

Iraq Isn't.
(or how Aladdin Bush can't get
the ethnic genie back in the bottle)

A Blog Entry in Comments From Left Field & GordonTalk

August 16, 2005

I have a confession to make (It's a Catholic thing): Even though it'd be a big feather in George Bush's cap—and might seem to justify an illegal war—I really do hope that the Iraqi people resolve their differences, write a good constitution, form a stable government, and let our troops come home sometime before they qualify for military pensions.

But despite incredibly intense pressure from an increasingly desperate Bush Administration ([Only 27% of Americans now think George Dubya's a man with a plan to fix the mess in Iraq](#)), the deadline for the Iraqis to draft their constitution has come and gone. Fortunately, the Iraqi National Assembly voted just before the midnight deadline (which if missed would have forced a dissolution of the Assembly and a new round of elections, a failure that would have undoubtedly emboldened the insurgents) to extend the deadline by a week. Unfortunately, the possibility of failure still looms large, as [they cannot even agree about what they disagree about](#) (and sometimes as passions "cool down," [positions harden](#)).

Now, I realize that "[democracy is a messy thing](#)" (as Paul Wolfowitz infamously testified, when

things first started going to hell in Iraq, right after we liberated Baghdad ... and turned it over to mob rule) and that if Saddam Hussein were to have gone about the business of writing a new constitution, there would be no chance of missing deadlines (there would just be lines of missing dead opponents).

However, there are several ominous reasons to believe that Iraq is now less a Pottery Barn—in which breakage can be dealt with by throwing lots of money at the problem—and more a Humpty Dumpty—for whom all the King's horses and all the King's men ...

Just take a look at the breakdown of the three major issues, the breakdown of the nation-state of Iraq; the Shiites, Kurds, and Sunni Arabs are forming alliances with and against one another that shift from issue to issue, like the sands of the Iraqi desert:

1) Islamic Law & the Status of Women:

Most of the Shiites want secular law to be based upon [Sharia](#), religious law, with their Marjariya council of ayatollahs beyond the reach of the civil authorities. Most of the Kurds, who are Sunnis, want secular law to be merely inspired

by religious precepts. And the Sunni Arabs are strongly divided into secular and religious factions. Many of the women in Iraq fear the loss of civil rights that they've enjoyed for generations, even under Saddam Hussein, as guaranteed by laws passed in 1959.

2) Oil Revenues: Most of the oil is in the Shiite south, there is considerable oil in the Kurdish north, but virtually none in the Sunni Arab west (especially if the Kurds get the territorial boundaries drawn the way that they want). Not surprisingly, the Shiites and Kurds want to withhold much of their oil revenues from the central government; the Sunni Arabs want them to share the oil wealth, more than 95% of the income of the country.

3) Federalism: The Kurds—who had for years been the most oppressed under Saddam Hussein (as with those infamous incidents of gassing ... while Saddam was still our ally), who have in recent years enjoyed quasi-independence under the protection of our No Fly Zones, and who have for over a century clamored for [a state of their own](#) to unite their tens of millions of people in Iraq and neighboring countries (including our uneasy NATO ally of Turkey)—want continued autonomy at least, complete independence at most from any central authority in Iraq, a mostly Arabic—not Kurdish—nation. The Shiites—who (even though numerically a majority) were likewise oppressed by Saddam Hussein, who were somewhat protected by our No Fly Zones (although how can they forget our having encouraged their uprising after the first Gulf War, only to allow them to be felled by Hussein into those infamous mass graves), and who are

closely aligned with the Shiite regime in neighboring Iran (religious identity rivaling, perhaps transcending ethnic differences, between Arabs and Persians)—want at least as much autonomy as the Kurds. And Sunni Arabs—many of whom long for "the good old days" when they enjoyed pre-eminence under Saddam—are divided: The moderates, the majority of Sunni Arabs in the National Assembly, want a strong central government, to secure the rights and revenues of their people; the Sunni Arab radicals, the leaders of the violent insurgency, want nothing to do with a "puppet government" installed under the gun (both literally and figuratively) of an occupying power.

Viewed in the harsh light that has broken with the failure of the Iraqis to reach agreement (or to maintain agreement) on each of these major issues, it becomes more apparent than ever that the fundamental problem in Iraq is ...

Iraq isn't.

Even if a constitution is drafted and approved (and the Shiites are now threatening to use their majority in the National Assembly to force a "compromise" down the Kurds' and Sunni Arabs' collective throats, as an act of Shiite "[benevolence](#)"), even if a new government is elected, even if the violence subsides and our troops are withdrawn, there is little if any chance that a truly democratic [Iraq](#) will ever become a stable, united nation—any more than the former [Yugoslavia](#), another multi-ethnic state artificially created out of the former Ottoman Empire, at the end of the First World War.

The "balkanization" of Iraq—into separate, perhaps feuding Shiite Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish Sunni regions or states—is practically guaranteed as a natural consequence of their competing religious, ethnic, and historical differences.

Unless we intend on presiding over a "shotgun wedding" of these obviously incompatible mates—held together for decades only by the iron fist of Saddam Hussein, like that of Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia—we should be prepared for the eventual break-up of Iraq.

Whether that happens peacefully (well, relatively peacefully), through negotiations, or violently, through outright civil war, it will almost certainly happen.

And our hundred thousand-plus troops will continue to be caught in the middle of this dangerous domestic dispute. When we liberated the Iraqi people, we also set their ancient rivalries free.

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In the long run I suppose we will have done the Iraqi people a favor, by emancipating their three major factions from a national federation enforced by a murderous dictatorship (although in doing so, we have killed and maimed tens of thousands of them).

But also in the long run we will have opened a Pandora's Box of perilous possibilities—ranging from the revolt of Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Armenia; the oppression of women and seculars

by Shiites controlling vast oil wealth and closely aligned with Iran (increasingly radicalized since our Great Leader branded them part of an "Axis of Evil," which existed only in the most paranoid of fantasies); and the creation of a new haven for Al Qaeda et al. in the Sunni Arab west (radicalizing many other Sunnis, the majority in the Muslim world).

And in the short run—and for no one knows how long a run—we continue to kill and die in Mesopotamia, into whose sands has soaked the blood of countless warriors, and those caught in the crossfire of war, since the earliest days of recorded history.

"Civilization."

[Note: My article's contention that Iraq will need to be broken-up along ethnic lines in order to produce peace and stability, as in the former Yugoslavia, is similar to the plan in the [now-famous New York Times op-ed in May of the following year](#), by then-Senator (now-Vice President) Joe Biden with Leslie Gelb, of the Council on Foreign Relations, although their undoubtedly more diplomatic plan called for "largely autonomous regions" within a decentralized, not completely divided Iraq.]