The costs and challenges of keeping the peace in Iraq

Eric Schwartz

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Political commitment, public security, sharing the burden of reconstruction, and making Iraqis stakeholders in their own future are the four major themes that evolved in a study of post conflict Iraq by an independent task force made up of prominent Americans, advised Eric Schwartz, the director of the project, in his address to the Forum. Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, the findings of the study were published in a report on March 12.

"Other issues that we dealt with included the rule of law and accountability, the role of oil, and regional security," said Schwartz.

The task force emphasized the importance of communicating unequivocal support for the development of Iraq, with no time table except to get the job done. "We argued that Iraqis need to believe that the United States is there in force and will not walk out before the vital tasks are completed," said Schwartz. The concerns of the American people also need to be addressed "so they are willing to bear the cost of peace stabilization and reconstruction in the years ahead, well after senior officials have turned their attention to other crises."

There has been some speculation that costs can be covered by oil revenues once all the fields are producing at full capacity. Not so, said Schwartz. "Oil is not the silver bullet. Oil will not enable us to avoid commitments that are projected to fall somewhere between $20 billion and $40 billion a year, most of it designated for the support of U.S. peace stabilization forces." Since the Bush administration has repeatedly insisted that Iraqi oil is for the Iraqi people, it is unlikely that Iraqi oil revenues will be used to keep U.S. troops in the country.

"These are real costs that we're going to be incurring, and we have to weigh that against the benefit that we sought in going to war. No decision to go to war should have been made without an appreciation of the magnitude of the postwar commitment."

How are we going to pay all the costs?

"In the post-Sept. 11 world, the costs of not engaging are far higher than the costs of engaging. If you believe these costs are worth incurring, I don't think the budgetary requirements, as compared to the size of our gross domestic product, will be unachievable," said Schwartz.

One way to lighten our load, he added, is to get the international community behind us. "The more we involve other governments in these post-conflict peace stabilization exercises, the easier it will be for us."

The report, said Schwartz, cites the need for "meaningful international participation and the sharing of responsibility for decision making in important areas that go beyond humanitarian assistance. This means the United Nations should take responsibility in organizing, with U.S. support, a political consultative
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process leading to a transition to a new Iraqi government; that the UN and other governments could play a meaningful role in developing an oil oversight board for Iraq during the transition period, and in establishing a consortium of donor countries together with the World Bank and the IMF."

Iraqis have to be made to feel like stakeholders throughout the transition process "in order to avoid the perception of American control over the process. Consultative mechanisms on political, constitutional and legal issues need to be quickly established so that the period of interim governments is limited and characterized by increasing Iraqi involvement."

On the other hand, the task force urged against handing Iraqis the full reins of government too quickly, before the indigenous capacity to run things has been developed. "Any such precipitous effort would force American officials to turn to exile leadership that lacks a demonstrated basis of support within the Iraqi population at large."

Military challenges

Will the growing need for peace stabilization forces lead to a reinstatement of the draft?

Schwartz doesn't think so, pointing out that "the principal benefit of the draft is that it helps ensure political accountability on the decision to go to war." In the case of Iraq, "if a broader percentage of the population had been at risk of being drafted, we would likely have had a more vigorous national debate about the wisdom of the decision than we did.

"But the principal disadvantage is that the draft hasn't proven to be a very effective or efficient way to build a highly capable military force."

However, the military has to be better positioned to deal with demands on its human resources. Unfortunately, "we don't learn from the lessons of the past and we don't plan for the future. We don't build a peace stabilization capability within our own military, nor do we seriously engage in discussions about creating a ready reserve of international civilian police. Because every time we get involved in a military action, we're lulled into this false notion that it's the only time we're going to do it."

Dan Brumberg (see page 2) added that while we have a technologically sophisticated military, "we have a complete absence of long-range political thinking about how to use peace keeping forces. It's really shocking how little effort is going into that."

The Iraqi military presents a different challenge for the U.S.: how to create an Iraq strong enough to defend itself but not strong enough to threaten Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. As a first step, the task force "urged that the administration consider a regional forum for discussion of security issues and also to consider confidence building measures and related topics such as nonproliferation guarantees. And we also urged the administration to give high priority to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict."

Iraqi economy

A Forum member asked: What do we have to do to create a stable economic environment in Iraq over the next 18 to 36 months? Said Schwartz:
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- "Ensuring public safety is the first critical requirement. Right now, store owners don't feel comfortable opening for business. You can't transport materials from one part of the country to the other. And you can't build up inventory because it's going to be looted.
- "The rule of law must be established and enforced, not just for Iraqis but also to give investors a sense of security and predictability in their dealings.
- "Legislative and constitutional reform is needed to define the political future of Iraq and also to define the commercial and civil codes under which the population can operate."

Schwartz outlined three critical non-oil sectors that need attention: agriculture, banking and finance, and basic government services.

"The agriculture sector," he said, "has been a very important component of the Iraqi economy but has been decimated under Hussein. Access to credit is a problem. There aren't clear rules about how potential producers can get funds to operate The whole sector requires reform.

"The banking and finance sector, which is related to problems in the agriculture sector, needs fixing. It has been subject to cronyism, to the exclusion of others.

"The government services sector, which also has been decimated, provides an opportunity for short-term employment for Iraqi civilians. The U.S. Office of Transition Initiatives is looking at immediate revitalization projects and working to get government services back up. The U.S. post-conflict administration is looking at that issue as well."

Do we know what the Iraqi people want to have in the way of institutions and government?

"What the Iraqis want is extremely important. A broad objective of the U.S. is the creation of more accountable institutions that are responsive to the wishes of the majority of the people. For better or worse, when you're trying to create more accountable institutions, there is some degree of paternalism that sometimes enters into it. And you don't run away from that."

It's not easy

Quoting a former U.S. government official, Schwartz described in broad terms three trains of thought within the administration.

- The regionalists who believe you can't build democracy in Iraq, that it's imposing an alien ideology and not worth the effort.
- The neoconservatives who say it's easy to create democracy in Iraq. You change the regime, give people the wherewithal to get the job done, and then get out.
- The nation builders who believe you can promote democratic forms of government but that it will take an enormous investment of Western resources.

"When President Bush discovers that the neocons are wrong about how easy it is, will he go to the nation builders and say we have to do the job right? Or will he say it's not worth the effort?"

"The initial signs are that this president is committed to doing the job." --Eric Schwartz
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Briefly: Major Recommendations of the Independent Task Force on Post-Conflict Iraq; Council on Foreign Relations

- Political commitment. To instill confidence in the Iraqis, President Bush should make it clear that the U.S. will stay the course; he should announce a multi-billion dollar, multi-year, post-conflict reconstruction program and seek formal congressional endorsement. He should also explain to the American people why it is in their best interests to support the rebuilding of a peaceful Iraq.

- Establish and maintain public security in the postwar environment. We argued from the outset of the conflict that the U.S. military needed to deploy forces not only with a mission to win the war, but also to help safeguard the peace. Failure to address this issue effectively would fuel the perception that the result of the U.S. intervention was an increase in suffering and chaos.

- Share the burden of post-conflict reconstruction. We urged that the administration move quickly to involve international organizations and governments. First, it would lighten the load for U.S. military and civilian personnel; second, it would help to diminish the impression that the U.S. wanted to control post-conflict Iraq. This doesn't mean that UN troops should be enforcing security in Baghdad. It does mean giving the UN a decision-making role in important areas.

- Make Iraqis stakeholders throughout the transition process. Here again, it's critical to avoid the perception of American control over the process by promoting Iraqi ownership as early as possible.