



# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## Iraq's Three Civil Wars

By Juan Cole  
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All war situations are a little bit opaque, but from reading the Iraqi press in Arabic, I conclude that there are three major struggles for power of a political and violent sort. What's striking is how little relevant the United States is. It is a superpower, and it is militarily occupying the country, but it appears most frequently to be in the position of going to the parties and saying, "Hey, guys, cut it out. Make nice. Please." It's odd that it should be so powerless in some ways, but let me explain.

So, what are the three wars? There's a war for Basra in the deep south. This is a port city on the Shatt al-Arab. It's the body of water where the Tigris and the Euphrates come together, and they flow together, then out to the Persian Gulf. In the old days, it was a major port, Al Basrah, because the ships could come up the Shatt al-Arab from the Persian Gulf. Now they'll stop instead at a smaller port named Umm Qasr near to Basra, and this is how you get things in and out of Iraq. Last I checked, Iraq was exporting 1.8 million barrels a day of petroleum. Where is it exporting from? Largely from Basra. (There is some, about 300,000 barrels a day going out through the north, but it's a relatively minor amount.)

So, basically, import, export, lifeline, and petroleum, are all that is centered in Basra, and if Basra were to collapse, then Iraq collapses. I don't see how the government survives, how anything goes positive in Iraq if Basra collapses, and I cannot figure out what's causing it not to collapse. There is not a good situation down there, as I'll explain.

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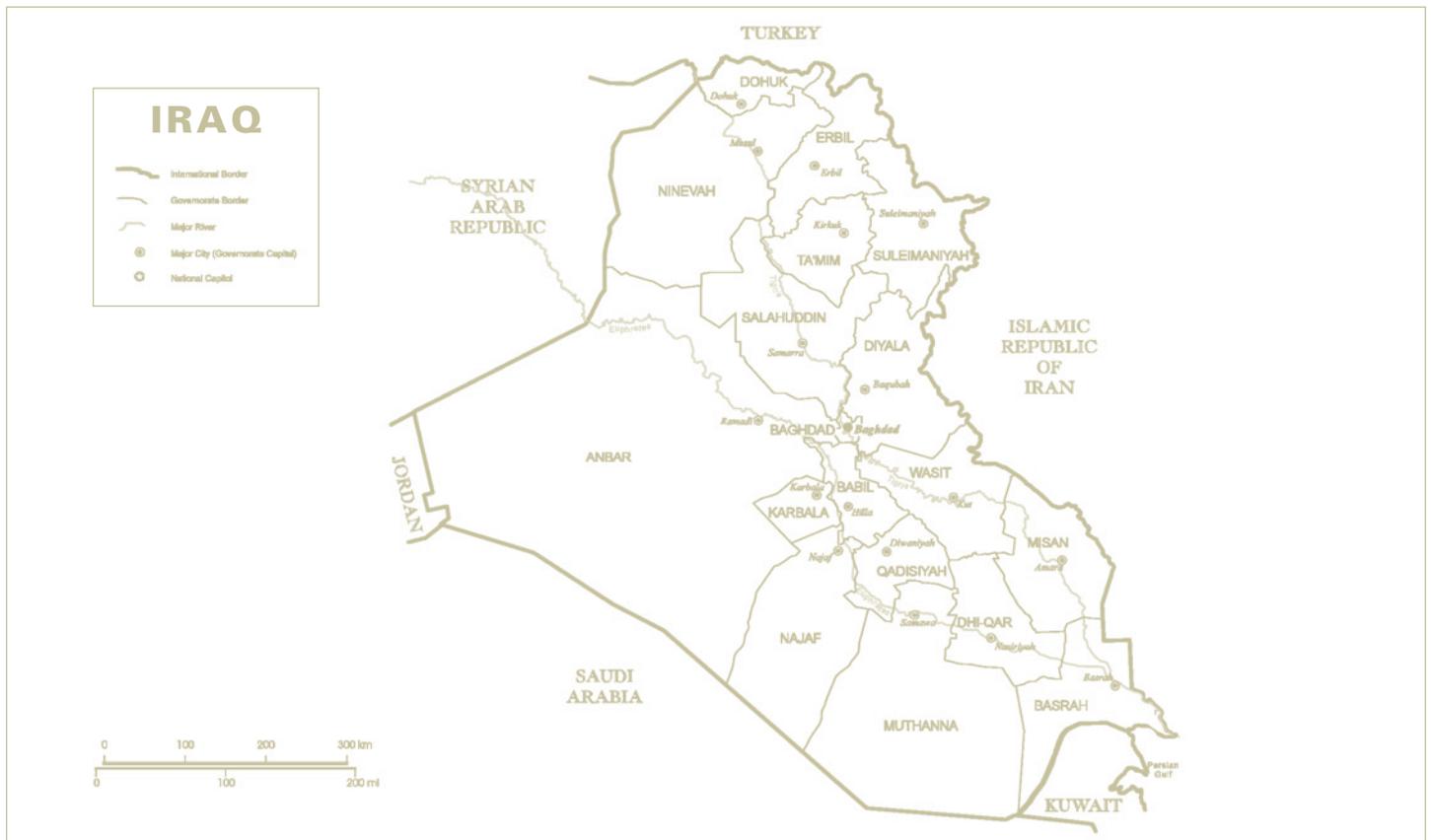
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This Audit is adapted from a lecture given at MIT on December 10, 2006.

Then, there's a war for Baghdad. This is the one that Americans tend to know about because the U.S. troops are in Baghdad, and so it's being fought all around our guys, and we are drawn into it from time to time. The American public, when it thinks about this war, mainly thinks about attacks on U.S. troops, which are part of that war because the U.S. troops were seen by the Sunni Arabs as adjuncts to the Shiite paramilitaries, and they have really functioned that way. Most American observers of Iraq wouldn't say that the U.S. is an enabler of the Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps paramilitaries of these Shiite fundamentalist parties, but you could make the case that, functionally speaking, that's how it's worked out. The U.S. has mainly taken on the remnants of the Ba'ath party, the Salafi jihadis, and other Sunni groups, and has tried to disarm them, tried to kill them, and has opened a space for the Shiite paramilitaries to claim territory and engage in ethnic cleansing and gain territory and power. So that battle between the Sunni Arabs and the Shiite Arabs is going on in Baghdad, is going on in the hinterlands of Baghdad, up to the northeast to Diyala Province, and then south to Babil and so forth.

And finally, as if all that weren't enough, there is a war in the north for control of Kirkuk, which used to be called by Saddam "Ta'mim Province". Kirkuk Province has the city of Kirkuk in it and very productive oil fields, in the old days at least. Kirkuk is not part of the Kurdistan Regional Authority, which was created by melding three northern provinces together into a super province; however, the Kurdistan Regional Authority wishes to annex Kirkuk to the authority.

Regional governments are super-provinces or provincial confederations. Try to imagine what happened—Iraq had 18 provinces in the old days, but it now has 15 provinces and one regional authority. It would be as though Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana got together, erased their state borders, elected a joint parliament and a prime minister, and then told the Federal leaders in Washington that if they would like to communicate with any of those states, they need to go through the regional prime minister, and by the way, we're not sending any more money to Washington. And don't even think about keeping federal troops on our soil. So, this is what the Kurds have done. They've erased the provincial boundaries that created one Kurdistan government that had -- it has its own military. They're giving out visas independent of Baghdad. They're inviting companies in to explore for oil independent of Baghdad. They're the Taiwan of the Middle East. They're an independent country. They just don't say that they are because it would cause a war.



There is a war for Kirkuk in the sense that there are Arabs and Turkmen there that don't want to be part of the Kurdistan Regional Authority. The Kurds, on the other hand, are very insistent on having Kirkuk because if Kurdistan has Kirkuk in the long run, it means Kurdistan is a viable country in its own right. The Turks don't want the Kurds to have Kirkuk, and so on and so forth. And the fighting around Kirkuk—not only in Kirkuk City and the rest of the province, but in places like Hawija—extends down to Mosul, a largely Arab city in Ninawa (Ninevah), where 70,000 Kurds have been chased out of Mosul. There's this ethnic cleansing phenomenon of Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen fighting. There's an international dimension because the Kurdistan Regional Authority would like eventually to be an independent country. They're regional expansionists and would like to add more parts of Iraqi provinces to themselves, part of Diyala, all of Kirkuk, part of Ninawa and so forth, and they seem to have an eye on Kurdish populated regions in Iran and in Turkey, ultimately adding them to themselves. This is an aggrandizing, regional, ethnically based new state in the Middle East and, I think, it bears some resemblance to the phenomenon of Serbian nationalism in the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. We all know what kind of trouble that caused, and I think similar trouble is coming in the north of Iraq.

Now, why is the U.S. irrelevant to these wars? Well, there are no U.S. troops in the deep south, or none to speak of. The Mahdi army of the Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr basically controls Maysan Province, which is nearby to Basra, and they won it in the elections. No U.S. troops to my knowledge are in Kurdistan. There's a U.S. base out at the airport in Kirkuk, but the U.S. forces are very thin on the ground up north, and the reason for that is partially that, in 2003, when the invasion occurred, the Fourth Infantry Division was supposed to come through Turkey into Northern Iraq, and the Turkish Parliament declined to allow that to happen. So, the U.S. never really did conquer Northern Iraq. It has a base around Mosul and so forth, I don't think there are more than a couple of thousand U.S. troops in Mosul, for instance, a major city. It's a million and a half people. It's a very important area.

So two of these struggles are going on virtually without reference to U.S. troops—because there aren't very many around in those regions—and one of the struggles is going on with 160,000 U.S. troops present, but apparently unable to do anything about it.

### The South

The Basra Provincial Council has 41 members, and 21 of the members of the council supported, in the aftermath of the election, the Islamic Virtue Party, which follows

Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who was killed by Saddam in 1999, and it is one of a number of offshoots of his movement. The one that's most famous is run by his son, Muqtada al-Sadr who formed the Mahdi Army. The Islamic Virtue Party is extremely popular among the Shiites of Basra, more moderate than Muqtada al-Sadr's branch of the movement, but these things are relative and I don't see them always acting in a very moderate way.

They elected the governor and The Islamic Virtue Party have a paramilitary but they also control the government, so they can induct members of their paramilitary into the police and the local security forces. They control the guards who guard the refineries. The other 20 members of this council support the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. That's led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a cleric who was in exile in Iran for 20 years. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq is an umbrella organization of Shiite parties which was founded at the suggestion of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 in Tehran, among Iraqi expatriate Shiites who had fled to Iran from Iraq to escape Saddam's persecution. There were some 400,000 Iraqi Shiites in Iran. They will all come back now, but many of them were organized by the Supreme Council, so in Iraq the Supreme Council is viewed by a lot of people as a kind of proxy for the Iranian government. It is also closely allied with the Bush administration and for that reason, the Bush administration doesn't talk about it as a proxy as the Iranian government and it blames all the other Shiites for being pro-Iranian.

A recent British parliamentary report concluded that there's continuing violence against civilians in Basra. There are reprisals against former members of the Ba'ath party, and several tens of thousands of Sunnis in Basra sometimes targeted by Shiites as having supported Saddam. In some cases, this is correct. Then there was local resistance to the British military presence and so British troops on patrol would get blown up by roadside bombs, there would be sniping at them, and so forth. Then, there are Marsh Arab tribal Mafias. The Marsh Arab population of some half a million Iraqis in the south dwelled in the marshes. They made their living from farming and fishing in the marshes. The marshes are also great for hiding out if you're a criminal,

so there's lots of smuggling and illicit things going on down there and guerrillas can also hide out there. So south Iraq is riddled with Marsh Arab Mafia families, and they fight turf wars with each other and with Shiite militias to control parts of Basra.

And finally there's party and militia competition in Basra. The Islamic Virtue Party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Sadr movement all have paramilitaries. They're all engaged in political competition with one another, but they also do fight turf wars with one another with their militias. So all of that is going on, and

over time Basra's security has gotten worse and worse. And it's not just Basra. There's been fighting between the Shiite factions in a number of southern cities, like Diwaniyah and Amara, where Badr Corps elements and Mahdi Army elements that fight each other. Now, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the party that had been based in Iran, had a paramilitary called the Badr Corps, trained by the Iran's Revolutionary Guards. From the Bush administration point of view, the Revolutionary Guards *bad*. Badr Corps, *good*. I can't entirely understand how they're different from one another, but anyway, that's

the way it works. And both the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army have kidnapped people, they run secret courts and prisons, they torture people, they extract ransom from them.

By May of 2006, a year and a half ago, Basra was being reported in the Arabic press as being in chaos, dominated by militias and lawless gangs. It was announced on May of 2006 by the Basra police that in the previous month there had been 800 assassinations. What are they fighting over? They're fighting over rights to gasoline smuggling.

There's a political crisis in Basra as well. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq won the federal parliamentary elections more or less in January and again in December of 2005. They were very influential on the appointment of cabinet ministers. In the first transitional government, they were eager to get the Islamic Virtue Party on their side, because the Islamic Virtue Party had Basra and was already in the petroleum business. It turned out to be a bad idea, because from the Islamic Virtue Party's point of view, this is an opportunity for upward integration.

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If you control the federal petroleum ministry and you also control Basra, then you're really on the way to controlling Iraq, and the Supreme Council gradually figured this out and so the next time they had a chance they put in Hussain al-Shahristani as the oil minister who's from the Supreme Council side.

So the Islamic Virtue Party was very, very upset about not having the federal petroleum ministry anymore. They got in a snit and withdrew from the Shiite Coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance that is led by the Supreme Council. When they did that the Supreme Council got in a snit and said, "well, if you're not going to be part of our federal government, we're not going to any longer support you regionally," so they engineered a vote of no confidence against the governor of Basra. But then he declined to step down; his attitude was, "I've got a paramilitary," and "make me." So he seems to still be governor. As we speak, I can't see that Basra has a government. Its governor has been deposed and the council is divided against itself, but the Islamic Virtue Party controls a lot of resources. It controls a lot of the police, it controls the guards of the refineries and so forth, and presumably is continuing to embezzle and to smuggle petroleum. The party has the kind of resources from having been the dominant party in Basra, such that it can't easily be dislodged even though by civil law it should have been.

Supplying at least some order to Iraq was the British troops, but they kept getting blown up and this was unpopular with the British public, and so especially as Tony Blair went out and Gordon Brown came in, they're being drawn down. Militarily, if you're not going to keep a substantial garrison there that could actually hope to defend itself, you might want to get them out all together quick. But then if they're gone, then all of those militias and Marsh Arab Mafias fighting each other, what if things go completely to pot in Basra and you can't get the petroleum out anymore? Who's going to pay the government salaries back in Baghdad? Are you going to bring down U.S. troops to do it? It doesn't seem to be on the horizon of anybody's concern that if Basra collapses, Iraq collapses, and Basra is well on its way.

### **Baghdad**

The Sunni Arabs had been the dominant social class or social group in Iraq until the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime, an Arab nationalist regime dominated at the upper echelons by Sunni Arabs and by the Tikritis around Saddam Hussein. When the U.S. overthrew that government, overthrew that social group, a de-Ba'athification committee was set up to fire people who had been in the Ba'ath party.

Initially they were only supposed to fire people who had been high-level, but they went wild. So a lot of people were being fired, and they were the only breadwinners in their family because the government was the major source of income.

This was one of the roots of the insurgency, and didn't have to be that way. In the fall of 2003, the U.S. military had some polling done. They found 14 percent of Sunni Arabs saying in Iraq that it was legitimate to hit U.S. targets. They did this poll again in August of 2006, and over 70 percent said it's legitimate to hit U.S. targets. So it wasn't the case that we started out with a hostile population that was determined to kill U.S. troops. Over the next three years, I think through search and destroy missions and poor policy, the U.S. angered the Sunni Arab population. It's not a unified population. It's in fact very fragmented politically. The Ba'ath Party is a major group. There are tribal groups, and then there are Salafi Sunni revivalists of the Zarqawi type, some Iraqi, some foreign. And Iraqi, Sunni Arabs are very, very unhappy about the new political situation, because from their point of view, first of all they think Iraq is majority Sunni. It's not.

The Kurds have an alliance with the Shiites right now, so the Sunni Arabs have gotten cut out of the deal and despite, I think, some efforts to avoid Iraq becoming a tyranny of the majority, it has become one. So the Sunni Arabs will never, ever win any vote in Parliament, from now until eternity. They will always lose any important issue they bring up. Shiites will outvote them. The Sunni Arabs haven't liked anything the parliament has done, including the new constitution that allowed the regional confederacies to be formed, because the Shiites and the Kurds have set things up so that the regional confederacies have 100 percent claim on all new natural resource finds, which will cut the Sunnis out.

Now, one of the key strategies for the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement has been to try to take Baghdad, and in 2004 and 2005, they actually seemed at some points to be on the verge of doing so. Baghdad is at the center of the area where the Shiites and the Sunnis meet, the Shiites in the south coming up, the Sunnis in the north and west coming down. And Baghdad could go either way. The Sunnis had multiple strategies. One was just to keep hitting the U.S. troops as much as they could to discourage the U.S. public and get the troops out. Another was to leverage their control of the northern and western hinterland of Baghdad so as to push the Shiites out of east Baghdad and make them move south, and so you have these constant attempts to cut off Baghdad from fuel, which were often quite successful. You

had drives within Baghdad of ethnic cleansing of Shiites who lived in Sunni neighborhoods pushing the Shiites east and ultimately hoping to push them out of Baghdad altogether, and so getting very near to the Green Zone. So this is what that particular civil war looks like—it's the area right around Baghdad that's producing this violence between Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs.

What turned things around was that in February of 2006, Sunni Arab guerrillas blew up the Samarra shrine where the father and grandfather of the “Mahdi”—the “rightly guided” one to come—have a tomb and a shrine. And although they didn't kill anybody when they blew it up, it just infuriated the Shiites and they went out on the streets with guns looking for Sunnis to kill. Any old Sunni would do, and they went into Sunni mosques and they shot down Sunni preachers, then they would torch the mosque. Four were burned down, over 50 were damaged, maybe 100. The Sunni guerrilla movement had been trying to provoke the Shiites to do this for some time, because they thought, you get a civil war going in Iraq, it's too hot for the Americans to stay, the Americans will leave, and then we'll finish off the Shiites and make the coup and come back to power. This was their plan.

It grew each month, so by June or July of 2006, you had two and three thousand people being killed a day.

There was death squad activity at night, right under the nose of the U.S. troops. The Iraqi police had to establish a special unit in Baghdad of the Corpse Patrol. They were found—the U.N. investigated this—to have chemical burns and signs of electrical burns. These people were being tortured and then killed, and they were being tortured because the Shiite militias wanted to get information from them about Sunni Arab insurgent activities.

Now, when you read that the surge has calmed Iraq, that there's been a great success in tamping down violence, the surge really coincided with a massive ethnic cleaning of the Sunnis of Baghdad. Baghdad is a Shiite city now. You figure it's a city of six, six and a half million. If you've got a shift of 10 percent that way, you're talking about 600,000 people being ethnically cleansed. They're killed, they're chased

away, they're living in Amman or Damascus now, or with relatives up in Anbar. So how has this happened is that the American surge, I believe—and this is a little bit speculative, but it's the only way I can understand it—the American surge concentrated on disarming the Sunni Arab population. If you disarm the Sunni Arabs, and the Shiite militias are still armed, and the Shiite militias want the Sunni Arabs gone, what's going to happen? Now the Sunni Arabs are defenseless. So that's what the surge really was. The surge, from an Iraqi point of view, equaled the ethnic cleaning of the Sunnis of Baghdad, so that's why the Sunni Arabs have withdrawn from the al-Maliki government and that's why the

people of al-Anbar province and so forth are very happy that they have done so, because they said the al-Maliki government in cahoots with the Americans has presided over the end of Sunni Baghdad.

### The Kurds

The Kurds are not just in the Kurdistan Regional Authority region. They stretch into Turkey, they stretch down to Diyala province and over into Iran. There are even some in the Caucasus. There are two million in Syria, so if you really got this Kurdistan thing going as a new state in the region and it was ethnically based and it got all of the Kurds inside it, you're dismembering, like, five countries, and there's going to be trouble over that. Even just dismembering Iraq is

going to cause trouble, and even just annexing large numbers of Sunni Arabs, Shiite, and Shiite and Sunni Turkmen into the Kurdistan Regional Authority, which is what happens if they grab Kirkuk, it's going to cause a lot of trouble. Now, not only are they trying to get Kirkuk but they also have their eye on Mosul, which is a city of about 80 percent Sunni Arab, and they've started giving safe haven to the Kurdish Workers Party guerrillas. This is a radical, almost Pol Pot style of movement of the 1980s and '90s in southeastern Turkey. Kurds weren't treated well in Turkey. Turkey has this very strong kind of monochrome Turkish nationalism, so that they would even deny there are any Kurds. So they felt marginalized and some of them joined this guerrilla movement.

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# The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

*In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nbhuch at [nhuch@mit.edu](mailto:nhuch@mit.edu), 617.253.1965.*

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The guerrilla movement is extremely violent and although the Turkish government was violent in putting it down as well, the guerrilla movement would kill local Kurds for what they called “collaboration”. And now, the Kurdistan Regional Authority under Massoud Barzani in Iraq is giving them safe harbor, so as far as I can tell, they’re going over and killing Turkish troops and then coming back and hiding in Iraq. Turkey is a NATO ally of the United States, and in September alone I think that the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) guerrillas killed 28 Turkish troops. Can you imagine what would happen if some guerrilla group came over the border into the United States from Tijuana and killed 28 U.S. troops? So the Turks want to invade, and you’ve got a situation where a NATO ally wants to invade the country that we are militarily occupying in order to kill terrorists, that we consider terrorists in the State Department, who are being coddled by our main ally in Iraqi politics, which is the Iraqi Kurds.

You can see what a mess it is. There are the three civil wars, and there is the irrelevance of the United States, because I don’t see that it’s been able to do anything about any of the three. I don’t see how this thing is going to turn out well.

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