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REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW IRAQ

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Unlike its predecessor twelve years ago, the latest war in Iraq has shaken the very foundations of the Iraqi state. At the macro level, it has brought about the collapse of the Sunni Center and the rise of previously peripheral forces, the Shi'is and the Kurds. At the micro level, it has caused the disintegration of a centralized political system and atomized Iraqi society and polity. These two trends have been reinforced by various American/British acts of commission or omission since the end of the war. The dissolution of the Ba'th Party, the army and the security organs has dealt a severe blow to the Sunni Center, since those were the main vehicles by which the Arab Sunni minority perpetuated its centralized regime and rule over the Kurds and the Shi'is. On the other hand, the lingering chaos and political vacuum, which were the result of the allies' inaction or inconsistent policies, gave further impetus to the communities on the periphery and to various other centrifugal forces.

The most dramatic phenomenon in post-Saddam Iraq is the growing power of the Kurds. They were the only group which participated in the war alongside the Americans in the north, and they are now playing a central role in the remaking of Iraq. This represents a revolutionary change in the history of the country. For the first time, the two main Kurdish groups -- the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan -- have left their strongholds in the north and established their headquarters in Baghdad, from where they now direct their political activities. Kurdish self-assertiveness stems from ten years of autonomy, the relationships they developed with Washington and other capitals in that period, their organizational and fighting experience, and their clear-cut alliance with the Americans during the war and its aftermath.

The Shi'is have also benefited immensely from the war. After decades of political, religious and socioeconomic repression, they can now express

themselves freely on all these levels. Yet unlike the Kurds, they have never experienced self-rule and they did not gain American protection or cultivate close contacts with the United States. Moreover, they lack any united organization, leadership or mode of action. Instead, they are divided between secular and religious groupings, between the "inside" and the "outside" (i.e., those who were in exile), between pro-Americans and anti-Americans, and between advocates of an Islamic state and a democratic one. However, the Shi'is do have one thing in common -- they aspire to redress the historical anomaly and rule the state as befits a majority. The war might well have brought them closer to this goal.

The atomization of the state-system has given rise to or reinforced various centrifugal forces, of which the most noteworthy are the tribes, new and old political parties, and the mosque and men of religion. Tribalism, which had been submerged in the first two decades of the Ba'th, resurfaced with great vigor after the 1991 Gulf War as a result of the weakening of the state system. Saddam Husayn, however, knew how both to mobilize it and to rein it in. In the current power vacuum, tribal leaders have reasserted themselves and become a power to be reckoned with. Similarly, the one-party system has given way to the proliferation of parties, some very old -- like the Communist Party, the National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brothers Movement -- and others completely new. The mushrooming of parties has also triggered the publication of at least 70 new newspapers, most of which are party-affiliated. A third major element is the mosque. Even as the war was still raging, men of religion organized themselves to carry out various emergency tasks, such as patrolling the streets and providing medical and other humanitarian services, as well as offering spiritual guidance.

While all these developments and activities may have accelerated the uprooting of the ex-Ba'th system, they could also boomerang against the allies. The quick dissolution of the three pillars of Sunni rule not only put all the burden of policing Iraq on the occupiers but also turned these occupiers into a target for all those thousands of embittered Iraqis who found themselves with no guarantees for their future. And while few would shed tears for the Ba'th or the security apparatus, the case of the army is different. The army is the symbol of Iraqi nationhood, and its dissolution may galvanize strong anti-American feelings. Furthermore, as the only organized elements in the country, the three power pillars are unlikely to disappear just because of an American edict and may well organize clandestinely and start acting against the Americans. This has already begun to happen in Falluja, northwest of Baghdad, which has been in a state of rebellion since April. Falluja, a Ba'thi stronghold, is Sunni, tribal, religious, and the home of many former high-ranking officers. Its rebelliousness might be the first sign of a reassertion of Sunni power.

Nor does the mushrooming of parties, organizations and groups augur well for the future. Not only will these parties make it extremely difficult for the allies

to control the country; they may also make it impossible to find a political formula with broad national appeal. In fact, American policy zigzags and failure to establish a government can be explained, at least in part, by the need to satisfy so many contending forces, both in the US and in Iraq.

Iraq is in a state of flux that confronts the Americans with difficult dilemmas. They are relentlessly fighting Islamism everywhere in the world but they may have inadvertently helped it flourish in Iraq. They proclaim their wish to bring democracy to Iraq, but this means allowing freedom of expression and organization to the very forces which will do their best to undermine the power of the allies. To enable democracy to take root in Iraq, the allies will need to stay there for a long time. But the longer they stay, the more they will arouse antagonism and risk being seen, not as liberators, but as just another imperialist force, no different from the British in the early years of the Iraqi mandate. Avoiding this fate will be their most difficult challenge.

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