

Does Iraq Have a Future?
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The blame game is going on about Iraq's descent into regional warfare. This is a futile exercise unless changes of policy and real geopolitical insight go along with the blame.

The Bush administration is rightly blamed for involving the US in an invasion of the wrong country, using specious excuses. However, that invasion could have done the region good by just removing Saddam Hussein, a very dangerous opportunist who threatened the region. But real blame should fall on the idiotic occupation, which dismantled the Iraqi army and goaded the various ethnicities into civil war. We should have just removed Saddam and replaced him with an Iraqi general, preferably one with US training. A well-run Iraq could have, over time, morphed into representative government (as did South Korea and Taiwan).

President Obama can be blamed for over-correcting the foolish Bush policy. He, like most Americans, just wanted our forces out. Bad policy. By retaining US forces in South Korea and Germany and Japan since the end of both the Korean War and World War II has stabilized those areas so that they could evolve into respectable democracies.

So what will become of Iraq now? First of all, we must see that the whole Middle East is going through a shakedown of the lines drawn on the map in 1918 by England and France. Disparate tribal areas, religiously reactionary rural areas and cosmopolitan cities were all pushed into nations that could never survive without strong dictatorships holding them together. Today, the dictatorships are falling one by one (Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and maybe Syria). When dictators fall, democracy does not follow; people revert to clan or religious sect. We witnessed that process years ago in Lebanon, which fell from democracy to a shooting gallery of sectarian hatreds.

Now we are watching a crazy Islamist military cult take over town after town in the Sunni parts of Iraq and in Syria. Why aren't the Sunnis (many of them secular and middle class) defending their countries? In Iraq, the Sunnis, now a minority, have been persecuted by their Shiite undemocratic president and in Syria, the Sunni majority has been persecuted by their Shiite dictatorial government. But before we assume that the crazies will win ultimately and establish an Islamic Caliphate, we must remember that not all Sunnis are crazies. If the Islamists were to win, they would very shortly fragment into warring factions. It is already happening.

The Middle East is a mess, but there are steps that we can take that will benefit our overall, long-term goals for the area. If Iraq falls into the three parts from which it was first carved in 1918 (Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite), we can work to keep them in a relatively functioning federation. We helped to do this for the Kurds after the first Gulf War just by providing air security (no fly zones) so that Saddam Hussein could not harm them. This security helped the Kurds create a very good functioning democracy, just one step removed from new nationhood.

We, our allies (Saudis, Jordanians, Lebanese) and adversaries (Iran) in the Middle East do share some goals: the Sunnis want decent representation in any government in which they are either the majority or the large minority. The Shiites (including Iran) want to make sure that Shiite minorities (or majorities) are not persecuted. All of these groups (including Israel) do not want Islamists winning anything! They are bad news wherever they go, and wear out their welcome wherever they prevail, as in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Chad.

In Syria, it appears the Assad government is stronger than we thought. In Iraq, even the revered Shiite grand Ayatollah Sistani is urging that the thuggish President Maliki government be replaced. Iran could be helpful (privately) on both fronts. They could withdraw their revolutionary guards and quit arming Hezbollah if a peace treaty could be made that keeps Assad temporarily in place. In Iraq, they too are not pleased with Maliki and in exchange for protecting Shiite shrines, could help remove him.

Not easy, but worth trying.

676 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.