

EXITING IRAQ: COMPETING STRATEGIES

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Finding an exit for U.S. troops from Iraq is becoming an urgent enterprise. Some plans call for virtually immediate withdrawal, some for withdrawal according to varying timetables, and some for withdrawal with no fixed schedule.

MORE IS BETTER

Thomas Friedman in June 2005 recommended doubling U.S. forces and fighting Sunni insurgents “to the death” so unifying political leaders could emerge.¹ An increase was also recommended by Kenneth Pollack. He argued that U.S. operations against insurgents have antagonized the Sunnis in western Iraq, and that the United States should shift its efforts away from these areas and concentrate on guarding communications and transportation sites and on building “safe zones” in cities and rural areas, particularly those dominated by Shiites and urban Sunnis. There, he argued, support for insurgency is low and the desire for normality high. U.S. forces could take part in patrols with Iraqi security forces in these “safe zones”; Kurdish

security forces are capable of securing their own areas. This approach would foster political and economic revival and break popular support for the insurgency.²

Some increase in troop levels was considered by Senators Jack Reed and Joseph Biden, both Democrats, and has been supported by Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, both Republicans. President Bush seemed to reject it unless his commanders in the field asked, which left the option open.

A problem with sending more U.S. troops is that this would strain both the military and U.S. public opinion. Another problem, even if these troops were deployed in Anbar province, is that there is no guarantee they would defeat a growing insurgency skilled in asymmetric warfare and composed of disparate cells. There is also no guarantee this approach would encourage political compromise among Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian communities. Making certain zones “safe” may not be feasible. Many cities and rural areas have mixed populations where Sunnis and Shiites kill each other and Iraqi and U.S. troops regularly.

Again, it may not foster compromise.

GET OUT FAST

Helena Cobban called in July for a “total, speedy and generous withdrawal,” saying “fears of foreign domination” in Iraq would grow if no withdrawal date were set, except among some in the Kurdish north. She argued that announcement of imminent withdrawal would enable Iraqi leaders to cooperate, make Iraqis less hospitable to insurgents, and lead to improvements in unit cohesion and motivation in Iraq’s security forces. The U.S. presence is not a stabilizing factor, she argued; and, while violence would continue if the United States withdrew, Americans would no longer be morally or legally responsible. She argued that, while the U.S. global strategic posture would be “dented” by rapid withdrawal, this could be minimized by calling it a “redeployment” and coupling it with generous reparations and reconstruction aid. The U.S. global strategic posture is already being eroded by its military presence in Iraq, she argued. “Imagine if there were one or more Beirut-style cataclysms inside Iraq, or an undignified Saigon-style exit.”³

In August, Cindy Sheehan called for immediate withdrawal to honor the troops, such as her son, who had died in a war she said was based on deceptions and lies, was illegal and immoral, and made the country vulnerable to disaster. Antiwar activists joined her near Bush’s Texas ranch to echo her call.

In December, journalist Nir Rosen called for fast withdrawal, arguing that the “jihadis” would be driven out, the insurgency would end, the civil war would diminish, Turkey would not invade Kurdistan, and Iran would not take over

the Shiite south. A secular democracy is impossible anyway, he claimed.⁴

Much of this analysis is correct. Resentment of occupation is one motive of the insurgents, and the lack of a timetable for withdrawal fuels it. The killing goes on apace. The occupation has eroded the military strength, respect and international goodwill the United States enjoyed after 9/11. The war was certainly based on poor policy making, if not deception and lies. The get-out-now arguments are, however, optimistic and speculative. It is not clear that rapid withdrawal will foster compromise, diminish the insurgency, improve security forces or promote reconstruction, particularly when sectarian and ethnic competition for power is another motive for the insurgency. It is also not clear that withdrawal would be followed by regional restraint and allow the United States to repair its strategic posture. Getting out now would be the best option for the U.S. forces dying and being wounded in Iraq, but it is not clear that it would be best for the U.S. national interests that have been challenged by the war, namely the deterrence of adversaries, the free flow of oil, and the protection of friends.

Others argue that rapid withdrawal before training Iraqi forces and fostering sectarian compromises would have the opposite results, undermining U.S. credibility, encouraging insurgents, stoking civil war, destabilizing the region, and causing spillover into neighboring countries that would lead to interventions by neighbors and jeopardize U.S. security. These arguments are made by the Bush administration and by many Democrats, including Senators Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Joseph Lieberman. These arguments are pessimistic and speculative but too credible to ignore.

SET A TIMETABLE

The Bush administration and many Republicans and Democrats have rejected rapid withdrawal and even a timetable, insisting that withdrawal must be “conditions-based,” relying on progress in building the Iraqi government and its security forces and in subduing insurgents. But, by mid-2005, some Republicans and Democrats were calling for a timetable. Senator Carl Levin, a Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, and Senator Russell Feingold, another Democrat, were among them.⁵

Former Undersecretary of Defense and CIA Director John Deutch outlined an exit strategy. The United States should announce that withdrawal would begin after the December vote for a parliament and urge Iraq and its neighbors to recognize “the common interest in the peaceful evolution of Iraq without external intervention.” The United States should develop a flexible timetable to deny insurgents any tactical advantage, while continuing no-fly zones, border surveillance, training of Iraqi security forces, intelligence collection and maintenance of a regional “quick-reaction force.” Washington should indicate how much aid it would provide Iraq if it evolves peacefully: “This aid should be one facet of a broader set of economic initiatives to benefit Arab states that advance our interests.”⁶

When Zalmay Khalilzad became U.S. ambassador to Iraq, he outlined a strategy for gradual U.S. withdrawal, but with no timetable, saying U.S. forces would hand control of specific areas to Iraqi forces, withdraw U.S. forces from those areas, and later withdraw some forces from Iraq. At the time, the Pentagon considered most Iraqi military units incapable of fighting

alone. Moreover, it was assumed that the regions where U.S. troops could be reduced were the predominantly Shiite south and the Kurdish north, where insurgency was not as strong as elsewhere. But the United States also began to do this in the Sunni triangle.⁷

In September, at a peace rally in Washington, Cindy Sheehan again called for withdrawal, but also called for an exit strategy to effect it in six months. Also in September, Lawrence Korb and Brian Katulis of the progressive Center for American Progress published a detailed exit strategy with a timetable. They agreed that premature withdrawal would have dire consequences and that a timeline could encourage Iraq’s Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni leaders to compromise. They argued for “strategic redeployment” to begin January 1, 2006, and for the drawdown of 80,000 troops by the end of 2006 and the drawdown of the remaining 60,000 troops by the end of 2007. They argued that U.S. forces should immediately and completely redeploy from cities and leave them to Iraqi police, troops and militias. They advocated focusing on core missions: training, providing border security and logistical and air support to Iraqi forces, serving as advisers to Iraqi forces, and “tracking down terrorist and insurgent leaders with smaller, more nimble Special Forces units operating jointly with Iraqi units.” The United States would rely on a rapid-reaction force based in Kuwait and offshore in the Gulf to coordinate with small teams of counterterrorism forces and advisers inside Iraq and, working with Iraqi security forces, to conduct strikes on terrorist havens in Iraq and to defend Iraq against external aggression. They argued that the United States should state that it would not

seek permanent bases in Iraq. They also called for a regional conference, to include Iran, to discuss “measures aimed at securing borders, tracking down terrorist networks and enhancing cooperation between military and intelligence services in the region.” As for the troops to be withdrawn in 2006, they recommended that 14,000 be assigned to the regional rapid-reaction force, 18,000 to bolster efforts in Afghanistan, and the rest to return to the United States, where some could be assigned to homeland security tasks.⁸

Senator John Kerry, a Democrat, subsequently proposed that 20,000 U.S. soldiers leave after Iraq’s December parliamentary elections, with the “bulk of American combat forces” to be

withdrawn by the end of 2006. He said that “our military presence in vast and visible numbers has become part of the problem, not the solution.” He proposed a major-power conference to forge compromise in Iraq, and an envoy to “maximize our diplomacy in Iraq and the region.”⁹

In November, Senate Democrats called on the administration to provide “estimated dates” for redeployment of U.S. troops once a series of conditions was met. The Senate instead passed a Republican compromise resolution saying, one, that “2006 should be a period of significant transition to full Iraqi sovereignty, with Iraqi security forces taking the lead for the security of a free and sovereign Iraq, thereby creating the conditions for the phased redeployment of United States

forces from Iraq”; and two, that the administration “should tell the leaders of all groups and political parties in Iraq that they need to make the compromises necessary to achieve the broad-based and sustainable political settlement that is essential for defeating the insurgency.”¹⁰

Soon after this, Rep. John P. Murtha, the ranking Democrat on the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, called for withdrawal “at the earliest practicable date,” which he said could be in six months. “Our troops have

become the primary target of the insurgency,” he said. “We have become a catalyst for the violence.” He maintained it was the moral duty of the Congress to intervene for U.S. troops, and he also

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Some elements of these proposals were essentially what the administration was already planning — training, withdrawal from cities, and reducing troop levels from the 158,000 deployed during the October referendum and the December election back down to the baseline of 138,000 — but certainly public pressure was building. The calls for timelines were new, and one problem with them is that they require sectarian/ethnic cooperation. Would a timetable forge such compromise, or would a conference of major powers? Would diplomacy generate regional restraint and cooperation? If not, would the United States withdraw as scheduled? If so, would “core missions” and a rapid-

reaction force, which are also common elements in most of these proposals, suffice to protect U.S. national interests? One important new element in the Korb and Katulis proposal was that withdrawal of U.S. forces would permit reassignment of some of them to other theaters where U.S. national interests are being challenged and where insufficient U.S. resources are being committed. Still, critics insist that withdrawing while Iraq's leaders are trying to achieve compromises would jeopardize U.S. national interests. But are Iraq's leaders trying to compromise? And how much would their failure jeopardize the United States?

THE BUSH STRATEGY

In early December, President Bush released a report and made speeches articulating a strategy for victory. He did so after the deaths of more than 2,000 U.S. troops, the wounding of almost 16,000 others, and the spending of almost \$300 billion had generated popular opposition and galvanized the Senate. The plan was called a victory strategy, but it could be an exit strategy with no timetable.¹² The "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" and the speeches claimed that victory would be achieved and U.S. forces withdrawn as more Iraqi troops are equipped and trained, a democratic government emerges and Iraq's economy is rebuilt.¹³

The report defined victory as the establishment of "a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists." Victory would also mean an Iraq with a free-market economy, able to provide essential services to its people and

integrated into the international economy.

The report explained the vital interests at stake by repeating the claim that Iraq is the "central front in the global war on terror," arguing that success would deal terrorists "a decisive and crippling blow." Failure would mean "Iraq would become a safe haven from which terrorists could plan attacks against America, American interests abroad and our allies"; Middle East reformers would never trust the United States again; and "tribal and sectarian chaos [in Iraq] would have major consequences for American security and interests in the region."

The report acknowledged that the enemy includes Iraqis who reject democracy, Iraqis loyal to Saddam Hussein, and terrorists affiliated with or inspired by al-Qaeda. The report also acknowledged that foreign terrorists are the fewest in number, but the most dangerous and committed to a global fight with the United States. The report indicated failure could mean al-Qaeda would control much of Iraq and its oil and have "control over a hub of the world's economy."

In discussing the victory strategy, the report and speeches acknowledged the difficulty of training Iraqi troops but argued that these forces were growing in number, improving their capabilities, and taking control over large areas of the country. They were succeeding in the north, in Mosul and Tal Afar, and in the south, in Najaf and Karbala, but also in Baghdad, and in cities in the Sunni heartland like Samarra and in Fallujah.¹⁴ They described the U.S.-Iraqi strategy of clearing an area of insurgents, holding it primarily with Iraqi forces, and building the economy and civil society there. And, the report explained,

As Iraqis take on more responsibility for security, Coalition forces will increasingly move to supporting roles.... The mission of our forces will change ... to more specialized operations targeted at the most vicious terrorists and leadership networks. As security conditions improve and as Iraqi Security Forces become increasingly capable of securing their own country, our forces will increasingly move out of the cities, reduce the number of bases from which we operate, and conduct fewer patrols and convoy missions. While our military presence may become less visible, it will remain lethal and decisive, able to confront the enemy wherever it may gather and organize.

Presumably, then, Iraqi security forces would take the lead against rejectionists and Saddamists, while U.S. forces would concentrate on al-Qaeda affiliates.

The report and speeches also acknowledged that economic reconstruction has been sabotaged by insurgents, has suffered from mistaken priorities and is riddled with corruption. It was maintained, however, that progress was being made in restoring infrastructure, introducing free-market reforms, and building institutions to manage these efforts. Bush named Najaf in the south and Mosul in the north as examples of progress.¹⁵

The report and speeches also acknowledged the political challenges in building a "culture of reconciliation" among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, but argued that progress was being made in isolating enemy elements that will never accept democracy, engaging those who will, and building a stable, united, federal Iraq with a strong central government and regional governments responsive to the needs of their

populations. The increasing participation of Sunnis in the political process and the many political milestones that have been met were cited: "Although many Sunnis voted against the constitution, amendments made days before the referendum in response to Sunni requests will permit further changes after the new government is established. This and other provisions of the constitution that defer important issues to the new assembly will ensure that elected Sunni leaders are able to influence the shape of the Iraqi state."¹⁶

Finally, the report and speeches noted that Iran and Syria posed threats to Iraq, other regional neighbors were slow to support Iraq, and international donors were slow in disbursing financial aid to Iraq. But they argued that Iran and Syria can be neutralized, and that political and financial support was materializing from the Arab League, the EU, the World Bank and the IMF.

One wonders if this strategy may be too optimistic. Iraqi leaders may not compromise, Iraqi forces may not become more capable and loyal, and insurgency and corruption may continue to sabotage reconstruction. If so, will the administration scuttle its conditions-based strategy or the military's projections of reducing U.S. forces to 100,000 by the end of 2006? It should be noted here that the administration is already planning to reduce the baseline level of forces from 138,000 to 133,000 early in 2006.

There are serious problems in training Iraq's security forces. They are not truly national Iraqi forces. In the north, they are largely Kurdish peshmerga from the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In the south, they are largely Shiite, often from militias of the

Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Dawa party and Muktada al-Sadr. Basra's largely Shiite police force is penetrated by Shiite militias and may be executing Sunnis and secularists. Baghdad's Shiite-dominated police force may be executing Sunni civilians. Interior Ministry forces, again largely dominated by Shiites, many from SCIRI's Badr Brigade and Wolf Brigade, are accused of killing and torturing Sunnis.

Outgoing Interior Minister Bayan Jabr, a Shiite and former Badr Brigade leader, objects to embedding U.S. forces in Interior Ministry units. SCIRI's leader, Abdul Aziz Hakim, calls for counter-insurgency tasks to

be turned over to Iraqi security forces, i.e. Shiite-dominated forces, for "vigilante groups" to join them, and for the United States to let

them act without U.S. restraint.¹⁷ He blamed killings of Shiites after the election on Sunni political parties that had warned of civil war and on U.S. forces that had restrained the Interior and Defense Ministries. Outgoing vice president Ghazi al-Yawar, a moderate Sunni, has pointed to Interior Ministry abuses as evidence of sectarian revenge against Sunnis and has accused the Shiite-dominated army of carrying out revenge missions against Sunnis. He even expressed concern that Shiite militias in the south might try to incite war against the Sunnis if U.S. forces withdraw too soon.

Al-Yawar wants more Sunnis in Iraq's security forces, especially in the officer corps. Minister of Defense Dulaimi, a

Sunni, wants former majors, captains and lieutenants in Saddam's armed forces to rejoin. U.S. officers want the Interior and Defense ministries to be staffed with more competent officials, including Sunnis, to support security forces with more Sunnis. But Sunnis are mistrusted by Shiite security forces and political leaders. Jabr has argued that Baathists pose a greater challenge than al-Qaeda now that U.S. and Iraqi forces have taken more control along the Syrian border. It is not only Sunni insurgents in the field that Shiites mistrust; it is also Sunnis in the security forces and ministries.

The handover of control to Iraqi forces

has had very mixed results. In the south, in Najaf, a largely Shiite police force with militia elements now patrols a Shiite city. Cooperation with a

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Shiite-dominated Iraqi army may be expected, but what are the prospects for cooperation with the army if more Sunnis are part of it? U.S. forces were recently attacked outside the city. In Karbala, where Shiite police patrol a Shiite city, a suicide bomber killed 50 at a Shiite shrine in January. Five U.S. soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb outside the city days later.

In the north, in Kirkuk, a city with a mixed Kurdish, Sunni and Turkmen population, the Kurds are the majority in provincial and local government and the police force. Kurdish police are accused of killing Sunnis who oppose the return of Kurds to the oil-rich area from which Saddam ejected them. Sunni insurgents attack

government and police targets, oil infrastructure and U.S. patrols. When protests recently erupted over rising fuel costs, the police called in U.S. forces and imposed a curfew. In Mosul, a city with a Sunni majority and a sizable Kurdish minority, the police are largely Sunni and thought to be penetrated by Sunni insurgents. They have a record of not cooperating with Iraqi army forces in Mosul, which are largely Kurdish with some Shia elements.

In Samarra, a Sunni city northwest of Baghdad, U.S. forces are trying to hand off control, but they say the Sunni police are not ready and must be supplemented by special police commandos from the Interior Ministry who are primarily Shiite.

In addition to problems of cooperation, both Sunni and Shiite police are targets of insurgents, with many killed recently and most not appearing for work. U.S. forces think Sunni police in Sunni areas could be effective

in fighting Sunni insurgents because they know the territory and can gain intelligence. But Sunni insurgents also know the territory well enough to murder police and their families. And U.S. forces know that Sunni police may collaborate with Sunni insurgents.¹⁸

More Iraqi forces have joined in U.S. military “clear, build and hold” operations against insurgent havens in Anbar province, but U.S. forces think the quality of these troops is low. U.S. forces continue to be killed in and around areas where success in

driving out insurgents has been hailed, such as Fallujah. Sunni residents have not been very cooperative. They are alienated by the “collateral damage” they endure, because Iraqi forces left behind to hold the areas are largely Shiite, and because the insurgency continues to enjoy support or arouse fear even after being disrupted and weakened. Sunni insurgents — possibly al-Qaeda, possibly nationalists — kill Sunnis trying to join police forces in Anbar and elsewhere, such as the 80 killed in Ramadi in early January in a bombing that also killed two U.S. military personnel. U.S. forces have complained that some of the Sunnis in the Iraqi security forces sometimes collaborate with Sunni insurgents in

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Anbar, Diyala and elsewhere. Insurgent attacks against U.S. patrols and convoys and against critical oil and electricity infrastructure are often so well timed and precise that Sunnis inside the security forces, and also

inside ministries of the central government, are suspected of collaborating with insurgents. There are ongoing U.S. talks with nationalist Sunni insurgents to elicit their help for U.S. and Iraqi operations against al-Qaeda and to exploit fighting between nationalist Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda, but they have been unproductive so far.

Efforts to secure Baghdad have not curbed sectarian violence or the killing of Iraqi and U.S. troops, although more than half of the city has been turned over to Iraqi forces. In some mixed neighborhoods,

as in other mixed cities around the country, one ethnic group or sect is choosing to move out rather than be killed. Insurgents essentially control the Dora neighborhood in the south. Insurgents produce carnage in Shiite neighborhoods such as Khadhamiya. Insurgents penetrated Baghdad's main police academy, killing 36 officers days after Bush spoke. In early January, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for suicide bombers who penetrated the Interior Ministry inside the fortified Green Zone and killed more than a dozen officers. Earlier, when U.S. forces tried to turn over control of the perimeter of the Green Zone as well as the road from the city to the airport to an Iraqi brigade, the Defense Ministry rejected the Sunni officer who was to command it, insisting on a Shiite officer.¹⁹ They later relented and accepted the Sunni officer.

There are also serious problems in rebuilding Iraq. The United States has spent \$12 billion on reconstruction, but Iraq's oil production and electricity generation are lower than before the U.S. invasion. Insurgents have crippled major infrastructure, forcing the United States to divert half of this \$12 billion to building Iraqi security forces and a criminal justice and penal system. When the Iraqi government announced that subsidized fuel prices were being tripled — an IMF demand for forgiving Iraq's debt — there were protests across the country. Insurgent attacks and threats forced the government to temporarily shut down the country's largest refinery, in Baiji, 150 miles north of

Baghdad. Insurgents attacked a U.S. military convoy outside the city as the refinery reopened. Then, the United States indicated that it would not request new funds for Iraqi reconstruction in its next budget and that Iraq and foreign donors should take over funding. For Iraq to take over would require earning revenue from oil exports. These are now at a new low of 1.1 million barrels per day; Iraq actually has to import much of its refined product. Donors that have pledged aid to Iraq have not honored their pledges, and foreign investors are waiting for the security situation to improve.²⁰

Finally, there are serious problems in forging political compromises among Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis. The parliament elected in January 2005 and the government formed in April, as well as the constitution approved in October, moved

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Iraq toward three or more highly autonomous sectarian or ethnic regions with a weak central government having insufficient control over oil resources. In December, Iraqis again voted for their own sectarian and ethnic parties. The United Iraqi Alliance, primarily SCIRI and Dawa, once again received the largest vote, and the Kurdish coalition again received the second largest vote. The Sunni parties did substantially better this time. The new parliament and government may take Iraq in the same direction as the last ones if the Shiites and Kurds have enough seats to form a coalition, even if they must include some Sunnis.

The Shiites and the Kurds do not want to modify their aspirations, and the Sunnis will not have the power to curb them. It will take a two-thirds majority vote for a “presidential council” of a president and two vice presidents that will nominate a prime minister for approval by the parliament. This will likely be a Shiite. The Sunnis will not likely obtain the cabinet posts they want. It will also take a two-thirds majority for any constitutional amendment to pass. Sunni members will not likely be able to muster the votes. In fact, SCIRI’s Hakim has said there should be no amendments that would constrain the establishment of autonomous areas. Finally, there are many new laws necessary to resolve questions on autonomy, oil and religion, and the Sunnis again will likely be outvoted.

Another question about the victory strategy is whether it is too pessimistic about the consequences of failure. The administration does not acknowledge that the large presence of U.S. troops is helping motivate both Iraqi and foreign fighters, although many generals and intelligence officials think so.²¹ Thus, withdrawal may help sap the insurgency somewhat. Moreover, it is unlikely that al-Qaeda will be able to implement its grand vision for Iraq and beyond. First, their numbers are small, and Iraq is the size of California. Second, secular Iraqi insurgents who do not share their grand vision will fight them if and when the United States withdraws. Third, U.S. forces outside Iraq but in the region will be able to undertake special operations against any safe haven in Iraq. Fourth, if al-Qaeda fighters are driven from Iraq and target neighboring countries, they will be hunted down by those regimes, which understand the threat. Fifth, al-Qaeda and

its affiliates are already dispersed and carrying out attacks in Riyadh, Casablanca, Bali, Madrid, London and Amman. They already have global reach, and not all of them need to wait for U.S. withdrawal before dispersing to the West. This necessitates more international cooperation, greater efforts in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and much better homeland security. But are U.S. forces in Iraq necessary?

REACTIONS AND NEW IDEAS

Many Democrats agree with the administration’s arguments that a rapid withdrawal or timetable would be exploited by al-Qaeda in Iraq, plunge Iraq into a civil war and risk a larger regional conflict. Despite minor variations, some agree with major aspects of Bush’s “strategy for victory,” although they do not express the same confidence that this strategy will succeed.

One example is Senator Biden, who suggested in November that Bush spend the following six months creating a “sustainable political compromise” that wins support from Iraq’s Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds: building up the ability of the Iraqi government to “deliver basic services”; bolstering reconstruction and shifting it from multinationals to Iraqi companies; and accelerating the training of Iraqi troops in order to facilitate a handover of military authority to them.²²

Another example is former NATO commander General Wesley Clark.²³ He supports continuing the strategy of “clear, hold and build,” arguing that it is succeeding along the Syrian border. He supports continued strikes against insurgent strongholds in Sunni areas, arguing that they should be coupled with efforts to draw

insurgents into the political process and turn them against al-Qaeda. He urges the dismantling of militias, especially in the Shiite south, and would use U.S. "muscle" to accomplish this if necessary. He argues for constitutional amendments giving the central government more control over oil and preventing an autonomous region in the Shiite south. He urges inclusion of all ethnic and sectarian groups in the central government, the army, the police and the judicial system. He also advocates using diplomatic strength to persuade Syria to end its "support for the jihadists" and to persuade Iran to stop "meddling" and respect Iraq's independence. This "will make it far easier to get international support against the Iranians if (and when) they break their word."

Most of this is essentially what the administration is trying to do, although it may not intend to use force to dismantle Shiite militias. But one new idea he is advocating is to expand the "clear, hold and build" strategy along the southeastern border with Iran. This would mean deploying U.S. forces where they are not currently deployed in significant numbers, or deploying friendly forces there at a time when they are being drawn down. This could be dangerous for U.S. troops, particularly if they have used force against the same Shiite militias that inhabit Iraqi security forces, or if Iran "meddles," as he seems to predict it will. But it could signal to Iran that meddling in Iraq is dangerous. There are two issues to consider here. First, Britain has now said there is no clear evidence that the Iranian government or Revolutionary Guards are behind the more powerful explosive devices that have killed British servicemen in recent months. Second, Iran may want to be careful about

how far it pushes its advantages in Iraq simply because of the general U.S. military power in the neighborhood, even if the United States is out of Iraq. With respect to Syria, the top operational commander in Iraq, General Vines, recently said that cooperation from Syria and Saudi Arabia had helped curtail the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq in recent months.

As to U.S. force levels, Clark argues that it will take "three or four ... brigades, some 20,000 troops, with adequate aerial reconnaissance, to provide training, supervision and backup along Iraq's several thousand miles of vulnerable borders." In addition, "over the next year or so, [operations against insurgents in Sunni areas] will probably require four to six brigade combat teams, plus an operational reserve, maybe 30,000 troops." Finally, Iraq "should request that for the next two years, six to eight American brigades serve as a backup, available as a last resort if there is trouble in cities with large militia factions like Baghdad, Basra and Najaf." Certainly there will be trouble in these cities. Would Clark send U.S. forces back into them?

Indeed, the administration has said U.S. forces could conceivably be increased if there are setbacks in Iraq, but it is not clear what these Democrats would do.

Other Democrats do call for a date certain for U.S. withdrawal. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Carter administration's national security adviser, advocates withdrawal "rapidly," no later than the end of 2006, arguing that a longer disengagement would be dangerous for U.S. forces. "We have to face the fact that the war is not going well and is costing us too much, not only in blood and money but also in the U.S. position in the world, discrediting our legitimacy, credibility and morality," said

Brzezinski. He favors keeping some U.S. forces in Kuwait and a regional rapid-reaction force.²⁴

Perhaps the most recent exit strategy with a timetable has been developed by Barry Posen, an MIT professor.²⁵ Posen recommends an eighteen-month timetable with the bulk of U.S. troops remaining until the end of 2006 — and continuing to mount attacks against insurgents — then a relatively rapid withdrawal over the first six months of 2007, with planning to counter any upsurge in insurgent attacks as the United States leaves. He argues that this is enough time to help build an Iraqi army that can maintain internal security, noting that the Kurds already have capable forces. “In effect, then,” he

writes, “this means training Shia-dominated security forces capable of policing and defending Baghdad and Shia-majority areas to the south.” U.S. and

NATO officers should provide instruction to the leaders of Iraqi forces, and “small contingents of U.S. Special Forces, A-detachments, can be attached to the principal Iraqi units to provide continuing advice as well as command and control to link these units with U.S. combat aviation.”

Like others, Posen suggests that a timetable will motivate Iraqi leaders to take action, whereas an open-ended commitment erodes the U.S. military, increases support for the insurgency and “infantilizes” the Iraqi government and military. A withdrawal, in his view, will sap some strength from the secular Iraqi insurgency, which will turn to fighting al-Qaeda.

Posen argues that the low-grade civil war already taking place will likely escalate when the United States withdraws but that it will result in a stalemate. The Sunnis will not be able to conquer Shiite and Kurdish territory; the Shiites will not be able to maintain the heavy weaponry and long supply lines necessary for offensive actions against Sunni areas; and the Kurds will not have the capability or motive to drive into Arab areas, except around Kirkuk. Moreover, he argues that the United States should foster a military stalemate and corresponding political stalemate, namely a de facto partition of territory into Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish areas under a loose federal structure. He argues that “U.S. air

support, intelligence and arms supplies can prevent the establishment of either an al-Qaeda or a Baathist state.” U.S. military and diplomatic pressure

can staunch the flow of money and weapons to these three areas, “limiting their autonomous power and preserving American leverage.” The United States would have leverage over Sunnis running an oil-poor region because they would need and accept U.S. economic help. The Kurds and Shiites may also see “that they have an interest in buying Sunni Arab cooperation” with their oil wealth. In addition, he expects Saudi and Syrian efforts to make sure that the Sunni areas of Iraq do not become a haven for forces that would seek to overthrow them after a U.S. withdrawal. Neighboring countries will have a stronger interest in securing their borders. The

An oil-poor, aid-dependent Sunni rump state next door to an oil-rich Iranian-influenced Shiite state is not what Iraq’s Sunni neighbors want.

United States “can both pressure them and help them to do so.” He specifically recommends “warnings and inducements to Iraq’s neighbors.” He also argues that “the United States should develop an understanding among major world powers and oil consumers that U.S. national interests and their own national interests are essentially the same.”

Finally, he argues that the United States will continue to be responsible for Iraq’s external defense after the withdrawal and will rely upon over-the-horizon capabilities to deal with conventional aggression against Iraq by a neighbor.

Posen may be right that low-grade civil war and stalemate are inevitable. He may also be right about the ability of U.S. military, economic and diplomatic power to prevent a Sunni area from becoming a strategic challenge. And he may be right about the ability of U.S. forces in the region to defend Iraq against external aggression. But his plan acquiesces in a Shiite-dominated security force, which may be able to continue revenge killings in Sunni areas, even in Anbar province; and Posen expects Sunnis to settle for aid from Shiites and Kurds. Moreover, insurgents may continue to cripple the oil infrastructure so critical to Shiites and Kurds. Thus, Posen may overestimate the potential for gaining support from neighboring Sunni states as well as their ability to restrain Iraqi Sunnis. An oil-poor, aid-dependent Sunni rump state next door to an oil-rich Iranian-influenced Shiite state is not what Iraq’s Sunni neighbors want.

Posen, Clark, Biden, Kerry, Korb and Katulis, Deutch and others have called for regional diplomacy and cooperation. Saudi Arabia and other GCC states and Jordan are concerned about the marginalization of

Iraqi Sunnis. These states already have reservations about supporting an Iraq based on the October constitution. At their recent summit in December, the GCC states called for a “comprehensive national reconciliation to constitute the main safety valve for the unity, stability and sovereignty of Iraq.” If this does not occur, their reservations will grow. They are also concerned about Iranian influence in Iraq, particularly in the oil-rich Shiite south. GCC delegates at their summit meeting discussed ways to curb Iran’s influence in Iraq.²⁶ Sunni states naturally have sympathy for their co-religionists in Iraq. They will not want Sunnis to provoke conflict that spills over into Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. But they may not be willing to tolerate a situation in which Shiites dominate and perhaps attack Sunnis, especially if Iran is perceived to be involved. They may not be able to restrain Iraq’s Sunnis in these circumstances.

With respect to the diplomatic contacts with Iran that so many call for, Khalilzad has been authorized to talk to the Iranians but in late December 2005 said he had not done so yet. It is definitely worth trying. But there are many contentious issues between the United States and Iran, particularly its nuclear program, its attitude toward Israel and its ambitions in the Gulf. Moreover, there is evidently considerable tension in Iranian ruling circles between the clerics and the new president. The former hold the real reins of power, but President Ahmadinejad seems to be challenging them. Talks either may not be possible or may produce little. It may be necessary to wait and see if the Iranians, too, want to make sure that conflict does not spill over into neighboring countries, including their own.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to accept Posen's pessimistic predictions about the meager results of this U.S. war, but he may be the realist in the house. It is understandable to root for the administration to achieve some of what it promises, but idealism may be mere wishful-thinking. The major question now is what the administration will do if its vision is not realized. As I argued in a *Baltimore Sun* op-ed in October, if Iraqi leaders

cannot or will not compromise, and if civil war degenerates further, U.S. troops do not deserve to die in the middle of this and should be withdrawn.²⁷ This will make U.S. forces in the region more important in deterring aggression and pressure against GCC states, particularly because of Iran's position in Iraq, but this comes at a time when Saudi Arabia and other GCC states may be questioning the wisdom of U.S. policy in the region.

¹ Thomas Friedman, "Let's Talk About Iraq," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2005.

² Kenneth Pollack, "Five Ways to Win Back Iraq," *Ibid.*, July 1, 2005.

³ Helena Cobban, "Next Step in Helping Iraqis: Set a Withdrawal Date," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 21, 2005.

⁴ Nir Rosen, "If America Left Iraq," *The Atlantic*, December 2005.

⁵ Levin suggested that the United States signal to Iraqis that the United States would set a timeline for withdrawal if the Iraqi government did not meet its August deadline for drafting a constitution. He argued that this might be necessary to motivate Iraq's Shia, Kurds and Sunnis to reach the kind of political settlement that he said must complement any military effort to defeat the insurgency. In mid-August, Feingold set December 2006 as the end date for a significant U.S. military presence in Iraq.

⁶ John Deutch, "Time to Pull Out, and Not Just from Iraq," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2005. Deutch acknowledged that this strategy would not guarantee success but argued that it could be the first step in securing long-term U.S. interests in the region

⁷ At the same time, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., was arguing in the September/October issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the U.S. military should concentrate on providing security and reconstruction in the north and south and in population centers like Baghdad and Mosul and finally in Sunni provinces and gradually turn these areas over to Iraqi troops. He argued that these safe zones could spread like "oil spots" and help win hearts and minds in Iraq. This is very similar to Kenneth Pollack's recommendation, but Krepinevich did not call for increasing U.S. forces. While Krepinevich did not call for a timetable, he wrote that the United States could begin this process even if U.S. forces were reduced from 140,000 to 120,000, and would ultimately only require 20,000. Months later, when Bush spoke to the nation about his strategy, there were elements of these ideas in what the administration called "clear, hold and build."

⁸ Lawrence Korb and Brian Katulis, "Strategic Redeployment," Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C. September 29, 2005. See www.americanprogress.org.

⁹ *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2005.

¹⁰ See *The New York Times*, November 17, 2005.

¹¹ *Ibid.* November 18, 2005.

¹² John Mueller argued in the November/December issue of *Foreign Affairs* that public support would continue to decline as casualties continue to mount. But Peter Feaver (of the National Security Council) and Christopher Gelpi argued that public opinion would hold or become more favorable if the administration could convince the public that the mission would succeed. See Feaver, Gelpi and Reifler, "Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security*, forthcoming.

¹³ *The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*. http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/iraq_national_strategy_20051130.pdf

¹⁴ They cited more than 120 Iraqi army and police battalions with 350 to 800 men each fighting the insurgency. Forty units were capable of taking the lead, with U.S. support, and 80 were capable of fighting alongside U.S. forces.

¹⁵ Bush acknowledged that the administration miscalculated by clearing insurgents out of a city and then not

holding it, thus allowing the enemy to retake control and stifle reconstruction. He said that the United States also mistakenly focused on large reconstruction projects that did not meet the immediate needs of the population, so it now focused on local projects such as schools, hospitals, police stations, clean water and irrigation facilities, roads, bridges and small-business loans. He also said that “corruption is a problem at both the national and local levels” but the United States would “demand transparency and accountability for the money being invested in reconstruction.”

¹⁶ While the report had indicated that tribal and sectarian chaos would be the result of U.S. failure in Iraq, Bush said, “I know some fear the possibility that Iraq could break apart and fall into a civil war,” [but]...”I don’t believe those fears are justified.”

¹⁷ But in addressing the Kurds, Hakim said, “We and you were victims of marginalization, aggression and mass graves, and it is not logical to practice the same policies we fought and objected to in the past.”

¹⁸ The United States has reduced its military presence throughout Diyala province in the Sunni Triangle, a province of 1.8 million with about 45 percent Sunnis, 35 percent Shiites, and 20 percent Kurds; but there had been considerable violence before and after the December parliamentary election. Insurgent attacks against provincial officials, Interior Ministry forces, local police and civilians have been of a spectacular nature, particularly around the capital city, Baqubah, 35 miles northeast of Baghdad. Sunnis in the city staged protests over allegedly widespread fraud in the election.

¹⁹ For another account of the troubling state of the Iraqi Security Forces, see James Fallows, “Why Iraq Has No Army,” *The Atlantic*, December 2005.

²⁰ As for the two cities Bush cited, he acknowledged that security in Najaf has improved but that kidnappings, militias and armed gangs still plagued the city. Many in the city still do not have basic services. And while some Iraqi investors are planning and building, many others are wary. In Mosul, unemployment stands at 45 percent, and insurgency and violent crime pay well.

²¹ See also Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, 2005.

²² Joseph Biden, “Time for an Iraq Timetable,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2005. This is not a call for a U.S. timetable. However, while Biden did not actually call for a withdrawal, he did say he expected 50,000 troops to be redeployed from Iraq by the end of 2006 and for many of the remaining 100,000 to be redeployed by 2007, which is what many leading generals have said may occur if conditions permit. He also expected a force of 20,000 to 40,000 to remain in or near the country to continue to train Iraqi forces and “prevent jihadists from establishing a permanent base in Iraq.”

²³ Wesley Clark, “The Next Iraq Offensive,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2005.

²⁴ See also Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Real Choice in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2006. And in December, MoveOn.org collected 400,000 signed petitions calling on the Congress to demand an exit strategy that would withdraw U.S. troops by the end of 2006.

²⁵ Barry R. Posen, “Exit Strategy: How to Disengage from Iraq in 18 Months,” *Boston Review*, January/February, 2006.

²⁶ *The New York Times*, December 19, 2005.

²⁷ Thomas R. Mattair, “When to Withdraw?” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 27, 2005.