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PREVENTING IRAQ FROM SLIPPING BACK INTO SECTARIAN CHAOS

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It is at least possible, if not likely, that different choices on two key 2003 U.S. decisions would have allowed the United States to withdraw most of its troops from Iraq well before the present date. The two decisions that are now widely understood to have been disastrous mistakes are the dissolution of the Iraqi Army and the decision to pursue harsh punitive actions against vast numbers of former Ba'ath party members beyond the leadership of Saddam's regime. Both decisions alienated Iraq's Sunni Arabs and opened the door for a strong al-Qaeda presence in Iraq. Despite the remonstrations of the former Chief Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), it is well understood that abolishing the Iraqi military rather than issuing a selective, voluntary recall was one of the worst mistakes of the war. Even former President George W. Bush, in a 2006 interview with journalist Robert Draper, refused to defend this decision, asserting instead that dissolving the army was contrary to the policy that he authorized. De-Ba'athification, for its part, disproportionately punished the leadership of Iraq's Sunni community as well as its professional class by removing them from their jobs or nullifying their pensions. CPA authorities and later the Iraqi De-Ba'athification Commission (which was and is dominated by former exiles) treated a large number of ordinary people as Iraq's victimizers while these people saw themselves as victims. The humiliated ex-Ba'athists usually responded to high-minded rhetoric about the price for collaboration with assertions that if you had not lived under Saddam's regime, you could not understand what it was like for those who did. Pressures to submit and conform permeated the Republic of Fear.

Now a third disastrous decision, this time made by Iraqi government leaders and again directed primarily at Iraq's Sunni Arabs, seems increasingly possible. This danger involves the strong possibility that the Iraqi government will begin treating the mostly Sunni paramilitary auxiliaries known as the Sons of Iraq (SOI) as potential enemies and end government funding for these groups. Various aspects of this approach (including a few, but not all of some recent high profile arrests) may be understandable since there appears to be an effort by al-Qaeda and other anti-government forces to penetrate and undermine these organizations (also known as Sahwa or "Awakening" groups) by infiltrating their ranks. There is, however, a more serious danger that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government will take a broad brush approach to this

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problem and react with punitive measures directed at the organizations or their leaderships as a whole. This sort of tactic will cause the Sunni community to feel increasingly under siege, and it is even possible that they will again choose the path of resistance and insurgency. Iraqi efforts to control al-Qaeda infiltration of the SOI are important; but the danger of a government over-reaction is even more serious. Moreover, whatever al-Qaeda penetration has already taken place has probably done so primarily because of increasing Sunni fears about the perceived indifference of the Maliki government to Sunni concerns.

The emergence of the Sons of Iraq as a viable force of around 95,000-100,000 fighters resulted from an American initiative that was part of the 2006-07 effort to turn the war around when the surge of U.S. troops took place. The Shi'ite-dominated Iraqi government never liked the initiative but tolerated it because of U.S. insistence. Many U.S. critics of the program stated that the United States was simply paying the insurgents to change sides. This statement was narrowly true, but it is also an oversimplification since the individuals who joined the SOI had often developed a strong hatred of many al-Qaeda policies including seizing economic resources, imposing a draconian version of "Islamic Law" (including the breaking of hands or fingers for smoking), and forced marriages of local women to foreign al-Qaeda fighters. Unsurprisingly, U.S. skepticism about the SOI program declined rapidly as a result of their members' ability to work well with U.S. forces and achieve significant military victories over al-Qaeda insurgents. The force was never perceived as permanent, however, and the government of Iraq was expected eventually to incorporate about 20 percent of the militiamen into the Iraqi police and military. The other 80 percent were to receive assistance in obtaining other jobs when the paramilitary groups were no longer needed. The timeframe for this change was left fuzzy. The SOI functioned as a reliable U.S. partner force, and its members were paid by the United States until October 2008 when the Iraqis assumed financial responsibility for about half of the SOI as part of an ongoing process of expanding Iraqi government authority. On April 2, 2009, Iraq assumed full responsibility for the entire movement.

The 2008 decision to begin transferring responsibility for the SOI to the Iraqi government was met with widespread unhappiness throughout the movement. This concern was well-founded. One of the first acts of the Iraqi government was to reduce the salaries of large numbers of militiamen as they fell under its jurisdiction. To make matters worse, pay is frequently in arrears, and efforts to correct this problem seem nonexistent. Some SOI members are believed to have been arrested for crimes committed during the insurgency despite promises of amnesty if they switched sides. More recently, confrontations between the SOI and the government are on the upswing as various senior SOI leaders have been arrested on a variety of charges, including terrorism. Some of these arrests may be well-founded while others are extremely questionable. One key arrested SOI leader has already been released by an Iraqi judge who found no valid reason to hold him. Also, at the time of this writing, the Iraqi budget process for the remainder of 2009 was still incomplete, but the working draft did not yet include funding for the SOI. This omission may be a deliberate move against the

Sunnis or it may be a function of Iraq's drastically decreased revenues. In either case, starving the SOI is a serious mistake.

The cost of a full-scale rupture between the Iraqi government and the SOI could be dramatic. In the worst case, many SOI members may see their only viable option as returning to some version of an anti-government insurgency. To do so, they would probably seek funding and weapons from Sunni Arab governments and wealthy individuals, including anti-Shi'ite radicals. The possible next insurgency may look different from the last insurgency, but it will still be a disaster for Iraq even without al-Qaeda leadership. If al-Qaeda does receive a second chance to work with the Sunnis, its leaders may also have learned from their previous mistakes and behave towards the Iraqis in a much less arrogant and heavy-handed way. Additionally, once the United States has removed the balance of its troops from Iraq, some Sunni Arab governments might be increasingly willing to allow their nationals to travel to Iraq to help defend Iraq's Sunni community. Currently, some of these governments are heavily (although not completely) constrained by the fear that their nationals who travel to Iraq will kill U.S. soldiers and that they will be held responsible.

So what is to be done to prevent a steady cycle of decline in the relations between the Iraqi government and the SOI? Unfortunately but inevitably, the United States may have to reach into its own pockets for a while to help fund programs to pay the SOI, as well as much later efforts to transition them into alternative work. We have simply come too far to let short-term Iraqi governmental missteps and paralysis re-energize the insurgency, and such a temporary effort will at least buy time for a political compromise to be generated by the Iraqi political system. Support for the SOI costs about \$25 million per month. This is not a small amount, but it is certainly dwarfed by the \$2 billion per week spent to manage Iraq in the 2005-06 timeframe, before the United States and its Iraqi allies were able to restore some measure of stability to Iraq. Additionally, the United States must oppose efforts to disarm the SOI until Iraq is more completely stabilized. These people declared war on al-Qaeda and its allies in 2006. To disarm them under current circumstances would be to impose a death sentence unless they managed to beg al-Qaeda's forgiveness with future promises of services. Neither of these outcomes is acceptable. Furthermore, any legal actions against SOI leaders will have to meet the highest standards of justice, and trials will have to be conducted with the most intense levels of transparency for crimes committed that are not covered under the previous amnesty. The United States must strongly interest itself in individual cases involving arrested SOI leaders and encourage international humanitarian organizations to do the same.

Finally, it must be noted that problems between the government and the SOI are only one set of difficulties that Iraqis must overcome. There are still huge differences between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs, especially over the status of the disputed city of Kirkuk. Iran's role in Iraq remains a problem, and the current low profile of Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army may not last forever. Over two million Iraqi refugees in foreign countries and an equal number of internally displaced persons will need help in being resettled and playing a productive role in Iraq's future. Fearsome organized crime

organizations will also have to be destroyed. Yet, in this entire mosaic of challenges, few problems are as frightening as a Sunni-Shi'ite civil war, and the SOI controversy remains one of the most sensitive Sunni-Shi'ite issues. Unfortunately, the problems of Iraq can be more severe than the sum of their parts. If problems between the government and the SOI are not effectively managed, the chances of increasingly violent intercommunal tensions will be increased. Even if full-scale civil war does not result, such tensions will distract Iraqis from other major difficulties while providing opportunities for terrorists and regional troublemakers. Without careful attention to the problems of the SOI, Iraq could slip back into chaos. This is a problem that can be addressed by Iraqi inclusiveness toward the Sunni Arabs (including the SOI in the Sunni areas) and U.S. backing for inclusive Iraqi policies. Failure to do so would betray not only Iraqi Sunnis, but also all Iraqis seeking national stability as well as the American and coalition soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for the future of Iraq.

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