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A Dayton Process For Iraq

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Last June, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced a 24-point plan for national reconciliation. Since then there have been meetings of clerics, tribal elders, army officers, civic organizations—all with much fanfare but little result. Less-public meetings with dissident Sunnis, especially in Amman, Jordan, have had little tangible impact on the political and security situations.

The United States has placed much emphasis on laws deemed necessary for Iraqi national reconciliation. Two significant laws, part of Maliki's 24-point plan, are stalled. The draft of a new, less draconian de-Baathification law has languished because Shiite factions oppose it. A draft oil law, designed to ease Sunni fears, is opposed by the Kurds. The review of the constitution, scheduled to be completed by May 15, is another benchmark on the path to national reconciliation, but the deadline probably won't be met. Dialogue with armed Sunni groups is deadlocked because the parties to the coalition government cannot agree on which groups are acceptable.

Meanwhile, regional diplomacy has intensified. On March 10 the Iraqi government hosted a meeting in Baghdad that brought together Iraq's neighbors, members of the U.N. Security Council and other regional and international participants. A follow-up meeting of foreign ministers took place last week in Egypt.

But as useful as regional and international agreements may be, they cannot provide a solution. Countries in the region can exploit opportunities for mischief provided by the fissures within Iraq, but they cannot mend these fissures. The paramount problem in Iraq is the disagreement among Iraqis themselves and their reluctance to compromise, and what is needed first and foremost is an agreement among Iraqi social and political groups. Only then will regional and international agreements be relevant. Similarly, the attention the United States pays to the legal aspects of national reconciliation puts the cart before the horse: Laws and constitutional revision must be outcomes of a national agreement, not conditions for one.

The central unresolved questions in Iraq are: Who rules, and how? The heart of the problem is the Shiite-Sunni competition for power: Shiite parties see no reason to give up the gains they made after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and they believe it is their turn to govern; the Sunnis cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that they no longer dominate the Iraqi state. Trust between the two is at a low ebb, and each side feels an existential threat that makes compromise difficult.

The United States must focus above all on an Iraqi compact. In 1995, after a war that left hundreds of thousands dead, a frustrated international community finally decided that the parties to the conflict in Bosnia had to be brought to the negotiating table. The Serbs, Croats and Bosnians were pressed to convene in Dayton and pressured by other nations to stay at it. The Dayton Accords were ratified by the key parties and overseen by the international community, and they have kept the peace in Bosnia.

The differences between Iraq and Bosnia should not deter us from using the Dayton process as a model. Many countries have high stakes in Iraq's stability. These countries must coax, persuade and otherwise induce Iraqis to engage in sustained negotiations in which they spell out disagreements, aspirations and fears, and reach compromises or solutions that determine who rules and how.

A Dayton-like process for Iraq would be a multi-tiered international engagement. At its heart would be an Iraqi national compact forged by Iraqis with international and regional endorsement. The process would require certain indispensable elements.

First, there must be a strong and credible driving force behind the process; the United States is best placed to be that driving force but need not be alone in this task. Second, the process must have a credible sponsor, such as the United Nations, and high-profile, skilled facilitators. Third, the single objective must be producing a Sunni-Shiite agreement as the cornerstone of the national compact. Fourth, Iraqi groups must be represented at the highest decision-making level. Fifth, the discussions and negotiations should be sustained until the necessary compromises have been made and agreements reached. Sixth, mechanisms for implementing the agreement have to be spelled out—with a timetable.

Finally, concerned countries, including Iraq's neighbors, must ratify this accord and agree to respect it. Once a national compact has been reached, it should be linked to other regional and international mechanisms and accords, such as the International Compact for Iraq, with its system of benchmarks, achievements, and Iraqi and international obligations.

Senior Iraqi officials said last month that measures on the path of political reconciliation were moving on an Iraqi timetable and that they should not be rushed. Unfortunately, this leisurely pace, so easily adopted by politicians living in the Green Zone, costs scores of Iraqi and American lives each day. It's time to inject a little urgency into the process.

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