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# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

*In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).*

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## Regionalizing the Iraq Conflict?

John Tirman

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**I**n one way or another, we are headed for a new engagement with the regional players to in an effort end the Iraq war. The idea of bringing in the neighbors to help stabilize and reduce the violence in Iraq is very attractive, and could contribute to a plausible exit strategy for the United States. The likelihood of “regionalization” being a success, however, depends on which version. And even with the more cooperative schemes being suggested, the closer one looks, the less promise it seems to hold.

For the White House, there has always been a regional strategy with respect to the Iraq war, but it is now—like Iraq itself—in complete disrepair. That strategy was the transformation of the region, with regime change in Tehran and Damascus openly discussed in Washington. So a cooperative approach by the Bush administration would represent a 180 degree reversal of fortune and intent. That is the first barrier to a regionalization strategy. It appears, moreover, that their compass is moving slightly toward a new regional strategy—less one of victory and transformation than of searching for a face-saving retreat—that may discount the value of more comprehensive strategies.

### Politics of a New Approach

Such a broad and penetrating set of ideas is being offered by the Iraq Study Group (ISG) headed by former secretary of state James Baker and former congressman Lee Hamilton. The ISG is recommending regional engagement on Iraq, among other measures. The national debate about Iraq, particularly since the mid-term elections November 7, has focused on a regionalization strategy, which in various versions would include direct dialogue with Iran, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan in particular, tradeoffs to gain cooperation, and broader regional issues—Israeli-Palestinian issues especially—also on the table.

While many in the administration demur from speaking with Syria and Iran particularly, there is acknowledgement of the need for more help from the neighbors, and some small movement in that direction. The Iraqi leadership itself is more openly welcom-

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ing of a stabilizing role from Iran, Syria, and the others, and dialogue with all neighbors is being pursued. But, thus far, the effort is incommensurate with the daunting tasks.

More starkly, in the run-up to the release of the ISG report, the Bush team has signaled its indifference after a post-election moment of possible accommodation. Most pointed was a memo authored by National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley after visiting Iraq in late October. He included a regional strategy of sorts by stating that the United States could help Iraq by continuing “to pressure Iran and Syria to end their interference in Iraq, in part by hitting back at Iranian proxies in Iraq”; by increasing “our efforts to get Saudi Arabia to take a leadership role” to reduce death squads, among other goals; and, most tellingly, by intending “to lean on Syria to terminate its support for Baathists and insurgent leaders.”<sup>1</sup> What is involved in “leaning on” Syria or “getting Saudi Arabia to take a leadership role” is not specified, but it appears to be much as before—imperatives without incentives.

As if to underscore that approach, President Bush in late November reiterated his firm refusal to open talks with Syria or Iran; the case of the latter is conditioned on Iran’s nuclear enrichment activities, which must be suspended, Bush says, before talks are possible.<sup>2</sup> Yet other signals from the administration continued to gain notice, especially intensified diplomacy with our allies. This latter tendency, weak and not universally embraced within the administration, nonetheless may be the clearest recognition that a new regional strategy must be attempted.

## Roles and Rewards

As many have noted, no credible exit strategy can exclude Iran’s cooperation. Prime Minister Tony Blair appears to have recognized that fact, judging from his inviting comments in early November, and the politics of Iraq strongly endorse this view as well. Iran’s relationship to the majority Shia, their political ties to the government and apparent support for other powerful actors, including militias, means they are the most significant regional player by far.

*“For Turkey, and possibly for Syria, subsidized peacekeeping troops and construction contracts could be part of the mix of incentives, once the violence subsides. ... A localized or regionalized economic plan is now advisable.”*

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## citation

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What would Iran want for cooperation, and what would cooperation mean? The first is likely easier to answer: Iran wants the same security guarantees—that is, a new U.S. policy of not seeking regime change in Tehran—that they are also seeking in the standoff over their nuclear development program. Beyond that, some gradual movement toward normalization, including the ending of punitive trade restrictions, would be in the cards. (Iranian leaders have also said that no action by Iran will be forthcoming as long as U.S. troops remain in Iraq. If the Iranians also resist redeployment in the Gulf theatre, as many suggest, then a new barrier will rise.)

In return for these considerable concessions, the United States would expect stout restraint on Iran’s allies, such as the militant Iraqi Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr, and perhaps even some restraint on Hizbollah in Lebanon.

The deal would be similar for Syria. Here, the equation would perhaps include movement on discussions, now in limbo, with Israel over the return of the Golan Heights. Reportedly, Washington blocked such discussions this autumn. Along with Jordan, Syria has borne the brunt of the enormous and growing numbers of refugees from Iraq—now more than two million region-wide—and some financial assistance on this would be an important piece in their puzzle.

Possibly more difficult to parse would be the role of Turkey, and what its interests dictate. Military leaders there have said repeatedly that if, as a result of a referendum next year, the city of Kirkuk becomes part of the Kurdish territory in northern Iraq, Turkey would move in to protect Turkomen in the area and to demonstrate clearly to Kurds that an independent Kurdish state would not be acceptable. However unlikely that is, the Turks now have 250,000 troops deployed along the border with Kurdish Iraq. One of the two oil pipelines from Kirkuk (which has as much as 25 percent of Iraqi petroleum reserves) goes through Turkey. The United States is reportedly supporting Kurdish separatists in Iran.<sup>3</sup> So the entanglements are extensive, and messy.

For Turkey, as for Syria and Jordan, money would have to be part of the equation—there needs to be a buy-off strategy that is not mere bribery, most effectively as part of a broader donor conference that would support long-term economic sustainability strategies. Jordan's war-related problems have much to do with the pro-American stance of King Abdullah and his dwindling political capital domestically; financial capital for economic development could be a balancing offset. For Turkey, and possibly for Syria, subsidized peacekeeping troops and construction contracts could be part of the mix of incentives, once the violence subsides. The habit of lavishing contracts on U.S. corporations for reconstruction has essentially failed; a localized or regionalized economic plan is now advisable.

The other Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia, are also difficult reads. Like all neighbors, they are keen to keep Iraq united into a single state—avoiding, they hope, the bleed out of the colossal political violence and refugees from a failed Sunni heartland. The prospect of a Shia-led government in Iraq aligned strongly with Iran has been troubling enough for the Saudis, which has a sizable Shia minority in its eastern province. The Saudis are holding Iraqi debt and see no reason to contribute to reconstruction of an oil-rich country.

### A Grand Bargain?

In all the capitals of the region, there is a stark recognition of the parlous situation gripping Iraq, and the threats implicit in such disorder for every state. While not wanting the Americans to fully succeed or completely fail, the likelihood of the latter now worries all, and as a result they have an incentive to work with Washington and the government in Baghdad.

While the ISG recommendations are not likely to be swallowed whole, they remain the most enticing, fresh options on the table. The Pentagon's new ideas—"Go Big" with an influx of U.S. troops for a few months; "Go Long" with reductions in troops but intensified training of Iraqis over years; or "Go Home," a full retreat—do not have special needs for regional diplomacy. The notion of par-

tioning Iraq, most prominently advocated by Sen. Joseph Biden, has no traction in the region (apart from some Kurds and their partisans) and little in the United States, particularly among Iraq specialists.

A grand bargain reflecting the ISG program would be a very complex affair, however, with conflicting interests between the neighbors in addition to testy relations with Baghdad and Washington.

Jordan's Abdullah has voiced concerns about the "arc of Shi'ism" in the region, and would rue an accommodation between the United States and Iran. The Saudis seem to harbor similar concerns. Turkey's issues with Kurds are well known. The Syrians play a cozy game with their porous border, may fear growing Iranian influence in Lebanon as well as Kurdish independence, and have anxieties about regime stability. Iran wants to make certain of Shia supremacy in Iraq, its longtime rival, which may set Tehran against Amman and Riyadh in particular.

Can these tricky currents be navigated? Does the Bush administration have the nimbleness, and the neutrality, to compromise and deliver suitable incentives? There are many assets in the region—Turkey's able construction companies and security forces, Syrian and Jordanian credibility with Sunnis, Iranian political clout, and Saudi and Kuwaiti money. Each stands to benefit from a stable

Iraq, but each is cautious about giving up too much, too quickly, to be the good neighbors Iraq needs.

Few if any peace processes can succeed without the neighbors' consent, and the more active that agreement is, the more likely the peace will be sustainable. That this was not recognized by the United States at the outset merely underscores the larger, deadly blunders of the whole enterprise. But here and now we have to find some accommodation with all the neighbors to ensure a safe and timely departure for U.S. forces.

That means giving up dreams of transformation that are moribund in any case, and bringing to the table a very large purse. Those two preconditions for Washington will not guarantee success. Conceivably, a third party may need to broker the deals, given the high level of distrust occasioned by the war and other issues. But the United States must, at some level, be intimately involved. And without flexible American participation, if not leadership, the neighbors will remain difficult to draw in, and the prospects for building a durable peace in Iraq will remain a faint hope.

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#### article footnotes

- 1 "Text of U.S. Security Adviser's Iraq Memo," *New York Times* (November 29, 2006): A10.
- 2 Paul Richter, "Bush firm on Iran, Syria talks," *Los Angeles Times* (November 29, 2006), online.
- 3 Seymour Hersh, "The Next Act," *New Yorker* (November 27, 2006).



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