

Here's the surge Iraq needs

The US can still stabilize Iraq – if it steps up its efforts.

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Washington

Iraq continues to surprise us. Even with our massive presence in Iraq, the United States responds to developments there more than it shapes them.

The Sunni tribes in Anbar decided they hate Al Qaeda more than they hate the American presence. They decided they need an ally against the Shiite-led government in Baghdad. Gen. David Petraeus, in turn, decided to place priority on protecting the Iraqi people, and decided it is better to work with the insurgents than to be their targets. Across a wide swath of western and central Iraq, US forces and former insurgents are at or near an uneasy cease-fire. So what do we do now?

The troop surge is the story of 2007. What the US needs in 2008 is a surge of political, military, diplomatic, and humanitarian activity across the board, in order to achieve a reduced but still attainable objective in Iraq – stability. Without stability, more ambitious goals cannot be achieved. With it, US forces can begin to withdraw.

We need to press the Iraqi government as hard as we can on questions of national reconciliation. Why? Because the current moment of hope in Iraq will fade unless Sunnis see a future for themselves in the life of their country. They need to be brought into the Iraqi Army, police, and government ministries. They need a chance to vote for their own elected representatives at the provincial level. They need to share in Iraq's oil wealth. Otherwise, the current lull in violence will be just a timeout in an unfolding sectarian war – and a future Iraq made up of gangs and warlords.

We need to move as quickly as we can to complete the training of Iraqi security forces and to transition the security mission to them. Why? Because the high-water mark for US troops in Iraq has already passed. At the direction of President Bush, US force levels will return to pre-surge levels by July 2008. The next president almost surely will reduce US troop levels further.

Polls consistently show that Iraqis and Americans both want a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Iraqi leaders want to take charge of security, and we should let them. Will it be messy? Yes, but Iraqis will have to find their own solutions, because a large US troop presence in Iraq can no longer be sustained.

We need strong US leadership in an international effort to support Iraqi reconciliation and regional stability. Why? Because Iraq cannot do it alone. Reconciliation in Iraq requires the support of all its neighbors. The neighbors, in turn, need stability in Iraq. They want to avoid spillover of the conflict, and want the 2 million-plus Iraqi refugees to return home.

US diplomatic leadership is necessary. Only the US can persuade Turkey to not invade Kurdistan. US encouragement for Saudi Arabia's quiet efforts can help sustain the "Anbar awakening." The US saw fit to invite Syria to the Annapolis peace conference: Why not now engage Syria directly on behalf of peace and reconciliation in Iraq?

Iran will be the toughest challenge for diplomacy. Yet the intelligence community's reassessment of the nuclear threat offers the opportunity to pursue a dialogue with Iran anew – and topic No. 1 should be our shared interest in stability in Iraq.

Reconciliation and stability in Iraq also require addressing the plight of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. Those who have fled Iraq are running out of money. They lack access to schools and medical care. Those inside lack almost everything. They are in a daily struggle for survival.

The president does not speak of Iraqi refugees in his speeches. Yet the US bears a large measure of responsibility for the 4.5 million Iraqis – 1 out of 7 – who have been forced from their homes because of the violence. The US spends some \$10 billion a month in Iraq. The total requested for humanitarian assistance in Iraq for fiscal year 2008 is \$240 million – less than one day's worth of war costs.

Surely our great country, with its long tradition of humanitarian relief, can do better by the Iraqi people. Surely it is in the national interest of the US to prevent the creation of another large and bitter exile community in the Middle East.

Good options are long past, but tolerable outcomes for the US in Iraq are still possible if we use all the tools of national power on behalf of national reconciliation, regional stability, and – as General Petraeus told us – protecting the Iraqi people.