



How to Untie the Gordian Knots in Iraq

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Headlines announce that Iraq is falling apart, just a few years after the United States wrapped up its invasion and left a supposedly liberated nation in the hands of an elected government. As ethnic groups take control of different regions, Baghdad itself is threatened by the rapid military advances of a transnational Sunni military group. What should the United States do?

Crises are not conducive to long-term thinking – especially not when conflicts boil over among contenders of different hues and mixed allegiances. Americans need to get a fix on the current Iraqi situation, to discern reasonable outcomes and how external parties could further them.

Iraqi Realities

Two useful points of departure help to define the current situation and challenges in Iraq:

- Sunni militants in the armed group called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, along with allied tribal leaders and former Iraqi Ba'athists, do not have the capability to take full military control of Baghdad or the Shi'ite heartland – and it is doubtful that the allied groups would even want to do this, unless there were a total collapse of the current Iraqi army and government.
- Many have called for a new political accord among the various Iraqi sectarian and ethnic parties, but getting there will require ironclad guarantees, not just verbal agreements and symbolic gestures. In practice, any stable political future for a united Iraq must take the form of federated arrangements under a reinterpretation of the current national constitution or a new constitution – giving a lot of regional ethnic autonomy to Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis.

Can Outsiders Help?

The present crop of Iraqi leaders is unlikely to depart the political scene without a big push, and mutual hostilities and suspicions among major ethno-regional groups may make it hard for new leaders to perform the essential delicate tasks of reconstructive political surgery. These realities point to the need for outside parties to act as catalysts and underwriters of a new Iraqi regime. But of course the United States already tried to do that while it held military sway, and another solo American performance is unlikely to work any better.

Right now, the Obama administration does not agree with this assessment, as it is engaged in a *sub rosa* campaign to unseat Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri el-Maliki, even as it casts about for new leaders who can achieve ethnic reconciliation and reunite the country. The Obama administration may not realize, yet, that any potential leaders who cooperate with this U.S. effort would likely be disqualified in the minds of most of their fellow countrymen.

Could the United Nations do better? It has failed at many similar attempts in various regions of the world, but it might be possible for the United Nations to provide a legitimate umbrella for the United States and Iran to facilitate the necessary political changes in Iraq. Those are the only credible powers for the task. Other nations such as Turkey could at best play a secondary role, using the credibility and ties they have with non-Salafist Sunnis and the Turkmen minority.

Who Can Push Back the Sunni Extremists?

The armed fanatics of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria pose the greatest obstacle to a reunited, federated Iraq. They are not susceptible to outside influence and compromise is not in their vocabulary, so their fighters will have to be badly bloodied before they will become open to participate in a collective political arrangement.

Ideally, the bloodying should be accomplished by fellow Sunnis in Iraq, such as tribal leaders and the Ba'ath elements organized under leaders who want a rapprochement with other Iraqi Shias and Kurds. Such Iraqi Sunni resistance to transnational extremists has happened before, and there have recently been reports of skirmishes in the vicinity of Kirkuk between Islamic State of Iraq and Syria fighters and the Ba'athists. Unfortunately, however, such internal Sunni splits are not likely to reach full fruition until after the immediate crisis passes or until non-Sunni forces create a stalemate on the battlefield.

The Kurdish Peshmerga fighters could possibly be strong enough to damage the Sunni militants, and here already have been skirmishes around Tal Afar and north of Baqubah in Diyala province, both of which have strategic military value. However, this sort of large-scale direct military engagement seems unlikely, because the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria militants have little immediate interest in controlling Kurdistan, and the Kurds themselves want autonomy, not all-out war. The Kurds may get appeals from Baghdad to join an anti-militant coalition in return for a promise of quasi-autonomy in a restructured Iraqi state. Were they tempted, it would make sense to jump in when the military conflict is almost decided, so as to reap the benefits at minimal cost. Taking the military lead makes little sense for Iraqi Kurds.

Iraq's Shi'ite led army and Shi'ite militias might be able to push back on the armed forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria enough to create a stalemate. The United States should stay out unless the Sunni militants are on the verge of taking Baghdad, because a lot of killing of Sunnis by U.S. forces, even if restricted to militants, would not be helpful to a long-term settlement.

Some U.S. cooperation with Iranian authorities may be in order, because, as Maliki's original sponsor, they could be in the best position to ease him off the national Iraqi political stage and keep another Shi'ite supremacist from taking over. Of course, the Iranians would insist on an Iraqi leadership amenable to them, but they might be open to a stable federated Iraq, which would be better for their interests than an extremist Sunni state on their border. In the end, Iranian cooperation may also depend on broader movement toward settling the nuclear weapons issues and forging multi-party negotiations on security arrangements for the Gulf region overall.

Is the United States capable of solving such a complex set of diplomatic challenges? The record inspires little confidence – and, clearly, President Obama will not succeed if he takes advice from those who got the United States into huge overreach in Iraq in the first place. Amid loud challenges from former Bush administration supporters of the Iraqi invasion, Obama and his administration will have to wend their way with savvy and care through the minefields of Iraq's disintegration and the larger crosscutting conflicts playing out in the volatile Middle East.