

Carving up Iraq may unleash more chaos

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For more than 200 years, Western governments have sought to shape the political geography of the Middle East.

In the 19th century, they worried about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which governed much of the Middle East, the Balkans and North Africa. When that empire fell after World War I, Britain and France imposed the system of states, which defines the Middle East today. That system has contributed to regional instability by denying states to peoples with clear national identities and forcing others to live in states governed by their ethnic, religious or linguistic rivals.

U.S. and European attempts to mediate regional conflicts have rarely been successful and have, at times, unintentionally increased tensions. So we should think twice before dividing Iraq.

When Iraq became a state in 1920, it was not a unified political community. While much of Iraq had been under Ottoman control, there had been no unified administration for centuries. Though 80 percent of the country was Arab, at least half of that population was Shiite and had ties to Shiite and Farsi-speaking Iran. Roughly another 20 percent were Kurds, an ethnically distinct people with their own language, culture and national identity. There were also Christians, Turkomen and other ethnic communities.

Britain forged Iraq for oil

None of this mattered to Great Britain, which saw a unified Iraqi state as the only way for its oil companies to take advantage of the country's vast resources. Following Shiite and Kurdish revolts against Britain's presence in Iraq in 1920, London allowed the minority Sunni Arabs to form a government and gave them the tools to dominate Iraq: chemical weapons, airplanes and access to oil revenues. Sunni Arabs would dominate Iraq from 1920 until 2003, often through violence. Saddam Hussein was not the first person to use chemical weapons in Iraq.

Four years after Saddam's government fell to a U.S. invasion, extraordinary sectarian violence and a lack of political will across sectarian and religious lines have driven Iraq into a virtual civil war. The violence has killed thousands and forced thousands more to flee their homes for other parts of Iraq or neighboring states.

Delaware Sen. Joe Biden has called for the division of Iraq into separate states, which would better reflect Iraq's major ethnic communities and facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. soldiers.

No matter how appealing Biden's plan may be, there are good reasons for treating it with skepticism. First, it is not clear how such a plan would be implemented, given Iraq's still ethnically integrated communities. Turkey and Iraq's other neighbors also oppose the creation of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Second, past experience suggests that dividing Iraq could have unintended consequences far worse than Iraq's current problems. Third, Iraqis reject dividing their country in poll after poll. Surprisingly, only 30 percent of Kurds, according to a 2007 *USA Today*/ABC News poll, supported dividing Iraq into separate states. Just 6 percent of Iraqis overall in the poll supported dividing Iraq.

Given Iraqi opposition to dividing their nation, can we morally justify adopting Biden's plan and imposing yet another political settlement in Iraq against the will of the country's people?

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