

# Talking Turkey about Plans for Iraq

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**T**he production of plans, options, and proposals for Iraq has become a cottage industry. As the plans roll out, by what criteria should they be evaluated? What makes one plan or set of plans qualitatively better than another?

### General Criteria

Several criteria that all plans or proposals should include are:

**Strategy.** Any option should explicitly recognize the political, economic, military, social, and informational dimensions of the Iraq problem. This recognition should be synoptic, covering the states, regions, and issues that will be affected beyond Iraq.

A high -- even clinical -- degree of situational awareness. What is actually happening in Iraq? For too long, attempts to determine what is really going on have been frustrated by overly optimistic presentations of reality. For example, the progress of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) has been officially touted, even as U.S. Army officers have reported major systemic problems in the training, performance, reliability, and cohesion of the Iraqi army and police. Plans need to be based on accurate accounts, not confections served up by those with an interest in a particular outcome or their place in history.

In-depth understanding of who the key agents are, what motivates them, and in which directions they are moving. The key people and groups in the Iraq drama must be understood. Any plan that does not account for the people in the story is to be suspected. Plans that go no deeper than statements like "the Shiites must do this and the Sunnis that" are the equivalent of a play without characters, as if Shakespeare had written *Henry V* with named references only to "the English" and "the French."

Clear identification of the problems to be solved. It is one thing to say the Maliki government is weak, but what does that really mean? The solution to this weakness can only be found, if at all, by understanding its sources and dealing with them.

Recognition and consideration of the situation's complex, dynamic nature. Iraq is a complex adaptive system of complex adaptive systems. One of these is the "violence system," a now self-sustaining organism that is driven to generate higher levels of mayhem by the creativity and competitiveness of its components. The density of actors in Iraq, the links among them, and the processes affecting them ensure that simple solutions will not work -- and may

do more harm than good.

### Feasibility

Any sound plan or option must be realistic. Declaring that one element of a plan is to get the Iraqi government or security forces to do something they are presently incapable of doing is setting a goal that requires its own plan of action and timetable. Reasonable plans have to be consistent with the actual timelines along which Iraq is moving. It does little good to say that sectarian violence must be brought under control, that the ISF will "stand up," or that a national compact will be achieved -- unless these issues are addressed within a timeframe.

In Iraq, the big problems, and even the little ones, are resistant to solution. Problems in Iraq change and evolve. Perhaps they have been nudged in one direction or another, but not solved. Policy and its implementation have always been rushed. The rush to form a government, withdraw troops, and create Iraqi forces has not served the overall mission well. Apparent successes have turned out to be built on sand. Deadlines and benchmarks are useful, but cannot be determinate. Resources and goals -- whatever they are -- must be matched in any feasible plan. Serious mismatches have already occurred: the size of coalition forces relative to the Sunni insurgency -- and now sectarian violence; the strength of the Iraqi government relative to its problems; and the capability of Iraqi forces relative to the insurgents and militias.

A feasible plan clearly shows the relationship between its components and goals. If additional U.S. troops are sent in, how will they be used and how will this support the objective? More troops may be an important element of a plan, but what they do and for how long is just as important. Plans should also be examined for their baseline assumptions, and these should be explicit. Do planners assume, for example, that the Iraqi populace wants a unified state in which power is reasonably distributed among the elements of the population? Do they assume the Iraqi government is representative of the people? Do they assume that members of the ISF will fight for the nation rather than the sects or ethnic groups to which they belong?

### Evaluation

Plans should be evaluated carefully, both in the proposal and consideration stages and during implementation. No responsible official should undertake an action of major consequences without testing it to the extent possible. Such tests should be built into the consideration process. Options can, and often are, evaluated prior to implementation by various means. Proposals for Iraq could and should be examined in policy games or simulations and in military exercises. These are tried-and-true methods of testing plans in dynamic ways, and sometimes they achieve surprising results. Proposals for Iraq should also be evaluated against history through the rigorous use of analogical reasoning, and not just by selecting some case from history that seems to fit. Such reasoning is an accepted evaluation method, especially under conditions of high uncertainty.

Plans should deal explicitly with the uncertainty involved. No one can know how things will work out, so how are uncertainty and probability treated by planners? Uncertainty -- partial knowledge, bad information, and human frailty -- can defeat the best-constructed schemes. No plan is perfect. All plans have weaknesses. Any proposal for Iraq should recognize these, determine how critical they are, and make arrangements for dealing with them if they are encountered.

Any proposal should also include metrics for measuring its success or failure. What to look for, what benchmarks must be passed, what data need to be collected and analyzed -- all these should be part of the plan. This was a shortcoming of the counterinsurgency effort; only when the insurgency was well underway did the U.S. government look for metrics by which to measure its efforts to establish stability. The temptation to "cook the books" to create a false sense of progress should be resisted strongly. Part of the American people's disappointment in our Iraq enterprise is probably due to the fact that people were told for so long that things were going right when they were

not.

## Good Planning

When it comes to planning, nobody in the world is better than Americans. There is no reason why good plans cannot emerge from the current "festival of proposal-making." Whatever emerges should be flexible enough to contend with the surprises that are inevitable in a complex situation like Iraq.

There will be breakdowns and failures, but a good plan can account for these. A good plan should recognize the risks involved, including the dreaded "unintended consequences." Iraq poses such a difficult problem that risk can only be managed, not avoided. A good plan avoids dramatic pronouncements about how decisive, how supported, and how successful it will be. Just because a plan aligns with a particular set of goals does not mean it is a good plan. Indeed, it could be a very bad plan. Hitler had a plan for invading Russia that aligned with his goals of creating "living space" in the east and reducing the Slavs to servitude, but no one will argue this was a good plan. In the face of Iraq, modesty and humility are in order.

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