

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD THINKING

REFLECTIONS ON A RESPONSIBLE AND PRINCIPLED WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

BY PROFESSOR BRENDAN O'LEARY



Brendan O'Leary (right) with Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq

President Obama is commendably committed to leaving Iraq responsibly, and Americans concur. But what does a responsible departure require?

Prevailing wisdom suggests that the U.S. should leave only after power is handed over to a “strong central government.” The premise is that “Baghdad” should be capable of replacing America’s military and “holding the country together.” Bush-administration diplomats insisted that Baghdad should organize reconciliation between Sunni and Shiite Arabs. And they wanted pesky Kurds to shut up about Kirkuk, considered an internal matter best left to “Iraqis” after the U.S. departs.

The prescription sounds like common sense; it even sounds principled, but it is folly dressed in blue-suit diplomacy and

treachery in the mask of honor. It would jeopardize the few benefits of America’s intervention, notably the defeat of Baathism, the establishment of a prosperous and democratic Kurdistan, and the drafting of Iraq’s 2005 Constitution. And it would increase the likelihood of further catastrophes and likely oblige the U.S. to return.

In a referendum validated by the United Nations, elected Iraqi politicians and four out of five Iraqi voters endorsed a new Constitution. Provisions in Article 140 call for a peaceful resolution of “disputed territories,” particularly Kirkuk.

Article 140 was to reverse the consequences of Arabization, which involved the genocidal destruction of Kurdish, Assyrian Christian and Turkmen communities. Arabization was part of the Baath regime’s assault on the Kurdistan national resistance and other ethnic groups. The 1974–75 war between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan National Movement was triggered by the failure of the Baath to implement the 1970 Agreement on Autonomy for the Kurdistan Region. The war led the regime to descend into ethnic expulsions, coercive assimilation and boundary-manipulations. Arabization was, in short, intended to destroy the effective presence of indigenous non-Arab peoples within their historic homelands. Fortunately, it did not succeed. Moreover, the constitutional program to reverse Arabization democratically is imperative, not only for a just and lasting resolution of conflict between Kurds and Arabs, but also for Iraq’s stability.

Encouraged by successive American and British ambassadors, the Kurdistan government has waited patiently for Baghdad to fulfill its obligations under Article 140—to restore Kurds to their homelands, return property, pay compensation, return Kirkuk Governorate to its 1968 boundaries before Saddam cut it in half, and conduct referendums to permit the accession to the Kurdistan Region of Kirkuk and other districts where there are decisive Kurdish majorities.

The December 2007 constitutional deadline to implement Article 140 has not been met. Some in the Obama administration seem to expect Kurdistan's patience to endure throughout a furtive U.S. exit. No one should wager a dollar or one marine's life on that prospect.

Quite aside from America's moral debt to the Kurds, whose soldiers gave their lives for a new Iraq, supporting re-centralization fails any realistic appraisal of U.S. interests. It will strengthen America's foes, not weaken them. Sunni Arab jihadists

judge that a centralized Iraq will prevent Kurds and Shiites from consolidating power, making Sunni prospects of engineering a coup and monopolizing natural resources much better. The same view is held by Sunni Baathists—renamed the Awakening Councils and the Sons of Iraq—whom the Pentagon put on its payroll under General Petraeus. If the Shiite Arabs who want Iraq re-centralized in their image should succeed (read Prime Minister Maliki), they will generate renewed war with both Kurds and Sunni Arabs.

A strong, central government in Iraq will inevitably renew zero-sum conflict between Sunni and Shiite Arabs. Shiites do not trust Sunni Arabs. Why would they, given the conduct of most Sunni Arab leaders, parties and people—before and after 2003? Re-centralization offers only one highly likely prospect: Shiite domination. The most likely scenario, aided by an ill-thought-out departure, is an Iraq dominated

even more by Iran, which has warm relations with the major Shiite parties. The next most likely scenario is a series of coups, counter coups and civil war, which will lead to armed interventions by neighboring powers and drag the U.S. back.

Why has Washington favored centralization at the expense of Iraq's Constitution? It has nothing to do with oil. The U.S. would do just as well through the decentralization of Iraq's oil production. It has certainly got something to do with appeasing Sunni Arabs, the ones who have killed most U.S. soldiers. But it has most to do with an old American obsession with having a strong Baghdad to "balance" against Iran.

Such thinking is not realistic. Shiites are pre-eminent in the new Baghdad government. The U.S. intervention and democratization created this new fact that cannot easily be reversed. The outcome has benefited Iran, which is friendly to almost all Shiite factions.

Fortunately, there is a better exit strategy, a principled one that would not betray America's commitments to Iraq's new democracy. It is based on realistic assessments of Iraq's history and political sociology, and is the logical opposite of the conventional wisdom.

In organizing its departure, Washington should commit to supporting Iraq's

Constitution, which mandates an autonomous Kurdistan with the right to unify with Kurdish-majority areas on its southern boundary. It enables Arab Iraqis to organize in their own governorates with a greater role for the Baghdad Federal Government than the Kurds want in their region. This "asymmetric federation" is best for all Iraqis,

not just Kurds: it minimizes the extent to which any of its three major communities are governed by the others against their will; it enables each to have local security arrangements, and it enables each to develop its own natural resources and share revenues from all fields in production in 2005.

This strategy is more likely to inhibit outside neighbors from intervening after the U.S. leaves. Kurdistan's relations with Turkey are improving, notably in energy matters. All that Turkey needs is assurances that the Kurdistan Regional Government will not become the basis for a Greater Kurdistan movement. This is fully within the ambit of America's power to facilitate. Under the alternative strategy, Iran's gains would be confined to Shiite-dominated Iraq. Sunni Arabs, those who most support Baathism and neo-Baathism, would have their own provinces to govern and their own quarrels to settle with their jihadists, and they would be kept from exercising racial and religious hegemony over Kurds and Shiites.

President Obama and his Cabinet are all highly intelligent people. They need to "stress test" the re-centralization program that is supported on autopilot by some officials in the State Department and Pentagon. At the moment, Washington is regrettably on course for a reckless departure, led by people with good intentions. The victims will not be just Arabs and Kurds, but U.S. soldiers, U.S. revenues and U.S. interests.

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