

Iraq: A Way Forward

I start from this hard truth: President Bush does not have a strategy for victory in Iraq. His strategy is to prevent defeat and to hand the problem off to his successor. Meanwhile, the frustration of Americans is mounting so fast that Congress might end up mandating a rapid withdrawal, even at the risk of trading a dictator for chaos and a civil war that could become a regional war. Both are bad alternatives.

There is a third way. The idea is to maintain a unified Iraq by decentralizing it and giving Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis their own regions. The central government would be left in charge of common interests, like border security and the distribution of oil revenues. The plan would bind the Sunnis by guaranteeing them a proportionate share of oil revenues. It would tie economic aid to the protection of minority and women's rights. It would require a regional non-aggression pact, overseen by the U.N. Security Council. And it would allow us to responsibly withdraw most U.S. forces from Iraq by 2008 – enough time for a settlement to take hold.

The new, central reality in Iraq is that violence between the Shiites and Sunnis has surpassed the insurgency as the main security threat. Ambassador Khalilzad and General Casey have acknowledged that fact. The recent reporting of Dexter Filkins in *The New York Times* and Tom Ricks in the *Washington Post* has confirmed it. In last December's elections, 90 percent of the votes went to sectarian lists. Ethnic militias increasingly are the law in Iraq. They have infiltrated the official security forces. Sectarian cleansing has begun in mixed areas, with 100,000 Iraqis fleeing their homes in recent weeks.

The only way to hold Iraq together and create the conditions for our troops to responsibly withdraw is to give Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds a cooling off period in their own regions.

This plan is not partition – in fact, it may be the only way to prevent partition and preserve a unified Iraq. This plan is consistent with Iraq's constitution, which already provides for Iraq's 18 provinces to join together in regions, with their own security forces, and control over most day-to-day issues. This plan is the only idea on the table for dealing with the militia. This plan is consistent with a strong central government, with clearly defined responsibilities. Indeed, it provides an agenda for that government, whose mere existence will not end sectarian violence.

The example of Bosnia is illustrative, if not totally analogous. Ten years ago, Bosnia was being torn apart by ethnic cleansing. The United States stepped in decisively with the Dayton Accords to keep the country whole by, paradoxically, dividing it into ethnic federations. We even allowed Muslims, Croats and Serbs to retain separate armies. With the help of U.S. troops and others, Bosnians have lived a decade in peace. Now, they are strengthening their central government, and disbanding their separate armies.

The course we're on leads to a terrible civil war and possibly a regional war. This plan is designed to head that off. I believe it is the best way to bring our troops home, protect our fundamental security interests, and preserve Iraq as a unified country.

The question I have for those who reject this plan is simple: what is your alternative?

Joe Biden

A Five Point Plan for Iraq

1. Establish One Iraq, with Three Regions

- Establish three largely autonomous regions with a viable but limited central government in Baghdad
- Put the central government in charge of border defense, foreign policy, oil production and revenues
- Form regional governments -- Kurd, Sunni and Shiite -- responsible for administering their own regions

2. Share Oil Revenues

- Gain agreement for the federal solution from the Sunni Arabs by allowing them to run their own region instead of being a permanent minority in a centrally run government or being the principal victims of a civil war
- Write into the constitution that the Sunnis would receive about 20 percent of all present and future oil revenues – an amount roughly proportional to their size
- Push the central government to set national oil policy and distribute the revenues, which would reinforce each community's interest in keeping Iraq intact

3. Increase Reconstruction Assistance

- Provide more reconstruction assistance, but clearly condition it on the protection of minority and women's rights
- Insist that other countries make good on old commitments and provide new ones

4. Maintain Iraq's Territorial Integrity

- Propose that the United Nations convene a regional security conference where Iraq's neighbors, including Iran, pledge to respect Iraq's borders and work cooperatively to implement this plan
- Engaging Iraq's neighbors directly to overcome their suspicions and focus their efforts on stabilizing Iraq, not undermining it
- Precede the call for the conference with a U.N. Security Council call for the necessary declarations and a P-5 conference to show a united international front
- Create a standing Contact Group, to include the major powers, that would engage Iraq's neighbors and lean on them to comply with the deal

5. Drawdown US Troops

- Direct U.S. military commanders to develop a plan to withdraw and re-deploy almost all U.S. forces from Iraq by 2008 or sooner
- Maintain in or near Iraq a small residual force – perhaps 20,000 troops – to strike any concentration of terrorists, help keep Iraq's neighbors honest and train its security forces