

## Getting the Middle East Back on Our Side

Brent Scowcroft

New York Times, January 4, 2007



Washington

THE Iraq Study Group report was released into a sea of unrealistic expectations. Inevitably, it disappointed hopes for a clear path through the morass of Iraq, because there is no “silver bullet” solution to the difficulties in which we find ourselves.

But the report accomplished a great deal. It brought together some of America’s best minds across party lines, and it outlined with clarity and precision the key factors at issue in Iraq. In doing so, it helped catalyze the debate about our Iraq policy and crystallize the choices we face. Above all, it emphasized the importance of focusing on American national interests, not only in Iraq but in the region.

However, the report, which calls the situation in Iraq “grave and deteriorating,” does not focus on what could be the most likely outcome of its analysis. Should the Iraqis be unable or unwilling to play the role required of them, the report implies that we would have no choice but to withdraw, and then blame our withdrawal on Iraqi failures. But here the report essentially stops.

An American withdrawal before Iraq can, in the words of the president, “govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself” would be a strategic defeat for American interests, with potentially catastrophic consequences both in the region and beyond. Our opponents would be hugely emboldened, our friends deeply demoralized.

Iran, heady with the withdrawal of its principal adversary, would expand its influence through Hezbollah and Hamas more deeply into Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian

territories and Jordan. Our Arab friends would rightly feel we had abandoned them to face alone a radicalism that has been greatly inflamed by American actions in the region and which could pose a serious threat to their own governments.

The effects would not be confined to Iraq and the Middle East. Energy resources and transit choke points vital to the global economy would be subjected to greatly increased risk. Terrorists and extremists elsewhere would be emboldened. And the perception, worldwide, would be that the American colossus had stumbled, was losing its resolve and could no longer be considered a reliable ally or friend — or the guarantor of peace and stability in this critical region.

To avoid these dire consequences, we need to secure the support of the countries of the region themselves. It is greatly in their self-interest to give that support, just as they did in the 1991 Persian Gulf conflict. Unfortunately, in recent years they have come to see it as dangerous to identify with the United States, and so they have largely stood on the sidelines.

A vigorously renewed effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict could fundamentally change both the dynamics in the region and the strategic calculus of key leaders. Real progress would push Iran into a more defensive posture. Hezbollah and Hamas would lose their rallying principle. American allies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the gulf states would be liberated to assist in stabilizing Iraq. And Iraq would finally be seen by all as a key country that had to be set right in the pursuit of regional security.

Arab leaders are now keen to resolve the 50-year-old dispute. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel may be as well. His nation's long-term security can only be assured by resolving this issue once and for all. However, only the American president can bring them to the same table.

Resuming the Arab-Israeli peace process is not a matter of forcing concessions from Israel or dragooning the Palestinians into surrender. Most of the elements of a settlement are already agreed as a result of the negotiations of 2000 and the "road map" of 2002. What is required is to summon the will of Arab and Israeli leaders, led by a determined American president, to forge the various elements into a conclusion that all parties have already publicly accepted in principle.

As for Syria and Iran, we should not be afraid of opening channels of communication, but neither should we rush to engage them as negotiating "partners." Moreover, these two countries have differing interests, expectations and points of leverage and should not be treated as though they are indistinguishable.

Syria cannot be comfortably clutched solely in the embrace of Iran, and thus prying it away may be possible. Syria also has much to gain from a settlement with Israel and internal problems that such a deal might greatly ease. If we can make progress on the Palestinian front before adding Syria to the mix, it would both avoid overloading Israel's negotiating capacity and increase the incentives for Damascus to negotiate seriously.

Iran is different. It may not be wise to make Iran integral to the regional strategy at the outset. And the nuclear issue should be dealt with on a separate track. In its present state of euphoria, Iran has little interest in making things easier for us. If, however, we make clear our determination, and if the other regional states become more engaged in stabilizing Iraq, the Iranians might grow more inclined to negotiate seriously.

WHILE negotiations on the Arab-Israel peace process are under way, we should establish some political parameters inside Iraq that encourage moves toward reconciliation and unified government in Iraq. Other suggested options, such as an “80 percent solution” that excludes the Sunnis, or the division of the country into three parts, are not only inconsistent with reconciliation but would almost certainly pave the way to broader regional conflict and must be avoided.

American combat troops should be gradually redeployed away from intervening in sectarian conflict. That necessarily is a task for Iraqi troops, however poorly prepared they may be. Our troops should be redirected toward training the Iraqi Army, providing support and backup, combating insurgents, attenuating outside intervention and assisting in major infrastructure protection.

That does not mean the American presence should be reduced. Indeed, in the immediate future, the opposite may be true, though any increase in troop strength should be directed at accomplishing specific, defined missions. A generalized increase would be unlikely to demonstrably change the situation and, consequently, could result in increased clamor for withdrawal. But the central point is that withdrawing combat forces should not be a policy objective, but rather, the result of changes in our strategy and success in our efforts.

As we work our way through this seemingly intractable problem in Iraq, we must constantly remember that this is not just a troublesome issue from which we can walk away if it seems too costly to continue. What is at stake is not only Iraq and the stability of the Middle East, but the global perception of the reliability of the United States as a partner in a deeply troubled world. We cannot afford to fail that test.

Brent Scowcroft was national security adviser to Presidents Gerald R. Ford and George H. W. Bush. He is now president of the Forum for International Policy.