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## Federalism, Not Partition

A System Devolving Power to the Regions Is the Route to a Viable Iraq

By Mowaffak al-Rubaie  
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BAGHDAD -- Iraq's government is at a stalemate. As in the United States, there is much discussion here of the need for political reconciliation. What does that mean? That the majority Shiites and the minority Sunnis and Kurds must find a way to govern collectively at the national level. As national security adviser to the head of Iraq's governments since March 2004, I have participated in the development of democracy in my country. I

strongly support the government and applaud its achievements. But I understand that the political objectives of Iraq's three main communities are unrealizable within the framework of a unitary, centralized state.

It has been impossible to maintain a political consensus on many important issues. For one thing, the U.S.-dominated coalition, which has its own objectives, must be accommodated. The regional "superpowers" (Iran and Saudi Arabia) meddle in Iraq's affairs, and their own sectarian tensions are reflected in the violence here. The absence of truly national political parties and leadership that reach the Iraqi people exacerbates the problem.

Overall, Shiites see their future based on two fundamental "rights": Power must be exercised by the political majority through control of governmental institutions, and institutional sectarian discrimination must be eliminated. Kurds see their future bound to their "rights" of linguistic, cultural, financial and resource control within Kurdistan. Sunni Arabs are driven by resistance to their loss of power, as well as fear of revenge for past wrongs and the potential for reverse discrimination.

The current political framework is based on a pluralistic democratic vision that, while admirable, is entirely unsuited to resolving this three-way divide. It ignores underlying issues and expects that a consensus will emerge simply by enacting a liberal constitutional legal order.

Pluralistic democracy will not take root unless the national political compact recognizes and accommodates the fears and aspirations of Iraq's communities. Resolution can be achieved only through a system that incorporates regional federalism, with clear, mutually acceptable distributions of power between the regions and the central government. Such a system is in the interest of all Iraqis and is necessary if Iraq is to avoid partition or further civil strife.

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Only through a new political compact among Iraq's main communities will a viable state emerge. A key condition for success is that the balance of power should tip decisively to the regions on all matters that do not compromise the integrity of the state. The central institutions must earn their legitimacy from the power that the three main ethnic groups are prepared to give them. Iraq needs a period during which the Shiites and the Kurds achieve political control over their destinies while the Sunni Arab community is secure from the feared tyranny of the majority.

The shape of a reconstructed, federal Iraq could vary, but it should permit the assignment of nearly all domestic powers to the regions, to be funded out of a percentage of oil revenue distributed on the basis of population. The federal government should be responsible only for essential central functions such as foreign policy (including interregional affairs), defense, fiscal and monetary policy, and banking. Regional parliaments and executives would govern their areas. A federal parliament with a new upper house could manage governance at the national level. A regional political structure would allow for the development of religious, cultural and educational policies more suited to areas' populations than a central government could create. A regional framework for economic policy would also fit better with traditional trade patterns and markets.

Iraq's political geography suggests five likely federal units: A "Kurdistan province," including the current Kurdistan and surrounding areas; a "Western province," including Mosul and the upper Tigris and Euphrates valleys; a "Kufa province," built around the Middle Euphrates governorates; a "Basra province," including the lower Tigris and Euphrates valleys; and a "Baghdad province," built around Greater Baghdad, which may include parts of Diyala and Salah ad Din Governorates. The Kurdish region would be given a special constitutional status as a recognized society and culture with a unique identity (similar to the Canadian province of Quebec).

The new, national Iraqi identity will be forged over time as a result of peaceful, respectful participation in governance and growth, not by fear and terror as in our past. Iraq's constitution was ratified before its communities reached agreement on many vital issues, such as provincial powers. Without a process aimed at reaching a broad political consensus on the makeup of the Iraqi state, order and democracy are unlikely. This consensus would form the backdrop to a referendum on a reformed constitution. Each of Iraq's communities has leaders up to the task of creating a new political consensus. It is time for them to begin work.

*The writer is Iraq's national security adviser. The views expressed here are his own and do not constitute an official position of the government of Iraq.*

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