



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

The elections in Iraq have occurred, and the elected National Assembly and new interim government have begun grappling with Iraq's substantial postelection challenge—governing a nation. In August 2004, the United States Institute of Peace launched a novel project in which it sought to develop multiple scenarios for the Iraq elections. This paper describes that project and illustrates how scenario planning can help policymakers grapple with great uncertainty and complex political environments. It was prepared by Alan Schwartz of PolicyFutures, LLC, who facilitated the scenarios exercise.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

Alan Schwartz

Iraq Election Scenarios Anticipating Alternative Futures

Summary

- The United States Institute of Peace sponsored a series of scenario-planning workshops with Iraq experts that was designed to anticipate Iraq election outcomes. Scenario planning includes an assessment of uncertain forces and factors, and of how they might shape the future. This process is designed to anticipate alternative futures, evaluate policy options that could affect those outcomes, and in so doing challenge mindsets and test assumptions.
- In the August 2004 workshop the participants identified the level and distribution of violence and the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the Iraq election rules and process as the driving forces that would shape the election's outcome. These two "drivers" were arrayed as a matrix that produced four quadrants—each representing an alternative future—two of which underscored the potential that the legitimacy of the election could itself be jeopardized.
- The November 2004 workshop focused on possible election outcomes, looking primarily at the actions of various groups and leaders and at the election logistics. The workshop identified a series of potentially "undesirable" election outcomes that could most easily occur should there be either high levels of violence or a perception that the election process was unfair. Of greatest concern were disproportionately low Sunni turnout and a failure of election-day logistics. Whether Iraq would be adequately prepared for the elections was explicitly considered.
- At the final session, in January 2005, just before the election, the participants examined very specific possible election outcomes, postelection scenarios, and the challenges that the new Iraqi government would have to confront, notably basic powersharing and federal structures and the strength of the government itself. While particular election outcomes would make these challenges a bit harder or easier to address, the specific election outcomes would not alter underlying challenges facing Iraq.
- In the end it became clear that who won and who did not was not as important as whether the process was transparently fair and would be perceived as legitimate by the Iraqi people.

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Multiple-Scenario Analysis	2
The Scenario Workshops	4
Conclusion	8

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- This process may serve as a valuable template not merely for facilitating interactions among subject-matter experts but for channeling the collective expertise of those individuals into a product of additional value to policymakers. One cannot predict the future with consistent accuracy, but one can anticipate how the future might unfold. That is a useful addition to the policymaker toolkit.

Introduction

From August 2004 until January 2005 the United States Institute of Peace, with the assistance of PolicyFutures, LLC, conducted a series of three scenario workshops designed to explore various alternative outcomes of the Iraq elections. These workshops, each attended by approximately twenty Iraq experts, (1) explored the forces and factors that could have an impact on elections outcomes; (2) focused on the driving forces that would have the greatest impact, but for which there was substantial uncertainty; (3) sketched a number of potential election outcome scenarios; (4) explored strategies that the United States could pursue; and (5) evaluated the impact of various election scenarios on the postelection environment in Iraq.

The scenario workshops proved illuminating even to Iraq experts, as they provided a structured process to understand not only what could happen but also why, and to discern how those outcomes might be reinforced or even potentially altered. Moreover, the process gave the participants an opportunity to test, without attribution, various assumptions that they individually and collectively held. Finally, those who observed this process were provided not only a looking glass into futures that might unfold but also tangible evidence of potential causal links in the underlying chain of events.

Scenario planning is not new, but it is rarely invoked in a structured fashion to understand political environments and how those environments might develop. Subject-matter experts, such as country experts, are usually called on to render high-level evaluations and to provide subjective judgments about likely outcomes. Oftentimes these evaluations and judgments, based on years of experience and expert observations, are both accurate and useful. But subjective opinions are rarely transparent, and reliance on them usually means not having a clear picture of the data on which those opinions are actually based (and the data that were ignored or discounted). Moreover, one rarely has an opportunity to explicitly understand how the expert resolved uncertainty when there is a continuum of possible data points. Finally, even where an individual expert might make all of this clear, experts are rarely explicitly asked, in a structured process, to share the underlying bases for their judgments. Multiple-scenario analyses can provide greater transparency to evaluating political environments and thereby aid the necessarily important exchange between policymakers and the subject-matter experts with whom they confer.

Multiple-Scenario Analysis

Multiple-scenario analysis is an analytic strategy that has proven effective for thinking about situations characterized by complexity and uncertainty:

- Scenario analysis is based on an understanding of underlying forces and trends, and of the uncertainty related to the development of those forces and of the impacts they may have.
- Scenario analysis makes no assumptions regarding historical continuity or change. Instead, scenario analysis requires that possible outcomes be justified by plausible developments in underlying forces and trends.
- Because scenario analysis recognizes and embraces the uncertainty inherent in complex situations, multiple outcomes and the developments that produce them are always considered. Single-outcome forecasts are not allowed.

- The analytic goal of multiple scenario analysis is not to forecast what a system will look like in the future. The goal is to estimate the range of behaviors the system can exhibit within a given time period.

Moreover, as an analytic strategy, scenario analysis allows for the inclusion of a wide range of disciplines, conceptual frameworks, and analytic techniques. While individuals can undertake scenario analyses on their own, teams generally produce better results, especially if their members differ on the perspectives they bring to bear on the focal issue.

Unlike most academic and intelligence analyses—which focus mostly on information that is known with confidence—scenario analysis focuses equal attention on uncertainties. The term “uncertainties” refers to factors or forces the development or impacts of which are impossible to forecast accurately. Although it is impossible to forecast the future state of uncertainties, there is much value in exploring how uncertainties might behave. It is possible to speculate on how rapidly a factor might change or how much improvement or deterioration in a condition is possible within a given time period. This kind of speculation provides insights into the volatility of situations and the constraints on change that exist in complex systems; it opens our eyes to what is possible and what is impossible.

There are several discrete steps in the scenario development process:

1. Define the focal issue—asking the right question is the first step in producing a useful answer. The focal issue is the guide to the insights we are seeking about the future. Often it relates to a decision that is to be made or involves identifying contingencies for which advance planning is desirable. For this project the focal question concerned the potential election outcomes in Iraq. Implicit in this was the possibility that the election might be postponed or be deemed illegitimate by one or more parties.
2. Identify the forces and factors that could affect developments relating to the focal issue.
3. Separate out the forces and factors believed to have the greatest impact on the focal issue, then sort the important forces and factors into those that can be forecast with certainty and those about which there is much uncertainty over the analytic time period.
4. Identify the “driving” forces. These can be thought of as the “forces behind the forces” or aggregations of similar forces and factors.
5. Generate and select scenario themes. The development of scenario themes starts by combining the extremes of two drivers. To illustrate the relationship of the four scenarios to each other we used a diagram called a “matrix,” which consisted of two axes crossed at a right angle. Each axis represented a driver, and each quadrant a scenario.
6. Flesh out the scenarios by creating a plausible plot that takes into account the other key uncertainties as well as the drivers.
7. Consider the implications of each scenario.
8. Identify leading indicators for each scenario so that we can effectively monitor events to see the degree to which events correspond to possibilities identified in the set of scenarios.

Scenario analysis builds on critical thinking about uncertainties and certainties to create a set of plausible scenarios or stories about how a situation can develop from today forward. The set of scenarios will illuminate the variety of paths developments may take. Because that set displays a range of potential developments, it helps move analysts beyond the conventional wisdom or mindsets about a situation.

Scenario analysis does not produce new information, although experts participating in a scenario development group may learn things from their colleagues. Instead, scenario

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analysis will lead to new insights about what can and cannot happen, about which factors matter most, about how factors interact, about the relative value of new information, and about which indicators it is most important to monitor.

The Scenario Workshops

First Workshop

To stimulate thinking further, the participants were asked to generate a list of “headline events” that might be emblematic of a force or factor coming to bear.

The first workshop was held on August 12–13, 2004. Over several hours of lengthy and detailed discussion the first day, the working group generated a list of more than sixty forces and factors that were classified as certainties or uncertainties (almost all were uncertainties, even the impact of demographics). To stimulate thinking further, the participants were asked to generate a list of “headline events” that might be emblematic of a force or factor coming to bear. PolicyFutures “translated” these events into a list of forces and factors for which the participants could vote, aggregating similar forces and factors and giving participants an opportunity to comment whether groupings were appropriate and reflected common issues. By their votes, the participants identified those forces that they believed were both uncertain and within the range of uncertainty able to exert a powerful influence on the election and its outcomes:

- The level and distribution of violence
- The perceived fairness and legitimacy of the election rules and process
- The role played by Iraqi leaders, the United States, and foreign governments
- Whether and how the main election actors would boycott the election or form coalitions in developing slates of candidates

Of these four forces, the working group focused the greatest attention on the level and distribution of violence and the perceived fairness/legitimacy of the election process.

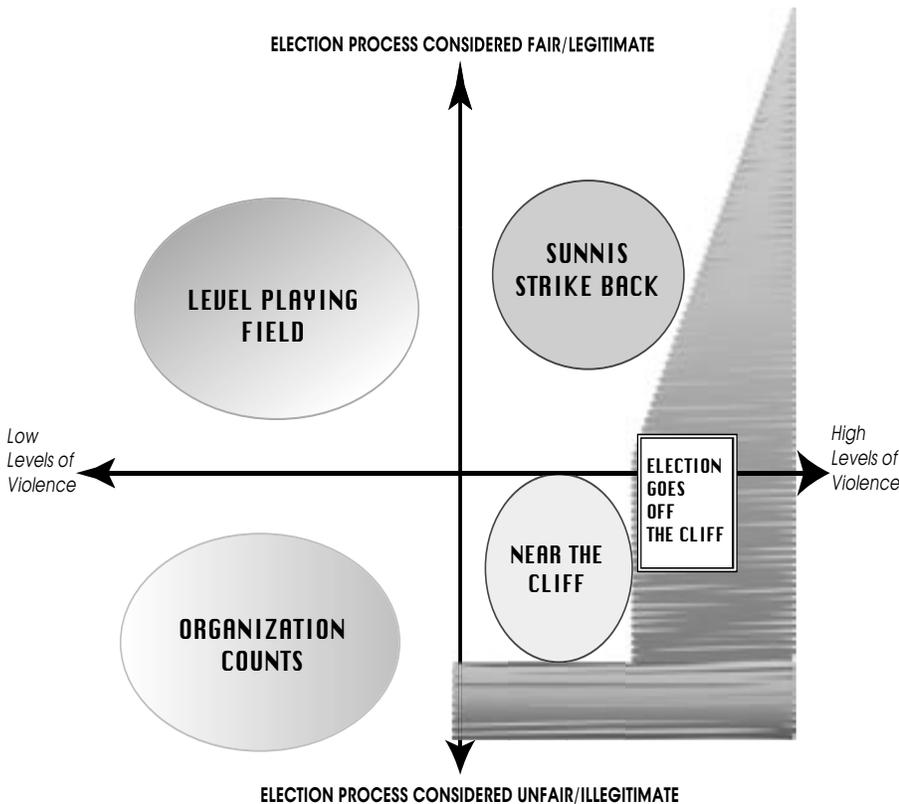
For the working group, violence included violence to intimidate or coerce voting decisions, violence designed to disrupt the election process, violence among competing factions, and anti-U.S. or antigovernment violence from insurgents. Also included were nonviolent forms of voter intimidation. However, it was important to consider the distribution (location) of the violence, that is, how widespread or localized it would be, as well as the level of violence. The perceived fairness, competency, and legitimacy of the election included rules and process for party registration, the timing of naming slates after registration, the enforcement of rules against militias, and rules for counting and distributing votes.

A scenario matrix was thereby constructed—a graphic display of two axes, each representing a continuum of a force/factor, that appeared to be orthogonal to each other, that is, independent variables rather than dependent variables. The graphic on page 5 contains notional titles for each of the four quadrant scenarios.

This scenario matrix recognized explicitly that at some level of violence (in either its intensity or its distribution), the election process itself would be endangered. While the precise description of the characteristics of this “tipping-point” level and distribution of violence remained to be explored, at some point violence would so degrade confidence in an open and secure election process that either the election would be postponed or its results would lack the confidence of the parties and the people of Iraq. The shaded area represents the portions of each quadrant along the continua where the election itself would be endangered.

Likewise, the matrix recognized that at some point the degree of confidence in the election process itself might be so low that the election and any election results would be rendered illegitimate in the eyes of the parties and the Iraqi people. Moreover, the combined effect of low election process legitimacy and high violence would create a tipping point with a lower threshold for either individual condition. In this sense, it

SCENARIO MATRIX
LEVEL OF VIOLENCE/ELECTION LEGITIMACY/FAIRNESS



was discussed that these two forces were not purely orthogonal. Greater violence could reduce the opportunity for voter education and election transparency. Likewise, less violence provides fewer incentives or excuses for acts of violence, while an unfair election process could provoke violence. Nonetheless, while the forces were not purely independent variables, their reinforcing nature did not substantially burden their distinctiveness for purposes of constructing scenario matrices.

In the upper right quadrant, increasing levels of violence, even with a fair election process, would put the Sunnis at a disadvantage as they would have difficulty turning out the vote. This could lead to either a Sunni boycott or efforts to dampen turnout in competing regions by exporting violence (e.g., to Kurdish strongholds).

In the upper left quadrant, a perceived fair and legitimate process combined with dampened violence would produce a level playing field where all parties could compete on their merits. Presumably this would invite robust participation by independent candidates and parties that organized around nontribal, nonreligious issues of policy.

In contrast, in the lower right quadrant, a perceived unfair election process combined with violence could endanger the election and any election results.

In the lower left quadrant, an election process that was not transparent and was not perceived to be fair would, in the absence of violence, advantage existing organizations, which could get out the vote, while independents and issue-oriented candidates would have a harder time connecting with the voters.

Less violence provides fewer incentives or excuses for acts of violence.

Second Workshop

Building on the base scenarios set out in the matrix, the second working group (held on November 9–10, 2004) focused on possible election outcomes, based primarily on the actions of various groups and leaders and election-day election processes. After review-

The participants recognized that there were some undesirable outcomes that could occur even in the absence of violence.

ing potential election outcomes and working backward to see what kinds of events might trigger such outcomes, the working group concluded that a variety of “undesirable” election outcomes could occur in three of the four quadrants displayed in the matrix, that is, wherever there were either high levels of violence or a perception that the election process was unfair. It is worth noting that the participants recognized that there were some undesirable outcomes that could occur even in the absence of violence or a perception of unfairness; rather, it was the existence of violence/unfairness that bolstered the likelihood or intensity of undesirable outcomes. Of greatest concern to the working group were two undesirable outcomes and the associated potential causal events/conditions: disproportionately low Sunni turnout (in the Sunni triangle region) and a failure of election-day logistics. One of the values of focusing on specific outcomes is that it concentrates attention on strategies and actions that can be pursued to ward off those outcomes or at least ameliorate their effect.

With respect to a Sunni boycott, the working group reviewed several proposed strategies to reduce the potential of either a formal Sunni boycott or a poor turnout:

- Finish the Fallujah operation as quickly as possible, and then promptly begin major reconstruction and job-production efforts. (The Fallujah operation was largely concluded in the week following the workshop, but similar operations were under way in other important cities, including Mosul.)
- Create a wedge between the insurgents and others in the Sunni community. This might be accomplished by assurances of some positions of power, either by the formation of a coalition or by ceding to local control administrative responsibilities in a “federal” system. Some participants expressed concern about whether it was wise to essentially bypass the national democratic elections by agreeing in advance to a distribution of seats in the National Assembly. In addition, the notion of decentralization of power for Sunnis would cause similar issues to surface in Kurdish areas and dilute the overall power of the national government. Some participants expressed concern over any effort that would add greater emphasis to ethnic and religious divisions (Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd) or that would undermine a national democratic election.
- Focus on security, with an Iraqi and not an American face, in polling places in key Sunni areas, that is, where there was the greatest potential that an increase in turnout might occur (e.g., neighborhoods in Baghdad vs. Fallujah).
- Press an aggressive public education campaign designed to foster participation in the elections and to encourage the public to take control of their own destiny and vest in themselves ownership of the election (as was successfully done in Afghanistan).

At bottom, the working group was skeptical that any of these strategies would be successful, implicitly recognizing the need in the postelection environment to find mechanisms to draw Sunnis into the new government to a greater extent than Sunni success at the ballot box would otherwise warrant. While this would be hard to pre-arrange, it might be more plausible once competing groups felt more secure in the aftermath of the election.

With respect to the election-day processes, the working group stressed its sense of urgency that everything possible be done to assure that they succeed. This would include maintaining ballot security, protecting the integrity of the voting process, and ensuring that eligible voters would be able to cast votes at polling places. So daunting were the logistical challenges that consideration had to be given to postponing the elections, or at least delaying the national-level elections while proceeding at the local level.

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Third Workshop

By the time of the third workshop, on January 14 and 18, 2005, matters had clarified—a bit. The elections were not going to be postponed, slates of candidates appeared to assure widespread candidate participation, and the election process seemed stable. However, the level of violence, particularly in the Sunni-majority areas, remained high. On January 14, the working group constructed four specific election outcomes, projecting percentages of National Assembly seats won by Kurdish, Sistani, Allawi, and other slates, and the national turnout as well as turnout in the Sunni-majority areas. The key variables across the alternative outcomes included:

- Whether the Sistani slate would win a plurality or an outright majority
- Whether the Allawi slate would win a sizeable portion of seats
- How high the Kurdish turnout would be, and whether the Kurds could become a necessary partner with a Sistani slate
- Whether national turnout would exceed 50 percent
- Whether Sunni turnout would be as high as 40 percent or as low as 15 percent

The workshop then turned to identifying the postelection issues and examining them in light of the alternative election outcomes. These issues included the religious nature of Iraq, the extent of postelection coalition formation, the inclusiveness of the new government, the extent of insurgent violence, security provided by the new government, the role of Iran and others in the region, attitudes toward the United States, U.S. commitment to Iraq, the drafting of the new constitution, the Sunni reaction, the Kurdistan Assembly and any move toward federalism/decentralization of power, and the potential breakup of Iraq by secession or other means. Interestingly, the participants generally agreed that none of the various election outcomes would uniquely or substantially affect the key issues they had identified. The lesson of this workshop session was that the particulars of the election outcomes mattered much less than whether the election itself was conducted successfully, thus giving the Iraqi people confidence that a legitimate process had taken place.

While it was agreed that many of the various outcomes would have some impact on these issues, the more fundamental understanding was that all of these issues would remain on the table and would have to be addressed under any election outcome, and those outcomes would not fundamentally alter the essential political dynamic that exists in Iraq today. For example, while a more polarized National Assembly would make it less likely that coalitions would form, some coalitions would likely still form. Likewise, though a polarized National Assembly with little Sunni participation would reflect an environment that might prompt greater violence and insurgent activity, violence and the insurgency would be real problems even in the “rosiest” scenario, where there was higher Sunni turnout and successful results for the secular, moderate slates. In other words, at bottom, deals would have to be struck among the parties and solutions attempted to resolve the economic, security, and other challenges Iraq faces. None of the election outcomes would fundamentally alter that calculus. And with respect to the United States, most election outcomes would likely result in a National Assembly that was not “pro-American.” However, Iraq would still need the help of the United States to address, among other things, its security challenges and reconstruction needs.

Accordingly, at the final session, on January 18, 2005, the working group participants focused on the key postelection challenges as a way to consider how the parties might cooperate and/or compete, and what outcomes might be obtained. This discussion drew on the issues/challenges identified in the January 14 session and focused on those considered most compelling by the participants : how the Iraqi constitution addresses basic powersharing and federal structures, and the strength of the new government. These two are quite related.

The election outcomes mattered much less than whether the election itself was conducted successfully.

The workshop developed three emblematic scenario stories that played out various dynamics in the postelection environment:

- The first scenario focused on the important negotiations that would occur primarily between Shiite and Kurdish leaders over Kurdish demands to be part of a ruling coalition. If the Kurdish leadership were unable to manage expectations or were otherwise unable to reach an accommodation with the Shiites, this could be quite destabilizing and have various ripple effects. Not only would Iraq be deprived of a stable ruling government; it might prompt a series of actions, including by the Kurds to assert control over Kirkuk and the oil revenues from Kurdistan.
- The second scenario grew from the possibility that the election process (and subsequent negotiations) would fail to produce a strong government as intersectarian competition sapped the vigor of the National Assembly and the new leadership. While the National Assembly would nominally go about its business, the insurgency would likely grow and, without an effective and strong national government, increasingly begin to exercise control at the regional, provincial, and even local level. This would take Iraq down a path of questionable long-term stability.
- The third scenario anticipated a more stable and secure Iraq, predicated on a strong and balanced turnout in the election, which itself was bolstered by an announcement by President Bush that the United States would remove its troops according to the wishes of the elected Iraqi government—a “sovereign” government. (President Bush made such a pledge just a few days after the January 18 workshop meeting.) Following the elections, a coalition government would hammer out a series of compromises on key issues, such as Kirkuk and related Kurdish matters, the allocation of oil revenues, the place of Sunnis and former Baathists in the new government, and long-term security plans, including a timetable for U.S. withdrawal and bolstering Iraqi security and police requirements.

The third scenario anticipated a more stable and secure Iraq, predicated on a strong and balanced turnout in the election.

This third workshop concluded an effort that began in August 2004 to understand the forces and factors that could have an impact on the Iraqi elections, which were scheduled to take place five months later, and to anticipate alternative election scenarios.

Conclusion

Early on it was apparent that the level and distribution of violence and the fairness of the election process were key ingredients that would have a substantial impact on the election. Even in August it was appreciated that the election process could itself be jeopardized by widespread violence or perceptions that the elections were not fair. Indeed, the ensuing months focused our attention on the rising levels of violence and concern that the election logistics were at best uncertain, and that there would likely be great disparities in voter turnout across Iraq. By the time of the second workshop, in November, there was great uncertainty concerning whether the process was sufficiently in jeopardy to warrant a postponement of the elections.

While the participants attempted to understand who might prevail and who might not prevail in the elections, *in the end it became clear that who won and who did not were not as important as whether the process was transparently fair and would be perceived as legitimate by the Iraqi people.* Only if this occurred could Iraq begin the path of using the democratic process and the postelection negotiation among groups and leaders to address the various hurdles that face the nation, including the insurgency, crime and security, economic development and job creation, and a fair distribution of power among the various ethnic and religious groups. This would help allow the development of a trusted, moderate leadership that can forge alliances and reach compromises within and among the various economic and political interest groups, and create a government strong enough to hold the country together without suppressing the strong ethnic and religious identities.

Even in August it was appreciated that the election process could itself be jeopardized by widespread violence or perceptions that the elections were not fair.

The scenario planning process facilitated a shared appreciation for a complex environment, an appreciation for what forces and factors mattered the most, an understanding of what the United States could affect and what it could not (and what it should and should not do), a recognition of the paths that lead to one scenario or another, and a recognition of signposts along the way. The participants did not produce a series of papers reflecting their perspectives or simply have a discussion. Rather, they engaged in a structured process that tested the conventional wisdom, challenged their assumptions, and provided them with sets of stories that vividly and concretely painted a picture of what Iraq might become.

Moreover, those who observed this process and read the three workshop reports had an opportunity to test both the validity of their own assumptions and the potential impact of policy alternatives under consideration, and to see where they could have an impact and how. This process may serve as a valuable template not merely for interactions among subject-matter experts but for channeling the collective expertise of those individuals into a product of additional value to policymakers. One cannot predict the future with consistent accuracy, but one can anticipate the future and how the future might unfold. That is a handy addition to the policymaker toolkit.

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