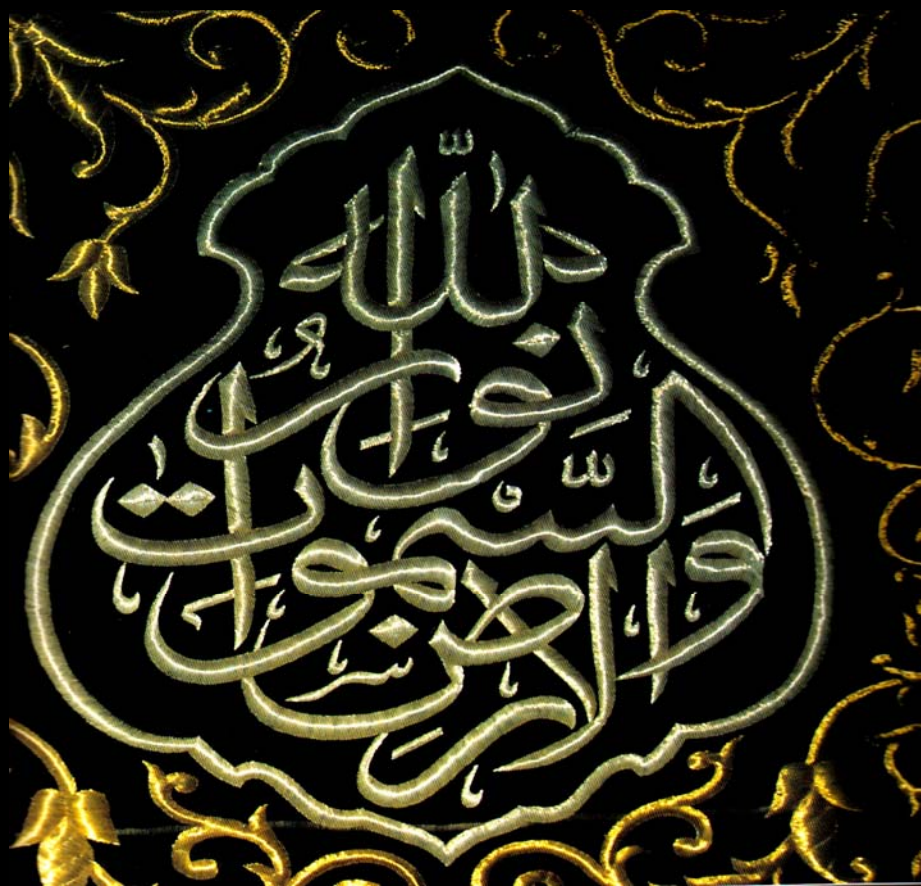


**FROM THE SWAMP TO TERRA FIRMA**  
**THE REGIONAL ROLE IN THE STABILIZATION OF IRAQ**



**OXFORD RESEARCH GROUP**  
**KING FAISAL CENTER**  
**DIPLOMATIC INSTITUTE RIYADH**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2008, 35 policy experts and practitioners gathered in Riyadh to examine the challenge of finding a regional consensus for stabilising Iraq. A number of key issues, opposing views and suggestions for future action emerged from a very rich dialogue. This report provides a detailed synopsis of the discussions, in particular a number of important insights into the view from Riyadh. It highlights five different scenarios for the future of Iraq and then examines competing images of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, the issues of national identity, sectarianism and federalism, and concludes by exploring a number of possible future paths and processes.

The discussions were underpinned by a number of key issues:

- 1) A real fear in Saudi Arabia (and elsewhere) of Iranian regional ambitions and regional sectarianism instigated by Tehran. This led to a powerful policy dichotomy between those wishing to further isolate Iran and those wishing to engage Tehran in dialogue.
- 2) The central importance in Riyadh of maintaining an Iraqi Arab national identity and Iraq's territorial integrity with federalism regarded with suspicion because of the attendant risks of secession of the Kurdish north and Shi'a dominated south.
- 3) A sense of extreme caution and uncertainty in Riyadh about what it can and should do to protect its interests. This was based in part on uncertainty about American intentions in the region and its understandings of key political forces in Iraq, particularly on the role of the Sadrists and the ability of the Maliki government to generate political unity. Concern was also expressed at the absence of a coherent policy towards Iran from Europe.

This report will differentiate between a number of suggestions that were made in the meeting where the attendees participated in their personal capacity and not in official government roles. Oxford Research Group (ORG) co-hosted and co-convened the meeting together with the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and the Diplomatic Institute, Riyadh. ORG acted as rapporteur and are the authors of this report. All efforts have been made to achieve an accurate account of the meeting, and the suggestions below do not necessarily reflect ORG's perspective. ORG is committed to quiet off-the-record dialogue in which parties are brought together who are not talking to one another and do not sufficiently understand the motivations, agendas and tensions of the other side. It is here that the strength of the organisation lies and four recommendations are made in the introduction for continuing and diversifying the dialogue initiated in Riyadh which reflect our methods of working.

The discussions amongst participants at the meeting yielded a number of suggestions for future action for Riyadh:

- 1) Initiate a three-way dialogue between Riyadh, Washington and Tehran on stabilising Iraq.
- 2) Pressure Gulf States, China and Russia, to restrict commercial relationships with Iran.
- 3) Forceful and repeated expression of Saudi concerns about Iran to highlight and challenge Iran's regional ambitions.
- 4) Engage the Sadrists and Sunni "Awakening" movement to bring them into Iraq's political process.
- 5) Convene an EU-GCC heads of government meeting on national reconciliation in Iraq.
- 6) Advocate convening a representative constituent assembly with representatives from Iraq's multi-denominational tribes, town councils and labour unions.
- 7) Sponsor proposals for Iraq based on the success of Afghanistan's national solidarity programmes to fund and empower reconstruction at the local community level.
- 8) Establish a well-resourced Iraq task force and an Iran task force in the Saudi government to explore strategies and outreach opportunities.
- 9) Sponsor a detailed examination of what a Helsinki-type OSCE process might look like in the region.
- 10) Sponsor a UN resolution under chapter seven of the UN Charter on guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Iraq.

This report should be read by all of those involved in, affected by or deeply concerned about future of Iraq, including policy-makers and parliamentarians. ORG intends to pursue a number of options to continue and diversify the dialogue initiated in Riyadh.

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of the meeting held in Riyadh on 18-21 April 2008 was “the regional implications of the Iraq crisis and the need for consensus amongst Iraq’s neighbours in order to help support stabilization”. Our host was His Royal Highness Prince Turki al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and Dr. Mansour Al Mansour , Head of the Diplomatic Institute, Riyadh.

This was the first such event co-organised by the King Faisal Center, the Diplomatic Institute and Oxford Research Group (ORG). On the first morning we had a clear indication of the seriousness our Saudi hosts ascribed to the meeting when participants were invited to meet the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud bin Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud and the Chief of General Intelligence, Prince Muqrin Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

The meeting was a reflection of the trust and imagination of the institutes to work together. Whilst it was an experiment, all parties seemed well satisfied and have stated an interest in a continued working relationship. This provides a real opening to making a creative and pragmatic contribution to the resolution of some of the conflicts in the region. ORG particularly welcomes this opportunity.

ORG has a long tradition of hosting and co-hosting quiet, private dialogues and bringing together policy-makers with their critics, in a safe environment, where concerns can be articulated. In order for dialogue to be worthwhile we believe that the chemistry of the group is crucial. The group for this meeting was therefore constructed to reflect a wide range of experience. The quality of international participation was of the highest level in terms of some of the best minds in political, strategic and creative thinking and in the realm of conflict resolution. The key to the success of the meeting, however, was the active and energetic participation of Saudi experts. It was recognized that without listening carefully to the concerns of Saudi participants (as these were critical to an informed understanding of the complexity of the issues) it would be difficult for non-Saudi participants to make a relevant contribution.

The conference provided a secure space for open, critical discussion of difficult issues such as Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Iran and its anxieties about Iran’s regional ambitions; the danger of a proxy war in Iraq that could threaten the territorial integrity of its neighbours; ‘legitimate’ interests and ‘illegitimate’ interests and activities in Iraq and the region; the potential for a regional dialogue and perhaps partnership for stabilising Iraq; and the ‘red lines’ for both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

ORG’s intention was to explore the scope for moving away from a power politics perspective where ‘winner takes all’ to more reciprocal agreements in which interests – common and vested – are recognised. The aim was to ask key question such as: what is the scope for a different set of relationships to emerge in the interest of the stabilisation of Iraq based on what regional governments are for, as opposed to what they are against? What is required to find the leverages for the positive exercise of power in support of collective interests? In particular, what are the incentives for Iran to behave more cooperatively?

Such incentives involve exploring the common interests of Iraq’s neighbours and their potential areas for alignment in the future stabilisation of Iraq. It also posed the converse questions of what would be the consequences of failing to find regional common interests in terms of greater tensions and a potential escalation to regional conflict? And are there other diplomatic instruments that could be used to avoid such a confrontation?

The meeting was predicated on the belief that, in the end, any progress in Iraq would be shaped significantly by the stance and actions of its neighbours, and of the United States which continues to hold the balance of military power in the region. The potential risks of large scale intervention by Iraq’s neighbours in pursuit of narrow self-interests are enormous and could spill over at a regional level, drawing states into a proxy war in Iraq and threaten its territorial integrity and that of its neighbours.

Before areas of interest could be established, it became clear that there was a need to address some of the concerns of the Saudis in terms of Iran’s pervasive influence in Iraq. Whilst conflict and

disagreement are essential aspects of regional relations, the crucial issue is how they are managed. When there is tension between states, and where there is little diplomatic contact, it is more likely to lead to Machiavellian interpretations of the other's motivations and distortion of judgments due to mistrust and suspicion, which may ultimately lead to escalation and conflict. This is why, wherever possible ORG is committed to dialogue as a means of understanding the motivation and agendas of all parties engaged in conflict.

Quiet dialogues and more open conversations are key tools used by ORG. There is no doubt that the more open forum with the King Faisal Center and the Diplomatic Institute was rich both in contact, content and chemistry. It was a particularly satisfying experience for the visiting participants to hear the voices of Saudi thinkers. The importance here is to differentiate between open conversations and confidential dialogues that can push the agenda further in a discreet setting that offers the opportunity for deeper exploration of the real fears and concerns of the different parties.

ORG would like to make a number of suggestions on how to take this initiative forward and is proposing some options for consideration.

- 1) The model of the first meeting as described in this report was clearly useful for the participants both in content and experience. A further meeting using this more open model could be developed in which invitations are extended to a number of regional countries including Iran, Syria, Turkey and Jordan, all of whom are integral regional players in the stabilisation of Iraq. This could include a small group of third party voices to bring in a different perspective. In terms of timing for such a meeting, the US elections and the Iraqi elections may be a decisive factor and thereby the end of November may be a good date.
- 2) An alternative format to the first meeting could be to invite key regional actors to explore the scope for establishing security mechanisms for addressing regional security concerns. The case for regional dialogue almost inevitably leads to comparisons between the OSCE and a hypothetical Middle East equivalent. Nevertheless, it would be an opportunity to explore what mechanisms would be relevant to this region and experts could be invited who have experience of other security structures.
- 3) Another track worthy of consideration would be to develop a smaller, more confidential meeting in which high-level US participation would be invited and would include representation from both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Later, Syria and Turkey could also be invited to join the process. The meeting would involve an exploration of each other's agendas, potential areas of cooperation and common agreement, red lines, and the possibilities for containing and managing differences. It would be necessary to select participation for such a meeting carefully in order to deal with genuine concerns about whether the parties could be trusted to hold the confidentiality. It would also be important to ensure very high quality third party facilitation. Some members of the seminar may help in this regard and could play an important facilitation role here. Again timing may be important and the sense of urgency would need to be balanced against certain political changes, i.e. in terms of elections in the US and Iraq.
- 4) A recent visit was made to Iran by Oxford Research Group with its specialist Iranian advisor. One of the intentions was to deepen the contacts on the Iranian front with the view to quiet dialogue both on the nuclear issue and on Iran's intentions in Iraq. Such a channel may offer the possibility of acting as a conduit to the Saudi track and could lead to greater clarification of intentions. This could offer the opportunity both to act as a bridge and open up the opportunity of a dialogue at the right time.

Sustainability and persistence are critical qualities in the resolution of conflict. Key to this are the next steps. ORG sees its role to be both a driver and a container of such forward movement. The strength that ORG brings to this process is the skills of dialogue (both public and private), and ORG would wish to provide the frame for the further facilitation of dialogue as relevant to the development of this project.

We greatly valued the opportunity provided by our hosts and we hope this is the beginning of a strong and trusting long-term working relationship. We wish to salute the high quality of exchanges that took place, a consequence of the depth of experience of the group, its potential for creative thinking and the calibre of the participants. We would welcome the continuation of such a process.

***Gabrielle Rifkind, Human Security Consultant, Oxford Research Group, June 2008***

## **“FROM THE SWAMP TO TERRA FIRMA: FINDING A REGIONAL CONSENSUS FOR STABILISING IRAQ”**

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The meeting in Riyadh on a regional consensus for national reconciliation in Iraq drew together policy experts and practitioners from Europe, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. The discussions came at an important time for Iraq: the American military ‘surge’ had reduced levels of violence but a corresponding political ‘surge’ had not occurred and American troop levels are now set to be reduced; there is profound disagreement between Republican and Democratic presidential candidates about the breadth and depth of American involvement in Iraq leading to considerable uncertainty about medium and long-term American intentions; and forthcoming provincial elections in Iraq planned for October 1, 2008 are seen as a vital test of the degree to which national reconciliation based on an equitable political and economic power sharing is a realistic prospect for the future of the country.

The purpose of this report is not to provide an objective analysis of the current situation in Iraq and the possibilities for regional consensus, but to provide a detailed synopsis of two days of frank exchanges and distil a number of suggestions for future action, particularly for the Saudi government. It is divided into a number of themes that permeated the discussions:

- 1) Alternative scenarios for Iraq and the region and the pressure of time.
- 2) Competing images of the intentions and capabilities of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States.
- 3) Challenges to an Iraqi national identity and deep uncertainty about the future of Iraq.
- 4) Political processes to facilitate a regional consensus on Iraq and national reconciliation.

From these four themes emerged five key issues:

- 1) There is a real concern in Saudi Arabia and many other countries about Iranian regional ambitions that increased exponentially following the invasion of Iraq and the emergence of sectarian conflict. While the Iranian state is weak, the theocratic revolution remains capable of destabilising the region.
- 2) Riyadh is not prepared to allow the demise of an Iraqi national identity and the sectarian disintegration of the Iraqi state to go unchallenged. These are its ‘red line’ vital interests.
- 3) Extreme caution underpins the Saudi narrative on Iran and Iraq based in part on uncertainty about American intentions and the exercise of American power and a sense of ambivalence on behalf of the European Union.
- 4) There is a powerful policy dichotomy between those wishing to further isolate what is deemed a belligerent and uncompromising Iran and those wishing to engage Tehran through a regional dialogue that is prepared to recognise Iran’s legitimate interests.
- 5) There is a need to find a common understanding between Riyadh and Washington on the political forces in Iraq, particularly on the nature and extent of Iranian intervention, the role of the Sadrists and the Sunni factions, and the ability of the Maliki government to generate political unity.

### **A WAITING GAME?**

Competing interpretations of Iraq’s political evolution since its invasion in March 2003 gave rise to five different scenarios for the country’s future. Differing assessments of the likelihood of each scenario affected the type of recommendations for those governments capable of shaping Iraq’s future:

- 1) Stable Iraq: the central government successfully amends the constitution and holds free and fair provincial elections with wide participation leading to a growing sense amongst the electorate of an equitable sharing of political and economic power at national and local levels.
- 2) Shi’a dominance: an uneasy stability is reached in which Shi’a political parties and militias dominate the institutions of national power, some or all of which have close links to Tehran, with political power devolved in a federal structure.

- 3) Military strongman: a powerful nationalist figure emerges from Iraq's armed forces and succeeds in unifying a national army and imposing stability through an authoritarian regime.
- 4) Proxy war: Iraq's central government fails to assert national political, economic and military authority. Inter-communal sectarian violence escalates drawing in external regional powers that provide substantial financial and military support to competing factions in a civil war.
- 5) Total state collapse: Inter-communal sectarian violence escalates to the extent that the institutions of national power cease to function, political processes for national democratic governance collapse, any remaining sense of Iraqi national identity dissolves, the Iraqi state disintegrates into many 'statelets' with local militias as the dominant political players and a wholly criminalised economy.

Some of these scenarios clearly favour regional stability more than others but there was a widespread acceptance that time may not be on the Kingdom's side. Waiting to see what the next White House decides to do may allow Iraq to sink further into civil war as the situation on the ground changes and violence returns after the surge, perhaps drawing in regional countries as the situation deteriorates. Some argued that there is only limited time to avoid this. Waiting may allow Iran to consolidate its position in Iraq at the expense of Arab and broader regional interests. For others the October 2008 provincial elections represent a cut-off point beyond which judgements must be made as to whether Iraq is on a genuine path of national reconciliation or civil war/state disintegration. Progress may be possible if the elections are generally considered free and fair, much of the electorate views the process as legitimate and an improvement in everyday living is experienced through a reduction in violence and increased reconstruction. Conversely progress may be stymied through direct and indirect Iranian interference in the elections and the extent to which they might encourage political devolution, particularly in the south.

## **1. COMPETING IMAGES OF IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA AND AMERICA**

### **Iranian hegemony**

Many participants expressed deep concern about Iran's involvement in Iraq and its wider regional ambitions. Iran was widely regarded as a primary obstacle to national reconciliation in Iraq with the primary solution being the further isolation of Tehran by the international community.

A key feature of the discussions was the simultaneous strength and weakness of the Iranian state. The primary concerns were not about the existence of the Iranian state *per se*, but about the export of a sectarian Iranian ideology to the region, the risks of the religious subordination of Iraq to Iran, and the threat to the stability of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a dominated Eastern Province.

The Saudi narrative of its relationship with Iran placed the two countries in a long-term regional 'Cold War' sparked by the Iranian revolution in 1979. Both countries have since been locked in a zero-sum 'chess game' competing for religious and cultural leadership of the region epitomised by the competing types of political system they champion (traditional Gulf monarchy vs. Islamic theocracy), competing claims to leadership of the Islamic world, and competing policies for security in the Gulf (Iranian regional hegemony vs. balance of military power or American military predominance). The current conflict in Iraq is seen as part of this competition that also encompasses the conflicts in Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan as well as Iranian activities in Bahrain.

The Saudi narrative in the context of Iraq revolves around fear of Iranian regional hegemony, not in the traditional Western sense of military or economic power but in terms of religious and cultural power derived from successful prosecution of an insidious grand strategy to promote client Shi'a theocratic groups to power in states throughout the region and export the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries. This expansionist strategy is not based on seizure of territory but on sectarian affiliation that provides political entrée to the highest levels of political and economic decision making in other countries in the region. The American-led invasion of Iraq handed Iran a golden opportunity to pursue this strategy by ridding the region of Saddam Hussein and unleashing powerful sectarian forces in the country. Iran is now perceived to be 'winning' the regional chess game and successful

consolidation of an already strong presence in Iraq will provide Tehran with a stepping stone to other countries.<sup>1</sup>

The image of politically dispossessed Sunni Muslims governed by Iranian satellite theocratic regimes challenges the core of the Saudi identity of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, natural and benign leader of the faith with its overwhelming global majority of Sunni worshippers, and a leader of the Arab world in which Iran has no right to interfere. More specifically Riyadh is wary of Shi'a political agitation in its Eastern Province fuelled by Iran that could, some argue, destabilise the Saudi state. It is in this context that Iranian regional ambitions constitute an existential threat to the Kingdom.

These powerful identities operate at many levels but the narrative suggests that the Arab-Persian identity clash supersedes a sectarian Sunni-Shi'a divide. In this context Iraq is claimed as part of the Arab world with national reconciliation deemed an Arab, not a Persian, affair. Iranian activities are castigated as destabilising 'external interference' that should be halted immediately whilst the presence of 160,000 coalition troops in Iraq is accepted.

The narrative argues that lasting Iranian influence in Iraq will be secured through a weak central government, army and police dominated by Shi'a parties and a federal structure promoted as the solution to long-term stability that will allow Tehran to dominate a federal Shi'a political entity in the south of Iraq, including decisions affecting its oil resources. This strategy is being pursued through widespread support of all Shi'a, as well as some Sunni, political parties and militias and playing a waiting game until coalition forces leave Iraq allowing Tehran to inherit the south and exert significant influence at the national level. Iran will ultimately emerge as the controlling centre of a Shi'a crescent dividing the region and carving up the Arab world. This grand strategy is being pursued with relentless vigour with the added dimension of a provocative nuclear programme.

A less alarmist view that highlights Iran's weakness cautions against such a stark image of a monolithic Iranian state bent on regional domination at all costs. It recognises Iran's cultural heritage, the historic role of Persian civilisation and that Iran has legitimate interests in Iraq and the region. It also recognises that the Iranian state is not a regional superpower, despite Tehran's repeated proclamations to the contrary. Iran is burdened by considerable domestic political and economic problems and lacks the national capabilities to realise its regional ambitions; it has failed to provide the basic needs for its expanding population (Saudi GDP is twice that of Iran); it does not enjoy stable relations with any of its neighbours; and its revolution was essentially exhausted by the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach is an aberration that has the potential to do great harm to itself as well as others and the overwhelming imperative of preserving the revolution by minimising risks to the state will eventually see a return to a more cautious strategy in Tehran, in particular to avoid another devastating regional war.

This view recognises the diversity of political opinion and influence in Iran and focuses its concerns on the activities of non- and semi-state actors such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its emergence as a major economic power in the country, and the powerful role of the Shi'a clergy. Particular concern was voiced about the Najaf hawza falling under de facto Iranian control since Saudi Shi'a follow the Najaf clergy rather than Iran's seminary centre at Qom. This view also acknowledges the detrimental impact of American threats of 'regime change' in Iran by fuelling Iranian insecurity and reactionary policies by the Ahmadinejad administration. In this sense Iran is less of 'roaring lion' than a 'paper tiger', but still one capable of very threatening actions. To paraphrase one participant, "the dreaded hegemony of Iran is more in the eye of the beholder than the acts of the perpetrator".

The dominant Saudi narrative in the discussions, however, stipulated that Iran cannot be deterred from pursuing regional hegemony, so it must be stopped and it must be stopped soon because the status quo works in Iran's favour. The solution is to keep tightening the economic screw on Tehran

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<sup>1</sup> The parallels to the American construction of the Soviet threat, the 'relentless expansion' of global communism, and the moral imperative of political, economic and military containment in the first decades of the Cold War are striking. History now allows us to recognise the dangerous misperceptions that clouded understandings of the other's actions and intentions during that period.

through universal implementation of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council and by the American, European and regional banking sectors. The hope is that the regime in Tehran will be forced to acquiesce, undergo a fundamental reconceptualisation of its relationship with the United States and countries in the region, cease its interference in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan and take a strategic decision to abandon its WMD programmes, particularly its uranium enrichment programme, in the manner of Libya in 2003. There is no strong Saudi desire to see military-led 'regime change' in Tehran, but to somehow convince the leadership in Tehran to stop fighting its battles in other countries by applying maximum political and economic pressure and exploiting political divisions in Iran.

One of the problems is that a number of Gulf States, as well as China and Russia, continue to do business with Iran. An important question asked of Saudi Arabia is whether it can use its influence to restrict these commercial relationships and further isolate Iran. In addition a number of participants argued that the Saudi government more forcefully express its concerns about Iran, highlight the degree of Iranian interference in Iraq and should ensure its American and European allies share a common threat perception.

### **Saudi caution and uncertainty**

A strong sense Saudi frustration with Washington in the face of Iranian 'hegemonic ambitions' also emerged from the discussions. The Saudi narrative suggested that the Kingdom has little influence in Iraq and little ability to stop Iran pursuing its grand strategy in the region and must therefore proceed with caution. It was argued instead that Europe needs to apply more pressure (particularly economic pressure) on Iran: pressure needs to be applied to the smaller Gulf states to sever, or at it least significantly curtail, commercial exchanges with Iran; the United States, France and Britain need to convince Russia and China to cease cooperating with Tehran; and the United States needs to fully appreciate Saudi concerns about the extent and malignancy of Iran's intervention in Iraq and take appropriate actions in defence of Saudi interests. There was also a reluctance to consider any direct Saudi intervention. When it was suggested that the Kingdom exert greater influence in Iraq the reply came back that "Iraq is a swamp – whoever goes in doesn't get out". It is up to America to restore stability based on an equitable sharing of power because it is America created the current mess in the first place.

This reflected an important current of resentment built on Saudi frustration that American actions in Iraq have fuelled sectarian divisions and supported SCIRI and the Da'wa party and by extension their Shi'a militia wings that have co-opted the United States by engaging fully in the evolving political process. This, in turn, has facilitated greater Iranian influence and federalist tendencies in Iraq at the expense of Saudi interests. In fact one participant argued that America has accepted Iran as a security partner in Iraq and is prepared to discuss issues affecting Iraq bilaterally with Tehran to the exclusion of Riyadh. This reflected a wider view that America has essentially accepted the dominance of Iranian political forces in Iraq in the name of 'stability', is protecting groups close to Iran such as SCIRI and has pursued a largely anti-Sunni agenda through extensive de-Baathification and destruction of the institutions of government. Perhaps, some argued, America's intention was to leave Iraq permanently weakened.

American demands on Riyadh have fuelled this resentment. Despite the fact the America has inadvertently worked against Saudi interests and has failed to comprehend the nature of the threat a Shi'a dominated Iraq poses to the Kingdom, Washington is now asking the Kingdom to open an embassy in Baghdad, do more to seal its long desert border with Iraq, cancel Iraq's debts and make a greater contribution to reconstruction. One Saudi participant rejected the opening of an embassy in Baghdad as "a fantasy of American policymakers" that would serve little purpose, noting that American requests that the Kingdom send an Ambassador to Baghdad are undermined by the severe limits on diplomatic activity imposed by the security situation. The problem is highlighted by the manner in which senior American officials visit Baghdad in relative secrecy, stay within the Green Zone and move around in armed and armoured convoys. It was strongly suggested that unless America is prepared to better understand Saudi concerns and listen to Saudi advice when it is given then assistance from Riyadh may not be forthcoming.

The narrative also suggested that Saudi Arabia can only exert influence in Iraq and pressure on Iran via Washington. The Kingdom's sense of uncertainty and the need for caution have been amplified as the line of communication has faltered and America turns inward for the 2008 presidential election. It was stated several times that Saudi Arabia is looking in vain to Washington for direction. Others familiar with the Kingdom insisted that it has always had much greater influence than it has been willing to show or exercise, for example through Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq, through the Arab League and through the example of the 2007 Mecca Agreement. The Kingdom has the potential to play a major role in Iraq but its tradition of discretion has so far prevented it from doing so. This led several participants to point to a dependency culture in Riyadh in which the Kingdom relied too heavily on leadership from Washington.

### **American power and intentions**

Long-term American intentions in Iraq are uncertain as the final months of the George W. Bush administration approach. The diversity of political opinion in America about the war in Iraq and Washington's preoccupation with domestic politics around the presidential election present a number of difficulties. First, the United States is clearly a central driver of change in Iraq but regional governments cannot look beyond January 2009 because American policy could change dramatically through a sudden single change or a series of incremental changes throughout 2009. A lasting regional consensus involving the United States is therefore difficult to contemplate at this stage. Second, the Kingdom is likely to be disappointed if it continues to seek leadership and direction on Iraq from Washington, at least for the next 12 months, increasing pressure on Riyadh to take the initiative. In fact several participants cautioned that the Kingdom cannot expect any real direction from Washington until mid-2009 that could potentially put Saudi minds at ease about America's long-term commitment to Iraq. Obama and perhaps McCain may also use the threat of withdrawal to galvanise Iraq's neighbours into forging some form of regional consensus to prepare the ground for a change of American policy.

The implications of General David Petraeus' assessment that only 20 per cent of a successful counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq is based on America's military presence with the other 80 per cent dependent on political and economic reform were discussed. A number of participants suggested that this has de-emphasised the future role of American forces making the prospect of withdrawal more realistic. It was noted that there is a growing view in America that the continued presence of American troops cannot achieve the necessary political goals in Iraq at reasonable cost. It also prevents America addressing other pressing issues in the region including the Israel-Palestine conflict, Lebanon and Iran. The extent to which Washington can focus significant and sustained political attention on these other issues is limited as long as there are 160,000 American troops in Iraq.

The effect of the war on the U.S. Army has also produced its own imperatives irrespective of Washington's political calendar. The Army is broken according to some and cannot continue on its current trajectory for much longer. It is suffering considerable war fatigue and lacks important human and material resources that will take many years to correct. 140,000 troops will likely remain in Iraq for the remainder of 2008 to try and create political space for national reconciliation, but they will not stay forever.

Others argued that the continued presence of American forces is essential in order to maintain sufficient political space for the political '80 per cent'. Most participants accepted that a precipitate American withdrawal could cause the security situation to worsen markedly due to the absence of a strong national army and police force to maintain a semblance of order. There is also a powerful constituency in America for whom any formal acceptance of 'defeat' is unacceptable. Some Saudi participants were reluctant to accept that American forces might leave in the near future, considering this to be a "remote possibility" based on the logic that America is a superpower, it can deliver and it will deliver. It is not fundamentally weakened by its experience in Iraq, but it has placed itself in a weak position. America has created the problems in Iraq and it must stay the course until a lasting solution emerges. General Saudi acceptance that American withdrawal is inconceivable before Iraq has been stabilised may be creating a climate within the Saudi government in which other options in response to such an eventuality are not fully explored.

## 2. NATIONAL IDENTITY AND FEDERALISM IN IRAQ

At the heart of the discussions lay the issues of national identity in Iraq and the impact of federalism. Sectarian-fuelled federalism was presented as the antithesis of Iraqi nationalism and a crucial identity distinction was drawn between Iraqi Shiites and Shiite Iraqis as part of the broader Arab/Persian identity clash. An important distinction is therefore drawn between Iraqi Shiites who emphasise a national political identity above religious denomination, and Shiite Iraqis who stress their religious identity and affiliation above that of the nation-state. Several Saudi participants argued that there was a major misunderstanding of the sectarian division in Iraq and stressed that Arabs do not object to the influence, or even dominance, of Shi'a political groups in the political process, but to the dominance of Shi'a *clergy* in Iraq, especially those that are beholden to Iran and might seek to use Iraq's state apparatus to advance the Iranian revolution. Participants commented that Riyadh is prepared to support Arab but not Persian Shi'a groups.

This underpinned many of the conversations on Iranian regional ambitions, American intervention in Iraq and Saudi fears based on three concerns: First, that an Iraqi Arab national identity was being pushed aside by the sectarian nature of the Maliki government and Iranian intervention and support for Shi'a militias to the detriment of Saudi interests. Second, federalism could lead to decentralisation, regional self-determination within Iraq and finally total independence following the controversial Kosovo model supported by much of the West that could set a dangerous precedent in the region. Third, the drive towards federalism could result in a prolonged civil war as happened in Lebanon after 1975.

### Moqtada al-Sadr and Nouri al-Maliki

These issues were particularly pronounced in competing perceptions of Moqtada al-Sadr and Nouri al-Maliki that highlighted the need to reach a common understanding between Riyadh, Washington and London. The Sadr family in Iraq is the only major Shi'a family considered by Saudi Arabia to be nationalistic and not inherently a tool of Iran. Saudi participants argued that Sadr could be a positive force as an Arab Shi'a and an Iraqi nationalist highlighting the importance attached to an Iraqi national identity first and denominational identity second.

Others perceived Sadr as a significant obstacle to national reconciliation and pointed to a British and American government consensus that Sadr was creating difficulties by keeping himself outside the political process in contrast to the Sunni "Awakening" tribes, SCIRI and al-Hakim, Da'wa, the Kurds and Fadilah. Sadr and the Jaish al-Madhi (JAM) militia were compared to Hezbollah in Lebanon: a non-state actor seemingly determined to undermine the state and maintain military power to intervene against state institutions. Concern was also expressed that Iran has extended its influence over Sadr indicated by his frequent visits to the country.

It was widely recognised that Sadr needs to be brought back into the Iraqi political state-building process as an Iraqi nationalist, but he cannot be enlisted by America or Britain because his legitimacy and popularity stem from his opposition to the occupation. Atrocious ethnic cleansing activities by Sadr's militias have also made it very difficult for Sunnis to accept Sadr as an Iraqi nationalist. It is also clear that not all of the militia groups associated with Sadr are under his control. Saudi Arabia hosted Al Sadr in 2006, but his opposition to the presence of foreign forces made him a target of American military action and a recipient of Iranian support. Riyadh could now play an important role by engaging with both the Sadrists and Sunni "Awakening" movement and drawing them further into the political process.

Considerable suspicion and concern was expressed about the sectarianism of Nouri al-Maliki's government. Saudi participants generally argued that Maliki had offered a promising programme when he came to power but has done little to implement it. He is considered a sectarian leader incapable of and unwilling to foster national unity, and a major obstacle to national reconciliation. The Kingdom cannot support national reconciliation with a sectarian government whose actions could lead to secession of the Shi'a dominated south, a confederation of separate political entities and civil war. America, on the other hand, does not consider Maliki a sectarian force but a politician who has escaped his sectarian identity as demonstrated by his pursuit of Sadr in Basra in March 2008.

## Federalism

From the Saudi perspective blueprints for a federal political structure and the gathering momentum behind a federal solution to Iraq's violence and instability must be resisted as it will inevitably lead to the secession of a Kurdish federal entity in the north and a Shi'a political entity in the south, de facto dissolution of the Iraqi state and with it the disappearance of a national Iraqi Arab identity and the prospect of an enduring civil war. The Saudi narrative condemns any form of federalism as a 'win' for Iran, although it was noted that many forms of federalism are practised in the world in which state sovereignty remains inviolable.

The Kingdom is reluctant to discuss the possibility of federalism and seeks reassurance from Britain and America that there will be a strong central government and that the means of production, policing and military protection will remain under central control. There was considerable uncertainty as to whether America and Britain are committed to the territorial integrity of Iraq or will actively pursue federalism in the name of stability and to facilitate early troop withdrawal. Further concerns were raised about the effect on the drive towards federalism of failure to rewrite the constitution and the degree to which the oil law and provincial elections due to be held in October 2008 will support economic and political autonomy for Iraq's regions.

The solution is to reinvigorate an Iraqi national identity and a number of proposals are discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, a number of participants cautioned that nationalism may not be the best antidote to sectarianism because whichever nationalist group might assume central control of the Iraqi state it will likely achieve legitimacy through opposition to foreign occupation. A nationalist government may therefore not suit America, Saudi or even Iranian interests. An Iraqi national identity may best be fostered through patriotism, rather than nationalism, via creation of a central state infrastructure with effective institutions that allow political space for other important identities.

## 3. FUTURE PATHS AND PROCESSES

A number of ideas, themes and suggestions for future action emerged from the discussions that focus on processes for national reconciliation in Iraq, reconstituting a national Iraqi identity and achieving a regional consensus.

### National reconciliation in Iraq

It was recognised that agreement *may* be possible on most crucial issues and that this *could* lead to national reconciliation. This will, however, require cooperation and interaction and some form of political compact at three levels: 1) within Iraq between competing political-militia groups; 2) between countries in the region and America to avoid a worst-case scenario of total state collapse in Iraq; and 3) the international level involving the EU and UN Security Council members. There was a strong sense that national reconciliation cannot lead to regional consensus or vice versa, both must move forward together and mutually reinforce each other with the highest levels of commitment from the state and non-state actors involved.

At the national level there was general agreement that a way must be found to avoid a prolonged civil war. This will require movement on three broad areas.

First, a political reform package to change the constitution, foster a more equitable sharing of political power and allow ex-Baathists back into the political process. Political processes that freeze one group in power tend to backfire if there are no means of expanding participation in government. It was noted that the Loya Jirga process in Afghanistan sequenced expanding political participation over time in which participatory rules were not final and binding. A specific recommendation for overcoming sectarian division was to reconstitute and empower a representative constituent assembly consisting of representatives from Iraq's multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic tribes, city and village councils, and labour unions. The assembly would work towards national reconciliation, amending the constitution and ensuring equitable distribution of Iraq's natural resource wealth and state finances and inclusion of all Iraqis in the political process to establish a strong central government. There were competing arguments on the extent to which Iraq's current ruling elite will only relent to outside political pressure

and the extent to which a fundamental renegotiation of the constitution is needed to accommodate those currently excluded from the political process.

Second, much greater control of Iraq's many militias. There were competing arguments as to the extent to which coalition forces are required to limit militia activity and create space for political processes and the extent to which the presence of occupation forces incites insurgent activity and sectarian violence and closes down as much political space as it opens.

Third, credible state institutions need to be rebuilt to ensure provision of government services that are national rather than sectarian in composition. This must include measures to ensure equitable distribution of Iraq's oil wealth and to strengthen the rule of law and an independent, effective judiciary. Powerful arguments were heard that there is a profound need to massively improve the national government's ability to spend its budget, mobilise its resources and invest in reconstruction. It was noted that the government has not been able to spend more than 14 per cent of its capital budget. The institutional capacity for managing and administering public finances is woeful, accountability is extremely low to non-existent, particularly amongst American contractors, and corruption is rife with abuses involving up to \$1 billion and a failure to account for \$24 billion in oil revenues. The current fragmentary approach involving over 30 agencies lacks coordination and accountability and leads to duplication. Privileging external contractors over local people marginalises Iraqis from the development and reconstruction processes based on Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) head L. Paul Bremer's fundamental mistake of trying to rebuild Iraq from scratch rather than utilising existing processes and institutions. Iraqi citizens need to be engaged and their urgent needs must be addressed.

A specific recommendation was to learn from the success of the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan to channel resources directly to communities. This led to between \$20,000 and \$60,000 being distributed to 32,000 villages with decision-making devolved to the local community level. A similar approach could be applied to Iraq to ensure accountable channelling of resources to Iraq's challenges of reconstruction and establishing an efficient and fair set of social policies. Application of the National Program approach for Iraq would include building a public finance system that ensured full accountability in management of resources, and design of effective expenditure programmes, including urban housing programmes that mobilised a domestic construction industry that in turn would secure large-scale job creation.

### **Reinvigorating Iraqi national identity (and countering Iran)**

A number of ideas and proposals were discussed for reinvigorating a sense of Iraqi national identity as a counter to sectarianism, federalism and Iranian influence. First, forthright and repeated statements from the highest authorities in the Kingdom that Iranian regional hegemony will not be accepted. This could be complemented by a major non-official public awareness campaign to highlight the extent of Iranian interference in Iraq. A number of participants urged Saudi Arabia, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League and the UN to take action so that Iran does not think it is succeeding because it is hearing no opposition to its activities in Iraq.

Second, a guarantee of Iraq's territorial integrity by a United Nations Security Council Resolution under chapter seven of the UN Charter. Such a resolution could change the mission of Coalition forces in Iraq from one of occupation and counter-insurgency to protecting Iraq's territorial integrity with the support of all UN member states. The extent to which this distinction would be recognised and accepted by competing factions within Iraq was contested.

Third, a process to bring Iraq's Arabs together in a political coalition with American support to counter Iran-dominated Shi'a groups, perhaps involving mobilisation of the Iraqi Diaspora in Jordan. The Kingdom and EU should be encouraged to actively support *Iraqi* national political forces rather than *sectarian* political forces in forthcoming elections and the dilution of the role of religious guidance in the political process and to act as if Iraq is and will remain a single political entity to mutually reinforce other governments' behaviour in support of territorial integrity.

Fourth, the development of a strong national police force and military, perhaps led by a Kurd, to embody Iraqi nationalism/patriotism and protect Iraq's territorial integrity. It was noted that building such institutions is a ten-year project. At the extreme some participants advocated a 'civilised' military coup in support of Iraqi nationalism based on the argument that a military solution has worked in Pakistan, Turkey and Algeria.

### **Regional dialogue**

A lasting political compact in Iraq will require engagement and political investment of regional governments to prevent them playing a spoiling role. Many participants' accepted that this will require a regional consensus reached and sustained through dialogue and negotiated compromise. This logic suggests that a process of regional dialogue must be initiated, particularly given the absence of any other Arab or American regional initiative after major regional concerns were expressed over the Bush administration's 2004 Greater Middle East Initiative.

Regional consensus need not involve all of Iraq's neighbours and interested parties or all of the issues affecting key governments in the region. Whilst it was recognised that many issues in the wider Middle East affect each other, including the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Israel-Lebanon-Hezbollah-Syria conflict, the confrontation over Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and the plethora of humanitarian issues spilling out of these conflicts, a comprehensive framework to address all of these issues would in all likelihood be self-defeating in the short term. These regional issues may be interconnected, but not in concentric circles with Israel-Palestine at the centre. Instead these issues overlap with multiple intersections in which the centre of gravity of the interconnected conflicts now includes not only Palestine but also Iraq.

A number of participants accepted that a dialogue process should focus on Iraq and initially involve only Iran, America and Saudi Arabia. It is these three states that will shape the future of Iraq since all three can effectively veto any reconciliation initiatives that are judged to threaten their interests. A deeper, broader dialogue between the Kingdom and Iran would focus on whether there is a solution to national reconciliation in Iraq in which neither the United States, Saudi Arabia or Iran judge their core interests and identities to be threatened beyond a tolerable and negotiable limit.

Participants recognised that the price of cooperation in dealing with Iraq will vary according to competing perspectives, interests and identities at stake and the political veto power of the governments involved. In particular the dialogue between Iran and the P5 plus Germany over Tehran's suspected nuclear weapons programme could have an unpredictable bearing on any long-term Iraq-centred discussions. Indeed it may not be possible for America to stabilise Iraq whilst simultaneously attempting to destabilise and further isolate Iran. A difficult trade-off in foreign policy goals may be required but one that recognises state's legitimate interests.

The case for a three-way dialogue is built on a vested interest of all three parties in avoiding a 'lose-lose' outcome of total state collapse in Iraq. Playing a waiting game may not, after all, yield a positive result for Iran since the break-up of the Iraqi state could encourage secessionist activities amongst its own Arab, Baluchi, Azeri, and Kurdish communities. The possibility of this scenario becoming reality and the existence of a common interest in avoiding it need to be recognised. The danger is that the absence of communication will lead to actions based on worst-case assumptions of others' intentions and a self-fulfilling worst-case scenario in which all three parties "labour towards the ends they want to avoid", to paraphrase one participant.

It is also clear that there are important differences in perception around some of the key political dynamics in Iraq and a process of sustained dialogue would serve as a useful medium for a frank, informal or formal exchange of views and appreciation of and perhaps tacit agreement on individual governments' 'red lines'. In fact some participants argued that stability rests on mutual recognition and acceptance of red lines by actual or potential adversaries whether through informal networks or formal inter-governmental processes and that dialogue to establish red lines should not be confused with appeasement.

For example, Iranian intervention in Iraq is not disputed but the extent and purpose of its intervention are subject to debate. Iran's negotiable and non-negotiable interests and the extent to which its intervention in Iraq is motivated by a desire for a specific outcome, a specific vision of the region and the character of its relationship with America can only be understood through dialogue. A sustained dialogue process could provide a means of limiting Iranian ambitions whilst addressing its anxieties and fears, particularly the fear of US-led regime change that many participants argued should be explicitly ruled out. Persuading Iran to be part of a regional solution and not part of the problem, convincing Tehran that a regional hegemonic strategy will fail and managing and mitigating Iranian paranoia of regime change will probably be an essential component of a lasting regional consensus on Iraq.

### **A Gulf Helsinki process**

The case for regional dialogue almost led to comparisons between the OSCE and a hypothetical Middle East equivalent. There are obvious problems with any attempt to transpose a cooperative security institution from one socio-historical context to another. Nevertheless, some of the principles and ideas that informed the evolution of the OSCE may be salient to the current situation in the region rather than its particular formal structure. Participants made a number of suggestions, including:

- Identifying three or four common areas of interest for regional cooperation at different levels, such as the Gulf region, or a broader level involving countries such as Turkey and Pakistan.
- A process involving all parties, both strong and weak and perhaps including non-state actors.
- A declaratory focus on reducing anxieties and worst-case threat perceptions and anticipating future problems through a series of timetabled military, socio-economic and political confidence-building measures (CBMs).
- Expansion of the current Neighbourhood Process involving discussions between Iraq's neighbours and other countries into a regional forum based on the principles of cooperative security. This could begin with an EU-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leadership conference involving the heads of government from Gulf and European countries.
- A two track process based on negotiations with all actors on all relevant issues affecting Iraq as well as a negotiable Helsinki-type process that would give Iran the responsibility of either engaging in the process or excluding itself.

Some participants argued that more work needed to be done to explore what a Helsinki process might look like in the region whilst others dismissed the applicability of such a process to the Gulf region and wider Middle East. One specific recommendation was that the Saudi government establish a well-resourced Iraq task force and an Iran task force within the government (perhaps the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) with the King's support to explore in detail various strategies with regard to the two countries and outreach opportunities.

### **Start with Syria**

A number of participants argued that a regional consensus on Iraq and further containment of Iran must begin with Syria and a determined effort to engage Damascus and draw it away from Iran. Current conditions provide a genuine opportunity for success, according to several participants, based on the argument that the government in Damascus is both very confident and at the same very afraid of the growing sectarian-nationalist tensions in the region. A process of engagement could begin by supporting negotiations between Israel and Syria leading to a lasting solution on the future of the Golan Heights and other issues plaguing the relations between the two. One participant in particular asserted that lasting stability in the region required "a more balanced order", and the best place to begin was with Syria.

Others insisted that change in Syria will first require change in Washington since Syria currently has no incentive to alter its position either in Lebanon, Iraq or its relationship with Iran. The price for persuading Syria to de-link itself from Iran may be deemed too high. Furthermore, breaking the Syria-Iran alliance may be positive, but perhaps not transformative. Syria, together with Turkey, could also be usefully brought into a dialogue process initially involving the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

## **Confrontation?**

It was repeatedly stated that the Kingdom's basic intent is peaceful and military force is not considered a useful or desirable option. Nevertheless, a number of Saudi participants argued that talks between the Kingdom, America and Iran will not work because Tehran is in a "winning position" and has no incentive to engage in meaningful dialogue to foster a regional consensus on Iraq. From this perspective it is difficult to contemplate dialogue and negotiations to establish a regional consensus for reducing instability in Iraq when instability supports Iran's long-term strategy of dominating Iraqi politics.

Concern was also expressed that a Helsinki-type process could legitimise Iranian intervention in the Arab world and encourage further consolidation of Iran's position in Iraq. Saudi efforts should focus instead on developing a common Arab position on Iraq and engaging America, the EU and Israel in a more concerted effort to further isolate Iran. This may require a more assertive Saudi role even if it increases the risk of conflict with Tehran and total state collapse in Iraq. In fact military solutions to Iranian intervention in Iraq were not exclusively dismissed and a number of Saudi participants forcefully insisted that anarchy in Iraq and a proxy war with Iran would be preferable to an Iraq ruled by sectarian forces in league with Tehran, even as the costs and risks of the unintended effects of another regional war were acknowledged. Others countered that a military response would not undermine Iran's position in Iraq – an objective that can only be achieved through political accommodation.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION**

Ten key suggestions for future action that Riyadh might usefully consider were articulated during the discussions. These cover a number of issues and do not reflect unanimous agreement of the participants.

- 1) Take the first step to initiate a three-way dialogue between Riyadh, Washington and Tehran on stabilising Iraq.
- 2) Bring pressure to bear on Gulf States, China and Russia, to restrict commercial relationships with Iran.
- 3) Forceful and repeated expression of Saudi concerns about Iran to highlight and challenge Iran's regional ambitions.
- 4) Engage with both the Sadrists and Sunni "Awakening" movement to bring them into the political process.
- 5) Convene an EU-GCC heads of government meeting on national reconciliation in Iraq.
- 6) Advocate convening a representative constituent assembly with representatives from Iraq's multi-denominational tribes, town councils and labour unions.
- 7) Advocate replicating Afghanistan's national solidarity programmes to fund and empower reconstruction at the local community level.
- 8) Establish a well-resourced Iraq task force and an Iran task force to explore strategies and outreach opportunities.
- 9) Sponsor a detailed examination of what a Helsinki-type process might look like in the region.
- 10) Sponsor a UN resolution on guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Iraq under chapter seven of the UN Charter.

***Dr. Nick Ritchie, Oxford Research Group, June 2008***

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **Conveners**

**H.R.H Prince Turki Al Faisal**, Head of King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

**Dr. Mansour Al Mansour**, Head of Strategic Studies Department, Diplomatic Institute Riyadh

**Gabrielle Rifkind**, Human Security Consultant, Oxford Research Group

### **Rapporteur**

**Dr. Nicholas Ritchie**, Oxford Research Group

### **Participants**

**Amb. William Patey**, Ambassador of the UK to Saudi Arabia

**Ray Close**, former top CIA analyst in the Near East Division and CIA station chief in Saudi Arabia

**Professor Wolfgang Danspeckgruber**, Director of Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination

**Joschka Fischer**, Former German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor in Schröder government

**Dr. Ashraf Ghani**, Chairman of the Institute for State Effectiveness

**Clare Lockhart**, Director of the Institute for State Effectiveness

**Robert Malley**, International Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa program director

**Gianni De Michelis**, President of IPALMO and former Italian Foreign Minister

**Robert Serry**, UN Middle East Special Envoy

**Gianni Picco**, Former UN negotiator, negotiated the cease-fire agreement between Iran and Iraq in 1988

**Joseph Wilson**, President of J.C. Wilson International Ventures

**Dr. Saleh Al Mne'a**, Dean of Political Science and Law College, King Saud University

**Dr. Mashari Al Noaim**, Vice Dean, Faculty of Political Science and Law College, King Saud University

**Dr. Saleh Al Khathlan**, Chairman of the Department of Political Science, King Saud University

**Dr. Abdullah Lohaidan**

**Mr. Khaled Altreiri**, Center for Media and International Communication

**Dr. Alshumrani**, Center for Media and International Communication

**Dr. Awadh Al Badi**, Head of Research Department at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

**Dr. Saad Al Ammar**, Head of the Diplomatic Institute Riyadh

**Dr. Asaad Al Samlan**, Head, Center of European Studies

**H.E. Mr. Abdulmohsen Al Akkas**, Minister of Social Affairs, Saudi Arabia

**Dr. Saleh Alnamla**, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information

**Dr. Abdulaziz Bin Saqr**, Chairman of the Gulf Research Center

**Mr. Nawaf Obaid**, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

**Dr. Mazin Motabbagani**, Head of Western Studies, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

**Mr. Abdullah Al Kuwaleet**, Head of Editing Department, Al Faisal Magazine

**Oxford Research Group**

Development House  
56-64 Leonard Street  
London EC2A 4LT  
United Kingdom

**T** +44 (0)20 7549 0298

**F** +44 (0)20 7691 1668

**E** [org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](mailto:org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk)

**[www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk)**