Israel and the Iraq Study Group Report

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by Jonathan Spyer

Introduction

As the date drew near for the publication of the report by the Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former Congressman Lee H. Hamilton—there were expressions of concern from various Israeli sources regarding the probable content of *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach*.[1] Initial speculation and concern derived from the individuals who made up the team responsible for the report's authorship. The members of the Iraq Study Group consisted largely of individuals who adhered to an approach to the region often called 'conservative realist.' According to this view, it is imperative that the United States 'engage' and dialog with the existing political forces of the region, even if in both words and practice these forces appear to hold to a pronounced hostility to the United States. This view holds that only through such engagement and accommodation can the United States help to maintain stability and goodwill in the region.

This view is dependent on a sort of baseline assumption that all regional powers share at root a similar, rational, self-interested outlook. On the basis of this assumption, the importance of extreme, ideological or theological statements will tend to be downgraded. It will be assumed that a shared self-interested, rational, balance of power outlook lies behind such statements, and may be appealed to.[2]

By definition, such an outlook will tend to produce a less- or uncritical acceptance of the official line emerging from various regional capitals on various key issues. By definition, it will therefore also tend toward a certain antipathy to Israeli policies and interests.

This is because the Palestinian issue remains the great *cause celebre* of the mainstream Arab political discussion. An important aspect of this professed centrality of the Palestinian cause is that the tendency in mainstream political debate in the Arab world is for any discussion of the general developmental failures of the Arab world, the problematic political culture of the region and in particular anti-western and anti-U.S. sentiment will tend to be turned back to the subject of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The assertion will be made, for example, that anti-U.S. sentiment is driven primarily by the sense that the United States is unfairly biased toward Israel. Because of this position—on which there is a consensus across both 'moderate' and 'radical' Arab capitals—there is a natural dynamic whereby a desire to 'reach out' , to 'engage' with Arab elites on their own terms leads almost unavoidably to support for renewed pressure on Israel to make hasty concessions, and a certain impatience with Israeli concerns and caution. The idea at the root of this is that if the Mideast displays aspects in its international politics that diverge from a 'rational self-interest' model for state behavior, then the factor that is causing this is the oft-repeated anger

at U.S. support for Israel, and Israeli behavior. Hence, remove or reduce this, and predictable, rational state behavior will be the result. Thus far the conservative realist assumption.

In the case of the Iraq Study Group, Israeli concern was magnified in that the states with which the group was likely to recommend 'engagement', if indeed it recommended such a course of action, were states which promoted an implacably hostile stance toward Israel, on religious and/or ideological grounds. Any analysis of the United States' troubled situation in Iraq which recommended engagement with states currently hostile to the United States and supportive of anti-U.S. elements in Iraq would lead directly to Syria and Iran. These countries, for reasons of both ideology and self-interest, are hostile to Israel. Each of them finances and supports organizations engaged in direct conflict with Israel. So any attempt to meet them half-way contained within it the near certainty that Israel would be pressed to make concessions of a kind which it would be likely to regard as excessive and unwise. Such concessions would, in turn, be likely to fail to have the placatory effect on the behavior and outlook of anti-western regional powers that their advocates predicted.

Regarding the make up of the Iraq Study Group—in the Israeli political memory, James Baker, co-chairman of the study group, is noted for his dismissive and critical remarks regarding Israel and allegedly also toward Jews during the course of his service as Secretary of State under President George H.W. Bush, and his subsequent closeness to Arab causes.[3]

Other individuals involved in the writing of *The ISG Report*, such as Edward Djeredjian, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, were known to favor renewed U.S. dialogue with Damascus. Similarly, Robert Gates, now Secretary of Defense, is known to be a strong advocate of dialog with Teheran.

Statements by one of the expert advisors to the Commission, former CIA Station chief for Saudi Arabia Raymond Close, were leaked in the weeks leading up to the issuing of *The ISG Report*. Close's statements included predictions that *The ISG Report* would center on a recommendation that the U.S. President convene an international conference, involving all regional states. At the conference, Close suggested, the U.S. President would seek to "enlist the support of neighboring states in establishing stability in Iraq."[4] Israel's presence would be essential, since the promise of Israeli concessions would be the incentive for such states as Syria and Iran to begin cooperating with the United States on Iraq. The rumors and leaks surrounding the likely content of *The ISG Report*, came together with additional murmurs from a different quarter of a possible major reversal in U.S. Mideast policy deriving from the grave situation in Iraq. Reports that Vice-President Cheney, during a surprise visit in November, 2006 to the Saudi capital, had listened in private meetings to top Saudi officials repeating the claim that Israel, rather than Iran, represented the main threat to the security of the region, added to the general concern.[5]

Israeli concern that *The ISG Report* looked likely to recommend levering U.S. support for Israel as a factor to entice self-professed anti-U.S. states in the region was coupled with a view, held by many U.S. and Israeli observers alike, that such a policy turn was likely to produce little of value for the United States itself. This was because the very process whereby the United States chose to approach these countries, at a time when both Syria and Iran were supporting armed insurgency against U.S. troops in Iraq—was likely to be interpreted as weakness to be further exploited in Damascus and Teheran.

In this essay, I will look into the extent to which Israeli concerns proved prescient, and the extent to which *The ISG Report* in its content did in fact conform to Israeli expectations. I will observe in detail what the report proposed regarding Israel, and the extent to which its proposals may or may not offer a genuine way to progress in reaching political calm in the region. I will observe the subsequent fate of the report, and Israel's responses to it. In this regard, I will touch on the Israeli policy community's own views regarding the situation in Iraq and its implications.

The ISG Report and Israel

Israel suspected that *The ISG Report* would likely contain analysis and recommendations which would prove contrary to Israeli views and interests. This would derive from the desire to 'deliver' Israeli concessions to anti-Israel and anti-western powers—specifically Iran and Syria—in the hope that the concessions thus obtained would prove sufficient to secure a quid pro quo from Iran and Syria that would include the cessation of their active support for anti-U.S. insurgent forces in Iraq.

When *The ISG Report* was issued, it became apparent that the concern had been to a considerable extent justified.

The ISG Report defines the key U.S. goal as building a 'new international consensus for stability in Iraq and the region.' To achieve this, the United States must 'embark upon a robust diplomatic effort to establish an international support structure intended to stabilize Iraq and ease tensions in other countries of the region.' This structure will include 'every country that has an interest in averting a chaotic Iraq,"[6] *The ISG Report* then mentions Iran and Syria by name, presumably in anticipation of the claim that these countries might not be generally considered to have a clear interest in helping the United States to avoid failure in Iraq. The authors state that despite the "differences" with these countries, all share an "interest in avoiding the horrific consequences that would flow from a chaotic Iraq."

Recommendation no.4 advocates the setting up of an "Iraq Support Group" which would "develop specific approaches to neighboring countries." *The ISG Report* lists a number of countries—in the Mideast and beyond it, which would be included in the envisaged Support Group. The list includes all states bordering Iraq, the "key regional states"— Egypt and the Gulf states', the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and includes the possibility that Germany, Japan and South Korea might also play a role. Israel is not mentioned and is intended presumably to be excluded from involvement.[7] Israelis consider that such a forum would rapidly turn into a tool for lobbying of the United States by regional powers keen for Israeli concessions. Some observers asserted that this was indeed the intention of the authors.[8]

The ISG Report states that "The U.S. will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the U.S. deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict."[9] This statement is coherent only on the basis of the assumptions outlined above—namely, that anti-western trends and elements in the region are primarily a derivative of the Arab-Israeli dispute, and that the settling of this dispute will thus cause the reduction or disappearance of anti-western sentiment and action.

Following this initial statement of intent, *The ISG Report* then proceeds to specifics. The report recommends a renewed negotiating process between Israelis and Palestinians, leading to "a final peace settlement along the lines of President Bush's two-state solution, which would address the key final status issues of borders, settlements, Jerusalem, the right of return, and the end of conflict."[10] The terminology in use here in itself was enough to confirm many Israeli concerns. The use of the term "right of return," indicates a clear stand on the refugee issue. The "right of return" is understood to mean the right of Palestinians who left or were expelled from the area that today forms the State of Israel in the course of the war of 1948 and their descendants to return to the area in question. This "right" is a codeword for the effective termination of Israel, and its transformation into an Arab state—since the individuals in question—who number between four and five million would transform Israel into a majority Arab state should they wish to exercise their "right" to take up residence there.

The issue of the refugees is one of the most fraught in the whole Arab-Israeli conflict. The usual term in neutral documents for the issue would be the "refugee issue." Use of the term "Right of

Return" obviously immediately marks the user as one in general sympathy for the Arab side—and its use is thus a matter of more than marginal interest.

Such not insignificant but essentially semantic matters offered clues as to the likely orientation of *The ISG Report*. These clues were then concretely confirmed in the report's recommendations relating to Israel.

With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, *The ISG Report* considers that the United States should sponsor a renewed process of negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian and Lebanese tracks. It suggests the Madrid Conference of 1991 as the model.[11] The report states clearly that the objective of the talks between Israel and Syria will be the full return of the Golan Heights to Syria, in return for full peace with Israel including the cessation of Syrian support and sponsorship for Palestinian and Lebanese terror groups.[12]

Similarly, with regard to the Palestinians, *The ISG Report* makes clear that the negotiations are to be conducted between the Government of Israel and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, with the intention of bringing about a two-state solution on the basis of UN Resolutions 242 and 338. It is envisaged that the final status accord, as noted above, would deal with all outstanding issues.[13]

The ISG Report thus considers that the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, and between Israel and the Syrians are amenable to rapid solution, once negotiations are undertaken in good faith.

Once Israel has been brought to the negotiating table and to readiness for concessions, *The ISG Report* considers that the United States will then be able to ask for its side of the bargain from Iran and Syria, whose acquiescence the report considers vital for the achievement of U.S. aims in Iraq. Thus, *The ISG Report* has the following demands to make of Iran:

Recommendation 11: Diplomatic efforts within the Support Group should seek to persuade Iran that it should take specific steps to improve the situation in Iraq.

Among steps Iran could usefully take are the following:

- Iran should stem the flow of equipment, technology, and training to any group resorting to violence in Iraq.
- Iran should make clear its support for the territorial integrity of Iraq as a unified state, as well as its respect for the sovereignty of Iraq and its government.
- Iran can use its influence, especially over Shia groups in Iraq, to encourage national reconciliation.
- Iran can also, in the right circumstances, help in the economic reconstruction of Iraq.[14]

The report also has concrete demands of the Syrians, which they are expected to undertake in return for the prospect of the return of the Golan Heights. Thus,

Recommendation 12: The United States and the Support Group should encourage and persuade Syria of the merit of such contributions as the following:

- Syria can control its border with Iraq to the maximum extent possible and work together with Iraqis on joint patrols on the border. Doing so will help stem the flow of funding, insurgents, and terrorists in and out of Iraq.
- Syria can establish hotlines to exchange information with the Iraqis.
- Syria can increase its political and economic cooperation with Iraq.[15]

Recommendation 15: Concerning Syria, some elements of that negotiated peace should be:

- Syria's full adherence to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of August 2006, which provides the framework for Lebanon to regain sovereign control over its territory.
- Syria's full cooperation with all investigations into political assassinations in Lebanon, especially those of Rafik Hariri and Pierre Gemayel.
- A verifiable cessation of Syrian aid to Hezbollah and the use of Syrian territory for transshipment of Iranian weapons and aid to Hezbollah. (This step would do much to solve Israel's problem with Hezbollah.)
- Syria's use of its influence with Hamas and Hezbollah for the release of the captured Israeli Defense Force soldiers.
- A verifiable cessation of Syrian efforts to undermine the democratically elected government of Lebanon.[16]

So it is clear: as Israeli preliminary concerns suggested, *The ISG Report* indeed laid down a blueprint for advancing the United States' interest in Iraq, based on the assumption that progress in the Israeli-Arab conflict is the key to progress on other fronts—notably, to the successful building of an 'anti-chaos' coalition, including Iran and Syria.

Israel would be required to abandon its current caution regarding the commencement of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. The present government of Israel is in favor of the principle of land for peace, and accepts the Road Map as its guide in policy regarding the Palestinians. However, there are substantive reasons for its current caution regarding the prospect of immediate, successful negotiations. These center on the situation of political uncertainty that has existed in the PA since the Hamas election victory of January 25, 2006, and to an extent before this date. The Hamas-led government of Ismail Haniyeh refuses to commit to the three conditions set by the Quartet, adherence to which, according to the international consensus, forms the sole basis for meaningful negotiations.[17] These conditions are the abandonment of terrorist activity, the recognition of the right of Israel to exist, and the commitment to previously signed agreements.

The Hamas-led government's refusal to commit to these conditions has led to a situation of international boycott and isolation against the Palestinian Authority since the Hamas victory.[18] Western countries have largely adhered to the boycott. It has led to undoubted hardship in the PA areas, but has preserved the principle that there is a price to be paid for rejectionism and the use of terror, and that organizations committed to policies of politicide and the destruction of neighboring states should be confronted, rather than accommodated.

The refusal of both Hamas and the international community to back down on this matter has led to a situation of political stalemate within the Palestinian Authority, between the Hamas-led government of Ismail Haniyeh, and the elected Chairman or President of the Palestinian authority, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen.) This stalemate has recently reached acute proportions, as the international isolation of the PA bites into living standards and provision of services. As a result, Chairman Abbas has adopted an uncharacteristically firm approach, seeking to announce new elections for the Palestine Legislative Council, and trying to disband a Hamas-led and financed militia operating from the PA Interior Ministry. Hamas' response has been defiant, and there have been violent clashes between the two groups, with fatalities on both sides.[19]

The ISG Report makes clear that it expects Israel only to negotiate with forces that recognize its existence.[20] But this formula leaves a number of questions open. The Hamas-led government clearly does not accept the right of Israel to exist. So this presumably means that the authors of *The ISG Report* would like to see Israel negotiate directly with Chairman Mahmoud Abbas. But Abbas' authority does not extend throughout the PA territories. Indeed, the movement at whose head he stands—Fatah—is itself deeply riven and divided, and Abbas does not enjoy

unquestioned authority within it. It is thus likely that any attempt to 'kick-start' the currently frozen Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process would rapidly run aground.

Given this reality, and given the regional importance that the authors of *The ISG Report* attach to progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front, there is concern that the likelihood, should the ISG recommendations be adopted, would be that Israel would be pressured by its allies into entering a negotiation process with no foundation in reality. Once negotiations between Israel and the PA Chairman ran up against the reality of the latter's relative inability to enforce his will in the territories, Israel would then face the choice of cessation of the talks, with all this would imply in terms of its then being portrayed as the factor standing in the way of progress in the Mideast, or continuing the talks—which would mean moving toward concessions to a Palestinian Authority ruled between an Islamist organization committed to Israel's destruction, and a PA Chairman commanding a disunited movement parts of which are similarly inclined to terrorist violence against Israel.

The same logic would apply to the commencement, under pressure, of negotiations toward major territorial concessions to Syria. The regime in Damascus is a major sponsor of organizations committed to Israel's destruction. These include Hizballah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.[21] It is suspected of involvement in political murder and the fomenting of chaos in Lebanon. Rushed negotiations toward major concessions to such a regime would be seen as surrendering to a policy of anti-Israel militancy, rather than as a basis for historic rapprochement. The result would be the strengthening of a regional power noted for its support for instability and hostility to western interests.

Aside from the substantive difficulties in moving negotiation forward between Israelis and Palestinians and Syrians, the very premise that movement in these areas would greatly assist the United States in other parts of the Middle East is deeply open to question. Such an assertion rests on the assumption that the political forces clashing in the Mideast share a primary concern with the Palestinian issue—progress toward the solution of which would have the inevitable effect of calming the general political mood in the region and reducing anti-western feeling. But it is hard to see how this view (long considered received wisdom among the elites of the Arab world) can be applied to the situation in Iraq. Certainly regarding the internal bloodshed in the country, it seems to make very little sense at all. How exactly would the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, or anti-Shia insurgents in Iraq's Anbar province be persuaded to adopt a different approach to inter-communal relations in Iraq as a result of Israel's beginning talks with Mahmoud Abbas? The connection is not intuitive, and the authors of *The ISG Report* imply rather than explain it.

The ISG Report, however, is mainly concerned with offering incentives to state, rather than sub-state actors. But the same logic may be applied. The report suggests engaging with Iran and Syria in order to win their cooperation on Iraq. Israel has a role to play in this—explicitly regarding Syria, which is to be offered the Golan Heights in return for cooperation, and implicitly regarding Iran, whose President has proclaimed his openly politicidal intentions toward Israel, and who would be expected to demand a softening of the United States' stance on Iranian nuclear ambitions in return for any cooperation with the United States.

But the desire to engage with these two states ignores the fact that both of them, in terms of their ideology, and in terms of their power ambitions in the region, are enemies of the United States. Both of these states are indeed of interest re. Iraq precisely because they have both engaged in giving active and tacit aid to elements hostile to the United States within Iraq. Both countries have an interest in U.S. failure, and both consider that the United States is in the process of seeing the eclipse of its plans in Iraq. It may be assumed that the power elites in both Syria and Iraq are aware, indeed, that the very reason they are being approached for engagement (or would be, if the authors of the ISG had their way) is precisely because the United States' situation in Iraq is so grim. As shown above, the ISG's recommendations list a long series of activities that Iran and Syria could undertake which would be of great help to the United States in Iraq if they were

undertaken.[22] But *The ISG Report* fails to explain why Iran and Syria, enemies in both power and ideological terms of the United States, should want to reach out to help the beleaguered Americans. It seems more likely that both countries will interpret the very issuing of *The ISG Report* as an indication that the tactics they have employed until now are proving successful, and that therefore the advisable course of action would be 'more of the same.'

In the weeks following the issuing of *The ISG Report*, it has become clear that the United States Administration has rejected the main thrust of the policy direction it recommended vis a vis Iraq. Instead, the Administration is planning an increase of forces in central Iraq, in an attempt to restore order in Baghdad.[23]

As far as Israel is concerned, however, efforts are clearly being made to give at least the impression of some movement in the Israeli-Palestinian process. Secretary of State Rice's visit to the region, and her determination to convene a summit involving Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and PA Chairman Abbas indicates this.[24] Given the situation on the ground, as discussed above, it is highly unlikely that this initiative will lead to a significant breakthrough in this conflict. It is quite possible that the U.S. Administration is aware of this, but wishes simply to give the impression of engagement in order to offset accusations that it is failing to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In this regard, it may be assumed that U.S. efforts at the appearance of progress between Israelis and Palestinians relate more to the desire to placate regional allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, than to the desire to engage with rejectionist regional forces, as recommended by *The ISG Report*.

Conclusion

It is not at all clear that the United States' latest attempt to restore order in Iraq will succeed, and it is possible that if the 'surge' proves unsuccessful, then the ideas contained in *The ISG Report* may re-surface with renewed force. It should be noted that from the perspective of the mainstream Israeli policy community, neither the 'neo-conservatives' with their project of the rapid democratization of the region, nor the 'conservative realists', with their desire to engage with hostile forces, display a particularly profound understanding of the international relations of the Middle East.

Evidence has now emerged that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon advised President George Bush against the invasion and occupation of Iraq.[25] Doubts were not made public at the time, but in closed discussions, Sharon's skepticism regarding the wisdom of the invasion reflected the recorded views of many Israelis. Israelis were deeply skeptical at the prospect of the rapid transformation of the political culture of Iraq and other Arab countries. The fear, which has been realized, was that the United States, having removed the dictatorship of Saddam, would find beneath it not a people yearning for U.S.-style democracy, but rather a complex, embittered society deeply divided along ethnic and sectarian lines.[26]

Whether the United States will yet succeed in returning some stability to Iraq remains to be seen. But the Iraq experience has already been a major contributory factor to profound changes taking place in the dynamics of the region. The new, emerging strategic picture pits Iran and its allies and clients—including Syria and various sub-state actors such as the Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements—against moderate and pro-western states including Israel, Jordan, Egypt, the small Gulf Emirates and Saudi Arabia (which might better be termed a pro-western but non moderate state.)[27]

This new alignment derives from the growing power and regional influence of Iran, which has been exacerbated by the sense of the stagnation or failure of U.S. policy in Iraq. In this context, the old claim of the 'centrality' of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to all other regional dynamics, begins to look not only unpersuasive, but actually absurd. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a

painful one and requires solution. But the idea that progress on it would radically alter all other regional processes makes little sense—when the main rivalry now building up is between a revolutionary and Shia bloc, (with some Sunni clients,) and pro status quo Sunni states. Both sides share a core hostility to Israel and sympathy for the Palestinians, but this is not going to be an issue with which they will be able to primarily concern themselves, or which will have a salient effect on the rivalry between them.

Thus, *The ISG Report* represented the temporary return of Mideast 'old think', offering its familiar panaceas to a radically changed situation. But the old-style solutions did not fit the new reality. If adopted, they would represent a U.S. attempt at rapprochement from a position of weakness with declared regional enemies. 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 illusory 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 United States and its allies in the region.

About the Author

Dr. Jonathan Spyer is a Research Fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs Center, Herzliya, Israel. He is a former official of the Israel Government Press Office, and Advisor on International Affairs at the Ministry of National Infrastructures. He completed his PhD at the London School of Economics. His articles include "Forward to the Past: the one-state 'solution'," *New Zealand International Review* (September-October, 2005); "The al-Qa'ida Network and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *MERIA Journal* (September 2004); "An analytical and historical overview of British policy toward Israel," *MERIA Journal* (June 2004). He holds a BSc (Econ) from the LSE, and an MSc in International Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His commentary on Israeli and Middle Eastern affairs is published widely.

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