

COMPREHENDING VIOLENCE IN IRAQ

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Most of the contending arguments regarding the future of the American operation in Iraq share the assumption Iraqi political leaders could settle the conflict if they were determined to do so. Those who support an indefinitely continued commitment believe that the forceful suppression of violence is a precondition for political accommodation among the various political factions, and they claim that progress is being made. Those who want to initiate the withdrawal of American forces believe that the prospect of reduced protection is necessary to compel the accommodation which virtually everyone concedes has not yet occurred.

Unfortunately there are reasons to doubt the capacity of any central leadership at this point. The pattern of 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 reported, an ominous fact that undermines the claim of significant progress. 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 anywhere in the country. 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 Johns Hopkins University’s School of Public Health estimated that more than 600,000 excess deaths from violent causes occurred throughout Iraq between 2003 and 2006 and that no part of the country escaped the affliction. Their estimate is nearly ten times greater than estimates of civilian casualties based on Pentagon reports and records compiled by the independent Iraq Body Count (IBC) 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 actually see on the streets. There is a grave humanitarian emergency in Iraq. Even those who escape violent death are hardly leading normal lives. Large numbers live in fear and economic deprivation without basic services. Many are being forced to move to more homogenous neighborhoods not out of preference but in search of protection that elected political leaders and government institutions cannot provide.

Because comprehensive observation is so difficult in Iraq, images of what is happening there are heavily affected by personal and political inclination. Even those dedicated to accurate understanding have difficulty visualizing the sustained breakdown of civil order in an advanced urbanized society. Given that difficulty, it is hardly ideal but nonetheless useful to consider analogies to more familiar settings.

One can imagine what would have happened in post-Katrina New Orleans, for example, 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 their own with minimal opportunity to leave the disaster area. Miserable as it has been in New Orleans, it would clearly have been far worse. People 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 like race and religion. Race plays a role in the social organization of New Orleans now, but it would very likely have become a violent fault line much as Sunni and Shia sectarian identities have become a fault line in Iraq. Under conditions of legal breakdown separatist identities are the result rather than the cause of violence.

One can 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 both Pentagon and IBC 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 ten to fifteen times more violent than Baltimore. The latter is intuitively more consistent with qualitative impressions – the fact that reporters can move freely throughout Baltimore, for example, while even the most intrepid have very restricted mobility in Iraq and the fact that lethal street explosions are not a daily occurrence in Baltimore.

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 dramatic revisions of global security policy