

Foreword

On December 6, 2006, the Iraq Study Group released a report that flatly stated: “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating. There is no path that can guarantee success, but the prospects can be improved.”

Those simple declarative statements came after the study group—which the two of us chaired with able assistance from the U.S. Institute of Peace—had spent most of that year examining Iraq, a country that was, and remains, critical to regional stability in the Middle East. In our report, study group members made the first bipartisan assessments of the problems facing the war-torn country. We were candid. At the time, three years after Saddam Hussein had been removed from power, violence fueled by a Sunni Arab insurgency, death squads, and al Qaeda was flourishing. Widespread corruption and criminality were rampant. Sectarian conflict was tearing the country apart, making it difficult for its fledgling democracy to advance reconciliation, provide security, or promote basic services. At the same time, the domestic political debate in the United States had reached a high boil.

Although the study group recognized that there was no guarantee for success, it provided seventy-nine recommendations as a way forward in Iraq. The central focus of the recommendations called for new and enhanced diplomatic and political efforts in Iraq and the region as well as a change in the primary mission of U.S. forces in Iraq so that the country’s military could begin to take control of security. If implemented, study group members believed that this approach could lead to a drawdown of U.S. troops in the 2008 time frame that the Bush administration military commanders had proposed. We also said we could support a short-term surge of troops as a way to stabilize Baghdad.

Most of the Iraq Study Group’s recommendations were ultimately followed. Three years later, U.S. military forces began a drawdown. Nevertheless, eight years after the United States led an international coalition that removed Saddam Hussein from power, America is still engaged in Iraq. At every key juncture, whether it was the height of Iraq’s civil strife from 2005 to 2007, or the more recent effort to transition from an American military to a civilian presence, relations with Iraq’s neighbors have remained pivotal—as they will for years to come.

It is for these and other reasons that we believe it is important that Henri J. Barkey, Scott B. Lasensky, and Phebe Marr have written *Iraq, Its Neighbors, and the United States: Competition, Crisis, and the Reordering of Power*. This volume offers rich and sophisticated historical perspectives on complex relationships and issues that have shaped events on the ground in Iraq. Such understanding can help policymakers advance stability in Iraq.

Early on, according to the authors, Washington paid too little attention to Iraq's regional relations and missed opportunities to engage other countries in a shared effort to secure Iraq's borders and stabilize its politics. In the first years following the fall of Saddam Hussein, some neighboring countries worked with the United States and the new Iraq leadership. But most either sat on the sidelines or actively sought to undermine efforts.

In early 2007, following the Iraq Study Group report, the authors explain, the Bush administration began to reach out to Iraq's neighbors—working in tandem with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his government. President Obama later intensified that effort. The U.S. role has changed dramatically with the signing in 2008 of a Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq, which included a timetable for drawing down American military forces. By the end of 2011, all American troops are scheduled to depart although some uniformed personnel will probably remain for some time as trainers and to reassure both Iraq and its neighbors.

As the authors explain, Iraq is not out of the woods yet. Violence, albeit much diminished from the peak days during Iraq's greatest civil strife, continues to exact a terrible toll on the daily lives of Iraqis. The government has yet to resolve some critical issues such as the delivery of basic services including electricity, gasoline, and water. Corruption continues to breed and the economy remains too dependent on oil. Politically, stalemate has become all too common. Iraqis had to endure the fruitless spectacle of a political class incapable of agreeing upon who should govern following the 2010 elections. This paralysis, which continues to this day despite the formation of a government, does not augur well for the future.

Still, as the authors point out, one can take heart at the fact that Iraqis are beginning to embrace democratic participation. A free press, for example, is developing and activists of many stripes are beginning to have their voices heard. The road ahead remains difficult and authoritarianism remains. But those and other problems are not insurmountable. How Iraq's allies and others in the region respond is of critical importance.

This timely volume about Iraq and its neighbors, written by leading analysts and scholars, will be an important resource to anyone interested in Iraq and the Middle East. It explores new directions in Iraqi foreign policy and offers detailed portraits of each neighbor—examining their interests and influence in Iraq, and their relations with the United States.

The authors also look at how post-Saddam Iraq has impacted politics in the neighboring countries and in the region as a whole. This is particularly relevant given the sweeping changes brought about by the “Arab Spring” and the ongoing transformation of Arab politics.

Understanding the impact Iraq has had on the broader strategic environment, as well as the region’s impact on Iraq, is critical to the foreign policy decision-making process. Too often policies are crafted in a vacuum or with incomplete understanding of potential consequences. Events move fast and decision makers have little time to fully contemplate the broad aftereffects of their actions. This volume takes a step back and allows the reader to understand and evaluate a broad set of strategically vital relationships. The authors, as well as the U.S. Institute of Peace, should be commended for this work.

—James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton

