

Is This the Time to Talk, and With Whom?

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Articles & Testimony

We have had the pre-publication leaks. Now we have the report. What I'm looking for now are the post-publication leaks. Only those leaks will explain what is, on the face of it, a very strange report. So strange, in fact, that its logic and findings might complicate the position of the United States in Iraq rather than ease it.

Strange aspect number one: it is unanimous. These reports are not usually unanimous. Ten people, experienced in politics with egos to match, from both Republican and Democratic backgrounds, and they all agree? It suggests that the desire for unanimity trumped any intellectual debate. Perhaps that is why there are no less than 79 recommendations.

Strange aspect number two: its conclusion is absurd. "These [79] recommendations . . . are comprehensive and need to be implemented in a coordinated fashion. They should not be separated or carried out in isolation." This is, at best, arrogant. The Iraq Study Group is telling President Bush to implement its recommendations in their entirety. The implication is that if President Bush just cherry-picks one or two, Messrs Baker and Hamilton et al will shrug off the consequences.

Strange aspect number three: its logic is flawed. "Given the ability of Iran and Syria to influence events within Iraq and their interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq . . ." Their interest in avoiding chaos? Both Damascus and Tehran want chaos there now in order to embarrass the United States and counter the pressure put on them currently by Washington. In the longer-term, a post-US-in-Iraq longer-term, a good measure of chaos in Iraq would probably keep Damascus and Tehran happy as well. Damascus and Baghdad have been rivals for years, arguably centuries, as have Tehran and Baghdad.

Strange aspect number four: which planet are the commission members on? "The issue of Iran's nuclear programmes should continue to be dealt with by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany." Dream on. The principle diplomatic threat to the Iranian nuclear programmes is from the United States. And while we are on the subject: "Programmes? Isn't there just one? The peaceful one? Does the ISG know something the rest of us don't? The principle military threat also comes from the US—the Israeli military threat is a pin-prick by comparison. Do Messrs Baker and Hamilton really think the Iranians will separate their nuclear diplomacy from their Iraq diplomacy in order to fit in with the convenience of Washington DC?

Strange aspect number five: deal with Hezbollah but not with Hamas. "There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israel peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush's June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. This commitment must include direct talks with, by, and between Israel, Lebanon, Palestinians (those who accept Israel's right to exist), and Syria." Lebanon? The only issue between Israel and Lebanon is the falsely constructed obstacle of Shebaa Farms—a small area which the United Nations considers to be part of the (Israeli-occupied) Golan Heights but Hezbollah says belongs to Lebanon. The implication is, don't deal with Hamas (because it doesn't accept Israel's right to exist) but deal with Hezbollah (which also doesn't accept Israel's right to exist).

Strange aspect number six: but why then deal with Ahmedinejad's Iran? When did Ahmedijad indicate that he

accepted Israel's right to exist? Good point. If Baker-Hamilton think that "those who accept Israel's right to exist" is an important criterion, why engage with Iran?

Strange aspect number seven: why say it is worth repeating the US doesn't want to take Iraq's oil? The US has said it often enough already. Saying it again, suggests that the earlier denial was not really meant. Many Iraqis might be perplexed that the US invaded for noble purposes like overthrowing a dictator and wanting to spread democracy. In the Arab mind, invasion might be associated with pillage. But if they don't "get it" already, they perhaps won't "get it" now, at least for a while.

Why has the Iraq Study Group got it so wrong? One can only assume that most of the commission members of the Iraq Study Group were mesmerised by the leadership of Baker-Hamilton and went along with some intellectual question-marks, if not absurdities. It will be interesting to hear the justification for their reasoning.

If there are no public comments by the commission members, the public might draw its own conclusions. (It would be unkind, perhaps, to suggest this was related in any way to the age of the commission's members—they are all in their 70s.)

The main area of future intellectual combat might be among the members of the working groups. These were the political, military, economic and social experts on Iraq who discussed, often knowledgeably but not always, the key issues. Much of their reasoning was probably rejected. But their names will be associated with the report. Expect more (proverbial) blood, and, sadly more of the real variety as Americans and Brits perish, and Sunni Iraqis slaughter Shia Iraqis and vice versa.

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