

Iraq Disengagement

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The U.S. counter-insurgency and state building effort in Iraq has entered its fourth year, with no end in sight. The U.S. and its remaining allies are simultaneously waging an intense counter insurgency campaign against Sunni Arab militants, a less intense but still costly counter insurgency campaign against Shiite militias, a “peace enforcement” operation among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, and a state-building effort that includes the training and equipping of Iraqi national police and army units. Though the administration can cite examples of progress in these four efforts, progress is slow. The struggle against the two insurgencies is best characterized as a dynamic stalemate in which the insurgents, the U.S. and its allies, and the nascent Iraqi government all intermittently achieve modest gains and suffer offsetting losses, with no sign of a true breakthrough for any party. This dynamic stalemate is costly to the U.S. in terms of money, the lives and health of its troops, the slowly eroding vitality of the U.S. Army’s enlisted and officer cadres, and the reputation of the United States in Arab and Islamic countries. The Administration’s “strategy” is not working and needs to be replaced.

A new strategy would pursue U.S. interests in Iraq from the outside in, rather than the inside out. It would seek to shape rather than administer, to influence rather than control. A key component of a new strategy is a firm commitment to disengage U.S. troops from Iraq by a date certain. At this moment July 1, 2007 seems a reasonable deadline; this would provide ample time to synchronize the diplomatic, political, and military elements of a new strategy, and to manage a secure and deliberate re-deployment of U.S. troops out of Iraq. To achieve the twin political purposes of de-energizing the insurgency, and re-energizing Iraq’s nascent government, this date must be announced publicly, and the U.S. must stick to it. The announcement of a date certain helps the U.S.

achieve its interests, because the U.S. presence in Iraq causes many of the problems that it is meant to solve.

The U.S. presence in Iraq helps to cause stalemate in two ways. First, the U.S. presence feeds energy into the ideological “-isms” that generate support for the insurgency inside and outside the country. Second, the U.S. presence serves as a safety net that permits key Iraqi actors to behave irresponsibly, because they know that U.S. forces are there to protect them from the consequences.

The U.S. presence energizes the insurgency in five inter-related ways:

1. It stimulates Iraqi nationalism and patriotism—the standard and predictable reaction to a foreign occupation. These values motivate both Sunni and Shia insurgents.
2. It catalyzes Islamic fundamentalism inside and outside Iraq. Islam has enjoyed a great revival among its followers in recent years, and many Iraqis find it intolerable that a non-Muslim army is on its soil determining its politics. This also draws support from outside the country.
3. The U.S. presence aggravates sectarianism. The U.S. victory knocked the Sunni Arab minority off its former perch as the dominant political force in the country. From the point of view of many Sunni Arabs, only the U.S. presence prevents them from reasserting their authority. Status reversal is a powerful motivator of violence by the losing group, and Iraqi Sunnis address their hostility to both the U.S. and to the Shia majority whom the U.S. has empowered.
4. The U.S. presence energizes “Pan Arabism.” Though this ideology has not typically been strong enough to facilitate easy cooperation among Arab states, it nevertheless is sufficiently strong to attract the attention of millions of Arabs abroad, some of whom send funds to support the insurgency, and some of whom actually journey to Iraq to fight the U.S.
5. These political and religious identities are only part of the story. Iraqis have strong family, clan, and tribal identities that produce unusual solidarity. When U.S. or Iraqi government forces kill, wound, or incarcerate an individual, this may prompt an emotional quest for revenge among many male extended family members.

The U.S. presence also enables unconstructive behavior by Iraqis who claim to share U.S. goals:

The political factions in Iraq will demand as great a share of Iraqi governmental positions and economic resources as they think their current relative power will allow. The close U.S. alignment with the Kurds and the Shia makes them feel very powerful, and encourages them to demand too much. Many Sunnis probably believe that absent U.S. military assistance to their enemies, they could perhaps defeat the more numerous Shia in a “fair fight” and garner a greater share of Iraq’s resources, so they also demand too much. The U.S. military presence is an obstacle to the Iraqi factions finding a legitimate, autonomous, measure of their relative power—which is a necessary prerequisite for a political deal.

- Iraqi political factions who claim to share U.S. goals nevertheless feel no sense of urgency. They can take their time forming governments and cleaning up ministries because they know that the U.S. will pick up the slack.
- Finally, the U.S. military, with the best of intentions, has produced an Iraqi military that is deeply dependent upon it. Because infantry battalions are the easiest units to produce, the Iraqi army is still missing all the other ingredients of a viable military organization—logistics, fire support, intelligence, command and control, and even accounting. Though U.S. trainers aim to remedy these lacunae, they seem in no hurry. Officers in the Iraqi Army seem comfortable with this dependency, as the U.S. guarantees them regular pay, and insures them against tactical defeats, with the promise of rapid reinforcement.

In sum, a clear plan for U.S. disengagement, with a date certain, will remove much of the political energy that feeds the insurgency, and simultaneously add a sense of political urgency to those Iraqi factions, bureaucracies, and military organizations that claim to want an orderly, stable, prosperous, and democratic Iraq.

Though disengagement is necessary to produce these positive results, it is only an element in a more elaborate strategy to protect U.S. interests. U.S. interests arise from one fact; Iraq and the surrounding region produce a great deal of oil. The U.S. is thus interested in ensuring that Iraqi oil wealth not fall into the hands of a terrorist organization such as Al Qaeda, that Iraqi oil wealth not fall into the hands of a hostile state,

and that Iraq not become the occasion for a major regional war to divide its spoils. The latter would surely significantly disrupt the flow of oil from the Gulf with knock-on effects on western economies.

The U.S. thus has to use the interval between now and mid-2007 for three key strategic initiatives:

- First, the Iraqi Army needs to be made more resilient so that those Sunni insurgents most closely aligned with Al Qaeda would not be able to seize Baghdad in a coup de main. I consider this unlikely, but it must be guarded against. Those Americans training the Iraqi Army have to lower their sights and pick up the pace. The Iraqi Army seems not to lack for infantry battalions at this time. Yet, the Iraqi army looks too much like an appendage of the U.S. army. This connection needs to be broken. The Iraqi army needs its own logistics, command and control, intelligence, and fire support. These capabilities can be very basic, but they need to be there if the Army is not to succumb to a “sucker punch.”
- Second, the U.S. must remind others in the region of its strategic interests through both diplomacy and military actions. The U.S. should publicly commit itself to the integrity of Iraq’s external borders and to their military defense if need be. The U.S., and indeed the industrialized world, does not want to see a war to carve up Iraq, and the U.S. must plan to make such actions costly for those who would start them. The U.S. should inventory both the credible threats it can make to deter regional actors from adventurism, and the benefits it can offer to those who cooperate. Military capabilities should remain deployed in the region to make good on this commitment. Some have recommended international or regional conferences to sort out these issues. Regional powers may have an interest in helping to stabilize Iraq to forestall a set of events that would attract one or all of them to intervene, and thus risk regional war.
- Third, the U.S. needs to settle on a reasonable political outcome for Iraq’s domestic politics. The Administration now seems to have pinned its hopes on a “government of national unity” in which Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite parties would share power at the center, dole out the resources of the state in a way that most citizens would come to accept as fair, and credibly commit to protect the helpless of whatever ethnic or political stripe. It is hoped that this would reduce

political support for the Sunni insurgent groups, and for the armed Shia and Kurd militias.

The current U.S. scheme for a strong Iraqi central government seems unlikely to lead to a stable peace. As noted above, each faction almost surely believes it is entitled to more than the other factions believe reasonable or just. Thus it seems improbable that the factions inside the government will agree on key policies. Even if they do, it is optimistic to expect all their followers to accept these agreements. Moreover, all factions will hang on to their arms unless and until they are pretty sure that the government security forces will work in an ideal, fair and impartial way. Such certainty is unlikely. Thus, those political forces most hostile to agreement will retain the means to wreck political progress.

Instead of chasing the chimera of a unified, democratic Iraq, the U.S. should accept a weak central state, and support the decentralization of political power and administrative competencies. The factions in Iraq will have to work out how they want to decentralize power, whether to existing provinces, provinces with new boundaries, or new regions.

The Iraqis will not easily find the recipe for decentralized government, and the process will likely involve a continuation or even escalation of the nascent civil war. My own judgment of the military balance among the factions is that stalemate is a likely outcome of such a fight, unless the U.S. is foolish enough to pour tanks and artillery into the Iraqi Army. These weapons might allow the Shia to triumph in a civil war, but only through the indiscriminate use of firepower, with huge collateral damage. The U.S. should quietly help the Iraqis achieve a military stalemate. To do so, the U.S. may occasionally have to switch sides in the war, quietly supporting the weaker parties. U.S. intelligence operatives, Special Forces, and perhaps air power will be the key tools in this effort, along with supplies of money and arms. Such a strategy is facilitated if most U.S. forces leave the country; if they remain they are hostages to whichever side feels most betrayed.

Stalemate is the military outcome most conducive to an internal political settlement that does not risk regional war. In some civil wars, the quickest way to an end is for one side to win decisively. Unfortunately in Iraq, Sunni victory would probably draw in Iranian intervention, and Shia victory would probably draw in Arab intervention. Kurdish success might draw in the Turks. To avoid regional war, no side can be allowed a decisive victory.

It is important, however tragic, that the Iraqi factions bear most of the cost of their internal conflict, because only the experience of these costs, and the shared perception that they are open ended, can provide a foundation for compromise. It is possible that a clear prospect that these costs are imminent may focus the minds of Iraqi pragmatists of every stripe.

The U.S. effort in Iraq has at best achieved a dynamic stalemate. The U.S. seems out of tools to win the counter insurgency effort. Though the U.S. military has developed a better understanding of appropriate counter insurgency techniques and forces, commanders in the field seem to understand that the war can only be ended politically, by Iraqis. But the state-building project in Iraq proceeds slowly, and does not seem destined to produce sufficient success to de-energize the insurgents politically or defeat them militarily.

The current strategy is one of attrition. It may be sustainable, but the costs to the U.S. seem high. Moreover, the course of the U.S. effort within Iraq is not predictable. There is plenty of scope for dangerous events that would produce new and difficult challenges. These include an escalation of the current civil war including more and more obvious gross human rights violations than have already occurred; an unusually successful attack against U.S. forces within Iraq; or the assassination of key political figures inside the country.

The U.S. must develop a new strategy in Iraq, a strategy that engages regional and international political actors, places responsibility for Iraq on Iraqis, plays to U.S. military strengths, and takes the burden of this project off the shoulders of U.S. enlisted military personnel.

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