

## *Iraq: New Goals, No Illusions*



### THE CHALLENGE

It is time to recalibrate America's equities and engagement in Iraq, and to focus on new goals that bring this relationship into a more sustainable framework. After focusing almost exclusively on security and the hand-off to reconstituted Iraqi security forces, it is time to attend to the broader political aspects of the relationship. Where do we want US-Iraq relations to be in five years? Where does Iraq fit in America's strategic interests and agenda in the region? How can the United States set a new course that promotes stability in the region and liberates US policy from being too closely tied to Iraqi behavior?

### THE CONTEXT

While not abandoning our commitment to help Iraq achieve stability, the United States needs to integrate its efforts in Iraq into a broader policy toward the Middle East that promotes pragmatic relationships in a region still rife with turmoil and mistrust. We can no longer be involved in or responsible for everything that happens in Iraq. We also should learn from the history of American partnerships in the region. Efforts to build and sustain special relationships with countries in the Middle East do not always produce the intended results. In the 1970s the US embraced Iran; in the 1980s and 90s the partner of choice was Egypt. In both cases, US policymakers believed that US support would enhance their leadership in the region and their roles as models of modernity and peaceful engagement. But the domestic, regional, and international context can change, and the historic bargain can become obsolete. The US should avoid a "special relationship" with Iraq and recognize that US and Iraqi interests and policies will diverge on many issues.

### WHERE TO START

- **Launch a policy planning exercise intended to disentangle everyday events in Iraq from longer-term US policy**

US policy will not determine outcomes in Iraq; events there will be determined by powerful currents within Iraqi society. **The new administration must set its strategic goals in the region independently of how Iraq's political dramas play out.** The current positive trend in Iraqi security cannot be taken for granted. Iraq will almost certainly experience continued political violence as it struggles to strengthen new national institutions and to implement federalism, but a new US policy should be driven more by our regional

goals and priorities than by worst-case scenarios of violence and instability in Iraq.

➊ **Address and manage public perceptions of failure for US foreign policy**

The president will want to assert the positive aspects of a new approach, and to manage public perceptions of failure. He will need to deal with Middle Eastern and other international reactions—possible charges of abandonment and betrayal, and contradictory and paradoxical worries about American weakness. It will be important to counter any concerns about US withdrawal from the region with signs of new activism and attention from the civilian side, and a desire to listen and learn from regional players.

➋ **Solicit ideas from diverse American constituencies and invite Iraqi and other regional input in an effort to manage the politics of a policy shift on Iraq**

The goal is to breathe some fresh air into US Iraq policy, with openness to new approaches and a willingness to reconfigure our engagement and presence there, to reach a more normal state of affairs with Iraq, a country that has not been and is not likely to be a close ally of the US. Support of activities related to training journalists, working with political parties, facilitating access to the US market for new Iraqi entrepreneurs, providing scholarships to worthy Iraqi students, etc., will show continued US interest and support for Iraq's emerging democracy, but on a more realistic scale than the exceptional period of 2003-2008.

➌ **Provide strong financial support and subtle leadership for the ongoing international presence in Iraq**

The international community will have its role in responding to Iraqi humanitarian, peacebuilding and reconstruction needs as this policy is executed, and can bring needed legitimacy to the change. International actors may find that a reduced American presence creates a more congenial space in which impartial international operations can proceed. The United Nations will play an increasingly prominent role, particularly on issues such as elections, a planned referendum on Kirkuk, and refugees and other humanitarian issues. The US should show strong political and financial support for their work. We should also not expect the international community to take on an important security function, unless carefully negotiated with Baghdad.

## 🔍 Re-evaluate US expenditures in Iraq against other policy requirements

In light of US economic and budgetary strains, it is incumbent on the United States to review its financial expenditures in Iraq and the ongoing costs of US deployments and civilian activities. Downsizing the overall civilian presence, managing the optics of the huge US embassy compound, and adjusting the purposes of our aid and reconstruction programs are warranted. This will also enable the President to focus on the current and future needs of returning vets, and provide support to their medical, education and employment requirements.

Iraq spending needs to be reintegrated into our established budgetary systems to bring it back to scale, provide normal oversight, and prevent misuse and corruption- one of the sad legacies of our aid relationship since 2003. The United States made an early commitment of \$18 billion in reconstruction funds to Iraq, which was roughly the same amount as total US aid to the rest of the world in 2004. With about 150,000 troops, 35,000 private security contractors, and 180,000 contractors for reconstruction, support to the military, and other purposes, U.S. presence in Iraq dwarfs our footprint in any major alliance relationship. Given Iraq's oil revenues and budget reserves and the need for Iraq to set its own spending and reconstruction priorities, the new administration will want to consider serious restructuring and downsizing of the aid presence in Baghdad.

### WHAT'S ON THE LINE

Upcoming elections in America and Iraq present an opportunity for a policy shift. Iraq is slowly emerging from its authoritarian history into a more representative and open system, albeit with many uncertainties in store. The US has a chance to revalidate its global leadership role through a transition to a more normal relationship with Iraq that allows for a positive and constructive engagement with an emerging civil society and an evolving political system. Changing course too dramatically will hurt both U.S. interests and the stability of Iraq. There is, however, a responsible path that allows us to reduce our outsized presence in Iraq and to refocus some of Washington's attention and resources to the denouement of this difficult period, with special focus on caring for returning vets and their medical and employment needs.

Note: this report is drawn in part from a paper published by The Century Foundation in May 2008 entitled "America and the Emerging Iraqi Reality: New Goals, No Illusions."



Ellen Laipson joined the Center in 2002 after nearly 25 years of government service. Key positions included Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) (1997-2002) and Special Assistant to the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1995-97). At the NIC, Laipson co-managed the interdisciplinary study Global Trends 2015 and directed the NIC's outreach to think tanks and research organizations on a wide range of national security topics.

Her earlier government career focused on analysis and policymaking on Middle East and South Asian issues. She was the Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs for the National Security Council (1993-95), National Intelligence Officer for Near and South Asia (1990-93), a member of the State Department's policy planning staff (1986-87), and a specialist in Middle East Affairs for the

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At the Center, Laipson directs the Southwest Asia project, which focuses on a range of security issues in the Gulf region. Laipson is a frequent speaker on Middle East issues and on US foreign policy and global trends. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute of Strategic Studies, the Middle East Institute, and the Middle East Studies Association. In 2003, she joined the boards of the Asia Foundation and the Education and Employment Foundation. Laipson has an MA from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and an AB from Cornell University.

### ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

For additional original research on the Middle East, please read the following publications by Ms. Laipson:

*"Prospects for Middle East Security-Sector Reform"* (Survival, 2007)

*"Iraqi Kurds and Iraq's Future"* (Middle East Policy, 2006)

*Improving the Interagency Process to Face 21st Century Security Challenges* (2005)

*"Security Sector Reform: the Final Frontier?"* (Arab Reform Bulletin, 2005)

*"Relating to the Muslim World: Maybe Less is More"* (Hoover Institution Press, 2004)

*"Syria: Can the Myth Be Maintained Without Nukes?"* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004)