MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

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The question of what to do in Iraq today must be separated from the decision to topple Saddam Hussein four and a half 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 UN 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: Baathists, 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.

The great question in deciding whether to keep fighting in Iraq is not about the morality and self-interest of supporting a struggling democracy that is also one of the most important countries in the world. The question is whether the war is winnable and whether we can help the winning of it. The answer is made much easier by the fact that three and a half years after the start of the insurgency, most of the big questions in Iraq have been resolved. Moreover, they have been resolved in ways that are mostly towards the positive end of the range of outcomes imagined at the start of the project. 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-Shia 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 Hussein 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 today are the leaders in Damascus, Riyadh and Tehran.

The mission in Iraq may be 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 Baath 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 per cent since the invasion. Many of the country's professionals—doctors, teachers, academics—have left. There has been much local sectarian cleansing, with around 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 Shia, and many units are loyal to militias. Although General Petraeus's military "surge" has had some success in reducing violence, Iraqis are still dying violently at an alarming rate—around 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. Shia 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: Baathists, Sunni religious fundamentalists (whom we will call Wahhabis after the most important of their closely related strains), and Sunni tribes. (The fourth source of violence is Shia, about which more later.) Baathism, 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 forever.

Equally clear was that neither could win in their battle for Iraq. The Baathists 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 per cent of the country that is not Sunni Arab, these forms of Sunni Arab totalitarianism were the ultimate non-starter. Sunni power was broken by the invasion: Iraq, finally recognising a group three times as numerous as the Sunnis, had become a Shia country; Baghdad, the dowager capital of Islam, is today a Shia 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 Baathists, 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. All sides acknowledge that this is what is happening today: the Wahhabis continue to cross the border in search of their 72 virgins in paradise, and the Baathists are negotiating with the Shias 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. Thus the Sunni tribes, like the Baathists, have done precisely what non-ideological observers predicted at the beginning of the violence. Once the victory of the Shias and the resolve of the US administration became clear, the Sunni tribes decided their interest lay in milking what they could from the new dispensation. Thus it is that Anbar today is one of the safer places in Iraq. (Until the pacification of Anbar, about 80 per cent of Iraq's violence happened in four of its 18 provinces: Anbar, Salah ad Din, Nineveh and Baghdad. In nine of the 18 provinces, there is basically no violence.) 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. (The assassination in September of Abu Risha—head of the "Anbar Awakening," an organisation of 25 Sunni tribes fighting al Qaeda in Anbar—while unfortunate, will not be material.)

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 Baathists 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 the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, started reaching out to the chiefs.

The tribes and the Baathists also noticed what happened in Fallujah and Ramadi: when those cities ran out of control, America doubled up. In November 2004, the marines surrounded Fallujah, killed every insurgent (and plenty of civilians), 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 has a political leadership that—unlike that of the British in Basra—responds to setbacks by trying harder. (That is essentially the Petraeus doctrine: more resources more intelligently applied further forward.) There is even less point doing so when you are a discredited minority, as the Sunnis are after 35 years of Baathism followed by their disastrous insurgency, and the enemy is in fact your main guarantor of a fair place at the national table.

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 misjudgement 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 from delivering on their promise of an Iraq that could freely choose its leaders. The habit of centuries of overlordship also fed the Sunni miscalculation: to them, Shia control was unthinkable and so the insurgency was sure to succeed.

By the second half of 2004, the insurgency had had six months to show what it was capable of, and it became clear that its goal could not be the military defeat of the Americans. The Sunnis were now fighting not for a military victory but a political one, to win in the US congress and the newsrooms of CNN and the New York Times the war they could not win in the alleys and date palm groves of Mesopotamia.

With regard to violence against their fellow Iraqis, the Sunni strategy revealed itself quickly to be an effort to provoke the Shias 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 Shia mosque in Samarra. Until then, the Shias had shown great restraint at the stream of Sunni provocations. Shia cells targeted Wahhabis and Baathists, but mostly left the Sunni populace alone. Under the steadying influence of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, their religious leader, the Shias endured mass slaughters in markets, buses and schools throughout 2004, 2005 and early 2006 without large-scale retaliation. As the main beneficiaries from the new Iraq, the Shias could only lose from a prolonged civil war.

The Samarra bombing seemed briefly to be the final straw. The Shia death squads, most associated with the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi army, long chafing under Sistani's restraining hand, were let slip. Neighbourhood cleansing began in much of Baghdad and went on for a year until Petraeus's surge began in February. It continues in many places where his troops are not present.

The world held its breath after Samarra: here, we thought, comes the cataclysm, the civil war that many had feared and that others had sought for three years. But it never happened. The Shia backlash in parts of Baghdad was vicious, and the Sunnis were more or less kicked out of much of the city. But over 18 months later, it is clear that the Shias 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 Shia Iraq.

What is the evidence for this? This summer, Maliki's office reached out to Baathist 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 Baathists have told Time magazine they want to be in the government; the 1920 Revolution Brigade—a Sunni insurgent group—is reportedly patrolling the streets of Diyala with the 3rd infantry division, and the Sunni Islamic Army in Iraq is telling al Jazeera it may negotiate with the Americans. The anecdotes coming out of Baghdad confirm the trend. The drawing rooms of the capital's dealmakers are full of Baathists, cap in hand. They are terrified of the Shia death squads and want to share in the pie when the oil starts flowing. Both Izzat al-Douri, the more prestigious of the two main Baathist leaders, and Mohamed Younis al Ahmed, the more lethal, have been reaching out from neighbouring countries to negotiate an accommodation. Since the summer, the news coming out on the Sunni front has consistently been in this one, inevitable direction.

The Shia story was different. There have been two broad tendencies in Iraq's Shia politics: the pro-Iranian camp and the nationalist camp. Iraq has two great traditional pro-Iranian Shia parties—Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa party and the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (the former SCIRI). They fought Saddam from exile and spent the wilderness years in Iran. Opposed to these two is the al-Sadr movement, which—under Muqtada al-Sadr's father Mohammad Sadeq, killed by Saddam's men in 1999—fought Saddam from inside Iraq and kept its sense of anti-Iranian Iraqi nationalism intact. Of these tendencies, only al-Sadr's rose up to fight the Americans.

Muqtada al-Sadr's announcement of a unilateral six-month ceasefire on 29th August 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 Baathists, with frequent clashes against other Shia factions. Al-Sadr's movement is splintered and immature. Its less legitimate fringes have been active in sectarian cleansing. Many who do have ties to his movement frequently work beyond his control. Some of these tendencies continue to direct violence against the coalition, but this is negligible compared to the force of a true Sadrist resistance, as anyone who was in Najaf or Sadr City in 2004 will attest. Since this spring, US troops have been comfortably based in Sadr City—the giant Baghdad slum that is the power base of the Sadrists.

In mid-September, the al-Sadr parliamentary bloc withdrew its support for Maliki's government, without providing a public explanation. This repeats a pattern. In April, al-Sadr withdrew his ministers from the cabinet in ostensible protest at the remaining presence of the coalition forces; while in December 2006 he did the same thing in protest at a meeting between Maliki and Bush. Each of these

exercises was greeted as Iraq's latest cataclysm, but, in the latter two cases, a month or two later 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.

Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraq's most successful, popular and important politician, has underwritten Iraq's progress towards legitimate politics since late 2004. His sense of Iraqi nationalism will never allow Iranian dominance; his fraternal stance towards the peaceful Sunni tendencies, and the sheer size and passion of his movement, make his support for the project of reconstruction and pluralism in Iraq the most important political factor in the country. *Prospect* readers will not be surprised to read that al-Sadr is on the right side of the key issues, and that this is helping Iraq get over its transition from 35 years of Baathism's murderous apartheid (see "**Iraq's rebel democrats**," *Prospect* June 2005). Since 2004 I have pointed out 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 who guaranteed the polls that liberated his people, or from fighting the Iraqi government of which he is himself the joint largest part.

As we have noted, the real al-Sadr ceasefire began three years ago. But by saying publicly, again, 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 Shia mosques when they can. Iraqi criminals will continue to bully their neighbourhoods into homogeneities that will give the strongest more leverage, although even this tide is turning in most places where Petraeus's surge has reached. 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. The only Iraqis still fighting for more than local factional advantage and criminal dominance are the irrational actors: the Sunni fundamentalists, who number but a thousand or two men-at-arms, most of them not Iraqi. Like other Wahhabi attacks on Iraq in 1805 and 1925, the current one will end soon enough. As the maturing Iraqi state gets control of its borders, and as Iraq's Sunni neighbours recognise that a Shia 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 Shias mostly hold back and Iraq's tough life goes on.

In early September, Nouri al-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 decimated and 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. According to a September poll, 47 per cent of Iraqis would prefer the Americans to leave. The surprise is that it's not 100 per cent. Who, after all, would not want his country rid of foreign troops? But if Iraqis had wanted government by opinion poll, they would have written their constitution that way. Instead, they chose, as do most people when given the choice, representative government.

Now that the outcome of the war in Iraq has been decided, a common argument heard on Capitol Hill and elsewhere is about moral hazard: the longer we stay, the less incentive Iraqis have to get their act together. They will not achieve reconciliation or become capable of keeping order in their own

country, because America is doing the work for them.

This presumes that Iraq's elite is not trying on either front. That is nonsense. What is the basis for the presumption that Iraq's government is failing at political reconciliation? Parts of a 15 per cent minority have capped a 35-year reign of terror with four bloody years of a failed effort to drag historic injustices into the new era, and now the other players do not want to treat that failure like a victory. On a partisan basis, Iraq's governing coalition represents about 85 per cent of the country: almost everybody but some of the Sunnis. This means the Shia Dawa, SIIC, Sadrists and others; the Kurdish KDP and PUK; and various secular and moderate Sunnis. At the local level, the government is reaching out to the Sunnis. Federal money is being pumped into Anbar, and in Baghdad 30 Sunni mosques have been reopened, over half of them in the mostly Shia east. For all Iraqis' understandable complaints about corruption, the coalition, public services and safety, Maliki's government would win another big majority tomorrow.

The Sunnis have three specific worries: oil money, federalism and de-Baathification. On oil, revenues are already being shared out among the provinces and, to please the Americans, an oil-sharing law will probably be passed in the next 6 months. On federalism, the principle of regional autonomy is enshrined in the constitution, the Sunnis will benefit from it by being able to run their own affairs, and everyone else will benefit from avoiding a repeat of the Baathist nightmare of a strong central state, when a much looser arrangement worked for 300 years under the Ottomans. On de-Baathification, a new law this autumn should restore pensions and job access to all but the previous top 1,500 Baathists, almost all of whom are in prison, Syria or Jordan.

The other half of the moral hazard argument is about security: if we provide Iraqis' security for them, they will never do it for themselves. This is equally inaccurate. First, Iraqis are increasingly providing their own security. Second, Maliki and his colleagues run an elected government. They are subject to the judgement of their people in two years' time. They have every reason to try as hard as possible to deliver an end to the embarrassing reliance on the foreigner. It would be foolhardy to bet on Iraq, of all places, becoming the first Islamic state in the middle east not to achieve a basic monopoly on domestic violence.

The argument of this article—that with nothing more to resolve from political violence, Iraqis can now settle down to gorge themselves at the oil trough—is based on two premises: Sunni acknowledgement of the failure of their insurgency and the need to reach an accommodation with the new Iraq, and a conjunction of interests between the coalition on one hand and the Kurds and Shias on the other.

We have become very familiar with General Petraeus and the disputed numbers of his surge. Does US strategy reflect the phenomena I have described? The Americans have never argued this way. But reading between the lines, American thinking does seem broadly to accord with the conclusions of this argument, if not its premises. Petraeus has already announced the first marine and army drawdowns for September and December respectively. His boss, defence secretary Robert Gates, is hoping publicly for a net withdrawal of 60,000 troops next year. Bush too is promising cuts. These plans are a recognition that the job in Iraq is moving rapidly towards something closer to Iraqi police work than American war.

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