

Entanglement in Iraq

Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Ephraim Kam

Since 2006, it has become increasingly clear to the American administration that its campaign in Iraq is not achieving its objectives and that a change is required. Several factors have contributed to this understanding.

First, the violence in Iraq has increased and has progressively assumed an inter-ethnic character, displaying initial characteristics of a civil war. Violence and terror have prevented real progress in stabilizing the regime and rehabilitating Iraq, and it has become apparent that the Iraqi government is weak, and as such, not capable of controlling the country. One can see no light at the end of the tunnel that signals a window of opportunity for improving the situation. To date approximately 3,800 US forces have been killed. The scale of Iraqi civilian losses is not known – estimates run between 70,000 and 150,000 killed. Added to this is the refugee problem: thus far 2.2 million refugees have fled Iraq, most of them to Syria and Jordan, and within Iraq another two million have been uprooted from their homes. Second, there has been increasing internal pressure on the Bush administration to close the Iraqi chapter. The president and his administration have lost much of their supporters due to the entanglement in Iraq, and the countdown towards the end of the president's term in early 2009 has substantially constrained his options. Third, a general sense of an impasse in Iraq has contributed to a partial disintegration of the coalition operating in Iraq, with most of the coalition countries having removed at least some of their forces from Iraq. The number of coalition forces has dropped from 28,000 soldiers in 2005, to 11,600 as of October 2007.

The US's problem is that it has no good options in Iraq. There are three main alternatives. The first is to send masses of additional forces to Iraq, with the aim of defeating the armed militias and terrorist elements, stopping the violence, and stabilizing the regime. This option is not realistic, because in order to achieve it numerous forces – 300,000-400,000 soldiers – are required,

and American public opinion will not sanction sending so many troops to Iraq. The second is to remove the bulk of American forces from Iraq within a short time frame. There are many in the US who support the removal of their forces; however, it is obvious that such a move would impact on vital US strategic interests, undermine US credibility and deterrent ability, aggravate the Iraqi situation

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even further, and generate severe regional repercussions for the US. The third alternative is to continue with the current policy – primarily a military effort to suppress the violence and prepare Iraqi security forces that will gradually replace American forces, with continued efforts to achieve some sort of accord between the different ethnic groups. This approach has been unsuccessful over the past four years. The main reasons are that leaders of the ethnic groups have first and foremost preferred ensuring ethnic interests at the expense of Iraq's welfare, and because military successes lacking a political settlement are insufficient for stabilizing the situation. It is difficult to assume this approach would be more successful in the future.¹

Surge Strategy

The difficulties involved in each of these options led the administration to opt for an intermediate approach, announced by President Bush in January 2007 and called the "surge strategy." The idea was to send additional forces to Iraq on a limited scale, enabling coalition forces assisted by Iraqi security forces to improve the security situation, particularly in Baghdad and its surrounding area. This was to be accomplished by reducing Sunni violence, destroying al-Qaeda strongholds, and disrupting the activities of extreme Shiite militias with Iranian connections while securing the regions to be cleared. Improving the security situation, chiefly in the Baghdad district, would reduce the population's dependency on armed militias and create more auspicious conditions for inter-ethnic reconciliation. Accordingly, an additional 28,500 American soldiers were sent to Iraq in early 2007 and posted mainly in Baghdad and the Anbar province in western Iraq. With this new contingent, the number of US soldiers

stationed in Iraq grew to over 160,000.

Eight months after activating the surge strategy, leaders in the administration and the military have cast it as a success story, even if partial and not guaranteed in the long term. Situation assessments delivered to Congress in September 2007 by the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and General David Petraeus, commander of American forces in Iraq, reflected this cautious optimism and were considered highly important for the continuation of the Bush administration's Iraq policy. The situation in Iraq was presented thus:

■ The new strategic goals were achieved via a series of offensive operations. Iraq's security situation has improved, mainly in the north and in the west, and to a lesser degree in other areas of the country. The extent of terror attacks and the number of civilians killed has dropped significantly. The al-Qaeda organization in Iraq has been hit hard and has lost a portion of its footholds, though it remains dangerous. The most important surge-era development has been the amplified resistance to al-Qaeda activity by the Sunnis, who hitherto had supported the organization. American operations also hit extremist Shiite militias.

■ Despite the ongoing high number of casualties, ethnic violence has decreased and thus the number of casualties has dropped substantially since the peak of December 2006. The number of suicide attacks dropped to half the number of March 2007. The number of Iraqi civilians killed dropped 45 percent from December 2006, declining from 3,000 to 1,500 deaths per month.

■ Iraqi security forces have grown steadily; today they number approximately 150,000 in the armed forces and 195,000 policemen – close to the target number of

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395,000. Their capabilities are improving and they are gradually assigned a greater number of independent missions with responsibility to spearhead operations, though they still suffer from worrisome ethnic influences and a shortage of logistical means and skilled commanders.

■ There is progress in inter-ethnic reconciliation: the government granted amnesty to former Baathists, offering pensions and employment, and it is taking steps towards distributing oil income equally among the ethnic groups.

■ In light of these successes, it will be possible by the summer of 2008 to downsize American forces in Iraq to their pre-surge level and withdraw 20,000 soldiers. This move will be accompanied by the transfer of added authority to Iraqi security forces.

■ There are initial signs of improvement in Iraq's economy, assisted by reconstruction teams and US financial aid. There is slow improvement in the rehabilitation of the infrastructure and the repair of damages caused by the war. Still, the potential of the Iraqi economy is much greater than its actual achievements. The violence negatively influences the scale and the marketing of the agricultural and industrial output, particularly the oil industry, which is the central target of terror attacks. Iraq today produces less than half the quantity of oil it produced before the war, although the rise in oil prices has compensated for some of the damage.

The Flip Side of the Coin

These assessments apparently do not present the complete picture of the Iraqi arena, as indicated by reviews of independent observers and even by assessments from the American intelligence community. These inspections reveal a more complex reality.

The security situation in Iraq has indeed improved somewhat, mainly in areas under direct control of American forces, i.e., Baghdad and the surrounding regions. The forces are using new methods of clearing territory of hostile elements; these reduce the deadliness of attacks and explain the fewer attacks and casualties. Nevertheless, the level of violence and the number of Iraqi civilian casualties remain high. In addition, there is other data indicating there has not been any real reduction in the loss of life, and it is still difficult to verify a definitive positive trend.

The number of Iraqi forces has indeed grown rapidly, and their quality and efficiency are gradually improving. Nonetheless, Iraqi forces are still dependent on American forces and lack the ability to conduct large independent operations. If American support ceases, all of the progress achieved in upgrading the capability of Iraqi forces will be lost. Moreover, a considerable portion of recruits are absent or have defected, as sectarian militias are penetrating the ranks of security forces and are involved in inter-ethnic violence. The Iraqi army lacks an independent command structure and is sorely deficient in the area of logistics. For its part, the Iraqi police force is in an even worse situation: it is inefficient, tainted by sectarianism and corruption, and is controlled by elements connected with extremist Shiite militias. It will take 12 to 18 months until the Iraqi army is able to receive independent missions, while it will take years until Iraqi forces can operate without American backing.

American forces have indeed succeeded in damaging al-Qaeda strongholds in Iraq, both via direct attacks and also thanks to the Sunnis who have begun to oppose the al-Qaeda organization. However, al-Qaeda is considered to be responsible for 90 percent of

attacks against military and civilian targets, and it still has the ability to execute high-profile attacks. Furthermore, the increased disfavor of al-Qaeda in Sunni eyes has not contributed to Sunni willingness to come to terms with Shiite power.

The government of Iraq, headed by Nuri al-Maliki, does not control Iraq; it does not represent all of the groups fighting on the ground and is not prepared to take steps necessary for inter-ethnic reconciliation. Indeed, in 2007 the government partially collapsed following the resignation of some of the Shiite and Sunni ministers. At the same time, the government is influenced by Shiite militias, mainly by the Mehdi Army led by Muqtada al Sadr. Most of the attacks against the Sunni population can be attributed to the Mehdi Army and to the Badr organization, which was originally established by the Iranians. Control of the four southeastern provinces, which contain 30 percent of the population and most of the oil destined for export, is in the hands of Shiite militias. The chief security problem of the Shiite south is the internal power struggle, in which Iran is also involved. American forces have extremely limited influence in the south and have no clear strategy for handling the region.

Above all, however, the main problem is that there has been no real progress in diminishing the inter-ethnic conflict. Hostility and suspicion between the sectarian groups remains unchanged, and the government in its weakness is not making a real effort to advance reconciliation. Under American pressure, leaders of the ethnic groups have occasionally agreed on steps towards reconciliation, but they have not implemented them. This failure stems from the fundamental incompatibility between the aims of the ethnic groups:

■ The Sunnis do not trust the government. In their eyes it was established by force under American occupation, is controlled by Shiites, is supported by Shiite elements connected to Iran, and seeks to firmly implant Shiite supremacy. The Sunnis remain splintered and have no leaders of authority who can represent the Sunni collective and conduct meaningful dialogue with the Shiites. The weakening of al-Qaeda plus the rise in Shiite violence have left the Sunnis weaker against the ethnic cleansing underway by extremist Shiite militias, which are assisted by elements in the police.

■ The Shiites, after generations of being oppressed, do not intend forfeiting the historic opportunity that has fallen into their hands to cement their leading status in Iraq by virtue of their numerical superiority. Shiite leaders are also divided over the method of achieving their goals and their attitude towards continued US presence in Iraq.

■ The Kurds have remained focused on establishing their autonomy in northern Iraq, having at their disposal the largest of militias, the Peshmerga militia. They are not involved in the Shiite-Sunni conflict, but their efforts to strengthen their control of Kirkuk, which include ethnic cleansing, have created friction between them and the Sunnis.

In this situation, terror and violence continue to exact a heavy price and prevent stabilization of the regime. The violence is nurtured by Shiite aspirations for dominance combined with Sunni refusal to accept the inferiority forced upon them since the American intervention in Iraq. Supplementing this is internal competition within the ethnic groups and the activity of extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda. Since 2006, sectarian violence has increased and has replaced the Sunni revolt as Iraq's prime security prob-

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lem. A contributing factor was the blowing up of the Golden Mosque of Samar by al-Qaeda, which led to attacks by Shiite militias on Sunni populations together with retaliatory acts and ethnic cleansing in various regions. The weight of Shiite militia activity in the inter-ethnic violence has risen, and Shiite militias are responsible for an increasingly large number of the civilians killed and the attacks on American forces.

In order to advance true reconciliation some essential steps are required, mainly those – legislation included – that bring about Sunni integration into the government system. These steps include: distributing jobs in the central government so that Sunnis hold a share of jobs relatively equal to that of the Shiites and the Kurds, thus reducing Shiite advantages; eliminating barriers to Sunni involvement in the army and in society, as well as finding a solution for former Baath party members; distributing oil royalties to Sunni regions, which have no oil sources; seeking an accommodation for mixed populations; and prohibiting sectarian militias. The government did indeed take some steps in this direction – distributing oil income and accommodating Baath members – but disagreements over these measures continue to make their implementation difficult. Without any substantial reconciliatory steps, no long term stability can be achieved, and the limited achievements gained up to now are likely to disappear.

Iraq, Where To?

Although the surge strategy has led to limited achievements, leaders in the US administration themselves admit that these are not guaranteed over time nor do they promise ultimate success. The Iraqi state of affairs continues to be severe: what is taking shape

is a divided and violent society given to widespread crime; bitter rivalry between its sectarian components; a weak central government with no control over the country; militia rule in the streets; and the trappings of a civil war. These facts negatively influence US ability to deal with the situation, because what has emerged is no longer a confrontation with terror and revolt, rather a confrontation with the much more difficult problems of a failed state and a civil war.

Surge operations have shown that a concentration of American forces in a relatively limited area is able to reduce violence and improve the security situation. Such improvement, however, will not suffice beyond the short term, because the application of force cannot lead to significant long term results in the absence of real inter-ethnic reconciliation. The American force in Iraq is not large enough to effect security in all of the violent regions, even in the Baghdad district. Therefore, the task for American forces is no longer to hit and weaken Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaeda – which is what they have done up to now – but to urge the different militias to stop sectarian violence as a means to the end. This is a much tougher mission, since the renunciation of violence depends on agreement on conditions for a stable settlement, and finding leaders with authority and influence over their communities who can and will impose a settlement. If no concrete reconciliation is achieved, the handful of achievements gained up to now will disappear, and the Iraqi establishment and government are liable to collapse.

The Bush administration has signaled that it is not about to alter its policy in Iraq significantly, at least not until the summer of 2008 and probably up to the end of its term, unless a fundamental change occurs in the situation

in Iraq. However, if ethnic reconciliation is not advanced, the prospects for success of the administration's policy will remain low. Even the American intelligence community judges that if American forces continue to direct extensive operations against insurgents, the security situation will improve only moderately in the coming year, but the level of violence will remain high; furthermore, there can be no expectation of broad reconciliation, political progress, and economic improvement unless a fundamental change occurs in the conditions that propel the political developments.

It is clear that Iraq will in any event not return to its prior state: a united country under strong central rule. At best, Iraq will become a country with a loose federal structure. The central government will be weak, as large parts of the country have already become sectarian provinces dominated by militias. The US's ability to influence the fashioning of the ethnic character of this system will be quite limited. Moreover, Iraq will be neither a stable country, at least in the upcoming years, nor will it be democratic.

Implications of the Exit of US Forces from Iraq

The Bush administration is not in a rush to withdraw its forces from Iraq and in the meantime also refuses to set a timetable for withdrawal, beyond a limited evacuation of forces next year to reach the pre-surge level. The state of affairs presented by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus in September 2007 supports the administration's adherence to its surge approach and its reluctance to withdraw US forces immediately. Even political elements in the US demanding an end to the Iraq entanglement are in general not pressing for an immediate comprehen-

sive removal of forces. Rather, they are demanding the formation of an exit strategy leading to the evacuation of forces based on a defined timetable; they too realize that an abrupt exit will create an even worse situation and undermine the US's credibility as well as its international and regional status. Even when the administration, the current one or its replacement, decides to withdraw the main part of its forces from Iraq, it is likely to do so gradually. It will presumably leave behind a smaller force in Iraq for an additional time period and position a force in the Persian Gulf in order to try to assist the Iraqi regime from the outside while it deters Iran from intervening in Iraq.

There are several conditions that could impel the administration to remove most of its forces from Iraq:

- An assessment that there is no longer any chance to achieve ethnic reconciliation and stabilize the regime in Iraq, and that the US will continue to pay a heavy price in casualties.

- Increased domestic pressure on the administration to end the Iraqi chapter. In any event, the new administration will not be bound to the policy of its predecessor.

- The expectation that an announced withdrawal of forces will force the sides in Iraq to accelerate dialogue between them to prevent deterioration of the situation.

Stabilizing Iraq's regime and security situation, if at all achievable, will take years; but the American administration does not have years at its disposal due to internal pressures to disengage from Iraq. This means that there is a reasonable possibility that the US will ultimately remove its forces from Iraq without having succeeded in stabilizing the regime. The withdrawal of forces from a situation of instability will have severe repercus-

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sions. The US is the primary force that has tried to fuse the diverse streams and bring the leaders of the ethnic groups toward dialogue, compromise, and reconciliation. The departure of forces will erase whatever hope and expectations are left among Iraqis to arrive at an agreed upon settlement, and will reduce the chances of stabilizing the regime. The US is the sole entity standing behind the construction of the Iraqi security forces, and its absence will propel the dissolution of the Iraqi force and its division along sectarian lines. With no American forces in place, there will not be any initiatives for improving internal security, and no military force to seal Iraq's borders with Syria and Iran to protect against the infiltration of jihad fighters and terrorist elements.

The departure of forces from Iraq without stabilized security would have severe and negative implications for the situation.² Inter-ethnic violence and militia control over sizable areas would likely expand, leading to increased ethnic cleansing and the flight of refugees within and from Iraq. Removing the American barrier would likely enable strengthened cooperation between militias and external agents, a setting that would allow al-Qaeda to expand its footholds and freedom of action in Iraq. In addition, the spread of violence is liable to bring forth even graver developments, such as:

■ The outbreak of a full civil war. Today there are already the first signs of civil war in Iraq: the activity of armed militias, sectarian penetration into the ranks of security forces, mass terrorist attacks, and ethnic cleansing. Diminished chances of arriving at national reconciliation may well convince extremist leaders that compromise is no longer possible and force is necessary to establish facts on the ground. This pivotal change would likely

occur if the security forces themselves disintegrate and transform into sectarian militias.

■ The division of Iraq. Almost all Iraqi elements (aside from the Kurds), all of Iraq's neighbors, and the US do not want to see Iraq divided, given: the assumption that a divided Iraq would be weak; the difficulty involved in splitting provinces with mixed populations; and the difficulty in division of control over oil sources as Sunni regions are devoid of oil riches. However some of the conditions for Iraq's division already exist: quasi-independent Kurdish autonomy, a weak central government, the activity of sectarian militias, and agreement for the new Iraqi constitution to support a federal structure for the country. If violence climbs to a higher level following the departure of American forces, it is likely that Iraqi leaders will come to the conclusion that there is no choice but to make the de facto divided Iraq the official reality.

■ Iraq's weakness and the violent struggles within the country are liable to turn Iraq into a safe haven for terror elements that will operate within Iraq as emissaries of the different sects, and outwardly, against moderate Islamic regimes, American and Western targets, and Israel.

■ The departure of US forces is liable to cause increased intervention in Iraq by Iraq's neighbors. Turkey is already on the verge of military intervention against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. If the Iraqi Kurds take steps towards achieving independence, Turkey and Iran would likely intervene in the Kurdish region. Iran is in any case deeply involved in some of the Shiite militias in Iraq; the evacuation of American forces would likely open up additional possibilities for Iran to intensify its influence in Shiite provinces.

The departure of American forces will

considerably strengthen Iran's regional status. Iran's strategic situation already improved with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, which removed the Iraqi threat hovering over Iran and dismissed the only regional force that could counterbalance Iran's status in the Gulf. A withdrawal by the US against the backdrop of failure would enhance Iran's situation and impact in the region even more, and in this regard, reinforce the image of the Shiite axis threat. There would be similar implications, though more limited in dimensions, for Syria's situation. Nevertheless, the American threat to Iran will not be removed; and if the US demonstrates its determination in handling the Iranian problem, especially the nuclear issue (including via military pressure) it would somewhat counterbalance the picture vis-à-vis Iran's increasing strength.

If the US removes its forces from Iraq under the cloud of failure, it would no doubt harm US credibility as well as its status and deterrent ability, at least in the immediate term. Its Arab allies would likely be skeptical as to just how much they can rely on the US and to what extent the US is able to defend them and their regimes in times of distress. The stamp of failure in Iraq combined with internal reservations in the US over the administration's moves are liable to limit the administration's ability to take far-reaching and forceful measures when the need arises, mainly in the Middle East – and that includes the Iranian nuclear issue.

Still, a lot will depend on the future approach and policy of the American administration. If it is determined to rectify the damage to its status and prove that its hands are not tied by the Iraqi chapter, it is reasonable to assume it will be able to restore its status and image as time goes by. The administration can note that even after its entanglement

in Iraq, the US remains the sole world superpower, at least for the coming years. The test case for this is likely to be the handling of the Iranian nuclear threat. If the American administration proves its determination, shrewdness, and consistency in tackling this issue, and especially if its efforts are crowned a success and Iran's nuclear program is stopped, it would be sufficient to counterbalance the failure in Iraq.

And finally, there are the implications for Israel. The biggest gain for Israel from the war in Iraq has already been achieved: the Iraqi threat, which once constituted an important component in the set of threats facing Israel, has been removed, at least for many years. However in other respects, matters are liable to balance negatively against Israel. The harm to US deterrent ability, the possible improvement of Iran's strategic position, the strengthening of the Shiite axis, the possibility of Iraq turning into a regional hub of terror, and increased threats against moderate Arab countries headed by Jordan do not bear good tidings for Israel. Moreover, the key to the future strategic balance of power, in regard to Israel as well, will probably be the outcome of the Iranian nuclear issue. American success here, whether by political or military means, could counter the impression of failure in Iraq – or vice versa.

Notes

- 1 In theory the American administration had two further options: to support one of the ethnic groups in the internal struggle and help it rule Iraq, or to bring about the partition of Iraq, but these approaches were even less practical. See Olga Oliker et al., *U.S. Policy Options for Iraq: A Reassessment* (RAND, 2007).
- 2 See Ephraim Kam, "Marching Johnny Home: Evacuating the American Forces from Iraq," *Strategic Assessment* 8, no. 4 (2006): 13-20.