



## **PASSING THE BATON: AN OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TAKES ON THE CHALLENGE OF IRAQ**

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*This article discusses the current situation in Iraq and U.S. policy on that country. It discusses current plans for a U.S. withdrawal and Iraqi politics, putting them also in the context of the likely policy of the Obama administration and the coming challenges in Iraq.*

All across America, people increasingly seem to believe that the war in Iraq is won. Republicans proclaim it triumphantly. Democrats acknowledge it grudgingly and then try to change the subject to Afghanistan.

There is only one problem. The war in Iraq is not won. Despite the remarkable progress since 2006, the situation in Iraq remains extremely tentative and could easily fall apart again.

The United States--and particularly the U.S. military--will be a critical determinant of whether it is able to build on that progress and leave a stable, functional Iraq that picks its way toward a better future, or squander all of the gains made and lives lost and allow it to sink back into civil war--a civil war that would be deadly for the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Taken together, however, the perception and the reality create a conundrum for the new Obama Administration. President Obama cannot be seen as "losing" the war that George W. Bush is now increasingly seen as having "won," albeit only after nearly losing it himself. The fact that this perception is inaccurate is also unfortunately irrelevant in the world of politics.

On the other hand, candidate Obama promised a rapid withdrawal from Iraq based on an unconditional timetable--an even faster one than the goals set in the new Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and Iraq. He also announced on the campaign trail that Afghanistan, not Iraq, would be the focus of his foreign policy, and

he will need to shift troops there if he is going to honor those pledges. Yet the truth is that Afghanistan has little strategic value for the United States, while Iraq is vital. Consequently, jeopardizing the real priority of Iraq for political gains and the lesser priority of Afghanistan would leave the new president vulnerable to a harsh verdict from history and require a lot of explaining during his 2012 reelection bid should he pull the plug on Iraq too soon.

Fortunately, the situation in Iraq is not hopeless for President Obama, although it will be hard. If progress in building a new political foundation in Iraq can proceed at even a fraction of the pace that security has improved since 2006, a reasonably rapid drawdown (albeit hardly the total withdrawal of combat brigades in 16 months he promised during the campaign) should be possible. If, as seems more likely, Iraqi politics encounter problems, a slower pace of withdrawal should still allow the new President to run for reelection having left a secure Iraq *and* having removed virtually all American combat troops in his first term.

### **CONTINUED SECURITY IMPROVEMENTS**

The reason that growing numbers of Americans are reaching the conclusion that the war in Iraq has been won is that the security situation there continues to improve in an impressive fashion. The civil war has been virtually extinguished--there have been close to zero instances of sectarian violence for

months. The Sunni insurgency is over. There are still frequent terrorist attacks in Baghdad, Mosul, and other cities, but these are more lethal nuisances than serious threats to the political order of the society. Reflecting this, the numbers of Iraqi casualties have fallen from nearly 4,000 per month in 2006 to about 500 per month over the summer of 2008.

Across much of Iraq, a sense of normality is creeping back. In areas that had previously experienced horrific violence, barriers are being torn down, soldiers replaced by police, and parents are once again allowing their children to play in the streets.

In response, Iraq's micro-economies are beginning to revive in much of the country. With security much improved, traffic--in the cities and on the highways--is thick again. The stores are open, and open for longer, and the markets are bustling. Iraq's macro-economy remains moribund (more on that later), but average Iraqis are having an easier time with many routine tasks of day-to-day life than they once had.

### **POLITICS, POLITICS, POLITICS**

As hoped and predicted, the improvement in security (and, to a much lesser extent, economics) has caused profound changes to Iraqi politics. The logjam that paralyzed Iraqi politics from 2004 through early 2007 has broken wide open. Instead, Iraqi politics today are remarkably fluid, with constant alignments and realignments producing unexpected coalitions. The old ethno-sectarian divisions among Sunnis, Shi'a, and Kurds are not gone, but they are now only one of several different axes around which Iraqi politics are coalescing. In one positive development, a number of the new divisions are driven by policy differences--over federalism, the American presence, relations with Iran, Iraq's oil industry, and the like--which have created important splits within the Sunni and Shi'i camps. Indeed, as of this writing, the most important rivalry in Baghdad is not Sunnis vs. Shi'a, but the alliance between the Shi'i Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the two main Kurdish parties on the one hand,

pitted against Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Da'wa Party, the Sadrists, and a Shi'i tribal movement that is trying to shape itself into a new political force.

In Iraq today, it is all about politics. All of the remaining problems--and they are still many and daunting--are problems of politics. Integration of the Sons of Iraq (SoIs) into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the treatment of thousands of (mostly Sunni) detainees who will be transferred from Coalition custody to the jurisdiction of the (mostly Shi'a) government of Iraq, the status of Kirkuk and wider Kurdish-Arab tensions, the residual violence in Mosul, the potential for a military coup, and Maliki's steady effort to centralize autocratic power in his own hands are the most likely sparks to renewed violence and even a return to civil war. All of them stem from failings of Iraq's political process.

The same is largely true today of Iraq's enduring economic problems. Direct foreign investment in Iraq increased from about \$10 million per month in 2007 to roughly \$100 million this year. The fact that it is not soaring even higher, like that of the region's other major oil producers, is no longer a product of poor security but increasingly a product of poor governance. In both the ministries of oil and electricity, the security factors affecting basic performance have largely been solved: attacks on pipelines, pumping stations, power lines, transformers, generators, and the like are way down. At this point, the remaining problems (which are very sizable) are the results of incompetence, dysfunctional bureaucratic practices, and the intrusion of venal politics into the provision of services.

For instance, Iraq is now generating roughly the same amount of energy that it did before the invasion and Coalition advisers to the Ministry of Electricity report that the national grid is stable. Instead, the reasons that most Iraqis get only a few hours of electricity per day are about demand and politics. Since 2003, Iraqis have gone on a buying spree, importing air conditioners, freezers, TVs, and all manner of other energy-gobbling appliances. As a result, demand has gone through the roof.

There is no question that Iraq desperately needs to build vast amounts of new generation, distribution, and transmission capacity to meet this new demand (and eventually replace the old grid infrastructure), but Minister of Electricity Karim Wahid al-Hasan is an old-style Saddamist who micromanages, has difficulty delegating authority or making major decisions, and is a non-aligned Shi'a who lacks the political base to back him against stronger foes in the government. His ministry is bloated with huge numbers of useless personnel--friends and cronies of powerful Iraqi leaders looking for sinecures--and too few capable technocrats. He is engaged in a moronic feud with Oil Minister Husayn Sharastani, in which Sharastani refuses to provide fuel for Iraq's generators and Karim retaliates by cutting power to the Bayji refinery.

Meanwhile, Sharastani is guilty of failings of similar scope and dimension, including a baffling failure to repair the main pipeline from Bayji to Baghdad even though there is no security reason not to do so. Add to that unintelligible disputes among Sharastani, Karim, and Finance Minister Bayan Jabr over funding, and it is easy to see Iraq's energy ministries are not doing better despite the improvements in security. Why these various personnel have not been replaced or compelled to do their jobs properly stem from Iraq's dysfunctional politics.

In short, if Iraq reverts back to widespread conflict and/or its economy continues to flounder, the cause will be the failure of Iraqi politics, not security. This means that continued progress in Iraq is now all about politics. That is especially true for 2009, which will see provincial elections at the start of the year, municipal elections in the spring, and then national elections in the winter (probably in December, but possibly in January 2010).

### ***The 2009 Elections***

The upcoming elections are critical because Iraqi politics today are in a state of disequilibrium. The fluidity roiling Iraqi

politics will not last. Iraqi politics will settle into a more stable pattern, a state of equilibrium, and the elections will play a huge role in determining which type of equilibrium prevails. Many of the imaginable states of equilibrium are very dangerous--the kind of political equations that would likely push Iraq back into all-out civil war, albeit perhaps more slowly and in a different manner than what was happening in 2005-2006. These include a bid by Maliki or someone else to make himself dictator; a coup by the military; or a recrudescence of the monopoly on power by the main Shi'a militia parties--ISCI, the Sadrists, Da'wa, and Fadhila.

All three of these scenarios would likely produce tremendous violence. Anyone attempting to make himself dictator will galvanize all of the other parties to oppose him by force and there is no leader out there who seems to have what it takes to win such a fight and unify the country under his iron fist, at least not for long. It is worth keeping in mind that the only Iraqi dictator who successfully held power for more than a few years was Saddam Hussein, who required genocidal levels of violence to do so. The Iraqi military is not strong or unified enough to pull off a coup, and the effort to do so could easily cause it to fragment. Finally, it was the chauvinistic misrule by an ISCI-Sadrism-Da'wa-Fadhila alliance that was driving Iraq to civil war in the first place in 2006.

There are also some more positive potential outcomes for Iraq's political process. However, it is worth noting that while Iraqi politics could crystallize very quickly--in weeks or months--around one of the bad scenarios, it would take much longer--several years at least--to settle into one of the better scenarios and, even then, Iraq would hardly be Switzerland.

Still, all across Iraq, average Iraqis desperately want political change. They consider the current parties ruling in Baghdad to be thoroughly corrupt, the cause of the violence, the source of their other miseries, unresponsive to their needs, and ultimately unrepresentative of their perspectives and aspirations. The sentiment of "throw the bums

out” seems ubiquitous, including among both Shi’a and Kurds. In response, hundreds of new independent political parties and candidates have emerged all across the country (even in Kurdistan), reflecting the desire of the average Iraqi for new leadership.

Of course, the current power-holders in Baghdad have no intention of going gently. Instead, they are fighting back every way they can. To a limited extent, they are trying to deliver good governance and basic services to the people to show that they can be responsive and responsible representatives of their constituents. Yet their main effort has been to subvert the political process as best they can, by killing, intimidating, or buying off potential rivals. What this means is that many of those “independent” candidates and parties may already be under the thumb or in the pocket of one or another of the big parties.

Nevertheless, there are still several positive scenarios despite this harsh reality. The first is if the people choose--and feel safe enough--to vote for true independents, unaffiliated overtly or covertly with the big parties. Such an eventuality would be a tremendous boon for Iraq, because it would break the monopoly on power held by the current parties. It would force them to begin delivering on political compromises, good governance, and basic services so as to hold onto a (dwindling) share of power in future elections. Over the course of two to three election cycles (eight to twelve years), it might actually produce a reasonably representative Iraqi parliament.

Even if the elections do not produce this most positive of the feasible outcomes, there are other paths toward stability, progress, and pluralism for Iraq. For instance, if significant numbers of independents are elected, even if they are all coopted by one or another of the major parties, this could still maintain the fluidity of Iraqi politics and prevent its crystallization around one of the bad alternatives *if* the independents are not wedded to one of the major parties.

In other words, if there are large numbers of independents who are always open to the highest bidder and willing to sell out one patron for another, this would make it difficult

for any one party to secure the kind of permanent majority they all seek. For instance, in southern Iraq, a new political movement among the Shi’i tribes, claiming to have over a million members, is selling itself to the highest bidder. While it would be much better if they were to form a party of their own and run candidates, as long as they do not become permanent constituents of Da’wa, ISCI, or the Sadrists, and are willing and able to shift their allegiance among them--thereby preventing any one of them from emerging with a clear, permanent majority--they can still play a positive role in Iraqi politics.

Moreover, because so many Iraqis are so desirous of change, even the illusion of change would be better than a clear-cut triumph by the same old parties using the same old methods of intimidation, fear-mongering, bribery, extortion, and violence. Even Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has recognized this by announcing that, unlike in 2005 when he told all Shi’a to vote exclusively for one of the chauvinistically Shi’i parties, in 2008, he believes Iraq’s Shi’a should feel free to vote outside the bonds of sectarian loyalty. This too should help secure some change, which is important because no one knows what would happen if the vast majority of Iraqis were disappointed by elections that failed to produce any meaningful change. Whatever their reaction, it certainly would not be positive.

## **THE CONTINUING VITAL U.S. ROLE**

While the problems of Iraq have increasingly become issues of internal politics, that should not be taken as a sign that the United States, and particularly the U.S. military, have done their job and can head home. Quite the contrary is true. Today, American forces and the wider American effort remain absolutely vital, although their role has changed significantly. Today, the refrain heard all over Iraq--from Americans, Iraqis, Europeans, UN personnel, and others--is that the American military is the glue holding the country together. A better metaphor would be that the U.S. military is

more like a cast placed on a broken arm that is allowing the fractures to knit together properly, a process that can produce a strong arm again, but only slowly.

The role of American military forces in Iraq has changed significantly since 2007, and continues to evolve. American forces continue to lead the fight against the remnants of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), in Mosul and other parts of northern Iraq. However, elsewhere, American forces are increasingly shifting over to two different sets of missions: on the one hand, advisors and enablers to Iraqi military formations, and on the other hand, peacekeepers.<sup>1</sup>

The advising and training role was always one foreseen by American commanders, and it remains crucial. Thousands of American soldiers are partnered with Iraqi formations; they provide guidance, occasionally sources of emulation, and often are able to call in critical enablers that only the United States possesses--air power, artillery support, predator drones, intelligence, and surveillance capabilities, even medical evacuation.

However, the second role--as peacekeepers--looms ever larger, especially because of the criticality of Iraqi politics during the next stage of Iraq's reconstruction. American troops are increasingly seen by Iraqis as a neutral force preventing all of Iraq's bad actors (including the government) from employing force against them and one another. It removes violence as a means of resolving disputes among different Iraqi groups, forcing them to try to solve their problems through the political process. It is absolutely essential for moving forward because it gives various Iraqi groups the confidence to "take risks for peace." For instance, in the absence of American military forces it is virtually unimaginable that the Sons of Iraq would have agreed to be paid and controlled by the government of Iraq as it did earlier this fall. The large American military presence gave them the peace of mind to do so, knowing that if the government of Iraq tried to crush them then the United States would step in to protect them.

This American role is emerging across Iraq as the most important one given current circumstances. At Khanaqin earlier this year, Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga probably would have come to blows had American military personnel not been present to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the stand-off. The American military presence is also the greatest impediment to a military coup. Similarly, the most important factor limiting Maliki's efforts to consolidate autocratic power is the United States, and specifically the fact that the U.S. military remains the most powerful force in Iraq. American forces are critical to the economic and political capacity-building missions of both Coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams, as well as the UN mission to Iraq. American and UN civilians have made clear that without the U.S. military, they cannot operate and if the U.S. military pulls back, they will also do so. American and UN personnel report that they commonly hear average Iraqis asking for American military personnel to be present at the polling places before and during elections because the Iraqis claim that only if the American troops are present will they really be free to vote for whom they want.

## **GETTING BY WITH LESS**

A key challenge then for the United States moving forward is how to continue to play this critical role in an era in which American resources and authority in Iraq will decline, perhaps precipitously. Whatever decision President Obama makes about the pace of the U.S. military drawdown from Iraq, it seems certain that there will be a drawdown. Moreover, in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, it seems unlikely that the White House or the Congress will be willing to fund economic reconstruction in Iraq as extravagantly as in the past. Moreover, there will be no "surge" in American civilian personnel to take up the slack as the military reduces its presence. Simply put, there just aren't enough Foreign Service Officers in the world to increase significantly the complement already in Iraq.

The UN might be able to tap into the wider pool of international reconstruction workers and NGOs, but, as noted, they see their role as unavoidably dependent on the American presence.

The pull from Washington is also likely to be accompanied by a push from Baghdad. Unfortunately, if it comes--as seems inevitable--it will be for mostly the wrong reasons. It is likely to come from Prime Minister Maliki, who increasingly sees the United States as the main impediment to his consolidation of power, as well as his Sadrist allies, who have always attempted to win support by playing the ultra-nationalist card--which pitted them against the United States from the outset and provoked a consistent American effort to prevent them from acquiring the kind of power they seek.

Indeed, Maliki was reportedly very ambivalent about the new SOFA agreement. In large part because the Iranians successfully (but inaccurately) convinced much of Iraq's Shi'i community that the SOFA would compromise Iraqi sovereignty, Maliki feared that supporting it would tarnish his nationalist credentials. This despite the fact that he had insisted on a SOFA rather than a simple rollover of the UN Security Council resolution as Washington had initially preferred. This coupled with frustration at the American efforts to prevent him from consolidating power left him toying with the idea of allowing the UNSCR to expire without a SOFA--thereby forcing a full American withdrawal.

However, Maliki also recognizes that he cannot allow the country to fall apart. What good is being dictator over a country torn apart by full-scale civil war? In late October 2008, at a dramatic meeting of the Iraqi leadership, Iraq's defense and interior ministers stated flat out that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) would not be able to hold the country together if the Americans left at the beginning of 2009. Consequently, Maliki was forced to agree to the SOFA, although he used the popular nationalist backlash to extract numerous concessions from the United States

that will make it harder for Americans to constrain his actions than in the past.

It is impossible to know how, where, or when the Iraqi government will choose to limit American freedom of action in the future, but it seems sure to do so--and more so over time. Nevertheless, it is still the case that the United States will remain enormously influential in Iraq for years to come. Indeed, the United States likely will remain the most influential entity in Iraq for some time to come because of the size of its military presence, the ISF's dependence on its presence, and the fact that so many Iraqis do not want to see all American troops removed immediately.

Moreover, there are actions that the United States could take that could potentially increase its leverage with the Iraqis. For instance, because Iraq's economic problems increasingly derive from dysfunctional politics rather than American-caused damage from the invasion or misguided early reconstruction, it would be plausible for the United States to announce that it will no longer pay for economic assistance or capacity-building programs for Iraq's economic ministries. Instead, the United States could propose a new model, perhaps based along the lines of the U.S.-Saudi Joint Economic Commission, to handle American support to Iraq's further economic and ministerial development.<sup>2</sup> In that example, American and Saudi officials jointly assessed Saudi Arabia's developmental needs and identified how best to meet them. In some cases, the U.S. government agreed to provide the expertise and materiel, but the Saudis had to pay for this assistance under a program similar to Foreign Military Sales. In other cases, the commission agreed that private contractors would be best suited to the task--and both countries then identified the right contractor, drew up the terms of service and oversaw the project.

The truth is that the Iraqis still need American assistance, not so much to prevent a further slide into chaos and violence, but to develop into the kind of country they would like to become. Consequently, they would likely want such an arrangement, which would remove the need for the U.S. taxpayer to pay

for Iraq's further reconstruction. Perhaps of greater importance, it would reconfigure the relationship from one in which the U.S. attempts to impose upon Iraq the development assistance it needs, to one in which Iraq is unambiguously asking for American assistance. This could be enormously helpful in recasting the relationship in a much more positive light for Iraqis and Americans alike.

### **FOCUS ON POLITICS, DRAWDOWN TROOPS SLOWLY AND PRIORITIZE**

There are three broad principles that an Obama administration should derive from this state of affairs in moving forward on Iraq.

1. *Disengage slowly, with an eye on Iraq's stability.* One cannot take off the cast until reasonably certain that the bones have healed. Unfortunately, this is where the medical analogy breaks down, because mending a broken society is much harder and more complicated than mending a broken limb. As General Odierno and his lieutenants already intend, the United States is going to have to test the waters continuously to see whether further drawdowns and redeployments can be sustained. U.S. commanders on the ground should test these propositions aggressively, but err on the side of caution whenever the results are ambiguous, because major set-backs simply cannot be afforded. At a tactical level, the United States does not want to have to withdraw from a place or a mission only to find things falling apart and have to reassert themselves. At a strategic level, the United States just cannot afford to allow the country to fall apart.

In particular, the plans of both the military command and the embassy in Baghdad for the drawdown of forces is smart, sensible, and logical, but it is predicated on things continuing to go as well in the next three years as they have over the previous two. As both General Odierno and Ambassador Crocker understand, given the litany of problems

plaguing Iraqi politics, that trajectory may prove illusory. Under those circumstances, the command and the administration are going to have to be willing to slow the drawdown to give the Iraqi political process the time that it needs, and give American personnel attempting to deal with the problems the most leverage and options to do so.

2. *Focus on Iraq's politics.* American military forces in Iraq need to help the Iraqis stamp out the last remnants of al-Qa'ida (if at all possible), prevent the re-emergence of Shi'i militias and terrorist groups, and continue to ensure the security of the Iraqi people against all possible threats of violence. However, looking forward, the entire U.S. mission needs to make Iraq's politics its principal concern. As noted, all of Iraq's remaining problems are now tied to the dysfunctions of its political system and therefore all American efforts in Iraq--political, diplomatic, economic, and military--must be structured with an eye toward alleviating or eliminating those problems, and certainly not making them worse. That may mean taking on tasks that do not seem militarily necessary to military officers, or economically sensible to economic advisers.

A prime example of this may be securing Iraq's elections. It is unclear at this time what will be necessary, but given the numbers of Iraqis asking for American troops at the polling places to ensure that they are fair and free, it may prove necessary. Although this would not be a true security mission, the importance of the election to Iraq's political progress means that U.S. military and political leaders must consider it any way.

3. *Prioritize.* Given that American resources and authorities will be more constrained in the future than they have been in the past (although the full extent is very unclear), the United States is going to have to do a much better job of determining its priorities and concentrating resources and

leverage against the most important ones. This will be an important change for Americans in Iraq. In the past, the United States had unlimited authority and extensive resources and, as a result, it concerned itself with almost everything in Iraq. There was certainly some virtue to that, but it will not be possible in the future regardless of whether it is desirable.

Moreover, to link this to the previous recommendation, many of the highest priorities will have to be those most closely related to ensuring that Iraq's political process develops in a positive, sustainable direction. It will mean ensuring that the ISF does not attempt a coup. It will mean continuing to prevent Prime Minister Maliki from making himself a strongman--or anyone else from doing so for that matter. It is also going to mean preventing the current powerbrokers in Baghdad from cementing their rule permanently by subverting the process.

This last point is important because even within the sphere of politics, some things are going to be more important than others. For instance, at some level the United States might try to determine who is in charge in Baghdad, as in the past. In the resource- and authority-constrained future, however, that is going to be much harder, and probably less necessary. Instead, the United States needs to focus on the political process itself and making sure that Iraq's various political parties are not able to subvert that process, as all of the large, current power holders are attempting. This will mean doing whatever is necessary to prevent them from bribing, blackmailing, intimidating, and killing political opponents--and seeing that those who use such methods are punished.

It will also mean doing whatever is possible to help level the playing field by providing greater support to the newly-emerging leaders and parties hoping to compete in the 2009 elections and displacing the corrupt old parties that have so far failed to deliver what the Iraqi people want or need. That is going to require a much bigger effort than the current programs

by National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute.

## **GRASPING THE REAL STRATEGIC SITUATION**

Another challenge the United States is going to have to overcome to deal with the real problems of Iraq is one of the new administration's own making. Throughout the presidential campaign, whenever the Republicans brought up the success of the "surge" in Iraq, Democrats would retort that Iraq was not the central front in the war on terrorism, that Afghanistan was, and that this required the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq so that they could be sent to Afghanistan--which was the more important of the two wars. Unfortunately, almost every element of these claims is wrong, and the new administration will have to demonstrate that it is willing to put the best interests of the country ahead of consistency with its campaign message.

Iraq is of far greater significance to American interests than Afghanistan for reasons that include, but go well beyond, the threat of terrorism. Iraq is of intrinsic strategic importance because of its oil wealth. It is of even greater importance because the civil war that threatened to engulf Iraq in 2006 (and which could still reignite despite all of the progress during 2007-2008) also threatened to destabilize the wider Persian Gulf region, whose oil production is economically irreplaceable.

Afghanistan has little intrinsic strategic value to the United States. The war in Afghanistan derives its importance to American interests from three sources. First, the United States did invade the country and topple its government. Second, there is concern that if allowed to fall back into tribalist semi-anarchy, the Taliban might return, and with them, al-Qa'ida might be able to reestablish a presence from which to launch new terrorist attacks. Last, there is the fear that true chaos in Afghanistan would further destabilize Pakistan, which, because of its extremist politics, terrorism, and possession of

nuclear weapons, cannot be allowed to deteriorate any farther. None of these arguments is inconsequential; together, they do justify keeping Afghanistan as a major priority for the United States in the years ahead, second only to Iraq in military terms.

It should be noted that the terrorist threat does not reverse U.S. strategic priorities. Simply put, al-Qa'ida central, which remains important for training and motivating terrorists around the world, as well as furnishing the skilled personnel critical to many recent attacks, is in Pakistan, *not* Afghanistan. Specifically, it is believed to be somewhere in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Given the ability to operate from the FATA, it is not clear that al-Qa'ida even need to move back into Afghanistan if it were possible to do so. Moreover, given current NATO force levels in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that the Taliban could carve out enough of a sanctuary there to allow al-Qa'ida to recreate the kind of facilities it had before 9/11. In other words, al-Qa'ida is a Pakistan problem, not an Afghanistan problem.

If the United States were willing to withdraw all of its forces from Iraq and commit them all to Afghanistan, effectively flooding the country with Western troops, it is unlikely to have more than a minimal impact on al-Qa'ida central or its ability to plan and conduct terrorist operations because they are in Pakistan, not Afghanistan.

The problem of the Taliban/al-Qa'ida sanctuary in Pakistan cannot be solved by deploying more American military forces to Afghanistan. A stronger American presence in Afghanistan might allow for more aggressive cross-border operations into Pakistan, but these are unlikely to eliminate the problem. As the United States learned in Vietnam, mounting cross-border operations--whether small special forces raids or much larger air and ground campaigns--cannot alone solve the sanctuary problem. These kinds of operations famously failed to eliminate Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, let alone North Vietnam itself, no matter how big or how protracted the operations.

As for dealing with al-Qa'ida central in Pakistan, doing so can only be accomplished by competent Pakistani forces as part of a wider effort by a legitimate Pakistani government to deal with the country's various internal problems. The kinds of low-intensity conflict operations that have succeeded in Iraq and that the United States is now contemplating for Afghanistan, may well be part of such a program, but they cannot be implemented by American forces alone, and certainly not without Pakistani government approval and assistance.

Thus, rooting out al-Qa'ida from the FATA is only conceivable with the cooperation of the Pakistani government, which so far is not forthcoming. That is a diplomatic challenge for the United States, not a military challenge. At some point, if the Pakistanis actually make a real effort to subdue the FATA and extirpate the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, some cross-border American operations from Afghanistan could be helpful. In fact, if the Pakistanis will countenance it, American combat units deploying alongside their troops might be even more helpful. That day, however, is a long way away, if it ever comes, and certainly does not justify a redeployment of troops from Iraq any time soon.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that in Iraq, U.S. troops are making a real difference. They remain important today, even as the surge has ended, and even as Iraq's security forces are bearing an increasingly large share of the collective burden. Among other tasks they are helping defeat an al-Qa'ida threat that emerged in the heart of the Arab world after 2003--where it would be far more dangerous than it is in Pakistan or Afghanistan--and are helping preserve a newfound Sunni-Shi'a ceasefire that is crucial to future Middle East stability.

Quickly shifting large numbers of U.S. troops to Afghanistan might or might not produce a major improvement in that situation there, but doing so would have little impact on the most important U.S. national interests and could easily jeopardize the higher priority of building on the gains made in Iraq since 2006.

The strategic calculus should be clear: Iraq is a vital American interest and American troops are critical to its success. American troops may also be critical to Afghanistan's success, but it is a lesser priority than Iraq. Pakistan may or may not be as important as Iraq, but solving the problems of Pakistan is a diplomatic task, not a military one. Consequently, the notion that American troops need to be withdrawn rapidly from Iraq to deal with the "more important" war in Afghanistan is strategically backward.

### **THE ROAD AHEAD**

The war in Iraq is neither won nor is it lost. Great progress has been made and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it could, over a period of years, achieve sustainable stability, and then at some future date even true pluralism and prosperity. Yet the quelling of the civil war that had been engulfing the country has brought to the fore the deep political dysfunctions of Iraq, and unless they are adequately resolved, they could easily reignite the same vicious cycle that were feeding that conflict. America's role in Iraq remains absolutely critical although the ability to play that role is becoming more and more complicated. With patience and perseverance, there is no reason that an Obama administration cannot achieve not just a satisfactory outcome in Iraq, but an outright positive one.

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### **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Credit for the initial observation regarding this shift--and what that means for the missions of U.S. forces--should go to Dr. Stephen Biddle, who first raised the issue with this writer in May 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Ambassador Ronald Neumann who reached the same conclusion regarding American support to Iraq's economic development and suggested the very useful model of the U.S.-Saudi Joint Economic Commission.