Rebuilding a Nation: Myths, Realities, and Solutions in Iraq

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A failure to understand Iraq’s history risks catastrophic blundering, likely to result in an exponential rise in the region’s entropy, as US policymakers and Iraqis ponder how to deal with the violence which has engulfed Baghdad. Several pernicious myths have entered this debate and, having become accepted “facts,” cause real-world harm when they influence the thinking of foreign policymakers. The myths, which assume a lack of national Iraqi identity, artificiality of the state, continuous sectarian fighting throughout history, Kurdish desire for independence, and Shi’a disloyalty, lead some to the conclusion that dividing Iraq is the best way to end the violence. Instead of building on these myths, however, the international community should create a long-term solution by working with the emerging democratic Iraq to recognize and develop its historic presence as a unified nation. The future of the country is as a cohesive, democratic, and pluralistic federation. With that understanding in mind, it will be possible to devise a strategy that averts some of the darker possible scenarios and helps return Iraq and the region to stability.

The Myth of Artificiality
The first of these myths is that Iraq is an artificial state, created in an exercise of imperial hubris during the waning days of the British Empire after World War I. The myth-makers, who are universally non-Iraqi, assert that nothing historical or cultural binds Iraq’s people together. Rather, the inhabitants were forced to coexist by their British masters, who stitched together the three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul into a single state. This argument is not only unhistorical, but it also has a far more destructive corollary that there is no point in attempting to hold this historic anomaly together and that its natural state should be one of division, de facto or de jure, among its three components, Shi’a Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurd. The myth ignores that Iraq is actually a nation with an ancient identity that actively took part in international affairs and modernization before the Saddamist Baathists took control. This corollary courts disaster.

To begin with, Iraq has the oldest recorded history of any country on Earth. The word “Iraq” itself is ancient, and probably dates back to Akkadian times. When medieval Islamic geographers referred to “Iraq,” they meant roughly the same place we mean now. Over the 500 years it was ruled by the Ottomans, the other two provinces were not independent of Baghdad, but were administratively subordinate to it. Thus, over a span of centuries—if not millennia—the people of Iraq have been one, for all their ethnic and confessional differences. Ancient history notwithstanding, Iraq has now been
a modern state for four score and seven years. Since 1920, a distinct Iraqi identity has emerged, one distinct from and layered over tribal, ethnic, and sectarian affiliations.

The process of forging an Iraqi national identity manifested itself in the country’s actions on the international stage. Iraq was the first predominately Arab country to gain its independence when it was admitted into the League of Nations in 1932. It was among the 54 countries that founded the United Nations in 1945, and it was also a founder of both the League of Arab States and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. This confidence and vibrancy in international affairs mirrored a high degree of internal optimism and cohesion.

Fueled by Iraq’s increasing oil wealth, a burst of economic development beginning in the mid-1950s resulted in spectacular strides. By the end of 1979—the last full year before the disastrous war with Iran—Iraq was on the verge of joining the developed world. Its per capita GDP equaled that of Spain, which would enter the European Union six years later. By then, Iraq had cash on reserve in hard currency reserves totaling US$50 billion (in 1980 terms). It is difficult to imagine the heights Iraq might have reached, domestically and internationally, had it been blessed with more enlightened leadership over the next 23 years. Instead, Saddam Hussein launched a series of wars which decimated the country’s population and economy.

Colin Powell asserted in 2002 US Congressional testimony that Iraq was a failed state. That is a hard case to prove, given the gains it made from 1920 through 1979. It would have been more accurate for Powell to have said that after 1979, Iraq had a failed government. Saddam Hussein’s deliberate policy of maintaining control by playing violently on ethnic and confessional differences has led some commentators to believe that such differences have always resulted in violence in Iraq, even though a long history argues otherwise.

**Reconciliation with Insurgent Nationalists**

Despite Saddam Hussein’s policies, this national history has fostered a true sense of national Iraqi identity that cannot be lightly dismissed. Indeed, as UN officials continually assert, it has been clear for some time that a significant segment—it is difficult to quantify the percentage precisely—of the current insurgency is now composed of Iraqi nationalists fighting against what they perceive as a potential break-up of the country by outside forces. These nationalists are individuals who, though suspicious of the United States, were relieved by the removal of the previous regime. Decisions made along the way, such as the dissolution of the army and overly aggressive de-Baathification, have pushed these individuals and groups to violence.

The United Nations is a logical intermediary in the efforts of the Iraqi government to reach out and provide both nonviolent avenues for discussion and reassurance that the dissolution of Iraq is not on the agenda. Another way of reaching out to Iraqi nationalists involves the constitutional process, a method which is often largely ignored by the international community. In October 2005, an agreement was brokered immediately prior to the referendum on the permanent constitution, which had garnered opposition and rejection by both nationalist and Sunni parties. Under the agreement’s terms, the process of amending the constitution would be re-opened during the first session of parliament. This pact was appropriate, recalling that, because the Sunni parties had boycotted the elections for the constitution-drafting Assembly, they then had minimal representation in the drafting process. In essence, the agreement extended the transitional period long enough to allow for full Sunni participation, even though the referendum has already approved the permanent constitution. As things turned out, a swing of 73,000 votes in Nineveh Governorate, just two-thirds of one percent of the total vote, would have defeated the constitution. Had this last-minute agreement not occurred, it is likely that the constitution would have been defeated.

Proceeding with the constitutional amendment pro-
process would not only honor a promise, but would also allow for addressing substantive deficits in the document. One gaping lacuna in the permanent constitution relates to the ambiguities respecting the ownership, management, and distribution of Iraq’s oil. This issue is perceived by many insurgent nationalists as fundamental to the future unity and stability of the country, and thus the ambiguities constitute a major irritant.

Regardless of any eventual substantive resolution, however, re-opening the amendment process allows for full acceptance of the process of constitution-drafting, which, by virtue of the Sunni parties’ boycott, did not occur in 2005. Though there is broad agreement within Iraq’s polity that the future of the country is as a unified, democratic, and pluralistic federation, there is not yet a consensus as to what federalism means in the Iraqi context. Engaging in the review process would allow for discussion by all parliamentary parties on these and other issues, thereby increasing confidence-building measures among not only the parties, but their respective constituents as well.

Any political solution would, of course, include a reconciliation process. Here the Iraqis must have a free hand to deal with their compatriots, which they have not had in the recent past. In 2004, when then-Prime Minister Iyad Allawi announced amnesty for those outside the political process, the US embassy in Baghdad immediately declared that such a policy would not be available to anyone who had spilled American blood. This statement, in turn, led Prime Minister Allawi to say that amnesty would not apply to those who had killed Iraqis.

While current Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was contemplating another such amnesty in May 2006, the US Congress decried amnesty for those who had killed US citizens. Yet if amnesty was not for those who had been involved in insurgent acts, for whose benefit was it? For reconciliation to have meaning, it has to include some unsavory characters, including some who have shed the blood of Iraqis and US citizens. That, after all, is the experience of other countries in similar circumstances. The Germans, for instance, had to reverse an overly rigorous de-Nazification process in order to maintain national cohesion and rebuild a functioning state.

There are other avenues of cooperation with insurgent nationalists. These nationalists are unlikely to be sanguine at the targeting of large numbers of Iraqi civilians by Al Qaeda and the Saddamist Baathists; they may even join in the fight against such organizations if they are induced to join the political process. Thus, political dialogue with insurgent nationalists and their inclusion in a reconciliation process that aims toward a unified Iraq will have the additional and necessary benefit of isolating both Al Qaeda and the Saddamists.

Neither Al Qaeda nor the Saddamists have a negotiable political agenda. They possess instead a nihilistic desire to destroy the political process which has been under way for the past three years. Al Qaeda and its allies in Iraq endeavor to establish a Taliban-style Islamic emirate and to defeat the United States and its allies not only in Iraq, but throughout the world. The Saddamists wish to return Iraq to the era of absolute rule by the Baath Party. Like Al Qaeda, they therefore thoroughly reject the political process. Neither group is interested in political dialogue, much less compro-
The most immediate threat confronting Iraqis is the existence of these death squads that roam, with substantial impunity, throughout the capital. As in other contexts in the Middle East, a small minority of extremists, despite a dearth of popular support, are nonetheless able to subject the majority to its will. Baghdad's beleaguered population has suffered unspeakable horrors. Because the government has not yet demonstrated the ability to protect the population, Baghdadis are understandably tempted to hide behind militias that do offer some form of protection. But to date, despite that temptation, these sectarian death squads have not demonstrated the ability to actually rally Baghdad's civilian populations to their sides.

Disarming these death squads and promoting the capacity of the government to protect its citizens will restore the trans-confessional harmony which has been the natural state of Iraq throughout its history. The government of Iraq has announced its commitment to accomplishing this goal. To that end, the planned surge of Multinational Forces (MNF) in Baghdad is a salutary development, as, of course, is the planned concomitant acceleration of the training of Iraq's own security forces. The goal must not be merely to enhance the role of the MNF. In the long term, Iraqi forces must be sufficiently trained, strengthened, and equipped to be able to provide security on their own. In addition to further training and better equipment, these forces must be purged of the unofficial militia elements which have infiltrated them. This process has also begun thorough screening and re-training of specific units. As militias are disarmed, Iraq's nascent security forces will have to earn the trust of Baghdad's population, street by street and neighborhood by neighborhood.

The Myth of Kurdish Separatism

Another perpetuated myth is that the Kurds of Iraq seek independence. The Kurdish leadership certainly understands that the Kurds will have much greater stability within a united Iraq rather than as part of a fragmented country. The leadership understands that it may now occupy the ideal position: autonomy in northern Iraq with a hand on the levers of power in Baghdad, all protected by an internationally recognized border. Nor is this concept of autonomy new to Iraqi politics: the term autonomy in the context of Kurdistan has been in the Iraqi lexicon since the 1960s, when it was first promised. The difference now is that the promise to Iraq's Kurds is not purely rhetorical. Their rights are no longer

“The Long History of Amity Among Iraq’s People Augurs Well for their Ability to Overcome Current Sectarian Tensions.”

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merely enshrined on paper, but are being respected on the ground. It is no small occurrence that Masoud Barazani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, stated in the ceremony announcing the interim constitution that, for the first time in his life, he was proud to be an Iraqi. Kurdish linguistic and political rights, which were already protected in the interim constitution, were preserved and augmented in the permanent constitution.

Given the barbarous treatment of ethnic Kurds throughout the 35-year Baathist reign of horror, including nearly 15 years of separation enforced by US and Allied jets, it is not surprising that many rank-and-file Iraqi Kurds are indeed skeptical of Iraq as a state. It may take time, but after the process of political, economic, and social re-integration has taken its course, it is easily predictable that the ardor for independence that they possess will cool. There is reason to believe that this process has already begun, as demonstrated by the overwhelming support in Iraqi Kurdistan regarding the referendum for a permanent constitution—a document that preserves Kurdish rights within a united, federated Iraq. Moreover, it should not be assumed in the first place that all Kurdish rank-and-file desire separation. The results of both the January and December 2005 elections suggest there is little appetite for secession amongst the Kurds of Baghdad, the city with the single largest Kurdish population in the country.

The Myth of Shi’a Disloyalty

The last myth informing much of the debate in Western and other capitals is that Iraq’s Shi’a population anxiously awaits the first opportunity to unite with Iran. Among others, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has publicly voiced such views. Inherent in the myth is that Iraq’s Shi’a population is of Iranian descent, even though the vast majority of Iraq’s Shi’a are descended from Arab tribes who converted to Shi’ism in the last two hundred years or so.

But there could be no more definitive repudiation of this myth than the eight years of brutal fighting in the Iran-Iraq war. A quarter-million Iraqis died in that conflict. Since the Iraqi conscript army was composed predominately of Shi’as, the Shi’a population took the brunt of the casualties. Iraq’s Shi’as fought and died for Iraq, in contrast to 1991 and 2003, when the army refused to fight for Saddam against the United States and its allies. The identification of the Shi’a conscripts, first and foremost, was with their country. Just as Iraq’s Shi’a population thought of itself as Iraqi, Iran’s ethnic Arab population in Khuzistan province regarded itself as Iranian, fighting the Iraqi army with ferocity. This otherwise pointless war proved one thing: the Middle East’s post-World War I state system was ingrained in the minds of the peoples of the region, and those who would tamper with it do so at their own peril.

The Implications of a Divided Iraq

Notwithstanding the lesson so brutally learned in the Iran-Iraq war and the many other realities on the ground, there are those—principally US citizens and elected officials—who advocate Iraq’s division. They harken back nearly a century to the myth of colonial creation. Indeed, they are themselves prepared to commit the same sin which they accuse the British of having committed: engaging in a neo-colonialist impulse to dispose of what is not theirs and tampering with what have been stable international borders—despite Saddam’s repeated attempts to ram them—for nearly a century. This is a Sykes-Picot Agreement for the new century. Whatever else is happening there today, no Iraqi is fighting to secure the division of the country.

Some go further, advocating the stationing of US troops

Kurdish women carry posters in support of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in Sulaimania, northeast of Baghdad. After spending two weeks in a Jordanian hospital, Talabani returned to Iraq to the cheers of thousands of Kurds. The question of a permanent Iraqi constitution has been met with great support in Iraqi Kurdistan.

[Image]
in Iraqi Kurdistan to effectuate the division. They fail, however, to consider the effect of doing so: the United States would be rightly seen throughout the region and the larger Islamic world as having forcibly divided Iraq at the point of a gun—in effect “proving” that such division was the real goal of the intervention from the beginning.

It is hard to overstate the negative effect this perception would have on US standing throughout the Islamic world in the long term, as it would immeasurably bolster recruitment into the ranks of militant Islam. In that sense, former US Ambassador John Bolton’s recent assertion that Iraq’s territorial integrity is not part of US “strategic interest” is myopic.

Advocates of division also fail to fully comprehend implications within the region. An independent Kurdistan, even if it were independent in all but name, would be viewed as an existential threat in three capitals: Damascus, Ankara, and Tehran. Each of those capitals’ countries has a larger Kurdish population than does Iraq. As such, they would have a vested interest in creating instability for this landlocked mini-entity, fearing, as each does, Kurdish separatism within their own states.

Furthermore, division would not result in three neat entities. The southern region could easily fracture into two to four zones, each ruled by its own warlord. This scenario would have worse implications for the large Shi’a populations in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States. West-central Iraq, in the meantime, would likely fracture into at least two zones of its own, one ruled by former regime loyalists, the other becoming a Taliban-style emirate on the border with Jordan. All this says nothing of the devastating human tragedy that would unfold with massive population shifts, as Iraq’s highly integrated populations move into differing ethno-sectarian zones.

Nor should the centripetal effect of a unified Iraq be lightly dismissed where the Kurds are concerned. They were unable to form a cohesive government during their 12 years of enforced separation from Baghdad until Iraq was put back together in 2005, and they fought a bloody civil war among themselves in the process. In short, ripping apart a country in the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds would make the last 60 years of Middle East history look like peace and tranquility itself.

Iraq’s neighbors understand the catastrophic implications of this scenario. While some of them have contributed to what they had hoped would be limited chaos they could control, the threatened disintegration of Iraq is not in their collective or individual self-interests, unleashing, as it will, competitive forces between them that will be impossible to control. It has thus become clear that a political solution to Iraq’s problems must include dialogue with each of its six contiguous neighbors, as well as with other powers. Such dialogue would serve to reassure countries that a stable, democratic Iraq will pose no threat to their interests. Iraq’s neighbors must, in turn, abide by their obligations under the 2005 UN Security Council Resolution 1618, which called upon regional countries to refrain from providing assistance of any type to those individuals or organizations who are committing acts of violence in Iraq. Iraq’s continued engagement with regional powers will help engender stability in Iraq and the larger region.

**Supporting Reconciliation and Stability**

Undertaking concrete steps in conjunction with various parties is the only hope of creating an internal and regional environment capable of bringing about a solution to the violence which now grips Iraq. Recalling the country’s own history of inter-communal harmony and cohesion, the steps must begin by expanding the political process, reopening constitutional negotiations on critical issues, and starting a serious reconciliation process, thereby isolating Al Qaeda and the Saddamists. The political process in Iraq must additionally engage Iraq’s neighbors. In the meantime, the temporary surge of US troops must go toward disarming militias in Baghdad. Ultimately, any approach to Iraq’s problems must not be merely a short-sighted expedience, but one which takes into account a strategic vision for the region, one that promotes stability and isolates radicalism, with the goal of definitively defeating it.

In the end, Iraqis will have to solve for themselves the difficult political questions and make the complex compromises necessary to stabilize their own country. This process of statecraft is not a matter of genetic memory, but rather a learnt behavior—one whose lessons, after 35 years of absolute tyranny, Iraq’s political elite are learning under far less than ideal circumstances. The international community can help Iraqis reach, if not a consensus, at least a *modus vivendi*, by acting as a catalyst, promoting the process of political reconciliation and generating regional support for the stability and unity of Iraq.