

The Iraq Study Group: a bipartisan conspiracy against the American and Iraqi people

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The Iraq Study Group (ISG)—a Congress-mandated committee of prominent Republicans and Democrats preparing a report on “options” for US policy—can best be described as a conspiracy against both the American and Iraqi people. Confronted with a strategic and political disaster, it is emerging as the vehicle for a powerful section of the American ruling elite to make a tactical “change of course” to try to blunt antiwar sentiment in the United States, while shoring up American interests in Iraq and the Middle East.

Underpinning the formation of the ISG is the undeniable fact that the invasion of Iraq has become a catastrophe for US imperialism. Three-and-a-half years on, the US is mired in a costly occupation that is descending into a bloody civil war between rival Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish factions of the Iraqi ruling class. Domestically, the Bush White House is arguably the most hated administration in American history. Communities all over the US are paying a bitter price for its lies and its program of militarism.

Within the American establishment, there are political figures who are acutely conscious of the tremendous dangers that can arise from the current state of affairs. The extent of popular opposition is such that a movement is developing outside the two-party system and challenging not only the war in Iraq, but the corporate and financial elite in whose interests it was carried out.

The ISG is the mechanism for a course correction that has the agreement of both senior Republicans and Democrats and seeks to remove Iraq from political debate. Its co-chair is James Baker III, a prominent member of the Reagan administration and the secretary of state under President Bush’s father. In the September edition of the *Washington Monthly*, sources told journalist Robert Dreyfuss that “Baker is primarily motivated by his desire to avoid a war at home—that things will fall apart not on the battlefield but at home. So he wants a ceasefire in American politics”.

Baker’s central involvement has provided reassurance to the White House that a Congress-backed review of Iraq policy would seek to assist, not threaten, the administration. As well as his close connections to the Bush family for over 30 years,

Baker served as the chief legal advisor for George W Bush in the election crisis of 2000, leading the campaign to suppress any recount of the vote in Florida.

The ISG’s mission statement makes clear there will be no criticism of the Bush administration. The Iraq Study Group, it declared, will “conduct a forward-looking, independent assessment of the current and prospective situation on the ground in Iraq, its impact on the surrounding region, and consequences for US interests”. That is, its purpose is not to hold anyone to account for the illegal invasion of a sovereign state; the lies told to the American people about “weapons of mass destruction” and Iraqi links to 9/11; the death and destruction that has resulted; or the tensions the war has created throughout the Middle East. As Baker told the US press, it was not going to “dwell on the past”.

The Democratic Party rushed to provide assistance. Republican Frank Wolf proposed the formation of the ISG to Congress in March with the support of leading Democrats such as Senator Joseph Biden. It enjoys the solid backing of Bill and Hillary Clinton. Lee Hamilton, a leading figure in the Congress throughout the Clinton period, accepted an invitation to serve as the ISG’s Democrat co-chair. Hamilton was an obvious choice. He was co-chair of the 9/11 commission, which covered up the Bush administration’s role in that disaster and can be expected to do the same on Iraq.

The other prominent Democrats on the 10-member commission are William Perry, Clinton’s defence secretary; Leon Panetta, Clinton’s chief of staff; Vernon Jordan, a close confidante of Clinton; and former senator Charles Robb. As well as Baker, the Republican Party is represented by former CIA director Robert Gates; former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O’Connor; Edwin Meese, attorney general in the Reagan administration; and former senator Alan Simpson.

The willingness of the Democrats to take part in such a body underscores a basic truth of contemporary American politics. The Democrats, just as much as the Republicans, are determined to preserve and extend the US grip over the Middle East and its oil resources. Both parties are equally committed to the perspective of using military force to block any challenges

to the waning US dominance over world politics and economy. While millions of Americans want an end to the violence, the US ruling class is plotting new wars against Iran, Syria and North Korea, to name just the most immediate targets. In the meantime, there is a consensus in Washington that the situation in Iraq must be brought under control.

The broad outline of how ISG proposes this can be done was leaked to the press last week. The *New York Sun* reported that one option, entitled “Stability First,” argues “that the military should focus on stabilising Baghdad while the American embassy should work toward a political accommodation with insurgents”. In the process, it noted, “the goal of nurturing a democracy in Iraq is dropped”.

The *Los Angeles Times* described another option, titled “Redeploy and Contain”, as proposing “a gradual, phased withdrawal of American troops to bases outside Iraq where they would be available for strikes against terrorist organisations anywhere in the region”. The *LA Times* reported that the Iraq Study Group was “less interested” in an option urging a “quick US withdrawal”.

Baker has indicated in interviews that he favours the “Stability First” perspective. Its implications are chilling and murderous. The insurgency against the US military is largely being carried out by Sunni members of the former Iraqi armed forces. A “political accommodation with insurgents” can only be taken as code for a US deal with the predominantly Sunni Arab ruling elite that held power under Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime. Any settlement with them would be bitterly opposed by the Shiite parties that form the largest parliamentary bloc.

Moreover, if “stabilising Baghdad” does not involve suppressing the Sunni-based insurgency, it can only mean a US-directed assault against the Shiite militias that control large parts of the city, in particular the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would almost certainly resist such a move. Hence, the need for democracy in Iraq to be “dropped”.

As the ISG prepares its findings, the US media has repeatedly hinted at the imposition of a military junta in Iraq after next month’s US elections. David Ignatius wrote in the October 13 *Washington Post* that “top officials of the Iraqi intelligence services have discussed a plan in which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would step aside in favour of a five-man ruling commission that would suspend parliament, declare martial law and call back some officers of the old Iraqi Army”. A leading Sunni politician, Saleh al-Mutlak—who is considered a frontman for the old Baath Party—has allegedly been travelling throughout the Middle East to get the backing of Sunni Arab regimes for the re-establishment of a Baathist-style regime to rule in cooperation with the US occupation.

This dovetails with what has been revealed of the ISG proposals, which Baker has also discussed with governments throughout the Middle East, including Syria and Iran.

Speaking on the ABC News “This Week” program on October 8, Baker declared that withdrawal was “not an option” and also voiced his opposition to partitioning Iraq into three or more mini-states—the main demand of both the Kurdish parties and the Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). He declared the “biggest problem” facing the Iraqi government was the Shiite militias and bluntly stated that success in Iraq would consist of achieving “representative government, not necessarily democracy”.

Baker indicated his belief that Iran and Syria could be convinced to go along with his plan. He stated: “Neither the Syrians or Iranians want a chaotic Iraq ... so maybe there is some potential for getting something other than opposition from those countries.” The “Stability First” option reportedly declares that “stabilising Iraq will be impossible without greater cooperation from Iran and Syria”.

In essence, Baker is advocating the same position as he advanced in 1991, following the Gulf War. At the time, he virulently opposed any overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime. In his 1995 memoirs he wrote that removing the Baathist dictatorship would have left the US confronting the “spectre of a military occupation of indefinite duration” leading to a “political firestorm at home” and the prospect that Iraq would “fragment in unpredictable ways that would play into the hands of the mullahs in Iran”. He obviously considers himself vindicated by the events since March 2003.

However, Baker’s call for talks with Syria and Iran cut across the ambitions of sections of the Bush administration for “regime change” in Tehran and Damascus. Greater support from Iraq’s neighbours to help prop up the failing American occupation would inevitably come at a price. Right now, however, the Bush administration is willing to clutch onto any straw.

Well aware of the overwhelming domestic opposition, Bush has gone out of his way to stress his willingness to alter Iraq policy in the lead up to the Congressional elections. On October 11 he told the press “we’ll change tactics when we need to change tactics” and that “my attitude is don’t do what you’re doing if it’s not working—change”.

For Iraq, the “change of course” being considered amounts to the establishment of an open police state and even greater violence against the Iraqi people.



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