

Is Iraq Headed for Genocide?

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Civil war or not, some human rights experts say Iraq is showing precursor signs of genocide

By [MASSIMO CALABRESI/WASHINGTON](#)

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President George W. Bush has continued to reject assertions that Iraq is in the midst of a civil war. But with the President set to meet with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Amman, Jordan, to discuss the country's continuing sectarian violence, some human rights experts are worrying about a different, worse fate for Iraq: genocide.

Gregory Stanton, a professor of human rights at Virginia's University of Mary Washington, sees in Iraq the same troubling signs of preparation and execution of genocidal aims that he saw in the 1990s in Rwanda when he worked at the State Department. Sunni and Shiite militias are "trying to polarize the country, they're systematically trying to assassinate moderates, and they're trying to divide the population into homogenous religious sectors," Stanton says. All of those undertakings, he says, are "characteristics of genocide," and his organization, Genocide Watch, is preparing to declare the country in a "genocide emergency."

While the term conjures up thoughts of enormous numbers of civilian dead, the quantity of victims is not the warning sign experts look for when considering the danger of genocide. Samantha Power, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, says with Shi'ite and Sunni sub-groups already identifying and killing victims solely on the basis of their religious identity, "genocidal intent" is already present in Iraq. "When you drive up to a checkpoint and you're stopped and somebody pulls out your ID and determines whether you're a Sunni or a Shiite and takes you away and kills you because of that, there is a genocidal mentality afoot." The question, Power says, is how broadly that mentality will spread. Iraq has already seen one genocide in recent decades: Saddam Hussein stands accused of attempting to exterminate Kurds, the third largest group in the country.

While Power and Stanton both see a mounting danger of widespread genocide in Iraq, there is certainly not consensus on the threat. Other human rights organizations, like the Committee on Conscience at the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the International Crisis Group, do not see the conditions for genocide developing. Human Rights Watch, which is particularly restrictive in what it calls genocide, says it believes Iraq is not headed in that direction. Joost Hiltermann, who covers Iraq for the International Crisis Group, says that the biggest impediment to full-blown genocide is the fact that there are divisions between Shi'ite factions, which prevent them from uniting in a nationwide persecution of Sunnis.

Much of the debate over the possibility of widespread genocide in Iraq stems from differing interpretations of the 1948 United Nations convention on genocide. There, genocide is defined

rather broadly as killing, seriously harming, restricting birth or attempting to destroy in whole or in part, "a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Says University of Mary Washington's Stanton, "Anyone who says that's not happening in Iraq is burying their head in the sand." But others say the number of people in Iraq operating with the intention of eradicating people solely on the basis of their membership in a ethnic or religious group is too small to constitute genocidal intent.

Stanton, Power, and a variety of politicians and foreign policy experts in Washington, including Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, worry that a U.S. pullout would only heighten the dangers of genocide. Some observers have held up Vietnam's long road to stability as a possible model for Iraq, after American troops leave. But says Power, "When you discuss what is left in America's wake you have to acknowledge that Saigon is not the only scenario that is hanging in our midst. What about the Rwanda scenario?" In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide that had been brewing only broke into full bloom after the withdrawal of U.N. peacekeeping forces.

While the genocide convention is relatively explicit about obligating its signatories to intervene to prevent genocide where it is occurring or preparing to occur, more often than not the world has declined to do so. And no one seriously believes that if widespread genocide unfolded in Iraq that the U.S. would be able to do anything about it. "The arc of humanitarian intervention has already been killed by Iraq for at least a generation," says Power. The clearest example of that is in Sudan. The United States has declared that genocide against the inhabitants of the Darfur region is under way, but there is no indication of possible military or humanitarian intervention to halt it.

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