World
Security
Institute

The Future for Iraq
Realities and Requirements

The American people sent a clear message on Nov. 7 that they will no longer accept the current course in Iraq. As a result, we have finally seen admissions of mistakes and failures, and long-overdue accountability. We have heard the choices regarding the future role of the United States in Iraq, from "cut and run" or "stay the course" to the Pentagon's so-called "go big," "go long," or "go home," and we now wait in anxious anticipation for the recommendations of the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group.

We will no doubt get some good ideas from the study group to add to the steady stream of ideas – good and bad – from politicians, pundits, think tank strategists, and many others over the past months and years who have been engaged with this conflict. What follows in this piece are some thoughts on what to do with those ideas, and a few added thoughts as well. Also included are some suggestions for what realities should be acknowledged before any plan can be advanced, a recommended structure for implementing any action plan for future U.S. involvement, and a list of requirements, in five areas – political, economic, security,

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social, and information/communications – that must be addressed in any truly comprehensive proposal. Given the mandate from the American people as a result of the mid-term elections, it is essential to get this right, now, or chance losing any support to see this through to a positive outcome.

THE REALITIES

The first reality we should acknowledge is that there is no brilliant short-term strategic option or stroke of genius waiting to be unveiled. We have missed too many opportunities, and have created too much irreparable damage via the mistakes that were made, for that to be possible. We are now faced with a complex set of problems that will take time, commitment, resources, skill, and some luck to work through.

The second reality is that we cannot simply pull out, as much as we may want to. The consequences of a destabilized and chaotic Iraq, sitting in the center of a critical region of the world, could have catastrophic implications.

The third reality is that there is no short-term solution. It will take years to stabilize Iraq. How many? I believe at least five to seven, which doesn't mean it has to be five to seven years of living with the current situation. It means we could see a steadily improving and stabilizing Iraq over that time.

The fourth reality is that the problem cannot be solved by simply addressing the security issues. Viable institutions must be built in addition to the military and police. Security is clearly a priority, and nothing else can take hold if the security environment is not reasonably stable. But security alone is not the answer.

THE STRUCTURE

The first step, before we can entertain or consider implementing "good ideas," is to establish a structure to vet or screen recommendations; oversee and plan implementation; monitor progress and determine resource requirements; garner regional and international support; and integrate efforts. It will do us no good to have a disjointed set of ideas dumped on President George W. Bush and his administration for cherry picking. Nor will it work to farm out the selected ideas to various government agencies to implement independently.

No other time in history begs more for interagency integration and cooperation within the U.S. government. The various stove-piped agencies, especially the departments of Defense and State, have traditionally and famously been dysfunctional as a cooperative entity. We can no longer afford the dysfunction and lack of coordination, especially in this situation. The structure proposed would be set up at three levels to ensure integration and coordination of all efforts in Iraq.

Bipartisan Executive Group

At the head of this proposed structure should be an executive or steering group. The members should be of the caliber of the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group. This group should provide continuous oversight and recommendations, and report periodically to the president and the Congress. Such a move would give this group and its efforts credibility in the region – internationally and domestically. The group would have the stature and prestige necessary to convene high-level international and regional conferences and summits, as some have recommended, in order to solicit support and involvement. The establishment of this group could also remove politics, as much as possible, from the equation and ensure that all views have a fair hearing.

Interagency Task Force

This organization would report to the president, the National Security Council principals, and the Bipartisan Executive Group. It would be responsible for program development, integrated planning, interagency coordination, monitoring the implementation of programs, and resource determination. It would have five reconstruction components or subgroups. They would be in the areas of political reconstruction support, economic development, security, social programs, and information and communications programs. The task force would also have a regional and international coordination component.

Implementation Teams

On the ground, we need quality implementation teams, working closely with the military and Iraqis at every level, to put into effect the coordinated programs developed by the Interagency Task Force. They would be task-organized based on the programs being implemented. Members would report to their respective agencies of government, as well as to the task force.

Assembling the Structure and Assigning its Members

If we learned anything from the experience with temporary ad hoc organizations such as the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, it's that simply selecting well-intentioned people cannot be the sole criterion for success. We need to staff these organizations with people who have subject matter expertise as well as regional and cultural savvy. This is a case where the best and the brightest are needed. We also need the reporting chains to be structured so that stove-piped bureaucracy does not restrict information flow, and interagency bickering does not prevent the healthy exchange of views, vertically or horizontally.

This recommended structure will not be well-accepted by the existing governmental establishment. Only the military understands integrated task organization for the mission. It's time for interagency adoption of this concept for extraordinary circumstances where existing governmental structure is inadequate to meet the coordination and integration demands of the task. The U.S. government has grappled with the issue of interagency integration for as long as there have been separate agencies. There is a clear consensus that the current structure is dysfunctional, and now is the time and opportunity to test a new approach.

THE REQUIREMENTS

All adopted ideas that get turned into implementation efforts at this point must answer a basic question, or meet a basic requirement, in each of the areas outlined below. To neglect any area will make successful stabilization more problematic.

Political

How do we help the Iraqi government succeed? The government in Iraq is a fragile one, under tremendous pressure from internal and external sources. The U.S. government is part of that pressure. Demands are made that may be beyond the ability of that government and its leaders to deliver. This is a fragmented society that has never known a true representative government, let alone democracy; the new system has been foisted upon them in a rapid-fire series of elections. The Iraqi society needs help. It is coping with monumental problems. Under the stress of near civil war, Iraqis are trying to sort out contentious constitutional issues such as local versus federal authority, revenue sharing, the role of Islam in governance, and the status of militias.

This society has no history of anything other than authoritarian rule, so decision-makers get a cacophony of views from mutually distrustful elements of an unnatural state. The Iraqi government needs technocratic advice and expertise. International support in this area would be best. It should be in the form of advisory groups that can offer advice, options, recommendations, etc., for consideration on each of the plaguing issues that confront Iraq's legislative and executive branches. Iraqis also need the help and support of mediation experts, preferably non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that specialize in mediation and facilitation. In the end, the sectarian factions will need to hash out their differences at a peace table. The U.S. administration may not like the attendees, but Iraqis

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will need to sort it out among themselves. They can't do it without the support of neutral, trusted facilitators.

To function, all governments need bureaucratic institutions. A requirement exists to build these in Iraq. They must be reasonably effective and non-corrupt. Again, international support should be generated to help form these agencies. This is not asking for boots on the ground, but technocratic support and advice. In the end, a society struggling to cope with a hostile environment needs the viable institutions that allow it to survive and eventually prosper. The best way to help Iraq succeed is to help Iraq build institutions that give it the basis to survive and grow. These will be the political, economic, security, and social institutions necessary for stability.

For those who would advocate a split state – who would cave in to the ethnic, tribal, and religious differences that pull at the cohesion of this artificially created state – it is important to remember what the United States stands for. It is the beacon for those who want to live in a world that doesn't divide itself along such lines. As much as Americans believe represent-ative government is a right of all men and women, so are the cherished freedoms that unite Americans above its social differences.

Besides, a partitioned Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd set of states simply will not work. A Sunni state would be landlocked and sorely lacking in natural resources to sustain itself; the Shiites would populate a sort of rump state in the south and encourage Shia populations in other states in the Gulf to separate; and the Kurds would also be landlocked, with Turkey looking over their shoulders, listening for them to utter any word of independence, at which time Ankara would react. Separating these three does not make sense and will exacerbate tensions to a point that could easily be destabilizing to the entire region. It will also send the wrong signal to others in the world who believe that tribal, ethnic, or religious identities should be the only basis for establishing states.

Economic

How do we help build a viable Iraqi economy? Next to a secure environment, the development of a viable economy is the most critically important task. Iraqis want jobs. They want a way to make a decent living to support their families and have a happy life. Companies that are labor-intensive must be a priority. Investment is needed. A series of business development conferences sponsored by regional states, such as Jordan, with international support could encourage investment in companies vetted by U.S., international, and Iraqi government agencies to ensure their viability and integrity, and would be a sound beginning. The companies could get priority of contracting based on continuous auditing to ensure credibility.

The continued use of third-country nationals to work on lucrative contracts is a source of discontent that works against stabilization. Businesses and companies in more secure areas could be the start-up programs to encourage those in less secure areas, as an incentive, to cooperate to remove destabilizing elements. An astronomically high unemployment rate is a breeding ground for those who want to recruit dissidents to their cause.

American and international business executives could be enlisted to help with business-development ideas and mentoring programs for Iraqi business leaders. Partnerships, investment opportunities, and sponsorships could result, where appropriate, in the generation of positive economic activity.

Security

How do we build a competent and credible security force capable of dealing with the complex problems threatening Iraq? Military theorist Sun Tzu advised that we should first know our enemy. Has the administration tried in the case of Iraq? At first they were simply labeled "dead enders" and "insurgents," yet there seems to be a much more mixed bag of threats. We have the al-Qaida elements, the remnant ex-Saddam Hussein supporters, the criminals, the sectarian militias, and the home-grown insurgents: five enemies and counting. Does one size fit all in terms of dealing with them? Can one negotiate with certain elements and not others? Are the strategy and tactics the same for all?

It's not clear whether the United States is battling an

insurgency, a war on terrorists, a civil war, or all of the above. The administration has chosen to counter these disparate threats by creating an Iraqi security force focused on conventional combat units and police. How many Civil Affairs units have we created in the Iraqi forces? What about Psychological Operations units? Or Counter-Intelligence units? How many Iraqi medical, dental, veterinary, or engineer units accompany combat units into areas to win hearts and minds? Do Shia and Kurdish troops kick in the door in Sunni provinces, and how is that received?

Imagine sending the New York National Guard to Alabama to handle a civil disturbance problem rather than having the Alabama National Guard be the first responders. The question decision-makers should ask is whether we are creating the right kind of security forces for the threat. Mass, combat power and numbers may not be the best answer. The type and quality of units and their ability to connect to the people should have greater priority.

The coalition forces in Iraq are confronting a problem with the local militias. Since the initial operation had inadequate U.S. forces from the start, and thus were unable to prevent the evolution of the militias, the military forces are stuck with them. What is the solution? To confront them at this point could embroil the military in an all-out civil war. Can we offer a more enticing alternative? Could a local National Guard force be created to be a bridge between the locals and the national forces? Could militia members and potential future members be lured by better paychecks to serve in local units that offer missions such as civil affairs, local security, and construction that make their community better off and ensure their security, while cooperating with national forces?

Like the U.S. National Guard, these units could be federalized and have clear accountability and transparency, yet respond in the first instance to local authority. This approach, or something similar, could offer an acceptable alternative to the militias and make an Iraqi government decision to disband them more palatable.

There has been heated debate over U.S. troop levels in Iraq. Clearly, those levels have been inadequate, despite contentions that they are sufficient. Military forces have been unable to secure lines of communications and logistics and unable to interdict the enemy's lines running across open borders. The forces have played, in the words of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., "whack a mole" in moving units around to higher threat areas, exposing areas left behind to the return of hostile forces.

The principle behind the stated "Secure, Hold, and Build" strategy of the military requires holding and staying in an area long enough for the building process to be effective. Moving in and out or occupying with too few troops ensures the building process will fail. More troops are needed. The United States does not, however, have the force structure in the Army and Marine Corps to sustain even the current levels over the long haul. The U.S. military could, with difficulty, support a short-term increase in force if the increase would provide the security momentum to jump-start other programs.

Eventually, the U.S. military presence should be phased into a greater support role to Iraqi units as they become more capable, and eventually into a regional presence as back-up. The administration should continue a robust Security Assistance Program to Iraqi security forces for the long term and look to integrating them into a sorely needed regional security arrangement. This sequence requires a detailed and phased plan based on goals and conditions understood by Iraqi and American leaders.

Social

As much as we claim to understand that this is a struggle for hearts and minds, the U.S. administration has failed to win that battle. The Iraqi people have not bought into the concept of a unified Iraq as the best outcome for them – an Iraq worth fighting for. They have retreated behind their sectarian identities. The bad guys have created the necessary fear, apathy, or support for them to survive in the midst of the people. If the people saw them as the obstacles to a more secure and better life, they could not exist.

The people need to be engaged, and they must have a voice. Mediation efforts to sort out the differences

between groups have to be implemented down to the neighborhood level. Youth programs, much like the Seeds of Peace, should be created to bring together young people to connect across sectarian lines before the hatred sinks in and drives them toward an ethnic or religious identity that prevents them from connecting. The "brain drain" causing educated Iraqis to flee must be reversed to ensure that the capacity for the society to function with quality leadership and skilled members is maintained. Programs such as these, that bring the people into the process of building a unified Iraq, are a necessary ingredient to success. The people cannot be uninvolved bystanders.

Information and Communications

Are the administration's messages reaching the Iraqi people? Iraqi leaders, with the help of Americans, must launch an effective information campaign – a national dialogue, a reconciliation program, a cathartic vetting of all the problems in Iraq. The trial and conviction of Saddam Hussein should have begun that process, but it failed to do so. Instead, it became a circus that had a greater polarizing effect rather than a uniting one. A program to use all media to engage and involve all levels of society should be developed for open discussion of the issues that divide, and cause friction and distrust. It should also be a public forum for soliciting recommendations for resolving issues and working together. Inter-sectarian groups should be formed to promote the dialogue and engage the differing communities. Media sources need to be effectively developed and incorporated to provide the means for dialogue and communication.

Regional and International Engagement

Can the administration get international and regional support to help in stabilizing Iraq? U.S. officials are now running around the world trying to solicit support to help America out of the mess that's been made in Iraq. This will be a tough sell, since the United States rejected the UN process at the outset and bruised many allies with arrogant rhetoric and lack of consultation. One would suspect that the administration

will now hear certain conditions laid down in exchange for their help. In the region, international actors will want a broader strategy that includes a region-wide security arrangement to replace the now shattered one. They will want re-engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and more direct diplomacy to help bring into the fold outliers such as Syria and Iran. They will want the United States to work with them to improve relationships and images on each side.

International involvement beyond the region will be dependent on some of the same conditions, but will also involve political and economic access and a voice that had been previously denied. Although boots on the ground may be a bridge too far for newly acquired allies at this point, burden sharing, political support and involvement, security training, and economic development support, among other things, can be secured.

CONCLUSION

As stated previously, we are not wanting for ideas on how to stabilize Iraq. It will do us no good, however, just to produce a menu of ideas with no cohesive and comprehensive means to implement them. This requires planning, organization, clear direction, and true competence in the ranks. That is the principal message conveyed here. The ideas and proposals offered here may not be the best, or even viable. They are offered to spur thinking and show how they might fit into a critically needed structure necessary for any ideas to be translated into credible action. Even the structure proposed may not be the best, but again, the point is to recognize the need for structure in implementing any ideas.

What we have seen to date is confusion, incompetence and contradiction. We cannot at this point resort to cosmetic, scattershot proposals that have nothing behind them to try to correct the course. We have a last chance to correct things. The American people do not want to see failure. And they will not continue to support something that can't clearly show progress and demonstrate success. ■