



Insight

Syria and the Lessons of Iraq

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One of the fears about regime change in Syria is that it will lead to sectarian civil war similar to Iraq. These fears are not without merit, but applying lessons learned in Iraq could improve the outcome in Syria. Specifically, the U.S. should encourage Syria not to purge its government of Ba'athists or disband the army. We also should support practical steps that focus on security, jobs, and political inclusion.

Indeed, Iraq and Syria have much in common. Both were led by nationalist Ba'ath party dictatorships dating back to the 1960s. Both are home to substantial ethnic and sectarian diversity, including Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, and Shia – and in the case of Syria, Alawite and Druze communities as well. Sectarian fighting in both countries attracted al Qaeda-aligned jihadists and Iranian meddling. In each country, transition to a more representative government implies loss of influence for a previously dominant minority group – Sunnis in Iraq and Alawites in Syria – which heightens the risk of conflict.

At the same time, key differences exist. Syria's opposition National Coalition enjoys more credibility than the Iraqi National Congress. Syria will not have an American military presence to help stabilize the country. The regional dynamics are different too. For example, Turkey opposed the intervention in Iraq but works closely with Syria's opposition.

Nevertheless, the experience of Iraq offers many valuable lessons, both positive and negative, for Syria.

1. De-Ba'athification is counter-productive. The very first order issued by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq was a wide-scale purging from the Iraqi government of anyone associated with Saddam's Ba'ath party. The loss of so many skilled workers resulted in the virtual collapse of the state, and needlessly created enemies for the coalition.

In Syria, all government workers should be retained except those most complicit in the human rights abuses and corruption of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Justice should be pursued cautiously rather than through blanket purges. By all accounts, the Obama administration has been communicating this message to the National Coalition. The U.S. also should work with the National Coalition on an effective and orderly transitional justice mechanism, building on the work of the Day After Project (<http://www.usip.org/the-day-after-project>).

2. The army should not be disbanded. The CPA next disbanded the scattered Iraqi Army rather than calling it back. The ensuing process of building a new army from the ground up took years, which impaired security. It also put hundreds of thousands of armed men out of work, the bulk of whom hadn't been Saddam loyalists anyhow.

Syria's army likewise is replete with both conscripts and professionals whose allegiance is to their country, not Assad. Elements of the Syrian army also may be valuable for securing chemical weapons during the transition. The Obama Administration should work with the Russians, who are much better connected to the Syrian military, to keep the Syrian military as intact as possible. Leaders with blood on their hands should be brought to justice over time.

3. The people want security. The vacuum in post-Saddam Iraq led to looting, destruction, and violence for which the U.S. was unprepared. It made Iraqis distrustful of the coalition as well as the new Iraqi government. In some places, al Qaeda-linked militants won local support by providing security. Ultimately, increased U.S. troop levels, cooperation with former insurgents, and the maturation of Iraqi forces helped stabilize the country.

The period immediately after Assad's departure will set the tone for Syria's future. If the next Syrian government, presumably one dominated by moderates, is able to ensure law and order, it will enhance its standing among the Syrian people. If chaos reigns, Syrians may gravitate toward extremists like the [al-Nusra Front](#). U.S. troops are not likely to run patrols in Syria, but should work closely with the Syrian army, as well as the Free Syrian Army, to bolster security and protect infrastructure. An international peacekeeping force, supported financially by the U.S. and others, should be considered.

4. Jobs are critical. De-Baathification, the dissolution of the army, and violence led to job losses in Iraq. So did the hasty privatization of state owned enterprises. More optimistically, the U.S. supported successful economic development projects that bolstered local Iraqi leaders through Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the Commander's Emergency Response Program.

Syrians, like Americans, will judge their new government in large measure by how it affects their pocketbooks. The U.S. and our allies should work closely with the new Syrian government on localized, high-impact economic development efforts that can be executed quickly. Any restructuring of Syria's bureaucracy and economy should be undertaken slowly.

5. Political inclusiveness will set the right tone. Iraq's post-Saddam politics got off to a rocky start and never fully recovered. Most of Iraq's Sunnis boycotted the country's first elections due to concerns about security and electoral losses. As a result, only two elected Sunnis were named to Iraq's 55-member constitution drafting committee. Additional Sunnis were appointed, but they lacked legitimacy and often were marginalized. In the end, they opposed the constitution, which was ratified anyway. On the positive side, Sunnis did participate in December 2005 elections for a new Council of Representatives – they were assured better representation because the seats would be apportioned by geographic districts rather than nationwide party lists. Still, politics in Iraq remain dysfunctional and highly sectarian.

The next Syrian government will need to strike a better balance between majority rule and minority rights. Syria's National Coalition must offer strong assurances to the country's Alawites and other minorities, who fear they will be sidelined after Assad is ousted. The U.S. should work with Syria's neighbors as well as the United Nations to press for an inclusive system from the beginning, strongly discouraging any side from election boycotts. All sides should be engaged in the development of a new constitution.

In all likelihood, Syria is in for a bumpy transition. Applying lessons learned in Iraq may help Syrians steer a better course.