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No Third Way in Iraq

By Frederick W. Kagan

The United States has two options in Iraq: stay and try to win, or cut, run, and lose. Attempts to chart a middle course—partial withdrawal or redeployment, accelerated handover to the Iraqis, political deals with Syria or Iran—ignore the realities of the military situation. The real choice we face is this: is it better to accept defeat than to endure the pain of trying to succeed?

The U.S. military, under the stewardship of CENTCOM commander General John Abizaid, has worked hard from the outset to avoid creating an Iraqi military that is dependent upon the continued presence of U.S. forces. The fear of such dependency is one of the pillars that has supported U.S. strategy from the outset. In order to avoid it, the U.S. military has never fully committed to conducting coherent and comprehensive counterinsurgency operations on its own, preferring to wait until the Iraqis are able to undertake them. We are still waiting, and the insurgency is strengthening its organization and inciting chaos through mass murder and sectarian violence.

A Progressive Loss of Will

The Iraqi military, unfortunately, is still a work in progress. Although there are growing numbers of trained Iraqi soldiers formed into increasingly competent tactical units, those units remain highly dependent on American logistical support for food, shelter, ammunition, and transportation. This situation is not entirely the U.S. military's fault. It stems also from the failure of the Iraqi government to establish ministries capable of performing their assigned tasks—a failure abetted by woefully inadequate assistance from the nonmilitary agencies of

the U.S. government. Abizaid and the U.S. military are right to feel let down in this regard by the rest of the government, but only partly. Their failure to establish reasonable security and safe working conditions in Iraq—particularly outside the Green Zone, where much of this effort would have to take place—is the principal cause for the lack of economic and political development.

Wherever the blame for this failure lies, there is no denying that it has occurred. The Iraqi military cannot function without a significant American logistical presence. It cannot continue to improve in quality without a significant American training presence, which includes a partnership between Iraqi combat units and coalition combat units conducting counterinsurgency operations. These facts make nonsense of any idea of significantly reducing the American presence as a way to “incentivize” the Iraqi military. Redeployment on any significant scale will not incentivize the Iraqi military. It will lead to its collapse.

Consider the current deployment. There are now about 150,000 U.S. service members in Iraq, including perhaps 65,000 in sixteen brigade or regimental combat teams (the troops who regularly conduct raids, patrols, cordons and searches, and so on). There are also about 5,000 soldiers permanently engaged in training Iraqi units. Most of the remaining soldiers are primarily engaged in supporting these efforts and the survival of the Iraqi army. They maintain supply depots and

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supply lines. They transport essential goods around the country and distribute them at forward operating bases (FOBs). They keep both the U.S. and the Iraqi armies alive and moving. They are assisted by numerous civilian contractors and even local Iraqis, but the military personnel provide the glue that holds the entire effort together.

“Redeployment” of U.S. forces would therefore have to be quite modest. Perhaps 35,000–40,000 support troops would have to remain if the 130,000 soldiers in the Iraqi army are to keep functioning. Most advocates of “redeployment” propose increasing the training effort—surely a precondition of success in such a scenario—by 5,000 or even 10,000 soldiers. That would mean a minimum presence of at least 50,000 troops. Security for the Green Zone, which would still contain a vast embassy and essential command headquarters, would require at least another couple of brigades, say 5,000–10,000 troops. Lines of communication from Kuwait to the FOBs would require a few more. We would also need to retain at least a brigade and probably two in ready reserve, since the new military posture would be entirely defensive and reactive. It is hard to imagine how fewer than 70,000–80,000 soldiers could suffice to maintain the barest functionality of the Iraqi army, even without conducting any counterinsurgency operations of their own.

A reduction of 60,000–70,000 soldiers in our presence in Iraq would certainly be significant, at least from the standpoint of the U.S. military and domestic public opinion. But what are the likely consequences in Iraq? The notion commonly expounded by Representative John Murtha (D-Pa.) and other advocates of redeployment that American troops are the main irritant causing the violence in Iraq is demonstrably untrue, as it does not explain the fact that the recent crisis results from Iraqis killing each other wherever U.S. forces are absent. The idea that keeping 70,000 soldiers in Iraq rather than 150,000 would reduce the sense of an American “occupation” is also nonsensical. The Osama bin Ladens of this world will call our presence in Iraq an “occupation” as long as there is a single American soldier there. The average Iraqi would be unlikely to notice our “lighter footprint”; U.S. raids and patrols are by now so restricted that most Iraqis never see an American soldier anyway.

Finally, the idea of “incentivizing” the Iraqis by such a partial withdrawal is a will-o’-the-wisp. The Iraqi army

relies on our troops for more than logistical support and training. American soldiers are also the ultimate backstop for Iraqi military operations. There is no force in Iraq capable of withstanding an American battalion in open

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or even unconventional combat for very long. That does not mean we can easily win the war, of course. But it does mean that Iraqi army troops can take the field, and when they do, they can do so with reasonable confidence that if the enemy escalates the fight, the coalition will have the last word. Removing that confidence will not encourage Iraqi troops to fight harder; it will encourage them not to fight

at all. An Iraqi policeman quoted in the *New York Times* was eloquent on this point:

A National Police officer posted at a checkpoint near the Habibiya Bridge entrance to Sadr City said the departure of the Americans, who had left 15 minutes earlier, would make his job more difficult. “They helped us to stop everyone,” said the officer, who gave only his first name, Salam. “If we are alone, we can’t say a word against certain people.”

Add to these problems the sense of abandonment the Iraqi military will feel, the loss of the role-modeling our professional military units provide, and the loss of the ability to plan and conduct military operations in tandem with the best soldiers in the world, and it becomes clear that “redeployment” can only harm the capability of the Iraqi army.

So much for reality in Iraq. The reality in the United States seems to be a progressive loss of will to continue the struggle. Drawing down 70,000 soldiers will be unsatisfactory to many people, but to some it will signal at least a commitment to moving in what they see as the “right direction”: pulling out. It might take the heat off the Republican Party (although it might also start a rush for the door). One thing it will certainly do is take some of the pressure off an overstretched U.S. Army and Marine Corps—something that advocates of “redeployment” increasingly demand.

Images of Withdrawal

There is no question that U.S. ground forces are strained. It has been clear to some for more than a decade that there are not enough soldiers in the U.S. military, and

years of (bipartisan) neglect have come home to roost. Many soldiers are now on their third tour in Iraq or Afghanistan. Many officers are kept in the ranks through “stop-loss” orders that prevent them from retiring in the period surrounding their unit’s planned deployment. Others reenlist primarily because they fear that they will be called back to active duty immediately upon retirement by virtue of their status as members of the “individual ready reserve.” It is highly likely that the end of these conditions will see a significant flight of talented officers and non-commissioned officers from the force. In addition, years of continual and rough use have worn out most of the ground forces’ vehicles and equipment. Units are now reduced to sharing tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and Humvees. Often, units that are not deployed do not have the vehicles they need to conduct fundamental training. The president who took office in 2001 promising that “help is on the way” to the military will leave in 2009 having gutted it.

The tribulations of America’s soldiers lead many to the conclusion that there are simply no more troops available to send to Iraq, even if we decided that was the right strategy. Strictly speaking, this conclusion is not true. There are 650,000 soldiers in the active-duty Army and Marine Corps, with an additional several hundred thousand in the National Guard and Reserves. There are now 170,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. If more were needed to avoid defeat in a war that was vital to America’s security, they would surely be found. When pressed, officers and analysts who claim that there are no more troops point out that it is impossible to “sustain” higher levels of forces in Iraq on any sort of reasonable “rotational” basis—that is, to be able to bring troops out of the country after their year-long tour and replace them with an equivalent number of fresher troops. They point out that extending tours or sending soldiers back after very brief periods at home would destroy morale in the force and break the Army—beyond its current state of brokenness, of course.

Placing greater burdens on America’s soldiers probably would erode morale further and advance the collapse of the ground forces. But the corollary is not true: relieving the burdens on the ground forces by withdrawing all or part of them from Iraq would not improve morale or delay or avoid the collapse. It would probably be far more devastating.

Advocates of withdrawal, either gradual or complete, rarely consider in any detail what that action would look

like. It is worth painting a few mental images. First, U.S. troops would pull back to their FOBs, ending patrols in Iraq’s towns and cities. In places like Ramadi, this would mean abandoning the city completely, since the coalition forces there cannot be secure without continual

raids and other combat operations.

American units in towns like Tal Afar, where a precarious peace still holds more than a year after the last major clear-and-hold operation, would also pull out, leaving the Iraqis, who put their faith in us, to fend for themselves. Before long, the only American troops in Iraq outside of the FOBs would be the small teams embedded in Iraqi units. The enemy

would then return and brutalize the decent Iraqis who pressed for reconciliation and peace, as has occurred following previous coalition withdrawals from cleared areas.

The pullback of U.S. forces to their bases will not reduce the sectarian conflict, which their presence did not generate—it will increase it. Death squads on both sides will become more active. Large-scale ethnic and sectarian cleansing will begin as each side attempts to establish homogeneous enclaves where there are now mixed communities. Atrocities will mount, as they always do in ethnic cleansing operations. Iraqis who have cooperated with the Americans will be targeted by radicals on both sides. Some of them will try to flee with the American units. American troops will watch helplessly as death squads execute women and children. Pictures of this will play constantly on Al Jazeera. Prominent “collaborators,” with whom our soldiers and leaders worked, will be publicly executed. Crowds of refugees could overwhelm not merely Iraq’s neighbors but also the FOBs themselves. Soldiers will have to hold off fearful, tearful, and dangerous mobs. Again, endless photographs and video footage of all this will play constantly. Before long, it will probably prove necessary to remove the embedded U.S. troops from the Iraqi military units. The situation will become too dangerous and the Iraqis will increasingly resent the restraint the embedded troops placed on their actions. The U.S. military will become fearful of being implicated in death-squad activity. It is a matter of chance whether the embedded troops are pulled before any are kidnapped or taken prisoner by Iraqi military units turning bad or being infiltrated by radicals.

How will all this ultimately affect American soldiers? The result could be worse than what we suffered in Vietnam. There will be no “decent interval” here during

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which we withdraw in reasonably good order—the withdrawal itself is likely to occur in the midst of rising violence. Instead of pictures of Americans on the embassy roof in Saigon, we will see images of Iraqi death squads at work with U.S. troops staying on their bases nearby. And let us not forget that in the world of Al Jazeera, we will be accused of encouraging those death squads. The overall result will be searing and scarring. The damage to the morale of the military could be far greater than what will result from burdening soldiers with longer or more frequent tours of duty in a stepped-up effort to achieve victory. Those who are concerned about the well-being of the Army should fear defeat of this type more than anything.

Asserting Control

The only question that matters is: can we still do anything to improve the situation in Iraq? The answer is yes. We can and must restore basic security to Baghdad and to the key cities and towns of the Sunni Triangle. In the past, I have recommended beginning with the outlying areas along the upper Tigris, Euphrates, and Diyala River valleys, both because clearing and holding smaller towns is easier and in the hope that success upon success in the heart of the Sunni Arab areas would demoralize the remaining fighters in Baghdad. That approach is no longer feasible. The U.S. and Iraqi governments have made it clear that the war will be won or lost in Baghdad.

Operation Together Forward, the recent joint Iraqi-American operation to pacify Baghdad, failed for a number of reasons. First, for lack of resources, it proceeded too slowly from neighborhood to neighborhood. Second, again because of resource constraints, there were not enough American troops left behind in neighborhoods that had been cleared, with the result that insurgents slipped rapidly back into those areas and destabilized them again. The price for conducting the operation was high: forces had to be drawn from the al Anbar province, the hotbed of the Sunni Arab insurgency, and the situation there has been deteriorating as a result.

The lessons of the U.S. military program in Iraq are reasonably clear by now. American forces, working with Iraqis, can clear areas dominated by terrorists and insurgents. The efforts to do so will lead initially to an upsurge in violence as the insurgents resist, but then to

greater calm. In places like Tal Afar, Al Qaim, and other small towns along the upper Euphrates River valley, Sadr City in 2004, and even Falluja (in the second battle in 2004), clearing operations have succeeded. In many of these cases, however, the U.S. command left inadequate American forces behind to help the Iraqi troops hold the area, with the result that insurgents gradually infiltrated and began to destabilize these regions once again. The lack of any coherent plan to move from one cleared area to another, moreover, often meant that stabilized towns were islands in a tumultuous sea.

The failure to hold cleared areas results in part from inadequate U.S. troop levels, but primarily from a strategy mistakenly obsessed with the irritation the American presence causes. The presence of U.S. combat forces is without doubt an irritant in Iraqi society—but so is the U.S. failure to assert control. When sectarian chaos recently engulfed Balad, local Iraqi leaders wondered loudly where the Americans were. In parts of Baghdad, local leaders warn their people to interact with Iraqi

Police formations only if Americans are present. Increasingly, Sunni Arabs who fear the rise of Shiite death squads see U.S. troops as potential protectors as well as occupiers. The issue is not so much the presence of U.S. troops, but whether they provide the essential service the Iraqis most need: security. To the extent that American forces bring security, resentment of their presence will be mitigated by relief from fear. It will not be perfect. Attacks will continue, and radical imams will preach bloodcurdling sermons. But it will be much better.

One of the factors eroding morale in the U.S. military and throughout the United States is the apparent ingratitude of the Iraqis. American soldiers feel, rightly, that they have liberated Iraq from a vicious dictator and are laying down their lives every day to protect Iraqis from each other. Yet radical clerics, government leaders, and local leaders constantly attack us. They will continue to do so even if we change our approach and work to pacify the capital and the country. Why sacrifice for such people? Because it is in our interest to do so. We did not ultimately invade Iraq to make the Iraqis happy, to make them like us, or to be popular in the Middle East. We have not stayed in Iraq for any of those reasons either. We are in Iraq because it is a matter of our national interest for that country to be stable and well-governed lest it become a center of terrorist training and

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the eye of a regional hurricane. The gratitude of the Iraqis is not the point, nor is the rhetoric of their leaders.

The Last Window of Opportunity

Baghdad can still be pacified, but it will require a change of approach and more troops—probably on the order of 50,000, most of them deployed to the capital. The aim would be to clear and hold the Sunni Arab neighborhoods, in the first instance, both to prevent violence within them and to protect them from attacks from their Shiite neighbors. After each operation, we would need to leave behind significant numbers of U.S. troops to preserve the gains, along with as many Iraqis as are available. The population to be thus pacified is about 4 million people (Sadr City, the Shiite area of about 2.5 million people in northeastern Baghdad, would need to be treated late in the process and in a different way). Historical norms from operations in this war and in previous peacekeeping operations suggest that forces of between 40,000 and 80,000 (Americans and Iraqis) would be needed to conduct these operations successfully. Such numbers are by no means unattainable with the deployment of additional U.S. forces to Iraq and the concentration of American and Iraqi forces within the country.

Assuming that such a procedure could get the violence in the Sunni areas of the capital to reasonable levels, it would then be possible to expand the operation to areas such as Ramadi, Balad, Baquba, and elsewhere along the upper Tigris, Euphrates, and Diyala River valleys. Putting a lid on the Sunni Arab insurgency would also reestablish American leverage with the Shiite leadership. The

Sunni insurgency has been the primary justification advanced for the rise in Shiite militias. It should be clear by now that the Shiite leadership will not heed our calls for disbanding these militias until the Sunni insurgency is better under control.

This approach is by no means a panacea. The Iraqi government must still undertake painful and difficult political bargaining and must support the disarmament of militias. It will be necessary to pressure Iran and Syria to stop supporting violence in Iraq. Regional Iraqi governments must be developed, long-delayed provincial elections held, rule of law established, corruption brought under control in the ministries, and a fair and equitable division of the country's oil resources agreed upon. Pacification will not inevitably usher in any of these outcomes. Failure to control the violence, however, will ensure the failure of the entire project.

It is quite true, as the American leadership often says, that there is no military solution to the problem in Iraq. That is true of any counterinsurgency. At the end of the day, the solution will have to come from the political process. But it is also true of almost every counterinsurgency that there is a military component necessary for political success. The American civilian and military leaderships have consistently downplayed and short-changed this military component. We are coming up on what will probably be the last window of opportunity to regain control of the situation in Iraq and stop the slide toward chaos and defeat. Considering the likely consequences of such a defeat for the region, our nation, and our armed forces, we would be derelict if the effort is anything less than all-out.