



USIPEACE BRIEFING

“No Choice Only to Succeed”:

Dr. Ali Al-Dabbagh’s Formula for Regional Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

USIP recently hosted Dr. Ali Al-Dabbagh, official spokesman for the Iraqi government. He unveiled a far-reaching regional initiative to increase economic and strategic cooperation in the Middle East. The initiative represents a new level of consciousness and independence in Iraqi foreign policy.

A FAR-REACHING PROPOSAL

Al-Dabbagh's "Formula for Regional Partnership," was introduced as an unofficial vision of the Iraqi government, designed to uproot the "seeds of tension, terrorism, instability and conflict in the region." The proposal seeks to include Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait (with possible expansion to the GCC countries) in a regional framework for economic and strategic cooperation. The plan is notable because it marks a newfound assertiveness and optimism among Iraqi leadership.

Al-Dabbagh's plan differs from previous international engagement initiatives because it is a unilateral Iraqi proposal and it envisions Iraq as a leader in strengthening the region. In contrast to previous engagement initiatives, the origins of the proposal are solely Iraqi. The Iraq Neighbors meetings, supported by the Arab League, initially excluded the country. Also, the 2006 International Compact with Iraq, which played a positive role in Iraq's emergence within the international community, was a bilateral initiative of the government of Iraq and the United Nations. These initiatives were undertaken when civil war seemed imminent. However, Al-Dabbagh asserted that Iraq is now capable of leveraging recent security gains and building on them in ways that were previously unthinkable.

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Second, the focus of previous initiatives was on supporting Iraq. Al-Dabbagh’s proposal reverses that premise, allowing Iraq to take the lead in supporting the region as a whole. Owing to its central location and demographics, “Iraq can serve as a crossing point for air routes” and “establish land routes to connect the Mediterranean with Iran, and the Gulf with Turkey,” he noted. In addition, its ethnic and sectarian diversity resembles that of the region, and can therefore provide a basis for economic and cultural integration.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROPOSAL

The proposed formula is based on four primary objectives: (1) improving regional security; (2) advancing regional development; (3) creating a platform for regional conflict resolution; and (4) limiting separatist trends.

First, the initiative would reduce the flow of transnational terrorist activity and cross-border violence. A “breeding ground for terrorism” in the past, Iraq could reverse this trend by becoming a hub of regional security cooperation.

Second, it envisions joint action toward resource development. Large-scale cooperative projects could be undertaken in the fields of energy, food security, water security and industry, along with the development of peaceful nuclear power and a regional plan for environmental protection.

The initiative would also provide a platform for resolving existing resource conflicts and facilitating economic cooperation. Border disputes could be resolved, as well as disagreements over the appropriate utilization of shared oil fields among Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Syria. The economic component of the formula, according to Al-Dabbagh, would be based on the EU model, which would progress “gradually toward removing custom and tax barriers, in addition to barriers on the movement of goods and individuals.”

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Finally, the formula would discourage ethnic and religious separatism by creating a venue for collaboratively addressing the issue of separatist movements. The level of regional integration inherent in the plan could also reduce the sentiment of isolation among minority groups. Such integration would "take away any ideological factors and mistrust that govern political behavior... attention will be shifted toward the development of economic and cultural interests, pushing aside the struggle for regional dominance."

REGARDING THE STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT

A related key element of Iraq's future which Al-Dabbagh discussed was the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The Iraqi Council of Representatives will host a country-wide referendum, slated for July 2009, on the agreement. Al-Dabbagh acknowledged that the question of U.S. military presence in Iraq impacts the country's regional relations. To assuage its neighbors' fears of Iraq becoming a proxy for U.S. interests, Iraq assured its neighbors that it would not allow U.S. troops to launch cross-border raids from its soil. Regardless of the referendum's outcome, Al-Dabbagh discouraged the next administration from rapid unilateral withdrawal, saying, "We should not sacrifice the five hard years of sacrifice by Americans as well as by Iraqis... [because of] a decision that has been [made] by one side."

Related to the SOFA, Al-Dabbagh remarked on the recent indictment of Blackwater employees involved in the shooting of 17 Iraqi civilians in September 2007. "The SOFA defined Iraqi and American jurisdiction... [and] the Iraqi government is pleased with the American jurisdiction. But in the end the Iraqi government reserves its right to protect the victims and the victims families and to get the proper compensation for them."

Al-Dabbagh acknowledged that the international economic downturn threatened to strain Iraq's reconstruction efforts in the next year. However, he maintained a

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determined and positive outlook. “We received a destroyed country, fully destroyed... and with all [our] efforts, we still believe that we [haven’t] reached to the level which we want. There is a lack of experience, lack of management, and problems that the Iraqi government is trying to fix. But in the end, we have no choice only to succeed.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This *USIPeace Briefing* was written by Elizabeth Detwiler, program assistant in the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR POST-CONFLICT PEACE AND STABILITY OPERATIONS

USIP’s Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations aims to transform societies emerging from conflict by promoting stability, democracy, economic development, and social reconstruction. Daniel Serwer is vice president of the center.

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