The Iraq We Left Behind
Welcome to the World’s Next Failed State
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From our March/April 2012 Issue

Caught in the crossfire: an Iraqi soldier on patrol in Baghdad, March 2009.
(Mohammed Ameen / Courtesy Reuters)

Nine years after U.S. troops toppled Saddam Hussein and just a few months after the last U.S. soldier left Iraq, the country has become something close to a failed state. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki presides over a system rife with corruption and brutality, in which political leaders use security forces and militias to repress enemies and intimidate the general population. The law exists as a weapon to be wielded against rivals and to hide the misdeeds of allies. The dream of an Iraq governed by elected leaders answerable to the people is rapidly fading away.

The Iraqi state cannot provide basic services, including regular electricity in summer, clean water, and decent health care; meanwhile, unemployment among young men hovers close to 30 percent, making them easy recruits for criminal gangs and militant factions. Although the level of violence is down from the worst days of the civil war in 2006 and 2007, the current pace of bombings and shootings is more than enough to leave most Iraqis on edge and deeply uncertain about their futures. They have lost any hope that the bloodshed will go away and simply live with their dread. Acrimony in the political realm and the violence in the cities create a destabilizing feedback loop, whereby the bloodshed sows mistrust in the halls of power and politicians are inclined to settle scores with their proxies in the streets.

Both Maliki and his rivals are responsible for the slow slide toward chaos, prisoners of their own history under Saddam. Iraq today is divided between once-persecuted Shiite religious parties, such as Maliki's Dawa Party, still hungry for revenge, and secular and Sunni parties that long for a less bloody version of Saddam's Baath Party, with its nationalist ideology and intolerance of religious and ethnic politics. Meanwhile, the Kurds maneuver gingerly around the divisions in Baghdad. Their priority is to preserve their near autonomy in northern Iraq and ward off the resurrection of a powerful central government that could one day besiege their cities and bombard their villages, as Baghdad did throughout the twentieth century.

All sides hold the others responsible for all the friends and family killed during the Saddam era and the civil war that followed the U.S. invasion. All of Iraq's political leaders seem to live by the maxim that no enemy can become a partner, just a temporary ally; betrayal lurks around every corner. Each politician grabs as much power as he can, and unchecked ambition, ego, and historical grudges lead them all to ignore the consequences of their behavior for Iraq's new institutions and its society. By turning a blind eye to Maliki's authoritarianism, U.S. officials let Iraq's politics disintegrate.

This was not the Iraq the United States envisioned as it planned its invasion less than a decade ago. After toppling Saddam in 2003, U.S. policy aimed to create a democratic state that enshrined civil liberties; national reconciliation; a fair, apolitical judiciary; and freedom of speech. However, this goal was jeopardized from day one of the U.S. occupation by a series of debilitating blunders: not sending enough U.S. forces to secure the country, dissolving the old Iraqi military, and allowing a draconian purge of Baath Party members from civilian ministries. It was only belatedly, in Iraq's darkest hour, that the Bush administration sent thousands more troops to stop the civil war that had erupted. During the "surge," in 2007, the United States forced the ruling Shiite religious parties to take steps toward making peace with the Sunnis, blocked blatantly political arrests, and worked to marginalize, if not jail, officials implicated in violence. The hope was that improved security would allow Iraq to reach stability and acquire the trappings of liberal governance.
Maliki and his colleagues are not the only ones to blame for the dashing of these hopes and the slide away from democracy. Since the last months of the Bush administration and the beginning of the Obama presidency, rather than concentrate on shoring up democratic principles, as it had during the surge, Washington has instead focused on securing its long-term strategic relationship with Baghdad, especially with the prime minister, so that it could more easily withdraw U.S. forces. In the process, the United States failed to capitalize on the gains of the U.S. troop surge -- the Iraqi people's renunciation of religious extremists and desire for normalcy -- thereby damaging the chances that a unified, non-sectarian government could emerge.

Endemic corruption within the army and the police feeds into broader, more systemic problems within Iraq's security apparatus. The culture of graft leads to crippling inefficiencies and dangerous gaps: commanders pad military payrolls with soldiers who do not exist, military officers and ministry officials receive kickbacks on contracts for everything from food supplies to defense equipment, and senior officials create skeleton companies to pilfer money from the Treasury.

The toxic brew of corruption undermines any hopes for reform and improved governance. Adel Abdul Mahdi, who was Iraq's vice president until he resigned last summer in protest over Maliki's bloated cabinet and the culture of entitlement among officials, told me that corruption is so pervasive that it is blocking the provision of basic services. For example, as he explained, "mafias" in business and the government make money off the lack of progress in the electricity sector through overpriced contracts and sales funneled to politically connected but inefficient firms.

This culture of corruption filters up to the highest levels of government: even Iraq's national budget is shrouded in mystery, with appropriations announced and spent with little transparency. Baghdad has spent more than $400 billion since 2004, but the government is only now preparing to release a final account of its budgets from 2004 to 2009. Most of the cash spent will likely never be properly accounted for. In 2011, Baghdad reported that it did not know how much of the $25 billion that the central government had advanced to ministries, local governments, and state companies as of the middle of 2010 had actually been spent or if any excess funds could be returned.

The only hope Iraq has of escaping a future of war or corrupt, authoritarian rule is for the United States and the international community to start pushing hard for power sharing and democracy. Since Iraq's 2010 elections, Washington has completely failed on this score. Even with U.S. soldiers gone from the country, the United States retains leverage over Iraq. It can and should, for example, threaten to keep Iraq locked in its so-called Chapter 7 status in the United Nations, which deprives Iraq of full sovereignty and requires it to make reparations payments to Kuwait. And it should warn Iraq that it will cancel the sale of U.S. fighter jets, tanks, and surveillance equipment to the government unless it changes course. Iraq's leaders need to know that the international community has "redlines."

The local elections in 2013 and the national elections the year after will be a test of whether Iraq's leaders indeed believe in representative government or whether those in power now will try to hold on to it by any means necessary. Maliki is currently pursuing a number of officials on the electoral commission's staff with corruption investigations. And in January 2011, he won a court ruling that placed the commission under his authority, rather than under the parliament's. Whereas some Iraqi officials wonder if the next elections will be free and fair, several former U.S. military officers wonder if the elections will happen at all.

The United States must ensure that they do and that they are free and fair, and it must not countenance any democratic backsliding for the sake of political expediency. Confronting Maliki and his government on abuses may strain relations, but ignoring such topics has only helped lead Iraq to its current, deeply troubled state. If Iraq slips into dictatorship or war, this will be the United States' legacy in the country. But Iraq should not be written off. With outside help, it could still manage to muddle through with an elected government that is somewhat accountable and somewhat representative. Such an outcome would go a long way toward redeeming the United States' disastrous misadventure there.

This article is part of the Foreign Affairs Iraq Retrospective.