

The Problem is Still the Insurgency

By Vali Nasr

When earlier this week the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maleki, indicated that he wanted to shake-up his cabinet – one which he admitted was not of his choosing to begin with – he was merely confirming that the U.S. political roadmap for Iraq had failed. The promise of reconciliation is fast fading and a national unity government is no longer a credible anchor for U.S. strategy for stabilizing Iraq. It is time to come up with a new approach. One often-discussed option is federalism: a soft separation of Iraq's feuding ethnic and sectarian communities that would be preferable to the alternative of civil war or a break-up of Iraq. Making Shias, Sunnis and Kurds each master of their own domain will end their anxieties about one another. This along with more secure internal borders of the kind that today separate Kurds in the north from Arabs in the south will cut down on the violence. With no prize at the center to fight over, all that will have to be decided is how to share the oil revenue.

Federalism faces many challenges, most immediately that almost all Sunnis and many Shias are opposed to it. It is not easy to decide who will get Baghdad or Mosul, or how they can be divided. In a country in which more than half of the population live in four mixed cities, population exchanges that are sure to follow will create myriad humanitarian and security problems. Far from stemming the violence, federalism will likely have the opposite effect – at least in the short run – and may even lead to the civil war that it is meant to avert. If the recent declaration by the insurgency of establishment of an Islamic state is any indication, federalism also runs the danger of relinquishing the Sunni region to al-Qaeda – just as it will cede southern Iraq to Iranian hegemony. If federalism is not a viable exit strategy then we have to make a unitary Iraq work. This requires a new political roadmap that could bring Shias, Sunnis and Kurds together around a national compact. Containing sectarian violence is important to success here, but it will not be enough. The main problem facing Iraq today is still the same one that the United States confronted from the very beginning: the insurgency. The insurgency was always as much about ending U.S. occupation as it was about reversing the Shia rise to power. For the first three years of the occupation, it was U.S. forces alone that fought Sunni insurgents as they attacked both American and Shia targets. With the United States doing all the fighting, Shias could afford to sit on the sidelines. Then, in late 2005, the U.S. changed its strategy; it decided that it could not defeat the insurgency without engaging Sunni leaders. The result was the national unity government of Prime Minister Maliki that

Washington hoped would weaken the insurgency. But the insurgency saw the change in course as proof that it was winning. American and British officials who met with insurgent leaders at the time were often surprised by how confidently the fighters dismissed talk of compromise and demanded a Sunni restoration. The insurgency intensified its campaign just as the United States turned its attention to security in Baghdad. The insurgency went from strength to strength and eventually succeeded in provoking a sectarian conflict.

Shias, too, interpreted the change in U.S. strategy as a sign of America's weakening resolve, and after a massive bomb destroyed a major Shia shrine in Samarra in February 2006, they turned to their militias. The war between the insurgents and the U.S. thus became the war between the insurgents, the United States, and Shia militias. It was still the same war but with more players. That the U.S. military found itself on the same side as Shia militias in the larger fight against the Sunni insurgency, but then became pre-occupied with suppressing those militias confounded its mission to the benefit of the insurgency.

After four years of fighting, one thing is certain: the insurgency has not been defeated, by the U.S. or by Shia militias. Sectarian violence captures most headlines these days, but it is the insurgency that continues to inflict most damage to U.S. forces – it accounts for 80 percent of the casualties. The ferocity of its campaign and the audacity of its rhetoric show that the insurgency believes it can win. Sunnis in Baghdad or Mosul may fear Shia militias and the vacuum that a hasty U.S. departure will leave behind. They want U.S. forces to stay and protect their lives and property. But such sentiments are rare in the Sunni heartland of western Iraq where the insurgency is centered. There, it is not fear of Shia militias, but confidence in victory that shapes attitudes. With the Sunni insurgency gaining in strength sectarian violence will only escalate and Shia political and religious leaders will resist dismantling their militias. For the United States, the implications extend far beyond Iraq: a surging insurgency will make any U.S. exit strategy look like defeat, and that in turn will fuel Islamic extremism everywhere else.

Defeating the insurgency needs a new political strategy. That means abandoning the failed national unity government in favor of constitutional changes that will free the government of the need to build large coalitions and accommodate the sundry of political parties to rule. That will make it easier to fight militias and deliver services the Iraqis need. Success will also need a regional consensus that can persuade Iraq's neighbors to close their borders to the flow of funds, arms and fighters, and, more importantly, to politically isolate the insurgency. The insurgency has operated on the belief that it enjoys the material, moral, and political support of the larger Sunni Arab world – that it has strategic depth beyond Iraq. Only Iraq's neighbors can change that perception. The United States must engage all of Iraq's neighbors – U.S. allies and adversaries alike – and ultimately convene a regional forum to develop a new broadly-supported political road map. Today, Iraq is a source of instability in the region not only because of the violence and extremism that is brewing in its borders, but because the uncertainty of the outcome in Iraq threatens the vital interests of its neighbors. It is only by including Iraq's neighbors in deciding its future that the United States can change their posture toward Iraq to isolate and weaken the insurgency. The United States needs the region's help to move Iraq in the right direction, and to get that it helps it must reach out Iraq's neighbors.