The American intervention in Iraq unseated a murderous despot in April 2003. It also triggered the collapse of the Iraqi state, plunged the country into a civil war that brought about the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, wrecked the country’s already debilitated infrastructure, and spurred violent sectarian rivalries that threatened to spill over into the broader Middle East.

The crisis has now moved beyond the capacity of Washington to control on its own. The results of the congressional midterm elections in November 2006 show that public support for the present course has buckled. The United States lacks the military resources and the domestic and international political support to master the situation. The number of US troops presently in Iraq as of January 2007, 134,000, allows commanders on the ground little room for manoeuvre. The disappointing results of Operation Together Forward in Baghdad in 2006 showed that while US forces can concentrate for a limited amount of time in a small number of targeted sectors, they lack the numbers to stabilise even those areas on a lasting basis. The 21,500 additional soldiers proposed by the Bush administration to fill the ‘five brigade’ gap in Baghdad fall far short of the total needed to tip the long-term balance toward peace within Baghdad, let alone the country as a whole. Assuming it were possible to restore order in Iraq, the task, according to the army’s new counter-insurgency manual drafted under then Lieutenant-General David Petraeus’s supervision, would require at least double the number of troops the United States will have on the ground once the latest surge has been implemented. A commitment this big would force the

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United States to reduce its forward-deployed forces in other areas where they safeguard American interests.

The US Army and Marine Corps are too compact to meet the labour-intensive challenge of state building in Iraq. This is true as well for the State Department’s civilian resources. To foster reconstruction of a country with 28.8 million people, the United States has authorised 167 non-Department of Defense civilians, alongside 178 soldiers, to work in provincial reconstruction teams. It has managed to fill 116 of these civilian positions. For a perspective on this commitment, consider Vietnam in 1969 – then a country of 18m – when the State Department had 1,700 personnel alongside 6,400 troops in Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support teams, the equivalent of today’s provincial reconstruction teams. The president’s declared intention to double the small number of teams in Iraq shows an awareness of the importance of reconstruction, but seems oblivious to the difficulty the State Department has faced in recruiting qualified officers for service in Iraq. In the late 1960s, one of every 25 State Department or US Agency for International Development employees was in Vietnam; in Iraq’s reconstruction teams, the ratio is one to 333. The level of reconstruction assistance tells the same story. The president’s pledge of more than $1 billion in additional funds represents a mere rounding error compared to previous allocations, and seems unrelated to the magnitude of current needs. Again, for comparison, the United States spent 2% percent of gross domestic product on economic and military assistance to Vietnam, but less than 0.2% for Iraq.2 If the consequences of defeat in Iraq are in fact ‘incalculable’, as Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates has told Congress, the gap between the presumed strategic stakes and the US level of effort is striking. Lamentably, the erosion of public support for the war and confidence in the president’s judgement have virtually ruled out the possibility of bridging the chasm between resources and requirements.

Arguably, this mismatch might prove to be irrelevant, given that the challenge of counter-insurgency where there is no indigenous government to support on the battlefield and the rigours of combat must be borne by the outsider alone is too steep for democracies, especially in a world of globalised media. The United States does not have the room for manoeuvre that Britain enjoyed in its counter-insurgency operations in Kenya or Malaya in the 1950s. The American public will eventually fault battlefield excesses, or abuses inflicted in cellars – the ineluctable byproducts of such wars – if the strategic goal is seen to be inessential. It will not long tolerate casualties if it sees their leaders are openly divided about the stakes and have lost faith in the possibility of victory.

Even if the United States had the abundant ground forces and reconstruction teams necessary, it is not clear that the situation in Iraq today is retrievable.
Twenty-three years of Saddam’s rule had already dismantled civil society before 12 years of sanctions hollowed out Iraq’s middle class. US intervention decapitated its leadership, swept aside its remaining institutions and created the security vacuum that empowered militias and reduced society to a state of Hobbesian misery.

Iraqis have thus been stripped of the capacity to build a post-Ba’athist state. At this point, a political settlement would have to involve agreement within and then among three of four major warring constituencies in Iraq. These groups do not have the internal cohesion, let alone the interest in a nationwide consensus, to negotiate a sustainable deal. The Kurdish leadership and the senior echelons of the main Shia party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), agree on autonomy and control of their respective oil fields. The urbanised Arab Shi’ites in Baghdad, whom Moqtada al-Sadr claims to represent, seek a centralised state empowered by oil revenues, as do the Arab Sunnis. But they disagree on who should run it. Both factions oppose the separatist impulse among the Kurds and segments of the Shia population based in Basra. Secular nationalists, exemplified by Iyad Allawi, who sought to mobilise what was left of the middle class, failed and, along with the majority of Iraq’s Christians, have fled the country. In a society beset by state collapse and rising sectarian violence, there is no plausible coalition that would be sufficiently inclusive.

As these political fissures have widened, ministries of the nascent state have become more deeply implicated in the savage violence sweeping through Baghdad. The government is paralysed. Prime Minister Nuri Kamel al-Maliki cannot move against the militias or adopt a conciliatory posture toward Sunnis without alienating his base of support. The militias themselves are splintering along lines of turf and ideology and are less responsive to the political guidance of their leaders within the government. US forces, too, are paralysed. They have been reduced to bystanders amid rampant abductions, pogroms, mass executions and ethnic cleansing. The inability of US forces to provide basic human security surely has contributed to the anti-American sentiment revealed in successive polls: a majority of respondents say that killing Americans in Iraq is justifiable.3

The case for disengagement

The United States has already achieved all that it is going to achieve in Iraq: the removal of Saddam, the end of the Ba’athist regime, the elimination of the Iraqi
regional threat, the snuffing out of Iraq’s aspiration to nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and the opening of a door, however narrow, to a constitutionally based electoral democracy. Staying in Iraq can only drive up the price of these gains in blood, treasure and strategic position. Any realistic reckoning for the future will have to acknowledge six grim realities:

- The United States cannot determine political outcomes or achieve its remaining political aims via military means. American military forces have not brought the violence to an end or under control and will not do so in the future. In the absence of the understanding and the intelligence needed to operate effectively in the complex and violent political situation in Iraq this should not be surprising.
- Leaving US forces in Iraq under those circumstances means the United States is culpable but not capable – that is, Washington bears substantial responsibility for developments within Iraq without the ability to shape those developments in a positive direction. In consequence, Iraqi support for the US presence has collapsed. Polls indicate that most Iraqis of all stripes want the United States to pull out. Moreover, the Iraq War has fuelled the jihadis and apparently been a godsend in terms of jihadi recruitment, as indicated by the 2006 National Intelligence Estimate on the ‘global war on terror’. More broadly, the Iraq War has had a very damaging effect on the US reputation in the Arab and Islamic world. Authoritative opinion surveys show this as well. The continued presence of US forces is thus a severe setback in the canonical war of ideas, which the Bush administration has correctly assessed as crucial to American interests.
- The ongoing war has empowered and advanced the interests of America’s chief rival in the region, Iran. The best way to regulate Iran’s attempts to exploit its advantages is to negotiate with them either bilaterally or in a multilateral framework, while protecting Americans in Iraq against Iranian attack.
- By siphoning resources and political attention away from Afghanistan, a continuing military commitment to Iraq may lead to two US losses in southwest Asia.
- The Iraq War constrains the US military, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to handle another significant contingency involving ground forces, and damages the US military, making it difficult for Washington to credibly employ coercive policies against others
in the near to medium term even once the United States has disengaged from Iraq. Furthermore, the military commitment in Iraq impedes the US ability to address other important international contingencies, in part because of the limitations of the US military but also because of the preoccupation with Iraq at the highest decision-making levels. In short, US interests in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region can be more effectively advanced if the United States departs from Iraq. Indeed, the sooner Washington grasps this nettle, the sooner it can begin to repair the damage that has been done to America’s international position. Staying longer means more damage and a later start on repair.

- The implosion of domestic support for the war will compel the disengagement of US forces; it is now just a matter of time. Better to withdraw as a coherent and at least somewhat volitional act than withdraw later in hectic response to public opposition to the war in the United States, or a series of unexpectedly sharp reverses on the ground in Iraq.

The United States should therefore make clear now to the Iraqi government that, as the results of the anticipated surge become apparent, the two sides will be negotiating a US military disengagement from Iraq. This would entail withdrawing the bulk of American forces from Iraq within 12–18 months (that is to say, over the course of calendar year 2008); shifting the American focus to containment of the conflict and strengthening the US military position elsewhere in the region; and engaging Iraq’s neighbours, including Iran and Syria, members of the UN Security Council and potential donors in an Iraq stabilisation plan.

Since the surge is a fait accompli, according to Vice President Dick Cheney, and its results will be known very soon, in the view of General Petraeus, the new commander in Iraq, there is little point in proposing that negotiation of a drawdown begin immediately. The prospect of disengagement, however, should be a matter of discussion with the Iraqi government now. (If Gates’s 12 January 2006 Senate testimony is accurate, then the drawdown of US forces might begin within one year, although nothing is known about the administration’s longer-range planning estimates apart from Gates’s denial that the United States seeks permanent bases in Iraq.)

The proposed military disengagement would not be linked to benchmarks the Iraqi government is probably incapable of fulfilling. This differs from the Bush administration’s new strategy in its repudiation of the idea that victory in Iraq, however defined, can be won militarily. More specifically, it departs
from current policy in terms of the unconditional nature of the proposed disen-
genagement, scepticism about the relevance of benchmarks, strong doubts about
the utility of a temporary build-up, and strong reservations about the feasibility
of further large-scale training efforts. Both the ‘Go Long’ option – named
after an American Football tactic that aims for a sizeable gain from a single pass
– which would combine a slight increase in US forces in the short term with a
longer-term intensive commitment to training Iraqi troops, and ‘Double Down’
– a Blackjack term that signifies doubling a bet on the basis of a promising but
incomplete hand – which envisages a heavy increase in US forces, are unwork-
able. Proponents of these tactical departures assert that the security situation,
particularly in Baghdad, impedes political compromise. The disengagement
proposal, in contrast, acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between secu-
urity and political progress, but sees the security situation since early 2006 more
as the effect of an Iraqi political process that failed to unify the country during
the previous two years, than the cause of the al-Maliki government’s current
weakness.

In 2004, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, said of the US inter-
vention in Iraq and Afghanistan: ‘Americans in both countries are between
two fires. If they carry on, they will bleed to death; if they pull out, they lose
everything.’ His forecast comes disturbingly close to describing current circum-
stances. It need not, however, be prophecy. Three years after the intervention
began, to be sure, the United States finds itself in an agonising strategic position.
The time has come to acknowledge that the United States must fundamentally
recast its commitment to Iraq. It must do so without any illusions that there
are unexplored or magic fixes, whether diplomatic or military. Some disasters
are irretrievable. Having staked its prestige on the intervention and failed to
achieve many of its objectives, the United States will certainly pay a price for
military disengagement from Iraq. But if Washington manages its departure
from Iraq carefully, it will not have lost everything. Rather, the United States
will have preserved the opportunity to recover vital assets its campaign in Iraq
has imperiled: diplomatic initiative, global reputation and the well-being and
political utility of its ground forces.

Causes and consequences of Iraq’s conflicts
The illusion that an American victory can be retrieved is sustained by a misdi-
agnosis of Iraq’s tragedy. The administration and its supporters see al-Qaeda
and Iran working to undermine an essentially responsible, moderate indige-
nous Iraqi centre. If the tempestuous violence instigated by Iran and al-Qaeda
were forcefully countered by US and Iraqi troops, their reasoning runs, a viable
centrist coalition would be free to form. The president’s announcement of new, presumably wider rules of engagement for US forces in Baghdad flowed from this assessment. Conversely, failure to stand up to Iran and al-Qaeda would grant them strategic success and signify the retrenchment of American power. Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, for example, argues that Iran is a ‘sponsor’ of the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr, an unlikely situation given al-Sadr’s nationalist leanings and his rivalry with Iran’s SCIRI client. Although Iran has apparently provided elements of the Mahdi Army with money, weapons and improvised explosive device know-how, the latter possibly through Lebanese Hizbullah, there is little evidence that the Mahdi Army is a creature of Iran, or that the Mahdi Army relies exclusively, or even largely, on Iranian support, or would wither if Iran were to withdraw the assistance it now provides.

Furthermore, the ‘external factor’ explanation overestimates Iran’s interest in stoking such terrible violence just across its border with Iraq. For Tehran, a weak but peaceful neighbour ruled by a Shia government best meets its strategic needs. Iran is deliberately cultivating a degree of economic dependency in Iraq by supplying electricity, cooking gas, cash subventions and financial credit to Shia markets. (Iran is setting up at least three banks in Iraq.) Iran is also thought to be establishing a clandestine military structure for the purpose of attacking US forces in the event of a confrontation over Tehran’s nuclear programme. Bleeding the United States, of course, serves multiple objectives: it embarrasses an adversary, probes its weaknesses and hastens its departure. On the other hand, chaos in Iraq does not serve Iran’s political, economic or military objectives particularly well. Syria, too, has the blowback of radical Islamic activism to fear.

The emphasis on al-Qaeda as a decisive factor in Iraq’s disorder fails to account for the radicalisation of the broader indigenous Sunni opposition and the increasingly blurry lines between al-Qaeda in Iraq and other segments of the Sunni insurgency. That there are Iraqis who espouse the jihadism of al-Qaeda is beyond doubt, just as there are hundreds of foreign fighters in Iraq. As suggested earlier, the use of Islamist language and symbols has grown across the board. But the extent to which this signifies an umbilical link to an external al-Qaeda that can manipulate Iraqi politics is open to doubt.

The more supportable view is that turmoil in Iraq is due largely to internal factors. The annihilation of civil society by a succession of disasters – Ba’athist rule, sanctions and invasion – has closed off the near- to medium-term possibility of normal national politics. Outsiders, whether American, Iranian or Syrian,
are not in a position to shape the evolution of Iraqi politics in a conclusive way. Iraqis have distinctive visions of Iraq and their place in it. That they are prepared to manipulate third parties to advance their respective agendas is only natural. But this does not imply effective foreign influence. Thus, Prime Minister al-Maliki rejects benchmarks, demands the removal of US military roadblocks from Sadr City and forbids the arrest of a Moqtada al-Sadr deputy; Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim shelters Iranian intelligence officials at his compound shortly after being hosted by President Bush at the White House; al-Sadr berates ‘Persians’ after visiting Tehran and declaring that the Mahdi Army will help defend Iran against American attack; and some Sunni insurgents say they are prepared to talk to the United States, while still others refuse to talk to the occupier or its ‘puppet government’.

Influential policymakers and experts argue that irrespective of whether Iraq’s root problems are external or internal, a robust and sustained US military commitment to Iraq is inextricably linked to the broader credibility of the United States as a security guarantor. From this standpoint, reputation is the cornerstone of deterrence, and disengagement from Iraq before it is stabilised would inevitably invite new challenges to US interests. The historical record, however, suggests that credibility is not cumulative. In reality, rivals constantly re-evaluate each other’s capabilities in the overall context of the prevailing strategic environment. They do not, typically, launch dramatic challenges to their competitors on the basis of what their rival did or did not do in the past and under different circumstances. Admittedly, this is truer of states than of terrorist organisations of Hamas’s or al-Qaeda’s ilk, which tend to project episodes from their respective enemies’ past onto the present in a rigidly simplistic way.

Whether the United States stays or goes, global jihadists and their supporters will believe that they have already won twice over: first by virtue of the intervention, which confirmed their narrative, and secondly by creating the appearance of having thwarted Washington’s allegedly imperial designs. A US decision to disengage militarily from Iraq will reaffirm these beliefs. However, given the size of the propaganda victory the United States has already conferred on Islamic extremists, and the way that US military operations continue to confirm the jihadi worldview, a decision to remain in Iraq so as to avoid emboldening radicals is quixotic. As for the administration’s concern that disengagement would weaken the resolve of regional states to counter the jihadi threat, chaos in Iraq has been used by Sunni governments in the region to justify their resistance to reform and to legitimise repression. A loss of will, therefore, is scarcely the problem. The more pressing issue is the effect of back-pedalling on reform on the growth of radicalism.
Even if rival states such as Syria and Iran, or global jihadis, are momentar-ily emboldened by a managed American disengagement, the central question is whether that cost would outweigh the blow to American credibility from floundering ineffectually in Iraq while supplying the Muslim world with iconic images of weakness and cruelty. If a viable Iraqi political centre is unachievable in the meaningful future, the answer must be ‘no’.

The complicating, painful consideration is that of moral obligation. An ill-informed and ill-prepared Anglo-American intervention, launched primarily to serve US counter-terrorism objectives, unleashed the horrors of the past four years. The United States incurred a duty to leave Iraqis no worse off, and if possible better off, than on the day of the invasion. The bleak truth remains that the United States is incapable of restoring Iraq even to the relative stability of the Ba’athist era, let alone the comparatively Edenic condition of Egypt or Jordan. The even bleaker truth is that continued US military operations on Iraqi territory might well leave Iraqis even worse off. In that light, for the US government to sacrifice the lives of its soldiers in the pursuit of an unattainable objective (a stable, pluralistic Iraq aligned with US interests) or an inappropriate one (a reputation for toughness and reliability) would be the least morally defensible course. This is not to say that the US obligation to Iraq is somehow nullified; incapacity stemming from the absence of will or competence cannot excuse a moral agent from ethical obligation. But the will and competence are simply unavailable.

In retrospect, George F. Kennan was correct when he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966, in the context of the war in Vietnam, that ‘there is more respect to be won in the opinion of this world by a resolute and courageous liquidation of unsound positions than by the most stubborn pursuit of extravagant and unpromising objectives’.  

**False hopes**

On 10 January 2007, the president disclosed his plan to augment the US force posture in Iraq with 21,500 troops to be deployed in the coming months. (Although the troop ‘surge’ received the most attention, the plan also includes political, economic and regional elements.) The purpose of this surge is to restore order in Baghdad. According to National Security Adviser Stephen J. Hadley, without the surge,

the Iraqi government and its security institutions could fracture under the pressure of widespread sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing and mass killings. Chaos would then spread throughout the country – and
throughout the region. The al-Qaeda movement would be strengthened … Iran would be emboldened and could be expected to provide more lethal aid for extremist groups. The Kurdish north would be isolated, inviting separation and regional interference. Terrorists could gain pockets of sanctuary throughout Iraq from which to threaten our allies in the region and our security at home.11

These developments could well follow a US disengagement, which Bush argues would force US troops to fight ‘an uglier battle’ elsewhere. In view of these stakes, as Cheney has made clear, the surge is going to take place regardless of public or congressional opposition. Thus, the issue is what happens after the surge. Since General Petraeus has said he expects the results of the surge to become apparent quickly, the ‘day after’ realities should be thought through now.

Although conditions for the success of a surge strategy are poor because of the already fractious state of Iraq politics, the disproportionately small number of US troops allocated to the effort, and the relatively short projected duration of the effort, a positive result cannot simply be ruled out; there is necessarily a glimmer of hope, however fleeting. Hope has also been placed in other proposals, some of which would complement a surge effort, and others that would differ in focus. None of these alternatives are likely to yield acceptable results.

Rejiggering the coalition
Taking steps to strengthen the government, as Hadley proposed in a December 2005 internal memorandum on Iraq, is unlikely to turn things around.12 Washington is scarcely capable of effective measures ‘to help [al-Maliki] form a new political base among moderate politicians from Sunni, Shia, Kurdish, and other communities’. Exhortation, as in the president’s January 2006 address to the nation, is also unlikely to work.

Taking sides
The alternative, choosing sides, poses its own problems. Sunnis and Shi’ites already regard the United States as an ally of their respective enemies. The Shi’ites resent American demands for power-sharing, while Sunnis are aggrieved by Washington’s installation of the Shi’ites as the country’s rulers. These perceptions have gained traction despite strenuous, if unsuccessful, efforts by US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to project an even-handed American stance. A change in posture would have substantial regional implications. If the United States were to side with the Shi’ites – the so-called ‘Eighty Percent Solution’ – its
relations with traditional allies in the Gulf and Middle East would be jeopardised. To side with Sunnis would be to back the apparent loser within Iraq and possibly to spur Iranian intervention; it would certainly embolden the Sunni ‘dead-enders’ the United States has been trying unsuccessfully to subdue or lure into negotiations. (It would however be consistent with an evolving US policy designed to solidify a regional Sunni bloc.) As much as taking sides is not in Washington’s interest, it is essential to acknowledge that cooperation with and support for the current Iraqi government is tantamount to taking sides. The issue is therefore unavoidable. Even disengagement will not extricate the United States from this bind, especially if the Iraqi government requests continued military aid, including arms transfers. Nevertheless, overt alignment with either party would transform a failed attempt to implant democracy into a seeming attempt to subvert it, further compromising America’s reputation in the region and beyond.

Reaching for stability via devolution
Separation of Iraq into a loose federation or clutch of mini-states is another chimera. The country is already being divided, either because the government in Baghdad has disenfranchised largely Sunni regions, or because cleansing operations in some mixed areas in and around Baghdad – projected to be a multiethnic city under one of these plans – and other cities are proceeding unimpeded by either the Shia government or the United States. Fully one-third to one-half of Iraq’s local minority populations is already displaced, either within the country or over the borders with Syria and Jordan. The Kurdish zone, in any case, is already largely autonomous. As envisaged by Leslie H. Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, and Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr, there are attractive, sensible elements to federalisation, including sharing of oil revenues and increased reconstruction assistance, both of which are already centrepieces of the administration’s programme. Peter W. Galbraith’s somewhat more radical approach to decentralisation also foresees an equitable division of oil revenue. The Iraqi government, if not precisely moving in the opposite direction, is certainly not rushing to pass a hydrocarbon law, and does not seem likely to fulfil its promise to revise the constitution in a way that guarantees a share of oil revenues to the Sunni minority.

It is as an operational matter, however, that devolution would be most problematic. The sectarian populations to be segregated would have to consent to the arrangement. Many would object. The resistance has shown its determination to prevent displacement of the Sunni population, especially in the south. Resistance to population transfers could turn violent. Given that over half of
Iraq’s population is concentrated in four mixed cities, the safe separation of populations under either the federalisation or decentralisation scenarios would require additional American troops; international police would not suffice. The forces necessary for this mission are not available.

**Concentrating on training Iraqi forces**

Leaving behind US training personnel who could not defend themselves would be imprudent, especially since they would not make a decisive difference in the loyalty, reliability and effectiveness of the Iraqi forces to which they were attached. Very few units would benefit from this kind of assistance now. Any US advisers embedded with Iraqi units would be at far greater risk of assassination or abduction than their comrades in training units. The deployment of special-operations advisers would be appropriate only in exceptional cases in which the US command and Iraqi governments identified superior potential for vital missions, such as suppressing death squads or insurgent cells, renditions, defending the Green Zone and vital installations, or protecting reconstruction teams.

**Withdrawning from the cities to the borders**

Pulling troops back to Iraq’s long, porous borders to keep infiltrators out, control refugee flows, or, in the north, to discourage Turkish intervention would have little political or military value. As long as US forces are on Iraqi soil in large numbers, the United States will be stigmatised as an occupier. In fact, redeployment within Iraq might simply reinforce fears that the United States seeks a permanent presence in Iraq despite the administration’s disclaimers. In any case, there are not enough Americans in Iraq to seal the borders. Basing US forces in the Kurdish area would also run counter to Washington’s interest in a unitary Iraq. Moreover, while basing of US troops might function as a deterrent to Turkish intervention, by the same token it could eventually encourage the sort of provocative Kurdish behaviour that will ultimately provoke the Turks. On balance, the Kurds are somewhat more likely to exercise caution without the United States providing what would in effect be a tripwire deterrent to Turkish intervention.

**How to disengage**

The presence of American troops cannot prevent an internecine conflict that is already raging. Whether or not the violence meets the textbook definition of a civil war, in which two armed groups square off to control the territory of a state, is immaterial. Iraqis are killing each other systematically and in large numbers;
according to the UN, over 14,000 have lost their lives since June 2006 alone.\textsuperscript{14} If there are more than two contending factions, this means only that there are multiple, simultaneous civil wars. Accordingly, the United States should withdraw the bulk of its military forces from Iraq within 12–18 months and without reference to Iraqi progress toward national reconciliation. The administration does owe it to the Iraqis, who have suffered immensely, and to Americans, who have invested precious lives yet face a now more dangerous world, to put more thought and planning into the exit from Iraq than it invested in the entry.

This means carrying out the disengagement in coordination with the Iraqi government and, as necessary, with armed groups, and using US forces in the queue for redeployment properly. A further step would be to convene a group of UN Security Council members, Japan, Canada and states bordering Iraq, including Syria and Iran, to participate in a regional stabilisation project, whose purpose would be to encourage Iraq’s neighbours to pursue their common interest in a unified, stable Iraq in mutually reinforcing ways.

The intention to withdraw should be declared now. Since there is a remote possibility that the situation on the ground might change radically during the drawdown period, the United States could qualify its declared intention to leave on a specific timetable with appropriate caveats. If, for example, there were a dramatic increase in intercommunal violence leading to a flood of refugees, US forces might be needed to set up camps, administer aid, and provide security for the refugees. On the other hand, if the current surge strategy works, political compromises are made, ethnic cleansing operations cease, militias are brought under the government’s control, a multiconfessional army including a meaningful number of Sunni officers is created, and the United States is asked to remain to battle a lingering insurgency, it might behoove Washington to suspend the drawdown. A 12–18-month timeframe for disengagement would leave the United States with the flexibility to respond to such changes. Nevertheless, the departure timetable would not hinge on specific benchmarks, since the Iraqi government is probably incapable of curbing militias and accommodating Sunni concerns; nor is it likely to generate an effective, multiconfessional army in the foreseeable future. The US drawdown should not be hostage to Iraqi performance.

US military disengagement would not mark the end of America’s involvement in Iraq. Withdrawing the bulk of its military forces from the country would, however, change the nature of America’s commitment to the Iraqi people. The US embassy would continue to administer large-scale economic, commercial
and technical assistance, and maintain robust intelligence liaison and collection efforts and a defence cooperation programme.

To provide a quick reaction capability to the US command and signal to regional states that disengagement from Iraq does not signify abandonment of the region, a robust combined-arms force should be deployed on the periphery of Iraq – there are several basing options – for ‘drive-by’ interventions necessitated by the establishment of al-Qaeda camps in western Iraq, the detection of networks working from specific urban locations, or the imminent threat of the Green Zone being overrun. The diplomatic and legal framework for these deployments is largely in place, but the United States should nevertheless open negotiations with basing countries as it coordinates the drawdown of US forces with the Iraqi government. A dual-track approach will help offset doubts about Washington’s commitment to the region that are bound to arise as the United States removes its forces from Iraq.

Troops or technical experts and equipment would be deployed to installations outside of Iraq to monitor cross-border movements for intelligence collection, interdiction or preparation for humanitarian operations. Training of selected Iraqi units could continue on a small scale at installations outside of Iraq, much as police training has been conducted in Jordan. Advisory personnel might be attached to selected Iraqi units whose reliability is assured. A robust force would remain in the Green Zone and Baghdad International Airport to protect access routes and deter a direct assault on the US embassy in the event that order breaks down.

During the disengagement period, the United States should focus on combating the Sunni insurgency, patrolling Iraq’s borders and training especially promising Iraqi units, much as commanders on the ground in Iraq have been doing in the absence of guidance from Washington, but without serious expectation of either stanching the insurgency or producing highly competent Iraqi formations. The unfortunate fact is that the few competent units stood up during this interval will run into logistical and financial difficulties later on as US technical support to the Ministry of Defence is reduced upon disengagement of US forces.

**Immediate consequences**

Overall, disengagement can be expected to diminish deterrence in the short term; it will surely be blamed for any increased violence. The US response to these criticisms should emphasise the sacrifices the United States has already made, continue American efforts to stabilise Iraq diplomatically and economically, and manage the humanitarian dimension of the civil war, especially refugee flows.
The United States’ priority at this stage should be to limit the effects of the civil war and, at worst, confine it to Iraq. This enterprise should include a multilateral effort to alleviate the humanitarian hardships Iraqis are enduring. The current conflict caused a dramatic increase in refugee flows that began in 1991. This is not just a potentially destabilising burden for moderate states like Jordan. Past experience has shown that large concentrations of refugees incubate irredeemable violence and nourish jihadism. Coping with these flows will require the coordinated efforts of the UN, wealthy donor countries, and non-governmental organisations. There is a major role here for US forces and technical assistance, either or both of which could be provided to countries that face burgeoning refugee problems.

An explicit US commitment to pull out the bulk of American troops from Iraq on a timetable to be negotiated with the Iraqi government might prove useful in persuading the relevant parties to cooperate in a stabilisation arrangement. Iraqi leaders and all the major Arab parties, both Sunni and Shia, in the government of national unity, have publicly called for US troops to leave as soon as possible. At the same time, the nationalist insurgents – so called to differentiate them from the jihadi component of the insurgency – have insisted that their precondition for negotiating with the Iraqi government or the United States is a timetable for the disengagement of American troops. If presented by the US administration with such a timetable, most members of the Iraqi cabinet, parliament or wider political elite would not voice opposition but instead use their leverage to secure continued financial and logistical assistance from the United States. While the insurgents might merely wait out the US military pullout and then intensify their challenge to the government, there is a roughly equal probability that they will perceive an increase in their bargaining power and at least experiment with negotiation. By sponsoring talks, the UN would lend weight to the diplomatic process and increase incentives to participate. A UN monitoring and implementation group could also help stabilise the disengagement process.

The war is unlikely to abate upon disengagement of US forces, because Iraq’s Sunnis will continue to fear the consequences of the reversal of fortune they perceive the Shi’ites seeking. The real question is how much worse the bloodshed can get. A credible, though perhaps optimistic, forecast is that the lack of organisational capacity, broad communal consent, and heavy weapons on either side militates against a drastic increase in the casualty rate. Crucially, the largely Sunni areas are of little interest to the Shi’ites as objects of desire or conquest. And without artillery,
armour and attack aircraft, Shia forces will be far less capable of reducing Sunni majority cities, such as Falluja, to rubble in the way that Serbs dealt with Croatian or Muslim urban areas in the former Yugoslavia. Ethnic cleansing in mixed areas will continue to advance, the large flow of refugees and internally displaced will continue to mount, massive bombings and death squads will continue to claim many lives, but crucial conditions for nationwide genocidal violence are as yet absent. This is hardly a cause for rejoicing; it only suggests that a bloody stalemate between similarly equipped adversaries is somewhat more likely than the annihilation or expulsion of Iraq’s Sunni population.

**Regional complications**

A related question is whether the disengagement of US forces in the near term would open the door to a regional war triggered by the civil wars within Iraq. Here definitions matter. Direct armed clashes between or among the armies of Iraq’s neighbours do not seem to be on the cards. Although history is not always an infallible guide, mid-to-late twentieth-century civil wars in the region – in Algeria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, even Lebanon – have not sparked bigger wars. In most cases, surrounding countries have tried to protect their interests through proxies, while avoiding the risks and costs of military intervention. Even Lebanon, whose civil war ultimately drew in both Syrian and Israeli forces, did not mushroom into a true regional war. Damascus and Jerusalem both took steps to prevent escalation. Indirect conflict, however, is probably inevitable, especially in the absence of a diplomatic process designed to stave off or at least regulate moves by neighbouring countries to protect their interests using proxies. Indeed, this low-profile competition is already underway. To the limited extent the presence of US military forces can stave off a regional war stemming from the violence in Iraq, such a presence could and should be kept in-theatre. But it should not be in Iraq.

Countries in the region may attempt to influence the timing and nature of America’s disengagement to suit their own national interests. This dynamic process must be managed through an intensive programme of diplomatic coordination, including Iran and Syria. The administration is understandably reluctant to confer tacit recognition on unsavoury regimes that believe, with some reason, they have the whip hand. The fact remains that their cooperation in a stabilisation plan for Iraq is indispensable. Syria, according to the US command in Iraq, is permitting about 60 foreign jihadis per month to enter Iraq. Although the Iraqi insurgency is largely indigenous, jihadis may have been used to carry out some of the devastating suicide attacks that have spurred Shia reprisals. A combination of pressure and inducement might convince Damascus to constrict
if not cut off this supply of potential suicide bombers. Iran has supplied Shia militias with weapons and funding and, by virtue of its proximity, the size of its intelligence presence, and cross-border Shia networks, Tehran could probably nudge Iraqi Shi’ites toward accommodating some Sunni political requirements, while getting the militias to cut back on their anti-Sunni activities.

Syria and Iran might regard a conciliatory US approach not as an appeal to mutual interest but rather as a source of increased leverage to put forward their own demands as to Syria’s interests and activities in Lebanon and the December 2006 UN Security Council sanctions resolution against Iran. Tehran might want concessions in the nuclear arena, while Damascus would probably seek some accommodation to its goals in Lebanon, assurances that the Hariri investigation will not touch core regime members, and renewed attention to the Golan Heights problem. Although a US offer to facilitate Syrian–Israeli talks would be feasible, concessions in other areas would be incommensurate with Syria’s actual ability to help Washington on Iraq. Concessions to Iran in the nuclear domain would be too high a price for Tehran’s help, given that a stable Iraq is in its interest and Iran’s capacity to affect Iraqi politics in a decisive way is uncertain at best. The stakes, however, demand that the possibility of cooperation be actively explored and that reservations about talking to Iran and Syria be subordinated to America’s paramount interest in a stable Iraq. With respect to Iran, this would require the administration to drop suspension of enrichment activity as a precondition for bilateral discussions. Since the Iranians themselves have not yet linked cooperation on Iraq to the nuclear issue, for Washington to insist on linkage would seem counter-productive. This overall approach could also entail direct US talks with the Iraqi nationalist section of the insurgency. Discussions have already taken place on a desultory basis, but a US decision to withdraw might alter the dynamic for the better.

There is no guarantee that Syria, Iran or members of the insurgency would engage in such a venture, or do so on terms acceptable to Washington. A multilateral framework in which the US presence would be diluted and other countries could bring their influence to bear might make it easier to persuade Syria and Iran that their interest in a stable Iraq is best separated from other policy priorities, hence the importance of creative multilateral diplomacy. Multilateral talks would also help mobilise Gulf Cooperation Council funds essential to put Iraqis to work and provide an honourable alternative to service in the militias. The talks would enlist the Saudis to persuade Sunni nationalists to disavow and suppress the jihadis among them rather than complicate the situation by dispatching Saudi militants, funds and weapons to Iraqi Sunnis, and to respond positively to conciliatory Shia gestures that might eventually surface. They
could also allay Turkish concerns about developments in the Kurdish areas; and help Jordan cope with a tidal wave of refugees. For the greatest possible leverage on regional players, especially with regard to blocking the transfer of weapons to the contending parties within Iraq, the diplomatic process should weave in Chinese, Russian and European Union participation.

**Global jihadism**

Finally, there is the issue of al-Qaeda. Clearly, al-Qaeda has succeeded in establishing a strong presence in western Iraq. How durable it proves to be and how focused it will be on attacking Americans remains to be seen. Opinions on these questions differ within the intelligence community. Nevertheless, the spread of the jihadi ethos within the insurgency does not bode well. Nor does the development of urban-warfare skills, including the effective use of snipers and improvised explosive devices, among the jihadis. These techniques could be used in European cities, for example, as well as in Ramadi. Jihadis have been urged by al-Zawahiri to attack targets outside of Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, masterminded an attack in Amman that claimed many civilian lives. The large numbers of Iraqi refugees in Jordan provides useful cover for jihadis looking to operate in that country. Moreover, the so-called ‘ratlines’ that bring foreign fighters into Iraq can support the reverse flow of terrorists to other regional cities, or onward to western Europe.

The jihadis’ ruthlessness gives them an edge in their quest to dominate the insurgency. They recently killed four leading tribal sheikhs and compelled others to seek refuge in Jordan and Syria. (Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan has applied the same tactic to the tribal maliks in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border.) Against a background of increasing convergence between the supposed nationalist insurgents and the religiously oriented jihadis, this momentum could conceivably lead to an al-Qaeda mini-state in western Iraq. If this were to happen, the United States would be confronted with an urbanised, cellular version of al-Qaeda’s rural presence in Afghanistan prior to 2002.

It looks as though foreign fighters go to Iraq both to kill Americans and because it’s easier to attack enemies of Islam in Iraq than elsewhere. (One Lebanese fighter told an interviewer that it was easier to enter Iraq than to penetrate the Israeli border and attack the near enemy.) It seems more than likely that in the absence of US troops in Iraq, the flow of outsiders will dwindle over
time. While it is true that the cross-border movement of refugees complicates the work of Jordanian and Syrian security forces, these states muster the resources to stay on top of al-Qaeda infiltration. The United States works closely with the Jordanians and, on a halting basis, with Syria. The latter relationship has been impeded because of tensions raised by other issues. As suggested earlier, these impediments could be put aside in the interests of both sides in tamping down al-Qaeda activity.

Upon the departure of US forces, the more mainstream elements of the insurgency seem likely to turn against the smaller jihadi groups whose ferocity has thus far given them a disproportionately large role. There is a precedent for this process in Algeria during the mid-to-late 1990s, when local village militias – death squads – were raised to challenge the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The creation of the Anbar Salvation Council, an Iraqi tribal group funded largely by the United States, might well develop in the way that Algerian anti-jihadi groups did a decade ago. At the same time, the Salafi element within the insurgency will focus more intensely on its Shia enemy within Iraq. This trajectory is not guaranteed, however, and there remains a serious chance that an al-Qaeda-linked Salafist organisation might dominate the Sunni provinces for an indefinite period.

Thus, the cities of western Iraq might still become safe havens for al-Qaeda operatives who steer clear of confrontations with other insurgents and take advantage of the relative safety of their neighbourhoods, the availability of transit routes in and out of Iraq, and the abundance of materiel to stage attacks outside of Iraq. This raises the question of whether the continued long-term presence of five US combat brigades, the current planning estimate, is the best way to counter the threat. If the deployment of troops to Anbar, a fiercely nationalistic region, is indeed a spur to violence, than the continued presence of US forces is likely to be counter-productive. Instead, the United States should continue to work closely with groups like the Anbar Salvation Council, and to build up local Sunni police organisations that can gather and act on intelligence regarding Sunni extremists. This is essentially an intelligence and law-enforcement task. The availability of highly mobile, specialised US forces at bases in Jordan could support the operations of indigenous units once the bulk of US combat forces have been withdrawn from Iraq. Until then, the United States could profitably use the interval to train and support local units for the counter-terrorism mission.

**Why not withdraw now?**

If the situation in Iraq is so dire, prospects so bleak, the use of force futile and the daily toll so grim, why put military disengagement on a 12–18-month timetable?
Why not draw down US forces immediately? An immediate disengagement is probably not possible without leaving much, if not all, of the heavy equipment – vehicles, armour, artillery – behind, because bulky materiel cannot easily be moved by air, the only way to exit swiftly. Transporting the large amount of materiel in Iraq by sea would take months, in part because of transit times and in part because of limits on the availability of appropriate cargo vessels and port capacity. A safe and orderly disengagement also hinges on carefully planned, choreographed troop movements that cannot be executed in haste. Logistical and tactical factors alone militate against the instantaneous redeployment of 160,000 troops.

There are also compelling strategic reasons to draw down in a deliberate fashion. In disengaging, the United States must seek to shape the narrative of its intervention in Iraq to preserve the greatest possible credibility in a painfully compromising situation. Washington would want to avoid the appearance of a rout or panicky departure. Nothing, for example, must be left behind that is not expressly intended for use by the Iraqi government or by US forces or other personnel in future. Troops destined for other bases in-theatre will need the way paved diplomatically and in military-to-military channels with their new host countries. This will take time. A hasty, apparently ill-organised or poorly coordinated departure would shake the confidence of friends and embolden adversaries at the worst possible time. On the ground in Iraq, the drawdown will have to be done in a way that deters attacks by insurgents. Shaping the narrative comes down to ensuring that no American leaves under fire from the embassy roof in a helicopter. It also means that as many Iraqi nationals as possible whose security is at risk because of their cooperation with the United States are given safe passage to the United States. A methodical disengagement will necessarily be carried out at the cost of additional American lives, a bitter but unavoidable price.

Finally, a 12–18-month disengagement period dictated by logistical, tactical and ‘narrative shaping’ factors would provide a large if steadily diminishing US troop presence in Iraq for a limited but crucial period, during which the Iraqi government has pledged to pursue a national reconciliation agenda and rein in the militias.

Disengagement and the diplomacy that must accompany it should be initiated immediately, before the costs of the war begin to widen: a looming threat to Jordan’s stability; the empowerment of a radicalised Iran; rise of ominous anxieties in Turkey and the Persian Gulf states; strained alliance relations;
Washington’s prolonged distraction from seething problems in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Palestine; the weakening of Arab moderate voices; fuming animosity toward the United States throughout the Muslim world; reinvigorated jihadi sentiment; and of course the direct cost measured in the loss of American blood and treasure. Each year of continued US military operations in Iraq will consign over a thousand American soldiers to their deaths and three times that number to crippling injury. The economic costs of the war are also massive, even for an economy as large as that of the United States. The direct cost is $8bn per month, though how much is actually being spent in Iraq per se is unclear since the Iraq War, as a budgetary category, is subsumed under the line item for the ‘global war on terrorism’. Spending for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in FY2007 is now projected to approach $170bn, with an additional supplemental allocation of $145bn planned for 2008. With the troop surge, this figure will increase, as will casualties generated by the more permissive rules of engagement in dense urban settings.

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As it prepares to withdraw militarily from Iraq, the United States should act decisively and creatively across the wider Middle East to offset perceptions of American weakness triggered by the setback in Iraq. The obvious arena for action is the triangle formed by Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Iran and its Syrian ally believe themselves to be ascendant. Withdrawing from Iraq might enable the United States to use its resources, leverage and residual credibility to counter the influence these countries bring to bear on Lebanese and Palestinian politics. Less plausibly, it might also improve prospects for a more assertive international response to Iran’s apparent pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. At a minimum, military disengagement will remove one of many obstacles to effective action. This is not meant to suggest that the disengagement of US military forces from Iraq will somehow usher in a new golden age for the United States or the countries of the region. Full recovery from its misadventure in Iraq is likely to take the United States many years.

Indeed, the project to rebuild American credibility will face two stark limits. No possibilities will open up for the United States in the region until it has successfully managed its disengagement from Iraq, a necessary though not sufficient condition for rebuilding US influence. And the weakness of the protagonists on both sides of the Palestinian–Israeli divide is likely to hobble any return to negotiations, although an Israeli–Syrian return to negotiations might be a productive alternative. Similarly, the challenge posed by Iran’s nuclear ambitions will not
easily be met. These problems are all the more difficult because Americans are palpably demoralised by the miscarriage of their huge effort in Iraq. Yet there is no reason to doubt the American capacity to overcome this calamitous episode and work with partners toward a safer and better future in the greater Middle East.

Notes


2 These data derive from a 2007 unclassified internal US government briefing memorandum made available to the author.


6 When asked in an interview on CNN what affect a Senate resolution against the president’s new ‘surge’ plan would have, Cheney answered: ‘It won’t stop us’. Interview with Wolf Blitzer on ‘The Situation Room’, 24 January 2007, http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/24/cheney/index.html. In response to a question by Senator John McCain about the likely outcome in Iraq should the US announce it would withdraw within 4–6 months, General Petraeus warned of ‘greatly increased ethnic cleansing’, ‘the very real possibility of involvement of [other] countries’, as well as the possibility of an international terrorist organisation ‘getting a grip on some substantial piece of Iraq’. Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Nomination of Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, 23 January 2007.


13 It would take almost the entire planned troop surge – 20,000 of the 21,500 soldiers – to begin to secure Iraq’s borders, using the number of US Customs and Border Protection and National Guard personnel on the US–Mexico border as a guide. And even then, the level of security would be no better than that at the Mexico border. Even though the agents and soldiers on the US–Mexico border know the terrain well and many have a command of Spanish, they apprehend only about one-third of those who get across the border. It would take time for a US border force in Iraq to gain corresponding advantages. Calculations based on data provided by the CIA World Factbook.


