

The Critical Battles: Political Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Iraq

By now it should be apparent to even the most hermetic observers that untangling the problems of Iraq will be a monumental task. As the January 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq highlighted, the country suffers from a variety of dangerous, complicated, and intertwined problems, including terrorism, pervasive organized and unorganized crime, an insurgency, a failed state, a security vacuum, and a civil war.¹ U.S. policy toward Iraq must come to grips with all of them if it is to have any chance of engendering an environment that leads to a sustainable peace.

Recognizing that Iraq is a failed state is fundamental to understanding that it lacks the capacity to fix itself, no matter how much pressure the United States applies. Rebuilding the political, economic, and bureaucratic institutions of a failed state requires considerable resources and a long-term commitment, both of which are only possible in a secure environment. This is why fixing Iraq's security vacuum is critical to creating the conditions under which economic, political, and social institutions can begin to reemerge.

Any U.S. strategy, including the Bush administration's spring 2007 troop surge, will thus be most successful if it can influence the dynamics on the ground to create political latitude for action. The best case is that a strategic approach such as the surge will create a secure space in which to start to rebuild Iraq's shattered political, economic, and social institutions and thus threaten Iraq's warlords enough to force them to make compromises for a political settlement, just as radical Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was forced to

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join Iraq's political process in 2004 when he lost control of Iraq's streets to a determined coalition offensive.

If it is going to have any chance to succeed, the surge or any other U.S. effort to stabilize Iraq cannot be left as simply a military strategy. To sustain any gains in stability, it will also be vital to forge a complimentary political agreement to achieve a sustainable peace and set in motion processes to begin to rebuild Iraq's capacities for self-governance and economic regulation. Without a truce that gets the warring parties to stop fighting, neither the United States nor the Iraqi state will be able to provide sustained security and a better life for the Iraqi people. Even the most wildly successful military strategy can do no more than create the space in which diplomatic, political, and economic efforts can build a viable new Iraq. The United States' lack of such exertions is key to the failure of its previous efforts in Iraq and essential to what is almost certainly the last chance to do so.

Learning from Experience

Before Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States had been engaged in major conflicts in Bosnia, El Salvador, Haiti, Kosovo, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere. It has learned about the difficulty of transforming centrally controlled states and building market-based democracies with a rule of law in central Europe and the former Soviet states. Whatever happens on the ground in Iraq, U.S. policy should take into account at least six previously learned principles of peacemaking and peacekeeping.

First, civil wars generally require political solutions. External military forces can help create pressure for a political agreement, but they cannot usually impose peace on warring parties. If at least one party has the money and recruits to sustain guerrilla tactics, it is difficult for governing or external groups to stop violent attacks solely through force, as shown in Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, and Sudan.

Second, such political solutions themselves require a "ripeness" that typically only emerges when all sides are exhausted by the fighting, a stronger external force compels them to cease, or the circumstances change in a way that makes it more compelling for the warring parties to make real compromises than to keep fighting. Unfortunately, Iraq's warlords—its Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias—are still full of fight, and compelling them to cease would require a far-greater force than even what the troop surge provides. Without a political agreement that creates a stake in peace, the incentive will be to disrupt and fight. Ending this logjam requires eliminating the security vacuum and rebuilding the failed state, thereby threatening the warlords' hold on the Iraqi people, in the expectation that doing so will persuade the warlords to

make compromises that they otherwise would not for fear of losing everything. At this late date, that will not be easy, but the easy options in Iraq disappeared a long time ago.

Third, political agreements need to achieve a truce on core grievances among fighting factions to buy time for parties to build trust and to achieve a longer-term solution. In Bosnia, Kosovo, and South Africa, for example, political settlements took root in stages. Although the transitions did not always work as planned, full settlements would have never worked at the outset. In Iraq, the core grievances include the sharing of oil revenues, federal-regional relations, and minority rights. Usually, there must be an amnesty for most combatants, or they have no incentive to end the fighting.

The prospect for a political solution is complicated by the constitution that the United States helped to broker in 2005 in order to demonstrate the progress of democracy. The ill-conceived provisions on oil set back the prospects for a viable political solution in Iraq and enraged the Sunni community by holding out the prospect that the Shi'a and Kurds will be able to control the development of future energy resources. A last-minute condition brokered by U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad created a provision for future revisions to the sections on energy developments that has not been fully acted on. At this stage, however, it may be necessary to suspend the constitution in favor of modest interim arrangements. The Shi'a and Kurds may have no interest to do so unless they are pressed by regional actors who are either their key supporters or actors who can block their ambitions to develop and retain energy wealth. The Sunnis will have to concede on some level of regional autonomy in return for guarantees on sharing oil wealth.

Fourth, a solid security environment sustained by the presence of adequate security forces is required to facilitate governance and economic activity. In Bosnia, for instance, 19 international troops were deployed per 1,000 civilians to implement the Dayton accords. In Kosovo, the ratio of security personnel to civilians was 20 to 1,000.² By contrast, the troop concentrations in Iraq of 7 to 1,000 in 2003 and in Afghanistan of 1 to 1,000 in 2001 have made it easier for insurgencies and militias to take root.³

If there is a political settlement in Iraq, force concentrations comparable to Bosnia and Kosovo would suggest boosting deployment from the current 150,000 troops in Iraq to as many as 250,000 to 450,000 in order to sustain stability. Iraqi forces should not be counted as part of this external troop requirement. International experience in building indigenous police and military forces has demonstrated that typically it takes three to five years to develop

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reliable indigenous capabilities. With Iraqi forces distrusted or seen as a tool of sectarian factions by large segments of the population, the presence of international troops would be critical in the process of capacity and trust building.

Fifth, the United States and the international community must be prepared to sustain external forces and economic support for eight to 10 years after a political settlement. The international community was still providing assistance in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in 1995, six years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Russia and Ukraine, both with massive resources, went through virtually eight years of economic contraction before they began to grow, and Russia was helped by soaring oil prices that masked structural imbalances.

With peace, Iraq has potential parallels to Russia in 1991: a well-educated population, massive energy resources, and a defunct command economy. Yet, not only does Iraq have a ruptured society, war has also destroyed much of its infrastructure, perhaps undoing as much as was invested by the United States and others. Not all U.S. investments in Iraq were wasted, and lessons have been learned about the need to rely more on Iraqi capabilities. Nevertheless, massive funding will be needed, particularly to create jobs. Those resources will ideally come from Iraq's own oil revenues, but outside support may still be necessary. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for Iraq's crippled bureaucracy to move local investments from central to provincial coffers and to the private sector.

Sixth, stabilization and reconstruction efforts must be multilateral, preferably under a UN mandate, to achieve legitimacy and sustain the levels of international support needed over eight to 10 years. At present, the trend is moving in the other direction. The United States' international partners in Iraq see failure, and domestic pressures are forcing them out as quickly as possible. Although the United Nations continues to provide a mandate for U.S. troops, at this point its impact on legitimacy is meaningless. The only way to renew multilateral support is through a new initiative that begins with a political and diplomatic agreement that creates a truce among Iraq's warring factions and unites regional and international actors in an effort to stem international terrorism.

Filling the Security Vacuum, Fixing the Failed State

Iraq is a failed state dominated by a sectarian war that encompasses Sunni and Shi'a militias, al Qaeda in Iraq, and, potentially, armed Kurdish fighters. Iraq's government is dominated by Shi'a militias, most notably Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a militia trained and organized by Iran that controls key cities in

southern Iraq. The militias gain their strength by providing protection, both voluntary and involuntary, as well as basic services such as food, medicine, money, employment, gasoline, and even electricity to Iraqis who cannot count on the central government to do so.

They provide these services in return for political support, which has allowed them virtually to sweep Iraq's elections and thereby dominate Iraq's government. As members of the ruling coalition, the militias have taken over Iraq's ministries, ensuring that they do not provide basic security and services, lest they undermine the popular support for the militias. The militias run these ministries like patronage networks, in which graft is the norm and government agencies function as private fiefdoms. Naturally, in this environment, crime of all sorts becomes a constant presence, adding to the mayhem and to popular reliance on the militias.

The situation of the Sunnis differs from that of the Shi'a only in that they are largely in opposition to the Shi'a- and Kurdish-controlled government. The early, mistaken decisions of the United States regarding de-Ba'athification and the constitution of Iraq's first few governments convinced Iraq's Sunni tribal population that the reconstruction of Iraq was meant to come at their expense, causing them first to shelter deadly Salafi jihadists such as al Qaeda in Iraq and then to support a full-blown insurgency against the central government, which the Americans had allowed to exclude Sunni interests early on. This state of affairs then became self-perpetuating when the Shi'a militias took control of Iraq's streets and with them its elections.

Iraqi combatants may just not be ready to accept that a peace settlement is their best option, but the Bush administration can make better use of the tools at its disposal to increase the incentives and prospects to make a political agreement viable. The military elements of the surge strategy correctly but much belatedly build on the lessons of past counterinsurgency and stabilization campaigns. The goal of the current plan is to secure Baghdad by blanketing the city with U.S. and Iraqi security personnel, working in joint teams with the primary mission of protecting the civilian population and making the streets safe, something coalition forces have rarely bothered to do over the previous four years.

The United States has a smart and realistic secretary of defense in Robert Gates. In General David Petraeus, it has a commander of U.S. forces in Iraq who has spent more time than any other U.S. general learning the lessons history has to teach about how to make an operation such as this succeed. Under

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Petraeus's leadership, U.S. and Iraqi forces have radically altered their tactics in Iraq and are seeing some success in establishing the kind of security that could create the time and space for civilian efforts to gain traction on politics and economics.

The plan and the implementation are much weaker when it comes to the various political and economic steps that will be needed to turn temporary military successes into lasting peace and stability. Although the administra-

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tion has talked about increasing the numbers of civilian personnel operating outside the relative security of the Green Zone, it is at best unclear from where those people are going to come. The U.S. government has not mobilized the people and resources for a major civilian initiative, lacking the numbers of people needed with the requisite skills.

In contrast to the 150,000 troops that will be in Iraq, there are only about 6,500 Foreign Service officers posted everywhere in the world.

The president has proposed to double the number of civilians in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to about 450, but that number will still fall well short of the hundreds of personnel desirable for an operation of this size, and they will have to operate within military units for protection, greatly hindering their ability to complete their mission.

Furthermore, without a change in security, it will be difficult to entice U.S. and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to return to Iraq. The Civilian Reserve Corps proposed by the administration may be a useful supplement for future conflicts, but it is not even proposed in the president's fiscal year 2008 budget. Only a fraction of the needed civilian capabilities will be available or able to operate in Iraq in 2007.

Perhaps the only community that could provide the numbers of personnel with the skills needed to shoulder the burden of political, economic, and social reconstruction in Iraq are the international NGOs and certain agencies of the UN, yet all along they have been notably absent from the administration's planning. Enticing them to greater participation will doubtless require a secure environment in which they can do what they do best by getting out among the Iraqi people. Even if Petraeus succeeds in creating such an environment in the greater Baghdad area, NGO personnel will likely also want an international political framework led by the UN or other international institutions, such as they have traditionally had in similar operations elsewhere around the world. This will require the administration to allow UN or UN-authorized personnel to play a much greater role in reconstruction than they have in the past.

Moreover, current U.S. operations remain badly hobbled by the absence of an integrated command structure in which U.S. and Iraqi personnel both from the military and civilian sides are able to closely coordinate their operations. Again, part of the problem is simply the lack of civilians, skilled or otherwise, to fill out a proper chain of command. Without the capacity to field civilians on the ground, it is not surprising that civilian and military agencies have not worked out how to cooperate effectively. Civilians in PRTs must depend on the military to move about in their areas. They typically get access to just a fraction of the projects they support. With at best only a handful of civilians on any PRT, it is almost impossible to have the necessary skill sets to make a difference.

Oddly enough, the Department of Defense, which under Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously disdained nation building in favor of war fighting, is now the only U.S. bureaucracy that has the thousands of personnel, security capabilities, and funding to take this critical mission to heart. Increasingly, most other U.S. government personnel want little to do with what is seen as a failing mission in a dangerous environment with little effort being made to exercise core diplomatic competencies to seek a political settlement. The result is, not surprisingly, rising frustration and distrust a sense among the military that they are alone and a sense among civilians that it was military incompetence that dragged the United States into this mess. As the United States learned belatedly in Vietnam, an effort such as the reconstruction of Iraq requires complete and constant coordination between the military and civilian elements of government, along with resources for the political, economic, and social programs that are equally if not more important than the military campaign.

Securing a Political Settlement

If the first steps of the surge do their job, they will improve the security climate in Baghdad and begin to build up the capacity of various elements of the Iraqi government. In doing so, they will threaten the power of the militias and insurgent groups by taking away their access to the populace and creating an alternative and preferable source for security and services. This threat could make those militia leaders willing to make real compromises on power sharing and revenue distribution—the very compromises they see no need to make now.

Hence, the bottom-up elements of the surge (taking back the streets and building government capacity) are designed to help the top-down approach (breaking the political logjam in Baghdad) that could make a real political settlement among the warring parties a tangible prospect for the first time. That political settlement would greatly assist securing the rest of the country, further aiding the process of capacity building. In other words, if it works, it will become a self-reinforcing process.

The process of brokering a political settlement needs to begin immediately.

Another key gap in the current surge is the underdeveloped plan to forge just such a political settlement. In parallel with the surge, the United States must begin what the Iraq Study Group called a “diplomatic offensive” to put in place an international process to broker a deal among the warring parties

when they are most vulnerable and willing to make compromises.⁴ Particularly because of the weak civilian side of the effort, Petraeus’s work to improve security may quickly come under strain, putting a premium on moving forward with political negotiations designed both to take advantage of that improved security situation and to reinforce it.

In other words, the United States cannot afford to wait for the bottom-up approach to succeed before starting the top-down one. Because of the difficulties facing both, the process of brokering a political settlement needs to begin immediately and long before the other elements of the surge have secured Iraq’s streets and rebuilt its government capacity precisely to assist that process.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PROGRESS

The immediate goals of a political settlement would be to stop the fighting among the militias, control or dismantle al Qaeda in Iraq, and establish at least a five-year truce that provides time and political space to work out a viable long-term constitutional arrangement. The critical necessary element is an agreement among sectarian groups, endorsed and enforced by international actors. Its longer-term goals would be to rationalize oil development and revenues, federal-regional relations, minority rights, control of militias, and amnesty for combatants. Militias would have to be disbanded or folded into formal security structures. A framework would need to be created for representative local government.

An increase in U.S. forces without an effort to forge such a political agreement is unlikely to significantly stabilize the situation for long, if at all. If properly sized and employed, a military force can create a secure space for political compromise and civilian development. Without these follow-on efforts, however, it will become increasingly difficult and eventually impossible to sustain the secure environment. Likewise, increased economic assistance without a political agreement and greater stability would have little sustainable impact because of the eventual return of instability and violence. Infrastructure investments would likely be destroyed. Wasted resources would later make it even more difficult to mobilize additional support if a political agreement were reached.

Many factors will make it difficult to secure a political agreement. No one clearly understands what now motivates the militias—politics, power, religion, personal greed, or all of the above. Some of the issues that sparked the Sunni insurgency, such as exclusion from oil profits and de-Ba'athification, are clear, but restraining the insurgency has become more complicated than redressing these grievances. In particular, the sectarian violence is now propelled as much by revenge for past killings and fear of future ones as it is by instrumental desires to achieve specific political goals. For these reasons, involving Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the neighboring Sunni states in this process will be critical to convincing them to use their influence to pressure militias to stop fighting. No one should expect that Iran and Syria will cooperate in good faith. A determining factor will be whether Iran sees danger in an uncontrolled war.

The United States cannot run such a process; the UN would need to lead.

The process and structure of political and diplomatic negotiations will be complicated. For the United States, one of the most difficult points to accept may be that it cannot run such a process because it is seen as an actor with a stake in the outcome and without the neutrality needed to broker deals. The UN would need to lead, call the parties together, and broker disputes. To make that possible, the UN would need a completely new team for Iraq, led by someone with the experience and stature of former Finnish president Marti Ahtisaari, who brokered agreements in Kosovo and Aceh, or the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Terje Roed Larsen. Putting this task in the hands of the UN's current placeholder team in Iraq, which is seen as inexperienced and lacking international stature, would lead nowhere.

A credible and reconfigured UN initiative might make it politically possible for the United States and Sunni states to join a process with Iran. Under the UN, the key external players—the European Union, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and the United States—will need to form a contact group to manage the process. A wider circle of countries and organizations, such as the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, China, Japan, and Russia, will need to be engaged, but it would be logistically impossible to involve all of them in each step of the negotiations. As a starting point, all non-Iraqi participants in the negotiations should commit to securing a political deal and to exert pressure on all Iraqi factions to participate.

To achieve a meaningful outcome, it will be necessary to secure the participation of all key Iraqi leaders. They will need to go into the discussions accepting that the goal is a five-year truce, not a permanent solution. A massive

public education campaign led by Arab radio and television networks outside Iraq should make the broad base of regional engagement in the process clear in order to stimulate grassroots Iraqi interest and generate bottom-up support for a settlement that stops the fighting. If the process stalls or proves counter-productive, the international actors must be ready to call off negotiations on Iraq and refocus on handling the regional consequences of war.

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The proposed agreement should be kept as simple as possible, recognizing that it is temporary and that excessive detail will stall both its negotiation and chances for implementation. In some cases, it may be best to revert to aspects of earlier arrangements such as the Transitional Administrative Law, the protoconstitution that governed Iraqi administration prior to the adoption of the constitution in 2005, or independent policy proposals. Key elements of

an agreement would include provisions for core compromises, absorption of militias, battling transnational terrorism, freezing the political process, Iraqi security and jobs, and regional peace and security.

Core compromises would include a formula for revenue sharing,⁵ a formula to balance federal and regional responsibilities, national guarantees for minority rights, and amnesty for combatants. Sectarian factions should agree to fold their militias into the national army or police forces. That said, Iraqi security forces would have to be restructured so that they do not become official sectarian weapons. All participants in a conference, Iraqi and international, would need to commit beforehand to their opposition to al Qaeda in Iraq. There needs to be a clear international and national message that al Qaeda serves no Iraqi interest.

It may be necessary to freeze elections for three to five years to provide a space for governance. Although this may seem antidemocratic, postconflict experiences have shown that democracy has a better long-term prospect if elections are not immediately imposed on war-torn societies. Officials involved in Bosnia, for example, argue that the heavy schedule of elections in the Dayton accords served to legitimize criminal leaders rather than facilitate political stability. In Iraq, Fareed Zakaria argues that “elections had wondrous aspects, but they also divided the country into three communities and hardened these splits. To describe the last four years as a period of political progress requires a strange definition of political development.”⁶

In the meantime, the international community would need to sustain support for security and to create jobs. The United States should seek to internationalize security forces under a UN mandate. Finally, the Israeli-Palestinian

issue will remain a destabilizing factor around which both Sunnis and Shi'a will rally. A sensitive yet critical part of a political process for Iraq will be to offer a dialogue to regional actors on peace and security in the region. Yet, any regional security dialogue could be divisive, and it will be necessary to keep these differences bounded so that they do not detract from a possible agreement on Iraq.

LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED

There are many reasons why such a political and diplomatic initiative could fail. It cannot be assumed that political or militia leaders will act out of concern for the greater good. At present, no leaders among either the Sunni or Shi'a Arabs can speak for and compel behavior from the welter of vicious militias, in contrast to the Bosnian war in which ethnic leaders controlled their forces by 1995, making the Dayton accords possible. Sectarian identity is increasingly taking over Iraqi identity as sectarian militias take over the streets. The Shi'a and possibly their Iranian backers think that they can win. Moderate Sunni states will likely increase support to Sunni extremists in Iraq if they think that the Shi'a will attain control. Actions, politics, and rhetoric in Iran and the United States every day make it more difficult for both sides to sit at the same table without appearing to capitulate. A political settlement will require the United States and other international forces to make it viable, and the political will to provide them may have already been eclipsed.

Even if the probability of success of a political and diplomatic initiative is low, so is the relative cost. A failed diplomatic initiative may at least stir some international goodwill, and it will not add to an already common international perception of failure in Iraq.⁷ Experience suggests that reaching a political settlement takes time and generally involves backsliding on the part of those involved, so a quick result will not be possible. That said, the act of engaging conflicting parties could put pressure on them to stop fighting. If done in a way that engages the UN, key regional actors, and other international actors, it could be a critical bridge to international cooperation to contain regional spillover.

As more time passes and violence escalates, the more difficult it will be to achieve a political settlement. The United States must cooperate with regional players, the UN, and other international partners to create leverage over Iraqis who might restrain the militias and reach a political compromise. The chances for success are low, but this is one of the few options that have not been tried, despite the imperative suggested by international experience with civil wars. Failing to try essentially amounts to accepting civil war in Iraq.

A Least Bad Option

The reconstruction of Iraq has been a four-year-long disaster. As a result, there simply are no good options left. As one U.S. soldier in Iraq put it in 2005, “[T]he problem with Iraq is that we can’t stay, we can’t leave, and we can’t fail.”⁸

Nevertheless, some policy options are worse than others. Withdrawal from Iraq would almost certainly condemn the state to all-out civil war that could destabilize the vital Persian Gulf region, either by allowing internal instability to spread or by plunging Iraq’s neighbors into a regional war. Proposals to partition Iraq appear premature at best

and would likely require either massive bloodshed or massive U.S. force levels to sort out the populations and convince them to accept divisions that very few Iraqis currently would accept. In the event of full-scale civil war in Iraq, the United States could shift to a posture of containment to try to prevent the spillover that traditionally accompanies such wars,⁹ but

The near-term goal is a five-year truce, not a permanent solution.

Washington should not readily adopt this option unless clearly there is no chance to stabilize the country.

This brings the focus back to the troop surge. It would have been much easier to apply the core concepts of the surge three years, two years, or even one year ago. At this late date, it is something of a “Hail Mary.” If it is going to have any chance to succeed, it cannot be left as simply a military strategy. It must be understood that the purpose of stronger military force is to create an environment for civilian efforts to revive Iraq’s economy as well as rebuild government capacity and to forge a political settlement among the warring parties. If the revised military approach cannot gain political and diplomatic traction, then it too will fail, leaving only the worst options.

Notes

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