

The Iraq Study Group: Assessing Its Regional Conclusions

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Brief Analysis

On December 12, 2006, Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross, and Mehdi Khalaji addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Robert Satloff is the Institute's executive director and author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255>). Dennis Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute and the author of [The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250>). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ROBERT SATLOFF

The eighteen regional, strategic, and contextual recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report precede the sixty recommendations that focus on Iraq itself, suggesting that the report's drafters are giving the former primacy. This is striking, both because the report was commissioned to devise a new strategy for U.S. Iraq policy, and because its regional recommendations are almost devoid of the analytical rigor behind the Iraq-focused ones. For example,

the commission consulted with only one representative of each major regional country, which can hardly produce a comprehensive assessment. In Israel's case, for example, the ISG consulted with just one Israeli, who neither serves in the cabinet nor is a member of the governing party. The ISG also conferred with Washington-based ambassadors, who may or may not be "in the know."

There is a back-to-the-future quality about the regional side of the report. Its recommendation to resurrect the Madrid model conjures memories of 1991—but that was a time of clear U.S. victory, in contrast with the current situation in Iraq. The discussion of engaging Syria actually refers to how this was successfully done in the early 1990s. Of course, the Lebanese might have a different perspective on whether Syria's contribution to the Gulf War was worth the price. Strikingly, the ISG report suggests that Syria's fulfillment of its Security Council responsibilities vis-a-vis Lebanon (under UN Security Council Resolution 1701) and its cooperation with the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri should be part of a grand Israel-Syria peace negotiation. In effect, the report gives the rulers of Damascus an excuse not to comply with these international requirements.

The report's greatest analytical leap of faith is the notion that all the key issues in the Middle East are "inextricably linked." In the past, it was believed that the export of the Iranian revolution would undermine pro-West regimes throughout the Middle East, or that failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would spark a regional war. Today, the idea of linkage implies that Sunni-Shiite violence will spread throughout the region. The problem with all these theories is that there is no evidence to back them up. To the contrary, military success in the Gulf does not translate into diplomatic success in the Arab-Israeli arena. The Madrid process had a promising opening session, but when it came down to bargaining it ran up against the reality of Israeli-Palestinian differences. Furthermore, there is no evidence that local disasters translate into regional disasters. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iran failed to export the revolution despite national efforts. There is no evidence to support the proposition that Israeli-Palestinian violence has substantial regional repercussions, let alone that it can lead to regional war. The years 2000 to 2003 saw the worst period of Israeli-Palestinian relations, but the regional implication was zero. Not one state threatened to fight Israel, the Arab street did not rise to protest, and no Arab regime's stability was threatened. The United States should not view the Middle East as an organic unit. Iraq's problems are primarily Iraqi in origin and Iraqi in solution. Iran alone poses a serious challenge, and the Israeli-Palestinian problem is important to solve because it is the right thing to do.

MEHDI KHALAJI

After the ISG report came out, Iranian minister of foreign affairs Manouchehr Mottaki said that Iran was ready to help the Americans withdraw from Iraq. When asked how the Iranians would help, Mottaki said that he would give that answer after the Americans agreed to leave Iraq.

The main reason Iran is keeping an ambiguous position on Iraq is to raise the price of its potential cooperation. Iran is emboldened and thinks it can threaten American interests in Iraq either directly or indirectly. By raising the price of helping the United States, it expects to see receive less pressure on the nuclear issue—among others. A further reason for Iran's reticence is that when the United States proposes negotiations, the Iranians suspect that it is not serious. In their view, after they cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan, the United States did nothing to help Iran when it was over.

It is true that the Iranian government wants Iraq to be stable and secure. But other than this fact, there are many differences between U.S. and Iranian interests in Iraq. Iran's leaders do not want Iraq to be a democratic country. They want Iraq to be run under Shiite control, and many Iranian leaders have close ties with Iraqi Shiites. A democratic system implies a distribution of power; Iranian leaders are not interested in seeing Iraqi Shiites share power with the Sunnis.

Iranian cooperation with the United States in the case of Afghanistan was totally different than its potential cooperation in Iraq. In the former, most divisions are based on ethnic—not religious—differences. But in Iraq, there are both ethnic and religious divisions. The religious differences are the most important to Iran, and it is trying to use them in its own favor. Iraq is a member of the Arab world. While Afghanistan was isolated, what happens in Iraq can spread throughout the Arab world—including to the Gulf monarchies.

In addition, Iran is uncertain about what it can really do in Iraq. Iranian leaders are unsure what will happen if they cut off money and weapons supplies to the insurgency; they do not know whether these groups will stop what they are doing. Iranian leaders deliberately exaggerate their role in Iraq so that the United States feels it has to talk to Tehran in order to resolve its problems in Iraq.

DENNIS ROSS

The core of the ISG report's Iraq-focused section addresses how the United States should exert leverage to get Iraqis to make decisions on national reconciliation that they have not been ready to make. This is well considered and should be the main preoccupation as the United States deals with Iraq. While there should be no objections to efforts to reach out to the neighbors—especially Syria and Iran—there should be no false impressions about what they can do. Iran and Syria are spoilers in Iraq, not fixers. They can make life worse there, but what they can do materially to make things better is limited. If Iran and Syria did everything that was requested of them, there would still be an insurgency, Shiite militias, and internal political divides in Iraq. If the internal issues are not dealt with, it does not matter what the external parties do. A mechanism needs to be put in place to treat Iran and Syria as part of a collective. Singling them out for individual treatment will magnify their importance.

The ISG report implies the United States has to play a more active role on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because that will prompt Sunni leaders in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey to do what they would not otherwise do in Iraq. To the contrary, progress on the Arab-Israeli issue is not necessary to get the Jordanians and the Saudis interested in what is happening in Iraq. They have their own stakes in the outcome. Jordan has at least 700,000 Iraqi refugees and cannot afford more. The Saudis are contemplating a \$12 billion security barrier on their northern border because they are concerned about the consequences of a total breakdown of security in Iraq.

The United States ought to be active in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations because it is the right thing to do, and because American involvement does affect the perception of the United States in the region. However, the prospect of a grand initiative serving a productive purpose at this stage is extremely limited. There is weak leadership on all sides, and the failure of such an initiative would only leave the United States in a worse position regionally.

In dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, a more productive approach would consider pursuing four options, each with its own set of implications and consequences. The first is negotiating a comprehensive ceasefire, which would require that Hamas assume responsibility to enforce it. This would drive Hamas and Fatah closer together.

Alternatively, a second option would facilitate the confrontation between Hamas and Fatah by advancing a clarifying national referendum based on two questions: Do you support a two-state solution? Do you support empowering a government to pursue it? Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas will only go down this route if he has an Arab umbrella of support and if he has assurances from the Israel that there will be a quick payoff the day after the referendum. The third option is to involve Syria in diplomacy, which would require that it cut off Hamas and Hizballah. And the fourth is to take advantage of regional concerns about Iran by initiating quiet diplomacy to encourage shifts on final status issues, particularly concerning the Palestinian definition of the right of return. There is a slim chance that any of these options will work, but an effort should be made and these or other options are worth testing behind closed doors before a public approach is adopted. ❖

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