

## The dangerous idea of partitioning Iraq

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### A Balkan lesson

**STOCKHOLM** There is an increasing air of desperation in the discussions on the future of the coalition efforts in Iraq. Much of this is understandable. Prewar dreams of quickly and easily setting up a representative regime in Iraq have turned out to be no more than dreams.

This should not have come as a surprise. All experience shows that regime reconstruction after regime destruction is a long, complicated and difficult process. This is particularly true in regions with the religious and national diversity we find all through the post-Ottoman area, from Bihac in Bosnia to Basra by the Gulf.

At the same time as the United Nations is struggling to put a credible political process for regime construction in place in Iraq, desperation in other quarters is driving a debate about an alternative strategy - letting Iraq be divided into three independent or semi-independent states. According to this argument, the Iraq set up after World War I was as big a mistake as Yugoslavia.

Whether Yugoslavia should or could have been saved as a single state is now for the historians to debate. What we know is that the process of its break-up involved an extremely brutal, decade-long conflict.

We saw millions of people driven from their homes, perhaps hundreds of thousands brutally killed, new borders drawn in blood and economies devastated. Feelings of resentment and revenge were built up that might take generations to subside. Perhaps we haven't seen the end yet.

Iraq would be even more difficult to break up in an orderly way.

If it was partitioned, it is easy to see that there would be fierce fighting over important cities like Baghdad and Kirkuk. It is even easier to see the fight that would develop over the oil resources in the north and the south and the infrastructure binding them together. We could well see more blood than oil flowing out of the Kirkuk area for years to come.

An independent Kurdistan would not be favorably viewed in Ankara, Tehran or Damascus. Nobody can predict in any detail the reactions in Riyadh and Amman to an Iran-linked Shiite state taking over key areas of Iraq.

It is more than likely that all regional powers will throw themselves into the chaos of a disintegrated Iraq to assist their allies and to block perceived adversaries. And all of them have far better possibilities to intervene than distant powers.

This will have repercussions well beyond the borders of Iraq. Just one important example: It is not hard to see how the breakup of Iraq could push security concerns to the forefront of politics in Turkey, halting or even reversing the process of democratization and reform, and critically endangering the prospect of Turkish membership in the European Union.

It is imperative that we don't let despair over the difficulties today drive us into what would be a disaster tomorrow. The voices in the United States and Israel toying with the idea of a Balkanization of Iraq are truly playing with fire.

The very debate is dangerous. There is a risk that it could fuel sentiments in different parts of Iraq that would undermine the current fragile efforts to set up some sort of functioning regime. Instead of concentrating on the difficulties of sharing power and making the compromises that will pave the way for a constitution for the new state, there is a risk that different players will start focusing on the possibility of grabbing whatever can be grabbed in a disintegrating Iraq.

There is no underestimating the difficulties that lie ahead in Iraq. This year will be very difficult. Next year, with an elected government assuming responsibilities and seeking agreement on a new constitution, will be even more critical.

It will be the mother of all state-building efforts. Thus it is important to make clear that a breakup of Iraq

must never be on the agenda of the international community.

In the flurry of prewar rhetoric on regime change, surprisingly few seemed to realize that regime reconstruction is exceedingly difficult. For all the attention that is now given to the formal end of occupation on June 30, we must understand that we are only at the beginning of that process.

There will be enormous challenges along the road to a stable state and a representative government in Iraq. But none of the difficulties in this process are an argument for jumping into the disaster that a disintegration of the country and the region would be. This is a basic lesson of very recent history.

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