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### **Iraq and Its Neighbors: A Regional Architecture Is Needed**

By Matthew Crane and [Daniel Serwer](#)  
**February 26, 2004**

Regime change in Iraq has affected its neighbors, and these neighbors in turn affect the reconstruction process in Iraq. In the past regional dynamics have too often led to strife and war. How can these dynamics be channeled in more positive directions: towards development, economic cooperation, democracy, and security for all?

To examine these questions, the United States Institute of Peace convened a meeting of its Iraq Working Group on February 17, 2004 to discuss, "Iraq and Its Neighbors: Reconstructing Relations." Moderated by Peace and Stability Operations director Daniel Serwer, the speakers included Geoffrey Kemp of the Nixon Center and Giandomenico Picco of GDP Associates, Inc.

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.



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#### **The dynamics are changing...**

While [Turkey](#) remains concerned about Kurdish aspirations towards independence and the welfare of the Turkmen minority in Iraq, Ankara's own hope of setting a date for the start of negotiations for European Union (EU) membership is a moderating influence. Turkey will not want to put at risk its EU ambitions. Syria, where reforms are stalled, is under enormous pressure from the United States and Israel. Assuming Baghdad manages its reconstruction well, Iraq's oil exports will soon pose a challenge to Saudi Arabia and Iran (especially with the rehabilitation of the port of Basra). In Iran, conservatives will cement power with contentious elections scheduled next week, but the regime has lost legitimacy at home and is under pressure from both the United States and the EU over its nuclear weapons ambitions.

#### **...and fears are growing.**

[Iraq and Iran](#) have long faced off in a regional competition, sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent. The liberation of the Iraqi Shi'a holy sites from Saddam Hussein opens the possibility of a competition for religious preeminence, with Najaf challenging Qom. While Ayatollah Sistani's voice is a moderate one, it is too early to be certain that his will prevail. There is concern in the Sunni world that the rise of Shi'a power in Iraq could create a Shi'a empire from Pakistan to Lebanon. This perception reinforces the Sunni impression that de-Ba'athification is really de-Sunnification and fuels support for al Qaeda, which targets the Shi'a.

In fact, phobias exist in every direction: while the Sunni fear they will be cut out of the political bargain in Iraq and lose their preeminent position, the Shi'a fear a return of Sunni oppression. Both Sunni and Shi'a fear Kurdish national aspirations, and the Kurds fear return of Arab nationalism. Iraq's neighbors—especially Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey—each have their own fears and are taking measures to ensure that their vital interests are not put at risk. All fear the resurgence of Iraqi military power and the possibility that a reinvigorated Iraq will some day once again be in a position to threaten

its neighbors.

### **A regional approach requires U.S. and European engagement.**

With regional relations in flux and Iraq's own ethnic groups regarding each other with suspicion, there is a growing need for an architecture that will stabilize the situation and provide reassurance to groups within Iraq and to its neighbors, who have met several times (most recently with Iraq present). This is a good sign, but vital ingredients are missing: the United States and Europe.

While UN secretary general Kofi Annan tried in December to launch a regional effort involving the five permanent members of the Security Council, Iraq, and Iraq's neighbors, the effort has so far not borne fruit, in part because several additional countries were included at the last minute. A more limited group would have greater chance of success. Some advocate participation by Iraq's neighbors plus the permanent five members of the Security Council. Others are uncomfortable extending the invitation to Russia and China, and feel that the EU role would be served best by including NATO allies such as Germany and Italy. In any event, the agenda should be limited to the problems of Iraq and all its neighbors (i.e., including Iran and Syria but excluding Israel/Palestinian Authority issues), participants at the meeting concluded.

The Helsinki process in Europe provides a possible model for Iraq and its neighbors. While accepting the Soviet bloc regimes, that process pointed clearly in a democratic direction. With the U.S. and the Europeans united in pointing towards a democratic future, a Helsinki process for Iraq and its neighbors would take as its common enemy al Qaeda—which is viewed as a threat by all concerned—and as its common purpose the preservation of a united Iraq. These are goals that Iraq's neighbors share, at least in principle. It could generate over time a code of conduct for all the participants, stabilizing their relations and allowing them to compete on a peaceful basis: in politics, in oil, and in religion.

### **Conclusions**

For a volatile region now at a critical juncture, a regional Helsinki-type architecture could provide stability and opportunity:

- The United States would have to be willing to engage with all Iraq's neighbors. A UN framework would help the process.
- The region needs a code of conduct that would regulate relations among Iraq and its neighbors and provide all with assurances of stability and security.
- A regional architecture would restrain neighbors from pursuing their interests through political forces within Iraq and allow Iraqis freedom to establish their democracy.
- A Helsinki-like process would point the neighbors in the democratic direction, even while accepting the existing regimes.
- Without regional restraint, there is a serious risk of competition to exert influence inside Iraq, vastly complicating the problem of reaching agreement on its future.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by Matthew Crane and [Daniel Serwer](#) of the Institute's Office of [Peace and Stability Operations](#). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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