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Iraq on the Edge

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1.

For the occasional visitor such as myself, various methods exist to measure America's standing in Iraq, Iraqi suspicions and aspirations, and progress in the transfer of power, but none prove as illuminating as the checkpoints into and throughout Baghdad's Green Zone, that diminishing symbol of the Bush administration's ambitions.

Armed with two pieces of picture ID, but not with a US-issued badge, I entered the Green Zone several times during my late-September visit to what had become a relatively peaceful "red" zone, i.e., the rest of this vast city. The US badge, a word that has entered Iraq's rich post-2003 lexicon as *bahtch*, exists in various colors, identifying the holder and denoting degrees of access. With the right color badge, you zip through checkpoints in your car; without it, you receive the same treatment accorded to many Iraqis who work in the Green Zone and daily make the crossing by foot or by car.

Dropped off at the gate by my driver, the upbeat Samir, I was accompanied by Daniel, an American friend with a press badge. We entered the gray concrete folds that mark the border between the red and green zones. First we removed the batteries from our cell phones, potential triggers for explosives we could have hidden in our clothes. A dizzying succession of ID checks, pat-downs, and bag searches followed, performed by Iraqi soldiers in the outer ring, then by Ugandan military contractors eager for friendly banter, by a sniffer dog, and at last, in the inner ring, close to the convention center housing the parliament, by Kurdish peshmerga guerrilla fighters, now enrolled in the regular army.

Security checks, I was told, became more severe following devastating suicide attacks—allegedly by al-Qaeda types linked to Baath elements operating from Syria—against the foreign and finance ministries on August 19 that killed and injured scores. Further into the zone, now passengers in an Iraqi politician's car, we were submitted to a prolonged search by Peruvian military contractors who were unfailingly polite, if slightly put off when my cell phone rang in an embarrassing reminder that I had forgotten to remove the battery. The Iraqis subjected to the security check along with us sullenly deposited their phones, visibly cursed under their breaths, and milled around until we were permitted to proceed.

Iraqis prefer checkpoints manned by Iraqis—as I observed time and again, they have learned how to navigate them. They often appear to know one of the security men—perhaps a distant relation or a friend of a friend. They know how to butter up the checkpoint guards with a kind word or humorous turn of phrase, and get past them even if they lack official permission. By contrast, they find American (or Peruvian) checkpoints, with their large signs in hortatory English and poorly rendered Arabic, bewildering, arbitrary, and humiliating. Over the years, many an altercation has occurred in these places owing to misunderstandings, impatience, or simply ill will.

Conversely, many Americans dislike, distrust, and resent Iraqi checkpoints. In a recent incident reported by Anthony Shadid in *The Washington Post*, Iraqi soldiers allegedly beat four American DynCorps contractors who refused to follow their orders at one of the entrances to the Green Zone^[1]—a reminder that the tables are turning. I had flashed only two pieces of ID on my first visit to the Green Zone. But on

my second day, Iraqi soldiers at the checkpoint one encounters when entering the Green Zone from the 14th of July Bridge insisted that I also produce an official *bahtch* or, failing that, procure a US Department of Defense escort, since I had told them I was on my way to meet General Raymond Odierno, who has succeeded David Petraeus as the US commanding officer in Iraq.

An American soldier lingering nearby, with no apparent mission other than to monitor the Iraqi soldiers, sauntered up to find out why I was being denied access to the Green Zone. After listening to my explanation that the Iraqis, now joined by an officer, required that I have an escort, he launched a verbal offensive that was as deeply insulting to the Iraqis' national self-esteem ("This is why we were able to defeat them in two days") as it was disrespectful and crude ("We could easily kill them all").

The Iraqis, while knowing no English, could not possibly have misinterpreted the soldier's abrasive body language, and I ended up trying to calm them down in the row that followed. When a DOD escort arrived, the American wandered off, leaving in his wake injured pride and burning anger over a relationship that had never worked.

2.

I found the general at his headquarters in Al Faw Palace, a sprawling piece of military real estate on the outskirts of Baghdad airport, to which I was conveyed from the Green Zone by helicopter. An architect of the "surge," which helped to reduce violence dramatically in the capital and other unstable parts of the country in the past two years, Odierno now has the task of bringing home the troops and transferring power to the Iraqi government. The withdrawal plan partly reflects President Barack Obama's campaign pledge to pull out all combat brigades by August 2010, and partly the strategic agreement, later accepted by Obama, that the Bush administration negotiated with Iraqi leaders in 2008, according to which all forces must leave by the end of 2011. Odierno's reputation will stand or fall with the successful implementation of that double mission. What this will mean for a post-US Iraq is an open question.

In a speech at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, earlier this year, Obama called for a rapid drawdown while promising to "ensure that we preserve the gains we've made and protect our troops." The surge's successes have been almost exclusively related to "security," i.e., stopping armed attacks. However, politics remains as fractious as ever, reflecting profound divisions among different Iraqi factions over central constitutional questions, including: (1) how to divide power; (2) how to allocate disputed territories, especially oil-rich Kirkuk; and (3) how to manage resources and share oil income. As Odierno and American Ambassador Christopher Hill realize, it is unclear how progress in security can be sustained without some sort of political accommodation. They have started to make significant efforts to reduce tensions between the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the autonomous Kurdistan regional government over these very questions. In particular, they will, after the January elections, be trying to negotiate a solution to the growing conflict over the governorate (or province) of Kirkuk, which lies outside of the current Kurdish border, and whose capital, the city of Kirkuk, is claimed by the Kurds, along with the entire governorate.

For more than a year now, tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, Kurdistan's capital, have increased as the Maliki government has taken steps to roll back the Kurds' post-2003 territorial, constitutional, and political gains. These included a military foray into Kurdish-held towns in August 2008 designed to offset the power of Kurdish forces, which set off alarm in Kurdistan and caused a sharp deterioration in relations between Maliki and the Kurdish regional president, Massoud Barzani. A year of verbal sparring followed, with Maliki accusing Barzani of aspiring to secede and Barzani countering that Maliki was just another despot in waiting. The victory of an Arab nationalist list in the Ninewa governorate—which adjoins Kurdistan—in last January's provincial elections heightened tensions. This was especially the case along an informal, nondemarcated, but all-too-real line in disputed districts that separates federal troops under Maliki's authority and Kurdish regional guards under Barzani's.

Odierno is seeking to defuse this incendiary standoff. When I saw him he was trying to overcome an early setback to his proposal to deploy, along this "trigger" line, joint patrols made up of government troops, Kurdish guards, and American officers.^[2] The patrols are meant to help cool tempers ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2010, and also to fill the "seams and gaps" between the two adversaries that have allowed outside elements, such as what remains of al-Qaeda in Iraq, to slip through and carry out devastating suicide attacks. In August and September such attacks targeted Ninewa's minority Turkomen, Yazidi, Shabak, and Shiite Kurds. Both Maliki and Barzani agreed to Odierno's proposal, but it ran into objections from Arab and Turkoman politicians in the neighboring Kirkuk governorate, who feared that it would legitimize the Kurds' military presence in disputed territories and thus lead to Kurdish independence and Iraq's breakup. Coordination with local politicians, the US military has discovered, will be imperative to its success in mediating conflicts before its leverage declines with the departing troops.

How the conflict plays out over disputed territories, especially Kirkuk, will determine the shape of Iraq. For now US diplomats and military commanders seem resigned to having to delay addressing the issue of Kirkuk until after the January parliamentary elections, while hoping there will be no violent flare-ups. Meanwhile, they face a formidable challenge. Festering unresolved for years, the Kirkuk conflict has started to contaminate Baghdad politics to the point of disabling Maliki's government. It has already complicated efforts to create a law governing petroleum and natural gas, for example, and it may well hold up the formation of a new government in the spring. America's legacy in Iraq could be a divided country that is left to fight over an undefined boundary with Kurdistan while a dysfunctional Baghdad government governs in name only.

If Odierno follows Obama's plan and pulls out combat troops by August 2010, roughly 50,000 troops will still remain deployed for at least another year. Their precise makeup and mission are unclear, but along with a State Department reconstruction effort the focus will be to ensure that the country the US leaves behind at the end of 2011 will be relatively stable and secure, and largely self-sustaining. Much will hinge on Washington's budget for the fiscal year 2011, over which the bureaucratic battle has just begun. The Pentagon may seek to cut significant parts from its Iraq allocation. Whether the State Department can obtain money to shore up political institutions will depend on the mood of Congress and, behind it, the American public. Some US officials rightly fear, as one ruefully phrased it, that the new approach toward Iraq "will be driven by financial resources, not policy," i.e., by how much money will be available. Instead, he said, Washington should set clear priorities about what it seeks to accomplish in the final year:

Since Iraq, compared to Afghanistan, is now considered a "good" war in Washington, we have a better chance to secure funding if we can make the argument that what we leave behind will be sustainable. It will cost a few billions more for us to achieve our mission.

One casualty, he surmised, might be American advisers who have been assigned to Iraqi ministries; these tend to be highly paid professionals recruited for their specialized skills. Therefore their departure would not be all bad, the official said: "We have infantilized the ministries. We have trained the Iraqis; we have helped them; now it's very important that we respect their sovereignty and treat them like adults."

3.

Iraqis don't like talk of long-term dependency, and indeed the US departure may bring about welcome changes. As Safa al-Sheikh, the deputy national security adviser, told me, in his view Iraqi lawmakers "will no longer be able to use the United States as a cover for not doing anything" once the Americans leave. My discussions with a broad range of Iraqi politicians suggest that they have a strong sense of entitlement to full control over their country and a growing confidence that they will be able to manage the transition to effective sovereignty, even if fears linger over a possible "security vacuum"—a lack of

strong and cohesive forces to maintain internal stability.

Those who disagree with this approach can be divided into two groups, each with its own worst-case narrative. Some, such as the Kurds and some of Maliki's Shiite adversaries, claim that Maliki is using the security forces he has grouped together under his command to establish a strong central state with dictatorial tendencies, recreating the previous regime but now with a Shiite sheen. A young Iraqi parliamentary aide, reflecting a wider sentiment, commented that "many people feel that while now they are more secure, the situation is reverting to Saddam Hussein days because of the way the security forces behave." He sounded almost nostalgic for US forces, which were never known for either subtlety or observance of human rights.

Others, especially in the Sunni camp, express fears that because many of the Shiite Islamist parties in power are beholden to Iran, Iraq will become, in effect if not design, an Iranian vassal. In a comment that is echoed throughout the Sunni community and neighboring Arab states, a senior Sunni politician told me that "the United States made a gift to Iran" by invading in 2003 and allowing the Shiite parties to gain power through elections. Iran, in this view, has won its eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988) after a two-decade delay, and now aims to bring Iraq snugly within its embrace following the US withdrawal.

The extent of Iran's influence in Iraq is controversial and subject to endless speculation. If you listen to Sunni politicians, the Iranian intelligence service Ittalaat is everywhere, firmly ensconced in Iraq's own intelligence apparatus. Its former director, Muhammad al-Shahwani, was known for his pro-US and anti-Iranian views, but he was sent into retirement following the Baghdad bombings in August.

In a common fallacy, however, many Sunnis tend to conflate Iraqi Shiite Islamists with the Iranian regime next door, even though the political ideology of Iraqi Shiites does not mesh with Ayatollah Khomeini's *vilayet e-fakih* (the guardianship of the jurist) and although ever since their return from exile in Iran in 2003, the Shiite Islamists have actively sought to shed whatever Iranian veneer they had acquired.

To many Sunnis, however, this is merely evidence of dissimulation, a Shiite practice known as *taqiyyah*, an acceptable form of self-defense against oppression by religious rivals. They accuse the Shiite-led government of Nouri al-Maliki of using the "war on terror" and the broad labeling of all Sunnis as terrorists to isolate, divide, and disenfranchise the Sunni community; to deter the (mostly Sunni) refugees from returning home; and to entrench Iran's position in an Arab country with a Shiite majority.

There is no doubt that the country's Shiite Islamist leadership retains close ties with Iran. These are based primarily on intermarriage, a history of cross-border trade, and reciprocal religious tourism to Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala, Iraq, in Qom, Iran, and elsewhere. Unquestionably Iran has expended great efforts to recruit agents, seeding them throughout Iraqi parties and institutions. From there things get fuzzy. Iranian weapons have found their way across the long and permeable border, carried by smugglers who may or may not be acting at the behest of Iranian security services. And while Tehran has tried to shape the positions and alliances of Iraqi Shiite parties, it does not appear to have any favorite among them but rather prefers to play one against the other, thereby keeping them weak and under its influence. Ultimately, Iran may have Iraqi pawns, not proxies, by virtue of the frailty of the state the US will leave in its wake.

Maneuvering among the parties in the months before Iraq's parliamentary elections illuminates the controversy over Iranian influence. Much has been made of the composition of the two competing Shiite-dominated alliances that have emerged. One, called the State of the Law, is headed by Maliki, and is composed of small groups and independent politicians, most of them Shiite but including Sunni and other members as well. The other, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), is a coalition of two major Shiite Islamist groups, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the movement of Moqtada al-Sadr; it likewise also includes smaller groups. The INA appears to be a narrower but equally sectarian version of the broad

Shiite electoral alliance that ran four years ago. Maliki's coalition presents itself as nationalist, nonsectarian, even secular. Iran is said variously by Iraq experts to have supported the INA as an anti-Maliki front after it fell out with Maliki over his alleged pro-US leanings; or to have proposed, deviously, that the 2005 Shiite alliance split itself in two so as to appeal to a broader electorate, only to reunite once the election results are in (an example of *taqiyah*).^[3]

The truth may be, rather, that Iran would be content with either Shiite list winning the elections, as long as neither becomes strong enough to turn its Iraqi nationalist rhetoric, effectively deployed against the US, against Iran instead, and as long as the winner observes an acceptable degree of cooperation with Tehran. It is, moreover, worth noting that the INA invited Maliki to join it, but not as the alliance's leader, which would have put him in place to head the next government. Maliki declined. Never underestimate the importance of personality-driven power politics in Iraq.

Maliki has worked hard to build up state institutions, and has managed both internal challengers and Iraq's neighbors quite adroitly. He also appears to have the quiet blessing of the Obama administration. But the January elections will show whether he will be able to continue on this course, or whether his political enemies will get the better of him. They have been plotting to oust him for the last two years but have little to show for their efforts. Now, however, Maliki's problems threaten to accumulate, as the Kurds seek to veto the continuation of his leadership as punishment for his refusal to accommodate them on Kirkuk. The INA, which appears willing to work with just about anyone on Maliki's list except Maliki himself, may end up with enough votes to force his retirement.

Either way, just as Odierno will be pulling out his first combat brigades, starting in March, Iraq will be entering into a period of fractious wrangling over the formation of a new government. If Iraqi national forces fail to impose their control, an absence of political leadership could thus coincide with a collapse in security; if politicians and their allied militias resort to violence, the state, including its intelligence apparatus so critical for maintaining internal stability, could fracture along political, ethnic, and sectarian lines.

4.

After a week in Baghdad, as I prepared to fly to Kurdistan, the city was calm, and at night there were many riverside strollers, who were making the best of the current lull. Guns, once both ubiquitous and conspicuous, are now mostly invisible except in the hands of security forces, which is only partially reassuring, in view of their uncertain loyalties. A Western humanitarian aid worker, who lives unprotected in the "red" zone with his colleagues, told me:

Some four hundred to five hundred people are killed per month. Compared to other countries, this is extremely high, but here, that's quite good. There is a feeling things are almost normal. Bombs are going off all the time, but we could call it a "banalization" of violence: people sitting in one room no longer pay attention to the bomb going off next door, so to speak.

Many expect that violence will go up as the elections approach. The bombs the aid worker described could have been planted by several insurgent groups, al-Qaeda in Iraq among them. Spoilers abound, and moreover, as Maliki's followers point out, his adversaries have an interest in puncturing his image as the man who restored law and order; perhaps the August bombings were intended to do just that. Much will depend on whether Iraqis will show their strength as a people against the current class of politicians, who arrived from exile on the coattails of US firepower and gorged themselves on the rich pickings provided by reconstruction.

Will Iraqis vote for candidates who have proven themselves in local constituencies rather than having

spent their time grandstanding in Baghdad? Will they reward Maliki for having brought calm, even if basic services remain sorely lacking? Will they even bother to vote at all, or succumb instead to fatigue or despair that meaningful change will not come? Their still little-known attitudes—Iraqi polls are not wholly reliable—will, most of all, determine whether Iraq will pull through the turbulent months it is about to enter.

Notes

^[1]"Scuffle with Security Contractors Highlights Iraqis' New Clout in Green Zone," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2009.

^[2]See the report for the International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line* (July 8, 2009); and *Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa* (September 28, 2009). Both are available at www.crisisgroup.org.

^[3]For a further discussion of the two alliances, and a recently announced third alliance, see three articles by the Norwegian researcher Reidar Visser at www.historiae.org: "After Sadr-Badr Compromise in Iran, the Iraq National Alliance (INA) Is Declared" (August 24, 2009), "Maliki Re-Launches the State of Law List: Beautiful But Is It Powerful Enough?" (October 1, 2009), and "The Unity of Iraq Alliance: Another Second-Generation Coalition" (October 21, 2009).

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