

 **Op-Ed** ESSAY

Sally Marks. “Whither Iraq? A Commentary for Americans” [An Op-Ed piece]

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The debate over Iraq thus far has focused on whether the United States should withdraw, not on whether it dares to do so. Since our present dilemma arose in part from reliance on Miss Rosy Scenario, plus extraordinary ineptitude in high places, we need to examine worst case possibilities (while praying they not occur) if withdrawal is precipitate and full or further folly aggravates a dicey situation. The worst case is World War III. That is not scaremongering; it could happen, as *The New York Times's* diplomatic correspondent noted some months ago on *Washington Week in Review*. The situation is aggravated because the American people understandably want out of this bloody mess, and so domestic politics is coming to dictate policy and strategy, which is scary. A primer is needed on the risks of our situation, for well-intended demonstrations for immediate withdrawal can create dangers.

As a student of twentieth century international politics who has read heavily on the modern Middle East though it is not my specialty, I strongly opposed the 2003 Iraq war, partly because a nasty aftermath was likely. After all, the British faced a considerable insurgency there in 1920 as Iraq was being created. But what matters is where we are now. Americans need to face a few basic realities which for some reason neither the press nor the commentariat has urged upon them. The actions of the American people have consequences, especially in the Congress, whose oratory and deeds also produce effects—and not just in Washington.

First of all, Iraq is an artificial but essential state which Britain created in 1920 by cobbling together the three Ottoman vilayets (provinces) of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul to form a League of Nations mandate (until 1932). Since World War II when Middle Eastern oil became *really* important, American policy has been to maintain a balance of power in the Persian Gulf between its two strongest states, Iraq and Iran, so neither could dominate the region's oil supply. The 2003 Iraq war destroyed that balance, along with much else. When the U.S. Congress first debated withdrawal in mid-2006, some Gulf states which had always ignored Shiite Iran began making overtures, assuming if the U.S. leaves, Iran will dominate the Persian Gulf. If we do, it may achieve that aim, though not without a fight.

The 1991 Kuwait war was fought primarily to preserve the Gulf balance of power from Iraqi domination. At the time, one heard, “It's just oil” in tones implying the issue was Texaco's profits. That may have been a factor, but Japan did not chip in nine billion dollars nor Germany six billion to fatten the coffers of American oil companies. The

industrialized world runs on oil; this is one of several ways in which Iraq is not another Vietnam. President Bush the Elder deserves credit for creating and maintaining a vast coalition in 1991, but the global thirst for oil aided his efforts. That thirst has only grown and spread.

Aside from Saddam Hussein's terror apparatus, the two institutions gluing Iraq together were its army and the Baath party. We ended his terror; instead of removing only the top layer of army and party, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disbanded the army, leaving 400,000 armed men unpaid, unemployed and free to create trouble, and carried de-Baathification to such an extreme that some government ministries were largely bereft of civil servants. It also wasted time and money in trying to create America on the Tigris, often using persons whose sole qualification was loyalty to Bush, instead of tackling basic tasks such as getting medicine to hospitals and cultivating tribal sheiks, who could have been helpful. As the situation deteriorated dangerously, the CPA created an independent Iraqi regime and handed over the mess to it.

Democracy can rarely be imposed effectively by a foreign occupier, especially if there is no prior history of it to recall. For an "infidel western imperialist conqueror" to attempt this in a Middle Eastern Islamic nation was rash, especially in such a diverse state. Of its main components, with some exceptions of course, Kurds would prefer independence, Sunnis wish to continue as the ruling minority they were through the modern history of Iraq and before, and many of the divided Shiite majority want revenge for past suffering. The hastily devised constitution provides for a weak prime minister, and if Nuri al-Maliki were a strong leader, he would not have the job, for the component parts are too leery of each other to accept a strong executive. As they engage in a power struggle, they have agreed on nothing major; getting them to meet any list of benchmarks will require extreme patience at best.

One difficulty throughout the US occupation has been insufficient troops to control Iraq. In 2006, Kofi Annan as U.N. secretary general made two important statements, the first of which was that the U.S. had got into a situation where it could not go further in and could also not get out. The first part has been borne out by the current mini-surge which seems too little too late. With ten times as many added troops, it probably would have succeeded four years ago, but it now clearly cannot handle serious trouble in several places at once. Besides, a counter-insurgency must win the trust of the inhabitants. As Baghdadis endure their fifth consecutive 120° summer with only sporadic water and electricity and ever greater danger of death when buying food, that seems too much to expect. In fact, the surge is evidently intended to buy time at high cost in lives and treasure. Time for what? For Iraqi politicians to get their act together and accomplish such difficult tasks as revising the new constitution, reversing extreme de-Baathification, and dividing the oil revenues. That seems excessively optimistic, especially as some are unwilling, but imposing deadlines for U.S. withdrawal would only end American influence at once, and all factions would merely await our exit.

It is widely agreed that complete U.S. withdrawal would cause Iraq to explode into a lethal full scale civil war. Agreement ends there. It is rarely noted that at least six other states in the region would be involved to varying degrees in this “civil war.” Much may hinge on whether Iran can manage not to involve its military forces overtly, for doing so would bring Egyptian and Saudi reactions. The second thing Kofi Annan said was that everything in the Middle East is connected to everything else. Alas, that is also true.

The Middle East is not only geographically and economically strategic; it is also probably the most politically volatile region of the world. There is the Israeli-Palestinian ulcer, now more complicated than ever, and Lebanon’s acute fragility. Factor in Iran’s aspiration to regional dominance and its nuclear ambitions, whether peaceful or military, plus Israel’s and Bush’s desire to thwart them. Consider Afghanistan to the east of Iran, going down the drain since we invaded Iraq, leaving the Afghani job half done. Add the fact that several Middle Eastern regimes, mainly ones which have been pro-American, are extremely precarious. And do not forget that the region produces about 70% of the world’s oil.

A few people, including Senator Joseph Biden and General Anthony Zinni, worry that if we leave and Iraq explodes, the whole Middle East will explode as well. If that happens, we shall be immensely lucky if the only serious consequences for us are skyrocketing oil prices, leaving us nostalgic for the days when gas was only \$3.50 a gallon and we could afford to heat our homes, and a global recession or depression. But we might not be so lucky, and our government—or another player—might commit a new blunder in Iraq, Iran, or elsewhere—which brings us to the worst case of all, nuclear war.

Of the nuclear powers, Russia alone is an oil exporter. However, though it no longer borders on Gulf states, it still considers the Persian Gulf part of its Near Abroad, meaning its backyard which it regards much as the United States has long viewed the Caribbean. Of the others, China is extremely oil thirsty and a power to be taken seriously as it emulates American development of a century ago and quietly penetrates much of Africa economically while buying up our debt and financial firms. India is thirsty, too. Pakistan, to the east of Afghanistan, is Sunni, an oil importer with a precarious pro-American president and an army and intelligence leadership inclined toward Islamic fundamentalism. It and India, both nuclear states, are perpetually on the brink of war over Kashmir. In the Middle East itself is Israel, nuclear and a likely monkey wrench in possible solutions. Then there is Europe, including two nuclear states (Britain and France) plus Germany, and the United States, as well as non-nuclear Japan. Historians famously do not predict, but it is obvious that the scramble for oil or other unstable factors and perhaps blunders in the Middle East and related areas could create a crisis leading to a global explosion. Clearly, the time for oratory about victory or defeat is past. Concentration now should be on limiting the disaster and doing our utmost to ensure it does not turn into utter catastrophe.

Among the imponderables is the problem of Al Qaeda, which gained entry into Iraq

during the chaos after our conquest and has since spread, becoming brutally inventive. We pursue it, but our main focus is on Baghdad, where progress is slow and the Iraqi army’s ability to hold what US forces gain is questionable. Along with other insurgencies, we must deal with Al Qaeda, though rhetoric about “If we don’t fight them there, we’ll have to fight them here” is nonsense. Al Qaeda will attempt further atrocities here, whatever we do in Iraq. Beyond pursuing it (preferably with the aid of tribal sheiks) and trying to train a reliable Iraqi army and police, if that is possible, we must restore the Gulf balance of power in order to keep the peace. For a year, I have queasily wondered whether we would end up with our troops in several heavily fortified bastions watching Iraqis slaughter each other. That is now being discussed. In any event, it seems unlikely that any American president will seriously consider full withdrawal in the next five or six years at least, given all the potential consequences.

Possibly none of these disasters will occur. Maybe those who say that an Iraqi civil war would burn out quickly and then that all would be fine are right. However, though our troops have performed splendidly, little else has gone well, and excessive optimism and dismissal of potential difficulties got us to where we are now. As any competent general will say, it is always wiser to assume that anything which can go wrong might do so, and to be prepared for the worst. Alas, a great deal might go wrong. Moreover, for decades it was axiomatic that World War III would start in the Middle East.

How would I withdraw from Iraq? Very slowly, very carefully, with as little linkage to domestic politics as possible (a tough one, that). With a great deal of basic, efficient economic aid (with maximum Iraqi input since, after all, it is their country) and massive job creation, including good jobs, not just garbage collection. Costly those, but cheap at the price. With intensive diplomacy in the entire region and as many steps from the Iraq Study Group’s report as possible. With a great deal of patience. Our president is too weak politically and probably too stubborn to proclaim a national emergency, though that is what we face. We need to pull together but are unlikely to do so. The goal is a regime in Iraq which can control and defend the country. Whether it is democratic is probably immaterial, since democracy is unlikely to long survive our departure. We probably cannot remove the democracy ourselves without damaging effects on the Iraqi people, but I confess to moments of wishing for the emergence of a reasonably benevolent strongman—perhaps on the order of King Faisal I.

What can we do? Recognize the gravity of the situation and that there are no good solutions. Do not confuse the “war on terror” with the war in Iraq, though we have allowed them to become entwined. Be patient, hard as that is. Accept that Iraqi politicians, unimpressive as many are, face difficult tasks in unfamiliar seas. Recognize that while Congressman Murtha is correct in saying that our ground forces are strained to the utmost and that is a factor, it is unfortunately not the only factor and we can do only a limited amount about it just now. *Educate others.* Pressure your representatives and senators to patience, caution, and very careful utterances, if any. Seek a more even-handed policy in the Palestinian-Israeli situation and more attention to it, as all Arab

states declare that vital. Fiercely resist any administration or Israeli moves to destabilize or bomb Iran (whose strange president was chosen in a genuine, democratic election). Any new destabilization is dangerous. And pray to whatever deity you prefer, reminding Him or Her that God reputedly looks out for drunkards, fools, and the United States of America.

Diplomatic historian **Sally Marks** is the author of *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918-1933* (1976; a revised second edition was published in 2003) and *Innocent Abroad: Belgium at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (1981), which won the George Louis Beer and Phi Alpha Theta prizes. Her most recent book is *The Ebbing of European Ascendancy: An International History of the World 1914-1945* (Edward Arnold: 2002)

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