

The Situation in Iraq

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The current conversation in Washington badly distorts what is happening in Iraq and what our options are. As it has from the very beginning, U.S. strategy has more to do with political needs in Washington than with realities on the ground – to our continuing confusion and detriment. Five key considerations provide a more clear-eyed view and may offer a new approach for the way forward.

The premise of our current strategy—that a political solution would follow if the violence could be reduced—is false. What is underway today in Iraq is a natural and inevitable struggle for power. The American presence delays what will eventually happen anyway.

- National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley said it over and over this past weekend—the premise of the President’s policy is that insecurity blocks political reconciliation. If we can reduce the violence significantly enough, reconciliation will follow. On close examination, every part of this argument is wrong.
- First, the word reconciliation is a huge distortion of what must happen. To reconcile means to restore friendship and harmony. That’s not what’s involved here. What’s happening on the ground is the natural second stage of a government overthrow (through revolution or, in this case, externally-imposed regime change), namely a domestic struggle for power in a political vacuum. The assumption behind the strategy, that political reconciliation was marching along when the bombing of the Samara mosque ignited open sectarian violence, and is now waiting to resume—like a current that would flow were it not blocked by the dam of violence—is not supported by the evidence. Nor is it semantics to point out that it is equally true that the lack of a political solution creates the violence. Whether you call it a civil war or not, what organized groups in Iraq are engaged in today is a *struggle for political power—within sectarian groups as well as between them*.
- A political solution—a power sharing agreement—will eventually emerge but likely only after the various parties have tested each others’ strength and will, when their desire to fight has burned itself out, and when the key parties decide that they can do as least as well at the negotiating table as they can in the streets. This will not happen by September, or by next spring. Based on recent history, it is unlikely to emerge even in five years. Since 1945, civil wars have lasted ten years on average, with half running for more than seven years (James Fearon, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 86, No2).
- To believe that the present strategy will ultimately succeed, therefore, one has to embrace three heroic beliefs: that together with Iraqi security forces we have a large enough force to contain over a long term guerrilla violence that springs from many sources; that a combination of political and military assistance and coercion can impose an artificial peace that could leap over the usual phase of political sorting out and struggle for power; and that we can maintain that artificial peace for long enough that people will put aside their fears and hopes to believe that the present distribution of power represents a stable and inevitable future.
- If we were willing to stay for a decade or more this *might* be true. But few believe we will stay for that long, and even so it is a highly uncertain bet. People can hold a political dream or desire for revenge for far longer than that. Iraqis know that they live there and

we don't; that someday we'll be gone and they'll remain. Many of them would plan that way even if they thought we were willing to maintain our present commitment for many years.

- Based on experience elsewhere and a three year test, it is unlikely that more of the same will produce a united Iraq at peace with itself. It is a bitter but sounder conclusion that the American presence and strategy in Iraq is prolonging and delaying a violent struggle for power that will ultimately happen when we depart.

The U.S. has been pursuing the same political goal since 2004—Sunnis, Shi'a and Kurds working together in a strong central government—with many changes of tactics but none of core strategy and without success. The present description of the needed next steps as mundane and achievable “benchmarks” is a self-deluding fantasy on our part, continued in the recent report to Congress which grossly exaggerates “progress” on the political front.

- There has been little if any progress towards a political solution for two primary reasons: because the needed agreements are hugely difficult in the best of conditions and because the current situation in Iraq is the worst of conditions for taking such great risks.
- Amending the constitution, allocating the country's one source of revenue, etc, all define the future allocation of power in Iraq. These are not simple pieces of legislation the current government could pass if its members would just try harder and were willing to work in August. These are fundamental political choices from which every individual in the country faces enormous potential gains or losses.
- What do I mean by the worst of conditions? Think of it this way. More than 4 million Iraqis are refugees, internally displaced, or dead from violence. *In per capita U.S. terms that would be 50 million people forced out of their homes, sitting in Mexico or Canada, or dead.* Think for a few minutes about what that would be like. Could we, under such conditions, come together as a nation, bury past and present wrongs and, under foreign occupation and direction, make painful and scary political accommodations, amend the constitution and reallocate wealth? The question answers itself—yet we continue to pretend that Iraqis can.
- Think of immigration policy as an American “benchmark”. Remember what we just went through in trying to deal with a threat that is miniscule by comparison to any of the dozens an Iraqi faces. Then remember these conditions—50 million people displaced or dead – and you will have a clearer understanding of why these benchmarks aren't being reached and won't be any time soon.

We are debating this political problem almost entirely in military terms which limits and distorts the available options. A change in political strategy in Iraq and a shift in political attention and economic and military priorities across the region redefines the possibilities. Analysis of options must recognize – as it generally does not today—that a significant change in U.S. policy will change what others are willing to do.

- When they are careful, our leaders remember to say that there is no military solution to the problem in Iraq; that it is a political problem. But for obvious reasons Americans see this as a war and therefore as a military issue and the debate in Washington follows suit. For every time that someone remembers to say that Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus will report in September, there are at least twenty times when only General Petraeus is mentioned.
- Similarly, the three broad options that are being debated—keep doing what we’re doing; reduce and redeploy the troops to focus on counterterrorism, force protection, border security and training; and, bring the troops home—are all defined almost entirely in military terms. They all assume that our core political strategy in Iraq doesn’t change. There is a different approach.
- The Iraq Study Group’s call for a multinational, regional effort to help find a solution in Iraq is an important step in the right direction. However, it assumes that Iraq is represented at such a conference by its current government and therefore that the current U.S. political strategy for the country continues. A better approach would be one that more resembles the Bonn process that laid the basis for political transition in Afghanistan. Iraq would be represented by all its major parties. The key foreign governments would participate and support their various clients. This would be a lengthy and chaotic process with higher political risk and less control by the U.S. than we have heretofore been willing to assume. However, it holds at least a possibility that broad representation and debate among Iraqis, heretofore short-circuited by U.S. policy to date, might produce a viable political outcome with less continuing violence.
- A necessary ingredient would be active roles played by Iraq’s immediate neighbors and other key states and that, in turn would depend on an announcement by the U.S. of its intent to begin to withdraw militarily from Iraq. The process would be preceded by intensive bilateral consultations to determine the best format: most likely under UN auspices. While making its direction absolutely plain, the U.S. announcement should not set a timeline for the end of withdrawal nor specify a predetermined number of remaining troops. Both of these should be determined by the political outcome. Perhaps we would be asked to stay in Iraq in some substantial way; perhaps not.
- This approach presumes a continuing, major American presence in the Middle East. Its success would also depend on a shift of the political energy and some fraction of the economic cost now consumed by Iraq (currently at a rate of \$10 billion per month; \$330 million per day) to other conflicts and threats in the region that hold inherently greater long term national security interests for the United States than does Iraq. Prominent among these are Iran, Afghanistan (because of the Taliban and Al Qaeda presence and its link to Pakistan), Pakistan (because of these, its nuclear weapons and its political instability) and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. One of the Iraq war’s greatest long term costs has been and will be the attention it has diverted from issues of greater inherent importance. The U.S. can not afford to continue to focus all its funds, military resources, and political capital on Iraq while leaving greater interests largely unattended.

Assertions are being made regarding what would happen if we leave Iraq for which there is little or no evidence or significant evidence to the contrary. Because the choice we face is among bad options, it is easy to make a case against any change in course. While uncertainties are immense, it is therefore imperative to examine such claims with as much care and knowledge as we can command, at least to set aside those fears for which there is little evidence.

- It is asserted by the administration as a given, and echoed by many experts, that the violence in Iraq would spread across the region if the U.S. were to leave. Why? Iraqis are fighting among themselves over power. There is no reason why they would travel abroad to do so. Moreover, there is a history that argues strongly in the opposite direction—*that civil wars in this region suck others in rather than spread across borders*. Algeria, Afghanistan and even Lebanon, which sucked in direct deployments by Syria and Israel, are among the civil wars that did not spread. The case for a spreading war has not been made.
- It is highly likely however that neighboring powers will get sucked into Iraq more deeply than they are today. This will most likely be through financial support, supply of arms, and proxy fighters rather than troops. Iraq's neighbors are well aware of the dangers. Neither of the two key players, Saudi Arabia and Iran, wants a direct confrontation. They and other neighbors are deeply aware of the risks of a sharper divide between Sunni and Shi'a countries, as evidenced in part by the sound rejection that met recent American efforts to organize a coalition of Sunni states against Iran.
- Another frequent claim is that an American exit would be a tremendous psychological victory for radical Islamists across the entire Muslim world. This echoes the fear of the dominoes that didn't fall after Vietnam. In this case, an American exit from Iraq (not the region) would be a cause for celebration among some terrorists and perhaps a temporary source of strength, but it is at least equally true that the American occupation of Iraq (I use those words advisedly because that is the way it is seen in the region) is jihadists' principal recruiting tool. Who is to say whether an American departure would be—on balance—a shot in the arm or a significant mid and long term loss? The danger from already committed terrorists after an American exit would probably increase outside Iraq as some would be forced out and others would be less likely to travel there.
- The fear that an American departure would leave open a field that would be claimed by Iran demands close scrutiny. Iran might seek to dominate southern Iraq, but Iraqi Shi'a are anything but monolithic. Some are close to Tehran, but without the infidel foreign presence many would fight Persian domination as they have before. Moreover, it is undeniable that American troubles in Iraq embolden and strengthen Iran. An American exit is a loss for Tehran in that respect.
- The greatest unknown after a carefully planned and executed departure is what effect the likely short term rise in violence in Iraq and generalized fear of the consequences would have on oil prices. This bears serious analysis it has not, to my knowledge, received and anticipatory planning.

Congress needs urgently to address and end the dangerous charade that has been underway between it and the administration regarding whether the U.S. government is currently planning a permanent presence in Iraq.

- Congress has repeatedly passed provisions prohibiting the use of appropriated funds to construct permanent military facilities in Iraq—in one case by a Senate vote of 100-0. On the first occasion the administration lobbied strenuously and successfully against the provision. Later, however, it allowed numerous such provisions to pass, presumably on the grounds that such language is meaningless because no one can prove that anything is going to be “permanent”.
- Meanwhile, the U.S. has continued to construct a massive, wholly self-contained embassy, akin to a 19th century foreign compound except heavily fortified, and equally large and self-contained bases with military facilities, amenities (stores, Pizza Huts and Burger Kings, swimming pools and exercise courses), and costs that could only be justified by very long term planned use. The major bases are designed to support force projection across the region and North Africa. The largest bases cover 15-20 square miles each and each accommodates 14,000-20,000 military personnel plus thousands more contractors.
- After years of evasions and denials, one month ago, the White House and the Pentagon finally revealed what has been obvious on the ground all along. Defense Secretary Gates remarked that the U.S. was seeking a “long and enduring presence” in Iraq under a yet to be negotiated Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). He went on to say “The Korea model is one, the security relationship we have with Japan is another.” U.S. forces have been in these countries for more than half a century. His comments did not receive nearly the attention they deserve.
- What is the administration’s thinking regarding a long term U.S. military presence in Iraq? How big a presence and for what purposes? Is there a settled policy? A document of any kind? Has it ever been debated at senior levels? Or, did the planning and building begin – as one general has said – by engineers who wanted to stay ahead of the policymakers and continued on autopilot ever since?
- This issue has immense political consequence. Repeated polls show Iraqis strongly oppose the bases. Across the Middle East, the enormous American footprint supports those who believe that the U.S. invaded Iraq to control the country and its oil resources and establish itself as a permanent power in the region. Congress must end its ineffectual Kabuki dance on spending and call the question on policy: what are the administration’s plans and are they wise? In my view, any serious attention to political and social realities in Iraq and to opinion across the region and globally, leads quickly to the conclusion that major U.S. military facilities in the Middle East should be located outside of Iraq.