



The Reality about Iraq

Soeren Kern

Análisis n° 155

December 13, 2006

Now that Democrats are about to take control of the American Congress, many European left-wingers are hoping that the United States will soon begin pulling its troops out of Iraq so that the Middle East can return to the utopia of peace and stability concocted by their collective imagination. Unlike their European counterparts, however, even most Democrats understand that a precipitous American pullout from Iraq would create a power vacuum that would lead to bloodshed on an unprecedented scale. Many thoughtful Democrats also seem to understand better than European lefties that a hasty American withdrawal from Iraq would be viewed as a propaganda victory for Al-Qaeda, which in turn would greatly increase the likelihood of more terrorist attacks on European (not American) soil.

It is true that many congressional Democrats, especially those on the far left, are eager to find a way to get out of Iraq quickly. Senator Carl Levin, for example, is the incoming chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, which is responsible for writing defence policy and authorizing billions of dollars in military spending. Levin, an early opponent of the war, says the United States should begin a 'phased redeployment' of the more than 140,000 US troops in Iraq within the next four to six months. But his position is being challenged by even some of the most vocal critics of the Bush Administration's Iraq policies, who argue that any substantial reduction in American forces over the next few months would be more likely to accelerate rather than stop the slide to civil war.

Then there is Senator Joe Biden, the incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He believes that Iraq should be partitioned into three semi-autonomous regions: One Shiite, one Sunni and one Kurdish. But many analysts, including some very prominent Democrats, have called that a recipe for massive sectarian strife.

Still other Democrats have urged Bush to discuss Iraq's future with Syria and Iran—rogue states that have provided large-scale assistance to the terrorist groups and militias that are working to tear Iraq apart. Such proposals, however, have been dismissed as naïve and risky by an array of Middle East experts and even some senior Democrats because they ignore the inconvenient fact that increasing ties with Iran and Syria would embolden these regimes as destructive forces on the world stage. Moreover, suspicions that Syria perpetrated the 21 November killing of Lebanese politician Pierre Gemayel will almost certainly increase resistance within the Bush Administration to seeking Syria's help in stabilizing Iraq. (The White House broke off high-level contacts with Damascus in early 2005, after the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri.)

In any case, the superficiality of much of the debate over Iraq is perfectly encapsulated in the trite slogan that some of the proposals have been given by Democratic Congressman Rahm Emanuel. He calls them the five R's: Reconciliation of the warring parties, reconstruction,

responsibility for results, recognizing the parties in the region and re-deployment. But even Democrats admit that this formulation is not particularly illuminating, nor does it really add much substance to the debate about Iraq. Indeed, upon closer examination, neither Democrats nor their sanctimonious friends on the European left have really offered any serious alternatives for Iraq.

In this context, there are currently two debates going on about Iraq: The first one is actually a pseudo-debate that is more about left-wing politics and ideology than about Iraq; it is not practically relevant. The second debate is being conducted by serious Democrats and Republicans about realistic options on Iraq and therefore it is the only discussion that really matters. This debate is being shaped by three main actors: The Iraq Study Group, the Pentagon and the neo-conservatives.

Iraq Study Group

The Iraq Study Group is a prestigious 10-member bipartisan commission examining strategic options for Iraq. The panel, which is being led by James A Baker III, former secretary of state under the first President Bush, and Lee H Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman, could have a decisive role in reshaping the American position in Iraq. Although the panel is in the final phase of its eight-month search for a new policy, the five Republicans and five Democrats that make up the group remain deeply divided over which

course to pursue, and no formal recommendations are expected until Congress adjourns at the end of 2006.

Until recently, the Iraq Study Group, whose deliberations are secret, was little known beyond the elite circles of the world of US foreign policy. Lately, however, some of the ideas being considered by the panel have been leaked to the American news media. Baker, for example, has indicated that the group's recommendations will fall somewhere between the troop withdrawal strategy often attributed to Democrats and the stay-the-course policy favored by the White House. He has also ruled out the idea of partitioning Iraq.

More specifically, however, the Iraq Study Group is examining two main concepts: 'stability first' and 'redeploy and contain'.

The first option would concentrate less on democracy promotion and more on stabilisation, especially in Baghdad, and on trying to bring nationalist insurgents into political life by focusing on a new political deal between warring Sunnis and Shiites. There has also been some speculation that the study group will advocate more aggressive regional diplomacy between the United States and Syria and Iran.

The second option would be more radical. It foresees a possible major, phased withdrawal of US forces, perhaps to bases within Iraq or even to bases in neighbouring countries from which they could support the

Iraqi government if necessary. Indeed, some Democrats believe that setting a date to begin withdrawal is the only way to pressure the Iraqis to show more leadership and take more responsibility for their own future. However, Republicans and Democrats on the panel remain deeply divided over the size and timetable for a withdrawal of American troops.

In any case, most analysts agree that ultimately the Iraq Study Group probably will not offer any genuinely new recommendations because there are few, if any, good options left facing Iraq. Many of the ideas reportedly being considered have either been tried or have limited chances of success, in the view of many experts on Iraq.

As the Baker-Hamilton group looks at a range of issues, therefore, many American lawmakers believe its true significance may be more about forging a bipartisan consensus rather than about advancing new proposals. Indeed, although Republicans and Democrats are bitterly divided over Iraq, the key players in both parties (unlike their European counterparts, it seems) understand that there are no easy answers to war-torn Iraq. This implies that the most important aspect of the Iraq Study Group is that it is bipartisan and therefore could provide both parties with a framework for agreement in a year when dissatisfaction over the war led to the changeover in Washington's political landscape.

The Pentagon Plan

The Department of Defense, meanwhile, is drafting its own set of new options for winning in Iraq, in part, to give President Bush counter-proposals to fall back upon in case the Iraq Study Group comes up with ideas he does not like. The Pentagon's closely guarded review of how to improve the situation in Iraq, which was commissioned by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Peter Pace in September 2006, consists of three basic options: Send in more troops, pull out of Iraq altogether, or shrink the American force but stay longer.

The first option contemplates a large increase in American troops in Iraq to try to break the cycle of sectarian and insurgent violence. A classic counterinsurgency campaign, however, would require several hundred thousand additional US and Iraqi soldiers as well as heavily armed Iraqi police. This option therefore has already been all but rejected by the Iraq Study Group, which has concluded that there are not enough troops in the American military and not enough effective Iraqi forces.

The second option, which calls for the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, has already been dismissed by the Pentagon on the rationale that such a move would undermine the Iraqi government and probably push the country directly into a full-blown civil war. This position was most recently voiced by Army General John Abizaid, the top US military commander for the Middle East, when he told the Senate Armed Ser-

vices Committee on 15 November that he thinks immediate troop withdrawals would increase the violence in Iraq. The Pentagon is also opposed to some of the variants of withdrawal, such as pulling American units out of the cities and keeping them in isolated enclaves, where they would not interact with the Iraqi population but would be available to combat major insurgent offensives and also to protect the government against coups.

The third option is a hybrid plan that combines part of the first option with the second one and calls for initially boosting and then cutting the US combat presence in favor of a long-term expansion of the training and advisory efforts. Under this combination of options, the American presence in Iraq, currently at about 140,000 troops, would be augmented by 20,000 to 30,000 more soldiers for about six months. The purpose of the temporary increase would be to do as much as possible to curtail sectarian violence, while at the same time to expand the program to train and advise Iraqi forces.

This third option is the one most favored by the Pentagon; it is also rumored to be remarkably close to the current thinking of the Iraq Study Group.

Realists, Neocons and Reality

President Bush has already invited some members of the Iraq Study Group to the White House for initial consultations on possible options for Iraq. But so far Bush has offered lit-

tle indication that he is open to dramatic policy shifts. Indeed, he told reporters gathered in the Oval Office on 13 November that 'the best military options depend upon the conditions on the ground' in Iraq, a position that in practice sounds almost identical to the 'staying the course' mantra that many Democrats say needs to change.

Moreover, Bush remains vehemently opposed to some of the so-called 'realist' proposals for altering the strategy on Iraq. For example, the president says that there has been no change in his position that Iran must first suspend uranium enrichment before a bilateral dialogue with the United States is possible. The 'focus of this administration is to convince the Iranians to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions', Bush said after a 13 November meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. 'That focus is based upon our strong desire for there to be peace in the Middle East. And an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be a destabilizing influence', Bush said. He also called on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon and to stop 'harbouring terrorists'.

Whatever policy the White House ultimately chooses for Iraq, all sides in Washington increasingly seem to be of the same mind that the only promising option for reducing the American presence in Iraq is to find ways to accelerate the training and deployment of Iraqi forces. And this is exactly what the neo-conservative allies of the Bush Administration have been demanding since the Iraq intervention began in 2003.

Indeed, in light of the many of the proposals for Iraq that have been floating around since the mid-term elections in November, the Euro-press has been abuzz in speculation that the Bush Administration is about to abandon neo-conservative idealism in favour of a return to the more traditional realism that marked American foreign policy during the Cold War. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The reality is that classical *realpolitik* is a European relic of an earlier age in American statecraft that is largely responsible for the geo-political insanity that is the contemporary Middle East. That 'realism' has for most of the past 100 years coddled dictators and championed faux regional 'peace' conferences that are directly responsible for most of the systemic instability that plagues the Arab world today.

It is also the same realism that provoked so much outrage among the American and European left during the Cold War, but somewhat incredibly is now being celebrated by those who call themselves 'progressives'. Indeed, the 'realism' that is suddenly in fashion with many left-wing 'intellectuals' is in fact a euphemism for cynicism, for playing for time and for passing up opportunities that carry high risks but potentially great rewards.

Such realism is, however, regressive, not progressive. It is also unrealistic. Indeed, old school realism denies reality because in its essence, *realpolitik* promotes short-term gain at the expense of long-term security.

And what today's Middle East needs most is a long-term strategy, not a short-term fix.

In this context, the only true realists in the world today are the neo-conservative thinkers advising the Bush Administration. Indeed, the neo-cons are the only foreign policy intellectuals to recognize that the old way of doing things in the Middle East is no longer sustainable in an era that combines weapons of mass destruction with Islamic terrorism.

Moreover, only the neo-cons have had the presence of mind to articulate a long-term vision for creating a new sustainable order in the Middle East. Even though the neo-con project to bring democracy to the Arab world is bound to suffer short-term setbacks like those in Iraq, neo-conservatism as an ideology is here to stay because the 'realist' status quo is not a realistic long-term alternative.

In war there usually are only two possible outcomes: victory or defeat. In the final analysis, therefore, most experts agree that the United States really has only two options in Iraq: one is to stay and win, the other is to

leave and lose. Any attempts to chart a middle course cannot succeed because they ignore the reality that the Iraqi military is not yet ready to secure Iraq without the continued presence of American troops. And even the most optimistic Pentagon planners say that it might take another 10 years to create a stable and competent Iraqi army.

This implies that even with Democrats in control of Congress, American troops are sure to be in Iraq (not to mention the greater Middle East) for well into the foreseeable future. It also means that the neo-conservative Bush Doctrine will be operative long after a new occupant enters the White House in January 2009, regardless of whether the next president is a Republican or a Democrat.

Thus by refusing to enunciate a meaningful foreign policy vision of their own, either for Iraq or for anywhere else, European political elites are choosing to remain largely irrelevant to the great questions of this era. The upshot is that it will be the neo-cons, not the cynics on the European left, who will shape the future. Welcome to reality.