



**American Jewish Committee**

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## **Assessing the Iraq Study Group Report**

**By Jason Isaacson and Aaron Jacob\***

Today's report of the Iraq Study Group marks an important step in the reassessment of American policy in that country. This document, along with other studies conducted by the Departments of State and Defense, merits the most serious consideration.

The American Jewish Committee stands with all segments of American society in wishing for the success of the Iraqi mission, honoring the service and the sacrifice of U.S. and coalition troops engaged in the difficult task of seeking to advance freedom and democracy in that country, and viewing with increasing concern the growing sectarian violence and mounting casualties among both Iraqi civilians and U.S. and other armed forces. At the same time, we agree with the report's conclusion that "There is no magic formula to solve the problem of Iraq." While the U.S. should strive to phase down its presence in Iraq, premature departure might have devastating effects on Iraq and the neighboring countries, much to the detriment of America's interests in the region.

The report analyzes the current security, economic and political situation in Iraq, and makes a number of recommendations regarding national reconciliation, political reform and troop deployments. It also places policy toward Iraq in a larger Middle East context, and proposes significant shifts in U.S. policy in the region – particularly policy toward the neighboring states of Iran and Syria.

### **Old Thinking in 'New Diplomatic Offensive'**

The Iraq Study Group proposes, among other things, that Washington embark on a "New Diplomatic Offensive" that, while unquestionably motivated by a desire to achieve broader stability in the Middle East, contains elements of old and unsuccessful diplomatic efforts, and old thinking, about the resolution of regional problems.

The recommendation also looks away from harsh realities. The ISG suggests, for example, that states bordering Iraq "can play a major role in reinforcing national reconciliation between Iraqi Sunnis and Shia" – while the record of recent years is that it is the neighboring countries themselves, in particular (but not exclusively) Iran and Syria, that have acted vigorously to promote Sunni-Shia tensions.

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The group makes the unconvincing argument that inviting competing supporters of sectarian violence to sit with each other and with their respective proxies will yield peace for the beleaguered people of Iraq. It is equally likely, we fear, that tensions in Iraq – and the deepening problems these tensions create for the United States and coalition forces there – serve, rather than conflict with, Iranian and Syrian policy interests.

The group urges that Iran and Syria be engaged “in diplomatic dialogue, without pre-conditions.” It further suggests that the two countries, the world’s foremost state sponsors of terrorism, should be lured into such dialogue with “incentives” that could include accession to the World Trade Organization, improved relations with the United States, an abandonment of U.S. support for regime change in their countries, and “U.S. involvement” in pressing for a negotiated Israel-Syrian peace. Why the “incentive” to pacify a neighboring country – should they share that objective – would be insufficient to draw the rulers of Syria and Iran into talks on Iraq’s future is not explained.

### **Questions About ‘Engaging Iran’**

An air of unreality infuses the report’s section on Iran – beginning with the opening sentence of the relevant section in the chapter entitled “The External Approach: Building an International Consensus.” The opening sentence reads: “Engaging Iran is problematic, especially given the state of the U.S.-Iranian relationship.”

In fact, “engaging Iran” is “problematic” for reasons that go far beyond relationship difficulties. Engaging Iran is “problematic” because Iran actively supports international terrorism, promotes the annihilation of Israel as state policy, threatens its neighbors, viciously suppresses human rights, and pursues nuclear weapons capability in open defiance of its international obligations. The report notes that Iran’s nuclear program should “continue to be dealt with by the United Nations Security Council” – which, it must be said, has so far been wholly ineffective in containing the Iranian threat – but that, in the meantime, the door to engagement should be held open to Iran, without pre-conditions. The report provides an insufficient rationale for such a gentle approach to so recalcitrant and menacing an adversary.

This is not to say that Iran and Syria, which both have significant interests in Iraq, and have contributed to its instability, could not be presented with policy options to play a more constructive role. It is not to say that political approaches to either regime – to lay out such policy options, and clarify U.S. interests and concerns – are unthinkable. It is only to say that such approaches cannot be divorced from the realities of each country’s intentions and activities.

### **Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations...With Whom?**

Citing the “wider regional context” of the Iraq crisis, the study group urges the United States to “[deal] directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict” – although, of course, Washington has been dealing with it directly, through promising and less-promising times, for many years – for the purpose of achieving “a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts.” The pursuit

of such a peace is a noble calling, to which the current and previous administrations have devoted intense effort, but the linkage between that half-century quest and the achievement of stability in Iraq is a false one; Sunni and Shia factions will not stop slaughtering each other in Baghdad and Basra on cues from the West Bank, and neighboring states do not need a Palestinian excuse to serve their own national interests in keeping Iraq from chaos.

Pressing this agenda, the report suggests “as soon as possible” the “unconditional calling and holding of meetings” under U.S. or Quartet auspices of Israelis, Lebanese and Syrians, on one track, and Israelis and Palestinians, on another track.

As an organization committed to Arab-Israeli peace and cooperation, and specifically to a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, AJC welcomes efforts to facilitate constructive dialogue between Israel and its Arab neighbors. But there is a quality of either naiveté or ungrounded optimism in the group’s suggestion that Israeli-Palestinian peace will result from internationally convened dialogue between the democratically elected government of Israel and, as the report states, “those [Palestinians] who accept Israel’s right to exist.” When given a chance to elect their own governing authority earlier this year, Palestinian voters elected Hamas, a terrorist organization that has repeatedly insisted that it does not and will not recognize Israel – and, further, that it will not renounce terrorism or accept the legitimacy of previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

The report does not explain what purpose will be served by negotiations between Israel and those Palestinians who, while presumably moderate, do not actually have the power to make and carry out agreements. The likelihood of such negotiations leading to Israeli-Palestinian peace and contributing a lessening of regional tension – absent a Palestinian partner willing and able, as Israelis are, to make compromises and enforce peace – is remote. The Iraq Study Group evades this critical fact.

### **Syria’s Role and Responsibility**

Specifically on Syria, the Iraq Study Group suggests that “elements of a negotiated peace” should include “a Syrian commitment to help obtain from Hamas an acknowledgment of Israel’s right to exist.” It is hard, frankly, to imagine a more hollow gesture from Damascus – or a more ingenuous suggestion from the ISG. The Syrians actively support Hamas, as well as Hezbollah, terrorist organizations committed to Israel’s destruction. Hamas maintains its headquarters in Damascus – and it is not the only terrorist organization with a strong Syrian infrastructure.

If Syria chooses to be a responsible member of the international community – and chooses to seek the path of peace with its neighbor Israel – it can demonstrate that policy shift by shutting down this terrorist infrastructure. It needn’t be asked, in the kindest terms, to ask Hamas to recognize Israel.