

G2 ANALYST NEWSLETTER

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G2 Analyst Newsletter No. 22 - 8 December 2006

Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it. GEORGE SANTAYANA

The case for dividing Iraq

The difficulty surrounding the question whether to divide Iraq into three independent, albeit closely interrelated, political, ethnic and religious entities to end the violent and rapidly accelerating civil conflict, seems to be suffering from a strong inhibition to impose such a drastic political and governmental change.

The current reality in Iraq, where strong polarizations in the Iraqi society hinder the possibility of a constructive dialogue between the various groups on this complex topic, has its

roots in Iraq's political history when, centuries ago the Ottoman Empire ruled the entire region.

At the turn of the 20th century the territory which is today's Iraq was managed by the Sultan's government in Istanbul as three separate provinces (vilayets): Mosul in the northeast,, Baghdad in the center and Basra in the south, the three loosely defined as Arab-Turkey; one of several underdeveloped regions of the Ottoman Empire

At the end of the First World War Britain took over the region from the withdrawing Ottoman forces and established a civil administration of an occupying force under the iron rules of Sir Percy Cox and his military advisor Colonel Sir Arnold Wilson. Promises for immediate independence and demarcation of international borders did not materialize and in June 1920 a major uprising erupted in the central Euphrates region which quickly spread across the country. This internal civil disturbance was dealt with at the San Remo Convention of 1920 and in 1922 the British Mandate was approved. To settle the problem which arose as a result of Britain's protégé` Faisal Ibn el-Hussein's expulsion from Syria by the French, Britain crowned him as Iraq's new monarch. Most Shiite, Sunni, Kurds and Christian minorities expressed strong disapproval of Britain's political solution for the former Saudi Prince and objected to the creation of a monarchy to reign over a diverse conglomerate of ethnic and religious groups with very little homogeneous elements to tie them together under one flag.

This devious political move, creating a kingdom with total disregard for the region's varied societies, their beliefs, aspirations and needs, laid the foundations for the chronic internal volatility which has been haunting what became to be known as the "Iraqi" people ever since.

(There are several suggestions for the origin of the name of *Iraq*; - one dates back to the Sumerian city of Uruk (or Erech).

From the onset it was obvious that the new Iraq is a fragile entity. Riots and massacres of minority groups, expelling people from their homes and other atrocities, were a common event. One of the bloodiest massacres occurred in 1933 when close to 1,000 Assyrian Christians were slaughtered by the Iraqi army. Each violent event turned into a political affair as time and again the three major ethnic groups expressed their demand for self determination. This unstable situation continued for decades as well as during the Second World War after which came short periods of political liberalism. These were, however, always followed by turmoil and chaos resulting in the country being ruled by a series of ruthless dictators of whom Saddam Hussein is currently the last. After the monarchy was finally abolished in 1958 by a group calling itself Free Officers, the country experienced repeated purges against various political and ethnic groups, and extreme tension and rivalry within the ruling parties of the day.

Following the first Gulf War of 1991 two de facto situations emerged. One is the Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, remaining more or less the same until now, and the second regards the marsh Arabs in the delta region of southern Iraq. Both fragile entities were abandoned at the end of the war by the U.S. led coalition and the marsh Arabs were brutally massacred by the Baath party as soon as coalition forces retreated.

Most Iraq watchers agree the creation of an artificially unified Iraqi state on the ruins of the Ottoman administration, and as

a wobbly political solution imposed by the British who arbitrarily created a kingdom to compensate a Saudi prince for his help during the First World War, has failed. This is especially true in cases when external powers “threatened” the rulers with democracy experiments. The last elections in Iraq, resulting in the appointment of a government of unity, or rather what these days is rapidly escalating into a government of disunity, have actually intensified the distinct ambitions of the more prominent ethnic groups on the one hand while deepening fear and anxiety among smaller groups on the other.

Ironically two countries normally defying U.S. policies in the Middle East, Syria and Iran, would rather have the Iraqi chaos



continue hoping their supporters will win the day which will then create a strategic land bridge between Iran in the east and south and Syria in the northwest. For Iran it would mean access to the Mediterranean and for Syria an important link to the Iranian military might which could become necessary in case of a major war or if the Assad regime is threatened.

Against Iraq's historic background and considering the anarchy which is tearing apart the few remnants of an orderly society, it might also be the right time to listen more carefully to Turkish observers claiming the Mosul area should "belong" to Turkey and generally reminding all that the three Ottoman vilayets in Iraq were artificially merged into one country by the British without the support of the Iraqi population.

The case for dividing Iraq into ethnic and religiously based economically viable autonomous entities should not be discarded as an unrealistic or unattainable goal. Not so long ago, when the level of atrocities in Yugoslavia became unmanageable the west, and the U.S. in particular, dismantled the country into several independent much more homogenous and relatively safe nations.



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