

STRATEGIC REDEPLOYMENT - A Better Alternative in Iraq

The Democratic leadership in Congress has been having trouble articulating a strategy beyond “let’s bring the troops home now.” Without a more specific plan, the default position is to continue the present course and to stretch hard to find signs of progress. And it is difficult to find a clear strategy since almost every course of action which we might consider brings its own problems. Articulating a new approach is even more difficult because it is like a chess game, played with lives and money, where all we can do is chart our moves in a game which is already underway. Thinking ahead, each decision leads to new choices which, in turn, depend upon consequences which cannot confidently be predicted at the outset. So, understanding that the situation is difficult and complex, how can we think about the alternatives?

Standing here, in autumn 2007, if we could envision an ideal future for the Middle East, what would it be? Let’s think about the elements of such a future from the vantage point of the United States.

All of our troops would come home soon. Democratic governments would slowly emerge throughout the region with tolerance for ethnic and religious minorities, checks and balances, rights and protections for the individual vs. those of the state and court, police and municipal systems modeled on those of the Western world. Palestinians would have a state and jobs, the territorial integrity of Israel would be protected, and oil would continue to be available in quantities and at prices similar to those prevailing now. The various economies would grow and develop at rates similar to those in the western world and the benefits would be fairly distributed. Individuals and groups in the region seeking change through violence would not be tolerated.

Not very likely is it? And, these goals are not shared uniformly by those living in the region. Maybe some of these ideals can be achieved and some not. Possibly, many of them can be achieved over time. Given this, what should we do now? How will what we do next affect our overall security? How will it affect our relationships and our reputation in the rest of the world? Are there better uses for the lives and money which will be committed? What are our immediate objectives?

In the most stark terms possible, we need the oil and we don’t want anyone, be it a state or a group of individuals, to kill or injure any of our citizens or interfere with our economy.

In addition, since we have caused much of the damage in Iraq, we have some obligation to try to make it right - however this is to be accomplished. The other more lofty goals described above are worth some effort on our part over the long term but we should be under no illusion regarding our ability to achieve these outcomes.

To meet the objectives of the preceding two paragraphs, we have five reasonably distinct alternatives:

1. Send more troops and spend much more money

2. Maintain approximately the same number of troops – the current strategy.
3. Begin a phased withdrawal, slowly reducing troop levels.
4. Bring our troops home as quickly as possible.
5. Leave Iraq as quickly as possible but build up our forces and capability in and around the Middle East in what could be called a “**strategic redeployment.**” Use our influence and money to seek help from others in the region and around the world. An earlier but different variation of this proposal was discussed in the press in 2006 but was ignored by the Bush administration.

Sending more troops and spending more money won't fly politically within the US. We have been at war in Iraq for four years now and more troops and more money would probably increase our casualty rate and throw our spending into the trillions. Some studies show that our spending in Iraq, including the long term effects, has already exceeded one trillion dollars, maybe much more. And, it is by no means certain that Vietnam level troop increases would achieve the desired objectives. Further, our country will not and should not tolerate the degree of repression and brutality which would be necessary to increase the probability of a successful occupation. Perhaps the best way to think about this alternative is to consider whether you would volunteer or, perhaps more tellingly, send your children or grandchildren to the front lines of this war.

Arguments for and against continuing the current strategy would take up more space than I have in a short essay. It does seem clear that we are in the midst of a civil war, that tribalism is resurgent, that sectarian cleansing is well advanced in most areas of the country, that there are millions of refugees in and outside of Iraq and that most of the people with managerial and professional expertise have left. Shiites are in control in the central government and the Sunnis are disenfranchised. The US is vastly unpopular within Iraq. In the latest poll by ABC News, 76% of Iraqis said that the US should withdraw now. In Anbar province where the administration is claiming a measure of success, every person polled called attacks on coalition forces “acceptable” and the United States led invasion “wrong.” With our troops tied down in Iraq and with the costs (including internal dissent in the US) ballooning and weakening our economy, we are increasingly vulnerable in strength and in reputation elsewhere in the world and unable to counter or deter moves others make which are detrimental to our interests. There will be no World War II “unconditional surrender” or “victory” and, to some degree, we have suffered defeat in that we have been unable to achieve stability, by any reasonable measure, in a conflict which has already lasted four years.

A phased withdrawal seems self defeating - essentially trying to accomplish the same mission with a steadily diminishing number of troops while putting them at increased risk. At the same time, Iran will be able to increase its influence and Russia will be tempted to make Iran a client state thus moving into the vacuum created by our withdrawal, further altering the balance of power in the region. Sunnis and Kurds from outside Iraq will see their own interests jeopardized and may become involved in the conflict. Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel all have divergent interests at stake.

China, India and Pakistan are at a further remove but have interests too. Oil flows will be further disrupted. Worldwide, everyone is affected by what happens here.

An immediate withdrawal has the same problems as a phased withdrawal and it is not clear that Iraqis themselves will limit the activities of terrorists. The present central government will almost certainly fail to retain control and the consequences of this are uncertain. It would become more difficult for us to protect Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The last alternative is a strategic redeployment, leaving Iraq as quickly as possible but building up our forces and capability in and around the Middle East and the surrounding waters. This alternative is the most likely to meet our own immediate objectives of ensuring our access to oil and protecting our own citizens and economy. It is also the alternative most likely to limit the ability of terrorists to organize and to reduce the likelihood of a change in the balance of power in the Middle East. From outside the borders of Iraq we could protect Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, deter aggression from Iran and Russia, discourage the activities and training of terrorists, and police no-fly zones. This could be done with a much reduced military presence bringing most of our troops home and increasing our ability to respond to threats in other parts of the world.

The most important element in this strategy is the need to reach out and commit ourselves to a worldwide cooperative effort, enlisting the participation of other countries in the region and beyond and fueled with our dollars but not our dominance, to stabilize the situation in Iraq. This effort needs to begin and proceed prior to and simultaneous with the withdrawal of troops. Beyond Iraq; similar cooperative efforts could help to resolve other critical problems in this area of the world.

There is no way to predict the eventual outcomes; there are simply too many forces at work. The most promising near term plan for Iraq would be the establishment of a federalized government with the country divided into three or more semi-autonomous regions. Malaysia and Cyprus are possible models. Despite the presence of our forces, sectarian cleansing is already well advanced in many Iraqi cities. It is also possible, even likely, that the present situation in Iraq could get much worse with even greater chaos and disorganization.

Our prior actions have put us in a situation where all the alternatives are flawed and we must choose the best from a series of bad choices. We do have to make a choice and our own immediate objectives are best served by what we term a strategic redeployment.

E. Packer Wilbur
September 25, 2007

The writer is a member of the International Dean's Council of the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at The University of Chicago and a former member of the Dean's Council of The John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University