

Iraq in 2012: four scenarios

By Volker Perthes

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The United States is in the middle of an intense series of discussions, hearings and reports about the future of its military forces in Iraq. Each assessment [1] of the current predicament carries some implication for possible ways forward. But the unfolding pattern of events in Iraq is not a matter for the US alone: whatever happens in that country will profoundly affect the lives of Iraqis themselves and people and states in the neighbouring region.

What then will happen in Iraq over the next five years? This article presents and outlines four scenarios.

Scenarios are thought-experiments of possible, contrasting futures. They are not about probabilities. Different scenarios may be more or less likely, but in principle each presents policy-makers with the same degree of challenge: thinking about how to prepare for them or how to prevent what would be regarded as the less favoured ones.

A simple scenario exercise identifies two main drivers of future development in a specific setting. In the case of Iraq, we can consider one external factor (the presence of United States troops) and an internal one (the ability of Iraqi political actors to achieve consensus on the most important constitutional distributional questions) as the most relevant drivers. Together they form a matrix with a horizontal axis that reaches from a total withdrawal of US forces to their remaining in place; and a vertical axis for the range of possibilities between no consensus among Iraqi actors at the bottom to consensus about the most important questions at the top.

Four different futures for Iraq [5] thus become apparent: with US troops either in or out of the country, a domestic consensus either achieved or missed. With a name to each of these Iraqi futures in 2012, we can now develop a short story about the developments that could have led to this outcome since 2007. The reader is invited to gauge the plausibility of each individual story.

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A German-language version of this article, entitled Schönes neues Babylon [4], was published in *Die Zeit* on 16 August 2007

Belgium

The gradual withdrawal of United States coalition forces was finally completed in spring 2011, following the parliamentary elections of December 2010, which had taken place as scheduled and without any major problems at the end of the Iraqi parliament's four-year-term.

This election had been preceded, one year earlier, by a referendum on the revised constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq which provided for constitutional federalism [6] with three autonomous regions - north, centre and south - plus the federal-capital region of Baghdad, which had a special power-sharing regime. The central government is in charge of foreign relations, defence, and the distribution of oil and customs income, but taxation, civil-status legislation, and control over local police and the regional national-guard units are left to the

regions.

Agreement on the constitutional revisions had been reached only after President Barack Obama [12] had brought about a drastic shift of US policies towards Iraq. Rather than demanding that certain benchmarks be reached prior to further reductions and an eventual withdrawal of US troops, he had openly challenged the Iraqi government and political actors as well as Iraq's regional neighbours with a clear declaration: US troops would be completely withdrawn by the end of his first year in office unless the Iraqis reached consensus about basic constitutional questions, there was reconciliation between the country's confessional groups, and all Iraq's neighbours committed themselves to forming a regional stability pact and abstaining from any intervention in Iraq's internal affairs.

Also in openDemocracy on Iraq: Paul Rogers, professor of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England, has been writing a weekly column on global security on since 26 September 2001.

Many instalments track the Iraq war in the context of the wider region. Among them:

"A thirty-year war [7]" (4 April 2003)

"The war for Gulf oil [8]" (26 May 2004)

"The world as a battlefield [9]" (9 February 2006)

"The war on terror: past, present, future [10]" (24 August 2006)

"The United States and Iran: the logic of war [11]" (1 February 2007)

Only under these conditions, President Obama pledged, would the US be prepared to maintain a reduced level of troops inside the country to complete ongoing training missions and give support to Iraqi security forces to guarantee security up to and during the general elections of 2010. It was only under these conditions too that the president would give a security guarantee for Iraq - a commitment (from US over-the-horizon bases [13]) to defend the country and deter potential aggressors - after the eventual withdrawal from the country.

Iraq's parties, political and religious leaders took up the challenge, and so did the country's neighbours. All feared the risk of total anarchy if the US were to withdraw too speedily. At a series of conferences, Iraqi leaders hammered out the compromises of constitutional federalism. At the same time, religious leaders convened a National Reconciliation Commission. Representatives of the US, Britain, Iraq, and Iraq's immediate neighbours, meeting almost daily in a contact group at the United Nations in New York, agreed on the outlines of a stability pact for the greater Gulf region that centred on non-aggression, confidence-building, and economic cooperation.

Iraq's new constitution, with its two-chamber parliament and the representation of regions as well as religious and ethnic community leaders in the senate, is somewhat complicated; but it appears to be functioning. Local politics are still marked by high levels of tension. Among other things, the Arab minority in Kirkuk [14] as well the Kurds in Mosul have regularly complained about violations of their constitutionally guaranteed language rights. Leaders with sectarian agendas have come to dominate various municipal councils, among other places in the larger cities of Basra and Baquba. The fragmentation of the political scene means that coalition government breaks down frequently into various regional and ethnic parties. No truly national party has been formed. However, the country holds together on the basis of expedience: at the least, stability has been achieved, foreign intervention has stopped, and the economy is picking up due to undisrupted oil exports [15] and a steady stream of Gulf-Arab direct investments.

Somalia

No American troops are left in Iraq, and no domestic consensus has been reached. The complete withdrawal [25] of United States forces had begun immediately after the inauguration of President John Edwards [26] in January 2009. In light of the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, Edwards's campaign slogan ("We're not the world's policeman") and his promise of a swift exit from Iraq certainly helped him win the presidential elections.

Among openDemocracy's many articles on Iraqi war and politics are:

Sami Zubaida, "The rise and fall of civil society in Iraq [16]" (5 February 2003)

Peter Sluglett, "Iraq's short century: old problems, new perspectives" [17] (3 June 2003)

Wendell Steavenson, "Afterwards [18]" (12 June 2003)

Fred Halliday, "Looking back on Saddam Hussein [19]" (9 January 2004)

Sami Zubaida, "The next Iraqi state: secular or religious? [20]" (15 February 2004)

The withdrawal was messy: pictures of rioters burning down Saddam's former palace which had served as the US embassy for the past several years, and of the gruesome killings of US-trained Iraqi guards and interpreters who had to be left behind, provoked some critical comments about the new president's performance. But after all, he had fulfilled his promise, and by August 2009, the US was out.

2004)

Fred Halliday, "[America and Arabia after Saddam](#) [21]" (13 May 2007)

Omar A Omar, "[Kirkuk: microcosm of Iraq](#) [22]" (21 March 2005)

Zaid al-Ali, "[Iraq's war of elimination](#) [23]" (21 August 2006)

Tareq Y ismael, "[The Iraq Study Group report: an assessment](#) [24]" (8 December 2006)

Inside Iraq, the recently appointed committee for revision of the constitution suspended its work after serious disagreements; and the Nouri al-Maliki government resigned after the takeover of the "green zone" by the so-called Real Mahdi Army. President [Jalal Talabani](#) [27] appointed [Iyad Allawi](#) [28] as the new prime minister, but the latter was unable to obtain a vote of confidence in parliament. By the end of 2009, Talabani had also resigned and moved to Sulaimaniya to personally look after the affairs of his constituency, and countebalance the monopoly of power and positions in Iraqi Kurdistan by the regional president, [Masoud Barzani](#) [29] and his Kurdish Democratic Party.

Its [virtual isolation](#) [30] from the rest of the country means that Iraqi Kurdistan remains relatively safe. This is largely owed too to a bilateral agreement which the regional government had concluded with Turkey, against the protest of the Iraqi ministry of defence. The agreement allowed a permanent Turkish military presence in the Kandil mountains; but in return, Turkey accepted the *de-facto* independence of Iraqi [Kurdistan](#) [31] and promised to keep open the common border and pipeline connections between the region and Turkey. Unfortunately, most Arabs have now been driven out of Kirkuk, and many lives were lost during these events. But otherwise, the region as well as the frontier between the region and the rest of Iraq has been relatively stable.

This cannot be said of other Iraqi regions. Different militias took control over various districts and quarters of [Baghdad](#) [32] as US forces withdrew. By 2012, the capital had lost 50% of its former inhabitants. Only Sadr City is now relatively calm and has even experienced some positive economic development; but the old business centre lies in ruins, and the Mansur district has been taken over by refugees from other parts of the city.

In Basra, too, local authorities have been able to establish relative calm. However, this was made possible only at the price of a strong Iranian presence in the city, following a "call of support" from local notables when clashes between rival [Shi'a](#) [33] factions had exploded in early 2010. The Saudi navy had responded to the deployment of a brigade of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, by blocking the port of Umm Qasr which had the undesired effect of making the [Iraqi south](#) [34] even more dependent on Iran. Saudi Arabia also sent a detachment of its national guard to Anbar province, where it has repeatedly clashed with Jordanian and, on other occasions, Syrian troops.

Syrian intelligence controls the city of al-Qaim on the Euphrates and most of the smaller places close to the Syrian border. In an environment where there is no central authority, most Iraqi provinces have been effectively [cantonised](#) [35] into small fiefdoms of rival militias, and there are repeated clashes between local militias and various criminal networks, the economy has been caught in a downward spiral. State institutions responsible for providing electricity, water, or schooling have broken down. Oil production has declined to some 300,000 barrels per day. Most pipelines - except for the Kirkuk-Turkey line - have been destroyed; the oil that is still being produced in the south is sold to Jordan and Syria and transported there by truck, with the resulting gains being privatised by the militias.

South Korea

Nine years after the 2003 invasion, more than 100,000 United States troops are still in the country, and a certain domestic consensus about the rules of the game has been established. In summer 2009, following an inter-agency review of the situation in Iraq and the middle east, President Hillary Clinton [36] decided to keep most of the troops in Iraq and make a public, binding commitment to defend Iraq as well as the Gulf-Arab monarchies against any open Iranian aggression or Iranian attempts to undermine the security of these states.

Against the background of the gradual but visible success of US forces and the newly established so-called "Iraqi Tribal and Home Guard" in fighting al-Qaida and other extremist groups, the majority of the Iraqi parliament accepted the continued presence of US troops for the medium-term future and asked the government to begin negotiations over a Troop Stationing and Mutual Defence Agreement with the United States, according to which US troops would gradually move from policing to training - and beyond that provide a credible deterrence against any potential threat from Iran.

Tensions with Iran have indeed increased, and the cold-war spirit between the two countries has escalated. A clear majority of Iraqis has been happy to side in this dispute with the US, given particularly the fact that all provinces and towns where the cooperation of local forces with the Iraqi government and the US troops has been deemed satisfactory have received enormous amounts of financial aid.

At the same time, the Mutual Defence Treaty which was eventually concluded between Washington and Baghdad early in 2011 is not to everybody's liking. A number of Iraqi deputies voted against the treaty, though not enough to win a majority. The popular dissent that manifested itself in unrest in Mosul, Tikrit, and Najaf was easily suppressed by a military which has grown in strength and begun to develop a new corporate identity as the "Shield of National Unity and Iraqiness". Iraq has not become a military dictatorship. But the Military Council, which has replaced the old general staff and is composed of an equal number of *Sunni Arab*, *Shi'a*, and Kurdish officers, wields considerable political influence, particularly in matters that impact questions of national security.

In parliament, the former *Shi'a* block has splintered; some factions were not happy with the government's confrontational stance towards Iran, and the decline of economic, cultural, and social exchanges between the two countries that had ensued. A by-product of this intra-*Shi'a* split is that the division has made it easier to preserve Iraq's still vulnerable parliamentary democracy; as no *Shi'a* group has been able to form a majority on its own or even with the support of the Kurdish parties, *Sunni Arab* groups and politicians who are now needed to form any solid coalition have found it easier to accept the new political system.

Thirty years' war

The five years since 2007 have not been good for Iraq or the middle east. A combination of factors - continued tension with Iran over its nuclear programme, strenuous lobbying by the new Saudi monarch, King Sultan bin Abdul Aziz [37], and the breakdown of efforts by United States ambassador Ryan Crocker and military commander General David Petraeus [38] to forge a domestic political consensus in Iraq and train a sufficient number of Iraqi troops - led President Mitt Romney [39] eventually to decide to maintain the US presence in the region. After all, he declared, the United States has a mission: it obtained a certain responsibility for the country and cannot afford to give in to terrorist forces. The aim is not, however, to control the villages and towns. Rather, the US will secure strategic locations in the capital, military installations around the country, and the main oil infrastructure.

While this redeployment has been going on, both the insurgency [40] (involving intermittent attacks against American forces) and a civil war (or rather, a number of mini-civil wars) between various groups and factions have been continuing. At the regional level, tensions increased when the protracted negotiations between Iran and the European Union (which had some support from the US) eventually broke down after the re-election [41] of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [42] in summer 2009.

In spring 2010, an incident [43] in the Straits of Hormuz was the prelude to dramatic confrontation. What happened involved a US frigate and some Iranian speedboats, though the precise details of the incident have not become clear. The United States embarked on a week-long bombing campaign against Iranian military and industrial installations. Iran responded, among other things, with several missile attacks on oil installations in Saudi Arabia and by encouraging Lebanon's Hizbollah [44] to attack Haifa with a barrage of rockets.

Israel retaliated by bombing the oil refinery in Homs, Syria. This in turn precipitated the overthrow of President Bashir al-Assad [45] by his brother-in-law, General Shaukat. The new leader established military rule and announced that he was prepared to cooperate with the US in Iraq and cut relations with Iran on condition of Washington's agreement to Syria's deployment of a military-stabilisation mission into Lebanon, and the reopening of the Kirkuk-Banias pipeline.

The US did not officially reject the Syrian offer, but a spokesman declared that Syria would first have to prove through its behaviour towards Iraq its worthiness as a partner for cooperation on other regional issues. Meanwhile, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran all have positioned troops inside Iraq in areas close to their own borders. There have been repeated clashes pitting Iranian against US or Saudi forces, as well as between various Iraqi militias and Turkish, Syrian, or Saudi troops.

The Iraqi government - though still the legitimate and internationally recognised government of Iraq - has no real control other than over the areas and installations that are effectively guarded by the US army. Its complete dependence on the US has further weakened it politically; at the same time, this situation makes it increasingly difficult for the US to keep its hands out of Iraqi politics or to assume a referee's role among the various local and regional parties fighting it out in Iraq.

In these circumstances, it is little wonder that *jihadis* from various countries see Iraq as a proper battleground to fight the United States. The sermons of preachers in countries as far from Iraq as Bangladesh and the Philippines resound to calls for volunteers to go to Iraq. As 2012 draws to a close, one of the Iraqi newspapers that still appear intermittently publishes a front-page headline: "Remember how good we had it in 2007?"

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