

MISREADING THE MAP OF IRAQ

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It is noteworthy that the troubling results of the National Geographic Society's survey of geographic literacy in America were reported in the media during the same week an unannounced candidate for the presidency and a former staffer of the New York Times published their geographically flawed op-ed piece on Iraq (Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq", New York Times, Monday, May 1, page A-25). Whether the world likes it or not, the United States today is the world's sole superpower, capable of intervening anywhere on the planet. This confers upon Americans the responsibility to know the world far better than they do, but the NGS survey revealed a worsening, not improving, level of geographic knowledge among the general public. That this geographic illiteracy afflicts political leaders as well is inevitable and has been evident since the Vietnam-war era, when Harvard University graduate Robert McNamara steered the U.S. into the Indochina War. (Harvard University closed its Geography Department in the 1950s). Its cost to the nation, in terms of insufficiently informed foreign-policy initiatives, misdirected priorities, and growing security risks, is incalculable.

The Biden-Gelb proposal is a case in point. I am sure that I was not the first to see the need for a geographically-based response to what was then an emerging insurgency crisis in recently-conquered Iraq, but my letter of October 11, 2003 in the New York Times under the headline "Seeking Common Ground on Iraq" may have started the debate. A condensed version of a more detailed analysis, it proposed that the three key regions of Iraq's cultural geography be guided separately, each at its own pace and perhaps with the involvement of neighboring countries through the United Nations, toward eventual recombination. On November 22, 2003, Leslie H. Gelb published a full-page article in the same newspaper under the title of "The Three-State Solution", elaborating on the idea but making no reference to its geographic fundamentals. Now Biden and Gelb have resurrected the notion, but the functional map of Iraq has changed and the "three-state" option is no longer viable.

In mid-2003 it may still have been possible to conceive of a three-state federal Iraq on the Bosnia model, but today the situation is crucially different. Iraq's cultural geography still is fragmented regionally, but the three cultural regions (Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish) converge on a fourth: Baghdad. And the Baghdad region, centered on the embattled capital, is now more populous today than two of the three culture regions. With more than 6 million inhabitants, Baghdad contains nearly one-quarter of the country's population. No system of regional autonomy will work unless Baghdad forms part of it.

The Tigris River crosses Baghdad and, in a general sense, creates one of the capital's many cultural divides. To the east of the river lie most of the Shiite neighborhoods, including the dreaded Sadr City, the slum once known as Saddam City where the regime savagely punished residents for even minor infractions. West of the river lay the headquarters of Saddam's Baath-Party regime, with key public buildings, monumental palaces, ornate mosques, statues, and other edifices of power, along with historically well-off Sunni neighborhoods. Here today sits the fortified Green Zone, the nerve center of the occupation.

Recent and continuing bouts of ethnic cleansing in the Baghdad region notwithstanding, the capital remains an intricate mosaic of cultures. By definition, any three-state partition of Iraq implies fragmentation of the capital. But the map of

Baghdad's cultural geography suggests that such fragmentation is impractical. It follows that Baghdad should be designated a fourth region, where the "autonomy" of the other three will *not* prevail. Baghdad, thus, would become a Federal Capital Territory, in the tradition of compromise capitals in other countries, when the federal framework is reconstituted.

A regional solution to Iraq's growing problems may yet be viable, but the country's geography precludes any "three-state" model.