

The Battle of Baghdad

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The 1990s was dull. As the Soviet Union melted, life in the White House got terribly boring: no more an evil empire to tear down. As the dotcom bubble began bloating, US Congress idled: not much of law to pass. Think-tanks dried up. Hordes of Americans boarded planes to remotest corners of earth to soak excitement.

As early as 1987, Gregory Arbatov, a top adviser to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, had warned Americans: 'We are doing something really terrible to you, we are depriving you of an enemy.' And they did: Soviet Union vanished. America found itself left with no adversary, no 'other' against which to define itself. And John Updike lamented: 'Without the Cold War, what's the point to be an American?'

The holy gracious One heard their prayer: a divine prince with shining armour was sent down to gallop into the Oval Office on horseback to rescue America from the depression of loneliness. The prince hurled a Hot War on Baghdad in March 2003.

On 2 October 2006, Iraq's prime minister al-Maliki unveiled a new 4-point plan to end the deepening crisis between the shia and sunni in Baghdad. This was the second time he is doing so. Four months ago when he took office al-Maliki had announced a 24-point reconstruction plan for all Iraq. The fate of that venture is not a secret.

The latest plan is to calm down Baghdad. Local committees will be formed in all blocks of the city. The membership of a committee will have representatives of all political parties, religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and security officials—no less.

In theory the committees would give sunnis a venue to press security forces to take action against militants. But shias will have equal chance to prevent action. Precise wording of the details remains to be worked out. Shia parties want the new plan to be focused on 'terrorism', which would suggest insurgents, while sunnis want it to address 'violence', which would mean shia militias. One can guess how far would these committees go, if they move at all.

1. *Three Witnesses* : Evidently, conflicts between zealots of two religions having separate written scriptures could hardly be resolved through violence. Recall that as many as nine crusades over more than two centuries beginning on the eve of the eleventh century did little to iron out animosity between Christians and Muslims.

But two religious groups with moderate theological disputes on more or less similar scriptures could be amenable to forgetting past bitterness as did the Christians and the Jews in the aftermath of bloodletting during the crusades. The Jews had produced a written literature, a world history, a collection of laws, chronicles, psalms, books of wisdom, poetry, fiction, and political utterances which became at last what Christians know as the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. This literature appears in history in the fourth or fifth century BC.

A comparable second event occurred at the dawn of the Christian era. The spreading Christian community was seriously torn by complicated theological disputes, especially on the contemplation of Jesus. St Paul familiarized his disciples with the idea that Jesus was a god who died to rise again and give men immortality. The Arians taught that Jesus was divine, but distinct from and inferior to the Father. The Sabellians believed that Jesus was merely an aspect of the Father, and that God was Jesus and Father at the same time. The Trinitarians preached a more subtle doctrine that God was both one and three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For a time it

seemed that Arianism would prevail over its rivals; and then, after argument, violence, and wars, the Trinitarian's formula became the accepted doctrine of all Christendom.

A third episode of the same genre came after the crusades, nearer our times. Martin Luther famously nailed his ninety-five tightly reasoned theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on the morning of 31 October 1517. The Reformation began.

Wars between Catholicism and Protestantism broke out. One hundred and fifty years later, almost half of Europe was Protestant. The wars resulting from the Reformation came to the end in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, by which princes could choose their state religions, and religious toleration was explicitly guaranteed. One-third of the population of Central Europe has been killed in a conflict nominally over religious belief. It proved the old maxim that religious freedom is a product of two equally pernicious fanaticisms, one canceling the other out.

2. *Muslims' Quandary* : Iraq is descending fast into the depth of shia-sunni confrontation, on a world-scale, no longer confined to the local players alone. Six months before the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June, a senior al-Qaeda figure had warned him in a letter that he risked removal as al-Qaeda. Leader in Iraq unless he obeyed certain instructions. The author of that deadly 11 December 2005 letter written from al-Qaeda headquarters in the Waziristan region of Pakistan, was a member of Osama bin Laden's high command who signed 'Atiyah' (full name Atiyah Abd al-Rahman).

Shias are the overwhelming majority in Iraq with 60 percent share of the country's population as against the sunnis' 20 percent. By no means does this arithmetic measure their relative strength. For the most powerful sunni jihadist al-Qaeda has entered the arena connecting the battleground in Iraq with the global theatre of war. The al-Maliki Baghdad plan has been reduced to a scene of comic relief in an unfolding drama of vast magnitude, unless the sunnis would use it as a ploy to pave a honorable-looking way for the departure of American troops.

Here is a systemic anomaly. Danish cartoons or a papal speech quoting an eighteenth-century Byzantine emperor could draw Muslim mass protest. But Muslims decapitating brethren—in Sudan, Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan, and Jordan—produces little community-wide street demonstration. On the first day of Ramazan last year a sunni Muslim suicide bomber blew up a shia mosque in Hilla, Iraq, in the middle of memorial service killing 25 worshippers. This year on the first day of Ramazan, a sunni suicide bomber in Baghdad killed 35 people who were lining up in a shia neighborhood to buy fuel. The Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam), fragmented within as it is, cannot confront the infidels; that's what the past says.

As detailed above, internecine brutality is not unknown in the history of other communities. All the same, the fact remains: unless the internal dissensions among Muslims are attended first, the fire in Iraq cannot be quenched.

3. *Two Scenarios* : The National Intelligence Estimate—"Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States", dated April 2006— was prepared by 16 intelligence agencies of the US. It reports that the war in Iraq has greatly increased the threat from terrorism by 'shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives.' Iraq has become 'the cause celebre, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in Muslim countries and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement.' It listed the war in Iraq as the second most important factor in the spread of terrorism—after 'entrenched grievances such as corruption, injustice and the fear of Western domination.'

Side by side, at the same time, vulnerabilities in the jihadist movement have surfaced that, if fully exposed and exploited, could begin to slow down the spread of the movement. Those vulnerabilities include: dependence on the continuation of Muslim-related conflicts, the limited appeal of the jihadists' radical ideology, the emergence of respected voices of moderation, and criticism of the violent tactics targeted on mostly Muslim citizens.

The jihadists' greatest weakness is that their ultimate political solution—an ultra-conservative interpretation of sharia (Islamic Law) and governance submissive to it spanning the whole Muslim realm—is unappealing to the vast majority of Muslims. Exposing the religious and political straitjacket that is implied in the jihadists' propaganda would help to distance the jihadists from the audiences they seek to persuade.

Recently a few notable Muslim clerics have condemned violence and sectarian interpretations of the scripture. The US National Intelligence Estimate considers this development a signal of the trend that could facilitate the growth of a constructive alternative to jihadist ideology: peaceful political Islam. It could also lead to the consistent and dynamic participation of broader Muslim communities in rejecting violence, reducing the ability of radicals to capitalize on passive community support. In this way, the Muslim mainstream emerges as the most powerful weapon in the war on terrorism.

Authorized by the White House, selected chunk of the report was declassified, released, and subsequently published by the media. President Bush now pleaded before the American people thus: The invasion of Iraq had created an entire new army of terrorists who would be emboldened by an American withdrawal. Therefore, the US has to 'stay the course' and indefinitely keep fighting these terrorists.

By that convolute logic of President Bush, the more the US fights, the longer the war in Iraq stretches on.

The fact of the matter is: having demolished Iraq and spawning thereby 'an entire new army of terrorists', America cannot afford to retreat leaving behind the lucrative Iraqi oilfields at the hands of those terrorists of its own creation. If so, it is going to be a quagmire of quick-sands, bleeding America in the process. This is one possible scenario.

Here is another. Iraq is on the brink of a civil war anyway. Sectarian vengeance cannot be satiated by infidel's bombs. It can be addressed only by the involved sects themselves; this is a lesson of history, of which three witnesses have been produced at the outset.

So, the alternative scenario is as follows :

Foreign troops depart from Iraq. A senior shia cleric says a decisive civil war would follow, no doubt; but it won't last beyond one year. Meanwhile, a moderate majority which has so long remained silent bystander in utter perplexity of the current situation would step forward to assert itself, now with far greater open public support. Eventually, a new-found rapprochement among the sects would prevail.

The spirit of toleration broadens the horizon of mind. It is conceivable that once the two sects learn how to tolerate two religious views, they would not find it difficult to accommodate three or more. ~~████~~