No Middle Way

The Challenge of Exit Strategies from Iraq

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Executive Summary

As the debate over American strategy in Iraq heats up, many opponents of the current counterinsurgency approach are seeking a middle way between the strategy General David Petraeus has designed and is executing and a complete withdrawal from Iraq that they recognize will gravely harm American security and national interests. The search for this middle way goes back to the Iraq Study Group's report, which suggested that an expanded diplomatic and military training effort could permit a significant reduction in American combat forces in Iraq while still offering the prospect of at least partial success. In June, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) published a report entitled *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq* that is the most detailed effort yet to describe what a middle-way military strategy would look like.

The importance of the debate over American strategy in Iraq, and in particular the importance of thinking through the challenges of moving from an active counterinsurgency strategy to an advisory mission in Iraq, led the Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) to conduct a detailed evaluation of the CNAS report and, more generally, the efforts to find a middle-way strategy that relies on expanded training efforts to permit rapid withdrawal of most American combat units from Iraq. This evaluation concluded that:

- It is possible to design a force structure of around 60,000 troops that can support itself as the CNAS proposal desires;

- It is probably possible to conduct a withdrawal of eighteen American brigades by January 2009 from a technical, logistical standpoint, as the CNAS proposal recommends;

However:

- There is a substantial contradiction within the CNAS assumptions about the security environment in which the transition would occur; to wit: the report assumes a benign security environment in which the transition can occur, while at the same time justifying the change in strategy as a response to the deteriorating security situation within Iraq;

- The execution of the CNAS report's recommended new strategy would require significantly more than the 60,000 troops set out by the report as the cap on the number of American force levels in Iraq;

- U.S. forces in Iraq would have to be supplemented by significant air power resources deployed throughout the Middle East.

Most seriously:

- The remaining combat brigades that the CNAS report proposes leaving in Iraq as "Quick Reaction Forces" (QRFs) could not perform the missions proposed for them by that report;

- The expanded advisory effort would place significant strains on American ground forces and would not achieve the desired objectives;

- The capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces would be significantly degraded throughout most of the transition period, despite the increase in advisory presence; and

- The advisory mission as proposed in the current security environment would put U.S. advisors at much greater risk of kidnapping and assassination than any U.S. forces now in Iraq currently face.

 In addition:

- The CNAS report offers no evidence to support its assertion that setting timelines for withdrawal would incentivize the Iraqi government to make necessary steps toward reconciliation, and it ignores significant evidence to the contrary;

- The report offers no evidence to support the notion that, precisely when U.S. forces would be drawing down, an expanded diplomatic effort would lead Iraq's neighbors to play a more positive role, and ignores much evidence to the contrary;

- The proposed strategy does not take account of the current disposition of al Qaeda in Iraq or the nature of that organization, and therefore will prove ineffective in preventing terrorists from establishing bases in Iraq during and after the U.S. withdrawal;

- The CNAS report does not consider the activities of the extremist Shia militias in any detail and offers no plausible plan for controlling those militias or limiting Iranian interference in Iraq;

- The likeliest results of the CNAS strategy in Iraq are increased violence, the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces, and ultimately the collapse of the Iraqi government, followed by the collapse of any remaining American will to continue the struggle there—leading to the precipitate withdrawal the report was designed to prevent.

The challenge of developing a sound strategy for transitioning from the current counterinsurgency strategy to an advisory role is real, and the CNAS report provides a service by highlighting this problem. But the report, like most middle-way strategies, mistakes the conditions that would make such a transition successful: *when basic security has been established.* Instead, it suggests that an immediate transition to an advisory role—driven by hopes for bipartisanship in Washington but irrespective of the security situation in Iraq—would allow the United States to withdraw most of its combat forces without compromising its interests. That conclusion is false. At the moment, the choices before America are very stark: continue the current counterinsurgency strategy with something like the current level of forces in Iraq until conditions actually permit transition to an advisory role, or withdraw and abandon Iraq to sectarian cleansing and the vengeance of al Qaeda terrorists. Considering the successes the current strategy has generated over the past eight months and the importance of succeeding in Iraq, the choice is clear.

No Middle Way:
The Challenge of Exit Strategies from Iraq

The debate over strategy for the war in Iraq has resolved into four basic approaches: maintain current force levels indefinitely, reduce forces as security conditions and the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi government permit, reduce forces on a fixed timeline with the goal of leaving behind a much smaller force to pursue key U.S. interests, or leave as rapidly as logistically possible. The first approach is advocated by no one—the Bush administration, its commanders in the field, and outside supporters of its strategy have always been clear that they saw the current increase in American military presence in Iraq as temporary, with views of its length ranging from six months to two years or so counting from January 2007. The second approach is the current strategy. The fourth approach is advocated by some presidential candidates and a small number of Congressional leaders, as well as the anti-war movement. The disadvantages of precipitate withdrawal are obvious, which is why those opposed to the current strategy have devoted enormous efforts to finding a middle way—a third approach that dramatically reduces the number of U.S. forces in Iraq in a short period of time without sacrificing vital American interests in Iraq or in the region. It goes without saying that such an approach, if feasible, would be highly desirable for strategic as well as political reasons. The Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) has therefore undertaken to evaluate in detail the most highly articulated vision of such a middle way in an effort to determine whether or not there is a realistic new strategic approach to the problems in Iraq. This report presents the results of that systematic evaluation.

Background

The argument at the heart of every middle-way strategy is that Iraqis alone can solve their own problems, especially their political and security problems, and coalition forces can only assist them in this endeavor. This argument informed American strategy before, during, and immediately after major combat operations in 2003. The Bush administration assumed that it would remove Saddam Hussein from power and then help shepherd the Iraqis through what some in the administration expected to be a relatively rapid and smooth transition to a new order of affairs suitable to both Iraqis and Americans. When it became apparent that the transition would be neither smooth nor rapid and that the beginnings of a Sunni Arab insurgency were emerging, the administration and incoming U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General John Abizaid adapted the argument to the changing circumstances. The aim remained to establish an Iraqi political system as quickly as possible, and it was believed in the administration that the establishment of that system would of itself dramatically reduce the violence that began to grow in late 2003 and that exploded in 2004. As the violence continued in 2004, American forces were drawn into quelling it directly, since there were too few Iraqi forces available to do so, and U.S. troops put down Sadrist uprisings in Najaf and Sadr City and also cleared Fallujah of al Qaeda and Sunni insurgents who had taken control of that city.

But General Abizaid and his subordinates never wanted American forces to take the lead in putting down the violence, establishing security, or protecting the Iraqi population and infrastructure. These were all jobs they felt would be better performed by the Iraqis themselves. They changed the direction of the training of the ISF from the limited force designed primarily

for external defense envisioned in 2003 to a much larger counterinsurgency force. Lieutenant General David Petraeus took command of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I), the organization charged with overseeing the growth of this force, in June 2004. The mantra throughout U.S. headquarters in Iraq (often literally posted in commanders' offices) was the famous T. E. Lawrence quote: "Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly."

From the start, the effort to train the ISF was plagued with controversy. There had been no coherent plan developed to do so prior to the start of major combat operations in 2003. CENTCOM planners responsible for preparing for the post-war situation had expected that there would be residual ISF of some kind available to assist with the maintenance of public order. Initial plans for a small and externally focused Iraqi military had to be quickly replaced with a vision for a much larger and more sophisticated force. Pressure grew rapidly to produce large numbers of Iraqi foot soldiers as quickly as possible to join the growing counterinsurgency effort, on the (correct) principle that effective counterinsurgency required Iraqis to interact with Iraqis rather than coalition forces operating alone among the Iraqi population.

Helping to train the Iraqi military in counterinsurgency warfare should, in principle, have been the mission of the U.S. Army Special Forces, which has "foreign internal defense" as one of its core competencies. But the leaders of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), with worldwide responsibility for prosecuting the War on Terror, primarily were focused on the tasks of hunting al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and striking the growing al Qaeda networks in Iraq. Further, while Army Special Forces are the largest single element in USSOCOM, they are in any case far too small and imperfectly structured to train up a multi-hundred-thousand-strong military force from scratch in a short period of time. The mission therefore fell on conventional Army and Marine units, both active and reserve, which put together ad hoc advisory teams, since there were no standing teams within the regular ground forces to perform this task.

Advocates of the advisory mission (as well as participants in it) complained regularly that both the number and the quality of the advisers assigned to the mission were too low, and that the mission was not receiving the level of resources that would have been appropriate given its centrality to the strategy of letting Iraqis solve Iraq's problems.

Despite the halting start, considerable progress had been made in developing the ISF by early 2006, although significant challenges remained. The emphasis on getting Iraqis into the fight had led to the creation of a large force of light infantry that had no organic transportation, armor protection, command and control, firepower, or logistical capabilities to speak of. Individual Iraqi units could and did fight alongside coalition forces, but only when coalition forces provided them with all of these capabilities. The ethno-sectarian make-up of the force was also problematic. The 2006 ISF was recruited during a period in which most Sunni Arabs were refusing to participate in government, boycotting both elections and recruiting drives. As a result, the ISF was predominantly Shia and, furthermore, infiltrated by elements of Moqtada al Sadr's Jaysh al Mehdi (JAM) militia, the Badr Corps militia belonging to the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, subsequently renamed the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council), and other militia forces. The emphasis on bringing Iraqi forces to bear on the counterinsurgency problem quickly required a focus on building the capabilities of the Iraqis who volunteered to serve, rather than on vetting them for partisan leanings or on building up the infrastructure of the Iraqi military. U.S. commanders and advisers did not entirely ignore these important issues, but they were largely submerged under the push to produce viable soldiers and police as rapidly as possible.

The sectarian problems within the ISF came to the fore after the bombing of the al Askariyah Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. The Shia majority in Iraq, which had tolerated more than two years of Sunni Arab insurgent and terrorists attacks without serious retaliation, finally lost its patience. Shia-on-Sunni violence exploded in the wake of the mosque bombing, sparking a spiral of sectarian violence that

continued to grow almost unabated throughout 2006. The ISF were not large or effective enough by themselves to control this spiral, even if they had faced no internal sectarian tensions themselves. As it was, elements of the ISF, particularly the police, began to participate in "death squad" activities against Sunni Arabs in large numbers, and the ISF was ineffective at controlling the Sunni attacks against Shia. The thrust of U.S. strategy did not change throughout 2006, however—the focus remained on tactical training of ISF and encouraging them to solve Iraq's problems themselves, although individual American units did clear out pockets of terrorists and insurgents in some areas.

The acceleration of violence throughout 2006 continued despite the completion of political milestones that the administration had expected to bring the insurgency under control—the seating of a freely elected Iraqi government, the creation of a growing ISF, the killing of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi in June, and several efforts to reestablish order in Baghdad. The collapsing security situation in Iraq in turn led to the collapse of public and political support in the United States for the war effort and to the Democratic victory in both Houses of Congress in the November elections. It was in this context of collapsing domestic support for the war and sectarian violence spiraling out of control in Iraq, that the Iraq Study Group (ISG), headed by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, developed its report, which it released in December 2006. The Baker-Hamilton commission was the original effort to find a "middle way."

Their explicit purpose was to find a strategy in Iraq that could command bipartisan support—as distinct from finding the ideal strategy for pursuing American interests in Iraq. The premise of this and subsequent similar efforts was that America has vital interests in Iraq from which it cannot simply walk away, but that the political climate within the United States was moving dangerously in the direction of supporting a precipitate withdrawal that would compromise those interests. The focus on achieving a sustainable bipartisan strategy was an attempt to salvage an American position in Iraq from a crumbling

domestic political base. In this context, the value of "Iraqification" became its appeal to Americans weary of the war, rather than its contribution to the counterinsurgency campaign. Its merit was measured more in Washington than in Baghdad.

At the same time, the study group was attempting to respond to a real problem on the ground in Iraq. Coalition forces, even operating with the growing ISF, appeared incapable of stemming the spiraling sectarian violence, and the group did not believe that the United States could send enough additional American troops into the country to take care of the problem. It also embraced the argument the administration and its commanders had been making all along that when American forces performed tasks that the Iraqis should be performing, they disincentivized the Iraqi government from taking responsibility for its own problems. The Baker-Hamilton panel hoped to force the Iraqi government to "step up" by making it responsible for bringing the violence under control through both political means and its own security services. The group also noted that Iraq's neighbors were contributing to Iraq's problems and called on the administration to undertake a diplomatic initiative aimed primarily at Iran and Syria to encourage them to play a more constructive role.

The commission's primary military recommendation was to increase dramatically the number and quality of American advisers working with the ISF. It sought to make this advisory effort the main mission of U.S. military forces in Iraq, and to flow more qualified American personnel into Military Training Teams (MTTs), expanding their coverage of Iraqi units down to the company level. (The lowest level of Iraqi forces with MTTs embedded then as now was the battalion.) The panel also advocated sending many more advisers into the Iraqi police services, even including local Iraqi police stations. The group's report called for locating and deploying suitable personnel from American and international police forces to support this effort.

The Baker-Hamilton recommendations did not establish a timeline for the withdrawal or reduction of American forces from Iraq, but it did state that the United States should begin to scale back its support,

both military and financial, of the government of Iraq if Baghdad failed to meet a set of specific benchmarks, which it specified. It noted that this withdrawal of |support could and should proceed independent of the situation on the ground in Iraq, if the Iraqi government was not properly fulfilling its responsibilities.

The Baker-Hamilton proposals did not differ from Bush administration strategy in one important way. The Bush administration had been pursuing a strategy of train-and-transition virtually from the outset, and at the end of 2006 General George Casey, commander of all coalition forces in the theater, was stating that areas of Iraq being turned over to "Iraqi control" was the key measure of progress. The focus on training Iraqi forces as a means of reducing the U.S. presence was not new to a president who had long since declared, "As they stand up, we'll stand down."

The ISG's plan differed from the administration's approach in three key respects, however: it aimed at achieving the most politically viable strategy rather than the ideal strategy for succeeding in Iraq; it proposed altering the quantity and composition of U.S. resources devoted to the fight and changing the allocation of those resources (diplomatic, political, economic, and military) among the various tasks required to succeed in Iraq; and it encouraged the president to declare that he would abandon Iraq to its fate if its leaders did not demonstrate the necessary commitment to succeed on their own—something the president had been consistently unwilling to do.

President George W. Bush did not accept the Baker-Hamilton recommendations. Instead, on January 10, 2007, he announced a new approach in Iraq and the deployment of additional American forces to support it. The new approach, a variation of that advocated by the Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute, continued to pursue the same goal of creating a situation in Iraq in which Iraqis could eventually take responsibility for maintaining security and building up their government, allowing first the additional U.S. "surge" forces to withdraw and then, gradually, many of the rest of the American forces in Iraq to follow. The "surge," as the new approach came to be known, was always

intended as a temporary expedient aimed at bringing the spiraling violence and terrorism under control and to a level at which the growing ISF would be able to maintain security and continue to reduce the violence. The new strategy, enunciated with increasing detail by the new coalition commander, General Petraeus, was also intended to create space within which the Iraqi political system could establish itself and make progress on key benchmarks. The president and his advisers repeatedly declared that the U.S. commitment to Iraq was not open-ended, that it depended on Iraqi political progress, but that they would announce no timetable for withdrawal and would not make continued American support to the Iraqi government contingent on that government's accomplishment of particular milestones.

The president had not sought to adopt the strategy with the most bipartisan support, and he did not receive such support. The new Democrat-led Congress almost immediately began efforts to compel him to change strategy once again, with some advocating immediate withdrawal and others insisting on more gradual, yet still firm, timelines. Over the spring and summer of 2007, it appeared that the administration was losing ground politically, as prominent Republicans in Congress began to indicate their displeasure with the president's strategy and their desire for a change to something like the Baker-Hamilton proposals, which emerged once again as the ideal way to forge a bipartisan consensus on Iraq strategy.

This was the context in which the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) prepared and published its report, *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq*, in June. Although a number of analysts had continued to advocate an increased training effort accompanied by a reduction in American forces engaged directly in counterinsurgency operations, and many politicians had continued to press for diplomatic solutions to Iraq's problems, none had offered a study or a plan as detailed as the ISG until CNAS produced its report. The seriousness of this effort and the detail with which it presents its conclusions have rapidly made the CNAS report into the exemplar of this kind of strategic vision. As we

shall see, *Phased Transition* offers an approach fundamentally similar in its major outlines to that proposed by the Baker-Hamilton panel, although it goes into more detail about the military implementation of its proposals. It is worth examination as one of the best possible presentations of this particular view of Iraq strategy, even apart from its significance as a rallying point for those who seek a middle way in Iraq during September's pivotal debate. These are the reasons why AEI undertook to evaluate the CNAS proposals.

Phased Transition: Goals and Objectives

The aim of the CNAS report is to reduce American military presence in Iraq dramatically by the time the next president takes office, and then sustain it at a gradually decreasing level over several years until no American forces remain in Iraq. The report begins by noting how unpopular, unsuccessful, and costly the war has been, but then shifts to an effort to build an American strategy in Iraq from the ground up, starting with a consideration of basic goals and objectives. It defines the goals with the negative formulation of "the three no's": no al Qaeda safe havens in Iraq, no regional war, and no genocide within Iraq. It then lays out a number of more specific and positive objectives necessary to achieve these overarching goals:

- encouraging the expansion of the grassroots movement among the Sunni Arabs in Anbar;

- overseeing a form of "soft partition" in which millions of Iraqis more or less voluntarily move from mixed areas into more homogeneous regions;

- building up strong regional security forces in these more homogeneous Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish regions;

- negotiating with Iraq's neighbors to stabilize the situation in Iraq and throughout the region;

- strengthening the Iraqi government's ability to function at the central and local levels;

- helping the Iraqi government pass critical benchmark legislation;

- maintaining security and progress in Kurdistan;

- strengthening the Iraqi military and police at the national and local levels; and

- transitioning to a stable, sustainable, and appropriate U.S. military and police advisory effort while withdrawing most American combat forces by January 2009.

The ISG had proposed all but the first three of these objectives. The first one did not make it into the ISG because the grassroots movement in Anbar was still in its infancy when the ISG report came out, and few people recognized that it would become as meaningful as it has. The ISG did not embrace the idea of partition either, and certainly did not propose to have American forces oversee it. Accordingly, it also refrained from advocating strengthening regional security forces to stabilize partition once it had occurred. These issues aside, the core of the CNAS proposal is the direct offspring of the ISG report in its overarching goals and preferred means and allocation of resources.

The CNAS objectives are also, for that matter, little different from those of the current strategy, apart from the question of soft partition and the commitment to dramatic reductions in troop strength by January 2009. The CNAS authors criticize the way in which the Bush administration has pursued each of these objectives, their prioritization, and their timing; but the objectives themselves are not really in dispute. The reason is simple. If one wishes to develop a strategy that leads to some kind of stability in Iraq and in the region that will survive after American forces leave, then there is a certain irreducible and unarguable list of things that must be accomplished first, including training and expanding the ISF; helping improve the capability of the

Iraqi government at all levels, helping the Iraqis establish and maintain security, and developing and executing a clear strategy of transitioning to an advisory effort at an appropriate time and under appropriate circumstances. Any strategy that does not address these objectives in the current circumstances will be virtually incapable of producing a stable Iraq. The CNAS and ISG reports and virtually all who are trying to find a middle way in Iraq strategy are still clearly trying to find a way for the United States to succeed at least at the most basic level in securing its vital interests in Iraq and the region. They stand in marked contrast to those who are calling for an immediate withdrawal that will lead almost inevitably to regional destabilization. The question is: is there a middle way to be found?

Phased Transition: **The Military Plan**

Both the ISG and CNAS recognized that the devil is in the details of any plan aiming at accomplishing these common objectives. The ISG put considerable effort into describing the diplomatic efforts that were the centerpiece of its proposal. The different environment of summer 2007 led the CNAS team to focus its effort on the military details. In particular, the CNAS goal of finding a military strategy that could gain sufficient domestic support to allow the next president to pursue an intelligent policy in Iraq and the region led the authors to propose a fixed timeline for the withdrawal of American forces and to specify the rough size of the forces they expected to remain in Iraq after January 2009. Fundamental throughout the report is the presumption that no strategy that did not set time and size goals for the American posture in Iraq could gain bipartisan support. An additional presumption is that the time goal must be soon, and the size goal must be considerably smaller than the current force. The CNAS report therefore set the target of not more than 60,000 U.S. troops of all services in Iraq by January 2009.

The report notes, quite rightly, that specific numbers and the particular disposition of troops it advocates can only be rough and would have to be refined by a military staff. The purpose of the evaluation offered below is not, therefore, to pick nits with the particulars of the military posture proposed by CNAS, but to explore what such a posture would look like on the ground and to examine its advantages and drawbacks from the standpoint of the objectives proposed in the CNAS report. It is worth noting, however, that a proposal of this type is likely to prove relatively inflexible in application. As President Bush and his predecessors have found on numerous occasions, numbers, benchmarks, and proposed timelines take on a life of their own when they have been publicly announced. If the number of 60,000 U.S. troops in Iraq by January 2009 is publicly discussed, it may prove difficult subsequently to revise it. The date, moreover, is not really subject to change at all—the purpose of the plan is to reduce American forces to a sustainable size by the time the next administration takes office. Otherwise, according to the CNAS report, the new administration would likely be stampeded into a precipitate withdrawal. In evaluating this and any similar plan, therefore, it is appropriate to consider the proposed force caps and timelines as relatively hard ceilings and inflexible dates.

One final caveat is that the CNAS report was written on the assumption that its proposals would be implemented instantly, i.e., starting in July 2007, which of course has not happened. The evaluation below therefore assumes that the CNAS proposals take effect on or about October 1, 2007, which is about the best case the CNAS authors could reasonably hope for now. It assumes that the end-state remains 60,000 troops by January 2009, because that date and figure flowed from CNAS assumptions about the political viability of any plan rather than from an evaluation of what was feasible between July 2007 and the end of Bush's presidency. This sort of problem will be a challenge with any timeline-based plan.

From Securing the Population to Withdrawal to Training the ISF: Shifting the Main Effort

Any successful strategy in Iraq must include a transition from current efforts to establish and maintain

security directly to an advisory mission in which ISF take full responsibility for that task. Planning and conducting that transition and the advisory effort to follow will entail significant challenges, as the CNAS effort to describe it shows. The key problem is knowing when to start the transition. As we have seen, train-and-transition had been U.S. strategy in Iraq from 2004 to the beginning of 2007, and it did not succeed. Conditions had not been set either in terms of the capabilities of the ISF or in terms of the security situation on the ground, and so premature efforts to transition responsibility to the ISF led to a decrease in security. The current strategy aims to set the right conditions for the transition by improving both security and the capacity of the ISF. But U.S. commanders and outside advocates of the strategy argue that this effort will require something like current force levels in Iraq well into 2008. The authors of the CNAS study argue that sustaining such levels is politically impossible, and so they have attempted to develop a plan to allow transition to begin immediately. The critiques of the CNAS plan that follow focus primarily on how it would work in the situation as it is today in Iraq rather than on the principle of developing an advisory approach at all. (There are, however, a number of problems common to this and many similar approaches dating back to the ISG proposals that will have to be addressed to make any advisory effort successful when transition becomes possible.)

The CNAS report proposes: to withdraw U.S. forces from direct participation in establishing and maintaining security immediately, to redeploy eighteen of the twenty-one U.S. brigade combat team equivalents now in Iraq by January 2009, and to add around 14,000 additional trainers to the 6,000 now in country for a total of 20,000—the same number proposed by the ISG in December 2006. These advisers would include teams working with around half of the companies in the Iraqi Army (advisory teams now go down only to the battalion level) and would embed more than 8,000 military police in around one-third of Iraq's police stations. These advisory teams would be charged with improving the capacity of their Iraqi units and also working to counteract sectarianism within those units.

Over time, the advisory mission would become the main effort of U.S. military operations in Iraq and would receive priority in terms of manning and resources. Recognizing the challenge of filling out so many new military advisory teams, the CNAS report recommends pulling officers out of combat units already in Iraq that are redeploying before their fifteen-month rotation is up and then offering incentives to those officers to stay with their advisory teams beyond the fifteen-month mark.

Supporting the Advisory Effort: Bases and Quick Reaction Forces

The CNAS recognized that American advisers dispersed throughout Iraq would need the protection of Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs) and air power, as well as logistical support. They also noted that the ISF remain heavily dependent on American logistics, and they advocated continuing to assist the ISF in that and other areas. The purpose of the CNAS proposal, after all, is to enable the ISF to take full responsibility for security assisted only by American advisers but without American ground forces in direct support of security missions. Such a proposal can only work if the Coalition continues to provide not only logistical support, but also fire support and air power support to Iraqi forces that will remain predominantly light infantry for some time to come.

To assist with this critical effort, therefore, the CNAS report proposes to leave three U.S. Brigade Combat Teams in Iraq, with one or two more in Kuwait. It specified possible locations and multiple missions for the brigades, which it designated QRFs. One QRF would be stationed in or near Baghdad (the report suggests either one of the current camps near Baghdad International Airport or Forward Operating Base [FOB] Falcon or Balad); one in Anbar (the CNAS report suggests al Asad airbase to the west of Ramadi); and one in Kurdistan (the report does not suggest a precise location, but the likeliest place based on the missions given this force would be near Irbil).

All of the QRFs would have the mission of providing logistical support, fire support, air support,

and rapid reaction capabilities to the advisory teams near them. In addition, the Anbar QRF has the mission of supporting the Anbar Awakening movement. The Kurdistan QRF has the missions of working with Iraqi forces against the anti-Turkish terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers Party, known by its Turkish acronym of PKK; of deterring Turkish intervention; and of responding to problems in Mosul and Kirkuk. The Baghdad QRF has the additional mission of protecting the so-called governmental "Green Zone" in central Baghdad and being the leading edge of any effort to evacuate U.S. embassy personnel if such an effort became necessary. All of the QRFs are also supposed to deter and, if necessary, respond to direct intervention by Syria or Iran, and to intervene to prevent death squad activity within Iraq if it threatens to break out. They are also supposed to support U.S. and Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOFs) working against al Qaeda terrorist cells throughout the country.

To conduct those operations, the CNAS report proposes leaving the current establishment of roughly 3,000 SOFs in Iraq, as well as around 4,000 U.S. Air Force personnel with adequate equipment to support the anti-terrorist, advisory, and QRF efforts. These forces would presumably be located with the QRFs at their bases. They would be accompanied by some 22,000 additional troops providing the necessary logistical and air power support to the effort. The total number of U.S. forces required in Iraq would be 60,000, a total that would be reached by January 2009 and then sustained for some few years before additional reductions became possible.

Making the CNAS Plan Work

For all the detail offered in the CNAS proposal, more work was required to determine how exactly the military plan would unfold and what would be required to make it work. AEI therefore gathered a number of active duty and retired military personnel for a two-day study of the technical military details of the CNAS plan. That study concluded that:

- It is possible to design a force structure of around 60,000 troops that can support itself as the CNAS proposal desires;

- It is probably possible to conduct a withdrawal of 18 brigades by January 2009 from a technical, logistical standpoint.

However:

- There are contradictions within the CNAS assumptions about the security environment within which the transition would occur, and some factual errors in those assumptions;

- The planning and execution of this transition in such a short period of time would be an enormous challenge that would probably require an initial reinforcement of U.S. forces in Iraq before the withdrawal could begin;

- The requirement to continue supporting the ISF would constitute an additional massive planning and execution burden on U.S. forces;

- U.S. forces in Iraq would have to be supplemented by significant air power resources deployed throughout the theater.

And, most important:

- The QRFs could not perform the missions specified in the CNAS report;

- The advisory effort would place significant strain on the U.S. ground forces and would not achieve the desired objectives;

- The capabilities of the ISF would be significantly degraded throughout most of the transition period, despite the increase in advisory presence;

- The advisory mission in the current security environment would put U.S. advisers at

greater risk of kidnapping and assassination than they now face.

We will consider each of these conclusions in more detail below, but the overall conclusion is that although the CNAS military proposals are technically feasible, they are unworkable in reality.

CNAS by the Numbers

Former CENTCOM commander Anthony Zinni recently commented that no military number produced by a think-tank should be taken seriously, and there is some justice in his remark: accurately determining the number of soldiers, units, or amount of equipment or time required to undertake any military operation can only be done by a military staff. The CNAS report, like all of its predecessors on both sides of this issue, notes that its proposed force-size is a rough estimate that would have to be refined by professionals. But as the experience of such previous outside reports has shown, numbers once published take on a life of their own. A president or a member of Congress who signs up to the CNAS plan may find it hard subsequently to explain that the real requirement in January 2009 is for 80,000 or 100,000 troops rather than for 60,000, without appearing to suffer an unacceptable political embarrassment. The AEI evaluation therefore took 60,000 as a hard ceiling in its effort.

CNAS provided a breakdown of the 60,000 troops it foresaw in January 2009 as follows:

- 9,000 military police in police training teams

- 10,000 officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in military advisory teams

- 11,000 personnel in three brigade-sized QRFs

- 3,000 SOFs

- 4,000 U.S. Air Force personnel

- 22,000 support personnel

CNAS did not provide detail on the support personnel required, but the AEI military planning team considered the problem and concluded that it would require:

- three combat aviation brigades to provide transportation and helicopter gunship support to U.S. and Iraqi forces (around 9,600 personnel);

- three engineer battalions, one to support each of the QRFs with road-clearing, fixed defense, and other essential functions (around 2,250 personnel);

- headquarters for the force, the QRFs, and the advisory effort totaling approximately 2,000 personnel;

- around 8,150 personnel in logistical support units.

This force structure could, in principle, feed and supply itself, move around, and participate in limited combat, as well as provide some air support to the ISF. It could not provide ground-based fire support to the ISF on anything like the current scale, and it could not provide logistical support to ISF units. Supplying the 20,000 advisers dispersed in small teams throughout the country would be an enormous challenge that could probably be accomplished only through the use of fixed- and rotary-wing air movements in most cases. This force structure would not be able to secure roads within Iraq, even between U.S. bases, and would have to rely on the ISF to provide such security, as well as to provide day-to-day security for the advisory teams.

The Withdrawal

The movement of eighteen combat brigades out of Iraq by January 2009 would be a daunting undertaking, although probably just this side of technically feasible. It would have to occur in several phases. American forces now deployed among the Iraqi

population in joint security stations, combat outposts, and patrol bases would have to move back to larger FOBs, turning responsibility for security in their areas over to their Iraqi partners. But very few U.S. brigades and regiments are now deployed with all of their subordinate battalions and companies in a single area. Military operations have required the detachment of battalions and companies from their parent brigades and their deployment to areas far from their headquarters. Reassembling these pieces in preparation for withdrawal from Iraq will be a significant and time-consuming process both in its planning and in its execution. It can be done, of course, and moving brigades out of Iraq at the rate of around one-and-a-half per month is probably technically possible, but it will absorb the full attention of staffs and commanders for many weeks. To repeat: the first mission under the CNAS plan is the withdrawal.

The movement itself will be extraordinarily complex. The lines of communication between the areas in which most American forces now operate and Kuwait are limited, in places funneling into a single road—known as Main Supply Route Tampa. The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces entails more than the movement of people. Tens of thousands of vehicles must also travel along that single road, together with perhaps 100,000 or more shipping containers worth of equipment and supplies. The convoys will have to move under heavy guard and will be vulnerable to attack in a variety of ways should any of our current enemies in or out of Iraq choose to attack them. The most probable attacks are bombs against bridges along route Tampa, something that AQI has already undertaken. Indirect fire attacks, either mortars or rockets, against FOBs are also possible, particularly as the U.S. forces currently patrolling outside those bases are withdrawn into them. The British experience in Basra is an example of what this kind of attack can look like.

The withdrawal will be complicated by the fact that remaining U.S. forces will be required to stand up a substantially increased advisory presence, including identifying advisers, forming them into teams, training them, and distributing them to Iraqi military and police units around the country. The

addition of 14,000 people to the advisory effort is the equivalent of around four brigades, but the planning and movement for the advisory effort will be much more complex than moving four brigades around, as it involves slotting 14,000 individuals into twenty-five-man teams. From a purely logistical standpoint, the U.S. military will have to develop and execute plans to move the equivalent of around twenty-two brigades' worth of people and vast amounts of equipment, supplies, and vehicles around Iraq within fourteen months.

In reality, we are certain to leave behind a significant amount of equipment. Indeed, we must do so if we are to help equip the ISF rapidly, as the CNAS report calls for. Leaving materiel behind eases the logistical burden in some senses—it means less equipment has to be moved along our single line of communication. But it complicates it in another way—we have to decide piece-by-piece what we will leave and what we will take. Simply inventorying and locating everything we now have in Iraq will be a massive undertaking. Choosing what to hand over and what to leave will be another. Actually moving it around, either to Kuwait or to Iraqi units, will be a third challenge. And all of the planning for these undertakings will have to occur within the first few weeks of the new strategy in order to ensure that all the moving pieces move at the right times and in the right directions.

It is extremely improbable that the current U.S. support forces in Iraq could plan and execute such a complex task on their own. It would almost certainly be necessary to augment them with additional supporters and planning staff at the start of the operation, which would very likely lead to an initial increase in the total U.S. force presence in Iraq.

Supporting the ISF

The ISF is heavily dependent upon Coalition forces for almost all of its support, including logistics, ground-based fire support, air support, intelligence support, communications, armor protection, and movement, including route-clearing and engineering support. As noted above, this dependence is not

a failure of the plan to stand up the ISF, but the result of the initial focus on getting Iraqis into the fight. Coalition forces and the Iraqi leadership are now at work in building these capabilities into the ISF, but the process will certainly take many months and, most likely, several years.

The ISF draws this support right now directly from Coalition units and the support structure that exists to maintain them in many cases. There is no independent Coalition logistical system designed to support Iraqi units, and Iraqi logistics units and systems are rudimentary and spotty. There is no separate Coalition fire-support or air-support system for Iraqi units, no independent intelligence apparatus helping the Iraqis collect and analyze intelligence, and so on. Iraqi units draw their support in most cases directly from Coalition forces operating in their areas, or from Coalition assets they request from the senior U.S. commanders.

If the United States rapidly withdrew most of its combat forces and the support structure that maintains them, the Iraqi Army would probably collapse. Even if Coalition commanders were given the mission of continuing to supply the Iraqis, as the CNAS report proposes, there would be no system in place to execute that mission. The prospects for setting up an Iraqi support system—including not only the bureaucratic and legal mechanisms, but also trained people with all the necessary equipment—within the time frame of the withdrawal proposed by CNAS are virtually zero. So the Coalition would have to race to develop an interim support structure virtually from scratch to prevent the very rapid and serious degradation of ISF capabilities. This would be yet another massive planning and execution task placed upon the staffs and support elements of U.S. forces. This would be in addition to planning and conducting simultaneously the withdrawal of U.S. forces and standing up a large and complex advisory effort for the ISF. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, for all three missions to be accomplished at the same time.

Even if they could, it is certain that we could not sustain an independent support system for the ISF as well as the advisory effort, the required QRFs, and overall support structure within the 60,000-person cap set by the CNAS report. There are more than 150,000 soldiers in the Iraqi Army, and at least that many in the police forces. Bearing General Zinni's comments in mind, this report will not attempt to determine the number of supporters required for such a force, but tens of thousands is probably a low estimate. The 8,100-some supporters we estimated as fitting within the CNAS plan would be fully occupied supporting the U.S. troops with little or no spare capacity for supporting Iraqi forces—and certainly no ability to sustain current levels of support.

Degradation of the ISF

The result of any precipitous American withdrawal, therefore, would most likely be a significant degradation in all of the capabilities of the ISF. Most Iraqi units can already feed and house themselves, so their most basic life support would probably not be seriously compromised. But very few Iraqi units have their own vehicles, and almost none outside the single mechanized division have armored vehicles. Most Iraqi units do not possess artillery or mortars. The Iraqi Air Force has no meaningful ground-attack capability. Iraqi intelligence analysis operates at a much lower level than that of the Coalition, where it operates at all, and is subject to political and sectarian interference. Most Iraqi units do not have their own secure communications systems. The ISF lacks any medical system and does not have adequate engineering assets. It also lacks any serious counter-improvised explosive device (IED) program.

The ISF would probably continue to exist, therefore, in that the personnel could remain with their units in bases and continue to survive, but it probably could not function as an effective military force. The lack of engineering assets and armored vehicles would make it extremely difficult for ISF units to move through areas in which the enemy could plant IEDs. U.S. counter-IED capabilities now permit coalition forces to handle a great many varieties of IEDs that would be very effective against Iraqi forces lacking those capabilities. In short, small and simplistic IEDs that now pose little serious threat to the movement of both U.S. and Iraqi forces would do

great harm to Iraqi units operating without direct U.S. support and assistance. The probable result would be that most Iraqi units would find themselves more or less confined to their bases unless they were willing to take very high casualties simply to move around.

The absence of ground- or air-based fire support would be another major problem for the ISF. Iran has been providing Shia militias with heavy mortars and rockets. In many cases, these militias can outgun Iraqi Army units they face. The U.S. presence has redressed this imbalance in many cases. Where U.S. brigades and regiments operate, they provide artillery, mortar, tank, and rocket support directly to their partnered Iraqi units. Where U.S. forces do not operate, particularly in the Shia south, they provide air support, both fixed-wing and rotary-wing, to Iraqi forces in need. Polish units in Diwaniyah also provide ground-based artillery support, and the Georgian brigade now deploying into Kut may do so also.

U.S. QRFs established as described by the CNAS plan could provide ground-based fire support to Iraqi formations within range of their guns, but the effective coverage of that fire would be far smaller than it is now. They would not be able to provide armor protection or direct-fire support from tanks, Bradleys, or Strykers, for reasons we will consider below. The American contribution to Iraq's fire support needs, therefore, would come almost entirely from fixed-wing air power, using assets based within Iraq, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf, and throughout the region. The United States could provide enormous amounts of fixed-wing air support, of course, but with a number of requirements and possibly unanticipated consequences.

To begin with, the requirement for air power would rise as the availability of ground-based firepower fell. The United States would have to rely on carrier-based aircraft, all airbases currently in use in the region, and possibly some that are not now being used to support strike missions in Iraq. The burden of supporting the war will shift from the Army and Marines to the Air Force and Navy, although it will very likely be a more manageable burden. Perhaps more important, from the standpoint of public

perception in Iraq, the region, and around the world, air power will become the primary means of U.S. participation in the war. Advisers generally make headlines only when something bad happens, and the QRFs are small and very likely to be limited in their operations, as we shall see. But continual U.S. air raids on Iraqi targets will grab the attention of Iraqi and Arab media, particularly as accusations grow that the United States is preferentially targeting one side or the other, as they surely will.

Worse still, it will be extremely difficult for American commanders to know whether the targets they are being asked to bomb are actually legitimate and not part of an ethno-sectarian cleansing campaign. U.S. units on patrol in Iraq now develop their own sources of information and analyze it independently of what they receive from their Iraqi partners. Advisory teams—even those described by the CNAS report—do not have this capability. They will be limited to receiving calls for fire support from the units they are advising, making their best guesses about the validity of the targets, and passing them along to U.S. aircraft. It is inevitable that some of the targets will be invalid. We have already seen cases in which Iraqi forces have tried to entice American units to target individuals for sectarian reasons—cases in which the American units refused because their own intelligence revealed the problem. American air power will thus almost certainly come to be used as flying artillery by both sides of the sectarian strife, and both sides will loudly complain about inappropriate American support of the other.

Even with no ill will, errors in targeting will inevitably increase as American forces cease patrolling. Iraqi abilities to analyze intelligence will decline, as noted above, but in many areas even their abilities to gather intelligence will diminish. It is a myth of this war that Iraqis are always best suited to getting information from local people. In some areas where the ISF are drawn predominantly from one sect while the population belongs to the other, the American units receive more information than the Iraqis. American units also have technical means of collecting information that Iraqis do not have—and that we surely will not give to Iraqi units in any

short period of time. As the quality of intelligence diminishes, errors in targeting rise. As our reliance on air power increases in that context, the number of innocent victims and the amount of collateral damage will also rise. The Bush administration has made the mistake of preferring air power solutions over ground forces before; now would be a poor time to repeat this mistake in Iraq.

Still another problem is that, as the advisory teams come to play a key role as air-support coordinators, they will need to be designed with that mission in mind. The CNAS report offers a detailed description of what an advisory team would look like, and their team does not include a forward air controller (FAC)—someone trained to call in and adjust air power against ground targets. Simply adding a FAC to every team will be another problem—there are not all that many FACs available. This problem could be managed, but it would place strains on the services and impose dangers on the advisory teams and their Iraqi units that should be taken into consideration.

As American units now partnered with Iraqis withdraw, the Iraqis will also lose access to a secure and reliable communications system—something they do not have and that American forces have been providing. The likeliest solution is an Iraqi one—they will probably resort to using cell phones. The spottiness of cell phone coverage and the vulnerability of cell phone towers to terrorism will create problems, which the ISF will probably solve over time by buying satellite phones. Then the main problems will be interoperability—U.S. soldiers do not communicate sensitive information by cell phone—security, reliability, and the inherent limitations of cell phones compared to sophisticated data-centered command networks. Iraqi command and control will suffer as a result.

The ISF also lacks a medical service at the moment, and wounded Iraqi soldiers are treated at American combat hospitals. Removing U.S. units and their medical teams and combat hospitals will expose Iraqi wounded to much greater suffering and danger if they have to be treated in local hospitals (where Iraqi soldiers have been targeted by opposing sects,

militias, and terrorists). Limiting the U.S. presence to three bases, we should also note, will mean longer flight times for MEDEVAC operations for most U.S. advisers as well. In reality, longer flight times will translate into a higher death rate from injuries sustained in combat, which advocates of this plan also need to take into consideration.

The rapid withdrawal of American combat forces will place incredible strains on the Iraqi Army in two key ways. First, it will simply crush nascent Iraqi command and control capabilities with a proliferation of new tasks. Second, the growth in sectarian violence that is almost certain to follow such a withdrawal will begin a struggle for the soul of the army.

Iraqi Army units in the most difficult areas—Baghdad and its environs, Diyala, Salah-ad-Din, Anbar, and Ninewah—are partnered with American combat units now. The American units share responsibility for establishing and maintaining security, developing and analyzing intelligence, and conducting time-sensitive raids on high-value targets like terrorist cell leaders or Iranian agents. When the American units withdraw to their basis in preparation for leaving the country, the Iraqis will be entirely on their own in executing all of these missions. Advisers can advise them, but they cannot actually execute operations. So Iraqi units that now routinely conduct joint planning with U.S. forces and go out on joint raids will suddenly find themselves obliged to do all the planning and all the raiding themselves. And they will be doing so without the assistance of some 80,000 American soldiers in combat units. In other words, the immediate impact of the CNAS proposal will be to pull around 80,000 troops out of the lines and require the Iraqis to fill their shoes. The Iraqis will not be able to do that. It would be hard enough to recruit, train, and equip 80,000 additional Iraqi soldiers in fourteen months (in addition to those needed to make up for combat losses). Even if that task were accomplished, 80,000 inexperienced Iraqi soldiers are not equivalent to 80,000 combat-hardened Americans. Simply dropping such a burden on the Iraqi Army suddenly would crush it.

Worse still, growing sectarian violence will place tremendous strains on the Iraqi Army. Radical

elements within the government will want to use Iraqi Army units to conduct or support sectarian cleansing. The professionalizing officer corps of that army will want to resist such operations (as it has been doing in much milder circumstances this year). Growing numbers of Sunni recruits into the force will complicate this equation. Increasing responsibility to include providing all security everywhere will overload command capabilities. The likeliest outcome is that the Army will break—good commanders will leave or be fired, bad ones more aligned with radical sectarianism will replace them, soldiers who are comfortable with sectarian cleansing will remain, those who are not will leave or be chased out. American soldiers and commanders now provide key counter-pressures to support the professional elements within the Iraqi Army. Partnered units offer both role models and checks on illegal behavior—Iraqis are extremely reluctant to be seen to conduct sectarian cleansing while America combat units are around. But advisor teams cannot be everywhere, and wherever they are not, this disincentive will evaporate.

The CNAS Training Effort: High Pain and High Risk to Solve the Wrong Problem

Like the ISG, the CNAS report proposes a dramatic increase in the number and quality of U.S. military and police advisers embedded within Iraqi units, including the deployment of thousands of military police to individual Iraqi police stations around the country, and the deployment of expanded twenty-five-man training teams with individual Iraqi Army companies. The premise of these proposals is that the United States can only responsibly draw down its forces if the ISF is capable of taking up the security challenges, and that premise is true (although it neglects the role the United States can play in making those security challenges more manageable for the ISF before the handover). And, as noted above, any successful U.S. operation in Iraq will transition to an advisory effort at some point as American units are no longer needed in direct support of ISF patrolling on the streets. The ISG and CNAS are

quite right to point out the importance of planning for that transition carefully and seriously.

The current American advisory effort has several components. The MNSTC-I oversees police and MTTs that assist the Iraqi Ministries of Defense and Interior, higher headquarters, and the efforts to build up Iraqi logistics and support systems, as well as the Iraqi Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The Iraq Assistance Group, under the command of Multi-National Corps-Iraq (the operational command of coalition forces in Iraq), coordinates the activities of MTTs embedded with Iraqi divisions, brigades, and battalions; National Police Training Teams (NPTTs) embedded with National Police divisions, brigades, and battalions; and training teams working with Iraqi logistics elements at the regimental level. In addition, the 89th Military Police Brigade coordinates the activities of NPTTs embedded with Iraqi police units at the provincial, district, and station level. Embedded training teams now coordinate closely with coalition brigades operating in their areas, drawing supplies, information, protection, and support from those units. For the most part, embedded advisers are never very far away from Coalition combat units. In addition, many Iraqi military and police operations are now conducted in partnership with Coalition units, which means that embedded advisers help the Iraqis plan and conduct operations and also help to coordinate with Coalition combat units participating in the same operations. The net result is that embedded advisers in Iraq today exist within a large and complex framework of support and protection provided by the coalition combat units engaged in active counterinsurgency operations alongside the Iraqis.

The CNAS proposals increase the risk to American trainers without improving the advisory program. Embedded trainers can serve several functions. They can be actual trainers, helping soldiers, NCOs, and officers learn how to perform basic and essential tasks. They can be fire-support coordinators, as discussed above. Or they can be advisers, whose job it is to work with soldiers and officers already proficient with many basic tasks to help them reach the next levels of proficiency and build professional military

organizations that can continue to grow and improve, ultimately without much outside assistance.

The CNAS proposal focuses almost entirely on the role of training. By scattering thousands of American officers and NCOs among Iraqi companies and thousands of MPs among Iraqi police stations, the CNAS report places the emphasis on helping low-level Iraqi soldiers and junior officers achieve basic proficiency in daily tasks and on helping the Iraqis do better the one thing they already do pretty well, namely fighting. Across Iraq today, tens of thousands of soldiers and police fight the enemy everyday, with or without embedded U.S. advisers. American units partnered with Iraqis regularly note that they do not do things quite the way we would, but they generally find ways to accomplish their missions when they are motivated to do so by a good commander. As in any new army forming in the midst of conflict, some units fight better and harder than others, but the average quality of the Iraqi soldier has been steadily rising as the Iraqi Army has been bloodied in repeated combat, and even the quality (if not the reliability) of many police units is increasing. The one thing the Iraqis do not need is an influx of thousands of American junior officers and mid-level NCOs into their companies and stations to train them to be fighters.

What they do need is a body of advisers who can help them set up support structures to address all of the deficiencies noted above. They can also use the continued presence of advisers—rather than trainers—working with battalion, brigade, and division commanders and staffs to help move those organizations from basic proficiency to skill in planning and conducting counterinsurgency operations. The primary problem in the Iraqi police force now is sectarianism rather than incompetence. If we simply train the Iraqi police and the National Police (which the CNAS report oddly fails to mention, although they are the most problematic sectarian actors within the ISF today) to be more effective, we will be training them to be more effective sectarian actors.

American units partnered with these organizations have instead focused on reducing sectarianism within their operations, but that is something that small dispersed training teams will find it very hard to do. Because they cannot develop their own intelligence, training teams have a very difficult time evaluating the real sectarian nature of the operations of the units they are embedded with. Because they cannot act independently of those units and do not control the resources those units need to operate in many cases (as U.S. combat units partnered with IPs, NPs, and Iraqi Army units now do), they cannot easily prevent their Iraqi counterparts from misbehaving. About all they can do is report up their own chain of command when they observe or suspect sectarianism, with what effect it is difficult to predict. Spreading small teams throughout Iraq will help the Iraqi forces most where they need it least, while reducing our ability to address the most serious problems they face.

The massive trainer surge the CNAS report proposes will place an extraordinary strain on American ground forces. The meat of these training teams will be the mid-level officers and NCOs who man it (the infantry squad the CNAS report wants to add to each team simply allows it to move more easily and protect itself—it does not add at all to its ability to train or advise). In the case of company-level teams, the burden will fall heavily on Army and Marine captains and sergeants. Considering that the Iraqi units they will be embedded with have almost all been fighting for some time, these captains and sergeants need to be combat veterans to be respected. The captains really need to have had company commands if they are to advise Iraqi company commanders and be listened to. The CNAS emphasizes the need for quality personnel—in this case, quality translates into a fairly high bar for qualifications.

Post-command captains are one of the rarest breed of mid-level officer in the Army, however, and one of the ranks most under pressure from the standpoint of retention. Promotion rates from captain to major (a measure of how many post-command captains stay in the force) now approach 100 percent. Mid-level and senior sergeants have also suffered significant attrition. Finding enough of these officers and NCOs to man the hundreds of training teams the CNAS proposal calls for will be challenging, to say

the least. It will also compromise efforts (which CNAS also insists on) by the Army and Marine Corps to focus on resetting and rebuilding U.S. ground forces rapidly. It is precisely these veteran officers and NCOs that are essential to that process. Could it be done? Certainly, but the price is very high for what is likely to be a low payoff on the ground in Iraq.

The proposal for increasing police training teams is even more problematic. The 9,000 MPs the CNAS proposal calls for deploying around Iraq constitute more than half of all active duty MPs. Since, in this context, we could hardly deploy female MPs on this mission, the base is even further reduced. The strain on that branch would be intolerable. Furthermore, MPs are not trainers. We have made this mistake in the past. Knowing how to be a policeman (or a soldier, for that matter) is not the same as knowing how to teach someone else to be a policeman or soldier. A significant retraining period is required—U.S. forces deploying into MTTs now go through a sixty-day course. The MPs would have to set up a similar course. Unless we are to send personnel with no training in how to be trainers into a complex and dangerous environment, it will be several months before the first teams show up with their units—months in which the ISF will have been under great stress and suffering from the degradation in their capabilities resulting from the withdrawal of their partnered U.S. units.

Some of these problems are inherent in the CNAS plan—the emphasis on training rather than advising and the focus on the lower levels of the Iraqi organizations rather than the higher levels and support structure. These problems could and should be addressed with plans that focus on the real areas of challenge in the ISF today.

Some problems are a product of the CNAS timeline. Soldiers, NCOs, and officers can be found and trained to serve on advisory teams, the institutional Army and Marine Corps can make adjustments to support that effort, and so on, but not overnight. The problem with trying to portray a massive training effort as the means to allow a rapid withdrawal of combat forces is that it places intolerable pressure on already stressed U.S. military institutions to undertake a difficult task instantly.

Some of the problems are inherent in the inconsistency of the CNAS assumptions about the threat environment in which this operation will be occurring, a theme to which we will return shortly.

In sum, although the CNAS report, like the ISG, was right to emphasize the fact that the U.S. effort will at some point have to transition to an advisory role, it makes the same mistake of imagining that that transition can come very rapidly and that it can be used as a means to reduce the U.S. presence in Iraq dramatically without compromising the pursuit of our vital interests in the country.

The QRFs

The most serious technical problems with the CNAS proposal affect the QRFs that the authors wish to deploy in Anbar, Kurdistan, and in or near Baghdad. Each force is to consist of a single brigade combat team (around 3,500–4,000 combat troops with some organic support elements). The CNAS report gives each of these forces several missions. All are supposed to:

- defend locations in which large numbers of Americans remain, especially the Green Zone;

- provide immediate support to Americans, both military and civilian—including combat search and rescue missions and "*in extremis* the conduct of a large scale Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation";

- "deter and if necessary respond to cross-border incursions or aggression, e.g., by Syria or Iran"; and

- "contribute to deterring and, if necessary, stopping genocide."[1]

In addition, the QRF in Kurdistan is to "provide a stabilizing influence" in Mosul and Kirkuk and support operations against the PKK terrorist group.

In reality, three brigades are not capable of performing all of these tasks. The CNAS report proposes

putting one at al Asad airbase west of Ramadi (more than two hours by helicopter from Baghdad); one near Baghdad (either near Baghdad International Airport, at FOB Falcon to the south of the city, or at Balad, our current major base but a considerable distance north of the city); and one in Kurdistan (given the mission to support operations in Mosul and Kirkuk, this one would need to be based near Irbil, although the report does not specify its location). None of these bases is now a major logistics support area, so the logistics planners would have to set up three new support bases while they accomplished all of their other tasks.

Each base would need to defend itself with significant combat forces "on the wire:" manning checkpoints, guard towers, patrolling, and so on. Because the plan relies so heavily on air power and air resupply, each QRF would have to defend not only its own FOB, but also the adjacent airfield, adding considerably to the defensive combat power required. QRFs at al Asad and Irbil could probably get away with devoting one battalion to such protection, leaving two battalions (in principle) for other operations.[3] The QRF in Baghdad would have much greater requirements, which we will consider in a moment.

The idea of a QRF is that it is a body of troops that is on standby to load into helicopters and/or ground vehicles at short notice and move rapidly to the assistance of soldiers or civilians in trouble. To maintain a QRF requires rotating units through that stand-by status; a single unit cannot be ready to go at a moment's notice 24/7 for days at a time. Two battalions might be able to keep two to three companies on standby at any given time, if they are not performing any other missions. A company includes around 150 soldiers and their vehicles. So advisory teams, civilians, and Iraqi units in Anbar and Kurdistan could hope to have perhaps 300 American soldiers move rapidly to any one location if they got into trouble, or 150 soldiers racing to two locations. Any prolonged presence—in support of operations against the PKK, say—would virtually eliminate the QRF's ability to react rapidly. And a wily enemy who can generate three or four crises simultaneously can reduce the

QRF's support to one or two of them to air power without any hope of rapid ground reinforcement.

The situation of the QRF in Baghdad is much more dire. The CNAS report explicitly states that we will continue to have a large presence in the Green Zone. The notion of putting the QRF at FOB Falcon is undermined by the fact that the QRF base must cover an airfield. Balad is too far away from the Green Zone of Baghdad over unsecured roads. The only sensible location is near Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). We now have several FOBs at BIAP, some housing combat units, others containing headquarters. These would presumably be consolidated into one, probably FOB Striker, which is nearest the BIAP airport facilities. MNF-I and its subordinate headquarters would presumably move to that FOB, where the QRF would also be based. But Baghdad International Airport is a very large airfield, and defending it is made more complex by the fact that half of it is run by the Iraqi government as the civilian airport for Baghdad. Protecting the military part of Baghdad International Airport and the military headquarters, as well as the FOB itself, will almost certainly require two battalions, leaving only one available.

But defending the Green Zone is also a significant challenge. The Green Zone, even just the American portion (which is presumably all that we would take responsibility for defending in this scenario, whereas we now also cover elements of the Iraqi government) is a large area that includes our embassy, the large trailer park in which most embassy personnel live, the large dining facility that serves them, motor pools, and so on. It is difficult to imagine committing less than a battalion to the task of guarding the perimeter of an area that contains so many high-ranking American officials.

The QRF assigned to Baghdad, therefore, would be stretched simply conducting a static defense of BIAP, the military headquarters, and the Green Zone. It would not be able to secure the airport road that connects BIAP and the Green Zone, so travel between the two would have to be by helicopter—or would have to rely on ISF security of that route. In addition, there would be no American forces available to patrol areas from which rogue JAM cells

have been firing mortars and rockets at the Green Zone, let alone clearing them out of those areas, as U.S. forces have undertaken to do in recent weeks. Protection against this indirect-fire threat (IDF) would come in the form of counter-battery fire (artillery, mortar, rockets, or airstrikes launched after incoming rounds are fired or land against the locations from which they were fired). The problem with this form of defense against IDF is that it is relatively ineffective—most mortar teams run from their firing sites as soon as they have fired, so counter-battery rounds usually land on nothing, and JAM rocket teams usually set their weapons off with timers so that they are not even present when the rockets are launched. Another problem is that JAM has taken to setting up rocket launchers and mortars in the midst of populated areas, so 155-millimeter artillery rounds fired back kill innocent civilians (to say nothing of what air-launched joint direct attack munitions do). It is difficult to see how we could prevent the enemy from regularly hitting the Green Zone with rocket and mortar fire without doing a great deal of collateral damage in the course of mostly ineffective counter-battery fire.

The complete commitment of the Baghdad QRF to fixed defense will leave U.S. advisers in the Baghdad area almost entirely without any rapid reaction force to support them. That's a significant problem because the Baghdad area is one of the most dangerous in which advisers can operate due to the presence of mixed neighborhoods, ongoing efforts at sectarian cleansing, and the high-profile attacks against U.S. forces there. The lack of any real QRF capability in Baghdad also means that U.S. advisers operating in Diyala, southern Salah-ad-Din, and Babil provinces will be effectively without support— again, mixed areas that pose significant danger and challenges to advisers embedded with Iraqi units.

Still another problem with the entire concept of the QRFs as it is laid out in the CNAS report is that U.S. forces would control no roads in Iraq. There are no forces available in the CNAS structure to conduct regular patrols of key routes to monitor for and deter IED emplacement, let alone to conduct IED-clearing operations. A QRF moving out of its FOB in support

of Americans in danger will face the choice of moving rapidly and running into the inevitable IED ambushes, or moving slowly while its engineering assets clear the road ahead of it, or moving by helicopter, which means without vehicles and potentially having to land in unsecured landing zones. None of these options would inspire great confidence in the advisers that help could reach them rapidly if they got into trouble, again, except in the form of fixed-wing air support. There have been instances in Vietnam and Afghanistan when senior commanders called in airstrikes on their own positions as they were about to be overrun, and modern American air power makes such an idea less terrifying, in principle, than it was in the 1970s or 1980s. Even so, it is a less-than-ideal solution to the problem of protecting American advisers dispersed throughout Iraq.

A last question about the QRFs concerns the one or two brigades that the CNAS report proposes to leave in Kuwait. It describes them as serving as QRFs for southern Iraq, but does not address another key question: are they also a theater reserve? That is, if additional support were required in the areas in which QRFs were already deployed in Iraq, could the theater commander bring one or both brigades from Kuwait into Iraq to assist? This is a key question, because if the answer is yes, then the CNAS report contemplates at least temporary increases above the 60,000-troop force cap. If the answer is no, then there is no reserve to come to the desperately over-committed QRFs in Iraq.

In sum, the QRF concept in the CNAS report is unworkable. The proposal gives too many missions to a force that is barely large enough to defend itself and critical support infrastructure. It would leave the advisers without reliable ground support in case of emergency. And the notion of one brigade in Anbar and one in Irbil deterring or resisting Iranian and/or Syrian invasions is frankly unrealistic. If American air power were not enough to prevent such movements, single brigades would not make up the difference. Likewise, the notion that 3,500 soldiers, at least a third of whom were committed to defending their base, could intervene to prevent

genocide or death-squad activity in their areas is also unrealistic. Death squads operate where American forces are not present. Reining in their activities in has required establishing a permanent U.S. military presence in the areas in which they had been operating. Even a larger number of American forces confined to FOBs would be hard-pressed to prevent death squad killings, as the death squads simply wait until American forces have withdrawn before operating. The tiny forces the CNAS proposals would assign to this mission will be incapable of preventing even large-scale death-squad activity in which the extremists move rapidly in areas where there are no U.S. forces—which will be almost everywhere—and withdraw or disperse before the QRF can react. The QRF structure outlined in the CNAS report could protect itself and some key bases, provide very limited quick-reaction capabilities in Anbar and Irbil, and nothing else.

Vulnerability of U.S. Advisers

As a result of the QRFs' limited capacity, American advisers deployed in Iraqi police stations and with Iraqi Army companies would be at the mercy of their partnered units and would be dependent on the competence of those units to survive. This situation will contrast sharply with the current advisory effort in which embedded trainers are frequently in contact with U.S. combat units operating alongside of the Iraqis in the field and are rarely far from help. Embedded advisers operating without benefit of patrolling combat units from their own country are always at risk, but we must ask: is the condition of the ISF and of security in Iraq generally now such that we could feel comfortable with such an arrangement? It is very difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. The ISF, particularly the police, is known to be infiltrated by JAM and its sympathizers. AQI is known to make a priority of kidnapping and executing Americans publicly. It is almost inconceivable in current circumstances that American advisers alone with Iraqi units and far from help would not fall victim to one or the other of these foes, and very quickly. What would happen then? U.S. forces in Iraq would have very

limited means for conducting rapid search-and-rescue operations, and routes from the FOBs to the locations of the kidnappings or attacks would surely be lined with IEDs and ambushes. Air power is useful in such cases only in retaliation—and against whom would it be used? In current conditions, we would have to expect that periodic kidnapping and murder of American advisers would be the norm—and it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine such a situation persisting for very long, even if 2008 were not a presidential election year.

Al Qaeda in Iraq

Still another problem with the CNAS report's proposals is that they mistake the nature and current disposition of AQI. The CNAS authors assumed that AQI was predominantly based in Anbar, and therefore that the QRF in Anbar could support SOFs acting against AQI. In fact, there is relatively little AQI left in Anbar. Apart from the area around Karmah in Anbar, most AQI fighters are concentrated in Diyala, with a number in Salah-ad-Din, north Babil, and Ninewah and, of course, cells scattered throughout Baghdad and Kirkuk. Meeting the challenge of fighting AQI, therefore, requires far more than stationing a brigade in Anbar. The CNAS report appears to assume that Special Forces and Iraqi troops will be taking the lead in this fight. As we have already seen, the ability of the ISF to fight al Qaeda without American direct assistance will be extremely limited in the near term. Nor is there any evidence to believe that Special Forces alone will be effective against this enemy. AQI does not maintain large training bases in the desert, as al Qaeda in Afghanistan did. It intermingles with urban populations by preference, and can only be separated from those populations by troops operating within the urban environment. Special Forces can and do eliminate senior leaders, but unless the population is protected against AQI reprisal attacks, the movement has shown itself remarkably adept at regenerating leadership. The CNAS report does not analyze this critical problem in any detail beyond asserting that the U.S. presence in Iraq is a recruiting tool for the global al Qaeda

movement, that reducing that presence would disrupt this narrative, and that negotiating with Sunni insurgents would drive a wedge between them and al Qaeda. There is no significant evaluation of al AQI's aims, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and methods at all.

The Inconsistent Basis of the CNAS Study

The major problems in the CNAS report, and similar proposals, flow from a single inconsistency. The report advocates a change in strategy on the grounds that the present strategy will not succeed in establishing security or building up a workable ISF; but their proposals only work after security has been established and the ISF is functioning pretty well. The challenges of moving around, of supplying advisers and Iraqi forces, of defending key bases, and of having advisers dispersed around the country flow in considerable part from the fact that multiple enemies continue to attack bases, lines of communications, and isolated Americans. If the security environment were benign (roads pretty clear of IEDs, few AQI or JAM cells operating mortars or kidnapping rings, and so on) or if the ISF could and would reliably protect the advisers embedded with them, then this or an appropriately adjusted advisory model might make sense.

But according to the CNAS report, that will not be the scenario facing American forces in 2008 or 2009: "the situation in Iraq may not yet be hopeless, but it is both dire and precarious. America's enduring interests—preventing the establishment of al Qaeda safe havens, preventing genocide, and preventing regional war—are at grave risk . . . The surge of U.S. troops to Baghdad and Anbar province in 2007 will not produce anything close to 'victory.'" The direness and precariousness of the situation in Iraq and the likely failure of the surge seem much more questionable in August than they did in June, but the logical problem remains the same. If the surge actually is working and may actually produce a situation in which a responsible transition to an advisory role would be possible, then it would seem logical to continue it. If it is not working and is not

going to work, then such a transition will be militarily infeasible, at least at the force levels and on the timeline the CNAS report advocates. In either event, the one thing that does not make sense is assuming the direness of the current situation and advocating an immediate transition to a strategy that can only succeed in a relatively benign security environment.

Other Issues

The problems identified above were treated in detail because they are common to all or most "middle-way" approaches to the situation in Iraq. In addition, the CNAS report made other errors and omissions that are important enough to mention briefly:

- *Supporting Grassroots Movements*. The development of a grassroots movement against AQI among Sunni tribes is perhaps the most important development of 2007, and the CNAS report rightly recognizes it as such. The report advocates supporting and strengthening this movement, but does not consider the implications of its proposed change of strategy for doing so. Again, whereas the CNAS report assumes that this movement is primarily occurring in Anbar (where it was, to be sure, most visible in June), the movement has now spread throughout Iraq to Baghdad, Babil, Diyala, and Salah-ad-Din provinces. Placing a brigade at al Asad airfield will do little to maintain the grassroots movement in Anbar, and nothing whatever outside the province. Nor is it likely that American advisers will be able to assist very much— since they will be embedded with ISF units, and not neighborhood watches or groups of concerned citizens, the forms in which many of these grassroots groups operate. And the report also ignores the fact that American forces operating among the Iraqi population are the key bridge between the Sunni tribes and the Iraqi Government that is making this movement possible. Tribes

that are suspicious of, or even hostile to, the government, will work with us against AQI. If our forces leave quickly, it is highly unlikely that they will start to work instead with an Iraqi government that is also suspicious of them. Grassroots movements like this take time to solidify, even more time to link into the statewide governmental structure. Removing the American bridge prematurely will probably lead to the contraction or collapse of this movement, and will certainly not encourage it to grow.

- *Shia Militias*. Because the CNAS report does not consider the enemy in any detail, it does not take adequate account of the influence of Shia militias in the Iraqi government and its security forces. Over the past few months, Shia militias, particularly elements of the JAM, have increased their attacks on American forces, actively supported by increased Iranian aid in the form of weapons, training, and advisers. There is no reason to imagine that these attacks will stop if American forces adopt the proposed CNAS posture (the Sadrist movement does not object to having 140,000 American troops in Iraq; it objects to having any). This lacuna in the report causes two problems for its proposals. First, as we have seen, it leads to a serious underestimation of the danger facing isolated American training teams embedded within JAM-infiltrated units. Second, it leads to a failure to develop any serious plan for reducing sectarianism within the ISF and the Iraqi government in general. In truth, it turns out that partnering American combat units with Iraqis and having both patrol the same neighborhood, is about the most effective way to address sectarianism. U.S. units develop their own understanding of the neighborhood and can evaluate the actions of their partnered units independently. They also have the force and resources to delay or prevent sectarian

actions by those units. Advisers have none of these capabilities. The CNAS plan is very likely to be far less effective at addressing this critical problem than the current strategy, and, again, it does not consider this problem in any great detail.

- *Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)*. The PRTs have long suffered from the problem of finding ways to move safely around Iraq. The most effective solution to this problem has been embedding PRTs with brigade combat teams that then become responsible for their safe movement. Removing the patrolling BCTs will severely restrict the movement of the PRTs that remain, once again limiting their effectiveness. The CNAS report, moreover, does not really consider the PRTs in any detail, and so does not offer a recommendation about whether their mission, composition, and support would need to be changed in line with the report's new strategy.

- *Detainees*. U.S. forces now hold more than 20,000 detainees in several camps in Iraq. These detainees are held under the provisions of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) under whose auspices Coalition forces operate in Iraq. Many of these detainees are held based on intelligence of their activities that would not be admissible as evidence in Iraqi courts, even assuming that the Iraqi judicial system was working adequately, which it certainly is not. The UNSCR could be extended in support of this revised plan, or the U.S. and the government of Iraq could come to a bilateral agreement about the terms of holding, releasing, or transferring these detainees (which include some extremely committed AQI terrorists and JAM leaders), but the CNAS proposal leaves no U.S. troops to oversee the camps and does not address the issue at all. Guarding the camps now occupies nearly a brigade's worth of American soldiers. Will

we turn the camps over to the Iraqis, who do not have enough personnel trained to manage them? Will we dump the detainees into the Iraqi judicial system, which does not have the capacity to process them even if there were adequate evidence (as opposed to intelligence) on all of them? Will we just release them? These are critical questions that go unasked in the CNAS report.

- *Humanitarian Assistance.* The CNAS report makes a point of calling for humanitarian assistance for the millions of displaced Iraqis it foresees as a result of the soft partition scheme it advocates. But there is no provision in the report for the distribution of this assistance or for protecting those providing it.

- *Coalition Participation.* There are now four coalition combat brigades in Iraq: a South Korean brigade in Kurdistan, a Polish brigade in Diwaniyah, a Georgian brigade in Kut, and a British brigade in Basra. The CNAS report does not consider what will happen to these forces, and what the effect of their remaining or departing might have on the coalition overall and on international support for the effort. But the report's final depiction of force levels appears to suggest that they would all have left. Considering that the Poles and Georgians are dependent upon the presence of a large U.S. force in Iraq for their security, and that the will of the British government to remain appears to be flagging even faster than that of the United States, this seems a good assumption. It is nevertheless an important issue that should have been considered.

- *Regional Repositioning.* Maintaining adequate U.S. air cover for U.S. forces remaining in Iraq will almost certainly require an increase in the number of American aircraft in the region. Some can be provided by aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf (although that

prospect has to be considered in tandem with our expectations about Iranian reactions to developments in Iraq), but some will require additional basing in the region. Will it be forthcoming? The report does not consider this problem, which is serious considering the difficulties the U.S. has experienced in the past in using bases in Turkey in support of combat operations in Iraq.

Iraqi and Regional Reaction

The CNAS report, like the ISG and many other "middle-way" reports, assumes a number of things about the likely Iraqi and regional response to its plans without really exploring its assumptions in any great detail. The key assumptions are that setting a timetable for withdrawal will incentivize the Iraqi government to make the hard decisions that it has been resisting and that an appropriate diplomatic initiative (i.e. one different from anything the Bush administration has ever tried to do) would bring Iraq's neighbors to play a more constructive role in Iraq. On the other hand, this report (like the ISG), pays very little attention to likely regional reactions to the American withdrawal from Iraq on a fixed timeline and the ensuing situation in that country. To examine this aspect of the proposal, AEI convened a daylong seminar that included regional experts and Iraqi and regional nationals, as well as experts on the American political scene. The conclusions presented below were informed by this discussion but should not be taken to be consensus positions or to represent the views of any particular participant other than the author of this report.

Iraq

The CNAS report considers the reactions of some of the key players within Iraq to the announcement of a withdrawal as it proposes, but it does so in an extremely constrained way: "The United States should initiate an extensive negotiating effort with Iraq's national and local leaders. These negotiations

would not aim to resolve all of Iraq's myriad political controversies (though such negotiations are needed). Rather, the negotiations would establish the conditions and timetables for an American withdrawal and what the mission of remaining 'transitional' forces will be."[3] Considering that the report has already laid out the conditions and timetables for the proposed withdrawal, as well as the specific missions of the remaining "transitional" forces, it is a little hard to see how these "negotiations" with Iraqi actors could have meaning. Nevertheless, the CNAS report concludes, "If successful, this could be the starting point for broader political and economic negotiations, and might help augment the U.S. role as a credible honest broker among Iraq's various political actors."

The thrust of the CNAS recommendations for conducting these negotiations is that the Shia-Kurd central government should be persuaded to make the necessary concessions to the Sunni insurgents to continue the momentum of the ongoing grassroots movements, and the Kurds must be both protected and restrained. Moqtada al Sadr, the report notes, will probably be happy to see the "occupiers" go and "this may provide some room for co-opting at least some elements of the movement . . ." How does the report propose to get the Shia-Kurd government to make the necessary concessions? It notes, "The Shiite government and its supporters realize that they are not ready to stand on their own and so must continue to rely heavily on the United States, particularly for military logistics and air support. The Kurds know that good relations and at least a minimal U.S. presence are important to deter Turkish intervention. Thus, the United States retains some leverage with the Shiites and the Kurds that it should be able to exploit in the context of a general troop drawdown."[4]

This logic is rather hard to follow. If the main leverage the United States has with the Shia in Iraq's government is their recognition of their dependence on American military support, why will that leverage increase as the military support is reduced? The report argues elsewhere that "setting a timeline [for withdrawal] will provide incentives for Iraqi political

leaders to take necessary steps on political reconciliation . . . By setting the terms of our own disengagement well in advance, the United States will provide incentives for Iraqi political leaders to take necessary steps to move toward a functioning albeit highly decentralized federalized state."[5] But the report notes, "In general, the dominant Shiite and Kurdish factions would likely prefer to be unconstrained in order to deal with the 'Baathists' and 'terrorists' in their own way. As time goes on and sectarian identities harden, there is a growing chance that several Shiite or Kurdish elements will attempt to implement their own ethnic and sectarian agenda."[6] Against this probability the CNAS report sets only the leverage of continued Shia-Kurd dependence on an ever-decreasing American military assistance program. If these tendencies exist among the Shia leadership now, and if elements in that leadership would "prefer to be unconstrained" in order to deal with their problems "in their own way," then why would they make more concessions as the constraints on their actions imposed by American forces were reduced? And if the current level of military support is not incentivizing them to make deals they would prefer to avoid, why will reducing that support create more leverage to force them to make the deals?

The purpose of parsing the language of the CNAS report so closely is not to show a flaw in that language, but to underline a critical flaw in the thinking that forms a key basis of almost all middle-way plans: that reducing the American military presence will increase both the pressure on and the incentives for the Iraqi government to make concessions it would prefer not to make. Apart from the fact that there is no evidence to support this assertion—the pliability of the Iraqi government has not varied according to the increase or decrease of American forces over the past four years—the argument itself is inherently contradictory. The CNAS report rightly notes that elements of many factions appear to be willing to contemplate civil war in order to achieve their objectives. One might add that these elements are prominently represented in a Council of Representatives chosen by a list-based system (designed

by international elections officials under UN auspices) that tended to throw power to extremists rather than moderates, and that these extremists are playing a key role in blocking movement toward reconciliation that many moderate leaders in Iraq appear to favor. It notes that some of these extremist leaders would prefer to execute their own schemes for "solving their problems," by which we mean sectarian cleansing at best and attempts at genocide at worst. It then implies (as other proposals have asserted) that forcing these extremists to stare down the barrel of a real civil war will somehow push them toward moderation. But if these are the extremists who seek civil war, why should they blanch from it when the opportunity presents itself?

In addition, the report paints a rosier military picture of the transitional period than is warranted, as we noted above. In reality, the capabilities of the ISF will degrade significantly and almost immediately. American support will be minimal, will not include logistical support, and will be largely confined to bombing things the Iraqis say they want bombed and advising Iraqi units that are probably largely confined to their bases. What will happen then? Will Sadr's militias disband when they see the two forces that are now opposing them most firmly—the Americans and the Iraqi Army—retreat? Or will they be emboldened to pursue the more radical agendas now circulating among them? Will AQI rejoice at the partial departure of the "great Satan," or will it begin to attempt to terrorize the Sunnis into supporting it again? Will the Sunni insurgents put down their arms in expectation of a deal that they were not offered while 160,000 Americans protected them, or will they take up arms again out of fear for their lives?

There has been no previous test of this experiment by which to judge the outcome on the scale of the country, but there have been numerous tests at the regional level that should give us an idea. As the British forces withdrew into their base in Basra and continued to cede territory and cease patrolling outside, the Shia militias they had been fighting did not gracefully accept the withdrawal and allow them to live in peace. They moved up their mortars and

rockets and have been attacking the British compound ever more aggressively, even as they began to fight one another for the spoils. When American forces cleared neighborhoods in Baghdad in late summer of 2006 and then turned them over to ISF to hold, the enemy—both al Qaeda and JAM—focused on those neighborhoods to demonstrate the failure of the U.S. effort. Within weeks, attacks and killings in Baghdad were higher than they had been before the clearing effort began. U.S. forces, acting on a local tip, killed AQI leader Abu Musaab al Zarqawi near Baqubah in June 2006. By the end of the year, Baqubah was a major AQI base and the "capital" of al Qaeda's puppet "Islamic State of Iraq." Where American forces have pulled out of areas prematurely and attempted to hand security over to unready ISF troops, the results have been consistent—locals do not compromise with one another or the Iraqi government, sectarian polarization increases, as does violence and death. On the other hand, where U.S. forces have moved in among the population in Baghdad, Anbar, the southern belt, and Diyala, locals have come forward to make cease-fires with us, have volunteered their sons for the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police, and have begun to fight AQI. Violence has decreased, cross-sectarian negotiations have begun, and death rates have fallen. There is simply no evidence to support the CNAS report's assertions about what a U.S. departure will bring. To the contrary, there is ample evidence to call them into question.

It is also necessary to examine the reactions of particular actors in much more detail than the CNAS report does, or than it is possible to do in this context either. Since the center of gravity of middle-way proposals is the reaction of the Iraqis to the announcement of a timetable for withdrawal, the paucity of evidence and analysis of that reaction is a major flaw in such studies.

It is difficult to predict exactly what will happen to Prime Minister Nuri Kemal al Maliki's government in the event of a rapid U.S. withdrawal. His Dawa Party has no militia of its own, and is dependent upon the ISF (and the Americans) for its security in the face of AQI and JAM attacks. As the Americans

leave and the capabilities of the ISF degrade, it is extremely unclear that Prime Minister Maliki will be able to maintain himself in power, or that he will try to do so.

The most obvious candidate to succeed him is Deputy Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi, the political leader of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), controlled by Abd al Aziz Hakim and, because of his illness, now his son, Amar. SIIC has traditionally been an ally of Iran and has a relatively small militia, the Badr Corps, but it has been working to Iraqify itself and the Badr Corps has largely either joined the ISF or moved on to more peaceful activities. SIIC controls the largest bloc of Shia votes in the Council of Representatives, and Adel Mehdi is well thought of as a likely successor to Maliki, but it is unclear what the effect of such a shift might be, or if it could happen in the context of an American withdrawal. The basic characteristic of SIIC at this point is that it dominates the leadership of provincial councils in the south and has a strong hand in parliament, but has little grassroots organization or support. In the context of a deteriorating security situation, it is not likely that SIIC will prosper.

The most likely de facto successor to Maliki within the Shia community is therefore Moqtada al Sadr or some political leader nominally under his tutelage. The Sadrist Trend, as it is commonly called in Iraq, is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon. Sadr trades on the name of his illustrious father, some rather dubious claims to clerical authority, and his ability to pose as a nationalistic representative of the downtrodden Shia majority. He has parlayed these attributes into a major role in the Iraqi security situation and a significant if lesser role in the political situation. It appears that he continues to exercise solid control of the political wing of his movement, the Office of the Martyr Sadr, but his control of the military wing, the JAM, is much more doubtful.

It is clear, in fact, that JAM, which is by far the largest and most active Shia militia, has not only slipped from Sadr's control but fragmented into a number of groups. The fragmentation has occurred on both regional and ideological lines. JAM has bases in Najaf, Basra, and Baghdad, but the groups in these three areas do not always see eye-to-eye. The increasing tilt of the movement toward Iran, moreover, has set up counter-currents within a movement that has always seen itself as nationalistic (and therefore Arab rather than Persian). Infighting between JAM groups has been reported, and it seems clear that Sadr returned from Iran earlier in the summer with advisers and the intention to regain control of part of his wayward military wing.

The fragmentation of JAM has been greatly facilitated by continuous American attacks on JAM leadership, particularly the leaders of the secret cells, who are part of a network that works around Sadr directly with Iranian Quds Force agents. The United States has captured or killed well over a thousand leaders and facilitators in this network, compromising the Iranians' ability to form and maintain a coherent structure within JAM, and frustrating Sadr's attempts to regain control of the movement. Almost all of these raids have been intelligence-driven and dependent upon a significant American combat presence on the ground, even though many were conducted by American Special Forces. Without that presence, the ISF raids conducted into places like Sadr City would be much more dangerous. Limited avenues of approach to key targets could easily lead to Mogadishu-like disasters if American forces were not regularly patrolling the area and in easy distance to assist any Special Forces troops in distress. It is also open to question whether American advisers working with Iraqi units heavily infiltrated by JAM would be able to obtain the time-sensitive intelligence necessary to conduct such targeted raids.

The pressure both on JAM and on the secret cells within it would be significantly reduced by an American withdrawal, therefore, leaving both Iran and Sadr in a considerably better position to destabilize the current Iraqi government, which has been their consistent aim. Given the degradation of the ISF capabilities and the withdrawal of American combat power, it is highly likely that they would succeed in this endeavor. Even if they did not, the pressure against JAM efforts to conduct sectarian cleansing would vanish almost completely with American

forces, and it is very probable that such cleansing would accelerate dramatically.

Increased JAM pressure on the remaining Sunni Arabs in and near Baghdad would do great harm to the grassroots movement the CNAS report seeks to support. The "concerned citizens" now fighting AQI and working with us because they believe we will protect them will focus instead on fighting JAM. Their turn will relieve the pressure on AQI, which will work hard to reestablish itself among Sunni communities terrorized by both JAM and al Qaeda itself. It will likely succeed. In sum, the most likely immediate effect of the beginning of a premature drawdown will be the ignition of a large-scale civil war in central Iraq.

It is less easy to predict with certainty the role the Kurds will play in these developments, but they are unlikely to take great risks to intervene in the Arab civil war to their south. They are likelier instead to work to seal their own borders against spillover and possibly to expand their control over contested areas like Kirkuk, northern Diyala, and northern Ninewah, to establish a buffer zone between their core territories and the violence. They will probably pursue these aims through ethnic cleansing of their own, using their militia, the Peshmerga, and Kurdish settlers. This movement will add fuel to the fire in Arab Iraq by creating more displaced persons and more opportunities for AQI to re-emerge as the only reliable defender of Iraqi Sunni Arabs.

AQI is certain to take credit for defeating the United States in Iraq. Osama bin Laden took credit for defeating the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, a claim that is ludicrous on its face but that has nevertheless proven effective as an al Qaeda recruiting tool. The presence of American forces in Iraq is no doubt another recruiting tool for al Qaeda, as the CNAS report notes, but there is no reason to believe that reducing that presence will reduce the effectiveness of the tool. The principle that groups like al Qaeda (and Sadr, for that matter) follow is not that there is some acceptable number of American forces in Muslim countries, but that any American presence is an intolerable occupation. AQI will therefore certainly increase its attacks on the remaining

American forces even as it claims credit for driving most of "the Crusaders" out of the country. Its aim will then become establishing itself in the population and driving the rest of the Americans out to ensure a completely free hand. Spectacular attacks, attacks against advisers, and complex attacks against our remaining bases will all be tried; some will succeed. Given the extreme vulnerability of American advisers in this sort of scenario, it is quite possible that casualties will increase as a percentage of forces deployed, even though they will probably decrease as an absolute number.

One of the key arguments proponents of middle-way approaches make is that their recommendations can lead to some sort of acceptable situation in Iraq, even if it is short of the president's stated goals. The best that can be said about this argument is that it is unproven. Close examination of the situation on the ground in Iraq suggests that it is highly unlikely. Until and unless its advocates can actually advance some evidence in support of this key assertion, it would seem unwise to build a strategy upon it.

Iran

Another key assumption of the CNAS proposal, like the ISG, is that Iran ultimately has an interest in establishing and maintaining a stable Shia government in Iraq, and that Tehran can be brought to play a constructive role in pursuing that aim if only it were approached properly. As with the assertion that a timetable would incentivize Iraqis to behave properly, the assertion that Iran seeks generally the same end-state in Iraq that we do is offered without substantiation.

What evidence is there that Iran actually does want to see a stable Shia government in Iraq? On the contrary, Iran expanded the infiltration of its agents and the range and capabilities of their networks in Iraq after Maliki's Shia government was formed in May 2006. If their aim was to support a stable Shia government, they had only to assist Maliki to rein in the extremists on his side and defeat al Qaeda and the Sunni insurgents on the other. Instead, Iranian agents have provided significant support to virtually

every fighting faction in Iraq except the Maliki government. Iranian advisers, trainers, and weapons arm the most extreme elements of JAM, supporting their attacks against Sunnis, against Americans, and against the ISF. Iranian rockets and mortars have rained down on the Green Zone for months not only at American targets, but at the Iraqi government as well. Maliki has repeatedly requested that Iran reduce its support for JAM and other fighting groups in Iraq, but that support has only increased. The mullahs in Tehran may well dislike Maliki, his ties to the United States, and the ineffectiveness of his government, but their consistent support for groups attempting not only to drive the United States out but also to overthrow that government offers no evidence of their commitment to a stable Iraq.

There is little evidence, in fact, that Iran is interested in stability in the Middle East in general. The actions of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, both Iranian clients, to say nothing of Syria—another key Iranian ally—in both Lebanon and Iraq, offer no basis to believe that Iran is interested in stability in its region.

In the popular discussion about the Middle East it is often forgotten that the difference between Arab and Persian is older than the difference between Sunni and Shia. Shia Iraqis may take help from Iran, but few are willing to be branded as allies, still less servants, of Persians.

Iran, furthermore, is a self-identified revolutionary regime. Its leaders today were young members of the Khomeini movement that seized power—and American hostages—in 1979. Revolutionary movements do not always seek to establish stability on their frontiers. The Soviet Union, after all, worked assiduously throughout its existence to undermine the stability of non-Communist governments, but proved much less able to establish stable Communist governments without directly occupying other countries. Some regimes are simply less inclined to seek stability, and less able to do so, than others, and we should avoid falling into the trap of imagining that because Iran is a state, it acts like "all other states" in seeking state-like stability throughout its region.

What could the United States offer Iran to change this calculation? A free pass on Iran's nuclear program, Lebanon, Afghanistan, leaving the Gulf? None of these are acceptable foreign policy options for America, and it is not clear that the Iranians would accept such a deal anyway. Even if they did, the Iranians' ability to help Shia factions in Iraq reach out to the Sunni and heal the sectarian rifts is highly limited. They could work to establish a stable Shia government in Baghdad in the same way that extremists within that government now wish to—by cleansing the Sunni Arabs from central Iraq.

The CNAS report appears willing to accept this solution, but offers no reason to imagine that it will be stable. Will the Iraqi Sunni accept being driven out of Baghdad, Mosul, Baqubah, and trapped in the desert? What sort of openings for AQI will such a development present? How will the "grassroots movements" the CNAS Report is rightly eager to support continue in the face of sectarian cleansing? As with other key assumptions in the CNAS report, there is little evidence to accept the conclusion, and much to contradict it.

Gulf States

A precipitous American withdrawal from Iraq will likely be portrayed in the region as a defeat for the United States and as a victory for Iran. Arab states are already concerned about the growth in Iranian power and pretensions in the region, but few have the capability to do more than complain. The Saudis and the Gulf states are no match for Iran militarily, and would almost certainly seek an accommodation with Tehran rather than allowing themselves to be drawn into a major confrontation. The Saudis and Syrians have already been supporting Iraq's Sunni Arabs in their struggle against the Iranian-backed Shia, and they would probably increase this support as American forces withdrew. In some scenarios, they might press military forces a short distance into Iraq in order to stem the flow of refugees or provide more immediate assistance, but they are unlikely to engage directly in combat either against Iraqis or against Iranians.

Kenneth Pollack and Daniel Byman have argued persuasively that civil wars of the sort that is likely to occur in Iraq as we depart in accord with the CNAS scenario generally spread. Most of Iraq's neighbors are mixed either along sectarian lines or along ethnic lines or both, with co-religionists and members of the same ethnicity represented in Iraq's fighting. Syria's Allawite government represents a small percentage of the population of that overwhelmingly Sunni country; Saudi Arabia has a small but significant proportion of Shia, as do many Gulf states. If the Sunni-Shia struggle emerges as the dominant characteristic of Iraq, it is possible that it could spread in the form of internal strife among Iraq's neighbors, via the flow of Iraqi refugees, or through state-to-state hostilities, or some combination of all three. One thing is certain: increasing violence in Iraq is very likely to be destabilizing throughout the Middle East, and Iraq's neighbors cannot intervene in Iraq without increasing that destabilization.

A possible side effect of the U.S. withdrawal is the establishment of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. Tehran certainly seeks a predominant position in southern Iraq (including Baghdad), and it would be in a position to put great pressure on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in the absence of a large American presence in the region following a visible U.S. defeat. That pressure might include efforts to deny the U.S. the use of bases or to support Iranian initiatives in the region and in the nuclear realm. The perception of an American defeat at the hands of Iran is likely to fuel seismic shifts in the politics of the Middle East, none of them to our advantage.

America

One of the stated purposes of the CNAS report was to develop a strategy that would be sustainable within the American political spectrum for several years to come. Like the ISG, the CNAS report holds out the hope of forming a bipartisan consensus around its proposals. It is possible to imagine forming such a consensus this fall, although improvements on the ground in Iraq appear to be shifting the consensus in the direction of sustaining the current

strategy. But the long-term viability of these proposals will depend very heavily on how their execution is perceived and on what actually happens in 2008 and 2009. Given the monumental challenges in execution, the high likelihood that the withdrawal will be perceived as a defeat, and the extreme likelihood of increased violence against Americans remaining in Iraq, the CNAS strategy is unlikely to survive the change of administrations in 2009.

The sheer scale of the challenges of planning and conducting the withdrawal of 100,000 soldiers and their gear in fourteen months will make the operation look like a chaotic mess, however well it actually proceeds. AQI and probably JAM elements as well will very likely attack retreating U.S. forces and remaining American bases, causing more chaos and casualties. Increasing sectarian violence will be well-covered by the media, which will remain interested in documenting the withdrawal (and it will be heavily covered by the regional media, some of which will spill over into the American press). The kidnapping or assassination of American advisers will generate spikes in media attention focused entirely on negative events. There is no reason to suppose that the Iraqi government will make political progress or that any positive trend will continue, as we have seen. Absolute numbers of U.S. casualties may go down, but casualties as a percentage of deployed forces will probably rise, and the nature of the casualties will change—and it does matter to the public whether soldiers are killed in firefights or by IEDs, or whether they are slaughtered with knives on videotape.

The demands of the anti-war movement are not for reductions in the number of American forces in Iraq, but for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces. As with AQI and the Sadrists, there is no reason to imagine that people calling for an "end" to the war will be satisfied with a reduction to 60,000 more vulnerable soldiers engaged in what can only look like failure.

The virtually certain absence of positive news combined with the likely increase of negative news will undermine whatever support for the military effort remains. The CNAS report acknowledges that sectarian cleansing and violence will increase. That increase will be seen by many as evidence of defeat

and failure. Whatever the desires of an incoming Democratic or Republican president in 2009 might be, it is very hard to see how this strategy increases the likelihood of a responsible policy of continued military engagement in Iraq. It will probably instead lead to the rapid withdrawal of any remaining U.S. forces—precisely the opposite of what the CNAS proposal claims to desire—and a complete failure to secure any of America's vital interests in Iraq.

Conclusion

The efforts by CNAS, like those of the ISG, to find plausible and viable middle-way strategies in Iraq are laudable and contribute positively to the discourse on this important topic. The CNAS report in particular presents the most detailed military plan to support such a strategy, and therefore facilitates a serious evaluation of the approach. In a world in which it is far easier to criticize than to create, any group that produces a thoughtful and well-based proposal deserves praise and serious consideration.

But the work of the CNAS team has not produced a viable strategy. Their failure does not result from their incapacity or lack of effort, but rather from the impossibility of the task. It is simply not possible to design a militarily feasible plan to draw down U.S. forces dramatically and on a rapid timeline that still permits the accomplishment of America's vital interests in Iraq and the region. The CNAS report has raised the extremely important question of devising a sound plan for transitioning to an advisory role, and this question deserves a great deal of careful study in the months ahead. But now is the time to start thinking about that transition, not to start implementing it prematurely.

Any plan that requires a withdrawal based on a timeline, rather than on conditions on the ground, is likely to lead to failure. The notion that imposing timelines would somehow force the Iraqi government to "do the right thing" and thereby resolve the problems in the country is always presented without any evidence. It is a logical argument without substantiation that appears to be contradicted by past precedent and by facts on the ground. It is a mirage that some people cling to as a way of convincing themselves and others that an action likely to lead to complete failure in Iraq will instead lead to at least partial success. As the president and Congress deliberate on the best way ahead for the United States in Iraq, therefore, the choices are quite stark. Either the United States can continue its efforts to establish security while improving the capabilities of the ISF or it can abandon those efforts, withdraw, and allow Iraq to sink into chaos where terrorists can flourish.

Notes

1. CNAS Report, 62.

2. A BCT now includes nominally two maneuver battalions and one reconnaissance squadron (a formation lighter and smaller than a maneuver battalion). BCTs in Iraq have dismounted their artillery battalions and trained them as infantry to provide an additional small battalion. Considering the need for fire support, it is not clear that this practice could be continued under the CNAS plan. Calculating three disposable battalions for each BCT is generous, but possible.

3. CNAS Report, 41.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 39.

6. Ibid., 41.

Glossary of Acronyms

AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
BCT	Brigade Combat Team
BIAP	Baghdad International Airport
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CNAS	Center for a New American Security
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FOB	Forward Operating Base
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IP	Iraqi Police
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISG	Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton)
ISOF	Iraqi Special Operations Forces
JAM	Jaysh al Mehdi
JDAM	Joint Direct Attack Munition
MTT	Military Training Team
MNF-I	Multi-National Forces-Iraq
MNSTC-I	Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq
MP	Military Police
MSR	Main Supply Route
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NP	National Police
NPTT	National Police Training Team
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SIIC	Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

About the Iraq Planning Group at AEI

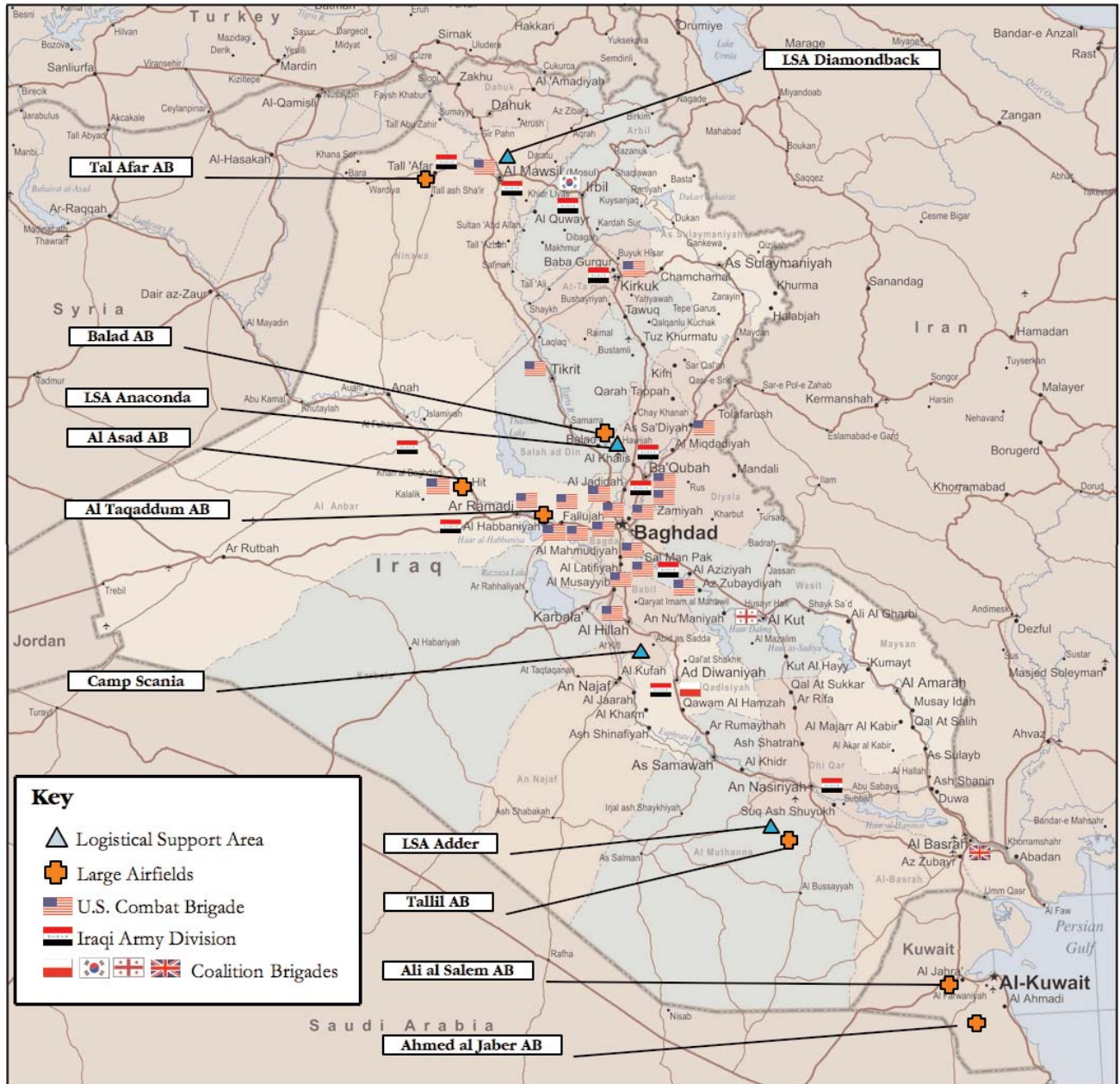The following individuals participated in the Iraq Planning Group sessions of August 2007:

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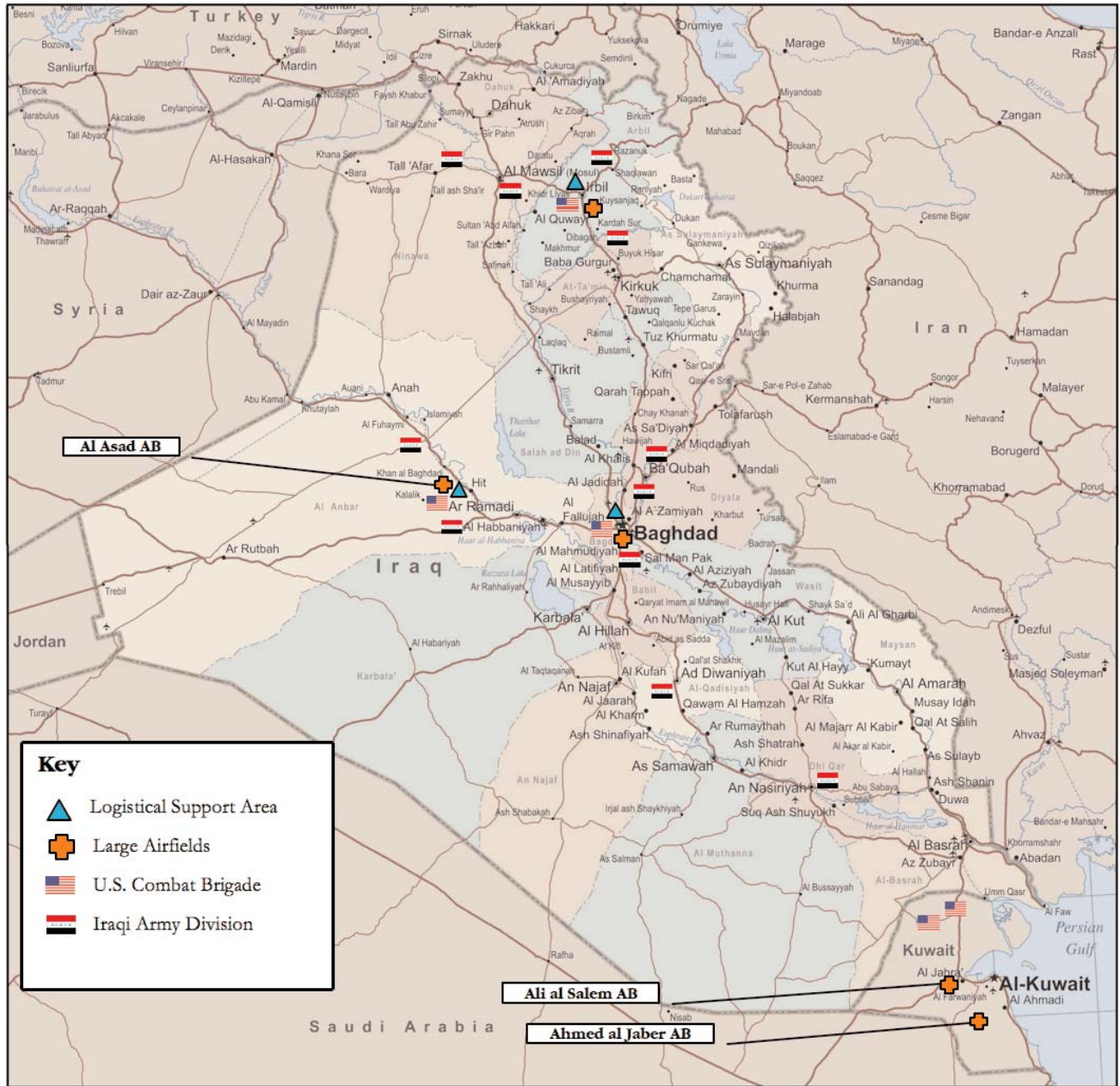- Caroline Sevier
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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the participants or the agencies by which they are employed.

Figure 1
Current Disposition of Combat Forces in Iraq

Figure 2
Consolidation and Redeployment of U.S. Forces

Key

▲ Logistical Support Area

✚ Large Airfields

🇺🇸 U.S. Combat Brigade

🟥 Iraqi Army Division

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Ali al Salem AB
Ahmed al Jaber AB