

It Takes the Right Army

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The Bush administration is making it clearer day by day that it intends to withdraw American troops from Iraq rapidly and roughly in step with the increase in the number of Iraqi troops deemed capable of taking over security responsibilities. Even while denying rumors of a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces, President Bush has declared that "as Iraqis stand up, we will stand down."

This could be a big mistake. It is likely to simply sustain the current level of security in Iraq--which is poor--rather than take advantage of increasing numbers of Iraqi troops to improve the security situation. And, more important, relying on increases in the number of combat-capable Iraqi troops to make U.S. withdrawals possible ignores a serious set of challenges that have to be dealt with before the United States can depart with confidence in the prospects for victory.

The United States is engaged in creating a force of light infantry in Iraq that will ultimately number nearly 250,000 troops. This force will be well suited to conducting patrols in fixed locations, maintaining a presence in threatened areas, doing searches and sweeps, and performing high-end police functions. As more of these troops become available, we can expect improved intelligence and less friction between U.S. forces and local Iraqis. And although we can also be sure that these forces will be less effective than professional American soldiers and will suffer from conflicting tribal and sectarian loyalties and corruption, it will be generally true that the more such Iraqi troops there are on the streets the better.

But this light infantry force does not constitute an army. It will not be able, whatever its numbers, to conduct a counterinsurgency by itself for many years, and it will not be able to do so at all unless certain critical deficiencies are remedied. For example, it appears that efforts to establish Iraqi logistical elements are lagging badly behind the formation and training of light infantry units. Iraqis thus rely on coalition logistics when they must move from their home bases--or, more commonly, they simply do not move from those bases at all. Their transportation assets are minimal, and so they lack the ability to project their forces within Iraq. As a result, they would not be able to concentrate force rapidly in particularly violent areas or to destroy insurgent concentrations quickly. For as long as these conditions hold, the U.S. military will remain an essential part of the struggle against insurgency in Iraq.

It is also important to understand that the current Iraqi forces rely heavily on the availability of responsive U.S. airpower. They do not have their own organic fire support (artillery or aviation), and so must wait for the American soldiers embedded within their formations to call in coalition air support when they run into any sort of serious opposition. The combined operations of Iraqi formations with embedded U.S. trainers

and coalition troops have been excellent preparation for the Iraqis and have gone a long way toward creating a meaningful indigenous light infantry force. But they are also conditioning the Iraqis to rely on a capability that only a significant U.S. presence can provide.

Nor will it be easy for the Iraqis to learn the arts of planning and conducting large-scale raids and sweeps, coordinating the activities of multiple infantry units, and using artillery and air power. These are among the most difficult tasks to train for quickly, and they can normally be learned in combat only at great risk. Even in wartime, it takes years to produce a brigade or division commander who can actually command his unit without outside assistance.

The efforts the U.S. military has made to train the Iraqi forces should not be in any way disparaged. They have achieved remarkable results in a much shorter time than anyone had a right to expect. These efforts will, over the long term, prove essential to allowing the coalition to transfer responsibility for Iraqi security to Iraqis. But Americans should not imagine that this transfer is likely to come quickly. If the insurgency persists--and there is every reason to believe it will--Iraqis will be dependent on significant levels of U.S. military support for years to come.

A decision to reduce forces based mainly on the number of Iraqi light infantry available at any moment would be dangerous and unwarranted. It might well put at risk the success of U.S. efforts, and the millions of Iraqis working in perilous conditions to establish democracy in their country.

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