Scholars: Divide Iraq Into Three Regions

With President Bush's war strategy clouded by limited results and mounting casualties, two scholars are proposing a partition plan that would divide Iraq into three main regions.

The authors, Edward P. Joseph of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, are hoping to draw the attention of Bush administration policymakers.

They are circulating their suggestions within the Bush administration.

Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, who is a Democratic presidential candidate and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has sought for months to attract support for a partition plan he formulated with Leslie Gelb, former head of the private Council on Foreign Relations. It would establish a federal system of government in Iraq.

The idea has gained some attention in Congress but has not been embraced by the Bush administration.

"The time may be approaching when the only hope for a more stable Iraq is a soft partition of the country," the report by Joseph and O'Hanlon said.

Administration strategy is geared toward building up a strong central government. But U.S. public support is declining, and according to some observers, Iraq may be on the verge of civil war.

A major assessment of policy is expected in September.

In the meantime, there have been proposals for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, now numbering about 157,000. The Pentagon says more than 3,500 U.S. troops have died since the beginning of the war in March 2003 that toppled Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Under the plan, Iraqis would divide the country into three main regions. Each would assume primary responsibility for its own security and governance, as Iraqi Kurds already have in Kurdistan.

"Creating such a structure could prove to be difficult and risky," the report said. "However, when measured against the alternatives – continuing to police an ethnic-sectarian war, or withdrawing and allowing the conflict to escalate – the risks of soft partition appear more acceptable."

Joseph said in an interview Tuesday: "We have got to find a way through." He said the time

had come to decide whether the strategy of promoting a strong central government in Baghdad made sense.

"The vision we put forward is not a prescription for immediate withdrawal," Joseph said. "It does involve substantial commitments of U.S. troops."

"However," he added, "we anticipate a substantial reduction in U.S. casualties."

The proposal would require the acquiescence of major political factions in Iraq. There would be substantial, voluntary movement in mixed, volatile areas.

For instance, Saddam and his predecessors deliberately settled Arab Shiites and Sunnis in Kirkuk to disadvantage the Kurds, Joseph said. Arabs settled there have expressed willingness to move out if they are provided with housing and a livelihood elsewhere.

In Baghdad, rather than keeping vulnerable minorities in tense parts of the capital, Joseph said, "It might make sense to move them voluntarily to places where they would be safer."

Among the Shiites, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim of the Supreme Islamic Council has called for a Shiite region for years. But Muqtada al-Sadr and others in the Shiite leadership oppose it, as do the major Sunni politicians.

The three main spheres proposed in the report would be Shiite, Sunni and Kurdistan. The Kurds already control Kurdistan.

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