

VIOLENCE IN IRAQ IS BEYOND OUR CONTROL

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With the administration's long-awaited progress report on Iraq set to be delivered to Congress today, it seems clear that most of the contending arguments regarding the future of U.S. operations in Iraq share the assumption that Iraqi political leaders could settle the conflict if they were determined to do so. Those who support an indefinite commitment believe that forcefully suppressing violence is a precondition for political accommodation among the various political factions, and they claim that progress is being made. Those who want American forces to leave believe that the prospect of reduced protection is necessary to compel the accommodation that virtually everyone concedes has not yet occurred.

Unfortunately, there are reasons to doubt whether Iraq's leaders could control the violence even if they wanted to. The violence in Iraq is highly localized and does not have the features of organized conflict implied by the frequently used terms "insurgency" or "civil war." Moreover, the level of violence is probably substantially greater than is being officially reported - an ominous challenge to the claim of significant progress.

These facts suggest a response is needed that is of a different order than the remedies now under discussion in Washington.

It is increasingly evident that the forceful removal of the Saddam Hussein regime triggered such a profound disintegration of Iraqi society that basic legal order could not be preserved. In the absence of effective restraint, violent predators have emerged whose actions are not directed by any purpose that might be subject to negotiated settlement on a national scale.

The breakdown of legal order is apparent in two basic statistical observations. First, using standard epidemiological methods, researchers at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Public Health estimated that more than 600,000 deaths from violent causes occurred in Iraq between 2003 and 2006 and that no part of the country escaped the affliction. Their estimate is nearly 10 times greater than estimates of civilian casualties based on Pentagon reports and records compiled by the independent Iraq Body Count, which aggregates international press reports.

Second, comparisons with data from other conflicts reveal that many fewer large incidents involving fatalities of 500 or more have occurred in Iraq, indicating that violence there has been conducted on an unusually small scale. This is consistent with violence that is not being orchestrated by a small number of large groups, but is instead being generated spontaneously by conditions on the ground.

Catastrophic breakdown is also apparent from reports circulating within aid organizations and among military personnel candid enough to discuss what they see on the streets.

It is difficult for Americans to comprehend the sustained breakdown of civil order in an advanced, urbanized society. Although such comparisons are imperfect, it may be useful to consider analogies to more familiar settings.

One can begin by imagining, for example, what would have happened in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans if the National Guard had never arrived, if virtually the entire infrastructure had been destroyed and not replaced, if all of the governmental institutions including the police had been removed, and if the population had been left to cope entirely on its own with no prospect of leaving the disaster area.

People in such circumstances would have been forced to form groups to survive and defend themselves. These groups would probably be very local in nature and form along easily visible lines, such as race and religion, as we have seen in Iraq. When legal order disappears, separatist identities become the result rather than the cause of violence.

One might also compare the civilian fatality reports from Iraq with the reliably documented details of violence in Baltimore. In 2006, there were 275 murders in the city, which has a population of about 650,000. The same murder rate, scaled up to the Iraqi population of 27 million, would produce 11,500 violent deaths per year and 45,500 killed over four years of conflict.

Reports based on Pentagon and Iraq Body Count sources estimate that about 75,000 civilians were killed in Iraq over the first four years of the conflict. This suggests that Iraq is less than twice as violent as Baltimore. In stark contrast, the Johns Hopkins estimate of 600,000 violent deaths over four years suggests that Iraq is 10 to 15 times more violent than Baltimore. The latter is intuitively more consistent with qualitative impressions.

If the violence in Iraq is indeed the result of a sustained social and legal breakdown, then an effective response will not emerge from quibbles between Congress and the White House over small changes in the current Iraq operation. The fundamental problem is that we forfeited at the outset the legitimacy required to command consensual allegiance. In order to have any hope of acquiring it, we will need extensive international assistance from countries such as China, Russia, Iran and Syria that are themselves concerned about the use of American military power. Strong measures of reassurance will be required, involving drastic revisions of global security policy.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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