

IRAQ: The Way Ahead

Mitchell M. Zais, Ph.D.

*Remarks at the Newberry College
Honors Convocation,
Newberry, South Carolina, 8 November 2007*



Introduction

Last year at this Honors Convocation, I discussed the national strategy that produced the current situation we now face in Iraq. What I didn't do then was explain how to best resolve the Iraqi dilemma. Today, then, I'll describe what I believe to be the way ahead to produce the best possible outcomes in Iraq.

Initial Goal

America's original goal in Iraq was a unified and democratic nation with a strong central government. Our expectation was that such a country would serve as a shining example for the rest of the Middle East, a beacon of hope. But, contrary to assumptions under-girding our invasion, it now seems clear that Iraqi Arabs, the product of a tribal society, have little interest in establishing an American-style democracy or a Middle Eastern version of Switzerland where German, French, and Italian speaking citizens live in harmony. As Marc Wilson wrote in *The State*, "This is the lesson: Heretofore oppressed people do not automatically default to democracy. It is not axiomatic that freedom will . . . step in to fill the gap created when subjugated people become free." We can now conclude that because of sectarian hatred fueled by decades of Sunni oppression, because of an inadequate sense of national identity on the part of the Iraqis, and for other reasons I'll explain—our original goal is no longer attainable.

Proposed Solutions

Two primary solutions to the Iraqi problem are being advanced by the politicians, pundits, and policy makers in Washington: the "surge" and "quit and come home."

The surge. The surge, a temporary increase of an additional 30,000 troops, began last February. It took nearly six months for them to be deployed. The objective of the surge was to suppress sectarian violence in and around Baghdad by establishing combined Iraqi-American outposts in Iraqi neighborhoods. Presumably, this would buy more time to train the Iraqi armed forces and police while providing time for Iraqi politicians to create a functioning government.

Dr. Mitchell M. Zais is president of Newberry College, Newberry, South Carolina. A retired Army infantry Brigadier General, he served both as chief of conventional war plans on the Joint Staff in the Pentagon and as the commanding general of U.S. and allied forces in Kuwait.

PHOTO: A U.S. Army Soldier attached to Task Force 1-77, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force, scans his sector of security during an operation in Tharthar, Iraq, 5 October 2007. (U.S. Army, SPC Kieran Cuddihy)

***We can now conclude that...
our original goal is
no longer attainable.***

Thus, the surge focuses primarily on nationwide solutions. There are two problems with this approach. First, both the national police force and the national military have proven ineffective, rife with corruption and sectarian strife. Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware commented on the Iraqi police force: "It is zero; it's worse than zero. They're death squads." The centralized, multi-ethnic armed forces are not much better.

The second problem with the surge is there's little evidence that Iraqi national leaders have either the willingness or the ability to forge a political consensus around a strong central government.

Quit and come home. The second option, proposed by so-called peace activists, is to declare the entire Iraqi operation a colossal failure, pack up the troops and our huge embassy staff, and come home. A number of politicians have also called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The quit and come home option is, of course, nonsense. The long-term consequences for American national interests would be disastrous. In all probability, Iraq would implode in an orgy of killing and sectarian slaughter. Chaos would ensue. The only order would be imposed by local sheiks and clerics. Throughout the Middle East, and the world, America would be blamed for the carnage. Our prestige in world opinion would be even lower than it is now.

Politicians who advocate immediate withdrawal are either grandstanding for uninformed voters or demonstrating an appalling ignorance of history, economics, international relations, and national security affairs. The quit and come home approach is not a solution; it's the absence of a solution. So, neither of these two strategies seems viable. For the surge, we can't sustain high numbers of troops in Iraq indefinitely. Our Army and Marine Corps are far too small and the ground forces are unable to stanch the hemorrhage of experienced professionals who are leaving the service after two, three, and even four tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor can we summarily withdraw because of the chaos and

genocidal slaughter that would follow and the likelihood that Turkey, Iran, and perhaps Saudi Arabia would be drawn into the ensuing maelstrom.

The Current Situation

Before describing what our goal in Iraq should be, let me say a few words about the current situation.

Ineffective Iraqi government. The Iraqi central government is ineffective and split almost wholly along sectarian lines. This government, headed by a Shiite Prime Minister, has been slow to demonstrate initiative and shown little ability to reach consensus or govern. The majority Shiites, for decades oppressed by the minority Sunnis, see America as determined to protect their rule over a strongly united Iraq. As a result, there is little incentive for them to compromise or share power with the Sunnis and Kurds.

Both the Iraqi armed forces and the centralized police forces have been infiltrated by militia and insurgents. As one reporter noted, "In nearly every area where Iraqi forces were given control, the security situation rapidly deteriorated. The exceptions were areas dominated largely by one sect and policed by members of that sect."

Civil war, refugees, and ethnic cleansing. The power vacuum created in Iraq when we destroyed the Saddam Hussein regime unleashed a civil war where the warring sects seek to avenge centuries of abuse or hold on to their positions of power. Ancient hatreds are being fueled by a savage al-Qaeda who slaughter indiscriminately and the Iranian government which funds and arms extremist Shiite elements.

Ethnic cleansing is now moving apace, driven by this sectarian violence. You don't have to rape and murder too many of my neighbors before I figure out it might be a good idea to pack up my family and move.

As a result, every month, between 50,000 and 150,000 Iraqis flee their homes, about half to neighboring Jordan and Syria. In general, those who leave Iraq are the most educated who have the means to start anew. Thus, Iraq is losing the moderate middle-class so necessary for reconciliation. Thousands more move from areas where they are the minority to regions where they are in the majority. Consequently, inside Iraq there are over 2 million displaced persons, in addition to the 2 million refugees outside Iraq.

...inside Iraq there are over 2 million displaced persons, in addition to the 2 million refugees outside Iraq.

Current security status. Let me review the current security conditions in Iraq. The Kurdish north is relatively peaceful. It has enjoyed virtually autonomy for years. The central government in Baghdad has acknowledged the Kurdish parliament, ministries, and their 100,000-strong army. But trouble brews on Kurdistan's northern border. Kurdish rebels, supporting their ethnic brethren in Turkey, have been fighting a low level insurgency in Turkey for decades. Rebel attacks last month killed 47, including 35 Turkish soldiers. Turkey is now reinforcing the 200,000 troops already in the border region and threatens to invade northern Iraq to eliminate the rebel strongholds. However, the coming winter may postpone till spring the Turkish incursion.

The Sunni center of the country, particularly in the ethnically pure Anbar Province, has been the area of greatest success. Sickened by the savagery of local al-Qaeda, tribal chieftains, armed and financed by the U.S., united to expel the insurgents from their towns and cities. Employing local security forces and police, the Sunni sheiks restored order. This model has been expanded to Diyala Province. As a result, there has been an enormous reduction in violence in this region.

The Shiite south has seen Shia-on-Shia violence as contending militias battled for control. But overall, violence in Basra, the provincial capital and scene of the worst fighting, has dropped precipitously. U.S. commanders on the scene credit local security and police forces for the new level of stability.

Baghdad is a composite of neighborhoods that formerly were mixed. Today they are almost exclusively either Shia or Sunni—the minorities in each having been driven out or killed. This is the region of greatest uncertainty. Using some of the techniques which proved so successful in Anbar Province, U.S. forces are working to stabilize the city and its suburbs by granting local neighborhood autonomy and establishing local neighborhood security forces.

In summary, while violence has been significantly reduced throughout the country, these improvements are not the result of an increasingly able national police and military or a more effective government. Instead, they are the consequences of ethnic cleansing having run its course and the significant increase in autonomy in matters of local security. As local chieftains, militias, and police forces gain control, they are most successful in rooting out the insurgents and restoring order to their neighborhoods. The important point is that these forces which have proven so successful in establishing stability are both local and homogeneous along sectarian lines. They are not multiethnic units representing the central government in Baghdad.

A Third Option: Soft-Partitioning

Ultimately, the most significant problem in Iraq is neither al-Qaeda nor radical insurgents. It's the culture and psychology of the Iraqi people, divided into three distinct ethnic groups, which have oppressed and slaughtered each other for decades. Any solution which does not take into account these cultural and psychological factors has little chance of success. Instead of fighting the natural impulses of the Iraqi people, we should work to harness them to a strategic goal.

A strategy which does this represents a third alternative to the surge or quit-and-come-home options. Gaining increasing support amongst policymakers in Washington, it's called "soft-partitioning." Soft-partitioning refers to dividing Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions with a weak, central government in Baghdad. In other words, a federal system. The term soft-partitioning is used to distinguish it from hard-partitioning which entails the outright division of Iraq into three separate, independent countries.

To envision a softly partitioned Iraq, think "Shia-stan" in the south, "Sunni-stan," in the central part of the country, and Kurdistan in the north. Baghdad

Soft-partitioning refers to dividing Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions with a weak, central government in Baghdad.

would remain the capital with a primary function of managing the distribution of oil revenues. Baghdad would be a de facto fourth region, much as the District of Columbia is not a part of any state.

Americans err when they think of Iraq as a unified state. As one Egyptian diplomat noted, “Egypt is the only nation-state in the Middle East. The rest are tribes with flags.” These tribes, “communities with language, sect, and locality in common, have survived Rome, Byzantium, the Arab empire, the Crusader states, the Mamelukes, the Ottomans, Zionists and, more recently, local nationalist and religious zealots.” They’re not going away. One commentator explained, tribal members see themselves as “at most a collection of nations in a nation, but not of it.” Another observed that “even the mind-bogglingly brutal Saddam Hussein had trouble handling the tribes of Iraq.” In other words, while Americans have regional allegiances and often identify with a particular state, these in no way resemble Arab allegiances. An Arab is first a member of his family, then his clan, then his tribe, then his sect. For most Iraqis, allegiance to a remote, central government is a distant fifth.

Furthermore, the Iraqi people are increasingly in favor of partitioning. An ABC News survey revealed that 59 percent of the Shia believed Iraq should be partitioned and 73 percent believe they will be partitioned. Nationwide, 57 percent say Iraq will be partitioned. In the constitution ratified in August 2005, 78 percent voted in favor of an autonomous Kurdish region and the creation of other similar regions. These polling and electoral data suggest that Iraqi elections have not been an exercise in democracy, but rather examples of sectarian politics.

This is not to say there are no fervent Iraqi nationalists. There are. The issue is, “Are there enough of them and are they powerful enough to overcome the countervailing forces?” The evidence suggests not.

Obviously, the U.S. could not dictate a soft partitioning of Iraq by fiat. The Iraqis would have to embrace the idea as well. But rather than allowing partitioning to occur through ethnic cleansing or leaving the Iraqis alone to feel their way, we need to encourage and support them in the process. Let me explain how.

Implementing policies. First of all, it’s important to understand that partitioning is already taking

place without our assistance. The Kurds have enjoyed autonomy for years. Sunnis and Shiites have been purging each other from their respective villages, towns, and regions since the ouster of Saddam.

...partitioning is already taking place without our assistance.

Of the estimated 100,000 Iraqis who flee their homes every month, most seek refuge in areas where they are the ethnic majority, or outside the borders of Iraq. This growing segregation has produced increasing security and a decline in sectarian murders. In other words, the worst of the ethnic cleansing may be over as de facto partitioning is occurring.

Furthermore, U.S. forces are already assisting in partitioning Baghdad. As part of the operational plan, the surge divided Sunni from Shia neighborhoods, producing the urban Arab version of gated communities. U.S. military are also helping internally displaced families occupy previously vacated homes and helping them swap homes. As one reporter noted, “Iraq’s mixed neighborhoods are sliding toward extinction.”

A key requirement for soft partitioning is to establish local and regional governments. In part, this is also happening spontaneously as self-rule by tribal sheiks and local clerics is emerging from the vacuum produced by the weak and inept central government.

To formalize it, soft partitioning would require negotiations with the existing Iraqi administration, a new constitutional framework, and buy-in by regional neighbors. This means that a diplomatic effort, supported or even led by the international community, including the United Nations, must be launched. The scope of that diplomatic effort must match the energy and focus of our military initiatives.

Syria and Jordan are likely to support any move to restore order in Iraq. As stability is established, the 2 million refugees in those countries will be able to return home.

To facilitate soft-partitioning, the U.S. would also have to assist minorities who want to move to areas where they feel more secure. Clearly this would have to be a voluntary program. Some might argue

that it's unethical to facilitate mass relocations. However, insisting that people remain in danger to bolster a central government lacking popular support is far worse.

As part of the partitioning process, we would continue to work with sheiks and their tribes to improve local security. Security would be followed by improvements in jobs; services such as water, electricity, and phones; and infrastructure including roads, bridges, schools, and sewage treatment.

We have a pretty good model for how a federal system in Iraq might work. It's our own country. The U.S. began as a collection of semi-autonomous states with a weak central government. Ultimately, differences in culture between the states were so great that in 1861 they went to war, much as the Sunni, Shia, and Kurds have fought each other. Following the Civil War, the process of reconciliation took generations, during which time the United States became increasingly cohesive with a centralized government growing steadily stronger.

A three-state federalized system in Iraq could work much the same way. Over time, perhaps generations, the three ethnic groups in Iraq may be able to resolve their differences and evolve a stronger central government.

Summary

In summary, while significant mistakes have been made in the planning and conduct of this war, the American people and the U.S. military can be

***We have a pretty good model
for how a federal system
in Iraq might work.
It's our own country.***

proud of their effort. We overthrew a savage dictator who ravaged the country for decades. And we have expended enormous sums of money and blood to bring freedom to a foreign nation. But, in the end, the majority of the Iraqis have shown that they prefer theocracy to democracy, tribal domination to tolerance, and revenge to forgiveness.

A partitioned Iraq with three semi-autonomous regions and a weak central government was not our original goal in Iraq. But it's now the best possible outcome. It's a feasible alternative to the other two solutions being advanced in Washington—stay the course while policing a sectarian war, or precipitous withdrawal with consequent chaos. Soft partitioning offers the possibility, not a guarantee, of stability upon the drawdown and eventual departure of U.S. forces. It will not be easy. But unlike our original goal, it appears to be achievable—a viable way to restore a modicum of stability to Iraq. Clearly such an outcome is superior to the murderous dictator we overthrew, superior to an occupation with no seeming end in sight, and superior to the mayhem that would ensue if we summarily abandoned Iraq. **MR**

AN-SAFWAN, OIF 1, 2003

BEGGARS ON THE HIGHWAY,
CHILDREN IN THE STREET,
BANDITS ONLY TEN YEARS OLD,
NO SHOES ON THEIR FEET.

IRAQI BORDER TOWN
OVERCOME BY WAR
WE RIDE HUMVEES SIDEWAYS,
WITH GUNS OUT THE DOOR.

"CLOSE THAT DISTANCE UP!"
"KEEP THOSE PEOPLE BACK!"
"STAY ALERT UP THERE!"
"THAT COULD BE A TRAP!"

"DON'T STOP FOR NOTHIN'!"
"KEEP MOVING ON!"
DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN
UNTIL WE'VE PASSED SAFWAN.



—MAJ Theodore E. Lockwood II
821st Trans Battalion, Topeka, KS