

What to do About Iraq?

By James Dobbins

The United States has few good options in Iraq. The presence there of American troops incites resistance. Their absence could open the way for a broader civil war. In these circumstances, American policy makers continue to be left with the unhappy choice of either making things slowly worse by staying, or quickly worse by going.

President Bush has chosen the middle course, promising, on the one hand, to stay long enough to establish a representative Iraqi government capable of holding its own against the centrifugal forces threatening to break up the country, but also promising to draw down U.S. forces as quickly as Iraqi police and military units can be stood up. This policy has encountered criticism from both sides, some urging a more rapid, less conditioned withdrawal, others arguing for a more robust longer-term commitment.

Divergent Critiques

Those advocating accelerated withdrawal suggest that the early departure of American troops would encourage Iraq's political leaders to apply themselves more seriously to the process of reconciling contending factions, suppressing the insurgency and governing the country. Perhaps. But experience suggests otherwise. If history is any guide, a state as badly divided and weakly governed as Iraq will, if left to its own devices, probably descend further into open civil war. And it will likely remain there for some time, the level of violence waxing and waning from one year to the next, until some outside power or group of powers intervenes to restore order. This has been the experience over the past couple of decades of Lebanon, Yugoslavia, the Congo, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and Somalia, to name a few of the most prominent examples of state failure.

If this analysis is correct, the options confronting American policy makers may be either 1) stay and stabilize Iraq now, 2) leave and come back later, possibly after millions of Iraqis have been killed or driven from their homes, or 3) leave, stay out, and cede the task of securing Iraq to others, most notably Iran and Turkey, both of whom would find it hard to avoid being drawn into the vacuum created by a collapse of the Iraqi state.

Those who advocate a more robust longer-term commitment in Iraq argue for shifts in American military strategy. One school urges adoption of lessons derived from the American pacification program in Vietnam.¹ Another argues that the war in Iraq resembles more the ethnically based conflicts of the Balkans than the ideologically based insurgency in Indochina.² The Vietnam school argues for a "hearts and mind" campaign focused on protecting the local populations, affording them better government and ultimately winning their cooperation in marginalizing violent extremists. The Balkan

¹ *A Switch in Time*, Kenneth M Pollack et al, Brookings 2006

² *Seeing Baghdad Thinking Saigon*, Stephen Biddle, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2006

school rejects the “hearts and minds” objective, arguing that Iraqis are not fighting for good government, but for government dominated by their sectarian group. Both critiques tend to see the Kurdish and Shia militias as a greater long-term threats to Iraqi unity than the less numerous Sunni insurgents and both therefore urge that the United States shift the weight of its operations from hunting down insurgents in the Sunni heartland toward establishing secure areas, initially in Baghdad and the Shia south.

There is much to be said for both these views. American troops are slowly relearning counterinsurgency techniques honed in Vietnam in the 1970s. Ethnic tensions in Iraq are reminiscent of those that led to the break up of Yugoslavia, and could have a similar result. Shia and Kurdish militias do present a growing threat, if not to U.S. forces, then certainly to the unity of Iraq. Some repositioning of U.S. and Iraqi forces to ensure greater control over the country’s center of gravity, Baghdad, where twenty percent of the population lives, and where the Shia, Kurd and Sunni communities are thoroughly intermixed, may well be desirable.

American concerns have naturally focused upon the Sunni extremists and their foreign allies because these are the only groups regularly targeting American forces. But Kurdish militia are engaged in ethnic cleansing designed to reestablish their dominance over the city of Kirkuk and the northern oil fields. Shia militia are organizing death squads and intimidating the Sunni population in mixed areas like Baghdad. All of the sectarian groups on Iraq have thus been resorting to terrorism to achieve their political purposes. This is not a war with the terrorists on one side and the Americans on the other. It is a three cornered civil conflict with terrorists in all three corners, and the United States increasingly in the middle, doing its best to channel violent sectarian competition into more peaceful forms of political activity.

Prospects for Iraqization

After some false starts, the American efforts to recruit, train and equip Iraqi forces are bearing fruit. Iraqi army and, to a lesser degree, police units are taking functions over from American soldiers, and performing increasingly well. Iraqi soldiers and police have some advantages over American in waging a counterinsurgency campaign, specifically their greater access to the language and culture of the local population. These advantages may compensate for their comparative lack of firepower, defensive equipment, mobility and sustainability. On the other hand, to the extent that Iraqi police and army units themselves assume a sectarian guise, they may have an even greater difficulty than the Americans in winning the confidence of the population in mixed and Sunni areas of the country.

National Guard and police are recruited in the localities in which they serve, and thus reflect in their makeup the locally dominant sect, whether Kurd, Shia or Sunni. Only the regular army is recruited on a national basis and organized into fully multiethnic units. This means that only about one third of Iraqi national security forces are ethnically mixed and fully national in make up. The most recent Iraqi elections reinforced the coincidence between the countries political and militia leaderships. This might be interpreted as a

good sign; it is arguably better to have militia leaders, even highly irresponsible ones like Moqtader Sadr, inside the political process than outside it. Yet the presence of militia leaders in the political game greatly raises its stakes, allowing all sides to believe that they have other options if unable to achieve their objectives peacefully.

If, in the end, Iraqi national police and army units prove unable to secure their country, it will not be because they are inadequately trained or equipped, but because they are not working for a government capable of inspiring them, paying them regularly, and using them wisely. At this point, therefore, the critical variable of success in Iraq is no longer the pace at which the U.S. can train and deploy new Iraqi security forces, but the quality of Iraq's next government. The last Iraqi government was widely perceived as incompetent, divided, corrupt, and abusive. If the next government does not represent a marked improvement, even the best-equipped and trained Iraqi army will not suffice to hold the country together.

Obstacles to Multilateralization

Critics of the Administration have regularly called for greater internationalization of American nation building efforts in Iraq, urging increased involvement of the UN, NATO, the European Union and neighboring governments. This is, of course, easier said than done. The optimal time to have multilateralized Iraq's reconstruction was in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. At that moment American prestige was high, no significant resistance had emerged, and the world still assumed that WMD would be found. In those early months, however, Americans tended to see Iraq more as a prize won than a burden acquired. Steps were taken to ban French, German and Russian companies from reconstruction contracts. President Bush rebuffed Prime Minister Blair's efforts to craft a central role for the UN. The United States chose to formally designate itself as an occupying power, and to establish as the legal basis for its presence in Iraq the laws of armed conflict, rather than the United Nations charter. Perhaps most importantly, the United States made no effort during those early months to create, as it had earlier with Bosnia and Afghanistan, a regional framework designed to involve Iraq's neighbors in decision making regarding its future.

Holding together ethnically divided societies is hardly a new or unfamiliar task. Similar efforts were required to end the war in Bosnia in the mid 1990s, and to install a successor to the Taleban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001. Iraq was not a more divided society than Bosnia and Afghanistan. Both of those states were in the midst of open, long running civil wars when the United States stepped in. What makes Iraq different and particularly difficult is that in this case, for the first time, the United States has tried to pull a society back together without securing the cooperation, however grudging, of its neighbors.

In the mid 1990's NATO nations discovered that they could not put Bosnia back together without the active cooperation of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, the two men personally responsible for the genocide NATO was trying to stop. In late 2001, the United States recognized that it could not install a

broadly based successor regime to the Taliban without the active support of those nations that had been tearing Afghanistan apart for several decades.

In the Balkans, the United States and its allies created the “Peace Implementation Council”, which accorded all of Bosnia’s neighbors a role in overseeing its transformation. With Afghanistan, the United Nations established the “six plus two” forum, bringing together all of that country’s neighbors, along with the United States and Russia. It was this group that formally launched the process of forming a successor regime to the Taliban. Its principal members governments all participated actively in helping chose and install that government.

Democratization vs. Stabilization

In contrast to its earlier approach to nation building in Afghanistan, the Administration’s characterization of its objectives in Iraq has precluded any meaningful regional cooperation. The United States did not invade Afghanistan in order to remake that country into a model for Central Asia, nor did Washington state its intention to subsequently promote the democratization of all neighboring regimes. Had Washington announced such an intention, it would never have secured the support of Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the war, and nor would it have had their help in shaping the subsequent peace. The stated American goal in Afghanistan was to ensure that country never again became a launch pad for global terrorism. This was an objective all its neighbors could and did buy into.

In contrast, the United States did invade Iraq with the stated intention of making that state into a model for the Middle East, and with the promise that once this was achieved, the United States would then proceed to promote similar transformations in the political systems of all Iraq’s neighbors. This was not a vision any of those regimes was likely to embrace. Nor have they.

In weak, divided societies local claimants to power always seek external sponsors. Faced with a failing state, neighboring governments always seek to develop local clientele, and provide backing to one or another claimants to power. Much as one may regret and deplore such activity, neighbors can neither be safely ignored, nor effectively barred from exercising their considerable influence. It has always proved wise, therefore, to find ways to engage them constructively.

None of Iraq’s neighbors can match American influence in Baghdad, but several have the capacity to undermine American efforts to forge enduring power sharing arrangement among the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish communities. As long as the governments in Teheran, Damascus, Riyadh, Amman, Ankara and Washington are pulling Iraqi politicians in divergent directions, no government of national unity is likely to stay unified for long.

As has been repeatedly demonstrated in the Balkans, democracy can mobilize a divided nation, but democracy alone cannot unite it. Quite the contrary! Elections are polarizing

events, particularly in societies riven by sectarian conflict. In such circumstances, peace can only be secured through power sharing arrangements that accord minorities a greater share in governance than their performance at the ballot box would normally justify.

By making Iraq the centerpiece of a larger effort to transform the Middle East, Washington has complicated its efforts to secure such an outcome. Democratization of Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, not to speak of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories are all worthy goals, but not ones around which a regional consensus in favor of stabilizing Iraq can be formed. If stabilizing Iraq is America's most immediate priority, and if the support of neighboring governments is necessary, as experience elsewhere suggests it is, then these broader efforts at democratization need to be subordinated to the more immediate goal. That does not mean abandoning attempts to promote democracy throughout the Middle East. It does mean diminishing the prominence of the democratization campaign, while focusing American rhetoric and diplomatic activity upon the themes of power sharing, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional stability around which all the governments of that region can unite.

Establishing a Regional Security Dialogue

Stabilizing Iraq is not America's only interest in the Middle East. Washington must also be concerned with Syrian behavior in Lebanon, and Iranian behavior in toward Israel, not to speak of Teheran's nuclear aspirations. Conversations with those governments over Iraq should not, therefore, be conducted in isolation, but should be designed to lead into a broader regional dialogue ultimately addressing all these other issues.

The Persian Gulf is the only large area of the world that does not possess some framework for regular consultations on regional security issues. In the Western Hemisphere there is the Organization of American States. In Europe, there is NATO. In Africa, there is the African Union. In Southeast Asia, there is ASEAN. In Northeast Asia there is the five-power forum created to address the North Korean nuclear program. Even in the midst of the Cold War all the nations of NATO and the Warsaw Pact met regularly, in the context of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe to debate their differences and address their mutual concerns. The absence of any such forum for dialogue in and around the Persian Gulf makes what is already the worlds most tense and dangerous region even more volatile than it need be.

Just as the United States has leveraged regional concern about North Korea's nuclear ambitions to forge a regional forum for security consultations among all the nations of Northeast Asia, so it now has an opportunity to leverage anxieties over Iraq's future to launch broader regional dialogue over security in and around the Persian Gulf.

Conclusion

Neither the American nor the Iraqi people want to see a larger or more extended American presence in Iraq. On the other hand, majorities in both countries also understand that a precipitate withdrawal could make a bad situation even worse.

Proposals for future policy toward Iraq need to take account of the real constraints imposed by American and Iraqi opinion.

The policy of Iraqization represents the least bad option among a range of unhappy choices available to the United States. Staying in Iraq long enough to empower a broadly representative Iraqi government, and to seeking provide that regime the wherewithal to secure the country is the only responsible American course at this stage, given all that has gone before. On the other hand, leaving as quickly as Iraqi forces can take over from American is the appropriate response to the Iraqi public's antipathy to the U.S. presence, and the American public's waning support for the commitment.

American counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam and stabilization efforts in the Balkans both provide enlightening analogies to the challenges faced today in Iraq. But commitments on those scales are not realistic options. The United States put 500,000 troops into Vietnam, a country less than half the size of Iraq. NATO put over 100,000 troops into Bosnia and Kosovo, societies that in combination are less than 1/5 the size of Iraq. If the American commitment to Iraq is to be sustained, the American role in the counterinsurgency campaigns of Central America in the 1980's may provide a better model, one in which the residual American role is largely confined to advice and material support.

Sectarian militias are, as Ambassador Khalilzad has suggested, "the building blocks of civil war". In this respect the Shia and Kurdish militias may be even more of a threat to Iraqi unity than the Sunni insurgents. It is not realistic to think, however, that the United States, at this late stage, is going to shoulder the burden of disarming and demobilizing these forces. That is a challenge that will have to be met primarily by the Iraqis, and primarily through political means.

American efforts to build Iraqi security forces are beginning to show measurable results. If Iraqization ultimately fails, it will not be because Iraqi forces are inadequately equipped or trained, but because the government they work for cannot win their trust and use them wisely. Building a government that can perform those functions should, therefore, be the top American priority.

Experience with other badly divided nations suggests that the task of uniting such societies is beyond the capacity of any one foreign power, even one as powerful as the United States. On the other hand, full-scale internationalization of the nation-building effort in Iraq is no longer feasible, if it ever was. Some greater effort nevertheless needs to be made to engage Iraq's neighbors in the process of stabilizing that country.

Iraqi political leaders will coalesce only if and when they receive convergent signals from their various external sponsors. Washington's high profile commitment to regional democratization, and its concomitant challenge to the legitimacy of all the neighboring regimes is working at cross-purposes with its effort to promote the formation of a government of national unity. Regional democratization, therefore, needs to be subordinated, at least for the next several years, to efforts to stabilize Iraq. The United

States should leverage widespread anxiety over Iraq's future to promote the emergence of a forum for consultations among all the states of the region on issues of security in and around the Persian Gulf.

Draft circulated for comment and discussion