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The Flight of Iraq's Best and Brightest: Brain Drain as a Barrier to Rebuilding

The invasion and occupation of Iraq has coincided with the onset of unprecedented sectarian conflict and violence in the country. Kidnappings and murders targeted at civilians threaten the security and livelihood of the Iraqi populace. These incidents, paired with infrastructural disintegration, are responsible for the displacement of over 4.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The result has been an abrupt drain of the country's "best and brightest." Doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, and other specialists, who are more inclined to have the financial means to flee, have sought refuge in neighboring countries or in northern Iraq as IDPs. In their new locations, Iraqi refugees oftentimes experience trouble finding work legally, obtaining primary education and health care, and are targets for arrest, detention, and discrimination. Durable solutions for refugees include local integration in host countries, resettlement, and voluntary repatriation. Local integration is oftentimes not a viable option for the millions of Iraqi refugees residing in the Middle East. Additionally, only a fraction of those millions can be resettled. Voluntary repatriation, while it is the preferred solution, is not viable in the current and immediately foreseeable circumstances.

Significant progress in diminishing sectarian violence and rebuilding Iraq must be made before voluntary repatriation can be a realistic option for most refugees. Iraqi leadership is critical for any successful reconstruction in terms of democracy, infrastructure, and the provision of social services. This leadership will need to come from a skilled elite of Iraqi legal, engineering, and medical professionals. However, due to the Iraqi brain drain, many of these experts now reside outside the country as refugees or are living in tenuous circumstances as IDPs. Their absence is particularly felt in hospitals and infrastructural projects, where physicians and engineers are notably absent. As an antidote to the negative impact of brain drain on Iraqi reconstruction, repatriation should be considered as the preferred and primary durable solution for Iraqi refugees.

This paper will explore the nature of the Iraqi refugee crisis in the context of brain drain. First, the study will consider the causes leading up to the refugee crisis. Sectarian violence and infrastructural failure will be considered as the underlying factors in the flight of Iraqi professionals. Challenges faced by Iraqi refugees in the Middle East and durable solutions for the Iraqi refugee crisis will subsequently be considered, with special emphasis on voluntary repatriation. An examination of the realistic possibilities for safe return will be discussed with the aim of determining under what circumstances skilled Iraqis could return and become protagonists of the rebuilding effort.

The Iraqi Refugee Crisis at Large

The Iraqi civilian population has suffered greatly as a consequence of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. While annual civilian casualty data^{*} were initially disaggregated to specify civilian deaths caused by acts of war versus deaths caused by direct attacks on civilians by sectarian groups, more recent data have combined those figures to show the total of Iraqi civilian deaths. As of December 2008, conservative reports indicated there have been a minimum of 100,000 civilian casualties due to violence linked to the invasion. Other credible sources cite that as many as 600,000 civilians[†] may have been killed as a result of the occupation and sectarian violence.¹

Sectarian violence is responsible for the targeted killing of professionals in an effort to secure funding through ransoms and killings, and to establish regional power.² While sectarian conflict has long been present in the Middle East, sectarian violence was not a characteristic of Iraq before the invasion of 2003.[‡] Prior to the invasion and occupation, Sunni and Shia families co-existed peacefully in mixed neighborhoods, intermarried, and attended the same mosques.³

At the time of the invasion, however, U.S. and coalition forces were determined to wipe out any remnants of Saddam's regime, and they all but extinguished Ba'ath party representation, Iraqi police

^{*} From the Brookings Institute's periodic "Iraq Index."

[†] Compare this with the estimated 50,000 Iraqi insurgents who have been killed (see "Schools and Universities Deserted for Fear of Violence," NEAR).

[‡] The Baath party even sought to integrate Sunnis and Shias along with Kurds and Christians within its own organization. (see Library of Congress, "Sunni-Shia Relations in Iraq," May 1988).

forces, and, consequently, rule of law and public order.⁴ U.S. occupiers demanded a strict identification of Sunni and Shia areas versus those of minority groups. This “divide and rule” tactic, which has been errantly employed over time and space in colonial land divisions overseen by Western powers[§], was ostensibly done to allow for representative democracy; the U.S. occupiers wanted a representative number of Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Christians, and other minorities in the new parliament. The result however, was the formation of previously unrealized tensions between the sects in a struggle for power. In conjunction with a debilitated police force and lawlessness following the invasion, armed sects began segregating themselves in a massive power struggle.⁵

On February 22, 2006, the highly symbolic and holy Shia Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra was bombed by unidentified Iraqi militants. This incident is widely viewed as a catalyst in escalating sectarian violence. Following the bombing, Shia clerics called for Shiites to protect their holy sites if the government was unable to do so. Shiites retaliated across the country in the weeks to follow, attacking more than 20 Sunni mosques during that time.⁶ In the subsequent months, Baghdad transitioned from being mostly Sunni to mostly Shia by dint of the millions of people displaced by violence and targeted sectarian attacks.⁷

[§] For example: The Partition of India in 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan; the Cyprus Convention in 1878; the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 dividing portions of Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine between France and Britain; the British Balfour Declaration of 1917 favoring creation of a Jewish state in Palestine; German and Belgium division of Hutu and Tutsis by class and race in Rwanda and Burundi in the early 20th century; British division of northern and southern Sudan and also in Nigeria, etc.

Sectarian Violence and Infrastructural Woes Give Rise to the Iraqi Refugee Crisis

Sectarian violence in the form of intimidation, kidnappings, and murders are the greatest instigators of the current Iraqi refugee crisis. ** Those with financial means became potential targets for kidnapping, blackmail, and murder as sectarian groups attempted to oust lingering minorities. As neighborhoods became increasingly segregated, minorities were pushed out by brute force in the form of intimidation and killings.⁸ In one survey of Iraqi civilians, 26% of those questioned stated they had personally experienced the murder of a family member or relative from 2005-2008; 12% had experienced the murder of a friend or colleague; 8% had experienced the kidnapping of a family member; 6% had experienced the kidnapping of a friend. Only 21% of those surveyed in Baghdad had *not* experienced any of those events.⁹

Sectarian Violence Targeted at the “Best and the Brightest”

As of November 2008, there were an estimated 2.25 million IDPs^{††} in Iraq. Conservative estimates find that about 2.1 to 2.25 million refugees are now in Syria and Jordan; conservative estimates place approximately 150,000 refugees in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran, with about 200,000 in the Gulf States.¹⁰

The displaced are significantly comprised of highly skilled, highly educated professionals, including doctors, professors, and engineers, resulting in an acute “brain drain” of Iraq. An estimated 40% of Iraqi professionals have fled since 2003. Before the 2003 invasion, there were approximately 34,000 physicians in Iraq. The Brookings Institute’s Iraq Index estimates that 12,000 physicians have left Iraq since 2003.¹¹ Iraq’s current Minister of Health puts the figure even higher, estimating that approximately half of Iraqi physicians have fled.¹² Sunnis were often the targets of violent attacks in medical clinics in

** Note however, that many Iraqi refugees were displaced before the invasion of March 2003 in anticipation of war and unrest; also, some fled due to human rights abuses and previous wars (see Human Rights Watch, “Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon,” November 2007, p. 11).

†† Most of the IDPs are from Baghdad; the province of Sulaymaniyah is host to the greatest number of IDPs (see The Brookings Institute Iraq Index, 20-Nov, 2008.)

2005 when Moqtada al-Sadr's supporters took over the Health Ministry.¹³ Of the physicians who remained in Iraq, an estimated 2,000 have been murdered since 2003. An estimated 250 have been kidnapped. Of the 2,250 annual graduates from Iraqi medical schools, 20% of those will leave Iraq to seek work outside the country.¹⁴

The physicians and medical practitioners that have remained Iraq find that their options are severely limited by infrastructural problems, poor access to medical equipment and basic supplies, unreliable hospital conditions, and poor funding.^{**} Ninety percent of the state-owned health care practitioners, or KEMADIA, lack basic medical and surgical supplies.¹⁵ Hospitals are largely inhibited by unreliable water and electricity service. According to Médecins Sans Frontières,

former general hospitals, previously used to performing all but simple emergency cases, are now performing complex emergency surgery with only the most basic equipment and drugs. Doctors have had to ask the relatives of injured patients to search local pharmacies for blood bags, sutures, and infusions before they can start surgery.¹⁶

Other displaced medical professionals include pharmacists, dentists, and prosthetics specialists. Iraq's top neurosurgeon, the individual responsible for the disaster response system designed to handle bombings and mass casualties, has abandoned his post. In October of 2008, there were reported to be a mere 80 psychiatrists left in the country.¹⁷

Targeted violence on schools and educational professionals has led to an overall decline in the quality of education in Iraq, from primary school to universities. As of March of 2007, 280 academic professionals had been killed since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. As a consequence of this violence, a minimum of 30% of professors, doctors, pharmacists, and engineers had fled the country as refugees at that time. Some universities in Baghdad have seen up to 80% of their professionals flee as a result of the violence.¹⁸ University graduates were receiving diplomas after having studied the same curriculum that a first-year undergraduate would have studied during the administration of Saddam Hussein.¹⁹ From 2006-2007 it is estimated that only 50% of students at Baghdad University attended classes regularly, and hundreds of faculty were on unpaid leaves of absence.²⁰

^{**} The average salary of an Iraqi physician is approximately \$5,100 USD per year (see Brookings Institution Iraq Index, November 2008).

The consequence of this targeted violence led many parents to withdraw their children from schools altogether. A mere 30% of children were estimated to be attending classes as of November 2008.²¹ In one survey, 92% of children were found to have “learning impediments” due to the climate of fear.²² The residual effects of this attack on educational professionals and schools will be seen for many years. Even if students begin to resume studies that had been abandoned or heavily slowed, regression work will be required to get students back to a level of study appropriate to their grade level.

Between March 2003 and June 2008, 40 Iraqi judges were assassinated.²³ Attorneys’ and Judges’ families have also been targeted in violent kidnappings and murders.²⁴ This intimidation has serious implications for the soundness of independent and impartial legal institutions. The ability to enforce Iraq’s newly developing democratic institutions is seriously undermined when the judicial sphere is under constant threat of violence for carrying out its duties. Additionally, confidence in Iraqi police forces is seriously undermined as police have been accused of engaging in kidnappings, torture, physical intimidation, extortion, and theft.²⁵

Targeted violence has also greatly impacted the lives and work of engineers and electricians. After the invasion, US-Iraqi electricity specialist teams were routinely targeted during meetings. Sniper attacks and RPG attacks at electrical substations were a daily occurrence for electrical engineers in Baghdad. One engineer was shot outside her home in front of her family. If death did not become the ultimate sacrifice for some engineers, death threats have become a part of daily life.²⁶

Some data on violent attacks have shown that there has been an overall decline in attacks on civilians since the troop surge was initiated in April 2007.^{§§} One suggested reason for this is the much-diminished number of Shiite-led fatal civilian attacks. In the first half of 2007, the number of fatal sectarian bombings targeting civilians was largely carried out by Shiite actors. Since then, the number and proportion of Shiite-led bombings has significantly declined, and is now more or less matched by the

^{§§} The surge consisted of adding 30,000 troops for deployment in a strategic ring around Baghdad. Their mission would be to break down Al-Qaeda strongholds in these peripheral cities, with the aim of reducing the number of Baghdad car bombs and suicide attacks planned in those centers. (see Michael Duffy, “The Surge at Year One,” *Time*, 31-Jan 2008.)

number of Sunni and unknown bombers, followed closely by other minority attackers such as Kurds.²⁷ However, despite the overall decline in violence since the initiation of the surge, certain provinces have seen an increase in violent attacks while others have witnessed a decline; thus, if stability is emerging, it is unequally shared.^{***} This has serious implications when considering the possibilities for potential return of refugees on a wide scale.

Poor Infrastructure as an Additional Stress on Iraqi Civilian Life

In addition to persistent sectarian violence in the form of potential kidnapping and murder, Iraqis face serious infrastructural challenges which make daily life very difficult. Going to work or school and pursuing any sort of normal routine is next to impossible for many remaining families in Iraq. As of July 2007, the average Iraqi home was estimated to have access to electricity for a mere 1-2 hours per day.²⁸ Some Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad reported in early 2008 that they had not received electricity in over a year.²⁹ Only 37% of Iraqi homes had sewage.³⁰ As of July 2008, 70% of the population was estimated to be without suitable water.³¹ Four million people were determined to be “food insecure” and in critical need of humanitarian aid; of those, only 60% have access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) for food. Child malnutrition is up 19% since the invasion in March 2003. As of May 2007, 43% of the population was estimated to be in absolute poverty, largely due to unemployment. More than half of employable individuals are without work, many of them young men, who are susceptible to be recruited by armed sectarian groups in the absence of alternative employment and growing exasperation with the security situation.³² IDPs have limited access to health care if they are outside the jurisdiction in which they are registered. These infrastructural failures and changes in social wellbeing are shocking for a country that, prior to the invasion and occupation, had one of the highest standards of living in the Middle East, according to UNICEF and the WHO.³³

^{***} For example, the city of Ramadi, in Anbar province, has seen a decline from 25 violent attacks per day to 4, whereas the Diyala region has seen an overall *increase* by 30% in violent attacks (see Brookings Institute, 20-Nov 2008).

Due to the flight of seasoned professionals, young professionals in school lack crucial instruction and training.³⁴ As younger doctors pursue certification, they make plans to move abroad after receiving their degrees. Numerous physicians' offices are all but abandoned, leaving behind a direly understaffed health care industry.³⁵ Highly educated and skilled professionals have greater opportunities for work in neighboring Middle Eastern countries than less skilled workers who may find trouble acquiring work visas. Educated professionals also have less incentive to return to Iraq in the face of potential kidnapping or murder.³⁶

Eighty-four percent of higher education infrastructure such as classrooms and administrative buildings are unusable due to violence and looting. Unreliable or absent electricity and water also contribute to the inadequacy of university buildings. The student population is steadily rising despite the large numbers of Iraqis who have fled the country. University housing can only accommodate 50% of students in need. An estimated 30,000 computers are needed to correct a deficiency in that arena. More than 2,000 scientific laboratories are found to be in sub-standard condition. Security in universities is entirely lacking; since 2004, at least 47 academic professionals have been assassinated.³⁷

Durable Solutions: Voluntary Repatriation as the Preferred but Imminently Unlikely Option

Local integration

Local integration as a durable solution to refugee crises involves the legal, economic, and socio-cultural adjustment of refugees in the host country. A narrow interpretation of local integration puts refugees on the path to citizenship.³⁸ However, achieving legal, economic, and social integration may sometimes be possible by acquiring resident status. In the case of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, the prospect for integration on a legal, economic, and social level is very limited. These countries are already burdened with the challenges of providing ample employment and social services for their own citizens, so taking on Iraqi refugees has proven to be very challenging and limited in scope. Additionally, some of these countries, Jordan in particular, are already host to a vast number of Palestinian refugees who also seek the limited support available.

With over 1.2 million Iraqi refugees, Syria is the primary de facto host for displaced Iraqis in the Middle East. The Syrian government has been most receptive in offering assistance to Iraqi refugees; however, increases in the cost of living and limited resources pose a problem for such assistance. Health care is free and includes immunizations and preventative care for Iraqi refugees. Because primary education is free and higher education affordable, a massive rise in school enrollment has led to overcrowding and inequality in educational access. Work opportunities are very limited for Iraqis in Syria; many single women head-of-households have turned to prostitution to provide for their families. Child labor and drop-outs are also on the rise due to meager earnings by refugee head-of-households. Due to the stressful and dire conditions in Iraqi enclaves, crime has risen by more than 20% in some areas, including organized crime, kidnapping, ransom, and blackmail; these are crimes uncharacteristic of Iraq or Syria prior to the refugee crisis.³⁹

Lebanon hosts a relatively low number of Iraqi refugees (roughly 50,000, the majority of them Shiites). While the government of Lebanon recognizes Iraqis from central and southern Iraq as prima

facie refugees, it does not register them as refugees, but instead treats them as illegal immigrants. Iraqis who are not detained under strict immigration laws live in hiding and constant fear of arrest and detention. Those detained are oftentimes housed in cells with common criminals. Once detained, their options are to remain in detention indefinitely or to return to Iraq, the latter of which is arguably not voluntary return considering the alternative. Despite a greater threat of arrest in Lebanon, work opportunities are more abundant than in Syria. However, their legal situation makes them vulnerable to exploitation by employers who seek to take advantage of their undocumented status, and children are often sent out to work in lieu of attending school. Children that do attend school more often than not attend private schools, as enrollment of Iraqi refugee children in public school is very uncommon. Most health care services in Lebanon are private. As such, Iraqis do not face discrimination in that regard, but consequently cannot receive services unless they have the financial means, which is a difficult task as they struggle to meet other basic needs.⁴⁰

As of April 2007, Jordan hosted an estimated 800,000 Iraqis, only a small number of which were officially recognized. Since Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Convention Pertaining to the Status of Refugees, it has not codified legislation for processing refugees, providing them social services, or work authorization. While Jordan was initially receptive to the entry of Iraqis and turned a blind eye to their undocumented presence, as of November 2006, border officials began denying entry to single males. They have also been summarily rejecting Shiites. Police have also been conducting raids in public places to expel undocumented Iraqis.⁴¹

In early 2007, Egypt harbored as many as 150,000 Iraqi nationals and was actively pursuing efforts to forestall a further influx of refugees. Due to complicated immigration procedures implemented in January of 2007, it is now almost impossible to acquire a visa as an Iraqi in Egypt. Those who have been able to enter Egypt find themselves in a state of limbo; they have no work authorization and their children cannot attend public schools. In these circumstances, and with no foreseeable path to naturalization, they are subsisting on dwindling savings and find themselves choosing between living as outcasts or returning to unsafe conditions in Iraq.

Resettlement

Resettlement is another durable solution for Iraqi refugees. However, only a small portion of Iraqi refugees will be selected for resettlement, and those will be the most vulnerable populations.⁴² The U.S. has budgeted for only 17,000 refugees to be resettled in 2009.⁴³ Many of those will be individuals who are vulnerable to persecution due to their minority status or due to their risky affiliation with U.S. forces or contractors.^{†††44} Vast numbers of other families will be entirely ignored for consideration. Even Germany, which hosts the largest number of Iraqi refugees outside the Middle East, only hosted 52,900 people as of April 2007.⁴⁵

Additionally, Iraqi refugees face unique challenges upon being resettled. The majority of resettled Iraqi refugees are educated, skilled workers who are not inclined to take the typical job offered of a newly arrived refugee (manual labor, working in hotels and restaurants, etc.). Refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S. have confirmed that they mostly saw

urban professionals from Baghdad who had traveled to Europe and to the United States for conferences, business and exchange programs prior to the 2003 war. Some had held positions in international work environments before and after the war, which explains their high level of English proficiency and comfort with a ‘western’ work style.⁴⁶

One survey of resettlement service providers in Detroit revealed that 16% of service providers identified over-qualification as the second-greatest barrier to employment for Iraqi refugees, second only to that of the language barrier (21%).⁴⁷ Another major challenge Iraqi refugees face are unduly high expectations as to the assistance they will receive (financial and in-kind) upon arrival, in addition to expectations that they will be able to work in their previous positions of employment.⁴⁸

Recertification for highly skilled refugees such as physicians, lawyers, and engineers is a multi-year process that requires intense coursework and paperwork.⁴⁹ These requirements are sometimes mired by difficulties in receiving appropriate documentation and transcripts from Iraq. Additionally, the process is a costly privilege that newly arrived refugees find difficult to afford as they attempt to wean themselves

^{†††} The latter will benefit from legislation passed in January of 2008, entitled the “Defense Authorization Bill,” which grants special consideration for Iraqis who have collaborated with U.S. forces, as well as their family members (see HRW, note 23).

from public assistance under the pressure of limited six-month public assistance contracts.⁵⁰ Most Iraqis thus find themselves working in entry-level positions of their fields, which can oftentimes be frustrating, demoralizing, and psychologically trying after having been industry leaders in Iraq.

Some argue that by increasing target resettlement numbers and funding in the U.S. and allied countries, resettlement as a durable solution could be greatly improved. Considering the more than two million Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan alone, however, resettlement is clearly not a sufficient durable solution in and of itself. Even with increased resettlement targets, resettlement as a primary solution will not come close to addressing the crisis faced by the millions of refugees.

Voluntary Repatriation

Voluntary repatriation is the third durable solution for a refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR mandate for voluntary repatriation, such return must be facilitated through conditions which are safe and dignified.⁵¹ This implies that the fear of persecution must be absent as a precondition for return. Dignity entails “full restoration” of refugee rights, family unity, consideration for vulnerable populations, respect for refugee property, and freedom of movement.⁵² The UNHCR and other actors involved in repatriation should monitor conditions in the country of origin to ensure that safety and dignity are preserved before, during, and after refugees’ return. On a higher level, states must take on capacity building in legal and judicial spheres to address the initial causes of displacement.⁵³

Given the tenuous and limited potential for local integration and resettlement, a comprehensive solution to the Iraqi refugee crisis will necessitate the safe return of millions of Iraqis. This will involve the return of those living as refugees in neighboring countries, and also the relocation of many of the IDPs in the interior of Iraq. The Iraqi government has already begun to launch incentives for the return of millions of its displaced citizens. In June of 2008, the government announced a USD \$195 million package that would cover expenses for refugee return.⁵⁴ Examples of allocations of this funding include offers to triple doctors’ salaries, (up to \$2,300 per month in some cases) compensation for time spent abroad, and free land.⁵⁵

However, monetary and material compensation does little to foster security and improve infrastructure to allow for a durable, sustainable return of civilians. Additionally, due to drastic changes in neighborhoods as a result of segregation spurred by sectarian violence, many Iraqis return home only to find another family living in their home, or that the home has been altogether destroyed.⁵⁶

In a survey conducted on a portion of the approximate 45,000-60,000 Iraqis who left Syria in late 2007, a mere 14% of those interviewed were returning because they perceived conditions to be improved; the remainder returned due to economic troubles in Syria or as a result of changed visa status.⁵⁷ Additionally, in February of 2008, the UNHCR reported that the net number of Iraqis fleeing to Syria exceeds those returning to Iraq (1200 daily versus 700 daily, respectively).⁵⁸

In early 2008, the British government began to turn away Iraqi asylum seekers on the grounds that “neither civilians in Iraq generally nor civilians even in provinces and cities worst-affected by the armed conflict can show they face a ‘serious and individual threat’ to their ‘life or person’...merely by virtue of being civilians.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, refugees formerly residing in the UK who have been repatriated were made to sign waivers releasing the British government of any responsibility for what may happen to them once they returned. The voluntary nature of such recent returns is highly questionable, given the monetary compensation and “administrative pressure” involved.⁶⁰

This raises serious concern for the principle of *non-refoulement*; if the British government is uncertain as to the safety of Iraqi refugees upon their return to the extent that it requires a formal release from responsibility, what unsafe conditions does it recognize these individuals may face? Refugees are to be returned under the condition that safety in Iraq is a reality; their return does not itself prove that such safety exists.

Infrastructural Conditions Necessary for Voluntary Repatriation

In addition to safety and dignity, other infrastructural conditions must be met before any return of Iraqi refugees en masse can be seriously considered. Solutions must include investment in schools, universities and hospitals in the form of hiring new professionals, instituting pay raises, repairs to facilities, reliable water and electricity service, abundance of modern medical equipment and supplies, and increased security in and around schools and hospitals. The Iraqi government must design and implement concrete and sustainable solutions to the issues plaguing the hospitals and schools that were partly responsible for initial refugee flight. The education deficit will have far-reaching consequences unless these issues are immediately addressed, whether or not it is done in order to facilitate safe return of refugees. The Iraqi government has a projected budget surplus for the 2005-2008 period of approximately \$80 billion USD.⁶¹ The administration must stop sitting idly by, allowing these funds to languish while schools and hospitals continue to crumble. Once these institutions are on their feet, the country will have laid the first milestones for safe return.

Some claim that the groundwork for safe return has already been laid due to the surge that began in April of 2007. This is clearly not the case, however. The extent of a post-surge reduction in civilian casualties is questionable. Initial reports by the Iraqi government of a decline in civilian casualties are tempered by absent figures on just how many civilian deaths were reported for the period after the surge. Additionally, those undisclosed figures (lower than the roughly 34,000 casualties in 2006, claims the Iraqi government) did not include deaths resulting from car bombs and suicide bombings.⁶² In this case, the very measure of a successful surge story (increased security for civilians) is brought into question.

Others claim that increased security has less to do with the troop surge than a change in strategy and other factors independent of the surge. Following the troop surge, General Petraeus was able to form alliances with local tribes in an effort to resist insurgents.⁶³ These alliances, sometimes forged with

⁶³ Known as the “Anbar Awakening.” (see Michael Duffy, “The Surge at Year One,” *Time*, 31-Jan 2008.)

local militias, may be on shaky ground. We should not underestimate the potential for these groups to turn around and resist the Iraqi government in the near or distant future.^{§§§}

Another major factor in declining violence is that Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army stopped attacking U.S. forces as recently as August 2008.^{****} Many U.S. officials have identified this action as a tactic to quell insubordination within his army and have determined that his decision is unrelated to the troop surge. Regardless, this only affects U.S. forces and has less bearing on the immediate safety of civilians, which is the key element to safe return of refugees.

Ultimately, the safe return of refugees cannot be orchestrated independently of political change; that political change—not military force—can bring about security. Any sustained peace must come from the top-down in a political fashion. This will require coordination and cooperation between Sunni, Shia, and minority groups in the Iraqi administration. Once political tolerance and cooperation are in place in the upper echelons of the political sphere, we might begin to see a reduction in violence at the grassroots level. However, as long as the Iraqi government maintains a divided approach operating on the partially U.S.-imposed paradigm of Sunni versus Shia versus other religious minorities, sustained security is not possible. As long as individual sects view their own power as tenuous, armed factions will continue to seek control in the streets through violence, and civilians will bear the brunt of their actions. Until sectarian unrest is addressed by Iraqi political leadership and a true dialogue of democracy and representation is forthcoming, the safe return of refugees cannot seriously be considered.

^{§§§} Take the example of U.S. support for the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan.

^{****} This has reduced attacks on U.S. forces by 15-20% percent.

Iraqi Professionals' Role in Reconstruction

The ability of the Iraqi government to allocate and spend funds for reconstruction has notably been stymied by brain drain. Government officials have specifically acknowledged the absence of scientific and engineering experts and employees who are “trained to write contracts.”⁶⁴ These barriers, in combination with U.S. occupiers’ unequivocal preference for Western contractors to provide reconstruction services, have disenfranchised remaining Iraqi professionals from the reconstruction process, placing them in auxiliary or last-resort roles. It has usually been in the face of failed planning and execution of projects by Western contractors that projects have been turned over to Iraqi teams.⁶⁵

The rebuilding of Iraq necessitates active leadership and participation of Iraqi specialists. U.S. and other Western contractors do not have the historical and cultural understanding necessary to provide a coherent transition from the former Ba’ath regime to a new regime that embraces a budding Iraqi democratic organizational culture. If Western contractors are the frontrunners of Iraq’s rebuilding and reconstruction, the product will be inorganic, imposed, and hegemonic in nature. Additionally, Iraqis are in dire need of jobs. Reconstruction provides an ample opportunity for Iraqis to reassemble their lives through gainful employment while simultaneously designing and executing their own reconstruction.

There exists a causal paradox with regard to Iraqi brain drain and the barriers to rebuilding Iraq. Iraqi professionals have fled due to sectarian violence and poor infrastructure; yet the solutions to greater security and improved infrastructure are strongly linked to the return of Iraqi professionals and Iraqi leadership in the rebuilding effort. Therefore, a small corps of Iraqi professionals must be integrated into rebuilding efforts to gain critical inertia. Indeed, the UNHCR has recognized that “spontaneous returns [of refugees] can help stimulate the process of national reconciliation.”⁶⁶ Once those actors achieve the milestones in reconstruction such as reliable electricity, clean water, functional hospitals and schools, a slow trickle of returned refugees may facilitate greater progress in the rebuilding efforts. Reconstruction actors must also tackle nation building milestones such as constitutional development, judicial

independence, property law, and transitional justice.⁶⁷ Transparency and public participation in those efforts will be crucial to reducing the powerlessness amongst sects that often leads to violence.

The reduction of sectarian violence is a largely political problem, not a military one. Insecurity and violence stem from a feeling of powerlessness and ostracism within religious sects which can be solved through political adjustments. This necessitates a top-down process where leaders within the central government must abandon a sectarian approach to rebuilding; efforts must be made to reverse the segregationist and factionalized operations of daily life.

Conclusion

Sectarian violence and crumbling infrastructure after the invasion and occupation of Iraq rendered flight the best immediate option for many Iraqis. The ensuing Iraqi refugee crisis has led to a severe drain of highly educated, skilled professionals from Iraq. However, local integration and resettlement are not the best durable solution for the majority of the millions of displaced Iraqis. Safe return will thus be pivotal as a durable solution for most Iraqi refugees. Nonetheless, the conditions necessary for safe return are not yet in place and will ostensibly not be present for some time. Political change in a top-down fashion will be a catalyst for reduced sectarian violence. Additionally, massive improvements to schools, hospitals, and utility services must be present before return can be considered safe and dignified. The Iraqi brain drain and barriers to reconstruction are causally linked; a corps of “pioneer” returned Iraqi refugee professionals will provide critical momentum for reconstruction of Iraq, which in turn may pave the way for a more widespread return of refugees and IDPs.

Until sectarian ways of thinking and acting in the political sphere are reversed, however, the violence and insecurity that plagued refugees prior to flight will continue to inhibit resolution of the Iraqi refugee crisis. Just as sectarian violence coincided with U.S. occupation and concomitant destruction of public order, a well-orchestrated U.S. withdrawal may be a key catalyst for Iraqis to coalesce in an effort to achieve this political change.

Notes

- ¹ The Brookings Institute, “Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq,” <<http://www.brookings.edu/saban/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index20081120.pdf>>, 20-Nov 2008.
- ² Doug Struck, “Professionals Fleeing Iraq as Violence, Threats Persist,” *The Washington Post*, 23-Jan 2006.
- ³ BBC News, “Quick Guide: Sunnis and Shias,” 11-Dec 2006; see also U.S. Library of Congress, “Sunni-Shia Relations in Iraq,” May 1998.
- ⁴ Stephen Zunes, “The US Role in Sectarian Violence,” <<http://www.antiwar.com/orig/zunes.php?articleid=8668>>, 7-Mar 2006.
- ⁵ Dhar Jamail, “The Myth of Sectarian Violence in Iraq,” *International Socialist Review*, 8-Jan 2008;
- ⁶ Ellen Knickmeyer and K.I. Ibrahim, “Bombing Shatters Mosque in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 23-Feb 2006.
- ⁷ Joseph A. Palermo, “Why John McCain’s ‘Surge’ Success Story is a Lie,” *The Huffington Post*, 22-July 2008.
- ⁸ NPR, “Iraq’s Sectarian Violence Forces Displacement, Fear,” *Morning Edition*, 20-Oct 2006.
- ⁹ See note 1, *supra*, p. 56
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Larry Kaplow, “In Iraq, The Doctors are Out,” *Newsweek*, 18-Oct 2008.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
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