

Changing the Equation in Iraq

Alan Howe, US Air Force, retired

Peter Ezra Weinberger, Ph.D., School of International Service, American University

Please send correspondence to:

Peter Ezra Weinberger, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
School of International Service
American University
4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20016-8071

202 885 1673

weinberg@american.edu

Iraqis will not tolerate an American presence forever, and if the polls are to be believed, Americans may even be less patient. While the government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki wants American troops to stay, the majority of Iraqis already favor a US withdrawal, and a smaller majority finds the killings of Americans and other coalition forces acceptable. The US is leaving Iraq, sooner rather than later. But it is possible to withdraw and have a chance of success at the same time. The key to that success is putting in place a structure to replace the US-led force.

The new structure would involve the six states neighboring Iraq—Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Acting as a kind of bridge to the divided communities in the country, this Iraqi Transitional Assistance Group (ITAG) would provide aid to Baghdad on governance issues and especially with the disarmament of insurgents and sectarian militias.

US forces have nearly reached the end of their usefulness in Iraq. The United States finds itself required to serve as honest broker, which in practice means fighting Sunnis and then Shiites in order to provide “balance.” US personnel are struggling to do this without adequate language and cultural translators and without the full trust of Iraqi citizens. The actions of the US military often spread fear and animosity. Now US decision makers are asking Prime Minister al Maliki to join in a strategy of standing in the center and fighting everyone equally and fairly. This approach cannot succeed. It undermines Shia support for Maliki but does not give Sunnis any hope that they can survive with a Shia-dominated government. Something other than a US force is needed to keep the country together.

A Transitional Aid Group, formed by Iraq's neighbors, is the last best hope. Despite complex motives, Iraq's six neighbors have fundamental national interests in stabilizing the country. Uncontrolled chaos is likely to have a spillover effect on their diverse populations. Secessionist movements within their borders may be strengthened. Flows of refugees from Iraq are a massive strain on national resources, particularly in Jordan. It is also impossible for neighbors to make steady political and economic gains within an Iraq that is forever Balkanizing. Iran in particular does not benefit from the increasing fractiousness among Iraqi Shia, and would loath picking sides in a Shia civil war.

The ITAG would have the virtue of exposing to the light something that now exists in the shadows: the involvement of Iraq's neighbors in its internal affairs. The ITAG would significantly diminish, though certainly not remove, the motive of neighboring states to engage in covert activities in Iraq. It will allow Iraq's neighbors to openly protect their religious and ethnic allies, something they are already doing anyway, while also supporting the establishment of an effective Iraqi government.

The ITAG might find parallels in NATO's governance of post-war Bosnia and Kosovo. In these instances, diplomats and soldiers from powerful countries in the region effectively took over the administration of the country. The situation in Iraq is admittedly different from the Balkan cases. A system of command does not yet exist for ITAG to begin operations on the ground. But such an arrangement can be implemented with US guidance and logistical assistance. In a relatively short period of time, the ITAG could

help guide the Iraqi factions toward a durable settlement by providing basic security assistance and oversight of national rule. Iran, obviously, would have the interests of the Shia majority close to its heart. Jordan and Saudi Arabia can promise Sunnis a role in government and protection of their rights, while helping them shed any dreams of returning to power. The Kurds, oddly enough, may find support in Turkey, particularly if cooperation enhances the prospects that Kurdistan will remain part of Iraq. Support from Iraq's neighbors will encourage parties to participate in the central government.

What is to prevent regional states from joining rather than restraining the fight once they assume a formal role in Iraq? The former is a real danger. The question, however, is not *whether* Iraq's neighbors should be involved but *how* they should be involved. Bringing Iraq's neighbors formally into the process is also likely to lead to more enlightened policies in Damascus, Tehran, and Riyadh. All these governments have had trouble controlling—and in some cases have stoked—the desire of extremists in their midst to fight the Americans. With Americans out and their forces in, these calculations will have to change. Saudi or Syrian officials might turn a blind eye to extremists crossing the border to kill Americans; they are unlikely to do so when the target would be their own forces. The more open outside involvement in Iraq is, the lower the chances of a regional conflagration.

Would the major Iraqi factions accept such a regional force? Beleaguered Iraqi Sunnis are likely to accept any help they can get. The arrival of Saudi and Jordanian forces would be a welcome reassurance that their very existence is not threatened. Convincing

Iraq's Shia community to endorse the new peacekeepers would be a much more difficult challenge. Why should Prime Minister Maliki and the Shia majority agree to a plan that would hand over political power to a gaggle of conniving neighbors? The answer is simple: Shia rule is threatened more by chaos than order, even if that order is partially imposed from the outside. Only a successful diminution and eventual end to the violence will enable the Shia to govern Iraq. This logic may not be apparent to some Shia leaders, and Iran will have to play a critical role in persuading the bulk of Iraqi Shiites to go along. ITAG members will find that only a democratic Iraq, which protects the rights of its diverse citizenry, can emerge as a stable, peaceful neighbor. All other results—Balkanization or rule by a strongman, for example—pose lasting threats to the region.

Assuming the major players in the region are willing to consider the project, the US and its allies would have to take several quick steps to facilitate it. Securing a United Nations Security Council resolution establishing the ITAG as a complement to the coalition is a first step. The UN's imprimatur would establish the ITAG as the legal, open means for Iraq's neighbors to participate in the country's restoration and development. A one-year Security Council mandate that must be renewed each year would allow the US and its allies an opportunity to remove the ITAG's international endorsement if the project went awry. Most importantly, the US must provide key logistical support, such as airlift, to the ITAG states. Apart from manpower, most of Iraq's neighbors do not have all the military capabilities for this mission to succeed. The US will also need to equip the ITAG force monitors in some capacity and must be prepared to handover some bases and facilities.

Once on the ground, the ITAG forces would take over and expand the role of US observers currently embedded with Iraqi units. They would expand that mission to include Iraqi police units, the Facilities Protections Service, and every militia and insurgency group that volunteers for ITAG supervision or accepts supervision as a term of surrender. General Petraeus recently acknowledged the latter groups must be brought into any lasting military solution. The ITAG monitors will have language and cultural familiarity that will improve their chances of success. Multinational supervisory teams should include military and police observers from Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. A small number of UN observers could serve at ITAG command levels. Multinational ITAG observer teams from each group will help ensure that government forces do not engage in sectarian attacks.

Al Qaeda, of course, will claim that the departure of American forces and the arrival of forces from Islamic states is a victory for them. Let them make that claim. They will soon find that a post-America Iraq is not hospitable to them. No longer useful as an ally against US forces, they may find themselves in the sights of their reluctant hosts. The Iraqis have no love for foreign fighters within their borders, and Sunni tribes in Anbar province are already volunteering to fight al Qaeda groups. That momentum may accelerate as the US presence recedes. But the US would continue to keep up the pressure on Al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and wherever else they lurk. The truth is that Al Qaeda's leaders and planners have never been in Iraq. Handing over peacekeeping duties in Iraq to regional states will allow US forces to concentrate their energy on the Al Qaeda leadership.

A regional strategy like the ITAG will not end the bloodshed right away. Nothing can do that: Iraq has a period of score-setting and terrorism ahead of it. But there is a real chance that the departure of the Americans will help drain Iraq of the outside extremists behind much of the violence. Iraq has been a hard lesson of what some would think was already obvious: The US cannot expect to invade a country, topple its government, and then quickly construct a functioning and peaceful democracy. That daunting task becomes nearly impossible when the country's neighbors are supporting those who would tear the country apart. Changing the equation is essential to Iraq's future. The US must help Iraq's neighbors to begin undoing the damage and then it must get out of the way, for their interests and for its own.