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Center for Strategic and International Studies

1800 K Street N.W.

Washington, DC 20006

(202) 775-3270

To download: csis.org (Strategic Assessment)

To comment: Acordesman@aol.com

Iraq: Is This The Beginning of a Third Gulf War?

Anthony H. Cordesman

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

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Unrest in Iraq: Is This a Beginning of a Third Gulf War?

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It is too soon to describe the nation building effort in Iraq as a failure, although the US had clearly failed to carry out an effective process of conflict termination in the first months following the fall of Baghdad, as well as to make a well-planned transition to nation building. At the same time, the level of violence in Iraq has reached the point where it is beginning to approach a low intensity conflict, and it is time to look beyond the day-to-day list of casualties and consider what might happen in the future.

The best case is that the US-led nation building and security efforts get enough resources to steadily gather momentum, the US and its allies begin to work with the Iraqis to set goals for nation building that win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, some form of pluralist federalism is quickly set up to deal with Iraq's ethnic and sectarian divisions, and the US finds a way to resume oil exports and get enough outside investment support economic reform and development in ways the Iraqi people do not see as an effort to seize their patrimony. None of these goals are impossible, although the rate of progress to date offers no guarantee – or even a high probability – of success.

The most likely case still seems to be a mixed and poorly-coordinated nation building effort that does just enough to put Iraq on a better political and economic path, but does so in a climate of constant low-level security threats and serious Iraqi ethnic and sectarian tensions. This would be a case where the US and other nation-builders muddle through to the point where Iraq is making progress, and they can declare victory and leave. Scarcely the “shining city on a hill” that would transform the entire Middle East, but still a kind of victory and better for the Iraqis than Saddam and Company.

The worst case is very different. It would be a combination of some or all of the following problems:

- The nation building effort continues to blunder. Progress is too slow and too many promises are not kept. Local security is faltering, the

growth in jobs and economic activity is too slow, and many well-intended reforms either do not work or payoff too late to develop any real support or gratitude.

- The problems in nation building increasingly lead the US and its allies to talk in terms of an occupation, rather than a liberation. Rather than Iraq for the Iraqis on Iraqi terms – with clear goals in terms of milestones, political and economic action, and a transition to Iraqi rule – the US muddles through in ways that appear increasingly to involve a presence of 5-10 years. Rather than goals that can attract real Iraqi support, and win hearts and minds, the US appears to be muddling through in an effort to rebuild Iraq in its own image.
- The US and its allies continue to try to find the leaders they want, rather than the leaders the Iraqis want. Rather than screening the Ba'ath and Iraqi military, large blocs of Iraq's best people are rejected because they went along with Saddam's dictatorship to survive. No only is there a major power vacuum, but an increasing incentive to oppose the US-led nation building effort.
- The US security effort to halt the largely Sunni violence in Central Iraq has only partial success – even if Saddam and his sons are caught. It has its tactical successes, but alienates a large number of Sunnis in the process, who feel increasingly disenfranchised as the Shi'ites and Kurds gain a fair share of wealth and power. The remnants of the Ba'ath and the cult of Saddam become a major force in the Sunni part of the population, and low level violence and sabotage combine with a poorly managed nation building effort to create centers of organized opposition to the US and Britain that cannot be eliminated and which undercut much of the nation building effort. Even those Sunnis who do not want Saddam, come to want the US and Britain out. The resulting lack of a political and economic solution means that no military solution is possible.
- The US tries to ignore the lack of any meaningful secular opposition leaders in the Shi'ite south, and to avoid having religious Shi'ites come to power. It increasingly alienates the Shi'ites, who at most tolerated – not supported – the US and British military advance. The end result plays into the hands of religious hard-liners and Iraq. The same pattern of resistance and violence emerges in the South that

already exists in Central Iraq. At the same time, it not only is opposition to the US-led nation building effort, but to political secularism and any reassertion of Sunni/Baa'ath/purely secular authority. Growing sectarian divisions further complicate the nation building effort.

- The Kurds continue to support the US and Britain, but this does not mean Kurdish unity. Barzani and Talibani move back towards at least a covert power struggle as the cash flow from oil for food and smuggling drops. Moreover, ethnic cleansing and power struggles with the Arabs and Turcomans complicate the problems the US has with the Arabs and relations with Turkey. The US gets the blame with Sunnis and Turcomans for the assertion of Kurdish power.
- US efforts to try to create a federal structure that can bridge over the ethnic and sectarian differences between Sunni, Shi'ite, and Kurd come too late to prevent civil tension and violence, and no Iraqi faction is convinced that such efforts will give them a fair share of real power. Fear of prolonged occupation, and the feeling among most Iraqis that those who go along with the US effort simply do so as appeasers and for their own benefit, undercuts the nation-building effort and adds to the level of anti-nation building/anti US and UK violence.
- The US continues to badly mishandle the rehabilitation and expansion of Iraq's energy industry, nation-building contracts and the funding of the effort, and the search for foreign investment. It improvises solutions in Western market terms, failing to realize that oil expert revenues are the only glue that can hold Iraqi federalism together, and that it is operating in a climate of hostile conspiracy theories the believe the US and Britain are in Iraq to seize its oil revenues, benefit from contracts, and finance an occupation. The US and its allies may do the right thing in economic and technocratic terms, but every such action ends in increasing Iraqi distrust and hostility because it lacks transparency and a quick transition to Iraqi planning and control.
- A token 40,000 man Iraqi Army is seen as leaving Iraq defenseless, and as dependent on US and British occupiers. This problem – and the lack of any clear plan to create a meaningful self defense capability against Iran and Turkey, the failure to deal with Iranian

proliferation, and the lack of any clear concept to share power equitably among Iraq's ethnic and sectarian factions – makes the new force seem like a puppet army. Even those officers who seem to support the US and British secretly become increasingly nationalistic and hostile.

- Each step in this process pushes the US and its allies towards more dependence on outside Iraqi opposition leaders who have little real influence and credibility, and dependence on “Iraqi” Iraqis willing to go along with the “occupying” powers for their own benefit. It also creates a climate that is more and more security, rather than nation building oriented. US and allied forces will spend more and more time in “fortress” casernes and headquarters and in patrolling for self-defense purposes.

It should be stressed that there is nothing inevitable about this “worst” case. In fact, each problem just listed is the mirror image of what the US, Britain, and everyone else in the nation building effort need to do to succeed. The problem is that two months after a great military victory, the US and its allies have done far too little to win the peace. Unless this situation changes soon, and radically, the US may end up fighting a third Gulf War against the Iraqi people. If it does, this war will be primarily political, economic, ethnic, and sectarian; and this is a kind of asymmetric war that it is far from clear that the US can win.