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The Conflict in Iraq—Views from Political Science

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Workshop Session 1—Civil War Dynamics
James D. Fearon, Stanford University

Workshop Session 2—Political Economy of Insurgency
Peter Moore, Case Western Reserve University

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Christopher Gelpi, Duke University

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Workshop Session 1 -- Civil War Dynamics

James D. Fearon, Stanford University

James Fearon spoke about the policy options for the US in regard to the Iraqi occupation given what we know about the dynamics of civil war. He said that the US's problem in Iraq is not complicated. There are two parts to it. First, there is very little good reason to think we can get to a place where we can leave without a civil war or political collapse. Second, if we leave now, there is a high risk of civil war intensification. The policy problem confronting the US is to evaluate two options. The first is a long term presence in Iraq until we can get a low troop presence, 20-30,000 troops, and political stability, defined as a low death rate for our troops. This is a 'Bosnia' scenario, in that there would be a new model protectorate, involving a third-party security guarantee so that local parties know that they will face coercive consequences if they misbehave. The second option is to really get out. This means quickly and completely withdrawing and dealing with the consequences.

He noted that the current public discussion of these scenarios has not been very good. The Bush administration has focused on the worst case scenarios when discussing withdrawal, such as Iran taking over the world, and best case scenarios when discussing staying, exaggerating the possibility of 'getting to Bosnia'. The critics of the war have not seriously engaged with the consequences of withdrawal.

He developed the two scenarios to explore their repercussions. Withdrawal risks higher levels of chaos. This has consequences for US national security (likely not disastrous and may even be net positive) and also humanitarian consequences (likely terrible). If Sunni-Shia conflict increases, is that bad for the US? Wouldn't it be bad for Iran? Iran doesn't want a Sunni-Shia framing on the situation. How does withdrawal benefit Iran? Right now, the US is tied down in Iraq. Iran can contribute to escalation in Iraq, keeping lots of US troops tied down there. There is a fear that withdrawal might lead to Iran controlling Shiite Iraqi areas. So what? Is oil the concern? The US hasn't been buying much Iraqi oil for over a decade. But Iran's control in Iraq is implausible because Iraqi Shiites are not all happy to be under the thumb of Iran because they aren't going to benefit much.

He concluded that there is no nice exit for the US. There is no simple way to leave without chaos. President Bush is stuck with significant nation-building problems similar to those faced by Clinton. The best case for the US is to leave while propping up a government with explicit security guarantees, similar to the Australians in East Timor, which will be very expensive.

Questions/Comments:

Q: Are there examples of collapse that we can draw on?

James Fearon: Somalia is the best example.

Q: Can you comment on any commitment and information problems, such as those involved when groups on the ground have beliefs about whether the other side will attack them or feel confident that their interest will be protected?

James Fearon: Most civil wars end with one side establishing military dominance. Maybe the other side will not be completely destroyed, but in 80% of center-seeking civil wars you see a military resolution. Some say that the Sunni groups have updated since 2006. They realize now that they can't take power back, so they might be willing to cut a deal and the Shiites might be willing to pay off the Sunnis with oil money. However, the suspicion is that if the US leaves, the sides might think that they can get more than they have right now.

Q: How do you see the two scenarios being different operationally? Both involve troop withdrawal and that will probably take more than 24 months at the earliest. How important is it that the US say why they are withdrawing? Signals might matter hugely.

James Fearon: The argument for trying a Bosnia scenario has improved recently. The difference between the two scenarios is pace. How fast do we want to take troops out? The more 'Bosnia' is likely, the longer you take to withdraw troops. If it is not likely, decisively, quickly, ASAP, withdraw.

Q: The Iraqi Army has improved its performance against the Sadrists recently, especially compared to August 2004, so the prospects of stability are pretty good. A rapid US withdrawal is not an option, partly because oil prices will rise to \$150 a barrel and other Middle East allies like Saudi Arabia will feel vulnerable as the US has demonstrated a lack of commitment to the region. After pulling out, you will see a flood of extremists and Al Qaeda in Iraq will be mainstream.

James Fearon: I agree that there has been progress in building a more capable Iraqi Army, but if you look at other cases, it is very typical to have competent armies on both sides but that is not a condition for stability. Also, the cohesive army is not representative of national groups. In the absence of external guarantees, when the US leaves you will see different dynamic, for example, the probability of a military coup will rise. You can't point to the strength of the Iraqi Army and say we'll have a stable Iraq state.

C: If a Democrat becomes president, there is not much they can do because even if they withdraw 40 thousand troops there will still be 100 thousand on the ground. The analogy to Somalia is not as relevant internationally as the Vietnam analogy. What if Bin Laden took the message that the US can get spooked? Somalia also affected the decision not to intervene in Rwanda. If something more in US national security interests comes up, what would the US do with the mindset being that we don't want another Iraq?

C: Political Scientists should re-examine fundamental assumptions about civil war. Senior military officials in Iraq talk about 'self-sustaining cycles of violence' but there is little empirical evidence for that. Most violence is done strategically by elites. Also, the dynamics of militia-based wars are different from insurgency and regular warfare. Militias generally hold territory as they are tied to neighborhoods,

insurgents don't. They are also logistically constrained in that they are much better at protecting their own neighborhoods than operating away from them.

James Fearon: The resolve argument, including the idea of emboldening Bin Laden, will be made by Al Qaeda. But imagine that President Bush said that he was going to knock down a brick wall with his head. If we are trying to do something undoable then the sooner we stop, the better. Besides, in Vietnam, the US lost over 40 thousand lives over a long time period. How does that not demonstrate resolve? As for the self-sustaining cycles of violence, Stathis Kalyvas's book *Logic of Civil War* shows that there is an internal dynamic to civil war. When you do have people interested in using force, there is a dynamic there, grudges and small stuff can last and create new grudges. Generations are going to remember what happened, who did what to whom.

C: I wonder if a US military presence does actually promote stability. Military experts say that there is a prioritization of action by US forces; 1) force protection, 2) attacking the enemy, 3) pursuing US interests, and 4) preserving stability. All of these come before protecting civilians. The US is never going to stop Iraqi on Iraqi violence and so the Bosnia model is not going to work. If the US withdraws, it might be possible to have equal partners and low levels of violence with no-go zones as barriers between the groups. The humanitarian consequences of withdrawal are not likely to be so bad. In Somalia, most of the humanitarian disaster happened before the intervention, and most of the violent deaths were during the intervention. Iraqis say they don't need external interference and it is insulting to say that they need US help to rule themselves.

C: The old cases, East Timor, Haiti, Cambodia, provide a case for pessimism. In Iraq the government is a resource for the militia groups. The government is divided by different factions, the Sadrists control the health ministry and so on. So you have a situation where fighting takes place within and not just without. The participants have no incentive to renounce their position in the government in favor of a United Iraq.

Workshop Session 2 – Political Economy of Insurgency

Peter Moore, Case Western Reserve University

Peter Moore spoke about the political economic factors that are driving the insurgency in Iraq. He said that there is more to the fighting in Iraq than ethno-sectarian violence; there is also a war economy that needs to be taken into account. The main questions when considering war economies are what contributes to the construction of a war economy and why do certain antecedents lead to long wars. He characterized a war economy as involving the capture of monopolies with a domestic market used to fund violence and the violence being used in turn to capture monopolies.

He noted that Iraq is dependent on imports. The Kurds in the north control trade, this means they can fund themselves. There are not as many goods coming in from Iran. There is an important link from Jordan. Jordan and Iraq were major trading partners until 2003. Highway 10 runs straight from Jordan to Iraq. Moore argued that economic opportunity leads to civil war and the endurance of war once it has started. He noted that in Iraq, domestic retail networks were rearranged due to the rise of militia power networks. He asked the question of why the Iraqi economy is not controlled by a central power. The answer is that after the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam moves to privatization and sells off lots of monopolies and state-owned companies. Paul Wolfowitz and others thought that Iraq had a command economy but that was wrong.

Moore stated that Jordan is the most important economic source for the insurgency. Jordan was having economic problems at the same time as Saddam was moving to privatization. In the 1980s a trade network developed with the aim of regime survival. There was a trade for oil program. Based on interviews with Jordanian and Iraqi traders, Moore found that attacks on Highway 10 are down due to negotiations between the Iraqi insurgents and Jordanian traders. Compared with the domestic and international antecedents of the war economy, the post-invasion foundations of the war economy are not that important. What was needed for the current situation was already in place before the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) started its reforms. The CPA introduced currency evaluation but that had little effect. They also obliterated tariffs but this probably meant that the insurgents made even more money. Even though there was no more oil-for-trade protocol, Iraq-Jordan trade increased every year.

He discussed the major manifestations of the war economy. These include the militia governments and the creation of new institutions. He explained that you want to deal with the powers on the ground once you create new institutions so there are incentives to persist. The militias are economically independent. They trade with each other but this is not a basis for reconciliation necessarily. The militias tend to get classified as organized crime but the dynamics are different. For example, you want allies and partners to be dependent on you in a war economy. The war economy is driving the civil war. The Iraqis with resources get out and those left have two choices; stick their head up and get it cut off, or go along with the situation and make the best of it.

Questions and Comments:

Q: Is there a literature on the evolution of war economies and how they can be dismantled? In Somalia, for example, the situation evolved so that the business community changed so that they no longer had an interest in civil war communication. What about the impact of kidnapping, oil theft and other banditry? Peter Moore: There is a literature out there. Luis Martinez's book on Algeria and Vladimir Volkov's book on Russia are both very good. There is a reason for the decline in violence. A strong Algerian state used foreign investment in the oil sector to lure business interests away from rural areas and the militias. In Lebanon, they had financial frustration by the 1980s. As for kidnapping etc., this sort of thing is

small beans. You could be the only guy selling generators or air conditioners and that's how you make good money. Controlling import supply chains and retail networks is the way to make money.

C: I am skeptical that the command economy went down as much as you say. The CPA did a lot to destroy the command economy. Look at the cigarette sector, which was monopolized privately but backed by state resources. In 1992 they executed 40 heads of merchant families to cut the power of traders. I am reminded of Bosnia where the Bosnians and Serbs were trading all the way through the civil war.

C: There has been a turn of the Sunni tribes against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Why was that? Some say that the Sunnis realized that the US was their ally versus a closer enemy. AQI was said to be taking trade routes away from the locals as well as making them change their hairstyles and such, which was unpopular.

Peter Moore: No one ever mentions AQI to me by name, so it is very hard to know which groups are doing what.

C: There were antecedents to the tribal awakening. Al Qaeda was making a whole different social structure which challenged the status quo and those who stood to lose fought back.

C: The War economy has existed since 1980 (the start of the Iran-Iraq war). Privatization started in the 90s was actually carried out in partnership with the state. The state is no longer doling out who gets the contracts. In Lebanon there was the development of some local prosperous enclaves and I hear that in Iraq there has been the same sort of development. What is the political solution to these economic issues?

Peter Moore: I agree that the beginnings of the war economy was in the 1980s but the sanctions in the 90s made trade with Jordan clandestine which made it easy to hide it from the US when the US invaded. The antecedents of a successful occupation were not there like they were in Germany and Japan. And, yes it was state-controlled privatization and it was those who bought the state-owned companies who were strong after the invasion. Also, I have also seen some prosperous enclaves in northern Iraq. As for political solutions, we will start to see political violence subside because the state is becoming stronger and becoming able to enforce contracts. However, commodities inflation is going to hit Iraqis hard.

Workshop Session 3 –“Spin vs. Reality: Formation of Attitudes towards the Iraq War” Christopher Gelpi, Duke University

Dr. Gelpi conducted a survey in which respondents answered questions about their perceptions of progress in the Bush administration's "surge" strategy and of the overall war effort. In the survey, respondents were shown a news story about the war that was either neutral, positive, or negative and were asked about their positions on both the "surge" and war itself. The survey then asked respondents to review statements from President Bush and

answer similar questions about their perspectives of the “surge” and the war effort. Dr. Gelpi measured whether each type of news story or statement from President Bush altered the positions of those who approve of the Bush administration and those who do not.

The data provided the following results:

- Those who disapprove of the Bush administration registered lower overall levels of support for the “surge” and the war effort for each kind of news story but those who were shown a news story depicting positive news in Iraq registered higher relative numbers of support for the “surge” and the war effort.
- Those who approve of the Bush administration had higher overall levels of support for the “surge” and the war effort but those who viewed a negative news story had statistically significant lower levels of support for the “surge.” There was no such similar effect on support for the war effort.
- Respondents’ views on the success of the “surge” and the war effort did not change after reading statements from President Bush.
- Regarding respondents’ support for a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, those who read positive stories or statements from Bush registered statistically significant reductions in their desire for withdrawal.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Dr. Gelpi posed several questions he thought were relevant to the data from the survey:

Why is elite rhetoric so weak?

- Perhaps Pres. Bush is no longer trusted
- Element of path dependence (i.e. too far downstream for his statements to matter)
- Perhaps elite rhetoric is result of events, not vice versa.

Does the media’s reporting alter results?

- Positive news does get reported
- Bias may be overstated
- Self-selection of media may be overstated

What is the potential impact of this data on the vote?

- Voting is based on voter’s sense of “the right thing,” not expectations of future events
- Positive events increase perceptions that Bush did the “right thing” only among Bush supporters.

From Dr. Gelpi’s previous work on voters’ perceptions of the Iraq war (a paper titled “Iraq the Vote”), he classifies voters as falling into one of three mutually exclusive categories:

- Vietnam syndrome – Those who believe we are in Iraq for the wrong reasons and we are current in a quagmire and should get out
- Pottery Barn syndrome – Those who believe we are in Iraq for the wrong reasons but that we owe it to Iraq to do our best to rebuild the country
- Noble Failure syndrome – Those who believe that we went to Iraq for the right reasons despite the poor results

Dr. Gelpi then concluded with brief remarks on the priority Iraq receives in voters’ minds depending on whether those voters support Bush or not. Those who do support Bush prioritize Iraq moreso than Democrats and non-supporters.

During the presentation and after, participants raised the following questions:

- Dr. Fearon questioned the design of the study, wondering whether or not Dr. Gelpi's survey had an adequate "control" against which the data could be measured and whether or not the survey primed respondents to answer in certain ways that might skew the results
- Dr. Goldgeier asked about how informed respondents were regarding the Iraq war.
- Dr. Lynch questioned what the relationship of Americans' perceptions of events in Iraq and voting choices in the U.S. was with the relationship of Iraqis' perception of events in the U.S. and voting choices in the upcoming Iraqi elections.
- Others questioned whether Maliki had a strategic imperative to create positive news in Iraq prior to the Iraqi and U.S. elections. Dr. Goldgeier argued that Maliki would calculate that he was powerless over the U.S. elections and would act to shore up his position no matter the reception of his actions in the U.S.
- Dr. Gelpi commented that positive news from Iraq will make it harder for the next U.S. president to withdraw troops from Iraq.
- Dr. Moore and Dr. Lynch debated the meaning and significance of the upcoming provincial elections in Iraq.