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Iraq: Who Holds the Key to its Future?

I have been asked to discuss Iraq in a regional context. I interpret the request to be less about how Iraq fits in the region and more about how the region may affect Iraq and its future.

I take this view largely because most Americans—and I presume this committee—are principally concerned with how we are going to manage the best possible outcome in Iraq. The starting point for achieving the best possible outcome, or more accurately the least bad one, is understanding that the future of Iraq is going to be determined by Iraqis. While Iraq's neighbors certainly have influence on different sectarian groups within Iraq, their influence is limited.

The Iraq Study Group's assessment of the internal reality of Iraq was extraordinary in its candor and its insights. Its emphasis on the role of the outside world was far less so. Saying that all issues in the Middle East are inextricably linked belies reality and placed a misleading focus on the role of Syria and Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is certainly fair to say that the different conflicts in the area affect the broader climate, the expectations of different regional leaders and publics, the likelihood of who is on the defensive and who is on the offensive, and whether or not it pays to be an American friend or foe. From that perspective, it is certainly true that settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would take away a basic source of grievance that Islamists exploit to recruit new followers and to manipulate anger against the United States.

Beyond that, the Israeli-Palestinian has precious little relevance to Iraq. If there were no Palestinian conflict, we would still face a Sunni insurgency in Anbar province. We would still face Shia militias determined to protect against Sunni insurgent attacks and to wreak vengeance either in response to, or unfortunately, in anticipation of such assaults.

While I support intensive efforts to defuse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I do it for reasons completely unrelated to Iraq. I do it because it is right to try to reduce the violence and settle the conflict on its own merits. It is right to remove a source of radicalism in the region. It is right not simply to deny Islamists a grievance, but also the ability to transform what has been a national conflict into a religious conflict—almost assuredly what could happen if Palestinians come to believe that there is no possibility of settling the conflict and Hamas comes to dominate the Palestinian future. It is right also to correct the impression that much of the Muslim—and certainly nearly all the Arab—world have presently of the United States: that given the Bush administration's disengagement from the peace process for the last six years, the United States is simply indifferent on an issue that matters deeply to them.

But there should be no illusions. Our efforts to settle the conflict are not going to materially change the challenges we face in Iraq. Moreover, the notion that if we do more to settle the Palestinian conflict, the Saudis and Jordanians will become more helpful on Iraq is also illusory. Both have a stake in what happens in Iraq. Neither can be indifferent. The Saudis are contemplating a \$12 billion security barrier along their border with Iraq, fearing the spillover of terror or refugees or instability otherwise. Similarly, Jordan has already absorbed 750,000 Iraq refugees. It cannot absorb more—and yet an all-out convulsion within Iraq would certainly confront Jordan with the prospect of having to absorb thousands more.

Neither the Saudis nor Jordanians want to see Iraq fall apart; nor do they want to see a Shia dominated state with very close ties to Iran. Today, they seem to be more concerned about the latter than the former. They see Sunnis under constant assault from Shia militias; they see Sunnis being driven from their homes in mixed neighborhoods; they see Iran with increasing presence and influence. It is not the Palestinian issue that has led the Saudis, Jordanians and other leading Sunni countries and leaders to hesitate in providing the kind of support they could to the Iraqi government. What holds them back is their dislike for what they see emerging in the new Iraq.

One development that might trigger far greater involvement by the Sunni regimes is a negative one. The more they see the Sunni tribes threatened by the Shia, the more likely the Saudis and Jordanians are to intervene. Until that point we can push and cajole but I suspect with marginal affect.

We are led back again to Iraq and its internal dynamics. The Palestinian conflict cannot affect these dynamics but could Iran and Syria? Again, the answer is probably more as spoilers rather than as fixers, though Iran is undoubtedly more of a problem in this connection than Syria. Bear in mind that Iran has unmistakable links to the Mahdi army and to the Badr organization, and has helped to arm, organize, and finance both. While today neither of these militias is any longer primarily dependent on Iran for money and weaponry, given their access to governmental and non-governmental coffers, Iran can certainly wield influence with these militias and with different Shia political figures. Moreover, as power and the militias have become more diffuse, localized, and less hierarchical, Iran's capacity to be a spoiler has probably increased, particularly as militias and criminal gangs merge at local levels and as Iran can provide them material support.

What this suggests is that all the neighbors—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey, Syria, and Iran—can probably add to Iraq's problems. They are far less capable of being the key to Iraq's salvation; only the Iraqis can provide that. Only Iraqis can decide whether they will forge a national compact. To date, they have done little to indicate that national reconciliation is a serious priority. And, unfortunately, the Maliki government chose to handle the execution of Saddam Hussein not as a moment for reconciliation but instead for conveying to the Sunnis that the Shia now ruled, that the Sunnis were powerless in the new Iraq, and that the Shia would act without regard for Sunni sensibilities. While the execution could have been seized by the Maliki government as an opportunity to send a message to the Sunnis that now was a time to end a chapter of Iraqi

history in which all sides had been brutalized and chart a new future together, it preferred to signal its dominance and its need for vengeance.

This is the context in Iraq in which the President has made his decision to increase our forces in Baghdad and Anbar province. Maliki's commitment to act on a new security plan and to treat Shia and Sunnis similarly, no longer favoring Shia militias, is unlikely to be believed within Iraq. Previously, he has said he would not tolerate lawlessness or the militias and not only never acted against them, but has consistently turned a blind eye to the infiltration of the militias in the Interior ministry and the police forces. In the eyes of the Sunnis, he has tacitly supported Shia death squads and the depopulation of Sunnis in the mixed neighborhoods of Baghdad.

Words won't convince Sunnis that Maliki is serious about a new strategy to provide protection to all Iraqis regardless of sect. There will need to be demonstrations of his national, not sectarian, commitment. It won't take long to know whether his commitments are real or merely rhetorical. Will Iraqi forces join ours in the numbers the security plan calls for? Will they protect Shia and Sunni populations equally? Will legislation finally be adopted on sharing oil revenues with a mechanism for implementing these shared provisions according to population? Will there be a fair process finally for dealing with the amendments to the constitution? Will the Iraqi reconstruction monies materialize and be available also in Anbar province? Will former Ba'ath officials below the highest levels be rehabilitated and integrated back into ministries?

Without even confronting the Mahdi army which I doubt is realistic for the time-being, all the actions implied in the answers to these questions would signal a profound change—and President Bush, in effect, has offered all of these as measures of why the surge will work now as opposed to all previous efforts. To be sure, Iraq's neighbors could make these behaviors more likely if they were prepared to make a collective effort to use their respective leverage. In theory, Iran could press both Abdul Aziz al Hakim and Moktada al Sadr—given their weight within the parliament and their leadership of competing Shia militias—to support Prime Minister Maliki in taking such steps. The Saudis and Jordanians could use their connections with the leading Sunni tribes to get them to show they will meet the prime minister part way and to reciprocate when the Maliki government takes steps toward them. The Syrians could make it easier for Sunni tribal leaders to reach out by working to prevent jihadists from crossing into Iraq and threatening them.

But turning theory into reality seems highly improbable at this time. Unless the Iranians and Saudis are prepared to forge a deal on Iraq, I suspect that Iraq's neighbors will not contribute to defusing tensions among the different sectarian groups. Indeed, the only circumstance in which I see Iran and Saudi Arabia behaving differently is if they both became fearful that a precipitous US withdrawal might trigger a real convulsion in Iraq. Potentially millions of refugees on the move, instability bleeding across Iraq's borders, and competition to bolster their friends in Iraq that intensifies and proves very expensive to both the Saudis and Iranians could conceivably create enough of a convergence of interest in Iraq to lead the two to explore a possible deal.

There is irony here: only if the reality in Iraq threatens to be far more costly to both the Saudis and Iranians are they likely to contemplate some limited understanding on Iraq. I don't have high expectations. Iran may think they are more insulated from spillover of instability in Iraq and in any case they would rather back 60% of the population than the 20% the Saudis would be supporting. Nonetheless, the Saudi capacity to underwrite the Sunnis could give the Iranians pause.

I would support a regional conference with the neighbors, including Iran and Syria, not because I expect much to come of it, but because all sides might come to see some value in tempering their spoiling instincts. The US role at such a conference might be to see whether there is a potential for some understandings on Iraq, and to cultivate them even between the Saudis and Iranians if we deem them to be of any value.

While worth considering, I don't believe that any such deals are on the horizon. In fact, I suspect that at this point they are about as likely as seeing Iraqis begin to act on national reconciliation. In either case, it will take discomfort to get Iraq's neighbors or Iraq's government and sectarian leaders to transform their behaviors. The situation may be objectively terrible in Iraq, but it has not been sufficiently bad to catalyze a change in behavior of Iraq's leaders and Iraq's neighbors. By keeping the lid on with our forces, and preventing a real collapse, we make it safe enough for everyone—next to and within Iraq—to avoid taking what they regard as excruciating decisions.

It is not an accident that Iraq's leaders have avoided the hard choices required to create a national compact. Sunnis continue to resist at least emotionally that they must be subservient to the Shia. The Shia are a majority who act as if they believe they will lose their dominant position in governing Iraq unless they hold the line every day against the Sunnis. Insurgent attacks justify the maintenance of militias, which in the eyes of Shia, protect them when no one else will.

In my experience, leaders don't cross thresholds in historic conflicts because they are induced into do so. They may approach the thresholds given certain promises about the future, but they don't cross them unless they see the costs—as they measure them—if they fail to act.

President Bush has now established the key measures that will show whether the Iraqi government and its Shia leaders are prepared to change their behavior in a way that also produces Sunni responses. If there is no consequence for the Iraqi government for failing to meet their commitments, I believe that neither the different Iraqi leaders nor their counterparts in the neighboring states will perceive that the United States will decide to give up our readiness to keep the lid on in Iraq—regardless of the cost to us.

The great paradox of Iraq today is that our fear of an Iraqi collapse keeps us there and reduces the need for either Iraqis or their neighbors to change course.