

What's next for Iraq? After the U.S. leaves: After the U.S. leaves

by [Patricia Mei Yin Chang](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

What will happen if Barack Obama makes good on his promise to withdraw American troops from Iraq by 2011? One scenario is that hostilities between Iraq's Shi'ites and Sunnis will reignite in a destructive civil war, plunging the country into further chaos. A second scenario is that Shi'ite groups will ally themselves with Iran in order to gain power and transform Iraq into an Islamic theocracy. A third possible threat is posed by Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey, which may seek to take advantage of the weakened state and annex parts of Iraq for themselves.

The most optimistic scenario is that a competent, democratically elected leadership will be able to quell the militias and provide security throughout the country, after which a combination of foreign aid and investment can help the Iraqis rebuild their infrastructure. This last scenario reflects what most Iraqis argue that they want—a return to a functioning civil society that has reliable services, jobs and opportunities. Most experts agree that the crucial foundation for such an outcome is security. Without security any efforts to build public works projects to provide water, electricity, sewage systems and garbage removal will likely be sabotaged. Without security Iraq will not receive the kind of economic investment it needs to provide jobs and opportunities. And without security, people will not feel free to exercise the freedoms that the new Iraqi constitution seeks to grant the people.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the greatest threat to security has been sectarian violence between various Sunni and Shi'ite militias. The causes of this violence are far more complex than simply theological differences. Although antagonisms between Sunni and Shi'ite groups existed before the Americans arrived, they rarely rose to the surface under Saddam's regime. Throughout most of his tenure he maintained a policy of secularity, although he did allow more latitude for religious expression late in his reign when his control began to slip away. When the Americans arrived, their emphasis on building the foundations of democracy, and particularly religious freedom, encouraged religious expression—and along with it,

old antagonisms that had been previously repressed were revived.

Ironically, many Iraqis blame the Americans for the rise in conflict between religious groups. By focusing on religion as a political identifier, they created incentives for religious groups to compete against one another. Early in the war, the Americans made a number of policy moves that signaled to Iraqis that a new social order was being created that would change relations within their society. One of the first moves by the U.S., which many experts now agree was a mistake, was to remove all members of the Baath political party from positions of authority within the government and to disband the Iraqi army. The Baathists, many of whom were recruited from Saddam's tribal homeland, were largely Sunni, and their exclusion was interpreted by some as barring Sunni influence in the new regime.

In addition, in forming temporary advisory councils like the Coalition Provisional Authority, and later the Iraqi Governing Council, the Americans appointed leaders from the various Shi'ite parties, representatives of the Shi'ite grand ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Kurds and some important tribal chiefs, but gave relatively little representation to the Sunnis. This signaled to Iraqis that the discrimination experienced by Shi'ites under Saddam was now going to be turned against the Sunnis. This perception led many Sunni to take an anti-American stance from the outset, and it also created competition among various Shi'ite groups. The most virulent and effective anti-American Shi'ite Islamist, Muqtada al Sadr, managed to win a large number of followers, and with help from Iran he funded a large militia that targeted American outposts and those whom it accused of collaborating with the Americans, which included some fellow Shi'ite groups. These groups in turn raised militias of their own, incorporating a large number of soldiers from Saddam's former army who had been demobilized and were now without employment.

As we now know, U.S. leaders did not have clear plans for post-invasion Iraq. They wanted to create an Iraqi democracy that would be a model for other countries in the Middle East, but they had not given much thought to implementing that goal. The more time they spent trying to figure this out, the more the American invasion began to be perceived as an occupation. The Americans had failed to understand that once Saddam had been toppled, they were no longer wanted. The general Iraqi sentiment was, "Thank you, now please go home." The Iraqis wanted to prove that they were capable of self-rule—and the longer the Americans stayed, the more the groups to whom they had accorded nominal authority were targeted by insurgents.

Now that Iraq's political power structure has been realigned along religious party lines, it will be very difficult to reverse course even after the Americans leave. In the elections held on January 31, 14,000 candidates ran for 440 seats in the provincial councils. With so many candidates, name recognition is almost nonexistent and most voters do not vote for individuals; instead they select slates of candidates by party. This gives incumbent parties a large advantage over new parties even if they have not been successful legislators.

In the last major elections of 2005 numerous parties campaigned using religious themes, symbols and rhetoric, arguing that supporting them was what a good Muslim would do. The elections were discussed in the mosques, and religious workers put up posters; an explicit relationship between politics and piety was evident. The parties of prominent clerics appealed to Iraqis in the belief that after Saddam, those best suited to guide the country were the religious leaders. They were deemed most likely to do what was morally correct and to put the interests of the Iraqi people before their own interests. However, many Iraqis have changed their minds since those elections. They have seen a rise in violence as well as the exposure of corrupt religious leaders, and they have been dismayed by the lack of progress in the conditions of their daily lives.

As sectarian antagonisms mounted, formerly integrated neighborhoods in Baghdad and other cities became increasingly segregated by religious divisions into Sunni-only or Shi'ite-only areas. People have moved from their homes out of fear that they will be persecuted by whatever militia controls the neighborhood. In some areas, the militias have gained control of crucial public services so that people are dependent upon party representatives for access to electricity, water and garbage removal. Opportunities for corruption proliferate and are exploited by religious and secular leaders alike.

Huda Ahmed, an Iraqi journalist who left the country in 2006 to study in the U.S., expresses a view which she says is widely shared by other Iraqis: "Candidates use religion as a cover; they use religious symbols and phrases in their speeches. They tell people they are good Muslims but they have failed to deliver, and the people are fed up." She laments the loss of the basic principles of the religion in which she was raised: "I love Islam, but what is happening now is not what we learned, not what we studied in school or were taught in our homes. Religion in Iraq now is a cover for lying, cheating, adultery and drinking, but they all say 'I am Muslim' with pride."

She deplores the politicization of her religion by fellow Iraqis and is also frustrated and angered by the sectarian perspective through which many Americans view Muslims. “Whenever you meet an American, they always ask you what religion you are. I tell them I am an Iraqi Muslim and they say, ‘No, are you Sunni or Shi’ia?’” Ahmed says that “this question does not make sense to me because my father is Shi’ite and my mother is Sunni—most of my friends and family are both. This is a question an Iraqi would never ask; it would be very rude, like asking someone how much money they make. . . . Before the Americans came, this was not an important question for most Iraqis. Now it is what matters.”

Given the apparent willingness of Iran and Syria, as well as Saudi Arabian Shi’ites, to support various Shi’ite parties in Iraq, the involvement of outside countries could very well lead to greater sectarian conflict unless the U.S. is able to improve its own relations with these countries in the next two years. Bringing stability to Iraq may require that the Americans deal effectively not only with internal Iraqi politics but with Shi’ite and Sunni factions within the entire Middle East region, particularly Iraq’s immediate neighbors.

However, some Iraqis believe that if the Americans leave, the *raison d’être* for anti-U.S. movements like Muqtada al-Sadr’s will vanish. It will also rob the Sunnis of one of their most potent arguments, namely that the Shi’ites handed Iraq over to the Americans. The Kurds, who want to form a semi-autonomous state of their own, may also realize that without American support, their hopes for such a state will be overshadowed by threats from neighboring Turkey and Syria. This may lead them to reconcile their desire for autonomy with their need for the greater security that a unified Iraq can offer them.

There are reasons to be hopeful. The January provincial elections gave evidence that Iraqis are making progress toward an independent democracy. Voters showed strong support for the Dawa Party of the current prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, despite the fact that he has made little progress in providing social services during his tenure in office. Ayad Allawi, the first prime minister selected after the Americans handed power back to the Iraqis in the 2004 election, also received stronger support than expected. Both of these men are seen as having strong U.S. backing. Muqtada al-Sadr backed away from endorsing candidates in this election, and people speculated that this was because he did not want to campaign vigorously for candidates who might lose. Slates of candidates his party supported did win some seats at the polls but nowhere near the support he had gained in 2005

when candidates aligned with him won 32 of the 275 legislative seats being contested. These results suggest that Iraqis are turning away from leaders who have campaigned mainly on religious or moral themes, or advocated violence or anti-Americanism. Even in Anbar province, where Sunnis boycotted the elections in 2005, voting was high. A larger number of secular slates also came to the fore during this campaign, and many voters expressed a preference for the secularists in what seemed an “anything but religion” attitude.

“Our analysis is that over the last four years the religious parties tried everything and proved that they are not successful leaders,” says Aiham Alsammarae, an American citizen who returned to Iraq in 2003 and served as Iraq’s electricity minister from 2003 to 2005. “They couldn’t deliver what they promised. They could not do anything right.”

Quoted in the *Nation* shortly before the elections, Alsammarae said he believes that voters are turning away from the religious parties. “In the south, people are asking, ‘What have they done for us? There are no jobs. There is no electricity and water. The schools and hospitals are terrible. And there is so much corruption.’” This opinion is echoed by journalist Ahmed: “Iraqis have been traumatized, killing is nothing, violence has become a part of their lives. There is no education, no water, no garbage removal, no security and no jobs. The electricity is turned on only every six hours. The Iraqi people love their religion but see that their religious leaders did not bring promised prosperity. They have seen violence, corruption and self-interest on the part of those leaders. They no longer see them as religious.”

The perception in the West is that Iraq’s elections were a success because they entailed less violence and greater participation; also, the slates were more representative of the local regions that the candidates represented. Most Iraqis expressed a desire to elect candidates who would get things done. The extreme religious parties need to heed this sentiment if they are to be credible players in Iraqi politics from now on. However, it is too soon to say how long these trends will last. The Iraqi people are impatient for visible signs of progress. They may turn out this group of legislators in the next election and embrace others if they are disappointed again.