



July 2006

There's No Choice but to Win in Iraq

By Frederick W. Kagan

Abandoning Iraq now would have devastating consequences for the Iraqi people and would endanger the United States as well.

Is the moment coming when we must redefine success in Iraq or even abandon the struggle as a lost cause? Is it time to turn our attention to other problems, accept less-than-ideal solutions in this troubled land, and move on? Absolutely not. Those on both sides of the political spectrum who advocate such “solutions” fundamentally mistake the situation in Iraq and the likely consequences of their proposals. “Cutting and running” in Iraq might generate a brief sense of relief, but it would dramatically increase the danger to America down the road.

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America's interest in Iraq cannot wane for at least a decade—and probably longer—without risking grave danger not only to the stability of a vital region, but also to the American homeland. Defining success down there is likely to replace short-term pain with long-term danger. Alternatives to the success of the current democratic experiment in Baghdad include dividing the country along ethnic lines, permitting (or

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encouraging) the establishment of a military dictatorship, and simply leaving and letting the Iraqis sort things out for themselves (some on the Left have been calling this “incentivizing” the Iraqis). None of these options is acceptable.

The Alternatives

The idea of creating some sort of Lebanon-type solution in Iraq is foolish for several reasons. First, Iraq is not Lebanon—its large numbers of ethnically mixed cities and regions would require substantial population movements to create stable ethnic zones. Since places like Baghdad and Mosul, two of Iraq's largest cities, are also both heavily mixed and strategically important, it is almost inconceivable that such population movements could be accomplished without ethnic or sectarian violence on a vast scale. That violence would delay and disrupt progress toward any sort of new political solution and might well generate the kind of long-term vendetta mentalities that it has taken more than a decade of peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia just to keep under control. Nor has the Lebanon solution produced a Lebanon that is stable and able to resist the control of stronger neighbors, as recent events have made clear. Instability in a tiny country with few resources might be strategically acceptable; instability in a country like Iraq, with vast oil reserves and troublous neighbors, is intolerable. Any solution that weakens the power of the central Iraqi government positively invites increased Iranian intervention,

and perhaps the meddling of Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors in response. Such interventions would further destabilize and delegitimize the Iraqi government, increasing the likelihood of its total collapse.

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Is it not enough to have removed Saddam Hussein and destroyed al Qaeda in Iraq?

Does the United States really have any further interests there? Absolutely.

Some might argue that the danger of this scenario points to the folly of trying to establish a democracy in Iraq at all. Leaving aside the question of whether the United States could establish a nondemocratic government in the wake of a war in this day and age, supporters of "strongman" solutions in Iraq forget the basic problem with monarchical systems throughout history: choosing the right monarch. If one could imagine the ideal Iraqi strongman—tough, fair, effective, competent, and able to command the support and loyalty of the army and a lot of the population—then this approach might be strategically workable, if ethically dubious. If there is any such figure in Iraq today, however, he has been keeping a low profile indeed. The emergence of such a person at just the right moment is unlikely. A power struggle among a number of less competent, sectarian candidates, each of whom appeals only to a portion of the population, is much more likely. The first result of such a struggle would be the destruction of the government and a period of chaos. The next would almost certainly be the further polarization of Iraqi society and increased—and increasingly organized—group violence. Nor is it likely that the violence would stop with the ascent of the victor in this struggle. The temporary triumph of one such strongman is much more likely to lead to continued efforts to unseat and replace him, possibly plunging Iraq into the sorts of cycles of violence that disrupted many Latin American and African countries throughout the twentieth century. Once again, given what is at stake in Iraq, it is extraordinarily unlikely that the United States and its allies could look upon such a struggle with unconcern.

But why is that? Does it really matter, at the end of the day, whether Iraq is stable, peaceful, and strong? Is it not enough to have removed Saddam Hussein and destroyed al Qaeda in Iraq? Does the United States really have any further interests there? Absolutely.

America paid a hideous price for ignoring the collapse of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. That country, among the poorest in the world and torn by two decades of war, was still able to provide Osama bin Laden with the base he needed to prepare the 9/11 attacks. Iraq has the resources to be among the wealthiest countries in its region. Even a fraction of those resources would have been riches beyond compare with what Afghanistan's bedraggled government could offer bin Laden. If the government in Baghdad is not able to control its territory, Islamist terrorists will work rapidly to rebuild their networks, cells, and training areas. As the Clinton administration's fatuous efforts to use cruise missiles against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan demonstrate, only forces on the ground will be able to disrupt those networks.

Allowing Iraq to fall into chaos, or even leaving before the Iraqi government is able to govern successfully, makes the return of U.S. forces into Iraq at a later date extremely likely. Such a return will also be much more dangerous. Right now, the Iraqi government recognizes the need for continued American military presence. Once we have abandoned that government to its own devices, it or its successor is unlikely to welcome us back in. Depending upon the course of ethnic and sectarian struggles in Iraq, moreover, it is even possible to foresee scenarios in which a jilted Shiite government adopts an actively hostile stance toward the United States and attempts to thwart efforts to clear out suspected jihadi groups. The creation of a stable Iraqi government that represents, includes, and controls all of Iraq's people is by far the best way to mitigate the intense dangers raised by accepting any lesser solution.

Cutting Our Losses?

Some are now arguing that this goal is beyond our reach already, however desirable it might be, and that it is time to abandon the effort, if only because of rising dangers in Iran, North Korea, and elsewhere. Such arguments are only superficially wise. The outcome of the struggle in Iraq is not yet clear by any means. The

insurgency continues, violence in Baghdad remains high, and sectarian tensions are rising. In contrast, a democratically elected government resulting from sensible compromises that actually represents all of Iraq's major population groups has just been formed, Zarqawi was killed and enormous damage done to his dangerous network, and U.S. and Iraqi forces are even now engaged in clearing out one of the most dangerous trouble spots in Iraq, Ramadi. There is currently no clear momentum in this struggle. That is bad from one standpoint: it means that the United States has not been able to generate clear progress toward victory. From another standpoint, however, it means that there is no way to be certain of the outcome of the struggle—unless we simply abandon it. Those who argue that it is time to “cut our losses” risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. We have not yet lost in Iraq, but we will certainly lose if we heed their advice.

A failed or failing state in Iraq will demand our constant attention and intervention. U.S. forces will continue to be committed to Iraq—if not in the country itself, then in ready positions from which to intervene as necessary.

When things get hard in wars, those who counsel accepting defeat and moving on may seem wise. Resignation and withdrawal are emotionally easier than continued efforts to deal with a dangerous situation. And in democratic states, the desire to seem to be on the right side of history can be a powerful factor that drives good people to accept defeat prematurely, even against their better instincts and judgment. It certainly has not helped the situation that the Pentagon and U.S. commanders in the field seem to be devoid of any new ideas for winning in Iraq. Whatever the unforeseen problem or challenge, the military has always offered the same solution: train Iraqis, turn responsibility over to them, draw down U.S. forces, and pull out as quickly as possible. Wars are rarely won by such strategic inflexibility, refusal to engage in serious internal or

external debates over strategy, or intellectual bankruptcy. It seems very clear that we long ago passed the point at which steadfastness becomes simple stubbornness and commitment to an idea becomes refusal to adjust to reality. And the unanimity of both military and civilian advice to the president about how to fight the war has stripped him of the ability to choose among meaningful options or even to interrogate his senior advisors thoroughly about the risks and virtues of the approaches they prefer.

None of these problems justifies accepting failure in Iraq or defining success down. The administration's strategy may lead to defeat. Even if the strategy changes tomorrow, forces already in motion might lead to defeat. It is possible, however, that the powerful forces for success that have carried Iraq this far will carry it farther, despite the military's strategic stubbornness. And it is also possible that the military strategy is the correct one and will lead to victory. The point is that we cannot know today what tomorrow will bring in Iraq or anywhere else; that is the nature of war and of life. As long as the outcome is really in doubt, decent people everywhere must engage in the struggle with all their might, find ways of improving it, and persuade the leadership to adopt their ideas. Giving up now—even simply giving up the effort to argue—may well mean giving in to a defeat in a vital theater that is by no means inevitable.

And even if defeat in Iraq were inevitable and we accepted it, we would still not be able to wash our hands and turn to other things. For all of the reasons outlined above and many more, a failed or failing state in Iraq will demand our constant attention and intervention. U.S. forces will continue to be committed to Iraq—if not in the country itself, then in ready positions from which to intervene as necessary. Concerns about Iraq will continue to distract this administration and its successors from other things, will make them hesitant to engage other enemies, and will strengthen the feeling of helplessness that is steadily gnawing at American grand strategy today. Abandoning Iraq now will provide no real relief: it will only make a dangerous world even more dangerous.

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