

Toby Dodge
Political Mobilization in the Absence of a State: Islamism, Nationalism and Sectarianism in Iraq

By Sinan Hastorun

Iraq is the first autocratic and Muslim-majority country that the United States has attempted to democratize since Sept. 11. Regime change in Iraq was part of the broader U.S. project to plant democracy in the Middle East, albeit with force and from without, in hopes that this would eradicate terrorism and create an impetus for positive change in the broader region.

Unfortunately, said Toby Dodge, lecturer in the Department of Politics at Queen Mary University in London, this project has clearly failed, both in its implementation and the realization of its goals. It is important to examine the political and social dynamics of post-Saddam Iraq for two reasons: first, to understand why this project failed, and second, to discern what should be done to keep post-invasion Iraq from continuing its downward spiral into chaos and division and help it evolve into a stable system with some semblance of democracy.

Iraq is rife with ethnic and sectarian divisions, Dodge said, although an overwhelming percentage of the population is Muslim. After the U.S.-led invasion, the country witnessed the destructive potential of such divisions as it emerged into a political arena free of any state control. For several reasons, Iraq faces enormous difficulties in creating a stable political system that can guarantee security and basic social services for its citizens. The legacy of the Baathist rule is important in this regard, along with two dynamics unleashed after the U.S.-led invasion: the rise of radical Islam, with a strong dose of nationalism, and sectarianism, which threatens to plunge the country into civil war.

If Iraq continues to slide down the path of sectarian violence perpetrated by militias in absence of a central political authority, Dodge argued, the result will be not only increased radicalization of politics and possible break-up of the country, but also the destabilization of the broader Middle East. Therefore, it is very important to correctly identify the reasons for chaos and conflict in Iraq in order to keep it from getting worse. Only then may one talk about prospects of democratization anywhere else in the region.

The decades-long Baathist rule in Iraq did much to shape Iraqi society, Dodge said. After Iraq was created by the British in 1920s, the state was vulnerable both domestically and internationally. The Baath party countered this by solidifying its authority. With a powerful bureaucracy, the Baathists atomized society by either co-opting or eliminating powerful groups. They also made sure a huge portion of the Iraqis were dependent on state payments for economic survival. Through a massive nationalization program, the state became the largest landowner and oil producer, and it came to control all aspects of social security, health and education. Saddam also infused the country with a high dose of Iraqi nationalism that emphasized the centrality of the strong state.

However, in the wake of United Nations sanctions in the 1990s, this large state apparatus was cut back extensively. Poverty rose among the Iraqis, and there was enormous inflation and malnutrition. Marginalizing the party, Saddam came to rely on patronage to maintain his power, using diffuse and informal channels of distribution. Iraq's complex bureaucracy was hollowed out with lack of resources and increasing corruption.

This poverty and decline in state services led to two trends in Iraq. The first was the emergence of an extreme Iraqi nationalism that was stubborn and proud of survival. The second was the re-Islamification of the Iraqi society, with increasing piety among the masses. Re-politicized Islam began to fill the vacuum left by the declining state and to offer certainty in the face of hardship and instability. The Saddam regime was content with Islam's new role, as long as the anger of masses was directed at foreign powers. But with the demise of the regime, Dodge said, one unintended consequence of the U.S. invasion was to create ample political space for this radical Islam to flourish.

U.S. military superiority was clear during the war; however, the U.S. army could not secure the country after Saddam was overthrown. The initial lawless celebration of Saddam's fall turned into looting and endless violence. After the fall of the Baathist regime, all aspects of the state were gone and bureaucracy vanished. Political mobilization in the complete absence of the state proved to be disastrous.

Why did such extreme violence erupt in Iraq? First, Dodge said, with no authority to guard law and order in the aftermath of Saddam's fall, lawlessness became the norm. Second, a plethora of independent militias armed with sectarian ideologies forced themselves onto the scene, wielding the power to pursue their goals. The new Iraqi regime simply could not guarantee its own safety, let alone that of its citizens. Third, the presence of foreign troops gave rise to a vicious insurgency. As insurgents emerged in a localized fashion, U.S. forces were ill-equipped to deal with a decentralized enemy.

Non-governmental organizations were not able to help restore order in Iraq because they had broken down during the years of Baathist rule and U.N. sanctions. Thus, Dodge said, there was no functioning civil society. As the regime vanished, the powerful ideologies of Islamism and nationalism that it had been keeping under control were unleashed. As Iraq descended into chaos and violence, with various political forces unable to form a united government, sectarianism became the defining factor in the new Iraq.

Iraq is divided along sectarian and ethnic lines between Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs and Kurds, Dodge said. Within both sectarian communities, there are radical and moderate political groups that overtly employ Islam. Radical Shiite clerics such as Muktadar Al Sadr pose the greatest danger to the emergence of a stable, democratic Iraq for two reasons. First, they are fundamentalist in ideology. Second, they command a huge following through their religious standing and provision of basic social services. This is very important because the absence of state has led many ordinary Iraqis to seek refuge with powerful clerics who are able to provide security and means of survival.

These clerics, in turn, pursue a two-pronged strategy. First, they project an uncompromising, radical image by leading rebellions and battling U.S. forces actively in the streets. But they also play an important political role by influencing the political process behind the scenes, having their followers run for office and sending the message that nothing can be accomplished without their support.

Shiites see a real chance for ruling Iraq after the fall of Saddam, since they constitute the majority. Their highly religious message is heavily dominated by radical clerics. Sunnis, on the other hand, are alienated from the system because the Baathist party was their main channel of rule. They fear domination by the Shiites and so many have turned to radical measures to prevent this from happening. Therefore, Dodge argued, the actions of both sectarian groups have not been conducive to establishing stability in Iraq.

In the absence of a central authority, political mobilization is fraught with danger, as the current state of affairs in Iraq clearly shows. If the current Iraqi government fails, Dodge said, radical groups will capitalize on the alienation of Iraqis and engage in more violence to achieve their sectarian goals. In order to achieve stability in Iraq, state institutions with the power to rule the entire country must be built from the bottom up. This begins with the security forces, as nothing can be accomplished in the absence of basic safety.

It is important to remember that the whether state is sustainable depends on how legitimate it is deemed by the population, Dodge said. Therefore, Iraq's future depends on the ability of state institutions to become central to the Iraqi people's ongoing struggle for survival. The reconstruction of a viable Iraqi state must take place before anything else can be achieved. The state needs to monopolize the use of force within its territories and become central in the provision of public goods and services. Increasing the state's administrative capacity is a must to keep radical groups from filling the void and crushing any chance of constructing Iraqi citizenship, let alone achieving democracy.