



Reconcilable Differences

By Frederick W. Kagan

How much does it matter that the Iraqi parliament has not yet passed an oil law? According to war critics, it is the only thing that matters: Iraqis' failure to complete "reconciliation" by passing "benchmark" legislation as required by Washington is evidence not only that the current strategy has failed, but also that any strategy will fail and the United States should simply leave now. Underlying this argument is the belief that a stable peace in Iraq can occur only after the Iraqis have worked out their own basic problems. This is a remarkably unrealistic claim.

The suggestion is that American forces must keep fighting in Iraq until the Arabs and Kurds have put aside their differences, resolved their internal tensions, and started singing "Kumbaya" in Arabic. But even the president's most ambitious aims involved only establishing a stable and peaceful democracy in Iraq—which is very different from resolving all tensions, as anyone who knows anything about democracy can tell you. For the United States, reconciliation should mean persuading the peoples of Iraq to address their problems and power struggles peacefully, through a political process rather than through violence, and to reject and oppose those who seek to use force to gain leverage in the political process. That is exactly what we are now in the midst of doing.

To this day, not all outstanding political tensions have been resolved in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, or Kosovo, yet the civil wars and terrorist campaigns that once threatened to engulf those places have ended, and the competing factions are pursuing their agendas primarily by peaceful political means. After our own Civil War, Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House did not coincide with the resolution of the slavery problem, much less the racial problem generally.

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Violence and terrorism at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations continued to disrupt America's peace for decades—and are not unheard of to this day.

Balancing racial, ethnic, religious, and even regional tensions continues to be part of every national political campaign in the United States. Rather than being settled once and for all, core issues are addressed through politics, and the accompanying violence is limited and infrequent enough that police can handle it. If the standard for a successful end to the American Civil War had been passage of legislation that satisfied all parties, then the war would have been judged a failure. By that standard, even the civil rights legislation of the 1960s has not brought complete and final success. But achievement of perfect harmony was not the standard for the United States, and it should not be the standard for Iraq.

Iraqis, like the people of almost any modern state, are engaged in power struggles. Hitherto these struggles have been pursued largely by violence that has destabilized the country and threatened to destabilize the region. In particular, it has created an opportunity for al Qaeda and Iran to establish themselves in Iraq, either directly or through proxies. We are fighting to bring the violence under control as a means of driving al Qaeda and Iranian agents and proxies out of Iraq

and keeping them out. Our aim is to create a stable government in Iraq that is able to govern its own people and drive violence down to a manageable level.

We have been remarkably successful in 2007 in reducing violence in Iraq. According to Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, the operational commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, enemy attacks are at their lowest since January 2006 and continue to drop. There has been a 60 percent decrease in improvised explosive device attacks in the past four months. The reduction in violence is partly a result of the presence of additional American forces and their adoption of a sound counterinsurgency strategy. This has allowed Iraqis to turn against al Qaeda and the Baathist insurgents and form their own local defense groups in concert with the Iraqi government. It even appears to have encouraged some Shias to turn against the Shia militias. Also driving these trends are the Iraqis' rejection of al Qaeda's ideology and, more profoundly, their exhaustion with the struggle—a key development in the winding down of any violent internal conflict. What these positive developments do not reflect is any expectation that Iraq's internal tensions can be quickly or comprehensively resolved. Nor do Sunni Arab tribesmen coming over to the coalition side ask when an oil law will be passed. They ask whether we will continue to help protect them.

As the violence recedes, leaders in all the contending Iraqi communities will naturally seek to address their internal differences. Our interest in the outcome is limited: as long as the Iraqis are committed to the principle of resolving their differences through a political process rather than violence, and as long as any settlement they reach is sufficiently fair so as not to reignite the violence, then our interests will have been secured. The Iraqis can continue to debate the oil law, provincial rights, federalism, and so on for decades (as Americans have debated civil rights, Social Security, immigration, health care, and states rights) with no harm to our interests, assuming their debates are channeled through a political process. And this is almost certainly what will happen. Even if the current Iraqi parliament passed all the benchmark legislation Americans desire tomorrow, Iraqis would continue to debate, argue, adjust, and press for reforms on these key issues, probably for generations. That is what a self-governing people does.

We therefore made an enormous mistake—one in which the Bush administration was complicit when it promulgated the benchmarks in 2006—by defining success as the resolution of Iraq's internal problems, rather than as the creation of a political system within which Iraqis could pursue their struggles peacefully.

Many believe that as long as major grievances remain, violence will persist. More likely, a point will be reached where contending groups are convinced that they will suffer more than they will benefit from resorting to force. At that point, political players will either moderate their objectives or find ways of pursuing them peacefully, or both, which is what is happening among Iraq's Sunni Arabs today. Where previously Sunni hotheads believed that an alliance with terrorists would give them the leverage to insist upon a maximalist political solution, now local leaders, including leading sheikhs, recognize that the violence is hurting them far more than it is helping them, and that they must reduce their demands and find peaceful ways to pursue them.

There is still a long way to go. Shia extremists inside and outside the government continue to see force as a way to change the situation in their favor and so shape the ultimate political contest to suit them. The danger remains that these extremists will antagonize the Sunnis into renewed violence. More likely, outside actors with an interest in stirring trouble in Iraq will find their footing once again and either prevent the situation from stabilizing or destabilize it once it has.

No doubt the difficulty of resolving political issues will also seem to some extremists an opening to gain leverage by use of force. There are likely to be spikes in violence in the coming years, as outside actors and hardcore extremists maneuver and resist final defeat. The passage of legislation now would not change that. Any meaningful legislation would be a product of compromise, and it is the nature of extremists to reject compromise.

What matters more than any benchmark laws, then, is whether Iraqis believe they must work to resolve their differences through a political process and that they cannot resort to force because doing so would hurt their cause. That is the essence of the reconciliation we seek. The acceptance of a political process as the only legitimate means of resolving internal differences cannot be measured by any legislative checklist, but it is the measure that actually counts.