The Political Situation in Iraq: A Snapshot from 2016 (APA style, British English)

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Abstract

This essay attempts to assess the political situation in Iraq from a viewpoint in 2016. The political situation is extremely volatile and, given the major political events which have taken place on the world stage – the election of Trump, increasing tensions between Russia and the West, and Turkey's unpredictable politics – any analysis can only be a snapshot of the way things are at a given moment. The essay looks at the antagonistic internal forces (Sunnis, Shias and Kurds); the geopolitical strategies of the major political world powers dating from the Sykes–Picot agreement involving the British and the French to the present–day involvement of the major world powers of Russia and the USA; the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); and the prospect of a federal solution to the problem. The essay posits the problem of dealing with ISIL as the fundamental problem for the political future of Iraq.

Keywords: Iraq, Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, ISIL

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It is impossible to understand the political situation in Iraq without investigating the major antagonistic forces – Sunnis, Shias and Kurds – which divide Iraq, along with the importance of Iraq as a geopolitical force and a major producer of oil.

The Antagonistic Internal Forces

Sectarianism divides the Arabs into two factions: the Sunnis and the Shias. Although both Sunni and Shia Arabs are Muslims, in Iraq the majority of citizens are Shias but, when Saddam Hussein ran the country between 1979 and 2003, the Sunni minority was dominant in government. The Shias are not a homogenous group. In the south, their leadership has, in the past, used religious issues to stir up sectarian divisions. The secular nature of the Iraqi government was targeted for this reason. Saddam Hussein's attempts to exert central control over religious practices in the south further exacerbated the tensions.

The Kurds are also mainly Sunni Muslims and cannot be considered a homogeneous group as there have been many pro–government as well as anti–government sympathisers and much fighting has taken place among them since the no–fly zone was imposed over Kurdistan in 1991 (Gunter, 2008, p.14). Gunter traces the development of Kurdish demands for cultural, linguistic and political rights back to the 1970s. The formation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan – PKK) was a response to intransigence on the part of the states where the Kurds are present – Iraq, Iran, Syria and especially Turkey – to grant political concessions to the Kurdish minority. Gunter identifies three reasons which explain a heightened rebelliousness of the Kurds in Iraq as opposed to those living in the neighbouring countries of Turkey and Iran. In the first place, the Kurds make up a larger segment of the Iraqi population than they do in Iraq's neighbouring countries. Secondly, the fact that Iraq was a relatively recent artificial creation conferred on it less legitimacy as a nation state, therefore legitimising insurrection. Thirdly, the Sunni–Shia sectarian antagonisms created

further instability in Iraq, so weakening whichever Arab sect might take political power (pp. 11–12). From the perspective of the Sunni dominated Arab government the possibility of a serious rebellion of the Iraqi Kurds would threaten the economic resources of the governing party as approximately two thirds of the oil resources were located in the Kurdish dominated northern region (p.12).

Geopolitical Strategies

Geopolitical strategies have dominated both Syria and Iraq since their creation. When the two countries were created, little consideration was given to the potential internecine strife that might result. The borders of both nations were drawn up from a secret agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and France – the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 – and sanctioned by a League of Nations mandate. Its main purpose was to delineate French and British spheres of interest in the region. Former United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, a renowned expert in international strategies which defend American interests, could not have explained it better:

> Syria is not a historic state. It was created in its present shape in 1920, and it was given that shape in order to facilitate the control of the country by France ... The neighbouring country, Iraq, was also given an odd shape, that was to facilitate control by England. And the shape of both of the countries was designed to make it hard for either of them to dominate the region. (Ford School, 2016)

The present political crisis in Iraq must be seen in the context of a long history of foreign intervention. Anderson and Stansfield (2004) explain how Iraq was artificially created by Britain 'stitched together from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire' (p. 186). The creation of Iraq meant that the province of Mosul (which was dominated by Kurds) was tied together with those of Baghdad and Basra (both of which were dominated by Arabs). Throughout their history, the Kurds have been treated as second class citizens of Iraq or even traitors to

the Arab cause. The imposition of a no–fly zone by American–led coalition forces in 1991, meant that the Kurds in Kurdistan could enjoy the stability of a de facto independent state. The Kurds do not see themselves as belonging to Iraq, and there is little sympathy from the Iraqis for their plight as they are generally seen as traitors to the Arab cause (p. 187).

The predominant international power operating in the Middle–East since the end of the Second World War has been the United States. United States policy has always sought to maintain stability in the Arab region in order to defend American geostrategic interests even when that means bolstering up brutal dictatorships. The United States tended to view the Kurds in Turkey with suspicion and therefore supplied weapons and intelligence training to the Turks, who are also the Americans' partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, in order for them to quell any signs of rebellion among the Kurds. At the same time the American view of the Iraqi Kurds was more benevolent, especially as they were liable to carry out small scale insurgency attacks against Saddam Hussein (Gunter, 2008, p. 7). Anderson and Stansfield argue that, after the events of 11 September 2001, it was no longer viable to attempt to bolster up regimes that might favour American interests but were brutal dictatorships (p. 185). It should not be forgotten that, in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's brutal regime was supported by the United States because it was a time when Iran was thought to be the principal enemy of American interests.

In 1983, Donald Rumsfeld met secretly with Saddam Hussein, when The United States brokered a deal on the selling of weapons and the granting of loans to strengthen Saddam Hussein's power in the Arab world. A number of factors contributed to anti–American feelings: the United States' traditional support for Israel; the proximity of American ground troops deployed in Saudi Arabia; and the sanctions imposed on the Iraqi regime. The American discourse emphasised the necessity to combat political repression and poverty in the region. Saddam Hussein's regime was seen as a major obstacle to the mission of bringing

democracy and freedom to Iraq. If the Americans could establish a democratic regime in Iraq, then that regime would presumably be more inclined to favour American influence (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, pp. 85–86). As George W. Bush put it:

> The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder … A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region (2003).

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

There is no doubt that the political situation in Iraq and neighbouring Syria has worsened with the entry of ISIL onto the political stage. ISIL must be considered, at present, the biggest obstacle to the establishment of any long–standing peace arrangement. Any discussion of the political future of Iraq must, therefore, take into account the prospective of ISIL domination the political stage from the near to distant future.

The Iraqi military security forces have, over the years, not offered the security to its citizens that might be expected in a modern state. They suffered humiliation at the hands of ISIL when the insurgents stormed the northern province of Mosul. ISIL fighters entrenched themselves in positions in urban areas. Although Iran might lend some support, the prospect of hand–to–hand fighting with ISIL guerrillas in built–up areas is a daunting task for the Iraqi army. Iranians tend to support the Shias. As part of the fight against ISIL, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were recruited from militia groups existing in Iraq. The PMF is dominated by the Shias, which could prove problematic if the government becomes more reliant on them. These forces have been trained by military advisors from both Iran and Turkey, both of which have interests in seeing the conflicts in Iraq resolved. There has been some support for ISIL from the Sunnis in the Province of Anbar, so the threat of an escalation of terrorist activity remains, particularly against Shias, especially in those parts of Iraq where

Shias outnumber Sunnis and are known to be participating in anti–ISIL activities.

The defeat of ISIL in Mosul, which, it may be remembered, has been controlled by ISIL since June 2014, will probably require Kurdish cooperation with central government forces. The Kurds tried to do so before ISIL's offensive on Mosul. In early 2014, Kurdish intelligence had unearthed information of ISIL's forthcoming onslaught and had informed the coalition forces, but according to Rooz Bahjat, a senior lieutenant in Kurdish intelligence, the information 'fell on deaf ears' (Spencer, 2014). The Iraqi Prime Minister, al–Malaki, refused to accept help from the Peshmerga (the Kurdish military). However, in January 2015, the Peshmerga, with the support of coalition air strikes, managed to get almost to the city limits of Mosul. In addition, a supply road used by ISIL was cut (Hawramy, 2015). The Kurds also regained control of a large area of Sinjar. On April 19, 2016, it was reported in the Iraqi News that, with the air support of coalition forces, combined militia forces and the Peshmerga had liberated two villages northeast of Mosul (Sarhan, 2016b).

Although Iraq has a large standing army it seems incapable of suppressing challenges to its authority. This means that military power has tended to shift towards the militias. A modern state must have a monopoly of military power. For the modern state to function, the use of force must be monopolised by the central power. This was certainly the case under Saddam Hussein, and the absence of full blown dictatorships in the Arab region has been a constant source of instability. The weak central government in Baghdad is highly susceptible to having Iran influence its internal affairs.

The Iraqi military is becoming less and less a representative of the Iraqi people as a whole and more and more sectarian. The Iraqi government has come to be more reliant on militia units which reflect sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraqi society. The insurgents against the central government and the national military are mainly Sunnis, many of whom have joined ISIL or are among its supporters. The presence of some Sunnis who continue to

fight on the side of the Iraqi government has led to increased internecine conflict (Jenkins, 2015).

The national army cannot recruit more members as more and more territory has been lost and along with it the chance of getting locals in those territories to join up. The war against ISIL has transformed a large proportion of the population into refugees. The United States had supplied equipment to the Iraqi army and had trained the troops. But even though it was made up of over 350,000 men, it was unable to prevent ISIL from advancing. However, in 2015, Tikrit, which had been under ISIL control since June 2014, was recaptured with the help of Shia militias and Sunni tribesmen. On 28 December 2015, Ramadi was retaken, having been under ISIL control since May 2015. This is seen as a major reversal for ISIL, and on April 17 2016, the Iraqi News reported that ISIL had begun to flee from al–Baghdadi Island and from Noaam (Sarhan, 2016a). Although it had the backing of coalition air strikes, the retaking of Ramadi took much longer to carry out in comparison with the retaking of Tikrit. This was probably a consequence of the government's decision not to use Shia militias that had participated in the assault on Tikrit. The intention may have been to avoid increasing sectarian tensions. These examples show how sectarian tensions pervade all sectors of the decision–making process. The political future of Iraq depends on cooperation between all of the interested parties.

The city of Fallujah, in Anbar Province, has been partially occupied by ISIL since January 2014. On April 19 2016, the Iraqi News reported that ISIS leaders and emirs had fled from the district of Fallujah taking their families with them (Mamoun, 2016). This is a sign that coalition forces along with the Iraqi military are beginning to gain some control of the military situation. However, this news is very recent, and it would be wrong to assume that ISIL is losing control on the basis of relatively isolated victories.

There is no doubt that this is a war of attrition, and it is not known how ISIL will adapt. The

war effort might be speeded up if dissident Sunnis were to begin to see that there is no future in allying themselves with ISIL. The problem is that many Sunnis see the Iraqi government as being controlled by Iran. Militias have difficulty engaging in strategic, coordinated actions, and frequent internal bickering complicates the operations of military command.

A Federal Solution?

There is already a federal solution operating in Iraq. It is, however, at the moment limited to the region of Kurdistan. Having suffered from Saddam Hussein's attempts to exterminate them – the most notable case to hit the news being the 1988 chemical bombing of Halabja, which caused the deaths of more than 5.000 people from sarin and mustard gas – the Iraqi Kurds played a significant role in his downfall in 2003. In 2005, the new Iraqi Constitution defined the Republic of Iraq as 'single federal, independent and fully sovereign state' (*Iraq 2005*, n.d.). It recognized the Kurdistan Region (Article 117) and any laws passed that had been passed by the Kurdish Regional Government since it was created in 1992. Gunter explains that there are two types of federalism: the majoritarian and the ethnic. Other names can also be used but they are of little interest here. The majoritarian model, exemplified by the United States system confers a larger amount of power on the central (federal) government. The authors argue that whereas the Shia would favour a majoritarian model – which, given their superior numbers, they would be likely to dominate – the Kurds are more inclined towards the ethnic model as it is more likely to guarantee their cultural and political identity. The Sunni, for their part, having enjoyed a prolonged period of security under the banner of a united, centrally governed Sunni–led Iraq, harbour a mistrust of federalism (p.21).

Any rebellions of an ethnic or sectarian nature were quelled by previous military dictatorships. But the invasion of Iraq by American–led coalition forces set loose those old antagonisms. In the present climate, the borders do not correspond well to the political reality.

As a consequence, the alternative solution of a collection of federal states based more on ethnicity or religious convictions has been suggested, but the suggestion is regarded with suspicion by many the Middle East as another example of Western imperialism. This fosters the belief that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of the United States to stir up sectarian conflicts in order to serve their own interests. For example, in an article published in Al Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper, Sharmine Narwani writes: 'If ever a conspiracy had legs, this one is it. Stirring Iranian–Arab and Sunni–Shiite strife to its advantage has been a major US policy objective since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran' (2013).

The suspicions cast by Narwani have some grounding in the United States' tendency to try to arrange the world to suit its own interests. In September 2007, a bipartisan resolution was passed in the American Senate calling for a decentralized Iraqi government 'based upon the principles of federalism'. The resolution defended a relatively weak central government with strong Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish regional administrations, and was condemned immediately by the Iraqi central government. The reaction of the Iraqi government is not atypical of the reaction of Iraqi citizens to what is often seen as American interference in what does not concern the Americans. In September 2007, the British Broadcasting Company published a poll of 2,000 Iraqis in which 63% of those interviewed expressed the opinion that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by coalition forces led by the United States was wrong. 62% believed in maintaining a unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad, while 28% favoured having a group of regional states with their own regional governments and a federal government in Baghdad. Only 9% favoured the division of the country into separate states. 85% of those interviewed expressed a lack of confidence in the British and American occupying forces and 57% (93% Sunnis, 50% Shias and 5% Kurds) thought that attacks on coalition forces were acceptable ('Iraq Poll September 2007,' 2007).

Surveys like the one outlined above may be criticised from a number of perspectives.

In the absence of any more technical information concerning the way the survey was carried out, prudence demands that sweeping statements as to the nature of human sentiments in Iraq should be avoided. Conducting a survey in a war zone is very different from carrying out one on a housing estate in Waltham–on–Sea. Just how representative of the population the survey was, the BBC does not say. The other aspect that always needs to be taken into account is the volatility of the situation. A survey provides a snapshot, good or bad, of a particular situation at a particular time. Since the beginning of the 'Arab Spring' the situation in the Middle East is anything but stable. What may be true one day, may be untrue the following day. Nonetheless, the issue of federalism, where power is divided between central and local or regional governments has been described by political commentators as a political disaster in the making (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 194). As a rider to this discussion one might add that it is difficult to imagine an even greater disaster than the one that is already happening in Iraq, and that a federal solution would at least be something that had not been tried since the setting up of the Iraqi state, with the exception, of course, of the Kurdish solution.

There is an American presumption that if governments are willing to participate in a power–sharing solution then political and sectarian differences can be assuaged. This mindset is not without foundation. It will be remembered that the United States paid a pivotal role in the peace process of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, and it is fair to say that under President Carter, relationships between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation improved, albeit for a relatively short period of time.

Violence in both Iraq and Syria is also being fuelled by external actors and neighbouring states that are competing over regional power and influence. Sectarian divisions do not only reflect rivalries between the Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities, external eyes are focused on the conflicts because they affect the stability of neighbouring states – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. Relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government and

Turkey have recently improved as in 2013 the Kurds began exporting oil directly to Turkey. Turkey has traditionally been concerned that the Kurds might try to set up their own state which would transcend the border between the two countries. The Kurdistan Regional Government decided to build a new pipeline directly to the Turkish border. The new warming of relationships between Turks and Kurds, however, led to concerns that the revenue from oil might encourage the Kurds to seek independence. (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2014).

The development of a strong autonomous and financially independent region of Kurdistan is an indication that the federal solution outlined above is perhaps not as dangerous as it might seem. The Kurds seem to be the only winners, relatively speaking, in the crisis which has engulfed Iraq and the rest of the Arab regions.

Conclusion

A lot of obvious problems arise when we try to predict the political future of a country or region, especially when those problems have such a long history. It is possible to take as a starting point the attempt to stabilise the region and establish spheres of influence by the victorious forces of World War I, but it is hard to imagine that the British and French forces responsible could have predicted the century of interregional and internecine, sectarian conflict that has ensued as a result of their decision–making.

Another fundamental problem faces anyone trying to suggest a solution to the Iraqi political dilemma. Any information coming out of Iraq is tainted by the conflict. In any war disinformation is used as a propaganda weapon to weaken the other side. So when the government proclaims a victory, it is prudent to adopt a wait and see policy. Much of the information comes from local reporters who are writing for a specific audience.

ISIL is the result of a history of internal struggles mainly in the disgruntled Sunni Arab religious faction. The toppling of Saddam Hussein meant that the Sunnis no longer had the protection of a powerful dictator and would have to face the consequences of being a

minority ethic/religious group in a new Shia–controlled Iraq. The fundamental problem for the political future of Iraq is, without doubt, the problem of dealing with ISIL.

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