

57. Iraq and the Persian Gulf: Getting Out, Staying Engaged

Policymakers should

- establish a firm timeline for American military withdrawal from Iraq;
- refocus efforts on the principal task of fighting terrorism: identifying and destroying Al Qaeda and other anti-American terrorist networks;
- recognize that the United States cannot impose liberal democracy in Iraq by force; political and economic reform must be embraced and nurtured by the Iraqis themselves;
- follow the withdrawal from Iraq with a military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf; and
- encourage trade, private investment, and other forms of voluntary exchange (including travel, tourism, and study abroad programs) between Americans and the people of the region.

It is in America's strategic interest to end the military occupation of Iraq at the earliest possible date, because a long-term military presence in the country undermines many of the goals that we are hoping to achieve there. A U.S. military occupation is a lightning rod that enables anti-American terrorists to expand their operations against the American troops in their neighborhood and ultimately to America's shores. Further, the presence of U.S. military garrisons in Iraq weakens the forces of democratic reform by undermining the indigenous government's authority and credibility. Finally, because any attempt to impose democracy by force is likely to fail, our presence in Iraq weakens the United States as a nation, diverting our resources and making the United States less capable of responding to genuine threats to U.S. security elsewhere in the world. Regardless of whether the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was right or wrong, it cannot

be undone now, and policymakers are responsible for crafting a strategy that minimizes the risks to U.S. security, especially the risk of terrorist attacks against the United States.

The Costs and Burdens of Occupation

The primary concern for U.S. policymakers should be defending Americans from known threats. An expeditious end of the military occupation of Iraq serves that end because a withdrawal would free crucial resources for fighting known terrorists and at the same time remove a source of grievance for future terrorists. In the meantime, the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq is costly, in terms of both in lives lost and dollars spent. The U.S. occupation in Iraq has already cost the lives of more than 1,000 American service personnel. Several thousand more have been wounded, many of them grievously. Casualty figures among Iraqi civilians are even higher. Through 2003 and 2004 occupation costs totaled, on average, more than \$4 billion per month.

A calculation of the true costs of the military occupation of Iraq must also include the strains on the nation's military. Absent a firm commitment to quickly reduce, and then eliminate, the military presence in Iraq, more and more will be demanded of the men and women in uniform. We're already extending tours of duty involuntarily, a back-door draft for active duty enlistees and for reservists and national guardsmen who have been called to active service. These burdens threaten to undermine the recruitment and retention that are key to the health of the all-volunteer force. Weakening the military diminishes America's ability to deter and defeat challenges to our vital security interests in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

As dangerous as the current situation in Iraq is for our troops and for average Iraqis, the risks extend much further. So long as our forces remain in Iraq, they risk becoming caught in the middle of a civil war between Iraq's feuding ethnic and religious factions. Some advocates of "staying the course" have justified a long-term presence on the grounds that our troops will prevent such a conflict from occurring. On the contrary, these forces may succeed in temporarily stifling ethnic tensions, but true reconciliation can only come from Iraqis themselves and will likely take many years, if it occurs at all. Meanwhile, the presence of U.S. forces serves as a lightning rod for domestic dissent and rebellion.

The Occupation of Iraq Is Counterproductive to Addressing the Terror Threat

The American military occupation of Iraq is not merely costly and burdensome for the United States; it is detrimental to fighting the war on terrorism. Bringing an end to the occupation and withdrawing militarily from Iraq will maximize America's ability to refocus its military and intelligence assets on the fight against those terrorists who present the gravest danger to American security—specifically, Al Qaeda and other anti-American terrorist groups with global reach—while minimizing the risks to vital U.S. national security interests.

Most proponents of a long-term military occupation of Iraq seem to disregard the detrimental effect that the occupation is having on the U.S.-led war against terrorism. By staying in Iraq, the United States sends a grim and misleading message to the rest of the world that Washington is using the occupation as a vehicle for asserting its dominance in the Middle East and imposing its will on the region's populace. The killings of Iraqis, including the inadvertent killings of Iraqi civilians, create new jihadis from the ranks of a population that had previously been largely unreceptive to Osama bin Laden's radical message. But even if our forces never fired a shot in anger at Iraqi citizens, the mere presence of our forces in Iraq would be seen as humiliating. Humiliation breeds contempt. And contempt breeds terrorism.

The jihadis will certainly claim that the American withdrawal represents a victory for their side, but it would be the height of irresponsibility for U.S. policymakers to allow that misperception to take hold. An American military withdrawal would not, and must not, signal that the United States has chosen to ignore events in Iraq. Instead, the withdrawal of U.S. forces must be coupled with a clear and unequivocal message to the people and elites of Iraq: do not threaten the United States; do not support anti-American terrorists; do not develop weapons of mass destruction. If you do, we will be back. Anyone who questions U.S. willingness and resolve to use force need only be reminded of the fate of the Taliban.

The end of the U.S. military occupation actually weakens the terrorists over the long term because Al Qaeda and other anti-American terrorist groups have used the U.S. occupation as a vehicle for promulgating their message of hatred and violence. In short, our occupation emboldens the forces of terror. The United States must use withdrawal from Iraq to its own advantage by countering propaganda by the likes of Osama bin Laden and other anti-American extremists who argue that the United States is

planning to take control of Middle Eastern oil or to otherwise consolidate its control in the region.

Imposing Democracy by Force Is Doomed to Failure

Some of the most fervent advocates of a long-term presence in Iraq move beyond questions about terrorism and direct threats to the United States and argue that American security depends on the establishment of democracy in Iraq. For many, the creation of an Iraqi democracy is America's primary duty after the fall of Saddam. The general reasons for the support of Iraqi democracy are twofold: first, the humanitarian idea of democracy for democracy's sake and, second, the notion that democratic regimes tend not to threaten U.S. national security interests.

While the rhetoric of democratization and political liberalization is used to justify a continued military occupation of the country, the practice of occupation often entails thwarting the wishes of millions of Iraqis. The deeper problem, however, is that it is unlikely that democracy will take hold in Iraq, and certainly not in short order. Moreover, the very conditions for the formation of liberal democratic institutions are in fact undermined by the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. The handover of political sovereignty in June 2004 left in place approximately 140,000 American soldiers. This massive foreign military presence implies a measure of coercion on the Iraqi polity, playing into legitimate concerns that the United States does not really favor self-rule for the Iraqi people but instead hopes to see the emergence of a compliant government in Iraq, imbued with an aura of democratic legitimacy.

Genuine sovereignty for a new government in Iraq can be achieved only when American military personnel are removed from the country. Anything short of that end will forever leave the impression that the new government does not truly serve the people of Iraq. That is true even if the government of Iraq is afforded the superficial trappings of international legitimacy, such as membership in international organizations, and recognition of new national symbols. Sovereign states must be free and independent, and this independence must include the ability of the Iraqi people to defend themselves from threats and to conduct their own foreign policy.

Assuming that U.S. policymakers sincerely hope to create a self-reliant, stable democracy in Iraq, a model that will then be exportable around the Middle East, a prolonged U.S. occupation is unlikely to do the job. Even if it were possible to export democracy at gunpoint, such a strategy entails a much greater commitment than simply overthrowing unfriendly dictators;

it also requires the formulation, and subsequent stabilization, of democratic institutions. That, in turn, would require a massive commitment of will and resources that would erode America's own political and economic health. A long-term military occupation of Iraq is unsustainable.

U.S. military withdrawal therefore should not be predicated on the establishment of a liberal democratic government in Iraq. Policymakers must make a clear distinction between core U.S. national interests (in other words, those interests worth fighting for) and those goals that, while they may be worthy, are not, and should not be, the central object of U.S. foreign policy. Most Americans welcome the prospects for the emergence of a new government in Iraq, even as they recognize that the process is likely to take many years. Most believe that a liberal democratic government can eventually develop and that trade and economic interaction between Iraqis, Americans, and the rest of the international community can stimulate the process. U.S. policymakers should welcome the participation of private groups and nongovernmental organizations in supporting and, where possible, encouraging institutions of civil society that promote political and economic freedom. Those goals cannot be achieved through the application of military power and are not advanced by the maintenance of a U.S. military presence in Iraq.

The United States cannot ensure that the Iraqis will elect liberal democrats to represent them. Instead of trying to dictate outcomes and create a democracy in America's image, policymakers must allow the Iraqi people to create their own system of governance absent the pressure and humiliation of a foreign occupying army.

The tasks of governing must be left to the Iraqi people. The United States for its part should encourage the widest possible representation for Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities and should not demand that the new government be organized around a strong central authority based in Baghdad. If Iraq's disparate ethnic communities opt for some measure of autonomy, the United States should not stand in the way of a federal solution. However, Iraqis must understand that they will have responsibility for defending themselves from both internal and external threats.

For the United States to remain tied to the fortunes of the government of Iraq places our country, and our citizens, in a no-win situation. For example, in stating its preference for democracy, but in opposing the democratic impulses of the Shiite majority and the Kurds' desire for autonomy, the United States finds itself on a collision course with the wishes of millions of Iraqis. As policymakers juggle various and clashing

commitments, Americans—both in Iraq and abroad—could become a target for all unsatisfied Iraqis, Shiite or Sunni, Arab or Kurd. Every month, every year, that the U.S. military remains in Iraq only makes it more difficult and more costly for the United States to extract itself. A decision to remove all U.S. military personnel from Iraq will minimize the enormous costs and risks associated with a military occupation and could eventually set the stage for a stable and sustainable relationship between Iraq and the United States.

Changing American Policies in the Middle East

Many observers believe that the United States must maintain a large military presence in the Middle East to secure its vital national interests in the Persian Gulf. In reality, however, the United States need not retain troops in a region in order to protect our security interests there. This applies both to our physical security—protection from attack by terrorist groups—and our economic security, in this case, ensuring continued access to Middle Eastern oil. The United States has the most capable military in human history; our capacity for projecting our power throughout the entire world is truly unprecedented. In other words, in the highly unlikely event that regional conditions were to threaten vital U.S. security interests, the United States could draw upon the military’s capacity for projecting force over great distances to eliminate those threats.

Meanwhile, from a strictly economic standpoint, the United States need not retain troops in the Persian Gulf in order to remain engaged in the region or to secure its access to Middle Eastern oil. The gulf’s energy resources are important to the global economy, but goods and services flow on the world market absent explicit “protection” by military forces.

In short, U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf should not be based on the assumption that the region’s energy resources will not reach global markets absent the physical presence of the U.S. military. Oil is the principal source of revenue for the Persian Gulf countries; the leaders of those countries could not withhold the precious commodity from the world without committing economic suicide. That is true regardless of the internal composition of the government (i.e., democratic or autocratic) and applies to both pro- and anti-American governments.

The presence of U.S. troops may have temporarily stabilized the Persian Gulf from time to time, but, as the terrorist incidents in Saudi Arabia demonstrated, the troops have also been, and remain, a source of tension and instability. While the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from

Saudi Arabia in 2003 was both appropriate and welcomed, that action should be the first of several steps leading to a wholesale reduction in the American military's "footprint" in the entire region. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's decrepit regime provides a golden opportunity for a fundamental change in U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. In addition to the removal of troops from Saudi Arabia and Iraq, U.S. forces should be withdrawn from the other Gulf States, including Qatar and Kuwait.

Focusing on Known Threats As We Reduce Our Risks

Prior to launching the military operation that ultimately resulted in the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, the Bush administration argued that this would set in motion a chain of events that would ultimately democratize the entire region. That may happen, but U.S. policy should not be directed toward that end. Our overriding goal should be the protection of vital U.S. interests and the mitigation or elimination of threats to the United States and its citizens. Given the United States' low standing in the region, skeptics are likely to question U.S. motives, inherently weakening would-be reformers. Rather than take a direct, active role in the creation of new governments in the region, the United States can foster an atmosphere conducive to reform in the Middle East, including the expansion of liberal democratic principles, and free-market economics and entrepreneurship, by adopting a largely hands-off approach.

U.S. policymakers should do so with a clear eye on the lessons of recent history. Many scholars warned of the dangers of a lengthy U.S. presence in the region, long before the events of September 11. There were alternatives to a lengthy U.S. presence in the region throughout the 1990s, a presence that most people realized posed grave risks for American military personnel and American interests. There are even more alternatives today. A decision by the Bush administration to substantially reduce the number of U.S. military personnel stationed in the region will be welcomed by the troops and by U.S. taxpayers and could set the stage for a stable and sustainable relationship between Americans and the men and women living there for many years to come.

Suggested Readings

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