

Introduction to the Special Edition of *Strategic Insights* on the Iraq Study Group

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 2 (March 2007)

by [Robert Looney](#)

Strategic Insights is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

This special edition of *Strategic Insights* is devoted to a discussion of many of the key issues identified in *The Iraq Study Group Report*.^[1] The report contains 79 separate recommendations directed at U.S. policy and the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The recommendations fall broadly into four main categories: (a) military strategy, (b) diplomacy, (c) policies for the Iraqi government, and (d) economic strategy. Each of these areas are reflected in the variety of approaches and analysis taken by the writers of the papers contained in this issue.

Since its release in early December 2006, *The ISG Report* has stimulated a lively and sometimes heated discussion throughout the political, policy, and academic communities. As it turned out the Bush Administration did not endorse the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. Instead, the Administration appears to have tacitly accepted^[2] a strategy promoted by a Washington think tank, the American Enterprise Institute.^[3] The two approaches differ in a number of significant ways:

Military Strategy

Bush Administration: Send 21,500 more troops to help reduce violence in Baghdad and Anbar province. Embed more troops with Iraqi forces as advisers. No timetable for withdrawal of troops.

Iraq Study Group: Temporarily increase by about 16,000 the number of troops devoted to training and equipping the Iraqi forces. Plan a gradual withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, with a goal of bringing the bulk home by early 2008.

Diplomacy

Bush Administration: Do not engage in talks with Iran and Syria. Instead, intensify U.S. efforts to counter Iranian and Syrian influence in Iraq. Urge Arab states to support the Iraqi government. Increase U.S. military presence in the region.

Iraq Study Group: Launch a diplomatic offensive to quickly engage Syria, Iran and the leaders of the insurgency in negotiations on Iraq's future. Work toward resolving the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict to ease hostility in the Middle East.

Iraqi Government

Bush Administration: Iraqis should dedicate \$10 billion for reconstruction efforts, deliver three brigades to Baghdad in an effort to crack down on all insurgents and extremists, regardless of sect or religion. The Administration's plan also sets benchmarks for Iraqis: complete oil profit-sharing law, reintegrate Ba'athists into government, hold provincial elections, transfer security to Iraqi forces. Doesn't tie the United States to support specific goals.

Iraq Study Group: Similar benchmarks for security, government and reconciliation progress but said the United States should make it clear that American support will be reduced if goals not met.

Iraq Economy

Bush Administration: Spend \$814 million to double the number of U.S. civilians helping coordinate reconstruction and to provide quick-response funds for local rebuilding projects; spend another \$350 million on a new program that gives field commanders money to solve local problems and quickly improve Iraqis' lives.

Iraq Study Group: The United States should provide \$5 billion a year in economic aid and work faster to implement assistance programs, giving U.S. officials more flexibility to quickly fund or eliminate programs.

While the Bush Administration has charted out a course quite different than the one envisaged by the Iraq Study Group, events in Iraq may dictate further policy modifications. In any case, the debate over U.S. Iraqi policy continues. Hopefully the papers comprising this special edition will advance that debate and perhaps in time provide valuable insights for future policy adjustments.

On the diplomatic front, John Tirman, Executive Director of the MIT Center for International Studies explores the benefits of following up on the Iraq Study Group's recommendation for opening talks with Iran and Syria in "[Diplomacy and the Iraq War](#)." Looking at U.S. diplomatic problems to date, he concludes they stem largely from a misunderstanding of the scale, origin and course of the violence in Iraq. According to Tirman, "The massive, decentralized violence shapes politics and insecurity in Iraq, drives the neighbors to actions that include support for violent actors and international diplomacy, and beleaguers U.S. attempts to restore order. This misunderstanding and the fitful diplomacy that follows from it leaves Iraq as the ultimate victim."

Saudi Arabia must be handled with skilled diplomacy. As Gregory Gause of the University of Vermont notes in "[Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance and the Sectarian Question](#)," a major Saudi concern is Iran's increasing influence in Iraq. Here, he notes, the United States must be very careful for "playing the sectarian card is a double-edged sword for the United States...It is certainly not in the American interest to do anything to recreate that atmosphere of regional sectarian tensions, which would give aid and comfort to Al-Qaeda and its ilk."

The Iraq Study Group concluded that the United States must deal directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict if it is to achieve its goals in the Middle East. Expressing Israeli concern over this proposed shift in U.S. policy, Jonathan Spyer of the Global Research in International Affairs Center, Jerusalem, assesses the assumptions underlying this policy prescription in "[Israel and the Iraq Study Group Report](#)." He concludes that the group's recommendation "simply represents a temporary return of Mid-East 'old think', offering its familiar panaceas to a radically changed situation...While attempts at conflict resolution in the ongoing dispute between Israelis and Palestinians are of value, an attempt to force Israel to return to the illusionary peace process of the 1990s as a means to placate hostile forces in a region vastly more volatile and dangerous

than the Middle East of ten years ago, would serve only to project weakness and uncertainty at a time of supreme test for the U.S. and its allies in the region.”

Other political issues are more internal to Iraq where the report has been poorly received by key ethnic groups. In [“Iraq’s Future 101: The Failings of the Baker-Hamilton Report,”](#) Brendan O’Leary of the University of Pennsylvania observes, “The prospects of the Group’s major recommendations having purchase within Iraq are close to zero because it has been rejected in scorching language by the leaders of Kurdistan and by significant Shi’a Arab leaders.” At issue is the ISG’s disregard of the Iraqi constitution and the form of federalism voted for by the Iraqi people. While the ISG would prefer a highly centralized Iraq, O’Leary feels it failed to “appreciate the political consequences of the changes which have happened in Iraq since 2003...Any realistic appraisal of contemporary Iraq political and military, will report that it is divided into four parts: Kurdistan (including Kirkuk), Baghdad, the Sunni Arab triangle, and the south. Politically, Sunni Arab elites, *jihadi* religious fanatics and the Sadrists cling zealously to the vision of a centralized Iraq.”

Abbas Kadhim continues this strain of thought in his [“Shi’i Perceptions of the Iraq Study Group.”](#) A serious student of Iraqi history, Dr. Kadhim notes a similar study from the Iraqi Mandate era of the 1920s that concludes with an eerie: “There is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq...Our political leaders must build a bipartisan approach to bring a responsible conclusion to what is now a lengthy and costly war.” Unfortunately he finds eighty years later the current study group has learned little from history. Instead, “Iraqis do not view the Iraq Study Group’s main purpose to be pertinent to their plight. Rather, they view the formation of the ISG as a means to help a perplexed American administration to break the vicious cycle of failure in Iraq which has encompassed every aspect of life in the country.” Sadly, he details how “the report could not have been written with a more alienating tone as far as the Iraqi audience is concerned.”

On the economic front, programs that have met with success in other contexts, the Marshall Plan in Europe and the Shock Therapy reforms in Poland, have failed in Iraq. After examining the dynamic forces and linkages between Iraq’s shadow economy, deteriorating social capital, and the evolving relationship of increasingly overlapping networks of tribes, gangs and the insurgency, Robert Looney concludes in [“Beyond the Iraq Study Group: The Elusive Goal of Sustained Growth”](#) that programs focused on slowing or reversing the impetus to join the shadow economy might be the most effective. A variant would be the reorientation of economic programs from the post-war, centralized, top-down orientation toward one that is decentralized and inclusive. This reorientation would likely erode somewhat the popular, or at least passive, support for the insurgency. In either case, the levels of aid proposed by the ISG are much closer to what is needed than the figures put forth by the Bush Administration.

On the strategic front, James Russell, [“Strategic Insecurity After Saddam: Whither Regional Security in a World Turned Upside Down?”](#) observes that while *The Iraq Study Group Report* rightly addressed many of the problems confronted by the United States in Iraq “it left largely untouched the more troubling longer range strategic implications of the Iraq War.” For analytical purposes, he divides the strategic implications between those in the region and those specific to the United States and its position of global leadership. A number of vicious circles are identified each leading to a rather grim state of affairs that will confront the United States and its allies for some time. For the region: (1) the political and military empowerment of a new and younger generation of state- and non-state actors that will profoundly shape the evolving politics and internal security within the surrounding states; (2) enhancement of Iran’s influence in the Gulf that will increase its political leverage over the Sunni monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula. For United States an even more serious state of affairs lies ahead: (1) the possible end of a 50-year era of American global political and military leadership based on a balance of soft and hard power; (2) the increasing irrelevance of the American way of warfare as a tool to further its global influence and objectives; and, (3) the potential end of the regional security architecture in which the US has guaranteed regional security from military bases inherited from the British and

expanded upon during the 1990s. "Unfortunately for the United States, a period of regional upheaval may be coming at a time when Gulf oil becomes steadily more important to the world's economy."

On the cultural front, both the Bush Administration and ISG approaches are far too sketchy and incomplete. Both suffer from what Kathleen Meilahn characterizes, in "[Cultural Understanding within Context as a Tool for Countering Irregular Threats and as a Force for Peace](#)," her article in our "Reflections on the Long War" feature story section, as an approach that "tends to focus on cultural, ethnic, and religious differences instead of family ties that bind and opportunities for reconciliation and rapprochement." Given that a purely military solution in Iraq is highly unlikely at this point, the understanding of and reliance on these potential channels for reconciliation and rapprochement take on increased importance if peace is to be achieved anytime soon. "To be successful in Iraq, U.S. authorities must reach outside of Western conflict resolution tradition and theory to understand and utilize Islamic and cultural methods of managing conflict. *Sulha* (the peace-making tradition) and *musalaha* (reconciliation) can be utilized to manage conflict between the coalition forces and tribes or families that seek revenge."

The military implications of *The Iraq Study Group Report* have been assessed at length in the news, and in the professional and academic literature. There is little to add here. Clearly, the Bush Administration and the Iraq Study Group would move the conflict in different directions. Each approaches the conflict from a different set of assumptions concerning the nature of the insurgency and the consequences of a buildup or gradual withdrawal of American forces. Perhaps what is most striking is how little the experts really know with any certainty about the outcome of either course of action. The one constant since the conflict began has been the quick invalidation of forecasts of military outcomes.

One comes away from this discussion with the realization that developments on the political, diplomatic, economic and cultural fronts will become increasingly important in determining the eventual outcome in Iraq. Ironically to date each has proven to be an area of U.S. weakness. The Iraq Study Group has made a valiant attempt at defining and clarifying and drawing attention to these issues. Hopefully the papers in this special issue will be viewed as building on and extending this effort. In any case they provide a great deal of food for thought. Fittingly, Leon Panetta, a member of the Iraq Study Group, concludes the discussion by offering valuable insights into the Groups' thinking as he responds to a number of the concerns and criticisms raised in this set of essays.

About the Author

Robert E. Looney is professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. He specializes in issues relating to economic conditions and security in the Middle East and South Asia. He has had extensive field work in Iran and Saudi Arabia and has published twenty books on various facets of economic development, economic intelligence and macro-economic modeling. He is currently working on a book forecasting alternative futures for the Iranian economy. In addition, he has over 200 articles appearing numerous professional journals. His recent writings on the Iraqi economy can be found at: <http://web.nps.navy.mil/~relooney/Iraq-Pubs.htm>.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page. To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox, please email ccc@nps.edu with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

References

1. James A. Baker, III and Lee H. Hamilton, co-chairs, [*The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach*](#) (New York: Vantage Books, 2006).
2. Mark Benjamin, "[The Real Iraq Study Group](#)," *Salon.com*, January 6, 2007.
3. Frederick W. Kagen, [*Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq: Phase I Report*](#) (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, January 5, 2007).