

Engaging the Neighbors: Key to Resolving the War in Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

According to press reports, one of the principal policy recommendations of the congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group will be that Washington should engage Iraq's neighbors—particularly Syria and Iran—in its efforts to staunch the ongoing violence in Iraq. However, both historical precedent and current conditions on the ground in Iraq suggest that, at least for the time being, this approach is unlikely to succeed.

The Role of Neighbors in Resolving Insurgencies and Civil Wars

In resolving insurgencies and civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan, a key factor was multilateral diplomacy involving those neighboring states that had either supported one or more sides of a given conflict or that had an interest in regional stability. Such diplomatic efforts may also be key to one day resolving the war in Iraq. In each case, however, cajoling, international pressure, and arm twisting succeeded because the particular insurgency or civil war was “ripe” for negotiated settlement.

The factors that make an ongoing conflict ripe for such a settlement generally include: (1) a military stalemate that leads both sides to conclude that they cannot achieve their objectives by military means; (2) an emerging consensus among the belligerents over the terms of a settlement; and (3) authoritative leaders capable of speaking and negotiating on behalf of their respective constituencies. Unfortunately, none of these conditions currently exists in Iraq.

All sides in Iraq appear to have lots of fight left in them. Key actors on both sides of the conflict may believe that time is on their side, and that when the United States withdraws from Iraq—perhaps after the next presidential election—they will be able to wage an unrestricted war on their own terms. Sunni Arab insurgents look forward to the day when government forces will be unable to depend on U.S. military support, while Sadrist and Badr Organization militiamen may hope that they will be able to go after their enemies without U.S.-imposed constraints. Elements on all sides may believe that, with the United States set to draw down or leave after the 2008 election, a window of opportunity may be opening—not closing.

Moreover, there is every indication that the perceptual gap between the belligerents remains broad and deep. Many Sunni Arabs believe that they are the majority in Iraq (more likely, they constitute some 15 to 20 percent of the

population) and are unwilling to negotiate with the “occupation government,” in which Shiite parties comprise the majority. There also remain major differences over the sharing of the country’s oil resources and the form and nature of its central government. The Kurds and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq support a loose federal arrangement, while the Sadrists and most Sunni Arabs favor a unitary state with a strong central government. Finally, while the Kurds seem to have transcended internal divisions for now, the Shiite and Sunni Arab communities remain bedeviled by internal divisions and lack authoritative leaders capable of speaking with a single voice or negotiating on their behalf. If anything, the general trend has been toward fragmentation of political and religious authority. In the Shiite camp, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is ineffective, Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani has been unable to stem the slide toward sectarian violence, and Muqtada al-Sadr has apparently been unable to control elements of the Mahdi Army. As for the Sunni Arabs, although some support the political process, others reject the very legitimacy of the Iraqi government, while the insurgents are divided among various Islamo-nationalist and jihadist tendencies. There is no common vision of a future Iraq, and no one on either side capable of stemming the violence or negotiating authoritatively on behalf of their constituents.

The Role of Iraq’s Neighbors

Neighbors and others can help when the belligerent parties are dependent on them for funds, arms, manpower, or political support. This provides neighboring states with leverage over their clients (whether insurgents, militias, or the government), which they may wield to help bring about a settlement. In Iraq, however, such leverage is minimal. The insurgents have access to all the weapons, funds, and manpower they need, in amounts sufficient to sustain current activity levels indefinitely. And no one neighbor wields decisive political influence over any of the major Iraqi actors (although Iran’s intelligence and security services likely wield some influence over a number of Shiite militias).

Insurgent groups and sectarian militias have access to a large supply of arms, explosives, and munitions, in part because of the failure of coalition forces to secure Iraqi armories and ammunition storage points against looting during and after the invasion. They have also probably benefited from the transfer of advanced improvised explosive devices from Iran. They are able to finance their activities within Iraq’s emergent conflict economy, which generates funds through kidnappings, protection rackets, and the diversion, smuggling, and sale of oil products to domestic consumers and Iraq’s neighbors. And they are able to draw on large manpower reserves because of rampant unemployment—although foreign suicide bombers are an important force multiplier for Sunni Arab insurgents. In short, although Iraq’s neighbors (particularly Syria and Iran, but also Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states) have played a role in fanning the flames of violence by permitting the transit or transfer of arms, funds, and personnel, halting such support would reduce, not end, the bloodshed.

In sum, while there is an important role for Iraq’s neighbors in efforts to set the conditions for a political settlement in Iraq, their leverage at this time is relatively limited, and conditions are far from ripe for regional diplomacy or a regional conference to resolve the conflict. Moreover, Syria and Iran have little reason to help the United States in Iraq. They seem confident of their ability to deal with any violent spillover that might occur, and to benefit from the impact of Iraqi violence on Washington’s credibility and its ability to project power elsewhere in the region.

Toward an End Game

So what is to be done? To set the conditions for a negotiated settlement, Washington must maintain military pressure on the Sunni Arab insurgents and convince them that (1) military victory is unattainable, (2) the United States will stand by the Iraqi government come what may, (3) the United States will retain a potent military presence in Iraq for years to come—even if at somewhat reduced levels—in order to preclude an insurgent victory, and (4) the U.S. presence is a major constraint on Shiite revanchist violence and Iranian influence, and is therefore in the interest of Sunni Arabs. Washington must also convince the governing coalition to make the necessary compromises on oil and federalism. These are the prerequisites of an eventual political settlement. Accordingly, the United States must do

what it can to encourage the formation of a consensus regarding the contours of such a settlement.

It will be very difficult to accomplish these goals under current conditions. The highly charged U.S. policy debate over Iraq has sowed doubts about American resolve and staying power and created a psychological dynamic in Iraq that undermines U.S. influence. This dynamic will make it difficult to even begin setting the conditions for a political settlement in Iraq before the next U.S. presidential election. In addition, Sunni and Shiite hardliners will be tempted to wait out the U.S. presence in the hope of achieving the “victory” they believe they have been denied because of it, while moderates will be less responsive to advice and pressure from Washington because of concerns that the United States is preparing to leave. This dynamic might even affect coalition intelligence operations (e.g., Iraqis may be less willing to cooperate with government security forces if they believe that the United States is poised to leave), aggravate the problem with militias (i.e., more people might be inclined to seek their protective embrace under such circumstances), and eventually undermine the morale, cohesion, and effectiveness of the Iraqi Security Forces. It will be very difficult to reverse this dynamic before the 2008 U.S. election, when the new president will either confirm the expectations of those who believe the United States intends to withdraw, or confound those expectations by committing to the U.S. military presence, forcing Iraqis of all stripes to revise their plans.

At any rate, U.S. policymakers should assume that the security situation in Iraq is liable to get worse before it gets better; that, at this point, neighbors like Syria and Iran are part of the problem, not the solution; and that Washington’s main focus should be allaying fears of a precipitous U.S. departure from Iraq, a perception that has the potential to further complicate an already urgent security situation.

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