

HOW WE'VE WON THE WAR IN IRAQ

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With most Sunni factions now seeking a deal, the big questions in Iraq have been resolved positively. The country remains one, it has embraced the ballot box and avoided all-out civil war. What violence remains is largely local and criminal.

The question of what to do in Iraq today must be separated from the decision to topple Saddam Hussein 4½ years ago. That decision is a matter for historians. By any normal ethical standard, the coalition's current project in Iraq is a just one. Britain, America and Iraq's other allies are there as the guests of an elected government given a huge mandate by Iraqi voters under a legitimate constitution.

The United Nations approved the coalition's role in May 2003 and the mandate has been renewed annually since then, most recently this August. Meanwhile, the other side in this war are among the worst people in global politics: Ba'athists, the Nazis of the Middle East; Sunni fundamentalists, the chief opponents of progress in Islam's struggle with modernity; and the government of Iran. Ethically, causes do not come much clearer than this one.

Some just wars, however, are not worth fighting. There are countries that do not matter very much to the rest of the world. Rwanda is one tragic example and its case illustrates the immorality of a completely pragmatic foreign policy. But Iraq, the world's axial country since the beginning of history and all the more important in the current era for probably possessing the world's largest reserves of oil, is no Rwanda. Nor do two or three improvised explosive devices a day, for all the personal tragedy involved in each casualty, make a Vietnam.

Three and a half years after the start of the insurgency, most of the big questions in Iraq have been resolved. The country is whole. It has embraced the ballot box. It has created a fair and popular constitution. It has avoided all-out civil war. It has not been taken over by Iran. It has put an end to Kurdish and marsh Arab genocide and anti Shi'ite apartheid. It has rejected mass revenge against the Sunnis.

As shown in the great national votes of 2005 and the noisy celebrations of the Iraq football team's success in July, Iraq survived the Saddam era with a sense of national unity; even the Kurds – whose reluctant commitment to autonomy rather than full independence is in no danger of changing – celebrated. Iraq's condition has not caused a sectarian apocalypse across the region. The country has ceased to be a threat to the world or its region. The only neighbours threatened by its status are the leaders in Damascus, Riyadh and Tehran.

The mission in Iraq is on the way to being accomplished but it has clearly been imperfect and costly. At least 80,000 and perhaps 200,000 or more Iraqis have been killed since the invasion, almost all of them by Iraqis and other Arabs (although this should be weighed against the 1.5m people killed by war and political violence during the 35-year Ba'ath reign).

The Sunni insurgency has degraded the country's utilities infrastructure with the result that services remain patchy in much of the country and very bad in Baghdad: from April to June 2007, Iraq as a whole

averaged 12.8 hours of electricity per day, while Baghdad averaged just 9.2. Oil production is down by 20% since the invasion. Many of the country's professionals – doctors, teachers, academics – have left. There has been much local sectarian cleansing, with about 1m people internally displaced since 2003 and up to another 1m externally displaced.

The US-led coalition has lost almost 4,100 lives, with many more wounded. Much money has been stolen and some of Iraq's priceless historical legacy looted. In parts of the country, local disorder has opened opportunities to criminals and fundamentalists. Much of the police force is militantly Shi'ite and many units are loyal to militias. Although General David Petraeus's military "surge" has had some success in reducing violence, Iraqis are still dying violently at an alarming rate – about 1,500 a month.

Understanding this expensive victory is a matter of understanding the remaining violence. Now that Iraq's big questions have been resolved – break-up? No. Shi'ite victory? Yes. Will violence make the Americans go home? No. Do Iraqis like voting? Yes. Do they like Iraq? Yes – Iraq's violence has largely become local and criminal. The biggest fact about Iraq today is that the violence, while tragic, has ceased being political and is therefore no longer nearly as important as it was.

Some of the violence – that paid for by foreigners or motivated by Islam's crazed fringes – will not recede in a hurry. Iraq has a lot of Islam and long, soft borders. But the rest of Iraq's violence is local: factionalism, revenge cycles, crime, power plays. It will largely cease once Iraq has had a few more years to build up its security apparatus.

There have been four main sources of political violence in Iraq since the invasion. The "insurgency", which means the Sunni violence, comprised three of these four elements: Ba'athists, Sunni religious fundamentalists (whom we shall call Wahhabis after the most important of their closely related strains), and Sunni tribes. (The fourth source of violence is Shi'ism, about which more later.)

Ba'athism, modelled from its birth in the 1940s on German national socialism, is a secular movement. Wahhabism, fighting for a return to the pure days of Islam in the 7th century, is the opposite. It was clear from the beginning that these two tendencies, which today are fighting each other in much of Sunni Iraq, would not get along for ever.

Equally clear was that neither could win in their battle for Iraq. The Ba'athists wanted a return to the privileges they enjoyed under Saddam. The Wahhabis wanted a return to the days of the prophet. Neither was going to happen; for the 85% of the country that is not Sunni Arab, these forms of Sunni Arab totalitarianism were the ultimate nonstarter. Sunni power was broken by the invasion: Iraq, finally recognising a group three times as numerous as the Sunnis, had become a Shi'ite country; Baghdad, the dowager capital of Islam, is today a Shi'ite city for the first time since 1534.

All this was foreseen in the first phase of the violence, from the insurgency's start in spring 2004 until the Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006. The Ba'athists, thugs but rational actors, would eventually give up and sit down to bargain for as much as they could get from the mess they had made. And the Wahhabis, answering to a higher power and mostly foreigners anyway, would keep blowing themselves up. This is what is happening today: the Wahhabis continue to cross the border in search of their 72 virgins in paradise and the Ba'athists are negotiating with the Shi'ites and the Americans to come inside the tent.

A third element of the Sunni violence was tribal. This was particularly prevalent in Anbar province in western Iraq, where Sunni tribes have traditionally prospered from banditry on the Damascus road and where even Saddam was not fully in control. Fighting outsiders is an old habit in Iraq's Sunni bandit country. So is making money. Anbar today is one of the safer places in Iraq. The importance of the achievement in Anbar cannot be overemphasised: pacifying the heartland of the Sunni insurgency was considered unachievable as recently as this spring.

It was always clear that Iraq's Sunni tribes would eventually take up arms against the Saudis, Jordanians and Syrians in their midst who were banning smoking, killing whisky vendors, executing sheikhs of ancient tribes and forcibly marrying local girls to "emirs" of the soi-disant "Islamic state of Iraq". Of course, Anbar's tribal leaders and Ba'athists could be bought off either directly or by the indirect promise of owning a chunk of what will be a very rich country now that the basic question of who owns Baghdad has been resolved. At least 14,000 Anbari young men have joined the state security services since the surge began in February and Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, started reaching out to the chiefs.

The tribes and the Ba'athists also noticed what happened in Falluja and Ramadi: when those cities ran out of control, America doubled up. In November 2004, the US Marines surrounded Falluja, killed every insurgent, started rebuilding the place and left an effective security cordon around it. Ramadi, on a smaller scale, was next. Now the insurgency has decamped to other provinces, where it does not want to be. Beating them there will be even easier, as is proving to be the case in Diyala.

The Sunni insurgents have recognised that there is little point fighting a strong and increasingly skilled enemy – the US – that is on the right side of Iraq's historical destiny and which – unlike the British in Basra – responds to setbacks by trying harder. Iraq's Sunnis would not be needing the help of the US today had the Sunni leadership not made a historic miscalculation back in 2004.

Saddam, a rational man, made an understandable but fatal misjudgment about the people he was up against and paid for it with his throne and his neck. His Sunni supporters did not learn from this. Thinking they were dealing with the post Vietnam America of Carter, Reagan and Clinton, they took up arms to prevent the Americans delivering their promise of an Iraq that could freely choose its leaders.

The habit of centuries of overlordship also fed the Sunni miscalculation: to them, Shi'ite control was unthinkable and so the insurgency was sure to succeed.

The Sunni strategy revealed itself quickly to be an effort to provoke the Shi'ites into full-fledged communal violence and civil war. Such a conflagration would be so hot that even Bush's Americans would run for home. The key moment in this strategy was the bombing of the Shi'ite mosque in Samarra. Until then, the Shi'ites had shown great restraint at the stream of Sunni provocations. The Samarra bombing seemed briefly to be the final straw.

Here, we thought, comes the cataclysm, the civil war that many had feared and others had sought for three years. But it never happened. The Shi'ite backlash in parts of Baghdad was vicious and the Sunnis were more or less kicked out of much of the city. But more than 18 months later it is clear that the Shi'ites were too sensible to go all the way. It was never a civil war: no battle lines or uniforms, no secession, no attempt to seize power or impose constitutional change, no parallel governments, not even any public leaders or aims. The Sunnis rolled the dice, launched the battle of Baghdad and lost. Now they are begging for an accommodation with Shi'ite Iraq.

What is the evidence for this? This summer Maliki's office reached out to Ba'athist ex-soldiers and officers and received 48,600 requests for jobs in uniform; he made room for 5,000 of them, found civil service jobs for another 7,000 and put the rest of them on a full pension. Meanwhile, leading Ba'athists have told Time magazine that they want to be in the government and the Sunni Islamic army in Iraq is telling Al-Jazeera that it might negotiate with the Americans.

The drawing rooms of the capital's dealmakers are full of Ba'athists, cap in hand, terrified of the Shi'ite death squads, who want their slice of the pie when the oil starts flowing. Since the summer, the news coming out on the Sunni front has consistently been in this one inevitable direction.

The Shi'ite story was different. There have been two broad tendencies in Iraq's Shi'ite politics: the pro-Iranian camp and the nationalist camp. Iraq has two great traditional pro-Iranian Shi'ite parties – Maliki's Dawa party and the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council. They fought Saddam from exile and spent the wilderness years in Iran. Opposed to these two is the al-Sadr movement, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, which fought Saddam from inside Iraq and kept its sense of antIranian Iraqi nationalism intact. Of these tendencies, only al-Sadr's rose up to fight the Americans.

Al-Sadr's announcement of a unilateral six-month ceasefire on August 29 was significant but not for the reasons most apparent. Al-Sadr actually stopped fighting the Americans three years ago. He rose up against them twice in 2004, but since the end of his second uprising his Mahdi Army has focused its violence on Wahhabis and Ba'athists, with frequent clashes against other Shi'ite factions.

Several times the al-Sadr parliamentary bloc has withdrawn its support for Maliki's government, but within a month or two al-Sadr's chiefs were quietly back fronting the ministries that their minions had continued to run in their absence. The point is that having al-Sadr playing political games rather than military ones is the most positive thing that could be happening in Iraq.

Since 2004 I have argued that al-Sadr, as leader of the country's largest popular movement, has more to win from a functioning electoral politics than from fighting the Americans. As we have noted, the real al-Sadr ceasefire began three years ago. But by saying publicly that his men are putting down their guns, al-Sadr is declaring in the most unequivocal way that the violence in Iraq is not in his name.

Iranian-made rockets will continue to kill British and American soldiers. Saudi Wahhabis will continue to blow up marketplaces, employment queues and Shi'ite mosques when they can. Bodies will continue to pile up in the ditches of Doura and east Baghdad as the country goes through the final spasm of the reckoning that was always going to attend the end of 35 years of brutal Sunni rule.

But in terms of national politics there is nothing left to fight for. As the maturing Iraqi state gets control of its borders, and as Iraq's Sunni neighbours recognise that a Shi'ite Iraq must be dealt with, the flow of foreign fighters and suicide bombers into Iraq from Syria will start to dry up. Even today, for all the bloodshed it causes, the violence hardly affects the bigger picture: suicide bombs go off, dozens of innocents die, the Shi'ites mostly hold back and Iraq's life goes on.

In early September Maliki said: "We may differ with our American friends about tactics . . . But my message to them is one of appreciation and gratitude. To them I say, you have liberated a people, brought them into the modern world . . . We used to be . . . killed like locusts in Saddam's endless wars and we have now come into the light."

Here is an eloquent answer to the question of when American troops will leave Iraq. They will leave Iraq when the Iraqis, through their elected leadership, tell them to.

This is an edited extract from an article in the current issue of Prospect magazine (www.prospect-magazine.co.uk) Bartle Bull has spent time living with Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in Iraq and writes for The New York Times and Washington Post

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