

Postwar Iraq Policy Options for Russia

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From Occupation to Internationalization

As foreseen by many observers, the fall of Baghdad to U.S. forces on April 9, 2003, was just the beginning, not the end of the story. In postwar Iraq, the United States faces continuing resistance in the form of what Gen. John Abizaid (commander, U.S. Central Command) called “classic guerrilla war.” It is not surprising that the postwar stage emerging for the United States and its partners is no less expensive, deadly, and problematic than the military stage, stretching the occupying forces thin and increasing the cost of the postwar presence up to one billion U.S. dollars per week. The apparent intention of the United States to retain the overall command and control over any stabilization presence in Iraq, while internationalizing it by getting help from those states willing to provide cannon fodder and financial aid, is also not surprising.

Given the highly contentious nature and lack of legality of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, the only way for Washington to secure the participation of states contributing personnel, such as India and Pakistan, in any postwar security presence and to share the financial burden for postwar reconstruction was to act through the United Nations Security Council, where U.S. concerns and suggestions could not be accommodated within the framework of Resolutions 1483 (May 23, 2003) and 1500 (August 14, 2003). Any compromise to be reached in the Security Council, however, was doomed to boil down to approving, by and large, the existing command and control arrangement, while extending the UN role, primarily in political and legal matters such as constitutional and electoral issues, as well as in relief and reconstruction (the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1511 on October 16, 2003, became such a compromise solution). There is little doubt that the UN is the international actor best posed to arrange for elections and to push for a much swifter transition of power to the elected Iraqi authorities.

Although ready to compromise on selected political and legal issues, the United States is determined to keep control over security and economic matters. In postwar Iraq, these two sets of issues are closely interconnected: apart from technical and reconstruction matters, it is the lack of basic security in general and sabotage actions

against pipelines and oil production facilities that remain the main impediments to higher oil production.

Although at this stage the task of providing a relatively safe and secure environment for the occupying forces and for the population at large seems to be the most pressing and problematic in postwar Iraq, there are few, if any, viable alternatives in shaping the new international security arrangement to be sorted out at the UN level. The occupying forces under U.S. command bear direct responsibility for the consequences of the military operation that has not been approved by the Security Council and for the security situation in the occupied country, and it is their task to ensure basic security in a risky and unstable environment. Also, the United States (and its junior partners) is the only force that enjoys some control on the ground in Iraq, and any international activities in Iraq would be practically impossible without its approval and involvement. Although the UN can hardly take on itself basic security tasks, it has an important security contribution to make by providing, as soon as the situation allows, the UN police force to deal with matters for which regular troops are badly suited.

It is the postwar economic reconstruction of Iraq that will possibly remain the most contentious issue for the international community at large, particularly between the former and the current key foreign economic players in Iraq. The United States is clearly determined to rebuild and reshape the Iraqi economy according to its own vision and guided by its own economic and strategic interests. Although (even according to the most optimistic assessments) pledges of foreign (non-U.S.) aid to the U.S.-led reconstruction and stabilization of Iraq are unlikely to exceed \$1 billion (or 10 percent of the funds needed) and the United States will probably have to invest more than was expected in the reconstruction of Iraq, it is U.S. companies that will get the main rewards from liberalization of the Iraqi economy, rapid privatization and sell-off of its non-oil sectors (overseen by the United States), and lucrative contracts in the oil sector. In the end, the reconstruction experiment is ultimately to be paid for by Iraq's own property and resources, particularly by oil revenue (according to some assessments up to \$12.1 billion in 2004 and \$20 billion in 2005), making the task of rapid development and modernization of the Iraqi economy, particularly of the oil sector, a key priority for the United States. The U.S. ability to stand up to this task, facilitated by the lifting of the UN sanctions, will not post-factum legalize its military intervention in Iraq, but can help normalize the situation in Iraq and, ultimately, prevent the emergence of a constant source of instability for the entire region.

In this context, the UN ability to influence the character and pace of the postwar reconstruction in Iraq is weakened by the fact that it bears its own share of responsibility for the situation in and around Iraq throughout the 1990s. The UN record vis-à-vis pre-war Iraq was very mixed. Although always pushing for a political solution and standing firm against U.S. attempts to use it as a political and legal cover for its decade-long "bombing is better than nothing" strategy in Iraq, the UN has seriously compromised itself in the eyes of Iraqis by its inability to lift the sanctions regime. In particular, the Security Council decision to impose sanctions against Iraq for an indefinite rather than a fixed period of time has been a critical mistake, as it has made the lifting of sanctions dependent on the consensus of the permanent five unattainable due to their continuous strategic, political, legal, and moral disagreements about Iraq throughout the 1990s.

Although many in the international community justly contested the U.S. heavy-handed military solution for Iraq, many also recognized the absurdity of the situation when one of the world's leading oil exporters was for a decade functioning under strict UN sanctions, only partly assuaged by the piecemeal Oil for Food Program, with no or little progress on the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issue. The absence of WMD in Iraq has undermined the main rationale not only for the U.S. military operation, but also for the UN rigid sanctions regime. Against this background, the UN economic marginalization in postwar Iraq is not only the side effect of the U.S. military intervention and occupation of Iraq, but also a logical progression of the inevitable end of the sanctions regime. Although depriving the UN of its main economic leverage in Iraq, the lifting of sanctions has been a strong sign of and one of the key elements of economic stabilization in Iraq.

In sum, despite strong disagreements between the United States and other leading members of the UN, most evident in Security Council discussions on U.S. military intervention and in conflicting interpretations of international law, their positions on and practical approaches to the Iraqi problem throughout the 1990s have not been diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive. Nor should either the U.S. or the UN solution be seen as a panacea for stabilizing postwar Iraq. The main impediment to stabilization in Iraq lies in attempts to impose on it a certain type of government, society, and economic development, regardless of whether they are carried out under the American flag or under the UN banner.

Policy Options for Russia

Strongly opposed to the war in Iraq, Russia joined its European partners France and Germany in the rift with the United States and the UK over the matter, and repeatedly called for a greater UN role in rebuilding the country and in helping create the new Iraqi government.

In postwar Iraq, for the international community at large, and particularly for the states vehemently opposed to the U.S. intervention, there seemed to be two main policy options:

- to recognize that things cannot be left as they are and to do something to bring the situation back into the international legal framework, while at the same time, trying to limit the damage caused by the war to their economic, political, and other strategic interests in Iraq (an option implying cooperation with the U.S.-led occupying force and authorities);
- to wait and see if, with time and mounting challenges in Iraq, the United States might become more willing to involve the broader international community and Iraqis themselves, in governing Iraq.

For Russia, each of these policy options had advantages and limitations. Russia hoped to limit the damage to its economic interests in Iraq (oil contracts signed with the pre-war government and repayment of Iraq's \$8 billion debt to Russia) by participating in some way in postwar economic activities in Iraq—from reconstruction to oil exploitation and production. In return, it could offer little other than accommodation of at least some of

the U.S. demands and concerns, particularly within the framework of the UN Security Council. Although unlikely to contest the U.S. leadership in a multinational security force, mandated by the Security Council, Moscow will continue to insist on a much stronger role for the UN, particularly in political and economic affairs.

Regardless of the political concessions made by Russia, it will be allowed to play a very marginal, subsidiary role at best in postwar Iraq. There are few doubts that the terms of the postwar economic game are and will remain unequal, favoring the occupying powers, making it even harder for Russia to compete with Western and particularly U.S. and British companies economically. Also, politically facilitating the transitional period in postwar Iraq for the occupying forces involved a number of political, legal, and moral dilemmas (it could be interpreted, both domestically and internationally, as acquiescence to U.S. pressure and post-factum justification of the illegal military intervention and occupation of a sovereign state).

A critical disadvantage of the second (wait-and-see) option for the international community and for Russia is the risk of missing the opportunity to prevent another major hotbed of confrontation in the already troubled Middle East. Although this option does nothing to prevent further destabilization in Iraq, it is not in conflict with the geo-economic interests of Russia as the world's second leading oil producer (behind Saudi Arabia), with a daily production rate of 8.4 million barrels. With sanctions lifted, the reconstruction and modernization of the Iraqi oil sector will not help to keep the world oil prices high, undermining the main factor behind Russia's economic stabilization and the growth of gross domestic product and foreign currency reserves. As oil fields recover, by the beginning of 2004, Iraq could increase its daily production to 1.9 million barrels. According to the oil minister appointed by the Interim Governing Council formed by occupational authorities, production could increase to 2.8 million barrels by March 2004 and to 3.5–4 million by the end of 2005 (although the time limit for the Iraqi oil sector to reach its pre-war production capacity has been repeatedly extended).

The main impediment to implementing the wait-and-see option lied in the political and strategic self-interests of the key external actors involved (Russia being no exception). In some other part of the world, the world's key political players opposed to the military intervention in Iraq could probably reconcile themselves with the prospects of the U.S.-led coalition getting stuck deeper and deeper in the postwar quagmire there. In Iraq, however, they would rather choose to legalize the result of the war and run the risk of local and regional destabilization, growing anti-Western sentiments, emerging Islamic extremism, and the spread of terrorism, than give up hopes of getting their own, if only minor, piece of the economic pie. In the case of Iraq, the non-involvement strategy is seen as an impermissible luxury. Thus, it is the first option (damage limitation) that seems to be followed by Moscow in practice, if not always at the level of rhetoric.

In the end, however, both of the above-mentioned options were acceptable for Russia: ironically, its relatively marginal role gives it an advantage in making low-risk choices. This partly explains why, under any circumstances, Russia would not have been the main driving force behind the push for one solution or another. In the long run, however, Russia's current "coyote" tactics (trying to achieve limited goals, preferably by others' hands) cannot serve as a substitute for a coherent political strategy in Iraq or elsewhere.

Terrorism, Islamism, and Resistance

One of the few potential political common grounds for all external actors concerned (whether the United States and its partners or the key European states, including Russia) is the need to prevent Iraq from becoming a new source of Islamic extremism and terrorism.

Before the war, Iraq had not been a hotbed of either. Under the Baathists, Islamists were suppressed. The mythical Iraqi terrorist threat used by Washington as one of the pretexts for the war by and large boiled down to open political and financial support to the Palestinian resistance, while links between the Baath Party and Al Qaeda were non-existent.

In postwar Iraq, the situation is rapidly changing. Even in an occupied country, terrorism as a mechanism of political radicalization and destabilization and as a mode of operation employed by forces of resistance is never a spontaneous reaction of the masses. It can only be employed by a capable and determined opponent, that is, one that possesses the necessary structural capabilities (beyond merely technical means and experience) and a high level of determination provided by an extremist ideology.

In the relatively secular, centralized, and authoritarian Baathist state, extremist, particularly radical Islamic, ideologies, as well as all non-states structural capabilities, were suppressed. In postwar Iraq there is no shortage of technical capabilities, freed by the collapse of the Iraqi state (arms, trained personnel). The lack of experience in building flexible non-state horizontal networks, best suited for terrorist activities, will be made up for with time. Both guerrilla-type and terrorist attacks will soon become better organized, more sophisticated, and potentially more deadly (attacks against coalition military and security personnel are not defined here as terrorist acts, while politically motivated attacks against civilians, both foreign and local, are).

As for extremist ideology, there is a widespread view that it is Islamic fundamentalism facilitated by the influx of Islamic radicals and militants from all over the world that is most likely to play this role and will be hardest to deal with for both the occupying forces and a broader international presence. In the case of Iraq, however, the role of external, radical Islamic influences should not be overestimated; Islamic radicalism has important domestic sources and dynamics (as demonstrated by the August 29, 2003, bombing that killed Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim, the relatively moderate head of Supreme Assembly of Islamic Revolution in Iraq). Islamic extremism alone, however, cannot explain the severity of anti-American resistance. Indeed, one of the critical mistakes of the coalition forces has been underestimation of the genuine and rising nationalism, with a strong anti-colonial element, as an ideological basis for resistance—a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to mere revenge by remnants of Saddam's regime. Nevertheless, the United States's continuing over-preoccupation with Saddam is understandable: in the absence of WMD in Iraq and in the midst of growing anti-American sentiments and actions, symbolic achievements such as “getting Saddam and company” acquire heightened importance.

In sum, it is a potential combination of Islamic fundamentalism with post-Saddam anti-colonial nationalism that, if it materializes, will provide the most explosive fuel for an anti-American struggle. Moreover, although terrorism is the growing threat in Iraq, as

long as the U.S. and allied forces remain there in one form or another regardless of their status, it is the guerrilla-type resistance against foreign and collaborationist military and security targets that is likely to dominate the security landscape.

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