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Commentary

In Iraq, Democracy Is the Only Option

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Continued violence and loss of American lives make it understandable why much of the American public has lost confidence in efforts to create a democracy in Iraq. It also explains increasing support for withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.

But consider what is at stake in Iraq. Possessing the world's second-largest oil reserves, Iraq is a potential leader of the Arab world, being the only Arab country with oil, water and extensive human capital in the form of a highly educated middle class. A failure to create a functioning democracy, and spiraling down of Iraq into chaos and anarchy, would have disastrous consequences not just for Iraq, but for the entire Middle East and U.S. national interests in the region. Iraq's collapse would lead to more violence and instability in the Middle East.

What are our policy options in Iraq? There are three logical policies that the U.S. can pursue in Iraq: immediate or phased withdrawal of our troops; division of Iraq into three statelets representing its three main ethnic groups (Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds); or remaining in Iraq until its democratically elected government and society can be stabilized.

What would be the consequences of the immediate or phased withdrawal of American troops? One likely possibility is the seizure of power by a coalition of ex-Baathists and radical Sunni Islamists. Because this coalition would face strong opposition, particularly from the Shiite and Kurdish communities, Iraq would remain highly unstable. If, on the other hand, Shiite militias took power, we would see a rise in Sunni insurgent activity. A seizure of power by radicals in Iraq would embolden radicals in surrounding countries, including our allies -- Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Arab oil producing states. Extensive instability in Arab Iraq might propel the Kurds to declare independence, which would provoke Turkey to intervene in the Kurdish north. In short, a reduction in U.S. forces is not in Iraq's or American interests.

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Another option that purports to offer an end to the violence in Iraq is dividing the country along ethnic lines into three separate states. This idea is a non-starter. First, as public opinion polls make clear, Iraqis do not want their country divided along ethnic lines. Second, separating Iraq's ethnic groups, who live in mixed areas throughout the country and who are often intermarried, is logistically impossible. Third, were the country to be divided into small statelets, the probability is that violence would increase, not decrease. Increased instability in the Shiite and Sunni statelets would invite further intervention by outside powers, especially Iran. Equally important, the attempt to divide Iraq would support the arguments of the "Arab street" throughout the Middle East that there is a "U.S.-Zionist-imperialist" conspiracy to divide the Arab-Muslim world into smaller political units so as to better control it.

A third option is to strengthen Iraqi democracy by initiating policies that would lead to greater stability, offer Iraqis more hope in the future, and create an environment supportive of economic growth. Iraq does not have a history of sectarianism. The Iraqi nationalist movement, which flourished between 1920 and 1963, when the first Baathist regime seized power and repressed it, emphasized cross-ethnic cooperation and promoted building a civil society. Iraq also has no tradition of Islamic radicalism. It was only after the collapse of Iraq's welfare state following the 1991 Gulf War that Islamist organizations began to offer the services no longer provided by the state. With severe economic decline caused by the U.N. sanctions imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War, and the spread of corruption and increased repression by Saddam Hussein's regime, many Iraqis began to turn inward to religion and ethnic identities to escape the horrors of everyday life. In other words, the rise of sectarianism was caused by economic and political decay, including an unemployment rate estimated to be between 50 percent and 60 percent.

Since the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003, there has been little job creation for young Iraqis. Most Iraqis in their 30s, 40s and older retained their employment, and some have seen considerable wage increases over the past 4 years. Because 65 percent of Iraq's population is under 25, stagnation in the job market has disproportionately affected young people, one of the main sources of recruits for Sunni insurgent organizations and Shiite death squads. Large numbers of rural migrants, responding to the continued decline of Iraq's agricultural sector, have also provided recruits for organizations promoting political violence in Iraq's urban areas.

A weak Iraqi economy has spawned another development, namely crime syndicates. Kidnapping, for example, has become a large industry in post-Baathist Iraq.

When the United States faced severe economic problems and political instability during the Great Depression, President Roosevelt wisely initiated the New Deal, in which the government took an active role in putting Americans back to work. Iraqis frequently tell me that

an improvement in the economic situation would lead to a considerable decline in violence and crime. Thus one important way in which the U.S. government could promote democracy in Iraq is to establish an economic reconstruction fund that could put unemployed Iraqis back to work.

How might such a fund work? With the United States already contributing a significant amount of funds to Iraq, and facing a large budget deficit, one idea would be for the U.S. government to lobby our Arab oil-producing allies, who have benefited by recent steep increases in the price of oil, to make major contributions to such a fund. An economic reconstruction fund that had an "Arab face" would not be subject to accusations that the United States was trying to "control" Iraq.

Why would Arab oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait be interested in contributing to such a fund? First, an anarchic Iraq constitutes a threat to the entire region by encouraging radicals in these countries. Second, an unstable Iraq would allow Iran to exploit this instability and extend its influence in Iraq.

While it might be argued that Sunni governments would be hesitant to support the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad due to suspicions that it is sympathetic to Shiite Iran, Iraq's Shiites are, in fact, as suspicious of Iranian intentions in their country as are their Arab neighbors to the south. Let us not forget that Iraq's infantry, 90 percent of which was Shiite, fought tenaciously against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. In short, Iraq's Shiites are Iraqis first and Shiites second.

If the U.S. and other Arab allies could persuade wealthy Arab oil producers to contribute to a reconstruction fund, how might such a fund help put Iraq on the road to stability and democracy? Initially, the funds could be used to create Works Progress Administration-type jobs reminiscent of the New Deal. Such jobs would replicate the Commander's Emergency Response Program that the U.S. military has used so successfully to quell political violence. CERP funds have created temporary jobs for men in areas characterized by high levels of insurgent activity, leading to a sharp decline in violence, gratitude on the part of those Iraqis put to work, and benefits to the local community.

Once violence began to decline following the implementation of a WPA-type program of job creation, the economic reconstruction fund could organize a second phase in which small economic projects would be promoted to provide sustainable employment. Bakeries, schools, new markets, expansion of hospitals and construction work represent the type of activity that could immediately put large numbers of Iraqis in sustainable economic activity which could both pump money into the economy and add to Iraq's social capital.

One of the most significant benefits of this two-stage program would be the development of a new incentive structure with which to entice local leaders in Iraq's major cities and towns to compete for the

distribution of economic largesse rather than engage in political violence. Providing economic resources in kind (not in the form of cash, which could be used to purchase weapons) would act as an incentive to bring local leaders and notables into the economic reconstruction project.

In return for their assistance in promoting economic stability, these leaders would receive a wide variety of goods and services which they could use to enhance their status in their respective communities. A new school, new medical technology for a local hospital, expanding orphanages, creating public parks, are all projects that local leaders could point to as bringing benefits to their communities.

The benefits of increased employment and economic growth would give Iraqis greater hope for the future. It would lower hostility to both the Iraqi government and United States forces in Iraq. A prosperous and democratic Iraq could become a model for the Middle East, whose "silent majority" desperately wants to substitute greater political freedom and economic prosperity for religious radicalism and authoritarian rule.

Americans are right to be dissatisfied with the continued loss of American lives in Iraq and the tremendous burden Iraq places on our own economy. Pressing forward with a serious economic reconstruction program with our Arab allies providing the bulk of the funds offers hope for a more rapid transition to a democratic Iraq, increased political stability in the Middle East, as well as the homecoming of American troops.

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(Eric Davis wrote this article for The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J. He can be contacted at news@newhouse.com.)