

# THE REALIGNMENT OF IRAQ

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The war in Iraq was always going to be won by the Iraqis, and so it has proven. But the Iraqis who have won it are on our side.

It was in the spring of 2004--a month or so before I first arrived in Baghdad in a taxi to stay in a small hotel--that the Sunnis launched their disastrous insurgency. Its defeat is becoming ever more clear this autumn as new reports reach us of the patriotic stand of the Anbar tribes, the pacification and nascent prosperity of Fallujah and Ramadi, the isolation of al Qaeda, and the peace overtures of defeated Baathists.

That first season of serious fighting also included the time of the original uprising by the poor Shiites of Iraq, led by Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army. Six times during that fighting I drove with Iraqis through the so-called Death Triangle of Sunni towns south of Baghdad to cover the events in Najaf. Surrounded on the highway by pickup trucks carrying chanting Mahdi Army fighters and caskets bearing the dead from the Sadr City fighting, one would see the green and black flags of the Shiite saints atop houses and feel safe.

Why did it feel so good to see those Shiite flags? Why was the Death Triangle so lethal? What on earth were the Mahdi fighters doing trying to fight the U.S. Marines and Cavalry head-on in pitched battles?

The last three years in Iraq have evolved as the answers to those questions suggested they would. The leaning, rag-like Shiite flags were good news because it was Sunnis, not Shiites, who beheaded people. Islamic violence in Iraq was then as now a phenomenon of the Wahhabis--Sunni fundamentalists. The Sunnis also did the kidnapping, and were the ones behind the car bombs that targeted random civilians.

The Death Triangle was so bad because the Baathists who lived there, angry to have lost their apartheid privileges, desperate for the chaos that might derail the new project, would sell you to the Wahhabis, who would cut your head off to make good TV to erode the will to fight the chaos. The Mahdi fighters were dying not because their leaders thought they could beat the Americans in battle, for their leaders were too clever to think that, but to earn Mr. Sadr his nationalist credentials as the only important Iraqi--Shiite or otherwise--to stand up and fight the Americans.

Mr. Sadr's eyes, we learned at Najaf, were on domestic politics. It was clear then that his skinny men with their pickup trucks and light arms, men who on that road down from Baghdad were as scared as I was of the Sunni minorities, lacked the muscle to take over the country. Domestic politics for Mr. Sadr could never mean the whole cake, but only as much of it as he could grab. If he was as rational as his success in pushing the Americans to the very brink of his destruction--but never beyond it--in both of his two rebellions indicated he was, the ballot box, promised for 2005, would be where he fought his next battles.

These outlines of Iraqi politics duly asserted themselves over the last three years, providing the basis for the victory that is happening today. The Baathist Sunnis continued to kill to get back what they used to have, until accepting this past summer that they had suffered an historic defeat in a Battle of Baghdad of their own calamitous making. Shiite Iraq has

arrived to stay, and today the drawing rooms of Baghdad's dealmakers are full of Baathists, cap in hand, terrified of the Shiite death squads they inspired and hungry for their slice of the coming oil pie. Meanwhile the Wahhabis, mostly foreigners, answering to a higher power and blind to selfish thoughts of wealth and survival, continue to kill but find themselves increasingly unwanted.

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. Fighting outsiders is an old habit in Iraq's Sunni bandit country. So is making money, and Anbar today, as Iraqis prepare to gorge themselves at the oil trough, is one of the safer places in Iraq.

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, blowing up their utilities and oil infrastructure, executing sheikhs of ancient tribes, and forcibly marrying local girls to "emirs" of the absurd Islamic State of Iraq. Anbar's tribal leaders and Baathists were going to be bought off eventually, either directly or by the indirect promise of owning a chunk of what will be a very rich country.

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. 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.

As for Mr. Sadr, I reported the first hints of his democratic conversion in 2004 when a member of his top political committee told me Mr. Sadr was going to start a political party and contest the elections when they came. He still has not formed such a party, but as I saw up close when I later spent five weeks of the December 2005 election period embedded in Sadr City with his Mahdi Army, he embraced electoral politics with subtlety and enthusiasm.

Of course he did: He is the leader of the country's biggest popular movement. Today, controlling five major ministries and about 30 members of Parliament (one of the two largest blocs in the government) he underwrites the pluralist project in Iraq as he has done since late 2004.

So--with the Sunni insurgency defeated, the Shiite nationalists inside the government, breakup and true civil war avoided, Iran a pest at worst, regional sectarian disruption a fantasy and a White House that will not be forced into declarations of defeat by three IEDs a day--the main questions of Iraqi politics have been resolved. Despite the huge prices paid for these victories, the resolutions have mostly been for the best.

Violence continues in Iraq, but it is mostly local: revenge cycles, factionalism, crime, brutal neighborhood power plays. And it is declining. Iraqi civilian deaths in September, like U.S. military deaths, had halved since their highs earlier this year. By December they will be much lower.

Meanwhile reconciliation, which will never be complete, is happening. We saw, with the huge success of the two 2005 elections and the week-long nationwide celebrations attending the soccer victory this July, that deep unities have survived the 35-year Baath nightmare. The Kurds and Shiites can be forgiven for not wanting to reward the Sunnis

immediately for the destructive insurgency that followed those 35 years of apartheid and genocide.

But from the local level to the national, the huge majority of Iraqis are showing enormous tolerance. Federal money is being pumped into Anbar, and in Baghdad this year over 30 Sunni mosques have been reopened by the government, mostly in the mainly Shiite east of the city. Today the Mahdi Army and the Sunni tribes in the Death Triangle are negotiating a modus vivendi. Sheikh Fawaz al Gerba, a Sunni sheikh and former general, is doing the same around Mosul. And Shiekh Harith al Dari, as head of the Association of Islamic Scholars, the leading Sunni group, which many Iraqis used to call the Association of Islamic Kidnappers, is doing it with Shiites in various parts of the country.

The biggest unifier of all currently might be the most predictable one. Help from foreigners is welcome in Iraq. The country's elected prime minister, possessing after Iraq's heroic elections more popular legitimacy than almost any leader in the world, often points out that the Coalition is there as invited guests. When the U.S. Senate passed its disingenuous "plan" for extreme federalism in Iraq last week, the uproar in the country crossed the sectarian divide. Iraq already has a constitution. It was written by freely elected Iraqis and ratified overwhelmingly by the public in a brave vote two years ago.

Thousands of Americans and their allies have died helping to give Iraqis this opportunity. We have shown enormous skill and bravery in helping them fight their enemies, and immeasurable goodwill in sending our young men to protect Iraqi schools, mosques and polling booths. The reason we and Iraqis are winning this war together is that its purpose is to give Iraqis what they want.