or that person living in Fallujah or Najaf. It did not matter if you were a Kurd, a Shiite, or a swamp dweller in southern Iraq; the regime of Saddam was the oppressor.

After Saddam, these same Iraqis know and understand well the reasons why their country was invaded, they know it is to siphon off their natural resources and to transform their country into a base for a policy of domination aimed at them and at their neighbors. All surveys show that the majority of Iraqis favor the departure of the occupier.

Due to these facts, it was very difficult to plunge Iraq into a civil war after the removal of Saddam. At the same time, Iraq would have been very difficult to control by a conquering army and the neo-cons in Washington if the country were peaceful, thriving, and allowed to develop a monolithic vision vis-à-vis the occupier.

Again, the United States, as a neo-colonialist, capitalized on the lessons handed down by the Ottomans, Tsarist Russia, Colonial Europe, and the brutal tactics developed by Israel through its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, in order to control the country and create a wide open back door for future intervention. And in the process, even though it was not in its own interest, it increased the potential of a civil war.

I say capitalized because I think it was intentional and not the result of stupidity, unless, you consider the combination of greed, arrogance, and racism, the common denominator of the neo-cons to result in stupidity.

The first step toward controlling Iraq was to transform it into an economic disaster zone by disbanding the Iraqi army and instantaneously raising the unemployment level and reducing the cash flow within the economy. As a result, the unemployment level could only rise and was augmented by the fact that the occupier employed foreigners as contractors even for the simplest of tasks.

The average Iraqi was left to spend each waking moment, when the bombs were not

keeping him up, scavenging for meager jobs, dependent on the handouts from the occupier and their expatriate minions, barely able to think about basic necessities needed for his survival and that of his family. The luxury to clearly think about the future, about aspirations, about daily happenings other than how they impact the individual's survival is lost and that individual was rendered easier to manipulate and control.

The next step was to divide and conquer. While the Arab migration into Kirkuk could only be blamed on Saddam Hussein's policies and was not the malicious act of individual Arab migrants, the reverse migration of Kurds into that city and the way it was conducted, pinned individual Iraqis, Kurds and Arabs, against each other, and transformed the issue through that personal interaction into an ethnic conflict bordering the realm of irreconcilable differences and sowing the seeds of civil war. The Kurds, who as a group were oppressed by Saddam, are now perceived to be using the protection of the country's enemy, the occupier, in their oppression of individual Arabs.

As a firm believer in the Kurdish right to self-determination, which to me spans four borders and is not limited to Iraq, it is very difficult to observe what is happening in Kirkuk and that the Iraqi Kurds allowed themselves to fall into this trap.

The group on the receiving end of the intentional and direct abuse by the occupying force was the Sunnis. Their backs were pinned to the wall and their only way out was to join the resistance. Systematically, the occupier arrested their clerics and sometimes killed them as a result of a routine office search, desecrated their mosques, arrested their men, bombed their villages, destroyed their palm groves, raided their homes, stole their life savings, even leveled a whole town, Fallujah, a month prior to the general elections in order to insure that Fallujans voted.

The tactics used against the Sunnis of Iraq are no different than those perfected by Israel against the populations of Gaza and West Bank. Lessons shared among friends; from one long-term and experienced occupier to the fledgling one.

Once Israel decided to undermine the Oslo accord, it systematically antagonized the Palestinian population and specifically the opposition embodied by Hamas through the targeted killings of their leadership, incessant attacks on cities and villages by occupation soldiers or the surrogate settlers, and the humiliation of anyone who ventured into the street through its practices at roadblocks and transit points. Coupled with that onslaught was the destruction of the public infrastructure and that of the Palestinian authority. As a result, the second intifada, as the first, which started with youths throwing stones, was intentionally transformed by the occupier into a struggle that used a much more indiscriminate and deadlier weapon; the suicide bomber.

The Palestinian Authority, stripped of all credibility to protect its people, and through the loss of its infrastructure was left too impotent to have any impact on events and became dependent on the good graces of the Israeli government for any semblance of authority it might have.

The same thing is happening in Iraq. The insurgency had to grow in order to make any elected government reliant on the protection and the good graces of the occupier for any semblance of authority it might have.

The policy served many other purposes in a single stroke:

1. It ensured that the occupier's stay is extended, a goal of the invasion, as evident by the construction of the largest American embassy in the world and the construction of the permanent bases for US troops.
2. It manipulated the Sunni population out of the election process - no need to stuff ballot boxes - since boycotting the elections was their only non-violent mean to register their discontent with the occupier, and specifically the atrocities of Fallujah.
3. It gave more leverage to a reliable ally, the Kurds, in the writing of the constitution, and reduced that of the Shiites.
4. It created a previously non-existent wide-open back door by raising the hopes and expectations of the Kurds in the fulfillment of their aspirations.
5. It put in doubt the legitimacy and evenhandedness of the, yet to be written, permanent constitution and any future political system in relation to the Iraqi Sunnis; another back door wide open.
6. It inflamed Arab populations outside Iraq and fueled insurgencies, the only effective form of descent, in neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Egypt, thereby increasing the reliance of those regimes on the United States in preserving their existence.
7. It forced those neighboring countries to pay lip service to democratization to appease the general population, which gave the Bush administration the photo ops and sound bites about the effectiveness of its policy in the Middle East.

You would say, wow, this is a stroke of genius...Not necessarily.

When the policy is to destabilize in order to control, that same policy that made the country easier to steer put Iraq on a tight rope and increased the potential that the whole thing might just go south on you. There are always wild cards, and the occupier does not control all of them.

It is important to mention that the occupier needed willing participants from within.

Other than the obvious ally, the Kurdish population, a traditionally unfriendly segment, the Shiites, had to be brought into the fold.

Sistani and his traditional Shiite supporters, the elite merchant upper class, were easy to lure into acquiescence and complacency by the promise of power through "democratic elections".

Keeping with the tradition of laying low under Saddam, Sistani was only vocal when the interests of this elite were at stake. Sistani did not raise a finger to protect Moqtada Al-Sadr in Najaf until Al-Sadr was at the end of his ropes; let someone else do the dirty work of marginalizing those poor Shiites. Sistani did not say a word to protect the Sunnis from the occupier; blinded by the promise of power left him unaware how his inaction would affect his credibility as a Shiite and an Iraqi leader, and, the credibility of any future political system resulting from the elections.

We heard Sistani lately call for a conference for all Iraqis to discuss the violence in Iraq and

how to bring matters under control and restore peace and prosperity. Sistani spoke because his grip on the street might be weakening and the interests of his supporters under threat. This attempt for appeasement is nothing but servitude to the neo-cons.

Will he succeed in his efforts? The only way Sistani will be successful and at the same time restore his credibility as an Iraqi leader, not just as a Shiite cleric, is if he allowed the conference to declare the voting illegitimate, to delay the writing of the permanent constitution, to call for new elections, and request a departure timetable from the occupier.

Such a move, even though the only fair option that would gain wide support among the majority of Iraqis, is not in the interest of the United States, the Kurds, the money and power grabbing expatriates, or the Baathist henchmen Allawi recruited to butcher the resistance and the population at large. It pains me to admit that such a bold, courageous, and fair move might hasten a civil war since it seriously undermines the neo-cons' planning.

A similar conference limited to representatives of the Sunni elite took place recently to discuss rejoining the political process and appeasing the resistance in exchange for more power and influence in the writing of the constitution. The conference was moderated by Pachachi who hinted of a possible alliance between the Sunni elite and Allawi as a counter balance to Sistani's Shiite coalition. Whoever dreamed up this conference does not understand the resistance yet, and such a maneuver, if successful, contains a pitfall that would increase the rift between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and bring the country closer to a civil war.

In the outside chance that the resistance took the bait and allied itself behind the Sunni elite leadership, the resistance runs the risk of becoming a tool of the Sunni elite rather than a legitimate Iraqi resistance. It could run the risk of being used for leverage to exert pressure if negotiations the elite are engaged in turn unfavorable. The resistance would lose its Iraqi identity and becomes a Sunni militia, thus making it easier to pin against its Shiite counterpart in a civil war.

A civil war is acceptable to the neo-cons when it becomes evident to them that all is out of control with no prospect of any returns on the cost of the invasion and occupation. A civil war would be a good pretext for a quick exit that would allow minor future geopolitical control through what would become their Kurdish surrogates while watching from a distance how things play out as more Kurdish and Arab blood is shed.

Who is at risk if Iraq is to plunge into a civil war? Based on the Lebanese experience, all credible Iraqi leaders who are capable of controlling the street, leading their constituents during a civil war, and most importantly, leading them safely through its hazards. In order for a civil war to gain traction, those lucid, sane, and clairvoyant leaders have to go.

The biggest wild card and the most at risk is Moqtada Al-Sadr, not for his value as a Harriri, but due to his ability to bridge the differences between Shiites and Sunnis and his ability to create a large anti-occupation block. The risk to him increases if the conference called by Sistani fails to reach its objectives. Al-Sadr is also a man in contact with the street with a family history of standing up to Saddam and fighting injustice. If the resistance expands to include Shiites, the Sistani elite supporters will be the first to transfer their assets and families outside Iraq due to "unfavorable conditions" while leaving the economically disenfranchised Sistani constituency to join the Al-Sadr movement.

Can we predict based on the Lebanese experience whether a civil war is to take place in Iraq? As things stand, a civil war as an outcome is under the control of the United States. Israel could play a role due to its involvement in the American Middle East policy and its reported close relationship with the Kurds, but cannot predict if Israel would act on its own.

Currently, based on their knowledge, which they refuse to share or admit to, as to how bad the situation in Iraq is, the neo-cons are forced – it is no longer an option – to vigorously pursue a diversion in order to delay the civil war option and to serve the pro-Israeli arm of the Middle East policy; that diversion is a conflict with Syria. The recent military activities in western Iraq target Syria more than the resistance. For a long time now, Syria has been criticized for its porous borders with very little documentation that would persuade the American public. The latest activities in western Iraq are designed to force the retreat of the resistance fighters into Syria or increase activities across the border that could be documented. The first attempt failed because the resistance saw the writing on the wall, attacked the rear flanks, and disrupted the implementation. The second attempt that is underway is very likely to fail too since the hand has been exposed.

If it becomes evident to the neo-cons that they cannot shape Iraq to fit their plans, and if the Syria and possibly Iran diversions don't play out properly, plunging Iraq into a civil war would be their last option and the only exit policy that they have planned for.

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