

The New York Times: a proposal for ethnic cleansing in Iraq

By Bill Vann
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With popular resistance mounting to its military occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration is casting about in increasing desperation for a new strategy to salvage the principal aims of its war—the seizure of oil resources and the establishment of a US client regime in a strategically vital region.

While plans have been announced for Washington to erect a “sovereign” Iraqi regime by the middle of next year, this hollow exercise holds little prospect for ending a bitter conflict that is claiming the lives of American soldiers daily and creating growing political unrest in the US itself.

Enter the *New York Times* with a modest proposal for a bloodbath. It advances what it terms a “three-state solution,” based on the partition of Iraq along ethnic and religious lines.

The proposal appeared in a November 25 column by Leslie Gelb, a former editor and senior columnist for the *Times*. Gelb calls for dividing Iraq between the “Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the center and Shiites in the south.”

He continues: “Almost immediately, this would allow America to put most of its money and troops where they would do the most good quickly—with the Kurds and Shiites. The United States could extricate most of its forces from the so-called Sunni Triangle, north and west of Baghdad, largely freeing American forces from fighting a costly war they might not win. American officials could then wait for the troublesome and domineering Sunnis, without oil or oil revenues, to moderate their ambitions or suffer the consequences.”

Gelb’s proposal is a clear manifestation of another triangle—a reactionary nexus between the US State Department, Israeli intelligence and the editorial board of the *New York Times*.

Until recently, Gelb headed the Council on Foreign Affairs, the influential Washington think tank that provides a forum for corporate executives, CIA and State Department officials, and a select group of establishment journalists and academics with intimate ties to these camps. Gelb himself followed stints at the Pentagon and the State Department with his position as columnist and editor at the *Times*. There is no doubt that his piece on Iraq gives voice to policies that are under active consideration within the top levels of the US government.

The obvious attraction for Washington in the partition proposal advanced by Gelb is that by dismembering Iraq it would allow the deployment of US troops in the areas that are of the greatest strategic concern: the oilfields in the predominantly Shiite south and the largely Kurdish north, while the Sunni population, which has dominated Iraqi political life since the days of Ottoman rule and has been the most hostile to the US occupation, would be left stranded in an isolated mini-state stripped of its resources.

Just as Iraq’s boundaries were artificially drawn by the British after World War I to further colonial ambitions and establish control over oil reserves, so, according to Gelb’s thesis, they can be redrawn by the region’s new US imperialist master to further similar aims.

It is not only in Washington, however, that this proposal finds support. The partition of Iraq has long been a strategic objective of the Israeli regime. An article that appeared in the World Zionist Organization’s publication *Kivunim* in 1982, on the eve of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war, spelled this out. Written by Oded Yinon, an official in the Israeli foreign ministry, the article was entitled, “A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s.” It stated, in part:

“Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel’s targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run it is Iraqi power which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel. An Iraqi-Iranian war will tear Iraq apart and cause its downfall at home even before it is able to organize a struggle on a wide front against us. Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us in the short run and will shorten the way to the more important aim of breaking up Iraq into denominations as in Syria and in Lebanon. In Iraq, a division into provinces along ethnic/religious lines as in Syria during Ottoman times is possible. So, three (or more) states will exist around the three major cities: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, and Shiite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni and Kurdish north. It is possible that the present Iranian-Iraqi confrontation will deepen this polarization.”

Israel actively sought to promote this agenda, offering covert support both to the Khomeini regime in Iran and the Kurdish separatist movements in Iraq itself.

Washington had previously opposed such a partition on the grounds that it would destabilize the entire region and remove a strategic counterbalance to Iran, which in the wake of the 1979 revolution was seen as the greater threat to US interests. Clearly, however, if the US is planning to maintain permanent military bases on Iraqi soil and preparing further wars in the region, these calculations have changed.

What is most breathtaking about Gelb’s proposal is its utter indifference to the welfare of the Iraqi population, not to mention international law.

He warns that the Sunni population in central Iraq “might punish the substantial minorities” left out of the ethnic states to be created in the north and south. “These minorities must have the time and the wherewithal to organize and make their deals, or go either north or south,” he writes. “This would be a messy and dangerous enterprise, but the United States would and should pay for the population

movements and protect the process with force.”

What is proposed here is the uprooting of masses of people and the igniting of an ethnic bloodbath the likes of which has not been seen since the British partition of India 55 years ago, when a million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were slaughtered and some 14 million people were driven from their homes.

Baghdad’s largest neighborhood, Sadr City, a sprawling slum named after a Shiite leader killed under the Saddam Hussein regime, is home to some 2 million residents, most of them Shiites. These impoverished masses, the vast majority of whom have never lived anywhere else, are supposed to “make their deals” or move south. The same presumably holds true for the substantial Assyrian and Turkoman populations in the north.

It should be recalled that in the mid-1990s Gelb, together with *Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, was one of the principal media advocates for US intervention in the Balkans, demanding that Washington punish the Serbs for “ethnic cleansing.” Now it is precisely such a bloody process that Gelb advocates for Iraq.

Indeed, Gelb cites the dismemberment of the Yugoslav federation along ethno-nationalist lines beginning in 1991 as a “hopeful precedent” for what his plan envisions in Iraq. The column makes clear once again that—the human rights propaganda used to justify the 1999 US/NATO attack on Serbia notwithstanding—the attitude of US policy makers towards ethnic cleansing is quite flexible. It depends upon who is doing it and whether it furthers Washington’s strategic interests.

“Overwhelming force was the best chance for keeping Yugoslavia whole and even that failed in the end,” Gelb writes. “Meantime, the costs of preventing the natural states from emerging had been terrible.”

Here the former official of the Pentagon/State Department and *Times* editor offers a false and self-serving explanation for Yugoslavia’s disintegration, while providing a glimpse of the reactionary conceptions underlying what Washington depicts as a crusade for democracy in Iraq. Yugoslavia’s breakup was not the triumph of “natural states” against “overwhelming force.” It was the byproduct of economic “shock therapy” policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and other world financial institutions that led to the collapse of the country’s national economy and the destruction of the jobs and living standards of masses of working people.

In an attempt to divert the resulting social unrest, Stalinist bureaucrats and communalist demagogues fomented nationalist sentiments while seeking patrons among the major powers. The principal aim of Washington and the other imperialist powers became the transformation of the splintered territories of the former Yugoslavia into a collection of semi-colonies.

A carve-up of Iraq will similarly be a process imposed by US imperialism against the interests of all Iraqi people, rather than any realization of pent-up demands for ethnic “self-determination.”

The idea that Iraq is no more than a collection of “natural states” composed of different ethnic groups yearning to live separately is not only backward but also, from the standpoint of US policy in the region, wholly inconsistent.

If Washington were truly to embrace this conception of “natural,” i.e., ethnic states, then it could not but welcome the unification of the Kurdish people, presently divided by the borders separating Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Likewise, it would have to support the unification of the Shiites of southern Iraq with their coreligionists in

neighboring Iran, not to mention eastern Saudi Arabia, in one contiguous state. But, in fact, the Bush administration has made it clear it is prepared to use overwhelming military force against anyone daring to attempt such a “natural” form of statecraft.

The proposal to dismember Iraq along ethnic lines is a stark expression of the predatory character of the US intervention. Notwithstanding the Bush administration’s rhetoric about “liberating” Iraq and turning it into a “beacon of democracy” for the Middle East, the conceptions advanced by Gelb demonstrate that Washington has no answers to the complex historical and political problems posed in Iraq. Its only aim is to exploit existing divisions to further the profit interests of the oil conglomerates and other US-based corporations and banks.

An ethnic carve-up of Iraq would have far-reaching implications throughout the Middle East, where the boundaries of none of the existing states are a “natural” reflection of ethnic identity, but rather are the legacy of the previous division of the region between British and French imperialism. Any number of these states could also be dismembered, and proposals already exist to do just that. Within the civilian leadership in the Pentagon, for example, there has been discussion of the US fostering a breakaway Shiite “Muslim republic of east Arabia,” as a means of prying loose the vast oil reserves of Saudi Arabia from the crumbling monarchy.

Such policies have an attraction for the Israeli regime that goes well beyond its security concerns and regional ambitions. The principle that borders should be drawn according to ethnic and religious identity finds direct expression in the demand by elements within Israel’s right-wing Likud government for a policy of “transfer,” i.e., the forced expulsion of the Palestinian population from both the occupied territories and Israel’s pre-1967 borders so as to realize the exclusively Jewish character of the Zionist state. Should the US begin massive population transfers in Iraq, the Israelis could well be emboldened to follow suit.

For its part, the *New York Times*’ publication of its former editor’s recommendation to the Bush administration for the carve-up of Iraq represents the continuation of its promotion and justification of the illegal war, as well as its long-standing defense of Israeli interests. With the Gelb column, however, the newspaper has abandoned its pretense of liberal humanitarianism to openly promote a war crime of world-historic proportions.

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