

How to Leave a Stable Iraq

Building on Progress

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Summary: The situation in Iraq is improving. With the right strategy, the United States will eventually be able to draw down troops without sacrificing stability.

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The Iraq war has become one of the most polarizing issues in American politics. Most Democrats, including Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.), want large, early troop cuts; most Republicans, including Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), want U.S. troops to stay until Iraq's stability is guaranteed. Years of bad news from the front have hardened these divisions along partisan lines and embittered many on both sides. Today, however, there is reason to believe that the debate over Iraq can change. A series of positive developments in the past year and a half offers hope that the desire of so many Americans to bring the troops home can be fulfilled without leaving Iraq in chaos. The right approach, in other words, can partly square Obama's goal of redeploying large numbers of U.S. forces sooner rather than later with McCain's goal of ensuring stability in Iraq.

If the prognosis in Iraq were hopelessly grim, it might make sense for the United States to threaten withdrawal, hold its breath, and hope for the best. But the prognosis is now much more promising than it has been in years, making a threat of withdrawal far from necessary. With a degree of patience, the United States can build on a pattern of positive change in Iraq that offers it a chance to draw down troops soon without giving up hope for sustained stability.

The last 18 months have brought major changes in the underlying strategic calculus facing Iraq's main combatants -- undermining the Sunni insurgency, weakening the Shiite militias, severely degrading al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), strengthening the Iraqi security forces (ISF), and creating new, more positive political dynamics and incentives. But these developments have also brought new, if less acute, challenges to the fore -- demanding corresponding changes in U.S. and Iraqi strategy. Simply staying the course will not work under the new conditions in Iraq.

Both to deal with the new problems and to guard against any revival of the old ones, any further troop drawdowns, now that the "surge" is over, should be modest until after Iraq gets through two big rounds of elections -- in late 2008 at the provincial level and in late 2009 at the national level -- which have the potential either to reinforce important gains or to reopen old wounds. But starting in 2010, if current trends continue, the United States may be able to start cutting back its troop presence substantially, possibly even halving the total U.S. commitment by sometime in 2011, without running excessive risks with the stability of Iraq and the wider Persian Gulf region.

HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Most Americans have a mental image of Iraq that is defined by the chaos of 2006. But Iraq today is a very different place than it was two years ago. Overall violence is down at least 80 percent since the surge began, and ethno-sectarian violence -- the kind that seemed to be sucking Iraq into all-out civil war in 2006 -- is down by over 90 percent. Through June, the number of violent civilian deaths has averaged about 700 a month in 2008, a lower rate than in any previous year of the war (with the possible exception of 2003). U.S. military deaths in Iraq have dropped from about 70 a month in early 2007 to about 25 a month now, and the death rate for the ISF has fallen by half, from 200 a month to about 100. Although refugees and internally displaced people are not yet returning home in large numbers, so few Iraqis are now being evicted that the net displacement rate is about zero.

Meanwhile, the three main culprits in the ethno-sectarian violence of 2006 have stood down and agreed to

cease-fires or been crippled by military defeat. Sunni insurgents overwhelmingly switched sides over the course of 2007, signing on to cease-fires with the Iraqi state mostly through the Sons of Iraq program, which now includes over 100,000 participants, who provide local security in exchange for legitimacy and financial support. The Shiite militias, especially Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (also known as Jaish al-Mahdi, or JAM), have seen their position undermined by a combination of Sunni realignment, U.S. and Iraqi military pressure, the increasing independence of splinter and rogue groups, and a backlash against their own parasitic exploitation of the civilians they were ostensibly defending. And the most violent actors -- Iraq's extreme chauvinist Sunni groups and AQI -- have been driven from most of western and central Iraq and are losing their remaining urban havens in the provinces of Diyala, Nineveh, and Salah ad Din thanks to a series of offensives by U.S. and Iraqi forces. AQI will surely continue to be able to precipitate occasional incidents of terrorist violence from these hideouts, but its ability to foment large-scale low-intensity warfare is now hugely diminished.

This remarkable change in Iraq's security situation results from the interaction of AQI's errors, the surge in U.S. troop levels, the growing capacities of the ISF, and the downstream consequences of all of this for the Shiite militias. AQI's first big mistake was bombing the Shiite Askariya shrine in Samarra in February 2006. The attack drew the Shiite militias (many of which had been merely defensive) into the civil war in force and on the offensive, and so began the battle of Baghdad -- a yearlong wave of sectarian violence pitting Sunni insurgents and their AQI allies against JAM and its allies. At the time, Americans saw this wave of bloodshed as a disaster, and in terms of human life it clearly was. But it enabled a later wave of cease-fires by fundamentally changing the Sunnis' strategic calculus. The battle of Baghdad gave the Sunnis a clear view of what an all-out war would really mean, and they did not like what they saw. With U.S. forces playing no decisive role, the Shiite militias overwhelmed the Sunni combatants in neighborhood after neighborhood. By goading the Shiite militias into open warfare, AQI had triggered a head-to-head fight in which the Sunnis were decisively beaten by the Shiite forces they had assumed they could dominate.

AQI's second mistake was alienating its Sunni allies. AQI treated Sunnis it judged insufficiently devout or committed with unspeakable brutality and appropriated Sunni smuggling networks in Anbar Province for its own use, leaving tribal sheiks impoverished. Once the battle of Baghdad had demonstrated to the Sunnis that AQI could offer no real protection against the Shiites, these costs no longer seemed worth it. By late 2006, the Sunnis had realized that they faced defeat unless they found new allies -- and they turned to the United States while they still could.

The surge, and especially its new emphasis on the provision of direct population security by U.S. forces, enabled the Sunnis to survive this realignment in the face of AQI's inevitable counterattacks. In Anbar, U.S. firepower, combined with a persistent troop presence and Sunni knowledge of whom and where to strike, essentially expelled AQI from the province. News of this "Anbar model" spread rapidly among disaffected Sunnis elsewhere. In just a few months, the result was a large-scale stand-down of the Sunni insurgency and the decimation of AQI throughout western and central Iraq.

Cease-fires with Sunnis in turn facilitated cease-fires with key Shiite militias. Sadr's JAM had originally arisen to defend Shiite civilians from Sunni violence. But as that violence waned and resentment of JAM militia thugs (many of whom seemed mostly concerned with extorting personal profit) grew, Shiite support for JAM plummeted -- especially since the U.S. military buildup in Baghdad and the cease-fires with the Sunnis gave the United States enough troop strength to offer the Shiites security without gangsterism. Sadr, his popularity declining and his control over his own fighters increasingly tenuous, chose to stand down rather than confront the strengthened U.S. force.

The net result of all this was a profound change in the underlying strategic calculus in Iraq -- setting off a virtuous cycle in which decreasing sectarian violence weakens the hand of prospective sectarian warriors, which helps further reduce violence. From 2003 to 2006, the self-interest of the key internal actors lay in warfare. By the middle of 2007, the key players saw their interests as best served by peace.

It is worth noting that separation resulting from sectarian cleansing was not the chief cause of the reduction in violence, as some have claimed. Much of Iraq remains intermingled but increasingly peaceful. And whereas a cleansing argument implies that casualties should have gone down in Baghdad, for example, as mixed neighborhoods were cleansed, casualties actually went up consistently during the sectarian warfare of 2006. Cleansing may have reduced the violence somewhat in some places, but it was not the main cause.

AN ARMY OF ITS OWN

As the violence declined, two big changes in the Iraqi state took place -- one military, one political. On the military side, the ISF have grown much more capable than they were in 2006. There are now some 559,000 security personnel, with about 230,000 in the Iraqi army alone, and those ranks are growing by at least 100,000 new soldiers and police a year. Some 55 percent of the units rank in the top two tiers of readiness, according to U.S. assessment methods, which have been improved to include evaluations of actual battlefield performance. (Even these units, however, still need significant coalition help in some areas, particularly for more complex operations.)

The size and competence of these Iraqi forces have allowed U.S. commanders to maintain population security even as U.S. troop strength has declined significantly since the surge. With more troops to cover the battlefield, whole Iraqi battalions can be pulled off the battlefield temporarily for training, further increasing their capabilities. At the same time, the United States has greatly expanded its advisory effort. The typical Iraqi division now has over 100 U.S. Army and Marine advisers, who stay with it even in battle, and Iraqi units are often teamed up with U.S. units of comparable or smaller size. The greater availability of troops enables many of these teams to begin deployments in quiet sectors, building both skills and working relationships before being sent to high-threat areas.

Just as important as the ISF's size and technical proficiency are the major changes that have taken place in the ISF's politics and leadership. Sectarian, corrupt, incompetent, and turncoat officers have been removed. Aggressive recruitment and new amnesty and de-Baathification ordinances have led to increases in both the number of Sunnis, especially in the officer corps, and the number of people with prior military experience in the forces. Now, about 80 percent of the Iraqi army's officers and 50 percent of its rank and file are veterans of Saddam Hussein's military, and one of the most capable units in the Iraqi army, the First Brigade of the First Infantry Division, is 60 percent Sunni.

The cooling of Iraq's underlying sectarian tensions has interacted synergistically with these efforts. In an ongoing ethno-sectarian war, sectarian officers can be purged, but their replacements will face the same pressures, making real change difficult. With ethno-sectarian violence in remission, the replacements for purged sectarians are now much better able to resist militia pressure or political interference. There are still problematic elements in the ISF, and a renewal of ethno-sectarian violence would severely test allegiances. But declining ethno-sectarian violence enables sectarianism to be policed more quickly, consistently, and harshly than in the past. (A U.S. Special Forces officer who served as an advisory-team commander in 2007 and 2008 noted that collaboration with one of the militant sectarian groups was one of the few offenses that typically resulted in an officer's dismissal or imprisonment.) The net result has been important progress, which has been reflected in improved public perception of the ISF: the percentage of Iraqis who did not believe that the Iraqi army was sectarian, according to polling conducted by the U.S.-led coalition, jumped from 39 percent in June 2007 to 54 percent in June 2008.

The Iraqi National Police provides another critical example of this progress. As recently as the fall of 2006, the national police force was a disaster; a commission led by retired Marine General James Jones went so far as to recommend its dissolution. It was infested with Shiite militias as well as every variety of coward and criminal, and police units often acted as anti-Sunni hit squads. But a new commander, Major General Hussein al-Wadi, has turned the force around. He fired both division commanders, all eight brigade commanders, and 18 of 27 battalion commanders. He instituted new vetting and screening measures, enrolled every member of his forces in the massive biometric data system, recruited Sunnis and Kurds into the force, and retrained every police formation. Today, the national police officer corps has roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shiites, and its rank and file is 25 percent Sunni -- higher than the Sunnis' share of the overall population. Police units are now capable of supporting army units in combat zones, and popular trust in the police is growing. According to coalition polling, the percentage of Iraqis who believed that the Iraqi police were sectarian fell from 64 percent in June 2007 to 52 percent a year later, and the percentage who believed they were corrupt fell from 63 percent to 50 percent.

Despite such steps, the Iraqis are not yet able to stand on their own. They remain dependent on U.S. and British troops to assist with planning and provide logistical and fire support. (The "tooth-to-tail ratio" for the Iraqi army -- the ratio of combat to support troops -- is 75-25, the reverse of what it is for the U.S. Army.) Properly advised and partnered Iraqi formations perform far better than units without such support. In the offensive against JAM

in Basra this past spring, for instance, the First Brigade and the 26th Brigade, which had long fought with U.S. marines and were deployed with Marine advisers, performed well, whereas the brigades without U.S. advisers and partners did poorly, with one, the new 52nd Brigade, effectively collapsing in combat. The Basra campaign would have ended in disaster if not for support from coalition firepower and the arrival of ISF units with U.S. military- and police-training teams. In short, the ISF have improved to the point where they have become a powerful partner to U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, but they will require outside support for at least some time to come.

THE EMERGING POLITICS OF IRAQ

Iraqi politics are changing as well. Tensions, mistrust, and competitive pressures remain severe. But thanks to reduced violence, diminished sectarian warfare, weakened militias, and the prospect of upcoming elections for which Sunnis and others who boycotted the last round are expected to turn out in force, the old patterns of Iraqi political life are giving way to new ones. This moment of change brings risk and uncertainty, but those old patterns were so clearly dysfunctional that this transition offers an important opportunity.

During the years of severe ethno-sectarian violence, the three most influential political entities in Iraq -- the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Sadrist movement, and the Fadhila Party, all three of which are Shiite -- owed their influence to their powerful militias, which could provide protection to those who needed it and intimidate those who did not. But over the past 18 months, these militias have been significantly weakened. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's Badr Corps and Fadhila's militia have been integrating into the ISF for years. Today, they have largely vanished as independent militias using violence to advance their own political agendas and undermine central government rule. Meanwhile, JAM cadres, increasingly rejected by the Shiite population, which has come to see them more and more as members of predatory criminal gangs rather than as a necessary defense against Sunni attacks, have been routed on the battlefield or driven underground or into Iran. Communities once dependent on JAM now welcome ISF units as sources of law and order.

Sadr himself remains a popular figure among Iraq's downtrodden Shiite communities, if only because of his family ties and perceived nationalism. But he appears increasingly out of step with his erstwhile constituents. His long sojourn in Iran has removed him from day-to-day management of his movement and weakened his nationalist credentials. Sadr's calls for protests against the government now draw only a few thousand people out onto the streets, in contrast to the massive crowds he could bring out in the past. JAM cadres are increasingly frustrated with Sadr's lack of leadership. And U.S. officials report that more and more Sadrist officials have begun meeting with them in defiance of Sadr's orders. The Sadrist movement may be able to regroup -- especially if the government fails to provide services and jobs, which JAM has sought to offer its supporters -- but it is much weaker than it once was.

For their part, the Sunnis seem not only willing but also determined to participate in the government of Iraq, in ways they have not up to now. Most Sunni leaders have concluded that boycotting the 2005 elections was a mistake, which ended up ceding to the worst of the Shiite militias complete control of the central government and many provincial governments. Now, they are determined to participate: in the 2008 provincial elections in order to regain control over the governments of their provinces, and in the 2009 parliamentary elections in the hope of either taking part in a new government or at least preventing their rivals from depriving them of their fair share of Iraq's riches (now flowing from Baghdad to the provinces much more than before but still not enough). In many places, Sunni tribal leaders will try to supplant incumbents from existing Sunni political movements, many of whom are not particularly popular.

Now that the Iraqi people are rejecting the militias, the parties that had long served as façades for them are scrambling to be seen as helping to improve the government's capacity to deliver security and essential services, in the hope that voters will forget how badly the parties hindered that process before 2007. (Most of the established political parties are afraid of losing big in the coming elections, as voters turn to different leaders in an attempt to spur change.) The result has been a series of important political compromises among Iraq's senior leaders: in December 2007 and February 2008, they passed a budget law, a new de-Baathification law, an amnesty for former insurgents, a pensions law, and a provincial powers act that is an important part of an ongoing decentralization process.

Together, all of these developments raise the potential of creating a new and better political order in Iraq. For now, there is still more potential than realization. Legislative progress on reconciliation continues to be slow,

factional and sectarian differences remain divisive, and there is still no new political alignment or movement with the power to bridge these divides. Moreover, elections have had a very mixed track record in Iraq: as in many emerging democracies, electoral incentives can lead to instability as well as progress. But recent changes in Iraq's underlying military and political dynamics have at least broken the pattern of dysfunctional politics that has paralyzed Iraq in recent years. And this creates an opening that, if the Iraqis and the Americans can exploit it, could lead to a very different pattern -- one of positive political development and compromise.

Some argue that to do this, the United States must withdraw, or threaten to withdraw, its troops. They believe this would force Iraqi leaders to put their differences aside and reach a grand compromise on reconciliation, because Iraqis would need to solve their own problems either without a U.S. military crutch or in order to preserve a U.S. presence as a reward for reconciliation. There is some merit to this logic. It is true that the presence of U.S. forces reduces the stakes for Iraqi politicians, since it limits violence. And if Iraq faced chaos otherwise, a threat of withdrawal would certainly be worth trying. But withdrawal is a risky gambit. And progress is now being made without it: violence is down dramatically, and political change, although slow, is under way. Threatening withdrawal might speed this progress, but today it seems more likely to derail it instead.

Reconciliation will require all the major Iraqi factions to accept painful compromises simultaneously. If any major party holds out and decides to fight rather than accept risky sacrifices for the larger good, then its rivals will find it very hard to hold their own followers to the terms of a cease-fire -- likely plunging Iraq back into open warfare. If reconciliation can be done slowly, via small steps, then each stage of compromise is likely to be tolerable, with the risk of one holdout party exploiting the others kept to a manageable level. In contrast, if reconciliation must be done quickly, with a grand bargain rapidly negotiated in the face of an imminent U.S. withdrawal, the necessary compromises will be great -- making them extremely risky for all parties. In a factionalized, poorly institutionalized, immature political system such as Iraq's, many parties would doubt their rivals' motives and could refuse to make such large and risky compromises. The Iraqis, out of fear for their own safety, might well respond to a threatened U.S. withdrawal by preparing for renewed warfare. Rather than persuading the Iraqis to accept huge risks together, a threat of withdrawal would more likely produce the opposite effect.

Leverage to encourage compromise is important, as advocates of withdrawal argue, and U.S. policy has up to now erred in rejecting conditionality for U.S. aid and cooperation. But threatening withdrawal is hardly the only or the best way of gaining such leverage. Any element of U.S. policy can be made conditional -- economic assistance, military aid, the U.S. position in negotiations over the legal status of U.S. forces -- by offering benefits only in exchange for Iraqi cooperation. Withdrawal is the biggest potential threat that Washington can issue, but it is also a blunt instrument with great potential to damage both parties' interests. In an environment of increasing stability, the United States can now hope to succeed with subtler methods.

NEW PROBLEMS, NOT NO PROBLEMS

If the United States and its coalition partners are to keep Iraq moving toward stability, they must still overcome a range of new challenges. These problems promise to be generally less daunting than those faced at the beginning of 2007, but they could still plunge Iraq back into civil war. Iraq may no longer be a failed state, but it is certainly, as Emma Sky, chief political adviser to the U.S. military leadership in Iraq, puts it, a "fragile state," one that must become much stronger if it is to stand on its own and not fall back into chaos and war. Achieving this will require tackling a number of second-order issues, which are growing in visibility as the first-order problems of rampant sectarian and insurgent violence abate. There are a great many such second-order problems, but it is worth highlighting some of the most important.

First, there is the challenge of integrating the Sons of Iraq into the ISF and the Iraqi government. The stand-down of the Sunni insurgency under the Sons of Iraq program has been a critical element in the reduction in violence. The program has not "armed the Sunnis" for renewed warfare, as American critics have often claimed -- the Sons of Iraq hardly lacked weapons when they were fighting as insurgents, and they have received none from the United States. The real problem is different. Most Sons of Iraq groups want to be integrated into the government security forces -- a move they see as the best guarantee that a Shiite regime will not use the ISF to tyrannize them. But Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government has been dragging its feet, out of fear of empowering Sunni rivals. Some mix of security-sector and civilian employment must be found for the Sons of Iraq to satisfy their economic needs -- and their security concerns vis-à-vis Iraq's Shiite majority. As with other needed intersectarian compromises in Iraq, this will require hard bargaining. But the increasing stability, along

with the security that the improving ISF give to the Maliki regime, offers a reason to believe that such bargaining can eventually succeed if the United States stands firm.

The Sons of Iraq system is also highly decentralized, with over 200 separate groups under contract. Many are wary and distrustful of rivals, as are most Iraqis. Violations of cease-fire terms and contract provisions are inevitable with so many actors and so much tension; active enforcement of the terms is therefore essential to keep the peace. This is typical of the early years of negotiated settlements to civil wars, which commonly require outside peacekeepers to stabilize cease-fires. Until the Sunnis fully trust the ISF, this role will largely fall to the U.S. military -- and, in fact, many U.S. brigades already spend much of their time involved in peacekeeping duties to enforce the terms of Sons of Iraq contracts. This cease-fire policing function is likely to be an increasingly important mission for U.S. forces in Iraq.

Returning refugees and internally displaced people are another important second-order problem. The first-order problem of the civil war created about four million refugees and internally displaced people. Some of them are now starting to return home, and many more can be expected to follow if security continues to improve. The returnees often have neither jobs nor homes to return to. Although trying to put every family back in its original home would be simply impossible -- in many cases, the homes of returning refugees or displaced people are occupied by others whose homes were destroyed -- there need to be large-scale resettlement programs for the displaced. One solution would be a government voucher program to help people build new houses, perhaps in their original provinces but not necessarily their original cities or neighborhoods. Iraq should fund most of any such program, but American and international advisers can help design the program -- and then help in the critical tasks of implementing it fairly across sectarian lines and protecting the populations trying to relocate. This approach would have the added virtue of sparking a construction boom and thereby helping reduce unemployment (one of Iraq's chief economic problems). Without such measures, considerable violence -- both by and against the returnees -- could ensue, perhaps resurrecting the militias as the champions of the dispossessed.

The Iraqi central government's administrative capacity and the country's economic progress still lag far behind the gains in security, and there is still much to be done before Iraq has a mature political system and a productive economy capable of meeting the Iraqi people's basic needs. The Iraqi government has proved unable to spend more than a modest fraction of its own revenue, leaving the Iraqis largely unable to benefit from record-high oil prices. Unemployment is between 30 and 40 percent, and there has been little documented progress in providing health care, education, sanitation, clean water, or most other services. Money and goods are finally moving across the country, but they are moving very slowly. Without an electronic banking system, it is difficult to transfer funds from the central government to the provinces, where they can be more effectively spent.

Credible public administration is important for sustaining improved security. Some recent policy changes are steps in the right direction. As part of the surge strategy, the United States increased its support to Iraq's provincial governments, which are better able than the central government to develop the capacity to deliver essential services. U.S. civilian and military personnel, most deployed in new Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (EPRTs), have fanned out into the countryside to help Iraqi officials build local and provincial governance structures and utilities. Training programs for civil servants from provincial governments were established in Baghdad and Erbil to complement the work of the teams in the field. Likewise, the United States' economic-assistance strategy has shifted from an emphasis on massive U.S.-directed and U.S.-designed infrastructure programs to more effective local initiatives, such as microloans administered by the PRTs and the EPRTs (which are now nearly fully staffed).

There are signs that things are starting to improve on the economic front. U.S., Iraqi, British, and UN officials all say that there are more markets opening up, more businesses starting or reopening, and more traffic on the streets than in the past few years. In an area of Iraq south of Baghdad once so violent that it was known as "the Triangle of Death," 255 small businesses were opened in the first five months of 2008. Still, on economic issues, the glass remains less than half full, and the delivery of essential government services remains an important challenge.

A final second-order problem worth noting is the thorny issue of Kirkuk. Preventing Kirkuk from becoming a flashpoint will require compromises on a range of difficult issues. The city and its environs, once heavily Kurdish, were "Arabized" by Saddam in an effort to weaken the Kurdish hold on Iraq's northern oil-producing

region. Many Kurds were displaced by the influx of Arabs, and now, in much of the city, two different families claim every house. A solution might involve giving most Kurds their homes back or creating a voucher system to enable them to build new ones. Ensuring that all of Iraq's major groups are comfortable with a settlement on oil-revenue sharing and oil exploration will also be critical for Kirkuk. A fair resolution on oil requires making future oil wealth a national asset to be shared equally by all Iraqis. Resolving the problem of Kirkuk is likely to take considerable time, especially since any rapid resolution might produce considerable bloodshed. But the good news is that the Kurdish leadership recognizes the difficulties inherent in amicably resolving the Kirkuk problem and has so far supported the UN process established to handle it.

THE PROBLEM WITH POLITICS AS USUAL

As Iraq moves toward stability, other problems will start to emerge. Iraq risks becoming an ordinary Arab state -- hardly a rosy prospect given the horrendous political and economic record of other Arab states in the region over the past 60 years. As the United States and its partners work on such basic challenges as resettling refugees and improving government capacity, they must also try to prevent the fragile new Iraq from falling prey to the kinds of problems that have befallen so many other Arab states.

The most pressing risk is that the much-improved ISF, an increasingly competent and self-confident institution in a state of otherwise weak institutions, could turn to praetorianism. Even a failed coup attempt could have serious consequences, rekindling sectarian rivalries and causing the ISF themselves to fragment along sectarian lines. The United States' continued military presence can be an important deterrent in this regard; a rapid U.S. withdrawal could greatly increase the risk of a coup.

It is also possible that a clique of politicians aligned with the security services could take over the government from within and then proceed to hoard its vast energy wealth and parcel out the rest of the state to organized crime. The ties between increasingly prevalent organized crime and many Iraqi political leaders, the stronger ISF at their disposal, and Iraq's oil wealth make this a very real danger. Still another possibility would be Iraq's falling into a "Palestinian model," in which the central government fails to provide essential services and steals the country's wealth. That could create fertile ground for Hamas-like militias to provide many services (as JAM was attempting to do before the ISF displaced it).

None of these outcomes would bring sustainable stability to Iraq, and all would risk reigniting the civil war. The second-order problems thus demand increasing attention as the first-order problem of ethno-sectarian violence ebbs.

The United States must also contend with Iran's role. The war in Iraq is ultimately about Iraq and the Iraqis, but Iranian money, weapons, and training for Iraqi militias and guerrillas are clearly exacerbating Iraq's internal problems. How committed Iran is to this policy of malign interference, however, is unclear. The Iranian leadership is not entirely of one mind regarding its goals or strategies in Iraq, and the events of the past year and a half (particularly the weakening of the Shiite militias) appear to have shattered whatever consensus it once had. Iran has also done some things that could be beneficial -- such as trying to prevent fighting among the Shiite militias -- and the fact that it has done them to serve its own interests should not blind the United States to Iran's potential to be helpful in some regards.

Handling Iran will require a joint U.S.-Iraqi effort to engage Iran in a dialogue, in the hope of making Tehran more of a partner in the reconstruction effort. The Iranians need to be encouraged to do more of what is helpful and less of what is unhelpful, and the best route to that is to stop trying to exclude them from the process altogether. For instance, the U.S. and Iraqi governments should offer the Iranians a permanent liaison presence in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, allowing them to be briefed and to offer advice on developments relevant to their interests. Better still would be to act where possible in ways that take Iran's advice into account to reassure Tehran that it can secure its most basic interests without having to fight for them. Even a failed attempt at dialogue would underscore to the Iraqis that Iran is acting nefariously in their country -- making the Iraqis more tolerant of decisive government action against Iranian-sponsored militias and encouraging Iraqi, rather than U.S., action against Iranian arms smuggling and other types of interference.

WHITHER THE U.S. PRESENCE?

For now, U.S. troops are playing an important role in sustaining the fragile hope and security in Iraq. But

current troop levels cannot be maintained forever. How soon and how deep can a drawdown be without undermining the prospects for stability?

Exact projections of troop requirements are difficult to make, but current trends suggest that the United States should be able to cut its presence in Iraq substantially -- perhaps by half -- over the course of 2010 and 2011. Doing so would be contingent on making further progress against the insurgency, keeping the peace during the upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections, and continuing to assist the Iraqis as they work toward healing their sectarian divisions. A destabilizing election, a renewal of sectarian violence sparked by badly handed refugee returns or poor resolution of the Kirkuk dispute, or more destabilizing activity by Iran would change this timing. Any schedule for withdrawal will be subject to the inherent uncertainty of a conflict as complex as the one in Iraq.

Still, one possible model if current trends continue is provided by the recent developments in Anbar Province, which has famously gone from being the worst area of the country in 2006 to nearly its best today. In 2007, the United States had 15 maneuver battalions in the province; today it has only six. Now, U.S. marines participate in less than half of all patrols, and their aim is to drop that down to only 25 percent soon. Several hundred marines remain to advise the two Iraqi army divisions in Anbar, and a sizable number of Americans are working with the Iraqi police there. They will remain necessary for some time, as will further U.S. support of efforts to patrol Anbar's border with Syria to keep out foreign terrorists (who continue to enter Iraq at the rate of about 30 a month, down by two-thirds from earlier estimates but still a worrying figure). The United States will also have to continue to provide key "combat enablers" -- aerial surveillance and air, artillery, and armor support -- to Iraqi forces in battle. But the ISF are now providing most of the infantry and policing manpower in Anbar themselves, and U.S. forces there will soon be less than half the size they were in 2007, without any increase in violence or instability.

Another potential insight, despite the imperfect analogy, comes from the U.S. experience in Bosnia and Kosovo. A key to stability in the Balkans has been the continued presence of outside peacekeepers to enforce the deals that ended the fighting -- much like U.S. forces are now doing in Iraq (but were not before). Within four years of the cease-fires in Bosnia and Kosovo, peacekeeping forces in both places had been reduced by about half without causing any resumption of violence. And over the succeeding years, the foreign troop presence fell even further, with a token force of less than ten percent of its original strength remaining in Bosnia today.

Drawdowns on this scale in Iraq cannot be rushed without serious risk. For now, a substantial U.S. presence is essential to stabilize a system of local cease-fires and maintain an environment in which gradual compromise can proceed without gambling on a single grand bargain among wary rivals in Baghdad. This is not to say that today's troop count can or should be maintained until 2010 -- modest near-term withdrawals to below the pre-surge levels will be necessary to establish a sustainable posture. The 130,000 troops and 15 brigades of the pre-2007 force may be too large to maintain into 2009 without unacceptable damage to the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps. But if the United States can maintain a substantial force in Iraq through the critical period of the next two to three years, there is now a credible basis for believing that major drawdowns after that can be enabled by success rather than mandated by failure.

Of course, much could still go wrong. And if an electoral crisis or some other event returns Iraq to civil war, it would be very hard to justify another troop surge to try to stabilize Iraq. Containment -- withdrawing all U.S. troops while working to prevent the chaos in Iraq from spilling over to the rest of the region -- would then become the United States' only realistic option.

But today, there is a real chance that U.S. persistence in the short term can secure a stable Iraq and enable major withdrawals in 2010 and 2011 without undermining that stability. The American people -- to say nothing of the servicemen and servicewomen who are fighting -- have every right to be tired of this war and to question whether it should have ever been fought. But understandable frustration with past mistakes, sorrow over lives lost, anger at resources wasted, and fatigue with a war that has at times seemed endless must not blind Americans to the major change of the last 18 months. The developments of 2007 and 2008 have created new possibilities. If the United States is willing to seize them, it could yet emerge from Mesopotamia with something that may still fall well short of Eden on the Euphrates but that prevents the horrors of all-out civil war, avoids the danger of a wider war, and yields a stability that endures as Americans come home.

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