



Trouble With the Neighbors

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One of the most infuriating problems in [Iraq](#) seems to generate precious little fury.

In a kind of malicious chemistry experiment, hostile powers are adding accelerants to Iraq's frothing chaos. [Iran](#) smuggles in the advanced explosive devices that kill and maim American soldiers. [Syria](#) allows the transit of suicide bombers who kill Iraqis at markets and mosques, feeding sectarian rage.

This is not a complete explanation for the difficulties in Iraq. Poor governance and political paralysis would exist whether Iran and Syria meddled or not. But without these outside influences, [Tony Blair](#) told me recently, the situation in Iraq would be "very nearly manageable."

America does not merely have challenges in the [Middle East](#); we have enemies who contribute to the deaths of our troops. Yet Americans have shown little outrage, and the military reaction has been muted.

A stronger response would be justified, but the choices are neither obvious nor easy.

Iran, the main strategic threat, has two conflicting tendencies: It doesn't want long-term chaos in neighboring Iraq, but it wants America to fail decisively there. The second tendency is currently ascendant because the Iranians are hopeful that America is on the verge of a humiliating collapse of will -- for them an irresistible source of immediate pleasure. So Iranian paramilitary groups train and arm radical Shiite

militias and provide explosive devices that also find their way to radical Sunni groups.

Engagement and deft diplomacy are not likely to change the Iranian interest in American defeat. Iran would require an unacceptable inducement to bail out American interests in Iraq: permission to proceed with its nuclear program. America would purchase tactical advantages in Iraq at a tremendous price -- a strategic nightmare in the entire Middle East.

Additional economic pressures on Iran and its proxies would increase the cost of its current course. This week, [President Bush](#) issued an executive order financially targeting groups and individuals who recruit and send terrorists to Iraq. But any real leverage in this area will require the Europeans to take actions of their own.

There are also more straightforward approaches. Earlier this year, Bush announced a dragnet directed at Iranian paramilitary activity in Iraq, and the troop surge has taken on the radical militias more directly. Further action might involve stepping up raids against Iranians in Iraq who use legitimate jobs as cover.

Beyond Iraq's borders, the options become difficult: engaging in hot pursuit against weapon supply lines over the Iranian border or striking explosives factories and staging areas within Iran. This sort of escalation is opposed by the Iraqi government and [American military](#) leaders. The [Defense Department](#)

fears what is called "escalation dominance" -- meaning that in a broadened conflict, the Iranians could complicate our lives in Iraq and the region more than we complicate theirs.

Syria, however, is what one former administration official calls "lower-hanging fruit." The provocations are nearly as severe. Syria's [Baathist](#) regime provides a base of operations for its Iraqi Baathist comrades involved in the Sunni insurgency. Suicide bombers from [Saudi Arabia](#) and [North Africa](#) arrive by plane in [Damascus](#), and, with the help of facilitators, some 50 to 80 cross into Iraq each month. The Syrians say they lack the ability to stop them; what they lack is the intention.

Pressuring Syria is not without its own complications. The regime can cause more suffering for its hostage [Lebanon](#) or increase tensions with [Israel](#). And our European allies are less willing to support robust sanctions against Syria than against Iran, because Syria is not a nuclear threat.

But here the forceful options are more serious. Recent successful operations in [Anbar province](#) were undertaken, in part, to disrupt the trail of suicide bombers passing through Syria. It might also make sense to pursue targets into Syria on this theory: The Syrians say they are powerless to stop the flow of murderers killing innocent Iraqis, so we should try.

Increasing pressure of all types on Syria would demonstrate that being part of an anti-American alliance

with Iran brings unpleasant consequences. And when that pressure builds sufficiently, it becomes possible to offer Syria a way out that separates it from Iran.

These are realistic responses to the serious provocations of Iran and Syria: ramping up economic pressure on both regimes; intensifying operations within Iraq against for-

eign influence; and taking limited but forceful action against Syria's Ho Chi Minh Trail of terrorists.

In combination with the strategy of commander [David Petraeus](#), these measures hold out the promise of something unthinkable a few months ago: America, once again, on the strategic offensive.

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