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Handbook for
Policymakers

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7TH EDITION

49. Iraq

Policymakers should

- withdraw military forces from Iraq by July 1, 2009, leaving behind only a small number of Special Forces personnel to work with Iraqi authorities to disrupt any remaining al Qaeda cells in the country;
- encourage Iraq's neighbors to help contain any postwithdrawal internecine violence in Iraq;
- view the withdrawal from Iraq as the first step toward ending the dangerous and intrusive U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region; and
- learn the real lesson of the Iraq experience and avoid future utopian nation-building schemes in the Persian Gulf or any other region.

The U.S. military occupation of Iraq is now well into its sixth year, and the costs of that venture in both treasure and blood have been depressingly high. In October 2008, the financial costs reached $686 billion (in 2008 dollars), thereby exceeding the price tag of the Vietnam War in inflation-adjusted terms. Moreover, the meter continues to run at a rate of at least $120 billion per year. And those are just the direct costs. When one factors in the long-term obligations to America's wounded veterans, adverse economic effects, and other indirect costs, the Iraq War will ultimately cost American taxpayers well in excess of $1 trillion. Some estimates put the figure at more than $3 trillion.

Compared with some previous wars, the number of fatalities for U.S. forces has been relatively modest. Still, more than 4,200 American military personnel have lost their lives, and another 30,000 or more have been wounded, many with horrific, life-altering wounds. And then there are the Iraqis who have perished in this conflict. Estimates of Iraqi fatalities

vary wildly, ranging from about 80,000 to more than a million. The most credible estimate—slightly more than 150,000—comes from a World Health Organization study. Whatever the correct total, it is a sizable loss of life.

Supporters of the mission in Iraq have been in high spirits recently. They insist that the ''surge'' strategy of deploying an additional 30,000 U.S. troops, which President Bush announced in January 2007, has turned around the dire security situation. The United States, they believe, has finally adopted the right strategy for victory in Iraq.

War proponents do have some evidence to back up their assertion that the surge has been successful—at least in the narrow military sense. There is no doubt that the overall security environment in Iraq has improved. Both the number of insurgent attacks and the number of overall fatalities (Iraqi and American) declined noticeably, and by the summer of 2008 were about 70 percent below the levels of 2006 and the first half of 2007. The number of American military fatalities declined even more. The violence in Iraq is no longer the lead story on the network news on most days. Indeed, the media seem to have grown a bit jaded with the Iraq War now that spectacular car bomb explosions in Baghdad and other major cities occur less frequently.

Advocates of the war should be more cautious about proclaiming victory, however. Although the overall extent of violence is significantly lower than it was during the awful period from February 2006 (following the bombing of the Golden Mosque at Samarra) to mid-2007, it is still at about the same level it was in 2004 and early 2005. Very few people considered Iraq during that period to be a stable or peaceful place.

Moreover, war proponents have prematurely proclaimed victory on many occasions before. President Bush's infamous speech under the ''Mission Accomplished'' banner on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* was only the first of many faulty announcements. The capture of Saddam Hussein, the battle of Fallujah, and the election of the Iraqi parliament (with voters waving their purple ink-stained fingers) were all hailed as decisive turning points in the Iraq conflict. Vice President Cheney's comment in May 2005 that the insurgency was in its ''last throes'' was yet another erroneous claim of imminent victory. Given that dismal track record, Americans have a right to be skeptical when Iraq War supporters assert that the surge is a definitive success and that ''victory'' in Iraq is at hand.

If one looks more carefully at the reasons for the improved security environment, the case for caution and skepticism becomes even stronger.

The deployment of additional combat troops undoubtedly had a beneficial effect, but that is not the principal reason for the improvement. Several other factors have played more significant roles.

One reason is especially sobering. In Baghdad, but to some extent in several other cities as well, the decline in killings is largely a result of previous ethnic cleansing efforts that have succeeded all too well. At the beginning of the U.S. occupation, about 45 percent of Baghdad's neighborhoods were predominantly Shiite, about 35 percent were predominantly Sunni, and the remaining 20 percent were thoroughly mixed. Now, about 65 percent of the neighborhoods are overwhelmingly Shiite, about 30 percent are overwhelmingly Sunni, and only about 5 percent are mixed. The last two categories are also heavily dependent on protection from U.S. forces to maintain their precarious status. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Sunnis, have fled the city, and in many cases have fled Iraq entirely. With far fewer mixed neighborhoods—and fewer Sunni neighborhoods in proximity to Shiite ones—there are simply not as many opportunities for armed clashes between rival forces or opportunities for the Shiite death squads to practice their deadly trade.

A similar process of ethnic segregation has occurred in other areas of Iraq. Indeed, there are some 2 million internal refugees, most of whom have moved from areas in which they were ethnic or religious minorities to areas in which they and their kin are in the majority. Another 2.4 million people have left Iraq for other countries, in many cases fleeing the effect of ethnic cleansing. The security environment has become more quiescent as a result of those purges, but that should hardly be an occasion for U.S. satisfaction. It also does not bode well for Iraq's long-term prospects as a united country, which remains a key objective of the U.S. mission.

Another factor explaining the decline in violence is the less confrontational role that radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr adopted. Frequent clashes had occurred between Sadr's Mahdi Army and both U.S. and Iraqi government forces since the summer of 2003. Even worse, Sadr's followers were apparently some of the most active participants in the Shiite death squads that murdered countless Sunnis. On more than a few occasions, especially during the first two years of the occupation, American military commanders considered arresting Sadr, but they feared that doing so would enrage his followers and lead to full-scale warfare with the Mahdi Army. Moreover, after elections for Iraq's parliament, it became even more difficult to contemplate arresting him, since his faction controlled some

30 seats in the new legislature, and became (nominally at least) a member of the political coalition supporting the U.S.-backed prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki.

This uneasy relationship between the U.S. occupation force and the Mahdi Army persisted until September 2007, when Sadr unexpectedly announced a six-month cease-fire. Although his forces have not entirely honored that truce, there have been noticeably fewer incidents with U.S. and Iraqi government troops, and, perhaps even more importantly, a significant decline in death squad activities.

Sadr's motives for the cease-fire (which he extended in February 2008) are not entirely clear. Perhaps his forces had been weakened by previous skirmishes and needed time to regroup and reequip. In addition, factional rivalries appeared to have begun to undermine the Mahdi Army as a cohesive force, and Sadr used the cease-fire period to purge the organization of so-called rogue elements. Those elements apparently consisted of anyone who challenged Sadr's preeminence.

Whatever the motive, the cease-fire reinforced the decline in overall violence that accompanied the U.S. troop surge. It is uncertain, though, how long that truce will last or what will happen if it comes to an end. In all likelihood, an end to the cease-fire would bring the Mahdi Army back into play as an adversary of the occupation force and lead to an uptick in violence.

Although those various factors played meaningful roles, the most important reason for the improved security environment was the willingness of General David Petraeus and other U.S. military commanders to forge compromises with influential Sunni tribal leaders instead of reflexively regarding them as Saddam ''dead enders'' and implacable enemies. Many of those leaders signaled a willingness to turn on al Qaeda fighters and cooperate with the United States long before the surge began. Indeed, scattered media reports as early as the summer of 2006 indicated that some Sunni tribes had soured on their alliances with the terrorist organization. That was not too surprising. Foreign al Qaeda operatives were arrogant and abusive. For proud Sunni chieftains, accustomed to exercising power in their regions, being snubbed, bypassed, and bullied by al Qaeda zealots was infuriating. Al Qaeda's strategy of car bombings and other indiscriminate acts of violence against fellow Muslims served to further alienate the organization from its Iraqi allies. Even though most of the victims were Shiites, the spectacle of innocents being slaughtered daily became too much to tolerate.

Unlike their predecessors, Petraeus and his subordinates were shrewd enough to exploit the growing rifts in the insurgency. Indeed, the United States began a strategy to court receptive Sunni leaders even before President Bush announced the surge. Washington has since provided extensive funding to cooperative Sunni tribes and has even helped train the armed fighters of the so-called Awakening Councils. Simply put, the strategy moved from trying to bludgeon the Sunnis to trying to bribe them.

U.S. financial assistance is a crucial lubricant that keeps the Awakening Councils viable and cooperative. Ordinary members typically receive stipends of $300 per month, while higher-ranking figures receive somewhat larger sums. Three hundred dollars might not seem like much to most Americans, but in Iraq that is a sizable amount. It is especially attractive in a country where economic opportunities for the politically dispossessed Sunnis are especially bleak and where the unemployment rate runs well in excess of 20 percent.

In addition to the salaries given to rank-and-file Sunnis, unspecified sums are passed out to tribal leaders, largely in the form of reconstruction grants. At least some of that money does not go to construction projects but goes instead to purchase weapons—most apparently coming from Saudi Arabia—to boost the military capabilities of the Awakening Councils. And, of course, some of the lucre likely goes into the pockets of Sunni tribal elders.

At least in the short term, that approach has worked far better than the previous U.S. strategy. Many, although not all, Sunni leaders have waged open warfare on al Qaeda fighters, and perhaps even more importantly, the new Sunni allies have provided valuable intelligence to the U.S. military about al Qaeda, instead of shielding the organization. As a result, al Qaeda has been marginalized as a political and military player in Iraq.

Yet the strategy of bribing and arming friendly Sunni forces is not without potential peril. If Washington's new Sunni allies do not remain bribed, they could pose a more lethal danger than before to both the Iraqi central government and U.S. forces. As *Washington Post* correspondents Alissa J. Rubin and Damien Cave note, ''It is an experiment in counterinsurgency warfare that could contain the seeds of civil war—in which, if the fears come true, the United States would have helped organize some of the Sunni forces arrayed against the central government on which so many American lives and dollars have been spent.'' In other words, the U.S. strategy may end up funding and equipping both sides for a new, and more intense, phase of Iraq's sectarian warfare.

Lastly, whatever the tactical military successes of the surge, it has not achieved its larger political goal, which President Bush described in his announcement of the surge as giving the Iraqi government ''the breathing space it needs to make progress in other critical areas.'' Getting Iraq's feuding Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish political leaders to create an effective, united government remains elusive. American optimists highlight such developments as the parliament's passage of de-Baathification reform and a national budget as evidence of great progress. But most Sunnis regard the former as a fraud that will make their precarious status even worse, and when advocates of staying in Iraq cite the mere passage of a national budget as a huge achievement, they are truly grasping at straws.

In reality, the central government remains quarrelsome and largely impotent. The real power lies in the increasingly ethnically homogenous regions. Iraqi Kurdistan is an independent state in all but name, having its own flag, currency, and military—and routinely bypassing Baghdad to cut deals with foreign oil companies and other firms. The predominantly Shiite south is likewise increasingly independent of Baghdad regarding policies that really matter. Despite the decline in violence, the long-term prospects for a stable, united (much less secular and democratic) Iraq are not good.

What the surge did, though, was give the United States a window of opportunity to execute a semigraceful withdrawal. U.S. leaders can claim, quite plausibly, that Washington has gone the extra mile to give the Iraqi people a chance to create a new and effective political system. The United States overthrew Saddam Hussein, presided over the creation of a new constitution, supervised the election of a new government, stabilized the security environment, and dealt severe blows to al Qaeda forces that infiltrated the country. American leaders can, and should, argue that it is now up to Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people to determine the future of their country. If they are not ready now, when will they be?

Unfortunately, too many U.S. political leaders apparently regard the lull in violence as an excuse to perpetuate the American presence in Iraq indefinitely. As U.S. troop numbers return to presurge levels, it is important to clarify the real strategic choice in Iraq. The choice is not between a U.S. withdrawal in the next 6 to 12 months and a withdrawal some time in the next 5 years or so. It is a choice between promptly withdrawing and trying to stay in Iraq for decades—or, in Senator John McCain's flippant formulation, a century. Unfortunately, the United States' creating numerous ''enduring'' military bases and building an embassy nearly as large as Vatican City suggests that it intends to stay a very long time.

That would be a serious error. Despite the decline in violence, it is unlikely that the United States will ever achieve the goals that it had when it invaded Iraq in 2003. The notion of post-Saddam Iraq as a secular democratic model for the Middle East was always a chimera. The long-term prospects for even modest unity and stability remain bleak, with or without a U.S. military presence. One must ask how many more American tax dollars should be wasted, and even more important, how many more Americans should die because political leaders are unwilling to admit that they made a mistake. The United States needs a withdrawal strategy— one measured in months, not years. The partial success of the surge provides that opportunity.

Those who want to stay in Iraq insist that we are now on the verge of ''victory.'' Even if that prediction turns out not to be yet another in a long list of false hopes, it is important to understand what form ''victory'' in Iraq would likely take. Let's consider the best-case scenario that has any realistic prospect of coming true. It would include a democratic Kurdistan in the north that is independent in everything but official international recognition. The rest of Iraq would be run by a quasi-democratic, Shiite-dominated regime that is quite friendly to Iran. Any illusion that Iran does not already have a great deal of influence with the current Iraqi government evaporated in March 2008 when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received a red-carpet welcome in Baghdad.

Moreover, even under the best-case scenario, Iraq's Shiite-led government would still face a persistent, low-grade Sunni insurgency for the foreseeable future (think Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s). In other words, even the best-case scenario isn't all that great.

As it withdraws its forces, though, Washington should make an effort to try to prevent the worst-case scenario: a regional Sunni-Shiite armed conflict with Iraq as the cockpit. Washington should work with Iraq's neighbors to quarantine the violence in that country. A regional proxy war in Iraq would turn the U.S. mission there into even more of a debacle than it has been already. Worse, Iraq's neighbors could be drawn in as direct participants in the fighting—a development that could create chaos throughout the Middle East.

The best approach would be for the United States to convene a regional conference that includes (at a minimum) Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey. The purpose of such a conference should be to make all parties confront the danger of Iraq's turmoil mushrooming into a regional armed struggle that ultimately would not be in the best interests of any

country in the area. Washington should stress the point that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq's other neighbors risk having events spiral out of control if they do not quarantine the violence and instead seek to exploit it. The U.S. goal should be a commitment by the neighboring states to refrain from meddling—or at least bound the extent of meddling—in that country's sectarian tensions.

Realism about the role of Iraq's neighbors, especially Iran and Syria, is essential. Tehran and Damascus are not about to help the United States out of its dilemmas in Iraq because of a spirit of altruism. Indeed, both governments take a perverse pleasure in Washington's self-inflicted wounds. Our only feasible chance of gaining their cooperation is if we can convince them that overplaying their hand may provoke direct intervention by the Saudis, Turks, and other rivals. There is no guarantee that such a conference would be successful. All of Iraq's neighbors have significant incentives to try to prevent a victory by one Iraqi faction or another. But it is at least worth an attempt to minimize the danger of a wider conflict.

The risk of a proxy war is real, but trying to prevent that outcome does not warrant keeping U.S. forces in Iraq for decades to come. Washington has already worn out its welcome. By a wide and growing margin, the Iraqi people (with the notable exception of the Kurds) want the United States to end the occupation. Even the Iraqi government signaled in July 2008 that it wanted a timeline for the withdrawal of most, if not all, U.S. troops. Washington's decision to invade Iraq was profoundly unwise. Persisting in a costly and problematic mission against the wishes of Iraq's neighbors and the Iraqi people themselves would be even worse. It is time to leave. Indeed, it is long past time to leave.

Equally important, U.S. officials need to learn the right lessons from the bruising Iraq experience. If we merely shift U.S. military personnel from Iraq to another country or countries in the Persian Gulf region, they will still be a lightning rod for Muslim resentment and anger. We need far more than a mere redeployment of forces. America's intrusive military presence in the broader Middle East has been the perfect recruiting poster for al Qaeda and other extremist groups. That presence needs to be greatly reduced even in the short term and then eliminated in stages over the next few years.

Finally, there is a worrisome danger that the Iraq debacle has not eliminated the enthusiasm in America's foreign policy community for nation-building missions. The emerging conventional wisdom seems to

be that the failure in Iraq was due to lack of planning and to faulty execution. That is a dangerous delusion. The proper lessons of Iraq are that populations tend to resist being remolded at the point of American bayonets, and that our policymakers do not even begin to understand the political, social, religious, and economic complexities of those societies. Nation-building in almost any context is arrogant international social engineering at its worst. The examples of success (Germany and Japan) that nation-building proponents always cite occurred because of very unusual factors. They were fortuitous exceptions, not templates.

If the new administration assumes that the correct lesson of Iraq is that we need to do Iraq-style missions better in the future, it will be just a matter of time until America finds itself mired in another bloody, frustrating crusade somewhere else in the world. The real lesson of Iraq needs to be that we shouldn't attempt to do Iraq-style missions period.

Suggested Readings

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