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The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

October 29, 2006 Sunday
Final Edition

Partition Is Not the Solution . . .

BYLINE: Rend al-Rahim**SECTION:** Editorial; B07**LENGTH:** 850 words

Desperate to find solutions to the violence in Iraq and thus an exit strategy for the United States, an increasing number of lawmakers in Congress are considering Iraq's partition into Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite regions under the umbrella of a loose confederation. But partition is neither desirable nor feasible.

Neat partition lines are impossible because few regions in Iraq are ethnically or confessionally homogeneous. The governorates of Diyala, Mosul, Salahuddin, Hilla, Kirkuk and Basra are intermixed or have large minorities scattered throughout each province. In Baghdad, with probably a quarter of Iraq's population, the ethnic and sectarian groups are inextricably interwoven.

A plan to partition Iraq would plunge the country into total civil war far more widespread and bloody than the sectarian and factional violence we are witnessing now. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 resulted in 2 million dead and 11 million displaced. The death toll and refugee numbers from collective murder, reprisal killings and ethnic cleansing in Iraq would be comparable, dwarfing the casualties in Iraq today.

Nor would conflict end once areas had been purified at this horrific human cost. As in Kashmir, regions along the partition lines would continue to be contested for decades, leading to continued violence and warfare. The belt of towns surrounding Baghdad would be a war zone of competing territorial claims, as would the border regions skirting Kirkuk, Mosul and Diyala.

With the exception of the Kurdish regional government, the institutions of local governance, including regional councils, regional assemblies and the local police forces, are underdeveloped and fragmented, with little capacity to preserve the rule of law or deliver services. In such an environment, partition will inevitably lead to a meltdown of authority, and internecine fighting would intensify. We have had a harbinger of such warfare in the so-called stable areas in the south, where fighting has erupted in Basra, Diwaniyah and Amarah among the various Shiite factions; it has been contained only provisionally and with

the greatest difficulty. With control of resources and absolute power as the beckoning prize, the factions would battle even more viciously for supremacy.

Iraq's neighbors would not stand by and passively witness the turmoil attending efforts at partition. There is too much at stake for all of them, and several are already meddling in Iraq's internal affairs. If Iraq is partitioned, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia will intervene -- either militarily and directly, as Turkey might do in Kurdistan and northern Iraq, or by increasing and expanding support to Iraqi factions, or both. In the case of Iran, a stepped-up nonmilitary Iranian presence and increased support for pro-Iranian groups are both feasible and likely options. Iraq would thus become the battleground of an undeclared war for control not only of Iraq but of the entire Middle East.

The most probable outcome of this violent competition for territory, resources and power would be a radical Sunni, Taliban-style regime in the west and in parts of central Iraq that would be a breeding ground for terrorism. In the south it is likely there would be a fundamentalist Shiite regime pliant to Iran's will. In both cases these would be authoritarian regimes hostile to pluralism and genuine democracy. Unchecked by a stunted and impotent national government, these governments would use their resources to promote their radical ideologies abroad, support like-minded movements in neighboring countries and destabilize the region. Meanwhile, Baghdad would remain a war-torn city with a fig-leaf government too feeble to hold itself together, let alone uphold the rule of law across the country.

These are hardly the outcomes for which the United States fought a war to remove Saddam Hussein from power and for which Iraqis and Americans continue to pay a price in precious lives and resources. Rather than seeking ways to weaken the national government, we should find ways to strengthen and empower it to do a better job, and seriously consider substantially increasing the number of Iraqi army troops and raising the number of U.S. forces at least temporarily.

At this stage, strengthening the national government and providing it with the tools and institutions to enforce the rule of law is far more likely to produce a stable country that can govern and defend itself and be a friend to the United States. This, rather than a misguided plan of partition, presents a viable exit strategy for the United States and a definition of success in Iraq.

We need to engage in new thinking and develop new strategies for Iraq, but above all, no matter how dire the situation, we must not grasp at options that look good in theory but would prove disastrous in practice.

The writer is executive director of the Iraq Foundation. She served as the representative of the interim Iraqi government to the United States from November 2003 to December 2004. This article expresses her personal opinion only.

LOAD-DATE: October 29, 2006

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper