



# PDA

## PROJECT ON DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES

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### **More troops for Iraq? Time to just say “No”.**

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*Can a marginal increase in the US troop presence in Iraq pave a new way forward? Or is it a detour – a marginal diversion from our present, failed course?*

*Even if we were to accept, at this late date, that our troubles in Iraq are due to our having invested too few bodies, why should we believe that a small increment can turn the tide?*

These are among the questions raised by the Bush administration’s new initiative and they point to a more fundamental one:

*What is the problem that has bedeviled the US effort in Iraq for nearly four years?*

Few outside the administration would contest that the mission’s “measurables” are miserable. The progress in Iraq reconstruction has been glacial and the security situation has steadily deteriorated, despite a great expenditure of time, money, and lives. But why? Critics have variously targeted the administration’s strategy, planning, priorities, and level of effort – which suggest that there might be a better way. And, indeed, the administration now claims to have discovered one.

In fact, there is no way forward that does not lead out. This, because the mission itself is founded on strategic error. The error resides not simply in the administration’s “strategy for victory” in Iraq but, more broadly, in its national security strategy. It is evident as well in the President’s rejection of what is best in the Iraq Study Group report: the proposal to diplomatically engage Syria and Iran regarding the Iraq prospect. Indeed, the President’s proposal to pump-up Operation Iraqi Freedom with more money and troops is a direct counterpoint to the diplomatic path.

#### **The numbers game: Can more troops win?**

In the course of 45 months of war, three “troop surges”\*\*, and multiple major offensives and city sieges, the US-led coalition in Iraq has proved that it can sometimes dampen and displace insurgent activities – although only temporarily and on a local basis. Typically, the insurgent response to local offensives has been to exit, go dormant, or flow around affected areas.

In this light, we might be forgiven the belief that, if the coalition could deploy 250,000 troops and additionally find 200,000 reliable and capable Iraqi security personnel, then it might be able to impose a tolerable level of order throughout the country. Numbers this high would accord with historical experience in successful counter-insurgency and stability operations. These suggest

that achieving troop densities greater than 20 soldiers for every 1,000 citizens is often a prerequisite to success.\*\*

By contrast, in Operation Forward Together – the failed 2005 effort to suppress violence and militia activity in Baghdad – US and Iraq security forces (including police) concentrated somewhat more than 60,000 personnel in the city of 5.7 million.\*\* (Notably associated with the effort was a brief surge in Iraq-deployed US troops.)

Presently, the United States has approximately 40,000 front line troops in Iraq – soldiers and marines who are routinely conducting offensive and security missions. The remainder are devoted to force protection duties, support, and training. Adding 100,000 to this number would allow the coalition to very significantly increase the number of front-line fighters, while also providing for the training of Iraqi forces. Incidentally, 250,000 troops is the requirement initially suggested by former Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, before he was sidelined by the administration.\*\*

The United States can meet neither condition today. It can neither muster 250,000 ground troops for a long enough period of time, nor soon field 200,000 Iraqi personnel who will fight properly and on the right side. Today, the Iraqi security forces taken as a whole – military and police – are probably a net negative. Thus, the coalition lacks the force density to properly support a so-called “ink blot” strategy, in which pockets of security are supposed to spread outward. Instead, the coalition’s sporadic efforts to “clear and hold” areas have served mostly as opportunities to attrit those insurgent cells dim enough to stand and fight.

The logic of an attrition approach is apparent in former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s 2004 description of the administration’s exit strategy:

At some point the Iraqis will get tired of getting killed and we'll have enough of the Iraqi security forces [trained so] that [Iraqis] can take over responsibility for governing that country and we'll be able to pare down the coalition security forces...” (Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, DOD News Transcript, 14 September 2004)\*

Coalition officials also described this strategy as aiming to “lower the tide” of insurgent activity, while “raising the bridge” of indigenous security capabilities. In this way, future Iraqi forces were to be left with a security situation that they could manage.

However, the capacity of the insurgency (as a social movement) to generate new fighters has significantly outpaced the coalition’s ability to kill or incarcerate them. The level of insurgent activity and capability has steadily increased, year to year. Among other things, this has beggared the coalition’s efforts to train and control Iraqi forces, who are themselves often prime targets of insurgent attack. To think that a marginal increase in the number of US boots on the ground can break this dynamic is to underestimate the scale and nature of the problem. A marginal increase is even less likely to support a transition from an attrition strategy to a true “ink blot” strategy.

## **Overselling "More Troops"**

It would be a mistake to think of the Iraq impasse in purely quantitative terms, however. Success in stability and counter-insurgency efforts does not hinge on troop numbers alone – or even principally. Nor, for that matter, does it hinge solely on the methods or techniques of counter-insurgency and population control – as the US Army and Marine Corps' feverish search for an effective counter-insurgency doctrine might imply.

The play of insurgency and counter-insurgency involves a three-sided relationship between government forces, anti-government ones, and the citizenry. A key aspect is the relative "rootedness" and standing of the insurgent and counter-insurgent forces *vis a vis* the values, culture, and aspirations of the general populace.

In this contest, foreign occupiers suffer a distinct structural disadvantage – by virtue of being both "foreign" and "occupiers". Their presence is not organic, but instead dependent, ultimately, on their coercive power. Overcoming this disadvantage in the contest for "hearts and minds" depends on their being relatively modest in their aims and discrete in their methods – assuming that their mission permits it. Unfortunately, the American mission does not.

From the outset, the US goals in Iraq have been overly ambitious and intrusive. This goes to the heart of our problem there and it suggests that no amount of troop presence will suffice to stabilize the nation in the way the Bush administration intends.

The most disconcerting data from Iraq concerns popular attitudes toward US forces. The percentage of Iraqis desiring US withdrawal within a year or less has steadily increased as has the percentage who support attacks on US troops. Indeed, strong majorities in both the Sunni and Shia communities now favor such withdrawal and support such attacks. This leaves no grounds for optimism regarding the effects of adding troops.

Blanketing Iraq with troops would not likely extinguish insurgent activities. It would probably only transform them, along lines quite familiar to the British who fought for 30 years in Northern Ireland and the Israelis who have contended for even longer with *intifada* in the West Bank.

## **Our goals: unrealistic and overly intrusive**

The impasse in Iraq is not due principally to a lack of resources. The true source of our difficulties is the mission we set for ourselves and the strategy informing it.

What the Bush administration has sought to do, at the point of a gun, is thoroughly reinvent Iraq – its public institutions, legal system, security structures, economy, and political order. This is a revolution as profound as any, but foreign in origin, design, and implementation. The desired end state is a friendly and pliable Iraq – wide open to American influence, dependent on American power, and supportive of US interests and aims in the region. It should not be surprising that our efforts – which have flooded the country with nearly 300,000 foreign handlers – have bred resentment and resistance, both active and passive. Nor should it be surprising

that, when the experiment's democratic trappings actually work, they work against us – bringing to power parties at odds with the American purpose.

### **A mission founded on strategic error**

The strategy that led us into Iraq and that continues to guide our efforts evinces two fundamental errors. The first is a naive optimism regarding the utility of military force. The second, an underestimation of the power and dynamics of identity politics – nationalism, tribalism, and religious communalism. Together, these errors blinded the war's architects to the likely effects of our presence and combat operations – beginning with a failure to appreciate the chaos that war would unleash.

Strategically, the United States sought to leverage Iraq's communal and tribal divisions. Our ability to take and hold the country with an economy of troops depended on a condominium with fundamentalist Shia groups. Relative peace in the Shia-controlled areas was the prerequisite for rooting out the Baathists – our initial target. From the start, however, the Shia fundamentalist parties rejected essential elements of the US vision for Iraq, although they needed the cover our military could provide. The Kurdish community, while more amenable to US ends (including Iraqi *detente* with Israel), also has had its own agenda – independence – not to mention its own scores to settle.

The war's architects expected that the US mission could balance among Iraq's communities and create an opening for the eventual triumph of a friendly, secular "middle" – a more or less liberal, unifying force. In the meantime, American military power was to play a suppressant role -- neutralizing or containing the most intransigent actors, especially on the Sunni side.

Unfortunately, the envisioned Iraqi "middle" had no significant constituency other than American power – a circumstance that tarred it as comprador. And, despite America's military prowess, the ethno-religious forces proved to hold the stronger hand. Indeed, the very exercise of American power served to swell their ranks and status. It is they, not we, who have controlled majority sentiment. Thus, we have never been able to truly command the situation that we unleashed.

The initial effort to neutralize Baath party members and stamp out Baathist influences prompted a communal response from Sunnis. This, due to the broad brush character of anti-Baath measures and the blunt nature of military operations. Not only did these feed an anti-American insurgency, they also created support for Sunni-based terrorist groups intent on targeting the Shia community, as such. And, of course, Sunnis generally could see that, despite its declared goals, Operation Iraqi Freedom was bringing to power their ethno-religious rivals, not secular "unifiers".

For their part, Shia leaders and parties have remained intent on aggressively pursuing broad brush anti-Baath measures, despite their inadvertent effects. The descent into communal conflict was also accelerated by the actions of the Iraqi security forces, who are barely reconstituted ethnic militias. These, and clandestine Shia groups, soon began doing to Sunnis

what Sunni-based terrorist groups had been doing to the Shia. And US operations aiming to contain radical Shia elements had the same effect as similar efforts in Sunni areas: they recruited citizens to radicalism.

Thus, what began as an American-conceived and -controlled operation to depose a dictator and his clique became, step by step, a centrifugal communal conflict that the United States could no longer control. Ironically, public opinion polls show that Iraqi Sunni and Shia do strongly agree on one thing: their disdain for Americans and their desire to have us leave.

Many critics have derided the Bush national security team for incompetence in prosecuting the war. But the more consequential incompetence has to do with thinking that this enterprise was practicable in the first place.

### **The administration's "No Exit" strategy**

The administration's miscalculations are also evident in their current exit strategy, which does not differ much from that described by former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld in 2004. As quoted above:

"At some point the Iraqis will get tired of getting killed and we'll have enough of the Iraqi security forces [trained so] that [Iraqis] can take over responsibility for governing that country and we'll be able to pare down the coalition security forces..." (Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, DOD News Transcript, 14 September 2004)

Here, Rumsfeld proved himself utterly insensitive to the role of US military operations in generating insurgency. And he misconstrues the moral element with regard to Iraqi insurgents and security forces alike – a consequence of not appreciating identity politics. After four years and 80,000 insurgents reportedly detained or killed, the willingness of Iraqis to fight has not been nearly exhausted – on any side. Indeed, the rate of attacks by insurgents and militias has steadily grown with the body count. What will it take to exhaust them? An instructive historical reference point is Germany in the Second World War. Before it was beaten, it absorbed twenty times as many casualties per capita as has Iraq in recent years.

As for the Iraqi security forces: although ill-trained and under-equipped, their principal deficit is a lack of loyalty to the American cause and to US command. They can kill well enough when they want to. But their true allegiances are largely factional and tribal.

There probably is a level of US commitment that could bring Iraq's chaos, violence, and insurgency down to more manageable levels. However, the cost of such a "victory" would render it pyrrhic. And it would not produce a reliably stable democracy. Are we prepared to contemplate an occupation by 300,000 American troops lasting 15 years at a total cost of perhaps \$3 trillion and 8,000 American lives? This might eventually render Iraq as stable as Egypt or Pakistan – but we would also have to prepare ourselves for a surge in international terrorism as rebels, suppressed in Iraq, sought out American and Western targets elsewhere.