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IF IT'S BROKE, FIX IT

A BOSNIA OPTION FOR IRAQ

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON & EDWARD P. JOSEPH

United States Department of Least Bad Iraq Options
Washington, DC 20499
ACTION MEMORANDUM

TO: POTUS

FROM: Michael E. O'Hanlon and Edward P. Joseph

DATE: January 1, 2007

RE: The Bosnia Option for Limiting Civil War in Iraq

In light of the difficult and deteriorating situation in Iraq, we need to consider new options in the event that current efforts cannot soon turn current security, political and economic trends around. A Bosnia Option for Iraq focuses on the controlled realignment of population groups in order to minimize communal violence and set the stage for a stable political settlement--what might be termed a "soft partition" of the country (but with retention of a confederal structure, together with equal sharing of oil revenue on a per capita basis among all groups). This memo briefly reviews current circumstances and then outlines a Bosnia option for Iraq.

The Current Situation

The Iraq mission is failing. The Baghdad security plan of this past summer, which we viewed at the time as a last gasp to rescue the situation, has not reduced the violence. The political process is virtually stagnant, with the al-Maliki government drawing little Sunni Arab support, Shi'a leaders unable or unwilling to control their militias, and no progress on key constitutional disputes over oil

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resources and other crucial matters that were supposed to have been settled by now. The Iraqi economy shows some bright spots but, on balance, infrastructure performance is no better than under Saddam, unemployment remains high and private sector investment low, and the middle-upper-class brain drain is accelerating as Iraqis with means flee what they see as a failing state.

If the situation does not stabilize soon, the political momentum for throwing in the towel could become irresistible. However, those who urge precipitous withdrawal minimize the risks of a devastating civil war that could roil the broader region, allow al-Qaeda to claim victory and herald a worldwide display of U.S. failure. Whatever our mistakes, we have been right on the core point: We must work with our Iraqi allies to create a stable, cohesive state that does not attack its neighbors, massacre its minorities, collude with al-Qaeda or develop WMD. But at present we have no credible plan for achieving even these relatively modest goals (let alone the ultimate goal of creating a multi-ethnic democracy). Several new tactics, including a countrywide jobs-creation program and a rehabilitation plan for former low- and mid-level Ba'athists, can help. However, new tactics are no longer likely to be enough.

The Bosnia Option

Paradoxically, the explosion of sectarian violence and the onset of Balkans-style ethnic cleansing in much of Iraq may suggest an avenue toward stability. If the Iraqi government, with U.S. assistance, helps Iraqis relocate to parts of the country where they feel safer, violence can be dampened and the groundwork laid for a political solution. A model that can work for Iraq comes from Bosnia and its neighbors.

The war in Bosnia ended only after as many as 200,000 civilians died and half the country's population had either been expelled or fled from their homes, leaving the country a patchwork of ethnically homogeneous pieces. NATO airpower, a reinforced UN contingent and the military successes of Muslim and Croat armies were critical elements leading to the 1995 Dayton Accords. But Dayton could not have been negotiated had not ethnic relocations already occurred, creating definable and mostly defensible territories. As the UN stated in the seminal "Srebrenica Report", "there is no doubt that the capture of Srebrenica and Zepa by the Serbs made it easier for the Bosniacs and Serbs to agree on the territorial basis for a peace settlement." Only after considerable ethnic consolidation was it possible to

negotiate and then implement land swaps among Serbs, Croats and Muslims, creating a map that a decade later is still in place while the country remains, however unhappily, at peace.

In a disintegrating Iraq, our goal should similarly be to create militarily defensible sub-regions. That will stanch the violence and, in time, a unitary state could be preserved--to share oil revenue, conduct foreign policy, maintain certain national institutions, and hold out hope for a more cohesive Iraq in the future.

Ethnic relocation is very distasteful and hardly free from risk, but if carried out as government policy it can occur with less trauma than in the Balkans. Indeed, with Sunni death squads and Shi'a militias now attacking even hospitals, there may be no alternative. As the Balkans demonstrated, competitive campaigns of ethnic cleansing can unleash an uncontrollable, self-sustaining dynamic. More than 500,000 Iraqis have been displaced since Saddam fell, and that number is rising fast. Citizens of Baghdad, ground zero for the country's violence, are increasingly fleeing their homes. To stem the vengeful sectarian spiral, we should assist in a more humane process of relocation, providing alternative housing and jobs for those who leave their homes.

This approach worked in war-torn Bosnia. As a UN peacekeeper there, one of us (E. Joseph) co-ordinated the movement of several thousand Muslim women and children from the Zepa enclave in July 1995. The evacuation occurred after General Ratko Mladic and his Serb forces had seized the "safe area", contemporaneous with the slaughter in nearby Srebrenica that left more than 7,000 Muslims dead. The UN decision to participate in moving Muslims out of Zepa was controversial, so much so that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees refused to assist. But that agency's officials did not witness the shrieks of terror from the huddled Muslim women as Serb jeeps rolled by--a sound that erased any qualms we had about the propriety of our mission.

The same approach is now needed in Iraq. If U.S. and Iraqi forces cannot protect civilians, there is little moral dilemma about facilitating their movement to safer areas. Indeed, doing so can help defeat the jihadists and former Ba'athists who are intent on causing an overall collapse of the government. This plan could help preserve that government, and it can save lives.

Operational Considerations

Facilitating voluntary relocations is difficult to time

correctly. If done too soon, government-assisted relocations could codify an ethnic segregation process that most Iraqis do not inherently desire. It could even encourage some militias to accelerate violence against minorities within their neighborhoods in the belief that it would be relatively easy to drive people from their homes if they knew that new jobs and houses awaited elsewhere. If done too late, however, much of the killing that we hope to prevent would have already occurred (as in Bosnia). This is why the Bosnia Option needs to be discussed now, even if it might not be implemented for several more months as we try to salvage success from the current strategy.

The key--and the most challenging part of an ethnic relocation policy--is to get the parties to informally accept it. With an informal understanding among belligerents, ethnic relocation can be less traumatic and destabilizing. For example, the vast majority of Croatia's Serbs were expelled during two military operations (in May and August 1995) that had at least tacit acquiescence from Belgrade. Without minimizing the trauma to the Serbs (indeed, the Croatian commander will be tried in the Hague for alleged war crimes), the fact is that they suffered nothing like the calamities of Muslims forcibly uprooted from Serb-held parts of Bosnia. Likewise, thousands of Serbs left western Bosnia after the war, without violence, as part of land swaps agreed between Croats and Serbs at Dayton.

Obtaining agreement in Iraq will require not only rapprochement among some key Sunni and Shi'a leaders, but a constructive role by the Kurds, who are already ensconced in relative security in their own territory. Kurds see the oil-rich, multi-ethnic town of Kirkuk as both the capital of their longed-for state and a symbol of their oppression at the hands of Saddam Hussein (who engineered mass Sunni migration to Kirkuk while expelling Kurds). Thousands of Kurds have already returned to Kirkuk, heightening tensions. The upsurge in sectarian warfare has emboldened the Kurds and their backers to advance a partition/independence agenda. U.S. pressure on the Kurds (whose territory has been used as a base for Kurdish separatists in Turkey) could encourage them to cut a deal on Kirkuk's oil while earning greater Sunni cooperation on property swaps in the town. Progress on ethnic movements in Baghdad and Kirkuk could establish the basis for more ambitious land swaps similar to those in Sarajevo and western Bosnia that were a crucial prerequisite for attaining peace in Bosnia.

The Bosnia Option outlined here is more realistic than

various plans for Iraq's formal partition that have been advanced. Any attempt at formal partition would provoke a dispute over oil, Baghdad and Kirkuk without the prerequisite of a modicum of sectarian security. It would also make the eventual emergence of a unitary Iraqi state impossible. The Bosnia Option, on the other hand, would help establish preconditions for a viable Iraqi federal state.

How would the policy go forward? After informal agreement is secured, Iraqi officials could identify those areas of high minority vulnerability. With assistance from Coalition partners and other members of the international community, the Iraqi government would offer new houses and jobs to those who wished to move voluntarily, as well as protection for them as they left their homes for a different region. Houses left behind would revert to government ownership, to be offered to individuals of other groups in what would largely become a swapping program. There are already examples of Iraqis swapping houses on their own. With safeguards for security, the Iraqi government could form property commissions--as have already been formed in Kirkuk--to facilitate matches and avoid swindles. We estimate that it would take less than one year to accomplish the bulk of the mission, after which prospects for stabilization and an eventual drawdown of U.S. forces would greatly improve.

Implementation Optics

We might not want U.S. forces to participate directly in what some might see as sanctioning a form of segregation, even though it would be more accurately described as protecting people as they started new lives. Even so, there is an argument for NATO carrying out this mission under its own banner, with multinational units aiding in the protective effort. (Iraqi forces could be inadequate to the task, since some could wind up taking sides in any battles that occurred.) This would not require large additional numbers of Coalition troops, but it would change the optic of the relocation mission for the better.

If NATO leadership cannot be gained, then mixed U.S. and British units could identify select Iraqi units to assist in certain movement operations. The composition of these Iraqi Army units would reflect the ethnic mix of areas where movements would occur. Since most operations would be small scale, units could be of relatively small size. U.S. and British officers could tap only those units that have proven their fidelity in combat. For example, in movements of Sunnis from a Shi'a neighborhood, a select Shi'a-dominated army unit would provide perimeter security, while a Sunni unit would provide close

protection for those departing. The reverse would be the case in movements from Sunni to Shi'a neighborhoods.

Under this plan as well, police forces within Iraq would become more effective over time as their ethnic homogeneity, association with militias and limited competence levels would become less severe problems. They might still perform their jobs of preventing crime in a mediocre way, but they would be less prone to fuel sectarian violence since they would be working primarily among their own people.

* * *

We must not wait for slaughter in Iraq to reach the exhaustion point before finally confronting the reality of mass ethnic movements. Facilitating ethnic movement is not risk free, and it is no panacea. But it may soon become our only option short of condemning Iraq to years of Bosnia-like fratricidal violence and divisions that are both disastrous and permanent.

cc: CINC/CENTCOM, SECSTATE, SECDEF, DCI

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