

Those Who Forget History...

Informing U.S. policy through expert analysis of Iraqi history

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THE FINAL SESSION of the Fares Conference on Engaging in Dialogue on U.S. Foreign Policy, held at The Fletcher School at Tufts University in November 2004, advertised a panel of experts discussing what lessons can be learned from the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq. The greatest revelation emphasized by each speaker was that both the history of Iraq and the history of U.S. foreign interventions offer many lessons that could have contributed to an informed U.S. policy in the region, but ultimately remained irresponsibly unheeded. According to these experts, the most significant insight to be gleaned from the current U.S. occupation of Iraq is that American policymakers' disregard for the true leadership and sentiments of the Iraqi people, failure to adequately prepare for post-war security and stability, and arrogant disregard for both expert planning and multilateral decision-making all stem from an ignorance of history.

Juan Cole, Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at the University of Michigan, delivered a history and overview of the Shi'a organizations and leadership in Iraq and of America's interactions with them during the current occupation. Throughout his talk, he emphasized that the American administration did not understand Shi'ite politics in Iraq, and as a result, lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi Shi'a.

Cole emphasized three failures of U.S. policy that resulted from the American administration's ignorance of Shi'a history and politics: 1) The American administration did not understand the nature of Shi'a revolutionary movements kept suppressed by Saddam Hussein since 1991; 2) The administration wasted both time and goodwill by not relating to and cooperating with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the true leader of the Iraqi Shi'a; 3) The administration excluded the popular revolutionary leader Muqtada al-Sadr from leadership roles, ignored his organization of a private militia, and ultimately came into a conflict with him and, as a result,

devastated its image in Iraq and across the Muslim world.

In removing the Ba'ath regime and eliminating constraints on Iraqi Islamism, the United States unleashed a political force: not the upsurge

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of secular civic organization and democratic sentiment fantasized by American neoconservatives, but the aspirations of Iraqi Shi'ites to build an Islamic republic. As Professor Cole elucidated, this result was an entirely predictable consequence of the past thirty years of political conflict between the Shi'ites and the Ba'athist regime, and American policy analysts expected a different result only by ignoring this crucial aspect of history. For Professor Cole, pre-invasion Iraq resembled a pressure cooker, its lid blown off by the American invasion, unleashing a number of boiled-over revolutionary movements.

Furthermore, Professor Cole emphasized the great price the U.S. paid by refusing to cooperate with Sistani on issues of mutual interest. When the U.S. appointed a committee to draft a constitution, Sistani issued a *fatwa* declaring that Iraq's constitution must be drafted by officials who have been elected by Iraqis, stating, "Legitimate government derives from the will of the people." After the U.S. created the November 15th agreement in 2003, calling for a transitional government to be elected by the provincial councils that Americans had massaged into place, Sistani organized a peaceful urban mass protest against the U.S. involving hundreds of thousands of people and demanding the involvement of the United Nations. Professor Cole pointed out that much time and effort was wasted in resisting Sistani considering the fact that his repeatedly expressed interest coincided with the stated goals of the U.S. administration: the development of democratic elections in the new Iraqi state.

In the meantime, the U.S. refused to recognize the movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, which, according to Professor Cole's estimates, had connections to about one-third of the Iraqi population. Sadr immediately began agitating for the U.S. to leave Iraq; eventually, he organized a private army that came into conflict with the Americans in Najaf in early April 2004. The Americans, amidst demonstrations of protest across the Islamic

world, invaded the holy city of Najaf and stormed the Shrine of Ali, just as Saddam had done and for which he had been reviled in 1991. Ultimately, it was Sistani who called on the Shi'a to march to Najaf and retake the city, making him a hero while severely damaging the image of the United States.

The next panelist, Richard Shultz, Professor of International Politics and Director of the International Security Studies Program at The Fletcher School, spoke about the military mistakes of the post-conventional war conflict. Professor Shultz explained that the U.S. made a number of military mistakes that, including shortcomings in post-war planning and management, made insurgency more likely and the possibility of stability and political change less so. Unfortunately, these mistakes ultimately stemmed from the ignorance of lessons from the history of previous occupation efforts in Iraq and the foreign intervention experiences of the U.S. in the 1990s.

Professor Shultz outlined three primary mistakes made by U.S. policymakers: 1) Policymakers failed to appropriately use the intelligence at their disposal by paying no attention to the possibility of any meaningful post-war resistance or insurgency, despite warnings from the CIA and other analysts; 2) U.S. forces were not adequate in size or type for stability operations amidst the violent and chaotic conditions that exist in the aftermath of post-conflict intervention; and 3) U.S. military commanders improperly demobilized and reconstructed a new Iraqi military and Iraqi security forces.

Senior military managers never considered, through the lens of Iraqi history and occupation, the possibility of insurgency, political instability, religious and ethnic conflict, humanitarian crises, or any other factors that might characterize a post-invasion Iraq landscape. As Professor Shultz stated, the U.S. missed significant lessons gleaned from earlier international interventions about the conditions that exist in the aftermath of the fall of an authoritarian government, namely: establishing security and stability is difficult, labor-intensive, time-consuming, and requires considerable attention in the planning process. The use of far greater proportions of

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forces in the 1990s in Kosovo and Bosnia to maintain security should have served as a precedent, but the actual U.S. plan in Iraq was to have a much less significant ratio of troops and furthermore to quickly reduce that amount. While the insurgency actually continued to grow, the U.S. administration refused to add more troops. Furthermore, while the U.S. maintained mostly combat units in Iraq, the unique situation of maintaining security in a post-authoritarian urban insurgency demanded specialized types of units such as military police, urban control, crowd control, civil affairs, civic reconstruction, and counterinsurgency units.

In addition, the demobilization of the Iraqi army was devised to exclude any Iraqi official who held a senior level position from the army or security forces during Saddam's regime regardless of whether or not he had been directly involved in wrongdoing. By not having a vetting effort and demobilization plan, like that of the Department of Defense in the 1990s, the U.S. missed a chance to reconstitute the army to help establish stability and the conditions necessary for political evolution. Instead, the U.S. sent these individuals home with no income and no chance of a future. Tens of thousands of armed soldiers were out of work and became prime candidates for recruitment into the waves of insurgency.

The final panelist, Ambassador Barbara Bodine, who worked as a senior American civilian official in the post-war administration of Iraq, expressed serious disappointment in the American administration's willful ignorance of available expertise and planning and insistence on unilateral control of Iraq. She identified the monopolization of power in the Defense Department as a key error resulting in its dismissal of the history and analysis provided by other organizations. For Ambassador Bodine, the greatest failure of the occupation was the refusal to stop the daily chaos, including looting and kidnapping, and restore normal personal security, the neglect of which communicated to the Iraqis that the U.S. was interested only in their resources and in deposing Saddam Hussein and not in their political freedom or daily security. She emphasized the danger of "Lebanizing" Iraq by putting Iraqis into sectarian blocks rather than building on the existing Iraqi national identity, a mistake that might naturally result from repeatedly ignoring expert analyses of Iraqi history, politics and society.

In particular, Ambassador Bodine decried the dismissal by the U.S. of the Administration of the Future of Iraq project, developed over eighteen months by the U.S. State Department and composed of facts and expert analysis, in addition to disregard for a study by the Army War College and the public hearings on U.S. policy in Iraq by Senators Lugar and Biden. Instead, the U.S. post-war efforts in Iraq were guided by the Unified Mission Plan,

drawn up in Kuwait immediately prior to the occupation. This document, left in draft status all the way up until the invasion on April 16, 2001, was never allowed to be distributed to other agencies. According to Ambassador Bodine, the facts, analysis and people who could have guided the situation were in place, but irresponsibly ignored.

Ambassador Bodine's words sum up the misguided and self-interested planning failures: "We planned for oil fires, but not looting and kidnapping. We planned for the largest army in the Middle East, but not for an insurgency. We planned for roses and sweets, but not for the obligations of occupation. And we planned to do it all ourselves." The implications of Ambassador Bodine's presentation cast a shadow on the underlying priorities of the U.S. invasion and the ignorance and arrogance of the U.S. preparation for its aftermath.

To a concerned and interested individual, a conference such as the Fares Conference on Engaging in Dialogue on U.S. Foreign Policy, where ideas are expressed and debated by leading thinkers, and in particular a panel such as this one where expert analysis serves to enlighten the errors of the American invasion in and occupation of Iraq, begs the question of what parameters should inform U.S. policy to Iraq in the future.

Certainly, as made clear by Professor Cole's presentation, the U.S. must not ignore the appeal of Islamism. Other movements, including the Hashemite monarchy, the military republic and the Ba'ath regime, and ideologies, such as pan-Arabism, failed to bring true freedom to Iraq. As Charles Tripp illustrated in his *History of Iraq*, these movements in Iraq (including the Ba'ath despite its poor rural civilian origins) frequently existed as identities assumed by a small number of people at the center of the state to legitimize its rule, while exclusivity, communal mistrust, patronage and the exemplary use of violence constituted the main elements of the regimes. In this light, many among the Shi'a majority, a group historically excluded from Iraqi politics, envision an Islamic Iraqi state or a state run by clerics according to an Islamic program.

In addition, of prime importance is the revelation that U.S. policy needs to be formed in light of the history of Iraq and its reaction to intervention. The history of Iraq, marked by strategies of subversion and resistance, goes a long way towards explaining the politics of the state and its people today. Iraq is ridden with profound tensions, aggravated recently by the Persian Gulf War and subsequent sanctions, but caused by both the social, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic divisions and the lack of a real Iraqi history during the four centuries of Ottoman rule when it was split into the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The various rulers of Iraq in its

modern history, from Nuri al-Sa'id to Saddam Hussein, have made efforts to organize the various elements of Iraq's population according to their own notions of political order and desirable social peace. Each of these rulers has had difficulty in achieving stability, despite the material resources available to them and their often murderous methods. When stability was achieved it was at the cost of massive repression of every possible dissident. The U.S., in seeking to reorganize modern Iraq in accordance with its own strategic interests, has taken up its place in the line of successive Iraqi rulers seeking to impose a political order that challenges existing values and interests and as such, has met the violent resistance that has been a persistent and notable feature of the history of Iraq. A failure to recognize the powerful legacies at work in the history Iraq is tantamount to succumbing to their logic.

As Ambassador Bodine emphasized, there is such a thing as an Iraqi identity, which may have been artificially created, but after 80 years and several generations, has since taken root (according to the Ambassador, Ba'athis and Sunnis are not confused as to whether they are Syrian, Iranian or Iraqi). Although Iraq made efforts to assert ideological leadership in the Arab world during the two decades between the world wars and to reinvigorate and lead the pan-Arabist cause during the rise of radicalism, a particular Iraqi patriotism has still become a significant force in the country. To become genuinely effective, this patriotism will have to be far more inclusive than both the forms of nationalism that have blighted Iraq's history and the form of democracy that the U.S. administration has attempted to impose in the early phases of its occupation.

The failure of the U.S. to consider the history and politics of Iraq in the course of its invasion and occupation has had terribly damaging results for its image in the Middle East and throughout the world and has devolved the situation for the average Iraqi citizen into chaos and insecurity. Thus, to most effectively achieve stated U.S. aims, the U.S. must truly work towards an Iraq in which all the Iraqi majorities, previously excluded in terms of socioeconomic class or political rights of free citizens, are finally allowed to participate in the political life of the country. In order to accomplish this, the U.S. must devise a new plan for the political reconstruction of Iraq based on a motive that takes into account the available expertise and analysis and invites multilateral cooperation. The daily security of Iraqi citizens must be guaranteed and the leaders of the Iraqi people must be elected by the public and not installed by the U.S. Although the Americans have squandered previous opportunities, the possibility of rebuilding a truly independent, free, and participatory Iraq still exists, and the vicious cycle of injustice and violence in Iraq's modern history may yet be broken.