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## Iraq a Complete Failure for the United States

By Amitabh Pal

August 27, 2010

The United States is ending its combat mission in Iraq, leaving it in a complete mess. On virtually every count, the country is in the doldrums.

Back in March, some commentators crowed about the parliamentary elections there, and how this vindicated the Bush Administration's "nation-building" afterthought of a project. Wall Street Journal alum (and, I'm embarrassed to admit, a schoolmate of mine) Tunku Varadarajan claimed at the Daily Beast website that "what Iraq has achieved in five years is a political wonder, and those who would deny that are being very, very dishonest." Resident New York Times Middle East expert Thomas Friedman declared, "Former President George W. Bush's gut instinct that this region craved and needed democracy was always right."

Really, Tunku and Tom? Five months after these words, the country is at political paralysis, with yet another round of failed talks producing again no government. "The political crisis has shown no sign of easing as the U.S. moves forward with its target of reducing its troop numbers in the fragile nation to 50,000 and ending all combat missions by the end of August," [the Financial Times reports](#).

On other fronts, too, the situation is dismal. Dozens of lives were claimed in a wave of attacks in cities across the country on Wednesday.

“For weeks, there had been a sense of inevitability to the assaults, and American military officials had warned that the insurgents would seek to show their prowess during the holy month of Ramadan,” [the New York Times reports](#). “But the anticipation seemed to do little to prepare security forces for the breadth of the strikes, which followed what has become a daily campaign of bombings, hit-and-run attacks and assassinations against security forces and officials in Baghdad and elsewhere.”

The recent toll has been grim. The [Hindu newspaper of India](#) tallies that in August so far 535 Iraqi lives have been lost to violence, exceeding the appalling total of 500 in July.

So much for the surge success story.

And then there’s the harshness of daily life, which doesn’t seem to have improved much in seven years of strenuous exertions by U.S. occupation forces.

“Many residents still don’t have access to basic services,” [states the Economist](#). “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.”

It was all essentially for nought.

Of course, some are using the worsening of conditions to argue that U.S. troops should not leave. But Professor Juan Cole, one of the most perceptive observers of the region, says that this argument is wrongheaded. He asserts that the Obama Administration’s picking sides in the political game in Iraq is actually contributing to the instability. Besides, U.S. forces were not able to prevent the worst of the violence a few years ago.

“Washington should stop trying to shoehorn its favorite into office, should stop showing favoritism to some ethnic groups over others, and should show some understanding of the necessity for good relations between Iraq and Iran (which are becoming major trading partners),” he writes in [a commentary for CNN](#). “When it comes to the military and political balance, the U.S. has done enough damage, and can best help Iraqis by allowing them to return to being an independent country.”

Besides, the United States is not actually leaving the country. As Chris Toensing, editor of the Middle East Report (a must-read for understanding the area), points out, there will still be 50,000 troops left behind in an “advisory” capacity.

“The essential realities of the Iraq War remain the same: Iraq is oil-rich and strategically located at the head of the Persian Gulf. Its ruling elites are fractious and weak,” [Toensing writes](#). “Our continued troop presence is an insurance policy against disaster for the U.S.-sponsored Iraqi politicians, who would otherwise fear violent overthrow, and the White House, which would otherwise fear Iraq’s takeover by unfriendly elements.”

A lot of people will be paying for George Bush’s folly for a long time to come.