

## **ISG Report Finds Few Friends**

**By Jim Lobe | December 13, 2006**

The highly touted and long-awaited final report of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG) appears headed toward an uncertain future, with hawks and doves in both parties taking increasing aim at its package of 79 recommendations on Iraq and U.S. Mideast policy.

The ISG report, the product of nine months of work by a congressionally appointed panel equally divided between former top Republican and Democratic public officials, calls for the adoption of three main policy initiatives: 1) the creation of an International Iraq Support Group, which would commit all of Iraq's regional neighbors, including Iran and Syria, to take concrete steps to stabilize Iraq; 2) a broader, two-track effort to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, on the one hand, and Israel and Lebanon and Syria, on the other; and 3) greatly intensified training of Iraqi security forces, which would permit Washington to withdraw virtually all of its combat forces within 15 months, depending on conditions on the ground.

Aside from the ISG's two co-chairmen—former Secretary of State James Baker and the former Democratic Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Lee Hamilton—and its other eight members, the only person who appeared to give the report nearly unqualified support was British Prime Minister Tony Blair. “It offers a strong way forward,” said Blair, who has long, albeit unsuccessfully, urged President George W. Bush to adopt many of the main recommendations contained in the ISG report, pushing in particular to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. “There is a kind of whole vision about how we need to

proceed that links what happens inside Iraq with what happens outside Iraq ... I think that the Baker-Hamilton report put this very simply and very clearly,” said Blair.

While generous in his praise of the report and eager to adopt the report's subtitle, “A New Approach,” Bush is unlikely to take seriously its central recommendations. Those recommendations include the notion that Washington be prepared to withdraw support for Iraq's government if it fails to make serious progress toward national reconciliation over the next 15 months, and that it attempt to engage Syria and Iran directly and without preconditions as part of a proposed diplomatic offensive to stabilize Iraq.

“If people come to the table to discuss Iraq, they need to come understanding their responsibilities to not fund terrorists, to help this young democracy survive, to help with the economics of the country,” Bush declared regarding the ISG's proposal to engage Damascus and Tehran within the framework of a proposed Iraq International Support Group. “And if ... Syria and Iran is [sic] not committed to that concept, then they shouldn't bother to show up.”

“If they want to sit down at the table with the United States, it's easy,” he said. But it would not be that easy, as he made clear by adding

---

several other preconditions, including Iran's freezing of its uranium enrichment program and a halt to Syria's "destabilizing the [Lebanese] government ... allowing money and arms to cross your border into Iraq, [and providing] safe haven for terrorist groups."

It was thought that Baker, whose decades-long status as the Bush family's chief consigliere, might facilitate the president's acceptance of the policy overhaul urged by the report. Instead, he was reduced to pleading with lawmakers on Capitol Hill to endorse his recommendations as a counterweight to resistance at the White House.

---

During a series of appearances on Sunday, Baker and Hamilton began targeting many Republican critics of the report, many of whom, like Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), have rejected out of hand the notion that anything short of "victory" would be acceptable.

---

"If the Congress could come behind supporting, let's say utopianly, all of the recommendations in this report, that would do a lot toward moving things downtown," Baker said shortly after the report was released, stressing that the recommendations should be seen as both comprehensive and interdependent.

Met with an equivocal, though not unsympathetic, response by outgoing Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-VA), Baker asked: "Could you say, 'This is good, til something better comes along?'"

During a series of appearances on Sunday, Baker and Hamilton began targeting many Republican critics of the report, many of whom, like Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), have rejected out of hand the notion that anything short of "victory" would be acceptable. Said Hamilton: "It all depends on what you mean by victory. What we're saying in this report is we want to conclude this war ... We do not want American forces involved in sectarian clashes and violence. That's not our business."

For their part, Democrats, who as a result of their landslide victory in the November 7 elections will take over the leadership in both houses of Congress next month, seemed more eager to use the report—especially its conclusion that the situation in Iraq was "grave and deteriorating"—as a bludgeon against Bush than as a policy manifesto they were ready to sign onto.

Though the incoming chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI), said he would be inclined to co-sponsor a resolution endorsing the report's general principles, if not its specific recommendations, his counterpart on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DE), deplored the ISG's rejection of his plan for creating three semi-independent regions in Iraq as the best political solution to the sectarian conflict there.

In a speech to the dovish Israel Policy Forum on December 6, Biden also denounced the way the ISG linked Iraq with making progress in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, calling it "dangerously naïve." "Israeli-Palestinian peace should be pursued aggressively on its own merits, period—not as some sort of diplomatic price to make the Arab states feel good so they will help us in Iraq," said Biden.

The ISG's members have argued that its appeal to both Congress and the White House rests not

---

only on the strategic and tactical value of the recommendations themselves, but also on the fact that it was adopted unanimously by its members and thus formed the basis for a policy that could rally bipartisan support.

“This country cannot be at war and be as divided as we are today,” one member, Clinton’s former chief of staff Leon Panetta, said Wednesday. But if the group was expecting bipartisan support, what they got instead was bipartisan criticism.

Echoing his neoconservative supporters, McCain, a leading Republican presidential contender in the 2008 elections who supports a substantial increase in U.S. troop strength in Iraq, denounced the ISG’s call for the gradual withdrawal of combat troops, calling it “a recipe that will lead to, sooner or later, our defeat in Iraq.”

He and Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut also opposed engaging Iran and Syria. “I don’t believe that a peace conference with people who are dedicated to your extinction has much short-term gain,” said McCain.

A number of Democrats, notably the incoming chairman of the powerful House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), said they were disappointed that the ISG had not called for a more rapid withdrawal according to a specific timetable. “This is not different from the current policy,” he said of the ISG’s recommendation of a 15-month conditional phaseout of the U.S. combat role.

In his comments last Thursday, Bush stressed that the ISG’s work indeed “shows that Republicans and Democrats can work together to come up with a strategy to achieve an objective” and that there were “a lot of important

things in the report that we ought to seriously consider.”

At the same time, however, he stressed that he was awaiting reviews from the Pentagon and the State Department before reaching final conclusions, which, he said, he will set forth in an upcoming speech. Uncharacteristically, he also admitted that the situation in Iraq was “bad.”

---

Among the report’s most vociferous critics have been neoconservatives, whose approach on Mideast policy is sharply at odds with many of the report’s recommendations. Before it was even released, many core neoconservatives worked vigorously to preempt its impact.

---

Among the report’s most vociferous critics have been neoconservatives, whose approach on Mideast policy is sharply at odds with many of the report’s recommendations. Before it was even released, many core neoconservatives worked vigorously to preempt its impact. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Eliot Cohen, a member of the Defense Policy Board and supporter of pro-war groups like the Project for the New American Century, mocked the ISG as a “collection of worthies commissioned by Congress that has spent several days in Iraq, chiefly in the Green Zone.” He added: “To think that either [Syria or Iran], with remarkable records of violence, duplicity, and hostility to the United States, will rescue us bespeaks a certain willful blindness.”

---

By Sunday, the neoconservatives seemed to have reached their stride with many, like Richard Perle, receiving prominent space in some of the country's major newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Perle wrote in an op-ed for the *Times* that "an approach to the dictators in Iran and Syria would be seen throughout the region, and especially in Iraq itself, as a sign of American weakness and resignation." He added: "Missing from the report is any serious

reflection on the president's goal of encouraging the development of representative government in the despotic Arab world, an objective that would be scuttled by the report's proposed 'diplomatic offensive.'"

---

*Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a contributing writer to Right Web ([rightweb.irc-online.org](http://rightweb.irc-online.org)).*

Published by the Right Web of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

## **The Right Web**

"Exposing the architecture of power that's changing our world"

### Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, "ISG Report Finds Few Friends," Right Web Profile (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, December 13, 2006).

### Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/3793>

### Production Information:

Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC