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Achieving Success in Iraq
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Can the United States achieve success in Iraq?
Can the Maliki unity government come to an agreement about sharing oil revenues and other benchmarks facing it?
Yes, if ...

If, first, the United States recognizes that the government is a unity only in name; it is actually a collection of enemies, two of which would sooner destroy each other than talk to each other, namely, the Sunnis and the Shiites.

If, second, the United States organizes negotiations and acts as a strong mediator to ensure the two sides talk seriously and come to an agreement.

The model for understanding the Middle East conflict of Iraq and its Sunni insurgency is that other Middle East hotspot, Israel-Palestine. While not exactly the same, the two situations share certain features that enable lessons learned from one to be applied to the other.

Lesson one: The might of arms may bring about victory, but not the end of the conflict. The Israeli army has for decades been able to crush any armed organized Palestinian resistance. But that does not mean that the Palestinians have been pacified. From the PLO terrorist attacks in the 1970s to the Intifada in the 1980s and 1990s to the more recent spates of suicide-bomber attacks, the Palestinians have rejected the right of the Israelis to control them and have struggled for freedom.

Military victories have not brought peace, but ongoing friction and hatred. The Israeli army is the focus of the problem, for it is bogged down in the occupied Palestinian territories. The Israeli army can control the Palestinians, but it cannot create a situation in which it can leave successfully.

The U.S. military finds itself in a similar situation in Iraq. Its army easily took control of Iraq, but there is no peace. The defeated citizens (and outsiders) are still able to mount disruptive bombings, kidnappings, and other activities which reveal that military control does not result in a peaceful society. The United States' military presence has produced a situation in which the army that controls the country has become a target. Its presence provokes unrest, yet if it leaves then the little civil pacification that exists in Iraq will be lost.

Lesson two: Peace agreements come about through negotiations, but enemies do not voluntarily talk to each other; there must be a strong mediator to guide the negotiations and keep the two parties talking until an agreement is reached. This has always been the case with Israel. Whether it was Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy under President Nixon, the Camp David Accords under President Carter, or the Oslo Accords guided by the Norwegian foreign secretary, peace agreements have come about only when outside nations took the lead in providing the setting for negotiations and played a strong mediating role.

It is not surprising then that there have been no agreements between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the last six years, for neither the United States nor any other country has gotten involved in ongoing negotiations between the parties.

This is also the situation in Iraq. The Iraqis had elections and the elected leaders formed a government. But the government has not been able to make the necessary tough decisions because the two sides (leaving out the Kurds for the moment) remain enemies. This has enabled the insurgency to continue unabated. It is time that the United States learned these two lessons and stepped in to provide committed, ongoing mediation that would enable the two sides to reach the needed agreements.

Such negotiations cannot be accomplished by lightning visits from the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, or even the vice president. Maliki, the leader of the Iraqi government, cannot achieve the agreement because he remains a committed partisan of one of the sides; he is a negotiator rather than a mediator. The lessons of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict show that only with the serious, long-term involvement of a strong mediator can the necessary agreements be reached.

If an agreement could be reached by Shiites and Sunnis on the key issues, then the leaders of the communities could show the government is working and delivering results for their side. This would in turn provide leverage so that they would be able to restrain their members. In the end, this might be able to reduce the country's violence and lead to the restoration of a civil society.