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Make Sharm el-Sheikh the Turning Point for Region

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Istanbul, Riyadh and Washington - No one fears instability and violence in Iraq more than Iraqis and their neighbors. But mutual suspicions and rivalries, and a lack of U.S. commitment to regional diplomacy, have prevented Iraq and its neighbors from turning common anxieties into a common agenda. However, an emerging regional diplomatic initiative—the focus of this week's foreign minister's conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt—could be a turning point that leads all sides toward concerted action.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice should use the Sharm el-Sheikh gathering to demonstrate Washington's new commitment to sustained, high-level engagement and effective regional diplomacy. If this new initiative is to succeed, the United States should also make clear that the American military presence in Iraq is also part of the agenda.

As regional anxieties surge, reliance by the neighbors on unilateralism is giving way to renewed interest in multilateral diplomacy. "Iraq's neighbors acknowledge their shared responsibility to support Iraqi reconciliation," said a group of leading foreign policy figures in the Marmara Declaration, the recent product of non-official dialogue between Iraqis and their neighbors. Stabilizing Iraq, the group declared, "is inextricably linked to protecting [the neighbors'] own national security interests."

The first order of business is to build an on-going, results-oriented process that includes all the pivotal players. Iraq and its neighbors have been holding regular ministerial meetings since 2003 as part of a Turkish initiative, but without the United States. The key international and regional players convened in late 2004 at Sharm el-Sheikh, but with little follow-up. Summit meetings should punctuate rather than define the process.

The international compact between donors and the Iraqi government, which will be ratified at Sharm el-Sheikh, provides a framework for regional and international economic assistance to flow in sync with Iraqi government reform. But much more needs to be done to address the worsening security vacuum. In this regard, the involvement of military, intelligence, and police officials in both the ministerial meetings and the technical-level working groups is critical, as is the establishment of a joint crisis-response mechanism.



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This new diplomatic initiative could also be used to generate regional support for Iraqi political reconciliation. It is a collective opportunity for the neighbors to signal unambiguously to the various Iraqi factions that reconciliation is a regional priority. But the key ingredient is for the Iraqi government to start a serious process of reform and reconciliation, and to demonstrate its effectiveness and credibility at home so that the neighbors can then provide more political backing.



Secretary Rice travels to Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, to meet with Iraq's neighbors. (Photo Courtesy: State Department)

For its part, Washington needs to generate new ideas to turn around the worsening crisis in Iraq. The United States should continue its dialogue with all Iraqi factions, including insurgents, with the objective of bringing all sides into the political process. Washington should pay more attention to its Arab allies, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and demonstrate its commitment to sustained, high-level engagement with all the key players, including Iran and Syria. Moreover, the United States should step up its involvement in the working groups, which were established last month at a preparatory meeting in Baghdad, but have yet to get moving. With intense skepticism in the region about American intentions, the more Washington can do to demonstrate its commitment to multilateral solutions, the greater the chance engagement will work.

On the question of the U.S. military presence, there is no way to satisfy the expectations of all sides without declaring definitively that the United States will withdraw: not precipitously, but responsibly. A precipitous withdrawal would accelerate unilateralist impulses in the region, further imperil Iraq, and raise the prospects of a regional war. But digging in heels is also problematic, since it will impede the drive for greater regional diplomacy. Regional players—whether they want the United States to leave or to stay—need to be convinced that they will have more influence by acting within a process than by challenging it on the battlefield.

Finally, the United States can help generate incentives aimed at both defusing flashpoints and encouraging regional reconciliation. Stepped-up humanitarian assistance to the front-line states in the refugee crisis, Jordan and Syria, which also have the most fragile economies, could provide an early boost to the process. More broadly, expanding the agenda to cover a wider range of issues—including changes to the Iraqi constitution, the status of Kirkuk, economic development, and support for militias—would motivate the neighbors to invest in a process viewed as inclusive of their concerns. Last but not least, the United States should assist Iraq in taking concrete, visible steps to prevent armed groups from using Iraqi soil to attack Iraq's neighbors.

Skeptics in the United States would argue that regional diplomacy and high-level engagement with Iraq's neighbors is itself a concession, but the situation in Iraq is too desperate to cling to high-minded notions at the expense of pragmatic solutions. Hard bargaining and multilateralism have produced results elsewhere, from Afghanistan to the Balkans.

This emerging process could provide a framework to ease tensions in the region and deliver practical solutions for Iraq. Moreover, if this process succeeds it could provide a major boost to American credibility, at a time when the gap between U.S. power and influence seems so wide.

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The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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