

Rethinking Unconditional Commitment in Iraq

By Jim Lobe

Despite a reduction in violence over the past 15 months, “the U.S. risks getting bogged down in Iraq for a long time to come, with serious consequences for its interests in other parts of the world,” according to a new assessment by the same group of experts who advised the bipartisan blue-ribbon Iraq Study Group (ISG) in 2006.

The assessment, which was released on the eve of a critical congressional testimony this week by Washington’s ambassador and chief military officer in Iraq, concludes that the decline in violence has resulted in very little progress toward achieving national reconciliation and that gains in security remain “fragile and dependent on the presence of U.S. forces.”

“Political progress is so slow, halting and superficial, and social and political fragmentation so pronounced that the U.S. is no closer to being able to leave Iraq than it was a year ago,” according to the report released by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and entitled “Iraq After the Surge: Options and Questions.”

“Lasting political development could take five to ten years of full, unconditional U.S. commitment to Iraq,” it concluded, noting that such a commitment already “carries a massive cost, both human and financial, in addition to the global interests the U.S. is sacrificing to its commitment in Iraq. Even if progress in Iraq continues, the results may not be worth the cost,” it warned.

The report, which lays out three possible options for U.S. policy in Iraq over the next year or so, came just two days before Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus were set to ask that Washington suspend its current drawdown of U.S. “surge” forces in Iraq at the anticipated 140,000-troop level by the end of July to ensure that security gains achieved over the past year can be sustained. At the height of the surge several months ago, Washington had about 170,000 troops in Iraq.

That recommendation, which appears to enjoy the backing of U.S. President George W. Bush, is likely to be hotly disputed by Democrats in Congress who favor continuing to withdraw combat troops at the rate of about 5,000 a month through the end of the year—a position privately shared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who have fretted publicly that maintaining high levels of deployment in Iraq is taking an unsustainable toll on both the morale of U.S. ground forces and on their readiness to deal with other potential military crises.

The new USIP report, which represents the views of scores of military and regional experts who advised the congressionally appointed ISG two years ago, will almost certainly give the dissenters ammunition in their questioning of Crocker and Petraeus.

The ISG, which was co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Indiana Democratic Rep. Lee Hamilton, had called in December 2006 for withdrawing all U.S. combat troops by April 2008, leaving the remaining troops—around 80,000—to focus on training and equipping Iraqi security forces, conducting operations against al Qaeda in Iraq, and protecting U.S. civilian personnel.

Bush, however, rejected that recommendation and opted instead for a “Surge” strategy that increased U.S. troop strength by about 30,000 in hopes that the additional forces would

substantially reduce sectarian violence in and around Baghdad and encourage Iraq's warring political and religious factions to make the compromises necessary for national reconciliation.

While the strategy has made major advances on the security front, progress toward reconciliation has largely consisted of "tactical horse-trading" designed above all to satisfy minimum U.S. "benchmarks"—such as revenue sharing and a reform of the de-Baathification laws—to ensure Washington's continued support, according to the report.

"[T]hough positive as far as it goes, [it] has not alleviated the underlying causes of political instability in Iraq or facilitated the emergence of a truly national polity," the report concluded, noting as well that much of the success of the current strategy "is due to factors that are outside U.S. control and therefore subject to change."

Among those factors are a cease-fire by the Moqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Army and the willingness of former Sunni insurgents "stridently opposed to the [Shia-led] Iraqi government" to cooperate with U.S. forces against al Qaeda in Iraq.

The report suggests two possible alternatives to the current policy of an "unconditional" U.S. commitment to Iraq.

The first, an echo of the 2006 ISG report, calls for a "reduced, conditional commitment" that would tie future U.S. support for the government in Baghdad to a few minimal goals—creating a mechanism for oil revenue sharing, holding provincial elections to formalize a decentralized power structure, and professionalizing a non-sectarian army to "guard the state and police factional violence."

If Baghdad failed to make meaningful progress toward these goals by the end of this year, then the United States would withdraw its forces according to its own timetable. If it did make such progress, Washington would still reduce its forces and focus on training and equipping the Iraqi army and helping it prevent factional violence.

A second option would be an "unconditional, near-total reduction of the U.S. military commitment" coupled with "an enhanced security presence in the region, an invigorated diplomatic effort [directed primarily at Iran and Saudi Arabia], and continuing political support for the Iraqi government."

Each of these options, including the current strategy of unconditional commitment, carries different risks and possible benefits for U.S. interests in Iraq, the region, and beyond, according to the report which identifies five "paramount interests" affected by U.S. policy in Iraq.

They include: preventing Iraq from becoming a haven or platform for international terrorists; restoring U.S. credibility, prestige and capacity to act worldwide; improving regional stability; limiting and redirecting Iranian influence; and maintaining an independent Iraq as a single state.

The report addresses the possible impact of each of the three scenarios on the five interests. Maintaining the current strategy, it concludes, would have a "major negative impact" on Washington's capacity to act worldwide; a reduced, conditional commitment would, on the other hand, have a "positive" impact on that capacity, while an unconditional, near-total reduction of commitment would have a mixed impact by, on the one hand freeing up U.S. military capacity, while, on the other, risking the "perception of U.S. defeat."

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