

## Winning in Iraq:

### Enlisting Iraq's neighbors in facilitating the International Compact with Iraq and enabling a U.S. exit

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The recent agreement in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, the International Compact with Iraq (ICI), sets the nations of the world on a course toward ensuring a stable, unified Iraq will rise from the ashes of four years of unremitting violence. Each of Iraq's immediate neighbors, as well as nations around the world, including, importantly, the United States, reached an agreement with the elected Iraqi leadership to provide a sound economic future for the country after the Iraqis achieve stability. The signatories wait and hope for a reconciliation plan that will stabilize the country and allow the rebuilding to commence. If important changes are not made, that hope will long remain unfulfilled.

The reconciliation plan, which includes passing an oil revenue law, resolving the status of Kirkuk, finding an acceptable roll-back of de-Ba'athification, making important changes to the country's new constitution, and completing other challenging actions, represents the same wish-list of milestones the United States has anticipated for years. These are complex goals that will take additional years to accomplish in some cases.

Meanwhile, the patience of the United States in the face of increasing combat fatalities (the monthly average of fatalities is nearly thirty-eight percent higher for the first half of 2007 than it was for the preceding three years) is at an end. Continuing reference is made to the different and incompatible timelines in Washington and Baghdad. The "surge" of US and Iraqi forces in Baghdad and Anbar province has in some cases repositioned but not reduced the violence, nor has it allowed political space that resulted in the Iraqis reaching compromise and resolving the critical issues. In this environment, the attitude of US voters and their representatives is clear: American forces must be extricated from Iraq. Thus changes must be made to accommodate the differing timelines and to assist Iraq in satisfying the requirements of the ICI.

An additional hazard is present in the increasing chance that involvement in Iraq's internal affairs by its neighbors could touch off a regional conflict. Turkey has shelled Iraqi territory while protesting the lack of US and Iraqi action against the Kongra Gal, the Kurdish People's Congress, (KGK, formerly the PKK) and further vows to protect Turkomen in northern Iraq. Iranian arms continue to be found in the possession of Iraqi

Shiites. Syria, according to the January 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, “continues to provide safe haven for expatriate Iraqi Bathists and to take less than adequate measures to stop the flow of foreign jihadists into Iraq.” Saudi Arabia has vowed to protect Sunnis. A miscalculation by any country or countries could easily touch off a conflict that spills beyond Iraq’s borders, possibly doing severe harm to regional stability and the world economy, not least by interrupting the flow of oil.

The debate continues about whether the US invasion of Iraq served American national interests, whether leaving Iraq now will satisfy more important national interests than will staying, and what will result from departure. Simply put, there are two important decisions facing the United States: to leave or stay, and what to leave behind. It seems clear that an immediate exit is necessary and that a structure must be left to increase the odds of a favorable regional outcome in connection with that exit.

The toll on our national defense capabilities and on our war against al Qaeda makes leaving an important and necessary national objective. Because the toll on active duty units has been unsustainable, as evidenced by newly extended tour lengths, nearly all US National Guard units are no longer fully combat-capable. Consumption rates of munitions and equipment have required that four of our five strategic pre-positioned reserves be raided for assets. Only the reserve for forces charged with fighting off an attack by North Korea remains untouched. Over three thousand five hundred and eighty Americans have lost their lives in Iraq, and well over twenty-six thousand have been wounded. The US Army has been forced to accept people in their forties as well as felons to fill out its ranks. US defenses are significantly diminished by this war.

Fighting in Iraq also constrains the fight against al Qaeda. President Bush and Osama bin Laden agree that Iraq is the central front in the war on terror. The President goes as far as quoting bin Laden to make his own case. However, the main targets of U.S. counter-terrorism policy, bin Laden and his senior lieutenants, evidently are located along the Afghanistan – Pakistan border, about sixteen hundred miles to the east. President Bush insists US forces will not leave Iraq unless the violence there is significantly reduced.

That position hands bin Laden a veto over a US exit. As long as al Qaeda supporters sustain a minimum level of violence, the President will continue to provide more American targets. Through this unfortunate agreement, bin Laden may have doubled the number of Americans he has had a hand in killing.

For bin Laden and Islamist extremists, Iraq is the central front because they can easily kill Americans there. By attracting the US-al Qaeda fight to Iraq, the total violence there may be increased by our presence, not reduced. We must leave Iraq in order to stop providing al Qaeda a fair fight, and to put our effort into finding and arresting or killing bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership cadre on the real central front—their home base. Given enough focus and resources, his capture or death could coincide with his empty declaration of “victory” in Iraq.

As important as leaving Iraq is to American interests, how that exit is accomplished is also vitally important to our interests and to the world’s future. As indicated in the recent National Intelligence Estimate, a sudden withdrawal without ameliorative measures will likely yield disastrous effects, including especially a more sectarian role by the Iraqi national security forces that will lead to an even more bloody civil war. That result, in turn, may lead to a regional conflict involving many or all of Iraq’s neighbors. The global security and economic repercussions could be disastrous.

It is vitally necessary, therefore, to combine a departure with the establishment of effective regional and internal support for Iraq. The country needs centripetal forces that will bring more Iraqis into a peaceful political process and allow the central government to achieve effective sovereignty. This will help ward off both a worsened civil war and a wider conflict. US efforts to achieve these goals have been unsatisfactory. US troops largely lack the regional expertise—the language and cultural literacy—and the legitimacy necessary to succeed. Americans are viewed by wide segments from all sectors of the Iraqi public as a neo-colonial force of occupation, not liberation. The United States was reviled for imposing sanctions before the invasion and has been reviled as an occupying force since then. According to nearly all extant opinion polls, most

Iraqis want coalition forces to leave; most think killing those forces is justified. Stability has thus been almost completely absent.

In this context, it now appears that an Iraq Transitional Assistance Group (ITAG) comprised of Iraq's immediate neighbors and working with the Iraqi government and its citizens, the United States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the United Nations Security Council, provides the best chance of successfully dealing with these challenges. The ITAG, with political and military supervisory functions agreed in conjunction with Iraq's national government and political authorities, will allow the US to withdraw its forces, will allow the Iraqi government time to resolve its internal political conflicts, and will reduce the risk of a regional conflict while increasing the confidence of the Iraqi public in their day-to-day security.

Recent regional conferences, like the ICI and embryonic bilateral diplomatic contacts between the US and Iran and Syria, indicate it is time to turn to Iraq's neighbors for help. Working with its immediate neighbors—Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE and Syria—and with support from the OIC, Iraq can form a more inclusive political culture, lessening the appeal of political violence. The ITAG can provide the necessary support to create an Iraq that is stable, potentially democratic, and non-threatening. It will be challenging but feasible to gain commitment from the neighboring states both to respect Iraqi coherence and sovereignty, and to back that up with an active security stance to stabilize the country. In the context of a US exit strategy, this should not be seen as an American-imposed plan, but as a regional response to the aftermath of an unfortunate war.

Specifically the ITAG political body could function much like the UN High Commissioner in Bosnia, promoting and providing oversight of constitutional changes and new laws to separate and buffer warring factions and to ensure that majority interests and minority political rights are both respected. ITAG should work with the Iraqi government, the United States, and the United Nations Security Council to assure all Iraqis that the central government poses no threat to their rights and liberties.

Concomitant to U.S. military withdrawal, individual ITAG nations, with support from Security Council permanent members and the OIC, can reach out to their co-religionist, ethnic allies, and clients in Iraq and convince them to join the political process and to end support for violent factions. Strong statements that breakaway Iraqi states will not be recognized can condition this pressure.

The more collaboration the ITAG is allowed in Iraqi political decisions, the more success its members will have in drawing Iraqi factions into peaceful politics. For example, ITAG support for a fair and effective oil revenue law and for assured regional water rights will help Jordanian and Saudi representatives draw additional Sunni elements into the government. ITAG members also can help moderate unreasonable expectations held by their local allies. The ICI reconciliation steps include making government actions “open” and “transparent.” This requires a level of trust that seems a very remote possibility at this point. The ITAG political observers can assist in this process by assuring all groups that openness and transparency are, in fact, being realized.

The ITAG political coalition could also bring in governmental and economic expertise to help fill voids in agencies created by de-Ba’athification. Besides helping the Iraqis, this will promise to provide economic partnership and commercial opportunities for ITAG nations, encouraging their participation. The United States should consider establishing a multi-national reconstruction and citizen compensation fund that Iraqi companies and disadvantaged groups can tap to rehabilitate the economy. Preference for awarding contracts must of course go to Iraq, but some contracts should be granted to companies belonging to ITAG states.

Multi-national military and public safety (police) contingents provided by the ITAG states also would embed with and monitor the nascent Iraqi security and police forces, supplanting the withdrawing coalition forces. They should begin by taking on the unsupervised forces, especially police units and the facilities protection service—both widely corrupted with militia influence. A supervised Iraqi national force will increase confidence among Iraqi citizens that neither the central government nor rival militia are

out to destroy them.

An effort also must begin to add observers to militia and insurgency forces that commit to exclusively defensive roles. US Army General David Petraeus has already suggested that these forces must be co-opted to bring peace to the country. Supervision by multinational teams that represent the interests of potential militia targets will help ensure that defensive rather than offensive actions are pursued. Sunni tribes in Anbar province, volunteering to fight against foreign al Qaeda fighters, might be the only exception to this restriction to purely defensive actions, but their operations also must be closely monitored by ITAG observers as US or other weapons are released.

Militia should be allowed to request ITAG supervision or, upon their surrender to ITAG-monitored forces, accept supervision as part of their surrender terms. ITAG supervision may entitle militia members to a salary, logistical support, legitimacy, and perhaps limited immunity as part of a national reconciliation plan. When the violence subsides, members should be moved on to military or police positions or be disarmed and returned to civilian status. ITAG-supervised militias will meanwhile work to ensure that their defended areas are kept free of terrorists and non-Iraqi, non-ITAG elements. Leaders of militia and government forces that conduct actions in defiance of ITAG monitors should be arrested and imprisoned. Persistent failure to abide by ITAG rules should result in the ITAG monitors removing themselves. “Unprotected” militia groups will become legitimate targets of the Iraqi security forces and of further international sanctions.

ITAG supervision will allow an end to the practice of dismissing rogue elements of security forces—a practice that allows them, now trained and armed, to join a militia or the insurgency. Rather than kicking suspected militia members out of Iraqi police units, they should be retained and watched. Supervision by multinational ITAG teams will help ensure these elements behave or are identified as working against the Iraqi state and arrested. ITAG supervision also improves the US clear-hold-build strategy, allowing Iraqi military units to clear, Iraqi militia to hold, and Iraqi civilians to build.

US forces, positioned outside Iraq at bases in Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and perhaps also in Jordan, should contribute logistical and aerial bombardment support for ITAG-observed forces as needed under a Security Council mandate, and continue training and equipping Iraqi units. It is possible that ITAG countries may not have enough resources to properly supervise all Iraqi entities. If this proves true, the Organization of the Islamic Conference should be asked to use its good offices to recruit additional support from extra-regional Islamic states such as Indonesia, Malaysia and perhaps Pakistan or Bangladesh. The United Nations, of course, may also be called upon to provide trusted-nation forces to enhance ITAG supervision.

ITAG members themselves should discuss and agree on the deployment of their force contingents in consultation with the United Nations and with approval of the Iraqi government. The mixed, multi-national nature of the ITAG military contingents must be carefully preserved. An all-Iranian supervisory force traveling with a Shia police unit in Baghdad is potentially a recipe for conflict if not outright disaster. Turkish-only supervision deployed in Kurdish zones could likewise be an unwarranted provocation. In some areas, participation by certain ITAG members may be limited to avert protest while still allowing all members the ability to observe actions in all areas. Conflict must be avoided while preserving the confidence-building quality of the effort.

ITAG military supervision would mark two important shifts in the armed conflict in Iraq. First, opposition to occupying forces will end when the occupying forces are replaced with Iraqi security forces and supervised militia. Second, a supervised and more trustworthy Iraqi national force will reduce its sectarian appearance and assume a more patriotic look. This, in turn, will make recalcitrant opposition forces appear less sectarian and more anti-Iraqi or anti-nationalist. Sunni insurgency groups, for example, will no longer be able to convincingly claim they protect Sunni populations against a threatening Shia government's sectarian forces when Jordanian and Saudi observers vouch for the latter's actions. The battle line will shift slowly from Sunni versus Shia to pro-Iraq national forces versus anti-Iraq rebels. Only groups that favor a partition of Iraq will retain an interest in that fight.

The Iraq Transitional Assistance Group should be created under a UN Security Council resolution and should require annual reauthorization. This legitimizes participation by Iraq's neighbors, further de-legitimizes actions outside the ITAG framework, and allows the US to exercise a veto over reauthorization if the ITAG or its members act against Iraq's national interests. All of Iraq's neighbors are currently seen as *interfering* with Iraqi sovereignty. A UN-sanctioned ITAG allows those neighbors to legally participate in *protecting* Iraq's sovereignty.

Possibly the largest question is how to get the United States, potential ITAG members, and especially Iraq's Shia dominated government to agree to this initiative. In fact, it is in the interests of all to do so. First, as mentioned earlier, the United States is finding increasingly only disadvantages in staying in Iraq. While the US has a moral obligation to repair the damage it has wrought, it is fair to say the US is presently sacrificing too much in the process. The US requires a less costly, more sustainable way to meet its responsibilities to Iraqis and Americans. Besides the obvious benefit of sharing the burden, the ITAG brings advantages the US cannot supply. ITAG members can serve as reassurance for their confessional and ethnic allies inside Iraq, offering stronger, more reliable support for groups fearful of the central government. With cultural and language familiarity not widely available to US representatives and forces, ITAG members will have the potential to be much more effective in supporting political reconciliation steps and in identifying and restraining illegal sectarian operations. The ITAG will allow the US to withdraw military forces from most or all of Iraq while putting the country on track to meet objectives shared by the Iraqis, the International Compact, President Bush and Congress.

ITAG members also have a great deal to gain from participation. They have clients or associates in Iraq about whom they are deeply concerned. No neighbor wants to see an unstable Iraq spiral into deeper chaos and civil war or ignite a regional conflagration. The Iraq Study Group asked a senior Iraqi official which of Iraq's neighbors are interfering in his country. The response was, "All of them." Clandestine support for

various factions provides for ample opportunity to miscalculate. As a result, the current risk for a wider conflict is very high. A structure such as ITAG would greatly reduce that risk by bringing protective actions and remedial advocacy into the open. Hesitancy by some nations to participate can be overcome by establishing a definite U.S. withdrawal date as well as a Security Council commitment to non-recognition of secessionist states. A deadline for joining the ITAG might also be included, since missing the deadline will force a country to wait for the annual Security Council reauthorization to enter the process. Working legally inside the ITAG will be immensely preferable to, and much more effective than, working illegally outside it. All of Iraq's neighbors must sign up to avoid handing an advantage to those states that do participate.

For the Iraqi government this proposal may look like a loss of sovereignty. In truth, it is the opposite. Sovereign governments have both the right and the responsibility to exercise a monopoly on violence in order to provide security for their citizens. The Iraqi government cannot at present meet this critical test. The country is nearly ungovernable, nearly a failed state. Iraq needs help becoming a viable state before any entity can establish full sovereignty. Prime Minister Maliki and the central government cannot peacefully secure the country on their own or with US assistance; they need their neighbors' help. With several ethnic identities and a currently pervasive environment of political violence, only a constitution that guarantees civil rights and individual liberties for all Iraqis along with satisfaction of regional concerns and interests can lead to peace and prosperity. Iraq's Shia population is an absolute majority. They will inevitably benefit in a stable environment of inter-ethnic/inter-regional, democratic accommodation ushered in by the ITAG.

In a February 11<sup>th</sup> Washington Post essay, Lieutenant Colonel Gian P. Gentile, who served in West Baghdad with the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division last year, related the challenge faced in Iraq today. "Residents saw the Sunni insurgents as their final hope for protection from an illegitimate government out to crush them," the Colonel reports. "Shopkeepers, professionals, imams, and others" told him "the solution to ending violence—both insurgent attacks and sectarian killings—was an Iraqi government they saw as

legitimate.” The solution in Iraq, as Colonel Gentile, the NIE, the Iraq Study Group, and so many others have cogently argued, is primarily political. Only when political voice can be counted on to work more successfully than political violence can arms be laid down and lives picked up. The ITAG is the best approach to that end.

### The Way Ahead

It is possible President Bush will not accept a withdrawal without a scapegoat, a person or entity to absorb responsibility and blame if Iraq turns out badly. The President has stated in the past that it will be his successor in the White House who will face the responsibility to withdraw troops. During his visit to Vietnam, he was asked what lessons he had learned. “We’ll succeed,” the President said, “unless we quit.”

Congressional promotion of an Iraq Transitional Support Group may offer two plausible alternatives to scapegoating—a veto-proof majority of support, and the ITAG itself. The addition of the ITAG to a withdrawal proposal such as that sponsored by Senators Carl Levin and Jack Reed or Senators Olympia Snowe and Evan Bayh may garner sufficient bipartisan support to reach that goal. Legislation requiring the administration to work with the UN Security Council and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to create a mandate for the ITAG and to enroll members by a certain date, and a requirement that the administration begin withdrawing US forces by that date regardless of the status of ITAG negotiations, is wise US policy that may attract the endorsement of Senators Lugar and Voinovich and similarly minded Republicans. The President has just announced his intention to appoint a US envoy to the OIC. Iraq will almost certainly be the first topic of discussion for the new envoy. The ITAG should be the second. A US withdrawal should be the third.

If the United States was simply to withdraw—and withdrawal is an inescapable eventuality—the threat posed by Iraq’s chaos would be left to Iraq and its neighbors. The choice, therefore, is whether to leave them unprepared for that challenge or to help them organize to best manage the various threats and to help Iraq meet the requirements for earning support through the International Compact. This is a simple moral and important

political equation. The Iraqi people have suffered under colonial occupation, under post-colonial governmental instability, under Saddam Hussein, under crippling international sanctions, and under occupation again. Every nation has an interest and a responsibility to help stabilize and rebuild Iraq and to bring peace and prosperity to all of Iraq's citizens. If the US continues to "stay the course," it will bear that increasingly unsupportable burden nearly alone. With a UN-mandated OIC-supported Iraq Transitional Assistance Group focused on realizing implementation of the International Compact with Iraq, the burden is shared. The long-suffering Iraqi people deserve our best, combined efforts.

This proposal reached its current form on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

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