

HYPOTHETICALS

**A ROLL OF THE DICE**

The future of Iraq. A board game BY SPENCER ACKERMAN



**Instructions:** Each Iraqi faction begins the game with goodwill points—50 points each for the Shiites and Kurds, and 20 points for the Sunnis. Add and subtract goodwill points as instructed throughout the game. If the goodwill of any group reaches zero, the game ends and Iraq is sent into a downward spiral of violence and anarchy.<sup>1</sup>

CONSTITUTIONAL HAGGLING

**START**

Roll die and advance number of squares indicated by roll.



**Kurdish Veto<sup>2</sup>**

Kurds denied guarantees of autonomy. Constitution blocked; Kurdish secessionists strengthened. Subtract 15 points from each faction and return to Start.<sup>3</sup>

**Grand Bargain**

Shiites and Kurds swap favors: sharia for Shiites, autonomy for Kurds. Add 10 points to both. Advance to next square.



Shiites and Kurds have a deal. How will Sunnis react? Roll and advance.

**Sunni Veto<sup>4</sup>**

Sunnis make passage of constitution impossible unless it leaves them dominant. Subtract 15 points from each faction and return to Start.<sup>5</sup>

You've made it through the constitutional process. Developing capable security forces is now the government's first priority. Advance one square to see how the government handles itself.

**No-Fault Defeat**

Referendum fails not because of any one faction's demands but because of accumulated "no" votes across three disparate provinces. Subtract 15 points all around and return to Start.<sup>6</sup>



**Sunni Acceptance**

Sunni leaders satisfied that constitution secures their interests; referendum passes. Add 10 points all around and advance three squares.



HANDLING OF SECURITY



**Baathist Purge?<sup>7</sup>**

Roll die. On 1–3, Shiite and Kurdish government fires all alleged ex-Baathists in the security and intelligence services—subtract 10 points from the Sunnis. On 4–6, Baathists stay—subtract 15 points from both the Shiites and the Kurds. Tally points, roll die, and advance.



**Widening Security Gap**

In response to insurgency, Iraqi leaders announce that security forces will have to grow yet again. U.S. troops prepare for a protracted stay. Subtract 5 points from Shiites and Sunnis. Advance three squares.<sup>8</sup>

ADMINISTRATION OF KIRKUK

**Disintegration**

Impasse over control of Kirkuk leads each faction to take matters into its own hands. Kirkuk becomes the epicenter of instability and violence. Subtract all points from all factions. Game over.

How will Iraq resolve the final status of oil-rich Kirkuk—the Kurdish "Jerusalem" claimed by all factions? Roll and advance.<sup>9</sup>



**Increasing Self-Sufficiency**

As insurgency diminishes, United States meets targets for Iraqi security-force training. U.S. presence drops. Add 10 points all around. Advance one square.

**Shadow Security**

Shiite militias bolster police and army units, but act as political enforcers. Sunnis fear retribution; subtract 5 points from them. Advance two squares.



**Uneasy Peace—Unending Occupation**

U.S. troops are asked to enforce peace on the ground, Balkans-style. Resentments rise; insurgency claims a new rationale. Subtract 5 points from all parties. Advance to Finish.

**Durable Compromise**

Complex agreement allows both Baghdad and Kurdistan to plausibly claim control over Kirkuk. All factions somewhat mollified. Add 10 points to all parties. Advance to Finish.

**FINISH**

Tally up all points. If the Kurds have 20–30 points, the Shiites have 10–20, and the Sunnis have 5–10, congratulations: Iraq is in the same netherworld as today. Anything more on all sides should suggest that Iraq is on a path toward sustainable peace and democracy. Anything less—or goodwill of zero or less for any group—and Iraq may careen toward outright civil war or failed statehood.

Spencer Ackerman is an associate editor at The New Republic, where he covers Iraq. For a fully annotated version of the game with additional commentary, go to [www.theatlantic.com/iraqgame](http://www.theatlantic.com/iraqgame).

## FOOTNOTES

1. This game board, of course, imposes an artificial order on a very messy reality. The precise chronology of events indicated by the game board is certainly possible, but not preordained; in some cases, events may happen concurrently. “Goodwill” cannot really be quantified, and is subject to influences beyond the events captured by this game. All that said, the game does highlight the major hurdles that Iraq must overcome in the next year or so, and may provide some rough sense of how difficult it will be for Iraq to clear each of them.

2. The passage of a Constitution acceptable to all three of Iraq’s factions—Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds—is the most pressing challenge facing the new government, and a prerequisite for any lasting political order. Drafting must be complete by August 15, though if deadlock persists, President Jalal Talabani can—until August 1—seek a single six-month delay. Iraq’s Sunni and Kurdish minorities can block constitutional ratification: In a referendum scheduled for October 15, the Constitution will fail if rejected by two-thirds of the voters in any three of the country’s 18 governorates. The Kurds in particular might reject the Constitution unless it allows them to maintain their pesh merga militia as the sole armed force within their northern Kurdish region; to amend federal law as it applies to Kurdistan; to keep a sizable portion of the oil revenues derived from Kurdish fields; and to redraw the boundaries of Kurdistan to include cities like Kirkuk. (More on that later.)

3. If ratification fails, the government must be disbanded and a new one created to try again. In practice, second chances are dicey affairs. Failure the first time around would likely harden factional grievances, perhaps dooming Iraq to a vicious circle of serial failure and rising mistrust.

4. Sunnis are likely to insist on a timetable to end the U.S. presence in Iraq as a major component of their buy-in to

the political order. While the Shiite fear that could be a prelude to a Sunni-led coup, they might agree to a staggered (read: drawn-out) U.S. departure—if it meant Sunni support for a process that will ensure majority-Shi’a rule.

5. See footnote #3.

6. Any three governorates can block the Constitution: they need not be contiguous. Hence, hard-line governorates from different regions, dominated by different ethnicities and religious sects, could ensure the Constitution’s demise—for entirely different reasons. Confused? Iraqis will be, too, if the Constitution is rejected not despite a carefully arranged effort to compromise, but essentially because of one.

7. Iyad Allawi’s interim government made a strategic decision to rehire ex-Baathists to staff the security forces and drain the insurgency of manpower. So-called “re-Baathification” has been vehemently denounced by the Kurds and Shiites, who have vowed to reverse it. While it’s unclear how extensive a prospective de-Baathification purge would be, the Ministry of Defense stated in March that half of its soldiers and three-quarters of its officers served under Saddam Hussein.

8. Estimates of the number of Iraqi security forces required to police Iraq have not only been rising, they’ve been rising faster than the U.S. military can properly train and equip quality recruits. As the Carnegie Endowment’s Jeffrey Miller found in March, “the gap between the total number of Iraqi security forces and the total required is now almost twice the size of the gap reported fourteen months ago.” Unless this changes—and changes dramatically—the U.S. will either have to leave Iraq before the security forces are truly ready or accept an indefinite occupation.

9. The final status of the city of Kirkuk is the most complex and incendiary problem facing Iraq. Kirkuk sits atop

about 40 percent of the country’s oil wealth. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein reshaped its demographic and geographic boundaries, murdering or displacing tens of thousands of Kurds and bringing in Sunni and Shiite Arabs. Reclaiming the city is a central Kurdish political aspiration, and Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani has threatened war to achieve it. Thanks largely to the return of over 70,000 refugees to Kirkuk, the Kurds won a massive victory in the January provincial council elections, instilling fear in the city’s Arabs and Turkmen that a resolution on the “final status” of the city—which will occur sometime after the Constitution is passed—will mean their deportation. Violence in Kirkuk has risen significantly since, and some Sunni leaders from the city have started to talk about “an occupation of Kurds and Shiites,” suggesting that escalating tensions over Kirkuk could light the spark for civil war.