Plan "C" is for Culture:
Out of Iraq, Opportunity

by

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Recent post-conflict operations in a growing number of areas around the world—Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, to name a few—have shown a need for a new set of cultural insights with which to inform government policies and new cultural skills with which to complement the combat competencies of intervention forces. Marine General Anthony Zinni famously termed cultural awareness a "force multiplier." Parallel to Washington's nonmilitary efforts at inspiring reconciliation in Iraq, the Multi-National Command in Iraq is seeking to achieve its goals by boosting the cultural skills of its forces. Some speak of cultural awareness and others of cultural competency, but little clarity exists as to what is meant, how much of it is needed, and how to get it.

In the absence of reliable, evidence-based answers, partial solutions are pursued, without a consistent approach. Ranging from ultra-short language warm-ups to cultural profiling, from the establishment of a special civil-military force to outright bewilderment at the "complexity" of cross-cultural equations, the response to the perceived need has been spotty at best. There seem to be few if any places to which governments can turn for trustworthy policy recommendations pertaining to foreign interventions in societies radically different from those in Western Europe and North America, or where military and civilian organizations can acquire the potentially life-or-death cultural skills to help achieve post-conflict objectives in challenging overseas deployments. Traditionally, language schools pay only ancillary and anecdotal attention to the needed cultural questions, their expertise rarely being applied-anthropological in nature.

The small though growing field of diversity training is no good fit either, since it is focused almost exclusively on workforce diversity in Western societies and the practical problems of expatriate elites. Though the acquisition of any local cultural knowledge may be better than none at all, the hitherto haphazard way of pursuing policy and spending public coin is less than promising in practice and less than satisfactory in principle. As argued and outlined below, efforts of a different quality are needed. A new perspective is offered, an impartial and nonpartisan professional

proposition for changing the nature of foreign interventions, such that they may offer a platform for constructive social change. After the 2003 invasion and the 2007 troop boost, the time is right for a plan "C." Focusing less on the central government of Iraq and more on the roots of the rising carnage, it shows a way to help that country build a better future, to assist the world in confronting multiethnic tensions, and to facilitate the reduction of foreign troops, costs, tensions, stigma and violence.

For foreign forces to sound a frustrated retreat could prove disastrous for generations to come. Though powerful and professional, their post-conflict success in Iraq has been all too limited. Why is this the case? In Afghanistan, too, coalition forces may have prevailed in certain battles, but the larger war is far from won. How can such power be so consistently thwarted, and what could be differently done, given the coalition's involvement in the status quo? Clearly, the creation of a stable multiethnic society has less to do with force than was thought. The normal trappings of statehood—law, security, economic policy, etc.—are essential but insufficient. For the world has progressively turned to other avenues of organization and decisionmaking; on the one hand, global allegiances have been inhibiting states' roles, and at the other end of this vertical axis local initiatives ever more frequently affect public outcomes. Some minority groups have grown stronger in their ability to assert themselves and fewer are resigned to being ruled into oblivion. The extent to which governments fail to take into effective account this multilayered global order is the degree to which their efforts must fall short.

Iraq may be a young state, but its people have known centuries of ethnoreligious strife. In this birthplace of the Shî'a–Sunna schism, ethnocultural identities are held in the deepest regard. To recognize the true significance of minorities does not come naturally to states, deceived as they often are by the concept of "nation"—that romantic notion of "nation-state" that denotes the sovereign land of a single ethnocultural population. Worldwide, such "nations" are about as prevalent as unicorns. To avoid or reduce ethnic strife in real countries today, states remain relevant, but the ideal of the nation-state does not. Moreover, like some others, the Iraqi state is particularly fragile. The legitimacy of the central government, its ability to supply security, its control over the economy—the very indicators of statehood—are much in question, and not just for internal reasons.

Externally, the country is challenged by an armed intervention and destabilizing infiltrations. Some also blame the information age, citing grassroots cumulatively disaffected by news and commentary about Abu Ghraib, Extraordinary Rendition, Guantánamo and Saddam Hussein's less than dignified execution. Information technology, however, can aid the efforts of *all* parties and does not alter the clash of values on which the conflicts rest. To complain of ubiquitous information is to overemphasize technological means over cultural substance and to betray a bias that would give states communicative tools denied to others. At least potentially, the world is a more democratic place today. Those who define the volatility of Iraq as a mere "insurgency" in the face of "nation building" exhibit too simple a top-down view of the social order, the limitations of which are unambiguous. Informational issues aside, Iraq's crisis is deeper than can be adequately addressed by state, military, and/or diplomatic means alone, the considered views of traditional experts notwithstanding. The key is culture.

Culture: The Missing Element

What exactly does the conventional approach lack? To address the Iraqi crisis only through established state interventions is more than insufficient; it is inappropriate. Counterinsurgency models

often spell trouble due to their blindness to cultural needs. In Iraq, given the frailty of the state, the strength of minorities and the intercivilizational tensions, this is even more the case. The new Iraq simply cannot be willed only from the central government down. It must also be constructed from the local cultures up. Therein lies the rub. Whereas the modern state includes certain prerogatives, culture is scarcely one of them, despite official cant to the contrary. Culture is the way in which humans, inwardly and outwardly, reflect the essence of the community that has shaped them—the behaviors and attributes that are normative to its particular way of life. Hidden largely in plain sight, it lies embedded deep in the soul of societies. There are three dimensions of culture— physical or material culture, social or institutional culture, and ideational or inner culture. Of these, the ideational aspects, or values, of a culture are arguably of greatest consequence. However subconsciously, cultural values act as measures of what is acceptable, what is not, and to what extent. Under duress, cultures may adjust their priorities, but data suggests that they react adversely to the perception of untoward outward pressure—especially minority cultures. Unlike lifestyles, cultures are not chosen. As the main sources of meaning and identity that make people necessary members of inherited groups and identities, cultures are rooted in such nonnegotiables as language, religion and race. They are *sine qua non*. They are needs, not wants, and thus deserve and demand certain rights and consideration. Culture is a significantly more visceral and authentic reality than statehood. Worldwide, it draws on deeper waters than state governments. At best, states are ancillary to culture—not vice versa.

Little wonder that there is, these days, a mounting mood to assert rather than self-censor minority cultures. Even as global networks tighten, local cultures strengthen—with "glocalization," the view that communities can turn globalization to local advantage, the optimistic buzzword of the politically correct. In this force field, states have two basic options, both of which are in evidence today: either they pursue the path of displacement and destruction of minority groups or they grant them some control over their affairs. The former, the forced-integration–ethnic-cleansing–genocide continuum, aims at the disappearing of minorities; the latter intends to stabilize the state through decentralization, federalization, regionalization and other legal-political accommodations. *Endlösung* aside, decentralization and the like tend not to be cultural but just political devices of an administrative kind. Generally, they are not grounded in interethnic understanding, but are motivated by *Realpolitik,* such as the risk of secession or other power practicalities. This limits their effectiveness in cases of cultural tension. As a stratagem, states may attempt to forestall social tensions by co-opting minority elites, elevating them to prominence to mitigate their group's resentment of the dominant. As minority groups emancipate, however, such ploys become less promising. Moreover, minorities may be difficult to separate geographically, as seen in Baghdad, and mere "political" solutions such as regionalization can be undermined, as decreasing state control over areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan demonstrates. The more culture is at issue, the less the traditional tricks of statehood, be they hawkish or dovish, will do. The higher the cultural stakes, the less stock minorities are likely to put in central or regional incarnations of a culture-blind state that does not honor the things that uniquely define them. While they may play along for temporary or superficial gain, minority groups whose key cultural concerns are not credibly addressed remain unlikely to truly submit themselves to state control.

In states such as Iraq, culture is the elephant in the prime ministerial chamber. Some observers have difficulty grasping that the "progress" they seek cannot be created by state mechanisms alone. "We need to create economic opportunities," they say with materialistic overconfidence.

Not all minorities, however, are as amenable to economic determinism—as evidenced by Apartheid-era calls for boycotts on the part of the oppressed. In the end, minority values dictate how best to satisfy material needs. Moreover, "democracy" may be conducive to economic development, but the opposite is not necessarily true, as certain wealthy states adjacent to Iraq illustrate. "The coalition needs to communicate its message more clearly," others assert, convinced of the universality of their value set. Members of all cultures, however, are ethnocentric. Might does not necessarily make right in the eyes of others. Public diplomacy also has its limits: there is not only the message but also the messenger and the culturally-encoded perceptions thereof to consider—which is why the 2007 U.S. military door-to-door campaign may not win the United States many more friends. "We need more human intelligence and linguists," yet others claim, intent on covert control. While governments' inherent disregard for diversity has been self-defeating, attempts at "reconstruction" and "judicial reform" in the image of foreign and central powers remain constrained by local values. The cultural heartland determines what change, if any, to accept or regurgitate. Ultimately, societies congeal through their own values rather than through foreign funds, clever communications or social scientists.

The returns of civilizing missions have been diminishing in the course of history. In the Middle East, there are large, old, proud and autonomous ethnoreligious groups in non-Western countries with weak central governments, difficult terrain, however clandestine financial resources, extensive military experience, support from neighboring populations, and what is perceived as a substantial occupying force from a distant and morally suspect civilization. There is, moreover, a deep ethnoreligious resistance to Western presence and domination. As long as "victory" means that these cultures, individually and collectively, are to yield because foreign powers and the central governments they support lavish money and firepower on them, the world can forget it. Whether treated to carrots or sticks, they will resist and they will prevail—for such is the nature, and power, of culture.

The Need for Intercultural Expertise

Therein, however, also lies opportunity. Challenges must be met where they occur. While foreign coalitions have been pursuing their own vision in countering the *effects* of cultural dissonance, they have stopped short of confronting the root causes. Perhaps now they are ready to appreciate the significance of culture, the rights of minority groups and the notion that true democracy begins in the soul of communities rather than in the bureaucracies of far-off or makeshift polities. A new kind of intervention is required, one less costly and more promising.

In the U.S. military, the current model is two-dimensional: to complement foreign operations with local cultural skills and information—though how and to what level this is to be achieved remains uncertain. Rudimentary language skills and cultural information are being added to pre-deployment training, and the advice of sociopolitical advisors is sought in theater. Such anthropological and linguistic additions to the one-dimensional perspective that considers foreign sociocultural contexts irrelevant to operations are an improvement, but they are not enough. Rather than the current "how to" standard that adds static cultural skills and ill-defined local information to the operational equation, a culturally interactive model is needed. To wit, the approach must be three-dimensional, consisting of a local component, a foreign perspective and a crucial supra-cultural framework of *inter*cultural insights, principles and standards by which to understand the issues, gauge what is relevant and direct the exchange.

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Politically, diplomatically and militarily, a comparative understanding of the intercultural exchange as yet eludes us. It need not, since the relevant expertise, that combination of knowledge and experience, does exist. It can be vetted and made operational. First, at the minority level, experts in the dynamics of minorities must be rallied, to foster cooperation between minority groups and the larger society. This goes well beyond sending to the region emissaries of Arab-American origin who represent foreign interests. Nor does it mean hastily hiring hosts of translators and trainers to transfer often trivial traces of information to field operatives. Local information can be useful, but to present facts on minority cultures to dominant decisionmakers while the latter forcefully impose their vision does not produce trust. It merely pits one culture against the other—one dominant, the other resistant. True intercultural mediation requires something qualitatively different: an intimate grasp of the issues that characterize relationships between all minorities and mainstreams. Since culture subconsciously shapes perceptions, the potential pitfalls are myriad. Only expert intervention can approach local cultures such that confidence can be built and the inevitable compromises brokered. This entails far more than language. A profound knowledge of the nature of culture and its influence on perception—including one's own—is essential. Moreover, it presumes impeccable impartiality, being neither beholden to a foreign or local order nor biased in favor of a particular group, however subconsciously. It also requires that most universal of attributes—unquestionable integrity.

Second, at the central government level, policy advice is needed on the equitable inclusion of minority cultures. Governments often claim that overbearing policies are necessary to avoid interethnic strife, but rarely are they disinterested. Consequently, minority issues fester, only to reappear later. The current Iraqi government concedes that its partisanship, including regarding its security forces and sectarian violence, has aggravated the instability of the society it represents. To leave certain minorities seriously aggrieved is to plant the seeds of revenge. It leaves them little choice but resistance, and it can lead to centuries of cyclical conflict. To aid in turning back spiraling violence, assist in creating sustainable peace, and not abandon Iraq to sectarian chaos and the triumph of terrorism, new standards for mediating minority interests are called for. Let us make no mistake: this is no nice-to-have option. In a world where millions of disaffected minority group members, especially the youth, are desperate and angry, and the going rate for planting an improvised explosive device has come down well below fifty dollars, the task of those who would foment sectarian strife is infinitely easier than that of those who would contain it. No army is up to the task. The only hope is to prevent it. For that, the effective means is to engage the values that motivate cultures and to broker peace.

Third, new terms of intercultural engagement are needed. The time has come to expand the concept of "democracy" to include the rights of cultural groups, as groups. In Iraq and elsewhere, the consequences of a system that recognizes only the rights of states and individuals—not those of cultural groups—are in evidence. This culture-blind model has deprived the international community of the tools to respond effectively to ethnic strife abroad. Many countries look the other way, invoking the principle of noninterference in the affairs of other states that are populated by too many individuals to deal with. Even when the response is not indifference, the world often brokers ineptly or unwisely, for lack of a proper methodology. A shift from a bifocal to a trifocal model is needed, by adding the cultural group as a legal sub-state entity. This requires an understanding of cultural groups and their rights. Coalition powers in Iraq and elsewhere rely on military and intergovernmental maneuverings that alone cannot produce the desired result, since

they do not include cultural groups as legitimate partners. On the faulty logic of building "nations," the world community allows governments to align themselves with whatever groups suit their purpose, emboldening some and enraging others. In lieu of such an overly general view of democracy that globally recognizes only states and individuals, developments in Iraq point to a more multilayered, cooperative model that incorporates the right of cultural minorities to ensure their essential integrity, within the framework of states. Truly intercultural knowledge will help fashion a competent framework for addressing interethnic strife worldwide. In Iraq and elsewhere, its absence tragically disserves the common interest.

Such are the critical imperatives that the crisis in Iraq presents today. Since the source of the violence in Iraq resides in minority cultural values, so does its solution. *The* element missing is expert intercultural intervention, to wit the ability to a) fruitfully negotiate with minorities, b) formulate successful interethnic policies and c) inspire a new paradigm for the political inclusion of sub-state cultural groups. It is important to realize that this involves a process: certain cultural incompatibilities will continue for the foreseeable future and none of the parties will escape patience and compromise. Neither all minority practices nor all foreign views will be upheld. Through a process of impartial mediation and negotiation, whereby the least violable elements of culture are distinguished from those most open to compromise, multiethnic societies can move forward, as can the world at large. This practice requires skills only remotely akin to interstate diplomacy. It is rooted not in state power but rather in an understanding of minority cultural justice. It operates in a far more asymmetrical environment. It is impartial, nontraditional and scarce; yet it exists and is of crucial importance here.

By contrast, a hit-and-run "Iraq for the Iraqis" policy is as ineffectual as it is irresponsible. The only promising way forward is to assist Iraq in resolving its tensions. Failure to do so has created the situation faced today: caught between an exorbitant war that cannot be won by traditional means alone and the abyss of potentially large ethnoreligious conflict. The outreach efforts of General David Petraeus, commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq, have been a step in the right direction, but there remain serious organizational and societal constraints on what thoughtful military leaders alone can achieve in this context. Academic ethnic-conflict specialists also tend to know more about the effects than the causes of conflicts. It is a collective imperative to complement the military and political equations with the application of expertise in understanding minority cultures and policies. Specialized, independent brokerage is needed on behalf of Iraqi cultural groups, the Iraqi state and Iraqi society in general. Only this can resolve the underlying issues and help turn the tide in Iraq. Properly viewed and handled, the current crisis is an opportunity to build peace in Iraq and lead the world to a more effective way of establishing ecological relations between cultural groups.

In Iraq and elsewhere, we see the unacceptable consequences of confusing states with nations and underestimating the role of cultures within the broader society. A new intercultural model is required, in terms of government policy and operational competency. It must be three-dimensional, comprising minority, state and worldwide levels. Unless and until such a comprehensive interethnic paradigm is adopted, unholy scenes of strife are likely to be played out around the world, as recent horrors not only in Iraq but in the Sudan and beyond also illustrate. As the civic and political rights of minorities are inextricably linked to their cultural rights as groups, peace in multiethnic societies such as Iraq will prove elusive without a more fundamental approach to the interethnic commonwealth. States have traditionally ignored this, but they no longer have that luxury. Appeals

to the Iraqi stakeholders to simply reconcile and to consider the limited patience of the foreign coalition are inadequate. Culture being indispensable to the dominant and the subaltern alike, and increased intercultural contact being inevitable, compromises must be informedly brokered. The world must learn to deal minority groups a more just hand and engage them effectively or face potentially interminable, destabilizing turmoil. Similarly, intervention forces must be equipped not with a few linguistic phrases or societal factoids but with intercultural tools and practical understanding based on an adequate model. Nowhere is this clearer than in Iraq today, where a crisis of world proportions forces the world community's hand. Local power cannot contain it, nor can foreign forces resolve it. The only way out of this injurious impasse is forward: to neutralize the tensions that feed it. This requires more than a two-dimensional effort, more than the addition of cultural details. *Inter*cultural expertise in the above sense is required. For this reason, plan "C" calls for the engagement of skilled and independent experts to mediate among the minorities, the state, the coalition and others in the world community, and to guide those who serve in theater. Due to the Iraqi emergency, the coalition faces both the need *and* the opportunity for such new seminal global leadership. May it seize this opportunity, for the good of all.

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