

The Iraq Conference in Egypt:

Aims, Risks, and Approaches

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Brief Analysis

On November 22-23, officials from several countries will hold a conference in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, regarding Iraq's future. The meeting will represent the first major international event focused on Iraq since the reelection of President George W. Bush and the resignation of U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell. Though organized to improve international assistance to Iraq, the conference promises risks as well as rewards.

Background The conference is part of an ongoing series of ministerial-level meetings held by the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG), Iraq's neighbors, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, the most recent being an Egyptian-hosted meeting of foreign ministers in July, and the next an Iranian-hosted meeting of interior ministers scheduled for November 30. At the request of the IIG and the United States, the upcoming conference has been enlarged to include foreign ministers and senior diplomats from the G-8 nations and senior representatives of the UN, the European Union, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Foreign ministry officials from Algeria, Bahrain, and Tunisia will also be present. The conference will be attended by Iraqi prime minister Ayad Allawi as well as Colin Powell, following his meeting with Palestinian leaders on November 21.

Aims of the Conference An IIG spokesman described the objective of the conference as "promoting security and stability in Iraq, as well as Iraq's democratic transition," the general theme of the series of conferences held by Iraq's neighbors. The expanded Sharm al-Sheikh conference will differ from previous ministerial meetings in key ways. In essence, the conference will seek to revisit the same issues that were encompassed within UN Security Council Resolution 1546, which passed unanimously on June 5, 2004. The resolution recognized and pledged international support for the IIG and the planned process of political transition, and authorized the continued presence in Iraq of a U.S.-commanded Multinational Force (MNF) until "reviewed at the request of the Government of Iraq, or twelve months from [June 5, 2004]." Yet, while Resolution 1546 passed unanimously, many nations clearly had strong reservations about the legitimacy and sovereign independence of the embryonic IIG, or felt that the resolution fell short by failing to provide the mandate necessary to commit their troops to a new UN-commanded peacekeeping operation. The Sharm al-Sheikh conference will seek to show that the IIG has developed into a strong and

independent body, effectively asking attending nations to look again and more generously at the requests for security, electoral, and economic assistance that were made in Resolution 1546. The conference will see Prime Minister Allawi remind nations of their obligations, principally: -- To rhetorically and materially support the "full responsibility and authority" of the IIG as Iraq's legitimate government and to endorse the proposed timetable of elections and constitutional design that will take place under the transitional government throughout 2005. -- To rhetorically and materially deny support or passage of borders to violent anti-IIG and anti-MNF forces in Iraq. -- To provide forces to undertake stabilization operations under MNF control, to support capacity building in the Iraqi Security Forces, or to protect UN staff overseeing Iraq's electoral process. -- To support Iraq's National Development Strategy (2005-2007) by speeding the disbursement of pledged aid and moving to maximize debt forgiveness.

Potential Risks Depending on how the two-day discussions develop, the conference could either improve or damage the prospects of the IIG as well as Iraq's electoral and constitutional processes. Strong political currents threaten to draw the conference off course. Relations between the U.S. government and key states such as France and Germany remain strained over U.S. policy in Iraq following the reelection of President Bush, and arguments also continue between European states over their stances on Iraq. The communal pressures created by a gathering of regional states can generate resistance to initiatives perceived to be driven by actors outside the region, particularly the United States. Specifically, the upcoming conference presents four key risks:

1. The legitimacy of the IIG may be compromised by the perception that (i) "opposition" or non-IIG Iraqi political forces have equal claim to politically represent the Iraqi nation, and (ii) the IIG cannot make decisions independently of the U.S. government. On the former count, the risk has reduced as Iraqi factions that have not publicly and consistently renounced violence are likely to be excluded from meetings held at the sidelines of the conference.
2. The conference may fortify doubts within Iraq's Sunni community concerning whether they should vote in the January 31, 2005, elections. Delegations may call for elections to be postponed until security and Sunni political representation have coalesced. This kind of delay would undo months of careful work in building a modicum of trust among the politically cautious Iraqi public in the electoral and constitutional process, a trust based on the fact that all deadlines have thus far been met.
3. Participating states may seek to agree on a date for the end of U.S.-commanded MNF operations in Iraq, most likely in June 2005, pressuring the IIG to call for an MNF withdrawal or absorption into a UN-commanded force structure. Instead, the present security environment requires continuity and the kind of robust military capability provided by the U.S.-commanded MNF.
4. Meetings held at the sidelines of the conference (e.g., on Israeli-Palestinian issues) could complicate or dilute the focus on Iraq, possibly involving attempted linkage between issues.

Policy Implications The United States must display deft political footwork and a light touch to maximize the chance that the conference will meet its goals. The key will be focusing on the achievable and limited objective of a more favorable global view of the IIG rather than unrealistic objectives such as healing transatlantic and trans-European rifts over Iraq. To this end, four fundamental principles should be adhered to:

1. The IIG must act independently. The success of the conference will hinge on whether the IIG can begin to alter perceptions by acting in an independent manner. Though the United States remains Iraq's strongest partner, it needs to sharply lower its profile while continuing to demonstrate its commitment. Only the closest preconference liaison will allow the United States and the IIG to guide each other and avoid public surprises or disagreements. In addition, the international community needs to interact with the IIG, which is far more credible than it was when Resolution 1546 was passed.
2. The IIG must be realistic and constructive. The IIG must recognize that Iraq is not owed anything by the

international community. It should instead make the case for aid based on the transnational impact of a deterioration in Iraq's stability. However modest the efforts by the UN, NATO, or some European Union states, the IIG should welcome all current and future contributions of security, electoral, or economic assistance.

3. The conference communiqué must be clear and simple. The communiqué should consist of a pithy version of the international community's obligations under Resolution 1546. The essential points are: the IIG and its successors as defined by the process of political transition are the only legitimate representatives of Iraq; the timeline for political transition will be adhered to; and the IIG encourages existing troop contributors to remain in Iraq and encourages new contributors to come forward to serve under MNF or UN command.

4. Maintain the focus on assisting Iraq. In addition to reducing the significance of sideline discussions, the United States needs to be prepared to react to bad news from Iraq (e.g., intentional insurgent attempts to derail the conference or unrelated controversial news events).

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