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Iraq: What happens when America pulls out?

LSE Ideas

By Yaniv Voller

Predicting the future is not an easy task. Nevertheless, Iraq's political history provides some insights which might allow us to assess its post-American occupation future and provide at least one possible scenario.

As gloomy as it may sound, this writer believes that it will get worse – at least for the Iraqi people. It seems as though Nouri al-Maliki is taking the notorious part of the Iraqi dictator, relying on manipulation of sectarian and tribal loyalties, a weak party structure to boost his network of patronage, and a personal paramilitary committed to certain sects/regions. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Maliki, or anyone else, can be cruel as Saddam Hussein – but the possibility of yet another dictator in Baghdad seems very plausible.

In fact, Iraq's history offers no other alternative to dictatorship. It is not a matter of culture – but rather the fragile composition of the Iraqi population: sectarianism and tribalism have been played for almost a decade by the different governments in Baghdad and the tradition of patronage is embedded in the Iraqi political system. It is too easy and too tempting for a ruler to succumb to dictatorship, particularly one in the position of Maliki, who is striving to gain more power in the periphery to take advantage of this system.

Indeed, there are some alternatives. One which is espoused by scholars and practitioners, as well the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq, is a federacy. Nonetheless, a weak Baghdad means that this federacy might end up as a confederacy, where the different components have no loyalty to the idea of an integrated Iraq and to the idea of Iraqi nationality. From confederacy, the road to Iraq's disintegration is short. Although some may welcome such an event, it would only cause chaos and further resentment in a region already torn apart by the Shiite-Sunni and Arab/Turkish-Kurdish divides.

Another alternative is the Lebanese-style confessional system. According to such a system, every position in the government administration will be allocated according to sectarian affiliation – where the Shiites, for example, have the premiership, Kurds the presidency and Sunnis the Ministry of defence. In fact, the current Iraqi system is a de facto confessional system, with senior positions already allotted based on ethnic and religious lines. The institutionalisation of this system has been advocated fervently since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, either by those who perceive it as necessary to compensate the Sunnis for their loss of power, or by those who believe that such a system would represent more justly the Shi'a majority. However, if any lesson can be drawn from the Lebanese case, it is that this system does not work: it is too enticing for both internal and external forces to manipulate such a system. The system perpetuates artificial animosities as well as sectarian affiliation – which are the last things that a nation trying to rebuild itself needs. Furthermore, the confessional system is far from meritocratic, as positions are used as means to appease rather than used to build viable state institutions. Functioning state institutions are integral to saving Iraq.

Indeed, a viable federal system, which will compromise Baghdad's power but will preserve the idea of an Iraqi nation, is a blessed idea. But it requires a brave leader, free of sectarian loyalties and committed to the idea of the Iraqi nation. A leader who knows that by giving up on Kirkuk, for instance, he or she might give the Kurdish people the hope of being safe in their homeland as Iraqi citizens who are proud of their Kurdish heritage; that is aware of the fact that the Sunnis feel threatened by the growing Iranian influence, even if it is only an imagined one; and that the Shiites deserve compensation for years of marginalisation. Nouri al-Maliki has proven to not be this kind of leader.

The nightmarish scenarios, in which either the Ba'th or al-Qaeda overtake Iraq as soon as the Americans leave, seem quite farfetched. Even the threat of growing Iranian influence on Iraq seems less plausible now, though Maliki has proven that Iran is his natural supporter. So we are left with yet another tyrant – and with a torn apart, miserable Iraqi people. It might be good in the short run, at least from a regional perspective – but it is a recipe for instability and disaster in the long term.

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