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## Why Iraq's Sunnis Won't Deal

By Gary Schmitt

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Despite efforts by Shiites, Kurds and U.S. officials to find a way for Iraq's Sunni Muslims to support the draft constitution, it seems less and less likely that a deal will be struck, which raises the question: Is there any road forward that leads to a stable, democratic Iraq?

The answer is yes. But it's not an easy path. Nor is it one that most commentators and diplomats seem to understand, let alone advocate. The reality is that a stable, democratic Iraq, with large-scale Sunni participation, is unlikely until the insurgency in Iraq is widely seen by the Sunnis themselves as not succeeding.

Of course, the Sunni Arabs of Iraq are not a monolith. Many of them want a new political order for their country, and many undoubtedly will participate in the coming referendum to vote the proposed constitution up or down. Indeed, there are even reports out of western Iraq that Sunnis are now fighting Abu Musab Zarqawi's fighters.

Nevertheless, to the mind of probably a majority of their leaders, the Sunnis face two fundamental choices, neither pleasant. They can accept the new constitution, in which, as a minority, they lose their long-held dominance over Iraq. Or they can continue to reject the constitution and hope that a prolonged insurgency will somehow bring them back to power. With jihadists willing to kill themselves in terrorist attacks and a ready supply of young, unemployed Iraqis willing to bury explosives and launch rocket attacks for a few dinar, the average member of the Sunni elite, even if not an active participant in the insurgency, could well believe that the resulting chaos and even occasional death of a neighbor or a member of his extended family is a price worth paying for a return to Sunni ascendancy.

In fact, too many Sunnis believe the insurgency and the threat of a prolonged insurgency are their hole cards to play. Irrespective of the fact that their demands cannot be met without losing, in turn, Iraq's critical majority -- the Shiites -- Sunni leaders still live in a world that is about past prominence and future expectations. And until a new reality is forced upon them, they are not likely to move from their current opposition to the constitution.

The proposed constitution ought to be reasonably attractive in many respects. The Sunni Arabs are a decided minority in Iraq, certainly no more than a quarter of the population. And the federalist features of the draft document may well be a better guardian of their rights than a unitary state in which majority rule would probably leave them routinely short of the voting strength necessary to have an effective say in their own governance. In addition, the new constitution provides for a distribution of oil revenue along per capita lines, preventing either the Kurdish north or Shiite south from hoarding the country's wealth. By any realistic metric for the Muslim Middle East, the constitution put forward by Iraq's constitutional drafters is about as good as it gets, and far better for the country's minorities than the Sunnis should have expected, given the ruthlessness of their own rule over the past several decades.

But whatever the constitution's merits, that is not how the majority of Sunni leaders sees things today. And only when they see that the insurgency stands no chance of succeeding and, equally important, they personally are not in danger of losing life and limb if they publicly support the new

political order, will they come around to accepting a federal, democratic Iraq.

Contrary to most commentary, then, the key to succeeding in Iraq is no longer putting in place a grand political bargain in which Iraqis of all sectarian stripes live happily ever after. In fact, by suggesting that this is the goal, we probably have fueled the Sunnis' own misperception of their future status in Iraq and hardened their own position.

The goal, of course, is to create a political order by which Iraq is made relatively stable and the normal democratic politics of give-and-take are made possible. But that will be a decidedly uphill struggle until the prospect of a successful insurgency is taken off the table and the Sunni Arabs come to the understanding that the new constitution is, in practice, a pretty good deal after all.

Politics cannot solve what ails Iraq now. It can help, and certainly the constitution is an important step in that direction. But at the end of the day, it's only when the so-called dead-enders are either dead or vanquished that one can count on the political process moving decisively forward as most Iraqis desire.

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