

THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT IRAQ: REPORT FROM A SYMPOSIUM

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Is America now winning in Iraq? What would "victory" mean? Over the last several months, optimism over the spread of local-level security in Iraq and the changed politics of the Iraqi Sunni community has surged. Analysts from all sides of the political spectrum have noted the decline in American and Iraqi casualties from their peak in the preceding year but sharply disagree about how to interpret these trends. Republican presidential candidates and the conservative media now routinely trumpet that the United States is winning. American military and diplomatic officials in Iraq themselves are notably more circumspect, routinely warning of the fragility of the current progress and the urgent need for political progress commensurate with recent security gains. Many Democratic politicians and liberal analysts have in turn focused upon the political dimension, in particular the failure of Iraqi politicians to take advantage of the security gains to achieve national political reconciliation.

Lost in much of the political argument over the success of the "surge" has been a more fundamental debate over the purpose of American strategy in Iraq. Much of the public discourse seems to have degenerated into partisan arguments about body counts, while neglecting the core political and strategic questions. Suppose that Iraq stabilizes into a condition of low-level but manageable violence, a "warlord state" composed of a patchwork of local-level deals largely ignoring a sectarian and irrelevant central state, maintained by a long-term American presence of some 100,000 troops. What American strategic interests would be served, and what opportunities forgone, with such an outcome? Such calculations depend on a whole series of crucial questions about the sustainability of current trends. Can such a patchwork lead to a stable peace in the absence of political reconciliation? Does the devolution to the local level make strategic sense, even if it reaps short-term tactical gains? Will local security eventually trickle up to reconciliation at the national level, either by changing the calculation of national elites or by cultivating an alternative elite more amenable to compromise? Towards what endpoint are the tactics leading? Do we want to see a unified Iraq with a sustainable political accord? If so, are American political and military tactics encouraging or discouraging such an outcome?

In November 2007, I organized an online symposium about these strategic questions.¹ Colin Kahl, an assistant professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University and contributor to the Center for a New American Security report, "Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Out of Iraq," and Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and co-author of the report, "Strategic Reset: Reclaiming Control of U.S. Security in the Middle East," provided extensive posts bookended by my own commentary. Each extensively revised his

contribution to that symposium, taking into account the others' arguments as well as the extremely productive comments and arguments the symposium generated across the blogosphere.

Marc Lynch

TURNING POINT OR TACTICAL PAUSE? PROSPECTS FOR STABILITY AND POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION IN IRAQ

Colin H. Kahl

It has become a cliché in Washington to say that there are "no good options" in Iraq. The cliché has taken hold so quickly because it is true. Although some conservative commentators continue to speak of an American "victory" in Iraq,² such talk is ridiculous. At this point, if we are lucky, the various warring Iraqi parties may eke out a basic accommodation that allows them to coexist with a modicum of stability. There is little hope of real national reconciliation in the foreseeable future, let alone achievement of President George W. Bush's grandiose vision of a Jeffersonian democracy on the Tigris. If everything works out, Iraq may just barely avoid becoming a safe haven for international terrorism, the site of a major humanitarian catastrophe, and the focal point for a regional conflagration. This is not victory; it is simply the mitigation of the self-inflicted wounds created by the invasion and years of mismanagement of the war.

Yet it would have been difficult to imagine achieving even this minimalist definition of success a year ago. The "surge" of additional U.S. forces starting in February 2007 and a series of critical decisions by Iraqi combatants have opened a narrow window of opportunity to move Iraq toward stability. But this window could close quickly. It is not clear whether recent security gains represent a genuine turning point or a mere tactical pause that will soon give way to renewed civil war. Much will depend on the actions of the U.S. and Iraqi governments in coming months.

As the United States adjusts its strategy, it must recognize that Iraq is moving rapidly in the direction of a highly decentralized state.³ It will not be a neat three-way division, as some "soft partition" proponents envision.⁴ Instead, there will be some relatively homogenous provinces and localities, and others with pockets of homogenous and mixed communities, all attempting to provide for their own security and governance. In this emerging context, the best we can hope for in the near-to-medium term is a stable, decentralized equilibrium that is sustainable as U.S. forces draw down. This equilibrium should be rooted in a rough balance of power among Iraq's Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities; sufficient security and economic ties between center and periphery to prevent the country from flying apart; and a minimalist approach to political accommodation that empowers provinces and localities and contributes to a "live and let live" attitude. The United States should foster this accommodation by setting firm conditions on the continued presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and by bargaining hard during upcoming negotiations aimed at creating a long-term U.S.-Iraq agreement.

PROGRESS IN IRAQ?

Although Iraq remains a very dangerous place, there has been significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation over the past year. The clearest evidence for this is the declining level of Iraqi civilian casualties. After the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samarra tipped the country into sectarian civil war, the number of Iraqis killed by violence skyrocketed. Based on Iraqi Ministry of Health and morgue figures, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq estimated that approximately 1,800 civilians were killed in January 2006; by June-December 2006, the monthly average nearly doubled to 3,300. According to U.S. military statistics incorporating data from Iraqi ministries, the number of civilian deaths per month went down steadily, albeit

unevenly, across the period of the surge. The monthly total declined from approximately 2,800 in January 2007 to 1,600 in June to around 550 in December.⁵ Estimates from independent organizations are higher but confirm the same general trend. According to Iraq Body Count, a non-profit organization that tallies civilian deaths from media accounts, the number of fatalities declined from approximately 2,600 in January 2007 to 2,100 in June to 900 in December.⁶

Signs of security progress can be seen in other statistics as well. According to U.S. commanders, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has been crippled in Baghdad and Anbar and degraded by 60 to 70 percent nationwide since the beginning of 2007 (although the organization continues to be active in parts of Diyala, Salah ad Din and Ninewa provinces).⁷ The total number of all types of attacks on U.S. forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and Iraqi civilians in October 2007 was down 55 percent from their levels in June, and, by the end of November, attacks had declined to a level not seen consistently since mid-2005.⁸ Finally, although 2007 was the deadliest year in Iraq for the U.S. military, casualties came down substantially in the latter part of the year. From a peak three-month total of 331 killed in April-June, the numbers declined by 70 percent to 98 in October-December, the lowest three-month total of the entire war.⁹

In contrast to the security trends, the news on the political front in Iraq is more mixed. There have been a number of high-profile symbolic engagements between Shia and Sunni leaders,¹⁰ but genuine cross-sectarian accommodation remains elusive. Indeed, in Baghdad, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government is narrower and more sectarian than ever. The so-called "unity" government remains dysfunctional, and decision-making authority appears to be increasingly concentrated in the hands of Maliki and a small clique of Dawa party advisors who remain reluctant to engage in genuine accommodation.¹¹ The Bush administration and the American embassy in Iraq have attempted to frame *de facto* revenue sharing, leniency toward former Baathists and insurgents, and local and provincial empowerment as evidence of political progress.¹² But movement toward accommodation has been uneven; and in the absence of legislation formalizing these arrangements, any cooperation may prove fleeting.¹³ On this score, it is meaningful that the Iraqi parliament has recently approved de-Baathification reform, amnesty legislation for detainees, and a provincial powers law.¹⁴ This is good news, but the devil will be in the details — which remain vague — and the implementation. Sunni politicians, for example, fear that the ambiguous legislation may actually be used to further purge their ranks from the ISF.¹⁵

SECURITY AND THE SURGE

Four factors have combined to improve the security situation in Iraq.

U.S. Operations. The first factor is the surge. The surge married 28,500 additional U.S. forces to better counterinsurgency tactics and a much-improved "joint campaign plan" designed by General David Petraeus, the overall commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker.¹⁶ As additional troops began to arrive in mid-February, the military kicked-off Operation Fardh al-Qanoon ("Law and Order"). U.S. troops fanned out into dozens of joint security stations and combat outposts and partnered with Iraqi forces in volatile neighborhoods to provide 24/7 population security. At the same time, the U.S. military continued to target AQI cadre and began to move more aggressively against "rogue" elements of the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM), Moqtada al-Sadr's Shia militia. Then, in June, as the final installments of the surge arrived, the U.S. military launched Operation Phantom Thunder, a series of large-scale clearing offensives against AQI and Shia militants in the Baghdad "belts" (including northern Babil, eastern Anbar, and the southern outskirts of Baghdad) and Diyala province. This was immediately followed up by Operations Phantom Strike and Phantom Phoenix, large-scale offensives aimed at pursuing AQI remnants fleeing north and west of Baghdad. As AQI and extremists have been pushed out, U.S. and Iraqi

forces have attempted to hold these areas to prevent reinfiltration.¹⁷

The Sunni "Awakening." The second and perhaps most decisive reason for improved security is the so-called Sunni awakening: the successful effort to recruit Sunni tribes and former militants to cooperate with U.S. forces against AQI. The movement began in 2006 in Anbar province with the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council, a group of tribal sheiks that revolted against AQI affronts, atrocities, power grabs and encroachments into (often illicit) tribal economic activities. The beginning of the movement predated the surge and was, to a large degree, causally unconnected to it. Nevertheless, nimble U.S. commanders effectively exploited the growing wedge between Sunni tribes and AQI to forge cooperative arrangements, and the tribes responded by providing thousands of men to serve in auxiliary security forces.¹⁸ The result was a dramatic reduction in violence in Anbar, once the hotbed of the Sunni insurgency.

In late May 2007, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, the day-to-day operational commander in Iraq, announced the U.S. military's intent to apply the Anbar model elsewhere. Odierno estimated that 80 percent of Sunni and Shia militants in Iraq were "reconcilable," and U.S. military commanders were given wide discretion to reach out to these groups.¹⁹ This spurred a rapid proliferation of ceasefires and financial arrangements (usually rooted in large cash payments) with tribal sheiks, former insurgents, and other community leaders to cooperate with U.S. forces, go after AQI, and recruit auxiliary security forces. The effort has now spread to many neighborhoods in greater Baghdad, Diyala, Salah ad Din and Babil provinces, contributing to the rapid growth of "Concerned Local Citizens" (CLCs) groups (perhaps the worst euphemism of the war).²⁰ Approximately 80,000 individuals currently participate in CLCs, 80 percent of whom are Sunnis. Most CLC members receive a monthly stipend from U.S. forces, averaging \$300, to man checkpoints and patrol neighborhoods.²¹

The Sunni awakening has coincided with a dramatic consolidation and politicization of the Sunni insurgency. Significant portions of the long-fragmented Sunni resistance are coalescing into three Sunni insurgency councils: the Reformation and Jihad Front, the Jihad and Change Front, and the Supreme Council for Jihad and Liberation.²² These councils represent loose national-level coalitions that oppose AQI (and its self-declared Islamic State in Iraq) and seek to protect Sunni communities against Shia militia groups. Elements of the Reformation and Jihad Front and the Jihad and Change Front have also created the Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance, the first attempt by Sunni insurgents to form a political umbrella organization.²³

As a consequence of these changes, many segments of the Sunni insurgency have begun to cooperate with U.S. forces against AQI, either directly or through intermediaries. Indeed, many of the CLCs simply represent front organizations for these groups. In conjunction with tribal realignments, the altered disposition of Sunni militants has played a huge role in security improvements in many areas. But it is important to recognize that the decision by Sunni tribes and insurgents to cooperate with American forces does not necessarily signify a fundamental change of heart toward the U.S. presence in Iraq. Instead, it represents efforts by Sunni groups to eliminate the proximate threat from AQI, reverse their current political marginalization, and position themselves vis-à-vis the Shia (and their presumed Iranian patrons) in the event of a U.S. withdrawal.²⁴ The surge may be exploiting these dynamics, but it is not the cause.

The Sadr "Freeze." A third factor contributing to improved security has been the decision by Muqtada al-Sadr to stand down his militia. When the surge was announced, Sadr instructed his forces not to directly challenge the Baghdad security plan (although elements of JAM continued to attack the coalition).²⁵ Then, on August 28, a ferocious gun battle erupted between JAM and members of the Badr Organization, the rival militia associated with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), during a festival in Karbala, killing dozens and wounding hundreds. The following day, Sadr announced a

six-month freeze on all armed actions by JAM in an attempt to "rehabilitate" his organization.²⁶

The motivations behind the freeze remain unclear. Sadr's decisions may have been intended in part to improve JAM's image in the face of growing accusations of criminal behavior. Sadr has also been facing fierce competition from extremist factions within JAM, and may have decided to look the other way as U.S. forces targeted these rogue elements (often referred to as "special groups" or "secret cells") as a means of consolidating control.²⁷ It is also likely that he wanted to avoid the kind of large-scale confrontation with U.S. troops that substantially degraded his militia in the summer of 2004. Whatever the precise motivation, General Petraeus recently credited the Sadr freeze with helping reduce sectarian violence and attacks on coalition forces.²⁸

Prior Sectarian Cleansing. Fourth, and finally, the aftereffects of prior sectarian cleansing help account for lower levels of violence now. Since the beginning of the war, more than four million Iraqis have fled the country or become internally displaced. This process accelerated in 2006 and early 2007 as sectarian cleansing exploded. Hundreds of thousands have been pushed out of Baghdad, and many formerly mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhoods are now dominated by one sect. Sectarian cleansing had the perverse effect of driving down subsequent violence by reducing the pool of potential victims and segregating groups into defensible enclaves.²⁹

TOWARD A STABLE EQUILIBRIUM

The security progress over the past year is real but brittle. In the coming months, as the surge ends, population security gains may not survive the transfer of responsibility to ISF units; Sunni CLC members may get frustrated at the failure of the Maliki government to integrate them into the Iraqi police and army and decide to turn their sights on the government; Sadr's freeze may turn out to be a temporary pause rather than evidence of moderation; and the return of refugees and internally displaced people may spark new sectarian clashes. The clock is ticking, and there is precious little time to put Iraq on the path to sustainable security.

Still, recent improvements in security have at least made it possible to envision a stable equilibrium emerging within a highly decentralized Iraq. But this equilibrium will not magically appear on its own. It will take determined efforts by the U.S. and Iraqi governments to shape and shove the political and security landscape into something that is sustainable as U.S. forces inevitably begin to withdraw.

Focus on Legislation to Make Provinces Viable. A stable outcome in Iraq does not require a breakthrough on every single contentious issue or full-scale national reconciliation, but any viable decentralized system in Iraq still hinges crucially on a handful of difficult compromises at the center. The first is an oil deal that equitably distributes revenue to the provinces. The vast majority of Iraq's oil wealth is located in the south and north of the country, where Shia Arabs and Kurds are the demographic majorities, respectively. Currently producing fields are concentrated in Basra and Kirkuk, and there is also limited production in fields located in the Baghdad, Diyala, Maysan, Mosul and Salah ad Din provinces. There are some undeveloped fields scattered throughout most of the country's other provinces, except Anbar, Babil, Dahuk and Diwaniya.³⁰ Unless an oil law is crafted to ensure that Sunni Arabs, who make up about 20 percent of the population but control land with only about 10 percent of the oil resources, receive an equal share of revenue, their areas will not be economically viable, and they will face continued incentives to try to violently seize the central government.³¹

Fully implementing and, if necessary, clarifying recent provincial powers legislation is also essential. Delineating the rights and responsibilities of provincial councils and governors is necessary to facilitate the provision of essential services and establish mechanisms to hold local leaders accountable to their constituents. It is also a prerequisite for provincial elections, now scheduled for October.³² Because the Sunnis largely boycotted the 2005 provincial elections, they are currently underrepresented in many provincial councils. As new local leaders have begun to emerge, ensuring that these

elections occur as scheduled is vital to form provincial councils with greater legitimacy.³³

Carefully Manage CLCs. It is no secret that many of the Sunni groups now cooperating with U.S. forces are populated with unsavory characters ("former" insurgents, smugglers, common criminals and would-be warlords) whose loyalties and motivations may not be benign. Overall, it remains unclear whether the CLCs are primarily a "defensive" movement that seeks nothing more than to protect Sunni localities against AQI and Shia militias, or whether many of these groups have "offensive" and expansionist aims to exact revenge, reclaim Sunni neighborhoods lost in 2006-07, and topple the Iraqi government.³⁴ Abandoning cooperative efforts with these groups based on fears of potential "blowback," however, would not reduce risks of Sunni revanchism. On the contrary, now that these groups have organized, severing relations with them is more likely to drive them into open conflict with U.S. forces and the central government, and it may even push them to once again make common causes with AQI against the Shia. Instead, a comprehensive strategy that capitalizes on the clear short-term security benefits CLCs have produced, while managing the medium- and long-term risks associated with CLC mobilization, must be developed. The U.S. approach must address the defensive motivations of these groups by allowing them to ensure security for their neighborhoods while limiting their ability to carry out offensive operations. This means tightly restricting their jurisdictions and movement, and closely monitoring them for compliance, so that they do not rub up against rival militias. It means calibrating their military capabilities by preventing them from acquiring heavy weapons or otherwise outgunning the Iraqi Army. And it means rigorously screening the CLC recruits and continuing to collect their biometric information to deter illegal behavior and, if necessary, respond to actions taken against the government.³⁵

But the single most important step in managing the CLCs is integrating them into the Iraqi police and army or otherwise providing them gainful employment through ties to the central government. Forging financial and institutional dependencies will help dissuade CLCs from reverting to insurgents, and, by giving the Iraqi government leverage, will help minimize anxieties among the Shia that the CLCs will do so.

The Iraqi government initially welcomed the Sunni awakening in homogenous Anbar province, but as the movement has spread into mixed areas, the anxieties of the Maliki government have grown.³⁶ After considerable cajoling, the Maliki government has agreed to integrate about 20 percent of current CLC members into the ISF and provide the remainder with nonsecurity jobs. But the government has been very slow in carrying out these pledges and the new de-Baathification reform law may actually complicate integration efforts by precluding ex-Baathists from the security services.³⁷ Given the slow pace of integration, the U.S. military appears to be hedging its bets by establishing a civilian jobs corps to absorb the tens of thousands of CLC members that may not be hired into the ISF. The goal is to transition them into public works and vocational training programs.³⁸ But this is, at best, a quick fix. Creating the needed relationships and demonstrating good faith with Sunni volunteers will require the Iraqi government to carry through on its promises to integrate CLCs and eventually take over the management and funding of civil employment programs. As one U.S. Army officer recently observed, if the Iraqi government fails to reach out to the CLCs in this manner, "it's game on — they're back to attacking again."³⁹

Defang JAM. Disarming and demobilizing all militias in Iraq should remain a long-term objective, but, in the short term, attempts to marginalize extremist elements and manage their role in providing local security may be more realistic. This is true of Sunni CLCs, and it is also probably the case with JAM. Since eliminating JAM or Sadr's political influence is impossible, the goal should be to create an incentive structure that draws as much of the movement as possible away from violence.

In part, this entails working with the Iraqi government to weaken popular support for extremist and criminal elements within JAM. This means continuing to hold informal talks with Sadr representatives and mobilizing elements within Shia communities that are fed up with JAM factions

engaged in criminal extortion. In some Shia-majority neighborhoods, moderate elements of JAM should be integrated into the ISF and placed under the same restrictions as Sunni CLCs. For example, in Baghdad's Rashid district, once a majority Sunni area and now mostly populated by Shia, U.S. forces have engaged moderate elements of JAM to guard outdoor markets and pick up trash, and they have even managed to craft a reconciliation agreement between Sunni and Shia residents in Rashid's Jihad neighborhood.⁴⁰

Taking other steps to maintain security improvements is also an indirect way of encouraging Sadr to maintain his freeze and prevent JAM's resurgence.⁴¹ Sadr could confidently pull his forces back, in part, because his main constituents, poor Shia, were no longer under attack by Sunni insurgents. If the U.S. military and ISF are able to protect Shia civilians from AQI attacks and provide assurances to the Shia community that other Sunni insurgents have been effectively co-opted, they may be able to continue chipping away at support for the most violent elements within JAM.⁴² Together with continued efforts by U.S. and Iraqi forces to target groups that refuse to comply with the Sadr freeze, this may tilt the playing field in favor of moderate factions within the movement.

Resettle Refugees and Displaced Persons. Over the past several months, thousands of refugees have returned to Iraq as a consequence of growing economic hardship abroad and improved security in Baghdad. Many have arrived to find families from a rival sect occupying their homes. The Iraqi government appears to have no plan to provide shelter, food or other essential services for these people. It also has no mechanism to settle property disputes or otherwise prevent the influx from sparking a fresh round of bloodshed.⁴³

Returning families should receive compensation for family members who were killed and property destroyed, as well as assistance in resettling. However, at least initially, it may be better to encourage displaced persons attempting to return to fault-line neighborhoods, especially in Baghdad, to settle elsewhere. This obviously risks ratifying previous sectarian cleansing, but the alternative is to create thousands of flashpoints for renewed bloodshed by attempting to aggressively "reverse engineer" mixed neighborhoods.

Professionalize the ISF. A stable equilibrium in a highly decentralized Iraq is impossible without a neutral Iraqi Army. The army must become a national, nonsectarian guardian of the state that can provide security in mixed neighborhoods and regions and police the seams between rival groups as U.S. forces withdraw. The operational effectiveness of the Iraqi Army has improved, but it still requires substantial support from U.S. forces, and some units remain prone to sectarian tendencies.⁴⁴ As the surge ends, more U.S. military resources must be shifted to training and advising missions through some mix of enhanced military "transition teams" and retasked U.S. brigades from a combat to a support role.⁴⁵

Unlike the Iraqi Army, the National Police appear to be an unmitigated disaster. The 25,000-man police force is heavily infiltrated by sectarian agendas and, in the past, has been complicit in gross human-rights violations.⁴⁶ Completely disbanding it is probably not an option, but National Police counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions should be folded into the Iraqi Army. Moreover, the number of U.S. advisers embedded in the Ministry of Interior and police should be increased to enhance their ability to detect sectarian tendencies and human-rights abuses, and all U.S. support should be conditioned on respect for the rule of law.

Dampen Powder Kegs in the North and South. Central and western Iraq, the focal points for the Sunni insurgency and sectarian conflict, remain the most volatile parts of the country. Nevertheless, significant conflict potential also exists in the north and south.

Up north, the biggest flashpoint for communal violence is the impending referendum to determine the status of oil-rich Kirkuk. Kurds have a strong cultural and emotional attachment to Kirkuk and seek to absorb it into Iraqi Kurdistan. In contrast, Kirkuk's Arab population, including

many who resettled there during Saddam's rule, generally favor continued governance from Baghdad. The referendum was supposed to be held in 2007, but it now appears that it will be held in mid-2008 or later. The decision to postpone it temporarily avoided a showdown between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, providing some breathing space to reach agreement on the process for determining Kirkuk's fate. The prospect for a peaceful political settlement was given a boost recently by the decision of the Arab bloc in the province to end a year-long boycott and return to the provincial council, as well as by a new round of dialogue between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen initiated by Kurdish leaders.⁴⁷ This may signal that Kurdish politicians recognize that a consensus-based approach resulting in a shared Kirkuk is preferable to risking a violent confrontation. At the same time, relations between the Kurds and the central government appear to be rapidly deteriorating over oil contract disputes, and a bloc of Iraqi parliamentarians recently proposed eliminating the referendum altogether and imposing a decision on Kirkuk's status from Baghdad.⁴⁸ In this volatile context, the United States must continue to push for the referendum to be held while encouraging local dialogue on the issue.

In southern Iraq, the biggest challenge to stability has been violent competition between Shia political parties and their affiliated militias, particularly between the Sadrists/JAM and ISCI/Badr. Clashes appear to have subsided somewhat as a result of the October 2007 announcement of a ceasefire by Sadr and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the head of ISCI.⁴⁹ Moreover, as British forces have withdrawn from southern Iraq, the much-feared intra-Shia bloodbath in Basra province, home to the country's second largest city and the majority of the country's oil, has thus far been avoided. Basra remains beset by widespread criminality, but a crude stability has emerged from a mafia-like division of turf and spoils by the Sadrists, ISCI and Fadilah (a smaller Shia party). Iraqi Army units have also been deployed to keep the residual competition within bounds.⁵⁰ The incentive to keep the oil (and profits) flowing may provide sufficient motivation for the major parties to maintain the current arrangement. U.S. forces should assist the Iraqi Army as requested, but, ultimately, the departure of British forces leaves the United States little influence over the region.

ENCOURAGING POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION

Given the tenuous nature of current security improvements in Iraq, there is no prospect for lasting stability without genuine political accommodation regardless of the number of U.S. forces in the country. At the moment, the main barrier to political progress is the reluctance of the Iraqi government or, more specifically, Shia parties that seek to run the Iraqi state solely on their own terms. Because the Sunnis lost the battle for Baghdad in 2006-07, the costs of ignoring them declined, reducing the Maliki government's incentives to compromise. American outreach to Sunni tribes and former insurgents alarms the regime — but this very alarm increases pressure on the government to reach out if they want to avoid further bloodshed. At the same time, the events of 2006-07 have probably convinced most Sunnis that they cannot defeat the Shia in a civil war. This is also good news; it encourages Sunni groups to shift from offensive, power-centered goals to predominantly defensive, security-centered ones. This may increase their willingness to make a deal and settle for less, as long as doing so does not leave them completely defenseless against a potential onslaught by Shia militias or the Shia-dominated ISF. Last but not least, the consolidation of Sunni groups may increase the odds of reaching and enforcing a negotiated settlement, which has historically been complicated by the sheer number of insurgent groups.

The conditions are thus ripe for the United States to push the Iraqi government to follow through on its promises, fairly implement existing legislation, and reach deals on oil, CLC integration and employment, reforming the National Police and Iraqi Army, and other issues. But this pressure will only work if the Bush administration uses all of its remaining leverage with the Iraqi

government. This requires a credible threat of U.S. withdrawal but also a credible promise to provide U.S. support if key steps are taken. The Bush administration has thus far failed to generate this leverage because its commitment to the Iraqi government has been effectively open-ended. On the other hand, many Democratic initiatives that propose a unilateral timetable for complete withdrawal also provide no leverage, because there is no carrot held out to the Iraqi government if they accede to U.S. demands and no ability for the Iraqi government to affect the pace of the withdrawal in a way that serves their interests.

A new approach is needed. To correct the perception that its commitment is open-ended, the Bush administration should immediately make a formal pledge that the United States will not seek, accept or under any conditions establish permanent military bases in Iraq. The administration should then announce that, after U.S. forces return to their pre-surge levels of 15 combat brigades in the summer of 2008, it intends to draw down further (perhaps to 10-12 brigades) before it leaves office in January 2009. A down payment on U.S. withdrawal below pre-surge levels would not only alter the perceptions of the Iraqi government, it would also signal to groups strongly opposed to the occupation inside the Iraqi parliament, as well as organizations representing the Sunni insurgency, that the United States does not intend to stay forever. This might open up additional avenues for bringing them into formal and informal negotiations.

The Bush administration must also take advantage of upcoming talks aimed at shaping a long-term bilateral framework between the U.S. and Iraqi governments to push the Iraqis toward accommodation. These negotiations, which the Bush administration hopes to complete by July 2008, are meant to replace the current UN Security Council resolution authorizing the presence of international forces in Iraq with a bilateral accord, including a status-of-forces agreement.⁵¹ On November 26, 2007, President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki signed a Declaration of Principles outlining the goals of each party. The document clearly reveals the Iraqi government's desire for U.S. security assurances against external aggression, protection against internal terrorist threats to the government, and continued support for the ISF. In the economic sphere, the Iraqi government wants continued assistance in renegotiating the country's debt obligations, encouraging foreign investment and supporting further integration into international financial organizations.⁵² The fact that many of Iraq's leaders have requested an enduring relationship gives the United States a rare opportunity. The Bush administration should exploit these talks to set conditions and deadlines for the Iraqi government that will affect the pace of further U.S. withdrawals, as well as the distribution and mission of residual forces.

If the Iraqi government passes key legislation and takes other steps necessary for genuine political accommodation, the administration should signal its willingness to sign an agreement that continues U.S. economic and diplomatic support for Iraq, withdraws U.S. forces gradually, and maintains a robust residual presence of perhaps 50,000-80,000 troops for several years to support the ISF, conduct counterterrorism missions, and deter external aggression. However, if the Iraqi government fails to act, the administration must threaten to redeploy U.S. forces much more rapidly, leaving the Iraqi government to face its enemies alone, and shift the U.S. posture toward containment.⁵³

To make this threat credible, the administration should seize on the impending U.S. presidential election and the prospect that the next administration may abandon the Iraqi government altogether. Since U.S. public opinion continues to oppose the war, the U.S. presidential election represents a crucible of sorts for the Iraqi government. The presidential candidates from both parties should drive that point home by publicly endorsing the conditions the Iraqi government must meet in order to affect the pace of a U.S. withdrawal and gain their administration's support for leaving a robust residual force in the country. The candidates should also declare their intention to revise any bilateral accord that does not hold the Iraqi government accountable.

END IN SIGHT

Given recent but fragile security gains, it would be a mistake for the United States to set a firm unilateral timetable *now* for withdrawal before one last round of hard bargaining in 2008. At the same time, even at lower levels of violence and U.S. casualties, a continued American presence in Iraq entails costs (in terms of lives and money, the ability to devote more resources to the war in Afghanistan and other contingencies, strains on the U.S. military, and the continued perception of occupation). Therefore, U.S. patience with the Iraqi government should not be unlimited. General Petraeus suggested as much in an exchange with Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) during his September 11, 2007, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee:

SEN COLLINS: If, a year from now, the Iraqi government has still failed to achieve significant political progress, what do we do? . . .

GEN. PETRAEUS: Senator, if we arrived at that point a year from now, that is something I would have to think very, very, very hard about. . . . Because, on the one hand, we have very real national interests that extend beyond Iraq. . . . On the other hand, there clearly are limits to the blood and treasure that we can expend in an effort. And I am keenly aware of that.⁵⁴

If, in the coming year, the major conflict groups in Iraq move toward genuine accommodation, the United States should gradually redeploy its troops but leave a robust residual force in the country to support the Iraqi government. However, if the Iraqi government will not engage in genuine political compromise, no amount of U.S. military force will be sufficient to produce long-term stability. Under this scenario, American national interests would be better served by a more rapid departure and transition to a containment posture. Either way, 2008 should represent the beginning of the "endgame" in Iraq.

REDEPLOYING FROM IRAQ AND RESETTING U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY IN 2009

Brian Katulis

With the fifth anniversary of the start of the Iraq war rapidly approaching, the United States is entering a period of transition in its Iraq policy, driven by three forces: a continued lack of American public support for the war, a growing U.S. military-readiness crisis, and other pressing priorities in the fight against global terror networks, particularly in Afghanistan. As the Bush administration enters its last year, it has set into motion a series of important policy shifts on the Iraq front. After temporarily boosting its troop presence in Iraq in 2007, the United States has begun a process of troop withdrawal that will continue in the coming year.

In 2007, the United States engaged in a series of diplomatic efforts centered on Iraq, including the launching of an International Compact for Iraq sponsored by the United Nations, participation in several regional conferences dedicated to boosting Iraq's security, and bilateral discussions with Iran in Baghdad. It also supported an effort by the United Nations to boost its presence after four years of relatively quiet, yet at times important, involvement in Iraq, with the goal of using UN assets in an attempt to mediate among Iraq's leaders and respond to humanitarian challenges resulting from the four million Iraqis currently displaced.

Although President Bush's lame-duck administration will maintain an extensive U.S. troop presence in Iraq through the end of its term, a debate continues in the United States, with strong majorities supporting troop withdrawals within the next one to two years. Even after violence declined in late 2007 in Iraq, three quarters (73 percent) of Americans said that two years would be

the maximum amount of time they would be willing to have large numbers of troops in Iraq, and half of the country saying that they want large numbers of troops in Iraq for no longer than a year.⁵⁵ American public support for the war has steadily declined since Saddam Hussein's capture in December 2003 and seems to have passed the point of no return. The composition of the leadership in the 111th Congress and the new administration that will take office in 2009 will likely reflect this desire for a diminished troop presence, just as it has in other democracies that had a troop presence in Iraq, including Great Britain, Australia and Poland. As Iraqi authorities increasingly look to assert their own sovereignty and the number of U.S. partners in the so-called coalition of the willing dwindles to less than one-fifth of its original size, U.S. military commanders are looking for the best way to manage the eventual drawdown of U.S. forces.

Within the Pentagon, a debate continues, weighing the strategic costs and risks of maintaining a sizable U.S. troop presence in Iraq against potential security benefits. One major concern among top Pentagon officials is the impact on overall U.S. military readiness. The Army has lowered its recruiting standards to unprecedented levels, and the United States no longer has a strategic ground reserve as a result of the extended deployments. Proposals for a prolonged military presence makes little sense at a time when the Iraq War threatens to break our all-volunteer military — a crisis so bad that the Army recently raised potential signing bonuses to \$45,000.⁵⁶ The increase in 'moral waivers' for recruits is also a worrying problem. Of course, the United States has considerable resources, and it could always reinstitute conscription if we needed to meet these challenges. But the Iraq War's unpopularity with the American public makes a draft improbable.

The Chief of Staff of the Army, General George W. Casey, Jr., warned in early December 2007 that the Army was "suffering the cumulative effects of six years at war" and that its forces were "deploying at unsustainable rates."⁵⁷ In the fall of 2007, Marine Corps Commandant James T. Conway proposed redeploying Marine forces from Iraq to Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Though Defense Secretary Robert Gates eventually rejected the proposal, this call is further evidence that U.S. military commanders are recognizing the need for the United States to reallocate its military assets to meet continued threats on other fronts.

The growing concerns about increased instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan prompted some senior officials in the U.S. government to conclude that the United States must accelerate a drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq in order to increase force levels in Afghanistan. Military commanders there, concerned about the resurgent Taliban movement, are seeking additional battalions, to join the approximately 26,000 U.S. troops and 28,000 NATO forces in their efforts to combat the Taliban insurgency, root out al-Qaeda elements, and boost the capacity of the Afghan government and its security forces.⁵⁹ Even though some analysts have argued for several years for making this shift,⁶⁰ efforts to make a strategic reallocation in U.S. resources and shift greater focus back to the mission left unaccomplished in Afghanistan are likely to garner greater support in 2008.

Nearly seven years after the September 11 attacks, the military actions initiated by the Bush administration have cost the United States an estimated \$1 trillion, the majority of those resources going to the military and reconstruction efforts in Iraq. As the United States looks at the broad global landscape and assesses the best way to marshal its considerable but still limited resources to address global security challenges, more Americans will continue to conclude that it is time to get out of the weeds in Iraq's multiple internal conflicts, reset its overall Middle East policy, and shift the focus back to eliminating al-Qaeda's leadership that planned the September 11 attacks.

Taking Stock at the End of 2007

As 2007 drew to a close, three main features characterized the complicated state of affairs in Iraq: an improved but still deadly and tenuous security environment in the central part of the country, continued deadlock among a divided leadership on fundamental questions of power-

sharing, and growing trends towards decentralization.

A Temporary Lull in Violence? According to Pentagon statistics, violence in Iraq has declined to 2005 levels. The primary reasons for this decline include the pragmatic shift by Sunni groups and tribes against foreign fighters, a move that began as early as 2004; a new set of tactics introduced by U.S. and Iraqi forces in the central part of the country involving an increased force presence and the building of separation barriers between communities; and the impact of sectarian cleansing campaigns that continued throughout 2007 and left increasingly homogeneous sectarian neighborhoods in their wake.

This improved but still tenuous security environment in the central part of the country came to some degree at the expense of security in the northern areas of Iraq just south of the autonomous Kurdish regions.⁶¹ The northern city of Mosul has emerged once again as an important hub for Iraq's insurgency, with local government officials reportedly collaborating with militants to help boost the insurgency's finances.⁶² In southern Iraq, intra-Shia clashes continued in the streets of major cities like Basra and Diwaniya. A battle between two rival Shia militias in late August in the city of Karbala killed more than 50 people, prompting the militias to take some steps away from the brink of further violence.

Because much of the violence in Iraq is linked to vicious struggles for power, and the fundamental disputes over power sharing remain unresolved, some have concluded that the past few months are little more than a temporarily lull. "It's more of a ceasefire than a peace," Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih remarked in early December 2007, a comment echoed by several Iraqi leaders.⁶³

Rather than fundamentally reshaping internal Iraqi political dynamics to advance a sustainable agreement, the 2007 surge of U.S. forces may have simply put a temporary lid on the violence and driven the activities of various militias and insurgent groups underground. Death squads that still operate in Baghdad have reportedly begun to hide victims' corpses rather than drop them in the streets, as they had done before. Robert Lamburne, the director of forensic services at the British Embassy in Baghdad, said, "There's less killing, but there's more concealment."⁶⁴ As U.S. forces scale back their presence, they become more reliant on Iraqi security forces for statistics such as the number of attacks; serious questions remain about the quality of this data.⁶⁵

Despite recent purges, the Badr Organization, the militia of the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), has extensively infiltrated the National Police, whose units have perpetrated sectarian violence and formed death squads against Sunnis. Although the surge of U.S. forces continued through Baghdad in 2007, Muqtada Sadr's Mehdi militia still rules underneath the radar of U.S. forces and has continued to expand and consolidate its control on neighborhoods, turning to a new generation to fill a vacuum left by arrested and purged Mehdi militia leaders.⁶⁶

Finally, the much-touted U.S. effort to support "irregular" forces, termed "Concerned Local Citizens" (CLCs), is fraught with significant risk. Opposed by the Shia-led government, this initiative has organized close to 80,000 individuals — 80 percent of them Sunnis — and provided most of them with monthly \$300 contracts with the goal of integrating them into Iraq's national security forces. But top Iraqi leaders in the central government have harshly criticized this effort; and, as of December 2007, fewer than 2,000 of the members of CLCs were "approved" for jobs.⁶⁷ By the end of 2007, some members of Iraq's government had changed their tone on the effort and indicated an increased willingness to integrate these forces, but concrete action towards integration remains to be seen. A considerable risk remains that this initiative may amount to little more than creating yet another category of militias outside of the framework of Iraq's formal security forces. If Iraq's political leaders remain bitterly divided and incapable of resolving their power-sharing disputes, these competing armed groups could turn their weapons on each other and make Iraq's internal conflicts even more deadly.

Continued Deadlock among Iraq's Leaders. The core objective of President Bush's surge strategy — that Iraq's leaders will make key decisions to advance their country's political transition

and national reconciliation — has not been achieved. Iraq's leaders are fundamentally at odds over what Iraq is and should be, how power is and should be distributed, and who controls and should control the nation's oil wealth.

Because of sharp divisions, Iraq's national government has made little progress on the fundamental questions related to constitutional reform, oil and revenue sharing, and the balance of power between national and provincial governments. The Iraqi parliament decided to suspend its session for the rest of the year on December 6, 2007, without achieving any meaningful progress on the core issues. This recess comes just four months after a month-long recess in August. Without some sort of emergency political and diplomatic intervention, Iraq's leaders at the national level will likely spend 2008 debating the same issues they debated in 2004, without achieving meaningful resolution. Even if the United States and other countries can motivate Iraq's leaders to peacefully address the unanswered questions, it is unlikely that these accords would be implemented. On most issues, what happens *de jure* in Iraq at the national level will not matter very much in the next few years; it will be the *de facto* practices, actions and institutions that will shape events. For example, Iraq's national government may at some point take action on finalizing new oil- and revenue-sharing laws. These laws may even win the approval of the national parliament. But the greater challenge will come in implementing the laws' provisions.

Growing Trends towards Decentralization. Because Iraq's central government is incapable of providing a forum for resolving disputes over power-sharing, a growing number of political forces have opted to disengage from the national government. In the past year, two Shia factions, Fadhila and a bloc led by Muqtada al-Sadr, dropped out of the coalition created by Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, leaving him with very slim support in parliament. Sunni leaders abandoned the Maliki government and suspended their participation in parliament numerous times throughout 2007.

An increasing number of Iraqi actors are instead focusing their efforts on extending their influence in individual communities and provinces, taking their cues from the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq, which has carved out its own space and autonomy. If the long-delayed provincial elections go forward in 2008, it will likely reinforce this trend towards decentralization. A highly decentralized state — though not simplistically drawn along three regions as proposed by some⁶⁸ — is a probable outcome in Iraq.

Developing a Multi-Year Process to Resolve Conflicts for Power

The decline in violence in 2007 has not yet resulted in a more functional process for Iraq's leaders to resolve their disputes over power sharing, and the institutions of Iraq's central government, as well as the numerous security forces being built and supported by the United States, have done little to set Iraq's leadership on the path towards a sustainable settlement of their conflicts. Iraqis remain as bitterly divided as they were at the start of 2007, and the environment of mistrust remains strong. The conflicts are not religious civil wars or part of a clash of civilizations, as some have simplistically argued. Rather, they are about influence and power: which forces control and distribute the country's resources and jobs and provide the people with basic needs like safety and security and services such as food, water, electricity and healthcare.

At this stage, the open-ended commitment of U.S. troops to Iraq serves as a disincentive to Iraq's leaders to resolve their power-sharing disputes. In essence, unconditionally committing U.S. troops to an enduring presence in Iraq has fostered a culture of dependency on the U.S. military among some Iraqi leaders. These leaders use the imperfect security umbrella provided by U.S. forces to maintain their grip on power without taking tangible steps forward to reconcile their differences. To break this continued cycle of dependency, the United States needs to send a clear signal that it plans to remove its troops from Iraq, centered on a defined goal with a clear date, and intensify diplomatic efforts in coordination with Iraq's neighbors and other international power.

Implementing U.S. Troop Redeployment in 2009. The realization that the U.S. military's efforts can only lead to a temporary lull in Iraq's violence without true steps towards political reconciliation will lead U.S. leaders to conclude that the time has come to implement a phased redeployment of troops as efficiently as possible in 2009.

The declaration of principles signed by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and President Bush in November 2007 set guidelines for an enduring security pact between Iraq and the United States. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari indicated that the new agreement would put a time limit on the presence of American troops.⁶⁹ Given the deep unpopularity of the U.S. military presence among ordinary Iraqis,⁷⁰ it is inevitable that Iraq's leadership will try to limit the role and tenure of U.S. troops in Iraq.

In order to maximize its leverage over Iraq's divided leadership, the United States should utilize discussions on this pact as leverage to motivate Iraq's leaders to settle their power-sharing disputes. The strains on the U.S. military as well as the growing need for additional support in Afghanistan will likely require this shift, and the United States should seek to maximize the political impact that its redeployment of troops might have on Iraq's leaders. The best way to motivate Iraq's leaders to jumpstart their political process is to set a certain date for redeploying all U.S. troops from Iraq within a 12-18 month time period. In any security-assistance pact that the United States strikes, it should seek to maintain the capacity to carry out targeted strikes on select terrorist sites from a robust U.S. military presence in the region. But the United States should make clear that it has no intention of maintaining permanent bases in Iraq and that its commitment of military forces will end in a defined period of time.

Continuing Diplomacy in Iraq and the Middle East. All too often, discussions on Iraq get mired in the various intra-Iraqi disputes and details of possible long-term security training and assistance programs without strong reference to the political dynamics within Iraq and the broader Middle East. Getting to a stable equilibrium inside Iraq will mean some degree of accommodation and cooperation with Iraq's neighbors, which will require a complicated set of initiatives given the diverse security interests involved. Iran, for example, offers support to some Shia militia while also maintaining positive official relations with Iraq's Shia and Kurdish leadership. Elements in Syria and Saudi Arabia offer financial and logistical support to some Sunni groups in Iraq. Iraq's internal conflicts have in some ways already become proxy wars for regional forces, pitting country against country, Shias against Sunnis, and Arabs against Persians against Kurds against Turks. Iraq's neighbors have stakes in key aspects of Iraq's internal conflicts. The consequences of an escalated conflict in Iraq would be dire for these countries — more refugees, the possible spread of attacks by global terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and more criminality and lawlessness. This is why a sustained set of regional diplomacy initiatives is necessary.

After much delay, the Bush administration finally began the process of reaching out to Iraq's neighbors by participating in regional conferences in Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Turkey. Regional working groups on refugees, fuel imports and border security were created. The administration also began bilateral discussions with Iran on issues of mutual interest in Iraq in late May 2007. This engagement may have delivered important results: by the end of 2007, top U.S. commanders in Iraq noted a significant decrease in attacks linked to Iran. Similar regional-security and diplomatic initiatives are necessary on several fronts, including the borders with Turkey, Syria and Iran. These initiatives should be targeted; securing border outposts and setting up cross-border communications between different governing authorities would be a good start on some fronts.

The United Nations, which saw its role in Iraq expanded in an August 2007 resolution, can play a helpful role in reconciling Iraq's political factions and addressing the needs of displaced Iraqis.⁷¹ The new UN special representative to Iraq, Staffan de Mistura, has already started working to resolve emerging crises such as the ongoing dispute over Kirkuk. In December, Sunni Arabs ended a year-long

boycott of the provincial governing council, and the deadline for holding a referendum on the status of the city, due before the end of 2007, was extended into 2008, in part because of quiet diplomatic efforts. These moves represent steps in the right direction, but they are not nearly enough.

For years to come, diplomats from the United States and other major countries will need to help Iraqis grapple with difficult choices about their country's future. In some instances, U.S. diplomatic engagement will not be constructive at all. For example, in southern Iraq, the United States seems to have little influence on the warring Shia factions, but it could encourage other interlocutors from the region or other Muslim-majority countries to play a constructive role. With the right kind of diplomatic support and approach, the United States, working with key international powers and countries in the region, can build on the steps taken in 2007 to stabilize the Middle East on two key tracks: resolving Iraq's internal conflicts and restarting international efforts to manage and resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This increased diplomatic engagement on the Arab-Israeli conflict is critical for two key reasons. First, resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict will benefit U.S. national security interests by ending a conflict that has undermined regional security and been used as a propaganda tool by global terror groups. Second, people in the region view the United States more positively when it is working to address tensions between Israel and its neighbors and seen to be taking an active role in constructively shaping regional dynamics. The United States might productively focus more effort on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict in return for more effort on the part of Middle East countries to help manage, contain and resolve Iraq's conflicts.

CONCLUSION

No simple military solutions exist for the many challenges inside Iraq. Iraq's internal conflicts are struggles for power that require much more than just a long-term U.S. military training and assistance effort that aims to strike an internal balance of power. A narrow focus on continuing the security initiatives introduced by the Bush administration in 2007 in the hope that it will somehow achieve equilibrium is far-fetched. New diplomatic efforts to break the logjam among Iraq's leadership are necessary to achieve a sustainable security pact that stabilizes the country and the region.

More than five years after the start of the war, Iraq's leaders remain incapable of making the tough compromises necessary to stabilize their country. The U.S. strategy in 2007 recognized this reality and invested more resources in local security initiatives, but these initiatives failed to bridge the divides among Iraq's leaders — and in some ways may have exacerbated tensions and mistrust. The surge, which the Bush administration argued would create a more stable environment that would induce Iraq's leaders to strike power-sharing deals, has not achieved its intended results. Iraq is more stable, but without a brokered agreement or minimal accommodation among its leaders; this increased stability is not likely to endure.

In 2007, the Bush administration adopted a more pragmatic approach to the Middle East, engaging in a series of diplomatic initiatives that offer some potential for progress but may not end up achieving anything without serious follow through and continuous efforts. The key question in 2008 is whether the administration will remain intensely engaged on the multiple diplomatic fronts. If it continues to take pragmatic steps forward, engaging all of Iraq's neighbors and trying to achieve progress on the Arab-Israeli front, it could help revive U.S. power and position in the Middle East. But without a clear signal that the United States is leaving Iraq and a clear message that the United States does not desire long-term military bases in the heart of the Middle East, leaders in the region will lack the necessary incentives to take greater responsibility for their own affairs.

U.S. STRATEGY AND THE FAILURES OF POLITICAL RECONCILIATION

Marc Lynch

Colin Kahl and Brian Katulis offer sharply opposed verdicts on the long-term strategic merits of America's current strategy in Iraq and on what to make of recent changes in the security situation. It is worth noting, however, that a general consensus exists on where Iraq is headed, and the general situation that will confront a new American president in January 2009. Partition, hard or soft, now seems very unlikely. Most now expect to see a highly decentralized state, where governance and security are increasingly devolving to localities and the central state has limited reach. The original goal of a strong, centralized democratic state rooted in a general consensus on political identity and norms, with a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, for now seems to be off the table. Most expect that the formal Iraqi state will remain governed by the existing political rules: no new elections, no new constitution, no new grand bargain — meaning a political monopoly of the major Shia parties supported by a deal to leave the Kurds alone in exchange for their votes. Few expect serious progress on national-reconciliation legislative benchmarks or on the large-scale integration of the Sunni "Awakening" militias into the Iraqi army or police. Most agree that the situation in the Shia areas is beyond American control and likely to remain violent, fragmented and unstable. Most expect, though here there is less consensus, that the general reduction of violence in Sunni areas will continue. Few think that there will be any national-level political accommodation. And it seems clear that the American troop presence will remain at pre-surge levels of about 130,000.

This widespread consensus, while grim, offers a standpoint from which to begin seriously debating America's strategic options. Debate should now move to whether such an outcome is acceptable in terms of American interests, and whether security gains are sustainable in the absence of national political reconciliation. Optimists suggest that if local-level peace can be maintained, Iraq may eventually stabilize into a functioning, decentralized federalism in which each community largely governs its own affairs. American forces would largely function as a buffer preventing backsliding into violence. For instance, the military theorist Stephen Biddle recently returned from Iraq convinced that the prospects for success had greatly improved over the last year. But in the end, his optimism was tempered by a sobering policy suggestion: Maintaining a stable Iraq would require a commitment of some 100,000 American troops over a 20-30-year period.⁷² Pessimists see the contours of an emerging warlord state, with power devolved to local militias, gangs, tribes and power brokers, in which even minimal stability will require an active American military presence. Between these federalist hopes and warlord fears lie the fundamental questions about American interests, the opportunity costs of maintaining a large troop presence, and the risks of withdrawal.

I argue that the core question for assessing the strategic future of Iraq and America's role should be whether the military and political trends are leading to the consolidation of a sustainable Iraqi state. In the absence of an effective, nonsectarian state with a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, only external peacekeepers — the United States — would be able to maintain a fragile mosaic of uneasy local-level truces and ceasefires. I am far less optimistic than Kahl that the security gains in the second half of 2007 are building towards a sustainable equilibrium. This is primarily because the trends are working against the consolidation of an effectively sovereign Iraqi state, devolving power to local levels that are themselves wracked by infighting and growing political fragmentation.⁷³

Second, I argue that this fragmentation is not one remaining obstacle to an otherwise successful strategy. Such fragmentation is both a primary reason for the current patina of success (as the United States has cut deals with Sunni factions and largely ceded Shia areas to local power

brokers) and the most likely effect, intended or otherwise, of the Petraeus-Crocker tactics.⁷⁴ The United States is empowering local actors at the expense of the national level, with, at best, the nominal participation of the Iraqi state. Not coincidentally, both the Sunni and Shia communities are fragmenting at a remarkable rate. The Sunni side is increasingly divided by a fierce power struggle among the various insurgency factions, the elected leadership, the Awakenings (which are themselves internally divided, with tribes and local leaders bickering over power and personalities), and a "salafi-jihadist" wing of the insurgency (the Islamic State of Iraq associated with al-Qaeda) that has experienced significant setbacks but has hardly disappeared. On the Shia side, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) has fragmented; Muqtada al-Sadr has been confronted with internal challenges and "rogue" militias; Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has lost influence, and his aides are being murdered at an alarming rate; and militias are battling it out on the streets for power and control.

This kind of fragmentation might help the United States in its tactical maneuvers at the local level and buy local stability in the short term, but it is anathema to any kind of national deal. As Jim Fearon, one of the leading political scientists working on civil wars, recently put it, "a power-sharing deal tends to hold only when every side is relatively cohesive. How can one party expect that another will live up to its obligations if it has no effective control over its own members?"⁷⁵ American strategy over the last year encourages the fragmentation of authority within communities and undermines those groups that might be able to deliver such a lasting bargain. The fragmentation of the communities at the local level makes a national bargain more important and less likely. For a deal to stick, it needs to be negotiated with interlocutors capable of delivering on the bargain. The Anbar Salvation Council (ASC), for instance, might settle with the United States and the Shia-dominated government on better terms than would the insurgency factions. But can they make such a deal stick?

Finally, I return to the core question: Is a fragmented, sectarian, warlord state held together by a long-term commitment of significant numbers of American troops an acceptable or desirable destination for American policy makers? Whether such an outcome, if combined with a local Sunni power structure hostile to al-Qaeda, would pose a threat to American national interests is a debate worth having. It would certainly mean a major climbdown from initial American goals, but a lot has happened over the last five years, and it is quite clear that the United States no longer has the power to achieve its original goals. It would hardly be optimal for Iraqis either, since they would be condemned to live in a Hobbesian environment, and the refugee crisis would likely never be resolved. Should Washington simply acknowledge the reality of the institutional and political environment it has created in Iraq, or maintain its current radical disconnect between its stated objectives and what it is actually doing? Finally, would an American drawdown or withdrawal undermine or promote American interests?

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

National reconciliation matters not because of arbitrary legislative benchmarks or the self-serving demands of Sunni politicians. It matters because only genuine political accommodation, in which mutually acceptable agreements are not only signed but implemented and manifested within key state institutions, will make possible the consolidation of a sovereign Iraqi state. When the "surge" was announced, American officials clearly recognized this, making political reconciliation the central focus of their efforts. The military escalation would provide a secure window of opportunity for Iraqi politicians to finally make desperately needed compromises on the fundamental issues dividing the country.

Such reconciliation has not happened, as Kahl's essay recounts in painful detail. Instead Sunni-Shia political tensions at the national level have escalated while the Iraqi state has become ever more dysfunctional. In August, the Sunni Accordance Front withdrew its six ministers from Maliki's cabinet in protest over the lack of progress on sectarian reconciliation. Since surviving a dizzying flurry of

attempts last summer to topple his government, Maliki has been content to govern with a rump cabinet of Shia and Kurds and a Sunni-free "coalition of moderates." Talk of a cabinet reshuffle (a "national unity" government of technocrats under Maliki) circulates endlessly, thus far with little to show.

When the Parliament adjourned early in December without passing any major legislation, it was probably for the best. In the preceding week it had been the scene of vitriolic disputes between Shia and Sunni parliamentarians over allegations of the involvement of Adnan Dulaimi's son and bodyguards in a car-bombing plot. Even when legislation is passed, as in the package of laws including provincial powers and an amnesty approved on February 13, 2008, the implementation can actually make things worse. In January, the Parliament finally passed a long-awaited reform of the de-Baathification law, only to see its ambiguous and potentially punitive contents generate outrage among Sunnis and a veto threat from Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, who argued that "We cannot regard this law as a step in the national reconciliation process [because] the spirit of revenge is so clear in many articles of the law."⁷⁶

While the sectarian, insular government of Nouri al-Maliki bears a considerable share of the responsibility, the blame is not only his, and a new prime minister or cabinet reshuffle would not likely change the more fundamental underlying problems. The failure of national reconciliation is rooted in fundamental divides over core principles underlying the foundations of the Iraqi state and the exacerbation of these divides by the institutions designed under American occupation. The total dysfunction of formal institutions adds to the problem. With Parliament hopelessly deadlocked, often unable to muster a quorum, even goodwill would likely fail to achieve legislative progress. With the Iraqi Police thoroughly controlled by sectarian forces, additional training or funding would not fix the problems.

American officials frequently air their distress that the Iraqis are "wasting the opportunity" provided by the improved security conditions.⁷⁷ But there is less recognition of the possibility that American strategy actually contributes to losing this opportunity by strengthening localities over the central government and by creating a dangerous condition of "moral hazard" in which Iraqi politicians have few real incentives to change their behavior because of their confidence in continued American military backing.

A new grand bargain over the contentious issues dividing Iraq is difficult to imagine today, but it is even more difficult to imagine any form of long-term stability without one. Reforms of the de-Baathification decrees are widely seen as crucial to entice Sunnis into the political process but horrify many Shia and Kurds who see Saddam's ghost lurking in the shadows. Kahl is right to place the oil issue at the center of any achievable national reconciliation. But those oil negotiations are deadlocked, with Kurds in particular taking a series of steps that have inflamed the issue. There is little reason for the Shia to believe that funneling more oil revenues to the Sunni areas will not simply help finance their military capabilities for the coming civil war. With a wider political settlement, oil revenue sharing creates positively reinforcing incentives. Without that grand bargain, oil revenue sharing could cut in either direction. This is one of the reasons that a deal has been so difficult to strike.

Provincial elections, which feature prominently in recent American discussions of reconciliation, appear to be a relatively tangential issue for most Sunnis, in contrast to prisoners, amnesty, oil and the rampant sectarianism in state agencies. Sunnis seem deeply opposed to anything resembling a move towards federalism or partition and would probably feel more threatened than reassured by heavily promoted provincial elections. Provincial elections have been touted as a panacea, but they threaten the interests of current Green Zone elites and could actually inflame the growing intra-communal power struggles among Sunnis and Shias. Various political groupings, including Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, Iyad Allawi, and the Sadrist movement, have expressed interest in new national elections. Of course, it is not clear that new national elections under the same electoral law would solve any problems, but the interest in these elections demon-

strates Iraqi frustration with the performance of national institutions.

NATIONAL-LOCAL LINKAGES: "BOTTOM-UP" RECONCILIATION?

American and Iraqi officials, recognizing this deadlock at the national level, have responded by advancing a new theory of "bottom-up reconciliation." They have turned, however opportunistically, to a new argument: that local-level reconciliation is actually more important than national reconciliation.⁷⁸ The important thing, they now argue, is that Sunnis (in particular) have been bought into the political process, and that, over time, they can be integrated into the state without waiting for a grand national bargain. Local security, by this argument, will allow passions to cool and sectarian trust to build. This, over time, would alleviate the worst problems at the national level.

Maliki has frequently echoed these American arguments, dismissing the significance of national reconciliation and even mocking those calling for it as conspirators and opportunists. In a November interview, he made clear that he had no intention of pursuing moves towards national reconciliation defined in terms of legislation at the national level or agreements with Sunni political parties. Instead, Maliki argued that Iraqi national reconciliation has not only already been achieved, it is "strong and stable and not fragile." He made clear that he does not equate national reconciliation with political progress at the national level: "I think that national reconciliation will come about not as some understand it, as a reconciliation with this political party governed by an ideology or a specific mentality." Indeed, he dismissed the politicians demanding reconciliation as "minor political parties" whose tiresome complaints now fall on deaf ears with the people.⁷⁹

Ironically, then, the achievements of the Sunni awakenings have become an excuse to absolve the national government of any further responsibility, an important example of how American strategy has been working against its stated goals. Feeling little political threat, Maliki chose to take advantage of the space created by a moment of relative security to further marginalize his Sunni "partners." The Bush administration, determined to exploit the security improvements for domestic political advantage, is in no position to object to his appropriation of the language of "bottom-up reconciliation." But to the extent that the Sunni suspension of armed insurgency weakens their bargaining position with the Shia-dominated government, what does this tell Sunnis about the value of political participation rather than violent resistance?

A key dimension of the bottom-up-reconciliation argument has been that the integration of Sunnis into the police forces and military will give them a stake in the central government while preventing the emergence of militias. This is not yet happening. The 80,000 reported CLC members now patrolling their own neighborhoods are paid by the American military and owe loyalty to General Petraeus, not to Maliki or to Iraqi national institutions.⁸⁰ As of mid-November, only about 1,600 of the volunteers had been integrated into the Iraqi security forces. Iraqi government officials have recently been signaling a willingness to take more of these militias on to the official payroll, but such promises have routinely fallen through, and the details remain sketchy. Indeed, in December the United States announced plans to convert some of the CLCs into a public-works program, paid for by the Americans, because of the Iraqi government's refusal to move quickly to integrate them into the national security forces.⁸¹ Voices on all ends of the Sunni spectrum, as well as American officials at all levels, have called for such integration with increasing urgency - with some Awakenings commanders publicly warning of a return to the insurgency in months if they do not receive satisfaction — but to no avail. American military officials reportedly now do not expect more than a third to be integrated, suggesting an imminent disaster.

To be fair, there have been some efforts to initiate reconciliation, largely outside the formal institutions of the state and all meeting with limited success. At the national level, Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi prepared a 26-point National Compact to overcome the sectarian divide

and received support from Sistani, but the Compact has since gone nowhere.⁸² A series of reconciliation conferences have been held in Iraq and abroad, but have produced little; a summit in Baghdad in mid-March ended with boycotts by the Sunni parties and Allawi's bloc, a walkout by the Sadrists, and no joint statement.⁸³ On a different level, the second in command of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Ammar al-Hakim, took a heavily publicized trip to Ramadi to try to sell the concept of federalism to the Sunni tribes, and a variety of ISCI figures have publicly praised the Anbar Salvation Council's efforts.⁸⁴ But as discussed in the next section, the cautious public détente between the Anbar Salvation Council and ISCI may be something entirely different from reconciliation: highly controversial moves in the intra-communal power struggles that increasingly dominate Iraqi politics.

In short, whatever the logic of bottom-up reconciliation, it has thus far failed to materialize. Developments at the local level have not translated into national-level progress and arguably are strengthening local forces at the expense of national institutions. This does not mean that it cannot happen, since the provision of security certainly changes the calculations and expectations of all involved. But this only underlines the importance of an effectively sovereign state for overcoming the sectarian security dilemma and allowing Iraqi institutions to survive the withdrawal of American forces. Unless the local-level deals are consolidated into a national arrangement, the security gains will easily be blown away like so much tumbleweed when the atmosphere goes sour.

FRAGMENTATION AND INTRA-COMMUNAL POWER STRUGGLES

What complicates efforts at striking a national bargain, above and beyond the blockages at the national level and the devolution of power to the local level, is the relentless fragmentation of politics within both the Sunni and Shia communities. The UIA, which brought together the major Shia parties under a single umbrella, has largely collapsed. ISCI and the Sadrists, despite occasional uneasy truces, have been fighting for control of the streets across Shia towns, cities and neighborhoods.⁸⁵ The influence of Sistani and the Hawza seems to have declined relative to the powerful armed militias controlling the streets. In this section, I will focus primarily on the Sunni community, however, since it is there that the great hopes of the current American strategy have largely been placed. And here, largely unnoticed by those focused upon American success, a power struggle has been emerging in earnest in recent months.

The proximate cause of the reshuffling of Sunni politics was the emergence of the Awakenings, which turned against the al-Qaeda wing of the insurgency and began negotiating agreements with the American military. The true origins of the Awakenings remain a mystery, somewhere between tribal dynamics, insurgency factional tactics, and American largesse. While Americans had tried in various ways for years to reach out to the Sunni tribes, the new course began to gain momentum in April 2006 (well before the surge) and crystallized that fall in response to al-Qaeda's strong-arm tactics following its declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). While this is often portrayed as a "tribal" turn against "the insurgency," the initial moves against al-Qaeda came from key "nationalist-jihadist" insurgency factions such as the Islamic Army of Iraq. Those factions lacked a public political face, however, and risked being outgunned by the various hard-line factions surrounding the ISI. The Salvation Councils might then be seen as initially offering an acceptable public face for the insurgency's battle against al-Qaeda — and as a conduit for American funds.⁸⁶

Americans, delighted to find large numbers of Sunnis volunteering to join its battle against al-Qaeda, generally assumed that the fighters came from insurgency factions but did not ask many questions. The insurgency factions and the Salvation Councils have been coy about their relationship. When al-Arabiya TV featured an Awakenings leader who claimed to be a former leader of the Islamic Army of Iraq, the faction issued a series of furious denials rather than try to take credit for his success.

Some insurgency spokesmen have argued that they disagree with the Awakenings but do not wish to fight them, and so have stood down in those areas while redeploying elsewhere.⁸⁷ In a September interview on al-Jazeera, Islamic Army of Iraqi spokesman Ibrahim al-Shammari acknowledged that some "sons of the tribes" were cooperating with the Americans, but insisted that the cooperation was strictly limited to self-defense and to fighting against al-Qaeda. The street remains with the resistance, he claimed, and it was absurd to try to distinguish between the resistance and the tribes.⁸⁸

While its origins therefore lie to some degree within the insurgency and the prevailing Sunni power structure, the ASC has lately been attempting to put itself forward as the legitimate representative of Iraq's Sunni community. Ahmed Abu Risha, who took over as its leader after the murder of his charismatic brother, has been advancing the idea of an "Iraqi Awakening."⁸⁹ This Iraqi Awakening would consolidate as a formal political entity, within which the leaders of the ASC would speak politically on behalf of tribes throughout the country. This bid for national power has sparked growing political conflict with other Sunni political forces.⁹⁰ The ASC has also been jockeying for local power with the elected leadership, especially representatives of the Islamic party.

It would be a serious mistake to assume that the ASC speaks politically for all of the CLCs — especially those in the Baghdad area, which seem closer to the insurgency factions than to their nominal Salvation Council leaders. Where the ASC has warned against an American withdrawal and been open to ISCI's overtures, a number of prominent CLC leaders oppose the American occupation and claim to be prepared to do battle with the Shia and Iran. For example, Abu Azzam, a leader of the Abu Ghraib Awakening, recently said that "the greatest threat to the Arab Sunnis is the Iranian occupation, before the American occupation... not al-Qaeda as portrayed in the media but Iran and its agents."⁹¹ Even the demand that the CLCs be incorporated into the national army and police is often cast as a way of combating Iranian and Shia power, rather than purely about reconciliation.

Faced with a rapidly changing political and military situation, the Sunni insurgency factions that led the initial turn against al-Qaeda began to try to unite and put forward a public political front.⁹² As noted in Kahl's essay, insurgency factions have consolidated into several larger groupings, including the Reform and Jihad Front, the Change and Jihad Front, and most recently the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR). The PCIR was welcomed by Tareq al-Hashemi's Iraqi Islamic party, which called on all parties to "deal with the Political Council and to recognize it as an important representative of a section of Iraqi society," as well as by Salah al-Mutlaq and other leading Iraqi Sunni politicians.⁹³ Thus far it has failed to act effectively, however.

The PCIR's public attitude towards the Awakenings has been muted, largely avoiding direct criticism but adhering to their longstanding political platform. These factions have consistently demanded that the United States leave Iraq, claiming that they would be willing to participate in the political process on that condition. They fairly consistently argue that their insurgency defeated the United States and that they have also defeated al-Qaeda, something the Americans never could do. They retain their commitment to the "jihad" and to driving the United States from occupied Iraq. While they blame their setbacks at the hands of Shia militias partly on American interference and on Iranian support, one can find self-criticism and reflection in their forums and public statements — a recognition, driven in no small part by the "Battle of Baghdad," that they could not win the sectarian war.

The political efforts of the factions were partly sparked by a belief in an impending American departure, which they had long maintained would make possible their entry into political life. They also seem to have responded to concern over the political ambitions of the Awakenings. In early September, a leading Sunni website published an essay by Abd al-Rahman al-Ruwashdi that complained about (unnamed) politicians stepping forward to claim the fruits of the insurgency's victory without having made its sacrifices or paid its costs.⁹⁴ He called on the politically influential leaders of the insurgency to step forward and reveal themselves, to prevent others from exploiting their victory and claiming to speak for the Sunni community. Spokesmen for the insurgency factions consistently

repeat that they are the authentic representatives of the Sunni community, their legitimacy earned by force of arms and their roots in that community. For example, in late September, the spokesman for the Reform and Jihad Front, Abd al-Rahman al-Qissi, claimed that the jihadist factions were the only legitimate representatives of the (Sunni) Iraqi people, even if they reject and seek to abort any political process that gives legitimacy to the occupation or helps it to achieve its goals and reject the legitimacy of a constitution devised under occupation.

The fragmentation and internal conflict clearly worries some Sunni leaders, some of whom now openly worry about the Afghanistan experience, where the victorious jihad was squandered in the subsequent factional warfare.⁹⁵ Others grumble that the Awakenings were foolishly trusting the United States and that cooperation could only harm Sunni and Iraqi interests in the long term. The head of the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) of Iraq, Hareth al-Dhari, for instance, attacked the Awakenings as an American tool to divide and defeat the Resistance.⁹⁶ He later released a scorching open letter to the Iraqi tribes upbraiding them for falling into an American trap and allowing themselves to be divided and ruled.⁹⁷

The insurgency factions may be battling al-Qaeda and at times tactically cooperating with the United States, but that does not mean that they have forgone an interest in power. It appears likely that the vast majority of the Concerned Local Citizens are in fact insurgency factions taking on a new role. It is less clear whether the insurgency factions retain operational control over these fighters. In November, a series of representatives of these factions publicly stated that they had used the lull of the last few months to regroup, rearm and reorganize, and were prepared to relaunch the insurgency when strategically appropriate.⁹⁸ The steady campaign of assassinations of Salvation Council members, of which Abu Risha was only the most prominent, cannot be definitively attributed to al-Qaeda (even if they are happy to take credit, as always). There are many Sunnis able and keen to resist the attempt to establish a new elite that is not themselves — and many others who blame Shia death squads, rather than al-Qaeda, for the rising carnage against the Sunni Awakenings.

Americans and Iraqi Shia politicians alike have seen the possibilities created by the Awakenings movement and seem to be attempting to empower an alternative and more compliant local-level leadership that might be willing to strike an easier bargain than the more contentious elected politicians or insurgency factions.⁹⁹ Maliki has repeatedly discussed replacing recalcitrant Accordance Front deputies with Salvation Council figures.¹⁰⁰ Leaders of ISCI, including both Ammar Hakim and Abd al-Aziz Hakim, have ostentatiously reached out to the Awakenings — in sharp contrast to their treatment of other Sunni politicians. Abu Risha recently shocked the Iraqi public by praising Hakim as a great national leader and agreeing to work with him on the resettlement of Shia refugees in Anbar.¹⁰¹ This Shia enthusiasm for the Sunni Awakenings might plausibly be understood as a preference for a more compliant Sunni interlocutor rather than as a signal of national reconciliation, particularly since many Shia clearly fear both rising Sunni military potential and better Sunni ties to the American military.¹⁰²

The promotion of alternative elites is always a risky business, as the Israelis discovered over decades in their attempt to promote local leaderships over the PLO in the West Bank and Gaza, or South Africans in their efforts to promote alternatives to the African National Congress in the Apartheid era. The current leaders of the various U.S.-aligned councils are not democratically elected, nor do they particularly want to be. Relations with the United States remain deeply controversial, which makes the standing of alternative elites whose claim to power rests on their ties to the Americans somewhat tenuous. Abundant evidence suggests that the power of these new elites derives largely from American cash. This is not a stable basis for political order. The Salvation Council spokesmen have recently suggested that Anbar deserves and needs billions of dollars in compensation for damage done during the war and in reconstruction assistance. In today's political climate, massive new reconstruction funds for Iraq are unlikely to materialize. This

means that in the not-distant future, these leaders are going to face a serious challenge due to their likely failure to deliver a better life.

Any deal struck by the Salvation Councils on behalf of the Sunnis might offer terms acceptable to the Shia but would not necessarily represent the real interests or preferences of the Sunni community. Bringing the insurgency factions into the process, long a goal of American policy, would increase the prospect of a deal's holding, but would make such a deal far more difficult to negotiate and would challenge the authority of America's current allies. The rise of the Awakenings, therefore, has sparked political conflict with both elected Sunni politicians and the insurgency factions.¹⁰³ In November, the Baghdad office of the Association of Muslim Scholars was closed by the head of the Sunni waqf, who blamed the AMS for helping al-Qaeda and for preventing the integration of Sunnis into the military.¹⁰⁴ In late November, Abu Risha accused the Islamic party of corruption and challenged its electoral legitimacy, while elected Sunni politicians have been sniping back at the tribal leaders. In February, ASC leader Hamed al-Hayes threatened to take up arms against the Islamic party if the local councils it dominated were not dissolved.¹⁰⁵ In short, the Sunni community is increasingly consumed by internal power struggles, which make it less, not more, likely to be able to strike such a bargain.

Finally, it is important to remain cautious about the newfound Sunni affection for the United States after four years of brutal insurgency and counterinsurgency. The most recent public-opinion survey, conducted in August, found that Sunnis were more opposed to the American presence than ever, do not think the surge has accomplished either its military or political goals, and have dwindling confidence in the U.S. forces.¹⁰⁶ Only 11 percent said that security in the country as a whole has improved in the last six months, and 70 percent said that the conditions for political dialogue have gotten worse. Only 15 percent expressed confidence in U.S./UK occupation forces — down from 18 percent in February — with 58 percent expressing "no confidence at all" (the highest in any of these surveys dating back to 2003) and 79 percent opposing the presence of coalition forces in Iraq. Only 1 percent of Sunnis said that they have confidence in American forces and support the American presence in Iraq or that security has improved in Iraq as a whole in the last six months. Seventy-two percent of Sunnis said that the U.S. forces should leave immediately, and 95 percent said that the presence of U.S. troops makes security worse; 93 percent still saw attacks on coalition forces as acceptable. While views may well have changed as the alliance with the American forces bore some fruit, skepticism about the latest round of "good-news" reporting from Anbar seems appropriate. On January 13, Kamal Abu Risha, the vice president of the Anbar Salvation Council, said that the Awakenings opposed the American presence and called on the United States to leave as soon as possible and turn security over to Iraqis — only to be immediately corrected by Ahmed Abu Risha, who urged the Americans to stay.¹⁰⁷

SPOILERS

Beyond these core political problems, a number of potential spoilers loom. First, Kurdish issues have been growing increasingly tense. Sharp differences over Kurdish oil deals have provoked serious political conflicts. Turkish raids directed at PKK fighters alleged to be based in Iraqi Kurdistan have generated outrage. A remarkable coalition of a dozen political parties, including 150 MPs, released a blunt statement in December calling for the status of Kirkuk to be negotiated rather than submitted to the referendum mandated by Article 140 of the Constitution. Avoiding this referendum would be a great relief to most Iraqis and to the United States, but Kurdish leaders do not seem inclined to give way.

Second, despite recent reports of some refugees returning to Iraq from Syria (largely due to increasing hardships in the reluctant host country), virtually nobody expects a serious return of refugees or displaced persons to their old neighborhoods. Indeed, many fear that their return

could spark intense new fighting.¹⁰⁸ One of the explanations for the recent reduction of violence is almost certainly that sectarian cleansing has succeeded in so many formerly mixed areas. No plan can succeed if it fails to take into account the bitter, angry, fearful displaced communities both inside and outside of Iraq's borders. These refugees and internally displaced persons constitute not simply a humanitarian disaster, but also a constituency for radicalism and irredentism that will weigh heavily over all local-level politics or future democratic elections. The narratives and symbolic politics carried by these communities, to say nothing of their sheer numbers and material interests, are likely to have a powerful impact on any future Iraq. I suspect that few of them are going to be easily reconciled to a "local-level dominant" Iraq in which they are permanent outsiders and have little hope of gaining satisfaction at the national level.

A third point has to do with Sunni prisoners. Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and many other Sunnis have made a major issue of the large number of their kin held without charge (over 80 percent of those held by U.S. forces are currently Sunni). The numbers of detainees is not clear, with accounts ranging from 20,000 to 60,000. These mostly military-age men, often rounded up in sweeps during clearing operations, represent something of a wild card. While Nuri al-Maliki proposed a general amnesty in late December, it has bogged down in Parliament and its fate is unclear. Their release would be a major step towards meeting Sunni grievances, but at the same time would return large numbers of embittered, military-age young men to the streets.

Fourth, while Iranian responsibility for the violence in Iraq is often overstated, Iran's calculation of its self-interest will likely play a significant role in stability or instability in Iraq. The recent National Intelligence Estimate report, by making the prospects of an American attack on Iran less likely, could potentially encourage Iran to rein in its proxies. But this, like other fluctuations in the security situation, would represent only a tactical rather than a strategic change. Few Americans seem willing to confront the basic strategic dilemma that its policies have created: a heavy reliance on an Iraqi government that is, at its core, fundamentally aligned with and dependent upon Iran. In mid-December, a group of Iraqi politicians including Iyad Allawi and Adnan Dulaimi released an open letter to George Bush calling upon him to stop backing Maliki in the name of resisting Iranian influence and "religious fascism." Iran could well provide the common enemy to energize a united Iraqi nationalism, save that the current government and the most powerful factions in the coalition are the closest Iranian allies in the country.

Finally, for all the recent setbacks of al-Qaeda in Iraq, it remains quite resilient and capable of carrying out a wide range of attacks, and there remains some hope on both sides of reconciliation with the wider insurgency. Hareth al-Dhari called on Osama bin Laden to intervene and correct the behavior of his Iraqi allies, later arousing intense controversy by declaring that al-Qaeda was not beyond the pale. An unusually direct intervention in Iraqi affairs by Bin Laden in October received wildly varying interpretations. The insurgency factions, relying on excerpts broadcast on al-Jazeera, trumpeted his speech as a rebuke of al-Qaeda in Iraq and immediately called for the reunification of the ranks. But the full speech was less forthcoming and seemed to take the side of al-Qaeda by virtue of its adherence to the sharia, a point emphasized by Ayman al-Zawahiri in a follow-up video released in mid-December. Attacks on Awakenings members have increased significantly since ISI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi released an audiotape calling for an offensive against it. For all the current bad blood, should the political process continue to fail and the political struggle between the factions and the Awakenings escalate, it is not inconceivable that Sunni fighters could once again realign and resume armed insurgency.

STRATEGIC VISION AND MORAL HAZARD

What should the United States then do with this situation of political deadlock and local

fragmentation? The last five years have left me deeply skeptical of any argument requiring either a high degree of sophisticated American micromanagement or a large number of things that have to go right. Kahl makes a range of very sensible suggestions as to what the United States should do, threaten, recommend or promote. But the United States has little ability to do any of these things, even were the Bush administration to suddenly develop an interest in them at this late date. Why would the Iraqi government take seriously the sorts of demands and threats suggested by Kahl, after ignoring American entreaties on such matters for years? What would make such threats credible to an Iraqi observer capable of reading the American political arena? The Iraqi government has proven quite impervious to American demands on political reconciliation over the last year, and few actors take seriously American threats to withdraw military or political support (at least during this administration). What is more, American power is a wasting asset. Everyone in Iraq and the region knows that the United States is running out of time and patience and that U.S. forces will soon be drawn down, whether by Bush or his successor. Everyone is gaming that reality, taking what they want from Americans while ignoring American demands or advice.

As Katulis very effectively outlines, American efforts to advance the sorts of ideas proposed by Kahl are hamstrung by the moral-hazard problem that the United States has created, where Iraqi politicians are shielded from the negative consequences of their risky decisions. Since the Bush administration cannot credibly threaten to escalate and will not threaten to withdraw, it has no leverage over any of them while protecting them from the consequences of their decisions. Even if those politicians did somehow magically come to agreement, their ability to deliver on any such agreement declines by the day. As long as Americans provide his security, Maliki simply has no reason to make concessions to people he sees as political conspirators and sectarian troublemakers. As long as Americans protect their interests, the Kurdish parties see no reason to move away from their unconditional support for Maliki's government. Finally, many of the Sunni insurgency factions described above have repeatedly and publicly stated that their participation in the political process is contingent upon an American commitment to withdrawal. An impending American withdrawal will change those calculations in fundamental ways, giving the Shia and the Kurds reason to make more serious concessions and the Sunni groups the political cover they need to strike the deal.

Advocates of the current strategy hold out hopes that a political balance can be achieved by adjusting the sectarian balance of power, for instance by strengthening Sunni military forces against their Shia rivals. But the degree of precision necessary to achieve the "Goldilocks" equilibrium (not too strong, not too weak) is daunting in an environment in which we hardly seem to know where the guns are going or who our allies are. In short, the only thing that can seriously overcome the sectarian security dilemma in the absence of a heavy American troop presence would be the tight integration of military capability into an institutionalized, centralized security force — the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence that is essential to statehood. But the current policy of devolving authority to the local level and empowering militias outside of state institutions undermines rather than increases prospects of achieving such effective state sovereignty.

This is precisely where the failure of political reconciliation becomes such a core strategic problem, rather than one issue among many. Traditionally, the solution to domestic security dilemmas is a state that enjoys a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence and enforces the laws in a nonsectarian way. In the absence of meaningful political reconciliation, the Iraqi state offers neither. The strategy suggested by this institutional disaster is to start over: convene a new constitutional assembly under international auspices to achieve a new grand bargain on the rules of the game among all the politically significant factions. But while such a "diplomatic surge" is the best hope for overcoming the strategic dilemma, it is difficult to imagine the United States accepting its failure, the world mustering the energy, or the ascendant Shia-Kurdish coalition allowing its gains to be put on the bargaining table.¹⁰⁹

Absent such a comprehensive "reboot" of Iraq's political system, the current approach is clearly a second-best strategy, substituting American forces for the state that seemingly cannot be effectively constituted. The best-case scenario then calls for a long-term American military presence to provide security guarantees for the distrustful, heavily armed sectarian communities that the Iraqi state cannot protect. The U.S. military would maintain an unsteady equilibrium among these forces rather than actually solving problems, leaving American global strategy hostage to an effectively endless Iraqi presence. At this point, political reality must intrude. A recent public-opinion survey found only 13 percent of Americans in favor of keeping troops in Iraq more than two years.¹¹⁰ It seems highly unlikely that the American public will accept the long-term, large-scale commitment the current strategy's defenders consider necessary. This seems to make the case for the current strategy untenable, even on its own terms. With the 'surge' winding down, it is time to admit that a strategy which cannot succeed without a long-term, massive American military presence has already failed.

¹ A PDF version of the symposium can be downloaded here: <http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/debate-pdf.html>.

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³ Mowaffek al-Rubaie, "Federalism, Not Partition," *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2008.

⁴ Edward P. Joseph and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Case for Soft Partition in Iraq*, Brookings Institution, Saban Center Analysis, No. 12, June 2007.

⁵ The Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index*, January 28, 2008, p. 5.

⁶ Iraq Body Count, "Civilian Deaths from Violence in 2007," <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2007/>.

⁷ Thomas E. Ricks and Karen DeYoung, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Reported Crippled," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2007; Damien Cave, "Militant Group is Out of Baghdad, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2007; and Richard A. O'Connell and Qais Mizher, "Bomber Kills Sunni Allies of the U.S.," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2008.

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⁹ Based on the monthly tabulations provided by Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, <http://icasualties.org/oif/>.

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¹⁶ David Kilcullen, "Don't Confuse the 'Surge' with the Strategy," *Small Wars Journal Blog*, January 19, 2007, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/01/dont-confuse-the-surge-with-th/>; and Ann Scott Tyson, "New Strategy for War Stresses Iraqi Politics," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2007.

¹⁷ Kimberly Kagan, "How They Did It," *The Weekly Standard*, November 11, 2007; and Scott Peterson, "Iraq Offensive: Clear Out Militants-And Stay," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2008.

¹⁸ Greg Jaffe, "How Courting Sheiks Slowed Violence In Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2007; and David Kilcullen, "Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt," *Small Wars Journal Blog*, August 29, 2007, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>.

¹⁹ "DoD Press Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon," May 31, 2007, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3973>.

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