

Dividing Iraq: Think Long and Hard First

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It is easy to call for dividing Iraq as if that could somehow solve the nation's problems, and allow the US to exit. There are also some lobbyists calling for Kurdish independence or autonomy who see such calls as the road to their success. The US needs to think long and hard before it supports such a policy. Civil war and division may be inevitable, but the results could be anything but pleasant:

- **Sectarian and ethnic cleansing:** Iraq does not have a neat set of ethnic dividing lines. There has never been a meaningful census of Iraq that shows exactly how its Arab Sunnis, Arab Shi'ites, Kurds and other factions are divided or where they are located. Recent elections have made it clear, however, that its cities and 18 governorates all have significant minorities, and any effort to divide the country would require massive relocations.

Moreover, Iraq is heavily urbanized, with nearly 40% of the population in the divided Baghdad and Mosul areas. Kirkuk is already a powder keg, and Basra is the subject of Shi'ite Islamist "cleansing." Ulster and the Balkans have already shown how difficult it is to split cities, and with Iraq's centralized and failing infrastructure, and impoverished economy, violence and economics cannot be separated.

- **The Army and security forces:** The regular military have held together so far, but they are largely Shi'ite with a large number of Kurds. The Ministry of Interior forces are largely Shi'ite, and the police are hopelessly mixed with militia and local security forces that divide according to local tribal, sectarian, and ethnic ties. Dividing the country essentially means dividing the army and security forces, creating local forces on sectarian and ethnic lines, and reinforcing the militias -- all-leading to more violence.
- **Oil and money:** More than 90% of Iraq's native government revenues come from oil exports. The Sunni Arab west has no present oil revenues. The Kurds want the northern oil fields, but have no real claim to them and no secure way to export. The Shi'ite south is also divided, with the Shi'ites in Basra talking about their own area separate from many other Shi'ites who would control the oil in the south.

Once the nation effectively divides, so does its major resource, and in ways that make the territorial losers in non-oil areas effectively dysfunctional. The central government cannot preside over a divided nation and hope to control oil and the nation's infrastructure and export facilities at the same time. This leaves the "losers" with little choice other than further conflict.

- **Foreign linkages:** Neo-Salafi Sunni Islamist extremist groups with ties to Al Qa'ida already have come to dominate the Sunni insurgents. If Iraq divides, either they will dominate the Iraqi Arab Sunnis, or Arab Sunni states like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will be forced to do so -- and they may well end up competing. Iran will compete for the Shi'ites and exploit the power vacuum if the US leaves. The Kurds have no friends: Turkey, Iran, and Syria will all threaten, and attempt to divide and exploit them.

The US has made serious mistakes in Iraq, and Iraq may well divide on its own. A strategy of dividing Iraq, however, is virtually certain to make things worse, not better, and confront the US with massive new problems in an area with some 60% of the world's proven oil reserves and 37% of its gas. Even if one ignores the fact that the US effectively broke Iraq, and its responsibilities to some 28 million Iraqis, a violent power vacuum in an already dangerous region is not a strategy, it is simply an abdication of both moral responsibility and the national interest.