

# Policy Memo

**DATE:** December 17, 2007

**RE:** The UN's Expanded Role in Iraq: Why Now?

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In August 2007, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1770 extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) by 12 months. The resolution also gave the organization an expanded political role in the country. Under this expanded role, the UN is to “advise, support, and assist” the Iraqi government with national reconciliation, constitutional review, the setting of internal boundaries, and the displacement of millions of Iraqis from their homes.

Given what has transpired since the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq, most experts agree that future UN efforts will face a multitude of challenges, not the least of which are the security of its personnel and establishment of an effective role for itself with the consent of the US and Iraqi governments. Even then, expectations for future success are tempered due to continued uncertainties on the ground—security is better but not guaranteed to hold especially with a planned drawdown of US forces in the summer of 2008; national political reconciliation between factions continues to be slow and even nonexistent; and economic reconstruction is hampered by the aforementioned security and political challenges.

Yet most experts agree that security has improved for a variety of reasons including the US troop “surge,” the commitment of Sunni tribes to fight Al Qaeda in Anbar Province, and the cease-fire called by Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army.

Given Resolution 1770, US requests for greater UN assistance, and the current improvement in the security situation, key questions remain regarding the UN's expanded role in Iraq. Is this the right time for the UN to expand its political role? If so, what challenges does it face? What does the UN need from Iraq, the US, and the larger international community to raise the odds of success? Are there scenarios that will enable the UN to gain greater support from local, regional, and international actors? And on the flip side, why shouldn't the UN expand its role? What is the “downside” for the organization, Iraq, and the international community if it does not choose to take advantage of even a short-term improvement in the security situation?

## Is the Timing Right?

Even though the UN has historically been quite useful and successful when “impossible conflicts” exist, this has usually occurred when the parties to the conflict have essentially exhausted themselves through violence and killing. Essentially, the parties must be tired of deadlock, violence, and death. RAND studies of other fratricidal situations since World War II provide some key lessons:

- The UN does have a history of success when conditions are right.
- Major third-party mediation is crucial and necessary.
- Intensive and positive involvement by regional neighbors is absolutely crucial.
- It takes an average of 14 years to get out of such situations.

However, historically, the UN has also not had a strong role in conflicts and issues about which the major powers care the most.

These “conditions” for success are not currently being met in Iraq. Of greatest concern is the ongoing sectarian violence among Iraqis—both sects fighting with each other and sects fighting within themselves—and the related lack of national political reconciliation. Current elites such as Prime Minister al-Maliki also show a lack of interest in interlocutors of any kind. The current lack of political movement and perceived unwillingness to welcome outside mediation is not unlike the situation in many failing or weak states when political elites are benefiting from the current status quo. However, the nature of Resolution 1770 and the need for cooperation from the Iraqi government also implies that there must be a coherent Iraqi demand for mediation in addition to calls from the UN and the US.

Also of concern is the interference in Iraqi internal affairs by its regional neighbors. Iran’s role is of great concern even though the US’ past actions may have facilitated Iran’s activities. The question is whether or not there is any interest from Iran in changing the current situation if the UN is now the interlocutor rather than the US.

Finally, there is suspicion that the US administration may not yet be ready to provide the UN with the requirements it needs to effectively act in Iraq. Chief among these is a level of independence from the US while the US simultaneously gives the UN the support it needs to leverage the legitimacy conferred on the organization by its 192 member states. The UN already suffers from a certain lack of legitimacy among Iraqis due to the Oil-for-Food Program, previous sanctions, the conduct of some of its representatives, and suspicions that its previous activities were really conducted at the request of the US.

Together these considerations suggest that an *all-out* effort by the UN now may be premature even with the reality of a decrease in violence, the fact that US force levels will only be at this current strength for a limited time, and concerns regarding critical humanitarian conditions including a substantial displacement situation. To place the UN in an untenable situation with limited chances for success may simply further weaken the organization while gaining very little for Iraq.

## “One Bite at the Apple?”

Even given these less than ideal conditions for expanded UN involvement, concerns about the UN’s viability should it “fail” in Iraq over the next year or two may be exaggerated. The UN’s viability and legitimacy have survived other situations in which its actions (or lack thereof) cast a cloud over the organization such as the tragedy that occurred in Rwanda in the 1990s.

In addition, this is the type of situation for which the UN was created—when the will of the international community is necessary to rectify a bad situation which, if not addressed, could lead to greater suffering and conflict. If the UN is only called upon when it has a high chance of success, then is it really functioning in the role for which it was intended?

The UN is also given cover by the fact that the US has not been able to make much headway on the political front. The US ambassador to the UN has publicly requested the UN’s assistance. Therefore, it is widely known that the UN is being asked to intervene because the US and Iraqi governments have not been able to make forward progress and expectations for “success” are accordingly low. However, if the UN chooses to wait and nothing diplomatic happens between now and the drawdown of US force levels in summer 2008, there will most likely be deterioration in the situation that may make a later UN intervention even more problematic.

Further impetus for the UN and international community to act is the fact that should a Democratic candidate win the US presidency in 2008, there will be increasing public pressure to remove significant numbers of US forces in 2009. Given the current political deadlock in Iraq and the tenuous nature of the security situation, the UN may never have a better time to begin inserting itself into the Iraqi political process.

Overall, this is not a “one bite at the apple” attempt for the UN. Rather, there are various goals, approaches, and solutions that can be employed, some with longer timetables than others. For example:

**Short Term:** the UN begins to work with the Iraqis on federal and regional issues and oil arrangements while US forces are at their peak.

**Short-to-Medium Term:** the UN and larger international community contribute toward the goal of building good governance practices and institutions.

**Longer Term:** the UN and larger international community assist Iraqis in achieving “full reconciliation.” As this is a societal task and a generational process, full reconciliation probably will not be achieved in the short term.

A key component of success will be the selection of a high-profile UN Special Representative (or even Representatives) that has a track record of success in these types of situations. Former UN Special Adviser on Iraq, Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, was mentioned as the type of mediator/interlocutor needed if an expanded UN mission is to meet with even limited success.

## **Trends That May Signal Some Political Promise**

There are also some promising local trends that the UN may be able to exploit. Local reconciliation efforts between Sunni and Shia factions are meeting with some success. General Petraeus is concentrating efforts on the local level in a ground-up initiative to help influence overall reconciliation. The UN and the larger international community, particularly the European Union and its member states, have considerable expertise that can be brought to bear in support of these current US and Iraqi “ground up” local initiatives.

There are also signs that Iraqi Shia Arab nationalist sentiment is rising in southern Iraq in response to Iranian meddling and Iranian-supported elites. The rise of Arab Shia Iraqi nationalism, even if it is only in certain regions of the country, may mean increased support for free elections, less corruption, and true delivery of services.

These trends at the local level and within portions of the Shia community combined with the current Sunni tribal unity against Al Qaeda and limited national oil revenue sharing in spite of the lack of a national law may all be trends that can be supported by the UN to positive effect, particularly if the Iraqis see commitment from the international community beyond the US. Also, the UN’s member state-conferred legitimacy will be critical to successfully negotiating with Iraq’s neighbors—a step that is critical to quelling further support for sectarian violence.

## **Recommendations**

### **For Iraq**

- Provide the UN with a stronger mandate to mediate political disputes within Iraq and with Iraq’s neighbors.
- Work with the UN to set an agreement in principle on benchmarks for achieving key political tasks such as national oil legislation.

### **For the United States**

- Publicly acknowledge that political reconciliation in Iraq is a long-term process that is best served by turning the leadership in this area over to Iraq and the UN. This will require the US to give the UN political independence from the US to bring the full legitimacy of the organization’s offices and member states to bear on the situation.
- Set expectations that, due to the inability to make political progress to date, the UN is accepting this challenge in the face of low odds of success in the short- to midterm since full reconciliation can take generations to achieve.
- Put the Iraqi leadership on notice that failure to act in good faith with the UN and to meet specified benchmarks will lead to US requests to the UN to withdraw its staff along with a significant and immediate drawdown in US forces.

### **For the United Nations and Its Member States**

- Make US protection for UN staff, including living quarters, a precondition for an increased presence in the country.
- Gain support from the US and Iraqi governments for a high profile, experienced SRSG.
- Request additional funding from the US, regional states, and the international community for public diplomacy and communications support in Iraq, the US, and the region to keep the key publics abreast of ongoing developments.
- Set agreements in principle with the Iraqis on benchmarks for achieving key political tasks such as national oil legislation.
- Work with the US, international community, and Iraqis to create a political map of Iraq that denotes the various leaders, factions, and supporters (internal and external) in each region of Iraq.
- Create a clause in any agreement that if the Iraqi national and regional leadership does not meet good faith criteria then the UN has the right to withdraw its personnel.
- Gain agreement from the US for full support of UN efforts to negotiate with all of Iraq's neighbors including Iran and Syria and to involve these neighbors in solutions to Iraq's security, political, economic, and humanitarian issues.

### **For Iraq's Neighbors**

- Stop all support for Iraqi factions and recognize Iraqi national sovereignty.
- Provide public support and resources including financial aid, personnel, and technology transfer as part of the UN's new role in Iraq.
- Use existing forums such as the Iraq Neighborhood forum and the UN Compact for Iraq to provide concrete assistance to Iraq's security, political, and economic needs.
- Encourage states and regional organizations such as the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to develop plans in support of displaced Iraqis.

### **For Europe, Russia, China, and Other Powers**

- Require the US to provide the UN with an independent role to negotiate the political and humanitarian issues with Iraq and its neighbors.
- Provide public support and resources including financial aid, personnel, and technology transfer as part of the UN's new role in Iraq.
- Provide a joint statement encouraging Iraq and Iraq's neighbors to support UN efforts.

## **About the Event**

For more than 50 years the Stanley Foundation has worked with the UN to strengthen the institution's role and effectiveness in solving international peace and security issues.

As part of its current United Nations and Global Institutions Initiative, the foundation convened a salon policy dinner of 14 experts in late November 2007 to discuss the UN's expanded role in Iraq. A majority of these experts spent time on the ground in Iraq with either the UN or the US government since the US-led intervention in 2003.

**This policy memo was prepared by Stanley Foundation Program Officer Kathy Gockel. It contains her interpretation of the proceedings. Participants neither reviewed nor approved the contents. Therefore it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all recommendations, observations, and conclusions.**

Two papers served as background to the discussion—[The UN and Iraq: Moving Forward?](#), a Stanley Foundation policy analysis brief by James Traub of *The New York Times Magazine*, and [The United Nations in Iraq](#), a Brookings Institution policy paper by Carlos Pascual commissioned by the Better World Campaign. These papers can be found at [http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/Traub\\_PAB\\_1007.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/Traub_PAB_1007.pdf) and [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/09iraq\\_pascual.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/09iraq_pascual.aspx).

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## **About The Stanley Foundation**

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