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Dilemmas of Security in Iraq

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This article suggests that much of the violence that has ravaged Iraq since the country's occupation by the US-led coalition in 2003 can be explained by focusing on the interplay between domestic and external factors that pushed Iraq's major communities (Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds) into conflict. The domestic factors include an intercommunal 'security dilemma' that was engendered by the US-led invasion; the role of belligerent 'ethnic entrepreneurs' within these communities; and the long-term animosities, apprehensions, and fears among their members. External factors include the disbandment of Iraq's ruling elite, regime, and security sector by the USA, along with the role of the Arab and Muslim volunteers who came to fight Iraq's foreign occupation. The article concludes by discussing the possible ramifications of the conflict in Iraq for domestic, regional, and international security, and mentions several steps that can help ameliorate it.

Keywords ethnic conflict • civil war • power-sharing • security sector reform • US foreign policy

Introduction

WHAT CAN EXPLAIN the unremitting violence in Iraq, a state that according to US President George W. Bush (2003) was to become an 'example' for the Middle East, but which now seems to be in the midst of bloody civil war with an unmistakable intercommunal character?[1] A year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Fouad Ajami (2004), an acclaimed historian of the Middle East whose views have helped shape recent US policies in the region, observed: 'In its modern history, Iraq has not been kind or gentle to its people. Perhaps it was folly to think that it was under any obligation to be kinder to strangers.' But, cultural factors have proved insufficient in accounting for the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the former USSR,

[1] Experts on intrastate conflicts argue that Iraq is indeed in the midst of a civil war; see Sambanis (2006); Biddle (2006); Fearon (2007). The US military, for its part, claims that a civil war in Iraq is 'possible'; see CNN (2006).

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and elsewhere, and rational and structural factors, too, have been mentioned (on this distinction, see Lichbach, 1997). The impact of outside forces on instances of intercommunal violence has also been identified. Why, then, should Iraq be different?

This article suggests that much of the violence that has ravaged Iraq since its invasion by US and allied forces in March 2003 can be explained by focusing on a set of domestic and external factors that have pushed the country's major communities (alternatively: ethnic groups)[2] – Arab Sunnis (below: Sunnis), Shi'is, and Kurds – to war. The domestic factors include an intercommunal 'security dilemma' engendered by the US-led invasion and subsequent events; the belligerent role of 'ethnic entrepreneurs' *within* these communities, who seized the opportunity to assert themselves; and the long-term animosities and fears *between* these communities, which fostered mutual apprehensions among their members. The external factors, which are closely intertwined with the domestic ones, are the actions taken by the US forces in Iraq since its occupation, especially the disbandment of the Iraqi Army, the Ba'ath Party, and the country's ruling elite; and the role of the Arab and Muslim volunteers who came to Iraq to fight its foreign occupation. The role of Iraq's close neighbors – Syria and Iran – can also be mentioned in this context, but their impact has been more indirect (I relate this role in the conclusion).

The article proceeds as follows. First, I discuss recent advances in the study of intercommunal violence, focusing on works that highlight the intertwined role of cultural, rational, and structural factors. I also discuss the close interplay between domestic and external factors for these conflicts, which is not always emphasized. I then analyze the domestic–external dynamic that led to the current conflict in Iraq. The article concludes by discussing the implications of this conflict for domestic, regional, and international security, and suggests several steps to ameliorate it.

But, before proceeding further, a few caveats are in order. First, the article analyzes the causes of the Iraqi conflict but is not an exhaustive account of developments in Iraq since 2003. Second, I focus on the relationship between Iraq's major communities – and not on other communities (e.g. Christians, Turkomans), clans, or regions – because these play the major role in the conflict. This is manifest in the frequent attacks launched against their ethnoreligious symbols and leaders; in the mass killing of their members just because they belong to one of the 'other' communities; in the large-scale

[2] Gurr & Harff (1994: 190) define ethnic groups as being 'composed of people who share a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on shared experiences and cultural traits. They may define themselves, and be defined by others, in terms of any or all of the following traits: lifeways, religious beliefs, language, physical appearance, region of residence, traditional occupations, and a history of conquest and repression by culturally different peoples'. According to them, ethnic groups are 'also called communal groups'. In this article, the terms 'communities' and 'ethnic groups' are used interchangeably.

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'ethnic cleansing' and mass flight of their members from the country's mixed areas; and even in the breakup of mixed marriages.

Towards an Integrative Approach to Intercommunal Conflict

Since the end of the Cold War, intercommunal conflicts have become a major concern for policymakers and scholars. Yet, in contrast to earlier attempts to explain these phenomena – which focused on cultural factors, and particularly the long-term animosities ('ancient hatreds') between communities (for a review, see Kaufman, 2006) – the emphasis in more recent studies has shifted to structural factors like intercommunal 'security dilemmas' that stem from the breakdown of states and empires (Posen, 1993), and rational factors like the role of belligerent 'ethnic entrepreneurs' who use violence against members of other communities to acquire material gains (Mueller, 2000).

The idea of the 'security dilemma', which is a basic concept of International Relations (IR) theory, was developed during the Cold War to explain why states that wish to defend themselves under the 'anarchical' conditions of the international system may end up fighting one another. In the absence of a global government, it was argued, security is the primary concern of sovereign states, and each attempts to enhance it. But, the same actions that each state takes to defend itself against potential threats to its security may trigger violent responses by other states, which cannot but view these actions as threatening (Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1997). However, later contributions to IR have suggested that since the definition of a state's security is, essentially, subjective, various entrepreneurs such as civilian leaders, security officials, and heads of large corporations can *inflate* potential threats to the state and promote belligerent responses. What follows is that the particular motivations of these actors, as well as the prevailing values in society that facilitate this process of 'securitization', must also be considered (Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Williams, 2003; Mitzen, 2006).[3]

After the end of Cold War, the security dilemma was introduced into the sphere of intercommunal relations, where it was argued that when states or empires (e.g. Yugoslavia, the USSR) break down, communities behave like sovereign states in the international system (Posen, 1993). Applying this concept to the realm of intercommunal relations, however, was not without its

[3] Some authors have identified rational and cultural factors in classic works such as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, considered the hallmark of realist thinking; see Garst (1989); Lebow (2001). Indeed, Thucydides' account of the Melian dialogue and the Sicilian expedition suggests that both actions, presented as responses to Athens's security dilemma, were, in effect, belligerent actions conceived by opportunistic leaders who appealed to the greed and adventurism of their public.

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problems. Although drawing interesting parallels between intercommunal and interstate relations was not new (see Hudson, 1968), this practice did elicit criticism. 'Although a number of important similarities can be identified between international relations and interethnic relations', one author observed, 'attempts to base a theory of ethnic conflict on theories of international conflict seem likely to end by resting one unknown upon another' (Horowitz, 1985: 95). One such 'unknown' was, or so it seems, the concept of 'security' itself, which could be manipulated by self-interested actors, and was, moreover, influenced by the hegemonic values in the group. Indeed, several authors call attention to the role of belligerent (or predatory) 'ethnic entrepreneurs' in inducing intercommunal conflicts (Mueller, 2000; Barak, 2002; Kasfir, 2004) and the role of a pessimism based on a traumatic experience – a 'fear of the future, lived through the past' – that may encourage an intragroup and intergroup dynamic that leads to violence (Lake & Rothchild, 1998: 7; see also Kaufman, 1996).

Another problem in employing IR theories to explain intercommunal violence has been their underlying assumption that 'all "units" in "anarchy" . . . can be expected to behave in accordance with the very same neorealist logic' (Lapid & Kratochwil, 1996: 113; see also Roe, 1999). This despite the basic differences between communities and states (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998: 8). Unlike states, communities are non-uniform actors that are neither sovereign nor territorially defined. Hence, they are more prone to intracommunal power struggles. In this sense, communities are like Third World states, which are plagued by an 'insecurity dilemma': a lack of internal cohesiveness, a questionable legitimacy of the regime, a contested claim to the provision of peace and order, and the primacy of internal threats over external threats (Job, 1992). At the same time, communities are not protected by international norms that help sustain even the 'quasi-states' of the Third World (Jackson, 1990; Zacher, 2001).

As this discussion suggests, the best way to account for intercommunal violence is not to dismiss the role of culture, rationality, or structure, but to integrate these factors in order to provide a *comprehensive* account of the phenomenon. Thus, Kaufman (1996: 109) has identified three reinforcing factors that explain the 'spiral of increasing conflict' in Moldova in 1991–92: 'hostile masses' (cultural factor), 'belligerent leaders' (rational factor), and 'inter-ethnic security dilemmas' (structural factor). And there are other examples (see, for example, Barak, 2002, 2005).

But, despite the utility of these integrative approaches, a crucial dimension of some intercommunal conflicts cannot be overlooked: the role of external forces in these instances.[4] This factor is important because close ties with external players can motivate 'ethnic entrepreneurs' to use violence and, moreover, provide them with the necessary means to do so (e.g. funds, arms);

[4] There are, however, cases where this factor is overstated; see, for example, Barak (2007: 53).

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because such relationships are liable to brand some communities as 'collaborators' with foreign forces, thus aggravating intergroup animosities; and because external forces (especially the great powers), and not only domestic forces, can dissolve state institutions, regimes, and ruling elites.

In the following section, I explain the violence in Iraq since 2003 by focusing on the role of these domestic factors and their interplay with the relevant external factors.

Domestic and External Sources of Conflict in Iraq

There are three major causes for the current violence in Iraq: first, an intercommunal 'security dilemma' engendered by the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003; second, the role of 'belligerent entrepreneurs' within Iraq's major communities; finally, the long-term animosities and fears among these communities. Since the domestic factors of the conflict in Iraq are closely intertwined with the external factors, I address them jointly.

The US-Led Invasion and Iraq's Intercommunal Security Dilemma

The first factor that warrants consideration when attempting to explain the current violence in Iraq is the security dilemma of its major communities – Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds – engendered by the US-led invasion in 2003.

Since 1968, when the Ba'ath Party came to power in Iraq, and particularly since 1979, when Saddam Hussein became its president, members of Iraq's Sunni community had dominated the country's political, social, and economic spheres. This pattern of inter-ethnic relations, which ranged from 'control' (Lustick, 1979) to coercion (al-Khalil, 1989; Salih, 1996), was relatively stable and managed to endure despite significant domestic and external challenges: Iraq's long war with Iran (1980–88), Iraq's defeat by the US-led international coalition in 1991, and the subsequent Kurdish and Shi'i uprisings. In sum, before its occupation in 2003, Iraq was a functioning state, although one dominated by one societal sector and ruled by a leader who perpetrated unspeakable crimes against his people.

However, the invasion of Iraq by the forces of the USA and its allies, and the subsequent launching of the US-sponsored 'nation-building' project there,[5] modeled on the successful resuscitation of postwar Germany and Japan (Pei & Kasper, 2003; Dobbins et al., 2003) has transformed Iraq into a 'failed state' par excellence (Mueller, 2005: 120). This is because Iraq was simultaneously

[5] Although US leaders have refrained from using the term 'nation-building' when referring to their involvement in Iraq, US think-tanks, scholars, and media have employed the term on a regular basis; see, for example, Dobbins et al. (2003); Fukuyama (2004a,b); Chesterman (2004).

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stripped of its ruling elite, regime, and security sector, but without the provision of adequate replacements. While many authors (e.g. Diamond, 2004a,b; Mueller, 2005) emphasize the lack of an effective authority in Iraq since 2003, what is absent there is, in fact, an effective *and* legitimate authority, namely, one that is acceptable to its major communities.

During 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' and in its aftermath, US and allied forces captured or killed most of Iraq's political elite, including Saddam Hussein and his two sons, Uday and Kusay. In the meantime, US officials in Baghdad outlawed and disbanded Iraq's ruling Ba'ath Party and announced that 15,000–30,000 of its officials (1–2% of its 1.5 million members) would be banned from participating in the new Iraqi government. This modus operandi was then applied to the Iraqi Army: this institution was officially disbanded and its estimated 350,000 soldiers, described as 'well trained, well armed, and deeply angry at the Americans', were 'sent out into bitter shame and unemployment' (Danner, 2003; see also Slevin, 2003).

But, the dismemberment of Iraq's leviathan has impinged on the relationship between the country's major communities, which were suddenly left without their chief arbiter, the state – arbitrary as it was. According to Hendrickson & Tucker (2005: 17), 'the breaking of the state in effect destroyed Iraq's immune system, making it vulnerable to a host of ailments'. The worst of these ailments was, or so it seems, the growing domestic disorder, which fostered intercommunal tensions.

Without the removal of Saddam Hussein and his associates from power, political reforms in Iraq were infeasible. However, given that the Ba'ath Party, 'a highly elaborated structure that over a half-century spread and proliferated into every institution in the country' (Danner, 2003), had maintained an almost symbiotic relationship with the Iraqi state, any attempt to do away with it was risky. A better way to handle it was to allow some of its members, especially those who had not committed atrocities, to join Iraq's new political system. Indeed, a corresponding approach was taken in postwar Germany and Japan (Dobbins et al., 2003). When they decided to disband the Ba'ath Party en masse 'even at the cost of administrative efficiency' (Bremer, 2006: 45), US officials ignored the fact that many Ba'ath members had joined the party not because they identified with its ideology but because it was one of the few available channels for social mobility in Iraq. By failing to distinguish these self-motivated Ba'ath members from their ideological comrades, US officials in fact pushed the two groups closer to one another.

Apart from creating a strong incentive for tens of thousands of Iraqis to oppose the US-sponsored 'nation-building' project, the dismantling of Iraq's only political organization created a serious void in its political system. This can be inferred from a number of opinion polls conducted in Iraq since 2003. The first (ORI, 2003) showed that Iraq's existing political parties, including those outlawed before 2003, were supported by only a fraction of the popu-

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lation. Moreover, all four parties that did enjoy some popular standing were communally based. If Iraq's parties were not acceptable to the bulk of its citizens, who was? According to the same poll, 69.8% of Iraqis had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the country's religious leaders, while local leaders came in second with 54%. Additional polls from the first half of 2004 (ORI, 2004a,b,c) corroborated this finding, and even indicated a steadily increasing confidence in Iraq's religious leaders: from 76.6% in February 2004 to 78.4% in March to 87% in June. Iraq's prime minister, Iyad Allawi, later explained this trend as follows: 'Since the state was dismantled in Iraq, institutions have disappeared and people have withdrawn into their clans and tribes' (quoted in Tavernise, 2006b). Yet, reliance on one's clan or tribe for security occurred mainly in the countryside; in the cities, and especially in Baghdad, it was the communal militias that provided security (see below).

The expectation that returning Iraqi exiles would be capable of reinvigorating the country's political system was also exaggerated. This was because their organizations, which helped induce the US-led invasion, were loose formations united only by their opposition to Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party. Moreover, some prominent exiles (e.g. Ahmad Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress) had dubious reputations.

In sum, neither Iraq's existing political parties nor its returning exiles have managed to fill the political vacuum in Iraq in the wake of the US-led invasion. Rather, it was Iraq's religious leaders – the only influential actors that had operated outside Iraq's tightly controlled political system before 2003 and managed to remain in place after the invasion – who filled the void.

But, the single most important action that induced Iraq's intercommunal security dilemma since 2003 was the dismantling of its security sector. On 23 May 2003, Paul Bremer, the US chief administrator in Iraq, officially disbanded the Iraqi Army, causing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers to lose their jobs, their salaries and pensions, and their honor and prestige (Hashim, 2003a; Tripp, 2004).

This step has been explained in several ways. Some argued that the USA disbanded the Iraqi Army in order to prevent it from opposing the USA's 'nation-building' project owing to the troops' loyalty to Saddam Hussein and the army's own, dubious character (Slevin, 2003). Others explained that the Iraqi Army in fact fragmented soon after the invasion (Slevin, 2003; Slocombe, 2003; Perito, 2005; Rathmall et al., 2005; Bremer, 2006). Finally, it was suggested that Shi'is and Kurds, who had been oppressed by the army and were, moreover, underrepresented in its ranks, demanded its total dissolution and, perhaps, made their support for the 'nation-building' project conditional on this (Slevin, 2003; Hickey, 2005; Bremer, 2006: 59).

In any case, disbanding the Iraqi Army, like the Ba'ath Party and Iraq's ruling elite, was imprudent. Not only did US officials fail to appreciate the central role of the military in the modern state, in non-Western regions

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(including the Middle East), and in divided societies, they also overlooked the particular character of the Iraqi Army. These points warrant elaboration.

First, and most important, the Iraqi Army (and the rest of Iraq's security sector) had provided at least of a measure of security in Iraq before 2003, especially for those citizens who did not oppose Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party. While dismantling the army did convey the message that neither the ruling party nor the Iraqi president were any longer in power, the absence of an effective and legitimate authority in their place – manifest in the dramatic increase in crime rates and the looting of public institutions – encouraged Iraqi citizens to look out for themselves. This state of affairs, together with the weakness of Iraq's political parties and returning exiles, prompted many Iraqi citizens to rally around religious leaders and communal militias, which mushroomed in the country.

Second, in many Third World states the military sees itself not only as the state's foremost protector against foreign threats but also as its most patriotic institution. The Iraqi Army, for one, has fought the Iraqi state's enemies almost unremittingly for almost a quarter of a century. To dissolve it now was thus tantamount to erasing its entire institutional history – problematic as it was, especially with regard to the Kurds and the Shi'is (Salih, 1996) – and deprecating those who had given their lives for the homeland. This gave its ex-soldiers an added incentive to oppose the US-sponsored 'nation-building' project, and many of them had both the necessary training and weapons to do so (Hashim, 2003a; Janabi, 2004; Qassab, 2005).

Finally, like other divided societies where one community dominates the state and its institutions, including the security sector (cf. Enloe, 1980; Horowitz, 1985: chapters 11–12; Peled, 1998), the Iraqi Army relied mainly on the more 'trustworthy' sectors of Iraqi society: Sunnis; natives of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's birthplace; and members of the Iraqi leader's extended family (Picard, 1990; Quinlivan, 1999; al-Marashi, 2002, 2003; Hashim, 2003b). This was particularly true with regard to the army's elite units – the Republican Guard (80,000), the Special Republican Guard (16,000), and the Fedayeen Saddam (40,000) – which were set apart from the 'ordinary' units in terms of salaries, equipment, and tasks (Danner, 2003).[6] As with the Ba'ath Party, US officials could have tried to find allies in these 'ordinary' army units (which, if these figures are correct, included about 60% of Iraq's troops), and especially among soldiers who enlisted for practical reasons. They could also have reformed Iraq's security sector to better represent the country's communal makeup.[7] But, US officials saw the Iraqi Army as Saddam's army

[6] So pronounced were the disparities within the Iraqi Army that its chief of staff had learned of Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait only after the fact, because the Republican Guard, which was answerable only to Saddam Hussein himself, had carried out the operation; see Quinlivan (1999); Hamadani (2006).

[7] A growing body of literature is dedicated to security sector reform (SSR), and some works propose more ethnically diverse security services in divided societies; see McGarry & O'Leary (1999); Holm & Eide (2000).

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(see especially Bremer, 2006) and sought to replace it with a new military – the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Yet, this decision not only proved to be time-consuming but also led to a situation where Kurds and Shi'is were predominant in the ISF, whereas Sunnis, estimated at one-fifth of Iraq's population, formed less than 10% of its enlisted personnel, though they did account for 20% of its officers (Sharp, 2005; Tavernise, 2006a; Bender & Stockman, 2006). The renewed communal imbalance in Iraq's security sector and the creation of ethnically homogenous units in the ISF (made up mostly of Shi'is and Kurds) increased Sunni apprehensions towards the new security sector and impinged on the willingness of Sunni leaders to cooperate on the political level (Filkins, 2005). The USA, one observer concluded, 'faces the possibility that it has been arming one side in a prospective civil war' (Wong, 2006). Meanwhile, efforts to rebuild the Iraqi police, which were poorly planned, encountered difficulties, and this factor too contributed to the aura of lawlessness in many parts of the country (Moss & Rhode, 2006; Moss, 2006).

It was only later, after security in Iraq deteriorated, Sunni grievances mounted, and communal militias proliferated throughout the country, that the USA acknowledged its mistake: payments to former Iraqi soldiers were resumed, and some of these ex-soldiers, including former Ba'ath activists, were recruited to the ISF, amounting to 60% of its personnel (Slevin, 2003; Peterson, 2003; Maass, 2005). At the same time, former army officers were reinstated to strengthen the ISF, particularly after 10% of its personnel had changed sides during the fighting with the 'insurgents' and another 40% had returned home (Cockburn, 2004). But, this change of policy was difficult: In 2004, when fighting broke out between US forces and Iraqi 'insurgents' in Falluja, a former Iraqi general, Jassem Muhammad Salah, was named the head of a new security force in the city and given a 'hero's welcome' by its Sunni inhabitants. However, Shi'i and Kurdish leaders objected to this appointment on the ground that Salah, who had served in the Republican Guard, was involved in quelling the 1991 uprisings, and he had to be replaced (ABC News Online, 2004). Having disbanded the Iraqi Army en masse, the USA was thus subject to the veto power of Iraq's Shi'is and Kurds – who dominated Iraq's new security sector – when attempting to recruit former Iraqi soldiers (Bremer, 2006: 59). Meanwhile, building the ISF proved difficult, and although by June 2005 about 170,000 security personnel were trained and equipped and 107 operational military and special police battalions had been formed, only three battalions could operate independently (US Department of State, 2005; Shadid & Fainaru, 2005). It was reported, moreover, that the ISF is 'full of "ghost battalions" in which officers pocket the pay of soldiers who never existed or have gone home' (Cockburn, 2005; see also Schmitt, 2005b). Finally, communal militias penetrated Iraq's new security sector, and especially the police, and Baghdad became a place 'where the good guys wore masks and the bad guys wore police uniforms' (Gettleman, 2006).

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All in all, then, the US-led invasion of Iraq and its subsequent 'nation-building' project have resulted in a political and security void that fostered an inter-ethnic security dilemma for Iraq's Sunnis, Shi'is, and Kurds. This is not to say that communal differences in Iraq were *engendered* by its invasion and occupation by foreign forces – Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party had exploited ethnic, tribal, and regional identities in Iraq well before (Baram, 1997; Wimmer, 2003–04: 119) – or that Iraq's leaders had done a good job attending to all of their citizens' needs. Rather, the dismantling of Iraq's formal institutions, regime, and political elite aggravated the tensions between its major communities by making security their primary concern. Under these circumstances, it was logical for many Iraqis to resort to self-help: While Sunnis formed armed groups that engaged in 'resistance' against the US forces and their local allies, Shi'is and Kurds formed militias and joined Iraq's new security sector, where they became dominant. Yet, all of these steps, designed to increase the security of the communities involved, exacerbated intercommunal tensions.

Opinion polls taken in Iraq in November 2004 and November 2005 (ORI, 2004d, 2005) reaffirm its citizens' concerns for their security. The lack of security and stability was mentioned as the biggest problem facing Iraqis, and while the security situation in the villages and neighborhoods had improved somewhat (38.3% described it as 'quite bad' or 'very bad' in 2005, compared to 50% in 2004), most Iraqis (64% in 2004 and 56.6% in 2005) mentioned 'regaining public security in the country' as their number one priority.

Ethnic Entrepreneurs, Local Insurgents, and Foreign Volunteers

The second domestic factor that deserves attention is the role of belligerent entrepreneurs who capitalize on the weakness of the central government to further their goals. In Iraq's urban areas, militias that draw on ethnic symbols cater to the real or purported security needs of their communities, while in the countryside, powerful leaders of clans and tribes protect their members against militia encroachment (Daragahi, 2004). But, for some of these actors, and especially those who wish to challenge the hegemonic status of their intracommunal rivals, the continued state of lawlessness in the country represents an opportunity to assert themselves by claiming to address their communities' needs, and especially security. While these 'ethnic entrepreneurs' can afford to use only limited violence against their intracommunal opponents – to act otherwise might alienate their kin – 'resistance' to the foreign occupation or 'retaliation' against other communities could win them popular support.

A noted example is the young Shi'i leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose militia, the Mahdi Army, has been one of the major forces opposed to the US forces in Iraq since 2003 and is believed to be behind many attacks against Sunnis,

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particularly since the bombing of the Shi'i shrine in Samarra in February 2006. A scion of a prominent family of Shi'i clerics, but having only modest religious training himself, al-Sadr, through his open defiance of the US-led occupation, has sought to outmaneuver his intracommunal rivals: the Tehran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its militia, the Badr Brigades; Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraq's Shi'is, who has adopted a moderate stance toward the USA; and the London-based Shi'i activist Abd al-Majid al-Khu'i, who was murdered upon his arrival in Najaf in April 2003, allegedly by al-Sadr's supporters. Al-Sadr's defiant stance towards the US forces in Iraq, demonstrated in two violent struggles that his militia waged against them in 2004, has enhanced his political standing. In the parliamentary elections of December 2005, al-Sadr won 33 seats and became one of the major supporters of Iraq's prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki (Shi'i). At the same time, and especially since the Samarra bombing, the Mahdi Army became the main force defending the Shi'is against Sunni attacks, raising doubts as to al-Sadr's actual control over the militia (Cole, 2003; Rahimi, 2004; Rosen, 2006).

Another type of ethnic entrepreneur, though one that is not always recognized as such, are the Iraqi 'insurgents' fighting against the US-led occupation. These fighters, who are mostly Sunnis, direct their military efforts against both the US forces and the local ISF in an attempt to restore their community's privileged position in the state (Cordesman, 2005; Eisenstadt & White, 2005; Biddle, 2006).

Finally, there are the Arab and Muslim volunteers who have arrived in Iraq since 2003 to fight its foreign occupation. These fighters, who are mostly Sunnis, are believed to be behind some of the deadliest attacks against Iraq's Shi'is, in addition to their struggle against the US forces and the ISF. Hence, they too have played an important role in pushing the country toward civil war.[8]

As these examples suggest, significant parts of Iraq, and especially its large cities, have become an arena for various political actors who seek to enhance their own standing by purportedly addressing their communities' security. Since political 'newcomers' try to compensate for their inferior position within their community by attacking its enemies, this situation is particularly prone to negative outbidding; alliances between local actors and foreign players; intercommunal attacks and counter-attacks; and fighting between local militias and foreign fighters, on the one hand, and the US forces and the ISF (which has been penetrated by Shi'i militias, see above), on the other.

[8] According to documents published by US agencies in 2004 and 2005, targeting Iraq's Shi'is was advocated by Abu Musib al-Zarqawi, leader of the Arab fighters in Iraq, but objected to by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy. See 'Text from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi Letter', 12 February 2004; available at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212_zarqawi_full.html (accessed 9 August 2007); 'Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi', 9 July 2005; available at: http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm (accessed 9 August 2007).

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Thus, despite the fact that many political leaders in Iraq (including some Sunnis) have decided to participate in its new political system, and particularly in the parliamentary elections of December 2005, they and other leaders who have refused to do so still have an incentive to use violence, especially when it helps keep their hold on their constituencies.

Long-Term Animosities, Mutual Apprehensions, and Fears

The last factor that warrants consideration is the long-term animosities and mutual apprehensions and fears among members of Iraq's major communities and the failure to address these factors in a satisfactory manner since 2003. As mentioned earlier, Iraq under the Ba'ath Party had been dominated by the Sunni community, and especially by members of Saddam Hussein's extended family, town, and region. In fact, Sunni domination had existed in Iraq since the country's independence in the 1930s. In later decades, the Iraqi regime brutally suppressed Kurdish revolts, and during the Iraq–Iran War the Iraqi Army used chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians. In 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, the Iraqi Army quelled the Kurdish and Shi'i uprisings. In 2003, however, it was the Shi'is and Kurds who were the allies of the US forces in Iraq, whereas the Sunnis lost their deep-seated privileges in the state.

What was needed, in view of this bitter legacy of intercommunal relations, were credible guarantees for all of Iraq's communities that would foster cooperation on the political level. As in other divided societies, this could have been provided by power-sharing and/or federative settlements that would limit the possibility of repression and retribution (Lijphart, 1977, 2004; O'Leary, McGarry & Salih, 2005), credible commitments by outside powers (Walter, 2001), or both. But this was not the case.

On the domestic level, considerable efforts were made to include Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq's interim Governing Council, the Iraqi Parliament, and the government. In addition, both the provisional constitution and the draft of the Iraqi Constitution featured clauses that addressed all of these groups' collective rights (*New York Times*, 2005; Brown, 2005). However, since Iraq's security sector remained primarily in the hands of Kurds and Shi'is, it is not surprising that many Sunnis considered its agencies – especially the ISF and the police – as hostile, and that this factor impinged on their willingness to cooperate with those communities in the political arena.[9]

But, making credible commitments to Iraq's communities by outside forces was also problematic. Although the USA gave assurances to the Kurds and the Shi'is, both communities harbored resentment against it for failing to come to their help during the 1991 uprisings (Galbraith, 2003). Moreover, in view of the failure of previous US-sponsored 'nation-building' projects in the

[9] In March 2006, an ethnically mixed 19-member National Security Council was announced, but Shi'i leaders objected to its formation.

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Third World (e.g. in Vietnam, Lebanon in 1982–84, and Somalia in 1993), it was only logical for Iraq's Kurds and Shi'is to expect that if the number of US casualties in Iraq were to rise significantly, the Bush administration would find it increasingly difficult to 'maintain the course' there (see Pape, 2003). Iraqi Sunnis, for their part, needed credible assurances that they would not suffer retribution and would be regarded as equal partners in the 'New Iraq'. But, while US officials did make considerable efforts to include Sunni leaders in Iraq's new political institutions – sometimes alienating their Shi'i and Kurdish allies in the process – Sunnis remained marginalized in Iraq's new security sector, thus signaling that, in effect, one type of communal domination had replaced another.

Making credible commitments to Iraq's major communities was problematic also because of the ambiguity surrounding the motives for the US involvement. Initially, the Bush administration claimed that Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Regime had ties to al-Qaeda and were clandestinely developing weapons of mass destruction. But, since both claims were soon disputed, US leaders felt obliged to change their rhetoric and explained that a war against Iraq would promote democracy in the Middle East. This ambiguity, coupled with the belief that the USA was, in fact, interested in gaining control over Iraq's vast oil resources (Klare, 2002), made the US role in Iraq problematic. But, the US intervention itself also raised antagonism: Three and a half years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, 78% of Iraqis opined that the US military presence in their country was 'provoking more conflict than it is preventing', and this view was shared not only by 97% of the Sunnis but also by 82% of the Shi'is, who were supposedly better off since 2003. Only the Kurds (56%) considered the US military presence in Iraq to be 'a stabilizing force' (WPO, 2006).

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the conflict in Iraq can be traced to three major factors: first, a growing intercommunal security dilemma, which is traceable to the lack of order and stability in the country; second, the rise of belligerent ethnic entrepreneurs who have capitalized on this political and security void; third, the growing fears of domination and retribution among Iraq's communities, which have not been ameliorated by political settlements and foreign guarantees. Thus, while many Shi'is and Kurds suspect the USA owing to its past record of foreign intervention both generally and vis-à-vis Iraq, Sunnis decry the loss of their privileges in the country, fear retribution from other communities, and charge the latter of collaborating with the enemies of Iraq and the Arabs. While Shi'is and Kurds (together with some Sunnis) have

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participated in the political process in Iraq and came to dominate its new security sector, many Sunnis have regarded these communities' increased power as an attempt to dominate the state, or, in the case of the Kurds, as a prelude to separatism. Finally, while many Sunnis reject the US occupation and Sunnis are believed to be behind many of the attacks on US forces, the ISF, and other communities, Shi'is and Kurds, while differing in their positions regarding the US 'presence' in Iraq, see this violence as an attempt to roll back political developments in Iraq and retaliate against the Sunni community.

What, then, are the possible consequences of the conflict in Iraq for domestic, regional, and international security, and what can be done to ameliorate it?

In their comprehensive study of civil wars since 1945, Fearon & Laitin (2003) show that rather than being induced by ethnic or religious diversity, these conflicts stem from two major factors: first, the weakness of the post-colonial state, which is unable to impose its authority over its entire territory; second, the continued existence of small groups of insurgents with military capacities that can avert suppression by the central government while imposing their will on various social groups. In the case of Iraq since 2003, both factors have been at work, together with the long-term animosities, fears, and apprehensions among Iraq's major communities. The result is a bloody civil war with an unmistakable communal character.

Yet, the factors for the Iraqi conflict are not only domestic. When the USA decided to reformulate its Middle Eastern policy after 9/11, emphasis was placed on the region's 'outlaw states' (Simpson, 2004). However, little attention was devoted to the reality *within* these states and to broader regional dynamics, while US capacities to affect them were overestimated. A year and a half later, when the USA set out to topple Saddam Hussein's 'evil' regime, it underestimated the salience of internal cleavages in Iraq and failed to consider how its actions might affect that country's pattern of intercommunal relations. After having dispersed Iraq's ruling elite, regime, and security sector, the USA did not restore law and order in the country and did not establish effective or legitimate institutions that would mitigate the security concerns of Iraq's communities.

On the regional level, too, US leaders failed to provide Iraq's close neighbors, Syria and Iran, with guarantees that would make them more accepting of the US role in Iraq, resulting in a regional climate that is neither conducive to the USA's 'nation-building' project nor hospitable to political reforms elsewhere in the Middle East. This is not to say that Iran and Syria had been on good terms with Saddam Hussein before 2003: Iran had fought a long and devastating war with Iraq, and Syria supported Iran in that war and severed diplomatic ties with Iraq in 1982 (these were restored in 2006). Yet, the circumstances in which the Iraqi leader was deposed and the violent consequences were in neither state's interest: not only have Syria and Iran become more apprehensive about their own sovereignty, but they also face the threat

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of spillover of intercommunal tensions. Indeed, some of the actions that these states have taken since 2003, such as reinforcing their bilateral ties and supporting Iraq's 'insurgents' (Syria) and Shi'i militias (Iran) can be seen as responses to this challenge.[10]

What implications could a failure of this most recent US 'nation-building' project have both for Iraq and for regional and international security? If Iraq continues its slide toward an all-out intercommunal conflict, this may result in even greater loss of lives and devastation and additional spillover of tensions into its neighbors. But, on the global level too, the potential risks cannot be overstated.

If the invasion of Iraq was defended by its proponents as a means to reduce nuclear proliferation and combat international terrorism, then its results cannot be more paradoxical. The defiance of Iraq's sovereignty was not lost on other 'rogue states' – especially Iran and North Korea, which were also included in the 'Axis of Evil', defined by President Bush in 2002. Libya's reaction, the acceleration of its rapprochement with the West, including a commitment to abandon its nuclear arms program, was one example of how 'rogue states' could respond to this challenge. But, North Korea quickly set another by disclosing that it had nuclear arms and performing a nuclear test. As far as Iran and Syria are concerned, the former seems bent on acquiring nuclear arms while the latter lacks such capacities. In any case, the strategic choices made by both states would no doubt be influenced by their proximity to Iraq, which makes them particularly vulnerable to developments there.

But, the current situation in Iraq also works against efforts to reduce global terrorism. According to a CIA report from May 2005, Iraq had, since 2003, become 'a training ground in which novice terrorists were schooled in assassinations, kidnappings, car bombings and other terror techniques' and could 'prove to be more effective than Afghanistan in the early days of Al Qaeda as a place to train terrorists who could then disperse to other parts of the world, including the United States' (quoted in Herbert, 2005; see also Schmitt, 2005a). According to the US National Intelligence Estimate from 2006, 'the Iraq conflict has become the "cause celebre" for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement' (NIE, 2006).

There are ways to reduce the violence in Iraq, but these require a change in US policies both there and in the wider Middle East. First, power-sharing

[10] In October 2005, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad mentioned the threats inherent in the continued state of disorder in Iraq: 'The first danger threatening Iraq is eliminating its Arab identity under a number of pretexts and implications which are at odds with the history of Iraq and its people. The second danger is the political and security chaos which pervades the Iraqi arena and which is directly related to the question of Iraq's territorial integrity. The more chaos prevails, the greater the possibility for internal strife, which increases the danger on Iraq and leads to shedding more of the blood of innocent Iraqis. Both dangers pave the way before the disintegration of Iraq with its incumbent direct dangers for Iraq's neighbors'; see Assad (2005).

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mechanisms ought to be introduced into Iraq's security sector, thus assuring all communities that they would not be oppressed. This could be achieved by making structural readjustments in the command of the security services and in the controlling civilian bodies to create a 'grand coalition' in all security-related matters; changing the composition of the security sector to make it more socially representative; and redefining the identity, mission, and tasks of the security sector to enhance its representativeness.[11] Second, an international peacekeeping force, preferably one that is sanctioned by the UN and includes a large number of Muslims, including Sunni Muslims from the Middle East, should replace the US forces in Iraq. Third, the USA must engage in direct dialogue with Iran and Syria regarding Iraq and other issues of mutual concern, such as Iran's nuclear program and the Middle East peace process. This may encourage Syria and Iran to seal their borders with Iraq and exert a moderating influence on their Iraqi clients.

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[11] For further discussion, see Barak (2006).

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