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The Evolution of Iraq Strategy

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, Iraq has become one of the most divisive and polarizing issues in modern American history. It is now a subject on which Republicans and Democrats tend to disagree fundamentally about the past (the reasons for going to war), the present (the impact of the “surge” in American forces), and the future of American policy (how quickly, and in what way, American forces should leave Iraq). Reflecting this divide, the two presidential candidates staked out starkly opposite positions during the campaign, with much of the public debate more emotional and ideological than substantive.

With the campaign over and a new president entering office, the debate should change to one of substance over politics. Recent trends suggest that the United States may be able to reduce significantly its forces in Iraq fairly soon, premised not on the certainty of defeat, but on the likelihood of some measure of success. The past eighteen to twenty-four months have seen a remarkable series of positive developments in Iraq that offer hope that the United States may be able to ensure stability in Iraq while redeploying large numbers of American forces sooner rather than later.

The likelihood of this outcome should not be overstated. Because of the remarkable developments of recent months, it is more than just a

long-shot, best-case scenario—but it is hardly a sure thing. Challenges still abound in Iraq, and their nature changes over time even as the overall risk they pose slowly abates. Thus, as a new crop of problems moves to center stage, coping with them will require the United States and its Iraqi allies to make important shifts in strategy and tactics rather than to just stick with approaches that succeeded against problems now receding in importance.

In our judgment, now that the surge is over, any further drawdowns should be gradual until after Iraq gets through two big rounds of elections of its own—provincial elections to be held perhaps in early 2009, and follow-on national elections. These have the potential either to lock in place important gains or to reopen old wounds. But starting as early as 2010, if current trends continue, the next president may be able to begin cutting back on U.S. forces in Iraq, possibly halving the total American commitment by late 2010 or 2011, without running excessive risks with the stability of Iraq and the wider Persian Gulf region.

Faster reductions would be ill-advised. But if undertaken nevertheless, it is important that they be balanced. Both combat and support functions from the United States will be necessary for years to come in Iraq; rapid drawdowns that leave an imbalanced residual force without major combat formations would be worse than rapid cuts that preserve significant combat capability.

This approach suggests another difficult year or two ahead for the brave and committed men and women of the U.S. armed forces, especially as the United States likely undertakes to increase forces in Afghanistan modestly in 2009. Although the American military is under considerable strain, most trends in recruiting, reenlistment, and other indicators of morale and resilience are relatively stable. And with the surge over, the worst of the overdeployment problem is beginning to pass. Compared with the alternative of risking defeat in a major war vital to critical American interests, concerns about the health of the military should not therefore, in our judgment, be the main determinant of future strategy.

Our suggested approach is “conditions-based” and somewhat gradual in the time horizon envisioned for reducing American forces in Iraq. But it also foresees the possibility that most (though not all) main American

combat forces will come out of Iraq by 2011, and it further argues that the United States needs to continue to seek ways to gain leverage over Iraqi decisionmakers rather than assure them of an unconditional and open-ended U.S. commitment.

Although this approach matches neither of the divergent strands of American thought prevalent before the election, it thus parallels aspects of both. Similarly, it reflects important elements of Iraqi political reality if not its recent rhetoric. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has partisan incentives to favor rhetoric calling for rapid U.S. withdrawals, and he may overestimate his own military's ability to perform in the absence of U.S. troops. But his actual ability to secure Iraq without a significant U.S. force has serious limits, and his own commanders' awareness of this may yield an emphasis on aspirational goals for U.S. withdrawals rather than binding commitments. Implementation details always matter in Iraqi politics, and there may be more room for a continuing U.S. presence than there sometimes appears to be in the declaratory stances of Iraqi politicians

NEW PROGRESS, NEW PROBLEMS

The problems of Iraq today resemble the proverbial onion: dealing with one set of issues just reveals a deeper layer that then demands attention. As Major General Michael Jones, the chief American adviser to the Iraqi National Police put it, "Progress is *new* problems, not *no* problems." At the outer layer of the onion were a set of first-order issues that were sucking Iraq into the maelstrom of all-out civil war in 2006 and early 2007. These consisted principally of widespread sectarian conflict, a full-blown insurgency among Iraq's Sunni community (spearheaded by al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI), and a failed state incapable of providing basic security or services such as food, medicine, clean water, electricity, and sanitation to its citizens. The change in the U.S. approach—a new counterinsurgency strategy and increased force levels (the surge)—was designed to cure these problems. Across Iraq it has had a dramatic impact, in conjunction with a range of other factors. However, even as these first-order problems abate under the influence of the surge strategy, second-order problems are emerging that demand attention lest they undermine the progress made so far. Behind them lie third- and even fourth-order problems.

Each new set of challenges is both somewhat less dangerous than its predecessors and easier to deal with. For instance, some of the most important second-order problems include factional violence within the Shi'i (and potentially Sunni and Kurdish) communities; disputed jurisdiction over key pieces of territory, most notably the oil-rich northern region of Kirkuk; the limited capacity of the Iraqi bureaucracy to administer the country, improve living standards, and reduce unemployment; the persistence of terrorism even as the insurgency recedes; the need to help more than 4 million displaced Iraqis return home or find new homes in their country; and the weak and immature political system vulnerable to paralysis, a military coup d'état, loss of power to a Hamas-like organization, or a slide into a Russian-style mafia state. These problems remain dangerous in their own right, but their greatest threat comes from the possibility that each, left unchecked, could resurrect the first-order problems and plunge Iraq into the all-out civil war that the surge strategy has so far kept in check.

It is also worth noting that the need for large American combat formations diminishes as each set of problems is addressed and the next moves to the fore, both because the lesser-order problems tend to be more political and economic in nature (and thus lend themselves less to military approaches) and because they are progressively less likely to produce the kind of catastrophic Iraqi civil war that would truly threaten American vital interests. Had it not been for the application of the full range of American resources—including the major military commitment of the surge and a new strategy focused on protecting the Iraqi population—the first-order problems would almost certainly have plunged Iraq into an all-out civil war and possibly spill over into the rest of the economically vital Persian Gulf. Many of the second-order problems probably will not require the same levels of American forces to keep them in check as the first. Third- and fourth-order problems like repairing infrastructure, rooting out corruption and organized crime, and stimulating the economy's private sector require fewer American military forces to address and are also far less likely to create the same kind of threat to America's vital national interests even if mishandled. Thus, the more that the first- and second-order problems abate, the greater the likelihood that large numbers of American combat formations can safely be withdrawn.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: FROM WORST TO BAD

Even as the situation remains fragile, Iraq is currently doing much better overall. Civilian deaths from war were down to just over 500 in May 2008, according to a count that uses both U.S. and Iraqi government sources. That is probably the lowest figure since 2003 and reflects an 80 percent reduction in violence since the surge began. Typical civilian fatality totals for 2008 ranged from 500 to 700 a month nationwide—down 75 percent from 2006–2007 and lower even than the rates in 2004–05. In addition, security force fatalities have been roughly halved since 2006–07, falling from about 70 to less than 25 a month for American personnel and from 200 to less than 100 a month for the Iraqis. This drop in violence can be attributed to a combination of factors, including waning ethnosectarian conflict, a strengthened Iraqi military, and improved state institutions.

The Waning Ethnosectarian Conflict

One of the most surprising developments over the past eighteen to twenty-four months has been the dramatic decline in ethnic and sectarian conflict across Iraq—down by more than 90 percent in 2008. Contrary to popular opinion, this drop in violence is not primarily a product of effective ethnic cleansing. Large swaths of Iraq remain heavily mixed, and relatively few areas of Iraq that started out ethnically and religiously mixed are now homogeneous. Instead, it is largely a result of the area security operations of the U.S. and Iraqi militaries, coupled with the formation of local security forces like the Sons of Iraq (SoI), that halted the progression of ethnic cleansing in those mixed areas. Today, many of these areas remain segmented by physical barriers and inundated by security forces, but because of it, they are far more secure than they once were. In important areas of Iraq, the role of American forces has shifted from crushing sectarian groups intent on causing violence to essentially policing cease-fires among the groups and reassuring ordinary Iraqis that the violence will not be allowed to resume.

Consequently, Iraq may be approaching the point where ethnosectarian violence, once the greatest problem in the entire country, has been effectively suppressed. Over time, this should enable more and more

American forces to shift over to the role of policing such cease-fires. The historical record indicates that if pressure is maintained, then there is a reasonable chance that the sectarian militant organizations that have been driven underground will lose their cohesiveness, their grip on the people, and eventually their membership, resulting in a permanent peace.

The main culprits in the ethnosectarian violence of 2006—Sunni Salafist groups, more secular Sunni insurgents, Moqtada al-Sadr's (Shi'i) Mahdi army, and the Shi'i Badr Organization—have now either stood down in cease-fires, been crippled by military defeat, or both. Sunni insurgents, for example, overwhelmingly switched sides over the course of 2007, signing onto contractual cease-fires especially through the Sons of Iraq program, which now enrolls about 100,000 participants in security roles. The most violent actors in the ethnosectarian violence—Iraq's Salafist and extreme chauvinist Sunni groups, especially al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—have been driven from western and central Iraq, and a series of offensives by U.S. and Iraqi forces have now largely cleared their remaining urban havens in Diyala, Salah-ad-Din, and Nineveh provinces. AQI has been dramatically weakened and may soon be driven into isolated rural hideouts at the margins of Iraqi society. It will surely continue to be able to mount occasional incidents of terrorist violence from these hideouts, but its ability to foment large-scale, low-intensity warfare may end.

Iraq's Shi'i militias, especially al-Sadr's Mahdi army, or Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM)—have been radically weakened by a combination of factors: Sunni realignment (which removed its original *raison d'être*), U.S. military pressure from the surge, a security presence in Baghdad since the surge, the declining popularity of the militias, and the increasing independence of splinter groups and rogue elements (which diminished the cohesiveness of their efforts and alienated the population with thuggish behavior). JAM's increasing weakness led Sadr to avoid a prospectively crippling fight with the U.S. military and instead to declare a cease-fire in late 2007. Although the mainstream JAM largely abided by this cease-fire, rogue elements did not, providing a *casus belli* for Iraqi government and American forces to launch a series of offensives beginning in Basra in March 2008 that have further weakened JAM and further diminished its prospects in large-scale warfare. The net result has been a virtuous spiral, in which decreasing sectarian violence weakens the

hand of prospective sectarian warriors, which in turn helps reduce the scale of violence.

The Iraqi Military Comes of Age

Heading into 2008, a key question was whether the U.S.-led coalition could hold on to these gains after the five surge brigades began to return home in March 2008 (the last of these left Iraq in July 2008). Although the adoption of population-protection tactics seems to be the more decisive change in America's conduct of the war in Iraq, the additional forces were still important. The surge allowed General David Petraeus and his field commanders to take advantage of a number of important developments (including the Sunni realignment) and to secure much larger areas of the country than would otherwise have been possible, thereby denying them to AQI, JAM, and other militant groups. Recent events appear to have answered this question in the affirmative: there has not been any notable backsliding across northern Iraq, and there has been a remarkable further expansion of security into southern Iraq despite the end of the surge proper.

Major contributors to this favorable outcome have been the growth and maturation of the Iraqi security forces (ISF)—the Iraqi Army, the National Police (NP), the local Iraqi Police, the Facilities Protection Forces, and the border guards. By mid-May 2008 the total strength of the ISF had reached 559,000 personnel, reflecting growth of about 100,000 a year since the invasion, with almost 250,000 in the Iraqi Army alone. Moreover, the Iraqi security forces continue to grow, adding roughly 50,000 new troops a year to the army and a comparable number to police units. By mid-2008, some 56 percent of all Iraqi formations were in the top two readiness categories, which have been modified to require demonstrated performance on the battlefield (not just adequate equipment inventories, manpower levels, and training histories, as before).

The size of the force has allowed coalition commanders to provide ongoing protection to urban populations in the aftermath of military offensives aimed at clearing these areas of militias, insurgents, and Salafists. So many Iraqi security personnel are available (along with defensive measures like "smart fences" and berms) that Iraq's petroleum pipelines are now receiving adequate protection, with the result that

attacks on the oil infrastructure are down by 80 to 90 percent since 2007. Indeed, Iraqi and American commanders now feel able to pull entire Iraqi Army battalions out of active duty one by one for advanced training that should further improve their capabilities.

In addition to the size, the quality of these units is much better than previous iterations of the Iraqi armed forces, although they are still hardly the equal of U.S. or other Western armies. Every Iraqi brigade now goes through an additional three- or four-month training process after it is created, at the end of which it is immediately paired with an American military transition team (MiTT) that aids it with combat planning, communications, fire support, and some operations.¹ In addition, many new Iraqi units are also partnered with American combat units of comparable or smaller size and typically sent to a quiet sector where the soldiers and officers can learn from their American advisers by operating in a low-threat environment. As a result, many Iraqi brigades now control their own battle space (with American formations playing an important, but supporting role), and some are good enough to be able to “clear” areas (with American fire support and other enablers), not merely “hold” those cleared by American forces.

A series of changes in the leadership and politics of the military has also been critical to the improvement of the Iraqi security forces. Major efforts have been made, especially in the last two years, to remove sectarian, corrupt, incompetent, or turncoat officers from the ISF. At the same time, a combination of aggressive recruitment of Sunnis and newly passed amnesty and de-Baathification ordinances have greatly increased both the presence of Sunnis in the security forces (especially the officer corps) and the availability of people with previous military experience.

The cooling of Iraq’s underlying sectarian tensions interacts synergistically with these efforts. In an ongoing ethnosectarian war, sectarian officers can be purged but their replacements will be subject to the same pressures from above and from external forces, thus making real change difficult; with ethnosectarian violence in remission, the replacements for purged sectarians are now much more able to resist militia pressure or political interference and maintain nonsectarian policies.

The process is not complete—there are still sectarian elements in the ISF, and a renewal of ethnosectarian violence could undo much progress. But major progress has been made, especially in the leadership echelons.

A critical example of the improvement in ISF leadership has been in the Iraqi National Police. As recently as the fall of 2006, the NP was infested with Shi'i militiamen of every stripe, as well as every other form of miscreant. Police units often acted as hit squads, killing Sunnis wantonly, and they were feared by most Iraqis. Since then, a new commander, Major General Hussein al-Wadi, has fired both of the NP's division commanders, ten of its eight brigade commanders (meaning he also fired two of the replacement brigade commanders) and eighteen of its twenty-seven battalion commanders. He instituted new vetting and screening measures, made a determined effort to recruit Sunnis and Kurds into the force, and insisted on thoroughly retraining every police formation. The NP's officer corps now has roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shi'ah, while Sunni Arabs make up 25 percent of its rank and file, slightly higher than their percentage in the overall population. The result is a quickly growing popular trust in the police, coupled with a much-needed capability for NP units to serve as auxiliaries to American and Iraqi army units in combat zones.²

More broadly, there has been a deliberate, general improvement in the institutional response of the various armed services and their ministries, so that sectarianism is dealt with more quickly, more consistently, and more harshly than in the past. For instance, rules and regulations regarding the conduct of Ministry of the Interior forces (including the national and local police and the Facilities Protection Forces) now mandate harsher penalties for their personnel who commit crimes than the Iraqi law prescribes for civilians guilty of the same infractions.³ A dedicated effort has also been made to slowly introduce personnel from other ethnic and religious groups into various Iraqi formations.⁴ Consequently, coalition polling found that the number of Iraqis who did *not* believe that the Iraqi Army was sectarian jumped from 39 percent in June 2007 to 54 percent in June 2008.

If integration remains a work in progress, one notable change has been the ability of ISF formations with substantial representation by one sect to operate without significant problems in areas heavily dominated by other sects. For instance, the 26th Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division, which rushed south for the offensive in Basra in April 2008, was 80 percent Sunni, but it encountered no more difficulties with sectarian resentment in Basra than the more heavily integrated 1st Brigade—and

performed far better than large elements of the heavily Shi'ah 14th Iraqi Army division (especially its 52nd brigade), which made up the government's initial attack force in the city.⁵

One of the most important residual problems for ISF units in this respect is that some formations are reluctant to operate in the specific areas from which their personnel were recruited. For some Iraqis, it is difficult, shameful, and potentially even life-threatening to have to arrest—let alone fight—old friends, distant relatives, or fellow tribesmen. As a result, there is a rule of thumb that Iraqi Army formations are generally deployed at least 100 kilometers from where they were raised. Even here, however, there are exceptions that suggest that this practice too may be a passing phase.⁶

The net effect of these improvements is that a great many Iraqi formations now conduct the full range of security operations with only American support, although that support is critically important for many of these units. While this marks a major step forward and points toward how American forces could significantly reduce their combat role (and thus presence) over time, it is not the case that the Iraqi troops are ready to stand by themselves yet. For one thing, the army is still not fully trusted by all cease-fire participants. To many Sunnis in particular, armed forces commanded by a Shi'ah-dominated government are not yet trustworthy enough to be tolerated without an American presence to provide reassurance.

But that is not the only concern. The Iraqi security forces are simply not yet able to operate effectively without Western troops to assist with planning (the original Iraqi plan for the Basra offensive was a disaster), fire support, and logistical support (in fact the “tooth-to-tail” ratio—combat troops compared with support personnel—of Iraqi Army personnel is 75:25, which is close to the reverse of the ratio in the U.S. Army). MiTT and other partnering functions are particularly critical to the performance of the Iraqi military. Across the country and across time, properly trained and partnered Iraqi formations have performed far better than similar units in similar operations that lacked such support.⁷

From Failed State to Fragile State

In 2006 Iraq had become little more than a name on a map. The government, such as it was, was barely capable enough to qualify as a klep-

ocracy. Despite the protestations of the Bush administration to the contrary, it was widely seen by Iraqis and foreigners alike as illegitimate, dominated by militias and organized crime, and possessing virtually no capacity except to steal oil and money from the public trust. This was as true for local and provincial governments as it was for the hollow central government.

Iraq today is not exactly Sweden, but neither is it Somalia. Slowly, Iraqi institutions are beginning to gain some degree of capacity. For instance, Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Water Resources, and a few others are finally beginning to demonstrate the ability, albeit modest, to administer their relevant sectors. Governmental capacity building, economic revival, and provision of essential services continue to lag well behind improvements in security, but they are improving.

This capacity improvement is especially evident in local and provincial governments in northern, central, and western Iraq, all regions that have enjoyed tremendous support from the U.S. government. As part of the surge strategy, a decision was made to increase such support to these provinces in the (correct) expectation that it would be easier to reform them and build their capacity to deliver essential services to the people than it would be to do the same for the central government in Baghdad. American civilian and military personnel, most deployed in new provincial reconstruction teams and embedded provincial reconstruction teams, fanned out into the countryside to help Iraqi officials build local and provincial governance structures and rebuild utilities. Training programs for civil servants from provincial governments were established in Baghdad and Irbil to complement the work of the teams in the field.

The United States made a major effort to try to jump-start Iraq's economy through targeted development efforts, providing microloans to small businesses, creating make-work programs, and reviving large Iraqi industries in an effort to create tens of thousands of desperately needed jobs as quickly as possible. Some of these efforts have started to dent the country's crippling unemployment problem. In northern Iraq, for instance, the coalition's divisional headquarters there set out to create 50,000 jobs through a community stabilization program over twelve months in 2007–08; after just nine months they had created over 60,000.⁸

Iraq has also taken some baby steps on the road toward establishing the rule of law, the foundation of any successful pluralistic society. The

government has shown itself more willing to investigate and prosecute corruption and other crimes. For instance, in May the director general of the Iraqi prison system was brought up on charges of cooperating with Shi'i militias who sought to recruit Shi'ah and kill Sunnis in those prisons. Such high-level arrests are still unusual, but the hope is that when they occur, they send a signal that such activities will no longer be condoned and will incur stiff punishments.

All of these efforts are just beginning to pay off in the form of a tentative return to normality and newly reviving local economies in many places around the country. Although progress is difficult to quantify, American, Iraqi, British, and UN officials aver that there are more children in school, more markets opening up, more businesses starting or reopening, and more traffic on the roads than in the past. For instance, in an area of Iraq south of Baghdad once so violent that it was known as "the Triangle of Death," the situation has improved enough that 255 small businesses were established in the first half of 2008. In Basra property prices had started to rise and retail outlets to proliferate as little as two months after the offensive that cleared the city. Across Iraq electricity provided by the official grid is up only 10 to 20 percent from its 2003–04 levels, but the informal grid of local, private generators provides up to another 50 percent of total capacity.

This progress is limited and extremely fragile. In particular, there is a serious risk that Iraqi demand and expectations will climb faster than the improving economic and administrative performance can meet (for example, growth in electricity demand may well outstrip improving power generation as people buy more air conditioners, freezers, and other power-gobbling consumer goods). But it is a mistake to claim, as many have, that no progress has been made in economic reconstruction or the government's ability to provide essential services.

The Changing Political Landscape

The positive security and sectarian developments have had a strong impact on Iraqi politics. While the watershed of the ending of ethnosectarian violence has already had a transformative effect, it is not yet fully clear what realignments it will produce and whether these will be posi-

tive and sustained. The upcoming local and national elections may help provide answers.

Previously, the three most influential Shi'i political entities in the country—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Sadrist movement, and the Fadhila party—all acquired and preserved their sway by maintaining powerful militias that could provide protection for their supporters and intimidate their competitors. In the power vacuum in Iraq before the surge, those capabilities allowed them to dominate Iraq's majority Shi'i community. Today, however, these militias have largely disappeared from Iraq's streets. As noted, JAM was routed on various battlefields and its cadres driven underground or into Iran. And though they may come back, they do not have the same capability to influence the political situation. ISCI and Fadhila adopted a different path, melding nearly all of their own independent militia units into the Iraqi security forces—ISCI's Badr Organization melting into the army and the police, Fadhila's troops mostly taking jobs in the Oil Facilities Protection Force. Their approach has created a second-order problem regarding the responsiveness of the Iraqi security forces to a future government not aligned with ISCI (discussed later), but it has largely removed the first-order problem that these militias employed systematic violence to advance their political agendas beyond, and at the expense of, government control.

As noted above, an important element of ousting JAM from its previous strongholds from Baghdad to Basra was the rejection of this militia by most of the Shi'i populace. In the eyes of many Shi'ah, JAM had gone from protector to predator. JAM members were no longer considered the guardians of the oppressed Shi'ah against Sunni savagery. They had devolved into organized criminal gangs who inflicted extortion, theft, and a range of other indignities on the people of those cities, with the result that Iraqi security forces were welcomed as the legitimate, disinterested purveyors of law and order when they began to move in and push JAM out. For weeks thereafter, Sadr called for demonstrations virtually every Friday to protest the government's actions but could produce only a few thousand people, rather than the tens, or even hundreds, of thousands his call had once been able to generate.

Although this rejection of the JAM militia does not necessarily translate into a wholesale rejection of the larger Sadrist movement altogether,

it does suggest that it may not be as popular as it once was, at least for now. Certainly some Iraqi Shi'ah blame the wider movement for the misbehavior of its militia. Likewise, others simply see no reason to back the Sadrist movement now that they do not feel the need to be protected by its militia from Sunni ethnic cleansing. Sadr himself remains a popular figure among Iraq's downtrodden Shi'i communities, if only because of his family ties. However, he also appears increasingly out of step with his erstwhile constituents. His long sojourn in Iran has removed him from day-to-day management of his organization and has hurt his nationalist credentials.⁹ As a result, the Sadrist movement, which previously occupied a large political space in Iraqi politics (among nationalist, moderately Islamist, underprivileged Shi'ah), has been considerably weakened. However, no new group has emerged to claim its ground, which creates the potential for a comeback at some point in the future.

Prime Minister Maliki's own party, Dawa, has splintered just when he has soared to new heights of popularity. In the spring, former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari split off nearly half the party after losing a vote for party leadership to Maliki. Consequently, Maliki's faction controls less than a dozen of 275 seats in the Iraqi parliament. This seems incongruous at a time when Maliki has gained tremendous stature and popularity for ordering the attacks on Basra and Sadr City that confronted JAM, as well as the Mosul operation that is seen to have neutralized AQI (at least for now). The small size of his faction may, however, help explain his interest in driving a tough, nationalistic-inspired bargain in negotiations over a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States. Even some Sunni groups in Anbar began to speak positively about Maliki after he demonstrated that he would take on JAM. But to sustain his position as prime minister, Maliki needs more than begrudging praise from Sunni leaders, he needs votes—and he needs more members of parliament from his own party to be elected in Iraq's coming elections.

The Sunnis themselves seem increasingly not only *willing* to participate in the government of Iraq as they never have in the past, but *determined* to do so. Most Sunni leaders have concluded that boycotting the 2005 elections was a mistake, one that resulted in the worst of the Shi'i militias being able to control the central and even provincial governments without any Sunni counterweight to restrain them. This time around, they are intent on participating in the provincial elections so that

they will gain control over the governments of their provinces, as well as the parliamentary elections, in hope of either participating in a new government or at least preventing their rivals from depriving them of their fair share of Iraq's riches. Indeed, Sunni leaders even within the tribal community appear to be laying the foundation for cooperation with a new Shi'ah leadership—one that is no longer dominated by chauvinist militia warlords—if such a leadership emerges over the next six to twenty-four months.

The last piece in the changing kaleidoscope of Iraqi politics is the elections themselves. Now that the people are increasingly rejecting the various militias in favor of the government, the parties that serve as the political façade for the militias are scrambling to be seen as helping to improve the government's capacity to deliver security and essential services, in hope that the people will forget how badly they hindered that process before 2007. There is considerable fear among all of the established political parties that they will lose badly in the coming elections because the people will reject them for their past misbehavior and will vote for alternative parties to spur change. These incentives led to a series of compromises among Iraq's senior leadership between December 2007 and February 2008: they passed the budget, the de-Baathification law, an amnesty for former insurgents, and a Provincial Powers Act bestowing new authorities on the provincial governments as another element in the decentralization process.

All of this represents a new fluidity and hopefulness in Iraqi politics that has been absent over the past three or four years. Like much in Iraq, this promise comes with peril: elections produce winners but also losers, and it remains to be seen how the latter will respond in a country with Iraq's political history. Elections in emerging democracies can be sources of instability as well as progress. But recent changes in Iraq's underlying military and political dynamics create at least the potential to begin a very different pattern of much more positive political development and compromise, if Iraqis—supported by the United States—can realize it.

MOVING FORWARD

If the United States is going to grasp the historic opportunity created by the reduction in violence since 2007, the first step must be to see the

first-order problems that threatened to drag Iraq into all-out civil war more definitively resolved. As already explained, considerable progress has been made on these issues, but the situation is hardly complete.

On the security front, important challenges remain. Across the country, the militants are down, but they are not yet out and they will almost certainly try to come back. AQI and other Salafist groups are still able to hide and operate in some areas of Iraq, and their attacks still cause casualties. Some AQI elements are using Syria as a sanctuary to regroup. JAM suffered severe setbacks in the first half of 2008, but for all its defeats, many of its cadres fled to fight another day.

Iraqi and coalition security forces have a critical advantage in that they now hold the potential battlefields, but they need to cement their control of that terrain, both through improved security measures and by convincing the local populace to remain loyal to the government. Critical to this effort is the provision of essential services. If the United States and Iraq are able to provide these basic services, it will likely be very difficult for any of these groups to insinuate themselves back into these communities; if not, it may be relatively easy. Consequently, a continued emphasis on building Iraqi capacity to provide basic services—in the central and provincial governments as well as in the private sector—must remain an American priority.

The Continuing Importance of American Combat Forces

Perhaps the most important decision the new president will make will be how and when to withdraw troops from Iraq. Some argue that the United States must withdraw, or threaten to withdraw, all major U.S. combat units to force Iraqi leaders to put their differences aside and reach a grand compromise on reconciliation. It is true that the presence of U.S. combat forces limits violence and thus reduces the stakes for Iraqi politicians. But while the threat of withdrawal might speed reconciliation efforts, it could also derail them.

Iraq's political system is factionalized, poorly institutionalized, and immature. The process of political reconciliation will require all major Iraqi factions to accept painful compromises. If any major party decides to resist rather than accept risky sacrifices for the larger good, then wary rivals who already distrust one another's motives will have great diffi-

culty holding their own followers to the compromise—likely plunging Iraq back into open warfare. If reconciliation can be done slowly, through small steps, then each stage of compromise is likely to be tolerable, with the risk of one holdout party exploiting the others at a manageable level. In contrast, if reconciliation must be done quickly, with a grand bargain rapidly negotiated in the face of imminent U.S. withdrawal, the necessary compromise will be great—making it extremely risky for all parties. Iraqis, out of fear for their own safety, might well respond to a U.S. withdrawal threat by preparing for renewed warfare. Rather than convincing Iraqis to sacrifice and accept large risks together, a threat of withdrawal could well produce the opposite effect.

Leverage to encourage compromise is important, and the Bush administration's policy erred in rejecting conditionality for U.S. aid or for U.S. cooperation with Iraqi government preferences. But withdrawal threats are hardly the only or the best source of such leverage. Any element of U.S. policy can be made conditional as a source of bargaining leverage—from economic assistance to military aid to diplomatic or political positions, and the next president can gain leverage by offering benefits only if Iraqis deliver compromise. Withdrawal is the biggest potential threat he can use, but it is also a blunt instrument with great potential to damage both U.S. and Iraqi interests. In an environment of increasing stability, the new American president can now hope to succeed with subtler methods.

Moreover, until the first-order problems have been definitively resolved, large American military forces will remain a necessity. Indeed, they are crucial to see Iraq through a variety of ongoing processes and critical events over the next twelve to eighteen months.

Although progress on security has been maintained—even dramatically advanced—since the drawdown of the surge formations in 2008, the reduction in forces has had an impact. Some American personnel fear that further rapid reductions will make it impossible for the reconstruction teams to operate as freely as they have because they will not have the same access to security by American forces they enjoyed during the surge. The United States now has roughly 500 military and police transition teams of all kinds with Iraqi formations. Although this seems to be the maximum number that American forces in Iraq can sustain, it is still insufficient to provide for every Iraqi formation. Finally, the presence of

American forces has been an important check preventing Iraqi forces from engaging in widespread human rights abuses that might otherwise provoke further rebellion and resistance from targeted communities. For instance, the transformation of the Iraqi prison system has been a huge success story, but it was made possible only by having American advisers present at every Iraqi prison, thus dissuading the Iraqi guards from abusing their charges. Further reductions could mean the loss of such advisers, leading to recurring problems across the force.

As discussed, the upcoming elections in late 2008 or early 2009 will represent a critical moment for Iraqis. A great many Iraqis are hoping that these elections will reconcile the Sunni community, weaken militia parties, enable the emergence of moderate parties, and encourage the political system to focus on the needs of constituents. But if these expectations are not met, the fears and frustrations of millions of Iraqis will increase, possibly even driving them back in the destructive directions of 2005 and 2006. Although the Iraqi people have shown remarkable patience with the disastrous course of reconstruction over the past five years, it is just not clear how much progress on these various scores they will need to see. Many Iraqis suggest that they are very realistic about the prospects for change and will accept evolution even while hoping for revolution. But even evolution may be difficult to deliver.

Previous Iraqi elections have made the situation worse, not better, and a range of actors hope the same will be true this time around. All of the militias and current leading parties are doing what they can to buy, intimidate, and otherwise manipulate candidates and voters. In particular, Iraqi and American personnel have suggested that the infiltration of Badr cadres into the ISF could be potentially very problematic during these elections because ISF personnel will be standing guard at the various polling places. These troops could be used to intimidate voters or stuff ballot boxes, or their presence simply might open ISCI up to charges of doing so. Finally, on-the-ropes extremist groups like AQI and JAM might try to mount spectacular attacks on the election process to demonstrate their continuing influence in Iraq and to suborn the elections in hope of reigniting the sectarian conflict.

For these reasons, the elections need to be seen as reasonably fair and free, and they need to demonstrate some degree of change in all of these areas. The Sunnis need to feel, at the very least, that they have elected

legitimate provincial leaders and parliamentary deputies who will truly represent their interests. The Shi'ah need to see some diminution in the dominance of the ISCI, the Sadrists, Dawa, and the other parties who did so much damage to Iraq in years past. They also need to see their representatives working to make life better for their constituents and not just treating their offices as private fiefdoms with all of the perks of corruption and patronage. For their part, the Kurds will want to see the emergence of more realistic Sunni and Shi'i parties willing to respect Kurdish aspirations and negotiate realistic settlements of their disputes. Accordingly, American forces will have a critical role to play in protecting the electoral process across Iraq; a large-scale withdrawal of forces before the elections would make that much more difficult and risky.

Finally, while the modest progress in capacity building and microeconomic revival is important, it is also far from where it needs to be. Put plainly, all Iraqis need to be able to secure the essential services necessary for their survival, either from the Iraqi government (whether at national, provincial, or local levels) or through the Iraqi economy. That is simply not yet the case. At a macroeconomic level, indicators seem better in recent months, most notably the important area of GDP growth, which has been driven up mostly by the increase in the global price of oil (Iraq's production has increased but only modestly). Inflation is also in reasonable check, and foreign investment is beginning to trickle in. But unemployment remains at 30–40 percent and essentially unmitigated by recent developments. On this front, there is still a great deal to do.

In this area in particular, the United States is still carrying too much of the burden directly. For instance, Anbar Province was receiving only about 8 percent of the fuel it needed from the central government when we visited there in the early summer of 2008. The marines took it upon themselves to begin trucking the needed oil down from the Bayji refinery while simultaneously funding the refurbishment of a local refinery at Haditha as well as the rail line from Bayji to Haditha to provide a longer-term solution. While the marines deserve praise for this effort, this is exactly the kind of problem that the Iraqi government should be fixing instead. Unfortunately, it is still too often the norm in Iraq that it falls to Americans, particularly American military personnel, to do so.

At this point, the problems on this score lie mostly within the Iraqi system itself. There is a lack of trained budgetary personnel throughout

the government, and in the provincial governments a lack of trained civil servants altogether. (Under Saddam the central government did everything—badly—while the provincial governments did nothing.) Corruption still exists throughout the government, but draconian new anti-corruption regulations have so terrified many government employees that they refuse to spend any money at all. Without an electronic banking system, transferring funds from the central government to the provinces, where they can be more effectively spent, is difficult and cumbersome. Another holdover from Saddam's era is the continued over-centralization of the bureaucracy and overplanning of the economy. Iraq desperately needs to streamline its cabinet from its current bloated size (with over three dozen ministerial posts), create cabinet subcommittees to focus on critical problems like the economy, and eliminate the obsolete and crippling Ministry of Planning, which does nothing but hinder the operations of every other ministry.

Turning to the Second-Order Problems

Across Iraq, American military and civilian personnel recognize that the challenges they face are changing. At a strategic level, adapting to those changes, helping the Iraqis devise solutions to them, and doing so while helping to finish off the first-order problems, should be the principal task of the next phase of the reconstruction of Iraq. There are a great many second-order problems, but it is worth highlighting some of the most important, including terrorism and intrasectarian violence; refugees; weak political systems; Kirkuk; and the role of regional players, especially Iran.

TERRORISM AND INTERNECINE VIOLENCE

Terrorism is not as great a threat to the security of Iraq as it once was, but if left unchecked, terrorist groups could, over time, build back into full-blown insurgencies, thereby reviving the much more dangerous first-order problem. Here the incoming administration should maintain the pressure on AQI across northern Iraq.

Similarly, as the first-order problem of intersectarian conflict abates it has brought to the fore the second-order problem of intrasectarian conflict—particularly Shi'ah fighting Shi'ah. Maliki's offensives against

Basra, Sadr City, al-Qurnah, and al-Amarah dealt with that problem at least temporarily because they damaged JAM's organizational infrastructure and its hold over swaths of the Shi'i population. JAM's defeat coupled with the absorption of the Badr Organization and Fadhila's militias into the ISF have dramatically reduced the number of Shi'i militiamen on the street for the moment. However, if JAM is able to mount a comeback, the ISCI and Fadhila might be prompted to reconstitute their own discrete militias to oppose it. The solution to this problem includes a substantial, and increasingly Iraqi, troop presence to secure the population, to prevent JAM from reestablishing control, and to remove the incentive (or the ability) for the Badr Organization and Fadhila to return to militia behavior. It will also require important shifts in how these operations are conducted, focusing on activities designed to reinforce the various cease-fires among these groups and policing their interactions so that no group believes it has an incentive to break such cease-fires.

However, other problems will not be so straightforward. The stand-down of the Sunni insurgency in contractually regulated cease-fires under the Sons of Iraq program has been central to the reduction in violence. This program has not "armed the Sunnis" for the conduct of renewed warfare, as American critics have often claimed—SoIs hardly lacked weapons when they were fighting the United States and the Iraqi government and are no more militarily potent now than they were then. The potential problem is that most SoI groups want to be integrated into the government security forces (they see this as the best guarantee that a Shi'i regime will not use the ISF to tyrannize them), but the Maliki government has been dragging its feet, fearful of empowering Sunni rivals.

In fact, by late summer 2008 Maliki was even pursuing some of these Sons of Iraq and arresting them. While some are likely former AQI fighters, and many were undoubtedly shooting at American and Iraqi security forces only a couple of years ago or less, the trends are ominous. Genuine Sunni cooperation with Maliki, which has begun, will likely not continue if the Shi'ah-led government cannot bring itself to reconcile with some former enemies. It will need to make its purges of SoI limited in number, bring more of them into the security forces, and in the meantime keep paying the 100,000 SoI as it takes ownership of the program from the United States. The good news is that Maliki's efforts to bring more Sunnis, including former Baathists, into the security forces suggests a

willingness to avoid sectarian bias. But Maliki's concerns about the SoI are clearly different from his worries about many other Sunnis, suggesting that an American role will remain important for gradually cajoling him into further placing Awakening Council volunteers into government jobs and ensuring that the Sons of Iraq stay on the straight and narrow until he does. This also should remind us that Maliki's interests in getting American forces out of Iraq quickly are not necessarily consistent with the interests of other major Iraqi actors—or of long-term stability.

Moreover, the cease-fires produced by the SoI movement are not inherently stable or self-enforcing. Some SoI members provide less security service than agreed in their contracts; others periodically test the waters by trying to expand their control, by challenging the ISF, or by confronting neighboring SoI groups. Such violations are to be expected in the early years of any such stand-down: a system of cease-fires implemented through more than 200 separate contractual agreements, as the SoI system is, cannot be sustained on autopilot or by its own efforts until the participants' expectations for the future change over time with the experience of peaceful coexistence.

This situation in turn creates two major challenges for the future. Some mix of security and civilian employment must be found for enough of today's SoI members to satisfy their economic needs and, more important, their security concerns vis-à-vis Iraq's Shi'i majority. And some form of ongoing enforcement of SoI contract terms is going to be essential for years to come. Until the Sons of Iraq themselves come to trust the ISF, this enforcement role will have to be played by the U.S. military. And in fact many U.S. brigades now spend much of their time in exactly such enforcement activities—this is already an important U.S. mission, and is likely to become increasingly so over time.

REFUGEES

Returning refugees are another important second-order problem. The first-order problem of the civil war is believed to have created about 4 million internally and externally displaced Iraqis. As the civil war abates, these people are just starting to return home—and many more can be expected to follow if the current positive trends continue. The problem is that they have neither jobs nor homes to come back to. In many cases, their homes are now occupied by other people who took over these prop-

erties when their own homes were destroyed. As the United States learned in the Balkans, trying to put every family back in its original home is simply impossible. But that means devising programs to resettle millions of returning refugees. If not, considerable violence could ensue—both by and against the returnees—which could help resurrect the militias, this time as champions of the dispossessed.

The next president should press the Iraqi government to set up a major voucher program to help people build new homes, perhaps in their original provinces but not necessarily in their original cities or neighborhoods. Such an effort will be needed in and around Kirkuk as well, once more disputed property claims are adjudicated (a process that will obviously produce losers as well as winners). This type of program could also help address unemployment by sparking a construction boom. The Iraqi government will have to be the major agent to devise—and fund—such a program, but the United States can help spur the process along, and U.S. troops will likely be needed to help ensure effective, safe implementation of it in the early months so that sectarian tensions are not rekindled.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Perhaps the most dangerous second-order problems are those related to the immaturity of the new Iraqi political system. Emma Sky, General Petraeus's chief political adviser, explains that while Iraq may no longer be a failed state, it is certainly a very "fragile" one. Its institutions remain underdeveloped and limited in capacity. Its political parties are unrepresentative and unfamiliar with pluralist politics. Its leaders are new to government and even new to leadership itself in many important cases. Iraq has tremendous wealth but, even with enormous help from the United States, is still not fully in control of it and is unsure about how to share that wealth. It is a new, weak political system subjected to a range of internal and external pressures any of which, in the absence of the protection provided by the United States, could cause it to collapse.

Moreover, one of the necessary solutions to the first-order problems has contributed greatly to this second-order problem: the growth in size and capability of the Iraqi security forces. Dealing with the first-order problems of the civil war and the insurgency required the creation of a large, fairly capable Iraqi military. Ironically, Iraq's military may now represent a threat to Iraq's future stability. Today, the Iraqi security forces

are feeling their strength. They are proud of their capabilities and achievements, and when they look around, they see few other government institutions as capable as they are. Elsewhere in the Middle East over the past century (including repeatedly in Iraq), those conditions have often produced military coups d'état.

It is highly unlikely that the Iraqi security forces would try this while a considerable American military presence remains in the country. However, a coup is not the only problematic scenario to which the immature Iraqi political system might fall prey. Even if Iraq does not become another military dictatorship like Syria, it might become another mobocracy like Russia, with a powerful clique of politicians from the security services dominating the government, hoarding the country's vast energy wealth, and parceling out the rest of the state to organized crime. The strength of the security forces, the prevalence of organized crime, the ties between organized crime and many Iraqi political leaders, and the temptation of Iraq's oil wealth make this a very real danger. Many fear that Maliki is already headed down this path, intentionally or inadvertently. Still another possibility is a "Palestinian model"—a scenario in which the central government, despite the best efforts of the United States, fails to develop its own capacities to provide essential services but prevents provincial and local governments from filling that gap, continues to steal the country's wealth, and allows Hamas-like militias (which JAM was attempting to emulate before it was booted out by the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people) to move in to provide those services and so capture the support of the populace.

Perhaps the easiest threat to imagine is a reversion to the pattern in 2005–06, when chauvinistic Shi'i parties ruled the government (with the connivance of the Kurdish parties) for their own benefit and, secondarily, that of their community. Maliki's treatment of the Sons of Iraq and distrust of the Awakening Councils certainly raise fears among Sunnis about the resurgence of such majoritarian rule. This is one reason why the future of the Sons of Iraq is so important: many Sunnis see their treatment as a bellwether of Shi'i intentions, and the government's unwillingness to integrate them into the ISF will be seen as a determination to reduce the Sunni community to second-class status.

Ultimately, all of these scenarios could reignite the first-order problems that were dragging Iraq (and potentially the whole region) into civil

war. For instance, a failed coup attempt could be even worse than a successful one. Any military officer making the bid could be seen by the other communities as a sectarian chauvinist trying to take over the government for his sect, which would cause them to rally together to oppose him. It could easily cause the newly formed security forces to fragment along ethnosectarian lines, as happened in Lebanon during its civil war, putting the United States and Iraqis right back where they started at the end of 2006. Likewise, if the Sunnis believed that the Shi'ah intended to rebuild majoritarian rule, they might well decide to resume their armed resistance, which could lead to a similar outcome.

KIRKUK

Another second-order problem that will demand the attention of the next president is the thorny issue of Kirkuk. Preventing Kirkuk from becoming a flashpoint will require compromises on a range of difficult issues. The city and its environs, once heavily Kurdish, were "Arabized" by Saddam in an effort to weaken the Kurdish hold on Iraq's northern oil-producing region. Many Kurds were displaced, and now, in much of the city, two different families claim every house. One solution the next president should consider promoting would involve giving most Kurds their homes back as well as creating a voucher system, described earlier, to enable those who lose out on their claim to a given disputed home (be it a Kurd or Turkoman or Arab or other) to build a new one. Ensuring that all of Iraq's major groups are comfortable with a settlement on sharing Iraq's oil revenues and oil exploration will also be critical for Kirkuk. A fair resolution on oil requires making future oil wealth a national asset to be shared equally by all Iraqis. Resolving the problem of Kirkuk is likely to take considerable time, especially since any rapid resolution might produce considerable bloodshed.

But important positive factors pertain to Kirkuk as well. So far, the Kurdish leadership has recognized the difficulties inherent in amicably resolving the Kirkuk problem and has resisted popular calls for more precipitous action. In 2008 the new UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura of Sweden, inaugurated a process to deal with Kirkuk and other internally disputed Iraqi territories. Initially, all of the parties cheered this program; upon hearing the first recommendations for how to move forward on Kirkuk, these parties now universally condemn the program.

Taken together, both responses suggest that it is a fair and reasonable approach to the problem. Of greater importance, it is based on a gradual resolution of the problem, with both sides receiving some compensation up front to provide incentives to keep moving forward. Unless a better alternative miraculously appears, the next president should not only support this process but be prepared to put the weight of his office behind it if one party or another threatens to abandon it.

REGIONAL ACTORS

Another second-order problem the new administration must consider is the role of external actors. Iran is not the only issue in this regard, even if it is the most problematic.

Consider first the countries to Iraq's west and south. If challenges over the Sons of Iraq program, a fair sharing of oil revenue, and other issues are not well handled, significant external problems could develop. Some key Sunni-majority states in the region have finally begun to reconcile themselves to the idea of a Shi'i-majority government in Iraq, albeit grudgingly, by returning their ambassadors and encouraging investment to help the Iraqi economy. This process accelerated after Prime Minister Maliki demonstrated in the spring of 2008 that he would pursue extremist Shi'i actors (such as JAM) in addition to Sunni insurgents and terrorists. But that dynamic could end if Sunni-majority countries perceive Maliki to be reverting to Shi'i-chauvinist policies. The consequences could be numerous: no further debt forgiveness for Iraq from its neighbors, limited diplomatic contact (leaving many Iraqi leaders few alternatives to the option of currying favor with Iran regardless of the consequences), less cooperation in preventing Salafist terrorists from traveling through Sunni-majority states into Iraq, and less inclination to work together with Baghdad to bring refugees home to Iraq in an organized, nondisruptive manner.

Nonetheless Iran remains the chief regional challenge for Baghdad to contend with. In the dark days when Iraq was spinning out of control, Iranian support for various Iraqi militant groups was little more than an afterthought, another party contributing to the mayhem. However, as the ethnosectarian conflict dwindles, Iranian support looms much larger because it appears that Iran is trying to sustain (or even resurrect) conflicts that Iraqis and Americans desperately want to end. The truth, of

course, is that the Iranian leadership is not entirely of one mind regarding its goals or strategies in Iraq, and the events of the past twelve to eighteen months (and particularly the setbacks to the various Shi'i militias) appear to have thrown whatever agreement they once had into considerable disarray. Moreover, while Iran is clearly doing a lot of very unhelpful things in Iraq (such as arming various insurgents and militias), it is also doing some things that are very helpful to the United States and Iraq (such as sometimes trying to restrain the Shi'i militias from fighting one another). That they are doing so to serve their own interests should not blind the United States to the fact that it is still helpful.

The key to handling Iran, in brief, is likely to lie in a joint U.S.-Iraqi effort to engage Iran in a dialogue, which the Iranians have so far refused, in hope of making Tehran more of a partner in the reconstruction effort. The new president needs to encourage Iran to do more of what is helpful and less of what is unhelpful. The best route to that is to stop trying to exclude Iran from the process altogether. That will be hard for both Americans and Iraqis (many of whom are more anti-Iranian than Americans are), but it may prove necessary. Washington and Baghdad ought to offer Tehran a permanent liaison presence in Baghdad, which the U.S. government could use to brief Iran on developments relevant to its interests and even solicit its advice on various issues. Better still would be to try to act in ways that take Iran's advice into account so that Tehran might feel that it could secure its minimal interests without having to fight either the Americans or the Iraqis for them. If nothing else, even the failure of such an attempted dialogue will underscore to Iraqis that Iran is acting nefariously in their country, leading them to further increase the political pressure they place on Tehran to stop it—and making them more willing to tolerate decisive government action against groups like JAM that are seen as being funded, armed, and even directed by Iranian agents.

Behind the first- and second-order problems lie a range of third- and even fourth-order problems such as corruption, organized crime, and Iraq's decrepit infrastructure. These are all challenges that American and Iraqi officials already confront every day, but mostly as exacerbating factors to their main problems, not as the principal problems themselves. Some day, if the United States and Iraq are able to eradicate the most crucial threats, these lesser problems will loom much larger. They are not

insignificant, and the president should plan to help Iraq address them when they, in turn, come to the fore. However, they should not require large numbers of American combat troops to resolve, and they pose less inherent risk of reigniting major internal war in any event.

U.S. FORCE LEVELS AND THE COMING CHALLENGES IN IRAQ

Americans deserve some sense of how long the current strategy in Iraq may take to achieve most of its desired results. After all, Afghanistan beckons for more American troops, and other national security challenges loom as well. How much longer will a strategy centered on policing Iraqi cease-fires, strengthening national institutions, and ensuring a prudent and gradual transfer of security responsibilities to Iraqi security forces likely take?

Making precise predictions is difficult, and it is more sensible to offer a range of scenarios for war and state-building efforts as complex as those in Iraq. Some things, however, seem clear.

First, some near-term, relatively modest, drawdowns may be required to establish a sustainable posture in Iraq—especially as the United States adds troops to its presence in Afghanistan in the coming months.

Second, current trends make it possible to imagine that the next president could safely cut the U.S. troop presence in Iraq much more substantially—perhaps even by half of today's deployment—at some point during the course of late 2010–11, once the insurgency and sectarian conflicts have been further suppressed, and if the two rounds of Iraqi elections and the formation of a new Iraqi government have laid the foundations for a more positive trajectory in Iraqi politics.

One possible model for further reductions in Iraq if current trends continue is provided by the dramatic turnaround in the situation in Anbar Province. In 2007 the United States had fifteen maneuver battalions in the province; today it has only six. In 2007 American forces participated, together with Iraqi security forces and the Sons of Iraq, in most of the patrolling and hard fighting there. Now marines are included in fewer than half the total number of patrols, with an aim to go down further to only 25 percent soon. Several hundred marines remain in military transition teams (at various levels of command) with each of Anbar's two Iraqi Army divisions, and sizable numbers of Americans are also

working with the Iraqi police there. These will remain necessary for some time. Border forces require further partnership with American advisers too, to secure the country's borders against smugglers and, most of all, against foreign terrorists. The United States will also have to continue to provide key "combat enablers"—aerial surveillance as well as air, artillery, and armor support—to Iraqi forces in battle. But Iraqi security forces are providing most of the infantry and policing manpower already.

Another potential measure of the necessary future size of the U.S. troop presence in Iraq is to compare it with the U.S. experience in Bosnia and Kosovo. Of course there are many differences between Iraq and the Balkans. But an important similarity is the prevalence of ethnosectarian conflict in these wars. And an important potential similarity is the ability of a system of cease-fires to underwrite sustainable stability and end the violence. A key to stability in the Balkans has been the continuing presence of outside peacekeepers to enforce the deals that ended the fighting, as U.S. forces are increasingly doing in Iraq. But the Balkan peacekeeping presence has not been static. Within four years of the cease-fires in Bosnia and Kosovo, peacekeeping forces in both countries had been reduced by about half, without a resumption of violence. Starting the Iraq clock counting in 2007, when the process of cease-fire formation culminated, this would suggest a halving of the U.S. presence around 2011, as noted.

Safe drawdowns of major elements of today's forces are becoming possible—if the United States is patient in their timing. Neither Anbar nor the Balkans involved rapid reductions to zero combat troops. Much important work remains to be done in Iraq, from policing cease-fires to supporting the ISF to stabilizing critical elections to helping refugees return safely, and more. And none of this work can be completed on demand or accelerated safely: a stable environment, for example, cannot possibly be ensured until after national elections that will not be held until late 2009 at the earliest. So eliminating American combat battalions and brigades entirely would be enormously imprudent at least in the short term. In addition, brigade headquarters provide important command, control, and liaison capabilities, suggesting that it may be prudent to keep most of them even as combat battalions are sent home. Of course, caveats abound. The northern parts of Iraq remain unsettled, Basra's newfound security is fragile, and Baghdad could again face accel-

erating sectarian tensions as refugees try to return home or militias try to reassert themselves. Iran may also seek to further stoke the situation, transferring even more potent weaponry to some militias. An election that proves destabilizing, a renewal of sectarian violence, a coup attempt, or some other wild card could change the situation in ways that could require a larger U.S. presence—or that could undermine the prospects for success so badly as to make any U.S. presence ineffective. The odds of such a malign future are much lower now than they were in mid-2007, and the case for hope in Iraq is correspondingly stronger. But any single projection, and any fixed schedule for withdrawal, is subject to the inherent uncertainty of a conflict as complex as Iraq's.

We thus see a combination of real promise but continuing risk. Patience could enable large, safe drawdowns in coming years, but haste or misfortune could still undermine the prospects for stability and threaten profound U.S. security interests.

This view is not uniformly shared, however. In particular, some Iraqi politicians, and especially Prime Minister Maliki, have recently appeared to favor earlier, deeper reductions in U.S. forces than we propose. More broadly, there is widespread impatience with the foreign occupation among Iraqis. Will Iraqi domestic political dynamics permit a continued presence by tens of thousands of Americans beyond 2010 or 2011?

The answer could prove to be no; foreign occupation is rarely popular, and one could certainly imagine anti-occupation sentiment among Iraqis rising to the point where all Americans are forced to leave. As a sovereign nation, Iraq has every right to ask U.S. forces to leave, and if Iraq does, the United States should comply. But this is far from preordained. Iraqi attitudes are more complex than often portrayed in the United States: for years, polls have shown that Iraqis want the United States to leave but not immediately because most Iraqis have consistently seen a need for U.S. security. This pragmatism extends even to populations that once harbored insurgents and AQI terrorists: each of us has recently walked through neighborhoods in places like Falluja where Americans would once have been shot on sight and instead we have found kids mugging for photos and Sunni parents waving from market stalls. This was not so much because Fallujans suddenly loved Americans; it was because they had come to see the security advantages of the U.S. presence and thus tolerated it. As the memory of past violence dims,

this perceived need for U.S. troops will diminish, and public tolerance will likely decline with it. But, then so can the U.S. presence. In both the Anbar and the Balkan models, required troop counts fell gradually as the need for a combat presence ebbed. Managing this relationship so the U.S. posture subsides at the right rate—maintaining Iraqi public tolerance long enough to facilitate stability while drawing down safely—will be challenging. But there is no reason to assume that it is impossible.

On balance, the case for believing that a substantial U.S. drawdown can be enabled by relative success rather than mandated by failure is stronger than it has been for years. Before the surge, leaving Iraq in the midst of defeat to corkscrew into chaos and civil war would have been tremendously risky. Today there is a real possibility that persistence could enable a stable Iraq and permit major withdrawals beginning in 2010 without undermining that stability. The American people have every right to be tired of this war—indeed, the soldiers, marines, and civilians who are waging it are a lot more tired of it than the general American public. But understandable frustration with past mistakes, sorrow over lives lost, anger at resources wasted, and fatigue with a war that has at times seemed endless should not result in overlooking the positive developments that have occurred. Nothing in Iraq can ever be guaranteed. But the changes of 2007–08 have created new possibilities. If the next president is willing to build on them, the United States may yet emerge from Mesopotamia with something that may still fall well short of Eden on the Euphrates, but that averts the horrors of all-out civil war, avoids the danger of spillover to a wider regional war, and yields a stability that endures as Americans gradually come home.

NOTES

1. Advisory teams typically consist of 10–30 U.S. soldiers or marines. Each team is attached to a headquarters. Altogether, there are typically more than 100 American personnel for each Iraqi division in various MiTT teams (and a total of more than 5,000 Americans playing such roles nationwide, counting Police Transition Teams as well).

2. According to coalition polling, the number of Iraqis who did *not* believe that the Iraqi police were sectarian rose from 36 percent in June 2007 to 48 percent in 2008, while those who did not believe the police were corrupt rose from 37 to 50 percent during the same period. More anecdotally, in Mosul in the spring of 2008, throngs of people (mostly Sunni Arabs) demonstrated in protest when the government wanted to

move its local NP brigade to another sector, and in the fighting in Basra in March and April, NP personnel staunchly defended their stations against determined attacks by JAM fighters.

3. An American special forces officer who served as the commander of a MiTT team in 2007–08 noted that while the Iraqi officers he worked with might turn a blind eye toward moderate corruption and simply reprimand an officer for more extensive corruption, collaboration with one of the sectarian militant groups typically resulted in the officer's dismissal or imprisonment.

4. The most capable unit in the Iraqi Army, the 1st Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division, was formed in Anbar in 2004, but currently boasts a 60-40 Sunni-Shi'ah split. During the battle of Basra in April, Basrawi Shi'ah in the brigade were used to infiltrate into the city and gather critical targeting information on JAM leadership that helped win the fight. What is more, after the battle, the 1st Brigade's parent formation, the 1st Division, started a recruiting drive in the Hyyaniyah area of the city, formerly one of the major JAM strongholds, to try to bring more Basrawi Shi'ah into the unit. They had hoped to get about 1,000 recruits (the division had about 8,000 personnel at the time), but 3,000 volunteers stepped up on the first day of the drive.

5. Another brigade of the 1st Infantry Division, the 2nd, was committed to the fighting in heavily mixed Diyala Province, and the assessment of the American commander was that they were "pretty friggin' good" and were not encumbered by their provenance in Anbar or their predominantly Sunni composition.

6. Members of the 1st and 7th Infantry Divisions were raised in Anbar but have performed very well there—so well that the U.S. Marine commander of that sector hates losing brigades from these formations, which typically are sent to handle the toughest tasks elsewhere in the country. Likewise, as noted earlier, large numbers of soldiers and officers in the 1st Brigade were from Basra, but that did not prevent the government from deploying it there when the unit was needed.

7. For instance in Basra the best-performing formations were the 1st and 26th Brigades, which had long been partnered with U.S. Marine formations in Anbar and deployed south with their Marine MiTTs. Similarly, the three brigades of the Iraqi 14th Infantry Division, which had never received MiTT or other partnering support, performed poorly in Basra, with the new 52nd Brigade effectively collapsing in combat. Once those same formations were paired with British combat formations, they performed far better.

8. The same division's reconstruction teams also created a program to reestablish Iraq's traditional farmer-to-consumer chain to try to revive agricultural jobs, as well as creating soccer leagues to give unemployed rural youth something to do until paying jobs could be created.

9. Sadr has established offices in Lebanon and Europe, suggesting that he is more focused on becoming a leader of the world Islamic community, or *ummah*, rather than the leader of the Shi'ah of Iraq. Coalition and Iraqi intelligence officials report that captured JAM cadres evince considerable frustration with his lack of leadership and reluctance to make hard choices.