



Groping for the Exit

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"This business about graceful exit just simply has no realism to it at all," President Bush said yesterday after meeting with the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. And that's probably the right headline as the administration reviews its options for Iraq: No graceful exit.

That doesn't mean there aren't significant changes ahead in Iraq. The premise of a secret White House policy review conducted over the past two weeks is that current policy isn't working. One of the options that has emerged from this review is a redeployment of U.S. forces over the next year that would focus the American mission on training and advising Iraqi troops.

Bush said yesterday that his goal is to "accelerate" the Iraqi military's control of the country and to reduce U.S. forces there "as soon as possi-

ble." Those words should probably be taken at face value. Though administration officials recognize that increased Iraqi control is likely to be a messy process -- the opposite of a "graceful exit" -- the administration has no appetite for a big troop increase. Every senior official I've talked to recently agrees that the number of U.S. troops in Iraq must be reduced over the next year, even if sectarian violence remains high.

The administration is wary of the bold strokes, such as engaging Iran and Syria, that are likely to be proposed by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group headed by former secretary of state James Baker and former representative Lee Hamilton. Administration officials are all for engaging Iran in principle, but they think that under current conditions it's likely to be a dead end. As for Syria, there are different views within the ad-

ministration, with some officials ready to test Damascus's willingness to temper its alliance with Tehran and others seeing the Syrian regime as a menace whose support could be achieved only at the price of sacrificing the pro-American government in Lebanon.

As administration officials review Iraq strategy, one failed element is the policy of "Sunni outreach" pursued by the U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad. Some officials have concluded that Khalilzad's approach made Iraqi Shiites fear that America was abandoning them, without achieving any meaningful reduction of the Sunni insurgency. A few officials argue flatly that it's time for America to take the Shiite side in the Iraqi conflict. "National reconciliation is a fallacy," one senior intelligence analyst said in an interview this week, insisting that, in Iraq, "You have to pick a winner."

The administration seems to be leaning toward a more polite version of this "pick a winner" approach, which is to support the Shiite-led government and an Iraqi army that is overwhelmingly Shiite and Kurdish. Officials hope they can contain the sectarian fighting short of full-blown civil war and partition of the country. But with Khalilzad scheduled to return soon to Washington, probably to be replaced by veteran diplomat Ryan Crocker, the U.S. effort is likely to involve less "Sunni outreach" and more reliance on the Shiite majority and its elected government.

Iran has been especially frustrating for the administration. Officials believed that a breakthrough was near

in mid-September, when Iranian national security adviser Ali Larijani signaled that he would be coming to New York with a compromise on the nuclear issue that would open the way for direct U.S.-Iran talks. The U.S. Embassy in Bern, Switzerland, rushed to prepare 150 visas for Larijani's team. But Larijani never made the trip, and U.S. officials concluded that he had lost an internal battle with the hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Administration officials want to leave the door open for contact with Iran, as in President Bush's statement yesterday, "They know how to get us to the table." But there's little hope now that these talks will be productive.

Rather than seeking Iran's help, the administration is looking for ways to step up the pressure on Tehran, short of military confrontation. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson has been urging banks in Europe and Japan to restrict lending to Iran, an effort that officials say has had some success. And the White House is said to be talking quietly with Saudi Arabia about a strategy for squeezing Iran's oil revenue over the next several years, through more Saudi production and lower prices, which would worsen Iran's economic predicament.

A sign of how bad things are in Iraq -- and of the administration's conviction that there aren't any silver bullets -- is that White House hopes for a strategic breakthrough now appear to be focused on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Senior officials think this is an area where U.S. diplomacy can pay dividends and where compromise may be possible.

That's how bad it is right now in the Middle East -- when the Palestinian

morass is regarded as a bright spot.