

## The Iraq Study Group report: an assessment

By Tareq Y Ismael,  
Created 2006-12-08 00:00

The Iraq Study Group (ISG), formed on 15 March 2006 [1], released its findings on 6 December 2006 against the backdrop of a political crisis in the United States. The components of this crisis include the collapse of public support for the US venture in Iraq, the "trouncing" of President Bush's party in the mid-term elections on 7 November, and the subsequent "resignation" of two senior figures: defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and the US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton.

The ISG lists seventy-nine recommendations [2] for future US security policy in Iraq. Most of them can be categorised under three headings:

- a shift in the United States mission from a military role to a support role is required
- continued US support will depend on the Iraqi government meeting periodic benchmarks towards "national reconciliation"
- most controversially, the US should initiate a diplomatic blitz that involves regional and international states, including official enemies Syria and Iran; and furthermore, that the US must work towards a settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

**Tareq Y Ismael is professor [3] of political science at the University of Calgary, and editor of the International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies [4]. Among his many books are *Middle East Politics Today: Government and Civil Society* (University Press of Florida, 2001 [5]); (co-edited with William W Haddad) *Iraq: The Human Cost of History* (Pluto Press, 2003 [6]); and (with Jacqueline S Ismael), *The Iraqi Predicament: People in the Quagmire of Power Politics* (Pluto Press, 2004 [7])**

Tareq Y Ismael wishes to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of his postgraduate research assistant Christopher Langille to this article

The subject of this article is James A Baker III, Lee H Hamilton, et al., *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach* [8] (United States Institute for Peace, 2 December 2006)

### An Iraqi shift?

The ISG correctly notes that the exercise of force by the United States has been largely ineffective in stabilising the country, and further concedes that Iraqi security forces are also currently ineffective (where not compromised by militia ties). As such, the group [9] recommends that the US mission in Iraq shift from a direct military function to a "support" one, speeding the training of Iraqi forces and the embedding of qualified US officers and military personnel with Iraqi units.

While the sectarian affiliation of much of the Iraqi security apparatus is acknowledged, it seems nevertheless to be presumed that increased training can create an effective national force. This is a devil's bargain [9]: for even if the US succeeds in creating a militarily effective Iraqi army/police, it will be difficult to shed the forces' sectarian militia ties; at the same time, the embedding of US officers in Iraqi units will reinforce public perceptions that the Iraqi army/police extends US - not sovereign Iraqi - power.

The ISG argues that continued US support for Iraqi forces and the national government must be made contingent on the ability of the Iraqi government to meet "national reconciliation" benchmarks; in the absence of any progress on this front, the ISG recommends that America withdraw support for the government and its security forces (page 65).

The measures of national reconciliation recommended by the ISG include: a review of the Iraqi constitution, a qualified reversal of de-Ba'athification, amnesty and dialogue with armed factions [9] (*Sunni* insurgents, al-Sadr group, *Shi'a* paramilitaries), and a settlement of the Kirkuk issue (page 61).

National reconciliation, noble and essential for certain, is nonetheless absurd within the context of contemporary Iraq. The nominal government of Iraq commands little authority - the bulk of its members live either abroad [10] or as permanent residents in Baghdad's Green Zone [11]. Furthermore, the very structure of the government is one of enforced sectarianism, where state bureaucracies have become the fiefdoms of competing militias. The Iraqi government, as it currently stands, is a pastiche of sectarian interests, whose survival depends exclusively on US support: it therefore lacks the will or the way to initiate a programme of "national reconciliation".

## **A regional dialogue?**

Beyond the ISG's recommendations for the internal politics of Iraq and America's role therein, the Bush administration is encouraged to initiate a diplomatic blitz that involves regional and international states, including Syria [11] and Iran [11]. The report, while acutely aware of the official opposition to any diplomatic rapprochement with these countries, acknowledges that "a nation can and should engage its adversaries and enemies to try and resolve conflicts and differences consistent with its interests" (page 50).

On the lingering question of Iran's nuclear programme [12], the commission suggests that the issue should continue to be dealt with by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council; this stands in contrast to the official Bush administration position which bundles any approach to Iran to the abandonment of its suspected nuclear programme (a position reaffirmed the day after the ISG report's publication, at the joint George W Bush-Tony Blair press conference [13]).

The ISG's recommendation for a renewed diplomatic push is connected to the proposed creation of an international Iraq Support Group, to be launched with an Organisation of Islamic Conference [13] or Arab League [14] meeting. The group identifies Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, the Gulf states, and Jordan as potential leaders of this initiative. This is problematic. The US administration's unequivocal failure in Iraq has vacated it of any moral authority and has damaged its regional influence; in consequence, US regional allies - namely, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan - have suffered discredit. Turkey, with its refusal in 2003 [14] to host US troops, and its proximity to (and familiarity with) the conflict, is a potential leader, though it will be similarly compromised if the programme is run under an US aegis.

The commission further recommends a diplomatic push [15] to integrate the international community, particularly the agencies of international and regional governance" [for example, the

United Nations and European Union] (page 49). And while not explicitly stated, the commission's recommendations seem to imply a possible framework for an international stabilisation/reconstruction force; though any such effort, again, could not operate under US suzerainty, lest it be interpreted as an extension of US power and its corporate entities.

The ISG, furthermore, bundles the ongoing crisis in Iraq [15] into the wider regional disorder, emphasising the need for "comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all front: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush's June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine" (page 54).

While it recommends dialogue with concerned parties (Israel, Lebanon, Palestinians, and Syria), it also restricts Palestinian participation to those who "accept Israel's right to exist"; this, in conjunction with the ISG's plaudits for Mahmoud Abbas, implies continued isolation of the Palestinian elected leadership, Hamas [15]. In any event, the ISG characterises the Israel-Palestine conflict as one that cannot be resolved by military means; as such, the group endorses the principles set forth in UN Security Council resolutions 242 [16] and 338 [17] ("land for peace").

### **A final assessment**

The Baker-Hamilton commission, while rejecting President Bush's "stay the course", is highly suspect. Fundamentally, United States failure in Iraq [18] has bankrupted it of any meaningful authority, and its continued presence merely reinforces sectarian violence and social disorder. The rhetoric of diplomatic engagement and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be encouraging, but it is doubtful that any substantive action will proceed on that front. Ultimately, "national reconciliation" and social reconstruction cannot move forward in the presence [19] of US coercion and violence.

---

### **Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraq/baker\\_report\\_4164.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraq/baker_report_4164.jsp)

### **Links:**

- [1] <http://www.usip.org/isg/timeline.html>
- [2] [http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq\\_study\\_group\\_report/report/1206/index.html](http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/index.html)
- [3] <http://www.poli.ucalgary.ca/Ismael.htm> target=\_blank
- [4] <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journalissues.php?issn=17512867&v=1&i=1> target=\_blank
- [5] <http://www.upf.com/book.asp?id=ISMAEF01> target=\_blank
- [6] <http://www.plutobooks.com/cgi-local/nplutobrows.pl?chkisbn=074532147XA&main> target=\_blank
- [7] <http://www.plutobooks.com/cgi-local/nplutobrows.pl?chkisbn=0745321496&main=&second=&third=&foo=../ssi/ssfooter.ssi> target=\_blank
- [8] [http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq\\_study\\_group\\_report/report/1206/index.html](http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/index.html) target=\_blank
- [9] <http://www.usip.org/isg/members.html>
- [10] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-2482024,00.html>
- [11] <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400044870>
- [12] <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/laealran/index.shtml>
- [13] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/12/20061207-1.html>
- [14] [http://www.cfr.org/publication/9061/arab\\_league\\_and\\_iraq.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9061/arab_league_and_iraq.html)
- [15] [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HL08Ak05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HL08Ak05.html)
- [16] <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/un242.htm>
- [17] <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/un338.htm>

[18] <http://us.penguingroup.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9781594201035,00.html>

[19] [http://www.versobooks.com/books/cdef/c-titles/cockburn\\_p\\_the\\_occupation.shtml](http://www.versobooks.com/books/cdef/c-titles/cockburn_p_the_occupation.shtml)



This article is published by Tareq Y Ismael, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.