



400 days and out: A strategy for resolving the Iraq impasse

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Executive summary

The key to enabling total US troop withdrawal from Iraq within 400 days is achieving a political accord with Sunni leaders at all levels and with Iraq's neighbors – especially Syria and Iran. The proximal aim would be to immediately lower the level of conflict inside Iraq by constricting both active and passive support for the insurgency, inside and outside the country. This would allow the United States to shift resources to the training mission and to adopt other de-escalatory measures – most importantly: a withdrawal time line. The strategic price of this diplomatic initiative would be a return to self-governance in Sunni areas, a guaranteed level of representation for these areas in the national assembly, an end to broad-brush measures of de-Baathification, an amnesty for most indigenous insurgents and for most former Baathists, and a de-escalation of the US confrontation with Syria and Iran regarding a range of issues.

In conjunction with these diplomatic initiatives, the United States would announce a tentative time line for withdrawal of its troops from Iraq -- associated with training milestones. Also: US forces would end major offensive sweeps inside the country, adopt a defensive posture, and shift the emphasis of their activity to training Iraqi security forces. Finally: the Iraqi government would re-activate portions of the old army -- partly as a confidence-building measure, but also in order to (i) rob insurgent organizations of their recruiting base, (ii) augment the power of the new Iraqi security forces, and (iii) produce a better ethnic balance in the new forces (which are currently dominated by Kurds and Shiites). As new forces increase in capacity, US forces would be removed, further reducing a stimulus of insurgent action.

Four hundred days – 57 weeks – is sufficient time to complete several Iraqi training cycles, including field exercises for many units at the battalion and brigade levels. Some division level training also can occur. Given sufficient resources (24,000 training personnel), 100,000 Iraqi

security personnel can receive remedial training and another 80,000 new personnel can be trained and exercised during this period. Together with the full provision of all appropriate equipment, this development effort can yield Iraqi security forces that are several times more capable than those it controls in mid-2005.

After thirteen months, the only foreign military assets remaining in Iraq would be a small monitoring and training mission with a security detail: less than 10,000 foreign civilian and military personnel in all. US troops should constitute no more than one-third of the military component -- that is, approximately 2,000 troops. This mission should be conducted under a three-year UN mandate and joint NATO-international command. In addition, the United States might maintain a 25,000-person rapid reaction task force in the region, but outside either Iraq or Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction: to break the vicious circle

Since the January 2005 elections in Iraq, proposals to accelerate US military withdrawal from the country have been gaining increased interest in the United States.^{1} This, for several reasons:

- * First, because the financial and human costs of the conflict continue to mount with no sure end in sight;
- * Second, because the global and regional impact of the American effort in Iraq seems, on balance, to have turned negative.

More Americans than a year ago see the Iraq occupation and military operations to be alienating America's friends, fueling anti-American sentiments worldwide, and feeding the growth of terrorism and extremism. At the same time, the Iraqi experience no longer seems an attractive example of the benefits of democratization. Instead, it has come to associate the prospect of transition with a host of negatives: protracted foreign occupation, ineffectual governance, economic stagnation, criminal chaos, ethnic-based politics, and social strife.

- * A third reason for interest in troop withdrawal is that the Iraqi insurgency increasingly seems to be intractable -- and the fight against it has come to overshadow all other American goals in Iraq. ^{2}
- * A fourth impetus to withdrawal is the growing suspicion among Americans that US military activity in Iraq has become counter-productive.

Common to a number of the recent congressional proposals for US withdrawal is the notion that the US military presence and operations in Iraq are fueling anti-occupation and anti-government sentiments -- to the benefit of the insurgency. Thus, proponents of withdrawal contend that the removal of US troops -- indeed, the announcement and initiation of a withdrawal process -- will serve to significantly deflate the insurgency.

Clearly, the feasibility of withdrawal hinges on the nature of the insurgency. Specifically, it hinges on the extent to which the insurgency reflects a diffuse nationalistic reaction to foreign occupation. The Bush administration and the Pentagon have insisted instead that the insurgency is mostly the work of former regime leaders (that is, Baath restorationists), foreign Islamic extremists, and criminal elements. Most proponents of withdrawal do not deny that such

actors play an important role in the insurgency. The pivotal question is: How much of the insurgency's strength is attributable to diehards and incorrigibles and how much reflects a broad but tractable nationalist reaction to the American military presence?

If much of the insurgents' freedom of action depends on popular support (including the cooperation or acquiescence of local tribal groups and Mosque leaders), then a process of US withdrawal might be key to undercutting the insurgency's strength and rolling it back to a level that indigenous security forces can manage.

Indeed, the available empirical evidence indicates that the breadth and persistence of the insurgency depends substantially on popular disaffection with the occupation and its practices.^{3} The insurgency has grown in tandem with anti-occupation sentiment among the Iraqi public, as measured by opinion surveys.^{4} Large majorities in both the Sunni and Shiite communities oppose the occupation and want to see it end within a year or so. Indeed, the proportion of Iraqis who countenance anti-coalition violence, although a minority, is disconcertingly large. (In Sunni areas, it is a majority.) Poll results, as well as numerous journalist interviews with insurgents, tend to support the contention that US withdrawal would reduce the insurgency's support base as well as its ranks, leaving the "diehard" elements more isolated and vulnerable.^{5}

A reasonable hypothesis is that as much as 75 percent of insurgent activity depends significantly on high levels of popular opposition to foreign occupation and military activities. Relevant to this is the fact that the initial level of insurgent activity was less than 25 percent of the level in June 2005, as measured in terms of attacks per month: that is, less than 400 attacks per month *circa* June 2003 *versus* more than 1800 per month *circa* June 2005. ^{6}

The first surge in the level of attacks *followed* the initial efforts of the coalition to extend its military control to the local level throughout Iraq, which occurred during June and July 2003. Following almost every major coalition offensive, insurgent activity has climbed to and then sustained a higher level. (An exception is the spike in attacks that accompanied the 2005 election period, which was followed by an ebb before attacks returned to late 2004 levels.)

None of the coalition's successes in killing or capturing foreign terrorist leaders or former regime members have dented the insurgency. Those neutralized without apparent effect include Saddam Hussein, his sons, Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan (purported to be a key financier of the insurgency), dozens of other former leading Baathists, and several high-ranking associates of terrorist leader Abu Musab Zarqawi. During the past two years, thousands of insurgents have been reported killed and many thousands more Iraqis have been imprisoned and interrogated. And yet the insurgency has not only persisted, but grown. In other words: American success at the tactical level, which is undeniable, has not led to progress at the campaign or strategic levels. Indeed, military operations seem to be having a negative effect, on balance. This tends to disconfirm the Bush administration and Pentagon view that the insurgency is narrowly based.

2. Withdrawal is not enough: how most disengagement proposals fall short

The congressional proponents of a near-term US exit do not contend that troop withdrawal will entirely defuse the insurgency or that the dampening effects of withdrawal will be immediate. They recognize that Iraq's security problems and vulnerabilities will persist at some level for some time. And none are willing to simply abandon Iraq to its fate. For these reasons, withdrawal proponents suggest a variety of complementary measures to enhance Iraq's

security. Notable among these are proposals (1) to increase the emphasis on developing Iraq's indigenous security forces, (2) to organize the deployment of international forces to supplant US ones, and/or, (3) to forge a non-interference regime among Iraq's neighbors.

Most strategies of withdrawal envisage a two-phase process in which troop withdrawal serves to substantially defuse the insurgency while assistance to indigenous security forces improves their capacity to manage residual security problems. Realistically, the near-term aim is to achieve a favorable balance of capabilities, insurgent *versus* government, at a significantly lower level of violence than today. Implicit in this, however, is a serious dilemma: in the best of circumstances, US forces would be hard pressed to simultaneously begin withdrawal and shift substantial assets to training and assistance efforts. Any lag in the positive de-escalation effects of withdrawal would worsen the dilemma. For some proponents of withdrawal, the arrival of international forces – who are presumed to be less provocative – is supposed to mitigate this dilemma.

It would be a mistake to pin the hopes for US withdrawal on the early arrival of international forces, however. Neither the United Nations, nor any alliance of nations, nor any individual nation (other than the United States and Great Britain) has shown much interest in deploying substantial numbers of troops to Iraq – not, at least, while the security challenges remain as acute as they are today. International forces can and may play a key role – once the security situation has improved. But this option should not be viewed as a solution to the near-term withdrawal dilemma facing US forces.

A more serious problem concerns the expected level of “residual strife” – that is: violence and insurgent activity that is not driven by foreign military occupation and that is likely to persist whether or not US troops withdraw. Although US withdrawal would likely leave former regime diehards and foreign terrorists more isolated and vulnerable than they are today, *the Iraq conflict has assumed an inter-communal character, rooted in a competition for power among ethno-religious groups*. This competition and conflict has a popular foundation and will not simply end should the US withdraw or promise to withdraw.

Although discontent runs high in both the Sunni and Shiite communities, and both Sunni and Shiite groups have engaged in insurgent activity, the insurgency has become since September 2004 a largely Sunni phenomena. (It was in late summer 2004 that Moqtada Sadr and his Mahdi Army, the largest Shiite insurgent group, stood down and agreed to support the political process – at least temporarily.) Moreover, since mid-2004, some insurgent groups have taken a distinctly anti-Shiite turn, following a path outlined by Abu Musab Zarqawi in a 10 February 2004 communiqué.

The alienation of much of the Sunni community from the postwar transition process has been uniquely acute. This problem has grown much worse than it had to be. It is rooted in a series of ill-conceived steps by the Coalition Provisional Authority and by appointed Iraqi leaders, culminating in the formation of an Iraqi parliament and government dominated by Shiites and Kurds. Moreover, the new Iraqi army, which is supposed to take the place of coalition troops, is comprised mostly of Kurds and Shiites. Having thus taken on an ethnic hue, the confrontation between the insurgents and the Iraqi government could transmute into large-scale communal conflict should US troops withdraw precipitously. This possibility has not been adequately addressed by current exit strategies. Attending to it requires new political initiatives that redress some of the key Sunni concerns and draws Sunni leaders at all levels more fully into the transition process.

3. How the occupation went wrong

Progress toward a stable peace in Iraq and the withdrawal of US troops begins with the recognition that America's postwar troubles there are substantially self-inflicted. The goals of the Iraq mission as they have evolved are unnecessarily ambitious, impractical, and intrusive; they reach beyond what the United States must or can do to advance its security, that of the region, or that of the Iraqi people. The first step out of the present imbroglio is to define a practicable set of goals that might win greater support both inside Iraq and internationally. Once done, this could illuminate an acceptable way to end the occupation within 13 or so months.

Americans were deeply divided regarding the decision to go to war, while most of the rest of the world strongly opposed it. However, once the war and removal of the Hussein regime were accomplished facts, it should have been possible to formulate a more consensual set of objectives for the postwar period. The postwar mission might have limited itself to the following objectives:

- * Meet immediate humanitarian needs, restore social order, and repair the damage caused by war and sanctions;
- * Limit future Iraqi military potentials while supporting capacities for self-defense;
- * Bring to justice those most responsible for Iraq's violations of international law and human rights;
- * Set Iraq on the institutional path of representative government, rule of law, respect for human rights, and civilian control of the military; and,
- * Reduce and contain postwar potentials for civil strife and state fragmentation.

Notably, while some of these objectives (such as reconstruction) might have implied an engagement lasting three or more years, most of them would not have required a military occupation. Indeed, only the restoration of social order and containment of civil strife might have required a military occupation lasting a year or more.

Other objectives -- such as those related to government reform -- could have aimed for something less than absolute assurance of an ideal outcome. Thus: rather than pegging the occupation to the establishment of a resilient democratic order, the United States could have aimed more modestly to set Iraq on an institutional path toward that outcome -- recognizing that long-term adherence to this path could not be guaranteed except by means fundamentally at odds with national sovereignty. At any rate, once a democratic foundation had been created, its further development could have been nurtured by non-military means.

The goals and guidelines enunciated above may not differ much from what most Americans who were supportive of the war would have hoped to accomplish in Iraq. But they do represent a radical departure from the declared and *de facto* aims of the Bush administration. Beyond or in contradistinction to the approach outlined above, the administration has sought:

- * To substantially determine the future balance among political parties and ideologies inside Iraq, with the aim of diminishing the role of both Arab nationalism and political Islam;

- * To reconstitute Iraq's economy in strict accord with neo-liberal ideology -- that is: notions of weak government, comprehensive privatization, unrestricted trade, and de-regulated markets; and

- * To establish the country as a reliable US ally, friendly to US interests, and as a base for US initiatives and operations in the region.

The problem with these goals is that they intrude too far on the prerogatives of the Iraqi people, making the mission an enemy of too many Iraqis and an affront to too many more. The administration's drive to reinvent Iraq led to a series of specific policy blunders that fed the insurgency and provided the rebels with a resonant base of popular disaffection. Notable among these blunders were:

- * The wholesale demobilization of the Iraqi army and police forces;

- * The precipitous dismissal of tens of thousands of Iraqi civil servants; and

- * Broad-brush sanctions against tens of thousands of former lower-level Baath Party members.

In addition, some aspects of the administration's approach unnecessarily stoked regional opposition to the US mission. In the administration's vision, Iraq was meant to serve not only as an example for its neighbors, but also as a staging area for a program of coercive transformation affecting both the external behavior and internal constitution of Arab and Muslim states. However, casting the postwar Iraq mission as a stepping stone in a explicit program of confrontation with Syria and Iran (among others) only solidified and intensified their opposition to it. Thus, both internal to Iraq and regionally, the Administration pursued policies bound to generate more friction than necessary.

Finally, the administration's chosen strategy for supplanting Hussein exacerbated the potentials for communal conflict in Iraq, which are now manifest. Operation Iraqi Freedom has had a de facto ethnic slant since its inception, favoring Kurdish and Shiite leaders and organizations. This was apparent in the recent election process, which simply steam rolled Sunni concerns and produced a government overwhelmingly dominated by Shiites and Kurds. It also was evident in earlier governing arrangements, which under-represented indigenous Sunni leaders and grassroots organizations.

These developments were not the necessary concomitant of dislodging the Hussein clique and bringing it to justice. Even though Hussein favored some Sunni tribes, and Sunnis predominated in the upper ranks of the Baath party, almost all Sunnis -- and, indeed, a large majority of former Baathists -- could and should have been co-opted. Instead, they were driven out by broad-brush de-Baathification and large-scale army and civil service dismissals, mentioned above.

The ethnic turn-about in Iraq does not reflect any essential preference for Kurds or Shiites on the part of the Bush administration, however. Instead, it reflects strategic and tactical considerations. The chief one was the administration's incapacity to control the postwar situation without the cooperation of the Kurds and the acquiescence of the Shiite leadership. In order to pursue its overweening goals in postwar Iraq, the administration had to carry forward and leverage the nation's ethnic divisions -- just as it had in Afghanistan.

In sum: overly ambitious and intrusive objectives and the needless multiplication of enemies have bedeviled the postwar mission from its inception. Had the Bush administration sought to accomplish less, it would have achieved more -- and at much lower cost to the United States and Iraq. This is not solely a lesson for the future. Recognizing it today can help open a path out of Iraq.

4. A strategy for resolving the Iraq impasse: essential elements

Foreign military occupation inadvertently creates a base of popular support for insurgent activity in Iraq. The coercive practices of the occupation and their collateral effects also help feed a cycle of revenge. These circumstances undermine the prospects for stability, reconstruction, and effective democratic governance. This argues for beginning a process of US troop withdrawal, while increasing efforts to build and strengthen indigenous security forces.

On the other hand, the palliative effects of withdrawal will not be immediate -- nor will they be complete, for two reasons: First, some elements of the insurgency seek much more than the withdrawal of US troops. Diehard Baath restorationists and foreign extremists will fight on, each seeking through violence to impose their vision on Iraq. Second, the Iraqi conflict has partially assumed an inter-communal character -- Sunni *versus* Shiite -- that US withdrawal would not extinguish. Indeed, the opposite reaction is a distinct possibility.

The key to enabling a withdrawal process and getting Iraqi reconstruction back on track is striking a deal with leaders of the Sunni community and with Iraq's neighbors. Its aim would be to immediately constrict insurgent activity and isolate the foreign and diehard elements. The resulting near-term de-escalation would enable the coalition to shift resources to the training mission, while also beginning a process of troop withdrawal -- which should further erode popular support for insurgent activity.

The essential elements of this strategy are:

The military occupation and operations

The United States should declare that it seeks no long-term military position in Iraq and is disinclined to establish one, even if asked. Moreover, the United States should declare that it aims to withdraw in discernible steps all but a handful of its Iraq-deployed troops by no later than 1 September 2006. An initial modest step of withdrawal -- 15,000 troops -- should occur immediately. Within six months, the United States should aim to reduce its military presence in Iraq to less than 100,000 troops. In the meantime, the Multinational Force and the Iraqi government should adopt a defensive posture and temporarily suspend large-scale offensive action against insurgent strongholds, while pursuing a political resolution to the Iraq conflict.

Political measures meant to draw in disaffected communities

- * Blanket sanctions against former members of the Baath Party should be ended -- excepting those individuals charged with criminal activity. Likewise, sanctions prohibiting selected militia members and leaders from holding public office should be lifted -- except with regard to individuals indicted for criminal activity.

- * Punitive action should be focused on those most responsible for the crimes of the

Hussein regime and on those responsible for major postwar attacks on civilians -- a set defined to involve several hundred, but not thousands of individuals. Beyond this, a general amnesty should be offered to former regime elements and to insurgents. In the case of influential leaders, this amnesty should imply a quid pro quo of cooperation in advancing the peacemaking and stabilization process.

* Foreign military control of localities must end. Local political authority must devolve to local government bodies and these must be elected locally without the interference of federal or coalition authorities. Exclusions from political office should be restricted only to those individuals found guilty of crimes that carry this sanction.

* On the federal level, Iraq needs to adopt a system of representative government that better addresses the concerns of minority communities regarding majority domination -- and do so in way that does not add impetus to state fragmentation.

(i) A first step would be to tie all or most assembly seats to local districts -- as is the case in the United States -- and to require that all prospective candidates live in the areas they hope to represent. The current system makes the power of localities contingent on voter turnout. Contingent representation is something that rightfully concerns minority communities.

(ii) As a further confidence-building measure, a portion of assembly seats might be divided equally among the three main confessional and ethnic communities in Iraq and then distributed to their majority provinces according to population -- in effect, making some provinces somewhat "more equal" than others (much as Mississippi is "more equal" than New York in the United States).

(iii) Alternatively (or in addition): Each of the three members of the Presidency Council might be directly elected by different regions of the country, corresponding roughly to the distribution of ethnic groups.

* Municipal police forces in all areas should be recruited locally and there should be local accountability mechanisms -- ie. local civilian review boards. Other security forces that *regularly patrol localities* should have a strong representation of the ethno-religious group they are supposed to patrol. This requires a concerted effort to significantly increase the representation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq's security forces. Practically speaking, this means re-mobilizing portions of the former Iraqi army, as outlined in the next section.

Taken together, these political measures should relax much of the overt rejectionist sentiment in the Sunni community.

Iraqi security force development

The Coalition needs to dedicate 24,000 personnel to the task of training and exercising Iraqi security personnel during the next 14 months -- not 8,000-10,000 as currently planned. And it needs to ensure that Iraqi units are fully equipped with upgraded equipment and adequate facilities.

* This level of commitment should permit an increase in security and police forces to the level of 250,000 by September 2006 with more than half of them equaling the quality of

the best 30,000 today. This should put in the hands of the Iraqi government a security force that, in qualitative terms, is several times as capable as the one it controls today.

* The Iraqi government and the coalition need to redouble their efforts to draw former Hussein-era military personnel into training and reorientation programs -- and this should now include the many thousands of influential personnel with former ranks of colonel and above. Where feasible, entire units of the former Iraqi army should be reconstituted -- including units of the Republican Guard. Even if many of these are initially assigned reserve responsibilities, re-mobilizing them would draw them into a positive process and make them more readily available for screened recruitment into the active forces.

Monitoring of Iraqi military potentials

Until Iraq stabilizes and settles into a pattern of peaceful relations with its neighbors, the United States and others will continue to be concerned about its military potentials and will want some reassurance. However, as an alternative to a long-term large-scale military presence in the country, the United States should favor the development of a Military Monitoring Regime under UN auspices. This would require the Iraqi government to forswear weapons of mass destruction and support for terrorist activity, agree to limit the size and capabilities of Iraq's armed forces, and permit unfettered access to its military sites by a multinational corps of UN monitors. A reasonable term for the monitoring regime would be five years or less, as the Security Council sees fit. A highly effective monitoring corps might comprise 1,500 personnel and could be accompanied by a multinational security detail comprising 6,500 troops.

Regional confidence- and security-building measures

The last component of this proposal focuses on creating a regional environment more conducive to Iraqi stability. A Group of Contact States should be formed under UN auspices, comprising all of Iraq's neighbors as well as those states participating in the multi-national force. This group would function as a forum for discussing and addressing security concerns related to postwar Iraq. The explicit basis for the group would be an understanding that:

- (i) All members have legitimate security concerns regarding the future of Iraq;
- (ii) Participants in the multinational force and training mission will not use Iraq as a base for military operations outside of Iraq or outside the scope of the UN mandated mission;
- (iii) None will seek a permanent military position inside the country apart from standard training missions, military assistance programs, or military-diplomatic missions; and
- (iv) All members will pledge not to impede the stabilization process, but instead to do their utmost to advance it.

Withdrawal time line; residual forces

The measures outlined above should allow within six months a reduction in US forces in Iraq to 95,000. Pegged to cycles in the training of Iraqi forces, subsequent reductions would bring US forces down to 70,000 troops in Month Nine and down to 40,000 troops in Month Twelve. By 14 months, there would be only 2,000-3,000 US troops left in Iraq to participate in multinational military training and monitoring missions, commanded by NATO and under a three-year UN mandate. Outside Iraq, but very nearby, the United States might continue to maintain for the

foreseeable future 25,000 ground troops and the equivalent of one tactical air wing -- as well as capacities for rapid force expansion. Among other purposes, these forces might serve in a rapid reaction role, should they be needed.

5. Conclusion

By necessity, the proposed strategy for resolving the Iraq *impasse* is both conditional and contingent – as are all strategies. Whatever we choose to do in Iraq, we cannot be certain of the eventual outcome – especially not the long-term outcome. We can set the country on a new path, but we cannot be sure that it will stay on that path. Of course, uncertainty about the future -- an existential condition -- does not itself constitute a good reason for continuing to occupy Iraq. Otherwise, we would never leave. But the United States can take comfort in this: military occupation is not the sole policy instrument at its disposal; it is only the most extreme and costly one. The end of the Iraq occupation will not be the end of America's capacity to influence the Iraqi prospect by both military or non-military means.

Appendix: The Iraqi Insurgency & Iraq Security Force Development: Selected Bibliography

Notes

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6. See "Figure 1: Violent Incidents Against the Coalition and Its Partners, by Month, June 2003 Through February 2005," page 10, Joseph A. Christoff, *Rebuilding Iraq: Preliminary Observations on Challenges in Transferring Security Responsibilities to Iraqi Military and Police*, Testimony Before the Committee on Government Reform; Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations; House of Representatives (Washington DC: Government Accountability Office, 14 March 2005). Also see the Brookings Institution's *Iraq Index*, reproduces a chart of insurgent attacks from the *Associated Press*. Michael E. O'Hanlon and Adriana Lins de Albuquerque, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 11 July 2005), page 17; www.brookings.edu/iraqindex.