

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1632
September 21, 2007

Proposed Timetables for U.S. Withdrawal Would Sabotage Reconciliation in Iraq

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With mounting evidence showing that the Bush Administration's surge policy has made significant military progress, the congressional debate has shifted to focus on the need for political progress toward national reconciliation in Iraq. Many opponents of the surge continue to argue that the way to force Iraqis to compromise is to rapidly withdraw U.S. troops. But such a policy is likely to have the reverse effect. A premature reduction in troops would squander hard-won gains in security, take the lid off sectarian violence, strengthen the hand of Sunni and Shia hard-liners at the expense of moderates, and set back efforts at national reconciliation. The United States must maintain enough troops in Iraq to help Iraq's young government to establish the security conditions necessary to forge a durable power-sharing agreement.

Timetables for Meltdown. This week the Senate is considering amendments to the fiscal year 2008 defense authorization bill that would impose deadlines for the withdrawal of most U.S. troops from Iraq. The Senate defeated by a vote of 70 to 28 an amendment sponsored by Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) to cut off money for combat in Iraq by next June. The Senate will soon consider an amendment by Senators Carl Levin (D-MI) and Jack Reed (D-RI) that would force the removal of all U.S. troops within nine months except for a small residual force that would be tasked with counterterrorism operations, protecting American personnel, training Iraqi security forces, and logistics support.

Supporters of withdrawal timetables argue that such precipitous American action would somehow shock Iraqi political leaders into taking necessary action to forge a more broadly based government coalition that would drain away support for insurgents and sectarian militias. This contention is far-fetched. A rapid pullout of U.S. troops would inevitably be accompanied by a deteriorating security situation that would reduce the prospects for political compromise, not increase them.

Al-Qaeda forces now on the run would quickly regroup and renew their murderous campaign to incite a civil war. The political leaders of Iraq's Shia majority, which has borne the brunt of al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks, would be put under growing pressure to take strong action to destroy al-Qaeda and other violent groups and crush their Sunni supporters. Shia militias, which have been forced to stand down in areas that were reinforced with U.S. troops during the surge, would spring back up to launch vengeance attacks against Sunnis.

Spiraling sectarian violence would dissolve the fragile trust between Iraq's elected leaders and strengthen the hand of hard-liners and militia commanders in every community. Advocates of political

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1632.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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compromise would be undermined and bitterly chastised for not taking tough action to protect their followers. The end result would be a political meltdown that would doom Iraq to a savage sectarian bloodbath.

A sudden U.S. withdrawal would increase the likelihood of a full-fledged civil war and the disintegration of the Iraqi army into factions. The defection of soldiers (along with their heavy equipment) to various militias would bolster the militias' firepower and their capacity to seize and hold terrain. The result would be a bloody and protracted civil war, similar to the conflict in Bosnia following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The Surge and Awakening. The surge did not trigger the "Anbar Awakening," the backlash of Sunni tribes against the harsh tactics of their former allies in al-Qaeda. That rebellion was simmering long before the surge began earlier this year. But the dispatch of additional U.S. troops to Anbar province and other former insurgent strongholds helped to expand the Sunni awakening to other areas, such as Baghdad and Diyala Province, at a much quicker pace. As General Petraeus testified, "the surge certainly enabled that to move much more rapidly, we believe, than it otherwise would have." The additional security afforded by the surge emboldened many local Sunni leaders to turn against al-Qaeda and order more than 20,000 Sunni tribesmen to join security forces in attacking them.

Forcing a withdrawal of U.S. troops would hamstring efforts to consolidate bottom-up political progress in Iraq. Several National Intelligence Estimates have pointed out the grave implications of a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces—not only for Iraq but also for the entire region—due to the destabilizing spillover effects of a failed Iraqi state. Congress has also been warned by Iraqi officials of the dire consequences of a premature withdrawal. Yet many in Congress continue to turn a blind eye to the disastrous consequences of a rush to exit.

Some proponents of an immediate pullout have sought to cloak the negative consequences of their

policy prescription with a diplomatic fig leaf. The Levin–Reed amendment, for example, proposes a vaguely defined international diplomatic effort that would include the appointment of an international mediator for Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council. It is difficult to see how this would resolve Iraq's problems, particularly if the security situation deteriorates due to a reduction in American military operations. Moreover, such wishful thinking ignores the fact that U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon warned against the dangerous consequences of a rapid American pullout on July 16: "It is not my place to inject myself into this discussion taking place between the American people and the Administration and Congress," Ban told a news conference. "However, I would like to tell you that great caution should be taken for the sake of the Iraqi people." He stressed that "Any abrupt withdrawal or decision may lead to a further deterioration of the situation in Iraq."

Conclusion. Reconciliation must be an Iraqi process, led by Iraqis. But to give the political process the greatest possible chance at success, the United States must remain actively involved in shoring up the security situation. Prime Minister Maliki's government, only 16 months old, needs time to build up Iraq's security forces, reach a compromise with moderate Sunnis, restore the rule of law, and deliver better services to the Iraqi people. If the United States succumbs to wishful thinking and undertakes a rapid withdrawal, then Iraqi leaders are likely to harden their positions and take fewer risks in efforts to reach a political compromise. Such a negligent policy could result in a failed state in Iraq that would be much more dangerous than Afghanistan as a base for al-Qaeda and other terrorists in close proximity to the heart of the Arab world and the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

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