SPECIAL REPORT

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Scenarios for the Insurgency in Iraq

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Summary

- Three workshops explored hundreds of forces and factors relevant to insurgency outcomes and focused on key drivers to develop five alternative scenarios. These scenarios reflected the participants' perception that positive outcomes would be hard to achieve, and negative outcomes could be foreseen much more easily.

- The workshops' principal finding is that U.S. goals for Iraq and the region should be reexamined and scaled back. The administration's expressed goal of "an Iraq that is peaceful, united, stable, democratic, and secure, where Iraqis have the institutions and resources they need to govern themselves justly and provide security for their country" is possible only in the very long term.[1] *Avoidance of disaster and maintenance of some modicum of political stability in Iraq are more realistic goals—but even these will be hard to achieve without new strategies and actions.*

- The scenarios include recommended adjustments to U.S. goals and strategies to achieve reduced expectations. Unfortunately, the United States is now in a position to influence but not to control outcomes; it will have to engage and enlist the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors to attain success. This report broadly outlines the strategies that appear best suited to the current situation and the unfolding futures the participants envisioned.

Introduction

Participants in the three scenario workshops, held in November 2005, January 2006, and April 2006, sought to anticipate possible outcomes of the insurgency in Iraq. To do this they tried to understand the underlying forces and trends and the uncertainties related to their development and impacts. Unlike most academic and intelligence analyses—which focus mostly on information known with confidence—scenario analysis focuses on uncertainties. This term refers to factors or forces whose development or impacts are impossible to forecast accurately.

Participants made no assumptions regarding historical continuity or change. Instead they focused on plausible developments in underlying forces and trends—in this case over a three- to seven-year period.

They considered multiple potential outcomes and the developments that produce them rather than forecasting a single outcome. Given the complexity of the insurgency, we recognized the value of having several potential outcomes for which we would evaluate U.S. and Iraqi goals and options.

The scenario process exposes and illuminates not simply the views of expert observers, but the assumptions underlying those views and the implications of conditions and uncertainties that might not have been considered. It includes the group's exploration of possibilities, with a give-and-take that adds richness and nuance that otherwise might be more difficult to achieve. Finally, the process can preempt surprises by anticipating developments before they occur.

The Scenario Workshops

First Workshop

In the first workshop participants examined what is known about the current state of the insurgency, including who the actors are and how the effectiveness of countermeasures by the Iraqi government and coalition forces can be measured.

They identified the factors and forces that are likely to shape the insurgency in the future. To develop a shared understanding of the nature of those factors and forces, participants discussed them and evaluated the extent to which each factor would have an impact. They bundled similar uncertainties into "drivers" that would give structure to sets of scenarios. The drivers were arrayed in various combinations to create many scenario matrices and produce a multitude of potential scenarios. Participants identified the scenarios that seemed most compelling because they challenged the conventional wisdom by bringing to bear forces and factors in varied combinations.

At the outset participants were uncertain about who the insurgents were, since they included many different kinds and categories, including al Qaeda (AQ), non-AQ jihadists, Baathists, Sunnis writ large, those who "lost out" with the fall of Saddam, nationalists, and criminals. They could not agree which groups were most influential in directing the insurgency, which were most responsible for producing impacts (however those might be measured), and which were the largest (in membership or according to other criteria).

Moreover, there was general agreement that measures of the insurgency (including the effectiveness of countermeasures) were simply unavailable. Media-created measures, including the number of U.S. casualties (which had reached 2,000) and Iraqi civilian casualties (then estimated at 26,000) were of dubious value in helping the United States assess the state of the insurgency. Ironically, however, they provided the insurgents with measures.

Over several hours of lengthy and detailed discussion on the first day, the participants generated a list of more than 240 forces and factors they believed could affect the future of the insurgency. They organized the lists according to various themes or affinity groupings and then voted for the groupings they deemed most important for understanding the future of the insurgency in Iraq.

The following groupings of forces and factors garnered the most votes:

A. United States' will (leadership and popular support);

B. Iraq's neighbors;

C. Iraq's economy: jobs, oil production, and investment;

D. The Iraqi political environment: formation of coalitions, secular participants, degree of federalism, including local and sub-regional government power, ethnic blocs;

E. Iraq's military capability;

F. Popular perceptions of the United States, the Iraqi government, and the insurgents, through Iraqi media and information operations;

G. Actions by and relations among the Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis.

If these seven groupings were viewed as dimensions of the issue and then paired, they would yield twenty-one combinations. Each combination, in the form of a matrix, produces four quadrants or distinct environments. That would mean eighty-four potential scenarios (one scenario per quadrant, four quadrants per matrix). It appeared most efficient to reduce the choices and focus attention on the most compelling combinations.

U.S. will. The participants judged the will of U.S. leadership and the support of the American people to be the overwhelmingly dominant factor. But PolicyFutures recommended that the group not consider this factor as a separate driving force to be combined with one or more other drivers. Since the importance of U.S. will was deemed so important, and U.S. actions or strategies would be considered in all scenarios, it would be artificial to develop some scenarios with U.S. will as a force or factor and others that would exclude it. In addition, it appeared self-evident that U.S. will might be a necessary but not a sufficient force or factor. Accordingly the workshop participants probably would not learn much about alternative futures that assumed a loss of U.S. support for Iraq. Finally, since U.S. strategies would be examined in all scenarios, it seemed more appropriate to include U.S. will as a factor in all of them.

Iraqi factors. The participants found it useful to combine categories D, F, and G into an overarching affinity group encompassing the political environment, the public's perception of the insurgency and the performance of government, and the role of the leaders and members of the three primary groups. The participants expanded category E to include police and military capacity under the rubric of Iraqi security.

That process focused attention on the following four dimensions:

A. Iraq's neighbors;

B. Iraq's economy: jobs, oil production, and investment;

C. The Iraqi political environment: formation of coalitions; secular participants; degree of federalism, including local and sub-regional government power; ethnic-sectarian group relations and perceptions;

D. Iraq's security capability.

The participants explored various pairs of these dimensions to see which combinations of forces yielded compelling scenario environments. Then they sketched sixteen scenarios, the most compelling of which focused attention on the role of neighboring countries, the state of security in Iraq, and the extent to which the ethnic and sectarian political divide was bridged.

Second and Third Workshops

At the second workshop the participants reviewed the major events since the first workshop. These included the elections in which Iraqis approved the draft constitution and elected 275 members of the Council of Representatives; increased violence following the bombing at the Askariya mosque in Samarra; and efforts to form a new government. They then divided into breakout groups, each charged with developing scenarios (ideally one positive and one negative) for the next three to seven years. These built on

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the themes and the scenario sketches that predominated in the previous workshop: ethnic and sectarian politics, the role of the neighboring countries, and Iraqi security.

Each of the breakout groups was guided but not constrained by the previous scenario sketches in developing a robust flow of events describing the key actors and the impact of the other forces and factors. The second workshop developed five different scenarios in some depth.

- Ethnic and Sectarian Politics. Two scenarios focus on the extent to which the Iraqi people and their government forge a working arrangement among the key ethnic and sectarian groups. In one of these scenarios, a functioning state is created as the parties find common ground. In the other, ethnic and sectarian politics result in division.

- Neighboring Countries. Two scenarios focus on the role of the neighboring countries and the extent to which their role helps support Iraq's stability and unity rather than encouraging political divisions and instability. In one scenario, the sectarian divisions in Iraq spill over into the region. In the other, neighboring countries help stabilize Iraq and quiet the divisions.

- Security. One scenario focuses on a deteriorating security situation in Iraq, in which the United States acquiesces to increased Iranian influence to provide short-term stability.

In the third workshop the participants examined each of the five scenarios and identified the goals and the strategies the United States and the Iraqi government could adopt, either to alter the scenario outcome or achieve its goals within the scenario.

Below are sketches of the five scenarios and the goals and strategies for each.

The Long Slog to Overcome Ethnic and Sectarian Politics

This is an Iraq that slowly, in fits and starts, trudges down the difficult road of creating a functioning state.

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Shia and Kurdish leaders make concessions to the Sunni for the sake of preserving a chance for a unity government. The key concessions are agreements not to form a large Shia region, a more equitable distribution of oil revenues, maximization of production from current oil fields for the benefit of all, and relaxation of strict de-Baathification.

Other major elements of the concessions are acceptance of an autonomous Kurdistan and recognition that Sunnis and Shia need each other to create any semblance of a united Iraq (or even Iraqi Arabistan). The parties find common ground in opposing the foreign fighters, who are on a mission of disruption.

A positive feedback loop is created when the UN mission returns in force and the World Bank offers substantive assistance. As conditions improve, the interest of investors increases.

It is a delicate balancing act to have a limited national government, which tries to do what it can reasonably succeed at, and effective, governorate-level economic and political activity. But the government works to diminish ethnic-sectarian divisions.

Goals and Strategies

This is a positive story: The United States would embrace and seek to reinforce the dynamic of the scenario. Necessary predicates of the scenario would include agreement, by side-letter or otherwise, not to create a large region in the south as a Shiastan; some formula for the equitable distribution of oil revenues; and relaxation of de-Baathification.

The United States would assist in strengthening the social center, building civil society, and supporting moderate elements and institutions to help create an Iraqi identity. It would reinforce the political center and the capacity of central and local governments to

deliver services through a USAID Community Action Program (CAP) for small infrastructure projects, training, and election law improvements.

Working with the Iraqi government, the United States would engage Iraq's neighbors (Iran, Turkey, and Jordan) by gently encouraging them to keep at arm's length, rather than interfering in Iraq's internal affairs. With U.S. support Iraq would seek to establish working diplomatic relations with all its neighbors and encourage them to locate diplomatic missions in Baghdad. The United States would encourage distance between Iraqi Shia and Iran by supporting Howza (the Imam Mahdi Seminary) and other moderate Islamist elements. The United States would enhance military collaboration with Iraq and training and exchanges with NATO. The United States and Iraq would focus attention on foreign fighters in Iraq.

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Ethnic-Sectarian Politics Derail the Political Process

The Iraqi political process fails to bind the country together.

When a new government forms, ministries are doled out to accommodate all the factions; the result is a collection of fiefdoms. The Kurdish and Shia blocks remain the largest but still cannot be effective on behalf of their constituencies with a balkanized set of ministries. The Iraqi government is weak and unable to deliver services on a national basis, or indeed on any uniform basis.

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Secondary rounds of elections at the governorate and regional levels further polarize the electorate. Weary of the task of national rule, the parties retreat to their own turfs. At the local level, governance is extremely uneven, depending on the capacity of local administrators and the presence of militias.

Marginalized, the Sunnis have few options. De-Baathification is completed, and Sunnis are welcome only in their own territory. The Sunni insurgency initially is intensive, as they have the most to lose, but they cannot compete militarily with the more numerous and better-equipped Kurdish and Shia militias.

The United States and its troops move to remote bases and have little need or desire to intervene in daily Iraqi life. They are neither wanted nor welcomed.

Over the years, a self-directed ethnic cleansing of the regions takes place. Baghdad is still a patchwork, but the neighborhoods are more sharply divided than ever. There is a 1990s Beirut-like quality to the city. Gangs supplement militias in enforcing the boundaries. The city itself hardly functions anymore.

By 2008 a de facto division of the country into three parts has taken place. The division further weakens the national government and makes it less relevant.

Goals and Strategies

In this scenario, Iraq is unstable and could deteriorate without substantial intervention. Here the overarching U.S. goal would not be to make major improvements but to avoid major downturns.

To avoid the breakup of Iraq, the United States would seek to maintain at least the appearance of a unitary state, with the hope of greater cohesion and central government capacity in the future. It would try to make Baghdad work so it did not look like Beirut. It would use economic incentives to help maintain a united Iraq by creating a "single commercial space." To further this goal, Iraq would adopt a national commercial code to foster the creation of truly national enterprises and encourage external economic interest in Iraq as a national economic entity. In addition, Iraq would try to capture some revenue flow from oil or international trading for the central government. It would seek to secure the borders for customs purposes and create a national taxing mechanism.

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Recognizing that most power would reside at the regional and governorate levels, Iraq and the United States would attempt to even out the power disparities among them, especially to improve the relative position of the Sunnis. To this end, the United States would

use CAPs to increase capacity in the Sunni Triangle. Iraq and the United States would seek international support for training and infrastructural capacity building.

To stave off increased Iranian influence, Iraq and the United States would make every effort to develop the militias into a more cohesive national force. They also would try to deal with the broader security issues vis-à-vis the neighbors (for example, through border controls).

Descent into Hell

The insurgency leads to a regional war.

Iraqis make no significant changes to the constitution, and the various factions cannot form a true unity government. The militias gain strength—and increasingly are responsible for maintaining order.

The ethnic and sectarian divide leads to the creation of "Shiastan" in the south, and Iranian influence increases there.

Seeking to blunt the emergence of a Kurdish analog to Shiastan, Turkey strikes a bargain: It pledges noninterference with virtually independent Kurdistan (including Kirkuk) and a cross-border trading relationship (including oil) in exchange for Kurdish pledges to protect Turkmen and not to challenge the integrity of existing borders.

The need to choose a successor to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani leads to an open struggle for power in Shiastan. Ayatollah Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), emerges with Iran's blessing, and Shia leader Mokhtar al-Sadr crumbles. Shiastani militias set up border checkpoints and try to expel Sunnis from Baghdad.

The Sunni population is without resources and pinned between heavily armed Kurdistan (supported by Turkey) and Shiastan (supported and strongly influenced by Iran).

Baghdad itself is barely functioning. It reflects the national divisions, with increasingly isolated neighborhoods riven by ethnicity and sect.

U.S. troops increasingly acquiesce in separation of the major ethnic and sectarian groups; managing the safety of fleeing populations is the primary security requirement. The Iraqi security forces are crumbling.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia pledge support for the Sunni populations, whose militias are trying to fend off the Shia militias. Iran and Hakim warn against external Sunni meddling or U.S. support for Sunni populations.

Iran strikes out at Saudi oil transport and production facilities.

Goals and Strategies

This is a very challenging scenario, with only difficult options available to avoid a negative outcome by at least containing the conflict within Iraq's borders and preventing a larger conflict.

It would be essential for Iraq to forge and maintain a national-unity government. This would require not only active assistance of the parties, but probably active Saudi involvement to tamp down regional Sunni activists who were exacerbating the Sunni-Shia divide.

The United States and Iraq would seek active involvement by neighboring Arab countries to establish diplomatic missions in Iraq and promote formal exchanges. The Organization of the Islamic Conference would be called in to help reduce factionalism.

The United States and Iraq would encourage religious reconciliation through the Arab Muslim leadership, engage Sunni clerics in Egypt, and encourage cooperation by Saudi Arabia.

The United States and Iraq would dramatically improve security on the ground by focusing on professionalizing the Iraqi military and police. They would look to Arab nations for border security.

The ethnic and sectarian divide leads to the creation of "Shiastan" in the south, and Iranian influence increases there.

Baghdad reflects the national divisions, with increasingly isolated neighborhoods riven by ethnicity and sect.

The United States would use a concerted, carrot-and-stick approach with Iran to dissuade adventurism.

The United States would redeploy its troops, with some returning home and some remaining stationed in Kurdistan and Kuwait.

The United States and Iraq would seek greater assistance from Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to avoid the consequences of the descent that might otherwise occur.

Neighboring Helping Hands

Iraq is stabilized through the diplomatic efforts of its neighbors, allowing the United States to reduce its forces.

The Iraqi political stalemate and ethnic-sectarian violence do not abate.

Iraq's neighbors try to facilitate a more stable arrangement. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait make the effort but are hobbled by a lack of diplomatic presence within Iraq and difficulty in finding a willing and able Iraqi partner.

The United States is caught in the middle. Reluctant to intervene in the ethnic-sectarian clashes, it cannot provide security, but it fears that a pullout will encourage more violence.

The United States supports a Saudi decision to break the Iraqi sectarian deadlock. With the Iraqi government, it calls on the Supreme Council of Al-Azhar, the Sunni theological university, to propose Shia-Sunni reconciliation. Sistani gathers internal support from SCIRI and nationalist insurgents and thereby moderates Sadr's reaction.

Relaxing sanctions, the United States quietly provides Syria with modest assurance about its intentions. In turn, Syria intercedes with Iran and persuades Tehran that it should not increase its already notable involvement with the more radical Shia in Iraq. Preoccupied by other difficult issues involving the United States, Iran does not alter its long-term goals and objectives but takes a more subtle and quieter approach.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait promise Iraq debt forgiveness and long-term economic aid.

The United States publicly declares its intention to withdraw its troops from Iraq.

Goals and Strategies

Despite the involvement of Syria and Iran, the U.S. goal would be to reinforce this scenario. Strategies would include
- Encouraging debt forgiveness and investment from Arab nations and the World Bank;
- Working hard with Syria to exert influence over Iran, which may require suspending the Syria Accountability Act and reducing pressure on Saudi Arabia;
- Training and equipping Iraq's police and army, and building international rather than U.S. military presence.

"Lebanonization"

Baghdad becomes Beirut, and Iraq becomes Lebanon. Iran plays the role of Syria after a bitter civil war in Iraq has reduced the parties to exhaustion, and the United States reduces its forces.

While militias maintain order in Kurdistan and the Shia south, sectarian fighting continues in the Sunni Triangle, including Baghdad.

Shia unity is increasingly hard to maintain, as the pressure of governing, a weak infrastructure, and a stagnant economy take their toll. Baghdad becomes the locale of most of

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the fighting. The seat of the weak "national" government cannot deliver services, maintain order, or even hold the country together.

Unable to maintain control, the United States is itself a target when it becomes involved. The Sunnis attack the occupiers who fail to protect them, and the Shia resent their inability to stop the Sunni violence. U.S. troops largely retreat behind fortifications, distant from population centers, and head north to Kurdistan.

Shia militias, which now dominate the Iraqi security forces, cannot subdue the Sunni insurgency; Shia political leaders are unable to offer meaningful compromise and power sharing. Sunnis, criminals, and local militia dominate the Sunni Triangle and Baghdad.

Iran, which has provided deftly subtle support to its Shia supporters, has poured huge amounts of its oil revenues into its own military capability. The Shia leadership in Baghdad increasingly looks to Iran for assistance—including mediating disputes among the Shia leaders. Iran's military provides competent and comprehensive border security, relieving the Iraqis of the task.

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Iran's role in providing security is an open secret not publicly acknowledged by the parties or the United States. No other party in the region is both willing and able to contain the fighting and maintain some semblance of order in Iraq (and the region). The best analogy is Syrian maintenance of the peace in Lebanon in the 1990s.

Recognizing that Iran prefers stability, the United States tolerates Iran's involvement in maintaining the peace, notwithstanding the long-term risks to regional stability. Indeed, some in the U.S. government welcome Iran's involvement in the Iraqi quagmire, as a distraction from other, perhaps more ambitious and troubling, items on its foreign policy agenda.

Goals and Strategies

In contrast to its previously stated goals, the United States would accept far less in this scenario.

Instead of remaining united, Iraq would be allowed to fragment, with Iranian influence strongest in a Shia dominated, autonomous south.

Instead of having a strong, democratic, constitutional, central government representing all parts of the population, Iraq would have only a weak central authority, which would be heavily influenced by Iran.

To cope with Iranian hegemony in Baghdad and the Shia south, the United States would expand its presence and influence in the Kurdish north. The United States would encourage Arab states (particularly Jordan and Saudi Arabia as Sunni states) to assist Sunni efforts to expand their influence and oppose Iranian control.

The United States would pursue its goal of maintaining even a weak and Iranian-dominated central government by maintaining an embassy in Baghdad and using its military forces, and perhaps those of other countries, to preserve an international green zone for the diplomatic community.

Through international organizations and NGO aid to restore cultural and educational institutions, the United States would promote international efforts to rebuild Baghdad.

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The United States would maintain access to Iraq's oil by promoting open commercial competition and access to Iraq's oil fields and petroleum industry. It would press the Iraqi and Iranian governments to allow multinational oil companies to modernize Iraq's oil infrastructure and buy crude oil.

To make Iraqis more self-sufficient, the United States would provide agricultural assistance in Sunni and Kurdish areas and promote the development of small businesses across the country. This would lay the basis for their resistance against an Iranian presence.

To reach the goal of regional stability, in the Kurdish areas the U.S. presence would reassure both the Kurds and Turkey, thus preventing either a Kurdish move for independence or Turkish intervention.

In the south the United States would acknowledge Iranian hegemony through increased dialogue with Iran and by offering incentives for Iranian good behavior. In the

Sunni areas, the United States would encourage Saudi Arabia and Jordan to organize Arab states to support Sunni welfare and expanded influence.

The United States would reaffirm its military support of Israel in the face of Iranian expansion and seek to prevent an Israeli attack on Iran.

To make more likely Russian and Chinese cooperation in limiting Iranian activity, the United States would maintain the appearance of having substantial influence in the region.

In Afghanistan, the United States would shift financial and military resources to assist in suppressing the Taliban, al Qaeda, and drug trafficking. This would reassure the Iranians, who would appreciate help in defending against Afghan chaos on their eastern border.

Basically the United States would hope that these setbacks were temporary. It would assume that over the long term, Iraq would make progress in shaking off foreign influence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although encouraged to develop positive scenarios, the workshop participants struggled to do so. But even the less-negative scenarios, such as *The Long Slog to Overcome Ethnic and Sectarian Politics*, required some leaps of faith and careful coordinated cooperation of the many actors (any of whom could have derailed the positive process). This may reflect general pessimism on the part of the participants, but it would be unwise to ignore what they were able to do and what they found difficult to do.

Three major themes emerged in all the scenarios: the helpfulness (or lack thereof) of Iraq's neighbors, the capabilities of Iraqi security forces (army and police), and the extent to which the dominant ethnic and sectarian groups can forge a governing consensus.

An important dynamic in the scenarios is the waning of U.S. influence and the waxing of Iranian influence in the region. The United States must engage all of Iraq's neighbors to piece together policies and actions to move Iraq and the region away from conflict and toward peace and stability. For example, the scenario *Neighboring Helping Hands* depends on the constructive role of neighboring countries, some of which (Syria and Iran) have tenuous relationships with the United States. Their helpfulness will not materialize as a natural extension of existing relationships or policies, or by serendipity. Rather, current U.S. policies, particularly with respect to Syria and Iran, would have to change. A major uncertainty is whether Iran can be engaged and persuaded to be a constructive influence.

The negative scenarios (*Descent into Hell, "Lebanonization," and Ethnic-Sectarian Politics Derail the Political Process*) are not predicated on any surprising event or U.S. blunder. Rather, they are based on forces the experts saw as inexorable at worst or unsurprising at best. The participants found it difficult to imagine effective and realistic countermeasures to avoid these kinds of negative outcomes. The strategies the participants outline do not attempt to detail the specific steps to be taken, but only broadly sketch the kinds of initiatives required. Even without going into details, which would be more difficult, accomplishing them would be daunting.

The participants' judgment was that the United States must take a broader view of its national interests and determine whether specific Iraqi goals and strategies are truly consistent with U.S. objectives. In some scenarios the participants identified broader objectives, including the free flow of oil. Other scenarios at least question what the effects will be of likely future activities of al Qaeda and jihadists now active in Iraq. This national calculus must include weighing opportunity costs. We cannot do everything at once and need to measure the impacts of the Iraq burden on our larger military capacity. And any strategy must integrate all aspects of U.S. national power, not just the military.

The administration's ambitious goals ("an Iraq that is peaceful, united, stable, democratic, and secure, where Iraqis have the institutions and resources they need to govern

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The administration's ambitious goals, if possible at all, are attainable only in the very long term.

themselves justly and provide security for their country"), if possible at all, are attainable only in the very long term. Instead, avoidance of disaster and maintenance of some modicum of political stability in Iraq are more realistic goals—but even these will be hard to achieve without new strategies and actions and the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors. In the workshop participants' view, this is a very challenging problem, requiring careful consideration and modulation of U.S. expectations, rhetoric, and policies.

Notes

1. From "Our National Strategy for Victory in Iraq." www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq_strategy_nov2005.html.

Of Related Interest

Iraq Election Scenarios: Anticipating Alternative Futures, by Alan Schwartz (Special Report 142, July 2005).