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U.S. Policy Options in the Iraq Crisis

JAMES DOBBINS

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**Statement of James Dobbins¹
The RAND Corporation**

U.S. Policy Options in the Iraq Crisis²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives**

July 17, 2007

Whether or not one believes the invasion of Iraq to have been necessary, there is little dispute that its occupation, stabilization and reconstruction have been poorly handled. Many actions have been cited as turning points in this regard, from disbanding the Iraqi army to firing much of its civil service. Personally, I am more inclined to attribute the difficulties American efforts have encountered to two more fundamental and underlying policy choices.

The first of these choices was the low priority assigned to public security. The second was the even lower priority attached to collaboration with neighboring countries.

The first responsibility of any occupying power is the security of the civilian population in its charge. In the spring of 2003, as looters stripped every public edifice in the country to the bare wall, American troops stood passively by, responding to inquiring journalists that preserving public order was not their job. Whose job, one may ask, did they think it was? They had just conquered a foreign country. Had no one reviewed the laws of armed conflict as regard occupation before launching the invasion?

Moral and legal responsibilities aside, experience has shown that the ability of any occupying force to secure the cooperation of a civilian population depends most heavily upon its ability to afford that population protection in return. If an occupied people feel safer by reason of the occupier's presence, they will be inclined to collaborate. If not, then not. The United States failed in this single measure of success from the day Saddam's statue fell. Long before any organized resistance movement emerged the Iraqi population was exposed to the depredations of thieves, rapists, and murderers. For several years thereafter, the primary focus of American military efforts

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was seeking out and destroying resistance elements, rather than securing the civilian population. During these years American military authorities made no effort to tabulate or keep track of civilian casualties, which should have been the primary benchmark of their success or failure.

Neighboring states bear considerable responsibility for the current state of Iraq, but the United States bears even greater responsibility for thinking that the influence of these societies could be safely ignored. If two decades of nation building experience had taught us anything, it should have been the impossibility of holding together failing nations without the cooperation of adjoining states. Nearby societies simply have too much access and too much influence, by reason of proximity, personal relationships and cultural affinity, to be ignored. Neither can these societies be persuaded to eschew interference. After all, it is they, not more distant countries like the United States that will get the refugees, the crime, the terrorism, the endemic disease, and the economic disruption caused by having a failed state on their doorstep. These neighboring societies cannot afford to remain uninvolved, and they will not.

Unfortunately, left to their own devices, neighboring states will tend to exacerbate the disintegration they would generally prefer to avoid. In any failing state, all claimants for power seek foreign sponsors, and all neighboring states back favorites in this contest. As a result, by backing rival claimants for power, they accelerate the breakup they are usually trying to stop. This effect can be avoided only if neighboring governments can be persuaded to exert their influence along convergent, rather than divergent lines, pressing the local political leaders to coalesce rather than to fight.

American success in ending the Bosnian civil war in 1995 depended upon bringing two neighboring states that were fighting a proxy war there, Serbia and Croatia, into the negotiating process. Those states, and their leaders, were personally guilty of the genocide America was trying to stop. Yet Washington engaged these leaders, gave them a privileged status in the negotiations, and then worked with them to implement the peace agreement. President Milosevic and Tudjman both won subsequent elections, based in part on the prestige they had garnered through this connection. Had the Clinton Administration not been willing to pay that price, however, the war in Bosnia would have continued.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States worked with all the very states that had been fomenting civil war in Afghanistan for twenty years. With their help the United States was able to overthrow the Taliban in short order, and then even more quickly replace it with a broadly based government under Hamid Karzai. These achievements were only possible because the United States sought and gained the support of all of Afghanistan's neighbors, to include basing rights in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, over flight rights in Pakistan and diplomatic support from Iran. In fact, Iran played a

decisively positive role in the negotiations that led to the formation, installation and subsequent consolidation of the Karzai government.

Unlike its approach in Afghanistan, the United States entered Iraq on the basis of a proposition that precluded this sort of support. The United States did not invade Afghanistan with the declared objective of making that country a model of democracy, which by its very existence was intended to undermine the legitimacy of all its neighboring regimes, and ultimately lead to their replacement. Had this been its stated intention, Washington would have never achieved the regional support which brought quick success in Afghanistan.

By contrast, the United States did enter Iraq loudly proclaiming the intention to turn that country into a model democracy, the example of which would undermine neighboring regimes and ultimately lead to their replacement. Needless to say, this was not a project that other regional governments were likely to buy into. Nor have they.

In so describing its mission in Iraq, the United States effectively excluded the possibility of securing regional support for its efforts there.

The question before this Committee today is whether there is still a chance for the United States, at this late date, to rectify these two errors, to win the confidence of the Iraqi people and to secure the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors. My answer to the first question is probably not; to the second, possibly, but only if Washington makes such an effort the centerpiece of its Middle Eastern diplomacy for the rest of this Administration's term.

The Administration's latest report to Congress indicates that only very limited progress has been made by the Iraqi political leadership in reconciling their differences over the future shape and direction of their country. The American military does seem to have made some progress in bringing down levels of sectarian violence and securing cooperation of Sunni tribal forces to combat Al Qaeda. Both developments reflect local accommodations which seem quite fragile. The reduced sectarian killings seem to reflect a decision by the Mahdi Army and other Shia militia to stand down temporarily while the American "surge" runs its course. The Sunni militia who are fighting Al Qaeda today could well return to attacking American forces tomorrow.

Opinion polling indicates that the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people want American troops to leave, if not immediately, then soon. A smaller number, but still a majority of Iraqis, actually believe that attacks upon American forces are justified. Under General Petraeus's leadership American forces are finally putting the security of the civilian population at the center of their strategy. Had we done this four years ago, Iraqi attitudes toward the American presence might

have been very different today. At this late stage, however, it seems unlikely that American forces can gain the confidence and thus secure the cooperation of the Iraqi people.

Neither will it be easy to gain the confidence and secure the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors. Nevertheless, all of these governments have strong incentives to avoid a total collapse of the Iraqi state, which would be the most likely consequence of an early and complete American withdrawal. The threat of military disengagement thus could give the United States some potential leverage with these states. To employ that leverage, however, Washington will need to engage them much more intensively than we have to date.

Last December the Iraq Study Group recommended a "diplomatic surge". Two weeks ago, in the Washington Post, former Secretary of State Kissinger did the same. Last week Senators Warner and Lugar introduced legislation to the same effect. No one believes that diplomacy alone will reverse the tide in Iraq, nor can one be certain of obtaining the cooperation of states like Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia, all of whom have been quite hostile to our efforts in Iraq for the reasons I have cited. Those who advocate a diplomatic surge simply believe that trying to engage these and other regional governments is the last, best hope of retrieving something from the impending debacle.

Such a process cannot succeed unless the United States makes stabilizing Iraq its top objective in the region. In 1995 American diplomacy succeeded in ending the civil war in Bosnia because until peace was achieved, nothing else was more important. Other issues in American relations with Russia, our European allies and the Balkan states took second place to ending that war. Competing concerns, including ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and democratization in Serbia were subordinated to that priority.

Similarly, in 2001, the United States succeeded in overthrowing and replacing the Taliban in a matter of weeks because all other objectives were subordinated to that goal. The Bush Administration embraced Pakistan, despite its record of nuclear proliferation and support for terrorism, it stopped hectoring Putin about human rights in Chechnya, and it even collaborated with Iran.

The United States has a number of important and legitimate objectives throughout the Middle East, to include denuclearizing Iran, curbing Syrian support for terrorism, preventing civil war in Lebanon, promoting the emergence of a Palestinian state willing to live at peace with Israel, and supporting democratic forces throughout the region. None of these interests should be abandoned, but some may need to be postponed. There is no way we can achieve, or even advance all these objectives simultaneously. It has never been likely, for instance, that the United

States could stabilize Iraq and destabilize Iran and Syria at the same time, as it has been trying to do.

Statecraft, after all, is all about choosing, prioritizing and sequencing the objectives of a nation's diplomacy. In 1995, the United States and its allies brought peace to Bosnia at the expense of ignoring ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. In 1999 the United States and its allies liberated Kosovo while leaving Milosevic in power. Then in 2000, the United States and its allies supported his overthrow. Sequencing and prioritization allowed Washington to achieve all its objectives in the Balkans, but not all at the same time. Until the Administration makes hard choices of this sort in the Middle East, it will continue to fail across the board, as it has to date.

The debate in Congress has largely been about American troop levels. The obvious question, therefore, is what sort of American troop levels might emerge from such a process of regional diplomacy, and might be required thereafter to sustain it. The answer, I think is some smaller, but not insignificant number of troops, for some extended, but not indefinite period. In other words, in my judgment, consultations with Iraq and its neighbors would likely lead to a result not dissimilar to that recommended by the Iraq Study Group a year ago.

I would prefer that decisions regarding American troop levels flow from such a diplomatic process, rather than precede it. Faced with a real prospect of American withdrawal, I believe most Iraqi leaders, and all regional governments will urge us to stay, not indefinitely and not necessarily in our current numbers, but in some strength, and for some further period. Open ended consultations about America's future role can thus help us forge a regional consensus about that role, and about the shape of a future Iraq that we currently lack. Knowledge that the United States will not remain indefinitely in Iraq in current numbers, or permanently in at any level can provide American diplomats some leverage in moving governments of the region to recognize their own interests in, and responsibilities for, stabilizing Iraq. I would therefore urge Congressional action that presses the President to move in this direction, without so circumscribing his discretion as to render such diplomacy ineffective.

Admittedly, this is much easier to say than to do. So far the Administration's regional diplomacy has consisted of a series of largely substance free photo-ops without hard bargaining or meaningful follow through. In his last meeting with his Iranian opposite number, our Ambassador to Baghdad did not even have instruction that would let him agree to a second meeting. What can the Administration possibly have believed could be achieved in a single brief encounter with Iran, lasting but a few hours, after years of non-communication?

Neither has there been any visible follow through to Secretary Rice's last meeting with the Syrian Foreign Minister. It appears the Administration is actually discouraging the Israeli government from exploring accommodation with Syria over the Golan Heights. "They know what they have to do", has been the Administration's response to criticism of this policy of non-communication.

In my view President Bush should inform the Iraqi leaders and those of its neighbors that he is rethinking US policy, but wants to hear from all the factions in Iraq, and all the neighboring governments before coming to any conclusions regarding the future American military role. In doing so, he should make clear that his decision about the future size and mission of the American military in Iraq will be heavily influenced by what he hears, and what others are willing to do to help stabilize that country. Further, in order to facilitate and perpetuate these consultations, he should propose establishment of a standing forum, including representatives of Iraq, each of its neighbors and the U.S., perhaps under United Nations auspices. These representatives should agree to meet daily, in some neutral location, for an indefinite period probably extending several months into the future to work together on common approaches toward the crisis in Iraq. Their objective would not be to produce a communiqué, or even a treaty, but rather to develop an effective, continual working relationship among all those with a stake in Iraq's future.

The gathering I suggest should not be the exclusive forum for helping bring peace to Iraq. There should also be scope, at some point, for an internationally sponsored gathering of all the warring factions in Iraq. There should also be a wider forum bringing together the many states and organizations that could contribute to the reconstruction of Iraq once some minimal level of security was restored. Neither of these gatherings is likely to be productive, however, as long as Iraq's neighbors are operating at cross purposes there. I would therefore advise the Administration to begin with the core group consisting of Iraq, its neighbors and the United States, moving to constitute the other gatherings as the situation permits.

The American habit is to decide and then consult. In this case, I would recommend the opposite. Uncertainty about our ultimate intentions can, in this instance, provide us leverage with the Iraqis and their neighbors. Obviously, in the end, we will make our own decisions. Those decisions will be wiser and more sustainable, however, if they are informed by genuine consultation and buttressed by local and regional support.