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There's a Job to Finish in Baghdad

The question now is how good we want Iraq to be.

By BRET STEPHENS

Baghdad

Last week, a 14 year-old suicide bomber was apprehended by two Iraqi security guards as he made his way toward the Rasoul mosque, which was filled with Shiite worshippers celebrating the end of Ramadan. The boy detonated himself as he struggled with the guards, who were killed instantly, as were several passersby.

The attack was one of two that day against Shiite targets, which the New York Times duly reported under the headline "Baghdad Suicide Bombers Kill 2 Dozen in Attacks on Mosques." The Times added that "many in the crowd immediately said they suspected American involvement," although it added that "they displayed no obvious signs of hostility to a group of American soldiers who remained at the scene for some time."

Taken at face value, the story suggests just how "fragile and reversible" things are in Iraq, to use what has now become a stock line. Not reported by the Times, however -- or anywhere else in the Western media, as far as I can tell -- was the identity of the guards who prevented what could have been a much deadlier attack. One of them, Hamid Mansour Hassoun, was a Sunni. The other, Mohammed Nouri al-Rubaie, was a Shiite. Their joint sacrifice is a testament to everything much of the world thought Iraq could never be.

Much the same goes for nearly everything else one sees in and around Baghdad these days. In an interview, U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker recalls his first visit to the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Doura, in March 2007. "God it was depressing," he says. "There were about a dozen shops open and the streets were empty."

Today, Doura is a bustling place of banks, doctors' offices (including a specialist in venereal disease), food vendors and jewelry stores. One merchant, Khaled Jumail, rents out wedding dresses for about \$35 a day. He says business has picked up nicely in the past five months. Two blocks away is a gym -- evidence that the locals have money to spend on something other than life's necessities.

Elsewhere in Baghdad one sees well-tended public parks and private lawns,

heavy morning traffic, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool in Sadr City, which until recently was the stronghold of the militant Mahdi Army. The Green Zone remains a maze of high concrete walls and heavily manned checkpoints, but seems increasingly out of place in the city and will formally disappear when the Iraqi government regains sovereign possession on Jan. 1.

What happens after that date? About this there is huge anxiety, although perhaps more so in Washington than in Baghdad. Will Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sign a status-of-forces agreement? "I'm certain he is for an agreement," says Mr. Crocker. Does Mr. Maliki want the U.S. out by 2010, as he seemed to indicate around the time Barack Obama was in town? "I was in the meeting with Maliki and the date 2010 was never mentioned." Will Tehran use its proxies in Baghdad -- including in Mr. Maliki's own Dawa Party -- to become Iraq's puppeteer, as it is Lebanon's? "Being pro-Iranian in Iraq in 2008 isn't good politics," he says, adding that "Iraq isn't Lebanon."

As for whether Mr. Maliki's government will run roughshod over the interests of Sunnis and Kurds, Mr. Crocker notes that "as fractious as Iraqi politics are . . . there is an understanding that at this stage of political development a 'dictatorship of the majority' would be a highly dangerous thing." Exhibit A is the election law, wrangled over at such length that for a while it seemed an emblem of the government's inability to achieve "political reconciliation." The law was approved by a unanimous vote last month.

All this puts the U.S. in the peculiar position of trying to understand the measure -- and the limits -- of its own success. The U.S. has built the Iraqi army into a relatively effective fighting force. Now U.S. commanders worry about things like teaching Iraqis the ABCs of logistics, procurement and network-centric warfare. But is the goal to build an Iraqi army as good as Turkey's, or will the Egyptian model do? Should Iraq's government be as responsive and efficient as Konrad Adenauer's Germany? Or is it enough that it perform as well as Mexico?

Nor do U.S. commanders seem to be giving much thought to what an Obama victory might mean for their mission. Much of what American soldiers now do amounts to a peacekeeping effort, similar to the NATO mission in Bosnia. Can the U.S. safely relinquish the peacekeeping component to the Iraqis while successfully pursuing a much narrower counterterrorist and training mission, as Mr. Obama seems to have proposed? Or do effective counterterrorist and training operations depend on the presence of more sizeable forces to preserve overall stability?

Mr. Crocker's formula for dealing with the questions is simple: "Stay very, very flexible," he says. "Don't back [yourself] into a particular concept." From the vantage of Baghdad, it's a course that seems beyond argument. But whether America pursues it will depend on whether, when it comes to wanting to get out of Iraq as soon as possible, we are beyond persuasion.

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