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The Burden: America's Hard Choices in Post-Election Iraq

POLICY BRIEF

By Thomas E. Ricks

The March 7 national election in Iraq and the period of government formation that will follow it carry enormous implications for both the future of that country and for U.S. policy there. It appears now that the elections are unlikely to resolve key political struggles that could yet return the country to sectarianism and violence. If so, President Barack Obama may find himself considering whether once again to break a campaign promise regarding Iraq and keep tens of thousands of troops there for several more years, perhaps until the end of his term. Surprisingly, that probably is the best course for him, and for Iraqi leaders, to pursue.

At a time when American attention has shifted to Afghanistan, the Obama Administration may find itself in a few months again facing major decisions about troop levels and the degree to which the United States government should intervene in Iraq's political and security affairs. Whether or not the Iraqi national elections bring the long-awaited political breakthrough that genuinely ends the fighting there, this year is likely to be a turning point in the war, akin to 2003 (when the United States realized that it faced an insurgency) and 2006 (when that insurgency morphed into a small but vicious civil war and U.S. policy came to a dead end, even as Anbar province began turning). One way or another, and for good or for ill, 2010 is likely to begin to reveal the broad outlines of post-occupation Iraq, and especially the U.S. role there.

Many commentators have asserted either that the surge succeeded or that it failed, but the fact of the matter is that no one really knows – yet. It improved security, but it is unclear whether its larger goal of leading to a political breakthrough has actually happened. Any lasting effect likely will become apparent only in the coming months, with the upcoming election and, even more importantly, in the months after that when a new government is formed. The early signs are not good, with the latest being the decision over the weekend of the leading Sunni party to withdraw from the elections. The political situation is far less certain and less stable than Americans seem to want to believe. Retired Marine Col. Gary Anderson, who just returned from Iraq, predicts a civil war or military coup by September, while the writer Nir Rosen avers that Iraq is on a long-term peaceful course. Both men know Iraq well, having spent years working among Iraqis there. This is the greatest discrepancy in expert views I have seen since late 2005.

The period surrounding the surge has been misremembered. It was not simply about sending 30,000 more troops to Iraq; it was about using force differently, moving the troops off big bases to work with Iraqi units and to live among the people. Perhaps even more significantly, it was a change in American attitudes, with more humility about what could be done, more willingness to listen to Iraqis, and with quietly but sharply reduced ambitions. The Bush Administration's grandiose original vision of transforming Iraq into a beacon of democracy that would alter the Middle East and drain the swamps of terror was scuttled and replaced by the more realistic goal of being able to get U.S. forces out of Iraq and leave behind a country that was somewhat stable and, with luck, perhaps democratic and respectful of human rights. As part of the shift, General Petraeus also effectively put the Sunni insurgency on the American payroll, through a series of ceasefire agreements under which we paid out about 30 million dollars a month.

I followed the surge closely, conducting hundreds of hours of interviews with senior officials involved in it, for my book *The Gamble*.[1] Looking back, the surge was the right thing to do. In rejecting the view of the majority of his military advisors and embracing the course proposed by a handful of dissidents, President George W. Bush found his finest moment. The surge improved security, and many Iraqis are alive today because of it.

That said, the larger goal of the surge was to facilitate a political breakthrough, which has not really happened. All the existential questions that plagued Iraq before the surge remain unanswered. How will oil revenue be shared among the country's major groups? What is to be the fundamental relationship between Shiia, Sunni and Kurd? Will Iraq have a strong central government or be a loose confederation? And what will the role of Iran (for my money, the biggest winner in the Iraq war thus far) be?

KEY POINTS

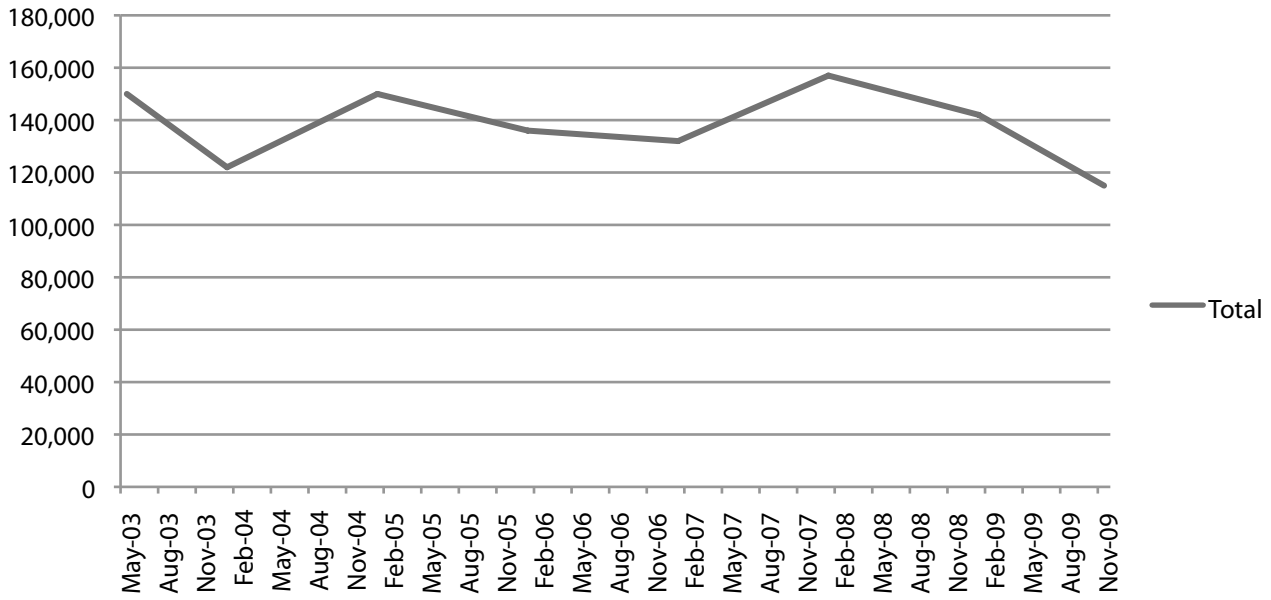
1. Re-negotiate the Status of Forces Agreement, but let Iraqi leaders make the first public move. Send signals, early but privately, that the United States government is open to this discussion.

2. When this becomes public, explain to the American people that one of the primary mistakes the Bush Administration made was keep arbitrary deadlines.

3. Be prepared to postpone the deadline of September 2010 for removal of all "combat" troops.

4. Most importantly, begin military planning immediately for the possibility of keeping at least 35,000 American troops in Iraq for several more years beyond next year's announced total withdrawal. The sooner the planning begins, the less disruptive it will be.

Coalition Troop Strength In Iraq Since May 2003



Source: DOD Personnel and Procurement Statistics

The fact that Iraq has not gone off the tracks in the last year is a significant but isolated positive change. It is not yet clear whether this is a sustainable achievement or if various Iraqi factions are simply keeping their powder dry until the Americans are out of the picture.

With the elections quickly approaching, these issues are likely to cause tensions to rise once more. Unfortunately, they have all led to violence in the past – and could lead to violence again. More disconcertingly, the Administration's timeline could lead troops to leave areas that are far from quiet, just as new tensions begin brewing as a result of the elections. Let us not forget that it was the U.S. intervention back in 2007 that was a major factor in ending the small civil war then bleeding central Iraq. The only part of the Iraq security equation that is changing is that the Americans plan to radically reduce their military presence in the coming months.

Soon after taking office, Obama threw out a campaign promise to withdraw at least a brigade a month from the time he became president.[2] Instead, he has kept troop levels at or near Bush-era levels, with close to 100,000 military personnel there even now. The plan for 2010 is to pull out about 10,000 troops a month for five months, beginning in late spring. That will halve the U.S. military presence this year, with the remainder scheduled to be withdrawn by the end of next year.

This timing is worrisome. The original American withdrawal plan was drafted under the assumption that the Iraqi elections would be held late in 2009 or early this year. Troop levels were to be held stable as a new government was formed, because that will be a vulnerable period, especially if the Sunnis feel that the electoral process was unfair or if they were not given a role in the new government commensurate with their success at the polls. Instead, as Iraqi

political leaders struggle to form a new government, U.S. military leaders will be distracted by the myriad tasks of supervising major troop movements. On top of that, the deeper the troop withdrawals go, the more potentially destabilizing they will be, because the first are due to be made in areas that are considered more secure, or where Iraqi forces are deemed more reliable or even handed. By June however, troops may be leaving areas that are far from quiet, where new tensions have emerged as a result of the elections. Once again, the United States would be rushing toward failure in Iraq, as it did so often under the Bush Administration, trying to pass responsibility to Iraqi officials and institutions before they were ready for the task.

Few observers expect Iraqi forces to be able to stand entirely on their own by the end of next year, so at some point the SOFA is going have to be re-visited. The only question is when and how.

By late summer, the Obama Administration may find itself in the uncomfortable position of reconsidering its vows to get out of combat in Iraq by August and to remove all troops by the end of 2011. This will be politically difficult for the president, but he has shown admirable flexibility in his handling of Iraq. Judging by a recent series of discussions I have had across the country, from California to Kentucky to South Carolina and New Hampshire, the American people now wish the United States had never become entangled in Iraq, but they understand just how precarious the situation is and appear willing to give the president a surprising amount of leeway on it.[3]

Extending the U.S. military presence will be even more politically difficult in Iraq, and for that reason, it would be best to let Iraqi leaders make the first public move to re-open the Status of Forces Agreement. Few observers expect Iraqi forces to be able to stand entirely on their own by the end of next year, so at some point the SOFA is going have to be re-visited. The only question is when and how. Leaders in both countries may come to recognize that the best way to deter a return to civil war is to find a way to keep 30,000 to 50,000 U.S. troops there for many years to come. Their missions would be far narrower than during the surge era and would primarily involve training and advising Iraqi security forces and carrying out counter-terror missions. It is actually quite hard to get below 30,000 and still maintain an effective force, because in order to carry out those missions, surprisingly large numbers are needed for logistical, maintenance, medical, intelligence, communications and headquarters functions, and additional infantry units must then protect those troops. During the presidential campaign, Obama stated that his "guiding approach" to Iraq is "that we've got to make sure that our troops are safe and that Iraq is stable."[4] Military planners are likely to tell him that going below those levels would be unsafe, and further, less likely to help Iraq become truly stable.

Such a relatively small, tailored force is not big enough to wage a war, but it might be just enough to deter a new one from breaking out. Keeping American troops in Iraq may in fact just buy time. But, if by maintaining a presence, the United States can help Iraq avoid sliding back into civil war, it should do so. Such a civil war would be a three- or four-sided affair, with the Shiites breaking into pro- and anti-Iranian factions, and could easily metastasize into a regional war. Neighboring powers such as Turkey and Iran already are involved in Iraqi affairs, and Arab states would be unlikely to stand by and watch a Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad slaughter and displace the Sunni minority. A regional war in the middle of the world's largest oil patch could shake the global economy to its foundations and would likely make the current recession look mild.

In addition, a continued U.S. military presence may help Iraq move forward politically. Few if any Iraqis particularly like this presence, but many groups seem to trust the Americans as "honest brokers," and military officials say their presence has been a major factor in keeping factional fighting from breaking out several times in recent years, especially between Kurds and Arabs.

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Finally, there is a moral, humanitarian and political benefit: Having Americans present in Iraqi military and police units may improve the behavior of Iraqi forces, discouraging relapses to Saddam-era abuses or the use of force for private ends. U.S. advisors not only instruct Iraqi commanders, they also monitor them. For example, in *The Gamble*, I wrote about a Turkmen Shiia police chief who used his pull with an Iraqi general to call an air strike on a Sunni village as part of his ethnic cleansing work. As it happened, the American gunships, seeing no hostile actions or threats in the village, declined to fire into it.[5] Making U.S. forces a tool for internal feuds would be worse than simply leaving altogether.

As a longtime critic of the American invasion of Iraq, I am not happy about advocating a continued military presence there. After all, I wrote a book titled *Fiasco* about the invasion of Iraq, which I consider perhaps the biggest mistake in the history of American foreign policy.[6] And I think that Americans, even now, do not grasp just what a blunder it was to invade a country preemptively based on false information, enmeshing the United States in events that will take decades to play out, with much more blood, sweat and tears to be expended by us and by others. As Ambassador Ryan Crocker told me twice in Iraq, the events for which this war will be remembered have not yet happened.[7]

Yet, to echo counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, just because you invade a country stupidly doesn't mean you should leave it stupidly. In part because of the mistakes the United States has made in Iraq, it owes enough to the Iraqi people to consider keeping some troops there. The United States would do it not so much because of the benefits of doing so – few are possible, and none are certain – but because of the possibly horrible consequences of not doing so. The best argument against a continued presence is one some U.S. officers make, which is that a civil war is inevitable, and that by staying, all we are doing is postpone it. That may be so, but it is not worth gambling to find out.

The consequences of a renewed civil war in Iraq would reverberate both regionally and globally, with profound costs for American interests. The United States has paid a huge price in Iraq so far, and Iraqi civilians have paid far more. The relatively small force proposed here, about a quarter of the size we have maintained in Iraq for the last six years, would be far less costly, and the potential results significant for all involved.

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Endnotes

1. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

2. Karen DeYoung wrote, "[Obama] pledged during the campaign that combat troops would depart Iraq at the rate of one brigade a month and would all be home within 16 months of his inauguration" – that is, by April 2010 ("Obama Sets Timetable for Iraq," *The Washington Post* [28 February 2009] A1. See also Michael Abramowitz, "Bush Reversal on Iraq Deadline Gives Obama Breathing Room," *The Washington Post* [18 November 2008]: A23).

3. The author conducted 19 talks and discussions across the country (in bookstores, universities and other venues in New York, Massachusetts, Washington DC, New Hampshire, California, Kentucky, Georgia, South Carolina and Colorado) during January and February 2010 in connection with the publication of an updated, paperback edition of *The Gamble*.

4. *The Gamble*: 309, from multiple quotes in newspapers from a statement Obama made 3 July 2008.

5. *The Gamble*: 324.

6. Ricks, *Fiasco* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

7. *The Gamble*: 325.

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Center for a New American Security

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Photo Credit
Iraqi Brig. Gen. Amer Khames Hameed (left), Lt. Col. William E. McRae and Col. Timothy McGuire walk to a voting site Jan. 26 in the Al Karradah district of eastern Baghdad.

(SGT. 1ST CLASS ALEX LICEA/U.S. Army)