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Security, Reconciliation in Iraq Are Irreconcilable

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Insecurity in Iraq is in – built in the U.S. – conceived sectarian and “federal” constitution drafted after the U.S. – led invasion in 2003, in the political process engineered by the U.S. occupying power on sectarian and federal “constitutional” basis to create a secure pro – U.S. post – Saddam regime as well as in the sectarian polity born therefrom -- or more to the point brought in by the invading army -- and is still, seven years on, struggling to survive a possible U.S. military disengagement, and in a self – defeating contradictory and security oriented U.S. blueprints for Iraqi reconciliation as a prerequisite for securing the country at least as an ally of the United States, if not as a puppet regime.

“Six and a half years from the moment when American troops captured Baghdad on April 9, 2003, nothing is settled.” “Without reconciliation, all the gains .. will be at grave risk of foundering when American troops are no longer around. ” That’s the “warning” message that U.S. President Barak Obama, the present and immediate past U.S. ambassadors, Christopher R. Hill and Ryan C. Crocker, and the present and former American military commanders, Gen. Ray Odierno and Gen. David H. Petraeus have been repeatedly whistle-blowing. “What Mr. Obama would do if chaos set in as the American troop withdrawal gathers momentum next spring and summer could be one of the most testing moments in his presidency, all the more so for the evident fact that most Americans and most American legislators .. seem to have decided that America has already borne the burdens of Iraq for too long and needs to shift its priorities to Afghanistan,” according to John F. Burns, The New York Times’ chief foreign correspondent, on the ground in Baghdad before, during and after the U.S. – led invasion.

The car bombing in a parking lot adjacent to a building where a meeting was held on reconciliation efforts -- attended by a representative of the National Reconciliation Committee (NRC) formed by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki -- in the capital of the

Iraqi western province, al-Ramadi, on October 11 was the latest symbolic bloody example of the irreconcilable security and reconciliation in Iraq.

All efforts at reconciliation exerted by the U.S. occupying power, Arabs collectively through the Arab League or separately by individual Arab states, or by regional powers have failed. While Obama is seeking a tactical exit strategy from Iraq for the sake of a long term “strategic” commitment thereto, “Iraqization” of what he described as the U.S. “war of choice” on Iraq seems to be his option. A pre-requisite for “Iraqization” is installing an effective “Iraqi” government in Baghdad; a pre-requisite for such a government is an Iraqi national reconciliation, and here Obama’s moment of truth in Iraq is racing against time.

Biden, al-Maliki Cannot Deliver

Promoting the level of the supervisor of a sectarian reconciliation from a secretary of state or a defense secretary to vice presidency to mandate Joe Biden with a failed mission will not make it a success. Biden made three visits to Iraq this year, but the outcome has been more insecurity and instability. Inside Iraq, Biden is best known as a co-author of the 2006 “Biden-Gelb Plan,” which urged “as much real power as possible be devolved from Iraq’s central government in Baghdad to three mini-states that would divide the country along ethnic and religious lines,” Helena Cobban on July 6, quoted an Iraqi demonstrator against Biden’s second visit as telling a McClatchy News reporter that, “Biden’s visit sent the signal to us that Iraq will be divided. Biden’s background doesn’t allow him to play any role in reconciliation.” Norwegian analyst of Iraqi affairs, Reidar Visser, concluded that Biden’s “solution” boils down to merely a power quota distribution among the three ethno-religious groups of “Kurds, Sunnis and Shia.” The persisting failure proves that Biden was the wrong man for a mission of an Iraqi “national” reconciliation.

Al-Maliki is neither the right man for the mission. Bolstering him only gives him a veto power on reconciliation. His life long anti – Baath deep –rooted bias as well as his life long engagement with Iran and his sectarian and political loyalty thereto are trapping him into an anti – Baath obsession that unwisely made him challenge Biden during his second visit to state on record that reconciliation was and is an Iraqi “internal affair” that Biden has nothing to do with. Al-Maliki’s version of reconciliation is based on abruptly cutting Iraq off its Arab geopolitical affiliation, conceding to the Iranian and Kurdish view that only the Arabs of Iraq, a founding member of the Arab League, are part of the Pan – Arab bondage, although they are the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, and consequently giving priority to ties with Iran and the United States. Hence the latest deterioration of Al-Maliki’s ties with Syria and the reluctance of Saudi Arabia to send an ambassador to Baghdad. Internally, al-Maliki’s sole hope to form a semblance of a non – sectarian electoral constituency ahead of the upcoming elections on January 16 -- pending “sectarian” reconciliation in the “parliament” to pass an election law – was pinned on winning the support of the Sunni al-Sahwa (awakening) militia, which the U.S. was financially successful to recruit to fight al-Qaeda among its Sunni power base. However, the tribal leader of al-Sahwa, Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha, recently announced he would not join al-Maliki’s electoral coalition. (Iraqi daily al-Zaman on October 13, 2009).

Meanwhile, Iran’s version for reconciliation is on record sectarian, and accordingly a non-starter, neither for national accord nor for security. Tehran succeeded in grouping together almost all the pro-Iran Shiite militias in one electoral bloc, a recipe for more bloody sectarian strife and further disintegration of the country on sectarian basis. The Baghdad’s bombings of August 19 of the sovereign ministerial symbols of al-Maliki’s “state” was the bloody

manifestation of “to – the – death” power struggle between the two sectarian blocs. Both blocs found in accusing Syria of harboring the alleged culprits in the bombings, and in threatening to take Syria to the UN Security council, their best way to divert both internal and external attention away from their own responsibility, and indirectly that of Iran.

Former British Army Chief of Staff, General Richard Dannatt, who stepped down at the end of August, speaking at the Royal United Services Institute in London, attributed “our failure” in Iraq first to the “early switch to an economy of force operation in favor of Afghanistan,” which has become now Obama’s “strategic priority,” and second to missing “a window of consent” early after the invasion to address Iraq’s security and basic needs by the U.S. – led coalition forces, which allowed “the rise of the militias supported so cynically by the Iranians.” Dannatt was short of saying that the security and reconciliation in Iraq have become irreversibly irreconcilable.

In February last year, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was asked by CNN’s Wolf Blitzer about the success of the “surge” in Iraq: “The gains have not produced the desired effect, which is the reconciliation of Iraq. This is a failure. This is a failure,” she said. Defense Secretary Robert Gates admitted candidly in mid-March that without “sectarian reconciliation” among Iraqis the “strategy won’t work.” Indeed, the entire point of the surge of 30,000 troops was to bring such reconciliation about by, in Gates’ words, “buy[ing] the Iraqis time.” Gates was wrong, what is required is a national reconciliation, not a sectarian one. Sectarian strife was “the” expected outcome of the removal by invasion of a national regime, not the other way round.

Less than seven years on, the “political process” has already proved a failure. Those same players -- whom the White house, whether under Obama or under the administration of his predecessor George W. Bush, has been trying to recruit recognition of their legitimacy by the United Nations, but more importantly by their Arab brethren and regional neighbors – doomed it a failure and will continue to abort all endeavors to salvage whatever is there to make it a success story. This “process” seeks to reconcile the irreconcilable militias turned into political parties, whose dual loyalty is more to Iran and the U.S. than to their own people, who are driven by this dual loyalty and their factional interests than by the national interests of Iraq, incessantly playing their U.S. and Iranian mentors one against the other, and more than ready to instantly recur to militia practices and drop their posturing as civilized political players whenever their narrow factional interests are threatened or their quotas in the U.S. – engineered “political process” diminish or seem about to be altogether lost.

Four de Facto Governments

Ironically, Iraq has now two self – proclaimed sectarian governments, the first is the Shiite U.S. – installed and backed in Baghdad’s heavily fortified Green Zone and the second is the al-Qaeda’s underground Sunni Islamic State of Iraq (or Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiyya in Arabic); both are in a declared state of war, but neither has real authority on the ground that encompass all the regional territory of the country. A third de facto theocratic pro – Iran Shiite state has evolved in southern Iraq, where it is no more possible to discern whether it is Baghdad or Tehran the central authority to which the area reports. No surprise a strong call is voiced deafeningly here for a “federal” entity similar to the Kurdish one in the north. A fourth de facto Kurdish government rules in Iraqi Kurdistan, but similarly has no “national” authority. Legitimacy of the four governments is challenged both internally and externally.

Obama's strategy, like that of his predecessor Bush, reveals no concrete evidence that he is looking for other than sustaining this tragic status quo in Iraq.

There is no single dominant grouping in this internal struggle for power. The new "Iraqi army most often behaves as a Shia militia," and "the last chance for some kind of stability may be the division of Iraq into three nationally based independent states," Michael Dougall Bell concluded, writing in the *Globe and Mail* on September 30. Disintegrating regional states into smaller ones on religious, sectarian and ethnic bases has been a pronounced goal of Israeli strategists for too long now to be dismissed as an unrealistic Israeli strategy. The writer only can tell how much he was influenced by the Israeli view, given the fact that Bell was a former Canadian ambassador to Israel and former chair of the Donor Committee of the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq. However, Bell is not a lone voice. The think tank of The Independent Fund for Peace titled its ninth report on Iraq earlier this month, "A Way Out: The Union of Iraqi States." Dismantling Iraq is now a realistic threat as never before.

The NRC was grudgingly formed under the pressure of a U.S. and Arab demand to reconcile the sectarian (Shiite) government of al-Maliki and the pro-Iran sectarian regime that brought him to power with the national and Pan-Arab majority, whose power base is perceived by his U.S. mentors to be among the Sunnis, who have been marginalized and bloodily squeezed out of public life and institutions since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 -- allegedly for being the power base for the pre-invasion regime, but for sectarian purposes as evidenced over the last seven years -- and who populate the heart of Iraq in the capital Baghdad as well as the northern and western provinces, in particular in al-Ramadi, which is the largest in area and the most decisive strategically because it borders three Arab countries, namely Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. No surprise this majority was the incubator and their provinces were the bed rock of the Iraqi national resistance, which so far has deprived the White house from declaring "victory" in Iraq. "I'm not sure we will ever see anyone declare victory in Iraq, because first off, I'm not sure we'll know for 10 years or five years," U.S. Army Gen. Ray Odierno, the top American commander in Iraq, told reporters at a Pentagon briefing on October 1. Disillusioned by the U.S. promises of security, democracy and development as well as by any sectarian bonanza promised by Iran, the Shiite majority in southern Iraq are again recurring to their national and Pan-Arab credentials, and the Islamic-oriented or motivated rejection of foreign hegemony, be it U.S. or Iranian, is increasingly contributing to this disillusionment both in the south and the north of the country, which paved the way for the Iraqi resistance to expand southward gradually, but determinably.

Regional Input a Side Show

Later this year Washington is reportedly bracing to host an Iraqi national reconciliation conference, to be chaired by Obama himself and attended by several Arab countries, which are expected to use their good offices or their "influence" or both to secure that the Iraqi resistance to U.S. military occupation, mainly that is led by Baathists, lay their arms and join the "political process" in exchange for a greater role in decision-making "if they are allowed to function as a legitimate political party." Egyptian the *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported recently that Joe Biden urged al-Maliki to allow the Ba'athists to regroup into a new party and run in the elections scheduled for early next year.

The "sixth" conference of Iraq's neighboring countries, which convened in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on October 14 -- on the backdrop of "no Iraqi-Saudi relations" as well as on an escalating Syrian-Iraqi crisis -- grouping the interior ministers of

Turkey, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, Bahrain and the Arab League as observers, will remain a side show as it was in its previous sessions. It serves to contain the fallout of the U.S. military occupation of Iraq more than it contributes to the security or to the reconciliation of the country, as hopefully perceived by Washington's seven – year old efforts to enlist the participants' contribution thereto, given for instance Turkey's concerns with the repercussions on its own "Kurdish problem" of the de facto independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, or Iran's concerns with losing its own exploits of the U.S. war on Iraq, mainly the strategic role it has gained in Iraq as a security subcontractor to the U.S., let alone the conflicts of interest among the participating countries, or the sectarian repercussions emanating from the sectarian regime in Iraq on other neighbors. This "regional factor" is still cited by the U.S. occupying power and the political regime it is still struggling to install in Baghdad's "Green Zone" as part of the problem of insecurity more than it is part of the solution. The recent opening of the NATO mission offices in Baghdad's Green Zone and the assumption on October 8 of U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Michael D. Barbero of his duties as the chief of the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq is the latest proof that the occupying power could trust none other but itself with the security of Iraq; whatever regional input could be recruited will remain a subordinate side show.

However, the U.S. strategy remains the real problem, and not just part of it. This strategy has pursued five self-defeating goals, namely to empower a pro-U.S. regime that has proved powerless in fending off the overwhelming rejection of the U.S. occupation and whatever regime emanating therefrom, to dismantle sectarian militias by creating the additional al-Sahwa sectarian militia, to establish a "democratic" political process that "constitutionally" negates the democratic rights of the country's Arab majority, to hopelessly try to uphold a "central" government on the ruins of the devastated central infrastructure of the Iraqi state, and to save a semblance of the territorial unity of the country while empowering "mini-states" that would sooner or later doom any such unity.

Many U.S. officials were on record to fault their earlier strategy in Iraq. Developments in the country over seven years vindicated them. Immediately following the invasion, Lewis Paul Bremer III -- the first U.S. administrator of Iraq after the 2003 invasion who reported primarily to U.S. secretary of defense -- enacted his three – pronged strategy to, first, bring down the central state infrastructure as the prerequisite to replace it with a loose "federal" decentralized governments "at each other's throats" over wealth and power, second to neutralize an Iraqi "national" consensus on resisting the invading armies of the occupying power by luring the large Shiite minority (with the Iraqi Kurds inclusive the Sunnis constitute the majority) with the carrot of promising them that their centuries old Iran – fueled dream of exclusively ruling the country on a sectarian basis, that history has proved it cannot be ruled by any one sect, and, third, thus neutralizing Iran by luring it with the carrot of having a sectarian stake that would on the one hand empower it to become a regional power and on the other to settle its scores with Iraq, which were left unsettled by the 1988 ceasefire.

The Realistic Way out

However, Bremer proved wrong on the three accounts, but Obama seems determined to build on his legacy. Somebody wrote recently: "Indeed, as the American victory during the 1968 Tet Offensive demonstrated, a military success can even contribute to political defeat."

The outcome after more than six bloody years is "that Iraq continues to lack security, stability, vital services and the non-sectarian institutions of a sovereign state" and "lack of

political reconciliation, persistent sectarianism,” Prime Minister of Iraq from May 2004 to April 2005, Eyad Allawi, told the Gulf News on July 4th, concluding that, “There is already a power vacuum since the war,” a power vacuum that Obama’s approach seems intent on sustaining and “that will have to be filled by one of the two regional powers involved in Iraq - Saudi Arabia or Iran,” according to Allawi, who has no interest in recognizing the only home-grown viable alternative, i.e. the national coalition of resistance led by a hardened but wiser al-Baath, the only experienced and credible “non-sectarian institution” in Iraq today. But of course it is unrealistic to expect any of the powers which have been for seven years now actively working in and around Iraq to “debaath” the country to acknowledge this reality of life in Iraq today. So the struggle goes on, and the security and reconciliation will remain as illusive as ever since 2003.

The U.S. administration has realistically moved recently to indirectly recognize the de facto role of al-Baath as a unifying force that is essential for both security and reconciliation, but unfortunately in a divide – and – rule approach, that aims at neutralizing or containing the rank and file of the party and the military which the party used to command. The administration/s seemed to unofficially admit the twin grave mistakes committed by Paul Bremer of disbanding the national Iraqi army, which embodied and protected the national unity for some one hundred years and of the de-Ba’athification of the Iraqi civil service, which deprived the country of its secular unifying state manpower. However this divide – and rule approach has proved counterproductive. In the end, negotiating the U.S. exit strategy with al-Baath and the Iraqi resistance, the real enemy, could prove the only viable way out of Iraq for the United States.