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Analysis

Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq

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Following its overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the United States was confronted with one of the most complex state-building enterprises of recent history. A central component of state building, emphasised in the literature yet given scant attention at the time of the invasion, is the process of political reintegration: the transformation of armed groups into political actors willing to participate peacefully in the political future of the country. In Iraq, political reintegration was a particularly important challenge, relating both to the armed forces of the disposed regime and to the Kurdish and Shia militias eager to play a role in the new political system. This article examines the different approaches employed by the United States toward the political reintegration of irregular armed groups, from the policy vacuum of 2003 to the informal reintegration seen during the course of the so-called "surge" in 2007 and 2008. The case study has significant implications for the importance of getting political reintegration right—and the long-term costs of getting it badly wrong.

Introduction

The conflict in Iraq, ongoing since the US-led invasion in 2003, presents a uniquely inauspicious context for the political reintegration of irregular armed groups. With the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the reintegration of Iraqi militias and other armed forces was to occur in an environment where new state structures were only just emerging.

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Militia and insurgency groups were thus asked to lay down their arms for the sake of a political system whose sustainability and dispensation of power were far from certain and with no guarantee that security be maintained subsequent to their dissolution. The situation distinguishes itself further by the fact that none of the targeted armed groups had won or been defeated in the war leading up to regime change. Rather than as victors and losers, the groups were defined and treated according to their supposed proximity to Saddam Hussein prior to the war. Sufficiently complex, this effort at reintegration was also to proceed alongside a hugely ambitious exercise in state building, conducted by a reluctant "nation-builder" short on plans and personnel, in a region marked by tension and in which the intervening state suffered a lack of legitimacy. Yet in this context of few positives, the process of political reintegration was perhaps most critically undermined by the dearth of attention paid, by both the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq and the Bush administration in Washington, to this critical component of state building.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the significance of the low prioritisation of political reintegration in Iraq's subsequent unravelling. The story is familiar: in the years following the US invasion, Iraq experienced a descent into civil war characterised by insurgent violence, militia rule, crime and insecurity. US authorities and forces were badly prepared to counter this downwards spiral and in some ways contributed to it. The Iraqi government and security forces were similarly unable, or even unwilling, to address the growing anarchy, all of which reinforced the scope for vigilante violence and tit-for-tat retaliations among rival militias. By 2006, the situation had reached a nadir, marked by insurgent attacks, roaming Shia death squads targeting Sunni civilian populations and a government infiltrated by sectarian agents.

While these developments have received substantial attention elsewhere, the concern here is the degree to which these challenges grew out of the initial failure to formulate and implement an effective reintegration strategy—one able to transform "insurgent" and other non-state armed groups into viable political entities; from potential "spoilers" to groups and key individuals that are prepared to eschew armed struggle and participate in peaceful political intercourse. Within the context of Iraq, such a strategy would have targeted the former armed forces of the Saddam Hussein regime, the insurgency to have arisen soon after its dismantling, and the Shia and Kurdish militias that returned to Iraq following the invasion or that formed shortly thereafter. The focus is thus on the crystallisation of a new Iraqi government and the efforts taken to include or exclude the leaders of Iraq's many irregular armed groups in this deeply political process.

The article concludes with an examination of the United States' so-called "surge" strategy, implemented in early 2007, and the ensuing improvement in the Iraqi security situation. Though the factors contributing to the lull in violence had little to do with reintegration, it did bring groups and individuals formerly seen as irreconcilable into accommodative arrangements and local ceasefires, resulting in greater stability and leading the way, possibly, toward permanent reintegration. Examining this volte-face sheds light on how reintegration can occur in the most inauspicious of circumstances and in the absence of the formal type of DDR strategy anticipated through much of the literature. Nothing here should suggest that the security gains achieved through the surge are irreversible, uncontested or tantamount to strategic victory for the US. As will be seen, it is also far from certain whether the lack of a comprehensive government-owned reintegration strategy will not, in time, be felt.

Getting off on the wrong foot

Many of the problems associated with militias, insurgents and civil war in Iraq stem from the initial US failure to implement a workable reintegration plan following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. Compounding the lack of a viable strategy, the invading force knew very little about Iraqi society and its actors; it was therefore unable to devise effective policy on the fly. Instead, CPA's reintegration policy was an amalgam of unquestioned assumptions regarding the Iraqi state, hunches at to whom could be trusted, and retributive urges targeting all those associated with the former regime. This combination of incompetence and ignorance coloured the CPA's initial approach to Saddam's security forces, the mounting insurgency and to the Shia and Kurdish militias eager to stake a claim in the newly liberated Iraq.

The desire to reform and to punish Saddam Hussein's armed forces led to CPA Order 2, issued on 23 May 2003, which dissolved most of Iraq's official security-related institutions.[1] Perceived as embodiments of Saddam's totalitarian regime, these forces were to be removed and replaced with the yet-to-be-established security structures of the yet-to-be-formed successor regime. The architects of CPA Order 2 have since argued that the edict simply recognised a *fait accompli*, as the Iraqi forces had self-demobilised during the US invasion.[2] Even so, only a desire for retribution or a lack of planning (or both) can explain the subsequent failure to pay the sacked soldiers, many of whom felt spurned and turned against the occupation.[3] These soldiers were not reintegrated as much as deliberately alienated. With easy access to weapons, in a country awash with munitions, they mounted a potent threat to the US presence in Iraq and to its partners within the emerging government.[4]

The CPA's adversarial approach toward the former security structures of the Ba'athist regime also coloured its response to the low-level violence that emerged soon after the invasion. Even when the threat of insurgency was recognised, there was no talk of placating those opposing the US efforts in Iraq. In general, the CPA "insisted that all of the problems of the country were caused by the insurgency—rather than that all of the problems of the country were helping to fuel the insurgency—and that . . . the insurgency was really about al-Qa'ida operatives and former regime 'dead-enders'".[5] While this characterisation was in some cases accurate, blind devotion to Saddam Hussein was rarely the driving force behind the violence; many of those who took up arms felt offended by the occupation and had only a loose affiliation with the Ba'athist party (which had after all dominated most walks of life). Regardless, the CPA's characterisation of the adversary served to obscure the insurgency's nationalist dimension and encouraged strategies of coercion rather than cooption.[6] In many areas, the principal response to the insecurity was to "kill-capture" insurgents, the flaws of which have been widely discussed. In short, the US lacked the necessary intelligence to locate its enemy; the troop numbers to hold cities and towns; the legitimacy to gain popular support; and the familiarity with counterinsurgency to appreciate the centrality of its "non-military" components: the delivery of basic services, provision of security and establishment of legitimate governing and administrative structures. The strategy contributed to an escalated insurgency, which in turn generated a climate of insecurity and fear.

This context helps explain the second tenet of the CPA's initial reintegration strategy (or lack thereof)—that concerning Iraq's militias. These paramilitary organisations had long opposed the rule of Saddam Hussein and were operating from various sanctuaries—often Iran in the case of the Shia militias or in Iraq's protected northern territory in the case of the Kurdish Peshmerga. With Saddam's overthrow, the obvious question was how to deal with these forces: the Shia militias were returning to Iraq and the Peshmerga had itself contributed to the US war effort in Iraq's north.

The initial US intention had been to "DDR sub-state militias"—to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate their members into society—and the Pentagon's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) was pledged a $70 million contract to this end.[7] ORHA hastily put together a plan to establish DDR offices in the north, centre and south;

to inform former fighters of the benefits available to them through the DDR process; and to provide them, upon registration, with a place in the new security services, a pension or vocational training.[8] Whatever its flaws and potential, the plan was never executed: when ORHA was replaced by the CPA on 21 April 2003, and retired general Jay Garner was succeeded by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, the whole notion of DDR, for the Iraqi armed forces as for the militia, was abandoned.[9] In part, this was because senior officials at the US Department of Defence did not want to spend funds on the defeated forces of Saddam Hussein.[10] Yet in torpedoing the DDR effort for the former security forces, the Shia and Kurdish militia were also left in place.

The CPA did not perceive this outcome as particularly problematic. After all, these groups were opposed to Saddam Hussein; there was a sense that they deserved some sort of reward or recognition.[11] The militia also did not appear to resist the US presence in Iraq. The Kurdish parties were content to let the Peshmerga maintain security in Iraq's northern provinces, where they had operated before the war, and pledged to join the Iraqi security forces once they were created.[12] The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) also assumed a seemingly positive stance toward the occupation. On 31 May 2003, it announced that its 10,000-strong militia, the Badr Corps, had relinquished its heavy weapons—a symbolic, if nonetheless spurious claim.[13] In September, SCIRI changed the name of the Badr Corps to the "Badr Organisation"; to SCIRI leader Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the move signalled the force's transformation "into a civil organisation" that would "play a role in the restoration of security and the reconstruction and building of a new Iraq".[14] This was thus a further gesture showing just to what extent SCIRI did *not* present a threat to the US state-building endeavour. Moreover, in terms of its operations, the Shia militia appeared predominantly engaged in security duties, such as the guarding of mosques and other holy places—tasks that the American leadership in any case preferred to delegate, particularly given the shortfall in US troops.[15]

Indeed, between the escalating violence, the lack of US troops and the preoccupation with other issues—the search for Saddam Hussein, or his vaunted weapons of mass destruction—the reintegration of seemingly cooperative militias did not present itself as a priority. Given the widespread instability, "Walter Slocombe, the CPA's director for national security from May to November 2003 . . . was sympathetic to the political parties who said their militias were an 'insurance policy' pending a political solution that would ensure their security against other groups".[16] The Shia and Kurdish militias were thus not reintegrated; they were allowed to thrive because of the security vacuum created through the US occupation. The Peshmerga continued to dominate in the north and, in the south, the Badr Organisation remained essentially intact, all while infiltrating the local security units that would later be subsumed within the national police.

The appearance of a common cause between the Shia militias and the US forces was largely illusory, or at least transient. All while collaborating with the CPA, SCIRI leaders denounced the United States as "colonialists" for having invaded Iraq; in April, they also shunned a major CPA-organised conference at which Iraq's leaders were to discuss the country's political future.[17] More seriously, Shia militias were quickly assuming control of the south of the country, filling the political space left by the collapse of the central regime; and where Coalition forces were at their thinnest.[18] While their action seldom resulted in armed confrontations with the occupying forces, the militias did insist on total freedom of action. Thus, the one attempt to rein in these sub-state forces—a UK effort to disarm forcibly the town of Majar al-Kabir in June 2003—resulted in the deaths of six Royal Military Police and was the last such action in the south-east for some time.[19] In the following months, the CPA "decided that dealing with the militias was not a high priority [and], instead, Coalition military units made tactical arrangements with militias on an ad hoc basis".[20]

This understanding further encouraged the various Shia militias to assume local control of security and of other functions of state. Not only did this threaten the state-building enterprise in Iraq; it also begged the question of who, exactly, was in charge. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Shia militias themselves competed for power, through sermons in the mosques as well as violence in the streets.[21] In April 2003, the moderate and influential Shia cleric, Abdul Majid Khoei, who was working with US forces, was hacked to death by a Shia mob in Najaf. The same movement surrounded the home of Iraq's most senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani—another influential and moderate Shia leader—and ordered him to leave town (before being persuaded to disperse by tribal elders in the city). In August 2003, the suspected sponsor of both incidents, Moqtada al-Sadr, founded a new Shia militia, the Mahdi Army, which established itself as a powerful anti-American force and as a counterpoint to the other militias left in place post-invasion, principally the Badr Organisation. In Spencer Ackerman's words, "as Sadr saw SCIRI grow stronger—with US acquiescence—he felt the need to respond in kind".[22] In the following year, Sadr established his own law in large parts of the country and geared up for future violence.[23]

A strategy emerges

The CPA did eventually recognise the potential challenge posed by the militias. In November 2003, Walter Slocombe was replaced by David Gompert, who received instruction from Bremer to eliminate the sub-state paramilitaries; their power, it was felt, was threatening the viability of the Iraqi state.[24] The policy shift led to the development of the *Transition and Reintegration Strategy*, issued on 21 May 2004. As Thomas Mowle explains, the new strategy was in many ways sound: it recognised that the security and social functions served by the militias would have to be supplanted before these forces would stand down. It also acknowledged that, for historical reasons, the militia leaders were distrustful of the central government and that the Coalition, therefore, would face difficulties persuading them to disarm, particularly as the nature and composition of the new government remained uncertain. In recognition of these obstacles, the strategy paper noted that the "transition and reintegration" (TR) process would need to be long-term, lasting years.[25]

On 1 June 2004, following months of negotiations, David Gompert signed reintegration memoranda with nine Iraq militias, representing a combined total of 102,000 fighters.[26] The list of participating groups included the Kurdish parties, SCIRI, Iraqi Hezbollah and the Da'wa Party but excluded the Mahdi Army, which was disqualified as it was created *after* the US invasion.[27] Even so, the participating militias agreed to designate themselves as "residual elements" and committed themselves to a timetable for their own dissolution through the three tracks presented in the *Transition and Reintegration Strategy*: reintegration into the security forces; a pension commensurate to that of an Iraqi solder; or vocational training for civilian employment.[28]

With the memoranda signed, the CPA issued Order 91 on 7 June, which provided the legal basis for the reintegration process.[29] The order set out the conditions imposed on the "residual elements": until their final dissolution, they were to cease all recruitment and armament; restrict themselves to security operations (which also required the prior approval of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) and the US military command) and inform the government as to their composition and arsenals. To oversee this process, Order 91 created the Transition and Reintegration Implementation Committee (TRIC), to be chaired by the MoI. Failure to comply with Order 91 would result in a change of status from "residual element" to "illegal armed force or militia", at which time the transgressing force would void its temporary right to exist and face punitive measures, the nature of which would be determined by TRIC through discussions with Iraqi and Coalition authorities.[30]

From the policy vacuum of 2003, a plan had emerged. Even so, action taken to reintegrate the militias remained minimal, reflecting a continued disinterest in this component of state building. A RAND report notes that the TR effort "was unfunded and all but unstaffed as late as the start of 2004" and that by the spring, when the new strategy emerged, "the CPA TR office was one person strong".[31] The CPA also assumed that the TR process would not require substantial funding – around $14.3 million—and that it would instead lean on existing programmes and budgets.[32] This assumption proved optimistic: the supporting programmes were rarely fully developed and they lacked the resources to finance the reintegration of some 102,000 fighters. The TR plan had stipulated continued Coalition support and funding for reintegration, but nothing ever materialised on this front.[33] Instead, some reports claimed that "millions of dollars earmarked for militia demobilisation and reintegration were actually used to address unplanned-for security threats".[34]

The TR programme was further undermined by its lack of realism. Neither the Iraqi government nor the US military were able to provide the reintegrating militias a security guarantee. Given the Sunni-dominated insurgency and the ongoing power-struggle between Shia militias, the leaders of these forces saw no reason to disarm or to stand down.[35] Misgivings toward the reintegration process were heightened following Moqtada al-Sadr's uprising in April 2004, through which he seized control over Najaf, Kufa and other strategically located cities.[36] In this climate, the vocational training programmes did not seem particularly relevant. Sensing danger, the "residual elements" also refused to provide the government with information on their composition and armaments—a requirement of Order 91 but not, significantly, of the TR memoranda signed the earlier week.[37]

This context made the short timelines for reintegration particularly unfortunate – and unrealistic. Whereas the *Transition and Reintegration Strategy* had recommended a five-year schedule for reintegration, to be completed by 2009, the memoranda advanced this deadline to the end of 2005. In addition, when Ayad Allawi, then the prime minister of Iraq, announced Order 91, he declared that 90,000 militia members would be processed by January 2005.[38] As Mowle notes, "the five-year approach recommended by the strategy had now shrunk to, effectively, seven months".[39] The narrowing timelines were testament to the desperation of the CPA and the Iraqi government somehow to control the militias, quickly, or to a serious underestimation of what reintegration would require. Either way, Order 91 set unrealistic targets whose eventual transgression served to compromise the integrity of the entire process.

The reintegration process was also undercut by a lack of trust and goodwill. While US authorities viewed reintegration as bringing armed forces under legal and civil control, the militia leadership saw it as an opportunity to insert their supporters in the emerging security structures as a power base, and to exclude those of potential rivals. Hazim al-Shaalan, the interim Defence Minister and an ally of the secular Achmed Chalabi, was for example opposed to the inclusion of "Islamists" in the security services, which barred the majority of militia fighters from reintegration. Meanwhile, those who sought reintegration demanded ranks beyond what was offered, while those opting for a pension found it difficult to prove their eligibility to the sceptical government officials.[40] A final lack of support for the TR strategy, through despondency or disinterest, meant that it floundered. In the months following its formulation, "job training programs run by Allawi's Labour Ministry were cancelled over personal feuds and pension programs and other aspects of the program of DDR . . . were bounced around from one command to another".[41] With time, the ministries of defence and of labour and social affairs gradually eliminated the first and third tracks: reintegration into the security forces and the provision of vocational training.[42]

Left to their own devices, the "residual elements" proceeded to breach the many conditions of their reintegration plans. Despite the strong language in Order 91 of "disciplinary measures and penalties", no significant action was taken to punish the transgressors; nor had Order 91 set out who was to mete out these measures.[43] The militias were thus allowed to operate as before and for the same reasons as before: the US preoccupation with the Sunni-driven insurgency, the lack of troops to provide security and the fear of upsetting the Shia militias and thereby open up a second front alongside the ongoing campaign against insurgents and criminal actors.[44]

Reintegration by default

With Order 91 failing, the political reintegration of militias and of their leaders occurred "by default"—without any conditions, strategy or monitoring mechanism. This process of transforming militia groups into political entities had already begun with the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council on 13 July 2003, but it was powerfully entrenched through the handover of sovereignty to the Interim Iraqi Government in May 2004 and the Iraqi elections of 2005. The unchecked process of political reintegration embarked upon in 2003 would in the end determine the political balance of power in post-war Iraq and initiate a vicious and seemingly irreversible circle of violence.

Soon after the initial invasion, the CPA appointed a body of Iraqi authorities to the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which was to advise the CPA and lend an Iraqi face to the occupation. The US wanted the IGC to be established quickly and for its membership to reflect Iraq's ethnic composition—as a body founded by the US, this was to be its claim to legitimacy.[45] Problematically, the US was in too much of a hurry to allow and encourage truly representative leaders to emerge from the clean slate that was Iraqi civil society in 2003.[46] Instead, CPA officials distributed political power to "twenty-five Iraqi leaders well-known *to them*" and who appeared to represent the ethnic constituents of Iraq—that is, the leaders of the political wings of the country's various militias.[47] Appointed to the Council in this fashion were Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim of SCIRI; Abdel-Karim Mahoud al-Mohammedawi of the Hezbollah party in Iraq; Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Ezzidin Salim of Da'wa; and Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, chief commanders of the Peshmerga force. With the possible exception of the last two, these individuals did not enjoy much public support, even among their supposed constituents; their promotion was instead based on their opposition to Saddam Hussein, their unmistakable ethnic identity and the power they held through their control of militias. The influence of these appointed leaders on Council affairs was nonetheless to be significant: four of them served as IGC presidents, a rotating position, and they competed against Council members who were either similarly unknown to the Iraqi population or perceived as illegitimate outsiders.[48]

The placement of militia leaders on the IGC, coupled with the United States' reliance on these Council members to give the appearance of an orderly transition to Iraqi rule, severely limited US options for dealing with non-complying militias. The result can be seen as *a false process of political reintegration*: as Larry Diamond has put it, "the menace of radical, Iranian-backed armed militias ... was mounting rapidly ... even as the leaders of their sponsoring political parties were sitting in Baghdad on the Iraqi Governing Council, signing democratic declarations and evincing to their American interlocutors sweet moderation and restraint".[49] This set-up offered a poor foundation to the *Transition and Reintegration Strategy* and militated against the notion of an Iraqi government loyal to the state.

This unconditional co-option of militia leaders could plausibly have been reversed with the dissolution of the IGC and the handover of sovereignty to a new Iraqi government. Instead, at an extraordinary meeting on 15 November 2003, the Bush administration elected to transfer authority over Iraq to the members of the IGC, who were to form the nucleus of the new Interim Iraqi Government (IIG). With US presidential elections looming and with violence in Iraq unabated, the ease of transferring sovereignty to the established Iraqi leadership of the ICG seemed all too appealing—at least in Washington. Yet because of the continuity of the transition, "all the problems that dogged the IGC, its lack of legitimacy, its inability to forge meaningful links with the population and criticisms of it being appointed and not elected" resurfaced.[50]

Nor did this imperfect arrangement guarantee security; much like Order 91, the political incorporation of militia leaders did not apply to Iraq's Sunni tribes and armed groups.[51] The difference was of course that these elements were actively opposing the US effort in Iraq, which raised problems for their reintegration. First, there was the emotive issue of dealing with those responsible for US military casualties. When on 3 August 2004 Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih announced an amnesty plan to co-opt Sunni insurgents, its scope was immediately curbed by American officials, who insisted that it exclude those responsible for killing US servicemen. The issue of amnesty always presents moral dilemmas. In this instance, the Sunnis perceived their armed activity as resistance against occupation and their exclusion from the amnesty, for having targeted what from a guerrilla-warfare perspective were nonetheless legitimate military targets, was therefore strongly contested. Indeed, both Shiite and Sunni leaders vigorously opposed the amnesty deal, arguing that "those who resist the American occupation are patriots and have no need for official pardon"—a position that clashed with the US desire not to "reward" its adversaries or allow them, possibly, to launch future attacks.[52] In the end, this and other similar efforts at reintegration came to naught.

It should also be recalled that the US military for a long time saw Sunni insurgents as seeking nothing less than the return of Saddam Hussein—hence their characterisation of the insurgents as "dead-enders", "foreign-regime loyalists", "Ba'athists", etc. "The logic of this argument", says Toby Dodge, was that "the violence is highly unrepresentative of Iraqi population opinion … and politically limited to those fanatical enough or unintelligent enough not to realise that the old regime is dead and buried".[53] The reality was more complex: as Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi explained at the Council of Foreign Relations in 2006, sections within what the US termed "the insurgency" could be cast as "resistance", groups opposed to the US presence in Iraq but willing, according to al-Hashimi, "to contribute and to participate in the political process as long as we offer to them … a workable [and] significant project to accommodate them".[54] This distinction was not then apparent to the US military, which tended to misconceive the Sunni insurgents as inherently irreconcilable and as impervious to all but armed force.[55] Nor did the US military fully accept that clumsy security operations and the mass detention of Sunni Iraqis would fan rather than quash the insurgency.[56]

Through this rushed accommodation of Shia militia leaders—and the refusal to co-opt, while still failing to coerce, the Sunni resistance—the United States sowed the seeds of many of Iraq's later problems. This was also a mess from which extrication would be difficult. Once in government, the militia leaders gained control over specific ministries, which quickly "turned into party fiefdoms directly breaking governmental coherence".[57] Henceforth, the arrangements of the Iraqi government were spun to serve the interests of particular leaders and groups rather than, necessarily, those of Iraq. The Transitional Administrative Law (TAL)—Iraq's interim constitution—was produced as a compromise between Shi'ite and Kurdish interests but gave little room to Sunni' preferences.[58] Similarly, the emergence of new security structures, including the Army, was heavily politicised and took on a sectarian character, further highlighting the Sunnis' disenfranchisement.[59] The de-Ba'athification Council, overseeing the dismantling of the former regime, allowed Shiite Ba'athists to repent and reintegrate but remained firm against their Sunni former colleagues, who were thereby barred from senior government positions.[60] All this time, the Sunni witnessed their weapons being forcibly seized, while the Shia and Kurdish militias were allowed to operate freely.

Elections: entrenching the problem

If the Shia militia leaders were treated all too kindly, the Sunni leaders were indiscriminately excluded — a distribution of power and privilege that soon became self-perpetuating. This vicious circle was only entrenched by the two elections held in Iraq in January and December 2005. The January election was designed to create a Transitional National Assembly (TNA), which would be charged with drafting a new Iraqi constitution. The election passed off without major problems, but it was undermined by the legacy of failed reintegration. Entrenched as the likely political elite, the IIG's Kurdish and Shi'ite militia leaders did comparatively well; in contrast, the Sunni leadership—excluded so far from government and the target, instead, of an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign—decided that political participation was not in their best interest.[61] Their boycott of the elections further strengthened the Shi'ite and Kurdish parties' hold on government; these groups now dominated the TNA and controlled the appointment of senior government officials—while the Sunnis remained excluded and with little to gain through party politics.[62]

By this point, even the recalcitrant Moqtada al-Sadr had found a place in government. Following clashes earlier in 2004, the Coalition reached a deal with Sadr on 9 October, whereby militia members were paid to turn in their weapons and Sadr was offered to join the government.[63] As with the previous round of disarmament and political reintegration, there was no expectation or demand that all arms be handed over or that the Mahdi Army disband or shift its allegiance to the central government. The cost of reducing violence between US forces and the Mahdi Army was thus the unconditional accommodation of al-Sadr within the Iraqi government, where his officials sat side-by-side with those of other militia-wielding parties. Again, the contradiction was palpable: Sadr "consistently denounced the occupation and displayed sympathy for the armed opposition while simultaneously participating in the political process the US set up and which the armed groups combat".[64]

Their sectarian rule legitimised through elections, the dominant parties used their position in government to consolidate their power. The new constitution, written by the victors of the January election and completed in October 2005, was widely seen by Sunnis as a "sectarian text"—one that "prescribed a form of federalism that would facilitate the dissolution of the state ... [and] that would leave the Sunni Arab community landlocked and without oil".[65] The constitution also seemed to condone the continued existence of militias: while it prohibited the "formation of military militia outside the framework of the armed forces", it also reserved the right of "regional governments" to establish "the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces and guards".[66] It was no surprise that while Shi'ite and Kurdish voters supported the new constitution in the 15 October referendum, the Sunni community overwhelmingly voted against it (while also narrowly failing to defeat it).[67]

The ministries of the new government were also divided up between the dominant parties and transformed into sectarian powerbases. Sadr loyalists gained control of the ministries of health and of transportation, which were purged of their Sunni employees and taken over by sworn Sadrists.[68] In later months, two officials associated with al-Sadr—Hakim al-Zamili, then the deputy health minister, and Brig.-Gen. Hamid Hamza Alwan Abbas al-Shamari, a commander of the ministry's security force – allegedly turned Baghdad's hospitals into "death zones for Sunnis seeking treatment there".[69] The two "were accused of organizing and supporting the murder of Sunni doctors; the use of ambulances to transfer weapons for Shi'ite militia members; and the torture and kidnapping of Sunni patients".[70]

SCIRI, meanwhile, appointed Bayan Jabr Solagh, a former Badr commander, to the post of Interior Minister. He proceeded to sack hundreds of Sunni officials working in the Ministry, claiming that they were criminals.[71] Henceforth, MoI recruits required a *tazkiya*, or letter of reference, from a SCIRI office or mosque.[72] Jabr also announced that militias would increasingly be incorporated into the Interior Ministry's security structures.[73] This was something President and Peshmerga leader Jalal Talabani could readily agree on. At a meeting on 8 June 2005, he underlined that the "heroes of Badr"—along with the Peshmerga—were valued by the Iraqi state: "You and the peshmerga are wanted and are important to fulfilling this sacred task, to establishing a democratic, federal, and independent Iraq".[74] The US administration had assumed that political power would provide militia leaders the guarantees necessary to disband their forces.[75] Instead, the militias simply transitioned into the security structures to further the sectarian interests of their masters, but in the legitimising uniforms of the national forces.[76]

This form of reintegration had two broad effects on Iraqi politics and security. First, the reality of a government ruled by militia leaders and run according to sectarian interests prompted many Sunnis to align themselves with the insurgency and with emerging extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), for protection or for revenge. "Knowing they could not win democratically, and fearing the consequences of living as a minority, civil war seemed like the best hope".[77] Frustration and suspicion of the emerging political system led to a rise in attacks directed against the occupying forces and the political institutions that they had put in place. Given the sectarian nature of Iraqi politics, the violence also assumed a distinctly ethnic dimension, particularly following the bombing of the Shia al-Askariyya mosque in Samarra on 22 February 2006.[78]

Second, when the Sunnis did engage in politics, they too mobilised under a strictly sectarian flag, contributing further to the fractured nature of Iraqi politics. Thus, even though a Sunni coalition, the Iraqi Accord Front (IAF), did in the end participate in the December 2005 legislative elections, "each alliance focused its energy on cementing support among its own base, while doggedly obstructing intrusions by other alliances into its home area".[79] By the time Nouri al-Maliki, the new prime minister, came to dole out ministerial positions and political authority, he still faced a series of sectarian coalitions, each of which vied to fill ministries with its own lackeys.[80]

No basis for progress

In part, this unfortunate outcome of democratisation stemmed from the constitutional set-up of the Iraqi government, which does not afford the prime minister much bargaining power. Constitutionally, the prime minister is at best a *primus inter pares* requiring the buy-in of ministers to implement policy. These ministers are however loyal to the parties that they represent and which appointed them.[81] Furthermore, Maliki also had to answer to the United States' preferences, which did not always overlap with those of the Iraqi body politic, such as it was. All of this explains why the Iraqi PM was on the whole unable to counteract the false political reintegration of militia leaders or to address the bar on reintegration imposed on the Sunni community since 2003.

In May 2006, for example, Maliki managed to dislodge Bayan Jabr from the MoI and replace him with the independent Jawad al-Bolani. However, as Toby Dodge explains, "the weakness of the prime minister's position meant that Jabr could not simply be sacked from the cabinet, but was instead moved sideways to become minister of finance"—a position which he has allegedly used to obstruct reconstruction projects in Baghdad's Sunni areas.[82] Lacking a strong backer, al-Bolani by the same logic has struggled to reform the MoI or to dismantle the death squads created during Jabr's reign. Indeed, throughout 2006, the MoI was increasingly penetrated by Sadr's Mahdi Army, which transitioned into the security forces in large numbers.[83]

In June 2006, Maliki announced a 24-point strategy for a National Reconciliation and Dialogue Project, which was to include an amnesty for insurgents and a review of de-Ba'athification regulations. Clearly, this was an attempt to smother the escalating violence and provide a clean break to those who had taken up arms. The amnesty was initially going to apply to those responsible for attacks on US forces; only those guilty for "the shedding of innocent Iraqis' blood" would be excluded.[84] However, following pressure from the US and from SCIRI, the final version of bill barred anyone involved in the killing of American or of Iraqi security forces. As Maliki put it, "The fighter who did not kill anyone will be included in the amnesty, but the fighter who killed someone will not be".[85] This revision blurred the distinction made in a previous draft between "national resistance" and "terrorism" and limited the prospects of successful engagement with the Sunni insurgents.[86] Indeed, the reconciliation plan resurrected the problems faced by the 2004 amnesty: semantically, the definition of "participation" in the act of killing led to confusion as to eligibility and, more importantly, the Sunnis again felt that their "nationalist struggle against occupation" was dismissed as terrorism and criminality. The Sunni speaker of the Parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, reflected a wider Sunni concern when he declared that, "If we punish a person who killed an American soldier, who is an occupier, we should punish the American soldiers who killed an Iraqi who fought against the occupation".[87]

As problematically, the reconciliation plan was silent on the topic of militias, offering little more than hopeful injunctions as to their eventual disbandment.[88] The reasons for this were simple. First, Maliki was dependent on the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) Coalition, which represented SCIRI, Da'wa as well as al-Sadr and had gained 46.5% of the ballot in the legislative elections. "Efforts to go after these groups risked defection … with devastating impact on the capacity to govern".[89] Second, these parties still did not have a compelling reason to disband their militias: the government security forces were either weak or had been infiltrated. Even Pentagon reports candidly predicted that the militias were "likely to remain active in areas where Iraqi institutions and forces are not yet adequate to meet the social and public safety needs of the local population".[90] At the same time, their continued existence and operations further dissuaded the Sunnis from accepting the amnesty.[91]

De-Ba'athification, the second tranche of Maliki's reconciliation plan, confronted a similar lack of support and floundered. On 22 July 2006, Maliki established the National Council for the Reconciliation and National Dialogue Plan—a group of 30 leaders drawn from a cross-section of Iraqi society and charged with implementing Maliki's reconciliation plan, such as it was. On 26 August, tribal leaders were convened in Baghdad; statements were made condemning sectarian violence and in support of the government's reconciliation plan.[92] However, there was little substance behind the rhetoric. In the first place, the plan itself was vague, expressing a general desire for progress but proposing no clear means of achieving it. Second, the provisions for de-Ba'athification had initially, and on the UIA's insistence, been removed from the plan; they were only restored following strong US pressure—an indication, perhaps, of a lack of "local ownership".[93] Third, the National Council for Reconciliation gained no momentum and its meetings, in June as in December 2006, were marked by suspicion, infighting and notable absences.[94] As Anthony Cordesman noted, "the initiative did not appear to carry the weight required to end the political deadlock perpetuated by sectarian and ethnic differences".[95]

The elevation of sectarians within government and their entrenchment within that position through a series of elections had contributed to a seemingly irredeemable corruption of Iraqi governmental affairs. Incoherent at best, at cross-purposes more often, its ministries and parties represented no basis for national policy, for compromise or for reconciliation. Nor was there a Leviathan—a strongman or authority—to repair the damage inflicted through the pragmatic accommodation of these elements. Even the introduction of a Sunni coalition had failed to broaden the scope of Iraqi politics, and in fact contributed to its further fragmentation along ethnic lines. This highly imperfect government was expected somehow to find it within itself to carry through on critical reforms to address the motivation for continued violence. Meanwhile, the US military, perceiving itself as an "antibody" in Iraqi society and frustrated with the lack of progress, increasingly transferred the responsibility for containing the threat of violence to its Iraqi counterparts—and this in spite of their inadequacies and infiltration by sectarian elements.[96] A veritable recipe for disaster, this set-up led to both political stalemate in Baghdad and a dramatic rise in casualties nationwide.[97] The prospects of salvaging some sort of stability were quickly fading.

Reintegration by other means[98]

From this nadir in 2006, violence in Iraq diminished throughout 2007 and into 2008.[99] Starting in late 2006, Sunni tribes and former insurgents increasingly partnered with various US brigades to combat the threat of Sunni extremist—or *takfiri*—groups such as AQI. Simultaneously, some US brigades abandoned the isolated "forward operating bases" (FOB) for "Joint Security Stations" (JSS)—small forts constructed across Baghdad and nearby cities to enable the persistent provision of population security. This shift became official strategy with the launch of Operation *Fardh al-Qanoon* in February 2007, which also saw the deployment of five additional brigades to Iraq. In 2007, this surge in troops and the new US strategy compelled Moqtada al-Sadr to curb his armed activity.

The lull in violence occurred in the absence of a DDR plan. Nor were the conditions on the ground amenable to such a programme: security was lacking, there was no political agreement and no scope for reconciliation.[100] Nonetheless, the security gains grew out of and enabled *informal processes of reintegration*, relying on a series of pacts made between the US military and the more moderate elements of its erstwhile enemies. These pacts were predicated on a shared desire for greater stability on the local level and a mutual dedication to work toward that goal. Through such cooperation, former "irreconcilables" soon assumed greater responsibility for keeping the peace and enabling reconstruction; in some places, the security gains even brought Sunni and Shia tribal leaders into local peace agreements. The process can be viewed as "reintegration by other means".

The schism between moderates and extremists was first felt among the Sunni tribes of Anbar Province, which in 2006 turned against the radical Islamist elements active in the area. Cooperation had hitherto been possible because of the tribes' and extremists' shared Sunni identity and opposition to the Shia government. With time, however, AQI rendered itself deeply unpopular—by disrupting or taking over informal business networks, seeking to marry its members into the higher tribal echelons or by using violence to coerce the tribes into submission.[101] By late 2006, the extremists' efforts to embed themselves had resulted in a backlash.

The US military actively assisted in this decoupling. Doing so would however require a complete reconceptualisation of the Sunnis, of their motivation to fight, and of the US military's own role in Iraq. In short, US brigades moved from a narrow focus on rooting out the insurgency to a broader effort to "end the cycle of violence", primarily by engaging with its adversaries' initial motivation to take up arms. This helped locate groups and individuals within the insurgency with whom cooperation would be possible. By co-opting this middle-ground and working with it against more extreme elements, the US military not only helped achieve common goals but also improved its own image, all while contributing to the marginalisation of the hardliners.

As an illustration, when the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, the "Ready First Combat Team" (RFCT), deployed to Anbar in 2006, then a hornet's nest of insurgent activity, it first conducted a review of its population.[102] The study revealed that in this predominantly Sunni province, the local population did not willingly side with the extremists as previously assumed. Instead, AQI was escalating its intimidation and was disliked, yet the tribes were unable to counter this threat for fear of retaliation. Meanwhile, American assurances of an imminent troop withdrawal, intended to placate the Sunni tribes, in fact heightened their fears of AQI intimidation and of an Iranian power-grab (conducted either directly or through the Iraqi government, widely seen as a "Persian" stooge). Col Sean MacFarland, RFCT commander, therefore changed the message and the mission: the US troops would not leave, but would stand by the sheiks and help their forces defend the population against AQI retributions and any form of Iranian interference.

A similar partnership was emerging in northwest Baghdad. With a mission statement "to defeat al-Qaeda and affiliated movements", the 1st Infantry Division's "Dagger Brigade" also initiated its tour in November 2006 by studying the local population.[103] It emerged that, in this ethnically mixed area, the Sunni population sided with AQI as an imperfect security guarantee against the incursions of Shia death squads conducting ethnic cleansing. As Col J. B. Burton, commander of Dagger Brigade put it,

> *We understood their story-line: "you know that the Government of Iraq is sectarian; you know that the Iraqi Security Forces are sectarian-motivated and members of Jaysh al-Mahdi, and you know that the Coalition Forces are leaving. So as a Sunni in northwest Baghdad, your best hope is to allow al-Qaeda to come in and fight Jaysh al-Mahdi for you".*[104]

This understanding of the Sunni perspective offered an opportunity to "turn" the moderate fighters in that area: if the US troops could help these Sunnis curb Shia violence, it could drive a wedge between these "honourable resistance members" and AQI, expand security in the area and build bridges with former "spoilers".[105]

The pacts were to be sealed with action rather than words. Even before the shift from FOBs became official US strategy, Colonels Burton and MacFarland, and others, deployed to the most volatile sections of their areas of operations to help provide security. The Dagger Brigade established combat outposts on the fault lines separating the Sunni community from Shia incursions. With the first outpost built, the unit "saw an increased partnership on the part of the local nationals", which led to the collocation of volunteer Sunni units and US soldiers—one that soon included Shia security-force personnel.[106] In Ramadi, outposts were constructed where AQI violence was at its highest, where US troops would team up with the sheiks' forces to combat the terrorist threat. In subsequent months, tribal fighters joined the security forces *en masse* and worked with the US military to protect and secure the hospital and other civil institutions against AQI control.[107]

The deployment of US troops in the city rather than in isolated bases became a central tenet of the US military's strategy in February 2007, leading to closer interaction with local communities, who were better protected and more willing to work with the Coalition. Emulating the above approach, several US units teamed up with Sunni moderates against extremist elements.[108] As various collaborative opportunities emerged, more "Sons of Iraq"—the collective term for the tribal elements, insurgents and civilians to have turned against the extremist groups—were put on the payroll.[109] The recruits were screened and registered using biometric technology and then organised for patrols of their neighbourhoods and towns, where they would help maintain security and produce an overall reduction in bloodshed.[110]

A similar form of bottom-up reintegration was practised by Task Force 134, the US military unit responsible for detainee operations and a microcosm, in some ways, of the overall change in the US approach. Formerly responsible for various prisoner-abuse scandals and criticised for its inadequate detention policies, Task Force 134 had initially contributed to rather than countered the insurgency.[111] Under the command of General Douglas Stone, the unit changed its strategy: from May 2007, the aim was to engage with the prisoners' "story-line": their motivation for violence, both within the prison and upon their release.[112] To this end, Gen. Stone offered each inmate an "initial assessment" to identify the prisoner's political orientation, religious beliefs and social concerns. Assessments revealed that many detainees were "illiterate, disillusioned and angry" and that some became "security threats to Iraq because they felt they had no other way to make a living or were influenced by radicals".[113]

Reacting to this information, Task Force 134 launched educational courses in September 2007 for approximately 7,000 detainees, many of whom were uneducated or of school age.[114] Gen. Stone also organised vocational training for lower-risk inmates, who were allowed outside the camp to earn money.[115] Islamist extremists, meanwhile, were put through religious courses organised by moderate clerics, involving discussions of Islam and the Koran. Psychologists were also made available to deal with traumatised inmates. Finally, the detention facilities held 140 reviews daily to assess inmates' threat level. Those granted release were placed in front of an Iraqi judge to discuss their future and sign a binding pledge to renounce violence. While Gen. Stone says he did not envisage turning "radicals" into "choir boys", as of March 2008, his unit had experienced only two returns per 1,000 prisoners released.[116] This ratio of 0.2% contrasts with the 6–8% return rate of January 2007 and illustrated the rehabilitation, reintegration even, of former insurgents and disgruntled young men into society.[117] Within the prisons, moderates had even launched a backlash against the extremist elements that had previously used the facilities as insurgency training grounds.[118]

The new approach, on the ground and in the prisons, relied on the willingness of US commanders to overlook insurgents' past involvement in attacks if they, in return, were willing to forgo violence and participate constructively in Iraqi society. While the RFCT refused to meet with insurgent leaders and promised to punish anyone with Coalition blood on their hands, its leadership did encourage the sheiks to act as interlocutors between the two sides and condoned the mobilisation of insurgents against AQI and their recruitment into the Iraqi security forces (so long as they passed the screening process).[119] The new approach stemmed from a greater understanding of the insurgent's perspective: a lack of options, resentment against occupiers—all understandable and rectifiable causes.

The characterisation of the Sunni fighters as "honourable resistance members" by Col Burton was unprecedented but typical of this understanding, as was Gen. Stone's distinction between "moderate insurgents" and "extremists".[120] Such nuance was rare prior to 2006; it was also foundational to the pacts made with the Sunni community that year and thereafter.[121] At no point did this attitude denote a free-for-all: the point was to separate those who could be co-opted from those who could not; to transform the hardliners into moderates through a variety of means, including military force; and to consolidate successful co-option through localised peace agreements and progressive reintegration.

If the above translated into an "approach" toward reintegration, similar methods were used to bring Moqtada al-Sadr into the fold. The US military first gained leverage with Sadr by increasing its force levels and positioning itself in the street of Baghdad.[122] For the first time, the US military also obtained the government's authorisation to enter Shia areas of Baghdad that had previously been off-limits. Some commentators argued that Maliki had realised that he did not need to kowtow to Sadr to keep his government intact – Sadr had withdrawn his party's ministers from the cabinet in November 2006, yet the government did not collapse.[123] It is as likely, however, that Sadr himself agreed to more intrusive US operations as a means of streamlining his militia, which had lost its coherence and discipline during the previous year of violence.

During 2006, Mahdi Army elements operated with no real direction from Sadr and engaged in armed activity for personal self-enrichment: renegade units turned on each other for war spoils, targeted civilians—even in Shia areas, and attacked anyone opposing its activities.[124] The movement, which had captured the grievances of working-class Shias, was losing its legitimacy and jeopardising Moqtada's hopes for greater influence—relative, primarily, to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, the new name for SCIRI following a May 2007 name-change). Sadr therefore "sought to use the surge as a further opportunity for cleansing his movement, ridding it of notorious troublemakers and giving their names to the government or Coalition forces".[125] Following a fire fight between the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organisation in Karbala in August 2007, Sadr even imposed a six-month ceasefire, which "lifted the impunity that many groups—criminal gangs operating in the Mahdi Army's name and Sadrist units gone astray—had enjoyed".[126] Despite numerous assaults on Mahdi Army units, Sadr renewed the ceasefire in February 2008. In the meantime, he also stood up the "Golden Battalion", which was to hunt down rogue Mahdi elements, now referred to as "special groups".[127]

Again, by tapping into the motivations of its erstwhile enemies, the US military found common causes that could be used to promote a form of reintegration. It capitalised on the split in the Mahdi Army by supporting the moderates and targeting extremists, much as it had done in Anbar and Baghdad. Accordingly, the US military supported Sadr's Golden Battalion, and reportedly paid some of Sadr's forces to "help keep the peace"—a reversal on previous policy.[128] Gen. David Petraeus, meanwhile, held secret meetings with senior Sadr officials to discuss security cooperation.[129] The goodwill thus engendered was used to goad Sadr toward peaceful political participation: henceforth, US officials were careful to distinguish between the "special groups", on whom ceasefire violations would be blamed, and Sadr himself, who was no longer cast as an extremist cleric but as a moderate and important political figure, seeking to reign in his militia. In Gen. Petraeus' own words, "this is a movement that was built on the principles of the martyr Sadr, Moqtada's father, and it was all about serving the people, not extorting money from them, carrying out criminal actions against them".[130] Most ambitiously, Petraeus "started using the honorific 'seyed' when referring to Sadr"—used to address descendents of the Prophet Mohammed—and "asked US officers to do the same".[131]

Pacts—but no compact

The pacts described above brought about undeniable security gains. However, the viability of disparate security pacts as a form of national reintegration remains uncertain. "National ownership" over the DDR process is commonly touted as a prerequisite for success. In this instance, it was doubtful whether the Iraqi government—the composition and fragmentation of which lies at the root of the conflict—would react constructively to the changing security situation in Iraq. The local reintegration of Sunni tribes and former insurgents has clearly not displaced the Shia-dominated governmental structures that the Sunnis have so long resisted. Similarly, there was little beyond hope to suggest that Sadr's decision to sell out some unruly elements of his militia would translate into a renunciation of violent means altogether or a peaceful conclusion to his rivalry with other Shia militias. Indeed, would the parties in government be willing to accommodate the new political entities and to share political power? In the absence of a constructive government response to the changing political landscape, the pacts made with the US military are likely to unravel, along with the security gains that they embody.

The government has taken steps to further the bottom-up reintegration process, primarily by affording Sunnis a greater place in society and government. In October 2007, the Iraqi parliament passed a Unified Retirement Law, granting pensions to former Iraqi soldiers. On 12 January 2008, it passed the Accountability and Justice Law, a de-Ba'athification bill that would provide employment and pensions for former lower-ranking Ba'athist officials. On 13 February, it passed an amnesty bill that would see the release of approximately 5,000 suspected former Sunni insurgents from Iraqi prisons.[132] However, these success-stories belie the deep mistrust that still marks Iraqi politics. In August 2007, the IAF walked out of Maliki's government in protest against its failure to deal with Shia militias.[133] In addition, while subsequent legislation might have allayed Sunni concerns, they also prompted further feuding. The Sunni community assailed the Accountability and Justice Law for extending de-Ba'athification to the judiciary and for failing to disband the Higher National De-Ba'athification Commission, the body responsible for de-Ba'athification and that many Sunnis deeply oppose.[134] As serious was the opposition of Vice President Tariq Hashimi to the law's original provision to oust present Sunni members of government to accommodate those heretofore excluded.[135] This last objection points to the emerging rivalry between Sunnis in power and those empowered from the bottom-up, with the former viewing the latter as "potential organized competitors for support among Sunni Arab Iraqis".[136] Given these old and new rivalries, legislation passed remains contested, casting doubt as to its implementation.

The Sunni volunteer fighters' struggle to find a place within the government's security services represents a second factor staunching bottom-up reintegration. While fighters with civilian skills can return to a more traditional profession, many SoI are untrained, uneducated or simply unwilling to abandon the prestige of protecting their community. Moreover, several SoI had formed part of the former security forces, dismissed by the Americans in 2003, and they are eager to reclaim their profession. In theory, only 20% of the volunteers are to be integrated within the security forces, with the rest provided civilian employment opportunities. However, even the process of approving the selected SoI for national service has faced delays and rarely led to integration.[137] By early 2008, several volunteers were threatening to or actually deserting.[138]

The delays stem from bureaucratic impedimenta and government resistance. The Shia and Kurdish parties in power want to maintain their grip on the security structure, currently based around their own militia. The government has also expressed concern that the incorporation of volunteer fighters would bring AQI or insurgent elements into the security forces. These fears should have been allayed by the US registration and screening methods, but have nonetheless they have continued to retard the reintegration process.[139] Yet the problem is not merely one of Baghdad intransigence: while seeking the legitimacy of national service, some tribal elements have resisted foreswearing the benefits of their isolation, which range from control over local jobs and business opportunities to the significant pay-off provided through the extra-governmental deals made with the US military.[140]

Similar problems surround the political reintegration of Moqtada al-Sadr. Sure enough, the rapprochement resulted in the streamlining of the Mahdi Army and the removal of some elements responsible for significant bloodshed.[141] During the lull in violence, Sadr also took steps toward recasting himself as a national leader, launching a "reform and reconciliation" project to "establish a broad coalition of political parties" and sending his envoys to meet with Sunni tribal leaders and politicians.[142] Sadr also recommenced his religious studies, through which he sought to acquire greater credentials as a political leader.[143] Even so, how sincere is this transformation: has the American generals' change in tone really lured Moqtada into civility or were US soldiers used by Moqtada to settle scores within the Mahdi Army? In addition, are US and Sadr's goals at all compatible?

Moqtada's makeover has also intensified his rivalry with the incumbent Shia parties, for whom the threat of a reborn al-Sadr—wielding a more professional and disciplined force and with greater religious authority—represents a threat.[144] In anticipation of a future showdown, the ISCI and Da'wa-dominated government launched major military operations in Basra and in Sadr City in March and April 2008, targeting the Mahdi Army. Presented as ambitious attempts to rid the country of militias, the operations were also clearly intended to undermine the comparatively popular Sadr ahead of the provincial elections planned for later in 2008. To further undercut his political aspirations, the Iraqi government agreed on a draft law that would bar any party from participating in the elections if they also wielded a militia—a telling yet also very ironic decree, given the ruling parties' relation to their own militias.[145] Taking note of this ploy, the IAF allegedly returned to the government in July 2008 in return for guarantees that the SoI parties would also be barred from participating in the forthcoming elections, plausibly through the same draft law.[146]

Continued Shia-Shia violence will further fragment Iraq's identity-driven politics, much as the exclusion of Sunni SoI from government will threaten the country's newfound stability. These, clearly, are the risks of making pacts outside of government. There is a critical difference, in other words, between co-opting various outfits from below and fostering reintegration from the top down. The pacts helped mend rifts and curb violence, but the Iraqi government remains sectarian, even obstructionist. In the words of Gen. Petraeus, "no one feels that there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation".[147] Indeed the US role in this context is complicated, as it seeks to balance its support for the established, yet sectarian government with its support of new political entities such as the SoI, which represent tentative progress, but which the central government seek to keep weak and isolated.

Conclusion: Regime change anew?

In the first year in Iraq, the United States did not pursue any strategy to reintegrate either the defeated security forces of the Saddam Hussein regime or the pre-existing militias that opposed it. Nor did the CPA have a strategy, beyond sheer military power, to bring disgruntled former Ba'athists, nationalists and other Sunni insurgents into the fold. Even the use of military force was ineffective, given the US military's unfamiliarity and ensuing unsuitability for counterinsurgency. In the absence of security, the militias and insurgency groups grew stronger and multiplied. By the time a reintegration strategy emerged, it was irresponsive to political realities and badly implemented.

These political realities were themselves a product of the unconditional and ill-advised incorporation of sectarian elements within the Iraq government. Alongside the narrow, military targeting of the Sunni tribes and wider community, the political elevation of Shia and Kurdish militias helped create a vicious circle marked by ethnic rivalries that soon turned bloody. In retrospect, more time was plainly needed to allow representative Iraqi leaders to emerge, through a bottom-up process rather than as appointed by US officials. Relying on known quantities made the transition to Iraqi rule seem easy, but it critically undermined the long-term goal of state building.

Problematically, holding the line while Iraqi civil society produced representative leaders would have necessitated a longer-term US military occupation and thereby opened up another road to violence. Ironically, it was in the pursuit of greater legitimacy that the US handed power to a sectarian leaders, yet they themselves were neither representative nor legitimate. Iraq thus points to an unavoidable trade-off, inherent to efforts at regime-change, particularly those conducted unilaterally or through "coalitions of the willing". Enjoying the most transient of support and legitimacy, the occupier must swiftly locate indigenous authorities to whom power can be transferred, but these national leaders must also be effective and perceived as widely representative and accountable. This conundrum points to the centrality of political reintegration as a component of state building: the process elevates and entrenches the actors by, with or through subsequent action must be taken. In solving this conundrum, and as forcefully illustrated by the Iraq case study, the need for local knowledge cannot be underestimated. While the starting conditions for regime-change in Iraq were never propitious, some of the grossest of missteps—by the Bush administration, by the CPA—might have been avoided had those responsible for decision-making also taken some time to learn about the society they were so actively trying to reform.

With a vicious cycle set in motion, however, what are the prospects for political reintegration? As seen, progress toward reconciliation in Iraq has been slow. The government set up by the United States in 2003, composed of sectarians and secularists with questionable credentials, has never truly worked for Iraqi national interests, but for their own respective constituencies and power-bases. Correcting this situation has been near impossible because efforts at de-Ba'athification, amnesties and other measures designed to undercut the Sunnis' motivation for violence have had to arise from within structures with a vested interest in perpetuating the problem.

Against this backdrop, the best attempt at reintegration has been the bottom-up cooperative arrangements achieved between US military units and various Sunni groups since 2006. These pacts have compelled formerly alienated and apparently irreconcilable elements to claim an active role in providing security and enabling reconstruction. Similarly, although much more tentative, the partnership achieved in 2007 between the senior US military leadership in Iraq and al-Sadr pointed to a pragmatic yet conditions-based avenue toward reintegration, where commonalities were fully exploited to meet common goals. Yet as these arrangements emerged without much buy-in from the central government, this is still a far cry from proper "reintegration"—never mind "reconciliation". While bringing about unprecedented improvements in security, the long-term consolidation of these achievements would require the government to eschew the particularistic form of decision-making to have marked its policies since the handover of sovereignty in 2004.

Progress on this front has been too slow, but there are grounds for hope. Iraq is scheduled to hold provincial elections later this year and national elections by December 2009—these will provide Sunnis with a chance to elect more representative and legitimate leaders, which might in turn undercut much of the motivation for violence. The Sahawa al Iraq—the Anbar-based council of Sunni tribes to has rejected AQI—has already begun the process of turning itself into a political party; other Sunni tribes are following suit.[148] In a best-case scenario, the elections "will consolidate their de facto influence through democratic means, codifying both Sunni rejection of insurgency and lasting status within larger Iraqi society".[149] Should al-Sadr pursue his transformation into a legitimate politician—and if the US can find a means of working with him—his popular appeal among working-class Iraqis might help challenge the sectarian Shia elements currently in government, who are seen as out-of-touch and as Iranian proxies. If these are the outcomes of the forthcoming elections, the informal reintegration witnessed since 2006 will pay dividend. However, as the elections approach, it is also more likely that the central government actively and forcibly will seek to marginalise the up-and-coming political leadership that is threatening its hold on power. The US will find itself in the middle of this struggle, an unenviable situation, yet one that will require its continued engagement for the hard-earned progress seen since 2007 not to be squandered.

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Endnotes

1. See CPA Order Number 2, "Dissolution of Entities", 23 May 2003. In a James Fallows article, Walter Slocombe is quoted as saying: "We don't pay armies we defeated". See Fallows, "Why Iraq Has No Army". See also, Ackerman, "Badr to Worse", 13–18.
2. Interview with Walter Slocombe, *Frontline—Public Broadcasting Service*, 17 August 2004. See also, Bremer III, "How I Didn't Dismantle Iraq's Army".
3. As Fallows notes, "Several weeks later the Americans announced that they would resume some army stipends, but by then the damage had been done". See Fallows, "Why Iraq Has No Army".
4. Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins". The wrong-headedness of this act has been acknowledged by Gen. Garner. See Freedberg, "Federalism".
5. Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins".
6. "Bremer proved unwilling to incorporate the players—Ba'athists and Arab nationalists – who would have been capable of defusing the Sunni-based resistance, and who were, in fact, sending signals that they wanted to talk directly to the Untied States'. See Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 295.
7. See CPA, *Security Sector Reform: An Example of Structures Designed for Counter-Insurgency and for the Transition*, 29 November 2004—as cited in Rathmell, Oliker and Kelly et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 66.
8. It is worth noting that even the creators of the plan described it as hopeful and "modest". See Ackerman, "From Badr to Worse".

9. Ibid.
10. Fallows, "Why Iraq Has No Army".
11. Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 66.
12. RFE/RL, "KDP Head Says Peshmerga May Merge".
13. Terrill, *The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy*, 26.
14. As cited in Terrill, *The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy*, 26.
15. Ackerman, "From Badr to Worse".
16. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 47.
17. Mintz and Priest, "Shiite Demands for Control In Iraq Challenge US Plans".
18. In April 2003, Shi'ite clerics established themselves as local government in Najaf, Karbala and Kut, before moving on to the surrounding villages and towns. As Terrill explains, "Clerics did this in many cases by assuming control of essential services, including neighborhood security, garbage collection, firefighting, education, and hospital administration. They also appointed administrators and imposed curfews, while offering civic protection, jobs, health care, and financial assistance to the needy. In addition, clerics opened their own newspapers and other media outlets across Iraq". See Terrill, *The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy*, 11.
19. Ibid., 12. *BBC News*, "What happened in Majar al-Kabir?", 25 June 2003.
20. Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 66.
21. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Iraq's Muqtada al Sadr*, 9–10.
22. Ackerman, "From Badr to Worse".
23. See Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 8, 296.
24. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 47.
25. Ibid.
26. Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 68.
27. The participating groups were: Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Iraqi Islamic Party, SCIRI, Iraqi National Accord (INA), Iraqi National Congress (INC), Iraqi Hezbollah, Iraqi Communist Party, and Da'wa.
28. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 48.
29. See CPA Order Number 91, "Regulation of Armed Forces and Militias Within Iraq", 6 June 2004.
30. Ibid., 9–10.
31. Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 68. See also Frontline—Public Broadcasting Service, "Interview with Matthew Sherman", 4 October 2006.
32. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Rebuilding Iraq*, 68.
33. In the spring of 2004, a proposal was made to spend $10m over 18 months to create an office of international DDR experts and local Iraqi staff, which could advise the fledgling TRIC. The CPA elected not to fund the effort and the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, for its part, never pursued it. According to a 2005 RAND report, the CPA was at this time "avoiding new, open-ended financial commitments as the fate for transfer of authority to the IIG drew near". See Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 69. See also Frontline—Public Broadcasting Service, "Interview with Matthew Sherman", 4 October 2006.
34. Schwarz, "Iraq's Militias", 63.
35. Ackerman, "From Badr to Worse".
36. See Diamond, "The New War for Iraq".
37. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 48.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Allbritton, "Why Iraq's Police Are a Menace".
42. Rathmell et al., *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 71.
43. See CPA Order Number 91, 9–10.
44. Lasseter, "US Knew Shiite Militias Were a Threat but Took No Action Largely because They Were Focused on Sunni Insurgency".
45. The Council membership was to include 13 Shi'ites, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Assyrian and one ethnic Turk. As Carrie Manning puts it, "representativeness was defined, then, according to the CPA's mental demographic map of Iraq. So long as someone from each group is represented . . . the process and the institutions are representative". See Manning, "Political Elites", 729.
46. Dodge, "The Iraq Transition". See also ICG, *Iraq: Building a New Security Structure*", 8–9. Saddam's elimination of civil society may account for the dearth of suitable political leaders.
47. Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins" (emphasis in original). The IGC selection process is described in Haggard and Long, *On Benchmarks*, 21–22.
48. An October 2003 poll revealed that 69–85% of polled Iraqis had "not heard enough to voice an opinion on 18 of 25 Governing Council members". See Office of Research Opinion, "Iraqi Public". See also "Standing of Former Key US Ally in Iraq Falls to New Low", *Washington Post*, 21 May 2004.
49. Diamond, "The New War".
50. Dodge, "The Iraq Transition".
51. While the IGC did include one Sunni tribal leader, he was not widely respected in his own community. See Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins".
52. Fisher and Sengupta, "Iraq to Offer Amnesty, but No Killers Need Apply".
53. Dodge, "The Iraq Transition".
54. "A Conversation with Tariq Al-Hashimi, Vice President, Republic of Iraq, and Secretary-General, Iraqi Islamic

Party", event held at Council of Foreign Relations, New York, 19 December 2006.

55. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 53.
56. There were a number of important exceptions to this trend, including the experience of the 101st Airborne in Mosul during 2003 and the deployment of the 3rd Armoured Cavalry to Tal Afar. See, respectively, Atkinson, *In the Company of Soldiers*, 294–303 and Ricks, *Fiasco*, 419–424.
57. Dodge, "Securing America's Interests in Iraq".
58. "To the Kurds it promises a considerable degree of autonomy; to the Shiite it provides for a parliamentary government". See Brown, "Iraq's Constitutional Process", 8. See also Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins".
59. This process is discussed in detail in ICG, *Iraq: Building A New Security Structure*.
60. ICG, *The Next Iraqi War?*, 10.
61. Katzman, *Iraq: Elections, Government*, 11
62. Mowle, "Introduction", 9.
63. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 49.
64. ICG, *Iraq's Muqtada al Sadr*, i.
65. ICG, *The Next Iraqi War?*, 12–13. Partly through US pressure, the Assembly committee drafting the constitution agreed to include Sunni members. However, their opposition to provisions already written into the text was subsequently ignored, as the US—and the Iraqi government—wanted to reach an agreement quickly. See Haggard and Long, *On Benchmarks*, 21–22.
66. See Iraqi Constitution, articles 9(b) & 117(5), 2005.
67. See Dawisha and Diamond, "Iraq's Year of Voting Dangerously", 95.
68. ICG, *The Next Iraqi War?*, 19.
69. Paley and Sabah, "Case Is Dropped Against Shiites In Sunni Deaths".
70. Ibid.
71. *Frontline*, Interview with Bayan Jabr, 21 November 2006.
72. ICG, *Iraq's Muqtada*, 15. A similar method was used by Sadr and by Da'wa with regard to the health and education ministries respectively.
73. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 50
74. See Wong, "Iraq's top leaders voice approval of Kurdish, Shiite militias"; and "Iraq's Kurdish president backs Shiite militia".
75. Lasseter, "US Knew Shiite Militias Were a Threat".
76. Mowle, "Introduction", 9.
76. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", 49.
77. Mowle, "Introduction", 9–10.
78. In the aftermath of the al-Askariyya bombing, military sources estimated that Baghdad's homicide rate tripled from 11 to 33 deaths a day, with 365,000 Iraqis being forced from their homes. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS), "Iraq Under the Surge", 1.
79. Dawisha and Diamond, "Iraq's Year of Voting Dangerously", 96. See also, Cockburn, "Iraq's election result, a divided nation".
80. al–Waeli, "Iraq: Cultural/Political and media observations", 7.
81. Ibid.
82. See Dodge, "The Causes of US Failure", 97.
83. See ICG, *Iraq's Civil War*, 4–5.
84. Cordesman, *Iraq's Evolving Insurgency*, 74.
85. Partlow and Sebti, "Amnesty To Exclude Killers of GIs, Iraqis". See also, Moore, "Iraq Leader Cites Rebel Interest in Amnesty".
86. Haggard and Long, *On Benchmarks*, 25.
87. Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq's Reconciliation Committee holds its first meeting but differences emerge".
88. Tarabay, "Iraq Reconciliation Plan Is Short on Details".
89. Haggard and Long, *On Benchmarks*, 26.
90. US Department of Defense (DoD), *Measuring Security and Stability*, 31.
91. "Sunni group endorses national reconciliation plan", *USA Today*, 27 July 2006.
92. DoD, *Measuring Security and Stability*, 8.
93. Haggard and Long, *On Benchmarks*, 24.
94. Senanayake, "Iraq: Reconciliation Conference Fails To Deliver"; Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq's Reconciliation Committee holds its first meeting but differences emerge".
95. Cordesman, *Iraq's Evolving Insurgency*, 12.
96. Boot, "Can Petraeus Pull It Off?".
97. Mosher, "Baghdad Morgue Tallies 1,815 Bodies in July".
98. This and the remaining sections draw in part on Ucko, "Upcoming Iraqi Elections".
99. The Brooking Institute's Iraq Index reports casualties in December of 2005, 2006 and 2007 as 1,348, 2,914 and 550 respectively. See O'Hanlon and Campbell, *Iraq Index Tracking*, 5.
100. A 2007 GAO report cites "a secure environment, the inclusion of all belligerent parties, an overarching political agreement, sustainable funding, and appropriate reintegration opportunities" as the "minimum requirements for a successful DDR program in Iraq". See GAO, *Securing, Stabilizing*, 36.
101. Kilcullen, "Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt".
102. Ricks, "Situation Called Dire in West Iraq". See also Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens", 47.
103. Interview with senior officer, Dagger Brigade, Washington DC, March 2008.
104. Interview with senior officer, Dagger Brigade.
105. Kagan, "ISW Interview with COL J. B. Burton".
106. Ibid.

107. Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens", 44; Long, "The Anbar Awakening", 80.
108. Notable examples would include, the 1st "Iron Horse" Brigade Combat Team, commanded by Col. Paul E. Funk, and active around the northern and western outskirts of Baghdad; the "Commando Brigade", commanded by Col. Michael Kershaw, south of Baghdad (the "triangle of death"); the "Greywolf Brigade", commanded by Col. David Sutherland, in Diyala province.
109. By March 2008, nearly 80,000 forces were on the US payroll. See Dehghanpisheh and Thomas, "Scions of the Surge".
110. For more detail on the workings of the "Sons of Iraq" units, see Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 86–91.
111. Ibid., 91.
112. Gen. Stone's objective was to "impress upon the [detained] population that there is a mechanism by which their behaviour … can influence their release and can influence the society". Grossman, "Issues and Ideas—Rehabilitating Iraqi Insurgents".
113. "Bucca holds First Hasty School Graduation for 60 detainees", *Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Desk*, 18 December 2007.
114. "Bloggers" Roundtable With Gen. Douglas M. Stone", *Washington Post*, 18 September 2007.
115. As of September 2007, 500 inmates had signed up to this programme at Camp Cropper, with a further 2,000 expected to enrol at Camp Bucca by October. See Grossman, "Issues and Ideas".
116. "Bloggers" Roundtable With Gen. Stone"; see also "Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable with Brigadier General Michael Nevin, 177th Military Police Brigade, Joint Task Force 134", 4 March 2008.
117. "Bloggers" Roundtable with Gen. Stone".
118. Colvin, "Tide Turns as Prisoners Turn in Jail Hardmen".
119. Correspondence with senior officer of the RFCT, March 2008.
120. Kagan, "Interview with COL Burton". "Bloggers" Roundtable with Gen. Stone". As Gen. Stone explains, killing Americans is "a terrible thing … but warriors fight warriors … [and] there's a difference between somebody who is psychologically wedded to al Qaeda's doctrine, and somebody who was unemployed and was forced to go fight us".
121. Though US officials and Iraqi tribesmen had engaged in dialogue before, the tribes were never compelled to support the US military and sided instead with AQI and other extremist elements. Long, "The Anbar Awakening", 77.
122. A previous "surge"—Operation *Together Forward II* of August–October 2006—had failed because US forces lacked the "capability to hold areas that have been cleared" and the authority "to clear neighbourhoods that are home to Shiite militias". See Baker and Hamilton et al., *The Iraq Study Group*, 15.
123. This is apparently the opinion of David Satterfield, then the Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State and Coordinator for Iraq, as represented in Bennett, "Underestimating al-Sadr—Again".
124. The renegade Mahdi Army units would clear neighbourhoods of their Sunni population, take control of their common resources, seize and/or sell on individual property and possessions and engage in kidnapping to extort ransoms. See ICG, *Iraq's Civil War*, 6–10. See also Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Moqtada Makeover".
125. ICG, *Iraq's Civil War*, 8.
126. Ibid., i.
127. Norland, "A Radical Cleric Gets Religion".
128. Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Moqtada Makeover".
129. See Norland, "A Radical Cleric"; Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Moqtada Makeover".
130. Gen. David Petraeus, as cited in Haynes, "Transcript of The Times interview with David Petraeus".
131. Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Moqtada Makeover". See also Paley, "US Deploys a Purpose-Driven Distinction".
132. The prisoners marked for release were those who had been held "for more than six months without charge or more than a year without a court appearance". See Ardolino, "Inside Iraqi Politics: Part 5".
133. "Iraq Sunni bloc quits Coalition", *al-Jazeera.net*, 1 August 2007.
134. According to the International Center for Transitional Justice, "new law is a major victory for the Higher National De-ba'athification Commission and opponents of De-ba'athification reform". See International Center for Transnational Justice (ICTJ), "Briefing Paper", 6.
135. Ibrahim, "Iraq VP says won't ratify key Ba'athists law".
136. Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 88.
137. Boot, "We Are Winning. We Haven"t Won".
138. Raghavan and Paley, "Sunni Forces Losing Patience With US".
139. While Maliki has established an Implementation and Follow up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), its work has stalled. See Parker, "The Rise and Fall of a Sons of Iraq Warrior".
140. Westervelt, "Iraqi Tribal Leaders Work to Improve Security". See also Simon, "The Price of the Surge", 65.
141. "In Baghdad, they retreated to their strongholds; the walls and checkpoints the US erected in late 2007 to surround those neighbourhoods significantly restrict the movements of their militants". ICG, *Iraq's Civil War*, 18.
142. Senanayake, "Iraq: Al-Sadr Prepares For The Post-Coalition Era".

143. Nelson, "Iraqi Radical Cleric Al-Sadr Studies for Ayatollah".
144. ICG, *Iraq's Civil War*, 19.
145. Yates, "Iraqi cabinet seeks to ban militias from elections".
146. This rumoured deal was reported on in the blog Abu Aardvark and based on reports from the UAE-based paper *al-Khaleej*. See "Dissolving the Sons of Iraq ... ?", *Abu Aardvark*, 3 July 2008, abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2008/07/dissolving-the.html
147. Barr, "Petraeus: Iraqi Leaders Not Making 'Sufficient Progress'".
148. Correspondence with senior officer, RFCT, March 2008.
149. See Ardolino, "Inside Iraqi Politics: Part 3".
149. "Iraq Sunni bloc quits Coalition", *al-Jazeera.net*, 1 August 2007.

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