

A Plan for Iraq

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As a longtime negotiator in the Middle East, I learned that the most demanding requirement of peacemaking was just getting each side to adjust to reality. In Iraq today, 3 1/2 years after the United States went to war there, no one seems to be doing that.

The Shiites, who dominate the government, may have reason to distrust the Sunnis, but they also remain unready to recognize the Sunnis' need for formal assurance that they will have a piece of the pie. The Sunnis may understand, intellectually, that they will no longer hold all the positions of power and privilege, but emotionally they have yet to accept the idea of the Shiites—an underclass in their eyes—as the dominant political force. The Kurds, regardless of what they say, expect to be independent and simply want a political framework that legitimizes that status without exposing them to threats from Turkey or Iran.

And what about the Bush administration—has it adjusted to reality? It claims progress, even while we sink into civil war. New security plans are tried and fail. Expectations that we will be able to draw down our forces rise and then fall as sectarian violence increases and becomes self-perpetuating.

Staying the course is a prescription for avoiding reality. But simply setting a deadline and withdrawing might also constitute a form of denial—denial of what will happen in the region after a precipitous pullout. So what can be done?

The starting point is to recognize that Iraq is not going to be a democratic, unified country that serves as a model for the region. The violence and the Sunni-Shiite division have already ruled that out. Instead, Iraq could, in the best case, evolve into a country that has the following: a central government with limited powers; provincial governments with extensive autonomy; sharing of oil revenue; and, at the local level, some rough form of representation and tolerance for minorities. In those circumstances Iraq might eventually achieve stability.

Such an outcome won't materialize on its own. To be sure, it could emerge after a prolonged civil war, which is the path we are heading down. Three interconnected initiatives might create a more acceptable path for managing either this outcome or at least our own disengagement from Iraq.

First, it's time for the Bush administration to insist that a national reconciliation conference be held and not be disbanded until agreement is reached on amendments to the constitution. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has

presented his plan for national reconciliation, but it fails to address the constitution and the legal assurances Sunnis want.

The Sunnis supported the constitution and participated in the elections last December with the understanding that there would be amendments on sharing oil revenue, on a prohibition against provinces' seceding and on the role of Islam in the state. Those amendments were never adopted, and now, when a committee has finally been formed to discuss them, it appears to the Sunnis that they will have to negotiate with a gun at their heads: namely, with parallel discussions on developing plans for provinces to secede also taking place.

Above all, what the Sunnis don't want is a rump state without resources. If they think that's all they will be left with, they will continue to at least acquiesce in the insurgency. And for the Shiites, that will be justification for preserving their militias. No national compact, no formal structure giving the Sunnis a legal foothold, no end to their support for the insurgency and no readiness by the Shiites to disband their militias.

Second, a long-discussed regional conference with all of Iraq's neighbors should be held. None of them—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey—wants the Bush administration to succeed in Iraq (at least in the way the president defines success). And yet every one of them fears the consequences of an Iraq convulsed in the aftermath of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal. A full-scale civil war, with refugees streaming out of the country, with instability bound to leak across borders, and with other nations intervening to protect their own interests and their Iraqi allies is just as much a nightmare for Iran as it is for Saudi Arabia. While Iraq's neighbors may agree on little else, the common interest of wanting to avoid an all-out civil war in Iraq could create a basis for a general set of understandings on what they will and will not do to help foster stability there. The administration ought to work for such a conference now.

Third, President Bush should inform Maliki that we will not impose a deadline for withdrawal but we are going to negotiate with his government a timetable for our departure. The difference between a deadline and an agreed timetable is the difference between leaving the Iraqis in the lurch and informing them they have to assume responsibilities. The former guarantees preservation of the militias as they anticipate a deepening civil war; the latter puts all sectarian groups on notice that they can shape the future but the clock is ticking and if they don't begin to get serious about reconciliation and about fulfilling their own responsibilities they face the abyss.

No one in Iraq seems to want us there, but everyone is afraid to have us leave. In the meantime, everyone seems willing to sit back, to avoid tackling the tough problems and to let us carry the brunt of the fighting. That has to stop.

Clearly there should be a relationship between the effort to finally produce national reconciliation and our approach to working out an agreement on the timing of withdrawal. If the Iraqis create a real national compact, the United States can be more flexible on its timetable for withdrawal. If they fail to do so, the United States must be more demanding in negotiations on the timetable. Ultimately, if Iraqis are ready to resolve their internal political differences, to adjust to reality and to make the hard choices they face, our presence can help in the transition. But if they continue to avoid reality, our presence will simply prolong both their state of denial and ours. It is time for a change in course.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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