**Thinking Strategically About American Iraq Policy: on online symposium**

Between November 4 and November 13, 2007, the Abu Aardvark blog (www.abuaardvark.com) hosted a debate over the strategic possibilities for national reconciliation in the current Iraqi scene. The participants were Marc Lynch, host of Abu Aardvark and Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University; Colin Kahl, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Georgetown University and one of the authors of the Center for New American Security's "Phased Transition" plan for Iraq; and Brian Katulis of the Center for American Progress and one of the authors of its Strategic Reset plan. I have collected the contributions in this document without editing or revision so that it will be easier for interested readers to work with. This document does not have either the embedded links or the comments from blog readers or external commentators which can be found in the original. If quoting, please source to Abu Aardvark (www.abuaardvark.com).

**Marc Lynch:**
**Maliki: no more reconciliation**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/maliki-enough-a.html

Last week Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki mocked Iraqis calling for national reconciliation and dismissing them as self-interested conspirators. On Friday, he elaborated on his views of the current Iraqi political scene in a very intriguing, and frankly troubling, interview with al-Arabiya. The interview did not break any particularly new ground, but it did make one thing very clear: do not expect Maliki to pursue seriously any moves towards national reconciliation, defined in terms of legislation at the national level or agreements with Sunni political parties. The deadlock at the national political level, so clear at the time of the Petraeus-Crocker hearings in September, will not end any time soon. What that means for US strategy is something which I consider well worth publicly debating.

Maliki argued on al-Arabiya that Iraqi national reconciliation has not only already been achieved, it is "strong and stable and not fragile". There is no civil war in Iraq, or even any real sectarian conflict anymore - the sectarian hatreds incited by "some" in the past have been overcome. 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." Real national reconciliation, to Maliki, takes place at the local level, when "you can go into the street and meet with a Sunni in Shia areas or with a Shia in Sunni areas, where they live together once again." That, he suggests, has happened. The various Sunni awakenings demonstrate reconciliation at the local level, and their support for his national government. He claims that people who fled mixed Sunni-Shia areas are now returning (or are welcome to do so), and that the people now reject sectarianism in favor of national unity and his government. True, some politicians are still demanding reconciliation, but he dismisses them as "minor political parties" whose tiresome complaints now fall on deaf ears with the people. The attempt to unseat him last year by various political factions? An attempted coup against the political

process by those (regrettably mainly Sunnis) who want to return the Baath Party to its monopoly on power.

Leave aside the various dubious claims which he makes, such as the reviving of mixed Sunni-Shia areas or the alleged return of those who fled sectarian cleansing, or the contrast between his claims on behalf of the Sunni tribes and his own much-reported opposition to the Americans working with the Sunni militias. Focus intead on the political implications of what he's saying: this amounts to a public declaration by Maliki that there will be no further efforts to achieve political reconciliation. Don't expect any more national reconciliation in the form of "legislation" or "benchmarks", Maliki is signaling. The "achievements" of the various tribal awakenings absolve the national government of any further responsibility - and, pace the Weekly Standard - are more important than mere legislative agreements anyway.

In other words, Maliki is gleefully hoisting the United States on its own bottom-up reconciliation petard. In order to sell the surge to Congress, the Bush team decided to focus on positive developments at the local level and downgrade the significance of the deadlocked national political process. Evidently, Maliki took notes. It's ironic, in a way which nobody could possibly have seen coming.

Surge advocates have generally made two key claims about the relationship between local progress and the national level. The first was that local security progress would create a political space allowing the national politicians to make a deal. This clearly hasn't happened, and Maliki has just effectively said that it isn't going to. The second was that the Sunnis have decided to switch from a logic of armed resistance to a logic of political participation. Leave aside our ongoing arguments about whether this is an accurate description of Sunni attitudes today - what's relevant here is that Maliki is basically repudiating that one, too. Maliki now seems to feel no reason to make any concessions since he doesn't feel threatened, and indeed is using their local-level accomodation as a political weapon against their national demands. What does this tell Sunnis about the value of political participation rather than violent resistance?

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, if Maliki refuses to make further concessions and the national political level remains stalled, then it seems likely that Sunnis will become increasingly frustrated and rethink their political strategy. At least that's what would be predicted by, say, Petraeus's counterinsurgency manual, most political science analysis and most Sunni political leaders. There's nothing inevitable about any of this - Iraq is complex and fluid and rapidly changing, and it's not like Maliki's unwillingness to move on national reconciliation is anything new - but it certainly doesn't look promising.

It would be nice if the US could do something about this, but frankly at this point I don't think it can or will. The Petraeus-Crocker team, like the Bush administration and its public supporters, is now fully invested in the theory of a bottom-up reconciliation process. When Maliki claims that this bottom-up reconciliation absolves him of any need to pursue higher-level political reconciliation, the American team is hardly in a position

to call him on it.  Maybe they even agree with him. The Bush administration seems to really believe that things are now going swimmingly in Iraq, and is unlikely to change course.  Even if it wanted to, it clearly has very little leverage over Maliki - can't escalate, won't threaten to withdraw, and can't come up with any alternative to Maliki's rule.  If all those Bush phone calls and the deadline of the September Congressional hearings couldn't move him, why would he be more movable now?   And most cynically, if the problems don't manifest for another, say, 12 months does the Bush administration even care?

Maliki's interview doesn't really represent a dramatic change in his political strategy, just a slightly more public airing of it. But it does offer a window into where Iraqi politics might be heading over the next stage, and likely tells Sunni politicians and "former" insurgents what to expect.   Does Maliki's position tell us what to expect, or is it just a trial balloon?  Does the US role in this reflect strategic drift, and my oft-stated concerns about US tactics working against its avowed strategy, or does it lead to an acceptable strategic outcome?   Still worth keeping on the front burner.


**Colin Kahl:  in defense of bottom-up reconciliation**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/iraq-guest-post.html

Iraq is moving in the direction of a highly decentralized state. It will not be a neat three-way division as soft partition proponents envision. Rather, "all politics is becoming local," in the sense of some relatively homogenous provinces, and others with pockets of homogenous and mixed communities, all attempting to provide for their own security and governance. In this emerging context, I don't think that the emergence of a stable security equilibrium in Iraq necessarily involves some huge grand bargain inside the central government that addresses every Sunni grievance and fully includes them in the national political process. That was the old notion of national reconciliation -- and, as your recent commentary on Maliki points out, it is not likely to materialize anytime soon. A minimalist notion of national accommodation, in contrast, would focus on two and only two political compromises at the center: an oil deal and provincial powers/elections. In conjunction with bottom-up security mobilization and efforts to professionalize the Iraqi Army, this could *potentially* lead to a stable equilibrium in the following ways:

1. Fair oil revenue distribution may make Sunni areas economically viable, reducing incentives for them to seize the central government (and, because of this, hopefully reducing Shia fears that they will try).

2. Better local representation (via new provincial elections) and enhanced powers for provincial councils may help ensure that local Sunni elites have economic and political security, patronage resources, etc. -- again reducing their incentives to attack the center.

3. The creation of viable local security forces with *defensive* capabilities (as opposed to heavy weapons that provide them with the offensive capacity to topple the

government) may reduce the fear Sunnis have of being exterminated (thereby reducing their incentives to engage in violence) while deterring Shia offensive actions. In other words, if the system is defense-dominant, it helps alleviate the sectarian security dilemma.

4. The notional integration of local security forces into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) (in the sense of transparency regarding group membership and an arrangement whereby local security forces receive their funding from the central government instead of us) may create disincentives for Sunni groups to attack the center and create a sense among the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad that they have oversight and leverage over these groups, eventually reducing their own fears.

5. Continued efforts to forge a relatively neutral, professional Iraqi Army may create a force that is capable of policing the sectarian seams as we cut ourselves out of the population security loop.

This could work *in theory* -- although the probabilities are difficult to assess and are probably not particularly high. But the probability of a stable equilibrium if we leave now and cut off support for the ISF (e.g., recent suggestions from the Center for American Progress) before we pull off this delicate balancing act is certainly *much* lower. As the two 2007 NIEs on Iraq concluded, a rapid decline in American support would most likely splinter the ISF along sectarian lines and worsen the sectarian bloodshed.

I also don't buy the fact, as some have asserted, that in taking steps to help organize local security forces, we are necessarily making the civil war *worse* through these efforts. It is conceivable that we are, because we are helping to fund and recruit Sunni groups, but many were *already* organized (e.g., former insurgents that have now joined "concerned local citizens" groups), those that weren't could organize without us (and likely would if they were left to fend for themselves in the face of a possible Shia onslaught), and these groups could probably get money and weapons elsewhere (e.g., from Saudi Arabia, through criminal activities, etc.).

Finally, if our *only* goal is to end the civil war and one judged that our actions are, at best, only delaying the inevitable here and have no prospect for creating a stable equilibrium, then maybe we should stand aside, let nature run its course, and let the conflict "burn itself out." But ending the civil war is not our only interest. It matters to our interests very much *how* the civil war is ended. We want to avoid genocide if possible (so allowing the conflict to "burn itself out" is not a good idea -- since the mechanism for this happening could be the slaughter of many tens of thousands of people), we want to degrade al Qaeda in Iraq (so leaving the Sunnis on their own is a bad idea because it re-incentivizes them to make common cause with AQI against the Shia), and we want to maintain some influence in Iraq to limit Iranian gains and prevent a wider regional conflict (which argues for having some presence *inside* Iraq).

**Brian Katulis**
**Unanswered Substantive Policy Questions on Kahl's Iraq Argument**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/katulis-respons.html

Colin Kahl has made valuable contributions to the Iraq policy debate, most recently in his thoughtful post on Abu Aardvark earlier this week.

The end state he outlines for Iraq – a highly decentralized state, but NOT simplistically drawn along three regions as proposed by Senator Joe Biden and others – is a probable outcome. The real debate, then, is about means rather than ends – how do we get there from here?

And on this score, Kahl's argument suffers from important substantive weaknesses. In sum, simply offering a tactical military plan that hardens up different sides in Iraq's internal conflicts may in fact make an accommodation among Iraq's increasingly fractured and fragmented groups more difficult to achieve. There are four key problems with his analysis.

1. Narrowly focusing on military tactics is unlikely to achieve a true equilibrium inside of Iraq.

At the core of Kahl's argument is a tactical military plan not dissimilar to the one being pursued by the Bush administration: train and support an increasingly diverse set of Iraqi security forces organized at different levels along mostly sectarian and ethnic lines. The main thrust of the argument is that this security support will somehow change the strategic calculations of Iraqi political actors to achieve some sort of equilibrium inside of the country. Yet Kahl's argument never fully demonstrates how these measures would actually advance reconciliation, or even its less ambitious goal – "accommodation."

Iraq's multiple internal conflicts at their core are vicious struggles for power. Kahl's argument for a continued U.S. military training and assistance effort is that it will achieve a degree of internal balance among the competing Iraqi factions by giving a boost to Sunni irregular forces that were previously insecure in the face of Shi'a dominance, and that these groups will responsibly act in a defensive manner.

Accepting the conclusions of his argument requires several leaps of faith – first, that the bottom-up security mobilization is actually resulting in a coherent consolidation at local and provincial levels, and second, that some stable accommodation can result on a broader national level. At the local level, recent sniping among Sunni tribal leaders and long standing rivalries between competing groups in places like Ramadi and Fallujah raise questions of whether true bottom up reconciliation is occurring. The ongoing security challenges in the mixed Shi'a-Sunni province of Diyala raises serious concerns about whether a true consolidation is even happening at the local level. (And people should watch carefully what transpires in Diyala in the coming months)

Kahl overstates the role that the surge of U.S. forces had in leading to the turn of Sunni forces against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).  As Marc Lynch and other experts have noted, the shift in strategy by Sunni tribes against AQI predated the surge.  Kahl argues that a drawdown of U.S. troops might serve to reincentivize Sunnis to make common cause with AQI to defend against Shi'a.  But the reverse may in fact be true.  There could be an even greater risk that a long-term U.S. military presence in Iraq could create incentives for Sunnis to turn back to their cooperation with AQI elements.

More broadly, Kahl's argument fails to acknowledge large swathes of the country and other aspects of intra-Iraqi battles.  Kahl focuses on local security initiatives in Sunni areas and along Sunni-Shi'a fault lines, ignoring important dynamics in other parts of the country.

In the southern part of Iraq, the Shi'a heartland in the only Shi'a-majority Arab country in the world, there has been a complicated intra-Shi'a civil war playing out in the streets of Basra, Diwaniya, and Nasiriya for the past few years.  This southern part of the country is an important strategic center of gravity, containing the vast majority of the country's oil and gas resources and some of the holiest sites to Shi'a Islam.  Kahl's argument fails to mention that the U.S. and Coalition force presence in this part of the country is minimal and is doing little to shape these intra-Shi'a tensions.  On a separate front, it is not clear how an approach focused narrowly on military tactics can do anything meaningful to address growing tensions along the Arab-Kurdish fault lines in northern Iraq.

2.  Decentralized security initiatives could impede Iraq's national accommodation.

Others have pointed this out – but it is worth noting again – that Kahl's "minimalist" notion of national accommodation is actually quite maximalist – getting to a deal on dividing up the country's considerable oil resources and defining the powers of central vs. regional vs. provincial vs. local government is no small task in today's Iraq.  Yet Kahl offers no clear plan about how to get there from here – how to get Iraqis to yes on the oil law and implementing legislation, beyond a few vague ideas on how a set of military tactics and a bottom up security assistance program might create conditions more favorable for an accommodation.

Furthermore, the crux of Kahl's argument – that decentralized security assistance might promote accommodation – remains unproven.  Rather than reassuring the Shi'a-dominated central government that these initiatives are in the best interest of the country, it has done the opposite and put Shi'a leaders on edge.

Maliki is using the tribal "awakenings" to avoid responsibility for national reconciliation. This does not bode well for even the minimalist approach necessary for a stable sectarian equilibrium. Maliki's repeated opposition to working with Sunni irregular forces combined with Shi'a insecurity on their hold on power also augurs poorly for integration of these forces into some sort of national structure. Why, after all, would Maliki and his Shi'a coalition want to supply resources to people they believe are bent to destroy them? The United Iraqi Alliance's statement last month calling for an end to these security

initiatives bodes poorly for the notion that these tactical military initiatives might actually result in a sustainable equilibrium.  The evidence demonstrates that these decentralized security efforts could actually make the chances of national accommodation and a sustainable security arrangement LESS likely, rather than more likely.

3.  An extended U.S. training and support mission in Iraq is not likely to achieve the desired results without addressing the underlying political disputes between Iraqis.

Even if a credible plan can be devised on paper that brings the different pieces Iraq's complicated puzzle together in a true national equilibrium – one that doesn't simply focus narrowly along the Shi'a-Sunni fault lines – serious questions remain about the U.S. capacity to support these military tactics.

The views of many of our ground troops – captured best by twelve former Army captains who served in Iraq and seven soldiers serving in Iraq earlier this year (two of whom died in Iraq earlier this fall) – demonstrate serious skepticism in the ranks; for the perspective many U.S. troops, the fundamental problem with Iraqi security forces isn't skills building or training, but motivation and allegiance.

Moreover, if Kahl's plan advocates a training mission along the same lines of the Center for New American Security plan for Iraq of "phased transition" – one based on a formula of removing combat troops but keeping a diminished troop presence in the country – then he fails to answer how this could actually be implemented.  Numerous other military analysts – including Steven Biddle at the Council on Foreign Relations and Andrew Exum who served with the U.S. military in Iraq , have pointed out that simply splitting the difference on troops levels won't work logistically.  Increasing the number of trainers while withdrawing combat troops will create a force protection nightmare that won't likely yield significant results.

Furthermore, arguing that a reduced presence can accomplish more in Iraq than what was NOT already achieved in the past four years with a larger force is somewhat disingenuous.  As retired general Kevin Ryan pointed out earlier this year, the missions frequently outlined for a possible residual U.S. presence in Iraq would likely require the current level of troops to remain the same – because the United States never had enough troops in Iraq in the first place.

Finally, there remains the question of how stabilizing the U.S. presence truly is.  U.S. forces remain the target of the vast majority of attacks in Iraq and a majority of the Iraqi public say these attacks are acceptable.

4.  Attempting to deal with Iraq's conflicts in isolation of a volatile Middle East will not achieve equilibrium.  The fourth problem with Kahl's analysis is that it treats Iraq in isolation of the security interests of Iraq's neighbors – many of whom are already acting to assert their own interests inside of Iraq's multiple internal conflicts.   Getting to equilibrium inside of Iraq will require some degree of accommodation and cooperation with Iraq's neighbors – a complicated thing to pull off given the diverse set of security

interests involved. But getting to yes inside of Iraq will require some sort of coordination with Iraq's neighbors – a diplomatic surge of the sort outlined by individuals like Carlos Pascual at Brookings.

Kahl offers some important and textured analysis on the nature of the challenges ahead in Iraq – and clearly there are no easy answers or policy solutions. But his argument is incomplete and relies too heavily on tactical military steps that ultimately may not lead to a sustainable consolidation and equilibrium. After four and a half years of trying to make things a little better and make tactical shifts, it is time for a comprehensive strategic shift, not only in Iraq, but in the region.


**Kahl: response to Katulis**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/kahl-response-t.html

I want to thank Brian Katulis for engaging in such a smart and spirited debate on these issues, and I want to thank Marc Lynch for giving us a forum.

Before providing some responses to Katulis' post, I want to make a few things crystal clear.

I believe there are no good options for Iraq, just options that are bad in different ways. The trick is to find the least bad option for advancing core American interests and obligations in a vital part of the world. The goal here is not "victory" in the grandiose terms the Bush administration speaks of; that has not been possible for a long time if it ever was. Rather, the goal should be to craft a policy to mitigate and manage the horrendous consequences of the Bush administration's failures and mismanagement of the war since the outset. Of course, even finding the "least bad" option is easier said than done. Recognition of that should impose humility on all sides.

A starting point for a "least bad" discussion is recognizing that we have to deal with "the Iraq we have, not the Iraq we want." That Iraq is becoming increasingly clear. Katulis and I are in agreement that Iraq is becoming a highly decentralized political system where governance and security is increasingly devolving to localities. The only questions are how violent this decentralized system will be, and how (if at all) the U.S. should attempt to influence its trajectory. I do not think a grand national reconciliation is likely, whether we stay or go (although, ironically, Katulis and CAP often appear to hold out hope that such a national reconciliation will be motivated by a near-term U.S. withdrawal – more on this below). But I do think there is some prospect (albeit a slim one) of an accommodation (i.e., a "live and let live" attitude) and a relatively stable security equilibrium that is sustainable once we being to cut ourselves out of the population security loop, if our current actions and our future withdrawal from Iraq are handled properly. This outcome must be anchored in a political resolution on the oil issue and provincial powers and elections, coupled with political-military steps that establish a viable balance of power and an overall security architecture that creates incentives for defensive postures by all sides. Such an equilibrium will not be a democracy; it will not

be violence free; and it will not be nice. At this point, the most we can probably hope for is a country that is not a safe haven for al-Qaeda, where the risks of humanitarian catastrophe on a genocidal scale are reduced, and the level of violent conflict stops short of a regional conflagration. In short, the best we can hope for is a mitigation of the self-inflicted wounds Bush's war has caused to our national interests.

A key divide between Katulis and me is whether there is anything that the U.S. can do inside Iraq that can shape and shove the system into a stable decentralized equilibrium that is sustainable once we inevitably begin to leave. If one believes that there is zero or close to zero chance of achieving these objectives by keeping (any level of) U.S. forces in Iraq to influence events, and can demonstrate that the marginal costs of staying (at any level) outweigh the marginal benefits, then the Katulis/CAP "outside-in" position or a containment model makes a lot of sense. If, however, one believes the probability of managing the conflict from inside Iraq along the lines I suggested in my post are low but not approaching zero, then the magnitude of the interests involved suggest that we should try, using the Katulis/CAP position as the natural fall-back.

OK, enough preamble. Here is my detailed response to Katulis' response.

Katulis portrays my post as merely "tactical" and mostly "military," with insufficient attention to regional diplomacy. This is a bit unfair. First, my so-called tactical suggestions are informed by a strategic perspective that holds that the U.S. has a handful of important interests in Iraq – avoiding an al Qaeda safe haven, avoiding all-out genocide, and avoiding a regional war – and a belief that we should consider how certain steps might contribute to advancing these interests.

Second, my post begins by arguing that any viable decentralized outcome in Iraq hinges crucially on two political compromises at the center: an oil deal and provincial powers/elections. These agreements are essential to make localities and provinces economically and politically viable, while tying them sufficiently to the center so the country doesn't fly apart. I then say: "In conjunction with bottom-up security mobilization and efforts to professionalize the Iraqi Army, this could potentially lead to a stable equilibrium." In other words, the specific details I describe (mostly military) are meant to support the political strategy, not represent the whole approach.

Third, my relatively short post was an attempt to suggest some of the ways to make the most of the "bottom-up" changes now transforming the Iraqi political and security landscape (to make the most of the "Iraq we have"). It was never meant to be a comprehensive plan or strategy. Instead, I attempted to advance the debate by listing some (non-exhaustive) military and political elements of that plan. I also believe the steps I suggested should be complemented by, and integrated with, a broader political, economic, and diplomatic strategy for Iraq and the region as the U.S. begins to drawdown its forces. Outside Iraq, I completely agree that we need a "surge" of diplomacy aimed at reaching a regional compact on Iraq and other steps to resolve long simmering conflicts in the Middle East. This could serve an important facilitating role to both stabilize Iraq and facilitate a responsible and orderly withdrawal. Inside Iraq, such a fuller strategy

should include more efforts to promote economic development and good governance at the local and national level (including strengthening the role of and support to embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and bolstering efforts to advise government ministries), and steps to enhance the role of Regional Embassy Offices to engage with local actors. I suspect that Katulis agrees with these "civilian" steps to stay engaged in Iraq too, but it would be impossible to pull-off without residual U.S. troops to provide force protection for these endeavors.

Katulis wonders how my suggestions would motivate Sunni-Shia accommodation. To understand how it might, we should start with the recognition that many in the Maliki government (and major Shia parties) do not seek accommodation; rather, they seek to run the government solely on their terms. In the face of a weakened Sunni community, they have few incentives to compromise because the costs of ignoring the Sunnis are low. Sunni tribal engagement and other bottom-up efforts address this issue. At the same time, the events of 2006-2007 have probably convinced Sunnis that they cannot win the civil war. This is good because it motivates them to strike some accommodation, but only if they feel that such an accommodation will not leave them completely defenseless against either al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or the potential for an onslaught by Shia militias or the Shia-dominated Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Thus, in my post, I argued that Sunnis must have enough capabilities to defend their local interests, but not enough to take-over the government. In contrast, it is difficult to see how Katulis' recommendations for near-term unilateral withdrawal motivates parties to do anything other than look out for themselves. This might produce accommodation eventually, but only after a vicious civil war leaves one side victorious, or tens of thousands of additional deaths leaves both sides exhausted. Let's try my way first.

Katulis then questions whether bottom-up efforts are creating consolidated forces, which he takes to be a precondition for the success of my approach. He is right: from a bargaining perspective, consolidation is important because it creates actors that can credibly negotiate and enforce agreements on behalf of their constituents. In the absence of such Sunni consolidation, sustainable accommodation is unlikely to be reached or last. So far, Sunni consolidation appears to be most advanced in Anbar (despite the sniping Katulis alludes to); the "concerned local citizens" movement is still taking shape elsewhere and it is too early to tell where it is going. But here Katulis falls into a trap of his own making. The longer we stay engaged in—and encourage the Iraqi government to support—the bottom-up process, the more consolidation will occur, and thus the more likely we are to establish the necessary (albeit not the sufficient) conditions for accommodation. In contrast, withdrawing in the near-term and cutting off support to Sunni tribes and auxiliary forces, as Katulis recommends, would ensure that there is no consolidation and thus make any accommodation impossible to achieve (or enforce).

Katulis then states: "Kahl overstates the role that the surge of U.S. forces had in leading to the turn of Sunni forces against Al Qaeda in Iraq." Strange. I never stated this at all. Indeed, in a recent article in Foreign Policy (online) Shawn Brimley and I argued: "It is fast becoming conventional wisdom . . . that the surge is helping bring large numbers of Sunni sheikhs and former insurgents into the fight against al Qaeda in Iraq. But this

grassroots progress is not the result of extra troops. Instead, it is the result of Sunni outrage over atrocities committed by al Qaeda in tribal areas—grievances that predate the surge. Sunni groups also want to reverse their current marginalization and position themselves vis-à-vis their Shiite counterparts, and Iran, in the event of a U.S. withdrawal. It is enemy-of-my-enemy logic, not a change of heart or U.S. troop increases, that is driving Sunni cooperation."
(http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3968).

However, Katulis is correct that I fear that his favored approach, a near-term total U.S. withdrawal and abandonment of support for Sunni groups, could create fresh incentives for these groups to make common cause with AQI. Why? Because of the same self-interests driving current Sunni behavior. In the absence of our willingness to protect them or an inability to protect themselves, Sunni tribes will face pressures to turn back to AQI for self-defense against a common enemy: the Shia and their presumed Iranian patrons. I agree with Katulis that the U.S. staying too long could also trigger some increase in support for AQI down the road, which is why I don't support permanent bases and I think significant withdrawals should happen as soon as possible from homogenous areas where local forces are capable of providing their own security. But the bigger risk at the moment is not our presence—it is the fear among Sunnis that we may leave them in the lurch.

Katulis argues that I ignore the southern and northern parts of the country in my post. Guilty as charged. I think there is little the U.S. can do to influence events in the south—that ship sailed long ago. It appears that the U.S. is backing the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) and its Badr organization in the contest for supremacy against Sadr and elements of Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM), while hoping the ISF can keep a lid on the worst outbursts of violence, but, ultimately, we are marginal players here. I focused on the parts of the country where we may be able to make a difference—the parts where the Sunni insurgency and Sunni-Shia communal violence are the biggest challenges—and where the vital interests identified above (notwithstanding the flow of oil from the south) are most acute. That said, it is hard to see how the approach Katulis recommends provides more influence over the south. As far as Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned, I think a residual presence in the north is probably a good idea to maintain influence over the Kurds and dissuade Turkish intervention.

OK, back to the Sunni-Shia reconciliation debate. Katulis frets that bottom-up engagements with Sunni tribes and former insurgents will derail any prospects for national reconciliation by increasing Shia anxieties. Recent statements and behavior by the Maliki government demonstrate that this is a genuine concern, and Brimley and I said as much in the Foreign Policy article cited above. But let's not push the argument too far. Katulis argues: "The evidence demonstrates that these decentralized security efforts could actually make the chances of national accommodation and a sustainable security arrangement LESS likely, rather than more likely." I would ask, less likely than what? It is not as if the Maliki government was keen on reconciliation before the bottom-up movement began. Moreover, the solution to the danger of magnifying Shia parnoia is not to give up on the bottom-up process, but rather to take steps to address Shia anxieties.

How? By calibrating Sunni defensive capabilities in the way I suggest; by working hard to vet the huge influx of Sunni volunteers; by using the biometric information collected on volunteers to keep them in line; by integrating them at least loosely into the ISF so that the Shia-government is aware of their activities; and by making Sunni groups financially dependent on the central government (as opposed to U.S. payments) so that they are deterred from turning against the Shia government and the government, in turn, has confidence that they have some leverage over these groups.

What about the risk of blowback? Aren't bottom-up efforts just allowing the Sunnis to build up their strength for a bigger civil war down the road. Maybe. But as I noted in my post: "many [of these individuals] were already organized (e.g., former insurgents that have now joined "concerned local citizens" groups), those that weren't could organize without us (and likely would if they were left to fend for themselves in the face of a possible Shia onslaught), and these groups could probably get money and weapons elsewhere (e.g., from Saudi Arabia, through criminal activities, etc.)." Moreover, the consensus of American intelligence agencies concludes that a near-term withdrawal and abandonment of support for the ISF is the most likely scenario for a renewed escalation of the civil war.

Katulis then moves on to critique my recommendations for an extended training and advising mission, linking them to the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) report of "Phased Transition." He cites numerous military analysts who question the logistical plausibility of this model. (As an aside: This is somewhat ironic since the CNAS paper was actually crafted in consultation with military planners whereas no military planner I know of thinks the pace of the U.S. withdrawal advocated by Katulis/CAP is logistically possible).

The size and composition of the residual training and advising force would depend on the conditions on the ground: the more dangerous, the larger the total force needed for force protection. I would not be in favor of a sizeable training and advising mission under conditions where they would be incredibly vulnerable or where it would require such large forces that it would preclude a gradual withdrawal. However, assuming somewhat more permissive conditions facilitated by the bottom-up dynamics unfolding in Iraq at the moment, movement toward a residual force of 60,000-80,000 (including advisors, support, SOF, and quick reaction forces) in the timeframe sketched by CNAS (about 18 months) seems like a realistic halfway house to ensure our national interests on the path to a total withdrawal. Moreover, the significant drawdown this entails (100,000 from current levels) should signal to Iraqis that we do not intend to stay forever (capturing many of the benefits of Katulis' approach) while minimizing the biggest downside risks from the fear of total abandonment that a rapid and total withdrawal might produce. Moreover, if handled deftly as part of a broader diplomatic strategy, this sizeable but not complete redeployment could kick-start negotiations to establish the conditions for the follow-on phases of withdrawal.

Katulis quips that it is hard to imagine accomplishing more with fewer forces, but this belies a fundamental confusion with what I'm advocating. I'm not saying it is possible to

achieve the (unachievable) Bush administration objectives with less; rather, I'm saying it is possible to achieve less (i.e., minimal but still vital national interests) with less. This means maintaining residual forces (including advisors linked to local and national Iraqi security forces) for several years that are capable of: (1) gleaning essential intelligence for counterterrorism operations (intelligence that cannot be gleaned from a purely "over the horizon" posture—especially if the goal is to avoid bombing a lot of innocent civilians); (2) providing critical support capabilities to the ISF (and building their capacity for self-sustainment, which the Jones report suggested would take 18 months); (3) monitoring behavior to detect sectarian tendencies among the Iraqi Army and other national security forces policing the fault lines between communities or providing security in mixed communities (and providing early warning necessary to deter genocidal actions) as we pull back; and (4) providing a presence to dissuade and deter large-scale intervention by neighboring states.

The options I have presented are not ideal and they may not work. Indeed the probabilities of advancing any of our core national interests in Iraq remain low. But the probability of advancing them by not trying is zero.


**Brian Katulis:  The Iraq Debate: Looking at the Broader Perspective**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/katulis-looking.html

The history of the Middle East is filled with outside powers who tried to control events and forces inside the region that they did not fully understand.   The experiences of the Roman, Ottoman, and British empires in the Middle East offer important lessons for those who offer well-intentioned strategies aimed at tinkering with volatile internal power balances and dealing with actors that have strategies marked in decades, rather than months.

Recent involvement by the United States in the region - including support for the Shah of Iran in the 1970s, the military engagement in Lebanon in the 1980s, and efforts to boost Iraq's Saddam Hussein versus Iran in the 1980s - demonstrate how the law of unintended consequences rules the day and unanticipated blowback can come back to haunt us.  The current engagement in Iraq presents similar risks and difficult choices for U.S. security. It is in this historical context that one should evaluate any argument that makes a case for maintaining an extended U.S. troop presence in Iraq.

During the past week, Colin Kahl and I have had a constructive exchange   on the difficult questions moving forward in Iraq - much more thoughtful than other exchanges in which conservatives seem to do little more than posture and spew empty rhetoric. Kahl and I agree on some key points - there are no good options moving forward on Iraq policy and internal dynamics in Iraq seem to be heading towards a heavily decentralized system; and disagree on others - like whether it makes strategic sense for the United States to maintain a military presence in Iraq for an extended period of time.

Much of our debate is over analysis, rather than a dispute of the facts. But one of Kahl's specific points requires a direct rejoinder - the issue of how long it would take to redeploy U.S. troops. In his post responding to me, he claims, "the CNAS paper was actually crafted in consultation with military planners whereas no military planner I know of thinks the pace of the U.S. withdrawal advocated by Katulis/CAP is logistically possible."

Here Kahl gets it wrong, or at least he needs to expand of military experts with whom he consults. The implication of his statement is that Center for American Progress did NOT consult with military planners, which is actually untrue. I'm sure he didn't mean to questions the credentials of respected individuals like my colleague Larry Korb, a former defense official in the Reagan administration who coauthored a detailed report on the logistics of redeployment, "How to Redeploy." (This is a report that received positive comments for its technical recommendations on the logistics of redeployment from numerous planners in the Pentagon and in Iraq, all of whom said what Korb proposes could be done). In addition to this report, Kahl should take a look at contributions here, here and here, just as a starting point, and there are more arguments and analysis that demonstrate that Kahl simply gets this point of how long it could take to practically get out of Iraq wrong.

With that logistical matter out of the way, in order to complete this exchange, it is important to take a step out of the Iraq trenches and look at the broader perspective. One key element missing from this exchange was the bigger strategic picture - an analysis of the broader context in which the United States is operating. On these levels, Kahl understates the costs and risks while overstating the benefits of his approach. The strains on U.S. military readiness, the impact that the U.S. troop presence in Iraq has on global terrorist networks, and the escalating financial bill for American taxpayers of staying engaged militarily at the levels Kahl suggests are significant.

Keeping large numbers of U.S. troops in Iraq - at a time when our so-called coalition of the willing allies such as Britain are drawing down their force levels - places tremendous strains on our ground troops. The Army has lowered it recruiting standards to unprecedented levels, and the United States no longer has a strategic ground reserve as a result of the extended deployments.

Advocates for maintaining an extended U.S. troop presence in Iraq like Kahl forget the wise advice of Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, who once wrote, "If the army is exposed to a prolonged campaign, the nation's resources will not suffice... no nation has ever benefited from protracted warfare." A plan to keep tens of thousands of troops in Iraq - in support of goals that Kahl admits has little chance of being achieve - seems to be a bad option. (And these comments don't even address the question of whether our military has enough qualified trainers to serve in the roles that Kahl proposes they would in Iraq, which is a separate issue - it is not clear that we even have the capacity to do what Kahl proposes to do). Proposals for an extended 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. Of course, America is a

country with considerable resources, and we could always institute a military draft if we needed to meet these challenges.  But we also happen to be a democracy too, and the thought of instituting a military draft at a time when the Iraq war is deeply unpopular and the majority of Americans support withdrawing U.S. troops in a year seems improbable.

Beyond the strains on our military, there are other significant costs to U.S. national security that result from maintaining an extended troop presence.  A National Intelligence Estimate released last year concluded that the U.S. military presence in Iraq was a boon for global Islamist extremists - that the Iraq war has increased radicalism and made the global terror threat worse.  Leading terrorism analysts  have argued that an extensive U.S. military presence in Iraq is not an effective way to deal with the terrorist threat there and that the costs to the broader global battle are high - leading some like Steven Simon to reach conclusions similar to ours at the Center for American Progress - that military disengagement from Iraq is the most sensible option when one considers the full range of our country's strategic interests.

Beyond the military and national security costs, a continued U.S. troop presence in Iraq also has major financial implications for the United States - again all for achieving a low probability of success, as Kahl admits.  To date, we've spent at least $600 billion in Iraq, and our open-ended troop presence costs anywhere from $8-$10 billion a month.  One recent estimate put the financial costs of Iraq and Afghanistan so far at $20,000 for a family of four.  In an era of tax cuts and fiscal imbalances, this of course is a strategy being paid for with borrowed money from overseas, further weakening America's position in the world.

All of this adds up to significant strategic costs - for a plan that as Marc Lynch  and I have pointed out is not likely to achieve the equilibrium that Kahl argues would result inside of Iraq.  So not only are the tactics proposed by Kahl unlikely to achieve his stated goals, the strategic costs to U.S. national security are not worth the benefits.

One other important point to note -simply slapping a "responsible" label on proposals does not exonerate analysts from actually owning up to some very grim consequences of some of the policies that they espouse.  Many of the negative consequences feared by those who oppose U.S. troop redeployment from Iraq have already occurred just as U.S. troop levels were INCREASING in Iraq.  When historians look back on 2006-2007 in Iraq, they will see this as a period when massive campaigns of sectarian cleansing were underway - killing thousands, displacing millions more, and resulting in the largest refugee crisis in the Middle East since 1948.

When one consider that the current policy of supporting "bottom up" security initiatives means that the U.S. military is actually cooperating with sectarian cleansers and in some cases serial murderers - as Jon Lee Anderson's excellent piece in the New Yorker highlights - then it raises questions about who is being "responsible."  So instead of posturing about who is most "responsible" and "serious" about "U.S. interests" when we debate Iraq, it is probably better to just say that we agree there are no good options on Iraq and engage in the debate on its merits and facts.

In 2003, the Bush administration and its supporters made one of the greatest strategic national security blunders in the history of our country by leaving a mission unaccomplished in Afghanistan and taking the country into an unnecessary war of choice in Iraq. This slide to war was aided and abetted by foreign policy analysts of all partisan stripes who failed to ask the tough questions and challenge the assumptions behind going into Iraq. It is now equally important to debate the arguments behind maintaining an enduring and extensive U.S. military presence in Iraq. Instead of minor tactical adjustments to the current strategy - with shifts in training Iraqi security forces, the United States in essence needs to hit the "CTRL-ALT-DELETE" button - in a Strategic Reset of our entire approach to the Middle East. Continuing to tinker on the margins with small shifts in policy are not likely to lead to a sustainable political settlement to Iraq's conflicts, and they are not going to improve America's position in the world.


**Marc Lynch**
**Kahl-Katulis Debate: my thoughts**
http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/11/kahl-katulis-de.html

I come down much closer to Katulis than Kahl, which isn't surprising since that's where I started. But that doesn't mean that the debate hasn't been extremely productive - if for no other reason than to demonstrate that liberal foreign policy analysts are thinking seriously about Iraq strategy. Kahl lays out his side of the argument better than almost anyone else I've seen, but ultimately I'm not persuaded.

Before getting into the points of disagreement between Kahl and Katulis, it's important to see how much agreement there really is. Their understanding of the situation mirrors my experience at the DACOR conference last month: we all basically agree on where Iraq is heading - a highly decentralized state, without a formal or even semi-formal partition. where governance and security is increasingly devolving to localities. Whether this is "federalism" or a "warlord state" is what is in question; a strong central democratic state rooted in a general consensus on political identity and norms is off the table. Whether we state it or not, we all seem to expect that the formal Iraqi state will likely remain governed by the existing political rules, meaning a monopoly of the major Shia parties supported by a deal to leave the Kurds alone in exchange for their votes. We all agree that the situation in the Shia areas is beyond American control and likely to remain violent, fragmented and unstable. And none of us think that there will be any national level political accomodation. Never mind that the situation just described used to be defined as "failure" – the important issue here now, as Kahl and Katulis agree, is how to respond to this lousy scenario to best protect American (and Iraqi?) interests.

Another point of consensus, though one which doesn't come up as much in the actual debate as it should: none of us expect a serious return of refugees or displaced persons to their old neighborhoods. As I've argued repeatedly, and as numerous commenters point out, this is not an incidental point. 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 contitute not simply a humanitarian disaster, but also a constituency for radicalism and irredentism which 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 easily reconcile to a "local-level dominant" Iraq in which they are permanent outsiders and have little hope of gaining satisfaction at the national level.

The biggest point of disagreement is whether local-level deals can be self-sustaining in the absence of a national agreement, and the contribution of American military forces to that process.  I disagree with Kahl on this major point.   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.  Maliki now describes those calling for national reconciliation as conspirators and as selfish politicians making unreasonable demands for their own self-interest.  Backers of the bottom-up approach increasingly seem to be accepting this convenient frame, since it justifies ignoring the point of greatest failure.  After all those months where Maliki was vilified for refusing to move on national reconciliation, he now finds Americans far more receptive to essentially the same arguments:  don't worry about the "failure" of national reconciliation since it isn't important or desirable.  And so he is moving ahead without the troublesome Sunni politicians,  taking advantage of the space created by a moment of relative security to...further marginalize his Sunni "partners."

Kahl suggests that a "grand bargain inside the central government that addresses every Sunni grievance and fully includes them in the national political process" is neither necessary nor likely. Obviously, I agree that it is not likely. But it really is necessary.  Of course the Sunnis won't get everything that they want - that sets the bar far too high, and most Sunni politicians probably understand this (although many do continue to have a greater sense of their own power and population size than is warranted).  Every negotiation involves opening bids and real bottom lines, and there's no reason to think that this is any different.   Kahl is really saying that among the variety of things Sunnis demand, their real bottom line is fair sharing of oil and provincial elections. But I don't see this as a formula for even minimal agreement. Maliki clearly sees no reason to make compromises on oil, and provincial elections are fairly marginal to Sunni demands.

Kahl is right to place the oil issue at the center of any achievable national reconciliation. But while this isn't an issue I follow especially closely, it appears that the oil negotiations are deeply deadlocked.  The stakes are huge, and the Shia demands for federalism do not seem particularly sensitive to Sunni interests (look at that inflammatory map which was circulating on the internet a few weeks ago).  What's more, there's little reason for the Shia to believe that funneling more oil revenues to the Sunni areas won't 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 either direction - which is one of the reasons that a deal has been so difficult to strike.

As for provincial elections, they matter more to bottom-up reconciliators than they do to most Sunnis.  I haven't seen any major demand for them, at any rate, compared to the headline issues like prisoners and amnesty and oil and the rampant sectarianism in state agencies.   On the contrary, 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.   There seems to be more interest in change at the national level, actually.  Tareq al-Hashemi and other national leaders have called for Maliki to be replaced by a technocratic government, and there seems to be renewed interest in new national (not provincial) elections - both of which, by the way, are also demands made by leading Sadrist figures, by the Allawi list, and by others. It isn't clear that new national elections under the same electoral law would solve any problems (and it's clear that Maliki has no interest in such a move), but that's more on the agenda right now than provincial elections.

The focus on the provincial elections really seems to be driven by the hope of creating what Kahl calls "better local representation (via new provincial elections) and enhanced powers for provincial councils."  But I think it's worth calling this what it is:  an attempt to empower an alternative, more compliant local-level leadership in the place of the factions which have claimed to represent the Sunnis by virtue of their armed struggle.  Certainly, that's how Maliki is treating it (I'm thinking here of the frequent reports that he is trying to get tribal shaykhs from the Awakenings to take the place of elected Sunni politicians in his government).  This is not a technocratic question of improving services, it's about power.

The promotion of alternative elites is always a risky business, one which sets up all kinds of problems down the road - think back to various Israeli efforts over the years to promote local leadership in the West Bank and Gaza (or Mohammed Dahlan for that matter), or South African efforts to promote alternatives to the ANC back in the Apartheid era.  The current leadership of the various US-aligned councils isn't democratically elected, nor does it particularly want to be. Abundant evidence suggests that the power of these new elites derives largely from American cash.  That's 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 reconstruction assistance.   In today's political climate, massive new reconstruction funds for Iraq are unlikely to materialize – which 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.

These US-backed tribal entities challenge the authority of the insurgency factions, who feel that they've earned the right to lead the Sunni community through their armed resistance resistance, and the elected Iraqi politicians.   The insurgency factions may be battling al-Qaeda and at times tactically cooperating with the US, but that doesn't mean that they have foregone an interest in power.  Quite the contrary, at least judging by their

own political statements and rhetoric.  They believe that they are the authentic, legitimate representatives of the Sunni community – earned by force of arms and by their roots in that community.  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 US somewhat tenuous. The steady campaign of assassinations of Salvation Council members, of which Abu Risha was only the most prominent, can't 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 which is not them.

The fragmentation of the communities at the local level simultaneously 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.  In that regard, it's interesting that there has been some consolidation taking place, slowly and haphazardly, in the ranks of the insurgency factions which remain outside the process.  The Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance, the latest move by the Reform and Jihad Front and others, is aimed at creating a political front capable of negotiating with the Americans on the terms of their withdrawal (it was reportedly welcomed by Tareq al-Hashemi in a statement dated October 21).  It is somewhat heartening that this grouping is evidently being recognized and courted behind the scenes by Americans (at the secretive Dead Sea reconciliation track 2 meeting, for instance).  But it isn't clear that those talks are going anywhere, and even if they do this isn't going to be easily integrated with the currently evolving power structure.

What about the original "bottom-up reconciliation" argument, 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. The Washington Post's recent reporting casts serious doubt that this is happening.  The Post reports that "about 37,000 are being paid about $300 a month through contracts funded by the U.S.-led military coalition." They are paid by Petraeus and owe loyalty to him, not to Maliki - hardly support for national institutions.  As for the idea that the volunteer forces are being integrated into the institutions of the state:   "Only about 1,600 of the volunteers have been trained and sworn in to the Iraqi security forces, primarily with the police."  That's the number which matters in terms of linking up the local forces to the national level (and avoiding the militia problem) – and in those terms, 1600 might as well be 0.

The last four years have left me deeply skeptical of any argument which requires either a high degree of sophisticated American micromanagement or a large number of things which have to go right.   Kahl advocates a version of Stephen Biddle's notion of manipulating the sectarian balance of power:   "Sunnis must have enough capabilities to defend their local interests, but not enough to take-over the government." But think about the degree of precision necessary here – in an environment where we hardly seem to know where the guns are going or who our allies are.   I am skeptical about the applicability of offensive- defensive distinctions ("The creation of viable local security forces with *defensive* capabilities) - any weapon that you can use to fight against al-Qaeda can also be used against a Shia militia (or family).  I don't see how this alleviates the sectarian security dilemma.  The only thing which would do that would be the tight

integration of military capability into an institutionalized, centralized security force - the whole "monopoly on the legitimate use of violence" thing which goes into being a state. Finally, US power is a wasting asset – everyone knows the US is running out of time and patience and that US forces will soon be drawn down, whether by Bush or by his successor. Everyone is gaming that reality, taking what they want from Americans while ignoring American demands or advice.

Where does this leave us? Kahl argues that as long as there is a chance greater than zero that the current American approach can salvage something from the wreckage of Iraq, then the stakes dictate that we try. I disagree with Kahl's framing of the choice on two grounds. First, I disagree that the "strategic reset" alternative holds out no hope of success. Kahl fails to grapple with the moral hazard problem which the United States has created, where Iraqi politicians are shielded from the negative consequences of their risky decisions. As long as Americans provide his security, Maliki simply has no reason to make political concessions to people who 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 from Iraq. 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.

Second, Kahl suggests that if we think the chance of success is low but not zero, the stakes dictate that we give it a shot. But that really depends on how close to zero it is, right? If it's 2%, then that would be an absolutely insane gamble. If it's 48%, then maybe. But Kahl presents it as unlikely, as low probability, as very difficult – suggesting he's closer to 2% than 48%. In my opinion, saying that the current tactical approach has a, let's say 4%, chance of leading to strategic success is functionally equivalent to saying that it has no chance. If the probability is really that low, then supporting this policy seems literally insane. Since Kahl is not insane, I have to assume that he thinks the prospects for success (as he's defined it) is considerably higher than he intimates. So how high is it? What are the grounds for that assessment?