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Managing the Consequences of a Split Iraq

Jason Yossef Ben-Meir, Arab News —

ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico, 3 January 2007 — It is becoming increasingly likely that some form of break-up will be the fate of the nation-state of Iraq. Such a break-up will reflect the relationships among Iraq's Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish groups, and the relationships of these groups to the central government, which in turn should have major consequences for the region. If forces inside and outside of Iraq responsibly manage the redefinition of the country, we can avoid what could be a spiraling situation that would subject many more people to suffering, deprivation, and deadly violence.

The more the Iraqis and the international community help build productive local-national bonds inside Iraq, the greater the possibility is that the severity of harmful fallouts impacting the region will be lessened. The two smaller ethnic groups, the Sunnis and the Kurds, will likely accept and maintain relationships with the central government that advance development. Such relationships are in the self-defined interests of these parties and have the capacity to become lasting connections, which will then need to become a web of mutual gain connections between the Iraqi government and the various ethnic groups. Therefore, initiatives, such as development assisted by the central government, which are identified and managed at the local level, should be strongly supported.

This developmental approach of creating local-national ties also directly advances reconciliation. Locally driven development and reconciliation are both processes that reflect the self-defined identities and experiences of their participants. They should therefore be pursued in tandem, rather than as separate programs, because this will be more cost-effective and expeditious in generating the range of intended positive results.

The procedures of locally driven development bring people together and build trust in the process of generating new jobs, better health, and so forth. By the same token, the participants of reconciliation processes can naturally segue into joint development planning and management of projects.

Development planners from different government and nongovernmental agencies that operate at the local and provincial levels in the three ethnic "enclaves" should be supported to first meet and then collaborate. For the same reason, public and private projects resulting from inter-ethnic dialogue should also be supported.

However, even if this strategy were vigorously pursued, which it should be, the creation of distinct and self-determined ethnic entities that formerly comprised Iraq is probably unavoidable. In principle, in and of itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing. If only the process were peaceful, it could be congruent with the democratic tenets of decentralization and self-management. Among the most serious regional concerns regarding the break-up of Iraq is that it could challenge to some degree the territorial integrity of Iraq's neighbors, particularly Turkey, which has the largest Kurdish population. Nations will virtually do anything to preserve their territorial integrity. If the Kurdish people, for example, who live in adjacent parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, more strongly advance their group identity, this could trigger terrible regional violence.

The tense situation in Iraq certainly warrants honest discussion among representatives of the regional parties about the possible consequences of Iraq's splintering, and certainly as it relates to the Kurdish people. In this case, early planning could help ensure the territorial integrity of Iraq's neighbors while simultaneously creating a new context that allows for a level of expression acceptable to the Kurdish people. What is important now, though, is that leaders in the region and the international community quietly prepare for the eventuality of being pressed for a solution to the Kurdish plight, as well as for other eventualities.

How far is Turkey willing to go to ensure its territorial integrity and allow for Kurdish expression? This is among the hard questions that need to be asked and answered if the consequences of an Iraqi break-up are to be effectively managed.

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