IRAQI NATION-BUILDING IN THE HONORS COLLEGE

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Since the end of the Cold War, nationalist, ethnic, and civic conflicts have proliferated around the globe. Thus, the optimistic notion of the "End of History" has degenerated into a "Clash of Civilizations," at least according to some prominent thinkers of international relations.[1] The United States, the United Nations, and other international actors have been drawn into several of these conflicts, and, despite the protests in 2000 of candidate George W. Bush, peacekeeping and nation-building has assumed a prominent place in American foreign policy—in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, and, most obviously, in Iraq. The task of rebuilding Iraq and constructing a democracy there has been compared to past efforts to do the same in post-war Germany and Japan, and, without much exaggeration, it is safe to say that US involvement in Iraq represents the most substantial—and in important ways radical—commitment of US political, military, and economic power in several decades.

The preceding constituted the motivation for HC 205,

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[1] See Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *National Interest* (Summer 1989), and Samuel Huntington, Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993).

Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict, which I taught in fall 2003. I had several goals in this class: to expose students to theories of nationalism; to examine historical attempts at nation-building, particularly when such efforts were accompanied by democratization; to understand how democracy can, in some cases, lead to ethnic mobilization and conflict; and to consider various means that ethnic conflict might be avoided or ameliorated. However, I wanted to give students a chance to learn in a more "hands-on," interactive manner. Thus a major component of the course was role-play exercises, in which each student assumed the role of an actor in a particular conflict, and the class as a whole was responsible for simulating the conflict and efforts to resolve it. Not surprisingly, students selected the Iraqi case for our first simulation, which we conducted during two and a half weeks from late October to early November.

Each student was assigned a character. There were seventeen in all, ranging from well-known figures such as President Bush and Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress to lesser-known actors such as Hamid Moussa of the Iraqi Communist Party and Sharif Ali Bin al-Hussein of the Constitutional Monarchy Movement to three "average" Iraqis that spoke for the citizens that the various political elites, ostensibly, are trying to represent and help. Students composed a 4–6 page position paper, and then, through e-mail and discussions on WebCT and in-class "negotiations," they were supposed to interact with others, and hopefully, work toward a solution of the numerous tasks facing Iraqis and the international community.

Background on Iraq

Before jumping into the simulation, however, students had to acquire a basic knowledge of Iraqi history and the dilemmas existing in Iraq today. Thus before discussing what occurred in our simulation, it might be helpful to review a few basic points.

The first is that the Iraqi state is an artificial creation,

carved out by the British after World War I from three provinces of the Ottoman Empire. These three regions differed substantially. The mountainous north was (and is) overwhelmingly Kurdish. Kurds, although Muslims, are not Arabs: they speak a different language, have a variety of distinct cultural traditions, and, spread as they are across Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, have fought numerous times for their own independence. Within Iraq, Kurds constitute about 20% of the population, and have revolted against Arab rule in almost every decade since the creation of Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein, Kurds were subjected to poison gas attacks and, in the view of many, a campaign of genocide to physically annihilate them. In 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, they again revolted and received international protection, and for the past decade have enjoyed an unprecedented degree of self-rule.

The southern regions of Iraq are overwhelmingly Shia (or Shiite) Arab, and Shia represent about 60% of the total population of the country. The Shias are a sect of Islam, and split off from the conventional Sunnis (who represent about 90% of Muslims worldwide) in the seventh century following the death of the Prophet Muhammed. The details of their theological disputes need not concern us here. The relevant point is that the Shia never enjoyed political power in Iraq, as the political and military leadership under the Ottomans, under the Iraqi monarchy (1920-1958), and under a series of military/Baath regimes (1958-2003) fell to the Sunni Muslims. After the first Gulf War, Shia in southern Iraq revolted against Saddam Hussein, but the regime brutally put down the rebellion.

The Sunni Muslims, representing about 20% of the population, are predominantly located in central Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein, Sunnis, particularly those from his hometown of Tikrit, received numerous privileges, and it is in this area that US forces have received the stiffest resistance, in large part because Sunnis fear a loss of status in a truly democratic Iraq.

These demographic factors obviously lead to a very complicated situation. Shia would be happy with majority rule, but Sunnis and Kurds—for different reasons—are wary. Federal

arrangements, autonomy, or an extremely decentralized government are frequently discussed as a means to ameliorate the concerns of ethnic/religious minorities in Iraq (and elsewhere). However, our readings for the term cast doubt about the utility of such arrangements[2], and thus students were urged to consider how to forge some sort of common Iraqi identity to unite the people into a single state. The problem, of course, is that aside from growing resentment at US forces, there is not that much that unites Iraqis today.

Above and beyond this concern, there are other problems: what to do with former military and Baath party officials, who may have needed expertise but whose hands may be stained with the blood spilled by the whole regime?; what should be the role of Islam in Iraq, as many (particularly Shias) take inspiration from Iran and other states that eschew secularism?; how democratic should Iraq be, and how quickly can the transition to democracy really take place?; what should be the political institutions (e.g. a presidential or parliamentary system)?; what of groups that argue for re-establishment of a monarchy in Iraq?; what of the role of women and non-Muslim minorities?; and, obviously the most pressing concern of the moment, how to provide security for Iraqis and create a more "normal" situation in a country that has not known "normal" for decades due to war, economic depravation, and political repression?

Our Simulation

I had conducted simulations in other classes (they are a prominent feature in my Politics of the Middle East class), but I had never conducted one for Iraq, and I was eager to see

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[2] Our main text was Jack Snyder, *From Democratization to Violence* (Norton, 2000), which provocatively argues that the spread of democracy can, and often did, lead to international and civil conflict, as opposed to the oft-stated argument that the spread of democracy is good for peace in the world.

what the results would be. They were several lines of con-
flict/cooperation that I thought would be most interesting.
Obviously, Kurd v. Arab and Shia v. Sunni, but beyond that I
wanted to see with whom the US could most easily ally, if
Iraqis could unify around anything, and how the programs of
various Iraqi elites would play with "average" Iraqis.

Let me list just a few of the developments that took place
in the simulation.

- Iraqi parties, ranging from the Communists to the Is-
  lamic Party to the Constitutional Monarchy Movement,
  attempted to rally public support with popular demon-
  strations. In the end, however, Jalal Talabani, a Kurd
  who was passionately and articulately played by one of
  the students, was "voted" the "most trusted" politician.
- Sultan Hashim, the former Defense Minister now
  under arrest by US forces, did all he could to gain his
  release from prison and secure a position for himself
  and other former Baathists in post-Saddam Iraq
- Different Kurdish factions continued to squabble
  among themselves, bringing up past betrayals and al-
  leged corruption today
- Iraqi leaders with militias were up to various forms of
  mischief
- US forces set up a "sting operation" to catch would-be
  militants
- Bombings and kidnappings put the pressure on the US
  to do something to improve security
- As a sort of omnipotent observer, I put forward various
  schemes that would allow certain actors to "backstab"
  others, but, to my chagrin, none of these plots amounted
  to much

The main issues, however, were creation of an Iraqi security
force and development of an Iraqi constitution. It soon be-
came clear that all Iraqis were interested in getting the US out
and having Iraqi police, military, and para-military units take
over to provide for security. While the US initially expressed

little enthusiasm for this idea, it soon became apparent that US intransigence was only provoking more resentment from the Iraqis and risked more violence. As it turned out, during the simulation itself bombings in real Iraq were forcing the hand of President Bush and Ambassador Paul Bremer, who approved creation of Iraqi security forces and a quicker handover of power to the Iraqis. Building upon that, our participants, with input from the UN and France, were able to agree on a plan to create Iraqi security forces, provided that only individuals (as opposed to militia units) would be accepted, and each applicant would be reviewed by US and UN personnel. This seemed to placate the Iraqi participants in the simulation, although one might wonder how newly-trained Iraqis will be better able to provide security than US forces.

With that issue "solved," the work then fell to the Iraqis—specifically the eight students whose characters sat on the Iraqi Governing Council—to draft a constitution. This proved to be an arduous process, but one that was at times quite entertaining. The actors—particularly the Kurdish ones—literally stuck to their guns, demanding some form of autonomy and pulling out maps to show where the Kurdish boundaries should be and (not coincidentally) where oil fields are located. Obviously, Kurdish claims did not sit well with most of the Arab representatives, who, while agreeing to general provisions of civil and political rights for all, refused to grant special privileges or autonomy for the Kurds. I sat in on some of these talks and tried to say as little as possible, but, in addition to noting how students passionately argued for their characters, noted how their discussions echoed not only what is occurring in Iraq today but also what occurred in previous conflicts (particularly in Bosnia), where various schemes of confederation, a three-person presidency, and effective vetoes by ethnic minorities (all things that were mentioned in our simulation) were actually put into practice.

In the end, the students/Iraqis (with just a little bit of help) were able to draft a constitution. Among other things, it guaranteed Iraqis a host of political and civil rights (e.g.

freedom of speech, freedom of assembly), refused to establish a constitutional monarchy, guaranteed the rights of women and paid homage to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, nationalized the nation's oil wealth, affirmed the Islamic traditions of the country and agreed that the state could fund religious organizations, created an Iraqi army and required military service of able-bodied males, prohibited any individuals (e.g. ex-military officers or Baath party officials) convicted of felonies for actions under Saddam from holding office or serving in the military, and established an Iraqi National Assembly that would in turn elect a President. There was no mention of Kurds, Shia, or Sunnis, and there was no provision for any special autonomy or self-rule for the Kurds.

On the last day of the simulation, the actors voted on the constitution. While the international community (US, UN, and France) approved it, the Kurdish groups and Kurdish "citizen" refused to do so, and the Kurds noted that they were deploying their sizeable militia forces along their "border" and were prepared to fight any intrusion upon their territory.

Results and Discussion

In general, despite failure to resolve all the issues (who could?), I think we all were quite pleased with the simulation. In an after-simulation evaluation, not only did students indicate that they learned a lot, but also that they enjoyed participating in it. While some noted that they did not feel completely prepared because of difficulties in researching their character or lack of clarity about the parameters of the simulation, the overall consensus was that the exercise was extremely worthwhile. For my part, I was pleased with the energy the students devoted to the project and also to the 'realism' that we were able to create. As I noted, during the time of simulation, the transfer of security powers ranked as the most pressing issue in Iraq, and we were able to "solve" it, although I recognize that none of us were equipped to delve into the

technical details of creating an Iraqi security force. On the constitutional issue, I would note that our Iraqi Governing Council actually did meet and discuss things, whereas in real life the members of that body have been accused of not even showing up for meetings and shirking their duties. However, despite students' efforts and ability to find compromises on a variety of issues (e.g. there is no Islamic law, but Islamic traditions are recognized, similar in some respects to what was done in Afghanistan), the basic schism between the Kurds and Arabs could not be resolved. Given this difficulty, which certainly exists in real life (although it might not be an intractable problem), perhaps it is a positive development that the US has backed away from its demand for rapid approval of a new constitution. Unfortunately, though, as our simulation amply demonstrated, any immediate transition to democracy or Iraqi self-rule will be difficult, as Iraqis are divided in a number of important and potentially explosive ways. Interestingly, I note that, when asked, eight of the students said the simulation made them more pessimistic about the situation in Iraq, seven said they were more optimistic, and two reported no change.

At the end of the simulation, I asked students what they thought the next step would be, and, aside from a few who thought a Kurdish-Arab war was inevitable, most speculated that the US would have to intervene and get the various sides talking again, if not impose a settlement upon them. This to me seems to be a realistic scenario. Left to themselves, if the positions of the students are truly valid, it is hard to imagine how the Iraqis will be able to divide powers among the different demographic groups in the country. Specifically, it is hard to believe the Kurds would ever surrender the self-rule that they now enjoy and willingly integrate into an Iraqi state dominated by the Arabs, who, time and time again, have invaded "Kurdish" lands in an effort to assert their dominance over the state. Yet, listening to the students in the simulation, one could see where, with effective diplomacy, a deal could be struck that would create a federal Iraq to grant the Kurds their

own regional parliament and a host of rights on cultural and social questions (what Scotland has in the United Kingdom or Quebec has in Canada) but at the same time establish a central government to administer an army, foreign relations, and oil revenues. No doubt, international troops would be required to prevent the outbreak of intra-Iraqi violence. With time and a strong international commitment—which will cost a lot of money—perhaps Iraq can enjoy the success of post-war Germany and Japan and establish an effective democracy and state viewed legitimate by the overwhelming majority of Iraqis.

On a closing note, I would heartily recommend use of simulations, although I recognize that larger class sizes can make them unwieldy and that they hardly provide a "break" for the faculty member. In order to conduct one successfully, the faculty member must provide the students with background information, monitor communication, make sure students stay within their roles, and supply the students with updates (I play CNN) and creative possibilities (e.g. spreading rumors or leaks) to keep the exercise interesting and less predictable. The biggest problem I have had in the past is the handful of students that will inevitably fail to get sufficiently involved in the project, so that the action is slowed down and/or all points of view are not adequately represented. Both Harvard and the Pew Center at Georgetown University publish ready-made "cases" that can be used for simulations in fields such as political science, economics, history, and international studies, or, as I did here, they can be made up to respond to very current events. Simulations can last a class period or two, or for several weeks. Those that are more ambitious can use these simulations—particularly the e-mail or electronic discussion components—to link our students with classes at other universities, both in the US and even overseas. This is currently being done in an upper division class in political science (run through the University of Maryland, this project links Oakland students with, among others,

students in Finland and in Chile)[3], although, as I found out last year, there are serious concerns in the administration about such use of electronic technologies in light of the USA Patriot Act.[4] After years of doing exercises such as these, however, one thing is clear: these simulations are extremely useful pedagogically and extremely enjoyable for the students. They learn and they like it, and through interactive role-play—in ways that lectures, reading, and impromptu discussions usually cannot—they learn the complexity of world around them by seeing different perspectives and thinking like actors with whom they probably cannot easily identify.

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[3] This is being done in a seminar in International Relations, taught by Peter Trumbore.

[4] This story might be an interesting article in its own right, but suffice to say that the prospect of students playing, among others, Yasser Arafat, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in an Arab-Israeli simulation and communicating with each other via e-mail (where, we should all know, the FBI is searching for terrorist activity and does not need search warrants) in my Politics of the Middle East class greatly disturbed a host of university officials, including the Provost, Dean of Students, Legal Counsel, campus police, and director of Communications and Marketing (who, I gather, feared the publicity of people exercising what most would construe as our constitutional rights), although I was told no one would actually stop me from conducting the exercise but I was urged to consider the merit of the project in light of the risk it might create for students and myself. In the end, I spoke with the FBI beforehand to resolve the doubts and concerns of the administration, but agreed to put the activity on the WebCT system, available only to OU students and faculty.