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## Iraq: Which Age is Dawning?\*

Florence Gaub(\*\*)

The withdrawal of the United States combat troops from Iraq marks, in many ways, the end of an era. But as the saying goes: one door closes, another one opens. Where there's an end, there's a beginning. While the United States may currently digest the termination of their combat involvement in Mesopotamia, Iraq faces an important crossroad in its political development. It is thus the dawning of a new age for the country. The key question for Iraqis, and for regional and international players alike, thus focuses on the kind of new age that is actually beginning in this geopolitically important country.

The increase of violent attacks since the official end of the combat mission is interpreted by some as the harbingers of another dark age for Iraq, where insurgents and terrorists will use the security vacuum and the fragile political make-up of the country to destabilize the young democracy. Beyond this point, anything goes in worst case scenarios: another coup d'état (Iraq was, after all, the first Arab country to see a putsch by its armed forces in 1941), another dictator, the secession of a certain area, or possibly the invasion of a malevolent neighbor? It is easy to project the worst on Iraq at this point, because *périodes charnières*, transition periods, generally allow question marks on anything.

Yet, Iraq may also stand at the beginning of its coming of age. Transitions to full democratic systems are historically marked by spurts of violence and even civil war. Several Western nations had to undergo violent periods before emerging as stable political systems that eventually produced functioning economies. The current situation in Iraq (that actually mirrors the departure of British Forces in 1947 which was accompanied by an increase in insurgent attacks) could thus also be read as after-pains of an occupation that was resented by the population, and the growing pains of a new state and nation.

Because in spite of dark age talk, Iraq has the capacity to enter the age of reason at this point in its history: a largely educated population, oil revenues and reconstructed infrastructure could support a thriving economy, and it has a solid basis of grown institutions to build on its state. Furthermore, some (statistically proven) conditions for civil war are missing: diamonds or drugs as a source of income for insurgents, a largely mountainous geography and a weak central government are all important elements in the outbreak of uncontrolled violence. Yet, there are some elements in Iraq that could support civil war prevalence: a possibly insurgent-favorable external power and a supportive countryside population (33% of Iraq's population is not urbanized).

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\* The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

(\*\*) Florence Gaub is a lecturer and researcher at NATO Defense College's Middle East Faculty.

Whether or not Iraq will turn to political maturity will thus depend on essentially two factors: first of all its reintegration into the regional game of which it is currently more or less excluded, and the provision of security for its people. Whether or not Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia will support, or refrain from supporting any antagonistic groups in Iraq will largely depend on their own stakes in the game, and how a weak or strong neighboring country is profitable to them. Secondly, the readiness, but more importantly the willingness of Iraq's security forces to crush a possible insurgency are thus crucial for the determination of which age is actually dawning for Mesopotamia. Years of training and enormous sums of money by the coalition, and to a lesser extent from the NATO's Training Mission, have contributed significantly to the reconstruction of the Iraqi security forces. However, their inclination to act appropriately is difficult to predict. The armed forces' officer corps for instance, while drawn in large parts from the old Iraqi military, is understaffed in its middle rank and resembles an ethnic sandwich with predominantly Sunni senior ranks and more balanced junior ranks. There is thus a question mark over the political ambitions of the army personnel, while the continuity of the pre- and post-2003 armed forces in a way ensures a certain degree of professionalism. Ultimately, Iraq will need a political personnel which stops playing the sectarian card and is strong enough to support the vision of a strong and democratic country.

One way or the other, the departure of the foreign combat troops marks the return to Iraq's age of majority. Majority and maturity are not necessarily the same thing – this is true for human being, just as it is for nations and states. Iraq's coming of age might be dawning just as well as it mightn't.

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**ISPI  
Palazzo Clerici  
Via Clerici, 5  
I - 20121 Milano  
[www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)**

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