

**‘HOPING’ POLICY: A DISSENT TO THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL’S TASK
FORCE REPORT ON THE FUTURE OF IRAQ**

PROFESSOR MICHAEL M. GUNTER

The Atlantic Council, a leading U.S. think tank in Washington D.C., recently released its “Report of the Task Force on the Future of Iraq: Achieving Long-Term Stability to Ensure the Defeat of ISIL.” Despite so much evidence to the contrary,¹ the Report concluded that Iraq continued to be a viable state, the Kurdistan Region should remain a part of it, and that this would best serve the interests of the United States, the Iraqis and the Kurds.

In coming to these questionable conclusions, the Task Force declared that it had “brought together the world’s leading Iraq scholars, experts, and former policy practitioners to conduct a rigorous inquiry into how the United States could best protect its national security interests, traveled to Baghdad, Erbil, Sulaimani, Najaf, Amman, Berlin, and twice convened in Washington D.C. to listen to the perspectives of Iraqi political leaders, civil society actors, and religious leaders.” Ryan Crocker, a distinguished former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon; a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom; and currently the Dean of Texas A & M University’s George Bush School of Government and Public Service, chaired the Task Force.

Maybe the Atlantic Council Report is correct that a united Iraq can still be pulled back from the precipice, and there can be successful mediating accomplished between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that will lead to a united, successful, democratic, peaceful, and pro-U.S. Iraq. However, this is not likely!² Iraq is an

artificial,³ violence-prone,⁴ and failed state,⁵ a situation that the United States is powerful enough to keep denying, but whose continuing insistence in trying to maintain furthers instability and war, the very ultimate goals the United States seeks to prevent.

ISIS's ability to conquer and control significant territory for so long—including Mosul, Iraq's second largest city—illustrates how Iraq has failed. Furthermore, ISIS,⁶ born largely out of Iraq, also demonstrates not only how that state is so violence prone, but also represents a significant part of Iraq's continuing civil war that has racked that state since shortly after the U.S. invasion in 2003 and is likely simply to move on to its next stage even after ISIS is driven out of Mosul.

Correctly, the Atlantic Council Report argues that “extremism flourishes in societies where the government is seen as corrupt, weak, and illegitimate by its population. The United States can most effectively tackle extremism in the long-term by pressing the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government to better meet the needs of the Iraqi people.”

However, Joseph Biden's realistic, three-state alternative remains a more viable, but ignored solution to achieve these worthy goals.⁷ As the Atlantic Council Report correctly states:

There is a fundamental lack of trust and good faith in the relationship between Baghdad and the KRG, with the KRG feeling victimized by Baghdad, and Baghdad feeling exploited by the KRG. The KRG believes that Baghdad has never paid it the full proportion of the federal budget to which it is entitled. In particular, Baghdad usually refuses to pay for the Peshmerga, and has balked at paying operating costs of oil producers that the KRG has contracted independently of Baghdad. Baghdad argues that the Peshmerga are a regional expense, rather than a sovereign expense that would fall under Baghdad's remit, and that it has no responsibility to subsidize agreements that the KRG has independently signed with international oil companies.

Unfortunately, the Atlantic Council Report fails to reach the logical conclusion that further mediation between Baghdad and the KRG in an attempt to maintain a united Iraq goes against the interests of both parties as well as the United States. The KRG continues irrevocably moving towards independence. Only the collapse of oil prices in 2014 and the resultant economic and political crises stand in serious opposition. Nevertheless, even these twin problems do not prevent most of the KRG leaders continuing to envision independence in the near future. Once this occurs this Report's vision for Iraq will be obsolete. Therefore, this Report at least should have included a short dissent as an appendix or at least an endnote that states that U.S. interests in the former Iraq can be best furthered by accommodating to an independent KRG and supporting both it and Baghdad to achieve this through an amicable divorce partially brokered by the United States.

Indeed, the legal break up of Iraq would merely affirm the de-facto KRG independence that already exists. Instead of vainly hoping that a united Iraq would be a friend of the United States, an independent KRG would clearly be America's friend and willingly provide it all the bases it needed in the region because it would guarantee the much-desired American protection. For the United States such a presence would alleviate the need to depend on the unreliable Incirlik air base in Turkey. As a moderate, Muslim state, the KRG also would constitute a welcomed alternative to radical Islamism. In addition, the KRG would be a valuable base for intelligence for the United States to counter violent regional extremism.⁸

'Hoping' otherwise as does the Atlantic Council Report, has proven an unlikely road to success. Rather it sounds more like a return to the pre-Obama policies. Call it nation-building light. The Iraqis will eventually get it correct if only given enough

international (read American) time, money, training and other support. The Atlantic Council Report continues to see the problems in Iraq and elsewhere in the Islamic world as primarily political and economic in nature, but true to political correctness fails even to consider the religious component to these conflicts. Why do we refuse to believe they mean what they declare, when our enemies tell us that their faith drives their struggle? Why is there no mention in this Report of the existential Sunni-Shia divide that continues to rip Iraq apart? The Atlantic Council Report boils down to the following: we were doing the correct things 8 years ago and were on the right track until Obama fouled everything up. Now that we are rid of Obama, it is time to turn back the clock and make another concerted effort at Iraqi nation-building and all will miraculously be OK. Such a strategy looks an awfully lot like rewarding and reinforcing failure.

Michael M. Gunter is a professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University, the Secretary-General of the EU Turkey Civic Committee (EUTCC) in Brussels, and an advisory board member of the Turkish Heritage Organization (THO) in Washington D.C. He also was one of many senior advisors to the Atlantic Council's Task Force Report discussed in this article. His most recent book is *The Kurds: A Modern History*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2017).

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Sherko Kirmanj, *Identity and Nation in Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), which deals with the failure of national integration in Iraq; Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012), which analyzes state-building in Iraq; and Mohammed M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and*

Nation-Building (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), which details the failure of Iraqi nation-building, among others.

² See, for example, Mohammed Ihsan, *Nation Building in Kurdistan: Memory, Genocide and Human Rights* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); and Joost Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), among others, for why, given their horrific past experiences under Iraqi rule, the Kurds are unlikely to want to remain in that state.

³ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁴ Prophetically, Allen Dulles, the former U.S. CIA director, declared almost 60 years ago that Iraq “was the most dangerous spot on earth.” Cited in Said K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 54.

⁵ Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); and Gareth Stansfield, “The Unravelling of the Post-First World War State System? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Transformation of the Middle East,” *International Affairs*, 89:2 (March 2013), pp. 259-282.

⁶ Among a number of useful studies of ISIS, see Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015); and Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

⁷ Joseph R. Biden and Leslie H. Gelb, “Unity through Autonomy in Iraq,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2006.

⁸ Members of the U.S. Army Special Forces report that the United States already has air bases in KRG territory as well as intelligence capabilities attached to Erbil International

Airport. Michael M. Gunter, Interviews in Erbil, September 30, 2014. Also see “US Opening Air Base near Erbil, Kurdish Official Says,” *Rudaw*, November 2, 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/110220152>, accessed February 24, 2017.