

# OPINION

## Iraq without a U.S. midwife

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With the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops from Iraq, we're finally going to get the answer to the core question about that country: Was it a wise choice?

My answer is twofold: "No" and "Maybe, sort of, we'll see."

After 9/11, the idea of helping to change the context of Arab politics and address the root causes of Arab state dysfunction and Islamist terrorism — which were identified in the 2002 Arab Human Development Report as a deficit of freedom, a deficit of knowledge and a deficit of women's empowerment — seemed to me to be a legitimate strategic choice. But was it a wise choice?

As I never bought the argument that Saddam had nukes that had to be taken out, the decision to go to war stemmed, for me, from a different choice: Could we collaborate with the people of Iraq to change the political trajectory of this pivotal state in the heart of the Arab world and help tilt it and the region onto a democratizing track?

Iraq was always a war of choice. As I never bought the argument that Saddam had nukes that had to be taken out, the decision to go to war stemmed, for me, from a different choice: Could we collaborate with the people of Iraq to change the political trajectory of this pivotal state in the heart of the Arab world and help tilt it and the region onto a democratizing track?

I say "no" because whatever happens in Iraq, even if it becomes a dictatorship to surrender his nuclear program (and helped expose the Abdul Qader Khan nuclear network); the birth in Kurdistan of an island of civility and free markets and the birth in Iraq of a diverse free press. But Iraq will only be transformational if it truly becomes a model where Shites, Sunnis and Kurds, the secular and religious, Muslims and non-Muslims, can live together and share power. As you can see in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, this is the issue that will determine the fate of all the Arab world development. Can the Arab world develop pluralistic, consensual politics, with regular rotations in power, where people can live as citizens and not feel that their tribe, sect or party has to rule or die? This will not happen overnight in Iraq, but if it happens over time it would be transformational, because it is the necessary condition for democracy to take root in that region. Without it, the Arab world will be a dangerous boiling pot for a long, long time.

The best case scenario for Iraq is that it will be another Russia — an imperfect, corrupt, oil democracy that still holds together long enough so that the real agent of change — a new generation, which takes nine months and 21 years to develop — comes of age in a much more open, pluralistic society. The current Iraqi leaders are holdovers from the old era, just like Vladimir Putin in Russia. They will always be weighed down by the past. But as Putin is discovering — some 21 years after Russia's democratic awakening began — that new generation thinks differently.

I don't know if Iraq will make it. The odds are really long, but creating this opportunity was an important endeavor, and I have nothing but respect for the Americans, Brits and Iraqis who paid the price to make it possible.

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So no matter the original reason for the war, in the end, it comes down to this: Were America and its Iraqi allies going to defeat al-Qaida and its allies in the heart of the Arab world or were al-Qaida and its allies going to defeat them and laid the groundwork for America and its allies defeated Iraq war: the first ever voluntary social contract between Sunnis, Kurds and Shites for how to share power and resources in an Arab country and to govern themselves in a democratic fashion. America helped to midwife that contract in Iraq, and now every other Arab democracy movement is trying to replicate it — without a U.S. midwife. You see how hard it is.

Which leads to the "maybe, sort of, we'll see." It is possible to overpay for something that is still strategic benefits: the removal of a genocidal dictator; the defeat of al-Qaida there, which diminished its capacity to attack us; the intimidation of Libya, which prompted