



AFTER THE SURGE: THE ONLY IRAQ WORTH FIGHTING FOR

by Keith W. Mines

The best way for a big power to fight an insurgency is to avoid fighting it in the first instance by helping solve the political issue that created the conflict, thus drying up support for the insurgents. The second best way is to engage proxies who know the terrain, the culture, and the internal politics driving the insurgents, and who will not feed the nationalistic narrative that fuels insurgencies. The worst way is to fight an insurgency directly, and it should only be done by a big power as a last resort, in those cases where there is a vital national interest involved that can only be attained by engaging directly on the ground.

U.S. strategy in Iraq has focused primarily on fighting the insurgency directly, rather than through political accommodation or proxies. As a temporary solution this may be essential, but over time is unlikely to yield success. Any long-term strategy must focus on the underpinnings of the conflict and seek political solutions, bolstered by force and economic reconstruction.

Iraq in its current configuration, in which citizens' core political identification is ethnically based and politics is a scramble for confessional power at the national level, will never be stable. The only Iraq worth fighting for is a country organized around a federation model for its 18 governorates,¹ which breaks down confessional groups at the local level, leading to provincial political identification that facilitates national unity. If this model is rejected by Iraqis, then the move to a soft partition should be encouraged and facilitated.

FOUR FLAWED PROPOSALS

Four major proposals for a way forward in Iraq have been proposed over the past months, all of which ignore Iraq's political center of gravity.

A. Partition

Joseph Biden, Peter Galbraith, and Leslie Gelb propose the division of Iraq into three ethnic states.² This is unquestionably where the country is headed, and unless concerted force and effort are applied over an extended period of time it is where Iraq will end up. It will not be a complete catastrophe for the United States. As long as the three new states control their territory, can be coerced to follow international norms of behavior, and regional spillover is minimized, it is a manageable outcome. The U.S. would be able to disengage over time, hopefully with the approval of the three new states and not fighting a rear guard withdrawal.

It is not a given that these three states would fall under the sway of outside powers, or that any would provide a haven for Al Qaeda. The postconflict relationship between southern Iraq and Iran is not clearly established, and the invitation to outside terrorist groups in western Iraq was very short-lived.

There are other two-state variations of partition: one of a Shiite-Sunni state in the south and a Kurdish state in the north, which has a number of advantages over the three state model, and another, a proposal of utter desperation, of a Sunni-Kurdish state in the north and west and a Shiite state in the south. Still, given the downsides of partition in any configuration, it would seem to be a last resort, not something to be proactively sought. Significantly, there appear to be few Iraqis outside of

¹ Al Anbar, Al Basrah, Al Muthanna, Al Qadisiyah, An Najaf, Arbil, As Sulaymaniyah, At Ta'mim, Babil, Baghdad, Dahuk, Dhi Qar, Diyala, Karbala', Maysan, Ninawa, Salah ad Din, and Wasit

² Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Biden-Gelb Plan Emerges as Leading Option for Moving Forward in Iraq," Issues in Focus, Feb. 7, 2007, <http://biden.senate.gov>.

the Kurdish region who support partition.

B. Regional Actors and Iraqi Security Forces

A second proposal, from the Baker Commission,³ ignores the fundamental internal political issues that are at the heart of the Iraq conflict. If one would play Metternich, every problem can be solved by a Concert of Europe. In its first core recommendation the Commission has taken the gritty, street-level issues of political stability inside Iraq, and tried to impose on them a regional formula. Iraq will defy this kind of solution, assuming the region could even be made to go along with it in the first place. The second core recommendation of embedding large numbers of American advisors inside the Iraqi security forces is similarly flawed. Even if the security forces improved significantly they would still be fighting for a political order that pits Sunni against Shiite against Kurd; their improved capability will quickly fall fighting for confessional groupings, not the Iraqi nation. Engaging regional players and transitioning to Iraqi security forces are supporting pillars in stabilizing Iraq, but they are not the central pillar.

C. Shiite Strongman

A third proposal is simply to empower the Shiites and encourage them to crush the Sunnis, establishing a Shiite variant of the Saddamist state. Desperation, it would seem, leads to desperate proposals. The Sunnis may be only 15 percent of the Iraqi populace, but they are the most capable 15 percent, the most vicious 15 percent, and the most militarily experienced 15 percent. They will not go quietly. A Shiite-Kurdish alliance to gain forcible control over the Sunnis would require the level of violence that Saddam used to likewise control the Shiites and Kurds, with the same negative impact on the country, the region, and now on U.S. credibility as well.

D. Troop Surge

Frederick Kagan and Jack Keane posited⁴ that the political piece is too complicated and the reconstruction piece too uncertain, so we should focus on what we can control -- security. To date the troop surge appears to have produced a fairly dramatic turnaround in security in Baghdad and its environs, and coupled with positive development in Anbar has bought some breathing space.

But ultimately the surge will only be effective if it buys time for the political process to advance. One cannot look at the surge in isolation – it will only yield fruit if it produces a viable political structure. In this sense recent developments are less encouraging. While there has been some reconciliatory progress of late, it does not appear deep-seated or lasting. Of perhaps more importance, the troop surge has created greater dependence on outside forces by a government that will only survive if it can burnish its nationalistic credentials, and the nature of our counterinsurgency operations perpetuates an anger toward the coalition that empowers religious nationalists who are one of the largest pieces of the political puzzle. On several fronts, stability is a question of less, not more, troops.

CENTER OF GRAVITY

All of these proposals fundamentally ignore Iraq's center of gravity. The real locus of stability is in how Iraqis relate politically to one another, as facilitated by the Iraqi government. The current political structure is fatally flawed and cannot be made to work, although it can possibly be fixed.

The political process, which first the U.S.-led CPA administered, and then the UN oversaw through elections, created the conditions for Iraqis to identify with their confessional groupings rather than with the Iraqi nation through their respective provinces. It has marginalized the Sunnis, empowered the Shiites, and allowed the Kurds their independence. This was the result first of the deep de-Baathification program administered by Ahmed Chalabi in 2003-04 and continued under the new government, which included the disbanding of the Army and intelligence services and the dismissal of most senior Sunni officials. The message to Sunnis was not just that their dominance of Iraq was over, but that they would now be dominated by the other groups. The confessional structure was perpetuated by Ambassador Bremer's concession to the Kurds to form a sub-regional grouping in the new governing structure as part of the Transitional Administrative Law, something the Shiites also took advantage of in the south. Finally, Iraq's de facto tri-state confessional division was given formal structure when the electoral process was conducted through the use of national lists, around which Iraqis naturally rallied to their ethnic grouping, rather than a locally based system which would have broken down the confessional groupings and forced Iraqis to

³ James E. Baker and Lee Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach* (Filiquarian: 2007).

⁴ Frederick W. Kagan and Jack Keane, "The Right Type of "Surge"; Any Troop Increase Must be Large and Lasting," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2006

participate in politics through provincial identification.

We should not perpetuate the fiction that there are military solutions or regional solutions or economic solutions to a problem that is fundamentally one of internal Iraqi political structure. Nor should we assume that an Iraq consisting of a Shiite dominated core with a semi-independent Kurdistan and a marginalized Sunnistan will eventually be stable. The current political program for Iraq is to attempt to garner concessions from the Shiite government on behalf of Sunnis. The very nature of this process perpetuates and hardens the ethnic divisions that are at the heart of the dysfunction in the Iraqi state. The only viable prospect for a unified Iraq state at present is to change the political framework so that the basic organizing principle is 18-state federalism. This, ironically, is where Ambassador Bremer was headed with his caucus system in the fall of 2003 when it was truncated by nervousness in Washington. It is not clear whether it would have worked then, but it is doubtful that anything else will work now. The structure of the Iraqi state must change fundamentally in order to break up ethnicity as the country's core organizing concept.

GETTING TO 18-STATE FEDERALISM

An 18-state federation will not emerge as a result of a ten-step program. It will be messy and circuitous and there will be innumerable diversions along the way. It starts with clarity about the current state of the country, which is that although it maintains the fiction of 18 administrative units, Iraq is increasingly a tri-state federation organized around its confessional groupings. Even when acting locally, Iraqis generally do so along confessional lines. The provinces as political units have simply never taken off in post-Saddam Iraq. It should also be noted that a confirmed three-state federation, as some imagine Iraq could become, will probably not work. History indicates that if Iraq moves in the direction of a formal tri-state federation it will invariably break up, so the option is between 18 (or at least 7) state federalism, and partition.

It is also important to recognize that the U.S. military remains the biggest political player in Iraq. However much it tries to take a backseat and influence events in Iraq from behind the scenes rather than from the front, the U.S. military is still the biggest faction on the block and wields the greatest influence locally and nationally. The U.S. military presence is also both cause and effect in the insurgency: its very presence is what is causing the majority of attacks and generating recruits for the insurgents nationally, while locally it can be a force for stability. As long as this force hovers over the Iraqi political process, holding in place a political structure that is untenable without it, we will never see what ultimate course politics will take. For the political process to advance, the U.S. military must begin to remove itself from the mix.

Getting to an 18-state federation will require first and foremost, the will of the current Iraqi government. Absent this it would be difficult to even get started. One of the strongest arguments for a timetable for withdrawal is that it may be required to get the attention of the Iraqi government and cause it to make the necessary concessions to move the country in the right direction.

Second, it will require a skilled UN envoy that has the neutrality and competence to work all sides of the conflict and garner the concessions to move Iraq on a new political path. U.S. officials will have to bolster this individual and allow him to take the lead on political reconciliation.

Third, it will require some sort of conference of national unity, with delegates drawn from the provinces to represent their province, not their national party or ethnic group. Stability in Afghanistan flowed from the Bonn Agreement and the subsequent Loya Jirga, where the Afghans could see their nation as a nation, and where they were given a governing structure that was national, not ethnic, in character. Iraq has never had anything like this. It went from a full-out occupation to an internationally chosen Governing Council without national credibility to an election which was structured such that it pushed Iraqis into their respective ethnic corners - suspicious, angry, and increasingly violent. The challenge will be to change the structure of the country without ignoring the hard-fought elections and without starting over on the constitution. A number of constitutional and federation experts believe it is possible. It will not be sufficient, however, to simply have the current ethnically-based government grant concessions to the opposing ethnic groups.

Fourth, in any plan for a way forward, U.S. forces must begin to forcibly disengage, to get out of the way of the evolving security and political dynamic. This is especially true now that their ability to influence the dynamic is falling off sharply. There must be a firm date for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq's cities, a timetable that puts the government on notice that the U.S. will not continue to enable the current dysfunction. As much as possible the disengagement should be tied to changes in the political structure that could lead to national unity. U.S. forces can, however be kept in overwatch on bases outside the cities for a lengthy period of time, whereby they can break up major attacks and movements without being a perpetual presence throughout the country.

One of the biggest challenges in such a plan will be managing the Kurds. Kurdish expectations now run so strongly in the direction of statehood that it will be difficult to get them back to a provincially-based system where they give up their regional

power base. It may simply be too far along to reverse course and the Kurds will have to be allowed to secede. But the cost for doing so is high enough that it is worth pressing them to walk back from the current semi-independent Kurdish Regional Government and into a provincially based system. They could be allowed some form of loose coordination short of autonomy to sweeten the deal. Or they could, as one constitutional expert suggests, be allowed the kind of autonomy of a Scotland, while the south remains fully unified.

It is not clear that Iraqis have the political maturity to manage such a transition, the fifth in four years. In addition to large amounts of political, diplomatic, and financial support, it could be a question of opportunity, working the ground so that such a system could be implemented when the time is right. The key will be creating the right internal conditions where today's power brokers see it in their best interest to move in this direction.

If skillfully developed, such a course correction would not only facilitate, it would require, a coalition withdrawal under conditions more favorable to the U.S. than a number of potential scenarios. This would serve us well in the global war on terror. Our current policy works at cross purposes -- on a tactical level U.S. forces are providing security and staving off sectarian fighting, while globally the images of occupation are stoking the flames of jihad. The key is to extricate U.S. forces from Iraq in such a way that it does not evince weakness or lack of staying power. A political plan that requires withdrawal in order to work, would be one way of doing so.

Only 18-state federalism can create a united and functioning Iraq, and this starts with Iraqis, in the arena, engaging each other and getting on with the business of reforming their state in a way that it can function.

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