

Iraq: After Baker
by Rod Lyon

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Although it is now only two weeks since the report from the Iraq Study Group was handed down, it is clear that it will not have a formative influence on US policy on Iraq. Already Bush seems to be distancing himself from the Study Group, first by his commissioning of further studies, and second by his delay in laying out a new plan for Iraq until after the Christmas break. Further, his statements over the past two weeks show a president who is not prepared to compromise on the objectives underlying his policy on Iraq. Much of the logic set forth in November 2005 in the National Security Council's publication *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* continues to colour Bush's recent statements.

The Baker-Hamilton Study Group—unkindly described by Zbigniew Brzezinski as 'an elite Washington "focus group", composed of esteemed individuals not handicapped by much historical or geopolitical familiarity with the region's problems'—submitted its report to President Bush on 6 December. The report (commonly referred to as the Baker report) outlined well the complex nature of the problem, including weak governance, sectarian divisions, escalating violence, and unhelpful neighbours. It noted that the ability of the US to control outcomes in Iraq was diminishing and the ability of the Sunni insurgency and the fragmenting Shia militias to make life more intolerable there was increasing. But the report was not 'user-friendly'. Its seventy-nine recommendations were not prioritised. Indeed, readers were told they must accept all the recommendations as a complete package. Almost no-one has. Even the Democratic Party's leaders in the new Congress haven't raced to embrace the report's findings.

Bush knows a new policy is needed, if only for the simple reason that the current policy is not working. He has said that he will outline his own thoughts on a new approach in January. Still, the strategic log-jam is proving hard to crack. Bush looks determined to keep his initial objectives intact: at the swearing-in ceremony for the new Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, on 18 December, Bush continued to speak of his goal of 'a unified democratic Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself and defend itself, and be an ally in our struggle against extremists and radicals.' But within the administration there seems to be no consensus now on how that objective can be achieved. Is it achieved by putting US support behind the Shia majority, or behind the Sunni minority, or behind a policy of national reconciliation? Does it require a larger US footprint in Iraq or a smaller one?

Baker's recommendations

The Baker report essentially argued the case that Iraqis needed to step up and take responsibility for their own country. It argued for a 'national reconciliation' strategy, despite its own finding that 'many of Iraq's most powerful and well-positioned leaders are not working towards a united Iraq'. And it argued that case within a broader judgment: that Iraq could not be stabilised except in the context of greater regional commitment to such an outcome.

But the report also contains a number of sub-themes less noticed by the public debate about its recommendations. It says, for example, right at the start of its assessment, that

'Iraq is vital to regional and even global stability, and is critical to US interests. It runs along the sectarian fault lines of Shia and Sunni Islam, and of Kurdish and Arab populations. It has the world's second-largest known oil reserves. It is now a base for international terrorism, including Al Qaeda.'

Those judgments tell Bush—up front on pages 1 and 2—that he can't quit.

The report's recommended approach depends heavily upon two critical variables: the ability to persuade regional neighbours—in particular Iran and Syria—as part of a wider 'support group', to help broker a more peaceful future in Iraq, and the ability of the Iraqi security forces to pick up more of the burden of internal conflict during the next fifteen months. Neither condition might be satisfied.

Regionally, Iran and Syria have ambiguous incentives. The Baker report argues that 'no country in the region will benefit *in the long term* from a chaotic Iraq', but it is not clear that such a judgment will guide regional ambitions during the next 12 to 18 months. Further, the diplomatic initiative that the US is meant to launch now to build the 'support group' for Iraq is itself hostage to the administration's lame duck status. Regional countries will calculate that—in 24 months—there won't be a Bush administration, and power in Iraq might still be up for grabs.

Internally, the Iraqi security forces have not so far proven themselves capable of handling the growing violence. Indeed, elements of the security forces—especially within the police force—seem to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. While the Baker report is correct that 'the most important questions about Iraq's future are now the responsibility of Iraqis', there is little evidence that Iraqis constitute one coherent political entity. A *New York Times* headline captured this point just a few days ago: 'Iraq's biggest failing: there is no Iraq'.

Bush's thinking

So the report of the Iraq Study Group does not tell us what President Bush is going to do in Iraq. And Bush has been out canvassing other views, including views from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council. So far, media coverage suggests President Bush might yet be attracted to one more round of incrementalism in Iraq: namely the deploying of a further 20,000 or 30,000 troops for a relatively short period to help 'stabilise' Baghdad, the perceived centre-of-gravity of the struggle for Iraq. Colin Powell has already gone public with his view that a temporary increase in troop levels probably won't help. And the figures being canvassed don't seem to be of an order that would make a major difference.

But Bush is reluctant to give up in Iraq. In his view, Iraq is still the lynch-pin in two different 'wars': both the War on Terror and the struggle to reshape the long-term political landscape of the Middle East. Walking away from Iraq would send a worrying message about US engagement on both of those wars. If Bush really does believe that the War on Terror is a 50-year struggle, he won't be easily persuaded to abandon the cause. Quitting isn't good strategy, even though it might be good politics. Baker's strategy of empowering the local players could help, but not if it weakens the US's own position in relation to those broader wars.

Middle East security

Iraq can't now be stabilised without reaching some new agreement on Middle Eastern security. And one point is clear: after the Coalition's intervention in Iraq, Middle Eastern security cannot simply go back to the *status quo ante*. So it matters very much what sort of Middle East the Coalition leaves behind. The terms of the disengagement are central to how we will judge its outcome. A precipitate withdrawal would probably increase Sunni-Shia tensions, not merely within Iraq itself but more broadly across the region. There would be a certain irony in having the Shia fight Al Qaeda terrorists in Iraq. But at the regional level the results would not be pretty. If the US puts its efforts behind the Shia, Sunnis—more numerous than Shia across the Arab world—would start drawing their own conclusions about the reliability of the US as a strategic partner.

Broader Middle Eastern security is already undergoing wrenching change, as Richard Haass made plain in a recent piece for *Foreign Affairs* magazine. The principal effects of that change

will be to increase the influence of local actors and to dilute the influence of external players. The region's oil reserves will help make key local regimes—in particular Iran and Saudi Arabia—more resistant to diplomatic pressure, whether for regime change or policy adjustment. In Haass's scenario, Iraq is likely to remain a weak, divided country for some time, prone to regular sectarian violence.

Vali Nasr has written in his recent work, *Shia Revival*, of how Middle Eastern security is changing as the 'old' Middle East—dominated by authoritarian Arab regimes—gives way to a 'new' order:

'The old Middle East lived under the domination of its Arab component and looked to Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus—those ancient seats of Sunni caliphs—as its "power towns"...The new Middle East coming fitfully into being—its birth pangs punctuated by car bombs but also by peaceful protests and elections—is defined in equal part by the identity of Shias, whose cultural ties and relations of faith, political alliances, and commercial links cut across the divide between Arab and non-Arab.'

But it is far from clear that the 'old' order has abandoned the contest. Moreover, some might argue that Iraq is more strategically important now than it was in 2003, precisely because of the strengthening Iranian position and the conflict in Lebanon. Geopolitically, Iraq has formed something of a buffer between the Shia and the Sunni worlds, so events there are central to the changing shape of Middle Eastern security.

Recent evidence suggests Saudi Arabia is experiencing its own strategic re-orientation to the shifting events in the Middle East. That evidence includes the abrupt resignation of the Saudi ambassador in Washington, and a piece in the *Washington Post* in late November by a Saudi strategist, Nawaf Obaid, saying that Saudi Arabia would have no choice but to prop up Sunni insurgents in Iraq if the US were to withdraw. Obaid's views might not reflect official policy, but it would be no surprise to see the Saudis becoming more active strategic players in their own right. Their own immediate region would certainly look much more threatening without a stable Iraq as a buffer zone.

Conclusion

Bush has a difficult decision in front of him. He shows no sign of abandoning his original objective in Iraq, nor of walking away from his judgment that the consequences of failure there are too high to be acceptable. In his interview with the *Washington Post's* reporters on 19 December, he interpreted the recent mid-term elections as a signal that Americans were looking for progress in Iraq, not that they want to abandon the mission there. So he is at least as likely to expand the mission in Iraq as to contract it. He will still need the support of the Iraqi Government for any strategy he adopts. The recent Australia–US ministerial talks in Washington suggest the current Australian Government could quite happily accept a continued Coalition mission in Iraq, and perhaps even an expanded one. If Bush does decide to commit much larger forces, it is likely that Australia will receive fresh requests for additional deployments.

Iraq is going through a difficult time. But it is far from clear that either it or the region would look much better if the Coalition withdrew.

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