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## **Pledged Obama and Iraq**

By Erik Swabb

Those expecting Sen. Barack Obama to get the United States out of Iraq would be wise to look closely at his plan: Not only would it fail to “end the war,” it would replace Gen. David Petraeus’s successful strategy with an approach that was previously tried unsuccessfully. Obama’s plan presents the worst possible scenario: the loss of U.S. lives for the wrong strategy. For those of us who served in Iraq when this tragedy occurred earlier in the war, it is a prospect too disturbing to contemplate.

Although Obama has promised a 16-month timetable to withdraw U.S. troops, two aspects of his plan put this promise in doubt. First, he has only called for removing all “combat brigades.” This does not include support troops, special-operations forces, and trainers, even though these soldiers can see just as much combat. Consequently, Obama could leave a substantial number of troops in Iraq without breaking his pledge.

Second, Obama has proposed enduring missions for a “residual force” that require numerous service members to remain in Iraq. After the withdrawal of the combat brigades, U.S. forces would continue to conduct three tasks: striking al-Qaeda in Iraq, protecting U.S. personnel, and training the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), as long as Iraqis make political progress. Obama’s own adviser on Iraq estimates that the remaining troops could total 80,000. Obama has declared that the residual force would be “entirely conditions-based,” so the number could be even higher. Unlike the combat brigades, this force would have no timetable for withdrawal.

Moreover, the troops that stay behind would continue to suffer casualties if they vigorously pursue the missions that Obama has given them. Operations against hard-core terrorists in urban areas are risky by their nature. They require armored forces as backup to avoid tragedies similar to the “Black Hawk down” incident in Somalia; as these combat brigades withdraw from Iraq, special-operations units would be more vulnerable.

Training the ISF would also entail casualties. The critical role that U.S. advisers play is not running boot camps on secure bases, which Iraqis are increasingly capable of doing. The most effective training occurs when advisers are embedded with Iraqi units in the field. These advisers

mentor inexperienced Iraqi leaders, foster a non-sectarian mindset, and provide logistical and air support that the ISF lacks. Since Iraqi forces are a prime target for insurgents, these trainers are at significant risk.

Finally, the mission to protect U.S. personnel, such as the staff at the U.S. Embassy, civilian contractors, and support units, may produce the opposite result. One feature of counterinsurgency is that sometimes the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be. Without combat brigades living among the populace, the residual force would lose both valuable intelligence and the ability to disrupt insurgent operations. Supply convoys that must sustain the large residual force could see a resurgence of roadside bombs. The U.S. Embassy could come under siege from rocket attacks.

Obama's plan ignores the central goal of counterinsurgency: winning the support of the populace. The removal of combat brigades from towns and cities, regardless of whether there is security, means that protecting the people is no longer the priority. Instead, the goal is to turn over the fight to the Iraqis, whether they are ready or not.

U.S. forces tried this strategy before, and it failed miserably. During 2006, top commanders were focused on replacing U.S. units with Iraqi forces in order to reduce troop levels. However, the ISF proved incapable of providing security, and sectarian violence consumed Baghdad, bringing the country close to civil war.

With Petraeus's appointment in early 2007, coalition forces began implementing the counterinsurgency strategy in the capital and other neglected areas. The results of this "surge" are now well known. U.S. and Iraqi units partnered together and moved into residential areas to protect the people, resulting in a sharp decline in violence. This strategy emboldened the Iraqi government to target both Sunni and Shia extremists, increasing its legitimacy and furthering political reconciliation.

Obama might claim that while such an approach was premature in 2006, Iraqi forces are now proficient enough that combat brigades may safely withdraw. Ultimately, he could be right. However, his repudiation of the current, conditions-based strategy is an unnecessary and dangerous gamble. If the ISF is as capable as he thinks it is, his timeline can be followed. If the ISF is not ready in 16 months, though, it would be a disaster to have a residual force large enough to be a huge target, but too small to maintain security. If that occurred, there is a real possibility that U.S. casualties would be higher with Obama's plan even if there were half as many troops in Iraq.

The far Left would argue that the solution is to pull every single U.S. service member out of Iraq. Fortunately, Obama understands that the United States needs a stable Iraq, as reflected in his call for a residual force. If Obama truly wants to "end the war" in a way that protects U.S. interests, however, he should continue the current counterinsurgency strategy and base troop withdrawals on the conditions in Iraq.

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