

# Iraq: The Logic of Disengagement

Edward N. Luttwak

Senior Advisor, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Given all that has happened in Iraq to date, the best strategy for United States is disengagement. This would call for the careful planning and scheduling of the withdrawal of American forces from much of the country --while making due provisions for sharp punitive strikes against any attempts to harass the withdrawing forces. But it would primarily require an intense diplomatic effort, to prepare and conduct parallel negotiations with several parties inside Iraq and out. All have much to lose or gain depending on exactly how the American withdrawal is carried out, and this gives Washington a great deal of leverage that should be used to advance American interests.

The United States cannot threaten to unleash anarchy in Iraq in order to obtain concessions from others, nor can it make transparently conflicting promises about the country's future to different parties. But once it has declared its firm commitment to withdraw—or perhaps, given the widespread conviction that the United States entered Iraq to exploit its resources, once visible physical preparations for an evacuation have begun--the calculus of other parties must change. In a reversal of the usual sequence, the American hand will be strengthened by withdrawal, and Washington may well be able to lay the groundwork for a reasonably stable Iraq. Nevertheless, if key Iraqi factions or Iraq's neighbors are too short-sighted or blinded by resentment to cooperate in their own best interests, the withdrawal should still proceed, with the United States making such favorable or unfavorable arrangements for each party as will most enhance the future credibility of American diplomacy.

The United States has now abridged its vastly ambitious project of creating a veritable Iraqi democracy to pursue the much more realistic aim of conducting some sort of general election. In the meantime, however, it has persisted in futile combat against factions that should be confronting one another instead. A strategy of disengagement would require bold, risk-taking statecraft of a high order, and much diplomatic competence in its execution. But it would be soundly based on the most fundamental of realities: geography alone ensures all other parties are far more exposed to the dangers of an anarchical Iraq than the United States itself.

## **Precedents**

If Iraq could indeed be transformed into a successful democracy by a more prolonged occupation, as Germany and Japan were after 1945, then of course any disengagement would be a great mistake. In both of those countries, however, by the time of the American occupation the populations were already well educated and thoroughly disenthralled from violent ideologies, and so they eagerly collaborated with their occupiers to construct democratic institutions. Unfortunately, because of the hostile sentiments of the Iraqi population, the relevant precedents for Iraq are far different.

The very word guerilla acquired its present meaning from the ferocious insurgency of the illiterate Spanish poor against their would-be liberators under the leadership of their traditional

oppressors. On July 6, 1808, King Joseph of Spain and the Indies presented a draft constitution that for the first time in the Spain's history offered an independent judiciary, freedom of the press, and the abolition of the remaining feudal privileges of the aristocracy and the church. Ecclesiastical overlords still owned 3,148 towns and villages, which were inhabited by some of Europe's most wretched tenants. Yet the Spanish peasantry did not rise to demand the immediate implementation of the new constitution. Instead, they obeyed the priests who summoned them to fight against the ungodly innovations of the foreign invader. For Joseph was the brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, placed on the Spanish throne by French troops. That was all that mattered for most Spaniards-- not what was proposed but by whom.

Actually, by then the French should have known better. In 1799 the same thing had happened in Naples, whose liberals, supported by the French, were massacred by the very peasants and plebeians they wanted to emancipate, mustered into a militia of the "Holy Faith" by Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo, coincidentally scion of Calabria's largest land-owning family. Ruffo easily persuaded his followers that all promises of merely material betterment were irrelevant, because the real aim of the French and the liberals was to destroy the Catholic religion in the service of Satan. Spain's clergy repeated Ruffo's feat, and their illiterate followers could not know that the very first clause of Joseph's draft constitution had declared the Roman Apostolic Catholic church the only one allowed in Spain.

The same dynamic is playing itself out in Iraq now, down to the ineffectual enshrinement of Islam in the draft constitution and the emergence of truculent clerical warlords. Since the invasion in 2003, both Shi'ite and Sunni clerics have been repeating over and over again that the Americans and their mostly "Christian" allies are in Iraq to destroy Islam in its cultural heartland as well as to steal the country's oil. The clerics dismiss all talk of democracy and human rights by the invaders as mere hypocrisy--except for women's rights, which are promoted in earnest, the clerics say, to induce Iraqi daughters and wives to dishonor their families by aping the shameless disobedience of Western women.

The vast majority of Iraqis, assiduous mosque-goers and semi-literate at best, naturally believe their religious leaders. The alternative would be to believe what for them is entirely incomprehensible--that foreigners have been unselfishly expending their own blood and treasure to help them. As opinion polls and countless incidents demonstrate, accordingly, Americans and their allies are widely hated as the worst of invaders, out to rob Muslim Iraqis not only of their territory and oil, but also of their religion and even their family honor.

The most direct and visible effects of these sentiments are the deadly attacks against the occupiers and their Iraqi auxiliaries, the aiding and abetting of such attacks, and their gleeful celebration by impromptu crowds of spectators. When the victims are members of the Iraqi police or National Guard, as is often the case these days, bystanders, family members, and local clerics routinely accuse the Americans of being the attackers--usually by missile strikes that cleverly simulate car-bombs. As to why the Americans would want to kill Iraqis they are themselves recruiting, training, and paying, no explanation is offered, because no obligation is felt to unravel each and every sub-plot of the dark Christian conspiracy against Iraq, the Arab world, and Islam.

But it is the indirect effects of the insurgency that end whatever hopes of genuine democratization may still linger. The mass instruction of Germans and Japanese into the norms and modes of democratic governance, already much facilitated by pre-existing if imperfect democratic institutions, was advanced by mass media of all kinds as well as by countless educational efforts. The work was done by local teachers, preachers, journalists, and publicists who adopted as their own the democratic values proclaimed by the occupiers. But the locals were recruited, instructed, motivated, and guided by Occupation political officers, whose own cultural understanding was enhanced by much communing with ordinary Germans and Japanese.

In Iraq, none of this has occurred. An already difficult task has been made altogether impossible by the refusal of Iraqi teachers, journalists, and publicists—let alone preachers—to be instructed and instruct others in democratic ways. In any case, unlike Germany or Japan after 1945, Iraq after 2003 never became secure enough for Occupation personnel to operate effectively, let alone carry out mass political education in every city and town as was done in Germany and Japan.

### **No Democrats, No Democracy**

Of course, many Iraqis would deny the need for any such instruction, viewing democracy as a simple affair that any child can understand. That is certainly the opinion of the spokesmen of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, for example. They have insistently advocated early elections in Iraq, brushing aside the need for procedural and substantive preparations as basic as the compilation of voter rolls, and seeing no need at all to allow time for the gathering of consensus by structured political parties. However moderate he may ostensibly be, the pronouncements attributed to Sistani reveal a confusion between democracy and the dictatorial rule of the majority, for they imply that whoever wins 50.01% of the vote should have all of the government's power. That much became clear when Sistani's spokesmen vehemently rejected Kurdish demands for constitutional guarantees of minority rights. Shiite majority rule could thus end up being as undemocratic as the traditional Sunni-Arab ascendancy.

The plain fact is that there are not enough aspiring democrats in Iraq to sustain democratic institutions. The Shiite majority includes cosmopolitan figures but by far its greater part has expressed in every possible way a strong preference for clerical leadership. The clerics, in turn, reject any elected assembly that would be free to legislate without their supervision, and could thus legalize, for example, the drinking of alcohol or the freedom to change one's religion. The Sunni-Arab minority has dominated Iraq from the time it was formed into a state and its leaders have consistently rejected democracy in principle for they refuse to accept a subordinate status. As for the Kurds, they have administered their separate de facto autonomies with considerable success, but it is significant that they have not even attempted to hold elections for themselves, preferring clan and tribal loyalties to the individualism of representative democracy.

Accordingly, while elections of some kind can still be held on schedule, they are unlikely to be followed by the emergence of a functioning representative assembly, let alone an effective cohesive government of democratic temper. It follows that the United States has been depleting its military strength, diplomatic leverage and treasure in Iraq to pursue a worthy but unrealistic aim.

Yet Iraq cannot simply be evacuated, abandoning its occupation-sponsored government even if legitimized by elections, to face emboldened Ba'ath loyalists and plain Sunni-Arab revanchists with their many armed groups, local and foreign Islamists with their terrorist skills, and whatever Shia militias are left out of the government. In such a contest, the government, with its newly raised security forces of doubtful loyalty, is unlikely to prevail. Nor are the victors likely to peacefully divide the country among themselves, so that civil war of one kind or another would almost certainly follow. An anarchical Iraq would both threaten the stability of neighboring countries and offer opportunities for their interference—which might even escalate to the point of outright invasions by Iran or Turkey or both, initiating new cycles of resistance, repression, and violence.

### **How to Avoid a Rout**

The probable consequences of an abandonment of Iraq are so bleak that few are willing to contemplate them. That is a mistake, however: it is precisely because unpredictable mayhem is so predictable that the United States might be able to disengage from Iraq at little cost, or even perhaps advantageously.

To see how disengagement from Iraq might be achieved with few adverse effects, or even turned into something of a success, it is useful to approach its undoubted complications by first considering the much simpler case of a plain military retreat. A retreat is notoriously the most difficult of military operations to pull off successfully. At worst, it can degenerate into a disastrous rout. But a well-calculated retreat can not only extricate a force from a difficult situation, but in doing so actually turn the tide of battle by luring the enemy beyond the limits of its strength until it is overstretched, unbalanced, and ripe for defeat. In Iraq the United States faces no single enemy army it can exhaust in this way, but rather a number of different enemies whose mutual hostility now lies dormant but could be catalyzed by a well-crafted disengagement.

Because Iraq is under foreign occupation, nationalist and pan-Arab sentiments currently prevail over denominational identities, inducing Sunni and Shiite Arabs to unite against the invaders. And so long as Iraqis of all kinds believe that the United States has no intention of withdrawing, they can attack American forces to express their nationalism or Islamism without calculating the consequences for themselves of a post-American Iraq. That is why Moktada al-Sadr's Shiite militia felt free to attack the U.S. troops that elsewhere were fighting Sunnis bent on restoring their ancestral supremacy, and why the action was applauded by the clerics and Shiite population at large. Yet if faced by the prospect of an imminent American withdrawal, Shiite clerics and their followers would have to confront the equally imminent threat of the Ba'ath loyalist and Sunni fighters--the only Iraqis with recent combat experience, and the least likely to accept Shiite clerical rule.

That is why, by moving to withdraw, the United States could secure what the occupation has never had, namely the active support of its greatest beneficiaries, the Shiite clerics and population at large. What Washington needs from them is a total cessation of violence against the Coalition throughout Iraq, full cooperation with the interim government in the conduct of elections, and the suspension of all forms of support for other resisters. Given that there is

already some acquiescence and even cooperation, this would not require a full reversal in Shiite attitudes.

## **The Neighbors**

Iran, for its part, has much to fear from anarchy in Iraq, which would offer it more dangers than opportunities. At present, because the Iranians think the United States is determined to remain in Iraq no matter what, the hard-liners in Iran's government feel free to pursue their anti-American vendetta by political subversion, by arming and training al-Sadr's militia, and by encouraging the Syrians to favor the infiltration of Islamist terrorists into Iraq.

Yet anarchy in Iraq would threaten not merely Iran's stability but also its territorial integrity. Minorities account for more than half the population, yet the government of Iran is not pluralist at all. It functions as an exclusively Persian empire that suppresses all other ethnic identities and imposes the exclusive use of Farsi in public education, thus condemning all others to illiteracy in their mother tongues. Moreover, not only the Ba'hai but also more combative heterodox Muslims are now persecuted. Except for some Kurds and Azeris, no minority is actively rebellious as yet, but chaos in Iraq could energize communal loyalties in Iran—certainly of the Kurds and Arabs. An anarchical Iraq would offer bases for Iranian dissidents and exiles, at a time when the theocratic regime is certainly weaker than it once was: its political support has measurably waned, its revolutionary and religious authority is now a distant memory, and its continued hold on power depends increasingly on naked force—and it knows it.

Once the United States commits to a disengagement from Iraq, therefore, a suitably discreet dialogue with Iranian rulers should be quite productive. Washington would not need to demand much from the Iranians: only the end of subversion, arms trafficking, hostile propaganda, and Hizballah infiltration in Iraq. Ever since the 1979 revolution, the United States has often wished for restraint from the theocratic rulers of Iran, but has generally lacked the means to obtain it. Even the simultaneous presence of U.S. combat forces on both the eastern and western frontiers of Iran has had little impact on the actual conduct of the regime, which usually diverges from its more moderate declared policies. But what the entry of troops could not achieve, a withdrawal might, for it would expose the inherent vulnerability to dissidents of an increasingly isolated regime..

As an ally of long standing, Turkey is in a wholly different category. It has helped the occupation in important ways --after hindering the initial invasion—but it has done less than it might have done. The reason is that Turkish policy on Iraq has focused to an inordinate extent on the enhancement of the country's Turkmen minority, driven not by a dubious ethnic solidarity (they are Azeris, not Turks) but by a desire to weaken the Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi Turkmen are concentrated in and around the city of Kirkuk, possession of which secures control of a good part of Iraq's oil-production capacity. By providing military aid to the Turkmen, the Turkish government is therefore assisting the anti-Kurdish coalition in Kirkuk, which includes Sunnis actively fighting Americans. This amounts to indirect action against the United States at one remove. There is no valid justification for such activities, which have increased communal violence and facilitated the sabotage of oil installations.

Like others, the Turkish government must have calculated that with the United States committed to the occupation, the added burden placed on Iraq's stability by their support of the Turkmen would make no difference. With disengagement, however, a negotiation could and should begin to see what favors might be exchanged between Ankara and Washington--in order to ensure that the American withdrawal benefits Turkish interests while Turks stop making trouble in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **With Friends like These..**

Even Kuwait, whose very existence depends on American military power, now does very little to help the Occupation and the interim Iraqi government. The Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society has sent the odd truck-loads of food into Iraq, and a gift of some sixty million dollars has been announced, though not necessarily delivered it. Given Kuwait's exceptionally high oil revenues, however, not to mention the large revenues of Kuwaiti sub-contractors working under Pentagon logistics contracts, this is less than paltry. The serious amounts of aid that Kuwait could well afford would allow the interim government to extend its authority, and help the post-election government to resolve differences and withstand the attacks destined to come against it. In procuring such aid, it would not take much reminding that if the United States cannot effect a satisfactory disengagement, the Kuwaitis will be more than 10,000 miles closer to the ensuing anarchy than the Americans themselves.

As for the Saudi regime, its relentlessly ambiguous attitude is exemplified by its July 2003 offer of a contingent of "Islamic" troops to help garrison Iraq. Made with much fanfare, the offer sounded both generous and courageous. Then it turned out that the troops in question were not to be Saudi at all--in other words, the Saudis were promising to send the troops of other, unspecified Muslim countries—and these imaginary troops were to be sent on condition that an equal number of US troops be withdrawn.

In the realm of action rather than empty words, the Saudis have not actually tried to worsen American difficulties in Iraq, but they have not been especially helpful either. As with Kuwait, their exploding oil revenues could underwrite substantial gifts to the Iraqi government, both before and after the elections. But Riyadh could do even more. All evidence indicates that Saudi volunteers have been infiltrating into Iraq in greater numbers than any other nationality. They join the other Islamists whose attacks kill many Iraqis and some Americans. The Saudis share a long border with Iraq along which there are few and rather languid patrols, rare control posts, and no aerial surveillance, even though it could be readily provided. And the Saudis could try to limit the flow of money to the Islamists from Saudi Jihad enthusiasts, and do more to discourage the religious decrees that sanction the sanctity killing of Americans in Iraq.

As it is, the Saudi authorities are doing none of this. Yet an anarchical Iraq would endanger the Saudi regime's already fragile security, not least by providing their opponents all the bases they need and offering Iran a tempting playground for expansion. Here too, therefore, hard-headed negotiations about the modalities of an American withdrawal would seem to hold out possibilities for significant improvements.

The Syrian regime, finally, could also be engaged in a dialogue, one in which the United States presents two scenarios. The first is a well-prepared disengagement conducted with much support from inside and outside Iraq, that leaves it with a functioning government.

The second is all of the above reinforced by punitive action against Syria if it sabotages the disengagement –much easier to do once American forces are no longer tied down in Iraq. For all its anti-American bluster, the Syrian regime is unlikely to risk confrontation, especially when so little is asked of it: a closure of the Syrian-Iraqi border to extremists, and the end of Hizballah activities in Iraq, funded by Iran but authorized by Syria.

Of all Iraq's neighbors only Jordan has been straightforwardly cooperative, incidentally without compromising any of its own sovereign interests.

### **The Ultimate Logic of Disengagement**

Even if the negotiations here advocated fail to yield all they might, indeed even if they yield not much at all, the disengagement should still occur-- and not only to keep faith with the initial commitment to withdraw--the United States cannot play diplomatic parlor games. Given the bitter Muslim hostility to the presence of American troops – labeled “Christian Crusaders“ by the preachers– its continuation can only undermine the legitimacy of any American-supported Iraqi government. With Iraq more like Spain in 1808 than Germany or Japan after 1945, any democracy left behind is bound to be more veneer than substance in any case. Its chances of survival will be much higher if pan-Arab nationalists, Islamists and foreign meddlers are neutralized by diplomacy and disengagement. The alternative of a continuing garrison would only evoke continuing hostility to both Americans and any Iraqi democrats. Once American soldiers leave Iraqi cities, towns and villages, some might remain awhile in remote desert bases to fight off full-scale military attacks against the government--but even this might incite opposition, as happened in Saudi Arabia.

A strategy of disengagement would require much skill in conducting parallel negotiations. But its risks are actually lower than the alternative of an indefinite occupation, and its benefits might surprise us. An anarchical Iraq is a far greater danger to those in or near it than to the United States. It is the time to collect on that difference.