

## The Battle for Baghdad

Пише: Kenneth M. Pollack  
среда, 26 август 2009 12:00

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THE SCHEMING had gone on for hours. The Iraqis were from a half dozen different political groupings, some sectarian, some secular. It was Baghdad, it was February 2009 and it was less than a month after Iraq's provincial elections. For our hosts, the purpose of the dinner was to assure me and a colleague that their coalition had enough people on its side to oust Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki in a vote of no confidence. It was one of many such meals we attended on that trip with Iraqi friends determined to prevent Maliki from spinning his recent electoral victories into absolute power.

That night our hosts were hoping to convince us of the strength of their position, but as the evening dragged on, assurances were forgotten. The scheming turned desperate. A little longer and any remaining vestige of confidence was gone altogether. The Iraqis began to reveal, to each other as much as to us, the problems they faced. This party boss would only join if he were named defense minister, but he brought too few votes to justify it. Another group would only join if still another party were excluded. But they would not give up on their dream of ousting Maliki, and their machinations turned to ways of getting around those obstacles.

Finally, the conversation reached its climax. The Iraqis managed to convince themselves they would have the votes they needed. They had convinced themselves that they had ways—tenuous ways, but ways—to overcome their problems. The somber mood of concern that had hung in the room seemed like it was about to lift. They had successfully built a Rube Goldberg machine that would oust the prime minister. Then, at that moment, one member of the group dispelled the whole fantastic edifice: “But Hakim [leader of the most important Shia party] won't agree to a vote of no confidence,” he pointed out glumly. “He says it would look like we were trying to overturn the will of the people. And without ISCI [the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Hakim's party] we don't have the votes.”

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The dream was over. The desperate confidence evaporated. The circle of conversation splintered as some went to get more coffee or tea or sweets; others simply rose to give physical manifestation to their frustration. They fell to complaining about Sa'ïd Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's unwillingness to join a vote of no confidence and to warning us that if the United States did not do something about Prime Minister Maliki we would be facing either a new Saddam or a new civil war. And as the evening faded, their warnings wasted away into plaintive questions about the new Obama administration's willingness to oust Maliki since they could not do it themselves.

America is still all that stands between stability and anarchy in Iraq.

A FEW days earlier we had seen the other side of the coin: a lunch with several of the prime minister's most important confidantes. The tone was understandably different. There was great confidence borne of Maliki's Dawa Party victory in the recent provincial elections. They now had control of many of Iraq's most important provinces and, of far greater importance, momentum. Yet, there was also concern. They knew that their position was hardly unassailable, and they knew all about the dinner meetings going on all over Iraq at which other Iraqi leaders schemed to forge coalitions to prevent them from securing an equal or greater victory in Iraq's national elections scheduled for January 2010. They wanted to convince me and my colleagues that Maliki could not only sweep to power in those polls, but would do so in a perfectly legal, democratic fashion. All of our questions about the prime minister's not-quite-constitutionally stipulated moves—his reliance on regional operations centers outside the official Iraqi military chain of command; the slew of procedures, especially in the oil and electricity sectors, that likewise bypass formal lines of authority; the formation of tribal-support councils beyond the established bureaucratic structure that are used to funnel money to willing sheikhs—were all deflected with pitch-perfect talking points and a Cheshire cat grin.

Here as well, we had many friends, and they knew us well enough to know that we took no sides in Iraq's political battles. So as the afternoon wore on we heard more about their electoral strategy. It was simple and powerful. During 2009, the prime minister would throw himself into the task of solving Iraq's last remaining security problems and improving the provision of basic services like electricity, clean water, sanitation and medical care to the Iraqi people. He would demonstrate that he was the only man who could do so. Many of the prime minister's foes may try to block whatever he tries to do on these scores, and this would only play to his advantage. Maliki and his allies would make the election about the provision of security and basic services, and the only question would be how big their victory would be.

We saw that the strength of this strategy also came from the weaknesses of the parties opposing Maliki, all of which are nearly hopeless when it comes to fashioning their own electoral

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message let alone successfully redefining the issues on which the election will turn.

But we also knew that Maliki had several more aces up his sleeve that were less savory than those our friends wanted to discuss.

IRAQI NATIONALISM is on the rise. And it is this force that the prime minister hopes to unleash if providing basic services is not enough to secure reelection. As always, nationalism is a double-edged sword. It has started to heal the rifts between Sunni and Shia. And it has been the most important factor in limiting Iranian influence. The more Iraqis feel confident in themselves, the more they push back on the mostly despised Persian interlopers. But the forces of nationalism are also threatening to Iraq's minorities and the cohesion of the state, no more so than when it comes to the Kurdish problem.

Since late 2008, Maliki has been deploying more of Iraq's nascent military power to the north and goading the army into regular provocations with the Kurdish militia—the *pesh merga*. The prime minister has a legitimate reason: the Iraqi government's security forces have a right and a need to control all of Iraq's territory. But no one with any sense believes that now is the time to resolve this issue, or that marching army battalions into Kurdistan without an agreement with the Kurds is the right way to do it. Predictably, the Kurds have just as regularly risen to the bait. In August 2008, an Iraqi army operation in the ethnically mixed city of Khanaqin in northeast Iraq nearly resulted in a firefight. Only the timely intervention of the American soldiers accompanying the Iraqi units prevented bloodshed. Since then, Iraqi army and *pesh merga* formations have continued to maneuver against one another constantly, and again it is only the presence of American soldiers that averts violence.

On the streets of most Iraqi cities outside of Iraqi Kurdistan, these near-clashes have cast the Kurds as villains seeking to dismember Iraq, something no Iraqi Arab will countenance. Stoking this rivalry allows Maliki to cast himself as the nationalist champion of a unified Iraq, a very popular position everywhere outside of Kurdistan. It's also not a secondary consideration that the two main Kurdish parties are key allies of the ISCI, Maliki's most dangerous political opponent. Thus, discrediting the Kurds also discredits his Shia political rivals.

Of course, the Kurds aren't blameless. Sometimes in response to Baghdad's moves and sometimes for reasons of their own, they too are taking increasingly provocative actions. The Kurds are threatening to promulgate a constitution for the Kurdish region which diverges from

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the national constitution on key issues like oil and security, which could trigger nationalist outbursts on both sides. Kurdish elements also continue to stir up trouble in places like Mosul and Diyala, and both sides treat the status of the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk like a political football, rather than the kind of powder keg that could bring them all to ruin.

Against this backdrop, the United States is increasingly becoming an impediment for Maliki. American soldiers prevent the clashes he seems to desire between *pesh merga* and Iraqi forces. This not only complicates his election strategy, but is an affront to his own nationalist desire to see the writ of Iraq's central government run everywhere in the country—including Kurdistan.

FOR THE United States, the reemergence of Iraqi nationalism has created two challenges. It produces new incentives to violence that American forces need to prevent. But it has also led many Iraqi politicians, including the prime minister, to take public positions unsupportive of the American presence, even though most know that America's role as peacekeeper, mediator, adviser and capacity-builder remain critical to Iraq's stability and progress.

In 2008, Maliki attempted to replace virtually every commander above battalion level in the Iraqi army divisions in the northern regions of Iraq, and the United States stepped in to prevent him from doing so. In the spring of that year, Maliki once again defied American military advice and launched his security forces unilaterally against the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia of Moktada al-Sadr in Iraq's great southern city of Basra, which they had made their fiefdom. After some initial disasters, the U.S. military came to the rescue, the Iraqis rallied, the people of Basra turned against the Sadrists and JAM was vanquished. Weeks later, a joint American-Iraqi operation cleared the JAM-infested neighborhoods of Sadr City in Baghdad, followed by Iraqi-led operations elsewhere in the south. Although these operations were all heavily supported by the U.S. military, and likely would have failed badly without that support, Prime Minister Maliki seems to have concluded that his security forces are much stronger than either the Americans or his own generals think them to be. He may already believe that by January 2010 they will be ready to handle Iraq's security entirely on their own. But not everyone agrees.

In October 2008, I found myself at yet another tense dinner in Baghdad. It was at the home of one of Iraq's most senior political leaders and when I arrived with several other Americans, a remarkable meeting was still going on nearby. The prime minister had brought the cabinet and other critical leaders together to hear the minister of defense and the minister of the interior brief on the state of the Iraqi security forces. The question before them was whether the government should sign the Security Agreement (SA) then being negotiated with the United States—the agreement that provides for American military forces to remain in Iraq until the end of 2011.

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The rumor among many well-informed Iraqis was that the prime minister wanted the two security ministers to report that the army and police were now ready to secure the country without American military assistance, which would allow him to decline the SA and send the Americans home. My host at that dinner and virtually all of the rest of Iraq's political leadership felt this would be a disastrous mistake. My host assumed that those in the meeting would find out that a group of senior Americans from Washington was sitting right next door, and that this might inject some caution into their decision making. And we Americans realized quickly that we were present just next-door to serve as witnesses and reminders to those in the meeting with the prime minister and the security chiefs that Big Brother may not have been watching, but Uncle Sam was.

The defense minister and interior minister both stood their ground in that meeting, arguing that the Iraqi security forces were still at least three years away from being ready to handle their country's safety on their own. By all accounts, Maliki was disappointed. But after extracting a few more concessions from the American negotiators, he signed the SA and tried to make as little of it as possible. Although it is clear that the political war is not yet won by either side, no one is willing to quit the field either.

The prime minister seems to have, at best, mixed emotions regarding the American presence. On the one hand, his popularity is based on the improvement in security across Iraq, which he recognizes was caused in large measure by the change in American military strategy and tactics (coupled temporarily with the increased numbers of American troops) beginning in 2007 under the leadership of Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno. If the American troops leave and the security situation worsens, his reelection prospects will dim accordingly. He recognizes that the average Iraqi wants to see Iraq stand on its own, but also wants to know that the Americans are still there in the background to prevent his country's problems from mushrooming into another civil war.

But the fact remains that the United States remains a powerful force in Iraq and not every action we take redounds to Maliki's personal or political benefit. The American military and political leadership is focused on what is in the long-term best interests of Iraq, not necessarily the immediate fortunes of the prime minister or his party. And this irritating American predilection seems to weigh evermore heavily in his thinking.

MANY IRAQIS (and many Americans) believe Maliki intends to make himself a new dictator. Although none of us can know what lies in his heart, I suspect that this is not his deliberate aim,

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but may end up being his unintentional goal. Maliki is said to be deeply suspicious by nature—itself not surprising for a longtime member of an underground terrorist movement relentlessly hunted by Saddam's minions. Moreover, he is impetuous and appears to react emotionally when he faces serious resistance. He lashes out at his political rivals and his actions often seem to reflect a frustration and a desire to rid himself of all opposition.

To many Iraqis, his moves look like those of an old-style Iraqi politician scheming to make himself all-powerful by exerting direct control over the levers of power and cutting out potential rivals elsewhere in the Iraqi leadership. But Maliki's supporters counter that the hapless Iraqi bureaucracy is incapable of functioning in a way that could produce the outcomes that the Iraqi people, the Americans, the UN and the rest of the world have repeatedly demanded. Only by circumventing bureaucratic choke points and energizing those responsible for acting can he get the Iraqi system moving. And when it comes to the prime minister's personnel policies, his supporters argue that many in the Iraqi military and bureaucracy serve other masters and so often ignore Maliki's directives, leaving him no choice but to replace them with others willing to follow orders.

Of course, the prime minister is not the only Iraqi politician perched between upholding democracy and subverting it. It was fascinating to hear all those Iraqi politicians back in February conspiring to bring about a vote of no confidence against the prime minister. A few years ago their goal would have been to kill him or simply force him out. It was absolutely stunning to hear them concede that their schemes were fruitless because Hakim, one of the cleverest and most powerful of Iraq's warlords, had refused to participate in a move that could be perceived as subverting the will of the Iraqi people—a conversation that even two years ago would have been unimaginable. But that doesn't mean democracy or even democratization has fully taken hold yet.

AND THEREIN lies the rub. There is still a lot of old-fashioned dirty politics in Iraq—the politics borne of Iraq's descent into civil war that in turn helped accelerate that slide. All of the same parties and all of the same politicians are still there, and they continue to try to maneuver for power any way they can. The ISCI, Dawa, the Sadrists, the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Accord and a handful of others continue to dominate Iraqi politics today just as they did at the height of the civil war.

But democratization is happening in Iraq, and it is transforming the Iraqi political landscape. It has brought new people and new parties to power, it has redistributed power among the old parties and it is creating new incentive structures everywhere. The January 2009 provincial elections killed off at least one of the old militia parties (Fadhila in southern Iraq) and heralded

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the emergence of at least one major new party (al-Hadba in northern Iraq). Moreover, Iraqi politicians everywhere are learning—like Abdul Aziz al-Hakim—that prospering in the new Iraq means responding to the will of the Iraqi people.

The old Iraqi politics of corruption and violence constantly risk subverting or co-opting the new politics of democratization. Left to their own devices, Iraq's militia-politicians would doubtless drive the country back to civil war.

The militia parties who ruled Iraq from 2003 to 2007 are very much alive and well. They remain the major political parties today, albeit mostly without their militias. They too scheme, plot and maneuver constantly. They still bribe and extort. They still assassinate and kidnap. They still steal and vandalize. They can't do it as openly or as much as they once did, and they often have to be much more subtle, but they find ways. Many pine for the "good old days" when their militias ruled the streets, the Iraqi security forces were their Wal-Mart, Iraq's oil fields were their ATMs and the Americans were off on wild-goose chases hunting "terrorists" around the wastelands of Anbar while they held sway over the Iraqi people. And they especially do whatever they can to prevent the emergence of new political parties—parties that are more secular, more democratic, more representative, less corrupt and less violent. If this *modus operandi* prevails and America is forced out, the glimmers of democracy will fade and Iraq will be lost again.

This is why the role of the United States remains critical. American troops are still needed as peacekeepers to prevent the old militia parties—including those that control the government and its security forces—from employing violence to advance their political agendas. And American diplomats are needed to rein in the forces of nationalism, prevent wrangling among the political bosses from causing the Iraqi political process either to halt or explode, and to keep the forces of corruption from derailing the process of democratization that could transform Iraqi politics altogether if it can survive long enough.

This is the stuff of the backroom deals. This has been the cost of the Iraqi historical legacy, the American blunders and an unsurprisingly difficult transition to democracy. The question now is whether the Iraqis can come out the other side of this process. The January elections will be critical in determining the contours of Iraqi politics for years, even decades, to come. There is a lot riding on this vote.

THERE IS growing evidence that the national elections are being set up to fail the Iraqi people.

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The Iraqi government is pushing to hold the elections using “closed” rather than “open” lists. In a closed-list election, individuals vote for a party, and the party determines who will occupy the seats it wins. It is a system that rewards party loyalty and insulates the individual candidate from democratic pressure. In an open-list election, the voters select specific individuals, which makes the members of parliament individually beholden to their constituents.

In 2005, the Iraqi parties were able to convince the United States and the UN to agree to closed-list elections. The result was utterly disastrous elections that helped propel the country into civil war. In January 2009, the United States and UN insisted that Iraq employ open-list voting and this resulted in an extremely positive election that represented a giant step toward greater stability and pluralism.

It is a no-brainer that Iraq should be employing open lists in the January 2010 polls, and yet so far we have not pushed them to do so. All of the Iraqi parties want the closed lists because it will diminish the impact of democratization and allow the old Iraqi politics—and the old Iraqi political parties who benefited from it—to reemerge. For some, it is their last chance to hold on to power because if the Iraqi people get to decide, they will be swept into political oblivion, and so backroom machinations are their only chance. For others, they simply distrust the unpredictability of the democratic process, preferring the greater certainty of deals cut with other parties at the expense of the popular will. Prime Minister Maliki is confident of his own popularity and desirous of the discipline over his own party that closed lists will give him. Thus, all of Iraq’s current power brokers win from closed lists. The only ones who lose are the Iraqi people and anyone who cares about the future stability and progress of Iraq.

And if, as seems likely, Dawa and the ISCI agree to reunite as one unified Shia electoral bloc, this will further limit the ability of the Iraqi people to decide who they want to run their country. In the run-up to the 2005 national elections, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani demanded that all of Iraq’s Shia political parties agree to run as one grand coalition called the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Especially with the change in Iraq’s fortunes after 2007 and the end of the civil war, the disputes among the various Shia groups tore the UIA apart. However, in the spring, reportedly at Iranian or clerical instigation, they moved to resurrect the UIA.

Since there is little chance that the ISCI and Dawa will truly reconcile, the UIA will be a sham. By running jointly, however, it will mean that the process of sorting out which should be more politically powerful will not be decided openly by the Iraqi people voting for the party they prefer, but in the shadows of postelection maneuvering. That fight is unlikely to be resolved

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democratically. Moreover, because the stakes will be so high for both (the UIA will likely garner a plurality of votes, possibly even an outright majority), they will have tremendous incentives to fight to win using whatever methods necessary. It is not a course apt to help Iraq move in the direction of greater stability and security, let alone democracy.

In the spring, another well-sourced rumor began to spread in Baghdad, a rumor that the government planned to move the national referendum on the SA to January 2010, the same time as Iraq's national elections. Holding the referendum at the same time as the national election could be the most dangerous step yet. According to the SA, all American troops must be out of Iraq by the end of 2011. But one of the contingencies placed on the finalized pact was a referendum in which the Iraqi people could vote on the terms. If they vote down the agreement, U.S. troops will have to be out of Iraq within a year and American influence in Iraq will evaporate within a day. This vote promises to be a disaster. It will make the election the referendum itself. If Prime Minister Maliki does push to hold the referendum with the election, it can only mean that his intent is to create a situation in which he is bound to remove one of the main obstacles constraining his freedom of action. He almost certainly will not campaign publicly in favor of the SA, as he did not when it was first signed and ratified in 2008.

By holding the referendum and the election at the same time, Maliki would back his political opposition into a corner. The groups opposing Maliki and his Dawa Party ardently believe that the U.S. military presence remains necessary, at least in part to keep the prime minister in check. However, by making the referendum the critical campaign issue, he would force them to publicly reject the SA as well. If they refuse to do so, they would probably be punished at the polls, handing Dawa victory. If they do, the referendum will fail, the SA will be abrogated and American troops will have to leave Iraq a year early. In this scenario, with the Iraqi people and their entire leadership having publicly rejected the American presence, U.S. leverage would be gone before the final vote is tallied.

MY FRIEND Terry Barnich was killed in Iraq by a roadside bomb in Anbar on May 25, 2009—Memorial Day. For over two years, he had been the senior Coalition adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity and was one of the finest men you could have met. He was also superb at his job, and his Herculean efforts were a major part of getting that moribund ministry moving in the right direction.

One of Terry's greatest frustrations was the resignation of so many American officials to the idea that the signing of the security agreement between the United States and Iraq left America powerless. Terry could quickly list two dozen ways in which the United States remained one of the most influential—if not the most influential—player in Iraq and would likely remain so for

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years if only we would learn to use that influence correctly.

In part to remember Terry and all that he achieved, but more because it is so important to understand the role that the United States should be playing in Iraq, it is worth considering the many sources of American influence there. We provide training and logistics for Iraqi security forces; we are the honest broker for the Iraqi people; our presence ensures that a policeman coming to knock on their door is not a death squad; we still provide critical economic and political assistance—microloans, military equipment, technical expertise; American provincial reconstruction teams are still demanded by Iraqi governors and mayors; American businessmen are pursued avidly, even amorously. There should be no question that the United States retains great influence in Iraq and will continue to do so for some time to come, as long as the referendum on the security agreement doesn't fail.

To avert disaster come January, now is the time to wield that power.

There is a lot of important work to be done by the United States in Iraq this year, and less time to do it every day. We need to work with the United Nations to establish a new process of negotiations to defuse the standoff over Kirkuk and the wider issues related to Iraqi federalism so dear to the hearts of the Kurds. We need to ensure that Iraqi detainees (the vast majority of whom are Sunni) and the Sunni Sons of Iraq are treated properly by the government. We need to push Baghdad to provide for the safety of Iraq's minorities, particularly Christians, Turkomans and others too small to protect themselves. And we need to convince the government that it must work harder to make its political and bureaucratic processes more effective and not simply figure out how to work around them.

Of greater import, we can't let the old parties hijack the January elections. Jointly with the United Nations (which works well with the United States in Iraq and tends to share its assessments and interests), we need to pressure Iraq's political leadership to adopt open-list voting for the national elections. U.S. aid can no longer be unconditional. Instead, we should dole out assistance only if the Iraqi government moves in the right direction. Open lists are a key part of that. To make good on this threat, the United States will have to think through what forms of aid could be suspended or canceled in the event the Iraqis refused.

The United States would also do well to more actively address the fears created by the prime minister's style of rule. President Obama must press Prime Minister Maliki to establish processes that would reassure other Iraqis about his intentions. This is particularly true in the

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critical area of security. Iraq currently has four joint-military operations centers—one for Baghdad, one for Basra, one for Nineveh (Mosul) and one for Diyala. And they terrify many Iraqi political elites because they bypass the normal military chain of command. Since there are still combat operations going on in Diyala and Nineveh, and Baghdad remains a work in progress, these centers are all arguably necessary. But Basra is quiet now and there seems unlikely to be a rapid resumption of large-scale violence there. To reassure Iraqis that these joint operations centers were temporary expedients to meet emergency situations (not permanent fixtures), the United States should encourage the prime minister to disestablish the Basra Operations Center. Likewise, the prime minister has established tribal-support councils to enable the central government to quickly provide resources directly to tribal leaders in southern Iraq. Many Iraqis believe that the prime minister uses these councils to provide government money to tribal leaders in return for electoral support. The United States should press Maliki to place the tribal-support councils under the provincial governors (many of whom are now Dawa anyway) as a way of demonstrating his commitment to abide by established, transparent, democratic processes.

But the United States needs to be there in order to make these dreams reality. We need to make clear that holding the referendum at the same time as the national elections will be regarded by the American people as an extremely unfriendly action, unless the prime minister himself actively campaigns in favor of the agreement. The Iraqis need to understand that rejecting the SA after American officials worked so hard to craft an agreement that would meet Iraqi needs would be seen by the American people as a snub, and a great ingratitude. It would also be taken as a sign that Iraqis were uninterested in continuing a relationship with the United States. In those circumstances, Washington would have to reassess its interest in the economic, diplomatic, political and security relationships with Baghdad enshrined in the longer-term Strategic Framework Agreement.

IN MAY 2009 I was back in DC and attended the annual U.S. government conference on Iraq. Perhaps the most powerful panel of the whole two days was the one most of the participants expected the least from. The first panel of the conference consisted of three of the leading academic experts on civil war. These were not specialists on Iraq or even the Middle East, but scholars who had spent decades looking at major internal conflicts—what causes them, what propels them and how they end. Their central message was a chilling one: countries that experience major civil wars like the one Iraq went through in 2004–06 have a terrifyingly high rate of recidivism, and the one factor that provides any hope of preventing such a recurrence is the willingness of an external great power (typically the former colonial power) to make a long-term commitment to serve as a peacekeeper and mediator.

Iraq has made a great deal of progress since 2006 and the evidence indicates it could make a great deal more. But it is not going to make progress if left to its own devices. If the United

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States walks away from Iraq or if we are evicted too soon, the old patterns of Iraqi politics will subvert the new patterns of democratization and the country could easily become yet another data point on the academic graphs that demonstrate how pitifully few countries can escape the civil-war trap.

In 2002, the United States turned away from Afghanistan prematurely to focus on Iraq. The result was a tragedy for us and for the people of Afghanistan. In 2009, we are courting the risk of turning away from Iraq prematurely to focus back on Afghanistan. Should we do so, the result could be a disaster—for us, for the Iraqis, for the entire Middle East and potentially for the world.

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