



A Conversation with Dr. Kenneth M. Pollack

Daniel Benaim

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I was struck by something you wrote recently. You said that “the only thing standing between Iraq and a descent into total Bosnia-like devastation is 135,000 U.S. troops — and even they are merely slowing the fall.” How will we know if Iraq is sliding into all-out civil war?

Well, the most useful statistic in these kinds of situations — counter-insurgencies, stability operations, civil war — is civilian casualties. Whether the number of Iraqis is 50,000 dead or ten times that, the number is less relevant than the

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trend — and the trend line is a very bad one.

Also, more and more Iraqis have lost confidence that next year will be better. This is a key bellwether of Iraqi hope for the future and willingness to cling to reconstruction. Also,

Iraqis are increasingly saying that the war was not worth it. They claim to be worse off than they were under Saddam Hussein. And that is saying a lot, because we should never lose sight of the fact that Saddam did not need to be demonized — he was a demon. The state that he ran in Iraq was absolutely awful, so for Iraqis to say their current situation is worse speaks volumes to their sense of where things are headed and just how bad the violence is getting.

To what extent can U.S. troops actually serve to stave off this war? Would it make a difference if there were 60,000 troops? 200,000 troops?

The troop numbers are certainly not unimportant, but there is more to it than that. The U.S. troop presence in Iraq is the most important retarding factor. Militias cannot openly engage in ethnic cleansing as long as the U.S. is there.

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Look at what happened in Balad: Sunni groups attacked Shi'a, the Shi'a retaliated and started a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Within just a day or two, American and Iraqi troops were deployed to Balad and shut down all of those operations. In the absence of U.S. troops, those operations would have continued; they would have snowballed. You would have seen reprisals from the Sunnis, a Bosnia-like situation of ethnic-cleansing breeding ethnic-cleansing. As long as the U.S. troops are there, they can shut this down.

Can the U.S. reverse this dynamic?

It's unclear at this point. We have gone so far down this path, we don't know whether we've crossed a point of no return. That said, it's clear that where U.S. troops are present, working with Iraqis and using the right tactics, they do have a very positive impact. Iraqi and American units paired up can bring real security to areas. I have seen this myself in Mosul. Where good Iraqi units are present with American forces, they can create greater security, which can open up low-level political and economic development that can really turn things around.

The best example of this was H.R. McMaster in Tal Afar. He was a brave commander, he trained his troops properly, got many to a basic level of Arab proficiency, they spent a lot of money on reconstruction, and they tried right from the start to bring real economic and political development along with security. And while they were there they enjoyed great success.

In parts of Baghdad, we're seeing something similar. The current plan does not have as many troops as it needs or the necessary political and economic equipment. But in some neighborhoods of Baghdad, they are creating greater security to where the economic and political components can begin to have a greater impact.

The problem is that we do not have nearly enough of that. We're just not concentrating the troops properly to do it in bigger swaths. We just

have 5 or 6 neighborhoods in Baghdad. And Baghdad is gigantic, basically the size of Los Angeles — we don't have enough troops to cover that much territory. Instead we have troops spread out elsewhere in Iraq, where they are simply sticking their finger in the dike.

So American troops are helping to stave off the inevitable, but if they had the right resources and the right concentration of forces, maybe they could still turn things around. But given the fact that we do not, the ground is starting to slip from beneath their feet. We may still get to civil war with the American forces there; it just will take a lot longer than if the American troops were withdrawn.

What other potential retarding factors do you see warding off a civil war?

There are a few. You do have a lot of Iraqi people who do not want a civil war. In most cases, you find that Iraqis understand the danger and want to stick with reconstruction. Whenever they see American and Iraqi forces doing the right thing, they do the right thing. You do still have Iraqis joining the security services, joining the police for the right reasons as well as the wrong reasons. If the Americans were to leave, all these Iraqis who still have hope and are trying to do the right thing would have absolutely no incentive to do the right thing. It is very contingent on the U.S. troop presence. In fact, they would have every incentive to join one of the militias as the only way they could protect themselves. And then there's also the Iraqi leaders who are trying very hard to do the right thing. It is an incredibly formidable task but because you do have people like that who are willing to try, again it is retarding this descent towards civil war.

It seems so much easier to prevent sectarian civil war than it is to reverse it once it's begun. If every flare-up like the one you described in Balad has the potential to become the spark for a nationwide civil war, what is the best-case scenario for Iraq? And how do we get there?

I'll give you an almost-miraculous scenario: the U.S. agrees to concentrate its troops and really deploys American troops along with the best Iraqi troops in the places they're most needed, fully recognizing that this means places like Anbar are going to go to hell. But that's the only way you can do this.

If the United States were willing to actually reach out to the UN and the international community in a way we never have, and create areas of security where those civilians can actually operate freely, then you could start to move things in a different direction. Again, this is all in the realm of possibility. These are all things which, if we had adopted them in the spring when they were proposed by my group and by Lt. Gen. Corelli, ground forces commander in Baghdad, we definitely could have turned the place around. Eight months later, it's going to be a lot harder to do so.

What we need to do in Iraq is to start from the ground up. All the solutions discussed on Iraq focus on the top, on a national reconciliation program, on a Dayton-style peace conference — they all miss the point. You are never going to have that happen until you start to change conditions on the ground. Right now, the problem in Iraq is that you have a security vacuum, people who live in fear, and no functional economy or local leadership. That's what needs to change. Once that happens, you can break the power of militias because they will no longer have the support of the people. Once that shifts to the central government, you can start brokering these kinds of national reconciliation deals. But by focusing all our efforts on the top, we have allowed the bottom to go to hell. And only by starting to rebuild things from the bottom up are we going to be able to transform them. The problem is that rebuilding from the bottom takes a lot longer and requires a lot more effort.

Is there any way divide the country and split mixed Iraqi cities without massive bloodshed?

No, and that's the problem. I have a great deal of respect for both Joe Biden and Les Gelb and for their proposal, which is basically to help Iraq divide itself and then simply preside over a partition within a federal structure.

The problem is that if you try to divide Iraq, you are going to get the civil war that you seek to prevent. However, if you cannot prevent the slide to civil war, perhaps in 5, 10, or 15 years there will be enough ethnic cleansing and enough bloodshed that you can preside over a partition. That is essentially what happened in Bosnia.

My colleague Michael O'Hanlon has been proposing "voluntary relocation." He is proposing that we create financial and other incentives for Iraqis to leave integrated or divided communities and move to communities that are more homogenous. It's certainly something we ought to be looking hard at, but there are obviously some problems.

In some cases, you have mixed families or mixed individuals. I cannot tell you how many Iraqi friends of mine describe themselves as "sushis" — half Sunni, half Shi'a. Where do they go? What becomes of them? And divided families? These are big unanswered questions, aside from the fact that most Iraqis do not want to move. Many are saying they would rather fight and die to stay in their homes. Which, again, is exactly how you get a civil war. But there are Iraqis who are increasingly being forced out of their homes. At least for them a program of voluntary relocation might give them an alternative to joining a militia. You offer a micro-loan to start a small business in a different part of the country. Maybe Iraqis see this offer and, while it is not their first choice, prefer it to joining the Mahdi Army to fight for their homes.

In case of a civil war, you recommend that the U.S. not pick sides. Why?

This might seem counterintuitive, but Dan Byman and I did some historical research analyzing civil wars over the last 30 years. It emerged that

picking sides is not actually helpful. Trying to develop a proxy force to win the war for you typically does not work.

When you get involved civil wars by supporting proxies, everyone comes to grief. And the best example is the Pakistanis. On the one hand, they created a proxy that won the Afghan civil war. The Taliban won the Afghan civil war, and look what it did to Pakistan. Pakistan is an absolute basket case, torn apart by Islamic fundamentalism and divisions within the society - many of which were either caused or exacerbated by the rise of the Taliban. And so, even in case of victory, supporting proxies is not a great model for how to manage a civil war.

There has been some discussion about the utility of supporting an independent Kurdistan to serve as a front-line ally in this region – akin to a “mini-Ulster” solution the British had in mind for Israel. In your estimate, is this something the United States should support?

But one of the things our study of civil wars revealed is that once one subgroup declares independence, others follow suit. Succession breeds secessionism

Look, I am a Kurdophile. I have publicly and repeatedly said that the Kurds deserve their own nation, and I absolutely believe that. But timing is everything in politics. One of the most interesting phenomena in Iraq is that many of the Iraqi leaders still trying to do the right

thing are Kurds – Jalal Talabani, Barham Salih, Hosheyar Zebari, and even Massoud Barzani. They have taken some of the most important steps making it possible for Iraq to continue to stumble along.

The Kurds recognize that the timing is not propitious for them to declare independence. If we give them no other alternative, they will declare independence. But one of the things our study of civil wars revealed is that once one subgroup declares independence, others follow suit. Succession breeds secessionism. You see it

everywhere: in the Caucasus, in Yugoslavia – it’s very common. And if the Kurds declare their independence in Iraq, you can expect to see Kurds and other groups in Iran, Turkey, and Syria doing the same thing. All of which would be very bad for the region and ultimately bad for the Kurds.

For the United States, Kurdistan can be an enclave in the midst of a Sunni-Shi’a civil war. I think that that would be helpful to all involved, certainly to the Kurds. The fewer Kurds being

slaughtered, the better for all mankind. I think it would be in America’s interest to help the Kurds maintain their security in the midst of a civil war. One of the only ways the U.S. can prevent the Kurds from declaring independence and launching a chain reaction of secessionism is to go to the Kurds and essentially say, “here is the deal: Iraq is in a civil war, we are not going to ask you to get involved, that would be very counterproductive. But in return for help with your security – arms sales, financial assistance, economic aid, perhaps even U.S. troops in Kurdistan – you are not going to declare independence until we stabilize the situation in Iraq so that you can secede in a peaceful way.”

Do you think that is already the tacit agreement?

I hope so. The Kurdish leaders certainly recognize that as their best course of action. I think there are Americans who believe that as well. Whether they have actually had these conversations, Kurds and Americans, I could not tell you that. But both sides do seem to recognize that that is the deal.

Can you talk a bit about the experience of revising your opinions about Iraq?

I cannot tell you how many Iraqi friends of mine describe themselves as “sushis” – half Sunni, half Shi’a. Where do they go? What becomes of them? And divided families?

Sure, it's an ongoing process. Look, I think you have to revise your opinions every day as the situation does unfold. Let me start with the most obvious thing — there was not a weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq. Saddam was not reconstituting his nuclear weapons program, so that aspect of my beliefs about the importance of a war with Iraq clearly goes out the window.

But it is not so easy to say that since there was no WMD threat, we never should have gone to war. There were other factors involved. First, Saddam was a threat, a complication, and a force for instability in the Middle East. In addition, Saddam was one of the worst dictators of the last 60 years.

As someone who believes in liberal intervention, who supported intervention in the Balkans, who wanted us to find a way to intervene in Rwanda and would still like to see us do something in Darfur or Congo, I cannot simply look at one of the worst dictators of the last 60 years and say it does not matter because removing him would be hard. All those things remain rationales for a war.

Obviously, it was never a rationale for going to a war as quickly or as recklessly as we did. I argued in my book and throughout the run-up to the war that we did not need to go to war immediately, that we had to go to war in as responsible a manner as we possibly could.

Having gone to war, unseated Saddam Hussein, and recognized that the WMD argument is not nearly as compelling as I believed at the time, the only rationales for war that remain are those other ones: Saddam was a threat, a force for instability in the region, and humanitarian arguments.

Whether those rationales can actually justify this war depends entirely on the success of reconstruction. It is very simple. Right now, Iraq is sliding into all-out civil war. If it does so, we will have created greater instability in the region than Saddam ever caused us. And we will have left the Iraqi people in a worse situation than they were under with Saddam — which Iraqis

increasingly believe is the case. If that is the case, this war is absolutely unjustifiable.

On the other hand, if we can somehow turn things around, even if it takes 5 or 10 years, if we get to a place where Iraq avoids nightmarish ethnic-cleansing, if we somehow do keep the violence to its current levels, if we get to a point where Iraq is stable and prosperous, then yes you can say reluctantly that the war had a justification, that we left Iraqis better off than they were before we invaded. . . It all comes back to how badly we mishandled the reconstruction, which I just find inexcusable.

Was the main problem that we underestimated the difficulty of the mission or that we executed it poorly?

At some level, this is something for historians to debate. I tend to be of the latter opinion. Everything that I have seen in Iraq leads me to believe that this was possible. Again, the fact that three and a half years after the invasion, after we have made every single mistake it was possible to make, leaving the Iraqis in the worst situations imaginable, you still have about 40% of the Iraqi population saying the situation is going to be better next year. That is stunning. Last year it was still up at around 60%. Public opinion is absolutely essential, and that you had enormous numbers of Iraqis who truly believed in this reconstruction project and who were incredibly patient in terms of allowing it to try to succeed. In my book, I predicted a honeymoon period when Iraqis were very grateful to be rid of Saddam Hussein. But we shouldn't assume more than 6-12 months to show Iraqis that reconstruction can work. In fact, we would up with nearly three years of a honeymoon period.

Look at all the books written about this Iraq War: everyone who participated in the reconstruction or has done work as an independent outside observer believes that it was possible for reconstruction to succeed. It was always going to be very hard, and the Iraq that we created was not going to be Switzerland for a very, very long time,

if ever. However, there does seem to be a consensus among both the people who were over there and the outside experts. They all said it was possible to have made this thing work in some fashion, and it was mostly our mistakes that doomed us.

You describe America’s policy dilemma regarding Iran in terms of “the two clocks” — the long-term effort to reform and reconcile with the Iranian regime and the short-term effort to stave off their nuclear program. It seems like the disjunction between these two clocks has grown. Is that still the policy dilemma we face in Iran?

The two clocks is still out there, and it is still useful for a certain segment of American policy.

But other things we see cropping up are becoming more important. It’s still important because I do still believe that there will be regime change in Iran some day. It seems like regime change is still pretty far away. There are people who say, with good reason, that Iran may face an internal economic crisis in 3-5 years. And if that kind of crisis comes to fruition, that could cause or speed regime change in Iran.

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The two clocks are still a useful analogy because they make clear that regime change is probably not going to happen before Iran acquires nuclear capability. And therefore, it is not useful, it is not realistic, it is not responsible to suggest that regime change as a policy of the United States government is a good way to solve our problems with Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons capability.

One often-neglected aspect Iranian politics is its ethnic diversity — the Arabs, the Kurds, the Azeris, and various other peoples. Should U.S. policy exploit these potential divisions?

Iran is a multi-ethnic, almost polyglot, nation. There are frictions and tensions among the different ethnic groups. And there certainly are things that the United States could be doing to exacerbate those tensions. But the big question is, to what extent do we want to do so?

And the first question before that is, what is it that we are trying to accomplish? If we truly are trying to accomplish is regime change, then that is a good way to go. We ought to try to exacerbate those tensions as much as we possibly can. But, again, if you start with the metaphor of the two clocks, then you assume this is not going to solve our nuclear problem, then you have got to first start with what are policies that could solve our nuclear problem.

If it is about negotiating with Iran, at some point you are going to need to be able to give that up because there is no question that one of the things that Iranians are going to demand as part of those negotiations is that we give up our support for the various minorities.

This is very similar to what the Nixon administration faced with the Kurds. Are you willing to sell these people down the river? The Nixon administration helped the Shah support the Iraqi Kurds to fight the Iraqi central government in the early 1970s. We did it knowing full well that at some point the Shah was going to cut a deal with Saddam. When he did that, he was going to be selling the Kurds down the river, and we would be complicit in it. And that is exactly what happened, and the Kurds paid the price. Do we want to stir up Iranian Kurds and Iranian Azerbaijanis and Iranian Arabs against their government only to sell them down the river when we decide to cut a deal with Tehran for their nuclear program? These are the dilemmas of these kind of covert action campaigns.

What would it take to deter Iran from pursuing a bomb? New leadership in America? In Iran?

All those things probably would be helpful. But I am always skittish about the term “grand

bargain," because I think it is unlikely to unfold that way if we negotiate with Iran. It is more likely to be a far more informal set of deals that will amount to the same thing.

Right now, the biggest problem is that Iran's hardliners are in a pretty dominant position. They don't control the government, but they have the advantage. That needs to change. You have to reach a point where the advantage is with

Iran's pragmatists. Don't get me wrong, pragmatists should not be taken as a euphemism for "nice guys." These are not nice guys. But Iran's pragmatists typically prioritize Iran's economic health and its domestic politics. They look for good governance and prosperity, and they have been willing to make deals on all these issues in return for the western investment and trade they recognize as critical to Iran's economy.

So what needs to happen is a change in the balance within Iran. And that can happen through external events. So if the UN agreed to impose sanctions on Iran, that would be very helpful.

The more the Iranians recognize that the international community truly is resolved to make them pay a price for insisting on this path, that is step one. Step two is that Iran's economy is going to have to worsen. It can worsen on its own. It has all kinds of deep-seated structural problems, and Ahmadinejad's policies are not helping — they're actually making it worse. That's one of the reasons why people talk about the potential for real crises inside Iran in 3-5 years. That is one way. Another way would be to get real sanctions imposed on them.

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Yes, but what are the chances of that? Will Russia and China ever agree to sanction Iran's oil industry?

They are within the realm of possibility. I'll put it this way. I published *Persian Puzzle* in 2004, and I laid out exactly this policy. I had people saying to me, "none of it will ever happen, the Russians, Chinese and Europeans will never agree to it, you'll never get the IAEA to sanction them, you'll never get it voted out of the IAEA, you'll never get it into the United Nations, the UN will never pass a Chapter 7 Resolution." All of those things have happened, all of those things that people said would absolutely never happen, have happened. So, it suggests that it actually is entirely possible to imagine a series of new resolutions which impose greater and greater sanctions on Iran. It's not a sure thing — it never was a sure thing. As for petroleum, we may not even need to get there. These financial controls the Bush Administration has talked about are actually very clever. Again, you need to create a climate where Iran is isolated. Iran's stock market has collapsed, it's getting very little foreign investment, and insurance companies are not willing to insure Iranian projects and goods because they're anticipating sanctions. That in and of itself is imposing a very serious burden on Iran without any sanctions actually being passed.

One of the great challenges is that, with Iran's complex system of mixed clerical and parliamentary rule, it feels as if Iranian policy is made inside a black box.

Yeah, unfortunately it is very difficult for us to know what is going on inside of Iran. Decisions are made by a very small group of extremely tight-knit, closed-mouthed people. When I talk about the hard-liners, I am referring to Ahmadinejad and a constellation of other people behind him, you know people with names like Janati, and Yazdi, and a variety of other figures including Safavi, the head of the Revolutionary Guards.

We tend to concentrate on Ahmadinejad because he is colorful and says a lot of obnoxious things, but he does not run the government of Iran. He's only one player. He has his own power, and his

We tend to concentrate on Ahmadinejad because he is colorful and says a lot of obnoxious things, but he does not run the government of Iran. He's only one player. He has his own power, and his stature within the Iranian regime has clearly grown over the last year because he has been able to use the nuclear issue and a lot of old-fashioned pork-barrel politics to make himself more popular with the Iranian people

stature within the Iranian regime has clearly grown over the last year because he has been able to use the nuclear issue and a lot of old-fashioned pork-barrel politics to make himself more popular with the Iranian people.

And we have seen that degree of popularity does translate into greater influence within the Iranian government. But it doesn't mean he is even first among equals. Khomeini remains first among equals. It is still an open question whether Ahmadinejad is first among the hardliners themselves.

If you could somehow get to the hardliners and ask them, "Who is your most

important figure? Who is the person who decides to do something and has everyone else fall into in line?" I am not certain they would name Ahmadinejad. But again, Ahmadinejad is the one who captures the headlines, who has captured the world's attention. And in some ways that is unfortunate because, he is not the one who is calling the shots in Tehran.

At this point it seems like a cliché for our politicians to praise Iran's culture and civilization while criticizing their politics. What is it that Americans should know about Persian culture?

One of the most important things for Americans to understand is Iranian pride, just how proud the Iranians are of their culture, of their achievements

and a belief deriving from that pride that Iran ought to be one of the world's great powers. This is one of the reasons we have all these clashes with the Iranians. Because Iranians believe they ought to be calling the shots in a part of the world where we believe that we ought to be calling the shots, and psychologically because the Iranians have such an enormous chip on their shoulder about the United States. That we are a greater power than them and, quite honestly, that pisses them off. And as a result, almost anything we do, they take the wrong way and they see as a sign of disrespect.

That said, let me just finish by making the point that while it is certainly useful to understand Iranian culture, and the more that Americans do understand it the better, I do not think that we should fall into the trap of thinking that the problems between the two of us are merely civilizational and caused by miscommunication. We have some real and difficult problems with the Iranians. They are trying to acquire capabilities that we do not want them to have. We do not want them to have them because they support terrorist groups, because they have been very aggressive against us in the last 26-27 years, and because they continue to define us as their enemy, and they act accordingly.

You know, whether they were Persians, Russians, or misguided-Methodists, it wouldn't really matter — those problems would still remain. And to some extent, trying to deal with them at this cultural-psychological level actually takes away from some of our strengths. We need to recognize the Iranians as important players in the Persian Gulf, we need to stop pretending that they are not, and stop insisting that we will not deal with them — but we need to deal with them in hard political terms.

The more time we spend wondering what Persians actually want based on their culture, I think it actually takes us away from dealing with the real problems we face. At the end of the day, we were able to find very good, constructive solutions to our problems with the Russians not

by understanding Russian civilization but by sitting down and working out a series of compromises that were acceptable to us and to the Russians. To a certain extent, the Iranians cannot do that because they cannot get over their own cultural baggage. Quite honestly, we can't help them get over that cultural baggage. We just need to be ready so that when they are able to, we are there with a real, constructive set of compromises. Which is something the Bush administration has been less than willing to do.

In Iraq, it seems that we took advice from expatriates who lived in a different Iraq than the one that we invaded. Is there any danger of that happening in Iran with the subset of anti-regime Iranians accessible to Americans as opposed to the majority that elected Ahmadinejad?

Sure, I certainly think there is a danger of that. It goes back to the same point about regime change. There are Americans out there who believe fervently in regime change, and it seems to be the case that these people are talking to Iranians who are trying to convince them that regime change would be quick and easy in Iran. They say the Iranian people are just waiting to overthrow their government, that all its going to take is a strong rhetorical commitment on the part of the United States for the Iranians to rise up against their government. That is exactly the same Siren song we heard on Iraq. I think it would be a tragic mistake if we followed it once again in Iran and dashed ourselves on those rocks. Especially given the fact that we just made this mistake in Iraq.

Five years into the Cold War, we already had foundational documents like the writings of George Kennan that would guide us over the next several decades. Do you think we have seen anything like that in the last five years that

will endure as a strategic road map for where we are heading over the next several decades?

I hope not because the only document out there is the Bush Administration's National Security Strategy, which I think is horribly misguided. Not because of their emphasis on preemption, which most people have focused on, but because of the problems they have diagnosed. One of my greatest concerns with U.S. Middle East policy is that the Bush Administration has tended to see it through the lens of terrorism. I think that's been a tremendous mistake. Terrorism is not the problem in the Middle East. Terrorism is a symptom of the problems of the Middle East. And by focusing on the symptom and not the underlying problems, we have exacerbated the underlying problems.

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