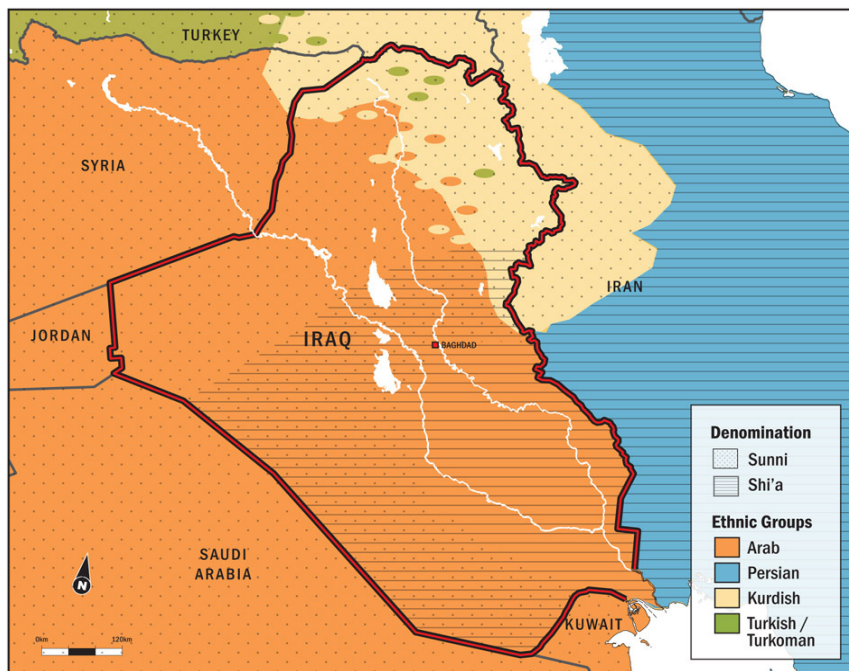


After the Baker Commission:

WHAT NEXT IN IRAQ?

Iraq is descending into chaos and is at risk of becoming a failed state. The US debate on how to proceed is marked by a sense of gloom. If Iraq is to avoid a headfirst plunge into a civil war that could destabilize large parts of the Middle East, Washington has little choice but to change its strategy and, above all, regionalize the search for a political solution. Yet, while this diplomatic option figures prominently in the report of the Baker Commission, it confronts the Bush administration with difficult choices regarding its future course on Iran and Syria. If the West wants to avoid a noticeable loss of influence in the region, Europe must also become engaged more forcefully in the search for peace.



Iraq and its neighbors

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Iraq is of great strategic importance for the Middle East. Due to its central geopolitical situation between Iran, the Arab world, Israel, and Turkey, as well as its rich oil resources, domestic developments in the country often have regional and even global implications. The US policy of regime change, accordingly, has not only been geared towards suppressing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Iraq. Rather, the intention was to democratize the country after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and make it the cornerstone of a new order in the "Greater Middle East". According to the line of reasoning inspired mainly by US neoconservatives, a democratic Iraq would trigger a dynamic

of political reforms throughout the region, marginalize radical forces, and roll back the regional influence of governments hostile to the US in Iran and Syria.

More than three years after the US invasion in Iraq, it is becoming evident that the US policy of intervention has in fact generated results that are the opposite of the intended outcomes. In the past years, Iraq has become a point of attraction and a training area for terrorists, whereas the US allegations about an active Iraqi WMD program and about Saddam Hussein's alleged connections to the al-Qaida group have proven to be baseless. And instead of developing into a stable democracy, the country - de-

spite democratic elections - has been descending into civil war since the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime. There is an increasing danger that the power vacuum in Iraq may destabilize the entire region and become a central source of instability for the West for years to come.

Necessity of a US change of course

According to the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" agreed by the National Security Council in November 2005, Iraq is to be transformed into a peaceful, united, stable, and secure country, integrated into the international system of states, and a staunch US ally in the so-called "Global War on Terror". US troops are to remain in Iraq until a representative Iraqi government is able to provide security on its own. The strategy paper envisages measures in three areas to achieve this end. In terms of security policy, the terrorists must be defeated, the resistance must be neutralized, and the buildup of Iraqi security forces must be speeded up. Politically, a national consensus for democratic power-sharing must be found. Finally, at the economic level, the infrastructure must be rebuilt and the Iraqi economy must be modernized.

Despite the enormous expenses of over US\$300 billion that the US has already incurred, these goals are now a distant and unlikely prospect. The approximately 160,000 coalition troops currently stationed in Iraq have not been able to staunch the violence or restore public order. Meanwhile, the constellation of the conflict has become increasingly complex since the end of Sunni rule in 2003. In the early stages, the resistance consisted mainly of attacks

by secular supporters of Saddam Hussein, as well as religious Sunni and foreign Wahhabi extremists, against the occupation forces and the new rulers. Since the February 2006 bombing of the Shi'ite Golden Mosque of Samarra, the fight against US forces has been increasingly overshadowed by a bloody sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites that has brought the country to the brink of civil war. Added to this is an ethnic conflict between Arabs and Kurds (as well as Turkmen) in northern Iraq that has not been at the center of attention so far, but has a potential for serious escalation. The increasing political and religious fragmentation of Iraq is reflected by the large number of Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurdish militias, which taken together already command between 180,000 and 250,000 fighters today. Rampant crime is another problem contributing to the destabilization of the country. Altogether, the violence in Iraq has caused the deaths of more than 3,000 coalition troops, more than 5,500 members of the Iraqi armed forces, and several tens of thousands of civilians since 2003. Furthermore, the UN believes that the conflict has dislocated more than 200,000 persons who have either fled the country or become internally displaced.

At the political level, the mutual distrust between Shi'ites and Sunnis, as well as Kurdish aspirations to wide-ranging autonomy, have made it impossible to reach compromise solutions for key issues, such as the distribution of oil resources and building efficient national security forces and political institutions. Due to the continuing violence, the current Iraqi government is barely capable of action outside of Baghdad's Green Zone, where its members are guarded by coalition troops. As a result, economic development has been largely non-existent to date (with the exception of the Kurdish North), and the unemployment rate remains between 30 and 40 per cent. Furthermore, the weakness of the Iraqi state has increasingly opened up avenues of influence for the neighboring states. Today, Iran in particular maintains in close contact with the political and religious leaders of the Iraqi Shi'ites and supports their militias with funds, logistics, and arms. But countries like Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are also rapidly expanding their networks in Iraq.

The current state of affairs in Iraq makes the establishment of a unified, democratic state all but impossible. The following two scenarios appear more realistic: Either the

political process will result in a differentiated autonomy plan with strong regional structures, a weak central power, and a limited role for the currently 300,000-strong national security forces. In the mid-term, such a development could lay the groundwork for a certain degree of stability, but Iraq would remain a country weakened by internal conflicts and external influence. Or, alternatively, the political process will collapse completely and the civil war will escalate. Under this scenario, Iraq would become a failed state, which in the long term could result either in a division of the country (into a Kurdish North, a Sunni center, and a Shi'ite South), a fundamentalist religious dictatorship, or the rule of a secular military junta. Such a development might trigger military interventions by neighboring states. Turkey would no more accept the establishment of an independent Kurdish state than Iran and the adjacent Sunni countries would accept a victory of their respective rivals in Iraq.

In any case, the strategic consequences of the US failure in Iraq and the damage to Western interests are already becoming clear. In particular, there is a significant erosion of US influence and credibility in the region, which coincides with Iran's ascent to a regional power that rejects the status quo, a strengthening of radical groups such as Hamas and Hizbollah, a weakening of the pro-Western Arab regimes, and increasing polarization between Sunnis and resurgent Shi'ites. The strategy of democratizing the region, which had been promoted by the US and Europe alike, has been largely discredited, while political Islam continues to gain strength.

Military and political options

Against this background, the future policy vis-à-vis Iraq has been intensely debated in the US for the past months. Although the administration of George W. Bush has for a long time relied on vows to "stay the course" in Iraq, it has become under growing pressure to change its strategy since the defeat of the Republicans in the November 2006 Congressional elections, which were dominated by the Iraq issue. The replacement of Donald Rumsfeld by Robert Gates as US secretary of defense can be seen as representing a loss of influence for the neoconservatives in the administration and a tentative return to a "realist" foreign policy as practiced during the presidency of George H. W. Bush Sr. The importance of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which was chartered by Congress in March 2006 and

has been co-chaired by James Baker, the secretary of state under Bush's father, has increased accordingly. The US administration will find it difficult to ignore the recommendations of this commission, which were published on December 6, 2006.

What options remain for the US in Iraq? Despite pre-election campaigning, a majority of the US political and military elite, including the Baker Commission, accepts that a quick end of the US military action in Iraq would have disastrous consequences

Recommendations of the Baker Commission

Immediate "Diplomatic Offensive"

- Create Iraq International Support Group
- Include all neighbor states of Iraq
- Engage Iran and Syria
- Include other key states in and outside the region

Deal directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict

- Renewed and sustained US commitment to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace
- Direct talks with, by, and between all parties involved

Reduce number and change mission of US forces in Iraq

- Iraqi government should accelerate assuming responsibility for Iraqi security
- US should increase the number of US military personnel imbedded in and supporting Iraqi Army units
- In parallel, US combat forces could begin to move out of Iraq
- By the first quarter of 2008:
 - ▮ All combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out
 - ▮ US combat forces deployed only in units embedded with Iraqi forces

Make continuing support for Iraqi government conditional

- Support Iraqi government achieve milestones on national reconciliation, security, and governance
- If insufficient progress by Iraqi government, US should reduce its political, military, or economic support

throughout the region and would not be in the interests of the US. Even if some important voices in Washington argue that the US forces have become an obstacle preventing a solution in Iraq, the US can be expected to modify goals and strategies, but will not leave Iraq to the Iraqis, even though the experts largely agree that no miracle cure will be found and that what remains is only an exercise in damage limitation. The focus of US policy towards Iraq can therefore be ex-

pected to be directed towards stabilization instead of transformation, with the primary goal of preventing a territorial breakup of the state.

As far as the necessary military and political measures are concerned, several suggestions have already been on the table even prior to the report of the Baker Commission. In the military sphere, the three main variants under discussion have been an increase of US troops in Iraq, a phased troop reduction (and/or pullback of US forces to fortified US bases) possibly linked to a timetable, and increased training of Iraqi security forces by US military advisers. The first option would aim at suppressing the resistance, but is hardly feasible due to lack of public support in the US and troop shortages. According to the second variant, which takes into account US domestic political considerations, a reduced visibility of US forces in Iraq should provoke less uprisings against them, but this would hardly help to reduce the sectarian violence between Shi'ites and Sunnis. Finally, the third scenario also aims to reduce the strain on the coalition forces, but will not be sufficient to stabilize Iraq. With its key recommendations, the Baker Commission has embraced a combination of options 2 and 3. While the Bush administration is unlikely to dismiss this approach entirely, it is bound to remain reluctant about both a timetable and a fast withdrawal of troops.

However, as emphasized by the Baker Commission, purely military measures will not suffice to safeguard the long-term unity of the state of Iraq together with a minimum of political stability. Rather, the key to averting failure will lie in the political realm, with the issue of national reconciliation being crucial. Three major political options have been under discussion in this respect: Involvement of neighboring countries in the search for a political solution; intensification of Western efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and stronger engagement of European countries in the pacification of Iraq. Again, these options are not mutually exclusive.

Difficulty in regionalizing the quest for a solution

Although Iraq's neighbors will not be able to stop the fighting in Iraq either, their involvement could be conducive to a de-escalation of violence and bring progress in the search for a political solution. None of these states stands to gain from a fragmentation of Iraq, as can be seen from the

fact that since the fall of Saddam Hussein, their representatives have already met several times at the ministerial level for informal consultations on border security and reconstruction. Unsurprisingly, conducting a more systematic dialogue with Iraq's neighbors is a key recommendation of the Baker Report, which specifically suggests an immediate diplomatic offensive to create an Iraq Support Group.

However, for the Bush administration, this approach also raises some serious questions, as it implies far-reaching changes of course in US Middle Eastern policy in two respects: First of all, engaging with Iran and Syria would require Washington to jettison its current strategy of isolating these states. Those who demand that Iran support a Middle East peace process or suspend uranium enrichment as preconditions for dialog fail to recognize that Tehran and Damascus currently have the upper hand in the regional power struggle and will, in turn, demand their own diplomatic price for cooperation in Iraq. Secondly, a policy of increased cooperation with authoritarian neighboring states would force the US to deemphasize its strategy of democratization well beyond Iraq.

Whether Bush is prepared to undertake such a far-reaching change of strategy remains to be seen. Important voices in Washington point out that no compromise solutions will be possible with Tehran and Damascus anyway. US concessions to Iran on the nuclear issue, for example, would cause grave concern not only in Israel, but also among the Arab states. Also, Washington is unlikely to be able to meet Syria's interests concerning Lebanon and the Golan Heights. On the other hand, despite these reservations, the US will hardly be able to stabilize Iraq in the long term without direct talks with Iran and Syria. Also, in view of the common interest in avoiding a breakup of the Iraqi state, there should be a substantial potential for pragmatic cooperation even without a fundamental US-Iranian rapprochement (in the sense of a Grand Bargain). It is not yet clear, however, to what extent Iraq's neighbors are interested at all in cooperation with Washington – a course of action that would have little popular support and that might even provoke reprisals from radical religious groups.

What role for Europe?

Another option that is worth considering, propagated first by the British government and now also by the Baker Commission, is

to improve the situation in Iraq through progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in terms of its potential effectiveness and feasibility, it is less promising than the regionalization strategy. Stable relations between Israel and the Palestinians and possibly between Israel and Syria would of course be desirable as they are likely to bring more regional stability and roll back the influence of extremist forces. Yet, they would hardly help to defuse the conflict between Sunni and Shi'ites in Iraq. Furthermore, this option would again entail a marked change of course in the White House from a one-sided pro-Israel policy towards a more mediatorial position, which Bush may find difficult to accomplish during the remainder of his presidency.

Finally, an option discussed mainly in European think-tanks is that of a greater role for the Europeans in the Iraq issue. Its attitude before and immediately after the invasion notwithstanding, the US government today would probably be interested in enhanced cooperation with the EU members. However, the Europeans have failed to conduct a strategic debate on Iraq since the bitter internal European and transatlantic conflict over the invasion in 2003. While the EU is an important actor in the areas of humanitarian assistance and economic reconstruction (the latter currently being largely suspended), its political participation in the quest for a solution has so far been marginal. No NATO or EU troops should be expected to deploy to Iraq for the foreseeable future. Yet, if the search for a solution were to be regionalized, the EU's relations with Iran and its leverage vis-à-vis Turkey and, to some extent, Syria could be valuable, just as its expertise in regional cooperative security and reconciliation processes. European *schadenfreude* at the current US difficulties in Iraq would be inappropriate. If the stabilization of Iraq fails, there will also be detrimental results for European security. This is why the Europeans should encourage the Bush administration to adopt the political recommendations of the Baker Commission, in particular.

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