

Iraq and the Crocker-Petraeus Testimony: The Risks that Only Time and a Sustained US Presence Can Deal With

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If there is any clear message that emerges out of the events of the last few weeks, it is that the risks in Iraq remain high enough so that no one can yet say whether the odds of any kind of US success are better than even. The fact remains, however, that there is still a marginally better case for staying than for leaving.

Moreover, no one in the America should forget that US decisions affect the lives of some 28 million Iraqis, or the responsibility the US bears for its failure to prepare for stability operations and nation-building in going to war, its failure to deploy adequate troops to secure the country, its empowerment of Shi'ite exile movements and its support of de-Baathification and the disbandment of the Iraqi military forces.

The Iraqis must share the blame for what followed, but it was the US that also has moral and ethical responsibility for creating a closed electoral system that did not allow for local representation and rushed into elections in ways that virtually forced the Iraqis to vote or abstain from voting on ethnic and sectarian lines. It was the US that remained in near denial as an insurgency developed, and then took years to plan and fund adequate Iraqi security forces. It was the US that pushed Iraq into a divisive, half-formed constitution. It was the US that massively mismanaged some \$40 billion in aid and \$30 billion in Iraqi funds.

It is also the US that is now perceived as responsible for most of what has gone wrong in Iraq, the region, and the world.

The Shi'ite Problem

The key risks in Iraq today, however, are driven by Iraqis, and the Shi'ite problem has recently become the most visible symbol of these risks. It is still far from clear why Maliki chose to act at this time and in the way he did in going on the offensive against Sadr and the Mahdi militia, and how his actions related to the complex power struggle emerging among Iraq's key Shi'ite factions. It is equally unclear why he stopped, why Sadr has so far shown so much seeming restraint, and how much of a role Iran played in the process.

What is clear is that the intra-Shi'ite power struggle has only begun, will be violent to some degree, and is likely to intensify through the fall 2008 local/provincial elections, the 2009 national elections, and beyond. It is also clear that the US does

not have a reliable Shi'ite partner in either Al Dawa (the Maliki faction) or the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq or ISCI (the Hakim/Badr Organization faction). It has even less ties to Fadila – the small party now dominating the Basra government.

All these Shiite factions are now virtually certain to continue to play the Iran card both to leverage the US and guard against US withdrawal. As for Dawa and ISCI, it is fine to talk about democracy, and the central government but the US needs to be far more careful about taking sides and possibly alienating large numbers of Shi'ites.

The US cannot be sure that Dawa and ISCI will not attempt to manipulate any provincial/local elections that take place this year. At least ISCI is certain to try to expand its local power base using its governors in the south and their ties to the police, and try to use the option of a nine province Shi'ite federation to carve out an enclave it can control even if this means further weakening national unity. At the same time, a weak Dawa and a stronger Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq also are potential competitors and may turn on each other.

This intra-Shi'ite power struggle is also having a negative impact on Iraq's Sunnis and Kurds. The Sunnis now have even more reason to distrust a central government that has become involved in violent struggles for power with other Shi'ites, and whose links to Iran have become more suspect. The Kurds have more reason to push for a clear definition of the Kurdish zone and Kurdish autonomy.

As a result, intra-Shi'ite political accommodation has become as much of an issue as sectarian and ethnic political accommodation. It is also a volatile issue, and one where Ambassador Crocker, General Petraeus, and everyone else, can only guess at the eventual outcome.

Yet, the events of the last few weeks also show it is still possible that the various Shi'ite factions can work things out peacefully, and do so without becoming dependent on Iran. The US can play a critical role in such efforts *if* the US does not take sides in ways that go beyond trying to bring security to Iraq, and *if* it does its best to mediate, push for political accommodation, limit sectarian and ethnic violence.

Much will depend on Sadr and whether his growing attacks on the US for supporting Maliki have pushed him towards open confrontation with the US. Much will depend on the US being able to distinguish between dealing with Mahdi Army and other Shi'ite extremists and taking sides in favor of the political struggle between Maliki and Sadr.

Yet the fighting should have shown Maliki and the Supreme Islamic Council that they need prolonged US support in building effective forces. It should also have shown them that they can't win any near term violent struggle with the Sadr militia, and dependence on Iran could pose serious dangers as well as advantages. Whatever Sadr may say about the US now, he also has little incentive to openly take on both the US and the central government if the US focuses carefully on security and makes a systematic effort to both reduce intra-Shi'ite tensions and to convince Iraq's Shi'ites that they will have fair and open elections and be able to make their own choices.

The US position is now distinctly more tenuous than before the intra-Shi'ite fighting, but the US presence is still the best hope for the future. Given the Sadr/Mahdi Army distrust of the Maliki government and Iraqi Army, the US also offers the best chance of providing stabilizing military presence in Baghdad and central Iraq.

If, on the other hand, the US should be seen as being committed to withdrawal under the next President, these same Shi'ite factions have little choice other than to grab what they can from the US while they can, and turn to Iran. The prospects for any kind of political accommodation between Shi'ite factions will become even more uncertain. Iran may well emerge as the power broker that helps choose the winner and then secures Shi'ite dominance over at least southern Iraq, putting an Iranian dominated area on the Kuwaiti border and on part of the Saudi border.

The Sunnis and Al Qa'ida

The Shi'ites are only part of the problem and the most critical link is likely to vary significantly over the months to come. In February, it was the Kurds and the Turks. This month, it is intra-Shi'ite conflict. Tomorrow, next week, or next month, it could be the Sunnis.

The Maliki government's mistakes in invading the south may ultimately prove to be less serious than its much longer-standing failure to move money into Sunni and mixed areas in the center and the north, to aggressively support political accommodation in the greater Baghdad area, and to reach out to the complex mix of tribal movements that the US is now calling the "Sons of Iraq."

These sectarian divisions and problems are compounded by the lack of any clear political leadership among Iraq's Sunnis. Its tribal, local, and provincial leaders are fragmented and focus on their own interests.

The "Sons of Iraq" have nominal leaders with no clear political followings or unity, and are divided by area and locality. The Sunni political parties are largely

self-appointed constructs that grew out of the closed list election system in Iraq and are feuding with local and tribal leaders and the Sons of Iraq as well as the Shi'ites and the Kurds. Unlike the Shi'ites, the Sunnis have no strong clerical leaders that are part of a religious hierarchy -- although the unity of Iraq's Shi'ite leaders has always been uncertain and Sistani's prestige and influence seem to be in decline.

The end result could become a series of highly-local and sometimes violent, intra-Sunni power struggles. More seriously, it could be a Sunni rejection of the central government as dominated by Shi'ite faction's unwilling to compromise or accommodate with any degree of "fairness," and lead to new, organized Sunni violence against Shi'ites. The worst case, would be for large numbers of Sunnis to turn back to Al Qaeda or insurgency.

The good news is that the US and US-led Iraqi forces have scored major gains against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) over the past year. There also is little evidence that AQI has listened to outside advice to moderate its conduct, improve its discipline, and win back the support of Iraq's Sunnis.

The bad news is that pushing Al Qaeda out of Anbar, Baghdad, and central Iraq--and into positions centered in the north west--exacerbates Kurdish-Arab tension in the area around Mosul. Moreover, fully defeating Al Qaeda will take years of additional US and Iraq military effort, and require Sunni-Shi'ite political accommodation.

In the interim, there is no way to keep Al Qaeda from carrying out a steady stream of brutal terrorist attacks designed to provoke Sunni-Shi'ite fighting, push the US out of Iraq because of US domestic politics, and push Iraqi Sunnis back towards support of Al Qaeda.

Once again, the US can only do so much to control such risks and limit their impact. At the same time, it is clear that the US military presence, support of the "Sons of Iraq" and local and provincial Sunni governments, and pressure on Shi'ite and Sunni leaders to reach a stable modus vivendi is the key stabilizing force that now gives Sunnis and Shi'ites any hope of moving towards political accommodation.

Staying in Iraq cannot guarantee Sunni-Shi'ite political accommodation; but leaving Iraq seems likely to guarantee its failure. The US is the key factor that is giving Iraqis time and reasons to negotiate -- slow, grinding, and unsatisfactory as the pace of success may be.

A US withdrawal, or even the announcement of one, will push Sunni and Shi'ite alike back towards the struggle for power and survival. This may not mean some kind of bloodbath or open civil war. It is more likely to mean violence along the dividing lines between Sunni and Shi'ite, limited fighting and ethnic cleansing in mixed areas, and the fragmentation of power in Sunni areas with outside Sunni Arab powers competing for influence and providing arms and money.

Whether such a violent mess would then constitute a "civil war" is an argument for semanticists. It would mean a dangerous power vacuum, a prolonged struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite that could broaden outside Iraq, the possible rebirth of support for Al Qa'ida or the birth of new forms of Sunni insurgency, and more reasons for the Shi'ites to turn to Iran. It would clearly mean wasting all of the gains of the last year, and far more suffering for the Iraqi people.

The Kurds, Arabs, Turcomans, and Other Minorities

The power struggle in the north has been less obvious, and the UN and US seem to have helped Iraq avoid a referendum that could trigger a violent crisis in the near term. The fact remains, however, that most Kurds still want independence, and an Iraq that divides its Arab population along sectarian lines could push Kurdish leaders towards demanding impossible degrees of autonomy, a share of oil wealth totally out of proportion to the Kurdish population, or independence. The Kurds now get 17% of Iraq's revenue for what seems to be 13% of the population.

The risk of open Kurdish-Arab conflict is the result of several factors: the fact Al Qa'ida is concentrating around Mosul, the existence of separate Kurdish forces and Kurdish-dominated elements of the ISF, reports of limited build up of Mahdi Army forces around Kirkuk, Kurdish claims to territory that is not now Kurdish, and Turkish-Iraq-Kurd tensions. These pressures have so far only led to limited violence, but they could combine to make the risk of ethnic conflict far too real. There has also been a rising volume of attacks on the Christian minorities in the north, and growing Sunni Islamist willingness to attack the smaller Muslim sects in the region.

Like any new Sunni-Shi'ite conflict, the scale of any such fighting is impossible to predict. It is equally easy to talk about blood baths or deny that violence will occur. What is clear is the present low-level violence can escalate sharply no matter how hard the US and UN try to prevent it, and that other forms of fighting can trigger it even if both the Kurds and Arabs want to avoid it.

The Kurds are unlikely to avoid trying to secure (or exploit) their position if intra-Shi'ite fighting indicates the country will come largely under Shi'ite control, or if Sunni-Shi'ite fighting threatens the north. They also are still caught up in a

Turkish-PKK issue that is likely to present problems for years to come. This spring's Turkish invasion resolved nothing, and Turkish internal politics scarcely are pushing Turkey towards accommodation with its Kurds.

What is clear is that the US presence in Iraq is now doing much to reduce the prospects for such conflict, and to limit Al Qaeda's ability to provoke it. A US presence is also critical in helping the UN push for a form of political accommodation based on real-world ethnic boundaries and not the kind of provincial boundaries called for in Article 140 of the constitution. Any referendum based on today's provincial boundaries would deeply divide the north and lock minorities under the rule of a self-serving majority.

It is equally clear that any decision by the US to leave would require hard choices between abandoning the Kurds and providing some kind of security guarantees. On the one hand, the Kurds have suffered in the past, and could suffer a great deal more in the future. On the other hand, their ambitions now exceed their ethnic share of territory and the population. They also are a source of tension with Turkey -- a major strategic interest -- and they would become a land-locked entity with no certain overflight and transit rights. An isolated "Kurdistan" cannot be a strategic asset and would be a serious potential strategic liability.

Iran, Turkey, and Syria and Intervening from the Outside

Iraq's internal divisions, and the uncertainties surrounding the future US position in Iraq, present further risks in terms of Iranian, Turkish, and Syrian pressure, influence, and possible military action. It is also difficult to believe that the Sunni Gulf states, and powers like Egypt and Jordan, will not at least move money, arms, and other support to Iraq's Sunnis if sectarian conflict becomes lasting and violent. A power vacuum is a power vacuum, and an early US departure would create a power vacuum some neighboring state or states will be certain to fill.

The US cannot ensure that such problems will not escalate if it stays. All these threats already exist in some form, and the British defeat in the south has done much to encourage Iranian influence and opportunism. The US, however, is a far better position to limit such risks if it stays, and to slowly build up Iraq security forces that can deter and defend if Iraq moves towards political accommodation.

Defining "Victory" and "Success"

It is all too clear that any form of US "success" or "victory" in Iraq will be limited, opportunistic, and relative. It is possible the Iraq may eventually become a stable, developing, and united democracy. If that happens, however, it will involve massive, and unpredictable changes in Iraq's internal politics and leadership; and

occur after the US has largely or entirely departed. History takes time, and shaping the full course of Iraqi political evolution and stability will take years, and ultimately be the result of internal forces and decisions.

The best the US can seek in the near term is a much more limited degree of Iraqi unity, political accommodation, internal security, and stability. With luck, this might enable the US to convert to the role of advisor and strategic overwatch during the life of the next Administration. It could then limit its combat role to enabling and supporting Iraqi forces, encouraging Iraq progress, and minimize its exposure in terms of combat and cost over the next few years, and largely. In a best case scenario, the US could leave Iraq by the end of the next Administration (2012).

The minimum definition of success is that the US will leave a more divided Iraq, but one that is still strong enough to act as a buffer against Iran. It will do so without creating the kind of power vacuum(s) that could lead to a broadening of sectarian conflict, Iranian influence in the south, Turkish tension with the Kurds, and pressure or some form of outside interference by Sunni states in the form of support for Iraq's Sunnis.

The Consequences of Early “Withdrawal” and “Defeat”

The consequences of “withdrawal” and “defeat” are equally hard to define and predict because there are so many forms that such events could take. Yet, some aspects of “withdrawal” are clear.

The US does not control the situation in Iraq, and Iraqis face fundamental problems in moving towards political accommodation that shape their very survival. They are well aware how uncertain American domestic political support is for the war, but survival and power are higher priorities. Any US uses of threats to withdraw need to be made quietly and without rigid public deadlines.

Moreover, threats to withdraw that are not mixed with incentives and patient US negotiating efforts, are more likely to further alienate Iraqis than persuade them. Anyone who takes a hard look at Iraq's internal tensions, Iraq's public opinion polls, and Iran's influence; should realize that threatening to leave is going to push Iraqis into resolving their sectarian and ethnic conflicts more quickly (and probably violently) and push Iraq's Shi'ites towards dependence on Iran. Under worst case conditions, pushing too hard could trigger an Iraqi political crisis where the government demands that the US leave.

It is also absurd to talk about withdrawing while retaining leverage in Iraq. Some have suggested that the US move to the borders, or retreating to a few main

operating bases in Iraq or neighboring states, and then intervene with limited amounts of air power, Special Forces or other ground forces.

How? What is the scenario where such intervention can deal with a major intra-Shi'ite power struggle or any major sectarian or ethnic power struggle? Who will be the side that deserves such intervention? How will it be shaped and targeted? How will we shoot or bomb the Iraqis into a political accommodation we cannot encourage with our current presence?

How can we attack growing Iranian influence if Iran is invited in? How can we take sides between the Kurds and Turkey after we leave if we find we cannot successfully take them now? How will any pressure on Syria become more credible once we are gone?

As for "defeat," one must be careful about exaggerating the risk of having to leave either because of Iraq's internal turmoil or because of domestic US politics. Much of the world already perceives the US as having "lost," or at least "failed" in Iraq. Most Iraqis show little gratitude to the US, feel it failed in providing aid as well as security, and want the US to leave as soon as "possible" – although only after they are more secure.

As for the Gulf region and the rest of the world, it is clear that most polls show that others in the region want the US to leave, and there is little support for the US position both inside and outside the Gulf area. In short, the impact of "withdrawal" and "defeat" has already been heavily discounted virtually everywhere outside the US.

What is far less clear is what would happen if the US did leave Iraq before achieving some degree of success. Given current tensions, it is possible that a major civil war might follow, but this possibility cannot be described as a probability. Talking about "bloodbaths" is going too far and a worst case option

What seems more likely, however, is that a US departure would leave Iraq an unstable mess, there would be added and much more enduring violence, and that Iraq's neighbors would play a much more destabilizing role. Iraq would probably either have to be unified by force, which the Shi'ites could only do with Iranian support, or would divide into sectarian and ethnic zones with constant violence along the fault lines that divided them and in mixed areas.

Iraq might or might not survive as a unified state. In either case, it would be the subject of interference by its neighbors. It seems likely that sectarian tensions would breed some new form of insurgency or fighting along ethnic and sectarian fault lines. Sectarian and ethnic cleansing would increase, as would the number of

Iraqi refugees. The search for sectarian and ethnic forces and strong men would become a major problem, and the current Iraqi security forces would either divide along ethnic and sectarian lines, or serve some as yet unknown strong man.

At best, the US would be seen as having been defeated. Even if Al Qa'ida could not claim victory, it could exploit the fact that Sunnis would almost certainly lose relative to Shi'ites. Iran would be the most likely "winner," exploiting the resulting power vacuum, and the Arab states would have good reasons to distrust any US security commitments and see Iran as the emerging power in the region.

| Can the US live with "defeat?" Of course. Should it live with defeat? Not as long as there is any reasonable probability of holding Iraq together and moving towards "success" over the next few years.

The Need for Real Leadership: No Meaningful Budget, a Secret Joint Campaign Plan, and No US Commitment to Staying

US tactics and strategy for staying in Iraq have to be "conditions-based" and opportunistic, not tied to some rigid strategy or benchmarks. The US has leverage and influence, but no control. Its influence and leverage will also drop steadily as the Iraqi security forces become stronger, Iraq's government learns how to spend its oil money more effectively, and Iraq's internal power struggles become more overt and dominate Iraqi behavior.

This still, however, leaves a critical leadership gap on the part of the Bush Administration. The President has never presented any public version of a long-term plan for dealing with the situation in Iraq, has never defined the sacrifices the American people and military need to make over time, and has not presented a meaningful budget request for this coming fiscal year.

It is hard enough to assess the Iraqi side of risk, but it is extraordinarily difficult to deal with a situation where the US position is at least as uncertain. Any form of US success in Iraq means implementing a conditions-based US plan, program, and budget for dealing with Iraq, Afghanistan, and the reshaping of the US military that will last through at least the first term of the next President. It is equally clear that a smooth, orderly transition in late 2008 and early 2009 is absolutely critical.

At least to date, however, there is no clear indication of Presidential leadership in any of these areas. The most that can be said is that there is a secret Joint Campaign Plan. Hopefully, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus will provide some details, but they cannot provide a Presidential plan, program, and budget. They also at best can explain just how much added risk the Congress has

imposed by failing to fund a large part of the FY2008 supplemental and restricting the use of much of what it did fund.

As for FY2009, no one has begun to explain why the President did not present a meaningful baseline budget request, and what the supplemental request will be. The budget requested put down a marker for \$70 billion for Iraq, Afghanistan, and the GWOT, but senior defense officials have talked about \$170-\$185 billion and never said a word about what the spending would actually be for.

As for any longer term plan, program, and budget, there is nothing public to work with. Yes, any such plan must be flexible, changing, and conditions based. But, this does not mean that no plan, program, or budget is an adequate way to deal with uncertainty or gain lasting support. So far, however, the Administration has not even asked the Congress and the American people for a blank check, or any form of defined sacrifice. The most it has done is express its irritation at the fact that so few have followed where it has so conspicuously failed to lead.

This is not a task that should be left up to Ambassador Crocker or General Petraeus. It is time for the Administration and the President to act. We need the base case possible for staying in Iraq, and the best possible plan for transition to the next Presidency. We need it now.