

Nov 04, 2016 by **Gordon Robison**

Redefining Iraq's Identity ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Here's a question that has been bothering me as I watch the Middle East watch Iraq's election campaign: if Iraq's Arab neighbors are worried about the country breaking up (and conventional wisdom holds that they are) then why do they insist on addressing Iraqi issues in language guaranteed to make things even worse than they already are?

Last week a meeting of Iraq's neighbors took place here in Jordan. Its supposed purpose was to encourage Iraqis to support the January 30 election and to turn out to vote. The rhetoric surrounding the meeting, however, was not especially promising. Iran refused to send its foreign minister in protest against King Abdullah's (unproven) claim that more than a million Iranians have crossed the border to vote in Iraq. Then, the day before the meeting, Jordan's foreign minister, Hani Mulki, offered this rationale for the get-together:

"The purpose of the meeting is to come out with a clear message to Iraqis that elections are on time and that they should go to vote to... ensure the country preserves its Arab character." The meeting, he added, would "call on the feelings of all Iraqis to vote for an Arab, not a religious, Iraq."

The problem with calling on "all Iraqis" to vote for an Arab Iraq is that a significant minority of Iraqis are not Arabs. About 20% of all Iraqis are Kurds. This includes the country's foreign minister (who presumably did not think the purpose of the Amman meeting was to reaffirm Iraq's Arabness) and a significant portion of the population of Baghdad. In addition to the Kurds there is a smaller, but still significant, minority of Turkmen.

Iraqi political leaders are a pretty self-interested bunch, but they at least seem to understand this in a way their neighbors do not. They often talk about the need for a federal Iraq. What exactly a federal Iraq might look like is a separate debate, one on which the country's various ethnic and religious communities have widely differing views. For now, though, the important thing is that they recognize Iraqi society as a mosaic whose various parts must be accommodated if the country is to hold together.

For most people both inside and outside the region holding Iraq together remains the preferred solution. It is difficult to spin a partition scenario that does not devolve into a bloodbath, and pretty much everyone agrees that a violent, unstable Iraq is a very Bad Thing. Iraq's neighbors have long opposed any break-up of the country. The Saudis don't like the idea of a Shia state emerging on their northern border any more than the Iranians, Syrians or Turks relish the prospect of an independent Kurdistan.

Why, then, this repeated emphasis on the country's "Arab identity"? Don't the neighbors understand that this is exactly the sort of thing that makes Iraq's Kurds and Turkmen nervous? That makes them fear for their culture and desire the independence the rest of the

region is so eager to deny them? Do the neighbors understand that by repeatedly stressing Iraq's Arabness they are making civil war more, not less, likely? Is this really what they want?

Pulling off an election three weeks from now that has even a shred of legitimacy is going to be difficult enough as it is. If this is the best the country's neighbors can offer in the way of help, it might be better if they stayed away entirely.

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