



How the West should respond to a divided Iraq - and not intervene again

By Ted Galen Carpenter
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One consistent feature of US and NATO policy regarding Iraq has been an official commitment to keep the country intact after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq by the “coalition of the willing” in 2003. Washington was especially adamant about the need for Iraqi unity. Recent developments, though, indicate that Iraq is in the process of fragmenting into three new states. Both the United States and the major powers of the European Union need to adjust to that reality and not make an already difficult, unstable situation even worse.

Ironically, Western (especially US) actions have contributed to the process of fragmentation. Washington’s behavior frequently contradicted and undermined the official insistence on preserving an intact Iraq. Following the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s, for example, the United States and its allies established “no fly” zones over northern and southern portions of the country to weaken Saddam’s hold on power. Yet that move enabled the Kurdish population in northern Iraq to resist Baghdad’s authority and establish a *de facto* independent state.

The development of an autonomous Kurdish region, complete with its own flag, currency, and military forces (the Peshmerga), gradually turned the concept of a unified Iraq into a diplomatic fiction. Although Kurdish delegates sat in the national parliament and a Kurd occupied the largely ceremonial post of president, the real governing power in northern Iraq resided with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Irbil. The reality of Iraqi Kurdistan’s *de facto* independence became even more evident when the KRG began concluding its own agreements with international oil companies and other enterprises over Baghdad’s strenuous objections. This past year, the Kurds began pumping oil through pipelines under their control to neighboring Turkey, where it was then available for sale on the global market. Once again, the central government in Baghdad was little more than an angry spectator.

What remained of Iraq’s unity outside of Kurdistan began to fray badly in 2012 and 2013 as the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki became ever more blatant in its autocratic and sectarian behavior. Political violence soared, as the

Sunni minority, which had been dominant under Saddam Hussein and his predecessors, chafed under its new, marginalized status. Funded by Saudi Arabia and other neighboring, Sunni-ruled countries, Iraq's Sunni tribes conducted a simmering insurgency against the Maliki government. The Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence that had plagued Iraq from 2005 to 2008 returned with a vengeance. It became so bad that in Iraq's May 2014 parliamentary elections, balloting could not even be conducted in portions of Anbar province and other heavily Sunni areas.

The growing fragmentation of Iraq surged with the onset of a military offensive from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an extremist faction that had its power base in Sunni regions of both countries. The headlong rout of Iraq government forces during that offensive gave ISIS control of Mosul and other major cities, as well as wide swaths of rural territory in western and northwestern Iraq. Prospects for a united Iraq became exceedingly bleak.

Washington and its NATO allies seemed both panicked and uncertain about how to respond to these developments. The Obama administration remained officially committed to the concept of a unified Iraq, even as that notion appeared increasingly detached from reality. Some vocal dissenters have emerged, however. Former Pentagon official Dov Zakheim urged US officials to abandon the pipe dream of a united Iraq and throw strong support to Kurdistan. That position at least has some underlying logic. In marked contrast to both the Sunni and Shiite populations of Iraq, which have exhibited strong anti-American sentiments and more than a few authoritarian tendencies, the Kurds have consistently been the one pro-American, pro-Western, and generally democratic faction in Iraq.

The nature of the Obama administration's recent actions indicates at least a hedging strategy, if not a drastic policy change. It was notable that Washington's initial response to the ISIS offensive was quite restrained, amounting to little more than providing some logistical support for Baghdad's military. That stance changed dramatically in early August when ISIS forces began to pose a threat to Kurdish-held territory, including the capital, Irbil. Obama then ordered air strikes in support of the Kurds and soon agreed to rush sophisticated military hardware to the Peshmerga.

There also has been a subtle, but revealing, shift in the Obama administration's foreign policy rhetoric. In a brief address to the nation in mid-August regarding the situation in Iraq, the President repeatedly referred to US support for "Iraqi and Kurdish forces," implying that the two are separate entities. That formulation was more than a bit odd. It would be akin to a leader referring to "US and Texas forces," implying that Texas is something other than part of the United States. Either it was a verbal gaffe, or (more likely, given its repeated use) a signal that Washington now fully accepted Kurdistan's *de facto* independence.

Such a move would be a belated recognition of reality. Baghdad has not exercised meaningful authority over Kurdistan since the early 1990s. And it is increasingly doubtful if the central government can regain control over the predominantly Sunni regions of Iraq, even if ISIS is eventually repelled.

The wonder is not that Iraq seems to be coming apart, the surprise is that it did not happen earlier. Both Iraq and Syria are artificial creations of European imperial policy after World War I, and they lack significant ethnic, religious, or economic cohesion. In Iraq's case, London created a new entity from three disparate provinces of the defunct Ottoman Empire, relying on the minority Sunni Arab elite to maintain order. That system persisted after the British departure in the 1950s, but it ended with the US-led ouster of Saddam and the governing Baathist Party. A power vacuum emerged that Shiites and Kurds moved to fill - the latter to achieve their long-frustrated goal of an independent Kurdish state, and the former to become the new elite in the rest of Iraq. The rise of ISIS reflects the desire of the displaced Sunni elite in Iraq and the heretofore largely powerless Sunni majority in Syria to form a new, Sunni-ruled state out of portions of those two countries.

Washington and its allies must adjust to such new realities. Even if Iraq remains officially one country (which seems increasingly unlikely), it will be little more than a political shell, with most of the real power located in Kurdish, Sunni, and ultimately, Shiite regional entities. An official division of Iraq into three new ethno-religious states might produce greater stability than such a jerry-rigged arrangement.

In any case, it is important to let the various factions in Iraq work out a settlement with a minimum of outside interference. Washington's resumption of its military involvement in Iraq is not an encouraging sign. The impulse to oppose ISIS and support its adversaries, especially the pro-Western Kurds, is understandable, but it threatens to entangle the United States once again, in a complex, intractable civil war. That move would also revive resentment throughout the Middle East against what is perceived as Western imperialist meddling. The United States and the European powers have repeatedly made a mess of Mesopotamia. It is time to let the various factions settle their own affairs - as unnerving as that process might prove.

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