

# Soft Partition or Hard Politics?

By Khody Akhavi | October 8, 2007

With a strong majority of U.S. citizens favoring withdrawal from Iraq within a year and presidential elections set for 2008, Democrats and moderate Republicans continue to face an uphill struggle to force President George W. Bush to change course.

But as many Washington insiders have publicly declared, any shift in the White House's Iraq policy cannot create a new reality; it will be bound by the fact that "there are no good options, just bad and worse options."

Enter the Biden-Brownback Iraq Federalism Bipartisan Amendment.

Two weeks ago, the U.S. Senate voted 75-23 to back the non-binding resolution co-sponsored by presidential hopefuls Sen. Joe Biden (D-DE) and Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) to decentralize Iraq in a federal system to presumably stop the country from falling deeper into civil war. It proposes to separate Iraq into Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni entities, with a federal government in Baghdad in charge of border security and oil revenues.

"If the United States can't put this federalism idea on track, we will have no chance for a political settlement in Iraq and, without that, no chance for leaving Iraq without leaving chaos behind," wrote Biden and Leslie Gelb, former head of the Council on Foreign Relations, in a recent op-ed in the Washington Post.

"Federalism is the one formula that fits the seemingly contradictory desires of most Iraqis to remain whole and of various groups to govern themselves for the time being."

Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) voted yes for the bill, while her competitor Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) abstained from voting.

Critics argue that while the plan suggests a graceful exit strategy for U.S. forces that have been bogged down in an unpopular war in Iraq for more than four years, in reality it aims for the partition and division of Iraq by force. And the actual implementation of such a plan would mean increased U.S. involvement and the possible systematization of ethnic cleansing.

In a March op-ed in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Joost Hiltermann of the International Crisis Group wrote that the concept of soft partition "misreads Iraqi realities."

"Despite sectarian cleansing attempts, Iraqis remain deeply intermingled and intermarried in a mosaic that could be changed only through campaigns of intimidation and mass murder," wrote Hiltermann.

"Soft partition advocates counter that the country's new constitution, which allows for the type of loose federalism that they support, was adopted by a convincing majority in a 2005 [Iraqi] referendum. While true, this claim is undermined by the fact that Iraqis voted for the constitution as a whole, not its individual provisions," he wrote.

On Sunday, representatives of Iraq's major political parties and the White House also condemned the plan.

"This proposal was based on the incorrect reading and unrealistic estimations of Iraq's past, present, and future," according to a statement read by Izzat al-Shahbandar, a representative of the Iraqi National List, a secular political party.

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While Biden argued that his amendment will not try to impose U.S. will on Iraqis—"If the Iraqis don't want it, they won't and shouldn't take it"—the resolution appears to have angered many.

"The Iraqi and Arab world's reaction to the Biden resolution has been overwhelmingly negative," said Eric Davis, professor of political science at Rutgers University. "Even Iraq's Kurdish leaders have stated that they support federalism, but not partition. This resolution has reinforced public opinion in Iraq and the larger Middle East that the United States used the invasion of Iraq as a pretext to control Iraq's vast oil wealth."

In a statement last Sunday, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad said that any "attempts to partition or divide Iraq by intimidation, force, or other means into three separate states would produce extraordinary suffering and bloodshed."

"Our goal in Iraq remains the same: a united, democratic, federal Iraq that can govern, defend, and sustain itself," according to the unsigned written statement.

The irony is that the Biden Amendment is the first congressional legislation to offer a political solution

to the problems plaguing Iraq, whereas the Bush administration has only offered military stop-gaps, most notably the "surge strategy," that have unevenly increased security in Baghdad and select provinces.

Analysts argue that the plan remains one of the few bad options left for Iraq, but that it does not respond to realities on the ground. In a political climate that has many politicians bracing for the backlash of a vast majority of the U.S. public, it may also provide cover for Republicans eager to distance themselves from the perceived intransigence and failures of the Bush administration.

As Middle East specialist Marc Lynch wrote on his widely-read blog, [www.abuaardvark.com](http://www.abuaardvark.com), the Biden Amendment managed to "let Senate Republicans off the hook by allowing them to say that they voted for change even though they continue to vote against anything real; and endorse an unworkable plan which would massively increase human suffering while working against American interests in the region and not actually solving the problems."

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*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

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### Recommended citation:

Khody Akhavi, "Soft Partition Or Hard Politics?" Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, October 8, 2007).

### Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/4620>

### Production Information:

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