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U.S. Policy in the Quicksand of the Middle East

*Karim Douglas Crow **

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THE release of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) Report, amid a re-appraisal of U.S. strategy in Iraq and the Middle East now sweeping the corridors of power in Washington, purportedly signals a major turning point for American policy. Important realignments are simultaneously underway in key states of the region, prompted by the grave failure of American military strategy in Iraq.

Elements of a ‘policy adjustment’

President Bush is due to announce an adjustment in U.S. policy by early in the new year – yet several aspects have already become clear.

- There shall be no major or rapid withdrawal of American combat troops from Iraq, while a temporary surge has not been ruled out;
- A fragile Baghdad government and its ineffective security forces shall be prompted to take the lead in fighting the swelling Sunni insurgency and jihadist terrorism, and in dampening spiraling Sunni–Shi‘a communal violence;
- A more robust training effort leading to the iraqization of security conditions by embedding U.S. support ‘advisors’ directly into Iraqi security units may be accelerated;
- A *conditional* phased redeployment over time of U.S. combat brigades may take place, probably by pulling back to bases outside urban areas and/or to U.S. bases in Kuwait, Bahrain & Qatar;
- The White House and the State Department are still wedded to the *isolation of Iran and Syria*, despite growing momentum for a regional outreach drawing Iraq’s neighbours into a stabilizing engagement, and international pressure to end the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The bottom line for U.S. policy remains the continued presence of American forces acting as an insurance policy for the territorial unity of Iraq. Whatever the new policy adjustments, they should not affect the essential network of at least four super-bases inside Iraq referred to currently as “contingency operating bases”. These include the giant *Camp Anaconda* or Balad Air Base 68 kms north of Baghdad, al-Asad Airbase still under construction in western Anbar province and the huge *Camp Victory* at Baghdad International Airport. As the co-chairman of the ISG Report James Baker III recognizes, there shall remain “...a really robust American troop presence in Iraq and the region for a very long time” – at least up to 2010 if not beyond.

The policy reviews are accompanied by changes of key personnel: Secretary of Defence D. Rumsfeld is being replaced and several of his closest officials at the Pentagon are going, including Undersecretary of Defence for Intelligence Dr. Stephen Cambone. U.S. ambassador to Iraq Z. Khalilzad is stepping down; and the Bush administration will soon also replace its senior generals in Iraq, ground-forces commander W. Casey and Middle East regional commander J. Abizaid, with

generals P. Chiarelli and D. Petraeus who served earlier tours-of-duty in Iraq – perhaps signaling more flexible counter-insurgency tactics.

These changes cannot disguise the incompetence and misjudgements displayed by the U.S. civilian, military and intelligence leaderships. The military's embedding and advisory support of Iraqi combat troops, for example, has until now been crippled by the deployment of junior officers with no previous combat experience often lacking proper cultural sensitivity and Arabic language competence. This little-reported situation bodes poorly for any expected benefit from increasing the number of such 'advisors'. Similarly with America's diplomatic presence in Baghdad, the ISG Report (p.92) observes: "Our embassy of 1000 has 33 Arabic speakers, just six of whom are at the level of fluency."

Why all the fuss?

So why all the media fuss over the release of the 'bi-partisan' ISG Report? The Report is an exercise in damage control aiming to minimize the impact of failure in Iraq on the prevailing U.S. foreign policy status quo. It serves to deflect inquiry into the origins of this predicament: the flagrant manipulation and abuse of intelligence in the months leading up to the Iraq war; the utility of the Bush doctrine of preventive intervention; the feasibility of implanting democracy across the Islamic world; or the wisdom of an open-ended global war on terror. It provides cover for the U.S. Republican administration to adjust course in Iraq, and for a Democratic-controlled Congress to sign on and not to legislate any cut-off of funding for the war effort. American mainstream media coverage simply internalizes and promotes the basic worldview of the U.S. national security state.

The invariable factor that interferes in the planning and conduct of U.S. foreign policy comes into play here: *domestic political forces*. The Democratic landslide in the Nov. 7th 2006 congressional elections has led Republicans to appreciate they may lose even more congressional seats as well as the presidency in 2008 if a significant U.S. troop presence remains amidst a vicious civil war in Iraq. The tension between President Bush and his own party for positioning in the 2008 elections shall most probably determine the timing of any possible scaling-down of American troops. Already one sees signs of the U.S. blaming Iraq for its own untenable predicament, and of the coming debate over 'Who lost Iraq?'

Quicksands

The marked rise of violent conflicts throughout the wider Middle East is unprecedented in scope and intensity. These range from the continuing success of Sunni Arab insurgency inside Iraq (40% of American casualties since March 2003 are in Anbar province), to a resurgent Taliban in southern Afghanistan, to Hizbullah's power grab seeking the downfall of Lebanon's pro-U.S. anti-Syrian government, to an ascendant Iran projecting influence through the region and veiled threats by the U.S. or Israel to strike at Iran's uranium enrichment facilities. From this flux, a new status quo may eventually emerge, but acute birth-pangs could well result in a still-birth amidst bloody regional agony.

The states directly affected by the expanding conflict inside Iraq are now prudently initiating their own efforts to contain these dangers with renewed commitment to Iraq's territorial unity, realizing that the U.S. is incapable of effectively influencing events. Syria exchanges ambassadors with Iraq; Iraqi president Jalal Talabani visits Tehran; Turkish premier Erdogan visits Baghdad and then Damascus. A serious complication is the abrupt resignation of Saudi

ambassador to the U.S. Prince Turki al-Faisal amid signs of internal disputes over the Kingdom's Iraq policy, coupled with a provocative call by leading Wahhabi ulama for Sunni Arabs to actively oppose the rise of Iraqi Shi'a power.

Also significant are last week's consultation by President Bush with Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, president of the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and leader of the ruling parliamentary coalition; then with Iraq's vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi of the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party.

Over the coming years, the U.S. will have to learn to live with more strategic uncertainty, increased ambiguity and intensified violence in the Middle East, handicapped by its severely diminished reputation and capacity to influence the course of events. The U.S. military's recognition that there is no military solution to the Iraq situation is healthy; whether the political leadership has absorbed this lesson is still uncertain.

It will be difficult to mitigate the negative global repercussions of the most serious U.S. policy failure since Vietnam. Its reverberations will affect how rival powers such as Russia and China perceive and interact with the U.S. in a variety of spheres. America's friends and allies must render it good counsel with compelling persuasion to help America salvage something positive from the shifting sands of the Middle East.

* *Karim Douglas Crow is an Associate Professor with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*