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The Iraq Study Group Report: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

James Phillips and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

Politics should end at the water's edge. Americans need a bipartisan Iraq policy that acknowledges that there are no simple solutions and that the nation must invest the resources necessary to secure vital U.S. national interests. The report of the Baker-Hamilton Commission, formally known as the Iraq Study Group (ISG), offers that opportunity. It provides a clear-eyed, balanced assessment of the situation in Iraq and a largely practical set of recommendations to deal with the key military and political challenges facing the country.

The ISG report does clarify some of the ugly dilemmas intrinsic to Iraq and will provide a useful reference point for the ongoing policy debate on Iraq. Its recommendations comprise a sensible and realistic way forward in Iraq, with one major exception: Drawing Syria and Iran into efforts to stabilize Iraq would accomplish little at great expense or even backfire, undermining stability. The ISG's broad approach of reducing U.S. forces' combat role while increasing their role training Iraqi troops and police would put U.S. resources where they can do the most good as Iraq's government tackles the difficult political issues behind the country's current violence. Conversely, as the ISG finds, an abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces would lead to strategic, moral, and humanitarian disaster.

The Good

The Iraq Study Group (ISG) report correctly called for the U.S. to:

Put Security and Stability First. The ISG rightly emphasizes that reducing sectarian violence in Iraq

is essential. This, as the report explains, must be accomplished by the Iraqi government. The Iraqis must work to establish political stability by forging an effective power-sharing agreement that includes moderate Sunni Arab leaders and purging the government of the influence of sectarian militias. The Iraqi government must protect the population and combat the death squads, terrorists, and insurgents that seek to fuel an ever-deepening cycle of sectarian violence.

To these ends, the ISG report concludes that the Iraqis must take more responsibility for their security and that the U.S. military must undertake a disciplined reduction of the combat role of American troops and focus primarily on providing support for Iraqi forces. This is the right approach.

Make the training of the Iraqi army and police a higher priority. The ISG report correctly emphasizes the importance of increasing the strength and effectiveness of Iraqi military and police forces, which were initially neglected in the postwar period. More recently, American advisers have been embedded in Iraqi army units, with good results. The ISG advocates extending this practice to Iraqi police forces to increase their effectiveness, to help root out

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corruption, and to reduce human rights abuses. The ISG also recommends increasing the number of advisers, trainers, and embedded troops from 5,000 to 20,000 to accelerate and intensify training. It stresses the need to assign some of the Pentagon's best officers to training and advisory positions. To assure this outcome, it underscores the importance of making sure that such assignments should be a career-enhancing move for officers.

Reject partition. Seeking stability, some advocate "soft partition" of Iraq into autonomous mini-states of the three major sub-national groups. But this would be a formula for endless conflict because negotiating boundaries acceptable to all the groups would be impossible. Moreover, neighboring states such as Iran and Turkey would be drawn into the factional struggle in support of their Iraqi allies, fanning the flames of regional conflict. Iraq is a mosaic that would disintegrate into hundreds of autonomous territories, not just three. Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and other major cities are inhabited by many different groups and would be mired in unending conflict. Partition could quickly degenerate into murderous ethnic cleansing that would poison relations between Iraqis for decades to come.

Moreover, partition is a question that should be settled by Iraq's sovereign government, not Washington. If the United States drops its goal of a unitary Iraq and calls for partition, it will give undeserved credibility to anti-American conspiracy theories that contend that the U.S. wants to carve up Iraq to weaken the Arabs relative to Israel and the Kurds.

Reject an immediate withdrawal. A rapid pull-out would be a strategic, moral, and humanitarian disaster. Withdrawal would abandon Iraq's nascent democratic government, betray Iraqis who have taken tremendous personal risks to support a democratic government, and undermine U.S. credibility with other allies and adversaries.

The big winners of a quick U.S. withdrawal would be al-Qaeda and Iran. Al-Qaeda would be emboldened and bolstered by a rush of recruits seeking to join what they perceive to be a successfully cascading global jihad. It would use Iraq as a

base for exporting Islamic extremism to surrounding countries and terrorism to the entire world. Iran, meanwhile, would quickly replace the United States as the most influential foreign power in Iraq.

Reject a timetable for withdrawal. The ISG report wisely concluded that troop withdrawals should be based on security conditions on the ground in Iraq, not on political considerations in Washington. The ISG projects that U.S. combat troops would be able to begin pulling out by early 2008, based on the estimate by General Casey, the U.S. commander in Iraq, that Iraqi forces need 12 to 18 months to gain enough capacity to assume responsibility for security throughout the country.

General John Abizaid, the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, warned against a timetable for troop withdrawals in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services committee on November 15: "At this stage in the campaign, we'll need flexibility to manage our force and help manage the Iraqi force. Force caps and specific timetables limit our flexibility."

Advocates of a timetable for troop withdrawals argue that announcing withdrawals would force Iraqi leaders to do more to assume responsibility for security and reach a sustainable agreement on power sharing. But that policy could backfire if it is followed rigidly regardless of the security situation. If a drawdown of U.S. forces is accompanied by an increase in violence, it would be harder to build effective Iraqi security forces and make nervous Iraqi Shiite leaders less willing to take risks to strike a political deal with Sunni leaders.

The Bad

The ISG went astray when it recommended that the U.S. should:

Invite Iran and Syria to play a greater role in Iraq. As Senator Joseph Lieberman noted, "Asking Iran and Syria to help us succeed in Iraq is like your local fire department asking a couple of arsonists to help put out the fire. These people are flaming the fire."¹

Iran and Syria have been very much part of the problem in Iraq and cannot be trusted to be part of

1. CBS "Face the Nation," December 3, 2006.

a genuine solution. Both seek to inflict a decisive foreign policy defeat on the U.S., and both seek to throttle democracy in Iraq because it would pose an ideological threat to the survival of their repressive regimes. Syria's President Bashir Assad leads the world's only Baathist regime after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Assad has harbored high-ranking Iraqi Baathist leaders who continue to finance and direct diehard Baathist insurgents inside Iraq. Syria also allows radical Islamic movements to funnel militants, money, and weapons to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating in Iraq. Iran provides money, arms, sophisticated bombs, and training to Shiite militias, including Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which has staged two bloody uprisings against U.S.-led coalition forces.

Both countries have a long history of supporting terrorism and opposing democracy. Neither can be trusted to fulfill any pledges to help stabilize a democratic Iraq. Washington already has talked to Damascus about cutting the flow of foreign Islamic militants across Syria's border with Iraq. The Assad regime promised to crack down on cross-border movements but has failed to do so, just as it failed to expel Palestinian terrorist groups from its territory despite promising to do so. U.S. efforts to open a dialogue with Iran's revolutionary regime failed in the Carter, Reagan, and Clinton Administrations. There is little reason to expect a different outcome with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is even more hostile to the United States than previous Iranian presidents.

Although neither Iran nor Syria could be counted on to fulfill promises of cooperation, both can be expected to demand a high price in exchange for making promises. Syria would seek international acceptance of a renewed sphere of influence in Lebanon and the shelving of a United Nations investigation that has implicated Syrian officials in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Iran, which continues to ignore the U.N. Security Council's August 31 deadline for halting uranium enrichment, is sure to demand a relaxation of international pressure against its nuclear efforts.

The ISG recognizes some of the risks involved in seeking greater Iranian and Syrian involvement in

Iraq. It warns against making concessions to the two rogue states on other issues in order to secure their participation in an international conference on Iraq. But the problem is that Iran will use a conference as a shield to deflect international pressures on the nuclear issue. It will seek to use its "cooperation" on Iraq to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Europe, which is likely to use diplomatic engagement with Iran as a backdoor to bail out of its half-hearted pledges to impose sanctions on Tehran for violations of its nuclear obligations.

The U.S. should seek to mobilize greater international support for Iraq's young government from the European Union, Russia, China, Japan, and Middle Eastern governments that genuinely support progress in Iraq and have an interest in stabilizing Iraq and containing Iran, such as Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The Bush Administration has already sought greater international efforts in Iraq through the "Iraq Compact," which will lead to greater international aid commitments in exchange for government reforms and an agreement on national reconciliation inside Iraq. This is a better approach than seeking worthless promises, in exchange for great U.S. concessions, from Syria and Iran.

The Ugly Realities

The ISG correctly recognizes some ugly realities about the conflict in Iraq that the Bush Administration and Congress must take into consideration when crafting future U.S. policy:

The struggle in Iraq is both a low-grade civil war and a crucial front in the war against al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's terrorist atrocities have provoked Shia militias to retaliate indiscriminately, fueling sectarian violence and strengthening Sunni Arab support for the insurgency. A full-scale civil war is still avoidable, despite al-Qaeda's determined efforts, but only if Iraqi leaders work together to prevent it.

U.S. troops are the chief obstacle to a worsening civil war, regional instability, and a victory for al-Qaeda. If U.S. troops are withdrawn without a sustainable Iraqi agreement on national reconciliation and power sharing in place, the results will be an increasingly fierce civil war that will draw in Iraq's neighbors and further destabilize the volatile region.

If the U.S. pulls out abruptly, Iraq will become a failed state and a dangerous breeding ground for international terrorists. American neglect of Afghanistan after the 1989 Soviet pullout helped pave the way for a bloody civil war and the rise of the Taliban. Washington cannot afford to make a similar mistake in Iraq. An abrupt pullout from Iraq would have much more severe consequences, given Iraq's oil resources and strategic location in the heart of the Arab world and in close proximity to huge Persian Gulf oil supplies.

Even if the U.S. decides to withdrawal its combat troops, a continued U.S. military presence will be needed to provide logistical support, air support, intelligence, and training for Iraqi forces for years to come. A complete U.S. pullout is not only severely risky but also impractical.

The future of Iraq will be determined by Iraqis more than by Americans. The conflict in Iraq is winnable if the Iraqi government can foster national reconciliation, reach out to secular and moderate Sunni Arab leaders, and strike a power-sharing agreement that will assuage their concerns about Iraq's constitution and the distribution of oil revenues. The United States will play an important supporting role, but Iraqis must take the lead to contain and ease sectarian strife, build a broad-based ruling coalition, and marginalize and eventually disarm the sectarian militias. But if the Iraqi government fails to reach a sustainable power-sharing arrangement with moderate Sunni Arab leaders that drains support from the insurgency, then the security situation will deteriorate regardless of what the United States does.

A Way Forward

The ISG's findings are consistent with the goals and policies of the Administration, with the exception of the recommendation to draw Iran and Syria into an international conference. The ISG advocates policies that are compatible with President Bush's definition of success: an Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself.

The ISG report recognizes that the United States must remain actively engaged in Iraq to provide its fledgling government the best opportunity to avert civil war, humanitarian crisis,

regional instability, and creation of a breeding ground for global terrorists. This report provides an opportunity for all sides of the political spectrum to acknowledge that there are no easy answers in Iraq. Iraq policy often boils down to a choice of lesser evils. As bad as things are now, the situation could rapidly worsen. A sudden withdrawal would lead to the worst-case scenario. The best course is for America to finish the job it started: helping Iraqis secure the future of Iraq.

Such a policy would greatly contribute to America's highest priority, winning the global war against terrorism. Washington must prevent Iraq from becoming a base of operations for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups that target Americans. The United States has a vital interest in building an Iraq that is an ally in the war on terrorism, not an adversary. The United States must also prevent Iraq from falling under the influence of Iran and Syria, two of the world's most dangerous state sponsors of terrorism.

The Bush Administration had hoped that democratic elections would boost stability in Iraq, but they have not yet had a calming effect, in part because many of the sectarian political parties have exacerbated tensions. A stable, democratic Iraq remains a worthy long-term U.S. goal, but this project now rests primarily in Iraqi hands. If the Iraqi government can inch toward political stability while containing the insurgency and denying terrorist groups a base for international operations, that would be a net victory for the United States, even if Iraq remains a far-from-perfect democracy.

As the ISG report recommends, the United States should press the Iraqi government to purge its institutions of members of sectarian militias and to disband the militias. The infiltration of militia members into government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior and national police force, has undercut support for the government. The Maliki government should prepare a detailed timetable for purging government institutions of sectarian influences and demobilizing and disarming the militias, particularly the Mahdi Army controlled by radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The Mahdi Army has played a major destabilizing role by lashing out against innocent Sunni Arabs after terrorist

attacks that targeted Shiites. This kind of vengeance only exacerbates the downward spiral toward open civil war.

Washington must also urge Maliki to reach out to moderate Sunni Arab leaders and negotiate a sustainable power-sharing agreement. Sunni Arab leaders have reasonable concerns about the equitable distribution of oil revenues, amending Iraq's constitution, and gaining a strong voice in a national unity government. These must be addressed. A national consensus is needed to mobilize greater popular support for the government and undercut support for insurgents and militias.

Washington and Baghdad should negotiate mutually acceptable benchmarks for the gradual drawdown and redeployment of U.S. troops. These benchmarks, measured province by province, could include: the size, effectiveness, and degree of training of Iraqi army and police forces; the estimated size and capability of insurgent forces; the degree of popular support for the insurgents compared to the government; the capability of Iraqi forces to defend important oil facilities and other vital infrastructure; the capability of Iraqi forces to interdict the flow of supplies and fighters across

Iraq's borders; and the level of threat to coalition supply lines.

The aim should be to gradually redeploy U.S. forces out of Iraq's cities and out of roles best filled by Iraqis as soon as the Iraqis are able to replace Americans in those areas. U.S. military forces would retain the lead in counterterrorist operations and provide strong support to Iraqi forces fighting the insurgency, but Iraqi forces should increasingly take the lead in defending Iraqi civilians, government facilities, and economic infrastructure. Over time, American forces would act as SWAT teams, not as street cops. This would allow for a gradual drawdown of U.S. forces. However, U.S. servicemen would still be needed for expanded military training, air support, logistics support, intelligence functions and counter-terrorist operations for years to come.

James Phillips is Research Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies, and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow for National Security and Homeland Security, in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.