

Other People's Maps

An American-inspired redrawing of the Iraqi map along sectarian lines would do violence to the facts of Iraqi history.

BY REIDAR VISSER

OVER THE PAST YEAR, INCREASING NUMBERS OF American commentators have suggested various “territorial” solutions designed to extricate U.S. forces from Iraq. These proposals have come in several guises, involving different degrees of decentralization and compartmentalization: “Soft partition,” “controlled devolution,” and “Dayton-style *détente*” (a reference to the 1995 Bosnian settlement) are but a few of the concepts that have kept policymakers in Washington busy of late. All these proposals assign a role to foreign hands in drawing up internal federal or confederal border lines that would drastically reshape the administrative map of Iraq. At the very least, they foresee a role for the United States in “advising” the Iraqis on how to implement this process of demarcation, as, for instance, Senator Joseph Biden (D.-Del.) has advocated. And invariably, the authors of these proposals fix their sights on ethnicity as the guiding principle for the division of the country: Iraq is to consist of three separate subunits for what are seen as its “basic components”—Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiite Arabs.

The practical arguments against this sort of approach are legion—and, by now, they are mostly familiar and well accepted, as seen in the confluence

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of opinion between the Bush administration and the Iraq Study Group on this issue. For millennia the lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris have been a meeting place for civilizations, ethnicities, and religions. Never before has any attempt been made to reshape the entire region by establishing ethnic and sectarian cantons; doing so now would involve extensive displacements of people in areas with mixed populations. Families in multiethnic cities would be torn apart as the intermixed Iraqis would be forced to choose sides, and communal violence would spread throughout the country as cities such as Basra, Nasiriyah, and Hilla saw more of the kinds of atrocities that currently occur in many parts of Baghdad.

The consequences at the regional level would likely be equally dire. Few believe that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran would sit still while their Iraqi neighbor became engulfed in comprehensive civil war, and an involvement of their standing armies would pose a far greater risk than the less-invasive meddling by proxies that marks the current situation. A regional conflagration—possibly involving the entire Persian Gulf and its oil resources—could come to provoke Shiite-Sunni tensions on a previously unimagined scale. The new borderlines so enthusiastically promoted by armchair strategists in the West could easily become flash points comparable to the Kashmir line of control fought over by India and Pakistan for



Karbala, 2003.

decades. Today, Kashmir is routinely described as “the most dangerous spot on Earth.”

However, many partition zealots believe that history is their trump card over practical arguments. Iraq, they claim, is an “artificial” entity; once the birth pangs have subsided, their own “ethnic” alternative, with its supposed noble ancestry, will provide a superior basis for regional stability. Ironically, however, history is probably where the partition argument is at its weakest. What history shows is that using sects as the bases for political entities is among the most marginal and least tested approaches to state building in the land between the two rivers.

Ever since the establishment of Islamic rule in the seventh century, Iraq has been organized on the basis of

regions, not sects. Never was there any significant overlap between these two categories: The line that divided the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad and Basra, for instance, was much farther south than today’s partitionists have realized; it created regional legacies that sometimes pitted the Shiites of Basra against the Shiites of Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala (where they always had their greater demographic strength). Throughout almost 400 years of Ottoman rule, from 1534 to 1914, no secessionist attempt based on sectarian identity ever emerged. Instead, the one recurrent concept of super-regional identity was “Iraq.” Every historical study that is based on Ottoman documents proves that the idea of “Iraq” was omnipresent in the vast region from Basra to Samarra in the 19th century, contrary to the fashionable

(but hopelessly unsubstantiated) theory that Iraq as a regional concept was somehow “created” by the British in 1920. Those who claim that Iraq did not exist prior to World War I will have great difficulty explaining why it made sense to the Basra historian Abdallah al-Basri (who died in 1831) to casually quote a medieval work on geography that observed, “There are two Basras, a big one in Iraq, and a small one in Morocco.”

When the British overran the Ottomans in 1914, they soon grasped this situation. Whereas British strategists in London and Arabia held wildly conflicting ideas about what to do with the region, all British officials based in Baghdad from 1917 onward consistently came out in favor of the idea of a large Iraq from Basra to Mosul—this includes figures such as Arnold Wilson (whose axiom was that “the connection between Baghdad and Mosul is as close as between Baghdad and Basra”), Percy Cox, Gertrude Bell, Henry Dobbs, and Francis Humphrys. To the extent that there was uncertainty in British circles, it concerned the status of Mosul province as well as the precise location of the northwestern border with Syria. But a Shiite-Sunni split on a purely confessional basis was simply never on the agenda.

Moreover, outside of the Suleimaniya district in the Kurdish area, the only substantial native resistance to the vision of a large unitary state was confined to the port city of Basra. Here, in the 1920s, a group of wealthy merchants advocated the establishment of a commercial mini-republic limited to the gulf city and its fertile rural hinterland. Characteristically, though, that project had nothing whatsoever to do with sectarianism—rather, it brought together notables of Sunni, Shiite, Christian, and Jewish backgrounds who aimed for a tranquil mercantile republic under special British protection. But Iraqi nationalism proved stronger—even at this early stage—and in a peaceful propaganda struggle, Basra separatism was roundly defeated by a coalition of Iraqi nationalists whose ethnic complexion was just as diverse as that of the separatists: Some of the most fervent Iraqi nationalists of Basra in the 1920s were lower-class Jews, Shiites, Kurds, and Turkmens.

The history of Iraq in the 20th century underlines

this theme of a multiethnic polity with few discrete territorial subdivisions. The record of peaceful coexistence during monarchical rule before the onset of military coups in 1958 shows that Iraqi nationalism cannot possibly be dismissed as an artificial construct forced on the population by militaristic regimes. And even though the support base of the various Iraqi regimes in the second half of the century did gradually narrow, this was manifested mainly through favoritism and tribal or localist patterns of recruitment to top government posts (thus the preponderance of people from Tikrit in positions of power under Saddam Hussein) rather than through wholesale degeneration to sectarianism as ideology (which was more episodic, if horribly violent, as after the uprisings that followed the 1991 Gulf War).

Throughout the 20th century, the idea of territorial secession remained foreign to Iraqis living south of Kurdistan, and even to the increasingly radicalized exiled opposition. As late as 1997, Hamid al-Bayati, a high-ranking London-based member of the opposition Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), quoted his party’s spiritual leader, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, to make it clear that the Shiites had never had an interest in special territorial privileges, but instead wanted improvements in the general level of freedom of speech and religion in Iraq. And during the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003, when the idea of a federal Iraq finally found some support beyond the Kurds (primarily among members of the exiled opposition), the relatively few who embraced federalism among Shiite and Sunni politicians were careful to stress that any sectarian implementation of a devolution scheme would be anathema.

Even in today’s Iraq, where sectarian violence has reached unprecedented levels since the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite shrine in Samarra, there remains a glaring mismatch between the positions of Iraqis and the partitionist ideas being floated in the United States. Support for an ethnic remapping of Iraq is universal only among the Kurds, whose claims to regional autonomy have long been recognized and generally accepted. South of Kurdistan, opposition to a federal formula based on sectarian divisions remains strong. Sunni Arabs have tended to reject

the very notion of federalism but have lately moved toward acceptance of certain nonsectarian federal alternatives: either Arab-Kurdish binational federation or a “geographical” federation based on the 15 existing governorates south of Kurdistan.

Many Shiites share the Sunni skepticism toward federalism, although since 2004 some in the south have contemplated miniregions that would separate the oil-rich governorates of Basra and Maysan (and possibly Dhi Qar) from the other Shiite areas—again on a nonsectarian basis.

The more recent idea of a single Shiite region, on the other hand, is still struggling to make headway outside its SCIRI core constituency. (SCIRI accounts for slightly less than a quarter of the deputies of the Shiite Islamist coalition known as the United Iraqi Alliance.) Nevertheless, among Green Zone-focused foreign journalists this project has received immense attention. As a result, the Western mainstream news media frequently portray the Shiites as a community united in the call for a Shiite super-region from Basra to Baghdad.

While many Westerners ignore Iraq’s complex historical legacy, the country’s constitution recognizes it. However much certain Iraqi elites would have loved to carve up the Iraqi state to create their own fiefdoms back in 2005, they simply did not dare go that far. Instead, they created a hybrid constitutional system in which federalism is made optional: It can be chosen by those areas that desire it, but it is not mandatory. Furthermore, the territorial demarcation of any new federal regions is to be directed “from below,” starting with the governorates, instead of being imposed from the outside—whether by Iraqi politicians or foreigners. Thus, apart from recognizing the Kurdish region, the Iraqi legal framework—which in its approach to federalism “from below” is quite unique in the world and comparable only to the Spanish constitutions of 1931 and 1978—does not offer advantages for any particular combination of governorates into new regions. A major flaw in much of the partitionist propaganda

of U.S. politicians is related to this point, because many seem to believe that a tripartite sectarian federal subdivision of Iraq is somehow preordained by the new law on implementing federalism. Quite the contrary, for outsiders to advocate any particular combination of governorates into federal regions would be gross interference with a bottom-up process. Indeed, such a course of action would be tantamount to tearing up the Iraqi constitution itself.

Similarly, the widespread belief in the West that

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federalization in Iraq needs to be comprehensive and symmetrical is an affront to more sophisticated Iraqi interpretations of the 2005 constitution. Many leading Iraqi politicians expect that the combination of an 18-month moratorium on the implementation of federalism (regions can only be formed after April 2008) and the imminent adoption of a law that gives the governorates substantial decentralized powers (*within* the unitary state framework) will go far toward muting the federalism question in Iraq. In their view, federal regions—probably small-scale ones—could become the exception and not the rule in the Iraq of tomorrow, because many governorates would be happy to remain as ordinary provinces of Baghdad once their powers of local government were firmly established.

Needless to say, any loud antics by influential partition-inclined foreigners could upset this delicate process. The debate on the distribution of Iraqi oil revenue is a case in point. There are many good arguments in favor of an arrangement that would guarantee all Iraqis a share of the country’s oil wealth through development and reconstruction, but it would be completely illogical (and disrespectful of the constitution) to demand that this guarantee be defined in sectarian terms. With the implementation of federalism delayed

until 2008, the only impartial way of distributing revenue would be to employ the politically neutral existing governorates as points of departure. This kind of approach could achieve exactly the same result as a sectarian model in terms of advantages for the individual citizen, but without further inflaming sectarian tensions. Frequently overlooked by the advocates of sectarian partition is the fact that 16 of the 18 Iraqi governorates actually stand to profit from this kind of arrangement, because most Iraqi governorates have no oil, or relatively little of it—Basra and Kirkuk being the two exceptions. In another distorted portrayal of Iraqi society, partitionists have construed the “Shiite” governorates as “rich in oil” and the “Sunni” areas as “oil deficient”; the hard fact is that there is not much more oil in “Shiite” Najaf, Karbala, Babel, and Qadisiyya than in “Sunni” Anbar.

In the United States, the Democratic Party has had until recently a virtual monopoly on the drawing of such imaginary lines on Iraq’s increasingly crumpled map. The Bush administration has consistently avowed support for a unified state, with a meaningful role for Baghdad as capital. There are, however, signs that George W. Bush and his advisers may also be toying with hazardous plans containing some kind of sectarian territorial component. At the very least, notions such as the “80 percent plan”—leaked from the State Department this past December and based on the assumption that the Kurds and the Shiites, who together comprise nominally 80 percent of the population, could be enlisted en bloc for pro-U.S. policies—reveal fallacious assumptions about the internal coherence and meaningfulness of these sectarian and ethnic categories. Similarly, recent moves by the Bush administration to invite selected sectarian politicians to Washington (Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim for the Shiites and Tariq al-Hashimi for the Sunnis), ostensibly as “paramount” representatives of their communities, could be a worrisome indication of a search for a tripartite solution to Iraq’s crisis.

To address conflicts by drawing lines is a very Western way of approaching complex political situations, as centuries of European warfare in the name of religious and linguistic standardization

have shown. The Iraqis themselves are not searching for any magic sectarian formula to define the new Iraq. On the contrary, most Iraqis want sectarianism to go away. This is why repeated attempts to get the Sunni Arabs of Iraq to “think in terms of federalism” are unlikely to produce results. Similarly, the perception that there is a massive demand by Iraq’s Shiites for a “Shiite region” says more about SCIRI’s ability to tap into Western ignorance about Iraq than it does about the true level of the support for this scheme within the country. Perhaps the United States could engineer a temporary territorial truce between selected sectarian elites and thereby declare victory, but that would be a settlement based on an extremely fragile fundament. In Iraq today there is already considerable internal Shiite-on-Shiite violence—as seen in the several deadly confrontations over the past couple of years between SCIRI and followers of the young cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—and this might become an even more serious problem if the idea of a single political leadership for the entire sect is embraced by external forces such as the United States.

But the dangers of a partitionist approach to the Iraq conflict extend beyond Iraq itself. The real issue is not whether the lines drawn in the sand are historically sound or not. It is the very act of drawing such lines that is problematic. Even today, the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement—the World War I pact that sought to create Western zones of influence in the dying Ottoman Empire—has few rivals as an object of universal hatred throughout the Middle East. Sykes-Picot is regularly held up as exhibit number one in Islamist and Arab nationalist criticism of the Western legacy in the Middle East, and it is no exaggeration to say that bitterness about such imperial line-drawing has been a key factor in the rise of radicalism in the region. This rancor was one of the elements that produced the attacks of September 11 and other calamities, and people such as Osama bin Laden would no doubt be euphoric at the prospect of a modern-day equivalent to Sykes-Picot, say, a Gelb-Biden Agreement. With these realities in mind, America’s new Iraq cartographers ought to re-evaluate not only their novice works but their choice to draw lines on other people’s maps at all. ■