

Internal Affairs

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President Bush and his advisers were not the only ones who were anxious about what the Iraq Study Group would recommend. So were the Saudis, which explains why they sought an urgent meeting between King Abdullah and Vice President Cheney in late November. The source of Saudi anxiety was almost certainly the widely held assumption that, to help fix Iraq, the Baker-Hamilton Commission would counsel reaching out to Iran and Syria, both of which Riyadh regards as regional rivals. And, this week, that is exactly what the commission did, urging the Bush administration to "engage directly with Iran and Syria in order to try to obtain their commitment to constructive policies toward Iraq and other regional issues."

Should the Saudis -- and the rest of us -- be worried? Not if the administration understands why and how any engagement with Iran and Syria should unfold. Iran and Syria can both be spoilers in Iraq, but neither is the key to Iraqi stability. While engagement with both countries could represent prudent foreign policy, no one should expect that reaching out to Tehran and Damascus will prove central to fixing Iraq. The same goes for the commission's recommendation that the administration seek to jump-start the Arab-Israeli peace process: It may be a wise move for other reasons, and it certainly can't hurt our efforts in Iraq, but it isn't going to make an enormous difference there. That's because, ultimately, the problems we face today come from within Iraq, not outside it.

The key challenge in Iraq right now is to convince the country's leaders that, if they take basic steps toward national reconciliation, we will stay -- and, if they don't, we won't. In effect, we have to use the threat of our departure to get Iraqis to make the decisions they have avoided for the last three-and-a-half years on the most contentious issues: sharing oil revenue, granting amnesty to Baathists and insurgents, settling the relationship between Islam and the state, and determining the scope of autonomy in the provinces. Here, the commission has it right: We can and should exert leverage, but, in the end, whether or not to act will be up to Iraqis themselves.

It would be unrealistic to expect Syria and Iran to help much in moving this process along. The Syrians didn't create the insurgency in Anbar province, and the insurgents do not depend significantly on material and manpower coming across the Syrian border. Similarly, while the Iranians certainly played a role in building the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization, neither of these Shia militias currently depends on Iran to function. Within Iraq, sectarian violence has taken on a life of its own.

This does not mean Iraq's neighbors have nothing to contribute. Clearly, involving all of them, including the Iranians and Syrians, could be a device to influence the choices of different factions within Iraq. But this is not a given: While all of Iraq's neighbors may fear its collapse and the flight of millions of refugees, they may also hedge their bets and try to forge their own bastions of influence inside the country at the expense of their regional competitors. This ought to tell us that, if we are contemplating a conference of Iraq's neighbors -- or creating what the commission calls an "Iraq International Support Group" -- we need to prepare its agenda and aims very carefully. Will the group's decisions need to be unanimous? Will Iraq's neighbors be asked to make certain commitments? Will there be a mechanism for ensuring that countries are fulfilling their promises?

In this regard, Iran and Syria should be treated as part of a collective. Singling them out gives them more of a reason to be spoilers and to up the ante for what they seek in return. We want the focus with each of them to be Iraq -- not the nuclear issue with Iran, or Lebanon and the Golan Heights with Syria. The more we treat them as fixers in Iraq -- when, in fact, they are not -- the more they will seek trade-offs on other issues. I am not arguing against engaging either the Iranians or Syrians. But it should be done on terms that don't favor them so clearly. We should be prepared to raise the costs to them practically, not only rhetorically, when it comes to their bad behavior. To date, with both Iran and Syria, we have been speaking loudly and carrying a small stick. This needs to change.

As for the Israelis and Palestinians: I agree with the Iraq Study Group's call for a new, more activist U.S. diplomacy on the issue, even if I find some of its recommendations misguided or poorly worded. (For example, Palestinian refugees are a final status issue, but the "right of return" is not and, stated this way, would prejudice negotiations.) It has been a mistake for the Bush administration to disengage from the conflict. But our efforts now should be guided by what Israelis and Palestinians need, rather than by the illusion that Sunni Arab leaders won't help on Iraq otherwise. A collapse in Iraq is a disaster for them. The Saudis aren't contemplating a \$12 billion security fence along their northern border because they have no stake in Iraq. The Jordanians know only too well that they cannot absorb hundreds of thousands more Iraqi refugees.

We ought to try to cement a real -- not flimsy and vague -- cease-fire between Israelis and Palestinians; or push for a national referendum among Palestinians to clarify where they stand on peace and to build a mandate for a new Palestinian government to pursue it; or reestablish an international consensus on the principles of a credible two-state solution at a time when Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas reject the basic terms of co-existence. We should do these things because they are right, and we should do them in a way that is realistic. Acting boldly, as the Iraq Study Group recommends, is less important than acting wisely. The last thing we need is an ambitious initiative that proves to be hollow and only succeeds in further discrediting diplomacy and strengthening those who argue that violence is the answer. Whatever steps we take in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, let's take them with our eyes open and not because we think they will help us save Iraq. They won't.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. ❖

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