



U.S. Policy Options in Iraq

(Published in [*American Enterprise Institute*](#), July 17, 2007)

[Michael Rubin](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1846

July 27, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members. Thank you for this opportunity to testify from Camp Pendleton, California, where the 11th Marine Regiment is preparing for deployment to Iraq. The danger they face and their willingness to undertake this courageous mission adds gravity to our discussion here today.

The Initial Benchmark Assessment Report, released on July 12, 2007, painted a mixed picture: While the surge has created space to further training of the Iraqi security forces and reduced death squad activity and ethnic and sectarian cleansing, it has not, however, stopped terrorism. Nor have Iraq's political leaders met our political benchmarks. Still, there is reason for guarded optimism. It took five months after President Bush's announcement of the surge approach to deploy the five

additional Army brigades and Marine elements into theater. Only on June 15, 2007, with the commencement of Operation Phantom Thunder, did Generals Petraeus and Odierno inaugurate the surge strategy in earnest. Its success after only one month is impressive.

Nevertheless, today policymakers in this room and outside debate cutting short the surge and switching course. While few favor immediate withdrawal, there is open debate about other options:

- Reducing presence and limiting troops to training missions only
- Redeployment to neighboring countries
- Redeployment to Iraqi Kurdistan
- So-called soft partition; and
- Increasing diplomatic engagement with neighboring states

None of these strategies will solve the problems that Congress has identified. They will not better the situation in Iraq nor make the United States safer. Indeed, they may make them far worse. Each involves ceding ground to terrorists or to Iranian influence. Each also sends the message that, when faced with terrorism, America runs.

Precipitous withdrawal is ill-advised. In Lebanon and in Somalia, our quick withdrawal encouraged terrorism. Usama Bin Laden has cited both examples when rallying his followers to further terrorism. There is no way to spin defeat. Nor is wise to believe that we can contain violence within Iraq should we withdraw. Such a strategy did not work when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. It is risky to believe that, in a global age, it will work in Iraq.

Rather than bring stability or victory; partial withdrawal will ensure chaos and defeat. It is ironic that many who once criticized Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld because he deployed too few troops to stabilize Iraq would now counsel replicating his strategy. The major benefit of the surge is that it creates room to further train and to develop the Iraqi Security Forces. With fewer U.S. troops in Iraq, it will not be possible to continue training at the same level and with the same rigor. The ability to train sufficient Iraqis to guarantee to stabilize Iraq will be the chief determinant of U.S. success.

Over-the-horizon deployment will place the U.S. military's ability to conduct missions hostage to the

countries in which they are stationed. The diplomatic cost will be heavy, and effectiveness minimal. When our troops or our allies are engaged in a fight and need an instant response, we should not need to depend on an application to the Saudi, Kuwaiti, or Jordanian foreign ministries to cross borders or clear airspace. Cross-border operations are seldom rapid.

Nor is redeployment into Iraqi Kurdistan wise. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership's rhetorical declarations that they are America's best regional ally are more rhetorical than real. While Iraqi Kurdish leaders host visiting American delegations for lavish dinners, they also enable az-Zawraa, the most virulent anti-American and pro-insurgent television, to broadcast from their territory. Masud Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, has both enabled the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to increase their presence in the region and interfered with U.S. attempts to intercept those planning attacks on Americans. Barzani has provided safe-haven and arms to PKK terrorists responsible for the deaths in Turkey of more than 100 people since January alone.

It is tragic that Turkish-American relations have been so rocky since 2003. This is the result both of bungled U.S. diplomacy and the rhetoric and politics of a prime minister whose tenure may end with elections this Sunday. Regardless of our differences with Ankara, Washington should not turn a blind eye toward terrorism against such an important NATO ally nor should it lend protection to those who sup-

port such terrorism. Redeploying troops in Iraqi Kurdistan short of an end to the PKK's presence in northern Iraq would likely spark greater conflict and could conceivably lead to Turkey's withdrawal from NATO. In the short-term, Congress and the State Department should demand Barzani expel PKK terrorists, renounce any interest beyond the borders of Iraq, and stop weapons smuggling from Iraqi Kurdistan into Turkey.

Partition, hard or soft, is unwise. Any partition would require significant population transfer. But rather than resolve conflict, displaced people catalyze it. The Bosnia model does not apply well. Three years of ethnic cleansing and conflict proportionately far more intense than that currently occurring in Iraq. The Bosnia civil war killed 200,000 people and resulted in the displacement of half that country's population. This would be the proportional equivalent to more than 1.5 million Iraqis killed and twelve million refugees. To advocate for the partition of Iraq would, in effect, involve accelerating civil war and making millions of refugees. But division along ethnic or sectarian lines will not bring stability. Divisions within the United Iraqi Alliance demonstrate the fractured nature of Shia leadership. A leadership vacuum still plagues Sunni Arab communities. Kurdish unity is more theoretical than actual. Internal tension plagues the Kurdistan Regional Government. Corruption, resource division, and revenue sharing disputes similar to those which sparked the 1994-1997 intra-Kurdish civil war are on the rise.

Partition will divide Iraq into morsels which Iraq's neighbors will find easier to digest. This is not to condemn federalism. The age of a strongman is over; some Iraqis will advocate for a strong leader, but only so long as he happens to be their brother or cousin. Federalism can ensure Iraqi stability so long as it is administrative, based on the division of resources according to the population of each governorate. The bloodshed sparked by ethno-sectarian federalism will not be contained to Iraq.

Regional diplomacy--especially outreach to Iran and Syria--may appear attractive, but the assumption that Iraq's neighbors seek a peaceful, stable Iraq is false. The Iranian leadership fears that rival Shiite religious leadership could emerge in Iraq which could challenge the Iranian leadership's religious and political claims. Short of political domination, Iranian strategists believe limited instability and free rein of pro-Iranian militias to be in their best interest. While diplomats may engage, Iranian diplomats have no power over the Iranians conducting operations in Iraq. Inside the former U.S. embassy in Tehran, a Revolutionary Guards' unit publishes *Amaliyat-i Ravanshenasi (Psychological Operations)* a journal dedicated to discussing strategies to stymie the United States in Iraq. This past Friday, July 13, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former Iranian president whom many in Washington describe as a pragmatist, gave a speech in which he declared, "What a superpower is the United States is when it can be easily trapped in a small country like Iraq?" He continued to predict

that the United States would suffer the same lesson in Afghanistan.

Many use Iraq to call for a return to realism. It is ironic that their realism bases itself on a Utopian notion of an adversary's good will. Four days after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered an olive branch to the Islamic Republic, its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei ridiculed the offer. "Why don't you admit that you are weak and your razor is blunt?" he asked. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps proceeded to accelerate weapons shipments into Iraq.

When assessing U.S. policy toward Iraq today, it is easy to criticize Plan A. It is a leap of logic, however, to assume that Plans B, C, or D are better alternatives. While the Iraqi government has yet to make satisfactory progress toward all benchmarks, public threats to reduce or abandon the U.S. commitment to Iraq are counterproductive. To convince Iraqi politicians to make tough compromises that will anger powerful constituencies requires that the

Iraqi leadership knows Washington's commitment is firm. If Washington threatens to leave or reduce its support for the Iraqi leadership, we will force even the most pro-American politicians there to make accommodation with our adversaries. A constant theme of Iranian influence operations is that the United States lacks Iran's staying power. Willing to abandon allies only plays into Tehran's hands and will reverberate far beyond Iraq's borders.

Success in Iraq is possible. It is imperative that the Iraqis take the lead in their future. The U.S. mission should be to enable them to secure their own country. This requires that the surge continues. If the Iraqis do not have the opportunity to develop their own multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian security forces then their country and the wider region will descend into chaos and war. It will take hard work. We should not pull the carpet out from beneath them.

[Michael Rubin](#) is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.