

Should Iraq Fail Before it Can Succeed?

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Op-Ed for immediate release

Interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi attempted to convince America during his recent visit that free elections in Iraq will demonstrate that democracy can triumph over the forces of evil. Although the elections might not be perfect, Allawi argued, they are the best hope for the future of an integrated, united Iraq. Much as we rushed into a messy war before thoroughly examining assumptions, we are rushing toward elections without fully considering all options. Allawi's optimistic assessment of the current situation in Iraq is not shared by everyone. U.S. intelligence reports have warned consistently of a fragmented Iraq and the growing likelihood of civil war between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. One option that is never discussed is the restructuring of the territory into three distinct nation-states – for example, Kurdistan, Sunnistan, and Shiitestan.

Essentially, Iraq is an artificial political creation, constructed from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire after World War One when Britain and France split the Middle East up into spheres of influence. Britain got the arc of territory that stretched from Egypt to Kuwait and incorporated Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. No historical concept of an Iraqi nation or political territory existed, so the borders of these created countries simply were carved on the map without much consideration of pre-existing ethnic, religious, or linguistic geographies. As with most of the political entities that emerged from the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and European colonial empires in Africa and elsewhere, the lack of a clearly defined nation-state identity in Iraq presented significant political challenges during the 20th century. The borders of many of these troubled states have survived mostly because of the influence of a series of despots and dictators, not through any sense of an integrated national identity.

With Saddam Hussein gone, Iraq's cultural differences have risen to the surface again. Within the country's existing borders, three groups - Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Kurds - occupy very distinct geographic zones, and each group has its own regional identity and political agenda. Elections in Iraq likely will reveal these divisions, leading to a greater potential for internal conflict than exists presently. Yet, as any more detailed geographic analysis will show, these groups' patterns of distribution are not clear cut. Sunnis live among the Shiites, Kurds live among the Sunnis, and both Sunnis and Shiites live among the Kurds. Each group has built a political relationship with the state of Iraq and each calls the country "home," but each group has little idea of what its role should be or could be in a newly constituted Iraq. If the territorial existence of Iraq is to be maintained, these groups somehow have to work together to create an integrated national political identity. However, given the country's history, that may not be possible.

The remarkable thing about nation-state collapse in eastern Europe, the Balkans, Africa, and even the former Soviet Union is that no challenge to pre-existing political boundaries has ever been mounted. Boundaries somehow have become sacrosanct,

immutable, and unchangeable. To change them would somehow create chaos in a politically ordered world, despite the chaos that often prevails inside the boundaries. Iraq is no exception. No meaningful discussion has yet to occur over whether the existing boundaries are useful in a 21st century conception of Iraq. Yet three new countries could more feasibly hold free and open elections and perhaps defuse ethnic-religious conflict before it begins. The current administration and the interim Iraqi government are convinced that a democratic, unified Iraq can be created out of the ashes of Saddam Hussein's despotic regime. History and geography argue otherwise.

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