

The reckoning

American troops are leaving a country that is still perilously weak, divided and violent. Little wonder that some Iraqis now don't want them to go.

THE last American combat soldiers in Iraq shuffle through a half-empty base as they prepare for the one-way journey to the Kuwaiti border. Some recall their exploits during many tours of duty over the past seven years, charting their fortunes with language that has become common currency on television back home. The shock and awe of the invasion was eclipsed by insurgents using IEDs. Backed by contractors who erected blast walls around a green zone, the soldiers eventually inspired an awakening among Iraqi tribes that, aided by a surge of extra troops, in time brought something like order. In the soldiers' telling, the names of places that were little known before the war have acquired the resonance of history: Najaf, Sadr City, Abu Ghraib.

Some 50,000 American troops will stay on in a support role, to "advise and assist" the Iraqi forces that are now supposed to be in charge of the country's security. Nonetheless, August 31st marks the official end of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the combat mission that began with the invasion in March 2003. As a sign of America's changing role in the country, the State Department will now assume some of the responsibilities that were previously undertaken by the Pentagon. Chief among them is the training of Iraqi policemen, a key to keeping the peace. Consular offices will be opened across the country to replace military bases. Since the State Department does not have its own forces, it is hiring private gunmen. They will fly armed helicopters and drive armoured personnel carriers on the orders of the secretary of state long after the last American soldier has gone home.

For their part, the people of Iraq never learned to trust, let alone like, the Americans. Yet public opinion has shifted remarkably in recent weeks. After countless American warnings of their imminent departure, all met with stubborn Iraqi insistence that the "occupiers" would never leave, the penny has suddenly dropped. They really are on their way out. But instead of feeling joy, Iraqis have begun to worry. "We're not ready to go it alone," says Wesam, a junior army officer. He, like many others, fears a return of sectarian war. That points to the fragility of much of what the American army can claim to have achieved since 2003.

On the positive side, they conclusively ended the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein. Only his deputy, Izzat al-Douri, escaped capture and punishment in a war-crimes trial. American soldiers were flexible enough to change tactics in order to defeat an insurgency that threatened to overwhelm them; their emphasis on recruiting local allies proved superior to the unadulterated fire power they had used at first. They avoided all-out civil war and cut short the brutal reign of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born jihadist, who was hunted down and killed.

Furthermore, a more open society has taken shape in urban Iraq. Safia Souhail, a member of parliament, holds regular salons where discourse is free and often contrarian. On the streets too, politics is discussed openly, even among strangers. Iraqis are no longer afraid to say what they think. Where once there were only whispers, a cacophony of shouted curses now assaults political leaders. The press is nominally free, though highly partisan and often harassed by officials. Religious freedom is generally accepted, even if some minorities still complain of discrimination. Alcohol cannot be sold at certain times, in deference to Islamic hardliners, but is available nevertheless.

Iraq is also much more open to the world thanks to America's intervention. Travel is unrestricted, imports are plentiful, internet connections have gone up from 4,500 to 1.6m and the number of mobile phones has risen from 80,000 to 20m.

Yet freedom is still not universal in Iraq. Women and gays suffer discrimination, and there is little they can do about it. Across Iraq the rule of law is usually a distant aspiration rather than a solid achievement. Justice is no longer arbitrary, but judges can still be bought and the pace of trials is often glacial.

These gains have come at a terrible cost. About 150,000 Iraqis as well as almost 5,000 American and allied soldiers lost their lives. More than 2m Iraqis fled the country, many of them desperately needed professionals who are building new lives elsewhere. They despaired of a country in which many residents still don't have access to basic services. Although American taxpayers have spent more than \$700 billion, drinking water is scarce, health care and education are inadequate, electricity is available only for a few hours a day and petrol often runs out. Many say life is harder than ever.

This lack of services has crippled the economy. Manufacturers cannot survive without power; this condemns the non-oil private sector to irrelevance. The Americans have tried to boost business by financing the construction of markets across the country. They also gave seed money to entrepreneurs. But about half the Iraqi workforce is still without a full-time job. The Iraqi government is barely able to collect taxes and spending is financed almost entirely from oil money.

Leave us to bicker

The biggest failure of all is political. Building a state with a democratic government and institutions that work was central to President George W. Bush's vision of the new Iraq. The country has ended up with a travesty of good governance. Positions in the bureaucracy are awarded on the basis of family or sectarian allegiance rather than merit. Partisan interference so mars elections that no Western diplomat will call them "free and fair". The watchdog Transparency International reckons that corruption is endemic.

More than anywhere else in the world, Sunnis and Shias still fear each other in Iraq. Trust even between moderates is minimal, and national reconciliation non-existent. Five months after inconclusive elections, Iraq still has no new government. Parties are deadlocked in negotiations. The most obvious coalition partners are the prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, a moderate Shia whose block won 89 seats in the 325-member parliament, and Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister who is mainly supported by Sunnis and controls 91 seats. Yet the two men dislike and distrust each other so much that they rarely speak.

The prime minister could instead strike a deal with the next smaller block, a mix of mostly Shia religious parties dominated by the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, a hardline cleric. But Mr Sadr too distrusts Mr Maliki. Mr Maliki's only quasi-ally, the Kurdish block, has too few seats to secure him power.

Attention is now focused on an American proposal that would allow Mr Maliki to keep his job and make Mr Allawi the head of a powerful new national security council. The Kurds and Mr Sadr's followers are being encouraged to join as well. The result would be government by committee, a recipe for further deadlock, but perhaps the least bad plausible outcome. Corrupt party hacks would further carve up the ministries, but at least Iraq would have an elected government.

None of this would matter quite so much if the country were secure, but Iraq is still under siege. The insurgency is weakened but not defeated. Violence is down by 90% from 2007, but al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have staged a comeback in recent months. Officials and policemen are assassinated almost daily. The number of dead is increasing again, to nearly 500 in July.

On August 25th a series of bombs throughout the country killed over 50 people and injured hundreds more. "Al-Qaeda can probably keep this up for a while," says an American general.



Instability afflicts the whole country. In the south new extremist groups are springing up and old ones like Mr Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, are reforming. In the scarred northern city of Mosul much of the battle damage is recent. Along the dividing line between Arabs and Kurds, tension is as high as ever. Iraq's territorial integrity is not certain. Borders are routinely violated by aggressive neighbours.

The future of Iraq will hinge on its security forces after the Americans officially hand them control on September 1st. The forces are much better than they were a few years ago; buckling under pressure is no longer a certainty. Yet even their own generals say they are not really ready. The Iraqi army chief of staff wants American help until 2020. Privately, American officers agree their job is not done. Iraqi intelligence work is poor, extremist infiltrators are common, the air force is in its infancy, some commanders follow nakedly political agendas and initiative in the lower ranks is lacking, as is equipment. Prisoners are widely abused.

It is clear that Iraqis will for many years be plagued by corruption, insurgents, meddling neighbours, and their own stubborn politicians. Ending America's "combat mission" is a gamble—and gambles can be lost.

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