

## **Political Conditions Iraq**

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### **Body**

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The 1980s to 1990

From the time of Saddam Hussein's emergence as the leader of Iraq and the expanded role played by the ruling Baath Party, Iraq's sense of nationhood, as well as its general prosperity incrementally rose. From 1980 to 1988, the war between Iran and Iraq ensued, and when it finally ended, both countries had suffered massive destruction. Despite its huge losses in the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq was unchallenged as the most powerful military presence in the Gulf region. The army was weakened, but still disposed numerous troops.

The Gulf War

As a result of the war, the Iraqi economy was shattered. The need for a solution to these problems contributed to Iraq's revival of old territorial claims against oil rich Kuwait. Saddam Hussein called for the annexation of the Bubiyan and Warbah islands at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab, and thus giving Iraq a clear passage to the Gulf. He also accused Kuwait of illegally siphoning off oil from the ar-Rumaylah field, one of the world's largest oil pools, which the two countries shared. Hussein threatened to use force against all Arab oil producers, (including Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) who exceeded their oil quotas, and accused them of collaborating with the United States to strangle the Iraqi economy by flooding the market with low-priced oil.

Although Iraq had accompanied its threats by moving troops to the border area, the world was largely taken by surprise when, on Aug. 2, 1990, the Iraqi army invaded and occupied Kuwait. A force of about 120,000 soldiers and approximately 2,000 tanks and other armored vehicles met little resistance. The Kuwaiti army was not on the alert, and those troops at their posts could not mount an effective defense. Some aircraft operating from southern Kuwait attacked Iraqi armored columns before their air base was overrun, and they sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. Of the 20,000 Kuwaiti troops, many were killed or captured, although up to 7,000 escaped into Saudi Arabia, along with about 40 tanks.

Having completed the occupation of Kuwait, the Iraqi armored and mechanized divisions and the elite Republican Guard advanced south towards Kuwait's border with Saudi Arabia. Intelligence sources indicated that the Iraqis were positioning themselves for a subsequent drive toward the Saudi oil fields and shipping terminals, possibly continuing toward the other Gulf States.

In the first of a series of resolutions condemning Iraq, the United Nations Security Council on Aug. 2, 1990, called for Iraq's unconditional and immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. In the months following, a coalition force of more

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than 600,000 ground, sea, and air force personnel deployed to defend Saudi Arabia and to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait.

Command of the force was divided. Commander-in-Chief of the United States Central Command Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf headed American, British, and French units. Schwarzkopf's Saudi counterpart, Lt. Gen. Khalid ibn Sultan ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Saud, commanded units from 24 non-Western countries, including troops from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, and the other Gulf states. In addition to 20,000 Saudi troops and 7,000 Kuwaiti troops, an estimated 3,000 personnel from the other Gulf Cooperation Council states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) took part in the land forces of the coalition offensive, known as Operation Desert Storm.

In January 1991, Operation Desert Storm evolved into a full coalition offensive against Iraq by the coalition forces. Sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, the offensive was then called the Gulf War. On Feb. 26, Kuwait was officially liberated. An official cease-fire was established, international sanctions against Iraq were instituted, and carefully circumscribed provisions for peace were implemented, including enforced air-exclusion ("no fly") zones in southern and northern Iraq. The "no fly" zones were put into effect to protect the Shia Muslim and Kurdish minorities in those areas. Despite the existence of these measures, Iraq was accused of contravening against the peace concord by repeatedly violating the boundaries of the zones.

## The 1990s

In November 1994, another political conundrum erupted amidst the Kurdish population of Iraq. Specifically, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, and the Kurdish Democratic Party, or KDP, signed a peace agreement, which allowed elections to be held in May 1995. In January 1995, fighting broke out and resumed until May, postponing the Kurdish National Assembly elections. Peace negotiations to resolve the conflict in northern Iraq amongst warring groups were made in October 1995, which resulted in an agreement for them to hold elections in May 1996.

On Aug. 31, 1996, Iraqi troops were deployed to the Kurdish region to give assistance to the KDP. With the aid of the Iraqi military, the KDP was able to capture three cities, thereby controlling all three Kurdish provinces. Subsequently, the Iraqi government declared the restoration of Iraqi rule in Kurdistan, offering amnesty to Kurdish insurgents. In September 1996, the KDP formed a coalition consisting of the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan, or IMIK, the Kurdistan Communist Party, and Assyrian and Turkoman representatives. In October, PUK forces regained much of the terrain they had capitulated to the KDP.

In May 1997, around 10,000 Turkish troops were deployed to the northern Kurdistan region where they attacked Kurdish Workers' Party, or PKK bases. The United Nations opposed the Turkish presence and demanded their withdrawal from the region. The Turkish forces complied, but later commenced air strikes on the PKK bases. The KDP withdrew from peace negotiations in March 1997. On Oct. 12, 1997, the PUK instigated its strongest military assault against the KDP. A four-day cease-fire was negotiated beginning on October 17. The fighting, however, resumed shortly after the established cease-fire ended.

On Feb. 12, 1998, two delegations of KDP and PUK met in Shaqlawa. Participants of the meeting addressed the peace process and the recently exchanged peace plans. The meeting resulted with both sides agreeing to uphold and respect the cease-fire; settle differences through discussions; avoid violence at all costs; use the media to promote the peace process; unconditionally release all prisoners; and form a joint commission to coordinate the public services in education, health, and energy.

Domestically, Iraq experienced tensions between the ruling Sunnis and the Shi'a minority. The killing of Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr-a prominent Shia cleric-on Feb. 17, 1999, sparked violent demonstrations. Dozens of Islamic activists and security forces were killed, and several hundred people were arrested. Human rights organizations reported that hundreds of people, including political prisoners and possible prisoners of conscience, were executed and large-scale arbitrary arrests of suspected political opponents took place. Torture and ill treatment of prisoners and detainees were widely reported.

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In the latter months of 1998, United Nations Special Commission, or UNSCOM, teams that were directed to investigate Iraqi military sites and facilities, and to destroy Iraqi weapons systems, claimed that they had found evidences of chemical warfare production. At the same time, Iraqi officials expressed their position that UNSCOM investigations were controlled by the United States and their Western allies and was an unfairly prejudiced process. The Iraqis responded by intermittently closing off sites from UNSCOM inspection, and the United States, in the interim, admitted that it had, indeed, been involved in some clandestine investigations. . The UNSCOM teams, headed at the time by Richard Butler, left Iraq. A protracted process of military proliferation and reflux in the Gulf resulted.

In December 1998, American and British forces, operating under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council, bombed Iraqi targets, as a result of Iraqi non-compliance with the stipulations of the existing post-Gulf War agreement. For the most part, the bombing campaign, referred to as "Operation Desert Fox," concentrated on the air-exclusion ("no fly") zones of the northern and southern parts of Iraq. The city of Mosul, the area of Basra, and the Abu al-Khasib region all suffered human casualties as a consequence of the bombing campaign.

Iraq was repeatedly accused of violating the "no fly" zone provisions. For its part, Iraq has never recognized the legitimacy of the "no fly" zones, since they were not specifically articulated by a specific United Nations resolution. Iraq vowed to unrelentingly oppose the zones, as a result. Further, Iraqi officials explicitly blamed the United States and the United Kingdom for the bombing campaign, which they claimed targeted civilian installations, and resulted in deaths within the civilian population. Consequently, in the face of perceived aggression, Iraq hurled anti-aircraft fire back at allied aircraft activity. In this regard, the government of Iraq contended that because several Iraqi civilians were killed in attacks by allied forces, it had the right to protect its own people. The allied response, however, was that any indiscriminate anti-aircraft fire that might have been issued, in an attempt to bring down allied aircraft -- for whatever reason -- would be potentially detrimental to Iraqi civilians. American and British forces maintained that their presence in the Gulf was authorized by the existing United Nations Security Council Resolution. They also noted that Saddam Hussein reportedly -- but not definitively -- stated that a bounty would be offered for shooting down any allied aircraft. They point to this alleged statement as evidence supporting their actions of self-defense.

In July 1999, arrangements were made for a team of experts to begin the removal of toxic substances in Iraq that were left by UNSCOM disarmament inspection teams. This team of experts included Russians, French and Chinese representatives, and excluded the original UNSCOM team. Since the launch of air strikes in December 1998, no weapons inspectors had been allowed back into Iraq. In December 1999, a new commission, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission for Iraq, or UNMOVIC, was established to replace UNSCOM. The new United Nations weapons inspection team for Iraq and its director, Hans Blix, were ready to begin work in Iraq, but the ongoing disagreement between Iraq and the United Nations prevented UNMOVIC from moving into Iraq.

Meanwhile, the economic sanctions program against Iraq was repeatedly criticized, and an increasing numbers of governments and non-governmental organizations called for the lifting of the sanctions. Indeed, the sanctions regime had not brought down Saddam Hussein and Iraq's political elite, while Iraq's weapons program was no longer under international surveillance. Rather, the strict trade regulations had led to the lack of food as well as medication, consequently hurting the Iraqi population instead of the regime, as intended. UNICEF estimated that the infant mortality rate rose 160 percent since 1991. Several hundred thousands Iraqi children under five died as a result of malnutrition and lack of medication, which was directly attributable to the sanctions program. The apparent civilian sufferings and the political shortcomings increased international criticism and defiance of the sanctions regime. In March 2000, Hans von Sponek resigned as Director of the United Nations Humanitarian Program in Iraq, in protest of the sanctions.

## 2000 to 2002

In August 2000, the Saddam International Airport in Baghdad re-opened, 10 years after it was closed. A ceremony was held to mark the reopening of airport, regarded as a fresh and bold move by Iraq to counter the United Nations ban on commercial flights to and from Iraq. Also in August, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez became the first

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head of state to visit Iraq since the Gulf War. Since early 2000, numerous humanitarian, culture and trade delegations visited Iraq, underlining the increasingly international, and in particular **Arab**, opposition to the sanctions.

Encouraged by the growing opposition to the sanctions, in October 2000, Iraq demanded that oil bought under the United Nations administered "oil-for-food" program be paid in euros instead of **U.S.** dollars. Since November 2000, Iraq had also attempted to charge its own "oil surcharge," demanding that oil lifters pay an additional 25-40 cents for each barrel of oil bought, as well as attempting to collect a 10 percent fee on import contracts. The Iraqi regime was already benefiting from unauthorized sales of oil, made possible by corrupt border police and international oil traders. An estimated 400,000 barrels per day (almost a quarter of the two million barrels per day allowed under the sanctions), was transported through Syrian, Jordanian and Iranian pipelines, and by trucks crossing over the Turkish border. The oil was sold in a clandestine international oil market, enriching Saddam Hussein and his entourage.

On Feb. 16, 2001, American and British forces bombed five Iraqi control and command posts around Baghdad. The bombings represented the most extensive attacks since December 1998 and the first attacks close to the Iraqi capital city. The operation, described as a "routine mission" by **U.S.** President George W. Bush, came in response to increasingly sophisticated Iraqi attacks on planes patrolling the "no fly" zone.

Iraqi authorities claimed that two civilians were killed and more than 20 wounded in the attack, bringing the number of Iraqi civilians killed in allied bombings to over 300, and the number of people wounded to around 1,000 since December 1998. Large demonstrations took place in Baghdad the day after the raids. Iraqi press vowed to revenge the attack, and referred to President George W. Bush as "the son of the snake," accusing him of following his father's aggressive policy and hard stand towards Iraq. Saddam's continued defiance of the **U.S.** made him a popular leader in many **Arab** countries where people believed that the **U.S.** was playing a too influential role in the region.

Three permanent members of the **U.N.** Security Council -- Russia, China and France -- in addition to several other countries, also criticized the raids. France, who helped set up the "no fly" zone, but withdrew in 1998, condemned the bombings, and criticized **U.S.** and **U.K.** authorities for not informing NATO allies about the attack.

The February 2001 bombings again highlighted the shortcomings of the current sanctions regime. Renewed focus on the Iraq sanctions came amidst the Bush American administration's work on developing its policy towards not only Iraq, but the entire Middle East region as well. American policy and reputation was repudiated in the region, while Saddam Hussein's regime remained more entrenched than ever, while reaping the benefits of international sympathy.

Experts from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations' nuclear agency based in Vienna, had been in Iraq since 1998. In January 2001, IAEA experts praised Iraq for its willingness to cooperate, but refused to comment on the finding of the inspections. For its part, Iraq called for an end to the sanctions, claiming that it possessed no weapons of mass destruction. The United Nations hoped to see its weapons inspectors back in Iraq to verify compliance with United Nations resolutions, prior to the lifting of any sanctions.

The United Nations Security Council's permanent members remained divided on the issue of the sanctions. Russia and China called for an end to the sanctions; France called for a change in the sanctions regime; and the **United States** and the United Kingdom have for long remained skeptical about any changes. Various alterations of the sanctions were proposed. Movement towards considering the implementing so-called 'smart sanctions,' focusing more tightly on arms control and removing controls on civilian goods, was taken, but no consensus was reached. On June 30, 2001, sanctions were extended for five more months. Iraq responded by withholding oil from the world market.

The sanctions regime and the Iraqi government's priorities left civilian infrastructure and oil installations in dire need of repair and upgrading. Smuggling was normative and continued unchecked, to the benefit of neighboring countries. The November 2001 trade fair in Baghdad witnessed greater **Arab** interest in Iraqi markets and brethren.

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Moves to reform the sanctions were expected to be attempted at the November 2001 United Nations General Assembly session.

While it was widely expected that Russia would refuse to support the so-called smart sanctions, the events on Sept. 11 put the entire situation on hold.

Iraq strongly condemned the terrorist attacks on the U.S., but equally formidable wording was used to condemn the bombing of Afghanistan. Political developments in Iraq depended on the development in the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism. Iraq involvement had not been implicated in the attacks, however, military moves were possible, as the U.S. implicated Iraq in the pursuit of the development of weapons of mass destruction.

## 2002: The Road to War

In January 2002, U.S. President George Bush, in his state of the Union address, declared Iraq along with North Korea and Iran, as a member of an "axis of evil." Since then, there was widespread speculation of a U.S. offensive against Iraq. The Bush administration stated it would support a regime change in Iraq. The U.S. also stepped up its financial support of Iraqi opposition to Hussein. U.S. State Department officials met with Iraqi Kurdish opposition leaders from late 2001 until the time of the 2003 second Gulf War. It was believed that the U.S. favored stirring up instability within Iraq, as possible alternative to direct military action as a method to topple the regime.

In response to the Bush administration's threats to topple Saddam Hussein, the green light was given to Ba'ath party members to kill those people suspected of plotting to overthrow the government. Hussein has also intensified security along the northern Kurdish enclave, a well-known spot for Iraqi dissidents.

Meanwhile, in the first part of 2002, Iraq extended several invitations for the United Nations to begin a dialogue about how to implement U.N. Security Council resolutions. It also invited a United Nations envoy to review the human rights situation in the country. In February, Benon Sevan, the executive director of the UN oil-for-food program, recommended the organization make the necessary and constant adjustments to meeting the needs of the Iraqi people. The Iraqi government during this time also complained to the UN Compensations Committee that the committee was accepting too many demands from individuals or organizations, rather than from countries as a whole. On May 14, 2002, the UN extended "the oil for food program," and for a period of six months lifted restrictions on civilian goods.

Without external military intervention, Saddam Hussein's hold on power remained unchallenged. The Iraqi president had been rumored to suffer from cancer for some time, but had on several occasions appeared in public -- reportedly, in good health. In addition to the power struggle that would follow either his death or defeat, serious domestic problems continued to be identified in the Sunni-Shia divide and in the Kurdish dominated northern Iraq. Despite American financial and military support for opposition groups such as the exile Iraqi National Congress, as well as support for groups inside Iraq, there was little reason to expect these small measures would provoke change in Iraq.

The Iraqi regime continued to be one of the most repressive in the world. Amnesty International reported widespread use of torture, arrests of political opponents, forceful expulsions of Kurds, Turkmens and Assyrian, hundreds of executions-among them numerous political prisoners. Amnesty International, in its 2001 report, also reported human rights abuses in Iraqi Kurdistan. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights issued a resolution condemning "systematic, widespread, and extremely grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the government of Iraq."

Whether sanctions were lifted or reformed, it was hoped that changes would target and punish the Iraqi regime, alleviate the suffering of ordinary Iraqis, open up the country, and in a longer-term perspective, facilitate political change from within.

Meanwhile, in late July 2002, reports surfaced surrounding the United States' plan to remove Saddam Hussein as leader of Iraq. While in the past, such plans have centered on mass assaults reminiscent of "Desert Storm" over a

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decade ago, newer strategies seemed to center on specific key targets in Iraq, and the subsequent isolation and collapse of Hussein's government.

By late August 2002, voices in the Bush administration were stridently calling for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, citing the need for pre-emptive action against Iraq, which appeared poised on the verge of developing nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Unable to clearly link Iraq's alleged weapons program to identifiable terrorist groups, the Bush administration, bolstered by Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, stated that the simple existence of a burgeoning nuclear program in Iraq demanded pre-emptive action.

With international outcry against unilateral -- or even bilateral -- military action against Iraq, U.S. President George W. Bush addressed the United Nations in September 2002 in an attempt to shore up support for his efforts; specifically, he called for the international body to bring Iraq back into line with the dictates of a number of resolutions against Iraq. Most of the resolutions mandate weapons inspection, and as such, the resumption of this program remained the procedure of choice among most of the global community, however, the U.S. government was hoping for a strong resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq instead. The Bush administration believed that efforts toward weapons inspections would be useless and only regime change could assure the destruction of Iraq's alleged nuclear capacity. Detracting from this claim was the discovery of the fact that the IAEA report that Bush had cited to warn about Iraq's alleged nuclear capacity turned out to be non-existent.

Meanwhile, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed the parliament at home and outlined a dossier regarding Iraq's alleged weapons program and its tactics against weapons inspections. His speech was aimed at gaining support for action against Iraq.

As the United States' Congress discussed and debated the provisions within its own draft of a resolution empowering the Bush administration to take military action against Iraq, the United Kingdom's government drafted a resolution delineating the requirements for Iraq to fully comply with international weapons inspections. This resolution was to be formally offered to the United Nations; it would then have to be approved by the United Nations General Assembly and most importantly, by the Security Council. France and Russia, both permanent members of the Security Council, stated they did not see the need for another resolution. Instead, they favored going ahead with inspections on the basis of prior resolutions and on the basis of a letter from the Iraqi government, which was delivered to the United Nations in mid-September 2002. China -- also a permanent member of the Security Council -- expressed great reservations about the military option posed by the United States and the United Kingdom. China warned that such action would augur dire consequences.

Complicating matters was the fact that the Iraqi government rejected the resolution drafted by the United States and the United Kingdom. Iraq also stated that it would like to comply with weapons inspections in accordance with a plan negotiated by United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan. This plan did not neatly or easily coincide with the policies outlined by the Bush administration on Iraq.

In the week of Oct. 1, 2002, discussions were scheduled to commence in Austria regarding the re-admittance of weapons inspectors to Iraq. Inspectors from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Committee (UNMOVIC), headed by Hans Blix, would search for biological, chemical and ballistic weapons. Meanwhile, a small delegation of United States congressmen also traveled to Iraq to lobby the Saddam Hussein's government to allow the re-admittance of weapons inspections and to examine the humanitarian situation. Their efforts, not unlike those of former weapons inspector Scott Ritter, were ridiculed by various voices in the United States government.

These developments came after a week of intensified bombing by the United States and the United Kingdom in the "no fly zone." The bombing raids also included a civilian airport in the city of Basra. Russian officials noted that these bombing raids would be detrimental to the success of any political or diplomatic solutions regarding Iraq. The Russians, along with the French and the Chinese, continued to note that they favored a resumption of weapons inspections as the procedure of choice in dealing with Iraq.

For its part, Iraq denied any proscribed weapons capability and tentatively stated it would allow weapons inspections to resume. Members of the Arab community generally and collectively eschewed military action against Iraq, however, some Arabic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, stated that support for military action could be gained

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if it was sanctioned by the United Nations. Later, however, Saudi Arabian officials stated that bases on Saudi soil could not be used for any such military action.

Following United States President George W. Bush's national address on the issue of Iraq in October, a resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq passed through both houses of Congress. Anti-war protests ensued across the world, a defiant declaration came from Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, that he would not voluntarily relinquish power, and discussions in the United Nations about a resolution on Iraq commenced.

Debate in the United Nations continued in regard to the Iraq issue, and a resolution finally passed in November 2002. The resolution demanded unfettered access for United Nations inspectors to search for weapons of mass destruction. Although the United States claimed that military force would follow any failure on Iraq's part to comply with the resolution, the United Kingdom noted that while disarmament was inevitable, conflict was not. Nevertheless, the United States appeared to be preparing for war, by making plans that involve quarter of a million military troops.

Saddam Hussein convened a special session of parliament to consider a response to the United Nations resolution. Meanwhile, there was an emergency meeting of the Arab League. Member states expressed support for the resolution and encouraged Iraq to accept the demands stipulated in the resolution, while at the same time making it explicit that they were opposed to an attack on Iraq, which would be regarded as an attack against Arab countries. They also asked that Arabs be part of the inspection teams and that provocations by inspection teams be prevented.

In mid-November 2002, weapons inspectors returned to Iraq for the first time in four years. Led by Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, the weapons inspection team consisted of twenty five persons, including representatives from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and inspectors from the United Nations monitoring and verification commissions (UNMOVIC). By year's end, the team was expected to expand to 100 persons. Blix's team promised an objective and professional weapons inspection process, as well as rigorous inspections. The weapons inspection team will also be helped by the use of new technologies, which are capable of detecting the most well-hidden weapons. The Iraqi government stated it would fully comply with all United Nations dictates, for the sake of the Iraqi people, the Middle East region, and the world.

Official searches began on Nov. 27, 2002, and on Dec. 8, 2002, Iraq provided an account of banned weapons programs. Weapons inspectors' early assessment that their efforts appear unencumbered was tempered by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan's cautionary words that it was too early to draw any conclusions. Striking a more pessimistic tone, United States President George Bush stated that the inspections process was "not encouraging." The developments occurred just as Iraq released its required declaration on the country's weapons programs and capabilities. United Nations weapons experts began examining the 12,000-page document, while the five United Nations Security Council permanent members were given access to the documents as well.

In late December 2002, just as United Nations nuclear specialists interviewed Iraqi scientists who might have critical information about the Iraqi weapons program, the United States military stated that Iraq shot down one of its unmanned drones. The plane, which was used for surveillance in the southern "no fly" zone, was shot at by Iraqi forces in that very region of the country. The United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, did not regard the incident as an escalation of tensions, since the Iraqi forces consistently shoot at allied aircraft patrolling the "no fly" zone.

On the issue of Iraq's weapons inspections and ongoing inspections, however, the United States government stated that the Iraqi's declaration on its weapons programs was not a full accounting, as was claimed. Thus, the United States asserted that the Iraqis were technically in violation of the recent United Nations' resolution. For its part, Iraq stated that the United States accusation was levied for the sole purpose of setting the stage for an inevitable war against Iraq.

2003: The Second Gulf War Approaches

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By January 2003, in a televised address in honor of Iraq's Army Day, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein claimed that weapons inspectors were functioning as intelligence operatives. While the Iraqi leader also expressed his desire for war to be avoided, he called on the Iraqi people to be prepared for its inevitability. The Iraqi leader's defiant speech came just after two senior Iraqi officials reacted with anger to their detainment for several hours at a Baghdad compound, which was contained and searched by United Nations weapons inspectors. Although Iraqi officials described the activities as "uncivilized" and "intrusive," the procedures appear consistent with the provisions of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. Regardless of the uncomfortable tactics used by the weapons inspectors, it was imperative that Iraq be viewed as fully compliant with the weapons inspectors. For their part, weapons inspectors rejected Saddam Hussein's claim that they were involved in intelligence work and referred to his comments as "unfortunate." They insisted that they were not "exceeding their United Nations mandate" as was charged by the Iraqi leader.

With only three weeks left before the inspectors issued their report to the United Nations Security Council, analysts and correspondents in Iraq observed that there was no discernible evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

Then, in mid-January 2003, 11 empty chemical warheads were discovered in Iraq. Officials reacted cautiously to the news. Dimitri Perricos, the head of the United Nations team in Baghdad, said the find "may not be a smoking gun" that indicated a violation of United Nations resolutions. But chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, described the situation in Iraq as "very dangerous," and declared that Baghdad had illegally imported arms-related material to the country. Representing the view of the Iraqi government, Hossam Amin, head of Iraq's National Monitoring Directorate, said the material found was simply "forgotten."

By Jan. 20, 2003, Iraqi officials agreed to a 10-point concession accord established by Blix and El Baradei. The agreement was struck in the wake of the discovery of the empty chemical warheads, which were not accounted for in the 12,000 page weapons declaration document. The 10-point agreement included provisions to interview nuclear scientists outside of Iraq, possibly in Cyprus. Earlier, the Iraqis had not been pleased with the idea of private interviews. The stipulations of the agreement also required further documentation to be handed over by the Iraqis to the United Nations.

For its part, Iraq said it would also offer a response to the issues surrounding its incomplete weapons declaration. As well, Iraq stated it would appoint a team to search for munitions that may not have been declared in the original accounting under Resolution 1441.

Blix and El Baradei were both cautiously optimistic about the agreement, noting that it effectively resolved many practical issues. On Jan. 27, 2003, United Nations Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix told the United Nations that Iraq had complied with Security Resolution 1441 reluctantly. Blix also noted that many crucial issues, such as anthrax, VX nerve gas and Scud missiles, had not yet been adequately addressed, and the last set of documents from Iraq contained no new information. In addition, he cautioned that Iraq might still be in possession of biological agents and rockets. He did, however, state that the Iraqis had been cooperative in providing access to all sites. On balance, however, Blix observed that Iraq had not arrived at a genuine acceptance of the goal of disarmament. In specific terms, Blix expressed the belief that Iraq had agreed "in principle" to the dictates of Security Council Resolution 1441, which is aimed at disarmament, but in practice, Iraq had not acted on the substance of that principle.

In regard to weapons of mass destruction, Mohamed El Baradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said there was no evidence that Iraq had resumed its nuclear program, which was discontinued in the early 1990s. Notably, El Baradei disputed the alleged use of various high-strength aluminum tubes, which the **United States** claimed were to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon. The IAEA inspection team found that the tubes were not directly suitable for uranium enrichment. Instead, their usage appeared consistent with the formulation of ordinary artillery rockets. This finding coincided, in fact, with Iraq's official explanation for the tubes. Nevertheless, El Baradei stated that his inspectors would need more time to continue their investigative efforts before reaching any absolute conclusions.



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The Jan. 27, 2003, assessment would bear upon any decision to use military action against Iraq. Both the United States and the United Kingdom had said that any failure to comply with the dictates of Security Council Resolution 1441 could result in war. Indeed, the White House spokesman Ari Fleischer stated that partial compliance by Iraq did not constitute compliance in the comprehensive sense. Other key United Nations Security Council members, however, were adamant that inspections should continue. Two traditional allies of the United States and the United Kingdom, France and Germany, said that they would not support military action at that time. They believed that the inspections process should be exhausted before moving toward war footing. Meanwhile, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan stated that more time was needed to continue inspections before any action should be taken.

The United Nations Security Council met on Jan. 29, 2003, to decide the next step in dealing with Iraq. Most parties concurred that Iraq needed to be more pro-active in its compliance with the Security Council Resolution 1441, however, there was no consensus on whether or not Iraq's failure to fully comply should result in military action. Further, with no evidence of nuclear weaponry, there was a general sense of wariness about going to war against Iraq. The United States and the United Kingdom were the obvious exceptions in this regard, however, in a recent visit to the United States, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair noted that a new United Nations Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq would be needed before launching an attack.

Secretary of State Powell delivered a speech on Iraq to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003. The Bush administration promised "compelling evidence" on Iraq's weapons programs and other such violations during that speech. The substance of the speech, however, did not change minds on either side of the divide, although support for the war increased among Americans, based on the evidence espoused. Ironically, some of the very evidence from a British intelligence report was embarrassingly and remarkably discredited for being outdated, improperly altered and outdated.

Meanwhile, with the threat of war looming ahead, three key members of the United Nations Security Council -- France, Russia and China -- noted that they favored an intensified inspections regime to deal with Iraq, albeit noting that Iraq had much work to do in the realm of cooperation, compliance and disarmament. Germany and Belgium were also vocal in their reticence to go to war against Iraq. In this regard, France and Germany developed a disarmament proposal that will be offered to the United Nations, while Belgium said it would veto a request by the United States to give NATO support to Turkey in the event of a war with Iraq.

Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mohamed El Baradei delivered their report to the United Nations Security Council on Friday, Feb. 14, 2003. The report addressed Iraqi cooperation with arms inspectors and general compliance on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. Blix and El Baradei offered mixed reviews of Iraq's cooperation and compliance, noting that there had been some improvement since the time of the last report, when Blix famously noted that Iraq had not genuinely accepted the objective of disarmament. Notably, U2 surveillance over flights had been cleared, interviews with scientists had ensued, and Iraq had agreed to disarmament talks with South Africa. Both explained that no banned biological, chemical and nuclear weapons had been found, although they did not preclude the possibility that such weapons did, indeed, exist. Blix also made note of the fact that supplies of VX nerve agents and anthrax, as well as long range missiles were yet to be accounted for. He also noted that one particular missile with extended range was in violation of Security Resolutions. El Baradei observed that he had been presented with new documentation on weaponry and although the material did not provide new evidence, the gesture of openness suggested a notable shift on the part of the Iraqis. Significantly, Blix and El Baradei expressed the belief that inspections had been helpful and should be allowed to continue. In an unexpected development, Blix challenged aspects of the evidence that had been cited by United States Secretary of State Colin Powell in his address to the United Nations. He stated that there was no evidence that the Iraqis had previous knowledge of inspections, and he also said that the illicit movement arms had not been persuasively proven by satellite imagery.

The presentation was followed by passionate responses by members of the United Nations Security Council as well as the Iraqi ambassador. The address by French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin elicited a rare thunder of applause from United Nations members. Some plans were made for a new resolution on the use of force against Iraq, while French and other officials called for a follow-up report by the inspectors in early March.

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In the days immediately following the February 14 inspections report, the major cities of the world saw massive protests against a possible war against Iraq. In New York City and Los Angeles protestors each numbered around three-quarters of a million, while rallies in London, Rome, and other European cities each ranged from several hundred thousand to over one and a half million. Australia saw a two day rally as Australians railed against their country's involvement in a prospective war.

By the end of February 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom introduced a new resolution to the United Nations Security Council stating that Iraq had failed to disarm in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. While the new resolution augured consequences, it stopped short of expressing an explicit date for military action.

On March 7, 2003, Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohamed El Baradei delivered another report to the United Nations Security Council.

Hans Blix noted that while the inspections process was not free from friction, impromptu inspections and increased surveillance had taken place. Also, despite initial reluctance, Iraq had accepted the demand to destroy its proscribed Al Samoud missiles. In this regard, the destruction of the missiles had begun. Blix did observe, however, that a country with such a highly developed administrative system as Iraq could have produced more documentary evidence regarding its weapons program. The Iraqis had provided some paperwork on anthrax, and had undertaken a significant effort to furnish information regarding biological weapons reportedly destroyed in 1991. Thus, Blix deemed that the level of Iraqi cooperation had increased and he concluded that the complete verification and disarmament process would take months to complete.

Days after the oral report by Blix, the United States drew attention to the existence of a drone aircraft which had not been mentioned in the presentation by Blix. The drone aircraft was determined to possess a wingspan wider than originally stated by Iraq, and as such, it might be capable of exceeding the 150 kilometer or 93 mile range allowed for weapons delivery systems.

Mohamed El Baradei declared that 218 nuclear inspections had been conducted, while nuclear inspectors had interviewed individual and groups, in both scheduled and unscheduled inspections. El Baradei also took time to explain the IAEA's investigation of the United States' claims regarding Iraqi attempts to procure high-quality aluminum tubes, presumably for the purpose of developing Iraq's nuclear ambitions. Explaining that the investigative process had been "well documented," El Baradei said that the IAEA had concluded that the overtures to purchase aluminum tubes were unrelated to the attempted manufacturing of gas centrifuges, which are used in the enrichment of uranium. In regard to magnets suspected for use in nuclear endeavors, IAEA experts concluded that they could not be used to produce nuclear material. El Baradei also refuted allegations by the United States and the United Kingdom that Iraq tried to buy uranium from Niger. In fact, the IAEA found that the supporting documents provided by the United States and the United Kingdom were inauthentic. On this matter, the Washington Post published a story about the fabricated evidence, which was exposed through the discovery of incriminating errors, such as unmatched names and titles of officials (see article titled "Some Evidence on Iraq Called Fake: U.N. Nuclear Inspector Says Documents on Purchases Were Forged" by Joby Warrick, March 8, 2003). El Baradei noted that after three months of intrusive inspections, there was no evidence of a revived nuclear program in Iraq. In particular, he stated that there was no sign of resumed nuclear activity since 1988 and no suggestion that Iraq had attempted to import uranium after 1990.

Despite the promising tone of the reports by Blix and El Baradei, the United States and the United Kingdom intended to compel a vote on their new resolution, which augmented the existing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. The new resolution was co-sponsored by Spain. Bulgaria, a non-permanent member of the Security Council, also expressed support for both the new resolution, and the use of force against Iraq. Regardless, passage of the resolution required nine votes and no vetoes from the Security Council's five permanent members -- the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France and China. The latter three countries all expressed intense opposition to military action at this time. Diplomatic efforts to shore up support from non-permanent members of the Security Council were intensified, with so many other countries were opposed to the new resolution. With the exceptions of Spain and Bulgaria, every other non-permanent Security Council member state -- Germany, Syria,

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Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Pakistan, Guinea and Mexico -- were either in doubt or opposed to immediate military action against Iraq.

Despite initial misgivings that the new resolution would not pass in the Security Council, United States Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed optimism about its passage. Although he acknowledged that a positive outcome of the vote could be vitiated by a veto from a permanent Security Council member, he expressed the belief that a plurality of votes in favor of the new resolution would ensure a "moral victory."

Diplomatic negotiations, however, collapsed nonetheless. Efforts to modify elements of the draft of a second United Nations Security Council Resolution failed despite the efforts by the United Kingdom to create an agreement that would satisfy the misgivings of most of the non-permanent Security Council members. Many undecided non-permanent members wanted a clear set of reasonable benchmarks that Iraqi disarmament efforts could objectively be measured against. They also requested a 45-day period in which this assessment could be made before coming to the conclusion that war was the last possible option. The United States declared the 45-day time-frame to be "a non-starter" and later refused a subsequent request for three weeks. Meanwhile, France and Russia decried the provisions for an automatic trigger resulting in war if Iraq failed to accomplish various benchmarks in disarmament. Both France and Russia earlier warned that they would veto a resolution containing such language. In response, British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that "People have got to decide whether they are going to allow any second resolution to have teeth, to make it clear that there is a real ultimatum in it."

Following a meeting in the Azores between the leaders of the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain (the sponsors of the existing United Nations Resolution 1441), Blair announced there would be a final round of informal discussions to try to resolve the impasse between the three allies and the rest of the Security Council. A deadline of March 17, 2003, was given to the rest of the Security Council to decide on a possible course of action, before military force against Iraq would be exerted. France's Ambassador to the United Nations Jean Marc de la Sabliere responded that in one-on-one discussions with council members, it was clearly apparent that most did not endorse a use of force against Iraq at this time.

With no progress made in regard to a second resolution, or, in building consensus among the Security Council by the March 17 deadline, the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain reversed their original commitment to seek a vote on its passage in the Security Council and, instead, withdrew the draft resolution. In a media conference, United States President George W. Bush had promised a vote in the Security Council, whether or not the resolution passed, stating that council members would have to "show their cards." In an effort to pursue military action without overt illegality, which the defeat of a second resolution would surely signify, the allies took cover under the original United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 which augured "serious consequences" for Iraqi non-compliance. Experts on international jurisprudence, however, were not at all agreed on this reasoning.

Several hours after the withdrawal of the draft resolution, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the withdrawal of United Nations personnel, including weapons inspectors, from Baghdad in preparation for an imminent war against Iraq.

In an interview on United States television, French President Jacques Chirac said "We should pursue diplomacy until we've come to a dead end." France also called for an emergency meeting at the United Nations to discuss peaceful disarmament. Also on United States television, United States Vice President Dick Cheney said that it was difficult to take the French position seriously. In spite of Cheney's disparagement of France, many other countries have expressed great dismay at the prospects of a war against Iraq. China said that the matter should be resolved through dialogue, within the parameters of the United Nations. Russia condemned military action against Iraq as illegal and noted that it would only jeopardize international security. Germany expressed alarm over the developments and closed its embassy in Baghdad. Greece, which holds the European Union presidency, said that the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain were working outside the United Nations. The European Union has already warned that if action is taken outside of the United Nations, it will not provide support. Pope John Paul also called for a peaceful resolution and offered the belief that there was still time left for peace.

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For his part, Saddam Hussein warned that if Iraq were attacked, the battle would take place "wherever there is sky, land and water in the entire world." The Iraqi leader, however, was reported to have left Baghdad for another part of Iraq. In an interview on Arab television, the Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri said that tens of thousands of Iraqis were ready to become martyrs in a war against American enemies. Iraq had been divided into zones in preparation for the war, which was predicted to commence within days.

### The Failure of Diplomacy

With not even a "moral victory" materializing in the realm of diplomacy, discussions shifted to a vision of a post-war Iraq and analysis as to why diplomacy failed.

In regard to the post-war vision, Tony Blair promised that Iraq's territorial integrity would be protected and its natural resources used for the benefit of Iraqis. George Bush said that the United States and its allies were committed to the goal of a democratic Iraq, complete with an interim authority and a representative government, however, no specific form or process was mentioned. Notably, a recently released State Department report expressed grave doubts about the successful democratization of Iraq; instead, it cautioned that destabilization and chaos was more likely to follow military action and impending occupation. Humanitarian aid and the lifting of sanctions were also promised.

The failure of diplomacy has been blamed on two constellations of issues:

The first is the matter of hegemony. Although the lack of diplomatic tact by members of the Bush administration has not helped the diplomatic efforts, many countries around the world believed that the United States has never been committed to either inspections or disarmament, and instead, has viewed "regime change" and war as an inevitability. In a globalized world that generally respects sovereignty, actively facilitating "regime change" has been viewed negatively as a new form of hegemony. As such, France (among other less powerful countries in the United Nations), have made it clear that they will challenge this modality. Viewed as intransigence by the United States and the United Kingdom, France's steadfast adherence to a diplomatic solution has been viewed as the only contestation to unbridled power by the United States and the United Kingdom. The United States and the United Kingdom, however, blame France for obstreperousness in regard to Iraq.

The second matter concerns credibility. When the original Security Resolution 1441 was passed unanimously in the Security Council, the United Kingdom and the United States respectively claimed an impressive dossier of Iraqi ills. Over time, that dossier has crumbled. First, United States Secretary of State Colin Powell continuously repeated the claim that Iraq was in possession of aluminum tubes that could be used for uranium enrichment, however, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohammed El Baradei maintained that the tubing could only be used for the manufacture of conventional rockets. Second, Powell also made much of unmanned drones that Chief United Nations Weapons Inspector Hans Blix did not mention in his last oral report to the United Nations. The drones turned out to have been incapable of any dire activities involving the spread of biological and chemical weapons. Third, a document used by both the United Kingdom and the United States to make their case regarding the threat posed by Saddam Hussein was discovered to have been plagiarized from a graduate student's thesis. Fourth, allegations of Iraq purchasing uranium from Niger were revealed to have been fabricated, and included a collection of forged documents. Fifth, links between al-Qaida and Iraq were discounted by the United States' own CIA. Meanwhile, the CIA, as well as a respected conservative think tank, the Cato Institute, and a seminal international relations journal, Foreign Policy, all issued reports denouncing such a connection. Indeed, many experts dismissed the likelihood that Saddam Hussein would use biological or chemical weapons, noting that such a scenario would only transpire if Hussein's power was threatened. The Cato Institute also published a number of commentaries criticizing a proposed war against Iraq. Sixth, the realization that the United States and the United Kingdom were wiretapping the United Nations, in order to gain some advantage in procuring favorable votes on its second draft resolution, diminished the two countries' credibility in the eyes of the international community.

### The United States-led Coalition War Against Iraq

Following the failure of diplomacy and a subsequent 48-hour ultimatum by United States President George Bush, coalition forces began strikes against Iraq in mid-March 2003. On the basis of actionable intelligence, initial strikes

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were launched against leadership targets in Baghdad. Then, several days later, the start of the "shock and awe" strategy commenced. In this way, the command and control of the war was shifted so that tactical assaults on leadership targets could be played out before moving to the "shock and awe" strategy. The strategic shift was made in order to determine how the Iraqi leadership would respond to the war. Meanwhile coalition forces made their way over the Kuwaiti border into Iraq; special forces units were reported to have been functioning within Iraqi borders for some time.

Coalition forces encountered much tougher resistance from the Iraqis than had been expected. The towns of Basra, Najaf, Umm Qasr and Nassariya were particularly hit with massive attacks from coalition forces, while those very forces encountered fierce Iraqi resistance on the ground. In the face of criticism about the war strategy, coalition commanders insisted that they had expected these developments and the war was going according to plan.

Saddam Hussein appeared on Iraqi television several times urging the Iraqi people to keep up the fight. His appearances quelled stories of possible injury, although there remained suspicion that the person broadcasting was actually a body double of the Iraqi leader. The Iraqi government predicted disaster and death for coalition fighters. In the face of overwhelming air strikes and bombings, Iraqi defenders responded with mortars, rocket propelled grenades and anti-aircraft fire.

Several casualties on both sides were recorded among troops and also among the civilian population. Reports also registered the possible downing of one or two United States apache helicopters and British fighter pilots parachuting into Iraqi territory. British forces, in particular, were badly hit by friendly fire incidences and various mid-air accidents. As well, several prisoners of war from the United States were shown on Arab television. The videotape, which coalition forces deem to be a violation of the Geneva Convention, also showed the deceased bodies of coalition fighters. Critics, however, noted that the war on Iraq contravenes against the United Nations charter and so claims of violations of international accords were rather hypocritical. Nevertheless, George Bush warned that inhumane treatment of captives would result in war crimes prosecution; the United States is not, however, a country which accepts International Criminal Court jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, coalition convoys moved toward Baghdad and heavy bombardment of major cities by the United States and United Kingdom continued. As the war in Iraq raged on, air raids by coalition forces pounded Baghdad. Long range B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers were part of the attacks on communications and command centers in Baghdad. The assault of missiles and bombs was intended to erode Iraqi defenses before coalition forces arrived in the capital city. The presidential palace used by the son of Saddam Hussein was one of the key targets hit in aerial bombardment. The city's southern edge was particularly hammered by artillery and bombings, although explosions were also heard in the western parts of Baghdad.

As coalition forces moved closer toward the capital city, within 80 kilometers (or 50 miles) of Baghdad, they increasingly battled Iraqi Republican Guard units on their approach. Once in Baghdad, however, the Iraqi resistance was less intense than had been expected. United States forces captured two presidential compounds in Baghdad, including the palace which headquarters the Republican Guard units. The Iraqi information minister denied the capture of the compounds and instead claimed that Iraqi fighters were prevailing over United States forces. On Iraqi television, President Saddam Hussein called for a call to arms in the city and instructed fighters who could not reach their respective units to join any unit that could be located.

While heavy bombardment of Baghdad continued, United States forces positioned tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles near the Information Ministry and the al-Rashid Hotel. For their part, Iraqi fighters blocked bridges over the Tigris and defended key government buildings with rocket grenades. Fedayeen militia members patrolled the streets. Urban warfare and street fighting commenced. One battle zone was reported to be in central Baghdad near a residential district. United States officials said that the activity in Baghdad was intended to be "a show of force" and not a full-scale take-over and occupation. It was hoped that the demonstration of military might would convey the futility of Iraqi resistance.

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The demonstration was something of a success as United States forces were able to take control of large portions of the city. After toppling a statue of Saddam Hussein in the capital city, the United States declared the regime of Saddam Hussein to have been toppled, although the fighting raged on.

Meanwhile, the most difficult challenge for civilians to deal with was the terribly degenerated state of the Baghdad hospital. The hospital was understaffed because doctors and nurses were unable to safely travel the streets of Baghdad to get to work. Insufficient medical supplies exacerbated the problem as patients arrived by the hundreds every hour.

United States forces pounded on Saddam Hussein's stronghold of Tikrit. Although fierce battles ensued between remaining Iraqi army units in Tikrit, the majority of Iraqi forces had fled the town, most recently when Baghdad fell to United States forces. In Baghdad, even though it became evident that the regime of Saddam Hussein had lost power, pockets of resistance continued to engage with United States forces and widespread looting characterized a general climate of lawlessness. The Iraqi National Museum was hard hit in the looting; artifacts dating back to the earliest records of humankind were either destroyed or stolen. Joint patrols by United States forces and Iraqi civilian leaders were launched to combat the problem. Similarly, British forces were joined by Iraqi police in an attempt to restore security and calm to the southern town of Basra.

Violence raged in Najaf when mobs of people hacked to death two Shi'ite Muslim clerics who had aligned themselves with the United States-led war. Shi'ite factions also surrounded the home of another Shi'ite cleric and gave him forty eight hours to leave Najaf.

In Nassiriya, a meeting of Iraqis was scheduled to take place about the future of the country. Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the exile group, Iraqi National Congress, has been regarded as a key player in the post-war planning process by the United States. Chalabi, however, has been critical of the lack of post-war civil unrest that gripped Iraq.

Meanwhile, the head of Iraq's scientific program was taken into United States custody; he stated that Iraq had no biological and chemical weapons and declared the war to be unnecessary. Saddam Hussein's brother was also captured close to the Syrian border. Various other members of Saddam Hussein's regime were caught and arrested.

In a stunning positive development for United States forces, the missing prisoners of war were found alive.

## Post-War Iraq

With United States President George W. Bush declaring an end to most military activities in Iraq, attention shifted to plans for a post-war Iraq. In this regard, one of the most significant developments was the arrival in Baghdad of the new administrator of Iraq -- United States General Jay Garner. Before transitioning Iraq into the realm of democratic rule, Garner's main objective was the restoration of basic services to the cities and towns of Iraq. Another key responsibility was the facilitation of the flow of oil, so that oil revenues could be used to pay for the reconstruction of the country, which was destroyed in the United States-led war against Iraq. Garner would also have to bring the Iraqi National Congress together with other Iraqi interest groups to create a new Iraqi government. This was expected to be a difficult course and would demand harmonizing Iraq's political, religious and ethnic factions.

In this regard, General Jay Garner convened a meeting of about 300 Iraqi delegates in regard to the formation of a new government. Included in the group were various Kurdish organizations, the Iraqi National Accord, and members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution - the largest Shi'a organization. Some Shi'a participants were cautiously optimistic following Garner's pledge that the oil resources of Iraq would be used to benefit the Iraqi people; however, they also cautioned that "Iraq could only be ruled by Iraqis." From the group of delegates present at the meetings, it was hoped that a nine-member governing council could be formed. This council would reportedly interface with United States officials in Iraq. Possible members of the council included Ahmad Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party, Iyad Allawi of the Iraqi National Accord and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim of the Supreme Council for Islamic

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Revolution. Garner predicted that within a month, there would be a nucleus of an Iraqi government with an "Iraqi face." An agreement was forged after the meeting for participants to convene again in a month.

The nature of the "Iraqi face" of an Iraqi government, however, remained unclear. Despite the intent to create a representative council, Kurdish and exile groups expressed confidence they would dominate a future Iraqi administration, while Shi'ites, who form the majority of the population, complained they were marginalized in the process. Against this backdrop, the Kurds of Northern Iraq celebrated the arrival of the new United States administrator, while many of the Shi'a population throughout Iraq expressed anger and frustration instead. In a gathering in the Shi'a holy city of Karbala, some Shi'ites used the occasion to call for the withdrawal of the United States forces from Iraq. Others voiced the opinion that an Islamic state, rather than democracy, was desired in a post-war Iraq. Gatherings by Shi'ites at Karbala had been banned under Saddam Hussein's regime. With the fall of Saddam Hussein's government and the collapse of the control by the Ba'ath party, Shi'ites have been using their newfound freedom to strenuously express themselves. Rifts within the Shi'a population have also emerged with the killing of several clerics.

Dissonance has simply been of the religious variety. Violent altercations between civilians and United States forces in the town of Fajallah appear to have erupted due to frustrations with the United States presence in Iraqi civilian institutions, such as schools. As well, some Iraqis were infuriated by the decision to retain middle-tier Ba'ath government workers in their positions. Although the measure was instituted to ensure some continuity in terms of services and operations, tensions between factions remained high. Development projects within the Iraqi infrastructure by United States contractors did not progress at all because it was still not safe enough to establish operations in Iraq, and with an ongoing power vacuum, crime was still a problem across Iraq. As such, businesses were not re-opening and popular resentment was on the rise.

Then, there was a spate of attacks against United States soldiers in Iraq during the course of one week. In one case, gunmen fired on the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment convoy near the town of Haditha, 120 miles north of Baghdad. One United States soldier was killed and a second injured in the attack. In another incident, one soldier died and three were injured when a United States military vehicle went over a landmine in what officials referred to as "the result of hostile action." In Baqubah to the north of Baghdad, a United States military unit was hit in a grenade attack; however, there were no casualties. In another incident, a woman was holding a grenade and walking toward United States forces but was shot dead before she could detonate the device. At Baiji, which is close to Tikrit, a rocket propelled grenade was fired at soldiers but did not explode.

In a unique case, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms were fired at a United States Army unit from a Mosque in the aforementioned Iraqi town of Fallujah. In this incident, United States forces were able to respond quickly by killing two attackers and capturing six others. The town of Fallujah was the site of an anti-American demonstration a month ago in which 15 Iraqis died when United States forces opened fire. United States forces defended the decisive use of force against the gunmen despite their presence in the Mosque; United States officials noted that while coalition forces aspired to respect the sanctity of religious sites and institutions, they also have the right to protect themselves from attack, even when the attacks originate in places such as mosques and churches. Officials from United States Central Command (Cento) observed in an official statement on the latest incident at Fallujah that "the use of a religious site, such as a mosque or church, as cover for military purposes is a violation of the law of war."

United States and United Kingdom forces on the ground in Iraq were faced with the difficult challenge of stabilizing Iraq and re-establishing order. Some reports suggested that there might be too few troops on the ground to accomplish this objective, however, coalition forces expressly stated that these concerns are being addressed. The main objective has been to deal with all sources of possible destabilization, retain control and prevent a state of lawlessness from erupting both in urban centers like Baghdad, and in rural areas as well.

France, Russia and China, collectively called for an end to the sanctions regime in Iraq, noting that oil revenues would be necessary to rebuild the country. They expressed caution over the lifting of sanctions, however, as the embargo was linked with United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for disarmament of Iraq. As such, there was a renewed appeal -- by various countries, the last functioning set of United Nations weapons inspectors, and

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the United Nations itself -- for the return of weapons inspections to Iraq. Most parties agreed that without independent international verification of the weapons inspections process, there would be a massive credibility chasm. While the United Kingdom was more amenable to the return of the United Nations weapons inspectors, as well as a generally significant role for the international body in a post-war Iraq, the United States has not been keen on the involvement of the United Nations in any manner.

Nevertheless, the United Nations was to meet on the matter and Chief Weapons Inspector, Hans Blix, would testify before the international body. Thus far, there has been no discovery of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and no such weapons were used during the war that led to the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein's government of Iraq.

Meanwhile, the former diplomat and terrorism expert, Paul Bremer, arrived in the Iraqi capital Baghdad after a brief visit to the southern city of Basra. Bremer's arrival in Iraq made him the most senior civilian administrator; he was charged with heading Iraq's political transition. Contradicting earlier announcements about a quick transition of power to Iraqis, Bremer said that the United States would control Iraq for some time. Presumably, the priority would be the stabilization of Iraq rather than a quick transfer of power. For its part, the United States said that it had not yet been clearly established that it was the "occupying power" of Iraq, as described by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The United States also submitted a new resolution to the United Nations intended to suspend sanctions, transition jurisdiction over the Iraqi "oil for food program," and generally lend legitimacy to the invasion of Iraq. The resolution was passed, despite misgivings by countries who opposed the war in Iraq.

In a new operation dubbed "Desert Scorpion," thousands of United States troops intensified the hunt for fighters they believe to be loyalists of ousted Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein. The operation, which began in June 2003, involved raids on towns and villages in central Iraq. The operation emerged in the wake of a spate of attacks on United States forces by Iraqis. During the same time period, more than 100 Iraqis were reportedly killed during raids by United States forces on suspected militia in Balad. The raids were part of an operation code named "Peninsula Strike."

Since the end of the war in April, United States forces in Iraq faced violent resistance in some areas of Iraq. There were a number of violent protests, regular attacks against United States forces, and occasional acts of sabotage against pipelines. In some cases, rocket-propelled grenades were hurled at forces, while in other cases, there were suicide bombings and sniper fire.

In late June 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq announced the establishment of a new Iraqi army in late June 2003. The new army of only 40,000 would be significantly smaller than the now-disbanded Iraqi army of approximately 250,000. The CPA has stated that Iraq under the former Ba'ath Party regime had been terribly "over militarized" and new institutions and forces would have to be formed instead. New army recruits would be trained by United States forces, however, not all applicants would be welcome. Apparently, allies of the former Ba'ath regime would be banned from applying for entry into the new army.

Transitioning Iraq's massive army into a smaller incarnation meant that most of the former army's fighting force would not continue their careers in the military service. Professional soldiers from the disbanded army would be given monthly payments, while conscripts would each be given a single compensation payment. Any soldiers affiliated with the former Ba'ath regime, however, would not be given any compensation. Whether or not this compensation structure for unemployed soldiers continues to function in Iraq after a transitional government is established was unknown. Disgruntled former soldiers have formed a segment of the population in Iraq opposing the United States presence in their country. Experts criticized the move to disband the army and to leave so many soldiers unemployed in Iraq.

Meanwhile, at the World Economic Forum in Jordan, The United States administrator for Iraq, Paul Bremer, said that Iraqis would create a constitution of their own. A constitutional conference was to be convened in which a new framework for Iraq's political institutions would be established. Bremer noted that sovereignty in Iraq could not exist



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without elections or on the basis of the existing Iraqi constitution. Bremer also said that Iraq's vast oil revenues would be directly and evenly distributed to the people of Iraq. Bremer said that oil revenues would be used to formulate a "human social safety net," which would be used to help transition Iraq into a free-market economy.

In a related development, Iraq held its inaugural meeting of the country's new governing council on July 13, 2003. The meeting signified Iraq's first major step toward autonomy in the aftermath of the war, and following several months of coalition rule. The council would function as a predecessor to a new sovereign and democratic government. The council would have the authority to appoint and/or remove cabinet ministers, draft the budget and create a new constitution. Still, it would exist under the aegis of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). For that reason, some observers referred to the structure and system as being similar to that of a constitutional monarchy, in which the crown ratifies legislation and certifies policies that are developed.

Included in the new council were several representatives from the Shi'a communities. The Shi'a representatives decided to participate in the new council at the last minute, presumably opting to be engaged in the political process of Iraq, rather than be left out altogether. Shi'ites comprise about 60 percent of the total Iraqi population and hold over half the seats in the council. Other groups in the council included Kurdish organizations, however, almost all the remaining seats in the council are held by exile groups.

Also in July 2003, the United States announced the deaths of two sons of Saddam Hussein. In order to preclude doubt about this claim, the pictures of the bodies said to be Uday Hussein and Qusay Hussein were publicized in the media. The publication of the photographs and film footage garnered criticism. For the United States, their intent was to prove that the two sons of Saddam Hussein had, in fact, died. The United States was hoping that the reported deaths of the two Hussein sons would help ease the fears of Iraqis that the regime would return to power. As well, two of Saddam Hussein's daughters went into exile in Jordan.

The apparent deaths of the two Hussein sons did not significantly changed the climate within Iraq, although the number of Iraqi informants supplying information about the possible location of Saddam Hussein has increased. United States Joint Chief of Staff General Richard Meyers promised that the capture of the ousted Iraqi leader would happen in due course.

In August 2003, following a spate of attacks on Iraq's oil pipeline and infrastructure, and as concerns about the sabotage increased, the United States' administration in Iraq decided to double the number of guards around oil installations and other key facilities. The guards would likely be Iraqis, however, they would work under the aegis of a private security company contracted for reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

There were about 5,000 guards protecting the pipeline from Kirkuk in Iraq to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The pipeline accounts for up to 40 percent of Iraq's oil production. In addition to attacks on oil installations, there was also an attack on a water line in Baghdad, a fire at a sewage treatment plant, and a mortar attack on the Abu Gharib prison, which left six Iraqis dead and 59 injured. These attacks were predicted to affect the economic developments in Iraq. United States administrator for Iraq Paul Bremer said that attack on the pipeline would likely cost \$7 million a day.

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Meanwhile, as reconstruction efforts were marred by such acts of sabotage, international media rights groups were calling for an inquiry into the death of a Reuters cameraman, Mazen Dana, who was apparently shot by United States forces in Iraq. The cameraman was filming coverage of the prison where six Iraqis were killed (aforementioned). United States authorities said that the troops mistook the Dana's camera for a rocket propelled grenade launcher, whereas another journalist on the ground claimed that the troops were made aware of the fact that they were in the area filming and reporting events. Regardless, media rights organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF), as well as the head of Reuters, Tom Glocer, have all called for the "most comprehensive investigation" into the killing of Dana.

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In other developments, Iraq anticipated the resumption of crude oil exports as early as mid-June 2003. The issue of Iraq's debt was also be a primary concern when the world's G8 nations met for a summit in France; the United States advocated debt relief for Iraq by Iraq's creditors.

With the situation on the ground garnering much media attention, and with the price of operating in Iraq estimated by the United States at close to \$4 billion per month, coalition forces approached other countries for assistance in peacekeeping and in terms of financial assistance. India and Russia both said they would not be able to help militarily -- even in terms of peacekeeping activities -- without a United Nations mandate. No progress was made on the issue of debt forgiveness or substantial financial contributions aimed at reconstructing Iraq.

As well, the International Atomic Energy Agency returned to Iraq for the first time since the start of military activities in Iraq. They were charged with examining and verifying reports of looting at nuclear sites.

Questions arose about the veracity of certain aspects of the intelligence on Iraq. Although the CIA head and other officials took responsibility for the inclusion of a spurious claim regarding an Iraqi attempt to buy uranium from Niger, the issue of deception and the lack of credible evidence in the lead up to the war caused a drop in popular support.

Attacks against United States soldiers in Iraq became an almost-daily occurrence, and troop morale was reported to be decreasing as certain units, such as the 3rd Infantry Division, were told their stay in Iraq would be extended. Families of troops began to express dismay at the situation.

Since the official end of combat in May, over 50 United States troops were killed in various guerilla-style attacks by hostile factions. The claim that the attacks were carried out by "Saddam loyalists" began losing steam. New information, according to Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez in Iraq, suggested sophisticated orchestration of attacks. As such, the blame began switching to the arena of "foreign terrorists." Other observers suggested there was a resistance movement in Iraq operating in opposition to the country's occupation by coalition forces. Although not confirmed, United States administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer said that the Ansar-al-Islam terrorist group, which is linked to al-Qaida, might become more active in Iraq. A group now known as the Iraqi Resistance said on Al-Jazeera that it had no connection to Saddam Hussein and that it would continue to oppose coalition occupation. Three other previously unknown groups -- the White Banners, Muslim Youth, and Mohammed's Army -- also disseminated similar messages on the Arabic media channel.

Observers on the ground warned that regular Iraqi people would quickly grow tired of the search raids across Baghdad, which often affect daily life and result in the deaths of civilians. Task forces have been carrying out raids across the city in search for loyalists of the former regime. Their tactics, however, have been described as "heavy handed" by reporters and local Baghdadis. The deaths of five civilians -- witnessed by neighbors -- in the Mansur district by coalition forces has only fueled this perception. Troops from the task force, however, said they were fired upon first.

Fuel shortages and power outages led to popular unrest in Basra, resulting in several days of violent protests. A demonstrator and security guard were killed in the demonstrations, while four United States soldiers and one journalist were injured in guerrilla attacks. One soldier was reported to have been found dead in his bed, however, the cause of death was unknown. Earlier, violent altercations between British troops and about 1,000 residents resulted in several injuries.

In terms of larger acts of sabotage and terrorism, in mid-2003, a car bomb killed 19 people when it exploded at the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad.

Then, on Aug. 19, 2003, a truck bomb exploded at the United Nations headquarters at the Canal Hotel in Iraq. The explosion killed at least 23 people, including the United Nations Envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello -- a native Brazilian. Several people were thought to be trapped in the rubble. The attack was the most devastating in the 58-year history of the international body. The United States accused loyalists of the ousted regime of Saddam Hussein for the attack as well as others. Transnational terrorist groups, such as al-Qaida, as well as Ansar al-Islam, were also discussed as possible groups responsible for the attack. Nevertheless, the news agency Reuters,

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as well as an Arabic television station Al Arabiya, both reported that a previously unknown group called the "Armed Vanguard of the Second Mohammed Army" took responsibility for the bombing and promised further acts of violence against foreigners in Iraq.

Discussions about how to increase security began just as the United Nations humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, Ramiro Lopes da Silva, was appointed by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, to succeed the Viera de Mello.

The body of slain envoy, Sergio Viera de Mello, was returned to his home country of Brazil to lay in state draped in the Brazilian and United Nations flags. At a private memorial service attended by the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and Brazilian President Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva, Viera de Mello was praised as global hero and a champion of peace. Several Brazilian senators called for Viera de Mello to receive the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously, while Iraq's Governing Council called for the establishment of a monument in his memory.

By October 2003, the UN's presence in Iraq had been scaled back, with almost all staff removed from Baghdad. The decision was made on the basis on an increasingly disturbing security situation in the country's capital city.

Several rockets fired and hit the Rashid hotel in Iraq's capital city of Baghdad on Oct. 26, 2003. Using a van with a trailer, a rocket launcher was disguised as a generator and moved close to the hotel. Then, a timing device set off the rockets. The hotel, used by United States and other coalition officials, has been one of the most heavily guarded buildings in Baghdad. A United States colonel was killed and 17 people were injured, including American, British, Czech, Italian, Indian and Nepalese nationals. United States Deputy Defense Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, escaped the attacks unscathed. A day later, a car bomb exploded outside the Red Cross building in Central Baghdad. Several other blasts were reported throughout Baghdad, including four police stations. More than 34 people were reported to have been killed in the blasts.

At the start of November 2003, 18 soldiers were killed and 21 were wounded when a Chinook helicopter was shot down near Fallujah. The incident marked the greatest loss of American lives in a single day since March 23, 2003 when 28 soldiers were killed in fighting across Iraq, 18 of whom died in a single incident in Nassiriya. Within the town of Fallujah, a bomb on the side of the road killed two United States civilian contactors. In Baghdad, a United States soldier was killed when a bomb was detonated as he drove by.

Still, the biggest news in months was to break at the close of 2003. On Dec. 14, 2003, Saddam Hussein, the ousted leader of Iraq, was reported to be in United States custody, having being found in a "spider hole" close to a mud hut near his familial town of Tikrit. The ousted Iraqi leader was found with a pistol; there were also conflicting reports about the fact that he had possession of \$750,000. Although some media reports said he had been found by United States forces, other reports stated that Kurdish forces had been first to locate the ousted Iraqi leader.

Upon being discovered, Saddam Hussein offered no resistance and surrendered after identifying himself as the President of the Republic of Iraq. Later, the former president was shown on television broadcasts as he was being examined by an American military doctor. He appeared weary and disheveled, and to have grown a beard.

United States officials said Hussein refused to provide any intelligence information. Still, several media outlets cited a United States intelligence official in Iraq who stated that when Saddam Hussein was asked if his government had weapons of mass destruction, the ousted Iraqi leader replied: "No, of course not. The U.S. dreamed them up itself to have a reason to go to war with us."

Meanwhile, United States President George Bush promised that Saddam Hussein would "face the justice he denied to millions." The United States president, however, did not provide details about either the type the trial that might ensue or its possible venue. For its part, the Iraqi Governing Council said it wanted Saddam Hussein to be tried by Iraqi judges within Iraq. Human right groups, however, said that an international tribunal, without the possibility of the death penalty, would be preferable to an Iraqi trial.

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Even as news of Saddam Hussein's capture spread across the globe, violence in Iraq was ongoing. At least 17 people died and 30 were wounded after a car bomb exploded at an Iraqi police station in Khalidiyah, about 35 miles (60 kilometers) west of Baghdad.

A week after Saddam Hussein's capture, there was an ambush on the coalition headquarters; the head of the United States-led coalition, Paul Bremer, escaped unhurt. Days later, another oil pipeline was sabotaged by insurgents.

## Developments in Early 2004

On March 8, 2004, the Iraqi Governing Council signed an interim constitution that was to remain in place until a permanent one was finalized by the end of 2005.

However, within hours, Iraq's top Shiite cleric issued a fatwa religious ruling condemning the document -- leaving some question as to whether the interim constitution was indeed final. Still, the United States called the signing a "diplomatic victory" with United States President Bush describing the event as a "historic milestone" that moved the Muslim country toward sovereignty and democratic elections.

The charter included a 13-article bill of rights that was designed to protect freedom of speech and free choice of religion. The document also stipulated the relationship between citizens and the government.

The constitution was touted as the most liberal in the Arab world and outlined the shape of a parliament and presidency as well as a federal structure for the country. It also enshrined Islam as one of the bases of law.

An interim body was to assume sovereignty from the coalition forces in Iraq on June 30, 2004. That body was to prepare for direct elections for a transitional national assembly no later than Jan. 31, 2005.

The transitional national assembly will draft a permanent constitution, which will be put to a national referendum by no later than Oct. 15, 2005. Two-thirds of the voters in any three provinces will have the power to veto the permanent constitution. A general election is scheduled to take place by Dec. 15, 2005.

Also in March 2004, Iraq's interim Public Works Minister Noreen Mustafa al-Burwari escaped an assassination attempt in Mosul in the northern part of the country. Burwari, who is of Kurdish background and the only woman in cabinet, was unhurt after gunmen opened fire on her convoy while her driver and bodyguards were killed, according to various media reports.

In early April 2004, United States forces began an offensive against various targets which had become hotbeds of violent revolt. One target was al Shuala, a Shi'a district, while another was the Sunni town of Fallujah where four American contractors were brutally killed. A third area was the district of Sadr City. Meanwhile, clashes were reported in Amara, Najaf and Nassiriya. British authorities reported that the governor's office had been taken over in Basra in what was described as a "peaceful sit-in." The violent resistance among the Shi'a was led by a radical cleric Moqtada Sadr who had been a vocal critic of the occupation of Iraq. One of Sadr's newspapers was shut down on the basis that it was inciting violence and one of his top aides was also arrested. United States authorities said that Sadr and his followers placed themselves outside the law. They also warned that the uprising would not be tolerated and that a strong show of military power would be needed. Several coalition fighters and scores of Iraqis were killed in bloody confrontations.

By mid-April 2004, a fragile cease-fire appeared to be in effect in Fallujah following weeks of bloody confrontations. As many as 70 coalition forces were killed in the week of April 12 while up to 600 Iraqis were reported dead. Although U.S. officials claimed Iraqi fighters constituted the bulk of the casualties, international news agencies such as the BBC reported that the deaths included civilians. The chaos in Fallujah continued when one of Saddam Hussein's generals returned to that city with approximately 200 Iraqi peacekeepers on April 30. General Jasim Saleh's arrival in Fallujah occurred among conflicting reports that he was given control of the conflict-ridden city.

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In May 2004, a car bomb exploded close to the perimeter of the enforced "green zone" of Baghdad close to coalition headquarters, killing the head of the Iraqi Governing Council -- Ezzedine Salim. Several others were also killed or wounded in the attack. There were conflicting reports about who was responsible and it was unknown as to if Salim was the target of the attack.

Ghazi Ajil al-Yawer from the northern city of Mosul was appointed as Salim's successor.

Complicating the situation on the ground were reports by coalition troops that an artillery round with the nerve gas sarin was found. Reports also stated that a small amount of the agent was dispersed.

Soon thereafter, charges were levied that scores of people were killed by United States forces following wedding celebrations in the village of Makr al-Deeb, a desert area close to the Syrian border. United States officials insisted it was responding to hostile fire and had targeted foreign fighters. United States officials also said there was no evidence of a wedding but rather they had turned up evidence of cash and munitions. Local Iraqis, however, recounted a very different scenario to journalists, saying that after the wedding had ended and people had retired for the night, a bombing raid was launched, ultimately killing 40 people including 10 children.

With two conflicting versions of what happened emerging, a videotape broadcast by the Associated Press Television News appeared to show "before-and-after footage" of the situation. The videotape spliced together footage that apparently took place during a wedding celebration and footage taken after a bombing raid by United States forces. The footage in the videotape apparently showed faces of victims and survivors of the bombing raid consistent with previous footage of participants at a wedding celebration.

Meanwhile, United States forces were under fire as a result of reports and incriminating photographs of Iraqi detainees being abused in ways that, if proved true, would be in violation of the Geneva Convention and could technically be classified as torture. United States officials expressed dismay about the disturbing reports and photographs but asserted that the alleged cases did not constitute "systematic abuse" and reflected only the actions of a few. Amnesty International, however, claimed it had uncovered a "pattern of torture" and called for an independent investigation.

Amid this backdrop, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he expected the United Nations Security Council to authorize a multinational force for Iraq. Whether or not this authorization would actually translate into a greater contribution of troops from the international community was unknown.

### New Iraqi Government

In late May 2004, Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawer (a Sunni) was selected to fill the ceremonial position of president in Iraq.

His selection was made after an imbroglio emerged surrounding the composition of a new Iraqi government which was scheduled to assume power on June 30. Indeed, Iraqi leaders angrily accused the United States of trying to install its own preference -- a former foreign minister, Adnan Pachachi -- despite their opposition. When Paul Bremer, the head of coalition governing forces in Iraq, threatened to veto any other appointment, Pachachi was named to the post. Faced with the reality that he commanded insufficient support among fellow council members, however, he went on the decline the position which later went to Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawer.

Earlier, Iyad Allawi (a Shi'ite) was named as the new Iraqi prime minister. Media reports suggested that Allawi had been chosen to lead Iraq because of his capacity to deal with the country's dire security situation. In a statement that may have provided a hint to a negotiated settlement allowing United States-led troops to stay in Iraq, Allawi said that his country would need assistance from multinational forces to help defeat "the enemies of Iraq." Since being named as the new prime minister, Allawi presented a 30-member cabinet.

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Since the appointment of the new president, prime minister and the cabinet, the Governing Council decided to dissolve itself immediately rather than remain in office until the transfer of sovereignty to the new government. The United States-led occupation would nonetheless remain in power until the June 30 handover. These political developments, however, did nothing to abate the violence in Iraq with a spate of attacks since the political appointments were made.

In June 2004, the United Nations envoy to Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, said the United States would have to change its approach to Iraqi sovereignty, noting that complete power and control must be handed over to the interim government. Brahimi's comments followed the emergence of a new version of a Security Council resolution on Iraq from the United States and the United Kingdom. In addition to stipulating that elections be set for the following year, the new draft resolution states expressly that the United States-led multi-national force will have to leave if so requested by the Iraqi government. Given the remarks of Iraq's newly-appointed leadership, it was unlikely that the multinational force would in fact be asked to leave, however the provision for this item had been the source of consternation among Security Council members. The draft resolution also set forth an expiration date on the mandate of the multinational force following elections, but at a date no later than Jan. 31, 2005. The resolution went on to be adopted by the Security Council.

Meanwhile, Brahimi cautioned that further discussion on the role and command of troops was needed. Brahimi also clarified his earlier description of Paul Bremer as the "dictator of Iraq" by explaining that it had been a "tongue-in-cheek" remark.

In a surprise development, power was handed to the interim Iraqi government two days ahead of schedule on June 28, 2004 instead of June 30, 2004. Through the promulgation of the Transitional Administrative Law, the Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA) ceased to exist. Indeed, CPA Chief Administrator Paul Bremer left Iraq as soon as the formal handover was completed. By moving up the date of the handover of power, authorities were hoping to prevent disruption or violence by insurgents.

Although the new Iraq was described as "fully sovereign," in reality its sovereignty would be limited in scope, given the fact that it cannot create or amend basic law of the land. Moreover, the occupation by the United States-led forces would, in practice, continue. Known as a "multinational force" (MNF), it would have continuing responsibility for the country's security conditions, although its authority would be exercised in concert with a national security council, headed by a representative of the interim Iraqi government. Further complicating the situation was the fact that the new interim Iraqi government, like the previous Iraqi Governing Council, was an unelected body which was effectively installed by the United States authorities. Violence and kidnappings continued to plague Iraq since its movement to qualified sovereignty.

Note: The new United States Ambassador to Iraq was John Negroponte.

## Developments in late 2004

In August 2004, a report on terrorism by the British House of Commons concluded that Iraq had become a "battleground" for al-Qaida and that there were too few foreign troops on the ground in that country. It noted that Muslim states in the Middle East should be encouraged to send forces to Iraq since the country was unable to deal with security issues on its own. The chairman of the foreign relations committee concluded that the Iraq war may well have increased the threat of terrorism, at least in the short term.

Other findings of the report included concern over the sharing of intelligence and alleged human rights abuses as regards Iraq. It also expressed the view that the credibility of the United Kingdom had been compromised because of the inability to restore basic services, such as water and power, in Iraq. The report also made note of the situation in neighboring Iran where burgeoning nuclear activities might well contribute to the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

Also in August 2004, Salem Chalabi, the head of the special tribunal charged with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, was charged with murder for the death of Haithem Fadhil, director-general of the Iraqi finance ministry. Away from Iraq

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at the time when the judge issued the arrest warrant, Salem Chalabi told the media that murder charges against him were bogus and that he had become the target of a smear campaign. He also said that although he wished to respond to the charges, he had feared for his life and was seeking assurances of his safety before he would consider returning to Iraq.

While Salem Chalabi was reported to be in discussions with the Iraqi government to negotiate his return, the United Kingdom had not (yet) agreed to extradite him. A judge also issued an arrest warrant for Salem Chalabi's uncle and the head of the Iraqi National Congress, Ahmed Chalabi. In Ahmed Chalabi's case, the charges were focused on counterfeit money operations. Like his nephew, Ahmed Chalabi also denied the charges. He also said he wished to return to Iraq, from his vacation in Iran, to face the accusations.

Meanwhile, on the ground in Iraq, Iraqi **militant** Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr rejected the Iraqi interim government's demand for his forces to leave Najaf. The demand came after several days of violence and fighting in the holy city. The resumption of fighting marked the abandonment of a cease-fire. In addition to clashed between **militants** and security forces, there were reports of car bombs. For his part, the **militant** cleric al-Sadr said he would fight on and defend Najaf "until my last drop of blood." He also said he wished that his fighters no longer be called the Mehdi Army; instead, he wished them to be referred to as "defenders of the city." There were no conclusive number of casualties available.

At the Imam Ali shrine, a delegation of notable Iraqi dignitaries hoping to bring an end to the violence were thwarted when al-Sadr refused to meet with them. Indeed, fighting intensified around the area of the sacred shrine when **United States** forces went on the offensive by dropping bombs on a cemetery where al-Sadr's militia had reportedly taken up positions. The militia of al-Sadr responded with machine gun fire as well as mortar. Ironically, the dignitaries seeking to end the violence had been sent by religious and political leaders at Iraq's national conference. The national conference in Baghdad, where delegates were charged with selecting a 100-member Interim National Council, has been overshadowed by on-going violence in Najaf and several other parts of the country. (Note: The Interim National Council might be viewed as the precursor to an elected parliament following January 2005 elections.)

In other developments, moderate Shi'a cleric Al-Sistani traveled to the United Kingdom for heart treatment. Upon his return, he successfully managed to negotiate peace with al-Sadr. His success, while welcomed, arrived only after a burst of violence in Najaf left several people dead. Moreover, it raised questions about the effectiveness of the newly-installed government in dealing with such challenges. The effectiveness of the Shi'a cleric made clear that his voice and actions held more authority and legitimacy -- at least among some communities of Iraqis.

Iraq continued to experience much violence and bloodshed in the latter half of 2004. In August, over 1,100 **United States** troops were wounded, more than any preceding month since coalition forces invaded Iraq. The **United States** also surpassed a death toll of 1000 service men and women. Many foreigners remain as hostages, and assassination attempts continue targeting prominent Iraqis. In addition, many Iraqis are being killed by either coalition troops or insurgent militias.

With fighting raging in multiple towns, there were increased American air strikes on the rebel-held city of Fallujah resulting in the deaths of civilians and journalists. Baghdad was also in turmoil as fighting intensified around the coalition-held Green Zone and the impoverished suburb of Sadr City. Casualties continued to rise and there seemed to be no end in sight to the chaos.

In a related matter, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the mastermind behind much of the violence in Iraq issued a statement in October 2004. In the statement, he declared his allegiance to the terrorist group, al-Qaida, which is thought to be responsible for several bloody attacks across the globe, including the September 11, 2001, attacks in the **United States**. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi said that he was in agreement with al-Qaida in terms of strategy and called for unity against "the enemies of Islam."

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By December 2004, Shi'a Muslim cities, such as Karbala and Najaf, suggested that insurgents were trying to incite sectarian conflict.

## Developments in 2005

Violence continued through the start of 2005 following the election and the selection of new leadership.

In April 2005, a gruesome discovery was made in the River Tigris when the bodies of up to 50 people were found. The discovery came a few days after a report surfaced about dozens of Shi'ites having been taken hostage by Sunnis in the town of Madain. Also, in the town of Hadith, close to Baghdad, around 19 soldiers were found dead in a football stadium, reportedly having been killed "execution style." Soon thereafter, at least 16 people were killed in a duet of bombings in a market near a mosque in a Shi'a area of Baghdad. In a similar double bombing of a police academy in Tikrit, at least six people were killed and 33 were wounded. Meanwhile, up to 50 people were wounded in explosions near the Ahl al-Beit mosque in Shula, north of the Iraqi capital. During the same period, bombings continued in Baghdad.

While security forces have been the primary targets of insurgents in the past, Shi'ite civilians have increasingly been the victims of violent attacks. Attacks on foreigners, particularly Americans, have also been ongoing as exemplified by the downing of a civilian Mi-8 helicopter in which all 11 passengers and crew were killed, including a survivor who was shot to death on video by insurgents.

On April 20, 2005, outgoing Iraqi interim leader Iyad Allawai narrowly escaped death after an assassination attempt on his life. A suicide bomber attacked his convoy as he was traveling home from a meeting.

In the first week of May 2005, at least 16 people were killed in a car bomb attack in a market south of Baghdad. In Tikrit, several police officers died in a bombing there. A suicide attack in the Kurdish region of Iraq left at least 25 people dead and more than 30 injured at the start of May 2005. As well, a series of car bombs in Baghdad at the start of May resulted in the deaths of scores of persons. Separate attacks in the same period elsewhere in Iraq left several policemen and civilians dead.

Meanwhile, a videotape emerged with another apparent kidnapping victim -- this time an Australian citizen. The Australian government dispatched a team for the purpose of trying to secure his release. In another development, Iraqi police said they had arrested some individuals in connection with the kidnapping and murder of British aid worker Margaret Hassan.

Around the same period, eight United States soldiers were killed bringing the total number of American forces killed in Iraq up to 1600.

In May 2005, United States forces launched a military offensive called Operation Matador in the western part of Iraq, aimed at clearing the region which is believed to be a hotbed of foreign fighters allied with al-Qaida extremists and local insurgents. As the fighting between the two sides intensified in this part of Iraq, a mass exodus of civilian Iraqis from that area ensued. Aid workers from the Iraqi Red Crescent Society said that in the border town of Qaim, up to 1,000 families had been displaced when they fled the area, trying to escape the violence. Official reports suggested that 100 insurgents had been killed in the offensive by United States troops.

Elsewhere in Iraq, the upsurge in violence since the Iraqi election showed no signs of abating. As mid-May 2005 approached, there were reports of a car bomb attack in the town of Baquba, the killing of a policeman during patrols in western Baghdad, the killing of several soldiers at a checkpoint in Hilla, the ambush of an interior ministry official and a roadside bomb targeting a United States convoy en route to Baghdad's airport, double bombings at a market in the capital and more United States troops killed in clashes. .



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On May 16, 2005, a stream of reports about the discovery of slain bodies -- around 50 -- in areas around Baghdad were broadcast in the media. Interestingly, insurgent leader and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr emerged on that same day to deliver an incendiary verbal attack against the presence of foreign troops in Iraq, presumably for the purpose of sparking further violence.

At the close of May 2005, Iraqi security forces commenced plans for an offensive, called Operation Lightning, against insurgents in Baghdad. An estimated 40,000 security forces made up of soldiers and police established checkpoints and sealed roads at entry and exit points throughout the city. The operation was launched to deal with an upsurge in attacks by insurgents in that month, which left over 600 people dead.

In late May 2005, several multinational and Iraqi troops had been killed in Baghdad. Reports noted that three people were killed and 20 were injured after a car bomb exploded in western Baghdad, while another car bomb just south of the Iraqi capital left two police officers dead. A suicide bombing close to the oil ministry resulted in the deaths of two people and injuries to six. Attacks were reported elsewhere in the country, including Amara where a British soldier was killed.

June 2005 fared no better as violence continued. At least 35 people were killed in three separate suicide attacks in the vicinity of the northern city of Mosul in Iraq on June 26, 2005. Officials said that 15 people were killed in an attack on a police station in the central area of Mosul. Then, another 15 people died when a bomber attacked civilian laborers lining up outside a military base near the city. As well, several policemen among those killed in an attack on the very hospital where some of the casualties from the other bombings had been taken. In late June 2005, there were other attacks in Samarra and Kirkuk, the killing of the deputy police chief in Baghdad, as well as several other deaths of United States soldiers and Iraqi civilians across the country.

In July 2005, the Egyptian envoy to Iraq, Ihab al-Sherif, was abducted by extremists. Efforts by the Egyptian government went into high gear as the authorities in Cairo and Baghdad worked to arrange his release, while also pleading with kidnappers to treat him as an Arab patriot. Speculation abounded that his abduction was motivated by Egypt's intent to designate Sherif as the ambassador to Iraq. Weeks after the envoy had been abducted, reports emerged that he had been killed. It was believed that extremists were attempting to short-circuit efforts by Arab countries to consolidate ties with Baghdad.

In another development, an aide to Iraqi Shi'a spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in July 2005. Analysts speculated that the incident was orchestrated to provoke a response from the country's majority Shi'a community.

During that very period, a suicide bomber killed at least 20 people outside a special police recruiting center in the capital city of Baghdad. As well, a suicide bombing took place outside the offices of Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari's Shi'a Islamic Dawa Party.

A week later, another attack outside an army recruitment center in Baghdad by a suicide bomber left more than 40 people dead and scores injured. According to reports on the ground, the suicide bomber walked up to the queue of young men waiting to sign up for military duty and detonated the device strapped to his body. Such queues have increasingly been targeted by militants and as such, critics have asked why potential recruits for the much-needed military have been left to face such jeopardy. It is believed that the dearth of employment for young people in Iraq has meant that many are willing to deal with the risks and join the security forces anyway. Indeed, a full 50 percent of the workforce is estimated to be unemployed.

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In mid-July 2005, waves of suicide attacks around the Sunni triangle region surrounding Baghdad left dozens dead and scores injured. Elsewhere in Iraq --in Kirkuk and Mosul specifically, other suicide bomb attacks left several more people dead.

In yet another incident, a gunman apparently killed eight members of a family while they slept in a Baladiyat neighborhood in Baghdad. There was no explanation for the attack other than to spur sectarian violence since the family was Shi'a Muslim.

Sectarian violence was also believed to have been the cause of a suicide bombing close to a mosque in Musayyib, which killed 90 people and injured 156. The town's inhabitants were mixed, although predominantly Shi'a. That particular attack bore the rather dubious distinction of being the worst one since a massive car bomb in February killed at least 114 people in the town of Hilla.

In a separate development, former Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, was formally indicted.

A week after a suicide bomber blew up a tanker killing close to 100 people, a suicide bomber blew up a lorry laden with explosives at a police station. At least 25 people were believed to have been killed and more than 30 people were injured. That attack took place in the Mashtal area of Baghdad.

Also in mid-2005, Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, Samir Sumaidaie, demanded an inquiry into what he characterized as the "cold-blooded murder" of his 21-year old cousin by United States marines. Sumaidaie claimed that his cousin was shot and killed as he helped marines carrying out searches in his village within the volatile Anbar province. In a letter outlining the details of what happened, he stated: "All indications point to a killing of an unarmed innocent civilian - a cold blooded murder." In response, the United States military said that the allegations of the unprovoked killing roughly corresponded with "an incident involving coalition forces on that day and in that general location." United States officials promised a full investigation.

Meanwhile, the international media reported that hundreds of tons of explosives were missing from a military installation in Iraq. The National Security Advisor of the United States had been advised of this development some time before it became public knowledge. In 2003, the International Atomic Agency had warned of the dangers surrounding the explosives, were they not secured properly.

By mid 2005, in an interview on American television, United States Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned that it might be years before the insurgency in Iraq was defeated. In his interview, Rumsfeld said that the battle would eventually be won against insurgents by Iraqi forces, rather than by coalition troops. Rumsfeld also admitted that United States officials had held talks with the leaders of the insurgency. His statements came after a bruising congressional hearing on the matter of Iraq, and in the wake of contradictory statements made by Vice President Dick Cheney who claimed that the insurgency in Iraq was in its "last throes."

On the ground in the United States, opinion polls showed a drastic drop in support for the United States-led invasion of Iraq. In fact, according to a constellation of polls, a vast majority of Americans polls said that they no longer supported the war and did not believe it had been worth the costs.

Across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, the publication of an internal document evoked further challenges to the stated rationale for going to war as a last resort to deal with weapons of mass destruction. The infamous "Downing Street Memo" appeared to show that United States President George Bush had planned to attack Iraq months ahead of the public discussion on the matter in late 2002. At that time, Bush claimed that he had not decided

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whether or not to wage war in Iraq. The memo, which was dated July 23, 2002, cited British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw saying the decision to take military action had already been made by Bush, even though the timing had yet been decided. A second memo, which was also published by the same British newspaper, suggested that British cabinet ministers were compelled to find the means to make the war in Iraq legal. Back in the United States, Democrats, led by Congressman John Conyers, were hoping to call attention to the matter, which had received little coverage in the mainstream media.

In late August 2005, a journalist from the news agency Reuters was killed by United States forces in Iraq.

Soundman Waleed Khaled died and cameraman Haider Kadhem was wounded in the incident. Reuters Global Managing Editor David Schlesinger called for an impartial investigation of the incident. Schlesinger said, "A brave journalist has lost his life and another has been wounded and detained when their only actions were as professionals reporting the facts and images of the war. We are deeply saddened at this loss."

In mid-September 2005, Iraq was plagued by some of the bloodiest violence since the end of the United States-led war in 2003. More than 200 people were killed in the space of three days, and close to 700 were reported to have been injured.

In the worst incident on Sept. 14, 2005, around 180 people were killed when a car bomb exploded in the Shi'a district of Kadhimiya in Baghdad. In a separate incident in the southern Doura district a day later, 16 police commandos were killed when their patrol was attacked. Another 10 police were killed following bomb attacks and gun battles. On Sept. 16, 2004, at least 10 people were killed and more than 20 wounded in a suicide bomb attack outside a Shi'a mosque in the central Iraqi town of Tuz Khurmatu. Across Iraq, other attacks ensued.

A group claiming to be an Iraqi wing of al-Qaida issued a statement on a website saying that it was responding to attacks by United States and Iraqi forces on insurgents in the northern town of Talafar. In another development, al-Qaida affiliate, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, reportedly declared "war against Shi'as in all of Iraq." His declaration was made via an audio tape released on the Internet.

In October 2005, the Iraqi Oil Minister narrowly escaped assassination, and the human rights group, Human Rights Watch, condemned Iraqi insurgents for violating the laws of war by targeting civilians.

Also in October 2005, a military offensive by United States-led forces in Ramadi in western Iraq left 70 people dead. United States officials said that the 70 people who died were militants. Eye witnesses on the ground, however, disputed the claim and said that those who died were civilians.

On Oct. 30, 2005, Ghalib Abdul Mehdi, an aide to Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and brother of Vice-President Adel Abdul Mehdi, was shot dead en route to work in Baghdad. His driver was also killed in the attack. Also in Baghdad, Deputy Trade Minister Qais Dawoud Hassan was wounded by gunmen during an attack on his motorcade. Two of his bodyguards were killed. A day earlier, a bomb killed at least 30 people and wounded dozens more in Howaider, about 35 miles (60 kilometers) north of Baghdad. Ironically, in late October 2005, United States Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that United States and Iraqi forces were destroying the effectiveness of insurgents.

In other developments on the security front, an award-winning journalist for the Guardian newspaper, Rory Carroll, was reported to be missing in mid-October 2005. Speculation abounded that he may have been kidnapped. Carroll, a native of the Republic of Ireland, was later released by his kidnappers. Although the full details of his

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release remained murky, the government of Ireland said that no ransom was paid for Carroll's release. Still, there was speculation about a deal of some sort being struck. The kidnappers were identified by Carroll as "Shi'ite opportunists" rather than Islamic militant factions.

Ongoing violence also continued to strike Iraq by late October. During that period, three explosions at a hotel inhabited by journalists and contractors left around 17 people dead.

In late 2005, there were revelations of secret Interior Ministry prisons. Within their walls, the inmates were discovered living in poor conditions. Some inmates were even assessed as requiring immediate hospitalization as a result of allegations of torture. In a November 2005 interview with the United Kingdom's Observer, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi said that the current level of human rights abuses in Iraq was similar to that of the period under Saddam Hussein's regime. Allawi made the remarks while calling for immediate action on recent allegations of torture. In response, President Jalal Talabani dismissed the charge as "nonsense" and pointed to the number of democratic rights that Iraqis have in the post-Saddam Hussein era. He also said that current abuses could not be compared with the exterminations, evidenced by mass graves, which took place under the regime of the former Iraqi president. Clearly, Shi'as and Kurds, who suffered under the regime of Saddam Hussein, did not take kindly to Allawi's remarks. Nevertheless, his words likely resonated with Sunnis, who have accused the new Iraqi government of torturing detainees. Earlier in November 2005, 170 people were discovered at an Interior Minister detention center -- most of them reportedly suffering from starvation and other forms of abuse.

Meanwhile, four aide workers in Iraq were reportedly abducted in late November 2005. Two of those abducted were apparently Canadians, one was an American and the fourth was British.

## Elections in Early 2005

In the midst of the bloodshed and the tenuous security situation, the Iraqi interim government was preparing for general elections in January 2005. A National Assembly was to be elected and charged with drafting a new constitution, and local administrations for Iraq's 18 provinces were to be balloted. In addition, northern Iraqis were expected to cast ballots for a regional assembly in Kurdistan.

In order to ensure that the elections took place on time, the United Nations had to be able to carry out its role in laying the groundwork. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1546 endorsed the global body's involvement in preparing for the elections, but Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the volatility of the situation limited the presence of United Nations staff on the ground. With these limitations in mind, it remained to be seen if the ongoing violence would abate or if it would continue at its red-hot pace, disorganizing efforts for the completion of the elections.

Indeed, violence by extremist groups aligned with al-Qaida was ongoing. In fact, a report in early 2005 suggested that the United States could not succeed in its efforts in Iraq. The focus by American troops has been on making the Iraqi military into a viable force as this has been seen as the only exit strategy the United States military can count on.

Meanwhile in Iraq, interim authorities were making preparations for the trials of Ba'ath Party members as evidenced by meetings between judges and Saddam Hussein's aides.

By early 2005, a week prior to the scheduled elections, leaders from the majority Shi'a population said that if its political coalition secured victory, it would support the idea of a secular government in the country. This declaration contradicted conventional expectations that a Shi'a government in Iraq would follow the teachings of that particular Islamic sect. It was believed that this stance taken by the Shi'a leadership was intended to assuage the anxieties of both the smaller Sunni Muslim population around Baghdad, as well as the Kurds in the north of the country.

Finally, Iraqis at home and abroad cast their ballots in democratic elections on Jan. 30, 2005. Although most voters appeared jubilant at the prospect of voting in democratic elections, many were also fearful of attacks by extremists determined to disrupt the historic event. Indeed, violent attacks by mortar and gunfire marred the occasion. Still,

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turnout in some areas, such as Mosul in the northern part of the country, was high. Turnout in Sunni areas around Baghdad, however, was low due to anxiety over possible violence. As well, reports were emerging that Christians, located mostly in Kurdish areas, were unable to vote. Early and unofficial returns suggest an overwhelming victory for the Shi'a political factions.

By mid-February 2005, official election results showed that the coalition of Shi'a political blocs had indeed won the election with 48 percent of the 8.5 million votes cast. The Kurdish coalition followed with 26 percent and interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's party secured about 14 percent. The winners of the election will dominate the provisional National Assembly, which will form a government and write the country's constitution.

By the end of February 2005, Ahmed Chalabi, a former favorite of the Pentagon who was later accused of ties to Iran, claimed that he had enough votes to seize the post of prime minister in Iraq.

Initially, he had been the preferred pick of the Bush administration, and particularly, the Pentagon, to head the new Iraq. On the ground in Iraq, however, he was viewed with suspicion because of his favored status among the Americans, and also because of the time he had spent in exile out of the country. Over time, however, relations between Chalabi and the administration soured as allegations surfaced that he had been courting closer ties in Iran. Meanwhile, as he began to speak more openly against the administration, he began to build support among Iraqis at home. His efforts, however, came to halt when he withdrew his name from consideration.

Ultimately, Ibrahim al-Jaafari was chosen to be the new Iraqi head of government and prime minister. Ibrahim al-Jaafari is also head of the Islamic Daawa party, which is part of the Shi'a political alliance.

Known as being a Shi'a moderate with positive ties to Iran, and also reputed to be one of the most well-respected and trusted politicians in Iraq, al-Jaafari is backed by the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani -- the spiritual leader of the majority Shi'ites in Iraq. A confirmation by two-thirds of parliament was yet to occur before the office of the prime minister is officially filled.

In April 2005, the Iraqi parliament picked Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani to be the country's new interim president. Talabani founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and fought for Kurdish rights through most of his life starting as early as his teenage years and the following through the regime of Saddam Hussein to the post-Hussein period. His educational background was in law; however, in 1956 he was forced into hiding as a result of his political activism as the head of the Kurdistan Student Union.

After he was sworn into office on April 7, 2005, Talabani sat as head of state with two vice presidents -- Adel Abdul-Mahdi, a Shi'ite, and Ghazi al-Yawer, a Sunni Arab. He then named Ibrahim al-Jaafari (mentioned above) as prime minister. Talks on the formation of a new constitution were to be completed by August 2005 and a referendum on the constitution was to follow (discussed below).

By October 2005, political blocs were preparing for parliamentary elections to be held on December 15, 2005. Unlike the previous elections to the interim government, Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq's leading Shi'a cleric, said that he would not endorse any political party ahead of the December 2005 election. Instead, a spokesperson for the Grand Ayatollah said that people should vote in accordance with their own beliefs. His lack of endorsement was expected to affect the political prospects for the United Iraqi Alliance -- the ruling Shi'a-led coalition.

### The New Iraqi Constitution

Meanwhile in mid-August 2005, the date upon which the new draft constitution was to be promulgated in Iraq's parliament passed and was extended for another week. Heated discussions between various political factions continued with no conclusive resolution in sight.

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The minority Sunnis said that a federal system for Iraq would not be acceptable, and they also issued concerns about the distribution of resources, including lucrative oil revenues. Meanwhile, Kurdish members of parliament called for an autonomous region within a federated system, as well as a provision for a secession referendum within ten years. As a result, there was no agreement as to what the actual administrative structure of the country might be. For Shi'a members of parliament, the principal issue at stake was the degree to which the Islamic religion would play a role in the new Iraq. Gender issues also presented a challenge with no agreement in the offing on women's rights.

Agreement was, however, reached on the name of the country: Republic of Iraq.

With so many unresolved issues still on the table, the parliament voted to extend the deadline to ensure that sufficient time was provided to form agreements. But a week later, the deadlock was still intact and it remained unknown as to whether or not the new constitution would be ready for parliamentary approval on schedule. Although there were reports that the three main communities of Iraq had bridged some of the chasms dividing them, there was still insufficient consensus upon which the drafting of a constitution could be based.

If the new draft constitution was not ready on time, another extension could have been arranged. Alternatively, parliament could still be dissolved, making the current government into caretaker government and restarting the entire political and constitutional process.

But late on Aug. 22, 2005, ahead of the expiration of the extended deadline, media reports stated that a draft constitution was ready to be put forth. In the document, Iraq has been described as a "republican, parliamentary, democratic and federal" state. The degree and specific nature of the federalism being sought by Kurds and some Shi'ites was not detailed. Presumably, the lack of specificity was intended to act as a type of compromise for Sunni Muslims opposed to Iraq being a federal nation state.

Negotiations were ongoing to acquire Sunni approval on the draft document, rather than submitting it before parliament. In this regard, further extensions were put forth in order to win Sunni approval.

Technically, however, the draft of the constitution could be presented to parliament without concurrence from the Sunnis since the legislative body is dominated by Shi'ites and Kurds.

Such a move, however, would undoubtedly alienate the Sunni population, fire the flames of ethnic and sectarian conflict, and possibly reap deleterious effects in the upcoming ratification of the constitution. Under current regulations, the constitution would be defeated if it is opposed by two-thirds of the voters in three of Iraq's 18 provinces. Because Sunnis are the majority in at least four provinces, they could conceivably defeat the ratification of the constitution. (Note: Following approval by the National Assembly, the new Iraqi constitution was to be ratified in a national referendum scheduled for Oct. 15, 2005.) Indeed, on the eve of the second deadline, Sunnis warned against such a move saying it would only wreak havoc.

By late August 2005, another option was considered. With no agreement on the draft constitution, the document would bypass parliament completely. Instead, it would face ratification or defeat with the Oct. 15 referendum.

Meanwhile, members of parliament in Iraq said that the United States was pressuring them to craft the draft of the constitution by the deadline. Presumably, the United States believed that progress on the constitution would have an effect on the state of stability in Iraq. But a leading Sunni member of the committee, Saleh Mutlak, criticized the United States for applying too much pressure.

By September 2005, violence in Iraq was rampant (as noted above). Iraqi President Jalal Talabani tried to cool sectarian violence by saying that the new draft of the constitution could yet be modified to make it more acceptable to Sunnis. He also said that there should be no timetable set for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq.

At the close of September 2005, Iraqi President and Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani accused Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari of making unilateral decisions in violation of a charter signed by the Kurdish and Shi'a blocs for the purpose of establishing the new government. Talabani also charged that al-Jaafari has been using much of his power as head of government for the purpose of advancing Shi'a interests. With Sunnis set to oppose the new draft constitution set for ratification by referendum, the devolving relations between the Kurds and the Shi'ites heralded damage to the Shi'a-Kurdish alliance.

Iraq voted on its draft constitution on Oct. 15, 2005. Most experts expected that the 14-article draft document would be approved via the referendum since the majority Shi'ite population, as well as the Kurdish minority, were in favor of it. As well, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most influential Shi'ite cleric, compelled Shi'ites to vote "yes" in the constitutional referendum.

Due to specific provisions of the referendum process, a majority voting in favor of the constitution did not guarantee the constitution's passage. The fate of the document rested upon voting in three key provinces with predominantly Sunni Arab populations. If the Sunni Arab population was able to achieve the two-thirds threshold of the "no" vote against the draft constitution in three provinces, then it would be defeated. As a result, the drafting process would have to be restarted after the election of a new parliament at the close of 2005.

Ideally, the constitution has been intended to be a nation building document, drawing together Iraq's Shi'ite majority with the Kurdish and Sunni Arab minorities. As it stood, the draft constitution envisioned Iraq's existence as a federal, parliamentary democracy. Its official languages were to be both Arabic and Kurdish. The official religion was to be Islam, although religious freedoms and equal rights were to be guaranteed. The draft also provided for elections every four years and an independent judiciary.

The drafting process and concomitant negotiations went on for some time and became increasingly difficult, with Sunni Arabs feeling increasingly alienated. Indeed, the bloody insurgency, which has gone on since United States President George W. Bush declared an official end to combat operations, has been led by embittered Sunni Arab factions who oppose the changes in Iraq. They have opposed the ascendancy of the Shi'ite and Kurdish populations, which occurred at the expense of Sunni Arab political influence.

Of particular concern has been the matter of federalism and the possible future formation of Shi'ite and Kurdish quasi-states in the south and north respectively -- areas which have been home to country's energy resources. Such an outcome has evoked fears by Sunni Arabs about the consolidation of political and economic power by the other two groups in Iraq.

Other concerns have centered on the role of Islamic or Shar'iah law in Iraqi government, as well as the status of women.

Not surprisingly, then, there was a fierce "no" vote campaign by the Sunni Arabs to reach the aforementioned two-thirds threshold of the "no" vote in the western Anbar province, the northwest Nineveh province, as well as Salahuddin and Diyala in the north and northeast of the capital city of Baghdad. In most of these areas, although Sunni Arabs are the majority, there are also substantial Shi'ite and Kurdish minorities, making the mission for Sunni Arabs that much more challenging and certainly dependent on high levels of voter turnout. Elsewhere in Iraq, it was expected that the Sunni Arab vote would be split between "yes" and "no" factions. In fact, one Sunni party expressed support for the draft constitution following concessions by Shi'ites and Kurds, which would allow changes to be made in the future. On the other hand, many Sunni parties rejected the document -- with some even characterizing it as the work of "infidels."

Accordingly, if Sunnis failed to deliver high turnout levels in the key provinces due to voter apathy, confusion and bitterness, or even because of fears of bloodshed and violence, then it was quite possible that the requisite two-thirds threshold might not be achieved, and the draft constitution would be approved. Such an end could potentially

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fuel the fires of ongoing violent resistance. Conversely, if the Sunni Arab population manages to drive enough voters to the polls to defeat the constitutional charter, it would signal to the rest of Iraq, and to the world as well, that it is ready to participate in the political process. Such participation, however, would be driven by the demand for better representation within the political system.

Meanwhile, although Kurds were expected to vote in favor of the draft constitution, as noted above, Kurdish leaders questioned the office of the Shi'ite prime minister for attending primarily to the interests of that group exclusively. In their case, although a "yes" vote was anticipated, low voter turnout would suggest diminishing enthusiasm about the idea of being tied to a unified Iraq with Shi'ites at the helm.

On the eve of the referendum, there was an upsurge in violence across Iraq, despite the fact that security had been increased and the country's borders had been sealed. In Baghdad, a bomb exploded just outside the Iraq Islamic Party's office. In Fallujah, the party's office was set on fire by gunmen. In Baiji, the party office was vandalized. As well, power lines were sabotaged in Baghdad leading to a massive electrical blackout in the city. Power lines were also sabotaged between the northern towns of Kirkuk and Beiji leading into the capital city.

After the votes were counted, it seemed as if Iraq's draft constitution would go on to be ratified by the referendum. Initial results suggested that despite their high levels of turnout, minority Sunni Arabs had fallen just short of securing the necessary two-thirds "no" vote in three of Iraq's 18 provinces -- the required provisions for defeating the document's passage. Media reports stated that although the "no" vote had won out in the predominantly Sunni Arab Anbar and Salahuddin provinces, the "yes" votes had gained a slim majority in the other two key provinces of Ninevah and Diyala. In those two provinces, the Sunni Arab majority has not been quite so overwhelming in numbers and so their "no" votes were expected to be mitigated by high support from Kurdish and Shi'ite factions.

Sunni Arab leaders reacted to the news that the constitution had been passed with furor and accused both Shi'ite political parties and United States officials of orchestrating the results. Indeed, after reviewing the referendum results, the country's independent electoral commission acknowledged that there were statistical irregularities at play, which could well indicate fraud. In particular, both turnout levels and actual results were causes for concern. Consequently, the electoral commission said that it would have to carry out an audit before finalizing the referendum results. By the close of October 2005, however, the referendum results were made official and the new draft constitution was passed.

Sheik Abdul-Salam al-Kubaisi, a prominent Sunni cleric, warned that with the passage of the constitution, the dismal security situation in Iraq was destined to get even worse. Nevertheless, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani immediately announced a date -- Dec. 15, 2005 -- for new parliamentary elections. Based on election results at that time, a new government would be formed at the very end of 2005.

## Parliamentary Elections of 2005

Iraq's parliamentary elections began on Dec. 12, 2005, with hospital patients, prisoners and military personnel casting the first sets of ballots. At the Yarmuk hospital in Baghdad, as ballot boxes were brought to patients so that they could vote, one election commission worker, Yousif Ibrahim, said, "They are all looking forward to this process since this will be good for the Iraqi people."

The election process was set to commence among the general population on Dec. 15, 2005, and was expected to take several days. Security across Iraq was tightened in anticipation of the elections with up to 200,000 security forces registering to vote before taking up positions outside of polling stations. Security was a top priority given the antagonism presented by militants, insurgents and terrorist groups, such as al-Qaida, who condemned the elections as a kind of "devilish plot." On an extremist website, a message by such groups was posted as follows:



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"Entering the political process, taking part in the elections or voting is against Islamic laws and our constitution the Koran."

Nevertheless, many Iraqis approached the elections with a sense of jubilation. Soldiers were seen flashing the sign for victory and cheering as they patrolled areas. Indeed, even some Sunni Muslim groups declared their intent to vote in the elections.

In a speech on Iraq, **United States** President George W. Bush lauded the decision by some Sunnis to participate in the democratic process. He acknowledged that the re-integration of the Sunni minority into the Iraqi political landscape was a prime consideration, saying "More Sunnis are involved because they see Iraqi democracy succeeding. They have learned a lesson of democracy: they must participate to have a voice in their nation's affairs." In a speech to the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, Bush also commented on the challenges and struggles involved in Iraq's fledgling democracy noting, "No nation in history has made the transition to a free society without facing challenges, setbacks and false starts." He also promised that, "The year 2005 will be recorded as a turning point in the history of Iraq, the history of the Middle East and the history of freedom." During the question and answer period following the speech, Bush estimated that about 30,000 Iraqis had been killed since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That number was markedly lower than another recent assessment of the Iraqi dead by the British medical journal, the Lancet, which estimated numbers in excess of 100,000.

**United States** Congressman and decorated Vietnam veteran John Murtha responded to Bush's speech during his own news conference in Philadelphia. Murtha had gained notoriety after he called for a withdrawal of **United States** forces from Iraq -- a position strenuously opposed by the Bush administration. In his news conference, Murtha warned that the Bush policy could result in the presence of **United States** troops in Iraq for another 25 years, and throughout a possible civil war. To that end, he said, "We should be redeployed to the periphery and from that periphery we can go back in if it's necessary - not to fight a civil war."

In early 2006, the official results for the parliamentary elections were published as follows:

United Iraqi Alliance (Shi'ite coalition) 128 seats but 10 seats short of a majority

Kurdistan Alliance 53 seats

Kurdistan Islamic Union 5 seats

Iraqi National List (Sunni; led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's) 25 seats

Iraqi Accord Front (Sunni) 44

Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (Sunni) 11

Other parties 9

Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Chalabi's alliance won no seats

#### Post-Election Government Formation

In February 2006, the dominant Shi'a bloc in Iraq's parliament selected Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari to continue to lead the country, this time as the head of Iraq's first full-term government. Jaafari has been a member of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) as well as the Islamic Dawa Party leader. He won an internal power struggle within the UIA with Vice-President Adel Abdel Mahdi by a single vote.

Although the UIA won a plurality of seats in parliament following parliamentary elections, they did not win an outright majority. As such, their dominance has been somewhat tempered by the strong presence of Kurdish and Sunni factions in parliament. As such, if Jaafari was ultimately chosen to be Prime Minister from among parliament, he would be challenged, as before, by these two groups.

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Because of the sheer number of Shi'ites in parliament, it was expected in February that he would indeed be confirmed as the head of government for a full-term, however, negotiations had still not ramped up for the formation of a coalition government. The Kurdistan Alliance was likely to be a key coalition partner, while there were questions about if and how Sunnis might be included in government.

By March 2006, things took a turn for the worse. Iraq's parliament was scheduled to convene on March 5, 2006, in anticipation of the selection process for new leaders. According to the constitution, parliament was to sit within a month of date of the certification of the last election -- in this case, February 12, 2006. President Jalal Talabani, however, was urged not to open parliament as a result of the infighting among political factions. Indeed, political leaders remained sharply divided over the country's leadership, and especially the position of prime minister.

While the majority Shi'a bloc was set to nominate Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari for another term (as noted just above), his selection was opposed by Sunnis, Kurds and secular leaders. Sunnis expressed their opposition to al-Jaafari on the basis of his failure to tackle increasing violence, and they said that the security situation in Iraq under the current prime minister went from bad to worse. Among Kurds, al-Jaafari faced opposition due to lack of cooperation about jurisdiction over oil-rich Kirkuk.

In April 2006, despite withdrawal of support from the United States government for him, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari refused to resign. In an interview with the British Guardian newspaper, Ibrahim al-Jaafari said that the Iraqi people had the right to choose their own leader democratically. It has been the nomination of al-Jaafari by the dominant Shi'a faction in parliament that has created an obstacle in the formation of an Iraqi government months after the election.

Then, on April 21, 2006, in a turnaround, Jafaari said that he would not stand in the way of a new nominee being named. Two possible candidates for the position included political allies of Jafaari -- Ali al-Adeeb and Jawad al-Maliki.

Within 24 hours, it was announced that the choice by the Shi'a faction in government for the position of prime minister would be Jawad al-Maliki. Like Jafaari, Maliki was also a leader in the Shi'ite Daawa Party. His background included service on the committee that drafted the Iraq constitution and a stint as the Deputy Speaker of the Interim National Assembly. He fled Iraq in the 1980s after being sentenced to death by Saddam Hussein for his participation in Daawa. He returned after the invasion and fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

On April 24, 2006, President Jalal Talabani asked Maliki to form the country's next government within 30 days. The call by Talabani effectively ended the political deadlock although parliament would still have to approve each cabinet nominee to the national unity government. Competition for leadership of the key interior, foreign, defense and oil ministries was expected to be intense.

In his first policy speech after being asked to form a government, Maliki called for the merging of militia groups with official security forces. To this end, he said, "Arms should be in the hands of the government. There is a law that calls for the merging of militias with the armed forces."

On May 19, 2006, Iraq's Prime Minister-designate Nouri Maliki announced that he had almost completed the task of forming a government. Maliki was set to present his cabinet for approval before parliament on May 20, 2006. Still at issue was the question of who would fill the key positions of Defense Minister and Interior Minister. In an attempt to assuage critique, Maliki warned that these two posts would be filled only on a temporary basis. To this end, Maliki was reported to have said, "We decided on the names of the ministers and we will announce them... except for interior and defense ministries. Both will be acting ministers until we will choose the best ministers for those posts."

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The forming of a government had been a difficult task that stretched on for months following the elections, as a result of sectarian divisions. However, in a positive sign, some Sunni politicians said that they would support Maliki's cabinet choices, and there was little news of opposition by the Kurds at the time.

## The Security Situation in 2006

Meanwhile, in January 2006, an American television journalist, Bob Woodruff, and his cameraman, Doug Vogt, were seriously wounded in a bomb attack by an "improvised explosive device" in Iraq. Woodruff and Vogt have worked for the ABC network and were travelling as embedded reporters with the 4th Infantry Division near Taji, just north of the capital city of Baghdad. They were both treated at a hospital in Iraq before being transported to Germany, and later flown back to the United States for long-term treatment.

On January 30, 2006, journalist Jill Carroll was shown weeping and veiled in a video on the al-Jazeera Arabic network. She begged for the release of all Iraqi women prisoners. The al-Jazeera network did not report a deadline or threat to kill her that have become customary with such videos.

Also at the start of 2006, a video released by News of the World showed British soldiers beating and verbally abusing a group of young Iraqis. While the British government condemned the action by its troops against the Iraqis, Defense Secretary John Reid called for some degree of perspective, noting that out of the 100,000 British troops in Iraq, there have been very few credible allegations of the mistreatment of civilians. As such, Reid asked that people not rush to condemn British troops at work in the hostile Iraq environment. Despite such calls, two significant regional councils in southern Iraq ended all cooperation with the British army and demanded an immediate handover of powers from the United Kingdom. It was hoped that an investigation into the events depicted in the video footage would result in a thawing of relations.

Insurgents in Iraq bombed the al-Askari Shi'a shrine in Samarra on February 22, 2006, badly damaging its golden dome. The attack sparked revenge killings and other forms of violence across the country with several Sunni mosques burned to the ground. Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged Shi'ites not to indulge in reprisal attacks, however, the level of anger was so intense that it was not likely to be contained.

An emergency meeting called by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani was boycotted by Sunni Arab politicians who also withdrew from coalition talks, which had been ongoing at the time. In this regard, Tareq al-Hashimi of the Iraqi Accord Front, Iraq's main Sunni Arab alliance, said, "We are suspending our participation in negotiations on the government with the Shi'a Alliance."

Subsequently, Salah al-Mutluq, leader of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, said that there were hopes to put forth a new security plan aimed at reducing sectarian tensions. The plan would withdraw Shi'a-dominated security forces of the Interior Ministry from sensitive Sunni areas and replacing them with either the Iraqi army or multinational troops. A significant amount of outrage by the Sunni minority has been directed at the Interior Ministry police who have linked with "death squad" killings.

In order to prevent the country from devolving into chaos, a curfew was implemented in Baghdad. The decision to implement a curfew in Baghdad at first appeared to have curbed the violence, however, there were reports of several attacks across the country by February 26, 2006. Attacks included the bombing of a Shi'a shrine in Basra, mortar rounds fired in the neighborhood of Doura, a car bombing in that same district, and a bus explosion in Hilla .

The spate of violence in early 2006 carried on in unrelenting fashion with the death of scores of people in various attacks in March. Tom Fox, an American hostage in Iraq who had been working with Christian Peacemakers, was found dead. There was no word about his fellow captives.

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Car bombs in Baghdad in the second week of March left three dozen people dead, while about 100 casualties followed twin blasts at two markets in the Shi'a district of Sadr City. The city -- a stronghold of radical Islamic cleric Moqtada Sadr -- had enjoyed relative peace for several months but the respite came to a close as with the latest attacks. A separate car bombing near a United States military patrol left at least six people dead. Elsewhere in Baghdad, a few people were killed when a shell fell on their house during mortar attacks. As well, three people were found shot dead in a car in southern Baghdad, while in a southeastern suburb, the bodies of eight people were found bound, blindfolded and possibly tortured. A week prior, 20 bodies were found in a western district of the capital city. Outside Baghdad, mid-March marked the death of several civilians during a suicide truck bombing at a checkpoint in Falluja, two car bombings in Samarra which left several people dead, and attacks in Tikrit which lead to the death of others in that city.

In late March 2006, violence continued unabated in Iraq. A raid by United States forces at a mosque in Baghdad left several people dead. United States forces said that the mosque was apparently a base of militants aligned with extremist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The matter, however, took on political proportions when members of Iraq's own ruling Shi'a Islamic bloc said that civilians taking part in prayer at the mosque had been killed. Iraq's Interior Minister Bayan Jabr railed against the incident by the United States forces saying, "Entering the mosque and the killings there are an unjustified and flagrant attack." Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said he was "deeply concerned" by the reports of what had happened and was demanding a full inquiry. As well, there were reports that the Iraqi government was going to cease dealing with coalition forces and the United States Embassy in protest against the attack. For its part, the United States military denied that the mosque was attacked noting in statement, "No mosques were entered or damaged during this operation. "

In other developments in Iraq, a raid by United States troops in Iraq led to the arrest of more than 40 Interior Ministry staff, supposedly for involvement in operations at a secret prison. As well, Iraqi security forces discovered about 30 beheaded bodies near the town of Baquba. In a third incident, approximately 40 people were killed by a suicide bomb inside a military base housing United States and Iraqi forces near the northern city of Mosul.

The level of sectarian violence was so acute that analysts warned that Iraq could be on the brink of civil war. Some analysts have blamed the bloodshed on Sunni-backed insurgents, who have sought to spark sectarian violence against the country's majority Shia population. They pointed to the bombing of a Shi'a mosque and the associated spurring of reprisal attacks. Other analysts have suggested that sectarian violence in Iraq has been age-old and, accordingly, inevitable. Yet another cadre of observers has suggested that post-war Iraq, without a strongman like Saddam Hussein at the helm to hold things together in an authoritative fashion, was bound to dissolve into the kind of chaos being experienced in so far this year. A counterpoint, however, has been offered by some Iraqis on the ground who claim that sectarian differences were never a factor during the years of rule under Saddam Hussein. They have argued that sectarianism emerged only in 2003. Holding a somewhat different interpretation of events to those who have suggested that the power chasm contributed to sectarian dissonance, they say the violent insurgency is a direct result of the foreign occupation.

Regardless of these competing claims, Iraq continued to be wracked with attacks, bloodshed and a pervasive climate of political instability. The trial of Saddam Hussein, long thought to be a symbol of emerging freedom, democracy and accountability in Iraq, has commanded decreasing attention among Iraqis who were now more concerned about survival than anything else.

Indeed, the carnage in Iraq was unceasing. A car bomb in the holy city of Najaf on April 6, 2006, left at scores of people dead or injured. A day later on April 7, 2006, multiple suicide bomb attacks on the Buratha Shi'a mosque in Baghdad left hundreds of casualties. It was believed that at least two of the suicide bombers were dressed as women.

On April 8, 2006, a car bomb in Mussayyib, a Shi'a town south of Baghdad, left another groups of people dead.

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Further violence in Iraq in the third week of April occurred when a car bombing in south Baghdad left at least 34 people dead. Shootings in Mosul also took the lives of seven laborers while several United States Marines were reported to have been killed in combat. These latest attacks were expected to further intensify sectarian strife, hence advancing speculation about whether or not Iraq has slipped into a state of civil war.

In one positive development, three Christian peace activists who had been taken hostage in 2005 -- two Canadians and one British -- were rescued and returned home. The fourth hostage, an American named Tom Fox, was found dead two weeks prior as was noted above.

Further violence in Iraq in the third week of April occurred when a car bombing in south Baghdad left at least 34 people dead. Shootings in Mosul also took the lives of seven laborers while several United States Marines were reported to have been killed in combat.

The over-arching hopes that agreement on the leadership of the new government (discussed above) would bring an end to the conflict-ridden situation in Iraq was quickly dashed as sectarian violence continued to plague the country. Even as Prime Minister-designate al-Maliki vowed to unite Iraq, a spate of car bombs exploded across Baghdad. In one explosion to the south of Baghdad, five United States soldiers were killed. In other attacks at a market in Muqadiyah, two Iraqis were killed. As well, the bodies of 32 security force recruits were discovered.

May 2006 opened with a spate of fresh violence, most notably in the capital city of Baghdad and the holy city of Karbala. Car bombs in those two cities left scores of people dead, including a large number of soldiers. In separate sectarian attacks, close to 50 men were found dead as a result of multiple gunshot wounds. The nature of the attacks spurred the observation that in addition to car bombings by Sunni insurgent groups against Shi'ites, there was also a rise in execution-style killings as well as the targeting of Shi'a religious sites. The violence coincided with the government-formation process by new Prime Minister-designate, Nouri al-Maliki.

On May 29, 2006, CBS cameraman, Paul Douglas, and CBS soundman, James Brolan, were among those killed when a car bomb exploded next to their United States military convoy in Iraq. CBS correspondent Kimberly Dozier was gravely injured in the attack and was reported to be in critical condition at a United States military hospital in Baghdad following surgery. CBS News said on its website that the three journalists were in Iraq to cover United States military troops for Memorial Day. They were traveling with the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division.

They had just exited the armored vehicle in which they were traveling when the car bomb detonated. It was one of several attacks that ensued in Iraq in the last days of May 2006, leaving scores of people dead and hundreds of casualties.

Elsewhere in Iraq, the security situation was worsening rather than improving. On May 29, 2006, Iraq's leadership called on the new government to send a team of high-ranking negotiators to travel to Basra to resolve the conflict brewing there between rival Shi'a factions, as well as between Shi'ites and Sunnis. For his part, President Talabani referred to the situation in Basra as inflammable and warned that it required attention. Once thought to be a safer region of the country, Basra was increasingly becoming the site of both infighting as well as sectarian conflict. Altercations between Iraqis in the area and British troops, who have been based there, were also intensifying. A militant Shi'a faction, the Fadhlila Party, was said to be responsible for the devolving situation in Basra.

While the situation was worsening in Basra, there was some sign of a shift elsewhere when it was announced that the Iraqi army was set to take over control from the United States military in the unstable province of Anbar.

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In a move oriented toward "national reconciliation," the new prime minister said that he intended to release 2,500 prisoners, most of whom were Sunni Arabs. Excluded from the list, however, were to be individuals aligned with ousted President Saddam Hussein.

Violence in Iraq was ongoing in late May well into June 2006. In a particularly gruesome case, police reported that they had found nine severed heads near Baquba to the north of Baghdad. The discovery came only days after a similar discovery of severed heads in the capital, which included that of a local Sunni cleric. In another incident, five people died as a result of a car bomb at a funeral in Baghdad.

June 7, 2006 marked a successful day for the Iraqi authorities when a bombing raid on a safe house in Baquba resulted in the death of terrorist leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Pictures of Zarqawi's corpse were soon published in television, print and internet media. Several days later, following an autopsy, **United States** officials confirmed that Zarqawi was indeed dead. The report also suggested that Zarqawi was actually alive immediately following the bombing raid but died an hour later.

Meanwhile, the Mujahideen Council -- an al-Qaida group operating in Iraq that had been founded by Zarqawi -- vowed to avenge his death.

In an internet statement, the group said that al-Qaida in Iraq would launch attacks intended to "shake the enemy from its sleep." A later statement by the Mujahideen Council said that Abu Hamza al-Muhajir would be the successor to Zarqawi. Some observers noted that the name of the new leader belied non-Iraqi origins.

For its part, there was no immediate statement from Osama bin Laden's enclave about the death of Zarqawi. Several experts on terrorism have observed that despite Zarqawi's expressed allegiance to al-Qaida, his Mujahideen's tactics of indiscriminate killings did not neatly fit with Osama bin Laden's objectives of promoting Islamic ascendancy and getting the West out of the Middle East. Nevertheless, weeks later, communication from Bin Laden lionized Zarqawi's contributions to the Islamist cause.

In other developments in Iraq, a car bomb in the Karrada district of Baghdad left several people dead or injured. Another bomb attack in the north of the capital injured a senior police officer and killed his driver. In oil-rich Kirkuk in the north, gunmen shot an official within President Jalal Talabani's party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In the southern town of Amara say five civilians were killed in a gun battle between British troops and insurgents on Saturday which left one British soldier wounded.

By mid-June 2006, an attack at a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad -- said to be a shoe bombing -- left close to a dozen people dead and at least 25 people injured. It was believed that the imam of the mosque had been the ultimate target, although he escaped unscathed.

That particular attack came after the announcement by the Iraqi government of a massive crackdown.

In late June 2006, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki presented a national reconciliation plan to parliament aimed at decreasing sectarian tensions and violence. The 24-point plan included plans to disarm militias that have increasingly controlled neighborhoods, proposals to increased Iraqi security in anticipation of eventual withdrawal of coalition troops, a review of the treatment of Ba'ath party members who were forced out of public life after the 2003 invasion and thus turned to the insurgency, as well as an offer of amnesty to some insurgents. Excluded from the amnesty offer were groups that have targeted civilians. The plan also did not include any overtures to radical Islamists who lie at the core of the insurgency in Iraq.

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Speaking about his proposals, Prime Minister Maliki said, "The plan is open to all those who want to enter the political process to build their country and save their people as long as they did not commit crimes." Still, he made clear that there would be place in the new Iraq for the Islamic radicals.

The initial response to the plan was positive and included endorsement from Adnan al-Dulaimi, the leader of the largest Sunni coalition in parliament, Adnan al-Dulaimi.

As the prime minister was putting forth his reconciliation proposals, Japan began withdrawing its military vehicles from Iraq as part of its planned troop withdrawal. The prime minister said when he took office that Iraq would have full control of its security situation in 18 months, however, the United States has said that it will not give a deadline for withdrawal.

In other developments, four Russian hostages were reported to have been brutally killed in Iraq three weeks after being kidnapped. A video was released showing at least one hostage being beheaded and another being shot to death. The Mujahideen Shura Council, which has abducted and killed several individuals including two United States soldier in June 2006, said that it had executed the Russians in revenge for "torture, killing and displacement by the infidel Russian government" in Chechnya.

A spate of attacks in July 2006 prompted renewed fears of civil war in Iraq.

In the first part of July 2006, Iraq's Deputy Minister for Electricity minister, Raad al-Harith, and approximately 19 bodyguards, were kidnapped by gunmen in Baghdad. According to Iraqi officials, the deputy minister and seven bodyguards were released 12 hours later. There was no information released regarding the motive behind the abduction or the fate of the remaining bodyguards.

On July 8, 2006, a car bomb at a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad left two people dead. Some observers speculated that the incident spurred retaliatory attacks, such as the one that left at least 40 people dead a day later.

On July 9, 2006, Shi'a militants reportedly set up a fake police checkpoint in the western Jihad district of the capital city of Baghdad. At the checkpoint, the Sunni occupants of the vehicles were identified and then executed. Women and children were among those shot to death. The death toll was expected to rise beyond the initial estimate of 40 victims as more cases emerged of similar violent attacks. Indeed, there were reports of militants barging into Sunni homes and killing all those inside.

Just hours after the checkpoint killings, double car bombs exploded in the northern Kasra district of Baghdad. The attacks took place very close to a local Shi'a mosque and left more than 25 people dead. It was unclear whether or not this was a retaliatory attack, or, if it had been previously orchestrated and the timing was coincidental.

Elsewhere on July 9, 2006, an army intelligence officer was shot to death in Karbala, south of Baghdad. Separate attacks in other parts of Iraq left several people dead -- including security personnel and civilians.

On July 10, 2006, fresh attacks hit the mostly Sunni Amariya district of Baghdad when gunmen ambushed a bus and shot several people. Also on that day, a series of explosions in Baghdad left scores of people either dead or injured. One of the bombs exploded in the Shi'a section of Sadr City and was viewed as a reprisal for earlier attacks on Sunnis. Another bomb exploded in the center of the capital.

Moqtada Sadr, and his Mehdi Army, were named as some of the first suspects involved in the checkpoint killings against Sunnis in the Jihad district. The radical Shi'a cleric denied any responsibility, however, and instead called for both calm and unity between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Likewise, militant factions within the Interior Ministry, who were previously accused of carrying out extra-judicial killings against Sunnis, denied any wrongdoing. There was no word as to any particular group suspected of carrying out the attacks against Shi'ites in Kasra.

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In order to curtail further revenge attacks, Iraq's security forces set up barricades and imposed a curfew in the Jihad district.

Meanwhile, reports emerged about the release of three Egyptians who had been abducted and were being held hostage in Iraq. Yet even as this positive news came to light, violence was rampant across Iraq and the death toll in Iraq was rising.

In one case, three people were killed and seven wounded following a suicide attack in Kirkuk. The attack ensued just outside the office of the Kurdish party of President Jalal Talabani. In another case, Iraqi police found five bodies in Suwayra, located to the south of Baghdad. In Hilla, police said that a roadside bomb had killed one policeman and four civilians. In the province of Diyala, Council Member Adnan Iskandar al-Mahdawi was killed in a drive-by shooting.

This wave of attacks occurred just after Prime Minister Nouri Maliki announced his national reconciliation plan, intended to bring an end the violence and bloodshed between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq. The disturbing upsurge in sectarian violence, however, essentially rendered the prime minister's plan irrelevant, while simultaneously renewing abject fears of civil war in Iraq. To this end, Presidential Security Adviser, Wafiq al-Samaraie, said on Arabic television that the country was "at the gates of civil war." He warned that extraordinary measures would have to be taken to prevent such an outcome.

On July 16, 2006, a suicide attack at a busy cafe in northern Iraq left at least 20 people dead and several more people injured. The attack took place in a town, Tuz Khurmatu, located 50 miles (75 kilometers) from Kirkuk. The police chief, Colonel Abbas Mohammed Amin, said that the cafe was in close proximity of a Shi'a mosque and that the area was populated mostly by Turkmen. The reason for the attack seemed unclear and could not be attributed immediately to either sectarian or ethnic strife.

In the northern city of Mosul on the same day, a suicide attack left three people dead. Also, in Baghdad, one attack left four policemen dead, while another killed three people in the Karrada district. Baghdad on July 16, 2006 was also the site of the kidnapping of a senior official from the Iraqi oil ministry. The day before, Iraq's Olympic Committee chief, Ahmed al-Hadijiya, was kidnapped along with 30 other individuals.

On July 17, 2006, an attack on a market in Mahmoudiya, to the south of Baghdad, left around 50 people dead and more than 60 people injured. Although there were some reports that the attack was due to suicide bombers, witnesses on the ground said that mortars were fired into the market and then several gunmen opened fire on the crowd. Most of the victims were believed to be Shi'ites. The area, which has been inhabited by a mixed Sunni and Shi'a population, has been plagued by frequent shootings, bombings and other forms of violence by insurgent elements.

A day later, a car bomb in the southern city of Kufa left over 50 people dead. The bomb exploded as a group of laborers who were seeking work clustered together around a minibus, which was in close proximity to a golden-domed Shi'a shrine. The area has been regarded as a stronghold of the cleric Moqtada al Sadr and Kufa's Shi'a community have been the targets of many sectarian attacks in recent times. On this occasion, police arriving at the site of the attack were met with a barrage of stones, which residents pelted at them while accusing them of being agents of the **United States**.

Iraq's most prominent Shi'a cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called for an end to the "hatred and violence," warning that it would only extend the presence of the **United States** forces in Iraq. His call came around the same time that the new government was attempting to advance a reconciliation plan for peace across the country.

Despite these gestures towards peace, on July 22, 2006, seven construction workers, reportedly all Shi'ites, were killed and one was injured in the Sunni district of Khadra in Baghdad. According to reports, gunmen raided the



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house in which they were working and opened fire on them. A roadside bomb in eastern Baghdad left both an Iraqi civilian and a United States soldier dead. Another United States soldier was shot by militants in southern Baghdad while on patrol. Elsewhere in Iraq,

eight people were killed --- including United States soldiers, Iraqi police, and civilians -- in various attacks. In Baquba, there was a bombings and a shooting in the main market that left several casualties -- including the deaths of three police. In Mosul to the north of the country, gunmen opened fire leaving one civilian dead. In Kut to the south of the country, a roadside bomb killed an Iraqi soldier and wounded four.

On July 23, 2006, scores of people died in separate bomb attacks across Iraq. At a busy market in the Shi'a area of Sadr City, a bomb explosion took at least 34 lives. It was reported that a suicide bomber drove a explosives-packed minibus into the entrance of the marketplace and detonated the bomb. The market blast came on the heels of another bomb attack in which eight people died outside the townhall. Meanwhile, there were reports of fighting in Sadr City between the Shi'a militia, known as the Mehdi army, and troops from the Iraqi and United States militaries.

The same area was subject to attacks approximately two weeks prior, which left over 66 people dead. In the northern city of Kirkuk, a bomb blast next to a courthouse killed at least 20 people and injured close to 100. It was not clear if the car bomb had been detonated by a suicide bomber or not. The city was also the site of several attacks.

The first day of August 2006 was marked by continuing violence in Iraq. A series of bomb attacks in Karrada, Tikrit, Tar Afar and Baiji left more than 50 people dead, many of whom were soldiers. In Basra, attacks on police and coalition troops left at least a dozen people dead, including one British soldier. As well, 45 Shi'a Muslims were kidnapped as they traveled through the Sunni area of Ramadi, and the day before, on July 31, 2006, 20 people were kidnapped from an office in Baghdad.

The next day was also fraught with bloodshed. At least 12 people, most of whom were children, were killed in bomb attacks while playing football in a Shi'a district of Baghdad. Fourteen other people were injured. The attack came a few hours after a major announcement by Iraqi President Talabani saying that Iraqi forces would take over the security of the entire country by the end of 2006.

Gunmen opened fire on Shi'a Muslims on August 20, 2006, leaving at least 20 people dead and over 300 injured. Sunni extremists were thought to be responsible. The attacks came as tens of thousands of Shi'a Muslims were making a pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam Musa Kadhim in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad. While security was increased and a ban on cars was put into effect in anticipation of the arrival of Shi'a pilgrims in the city, the increased volume of people made the task of protection far more difficult. In one incident, pilgrims were ambushed by snipers. But on the other side of the equation, some Sunni leaders said that Shi'ites were provoking attacks and some Shi'a militias, such as the Mehdi Army, were accused of attacking Sunni homes.

On August 28, 2006, the southern Iraqi city of Diwaniya was wracked by fighting between Iraqi troops and Shi'a militias, which left dozens of people dead including 19 soldiers and 40 militia fighters. The militia fighters -- from a splinter group of the Mehdi Army and opposed to the peace process -- were reported to have taken control of sections of the city. In Baghdad, a suicide car bombing left 11 people dead at the compound of the country's Interior Ministry.

Eight policemen were among the dead.

A day later, an oil pipeline explosion in southern Iraq resulted in a massive fire and the deaths of scores of people (exact numbers varied according to sources). There were also several severe injuries with victims burned terribly over the majority of their bodies. Meanwhile, at two separate sites in Baghdad, 20 bodies of gunshot victims were

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found. There were signs of torture on the bodies of some victims. In Baquba, two Shi'a militiamen, reportedly linked with the cleric Moqtada Sadr, were killed by insurgents. Two United States troops were also among those killed in Iraq on August 29, 2006. At the close of August 2006, there were over 2,600 United States soldiers who had died in Iraq since the invasion of that country in 2003.

On August 30, 2006, a new round of attacks left well over 50 people dead. The violence ensued at the congested Shurja marketplace in Baghdad, which had been repeatedly hit by attacks. In fact, another blast occurred there only weeks earlier. Also in Baghdad, a blast at a gas station resulted in several casualties while gunmen shot to death three textile workers in a taxi. Violence and bloodshed also ensued outside a police recruitment center in Hilla -- another popular site for attacks -- leaving a number of applicants dead. Meanwhile, a bomb exploded on a minibus in the northern city of Kirkuk, while a roadside bomb hit a car carrying a family in Buhriz.

At the start of September 2006, scores of mutilated bodies were found in Iraq. Details about the situation were yet unknown, however, many of the bodies found showed signs of torture. By mid-September 2006, more bodies were found across Baghdad. As earlier in the month, most of the bodies showed signs of being both shot and tortured. While killings have become regularized fare in Baghdad, the sheer number of bodies found -- over 100 in total -- suggested something of an abnormal nature. Around the same time, the United Nations released a report asserting that the problem of torture was far more pervasive and problematic today than under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the report suggested that torture threatened "the very fabric of the country."

Elsewhere in Iraq, violence was ongoing with car bombs killing scores of people across the country and particularly in Sadr City. The last week of September 2006 began with the discovery of several beheaded bodies in Tikrit. In early October 2006, a spate of mass kidnappings had ensued involving the abductions of groups of people rather than single individuals. As well, further mutilated bodies were being discovered.

Meanwhile at the close of September 2006, a full curfew of Baghdad was instituted in the midst of the unfolding violence. The temporary curfew had been established in the midst of intelligence reports about a possible terror attack in the Iraqi capital scheduled for September 30, 2006.

In October 2006, as Muslims marked the period of Ramadan, death and violence had surged to a new apex. In the past few years since the [2003] United States-led invasion of Iraq, violence has typically increased during the holy month of Ramadan. In 2006, however, the number of attacks during the holy month was believed to have been unprecedented. Few analysts disagreed with the assessment that Iraq was being gripped by civil war. Argument instead focused on the question of whether Iraq was already ensconced in a low-grade civil war, or, if the country had slipped past that point.

In early October 2006, it was reported that between 600 and 700 policemen in southern Iraq were poisoned after partaking in the "iftar" -- the evening meal that ends the daily Ramadan fast.

An inspector for the Environmental Ministry said that following the meal, the policemen began to bleed from the ears and nose. There were also contradictory reports about approximately a dozen policemen dying as a result of the poisoning. Meanwhile, there were suggestions that the poisoning was intentional and investigations were being launched to determine the cause. In this part of Iraq, most of the policemen have tended to be Shi'ites, while insurgents, who have typically targeted police, security and militant forces, have tended to be Sunnis.

Days earlier, clashes between Shi'a militants and joint United States and Iraqi troops in the town of Diwaniya left several people dead. The fighting ensued as troops tried to arrest a militant believed to have been responsible for earlier deaths. In the violence that followed, a United States tank was destroyed. While initial blame for the violence was placed on cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army, subsequent reports suggested that more radical Shi'a

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**militants** (who were now outside the cleric's control) may have been responsible. Regardless, streets were blocked and a curfew was set.

Elsewhere in Iraq, violence was ongoing. Police were still finding scores of bodies of people who had been abducted and killed. In Kirkuk, a curfew was put into effect as a massive security operation was ongoing; it was later lifted. In that operation, close to 200 people were **detained** and both arms and ammunition were confiscated.

On October 9, 2006, a bomb at a market in Baghdad left 10 people dead and over 25 people injured. The attack ensued at the Shalal market in the predominantly Shi'a district of Shaab at sunset -- a time when people were ending their daily Ramadan fast.

In the early morning hours of October 12, 2006, gunmen sporting police garb stormed the offices of a television station in Baghdad and opened fire on the staff who had stayed overnight in the building. The Shaabiya satellite channel, also known as People's TV, had not yet opened for business, and was owned by the National Justice and Progress party -- a small secular political group. Among those killed was the party leader, Abdul-Rahim Nasrallah, who was also the head of the station's board of directors. The reason for that attack was unknown but followed on the heels of another attack on a television station in Baghdad almost two weeks prior when a car bomb exploded outside the al-Rafidain station, leaving two people dead.

October 12, 2006 was a deadly day filled with violence elsewhere in Iraq. Synchronized attacks in Baghdad involving a car bomb and roadside device ensued killing five people and injuring about a dozen. In the eastern part of the Iraqi capital, a suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonated the explosives strapped to his body, killing four and wounding eight people participating in a police patrol. In Samarra to the north of Baghdad, a bomb exploded in a residential area, killing one woman and injuring several others. In the province of Diyala to the north-east of Baghdad, four separate attacks left close to ten people dead. In the northern city of Kirkuk, gunmen opened fire on patrons in a coffee shop, killing two people and injuring another two. Reports stated that the victims had been quietly playing dominoes and backgammon when they were killed. Reports also suggested that the gunmen responsible for those casualties also killed an Iraqi soldier later that day. Meanwhile, in Suwayrah, less than miles from Baghdad, around 15 dead bodies were discovered. As with the many scores of bodies found in Iraq, these also showed signs of torture. Finally, the body of a Kurdish reporter, who had been abducted a week earlier, was identified in the Baghdad morgue.

The following days in Iraq were no less bloody.

On October 13, 2006, the beheaded bodies of about 14 Shi'a workers were found in Balad, located to the west of Baghdad. To the south of Baghdad in the predominantly Shi'a village of Wahda, three women and four men were killed in drive-by shootings on October 14, 2006. Also on that day, two Egyptians businessmen who happened to be married to Iraqi women were killed near Baqouba -- just over 30 miles to the northeast of Baghdad.

Then, the next day on October 15, 2006, the northern city of Kirkuk was the site of a series six bomb attacks, which left about a dozen people dead and more than 70 people injured. According to the police, some of the attacks were the result of car bombs, while others were detonated by suicide bombers. The targets of the attacks included two Iraqi police units, one **United States** military patrol, the local headquarters of a security agency and a crowded market. The attempted attack against the security agency instead hit a training college for female teachers, killing two students. Kirkuk -- located in an oil-producing area of the country -- has been badly hit by violence in recent years; it is home to a diverse population of Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs.

In Balad, the bodies of over 50 people were found on the same day [October 15, 2006], most of whom were said to be Sunnis. Their deaths were believed to be revenge killings of sorts, and were linked with the aforementioned

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discovery of the beheaded bodies of about 14 Shi'a workers two days before. Since then, furor over their deaths had resulted in bands of residents roaming the streets in search of Sunnis.

Baghdad was not spared from violence on that day. Two bombs targeted the convoy of a senior interior ministry official and left seven people dead -- four were passing by on the street and three were members of the convoy's security detail. Hala Shakr Salim, the head of finance for the interior ministry, managed to survive the attack. Elsewhere in Baghdad, another 30 corpses were found. In the Dora district of Baghdad, a mortar attack killed three people. Meanwhile on the same day, four members of a family were killed when gunmen opened fire on them in Iraq's third largest city of Mosul, over two hundred miles northwest of Baghdad.

On October 16 2006, Suweira to the south of Baghdad was the site of a car bomb that left 10 people dead and several more injured. In Baghdad, two almost-simultaneous roadside bombs were set off close to a bank in the city center. Among the 20 people reported to have died in the attacks was a policeman; there were also several people who were injured.

On October 22, 2006, police recruits and shoppers preparing for the end of the holy month of Ramadan were the principal victims of attacks on that day. Police recruits on buses in Diyala province were killed in one case, while a roadside bomb and small arms fire killed about a dozen others. There were about 25 casualties and an unnamed number of abductions as well. Other attacks across Iraq included a bomb blast at a Baghdad market that left at least three people dead, and a suicide bombing in the city center that left about six people dead.

At the close of October 2006, violence in Iraq was ongoing. In one case, an explosion in Sadr City within the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left more than 25 people dead, and over 50 people injured. The explosion was caused by a roadside bomb at Mudhafa Square in a mostly Shi'a neighborhood known for its association with Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army.

Amidst the many deaths of Iraqis were also the deaths of international forces in Iraq, and most notably, United States troops. On October 14, 2006 alone, five United States soldiers were killed -- four in Baghdad, and one in Falluja. A day later, two United States marines were killed in fighting in the volatile Anbar province. A week later, a Marine was killed during combat in Anbar province and a soldier was killed in fighting in Salahuddin province on October 21, 2006. Three soldiers were killed around the area of Baghdad on October 22, 2006. These were only a few example of the situation being faced by United States troops in Iraq. By mid-month, approximately 60 American soldiers had been killed in the first two weeks of October 2006 alone. Indeed, as of October 2006, since the start of the war in 2003, the number of United States soldiers killed in Iraq stood at over 2760; those injured numbered over 20,000.

With increased violence has come increased opposition to the war in the two countries that championed the 2003 invasion of Iraq -- the United States and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the war in Iraq has become increasingly unpopular and was expected to factor highly in the mid-term elections set for November 2006.

In Iraq itself, there was speculation about a deadline for the possible withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq -- a possibility that United States President George W. Bush dismissed during a telephone call on October 16, 2006 with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Yet in spite of growing domestic opposition to the war in Iraq, and even after talks in the third week of October 2006 between United States President George W. Bush and top military commanders, the White House said that there would be no official change in the Iraq strategy. While the Bush administration noted that there might be flexibility in tactics used in Iraq, the overall strategy and objectives remained the same. Questions about a possible change in direction were nonetheless rampant in the United States media.

Meanwhile, the Arabic media made headlines across the world on October 21, 2006.

Alberto Fernandez, a senior official with the United States Department of State, said in an interview with the al-Jazeera television network that the United States had demonstrated "arrogance and stupidity" in its approach to Iraq, which he characterized as a failure. The direct quote, according to the news agency Reuters, was as follows: "That's not the failure of the United States alone, but it is a disaster for the region. We tried to do our best but I think there is much room for criticism because, undoubtedly, there was arrogance and there was stupidity from the United States in Iraq." The State Department quickly countered with the claim that Fernandez had not been properly quoted. Language experts, however, countered this claim.

Two days later, it was reported that Fernandez retracted his statements, saying that they did not reflect the position of the State Department.

Earlier in the month, the British commander in Iraq, General Richard Dannatt, delivered a shocking criticism. In October 2006, he said the presence of British troops in Iraq exacerbated the security crisis there. While he later finessed his commentary so as not to completely break ranks with Prime Minister Tony Blair, he nevertheless stood by the spirit of his position.

Early November 2006 was marked by the sentencing of Saddam Hussein (discussed below) and a lull in violence due to a prevailing curfew. Some days later, however, the violence resumed.

On November 12, 2006, a suicide bomber killed 35 police recruits and left approximately 60 injured in Iraq.

The terrorist group, al-Qaida in Iraq, claimed victory for the attack and said that it was acting against the "Safavid" government -- an apparent historical reference to Shi'ite Iranian rulers as well as the current Iraqi government, which Sunnis accuse of being linked with present-day Iran. The suicide attack was only one of several attacks on November 12, 2006, which left over 100 people dead on that bloody day alone.

On the same day, with the country embroiled in ever-devolving and violent sectarian crisis that some analysts were already calling a civil war, Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said in parliament that he intended to make changes in government. His remarks about an impending cabinet shuffle came during a closed session, and were said to be aimed at under-performing ministers and intended to ensure greater competency in government. Later, the prime minister's office released a statement which read, "The prime minister called for a comprehensive ministerial reshuffle in accordance with the current situation."

Meanwhile, amidst the prime minister's announcement, Sunnis warned that they would resign from positions within the current government, unless they were given more power. Some Sunni leaders even threatened to turn to violence if their demands were not met. Prime Minister Maliki appeared undeterred by these suggestions saying, "Regrettably this suggests some of our partners are not fit for responsibility."

On November 14, 2006, gunmen disguised as police raided the Iraqi Higher Education Ministry and kidnapped over 100 of the research institute's staff -- from professors to janitorial staff. Some -- but not all -- of those kidnapped were released on a phased basis during the course of the day. Five police officers, including the police chief of the Karrada district -- the area in which the mass kidnappings ensued -- were arrested.

On November 16, 2006, five security guards were kidnapped at a bogus security checkpoint near Safwan in the country's Shi'ite south. Nine Asian drivers were also seized in the incident but were released soon after their capture. A hunt was ongoing to search for the kidnapped persons in the area of Dewajin.

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In other news on this day, a British security guard employed with a private firm was wounded in clashes with Iraqi police in Zubayr also in the country's Shi'ite south. Two policemen and a foreigner were also reported to have been killed there.

Days later, Iraq's Deputy Health Minister Ammar al-Saffar was kidnapped from his home in a neighborhood of Baghdad. Much like the two previous cases, some of the kidnappers were gunmen dressed in police garb. Less than 24 hours after Saffar's kidnapping, the convoy of the other Deputy Health Minister – Hakim Zanili – was attacked. The Health Ministry has enjoyed close ties with the Mehdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, suggesting that opponents of that entity may have been responsible for these attacks.

In other violence at the start of the third week of November 2006, there were scores of casualties a result of a suicide bomb attack in Hilla by a Sunni extremist group. In that incident, around 22 impoverished Shi'ite laborers were killed and around 50 people were injured. The suicide attacker lured the laborers toward him by promising work and then detonating the bomb strapped to his body. In another development, the bodies of close to 50 people were found in Baghdad, reportedly identified as victims of death squads.

On November 23, 2006, gunmen, believed to be Sunni insurgents, attacked the Health Ministry in Baghdad resulting in heavy clashes with guards.

The attack at the Health Ministry was soon followed by successive car bombs and mortar attacks in the largely Shi'a neighborhood of Sadr City in Baghdad, resulting in a devastating death toll. Reports suggested that over 200 people were killed and several hundreds were injured in what was being called one of the bloodiest days in the Iraqi capital city since the invasion by United States-led forces in 2003.

In response, the government imposed a curfew on Baghdad and closed key air and sea ports across the country, while leaders of the country's Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish communities called for calm. Nevertheless, Shi'ites blamed Sunnis for the attacks and there were mortar rounds fired on Sunni areas of Baghdad, such as the Adhamiya district, resulting in about a dozen injuries.

Because the site of the original attacks -- Sadr City -- had been a stronghold of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army, there was some speculation that it was responsible for the retaliatory rounds of mortar fire in the Sunni areas.

A day later, as Shi'ites buried their dead, there were attacks on Sunni mosques in Baghdad.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in the United States, there was an increasing call for the Bush administration to rethink its strategy in Iraq. This call was particularly intensified in the aftermath of the political defeat for the Republican Party in the mid-term elections of 2006, and in the face of low approval ratings from the American people on President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. With the situation in Iraq becoming untenable, and with victorious Democrats at home calling for a shift in the Iraq strategy as well as a phased redeployment of troops, the Bush administration gave some indications that it was examining its options.

The United States Pentagon then issued a report about the possible prospects for American involvement in Iraq, suggesting that there were three courses of actions available: "go deep, go long, or go home." Stated another way, the United States could expand its involvement in Iraq for the short term in the hopes of a resolution within a limited time horizon. Alternatively, it could look toward ensuring long-term involvement in the hopes of stabilizing Iraq and the region in the future. Finally, it could withdraw its troops from Iraq entirely.

Another set of options on the table for the United States was anticipated by the Iraq Study Group. Early indications were that the group would call for dialogue with regional powers, including Syria and Iran, but would not stipulate a

timeline for withdrawal. Such a proposition appeared to be a tall order since the Bush administration in the United States had eschewed the notion of dialogue with Syria and Iran for some time. Nevertheless, in the backdrop of these developments were concerted overtures by the governments of Syria and Iran to help with the task of establishing some semblance of stability in Iraq.

A top ranking Syrian official, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualeem, arrived in Iraq in for an unprecedented visit -- the first since the ousting of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in 2003. The Syrian foreign minister offered support to the Iraqi government in dealing with its sectarian crisis and state of chaos. That said, Moualeem was quick to note that his country's willingness to help Iraq was not intended to satisfy any other foreign interests. For its part, Iraq's government said it would ask Syria to prevent al-Qaida fighters from crossing the border into Iraq, to curtail the passage of the funding of insurgents by Ba'athists in Syria, and also to refuse safe haven for former members of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Syria aside, many analysts have argued that Iraq's security situation cannot be resolved without cooperation from Iran.

But the poor nature of the relationship between the United States and Iran did not augur well for productive dialogue between the two countries on the issue of Iraq.

Still, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani went to Tehran for talks with his counterpart in Iran.

The call for engagement with regional powers was uttered earlier in November 2006 by former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who, in an interview with British media, depicted a bleak picture of the scenario unfolding in Iraq. He also called for dialogue with neighboring countries -- including Iran -- if any progress in Iraq could yet be made. Also noteworthy was the fact that Kissinger said that he did not believe that military victory was possible in Iraq. In this regard, he said, "If you mean by clear military victory, an Iraqi government that can be established and whose writ runs across the whole country, that gets civil war ... and sectarian violence under control, I don't believe that is possible."

At the close of November 2006, United States President George W. Bush was scheduled to meet with Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki in the Middle East to discuss the crisis in Iraq. While some internationalists hailed the event as a positive development, Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq threatened to pull out of Nouri al-Maliki's government if the Iraqi leader went through with the meeting. Such a move would destabilize the government -- and by extension, the country -- even further.

Ahead of the meeting with the Iraqi head of government, Bush placed the blame for the violence in Iraq on the terrorist group al-Qaida. In so doing, he linked Iraq with the global war on terror, and essentially disregarded the complex power struggle ensuing between rival sects, manifest in the Sunni insurgency and the rise of Shi'a death squads. Bush also resisted the label of "civil war" in his characterization of the conditions in Iraq. Finally, Bush reiterated his stance that United States forces would not withdraw from Iraq. His assertion that he had no intention of pulling troops off the battlefield in Iraq "until the mission was complete" contravened against myriad calls from Democrats, political analysts, and regional experts, for a change in strategy.

That meeting between Bush and the Iraqi leader was postponed after the inopportune leaking of a memorandum, in which United States National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley cast the Iraqi leader's competence in negative light. When the meeting eventually ensued, however, both Bush and Maliki presented the image of cooperation.

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The situation on the ground in Iraq, however, remained as dire as before. December 2, 2006, for example saw a series of bombs explode in succession in a busy Shi'ite commercial area of Baghdad. More than 50 people were reported to have been killed and approximately 100 people were injured.

Isolated violence took place elsewhere in Iraq, as evidenced by the gunman who opened fire on a policeman at a checkpoint in west Baghdad, and the crash of a truck to the south of Baghdad that left 20 people dead and several more injured. Meanwhile, joint **United States** and Iraqi forces were carrying out raids in an area of Baquba notorious for being a stronghold of insurgents.

On December 12, 2006, a large suicide bombing in Tayaran Square in Baghdad resulted in over 70 deaths and injuries to more than 230 people. The suicide bomber detonated his truck, which was packed with explosives, after calling forth throngs of impoverished Shi'a laborers from Sadr City with promises of work. This tactic had been used in previous attacks with deadly results. Because of the high rate of unemployment in Iraq, desperate laborers have been particularly soft targets for violent insurgents.

A day later, the violence continued relentlessly. In one of several attacks of the day, car bombs exploded in the vicinity of a bus shelter and close to where a crowd of Shi'a laborers were gathered in Baghdad. Those attacks left more than 10 people dead and about 25 others injured. In another bloody incident on that day, gunmen stormed a house in the south of the capital city and killed nine members of a Shi'ite family.

There was also a suicide bombing at an army base in northern Iraq, which left several soldiers dead and 15 others injured.

On December 14, 2006, gunmen dressed in military garb kidnapped up to 70 people in the Sanak area of the capital city of Baghdad. About 24 hostages were subsequently released,

Then, only days later, gunmen kidnapped a number of people from the office of the only humanitarian group functioning across Iraq -- the Red Crescent. The hostages were abducted when armed men dressed in military garb drove up to the office of the aid agency in a long convoy of cars vehicles, which looked similar to those belonging to the Iraqi police. The gunmen then entered the office, saying that they needed to carry out an inspection. Once inside, they separated the people according to gender and took the males hostage. Included in the list of hostages were a number of visitors to the aid agency, as well as three guards from the nearby embassy of the Netherlands.

Kidnappings at official institutions and agencies had become widespread in the latter part of 2006, with two now occurring within a period of less than a week in December. As before, there were accusations that Shi'a militias had infiltrated official ranks and were able to masquerade as police units. Still, some kidnappings have also been carried out by criminal gangs.

On December 16, 2006, Prime Minister Nouri Maliki called for the return of members of Saddam Hussein's army to the military fold. His call appeared to be a calculated move intended to assuage disaffected Sunnis. Indeed, the majority of Sunnis had been employed by the army of Saddam Hussein, however, they lost their positions after the **United States**-led invasion, when the country went through a period of de-Ba'athification. Spurned by the ascendant Shi'a leadership, they turned their loyalty to the cause of the insurgency. Now with sectarian violence threatening to destroy Iraq, the urgency for reconciliation was at its apex.

Maliki's call came at a time when moderate Kurdish, Shi'a and Sunni groups were scheduled to meet for talks aimed at decreasing the level of violence, which carried a bloody toll of more than 100 Iraqis dying on a daily basis. Absent from the talks, however, were radical Shi'a militias and Sunni insurgent groups. Regardless, there was little optimism that these discussions would yield better results in comparison with previous endeavors of the same sort.



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Meanwhile, in mid-December 2006, Saudi Arabia warned that it would provide financial support to Iraq's Sunni population if a full-scale sectarian war broke out following the possible withdrawal of United States troops. The stance by the Saudis suggested that it regarded the ascendancy of Shi'ites in Iraq to be a threat requiring counterbalance. The warning was issued at a time of intense speculation about a possible shift in United States strategy in Iraq, given the record level of discontent with the war back at home on American terrain. Saudi Arabia also reportedly summoned United States Vice President Dick Cheney to Riyadh to inform him of this likely course of action, and presumably to influence whatever action the Bush administration intended to take in Iraq. (See below for details on this matter.)

## The Historic Death Toll

In May 2006, the government of Iraq said that the number of people dying violently in Baghdad was increasing. The main mortuary of the capital apparently received 1,400 bodies in May alone. There were fears that news of this disturbing trend would further enflame sectarian tensions. The record was hardly improved by mid-2006. As noted above, by October 2006, there had been a disturbing surge in the already-high rate of deaths in Iraq. Reports estimated that an average of 100 people were dying per day in violence across Iraq -- a rate that would suggest around 3,000 deaths in a single month.

As a result of the upsurge in violence, the United Nations refugee agency, known by the acronym UNHCR, said that tens of thousands of Iraqis were fleeing the country. In the latter part of 2006, the UNHCR said that in addition to the record number of Iraqis seeking asylum outside the country's borders, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were fleeing violent areas and were now essentially displaced within their own country. While media attention has been focused on the episodes of violence, it has not captured the steady stream of Iraqis out of the country in what could only be described as a mass exodus.

The media was also failing to capture the exponentially-increasing number of internally displaced Iraqis, which was estimated at about 300,000 since February of 2006.

The issue of the death toll in Iraq was also the subject of great consternation. In October 2006, the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health estimated that an astronomical 655,000 civilians had died in Iraq since the start of the war in 2003. United States George W. Bush's supposition that only 30,000 civilians had died since 2003 seemed at odds with these latest findings. Indeed, the findings of this particular research, published in the British medical publication, the Lancet, have been disputed by advocates of the war, who claimed that the methodology was flawed.

For its part, the Lancet noted that the report was recommended by four expert peers with few revisions. Meanwhile, in an interview on the Pacifica Network's morning program, Democracy Now, co-author Les Roberts noted that the cluster methodology was the standard practice for research in poor countries, and that it was the same methodology used by the United States government following wars in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Further, Roberts noted that the United States Smart Initiative program was expending millions of dollars annually for the purpose of teaching humanitarian workers how to use the same method for estimating mortality rates.

The cluster methodology entailed the use of mortality rates before and after the 2003 invasion from 47 areas in Iraq.

Essentially, the research looked at the total number of deaths from early 2002 onward and found that 13 percent of the deaths took place in the period of 14 months before the invasion, while 87 percent ensued in the 40 months following. Extrapolating that trend nationwide would mean that there was an increase in annual death rates from 5.5 per 1,000 to 13.3 per 1,000. As such, 2.5 percent of Iraq's 25 million citizens were believed to have died in the last three-and-a-half years.

Iraq's government in November 2006 offered its own calculation about the numbers of deaths that took place. Indeed, it estimated that the number of people killed in the years since the United States-led invasion was more than 100,000.

Also in November 2006, the United Nations issued a statement noting that violent deaths among Iraqi civilians reached record highs in recent months due to sectarian attacks.

Not all deaths in Iraq were the result of sectarian violence. Journalists and media staff have also been victims of violence. In some cases, journalists have been kidnapped and/or killed by anti-Western terrorist factions operating in Iraq. As well, journalists and media personnel have been the unfortunate casualties of coalition forces. For example, in 2003, British journalist Terry Lloyd shot in the head and killed in the southern town of Basra. In 2006, a British inquest found that his death at the hands of United States soldiers was unlawful. It was unclear how the United States authorities would respond. Nevertheless, the media rights group, "Reporters Without Borders," has warned that there were more journalists and media staff killed in Iraq [over 65] -- since the start of the war in 2003 than during the entire 20 year conflict in Vietnam. From 1955 to 1975, 63 journalists and / or press corps were killed in Vietnam. In the former Yugoslavia, 49 journalists were killed doing their job over the course of four years from 1991 to 1995. In the civil war in Algeria, 57 journalists and 20 media assistants were killed during the period of 1993 to 1996. Iraq has thusly gained the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous place on earth for journalists in recent memory.

#### The Trial of Saddam Hussein

In other developments, former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein said that he was willing to sacrifice himself in the interests of the Arab people, and for the purpose of ending the foreign occupation. In a letter reportedly delivered by the International Committee of the Red Cross and heavily redacted by the United States military, Saddam Hussein wrote, "I sacrifice my soul and very existence to the Arab cause and liberation of our homeland from foreign liberation." As resistance to the foreign occupation of Iraq has grown, Saddam Hussein has increasingly been viewed more positively among certain Arab factions. The former Iraqi leader's trial was set to begin in October 2005. He was charged with crimes against humanity.

October 2005 marked the start of the trial of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. The former Iraqi leader challenged the very legitimacy of the court but nonetheless entered his "not guilty" plea. The trial was then adjourned until late November 2005. Hussein's lawyers wanted more time to prepare his case, however, the postponement was actually due to problems with witness attendance.

Meanwhile, despite the reports about tight security around the court where the trial was taking place, Sadoun Nasouaf al-Janabi, an attorney defending a co-defendant of Saddam Hussein, was seized by gunmen from his office in Baghdad. His body was later found outside the Firdous mosque with a gunshot wound to his head. Janabi's client, Awad Hamed al-Bandar, had been a judge during Saddam Hussein's regime.

For its part, the Iraqi government condemned the killing. Nevertheless, the killing of Janabi sparked questions about whether or not it would be possible for Hussein and other former Ba'athist Party officials to have fair trials. Indeed, Abdel Haq Alani, an Iraqi attorney living in the United Kingdom who has acted as a defense strategist for Saddam Hussein, said: "This incident has proved what we've been all along saying, that there could be no fair trial in Iraq at this time, there could never be a fair and just trial simply because there's no authority. Meanwhile, Badie Izzat Aref, an attorney for former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who is also expected to face trial, asked: "If they can't protect lawyers, how are they going to defend their clients, and how will witnesses dare to come before the tribunals?" Echoing these sentiments, Miranda Sissons, a principal with the International Center for Transitional Justice expressed the need for an effective witness protection program for this trial.

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Some observers pointed to the fact that several judges and attorneys associated with the trial of Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants were kept anonymous, however, the identities of the defense teams were not kept secret, despite threats to many of them. In the aftermath of the murder of Janabi, the Iraqi authorities offered to provide protection to defense attorneys.

A month later in November 2005, another lawyer for one of Saddam Hussein's co-defendants, Abdel al-Zubeidi, was killed when gunmen opened fire on the car in which he was driving. The other passenger in the care, Thamer Hamoud al-Khuzai was injured.

In the aftermath of the murder of lawyers defending the former Iraqi president, Iraqi police apprehended eight Sunni Arabs in Kirkuk for allegedly plotting to kill the investigating judge, Raed Juhi, who prepared the case against Saddam Hussein. With parties on either side plotting to carry out assassinations against those believed to be their enemies, the trial became increasingly shrouded in secrecy, in order to preserve security.

The trial of Saddam Hussein resumed in late November 2005 with the arrival of for United States Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who was expected to help build a case for the defense.

In early 2006, Judge Rizgar Amin offered his resignation from the trial of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein following criticisms by the public that he was being too lenient with the former Iraqi leader in court.

In late January 2006, Saddam Hussein exited the court room just after his defense team walked out. The incident occurred after the new chief judge, Raouf Abdul Rahman, removed a co-defendant -- the half-brother of Saddam Hussein, Barzan al-Tikriti -- from the courtroom. The trial proceeded despite the absence of half of the defendants.

In March 2006, the testimony by three of Saddam Hussein's co-defendants regarding the 1982 massacre of close to 200 Shi'ites in Dujail received scant attention in the media amidst the coverage of widespread bloodshed and relentless attacks.

In June 2006, another member of Saddam Hussein's defense team -- senior attorney Khamis al-Obeidi -- was shot dead. His death added to the dismal record of security for the defense team.

The trial of Saddam Hussein was ongoing in early July 2006 even though the former Iraqi leader and his lawyers announced that they would boycott the trial unless security was improved. The call for improved security was motivated by the murders of various members of the defense team. While closing defense arguments commenced on July 10, 2006, Saddam Hussein, some co-defendants, as well as the defense lawyers, did not appear in court.

In late July 2006, Saddam Hussein, was taken to hospital as a result of his deteriorating health conditions, which was brought on by a hunger strike. Iraq's former leader commenced the hunger strike earlier in the month to protest the murder of one of his lawyers and the poor security provided to his defense team.

Three members of the defense team had been assassinated during the course of the trial.

Also in July 2006, while in court, Saddam Hussein requested that if he were to be found guilty and sentenced to death, he wished for his mode of execution to be by firing squad -- consistent with the typical soldier's execution in Iraq.

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In September 2006, the prosecution accused the presiding judge of being lenient with the former Iraqi leader and called for his resignation. A day later, the same judge -- Abdullah al-Amiri -- dismissed the label "dictator" in its application to Hussein. Such a position was expected to underscore the claim of the prosecutor. Indeed, soon thereafter an announcement was made stating that the judge would be replaced by Muhammad Oreibi al-Khalifa. The new judge promptly asserted his power by dismissing Saddam Hussein for failing to remain seated as quiet as directed. Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants themselves said that they would boycott the trial. Then, only days after being appointed as the new judge for the trial, Muhammad Oreibi al-Khalifa's brother-in-law, Khadem Abdul Hussein, was shot to death.

The trial ended soon thereafter and attention turned to the conviction and sentencing stage, which was scheduled for early November 2006. On November 5, 2006, Saddam Hussein and his cohorts were convicted of the killing of 148 people in the Shi'a town of Dujail. As expected, the former Iraqi leader was sentenced to death by hanging for crimes against humanity.

Two other key members of Saddam Hussein's regime -- his half-brother Barzan al-Tikriti and the country's former chief judge Awad Hamed al-Bandar -- were also sentenced to death by hanging. Taha Yassin Ramadan, Iraq's former vice-president was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Three senior Ba'ath Party officials -- Abdullah Kadhem Ruaid, Abdullah Rawed Mizher, and Ali Daeem Ali -- were sentenced to 15 years in prison. Mohammed Azawi Ali, a local official from Dujail, was acquitted.

Prior to the reading of his sentence, one of his lawyers, Ramsey Clark, was dismissed from the court room after a disagreement with the judge. During his sentencing, Saddam Hussein decried the legal process and the United States-led occupation of Iraq, saying loudly and repeatedly, "God is Great! Long live Iraq! Long live the Iraqi people! Down with the traitors!"

With the conviction and sentencing completed, Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants had 10 days to issue their legal right to appeal. Following the completion of the appeals process, those convicted to death by hanging were expected to be executed within 30 days.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said the sentence was deserved and noted that the verdict represented the end to a dark era of Iraqi history. United State President George W. Bush hailed the verdict as a "milestone" for Iraq. European Union countries called for reconciliation and expressed their opposition to the death sentence for Hussein.

Some critics characterized the trial as a "kangaroo court" of sorts, aimed at assuaging victims but without proper adherence to jurisprudence, while human rights groups condemned the fact that the defense team was not provided with proper security. Nevertheless, on the streets in Iraq, despite a lockdown in Baghdad, there were some celebrations in Shi'a areas, such as Sadr City, while clashes ensued in areas dominated by Sunnis, such as Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit.

The execution of Iraq's former leader, Saddam Hussein, appeared imminent at the close of 2006. With his final appeal rejected, Saddam Hussein could be hanged at any time within 30 days, in keeping with the sentence rendered at his trial for the killing of Shi'ites at Dujail in 1982. Although the appeals process drew to a close even as his second trial was ongoing, his execution could be carried out regardless of the progress in other cases before the court. The execution date was not disclosed, however, Iraqi law required that the death sentence against the former Iraqi leader be carried out by the 30 day deadline.

While the Bush administration in the United States hailed the prospective death sentence as an important and positive development for Iraq, various countries across the world called for clemency instead. India warned that the execution of Saddam Hussein would delay the peace process in Iraq, while the European Union (EU) decried the death sentence itself.

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In the early hours of December 30, 2006, Saddam Hussein was executed. Initial reports suggested that members of Iraq's predominantly Shi'ite community were jubilant over news of the death of the former Iraq leader.

The situation took a rather bizarre turn when video footage taken by a mobile telephone camera of the execution surfaced in the public purview. In that footage, it was revealed that the execution was far from a sober affair whereby justice was served in the context of law and order. Instead, the former Iraqi leader was the recipient of taunts and mocking, with many of those present chanting the name of the leader of one of Iraq's violent Shi'ite militias -- Muqtada al-Sadr. The video footage also depicted Saddam Hussein appearing incredulous at the level of impropriety as he was being prepared for execution.

Days later, attention turned to the increasing outrage of Iraq's Sunnis. They were already angered by the fact that the execution appeared to have ensued in a rather hurried manner -- only days after Saddam Hussein's conviction and sentence were upheld by an appeals court.

Their anger was also not helped by the fact that the timing of the execution coincided with Sunni celebrations of Eid al-Ahda. Not only was the execution an affront to their religious custom, but it also appeared to be in violation of Iraqi law, which prevented executions from being carried out on days of religious significance. Now, the aforementioned video footage only served to infuriate them further.

Across Iraq, protests were reported in Sunni-dominated areas. In Samara, Sunnis broke the locks off a well-known Shi'ite shrine, which had already suffered damage due to the sectarian violence plaguing the country. In Sunni enclaves of Baghdad, mourners praised both the former Iraqi leader and the Ba'ath Party. In Dor, to the north of Baghdad, a giant mosaic of the former Iraqi leader was dedicated. In Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit, sheep were slaughtered in sacrifice to the former leader, while the town's mosque was decorated by condolence cards that were sent from as far as southern Iraq and neighboring countries.

There was intensifying anxiety that Sunnis, who had at one time only sympathized with the insurgency, would now take a more involved role in the conflict. Indeed, the intensity of the post-execution protests suggested that the insurgency was likely to take another dire turn for the worse.

### The United State Policy in Iraq

December 2006 saw the release of the findings of the Iraqi Study Group (ISG) -- a blue bipartisan panel led by former United States (U.S.) Secretary of State James Baker and former United States Congressman Lee Hamilton -- which was intended to offer suggestions about United States policy regarding Iraq. Should the U.S. "stay the current course," as suggested by the Bush administration, or, should another path be considered, as touted by key Democrats including incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi? The much-anticipated report assailed the Bush administration's policies and handling of Iraq. It also warned that the situation on the ground in Iraq was rapidly devolving and that there was limited time left to reverse the dire situation. Key aspects of the ISG assessment included the following suggestions:

1. U.S. efforts in Iraq should be shifted from a primarily combat role to one of support and training of Iraqi forces
2. Withdrawal of all U.S. combat brigades not needed for force protection from Iraq by 2008
3. No open-ended commitments regarding the presence large numbers of U.S. forces in Iraq
4. Imposition of consequences if Iraq fails to strengthen its security situation
5. Dialogue with members of former regime, aimed at national reconciliation
6. Dialogue with regional powers, such as Iran and Syria, aimed at stemming the violence and preserving geopolitical stability in the Middle East

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Although U.S. President George W. Bush said that he would "seriously consider" the findings of the ISG assessment, he quickly foreclosed the possibility of unconditional dialogue with Iran and Syria. As well, he seemed to reject the notion that the U.S. combat role in Iraq should be phased out. That said, following a meeting with congressional leaders in Washington D.C., Bush said that he would work with all parties to forge "a new way forward" in Iraq. To this end, Bush was expected to meet with senior State Department and military officials, and also to consult with the U.S. ambassador to Iraq as well as external experts.

Meanwhile, the leader of Iraq's Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani, criticized the ISG for being "unrealistic and inappropriate." He was particularly negative about the notion of involving regional powers and cautioned against weakening Kurdish autonomy. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani echoed Barzani's criticisms. At the same time, he specifically rejected the idea that the U.S. should withdraw its troops if Iraq failed to strengthen security. He also rejected the notion of reconciliation talks with former regime members.

Earlier, however, Talabani had expressed support for the idea of talks with Iran and Syria. Talabani also objected the tenor of the report, which he said treated Iraq as if it were a colony of the U.S., subject to the imposition of external will.

In the aftermath of the dissemination of the assessment by the Iraq Study Group (ISG), United States (U.S.) George W. Bush delayed making any major decisions on Iraq until early 2007. Bush made clear that he would not be rushed into making any key decisions regarding his Iraq policy. In this regard, he said, "I will not be rushed into making a difficult decision, a necessary decision." Bush said that one reason for the delay was that he wanted to give his incoming Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, some time in the position before being required to provide his insights.

There were some suggestions that Bush also wanted more time to consider the findings of three internal reviews that were still being carried out.

Earlier, as noted above, Bush had offered limited commentary about the ISG assessment, although he summarily foreclosed two of its key recommendations: dialogue with neighboring countries, including Iran and Syria, as well as the phasing out of the combat role for U.S. forces in Iraq. His Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, also rejected the notion of dialogue with Iran and Syria. As such, there was no comprehensive sense of what Bush's new strategy would be, and how radical a shift he was willing to make.

In interviews with the media, Bush said that he would not relinquish the objective of making Iraq into a stable democracy. Bush also made clear his intent to reject any "ideas that would lead to defeat," and reiterated his objection to "leaving before the job is done." As such, whatever policy he ultimately put forth was unlikely to include provisions for any substantial reduction in troop deployments. It was a stance unlikely to be met with resounding support by the incoming Congress, which would be dominated by Democrats, or with the American public who were becoming increasingly opposed to United States involvement in Iraq.

In another development, Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona called for more United States troops to be deployed to Iraq to control the violent sectarian conflict raging in that country. McCain's remarks came just as President Bush was warning that he would not be rushed into making new decisions about Iraq, and as he was indicating that troop reduction was unlikely to be part of his plan.

McCain, a 2008 presidential hopeful, said that he agreed with the Iraq Study Group's (ISG) assessment that the situation in Iraq was dire. However, he broke with the suggestions outlined by the ISG in calling for the deployment of approximately 30,000 more United States troops to Iraq, for the purpose of helping with the stabilization of that country. To that end, McCain, who was visiting Iraq to assess conditions personally, said, "The situation is very, very serious. It requires an injection of additional troops to control the situation and to allow the political process to proceed."

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Bush subsequently said that he would issue statements about his policy on Iraq in early 2007. There were expectations that Bush's policy would be in line with the Mc Cain doctrine of escalation. Such a move would be at odds with some of the key suggestions put forth by the ISG assessment.

In a related development, polling data from the Military Times showed that only 38 percent of active duty troops agreed with the notion of escalation in Iraq. The polling data also found that only 35 percent of military personnel approved of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq -- a distinct shift from previous assessments showing strong military support for Bush's approach to Iraq. As well, the polling data showed that only 41 percent of military forces now believed that the United States should have gone into Iraq in the first place -- a significant reduction from 65 percent in 2004.

On January 10, 2007, Bush delineated the details of his new plan for Iraq. As expected, Bush said that there would be an escalation of United States forces in Iraq. Bush said that his government was committing an additional 21,500 troops to Iraq, most of whom would be deployed to Baghdad, for the purpose of working with Iraqi troops to secure the volatile capital. About 4,000 marines, however, were to be sent to the restive al-Anbar province, which Bush said functioned as a de facto base for al-Qaida operatives.

Bush called on Congress to provide an extra \$6.8 billion to cover the cost of the plan -- most of which would be used to pay for the new deployment, but some of which would be used to fund reconstruction and development in Iraq.

Bush also noted that the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had to do its part to advance progress and security. He explained that a number of benchmarks had been set against which progress by the Iraqi government would be measured. These benchmarks included legislation to share oil revenue among competing factions, an easing of de-Ba-athification policies, and further responsibility for security by Iraqi forces.

Bush additionally addressed the relationship between the United States and the Iraqi government of Prime Minister al-Maliki. To this end, Bush said that he had warned the Iraqi government that United States involvement was not open-ended, but he stopped short of discussing a possible timetable for redeployment.

The United States president then directed his speech to the citizenry of his country. Bush said that, much like the vast majority of Americans, he believed the situation in Iraq to be unacceptable. For the first time, Bush also acknowledged that mistakes had been made in Iraq, and he claimed responsibility for those failings. Furthermore, he warned Americans that "trying" times were in the offing, and he suggested that victory would not be claimed in the fashion of previous generations at war.

Absent from his speech was any suggestion that he would negotiate with Iran and Syria, whom he instead blamed for firing the fuel of discord in Iraq. In fact, he appeared to have issued a subtle threat to both countries, indicating that United States forces would work to disrupt their efforts to assist insurgent groups functioning in Iraq. At the regional level, however, Bush noted that United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would travel to the Middle East to build support for Iraq's government.

Bush's decision to increase the United States military presence in Iraq was met with strong opposition in the Democratic-led Congress, among key members of the military, and within the American public at large. In Iraq, the Bush plan was met with skepticism as many Iraqis did not think it would substantially improve their situation. While the proposal for economic development was met with a bit more positive feedback, it was mitigated by strong levels of either ambivalence or antagonism about the increased presence of United States troops in Iraq. The reception to the plan was no better in other regions of the world, with many editorial boards of newspapers and politicians from various countries expressing strong reservations about the positive effects of a singularly military strategy, bereft of diplomatic measures and political solutions.

Days after officially declaring his new plan for Iraq, President Bush was interviewed on the American television network, CBS.

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The president expressed his enduring belief that going to war in Iraq was the right course of action. He said, "I am proud of the efforts we did. We liberated that country from a tyrant. I think the Iraqi people owe the American people a huge debt of gratitude, and I believe most Iraqis express that. I mean, the people understand that we've endured great sacrifice to help them." Bush was resolute in his view that more troops needed to be deployed to Iraq. He said, "There's not enough troops on the ground right now to provide security for Iraq, and that's why I made the decision I made." The president also noted that congressional opposition would not stop him from following through with his decision to increase the United States military presence in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration appeared to issue a warning to Iran. During their respective media appearances, Bush expressly described Iran as being a threat to world peace, saying, "Failure in Iraq will embolden the enemy. And the enemy is al-Qaeda and extremists. Failure in Iraq would empower Iran, which poses a significant threat to world peace." For his part, Cheney admonished Iran for allegedly meddling in Iraq's affairs.

The latest references to Iran came on the heels of the detainment of five Iranian nationals in Irbil. The United States claimed that the five Iranians were linked with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (also known as the Pasdaran), and accused them of providing arms and training to Shi'a insurgents operating in Iraq. However, Iran said that the five detainees were diplomats working in an Iranian liaison office. The Iranian government responded to the situation by warning that the incident could evolve into a diplomatic imbroglio if the five individuals were not immediately released. The Iranian government also noted that it was seeking compensation for damage to the liaison office, which was raided and from which the five men were seized.

For its part, Iraq's government reacted with caution. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said that his country was becoming the terrain for outside forces to advance their own agendas. He said that while his country valued its close ties with the United States, Iraq has its own national interests to satisfy. To this end, he said, "We fully respect the views, policies and strategy of the United States, which is the strongest ally to Iraq, but the Iraqi government has national interests of its own. We can't change the geographical reality that Iran is our neighbor."

On January 28, 2007, Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, delineated the details of a plan to strongly expand his country's economic and military ties with Iraq. He noted that Iran was prepared to offer its neighbor military training, equipment and advisory staff in order to bolster Iraq's efforts in "the security fight." As well, Qumi said that Iran was ready to bear greater responsibility as regards Iraq's economic reconstruction. Qumi's remarks were made in an interview at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, which was published by the New York Times.

The Iranian ambassador also addressed the detainment of Iranians by United States forces weeks earlier, acknowledging for the first time that they were, indeed, security officials.

Qumi explained that the Iranian security officials were in Iraq to meet with counterparts in the context of a bilateral agreement to resolve security. As such, he argued that the Iranians should never have been detained in the first place. Additionally, Qumi dismissed United States claims that Iranians were involved in the orchestration of attacks against Iraqi and American forces.

For its part, however, the United States has maintained the view that there is a mountain of evidence pointing toward Iran's support for militants inside Iraq, even providing bombs and weaponry. United States President George W. Bush warned that his country's forces would "respond firmly" in response to Iran's alleged activities in Iraq. Bush also said, "It makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troops or stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them," His words appeared to be evidence of the growing and very public standoff between Washington and Tehran. Bush additionally responded to the Iranian ambassador's plan to expand ties with Iraq with skepticism.



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In mid-February 2007, the United States (U.S.) accused the Iranian leadership of providing Shi'a militias in Iraq with bomb-making material used to create "explosively formed penetrators" (EFPs). The U.S. claimed that some of its own troops had been killed as a result of these armor-piercing roadside bombs, which could be traced back to material originating in Iran. It also accused Tehran of providing mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades. The U.S. said that its report was being advanced only after weeks of preparation and revision of the evidence by the military.

For its part, Iran denied the accusations, suggesting that materials could have been garnered by any party on the black market. As well, Iran disparaged the U.S. record of reliability with a Foreign Ministry spokesperson saying,

"Such accusations cannot be relied upon or be presented as evidence. The United States has a long history in fabricating evidence. Such charges are unacceptable."

Meanwhile, Iraq reacted with dismay to the fact that it was increasingly caught in the war of words between Iran and the United States. As such, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki called on both parties to deal with their hostilities outside of Iraq. To this end, he said, "We have told the Iranians and the Americans, 'We know that you have a problem with each other, but we are asking you, please solve your problems outside Iraq.' "

On February 21, 2007, British Prime Minister Blair announced the withdrawal of some troops from Iraq over the course of the following months. He said that the 7,100 British troops serving in southern Iraq would be reduced to 5,500 and he hoped that another 500 troops could leave by late summer. He expected the remaining troops to stay in Iraq until 2008. Prime Minister Blair defined a new objective for British troops in Iraq, saying that they would be expected to provide requisite support for Iraqi forces and securing the borders. He also made clear that Iraqis would write the next chapter" in their country's history.

The announcement by the British prime minister was soon followed with news that the few Danish troops operating in Iraq would also be withdrawn. As well, Lithuania said that they were considering the removal of their troops from Iraq.

Even as the news from these three countries was being made public, the United States was moving to increase its troop presence in Iraq under President George W. Bush's controversial plan for escalation. For its part, the United States characterized Blair's announcement as a positive sign of success in Iraq. Still, the fact of the matter has been that the last year has seen an exodus of coalition troops from Iraq, as the war in that country has become ever more unpopular across the globe. Indeed, troops remaining in Iraq from countries belonging to the coalition numbered few in comparison with their United States counterparts. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to criticism of the dwindling presence of foreign forces in Iraq by saying that the coalition "remains intact."

On March 8, 2007, the United States (U.S.) commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, said that there was no military solution to ending the rampant violence plaguing Iraq. Petraeus warned that military force bereft of political action could not quell the violent insurgency in Iraq. To that end, he suggested that the prospect of peace rested on political engagement with militant and insurgent groups. He also noted that there was no immediate need for further U.S. troops in Iraq.

Still, he said that those troops already committed to the ongoing effort would remain in place for several months.

A day before General Petraeus' assertion that there was no immediate need for further U.S. troops in Iraq, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced plans to send almost 5,000 additional troops to Iraq. The additional troops were expected to serve in various capacities, including that of military police.

Soon thereafter, President Bush requested \$3.2 billion to pay for 8,200 more U.S. troops to fight wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This request was made in addition to the troops and funding requested for the escalation in Iraq announced at the start of 2007. In conjunction with the buildup of 21,500 troops in Iraq, which was announced by the Bush administration in January 2007 as part of the escalation strategy, the total number of additional troops deployed to Iraq would top 26,000.

Democrats in both house of the United States (U.S.) Congress advanced legislation to force a deadline on the redeployment of troops operating in Iraq. Democrats set a deadline of August 2008, or even sooner, if key benchmarks measuring progress were not met. The White House threatened to veto such legislation, if it were to pass.

By April 2007, both houses of the Democratic-led Congress of the United States (U.S.) passed legislation containing war funds as well as a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, starting later in 2007. While the legislation mandated the start of the redeployment of U.S. troops -- pending certification of progress on disarmament of militias -- in 2007, the bill did not call for a complete withdrawal. It advised such an end should take place in 2008, but it allowed that troops could remain in Iraq subsequently to work on counter-terror missions and to train Iraqi security forces.

U.S. President George W. Bush responded by reiterating his threat to veto the legislation because of the inclusion of both the timetable for withdrawal, as well as a litany of spending initiatives. Bush called on Congress to send him a "clean" bill instead and invited legislators to the White House to discuss proposals for new legislation, which would not include the provisions he deemed to be problematic. With the Democratic-led Congress unlikely to sustain enough votes to override the presidential veto, such an end appeared imminent. Nevertheless, congressional leaders pushed forward with the legislation, with key members of the Senate saying that they hoped that the bill would arrive on Bush's desk by early May 2007.

On May 2, 2007, United States President George W. Bush vetoed legislation by Congress linking funding for the war in Iraq with a timetable for the withdrawal of troops operating in that country. It was only the second time Bush had exercised his veto during his tenure in office. Bush said that the withdrawal timetable was kin to "setting a date for failure." Bush also said that he would veto further legislation from Congress of the same type and said that his surge strategy should be given an opportunity to succeed in Iraq.

Days later, eleven Republican legislators visited Bush at the White House and warned the president that he had lost credibility on the matter of Iraq. As well, several leading Republicans, including House Minority Leader John Boehner, warned that there was limited patience regarding United States military efforts in Iraq.

Late May 2007 saw United States President George W. Bush sign a new compromise bill containing war funding. This bill did not include a timetable for a United States troop withdrawal, as was the case for the legislation the president vetoed. Instead, it contained key benchmarks intended to measure progress by Iraqi leaders.

By mid-2007, amidst the ongoing escalation of United States troops in Iraq, which was intended to curb the prevailing climate of violence and bloodshed, the landscape took an ominous turn for the worse in mid-2007. On the first weekend in July 2007, more than 200 people died in various attacks across the country. In the background of these developments was the renewed clamor by Democrats in Congress for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq. This new push came as General Petraeus in Iraq said that the fight against insurgents could take

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years, and after key Republicans, such as Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana and Senator Domenici of New Mexico, expressed doubts about the sustainability of the war effort in Iraq.

On July 12, 2007, even as the United States (U.S.) House of Representatives voted in favor of the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, a new report was released depicting limited progress in improving the security situation in that country. The report portrayed Iraq as continuing to be plagued by ethno-sectarian violence and with local security forces unable to conduct operations without significant assistance from U.S. forces. Even more disturbing was the fact that the report noted that there had been a "slight reduction" from earlier months in the number of Iraqi security units deemed operating independently. This finding was a particular blow since a central aspect of the U.S. strategy in Iraq has focused on recruitment and training of Iraqi security forces. The report additionally suggested that Iraqi security forces often resorted to ethno-sectarian bias when carrying out justice; on the other side of the equation, there had been unsatisfactory progress in reducing politically-motivated accusations against the Iraqi authorities. The report additionally made clear that the benchmarks issued by the U.S. Congress had not been met, thus evoking questions about the success of the troop escalation plan touted by the Bush administration in the U.S.

In response to the report's findings, which appeared to issue "not satisfactory" grades for the majority of benchmarks and progress criteria, President George W. Bush characterized the report as a "mixed bag" and maintained the view that the fight in Iraq would continue as before with no change in sight. Democratic politicians in the U.S. issued criticisms of Bush's Iraq strategy and for being out of touch with the reality of both Iraq and public sentiment at home. Among the greater U.S. population base, public discontent with the war was at an all-time high of approximately 70 percent, with the majority of Americans saying that the war had been a mistake and a timetable for withdrawal was needed.

## Iraq's Landscape in 2007

A week after United States (U.S.) President George W. Bush announced an increase of American troops to Iraq, violence in that country continued unabated.

In mid-January, 2007, 142 Iraqis were killed or found dead on a single day. In one case, 65 students died in twin car bombings at a Baghdad university.

On January 19, 2007,

there were two reported combat deaths of U.S. troops in Nineveh and Anbar respectively.

On January 20, 2007, more than 25 U.S. troops were killed in military operations in Iraq. The heavy losses on January 20, 2007 were primarily due to the crash of a U.S. Black Hawk helicopter in Diyala. The cause of the crash was unknown, however, some reports suggested that hostile fire may have been responsible. Other deaths were blamed on attack by militias in Karbala, after attackers entered a secure area dressed in U.S. military garb in what appeared to be military vehicles. Still other deaths were blamed on roadside bombs in Baghdad and Nineveh. In the restive Anbar province, four U.S. soldiers and one marine were killed during combat.

The day was also deadly for Iraqis. Scores of Iraqis were also found dead across Iraq -- from Baghdad to Mosul -- with the bodies showing signs of torture by death squads.

A day later, a bomb exploded on a bus transporting people to work in a mainly Shi'ite area of Baghdad; seven people were killed and 15 others were wounded as a result of the attack. As well, a bomb in a car exploded outside a restaurant in eastern Baghdad, leaving one person dead and five people injured. A suicide car bombing in the northern city of Mosul left one woman dead and five other wounded.

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On January 22, 2007, bomb blasts across Iraq left over 100 people dead and close to 200 people injured. One of the bombs exploded in a busy Shi'ite marketplace north of Baghdad, while bombs exploded in a mainly Shi'ite commercial area of the capital city.

Meanwhile, U.S. and Iraqi forces were stepping up their efforts against Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army, which had earlier been aligned with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's ruling coalition in government. The capture of a senior aide to the radical cleric raised the ire of the group, further straining relations with al-Maliki, who promised the U.S. that he would crack-down on militias. Nevertheless, lawmakers loyal to al-Sadr announced an agreement whereby they would return to government -- both in parliament and in cabinet -- following a two-month boycott.

After the return of politicians aligned with Moqtada al-Sadr to government, the United States military said that during joint operations with Iraqi forces, it had detained 16 high level members of the radical Shi'a cleric's Mehdi Army, and had killed one commander. The announcement may have been intended to show progress in its hard-line approach to the group.

As well, parallel efforts by United States and Iraqi forces were being waged in the Dora neighborhood against an al-Qaida-linked Sunni militant group, known as the Omar Brigade. Other joint operations were being carried out against the Sunni-dominated neighborhood of Yarmouk.

On January 25, 2007, a bomb exploded at a central shopping district. The attack left 40 people dead and more than double that number injured.

A day later, a bombing at a popular pet market in Baghdad left at least 15 people dead and 35 others injured. The Ghazil market was the venue for the sale of dogs, cats, sheep, goats, birds and more exotic animals. This was the latest attack among several, which have targeted crowded market centers.

On January 27, 2007, twin suicide bombs exploded at a busy market in a Shi'a district of Baghdad. The attacks left more than a dozen people dead and over 50 people injured.

In another incident, eight employees of a computer company in Baghdad were abducted by kidnappers garbed in police uniforms.

Roadside bombs in the same time period killed three United States soldiers dead just north of Baghdad, two others in Diyala, and another two in east Baghdad.

Meanwhile, the United States military announced that an air strike on a building believed to be a hideout south of Baquba resulted in the deaths of 14 suspected insurgents.

On January 28, 2007, the holy city of Najaf was the site of fierce fighting for a full day between joint United States and Iraqi forces and a group of militants calling themselves "Army of Heaven." The governor of the province, Asaad Abu Gilel, explained that the clashes were sparked because the group was trying to attack Shi'a clerics and pilgrims celebrating the holy festival of Ashura. He also said that the group was well-equipped, even possessing anti-aircraft missiles.

Reports stated that three Iraqi soldiers were killed and 21 were wounded in the battle. United States officials said that one of its helicopters was shot down, leading to the death of two of its troops. That said, officials also noted that over 250 militants had died as the fighting raged on.

On the same day, several schools across Baghdad and Ramadi were attacked, leaving several children dead as a result of mortar fire and bombings. As well, a car bomb in the Sadr City district of Baghdad killed approximately four people. In Kirkuk, another bomb killed at least five people outside a warehouse.

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The day also saw the murder of a senior official in Iraq's Ministry of Industry ministry, when militants ambushed him as he drove to work, killing him, his daughter and two other people.

On January 30, 2007 at the close of the Ashura religious celebrations, scores of Shi'as were killed and close to 100 injured in two bombings in Iraq. In one case, a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body as worshippers gathered outside a mosque at Baladruz. In another case, a bomb that had been deposited into a garbage can exploded in the town of Khanaqin. Both of the two towns were home to a mixed population of Shi'as, Sunnis and Kurds.

At the start of February 2007, twin bombings at Hilla left over 45 people dead and over 100 injured.

Also in February 2007, joint United States (U.S.) and Iraqi forces were set to carry out an offensive operation aimed at bringing security to conflict-ridden Baghdad. The Iraqi government said that it intended to release the guidelines for the plan for the capital city.

With the new security strategy for Baghdad set to go forth, United States forces officials admitted that it had lost four of its helicopters in Iraq from late January through early February 2007 as a result of ground fire. Officials said that it was clear that they would have to use new tactics to deal with this threat, which indicated that insurgents might be using more sophisticated weaponry.

In other developments in Iraq, a market bombing in the al-Sadriya district of Baghdad on February 3, 2007, left at least 130 people dead and many more injured. It was one of the deadliest single-incident attacks since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The bodies were taken to the holy city of Najaf for burial.

A day later, attacks in Baghdad left at least 15 people dead including four policemen. As well, an ally of Shi'a extremist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was killed by gunmen in the southern city of Basra.

On Feb. 5, 2007, mortar attacks and car bombs killed over 30 people and wounded over 100 others across Baghdad.

A week later, Feb. 12, 2007 saw a suicide bombing close to a restaurant, and three car bombs at a marketplace in a Shi'ite enclave of Baghdad, kill at least 80 people in total.

On Feb. 18, 2007, three car bombs hit Shi'a districts of Baghdad killing more than 60 people in total. Twin explosions erupted in a market close to vegetable stalls and a row of electrical good shops respectively. A third blast erupted in Sadr City. The vast majority of casualties occurred in the twin attacks at the market.

The bombings occurred after border crossings between Syria and Iran were re-opened following a three-day closure. It was unknown if the re-opening of the routes across the borders may have contributed to the latest violence. Regardless, Iraqis responding to the attacks with outrage and questioned whether the new security plan, which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called "a brilliant success," was really in effect. As well, there was speculation about whether or not the radical Shi'a cleric and leader of the Mehdi Army, Moqtada al-Sadr, had really left Iraq for Iran ahead of the security crackdown.

A day later, on Feb. 19, 2007, Iraq was hit by a spate of violence that left more than 40 people dead on that day alone. In one case, a mortar attack killed around a dozen people in the Shi'ite area of Dora of the capital. Also in Baghdad, a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body in a public bus headed for the Karradah neighborhood, killing five people. In the Shi'a neighborhood of Zafraniyah, two bombs left eight people dead. Outside of Baghdad in Mahmoudiya, a car bomb exploded in an area housing a number of automobile repair shops; two people died and two people were injured as a result. The town has been inhabited mostly by Shi'ites with Sunnis living in surrounding villages. In Ramadi, a car bomb killed at least nine bystanders at a police checkpoint

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following a failed suicide attack. In Sunni-dominated Duluiyah, explosives attached to a car were detonated, killing at least four people.

Meanwhile, insurgents, including one suicide bomber, carried out an attack on a combat post to the north of Baghdad. The attack left two **United States** soldiers dead and 17 others wounded. In recent days, several **United States** soldiers were also killed. Two were killed during patrols earlier on February 17, 2007, others died while fighting in the restive Anbar province – a hotbed of Sunni insurgent activity.

On February 21, 2007, a car bomb exploded in the holy city of Najaf in central Iraq. The explosion was triggered by a suicide bomber at a policy checkpoint at a police checkpoint in Maydan Square close to the Old City.

At least 13 people were killed and dozens more injured as a result of the attack.

As a pilgrimage venue for Shi'a Muslims and as the site of the mausoleum of Imam Ali, Najaf has not only been distinguished as a particularly holy city among Shi'ites, but also as the home of noted clerics, including the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

A few days later, a car bomb exploded killing one person and injuring several others close to the Iranian embassy in Baghdad.

Also in the last week of February 2007, a female suicide bomber detonated herself at the mainly Shi'ite Mustansriyah University. More than 40 people were killed as a result. the university was the site of a spate of bombings a month prior in which 70 people died.

On February 27, 2007, the media reported that a suicide bombing at a soccer field in Ramadi on left at least 18 children dead. That report was subsequently retracted and deemed inaccurate. The mistake transpired due to confusion over two separate incidents -- an explosion at a soccer field and a suicide bombing the day before. There was, in fact, a controlled explosion at a soccer field, carried out by the **United States** military. About 30 people were injured in that incident, including nine children. The day before, on February 26, 2007, an attack ensued at a nearby village, where an imam had spoken against the group, al-Qaida in Iraq. More than 50 people died in that incident, including women and several children when a car bomb exploded outside the mosque.

Meanwhile, as the **United States** moved to increase its presence in Iraq and as a new security plan was being implemented, the radical Shi'ite, Muqtada al-Sadr, warned that the initiatives were doomed to failure. He said that despite the new efforts, "car bombs continue to explode" and he blamed the situation on **United States** involvement in Iraq.

Also in late February 2007, Ammar al-Hakim, the eldest son of a key Shi'a politician, was released from **United States (U.S.)** custody. The **U.S.** said that Hakim had been arrested because the convoy in which he was travelling appeared suspicious. The **U.S.** also said that Hakim had been treated with "dignity and respect." However, in a press conference after his release, Hakim disputed this claim saying that he was treated "rudely," and was both bound and blindfolded. Demonstrations of angry Shi'a Iraqis ensued in Najaf to protest Hakim's arrest and treatment.

Late February 2007 also saw the Iraqi leadership wrestle with life and death issues on a personal level. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani was taken to Jordan for medical care. There were conflicting reports about whether or not he had a heart attack. Also, one of the country's two vice presidents, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, and the minister responsible for Public Works, Riad Ghareeb, were both wounded after a bomb exploded during an official ceremony

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at the ministry. While the vice president's injuries were light, the cabinet minister was more seriously affected. Six others were killed in the attack.

In the first few months of 2007, scores of bodies were found on an almost daily basis in the capital alone, many showing the signs of torture -- the hallmark of sectarian hatred and violence. A spokesperson for the Interior Ministry said in an interview with the Associated Press that in the period of late January to early February 2007 alone, as many as 1,000 people had died in Iraq.

On March 2, 2007, the bodies of 14 slaughtered policemen were discovered in the streets of Baquba to the north of Baghdad. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki condemned their murders, and vowed to bring those responsible to justice. Earlier, an alliance of militant organizations had said that the missing policemen would have to be killed as a measure of retribution for the alleged rape of a Sunni woman. The accusation was emblematic of the deeper sectarian division plaguing the country. Sunnis have said that while the government has taken a hard-line position against Sunni insurgents, it has simultaneously ignored the human rights abuses carried out by Shi'ite dominated security units against Sunnis. In the background of these developments was the establishment of a new security plan, which included the deployment of predominantly Shi'ite police units in Sunni districts.

On March 4, 2007, a security crackdown was being implemented in the Shi'a stronghold of Sadr City within Baghdad. The operation was being carried out jointly by Iraqi and United States troops.

The action in Sadr City was part of an overall security crackdown, called "Operation Imposing Law," which would impact the whole country, while offering amnesty to insurgents interested in ceasing their violent activities.

On March 5, 2007, a suicide car bomb at a Baghdad market left 28 people dead and over 66 people injured. Those on the scene said they expected the death toll to rise. The attack took place in a mixed Sunni-Shi'a area and was centered in an area with several book stalls.

Also in early March 2007, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki indicated that a shuffle within his governing cabinet was imminent. There was speculation that the cabinet shuffle could center on the dismissal of six ministers with ties to radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr. These proposed changes were expected even as the government was carrying out the aforementioned security crackdown, called "Operation Imposing Law."

On March 9, 2007, the United States (U.S.) military said that it had captured 16 suspected insurgents, included one suspected al-Qaida leader. The local al-Qaida leader was among six people captured in Mosul, and was accused of being involved with several kidnappings, beheadings and other violent actions. Other suspected insurgents were captured in Fallujah and Karmah.

On March 10, 2007, Iraq played host at a conference intended to bring together regional and world leaders to discuss bringing stability to that country, and to prevent the spreading of sectarian violence across the Middle East region. The conference presented a rare chance for Iran and Syria to sit at the same discussion table with the United States, which has accused Iran and Syria of supporting militants and extremists operating in Iraq. All countries in attendance talked about ways to end the violence in Iraq. The conference resulted in Iran's statement that it backed efforts to stop the violence plaguing Iraq, while Syria said that it supported a "political solution" in Iraq. Also present at the meeting were other Arab countries, as well as the other permanent United Nations Security Council members -- Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom.

The convening of a stability conference in Iraq came at a time when Shi'ite pilgrims journeyed to the holy city of Karbala to celebrate the holy day of Arbayeen. The second week of March 2007 was thusly a bloody one -- with more than 170 Shi'ite pilgrims killed and close to 300 injured while making their way, mostly on foot, to Karbala.

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On March 11, 2007, a day after world and regional leaders met in Iraq to discuss the stability of that country, suicide bombers carried out attacks in Baghdad, killing approximately 30 people in total. In one incident, the target of attack was a truck transporting Shi'ite pilgrims in central Baghdad. In another incident, a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body while on a minibus. That attack, which took place near the Shi'ite stronghold of Sadr City within the Iraqi capital, left 10 people dead and several wounded.

Using a new tactic of attack and intimidation, Sunni insurgents set fire to the homes in the mixed Sunni and Shi'ite areas to the northeast of Baghdad during the same period.

In the third week of March 2007, three chlorine gas attacks were reported in Iraq. Trucks loaded with both explosives and chlorine were apparently detonated at their targets. Eight people were reported to have been killed as a result, and hundreds were injured including six United States (U.S.) troops.

Two of the attacks apparently took place close to Fallujah, while a third ensued in the vicinity of Ramadi; both locations were regarded as strongholds for al-Qaida in Iraq. There was some speculation that the attacks close to Fallujah were spurred by the fact that tribal leaders in the area had criticized al-Qaida in Iraq.

Coming a month after three similar chlorine in February 2007, there was a high degree of anxiety that the use of chlorine gas, which burns the throat and lungs of victims, and which can prove deadly after only a few breaths, could be a new weapon of choice.

Also in the third week of March 2007, United States (U.S.) authorities said that seven troops had been killed in recent days. In one case, a military vehicle was the target of a roadside bomb, which left four soldiers dead and a fifth soldier wounded on March 17, 2007. On that same day, an explosion in the capital of the province of Diyala left one soldier dead and five injured. As well, one U.S. marine was killed during fighting in the restive Anbar province.

On March 18, 2007, attacks in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left several people dead. In one incident, a car bomb at a market in the Shi'a district of Sadr City killed three people and injured at least seven others.

A day later, on the fourth anniversary of the start of the war, an explosion at a Shi'ite mosque in Baghdad left about eight people dead. On the same day, a series of car bombs in the oil-rich city northern of Kirkuk killed at least 12 people.

Meanwhile, four years after the start of the war in Iraq, General David Petraeus, the United States (U.S.) commander in Iraq expressed optimism over the ongoing security effort in Iraq.

Petraeus said that the extra brigades operating on the ground in Iraq had resulted in fewer sectarian attacks.

U.S. Defense Secretary gates also expressed satisfaction with the thrust of the new security plan.

Ironically, even as the United States (U.S.) commander in Iraq expressed optimism over the ongoing security effort in Iraq, a survey showed that a substantial number of Iraqis were pessimistic about their future prospects. The survey showed that only 18 percent Iraqis had confidence in U.S. and coalition troops, and only half expressed confidence in their country's government. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority -- 86 percent -- expressed serious anxiety about someone in their own household becoming a victim of violence. As well, 67 percent of respondents said that reconstruction efforts in Iraq had been ineffective. The results of the survey demonstrated a sharp disconnection with a previous study of Iraqi attitudes in 2005, which found a far more hopeful view of the future.



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Note: The survey, which polled more than 2,000 respondents, was conducted by D3 Systems and was commissioned by a consortium of media outlets including the BBC, ABC News, ARD and USA Today.

On March 22, 2007, an explosion in Baghdad disrupted a news conference led by

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and United Nations (U.N.) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. It was caused by either a mortar round or rocket landing just 330 feet (100 meters) from the building in the Green Zone of where the news conference was being held. The explosion left the U.N. chief unhurt but visibly shaken. It was his first visit to the Iraqi capital since taking office at the start of the year.

On March 23, 2007, double bomb attacks in Baghdad left nine people dead and 15 people injured, including Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Salam Zaubai. One attack was caused by a suicide bomber and the other was due to a car bomb. Both attacks were carried off successfully despite the fact that a vehicle ban was in effect for that particular day. The attacks ensued as Zaubai, who has been a member of the Accordance Front, the main Sunni political bloc, was leaving a mosque located close to his home. He was taken to a hospital and underwent surgery.

March 24, 2007 was one of the bloodiest days in Iraq since the start of a security strategy. More than 50 people were killed in a spate of attacks across the country. In one incident in the Sunni district of Doura in Baghdad, a suicide bomber drove a truck to a police station and detonated the explosives, some of which were hidden under bricks. The attack ultimately destroyed half the building, killed 20 people, and injured at least 25 others. Meanwhile, another suicide truck bomber killed eight people at a Shi'a mosque in Iskandariya to the south of Baghdad. As well, a suicide bomber at a market in Talafar -- in the northwestern part of Iraq -- killed 10 people. There were another three suicide attacks on the roadways to the Syrian border, which resulted in the deaths of about one dozen people and injuries to another 25 individuals.

In Haswa, to the south of Baghdad, a truck bomb killed four people. In Fallujah, a roadside bomb killed four Iraqi soldiers. Also in Fallujah, the bodies of 12 people were found.

On March 27, 2007, two truck bombs left more than 150 people dead and many more injured in the Iraqi town of Talafar. It was one of the deadliest days in Iraq since the start of the war. Days earlier, a suicide bomber killed ten people outside a pastry shop in the market in the same town. Ironically, United States President George W. Bush used the example of Talafar to cite progress on the security front in Iraq about a year earlier.

The same day saw the deaths of about 30 other people in other parts of Iraq. In one case, two women, believed to be nuns at the Cathedral of the Virgin in Kirkuk, were reported to have been stabbed to death. In Shi'a-dominated Abu Chir in southern Baghdad, a mortar attack left four people dead and 14 others wounded.

In Iskandariya, to the south of Baghdad, gunmen open fire on a Sunni funeral procession, killing four people. In Ramadi, a suicide car bomb targeted a restaurant and killed 15 people. Meanwhile, an ambush led to the killing of a leading Sunni insurgent, Harith al-Dari.

On April 2, 2007, a suicide truck bomb in Kirkuk left at least 13 people dead and dozens more injured. The attack appeared to have targeted a police station, although children at a nearby school were also among the casualties. A day later on April 3, 2007, 22 shepherds were abducted by gunmen in the desert located close to the city of Karbala.

On April 5, 2007, a United States military helicopter came under attack near Latifita, 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of Baghdad, and was brought down by heavy fire. Four people were confirmed to have been injured as a result. On that same day, eight coalition troops and 10 Iraqi soldiers died in attacks across the country. The Iraqis were

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killed during an attack by gunmen at a checkpoint in Mosul; four British troops were killed in a roadside bomb attack in western Basra; the Americans were killed in separate incidences in Baghdad.

In Ramadi on April 6, 2007, a truck loaded with chlorine and explosives was rammed into a police checkpoint. The bomb attack left at least 35 people dead and more than 50 injured. In Diwaniya, clashes between joint United States-Iraqi forces and militants from the radical Shi'a Mehdi Army, with high casualty numbers affecting both combatants and civilians. Diwaniya was the site of several killing in the early part of the month.

On April 8, 2007, an explosion in Mahmudiya, to the south of Baghdad, left close to 20 people dead and close to 30 wounded. Authorities said the explosion was caused by a car bomb, which apparently targeted those close to the militant Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr. For his part, Moqtada al-Sadr urged his backers to convene mass protests in the Shi'a holy city of Najaf to mark the fourth anniversary of the fall of Baghdad, and to call for the withdrawal of coalition troops from Iraq. On the same day, a car bomb in Ilam, an area in Baghdad, left five people dead and six injured. As well, six United States troops died in various attacks across Iraq.

On April 12, 2007, an attack was carried out on the Iraqi parliament. The suicide bombing resulted in the death of one parliamentarian and approximately 25 people injured. A day later, insurgents allied with the terrorist enclave al-Qaida in Iraq claimed responsibility, although there was no confirmation about the legitimacy of the statement. Regardless, the attack raised serious questions about how a suicide bomber was able to enter into the highly-fortified Green Zone of Baghdad at a time when a United States-led security strategy was ongoing.

In other developments, the Sarafiya bridge, one of Baghdad's main bridges linking the banks of the Tigris River, was hit by explosives a day earlier.

On April 14, 2007, a suicide car bombing in the holy city of Karbala killed at least 40 people and injured scores more. Women and children were among the dead. The attack ensued at a bus station close to a Shi'ite shrine and a crowded marketplace. Meanwhile, in Baghdad, another suicide car bombing killed 10 people. That attack took place close to a checkpoint at the Jadriyah bridge.

April 18, 2007 saw a string of attacks in Baghdad that left more than 180 dead. It was deemed the worst day of violence since the start of the highly-touted security operation, and spurred serious questions about whether or not the United States troop "surge" was actually curbing insurgent attacks. Ironically, this particularly deadly day in Baghdad came just as Prime Minister al-Maliki said that the authorities were hoping to transfer security responsibility to local forces -- on a "province by province" basis -- by the end of the year.

Among the string of attacks was the particularly bloody car bombing at a busy food market in the Shi'a-dominated Sadriya district, which resulted in the deaths of 120 people. Women and children made up a large portion of the victims. That same market had been hit by a bombing two months earlier and was in the process of being repaired. Meanwhile, a car bomb at a checkpoint in Sadr City killed 35 people, another car bomb at a hospital in Karrada killed around a dozen people, and a third bomb killed at least two people on a minibus. Two other attacks in Baghdad accounted for the rest of the deaths.

On the political front, by mid-April 2007, a cadre of lawmakers allied with radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, decided to quit the government. The implications for the stability of the government, or the effects on the dire security situation, were not yet known at the time of writing.

On April 22, 2007, the violence in Iraq took a strange twist when members of the Yazidi minority were murdered in the northern city of Mosul. The area, which has been inhabited by Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis -- an ancient sect of ethnic Kurds, has typically been marked by peaceful coexistence. However, that climate of calm changed in the village of Bashika where a Yazidi woman converted to Islam and eloped with a Sunni Muslim man. The woman's relatives responded by abducting the woman, returning her to the village, and stoning her to death. Sunni

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Muslims and village police called on the villagers to identify those responsible for her killing, but gained little cooperation. Then, in an apparent act of retaliation, a bus transporting workers was stopped, 23 Yazidis were identified, and then shot to death. The culprits were assumed to be Sunnis. The situation augured negatively for Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict, by adding another dimension of hostility and revenge killing.

On April 23, 2007, three separate car bombs in the Iraqi city of Ramadi left between 20 and 30 people dead. Civilians and police officers were among those killed. The day also saw blasts in the area of the Iranian embassy in the capital city of Baghdad. One person was reported to have died as a result.

Also in Baghdad, at least seven people died in a suicide attack close to the boundary of the Green Zone. A police station in Baqouba was also hit by blasts, killing at least ten people. Meanwhile, ten people died at the hands of a suicide bomber in Tal Uskuf, to the north of Mosul, just outside the office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. It was the first time the predominantly Christian town was hit by attacks since the start of the violent insurgency.

In addition to the long litany of people killed across Iraq on this bloody day, more than 150 people were reported to have been injured.

A day later, on April 24, 2007, Ramadi was again hit by violence when a suicide truck bombing killed at least 20 people and wounded 25 others. A suicide bomb attack at a military base close to Baqouba killed nine **United States** soldiers -- the highest number of ground deaths of American troops in one incident since late 2005. The area around the Iranian embassy was also the site of violence in Baghdad a day later when two bombs exploded, injuring at least four people. In a Baghdad suburb of Zafaraniya, there were at least a dozen casualties (four deaths included), as a result of a mortar attack. There was also another attack close to the boundary of the Green Zone. Roadside bombs and other such attacks elsewhere in Iraq also claimed further lives and caused injury. Meanwhile, at a Baghdad college for dental training, a bomb exploded in the locker of the son of the Minister of Electricity.

A few days later, three **U.S.** soldiers and two Marines died in the restive Anbar province during combat operations, and four more **U.S.** soldiers were killed as a result of roadside bombs to the south and south-west of Baghdad.

On April 28, 2007, the holy city of Karbala was the site of a powerful and bloody attack, which left at least 55 people dead and more than 70 people injured. The attack, which ensued close to the mosque of the Imam Abbas shrine with its famed golden dome, appeared aimed at people on their way to worship. Incensed by-standers railed at the police for failing to protect their fellow Iraqis, while others searched feverishly for relatives and friends in the unfolding chaos.

On May 1, 2007, Iraq's Interior Ministry said that Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, had been killed in an internal conflict involving extremists. Abu Ayyub al-Masri was the leader of the group since the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in an air strike in mid-2006. While officials appeared to have varying levels of confidence about claims of Masri's death, al-Qaida in Iraq issued a denial via an Internet statement.

On May 4, 2007, the **United States** military said that two other senior members of al-Qaida in Iraq had been killed during operations in the northern part of the capital, Baghdad.

A day later, 10 people were killed and 13 were injured as a result of a suicide bombing at an Iraqi army recruiting center on the outskirts the capital.

During the first week of May 2007, the bodies of several Iraqi police officers were found just outside the city of Baiji. As well, a roadside bomb in Kirkuk, which appeared to have been aimed at a police patrol, left one individual dead. In the Baghdad district of Yarmuck, a suicide bombing left a police officer dead, while a mortar round in the Bayaa district killed one woman.

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On May 8, 2007, United States forces in helicopters fired on suspected insurgents in the province of Diyala to the north-east of Baghdad. The attack, however, killed several children at an elementary school.

On May 10, 2007, the extremist group, Islamic State of Iraq -- seemingly a group operating under the aegis of al-Qaida in Iraq, announced that it had broadcast a video over the Internet, allegedly depicting the killing of nine Iraqi police and security personnel. The group had earlier threatened the deaths of the nice victims if Sunni Muslim women were not released from prisons in Iraq.

On May 13, 2007, at least 45 people were killed and dozens more wounded as a result of a suicide truck bombing in Makhmur in the Irbil Province in the north of Iraq. The attack was aimed at the office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party while a meeting was taking place. It was the second such attack in the Kurdish north in a short space of time. Days earlier, a truck bomb killed 14 people in Irbil. The back-to-back attacks in the Kurdish north came at a time while legislation was being drafted to redistribute oil revenue among the country's three ethno-sectarian groups.

In other violence during this period, a car bomb at a marketplace in the Sadriya district of Baghdad left at least 10 people dead and several more wounded.

Meanwhile, on May 12, 2007, three United States soldier were reported to be missing following an attack on their patrol. That attack killed four Americans on the patrol, as well as an Iraqi interpreter. A day later, the extremist group, Islamic State of Iraq, which was now operating in association with al-Qaida in Iraq, claimed responsibility for the attack. The group also warned that the three missing soldiers were now in its custody.

On May 16, 2007, a chlorine bomb attack at a marketplace in the village of Abu Sayda in Diyala left at least 32 people dead and more than 50 people wounded.

On May 18, 2007, the town of Samarra, which was under a curfew, was said to be suffering from a shortage of food and fuel. A shortage of power at the town's hospital was responsible for the deaths of four babies in incubators. Two patients in advanced years also died at the hospital. The town had been placed on a curfew following a bloody attack twelve days prior. Residents demanded that Iraqi authorities and United States forces end the curfew and associated restrictions so that supplies and aid could get into Samarra.

On May 19, 2007, the United States commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, claimed to know who was responsible for the capture of three American soldiers close to Mahmudiya less than a week earlier. He said that the kidnappers had connections to the terrorist enclave, al-Qaida. Petraeus also suggested that two of the three troops abducted might still be alive.

Meanwhile, the United States military said that the search for the missing troops was ongoing.

On that same day, several United States troops were killed during an attack by insurgents in Iraq. The United States military said on May 20, 2007 -- one day later -- that six soldiers and one interpreter were among those killed by a roadside bomb in western Baghdad. The soldiers and the interpreter were working on an operation to retrieve caches of weapons and bomb-making equipment.

On May 20, 2007, the United States military said that one soldier was killed and two were injured as a result of an explosion in Diwaniya, to the south of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, in other attacks, car bombs left five people dead in Baghdad, while a car explosion in the Shi'a area of Sadr City left four people dead. An explosion close to the office of the Ministry of the Interior killed one person and injured at least seven others. In the western part of the country, a truck exploded as it approached a police checkpoint just outside Ramadi. One policeman was killed and several others were injured as a result of the truck bomb, which authorities said involved the use of chlorine gas.

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On May 24, 2007, a body recovered from the River Euphrates to the south of Baghdad was identified as one of the three missing United States soldiers.

On that same day, a suicide bomber drove a car packed with explosives into a crowd of funeral mourners. The ensuing explosion killed at least 40 people and injured more than 70 others in Fallujah. The funeral was for a tribal leader, Allawi al-Isawi, who was working in an alliance with the Iraqi authorities to repel al-Qaida in Iraq. The incident suggested a high level of conflict between al-Qaida operatives and tribal elements in the Sunni-dominated province of Anbar.

In a separate incident in a Shi'a district of northern Baghdad, gunmen constructed a fake checkpoint where they stopped a bus and killed 11 passengers. The gunmen then concealed an explosive device among the bodies of the dead passengers, which detonated upon the arrival of police officers at the scene. The explosion resulted in the deaths of two more people and injuries to several others.

On the political front, Prime Minister Maliki named six new cabinet ministers to replace those who were aligned with radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, and who resigned several weeks earlier.

On May 25, 2007, the United States military reported the deaths of five soldiers in Iraq.

A day later, five separate attacks across Iraq led to the deaths of eight United States troops -- seven soldiers and one marine. In one incident, three soldiers were killed and two others were injured during a patrol in the province of Salahaddin to the north of Baghdad. The other deaths occurred in Baghdad and in the province of Anbar.

On May 28, 2007 -- Memorial Day in the United States -- ten American soldiers were reported to have been killed as a result of roadside bombings and a helicopter crash in Diyala. The same day saw two car bombings, which left 40 people dead and scores more injured, and also resulted in the destruction of a mosque in Baghdad.

A day later, five Westerners were reported to have been kidnapped from the Iraqi Finance Ministry office in Baghdad. The British Foreign Office subsequently noted that the five foreign nationals were British, and included a businessman and four bodyguards. As well on May 29, 2007, a bomb on a parked bus in central Baghdad left 38 people dead. A car bomb also exploded at congested marketplace in a Shi'a district.

Meanwhile, days earlier Moqtada al-Sadr, expressed support peace plan with Sunni factions for the purpose of reducing the country's ongoing ethno-sectarian strife, and in order to create a "united and democratic Iraq." The radical Shi'ite cleric also said that anger should instead be directed collectively against the United States occupation.

On May 31, 2007, a suicide bombing at a newly-opened police recruitment center in Falluja left 20 people dead and dozens injured. Ten policemen were among the dead. The suicide bomber wore a vest with explosives and managed to move beyond several security checkpoints before detonating the explosive device.

On June 1, 2007, mortar fire in the residential neighborhood of Umm al-Maarif in Baghdad left at least a dozen people dead, along with damage and destruction to homes and cars. After the initial mortar hit, a crowd gathered and were hit by the following three mortars, resulting in further deaths. Children were among the dead. Meanwhile, in the western part of the capital city, joint United States and Iraqi forces battled with suspected al-Qaida militants.

On June 3, 2007, roadside bombings in Iraq was said to have left 14 United States troops dead. A day later, the military identification for two of the soldiers abducted in Iraq earlier, were shown on an Islamic website. The authenticity of the identification was not immediately verified.

On June 5, 2007, a suicide car bomb in Amiriya close to Falluja left at least 15 people dead and more wounded at a marketplace. The attack appeared to have targeted al-Buissa elders belonging to a predominantly anti-al-Qaida

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tribe. The attack came after a **United States** security review admitted that despite its ongoing escalation of forces in Baghdad, there remained insufficient control of the capital's neighborhoods.

In another incident, an attempted suicide bombing was thwarted by police at a recruitment center. The would-be suicide bomber -- a woman -- was shot by police, however, the bullets then triggered the explosive belt strapped to her body.

On June 8, 2007, two car bombs close to Basra left at least 16 people dead and more than double that number of people injured. Women and children were among the dead. One bomb exploded at a bus station and another at a market.

Meanwhile, the day saw attacks allegedly by Shi'a militia men on two Sunni mosques in Baghdad. The violence forced many Sunnis to flee the area of the Rahman and Fataah Basha mosques. There was no comment from the predominantly Shi'a government regarding the situation. For their part, Sunnis have long complained that their mosques have been under threat and that the government has done little to resolve the situation.

As well, June 8, 2007 saw the murder of the wife of a senior police chief and the abduction of three of his children. Thirteen others were also killed in the attack on the home of Colonel Ali al-Jurani, the head of emergency police in Kanaan, located in the restive Diyala province.

On June 9, 2007, six civilian prisoners were killed and more than 50 were injured in an attack on a **detention** camp in southern Iraq. Also, reports on that day noted that at least 12 Iraqi soldiers were killed and 30 (mostly soldiers) were wounded as a result of a car bombing at a military base in Hilla.

In other violence, a car bomb in the Shaab neighborhood of the capital left two people dead -- including one policeman -- and 12 hurt. In the Adhamiyah district, an area under Iraqi army control, a car bomb killed two national police officers and wounded one. A third policeman was killed in the following small-arms fire.

In the Shi'a district of Baladiyat in Baghdad, a minibus was struck by a roadside bomb; seven people were killed and 12 injured as a result. Elsewhere in Iraq, one person was killed and four wounded as a result of a mortar in Fallujah. A mortar was responsible for the deaths of three people and injuries to five others in a residential neighborhood of

Salaheddin province.

Also on that day, **United States**-led coalition forces were carrying out raids on suspected al-Qaida in Iraq terrorists.

On June 10, 2007, a suicide bombing left seven Iraqi policemen dead and more than 36 wounded. The attack took place close to Tikrit, which was the home town of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein.

On June 13, 2007, Iraq's sacred al-Askar shrine in Samarra was bombed once again, resulting in the destruction of two golden minarets. The shrine, which is the site of the tombs of two revered imams, was attacked in 2006. Sunni **militants** aligned with al-Qaida in Iraq were believed to be responsible a year ago; it was not known if they were again to blame in 2007. The bombing of the shrine in Samarra in 2006 was widely believed to have escalated the ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq, ultimately resulting in the belief that the country had spiraled downward into a state of civil war.

Iraq's leading Shi'a cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, along with other political and religious figures, condemned the attack but called for restraint. To this end, Sistani's office issued a statement characterizing the bombing as a "heinous crime" while also urging people to refrain from responding with violence. As well, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said that Iraqis should "stand together against those who want to stir strife."

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Nevertheless, Iraqi authorities anticipated a violent backlash and following meetings with both Iraqi and United States security chief, Prime Minister Maliki said that an indefinite curfew would be established in Baghdad. As well, a state of emergency was declared in the holy city of Najaf, which was another site of a sacred shrine. More troops were also deployed to the streets, however, enraged Shi'a militias were already reported to be on the ground.

On June 19, 2007, a massive truck bomb in Baghdad killed at least 75 people and injured more than 200. The attack took place close to a Shi'a al-Khilani mosque in the commercial Sinak district of Baghdad. The attack ensued during a busy time of day when worshippers were leaving afternoon prayers, according to the imam, Sheikh Saleh al-Haidari.

The attack, with its sizable death toll, was able to be carried out despite the prevailing curfew, which had been instituted on the heels of the attack on the revered Shi'a mosque in Samarra only days before. Since then, a number of reprisal attacks against Sunni mosques and interests were ongoing.

Violence was not centered only on mosque attacks. In Nasiriya in the south of the country, more than 35 people died over the course of a few days, due to battles between Iraqi security forces and Shi'a militiamen loyal to the militant cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

In other developments, United States-led forces launched a major offensive operation against al-Qaida in Iraq militants around the city of Baquba in the province of Diyala -- a known "hot spot" of extremist Sunnis.

On June 21, 2007, the United States (U.S.) military announced that four attacks across the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in the space of two days had left at least 12 soldiers dead. In one case of a roadside bomb, five soldiers, three Iraqi civilians and one Iraqi interpreter were killed. In the west of the capital a bomb attack killed four soldiers. In two other strikes, three more soldiers were killed. There were also deaths of soldiers elsewhere in Iraq.

For example, in the Anbar province to the west, a bomb attack killed two soldiers.

On June 23, 2007, at least seven U.S. troops died as a result of roadside bombs and other attacks, while on patrol in Iraq. In one case, four soldiers and their Iraqi interpreter were killed as a result of a roadside bomb in the north-west of Baghdad. In the city center, a bombing and subsequent shooting left two soldiers dead and three injured. In Tikrit, a roadside explosion killed an airman.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military surge was ongoing, with major operations being carried out against insurgents and terror groups affiliated with al-Qaida in Iraq. The U.S. commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus said that he had expected increased attacks on U.S. forces by terror groups. In an interview with the newspaper, the Times, he said, "They wanted to make sure that the headlines about the launch of the offensive don't create too much hope." He also reiterated oft-made claims of the U.S. military that terrorists were crossing the border into Iraq from Syria, and that some extremist groups had links to Iran.

During the third week of June 2007, a suicide truck bomb destroyed homes and part of a local council office

in northern Iraq, close to Kirkuk, before leaving 15 people dead and 40 others injured. Women and children factored highly among the casualties.

On June 25, 2007, a suicide bombing at a hotel in central Baghdad left at least 12 people dead, and more than 15 people were injured.

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The attack took place in the lobby of the well-known Mansour Hotel, which has often been frequented by Westerners and Iraqi officials. Among the dead were six Sheikhs and a senior Sunni tribal leader from Iraq's Anbar province.

The tribal leader, Fasal al-Koud, was said to have had contact with the United States-led coalition in Iraq. It was believed that he was targeted because he, like many tribal leaders, had turned against radical Sunni groups and al-Qaida-like organizations operating in the region.

In the southern city of Hilla, an explosion outside the governor's office killed at least eight people; that attack appeared to have been aimed at police recruits. In the north of the country, a blast on an oil tanker at the headquarters for the police in Baiji killed at least ten people.

During this period of June 2007, a United States advisory team on patrol with Iraqi soldiers discovered more than two dozen emaciated children at an orphanage in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Images of the children were broadcast by the United States media company, CBS News. The children were naked, starving, and covered in their own excrement -- with some in such dire health that they were close to death -- despite the presence of sufficient food and clothes in the compound.

On June 28, 2007, a roadside bomb in Basra left three British soldiers dead and a fourth soldier seriously injured. A day later on June 29, 2007, five United States soldiers were attacked and killed while on patrol in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad; seven others on patrol were wounded as a result of a roadside bomb. That day also saw an oil pipeline to the south of Baghdad explode and ignite into a massive fire.

On June 30, 2007, the United States military said that it had carried out an offensive in Sadr City, killing 26 militants and detaining 17 others. But an Iraqi hospital said the death toll was smaller and included civilians in their homes. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki condemned the operation, which he said was carried out without permission from his government.

By late June 2007, a number of investigations and cases were in the offing involving the killings of Iraqis allegedly by United States soldiers. On June 30, 2007, two United States soldiers were charged with the murder of three Iraqis earlier in the year in Iskandariya. The soldiers were also charged with placing weapons by the bodies of the victims. The military released a statement saying that the soldiers were to be considered innocent until proven guilty.

Also at the close of June 2007, the United Nations Security Council voted to bring a close to the weapons inspections program that had been ongoing in Iraq for several years. Indeed, United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (Unmovic) had been established in 1999 to monitor the arsenal of former leader, Saddam Hussein, and to ensure that Iraq did not possess any weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Inspections by Unmovic permanently ceased in 2003 before the United States-led invasion, and the hunt for WMDs was then assumed by the United States-led Iraq Survey Group. To date, no such weapons were ever found in Iraq.

On July 2, 2007, a car bomb exploded at a market in northern Baghdad, resulting in the deaths of nine people and injuries to another 33. The area targeted in the Iraq was inhabited by a mix of ethno-sectarian groups.

On July 7, 2007, Iraq saw one of its bloodiest days since the United States-led invasion of that country in 2003. A truck bomb at a public market in the town off Armirli, to the north of the capital city of Baghdad, wrought massive devastation. The death toll ranged from 115 to 150, according to various sources. Those killed were mostly Shi'ite Turkmen -- an ethno-sectarian minority who dominate the area.



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Given the ethno-linguistic connection between Turkmen and the Turkish people, the Turkish military evacuated several people who had been injured in the attack and transported them by air ambulances to hospitals in Turkey. Other injured people were moved to the town of Tuz Khurmato, located nearby, as well as the larger city of Kirkuk.

The United States military responded to the attack by condemning the violence against civilians. United States Ambassador Ryan Crocker and United States military commander General David Petraeus issued a joint statement which characterized the attack in Armirli as "another sad example of the nature of the enemy and their use of indiscriminate violence to kill innocent citizens."

However tragic such terrorist tactics might be, the situation in Armirli made it clear that with the increased United States troop presence in Baghdad, extremists -- including al-Qaida -- were now transferring their attention to less protected terrain.

Armirli certainly fit the bill for less protected terrain, according to a Shi'ite Turkmen legislator -- Abbas al-Bayati -- who criticized the lack of security in the town, and pointed to the fact that the police force was composed of only 30 officers. Indeed, the Interior Ministry had responded to calls for more forces only days before. Angered by the situation in Armirli, al-Bayati spoke at a news conference a day after the bloody attack and called on authorities to assist residents to "arm themselves" for self-defense purposes against extremists.

This call was also made by Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni Arab, who said that civilians might have to deal directly with the violence plaguing the country. To this end, he said, "People have a right to expect from the government and security agencies protection for their lives, land, honor and property. But in the case of inability, the people have no choice but to take up their own defense." He suggested that the Iraqi government provide money, weapons and training to communities for this purpose.

This concept of local or community-based security was not without merit, given the relative success of Sunni Arab tribes in the restive Anbar province. There, the tribes armed themselves and managed to drive out al-Qaida factions from within their midst. There has been increasing attention on the Anbar model by both Iraqi authorities and United States officials, both of whom were hoping to apply the notion of community-based security initiatives across the country, in tandem with some degree of governmental regulation.

With the security situation in Iraq taking a turn for the worse, CBS News reported on July 7, 2007, that a significant bloc of Sunni politicians would call for a parliamentary vote of no-confidence against the government of Prime Minister Maliki. That non-confidence vote was tentatively expected to take place later in the month.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Adnan al-Dulaimi, a leading Sunni legislator said that the situation in Iraq had terribly deteriorated and that the al-Maliki government had failed to provide both key services and basic security. While Adnan al-Dulaimi warned that all options were on the table, he did not indicate involvement in the non-confidence vote. Instead, he said, "The situation has become terribly bad. All options are open for us. We are going to study the situation thoroughly, and we are going to look into the possible measures which go with the interests of the Iraqi people. We will also consider whether to keep on with the government or not."

Mouwaffak al-Rubaie, the Shi'a National Security Adviser of Iraq, took a different view on CNN on July 8, 2007. He insisted that the Maliki government enjoyed broad popular support, and suggested that there would be dire consequences if political factions attempted to take down the government of Maliki.

July 8, 2008 was marked by bloodshed across Iraq. A bomb attack aimed at a truck transporting newly-recruited Iraqi soldiers left 15 people dead and 20 wounded on the outskirts of Baghdad.

In the predominantly Shi'ite district of Karradah in the capital city, two car bombs exploded, killing eight people in total and wounding several others. One explosion took place in close proximity to a restaurant, while the other explosion ensued near to a bank of clothing and shoe stores. These explosions were regarded with some degree of alarm since they took place in Karradah -- the site of the largest Shi'a party in parliament, the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq, and thusly, one of the safer parts of the capital.

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On that same day, three people died and five people were injured when a bomb concealed under a car exploded at the entrance of the Shorja market, located in a predominately Shi'ite area of Baghdad. Several shootings were also reported to have taken place in Baghdad, resulting in several deaths.

Meanwhile, bodies of up to 29 people were discovered in various locations across Baghdad. The victims were presumed to have been killed by ethno-sectarian death squads roaming the city. As well, twelve Sunnis were abducted on route to work; their bodies were found a day later on July 9, 2007 close to the village of Ja'arah. Also on July 9, 2007, bomb attacks across the country left at least eight people dead.

On the first weekend in July 2007, the death toll among Western troops in Iraq included two United States soldiers outside of Baghdad and in Salahuddin respectively, as well as a British soldier killed during an offensive against Shi'ite militias.

Days later, 11 people were killed after being confined inside a house in Anbar province, which was later demolished using explosives. Officials said that the incident was a "vendetta attack" against villagers from Karmah who had been supportive of the military in the efforts against extremists. Indeed, the house was owned by a member of the community's security forces.

On July 15, 2007, a car bomb exploded in a square in central Baghdad, leaving 10 people dead and more than two dozen wounded.

July 16, 2007 was a particularly bloody day in Iraq when more than 80 people died and at least 180 were injured as a result of a series of bombings in Kirkuk. In the largest of the attacks, a massive suicide truck bomb exploded close to the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The area outside the office was hard-hit and part of the roof was destroyed. As well, the fencing of the historic Kirkuk Castle was damaged. But the most tragic outcome were the deaths of scores of people and the injuries to even more. Soon after that blast, a car bomb was detonated at the Haseer market. There were fewer casualties at that scene since there were few people in the market area, presumably because of the timing right after the aforementioned truck bomb. A third attack ensued hours later in the form of another car bomb in the Domiz area of Kirkuk. In that case, one police officer was killed and six others were wounded.

On July 17, 2007, two separate roadside bombs in south east Baghdad left at least six people dead. As well, the United States authorities reported on the deaths of two American soldiers in the western part of the Iraqi capital city. A day later, the United States military said that four American soldiers and their Iraqi interpreter died on patrol as a result of a roadside bomb in eastern Baghdad.

July 18, 2007 also saw the United States report that it had captured Khaled Mashhadani -- a senior al-Qaida leader in Iraq. Mashhadani was said to have been apprehended in the northern city of Mosul.

July 23, 2007 was marked by three successive car bombs in a Shi'a area of Baghdad. All three attacks involved parked cars that exploded. More than 12 people died and several more were injured as a result. In one case, police officers on patrol and pedestrians were the victims. In another attack -- very close by -- civilians were the victims at a market. A third parked car with explosives detonated close to an entry checkpoint into the Green Zone, which has been under United States control. Local Iraqis were reported to be the victims in that case.

As well, a bomb on a minibus in Baghdad exploded killing one person and wounding several others, while a roadside bomb hit an Iraqi army patrol in the restive Diyala province, killing five troops as a result. Close to the Iranian border, a convoy of trucks was ambushed resulting in several deaths and kidnappings. In the Anbar province to the west, a female suicide bomber at a checkpoint caused the deaths of two police officers and injuries to several people.

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On July 24, 2007, a suicide car bomb at a crowded market in the mainly Shi'a town of Hilla left at least 25 people dead and more than 60 others injured. According to the authorities, most of the victims were women and children.

On July 26, 2007, a series of attacks left more than 40 people dead across Iraq. In one particularly deadly case, a car bomb at a market in the Karrada district of Baghdad killed at least 25 people and injured scores more. Attacks ensued elsewhere in the country, including Kirkuk where six people died, and in the capital and Diyala province where United States troops were killed. As well, Iraqi police said that 20 bodies had been discovered; the apparent murders were attributed to death squads.

The incidences made clear that the drop-off in violence in the previous weeks was temporary, and could easily be interrupted by a mix of determined insurgent, extremist and terrorist movements now active in Iraq. Analysts also noted that attacks were moving to areas outside the capital, perhaps as a result of the increased presence of United States troops in Baghdad. In an effort to deal with the security crisis, the Iraqi government was hosting talks on the matter, which were attended by representatives of both the United States and Iran.

Meanwhile, on July 25, 2007, Iraqis shared a rare moment of joy over their country's national football team's victory over South Korea at the Asian Cup tournament. The victory cleared the way for Iraq to enter into the final match against Saudi Arabia. But this happy occasion, which was marked by national unity between Shi'as, Sunnis and Kurds, was quickly spoiled when two bombings left at least 50 football fans dead and more than 135 injured, as they celebrated in the streets of Baghdad. One attack occurred in the district of Mansour while the other attack ensued at a checkpoint in the eastern portion of Baghdad. Authorities said that people celebrating in the streets had been targeted deliberately. Despite this bittersweet episode, Iraqis returned to the streets days later after their football team won victory over Saudi Arabia to win the Asian Cup.

At the start of August 2007, two attacks in Baghdad left around 70 people dead and scores more injured on a particularly bloody day in Iraq. In one case, 50 people died when a fuel tanker exploded close to a gas station in the Sunni area of Mansour. In the other attack, which occurred earlier, a bomb in a parked car exploded in the Shi'a district of Karrada close to popular shops. That attack left close to 20 people dead. Karrada had been the site of a spate of car bombs in the previous week. As well, the United States and United Kingdom both saw losses of their troops on the ground.

On Aug. 5, 2007, mortar attacks left at least 11 people dead and more than 15 wounded in the eastern portion of the capital city of Baghdad. Mortar rounds also resulted in casualties to another six people in an area close by to the original site of the mortar attacks. A day later, a suicide truck bomber killed 28 people and wounded scores more in a Shi'a residential area of the northern city of Tal Afar. The majority of the victims were women and children.

These deaths came at a time when the United States authorities said that the surge was showing signs of success, as evidenced by a lower death toll for its troops serving in Iraq. But at the same time, the Iraqi authorities were announcing a higher death toll of Iraqi civilians.

Also in the first week of August 2007, United States officials in Iraq said they had killed the mastermind behind the bombings of the sacred al-Askaria Shi'a shrine in Samarra, which destroyed its golden dome and minarets in 2006 and 2007 respectively. The attack in 2006 was blamed for igniting a wave of ethno-sectarian violence, which ultimately led to speculation about Iraq devolving into a state of civil war. United States officials said that in addition to orchestrating the bombings at the shrine, Haitham al-Badrie had also functioned as the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq for the province of Salahuddin.

During the same period, the United States military said it could not account for close to 200,000 weapons. At stake were 190,000 AK-47 assault rifles and pistols that were intended for use by Iraqi security forces, but which

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the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said could not completely be tracked by the Pentagon. For its part, the Pentagon said it would look into its arms deliveries procedures. Meanwhile, analysts warned that the missing weapons perhaps made it into the hands of insurgents and extremists now fighting against United States forces in Iraq.

On August 10, an explosion at a market in northern Iraq left at least seven people dead and several more injured. The attack was caused by a car bomb, which exploded at a busy fruit and vegetable market in the ethnically-mixed city of Kirkuk. Two days later, an operation aimed at stopping the movement of weapons among militant groups was ongoing. Four United States troops and two civilians were reported to have been killed. As well up to 30 individuals were detained for their alleged connections to the terror group al-Qaida, while a house in Kufa belonging to an associate of the radical Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was raided.

Also on Aug. 10, 2007, the United Nations unanimously approved a resolution put forth jointly by the United States and the United Kingdom, which provided for an increased role by the international entity in Iraq. The resolution not only extended the United Nations' mission in Iraq, but it also provided for a stronger role in the process of national reconciliation, and increased the number of personnel. Since 2003, when a truck bomb killed head envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello and 21 other United Nations personnel at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, most of the staff was withdrawn from Iraq.

Ironically, the decision by the United Nations to increase its role in Iraq came only days after the United Nations Staff Council said that all its personnel should be withdrawn from the country until a future date when the security situation in Iraq might be improved. The United Nations Staff Council said that its personnel could not be adequately protected by United States-led forces in Iraq. The staff union could ostensibly block the further deployment of staff to Iraq.

Meanwhile, on the political front in the first week of August 2007, the Iraqi government was weakened by the decision of the main Sunni Arab bloc, the Iraqi Accordance Front, to withdraw from the cabinet. Six members of the group who held cabinet posts announced their decision to resign from the government, saying that the Shi'a-dominated administration had not met its demands, which included dealing with Shi'a militias and having more influence in matters related to security. Their exit meant that the government was hardly representative of the country's ethno-sectarian complexity. Presumably in an attempt to preclude the situation from devolving further, Prime Minister Maliki refused to accept the resignation of the six cabinet ministers from the Iraqi Accordance Front, and instead called on them to return to the fold.

Nevertheless, with almost all Sunni members of the Iraqi cabinet resigning from their positions, and with others boycotting meetings, the Iraqi government appeared to be in a state of crisis. On August 12, 2007, Prime Minister Maliki called for a crisis conference to be held, for the purpose of resolving the political impasse. To this end, Prime Minister Maliki said, "I have called the political leaders for a meeting to discuss the main issues in the political process." While Kurds were expected to participate in the summit, as evidenced by the arrival of a senior Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, it was unknown as to the level of Sunni involvement, or whether they would be brought back into government. Should the Sunni parties decided to go into the opposition, the result would be a significantly weakened Maliki administration at the helm, and one that could hardly claim the title of "unity government."

On August 14, 2007, coordinated bombings in Iraq devastated two Yazidi villages close to Mosul. Officials said that a fuel tanker and three cars were used in the terror attacks on the villages of Qataniya and Adnaniya. With a devastating death toll of approximately 350 people, and with more than 400 injured, according to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, the bombings held the dubious distinction of being among the worst attacks in Iraq over the course of the last several years. Making matters worse was the fact that the regional governor warned that as many as 200 people were likely buried in the remaining rubble. As well, up to 600 local residents were now homeless.

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Prime Minister Maliki, as well as President Talabani, condemned the bombings. The United States placed the blame for the terror attacks on al-Qaida, noting that the coordinated and "spectacular" nature of the bombings fit the profile of the notorious and violent extremist group. Meanwhile, correspondents on the ground in Iraq observed that as the United States was carrying out its "surge" around Baghdad, violent elements, including terrorists and insurgents, were seeking softer targets elsewhere in the country.

Yet unknown was the reason why the minority Yazidi community was targeted. There was heavy speculation by correspondents on the ground that a forthcoming referendum may have spurred the attacks on the basis of politics. At issue was the question of whether or not the Yazidis and Kurds currently living outside the Kurdish semi-autonomous region would join the grouping. Regardless, in a show of solidarity, a spokesperson for the authorities governing Kurdistan characterized the Yazidis as "a threatened minority" who might have been protected by Kurdish forces. Instead, he blamed the Iraqi government for the Yazidis fate saying, "But because of the inaction of the government in Baghdad and their inability to protect the population they are suffering the way they are now." he added. The Yazidis entered the public purview months earlier due to ethno-sectarian tensions with local Muslims in the area.

In the days that followed, violence continued to plague Iraq. A bombing at a central square in Baghdad left several people dead, while United States forces announced the deaths and injuries to some of their troops in the north of the city. On August 19, 2007, a mortar attack in a predominantly Shi'a suburb of Baghdad left seven people dead and 31 others wounded. The incident apparently occurred as a result of fighting between militias and United States troops. As well, at the time of writing, news was emerging about the possible death of an Iraqi governor as a result of a roadside bomb. The death of the governor of the province of Muthanna marked the second such killing in only weeks, with the governor of the province of Diwaniya also killed.

In the background of these developments was the political crisis unfolding in which almost half of Prime Minister Maliki's cabinet (mostly the Sunni members) had resigned. Talks were scheduled to take place for the purpose of addressing the issue of national unity.

In the last week of August 2007, Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish leaders in Iraq signed a reconciliation accord. The agreement came after four Shi'a and Kurdish parties formed an alliance. The moves were oriented toward presenting a show of national unity; however, left unresolved was the problem of reconstructing a broad-based unity government.

The last week of August 2007 saw Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki lash out in reaction to United States critics regarding his leadership abilities. At issue were the calls by some United States politicians for his removal from office, given what they perceived as poor progress on the political front in Iraq. Notably, Democratic Senator and then-presidential contender Hillary Clinton said that while United States forces were seeing some progress as a result of the surge in Iraq, their efforts had not yielded the desired effect, which was to provide the Iraqi government with "breathing room" to advance security and stability. Clinton's assessment roughly followed the same line of analysis of a new National Intelligence Estimate, which also noted some degree of progress militarily, juxtaposed against political instability in Iraq. But for his part, Prime Minister Maliki accused Clinton, and her colleague, Democratic Senator Carl Levin, of acting in a proprietary manner toward Iraq, and called on them to "respect democracy."

Also in the last week of August 2007, clashes at a Shi'a festival in the holy city of Karbala led to the deaths of more than 50 people, and injuries to scores more. Moqtada al-Sadr's Shi'a militia, known as the Mehdi Army, was attributed the lion's share of blame for the violence. Sadr denied that his cadre was responsible for the deaths, however, he nevertheless called for a suspension of the Mehdi Army's activities for approximately six months.

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One of his aides read a statement, which included the following assertion: "We declare the freezing of the Mehdi Army without exception in order to rehabilitate it in a way that will safeguard its ideological image within a maximum period of six months starting from the day this statement is issued."

The announcement was welcomed by the government of Prime Minister Maliki, which came under frequent fire often for its inability to control Shi'a militias in Iraq. As well, the prospective effect on American troops was welcomed, since another statement issued by the Mehdi Army in Najaf noted that the group would also freeze its efforts against "occupiers."

Nevertheless, the originating conflict in Karbala raised some anxieties about the growing prevalence of Shi'a violence against fellow Shi'as, indicating something of an internal schism. As well, there have been accusations that certain factions are trained by the United States yet armed by Iraq. Together, these factors have clearly complicated the basic ethno-sectarian divisions upon which most analysts and policy-makers have focused to date.

On September 15, 2007, at least ten people died as a result of a car bomb that exploded just outside a bakery. Some victims included people line up to purchase bread following the daily Ramadan fast that ends at sunset.

A day later, 14 people were killed in the province of Diyala, to the north of Baghdad, as a result of attacks by about 100 militants on two villages. The militants also set about a dozen shops on fire.

In Tuz Khurmato, located close to the northern city of Kirkuk, a bomb at a cafe left at least six people dead. The cafe was reported to be serving food during the daytime -- a period normally observed by fasting among Muslims during the Ramadan period. In Baghdad, a car bomb in the district of Mansour left two people dead.

The violence and bloodshed in Iraq marked the start of the holy month of Ramadan. Indeed, the al-Qaida allied terror group called the Islamic State in Iraq warned that it intended to carry out a series of attacks in the country during Ramadan.

Meanwhile, on the very day that United States President George W. Bush announced his plans for a continued presence in Iraq, drawing attention to success in fighting al-Qaida in the restive province of Anbar, a tribal leader in that region was assassinated close to his home in Ramadi. Bush had met with Abdul Sattar Abu Risha only a week before during a surprise trip to Iraq. Abdul Sattar Abu Risha gained attention when he changed sides from supporting al-Qaida to leading the Sunni opposition to that group in the province of Anbar. As the leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, also known as Anbar Awakening, he supported the United States-led efforts to stabilize Anbar province. A suspect in the assassination of the Sunni tribal leader was soon detained by United States forces in Iraq. The suspect was named to be Fallah Khalifa Hiyas Fayyas al-Jumayli and intelligence reports noted that he was involved in a plot to assassinate leaders within Anbar Awakening.

Mid-September 2007 saw radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, withdraw his group from the governing Shi'a alliance in Iraq. The move, which was announced during a news conference in the holy city of Najaf, came months after Sadr's group withdrew its ministers from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's cabinet. This decision would, therefore, affect the situation in parliament where Prime Minister Maliki's government would now command about 30 less votes.

Sadr's group had long criticized the Maliki government for failing to consult with them over key decisions, such as the inclusion of some former members of Saddam Hussein's regime in the new administration. As well, their calls for a timetable for the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq have gone unheeded by the Maliki government. There was also some speculation that Sadr wanted to create distance between his group and Maliki, who has charted an overtly pro-American course.

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Also in mid-September 2007, nine Iraqi civilians were killed by United States military contractors working for the firm Blackwater. The incident was sparked when a sniper shot at the diplomatic convoy that the Blackwater military contractors were protecting. They returned fire and a shootout ensued, ultimately resulting in the civilians being shot to death. A public outcry followed and the Iraqi government responded to the incident by revoking Blackwater's permit to operate in Iraq. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed her regret to Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki over the tragic turn of events. An investigation into the incident was also announced.

Following that investigation, the Iraqi Interior Ministry issued a report in which it found Blackwater entirely culpable for the incident in which the civilians were killed. The Interior Ministry's report also recommended that legal immunity of foreign security firms in Iraq be lifted. For its part, Blackwater maintained that its military contractors were acting in self defense.

The United States embassy had no comment on the matter other than noting that it was carrying out its own investigation.

Meanwhile, only days after the incident in which the civilians were killed, Blackwater resumed limited operations in Iraq despite the earlier decision to revoke the firm's permit. A spokesperson for the United States embassy said that the decision to allow Blackwater to return to work, albeit in a limited capacity, was reached after meetings with the Iraqi government.

It was unknown as to whether that decision would be maintained for the long term. Indeed, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki characterized the killings by Blackwater as a "criminal act" and said that it would not be tolerated. In an interview that took place in the United States on September 23, 2007, the Iraqi prime minister did not appear to moderate his view. He said that the killing of civilians by United States security contractors was unacceptable. He did not limit his comment to that incident, but also criticized the arrest of an Iranian citizen by United States forces, noting that the detained Iranian had been invited to visit Iraq. In both cases, Prime Minister Maliki emphasized the importance of Iraq's sovereignty, noting that his government was accountable only to the Iraqi people.

In October 2007, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tightened the reins of control over private security contractors in Iraq. The new measures were enacted following an investigation into the shooting deaths of about a dozen Iraqi civilians at the hands of Blackwater USA a month prior. The measures ordered by Secretary Rice included attaching video cameras and other recording devices to vehicles used by security contractors, the deployment of diplomatic security agents to oversee security operations, and improved coordination with the United States military. In a related development, following congressional testimony by Blackwater CEO Erik Prince into its practices, the United States House of Representatives passed legislation placing private contractors working on behalf of the United States government under the auspices of United States jurisprudence.

Meanwhile, in the third week of September 2007, two aides of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani -- Iraq's senior Shi'a cleric -- were shot to death in two separate incidents. Both shootings ensued in southern Iraq. In one case, Amjad al-Janabi, was shot after exiting a mosque near Basra. In the other case, Ahmad al-Barqawi was shot in his car as he traveled home to Diwaniya. They were the latest casualties in a spate of apparent assassinations of aides to Sistani that were ongoing since June 2007. While those responsible were unknown, there was speculation that the deaths may have been due to an ongoing internal conflict between Shi'ites in the southern part of the country.

On October 15, 2007, militants were responsible for attacking a Polish military base at Diwaniyah, located to the south of Baghdad. Five civilians were killed as a result, while 25 others, including two Polish soldiers, suffered injuries. Two days later on October 17, 2007, a roadside bomb left seven Iraqi policemen dead close to the city of Diwaniya. Reports suggested that the bomb exploded just as three police vehicles traveled from Diwaniya to a police station in Ifak. It was not known if rival militias were responsible for the attack in the predominantly Shi'a city.

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On the same day, a bomb exploded near Zafaraniyah, in south eastern Baghdad. Among the dead were two civilians.

On October 21, 2007, the United States (U.S.) military said that close to 50 "criminals" were killed in three raids on Sadr City in the capital of Baghdad. The impoverished Sadr City was known to be a stronghold of the radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, and was the notorious site of clashes between militants and U.S. troops. The U.S. military said the main target of the operation was "an individual reported to be a long-time Special Groups member specializing in kidnapping operations."

The U.S. military also said that as American troops began its operation, they were faced with attacks from people in buildings close by and were forced to return fire. A spokesperson for al-Sadr described the actions by the U.S. military as "barbaric." As well, local Iraqis reported that women and children were among the dead, however, the U.S. authorities denied such reports.

Late October 2007 saw a car bomb explode in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in the north of Iraq, which is dominated by Kurds but also home to Arabs and Turkmen. At least eight people died and more than 20 people were wounded as a result of the suicide bombing.

Also in late October 2007, approximately ten tribal leaders were abducted by gunmen in the mainly Shi'a district of Shaab in Baghdad. The tribal leaders, who formed a mixed Shi'a and Sunni alliance against al-Qaida, were seized as they were returning home to the province of Diyala following a meeting with a government official. The tribal leaders were subsequently released, however, officials would not disclose any details.

On October 29, 2007, a suicide bombing in Baquba left close to 30 people dead. The target of the attack appeared to be a group of police recruits. The scene was particularly gruesome since iron balls were packed with the explosives that detonated.

The close of October 2007 was also marked by the handover of control in Karbala from United States forces to Iraqi forces. Iraqi officials expressed confidence about the responsibility being placed on their own troops. That said, United States troops were expected to stay in reserve positions in cases of emergency. The holy city was the site of violent clashes between security forces and Shi'a fighters in August 2007, however, since that time, there has been increasing calm.

Meanwhile, in late October 2007, as Turkey threatened to launch incursions into Iraq to deal with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Iraq warned of serious consequences. At issue has been the spate of attacks on Turkish military carried out by PKK, allegedly from within Iraqi terrain. Turkey's government, backed by the parliament, since threatened to carry out strikes and launch a ground assault into Iraq to squash the PKK, which it deemed to be a terrorist enclave. Indeed, Turkey deployed up to 100,000 military troops to the border with Iraq in preparation for action against the PKK.

Iraq reacted by warning of "disastrous consequences" for the region if Turkey were to take military action in Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said that Iraqis were united against the notion of their "territorial integrity undermined by a friendly neighboring country." Zebari also accused Turkey of failing to seek a peaceful solution and making impossible demands, such as the handover of senior PKK members in Iraq. To that latter end, he said, "They are not under our control, in fact. They are up in the mountains, they are armed." The situation raised the specter of violence between Turkish troops and Iraqi Kurdish forces.

On December 16, 2007, Turkey carried out air strikes against Kurdish rebels in Iraq. Around 50 Turkish jets pummeled 10 villages inside Iraqi terrain but close to the border with Turkey. The move was apparently sanctioned



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by the United States (U.S.), according to Turkey's top general, Yasa Buyukanit, who said that the U.S. opened air space in northern Iraq in order for the operation to be carried out. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan characterized the air offensive as a "success." For its part, Iraq has condemned the air strikes as "unacceptable." Iraq's Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said in an interview with the British media, "There has been previous understanding that any such action should be coordinated with the Iraqi government or with the multinational forces. From what we've learned, they gave a very late notice for their operation, and those targeted villages... were not PKK infrastructure."

Meanwhile, Iraq was experiencing a downturn in the level of violence on the ground. The relocation of insurgent strongholds from one place to another, in conjunction with the ethnic cleansing in previously mixed Baghdad neighborhoods, suggested that the dropoff in violence could well be fragile rather than long-lasting. Nevertheless, Iraqi officials said that while 887 people were killed in October, the death toll among civilians fell to 606 in November. Many analysts attributed that decrease to the escalation of U.S. troops in key areas of Iraq, such as Baghdad. Following this aforementioned lull in violence in Iraq and as the military "surge" was being touted as a success, the period starting in late November 2007 was marked by a spate of violent attacks.

On November 22, 2007, attacks by extremists in two central Iraqi villages left dozens of people dead, including three Iraqi soldiers and 10 members of a local militia that had been intent on fighting al-Qaida elements. Those responsible for the attacks were believed to be extremists with links to the terror enclave, al-Qaida. In the village of Hawr Rajab to the south of Baghdad, the attack was initially carried out at an army checkpoint. Those responsible then stole an armored vehicle, dressed in Iraqi army uniforms and then carried out a secondary attack against the

headquarters of the Hawr Rajab Awakening Council. Such councils have been instrumental in stemming the tide of violence by al-Qaida allied entities. In a village east of Baquba, attacks left two civilians dead along with several militants.

In a separate incident, mortars were fired into the Green Zone.

A day later, a bomb exploded at a popular pet market in Baghdad leaving more than a dozen people dead and at least 50 others wounded. That attack was blamed on Iranian-backed militant Shi'ites, although United States authorities said that those responsible wanted Sunni al-Qaida factions to be blamed instead.

On December 5, 2007 as United States (U.S.) Defense Secretary Robert Gates was visiting Iraq, three car bombs exploded across the country. The attacks ensued in Mosul, soon after Gates arrived there to see the progress on the security front, as well as in Baquba and Kirkuk. Eight people were killed as a result of these attacks.

On December 7, 2007, two explosions in the province of Diyala left at least 26 people dead and several more injured. One attack was carried out by a female suicide bomber who stuck an office of one of the local "Awakening Councils" (local Sunni militias fighting al-Qaida), and the other was due to a suicide car bombing at a security checkpoint. Both attacks appeared to target local groups that have been fighting al-Qaida in Iraq. Recent reports suggested that because of the U.S.-led "surge," insurgents who had once operated in Baghdad and Anbar province were now based in Diyala instead. Meanwhile, two raids aimed at rounding up al-Qaida operatives north of Baghdad resulted in the arrest of up to 55 suspected militants.

On December 9, 2007, a roadside bomb near Hilla -- in the predominantly Shi'a area to the south of Baghdad -- led to the death of a police chief. Two of the police chief's guards were also killed in the attack. In recent months, a number of senior security and political officials have been assassinated in southern Iraq, including two governors and another police chief. Analysts surmised that the violence in the south of the country was likely due to a power struggle between Shi'a groups there. British troops who are due to exit Basra have said that the situation in the

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south of the country has not been stabilized due to such intra-sect conflict. One day later, the Iraqi Defense Ministry said that there would be a crackdown against militants operating in Diyala, presumably because it was the new locus of insurgents.

Around the same period, to the north of Baghdad, a suicide car bomb at an army checkpoint left at least two soldiers dead and others injured. It was the second such attack in the same region within days.

On December 10, 2007, attacks using mortar shells left at least seven people dead and 23 wounded -- most of them inmates at an Interior Ministry prison in Baghdad. The area of the prison most affected housed inmates accused of either civil offenses of terror-related offenses.

The southern Iraqi city of Amara was the site of violence on December 12, 2007 when three car bombs exploded, killing close to 40 people and injuring more than 100. Two bombs exploded in a parking area where laborers gathered as they awaited transportation for work; the third bomb exploded in the same area but several minutes later as people converged on the scene of the first two attacks.

In this way, it seemed clear that the triple bombings were orchestrated to yield maximum damage. The city of Amara, which is located in the province of Maysan, is predominantly inhabited by Shi'ites. The area is marked by increasing intra-sectarian dissonance as various militant factions jockey for political influence and power. The attacks were part of a wave of violence in Iraq in December 2007.

Mid-December 2007 was marked by the handover of control in Basra from the United Kingdom (U.K.) to Iraq. The handover was a keystone of the U.K.'s withdrawal from southern Iraq. At a ceremony in Basra, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband promised that despite its exit, the U.K. would remain a "committed friend" to Iraq. The remaining 4,500 British troops in Iraq were expected to take on the limited role of training Iraqi forces, and further troop reductions were anticipated in the spring of 2008. Meanwhile, Iraq's National Security Adviser, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, characterized the day as an "historic" one for Iraq.

The last day of 2007 saw a suicide truck bombing at a checkpoint to the north of Baghdad kill close to a dozen people. Most of the victims appeared to be people allied with a United States-backed "Awakening Council" -- a Sunni group opposed to al-Qaida in Iraq. In a separate roadside bombing in Diyala, two Iraqi security forces were killed. The first day of 2008 was marked by a suicide bombing in Baghdad in which 30 people were killed and another 32 were injured. The site of the attack was a funeral for a Shi'ite army officer. The next day, a female suicide bomber killed herself and 10 other people in Iraq.

Ironically, these attacks took place at a time when Iraqi authorities were releasing information about the decline in civilian deaths in Iraq.

## Iraq's Landscape in 2008

Despite oft-repeated claims of the success of the surge in Iraq, the country's security situation continued to be pressed in early 2008. On Jan.7, 2008, a double bombing in Baghdad left at least 14 people dead. Included in the list of fatalities was the head of an American-backed group that had been opposing al-Qaida in Sunni Muslim strongholds. The blame was placed on hard-line Sunni insurgents not eager to seek reconciliation. Violence across other parts of the country left five people dead on the same day.

Two bombs at animal markets in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad on Feb. 1, 2008, exacted a death toll of approximately 100 people. Around 200 people were also said to have been injured as a result of the attacks. Officials said that

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two mentally disabled women were unwittingly used to carry the explosives, which were detonated remotely. In response, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki condemned those behind the attacks, saying, "The terrorists used disabled women in this crime. This shows the moral degradation of these criminal gangs and how much they hate mankind."

On Feb. 10, 2008, a car bombing in the market town of Balad left at least 33 people dead, more than 45 injured and several more missing. The blast was said to have occurred near an Iraqi army checkpoint when a suicide bomber driving an explosives-laden truck. The explosion caused the collapse of several buildings and the death toll was expected to rise as a consequence of people buried in the rubble.

In the last week of February 2008, at least 40 people died and more than 60 were injured as a result of a suicide bombing in the town of Iskandariya, to the south of Baghdad. The attack appeared to have been aimed at Shi'a pilgrims headed for Karbala, where the religious festival of Arbaeen was to be held.

Another attack against Shi'a pilgrims took place on the same day in the Doura district of Baghdad. In that attack, militants detonated a roadside bomb and gunmen opened fire on pilgrims. Three people died and close to 50 were wounded as a result. In the background of these developments was an announcement by militant Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, that the ceasefire his powerful Mehdi army was observing would continue.

These massive and bloody bombings fractured the growing sense of security in the Iraqi capital, recently touted to be evidence of the success of the United States troop "surge" in Iraq.

Also in February 2008,

Iraq's parliament approved legislation that would pave the way for provincial elections later in the year. The legislation was yet to be approved by the presidential council, comprised of the president and two vice presidents.

Late February 2008 saw Turkey carry out a cross-border military campaign against Kurdish rebels into northern Iraq. While Turkish military carried out its operations, Kurdish rebels reported that they shot down a Turkish attack helicopter close to the border; there was no independent verification of the claim. For its part, the Iraqi government warned that an escalation of the ongoing operation by the Turks could destabilize the country as well as the region at large.

On March 10, 2008, two separate attacks in Iraq -- in Diyala and Baghdad -- left eight American troops and one interpreter dead. A day later on March 11, 2008, a roadside bomb in southern Iraq killed at least 16 people and injured more than 22 others.

Most of those killed were Shi'a pilgrims on a bus traveling on the Basra-Nasiriya road. On the same day, four policemen, four rebels and one civilians died in a gun fight in Mosul in northern Iraq.

On March 13, 2008, the body of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Paulos Faraj Rahho, was discovered in a shallow grave two weeks after he was kidnapped. A day later, the funeral was held for the murdered Iraqi archbishop in the village of Kremlis, close to the northern city of Mosul. Cardinal Emmanuel III Delly, the patriarch of the Chaldean church in Iraq, described the archbishop as loved by all Iraqis and said, "He was a man of honesty, loyalty and peace." The archbishop's murder was condemned by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, a number of Sunni and Shi'a leaders in Iraq, and Pope Benedict XVI in the Holy See.

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On March 23, 2008, the number of United States (U.S.) military forces killed in Iraq since the invasion five years prior crossed the 4,000 mark. The threshold was crossed when four soldiers on patrol in southern Baghdad were killed by a bomb.

The period was marked by violence elsewhere in Iraq. A spate of suicide attacks, shootings and rocket strikes across Iraq left dozens dead and even more wounded. A suicide bombing left 13 Iraqi soldiers dead and more than 40 injured in Mosul. Heavy mortar and rocket attacks killed at least 15 people dead in the heavily-fortified Green Zone in the centre of Baghdad. Gunmen opened fire on shoppers at a Baghdad market killing at least seven people. In the Shula district of Baghdad, a suicide bomber hit a queue of people outside of a gas station, killing five.

Near Samara, three people died when a suicide car bomb rammed into the house of a tribal leader. Close to Kirkuk, five Iraqi soldiers died as a result of a roadside bomb. Days earlier, a female suicide bomber killed six people at a bus station in Diyala. However there was better news from Diyala on March 23, 2008, when U.S. military said they had killed 12 men during a raid who appeared to preparing for suicide operations.

The violence came at a time when United States and Iraqi officials were discussing long-term cooperative arrangements, including the United States military presence in Iraq. At issue were the United Nations mandate under which United States troops were operating in Iraq; that mandate was set to end at the close of 2008.

The close of March 2008 saw an explosion of violence between security forces and militias in Iraq. The sudden destabilization, which included an attack on the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, came at a time when the United States military was drawing attention to the success of its "surge" in Iraq. That surge was aimed at decreasing violence. But the improved security situation in Iraq was also attributed to a formal ceasefire by the Shi'a militia known as the Mehdi Army, which has been aligned with radical Shi'ite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr. The uptick in violence has drawn that ceasefire into question.

It was also evoked questions as to why the Mehdi Army suddenly decided to go on the offensive.

The violence was not limited to the Iraqi capital and included the southern oil-rich city of Basra, and spread to a number of other towns and cities across the country, such as Karbala, Hilla, Kut, Diwaniya and Nasiriya. There was no conclusive number of casualties but some estimates placed the death toll at 250 -- with more than 100 dead in Baghdad and more than 50 dead in Basra. However, there was much debate about the number of dead in Basra, with local medical agencies noting that close to 300 had died in that city alone. Aid and humanitarian agencies warned that the situation on the ground was "critical."

With the violence increasing, the United States military carried out air strikes in Basra and Baghdad on March 29, 2008. Meanwhile, the Iraqi parliament convened an emergency session to discuss the emerging crisis; however, that session was not well attended since the area around the Green Zone was being bombarded with mortar and rocket attacks. One missile attack hit the office of Vice President Tareq Hashemi.

For its part, the government instituted a three-day curfew in the capital. As well, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called on the Mehdi Army to lay down their arms in exchange for money. To this end, the Iraqi leader set a 72-hour deadline for the Mehdi Army and warned of penalties if the Shi'ite militia did not cooperate. Despite this warning, there was no sign of cooperation from the insurgent Shi'ite militia and, as such, Prime Minister Maliki extended the deadline further. While the U.S. government applauded Prime Minister Maliki for taking the lead in trying to resolve the situation, analysts noted that the deadline extension revealed that the militias were not apt to acquiesce easily.

The situation seemed to reveal an internal Shi'ite power struggle between Maliki, who came to power with the help of Sadr's power base in 2005, and Sadrists who were now hoping to gain political influence in forthcoming elections.

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Moqtada al-Sadr entered the fray on March 30, 2008, by instructing his militia to cease its fight with security forces and end the bloodshed. While this move was welcomed by the government, analysts noted it would not result in the disarmament of the Mehdi Army.

Indeed, Sadr's directives appeared to indirectly suggest a more complicated calculus was at play. Indeed, while the violence was winding down, there was no sustainable resolution to the internal fight in anticipation of the October 2008 elections.

A day after Sadr called on militia members to stop fighting, Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone was bombarded with mortar fire. It was surmised that rogue elements of the extremist Shi'ite militia may have disregarded Sadr's directives.

On April 15, 2008, blasts in several cities across Iraq killed scores of people; it was one of the bloodiest days in recent times. One attack -- just outside a restaurant in Baquba -- was caused by an explosives-packed bus and killed more than 50 people and left close to 100 wounded. The death toll there was expected to rise. In Ramadi, a restaurant frequented by policemen was the apparent target of a suicide bombing that left 13 dead. That city had claimed a decline in violence until this day. In Mosul, three people died in an attack. But days earlier, 17 people died in a separate incident in that city, located in the northern part of the country. Among the 17 dead were

12 members of the Kurdish Peshmerga security force, who had since been integrated into the Iraqi army. Another person died in Baghdad. Immediate suspicion for the spate of attacks fell upon extremists Sunni groups aligned with al-Qaida.

Two days later, on April 17, 2008, a suicide attack targeted a crowd of funeral mourners in the Sunni village of Bu Mohammed, located to the north of the capital. That attack left

at least 30 people dead and many more wounded. Because the funeral was for two members of an enclave opposed to al-Qaida in Iraq, whose bodies were discovered days earlier, the blame quickly fell again on extremists Sunni groups aligned with al-Qaida.

Despite much-vaunted successes of the United States troop "surge" in Iraq, violence had been on a markedly increasing trend.

A report by hospital officials in Baghdad in late April 2008 noted that more than 400 people had been killed, and more than 2,500 were injured, in violent clashes over the course of the month. The situation caused a grave strain on hospital resources. The fighting, which was largely due to clashes between Shi'a militias and joint United States-Iraq forces in the Sadr City district of the capital city. The area was a known stronghold of the Mehdi Army militia, led by the extremist cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr. The month of April was also deemed significant for United States troops, which endured close to 50 deaths -- the highest number since September 2007 when 65 soldiers were killed in Iraq.

In the background of these developments was an emerging conflict between Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and Shi'a militia leader, Moqtada al-Sadr. Maliki had attained power in part thanks to backing from the cleric but that bond was now crumbling. While Maliki promised to crush all militias -- Shi'a and Sunni alike, Sadr urged his supporters to continue their resistance of the United States occupation but without fighting fellow Iraqis. Maliki was not helped when a bloc of Iraqi parliamentarians aligned with Moqtada al-Sadr issued a denunciation of the government using Koranic verse. The dissonance promised to complicate efforts to stabilize Baghdad.

By the start of May 2008, violence was on the rise in Iraq. Twin suicide bombings ensued in Balad Ruz, to the east of Baquba, as a party of wedding guests traveled through the area. One suicide bombing was detonated by an explosives-laden belt worn by a woman; the other was detonated by a man among bystanders. These attacks were

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blamed on Sunni extremists aligned with al-Qaida in Iraq. At least 35 people were killed and more than 65 were injured. Elsewhere in Iraq, a bomb exploded in Baghdad killing nine people; the target appeared to be United States troops. Meanwhile, Sadr City was the site of further violence and bloodshed.

On May 2, 2008, a roadside bomb in the Sunni western province of Anbar left four United States marines dead. Then, on May 4, 2008, the wife of President Jalal Talabani narrowly escaped unscathed when an improvised explosive device went off close to her convoy in Baghdad, as she traveled to a festival at the National Theatre. On the same day, Serwa Abdul-Wahab, a female journalist, was dragged from her car and shot to death

in the northern city of Mosul.

In mid-May 2008, Ahmed Ali Ahmed, known as Abu Omar -- a key leader of al-Qaida in Iraq -- was sentenced to death for the murder of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho. The body of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop was discovered close to Mosul two weeks after he was kidnapped in February 2008. The murder of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho was one of several attacks on Christian interests in Iraq by both Sunni and Shi'ite groups. Due to the insecurity Christians were now facing in Iraq, many fled to other countries. Those remaining in Iraq have accused the government of Prime Minister Maliki of not doing enough to protect the Christian minority in Iraq from persecution.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki visited Tehran in early June 2008 and met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as well as Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. The Iraqi leader offered assurances that his country would not be used to launch attacks against Iran. The Iranian state-controlled media reported Maliki as saying, "We will not allow Iraq to become a platform for harming the security of Iran and neighbors." Maliki also reportedly said, "A stable Iraq will be a benefit to the security of the region and the world." On the other side of the equation, Ahmadinejad promised to assist with Iraq's security. Trade and economic issues also factored highly during the meeting.

In the backdrop of these developments was the fact that the United States and Iraq were in the process of discussing the provisions of a treaty on the future of the United States military in Iraq. While the Iranian leader did not directly discuss this issue during talks with his Iraqi counterpart, President Ahmadinejad presented an oblique reference to United States influence in Iraq saying, "Iraq must reach a certain level of stability so that its enemies are not able to impose their influence."

Thus, the meeting in Tehran was likely to have repercussions for Iraq-United States relations, given the already acrimonious nature of the relationship between its neighbor, Iran, and its ally, the United States. In addition to the possibility of a continued United States military presence in Iraq, the United States has also accused Iran of supporting militants in Iraq. Furthermore, the United States has been the leading voice against Iran's burgeoning nuclear program. These issues have caused the already-poor bilateral relations between Iran and the United States to devolve into even more hostile territory. As such, Iraq has stood in the awkward position of being an ally of the United States, while also strengthening its bonds with its Shi'a Muslim neighbor in the post-Saddam Hussein era.

In the third week of June 2008, a female suicide bomber in the northern Iraqi city of Baquba killed at least 15 people and injured close to 40 others. Both policemen and civilians were among the victims. The attack took place at the front of a local government and court complex when the suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to her body. While there was no conclusive information about who was behind the attack, previous bombings in Baquba have been attributed to Sunni militants aligned with al-Qaida. Indeed, Baquba, to the north of Baghdad and located in the restive province of Diyala, has been a notorious flashpoint for violence, and a stronghold of al-Qaida militants. The attack in Baquba came less than a week after 60 people died as a result of a car bomb in Baghdad. That bombing was blamed on Shi'a militia and appeared to be aimed at stirring sectarian strife.

The period of late July saw a female suicide bomber detonate the explosives strapped to her body at a military checkpoint again in the town of Baquba. Her attack yielded eight deaths and more than 20 injuries as a result. The attack came weeks after yet another suicide bomber killed nine people in a market in the same city. .

Following the Baquba bombings, female suicide bombers carried out attacks in Baghdad, killing at least 25 Shi'ites participating in a pilgrimage to the Kadhimiya shrine. Close to 100 people were injured as well. Meanwhile, the country's northern city oil city of Kirkuk was hit by a suicide bombing that killed at least 22 people and injured more than 150 others. That attack took place as demonstrators protested the election law (discussed directly following) that has further strained ethno-sectarian in the diverse city made up of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen.

Also in late July 2008, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani denounced the draft election legislation that caused strong disagreement between various factions of the Iraqi government. The parliament adopted the election law ahead of provincial elections, despite protest from the Kurdish bloc. Indeed, the 54 Kurdish parliamentarians, along with some Shi'a members of parliament, boycotted the vote.

President Talibani -- a Kurd -- said he would not sanction the new election law and doubted that the three-member presidential council -- upon which he served with the Sunni and Shi'a vice-presidents -- would approve it. One cause of consternations among Kurds was the proposal for power-sharing in the ethnically-mixed oil city of Kirkuk.

By early August 2008, Iraqi leaders decided to postpone a parliamentary vote on a revised draft of the election legislation. Talks intended to resolve differences on the proposed election law were not met with success and could prevent provincial elections from taking place as scheduled in October 2008. That said, the United Nations had proposed that voting in Kirkuk be delayed pending a resolution, while provincial elections take place on schedule elsewhere across the country. This suggestion was received with mixed reviews; while some leaders suggest the compromise, others had said a delay of any kind would not be acceptable.

On Aug. 3, 2008, a truck bomb close to a passport office in a Sunni portion of Baghdad left at least a dozen people dead and more than 14 injured. A day later, a roadside bomb in the capital killed two United States soldiers and injured a third. These bombings occurred in the wake of attacks carried out by female suicide bombers noted above.

On Aug. 8, 2008, a car bomb at a vegetable market in Tal Afar left more than 20 people dead and approximately 70 others injured.

Ironically, Tal Afar was touted as an example of success in Iraq in 2006 by United States President George W. Bush. A year later in 2007, however, the situation had changed with the town being the site of a deadly truck bombing that killed more than 150 people. As of 2008, it was clear that Sunni militants were still functioning in Tal Afar. The town, located close to Mosul in northern Iraq, has become a new stronghold of al-Qaida in Iraq since the United States military "surge" in Baghdad forced militants from the capital city.

On Aug. 14, 2008, a suicide bombing in the town of Iskandariya left close to 20 people dead and about 75 injured. The suicide bomber was female -- consistent with a growing trend in Iraq, perhaps due to the fact that women were less likely to be viewed with suspicion. The suicide bomber in southern Iraq appeared to have targeted a group of Shi'a pilgrims traveling to the holy city of Karbala for a religious festival. The area, including Iskandariya, had enjoyed a marked reduction in violence thanks to the increased presence of troops in the region, in conjunction with increasing local antipathy to al-Qaida.

On Aug. 17, a suicide bomber on a motorcycle stuck the Abu Hanifa mosque in the Sunni-dominated Adhamiya district of Baghdad. The attack took place just after evening prayers, killing at least 15 people and injuring close to 30 others.

Included in the death toll was a local leader of "Sons of Iraq" -- one of several "Awakening Councils," which are paid by the United States to protect neighborhoods resisting al-Qaida in Iraq. As such, there was speculation that the attack was motivated by revenge.

On Aug. 24, 2008, a suicide bomber attacked a celebration at the home of tribal sheikh in Baghdad's western Abu Ghraib district, killing at least 25 people. The sheikh was a member of the Sunni "Awakening" that opposes al-Qaida in Iraq. Because of the group's anti-militant activism, which has been financially supported by the United States, it has been targeted by al-Qaida in Iraq.

On Aug. 29, 2008, it was reported that at least 25 people were killed and more than 40 others injured when a suicide bombing ensued in the town of Jalawlah in the Iraqi province of Diyala. The suicide bomber charged into a queue of police recruits before detonating the explosives strapped to his vest. The province of Diyala has become increasingly violent even as another hot spot -- the province of Anbar -- has seen a decrease in bloodshed by Sunni extremists aligned with al-Qaida. In this way, experts have surmised that Sunni militants had simply shifted their base of attacks from Anbar, where security had been tightened, to softer targets, such as Diyala.

Once a hotbed of insurgent violence, the Iraqi province of Anbar was returned to the control of Iraq on Sept. 1, 2008, at a ceremony in the provincial capital. A significant portion of United States' troops deaths have taken place in Anbar, however, security increased in 2006 when former insurgents decided to ally themselves with the United States and tribal leaders. United States President George W. Bush hailed the development, characterizing it as a major achievement and praising United States forces, as well as the tribal leaders, and other civilians, who worked to stabilize the restive area. He said, "Today, Anbar is no longer lost to al-Qaeda - it is al-Qaeda that lost Anbar." He continued, "Anbar has been transformed and reclaimed by the Iraqi people."

Yet to be seen however, was whether or not the Sunni tribesmen allied with the United States could be able to cooperate with the Shi'a dominated national government of Iraq.

In late September 2008, the Islamic holy period of Ramadan was met with intense violence in Baghdad. A spate of bombings in the Iraqi capital left more than 30 people dead and in excess of 100 others wounded.

These attacks came a week after eight children and 35 members of a joint police-Sunni Arab Awakening patrol were killed in an ambush in the al-Qaida stronghold of Diyala. Ironically, the increase in violence occurred at a time when a senior United States military commander said Iraq was witnessing its least violent Ramadan in three years.

In October 2008, a suicide bombing in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul left close to a dozen people dead including three women, three children, and five militants. The attack took place during a raid of the city by United States forces. There was some confusion about the actual cause of death since an official at the city morgue noted there were bullet wounds on some of the victims. United States officials acknowledged exchanging fire with gunmen before the actual suicide bombing ensued. Meanwhile, a gunman opened fire at a funeral in Mosul, killing four people. As well, a drive-by attack in Zanjili district left several people injured. In Baghdad, United States forces said they had killed a senior al-Qaida bomb-making expert.



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On Oct. 9, 2008, Saleh al-Ogaili -- a parliamentarian from the Shi'a bloc aligned with cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr -- was killed in an apparent bomb attack. Two other people were also killed in the explosion in the Habibiya district, located close to Moqtada al-Sadr's stronghold of Sadr City.

The bomb had been placed on a motorcycle and was detonated as the convoy of Saleh al-Ogaili passed by in the streets of Baghdad. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki initiated an inquiry into the apparent assassination of Saleh al-Ogaili saying, "We reaffirm our determination to get at the hotbeds of terrorism and crime, and arrest and prosecute the killers and bring them to justice."

Also on the same day, a roadside bombing to the north of Baghdad, a leader of a **militant** Sunni "Awakening" group, Abbas Khudair, was killed along with two of his children and another young relative. As has been the case with other Sunni "Awakening" groups, this one headed by Abbas Khudair had been working with coalition forces against al-Qaida **militants** in the region. His activities may well have made him a favored target of al-Qaida in Iraq.

One day after the two assassinations took place, a bombing in Baghdad left more than a dozen people dead and close to 30 other injured. Women and children were among the dead. The bomb exploded at a market in the mainly Shi'a area of Abu Dshir, located within the larger Sunni district of Dora. The complicated ethnic makeup of the area had contributed to much ethnic strife there, however, there were signs in recent times that the security situation was improving. Such a view was likely to be revised since, on the same day, another bomb exploded in the same area, leaving one person dead and 12 others wounded.

On Oct. 11, 2008, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki promised he would protect the Christian population of

Mosul after 12 people -- all Christians -- were murdered by Sunni **militants** in a period of two weeks. The prime minister said, "We will take immediate action to resolve the problems and difficulties faced by Christians in Mosul." Despite the government's decision to deploy 1,000 policemen to the northern city of Mosul in an effort to curb the violence, already hundreds of Christians had fled the city, seeking refuge in villages elsewhere.

Policemen were nevertheless establishing checkpoints at churches and orchestrating street patrols in Christian areas of Mosul.

The second week of November 2008 saw dozens killed and many more injured as a result of a spate of attacks across Iraq. The bombings were carried out by **militants** in some of the most volatile regions of the country. In one case, a bomb attached to a motorcycle was detonated in a crowded marketplace in the town of Khalis in the restive Diyala province. In another case, a female suicide bomber was responsible for an attack on a hospital close to the city of Fallujah. Close to Ramadi, in Anbar province, where violence has seen a downturn, a suicide bombing left eight people dead, including several policemen. Sunni tribal militias working with joint **United States** and Iraqi government forces have contributed to security gains in Anbar; as such, the recent violence was a significant blow.

The Iraqi capital city of Baghdad was not spared and suffered consecutive days of bomb attacks during rush hour traffic starting on Nov. 10, 2008. On that day, a suicide bombing and two car bombings left about 30 people dead and close to 70 injured in the capital. North of Baghdad in Baquba, six people died as a result of a female suicide car bomber. But Nov. 12, 2008 was also a particularly deadly day in Baghdad with 21 people dead and more than 85 wounded as a result of a series of bombs that exploded across the Iraqi capital city. In one case, at least a dozen people died and 60 others were injured when car and roadside bombs exploded simultaneously in the eastern part of Baghdad.

Days later, two bomb attacks struck Baghdad and Diyala respectively, as the Iraqi cabinet met to discuss the security pact with the **United States** (discussed below). Around 20 people were killed and many more were wounded as a result of the attacks.

On Dec. 11, 2008, a suicide bombing at restaurant in Kirkuk left at least 50 people dead and more than 100 injured. The attack in the ethnically mixed northern Iraqi city took place as Kurdish officials dining with Arab tribal leaders. The timing of the attacks coincided with the Islamic celebration of Eid-al-Adha.

Late December 2008 was marked by other attacks including a car bombing.

#### Special Report: Indications of Post-Bush Era Foreign Policy

Despite frequent assertions by the Bush administration in the United States that there be no fixed timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the United States and Iraq agreed in July 2008 to establish a "time horizon" for the reduction of United States troops in Iraq. The agreement was part the formal Status of Forces Agreement forged between

President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which would allow a continued presence of United States forces in Iraq after the expiration of the existing United Nations mandate at the close of 2008. The agreement came a week after the Iraqi leader said that he wanted a timetable for the United States troop withdrawal -- something the Bush administration has not endorsed.

For its part, the United States has been reluctant to advance such a timetable out of fear that security gains could be erased. President Bush has said that a fixed timetable would embolden violent insurgents. That said,

the current "time horizon" offering appeared to be a compromise in the security deal being negotiated. While the actual distinction between a timetable and a time horizon would inevitably provide fodder for debate, the Bush administration was nonchalant about the idea that it was reversing its previous hard line position on the matter. Instead, the White House said that troop reductions in the future would be "based on continued improving conditions on the ground and not an arbitrary date for withdrawal."

After the news broke about a "time horizon" for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, Prime Minister al-Maliki expressed support for the troop withdrawal plans proposed by presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, during an interview with Der Spiegel.

In reference to Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable (barring complications), Maliki said, "That, we think, would be the right timeframe for a withdrawal, with the possibility of changes." The Iraqi prime minister did not expressly endorse presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's candidacy, saying instead, "who they [Americans] choose as their president is the Americans' business." He then continued, "But it's the business of Iraqis to say what they want." Nevertheless, Maliki's views on the notion of a timeline appeared to be in line with Obama's stance on the issue.

A spokesperson for the Iraq government somewhat backtracked from these remarks, suggesting that Der Spiegel had "misunderstood and mistranslated" the Iraqi prime minister. The spokesperson did not, however, specify how precisely this misunderstanding or mistranslation might have occurred. Regardless, the German publication, Der Spiegel, issued a strong assertion stating it "stands by its version of the conversation."

Soon thereafter, Der Spiegel provided an audio recording of the Maliki interview to the New York Times, which appeared to bear out the fact that Maliki found Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable to be illustrative of the Democratic contender's understanding of the situation on the ground in Iraq.

In the direct translation from Arabic, as published by the New York Times, Maliki said: "Obama's remarks that — if he takes office — in 16 months he would withdraw the forces, we think that this period could increase or decrease a

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little, but that it could be suitable to end the presence of the forces in Iraq." He continued: "Who wants to exit in a quicker way has a better assessment of the situation in Iraq."

This synergy could well help shore up support for Obama's foreign policy credentials, particularly in regard to the difficult question of how to (if possible) disengage from Iraq.

Obama has consistently said that he would end the war in Iraq and withdraw United States troops from that country in a careful manner. He has called for a 16 month phased withdrawal timetable pending given conditions on the ground. (Note: Obama was also helped by the fact that British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also expressed concurrence for the notion of a 16-month timetable.)

By contrast, Maliki's suggestion that Obama had "a better assessment of the situation in Iraq" was not expected to help the presumptive Republican nominee, John McCain. For his part, McCain has opposed a withdrawal timeline and has said that he expects United States troops to be in Iraq for a long time, assuming that the Iraqi government sanctions the American presence in that country. McCain's presidential hopes have largely rested on his own heroic military experience and perceived understanding of foreign policy, both of which have strong resonance at home in the United States.

An agreement outlining such an exit came to the fore in late August 2008. The draft agreement, which was yet to be approved by the Iraqi parliament and presidency, called for a withdrawal of United States combat troops from Iraq by 2011, although an absolute final date would be dependent on the security situation. The objective of the concord was to ultimately hand over responsibility for security to Iraqi forces. Also included in the 27-point was a provision for American soldiers to receive some immunity under Iraqi law. For its part, the Bush administration in the United States said that the details of the deal were still under discussion.

By October 2008, top political leaders in Iraq were considering the draft of the security pact with the United States. With discussions continuing in the Political Council for National Security, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki delayed a scheduled trip to Australia. As noted above, the Status of Forces Agreement would provide for continued presence of United States troops in Iraq until 2011.

Also included in the concord was limited jurisdiction for Iraq over the prosecution of troops.

For its part, the dominant alliance of Shi'a and Kurdish parties in the Iraqi government indicated that it would table adjustments to the draft agreement.

Indeed, they suggested that their prevailing reservations prevented them from approving the deal wholesale. A statement by the United Iraqi Alliance noted, "Besides the positive points that were included in this pact, there are other points that need more time, more discussion, more dialogue and amendments to some articles."

At issue in particular was the matter of limited Iraqi jurisdiction over the prosecution of troops. Iraqis have not been keen on the notion of immunity from prosecution of United States troops. Also at issue was the schedule, including the 2009 date set provisionally for the withdrawal of some United States troops from some cities, as well as the 2011 date set for the final withdrawal from Iraq.

This development augured potential challenges in the process of ultimately approving the agreement, specifically because officials from Iraq and the United States had previously asserted that the draft was final and not subject to changes. But without approval from the Political Council for National Security, the agreement was unlikely to gain parliamentary approval.

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Meanwhile, outside the governing arena, some Iraqis were taking to the streets of Baghdad to protest the agreement and to demand the exit of United States troops from Iraq. Among the demonstrators were about 50,000 supporters of the radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, chanting anti-American slogans, such as "Get out occupier!"

In mid-November 2008, the Iraqi cabinet approved the Status of Forces Agreement, which provided for the continued presence of 150,000 United States troops in Iraq until 2011.

As aforementioned, the security pact has been a source of consternation in Iraq because it included in the concord was limited jurisdiction for Iraq over the prosecution of troops. Nevertheless, it appeared to have crossed one hurdle in its passage into law. Yet to be determined was the matter of whether it would be approved in parliament.

Note: The existing United Nations mandate for the United States-led coalition in Iraq was set to expire at the end of 2008.

In December 2008, United States President George W. Bush arrived on Air Force One at the Baghdad International Airport on a surprise visit to Iraq. For his first order of business, Bush met with Iraqi head of state, President Jalal Talabani, at the presidential palace in the Green Zone. Describing United States efforts in Iraq, which would no doubt shape his political legacy for generations to come, Bush said, "The work hasn't been easy but it's been necessary for American security, Iraqi hope and world peace."

But the political legacy of the 43rd president of the United States was likely to be mired by criticisms about the rationale for war, such as the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, the Bush Doctrine of pre-emption, the steep death toll among Iraqis and American troops, the financial costs of what some have called "an optional war," as well as a lack of planning and progress on the reconstruction front. To that latter end, a United States government report cast a scathing depiction of the power struggles and lack of cultural knowledge among the American planners of the war of the Iraqi landscape. According to the New York Times, the report also pegged the astronomical cost of the reconstruction effort alone at more than \$100 billion.

Nevertheless, with United States troops now in Iraq, attention was on their future role and their potential withdrawal.

As such, Bush's primary rationale for his trip to Iraq was to formalize a new security agreement with that country. Bush, along with the Iraqi head of government, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, signed the Status of Forces Agreement between their respective countries. That agreement provides for the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq in 2011. The Status of Forces Agreement notes that an absolute final date would be dependent on the security situation. The objective of the concord is to ultimately hand over responsibility for security to Iraqi forces.

Bush, who was in Iraq five weeks before the handover of power to his successor, President-Elect Barack Obama, said that the war in Iraq was not at an end and that there was further work to be done.

This statement, however, was somewhat at odds with a statement by United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates who said that the Iraq mission was in its "endgame."

The surprise visit by Bush, as well as the formalization of Status of Forces Agreement, were both overshadowed by an incident involving a journalist who threw shoes at the American president during a news conference. As shown in media broadcasts of the incident, an Iraqi journalist shouted, "This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, dog" and then threw two of his shoes at the American president. Security guards subsequently escorted the journalist out of the news conference.

## Political Conditions Iraq

Referring to a person as a "dog" is considered derogatory in Islamic circles while the soles of shoes are regarded as a sign of insult in Arab culture. Indeed, Iraqis threw shoes at Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad after the Iraqi leader was ousted from power. Thus, it could be said that the journalist was passionately -- and symbolically -- registering his discontent with the presence of Bush in Iraq for the signing ceremony.

For his part, Bush demonstrated quick reflexes and was able to dodge the incoming footwear. Bush also expressed good humor about the incident saying to the Associated Press, "All I can report is a size 10."

Note: President George W. Bush's successor, President-Elect Barack Obama, has said that United States combat troops will come home from Iraq in approximately one year after he takes office.

Parliamentarians set to vote on status of non-U.S. forces in Iraq

A week after United States President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki signed into law the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) allowing United States forces to remain in Iraq until 2011, attention was focused on a similar pact affecting non-United States forces in Iraq. There was a vote in Iraq's parliament on a resolution that would allow non-American forces to remain in Iraq until the end of July 2009. The matter was the source of much consternation in Iraq, with Iraqi parliament rejecting legislation on the matter because the terms set forth were not as circumscribed as those enshrined in the SOFA with the United States.

## Developments in 2009

In early January 2009, a female suicide bomber killed at least 35 Shi'a pilgrims close to a shrine in the Kadhimiya area of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad.

There were 16 Iranians among the dead. As well, more than 70 people were injured in the attack. Most of the victims were women and children.

Authorities said the suicide bomber detonated an explosive device strapped to her body at a checkpoint just outside the Imam Moussa al-Kadhim shrine. As such, she appeared to target pilgrims gathering for a religious ceremony, which was associated with the Ashura holiday that marks the 7th century death of Imam Hussein -- the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

Convoys and processions of Shi'a pilgrims have often been targeted by Sunni militants across the country.

The third week of January 2009 was marked by a spate of violent attacks across Iraq. The attacks appeared to precede provincial elections scheduled to be held at the end of the month. Previous provincial elections were boycotted by Sunni Arabs and some Shi'a groups, resulting in what some have viewed as unrepresentative provincial government in Iraq.

In the northern part of the country, a senior Sunni politician, Hassan Zaidan al-Luhaibi, died as a result of a suicide bombing. Hassan Zaidan al-Luhaibi, the vice-president of the Sunni National Dialogue bloc (one of the groups within the Sunni Muslim Accordance Front), was killed during a campaign meeting that was being held to the south of Mosul. He had been a candidate in the forthcoming elections.

In other developments, a series of bombings wracked Baghdad in the same period, leaving several people killed and even more injured as a result. Policemen and soldiers were among the victims and appeared to have been the main targets, but civilians were among those killed in an attack in the commercial district of Karrada.

## Political Conditions Iraq

At the close of January 2009, Iraqis went to the polls to vote in provincial elections. Turnout across the country was over 50 percent -- lower than had been expected, but with higher than average turnout in predominantly Sunni areas of the country, such as the province of Ninevah. High Sunni voter turnout was in sharp contrast to previous elections when Sunnis participated in voting boycotts. These provincial contests were regarded as test cases in anticipation general elections to be held in 2010.

According to the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq (IHEC), results showed that the political coalition backed by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki enjoyed the most success in the elections to provincial councils in Baghdad and in eight predominantly Shi'ite provinces. Meanwhile, the results also showed that Sunni Arabs gained ascendancy in the provinces of Nineveh and Diyala -- two areas that remained volatile as United States troops battled al-Qaida militants.

While the provincial elections went off in a climate that was notably free of chaos, the early election results in one province were cause for alarm. At issue was the apparent victory for a Sunni religious party, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), in the large western Anbar province. Known as the site of many attacks by the Sunni insurgency against United States troops, Anbar was subsequently distinguished as a success zone when tribal units, known as Awakening Councils, worked with American forces to drive out al-Qaida extremists from the area. Tribal sheikhs who participated in those Awakening Councils were now alleging fraud in the voting, which indicated victory for the IIP. Hamid al-Hais, head of the Anbar Tribes, warned of a violent backlash if the IIP was declared to be the winner of the election. But such an end was diminished when the final result showed that the tribal leaders in Anbar came second to a Sunni secular party, while the IIP came third.

Note: There were no elections in the three provinces that make up the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. As well, elections were postponed in oil-rich Kirkuk.

In early March 2009, the United States announced that 12,000 troops would be withdrawn from Iraq within six months. The reduction in troop strength was part of United States President Barack Obama's plan to end the combat mission in Iraq by a deadline of August 2010.

But as that announcement was being advanced, a suicide bomber attacked a police recruitment center in Baghdad. Around 30 people were killed and double that number were injured as a result of the attack, which was carried out by a motorcyclist with explosives strapped to his belt. Most of the victims were police recruits or police officers. This suicide bombing occurred only two days after a car bomb killed a dozen people at a cattle market in the province of Babil.

At the close of March 2009, the arrest of a local Sunni militia leader in Baghdad has spurred clashes between joint United States/Iraqi troops and militants. At the heart of the matter was Adil Mashadani -- the leader of the Fadil Awakening Group for whom the Iraqi government had issued an arrest warrant. The charges against Mashadani included bomb attacks on Iraq's security forces, links to al-Qaida in Iraq, collusion with the terrorist network known as Jaysh al-Islami, and extortion of Fadil's residents. The situation appeared to have resulted in unrest in Fadil. Troops were patrolling the Fadil district and calling on people to relinquish their weapons or risk being treated as terrorists.

United States President Barack Obama made a surprise trip to Baghdad in early April 2009. He arrived in Iraq during his return trip from Europe where he attended the G-20, NATO and European Union summits. In an address to cheering United States troops serving in Iraq, he reiterated his 2010 intended timetable to withdraw most United States troops from Iraq, and he noted that the time had come for Iraqis "to take responsibility for their country."

## Political Conditions Iraq

Hours before President Obama's arrival in Iraq, a series of coordinated car bombings in Baghdad left at least 34 people dead. A few days later, another Baghdad bombing killed nine people. Then, on April 9, 2009, a bomb exploded at a shopping area in a predominantly Shi'ite Kadhamiya part of Baghdad. Seven people were reported to have died and more than 20 others were injured as a result of the blast. The location of the attack was in proximity to the tomb of Imam Mousa al-Kazim -- a significant Shi'a shrine -- thus suggesting a sectarian motive.

The last week of April 2009 was marred by a spate of suicide bombings in Iraq. On April 24, 2009, Baghdad's main Shi'a holy site, the Imam Moussa al-Kadhim shrine, was hit by suicide attacks. The violence was carried out by two female suicide bombers and left at least 60 people dead and 125 others wounded. The attack took place as worshippers gathered for prayer.

That attack took place a day after two separate suicide attacks in Baghdad and Baquba left around 85 people dead. Most of the victims in the attack on a Baquba restaurant were Iranian pilgrims. Iranian cleric condemned the attacks on the pilgrims and former Iranian President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani said, "The incident yesterday was a very, very hateful example of those who harm religion in the name of religion." He continued, "We feel sorry for the Iraqi people because such corrupt groups have penetrated into Iraq. We also criticize America for not having the serious will to preserve Iraq's security." Meanwhile, displaced families were the victims in the Baghdad bombing.

On May 20, 2009, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was the site of a large car bombing that left around 35 people dead and more than 70 others injured. The attack occurred close to a restaurant in a predominantly Shi'a area of the city. The attack was one of similar such attacks on civilians at crowded tea shops and gathering points around the city in the same time period, although this particular case was the most violent over the course of several weeks. Another large attack occurred in late April 2009 when three bombs went off in the capital city. Almost a month later, there was something of a repeat performance.

On May 21, 2009, Baghdad was again struck. A blast at an outdoor marketplace left around several people dead -- both Iraqis and Americans -- and even more injured. Three **United States** soldiers were among those killed. In most cases, Shi'ites were the apparent targets, thus indicating a rise in ethno-sectarian tensions at a time when **United States** troops were expected to soon leave several major Iraqi cities including Baghdad. There was some speculation that the attacks were linked with the government's decision to carry out a crackdown on Sunni paramilitary groups, and were aimed at undercutting Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Shi'ite support base.

On June 8, 2009, a bomb exploded on a minibus, resulting in the deaths of seven people and injuries to around 25 others. The attack took place in the Shi'a Muslim enclave within the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Dora in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. The location, which has seen much violence in the years since the invasion on Iraq, thusly indicated a possible sectarian motive for the attack.

In the third week of June 2009, a suicide truck bomb killed at least 72 people and left close to 160 others injured close to the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. The attack took place as the predominantly Turkmen worshippers exited the Shi'a al-Rasoul mosque in the town of Taza. In addition to the human casualty list, approximately one dozen homes made of mud bricks were destroyed in the blast. Indeed, the force of the explosion was so great that a crater was left in its wake. It was one of Iraq's worst attacks of the year.

The suicide truck bomber struck on the heels of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's announcement that the withdrawal of **United States** troops from most of Iraq's cities and towns would take place as scheduled on June 30, 2009, with a complete end to combat operations in September 2010. The Iraqi leader encouraged the Iraqi people to expect occasional difficulties in the time of transition, saying: "Don't lose heart if a breach of security occurs here or there." But just hours later, the Kirkuk truck bombing ensued, making evident the high stakes at play. In a statement following the truck bombing, Prime Minister Maliki said, "This ugly crime is an attempt to harm security and stability and spread mistrust of the Iraqi forces."

## Political Conditions Iraq

Note: Kirkuk is Iraq's main oil city and is inhabited by a diverse ethno-sectarian mix of people, including Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Muslims and Christians.

On June 22, 2009, around 30 people died in various attacks in Baghdad. In the Shaab district in the north of the capital, three people died including a child, while five people died in the Karrada district of Baghdad.

On June 24, 2009, at least 70 people died and more than 130 were injured after a bomb exploded in the Sadr City enclave of Baghdad. Authorities said that a bomb was hidden under a cart carrying vegetables on sale in a marketplace in the mostly Shi'a part of the Iraqi capital. It was one of the deadliest attacks in Baghdad in 2009 and came ahead of the scheduled withdrawal of United States troops from Iraqi cities, towns and military bases within days by a deadline of June 30, 2009.

Then, on June 26, 2009, more than a dozen people were killed and scores more wounded as a result of a bomb attack in Baghdad. The bomb was placed on a motorcycle in the city center.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki responded to the spate of bombings by trying to calm the Iraqi people and offering assurances that Iraqi forces would be able to protect them when United States troops withdrew. The Iraqi leader said that the spate of attacks were intended to "awaken sectarianism and create chaos, and prevent the Iraqi people from standing on their own feet." It was not known if such statements would assuage the people who were becoming increasingly anxious and angry about the security situation in Iraq and the ability of Iraqi security forces to do enough to protect them.

United States troops withdrew from Iraq's cities, towns and military bases on June 30, 2009, in keeping with a prevailing bilateral agreement. Iraqi security forces were now charged with keeping the peace.

Iraqi politicians of various ethno-sectarian backgrounds lauded the move as a sign of progress is the path of sovereignty. Hashim al-Taie of the Accordance Front said, "The pullout is a very good step on the path to independence and sovereignty and Iraqis are glad of that." Mahmoud Othman, from the main Kurdish alliance in parliament, said, "We have concerns. Some towns still have trouble -- mixed areas -- but those concerns should not prevent the withdrawal."

For his part, United States President noted that "Sovereignty Day" was a significant milestone for Iraq, but warned that Iraq would yet be faced with "difficult days" in the future. Indeed, there were some anxieties that the withdrawal of United States troops could well act as a trigger for increasing ethno-sectarian violence across the country.

To that end, June 30, 2009 was also marked by yet another attack ensued in the northern oil city of Kirkuk. Around 30 people were killed as a result of a car bomb at a market in the Shurja district.

On July 8, 2009, twin car bombings hit the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Both attacks took place within minutes of one another close to Shi'a mosques. The second bombing left at least nine people dead. Elsewhere in Mosul, which has been home to a mix of various ethnicities and religious groups, an Iraqi soldier was shot to death at a checkpoint. As well, a bombing at a wedding to the south of Baghdad left two people dead. From the evening of July 11, 2009, through to the daytime hours of July 12, 2009, several bombings were reported to have taken place across Iraq, leaving an extensive casualty list. The most dangerous of all the attacks was a car bombing outside a Christian church in eastern Baghdad, which left four people dead and 21 others injured.

While the level of violence in Iraq has generally declined over the course of the last year -- indeed to the lowest levels since the post-invasion insurgency began -- it was clear that attacks by insurgents were on the rise. The new wave of violence has notably targeted the country's Christian community, effectively sparking anxieties about the safety of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq. Indeed, it was clear that in the aftermath of the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraqi cities and towns, the country has been plagued by almost constant deadly violence, raising questions about the Iraqi authorities' ability to keep the country secure. That said, a senior general in Iraq's military noted that such attacks should be expected to continue for years to come.



Earlier, the Iraqi health ministry released data showing that since 2005, more than 87,000 Iraqis have been killed in the bloodshed and violence gripping the country. That high death toll was sure to fuel the debate over the human cost of the war.

Mosques were targeted in a series of bombings in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad on July 31, 2009. Around 30 people were killed and more than 130 wounded in total, following six seemingly coordinated bombs exploded at five Shi'a mosques. The bombs appeared to have been intended to go off just as worshippers were exiting the mosques after Friday prayers, thereby exacting maximum carnage. In a separate attack, two people died as a result of a car bomb at a market in the northern city of Kirkuk.

Ironically, these attacks came only just days after United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Iraq and lauded the improved security situation there. Gates had also said that the United States might accelerate its anticipated withdrawal from Iraq ahead of schedule.

Multiple bombs exploded at the end of the first week of August 2009, leaving 36 people dead and scores more injured. The attacks apparently targeted Shi'a Muslims.

In one case, 30 people died when a car bomb exploded outside a mosque where a funeral was being held in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. In Baghdad, three bombs left six people dead who were returning home from a pilgrimage in Karbala. The attacks coincided with a significant Shi'a religious holiday, which marks the birth of the Hidden Imam Mohammed al-Mehdi. Two days earlier, a Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad was the target of a separate bombing. Accordingly, these attacks indicated an ethno-sectarian motivation in a country marred with strife between Shi'ites and Sunnis.

Days later, Iraq was plagued by further violence. A series of violent bomb attacks across Iraq exacted a heavy death toll of 40 people on Aug.10, 2009. More than 200 people were also injured in the blasts, which included two truck bombs in a Shi'a village close to the northern city of Mosul, as well as a spate of explosions across the capital city of Baghdad.

Two car bombs in eastern Baghdad in the second week of August 2009 left at least eight people dead. One bomb exploded close to a residential building while the second bomb exploded in proximity to a cafe., Both explosions occurred within minutes of one another in a Shi'a district of al-Amin. The day before, a roadside bomb was discovered in al-Amin.

Accordingly, suspicion rested on Sunni insurgents linked with al-Qaida in Iraq, who were believed to behind a spate of attacks in Iraq that targeted Shi'a and Christian enclaves, as well as multi-ethnic cities such as Mosul.

The attacks appeared to coincide with the United States' plans to reduce and eventually withdraw its troops from Iraq, and came ahead of the 2010 elections. To this end, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki sought to calm fears that the country was exploding into a renewed state of civil conflict when he noted that insurgents would try to destabilize the country by exploiting public fears. In a news conference, the Iraqi leader warned that insurgents would "try in any way they can to give the impression that the political process is not stable." But, in a bid to show that Iraqi security forces were up to the task, Prime Minister Maliki noted that the Iraqi authorities would exert great effort to reduce the insurgents the ability to do harm to the country.

Reporters in the field have noted that the Iraqi public was not particularly confident in the government capacity to maintain stability in Iraq.

## Political Conditions Iraq

In other developments, elections were held in late July 2009 in Iraq's autonomous region of Kurdistan. At the presidential level, Masood Barzani was re-elected with close to 70 percent of the vote share. Kurdistan's two-party ruling alliance retained control of the legislative body, albeit with a smaller majority, taking 57 percent of the vote share. The two-party ruling alliance was made up of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). To date, Kurdistan has endured some tensions with the central government of Iraq over the control of oil as well as territorial issues.

Also on the domestic political front, a cadre of Iranian-backed Shi'ite political parties announced a new coalition on Aug. 23, 2009 that excluded Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki from its ranks. The new coalition, named the Iraqi National Alliance, included the large Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, or SIIC, as well as the bloc led by anti-Western cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr's bloc, along with some smaller parties. It was a clear re-alignment on Iraq's political landscape, where a grand coalition of Shi'ite parties had held sway since the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The political implications for Prime Minister Maliki were clear, since if he wanted to stay on as head of government after the parliamentary elections set for January 2010, he would be compelled to forge some sort of alliance himself, likely with Sunni and Kurdish political parties. Should he be unsuccessful in forging such a new alliance, then the Iraqi National Alliance could potentially shift the geopolitical scene in Iraq. Indeed, a victory by the new Shi'ite bloc in January 2010 would intensify Iran's influence in Iraq at a time when United States forces would be withdrawing from the scene.

A victory by the new Shi'ite bloc could also enflame tensions further, with Sunnis feeling increasing alienation from the dominant Shi'a population.

The political development -- an ethno-sectarian complication in and of itself -- came at a time when ethno-sectarian violence was plaguing the country. On the same day of the announcement of the Shi'a alliance, bombs on buses exploded in mainly Shi'a city of Kut in southern Iraq, leaving about a dozen people dead. That attack came days after the deadliest strike of 2009, when two massive truck bombs left at least 95 people dead in central Baghdad.

On Aug. 19, 2009, close to 100 people died as a result of a wave of attacks across the capital city. The most brutal of the attacks occurred as a result of two massive truck bombs in central Baghdad. The country's foreign ministry and finance ministry buildings appeared to have been targeted in the attacks and bore the brunt of the destruction. It was the deadliest day in Iraq since the start of the year.

In the aftermath of the bloody attacks, Iraq's Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari charged that the militants must have been assisted by insiders in order to get past checkpoints to foreign and finance ministry buildings. In an interview with the media, Zebari said, "According to our information, there has even been collaboration between security officers and the murderers." To that end, 11 security officers were arrested on the basis of negligence. Zebari also mentioned the timing and orchestration of the attacks in central Baghdad, and noted that trucks had somehow managed to reach the city center even though heavy vehicles were not normally permitted in this area. Zebari also took aim at Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's recent decision to remove most blast walls protecting government buildings and shopping centers in Baghdad. He said, "The removal of blast walls and checkpoints due to a false sense of security is also a reason [for the attacks]."

As before, the spate of attacks came at a time when the United States has moved to reduce and eventually withdraw its troops from Iraq, and came ahead of the 2010 elections. They have raised questions about the ability of Iraqi security forces to maintain the stability of the country, in the absence of the United States forces on the ground. The attacks have also compromised one of Prime Minister Maliki's election platform issues, that he has presided over the stabilization of the country while at the same time ensuring the exit of the United States military from Iraq.

## Political Conditions Iraq

In the aftermath of the deadly attack discussed just above, Iraq and Syria respectively recalled their ambassadors. At issue was a deepening diplomatic row over Baghdad's claim that Damascus was giving safe haven to militants responsible for the aforementioned attacks on Baghdad, and particularly, the brutal bombings that targeted the foreign and finance ministries and left close to 100 people dead. Iraq recalled its envoy from Syria after a taped confession was broadcast, indicating that recent violent attacks in Baghdad had been ordered by Syria-based Iraqi Baathists. In retaliation for the move, Syria said it was also recalling its envoy from Iraq. Syria also rejected any involvement in the violence. Syria's declaration of innocence was somewhat bolstered by a claim of responsibility by al-Qaida wing called Islamic States of Iraq. Turkey was set to mediate the dispute.

On Sept. 10, 2009, a truck bomb in the Kurdish northern village of Wardek left around 20 people dead and 30 more injured including women and children. Several homes were decimated in the explosion and the authorities warned that as the search of the rubble was carried out, the casualty list was sure to increase. It was the latest attack on the ethnically-mixed region of northern Iraq, which has given rise to the belief that al-Qaida in Iraq has been intent on provoking ethno-sectarian violence in this region. To that end, Iraqi, Kurdish and United States officials were reportedly working on a plan to increase security in the area.

On Sept, 15, 2009, United States Vice President Joe Biden arrived on an unannounced visit to Iraq. His arrival coincided with an attack by militants firing rockets and mortars at the heavily fortified Green Zone. During his third visit to Iraq in 2009, Vice President Biden met with key Iraqi officials in Baghdad, including Vice President Adi Abdul-Mahdi the next day. After greeting Abdul-Mahdi, Vice President Biden jokingly said, "You can't get rid of me. I keep coming back, coming back." United States President Barack Obama has charged his second-in-command with providing "sustained, high-level focus" on Iraq, according to the White House.

By the start of October 2009, the United States had accelerated its military withdrawal from Iraq and intended to redeploy 4,000 troops within a month. Accordingly, the number of United States troops in Iraq was expected to go from 124,000 to 120,000 by the close of October 2009. The top American commander in Iraq, Army General Ray Odierno, explained that it was the latest move aimed at ending the United States' engagement in that country. In an eight-page statement intended to be delivered at a Congressional committee, he said, "We have already begun deliberately drawing down our forces - without sacrificing security." Odierno continued, "As we go forward, we will thin our lines across Iraq in order to reduce the risk and sustain stability through a deliberate transition of responsibilities to the Iraqi security forces."

Odierno expressed tentative optimism about the prospects of a stable Iraq in the future, while acknowledging the reality of continued violence, as evidenced by the Aug, 19, 2009, bombings at two Iraqi government ministries. He also noted that ethnic, sectarian and regional divisions continued to plague the country. He observed that unresolved tensions between the Arab and Kurdish populations promised to present problems in the 2010 parliamentary elections, with various groups seeking control over regional oil wealth. That said, Odierno suggested that most Iraqis sought peace and security, while opposing militancy and violence. He said, "The overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people have rejected extremism," Odierno said. "We see no indications of a return to the sectarian violence that plagued Iraq in 2006-2007."

Note: Odierno's congressional testimony was obtained by the Associated Press and the plan to reduce the number of brigades in Iraq was confirmed by the Defense Department.

Meanwhile, the start of October 2009 was also marked by the domestic political scene. On October 1, 2009, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki formed a new political bloc to contest the parliamentary elections due to take place in January 2010. The Maliki bloc was composed of 40 political parties from across Iraq's complex ethno-sectarian milieu, and included Sunni, Shi'ite and minority groups. A senior official from Maliki's Dawa Party said that about 30 other political movements were also thinking of joining the coalition.

## Political Conditions Iraq

While the new political bloc was expected to assist Maliki in staying in power, while eschewing the prevailing ethno-sectarian divisions, it was also borne out of necessity. Months earlier in August 2009, a cadre of Iranian-backed Shi'ite political parties announced the formation of their own new coalition, which excluded Prime Minister Maliki from its ranks. As discussed above, the formation of the Iraqi National Alliance, along with this new and diverse Maliki bloc, illuminated a clear re-alignment on Iraq's political landscape. For the pro-Iranian alliance, it meant that the grand coalition of Shi'ite parties, which had held sway since the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, would now have a serious challenge. At the same time, the political implications for Prime Minister Maliki were clear. If he wanted to stay on as head of government after the parliamentary elections set for January 2010, he had no choice but to forge some sort of alliance himself, as discussed above.

The elections of 2010 would answer the question of whether or not Iraq was undergoing some sort of socio-political transformation. Would the hardened Shi'ite forces prevail and be able to form the next government without Maliki, and thus, with a new head of government at the helm? Indeed, a victory by the new Shi'ite bloc in January 2010 would intensify Iran's influence in Iraq at a time when United States forces would be withdrawing from the scene.

A victory by the new Shi'ite bloc could also enflame tensions further, with Sunnis feeling increasing alienation from the dominant Shi'a population. Or would Maliki hold on to power, albeit with a new bloc of support?

That new bloc was marked by the inclusion of a diverse collection of players and parties on the Iraqi political scene, and could herald a government that is no longer reliant on any one ethnic or sectarian enclave having undue power in this complicated society.

On Oct. 11, 2009, three car bombs killed at least 26 people and injured more than 80 others in the Iraqi city of Ramadi. Two of the three detonated within 10 minutes of each other outside Ramadi police headquarters, killing at least eight police officers. Within an hour, the third attack ensued when a suicide car bomb exploded at a hospital in Ramadi. Just after the attacks were carried out in the predominately Sunni city, which is also the capital of Anbar province, Iraqi authorities closed off all the entrances to the city and instituted a curfew. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, al-Qaida in Iraq was named as the likely suspect. Anbar police Chief Gen. Tariq Yusuf placed the blame on generic "terrorists" and warned of further violence ahead of the 2010 parliamentary elections. He said, "They want to destabilize the situation in Anbar generally before the election."

On Oct. 19, 2009, United States defense officials said that they would cancel the expected deployment of 3,500 soldiers to Iraq as a result of the improving security situation in that country. Those soldiers were set to deploy to Iraq at the start of 2010 but, based on the assessment by General Raymond Odierno, the Pentagon said that Iraqi security forces should be able to protect their citizens and institutions without the addition of the United States troops.

Ironically, this announcement came a week before suicide bombings in Baghdad left more than 150 people dead and another 500 people wounded. The attacks on Oct. 25, 2009, were carried out by suicide bombers who detonated a truck bomb at a busy intersection and a car bomb in a parking area. The attacks appeared to be coordinated and targeted the Justice Ministry, the headquarters of the provincial government, as well as local government ministries. It was the worst violence in a single day in the Iraqi capital city since April 2007 when close to 200 people died in truck bombings in Baghdad.

For his part, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki placed the blame on the terror enclave al-Qaida, as well as loyalists of former president Saddam Hussein. He said, "These cowardly terrorist attacks must not affect the determination of the Iraqi people to continue their struggle against the remnants of the dismantled regime and al-Qaeda terrorists." Iran's foreign ministry said the attacks "aim to wreck stability and the process of reinforcing democratic structures." The attacks appeared to be part of the increased violence plaguing the country ahead of democratic elections set for early 2010. Indeed, the bombs exploded just as senior politicians were meeting to try to resolve a standoff on laws related to those election.

## Political Conditions Iraq

The rising tide of violence was also linked with the anticipated withdrawal of United State combat troops from Iraq in 2010, with a full withdrawal in 2012. In a statement, United States President Barack Obama said: "I strongly condemn these outrageous attacks on the Iraqi people, and send my deepest condolences to those who have lost loved ones. The American president expressed outrage over the attacks, saying, "These bombings serve no purpose other than the murder of innocent men, women and children, and they only reveal the hateful and destructive agenda of those who would deny the Iraqi people the future that they deserve."

At the start of November 2009, Iraqi parliamentarians were unable to agree on amendments related to a national election law, essentially placing the prospects of elections scheduled for Jan. 16, 2010, in doubt. At issue was a disagreement over the voting system. There was little concurrence among Iraqi parliamentarians on whether to use the closed system of only party tickets on the ballot, as was the case in the 2005 elections, or, if an open system using the name of candidates contesting parliamentary seats should be used instead. Also of concern has been a dispute over seat allocation of rival Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen in ethnically-diverse Kirkuk.

But by the close of the first week of November 2009, the Iraqi parliament was able to find some agreement on the structure of the national election law. Central to the election reform deal were two provisions. First, electoral lists would contain the name of politicians and not anonymous party tickets. Second, results would be provisional in Kirkuk and other provinces where there were ethnically complex populations.

The spirit of optimism over this breakthrough was short-lived since the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq decided to boycott the country's national elections, in order to protest the treatment of parliamentary seat allocation for the provinces. Then, Sunni Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi vetoed a section of the election law affecting seat allocation of refugees, minority ethnic groups, and smaller parties. Hashemi said he took the action out of concern for his Sunni constituents. These two developments contributed to the decision by the Iraq's election committee to halt all of its activity and refer the situation to the parliament for reconsideration.

The electoral timeline conundrum met its most substantial roadblock on Nov. 25, 2009, when Iraq's Independent Electoral Commission announced that it was now too late to meet the constitutional requirement for passage of an electoral bill ahead of the January 2010 elections. Specifically, it was now past the 60 day threshold to pass such legislation. Consequently, the holding of the January 2010 elections appeared to be out of reach.

But the volatile "on again/off again" saga of the Iraqi elections took a turn for the better in early December 2009 when the Iraqi parliament unanimously approved a new electoral law, following a special late-night session in which legislation was finally passed only minutes before the midnight deadline. The foundation for the new electoral law was brokered jointly by the United Nations and the United States embassy. It included a veto withdrawal from Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi thanks to the inclusion of a new amendment, which was characterized as containing fair provisions for Iraq's minority groups.

The deputy speaker of parliament first announced that the election might now take place on Feb. 27, 2009 -- a month after the original election schedule. Days later, on Dec. 9, 2009, a three-panel council approved the changes to the electoral law but delayed election further until March 7, 2009. It was yet to be seen if this new election date would indeed come to pass. If no agreement was forged, the elections would have been delayed, and the stability of the country would have been at stake. The United Nations has warned it would not endorse the election without the passage of a national election reform bill, while there have been worries that without such legislation, the expected timeline for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq could be affected.

On Dec. 8, 2009, a series of bombings in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad yielded a heavy death toll with at least 112 people dead and around 200 people injured, according to the Iraqi Interior Ministry. The first explosion was due to a car bomb in the Dora district and was followed by four other car bombs across Baghdad. The second explosion was at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, then two more explosions occurred in the commercial centers of Nahdha and al-Qashla Square, with the fifth explosion taking place just outside the Karkh Civil Court in Baghdad the Mansour district.

On Dec. 18, 2009, Iran briefly seized control over an Iraqi oil well. Reports stated that Iranian troops entered the southern part of Iraq and raised the Iranian flag over the Fakkah oil field. Iraq's Deputy Interior Minister Ahmed Ali al-Khafaji first denied these actions took place but subsequently confirmed that the Iranian troops were in Iraq and had control of the oil well. Iraqi officials then appeared to downplay the incident by saying that the area at stake was a disputed border region. On the other side of the equation, Iran denied taking control of any oil well inside Iraqi territory.

On Dec. 30, 2009, twin suicide blasts in a high security area of Ramadi in the Iraqi province of Anbar left 24 people dead. Most of the victims were police although the provincial governor, Qassim Mohammed, was among the 60 people who were wounded. The attacks appeared to have targeted the provincial government infrastructure. In the first attack, a suicide bomber in a car caused the first blast at a security checkpoint close to administrative buildings. In the second attack, a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body under an army uniform as he charged into a crowd surrounding the governor. The location of the attack -- Ramadi in Anbar -- was of particular note since it was at the center of the Sunni insurgency until tribal leaders turned against al-Qaida in Iraq, and instead began working with joint Iraqi and American authorities to improving the security situation. While Anbar was touted as a model of increasing stability within Iraq, the upsurge of attacks here in recent times -- ahead of the 2010 elections -- has been a source of concern. Months earlier in October 2009, Ramadi was the site of a triple bombing that also exacted a sizable casualty list.

Note: In a separate attack, a roadside bomb left six Shi'ite pilgrims in Khalis dead.

#### Recent Developments

On Jan. 25, 2010, a series of car bombs left at least 36 people dead and 71 others wounded at three hotels and an apartment building in Baghdad. The coordinated attacks struck the Palestine, Sheraton and Hamra hotels of the capital city. It was unclear as to if the attacks were carried out by Sunni insurgents in response to the execution of

Ali Hassan al-Majid or "Chemical Ali," the cousin of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, who orchestrated the poison gas attacks that killed more than 5,000 Kurds in 1988.

Also in January 2010, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission ordered that more than 500 Iraqi politicians be prohibited from contesting the March 2010 parliamentary elections due to their supposed links to Saddam Hussein's Baath party. That decision left several Sunni secular leaders, as well as some Shi'a politicians, out of contention, and earned criticism from the international community.

On Feb. 3, 2010, an Iraqi appeals panel ruled in favor of allowing hundreds of candidates with alleged ties to former President Saddam Hussein's regime to participate in the country's parliamentary elections set for March 2010. The ruling postponed a review of the politicians on the "banned" list, essentially allowing them the ability to contest the elections, and effectively nullifying the decision by the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission.

But a day after the appeals panel ruled in favor of the banned candidates, the Iraqi government weighed into the equation. The government said that allowing politicians with ties to Saddam Hussein's regime to contest the country's elections was both "illegal" and "unconstitutional."

By Feb. 11, 2010, the situation remained unresolved and still volatile since the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission moved forward with the printing of the ballots despite the fact that the appeals process in the courts was not completed. Then, a day later, the situation grew more tense as an advocacy group accused Iraqi soldiers and members of the national police of violating election law by distributing campaign propaganda. Ultimately, the ban on those believed to be associated with the Ba'ath Party prevailed on election day, as discussed below.

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During the third week of February 2010, the Sunni wing of Iraq's main non-sectarian political coalition announced that it was likely withdrawing from the elections. The Iraqi Front for National Dialogue charged that the vote would be illegitimate, given the aforementioned ballot purge. While the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue did not expressly urge Sunnis to boycott the impending parliamentary elections, it did nonetheless call on other political parties to withdraw from the vote. That call was quickly heeded by at least one other party -- the National Council for Tribes of Iraq.

Earlier, on February 3, 2010, a series of suicide bombings in the Iraqi city of Karbala left at least 20 Shi'a pilgrims dead and scores more injured. The pilgrims were traveling to the Imam Hussein shrine to commemorate Arb'een when the suicide bomber drove a car laden with explosives into the crowd, detonating the bomb. The attack occurred two days after a female suicide bomber killed more than 40 people and wounded at least 100 others in north-eastern Baghdad. The violence was thought to be linked to impending parliamentary elections, now set for March 2010.

The second week of February 2010 saw the Iraqi Shi'a holy city of Najaf subjected to a spate of bombings. The city has been an important stopping point for Shi'a pilgrims. The attacks, which left scores of people injured, appeared to be the latest evidence of violence against Shi'a Muslims. Earlier in the month, coordinated bombings left more than a dozen people dead in Karbala. In both cases, Sunni Ba'athist militias that could be affiliated with al-Qaida have been blamed.

Around a dozen people were killed and 20 others were wounded as a result of a suicide bombing in the Iraqi city of Ramadi -- the capital of the western Anbar province -- in the third week of February 2010. Four policemen and one girl were reportedly among those who died. The attack took place at a checkpoint in close proximity to government offices and courts. Meanwhile, in the northern city of Mosul, a car bombing close to a police station injured more than 20 people, including 15 police. While overall violence across Iraq has seen a decline in the last year, there has been something of an uptick as the country prepares for elections later in 2010. Indeed, the political situation in Iraq has become more tense as Shi'ites and Sunnis spar over the issue of a possible ban against some candidates associated with the Ba'ath Party that held sway during the regime of Saddam Hussein, when the minority Sunni population controlled the balance of power in Iraq. Without resolution on this matter, the country risked backsliding into sectarian conflict and violence.

Meanwhile, on February 10, 2010, Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani ordered employees of the United States security firm, Blackwater, to leave the country within seven days. As reported by al-Iraqiya television, the Iraqi cabinet minister said, "About 250 guards working for the security company Blackwater have been dismissed and given seven days to leave Iraq."

Blackwater, now called Xe Services, gained notoriety due to its role as a private security contractor in Iraq with clients including personnel of the United States Department of State. Blackwater became a source of controversy with its reputation severely tarnished due to accusations that it had used excessive force. Indeed, in one case in September 2007, in the aftermath of a car bombing, Blackwater guards reportedly opened fire on unarmed Iraqi civilians at Nissor Square in Baghdad, ultimately leaving 17 people dead.

The incident fueled the rage of local Iraqis and the perceived climate of impunity in which Blackwater had been allowed to operate. To that end, Blackwater's guards charged with protecting American embassy personnel were given immunity from prosecution in Iraqi courts. On the United States side of jurisdiction, the United States government accused five Blackwater guards of causing the deaths of unarmed civilians. However, that case did not progress due to a ruling by a United States judge who decided to drop the criminal charges against them. The matter re-ignited Iraqi outrage and resulted in the decision to attempt to sue the company.

At the start of March 2010, attention was on the impending parliamentary vote. With violence on the rise in the months leading up to the much anticipated elections, security was increased across the country, with close to one

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million military and police personnel deployed to key areas. Notably, 200,000 security personnel were to be deployed in Baghdad alone. As well, internal travel was restricted across the country, with vehicles banned and the border with Iran closed. For some time, there have been fears that security gains made in the last year could well be reversed. Indeed, there were prevailing anxieties that Iraq could backslide into a state of ethno-sectarian war.

While one Sunni **militant** group, Army of Naqishbandi, said it was laying down arms for two weeks so that Iraqis could participate safely in the parliamentary elections, it was clear that other groups did not hold such a view. Indeed, on March 3, 2010, two car bombs exploded close to government buildings in Baquba, to the north of Baghdad. In the first attack, the suicide bomber detonated his explosives-laden vehicle at a checkpoint close to a government housing office and a police station. In the second attack, another car bomb exploded at the headquarters of the provincial council. More than 30 people died as a result and dozens more were wounded. After injured victims were taken to a hospital for treatment from these two bombings, the hospital itself found itself to be a target of a third attack when a suicide bomber -- dressed in a police uniform -- detonated the explosives strapped to his body.

On the first day of early voting, several people were killed. Suicide bombers targeted polling stations in various locations across Baghdad such as Mansur and the city center. In one case, a mortar attack was apparently aimed at a polling station and landed in a crowded market. Early voting -- ahead of the official March 7, 2010 date -- was scheduled to allow government employees, prisoners, and hospital patients to cast their ballots.

## 2010 Parliamentary Elections and Government Formation

## Summary --

Iraqi citizens went to the polls on March 7, 2010, to vote in the second parliamentary elections since the 2003 **United States**-led invasion of that country. Iraq has been without a new government since that time as a result of an ongoing power battle between the main political factions. While the Sunni-backed secular Iraqiya bloc won the most votes, ahead of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, Maliki was able to form an alliance with the followers of Shi'ite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, effectively positioning the incumbent prime minister to remain in office. The Iraqiya bloc rejected the notion of a government dominated by the Shi'a alliance, leading to consternation among the parties with vested interests. By November 2010, efforts were afoot to form a government of national unity and avoid re-igniting ethno-sectarian tensions. However, despite optimistic hopes, the opening of parliament was marked by a walkout of key members of the Iraqiya bloc.

## Background --

Iraqi citizens went to the polls on March 7, 2010, to vote in the second parliamentary elections since the 2003 **United States**-led invasion of that country. The elections occurred at a significant moment in Iraq's political landscape, with **United States** military forces due to withdraw most of its combat troops by the middle of the year, and a full withdrawal anticipated by 2011. With varied political blocs expected to win representation in parliament, a coalition would likely have to be forged. Whether or not this complicated political terrain would result in more diverse and representative governance was yet to be seen. Without a clear winner, there was speculation that an alternative scenario would involve heightened ethno-sectarian tensions, effectively setting the stage for a resurgence of conflict.

The main coalitions contesting the elections were as follows --

- State of Law Coalition (Shi'ite dominated bloc includes Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party, several Sunni tribal leaders, Kurds and several individuals)
- Iraqi National Alliance (major Shiite-dominated bloc including Ammar al-Hakim's Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), followers of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, leading members of Dawa Party, and former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi, the leader of the Iraqi National Congress)



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- Iraqiya List (multi-sectarian alliance led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite, and including Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and Salah al-Mutlak's National Dialogue Front, which earlier threatened to withdraw from the election on the basis of discrimination)
- Iraq's Unity Coalition (headed by Shi'ite Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani but includes key Sunni figures, such as Ahmad Abu-Risha, the leader of Sunni militia "Awakening Councils" of Anbar province.
- Kurdistan Alliance (composed primarily of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Kurdistan Autonomous Region's President Massud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani)
- Iraqi Accordance Front (Sunni-dominated bloc that includes Iraqi Islamic Party, parliament speaker Ayad al-Samarrai, along with several other Sunni politicians)

The State of Law Coalition's strongest challenges were expected to come from the Iraqi National Alliance and Iraqiya List. The Unity Coalition was also expected to gain seats in the parliament, while the Kurdistan Alliance was expected to retain control over several parliamentary seats. By contrast, the Iraqi Accordance Front was expected to suffer diminished representation.

In the background of these prognostications resided the controversy surrounding a move to prohibit certain parties from contesting the elections. At issue was the January 2010 decision by the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission, which prohibited more than 500 Iraqi politicians from contesting the elections due to alleged ties to Saddam Hussein's Baath party. That decision left politicians out of contention and garnered criticism from the international community. A month later, a court overturned the ban; however, this ruling was itself ultimately reversed. As a result, Salah al-Mutlak of National Dialogue Front was banned from contesting the election due to connections with the Ba'ath Party of which he was a former member. His party had threatened to withdraw from the election as a result. The matter exacerbated already strained tensions between the main ethno-sectarian groups, with Sunnis alleging discrimination.

## Voting Day --

On the official voting day -- March 7, 2010 -- Iraqis went to the polls amidst the threat of violence with bombings and mortar attacks across the country -- from Baghdad to Mosul, Fallujah, Baquba and Samarra -- killing more than 35 people. Indeed, voter participation was reported to be more than 60 percent. United States President Barack Obama hailed the elections as a "milestone" in the recent history of Iraq, saying: "Today's voting makes it clear that the future of Iraq belongs to the people of Iraq." He continued, "Today, in the face of violence from those who would only destroy, Iraqis took a step forward in the hard work of building up their country."

The United States president also reiterated his expressed intent to withdraw combat troops from Iraq in August 2010, with a full withdrawal expected by the close of 2011. United States Army General Ray Odierno echoed the president's stance in saying that the election was, indeed, a milestone would set the path forward towards the goal of withdrawing troops from Iraq. Odierno said, "Unless there's a catastrophic event, we don't see that changing." He continued, "We believe we're right on track."

On the domestic front, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki dismissed the attacks, characterizing them as "only noise to impress voters," and asserting that "Iraqis are a people who love challenges" and whose morale would not be weakened. He also called for full participation in the country's fledgling democracy, and urged all politicians and parties to accept the election results saying, "He who wins today may lose tomorrow and he who loses today may win tomorrow." Those words were not likely to be easily accepted by some factions. Notably, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi of the Iraqiya List registered his discontent with the conduct of the elections, charging: "There was major confusion inside and outside Iraq in the voting centers and that leaves a question mark over the [electoral commission's] role."

## Election results --

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As the initial vote count ensued, there appeared to be a close contest between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's bloc and the coalition of his secular challenger, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. The preliminary tallies from Iraq's 18 provinces were a setback to hard-line religious Shi'ite political leaders who saw al-Maliki's State of Law coalition enjoying victories in two southern provinces of Basra and Najaf. The incumbent prime minister's bloc was also said to be leading in Babil, Muthanna, Karbala, as well as the capital region of Baghdad. The outcome of the vote count in Baghdad was expected to be pivotal due to high number of parliamentary seats there.

At the same time, Allawi appeared to be drawing on Sunni support north of Baghdad, and also in former Sunni insurgent strongholds of Anbar, Diyala and Salahuddin. His Iraqiya bloc was leading in several other provinces such as Nineveh. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Alliance won eight of the 12 seats in the ethnically divided province of Kirkuk, although Allawi's bloc was also performing well there. The Kurdistan Alliance was also performing well in Irbil and Dahuk.

It should also be noted that there were a number of election complaints that had been issued, according to international election monitors on the ground. Seizing upon this news, Allawi's coalition, Iraqiya, said there were incidences of fraud, which were described as "unjustifiable and illegal procedures to distort the will of the people."

The general view during the ongoing vote count was that some sort of coalition government was likely to be formed. As well, there was some chance that Prime Minister Maliki would retain power at the helm of a Shi'ite dominated coalition. However, he would also be tasked with bringing the Sunni minority into the fold of his government, or risk them feeling alienated from the power base in Iraq. Such an end would only imperil the country's security by igniting already-festering ethno-sectarian tensions.

During the third week of March 2010, election results showed a shift of fortune for those in political power in Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki was running neck and neck with former Prime Minister Allawi. President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri Maliki supported calls for a manual recount of the votes. This call was rejected by election officials. In an interview with BBC News, Saad el-Rawi of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) said, "It can't be done, it can't, we can't start all over again and count the votes manually." He continued, "We don't say it's impossible but it will take a lot of time."

By late March 2010, with the vote count complete, it was announced that former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's secular bloc had won the most seats in Iraq's parliamentary elections. His coalition garnered a small but significant advantage of two more seats than the coalition of incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki -- 91 seats to 89 seats. With this advantage Allawi was expected to be positioned to form the new government, although it would inevitably be a coalition government because he did not have an outright majority. At stake was control over at least 163 seats in the 325-seat parliament.

But the main focus has been on the Sadrist bloc -- those linked with **militant** Shi'a Moqtada al-Sadr -- who garnered 40 seats in parliament. Their surprisingly strong performance at the polls positioned them to potentially play kingmaker in the government formation process. To that end, the Sadrists said they would conduct a non-binding referendum to determine their supporters' preference for Iraq's new prime minister. While they were unlikely to support Allawi, whose secular bloc included many Sunnis, they were not keen on Maliki keeping his job. In fact, reports suggested that the Sadrists were offering to give their support to Maliki's State Law Coalition only if the incumbent prime minister promised to step down from office. Ultimately, in the Sadrists' vote, both Allawi and Maliki finished in the bottom rungs of that poll. Instead, the non-binding referendum resulted in a win for former Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who has said that he would ally himself with Maliki. Meanwhile, Iraqiya's small lead was itself compromised by the fact that several of its victorious candidates have been accused of having **ties** to the banned Ba'ath Party, and were at risk of being disqualified.

By late April 2010, election officials in Iraq ordered a manual recount of the votes cast in Baghdad following claims by Prime Minister Maliki that the electronic vote count system was unreliable. Maliki filed a legal challenge on the

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basis of this charge and the court ruled in his favor. It was not yet known if the recount in Baghdad would alter the final results of the election. Not surprisingly, pro-Maliki factions were touting the possibility of a shift in fortune, while Allawi warned of ramifications if the election results were overturned. He said, "If this happens, there will be very big problems in the country."

Shi'a dominated coalition formed; recount confirms victory for Sunni-backed bloc --

Following Iraq's inconclusive parliamentary elections, attention was on the vote count, recounts and the formation of possible ruling coalitions. To that end, by May 4, 2010, the State of Law alliance, led by Iraq's incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, reportedly formed a coalition with the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). According to initial results, the State of Law won 89 seats and the Iraqi National Alliance garnered 70 seats in the recent parliamentary elections. Together, the two blocs would have control over 159 seats -- effectively bringing them closer to the requisite 163 seats to form a new government. This potential coalition would be a serious threat to the governing aspirations of former interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, whose cross-sectarian Iraqiya List bloc won 91 seats in the elections and the largest single bloc in the parliament. In addition to the purely political tensions that were likely to rise from shutting Allawi and his substantial parliamentary members out of office, ethno-sectarian dissonance was likely to be sparked by the notion of a Shi'a dominated coalition taking power and alienating the Sunni minority that cast its lot with the Allawi bloc. In the background of these developments were the ongoing unresolved election disputes, including the disqualifications of some seat-winning candidates and a recount of ballots in Baghdad province.

While the formation of the Shi'a coalition discussed above would position Maliki to retain the reins of power, his case would not be helped by developments in mid-May 2010. Following the completion of a partial recount of the votes cast, Iraq's electoral commission confirmed the close victory of a Sunni-backed secular bloc led by former Prime Minister Allawi -- the Iraqiya List. This official victory served to legitimize Allawi's competing claim on power. Even if Maliki was able to reach another agreement to secure the handful of seats needed to command a majority in parliament, he would be faced by an infuriated rival bloc that actually won the plurality of seats (not including possible coalition partners). Was Maliki willing to risk possible repercussions? Indeed, the ethno-sectarian dimension of the equation would be of key importance, making the landscape in Iraq fertile ground for a resurgence of conflict.

Post-election developments --

On June 1, 2010, Iraq's Supreme Court approved the results of landmark elections, effectively clearing the way for the convening of the country's new parliament. While this development reified the slim victory of the secular Iraqiya alliance, headed by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, there was still no end to the coalition-building process with an eye on a future government of Iraq. At issue were the inconclusive results of the March 2010 parliamentary election, which produced no outright winner, and has failed to facilitate the formation of a coalition government. By mid-June 2010, the 325 members of the Council of Representatives were sworn into office, but the session was immediately suspended pending the election of a new speaker. Deciding who would hold that particular position, along with that of prime minister, would be part of the complex negotiations aimed at producing a power-sharing deal.

In August 2010, the al-Iraqiya bloc of former Prime Minister Allawi announced that it was suspending talks with the Shi'a-led State of Law alliance of Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, which garnered the second most seats following the elections. The reason for the suspension of the negotiations appeared to reside with a television interview in which Maliki characterized al-Iraqiya as being the Sunni party of Iraq. In fact, although Allawi's al-Iraqiya bloc contains some senior Sunni politicians such as Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi, it has always been expressly secular in its orientation. Thus, al-Iraqiya interpreted Maliki's statement as a blatant attempt to heighten ethno-sectarian tensions. The result has been a political realm fraught with uncertainty about Iraq's future government, within a larger context of insecurity, especially manifest in a rise in violent attacks.

On Oct. 1, 2010, the Iraqi Shi'ite National Alliance nominated incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as its candidate for the position of prime minister position. With *militant* Shi'ite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr -- in self-imposed

exile in Iran -- agreeing to support Maliki, it was all but certain that the incumbent prime minister would head the new government. The state-run television station of Iraq referenced Hassa al-Senied, a member of the Shi'ite allied bloc, as saying, "The National Alliance picked the head of the State of Law Coalition Nouri al-Maliki as its candidate to head the next government." Senied also hinted that a new government, headed by Maliki, would be one marked by "national unity and partnership," including various factions of the political sphere of Iraq.

Such an inclusive government was not immediately regarded as a realistic goal since the secular bloc, headed by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, said it would not join any government headed by Maliki. Indeed, following the closely-contested elections several months earlier, it was Allawi's Iraqiya bloc that won the most seats -- 91 -- while Maliki's bloc garnered two seats less in the 325-seat parliament. Allawi also made it clear that he would not recognize the Shi'ite National Alliance, which has been composed of Maliki's State of Law coalition (89 seats) and the Iraqi National Alliance (70 seats), which together would have control over 159 seats in parliament. According to a ruling by the federal court, which Allawi rejected, the largest bloc in parliament -- whether by single party or coalition of parties -- could be positioned to form a government.

On Oct. 17, 2010, former Prime Minister Allawi took aim at the Shi'ite National Alliance's relationship with Iran. He accused Iran of attempting to manipulate the political process, saying, "I can say categorically that Iran is trying even to bring about change to the political process according to their wishes and requirements." He condemned rival Iraqi politicians -- a veiled reference to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki -- for gaining Tehran's approval prior to forming the next government. To this end, Prime Minister Maliki was expected to travel to Iran in what some have characterized as an effort to shore up Shi'ite support for an Iraqi government with him at the helm. During an interview on al-Arabiya television, Allawi said, "I won't be begging Iran to agree upon my nomination." He also demanded that Iran stay out of the Iraqi political scene and "not impose or support one faction over the other."

At the international level, there have been anxieties about a Shi'a dominated government in Iraq, with close ties to Iran. Several Sunni Arab countries have indicated some worries about two Shi'a government leading large Middle Easter countries. Notably, Jordan's King Abdullah -- a Sunni Arab -- conspicuously refused to endorse Maliki for a second term in office. Western powers have worried that Iraq's Sunni and other minority communities would not react well to being left out of the power equation, especially after a strong election performance, and possibly igniting ethno-sectarian tensions. Nevertheless, as noted by the Associated Press, the Maliki political faction was reported to be dismissing advice by the United States that the government formation process be deliberate and inclusive, and instead looking to Iran for sanction. Accordingly, the geopolitical balance in the region was in a transitional mode.

Pressure was brought to bear on the political process when in October 2010, Iraq's high court ruled that parliament would have to resume its sessions, the political infighting notwithstanding. With the knowledge that they were legally bound to resume parliament and proceed with the political formation process, there were reinvigorated efforts to find a political resolution.

Government formation process --

On Nov. 10, 2010, the political impasse was breached as the Sunni-backed Iraqiya alliance, headed by Allawi, agreed to participate in the new Shi'a dominated government. In so doing, they were also agreeing to a second term in office as head of government for incumbent Prime Minister Maliki. The decision Allawi's Iraqiya Alliance to join the government was quite a reversal on positioning, given the secular bloc's strong negative pronouncements about a Shi'a dominated government headed by Maliki. But such a reversal had already occurred among the Shi'a ranks with Sadrists formerly rejecting the idea of Maliki staying on as prime minister, yet later backing such a plan. Earlier, the Kurdish alliance expressed support for the new government, headed by Maliki.

With the Sunni-backed Iraqiya secular bloc, as well as the Kurdish factions, now backing the proposed Maliki leadership, Iraq was actualizing the United States' recommended path of forming an inclusive government. Thus, there were high hopes that participation from a wider cross-section of ethno-sectarian groups would ease brewing sectarian divisions. In specific terms, this would mean that a government of national unity was in the offing, presumably with tops posts shared among Shi'as, Sunnis, and Kurds among others. As already discussed here,

## Political Conditions Iraq

Maliki would carry on as prime minister, but Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, would also continue on as president. The post of parliamentary speaker would go to the Iraqiya bloc. Speaking with an air of optimism on Nov. 10, 2010, Prime Minister Maliki said of impending government formation processes, "Tomorrow in parliament, it will be the beginning of forming not just the government, but forming the Iraqi state." He continued, "God willing, we will go ahead."

But despite this hopeful tone, later in the month, when the government formation process actually moved forward in the parliament, key members of the Iraqiya bloc walked out of the chamber in process. At issue for the Sunni-backed secular bloc was a demand (ultimately rejected) that the first vote involve the official dissolution of the decisions made by the de-Baathification program, which led to three members of the Iraqiya bloc being banned from taking government positions.

Instead, the first vote dealt with the presidency and soon thereafter, with Allawi gone from parliament, Talabani was inaugurated as president. Clearly, political tensions continued to prevail on the Iraqi scene. Nevertheless, by Dec. 21, 2010 -- several months since the elections and the ongoing political stalemate that emerged from it, the Iraqi parliament finally approved a unity government with Maliki at the helm as prime minister. The government included representatives of the three major groups in Iraq -- Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

## Editor's Note --

Iraq was without a new government since the time of the parliamentary elections, several months earlier in 2010, through close to the end of the year. The power battle between the main political factions had been ongoing since the March 2010 elections. In June, an attempt to move forward with the government formation process was short-circuited in parliament. The October 2010 announcement about the Shi'a alliance only served to underline the sectarian and political divisions. But also in October 2010, Iraq's high court ruled that parliament would have to resume its sessions, the political infighting notwithstanding. It was believed that the court decision placed pressure on all the parties with vested interests to find common ground and a resolution to the political deadlock. As well, the rise in attacks on Christians in Iraq may have reminded the people of Iraq of the kind of bloodshed and violence that plagued the country in the years following the ousting of Saddam Hussein from office. That reminder may have also served to pressure the parties at stake to reach an agreement, in the interests of national security. As discussed here, a coalition government with incumbent Prime Minister Maliki at the helm was formed by the end of 2010.

## Other Post-Election Developments (2010)

The government formation process -- the matter of which parties would join the coalition government -- as discussed above, was complicated by rising anxieties about the rise of ethno-sectarian violence. Indeed, only hours before the election results were announced, two bombs exploded in the town of Khalis in Diyala province, killing at least 40 people and leaving more than 60 injured. Meanwhile, Maliki again alleged irregularities and called for a recount; he also defiantly declared that his bloc would move forward with its own plans to form a government.

The city center of Iraq's capital of Baghdad was hit by three suicide car bombs on April 4, 2010. More than 40 people died as a result and at least 200 others were injured. The bombs appeared to have targeted foreign embassies and came a month after Iraq's parliamentary elections. The embassies of Egypt, Germany, Spain and Syria in the Mansour district appeared to have been affected. At the time of writing, it was not known who was responsible, however, there were suggestions that insurgents may have wanted to show that Iraq was still an unstable country, even as the sensitive post-election government formation process was ongoing. Indeed, the day before, on April 3, 2010, a village to the south of Baghdad was the site of another attack when gunmen open fire on people linked with an anti- al-Qaida militia. About 25 people died in that incident. Then, on April 6, 2010, at least 35 people died and 140 were injured when seven massive bomb exploded at residential buildings in a predominantly Shi'ite part of Baghdad. The spate of attacks raised the specter of a return to ethno-sectarian strife in Iraq, which was still waiting to determine who would form the next government of the country.

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In the third week of April 2010, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and United States Vice President Joe Biden respectively announced the death of two al-Qaida leaders in Iraq, as a result of a successful joint Iraqi-American operation.

Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki described the operation as follows:

"The attack was carried out by ground forces which surrounded the house, and also through the use of missiles." He continued, "During the operation computers were seized with e-mails and messages to the two biggest terrorists, Osama bin Laden and [his deputy] Ayman al-Zawahiri." The deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri -- the leader of Iraqi al-Qaida -- and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi -- the leader of an affiliate group -- were characterized as "potentially devastating blows" to al-Qaida in Iraq, according to Vice President Biden. The American vice president also noted that the joint operation was illustrative of the improved security capacity of Iraqi forces.

Soon thereafter, these claims were boosted by the announcement of the killing of a third al-Qaida player -- Ahmed al-Obeidi who has been an al-Qaida leader in the northern province of Nineveh.

Clearly, the deaths of al-Masri, al-Baghdadi and al-Obeidi were the most notable from among the al-Qaida leadership in Iraq since 2006 when the former leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was killed. At the time, Zarqawi's death was hailed as a milestone in the fight against the terrorist group's insurgency, however, it was only with the escalation of United States troops in Iraq after that there was any substantial abatement of the violence plaguing that country.

As if to signal a similar fate, only days after the Iraqi and United States authorities announced these three deaths, scores of people died in a spate of bomb attacks on April 23, 2010 in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. More than 100 others were injured in the bomb blasts that occurred close to Shi'a mosques during prayer time. Indeed, two bombs were detonated close to the offices of radical Shi'a cleric Moqtada Sadr. The locations and targets of the attacks suggested that al-Qaida in Iraq may have been retaliating against the deaths of the three members of their leadership. However, even if al-Qaida in Iraq was not to blame, it was clear that the attacks would likely inflame ethno-sectarian tensions between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq ahead of the anticipated withdrawal of United States forces from that country.

On May 10, 2010, more than 100 people died and 350 were injured after Iraq was struck by a spate of deadly

shootings and suicide bombings. Indeed, May 10 garnered the dubious distinction of being the worst day of violence in Iraq in the first part of 2010.

The central city of Hilla was the site of the worst violence with 45 people dead and 140 wounded as a result of three bomb attacks at a textiles factory. The first two bombings occurred in succession, but as bystanders and emergency personnel sought to help the victims, a third suicide bomber detonated explosives in a third attack. In the capital of Baghdad, there was a series of drive-by shootings that targeted police and members of the armed forces.

Most of those attacks ensued at checkpoints and were carried out by gunmen using silencers attached to their weapons. In other violence across Iraq, there was a double suicide bombing in a crowded market in the town of Suwayra, which left at least 11 people and wounded more than 40 others. In the

southern oil hub of Basra, three car bomb attacks killed at least 20 people and wounded dozens. In Falluja -- a predominantly Sunni enclave, two bombs left four people dead. Attacks were also reported in Iskandiriya to the south of Baghdad, and in the northern city of Mosul.

There was speculation that the political stalemate following the inconclusive parliamentary elections (discussed above) may have set a foundation for the violence, with

al-Qaida seeking to exploit the political instability. Indeed, most of the violence on May 10, 2010, was blamed on al-Qaida in Iraq. The situation showed that although authorities successfully killed two high ranking members of the terrorist organization only a month before, al-Qaida was still a powerful and destructive force on the Iraqi scene.

At least 15 people died and more than 50 others were injured as a result of an attack on Iraq's central bank in Baghdad on June 13, 2010. Bank employees were among those killed although there were also suggestions that five gunmen also detonated explosives strapped to their bodies. Reports from the ground indeed indicated bomb blasts. There were also reports that gunmen tried to storm the building, becoming embroiled in violent clashes with police. The attack occurred ahead of the convening of the new Iraqi parliament; this timing suggested that the attack may have been carried out by insurgents intent on disrupting the political process.

On June 20, 2010, a twin suicide car bombing in the Yarmouk district of Baghdad left more than 30 people dead and at least 50 others injured. The attacks ensued when the two vehicles exploded simultaneously in close proximity of a state-owned Trade Bank, severely damaging not only that building but also nearby office buildings, including an office of the Interior Ministry. While suspicion quickly fell on al-Qaida in Iraq as being the group behind the attacks, the target of the attack yielded suggestions that it may have been a means of covering up a money laundering operation. That being said, the suicide car bombings came in the aftermath of an attack on the Iraqi Central Bank, and a day after three roadside bombs exploded in the Shi'a district of Hurriya, killing two people and wounding several more.

On July 9, 2010, a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden car at a military checkpoint in Baghdad leaving at least five people dead, including three soldiers. The attack took place in western Baghdad's mainly Sunni Ghazaliya district, which was once regarded as a stronghold for militants.

The bombing came after a succession of attacks on Shi'a pilgrims in Baghdad left approximately 60 people dead. In the most deadly case, a suicide bomber targeted Shi'a pilgrims in a Sunni district called Adhamiya yielding a death toll of 35. Elsewhere in the capital city, bomb attacks left two dozen people dead.

Despite the clear danger, Shi'a pilgrims appeared undeterred and continued to gather at the shrine of Imam Musa Kadhim, a Shi'ite saint believed to have been assassinated while in captivity in 799.

On July 18, 2010, a suicide bomber killed more than 40 people and injured another 40 in the Radwaniya neighborhood to the southwest of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. The target of the attacks appeared to be members of the Sunni Awakening Councils or Sahwa, which turned against al-Qaida and allied themselves with the government in recent years. In fact, the reduction in the overall level of violence in Iraq has been attributed to the cooperation of the Awakening Councils or Sahwa. But clearly, this alliance with government forces has also brought with it a high risk of revenge-oriented attacks from al-Qaida in Iraq, the type of which have been on the rise in 2010. Indeed, in this case, the suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his vest just as the council members were lining up at the main gate of a military base, waiting to receive their salaries. Among the dead were council members, soldiers and accountants. Elsewhere in Iraq, a separate suicide attack left three people dead at a meeting of Sunni leaders.

In late July 2010, an Al-Qaida affiliate claimed responsibility for the bombing of the Baghdad headquarters of the Al-Arabiya television station. At least six people died on July 26, 2010, during that attack. On its website, the Islamic state of Iraq said that the operation had been carried out by a "hero of Islam" and characterized Al-Arabiya as "corrupt." Based in Dubai, the Arabic-language channel commands popularity across the Middle East despite the perception that it has a pro-Western orientation. Days later on July 29, 2010, four soldiers were killed and at least 10 others were injured when a suicide attacker drove a bomb-laden bus through the entrance of an Iraqi army base close to Tikrit -- the hometown of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein.

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In mid-August 2010, gunmen killed four Iraqi police officers during a spate of shootings at security checkpoints across the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. Days later, an attack on an army recruitment center yielded a higher casualty list. Taken together, these events were the latest examples of increased violence in Iraq since the parliamentary elections were held months earlier and ahead of the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq.

On August 11, 2010, eight Iraqi soldiers died when the house they were about to raid exploded in the northern province of Diyala. Just days later on August 14, 2010, the capital city of Baghdad saw a series of attacks at security checkpoints. In one of the checkpoint attacks, two off-duty police officers were shot to death as they slept in their car, which was itself set ablaze. In another attack, two members of the Sahwa "awakening council" or government-backed militia were killed in an attack at a security checkpoint. In these cases, the blame rested on al-Qaida terrorists who have carried out revenge attacks in recent times.

On August 17, 2010, around 60 people died and more than 100 others were wounded as a result of a suicide attack on an army recruitment center in the center of Baghdad. Soldiers were among the victims at the recruitment center, which was once used as the defense ministry during the rule of former President Saddam Hussein and which saw a series of small bombings only a week earlier. The suicide bomber approached the army recruitment center where hundreds of people were lined up for several hours in desperate hope of forging an army career in a country wracked by high unemployment.

While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, as before suspicion fell on al-Qaida in Iraq.

The timing of this suicide bombing on August 17, 2010 appeared to coincide with the al-Iraqiya bloc's decision to suspend talks on forming a coalition government, following Iraq's parliamentary elections. In those elections held five months earlier, the secular al-Iraqiya bloc, led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, narrowly won the most seats but the government formation process since that time has been laborious and without clear signs of resolution.

Indeed, on August 15, 2010, the al-Iraqiya bloc announced that it was suspending talks with the Shi'a-led State of Law alliance of Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, which garnered the second most seats following the elections. The reason for the suspension of the negotiations appeared to reside with a television interview in which Maliki characterized al-Iraqiya as being the Sunni party of Iraq. In fact, although Allawi's al-Iraqiya bloc contains some senior Sunni politicians such as Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi, it has always been expressly secular in its orientation. Thus, al-Iraqiya interpreted Maliki's statement as a blatant attempt to heighten ethno-sectarian tensions.

The result has been a political realm fraught with uncertainty about Iraq's future government, within a larger context insecurity, especially manifest in a rise in violent attacks.

It should be noted that there has, indeed, been a dramatic decrease in the level of violence plaguing Iraq in recent times with a clear decline from the peak of the sectarian conflict in 2006-2007. However, attacks have continued to occur with disturbing regularity, and there have been fears that incidences of violence were creeping up in numbers. By way of illustration, the United Nations released a report on July 8, 2010 noting that in 2009, 4,068 civilians were killed and 15,935 injured in violence in Iraq, demonstrating a decline in violence, according to the country's Ministry of Human Rights. However, since the latter part of 2009, the trend has been going in a somewhat negative direction.

The United Nations report stated: "This represents an overall decrease in comparison to 2008. However, the second half of 2009 saw a large increase in the number of injured civilians when compared to the first half."

While the checkpoint attacks do not compare in scope to the truck bombings and suicide attacks, all such incidents appeared aimed at destabilizing the political landscape after the elections and ahead of the end to combat



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operations in Iraq at the close of August 2010, which was to be followed by the withdrawal of all United States troops -- including those in support and advisory roles -- from that country at the end of the year.

On August 25, 2010, a spate of more than two dozen attacks by bombers and gunmen across Iraq left at least 60 people dead. The attacks appeared to target security forces -- police officers and soldiers -- sparking suspicions that militant extremist insurgents wanted to intimidate Iraqi forces tasked with keeping the country stable after the exit of United States forces. An added rationale for the attacks on security forces might reside in the desire to destabilize the country as the political factions struggled to form a government in the aftermath of close parliamentary elections earlier in the year. Other analysts have suggested a desire by insurgents to translate political chaos into political influence. As noted by Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari: "Here you have a government paralysis, you have a political vacuum ... you have the U.S. troop withdrawal. "And, in such (an) environment, these terrorist networks flourish." It should be noted that in recent times, attacks on security forces have increased with August 2010 holding the dubious distinction of being the deadliest month for police and military in Iraq in two years. According to a calculation by the Associated Press, approximately 265 security personnel — Iraqi military, police and police recruits, and bodyguards — died from June through August in 2010; this was a marked increase from the 180 killed in the previous five months.

On September 19, 2010, two car bombs exploded almost simultaneously in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad, leaving at least two dozen people dead and more than 100 others wounded. One of the blasts occurred in the residential district of Mansur in the western part of Baghdad, while the other blast took place at the Aden junction close to a national security office in the northern part of the capital. Earlier in the day, central Baghdad saw violence also as rockets were fired in the direction of the Green Zone where government and military installations are located, along with embassies of several countries.

On September 26, 2010, a car bomb in the former insurgent stronghold of Fallujah left four policemen dead. Fallujah -- once a hotspot at the height of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq years ago, had in the last few years been touted as an example of improved security. However, in recent weeks, Fallujah had been the site of a number of clashes between Iraqi security forces and Sunni extremist insurgents. As such, there was growing anxiety that the insurgents might be attempting to regain control of their former turf.

Meanwhile, in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, a government worker died as a result of an ambush along a highway at the hands of militants. As well, an explosion in Baghdad's religiously mixed Karradah neighborhood left one person dead and several others injured. Elsewhere in Iraq, in the northern city of Mosul, a drive-by shooting by a gunman resulted in the deaths of two brothers.

On October 1, 2010, the Iraqi Shi'ite National Alliance nominated incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki as its candidate for the position of prime minister position. With militant Shi'ite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr -- in self-imposed exile in Iran -- agreeing to support Maliki, it was all but certain that the incumbent prime minister would head the new government. The state-run television station of Iraq referenced Hassa al-Senied, a member of the Shi'ite allied bloc, as saying, "The National Alliance picked the head of the State of Law Coalition Nuri al-Maliki as its candidate to head the next government." Senied also hinted that a new government, headed by Maliki, would be one marked by "national unity and partnership," including various factions of the political sphere of Iraq.

But such an inclusive government may not actually be a realistic goal since the secular bloc, headed by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, said it would not join any government headed by Maliki. Indeed, following the closely-contested elections several months earlier, it was Allawi's Iraqiya bloc that won the most seats -- 91 -- while Maliki's bloc garnered two seats less in the 325-seat parliament. Allawi has also made it clear that he would recognize the Shi'ite National Alliance which has been composed of Maliki's State of Law coalition (89 seats) and the Iraqi National Alliance (70 seats), which together would have control over 159 seats in parliament. According to

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a ruling by the federal court, which Allawi rejected, the largest bloc in parliament -- whether by single party or coalition of parties -- could be positioned to form a government.

On October 17, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, the leader of the secular Iraqiya bloc that garnered the most votes in the March 2010 parliamentary elections, accused Iran of trying to destabilize Iraq. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN, Allawi said that Iran was fomenting unrest in Iraq, Lebanon and among Palestinians. He said countries in the region of the Middle East were "falling victim to ... terrorists who are definitely Iran-financed." He continued, "We know that unfortunately, Iran is trying to wreak havoc on the region."

Allawi also said that Iran was attempting to manipulate the political process, saying, "And definitely in Iraq, I can say categorically that Iran is trying even to bring about change to the political process according to their wishes and requirements" He condemned rival Iraqi politicians -- a veiled reference to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki -- for gaining Tehran's approval in forming the next government. To this end, Prime Minister Maliki was expected to travel to Iran in what some have characterized as an effort to shore up Shi'ite support for holding onto his post as head of government. Such support was clearly needed as Jordan's King Abdullah -- a Sunni **Arab** -- conspicuously refused to endorse Maliki for a second term in office. During an interview on al-Arabiya television, Allawi said, "I won't be begging Iran to agree upon my nomination." He also demanded that Iran stay out of the Iraqi political scene and "not impose or support one faction over the other."

Nevertheless, as noted by the Associated Press, the Maliki political faction was reported to be dismissing advice by the **United States** that the government formation process be deliberate and inclusive, and instead looking to Iran for sanction. Accordingly, the geopolitical balance in the region was in a transitional mode.

In late October 2010, a suicide bombing left at least 25 people dead and dozens more injured in the town of Balad Ruz in Diyala province to the town north of Baghdad. The area has been home to ethnic Kurds of Shi'ite background. The suicide bomber had explosives strapped to his body, which he detonated at a cafe as patrons sipped tea and played dominoes.

Around the same period, gunmen held dozens of people hostage at a Catholic Church in Baghdad, demanding the release of jailed **militants** from the terror enclave, al-Qaida. The dire situation got worse when Iraqi authorities decided to storm the church with an eye on rescuing the hostages since there had been threats that they would be killed by their captors. According to Iraqi authorities, the gunmen released a statement asserting that Iraqi Christians would be "exterminated" if Muslims in Egypt were not released. The gunmen were acting on behalf of the Islamic State of Iraq, which claimed responsibility for the incident.

As noted just above, when Iraqi authorities decided to storm the church to rescue the hostages, more than 50 people died in what was described as a botched rescue attempt; included in the death toll were six of the gunmen. In an interview with BBC News, Iraqi Defense Minister Abdul-Qadr al-Obeidi explained the government's decision as follows: "We took a decision to launch a land offensive, and in addition an airdrop, because it was impossible to wait - the terrorists were planning to kill a large number of our brothers, the Christians who were at Mass." He continued, "So the operation was successfully done. All terrorists were killed. And we now have other suspects in **detention**." From the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI condemned the actions of the hostage takers.

Days later on November 3, 2010, Islamic extremists characterized Christians in the Middle East as "legitimate targets," essentially encouraging attacks on people belonging to that minority religion in the region. As reported by CNN, the group released a message that read as follows: "The Ministry of War of Islamic State of Iraq declares that all the centers, organizations and bodies of Christian leaders and followers have become legitimate targets for the mujahedeen (holy warriors), wherever our hands will reach them.

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Meanwhile, on November 2, 2010, a series of about 10 bombings in Baghdad left around 65 people dead and more than 280 others wounded. The attacks, most of which were car bombs although there was at least one roadside bomb, took place in predominantly Shi'a areas of the Iraqi capital city. Taken together, this spate of attacks was the worst violence to plague Iraq in the latter part of 2010. As before whenever violent attacks have surged in Iraq, questions arose about the country's security forces' ability to keep Iraq stable and united.

A week later on November 10, 2010, a series of bombs and mortar attacks were launched against targets in Christian areas of Baghdad. Several people were killed as a result, and scores were injured in violence that stretched across six districts in the capital city. The rise in violence targeting Christians in Iraq has sparked debate among Christian Iraqi communities about whether or not they should remain in the country or emigrate elsewhere. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the size of Iraq's Christian population has been reduced to half its original size. As before, the Vatican and the United Nations condemned the attacks on Iraq's Christian civilian population.

On December 12, 2010, two separate suicide attacks in Iraq left more than a dozen people dead. In one case, a suicide car bomb exploded close to government offices in Ramadi, located in western Iraq's Anbar province. Policemen and civilians were among the victims.

More than ten people died in that attack, while at least 40 others were injured. In the second case, a suicide bomber killed two Shi'a pilgrims in the central Iraqi town of Baquba. Both victims -- a father and son -- were preparing to mark the Shi'a celebration of Ashura. The two attacks occurred at a time when Iraqi Nouri Maliki has been ensconced in the process of forming a government several months after a close and contentious election.

On December 27, 2010, two suicide bombers detonated explosives in front of a government office in the western Anbar province of Iraq. In one case, a suicide bomber drove an explosives-packed bus into the government compound in Ramadi. The second attack occurred when a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body as bystanders gathered in the aftermath of the original explosion. Nine people were killed as a result and at least 50 others were wounded. The site of the bombings -- Anbar provincial headquarters -- saw bloodshed only weeks prior, and was hit twice even earlier in the year. Blame for these two successive suicide attacks quickly rested on al-Qaida in Iraq, which has sought to destabilize the Iraqi authorities, given the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq. In a separate incident on the same day, three members of the same family died as a result of a roadside bomb just outside the town of Dujail, to the north of Baghdad.

Special Report:

### U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

In the early hours of August 19, 2010 (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011 in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of

United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago.

President Obama gave a televised address on August 31, 2010 regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military who carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and said that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

## Special Entry

### United Nations lifts sanctions on Iraq

It should also be noted that in December 2010, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions against Iraq. The vote ended most of the measures comprising a harsh sanctions regime that had been held in place for almost two decades, starting with the time of Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait during the era of Saddam Hussein. In its statement, the United Nations Security Council said that it "recognizes that the situation now existing in Iraq is significantly different from that which existed at the time of the adoption of Resolution 661." Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said of the move, "Today Iraq will be liberated from all sanctions caused by wars and misdeeds of the former regime." Meanwhile, United States Vice President Joe Biden, who acted as chairman of the meeting, said: "Iraq is on the cusp of something remarkable -- a stable, self-reliant nation." Striking a more pragmatic tone, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted that Iraq would yet have to forge an agreement with Kuwait in

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regards to its border, and would also have to resolve the matter of war reparations. To date, five percent of Iraq's oil revenues have been used to pay war reparations to Kuwait.

## Developments in 2011:

On Jan. 19, 2011, a suicide bomber used an ambulance to target Iraq police during an attack in Baquba. As many as 14 people died as a result. A day earlier, a suicide bomber killed approximately 60 people at a police recruitment centre in Tikrit -- the home of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Both attacks took place in an area known as the "Sunni Triangle" -- a stronghold of Iraq's insurgency. Around the same time, a third suicide bombing ensued in the town of Ghalbiyah, as a crowd of Shi'a pilgrims walked from Baghdad to the holy city of Karbala. In this case, at least two people were killed and more than 15 others were injured. Karbala was the site of further bloodshed on Jan. 20, 2011, when car bombs left at least 50 people dead and more than 150 others wounded. Those blasts occurred along routes used by Shi'a pilgrims participating in the Shi'a Muslim commemoration of Arbaeen.

Then, on Jan. 23, 2011, a series of car bombings across Baghdad left several people dead or injured. One car bombing took place close to a hotel; a second attack seemed to target a bus carrying Iranian pilgrims, while a third car bomb appeared to target a police patrol.

On Jan. 27, 2011, a car bomb at a funeral in a predominantly Shi'a area of Baghdad left more than 40 people dead and several scores more injured. It was the latest attack on Shi'ites in a relatively short space of time as Shi'a pilgrims made their way to the holy city of Karbala. Several victims on the scene in this case attacked police for failing to provide adequate protection.

On Feb. 9, 2011, the northern Iraqi oil city of Kirkuk was hit by three bomb attacks. At least seven people died, including two policemen, and more than 70 others were wounded in the bombings that exploded in succession close to the Kurdish security headquarters. In the first attack, a suicide bomber drove a truck into the surrounding wall of the aforementioned Kurdish security headquarters. The second attack was marked by an explosion close to a gas station. The third attack occurred on the same street as the initial bombing. While there was no immediate responsibility for the bombings, the BBC has noted that in recent times, the militant terrorist group, Ansar al-Islam, has threatened to carry out attacks. Kirkuk, a multi-ethnic city composed of Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs, and noted for its oil reserves, has been a particularly favored targets for various insurgent and terrorist groups operating in Iraq.

On Feb. 12, 2011, a suicide bomb attack on a bus close to the Sunni-dominated city of Samarra left close to 30 people dead. Most of the victims were Shi'a pilgrims, with women and children among the victims; they were about to leave a Shi'a shrine to the 9th century imam Hassan al-Askari. Two days earlier, at least eight people were killed in Dujail when a car bomb exploded as Shi'a pilgrims journeyed to Samarra to mark the anniversary of the aforementioned imam's death. The city of Samarra has been particular target of Sunni militant insurgents since it was home to the famous gold-domed mosque, which was destroyed in a brutal bombing attack in 2006. That event is believed to have sparked the 2006-2007 wave of massive sectarian violence and bloodshed.

While violence has generally decreased, attacks still plague the country. The latest flare-up of violence was a test for the newly-established Iraqi government, which was trying to show the world that the security situation in this country was improving. Indeed, Iraq was planning to host an Arab summit in March 2011 and hoped to showcase the country as one on the road to stabilization. Clearly, such attacks only serve to undermine the government. Note that United States forces completed their combat operations in Iraq in August of 2010 and their complete withdrawal remained on track for later in 2011.

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On Feb. 25, 2011, coming on the heels of the successful "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia and the "Nile Revolution" in Egypt, as well as the uprising in Libya, thousands of protesters took to the streets in cities across Iraq to participate in anti-government demonstrations. Approximately 10 people were killed in what was being referred to as Iraq's "day of rage." In Baghdad, the city was under lock down with no traffic allowed to move through the city and soldiers patrolling the streets. The previous day, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had asked people to stay away from the protests for security reasons, and blamed extremist elements of trying to destabilize the country with their calls for mass action. That being said, some people participated in small-scale protests in Baghdad where the call was for reform rather than regime change. The main demands of the protesters included improved law and order, more job opportunities, as well as better infrastructure. Overall, the protests in Baghdad were not violent -- perhaps due to the security precautions taken; however, elsewhere in the country, such as Mosul, Falluja, and Kirkuk, things turned violent with at least ten people reported to have died across Iraq.

Meanwhile, on Feb. 5, 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki announced that he would not seek a third term term in office after his mandate expires in 2014. Prime Minister Maliki acquired his latest mandate following inconclusive parliamentary elections in Iraq, which spurred a contentious and difficult government formation process that lasted a full nine months. As political turmoil brewed in the Middle East region -- with protesters taking to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen to demand democratic reform -- it was possible that Prime Minister Maliki was trying to foreclose any further contretemps over his leadership role.

For his part, Prime Minister Maliki indicated that two four-years terms were sufficient and also promised the inclusion of a new clause in the constitution ensuring term limits for prime ministers in Iraq. He said, "I support the insertion of a paragraph in the constitution that the prime minister gets only two turns, only eight years, and I think that's enough." Prime Minister Maliki also directly addressed the unrest in the region saying, "One of the characteristics of a lack of democracy is when a leader rules for 30 or 40 years. It is a difficult issue for people, it is intolerable and change is necessary." In further moves aimed at showing good faith with the Iraqi people, Prime Minister Maliki additionally announced that he would return half his salary to the country's treasury. The prime minister said that it was a gesture intended to acknowledge the income gap between the rich and the poor in Iraq.

See above for special coverage of the 2010 parliamentary elections in Iraq, as well as the government formation process. As discussed above, by December 2010, a new coalition government had been formed, with incumbent Prime Minister Maliki positioned to stay on at the helm of government. The government included representatives of the three major groups in Iraq -- Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

At the close of March 2011, violence returned to the fore in Iraq. On March 29, 2011, a group of men carried out an audacious assault on a government building in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. The attack began with a car explosion aimed at creating a diversion before the gunmen launched an assault on the provincial council building in Salahuddin. The gunmen, who were dressed in military uniforms, identified themselves as soldiers at a security checkpoint; once on the premises of the provincial council office, they opened fire on security guards and hurled grenades. The attack evolved into a five-hour standoff and ended when the gunmen blew themselves up with the explosives strapped to the insides of their uniforms. Up to 56 people died and close to 100 others were injured as a result. Included among the dead were 15 hostages whom the attackers subjected to execution-style killings, an elderly legislator on the religious affairs committee of the provincial council, the chairman of the health committee, a councilman who was known to have expressed opposition to extremism, and a journalist who has worked for al-Arabiya, Reuters and CNN. The attackers also set fire to the bodies of three victims. **United States** troops in the area on an advisory mission responded to the scene but were eventually relieved by Iraqi soldiers. The brutal assault appeared to be partially intended to intimidate civilians and demonstrate the ability of al-Qaida aligned insurgents to carry out attacks. Perhaps not surprisingly, the parliament of Iraq called for an investigation into the attack and the disturbing breach of security.

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At the close of April 2011, a suicide bomber killed at least eight people and injured dozens more inside a mosque in Iraq's Diyala province. The blast ensued following evening prayers in Balad Ruz, located to the northeast of Baghdad.

In the first part of May 2011, a prison revolt at a Baghdad jail left at least 14 people dead. On May 8, 2011, inmate Huthaifa al-Batawi was being moved from his cell to an office for questioning when the al-Qaida militant grabbed a gun from a prison guard, shot him, and effectively sparked a gun battle that went on for several hours. Batawi, the aforementioned prison guard, a general and a lieutenant colonel, were among the dead when the bloody clash was over. Batawi had been in prison for orchestrating the massacre at a Baghdad Roman Catholic church in October 2010 which ended in a heavy death toll.

Around the same period, five people died and another five were injured in gun and bomb attacks in Baghdad and Iraq's Diyala province. In Diyala, gunmen dressed in military uniforms broke into a house in the provincial capital city of Baquba, and executed two men there. To the north of Baquba, a bomb attached to a minibus exploded and left at least one person dead and others injured. In a separate incident, a shepherd was killed when gunmen opened fire on him outside the town of Qara-Taba to the northeast of Baghdad. There, in the capital city, a roadside bomb exploded in the Doura district, killing a civilian and wounding three others.

Then, on May 19, 2011, three bombs exploded in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. The attacks appeared to have targeted security forces and left around 30 people dead and scores more wounded. Surrounding buildings and cars were damaged in the explosions. Two bombs were detonated in succession close to a police station; some of the victims of those attacks were police who rushed out of the police compound in response to the first of those two explosions. Blame was quickly placed on al-Qaida for these attacks.

In the third week of June 2011, suicide bombers and gunmen attacked a provincial council building in Baquba, leaving at least eight people dead.

As June entered its final week, two car bombs rocked central Iraq, leaving at least 25 people dead. The attacks occurred in mainly Shi'a Diwaniya, to the south of Baghdad, and appeared to target police checkpoints just outside the provincial governor's compound. Provincial Governor Salim Hussein Alwan escaped unharmed, however, a number of police were among the 25 victims. According to security officials, the bombs were scheduled to be detonated as the governor's convoy departed for work; the governor's life may have been spared because he was delayed inside the garage when the car bombs exploded.

Elsewhere in the country on June 21, 2011, a bomb exploded in a restaurant in Mussayab, killing five people and injuring 10 others. At a joint United States-Iraqi base in Baghdad, three civilians were injured when militants fired rockets at the facility. In Ramadi, in the mainly Sunni Anbar province, there were reports of two car bombs. Police were able to defuse only one of the two bombs.

On June 26, 2011, a suicide bomber in a wheelchair detonated the explosives strapped to his vest at a police station on the northern outskirts of Baghdad, leaving about two people dead and at least a dozen others injured, including nine policemen.

In the first week of July 2011, there were dual attacks on a government building in the town of Taji close to Baghdad; at least 35 people died as a result and dozen others were wounded. The first bombing occurred at the parking lot of the municipal office. Once witnesses and emergency responders arrived on the scene, a second explosion occurred as a result of a car bombing. Meanwhile, there was a rocket attack on the heavily fortified Green Zone, which left three women and two children people dead and at least ten people injured. The rocket landed on the compound of the al-Rasheed hotel at the edge of the Green Zone just as United States officials convened at the nearby embassy for Independence Day celebrations.

## Political Conditions Iraq

On July 16, 2011, separate attacks in Iraq's eastern Diyala province, the holy city of Karbala, and the capital of Baghdad, left an Iraqi police officer dead and several civilians wounded. In one case, gunmen ambushed a police officer close to his residence in Jalula; the police officer died at a hospital during treatment. In another case, a roadside bomb hit a minibus near to Andalus Square in central Baghdad; that attack left six people injured.

In a third case, a roadside bomb exploded at central Baghdad's Allawi Square, wounding two civilians on board.

In the holy city of Karbala, nine people died and 70 others were wounded as a result of car bombs. These attacks occurred as Shi'a pilgrims gathered for a religious festival of Shabaniya, which marks the birthday of the last imam, Mohammed Ibn Hassan al-Mahdi. Only a day earlier, two car bombs killed six people just north of Karbala. The sectarian nature of the gathering in Karabala cast blame on Sunni al-Qaida in Iraq as the likely culprits in those cases.

Then, on July 23, 2011, two successive roadside bombs exploded in western Baghdad, leaving two people dead, including one police officer, and eight others wounded. A day later, a police officer was killed and two others were wounded in a bomb explosion in the southern city of Ramadi in the Anbar province, while in Baghdad, gunmen shot a traffic officer dead in the central Karrada district of the capital. In a separate incident in the same area, two police officers and a civilian were wounded in a bombing. In Diyala, a roadside bomb and a gun attack left one civilian dead and three others injured.

On July 29, 2011, 15 people died in the Iraqi town of Tikrit when two suicide bombers carried out attacks in the home town of former leader, Saddam Hussein. The attack occurred just as police and soldiers were collecting their salaries at a local bank. The attack was illustrative of a recent tendency to target local Iraqi security forces at a time when the remaining **United States** troops were preparing to withdraw from Iraq. While Tikrit is home to a majority Sunni Muslim population, the suspected assailants were Sunni Islamists allied with al-Qaida who have targeted the town repeatedly.

On Aug. 15, 2011, Iraq was hit by a spate of deadly attacks. The most deadly of the attacks ensued in the southeastern city of Kut where two near-simultaneous bomb attacks targeted the bustling city core and left 34 people dead and injured more than 60 others. The first explosion was caused by a roadside bomb planted in a freezer. Then, as rescuers and witnesses gathered on the scene, the second attack occurred as a car bomb exploded close by. Other attacks took place elsewhere in the country. In the province of Diyala, five bombs left at least 10 people dead. In the holy Shi'a city of Najaf, a suicide car bombing at a police checkpoint killed at least four people. An Iraqi counter-terrorism unit in Tikrit, the hometown of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, was the site of yet another attack. In that case, three policemen were killed and several other individuals were wounded at the hands of attackers wearing explosives-laden vests. An explosion in Kirkuk in the north left at least one person dead, while a bombing in Karbala killed at least two people. In Taji, a car bomb left one person dead, while an explosion in Balad injured more than a dozen people. Baghdad was not immune from the violence as five bombs exploded in the capital. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the spate of attacks.

On Aug. 26, 2011, a series of attacks swept across Iraq, with Basra, Falluja, and Baghdad among the targets. More than a dozen people were killed as a result. Then, on Aug. 28, 2011, a suicide bomber attacked the Umm al-Qura mosque in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad, killing around 30 people and leaving at least another 30 others wounded. According to the Associated Press, a member of parliament -- Khalid al-Fahdawi -- was among the dead. The suicide bomber targeted the biggest Sunni mosque in Baghdad during prayers at the close of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

On Sept. 14, 2011, a spate of bomb attacks plagued Iraq, leaving at least 17 people dead and dozens wounded. The most deadly of the attacks occurred in the central city of Hilla where a car bomb was detonated close to a restaurant frequented by security forces; as many as 15 people were killed there including two policemen. At a military base in Habaniya, to the west of the capital, a bomb placed on a bus left two troops dead. In addition to the bombings, gunmen also went on a attack at a Baghdad security checkpoint, killing two policemen.



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On Sept. 25, 2011, the Iraqi Shi'a holy city of Karbala was hit by a series of bomb blasts, leaving at least 10 people dead and close to 100 others wounded. One bomb exploded just outside a local government office responsible for supplying identity cards and passports. The attack occurred as people were gathered outside the building.

Then, as emergency personnel arrived on the scene, another series of three bombs exploded around the scene. On the same day, two roadside bombs exploded in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province; at least one person died as a result while six others were injured.

On Oct. 27, 2011, the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad was struck by two explosions, which left close to 20 people dead and about 40 others wounded. The first bomb attack occurred in the predominantly Shi'a district of Ur, while the second blast occurred in the vicinity as emergency responders were evacuating the victims. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

On Oct. 30, 2011, Iraq was hit by a number of bombing and gun attacks in the central and eastern parts of the country; four people were killed and eight others were injured as a result. In the area of Abu Ghraib to the west of Baghdad, two soldiers were killed and three others injured when a

roadside bomb struck their patrol. In a separate incident, two policemen and two civilians were wounded when a car exploded a police patrol in the central the city of Fallujah. In Iraq's eastern province of Diyala, gunmen opened fire on a house in the town of Bani Sa'ad, killing two men and a woman identified as their mother.

On Nov. 3, 2011, 12 people were killed and another 35 were wounded in separate gunfire and bomb attacks. In Iraq's eastern province of Diyala, a suicide bomber blew up his explosive vest among a group of Awakening Council members at the entrance of an Iraqi army base near the provincial capital city of Baquba. (Note: The Awakening Council group, or Sahwa in Arabic, was composed of armed groups, including influential Sunni insurgent groups, which have opposed al-Qaida militants in the Sunni Arab areas.) As Iraqi security forces gathered at that site to investigate the crime scene, a booby-trapped car exploded at a garage outside the base. On the same day, gunmen attacked an Iraqi army checkpoint in Baghdad's northwestern district of Hurriyah, killing one soldier and wounding another. As well, four people were wounded in two bomb attacks in eastern and southwestern Baghdad. In Iraq's northern province of Nineveh, one person died and another one was wounded when gunmen attacked an Iraqi army patrol in the city of Baaj. In the same province, two individuals were wounded when a gunman hurled a hand grenade close to a police patrol in a marketplace in central Mosul, to the north of Baghdad. In Salahudin province, a soldier was wounded when a roadside bomb exploded close to an Iraqi army patrol in the city of Tuz-

Khurmato.

Two days later on Nov. 5, 2011, four people died and about a dozen others were injured in bomb attacks to the north of Baghdad on the house of the leader of the local Awakening Council. The group leader was not at home and so escaped the attack; his brother and wife were among the dead, though, and his home was completely decimated. On the same day, central Iraq was hit by bomb and gunfire attacks. In one case, a bomb on a bus carrying passengers exploded in Baghdad's eastern district of Sadr City, killing one civilian and wounding four others. Meanwhile, three civilians were injured when a bomb exploded inside a residential building in a southwestern Baghdad neighborhood. Also in Baghdad, two civilians were injured when a sticky bomb attached to their car exploded. In Salahudin province, gunmen entered the home of a policeman in the city of Tuz-Khurmato and shot him to death.

On Nov. 6, 2011, at least eight people died and more than 20 others were injured as a result of a series of blasts at the sprawling Shurja market in the Iraqi capital Baghdad, as people were buying food for the major Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha.

On Nov. 26, 2011, a series of bomb explosions around the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left at least 15 people dead and wounded more than 20 others. As many as three bombs exploded in the commercial district of Bab al-Sharqi in

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central Baghdad; eight people died as a result of those blasts. On the road between Baghdad and Falluja, two bombs targeted a truck transporting construction workers; the rest of the victims died in those two explosions.

On Dec. 22, 2011, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was rocked by a spate of coordinated bomb attacks -- 16 in total -- spread across the city from al-Amil in the south to Karrada in the city center. The death toll after these 16 explosions was reported to be close to 70 with at least 185 people sustaining injuries. Several buildings in the areas affected were destroyed by the blasts, which were caused by a mixture of car-bombs and improvised explosive devices. The timing of the attacks -- some of the most deadly in months -- occurred just as the last of the United States troops had departed from Iraq, marking the end of the United States' engagement in that country.

Iraq has seen an increase in attacks since the summer months of 2011, many of which have specifically targeted police and military personnel and interests. In fact, violence spiked from May and continued to date -- now, well into the latter part of 2011. In a general sense, the spate of attacks in Iraq in recent times have been attributed to insurgents seeking to undermine the burgeoning security forces system in Iraq at a time when United states troops were withdrawing from the country. But there were competing theories as to who was responsible for the higher incidence of violence in Iraq against government and security targets. The government placed the blame on al-Qaida in Iraq; however, the United States warned that the surge in violence was partially attributable to Iranian-backed militias.

Regardless of the veracity of any of these claims, the spate of attacks raised questions about the capability of Iraqi forces to maintain the country's security. Indeed, in a report by the United States

Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), the Iraqi defense chief, Lieutenant General Babakir Zebari, said that his country would not be fully able to defend itself from external threats until at least 2020. It should be noted that despite the volatile conditions on the ground "in country" and the disturbing acknowledgment from Zebari, United States President Barack Obama announced the redeployment of all American troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. With United States forces setting that date-certain deadline of the close of 2011 to withdraw all troops from Iraq, there have been increased fears about the deterioration of the already-grim security situation in that country.

## Special Report

Special Report: It's officially over; United States ends Iraq War

Summary: On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept of one his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion. Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD. Meanwhile, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security, and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people.

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U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

## Political Conditions Iraq

In the early hours of Aug. 19, 2010, (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011 in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago.

President Obama gave a televised address on Aug. 31, 2010, regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military that carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

United Nations lifts sanctions on Iraq

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It should also be noted that in December 2010, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions against Iraq. The vote ended most of the measures comprising a harsh sanctions regime that had been held in place for almost two decades, starting with the time of Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait during the era of Saddam Hussein. In its statement, the United Nations Security Council said that it "recognizes that the situation now existing in Iraq is significantly different from that which existed at the time of the adoption of Resolution 661." Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said of the move, "Today Iraq will be liberated from all sanctions caused by wars and misdeeds of the former regime." Meanwhile, United States Vice President Joe Biden, who acted as chairman of the meeting, said: "Iraq is on the cusp of something remarkable -- a stable, self-reliant nation." Striking a more pragmatic tone, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted that Iraq would yet have to forge an agreement with Kuwait in regards to its border, and would also have to resolve the matter of war reparations. To date, five percent of Iraq's oil revenues have been used to pay war reparations to Kuwait.

### U.S. President Obama announces complete withdrawal of troops by close of 2011

On Oct. 21, 2011, United States President Barack Obama announced the complete withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. President Obama said his country's nine-year military engagement in Iraq would officially come to an end at that time. He noted that the United States had fulfilled its commitment in Iraq and would bring all American troops home "in time for the holidays."

With the end of United States' combat operations in Iraq in August 2010, the end of the war was believed to be in the offing. That being said, at the time in mid-2010, approximately 50,000 troops remained in Iraq in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Negotiations have been ongoing since that time to forge a deal that would allow them to stay in Iraq to work with Iraqi security forces. However, the United States and Iraq were unable to find concurrence on an agreement allowing United States trainers to remain "in country" and still enjoy immunity. Thus, United States President Obama and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki concluded that the time had come to shift the nature of their bilateral relationship to one marked by respect for mutual sovereignty.

The end of the Iraq war would close a controversial chapter in the story of American foreign policy, which began with George W. Bush's doctrine of "pre-emptive war," undertaken in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, the invasion of Iraq -- the defining policy decision of former President Bush -- resulted in the ousting of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from office. The invasion of Iraq was criticized as a violation of international law by many, and condemned as ill-conceived foreign policy by others who argued that Iraq had nothing to do with the terror attacks in the United States of 2001, and that Iraq was not home to weapons of mass destruction -- the two expressed reasons for going to war in Iraq, according to the Bush administration. Analysts further warned that the deleterious consequence of the war and the unintended result of the ousting of Saddam Hussein would be ethno-sectarian strife and a strengthened Iran. Of course, on the other side of the equation, the Bush administration insisted on the necessity of the war in the interests of national security. These competing viewpoints notwithstanding, the war in Iraq ultimately left more than 4,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

As President Bush's successor to the presidency, President Obama has stood as a vocal critic of the Iraq war whose political influence in the war-weary United States intensified due to his pledge to bring an end to the controversial military engagement in Iraq. Clearly, now in 2011, President Obama was honoring a 2008 campaign promise to end the war in Iraq in a responsible manner. Indeed, President Obama said: "The U.S. leaves Iraq with our heads held high." He continued, "That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end."

It should also be noted that the Obama administration has emphasized the fact there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq -- even after the withdrawal of all remaining troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. As well, as stated in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 passed by Congress and signed by President Obama on Oct. 28, 2009: "No funds appropriated pursuant to an authorization of appropriations in this Act may be obligated or expended ... to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq." That being said, Iraq is home to one of the United States' most significant embassies.

Flag of U.S. forces in Iraq lowered in Baghdad bringing the war to a close

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On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. The small, somber, and symbolic ceremony in Baghdad, which focused on the military tradition of retiring or "casing" the flag, marked the end of the Iraq War. On this historic day, only 4,000 troops remained "in country," and were expected to depart Iraq within two weeks. At the height of the United States-led occupation of Iraq, there were as many as 170,000 American troops in that country.

Speaking of the momentous occasion, United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "To all of the men and women in uniform today your nation is deeply indebted to you." Secretary Panetta paid tribute to the sacrifices of United States troops saying that they could leave Iraq with great pride. He declared, "After a lot of blood spilled by Iraqis and Americans, the mission of an Iraq that could govern and secure itself has become real."

As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept of one his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion.

Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." The American president also asserted that United States troops had left "with their heads held high" and he lauded their "extraordinary achievement." President Obama said, "Everything that American troops have done in Iraq, all the fighting and dying, bleeding and building, training and partnering, has led us to this moment of success." He continued, "You have shown why the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in the history of the world." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD.

Iraq -- while now liberated from the dictatorial hand of Saddam Hussein -- was not fully stabilized. Indeed, an insurgency continues to plague the country, which is culturally and politically characterized by ethno-sectarian tensions. There are enduring questions about the Iraqis' ability to maintain security in this country. Nevertheless, Iraq has made it clear that the time had come to end the occupation of their country. Indeed, as stated by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Hussain al-Shahristani, "I think we are all happy that the American soldiers are returning home safely to their families and we are also confident that the Iraqi people and their armed forces, police, are in a position now to take care of their own security."

Clearly, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people. That agenda would not be achieved with ease. On Dec. 20, 2011, only one day after the United States withdrew its last combat troops from Iraq, the Shi'a-dominated government of that country ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, on grounds of terrorism. The Iraqi authorities accused al-Hashimi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The serious charges were sure to damage the coalition government, and indeed, already a Sunni-backed political coalition said that its ministers would resign from their posts, effectively leaving several Iraqi agencies in disarray. While the charges themselves, if true, could not be understood as anything by highly disturbing, another school of thought was warning that the the Shi'a dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute the minority Sunni in leadership positions, in a bid to consolidate power. For his part, Vice President Hashemi denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism. Vice President Hashemi also wasted no time in accusing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. He also warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

Update (late 2011- 2012)

## Political Conditions Iraq

On Dec. 22, 2011, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was rocked by a spate of coordinated bomb attacks -- 16 in total -- spread across the city from al-Amil in the south to Karrada in the city center. The death toll after these 16 explosions was reported to be close to 70 with at least 185 people sustaining injuries. Several buildings in the areas affected were destroyed by the blasts, which were caused by a mixture of car-bombs and improvised explosive devices.

On Jan. 5, 2012, Shi'ites in Nasiriya and Baghdad were targeted in attacks by insurgents killed about 70 people. In Baghdad, explosives attached to a motorcycle were detonated close to a gathering of day laborers in the Shi'a-dominated Sadr City section of the capital. As rescuers sought to transport victims, further explosions were reported in the area, including a roadside bomb close to a tea shop. Several people died or were injured as a result of these attacks. Only an hour later, two car bombs exploded in the largely Shi'a neighborhood of Kadhimiya, leaving 15 people dead and more than 30 others wounded. The deadliest attacks took place close to Nasiriyah when a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his vest in a crowd of Shi'ite pilgrims at a security checkpoint; more than 35 people died and 72 people were injured in that incident alone. The pilgrims were en route to the holy city of Karbala where they were to mark the Shi'a festival of Arbaeen.

The timing of these attacks in late 2011 and early 2012 -- some of the most deadly in months -- occurred just as the last of the United States troops had departed from Iraq, marking the end of the United States engagement in that country. With the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq, there has been increased anxiety about the security situation in the country, and heightened fears of the country devolving once again into unmitigated ethno-sectarian conflict. In this case, while there was no conclusive evidence as to who might be behind the spate of brutal attacks, speculation rested on the Sunni terror group, al-Qaida in Iraq, as being the likely culprits. The coordinated nature of the attacks, cross-cut by the fact that Iraq was now in a state of fractious politics between the Shi'a prime minister and the Sunni vice president (discussed below), bolstered the belief that al-Qaida was very likely behind the attacks.

In regards to the state of fractious politics in Iraq, only one day after the United States withdrew its last combat troops from Iraq, the Shi'a-dominated government of that country ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, on grounds of terrorism. The Iraqi authorities accused al-Hashimi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The serious charges were sure to damage the coalition government, and indeed, already a Sunni-backed political coalition said that its ministers would resign from their posts, effectively leaving several Iraqi agencies in disarray. As well, the entire main Sunni bloc in parliament, al-Iraqiya, was soon boycotting the assembly in protest.

While the charges themselves, if true, could not be understood as anything by highly disturbing, another school of thought was warning that the Shi'a dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute the minority Sunni in leadership positions, in a bid to consolidate power.

For his part, Vice President Hashemi denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism. Vice President Hashemi also wasted no time in accusing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. He also warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

The vice president was reported to be in Irbil, under the protection of the autonomous regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. Speaking at a news conference there, Vice President Hashimi again denied the charges against him and promised to be vindicated in court. On the other side of the equation, Prime Minister Maliki was calling on the Kurdish region to hand over Hashimi to the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad; however, the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan was not quick to respond. By the start of 2012, officials in Iraqi Kurdistan were indicating that they had no intention of turning over Hashimi to the federal authorities.

Meanwhile, the Sunni al-Iraqiya bloc maintained its boycott of the National Assembly and its representatives continued the walkout from cabinet posts, highlighting the ongoing state of political crisis in Iraq.

On Jan. 24, 2012, four car bombs and a roadside bomb exploded in predominantly Shi'a districts of Baghdad; at least 10 people died and more than 70 others were injured. Two attacks occurred in Sadr City; in one case, a car bomb exploded near a group of laborers; in the second case, a car bomb exploded close to a gas station. The al-Hurriya neighborhood was hit by a car bomb. As well, a roadside bomb exploded in the northwestern Baghdad close to Adan Square. A car bomb in the Shulaa neighborhood marked the fifth attack. Two days later on Jan. 26, 2012, a bomb attack in Kirkuk left at least three people dead. On the same day, two brothers who worked at policemen and several members of their family were killed in a house bombing in Musayyib to the south of Baghdad. Since the start of 2012, more than 200 people have died in sectarian attacks in Iraq.

On Feb. 19, 2012, a spate of gun and bomb attacks hit the cities of Baghdad, Baquba, and Abu Khamis in Iraq. In a suicide bombing close to the Iraqi Police Academy in the eastern part of the capital city of Baghdad, at least 18 people were killed and more than 25 others were injured as a result. Most of the victims were new recruits to the police force. In the city of Baquba, to the north of Baghdad, four police informants were killed by apparent al-Qaida gunmen. At a checkpoint in Abu Khamis, to the north of Baquba, gunmen killed one policeman and two members of the Awakening Council.

The spate of attacks came after the exit of United States troops in totality from Iraq (at the close of 2011), as well as the early 2012 celebration of the Shi'a holy festival of Arbreen.

On March 5, 2012, about 40 gunmen disguised in police uniforms drove trucks painted to look like police vehicles and launched an attack in the Sunni Muslim city of Haditha in western Iraq. They invaded homes, lobbed grenades, and engaged with security forces in battles at security checkpoints. While one of the gunmen was reported to have died in the attack, most of the others escaped, but not before at least 20 police officers were killed in the carefully planned assault.

On March 20, 2012, Iraq was hit by a spate of suicide attacks and car-bombings that left at least 45 people dead and close to 200 injured across the country. As noted by the New York Times, the wide range of target sites ranged from a Shi'a pilgrimage site in the south to the ethnically diverse oil wealth base in the north. Indeed, the cities of Baghdad, Kirkuk, Karbala, Hilla, Tikrit, Baiji, Ramadi and Falluja were all hit by the wave of attacks. One of the Baghdad explosions occurred outside the gates of the Foreign Ministry but fortifications prevented that attack from exacting excessive damage. In the home of a holy Shi'a shrine in Karbala, the news was more grim as a car bomb left a death toll of more than a dozen. Likewise, the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk saw ten people die in an explosion outside a police station. In Falluja, a bomb at the home of a police officer killed a pregnant woman and wounded her young son.

While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, a day later on March 21, 2012, the Islamic State of Iraq -- an entity aligned with the terror enclave, al-Qaida, claimed responsibility for the rash of deadly attacks in a statement published on an Islamic website. "In a new coordinated wave, the lions of Sunnis in Baghdad and other [Islamic State of Iraq] states simultaneously carried out strikes against the security plan announced by the government of the fools in the Green Zone in preparation for the meeting of the Arab tyrants in Baghdad," the statement said. In this way, the statement made direct reference to the Arab League summit, which was to be convened in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad to following week.

It should be noted that March 2012 marked the ninth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, led by the Bush administration in the United States. The subsequent Obama administration made good on its promise to close down the long-running war in Iraq with the complete withdrawal of combat troops and the end of the war at the end of 2011.

On April 4, 2012, Tarik al-Hashimi, the fugitive Sunni vice president of Iraq, arrived in Saudi Arabia. He earlier met with officials in Qatar. It was not known if Hashimi was taking political refuge in Saudi Arabia or Qatar. Since the

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end of 2011 when Iraqi authorities issued an arrest warrant for him on terrorism charges, Hashimi had been living in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq.

At issue was the fact that the Shi'a-dominated government of Iraq accused al-Hashimi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The serious charges damaged the coalition government. Indeed, a Sunni-backed political coalition at the time in 2011 said its ministers would resign from their posts. As well, the entire main Sunni bloc in parliament, al-Iraqiya, was soon boycotting the assembly in protest.

While the charges themselves, if true, could not be understood as anything by highly disturbing, another school of thought warned that the Shi'a-dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute minority Sunni leaders in a bid to consolidate power.

For his part, Vice President Hashemi denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism and running a death squad. Vice President Hashemi also wasted no time in accusing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. He also warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

Hashemi has also said that he was not seeking exile outside Iraq; indeed, he has expressed a willingness to face trial in Iraq's northern Kurdish region, although Iraqi judicial authorities have rejected the transfer of the case.

As noted here, the vice president was, for some time, under the protection of the autonomous regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. At the start of 2012, officials in Iraqi Kurdistan indicated they had no intention of turning over Hashimi to the federal authorities. Now in the spring of 2012, the government of Qatar was similarly refusing to oblige the Iraqi government's demand that Hashimi be handed over to Baghdad. "Diplomatic norms and the post of al-Hashimi prevent Qatar from doing such a thing," said Khalid Al Attiyah, Qatar's state minister for foreign affairs.

It should be noted that Hashemi was greeted in Saudi Arabia by that country's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, at the Red Sea port city of Jeddah. No further information was available as to the purpose of the visit.

The fate of Hashemi was further internationalized a week later when the president of the Kurdistan regional government, Massoud Barzani, was scheduled to meet with the Iraqi vice president during a visit to Turkey. Hashemi was reportedly in Turkey seeking political support from that country. Presumably, Turkey was the latest destination in the region for the vice president following his visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, fugitive Sunni Vice President Hashimi made news when he accused the Shi'a dominated government of Iraq of torture. At issue, according to Hashimi, were the deaths of his **detained** bodyguards. In a statement posted on his official website, Hashimi's office claimed that evidence derived from "reliable sources" showed that two of Hashimi's bodyguards died "as a result of severe torture at the hands of the security services to extract false confessions." The statement of Hashimi's website also called for the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) to look into their deaths, as well as the earlier death of a third bodyguard allegedly due to torture during interrogations.

On April 19, 2012, a spate of deadly bomb blasts struck a number of major Iraqi cities including the capital city of Baghdad, as well as Kirkuk, Baquba, Samarra, Dibil, Taji, and Mosul. In Baghdad, five blasts struck a number of Shi'a neighborhoods. In Kirkuk, two car bombs reported exploded there. In Baquba, a suicide bomber killed a police officer. In Samarra, security forces were targeted in two car bombs in that city. Both Mosul and Taji were subject to roadside device explosions. As well, there was an attack on a convoy in which Health Minister Majeed Hamad Amin was traveling; the Iraqi politician was not injured in that incident. These seemingly coordinated attacks unfolded over the course of less than two hours and left at least 35 people dead and more than 100 others injured.

Iraqi authorities placed the blame for the violence and bloodshed on al-Qaida in Iraq. To that end, an Iraqi military command spokesman, Colonel Dhia al-Wakeel, said in an interview with BBC News: "They [al-Qaida] want to send a message that they can target the stability that has been achieved recently. This will not discourage our security forces."



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On April 26, 2012, at least eight people died and more than 15 others were injured as a result of two bomb explosions in Iraq's province of Diyala. The attacks ensued in the location of a cafe in a Sunni village near the town of Baquba. The first bomb was detonated outside the cafe by a suicide car bomber; the second bomb was planted inside the cafe.

The cafe bombings occurred a week after a series of blasts struck several Iraqi cities, killing at least 35 people and injuring 100 others. In Baghdad, five blasts struck a number of Shi'a neighborhoods. In Kirkuk, two car bombs reported exploded there. In Baquba, a suicide bomber killed a police officer. In Samarra, security forces were targeted in two car bombs in that city. Both Mosul and Taji were subject to roadside device explosions. As well, there was an attack on a convoy in which Health Minister Majeed Hamad Amin was traveling; the Iraqi politician was not injured in that incident. These seemingly coordinated attacks unfolded over the course of less than two hours and left at least 35 people dead and more than 100 others injured.

Iraqi authorities placed the blame for the spate of violence and bloodshed on al-Qaida in Iraq. To that end, an Iraqi military command spokesman, Colonel Dhia al-Wakeel, said in an interview with BBC News: "They [al-Qaida] want to send a message that they can target the stability that has been achieved recently. This will not discourage our security forces." That being said, the attacks close to Baquba appeared to target Sunnis (vis a vis Shi'as), raising the question of whether those attacks were in retaliation for the nationwide attacks the previous week, which did include Shi'a neighborhoods.

On June 4, 2012, suicide bomber reportedly detonated an explosives-packed car in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad, killing more than two dozen people and injuring several scores more. The bomb attack appeared to target the offices of the Shi'a entity, Waqf (Endowment), which manages Shi'a religious sites and was blamed on al-Qaida in Iraq. Security officials on the ground said that the explosives-laden vehicle was parked close to the Waqf building when it was detonated and caused the collapse of that office structure. According to the deputy chief of Waqf, Sami al-Massudi, the bombing occurred amidst a brewing dispute over the al-Askari shrine. That golden-domed mosque in Sunni-dominated Samarra, has been long regarded as an important Shi'a Islamic sites. It was targeted during attacks in 2006 and 2007, which were attributed to driving Iraq almost to the brink of civil war at that time. In more recent years, as the government of Shia Prime Minister Nouri Maliki has expressed a more dominant stance against the Sunni Iraqiya political bloc, there has been an uptick in attacks against Sunni targets.

It should be noted that only a week prior in late May 2012, when a spate of bombings struck Baghdad and left close to 20 people dead.

On June 13, 2012, Iraq was struck by a wave of bombs that left scores of people dead and close to 300 injured in the bloodiest day the country's seen since the withdrawal of United States troops from that country in 2011. The bombs ensued in at least ten locations across the country and appeared to target Shi'a pilgrims gathering to mark the anniversary of the death of Imam Moussa al-Kadhim. In Hilla, to the south of Baghdad, the blasts appeared to have targeted a restaurant frequented by security forces. In Taji, to the north of Baghdad, the blast targeted a procession of pilgrims as they traveled to a shrine. Baghdad itself was hit by a series of four blasts, one of which targeted a group of pilgrims as they gathered at refreshment tents, and a car bomb that appeared to target pilgrims but also hit city workers. There were also three bomb blasts in Kirkuk, one of which targeted the headquarters of Kurdish President Massoud Barzani. There were also bomb attacks in Mosul, Balad, and Karbala.

On June 16, 2012, two car bombs targeted Shi'a pilgrims in Baghdad and killed at least 30 people on that day. Then, on June 18, 2012, a suicide attack at a Shi'a funeral in Baquba left at least 15 people dead and scores more wounded. That Baquba suicide bombing occurred at a funeral gathering to mourn a tribal chief. According to the Associated Press, that gathering included as many as 150 people including the head of the Iraqi army's ground forces, Lieutenant General Ali Ghaidan, who escaped unhurt. Blame was placed on Sunni extremist militants linked with the terror enclave, al-Qaida.

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Then on June 28, 2012, a series of deadly car bombings in Iraq left more than a dozen people dead and around 50 other victims wounded. One bomb exploded outside a market in a mainly Shi'a district of the capital of Baghdad. Another car bombing occurred in the Sunni city of Taji; in that case, a government building was the target.

This spate of attacks in June 2012 began at a time when Shi'a pilgrims were gathering to mark the anniversary of the death of Imam Moussa al-Kadhim. The bombings continued days later and continued to target Shiites. Blame was placed on Sunni extremist militants linked with the terror enclave, al-Qaida.

In an important political development in the last week of June 2012, members of the Iraqi parliament were considering a confidence vote against Prime Minister Maliki. At issue was the growing discontent from the opposition ranks, including the Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc, the Kurdish coalition, the Ahrar bloc loyal to radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada Sadr, and independents, over the prime minister's policies, which the opposition views as contrary to the interests of a country with a diverse ethno-sectarian composition. They also expressed bitterness over the fact that the prime minister never lived up to his obligation to implement the power-sharing deal that he signed with rival political parties after the previous contested elections that yielded no clear winner.

By the end of June 2012, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was calling for early parliamentary elections, presumably in a move to vitiate the looming no-confidence motion. In a statement posted on his website, the office of the Iraqi head of government asserted the following: "When the other party refuse to sit on negotiation table and insists on provoking successive crises, including heavily damaging the higher interests of the Iraqi people, the prime minister found himself obliged to call for early elections of which the final word will be for the Iraqi people."

On July 3, at least 25 people were killed and 40 others were wounded in a truck bombing at a market close in the Iraqi city of Diwaniya. The violence extended to other sites across the country where dozens more fatalities were reported to have taken place. For example, in the central city of Karbala, four people were killed as a result of two car bombs, while as many as 30 people were injured in an earlier spate of explosions on the outskirts of the city. The locations of the attacks -- in Diwaniya and Karbala -- offered clues as to the motivation for the violence. In the case of the Diwaniya blast, the attack ensued at a market in close proximity to near a Shi'a mosque where pilgrims were gathered to travel onto Karbala (the location of a number of bombings) where the religious Shabaniyah festival was set to take place. It was apparent that both Shi'a pilgrims were the targets of attack in both case.

Meanwhile, Taji -- the Sunni-dominated city that was hit by a car bombing days before -- was again plagued by violence, with at least one policeman left dead and more than a dozen people injured. Attacks were also reported in Tuz Khurmatu, to the north of Baghdad.

A wave of bombings appeared to be aimed at Muslim Shi'a pilgrims and religious sites and left more than 200 people dead in Iraq since the beginning of June 2012. Indeed, June 2012 was the bloodiest month in Iraq since the departure of United States troops from that country at the end of 2011. The violence occurred at a time when the political sphere in Iraq has become more imbued by religious tension as the Shi'a-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has increasingly exerted its power -- usually to the detriment of Kurds and Sunnis.

July 23, 2012, though, marked one of the deadliest days of violence in Iraq over the course of 2012. Indeed, over 100 people were killed and double that number (more than 200) were wounded in a spate of bombs and shootings around the capital city of Baghdad on that day. The Sunni-dominated city of Taji to the north of Baghdad was badly-hit with scores of people dying there. Shi'a districts in Baghdad were also targeted with a car bombing in Sadr City killing more than 16 people. But the attacks were spread over more than a dozen towns and cities in what appeared to be a coordinated effort against security and government interests including checkpoints, army bases, and government offices. Five car bombs exploded in the northern oil city of Kirkuk, while bombs and shootings hit the northern city of Mosul, the province of Diyala, among other venues. As well, 15 soldiers died at an attack on an army base in Salaheddin province.

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It should be noted that the attacks occurred only day after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, said that his terror enclave would be carrying out a new offensive in Iraq, with an eye on regaining control over areas from which **United States** withdrew at the close in 2011. The general consensus was that al-Qaida in Iraq was trying to exploit the aforementioned ethno-sectarian tensions to re-exert its power in Iraq.

In September 2012, Iraq's fugitive vice-president, Tariq al-Hashemi, was found guilty on terrorism charges of organizing death squads and sentenced to death. The court case was carried out against the vice president in absentia, since he had taken refuge in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq. It should be noted that the court ruling occurred as a wave of violence rocked Iraq with 100 people killed.

The case against Vice President Hashemi, a Sunni, dated as far back as late 2011 when Iraqi authorities issued an arrest warrant for him on terrorism charges. At stake was the fact that the Shi'a-dominated government of Iraq accused Hashemi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. These extraordinarily serious charges damaged the coalition government. Indeed, a Sunni-backed political coalition at the time in 2011 said its ministers would resign from their posts. As well, the entire main Sunni bloc in parliament, al-Iraqiya, was soon boycotting the assembly in protest. While the charges themselves could not be understood as anything but highly disturbing, another school of thought warned that the Shi'a-dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute minority Sunni leaders in a bid to consolidate power.

For his part, Vice President Hashemi has consistently denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism and running a death squad.

Hashemi has also said that he was not seeking exile outside Iraq; indeed, he has expressed a willingness to face trial in Iraq's northern Kurdish region, although Iraqi judicial authorities (based in Baghdad) rejected the transfer of the case. The Sunni vice president has vociferously accused Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. That accusation could find resonance since Hashemi was one of Iraq's highest ranking Sunni Muslims. He warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

Meanwhile, fugitive Sunni Vice President Hashemi made news when he accused the Shi'a dominated government of Iraq of torture. According to Hashemi, the deaths of his **detained** bodyguards formed the basis of his accusations. In a statement posted on his official website in the spring of 2012, Hashemi's office claimed that evidence derived from "reliable sources" showed that two of Hashemi's bodyguards died "as a result of severe torture at the hands of the security services to extract false confessions." The statement of Hashemi's website also called for the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) to look into their deaths, as well as the earlier death of a third bodyguard allegedly due to torture during interrogations.

As noted here, the vice president was, for some time, under the protection of the autonomous regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. At the start of 2012, officials in Iraqi Kurdistan indicated they had no intention of turning over Hashemi to the federal authorities. By the spring of 2012, the government of Qatar was similarly refusing to oblige the Iraqi government's demand that Hashemi be handed over to Baghdad when Hashemi visited that country. "Diplomatic norms and the post of al-Hashemi prevent Qatar from doing such a thing," said Khalid Al Attiyah, Qatar's state minister for foreign affairs. Along a similar vein, Hashemi was greeted in Saudi Arabia by that country's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, at the Red Sea port city of Jeddah during the Iraqi vice president's spring 2012 trip to that country. The Saudi royal family's welcome of Hashemi delivered a powerful symbolic message that it was also unlikely to assist the Iraqi government in its efforts against the Iraqi vice president. The fate of Hashemi was further internationalized a week later when the president of the Kurdistan regional government, Massoud Barzani, was scheduled to meet with the Iraqi vice president during a visit to

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Turkey. Hashemi was reportedly in Turkey seeking political support from that country. Presumably, Turkey was another destination in the region for the vice president following his visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey indicated little interest in handing over Hashemi to central Iraqi authorities.

As of September 2012, irrespective of the positions taken by semi-autonomous Kurdistan and other sovereign governments in the region, the Iraqi authorities had moved forward with their case against Vice President Hashemi. To that end, prosecutors asserted Hashemi was involved in 150 killings and drew upon testimony from some of Hashemi's former bodyguards. However, given the vice president's claims that some of his entourage had been tortured into giving false confessions, there were suspicions surrounding this particular evidence.

Ultimately, Tariq al-Hashemi was found guilty in absentia on terrorism charges of organizing death squads; he was sentenced to death by hanging as a result. Hashemi offered no immediate feedback on the case or the ruling from Turkey, where he was carrying out talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Instead, he said he would in the future, "tackle this issues in a statement." Other Sunni politicians, along with secular voices, entered the fray and excoriated the Iraqi government of Shi'a Prime Minister Maliki for provoking sectarian conflict.

Meanwhile, even as the court case and ruling went forward, a wave of violence rocked Iraq with deathly consequences for around 100 people. At the start of the month, at least eight people died at Shi'a Muslim shrines and mosques in Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Then, on Sept. 9, 2012, car bombs killed around 25 people in Baghdad, while a dozen soldiers were killed in an attack on an army base in Balad to the north of the capital city. Another ten soldiers died in a dawn raid on a military base in Dujail. On the same day, two car bomb in the southern city of Amara outside a Shi'a shrine left at least 14 people dead and more than 60 others wounded. In the northern city of Kirkuk, seven police officers died as they applied for jobs in the oil industry, while attacks were also reported in Tuz Khurmatu, Baquba, Basra, and Samarra. Also on Sept. 9, 2012, a bomb exploded outside the French honorary consulate in the southern city of Nasiriya, in the south, leaving one person dead.

On Sept. 30, 2012, a series of car bombings in Iraq targeted Shi'ite Muslims and security forces and left more than 30 people dead and about 100 others wounded. In the predominantly Sunni town of Taji, to the north of Baghdad, four consecutive car bombs killed about eight people. The location of these bombs were reportedly in close proximity to homes of Shi'ites and police checkpoints. In the southern town of Madain, a bomb exploded close to a Shi'a shrine and left Iranian pilgrims injured. Several other cities also saw violence, including Mosul, Baquba, and Kut where a car bombing targeted a police patrol.

On Oct. 20, a spate of bombings and shootings rocked Iraq, leaving about a dozen people dead and close to 50 others injured. The explosions and shootings took place across the country, with the worst of the violence occurring as a result of twin bomb explosions close to a Shi'a shrine in the capital city of Baghdad. Also in Baghdad, gunmen opened fire on a police patrol in the capital, killing two police officers. In the northern city of Mosul, a soldier was targeted and killed. The attacks were thought to be the work of al-Qaida affiliated Sunni extremist groups that were intent on fomenting ethno-sectarian tensions and, therefore, undermining the authority of the Shi'a-led government of Iraq. On Oct. 23, 2012, at least nine people died in car bomb and mortar attacks in predominantly Shi'a districts of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. These attacks coincided with the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha.

In the last week of November 2012, a series of bomb attacks plagued Iraq, leaving approximately 43 people dead and more than 100 others wounded in total. The attacks appeared to target the predominantly Shi'a Muslim areas south of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. The city of Hilla saw the brunt of the violence with a double bombing in a busy commercial area taking the lives of 28 people. In the holy city of Karbala, a car bomb left at least five people dead. On the Basmala Highway to the north of the capital, a car bomb exploded outside a popular restaurant, killing two people and wounding 11 others. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, the general

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consensus was that the culprits behind these attacks were likely to be Sunni **militants** who have, in the past, targeted the Shi'ites in this country still divided by ethno-sectarian strife.

Around the same period of late November 2012, a suicide bomber targeted security forces at a police checkpoint in Fallujah, killing three police officers and wounding 11 others. As well, in the northern city of Mosul, a bomb planted in a parked car was detonated just as a police patrol traveled by, killing two people, one of whom was a policeman. In Taji, to the south of Baghdad, two roadside bombs exploded close to an Iraqi army base, killing one person and wounding six others.

A series of blasts struck the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk on Dec. 16, 2012, killing between six and ten people and wounding dozens more. Three roadside bombs reportedly were detonated close to a Shi'ite mosque, while a car bomb and another roadside bomb exploded next to a television station. The city -- a center for Iraq's oil reserves -- has been inhabited by an ethnically complicated population of Arabs, Kurds, cross-cut by Sunni and Shi'ite religious backgrounds. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, the bombings occurred at a time when tensions between the **Arab**-led government in Baghdad and the Kurdish authorities of semi-autonomous Kurdistan were on the increase. At issue has been security control over after the internal boundary between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq.

## Update (2013)

On Jan. 3, 2013, a car bombing left at least 20 Shi'a Muslim pilgrims dead and many more injured in the town of Musayyib, to the south of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. Children were reported to be among the dead, according to reports from Iraqi officials. While there were some suggestions of a suicide bomber, subsequent reports indicated that the bomb may have been planted in a vehicle in a parking lot. The bomb was detonated at a time when pilgrims were returning from the holy city of Karbala where they were observing the festival of Arbaeen. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for this attack, as in the past, suspicion rested on Sunni **militants**.

On Jan. 5, 2013, spate of bombings and shootings in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala left five people dead and 10 others injured. In one case, a car bomb exploded at a market to the north of the provincial capital city of Baquba, killing three people and wounding six others. Separately, a roadside bomb struck an army convoy near the town of Sa'diyah, killing one soldier and wounding four others. Elsewhere in Diyala, a man was shot to death by gunmen in front of his house in Baquba.

The start of 2013 was also marked by Iraqi Sunnis staging demonstrations to protest against discrimination by the Shi'a-dominated government. The demonstrations took place across Iraq in town such as Ramadi in the west, Mosul in the north, as well as the capital city of Baghdad. The protests were intended to draw attention to the claim of many Sunnis that they are now treated as second-class citizens in their own country and to condemn Iran's influence on Iraq's affairs. Cognizant of the sensitivity of the issue, Prime Minister Nouri Maliki called on Iraqi security forces to show restraint in dealing with Sunni protesters.

On Jan. 22, 2013, a series of car bombings struck the capital city of Baghdad. Then, on Jan. 23, 2013, a suicide bombing on a Shi'a mosque in the village of Tuz Khurmato in Iraq left at least two dozen people dead and scores more wounded. The attack appeared to target Shi'a adherents who were attending a funeral at the mosque in Tuz Khurmato. A report by Agence France Presse indicated that the suicide bomber entered the mosque and detonated the explosives strapped to his body in the midst of the funeral mourners. As has often been the case with such attacks on Shi'ites, blame rested on Sunni **militants** in this country that has been rocked by ethno-sectarian strife since the fall of Saddam Hussein. That said, it should be noted that the town of Tuz Khurmato is located to the north of the capital city of Baghdad and its jurisdiction has been under contestation between the Iraqi federal central government and the semi-autonomous Kurdish government in the north of the country. It should also be

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noted that the ethno-sectarian composition of Tuz Khurmato is a bit more complicated than the usual Sunni/Shi'a religious divide since it is inhabited predominantly by ethnic Turkmen.

On Feb. 3, 2013, suicide bombers and gunmen launched an attack on police headquarters in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. At least two of the attackers were disguised in police uniforms, while being armed with guns, grenades and suicide vests.

They appeared to have been trying to take control over the police compound but were thwarted in that effort. Nevertheless, at least 16 people died and more than 90 others were injured, including a police chief, when a bomb exploded as the gates of the police headquarters.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility although Kirkuk has been a frequent target for attack due to its diverse ethnic and sectarian composition, as well as the fact that control over the oil-rich city has been a source of consternation between the Iraqi government in Baghdad and Kurds who inhabit the semi-autonomous Kurdistan of the north.

Ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq has decreased from its heights in 2006 and 2007, when the country was on the verge of collapsing into civil war; however, since the exit of United States troops from Iraq, bombings and shootings have become more frequent. Political conflicts have cross-cut sectarian tensions in recent times, setting the stage for a particularly volatile and complicated political and social terrain.

That conflicted terrain sunk to a new nadir in 2012 when Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, was sentenced to death in absentia on charges of running death squads. For his part, Hashemi denied the charges but took refuge in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq and later, Turkey. The situation was not helped by the arrest of the bodyguards of the Finance Minister Rafa al-Essawi, the most high-profile Sunni in the Iraqi cabinet and a vociferous opponent of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. After the arrest of his bodyguards, Essawi called for the head of government to resign, saying that Maliki

"did not behave like a man of the state." The political turmoil in Iraq reached new levels on Jan. 13, 2013, when there was an attempt on the life of the finance minister himself, during an attack to the west of Baghdad. Essawi survived the apparent assassination attempt.

In mid-February 2013, there was no cessation of political turmoil rocking Iraq. In the Sunni Muslim stronghold of Fallujah, protesters took to the streets to demand the ousting of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The demonstrations in Fallujah were just the latest in a spate of protests in various Sunni area of the country. As well, a commander of Iraqi pro-government and anti-al-Qaida Sahwa forces in Iraq's Diyala province was reported to have been assassinated. Unidentified gunmen opened fire on Khaled al-Lahibi in Baquba, leading to his death and injury to one of his sons. Note that the Sahwa forces have functioned as an unofficial paramilitary force in Diyala province since 2007 and have been instrumental in the fight against al-Qaida type terrorists in Iraq.

On Feb. 16, 2013, the head of Iraq's intelligence academy, Ali Aouni, along with two of his bodyguards, were killed in a suicide blast in the northern town of Tal Afar. Aouni was not believed to be the original target since he died during an attack on his neighbor, Lieutenant Habib Amin Ilias -- a rapid response commander who had been a target of attack before. As the bombers fled the home of Ilias, one of them was killed by a bodyguard while the other detonated the explosives strapped to his body, killing Aouni as he walked out of his house. Then, on Feb. 17, 2013, a series of car bombs rocked the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, leaving at least 20 people dead and scores more injured. (It should be noted that some estimates by Iraqi officials indicated the death toll was twice as high.) The bombs reportedly occurred across the mainly Shi'a neighborhoods of the city and thus raised suspicions that extremist Sunni militants were responsible.

By the start of March 2013, Finance Minister Rafa al-Essawi -- the Sunni member of government and victim of an attempted assassination only weeks before -- announced his resignation from the Shi'a dominated cabinet of Prime

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Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Essawi's spokesperson, Aysar Ali, said the finance minister was resigning due to prevailing Sunni grievances with the Shi'a-dominated administration, and Prime Minister Maliki's failure to address the second-class treatment of Sunnis in Iraq.

Around this time in March 2013, not only were fears arising about the emergence of increased ethno-sectarian violence, but also that political strife and conflict in Iraq could lead to a fractured country. According to IraqiNews.com, a member of the Iraqi parliament was articulating the possibility of a partitioned Iraq in the future. Adel Abdullah of the Kurdistan Alliance was reported to have said, "The situation in Iraq is close to partition" with the possibility of three countries in the offing.

But Abdullah cautioned that many members of parliament simply did not comprehend the nuances of federalism or fracture, saying, "Many of the politicians do not know the concept of the federalism and think that it leads to the partition." Presumably, Abdullah envisioned two possibilities -- Iraq broken up into three countries (Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish) or Iraq divided into three entities but still connected under a federal rubric. He issued a tone of qualified optimism saying that partition could be avoided "if the political sides adhere to the dialogue." Abdullah also foreclosed the notion of Iraq being subject to an uprising of the type that has affected other Arab countries since the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011, saying: "The change that took place in the Arab countries will not take place in Iraq because the regime in Iraq is elected and the power was peacefully changed."

On March 14, 2013, coordinated bomb and gun attacks targeted government ministries in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, leaving close to 20 people dead and several others injured. The attacks took place close to the heavily fortified Green Zone where several foreign embassies and Iraqi government offices are located. Witnesses said that three explosions were heard emanating from around the Justice Ministry, while security forces said that six gun men disguised as police officers were part of the assault on the building that housed ministry offices. The death toll could have been higher; however, security guards quickly evacuated workers from the four level building through a back door, ultimately saving their lives.

While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the violence, suspicion rested on Sunni militants with links to al-Qaida militants, who have often targeted Iraqi government offices.

On March 18, 2013, bomb blasts were reported in the main Iraqi port city of Basra, which is home to a predominantly Shi'a population. One explosion occurred close to a bus station in Garmat Ali, while the other bomb exploded in an area to the west of the city.

As in the case of the Baghdad attacks, suspicion rested on Sunni militants with links to al-Qaida militants, who have serious grievances against the Shi'a population -- especially on the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

On March 19, 2013, Shi'a neighborhoods of Baghdad were struck by car bombings, sticky bombs, gun shootings, and other attacks. At least 50 people died as a result and as many 160 others were injured. The areas targeted for attack included the Sadr City, close to the heavily fortified Green Zone. As well, in Iskandariyah to the south of Baghdad, a suicide bomber drove an explosives-laden truck through the entrance of an Iraqi army base, killing at least two people and wounding more than 10 others. To the north of Baghdad in Tarmiyah, a car bombing wounded four soldiers. Given the targeting of Shi'a neighborhoods in the Iraqi capital, blame for the violence on this day rested -- again -- on Sunni insurgents linked with al-Qaida.

Those suspicions of blame on Sunni militants were bolstered by the fact that the wave of attacks took place around the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq by United States-led coalition forces, which resulted in the ousting of former President Saddam Hussein from office. The end of the regime of Saddam Hussein essentially ripped away any power held by the Sunni minority of Iraq, and repositioned the majority Shi'a population at the helm

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of political influence in Iraq. The end of the regime of Saddam Hussein also exposed complex ethno-sectarian tensions between the majority and minority demographic groups, ultimately heralding a violent conflict and nasty insurgency that has continued to date.

In the background of these attacks on the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq in March 2013 were rising fears about not only increased ethno-sectarian violence, but also that political strife and conflict in Iraq could lead to a fractured country. According to IraqiNews.com, a member of the Iraqi parliament was articulating the possibility of a partitioned Iraq in the future. Adel Abdullah of the Kurdistan Alliance was reported to have said, "The situation in Iraq is close to partition" with the possibility of three countries in the offing. Abdullah cautioned that many members of parliament simply did not comprehend the nuances of federalism or fracture, saying, "Many of the politicians do not know the concept of the federalism and think that it leads to the partition." Presumably, Abdullah envisioned two possibilities -- Iraq broken up into three countries (Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish) or Iraq divided into three entities but still connected under a federal rubric. He issued a tone of qualified optimism saying that partition could be avoided "if the political sides adhere to the dialogue." Abdullah also foreclosed the notion of Iraq being subject to an uprising of the type that has affected other Arab countries since the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011, saying: "The change that took place in the Arab countries will not take place in Iraq because the regime in Iraq is elected and the power was peacefully changed."

Still, the issue of fragmentation for Iraq was emerging elsewhere. In an article published by the Washington Post, Rajiv Chandresekhar observed that the so-called "surge" in 2007, which was intended to cool down the bloody sectarian civil war plaguing the country, may have accomplished that temporary objective, while failing to achieve the other goal of forging a political compromise among the three major demographic groups in Iraq. Chandresekhar suggested that rather than setting the path for ethno-sectarian compromise and stability between the Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and ethnic Kurds, Iraq years later was beset by intensified ethno-sectarian dissonance. Shi'ites -- happy to finally to have secured political power -- were unwilling to share it with Sunnis and Kurds. The result was a divided country whereby the Shi'ites controlled wide swaths of the country and the center of government, Sunnis in the central part of the country were railing against their enforced position as a political minority (or even participating in the insurgency), and Kurds were isolated to the exertion of power only in the semi-autonomous north. But the geographic division aside, there was also increasing political conflict as Shi'ites were accusing Sunnis -- even those in government, such as Vice President Tariq I-Hashemi -- of terrorism, and Sunnis were protesting against oppression by the Shi'a dominated government. The result was a particularly volatile and complicated political and social terrain.

On April 6, 2013, a suicide bomb and a grenade attack at a political rally in the eastern Iraqi city of Baquba left more than 20 people dead and around 50 others injured. The attacks constituted the latest manifestation of violence in the period leading up to the local elections; indeed, more than 11 candidates standing for election had already been shot to death, resulting in the decision to delay the polls in some provinces on the grounds of security concerns. This particular incident in Baquba -- the province of Diyala -- occurred as one Sunni candidate, Muthana al-Jourani, was meeting with his supporters. Although he escaped unhurt, some of his supporters were among the victims.

On April 15, 2013, Iraq was again struck by violence as a series of deadly bombs exploded in cities across Iraq, leaving more than 30 people dead and more than 200 others injured. The bombs exploded in cities including Baghdad, Tikrit, Fallujah and Nasariya in the south, as well as Tuz Khurmatu and Kurkuk in the north, and appeared to be a coordinated effort using car bombs and roadside bombs. The bombs were seemingly intended to be detonated during the early morning rush hour.

On April 18, 2013, a suicide bombing ensued at a Baghdad cafe with deadly consequences. A suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body just inside the cafe, killing close to 30 people, including two children. Dozens of other victims were injured in the blast. The force of the explosion destroyed part of the building, causing a collapse and trapping some persons in the rubble.



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There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the series of attacks on April 15, 2013, or the suicide bombing at the Baghdad cafe days later, although with the flare of ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq in recent times, all expectations were that they were related to this reality. As well, this spate of violence occurred just as Iraq was set to soon hold provincial elections.

A spate of violence erupted in the late spring to early summer of 2013 as ethno-sectarian attacks plagued cities across Iraq.

In the third week of May 2013, 10 policemen were kidnapped in the western province of Anbar and found dead. Around the same time, Sunni Muslim areas in Baghdad were subject to bombings that left 60 people dead.

Then, on May 20, 2013, close to 80 people died as many as 200 others were injured as bombs exploded in a number of Iraqi cities. The worst of the attacks occurred in Baghdad with multiple explosions occurring at markets and bus depots in Shi'a Muslim districts of the capital. In the Baghdad neighborhood of Shaab, for example, a car bomb exploded close to a crowded market killing at least a dozen people and wounding a score more. Samarra to the north of Baghdad, and the southern cities of Basra and Hilla were also sites of bloodshed and violence. In Samarra, an explosion occurred in close proximity to a meeting of members of the Sunni militia, the Awakening Council, which has fought back against terror attacks and has often been targeted by Sunni extremists as a result. The bomb attack on Hilla targeted two Shi'a mosques during evening prayers and left a dozen people dead. Several Shi'a Iranian pilgrims were also killed on this day.

While May 20, 2013, was regarded as one of the most violent days in recent times in Iraq, May 21, 2013, fared only a little better. A car bombing close to the Sunni Muslim Abu Ghraib Grand Mosque left eight people dead and 15 people injured. On the same day, three Iraqi soldiers were killed and seven more were wounded when armed gunmen stormed the army base in Tarmiya to the north of Baghdad. As well, three people died and more than 40 were wounded when two car bombs exploded in Tuz Khormato to the north of Baghdad. Northern Iraq was not exempt from the bloodshed with one person killed and 25 others were injured as a result of three successive bombs attacks at a sheep market in Kirkuk.

In response to this most recent outbreak of violence in Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki vowed to make immediate changes to Iraq's security strategy and told Iraqis that **militants** "will not be able to return us to the sectarian conflict."

But sectarian strife was displayed in full relief less than a week later. Indeed, on May 27, 2013, a series of car bombs in Baghdad left more than 65 people dead. These explosions appeared to target the Shi'a-dominated areas of the capital city, including Sadr City.

Then, on May 29, 2013, bomb blasts in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left more than two dozen people dead. In one incident, a wedding party appeared to be badly hit by a bomb attack with many guests as the unfortunate victims of the violence. A day later on May 30, 2013, further violence in the form of a series of car bombs hit not only the capital of Baghdad but also the northern city of Mosul. More than 20 people were reported to have died as a result.

June 10, 2013, was marked by a wave of bombing attacks across Iraq. The attacks targeted the central and northern part of the country and left more than 70 people dead and several more wounded. In the largely Shi'a town of Judaida al-Shat in Diyala province, two car bombs exploded at a market killing a dozen people there. In the northern part of Baghdad, a car bomb struck a fish market and killed seven people there. In the predominantly Sunni city of Mosul, car bombs at security checkpoints later killed at least two dozen people. Other attacks ensued in Kirkuk, Taji, Tikrit and Tuz Khurmato.

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In mid-June 2013, there was a wave of attacks across Iraq, this time apparently targeting Shi'ite Muslims. As many as 30 people died on June 16, 2013, as a result of car bomb attacks in the southern oil city of Basra, the holy city of Najaf, as well as other bomb attacks in Nassiriya, Kut, Hilla, Tuz Khurmato, and Mahmudiya in southern Baghdad. At a checkpoint in Hadhar, close to the northern city of Mosul, gunmen shot six policemen to death.

The close of June was also marked by violence as Iraq was struck by a wave of bombings. On June 25, 2013, a spate of car bombs left as many as 30 people dead in the capital city of Baghdad. Then on June 27, 2013, a series of bombings appeared to target crowded cafes in the capital city, which were packed with young people watching football on televised screens. More than 15 people died as a result and several others were injured. A similar attack on football viewers ensued on June 29, 2013 and killed seven people. Then, on June 30, 2013, a bomb planted close to a field where people were playing football in the town of Nahrawan, left a dozen people dead.

Iraq in mid-2013 was plagued by ethno-sectarian violence. On July 1, 2013, a suicide bombing at a Shi'a mosque in the town of Muqdadiyah in the volatile Diyala province left more than 20 people dead. The attack took place during a funeral ceremony for a police officer. On the same day, eight people died and 20 more were wounded in a separate attack on a cafe in the central city of Baquba.

Days later on July 5, 2013, more than 20 people died and double that number were wounded as a result of a series of attacks targeting Shi'as to the north of Baghdad. In one incident in Baghdad's Kiraiyat neighborhood, a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body at the Hussienieh Ali Basha mosque as people gathered for Friday prayers. As many as 15 people died in that attack alone.

In Samarra, a man disguised as an army officer carried out a car bombing close to a mosque on the same day during Friday prayers. There were also attacks reported in Kut, Falluja, and Jubail. In Hawija, two **militants** died as they attempted to situate a bomb.

On July 11, 2013, a spate of bomb explosions and gun battles across the country left more than 75 people dead across Iraq. In one incident alone -- a car bombing at a Shi'ite mosque in Dujail to north of Baghdad -- about ten people were killed. Then, a day later on July 12, 2013, a bomb attack on a tea house in Kirkuk left more than 30 people dead. The attack in the oil rich and ethnically mixed Iraqi city occurred just as people broke their fast for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Mid-July 2013 saw fresh violence erupt in Iraq as explosions were reported in Shi'a areas of the country. On July 13, 2013, six people died as a result of bombings in northern Iraq. On the same day, two policemen were shot to death in the city of Mosul, in the predominantly Sunni province of Nineveh.

In Baghdad, more than 20 people died at bomb attacks on Sunni mosques. Then, on July 14, 2013, as many as 15 people were killed, with eight victims dying as a result of a bombing close to the headquarters of a political party in the southern city of Basra. Other attacks were reported in this period of Karbala, Nasiriya and six in Musayyib.

Significantly, these episodes of violence occurred just as the United Nations missions in Iraq released an alarming report indicating that as many as 2,500 people had died due to violence attacks in Iraq from April 2013 to the start of July 2013. The high point in the attacks over the three-month period appeared to be May 2013 when more than 1,000 people were killed in that month alone; however, the spring-summer period was clearly marked by a disturbing level of bloodshed overall.

On July 20, 2013, a wave of car bombs struck the capital of Baghdad, killing at least 30 people. The attacks targeted commercial areas such as the districts of Karrada, Baiyaa, Shurta, Tobchi, and Zafaraniya and occurred just as Iraqis broke their fast for the day, again during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Then on July 22,

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2013, Iraqi officials said that a suicide car bombing in Mosul -- in the northern part of the country -- targeted an army patrol and left a dozen people dead.

As many as 30 people died across Iraq on July 23, 2013. In one incident, a group of armed gunmen opened fire on a police station in northern Iraq, killing nine police officers. The initial attack took place to the south of the city of Mosul, but was not the end of the intended violence as a roadside bomb exploded in the area -- presumably planted to target emergency personnel unfortunate enough to be responding to the initial gun attack. An ambulance driver and a nurse were injured as a result. In Baquba, gunmen shot a man death at a police station. Then on July 28, 2013, a suicide bomber killed eight Kurdish police in the town of Tuz Khurmatu in northern Iraq. Nine other police officers were wounded in the incident.

It should be noted that there was no immediate claim of responsibility for this series of attacks discussed above, although there was a flare of ethno-sectarian violence between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims in Iraq in recent times, reflecting the dramatic and escalating political conflict between the Shi'a dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the increasingly alienated Sunni opposition. Given this restive and volatile landscape, the United Nations envoy to Iraq, Martin Kobler, warned that "systemic violence" was about to explode "at any moment" in that country. Kobler called on Iraq's political leaders to "engage immediately to pull the country out of this mayhem."

In the last week of July 2013, the "mayhem" facing Iraq saw little relief when gunmen stormed two prisons in Baghdad, allowing hundreds of inmates -- many of them Islamist extremists and terrorists -- to escape. The two jail breaks affected the Taji and Abu Ghraib (which gained notoriety in 2004 over the abuse of Iraqi detainees at the hands of United States guards) and were said to have been carried out by an al-Qaida affiliated entity called "the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant." At the end of these jail breaks at Taji and Abu Ghraib, at least 20 security guards were dead and hundreds of freed prisoners were on the loose. At first Iraqi authorities dismissed the reports of the prisoner escape but eventually acknowledged the news and the Iraqi interior ministry also alleged that the jail break as accomplished with the complicity of some prison guards inside the two facilities. Meanwhile, Reuters news agency reported that some of the escaped inmates had immediate plans to go to Syria and join the rebel movement in that country.

The Islamic celebration of Eid -- marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan -- was marred by a spate of attacks in Iraq. On Aug. 10, 2013, 60 people died as a result of a series of bombings and shootings in Iraq. On this day, most of the attacks were car bombings that targeted cafes, restaurants, and markets in the capital city of Baghdad. Together with the other killings that occurred during the Ramadan period, the death toll was more than 670. As such, Ramadan 2013 in Iraq was proving to be the bloodiest and most violent in several years.

Security experts said that the attacks appeared to be work of al-Qaida in Iraq. Accordingly, a search was on for the leader of the group - Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi -- who was also linked to attacks on two prisons -- Taji and Abu Ghraib (which gained notoriety in 2004 over the abuse of Iraqi detainees at the hands of United States guards). In those prison attacks in late July 2013, al-Qaida in Iraq reportedly stormed the jails and released hundreds of inmates -- many of them Islamist extremists and terrorists.

Promises from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to escalate operations against militants were not positively received, with many Iraqi citizens accusing him of accentuating the ethno-sectarian conflict gripping the country. With those ethno-sectarian tensions on the rise, speculation was surfacing about a possible plan to partition the country. This controversial plan has, at times, been subject to criticism by advocates of a united Iraq; however, recent developments in Iraq suggest a deeply divided country, subject to ongoing violence, and with no serious political solution at hand to address the turbulence and turmoil.

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On Aug. 25, 2013, the Iraqi cities of Baghdad and Baquba were struck by a series of bomb attacks that left close to 50 people dead. It was the latest manifestation of ethno-sectarian violence between Shi'ites and Sunnis that has plagued Iraq since the time of the United States-led invasion more than a decade earlier. While Iraq did see some calm after the escalation of international troops years prior, in more recent times with the exit of United States combat forces from Iraq, the country has seen an alarming increase in violence and bloodshed. In this case, there were four bombs that exploded in Baquba alone while several more bombings hit Baghdad. In the northern city of Mosul, gunmen opened fire on a vehicle at a phony checkpoint, resulting in the deaths of five soldiers.

It should be noted that in August 2013, the United Nations released casualty figures for the previous month -- July 2013 -- which showed that more than 1,000 people died in that month alone. Indeed, July 2013 now had the dubious distinction of being the bloodiest and most violent month in five years.

On Sept. 3, 2013, ethno-sectarian violence flared again when a series of car bombs and shootings in the predominantly Shi'a districts of Baghdad left at least 60 people dead. The worst hit area was the northern district of Husseinia where two successive bombs targeted people at restaurants in the area. Other bombs exploded in the Talbiya, Sadiya, and Karrada areas of the city. In the southern part of Baghdad, gunmen opened fire on victims. Suspicion rested on Sunni militants with ties to al-Qaida.

On Sept. 11, 2013, explosions close to a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad killed at least 35 people, and injured another 55 individuals. The attack ensued in the predominantly Shi'a district of Kasra as worshippers departed the mosque following evening prayers. As before, suspicion for the attack fell on Sunni extremists and most observers agreed that the flare of violence was another manifestation of the ethno-sectarian violence plaguing the country.

On the same day, a bomb exploded in the northern city of Mosul killing a policeman and injured three others. Mosul was again the site of violence on Sept. 14, 2013, when a suicide bombing at a funeral in northern Iraq left more than 20 people dead and scores more injured. This attack also entailed overtones of ethno-sectarian differences as the funeral was for a member of the culturally distinctive Shabak people with some religious connections to Shi'a Islam. As such, the Shabak often endure attacks by extremist Sunnis.

On Sept. 13, 2013, two roadside bomb attacks outside a Sunni mosque in the central Iraqi city of Baquba left at least 30 people dead. The attack ensued as people were departing the mosque following Friday prayers. This attack did not bear the typical hallmark of Sunni extremists as the mosque itself catered to Sunni Muslim worshippers. Suspicion, therefore, rested on Shi'a extremists likely drawn back into ethno-sectarian hostilities with Sunnis as a result of the recent flare of communal violence. On the same days, a car bombing in Samarra killed three Shi'ite Muslim pilgrims traveling from Iran.

On Sept. 21, 2013, as many as 60 people were killed and another 120 others were wounded during an attack at a funeral in the mainly Shi'a district of Baghdad known as Sadr City. Women and children were among the dead. Two explosions -- possibly car bombings -- struck the tent where people were gathered to mourn. A third explosion occurred as first responders -- police, medics, and other emergency personnel -- arrived on the scene. On the same day, a separate bombing in the Baghdad neighborhood of Ur left several people dead. As well, a police station in Baiji to north of Baghdad was the scene of violence as five police officers were killed in an attack there.

It should be noted that on Sept. 29, 2013, as the month came to a close, a series of deadly explosions targeted the interior ministry and the headquarters of the security forces in the Kurdish city of Irbil. The attacks killed six security officers and wounded more than 35 other individuals. The bomb attacks were a shocking development in the normally quiet region of northern Iraq, which has not endured the constant barrage of violence seen elsewhere in the country. There were some suggestions that the attacks may have been linked with recent legislative elections in the Kurdistan region. However, the government of Prime Minister Nouri Maliki indicated that the attacks may have been connected with the spill-over violence from neighboring Syria, since there have been instances of battles between Islamist jihadists from al-Nusra Front and Kurds.

Sept. 30, 2013 saw violence and bloodshed plague the Iraqi capital of Baghdad as a wave of car bombings left close to 50 people dead and scores more injured. The bombs appeared to target crowded areas of markets and parking lots during rush hour in Shi'a districts of the capital. While there was no claim of responsibility, the location of the attacks in Shi'a areas of Baghdad indicated that Sunni extremists were the likely culprits in a country hard-hit by ethno-sectarian conflict. The Interior Ministry released a statement following the latest bout of violence in which it promised to continue the "war on terrorism" in Iraq.

On Oct. 5, 2013, Shi'a pilgrims were the target of an attack in Baghdad that left more than 50 people dead and another 100 wounded. This attack occurred in the Adhamiyah district as the pilgrims proceeded to a Shi'a shrine. Around the same time period, the mainly Shi'a town of Balad was the site of bloodshed when a suicide bomber targeted a cafe and killed a dozen patrons. In Mosul, two journalists were shot to death. In Muqdadiyah, a roadside bomb killed one person and injured three others.

The relentless wave of violence continued on Oct. 7, 2013 when Baghdad was again struck by series of deadly blasts that killed close to two dozen people and injured scores more. The coordinated attacks appeared to have targeted the commercial center of the capital city.

On Oct. 17, 2013, at least 60 people -- including children -- died across Iraq as a result of a spate of attacks targeting Shi'ite Muslims. In the Iraqi capital of Baghdad alone, as many as ten bombs exploded in Shi'ite-dominated districts, with deadly results. In the northern province of Nineveh, a suicide truck bombing ensued with the country's S Shabak minority as the victims.

Days later on Oct. 20, 2013, a suicide bombing at a cafe in Baghdad's S Amil area -- dominated by Shi'ite Muslims -- left more than 40 people dead. Another 40 people were injured as a result of the attack. According to Iraqi police, the assailant detonated his explosives-vehicle as he rammed into the cafe, which was a popular venue for youth.

On the same day -- Oct. 20, 2013 -- government buildings in western Anbar province were the targets of attack when five suicide bombers carried out an assault and killed two policemen and three government officials. In one incident, the police headquarters in the town of Rawa was targeted; in another incident, the local administrative headquarters was struck; a third incident involved an army checkpoint. As was the case in the other attacks that ensued in this period, suspicion rested on Sunni Islamic extremist insurgents. North of Baghdad, in the city of Samarra, a suicide bomber targeted the home of a senior police officer; at least six people -- mostly family members -- died in that incident.

On Oct. 25, 2013, a series of bombs left at least 16 people dead across Iraq as Shi'ite Muslims celebrated the Al-Gadeer festival. That festival marks Shi'ites' loyalty to Imam Ali -- a highly respected Islamic figure for Shi'ite Muslims.

Given the timing of the bombings at a time of significance for Shi'ite Muslims, the attacks were blamed on Sunni insurgents. The worst attack involved two roadside explosions at a market in the Shi'ite town of Yousufiya to the south of Baghdad; seven people were reported to have died there. Roadside bombs also exploded close to the homes of Shi'ite families in Baquba; four people were reported to have died in that case. Another four people died in a Shi'ite neighborhood of western Baghdad as a result of a roadside bomb attack there.

Two days later on Oct. 27, 2013, a spate of car bombings across the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left around 40 people dead. Iraqi officials said the bombs were planted in parked cars in Shi'ite areas of the capital city and detonated on a phased basis over a 30-minute period. Separately, the northern city of Mosul was also hit by violence on the

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same day as a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body as people were queuing at a bank. More than a dozen people were killed as a result.

On Oct. 30, 2013, Iraq was struck again by a fresh series of bomb attacks -- this time leaving as many as 30 people dead. Two blasts ensued to the north of Baghdad, when suicide bombers targeted about a group composed of about a dozen police officers and militia members as they gathered at an orchard. The militia members were from the Sahwa movement or "Awakening Council" that was formed in 2007 as a moderate Sunni anti-insurgency movement aimed at ending violence in Iraq. The Sahwa movement has more recently come under attack from Sunni extremists who view them as traitors to their cause. Meanwhile, in the northern city of Mosul, a suicide bomber rammed a security checkpoint with his car, killing three police officers and four civilian by-standers. In Tikrit, the target of a roadside bomb was the vehicle belonging to a police captain. In that attack, the police captain was wounded while a civilian was killed.

A week later on Nov. 6, 2013, a suicide bomber rammed an oil tanker packed with explosives into a police station to the north of Baquba. At least six police officers died as a result of this attack. Because security forces have been a prime target for al-Qaida in Iraq, all expectations were that Sunni Islamist extremists aligned with the notorious terror group was likely responsible. On the same day in Baghdad's Sadr City district, a police officer was shot to death while on patrol by a sniper. In Baghdad's Abu Ghraib district, a roadside bomb exploded, killing two members of the aforementioned "Sahwa" or "Awakening Council."

On Nov. 13, 2013, Iraq was struck by a string of bombings that appeared to have targeted Shi'a pilgrims and police or other security personnel. At least 20 people were killed and dozens more were wounded as a result. The worst attack occurred close to Tikrit when a suicide bomber drove his explosives-laden car into a police checkpoint. Ten people died in that incident alone. Another deadly attack involved three bombings in Baquba, which targeted a gathering of Shi'a pilgrims, and left at least eight people dead. The other attacks occurred in the capital of Baghdad and Falluja.

Because the bombings ensued around the time of the religious festival of Ashura, which marks the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, most observers surmised that the attacks were a manifestation of continuing ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq.

A day later on Nov. 14, 2013, there were further manifestations of sectarian violence as a series of attacks targeting Shi'a Muslims marking the festival of Ashura left more than 40 people dead across Iraq. The vast majority of the victims died in the province of Diyala. In the Wasit province, around ten people died when two bombs exploded close to a religious procession. Five people were wounded in the ethnically diverse city of Kirkuk when two blasts struck that city.

On Nov. 20, 2013, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was struck by a series of bomb attacks in mostly Shi'a areas, leaving several people dead and scores injured. The worst incident occurred in the Sadriya district where a car bomb was exploded at a crowded market. But bombs exploded in various other parts of the city.

As November 2013 came to a close, at least 10 people died and another 25 were injured as a result of a suicide bomb attack in northern Iraq. The attack took place in Muqadadiyah, to the north-east of Baghdad, and targeted the mourners at a funeral for the son of a tribal leader and a Sunni fighter. That Sunni fighter -- a member of the Awakening Council or "Sahwa" that opposes al-Qaida and other terrorists in Iraq -- was himself killed in a roadside bombing the day before. As such, the attack on the funeral was being interpreted as a clear warning to Sunnis daring to oppose the extremist Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

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On Dec. 24, 2013, a convoy carrying Iraqi Defense Minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi was targeted in roadside bomb attack. The roadside bomb was planted on the main thoroughfare connecting the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in the province of Anbar. While the vehicle carrying Saadoun al-Dulaimi was damaged and two bodyguards were wounded, the defense minister did not sustain any injuries. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, suspicion rested on Sunni Islamic insurgents who have been embroiled in ongoing ethno-sectarian conflict with the Shi'a Islamic-dominated government.

The escalation in violence in Iraq since the spring of 2013 appeared to have been sparked by an army raid on a Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp close to Hawija, just to the north of Baghdad. The raid was viewed as the latest example of persecution of Sunnis by the Shi'a dominated government and served only to deepen already-heightened ethno-sectarian grievances with clearly deleterious consequences.

The Shi'a dominated government has responded to the disturbing rise in ethno-sectarian violence by launching a crackdown against extremists, rounding up hundreds of people believed to be linked with al-Qaida in the Baghdad area as part of its "revenge for the martyrs" campaign.

The campaign was being branded as a security operation by Iraqi authorities, who said that it was being carried out by the Baghdad Operation Command in cooperation with the Air Force and the Anti-Terrorism Directorate. But such a crackdown -- as intimated by its very name -- which has focused on largely Sunni districts, was likely to breed even more ethno-sectarian hatred and likely only inspire further violence.

Update (as of 2014)

As the year 2014 began, Iraq was reeling from the news that a convoy carrying Iraqi Defense Minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi was targeted in a roadside bomb attack in late 2013. The roadside bomb was planted on the main thoroughfare connecting the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in the province of Anbar. While the vehicle carrying Saadoun al-Dulaimi was damaged and two bodyguards were wounded, the defense minister did not sustain any injuries. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, suspicion rested on Sunni Islamic insurgents who have been embroiled in ongoing ethno-sectarian conflict with the Shi'a Islamic-dominated government.

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Violence plagued Iraq at the beginning of the new year with a suicide car bomb in the town of Baladruz on Jan. 2, 2014, which left a dozen people dead. Also, a bomb exploded in the mainly Shi'a district of Shaab in Baghdad, and a separate attack in Latifiya, to the south of the capital, yielded its own death toll. These acts of violence were probably being interpreted as less disturbing as the news that the Iraqi government was losing control over Anbar province where Sunni Islamic militant extremism was on the rise.

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With ethno-sectarian tensions reaching new heights, speculation was surfacing about a possible plan to partition the country. This controversial plan has, at times, been subject to criticism by advocates of a united Iraq; however, recent developments in Iraq suggest a deeply divided country, subject to ongoing violence, and with no serious political solution at hand to address the turbulence and turmoil.

In fact, at the start of January 2014, Iraq had sunk even further into its morass of turbulence and turmoil with the news that al-Qaida allied Sunni Islamic fighters from the entity known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known by the acronyms, ISIS and ISIL) were taking control over two major Iraqi cities -- Fallujah and Ramadi -- in that very province of Anbar. Hadi Razeij, the head of the provincial police force for Anbar, said the police had fled the city. In an interview with al-Arabiya News, he said: "The walls of the city are in the hands of the police force, but the people of Fallujah are the prisoners of ISIS."

The newest burst of violence appeared to have been sparked by further incidences of the Shi'a government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki flexing its muscle against the Sunni population. Reminiscent of the army raid on the Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp close to Hawija in the spring of 2013, the Iraqi authorities in early 2014 carried out a raid on a Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp in Ramadi. That action left at least ten people dead and sparked the unrest there. The arrest of a Sunni member of parliament added to the sentiment that the Shi'a government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was persecuting the Sunni Arab population of the country. The result -- as before -- was an intensified effort by Sunni extremists to fight back. Their efforts were rewarded with the apparent advance of al-Qaida linked Sunni extremists on Fallujah and Ramadi.

Iraqi military forces were deployed to both cities -- where the black flags of the militants were now flying -- to fight these Sunni Islamic militants from ISIS. However, from the point of view of the Iraqi government, the situation in the strategic city of Fallujah -- only 50 miles from Baghdad -- was dire.

According to Reuters News Agency, military troops were shelling parts of the city, presumably with the intent of regaining its hold. While security forces were trying to wrest back control over Fallujah, the fact of the matter was that on Jan. 5, 2014, the Iraq government had lost control of the city. Militants with allegiances to al-Qaida held control over the southern part of Fallujah while tribesmen allied with al-Qaida controlled the rest of the city. Indeed, the Iraqi government was being described in the international media as having "lost" Fallujah.

By Jan. 7, 2014, the government was launching an operation on Ramadi, with an eye on retaking control. That battle involved air strikes that killed at least 25 al-Qaida aligned militants. Those militants were urging Sunni tribes in the area to assist them in their fight against the government forces; however, several tribes in the area have, for some time, been supportive of the government effort to rid the area of terrorism, participating instead on pro-government "Awakening Councils." Meanwhile, residents were fleeing Ramadi to escape the shelling and air strikes by government forces, despite orders from the Sunni militants that they remain in their homes.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was at the same time promising to rid Iraq of the presence of Sunni al-Qaida aligned terrorists and warned that a major assault was afoot in the city of Fallujah. In a national address, Maliki on Jan. 8, 2014 said, "We are moving on the right course and that the result will be clear and decisive: uprooting this corrupt organization." He continued, "We will continue this fight because we believe that al-Qaida and its allies represent evil."

Indeed, on Jan. 9, 2014, the Iraqi army had deployed tanks and artillery around Fallujah in preparation for an offensive operation there. There were suggestions that a hardline approach in Fallujah would exacerbate the ethno-sectarian tensions. Indeed, it was highly unlikely that militants who had seen their biggest success in years would relinquish Fallujah without a fierce fight.



At the same time, Maliki and the Shi'a dominated government had their own reasons for fomenting ethno-sectarian divisions since they would need to consolidate the Shi'ite vote in parliamentary elections set for later in the year. Exploiting that Sunni-Shi'a division (as opposed to going easy on Sunnis who were from the religious group terrorizing the country) would be politically beneficial to Maliki who wanted to hold onto power, the national security and national (dis)unity risks notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, with the threat of violence from ISIS, the al-Qaida aligned group, the United States was ramping up its military support of Iraq by providing military equipment, including surveillance drones and more Hellfire missiles. According to United States Secretary of State John Kerry, despite such assistance, there were no plans afoot for the return of United States military forces to Iraq.

It should be noted that even though attention was focused on Ramadi and Fallujah, violence was continuing elsewhere in Iraq. A suicide bombing in the northern city of Kirkuk left at least two people dead in the same period. In Tikrit, a car bomb exploded near a local health department, killing an ambulance driver and injuring several other people. As well, another suicide bombing resulted in the deaths of about two dozen Iraqi army recruits in Baghdad. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for these attacks, however, the suicide bombing in Baghdad that targeted the army recruits occurred only one day after Prime Minister Maliki promised to eradicate al-Qaida linked terrorists.

By mid-January 2014, the violence in Iraq was ongoing. A series of bombings in central Iraq killed more than 70 people. One attack targeted a funeral for a pro-government Sunni militiaman in a village to the south of Baquba in Diyala province. Nine car bombs meanwhile exploded across the capital of Baghdad -- mostly hitting busy marketplaces in predominantly Shi'a and religiously mixed districts. The northern city of Mosul was also the site of violence as attacks there killed more than a dozen people, most of whom were soldiers.

On Jan. 20, 2014, more than 20 people were killed and twice those numbers were injured in a series of bomb blasts across the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. The worst attack occurred at a busy market where at least seven people were killed. Both Shi'a and Sunni districts of Baghdad were among the targets struck in this spate of bombings. Blame nevertheless quickly rested on Sunni extremists intent on destabilizing the Shi'a-dominated government of Prime Minister Maliki. Meanwhile, turmoil continued to characterize the scenarios in Fallujah and Ramadi.

As January 2014 entered its final week, the unrest in Iraq's Anbar province was ongoing. After a full month of conflicts in the region, Iraqi authorities said that as many as 125 people had died and more than 500 others were injured. As discussed here, the main battleground venues were the flashpoint cities of Ramadi and Fallujah.

Of course, violence was occurring elsewhere in the country as shootings plagued Baghdad with deadly consequences, and with other attacks in Baquba, Kirkuk, Mishahda, and Mosul. Of particular note was an attack by gunmen on the Transport Ministry building in Baghdad. Security forces responded to the incident, which ended with the elimination of all the assailants. Unfortunately, at least two employees were also killed. Elsewhere in Baghdad, two bombings close to a marketplace left at least six people dead. Estimates were that in the month of January 2014, more than 900 people died in attacks across Iraq.

February 2014 was not off to an improved start in the realm of violence. On Feb. 3, 2014, a series of car bombings in the Hurriya and Baladiyat districts of the capital of Baghdad, as well as the nearby town of Mahmoudiya, left as many as 14 people dead. Among the dead were four bodies marked by gunshot wounds to the head and bearing signs of torture. Days later on Feb. 6, 2014, another series of car bombs plagued Baghdad, with more than a dozen people dying as a result. Because these attacks targeted the predominantly Shi'ite neighborhoods of Sadr City, Karrada, Hurriya, Ubaidi, and Shaab, blame rested on Sunni insurgents.

By the last week of February 2014, the western Anbar province continued to be struck by violence as a car packed with explosives rammed the entrance of the governor's compound in Ramadi, killing three soldiers and wounding close to 20 others. Violence was ongoing elsewhere in Iraq. On Feb. 26, 2014, a car bomb at a crowded Baghdad market killed at least 14 people and injured dozens more. In the same period, three policemen were killed by gunmen at a police checkpoint close to Baiji in northern Iraq. In the town of Himreen in the eastern Diyala province, a car bombing at a market and killed three people, while gunmen opened firing killing three people in Diyala's capital of Baquba. A day later on Feb. 27, 2014, bombings across Baghdad killed more than two dozen people. One blast occurred at a motorbike market in the eastern Sadr City district which has been home to a mostly Shi'a population; another occurred on a minibus also in Sadr City. Blame in most cases rested on Sunni militants.

On March 9, 2014, violence continued to plague Iraq with a suicide bombing leaving scores of people dead and more than 150 dead in the southern Iraqi city of Hilla. The suicide bomber appeared to have packed a minibus with explosives and rammed it into a checkpoint at the entrance of the predominantly Shi'a city. Given the sectarian tensions and the Shi'a target, blame for this particularly bloody attack was placed on Sunni terrorists aligned with al-Qaida in Iraq. Observers noted that the attack was likely a matter of spillover bloodshed from the neighboring Anbar province, where Sunni terrorists and extremists from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have been trying to hold control over the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah.

In a separate attack on the border of Anbar province and western Baghdad in the first part of March 2014, gunmen attacked an army check point in the Sunni area of Abu Ghraib, killing four soldiers. Close to the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, three employees of an oil company were killed and seven others were wounded when gunmen shot at the bus transporting them.

Meanwhile, with the government forces were carrying out an offensive in Fallujah with an effort to recapture that town. The city was reportedly under shelling from the Iraqi military, as part of a preparatory moved ahead of an expected ground assault. An Iraqi official said in an interview with Reuters News (on condition of anonymity): "We believe that storming Fallujah as soon as possible is much better than the current situation. Yes, there will be many casualties, but it's better than this strain on army resources." A similar effort was also underway in Ramadi.

On April 21, 2014, an attack at a polling station in northern Iraq left 10 guards dead. According to Iraqi authorities, the gunman wore Iraqi military garb and targeted a facility just outside the city of Kirkuk, and which was intended to be used in parliamentary elections set to take place on April 30, 2014. Due to the nature of the target, it was assumed that the attack was intended to disrupt the polls. Elsewhere in Iraq, the pre-election scene was marked with violence and bloodshed as a spate of attacks left more than 30 more people dead. Meanwhile, with Sunni Islamic extremists holding sway over portions of Anbar province, it was unlikely that voting could even take place in that part of the country.

On April 25, 2014, series of explosions killed approximately 30 people and wounded 40 more at a political rally for the Shi'ite group, Asaib Ahl Haq (League of the Righteous), in eastern Iraq. The group was presenting its candidates for the impending elections at the end of the month when three bombs exploded in succession. One explosion was caused by a roadside bomb, another was caused by a suicide car bomb, and the nature of the third explosion was unspecified. The terror group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), claimed responsibility for the attack via the Internet. ISIL, which is aligned with the terror enclave, al-Qaida, declared that the bombings had been carried out in retaliation for the "murder, torture and displacement" of Sunni Muslims in Iraq by Shi'ite militias. Clearly, it was the latest manifestation of the ethno-sectarian strife that has plagued Iraq since the invasion by United-States-led forces in 2003.

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-- Some portions of this section includes information covered above --

Parliamentary elections were set to take place in Iraq on April 30, 2014. At stake would be the matter of which party or bloc would have the right to form the next government of Iraq. Typically, the party or bloc with the control over the most seats in parliament would form the government, and the leader of that party or bloc would become the prime minister.

According to the constitution of Iraq, there is a bicameral legislature. That legislature is composed of a Council of Representatives (325 seats consisting of 317 members elected by an optional open-list, proportional representation system and 8 seats reserved for minorities; members serve four-year terms), and an upper house, the Federation Council, which is yet to be established. As such, the election action is in the Council of Representatives.

The previous parliamentary elections were held in 2010. When the vote count was complete in that contest, it was announced that former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's secular bloc had won the most seats in Iraq's parliamentary elections. His coalition garnered a small but significant advantage of two more seats than the coalition of incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki -- 91 seats to 89 seats. While Allawi had the seat advantage in terms of plurality, he would still have to form a coalition government because he did not have an outright majority. Meanwhile, Maliki was able to form his own Shi'a bloc coalition that could compete for the right to form a government, despite his seat disadvantage. As such, Maliki was able to remain on at the helm of government following the 2010 elections.

In 2014, the political landscape in Iraq was quite different from 2010. Indeed, Iraq in 2014 was marked by ethno-sectarian violence between Shi'a Muslims and Sunni Muslims, with attacks occurring on an almost daily basis. At the political level, there was no shortage of ethno-sectarian enmity between the Shi'a dominated government and the rest of the country composed of Sunnis, secularists, Kurds, and members of other ethnic and religious minorities. With ethno-sectarian tensions reaching new heights, speculation was surfacing about a possible plan to partition the country. This controversial plan has, at times, been subject to criticism by advocates of a united Iraq; however, recent developments in Iraq suggest a deeply divided country, subject to ongoing violence, and with no serious political solution at hand to address the turbulence and turmoil.

In fact, at the start of January 2014, Iraq had sunk even further into its morass of turbulence and turmoil with the news that al-Qaida allied Sunni Islamic fighters from the entity known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known by the acronyms, ISIS and ISIL) were taking control over two major Iraqi cities -- Fallujah and Ramadi -- in that very province of Anbar. Hadi Razeij, the head of the provincial police force for Anbar, said the police had fled the city. In an interview with al-Arabiya News, he said: "The walls of the city are in the hands of the police force, but the people of Fallujah are the prisoners of ISIS."

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At the end of the first week of January 2014, the government was launching an operation on Ramadi, with an eye on retaking control. Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was at the same time promising to rid Iraq of the presence of Sunni al-Qaida aligned terrorists and warned that a major assault was afoot in the city of Fallujah. In fact, the Iraqi army had deployed tanks and artillery around Fallujah in preparation for an offensive operation there.

There were suggestions that a hardline approach in Fallujah would exacerbate the ethno-sectarian tensions. Indeed, it was highly unlikely that **militants** who had seen their biggest success in years would relinquish Fallujah without a fierce fight.

At the same time, Maliki and the Shi'a dominated government had their own reasons for fomenting ethno-sectarian divisions since they would need to consolidate the Shi'ite vote in parliamentary elections set for later in the year. Exploiting that Sunni-Shi'a division (as opposed to going easy on Sunnis who were from the religious group terrorizing the country) would be politically beneficial to Maliki who wanted to hold onto power, the national security and national (dis)unity risks notwithstanding.

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On April 28, 2014, with the elections only days away, suicide bombers carried out a spate of attacks against security personnel -- police and military troops -- who were voting early at polling stations in Baghdad and northern Iraq. The assailants appeared to be Sunni **militants** disguised in army and police uniforms. As many as 20 people died as a result of the clear attempt to disrupt the elections. By April 29, 2014, a curfew was implemented -- presumably in an attempt to preserve the state of security ahead of the elections the next day.

Voting finally went forward in the highly anticipated elections on election day in Iraq -- April 30, 2014 -- amidst high security. Soldiers and police were highly visible across the country, charged as they were with protecting voters as

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they exercised their democratic right to cast their ballots. As expected, in Anbar where Sunni militants have seized control over key cities, voter turnout was quite light. Elsewhere in the country, some polling stations had to close early due to security threats. Indeed, suicide attacks across the country -- including in Diyala and Salahuddin -- exacted a death toll of more than a dozen people. Nevertheless, Iraq saw a respectable voter turnout overall with millions of Iraqi citizens defying the security threats and proudly displaying ink stained thumbs to show that they had cast their ballots.

While no official results were available at the time of writing, Prime Minister Maliki was predicting victory for his State of Law party, and a return to the helm of leadership for him. Striking an ultra-confident tone, he said, "Definitely our expectations are high. Our victory is confirmed but we are still talking about how big this victory will be." Conspicuously absent from him comments were any suggestion of ethno-sectarian reconciliation or national unity.

In truth the parliamentary contest could be understood as a dichotomized experience. In Shi'ite areas of the country, voters were being driven by a desire to choose the person they believed to be capable of staving off the Sunni extremist threat from the al-Qaida aligned group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In Sunni regions, voters were motivated by their feeling of being bullied by the Shi'ite authorities, along with their fears of the ISIL threat.

Note:

Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission announced that the election results would be confirmed later in the month of May 2014. Tallies at that time in late May 2014 indicated that Maliki's State of Law party won a plurality of seats -- approximately 92 -- but short of an outright majority. Note that the 92 seat plurality was boosted to 94 seats with the addition of two seats through candidates aligned with Maliki.

The Muwatin Coalition was on track to carry about 48 seats, Al-Hadba was carrying about 33 seats, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq had 29 seats, the Sadrist Movement (of Muqtada Sadr-- a Shi'ite rival of Maliki) was close behind with 28 seats, the Iraqi National Accord appeared to secure about 25 seats, the Kurdistan Democratic Party had 20 seats, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan looked to carry 14 seats, the Civil Democratic Alliance, the Iraqi National Dialogue Front and National Reform Trend each were on track to secure 10 seats. Other parties made up the rest.

It was to be seen if these preliminary numbers would hold sway once the formal announcement of the results were made. However, it was clear that Maliki had performed well in the southern Shi'a provinces and would look to other Shi'a parties to cobble together a ruling coalition. Left to be seen was the matter of whether or not those other Shi'a parties would want to move forward with Maliki as prime minister, or, if they would seek new leadership.

In truth, though, Maliki's leadership was clearly validated at the polls with the performance of his party and he would thus have a legitimate argument to hold onto the reins of power.

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### Special Report

Terror group Islamic State carries out rampage of horror from Syria to Iraq; United States President Obama outlines strategy to to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Jihadist terror group alternatively referred to as ISIL and ISIS

--- Some portions of this entry are replicated from above ---

## Summary:

Sunni Islamic extremist militants, under the aegis of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS), have seized control over wide swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory. In Iraq, ISIL held sway -- from Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, to Mosul in Nineveh, as well as Tikrit -- the hometown of the ousted and late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Across the border in Syria, ISIL was proving to be the most successful anti-government force in that country. It was consolidating territory held either by the Assad regime or by rival rebel entities, even ousting other Islamist insurgent and terrorist groups in the process. These gains collectively constituted a spectacular victory for ISIL, which seeks to establish a Sunni Islamic Caliphate in territory that includes Iraq and Syria.

As Syria and Iraq respectively grappled with the tumultuous security landscapes within their borders, their political spheres were also mired by turmoil. In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's treatment of the Sunni minority, including his persecution of former Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, and raids on anti-government protest camps, had alienated even the more moderate Sunni elements in that country. As a result, Salafist Sunni Jihadists from home and abroad were answering the call to fight on Iraqi soil. At the same time, the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war had provided fertile ground for ISIL to take root, not simply challenging the Assad regime but also attracting Jihadists from across the world seeking a "cause" upon which to concentrate. ISIL's ascendancy thus mitigated Assad's control over wide swaths of Syrian territory while simultaneously delivering a remarkable blow across the border to the Iraqi leader at the time, Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The year 2014 saw Iraq rocked by the worst violence and bloodshed in recent years. The violence in Iraq was the result of the aforementioned ethno-sectarian dissonance between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims, and the dramatic and escalating political conflict between the Shi'a dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the increasingly alienated Sunni opposition. In the month of June 2014 alone, more than 2,000 people -- mostly civilians -- had been killed in the violence rocking Iraq, according to the United Nations. It was the bloodiest and most deadly month in Iraq since the peak of ethno-sectarian warfare in Iraq in 2007.

Given this restive and volatile landscape, the United Nations envoy to Iraq, Martin Kobler, warned that "systemic violence" was about to explode "at any moment" in that country. Kobler called on Iraq's political leaders to "engage immediately to pull the country out of this mayhem." As stated by Gyorgy Busztin, the United Nations' Iraq representative, "The impact of violence on civilians remains disturbingly high." He also called on Iraq's leadership to take steps to end the violence saying, "Iraq's political leaders must take immediate and decisive action to stop the senseless bloodshed."

The summer of 2014 was marked by devolving chaos in Iraq as ISIL expanded their control from Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, to Mosul in Nineveh, as well as Tikrit -- the hometown of the ousted and late Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, making significant territorial gains.

Across the border in Syria, the Assad regime had been grappling with an ongoing uprising that started in the Arab Spring of 2011. President Bashar al-Assad's brutal tactics aimed at quelling that uprising against various rebel factions served only to create an even more tumultuous landscape, and eventually set the path for a full-blown civil war. That civil war pitted the Assad forces, backed by Lebanon-based Hezbollah, against a disparate cabal of anti-government entities, ranging from the rebel Free Syrian Army to several Islamist terrorist enclaves. As noted above, the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war provided a breeding ground for extremism that ISIL could exploit and use to both challenge the Assad regime and function as a recruitment tool for Jihadists.

The result was a series of strategic victories across Syria and Iraq for ISIL. Then, at the start of July 2014, the security crisis in the region was at acute levels as ISIL had declared itself to be the sovereign power over a "caliphate" ranging from Syria to Iraq and renamed itself the "Islamic State."

Throughout, the United States-trained Iraqi forces proved themselves to be ineffectual in fighting ISIL. In fact, Iraqi troops abandoned their positions, thus allowing the terrorists to make off with heavy military equipment provided to the Iraqi military by the United States. Indeed, the only defense being provided against ISIL in Iraq were the Kurds who were now having to face ISIL terrorists armed with stolen American weaponry. While Kurdish peshmerga

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forces were far more engaged in the fight to save Kurdistan, they were nonetheless no match for ISIL, which now had in its possession United States-provided weapons that had been abandoned by Iraqi forces.

President Barack Obama of the United States was not eager to re-enter into a military engagement in Iraq, and as such, he advocated that leaders in Iraq work towards a political solution. That political solution remained elusive as Prime Minister Maliki refused to form an inclusive national unity government and as members of parliament failed to agree on a new government. Given the frustration over the failure of the Iraqi government in Baghdad to address the political and security crisis facing Iraq, the Kurdish president called for an independence referendum. The Kurds were also taking advantage of the power chasm by seizing control over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

But the scene in Iraq took an ominous turn in August 2014 as Islamic State was now pushing Kurdish peshmerga fighters into retreat. ISIL (or the so-called Islamic State) was exerting its self-declared power and authority as it carried out a rampage of barbaric violence, brutally targeting some of Iraq's historic minority communities. Certainly, Islamic State's persecution of Iraq's minority populations, particularly Christian and Yazidis, could be understood as nothing less than gross human rights abuses, even as it triggered a humanitarian crisis.

Initially, United States President Barack Obama dispatched military advisers to Iraq but ruled out renewed military engagement in that country; instead, as noted above, he called for a political solution. As the author of the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, President Obama was not keen to be drawn back into the Iraqi quagmire. But having recognized the dire landscape for religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, on Aug. 7, 2014, United States President Barack Obama ordered limited strikes in northern Iraq, released a supply of arms to Kurdish peshmerga fighters resisting Islamic State, and provided humanitarian relief supplies to civilians forced to flee their homes.

The presence of Maliki at the helm of Iraq had stood as another obstacle, as the United States was unwilling to be the unofficial military support of a Shi'a government known to have persecuted the Sunni minority population of Iraq. But the subsequent replacement of the Maliki government with a more inclusive Abadi government set the tone for an improved domestic scenario in Iraq, to the relief of the United States and the wider world. It also provided a more hospitable climate for increased United States' engagement in Iraq to fight ISIL.

That being said, the barbaric beheadings of two American journalists by ISIL fundamentally changed the calculus both for the war-weary American public as well as the American president. As a consequence, on Sept. 10, 2014, President Barack Obama outlined a counter-terrorism strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL -- not only in Iraq where the United States was already engaged in a limited manner, but also in Syria. To that end, the Obama administration was rallying a coalition of Western and Middle Eastern partners -- including Jordan -- to take on the threat posed to global security by ISIL.

In truth, the advance of ISIL in not only Iraq but also Syria had compounded the geopolitical crisis facing the Middle East. Suddenly, anti-Assad countries in the region were finding themselves in the uncomfortable position of sharing with Syria the goal of eliminating ISIL. For their part, Arab countries in the region were slow to respond to ISIL. Nevertheless, the Arab League was slowly coming to terms with the fact that it would have to engage in the regional security crisis and that its objectives would likely, at times, overlap with that of the Assad regime. Indeed, in September 2014, the Arab League endorsed the effort to confront Islamic States at a time when the United States was rallying allied countries to join the effort to repel and eradicate ISIL.

For his part, United States President Barack Obama made clear that his country was committed to eliminating the leadership of Islamic State (also known as ISIL or ISIS), while noting that a coalition of NATO allies and Middle Eastern partners was prepared to join the campaign against the brutality of these extremist Islamist Jihadists, and to take on the threat posed to global security by this dangerous terrorist group.

Accordingly, on Sept. 22, 2014, international coalition forces, led by the United States and including both European and Arab partner countries, commenced a campaign of air strikes against Islamist terror groups in Syria.

By October 2014, despite the active international air campaign over Iraq and Syria, ISIL continued to carry out its campaign of terror -- even extending the battlefield to Kurdish areas bordering Turkey. Irrespective of the fact that

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the town of Kobane (alternatively called Kobani and predominantly inhabited by Kurds) on the Turkish border was under siege, and regardless of legislation passed in Turkey's parliament authorizing action against ISIL, Turkey -- a NATO country -- showed little interest in joining the fight against ISIL, even with the protection of its own territory at stake.

Nevertheless, the United States-led global coalition was intensifying its strikes against ISIL targets; it was also air dropping weapons and military supplies to Kurdish forces.

The latter part of 2014 saw an intensification of the active air campaign over Iraq and Syria against ISIL by United States-led coalition forces. As well, United States President Obama called for more troops to be deployed to the region to assist with the training and advising of Iraqi forces.

At the start of 2015, Japan and Jordan were beset by tragedy when citizens of their countries that were being held by ISIL, were brutally killed. As has become a pattern, ISIL proudly released videotaped footage depicting their vicious acts of murder.

In response, Japan promised to do its part in the international fight against ISIL while Jordanian King Abdullah warned of a "relentless war" on the Islamist terror group as it commenced a campaign of air strikes against ISIL targets in Syria.

In February 2015, the horrific killings of more than 20 Egyptian Christians working in Libya marked a new front in the war against Islamic State. Post-Arab Spring Libya was on the brink of political collapse with Islamist extremists taking advantage of the power void. The result was an emerging satellite Islamic State venue in Libya. However, Egypt -- like Jordan -- was prepared to respond to the threat posed by these Islamist Jihadists to its citizens and commenced its own air strike campaign against ISIL targets in Libya.

It was to be seen if the Jordanian and Egyptian responses would mark a turning point for the Arab and Islamic worlds, regarding the international effort to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamist terror group, known in derogatory Arabic parlance as "Daesh."

Meanwhile, in February 2015, President Barack Obama of the United States called on the legislative branch of government in that country to advance new legislation authorizing military action against the terror group calling itself Islamic State. It was to be seen if partisan rivalries in the United States Congress would impede the process of passing a new authorization intended to carefully circumscribe the United States' military effort to degrade and destroy Islamic State.

Also at stake was a looming effort to retain control over the key Iraqi city of Mosul from Islamic State. To that end, United States military advisers were training joint Iraqi and Kurdish forces to achieve this end in what was expected to be a spring offensive operation. But before the Mosul offensive could move forward, the United States-led coalition continued to carry out air strikes in Iraq, supporting Kurdish fighters, with the goal being to drive Islamic State from the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

In mid-April 2015, the United States Pentagon confirmed that Islamic State lost more than a quarter of the territory in Iraq it held prior to the air campaign that was launched in August 2014. With the intent to build on this success, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi traveled to the United States to request more assistance in the air campaign against Islamic State. However, before the United States could even process this request, in mid-April 2015 - on the heels of their victory in Tikrit - Islamic State was carrying out an advance on the city of Ramadi, ultimately seizing control of that city in May 2015. It was apparent in the spring of 2015 that even if Islamic State was under pressure, it was still a functional and aggressive terrorist entity.

By the start of June 2015, with Islamic State still posing a threat in Iraq and Syria, as well as to the wider Middle Eastern region, and even the global community, United States President Barack Obama acknowledged that his country's strategy to defeat the terror group remained "incomplete." He indicated that a comprehensive strategy could only be advanced with the concurrence of the government of Iraq, and intimated there was a need for Iraqis to commit to the process of saving their own country.



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It should be noted that whereas some progress had occurred in Iraq, the prevailing dynamics remained in place in Syria where Islamic State continued to hold sway over large swaths of that country.

That being said, by mid-2015, with Islamic State posing a direct security threat to Turkey, the Turkish government shifted its calculus regarding its engagement in the international fight against the terror group.

Turkey had to this point refrained from involving itself in the global coalition against Islamic State, and has instead focused its energies on seeing the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria come to an end. Now, the United States and Turkey was announcing a campaign of close cooperation in the effort against Islamic State. But the Turkish government raised eyebrows when it announced it would also go after strongholds of Kurdish extremists as part of its burgeoning campaign against terrorism -- a move sure to raise the ire of Syrian Kurdish fighters, the YPG, who were to be distinguished from the PKK and who had led the local charge against Islamic State.

In November 2015, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters launched an effort against Islamic State, with an eye on liberating the area of Sinjar.

In mid-November 2015, the world was faced with a global security crisis at the hands of the notorious terror group, Islamic State. At issue was the fact that Islamic State was claiming responsibility for a bomb that exploded on a Russian jet flying from the Egyptian resort of Sharm-el-Sheikh, killing more than 200 Russians on board.

Also at issue was the Islamic State claim of responsibility for a spate of appalling terror attacks in the French capital city of Paris, which killed approximately 130 people.

At the start of December 2015, Islamic State-inspired terrorists carried out an attack in the United States, killing 14 people and injuring 21 others. Even before this act of bloodshed, though, the Obama administration in the United States had already augmented the air strike campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with the deployment of military advisors, and at the start of December 2015, President Obama supplemented these forces with a special operations expeditionary force to fight Islamic State. While this deployment collectively could actually be defined as ground forces, it was clearly being interpreted by hardline conservatives as insufficient.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter outlined the goals the special operations expeditionary force as follows: "These special operators will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL leaders." For the Obama administration, the imperative was to exploit the special operations expertise in a targeted strategy against Islamic State.

At the close of December 2015, Iraqi forces saw success in retaking control over Ramadi, which has for some time been a key stronghold of Islamic State. In the same period, United States-led air power eliminated 10 Islamic State leadership figures while going after oil resources used by the terror group.

By the start of 2016, United States air power successfully targeted banking facility used by ISIL, essentially depriving the terror group of the funds used to finance their activities.

The United States-led coalition was also seeing success going after Islamic State leadership and resources. As well, having come off their victory in taking back control over Ramadi from Islamic State, Iraqi forces were refocusing their attention on Mosul.

In the late summer of 2016, Islamic State was shifting to terror attacks after losing territory of its so-called Caliphate. Then, in the fall of 2016, Iraqi forces were getting ready for a final assault on Mosul to restore control over the remaining Iraqi stronghold of the terror group. That effort was in force as of November 2016.

By 2017, Iraqi government forces declared victory in Mosul and regained control over that high-value target. These victories on the battlefield against Islamic State were resulting in more terror attacks in Iraq, and by ISIL-inspired

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cells across the world; however they appeared to indicate pressure on the terror group. That is to say, no longer were they able to expand their Caliphate; instead, they were focusing their efforts in the realm of terrorism for branding purposes. It should be noted that the recapture of Mosul was not only a symbolic victory but also strategic as valuable intelligence was collected on Islamic State as a result - particularly on ISIL fighter profiles.

## In Detail

As the year 2014 began, Iraq was reeling from the news that a convoy carrying Iraqi Defense Minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi was targeted in a roadside bomb attack in late 2013. The roadside bomb was planted on the main thoroughfare connecting the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in the province of Anbar. While the vehicle carrying Saadoun al-Dulaimi was damaged and two bodyguards were wounded, the defense minister did not sustain any injuries. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, suspicion rested on Sunni Islamic insurgents who have been embroiled in ongoing ethno-sectarian conflict with the Shi'a Islamic-dominated government.

The escalation in violence in Iraq since the spring of 2013 appeared to have been sparked by an army raid on a Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp close to Hawija, just to the north of Baghdad. The raid was viewed as the latest example of persecution of Sunnis by the Shi'a dominated government and served only to deepen already-heightened ethno-sectarian grievances with clearly deleterious consequences.

The Shi'a dominated government has responded to the disturbing rise in ethno-sectarian violence by launching a crackdown against extremists, rounding up hundreds of people believed to be linked with al-Qaida in the Baghdad area as part of its "revenge for the martyrs" campaign.

The campaign was being branded as a security operation by Iraqi authorities, who said it was being carried out by the Baghdad Operation Command in cooperation with the Air Force and the Anti-Terrorism Directorate. But such a crackdown -- as intimated by its very name -- which has focused on largely Sunni districts, was likely to breed even more ethno-sectarian hatred and only inspire further violence.

With ethno-sectarian tensions reaching new heights, speculation was surfacing about a possible plan to partition the country. This controversial plan has, at times, been subject to criticism by advocates of a united Iraq; however, recent developments in Iraq suggest a deeply divided country, subject to ongoing violence, and with no serious political solution at hand to address the turbulence and turmoil.

In fact, at the start of 2014, Iraq had sunk even further into its morass of turbulence and turmoil with the news that al-Qaida allied Sunni Islamic fighters from the entity known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL (also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS) were taking control over two major Iraqi cities -- Fallujah and Ramadi -- in that very province of Anbar. Hadi Razeij, the head of the provincial police force for Anbar, said the police had fled the city. In an interview with al-Arabiya News, he said: "The walls of the city are in the hands of the police force, but the people of Fallujah are the prisoners of ISIS."

The newest burst of violence appeared to have been sparked by further incidences of the Shi'a government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki flexing its muscle against the Sunni population. Reminiscent of the 2013 army raid on the Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp at Hawija mentioned above, the Iraqi authorities in early 2014 carried out a raid on a Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp in Ramadi. That action left at least ten people dead and sparked the unrest there. The arrest of a Sunni member of parliament added to the sentiment that the Shi'a government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was persecuting the Sunni Arab population of the country. The result -- as before -- was an intensified effort by Sunni extremists to fight back. Their efforts were rewarded with the apparent advance of al-Qaida linked Sunni extremists on Fallujah and Ramadi.

Iraqi military forces were deployed to both cities -- where the black flags of the militants were now flying -- to fight these Sunni Islamic militants from ISIS. However, from the point of view of the Iraqi government, the situation in the strategic city of Fallujah -- only 50 miles from Baghdad -- was dire.

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While security forces were trying to wrest back control over Fallujah, the fact of the matter was that the Iraq government had lost control of the city. **Militants** with allegiances to al-Qaida held control over the southern part of Fallujah while tribesmen allied with al-Qaida controlled the rest of the city. Indeed, the Iraqi government was being described in the international media as having "lost" Fallujah.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was nevertheless promising to rid Iraq of the presence of Sunni al-Qaida aligned terrorists and warned that a major assault was afoot in the city of Fallujah. In a national address, Maliki said, "We are moving on the right course and that the result will be clear and decisive: uprooting this corrupt organization." He continued, "We will continue this fight because we believe that al-Qaida and its allies represent evil."

The Iraqi army soon deployed tanks and artillery around Fallujah in preparation for an offensive operation there. There were suggestions that a hardline approach in Fallujah would exacerbate the ethno-sectarian tensions. In fact, it was highly unlikely that **militants** who had seen their biggest success in years would relinquish Fallujah without a fierce fight.

At the same time, Maliki and the Shi'a dominated government had their own reasons for fomenting ethno-sectarian divisions since they would need to consolidate the Shi'ite vote in parliamentary elections set for later in the year. Exploiting that Sunni-Shi'a division (as opposed to going easy on Sunnis who were from the religious group terrorizing the country) would be politically beneficial to Maliki who wanted to hold onto power, the national security and national (dis)unity risks notwithstanding.

The government then launched an operation on Ramadi, with an eye on retaking control. That battle involved air strikes that killed at least 25 al-Qaida aligned **militants**. Those **militants** were urging Sunni tribes in the area to assist them in their fight against the government forces; however, several tribes in the area were more supportive of the government's effort to rid the area of terrorism, participating instead in pro-government "Awakening Councils." Meanwhile, residents were fleeing Ramadi to escape the shelling and air strikes by government forces, despite orders from the Sunni **militants** that they remain in their homes.

Meanwhile, with the threat of violence from ISIS, the al-Qaida aligned group, the **United States** was ramping up its military support of Iraq by providing military equipment, including surveillance drones and more Hellfire missiles. According to **United States** Secretary of State John Kerry, despite such assistance, there were no plans afoot for the return of **United States** military forces to Iraq.

It should be noted that even though attention was focused on Ramadi and Fallujah in Anbar province, violence was continuing elsewhere in Iraq and continued to rock the country through the first half of 2014. While the main battleground venues were the flashpoint cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, attacks by Sunni extremist insurgents plagued every corner of the country from the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul to ousted President Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, not to mention a relentless wave of violence in and around the capital of Baghdad, and even to the south of Baquba in Diyala province.

Ahead of the parliamentary elections in April 2014, an attack at a polling station in northern Iraq left 10 guards dead. According to Iraqi authorities, the gunman wore Iraqi military garb and targeted a facility just outside the city of Kirkuk, with an eye on disrupting the polls. In eastern Iraq, a series of explosions at a political rally for the Shi'ite group, Asaib Ahl Haq (League of the Righteous), exacted its own destructive results in the form of further death and suffering. Elsewhere in Iraq, the pre-election scene was marked with violence and bloodshed as a spate of attacks left a heavy death toll. Meanwhile, with Sunni Islamic extremists holding sway over portions of Anbar province, it was unlikely that voting could even take place in that part of the country. The aforementioned terror group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), claimed responsibility for many of the attacks via the Internet. ISIL declared that the bombings had been carried out in retaliation for the "murder, torture and displacement" of Sunni Muslims in Iraq by Shi'ite militias. Clearly, it was the latest manifestation of the ethno-sectarian strife that has plagued Iraq since the invasion by **United-States**-led forces in 2003.

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Following the elections that yielded victory for Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law party, despite criticism that his hardline approach against Sunnis has only accentuated ethno-sectarian conflict, the violence and bloodshed continued unabated. An attack by extremist militants on a military base close to the northern city of Mosul in Iraq left 20 soldiers dead on May 10, 2014. Most of the soldiers, who were responsible for guarding an oil pipeline, appeared to have been shot to death at close range; the hands of some of the dead soldiers were reportedly tied behind their backs. As such, the conclusion was that the killings were done execution-style. Sunni Islamic extremist militants who have been carrying out a fierce insurgency against the Shi'a government were the prime suspects for the brutal violence. On the same day of the apparent execution of these soldiers, about a dozen people died in the western city of Fallujah. Those deaths were due to a combination of a car explosion and government shelling.

Action by Sunni extremist militants moved to the city of Samarra in the adjacent province of Salahuddin on June 5, 2014, where the ISIL black banner was raised at a university and two mosques there. The government used aerial bombardment to subdue the Islamist militants in that city dispersing them but not eradicating the threat posed in that area.

On June 7, 2014, several car bombs exploded across Baghdad, killing more than 60 people. The attacks -- numbering dozens in total -- struck Shi'ite districts of the capital. As before, Sunni extremist insurgents were suspected of being behind the violence. Meanwhile, in the Ramadi and Fallujah where militants already held sway, they consolidated control by taking control of the campus of Anbar University in Ramadi. The target was likely not so much the university itself as the area behind the campus, known as Humaira, which would facilitate control over supply lines between Ramadi and Fallujah.

Security experts made clear that with Iraq now ensconced in a security crisis, the solution was not via military action but rather via a political pathway. Shwan Mohammed Taha, a member of the security and defense committee in the Iraqi parliament, was on the record with international media as he said, "The Iraqi government now relies on using force to solve things, that is why security will get worse." He continued, "This is not only deterioration, it is a failure to manage the security file."

That failure to manage the "security file" had taken on more dire proportions a day earlier. On June 6, 2014, dozens of people were killed in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in the province of Nineveh as a result of fighting between government troops and Sunni Islamist insurgents. Militants initially moved into Mosul, killing four riot police and three soldiers. In a separate incident, five assailants stormed an arms depot in the southern part of the city and killed close to a dozen soldiers before being neutralized themselves. In the village of Muwaffakiya, located close to Mosul, two suicide car bombings ended in the deaths of six Shabaks -- a minority group often targeted by Sunni extremists. Authorities in Mosul said the city was filled with corpses.

In response to the mass attacks, Iraqi forces carried out an assault in the area of Mosul and claimed to kill more than 100 insurgents. While the government assault ensured that Mosul returned to government control in fairly short order, the threat posed by increasingly brazen extremists was not quelled with any degree of finality. Indeed, most of the Sunni Islamist insurgents simply withdrew from the scene of the action to the desert or other towns and would be available to fight another day.

That new day came on June 10, 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) regrouped, engaged in fierce fighting with Iraqi security forces, and ultimately seized control of Mosul. The militants also managed to capture the Ghizlani army base, and set free more than 1,200 inmates from two high-security prisons. Iraqi security forces were forced to flee while the Sunni Islamic militants were able to claim a spectacular victory in a city with two million inhabitants.

A local military commander was quoted by Reuters News as saying, "We have lost Mosul this morning... Army and police forces left their positions and ISIL terrorists are in full control." He continued with a dismal assessment as follows: "It's a total collapse of the security forces." Other security forces were reported to be saying that they were no match for the ISIL fighters, armed with anti-aircraft weapons and rocket-propelled grenades, who appeared to be prepared for the type of street battles. By contrast, the military had been trained in conventional warfare. The

situation offered a clear advantage to the **militants**. One army officer was quoted by Reuters news as saying of the **militants**, "They're like ghosts: they appear, strike and disappear in seconds."

Meanwhile, residents of Mosul were fleeing in droves, taking refuge in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. Of note was the fact that Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of Kurdistan said his semi-autonomous region had attempted to coordinate a protection plan for Mosul, however, the federal government -- led by Maliki-- rendered that effort ineffectual. Prime Minister Maliki himself entered the fray, issuing a seemingly tone deaf and defiant reaction, characterizing the fall of Mosul as a "conspiracy" and threatening to punish security forces who abandoned their posts.

Things were no less depressing for the Maliki government in Hawija, located in Kirkuk province, where Sunni extremist Islamist **militants** were engaged in battles with security forces, ultimately driving military troops and police away. Then, on June 11, 2014, the news emerged that the city of Tikrit had also fallen to Sunni extremist **militants** with the fighters from ISIL now controlling the provincial government headquarters and raising their signature black flag. Also of note was the fact that they were advancing on the country's largest oil refinery at Baiji.

The victory in Tikrit augmented the gains for ISIL and delivered a massive blow to Prime Minister Maliki who has not been restrained in his hardline crackdown on Sunni Islamists. As such, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari called on the country's leadership to unite in the face of a "mortal" threat.

For its part, ISIL, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, claimed victory in the group's Mosul offensive, which was titled, "Enter Upon Them Through The Gates." It should be noted that while ISIL has been aligned with the notorious global Jihadist terror enclave, al-Qaida, Baghdadi broke ranks with al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahri. He has also clashed with Sunni extremist **militants** fighting the Assad regime in Syria. Indeed, Baghdadi has urged like-minded Sunni extremists to join the fight against Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki and his so-called pro-Iranian "Safavid" army, popularizing slogans such as, "Join the ranks oh brothers!" and "Maliki's tyrannical strength no match for pious believers." His aim was to ultimately establish a Sunni Islamic Caliphate from Iraq to Syria.

The **United States** again renewed its commitment to assist the Iraqi government in wresting control from the insurgents -- albeit without an actual military re-engagement in Iraq -- but it also echoed the words of the Iraqi parliamentarian, Mohammed Taha, in noting that Prime Minister Maliki and the government would have to address the grievances of the alienated Sunni Islamic population of Iraq. Essentially, the only long-term solution to Iraq's security emergency would be a political one.

It should be noted that the violence at the start of June 2014 was a continuation of the bloodshed seen in Iraq during the previous month of May 2014. The United Nations said that as many as 800 people had been killed in violence across Iraq in May 2014, making it the worst month for fatalities in the first part of the year. Close to 200 of the dead were members of the Iraqi security forces, while the vast majority of the victims were and civilians who died at the hands of Sunni Islamist extremist insurgents.

This dubious record was actually worse than indicated by these specific numbers since it did not include the death toll for the province of Anbar where Sunni Islamist extremist insurgents had seized control over key cities. According to the United Nations report, the worst hit part of the country was Baghdad; however, bloodshed was also at high levels in Nineveh, followed by Salahaddin, Kirkuk and Diyala.

At the broader level, the uptick in ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq peaked in 2013 with more than 8,000 people being killed in that year alone. It was the highest death toll in Iraq since 2007. That escalation in violence in Iraq in 2013 appeared to have been sparked by an army raid on a Sunni Muslim anti-government protest camp close to Hawija, just to the north of Baghdad. The raid was viewed as the latest example of persecution of Sunnis by the Shi'a dominated government and served only to deepen already-heightened ethno-sectarian grievances with clearly deleterious consequences.

The Shi'a dominated government responded to the disturbing rise in ethno-sectarian violence by launching a crackdown against extremists, rounding up hundreds of people believed to be linked with al-Qaida in the Baghdad area as part of its "revenge for the martyrs" campaign.

The campaign was being branded as a security operation by Iraqi authorities, who said that it was being carried out by the Baghdad Operation Command in cooperation with the Air Force and the Anti-Terrorism Directorate. But such a crackdown -- as intimated by its very name -- which has focused on largely Sunni districts, was likely to breed even more ethno-sectarian hatred and likely only inspire further violence.

Given the disturbing security landscape in Iraq, United Nations envoy to Iraq, Nikolay Mladenov, said, "I strongly deplore the sustained level of violence and terrorist acts that continues rocking the country... I urge the political leaders to work swiftly for the formation of an inclusive government within the constitutionally mandated timeframe and focus on a substantive solution to the situation in Anbar."

But before any resolution could be forged for Anbar, it was clear that the security emergency facing Iraq was expanding; the fall of Mosul and Tikrit were watershed developments on the political landscape and augured a nationwide crisis.

State of the Iraqi security landscape in mid-2014:

The security crisis in Iraq was at acute levels on June 12, 2014, as ISIL rebels advanced on Baghdad. With security and military troops fleeing their positions, Sunni militants from ISIL had taken control of towns only 60 miles to the north of Baghdad. The rapid advance of the Islamic extremist militants shocked the world.

Complicating the already extremely complicated political landscape was the fact that the semi-autonomous Kurdish authorities were reporting that they had seized control over the oil city of Kirkuk.

The Kurdish security forces, known as "peshmerga" (a word that roughly translates into "those who face death") had taken control over several military bases in Kirkuk that had been abandoned by the military. A peshmerga spokesperson, Jabbar Yawar, said: "The whole of Kirkuk has fallen into the hands of peshmerga. No Iraqi army remains in Kirkuk now." For some time, the Kurds have eyed the oil town as a desirable interest but they have not had control over Kirkuk under the federal system. Now, however, they were taking advantage of the clear power vacuum.

The reality was that the Iraqi military and security forces had collapsed, with ISIL extremists controlling wide swaths of the country to the west and north of Baghdad, and with the Kurds now controlling the northern most zones, including the strategic town of Kirkuk, which was home to significant oil deposits. This left the Maliki government securely in control only of the predominantly Shi'a south. As for Baghdad -- government forces had established a security presence but it was not known if they would be able to hold the capital against a highly motivated ISIL movement that was emboldened by its recent -- and meteoric -- gains.

In an ironic twist, the landscape in Iraq in mid-June 2014 represented the divided (Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish) state that United States Vice President Joe Biden had, at one time, envisioned as the only practical solution for an Iraq divided by ethno-sectarian tensions.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration in the United States suggested it would aid the Maliki government in trying to take back control of the country. For his part, President Obama was on the record saying of the situation in Iraq, "I don't rule anything out." However, it was unlikely that President Barack Obama would bow to the pressure by neo-conservative Republicans in Congress and return the United States to any serious engagement in Iraq. The president elected to power initially in 2008 to bring a close to the Iraq war was in no mood to return the war-weary country to a renewed military quagmire in Iraq. He was also reticent about making the United States responsible for civilian casualties in Iraq.

In fact, in a speech on June 13, 2014, President Obama made it known that no United States combat troops would be sent to Iraq. More likely was the notion of air strikes, either with warplanes or unmanned drones, the delivery of weaponry, and intelligence on the location of Sunni insurgents that would be gathered via drone flights over Iraq. It was also soon announced by the Pentagon that a United States carrier, the USS George H.W. Bush and its

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strike group, were already in the region, and thus ready for the kinds of targeted missions favored by President Obama.

Another option would be the entry of Shi'a Iran into the ethno-sectarian fray as it offered assistance to the Maliki government in regaining full control over the country. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also expressed support for the idea of working with the United States to assist the Iraqi government in its stabilization thrust. At a news conference on June 14, 2014, President Rouhani said, "We all should practically and verbally confront terrorist groups."

Also possible was the prospect of multilateral assistance for Iraq, given the regional threat posed by ISIL. To that end, the United Nations Security Council could consider possible multilateral options, such as air strikes, which would place the endeavor under the aegis of international law.

Note that as of mid-June 2014, Sunni extremists insurgents reported to be advancing towards Baghdad appeared to have slowed in their progress. Government troops were reported to be successful in regaining control over some territory.

Also being reported was the fact that Iraq's counter-terrorism forces carried out aerial bombardment in Diyala province of the banned Baath party leadership (allied with the former government of Saddam Hussein and aligned thusly with Sunni insurgents). Some 50 insurgents were reportedly killed as a result of this bombing campaign.

Major-General Qassim al-Moussawi, a spokesperson for the Iraqi military command, said, "Our security forces have regained the initiative to launch qualitative operations on various fronts over the past three days and have achieved remarkable victories with the help of volunteers." He continued, "We have regained the initiative and will not stop at liberating Mosul from ISIL terrorists, but all other parts."

In truth, though, it was to be seen if the Iraqi authorities would be able to sustain their effort to repel the Sunni extremist insurgents. The question of sustained effort by Iraqi government forces was at the forefront of the international purview on June 15, 2014, as Sunni insurgents continued to exert control over wide swaths of the country.

In fact, by June 16, 2014, ISIL extremists had seized control of other cities and towns in Iraq. Among them was the predominantly Turkmen northern city of Tal Afar as well as the town of Saqlawiya to the west of Baghdad. Making matters worse were reports that the Islamist extremist militants had massacred hundreds of Iraqi soldiers and executed more than 1,500 Shi'a recruits in Tikrit. In fact, the Iraqi army confirmed that photographs depicting the bodies of around 200 executed persons were legitimate.

On behalf of the United States Department of State, spokesperson Jen Psaki condemned the extrajudicial summary killings, saying. "The claim by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that it has massacred 1,700 Iraqi Shi'ite air force recruits in Tikrit is horrifying and a true depiction of the bloodlust that these terrorists represent."

It should be noted that on the same day, another United States vessel, the USS Mesa verde, moved into the Gulf carrying 550 United States Marines. (The USS H.W. Bush carrier was already in the region, as noted above). The actual role of those marines was yet to be publicized. There were also deployments of military personnel for the purpose of protecting the United States embassy in Baghdad. President Obama was set to notify Congress of these collective moves, which were authorized on the War Powers Resolution.

By June 17, 2014, the United States and Iran were in discussions regarding the Iraq security crisis. Discussions, however, were to be distinguished from military coordination. Of concern for the United States was the perception that it was aligned with Shi'a Iran to the consternation of Sunni Saudi Arabia at a time that the entire Islamic Middle East was erupting in a sectarian conflict. On the other side of the equation, Iranian Ayatollah Khamenei indicated that he was in no hurry to cooperate with the United States on Iraq, indicating his opposition to American intervention into "the domestic affairs of Iraq."

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On the issue of air strikes -- the most popularly discussed option -- United States Secretary of State John Kerry said, "They're not the whole answer, but they may well be one of the options that are important. When you have people murdering, assassinating in these mass massacres, you have to stop that. And you do what you need to do if you need to try to stop it from the air or otherwise."

On June 19, 2014, following discussions with his national security team, President Obama made clear that while he was prepared to dispatch 300 military advisers to Iraq to assist the government there in repelling ISIL extremists, the United States would not be renewing its military engagement in Iraq. He emphasized this point noting that "American forces will not be returning to combat in Iraq." The president refrained from ordering air strikes against any segment of the Iraqi population -- specifically Sunnis -- as he said, "The United States will not pursue military actions that support one sect inside of Iraq at the expense of another." Still, the president noted that the United States was prepared for "targeted and precise military action" against Sunni extremist Islamists in Iraq "if and when the situation on the ground requires it." In response to questions about the viability of the Maliki government, President Obama made clear that it was not up to the United States to make leadership decisions for another country; however, he urged the Maliki government to pursue an "inclusive agenda" and warned that there was "no military solution" to the Iraq crisis.

President Obama's stance was interpreted as a test for Maliki. It was to be seen if the Iraqi head of government would pass the test by pursuing an inclusive political solution to his country's crisis, or, if he would continue along a path that has only fueled ethno-sectarian hostilities.

Meanwhile, in the United States, President Obama's neoconservative critics continued to criticize him for not doing enough to rescue Iraq from its current crisis and questioning his leadership capacity. But President Obama's Democratic supporters in Congress were becoming increasingly vocal in noting that the Iraq crisis had been crafted and created by the very Republicans issuing criticisms of the Obama administration, and should thus be regarded with grave skepticism.

Recent Developments in the fight to hold Iraq --

In the last week of June 2014, there was no sign that Iraq's security crisis was abating. Instead, Sunni extremist insurgents had consolidated their gains in Anbar province, capturing the town of Rutba -- located on the main thoroughfare between Iraq and Jordan -- while advancing on Haditha. The militants also captured strategic border crossings into Syria and Jordan.

As well, ISIL militants had seized the towns of Rawa and Anah along the Euphrates river. Another site of contention was the Baiji oil refinery where it was unknown as to who was actually in control.

Despite the fact that Iraq was in the throes of a devastating national security crisis, Prime Minister Maliki was unwilling to assent to the United States call for a political solution.

It should be noted that United States Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Iraq to personally call for that political solution, noting that it was in Iraq's interests to bring an end the Sunni insurgency. But Maliki defiantly rejected the notion of a national unity government outright. In a national address that was covered by the media, Maliki said, "The call to form a national salvation government constitutes a coup against the constitution and the political process." Seemingly oblivious to the reality that he was quite literally losing Iraq to extremist militants, Maliki declared, "The dangerous goals of forming a national salvation government are not hidden. It is an attempt by those who are against the constitution to eliminate the young democratic process and steal the votes of the voters." But the truth of the matter was that irrespective of his desire to follow a normal constitutional process in the aftermath of the April 2014 elections that returned Maliki to power, Iraq was in the midst of an eminently abnormal crisis.

The battle in Tikrit was ongoing by the end of June 2014 and into the start of July 2014, with government forces yet unable to wrestle control back from the Sunni extremist militants and with the civilian population caught in the



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crossfire of violence. A particular problem for government troops was the fact that ISIL militants had booby-trapped several buildings in that town and planted roadside and car bombs throughout Tikrit.

In the first week of July 2014, the Iraqi military was able to take credit for a significant victory as it reclaimed control over the birthplace of Saddam Hussein -- Awja, to the south of Tikrit.

But not all the news for the Iraqi military was good. On July 5, 2014, a senior Iraqi general, Najm Abdullah Sudan, was killed as a result of "hostile shelling" in the town of Ibrahim bin Ali close to Ramadi. As well, ISIL terrorists destroyed about one dozen shrines and holy sites in Nineveh province in northern Iraq. The imagery of Shi'a, Sunni, and Christian shrines and holy sites being destroyed was well-publicized and thus raised the ire of several cultural communities. It also reminded the world of the campaign of cultural destruction attributed to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the early 2000s.

In the realm of human destruction, the Islamist extremists also struck Baghdad in the first week of July 2014, with a spate of suicide bombings that left several people dead.

Overall, as July 2014 commenced, it was fair to say that ISIL had made further dramatic gains, now controlling a wide swath of territory from Aleppo in Syria to the area to the west of Baghdad in Iraq.

With the collapse of the Iraqi nation state at stake, attention was on the matter of forming a government. Whereas the government formation process was to be determined by the outcome of the April 2014 elections that gave victory for Prime Minister Maliki's Shi'a bloc, now in mid-2014, the objective was to form a stable national government that could withstand the ethno-sectarian strife rocking the country at crisis levels.

On July 4, 2014, as Iraq's new parliament was convened with the goal of choosing a new prime minister, the process ended in failure as Sunnis and Kurds abandoned the chamber during recess. There was no concurrence on the matter of who would be the head of government, with no sign as to whether or not the candidate would be Maliki. Indeed, the entire climate in the parliamentary chamber was fractious, beset by petty conflicts and marked by disturbing discord. For example, a loud argument erupted from Kurdish lawmakers who accused the government of withholding salaries for their autonomous region, while a Shi'a parliamentarian aligned with Maliki accused the Kurds of removing Iraqi flags. Kadhim al-Sayadi screamed at his Kurdish counterparts: "The Iraqi flag is an honor above your head. Why do you take it down?" Illustrating the brewing Shi'a-Kurdish tensions, he added, "The day will come when we will crush your heads."

A new parliamentary session was not expected anytime soon; indeed, there was no new meeting of parliament scheduled until mid-August 2014. However, given the urgency of the need to move the country along politically, there was a rising chorus for the next session to be brought forward earlier. As noted by the acting speaker of the new parliament, Mehdi al-Hafidh, "Any delay in this could jeopardize the security of Iraq and its democratic course and increase the suffering of the Iraqi people."

With the political scene in Iraq marked by chaos and discord, former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi urged Maliki to relinquish his bid to hang onto power in the interests of national unity. In an interview with Reuters News, Allawi said, "I think it is time for Mr. Maliki to leave the scene. If he stays on, I think there will be significant problems in the country and a lot of troubles. I believe that Iraq would go the route of dismemberment, ultimately, if this happens." He continued, "Definitely there will be more violence, the security situation will deteriorate."

For his part, Maliki showed no interest in heeding Allawi's call, and instead reaffirmed his intent to seek a third term in office. In a statement on July 4, 2014, Maliki said, "I will never give up on my candidacy for the post of prime minister." He continued, "I have vowed to God that I will continue to fight by the side of our armed forces and volunteers until we defeat the enemies of Iraq and its people."

The possible fragmentation of Iraq became more of a reality when Kurdish President Massoud Barzani called on members of the Kurdish parliament to start the process of holding an independence referendum. In a closed session of the Kurdish legislative body, Barzani said, "The time has come for us to determine our own fate and we

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must not wait for others to determine it for us." He continued, "For that reason, I consider it necessary ... to create an independent electoral commission as a first step and, second, to make preparations for a referendum."

Barzani appeared to be acting in the aftermath of the fiasco that erupted in the first session of the new Iraqi parliament's in Baghdad (discussed above). That botched session that failed to end with the nomination of a new prime minister and a new government (ideally in the eyes of Sunnis and Kurds -- one that would not be headed by Maliki) was something of a "last straw" for Kurds who were now concluding that the best path forward was independence rather than being wedded to a weak Baghdad federal government unable to make basic governing decisions in the interests of national unity, and certainly unable to vanquish Sunni extremist militants. Addressing those frustrations, Barzani said, "We will not deal with those who have sabotaged the country...Iraq has divided itself and we are not responsible for that."

By mid-July 2014, there was some limited progress in the political sphere as the Iraqi legislative chamber managed to name a moderate Sunni Islamist as the speaker of the parliament. But there was no guarantee that the election of Salim al-Jabouri as speaker would act as the catalyst for the establishment of a broader unity government. The next step would entail the election of a president, followed by the nomination of the candidate for prime minister. All expectations were that Maliki was still intent on holding onto power as prime minister -- a move that would preserve the climate of ethno-sectarian hostility and dissonance.

At the broadest level, there was little sign that the leadership question would soon be settled. Those charged with governing the country seemed oblivious to the fact that the country was in a state of dire crisis. The result was a feckless government at the helm of a country on the verge of collapse and at the mercy of extremist terrorists.

On the matter of those extremist terrorists, ISIL, also known as ISIS, was making it clear that they were the new leaders of the region from Syria to Iraq, which they deemed to be a new Islamic Caliphate. The extremists Sunni militants also declared that their new name was "Islamic State" -- a move that seemed to imbue these extremist terrorists with a broad Islamist and Jihadist mandate unlikely to be limited to their existing territory. Indeed, the leader of the so-called "Islamic State," Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, demanded that Muslims across the world take up arms and descend on his self-declared caliphate, while also promising to move onto Baghdad.

Indeed, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of "Islamic State" -- the self-declared Jihadist and medieval-style caliphate including swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory -- released a videotaped message in which he demanded obedience from Muslims. His message cast him as a reluctant leader, as he said, "I am your leader, though I am not the best of you, so if you see that I am right, support me, and if you see that I am wrong, advise me." It should be noted that many of the fighters aligned with Baghdadi and "Islamic State" were from other countries in the region. In many ways, Baghdadi was surpassing Osama Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahri, as the new Sunni pan-Islamic and Jihadist leader on the world scene.

On the battlefield in mid-July 2014, Iraqi forces were faced with failure as they were unable to recapture territory from the Islamist extremists in Tikrit, Mosul, and other Iraqi cities.

On July 19, 2014, a spate of bombings struck the predominantly Shi'ite Muslim areas of the capital of Baghdad. Almost 30 people were reported to have died as a result. One explosion was caused by a suicide car bomber drove and struck a police checkpoint in the Abu Dsheer district. Another car bomb struck the Bayaa district; a third car bomb hit the western district of Jihad; the fourth and fifth bombs exploded in the northern Baghdad are of Kadhimiya; a sixth attack took place in the mixed Sunni-Shi'ite district of Saydiya in the southern part of Baghdad later. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, suspicion rested with the terror group, Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS and ISIL), which has been waging a brutal and bloodthirsty battle for control in Iraq, and as discussed above, had gained control over wide swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory.

Meanwhile, the government was carrying out an offensive on militants in the Islamic State stronghold of Fallujah, presumably in an effort to wrest back control there. But this operation was far from targeted with government forces firing artillery and dropping barrel bombs on the city and killing dozens of civilians in the process on July 21 and 22, 2014. It was to be seen how this unrefined approach would resonate with the beleaguered Iraqi people already

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suffering the plague and horror of Sunni Islamist extremists. Now, even the government "defense forces" constituted a power base to be regarded with fear.

On July 24, 2014, a bus transporting prisoners from a military base in Taji to Baghdad was struck by combined roadside bombs and shooting assaults. The violent attacks left more than 50 prisoners and approximately nine police officers dead. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, suspicion rested on Islamic State terrorists (formerly known by the acronyms ISIS and ISIL).

On July 28, 2014, the corpses of 15 people -- including three women -- were discovered by Iraqi police in various locations across Baghdad. The bodies showed signs of being subject to execution-style elimination.

Around the same period in late July 2014, a car bomb in the predominantly Shi'ite Baghdad district of Sadr City left 16 people dead. A separate car bomb in the Baghdad district of Ameen left another five people dead.

As July 2014 moved through its last week, Kurdish peshmerga fighters battled Islamic State terrorists in the northern part of the country. Kurdish fighters have shown themselves to be more effective than the Iraqi government forces in staving off the threat posed by Sunni extremist militants. Indeed, the Kurdish peshmerga fighters in this case were able to seize complete control over the town of Jalawla. Iraqi government troops (trained by the United States) have, at times, been at odds with the Kurdish regional guards over control of the area; however, with Islamic State posing such a dire threat, and Iraqi troops showing themselves to be inept at crucial moments, the Kurds were not wasting the opportunity to fill the power vacuum. Indeed, the Kurds had already taken control over the northern oil city of Kirkuk a month earlier in June 2014.

But Islamic State was also able to enjoy some victories against the Kurdish peshmerga forces, seizing control over the Mosul Dam, capturing the town of Zumar, and holding sway over two oil fields in the area on Aug. 2, 2014. To the west, Islamic State was also successful in wresting control over the town of Sinjar close to Syria. Of note was the fact that Sinjar was home to a significant Kurdish Yazidi community, whom Sunni extremists view as heretics and thus have repeatedly targeted for attack.

Not willing to relinquish territory and interests to Islamic State, the Kurds soon announced that they would regroup and reinforce their peshmerga fighters with an eye on moving forward with a counter-offensive in northern Iraq. To that end, peshmerga fighters were said to be shelling the eastern districts of Mosul at the start of August 2014 in a bid to regain control there.

The Maliki government continued with its broad (read: far from targeted) approach to striking Islamic State as it carried out an air strike in Mosul aimed at eliminating Jihadist militants at a court house. However, medical response teams on the ground said that the strike -- quite possibly by a drone -- hit a prison instead. Elsewhere in Iraq, car bombs struck Baghdad, killing close to 50 people in the increasingly unstable Iraqi capital.

It should be noted that while Islamic State was carrying out its advance, which was marked by its own particularly brutal brand of violence and oppression, Shi'ites militias were also active in Iraq. In late July, Shi'ite militias kidnapped and executed 15 Sunni Muslims. Then, in a thoroughly horrific display, the militants used cables to hang the dead bodies from electrical poles in the public square of the Iraqi city of Baquba. It was believed that the gruesome vista was intended to send a message to Sunnis in the city of what might come their way if they sided with Islamic State. Of course, the measure was as likely to have the opposite effect in a country beset by ethno-sectarian tensions and conflict, and with the minority Sunni population already feeling alienated due to Prime Minister Maliki's hardline moves in recent times.

In the first week of August 2014, fighting was going on in Makhmur close to Arbil -- the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region. As well, the predominantly Christian town of Tilkaif, along with the town of Al Kwair, had fallen to Islamic State, who wasted no time in flying their black flags and purging the towns of Christians and other minority groups. Also hard hit was the town of Qaraqosh, where the Christian population was forced leave and seek refuge elsewhere. As they left, Islamic State destroyed churches and burned religious manuscripts.

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Meanwhile, the international community continued to advocate the notion that a new inclusive government (and one without Maliki at the helm) might help to stabilize Iraq, and certainly help to persuade moderate Sunnis to reject the hardline extremist agenda of Islamic State. While an inclusive government might certainly help ease tensions in Iraq, where Maliki has only enraged Sunnis and inflamed ethno-sectarian conflict, it was unclear that such a government would have much effect on the success of government military forces in repelling Islamic State.

For his part, Maliki had only deaf ears for the international sphere, declaring on Aug. 5, 2014, that any outside interference or unconstitutional moves intended to form a new government would open "the gates of hell" in the country.

## International Interests --

With the threat of Sunni terrorists descending on Baghdad, the United States increased its earlier pledge to send 300 special forces advisers to Iraq. Now an additional 300 troops were being deployed to Iraq to help secure the United States embassy and the Baghdad airport. A Pentagon spokesperson, Rear Admiral John Kirby, explained the additional 300 troops as follows: "These forces are separate and apart from the up to 300 personnel the president authorized to establish two joint operations centers and conduct an assessment of how the U.S. can provide additional support to Iraq's security forces."

Meanwhile, Iraq was turning into a proxy war for several regional and international powers with their own stakes as Saudi Arabia -- a Sunni power -- deployed 30,000 soldiers to its border with Iraq. Saudi Arabia said it was protecting its own country against terrorists due to the fact that Iraqi soldiers abandoned the area; however, Iraqi authorities insisted that the boundary with Saudi Arabia was under its full control. As well, Russia had supplied Iraq with 1970s-era Soviet style Su-25 ground attack airplanes. As well, according to imagery by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Iran supplied Iraq with what appeared to be Sukhoi warplanes. The collective aircrafts from Russia and Iran would presumably be used to bolster the air power of Iraq's forces as they pursued the Islamic State militants, formerly known as ISIL and ISIS. That being said, it was unclear who would be operating and maintaining these jets. As stated by Joseph Dempsey from IISS, "It seems increasingly unlikely that Iraq retains the capacity to operate this type of aircraft in any significant number without some level of external support."

By August 2014, Islamic State controlled vast swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory, including key interests, such as the Mosul Dam. Their ascendancy had left the Iraqi army abandoning their positions and thus allowing Islamic State terrorists to make off with heavy weaponry and tanks supplied by the United States military. Armed with such assets, the militant Islamic terrorist entity was pushing Kurdish peshmerga fighters into retreat. As such, the fact of the matter was that Iraq was on the verge of collapse.

Although the international community was not keen to re-engage in Iraq -- the site of the unpopular 2003 invasion by United States-led forces -- the world likely could not afford the security risk of allowing Islamic State to flourish in the Middle East with impunity. Indeed, Islamic State was itself commonly known as more dangerous than the notorious terror enclave al-Qaida, which was behind the tragic terror attacks in the United States in 2001.

Meanwhile, Islamic State's persecution of Iraq's Christian and Yazidi populations could be understood as nothing less than gross human rights abuses, while that very persecution was triggering a humanitarian crisis. The scene was hence ripe for action.

United States President Barack Obama had already dispatched military advisers to Iraq, but he had also ruled out renewed military engagement in that country, preferring instead to advocate a political solution.

As the author of the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, President Obama was not keen to be drawn back into the Iraqi quagmire. But with a political resolution nowhere on the horizon, and having recognized the dire landscape for religious minorities in Iraq, on Aug. 7, 2014, the United States president ordered targeted air strikes on Islamic State militants in Iraq.

President Obama was also moving forward with a humanitarian response. To that end, the Defense Department said it had dropped more than 70 packages of food and water to the Iraqis fleeing Islamic State militants.

The White House was adamant in noting there would be no United States ground forces in Iraq. As stated by President Barack Obama, "Even as we support Iraqis as they take the fight to these terrorists, American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq." Still, it was clear that the human rights crisis unfolding in Iraq had created an imprimatur for the United States government to take action.

In an address to the nation, President Obama said of the plight of the Yazidi people, "When we face a situation like we do on that mountain, with innocent people facing the prospect of violence on a horrific scale, when we have a mandate to help in this case -- a request from the Iraqi government, and when we have the unique capabilities to help avert a massacre, then I believe the United States of America cannot turn a blind eye." President Obama added, "We can act carefully and responsibly to prevent a potential act of genocide."

Strikes by United States fighter jets were underway by Aug. 8, 2014, with Islamic State terrorists in their crosshairs. Indeed, those United States fighter jets pounded rebel positions around Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish semi-autonomous region. With this air assistance from the United States, Kurdish peshmerga fighters were able to regain control over Gwer and Makmur in Nineveh province.

A day later, President Obama emphasized that the air strikes he ordered would not be a short-term operation, but instead they would go on for months. In an interview with the media, he said, "I don't think we're going to solve this problem in weeks. This is going to be a long-term project." Again, the president made it clear that the United States engagement in Iraq would not constitute a fully renewed war with combat troops on the ground in that country. However, President Obama noted that the United States and other countries would not turn a blind eye to the fact that Islamic terrorists were gaining ground in Iraq, while also persecuting certain communities there.

As noted above, Iraqi army personnel had collectively abandoned their positions, thus allowing Islamic State terrorists to take possession of the heavy weaponry and tanks supplied by the United States military. Armed with such assets, the militant Islamic terrorist entity was making it difficult for Kurdish peshmerga fighters to defend territory in northern Iraq. With the Kurdish peshmerga fighters standing as the only functional defense entity in Iraq, Iraqi Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, called for the international community to provide military assistance in the effort to defeat Islamic State. Barzani noted the gravity of the battle against Islamic State as he said, "We are not fighting a terrorist organization, we are fighting a terrorist state." He called for the international community to provide the kind of weapons needed to put up a credible fight, saying, "The weapons they possess are more advanced than what the Peshmerga have. What we are asking our friends to do is to provide support and to co-operate with us in providing the necessary weapons that would enable us to defeat these terrorist groups."

On Aug. 10, 2014, United States fighter jets and drones continued to strike Islamic State targets close to Irbil while also striking targets near Sinjar -- the town from which Yazidis were forced to flee to the surrounding mountains. In the following days, United States forces continue to pound Islamic State targets from the air, facilitating efforts by Kurdish fighters against the terror group. However, the Pentagon warned that such air support could help slow -- but not ultimately stop -- the advance of Islamic State. On Aug. 11, 2014, United States air strikes hit Islamic State checkpoints and destroyed vehicles close to Mount Sinjar where thousands of Yazidis had taken refuge.

In addition to providing air strikes, the United States was also supplying weapons to Kurdish fighters, via the Central Intelligence Agency. Further arms were to be provided via the Pentagon. The Kurds were certainly in need of heavy armaments capable of confronting the heavy weaponry being used by Islamic State, and which ironically had been provided by the United States to the Iraqi military, which was now essentially missing in action.

Several European governments, including France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands soon announced that they would also supply arms to Iraq to aid in the fight against Islamic State. Canada announced that it would dispatch two military transport planes for the purpose of delivering weapons to the Kurds.

New governance for Iraq --

## Political Conditions Iraq

In addition to providing air power reinforcements in northern Iraq as well as weapons to the Kurds, the **United States** continued to push for an inclusive Iraqi government (read: one without Maliki as prime minister) to be formed. But as before, Maliki remained defiant, delivering a vociferous national address on Aug. 10, 2014, in which he emphasized his entitlement to another term in office. Furthermore, special forces loyal to Maliki were deployed in Baghdad's Green Zone that houses most government buildings -- a move apparently intended to show that Maliki would hold the capital regardless of external pressures.

But the **United States** was delivering the message that it supported the "new guard" in Iraq. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk, the State Department's main representative on Iraq, said via Twitter: "Fully support President of Iraq Fouad Masoum as guarantor of the Constitution and a (prime minister) nominee who can build a national consensus." To that end, the **United States** was making it clear that it was looking to the new President Masoum to ensure a new prime minister was chosen.

On Aug. 11, 2014, President Masoum named the deputy speaker of parliament, Haider al-Abadi, as the new prime minister. Following a parliamentary vote that ended in the ratification of Abadi's candidacy for the job of head of government, President Masoum asked Abadi to form a new government. Masoum said: "The country is now in your hands."

As expected, Maliki and some of his supporters in parliament rejected the move. Conveniently ignoring the fact that the internal parliamentary vote in favor of Abadi included members of Maliki's own Shi'a National Alliance, Maliki declared that the parliamentary approval of Abadi "had no value." He added that it would take a ruling from the courts to force him to relinquish power. To this end, Maliki said, "I confirm that the government will continue and there will not be a replacement for it without a decision from the Federal [Supreme] Court." This assertion set the stage for a political impasse in turmoil-ridden Iraq.

Nevertheless, many leaders in the global community were ready to move forward with the new Iraqi government, to be headed by Abadi. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon lauded the naming of Abadi as prime minister and called on him to form a broad-based government reflective of Iraq's cultural diversity. Likewise, **United States** President Barack Obama called Abadi to congratulate him for becoming Iraq's new prime minister and to urge him to form a diverse government representative of Iraq's religious and ethnic communities; he also noted that the establishment of a new head of government constituted an important step for Iraq in the fight against Islamic State **militants**. Meanwhile, Secretary of State John Kerry warned Maliki not to "stir the waters" by trying to hold onto power. Kerry said, "There should be no use of force, no introduction of troops or militias in this moment of democracy for Iraq. The government formation process is critical in terms of sustaining stability and calm in Iraq and our hope is that Mr. Maliki will not stir those waters." The **United States** top diplomat also warned, "There will be little international support of any kind whatsoever for anything that deviates from the legitimate constitution process that is in place and being worked on now."

International pressure on Maliki appeared to have yielded the desired result. On Aug. 14, 2014, it was announced that despite his earlier discussed obstreperousness, Maliki had agreed to end his legal challenge to the nomination of his replacement, and was stepping down from office to make way for Abadi.

For his part, Abadi was moving forward in his new capacity as head of government, saying in an address that the country had to unify in the fight against the "barbaric" Islamic State. He said, "We all have to cooperate to stand against this terrorist campaign launched on Iraq and to stop all terrorist groups."

Of note was the fact that Sunni tribal leaders and clerics have "blessed" the government, suggesting (with caution) that they would be interested in working with incoming Prime Minister Abadi if his administration was respectful of the rights of Iraq's Sunni community. Also of note was the fact that Kurdish members of government, who suspended their participation under the Maliki administration, announced their return. While the cabinet composition was likely to change regardless with Abadi at the helm of a new inclusive government, the fact that Kurdish politicians were now participating again in the political process augured well for the political sphere.

As of September 2014, the parliament of Iraq had approved a new government led by Prime Minister Haider Abadi.

## Recent Battlefield Developments:

In mid-August 2014, Islamic State was making further territorial gains, including across the border in Syria. In Iraq, Islamic State drove out the regional government of Jalawla and seized that town to the north east of Baghdad. Islamic State was also continuing its persecution of the Yazidi people, killing hundreds of men from that sect, burying others alive, and taking the women as sex slaves, claiming that they would be given to the terrorist fighters as "wives." These barbaric actions by Islamic State were reminiscent of warfare during the Dark Ages.

The effort against Islamic State appeared to be largely carried out by Kurdish forces, although on Aug. 13, 2014, it was reported that a group of about 100 United States special forces were on Mount Sinjar assessing the humanitarian situation of Yazidis taking refuge there. They determined that Kurdish forces were handling the rescue missions with repeated dangerous flights over terrain controlled by Islamic State and to the mountain top where they could provide food and water supplied and rescue people. According to United States President Barack Obama himself, the siege of Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq had been broken although Islamic States' genocidal terrorist mission continued to plague the country at large.

Indeed, even amidst the positive developments for the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar came further heartbreaking news for them. At issue was the massacre of scores of Yazidis (80 men in total) and the abduction of women and children by Islamic State in the village of Kawju (also known as Kocho) in the northern part of the country. According to sources inside Iraq, Islamic State terrorist spent several days there trying to force the local Yazidis to convert to Sunni Islam but ultimately ending with a killing spree that lasted for one hour.

Although the United States had ended its operation at Mount Sinjar, United States forces continued to carry out strikes in northern Iraq in mid-August 2014. These strikes were aimed at protecting the Kurdish capital of Irbil, and assisting Kurdish fighters to retake control over the strategic Mosul Dam, which had been lost to Islamic State weeks prior. Located on the River Tigris about 30 miles from the city of Mosul, the Mosul Dam was of core strategic interest since it provides water and electricity to northern Iraq. On Aug. 17, 2014, after a lengthy battle in which Kurdish fighters encountered fierce resistance from Islamic State, control over the Mosul Dam changed hands. With the support of United States air power, Kurdish fighters were able to gain control over the Mosul Dam, although a lengthy process of clearing the area of mines and booby traps was ongoing.

Next on the agenda for Kurdish forces would be the effort to regain control over Nineveh to the east of the Mosul Dam and then to areas west towards Sinjar. Their efforts would be aided by the United States forces, who were now continuing (and even expanding) their support efforts in the fight against Islamic States in Iraq. Also stepping up their involvement in the security crisis to repel Islamic State was the United Kingdom, which said that it would aid in the transportation of weapons and ammunition to the Kurdish peshmerga fighting forces. United Kingdom fighter pilots would also be carrying out intelligence gathering missions aimed at determining Islamic State positions in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Iraqi forces -- now somewhat revitalized by the successes experienced by Kurdish fighters -- were regrouping and re-entering the fray. An effort by Iraqi forces to recapture Tikrit on Aug. 19, 2014, was stymied to some degree by particularly fierce resistance from Islamic state fighters. Although the operation in Tikrit appeared to be temporarily stalled, the fact of the matter was that Iraqi forces had returned to the battlefield.

Aug 19, 2014, was marked by the grim news that James Foley, an American journalist, had been killed by Islamic State in retaliation for the United States strikes in Iraq. It was, as such, the day in which Islamic State had effectively carried out its first terrorist attack against the United States.

Islamic State released a gruesome video recording, titled "A Message to America," in which the photojournalist, who was abducted in Syria in 2012, was shown reading out a prepared statement by his captors before being horrifically beheaded. The disturbing video recording included footage of United States President Barack Obama announcing that he had authorized strikes in Iraq. A subtitled message, conveniently translated into both Arabic and English, was shown on the screen, noting: "Obama authorizes military operations against the Islamic State effectively placing America upon a slippery slope towards a new war front against Muslims."

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For its part, the White House declared that it was "appalled by the brutal murder" of Foley. Weeks earlier before this horrific and barbaric development, United States intelligence officials had warned that Islamic State was benefiting from its territorial gains in Syria and Iraq by attracting more Muslim extremists to its ranks. Once believed to be a movement totaling around 10,000 fighters, the militant Islamist Jihadist entity was now significantly larger in size. United States intelligence officials also warned that Islamic State was attempting to establish terror cells outside Iraq and Syria, with operatives believed to be in Western countries. Those external terrorism ambitions were causing grave anxieties for the countries of the West, including the United States, regarding existing or future plots to carry out terror attacks. At a time when the United States and the countries of the West were hoping to withdraw from "war footing" in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the reality was that the Islamic Jihadist terror threat continued to present a global security crisis.

Tikrit was the site of violence on Aug. 22, 2014, when an explosives-laden vehicle targeted soldiers and Shi'ite militia and ended in bloodshed. On the same day, an attack by gunmen on a Sunni mosque close to Baquba in the Diyala province left more than 65 people dead. Because the victims were Sunnis, suspicion rested on Shi'ite militias -- presumably in retaliation for all the attacks being carried out by Islamic State. However, some sources suggested that even with Sunnis as the victims, the likely culprits were Islamic State militants who were willing to murder or persecute any individual or group not adhering precisely to their hardline Salafist and Jihadist notions of Sunni Islam.

On Aug. 23, 2014, bombings plagued Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Irbil. Eight people died and two dozen were wounded when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives-laden vehicle by driving through the perimeter of the Interior Ministry compound in Baghdad. In the northern city of Kirkuk, security posts and a marketplace were targeted during near simultaneous bombings that killed 15 people. An attack also took place in the Kurdish capital of Irbil although reports of casualties from that center were unavailable.

On Aug. 24, 2014, a suicide attack on a Shi'a mosque in New Baghdad, left several people dead. A day later on Aug. 25, 2014, Karbala and Hillah to the south of the capital were struck by a series of car bombings that caused the deaths of two dozen people. At the end of the month, violence continued to plague the country with a suicide car bombing to the south of Baghdad that killed about a dozen people.

Also in the last week of August 2014, Kurdish Peshmerga forces were seeing some success as they regained control over the oilfields near Mosul in northern Iraq from Islamic State, and slowly recouping ground elsewhere. Of note was the fact that joint Kurdish and Iraqi forces had recaptured several key towns, such as Zumar and Suleiman Bek.

As discussed earlier, joint Iraqi and Kurdish forces, supported by United States air strikes, were able to take back some terrain including the important Mosul Dam. Still, the advances for the anti-Islamic State forces were not without harsh costs. Islamic State released videotaped footage of a Kurdish man being beheaded in Mosul -- presumably as a warning to Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

As August 2014 was coming to a close, Islamic State added a new group to its list of cultures needing to be "purified" (read: persecuted). According to the United Nations, in addition to apostate Sunnis, Shi'ites, Yazidis, Shabaks, Kakai, Sabaeans, and Christians, the Turkmen of Amerli were also being targeted for attack. Indeed, in the town of Amerli, as many as 15,00 residents were said to be trapped and the largely Turkmen population was under siege. The United Nations said that the Shi'ite Turkoman community of Amerli was cut off from government-held territory and at risk of being massacred. As noted by a United Nations envoy, Nickolay Mladenov, "The situation of the people in Amerli is desperate and demands immediate action to prevent the possible massacre of its citizens."

Iraq's most important Shi'ite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued his own call for Iraqi forces to confront the horror unfolding in Amerli and "save its peoples from the dangers of terrorists."

On Sept. 1, 2014, United States President Barack Obama formally notified Congress that he had authorized targeted air strikes in Iraq aimed at facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to the besieged town of Amerli. A



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statement from the National Security Council described the operation as follows: "This operation is consistent with the military missions we have outlined to date in Iraq -- to protect U.S. personnel and facilities and to address the humanitarian situation on the ground."

Around the same time in early September 2014, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights declared that Islamic State's campaign of terror, barbarism, and destruction had occurred on "unimaginable scale," and included targeted killings, forced conversions, sexual abuse, and torture in Iraq. As stated by United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Flavia Pansieri, "The reports we have received reveal acts of inhumanity on an unimaginable scale." She expressed grave concern over the persecution of a wide variety of minority groups by Islamic State, saying that "ethnic and religious cleansing" would constitute "crimes against humanity."

In the future record detailing those crimes against humanity would be the aforementioned beheading of American journalist, James Foley. But a second American journalist, Steven Sotloff, suffered the same kind of horrific fate in early September 2014, with Islamic State again releasing another gruesome and shocking videotape depicting his beheading.

Around the same time, Islamic State terrorist kidnapped 40 men in northern Iraq while Amnesty International said that it discovered mass graves in the city of Tikrit. Violence continued to plague Iraq with two bombs on Sept. 4, 2014, in the capital of Baghdad killing about 20 people in total. One car bomb in the Shi'a area of Kadhamiya left about a dozen people dead while a suicide bomber charged a police checkpoint in the center of the city, killing several other people.

The Syrian dimension in the Islamic State's rampage of terror:

On Aug. 24, 2014, following several days of fighting that left close to 500 people dead, terrorists from Islamic State stormed an air base in Tabqa in northeast Syria, taking control there at the expense of government forces. The victory at Tabqa was a significant one as it constituted the last stronghold for pro-government forces in that region of Syria. Two other Syrian military bases were taken in recent weeks in addition to the latest loss at Taqba, thus delivering a painful blow to President Bashar al-Assad's regime. In the nearby city of Raqqa, Islamic State militants celebrated their victory in their increasingly familiar and barbaric manner by displaying severed heads of Syrian soldiers in the city center while chanting "God is great." It was clear that whether Islamic State operated in Iraq or Syria, its tactics of bloodshed and brutality were being applied with enthusiastic conviction across its self-declared Caliphate.

Critics have suggested that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has avoided becoming overly-embroiled in a conflict with Islamic State, preferring to concentrate on his fight with other rebel groups opposed to him. They have intimated that Assad was counting on his neighbors in the Middle East, as well as the West more broadly, to come to terms with the brutality of Islamic State. Accordingly, they would be forced to confront the terror group, which was proving itself to be the most dangerous threat to global security in recent times.

That calculation was proving to hold some relevance in late August 2014. At issue were emerging reports that the United States was preparing its military options to deal with Islamic State -- not only in Iraq but also in Syria. While the United States authorities made clear that there was no immediate plan to extend the current engagement of limited air strikes in Iraq, they were not foreclosing other possibilities, especially since Islamic State had now brutally assassinated a United States national (as discussed above), also because the terror group was expressly conveying its threats against the United States. A spokesperson for General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said "With Central Command, (Dempsey) is preparing options to address ISIS both in Iraq and Syria with a variety of military tools including air strikes."

It was to be determined whether or not United States President Obama would re-examine his policy regarding Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, given the advance of Islamic State into Syria. President Obama was on the record calling for Assad to step down from power given his hardline and often brutal fight against rebels in Syria. Suddenly, the United States, the West, and several countries of the Middle East who had staked out anti-Assad

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stances were finding themselves aligned with unlikely countries, such as Syria and Russia, in wanting to see an end to Islamic State's rampage of terror in the region.

Note that on Aug. 25, 2014, Syria's foreign minister, Walid Muallem, said that his country would welcome a joint effort with the United States to fight Islamic State. Muallem said Syria was "the center of the international coalition to fight Islamic State" and called on the United States to coordinate with Syria as to any possible air strikes on its terrain. Muallem, however, warned that "Anything outside this is considered aggression."

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States made clear that if it chose to move forward with any engagement in Syria aimed at quelling the threat posed by Islamic State, it would not clear its plans with the Assad regime in Syria.

On Aug. 26, 2014, it was announced that President Obama approved air surveillance of Islamic State in Syria. The general consensus was that while this initial effort was aimed as intelligence reconnaissance, it could easily set the table for an expansion of air strikes against Islamic State -- not only in Iraqi territory but also on Syrian terrain.

Note: At the start of September 2014, the human rights watchdog group, Human Rights Watch, alleged there was "credible evidence" that the terror group, Islamic State, had used ground-fired cluster munitions in northern Syria. As well, videotaped footage of the mass execution of Syrian soldiers at the hands Islamic State was released to the world.

Special note on human rights abuses and cultural destruction --

In mid-2014, the United Nations published a comprehensive review of conditions in Iraq in which it accused Islamic State (formerly known via the acronyms ISIS and ISIL) of massive human rights violations and gross abuses ranging from execution to rape and the forced conscription of child soldiers. The report read as follows: "ISIL and associated armed groups have also continued to perpetrate targeted assassinations of community, political, and religious leaders, government employees, education professionals, health workers." The United Nations also detailed other crimes, making note of "sexual assault, rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls, forced recruitment of children, kidnappings, executions, robberies." Thus, the United Nations issued the following succinct conclusion: "This may also amount to war crimes." The United Nations, via this review, also had harsh words for the Iraqi government forces, which the United Nations said had done little to protect the civilian population.

The horrific security conditions in Iraq were described by Navi Pillay, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in the following manner:

"Every day we receive accounts of a terrible litany of human rights violations being committed in Iraq against ordinary Iraqi children, women and men, who have been deprived of their security, their livelihoods, their homes, education, healthcare and other basic services."

The bloodshed and death aside, there was also a humanitarian disaster in the making for those who managed to survive the wrath of Islamic State. In northern Iraq, as many as 200,000 people have been displaced in mid-2014 alone, according to the United Nations, as Islamic State has consolidated territory.

While Iraq's Shi'a population constituted the main target of Islamic State's wrath, Christian Iraqis were also on its target list. In fact, as of mid-July 2014, Christians -- typically Chaldeans and Assyrians -- were fleeing the culturally diverse city of Mosul in droves. Many were said to be taking refuge in the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan.

This mass exodus followed an ultimatum by the Sunni Islamist terror group that Christians either convert to Islam and pay a "jizya" protection tax or be faced with death. The ultimatum by Islamic State was announced in mosques and read as follows: "We offer them three choices: Islam; the dhimma contract -- involving payment of jizya; if they refuse this they will have nothing but the sword."

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Soon, these three choices were reduced to two, with the payment of jizya removed and Christians being forced to either convert or be killed; in several instances in Syria, even Christians who converted to Islam at the command of Islamic State were subject to brutal extermination via beheadings.

In an interview with Agence France Presse, a senior Christian cleric, Patriarch Louis Sako, sadly noted, "For the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul is now empty of Christians." Indeed, Iraq had been home to one of the world's most ancient Christian communities but since the **United States**-led invasion in 2003, the numbers have been on a downward spiral. The takeover of Mosul by Islamic State in 2014 was essentially ensuring that the ancient stamp of Christianity in Iraq was blotted out.

The blotting out of the ancient stamp of Christianity was also taking place in Qaraqosh -- known as Iraq's Christian center.

The Christian population was forced to abandon that town. Joseph Thomas, the Chaldean archbishop of Kirkuk, described the scenario as such: "It's a catastrophe, a tragic situation: tens of thousands of terrified people are being displaced as we speak." Meanwhile, Islamic State **militants** set upon the task of destroying the churches, the religious artifacts within them, as well as the ancient religious manuscripts that stood as sacred testaments to Iraq's rich cultural history.

Also in the crosshairs of Islamic State's rampage of terror was the Kurdish Yazidi community, whom the brutal Sunni extremists have viewed as heretics and have thus repeatedly targeted for attack.

As noted above, Islamic State had managed to wrest control over the town of Sinjar -- the ancestral home of the Yazidis -- driving them to desperately seek refuge in the mountains -- but also effectively trapping them there without food, water, or means of survival. For all intents and purposes, a de facto siege was underway with the Yazidis as the victims.

Because the Yazidis faced imminent death, there was an urgent call for international humanitarian intervention. As noted by Jabbar Yawar, the secretary-general of the Kurdistan Regional Government ministry: "Urgent international action is needed to save them. Many of them -- mainly the elderly, children and pregnant women -- have died." Indeed, the United Nations reported that as many as 40 Yazidi children had died "as a direct consequence of violence, displacement and dehydration" in the space of days.

There was a different kind of misery in the works for young female Yazidis who were kidnapped by Islamic State **militants**. These young women were forced into sexual slavery under the guise of "marriage" in the same manner as Boko Haram Islamic terrorists, who have abducted and oppressed young women in Nigeria.

Other victims of persecution at the hands of Islamic State included apostate Sunnis, Shi'ites, Shabaks, Kakai, Sabaeans, Christians, and ethnic Turkmen minorities from towns and villages in Nineveh.

Navi Pillay, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has condemned Islamic State, accusing its members of "appalling, widespread" crimes that could easily be classified as crimes against humanity Iraq. Among the list of abuses and human rights violations believed to have been carried out by Islamic State were targeted killings, kidnappings, trafficking, slavery, sexual abuse, forced conversions, destruction of cultural sites, and the persecution of entire communities. As noted by Pillay, "They are systematically targeting men, women and children based on their ethnic, religious or sectarian affiliation and are ruthlessly carrying out widespread ethnic and religious cleansing in the areas under their control."

As the Sunni extremist terrorists from Islamic State were continuing their aggression across Iraq, they were directing their campaign of abuse not only at people but also at Iraq's cultural and historic heritage. At issue was the destruction of the tomb of Jonah -- burial site of the Prophet Jonah revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. **Militants** from Islamic State reportedly planted explosives around the mosque that houses Jonah's burial site and detonated them remotely. The tomb of Biblical Daniel was also reported to have been decimated. Several

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other heritage sites around Mosul, such as the centuries-old shrine to Seth -- believed to be the son of Adam and Eve, the Prophet Jirjis Mosque, and the Awn al-Din Shrine, were also demolished. To the west of Mosul in the town of Tal Afar, several Shi'ite shrines and mosques were destroyed by Islamic State.

The actions were reminiscent of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as al-Qaida-aligned Ansar Dine in Mali in 2012. Both extremist Islamist enclaves have been aligned with the terror enclave, al-Qaida, and were responsible for cultural and historic destruction in these two countries, for the purpose of obliterating any monuments they viewed as insufficiently Islamic. Often, such holy sites are declared by Islamist zealots to be places of "apostasy" instead of prayer, thus resulting in their destruction. Of note is the fact that global analysts view Islamic State as being even more extreme than al-Qaida, which was responsible for the 2001 terror attacks in the United States.

Damage to Iraq's cultural and historic legacy was not a new phenomenon in a country beset by war for more than a decade. The United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted in the looting of Baghdad's National Museum and National Archives. But such incidences constituted the tragic consequences of warfare, and were to be distinguished from Islamic State's deliberate and nefarious campaign of cultural and historic destruction, which was intended to erase all cultural and archaeological remnants of Iraq's rich heritage -- precisely because they did not suit the extremist Salafist interpretations of Islam.

In addition to Islamists' campaign of human rights violations and cultural destruction was the emerging goal of eradicating Western-style education. In September 2014, the self-described Islamic State banned the study of Mathematics, Social Studies, and Civics (which includes learning about elections and democracy) in its self-declared caliphate. References towards science, such as evolution, were also to be removed completely, while laws of physics and chemistry were to be explained as "the result of Allah's rules and laws." Notions of ethnic and national identity were to be excised and replaced with "belonging to Islam" and the "denunciation of infidels." Sports were to be entirely prohibited. The anti-education edict ended with the following warning: "This is an obligatory announcement, and all violators will be punished." Reminiscent of the anti-education stance adopted by the Islamist terror group, Boko Haram, in Nigeria, it was apparent that such Islamist extremists were intent on purging their ranks of intellectualism and replacing it with ideological zealotry.

Western allies form coalition to fight Islamic State:

In the fight against Islamic State, there were emerging reports that air strikes on the northern city of Mosul in the first week of September 2014 killed Abu Alaa al-Iraqi, a senior Islamic State military commander from the city of Tal Afar.

The United States was also carrying out a series of air strikes using bomber and fighter aircraft against Islamic State targets in the area of the Haditha Dam in western Iraq. The aim of those strikes was to protect the strategic dam at Haditha, which has functioned as a key source of energy in Iraq. Meanwhile Iraqi troops were active east of Haditha as they sought to regain control over Barwana, while Kurdish forces worked to liberate the area of Mount Zarta. These actions showed some success for the effort against Islamic State terrorists.

That effort would be bolstered as the United States announced it was rallying allied countries to join the campaign to repel and destroy Islamic State. Speaking from a NATO summit in Wales in the first week of September 2014, United States President Barack Obama reiterated his country's commitment to eliminating the leadership of Islamic State, while noting that NATO allies were prepared to join the campaign against the brutality of Islamic State. To this end, President Obama formed what he termed "a core coalition" of allied Western countries to fight against the threat posed by Islamic State, albeit without the so-called "boots on the ground."

That coalition, according to United States Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, consisted of the following NATO allies: United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Turkey. The task of this bloc, according to United States Secretary of State John Kerry, would be as follows: "We need to attack them in ways that prevent them from taking over territory, to bolster the Iraqi security forces and others in the region who are prepared to take them on, without committing troops of our own."

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President Obama received criticism from remarks he made about not having a strategy to deal with the threat posed by Islamic State. While his remarks were actually focused on the Syrian dimension of the equation, they nonetheless fueled condemnations from neoconservatives who believed that President Obama was not moving fast enough as regards a confrontation with Islamic State.

Speaking on the NBC television show, "Meet the Press," President Obama sought to address concerns that he was not acting with sufficient urgency against Islamic State as he said: "We are going to be able to not just blunt the momentum of ISIL. We are going to systematically degrade their capabilities. We're going to shrink the territory that they control. And ultimately we're going to defeat them."

The particulars of his strategy would be detailed in a speech to be delivered on Sept. 10, 2014. President Obama said that in that address, his intent would be to "prepare the country" for the impending fight against Islamic State or ISIL. As before, however, he emphasized that the United States would not be returning to the battlefield on the ground in Iraq.

President Obama explained, "This is not the equivalent of the Iraq war. What this is, is similar to the kinds of counter-terrorism campaigns that we've been engaging in consistently over the last five, six, seven years. I just want the American people to understand the nature of the threat and how we're going to deal with it and to have confidence that we'll be able to deal with it."

On Sept. 9, 2014, one day before the highly-anticipated address in which he would prepare the country for the effort against Islamic State or ISIL, President Obama met with congressional leaders to apprise them of his plans. President Obama indicated that he already had the authority expand ongoing action against Islamic terrorists in Iraq and Syria without Congressional approval; however, the president suggested that he would welcome action from Congress in support of plan aimed at reversing and repelling Islamic State, also known as ISIL and ISIS.

Attention was also focused on the regional Arab powers in the Middle East who would most likely be affected by the territorial gains of Islamic State, but who have hitherto been largely "missing in action." In the first week of September 2014, the Arab League was meeting in Egypt. From Cairo, the Arab League issued its own support for the fight against Islamist extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, while indirectly endorsing the United States' campaign of aerial bombardment against Islamic State.

The head of the Arab League, Nabil al-Arabi, also warned that the ascendancy of Islamic State posed a serious challenge to the authority of Iraq, threatening "its very existence and the existence of other states." Thus, he urged that a military, political, economic, and cultural plan be advanced to confront the dire threat of terrorism posed by Islamic State. It was to be seen how the Arab League concretely envisioned its military, political, economic, and cultural involvement in the fight against Islamic State.

United States President Barack Obama outlines strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL --

On Sept. 10, 2014, President Barack Obama called on Americans to support a campaign to repel and eliminate the brutal and barbaric terrorist group that named itself Islamic State and declared a caliphate over broad swaths of Syrian and Iraqi terrain. President Obama said of his proposed campaign in Iraq and Syria: "Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy."

The president offered a scathing excoriation of the terror group that he has consistently referred to by the acronym ISIL rather than by their preferred name, Islamic State. President Obama said, "Now let's make two things clear: ISIL is not 'Islamic.' No religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslim. And ISIL is certainly not a state. It was formerly al-Qaida's affiliate in Iraq, and has taken advantage of sectarian strife and Syria's civil war to gain territory on both sides of the Iraq-Syrian border. It is recognized by no government, nor the people it subjugates. ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple. And it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way."

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President Obama made it clear that his proposal for a campaign to fight and defeat this terrorist organization (ISIL, also known as ISIS and Islamic State) was to be distinguished from the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. He emphasized that the endeavor would not involve United States ground troops, declaring: "We will not get dragged into another ground war."

President Obama indicated that the military structure of the effort in Iraq and Syria would involve United States air strikes with regional forces providing the military forces on the ground. Stated differently, the United States would provide air power and air support to Kurdish and Iraqi forces on the ground in the fight against ISIL. To this end, he said, "This counter-terrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground."

Nevertheless, President Obama announced that he would deploy 475 more United States troops to shore up allied forces, bringing the total American military personnel to just over 1,500. While their mission would be arm and train local forces to fight ISIL, and while these troops could not be properly be understood as "combat troops," President Obama acknowledged that these United States troops would nonetheless be at risk.

As indicated here, the counter-terrorism effort against ISIL would also include Syria. To be precise, the United States would extend assistance to select (read: "moderate") Syrian opposition forces. That assistance would include the training of Syrian anti-ISIL forces. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia confirmed that it would provide bases to train these "moderate" Syrian opposition fighters. Still, there would be no assistance for the Assad regime. As stated by the president, "In the fight against ISIL, we cannot rely on an Assad regime that terrorizes its people: a regime that will never regain the legitimacy it has lost."

Throughout, President Obama has been hesitant to enter into an engagement of any kind in Syria, largely due to the fact that it was difficult to distinguish between rebel forces. While the Obama administration has been willing to aid the Free Syrian Army and it has backed the official Syrian opposition in the civil war against the Assad regime in Syria, it has been careful about allowing weapons and aid to fall into the hands of anti-Assad terror groups, such as al-Nusra Front and even ISIL, which have increasingly held sway in Syria.

Now, however, with ISIL on an advance and posing a serious threat to global security interests, President Obama was prepared to strike them in Syria. To this end, he said, "That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq. This is a core principle of my presidency: If you threaten America, you will find no safe haven."

Other elements of President Obama's counter-terrorism strategy would include intensified measures aimed at cutting off terrorist funding for ISIL, stemming the tide of Jihadist fighters into the region, increased intelligence operations, and increased humanitarian assistance to civilians affected by ISIL's rampage of terror. President Obama also announced that he would chair a meeting of the United Nations Security Council that would be intended "to further mobilize the international community" around the effort to degrade and destroy ISIL.

Critics of the president have complained that the campaign outlined by President Obama offered no definitive goal lines for victory. Instead, a long-term effort to strike at terrorist targets, potentially lasting several years, lay ahead. Indeed, President Obama was making no pretense of this reality. Instead, he clearly indicated that the fight against ISIL might be a long and difficult one as he said, "It will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL." To be sure, the mission of eliminating terrorist threats in any country or region in the world would inevitably be a long-term endeavor.

Other critics -- predominantly in Congress -- were affronted by the president's claim that he already had the executive authority to expand military operations in Syria and Iraq. At issue was the prevailing 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that the Obama administration said provided the legal basis for extending anti-terrorist operations in Syria. Given the existence of that legislation, which was broadly used by the previous Bush administration to carry out its own activities, the Obama administration intimated that it would not need to secure further legislation authorizing military engagement. Of course, there was a certain irony regarding the fact that President Obama would be relying on the very same AUMF that he said should be "refined and ultimately repealed" a year earlier. To be sure, President Obama suggested that he would welcome congressional support -- possibly on

votes regarding funding rather than another grand authorization. Of course, there was no guarantee that members of Congress would agree with this stance. It was to be seen if an executive versus legislative showdown loomed ahead.

It should be noted that President Obama drew on examples of limited counter-terrorism engagements in Yemen and Somalia using drone strikes and special operations to show that models of such counter-terrorism campaigns were already being utilized.

Some critics have balked at this reference by President Obama to the counter-terrorism strategies in Yemen and Somalia as templates for the proposed strategy in Iraq and Syria to deal with ISIL. Their argument, picked up and advanced by the media, has been that the situation in Iraq-Syria with ISIL was to be distinguished from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen and al-Shabab in Somalia. That distinction, in the view of these critics, was due to the fact that ISIL had control over actual territory. However, President Obama's examples of targeted counter-terrorism approaches in Yemen and Somalia may not be wildly off the mark.

Much like Iraq and Syria, Yemen has a fragile government at the helm of a fractured country confronting multiple threats to its national security -- from Islamist terrorists from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, to a Shi'ite Zaidi rebellion in the north, and a secessionist movement in the south. The United States has concentrated its efforts via drone strikes on terrorist strongholds in Yemen, keeping in mind that al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula poses a threat to global security; the United States, however, plays no role in addressing the other domestic rebellions in Yemen. Likewise, President Obama has shown little interest in intervening significantly into the Syrian civil war; however, he was now willing to go down the select counter-terrorism path in Syria, in much the same as the United States has been involved in Yemen.

In Somalia, al-Shabab, much like ISIL, began with a domestic Islamist agenda and took hold in a failed state mired by fragile governance and a security crisis. Over the course of years, even after being driven from the capital of Mogadishu, al-Shabab was able to consolidate territory in the south of Somalia, and at time controlled as much as half the country. It also extended its domestic Islamist agenda to one with a more global Jihadist orientation, going after targets in Kenya. One could argue that al-Shabab has been, at least, a contender for bloodthirsty barbarism following its horrific attack on a Kenyan shopping mall in 2013. The United States has been carrying out a targeted counter-terrorism campaign in Somalia in recent years, going after the leadership successfully in 2013 and most recently in 2014. A similar strategy -- albeit one requiring years of targeted engagement -- could potentially yield results against ISIL in Syria and Iraq.

The determinations and evaluations of success will be decided by history; however, the fact of the matter was that there were at least some templates available for the United States to pursue a "no boots on the ground" campaign against terrorist threats in hot spots across the world, including in Iraq and Syria. That campaign in the Middle East would be coordinated by retired Marine Corps General John Allen, who would be named as the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition against ISIL.

It should be noted that on Sept. 11, 2014, following a series of meetings in the Middle East, United States Secretary of State John Kerry won the backing of several Arab countries for the campaign to degrade and destroy ISIL. According to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Brett McGurk, these countries included: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Lebanon.

Although the non-Arab nation state, Turkey, attended the meetings hosted by Kerry, it was left out of the reports. At issue were sensitivities regarding 46 Turkish hostages held by Islamist terrorists. (Note that in the latter part of September 2014, the Turkish hostages were released; it was not known if this development would create the imprimatur for Turkey to do its part, as a NATO state, to support the efforts of other NATO countries in the global fight against terrorism.)

Secretary of State Kerry described the roles of the participating regional powers as follows: "Arab nations play a critical role in that coalition, the leading role really across all lines of effort: military support, humanitarian aid, our work to stop the flow of illegal funds." He continued, "The participating states agreed to do their share in the comprehensive fight against ISIL, including ... as appropriate, joining in the many aspects of a coordinated military

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campaign against ISIL." State Department personnel subsequently said that some Arab countries went so far as to offer to conduct air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Secretary of State Kerry said that he was "extremely encouraged" by pledges of military assistance by the international community to fighting the dire threat posed by ISIL.

That dire threat was highlighted by another brutal assassination by Islamic militants on a Westerner; the third victim was a British aid worker, David Haines. It was apparent that ISIL was trying to intimidate the West into retreating from their (re-)engagement in Iraq and surrounding countries. Of course, these acts of barbarism were more likely to build public support in the United States and across the Atlantic in Europe for concerted effort to diminish and ultimately defeat these extremist Islamist terrorists.

On Sept. 16, 2014, during Congressional hearings in Washington D.C., Secretary of State Chuck Hagel said that the tactical approach against ISIL would involve striking the terror group's safe havens, essentially destroying its infrastructure and command capabilities. General Martin Dempsey noted that a "shock and awe" approach akin to the 2003 invasion of Iraq would not work against ISIL, given that terror group's particular organization. Instead, Dempsey promised a "persistent and sustainable campaign." According to Dempsey, that targeted approach would presumably take time but it would also be against more effective in the long term.

Indeed, in the middle of September 2014, the United States military was intensifying its air strikes on ISIL targets in Iraq, with targets being struck to the southwest of Baghdad. A statement from United States Central Command read as follows: "The air strike southwest of Baghdad was the first strike taken as part of our expanded efforts beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions to hit (Islamic State) targets as Iraqi forces go on offense."

Note that on Sept. 17, 2014, President Barack Obama's plan for confronting and defeating Islamist terrorists known as ISIL/ISIS gained congressional support with the House of Representatives approving a "stop gap" spending measure to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels. The measure was passed with bipartisan support -- 273-156 -- but also garnered bipartisan opposition. Despite the passage of the bill by a healthy margin, it was clear that re-engagement in the Middle East -- albeit in a limited capacity -- remained a controversial matter more than a decade after the 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the previous Bush administration.

A more decisive vote was taken in the Senate a day later and saw strong bipartisan support with 78 Senators voting in favor of a measure to train and arm Syrian rebels in the fight against ISIL, and only 22 voting against the measure.

International coalition launches air strikes in Iraq and Syria aimed at ISIL/ISIS targets --

On Sept. 19, 2014, the global coalition to fight the brutal and homicidal entity known as ISIS or ISIL was in force with French jets hitting Islamic terrorist targets in Iraq. According to French President Francois Hollande, his country's fighter jets struck "a logistics depot of the terrorists" near the city of Mosul, which was under ISIL control for several months. The active involvement by France was illustrative of the expanding global coalition, led by the United States, to "degrade and destroy" the Islamic terrorist movement, as promised by United States President Barack Obama.

Already, the United States was carrying out air strikes in northern Iraq and the area close to the capital of Baghdad. There, in the Iraqi capital, terrorist bombings were becoming regular fare; however, car bombings were taking place elsewhere in Iraq -- even in the Kurdish city of Kirkuk.

One of Iraq's major Shi'ite leaders appeared to sanction the international intervention, although warning against subservience to foreign entities. Via a spokesperson, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued the following statement: "Even if Iraq is in need of help from its brothers and friends in fighting black terrorism, maintaining the sovereignty and independence of its decisions is of the highest importance,"

Air strikes by foreign powers were having an effect, even as United States war hawks complained that a ground operation would be necessary to defeat ISIL/ISIS. In fact, air strikes provided Kurdish fighters with the support to



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regain control over portions of the northern province of Nineveh in Iraq. Still, control by the group that self-declared itself as Islamic State was being consolidated in the region, with the terrorists establishing a police force tasked with enforcing the dictates of the religious judiciary.

On the other side of the border in Syria, Islamic State terrorists targeted the residents of the town of Ayn al-Arab (known as Kobani in Kurdish), and the surrounding villages. Facing a likely massacre at the hands of brutal Islamist terrorists, tens of thousands of the mainly Kurdish population sought refuge in Turkey before the authorities in Ankara closed the border.

On the evening of Sept. 22, 2014, the international coalition to hit ISIL/ISIS commenced its operations in Syria. Led by the United States, a coalition of allies launched air strikes against the self-declared Islamic State terrorists in the Syrian city of Raqqa (a known Islamic State stronghold) and along the eastern border with Iraq.

Significantly, the coalition included several Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar. It was something of a coup for United States President Barack Obama and his top diplomat, Secretary of State John Kerry, that they had done what no American president in recent memory had managed to do with regard to global security threats emanating from the Middle East. They had forged a truly global coalition with Arab countries not only standing as major stakeholders, but also with these Arab partners actively engaged in the military operations. It should be noted that Israel was contributing its intelligence in the global fight against ISIL/ISIS.

Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, issued an official confirmation of the operation via the following statement: "I can confirm that U.S. military and partner nation forces are undertaking military action against ISIL terrorists in Syria using a mix of fighter, bomber and Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles." He continued, "Given that these operations are ongoing, we are not in a position to provide additional details at this time." Kirby added, "The decision to conduct these strikes was made earlier today by the U.S. Central Command commander under authorization granted him by the commander in chief."

Indeed, American warplanes, such as F-22 Raptors, B-1 Bombers, as well as armed Predator and Reaper drones, along with fighter jets from allied Arab countries, conducted a sustained campaign of aerial bombardment on the ISIL/ISIS infrastructure in the Syrian city of Raqqa. As well, Tomahawk cruise missiles unleashed a flurry of precision-guided bombs from United States navy vessels located in the area. The relentless strikes were collectively aimed at stationary targets, such as weapons depots, militants' barracks, and command and control buildings. Ultimately, the goal was to deprive ISIL/ISIS of its safe haven in Syria.

Rear Admiral Kirby made it clear that the air strikes on Sept. 22, 2014, were only the start of a long campaign against Islamic terrorists. He said, "I can tell you that last night's strikes were only the beginning."

The air strikes made clear that President Obama was making good on his promise to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the terror enclave known as ISIL/ISIS not only in Iraq but also Syria. This development was to be viewed amidst complaints from the right-wing neo-conservative flank of the political spectrum in the United States, which has argued that the Obama administration had "no strategy" for dealing with ISIL/ISIS in Syria.

For his part, United States President Barack Obama on Sept. 23, 2014 offered comment on the expanded military effort against ISIL/ISIS. During a televised broadcast, President Obama said that the wide global coalition, including several Arab nation states, showed the United States was not alone in its campaign against Islamist terrorists known as ISIL/ISIS. To this end, the United States leader said, "This is not America's fight alone." President Obama also lauded partner countries in the coalition, saying, that the United States was "proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with these nations."

Reports soon emerged that the United States had notified Syria of its impending campaign of aerial bombardment against Islamic State targets in Syrian territory.

There was no condemnation from Syria, which was likely tacitly blessing the actions of the international community. In fact, state-controlled Syrian media confirmed that the air strikes were taking place; it also emphasized that the

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strikes were not being treated as an act of aggression since the Syrian government had notified in advance. A Syrian analyst, Ali al-Ahmad, noted that while Syria was not part of the alliance carrying out the air campaign against ISIL/ISIS, there was nonetheless a "common enemy." Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition was more forthright in its applause for international intervention into Syria, especially since Hadi al-Bahra, the president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, had urged such action.

It should be noted that the day after strikes commenced in Syria, the United States announced that its efforts were not limited to ISIL/ISIS, but also to a hitherto unknown terror group, known as the Khorasan Group, which was planning an imminent threat against Western targets, including the United States homeland. The Khorasan Group was believed to be an offshoot of the notorious terror enclave, al-Qaida. The Khorasan Group was reportedly relying on innovative means to obfuscate explosive materials in their effort to carry out another 9/11-type attack. Of note was the possibility that bomb makers responsible for the so-called "underwear" and "printer cartridge" bombing plots were making further strides; indeed. There were suggestions that they were now innovating new means to hide explosives in toiletries that a passenger might carry onto a civilian aircraft.

President Obama addressed this ancillary operation against the Khorasan Group, saying, "Once again, it must be clear to anyone who would plot against America and do Americans harm that we will not tolerate safe havens for terrorists who threaten our people." On a related note, there were unconfirmed reports that the leader of the Khorasan Group, Mohsin al-Fadhli, was killed in the air strikes. Such a development would be considered a notable blow against the terror group. That being said, the threat posed by this terror group to the United States homeland remained in place. The Department of Homeland Security issued a national security bulletin warning law enforcement agencies to be on heightened alert for lone-wolf terror attacks.

Meanwhile, the full array of the results -- including human casualties -- from Day 1 of the air strikes on Syria was yet to be revealed. However, a third terrorist group in the Middle East was affected by the aerial bombardment campaign in Syria. On Sept. 23, 2014, there were unconfirmed reports that the air strikes the night before killed leader as Abu Yousef al-Turki, also known as "the Turk" -- the leader of the al-Nusra terror group that has long been engaged in the fight against the Assad regime in Syria.

On Sept. 24, 2014, United States President Barack Obama was scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York. There, he was scheduled to make his case to the world of the imperative to defeat brutal and barbaric Islamist militant groups that seek to terrorize the world. It should be noted that while United Nations Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon did not explicitly back the action against ISIL/ISIS, he nonetheless emphasized the fact that Islamic extremist groups in Syria "pose an immediate threat."

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama issued a strenuous defense of his policy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL, noting that military engagement was the only rational option. He declared: "There can be no reasoning, no negotiation, with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force."

It was the type of muscular foreign policy stance not often associated by the president who was elected to end the United States' lengthy wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But as history has often taught, leaders are compelled by circumstance to respond to the realities on the domestic and international scene and not the agenda items envisioned in election campaigns years prior.

In this case, President Obama was responding to the grim reality that an Islamist terrorist group was destabilizing the Middle East while, also sparking an eruption of Islamic zealotry and global Jihadism across the world. In response to this dangerous development, the United States leader said, "We must take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated fanatics...No God condones this terror. No grievance justifies these actions."

President Obama reminded his fellow Americans that the mission to rout ISIL would not involve United States ground forces, and did, in fact, involve a global coalition of partner countries from Europe and the Arab world. To this end, he said, "We do not act alone. Nor do we intend to send U.S. troops to occupy foreign lands. Instead, we

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will support Iraqis and Syrians fighting to reclaim their communities." President Obama also had a stark warning for the Islamic terrorists as he said. "Those who have joined ISIL should leave the battlefield while they can."

Later on the same day, President Obama chaired a meeting of the United Nations Security Council. As the leader of the United States, which held the rotating presidency of the 15-member Security Council at the time, President Obama was in the prime position to direct the agenda, which in this case was focused on the global terrorism and the associated flow of foreign fighters to conflict zones across the world. In that session, President Obama called for the adoption of a measure mandating that member states of the United States cooperate in efforts to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters.

The resolution called on member states to "prevent and suppress the recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, and the financing of their travel and of their activities." It also made specific mention of the Islamic terror groups functioning in the Middle East, such as ISIL, al-Nusra Front, and all groups associated with al-Qaida.

It should be noted that the United Nations Security Council is often a venue for controversial impasse when it comes to making major decisions. Veto-wielding permanent members invariably divide themselves into bifurcated blocs with the West on one side and the Russia-China duo on the other side. But in a rare moment of concurrence, the draft of this measure on the threat posed for the flow of foreign fighters gained unanimous support at the United Nations Security Council and was thus decisively adopted.

On the battlefield, the fight continued with the international coalition striking targets in Iraq and Syria. Among the targets of the air strikes on Sept. 25, 2014, were oil refineries controlled by ISIL in eastern Syria. Clearly, the objective in this case was tactical as the strikes would deprive the terror group of its crucial access to oil and, thus, its ability to operate over wide expanses of land.

As well, Kurdish forces were doing their part and had managed to push back ISIL forces advancing on the town of Kobani (mentioned above), where a mass exodus had taken place days earlier as the mainly Kurdish population fled in fear of being ISIL's latest victims.

Nevertheless, ISIL was seeing success of its own, as it managed to take over a military base in the western Anbar province of Iraq. It was also attracting more extremists to the fold, with an Algeria-based terror group being the latest example. But while ISIL was attracting like-minded militants, its actions were also reinforcing President Obama's call to action for the world to unite in fighting global Jihadists. One illustration of this phenomenon was the brutal decapitation of a French tourist in Algeria by the Islamic terror groups pledging allegiance to ISIL. That act of blood lust only served to strengthen France's resolve in the fight against this particularly barbaric brand of terrorism.

Note: The brutal beheadings by ISIL of a British tax driver, Alan Henning, and a British aid worker, David Haines, who were in the region to provide aid and assistance to civilians, likely had the same effect of bolstering the United Kingdom's stance against ISIL and other such inhumane Islamic terror groups.

Meanwhile, with the United Nations Security Council receiving an emphatic request from Iraq for foreign intervention in the fight against ISIL, other countries were joining the campaign. Belgium announced it would seek parliamentary consent to contribute fighter jets, while the Netherlands said it would not only carry out air strikes, but also train Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

Prime Minister David Cameron announced he was recalling parliament and would seek legislative approval to actively enter the aerial bombardment campaign against ISIL. Australia had already issued its fulsome declaration to support the effort in the same manner.

An anti-terrorism message was also emanating from within the Islamic intelligentsia with more than 120 Islamic scholars across the world advancing an open letter condemning ISIL and using a barrage of sophisticated theological arguments to challenge the Islamist terror organization for its warped interpretation of their religion, which they described as "a great wrong and an offense to Islam, to Muslims and to the entire world." The open

letter also included this excoriation of ISIL members: "You have misinterpreted Islam into a religion of harshness, brutality, torture and murder."

#### The Siege of Kobane and the Turkish Dimension:

By October 2014, despite the active international air campaign over Iraq and Syria, ISIL continued to carry out its campaign of terror, even extending the battlefield to Turkish Kurdish areas. Irrespective of the fact that the Syrian town of Kobane (alternatively called Kobani and predominantly inhabited by Kurds) on the border with Turkey was under siege, and regardless of legislation passed in Turkey's parliament authorizing action against ISIL, Turkey showed little interest in joining the fight against ISIL. Even with the protection of its own territory at stake, with access to its own sophisticated military might including significant air power, and despite its standing as a NATO country, Turkey was positioned on the sidelines of the conflict with ISIL.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan acknowledged that Kobane was likely to fall to ISIL; however, he said his country would not involve itself in the conflict raging across Syria and Iraq against ISIL unless the United States did more to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power. Erdogan's calculation appeared to be predicated on the belief that ISIL would not dare to actually penetrate the Turkish border, and so he was attempting to draw the United States more actively into the effort in Syria to remove Assad from power. Given Turkey's explicit and long-standing support for Syrian rebels -- many of whom could not be classified as moderate by any stretch of the imagination -- it was evident that the NATO country was not against the notion of intervening into another country's affairs in the region. The obvious conclusion was that, in a stunning display of self-interest matched by recklessness, Turkish President Erdogan was willing to risk his country's security at the border, in order to wrest concessions from the United States, and thus further the goals of his pet project: regime change in Syria.

The geopolitical risks notwithstanding, there was also a domestic gamble President Erdogan was making with regard to the Kurdish people who do not necessarily and neatly fit within any existing territorial borders. The Turkish nation state has had a fractious relationship with the Kurds, and has branded the Turkish Workers Party, which aims to establish an autonomous Kurdish state, to be a terrorist entity. However, in recent years, some progress has been made between the two sides in the path towards rapprochement. Now, Kurdish fighters in the battle zone were calling for reinforcements in the face of certain death, and the Turkish government was making it abundantly clear that it would not willingly heed that call. The repercussions promised to be long-standing. The Kurds were unlikely to forget Erdogan's selective humanitarian stances. While the Turkish leader favored going to great lengths to help Syrian civilians aligned with anti-Assad factions, he was apparently willing to watch a Kurdish blood bath unfold on his own border.

With pressure mounting for Turkey to move more pro-actively against ISIL, President Erdogan suggested that further action could not be taken unless a no-fly zone over Syria was established. However, United States officials pointed out that with the heavy air strike activity ongoing in the region, a de facto no-fly zone was already in place. Other officials excoriated Turkey for failing to act like a NATO member state. They railed against Turkey for not taking a leadership position when turmoil was unfolding on its doorstep.

By the second week of October 2014, progress was made in securing assistance from Turkey -- at least in limited form. Turkey agreed to allow the United States use of its military bases in the campaign against ISIL. According to United States National Security Adviser Susan Rice, Turkey agreed to allow the United States to access Turkish bases and territory "to train moderate Syrian opposition forces" and "engage in activities inside of Iraq and Syria." Rice said of Turkey's accommodation in these regards, "That's the new commitment, and one that we very much welcome."

Meanwhile coalition air strikes were being carried out against ISIL positions in Kobane. It was to be determined if the intensified air campaign would be enough to assist Kurdish fighters who said they were running out of ammunition and exhausting their troop strength.

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In the second week of October 2014, Iraqi troops abandoned their positions once again at military bases in that country. It was clear that even with aerial support from the international coalition, the Iraqi military was an ineffectual entity, very likely ill-equipped to actually defend the country (or what was left of it).

The continued poor performance of the Iraqi army was actually an argument in favor of President Barack Obama's original position to end the war in Iraq and withdraw United States troops from that country. Unless the United States was prepared to retain an endless military presence in Iraq, not only limited to training Iraqi troops -- a fruitless exercise that had already been attempted -- but rather functioning as Iraq's proxy army, it was difficult to argue that even a limited residual force would have much of a purpose.

If Iraq was to stand as a sovereign nation state, it could not indefinitely rely on international intervention to save it from nefarious forces that came into being partially because of the power vacuum created by the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein, and partially because of political mismanagement under the Maliki government. Perhaps Vice President Joe Biden's plan to partition Iraq along Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'ite lines might be the only viable solution to calm the ethno-sectarian strife and end a political climate clearly hospitable to the rise of Islamic militants, such as ISIL.

Meanwhile, bombings and other attacks continued to plague Iraq, as ISIL continued its campaign of terror. One attack in Iraq's Anbar province resulted in the death of the police chief when a bomb targeted his convoy close to the provincial capital of Ramadi. In response to the alarming level of violence and the advance of ISIL, neoconservatives in the United States intensified their argument in favor of ground forces in Iraq, even as the Obama administration insisted that the United States would not re-engage in a ground campaign in that country.

President Obama's 2008 rival in the presidential campaign of that year, Senator John McCain, said in an interview with CNN that the administration's targeted air strike strategy against ISIL was failing. He said, "They're winning and we're not. Pinprick bombing is not working."

During a meeting of military commanders from the countries\* that make up the anti-ISIL coalition, President Obama indirectly addressed such criticism, reminding people that a "long-term campaign" against ISIL was afoot in Syria and Iraq. He noted, "There are going to be periods of progress and setbacks." Underlining President Obama's point was the fact that a positive turning point was underway in Kobane.

Indeed, the United States-led global coalition had intensified its air strikes in the conflict zone, and particularly in Kobane. ISIL had the advantage there for several weeks, but with the expanded air strikes, suddenly the momentum shifted towards the Kurds and more success was being seen in holding off the onslaught from ISIL.

Asya Abdullah, the co-chairman of the Kurdish political party in Syria, conveyed thanks to the United States-led global coalition against ISIL, noting that the latest spate of air strikes had been "extremely helpful." He said, "They are hitting Islamic State targets hard and because of those strikes we were able to push back a little." However, he added, "They [ISIL militants] are still shelling the city center."

A similar report on Kobane also came from United States Central Command, which made the following assertion via a statement: "Combined with continued resistance to ISIL on the ground, indications are that these strikes have slowed ISIL advances into the city, killed hundreds of their fighters and destroyed or damaged scores of pieces of ISIL combat equipment and fighting positions." Central Command nevertheless noted that Kobane remained at risk of falling to the Islamist terror group, as it added the following warning: "However, the security situation in Kobani remains fragile as ISIL continues to threaten the city and Kurdish forces continue to resist."

For his part, President Obama emphasized the global dimension of the effort against ISIL, pointing to the number of countries\* joining the fight against the barbaric terror group. Of significance was the fact that the aforementioned meeting of military commanders included representatives from the countries that make up the international anti-ISIL coalition. \*That international coalition in October 2014 included: Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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Meanwhile, crisis conditions were unfolding in Iraq's Anbar province -- an ISIL stronghold -- as the Islamic terrorist expanded their control over yet another town there. At issue was control over the road running through Anbar to Baghdad. ISIL militants wanted an open route from the Syrian border to Baghdad and consolidating control over Anbar was the way to accomplish that goal. The genesis of the ISIL crisis really began when they took over Ramadi and Fallujah in Anbar several months prior, and have systematically expanded their terrain in the area. With the Iraqi military continuing to be an ineffectual entity, remaining "hold out" parts of Anbar not already under ISIL control were being protected by tribal fighters. However those fighters were warning that they were outgunned and likely to be overrun by ISIL without weapons and external assistance.

President Obama has promised that the effort would continue both in Kobane on the Syrian-Turkish border and in Iraq's Anbar province as he said, "Coalition air strikes will continue in both of these areas." To that end, the United States-led coalition carried out air strikes in Iraq close to Fallujah.

Even as the fighting was afoot in hotspots in Syria and Iraq, the Iraqi capital city was not immune from violence. On Oct. 17, 2014, a series of car bombings and mortar strikes in Shi'ite sections of Baghdad and in the rural areas to the south of the capital left close to 50 people dead and about 125 others injured. Because the targets of attacks were Shi'ite areas, suspicion rested on Sunni militants, likely ISIL itself or Sunni allies of the terror group. On Oct. 22, 2014, a series of bombings across Baghdad left more than 20 people dead and scores more injured. The attacks targeted restaurants in various districts in the capital city.

Iraqi authorities viewed these attacks as malicious messages from ISIL, intended to remind Shi'a Iraqis that even with a global coalition offering air support to Iraqi forces, they were able to target Shi'ites across the country at will. It was to be seen if that message was received, or, if Iraqis would heed the words of Iraq's new Prime Minister Abadi who said in a televised speech at a military compound, "Baghdad is safe and the vicious terrorists cannot and will not reach it. Our brave security forces have managed to secure Baghdad and its perimeter."

Another disturbing development was the news that Iraqi pilots who joined ISIL were training militants to fly the fighter jets that the terror group was able to capture. Reports suggested that the militants were undergoing training at the captured al-Jarrah military airport to the east of Aleppo in Syria. While the move indicated that ISIL was trying to move into the arena of air power, the fact of the matter was that three fighter jets were not likely to present that much of a threat to the far more sophisticated air forces of various countries now functioning as part of the anti-ISIL international coalition.

On Oct. 20, 2014, the United States military was air dropping weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies to Kurdish forces in the area of Kobane. According to announcements by United States Central Command, C-130 transport aircraft had made "multiple" drops of supplies. A statement from the United States Central Command explained that the air drop mission was "intended to enable continued resistance against ISIL's attempts to overtake Kobane." United States Central Command noted that all aircraft used in the mission had returned safely.

Turkey expressed displeasure regarding the United States' role in air dropping supplies to Kurdish fighters, whom they associate with the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that he would not allow Kurdish fighters to receive any transfers of United States arms. However, it was clear that the air drop had gone forward anyway.

An official from the Obama administration explained the decision to carry out the air drop mission in the face of Turkish objections, saying: "President Obama spoke to Erdogan yesterday and was able to notify him of our intent to do this and the importance that we put on it. We understand the longstanding Turkish concern with the range of groups, including Kurdish groups, that they have been engaged in conflict with. However, our very strong belief is that both the United States and Turkey face a common enemy in ISIL and that we need to act on an urgent basis."

That argument from the Obama administration -- that the United States and Turkey faced a common enemy in ISIL -- apparently gained traction. On Oct. 20, 2014, Turkey reversed its stance to some degree and said it would allow Kurdish peshmerga fighters from Iraq cross the Syrian border to fight ISIL terrorists in Kobane. The shift in policy would allow Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters safe passage through Turkey into Kobane. Then, on Oct. 22, 2014,

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members of the Iraqi Kurdish parliament approved a proposal that would result in the deployment of their fighters to Kobane. Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters would offer support to fellow Kurds who were trying to hold Kobane on the Syrian-Turkish border from falling to ISIL.

In the last week of October 2014 fierce fighting was ongoing in Kobane. ISIL fighters had the upper hand in Tal Shair, to the west of the town. Tal Shair had actually flipped between ISIL and Kurdish fighters, suggesting that conditions remained tense. Despite allied air support, Kobane and the surrounding area on the Syria-Turkish border certainly remained at risk of falling to ISIL.

In Iraq, joint Iraqi forces and Shi'ite militias saw a strategic victory, taking control over the strategic town of Jurf al-Sakhar near Baghdad.

Since ISIL was housing weapons and supplies, and also moving fighters, through tunnels close to Jurf al-Sakhar, control over the town essentially meant a disruption of a key network for ISIL. It was a notable success for Iraqi forces, which have not shown themselves to be much of a match for ISIL. Although ISIL fighters and allied Sunni insurgents had retreated to nearby villages, they were continuing to fire on Iraq and Shi'ite rivals in the area. Nevertheless, Jurf al-Sakhar was also the site of despair in late October 2014 as a suicide bombing killed close to 30 Shi'ites and wounded 60 others.

Kurds in Iraq were also seeing success against ISIL, retaking control over Zumar in Nineveh and several villages in the area, thanks to allied international air support. Kurdish intelligence sources told international media that despite encountering strong ISIL resistance, Kurdish peshmerga forces were able to advance on Zumar from several directions ultimately overwhelming ISIL fighters there. Success in Zumar could position Kurdish peshmerga fighters to go after Sinjar -- a particular flashpoint since ISIL forces laid siege on the local Yazidis in the region.

But despite these strategic gains, the region remained mired by violence and strife. In late October, central Baghdad was struck with violence as a car bomb left 15 people dead in the Karrada district of the city center. ISIL **militants** also attacked the town of al-Mansuriyah, to the northeast of Baghdad, killing six Iraqi security forces.

In Syria, the fight against ISIL continued, with news arising that **United States**-led coalition forces were carrying out air strikes there.

Spillover violence from Syria was at the same time arising in Lebanon where Islamic **militants** were engaged in battles with Lebanese military forces in the northern city of Tripoli. Fierce battles went on for days and left Lebanese soldiers, civilians, and Islamic extremist fighters dead. However, Lebanese authorities were ultimately able to gain the upper hand and re-assert control over the city.

Of concern was the fact that the Islamist **militants** appeared to be a mix of Lebanese and Syrian fighters aligned with ISIL and the al-Nusra Front. This development pointed to a closer alliance between the two extremist entities than previously thought.

As October 2014 was drawing to a close, estimates from the ground in Syria suggested that approximately 550 people had been killed in **United States**-led air strikes in Syria -- the vast majority of them being Islamic State and other **militant** fighters operating in the region.

As November 2014 began, Iraqi Kurdish fighters had joined the battle against ISIL terrorists in Kobane and were backed by **United States**-led coalition air strikes. Kurdish peshmerga fighters from Iraq were using long-range artillery and semi-heavy weaponry, which was aiding the effort. In the first week of November 2014, fighting was reported as being heavier than in the past.

As the world was focused on Kobane, ISIL was making gains elsewhere in Syria, particularly with regard to the control over a gas field in the central province of Homs.

That being said, there was a glimmer of hope for the Syrian civil war in the second week of November 2014. At issue was a United Nations proposal for a truce in the northern flashpoint city of Aleppo, which has been Ground

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Zero of the Syrian civil war and remained divided between rebel and government control at the time. According to United Nations envoys, the Assad regime showed genuine and constructive interest in the plan that would include a ceasefire and access for humanitarian aid. It was to be seen if this truce proposal -- admittedly to be applied in a limited form only to Aleppo -- would actually progress beyond the theoretical stage.

Meanwhile, joint coalition forces were also conducting air strikes against ISIL units in Anbar province close to Baghdad. There, ISIL's reign of terror was continuing. A disturbing report emerged in late October 2014 regarding the massacre of 300 members of the Albu Nimr tribe -- including women and children -- in the village of Zauiyat Albu Nimr in western Anbar. According to the Iraqi government, ISIL terrorists killed them because they resisted control. They then dumped all the bodies into a well. It was yet another manifestation of the barbarism that had come to characterize the Islamic terror group.

Regional human rights observers were watching the impending religious festival of Ashura dubiously, with fears arising that Shi'ite pilgrims would undoubtedly be favored targets for ISIL -- an extremist Sunni terror group. Indeed, on Nov. 2, 2014, almost 40 Shi'ite pilgrims died in a series of bomb attacks in Baghdad.

A week later on Nov. 8, 2014, a car bomb in Baghdad's mostly Shi'ite Sadr City left eight people dead, although in conjunction with other attacks in the capital, in Baquba to the northeast of Baghdad, and in the western city of Ramadi, the total death toll was closer to 30.

On Nov. 11, 2014, the Iraqi city of Baiji was the site of violence as a suicide bomber killed eight people, including six soldiers. Of note was the fact that the attack ensued even as United States-led air strikes targeted the city, with an eye on wresting control from ISIL fighters who have surrounded the oil refinery there. A separate attack ensued on the same day when a suicide bomber rammed his vehicle into a military outpost in the Baghdad district of Tarmiyah. Seven soldiers died as a result of that attack while at least a dozen others were injured.

In the third week of November 2014, a suicide car bombing occurred in Irbil -- the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan region. The suicide bomber and five victims died in the attack. Typically, Kurdistan has been somewhat insulated from the types of suicide bombings that plague Baghdad and other parts of the country. Thus, this act of violence was a warning to the Kurds that despite being under pressure by coalition-led air strikes, ISIL was still capable of striking at the heart of the Kurdish semi-autonomous region. Meanwhile, around the same period, at least three bomb attacks ensued in Baghdad.

U.S.-led strikes on the battle zone and U.S. foreign policy relating to the campaign --

In the second week of November 2014, there were news reports that United States-led airstrikes were targeting gatherings of Islamic State or ISIL leadership in Iraq close to the border with Syria. There were soon suggestions by Iraq's Defense and Interior Ministries that ISIL leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may have been injured in the strikes; however, United States officials were not prepared to comment on the matter. Later, ISIL itself was releasing videotaped footage purportedly proving that the leader of the terrorist group was still alive.

That being said, the United States continued aerial bombardment of ISIL targets in Syria and Iraq, offering air support to anti-ISIL operations on the Syrian town of Kobane where Kurds were under attack, in Sinjar where the minority population there was also under attack, and on other Iraqi targets in Mosul, Baiji, Falluja, and Ramadi.

Iraqi forces, with United States support, were wresting control of the strategic oil refinery at Baiji back from ISIL. Another key aspect of the United States' operations in Iraq involved United States military advisers in Anbar -- an ISIL stronghold -- and their effort there to train Iraqi forces.

As well, the United States acknowledged that it was going after the al-Qaida linked terror entity, known as the Khorosan Group, based in Syria. A highly skilled group of al-Qaida specialist terrorists, the Khorosan Group initially operated in the Afghan-Pak region before relocating to Syria and resuming operations under one of the main al-Qaida linked groups in Syria -- al-Nusra Front. The area hit by the strikes included Sarmada in Idlib province, close to the border with Turkey and to the west of the Syrian city of Aleppo. A key target in that operation was a French-



born militant and Islamic convert, David Drugeon, who was known to be a bomb maker. United States officials were not prepared to comment in detail on the matter. Instead, the military was said to be assessing the success of the strikes.

For his part, the United States appeared to be intensifying its footprint in the region and in the fight against ISIL with President Barack Obama approving the deployment of an additional 1,500 more troops to Iraq, for the purpose of advising and training Iraqi forces to fight the Islamic State terrorists. The additional troops effectively doubled the presence of United States military forces in Iraq, irrespective of the official stance that United States troops were not in Iraq to carry out active combat roles.

In the aftermath of mid-term elections that left President Obama with hostile Republican Congress in control of both chambers, the United States leader nonetheless looked to close ranks in the interests of national security. To that end, President Obama announced he would ask the Republican-controlled Congress to move forward with a fresh authorization for the use of military force against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Speaking of this push for congressional approval, President Obama said, "The world needs to know we are united behind this effort and the men and women of our military deserve our clear and unified support."

President Obama added that the fight against Islamic militants and terrorists in the region had reached a "new phase." He explained, "We now have a different type of enemy. The strategy is different, and how we partner with Iraq and other Gulf countries and the international coalition, that has to be structured differently." As such, he noted that there was a need for a new "Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF)" that would reflect the existing challenges and the associated strategy moving forward.

On Nov. 17, 2014, it was confirmed that ISIL had brutally decapitated yet another American hostage. The videotaped footage depicting the gruesome remains of Peter Kassig was released by ISIL, who also ominously promised to "slaughter" Americans at home "in the streets." United States President Barack Obama reacted to the latest act of barbarism from the Islamic group by casting it as "an act of pure evil by a terrorist group that the world rightly associates with inhumanity." Of note that Kassig was actually a convert to Islam and known by the name Abdul-Rahman. His killing by ISIL suggested that the terror group was not simply targeting non-Muslims or apostates, but that they were interested in killing Western nationals for supremely political and Jihadist reasons.

While the death of Kassig cast a shadow on the global anti-ISIL effort, the United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reminded the world that the United States-led global effort against the terror group was yielding results. During a surprise visit to Baghdad, General Martin Dempsey said that the United States military re-engagement had helped rescue Iraq "from the precipice" and now the momentum was with joint international anti-ISIL forces. He said, "And now, I think it's starting to turn. So well done."

As November 2014 was drawing to a close, part of the United States plan to fight ISIL in Iraq included a proposal to fund weapons for Sunni tribesmen willing to oppose the Islamic militant terrorists in Anbar province. The price tag for the weaponry was around \$24 million and illustrated the view from the United States Pentagon that Sunni tribesmen would have to play an integral role in the anti-ISIL strategy in Anbar -- a Sunni enclave where Iraqi security forces would not be particularly welcomed. It should be noted that the procurement of the weaponry would go through the government of Iraq, in keeping with existing policy.

Other United States foreign policy developments related to the fight against ISIL in December 2014 included an effort from the Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to advance a fresh authorization for the use of military force against that terror group in Iraq and Syria.

At the defense level, an additional 1,500 troops were being deployed to Iraq, bringing the total to 4,600, according to Lieutenant General James Terry, who was responsible for the fight against ISIL. Terry offered a cautiously optimistic view of the engagement in the region, and specifically the effort to build up Iraqi security forces as he said: "While [the Iraqi security forces] have a long way to go I think they're becoming more capable every day." He continued, "When you start now to balance the different capabilities out across the coalition, I think we're doing pretty well in terms of boots on the ground."

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Meanwhile, in the first half of December 2014, the United States-led coalition continued to carry out air strikes against ISIL targets inside Syria and Iraq. Indeed, as of mid-December 2014, the United States-led coalition continued to conduct air strikes against ISIL militants in Iraq and Syria.

Other recent developments with regard to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran --

As November 2014 drew to a close, Syrian forces had carried out aerial bombardment of ISIL targets in Raqqa. The strikes reportedly hit an industrial zone and a marketplace, killing 60 people -- half of whom were believed to be civilians.

In the first part of December 2014, three journalists from a Syrian opposition television channel, known as Orient News, died while reporting the war in the southwestern part of Syria. Orient News accused the Assad regime's forces of targeting the journalists. Regardless of the reliability of this claim, the fact of the matter was that as many as 70 journalists -- most of them being local reporters -- have been killed while covering the war in Syria since its start in 2011.

Also in early December 2014, suggestions emerged that Iran was carrying out air strikes on ISIL targets in Iraq. While Iran officially dismissed the claims, there was videotaped footage from the media outlet, Al Jazeera, of a jet identified by Jane's Defense as an F-4 Phantom striking ISIL in Diyala province. Because only Iran and Turkey were known to operate F-4 Phantom jets regionally, and because of Turkey's reluctance to become engaged in the fight against ISIL, all indications were that the strikes were carried out by Iran. United States Secretary of State John Kerry was reticent about commenting on the matter, saying, "I am not going to make any announcements or confirm or deny the reported military action of another country in Iraq. It is up to them (the Iranians) or up to the Iraqis to do that if it did indeed take place."

However, Kerry later noted that any Iranian action against ISIL in Iraq should be regarded as a "positive" development. To this end, he said, "If Iran is taking on (IS) in some particular place... and it has an impact, then it's going to be net effect (that) is positive."

Around the same time in early December 2014, Lebanon's interior ministry said that its security forces apprehended a woman believed to be the wife of ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, along with a child born to the couple. The detainment actually took place months earlier, but Lebanon was only now acknowledging the development. It should also be noted that Iraqi sources poured doubt on the claim that Saja al-Dulaimi was actually Baghdadi's wife, suggesting she was more likely to be the sister of a man convicted of bombings in southern Iraq. Lebanese sources nevertheless cast her detainment as part of a foreign intelligence operation. They said that the detainment of Dulaimi would be used as leverage in negotiations aimed at releasing 27 members of the Lebanese security forces who were seized by Islamist militants along the border with Syria.

Recent developments in the battlefields --

In December 2014, the United States-led coalition continued to carry out air strikes against ISIL targets inside Syria and Iraq. But despite the pressure being placed on ISIL, Islamist terrorists continued to carry out a campaign of horror in Iraq and Syria at the end of 2014.

In Iraq, a car bombing in Kirkuk left 15 people dead and 20 others injured in that city. Two car bombings in the Shi'ite district of Sadr City in Baghdad killed 15 people and wounded more than 50 others. Separately, a bomb exploded close to the Green Zone of the Iraqi capital, which is home to government and security offices; two people died as a result. To the north of Baghdad on Dec. 10, 2014, a suicide bomb and mortar attack by ISIL terrorists killed a dozen Shi'ite militia, while bombings in the Iraqi capital killed six people and injured two dozen more. In the western Anbar province, ISIL attacked an army post in the town of Garma.

By the third week of December 2014, there was some good news in the fight against ISIL as Kurdish peshmerga fighters, backed by United States air strikes, took victory for liberating hundreds of people trapped on Iraq's Sinjar mountain. For months, Iraqi Yazidis have been trapped on Sinjar mountain, living in desperate conditions and

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under siege by murderous ISIL forces. Now, however, relief was at hand. According to Masrour Barzani, the head of the Iraqi Kurdish region's national security council, said, "The peshmerga have managed to reach the mountain. A vast area has been liberated." He continued, "All those Yazidis that were trapped on the mountain are now free." The actual town of Sinjar was yet to be liberated, however, Barzani expected further gains, adding, "Now a corridor is open and hopefully the rest of the (Sinjar) region will be freed from Islamic State."

Meanwhile, the toll of the war in Syria was increasing. As 2014 came to a close, the United Kingdom-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that more than 30,000 civilians had been killed during the year in the civil war in Syria. Including fighters, the death toll for the year was more than 76,000. According to United Nations, the number of people killed since the start of the conflict in 2011 was 191,000.

At the start of 2015, progress was being made in the effort against ISIL. Iraqi Kurdish forces, backed by United States air power, had regained control over most of the territory lost since the summer of 2014. This claim was made by Falah Mustafa Bakir, the head of the department of foreign relations for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in an interview with Voice of America. But Bakir indicated that the Iraqi army continued to present a weak point in the fight against ISIL. He posed the following question: "Where is the Iraqi army and where are the Sunnis?" Of course, the fact of the matter was that the Iraqi city of Mosul remained in ISIL hands and Bakir was urging an effort to liberate that city as he said, "Mosul is key." The defeat of ISIL at the location where the terror group declared its caliphate would make it easier to dislodge them from across the region.

United States Pentagon Press Secretary Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby appeared to share a similar assessment as Bakir. At a press briefing, Kirby said, "What we haven't seen in the last several weeks has been any renewed offensive moves by ISIL of any significance. They have largely taken a defensive posture in the last several weeks." Kirby cautioned that "nobody is taking that progress for granted."

Instead, Kirby noted that ISIL retained control over Mosul, Baiji, wide swaths of Anbar province, and remained a threat to the Yazidi minority in the region of Mount Sinjar. With an eye on a possible offensive on ISIL in Mosul, the Pentagon said it would train 12 new army brigades in Iraq including three in the Kurdish region.

As of Jan. 21, 2015, the United States was leading air strikes on Mosul.

An effort in Syria was also in the offing with the United States military set to deploy approximately 400 soldiers to train Syrian rebels to fight ISIL. Several countries, including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have expressed interest in hosting the training. The United States government of Barack Obama had already authorized the deployment of some 3,000 troops to advise and train Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

While Syria has welcomed the United States effort to fight ISIL in the region, it draws the line at training Syrian rebels, regarding all such groups as a threat to its power, and has a blanket assessment of all opponents, from Syrian moderate rebels to ISIL, as terrorists. Thus, the Syrian state news agency. SANA, accused the United States of "continuing to support terrorism in Syria."

But in the last week of January 2015, Syrian President Assad called for an agreement with the United States over the air strikes against ISIL targets in Syrian territory. In an interview with the magazine, Foreign Affairs, Assad said, "With any country that is serious about fighting terrorism, we are ready to make cooperation, if they [the United States] are serious." He continued, noting that the United States should "make legal cooperation with Syria and start by asking permission from our government to make such attacks." Assad also said that Washington should urge Turkey to refrain from funding and arming rebels in northern Syria.

For Washington, it was quite conceivable that it believed its obligations were fulfilled when it informed Damascus of its impending air strikes on ISIL in Syria in the autumn of 2014.

On Jan. 26, 2015, it was announced that the Kurdish city of Kobane, where a long-standing battle with ISIL was ongoing, had finally come under Kurdish control. Kurdish forces had driven Islamic State militants from the city and were flying their flag high. Kurdish fighters were proceeding carefully into the city due to fears about landmines

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planted by the Islamic terrorists; however, Kurds were seen celebrating in the streets and jets were seen flying over Kobane. The recapture of Kobane was a significant and hard-fought victory in the Kurds' fight against ISIL.

By the start of February 2015, Kurdish forces, backed by United States-led air strikes, were advancing on the rural areas surrounding Kobane, driving Islamic State militants further away. In an interview with Reuters News, Redur Xelil, a spokesperson for the Syrian Kurdish militia, said: "The fighting organization of Daesh ... is in a state of complete collapse at present and cannot hold ground." (Note: "Daesh" is a pejorative term for Islamic State which that terror group rejects, but while the anti-Islamic State activists have used in defiance.)

## Complex Geopolitics --

Not all the news was positive. A complex hostage crisis was playing out as ISIL continued its campaign of barbarism and terror, threatening to kill two Japanese hostages -- Kenji Goto, a freelance journalist and film-maker, and Haruna Yukawa, a self-declared security consultant. ISIL terrorists demanded an unrealistically high ransom demand of \$200 million for the Japanese hostages, while the government of Japan warned that it would not negotiate with terrorists. Indeed, while some countries have been prepared to pay ransoms to secure the release of their kidnapped nationals, other countries, such as the United States, have argued that the ransom funds are used to pay for continued terrorism. Regardless, with a ransom left unpaid by Japan in this case, the pattern of tragedy and terror unfolded as a 72-hour deadline passed, and ISIL released a gruesome video depicting the beheading death of Yukawa.

Soon thereafter, a twist on the hostage saga occurred as ISIL suggested it might consider releasing Goto and a Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, if Jordan were to consider a prisoner exchange. Kasasbeh was shot down over Syria in December 2014 on a mission to support the United State-led military coalition effort against Islamic State.

At the center of the prisoner exchange for ISIL was a female Iraqi militant, Sajida al-Rishawi. She and her husband, Hussein Ali al-Shamari, attempted to carry out double suicide bombings at the Radisson hotel in the Jordanian capital of Amman in 2005. While her husband completed his mission, and 60 people died as a result, the explosives failed to detonate in her case and she was arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. She remained alive only because in 2006, Jordan imposed a moratorium on the death penalty. Of note is the fact that the moratorium expired at the close of 2014 and executions have resumed in Jordan. Rishawi is regarded as a high value prisoner by ISIL due to the fact that she was the sister of the "right hand man" of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. For ISIL, any one in Zarqawi's inner circle was regarded highly since he was leader of al-Qaida in Iraq -- the terror group that ultimately gave birth to ISIL.

At the end of January 2015, the Jan. 29, 2015, deadline imposed by ISIL passed. Two days later, another gruesome video, typical of the Islamist terror group, was released showing a British ISIL terrorist beheading Goto. While the Japanese government has expressed horror and outrage over the horrific killing of two of its citizens, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has nonetheless maintained a resolute stance, as he declared that Japan "would not give in to terrorism." Moreover, Prime Minister Abe vowed that Japan would do more in the global effort against ISIL.

Meanwhile, Jordanian officials said they were exploring all their options related to the release of Kasasbeh. However, they were calling for some sort of proof of life sign. By the start of February 2015, Jordan made clear that because Kasasbeh was a military asset, and because Rishawi had not been successful in her attempted act of terrorism, it was willing to pursue the prisoner exchange path. As noted by Mohammed al-Momeni, a Jordanian spokesperson in an interview with the official Petra news agency, the government was doing "everything it can to save the life and secure the release of its pilot." Momeni continued, "All state organizations have been mobilized to secure the proof of life that we require so that he can be freed and returned to his home."

On Feb. 3, 2015, however, the tragic news emerged that although ISIL had been using Kasasbeh as a bargaining chip, they had actually burned him to death in a cage a month earlier. As before, Islamic State terrorists released another highly-produced but entirely gruesome video depicting their vicious act of cruelty and horror.

King Abdullah of Jordan, who was in the United States for security talks, cut short his visit but was sure to meet with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden before returning home to deal with what had become a national tragedy. The Obama White House condemned the killing of Kasasbeh and Vice President Joe Biden reinforced "America's ironclad support" for Jordan. The European Union issued a statement of solidarity with Jordan over the killing of Kasasbeh, while Japan, whose constitution prevents it from being militarily engaged, nonetheless vowed to do its part in the fight against Islamic State. Japan also made clear that it shared the pain of Jordan having similarly suffered the brutal beheadings of two of its own citizens by the hand of ISIL terrorists.

Several Arab countries were compelled to issue statements on the murder of Kasasbeh. The Saudi Arabian state news agency described the killing as a "barbaric, cowardly act, which is not sanctioned by the principles of tolerant Islam... and cannot be perpetrated except by the bitterest enemies of Islam." From Egypt, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University in Egypt and one of the leading authorities on Sunni Islam, made it clear that burning Kasasbeh to death was a violation of Islam, which prohibits the mutilation of bodies. As well, Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi said the killing of Kasasbeh was "brutal" and "beyond belief." Arabi noted that Islamic State was "a menace which should be stopped."

At home in Jordan, citizens took the streets in spontaneous demonstrations to denounce the terror group, ISIL, which anti-extremist Arabs derisively refers to as "Daesh," and demanded revenge. Among those calling for a harsh response by Jordan was Kasasbeh's father, Safi al-Kasasbeh, who said, "I demand Islamic State should be wiped out... I call for [ISIL] to be eliminated completely."

Clearly, Jordan's outrage was being felt globally, with the civilized world angered that ISIL clearly had no intention of acting in good faith on their proposed prisoner exchange, since Kasasbeh had been killed a full month prior. The terror group had essentially been negotiating in bad faith and clearly were willing to manipulate and exploit the circumstances to their benefit. While this tactic may have worked -- with tragic consequences for the two Japanese hostages and the lone Jordanian hostage -- it was not something that could easily be replicated. First, there were only a limited number of Western hostages known to be in ISIL hands, and second, the cruel murder of Kasasbeh had motivated the global community to take more decisive action against the terror group. As noted by United States President Barack Obama, "I think it will redouble the vigilance and determination on the part of the global coalition to make sure they [Islamic State terrorists] are degraded and ultimately defeated."

Upon arriving back home in Jordan on Feb. 4, 2015, King Abdullah made his voice -- and that of his country -- heard as he declared: "The blood of martyr Moaz al-Kasasbeh will not be in vain and the response of Jordan and its army after what happened to our dear son will be severe." King Abdullah essentially declared relentless war on Islamic State in the following statement: "Jordan and its Arab army's response to what its son had suffered in the criminal and cowardly act, will be harsh, because this terrorist organization is not only fighting us, but fighting the true Islam and its values. We are fighting this war to protect our faith, our values and humanitarian principles, and our fight for these values will be relentless, we will be on the lookout for the criminals and hit them in their own homes."

It was assumed that response would involve a greater military involvement by Jordan in the global effort against Islamic State. To that end, President Barack Obama's nominee for defense secretary, Ashton Carter, said he would resolve a delay in the sale of arms from the United States to Jordan.

Note that on Feb. 5, 2015, Jordanian fighter jets were pounding ISIL targets in Syria. According to media sources, the strikes were on the eastern province of Deir al-Zor and near the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa where Kasasbeh was executed. This news appeared to be verified by King Abdullah himself, who was overheard by witnesses telling the family of Kasasbeh that the Jordanian forces were striking at the heart of ISIL territory in Raqqa.

On Feb. 8, 2015, Jordan continued to carry out air strikes against Islamic State bases and hideouts in Syria. Jordanian Air Force chief, General Mansour al-Jbour, said, "We achieved what we aimed at." He added that as many as 20 percent of all the sorties by the United States-led coalition in Syria had been carried out by Jordan, and that a significant portion of Islamic State's capacities had been degraded.

For its part, Islamic State announced that one of the Jordanian air strikes had killed a United States aid worker, Kayla Mueller, the remaining American hostage being held by the terror group. Mueller's death was soon verified; however, United States officials said there was no evidence to support ISIL's claims that that aid worker was killed in a Jordanian air strike. United States authorities also made clear that the only group responsible for the death of Mueller was ISIL.

In mid-February 2015, a new battleground of Islamic State merged in Libya when more than 20 Coptic Christians from Egypt were brutally killed. In keeping with the terror group's favorite mode of assassination, the victims were beheaded. As with the horrific immolation of a Jordanian pilot by Islamic State at the start of 2015 in Syria, the decapitations of the Egyptian Christian workers in Libya stood as an imprimatur for yet another Arab country to enter the global effort to defeat the Islamist Jihadist terror group.

Six weeks earlier at the start of January 2015, masked gunmen kidnapped the 13 Coptic Christians in northern Libya. The Coptic Christians were workers from Egypt living at a residential compound in the city of Sirte. The gunmen entered the compound and demanded to see identification papers of the workers; Christians and Muslims were separated with the Christians being taken away in handcuffs. A week prior, a group of seven Christians from Egypt were similarly attacked and kidnapped from a phony checkpoint in the very same Libyan city of Sirte. In a separate attack, an Egyptian-born Coptic Christian doctor and his wife were attacked and killed in their own home in Sirte. These acts of kidnapping and murder, with Coptic Christians as the targets, appeared to be the latest manifestation of the manifold instability plaguing Libya. In the post-Qadhafi era, Libya was now beset by violence at the hands of rival militias, and a stronghold for extremist fighters aligned with Islamic State for whom Christians present a prime target for attack.

The ghastly targeting of Christians by Islamic State reached a new nadir in mid-February 2015. As discussed here, videotaped footage emerged depicting the gruesome beheadings of the more than 20 Coptic Christians from Egypt who had been kidnapped by Islamic State terrorists in Libya. As has become a favored pattern by Islamic State, the revolting footage showed the victims dressed in orange jumpsuits, forced to kneel down, and then decapitated in a barbaric theatre of horror. Adding to the tragedy was the fact that most of the victims were from poor villages in Upper Egypt who were forced to work in Libya due to their socio-economic plight.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made a point of visiting St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo to offer his condolences to the Coptic Christian Pope Tawadros II. For its part, the Coptic Christian Church of Egypt expressed grave sadness over the deaths of the victims but said it was "confident" that the Egyptian authorities would respond appropriately.

To that end, the Egyptian government declared a week of mourning and banned all travel by Egyptian citizens to Libya.

It should be noted that Egyptian President Sisi condemned the repugnant murders of Coptic Christians, calling their assassins "inhuman criminal killers." The Egyptian leader wasted little time in asserting that it was his country's prerogative to exact retribution. Sisi also made clear that there was a global war emerging as the world confronted Islamist Jihadists. He said, "Egypt and the whole world are in a fierce battle with extremist groups carrying extremist ideology and sharing the same goals."

Soon, Egyptian forces were striking various Islamic State satellite targets in Libya -- from terror training camps and sites to weapons depots in the city of Derna. Meanwhile, Libya forces -- under the instruction of the internationally-recognized government of that country and in coordination with Egypt -- were hitting Islamic State targets in Sirte and Bin Jawad. Egyptian authorities soon said that the plan would be to target all Islamic State locations in Libya. Egyptian authorities also called on the United States-led international coalition against Islamic State to provide support to Egypt in its efforts against the bloodthirsty Islamist Jihadist terror group. Moreover, President Sisi called for a United Nations resolution facilitating an international intervention into Libya. In an interview with French media, the Egyptian leader explained that there was no other alternative, saying, "We will not allow them to cut off the heads of our children."

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Following the commencement of Egypt's air strike campaign, Libya was struck by violence when Islamic State militants launched a spate of suicide attacks. The terrorists packed cars with explosives, which were then detonated in the eastern town of Qubba, ultimately killing 40 people. Islamic State said that the attacks were being carried out in retaliation for Egyptian air strikes on pro-ISIL targets in Derna, Libya (as discussed above).

The claim of responsibility statement by Islamic State of Cyrenaica read as follows: "They killed and wounded tens in revenge for the bloodshed of Muslims in the city of Derna."

President Obama seeks new military authorization in campaign against Islamic State --

In the geopolitical sphere, on Feb. 11, 2015, President Barack Obama of the United States called on the legislative branch of government in that country to advance new legislation authorizing military action against the terror group calling itself Islamic State. President Obama's request, which was issued via a letter to Congress, included a provision that would prevent any large-scale invasion by United States ground troops, while nonetheless allowing for the use of special forces in rescue operations and special strikes based on key intelligence. President Obama also advocated limiting the military operations to a period of three years.

Republicans in Congress immediately railed against the request by the United States president, angered that it precluded the use of massive ground forces to fight Islamic State. They insisted that a more muscular policy was needed with "boots on the ground" as well as an open-ended engagement.

But some Democrats had their own objections, calling for a far more circumscribed authorization to be crafted, and specifically, one without broad war powers at stake.

It was to be seen if partisan rivalries in the United States Congress would impede the process of passing a new authorization intended to carefully circumscribe the United States military effort to degrade and destroy Islamic State. For his part, President Obama said he was committed to working with both parties in Congress to enacting new legal authorization aimed at fighting the Islamic State terror group. In an address broadcast by the media, and intended to complement his letter to Congress, President Obama warned that the fight against Islamic State terrorists would be difficult, but he insisted that the United States-led coalition was seeing success in its campaign. He said, "But our coalition is on the offensive. ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose."

Other recent developments --

The fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria was ongoing in mid-February 2015. On Feb. 13, 2015, Iraqi security forces repelled an attack by ISIL on an air base in Anbar province in Iraq where United States Marines were providing training to Iraqi troops. Fighting was also going on in the town of al-Baghdadi. Days later on Feb. 17, 2015, that town was the site of a massacre when ISIL terrorists burned 45 people to death.

Around the same period in Syria, pro-Assad military forces were advancing on the rebel-held northern stronghold of Aleppo, capturing several villages in the area, and engaging in heavy battles. Backed by Hezbollah forces from Lebanon, the Assad army was also launching a serious assault in southern Syria.

For his part, Syrian President Assad said in an interview with BBC News that although there was no direct cooperation with the United States, third parties, such as Iraq, had been passing on information to Damascus about the United States-led air campaign against ISIL in Syria. Assad said: "Through third parties, more than one party, Iraq and other countries, sometimes they convey a message, a general message, but there is nothing tactical." He added that there was no actual dialogue with the United States via third parties, saying, "There is no dialogue. There is, let's say, information, but not dialogue."

In the same interview, Assad denied that Syria was turning into a failed state, insisting that Syrian government institutions continued to fulfill "their duty toward the Syrian people." He also dismissed that his forces were dropping barrel bombs on insurgents. He said, "They're called bombs. We have bombs, missiles and bullets ... There is no barrel bombs, we don't have barrels."

Note that in February 2015, **United States**-led air strikes in Syria was bearing fruit with the recapture of several villages, previously held by Islamic State, in the terrorist-held stronghold of Raqqa province.

In the battlefields in Iraq and Syria in late February 2015, ISIL continued its campaign of terror. In northern Syria, the terror group abducted at least 150 Assyrian Christians, including women, children, and senior citizens. There was no word on their condition. On the Iraqi side of the border, as many as 100 Sunni tribesmen were abducted near the city of Tikrit. Also in Iraq, the capital of Baghdad was struck with terrorism when bombs exploded in the Jisr Diyala district, killing two dozen people.

In a more positive development, **United States** officials charged with training fighters in Syria have said that a more significant number of moderates have come forward with a willingness to fight Islamic State. Along a similarly encouraging note, Kurdish YPG militia fighters -- already in the trenches in Syria -- have seen increasing success in their efforts to go after Islamic State targets in northeastern Syria, with the notable capture of the town of Tel Hamis. Backed by **United States**-led air strikes, the Kurdish YPG militias have also managed to regain control over several other villages in the region.

At the start of March 2015, with all the attention focused on a forthcoming operation in Mosul (discussed below), Iraqi authorities launched a military assault on Tikrit aimed at retaking control of that town from from ISIL. Regaining control of Tikrit was of vital significance -- partially due to its symbolic value as the hometown of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, partially because it would the offensive would be a key test for Iraqi forces in the battle against ISIL, and also because it was related to the larger mission of moving north and retaking control over Mosul.

The assault, which was being carried out by Iraqi forces and without support from the **United States**, was somewhat stymied by roadside bombs and mines laid by Islamic State. As well, there were attacks with ISIL carrying out a suicide bombing against a camp outside of al-Dour, which left the head of the Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia dead. That being said, Iraqi army forces were making progress, having been able to take control of the village of al-Maibdi, located between Tikrit and the Kurdish-controlled city of Kirkuk, as well as the villages of Siha and Mazraat al-Rahim, to the north of Tikrit. As Iraqi forces moved towards Tikrit, Islamic State terrorists set fire to the Ajil oil field, presumably to ward off encroaching Iraqi forces.

Sunni **Arab** countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, were expressing concern over the involvement of Shi'a Iran's Revolutionary Guard in the eastern flank operations against ISIL, and specifically in the operation in Tikrit. At issue was an intensifying sectarian schism in the Middle East between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, was on the record saying, "The situation in Tikrit is a prime example of what we are worried about. Iran is taking over the country."

Elsewhere in Iraq, Iraqi forces were showing some strength as they were able to advance on ISIL in the town of al-Baghdadi -- close to the site of the Ain al-Asad air base where **United States** Marines were training Iraqi military troops. With this success, Iraqi forces were positioned to retake al-Baghdadi.

Meanwhile, attacks were ongoing elsewhere in Iraq, with a series of bombing and mortar attacks in the first week of March 2015 targeting Baghdad and leaving at least 10 people dead.

By the second week of March 2015, Iraqi forces backed by Iranian-backed Shi'a militias were making progress in their assault on the town of Tikrit. First they were able to subdue ISIL forces in the nearby town of al-Alam, and then they gained dominion over the northern Qadisiya district in Tirit, going street by street in their mission. Iraqi forces appeared to have control over the general hospital while heavy fighting was reported close to the presidential palace. This apparent success in Tikrit showed some degree of an impressive "turnaround" for the Iraqi forces, which were pilloried for abandoning their posts and their military weapons when first confronted by ISIL forces in 2014.

Perhaps in a show of its own strength, intended to demonstrate that it was not actually under pressure, Islamic State carried out a series of suicide car bomb attacks on army and security positions in Ramadi -- the provincial capital of Anbar province and a stronghold of the terror group. Islamic State also struck the northern town of Sinjar,



hitting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Meanwhile, a car bomb killed half a dozen people in the predominantly Shi'ite district of Hurriya in the capital city, Baghdad.

Across the border in Syria, bombing and ground attacks by anti-Assad rebels targeted a government security building in Aleppo. That attack on the Air Force Intelligence compound left dozens of people dead and the building destroyed.

But pro-Assad Syrian forces enjoyed significant success when an air strike hit the commander of the militant Islamist rebel group, al-Nusra Front. According to reports on social media, Abu Homam al-Shami was eliminated along with three other al-Nusra leaders in the strike; although that aspect of the news emerging from Syria remained unconfirmed.

In the Syrian civil war, spurred by the Arab Spring, al-Nusra Front emerged as one of the most powerful anti-government entities in the battlefield. Nusra Front's ties to the terror group, al-Qaida, have been at the forefront of the calculations of the United States government, which has been reluctant to offer unlimited support to anti-Assad rebels due to its fears that they might be inadvertently assisting this terror affiliate. Now, however, with the death of the Nusra Front commander, the edge was with the Syrian Assad forces who had managed to stake out a strategic victory in what they called a "unique operation."

Of note, however, was the fact that with the rise of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, al-Nusra has lost its Jihadist cachet to some degree. In fact, al-Nusra was reported to be interested in cutting ties with al-Qaida and currying favor with certain Arab Gulf states, such as Qatar, known for funding anti-Assad rebels.

In the third week of March 2015, the Tikrit offensive was on pause. Iraqi Interior Minister Mohammed al-Ghaban explained the decision as follows: "We have decided to halt military operations in Salahuddin in order to reduce casualties among our heroic forces... and to preserve the remaining infrastructure." He continued, "The situation is under control and we will choose the appropriate time to attack the enemy and liberate the area."

It seemed that despite the success seen by Iraqi forces against ISIL, they were yet to dislodge the Islamist terror entity from the central districts of Tikrit. With an eye on weakening Islamic State, Iraqi military officials called for intensified air strikes in the area. In an interview with Reuters News, Iraqi Deputy Minister of Defense Ibrahim al-Lami said, "We need air support from any force that can work with us against IS." Rafid al-Jaboori, a spokesperson for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, issued the same call for air strikes, saying, "We have been saying we need more air support for all operations. We welcome air support for all our campaigns against IS."

By the last week of March 2015, those intensified air strikes in Tikrit were happening, thanks to United States warplanes targeting Islamic State positions in that town. Of note was the fact that joint Iraqi and Iranian forces had argued that they could retake Tikrit without United States support. Now, however, it was apparent that with Islamic State still holding central Tikrit, United States air support was needed to dislodge Islamic State from that city.

As March 2015 came to a close, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi said that Islamic State forces had driven out of central Tikrit. A statement from the prime minister read as follows: "Our security forces have reached the center of Tikrit and they have liberated the southern and western sides and they are moving towards the control of the whole city." By the start of April 2015, in the aftermath of the liberation of the city, Tikrit was beset by violence, vandalism, and looting.

The United States-led global coalition was meanwhile carrying out air strikes in the northern part of Iraq, with the goal being to drive Islamic State from the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. That operation was being carried out by Kurdish forces, who have throughout fiercely battled Islamic States and often paying a high price in so doing. To this end, Kurdish military officials reported that their forces were exposed to chlorine gas attacks. General Aziz Waisi described one such chlorine gas bomb as follows: "When it exploded we realized it was not a normal smoke because it caused unconsciousness and vomiting."

It should be noted that in mid-April 2015, the United States Pentagon confirmed that Islamic State lost more than a quarter of the territory in Iraq it held prior to the air campaign that was launched in August 2014. While it was

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deemed too early to confirm that the momentum was no longer with the brutal terror group, according to United States Pentagon spokesperson, Colonel Steve Warren, "some damage" had been inflicted and Islamic State was "slowly being pushed back." To this end, Colonel Warren noted that the frontlines of the zone held by Islamic State was being forced further to the south and to the west in Iraq.

With the intent to build on this success, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi traveled to the United States to request more assistance in the air campaign against Islamic State. However, before the United States could even process this request, in mid-April 2015, on the heels of their victory in Tikrit, Islamic State was carrying out an advance on the city of Ramadi. In fact, reports emerged on April 15, 2015 that Ramadi was about to fall to Islamic State.

By April 22, 2015, Iraqi officials announced that Iraqi security forces were seeing success in their efforts to regain control over Ramadi. In truth, circumstances in the western city continued to be dire for residents, who continued a mass exodus out of Ramadi due to safety concerns. However, the fact of the matter was that Iraqi security forces had rapidly responded to the alarm sounded about Ramadi being on the verge of falling to Islamic State. Moreover, they were making progress in the effort to regain control of Ramadi.

Meanwhile, violence continued elsewhere in Iraq, including two car bombings in Baghdad on April 17, 2015, that resulted in the deaths of around 30 people, as well as an attack using an improvised explosive device in the Kurdish city of Irbil that appeared to target the United States consulate there.

It should be noted that whereas progress had been noted in Iraq, the prevailing dynamics remained in place in Syria where Islamic State continued to hold sway over large swaths of that country. United States Pentagon spokesperson Colonel Steve Warren said that while Islamic State had been defeated in Kobane on the Turkish border, it had nonetheless made gains around Damascus and Homs.

#### Plans for a Mosul Offensive:

The emerging success in Tikrit, as well as the Anwar operation, both of which are discussed above, was part of a broader plan to regain vital territory from Islamic State. At stake was a looming effort to retain control over the key Iraqi city of Mosul from Islamic State. Regaining dominion over Tikrit was of vital significance for three reasons. First, there was the symbolic value of Tikrit as the hometown of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Second, it would be regarded as redemption of sorts for the Iraqi forces, who were strenuously criticized for their initial cowardly response to the advance of ISIL. Third, recapturing Tikrit was related to the larger mission of moving north and retaking control over Mosul. Fourth, the new offensive in Anbar was aimed at reversing the earliest tide of Islamic State's success in Iraq, which really catapulted the terror group from being a regional menace into the world's newest and one of its most notorious terror enclave.

In regards to the Mosul offensive, United States military advisers were training joint Iraqi and Kurdish forces to achieve this end in what was expected to be a spring offensive operation. Mosul -- Iraq's second largest city -- had been under the control of Islamic State since mid-2014. The takeover of Mosul was regarded as one of the darkest chapters in the story of an ascendant Islamic State in 2014. Realizing that regaining control over Mosul would stand as a pragmatic and symbolic development in the fight against the Islamist terror group, a plan was afoot involving Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces.

To that end, United States military advisers were taking a central role in preparing these forces for the impending operation, while Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi confirmed that an offensive operation was in the works to liberate Mosul. Analysts have questioned the wisdom of telegraphing the timeline for the assault, noting that it would give the terrorists time to prepare; however, the United States military has insisted that with Islamic State forces in retreat, it was essential to show that the offensive against the terrorists was moving forward.

Note that in anticipation of the so-called Mosul offensive, a caches of United States-made weapons, ammunition, body armor, and other military supplies were dispatched to Iraq.

Landscape in the Spring and Summer of 2015

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In Iraq, despite the fact that Islamic State was being pushed back, the terror group continued to punish the people of the region. In the first week of May 2015, it was reported that the Islamist terror group had murdered hundreds of Yazidi captives in the Mosul region where Islamic State holds sway. For the Medievalist terror state, Yazidis have been viewed as apostates and have been targeted for attack and even extermination. For the surviving female Yazidis, life promised to be one of misery as the women were forced into servitude as sex slaves. This latest bout of heinous abuse of the Yazidi people reminded the world that Islamic State remained capable of carrying out its campaign of horror.

In other developments in May 2015, Islamic State was advancing on the strategic Baiji oil refinery in central Iraq. For its part, Iraqi authorities refused to offer significant commentary on the situation in Baiji. Nevertheless, all reports from the region indicated that the ISIL terrorists had breached the perimeter, taken control of half the compound, and cut supply lines to Iraqi government troops inside the facility. The assault by Islamic State was able to take place despite a campaign of aerial bombardment by a United States-coalition, highlighting the reality that the fight against the world's worst terror enclave continued to be a monumental task. Indeed, the view of military specialists has been that there are simply too few elite Iraqi fighting forces to combat Islamic State, which holds sway over wide swaths of territory from Iraq to Syria.

That being said, the United States-led coalition and Iraqi forces were enjoying some success in their effort against Islamic State. Of note was the announcement on May 13, 2015 that the deputy leader of the terror group was killed in an air strike in northern Iraq. According to Iraqi authorities, Abdul Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, also known as Abu Alaa al-Afari -- the second most senior leader of Islamic State -- was eliminated as a result of a United States-led air strike on a mosque near Tal Afar in Nineveh. While the United States had no comment on the matter beyond acknowledging that an air strike had been conducted at Tal Afar, Iraqi defense sources released videotaped footage purportedly showing the strike that killed Qaduli (also known as Afari) and several other militants with whom he was meeting.

In the background of this news was the claim by Iraqi sources that Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been sidelined with injuries following an air strike in March 2015. Since that time, Afari had reportedly taken over control of the terror group's operations. Assuming this news of Afari's death is confirmed, it would be regarded as a major accomplishment in the fight against Islamic State. Indeed, with the leader incapacitated and the deputy dead, the terror group would have suffered two successive blows at the very top of its Islamist terror institution.

Of course, it should be noted that these two claims by Iraqi authorities of the incapacitation of Baghdadi and the elimination of Afari were yet to be confirmed by United States authorities. The Iraqi government's record on announcing high profile deaths of militants has been spotty, with many claims being refuted when the said militants emerge alive and well later.

To this end, on May 14, 2015, Islamic State released videotaped footage depicting Baghdadi alive and well -- presumably in an attempt to disprove claims that the terror group's leader was injured and unable to function.

At the end of May 2015, even as the discussion of retaking control over Mosul was ongoing, Islamic State was making gains in Iraq. Indeed, Islamic State was carrying out an advance on the city of Ramadi, ultimately seizing control of that city.

This development constituted a huge blow for Iraqi and global coalition forces who were hoping to reduce the terror group's imprint in Iraq and reverse their gains.

That being said,

Shi'a militias -- largely backed by Iran -- were launching an operation to retake control over Ramadi. It was to be seen if this effort would be successful.

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in addition to Ramadi in the Iraqi province of Anbar, Islamic State had managed to capture the Syrian town of Tadmur and the historic site of Palmyra.

Around the same time in late May 2015, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was struck by violence with bombs exploding at two luxury hotels in the Iraqi capital.

The bombs -- of which at least one was a suicide attack -- went off at the Babylon Hotel and the Ishtar Hotel (the former Sheraton), both of which were known to be popular with foreign nationals. Ten people died as a result of the blasts. While there was no claim of responsibility, blame rested with Islamic State.

Then, on June 1, 2015, Islamic State carried out an attack on military vehicles in Iraq's Anbar province, killing at least 45 police officers. Islamic State suicide bombers used captured Humvee vehicles packed with explosives to target the headquarters of a battalion of the Iraqi Federal Police. The attack, which took place in the region of Tharthar between Fallujah and Samarra, exacted a heavy death toll on the Iraqi federal police officers who happened to be deployed at the base as the ultimate victims.

Several senior officers were among the dead while a Brigade commander was among the wounded.

The suicide attacks on the base in Anbar at the start of June 2015 occurred as a report emerged that about 2,000 Humvee vehicles supposedly under Iraqi control had been stolen by Islamic State. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi officially admitted the loss in an interview with Iraqi media as he said, "In the collapse of Mosul, we lost a lot of weapons... We lost 2,300 Humvees in Mosul alone." It seemed that the Anbar attacks occurred using three of these very vehicles at stake.

On June 8, 2015, with Islamic State still posing a threat in Iraq and Syria, not to mention the wider Middle Eastern region, United States President Barack Obama acknowledged that his country's strategy to defeat the terror group remained "incomplete."

President Obama made his remarks from Germany where he was attending the G-7 summit of the world's most developed countries and in the aftermath of a meeting on the sidelines with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

President Obama explained that there could be no comprehensive strategy by the United States without a full commitment by the Iraqis to rescue their own country from the hands of Islamic State. To this end, the United States leader explained, "We don't have, yet, a complete strategy, because it requires commitments on the part of Iraqis."

President Obama added that the United States Pentagon was in the process of reviewing the plan to train and militarily equip Iraq. He said, "We want to get more Iraqi security forces trained, fresh, well-equipped and focused and Abadi wants the same thing so we're reviewing a range of plans for how we might do that." But the United States president admitted that the plan was being complicated by a notable lack of Iraqi troops to be trained.

President Obama noted that while he had ordered 3,000 United States military forces to Iraq, those personnel often found themselves with "more training capacity" than actual recruits. This pointed observation appeared to bolster his claim that there was only so much the United States could either plan for or actually do without the participation of Iraqis themselves. Indeed, it would require the personal investment of Iraqis themselves to save their own country from being overrun by the world's most notorious terror group. Only a month prior, the new United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter made the significant claim that the loss of Ramadi to Islamic State was at least partially due to the Iraqis' lack of a "will to fight."

Yet even with his call for Iraq to demonstrate more commitment to the process of fighting Islamic State, President Obama nonetheless ordered the deployment of an additional 450 United States troops to Iraq to train and assist Iraqi forces on the front lines.

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General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained the move as being an extension of the existing strategy to assist in the fight against the Islamist terror group. He noted that the United States was providing training and support to Iraqi forces on the ground in Iraq, while ensuring that there were no American ground forces on the front lines. Dempsey said, "We've made some recommendations on potential enhancements to the training and equip mission."

Dempsey also shutdown criticism that the existing approach was defective or lacking, as he said that President Obama had not asked for military options that "would imply the strategy is ineffective."

For his part, President Obama acknowledged that the effort to degrade and ultimately defeat Islamic State was going slowly, as he said, "But it has not been happening as fast as it needs to." Nevertheless, President Obama insisted that while the terror group could rightly be understood as "nimble, aggressive and opportunistic," he was "absolutely confident" the terror group would ultimately be vanquished in Iraq.

In the first part of July 2015 during the holy Muslim period of Ramadan, Islamic State was ramping up attacks in Iraq. In fact, a spate of bombings in the capital of Baghdad during this time period left approximately 30 people dead. Most of the violence took place in Shi'a areas of the city, and ranged from car bombings to suicide attacks.

Islamic State was proud to take responsibility for the bloodshed, stating via social media that the bombings constituted the "pounce of the monotheists on the chests of the apostates."

By mid-July 2015, the government of Iraq announced that it was launching a large-scale military offensive in Anbar province, with an eye on defeating Islamic State there. However, such announcements have taken place in the past without any actual follow-through. It was to be determined if the assault on Islamic State in Anbar would actually proceed.

On July 17, 2015, the terror group, Islamic State, carried out a brutal attack in the eastern province of Diyala in Iraq.

The powerful car bomb exploded at a busy market in the town of Khan Bani Saad in Diyala, killing at least 80 people, including women and children, and utterly destroying several buildings in the area.

It was one of the worst attacks by Islamic State in Iraq since the Islamist terror group seized swaths of Iraqi territory. The timing of the attack coincided with the end of the Muslim hold month of Ramadan, and clearly dampened what should have been a joyful celebration of the Eid ul-Fitr holiday.

In mid-August 2015, as Iraq's government was in the process of enacting structural reforms to its system of governance, the country's landscape was struck by violence when a truck bomb struck the largely Shi'a district of Sadr City in Baghdad, killing close to 70 people. The truck bomb targeted the crowded Jameela marketplace

Islamic State claimed responsibility and made clear its intent was to target Shi'ites. The attack constituted the worst act of terrorism in Iraq since Prime Minister Abadi took office and raised questions as to whether Iraq was adequately addressing the regional threat posed by Islamic State.

In the same period of mid-August 2015, Prime Minister Abadi's predecessor, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, was facing political and legal consequences for his role in fomenting ethno-sectarian tensions in Iraq that led to Sunni support for Islamic State. That terror group went on to seize control over wide swaths of Iraqi territory as the country moved from a national ethno-sectarian crisis to a national security emergency.

At issue was the decision by a parliamentary panel to call for Maliki to face trial over his role in the fall of the strategic city of Mosul to Islamic State.

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Maliki was not the only Iraqi official or former official named in the parliamentary report, which was approved by a parliamentary committee and which would be submitted for a vote by the entire parliament.

As noted by Parliamentary Speaker Salim al-Jaburi: "No-one is above the law and accountability to the people. The judiciary will punish perpetrators and delinquents."

For his part, Prime Minister Abadi was signaling his interest in improving stewardship of Iraq's defense forces by approving court martial procedures that would apply to military commanders and officers who notoriously abandoned their posts during the assault of Islamic State on the city of Ramadi earlier in 2015. The fall of Ramadi in 2015 -- almost a year Islamic State began its assault of aggression in Iraq -- was regarded as a devastating blow to the anti-terrorism effort, and stalled any and all discussion of an Iraqi campaign to regain control over the strategic city of Mosul that was lost a year prior. This move to force members of the Iraqi forces to be accountable for their actions, which included allowing a massive cache of weapons and military equipment to fall into the hands of Islamic State terrorists -- was regarded as a significant shift in Iraqi political dynamics.

Meanwhile, with the ongoing threat posed by Islamic State, the United States army's outgoing chief of staff, General Ray Odierno, said that his country should consider a plan to embed United States troops with Iraqi forces if significant progress was not advanced in the battle against Islamic State.

To this end, he said, "I believe that if we find in the next several months that we're not making the progress that we have, we should probably absolutely consider embedding some soldiers with them, and see if that would make a difference." Odierno noted that United States forces should take on a support role rather than a combat role; however, it was not clear that there was any appetite by the Obama administration in the United States for increased military engagement in Iraq.

Odierno acknowledged that his proposal would only work in the short term and that regional forces should take the lead role in the effort against Islamic State. To this end, he admitted, "We'd probably be right back where we are today six months later. I absolutely believe that the region has to solve this problem. The US cannot solve this problem for the region."

Deputy leader of Islamic State killed in air strike amidst continuing threat posed by terror group

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In the third week of August 2015, the deputy leader of Islamic State (IS), Fadhil Ahmad al-Hayali, was killed in a military strike by United States forces in northern Iraq.

United States officials confirmed the elimination of the terrorist deputy leader, Hayali, also known as Hajji Mutazz, who was the second-in-command to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. (Hayali

functioned as the main weapons and military coordinator for Islamic State, but he was also a key player as regards the group's wider operations including media and basic logistics. As such, his death struck a strategic blow to the terrorist group. As noted by Ned Price of the United States National Security Council, "Hayali's death will adversely impact IS's operations given that his influence spanned IS's finance, media, operations, and logistics."

It should be noted that the title "Islamic State second-in-command" has also been attributed by Iraqi officials to Abdul Rahman Mustafa Mohammed, whom the Iraqi government said was killed as a result of an air strike in northern Iraq months prior. According to Iraqi authorities, Mohammed, also known as Abu Alaa al-Afari, acted as an interim leader of the terror group when Baghdadi was widely reported to have been incapacitated.

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## Recent Developments in effort against Islamic State

In October 2015, a series of bombings across Iraq left scores of people dead. In one attack in the southern town of al-Zubair, located close to the oil city of Basra, a car bombing left at least 10 people dead. In the capital of Baghdad, bombings resulted in more than a dozen people being killed. In the town of Khalis, located in the restive eastern province of Diyala, at least 40 people were killed in attacks there.

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Islamic State, proudly claimed responsibility for the al-Zubair bloodshed alone; however, all the other attacks were also attributed to the Islamist terror group. With the concerted coalition engagement in Iraq against Islamic State ongoing in Iraq, the terror group was now resorting to sporadic acts of terrorism, such as car bombings and suicide missions.

The Kurdish effort against Islamic State was going into high gear in the second week of November 2015 as Kurdish Peshmerga fighters launched an offensive operation aimed at retaking the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar. The immediate objective was to establish a buffer zone for the protection of civilians. Kurdish authorities told international media that their fighters had successfully taken control of villages in the area surrounding Syria, as well as part of a strategic transportation route, known as Highway 47, between Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria used by Islamic State to transport military supplies. Meanwhile, the United States-led international coalition was carrying out sustained air strikes in northern Iraq.

These developments indicated that there was a concerted effort afoot to place increasing pressure on Islamic State in Iraq.

That effort saw some success when only days after the operation was launched, it was announced that Sinjar had been liberated from the clutches of Islamic State.

#### U.S. augments anti-terror strategy for Iraq and Syria --

Recent terror attacks on Lebanese, Russian, and French targets constituted a terrorist trifecta for Islamic State, and could only be understood as manifestations of the terror group's effort to demonstrate its relevance and resilience -- even as it was being subject to strikes from various international actors.

Indeed, the terror enclave was certainly under pressure from a United States-led international coalition, as well as a bombing campaign by Russia. Earlier in November 2015 Islamic State lost control of Sinjar in Iraq as a result of a fierce offensive by Kurdish peshmerga fighters backed by United States air power. In the same period, as discussed above, the United States Pentagon reported that it had targeted the "face" of Islamic State in a drone strike -- the notorious terrorist "Jihadi John" who was shown in barbaric videotaped footage with international hostages who were executed via decapitation. The Pentagon indicated that the drone strike was very likely successful, thus inflicting a symbolic blow against the terror group.

Around the same period, Islamic State was reported to be losing control in Aleppo in Syria.

While these losses were recent, the downward trajectory for Islamic State had been occurring for several months. As such, the terror enclave's evolving imperative might be to show that it still had power and influence.

No longer able to expand its territorial advances, Islamic State was very likely transforming its efforts. Rather than concentrating on building and expanding its so-called Caliphate, Islamic State could be refocusing its ambitions in the direction of international Jihadism.

Should this working theory gain support, it would suggest an acute threat to global security.

Given this burgeoning global security threat, neoconservative critics of President Obama in the United States were clamoring for him to articulate a more muscular foreign policy in regard to Islamic State. At the G20 summit in Turkey, an unusually angry President Obama dismissed the notion of warfare without careful consideration, saying, "It's best that we don't shoot first and aim later." In response to the call for him to extrovert American hegemony and leadership in a robust manner, President Obama said, "If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they want to do, present a specific plan. What I am not interested in doing is posing, or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning or whatever other slogans they come up with ... I'm too busy for that." He added, "What I do not do is to take actions either because it is going to work politically or somehow make America look tough, or make me look tough. And maybe part of the reason is that every few months I go to Walter Reed [a



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military hospital] and I see a 25-year-old kid who is paralysed or has lost his limbs. And some of those are people who I have ordered into battle. So I can't afford to play some of the political games that others play."

One flashpoint issue in the discussion of United States policy regarding Islamic State was President Obama's claim that the terror group had been "contained." Asked how he could make that claim given the ongoing terror activity by Islamic State, President Obama explained, "When I said that we are containing their spread in Iraq and Syria — in fact, they control less territory than they did last year. The more we shrink that territory, the less they can pretend they are somehow a functioning state and the more it becomes apparent that they are simply a network of brutal killers."

He also insisted that it was vital that Islamic State not be treated as a conventional state enemy but rather as a terrorist network. President Obama said, "Our goals here have to be aggressive and leave no stone here, but also recognize this is not conventional warfare. We play into the ISIL narrative when we act as if they are a state and we use routine military tactics that are designed to fight a state that is attacking another state. That's not what's going on here."

In December 2015 when the United States was struck by a massacre in the California city of San Bernardino. President Barack Obama said that the assailants were inspired by Islamic State. In his national address on Dec. 6, 2015, President Obama cast the bloodshed in San Bernardino as "an act of terrorism designed to kill innocent people" and promised to "hunt down terrorist plotters" anywhere they are. At the same time, he insisted that there would be no renewed ground war using United States blood and treasure in the Middle East as he declared, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria."

President Obama's address spurred his hardline conservative rivals to blast his anti-terrorism strategy and argue for a more aggressive approach, marked by a massive ground force engagement in the region. However, President Obama had already augmented the air strike campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with the deployment of military advisors, and at the start of December 2015, he supplemented these forces with a special operations expeditionary force to fight Islamic State. United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter outlined the goals the special operations expeditionary force as follows: "These special operators will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL leaders." For the Obama administration, the imperative was to exploit the special operations expertise in a targeted strategy against Islamic State, rather than the conventional warfare.

Iraqi forces make progress against ISIL in Ramadi --

It should be noted that in December 2015, there was some success against Islamic State as Iraqi military forces managed to recapture a district in the city of Ramadi, which has long been under the control of the terror group. The operation in Tamim was carried out by Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service and was the result of a long process of planning. The capture of Ramadi by Islamic State has been regarded as a notable humiliation for the Iraqi government, making the success in Tamim to be both a strategic and symbolic victory.

The rest of the operation in Ramadi promised to be difficult as the city center was very likely booby-trapped with bombs and subject to attacks by sniper fire and suicide bombers.

Nevertheless, by the last week of December 2015, Iraqi forces had successfully liberated a former government compound in Ramadi from Islamic State, effectively returning it to complete government control. The Iraqi forces on the ground were aided by coalition air power, with an eye on releasing the city from the grip of the Islamist terror group.

This strategic victory marked the defeat of Islamic State in Ramadi after several weeks of fierce fighting. Iraqi defense officials said that aerial surveillance suggested that there was no further human activity of the type that would indicate the presence of ISIL fighters. As noted by an Iraqi military spokesperson, Sabah al-Numani, in an interview with Reuters News: "The complex is under our complete control, there is no presence whatsoever of [IS]

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fighters in the complex. By controlling the complex this means that they have been defeated in Ramadi. The next step is to clear pockets that could exist here or there in the city." A joint operations command spokesperson, Yahia Rasool, said in an interview with Reuters News that after Ramadi was fully secured and cleared of any possible pockets of resistance, it would be transferred to the control of Anbar police and local tribes.

While there were some voices disputing the success of Iraqi forces in Ramadi, and warning that remnants of resistance remained in the area, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi took something of a "victory lap" as he erected the national tri-color flag in Ramadi. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi also said there would be further efforts of this type to come, with the country's defense forces refocusing their efforts on the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Given the fact that Mosul was a large population center under the control of Islamic State, it promised to be another difficult battle.

By the start of 2016, Iraqi forces, backed by United States-led coalition strikes, targeted extremists in the Iraqi city of Haditha, killing approximately two dozen people.

United States-led coalition targets ISIL leadership and resources --

Meanwhile, the United States led an air offensive against Islamic State in the same period of late December 2015, killing 10 Islamic State leaders.

Included in the list of targets were Abdul Qader Hakim and Charaffe al Mouadan, who linked with the terror attacks that took place in Paris a month earlier and left as many as 130 people dead at the hands of ISIL-linked terrorists.

United States Army Colonel Steve Warren, a spokesperson for the United States-led campaign against the Islamist terror group, outlined the development, saying, "Over the past month, we've killed ten ISIL leadership figures with targeted air strikes, including several external attack planners, some of whom are linked to the Paris attacks. Others had designs on further attacking the West." Army Colonel Warren was clear in noting that the increased successes against Islamic State was due to the fact that the coalition was making progress in decapitating the terror group's leadership. He said, "Part of those successes is attributable to the fact that the organization is losing its leadership." Still, he acknowledged there remained much work to do as he added, "It's still got fangs."

Also during this period, the United States' air strike effort was aggressively geared towards hitting Islamic State's oil producing resources, which essentially funds the terror group. The air strike campaign, called "Tidal Wave II," was thus concentrating on oil tanker trucks, oil rigs, pumps and storage tanks. The objective was to hit the targets so as to disrupt the oil related activities for a significant period of time, but without either destroying these oil facilities completely or just inflicting minor damage that could be repaired in short order.

In mid-January 2016, United States air power and military might successfully targeted a banking facility in Mosul used by ISIL. Two 2,000 pound bombs were reportedly used in the operation, which resulted in the banking compound being decimated in via aerial bombardment. The bank was believed to house millions in funds accrued through oil sales, looting, and extortion. The operation thus deprived Islamic State of the funds used to finance the terror enclave.

United States commanders acknowledged that because the bank was located in a civilian area, there was a chance of civilian casualties; however, they opted to move forward with the strike "due to the importance of the target."

As noted by Lieutenant Commander Ben Tisdale, a spokesperson for the United States Central Command, said, "The bulk cash distribution site was used by ISIL to distribute money to fund terrorist activities."

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By February 2016, United States authorities were reporting that the effort against Islamic State was yielding results. Of note was the fact that the estimate of terrorists in Iraq and Syria was declining, likely due to a stall in the influx of foreign fighters, and with the terror group having to resort to forced conscription and child soldiers. As well, payments to the terrorists by the leadership were being reduced due to financial woes. As noted by United States Army Colonel Steve Warren, "We believe that Daesh is now beginning to lose. We see them in a defensive crouch."

Warren also made note of the fact that Islamic State was losing significant portions of territory in Iraq.

Ongoing Violence by ISIL --

Even as these successes were being registered, Islamic State continued to be active. Of note was a suicide bomb attack on the former United States base of Camp Speicher, just outside Tikrit, on Jan. 3, 2016. That attack left a dozen members of the Iraqi security forces dead and at least 20 others injured.

In mid-January 2016, Islamic State claimed responsibility for carrying out an elaborate terror assault in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. This double attack involve suicide bombers targeting the Jawaher shopping complex in a predominantly Shi'ite area of the city, and a car bombing on a commercial street. Together, the two incidences resulted in a death toll of 18, with another 40 people being wounded. A suburb of Baghdad was also struck with an explosion killing seven people.

Separately in the town of Muqadadiya, an attack killed almost two dozen people and injured more than 50 others, while a car bombing at a restaurant in Baquba took the lives of three people.

Iraqi forces look to target Islamic State in Mosul --

In February 2016, following their victory in taking back control over Ramadi from Islamic State two months before, Iraqi forces were refocusing their attention on Mosul. That city fell to the terror group in June 2014 and marked a breakthrough moment in Islamic State's campaign to control territory from Syria to Iraq. Now, in the first part of 2016, the Iraqi army was deploying troops to a base in northern Iraq, with an eye on retaking control of Mosul from ISIL. There had been earlier plans to retake control over Mosul but they were postponed due to concerns that the battle would be difficult, and that Iraqi forces were not quite ready to achieve their objectives.

According to statements from the Iraqi army, the troops had been trained by coalition forces near Baghdad, while officials from the United States-led coalition indicated that the actual schedule for the Mosul offensive operation remained undecided at this time, despite the deployment of troops, as discussed here.

The United States-led coalition also noted that any operation to take back Mosul would be difficult and likely would not be finished by the end of the year.

Charges of "genocide" being advanced in regard to Islamic State

United States Secretary of State John Kerry in late February 2016 indicated that considerations were being made as to whether or not to formally accuse Islamic State of genocide.

Secretary of State John Kerry made this suggestion during testimony before a House Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in which he said that the Obama administration "will make a decision on this" after evaluations were made regarding the process of making a declaration of genocide against the Islamic State. To this end, Kerry indicated that there had to be a rigorous review of the "legal standards and precedents."

Clearly, if the United States wanted to move forward with such a serious accusation against the terror group, it wanted to do so on solid juridical ground.

Of significance was the fact that "crimes against humanity" has been regarded as an easier legal bridge to cross as compared with genocide. As such, there were some administration voices suggesting that the "crimes against humanity" designation might be a preferable path to traverse.

On March 14, 2016, the United States House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to declare the actions of Islamic States to be genocide.

The United States Department of State would thus be compelled to respond with a decision as to whether or not they concur with this designation, or, if another characterization was in order.

Days later on March 17, 2016, United States Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Islamic State -- referred to as "Daesh" -- Whipps Jr., against several ethnic and religious minority groups, including Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'ite Muslims.

Secretary of State Kerry said, "The fact is that Daesh kills Christians because they are Christians. Yazidis because they are Yazidis. Shi'ites because they are Shi'ites."

While the declaration could add weight to the argument in favor of more hardline action against Islamic State, the designation was not expected to significantly change United States policy toward the terror group.

As noted by State Department spokesperson, Mark Toner: "Acknowledging that genocide or crimes against humanity have taken place in another country would not necessarily result in any particular legal obligation for the United States."

Along the same vein,

Jon Alterman, the director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an interview with Reuters News conveyed a similar sentiment. He said, "It may strengthen our hand getting other countries to help. It may free us against some (legal) constraints, but the reality is that when you are fighting somebody, you don't need another reason to fight them."

Iraqi forces announce that they have commenced their anticipated operation to recapture Mosul

In late March 2016, the Iraqi military, backed by United State-led coalition air power, commenced a long-anticipated operation to recapture the northern city of Mosul from Islamic State terrorists. The operation began with Iraqi forces retaking control over several villages in the area, although an arduous and complex effort was in the offing to go after Mosul itself.

As Iraq's second-largest city, which was lost to Islamic State in 2014, its recapture has been considered a priority in the effort against the terror group both in terms of battleground strategy and symbolically.

Islamic State continues its campaign of terror with attack at football match

Meanwhile, however, even as the operation was afoot to go after Islamic State in Mosul, the fact of the matter was that the terror group continued to be active in Iraq. Of note was a suicide bombing attack during a football match at the al-Shuhadaa stadium in the city of Iskandariya in

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Babil province. More than 30 people were killed and scores more injured as a result. Islamic State claimed responsibility.

At the start of April 2016, Iraq was being rocked by no shortage of violent attacks. In one incident, Islamic State claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in the southern city of Basra, which killed five people and injured 10 others. In another attack, the target was a coalition of Shi'ite militias in Mashahdeh to the north of Baghdad, and resulted in the deaths of another five people.

At a security checkpoint in northern Baghdad, a bombing left four people dead, while a bombing at a

restaurant in Nasiriyah killed three people. In Anbar Province, west of Baghdad, two Iraqi security personnel were killed in a suicide car bombing. To the south of Baghdad, a police officer died as a result of an explosives device to the Baghdad. Meanwhile in

Abu Ghraib to the west of Baghdad, mortar rounds struck and killed two individuals.

Islamic State shifts to terror attacks after losing territory

In the spring of 2016, Islamic State was under intensified pressure, faced with significant territorial losses, and thus accelerating its terror attacks. In the first part of 2016, there had been close to 890 attacks, according to reports, which killed more than 2,000 people, As noted by Matthew Henman, the head of IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, which produced the report, "The group is resorting more and more to mass-casualty violence as it comes under heavy pressure from multiple angles."

Meanwhile, the **United States** Department of Defense said that Islamic State's territory in Iraq has shrunk by about 40 percent and by 20 percent in Syria. Of note was the fact that Iraq's military had success retaking control over the western city of Ramadi and advancing west towards the Syrian border. The northern effort, in the direction of Mosul, was slower but ongoing nonetheless. Across the border in Syria, Russian-backed government forces captured significant territory from Islamic State, including the historic city of Palmyra.

As noted by Henman, the aforementioned head of IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, "High profile, mass casualty attacks are a tried and tested method of changing the narrative and deflecting attention away from the problems it is facing." He added, "This is done for internal consumption just as much as external."

Note that in May 2016, three car bombings struck the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, and left scores of people dead. The most bloodshed occurred at a car bombing at a market in largely Shi'a Muslim area of Sadr City where more than 60 people died.

Two other attacks ensued in the northern district of Kadhimiya and the western area of

Jamia, in the west, where the remaining deaths occurred. Islamic State claimed victory.

Also in mid-May 2016, a series of successive bomb blasts in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad left more than 60 people dead. The explosions occurred in three cases in predominantly Shi'a Muslim districts, while a fourth struck an area known for a mixed Shi'a and Sunni population. Blame rested on Islamic State for the carnage.

Note that Syrian cities of Jableh and Tartous on Syria's Mediterranean coast were struck by bombings that killed 150 people and injured more than 200 others at the end of May 2016.

Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks and made clear that it was targeting members of President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite minority.

Iraqi military targets Fallujah in anti-ISIL operation; attacks plague Baghdad

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As May 2016 came to a close, Iraqi government forces were battling Islamic State terrorists close to Fallujah as part of a long-anticipated effort to regain control over the ISIL stronghold. An Iraqi military spokesperson, Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, speaking on state television, said the operation would involve a "careful" advance. Of note was the fact that Iraqi forces have surrounded Fallujah for a year; however, they have refrained from an all-out assault, preferring instead to concentrate on operations against ISIL to the west and north.

Meanwhile, in Baghdad, suicide bombers using both a car and a motorcycle, detonated explosives. A third attack ensued involving a car bomb. In total, more than 20 people were killed and scores more were injured. The attacks targeted the Shi'ite districts of the capital -- Shaab and Sadr City -- thus raising speculation that they were likely carried out by Islamic State. However, a government building in the predominantly Sunni suburb, Tarmiya, to the north of Baghdad, was also a site of attack.

In June 2016, the battle for Fallujah continued as Iraqi government forces, backed by air power from the **United States**-led international coalition operating in the area to defeat ISIL, advanced on the city. There were successes in capturing some key government buildings in the city center; however, ISIL held sway in some portions of the city, and were maintaining their positions with sniper fire, while many houses and streets were laid with explosives making further progress precarious. Despite this reality, Iraqi authorities raised the Iraqi flag aloft the government buildings and claimed victory.

With the city increasingly under siege, with the two sides in battle, there was something of a humanitarian crisis brewing. However, residents were eventually allowed safe passage to flee -- effectively joining the ranks of displaced persons.

Addressing this issue, Prime Minister Abadi said: "We want there to be security and peace in this city for you to go back to live there."

By the end of June 2016, the battle to regain Fallujah was coming to completion and Iraqi forces celebrated taking control of that city from Islamic State.

In a nationally broadcast speech, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi celebrated the victory in Fallujah and signaled that the army would soon turn its attention to Mosul, as he said. "This Iraqi flag is flying in Fallujah. God willing, soon it will be flying in Mosul."

To that latter end, during in a **United States** Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, **United States** President Barack Obama's special envoy, Brett McGurk, noted that the planning effort for a Mosul military campaign was underway. He said, "Mosul will be a significant military challenge but also a political, diplomatic and humanitarian challenge. The planning is now underway."

Meanwhile, the successes by the **United States**-led international coalition fighting Islamic State were on clear display at the end of June 2016.

**United States** air strikes on a convoy in southern Fallija resulted in the elimination of at least 250 Islamic State terrorists.

Iraq struck by worst attack since the 2003 invasion; ISIL blamed; 250 dead

In the first week of July 2016 -- a week after the celebrated recapture of the town of Falluja by Iraqi forces -- Iraq was struck by a devastating terror attack. Indeed, it was soon distinguished as the deadliest terror attack since the 2003 **United States**-led invasion that ultimately brought down the regime of Saddam Hussein.

According to reports from Iraq, the bloodshed was caused by a suicide truck bomb in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. The explosives laden vehicle was detonated in the Karrada district during a busy time of the day as people shopped for goods needed to celebrate Eid al Fitr at the end of Ramadan. The force of the blast was so great that

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it yielded maximum destruction of buildings in the area and killed many people - 250 in total, with hundreds more wounded. Hospitals were overrun by critically injured survivors requiring treatment.

Separately, a roadside bomb exploded at a market in al-Shaab, a Shi'ite district in the north of Baghdad.

At least two people were killed in this incident.

Iraq declared three days of official mourning to mark the bloodshed.

For his part, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was subject to harsh criticism, with his convoy pelted by stones and rocks when he arrived in Harrada to see the damage for himself. Residents were outraged that despite promises of better security, Iraq continued to be mired by instability and ongoing bombings, as seen in this case, with the continuing plague of terrorism. Meanwhile, Interior Minister Mohammed Ghabban declared the security checkpoints through the city to be useless and promptly submitted his resignation.

The attacks in Iraq took place during the Muslim holy period of Ramadan and occurred during a time when similar attacks ensued in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh.

All eyes rested on the notorious terror group, Islamic State, as the likely culprit, which soon claimed responsibility for the suicide attack.

The general consensus was that as Islamic State lost territory across swath of Syria and Iraq due to a **United States**-led global offensive, it was shifting its focus. Rather than expanding its Islamic Caliphate, now Islamic State was re-adjusting its goals to international Jihadist terrorism, for the purpose of remaining relevant.

Supporters of Shi'ite Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr storm parliament inside Baghdad's Green Zone --

At the end of April 2016,

Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone was rocked by turmoil. At issue was the fact that supporters of Shi'ite Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr stormed and occupied the parliament inside the capital's Green Zone. Critics pointed to security failures as the protesters were able to breach the fortified zone. While the Green Zone was placed under lockdown, security forces fired teargas and bullets into the air to try to disperse crowds. As well, the capital city was placed under a state of emergency.

It should be noted that the Sadrist protesters were motivated by failures to implement reforms and delays in approving a new cabinet. They were also railing against corruption in government.

For his part, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called for the arrests of the individuals who had stormed the parliament. He also said that the political turbulence would serve only to help Islamic State, which still held sway over portions of northern and western Iraq. In addition, the prime minister warned that the terror group could take advantage of the turmoil to step up their attacks.

Protesters vacated the parliament and relocated to Celebration Square in the Green Zone on May 1, 2016.

By May 2, 2016, Baghdad's Green Zone was returning to normal; however, the uprising by the Sadrists evoked questions of internal conflict among Iraq's dominant Shi'ite population. Indeed, there were concerns over confrontations between Shi'a brigades which were formed after the Iraqi army collapsed in mid-2014.

The general consensus, though, was that there were divisions among Shi'a political parties, which were manifesting ahead of elections expected to be held in 2018.

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While the Green Zone episode was ensuing, so too was violence at the hands of extremists. On May 1, 2016, Sunni extremists carried out a suicide bomb attack against Shi'ite pilgrims in a southeastern Baghdad suburb, killing almost 20 people.

On May 3, 2016, Baghdad was struck by three bombs at the hands of Islamic State. At least 14 people, including Shi'ite Muslim pilgrims, were among the dead.

Islamic State shifts to terror attacks after losing territory --

In 2016, Islamic State was shifting to Jihadist terrorism as it lost territory of its so-called Caliphate.

Going back to the spring of 2016, Islamic State was under intensified pressure, faced with significant territorial losses, and thus accelerating its terror attacks. In the first part of 2016, there had been close to 890 attacks, according to reports, which killed more than 2,000 people. As noted by Matthew Henman, the head of IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, which produced the report, "The group is resorting more and more to mass-casualty violence as it comes under heavy pressure from multiple angles."

Meanwhile, the United States Department of Defense said that Islamic State's territory in Iraq has shrunk by about 40 percent and by 20 percent in Syria. Of note was the fact that Iraq's military had success retaking control over the western city of Ramadi and advancing west towards the Syrian border. The northern effort, in the direction of Mosul, was slower but ongoing nonetheless. Across the border in Syria, Russian-backed government forces captured significant territory from Islamic State, including the historic city of Palmyra.

As noted by Henman, the aforementioned head of IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, "High profile, mass casualty attacks are a tried and tested method of changing the narrative and deflecting attention away from the problems it is facing." He added, "This is done for internal consumption just as much as external."

From May 2016 through the summer of 2016, Iraq was struck by a succession of attacks at the hands of ISIL. In May 2016, three car bombings struck the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, and left scores of people dead. Islamic State claimed victory. Also in mid-May 2016, a series of successive bomb blasts predominantly Shi'a districts of Baghdad left more than 60 people dead. Blame again rested on Islamic State for the carnage. In July 2016 -- a week after the celebrated recapture of the town of Falluja by Iraqi forces -- Iraq was struck by a devastating suicide attack. The suicide truck bombing was soon distinguished as the deadliest terror attack since the 2003 United States-led invasion that ultimately brought down the regime of Saddam Hussein. The explosives laden vehicle was detonated in the Karrada district during a busy time of the day killed 250 people in total, with hundreds more wounded. Separately, a roadside bomb exploded at a market in al-Shaab, a Shi'ite district in the north of Baghdad. The particular attacks in Iraq took place during the Muslim holy period of Ramadan and occurred during a time when similar attacks ensued in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh.

All eyes rested on the notorious terror group, Islamic State, as the likely culprit, which soon claimed responsibility for the suicide attack.

The general consensus was that as Islamic State lost territory across swath of Syria and Iraq due to a United States-led global offensive, it was shifting its focus. Rather than expanding its Islamic Caliphate, now Islamic State was re-adjusting its goals to international Jihadist terrorism, for the purpose of remaining relevant.

By August 2016, Islamic State was losing its hold on territory in Iraq, while the terror group's leadership was intensifying its harsh tactics in order to retain control. Of note was their penchant for eliminating deserters who tried to flee battleground that was increasingly under fire from coalition forces. Also of significance was the need to recruit increasingly younger and less experienced fighters as the cachet of Islamic State decreased, as living circumstances in the Caliphate degraded, and as the battlefield conditions grew more onerous.

The United States-led coalition's effort to go after ISIL banking structures and oil supply routes were particularly helpful in spurring the deterioration of living conditions within the so-called Caliphate.



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## Pressures on Islamic State --

The pressures on Islamic State were expected to get worse as the Iraqi army, backed by United States forces, prepared for an operation to take back control over Mosul. Already, a mix of Iraqi troops, militias, and Kurdish forces were reclaiming territory from ISIL en route to Mosul.

In the third week of August, pro-Iraqi forces were able to regain control over a swath of territory close to a strategic military base to the south of Mosul, which would now be used as the locus point for the impending assault on Mosul.

One town, Qayara, remained in the hands of Islamic State. Presumably due to the awareness of losses in the area, Islamic State leaders there were using brutal disciplinary tactics of beheadings and other forms of atrocious killings in increased measure.

En route to Mosul, Iraqi forces in the early autumn of 2016 were in the process of retaking control over the northern town of Shirqat.

By September 2016, with the final assault on Mosul appearing to be imminent, Islamic State fighters were closing off districts, constructing a network of tunnels, and building a trench around the city. Their aim was clear -- to protect their large remaining major stronghold in Iraq. A long, arduous, and violent battle was clearly in the offing.

In October 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the start of the offensive to retake Mosul. In a nationally broadcast test on state television, he said, "The hour has come and the moment of great victory is near. I announce today the start of the operation to liberate the province of Nineveh." The operation was being backed by the United States-led International coalition. Accordingly, Brett McGurk, the United States envoy to the coalition said via the social media outlet, Twitter, "We are proud to stand with you in this historic operation.

It should be noted that the assault on Mosul was very likely the most significant military operation in Iraq since the invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003.

That being said, the United States Pentagon has demurred on that country's role in the operation, maintaining the position that it was maintaining an advisory and support capacity. Pentagon spokesperson, Peter Cook, said, "Americans are again playing an advisor role, an enabler role for these Iraqi forces ... Most of the American forces in Iraq are not anywhere close to the front line." He added, "The role of the U.S. forces today is no different than up to this point."

In anticipation of the operation, the Iraqi government sought to allay fears of a sectarian fracas by stating that only military and police would be involved in the Mosul assault. As well, the Iraqi army dropped tens of thousands of leaflets on the city, notifying residents that the assault was about to commence and that civilians would not be targeted. The guidance suggested that a mad dash to flee the city could spark safety issues, residents were urged to remain at home and avoid areas frequented by Islamic State fighters.

By the third week of October 2016, the United States Pentagon made clear that the Mosul effort was going "according to plan," while Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi indicated that the offensive to take back Mosul was actually going along faster than anticipated. To this end, the Iraqi leader said, "The forces are pushing toward the town more quickly than we thought and more quickly than we had programmed." There were some suggestions that ISIL fighters in some areas of Mosul had abandoned booby-trapped houses and were reported to have retreated to Syria.

By the start of November 2016, there was a full battle going on for control over Mosul.

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Iraqi forces backed by Shi'a militias, Kurdish peshmerga and the United States pounded the city using aerial strikes and artillery shelling. As well, battles were going on between Iraqi special forces and Islamic State fighters on the edge of the city.

Speaking of the effort, Counter Terrorism Lieutenant-General Abdul Wahab al-Saidi said, "We are currently fighting battles on the eastern outskirts of Mosul. The pressure is on all sides of the city to facilitate entry to the city center."

Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi noted that part of the goal was to foreclose

escape routes for the Islamic State fighters inside Mosul. In a national address, he said, "God willing, we will chop off the snake's head. They have no escape, they either die or surrender."

At the close of December 2016, Iraqi forces launched a second phase of the ongoing Mosul offensive against Islamic State.

The effort targeted eastern districts of the city— a venue of ongoing battles, with an eye on breaking through the stalemate.

By the start of January 2017, Iraqi forces were making some headway in southeastern districts of Mosul; however, progress was slow. Of concern was Islamic State's use of human shields from among the civilians population in defending the area. As noted by Lieutenant-Colonel Abdel Amir al-Mohammedawi in an interview with Reuters News, "The challenge is that they (IS) are hiding among civilian families, that's why our advances are slow and very cautious." Nevertheless, by mid-January 2017, Iraqi officials were noting that 70 percent of eastern Mosul had been retaken from Islamic State.

Meanwhile, the United Nations noted that trauma casualties in and around Mosul were high, especially in areas hard-hit by fighting.

It should be noted that even as Iraqi forces took the lead in the Mosul operation, United States military advisers continued to play a role.

United States military advisers have assisted in ushering Iraqi fighters to safety when caught in battle with Islamic State terrorists, and in avoiding roadside and suicide bombs. Until the Mosul operation, the United States footprint in Iraq has been subtle; the effort in Mosul, though, had heralded a more visible and active presence.

Islamic State's attacks on Iraq followed by victory for government forces in Mosul --

Two car bombs struck the Iraqi capital of Baghdad at the end of May 2017, leaving more than two dozen people dead and scores more injured. One attack ensued at the al-Faqma ice cream shop in the Karrada district where people were breaking their Ramadan fast. Several hours later, another bomb exploded at Shuhada Square close to the Shuhada Bridge. The notorious Sunni Islamic terror group, Islamic State, said that it was responsible and that it had targeted Shi'a Muslims, whom they view as apostates.

Brett McGurk, the United States envoy representing the multinational coalition of forces fighting Islamic State, expressed his condemnation of the attack. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, he said, "Islamic State terrorists tonight in Baghdad target children & families enjoying time together at an ice cream shop. We stand w/Iraq against this evil."

It should be noted that these attacks occurred even as an ongoing operation was underway to recapture Mosul from Islamic State. To that end, by July 2017, Iraq was declaring victory in Mosul over Islamic State. While fighting continued in the city regarded as Islamic state's Iraqi stronghold, the entry of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in Iraq's second-largest city made clear that the tide had turned and the self-declared Islamist terrorist caliphate was

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on the verge of a significant strategic defeat -- at least on the Iraqi side of the border. Declaring victory, Prime Minister Abadi said, "The world did not imagine that Iraqis could eliminate Daesh. This is all a result of the sacrifices of the heroic fighters who impressed the world with their courage." Still, the overall fight against Islamic State was expected to continue for the next year at least.

Meanwhile, that fight would be aided by the collection of no shortage of valuable intelligence. Of significance was the data garnered in

Mosul, Tal Afar, and Raqqa, after ISIL suffered defeats in these cities. According to the Los Angeles Times, 30 terabytes of data was retrieved and sent to the National Media Exploitation Center in Bethesda, Maryland for analysis. The records included names aliases, countries of origin, and other details related to the profiles of Islamic State fighters. The information was shared with a 19-nation anti-terrorism task force based in Jordan and led by the United States Joint Special Operations Command, which functions under the code name Operation Gallant Phoenix. That entity is charged with tracking and disrupting foreign fighters, terrorist cells, and networks. The task force is led by the U.S. military's clandestine Joint Special Operations Command."

For the people of Mosul, the notion of "victory" was a nebulous one. As of October 2017, as residents of Mosul who had fled Iraq's second largest city during Islamic State's takeover started to return, so did the reality about a return to normalcy. Homes had been destroyed, identification documents were lost, and the separation of families was commonplace, not to mention the fact that food and basic supplies scarce. With aid and humanitarian agencies under pressure, the future for the people of Mosul appeared to be grim.

#### Campaign of Cultural Destruction -

Amidst the intensified effort to vanquish Islamic State, the fact of the matter was that the Islamist Jihadist terror group was still in control of vast swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory, and thus able to continue its disturbing campaign of cultural destruction.

Since 2014, the barbaric terror group has been carrying out this campaign, targeting historic objects and sites deemed to be violations of its strict notions of Islam. In 2014, Islamic State destroyed the tomb of the Prophet Jonah revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. The tomb of Biblical Daniel was also reported to have been decimated. Several other heritage sites around Mosul, such as the centuries-old shrine to Seth -- believed to be the son of Adam and Eve, the Prophet Jirjis Mosque, and the Awn al-Din Shrine, were also demolished. To the west of Mosul in the town of Tal Afar, several Shi'ite shrines and mosques were destroyed by Islamic State.

Now, in 2015, the latest targets were the cultural treasures of the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, dating back 13 centuries. Once the cultural treasures of Nimrud were either destroyed or stolen, Islamic State moved on to the ancient city of Hatra, which was founded by the Parthian Empire over 2,000 years ago. Also in the crosshairs of ISIL were the ancient carvings, statues, and other historic valuables at the museum in Mosul. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) responded by condemning Islamic State, and characterizing the terror group's actions as both "cultural cleansing" and a war crime. UNESCO's head, Irina Bokova, decried the "deliberate destruction of cultural heritage," which she said should be regarded as "the heritage of the whole of humanity."

Undeterred, by the spring of 2015, Islamic State was advancing on the Syrian town of Tadmur, the location of one of the world's most significant archaeological sites was located. Dating back to the 1st and 2nd centuries of the Common Era when the area was under the rule of the Romans, Palmyra was home to the temple of Baal while also bearing elements of the Roman imprint. Antiquities and historic experts were fearful that Islamic State would target Palmyra in its latest barbaric act of cultural and historic destruction.

The actions of Islamic State were reminiscent of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as al-Qaida-aligned Ansar Dine in Mali in 2012. Both extremist Islamist enclaves have been aligned with the terror enclave, al-Qaida, and were responsible for cultural and historic destruction in these two countries, for the purpose of obliterating any monuments they viewed as insufficiently Islamic. Often, such holy sites are declared by

Islamist zealots to be places of "apostasy" instead of prayer, thus resulting in their destruction. Clearly, Islamic State was yet another Islamist terror group dedicated to the task of decimating some of the world's greatest archaeological artifacts and historic sites.

It should be noted that Islamic State retained some mercenary instincts, looting several artifacts, presumably to be sold to blackmarket antiquities merchants to raise money to fund the activities of the terror group.

#### Editor's Note on Islamic State

Islamic State (alternatively referred to as ISIL and ISIS), has gained notoriety for its particularly brutal tactics, ranging from the abductions and mass murders of religious and ethnic minorities, which they view as apostates, and their beheadings of soldiers and journalists. The group has said that it aims to establish an Islamic "caliphate" that would be ruled according to Islamic Shari'a law. Its ambitions are Jihadists and not simply limited to Iraq and Syria; in fact, ISIL has made clear that it intends to extend its control to Jordan and Lebanon. A satellite venue of Islamic State has opened up in post-Arab Spring Libya as extremists have taken advantage of the power chasm there. Another ambition for ISIL is the cause of Palestine. Adherents are required to swear their allegiance to the ISIL leader, Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, known in the public sphere as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi's appeal has, to some degree, been fed by his mystery as he has only rarely been seen in public.

In terms of legacy, ISIL is actually an outgrowth of al-Qaida in Iraq, led by the Jordanian-born terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, al-Qaida in Iraq transposed itself into Islamic State in Iraq. Although it was weakened by the United States-led "surge" in Iraq to deal with the Sunni insurgency, and which included the involvement of Sahwa (Awakening) councils by Sunni Arab tribesmen, Islamic State in Iraq experienced a resurgence in 2010 under Baghdadi. Once Syria was embroiled in a civil war in 2011, Islamic State was able to establish a foothold in Syria, essentially uprooting other extremist and terror groups, such as al-Nusra Front and al-Qaida, by 2013, and ultimately holding control over wide swaths of territory from Syria to Iraq as of 2014, and extending to Libya as of 2015. ISIL's ability to take over Anbar province and then the northern city of Mosul in Iraq in 2014 were key developments in the entrenchment of ISIL in the region.

ISIL's genocidal practices have been characterized most acutely by their infamous and gruesome beheadings of foreign nationals and apostates, but have also included other revolting and repugnant means of execution, such as crucifixions, immolations, and mass shootings. These bloodthirsty techniques of terror and tactics of murder, which are professionally videotaped and disseminated for maximum effect, have been so ghastly that other militant Islamist movements have sought to distance themselves from ISIL. Indeed, the Yemeni wing of al-Qaida (known as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) went so far as to note that beheadings, and the videotaping of decapitations, were to be regarded as un-Islamic. Meanwhile, Lebanon-based Hezbollah, which has been deemed to be a terrorist organization by some countries of the West, made clear that ISIL's tactics of terror were inhumane. These stances by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Hezbollah suggested that even among extremists, militants, Jihadists, and Islamist terrorists, there remained some degree of a "code" that ISIL had apparently violated.

It should be noted that ISIL's barbarism and brutality has had a double effect. First, the brutality appears to have functioned as a recruitment tool for other murderous Islamist extremists across the world. To date, it is not known how many ISIL fighters exist in the Middle East although estimates suggest that as many as 30,000 Islamic State fighters are in the Iraq-Syria region. These fighters come from across the world although, as Libya has slipped further into failed state status, it is believed to be the largest single source of terrorists to the cause. That being said, ISIL has attracted disgruntled youth from Europe and the Americas as well, with recruits often traveling through Turkey to enter ISIL-controlled territory. Second, even as ISIL's barbarism has been a recruitment tool, it has simultaneously stimulated the reluctant engagement of a United States-led international coalition in an anti-Islamic State mission.

Socio-economic strife is a popular -- and often facile -- explanation for extremism and activism. It certainly applies to the roots of the Arab Spring and specifically the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, for example, but does not apply to ISIL. Yes, the power chasms created in the wake of the Arab Spring -- specifically in Libya but also in other

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countries in the region -- certainly created the conditions for recruitment. But creating fertile ground for recruitment still does not address the reason why people would be attracted to ISIL.

Likewise, the call for more education may have resonance in countries where young people are educated only about Islam in Madrassas, or in impoverished regions where people simply have no access to education at all. But these cases do not properly apply to ISIL recruits and sympathizers. The problem is not a lack of education -- most of these recruits are computer savvy and were recruited via the Internet while using their own laptops or in Internet cafes. Indeed, many youth ISIL recruits were from middle class or even wealthy families -- certainly not backgrounds without marked by socio-economic hardship.

Of note was the revelation that the so-called "Jihadi John" shown in the gruesome beheading propaganda videos used by Islamic State was actually a well-educated and well-heeled Kuwaiti-born man, Mohammed Emwazi, who later settled in the United Kingdom where he graduated from the University of Westminster with a degree in computer programming. The theory that extremists, such as Emwazi, would be drawn to terrorism as a result of economic strife or due to a lack of education, is simply inoperable in such cases. (Note that Emwazi was killed in a United States drone strike in November 2015.)

It should also be noted that recruits and sympathizers to the Islamic State cause are also not necessarily from strict Muslim families; indeed, there were reports that many ISIL recruits were actually fairly new to hardline Islam with translations of instructional introductory texts on Islam being a particularly popular purchase for them.

It would seem that many recruits to ISIL appeared to be the same type of profile as vulnerable youth likely to join gang or cults, susceptible to brainwashing, and thus excellent candidates for adherence to Islamic State's religious ideology.

That being said, to properly understand the attraction of ISIL, it is imperative to address the ideological appeal of hardline and regressive Islam, which embraces barbaric practices of execution, such as beheadings and crucifixion, while integrating socio-governing practices such as conquest and the enslavement of women. Well-meaning public figures have cast these tactics of terror and abuses of humanity as "perversions" of Islam. Left unsaid is that fact that they are actually clear dictates that come from historic Islam, and which have been embraced by ISIL as the "true" path to salvation, irrespective of the fact that their practices are a violation of modern understandings of human rights.

Indeed, Islamic State must be an apocalyptic and millenarian death cult, with a strict Medieval interpretation of Islam at the core and a gruesome theatre of murder as the main attraction for persons with a sense of psychopathic piety. Relying on apocalyptic prophesies of Islamic Jihadist ascendancy and an ultimate "Day of Judgement," the expansion of Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria, and even Libya, was being understood as a sign of "victory." Stated differently, the rapid rate of expansion (read: victory) by ISIL in Iraq and Syria in 2014 functioned to empower sympathizers and recruits to the ISIL cause.

Given this paradigm, the only prescription for defeat would be the disruption of what looks like an unstoppable juggernaut by ISIL. That being said, the texture of that defeat would have to be carefully -- and globally -- crafted since ISIL militants believe in the apocalyptic prophesy of a "final" confrontation with the West. Rather than facilitating that end, international stakeholders have noted that the preferable path would be to target this Islamist Jihadist terror entity as part of a global coalition. With United States-led air strikes only going so far to destroy ISIL, there would ultimately be a need for ground forces. An effective strategy against ISIL would be one that looks to Arab "boots on the ground" rather than feeding the hunger by Islamists for a Crusades-style war with the West. It was to be seen if the attacks by Islamic State on a Russian jetliner and in Paris, which yielded hundreds of deaths, would change this calculus.

It should be noted that Islamic State is sometimes pejoratively referred to as "Daesh." Islamic State rejects this term of reference, which sounds roughly in Arabic to the words "Daes" which means "one who crushes something underfoot" and "Dahes" which means "one who sows discord." For precisely these negative associations, the enemies of Islamic State have increasingly used the term "Daesh" to describe the terror group in defiance.

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### Special Note on Government in Iraq

Iraqi parliament approves significant overhaul of government; executive government structure and judicial system to be reformed --

In August 2015, the Iraqi parliament approved a significant overhaul of the government, effectively reforming the structure of the government, ameliorating the judicial system, reducing bureaucracy and corruption, in addition to expanding the powers of the prime minister.

These moves have been broadly applauded across partisan and sectarian lines in Iraq, as well as being lauded internationally.

Under the comprehensive overhaul, the provisions for multiple vice presidents and deputy prime ministers would be eliminated. This layer of executive posts had been created to offer political influence to the main ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq -- Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds -- and thus build a more inclusive government in a country with complex ethno-sectarian divisions.

However, in the years after the invasion and occupation of Iraq, these posts had actually been transposed into arenas for patronage and corruption.

The move would effectively remove former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki from the reins of power since he had continued to hold office as vice president even after he was forced to step down from power as the head of government in 2014 when the terror group, Islamic State, gained control over wide swaths of the country in the escalating ethno-sectarian crisis.

Sidelining Maliki held significant political symbolism as he has been largely been blamed for fomenting the ethno-sectarian tension that gave rise to Sunni support for Islamic State in 2014.

Symbolism aside, a parliamentary panel was now calling for Maliki to face trial over the fall of the city of Mosul to Islamic State, making clear that there would be no shortage of political consequences for Maliki in the offing.

In addition to Maliki being stripped from executive power entirely by the elimination of the vice president role, the hand of the new head of government, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, would be strengthened. Of note would be the prime minister's new power to fire various provincial and regional officials.

But Prime Minister Abadi started the work of sacking officials within his own cabinet and from among his own aides. In this way, he was acting in good faith on his commitment to streamline cabinet ministries and reduce the country's bureaucracy.

Prime Minister Abadi was also signaling his interest in improving stewardship of Iraq's defense forces by approving court martial procedures that would apply to military commanders and officers who notoriously abandoned their posts during the assault of Islamic State on the city of Ramadi earlier in 2015. The fall of Ramadi in 2015 -- almost a year Islamic State began its assault of aggression in Iraq -- was regarded as a devastating blow to the anti-terrorism effort, and stalled any and all discussion of an Iraqi campaign to regain control over the strategic city of Mosul that was lost a year prior. This move to force members of the Iraqi forces to be accountable for their actions, which included allowing a massive cache of weapons and military equipment to fall into the hands of Islamic State terrorists -- was regarded as a significant shift in Iraqi political dynamics.

Other key changes involved the amelioration of the judicial system, with an eye on targeting manifold corruption. Prime Minister Abadi acknowledged that tackling corruption would be difficult. In a nationally-broadcast speech, he anticipated opposition, saying, "The corrupt will not sit idly by. Those with interests and privileges will defend their

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interests and privileges. Some of them will even fight for them. They will attempt to sabotage every step we take towards it." He would be helped in his reformist task by support from Iraq's most powerful Shi'a cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who gave his blessing to the reforms. To this end, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged Prime Minister Abadi to "strike with an iron fist" against corruption.

Note that by the end of August 2015, Baghdad and southern Iraq were subject to no shortage of demonstrations as people took to the streets to demand better public services, including improving electrical power supplies. But the demonstrations were also supportive of Prime Minister Abadi's reform agenda as people also demanded greater accountability for corrupt politicians.

## Special Report

Kurdish independence referendum sparks power struggle with Iraqi government; Iraqi military takes control of central Kirkuk as Kurds flee; Iraqi Kurds freeze results of the independence referendum in order to secure a ceasefire

## Summary:

An independence referendum went forward in the Kurdish north of Iraq and delivered decisive ratification for the path of sovereignty. Following that independence referendum in the northern Kurdish region of Iraq, tensions have flared between the central government of Iraq in Baghdad and the Kurdish leadership of the autonomous region in the north. Reports of "foreign fighters" with Kurdish nationalist ties spurred the Iraqi government to Kirkuk to take control of the area from Kurds, who have held sway there since battling Islamic State terrorists there years prior. In order to secure a ceasefire and dialogue with Baghdad, Iraqi Kurds moved to freeze the independence referendum results.

## In Detail:

The autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq was expected to hold a referendum on full independence in late September 2017. Kurds make up the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East region, yet they do not belong to an actual nation state. Instead, the Kurdish diaspora is spread across the world. In Iraq, Kurds make up a significant minority of between 15 percent to 20 percent and have faced repression, before receiving some degree of autonomy in recent decades, albeit short of actual independence.

A week ahead of that long-anticipated independence referendum in 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi formally called for the suspension of the referendum, pending a Supreme Court ruling on its legality. However, since Iraq cannot actually enforce the prime minister's call, Kurdish leaders were well within their rights to go forward with the referendum. Indeed, Iraq's Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, insisted that the referendum would take place, as planned.

The political dissonance being produced by the referendum within Iraq aside, it was also cause for consternation internationally. Both Turkey and Iran, which are home to their own Kurdish populations with aspirations of self-determination, have opposed the notion of an independent Kurdish homeland. The prospect of an autonomous and sovereign Kurdistan would likely spur separatist leanings among Iranian Kurds, while emboldening the already-activated Kurdish Workers Party in Turkey (known by the acronym, PKK). With this possibility in mind, Turkey wasted little time in commencing military exercises close to its border with Iraq, and warning that it would respond to any perceived threats to Turkish sovereignty. Iran did likewise and launched joint military exercises with Iraqi troops along the borders with Iraq's Kurdistan region.

Even the United States entered the fray, expressing concern that the Kurdish independence vote could obstruct the effort against the Islamic State (IS) terror group in the region. Meanwhile, the government of the United Kingdom indicated that it was committed to the territorial integrity of Iraq. The United Kingdom's Defense Secretary Michael Fallon was expected to meet with Iraqi Kurdish leaders in Irbil, with an eye on suspending the vote and exploring alternative scenarios for Kurdish autonomy. Indeed, the only country to have outright support the Kurdish independence bid was Israel.

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Irrespective of these aforementioned efforts to stymie and suppress the Kurds' independence aspirations, the referendum went forward and delivered decisive ratification for the path of sovereignty.

This development raised the anger of the Iraqi government, which was focused on the territorial integrity of the Iraqi nation state. Accordingly, the government of Iraq in Baghdad responded to the referendum by instituting international flights ban on Kurdish airports.

For allies in the region, as well as allied actors in the region, including the United States and the United Kingdom, there were anxieties that the independence move by the Kurds might hurt the effort to fight Islamic State.

Turkey was perhaps the most opposed to an independent Kurdish state, given its longstanding fight with the Kurdish Workers Party (known by the acronym, PKK) in that country, which has been accused of acts of terrorism. Turkey, as discussed above, has long feared that an independent Kurdish nation state would only fuel the PKK. As such and in retaliation for the holding of the independence referendum, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan warned that his country would levy harsh sanctions on the Kurdish northern region of Iraq.

By October 2017, Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region announced that presidential and parliamentary elections would be held on Nov. 1, 2017. In reaction, the federal government of Iraq in Baghdad imposed sanctions on Kurdish banks and stopped foreign currency transfers to the Kurdish region. These punitive moves were intended to pressure the Kurds, given their ostensible efforts to further bolster and legitimize their autonomy -- presumably along a longer march to full independence. As well, the Iraqi government in Baghdad rejected an offer by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to discuss independence.

That being said, it should be noted that in the aftermath of the referendum, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) did not follow up by declaring independence. Indeed, the announcement of presidential and parliamentary elections were not intended to be for an independent state, but for the existing autonomous Kurdish region.

To that end, the presidency of the Kurdish region was an open question since Kurdish law stipulates a two term limit and incumbent President Masoud Barzani started his tenure in 2005, and his second term was extended in 2013 amidst violence in the region. Technically, it was unclear how Barzani could run for a third term, given current law. Regardless of who would actually be eligible for the presidency, the campaigning was set to commence in mid-October 2017.

While these tensions were flaring between the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Kurds in the north, former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani died in Germany in early October 2017.

The veteran politician was perhaps one of the country's most famous persons of Kurdish background. He suffered a stroke in 2012 and stepped down from power two years later.

Talabani was buried at a grave on the Dabashan hill overlooking Sulaimaniya close to his family home in the northern Kurdish region of Iraq. The Kurdish flag draped on his coffin provoked anger by Iraqis who objected to the president of the country being buried under the Kurdish flag and not the Iraqi flag. Of note, however, was the absence of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi at Talabani's funeral.

Note that Talabani served as president of Iraq -- a post as head of state of Iraq; the election to the Kurdish presidency occupied by Barzani as of October 2017 was intended to fill the leadership post of the Kurdish autonomous region. Talabani's views about the Kurdish independence referendum of 2017 were unknown since he was too ill to speak on the matter. That being said, Talabani generally had good ties with the post-invasion central government in Iraq.

Note that the serving President of Iraq, as of Oct. 2017 was Fuad Masum, a Kurd.

In mid-October 2017, Kirkuk was turning into a flashpoint between Iraqi and Kurdish peshmerga fighters, as the former drove out the latter from the southern outskirts. The government of Iraq in Baghdad declared: "The central



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government and regular forces will carry out their duty of defending the Iraqi people in all its components including the Kurds, and of defending Iraq's sovereignty and unity."

That statement from Baghdad was issued just before the expiration of a deadline for Kurdish peshmerga forces to withdraw from areas they took control in 2014 during the thick of battles against the Islamic State terrorist group. The city of Kirkuk would have to be viewed as high value terrain, with the broader province being home to three major oil fields. In the event of an independent Kurdistan, control over Kirkuk would be a matter of contestation since Baghdad and the Kurds would want oil revenues.

The Iraqi government in Baghdad said that it was targeting Kurdish peshmerga -- a key fighting force in the effort to drive out Islamic State terrorists from Iraq -- because there were "foreign" Kurdish forces among them.

The Iraqi government in Baghdad asserted that the presence of foreign Kurdish forces constituted a "declaration of war." Indeed, the National Security Council, led by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, said some members of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were among "fighters not belonging to regular security forces in Kirkuk." The National Security Council characterized the development as "a dangerous escalation." Moreover, it added, "It is impossible to remain silent" given the "declaration of war towards Iraqis and government forces."

For their part, Kurdish officials denied that fighters from Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were in their midst. General Jabar Yawer, chief of the peshmerga ministry, said, "There are no PKK forces in Kirkuk, but there are some volunteers who sympathize with the PKK."

While there were talks going on in mid-October 2017, with an aim to tamp down tensions and resolving the dispute, there was no immediate breakthrough between the Iraqi government and Kurdish officials.

Instead, the Kurds were hardening their position with the issue of the Kurdish referendum coming back to the fore. Hemin Hawrami, an adviser to the Kurdish region's presidency, Barzani, said via twitter that the main Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), were united in rejecting "any demands to nullify the referendum results" and to "refuse preconditions" on talks.

Note that on Oct. 16, 2017, the Iraqi military entered central Kirkuk retaking areas that had been under Kurdish control since Kurdish forces fought Islamic State there years earlier. Of note, the Iraqi military said it had captured control of the K1 military base, the Baba Gurgur oil and gas field, as well as state-owned oil company's offices.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said via a statement that the operation in Kirkuk was necessary to "protect the unity of the country, which was in danger of partition" because of the independence referendum. He urged citizens to "cooperate" with Iraq's armed forces. Abadi also ordered the Iraqi flag to fly over the area. There were reports from Reuters news of Iraqi forces removing the Kurdish flag.

The Iraqi military's capture of Kirkuk from the Kurds caused Kurdish political parties to devolve into infighting with the Peshmerga General Command, led by President Massoud Barzani of the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), accusing the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of assisting in a "plot against the people of Kurdistan."

The Kurdish people of Kirkuk were reported to be fleeing as a result of the influx of Iraqi forces.

At the geopolitical level, with Iraq touting the fact that it had seized control over Kirkuk, and with the broader declaration of victory over Islamic State, United States Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that the time had come for Iran-backed militias to disband. But Abadi had a very different view, saying that the militias were, in fact, the "hope of Iraq and the region."

Alert:

On Oct. 24, 2017, Iraqi Kurds moved to freeze the results of the independence referendum, in order to secure a ceasefire and dialogue with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. The Kurdistan Regional Government explained that it was "obliged to act responsibly in order to prevent further violence and clashes." The Kurdistan Regional Government also called for an end to "all military operations" in the region.

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## Government Note

Former Iraqi President Talabani laid to rest in his home Kurdish region

Former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani died in Germany in early October 2017.

The veteran politician was perhaps one of the country's most famous person of Kurdish background. He suffered a stroke in 2012 and stepped down from power two years later.

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New president and prime minister for Iraq months after election

In October 2018, months after parliamentary elections had been held, the political deadlock was broken and Iraq had a new president and a new prime minister.

The political shifts were set in motion on May 12, 2018, when parliamentary elections were held in Iraq. At stake was the matter of which party or bloc would have the right to form the next government of Iraq. Typically, the party or bloc with the control over the most seats in parliament would form the government, and the leader of that party or bloc would become the prime minister.

According to the constitution of Iraq, there is a bicameral legislature. That legislature is composed of a Council of Representatives where members serve four-year terms, and an upper house, the Federation Council, which is yet to be established. As such, the election action would be in the Council of Representatives.

The previous elections were held in 2014. In these elections on 2018, the big question was whether Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's bloc would, as expected, emerge victorious.

On election day in 2018, Iraqis went to the polls. Once the votes were counted, it was apparent that Iraqi voters had opted for change -- and of a jarring type. The Sairoon alliance, controlled by populist cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, was on track for victory, according to the country's electoral commission. It should be noted that the Sadrist bloc has long been known to harbor anti-American sentiment. In second place was the Fatah bloc of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia chief, Hadi al-Amiri. In a shocking development, the Nasr bloc of the pro-Western Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was trailing in third place. All estimations were that Sadr's bloc would take about 54 seats. Amiri's bloc was on track for 45 seats. Abadi's coalition would take about 39-40 seats.

The emergence of Sadr as the likely winner of the Iraqi election has presented a challenge for the United States, should he actually be charged with forming a government. Whereas Abadi balanced the government's relationship with both the United States and Iran, Sadr was known to be hostile to both countries. Indeed, Sadr led an uprising against United States forces operating in Iraq, while at the same time repelling influence from Iran. In 2018, his

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campaign was expressly Iraqi nationalist in flavor to the consternation of Iran, which telegraphed that they would oppose a Sadrist government next door in Iraq.

It was still possible that Abadi might be in a position to lead the government, assuming he was able to work with Sadr to forge a broad coalition. Those moves were yet to be determined. Although Sadr's bloc had the most votes, Sadr himself did not run for election, meaning that he was not positioned to be prime minister.

Note that in mid-May 2018, Sadr made clear that he would be looking to form a broad coalition, quite likely involving several political rivals including Abadi's coalition, Kurdish parties, and others.

In the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, the political deadlock was broken when the new parliament elected Barham Salih to be the new president of the country.

At the start of October 2018, Salih was elected in an indirect parliamentary voting exercise with 219 out of 329 votes. Consistent with Iraqi provisions, Salih was a Kurd, but one who has supported the notion of Iraqi territorial integrity and who has vowed to be a head of state for all Iraqis.

Salih's victory was emblematic of the internal battle going on between the main Kurdish parties -- the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Earlier in 2018, Salih left the PUK to form his own faction, the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, before leaving his own creation and rejoining the PUK, ultimately becoming the party's nominee.

Soon thereafter at the start of October 2018, President Salih called on a political independent, Adel Abdul Mahdi, to form the next government. It was to be seen how long the government formation process would take. At issue was the question of how many ministries and positions could be divided between the main Shi'ite blocs.

Mahdi would be helped by the fact that he was supported by both the Sairoun Alliance, which was aligned with the anti-Iran cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as the Fatah Coalition, which was supported by Iranian-backed militias.

Meanwhile, outgoing Prime Minister Abadi signaled a peaceful transition of power, wishing the new premier "success in shaping and choosing who best to fill the government" via tweet.

Note: In Iraq, the presidency is reserved for a Kurd, the parliamentary speakership for a Sunni, and the premiership for a Shi'ite.

Following Trump's visit to troops, Iraqi lawmakers demand U.S. troop withdrawal

On Dec. 26, 2018, United States President Donald Trump traveled to Iraq to visit United States troops at the Al Asad Air Base.

The event had all the makings of a campaign rally, with Trump signing caps with his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," emblazoned on them, claiming that the U.S. was once again respected in the world, and declaring, "We're no longer the suckers, folks."

The president also said that he provided troops with their first pay raise in 10 years. In truth, this was not accurate as U.S. troops have received periodic pay raises over the years. However, the president, not always known for faithfulness to the facts, was focused on delivering good news to troops serving abroad in a rally-like setting where he appeared to be very well received.

The reception by Iraqi lawmakers, however, was something quite different. Many officials in Baghdad decried the surprise visit by Trump to be a violation of their national sovereignty.

As with all visits by United States presidents to combat zones, Trump's trip to Baghdad was undertaken amidst the highest levels of secrecy for security reasons. But in a departure from normal protocol, the U.S. president was only "in country" for three hours and did not meet with the Iraqi prime minister, thus incurring the anger of many in Iraq.

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The displeasure was amplified by the fact that Trump's visit occurred at a time when post-election Iraq was already chaffing against foreign influence.

To be specific, the new parliament of Iraq was now dominated by members of the Sadrist bloc -- supporters of the populist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr and his Islah bloc campaigned on a nationalist platform, arguing for reduced influence by foreign powers -- particularly that of the United States and Iran.

Many Iraqi lawmakers compared Trump's visit to the post-2003 invasion period when the United States exerted hegemony over Iraqi terrain. Indeed, it was a time when former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was effectively ousted from office and the United States operated as the occupying power. Sabah al-Saidi, the head of the leading Sadrist Islah political bloc in the Iraqi parliament, said, "Trump needs to know his limits. The American occupation of Iraq is over." Trump, he added, was treating Iraq "as though Iraq is a state of the United States."

Saidi's displeasure was shared by other lawmakers from across the political spectrum, with members of parliament calling for a vote to expel U.S. forces from Iraq. Of note was the fact that the pro-Iranian Binaa bloc, which has been hostile to the U.S. presence in Iraq on an ordinary day would inevitably favor an exit of U.S. troops from Iraqi soil.

Meanwhile, Qais Khazali, the head of the Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia, which battled Islamic State in northern Iraq, promised via the social media outlet, Twitter, that either parliament would vote to expel U.S. forces from Iraq or the militias would get them out by "other means."

Note: Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing occupation of Iraq by the United States under the administration of George W. Bush, President Barack Obama made good on a campaign promise to get end the war in Iraq and withdraw U.S. troops from that country. The withdrawal of U.S. troops occurred in 2011. A limited number of U.S. troops, as part of a global coalition, were invited by the sovereign Iraqi government to return in 2014 to fight the terror group, Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). During his visit to Iraq, President Donald Trump declared that the fight against ISIL had been won, thus his decision to withdraw troops from Syria. Since the presence of U.S. troops from 2014 to 2018 was for that purpose of fighting ISIL, Trump's declaration that U.S. troops would remain in Iraq indefinitely was regarded as perplexing.

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Written by Dr. Denise Coleman, Editor in Chief, [www.countrywatch.com](http://www.countrywatch.com)

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