

A Stable Iraq

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Aug 27, 2007

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President Bush's commitment to staying the course in Iraq remains as strong as ever. In his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars last week, he invoked the ideological struggles of the past to explain why we must prevail in the current conflict. While many have questioned his analogies to Southeast Asia and Vietnam, I found his continuing conviction that a "free Iraq" will be an "important ally in the ideological struggle of the twenty-first century" more troubling.

It is an illusion to believe that the new Iraq is going to act as our partner in the war on terrorism. Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki has demonstrated repeatedly that he does not seek trouble with either Iran or Syria. Maybe he has good reason to worry about their trouble-making capacity in Iraq, but his government has actually sought to get us to release the Iranian Revolutionary Guard members that we have seized and has done little to publicize Syria's facilitation of jihadists crossing their border into Iraq. Trying to accommodate them, however, hasn't stopped Iran or Syria from causing trouble in Iraq. President Bush has so far excused Maliki's reluctance to act externally or internally. In his VFW speech, he referred to Maliki as "a good guy" with a hard job to do. That may be, but it also indicates that Maliki will not be an ally in the struggle to change Iran and Syria's behavior.

I don't mean to single out Maliki; it seems to be a cottage industry in Washington these days to say that he is the problem in Iraq. But the problems go far deeper. Is there a Shia leader who has credibility in Iraq who seeks enmity with Iran? Certainly not one who has any prospect of emerging as an Iraqi leader. If anything, that adds to suspicions that Sunnis have of nearly every Shia leader: They are all perceived as serving Iranian, not Iraqi, interests.

It matters little whether the Sunni perceptions are correct. The prospect of an Iraq in which a new political compact can be forged is still a distant illusion. The new National Intelligence Estimate has judged that over the next six to twelve months the situation of the Iraqi government will become more precarious, not less. At the latest, the surge will end next April, because the U.S. Army does not have the available forces to sustain it longer, and it is unrealistic to believe that is long enough to create the political space needed to overcome Iraq's internal political divisions.

Truth be told, the surge itself was never going to be sufficient to overcome the psychological and political barriers that make internal compromise difficult. The fundamental problem remains that the Shia are convinced that, as the majority, they are entitled to rule, that the Sunnis are unwilling to reconcile themselves to Shia domination, and that

there is, therefore, a risk that the Shia will lose their hold on power. Fearing that they can yet have power snatched away from them, the Shia remain unwilling to share it. The surge can't deal with that problem; only the possibility that the Shia risk losing everything if they don't compromise might alter their behavior.

Would, for example, Maliki and Shia leaders act differently if they thought they might actually lose material assistance for the forces they want equipped if they continue to resist all efforts at compromise? One of the Iraq Study Group's proposals was to tie security assistance to performance on benchmarks: Live up to them, and it is provided, even accelerated; fail to live up to them, and it is cut off.

Leverage is essential to the exercise of statecraft. The Iraq Study Group seemed to understand that. The Bush administration hesitates ever to apply it. Even its quasi-pressure on Maliki is primarily rhetorical. Why would he change his behavior when he sees far worse alternatives, when he is under countervailing pressures from his own base and other Shia politicians, and when he doubts that the Bush administration will change course?

Instead, we ought to be asking how we can use the process of our disengagement to affect the behavior of Iraqis and their neighbors. Our baseline objective should be to make sure that Iraq's problems are contained within Iraq. But we can still hope to achieve more than that. We can still hope to create a managed transition to an Iraq that has a central government with limited powers, provinces with extensive autonomy, and some means for sharing revenues.

Achieving such a transition is worth one last try. To do so, we should do three things. First, we should declare the surge a success and announce that we will negotiate a timetable for our withdrawal with the Iraqi government. This would give Iraqis input into the timing and shape of the withdrawal and doesn't simply impose it on them. Second, we should set a date for the convening of a national reconciliation conference. Unlike previous such conferences, it should not be permitted to disband until agreement has been reached. Success in this conference would mean greater flexibility in our approach to the timetable on withdrawal, and a stalemated conference would produce the opposite. To increase the prospects of the conference working, we should suggest that French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who has credibility across sectarian lines, play a brokering role in setting the agenda of the conference and its ongoing negotiations.

Finally, we should talk to Iraq's neighbors about how to contain the conflict. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey all have little desire to see Iraq either fragment or be convulsed to the point that they get increasingly sucked into the conflict. I have my doubts about whether the neighbors will ever agree on what they want for Iraq, but they can agree on what they fear about it. From that standpoint, we should not be negotiating bilaterally with Iran on Iraq; instead, we should be trying to broker critical understandings between, for example, the Saudis and Iranians on what they will do to limit or contain the conflict.

Maybe it is too late for such an effort to work. For the Iraqis, perhaps there has been too much brutality, too much displacement, too much disbelief in the intentions of the "other," and too little willingness to accept a political solution with its attendant compromises. But at least this plan is guided by an objective that is far more rooted in the reality of Iraq than Bush's approach to date. And it might just be something that the president could accept.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

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