

Is it always necessary to reconcile?

The International Herald Tribune and The Boston Globe.

Perhaps, instead of talking about political reconciliation, we need to rehabilitate the notion of a truce and add it to our political and intellectual repertoire.

'Reconciliation,' like 'terrorism,' is becoming one of those words that is easy to use but hard to explain.

The U.S. troop surge in Iraq, we are told, was meant to buy the local government time to "achieve national reconciliation." Bush administration officials cite progress on "political reconciliation" as a key factor in deciding when to start sending American soldiers home. President George W. Bush, in his most recent speech, insisted that while "local reconciliation is taking place" the Iraqi government must show more "determination" in spreading it throughout the country.

But what is political reconciliation? What does this concept, upon which we are increasingly basing our exit strategy from Iraq, mean?

Perhaps it is easier to begin with what it does not mean. There is certainly more to reconciliation than the cessation of hostilities. If Sunnis and Shiites stopped blowing each other up tomorrow, Iraq would still not be reconciled. After all, no one would seriously claim that Israel and Hezbollah have reconciled just because they have held their fire for a year.

There is also more to reconciliation than two or more enemies reaching a fair agreement on how to divide disputed resources. Israel and Egypt reached such an agreement rather quickly in 1979. The Sinai peninsula was returned to Egypt, prisoners were exchanged, the war dead exhumed and shipped back home. Since then, Israelis and Egyptians have had few claims against each other. They have also wanted nothing to do with each other. Almost 30 years after Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat shook hands on the White House lawn, there are almost no cultural or personal ties between the two countries.

Can this state of affairs count as political reconciliation? To apply this to Iraq, even if the warring factions there reached a fair agreement tomorrow on the distribution of oil revenues, the use of reconstruction funds and the wording of the constitution, they will still not have reconciled.

There is more, then, to political reconciliation than the cessation of hostilities or than reaching a set of fair formal arrangements. But what? Does reconciliation require mutual forgiveness or is that an overly ambitious expectation? Is reconciliation facilitated by acknowledging past abuses,

or does a preoccupation with the past impede it? Should those who confessed to such abuses be punished, and, if so, how?

These are the kinds of issues that Iraqis and their friends need to think through if "political reconciliation" is to become more than a television sound bite.

But before such a conversation commences, there is a perhaps more fundamental set of questions worth considering: Must we always strive for political reconciliation, or are there circumstances when it is justified to aim lower? Don't we increase the chances of failure if we insist that full peace with justice is the only alternative to war?

Perhaps, instead of talking about political reconciliation, we need to rehabilitate the notion of a truce (an idea that, incidentally, has a rich history in Islamic theology and jurisprudence) and add it to our political and intellectual repertoire. Détente was one such truce, and for all of its cynicism and amorality, it kept the United States and Soviet Union from destroying the world, until the conditions ripened for a more principled and ambitious relationship between them.

"The best," Voltaire famously remarked, "is the enemy of the good." It is solid advice as we consider when and how to leave Iraq. Sadly, however, we have made such a mess of things there that even the "good" now seems far beyond reach.

Nir Eisikovits teaches legal and political philosophy at Suffolk University and is writing a book about political reconciliation. This article appeared first in The Boston Globe.