

# CAN IRAQ SURVIVE AS A SINGLE-STATE, OR IS A “THREE-STATE” SOLUTION MORE LIKELY TO BRING PEACE?

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## Introduction

The debacle that followed the invasion of Iraq has polarized not just American, but world opinion. Many consider the United States to be in a quagmire while others draw parallels to the Vietnam War. Almost every citizen of the United States is questioning the wisdom of the invasion and whether the U.S. strategy there will ultimately produce stability. Although it is currently popular to call for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, another idea is quietly trying to enter analysis into the American consciousness: the three-state solution. Leslie Gleb of The Council on Foreign Relations first put forth this theory in the United States which was later championed in an article for *The Nation* by Juan Cole<sup>1</sup>. With the recent election of Joseph Biden, a past strong supporter of the three-state solution, to the Vice-Presidency, the possibility of the United States adopting such a policy is the greatest it has ever been.

As a result, it must be discussed whether a three-state or single-state solution will bring peace. Many people point to the current chaos in Iraq as proof that a single-state solution is a failed strategy. Yet others dismiss the idea entirely, as demonstrated by John McCain chastising Biden in the third presidential debate for having “this cockamamie idea about dividing Iraq into three countries”<sup>2</sup>. To determine this, one must theorize about the ramifications of a three-state solution, taking into account not just the internal variables of Iraq, but also factors of geopolitics. For that reason, this essay will look at the ethnic and

religious reasons for a divided Iraq, but put a particular emphasis on the geopolitical factors at play in the Middle East and Iraq in order to determine which solution is more likely to bring peace.

## A Concise History of Iraq

The creation of Iraq was done by the haphazard design of the British and could almost be considered a historical accident. Had the Arabs been left to their own devices after World War I, it is extraordinarily doubtful that Iraq would have come into existence. However, this part of the Arab world would fall victim, as many other regions of the world, to the volatile times of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until World War I, the area of Iraq was governed by the Ottoman Empire and was divided into three different vilayets, or provinces: Mosul, Bassorah (Basra), and Baghdad. The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire was brought about by the WWI allies and more specifically in the Ottoman controlled Arab region by the Mesopotamian Campaign of the British. Britain had a large and influential presence in this region with upwards of 400,000 men stationed in the region at the end of 1918. Shortly after the end of WWI, Britain and France entered into the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement which effectively defined the spheres of influence of the two countries in the Arab region: Britain influencing parts of present day Jordan and southern Iraq and France influencing south-eastern Turkey, Syria and northern Iraq. Shortly thereafter, the British Mandate of Mesopotamia was issued by the League of Nations which entrusted the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the Arab region to Britain. Britain

<sup>1</sup>Gelb, 2003 & Cole, 2004

<sup>2</sup>McCain, 2008

combined the vilayets of Baghdad and Basra to form the Kingdom of Iraq and five years later it would add the vilayet of Mosul to the kingdom.

Almost immediately after the mandate was issued, resistance began to be organized among the local populations who were furious that the region was given mandate status. The British would struggle to suppress several Arab and Kurdish uprisings until 1932, when they granted Iraq its independence under the rule of King Faisal. Britain would find itself back in Iraq during World War II due to the fear of being cut off from oil supplies by Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani who opposed British influence in Iraq and had warm relations to Nazi Germany. Britain would occupy Iraq for the remainder of World War II until the monarchy was once again established in 1947. Iraq would remain a monarch for another 10 years until several military coups d'état would establish the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in 1968 which would later come under the control of Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti in 1979.

The Ba'ath party would prove to become the longest government in Iraq's short history. This fact must be attributed in no small part to Saddam Hussein, both during his presidency and rise to power. Saddam's early political career was marked with great successes in solidifying and expanding the Ba'ath party which would prove to help him in his own climb to power. Once he rose to the presidency, Saddam was faced with the challenge of stabilizing Iraq from the ethnic, religious and economic fault lines that had plagued the country since its inception. With both military force and economic and social development,

Saddam proved to be both progressive and brutal. Saddam modernized the public health care system, spearheaded agrarian reforms, established free universal education, and invested heavily in infrastructure and economic development. He also tortured dissident journalists and murdered tens of thousands of Iraqis in the face of attempted uprisings: some 30,000 Kurds in Halabja during the Iran-Iraq war and an untold amount of Shiites and Kurds after the 1991 Gulf War to name just two incidents. Saddam's brutal tactics and the fact that a minority group of Sunnis ruled over the larger Shiite and Kurdish populations served only to increase the intense animosity between the groups.

### **Ethnic and Religious Faults Lines in Iraq Today**

Naturally, the problems faced by the British and Saddam Hussein did not disappear after the U.S. invasion. These issues have now been brought to the world's attention, which have only served to embolden each group, who wish to realize their own political goals while they find themselves on the world stage. Indeed, in the absence of power that existed after the fall of Saddam, the release of pressure each group felt under Saddam exploded like a powder keg.

Currently, the Kurdish populations in the north have more of a government than Iraq as whole. Given major autonomy after the 1991 Gulf War, they have fully taken advantage of the U.S. invasion and the chaos that ensued by forming their own ministries, police and military academies<sup>3</sup>. The youth of Kurdistan have a unique identity since they have never seen an Iraqi flag flying over their

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<sup>3</sup> Khana, 2008

land, they do not speak Arabic and they have never traveled to “Iraq proper.” This, coupled with the fact that the Kurdish people are the largest ethnic group in the world without a country, makes the creation of a Kurdistan a real possibility.

The Sunnis in the middle are like an older brother who suddenly finds that his younger browbeaten brothers have come of age and are suddenly bigger and stronger and they are looking to strike revenge. The Sunni’s most grave concern is to not be systematically eliminated. Secondly, they look to find political relevance in an Iraqi government that no longer caters exclusively to them. Another issue with the Sunni population besides its size (roughly 32% of the Iraqi population) is that it is split between various ethnic groups who are not necessarily inline politically with each other. Despite this, the Sunni Arabs have taken the fight to its rivals and are not going to go away quietly. They have asserted their power with strong militias and violent attacks. Simultaneously, they have jockeyed for position in Iraq’s government by boycotting its involvement. Bolstered by freedom fighters and financing emanating from Saudi Arabia, the Sunni’s look to carve out their piece of Iraq.

The Shiites in the south find themselves in the vortex of where the Middle East meets Persia and Sunni meets Shia. Shiites living in this contact point are witnessing a friction between two great and influential regions, a friction which is heating up and threatens to ignite a geopolitical bombshell. Shiites in the south are increasingly becoming more and more aligned with Iran in reaction to

the escalation in violence between themselves and the Sunnis, which is more likely to just perpetuate the violence.

Between jockeying for power and revenge killings the common reaction is to let each group create their own state. This is seen as the quickest, and perhaps only, route to peace. However, one must contemplate the effect these three states will have on the region and what role Iraq’s neighbors will play in its reconstruction.

### **Geopolitical Factors**

The success of Iraq as a state, whether as a single-state or three, will greatly depend on its neighbors as well as major powers in the international community. Iraq borders six countries, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Jordan. Each of these countries has their own interests in Iraq and particular views of what Iraq should become. In addition to Iraq’s neighbors, the United States also has a substantial interest in Iraq’s future. Out of Iraq’s neighbours, the three biggest players in its future are Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. So far Turkey has had the most overt role of them all. Unlike during Gulf War I and the containment campaign of the nineties, Turkey did not allow the U.S. military to use any Turkish territory for the 2003 invasion thereby facilitating the escape of Baathists into Northern Iraq and prolonging the occupation. Once the invasion began, Turkey had amassed a large military presence on its border with Iraq, ostensibly to secure its border from refugees but also to signal to the Kurdish population that Turkey will not tolerate any attacks or destabilizing tactics. Again in July 2007, Turkey began

another military build-up on the Iraq border<sup>4</sup>. While many Turks hoped this was election year posturing and not the beginning of a full scale invasion, the build up did lead to several cross-border strikes within Iraq, destroying supposed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) enclaves. Turkey has an obvious objective to suppress any Kurdish separatist ideas. Its main target in Iraq has been the PKK, an organization whose started goal is to create an independent Kurdistan from parts of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Therefore, it is Turkey's interest in maintaining a united Iraq. Although Turkey did everything in its power to prevent the invasion in the first place, it has increasingly played a more cooperative role with the U.S. military, a sign that it wishes the United States to succeed in Iraq as soon as possible. An example of this is in 2004 when Turkey allowed the United States to use an airbase in its south in order to facilitate the military's massive troop rotation.

Like Turkey, the question of Kurdish independence is also an important factor for Iran. Iran has a large Kurdish population which it brutally suppresses (in addition to its Sunni population). The idea of an independent Kurdish state is unsavoury for Iran, and would certainly lead to the fear of its eastern frontier being annexed by such a state. At a minimum, it would embolden the Kurdish population who live in Iran and which receive little equality with Iranian Shiites. It may be theorized that a mass exodus of Kurds would leave Iran for Kurdistan, but this may not be the case. It would be in Kurdistan's interest to maintain large diasporas in various countries in order to gain political clout

from its neighbours<sup>5</sup>. A consolidated Kurdistan, with no populations in other countries, could be effectively ignored or embargoed against. Whether this occurs or not is somewhat irrelevant. A Kurdish state would be embarrassing for both Syria and Iran, but ultimately, it would not threaten its security in a significant way, as is the case with Turkey. Both Iran and Syria could easily strong arm and expel its Kurdish populations whereas Turkey must consider its reputation in the west, specifically in the European Union.

The close relations between Iran and Syria further boost Iran's influence in Iraq. The huge black market trade between Iraq and Syria is widely known. In addition to oil and other goods making its way between the countries, insurgents and, more importantly, financing are making their way into Iraq through these same channels. In this way, Iran can effectively approach Iraq from both its east and west, making it impossible for the U.S. military to secure Iraq's borders, having to focus on two massive fronts.

In analyzing Iran's position in Iraq the threat of an independent Kurdistan must be juxtaposed with the opportunity of an independent Shi'astan. The creation of a Shi'astan would dramatically alter the balance of power in the Middle East, if it has not already. Such a state would have strong ties with Iran, for both religious and cultural reasons. The countries would share the same religion and to a large extent the same language since Farsi is widely spoken in Basra, the largest and most important city in this region of Iraq. Iran would, and currently does, court such a state because such a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula would

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<sup>4</sup> Robertson, 2007

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<sup>5</sup> Khanna, 2008

have potent strategic opportunities. Not to mention the creation of such a state would represent an enormous triumph for Iran over the United States. The establishment of a Sunnistan would be the culmination of the covert operations currently being conducted by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is widely believed by the U.S. military to provide financing and insurgency knowledge in Iraq.

However, it should be noted that most foreign fighters enter Iraq via Saudi Arabia's huge border<sup>6</sup>. This is quite ironic since Saudi Arabia certainly benefited from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in a number of ways. First it removed a threatening leader from Iraq, one who invaded Saudi Arabia with the 1991 attack on the city of Khafji, which borders Kuwait. Although it had been U.S. policy to protect Saudi Arabia since President Roosevelt, the Saudi Royal family has feared the destabilizing factors such an attack would bring, as demonstrated by the large public outcry of U.S. troops being stationed in order to defend the country and push Iraq from Kuwait. This issue became a cause celebre for the massive disenchanted youth of Saudi Arabia as well as the religious conservative leaders who are mostly disgusted with the royal family's politics and lavish lifestyles<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, the 2003 invasion of Iraq gave the United States numerous bases within the Middle East and allowed the immediate withdraw of forces in Saudi Arabia. U.S. troops and equipment stationed inside the country since Gulf War I were gone just a few months after the invasion of Iraq concluded. So why does Saudi Arabia allow foreign fighters to freely

pass into Iraq who threaten Iraqis and Coalition forces? This seems to be another stabilization technique by certain royal family members. In exchange for supporting such endeavours, whether by financing or allowing the movement of fighters, the royal family asks that clerics turn a blind eye to their own moral shortcomings. However, continued terrorists attacks within the country have cast doubt about how effective either the U.S. withdrawal or Saudi Arabia's blind eye toward terrorism has been.

Which leads to the question, what kind of Iraq does Saudi Arabia want? The royal family certainly does not want Iraq to become a terrorist breeding ground which could bolster its own internal terrorist problems. Indeed, instability in Iraq can only lead to more volatility in an already fairly unstable Saudi Arabia. In addition, Saudi Arabia will come under increasing international pressure to boost its oil output, which would press its infrastructure to the limit. A secure Iraq, with large improvements in infrastructure, would come as a relief in both these respects. However, an Iraq under de facto power of the Shiite majority in the country is of primary strategic concern for Saudi Arabia, whose greatest fear is Iranian influence in the Arab Peninsula. Strategically, the best option for Saudi Arabia is a united Iraq, because any government under this solution would certainly provide controls to guarantee Sunni representation and block Shiite hegemony. A three-state solution would be the worst option for Saudi Arabia. Although the royal family would undoubtedly have great influence over an Iraqi Sunnistan, it would become a nation dependent on Saudi wealth for survival, since this area of Iraq contains

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<sup>6</sup> Schuster, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Klare, 2004

no oil. Even if an oil-revenue sharing scheme was effectively put into place, such money would only cover minimum government expenditures and infrastructure costs. Saudi Arabia would have to pick up the tab for Sunnistan's security as well as to make the nation relevant in the region.

The state with the most interest in Iraq is the United States. The United States has invested billions of dollars, thousands of American lives and five years of time in Iraq. The conflict has virtually destroyed foreign opinion of the United States. Not to mention U.S. interests in the political stability of the region in order to maintain affordable oil prices. Since the start of the war, the United States has staked all its chips in the one-state solution and the political atmosphere in the United States is not receptive to the idea of three-states. In addition, the public support for the war is so little that a change in strategy, a course that would require massive additional commitment in funds, soldiers, and time in addition to being an admission of failure, would be untenable. Therefore, the only way a three-state solution may come about is either by U.S. withdrawal or a monumental change in U.S. strategy, both of which is possible under a new administration, but unlikely nonetheless, despite election year posturing of the United States withdrawing from Iraq.

In order to truly test the three-state solution, one must theorize how it would play out with U.S. indifference or passive approval. Indeed, the United States will not be able to withdraw entirely unless an utterly indifferent administration enters the White House. Such indifference would border on

irresponsibility and would ultimately lead to future U.S. involvement by future administrations. The United States could remove its forces from the cities, stop providing internal security, and leave Iraq to its own political devices. For the sake of strategic interests, the United States would more than likely retain several bases in the country in addition to providing air support functions. Next, Iraq would have to actively support the three-state solution by a great majority in order for the United States to passively support the self-determination of the Iraqi people. At this point, the United States would have great concern over outside influences affecting how Iraq transforms into three states. The United States could ironically find itself in a sort of "reverse containment" whereby they secure the borders and create no fly zones to regulate outside influence. This would represent the opposite mission the United States had in the 1990's where they used the same operational tactics to keep Iraq from having influence outside its borders. Concurrent to this mission, the United States would also ensure that regional war would not spread out of Iraq, avert genocide, and prevent al Qaeda from establishing strongholds within the country<sup>8</sup>. In all probability the United States would also utilize covert means in order to counter the covert operations of Iran and other countries.

Such ambiguous manoeuvring by the United States and other countries increases the likelihood of proxy wars developing, or even full scale war between the United States and another country. In addition, Iraq will more than likely descend into some type of civil

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<sup>8</sup> Miller, 2007

war; the only question is of what intensity. Such a melee certainly has a chance of producing peace in time, but will it prove to be the most inefficient peace is the question.

### **Iraqi Nationalism & Recent Progress**

Regardless of the fact that Iraq is an artificial construct of an imperial power it does have a history of eighty-four years of existence, at many times in relative peace. Iraqi nationalism certainly exists for people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. This brings hope to many Iraqis that a one-state solution will prove to be successful. Indeed, a poll produced for BBC and ABC news said that 66% of the 2,228 Iraqis surveyed from around the country support a united Iraq. In addition, the poll suggests that Iraqis do believe in a one-state solution but mistrust their leaders. Iraqi nationalism can also be witnessed with the success of national institution. Since the Iraqi Military was disbanded by the U.S. government after the invasion, Iraqis had few ways to support or take part in a national institution. Because of this, they retreated back onto their religious and ethnic security blanket. However, one national institution still exists that brings Iraq pride and hope for the future: the national football team. The team's success in the Asian Cup has been a cause for many Iraqis to show their nationalism and temporarily put aside religious and ethnic differences. Many Iraqis see the team, which is made up of Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis, as symbol of what is possible under a united Iraq<sup>9</sup>.

Politically, Iraq show signs of improvement. Recently, Sunni Ministers

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<sup>9</sup> Shaadeh, 2007

have ended their boycott of the Iraqi Government under Maliki. The end of the boycott, which had been in effect since August 2007, solidifies the government and will allow the public to gain confidence in Maliki's ability to cross sectarian lines<sup>10</sup>. More and more Sunnis are taking part in what is being called the "Sunni Awakening," or *sahwa*, whereby more and more Sunnis are participating with American forces after being turned off by their countrymen's violent uprisings<sup>11</sup>. The same report also mentions a *détente* between Sunnis and Shiites. Although many are sceptical, even more good news has been coming from Iraq recently. High oil prices have left the government flush with money to spend, as demonstrated by an aid program that gives hard-currency to struggling Iraqis. Each Iraqi citizen is eligible for this award once and may receive up to \$8,000 to rebuild their home, business, and livelihood<sup>12</sup>. It will take time to see whether this program proves successful or not, but it does have similarities to the successful micro-credit schemes of Bangladesh.

### **Conclusion**

Proponents of the three-state solution are quick to point out the artificial nature in which Iraq came into existence. Indeed, the seams of Iraq have been present continuously since British rule. However, it is important not to ignore the fact that Iraq has been a single country for eighty-four years. The imagined country of the British Empire is indeed a reality today. Iraq needs a strong executive government that can

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<sup>10</sup> Robertson, 2008

<sup>11</sup> The Economist, 2008

<sup>12</sup> Associated Press, 2008

garner the faith and respect of the Iraqis. Recent developments have shown that this is slowly, but surely emerging. Geopolitically, three of the four major players in Iraq find it is in their interests to keep the country in one piece. As was stated earlier, these three countries are the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Two of these countries, Turkey and the United States, are actively and overtly influencing Iraq with troops on the ground. Saudi Arabia is playing a counter-productive role for a united Iraq because their focus of short-term domestic stability policies. Iran is the most powerful country that hopes to see Iraq break apart. However, their ability to achieve this goal is limited because they are restrained to using only covert

means for fear of escalating a conflict in the United States. While Iran's meddling is an annoyance to the Coalition, it does not pose a great threat to dividing Iraq permanently.

Therefore, to go against the single-state solution would only create more violence and less peace. For a three-state Iraq to come about, the country would first find itself in bloody civil war. In addition, each of these new states would be under incredible influence from rival countries, thereby increasing the chance of war escalating to multiple countries. For better or worse, Iraq should stay together as a united country.

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