

The United States' Tragic Role in Iraq

The dramatic rise of the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—which even al-Qaeda deemed too extreme to remain part of its network—is a tragedy by any measure. It would also be tragic if we allowed the very forces that created this mess to explain it away.

Despite claims by the Bush administration and its supporters to the contrary, outside of a few dozen fighters in a remote valley of the Kurdish autonomous region, there was no Al-Qaeda or related Salafi extremist presence in Iraq under the Saddam Hussein regime. But now, thanks to the U.S. invasion and occupation, the extremists control most of the northern and western parts of the country, including Iraq's second largest city.

Under U.S. occupation, Iraq's two major bastions of secular nationalism—the armed forces and the civil service—were effectively abolished, only to be replaced by partisans of sectarian Shiite parties and factions, some of which were closely allied to Iran. Sunni extremists, believing Iraqi Shias had betrayed their country to Persians and Westerners, began targeting Shia civilian neighborhoods with terrorist attacks. The Iraqi regime and allied militia then began systematically kidnapping and murdering thousands of Sunni men. The so-called “sectarian” conflict, then, has been a direct consequence of U.S. policy.

Despite this, recognizing al-Qaeda related extremists among them were a bigger threat, Sunni tribesmen and other leaders in northern and western Iraq agreed in 2007 to ally with the government in return for better incorporating Sunnis into the government and armed forces. This led to a temporary lull in the fighting, which Republicans and various pundits have falsely attributed to the U.S. troop surge that followed.

However, the Maliki regime did not come through with its end of the agreement. Indeed, discrimination and repression [increased](#). Nonviolent protesters were gunned down. Dissident journalists were targeted for imprisonment and assassination. There was widespread torture. Thousands of Iraqis were detained for years without trial. Sunnis and their communities faced rampant discrimination and the Maliki regime became recognized by [Transparency International](#) as one of the most corrupt governments in the world.

As a result, when ISIS emerged as the latest manifestation of al-Qaeda-style extremists, the Sunni population—despite their relatively secular outlook and strong opposition to such ideologies and tactics—found them to be the lesser evil, and various militia have joined with their former rivals in expelling government forces.

Their advance was made easier by the failure of the Iraqi army to fight. As the U.S. learned in South Vietnam, no matter how well you train a foreign army and how many arms you provide them, they will only be successful if they believe their regime is worth fighting and dying for.

The good news is that, thanks to an influx of Shiite militia and Iranian Revolutionary Guard fighting alongside the army, the ISIS advance appears to have stalled. The bad news is that it will reinforce the sense among the Sunni population that their country is controlled by Iranian-backed Shiite sectarians, which will only strengthen the power of religious chauvinists within their own community. Should there be attacks by the regime and its allies on the ISIS-occupied cities, the inevitable civilian death toll that would result would only increase the country's divisions further.

It is ironic that many of the very U.S. politicians and pundits who supported the invasion and occupation of Iraq are now being paraded through the mainstream media giving advice on how the Obama administration should respond, ignoring how the rise of ISIS and the underlying “sectarian” conflict is a direct consequence of Bush administration policies.

It is particularly bizarre that some of the very people who supported the illegal and unnecessary invasion of Iraq are now trying to somehow blame Obama for the unfolding fiasco. Obama opposed the war in part because he recognized that a U.S. invasion and occupation would “only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaida.”

Ironically, in that same [2002 speech](#), Obama called on the Bush administration to “make sure our so-called allies...stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality, and mismanaging their economies so that their youth grow up without education, without prospects, without hope, the ready recruits of terrorist cells.” Unfortunately, as president, Obama has spent more than \$25 billion in taxpayer money arming, training, and propping up the corrupt, oppressive, and discriminatory Maliki regime in Baghdad whose policies have directly resulted in the rise of the ISIS extremists.

There do not seem to be any good options for the United States to pursue now. Since the ISIS takeover is in many respects part of a larger popular rebellion, it cannot be reversed simply through air strikes and drone attacks. Conditioning aid on the Maliki regime becoming more democratic, inclusive, and transparent would seem like a sensible first step, but instigating such reforms would be difficult in the midst of such a major crisis. Ultimately, as difficult as it may seem for many Americans to accept, the Iraqis may just need to work things out themselves. Almost everything else the United States has done to that country in recent decades has only made things worse.

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