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Iraq Study Group is Wrong to Link Iraq to Israel

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Although the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report has been dubbed “the revenge of the realists,” it is unrealistic on two important diplomatic issues. While its recommendation to invite Iran and Syria to play a bigger role inside Iraq has been highly criticized, its questionable linkage of progress in Iraq to progress on resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict has received less attention. The simplistic connection the ISG report makes between building peace in Baghdad and building peace in Jerusalem does not stand up to serious scrutiny.

If Israelis and Palestinians reached peace tomorrow, it would be ludicrous to expect a therapeutic spillover effect in Iraq. The fighting in Iraq is caused by a brutal struggle for power, a proxy war fueled by Iran’s growing ambitions in the region and al-Qaeda’s ruthless campaign to establish a base of operations to export its totalitarian Islamic revolution. Iraq’s Sunni insurgents and Shia militias, provoked by insurgent atrocities, would continue their bloody handiwork regardless of events between Israelis and Palestinians.

But five of the Iraq Study Group’s 79 recommendations focused on jumpstarting the moribund Arab–Israeli peace negotiations in the vain hope that this would make a difference in Iraq. James Baker, the ISG co-chairman, maintains that Syria can be “flipped” and persuaded to reverse course and drop its longstanding alliance with Iran, and stop stoking terrorism and factional bloodletting in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. This advice represents the triumph of hope over experience.

As Secretary of State in 1990–1991, Baker failed to “flip” Syria, despite extensive diplomatic efforts. Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad did agree to send a small Syrian military force to Kuwait after its liberation from Iraqi occupation in early 1991, but this symbolic deployment came at a high price: the strengthening of Syrian domination over Lebanon. The Assad regime did attend the 1991 Madrid peace conference but continued to support Palestinian terrorist groups opposed to peace with Israel.

After the multilateral Madrid talks bogged down and Israel began secret bilateral talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization in Oslo, Norway, Syria made every effort to torpedo the Oslo peace process. Damascus stepped up its support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian terror groups opposed to peace. Baker’s failure was followed by the failure of Secretary of State Warren Christopher to broker a Syrian–Israeli peace agreement despite more than 20 trips to Damascus during the Clinton Administration. The Assad regime was interested in a peace process that it could exploit to deflect international pressure to halt its support of terrorism, but it rejected a genuine peace with Israel even though Israel was willing

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to return the Golan Heights, a Syrian territory occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Secretary of State Colin Powell also failed to “flip” Syria. Powell visited Damascus in May 2003 to discuss bilateral issues with Assad’s son Bashar, who became Syria’s dictator after Assad died in 2000. Bashar Assad reportedly promised to cooperate in halting the influx of foreign Islamic militants into Iraq across Syria’s border, but he has failed to deliver on his promises. In addition to harboring high-level Iraqi Baathist leaders who provide financing and direction to Iraqi insurgents, the younger Assad has stepped up efforts to intimidate Lebanese leaders who increasingly chafed at Syria’s longtime occupation of Lebanon. The Assad regime was implicated in the 2005 assassinations of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and a long list of other Lebanese leaders who opposed Syrian interference in Lebanon’s internal affairs. Last month Lebanon’s Minister of Industry, Pierre Gemayel, was assassinated before a crucial cabinet vote to approve an international tribunal to investigate Hariri’s assassination, a measure Syria strongly opposed.

Reviving the long dormant Syrian-Israeli peace talks would let Syria’s Assad regime off the hook for its transgressions in Lebanon by blunting international efforts to hold it accountable for its use of murder as a foreign policy tool. Damascus will

simply do what it has repeatedly done: pay lip service to peace negotiations while it continues to arm, finance, and harbor terrorists responsible for the murders of Americans, Israelis, Iraqis, and Lebanese.

Even if the Assad regime became genuinely cooperative on peace negotiations, the prospects for successful Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations remain terrible for the foreseeable future. The Hamas-led Palestinian Authority rejects not only peace negotiations with Israel but Israel’s right to exist. There is no realistic chance for advancing peace negotiations until Hamas has been squeezed out of power—not included in a government of national unity as recommended by the ISG.

If there is a link between the Arab-Israeli conflict and Iraq, it is the threat to a stable peace posed by terrorists supported by Syria and Iran. Those repressive regimes should be isolated and punished for their bloody subversion of their neighbors, not rewarded with invitations to participate in an illusory “peace process” that sacrifices the interests of American allies in Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq.

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