

The Iraq Debate
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By the fall of 2007, the Iraq debate in the United States will be in full swing. It will focus less on the past, the reasons for the war, and what has gone wrong than on the future – and not the distant future, but the next year or two. In brief, most Americans have become disenchanted with the war in Iraq and they want to see results soon that could justify the continuing cost in blood and treasure, or they want out.

The issues in Iraq, of course, are complex and do not easily yield to an election-driven American timeline. But in the United States, especially in the Democratic-controlled Congress, the major fault line runs between those who still believe that American military forces must remain in Iraq, on some scale, for many years to come, and those who believe that the US military presence there has become part of the problem, not the solution.

It is important to note that behind this fundamental difference of judgment lies a fairly extensive area of consensus. Most Americans would agree that we have major national interests in the Middle East region, including Iraq. These interests involve oil, the fight against anti-American extremists, the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace, preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and avoiding failed states that can become breeding grounds and support bases for terrorists. In one way or another, our current policies in Iraq touch on each of these interests. Thus, most Americans would agree that we need to find an effective strategy combining diplomacy, economic leverage and military power to protect and advance these interests. Very few Americans argue that we should simply turn our back on the entire region and hope for the best. But there are also very few who now believe that the Middle East can be easily transformed into an American-dominated zone of peace and liberal democracy.

In 2003, when President George W. Bush made the decision to go to war in Iraq, there were some in his administration who entertained the optimistic notion that regime change in Iraq would be the first step in the transformation of the broader Middle East. Iraq was to become a pro-American democracy; radicalism (both the Arab nationalist and Islamist varieties) would be placed on the defensive by the display of raw American power; “rogue regimes” such as those in Damascus and Tehran would be put on notice that they might also face the prospect of American opposition; authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the region would be under pressure to reform. With the growth of moderate forces in the Arab and Islamic world, peace with Israel would become a realistic goal. And with regional peace, problems of terrorism and nuclear proliferation could be managed within a US-led regional setting.

Today this hopeful vision lies in ruins. As a result, policy debates today are tempered by a greater degree of realism than was the case in 2003-2004, the high tide of optimism about remaking the Middle East. Now we talk about preventing full-scale civil war in Iraq and avoiding a region-wide conflagration. Debate focuses on American credibility and reputation. Will we be seen as weak and indecisive if we leave Iraq without achieving our primary goals? Or is the greater danger that we will be seen as reckless and aggressive if we stick with a course that seems destined to fail?

Damage limitation, not regional makeover, is the focal point of current debate. The democracy project, so central to the original Bush project in Iraq, has been quietly shelved; the rhetoric of “constructive instability” and “birth pangs of a new Middle East” is giving way to a new-found respect for order, security, realism and the modest gains that can be had by playing the regional Middle East game by an older set of rules anchored in interests and mutual advantage.

Even if reality has had a way of narrowing the range of perceived choices confronting Americans in the Middle East, it has by no means eliminated choice altogether. Indeed, there is no consensus on precisely the best course of action, and the upcoming presidential campaign is sure to see a deeply partisan debate over Iraq.

Choices

Two broad choices are now being actively discussed concerning Iraq and the surrounding Middle East region. The arguments, in brief, run as follows:

- **Stay the Course**

The United States has a vital stake in not being seen to have failed in Iraq. A widespread perception of US failure would erode American leadership on a global basis, would lead to a loss of influence in the oil-rich Middle East, would add to anti-American sentiment, and would enhance the prestige of Iran and its regional allies. Therefore, despite the difficulties and the cost of pursuing an assertive policy in Iraq, we really have no other choice. Failure is not an acceptable option.

The United States must maintain a substantial military force in Iraq for a prolonged period. Until Iraqi forces are better trained and more reliable, American forces will have to shoulder a large share of the combat burden against insurgent forces. In parallel, the U.S. must push Iraqi political leaders to reach agreement on crucial issues of governance – power-sharing, distribution of oil revenues, establishing the rule of law, balancing majority and minority rights, and establishing a constitutional framework that will allow Iraq’s diverse population to coexist within a single polity.

With patience and persistence, a relatively stable and relatively democratic Iraq, with friendly ties to the United States, is still a possibility. But this will take time to achieve. On average, insurgencies on the scale we see in Iraq take some 8-10 years to defeat. We are at mid-course along this trajectory, which is no time to give up. The consequences of a sudden withdrawal of US forces from Iraq would be disastrous. Full-scale civil war would ensue, accompanied by ethnic cleansing, increased sectarianism and possible military intervention by some of Iraq’s neighbors. The big winner in all of this will be radical forces and especially Iran. Our interests and our values require that we stay the course until Iraqis are able to run their own affairs without threats of violence from their own diehards and those foreign terrorists who have come to Iraq to pursue their vision of holy war against the United States and its Iraqi allies.¹

- **Plan for Withdrawal**

¹ See the Administration’s presentation of its [new “surge” strategy](#) in power-point format.

The United States does indeed have vital interests at stake in the Middle East, and has reason to be concerned with how events in Iraq will affect our global reputation. But the current strategy of deep American military engagement in Iraq is counterproductive and costly. According to repeated public opinion studies, most Iraqis – with the exception of the Kurdish minority -- see the American forces as occupiers and want them to leave, although there is some difference of opinion over how quickly this should happen.²

Even if one accepts the desirability of defeating the insurgency in Iraq, it is not clear that US combat troops can indefinitely play the lead role. We are stretched thin; additional forces are not readily available; wear and tear on equipment is taking its toll; morale is suffering as longer and longer deployments in Iraq are needed. In addition, by directing the anti-insurgency fight, we may inadvertently be reducing pressure on Iraqis to find solutions to their own problems. Many believe that the training and arms that we give to various components of the Iraqi security forces will ultimately find their way into the hands of militias and units that are primarily interested in winning the sectarian struggle that is already underway in Iraq. We have no business taking sides in Iraq's ongoing civil war.

The United States should therefore commit itself to a strategy of disengagement – first from its current combat role, and eventually to the point where a reduced US military presence is primarily for training and logistical support of reliable Iraqi government forces. Opinions differ over whether this can be achieved within a matter of months or years; over the political “benchmarks” that should accompany any such moves; and over whether the whole idea of trying to support a unified Iraqi government should give way to acceptance of a much more decentralized Iraq organized essentially along sectarian and ethnic lines.³

Supporters of this general approach are typically skeptical that the United States can do much to fine-tune the internal dynamics of Iraqi politics and society. In any event, they envisage an early withdrawal of most American military forces from Iraq by mid-2008 at the latest. They are also prepared to say publicly that the United States should not seek to maintain permanent military bases in Iraq. Some would go further and argue that events are now beyond our control in Iraq and we should simply design an orderly withdrawal, the sooner the better.

Central to this perspective is a greater emphasis on regional diplomacy to help insure that whatever happens in Iraq does not further inflame tensions in the Middle East. Thus, proponents of this approach favor diplomatic overtures to Iran and Syria; they look with favor on a regional security “contact group” involving all of Iraq's neighbors; they would welcome a stronger United Nations role in Iraq; and they typically see merit in trying to revive Arab-Israeli peacemaking as a way of strengthening moderate forces in the region and reducing anti-Americanism.

² See Cameron W. Barr and Jon Cohen, [“Poll Shows Dramatic Decline in How Iraqis View Lives, Future,”](#) *Washington Post* 20 March 2007: A14.

³ For a discussion of this last debate, see Edward P. Joseph and Michael E. O'Hanlon, [The Case for Soft Partition in Iraq](#), Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2007).

While this strategy does not guarantee an early end to Iraq's troubles, its proponents do not accept the inevitability of gloom-and-doom scenarios for what will happen once U.S. troops leave. Yes, there will be sectarian violence, but that is happening in any case and there is no reason to conclude that the level of violence will increase as American forces withdraw. From this perspective, U.S. interests and values require that we cut our losses and leave Iraq in an orderly but expeditious manner.

In sum, the choices outlined here come down to a judgment over the role of U.S. military force in helping to stabilize Iraq and to advance broader regional American interests. The first option sees American military power as essential, at least for the next several years, and its proponents have still not entirely given up on an Iraq that is at least minimally democratic. The second option sees the presence of large numbers of U.S. combat troops as a primary source of instability in the region and an expensive, counterproductive way to try to deal with the messy political realities of post-Saddam Iraq. In addition, our military role in Iraq weakens our ability to deal with other pressing issues that affect American national security. While a democratic Iraq would be welcomed by the supporters of the second option, they do not see it as likely in the near future, and in any case they see democratization as a process that is largely driven by indigenous forces, not by outside intervention.

Background and Context

History weighs heavily over contemporary Iraq. The modern state itself was the creation of the British at the high-tide of their imperial ambitions. After World War I, Britain decided to create a new state of Iraq out of three former Ottoman provinces, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. This was not so unusual at the time – Syria, Lebanon and Jordan were also colonial creations – but the particular mix of peoples and the way in which they were to be governed gave Iraq a particular coloration.⁴

Mosul and its surrounding area in the north contained a mixed population of Kurds, Turcomans and some Arabs (Sunnis, Shiis and Christians); Baghdad was the center of a heavily Sunni Arab region; and Basra in the south was surrounded by mostly tribal groups who had recently converted to Shiism and settled in the region to be close to the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. Overall, the Shii made up the majority of the population of the new state.⁵

To govern this heterogeneous society, the British has the idea of bringing in an outsider with distinguished religious credentials, Prince Faisal bin Hussein from the Hijaz (now Saudi Arabia), Lawrence of Arabia's companion during the revolt against the Ottomans during World War I. Faisal had hoped to rule in Damascus, but the French wanted him out, so the British decided that he should move to Baghdad. The fact that he was not an Iraqi and was a Sunni did not apparently strike them as problematic. Iraqis, however, did object to the whole idea of being occupied by the British. And they did not want to be told by foreigners who their new rulers would be. The British had to rely on considerable force, including newly developed air power, to put down the revolt that began in 1920. Iraq, as they and Faisal were to learn, was not an easy place to govern.

⁴ British historian Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), provides a reliable guide to Iraq's modern history, with emphasis on the role of the state as an integrative force in a fragmented society.

⁵ See Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

Already by the 1930s, it was the Iraqi military and a predominately Sunni bureaucracy that ruled the country under British supervision. At various times, there were “liberal moments” when elections were held, but power remained largely in the hands of the British, the military and the Sunni Arab minority. This is not to say that an Iraqi national identity never formed. As time passed, many Sunni and Shii Arabs began to think of themselves as Iraqis. Nationalism was very much part of the post-World War II political discourse in the region. Only the Kurds, who deeply resented that the promises of self-determination that had been dangled before them earlier in the century had been empty words, seemed to remain aloof from the allure of Arab or Iraqi nationalism.

By the time Saddam Hussein began his rise to power in the late 1960s, the British and the Hashemite monarchy that they had installed were long gone, but the country was still firmly ruled by Sunni Arabs with heavy reliance on the military and security services. Saddam’s special contribution to this mix was to add the secular Baath party to the system of control and to rely even more heavily on force to keep the restive Iraqi population from challenging his power.

Saddam proved to be not only an unusually harsh ruler, even by Iraqi standards, but also a remarkably adventuresome one. When next-door Iran underwent its revolution in 1978-79, Saddam saw an opening, and in 1980 he launched a war against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Eight years later, after the loss of hundreds of thousands on both sides, the war finally came to a close almost exactly on the lines where it had begun. Both Saddam and Ayatollah Khomeini were still in power, although Khomeini soon died. Saddam could hardly claim that Iraq had won the war in any meaningful sense, but he and his regime had at least survived.

Instead of licking his wounds, Saddam, who had enjoyed some support from the United States in his war against Iran, lashed out at Kuwait in August 1990, invading and annexing the country in a matter of days. This led the George H. W. Bush administration to reassess the wisdom of its previous tilt to Iraq, and by early 1991 the United States was ready to lead a broad UN-Sanctioned coalition to liberate Kuwait by force. This it did within a short period, and by the end of February a battered Saddam Hussein accepted the terms of a ceasefire.

In an important sense, the current crisis in Iraq stems from the perception that developed among some Americans in the 1990s that the Gulf war of 1990-91 had ended badly, with Saddam in power and with a containment and deterrence strategy that was losing effectiveness as time went on. As a result, voices were raised in Washington from the mid-1990s onward calling for regime change in Baghdad. The Cold War was over; America was powerful; and Saddam Hussein was the perfect enemy, a tyrant who had launched two regional wars, who had used banned weapons against Iran and his own people, whose human rights record was appalling, and who had few friends on the international stage. In addition, Iraq was known to have enormous oil reserves, and it was widely believed that a new regime might cooperate with the international oil companies to expand Iraq’s modest oil production, thereby helping to keep oil prices from escalating. In 1998, Congress passed legislation, and President Bill Clinton signed it, making regime change in Iraq official U.S. policy.⁶

⁶ For insight into the arguments and ideas invoked in support of regime change in Iraq beginning in the 1990s, see Study Group on a New Israeli Strategy toward 2000, [*A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*](#) (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, 1996). Also,

Clinton may have endorsed regime change, but his heart was not in it. The same could not be said of top officials in the new George W. Bush administration. From the first weeks of 2001, some were already thinking about removing Saddam. But this did not become a serious option until the 9/11 attacks and the new president's determination to take a strong stand in the "global war on terrorism". Sometime in November 2001 President Bush asked his secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, to start planning for a possible war in Iraq. By the following spring he apparently decided in principle to remove Saddam from power by force. After a phase of diplomatic efforts, including the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq in late 2002, Bush finally gave the order for military action in March 2003. Within weeks the regime of Saddam Hussein had collapsed and the Americans found themselves in charge of Iraq.⁷

The reasons for going to war were many. Saddam was accused of having maintained stockpiles of banned weapons; he was thought by some to have ties to Al-Qaida, the masterminds of the 9/11 attacks; he was a ruthless dictator; he was a potential threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries with particularly close ties to the United States. And then, of course, there was Iraqi oil, the geostrategic location of the country (bordering Iran and Syria), and the idea that the United States might be able to construct a long-term military presence in Iraq under a new, pro-American regime.⁸ For many Americans, these seemed to be convincing reasons for war and Bush initially could count on support from about 70% of the American public.⁹ Many in Congress, including prominent Democrats, backed the decision to go to war.

The initial stage of combat went well. The Iraqi army was no match for the fast-moving, heavily armed American forces. Baghdad fell without much resistance. The American military planners were delighted; the president appeared on the deck of an aircraft carrier with a "Mission Accomplished" banner in the background; and plans were made for an early turnover of power to friendly Iraqis and a swift withdrawal of most U.S. forces. This optimistic scenario did not last for long.

With hindsight, several errors have been signaled from these early days. First, the secretary of defense was determined to conduct the Iraq operation with a relatively small force – about 150,000, compared to the nearly 600,000 used in the 1991 Gulf war. This was a deliberate choice designed to show that the United States could fight with a lean and lethal force, rapidly deployable to any corner of the

see [the letter calling for regime change in Iraq](#) addressed to President Clinton in 1998 by the Project for a New American Century and signed by many individuals who would assume high-ranking posts in the Bush administration.

⁷ Several books provide detailed, comprehensive accounts of the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor's description of this period, in *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), focuses on the military aspects of the administration's preparation. For a broader discussion of the political dynamics of this period, see Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁸ A study conducted by Devon Largio revealed that no fewer than 21 separate reasons for war were offered by 10 prominent figures in the debate over Iraq. See ["21 rationales for war,"](#) *Foreign Policy* 144 (Sept-Oct 2004): 18 (1).

⁹ For comprehensive tracking of American public opinion concerning the war, see Opinion Research Corporation, ["CNN Opinion Research Poll,"](#) June 22-24, 2007.

world. Iraq was meant to demonstrate the virtues of the “revolution in military affairs” that the Pentagon had been advertising for some time -- smart weapons, superior communications, speed, lethality, real-time intelligence, integrated operations. The problem, however, was that such forces were fine for defeating the Iraqi conventional forces, but were woefully inadequate for the mundane tasks of providing basic security in the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi regime.¹⁰

The initial problem of too few troops for the post-war period was compounded, in the view of many, by the decision to disband the Iraqi army and to purge the ranks of the government of those who were enrolled in the higher echelons of the Baath party. Many Iraqis were immediately cut off from any means of economic support. They were angry, alienated, and knew something about how to run the state and where vast supplies of arms were stockpiled. Before long, some had joined the emerging -- predominately Sunni -- insurgency. Much of the Sunni Arab minority (some 20% of the population) had previously been used to privileged positions of power that their community had enjoyed since the founding of the state under British tutelage in the 1920s. Now Sunnis were confronted with the reality that the Americans and their Iraqi allies were intent on marginalizing them in the name of democratization and majority rule. Not surprisingly, many of them decided to fight back.¹¹

Another criticism heard from Iraqis is that the Americans immediately began to deal with Iraq as if the only significant markers of political orientation were sectarian or ethnic. Appointments were made with quotas in mind -- so many Shii, so many Kurds, so many Sunni Arabs, along with the occasional token Christian. Competence, commitment to the idea of the Iraqi state, and integrity seemed less important than sectarian affiliation in filling key positions. Within a short period, Iraqis responded by organizing themselves largely along sectarian/ethnic lines. Each group had its own militia and political party. Missing were institutions that cut across sectarian boundaries. What had always been a latent, potentially explosive issue in the old Iraq now became a major and divisive issue.¹²

By late 2003 an insurgency was underway, primarily in Sunni areas to the west and north of Baghdad. Efforts to nip it in the bud were made in 2004, notably the two battles for Falluja, but without clear success. Instead, more and more Iraqis began to see American forces as occupiers. The Abu Ghraib scandal that erupted in spring 2004, in which American mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners was graphically captured on film, was a shocking moment and had a measurable impact on Iraqi perceptions.

¹⁰ For an examination of the decision to enter Iraq with a smaller, lighter force, see Gordon and Trainor, chapters 1-3. James Mann, in *Rise of the Vulcans* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), presents an incisive analysis of the ideas and experiences which informed Bush's foreign policy team. See pages 288-291 for Rumsfeld's commitment to military transformation.

¹¹ George Packer's book, *The Assassins' Gate* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), considers many of the decisions by the Bush administration which have been subsequently identified as errors. For a discussion of the decision to disband the Iraqi army, see Chapter 4.

¹² Thomas E. Ricks, in *Fiasco: The American military adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), examines some of the policies which increased the salience of sectarian divisions, from the de-Baathification order to the abuses at Abu Ghraib. For the consequences of these policies, see Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), chapters 13-16. In Chapter 10 of *The Assassins' Gate*, Packer shows how the U.S. invasion and occupation strengthened sectarian identities.

2005 was meant to be the year of transition to a fully sovereign and democratic Iraqi government. A constitution was drafted, voted upon in October, and then parliamentary elections were held in December. The good news was that in these latter elections large numbers of Iraqis did actually go to the polls. The not so good news was that the constitution had postponed resolution of the most difficult issues, and that voting on both the constitution and for parliament took place almost exclusively along sectarian/ethnic lines. Sunnis overwhelmingly voted against the constitution; Kurds voted overwhelmingly for a coalition of Kurdish parties; Shiis voted overwhelmingly for a so-called Unified Shii list; Sunnis were less inclined to vote at all, but when they did it was largely for secular or religious Sunni lists. The few parties that tried to present a coalition of non-sectarian leaders did poorly, as did most of the special friends of the United States such as Ahmed Chalabi. The government that was finally cobbled together in spring 2006 consisted of a loose coalition of several Shii factions and the two major Kurdish parties, along with a few token Sunni representatives.

By the sole measure of holding relatively free elections, Iraq had the trappings of a parliamentary democracy. But it did not have a political system that was designed to work well, to resolve conflicts, to acquire legitimacy, to reduce sectarian and ethnic divisions. The postponed constitutional issues, for example, proved to be extremely difficult to resolve. The Kurdish north, which was the one part of the country that was relatively stable, seemed determined to go its own way. Many Shii in the south (where most of the oil reserves are found) seemed eager to follow suit. Sunnis read the tea leaves as meaning that they would end up, at best, with control over a few provinces with no oil resources, and some Sunni insurgents, along with foreign allies calling themselves Al-Qaida in Iraq, were determined to make such an Iraq ungovernable. In early 2006, an attack on a major Shii mosque signaled the onset of a new stage of sectarian warfare between Sunnis and Shiis, replete with ethnic cleansing and atrocities on both sides.

By November 2006, American public opinion had clearly soured on the Iraq project. Support for the Bush administration and for the war in Iraq had fallen to about 30% of the public.¹³ This made it possible for the Democratic Party to score a surprisingly clear victory in the Congressional elections and to gain control of both the House and the Senate. A good part of the reason for the shift in public opinion was the mounting cost of the war. By late 2006, over 3000 American military personnel had been killed; over 25,000 wounded, many very seriously; the economic cost of the war was nearing \$500 billion; hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had been killed and wounded; several million Iraqis had been forced to flee their homes, many into exile in Jordan or Syria; the price of oil had gone from about \$20 per barrel in 2003 to over \$60 by late 2006; and still Iraqis were struggling with irregular supplies of electricity and water, to say nothing of the appalling deterioration of the security situation.¹⁴ Few Americans felt that the very obvious costs of the war were leading to a decent outcome. On the contrary, each year things seemed to be getting worse, and the current Iraqi leadership did not inspire much confidence, even among the top echelons of the Bush administration.

¹³ See "CNN Opinion Research Poll" of June 22-24, 2007.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive account of the various costs the U.S. has incurred in Iraq to date, see Andrew Stephen, "Iraq: the hidden cost of the war," *The Economist* 12 March 2007.

Americans in Iraq, largely isolated within the “Green Zone”, seemed quite cut off from the harsh realities of the country that they occupied.¹⁵

What then to do? Shortly after the election, a bipartisan panel led by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton released the [Iraq Study Group Report](#). Consisting of many specific recommendations, the report, which included a hard-headed and rather pessimistic assessment of the current situation, differed from the Bush policy on two key points: first, it set a target date for withdrawal of most combat troops by spring 2008; and second, it called for robust diplomatic engagement with others in the region, especially Iran and Syria, but also on Arab-Israeli peacemaking. The response of the Bush administration was predictably unenthusiastic.

Soon after the Congressional elections, Bush made a number of significant changes that suggested that he understood the need for a new look at his Iraq policy. Most importantly, he replaced his secretary of defense, naming the experienced realist, Robert Gates, to the job. He also selected a new ambassador for Baghdad, the well-regarded diplomat Ryan Crocker. And, finally, he named a new top military man in Iraq, General David Petraeus. In the course of intense Congressional hearings, all three promised to take a careful and objective look at the situation in Iraq and to report back to Congress in September 2007.

Shortly after putting his new team in place, [Bush announced](#) that he was planning to send more troops to Iraq, an addition of about 30,000, in what came to be called the “surge”. The idea was to buy time for the beleaguered Iraqi government by providing a degree of security in and around Baghdad. Even the [proponents of the surge](#) such as Frederick Kagan did not see it as a magic bullet solution to the problems of Iraq, but they did think that it might provide the Iraqi government with an incentive to make a major effort at internal reform and greater competence in the anti-insurgency effort. [Critics of the surge](#) claimed, among other things, that it was “too little, too late”.

During the initial months of the surge, fighting did intensify, American casualties remained high, and it was unclear whether the net effect of the surge would be beneficial to the Iraqi government and would open the way for the United States to begin to reduce the size of its forces, which it was under pressure to do for logistical (as well as political) reasons by no later than spring 2008. Somewhat surprisingly, Bush soon began to express guarded support for the Iraq Study Group Report, and allowed his Secretary of State to initiate limited diplomatic contacts with both Syria and Iran. On the ground in Iraq, Petraeus and his team worked to win over Sunni tribal leaders with offers of arms and money. Relative success in this regard helped to reduce the threat from Al-Qaida in Iraq, but at the same time it seemed to alarm many of the Shii leaders, including, quite likely, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

By September 2007, the situation in Iraq is likely to remain opaque. The violence among Iraqis will most likely still be playing itself out; armed insurgents will still be attacking American and Iraqi forces with deadly effect; tough political issues will remain to be resolved. The question for Americans will be whether the added commitment of forces over the previous six months has begun to improve the prospects for a not-so-bad outcome in Iraq. If so, some would be inclined to stick with the president

¹⁵ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, in *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), offers an in-depth account of American activities in the Green Zone and the extent to which the U.S. has isolated itself from the Iraqis and their travails.

and his policy; if not, the pressure for “plan B”, a disengagement of U.S. forces from Iraq, would seem likely. Much therefore depends on how the “Iraq debate” unfolds during this crucial period.¹⁶

How Does Iran Fit In?

When Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled by American forces in April 2003, the rulers in Tehran were probably just as pleased as George W. Bush and his colleagues. After all, Iran had fought an eight-year long bloody, costly war and had been unable to oust Saddam. Now the Americans had done for free what they had tried and failed to do at enormous cost. In the view of many observers, Iran stood to be one of the most obvious beneficiaries of Saddam’s demise. Much would depend, of course, on how things turned out in Iraq. But at least Saddam and his regime were gone and Iraq was militarily weakened. That alone was cause for joy in Tehran.

The Bush administration did not initially seem to worry too much about Iran’s possible gains from the overthrow of Saddam. After all, Iraqi Shiites would not automatically rally to Iran’s leadership. They were Arabs, not Iranians. To an important degree, Iraqis had developed a sense of their own identity, and there was no reason to think they would want to subordinate it to that of any of their neighbors.

As the same time, it was also the case that many of the emerging Shii leaders of Iraq had spent time in Iran during the Saddam era. Where else could they have found support? And as they thought about the new Iraq, which might well have a predominantly Shii government if the American democratizers got their way, they must have realized that neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, Jordan and Turkey would not be very likely to welcome a Shii-dominated regime in Baghdad. Only Iran could be expected to offer support. This might mean that the only two states in the world with predominantly Shii regimes would be forced into a degree of cooperation that would be unprecedented in the region.

By 2007, the Bush administration looked at the role of Iran in Iraq with a jaundiced eye. On the one hand, the Americans had reluctantly begun to talk with the authorities in Iran about Iraqi security, and those talks seemed to open at least a limited channel of communication. At the same time, official Washington was making strident accusations about Tehran’s role in feeding the insurgency in Iraq and providing military support to those who were killing Americans. Added to the strong rhetoric from the Bush administration about the danger of Iran’s nuclear programs, some observers concluded that a military clash was just over the horizon.

In mid-August, the Iran issue seemed to divide the Iraqi government from its American sponsor. Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki visited Iran and pronounced that Iran was playing a helpful role in his country. President Bush immediately responded by saying that he begged to differ and that he might have to have a “heart-to-heart talk” with Maliki about the Iranian threat. Meanwhile the American Ambassador in Baghdad was meeting with Iranian counterparts.

¹⁶ In his [June 25, 2007 floor speech](#), Republican Senator Richard Lugar explicitly recognizes the present period as decisive in determining America’s fate in Iraq. His speech also demonstrates the pressure Republicans feel to dissociate themselves from the administration’s Iraq policy.

Some conclude from all this that there could be a deal to be made between the United States and Iran involving Iraq and other regional issues over which the two countries have differed. There may be an analogy in the minds of some observers with Nixon's opening to China as the United States withdrew in defeat from Vietnam. The China gambit helped to limit the damage of the Vietnam failure. Could something similar be done with Iran to mitigate the damage of the setback in Iraq?

Others conclude that there is no basis for a "grand bargain" between Iran and the United States. The term "appeasement" is directed by neo-conservatives at those who call for negotiations with Tehran. Some among them have staked out a strong position calling for regime change in Iran. While this latter goal does not seem to be a realistic military option as long as the U.S. remains deeply engaged in Iraq, some commentators do believe that air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities and other military targets would have a dramatic impact on the regime's military potential, its prestige and perhaps even its survival. Those who argue for engagement with Iran fear that military confrontation will actually strengthen the role of hardliners in the Tehran regime. How this debate over Iran is ultimately resolved may be as important for future stability in the region as the ongoing controversy over how to proceed in Iraq. And the two sets of issues are obviously related in complex ways.

Points of View: Hawks, Doves and Others

- **Hawks (those who basically support the administration's current force posture)**

Frederick W. Kagan, [*Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq*](#), January 5, 2007.

This is the comprehensive report in which Kagan, reputed to be the architect of the "surge", introduces the strategy. He operates from the assumption that the administration's focus on the political process as the key to stabilizing Iraq has failed. Instead, the U.S.'s primary task should be providing security to the population. In this regard, Baghdad is most critical since the majority of the violence occurs there, though some troops should also be deployed to Anbar province, the heart of the insurgency. The only strategy which will provide the time and space for Iraqis to reach a political compromise is the deployment of 20,000 troops to Baghdad and several thousand marines to Anbar. See also ["The Right Type of 'Surge'; Any Troop Increase Must Be Large and Lasting"](#), *Washington Post*, December 27, 2006.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, ["The Consequences of Failure in Iraq"](#), *The Weekly Standard*, Jan. 15, 2007.

The author, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and unflappable supporter of the war, contends that the President's "surge" can succeed in weakening the insurgency and constraining sectarian violence. The plan, as it both recognizes the vital importance of Baghdad and the necessity of holding territory once it has been cleared of insurgents, represents the best counterinsurgency strategy we have implemented to date. He implores the American public to support the effort, as failure in Iraq would be utterly disastrous to U.S. security, leading to everything from an emboldened Al Qaida to regional war and nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East. A stalwart supporter of the administration, he still believes Iraq can become a democracy, albeit an imperfect one.

Kenneth Pollack, ["Last Chance in Iraq"](#), The Brookings Institution, January 11, 2007.

This article demonstrates the support the administration has received on the war from liberal hawks. Pollack, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and former Clinton-era National Security

Council (NSC) official, provides qualified support for the “surge.” He contends that only a substantial infusion of troops can provide sufficient space for the political process and economic growth in Iraq. Contrary to other liberals, he believes that a deployment of 30,000 troops can have an appreciable impact on security in the country. Yet, he cautions that the strategy offers no guarantee of success. It may already be too late to revive a stable Iraqi government. More recently, see Michael E. O’Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack, [“A War We Just Might Win”](#), *The New York Times*, July 30, 2007.

Henry A. Kissinger, [“Withdrawal is not an option”](#), *International Herald Tribune*, Jan. 18, 2007. The former Secretary of State during the Nixon and Ford administrations rejects appeals for withdrawal and supports one last effort to establish the basis for a stable Iraq. He argues that the failure to provide Iraq with a functioning government would have a devastating impact on American interests as it would lead to Iranian dominance of the most oil-rich region in the world, the birth of a terrorist state in Iraq, and would strengthen extremist forces with the potential to destabilize Lebanon and Persian Gulf countries. The U.S. should couple an intense campaign against militias with a diplomatic effort to engage Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran and Syria, in an attempt to mobilize regional forces behind a stable Iraq. Once the Baghdad government is in control, American forces can begin to redeploy, minimizing our costs.

Frederick W. Kagan, [“Fighting to Win”](#), *The Weekly Standard*, April 23, 2007. This article provides insight into Kagan’s own assessment of the administration’s implementation of the “surge.” He maintains that progress has already resulted from his strategy. Iraqis are increasingly marginalizing Al Qaida, Shiis largely support the enhanced American presence, and there are signs that a more responsible, compromise-oriented Sunni leadership is emerging. With cooperation between American and Iraqi soldiers consistently improving, there is good reason to hope that Iraq can still be salvaged.

Frank J. Gaffney, Jr., [“Dunkirk in the Desert”](#), *National Review Online*, June 26, 2007. This piece demonstrates a defensive tone that some proponents of the administration’s policies are adopting in their opposition to withdrawal schemes. Instead of focusing on the inherent virtues of the “surge” or the costs of defeat, the author, a staunch advocate of America’s presence in Iraq, argues that withdrawal is simply not feasible at this time. He contends that those who endorse withdrawal fail to understand the tremendous logistical difficulties involved in implementing it, which have been exacerbated by the fact that the U.S. has access to fewer ports than it did in the first Gulf War. Even more disconcerting, from Gaffney’s perspective, is that such a withdrawal would likely be conducted under enemy fire, endangering the lives of American soldiers.

- **Doves (those calling for some form of disengagement or an emphasis on diplomacy)**

International Crisis Group, [After Baker-Hamilton: What to Do in Iraq](#), December 19, 2006. In this report, largely authored by Robert Malley, a Clinton administration NSC official, the view is advanced that the U.S. has exhausted its influence in Iraq. Malley and his co-authors contend that the Baker-Hamilton report is not a sufficiently dramatic departure from the Bush administration’s prior strategy. Our only remaining source of leverage in Iraq is our troop presence. Instead of strengthening it, we should use the prospect of withdrawal as a bargaining chip in an effort to forge a new compact among Iraq’s factions and neighbors. The U.S. should concentrate on

withdrawing troops, but this decision should be related to local actors' responses to the new strategy.

William E. Odom, ["What's wrong with cutting and running?"](#), August 3, 2005.

This article is notable because a former U.S. general and National Security Agency chief advocates withdrawal. Remaining in Iraq will only yield the very consequences proponents of the surge suggest we must avoid at all costs, from the onset of a civil war to the strengthening of Iran and extremist forces associated with bin Laden. Withdrawal is not a disloyal or defeatist act, as the administration suggests, but the strategy which will best serve our national interests.

Daniel Kurtzer, ["Get out of Iraq. Now"](#), *International Herald Tribune*, September 6, 2006.

This is another article written by a former supporter of the decision to invade Iraq. Kurtzer, Bush's Ambassador to Israel from 2001-2005, objects to the increasingly ideological tone of the administration's foreign policy, strongly asserting that such a posture is not an effective counterterrorism strategy. In his estimation, Iraq has become a distraction in the war on terror, preventing the U.S. from addressing Afghanistan and other critical nodes in our struggle against extreme Islamists. As such, he supports appeals for withdrawal, which he believes should be coordinated with Iraqi factions and regional actors. Having extricated itself from the chaos in Iraq, the U.S. would be in a position to devise a robust and effective strategy to combat terrorism.

Barry R. Posen, ["Exit Strategy"](#), *Boston Review*, January/February 2006.

The author, a political scientist at MIT, presents a comprehensive and nuanced argument in favor of withdrawal over an 18-month period. Posen believes that the American presence in Iraq only exacerbates its problems by strengthening Al Qaida, fueling the nationalist insurgency, and relieving Iraqis of any impetus to take control of their own destiny. Withdrawal extended over 18 months would provide the U.S. with sufficient time to train Iraqi security forces. He also calls upon the Bush administration to engage its neighbors and adopt an "over the horizon" posture for defending American interests in the region. Interestingly, Posen suggests that civil war may be inevitable, but it would not necessarily be inimical to American interests as the "hurting stalemate" it would produce could serve as the basis for an eventual political settlement.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, ["The Real Choice in Iraq"](#), *Washington Post*, January 8, 2006.

In this article, the former National Security Advisor under Jimmy Carter offers a realist and pragmatic argument in favor of withdrawal. He objects to the administration's claims that the choice which confronts us is one between victory and defeat, instead suggesting that our two options are persisting and not winning or desisting and not losing. As there is little prospect of forging a unified Iraq, let alone a democratic one, the American presence there does no more than waste blood and treasure. Brzezinski asserts that the U.S. should accept the realities of Iraq, withdraw, and seek to minimize the fallout. Indeed, there is still hope that an American withdrawal would remind Shiis and Kurds of their interest in an independent Iraq, generating an impetus which would support stability.

James D. Fearon, ["Iraq's Civil War"](#), *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007.

Fearon, a well-known academic at Stanford, makes the argument that Iraq is embroiled in a full-scale civil war. He opposes the administration's "surge" for it will only make the U.S. complicit in Shii atrocities. The U.S. cannot terminate the civil war. Only fighting between the parties, which

clarifies the balance of power, can generate momentum for a settlement and a power-sharing agreement (something which will take many years). All the U.S. can and should do is begin to draw down its forces and promote a balance of forces which favors its interests. A similar argument is made by Marina Ottaway, analyst at the Carnegie Endowment, in [“Getting Real in Iraq”](#), June 7, 2007, where she argues that an internal Iraqi political deal is key to eventual stability.

- **Pro-Partition**

Joe Biden, [“Biden-Gelb Plan for Iraq”](#), May 1, 2006.

This letter from the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee provides a brief introduction to the proposal that he co-authored with Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations. They advocate a thoroughgoing plan of decentralization involving the creation of three autonomous regions, something short of formal partition. By harnessing inexorable sectarian forces, the authors believe they can achieve some degree of stability in Iraq, permitting a major draw down in American forces.

Flynt Leverett, [“To the Incoming President: On Iraq”](#), *The American Prospect*, May 20, 2007.

In the guise of a letter to the victorious Democratic presidential candidate in the 2008 election, Leverett, a former member of the National Security Council, argues that continued efforts to stabilize Iraq through military measures are destined to fail. The dominant tendencies in Iraq are regionalist and the U.S. can do nothing to reverse this. As such, the U.S. should facilitate the soft partition of Iraq into three regions and redeploy its forces to contain the violence which may accompany this evolution within Iraq’s borders. The political component is the most critical and our primary task should be to engage all of Iraq’s factions and neighbors in an attempt to forge a new strategic compact for the country, one which recognizes the devolution of authority to Iraq’s sectarian regions.