



Salvaging American Interests in a United Iraq

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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Five months ago, Les Gelb and I laid out a detailed plan to keep Iraq together, protect America's interests and bring our troops home.

Our plan generated a much-needed debate about alternatives beyond the Bush Administration's "stay the course" rhetoric and those calling for an immediate exit.

Many experts here and in Iraq embraced our ideas. Others raised legitimate concerns. Still others mischaracterized or misunderstood our plan, calling it a "partition," when in fact it is the opposite.

Today, I'd like to explain in more detail what the plan does – and what it does not do.

Iraq's Central Realities

In July, I was in Iraq with Senator Jack Reed. It was my seventh trip.

Our soldiers and diplomats are making real progress, under the most difficult conditions.

But that progress is prisoner to the terrible violence raging around them. Its main driver is sectarianism.

In fact, the central reality in Iraq today is that violence between Shiites and Sunnis has surpassed the insurgency and foreign terrorists as the main security threat.

Sectarian militias are the main instruments of violence. Instead of disarming, they are growing, for one simple reason – young men have no jobs and the militias give them a steady paycheck.

Although half the Iraqi army divisions are capable of leading operations with American support, the nuts and bolts that any military needs to be self-sustaining are not there.

There are enormous problems with logistics, pay systems, transportation, procurement, and food delivery.

The police are in the most urgent need of reform. Sectarian forces riddle their ranks. The facilities protection service – 140,000 individuals assigned to specific ministries – is heavily involved in sectarian violence.

On the surface, Iraq has a unity government. But privately Sunnis and Kurds complain that they are not part of the decision-making.

Political competition among the parties that make up the Shi'a coalition prevents any genuine outreach to the Sunnis -- or any serious attempt to disarm the militias.

On the other side, too many Sunnis continue to aid and abet violence.

As a result, the political process is stalled and polarized.

While sectarianism is the major new reality in Iraq, the old reality – insurgents and foreign terrorists – is still very real.

Al-Qaeda is so firmly entrenched in al-Anbar that it has morphed into an indigenous jihadist threat.

As a result, Iraq risks becoming what it was not before the war: a haven for radical fundamentalists. It's what I call a Bush-fulfilling prophecy.

No number of troops can solve the sectarian problem, and we don't have enough troops to deal definitively with the jihadist threat.

Nothing makes the point more clearly than the fact we've just pulled troops from Anbar – where they were fighting insurgents and Iraqi Al Qaeda – and sent them to Baghdad, to secure neighborhood and stop sectarian violence.

Security operations in one neighborhood force the death squads and insurgents out.

But then they regroup in unsecured areas and return to the neighborhoods we've cleared when our troops move on to the next hot spot.

A Strategy for Success

So that's where we are. The more important question is this: where are we going?

Unfortunately, this administration does not have any discernible strategy for success in Iraq.

Its strategy is to prevent defeat and hand the problem off when it leaves office.

Meanwhile, more and more Americans, understandably frustrated, support an immediate withdrawal, even at the risk of trading a dictator for chaos and a civil war that could become a regional war.

Both are bad alternatives.

The five-point plan Les Gelb and I laid out offers a better way.

We start from the premise that the only way to break the vicious cycle of violence -- and to create the conditions for our armed forces to responsibly withdraw -- is to give Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds incentives to pursue their interests peacefully. This requires a sustainable political settlement.

To get there, we propose five steps:

First, the plan calls for maintaining a unified Iraq by decentralizing it and giving Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis their own regions.

The central government would be left in charge of common interests, such as border security and the distribution of oil revenue.

While we've proposed three regions, the exact number should be left for Iraqis to decide.

What matters is the principle of federalism as a way to manage competing interests and visions while keeping Iraq together.

But federalism will only work if each group believes that it has an economically viable region to govern. The Sunnis are in a unique position – they don't have any oil. They fear being permanently cut off from Iraq's natural wealth. That's why some of their leaders continue to resist federalism.

So the second element of our plan is a guarantee that each group will get a proportionate share of Iraq's oil revenue. For the Sunnis, that means about 20%.

Why would Shi'a and Kurds agree to share oil revenues? Because it's better for their bottom line.

Without an oil sharing agreement, Iraq will not attract the massive investment it needs to increase production.

If all sides agree to a formula for the distribution of proceeds and a unified oil policy, investment will flow, production will rise and each group will get a piece of a much larger pie.

Oil can become the glue that binds the country -- peacefully.

The third piece of the plan is to improve the living conditions of the Iraqi people and create a significant number of jobs. That requires increasing, not ending, reconstruction aid. It also requires altering the way the money is spent, and tying it to the protection of minority rights.

The administration's early fixation on multinational mega projects has wasted tens of billions of dollars on mismanagement, corruption and security for the foreign reconstruction teams – with virtually no results to show in terms of electricity generation, sewage treatment, potable water or oil production.

Gen. Chiarelli, one of our finest military leaders, described to me a project to supply drinking water to much of Eastern Baghdad.

The massive plant is complete, but there's one problem: no pipes to bring the clean water to Iraqi homes. Gen. Chiarelli calls the plant the "world's largest drinking fountain."

That would be funny if these failures – and their implications – were not so serious... if they had not literally fed the frustration and violence.

This incompetence on reconstruction makes more aid a tough sell. But we must ramp up and revamp our reconstruction program in concert with others, not wind it down.

To fund this effort, we should insist that our Gulf state allies – who have reaped huge oil profits – step up and put up.

Fourth, the plan calls for an international conference that would produce a regional nonaggression pact and create a Contact Group to enforce regional commitments.

There can be no lasting solution inside Iraq unless its neighbors use their influence with each faction to promote stability.

Most of Iraq's neighbors don't want to do us any favors. But being drawn into a civil war is in none of their interests, not even Iran's or Syria's.

Even if a Contact Group can't prevent a civil war, the more we can restrain the interventionist tendencies of Iraq's neighbors, the greater the odds that violence can be confined within Iraq's borders and a regional conflagration prevented.

Fifth and finally, under the plan we would begin the phased redeployment of U.S. troops this year and withdraw most of them by the end of 2007.

We would maintain a small follow-on force to keep the neighbors honest, strike any concentration of terrorists, and train the security forces.

In the meantime, U.S. troops would concentrate on securing sectarian fault lines.

What Our Plan Is – And What it Isn't

I said at the outset that some critics have mischaracterized or misunderstood parts of our plan. So let me conclude by telling you what the plan is – and what it is not.

Our plan is consistent with Iraq's constitution, which already provides for Iraq's provinces to form regions jointly or individually, with their own security forces and control over most day-to-day issues.

Our plan is the only idea on the table for dealing with the militias, which are likely to retreat to their respective regions instead of continuing to engage in acts of sectarian violence.

Our plan is consistent with a strong central government that has clearly defined responsibilities. Indeed, it provides an agenda for that government, whose mere existence will not end sectarian violence.

Our plan is not partition -- in fact, it may be the only way to prevent violent partition and preserve a unified Iraq.

To be sure, the plan presents real challenges, especially with regard to large cities with mixed populations.

We would maintain Baghdad as a federal city, belonging to no one region, as stipulated in the Constitution.

And we would require international peacekeepers there and for other mixed cities to support local security forces and further protect minorities.

For now, the participation of many other countries in a peacekeeping force is a non-starter.

But a political settlement, a regional conference, and a Contact Group to demonstrate international resolve could change their calculus and willingness to participate.

The example of Bosnia is illustrative, if not totally analogous.

Ten years ago, Bosnia was being torn apart by ethnic cleansing.

The United States stepped in decisively with the Dayton Accords to keep the country whole by, paradoxically,

dividing it into ethnic federations.

We even allowed Muslims, Croats and Serbs to retain separate armies.

With the help of U.S. and European peacekeepers, Bosnians have lived a decade in peace. Now they are strengthening their central government and disbanding their separate armies.

At best, the course we're on in Iraq has no end in sight.

At worst, it leads to a terrible civil war that turns into a regional war... and leaves a new haven for fundamentalist terror in the heart of the Middle East.

This plan offers a way to bring our troops home, protect our security interests and preserve Iraq as a unified country.

To those who reject this plan out of hand, I have one simple question: What is your alternative?