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TRANSCRIPT

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Analysis

Experts Still Divided After Iraq Study Group Recommendations

Following up on a series of conversations about U.S. Iraq policy, six guests debate the Iraq Study Group and President Bush's response to the different options offered.

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RAY SUAREZ: Several weeks ago, the NewsHour ran a series of discussions on ideas for Iraq. Now that the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group has issued its recommendations, we've brought back our discussion participants for their thoughts.

They are: Phyllis Bennis, who advocated an immediate U.S. withdrawal; Peter Galbraith, who proposed decentralizing Iraq; Michael Vickers, on training the Iraqi army; Eric Davis on bolstering reconstruction; Frederick Kagan on sending more American troops; and James Dobbins on the use of diplomacy.

And one of the subtitles of the Iraq Study Group's report is "The Way Forward." Ambassador Dobbins, did it offer a way forward?

JAMES DOBBINS, International Security and Defense Policy Center: I think, if you were looking for this group to come forward with some bold, new program that nobody had thought of before, you're going to be disappointed.

If what you were looking for was a group of wise and experienced people to apply commonsense realism and a certain pragmatism to the problem and try to come to a common bipartisan decision, you're going to be pleased with the result.

It is a way forward that can be supported across the political spectrum, which has some hopes of improving the situation or at least retarding the deterioration that we've been seeing continually for three years.

RAY SUAREZ: Phyllis Bennis, did it offer a way forward?

PHYLLIS BENNIS, Institute for Policy Studies: It didn't offer a way to end the war. It was not designed to end the war. The goal of the Iraq Study Group was not to end the war.

What it did was to propose a bipartisan consensus of what we might say is the economic and political elites of the United States, to say, "This is how we can take the issue off the agenda for both parties, make it not an issue for the 2008 elections, and have the current crisis in Iraq, that's so much dominating the news and the front pages, be transformed into a long-term, maybe even permanent, sustainable, less obvious occupation."

That's not an answer; that's not what the American people voted for this last November when they voted to end the war.

RAY SUAREZ: Ambassador Galbraith?

PETER GALBRAITH, Former State Department Official: The strategies that were recommended for Iraq were wildly unrealistic.

The report recommended centralizing Iraq, a country that basically has a constitution that creates powerful regions, is a road map for partition. They imagined that could be undone, as if the people who voted for that in the first place would wake up and change their minds.

Secondly, they proposed training Iraqi army and police, overlooking the fact that Iraq is in a civil war. In fact, the words "civil war" do not appear in the 98-page report.

And, of course, in circumstances of civil war, the Iraqi army and police are not, as the report imagines, neutral guarantors of public safety. They are fighters in a civil war. We can train them to be more effective killers, but we cannot train them to want to have a more inclusive Iraq.

RAY SUAREZ: Michael Vickers?

MICHAEL VICKERS, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments: I think the report largely is headed in the right direction, in the sense that it takes account of American politics. It takes account of Iraqi politics, and it adds this external dimension.

One doesn't have to agree with all the recommendations in the report, but if there is to be a unitary state in Iraq in the future, then you have to have a sustainable strategy. And it has to be one where you build national institutions.

And there may be a debate about whether Iraq is going to remain whole, but this is at least a plausible way forward.

RAY SUAREZ: Professor Davis?

ERIC DAVIS, Professor, Rutgers University: Yes, well, I think there's much to commend the report, from a political and diplomatic standpoint, but it still doesn't deal with the elephant in the room as it were.

The Iraqi economy is devastated; there's large-scale unemployment. On page 23, the report admits that unemployment may be as high as 60 percent.

And I was happy to see today in the Washington Post that the Defense Department has finally recognized the contribution that unemployment makes to the ongoing insurgency. And it was interesting, recently talking to an American officer who spent a lot of time in al-Anbar Province, he said that, when he went to local notables to ask them what was necessary to quell the insurgency, invariably they always said, "Find jobs for angry young men."

RAY SUAREZ: And finally, Frederick Kagan?

FREDERICK KAGAN, American Enterprise Institute: We've done a good job of putting together a panel where every one of us has a different elephant in the room. For me, the elephant in the room is security.

The fact of the matter is that it's never been the primary mission of the U.S. military presence in Iraq to establish security for the people of Iraq, and that's a fundamental failure. When you go back to Counterinsurgency 101, establishing security for the population is key.

And I absolutely agree that the unemployment is a major issue. I absolutely agree that the political situation is a major problem. There is no prospect for having forward progress on any of that until the violence can be brought under control.

I believe that we can do that. I believe that the ISG report offers a way not to do that, because the problem is: We can embed a lot of trainers and we can work on training the Iraqi security forces, but there is the problem that they're operating in the context of a civil war, which is going to make them less effective, and there's also the question of time lines.

You don't just train people up overnight. There's going to be a gap. And if we pull forces out of their tasks of patrolling and providing minimal security that they're doing now and embed them as trainers, violence is going to increase. I don't think we have time to allow this process to go forward.



Michael Vickers
Former Special Forces
Officer

“ The security situation is inextricably linked to politics. If you can solve some of the Iraqi political problems, the security situation becomes manageable. If you can't, ...all the forces in the world

Assessing the numbers of troops

RAY SUAREZ: Well, we had the conversations well before the Iraq Study Group made its findings known. And there are six of you. Three of your ideas were embraced; three were specifically rejected out of hand.

And, Frederick Kagan, advocating more American presence in Iraq was directly dealt with. They said there just aren't troops to do that.

FREDERICK KAGAN: Well, it was dealt with in a very off-handed way. And one of the things that troubles me about the report is you have 98 pages. Eight of them were devoted to the security problem. But, in my view, the security problem is the number-one problem that we're facing right now.

The proposal for increasing troops was sort of flipped off. You know, there was an exaggerated, in my view, estimate of the number of forces that would be required, no basis offered from what that estimate came from.

And then there's the blanket assertion that the Army and the Marines couldn't possibly send any more forces, which I think is demonstrably untrue. So I think, you know, really the proposal was dismissed out of hand, wasn't put in its context, wasn't examined in any depth.

And so, you know, I don't take the rejection of it very seriously.

JAMES DOBBINS: I mean, the report did specifically state that a temporary increase in troop strength might be

desirable, so they left the way open. But they were skeptical, clearly, that this could be sustained for very long against a background in which the war is wildly unpopular in this country and in Iraq.

Neither the Iraqi people nor the American people are likely to sustain a substantially larger American troop presence in Iraq for a very long period of time. So it's against that background that the very logical position that Fred has put forward ultimately didn't carry the day.

RAY SUAREZ: So that was a political conclusion rather than a strictly military one?

JAMES DOBBINS: I think it was.

MICHAEL VICKERS: And for that matter, the security situation is inextricably linked to politics. If you can solve some of the Iraqi political problems, the security situation becomes manageable. If you can't, as the ISG report quotes a senior American general, all the forces in the world aren't going to change that.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: I think the identification, though, of what the problem is, is crucial here.

The occupation itself is fomenting an enormous level of violent resistance to that occupation. It's within that protective environment that terrorist forces are operating.

The terrorist forces are those -- I define as those who are killing civilians, who are committing crimes against the Iraqi civilian population. They are operating within an environment in which 61 percent of Iraqis say they support military attacks against U.S. troops.

They don't support the attacks against Iraqis, but that gives them the ability to move; it makes it impossible to identify them and eliminate them as a fighting force.

So if we're serious about stopping the violence that is devastating the lives of so many Iraqis right now, we have to be serious about the environment in which those attacks are taking place, and that has everything to do with the existence of the occupation. Sending in more troops is going to only exacerbate the situation, not make it better.

ERIC DAVIS: Well, one program, if I could say, that has been successful is the Commanders' Emergency Response Program. It's suggestion 68, which you just dealt with.

That is a program that was designed to go to violent areas, use money seized from the Baathist regime, and put people to work. And ask any Army officer; that program is wildly successful.

We keep saying to the Iraqi government it has to create its own institutional capacity, it has to be more effective. It's only going to be more effective if it can get its economic house in order.

And why not take a program that's been successful and try to expand it and then build on that by involving local notables, building a bottom-up, not a Halliburton, you know, KBR top-down approach, but a jobs program, like we did here in the New Deal, like the Marshall Plan?

RAY SUAREZ: Quick response.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: We need to have that kind of support for economic support for Iraq, but it can't happen while we are occupying the country. We owe Iraq an enormous debt. We owe compensation, reparations, real reconstruction.

But while we are occupying their country, I don't think that can be a viable solution. We have to get the U.S. troops out; then, that's only step one. Then, we make good on the rest of our obligation.

Sectarian violence, security woes

RAY SUAREZ: But your suggestion sort of smokes all these other ones, that these things, in effect, won't work until these people are free of each other.

PETER GALBRAITH: Well, precisely. What good has the commanders' emergency response fund -- it hasn't actually reduced violence in these areas, because the violence is, in fact, communal.

It is a civil war in which Sunni insurgents -- now, they don't represent most of the Sunni population, perhaps, but they are the people who count -- have targeted Shiite civilians and provoked a civil war. The Kurds simply want out.

How do you build Iraqi security forces, when the Iraqi army consists of battalions, all of which are defined by sect or ethnically, which are not national instruments? They are instruments of the particular group.

aren't going to change that. »



Frederick Kagan
American Enterprise
Institute

And the police? The police are the death squads. Now, if you want to put that country back together, if you want to build national institutions, what you have to explain -- and, of course, what the Iraq Study Group did not even remotely explain, because they didn't even face up to the reality, they didn't even use the word "civil war," they didn't discuss the concept, you have to explain how you're going to put that country back together again.

Do you intend to use U.S. troops, those extra troops you'd like to have, Fred, to disarm the Shiite militias? Are we prepared to take on the Shiites, who are three times as numerous as the Sunnis? Should we become the police of Baghdad?

And then, Phyllis, to come to your point, it seems to me, whether you're for this war or against it, you have to ask the question: What are we accomplishing? We aren't accomplishing anything in the south.

PETER GALBRAITH: Why should we be there? We aren't stopping the civil war in Baghdad. Why should we be there? There are some places where we can accomplish something, and I think we have a debt to the people who supported us, who were the Kurds.

JAMES DOBBINS: But, I mean, Peter is right that Iraq is fragmenting. Unfortunately, we don't actually have sufficient influence to determine where that fragmentation ends.

It would be nice if it ends where Peter would like it, where others, like Les Gelb and Senator Biden, would like it, at three autonomous regions, working together with some coherent central government, providing security for Baghdad and other areas. But we don't have sufficient control to know where the fragmentation ends.

This is an effective vehicle with brakes and an accelerator, but no steering wheel. We can either try to slow the fragmentation down or we can try to accelerate it; what we can't do is determine where it stops.

And the responsible thing at this stage, recognizing the human cost of fragmentation, in terms of the population transfers, the genocide, the much larger scale killing that went on in Yugoslavia, that went on in Afghanistan, and which would go on in Iraq in those circumstances, is to try to slow it down.

Recognizing we can't stop it -- and it may well end up where people like Peter suggests it's going to end up -- but, at this point, slowing it down rather than accelerating it is the prudent choice.

RAY SUAREZ: One thing the report spent a lot of time on, Mike Vickers, is exploring further your notion about turning combat troops, gradually taking them out of the country, in favor of trainers, putting much more emphasis on the Iraqi army and national police. Did they get it right?

MICHAEL VICKERS: Well, indeed it did. And I think they're certainly headed in the right direction.

If you look at our advisory effort in Iraq compared to previous efforts, it's been far more ad hoc, lower quality, lower numbers. The areas where we have the biggest problems, police and others, is where we have almost no presence.

And I don't want to underestimate the difficulty of the problem, but if Iraq is to hold together, this is the only viable path that I see.

Now, there is a psychological dimension to American forces there. I think more, actually, than a physical security dimension, that one has to be very careful about timetables -- and because I agree with Jim totally, is that Iraq is fragmenting. And it's not clear where it's going to end up. And if we did withdraw, I think Iraq would descend into chaos.

RAY SUAREZ: Fred Kagan, how do you begin to make the changes that everyone agrees is necessary over time without setting timetables, without using the Iraq Study Group's recommendation of early '08 for at least starting that process?

FREDERICK KAGAN: Look, none of the things that the people around this table say they want to have happen -- and I agree that most of these things should happen -- can happen until we've gotten security established in Baghdad, none of them.

You cannot have political development. You cannot do reconstruction. And I do not believe that the presence of the U.S. troops in Iraq is what's causing the problem.

What's causing the problem now is the failure that, we've created a security vacuum which we have never tried to fill. The Iraqi army is not going to be capable of filling it in a short period of time.

And so the option is really very stark. Either we undertake actions now to make good mistakes that we've made in the past that have allowed the security vacuum to develop and allowed the security situation to collapse, that will facilitate economic development -- which I think is absolutely essential. I think the CERP program is vital. I totally agree with you about that.

“ What's causing the problem now is the failure that, we've created a security vacuum which we have never tried to fill. The Iraqi army is not going to be capable of filling it in a short period of time. ”

And the reconstruction programs that you say we owe the Iraqi people, I agree with you. We do, and we should be doing that. None of it is possible, in any time frame, until we have established security.

I think we can do that. I've just completed the process over this past weekend of putting together a report, which we'll be releasing on Thursday, that shows how we can do this. I think it's feasible. And nothing else will move us forward.

The role of Iraq's neighbors

RAY SUAREZ: Eric Davis, the report was very critical of economic development initiatives up until this point, but it endorsed them as a general principle, as a necessary pre-condition for fixing the country. So how do you stop doing what we've been doing wrong and start doing what needs to get done?

ERIC DAVIS: Well, first of all, I think you have to have an international effort. I think one of the reasons that Baker-Hamilton stayed away from economics is the American government just doesn't have the money.

We have oil-rich neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We have our new ally, Libya. We have Muslim countries like Turkey and Indonesia. We have European Union allies.

If we could get an international development agency, which I think it needs -- the problem is these things are all put as an either/or. It should all be happening together.

The CERP hasn't been effective because it's just this short-term kind of program. It's not something that's really sustained. That has to be then translated into bringing local notables into the process, having them develop sustainable, not top-down. I'm thinking about CHR, the Silver Springs firm that's been extremely successful in Iraq, precisely because it developed projects talking to Iraqis, asking them what they need.

Iran is, by the way, much more savvy than we are. They recently gave the Iraqi government a billion dollar line of credit and signed a whole series of contracts with the Iraqi government designed specifically for economic reconstruction.

They realize the way to hearts and minds and winning hearts and minds is through economic reconstruction. We don't seem to get it.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: But that's why the diplomacy aspect in the report is guaranteed to fail. It talks about the need -- certainly, there should be diplomacy. I absolutely agree with that.

But the way they talked about diplomacy is to create something that they call an Iraq support group, an international group that would be what they call an instrument of U.S. diplomacy -- "instrument" is the word they use -- and then say that all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran, Syria and everybody else in the region, has somehow an obligation to participate in that.

And if they choose not to, it becomes the basis for imposing new sanctions, for all kinds of punishments. But the point is it's based on the idea of U.S. power imposing the decisions of what the diplomacy should be.

It's the diplomatic side of maintaining a military occupation of Iraq. As long as that exists, we're not serious about real diplomacy, and we're not serious about ending the war.

RAY SUAREZ: Now, Ambassador Dobbins, the report endorsed the idea of getting Iran and Syria involved...

JAMES DOBBINS: Among others.

RAY SUAREZ: ... which was part of your presentation in the original series. And those two proposals have gotten some of the most serious criticism since the issue of the report, that we would talk as a country to nations that we haven't been able to talk to so far on this.

JAMES DOBBINS: Well, we haven't been willing to talk to, in the case of Syria. Syria is perfectly willing to talk to us. They have an ambassador here in Washington; we have an embassy in Damascus. We simply don't have an ambassador, because we've chosen not to.

Iran, it's controversial in both countries. And there's an element of Gaston and Alphonse, in terms of getting that dialogue started.

But the basic principle is: They're the ones who are going to get the refugees; they're the ones who are going to get the terrorists; they're the ones who are going to get the criminality, and the endemic disease, and the commercial disruption of having a failed state on their doorsteps. Those people aren't coming here.



Phyllis Bennis
Institute for Policy
Studies

“ It's the diplomatic side of maintaining a military occupation of Iraq. As long as that exists, we're not serious about real diplomacy, and we're not serious about ending the war. ”

And, therefore, they do have an interest in preventing the worst. And to the extent they're uncertain about whether the United States is going to stay and hold it together, to the extent we look like we're going to diminish our presence and turn responsibility over to the Iraqis and to Iraq's neighbors, they may get more serious.

It's at least worth a try. There's been never a case where we've successfully held together a failing state unless we did successfully involve the neighbors.

Gauging political momentum

RAY SUAREZ: What seems to be attracting the kind of response, attracting the kind of political momentum, that starts to look plausible, now that the Iraq Study Group's findings are sort of sinking into the pores of the American people?

PHYLLIS BENNIS: Well, I would just say that I think the American people -- and it was shown in the last election, but it's also been shown in the polls and in the overall sentiment -- recognizing that this was a war that was illegal, that was waged without international legitimacy, and in the face of massive opposition.

It's now something that has come back to haunt us and cannot continue, and that the only way to end it is to end the occupation. I think more and more people are recognizing that. Unfortunately, the people who were involved in the Iraq Study Group did not reflect that.

RAY SUAREZ: Very quickly?

PETER GALBRAITH: Look, the facts on the ground are that the country is broken up, and what we're doing is largely irrelevant. We're not going to put it back together again.

We're not going to build Iraqi army units, unless you can explain -- and perhaps in your time you might answer this -- how do you get them to behave like Iraqis, when in fact they consider themselves to be Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds? So the reality is that the country is broken up.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, Fred Kagan, that was your cue.

FREDERICK KAGAN: Well, you know, it has happened in the past. If you look at Tal Afar, there something really interesting happened. There was an Iraqi army unit that came in that was Kurdish. The Turkmen were very afraid of it initially.

We had forces there that helped establish security, and the truth is that it worked. This can happen. It can be successful.

What I see is a growing consensus that the force posture of American troops in Iraq is inadequate and our strategy is inadequate. And I hope that, as we go forward, we'll recognize that the options are pretty stark: We can either lose now, with just devastating consequences throughout the region, or we can change our strategy, and what we're willing to commit to this war and make an effort to win.

RAY SUAREZ: Very quickly.

ERIC DAVIS: I think that it was very heartening this morning to see that this Defense Department report is finally saying that we need to be able to develop jobs. And they said, if the United States had had three years and 50 percent unemployment, we'd have militias. We'd have the same kinds of problems as the Iraqis.

MICHAEL VICKERS: There's strong bipartisan support for expanded training and advisory effort. It's the principal security tool to hold the country together over the long haul. It's still high-risk. It may not work. But there's been a noticeable transition to an Iraqi-centric strategy, and I think that's the right way to go.

JAMES DOBBINS: Recognizing that what we're doing now isn't working is the beginning of wisdom in Iraq. And I think that everybody, including the president, has now recognized that.

RAY SUAREZ: Guests, thank you all very much.



Peter Galbraith
Former State
Department Official

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