



The UN and Iraq: Moving Forward?

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Recommendations

- The United Nations should attempt to broker a political settlement among the Iraqi parties, though only if it gains the compliance of key actors.
- The United Nations should not significantly increase the size of its mission, which in turn would raise security issues. It needs to send the right people, not more people.
- All Iraqi parties—save those allied with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups—must be included in the process, which will focus on the core issues of federalism, the distribution of oil wealth, incorporation of ex-Baathists, disarming of militias, the status of Kirkuk.
- The United States must not only explicitly back the process, but press its own allies in Iraq—above all, the Kurds—to make meaningful concessions. Harder still, the United States must accept that decisions about troop deployments and other fundamental concerns could be shaped by the negotiations.
- The negotiation process must incorporate all the regional players who have leverage over the various Iraqi factions.
- Even should the political process fail, the United Nations needs to expand its presence in neighboring countries in order to deal with the immense problem of Iraqi refugees. The chief donors will have to accept this additional burden.

In recent months, the United Nations has been called on to serve as Iraq's *deus ex machina*—the instrument that will somehow break the calamitous deadlock which now grips the country. These calls have been issued from the Bush administration, which until now has confined the United Nations to the most carefully circumscribed tasks—from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and from a few policy experts in Washington.

Why is the UN alarm suddenly being rung? Certainly it's hard to see any shifts inside Iraq that increase the likelihood that a UN political mission will succeed. It's rather that every other pathway, whether political or military, looks increasingly like a dead end. This recognition may itself constitute the UN's trump card, for even a profoundly stubborn White House may have come to see the virtues of international diplomacy.

Why the United Nations? A recent report from the Brookings Institution concludes that the organization is uniquely situated to broker a political compromise in Iraq because "it is the only body that approximates neutrality and can claim all the relevant state actors within its membership." Only the United Nations can offer itself as a neutral convening ground for the contending factions and the neighbors, with their conflicting interests. But recent history provides good reason to worry that the United Nations will be drawn into the inferno of Iraq for all the wrong reasons, whether it be the American wish to transfer responsibility, and blame, for a hopeless cause or the ambition of a new secretary-general to prove his mettle, and that of his organization.

Before committing the organization to so improbable and dangerous a task, we have to ask several crucial questions:

- Why will the United Nations now be able to put out fires it hasn't been able to quench before?
- What does the organization have to do to even make this onerous task possible?
- And do the various actors really mean it when they say they want the United Nations to come to the rescue?

The United Nations is not an icebreaker that smashes through obstacles; on the profoundly political questions upon which national reconciliation depends, the United Nations can play a role only if the chief antagonists want it to. And it is not at all clear that this is true in Iraq.

The Perils of Applying Old Formulas for UN Involvement in Iraq

If past conflicts had been any guide, one might have expected the United Nations to play a foundational role in post-war Iraq. In Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor, a coalition of Western military forces had intervened to stop atrocities, and in the aftermath the United Nations, along with other bodies, had established a transitional government until a stable, indigenous government could be formed, or recognized. In Afghanistan, a setting more directly comparable to Iraq, American-led forces had ousted an authoritarian regime that threatened the West, and then the United Nations had helped form a national government, and had kept it under close supervision thereafter. But neither model was applied to Iraq, in large part because neither the United States nor the chief powers in the United Nations were in any mood to cooperate after the ugly and, ultimately futile, struggle to gain Security Council approval for the use of force to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Ever since the invasion, the United Nations has had a peculiar, and very uncomfortable, role in Iraq. Resolution 1483, passed on May 22, 2003, recognized the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) as the interim power in Iraq. The resolution also authorized UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to appoint a special representative who, "in coordination with the Authority," was charged with "promoting" the return of refugees and the process of reconstruction, "encouraging

international efforts" in various spheres, and "working intensively" with all relevant parties to help establish a permanent Iraqi government. The United Nations, in short, would be held partly responsible for Iraq's progress, but would have no direct authority of its own—a formula that made many UN officials believe they had been handed a poisoned chalice.

Annan's representative Sergio Vieira de Mello, a deft and widely admired figure, proceeded to demonstrate that, even with no formal authority, the United Nations could use its special status as a neutral party to advance the cause of political reconciliation. De Mello persuaded reluctant Iraqi leaders to join the powerless Governing Council that CPA administrator Paul Bremer had decided to impanel. But Bremer had little further use for him, and de Mello was soon idled. And then, on the afternoon of August 19, the United Nations suffered the most cataclysmic event in its history: a truck bomb killed de Mello and 21 of his colleagues.

UN officials who had chafed at the idea of bailing the United States out of the mess it had created in Iraq were now enraged both at the United States and at Annan, who had pushed strongly for a UN role. And the United Nations had lost not only some of its most deeply respected figures but also its collective sense of security. The attack shattered the faith that impartiality conferred upon the United Nations a unique immunity from surrounding violence, and plunged the organization into a period of grief, fear, and embitterment. Nevertheless, Annan declined to remove the mission, reasoning that he ought not hand the terrorists that victory. Then, a month later, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the gates of the UN compound, and Annan agreed to remove all international officials from Iraq.

The United Nations was pinned between competing forces: It did not want to serve under a vague mandate in a murderous environment, and yet it did not want to be absent from Iraq; the Bush administration did not want to cede any authority to the institution, yet found that it could not live without it. By late 2003, Bremer's plans for a slow transition to Iraqi sovereignty were coming unraveled, and he devised a complex plan to draw up a new constitution and transfer power by mid-2004; but the Iraqis balked at the plan. Annan, eager to restore the United Nations to

Iraq despite the terrible trauma, agreed to appoint Lakhdar Brahimi, another of his most seasoned and gifted diplomats, to help resolve the standoff. And Brahimi did what the Americans could not. He persuaded Ayatollah al-Sistani, who would not speak to the Americans, that elections could not be held before the end of 2004, and thus that the transition would have to precede the elections; he persuaded Bremer that the Iraqis would never accept the unwieldy caucus system he had devised to create a simulacrum of democratic choice; and he chose, or at least approved the choice of, Iyad Allawi as Iraq's first prime minister.

The Security Council passed Resolution 1546, in June 2004, conferring its blessing on the transition process. The resolution established a new UN mission, known as the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), and stipulated that it would “play a leading role” in helping the new government of Iraq organize and carry out elections and draft a constitution. It would help reform Iraq's civil service and judiciary, provide humanitarian aid, protect human rights, and the like.

The national elections, scheduled for January 2005, became the supreme test of the UN role. With Iraq spinning downward into a vortex of bloodshed—US forces stormed the stronghold of Falluja in early November—and with the Sunnis prepared to boycott en masse, the election looked like a catastrophe in the making. But thanks to the enormous enthusiasm of Shias and Kurds, the iconic image of the voters' purple thumb, and the low levels of violence, the election was judged a tremendous success—the high point of the American presence in Iraq, and perhaps also of the UN role there. In the 21 months since the end of the war proper, the United Nations had, under unimaginably trying circumstances, carried out its classic political role in post-conflict settings: it had engaged and brought together the chief players of the new polity, helped forge interim institutions, and organized the election that would usher the country into its future.

In other settings, such as Afghanistan, the United Nations would then build on the trust it had created to continue playing a key role as interlocutor and referee. But not in Iraq. Neither the Americans nor the Iraqis had much further use for the United Nations, save in regard to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. And as the violence

descended into increasingly savage civil war, there was little use for the UN's “good offices.” The organization would remain in Iraq, but it would recede to the margins.

It was a Bush administrative initiative that revived the idea of an enhanced UN role in Iraq. In mid-2006, White House figures began talking about a “compact” with Iraq overseen by the United Nations. American diplomats orchestrated the effort, and in May of this year the Iraqi government, the United Nations, the World Bank, and donor nations signed the International Compact with Iraq. The Compact was the framework through which aid to Iraq was internationalized, as the United States had long sought. The donors pledged \$35 billion in aid and debt forgiveness; the Iraqis promised to carry out a wide array of political, economic, and constitutional reforms; and the United Nations and the World Bank agreed to oversee implementation.

But it was all something of a mirage. Few believed that the Iraqi government would succeed in, say, establishing the rule of law in exchange for a promise of aid. And the Compact did not actually expand the UN's role in Iraq, which continued to be governed by Resolution 1546. The Bush administration may have hoped that the Compact would help extricate the United States from its solitary role as the party responsible for Iraq, but since the pact produced little measurable progress, this did not happen.

Washington continued to push the United Nations to grasp the Iraqi nettle. In late July, Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador to the United Nations, used *The New York Times* op-ed page to laud the UN's “unmatched convening power and to propose that the organization “help Iraq's principal communities reach a national compact on the distribution of political and economic power,” and lead a “multilateral diplomatic process to contain the regional competition that is adding fuel to the fire of Iraq's internal conflict.” The United States then submitted, and the Security Council quickly approved, a resolution to extend and update UNAMI's mission. Resolution 1770 specified that the United Nations “advise, support, and assist” the government of Iraq on “national reconciliation”; the resolution of disputed internal boundaries; “facilitating regional dialogue, including on issues of border security, energy and refugees”; and the reintegration of former insurgents.

This was, at least in theory, a vast and ambitious remit. But the Shia-led government in Baghdad quietly watered down the language by stipulating that UNAMI would act only “as circumstances permit,” and “at the request of the government of Iraq.” The regime thus put the international community on notice that it would throttle the peace-brokering effort were it so inclined. Washington did not object.

Nevertheless, the United Nations, at least in its uppermost reaches, plainly hankered for the new role. On September 22, in the days before the opening of the General Assembly, Ban Ki-moon convened a meeting with Prime Minister al-Maliki and the foreign ministers of 20 nations to explore the means of furthering both the United Nations and the international role in Iraq. Very little of substance was accomplished, according to several attendees, but at a press conference afterward Ban announced that he had found strong support for a greater UN role both from Iraq and from the foreign ministers. The United Nations, he said, had a “comparative advantage” in promoting reconciliation and reconstruction—the exact language Khalilzad had used. Ban said specifically that he planned “a modest increase” in the staff in Baghdad and in the tiny office in Erbil.

Moving Forward in Reverse?

It sounds like the stars are aligned for a new era of UN engagement in Iraq. But in fact nothing has happened since the passage of Resolution 1770 to change the situation on the ground.

The most obvious obstacle to a greater UN role is the security situation. Kofi Annan was accused of sending a UN team to Baghdad so hastily that rudimentary precautions were overlooked. A subsequent investigation confirmed some of these charges, though de Mello was also not a man to be trampled by matters of safety. The tragedy left a deep scar on the organization, and has ensured that its footprint in Iraq is a very light one. UNAMI has 65 civilians in Baghdad, though only 25 or so are “substantives.” (The rest perform administrative functions.) The team is protected by 200 armed guards. The mission’s most recent report, submitted June 5, noted that attacks on the Green Zone “have become increasingly concentrated and accurate and often consist of multiple mortars and rockets landing within minutes of each other.” The number of car bombs set off near entry points to the Green Zone has also

increased. UN officials have thus “temporarily been relocated to more hardened accommodation facilities.” The special representative thus called for the construction of new facilities, which are estimated to cost over \$150 million and require 18 months to complete. Despite these attacks, UN officials suggest that the mission could grow to its authorized ceiling of 95 without having to add more guards along the perimeter, though it would require more effectively hardened facilities. And Ban is said to be quite eager to send more officials as a token of the UN’s commitment.

But this is putting the cart before the horse. Security is actually not the chief limiting factor. There is still no reason to send more international civil servants into harm’s way unless there are essential tasks for them to perform. And as both de Mello and Brahimi demonstrated, the most crucial tasks require only a handful of people. Thus the real question is: How much scope exists for the political tasks that have now been entrusted to the United Nations?

The answer, so far, has been very little. There has been halting progress, and in some cases none at all, on the major issues that separate Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds, and in many cases pit factions inside these groups against one another. These include the sharing of oil revenues, the relationship of the federal government to the provinces, the reintegration of former Baathists, the status of the disputed Kirkuk region, the demobilization of militias, and the protection of minority rights (for Sunnis, say, in majority-Shia regions).

Many of these issues must be addressed through amendments to Iraq’s constitution. UNAMI has been advising Iraq’s Constitutional Review Committee since the committee’s inception in November 2006; four of the “substantives” in Baghdad are constitutional experts. Earlier this year, the committee came up with a series of compromises to be presented to the Iraqi parliament. But Kurdish leaders did not accept the proposed language on oil revenues; and so the process is now in limbo.

The national government may crumble away before outside actors have a chance to shore it up. The Bush administration’s August 2007 National Intelligence Estimate notes that “Iraqi political leaders remain unable to govern effectively,” and predicts further deterioration over the next year.

Three different parties have withdrawn their support from the Shia-led government. More than half of the Cabinet positions are unfilled. The government's writ barely operates in much of the country, where issues of power are being settled among tribal leaders, militia commanders, and a new class of gangsters with sectarian affiliations. The semi-autonomous government of Kurdistan, tired of waiting for a new oil law, has begun to sign oil exploration contracts with foreign firms—a decision that some view as a poison pill for national reconciliation.

Historical Lessons: The Importance of Local, Regional, and Global Political Will

The United Nations is able to apply its form of medicine only under quite specific circumstances. In the case of civil war, the combatants must have exhausted themselves, and thus be prepared for a political solution, as was true in, for example, Angola and El Salvador. In the case of a defeated occupying force or a deposed tyrant, the elements of the old regime must have largely disappeared, leaving the former victims free to forge something new among themselves, as was true—at least briefly—in Afghanistan, or in Bosnia, Kosovo, or Haiti.

In Iraq, however, the contending parties still believe that they have much to gain through warfare, and the supporters of the *ancien regime* who melted away before American firepower returned almost immediately to the battlefield. Iraq presents the dismaying spectacle of a country that went through the usual UN protocol—engagement of indigenous leaders, establishment of interim institutions, election providing legitimacy to new regime—and then emerged even more violent and divided than before. How, then, is the United Nations to apply its magic in a yet more inauspicious setting?

The question, at bottom, is: Do the Iraqi factions *want* a UN role? Prime Minister Maliki, and the religious Shia faction that forms the core of the government, plainly does not. “The Iraqi government fears any internationalization of Iraqi issues,” says an official who works with UNAMI. “Internationalization means more pressure on them to make concessions to the Sunnis.” Another UN official observes, “To the Shia, reconciliation means the Sunnis saying they’re sorry”—for generations of abuse. For the Sunnis, it means restoring the sense of primacy they once enjoyed.

The Sunnis, as outsiders, welcome diplomatic intervention. But who are the Sunni interlocutors? The Sunnis are fragmented into old-line leaders with little following: ex-Baathists, extremists, tribal leaders, and so on. And the Kurds, thriving at least in relative terms behind their regional barrier, are deeply wary of compromise. (One leading UN figure notes that the closest translation for *compromise* in Arabic is *weak bargain*.)

Experts on Iraq disagree about whether the factions have already crossed a point of no return, reducing national reconciliation to a chimera. A report issued by the liberal Center for American Progress, for example, posits that since Iraq's leaders are “fundamentally incapable” of reaching a national accord, diplomacy, such as it is, should focus on provincial and local leaders rather than national ones.

Some UN officials take the same view. But the consequences of state collapse in Iraq are so grave that it seems reckless to simply accept its inevitability. Even the most bitter adversaries can sometimes be induced to step back from maximalist demands. Extremists affiliated with Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups, whose goals are wholly destructive, would have to be excluded from the process of negotiation; but all other parties are at least open to the possibility of discussion (or would have to be treated as such). The trick, as one UN official with deep experience in Iraq notes, is to offer solutions, even on just a few of the most contentious issues, that are appealing enough to enough members of each faction to create positive momentum.

But this raises the question of the political will of the key outsiders. The White House seems to be, along with the top management of the United Nations itself, the most enthusiastic backer of UN diplomacy—an ironic turn of events. But it has become painfully clear that the improvements in Iraqi security wrought by the surge have had little effect, if any, on the willingness of the factions to engage in political dialogue. The Iraqi Compact is plainly a nonstarter. And the proposal by Senator Joseph Biden and others to stage a diplomatic process around a “soft partition” of the country has forged rare unity among the Iraqi factions, who have denounced it as one. The Bush administration thus seems to have reached another point where it needs the United Nations to come to its rescue.

But while Ambassador Khalilzad has been eloquent on the subject of the UN's convening power, he has been silent on the question of what kind of political space the White House would cede should the United Nations really exercise that power. Would the White House back a UN diplomat trying, say, to limit Kurdish control over Kirkuk? What if that diplomat needed to promise a timeline for the withdrawal of US troops in exchange for Sunni concessions? There will probably be no way of knowing until the moment arrives.

Finally, what about the neighbors? A hypothetical UN negotiator would need to engage regional organizations and states at the same time that he was shuttling among Iraqi factions. Regional diplomacy may, in fact, prove a better fit for the United Nations, which has the unique standing that comes of its universal membership. The Iraqis will accept otherwise unacceptable compromises only if the factions come under pressure from external sponsors and protectors: the Kurds from the United States, the Sunnis from Saudi Arabia, the Shias—at least some of them—from Iran. But both Iran and Saudi Arabia have seen the benefit of fishing in Iraq's troubled water, though of course on opposite sides. The Syrians have increasingly aligned themselves with the Iranians. Lebanon is in turmoil, and still operates under the Syrian shadow. Regional diplomacy may thus turn out to be as perilous a high-wire act as national reconciliation.

The prospects are so daunting, and the likelihood of success so low, that one would never contemplate this act of diplomatic legerdemain were there any meaningful alternative. But there isn't. The American military presence is not, itself, changing the key political facts; and an American withdrawal, by itself, will not suddenly bring the parties to their sense.

Conclusion: The Inevitability of a Greater UN Role

And so the question about a deeper UN engagement is not whether, but how. There are many areas of disagreement even among those who seek that engagement. In "The United Nations in Iraq," a report written for the Brookings Institution, Carlos Pascual, a former State Department official in both the Clinton and Bush administrations, suggests that Ban Ki-moon appoint "a leader with international stature" who will operate independ-

ently of the current special representative in Baghdad. Others argue that the Iraqis can no longer be "bullied" by such a figure, and propose a more low-key form of diplomacy. Some suggest that the five or six major issues be presented as a package, while others put more stock in a piecemeal approach. Some insist that the Sunnis will not come to the table until the United States accepts a timeline for withdrawal; others believe that only the additional security created by the surge will make difficult concessions possible.

In his Brookings report, Pascual asserts that the endgame of the UN diplomatic scenario would be a "peacebuilding" phase featuring a UN-mandated peacekeeping force, as in the Balkans. Others have suggested as much—Barack Obama, for example, and Bernard Kouchner, the foreign minister of France. Pascual proposes a force of 175,000 initially consisting of 100,000 or so American troops, but shifting over time to a fully multinational force. This would be, as Pascual puts it, "a huge challenge for the UN," especially if the troops are to be drawn substantially from NATO-member forces, who are currently unable to add even a few thousand soldiers to the force in Afghanistan. It sounds, in fact, like one of those proposals is best left vague, since merely to specify it is to indicate its improbability.

The United Nations has a bias toward hope; and this bias arises from its very essence. The United Nations acts in the name of principle, not national interest. And the principles in whose name it acts are universal ones—or so, in any case, we like to believe. Trying to do what is right, and falling short—as happened with Kofi Annan's ambitious program of reform—is thus no shame; the United Nations will always err on the side of optimism.

But all too often, the bias for hope has kept the United Nations from making an honest reckoning with harsh facts. Perhaps this happened with the hasty return to Iraq in 2003; the case can be argued both ways. Certainly the rosy scenarios UN officials used to offer in the Balkans, or in Rwanda, cannot be excused as mere optimism; the proper term is *willful blindness*. UN officials have to push for the hopeful solution without tipping over into naivete or blitheness—above all when lives are at stake.

This is the quandary of Iraq. The major factions apparently would rather go on killing each other

than compromise. The dynamic of civil war may well prove irreversible—but it may not be. Since the United Nations really does have the legitimacy that comes of its impartial status and universal membership, it must take its best shot.

This said, half-hearted or merely symbolic measures will make the endeavor pointless. The United Nations must not send more warm bodies to Baghdad just to prove to the Bush administration that it has gotten over its trauma, or its resistance to the overall enterprise. The secretary-general may need to appoint a figure of international stature to signal his own seriousness to Iraqis and their neighbors; in any case, he must support him with a small, talented staff. And much hinges on Washington, which will have to push the Kurds harder than it has so far—the Kurdish hydrocarbon law provoked not even a peep from the White House—and, harder still, to accept the consequences of the diplomacy it has been instrumental in launching.

What if it all fails and Iraq continues spinning toward utter collapse? The United Nations will still have its hands full. About two million people have already fled Iraq, with another two million or so “internally displaced” inside the country. Already many of the UN’s 300 employees in Amman are trying to shelter, feed, and resettle this massive refugee flow, with other officials, mostly Iraqi nationals, dealing with the so-called internally displaced persons.

The numbers will only swell as violence increases. The United Nations may have to establish “safe havens” in which Iraqis can gather before fleeing across the border to Jordan or Syria. Refugee and humanitarian officials will need more money and more people. And the United Nations will have to engage in regional diplomacy in order to help keep the sectarian violence from spilling into neighboring countries. The all-American phase of the Iraq war is drawing to a fitful end after more than four years; and so long as Iraq remains both miserable and a source of misery for others, the United Nations will have a great deal to do in the neighborhood.

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