OPPORTUNITY 08
Independent Ideas For Our Next President

Waning Chances for Stability
Navigating Bad Options in Iraq

Carlos Pascual and Kenneth M. Pollack

Summary

Iraq is a failed state ensnared in a civil war. About 2.0 million refugees have fled Iraq, and another 2.2 million people have been displaced internally. The war has taken thousands of American lives and cost hundreds of billions of dollars. What started as a war with a clear enemy has spawned regional instability, transnational terrorism, risks to global oil supplies – and it has bolstered a nuclear-aspirant Iran. Initially, Washington insisted that the problems of Iraq were merely a problem of terrorism, and later of terrorism and an insurgency. However, pulling Iraq out of its nosedive will require the United States to confront the far more difficult problems of Iraq as a failed state and Iraq in civil war. Historically, rebuilding the political, economic, and bureaucratic institutions of a failed state require time, commitment, and a secure environment. Ending a civil war requires a negotiated settlement among the warring parties. Both will be necessary in Iraq for changes in military tactics and augmented troop strength to create conditions for lasting progress.

Four options frame the universe of possibilities facing this—and the next—administration: victory, stability, withdrawal, and containment. ***Victory***, as defined by President Bush, is not currently attainable. ***Stability*** would concentrate on stopping the fighting, dismantling Al Qa'eda in Iraq, and forging a broad, short-term political agreement that could bridge the way either to real recovery at some later date, or to containment if a truce among Iraq's warring parties proves unsustainable. ***Withdrawal*** would most likely lead to a catastrophic, wider war. ***Containment*** is, ultimately, the least bad option if stability proves out of reach. Containment requires

regional diplomacy under UN leadership, the creation of safe havens and buffer zones protected by international forces, and avoiding the partitioning of Iraq, at least until the parties are ready for it. The next President must ensure that diplomacy leads our policy in Iraq – first to pursue a political settlement, and if that fails, to reestablish wider international engagement to contain the regional and global consequences. Without a political settlement, military action in Iraq is unsustainable.

Context

As the January 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq highlighted, the complex and varied problems besetting Iraq include terrorism, crime, an insurgency, a failed state, and civil war. To succeed, U.S. policy toward Iraq must come to grips with all of them—a daunting challenge.

A Failed State and Civil War

Historically, rebuilding the institutions of a failed state takes time, commitment, and a secure environment. The United States, which itself could not disburse over three years the $18 billion appropriated for reconstruction in 2003, can hardly expect a dysfunctional Iraqi state to meet U.S.-imposed benchmarks. History shows that ending a civil war—as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Congo, Mozambique, and Northern Ireland—requires a negotiated settlement among the warring parties. At this writing, the absence of a realistic plan to craft a negotiated peace settlement, the difficulty of making any such plan work under existing circumstances, and the weakness of preparations to build Iraqi political and economic institutions dim long-term prospects for success.

Sectarian Splits

Iraq's sectarian war engages Sunni and Shi'ite militias, Al Qa'eda operatives, and potentially the Kurdish *peshmerga*. Shi'ite militias—especially Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM, or Mahdi Army) and the Badr Organization of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—dominate Iraq's weak government, running ministries as graft-ridden patronage networks. At the same time, exploiting the

absence of a capable central government, the militias appeal to civilians by providing protection against crime and violence and basic services—food, medicine, money, employment, gasoline, and electricity.

There are important splits among the Shi'a. JAM seeks a strong, Shi'a-controlled central government. It viciously extracts revenge for Sunni attacks and opposes a division of Iraq. By contrast, SCIRI favors decentralized power and a strong Shi'ite-dominated nine-province region in the South. SCIRI appears content to allow the Sunnis and Kurds to go their own way, although on terms unacceptable to Sunnis. Both the Mahdi Army and Badr Organization have infiltrated the police, to the point where U.S. forces consider Iraqi police interventions detrimental. The Shi'ite militias are so fractious that they may be killing more of each other than Sunnis.

On the Sunni side, early U.S. missteps convinced the population that reconstruction was meant to come at their expense, causing them first to shelter deadly Jihadists like Al Qa'eda and then to support an insurgency. The Sunni militias appear to be smaller and even more fragmented than the Shi'ite militias, although less violent toward one another. Another Sunni force, Al Qa'eda in Iraq, stirs violence among all groups and against the United States.

Current Situation

Reflecting the concurrence of heads of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, the National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Iraq's growing polarization, the weakness of the state, and the "ready recourse to violence are driving an increase in communal and insurgent violence and political extremism" that is likely to get worse. Militias and their leaders dominate Iraqi politics and the streets. U.S. forces are at once a target for violence and the main deterrent to a wider, more brutal sectarian war. At different stages of the war, on the order of 2,000 to 3,500 Iraqis have been dying monthly. If U.S. forces withdraw, we can expect violence in Iraq to soar—and its regional consequences to multiply.

Recognize the Stakes in Iraq

The Bush Administration has explained the stakes of American failure in Iraq almost solely in terms of the global war on terrorism. This is unfortunate. While the terrorist threat likely would increase if Iraq were to descend into all-out civil war, America has far more interests at stake.

Humanitarian Costs

About 2.0 million refuges have fled Iraq so far, another 2.2 million have been internally displaced, and several million more may eventually seek refuge. To date, most of Iraq's refugees have been professionals or relatively well-off individuals who can draw on the hospitality of extended families in the region. But newer refugees have fewer resources, and there is little resilience left in family networks. Future refugees may gather in camps, reluctantly hosted by neighboring governments who do not want to import problems. And, if conditions in the camps deteriorate, instability will mount.

Iraqis remaining at home face a war that has claimed 50,000-150,000 civilian lives since 2003. Internally displaced Iraqis are increasingly desperate. The International Organization for Migration documented that the majority fled their homes due to "direct threats to their lives." More female than male heads of households are killed, and women face extraordinary hardships relocating. The loss in many cases is triple: families, homes, and livelihoods.

Regional Risks

Humanitarian tragedies present massive security implications. Within Iraq, militias could entrench themselves further, eviscerating the state and exposing institutions to extremist ideologies. Along with refugees, insurgents and terrorists will traverse borders to obtain supplies, recruit members, and destabilize governments. Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia will be particularly susceptible to extremist agitators. Syria has admitted the second highest number of refugees, with thousands moving monthly across its border and potentially masking the movement of weapons and insurgents.

Some Sunni neighbors will be tempted to intervene, supporting Sunni insurgents in Iraq.

As instability grows within Iraq, so does the chance that the Kurds may declare an independent state, driving Turkey and Iran to intervene, seeking to prevent Kurdish uprisings within their own borders. In such a downward spiral, NATO could face the unhappy choice of supporting or alienating Turkey—and could be drawn into hostilities with Iran.

Iran's hand has been strengthened, complicating U.S. efforts to curb its nuclear program. Tehran has realized its ambition of a Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad and benefits from U.S. humiliation. Yet, Shi'ite ascendancy in Iraq also creates complications for Iran. Iran is barely half Persian. A raging insurgency in Iraq could spread over its borders and inspire Kurdish separatism. Moreover, Iran would be deceiving itself to think that its clients can succeed against the Sunni insurgency when U.S. troops could not—although it will no doubt try to help them do so if total civil war erupts.

For Israel, the stakes are tragically simple: greater regional instability will foment extremism, weaken Sunni moderates, encourage support for Sunni extremists, and create a platform for terrorism against the Israeli state. Hezbollah and Hamas will be emboldened.

Global Consequences

Terrorists thrive in political voids and weak states, as when Al Qa'eda emerged in Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan. A vacuum of governance in Iraq will engender transnational terrorism, which will target oil production and transit. Even without a disruption in production or shipping, instability alone will cause oil prices to spike. More strife in Iraq will further suppress oil production there and could spark conflicts in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, where a globally catastrophic loss of oil production could result. And, strife in Iraq could adversely affect Iranian oil production and transit.

As Middle East oil supplies diminish, Venezuela, Sudan, and Russia could use energy and the wealth they derive from it as political and diplomatic weapons. Similarly, Iran might proceed even more boldly with its nuclear program. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and perhaps other Middle East nations then might start a nuclear weapons race in a region prone to terror.

Learn from Recent Experiences to Craft a New Approach

In Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, Somalia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Sudan, and elsewhere during the late 20th century, the United States learned about the difficulties in attempting to transform centrally controlled states, build market-based democracies, and establish the rule of law. U.S. policy toward Iraq should take these lessons into account.

Negotiate a Political Solution

In societies racked by civil wars, external military forces can help create pressure for a political agreement but, in general, cannot impose peace on warring parties. If even one party has enough money and recruits to sustain guerilla tactics, violent attacks cannot easily be halted through force. The ritual in Iraq is now well-practiced: U.S. troops clear out insurgents and terrorists who move and fight elsewhere, returning as soon as U.S. troops depart. Without a political agreement that creates a stake in peace, the incentive for insurgents is to fight for local power.

In order to succeed, political agreements first must achieve a truce, suspending belligerent factions' core grievances. During a truce, parties can build trust and negotiate a longer-term solution. (Usually, an amnesty is needed to persuade combatants to stop fighting.) In Iraq, core grievances include the sharing of oil revenues, federal power, and minority rights. The prospect for a political solution has been complicated by the U.S.-brokered constitution, which gives Shi'ites and Kurds

control over the development of future energy resources.[1] It may be necessary to suspend the constitution and make interim arrangements until the parties can agree on a viable long-term division of power and wealth. In return, Sunnis may have to concede some level of regional autonomy.

Maintain Adequate Security Forces

A solid security environment, sustained by adequate forces, is necessary to establish governance and commerce. The ratio of international security personnel to citizens in both Bosnia and Kosovo was about 20:1,000. Troop concentrations in Iraq have been about a third of that—about 7:1,000 in 2003, and about 2:1,000 in Afghanistan in 2001—creating the space for insurgencies and militias to take root.

If one extrapolated from the Balkans, enforcing a political settlement and sustaining stability in Iraq would require 250,000 to 450,000 non-Iraqi troops for perhaps a decade. (Forces still remain in Bosnia-Herzegovina after 12 years and in Kosovo after eight years.) Such force levels may be beyond what is needed in Iraq, but the comparison drives home the point that the force structure in Iraq was never enough to succeed, much less salvage victory from what has become an even more complicated civil war. Judging from experience in diverse countries, it will take three to five years for Iraqi units to become sufficiently reliable and trusted by citizens to begin replacing international troops.

Furnish Economic Support for a Decade

The United States and the international community must be prepared to sustain economic support for eight to ten years after a political settlement. The international community was still providing assistance to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic six years after the fall of the iron curtain. Russia and Ukraine underwent eight years of economic contraction before they began to experience growth—aided in Russia by

[1] The United States pressed for a referendum in support of the constitution in October 2005 in order to demonstrate progress toward democracy. The ill-conceived provisions on oil set back the prospects for a viable political solution in Iraq and contributed to Sunni grievances. A last-minute provision brokered by U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad created a provision for future revisions to the sections on energy development that has not been acted upon.

soaring oil and gas prices. Like Russia in 1991, Iraq has a well-educated populace, massive energy resources, and a defunct command economy, but, unlike Russia, it also has a ruptured society and an infrastructure so devastated by war that much of the U.S. investment has been wasted. Massive funding will be needed in the aftermath of war, particularly to create jobs.

Stabilization and reconstruction efforts must be multilateral, preferably under a UN mandate, to achieve legitimacy and sustain the levels of international support needed over eight to ten years. At present, the trend is the opposite. America's international partners in Iraq see failure, and domestic pressures are forcing them out, despite the UN mandate for troops. The only way to obtain multilateral support is through a new political and diplomatic initiative to establish a truce among Iraq's warring factions and unite regional and international actors against terrorism.

Four Possible Courses

Prospects for peace and stability in Iraq erode every day, under a spiral of violence and complexity. Policy options highly viable a year ago are unrealistic today. The outcomes of the strategy unveiled by President Bush in January 2007 may limit options further, by changing the requirements, capabilities, domestic political receptivity, and international willingness to cooperate. Four alternatives define the range of decisions that could be taken in Iraq: focus on victory, seek a settlement for stability, withdraw forces, or contain the spillover of a continuing war. Analyzing what each course of action would entail provides a point of reference for judging the viability of strategic options that will be offered in the coming months as developments on the ground and in the corridors of political power define new realities.

Victory

In January 2007 President Bush defined his goal as "a democratic Iraq that upholds the rule of law, respects the rights of its people, provides them security, and is an ally in the war on terror." If this is the definition of victory, such a standard is not attainable in the next three to five years. If one were to take today's Iraq and postulate what

would be required for victory if a new intervention were mounted tomorrow, it would include:

- ***an international military force*** on the order of 250,000 to 450,000 troops—a doubling of current levels. The U.S. military cannot generate or sustain such an increase, and international forces are withdrawing
- ***political agreement*** on oil production and revenues, federalism, minority rights, militias, and amnesty—a huge political challenge
- ***the rule of law****,* empowering courts and penal authorities, whereas many Iraqis place greater trust in militias than in institutions of justice
- ***economic support*** on the order of billions of new dollars to create jobs and restore confidence in the Iraqi state, but U.S. domestic opinion is unreceptive to massive aid
- ***international mandate and support*** through UN and regional action, because the United States cannot carry the burden alone. Yet, there is no international backing for such an effort; instead, daily headlines out of Iraq are eroding the credibility of U.S. leadership and prospects for an international initiative
- ***a long-term commitment*** for eight to ten years by the United States, the UN, and international partners—when there is no indication that any of the parties within Iraq are interested in beginning anew or in committing to such a significant undertaking

For the Bush Administration to continue to speak of victory in Iraq with neither a political strategy nor international support to accompany American military engagement is simply to perpetuate a political illusion that is dangerous and costly for American troops and the region.

Stability

A more realistic course is to focus on lowering the violence, jumpstarting local economic activity, redistributing political power, and hammering out rough, possibly temporary political accords to avoid an all-out civil war. The emphasis would be on

stabilizing the country first, then creating a process that might eventually produce "sustainable stability."

The immediate goals of the stability option are to stop the fighting among militias, control or dismantle Al Qa'eda in Iraq, and establish at least a five-year truce to provide time and political space to work out a viable long-term constitutional arrangement. The critical element is a political agreement among sectarian groups, endorsed and enforced by international actors.

Ideally, the Bush Administration's military surge would have been combined with a diplomatic offensive to reach a truce among the warring Iraqis. However, the administration has not had a strategy, other than pressuring a broken Iraqi state to implausibly transform itself into a functioning political entity, to turn temporary military successes into lasting peace and stability. Nor is it clear how short-term military gains could be sustained or expanded into other areas without American troops.

Stability requires civilian experts to help build social and economic infrastructure. Although the administration has talked about increasing U.S. civilian personnel operating outside the Green Zone, the government simply does not have the number of people needed with the requisite skills.[2] Without an improvement in security, it will be difficult to entice non-governmental organizations to return to Iraq. The Civilian Reserve Corps proposed by the administration may be a useful tool in future conflicts, but the $50 million appropriated in the 2007 Supplemental Appropriation is not even enough to establish a modest reserve in three years. Few of the needed civilian capabilities will be available anytime soon, and even if more civilians are deployed, they will have little significant impact if they cannot operate outside tight rings of security.

[2] In contrast to 150,000 troops in Iraq, there are only about 10,000 Foreign Service Officers posted everywhere in the world. The President has proposed to double the number of civilians in Provincial Reconstruction Teams, but that might increase the numbers on the ground by dozens, certainly not by hundreds, and they will have to operate within military units for protection. Nor will these be the individuals who deliver services or create jobs; their role will be to help develop programs, but the implementation of these programs will depend on mobilizing non-governmental organizations and the private sector once the security situation allows them to move more freely.

All these considerations underscore that the main prerequisite for stability is a political settlement. A properly sized and deployed military force could create a secure space for political compromise and civilian development, but, without political agreement, it would become increasingly difficult—and eventually impossible—to sustain the secure environment. Likewise, increased economic assistance would have little sustainable impact without a political agreement; instability and violence would resume, and infrastructure investments would go up in smoke.

Achieving a Political Settlement

Many factors stand in the way of a political agreement. No one clearly understands what now motivates the militias: politics, power, religion, or personal greed. Some of the issues that sparked the Sunni insurgency, such as exclusion from oil profits and de-Baathification, are clear, but reining in the insurgency has become more complicated than redressing these grievances. One of the main reasons to involve Iran, Syria, Turkey, and other neighboring states is to use their influence to pressure militias to stop fighting. No one should expect that Iran and Syria will cooperate in good faith; a determining factor will be whether Iran sees the danger in an uncontrolled war.

Negotiations will be complicated. For the United States, one of the hardest points to accept may be that it cannot run such a process and would have to defer to the UN to lead, call the parties together, and broker disputes. Only by joining a UN process might it be politically possible for the United States and Sunni states to negotiate with Iran. Key external players—the United States, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait and the EU—could form a "contact group" to manage the process. A wider circle of countries and organizations (such as the Gulf Coordination Council, Arab League, Russia, China, and Japan) will need to be engaged, although it would be logistically impossible to involve all of them in direct negotiations.

As a starting point, all non-Iraqi participants should commit to securing a political deal and to exerting pressure on all Iraqi factions to participate. All key Iraqi leaders will need to enter the discussions accepting that the goal is a five-year truce, not a permanent solution. A massive public education campaign led by Arab broadcast networks could make clear the broad base of regional engagement in the process, in order to stimulate grassroots support. If the process stalls or proves counter-productive, the international actors must be must be ready to refocus negotiations on handling the regional consequences of war. (Illustratively, in 1999, the first attempts to reach a political agreement with Serbia over Kosovo had to be called off, then external force brought the Serbs back to the negotiations.)

The proposed agreement should be as simple as possible, given that it is temporary and that excessive detail will stall negotiations and hinder implementation. On some issues, it may be best to revert to aspects of earlier arrangements (such as the Transitional Administrative Law) or independent policy proposals. Key elements of an agreement would include:

- ***Core Compromises***—a formula for sharing oil revenue, a balance between federal and provincial responsibilities, guarantees for political inclusion (reversal of de-Baathification) and minority rights, and amnesty for combatants
- ***Absorption of Militias***—an agreement to fold militias into the army or police and restructure Iraqi security forces
- ***Trans-National Terrorism***—a prior commitment by all conference participants to oppose Al Qa'eda in Iraq
- ***Freeze Politics***—consideration of postponing elections for three to five years; democracy has a better long-term prospect if elections are not immediately imposed on war-torn societies[3]

[3] In "The Limits of Democracy," *Newsweek*, January 29, 2007, Fareed Zakaria argues that "elections had wondrous aspects, but they also divided the country into three communities and hardened these splits. To describe the last four years as a period of political progress requires a strange definition of political development."

- ***Security and Jobs***—international efforts to sustain support for security and to create jobs, and U.S. efforts to internationalize security forces under a UN mandate
- ***Regional Peace and Security*** —a dialog among regional actors on Israeli-Palestinian relations and other issues. Because any regional security dialog could be divisive, these differences should be bounded so they don't detract from a possible agreement on Iraq

Such a political and diplomatic initiative easily could fail. In addition, a political settlement will require U.S. and international support to make it viable, and the political will to provide support may have been eclipsed. Further, reaching a political settlement takes time and generally involves backsliding, so participants could run out of patience. Even if the probability of success is low, so is the cost. A failed diplomatic initiative might at least generate international good will. Most important, it could be a critical bridge to international cooperation to contain the conflict.

Withdrawal

The case for withdrawal is based on the assumption that no "course of action in Iraq at this point will stop the sectarian warfare, the growing violence, or the ongoing slide toward chaos," as a December 2006 memorandum by senior staff of the Center for American Progress (CAP) described the situation. In that case, some observers say, American troops should be withdrawn from Iraq over a rapid but phased schedule. The fundamental goal is to reduce U.S. casualties, and a secondary objective might be to limit regional spillover, particularly the spread of terrorism, through a reduced and regional troop presence.

The core element of the withdrawal option is to redeploy all 150,000 American troops over 18 months, while Iraqis coordinate with American troops, focus their training, and phase in security functions. A phased redeployment would leave, according to the CAP memo, "an Army brigade in Kuwait, and a Marine Expeditionary Force and a carrier battle group in the Persian Gulf. This force would have sufficient military power to

prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for Al-Qa'eda or being invaded by its neighbors." A strong regional diplomatic initiative, focused on a political solution for Iraq and addressing other Middle East issues, would be launched in parallel with the redeployment.

The security rationale for redeploying forces is that only Iraqis can stop Iraqis from fighting other Iraqis and that 300,000 trained military and police should have the capacity to perform this function, if they have the political will (and, if Iraqi forces do not have the political will, there is no point maintaining American forces). Conversely, maintaining or increasing U.S. forces would, again as the CAP memo suggested, "deplete our own strategic reserve, … extend the tours of those already deployed, send back soldiers and Marines who have not yet spent a year at home, and deploy units that are not adequately trained or equipped."

Contingency plans for withdrawal surely must be developed. However, disengaging from Iraq altogether would impose tremendous costs and risks:

- As long as one sectarian group thinks it can win, it will take advantage of a withdrawal to escalate violence.
- The reaction of Iraq's neighbors may not be constructive. They may fear an Iraq dominated by an opposing sectarian group more than the spillover of war, and so U.S. withdrawal could spur external support for sectarian militias and possibly an outright invasion which the light forces envisioned in this option could not prevent.
- Iraqi forces do *not* have the capacity or will to stop the violence and in many cases are part of the problem. Nor can the Iraqi government take on the responsibilities expected of it.
- Redeployed forces in the Persian Gulf would be unable to stop the spread of terrorist networks. (A much greater U.S. and NATO force in Afghanistan has not been able to control Al Qa'eda and the Taliban operating out of Pakistan.)
- The American force remaining in the Gulf would be too small to prevent the Iraqi civil war from growing into a regional conflagration.

- Iraq's neighbors are fragile states and may have considerable difficulty coping with many more refugees. This same fragility leaves them vulnerable to other internal disruptions that a light American troop presence could barely mitigate.
- A hands-off approach would inspire the Kurds to declare independence. This could trigger Turkish intervention and/or similar secessionist bids, causing chaos to spread.

Containment

If the Administration's new strategy for Iraq fails to secure stability, a containment strategy would be a more prudent fall-back position. Its goal would be to mitigate the regional impact of an Iraqi civil war, because America's interests do not end with Iraq: Saudi Arabia is the linchpin of the global oil market; Kuwait is another important oil producer; Jordan is the geographic keystone of the region; and Turkey is a NATO ally. Key elements of a containment strategy are regional diplomacy, safe havens, and avoiding a bloody partition.

Regional Diplomacy

The United States should help the UN shape a regional diplomatic initiative, in order to: (1) emphasize U.S. intentions to remain engaged in the region, (2) manage refugees and the security and humanitarian implications of major population flows, (3) prevent a Kurdish declaration of independence and resulting Turkish and Iranian interference, and (4) provide a forum for blocking any regional actor's destabilizing acts within Iraq. The initiative also could generate wider international engagement and even an international troop presence to prevent regional spillover.

The mechanism for dialog will be important. As in the Haitian transitional crisis of 2005-2006, a UN-hosted dialog among the United States, EU, and surrounding states could take place in New York, and a parallel gathering in Amman or another regional site. Iranian and Syrian participation, although troublesome, would either prove generally helpful or lead to their further isolation (perhaps bolstering Washington's

efforts to secure tougher UN sanctions against Iran for proceeding with nuclear enrichment).

A regional forum to address the spillover from war is not an alternative, but rather a necessary complement, to President Bush's surge concept. If the surge goes badly, diplomacy and containment will be essential to contain violence. If the surge goes well, a regional framework will be necessary to build on the progress.

Safe Havens and Buffer Zones

Plans should be developed now for alternative force deployments, fostering safe havens. Under a containment strategy, American forces would be pulled away from major population centers, but between 50,000 and 80,000 Coalition troops would remain in Iraq, redeployed to its borders, with another 20,000-30,000 providing logistical support from elsewhere in the region.[4]

The mission of these forces would be threefold. ***First,*** the force deployment would offer displaced Iraqis safe havens within Iraq for shelter, food, and assistance rather than crossing borders and creating refugee camps in surrounding states, which can become humanitarian nightmares and strategic flashpoints. This would increase the chances of Iraqis eventually returning home and reduce traffic across borders that could facilitate the flow of weapons and people that foment further violence in Iraq and the region. ***Second*****,** the forces would disarm Iraqis, police safe points and buffer zones, protect havens from attack, and ensure that they do not become militia bases or recruitment centers. ***Third,*** the international forces would patrol Iraq's borders, hinder the outflow of terrorists and insurgents, and prevent the inflow of armed forces, intelligence operatives, and support for Iraqi militias.

[4] A containment option would prudently eschew the recommendation of the Iraq Study Group to increase the numbers of American military personnel embedded as trainers and advisers in Iraqi military units. Such a shift will not stop the violence and will put American troops at even greater risk. The Iraqi military and police are controlled by sectarian groups, and giving them more control over security with fewer restraints from external forces will result in their greater collaboration with Shi'ite militias in an attempt to wipe out Sunnis. The Sunnis will respond with brutality, and the fighting will escalate. American trainers and advisers would find themselves caught in the midst of this, unable to affect the violence, but increasingly victims of it.

A UN mandate for the mission would be needed, in order to obtain troop and financial contributions from other nations and to retain clear legitimacy for this complex mission. Iraqis, by international law, would have to come to the safe havens voluntarily; they cannot be stopped from seeking asylum in other countries if their lives are threatened. On the one hand, Iraqis might not come; on the other hand, the safe havens might be overwhelmed. Further, the borders are vast and difficult to control, and patrolling them would place American troops at risk of immersion in new conflicts. Perhaps the most challenging risk would be that war would rage internally within Iraq, and U.S. forces could not intervene. Then, rightly or wrongly, the international community would hold the United States responsible for the ensuing slaughter.

Avoid Enforced Partition Until the Parties Are Ready for It

Some have suggested dividing Iraq into three sectarian provinces (Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurd), while encouraging Iraqis to move voluntarily to their respective sectarian zones. If Iraqis want to move, they should be able to do so and should be assisted. But, partition without a political settlement will not produce peace.

The ostensible causes of the Sunnis' insurgency were their exclusion from oil revenues, de-Baathification of Iraqi power structures, and the failure to guarantee minority rights—all points that could be resolved without partition but remain contentious with partition. Many Shi'a are determined to dominate all of Iraq and to revenge the killings perpetrated by Sunnis and so will not be satisfied by partition. Most Iraqis do not want to partition their country. And, if it is possible to reach a political compromise, then why focus negotiations on the issue of partition, which could prove bloody and ultimately unwise? Perhaps the civil war raging in Iraq has so divided the country and entrenched sectarian animosities that partition may prove a de facto reality. Yet even then, as in Bosnia, it will require a major external troop presence to prevent reprisals and rearming across the soft borders.

Concluding Observations

Above all, U.S. policy toward Iraq lacks realism. Dominated by ideology and illusions, the policy has produced neither a strategy for sustained security nor time and political space for a transition to effective governance. If all that the administration contributes in what is surely its last chance to stabilize the country is to add and reconfigure U.S. troops, this will not produce either.

As time passes and violence escalates, it will become ever harder to achieve a political settlement. *The United States must cooperate with regional players, the UN, and other international partners to reach a political compromise.* The chances for success are low, but this is one of the few options that has not been tried, despite successful precedents.

America's mismanagement of its invasion of Iraq has produced a civil war, leaving limited options for this and future administrations. If a political settlement fails, the United States can only try to contain the civil war or get out and allow the war to rage while hoping for the best. The consequences of regional destabilization—including the spread of terrorism, the risk of embroiling Turkey or other countries in the war, and the increased threat to Israel—all argue for containment. If a political solution and containment both fail, the United States would have to be prepared to end its military engagement, withdraw to regional positions, and try to support regional actors as constructively as possible. As a nation, we would then have to regroup—from failure.

About the Authors and the Project

Carlos Pascual

Carlos Pascual is a Brookings vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Studies Program. Pascual most recently served as Secretary Rice's lead adviser to create a new U.S. government capacity to manage stabilization and reconstruction in failed and conflict-ridden areas of the globe. A former Ambassador to Ukraine and Senior Director on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton Administration, his areas of expertise include post-conflict stabilization, international security policy,

nonproliferation, economic development, and regions such as Europe, Russia and Ukraine.

Kenneth M. Pollack

Kenneth M. Pollack, senior fellow, is director of research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. A former CIA analyst, Pollack is an expert on Middle East politics and military analysis. He also served on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton and Bush administrations. He currently teaches security and military analysis courses at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.

Additional Resources

Byman, Daniel, and Pollack, Kenneth. *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War*. Analysis Paper 11, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, January 2007.

O'Hanlon, Michael E., and Joseph, Edward P. "A Bosnia Option for Iraq?" *The American Interest*, Winter 2007.

Podesta, John, Korb, Lawrence, and Katulis, Brian. "The Critical Choice in Iraq: A Diplomatic Surge and a Strategic Redeployment of Military Escalation." Memorandum Prepared for the Incoming 110th Congress. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, December 27, 2006. Available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/12/pdf/iraq_memo.pdf. Accessed February 6, 2007.

Pollack, Kenneth M. *A Switch in Time: A New Strategy for America in Iraq*. Analysis Paper 7, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, November 2006.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “Iraq Situation: Growing Needs Amid Continuing Displacement.” January 2007. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/iraq?page=intro; accessed February 6, 2007.