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# The Other Side of the COIN: Perils of Premature Evacuation from Iraq

The United States is leaving Iraq. Both the U.S. administration and the Iraqi government have made that clear. In 2008, the United States and Iraq signed a security agreement allowing U.S. troops to stay only until the end of 2011, and in February 2009, President Barack Obama announced that he intended to reduce U.S. forces in Iraq to just 50,000 and to end their combat mission by August 2010.[1] But how the United States leaves is of tremendous importance for the region, the international community, and above all, for the future vital U.S. interests.

Iraq has made remarkable progress since the worst days of its civil war in 2006. Security has improved enormously, democratization has gained a foothold, and democratic pressures have forced Iraqi politicians to change their methods, if not necessarily their goals. Iraq's micro economies have begun to revive and foreign investment is beginning to pick up. But as countless policymakers and commentators have pointed out, these gains are fragile and reversible. All of the tensions that propelled the country into the maelstrom of civil war during the initial years of bungled reconstruction remain, as do the memories of the many horrific acts committed. As numerous scholars of civil war have noted, these lingering fears typically make the resumption of civil war uncomfortably likely in cases like Iraq, unless an external great power is willing to serve as peacekeeper and mediator during the critical early years when the new, fragile state must build institutions capable of providing effective governance and public safety.[2]

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Indeed, candidate Obama correctly argued that when the United States prematurely turned away from Afghanistan to focus on Iraq in 2002–2003, the result was the near collapse of the new Afghan government and the resumption of widespread civil strife.[3] Even if it is to focus on Afghanistan, if the United States turns away from Iraq prematurely, it would have dire consequences for Iraq, whose fragile government will be more likely to fail, and for the United States, because success in Iraq is vital to U.S. interests.

## Immature Civil–Military Relations

One of the least acknowledged problems with the ongoing transition of the U.S. mission in Iraq is the potential for problems to arise between the Iraqi military and the civilian government. The increase in the size, capabilities, and political reliability of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were important elements in the turnaround in Iraq in 2007–2008. Today, the ISF are so large (roughly 650,000 in early 2010) and relatively capable that many Iraqis and Americans believe that the U.S. military presence has become superfluous. In Baghdad and Washington, there is a growing consensus that the Iraqis can handle their internal security and the residual insurgency threat by themselves, and as a result, the United States can pull out its troops quickly. This notion is dangerously mistaken. There are many things that could still tear Iraq apart, and the future of the Iraqi security forces themselves are among those at the top of the list.

Today, the ISF sees itself as a strong, modern, progressive institution, fully capable of fulfilling its national mission. More critically, most Iraqi generals see few, if any, other institutions in Iraq that can make the same claim. They view Iraqi politicians as venal and incompetent, squandering all of the gains won at such a high price by their soldiers. In and of itself, this has been the textbook recipe for a military coup throughout modern history, especially in the Middle East. Moreover, Iraq's civilian leadership is well aware of both the army's sentiments and the historical pattern they seem to fit, and has been working hard to ensure the political loyalty of the armed forces. To do so, the government has been employing equally typical patterns of what noted RAND analyst James Quinlivan has called "coup-proofing": replacing military professionals with officers personally loyal to the leader; creating multiple chains of command, some of which skirt established lines of authority to report directly to the leader or his trusted aides; establishing multiple intelligence services that can watch each other as well as the military; and creating elite military formations directly under the control of the leader.[4] Naturally, the fact that the civilian leadership is showing such growing distrust of the military further antagonizes many generals,

which someday may incline some (perhaps all) to act against the civilian leadership.

As if that isn't bad enough, there is yet another problem: it is the nature of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations to politicize the militaries conducting them. The nature of COIN warfare is that the indigenous military fights an internal enemy. The history of militaries of developing countries conducting COIN campaigns is that in the absence of a large, foreign military presence with large numbers of combat troops, indigenous political–military relations often go sour as a result of the counterinsurgency effort, regardless of its effectiveness. Iraq's current civil–military relations are fragile and fraught with distrust on both sides. This is a major problem that must be addressed before the United States implements the drawdown of U.S. combat forces and shifts the U.S. mission from combat operations to advising and training.

Today, the surest guarantee that the Iraqi military will not move against the civilian leadership, and that the civilian leadership will be limited in its ability to emasculate the military—either of which could trigger a new civil war—is the presence of almost 100,000 U.S. troops. When that presence is removed in December 2011, that guarantee will depart with them. Since history in similar circumstances elsewhere warns of the risk of catastrophically bad civil-military relations, unless large numbers of the departing great power's combat troops remain behind for years or decades, the United States may be committing déjà vu all over again in Iraq.

The resumption of civil war is uncomfortably likely in cases like Iraq.

Of course, Iraq is not the only place where the United States is currently investing its blood and treasure to build an indigenous military capable of conducting COIN operations to enable locals to shoulder the burden of providing security so that U.S. combat troops can leave. In December 2009, Obama announced that the United States would deploy an additional 30,000–40,000 troops to Afghanistan, but would seek to remove them in roughly 18 months, with the expectation that the Afghan National Army (ANA) would then be ready to take on the task. The implicit expectation is that the United States will be able to help Afghanistan as it helped Iraq. Even though Afghanistan and Iraq are very different countries facing very different problems, if the United States achieves its goals in Afghanistan (still a major uncertainty), it may nonetheless face some of the same problems of premature withdrawal. As senior U.S. officers in Iraq regularly intone, progress in these kinds of wars "doesn't mean no problems, it means new problems."

## COIN Operations and Political Stability

As the endless debates over strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan should have made clear to even the casual observer, COIN operations are inherently political. The goal of any COIN campaign is to win over the proverbial hearts and minds of the populace and to convince them to back the government and oppose insurgents. This requires providing every citizen with basic services like electricity, food, and clean water; law and justice; security against arbitrary reprisals; and a functional economy in which the people are able to support themselves and their families. Of course, none of this is possible without reasonably good governance to ensure that resources are being properly allocated as well as procedures properly developed and applied to ensure the security and welfare of the people. Insurgencies are political in nature because they represent an act of armed rebellion against the political authority and are fueled by political grievances. Thus, which side will prevail is largely determined by political, economic, social, and security considerations—all of which stem from the inherent capacity, fairness, and legitimacy of the political leadership and political process to deliver.

Inevitably, the military is the establishment called on to take the lead in COIN operations because of its ability to fight the insurgents, provide security, and mobilize resources. Just as inevitably, the military gets sucked into the political and economic sides of counterinsurgency in its effort to defeat the insurgency. Because a competent military that understands COIN operations will quickly recognize the need to provide

> Iraq is following the textbook recipe throughout modern history for a military coup.

people with basic services, a functioning economy, an efficient legal system, and the like to win the struggle against the insurgency, they will take on part or all of these responsibilities. Like the U.S. and Iraqi militaries in Iraq, and the U.S.-led NATO forces and the ANA in Afghanistan, the armed forces end up providing much of the basic services for the population. Just as inevitably, soldiers and officers will begin to ask at some point what is wrong with the country's political system that led to such a state of affairs. And that is where the trouble starts.

Because the outbreak of an insurgency necessarily signals a failure of some kind in the nation's political system, the more that a military struggles to win the COIN fight, the more that it will focus on these political problems, and rightly so. Consequently, competent COIN forces often conclude that defeating the insurgency requires political reform, and since the current crop of leaders are typically those whose failings produced the insurgency, they clearly cannot be expected to effect the necessary changes. Thus, unless there is some reason for

the officer corps to expect dramatic political change, they may conclude that to fulfill their mission to defeat the insurgency, they must replace the political leadership with a new, possibly "interim" leadership able to do so. Not surprisingly, the result is a coup d'état.

Moreover, military forces engaged in COIN operations invariably find themselves involved in civic action programs designed to alleviate social, economic, medical, and other problems at the local level. As U.S. forces have rediscovered in Iraq and Afghanistan, these kinds of nation-building efforts are part and parcel of a good COIN strategy. For an indigenous military, however, such grassroots efforts both expose the military to the problems of the central political leadership and allow them to build political power by providing the kinds of services that the people desperately seek and the incumbent government fails to provide. Again, this provides both motive and opportunity for the military to move into the political sphere.

### Lessons from Uruguay . . .

The emergence and reemergence of the armed forces as potent political players in Latin America, driven by insurgencies in the wake of World War II, illustrates these problems. In the early 1960s, when the Tupamaro terrorist insurgency was born in Uruguay, the Uruguayan military was considered a model of professional disinterest, especially by the standards of twentieth century Latin America.[5] Although pay was low, morale was still high because soldiers received other benefits such as better medical care, housing, pensions, and loans for private homes since the military routinely participated in projects designed to improve infrastructure and otherwise assist the Uruguayan people. As a result, the Uruguayan military was a purely volunteer force, able to obtain all of the recruits it needed through enlistment, which further buoyed their sense of mission and professionalism. Moreover, the Uruguayan military had only ever had a hand in one "coup d'etat," and in that case, its crime was following the orders of the democratically-elected but dictatorially-inclined then-President Gabriel Terra. In the early 1960s, Uruguay could boast the lowest rate of domestic violence in Latin America, which is no small feat.

By the late 1960s, however, the political leadership in Montevideo had become increasingly panicky over the growth of popular discontent, symbolized by the burgeoning Movement for National Liberation, which came to be known as the Tupamaro movement. Beginning in 1968, the government resorted to ever more drastic repression to try to snuff out the insurgents and crush their allies among trade unions and other civil society groups. In 1971, the government transferred responsibility for the COIN campaign from the national police to the armed forces. The army responded by ratcheting up levels of domestic repression to previously unheard of heights—to the point where Uruguay had the greatest

Today, the surest guarantee against a military coup is the almost 100,000 U.S. troops.

number of political prisoners per capita in the world. Simultaneously, the government suspended its citizens' individual liberties to facilitate the military's counterterrorism and COIN measures.

When it was committed to full-scale COIN operations against the Tupamaros, the Uruguayan military realized that the critical factor sustaining the insurgents was popular support, especially from the frustrated middle class, as a result of the woeful state of the Uruguayan economy. The military also concluded that this economic malaise was the product of the corruption and mismanagement of successive Uruguayan governments. Consequently, in addition to its all-out war on the Tupamaros, the Uruguayan military waged a war of only slightly less intensity against "economic crimes" committed by government officials. As a result, the military increasingly arrogated political powers to itself. In February 1972, President Juan Maria Bordaberry tried to check the military by naming a new defense minister he hoped would rein in the soldiers. The generals countered by demanding that he undertake a set of specific economic reforms, which they believed would undermine the internal unrest, and then forced Bordaberry to give up much of his power to a military-dominated national security council. Within a year, this junta had dissolved the parliament, closed the national university, banned virtually all Leftist parties, and imprisoned its political opponents.

### . . . and Elsewhere in History

Unfortunately, Uruguay was not unique in this pattern of behavior. In 1925, the Ecuadorian military was called on to quell a variety of internal upheavals, proto-insurgencies, and other forms of unrest stemming from the massive economic dislocations of the cacao boom.[6] Here as well, not only did the military deal with the unrest itself, but they then demanded that the political leadership enact a series of sweeping economic reforms. When the government refused, the League of Young Officers overthrew it and installed their own leadership, setting a pattern for similar interventions in the 1960s and again in the 1970s.

A broadly similar pattern of developments prompted the Pakistani military under Mohammad Zia al-Haq to overthrow the civilian government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1979.[7] An important motive on the part of the Pakistani armed forces was its frustration with the political leadership's inability to take actions that the generals believed necessary to crush insurgencies in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province. Striking a common chord, in Algeria, winning the War of Independence in 1954–1962 conferred legitimacy on the state's

armed forces, the core of which consisted of former insurgents who liberated the country from France's control.[8] Ever since, the Algerian military has been a dominant—and mostly destabilizing—force in Algerian politics.

As a final point on the military's propensity to intervene in politics as a consequence of successful COIN campaigns, the historical record demonstrates that when the country in question has valuable natural and extractable resources, such as diamonds, narcotics, or oil, the problems are both more pronounced and persistent.[9] In places like Angola, Burma, Columbia, and Sierra Leone, the pattern is even more disturbing. The military's involvement in COIN operations typically results in widespread graft, as the insurgents and local elites try to buy off military personnel, and as military personnel suddenly find themselves protecting and even administering areas abundant in highly profitable natural resources. This in turn can add venal motives to otherwise altruistic ones in pushing the military into politics to run things for its own benefit. Thus, fostering a military equipped to properly execute a COIN campaign in a weak or transitioning state endowed with valuable natural resources—such as Afghanistan because of the narcotics trade or Iraq because of the presence of oil—can destroy the state, even if it also succeeds in destroying the insurgency.

## The Inadequacy of Foreign Advisors Alone

Iraq, and potentially Afghanistan at some later date, are not the first times that the United States has had to confront this politically vicious cycle of an indigenous military pushed into COIN operations that then poses a threat to its own civilian government, in turn prompting that government to try to prevent a military takeover by politicizing and crippling its military. The good news is that there is evidence that external military forces can prevent either or both. The bad news is that the history seems to demonstrate that such a foreign military presence needs to consist of large numbers of combat troops, not just military advisors. This is particularly salient for Iraq, both because of its importance to U.S. interests and the fact that current plans envision the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces so soon. There, the United States needs to leave behind not merely an Iraqi military capable of defeating the remnants of the insurgency, but a functional state that will remain stable and will not slide back into the kind of civil war that would threaten the stability of the wider Persian Gulf region.

### Lessons from Nicaragua . . .
In 1925, the U.S. Marines finally pulled out of Nicaragua.[10] They had arrived in 1912 to quell the domestic conflict between Nicaraguan liberals and conservatives, and largely succeeded in stamping out the violence itself. Unfortunately, neither the Americans nor the Nicaraguans had fully resolved the underlying problems that had led to the conflict in the first place. As a result,

only months after the Marines departed, the civil war resumed, fiercer than ever, in a struggle referred to as the Constitutionalist War. Immediately, the United States intervened again, forcing both sides to agree to a negotiated settlement that included provisions for new elections supervised by U.S. troops and the creation of a new national army, the *Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua*. Not all of the liberals were willing to abide by the agreement. A segment of the former liberal forces chose to follow Augusto César Sandino, a revolutionary and insurgent leader, in rejecting it and waging an insurgency against the regime and the U.S. Marines.

Although Washington had been far more supportive of the conservatives than the liberals, the United States—and particularly its envoy in Managua, future Secretary of State Henry Stimson—was not blind to the problems. Consequently when the Marines returned to Nicaragua in 1926, they came bearing new plans for a program of democratization and economic reform that the United States hoped would address the underlying grievances of the population and so undermine popular support for Sandino's insurgents. The Marines laboriously built the *Guardia Nacional* as a professional, non-partisan military institution, filling many of its officer billets with seconded Marines until 1933.

> Competent COIN forces often conclude that defeating the insurgency requires political reform.

The Marines also trained, assisted, and largely led the *Guardia Nacional* on a model COIN campaign to crush Sandino's guerrillas. Meanwhile, the campaign of democratization had immediate and far-reaching effects: the U.S.-run 1928 presidential elections were more open and peaceful than any other elections in Nicaraguan history, and stunningly produced the defeat of the conservatives by the liberals. Congressional elections in 1930 and a second round of presidential elections in 1932 showed even greater progress. Finally, the U.S. program of economic reform successfully crippled the power of the old elites, the landowning *caudillos*, who had been the principal source of popular grievance.

By 1932, the United States believed that it had won in Nicaragua. To some extent, this was merely making a virtue out of necessity as—see if this sounds familiar—the onset of the Great Depression caused Washington to decide to end its mission to Nicaragua because it was too expensive at a time of national economic emergency. Nevertheless, there was considerable evidence that the United States *had* succeeded and that Nicaragua was well on the way to stability. The country had had three highly successful elections. Popular enthusiasm was demonstrated by the highest rates of election participation in Latin American history. The power of the *caudillos* seemed to have been broken, with *caudillo* candidates losing in elections everywhere except in a few corners where they

were still able to wield some residual powers of graft. The *Guardia Nacional* was widely viewed as professional, apolitical guardians of the Nicaraguan people, a source of pride and relief for most Nicaraguans. In effect, the insurgency had been defeated and Sandino and his men laid down their arms one month after the Americans left and a new liberal president had been sworn in.

The problem was that, in seeking to reform Nicaraguan society, by 1933 the United States had successfully created only one effective, independent, and apolitical institution in the country, the *Guardia Nacional*. Washington's hope was that it would play a dual role as the protector of democracy and the guarantor of security. To that end, the Marines did a good job of teaching the *Guardia Nacional* COIN operations, and so its leaders came to believe that only functional, egalitarian economic systems would allow for the eradication of Sandino's insurgency. The *Guardia Nacional* took to building rural roads and schools, provided free medical care to the population, and after the start of the Great Depression in 1929, even began distributing food. Furthermore, the *Guardia Nacional* came to sponsor leisure activities like dances, festivals, movies, and baseball games, all as COIN tactics. As part of their campaign to reform rural economies and destroy the hold of the *caudillos*, the *Guardia Nacional* also took on the supervision, and in many cases the actual administration, of local government. Thus, to properly wage its COIN operations, the Nicaraguan military effectively took over much of the country's local economic and political functions. Naturally, this also led to a massive expansion of the *Guardia Nacional*, from roughly 650 to nearly 2,500 troops, almost four times its projected size, and the creation of the *Guardia Municipal* as an auxiliary force intended to reinforce the regular *Guardia Nacional*. But this new Nicaraguan army was partnered with a U.S. Marine force that eventually numbered almost 5,700.

As long as the Marines were present in Nicaragua in force, the *Guardia Nacional* stayed out of national politics. Even after the combat forces withdrew in 1933, however, the United States left behind a smaller force of Marines as advisors and a number of the officers seconded to the *Guardia Nacional* as unit commanders and staff officers. Nevertheless, this amounted to a major reduction in the U.S. mission, drawing down from roughly 5,700 to as few as 500 Marines, in addition to the shift in their mission from combat to training and advising. Without the large U.S. combat force, this residual contingent proved incapable of keeping the Nicaraguan military in its lane. In 1936, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, the commander of the *Guardia Nacional*, overthrew the liberal president and established a military dictatorship that would last for more than four decades. Somoza's coup was almost effortless, given the widespread control over so much of Nicaragua's economic and political life exercised by the *Guardia Nacional* during the period of the counterinsurgency.

### . . . and Elsewhere

Cuba furnishes a similar example of the perils of premature withdrawal.[11] When the United States won the island from Spain in 1898, Washington was forced to deploy 45,000 troops to crush the Cuban *insurrectos* and prevent them from gaining control of the government. These troops were hastily withdrawn in 1902 to assist with the U.S. military operations in the Philippines, leaving Cuba to oscillate between anarchy (as the insurgents reemerged) and dictatorship (as the Cuban military moved to seize power). Consequently, Washington found itself reoccupying Cuba in 1906, and again in 1912 to try to stabilize the country. Neither of these subsequent (significantly smaller) interventions succeeded and Cuba was dominated by military dictators until the Communist revolution of 1953–1959 replaced that problem with a new one altogether.

Some have invoked the U.S. experience in El Salvador as evidence that the United States could rapidly withdraw its combat forces from Iraq but maintain an effective COIN campaign with a small number of advisors alone.[12] Indeed, between 1980 and 1992, 55 U.S. advisors were deployed to El Salvador to train and advise the Salvadoran armed forces in COIN operations against the insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN).[13] Although this low-cost COIN program produced some impressive results in improving the capabilities of the Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF), it did so at a horrific price. U.S. advisory support was inadequate to defeat the FMLN outright or stabilize the country, and was only ever enough to produce a protracted stalemate: a civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992 and claimed the lives of more than 75,000 Salvadorans from the country's total population of 5.5 million. Projected on to Iraq, such a fatality rate would produce nearly 400,000 civilian deaths.

## Vietnam: A False Analogy or a More Hopeful Model?

Still, not all of the history suggests that a rapid withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq would be disastrous. An example that suggests greater confidence is furnished, ironically, by the Vietnam War during 1968–1972.[14] Mistaken popular perceptions notwithstanding, the U.S.-led COIN campaign had largely succeeded in South Vietnam by 1972. The country was stable, albeit hardly democratic, the Viet Cong had been effectively defeated, and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was increasingly demonstrating its ability to maintain the status quo with little more than material and advisory assistance from the United States. Even when North Vietnam shifted to conventional military invasions of the south (largely because the Viet Cong had been emasculated), the contribution of U.S. air power alone was adequate to allow the ARVN to hold its own. In the words of the renowned British counterinsurgency

expert Sir Robert Thompson, by December 1972 "*you* [Americans] *had won the war: It was over!*"[15]

Notably, all of this came about during the period 1968–1972, when General Creighton Abrams conducted a superb COIN campaign, one that has served as a model for General David Petraeus's strategy in Iraq. Not only did Abrams succeed where his predecessors failed, but he did so while dramatically drawing down U.S. forces in Vietnam from the peak of 543,000 in 1969 to just 49,000 by 1972. This reduction in the number of troops did not, in itself, produce new instability in South Vietnam or the collapse of its government. Instead, what ultimately brought about the fall of Saigon was the U.S. decision to end military aid and combat support to South Vietnam following the Paris Accords in 1973. This enabled the North to conquer the South by mounting a conventional invasion in 1975. Thus, the Vietnam case suggests a potentially optimistic scenario for Iraq, and possibly Afghanistan, in which a similar (in fact, somewhat *slower*) drawdown in U.S. troops from a high of 160,000 in 2007 to a projected 35,000–50,000 in late 2010 may not necessarily result in any attenuation of Iraq's stability gains.

> The critical function of U.S. forces is shifting to peacekeeping, which requires more troops.

The United States, however, needs to be careful with the Vietnam analogy. It rarely fits with Iraq. It is worth emphasizing a general problem with applying any "lessons" of counterinsurgency to the situation in Iraq, especially because Iraq was only partly a problem of insurgency. While it is true that there was a violent insurgency emanating largely from the Sunni Arab segments of Iraq's population, this insurgency was only an exacerbating factor of Iraq's other grave problems.[16] Iraq also suffered from being a failed state that experienced a Congo-, Lebanon-, and Yugoslav-style ethno-sectarian civil war triggered by the breakdown of the central government and the ensuing power vacuum, both aggravated by the many failures of the United States.

South Vietnam was also something of a failed or failing state, which dragged U.S. troops into nation-building activities there, but South Vietnam never experienced the same kind of power vacuum or intense communal violence that has traumatized Iraqi society. Consequently, the role presently played by U.S. combat forces in Iraq is in many ways distinct from that played by U.S. combat forces in Vietnam. More fundamentally, as Steven Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations presciently observed in 2008, the critical function of U.S. troops in Iraq is increasingly shifting from counterinsurgency to peacekeeping.[17] The insurgency is not extinguished, but without large-scale popular support, it has become more of a lethal irritant, manifested in discrete terrorist acts, rather than

an organized, collective movement that could threaten the state. Hence, it is very difficult to envision a revival of the insurgency without the prior resumption of the civil war. The real danger in Iraq, therefore, is not the revival of the Sunni insurgency per se, but the recurrence of the civil war—and that is the principal danger which U.S. military forces are seeking to prevent.

For that reason, Iraq may not conform to the hopeful pattern suggested by Abrams's experience in Vietnam. For peacekeepers to succeed, they need to be present in sufficient strength to prevent a recurrence of conflict and to reassure the populace that they can physically intercede between groups on the verge of using violence, including whichever group happens to control the government. That is why peacekeeping missions invariably demand much larger numbers of military personnel than do counterinsurgency advisory missions.

## No End in Sight

Since before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Israelis have been counseling their U.S. counterparts by saying, "Why don't you find yourself a nice Mubarak to run Iraq." By this they mean a pro-U.S. dictator who will hold the country together—by force, of course—and allow the United States to dispense with the difficult process of building a pluralist system of government in a nation that has known little of it. Setting aside the utter betrayal of U.S. values and Iraqi aspirations that this would represent, from a purely realpolitik perspective it is a tempting idea. Building some kind of proto-democratic state has already proven costly and divisive in a dozen or more different ways. There is no guarantee that democratization will succeed either, and today there is still troubling evidence suggesting it may not, in part because of U.S. failings and in part because of Iraqi ones.

The problem is that there is absolutely no reason to believe that finding "a nice Mubarak" is a realistic option for solving the problems of Iraq. Since the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, the only indigenous autocrat who successfully held power and the country together without foreign military assistance was Saddam Hussain, and he required genocidal levels of violence to do so. Moreover, his absolute repression at home fueled an expansionist foreign policy and a spate of massive civil wars that resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Saddam was a major source of instability in the critical Persian Gulf region, which was why the United States ultimately toppled him. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the United States could find "a nice" someone who could do what Saddam did. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the United States would want someone like Saddam in power again. For better or worse, even a "friendly" dictator would not be good enough to secure U.S. interests in Iraq.

In addition, it is highly unlikely that the United States would succeed in installing a new dictator, and any Iraqi who made the effort on his own would be

even more likely to fail—and in the process provoke a new civil war. Under current conditions, any Iraqi who attempted to make himself dictator would be seen by other groups as a partisan of one ethnic, religious, or political segment of the society, and the others would immediately mobilize against him. All of the factions which have laid down their weapons could pick them up again swiftly if threatened by a would-be dictator. The strength and cohesiveness of the Iraqi army is relatively much better than it was, but in absolute terms it is untested at best. The escalating tensions between the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Pershmerga inject yet another complication. Indeed, it remains the most likely scenario that if a general were to attempt to seize power or back a certain political faction, the army would fragment along confessional lines similar to the way the Lebanese army dissolved under the strains of its civil war of 1975–1990.

Thus, the real threat conjured by these historical patterns is not so much that a hasty U.S. withdrawal could result in a new Iraqi dictatorship. As bad as that would be, it would be preferable to the most likely outcome, which would be a resumption of all out civil war when the would-be dictator's bid for power succeeded only in fracturing the Iraqi security forces, crippling the government, and prompting all of Iraq's previously warring factions to resume their unfinished battles.

> Maintaining the AAB force in Iraq will likely be necessary beyond 2011.

Having made the political decision to withdraw the vast majority of U.S. troops, Washington is, to a certain extent, simply stuck with this risk. But it is a risk that can be mitigated, particularly by modulating the drawdown in accord with Iraq's political circumstances, and being willing to show the flexibility and adaptability that Obama insisted on in his February 2009 speech on Iraq.[18] Perhaps of greater importance still will be the president's plan to leave behind 35,000–50,000 U.S. troops—many of them combat troops rebadged as advisors in "Advisory Assistance Brigades" (AABs)—until at least the end of 2011 to guard against future instability.

Maintaining the AAB force in Iraq will likely be necessary, if the United States is to avoid the mistakes it made in Latin America and Southeast Asia in the twentieth century. These brigades retain virtually all of the personnel and much of the equipment of full combat brigades. Indeed, in an emergency, several of the AABs will be able to rapidly reequip as full-spectrum combat units. Thus, these brigades will perform a dual role: they will serve as advisors in peacetime but could quickly become combat brigades in a crisis. In many ways, the formation of the AABs is a clever way to square the circle between the president's commitments to transition U.S. troops away from combat missions while still retaining combat capacity in Iraq to guard against crucial problems

such as the propensity of COIN-trained developing armies to overthrow civilian governments.

In turn, this arrangement highlights another critical political-diplomatic hurdle that the United States faces in Iraq: securing a new agreement with the Iraqi government that would allow U.S. military forces to remain in the country beyond 2011. At present, the security agreement governing the presence of U.S. military personnel in Iraq expires on December 31, 2011. This means that every last U.S. soldier, sailor, airman, and marine must be out by that date. Because this subject is politically sensitive in both the United States and Iraq, no one is willing to discuss it. But Iraqi and U.S. military and civilian leaders alike recognize that a follow-on agreement to extend the U.S. military presence beyond 2011 would be desirable and probably necessary. It is highly unlikely that Iraq will have sorted out its political and security problems by the end of 2011, including finding a solution to the propensity of COIN-trained militaries to move against the civilian leadership. Consequently, it will be critical for the United States to retain at least the AABs for at least 3–5 years after the expiration of the current security agreement to allow Iraqi civil-military relations to mature, Iraqi political institutions to strengthen, and a culture of apolitical professionalism to take root within the Iraqi military before the last U.S. combat troops (even if they are masquerading as advisors) depart.

Finally, it is worth also considering the potential implications of this phenomenon for Afghanistan. The U.S.-led NATO forces are far from achieving in Afghanistan what the United States has accomplished in Iraq. If the United States, however, succeeds in achieving in Afghanistan what it did in Iraq, Kabul will most likely evince the same problematic civil-military relations that Baghdad is now confronting—and which has destroyed so many other nascent governments in the past. If so, the president's notional timetable to begin withdrawal in June 2011 will have to be implemented as a reduction in U.S. troops, but by no means a complete withdrawal. Like Iraq, Afghanistan will require roughly 50,000 U.S. combat troops, probably rebadged as advisors, for many more years before it is able to stand on its feet.

> Like Iraq, Afghanistan will require roughly 50,000 U.S. combat troops for many more years.

In the end, if Washington gets its fondest wishes, and Iraq continues to go well while Afghanistan succeeds at least as well as Iraq, then the United States will have to expect to maintain large troop commitments in both of those countries for a long time to come—similar to those U.S. deployments in Europe, East Asia, and elsewhere around the globe. Although this recommendation may

sound daunting at a time of national economic emergency, it is the least that is required to preserve the accomplishments bought with so much American blood and avoid the risks of a premature withdrawal.

## Notes

1. See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, February 27, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Responsibly-Ending-the-War-in-Iraq/ (hereinafter Obama's remarks on Ending the War in Iraq).

2. See Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 41–75; Erik Melander, "The Geography of Fear: Regional Ethnic Diversity, the Security Dilemma and Ethnic War," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 95–124; Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27–47; Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Barbara Walter, "Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 371–388.

3. See "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 15, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html and "Obama Calls Situation in Afghanistan 'Urgent,'" CNN.com, July 21, 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/20/obama.afghanistan/.

4. See James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131–165.

5. For details on Uruguay, see James A. Miller, "Urban Terrorism in Uruguay: The Tupamaros," in Bard E. O'Neill, William R. Heaton, and Donald J. Alberts, eds., *Insurgency in the Modern World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980) and James Kohl and John Litt, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

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8. For details on Algeria, see Steven A. Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) and Martin Stone, *The Agony of Algeria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

9. See Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, "Understanding Civil War: A New Agenda," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (February 2002): 3–12; James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 275–301; Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics*, 53, no. 4 (July 2001): 524–552; Michael L. Ross, "How Do Natural

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17. Stephen Biddle, "Afghanistan, Iraq, and U.S. Strategy in 2009," testimony before U.S. House Armed Services Committee, February 12, 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/18545/prepared_testimony_on_us_strategy_in_afghanistan_and_iraq_before_the_house_armed_services_committee.html?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F2603%2Fstephen_biddle%3Fgroupby%3D3%26amp%253Bhide%3D1%26amp%253Bid%3D2603%26filter%3D2009. Also see Stephen Biddle, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "How to Leave a Stable Iraq: Building on Progress," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5 (September/October 2008): 40–58.

18. Obama's remarks on Ending the War in Iraq.