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Iraq's Inevitabilities

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By Richard Cohen

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The creation of modern India and Pakistan entailed the uprooting of more than 12 million people. Bangladesh was itself ripped from Pakistan. The creation of Republika Srpska, an entity you probably have never heard of, was a consequence of the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, which did not exist before the 20th century and did not make it into the 21st. Countries come and countries go. It is time -- isn't it? -- that [Iraq](#) went.

The way it should go was long ago devised by [Joseph Biden](#), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, unbeknownst to most Americans, a candidate for president of the United States. Biden and Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council of Foreign Relations, [advocate](#) breaking Iraq into a federation consisting of three parts: a Kurdish north, a Sunni center and a Shiite south. Those terms -- north, center and south -- are the vaguest approximations, but they represent a thought, or a despair, or a resignation: The only way Iraq is going to work is if we concede that it is not likely to work the way we wanted it to.

Since the Biden-Gelb plan was promulgated four years ago, the vaunted facts on the ground have initiated its implementation. Iraqis of one sort or another are drawing into themselves, circling the proverbial wagons so that they remain safely with their own kind and creating somewhat autonomous regions. Presently, Iraqis are fleeing their homes at the rate of 100,000 a month -- Sunnis moving to Sunni areas, Shiites to Shiite ones and the Kurds going nowhere because they already have what amounts to their own state.

Those who question the Biden-Gelb plan point to [Baghdad](#), which is virtually impossible to assign to a single ethnic group or break into single ethnic zones. This is why I mentioned Republika Srpska. I was in [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) during the civil war of the 1990s, when it was pointed out how much intermarriage had occurred between Muslims and Christians and how it would be impossible to separate the two communities. This was especially true of [Sarajevo](#), which had hosted the Winter Olympics in 1984 and was, we had been assured, a thoroughly modern city with thoroughly modern residents. Within a decade, all hell had broken loose. Muslims fled to Muslim areas, Croats to Croatian ones and Serbs to Serb enclaves.

Iraq and Baghdad have followed the same pattern. As with [Yugoslavia](#), a country that was once united by force has come apart. The capital city, with its once lovely middle-class areas and a historic reputation for tolerance, has descended into chaos and fragmented into ethnic safe zones. Iraq is rearranging itself, a bloody form of rezoning, and it is doing so not because of the Biden-Gelb plan to create a federation but because its three main ethnic groups cannot get along. It would make sense for the United States to endorse reality and support a partition of the country. It would make sense, also, for the Democratic presidential candidates to do the same. But maybe because Biden is a competitor, all the others -- with the exception of [Bill Richardson](#) -- have steered clear. They have a different plan for Iraq. It comes down to this: They oppose whatever Bush is doing at the moment.

The main virtue of the Biden-Gelb plan is that it does not stand athwart history. It enlists it. The volcanic eruption of nationalism and sectarianism that drenched the 20th century in blood -- the Holocaust above all -- has not yet run its course. The farmer and the rancher, to put things in Rodgers and Hammerstein terms, will not be friends. [East Africa](#) ousted its Indian and Chinese merchants. Some of [Asia](#) did the same. Tutsi will murder Hutu, Bosnian Serb will murder Bosnian Muslim and the same thing would happen, incidentally, if a single-state solution of Muslims and Jews were imposed on [Israel](#). Even [Belgium](#) threatens [to come apart](#), French speakers (Walloons) and Dutch speakers (Flemish) going their

own ways. We human beings are remarkably imaginative haters.

There are formidable obstacles to implementing the Biden-Gelb federation plan -- how to apportion oil revenue, how to handle [Iran](#) (will the Shiite, but Arab, south come under the heel of Shiite, but Persian, Iran?) and how, exactly, do you turn a policy into a step-by-step plan? Still, any policy that does not, in the name of neoconservative romanticism or faith-based dreaming, spit into the wind of history should have American support. Enough lives have been lost already. Maybe by acknowledging the inevitable, a few can be saved.

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