

When to Leave Iraq Today, Tomorrow, or Yesterday?

By Colin H. Kahl and William E. Odom

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Summary: Today, tomorrow, or yesterday?

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WALK BEFORE RUNNING

Colin H. Kahl

In "The Price of the Surge" (May/June 2008), Steven Simon correctly observes that the Sunni turn against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), known as the Sunni Awakening, has been a key factor in security progress during the period of "the surge." Simon is also on point when he notes that the Awakening, which began before the surge, was not a direct consequence of additional U.S. troops. But although Simon gets much of the past right, he ultimately draws the wrong lessons for U.S. policy moving forward.

Rather than unilaterally and unconditionally withdrawing from Iraq and hoping that the international community will fill the void and push the Iraqis toward accommodation -- a very unlikely scenario -- the United States must embrace a policy of "conditional engagement." This approach would couple a phased redeployment of combat forces with a commitment to providing residual support for the Iraqi government if and only if it moves toward genuine reconciliation. Conditional engagement -- rather than Simon's policy of unconditional disengagement -- would incorporate the real lesson from the Sunni Awakening.

The Awakening began in Anbar Province more than a year before the surge and took off in the summer and fall of 2006 in Ramadi and elsewhere, long before extra U.S. forces started flowing into Iraq in February and March of 2007. Throughout the war, enemy-of-my-enemy logic has driven Sunni decision-making. The Sunnis have seen three "occupiers" as threats: the United States, the Shiites (and their presumed Iranian patrons), and the foreigners and extremists in AQI. Crucial to the Awakening was the reordering of these threats.

When U.S. forces first arrived in Anbar, upending the Sunni-dominated social order, they were viewed as the principal threat. Because AQI fought the United States, it was seen by the tribes as a convenient short-term ally, despite deep distrust. This ordering of threats changed in 2005 and 2006. For one thing, U.S. forces became more effective and discriminating in their counterinsurgency activities. AQI, meanwhile, became more brutal and indiscriminate, forcing the tribes to start defending themselves. In the fall of 2006, it also declared the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq, asserting political and economic hegemony over Anbar and other provinces with significant Sunni Arab populations. It started demanding brides, enforcing harsh fundamentalist social norms, and cutting into the tribes' smuggling revenues.

At the same time, U.S. forces had to convince the Sunnis that they were not occupiers -- that is, that they did not intend to stay forever. Here, growing opposition to the war in the United States and the Democratic takeover of both houses of Congress in the November 2006 elections were critical. Major General John Allen, the Marine Corps officer responsible for tribal engagement in Anbar in 2007, recently told me that among Sunni leaders, the Democratic victory and the rising pro-withdrawal sentiment "did not go unnoticed.... They talked about it all the time." According to Allen, the marines, from top to bottom, reinforced the message sent by the Democratic takeover by saying, "We are leaving.... We don't know when we are leaving, but we don't have much time, so you [the Anbaris] better get after this." As a result, U.S. forces came to be seen as less of a threat than either AQI or the Shiite militias -- and the risk that U.S. forces would leave pushed the Sunnis to cut a deal to protect their interests while they still could. As Major Niel Smith, the operations officer at the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center, and Colonel Sean MacFarland, the commander of U.S. forces in Ramadi during the

pivotal period of the Awakening, wrote recently in *Military Review*, "A growing concern that the U.S. would leave Iraq and leave the Sunnis defenseless against Al-Qaeda and Iranian-supported militias made these younger [tribal] leaders [who led the Awakening] open to our overtures." In short, contrary to the Bush administration's claims, the Awakening began before the surge and was driven in part by Democratic pressure to withdraw.

It was also critical, however, that U.S. forces did not leave immediately. According to Allen, the continued U.S. presence allowed U.S. commanders to argue that their troops would be the Sunnis' "shock absorbers" during the transition. In other words, the surge and the threat of withdrawal interacted synergistically: the threat of withdrawal made clear that the U.S. commitment was not open-ended, and the surge made clear that U.S. forces would be around for a while. Together they provided a strong incentive for the Anbaris to cooperate with the United States and turn on AQI.

This revised history of the Sunni Awakening has significant implications moving forward. Now, the principal impediment to long-term stability in Iraq is the reluctance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's central government to engage in genuine political accommodation. That will require a hydrocarbon law designed to equitably share oil revenues, better budget execution and service provision, steps to resettle and compensate victims of sectarian violence, resolution of the disputed status of Kirkuk, and efforts to demobilize and co-opt the Shiite militias (principally Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army). It will also require that the Shiite government integrate or otherwise employ the 90,000 "Sons of Iraq," mostly Sunni tribal militia members and former insurgents. After considerable cajoling, Maliki has agreed to integrate about 20 percent of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi army and police and provide the remainder with nonsecurity jobs. But his government has been very slow in carrying out this pledge, and the 20 percent figure is unlikely to be sufficient. Brigadier General Shija al-Adhami, the head of the Awakening force in Baghdad's Ghazaliya neighborhood, recently told *The Washington Post*, "This is a big failure -- either they take us all in or this is not going to work."

Convincing the Iraqi government to make the tough decisions needed for accommodation requires following the same logic that drove the Awakening: using the risk of abandonment to generate a sense of urgency while committing to protecting groups that make tough choices. The Bush administration has thus far failed to generate the leverage such a strategy would produce because it has effectively given the Iraqi government a blank check. To the degree that minimal political progress has occurred, it can be attributed at least as much to the prospect that the Democrats in Congress might force a withdrawal as to overt threats from the Bush administration. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admitted as much last April: "The debate in Congress ... has been helpful in demonstrating to the Iraqis that American patience is limited. The strong feelings expressed in the Congress about the timetable probably has had a positive impact ... in terms of communicating to the Iraqis that this is not an open-ended commitment."

As the United States moves forward in Iraq, more leverage is required, but the positions now being advanced by many Republicans and Democrats fail to offer the right mix of incentives to get the Iraqis to act. President George W. Bush has signaled his intent to "pause" the planned troop withdrawals when the surge ends, and Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) speaks of staying in Iraq for a hundred years, no strings attached. This policy of unconditional engagement will not work, because there are no consequences for Iraq's leaders if they fail to accommodate one another. Some Democrats, on the other hand, side with Simon and are calling for a unilateral timetable for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces, regardless of the conditions on the ground. This policy of unconditional disengagement also gives up too much leverage, because it provides no ability to the Iraqi government to affect the pace of redeployment or the nature of U.S. support in exchange for making tough choices. Unconditional engagement is all carrots, no sticks; unconditional disengagement, all sticks, no carrots.

A new policy of conditional engagement would take advantage of the ongoing talks aimed at shaping a long-term U.S.-Iraqi security framework to push the Iraqis toward political accommodation. U.S. negotiators should exploit the continuing discontent among Democrats in Congress and the impending presidential election to signal that a long-term U.S. commitment to Iraq is not politically sustainable unless there is tangible evidence of reconciliation. Because the Iraqi government has an interest in a long-term security relationship with the United States, especially continued U.S. support for the Iraqi security forces, this tactic could prove very effective.

The presidential candidates from both parties should reinforce this strategy by publicly endorsing the conditions the Iraqi government must meet in order to influence the pace of future U.S. withdrawals and gain their future administrations' support for the Iraqi security forces in the years ahead. This will require the Democratic nominee to clarify his or her stance on the disposition of residual forces in Iraq after a withdrawal of most of the

combat troops (only Senator Barack Obama [D-Ill.] has proposed explicit conditions to be placed on continued support for the Iraqi security forces), and it will require McCain to abandon his unconditional pledge to stay in Iraq.

When the new administration takes office in January 2009, it must follow up on this approach by initiating a down payment on redeployment. Starting from the roughly 15 combat brigades (a total of 130,000-140,000 troops) it is likely to inherit, the new administration should signal its intention to transition to a "support," or "overwatch," role by announcing the near-term reduction of U.S. forces to perhaps 12 brigades. The new administration should also immediately sign a formal pledge with the Iraqi government stating unequivocally that it will not seek, accept, or under any conditions establish permanent or "enduring" military bases in Iraq. Taken together, these actions would signal to the Iraqi government that the U.S. commitment is no longer open-ended while still maintaining enough forces in the near term to prevent a major reversal of progress on security. These steps would also signal to groups inside the Iraqi parliament that strongly oppose the occupation (especially the Sadrists), as well as to the organizations representing the nationalist wing of the Sunni insurgency, that the United States does not intend to stay forever. This might open up additional avenues for bringing those Sunnis into formal and informal negotiations.

Simultaneous with these decisions, the United States should start negotiations to establish a broad time horizon for the transition of the remaining U.S. forces to an overwatch role and the conditions for continued U.S. support for the Iraqi government. Once U.S. forces have reached a sustainable overwatch level, the primary mission of the U.S. military in Iraq will switch to counterterrorism, training and advising of the Iraqi security forces, and force protection for U.S. civilians and advisers. U.S. negotiators should make clear, however, that continued economic and diplomatic support, as well as continued support for the Iraqi security forces (something the Iraqi government deeply desires and needs), will hinge on continued progress toward political accommodation. U.S. negotiators should emphasize that over the long run, the United States intends to normalize its relationship with the Iraqi government and redeploy all of its remaining forces as conditions permit. This policy of conditional engagement should be nested within a wider regional diplomatic initiative that seeks to leverage the U.S. drawdown in Iraq and the common interest among Iraq's neighbors in avoiding a failed Iraqi state.

In the end, this approach may not work. If the Iraqis prove unwilling to move toward accommodation, then no number of U.S. forces will be able to produce sustainable stability, and the strategic costs of maintaining a significant presence will outweigh the benefits. If so, the new administration should shift to Simon's unconditional disengagement as Plan B.

RUSH TO EXIT

William E. Odom

Simon provides a brilliant analysis of Iraq's political realities, past and present, exposing the effects of the U.S. occupation. Sadly, neither the administration nor all but a few outside analysts foresaw them. More recently, most media reporting has wholly ignored the political dynamics of the new "surge" tactic. And peripatetic experts in Washington regularly return from their brief visits to Iraq to assure the public that it is lowering violence but fail to explain why. They presume that progress toward political consolidation has also been occurring, or soon will be. Instead, as Simon explains, political regression has resulted, a "retribalization" of the same nature as that which both the British colonial rulers and the Baathist Party tried to overcome in order to create a modern state in Iraq.

This should hardly come as a surprise. The history of tribalism in Iraq is well known. When the United States replaced the British in the Middle East after World War II, it set "stability" above all other interests there, maintaining it through a regional balance of power. President Bush's invasion of Iraq broke radically with this half-century-old strategy. The prospects of success, as Simon shows, were worse than poor.

Until recently, the wisdom of this new strategy has not been challenged. Instead, just as happened with regard to the war in Vietnam, the mainstream discussion has focused on tactics, "nation building" through elections, and diplomacy aimed at reconciling irreconcilable Iraqi elites. As a result, the domestic dialogue has not been serious, not even in this magazine, until the appearance of Simon's analysis.

Serious discussion today must be about how to deal with the repercussions of the tragic error of the invasion.

The key to thinking clearly about it is to give regional stability higher priority than some fantasy victory in Iraq. The first step toward restoring that stability is the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Only then will promising next steps be possible. Simon moves in the direction of such an approach, although not far enough. He shows unambiguously why the United States must withdraw from Iraq, but his hesitant formula for withdrawal risks sustaining the paralysis U.S. strategy now suffers from and could make regional stability far more difficult to restore.

Fear of the chaos that a U.S. withdrawal would catalyze is the psychological block that prevents most observers from assessing the realities clearly. As such observers rightly claim, the United States will be blamed for this chaos, but they overlook the reality that the U.S. military presence now causes much of the chaos and has been doing so since 2003. The United States cannot prevent more chaos by remaining longer. Preventing it is simply not an option. The United States can, however, remove the cause of disorder by withdrawing its forces sooner rather than later. That is the only responsible option.

I was convinced that Simon understood this until he began speaking of "a top-down approach to reconciliation" to be implemented "under UN auspices and led by a credible special envoy." Why should a UN special envoy move into the U.S.-guarded Green Zone as long as insurgents and militias occasionally fire mortar rounds and rockets into it? Some sort of UN-led effort may eventually become possible, but it is not likely as long as U.S. forces remain. And even a UN envoy could not "reconcile" Iraq's warring factions "from the top down."

Simon does understand that the United States' departure will force other countries, especially in Europe, to reconsider their hands-off policies toward Iraq. It will also lead Iraq's neighbors to rethink their hands-on policies. They all want stability there, but some are meddling in ways that exacerbate instability. Once U.S. forces leave, instability may be even less in their interests. Thus, the faster U.S. forces depart, the greater the shifts in other countries' policies will be. A two-year schedule for removing U.S. forces, as Simon proposes, would fail to achieve most of this shock effect.

After recognizing the breakout potential of withdrawal, Simon effectively reembraces strategic paralysis. Otherwise, he would not insist that Iraq's tribal fragmentation must be overcome by means other than civil war and violence. He recognizes that U.S. legitimacy for sponsoring such an effort has been lost -- if it ever existed -- and so he wants to try a multilateral substitute involving the UN. Its prospects for success, however, are dubious in the extreme. If it consists only of Western countries, it will never be seen as legitimate, only as a Crusade in another form. If it includes countries from the region, they are unlikely to agree on fundamental issues about the kind of Iraq they will permit. Moreover, a UN entity's military component would prove far less effective in dealing with insurgents, militias, and the Ministry of Interior's death squads. Its weakness would invite violence, not reduce it. And neighboring countries would support militant resistance for their own interests.

Tribalism will not be subdued in a couple of years, or even a couple of decades. Two well-known British officials in the 1920s, fluent in Arabic and deeply knowledgeable about the Arabs, T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, slowly relinquished their hopes for such an outcome in Iraq. And the fragmentation there today is not just along tribal lines. The larger Sunni-Shiite sectarian divide, although often overemphasized, has been made far more serious as a result of the U.S. occupation and the holding of democratic elections before a political consolidation was achieved. Kurdish separatism is probably as strong as it has ever been. These divides are unlikely to be bridged by any means other than a civil war fought to a decisive conclusion. This reality indicates that Iraq's eventual rulers are not now in the Green Zone, and when they one day occupy the capital, all foreign elements will be gone. Association with U.S. forces contaminates any would-be Iraqi regime. A UN entity would not overcome that handicap; at best, it could only sustain political instability and abet conflict.

Simon also argues that logistical imperatives require at least two years for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. That is probably true if all U.S. weapons and materiel are to be removed, but much of it is not worth the costs of hauling it back to the United States. Vast numbers of trucks and other equipment withdrawn from Kuwait in 1991 have never been used again and have been left in costly storage to rust. At least a thousand five-ton trucks can be found stored in Italy today, unused yet costing money to retain. If the highest priority is given to the withdrawal of personnel, not materiel, the required time can be dramatically shortened.

Other factors favor speed. Retrograde movements in war are risky affairs. They must be made when one has lost the initiative or when one's own forces are poorly deployed, which means the opponent has the advantage. More time favors the opponent even more. More speed reduces his opportunities. Speed would also improve

diplomacy abroad and boost public morale at home. In the very best circumstances, uncertainties abound during strategic withdrawals.

Most critical in the long run is recognizing that the primary U.S. strategic interest in this part of the world was and still is regional stability. That means subordinating the outcome in Iraq to the larger aim. Getting out of the paralysis in Iraq, chaotic or not, is the sine qua non of any sensible strategy for restoring regional stability.

Finally, some kind of rapprochement with Iran is essential. Regional stability from the 1950s to the fall of the shah in 1979 rested on three pillars: cooperative relations with Iran, moderate Arab states, and Israel. That arrangement served the strategic interests, if not always the tactical interests, of all parties. When the United States lost its footing in Iran, U.S. military requirements for maintaining the balance rose dramatically. That explains the rapid buildup and eventual creation of the Central Command during the Carter administration. The only way to reduce U.S. military requirements in the region is to restore the United States' diplomatic straddle between the region's two major conflicts -- the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Persian-Arab conflict. The invasion of Iraq not only destroyed the balance but is now imposing additional military requirements on the United States that cannot be sustained indefinitely.

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