Escaping the Trap: Why the United States Must Leave Iraq
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Optimism about the U.S. mission in Iraq has faded dramatically in the past few months. The bipartisan Iraq Study group conceded that the situation in Iraq was "grave and deteriorating." The Pentagon's report to Congress in November 2006 paints a similarly dismal picture, with attacks on U.S. troops, Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi civilians at record levels.

Yet proponents of the war refuse to admit what is becoming increasingly obvious: Washington's Iraq occupation and democratization mission is failing, and there is little realistic prospect that its fortunes will improve. Something much more dramatic than a modest course correction is needed.

It is essential to ask the administration and its hawkish backers at what point they will admit that the costs of this venture have become unbearable. How much longer are they willing to have our troops stay in Iraq? Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? How many more tax dollars are they willing to pour into Iraq? Another $300 billion? $600 billion? $1 trillion? And most crucial of all, how many more American lives are they willing to sacrifice? Two thousand? Five thousand? Ten thousand?

Proponents of the mission avoid addressing such unpleasant questions. Instead, they act as though victory in Iraq can be achieved merely through the exercise of will power.

The Dire Security Situation in Iraq

Whether or not one describes it as a civil war, the security situation in Iraq is extraordinarily violent and chaotic. Moreover, the nature of the violence in that country has shifted since the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of Shia Islam's holiest sites. The Sunni-led insurgency against U.S. and British occupation forces and the security forces of the U.S.-sponsored Iraqi government is still a significant factor, but it is no longer the dominant one. The turmoil now centers around sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites. Baghdad is the epicenter of that strife, but it has erupted in other parts of the country as well. The Iraq Study Group noted that four of Iraq's 18 provinces are "highly insecure." Those provinces account for about 40 percent of the country's population.

A November 2006 UN report highlights the extent of the growing bloodshed. The

carnage is now running at approximately 120 victims each day. This is occurring in a country of barely 26 million people. A comparable pace in the United States would be a horrifying 1,400 deaths per day–or nearly 500,000 per year. If violence between feuding political or ethno-religious factions was consuming that many American lives, there would be little debate about whether the United States was experiencing a civil war.

In addition to the casualties in Iraq, there are other human costs. The United Nations estimates that some 1.6 million people have been displaced inside Iraq (i.e., they are "internal refugees") as a result of the fighting. Another 1.8 million have fled the country entirely, mostly to Jordan and Syria. Moreover, the pace of the exodus is accelerating. Refugees are now leaving Iraq at the rate of nearly 3,000 a day. The bulk of those refugees are middle and upper class families. Indeed, there are affluent neighborhoods in Baghdad and other cities that now resemble ghost towns.

The Complex Nature of the Violence

The mounting chaos in Iraq is not simply a case of Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence, although that is the dominant theme. The Iraq Study Group notes the complexity of Iraq's security turmoil. "In Kirkuk, the struggle is between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. In Basra and the south, the violence is largely an intra-Shia struggle." Implicitly rejecting the arguments of those who contend that the violence is primarily a Sunni-Shia conflict confined to Baghdad, the members of the commission point out that "most of Iraq's cities have a sectarian mix and are plagued by persistent violence. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warns of that conflicts in the various regions could be "Shi'ite versus Shi'ite and Sunni versus Sunni."

There is also mounting evidence that the majority of Iraqis no longer want U.S. troops in their country. The bottom line is that the United States is mired in a country that is already in the early stages of an exceedingly complex, multi-sided civil war, and where all significant factions save one (the Kurds) want American troops to leave. That is an untenable situation.

Illusory Solution–Send More Troops

Increasing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq by 20,000 or so is a futile attempt to salvage a mission that has gone terribly wrong. In all likelihood, it would merely increase the number of casualties–both American and Iraqi--over the short term while having little long-term impact on the security environment. Moreover, the magnitude of the proposed buildup falls far short of the numbers needed to give the occupation forces a realistic prospect of suppressing the violence. Experts on counterinsurgency strategies have consistently concluded that at least 10 soldiers per 1,000 population are required to have a sufficient impact. Indeed, some experts have argued that in cases where armed resistance is intense and pervasive (which certainly seems to apply to

Iraq), deployments of 20 soldiers per thousand may be needed.

Given Iraq's population (26 million) such a mission would require the deployment of at least 260,000 ground forces (an increase of 115,000 from current levels) and probably as many as 520,000. Even the lower requirement will strain the U.S. Army and Marine Corps to the breaking point. Yet a lesser deployment would have no realistic chance to get the job done. A limited "surge" of additional troops is the latest illusory panacea offered by the people who brought us the Iraq quagmire in the first place. It is an idea that should be rejected.

Consequences of Leaving

Proponents of staying in Iraq offer several reasons why a prompt withdrawal would be bad for the United States. Those arguments vary in terms of plausibility. All of them, though, are ultimately deficient as a reason for keeping U.S. troops in Iraq.

Allegation: Al-Qaeda Would Take Over Iraq

Administration officials and other supporters of the war have warned repeatedly that a "premature" withdrawal of U.S. forces would enable Al-Qaeda to turn Iraq into a sanctuary to plot and launch attacks against the United States and other Western countries. But Al-Qaeda taking over Iraq is an extremely improbable scenario. The Iraq Study Group put the figure of foreign fighters at only 1,300, a relatively small component of the Sunni insurgency against U.S. forces. It strains credulity to imagine 1,300 fighters (and foreigners at that) taking over and controlling a country of 26 million people.

The challenge for Al-Qaeda would be even more daunting than those raw numbers suggest. The organization does have some support among the Sunni Arabs in Iraq, but opinion even among that segment of the population is divided. A September 2006 poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland found that 94 percent of Sunnis had a somewhat or highly unfavorable attitude toward Al Qaeda. As the violence of Al Qaeda attacks has mounted, and the victims are increasingly Iraqis, not Americans, many Sunnis have turned against the terrorists. There have even been a growing number of reports during the past year of armed conflicts between Iraqi Sunnis and foreign fighters.

The PIPA poll also showed that 98 percent of Shiite respondents and 100 percent of Kurdish respondents had somewhat or very unfavorable views of Al Qaeda. The notion that a Shiite-Kurdish-dominated government would tolerate Iraq becoming a safe haven for Al Qaeda is improbable on its face. And even if U.S. troops left Iraq, the successor government would continue to be dominated by the Kurds and Shiites, since they make up more than 80 percent of Iraq's population and, in marked contrast to the situation under Saddam Hussein, they now control the military and police. That doesn't suggest a reliable safe haven for Al Qaeda.

Allegation: The Terrorists Would Be Emboldened Worldwide

In urging the United States to persevere in Iraq, President Bush has warned that an early military withdrawal would encourage Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Weak U.S. responses to challenges over the previous quarter century, especially in Lebanon and Somalia, had emboldened such people, Bush argues. Hawkish pundits have made similar allegations.

It is a curious line of argument with ominous implications, for it assumes that the United States should have stayed in both countries, despite the military debacles there. The mistake, according to that logic, was not the original decision to intervene but the decision to limit American losses and terminate the missions. That is a classic case of learning the wrong lessons from history.

Yes, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups apparently concluded that the Lebanon and Somalia episodes showed that U.S. leaders and the American people have no stomach for enduring murky missions that entail significant casualties. They are likely to draw a similar lesson if the United States withdraws from Iraq without an irrefutable triumph. That is why it is so imperative to be cautious about a decision to intervene in the first place. Military missions should not be undertaken unless there are indisputably vital American security interests at stake.

A decision to withdraw and leave Iraq to its own fate is not without adverse consequences. America's terrorist adversaries will portray a pull-out as a defeat for U.S. policy. But the cost of staying on indefinitely in a dire security environment is even worse for our country. President Bush and his advisors need to consider the possibility that the United States might stay in Iraq for many years to come and still not achieve its policy goals. And the costs, both in blood and treasure, continue to mount.

Allegation: The Conflict Will Spill Over Iraq's Borders and Create Regional Chaos

That concern does have some validity. The ingredients are in place for a regional Sunni-Shia "proxy war." Predominantly Shiite Iran has already taken a great interest in political and military developments in its western neighbor. Indeed, Washington has repeatedly accused Tehran of interfering in Iraq. There is little doubt that Iran wants to see a Shiite-controlled government in Baghdad and would react badly if it appeared that Iraq's Sunni minority might be poised to regain power and once again subjugate the Shiite majority. The current Iraqi government is quite friendly to Iran, and Tehran can be expected to take steps to protect the new-found influence it enjoys in Baghdad.

But Iraq's other neighbors are apprehensive about the specter of a Shiite-controlled Iraq. Saudi Arabia, in particular, regards the prospect of such a state on its northern border as anathema, worrying about the impact on its own Shia minority–which is concentrated in the principal oil-producing region. There are indications that wealthy Saudis are already providing funds to Sunni forces in Iraq.

A regional Sunni-Shiite proxy war in Iraq would turn the Bush administration's policy there into even more of a debacle than it has already become. Even worse, Iraq's neighbors could be drawn in as direct participants in the fighting. Washington should take steps to head off those dangers.

Probably the best approach would be for the United States to convene a regional conference that included (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 the Iraqi turmoil mushrooming into a regional armed struggle that ultimately would not be in the best interests of any country involved. Ideally, that realization might lead to a commitment by the neighboring states to refrain from–or at least bound the extent of--meddling in the escalating violence in Iraq

Ultimately, though, maintaining a U.S. military occupation of Iraq to forestall a possible regional proxy war is simply too high a price to pay, both in money spent and American lives sacrificed.

Allegation: Leaving Iraq Would Betray a Moral Obligation to the Iraqi People.

In addition to their other objections, opponents of withdrawal protest that we will leave Iraq in chaos, and that would be an immoral action on the part of the United States. Even some critics of the war have been susceptible to that argument, invoking the so-called Pottery Barn principle: "You broke it, you bought it."

There are two major problems with that argument. First, unless some restrictions are put in place, the obligation is seemingly open-ended. There is little question that chaos might increase in Iraq after U.S. forces leave, but advocates of staying the course do not explain how the United States can prevent the contending factions in Iraq from fighting the civil war they already seem to have started. At least, no one has explained how the United States can restore the peace there at anything resembling a reasonable cost in American blood and treasure.

Leaving aside the very real possibility that the job of building a stable democracy might never be done, the moral obligation thesis begs a fundamental question: What about the moral obligation of the U.S. government to its own soldiers and to the American people? There is clearly an obligation not to waste either American lives American tax dollars. We are doing both in Iraq. Staying the course is not a moral strategy; it is the epitome of an immoral one.

The Consequences of Staying in Iraq

Leaving Iraq is clearly not cost-free, but the costs (both tangible and intangible) of a prompt exit must be measured against the costs of staying the course. Moreover, even if the United States absorbs the costs of a prolonged mission, there is no certainty that anything

resembling victory resides at the end of that effort. Indeed, most of the indicators suggest that we would be merely delaying defeat.

Damage to America's Standing in the World

Even the September 2006 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq conceded that the U.S. occupation of Iraq had served as a focal point and inspiration for Muslim extremists. Equally worrisome, it had also served as a training arena for such militants to hone their military and terrorist skills. An Al Qaeda letter intercepted by the U.S. military indicates that the organization itself regards a continued U.S. military presence and, consequently, a long war in Iraq as a boon to its cause.

A December 2006 Zogby poll of populations in five Arab nations reveals just how much anti-U.S. sentiment has increased throughout that region. Opinions of the United States, which were already rather negative, have grown significantly worse in the past year.

Outside the Arab world, there also has been a hardening of attitudes toward the United States. Even among long-standing friends and allies (in such places as Europe and East Asia), the United States is viewed in a significantly more negative light. The longer we stay in Iraq, the worse those problems will become.

Straining the All-Volunteer Military

Even some hawks are concerned about the negative impact of the Iraq mission on the all-volunteer force (AVF). They should be concerned. In December 2006, Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, the Army's chief of staff, bluntly told a House committee that the active-duty Army "will break" unless there was a permanent increase in force structure. And that is before any contemplated additional deployments to Iraq.

The military leaders are not exaggerating. Already the Army has struggled to meet its recruiting goals, even though it has diluted the standards for new recruits, including by issuing waivers in cases where there is evidence of criminal behavior or mental illness. Indeed, the Iraq occupation has been sustained to this point only through extraordinary exertions, including an unprecedented number of "stop loss" orders, preventing military personnel from returning to civilian life when their terms of enlistment are up, and recalling members of the reserves–including some people in their 40s and 50s. The AVF is straining to the breaking point already, and the longer we stay in Iraq, the worse those strains will become.

Costs in Blood and Treasure

The tab for the Iraq mission is already more than $350 billion, and the meter is now running at approximately $8 billion a month. Furthermore, even those appalling figures do not take into account indirect costs, such as long-term care for wounded Iraq war veterans.

Except when the survival of the nation is at stake, all military missions must be judged according to a cost-benefit calculation. Iraq has never come close to being a war for America's survival. Even the connection of the Iraq mission to the larger war against radical Islamic terrorism was always tenuous, at best. For all of his odious qualities, Saddam Hussein was a secular tyrant, not an Islamic radical. Indeed, the radical Islamists expressed nearly as much hatred for Saddam as they did for the United States. Iraq was an elective war–a war of choice, and a bad choice at that.

Deciding to Leave

The United States needs to adopt a withdrawal strategy measured in months, not years. Indeed, the president should begin the process of removing American troops immediately, and that process needs to be complete in no more than six months. A longer schedule would simply prolong the agony. It would also afford various Iraq factions (especially the Kurds and some of the Shia political players) the opportunity to try to entice or manipulate the United States into delaying the withdrawal of its forces still further.

Emotionally, deciding to leave under current conditions will not be easy, for it requires an implicit admission that Washington has failed in its ambitious goal to create a stable, united, democratic, secular Iraq that would be a model for peace throughout the Middle East. But that goal was unrealistic from the outset.   It is difficult for any nation, and especially the American superpower, to admit failure. However, it is better to admit failure when the adverse consequences are relatively modest. A defeat in Iraq would assuredly be a setback for the United States, particularly in terms of global clout and credibility. But one of the advantages to being a superpower is that the country can absorb a setback without experiencing catastrophic damage to its core interests or capabilities. Defeat in Iraq does not even come close to threatening those interests or capabilities. Most important, a withdrawal now will be less painful than withdrawing years from now when the cost in blood, treasure, and credibility will prove far greater.

The withdrawal needs to be comprehensive, not partial. The only troops remaining in Iraq should be a modest number of Special Forces personnel who would work with political factions in Iraq inclined to eradicate the Al Qaeda interlopers in their country. It must be clear to Iraqis and populations throughout the Muslim world that Washington has no intention of trying to maintain a military presence in Iraq.

Above all, U.S. policymakers need to absorb the larger lesson of the Iraq debacle. Launching an elective war in pursuit of a nation-building chimera was an act of folly. It is a folly they should vow never to repeat in any other country.