

# *Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up*

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Before the  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate  
Second Session, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress

2 April 2008

What will happen to Iraq as the recent surge in US troop strength subsides? Violence fell in late 2007; will this trend continue, or was this merely a temporary lull created by an unsustainable US troop presence? The last week saw a major spike in fighting as the Maliki government launched an offensive against militia fighters in Basra; is this a harbinger of future violence? And what do the answers imply for the US posture in Iraq? Should we extend the ongoing troop reductions? Or should these be slowed or even reversed?

In fact the violence reduction was more than just a temporary lull. It reflected a systematic shift in the underlying strategic landscape of Iraq, and could offer the basis for sustainable stability if we respond appropriately.

But this will not yield Eden on the Euphrates. A stabilized Iraq is likely to look more like Bosnia or Kosovo than Germany or Japan. And like Bosnia and Kosovo, a substantial outside presence will be needed for many years to keep such a peace. If US withdrawals leave us unable to provide the needed outside presence, the result could be a rapid return to 2006-scale violence or worse. Nor can we afford to hold out for a less Balkanized Iraq that could control its own territory without us in the near term: pushing too hard too soon for the ideal of a strong, internally unified Iraqi state can easily undermine the prospects for a lesser but more achievable goal of stability per se.

This is because the violence reduction of 2007 was obtained from the bottom up, not from the top down. Instead of a national political deal, the military defeat or disarmament of the enemy, or their conversion into peaceful politicians in a reconciled, pluralist society, violence fell because most of the former combatants reached separate, local, voluntary decisions to stop fighting even though they retained their arms, their organizations, their leaders, and often their ambitions. These decisions were not accidental or ephemeral – they reflected the post-2006 strategic reality of Iraq, which for the first time gave all the major combatants a powerful self-interest in ceasefire rather than combat. This new self-interest in ceasefire creates an important opportunity for stability. But the decentralized, voluntary nature of these ceasefires means that peace would be fragile and would need careful and persistent US management to keep it from collapsing, especially early on. The required US presence would change from war

fighting into peacekeeping, and US casualties would fall accordingly. But a continued presence by a substantial outside force would be essential for many years to keep a patchwork quilt of wary former enemies from turning on one another – if we try to exploit the violence reduction to take a peace dividend by bringing American troops home too quickly, the ceasefire deals we have reached would likely collapse. And if we try to replace this patchwork quilt of local ceasefire deals with a strong central government that could monopolize violence in Iraq and allow us to leave, the result is much more likely to be the collapse of today’s ceasefires without any effective central government to put in their place.

This is not what the Administration had in mind when it invaded Iraq. Reasonable people could judge the costs too high and the risks too great. But an Iraq stabilized from the bottom up in this way nevertheless offers a meaningful chance to stop the fighting, to save the lives of untold thousands of innocent Iraqis who would otherwise die brutal, violent deaths, and to secure America’s remaining vital strategic interest in this conflict: that it not spread to engulf the entire Middle East in a regionwide war. No options for Iraq are attractive.<sup>1</sup> But given the alternatives, stabilization from the bottom up may be the least bad option for US policy in 2008.

I advance this case in four steps. First, I assess the causes of the recent decline in violence, and attribute this to a series of voluntary local ceasefires – not national political reconciliation, the destruction or elimination of the enemy, an exhaustion of violence potential as a result of sectarian cleansing, or improvements in Iraqi government forces. Second, I discuss the chances for these ceasefires to hold. If violence is down because the combatants have chosen to stop fighting, will they choose otherwise when the surge brigades come home? I argue that while voluntary ceasefires are inherently reversible, they do not always collapse. The new strategic landscape in Iraq creates an opportunity for a lasting ceasefire that outlives the surge, but does not guarantee this by itself. Third, I argue that to realize this opportunity requires a continuing military presence by an outside peacekeeper. This does not mean open-ended war fighting or the US casualties that go with it, and it may not require the surge’s troop count. But peacekeeping is labor intensive nevertheless – and the right posture for stability maintenance in Iraq is thus the largest force we can sustain in steady state for an extended stay. Finally, I assess the alternative of strengthening the Iraqi state to enable it to monopolize violence, control its own territory, and replace US or other foreign troops with Iraqi security forces. I argue that for the foreseeable future, any attempt to replace local ceasefires with centralized state security is far likelier to destroy the gains bought at such cost in 2007. Iraq may eventually mature into a workable federal state. But this is a generational goal, not an immediate one. For a long time to come, stability in Iraq will require settling for what we can get, not holding out for what we once sought.

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<sup>1</sup> I address withdrawal alternatives and their consequences in greater detail in “Evaluating Options for Partial Withdrawals from Iraq,” testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, United States House of Representatives, First Session, 110th Congress, July 25, 2007.

## I. Why Did Violence Decline?

The original idea behind the surge was to reduce the violence in Baghdad in order to enable Iraqis to negotiate the kind of national power-sharing deal we thought would be necessary to stabilize the country. Chaos in the capital, it was thought, made negotiated compromise impossible; by deploying more US troops to the city and assigning them the mission of direct population security, it was hoped that a safe space could be created within which the national leaders of Iraq's Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds could afford to take the risks inherent in compromise.

The violence came down, but the compromise did not follow. Although some slow, grudging political progress has been made, the pace has lagged far behind the original intentions of the surge's designers. Many, prominently including the Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill, were prepared to declare the surge a failure given its inability to produce the reconciliation deal that was the whole point originally.

In the meantime, however, a completely different possibility arose – one that was neither planned nor anticipated nor intended when the surge was designed, but which has nevertheless become central to the prospects for stability in Iraq. This “Anbar Model” or “bottom-up” approach began with a group of Sunni tribal sheiks in Anbar Province, then quickly spread to Sunnis elsewhere in Iraq and now to many Shiites as well.

This model is built not around a national compact, but instead a series of bilateral contractual agreements in which particular groups of local Iraqis agree not to fight the United States or the government of Iraq, and to turn their arms instead on common enemies – initially al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and increasingly rogue Shiite militias as well. These local groups further agree to wear distinguishing uniforms, to patrol their home districts, to limit their activities to those home districts, and to provide Coalition forces and the Iraqi government with biometric data (e.g. fingerprints and retinal scans), names, and home addresses for all members. In exchange they receive recognition as legitimate security providers in their districts, a pledge that they will not be fired upon by US or Iraqi government forces as long as they observe their end of the agreement, and a US-provided salary of \$300 per member per month. (They do *not*, however, receive arms or ammunition from the United States – we are not “arming the Sunnis,” as many have alleged. Ceasefire participants use their own weapons and ammunition, of which they have plenty without our help.)

The parties to these local ceasefire deals have been variously termed “Awakening Councils,” “Sons of Iraq” (SOI), or “Concerned Local Citizen” (CLC) groups. As of March 2008, membership in these CLC organizations had grown from a baseline of essentially zero in early 2007 to more than 95,000 Iraqis under more than 200 such contracts across much of western and central Iraq. By way of comparison, the entire active strength of the British Army worldwide is about 100,000 – the growth in CLC membership in just a few months has been truly extraordinary.

For now, the CLC groups are disproportionately, though not exclusively, Sunni (about 80 percent of CLC members were Sunnis in January 2008). Many of the principal Shiite combatants, however, are observing their own ceasefires. In particular, Muqtada al Sadr directed his Jaish al Mahdi (JAM), or “Mahdi Army” militia to stand down from

combat operations following an altercation with the rival Shiite Badr Brigade in Karbala in August 2007.

The result is that as of early 2008, most of the major combatants on both the Sunni and Shiite side were all observing voluntary ceasefires.

One would expect this rapid spread of local ceasefires to have an important effect in reducing violence in Iraq, and indeed it did. In fact it has been largely responsible for the dramatic reduction in violence by late 2007. In effect, most of the combatant factions that had been fighting the Americans and the government voluntarily agreed to stop. Moreover, the remaining hard core AQI and rogue militia holdouts had been seriously disadvantaged by the defection of their erstwhile allies: without the safe houses, financial support, intelligence and concealment provided by their coreligionists, AQI and militia rogues were exposed to US firepower in ways they had not been previously. Guerillas survive by stealth – their key defense from destruction by better-armed government forces is the government’s inability to distinguish fighters from innocent civilians. When their former allies agreed to finger holdout guerillas for US engagement, AQI’s military position in western and central Iraq thus became largely untenable and they were forced to withdraw into the limited areas of Diyala, Salah ad Din, and Ninawa Provinces where CLC deals had not yet been reached. The net result was a dramatic reduction in opposition, a dramatic reduction in the number of enemy-initiated attacks, and a corresponding reduction in US casualties, Iraqi civilian deaths, and ISF losses.

The violence reduction was not, by contrast, caused by our killing the enemy or driving them out of Iraq. AQI’s casualties were heavy in 2007, but AQI was never the bulk of the Sunni combatant strength, and violence in 2006 was increasingly attributable to Shiite militia activity. Neither of the latter has suffered nearly enough losses to explain a radical reduction in violence, nor have many such combatants fled the country.

Nor is the violence reduction attributable to sectarian cleansing. Many have argued that violence fell because there was no one left to kill: Baghdad’s once-mixed neighborhoods are now purely Shiite, they claim, removing the *casus belli* that once drove the violence. Yet significant Sunni populations remain in Baghdad – many fewer than in 2005, but significant all the same. More important, the relative incidence of mixed and pure, or Sunni and Shiite, neighborhoods in Baghdad correlates very poorly with the scale of sectarian violence. The killing has always been concentrated at the frontiers between Shiite and Sunni districts, where, typically, Shiite militia fought to expand their control and Sunni insurgents fought to hold them off. As this unfolded, Sunnis were often forced out and city blocks would fall under Shiite control, but this simply moved the frontier to the next block, where the battle continued unabated. Cleansing thus moved the violence, but it did not reduce it. This can be seen in the casualty statistics for 2006, which hardly fell as the city’s Sunni population shrank: all estimates show *increasing* civilian fatalities over the course of 2006, not the opposite. The only way this cleansing process could explain a radical drop in violence is if the frontiers disappeared as a result of Sunni extinction in Baghdad – but this has not occurred. And it is far from clear that even a total Sunni eviction from Baghdad would end the violence: the frontier would simply move on to the “Baghdad Belts,” the ring of heavily Sunni towns and suburbs that surround the city. In fact this had already started in 2006-7: both Sunni and Shiite combatants maneuvered extensively to improve their positions for continued warfare

beyond the city by contesting control of key outlying towns. The violence did not simply run its course and ebb for lack of interest; regrettably, there remains an enormous potential for continued sectarian bloodletting in Iraq.

Nor is the violence reduction attributable to improvements in Iraqi government security forces. The ISF is better than it was, but its leadership, training, equipment, and logistics remain very uneven. Its key shortcoming, however, remains its politics rather than its proficiency. Predominantly Shiite or Kurdish ISF units are often distrusted by Sunnis and have great difficulty functioning effectively in their neighborhoods. Even Shiite ISF formations can have difficulty functioning in Shiite neighborhoods controlled by rival Shiite factions, as the recent fighting in Basra demonstrates. A few ISF units have established a reputation for even-handedness and can in principle act as nationalist defenders of all, but too few to secure the country. Much of the ISF, in effect, thus operates as the CLCs do: they defend their own. Local communities, whether Sunni or Shiite, accept defense by co-religionists they trust, but not by others – hence Iraq today is increasingly a patchwork of self-defending sectarian enclaves, warily observing the others but for now declining to use violence as long as they are left alone.

## **II. Can the Ceasefires Hold?**

Of course, a voluntary decision to stop fighting can be reversed. CLC members retain their weapons. Many are essentially the same units, under the same leaders, that fought Coalition forces until agreeing to stop in 2007. Many retain fond hopes to realize their former ambitions and seize control of the country eventually. The JAM has mostly stood down but not demobilized; they, too, could return to the streets. Many have thus argued that these ceasefire deals could easily collapse. And indeed they could.

But this is not unusual for ceasefires meant to end communal civil wars such as Iraq's. These typically involve very distrustful parties; they often begin with former combatants agreeing to ceasefires but retaining their arms; and they are always at risk of renewed violence. Many fail under these pressures. But some succeed: in Bosnia, Kosovo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, for example, ceasefires of this kind have held and led to persistent quiet, if not warmth or deep reconciliation, between the former warring parties.

At least two requirements are needed to translate fragile deals into persistent stability. First, peace has to be in the perceived strategic self-interest of all parties. If one or several see warfare as superior to ceasefire, then any deal is temporary and will collapse at a more tactically opportune moment.

Until recently, Iraq failed this criterion. Sunnis feared Shiite domination, but believed they were stronger militarily than the Shiites; if only Sunnis could drive the Americans out, then a weak Shiite regime would collapse without its US protectors and Sunnis could seize control. Hence fighting made sense for them. Shiites, by contrast, feared a Sunni restoration and saw warfare against Sunni insurgents as necessary to avert a takeover. Initially most Shiites were willing to let the government and its American allies wage this war for them. Eventually, however, they began to lose faith in either actor's ability to protect them, and thus turned to Shiite militias to wage war against the Sunnis on their behalf. Militia warfare offered Shiite civilians protection against Sunni violence. Fighting also offered Shiite militia leaders – and especially Muqtada al Sadr – a

power base they could not obtain otherwise, and a possible route to political control via military victory over the Sunnis, and eventually, over the Americans (who opposed Shiite warlord autocracy in favor of an unacceptable multisectarian compromise with the rival Sunnis). Shiites, too, thus preferred warfare.

Events in 2006 and early 2007, however, changed this strategic calculus fundamentally for both Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias. The key to this was the Sunni's military defeat in the sectarian Battle of Baghdad that followed the Askariya Mosque bombing of February 2006. Until that time, Shiite militias had fought mostly defensively and often stood on the sidelines in Sunni-US combat. But when AQI destroyed the shrine, the Shiite militias entered the war in force and on the offensive. The result was a yearlong wave of sectarian violence in Baghdad pitting Sunni insurgent factions and their AQI allies against, especially, Muqtada al Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi. At the time, this wave of bloodshed was seen as a disaster – and in humanitarian terms it clearly was. The United States tried to stop it. But in retrospect, it may prove to have been the critical enabler of a later wave of ceasefires by changing fundamentally the Sunni strategic calculus in Iraq.

Before the Mosque bombing, Sunnis could believe they were the stronger side and would win an eventual all-out war. The Battle of Baghdad, however, provided a window into what such a war would mean for Sunnis, and they did not like what they saw. To Sunnis' surprise and dismay, the battle produced a decisive Sunni defeat: what had once been a mixed-sect city became a predominantly Shiite one as the JAM progressively drove the Sunnis out and shrank their remaining strongholds in the capital. With the Americans playing no decisive role, Shiites overwhelmed Sunni combatants in neighborhood after neighborhood. Sunnis who had harbored fond hopes of ruling the country by defeating the Shia in open warfare were now unable to call relatives in traditional Sunni strongholds because the JAM had driven them from their homes and replaced them with Shiite squatters. Neighborhoods that had been Sunni homeland for generations were now off limits, populated with and defended by their rivals. In a head-to-head fight, the Sunnis had been beaten by Shiite militias they had assumed they could dominate.

A second major development was a series of strategic errors by AQI. Americans have no monopoly on error in Iraq, and AQI's leadership seriously overplayed their hand in 2006. Al Qaeda in Iraq is exceptionally violent, and not only against Shiites and Americans. Fellow Sunnis whom AQI's leadership felt were not sufficiently devout or committed were also targeted with extraordinary brutality – including delivery of children's severed heads to the doorsteps of Sunni sheiks who failed to follow AQI preferences. The smuggling networks that many Sunni sheiks in Anbar Province had relied upon for generations to fund tribal patronage networks were appropriated by AQI for its own use. Before the Battle of Baghdad, most Sunnis tolerated these costs on the assumption that AQI's combat value against Shiites and Americans outweighed their disadvantages. As defeat in Baghdad became clearer, however, it also became clear that AQI could not deliver real protection. By late 2006 AQI's inability to prevent defeat in Baghdad and the costs it imposed on coreligionists had thus convinced many Sunnis that they needed to look for new allies. And the only possible choice was the United States.

At the same time, the surge made this realignment with the United States much easier and safer. Americans had sought political accommodation with Sunni insurgents for years; attempted openings to Sunni leaders had been a major component of US policy throughout Zalmay Khalilzad's tenure as Ambassador, when the US tried to broker compromise from both sides. These efforts made little headway, however, with a Sunni leadership that expected to rule Iraq if it instead held out and won the ensuing war. By 2007, however, Sunnis had become much more interested in American protection. And with the surge, Americans had more protection to offer. Any Sunni contemplating realignment against their nominal AQI allies surely realized that a massive AQI counterattack awaited them – no organization with AQI's reputation for brutality would stand back and watch while its allies changed sides and betrayed them. And in fact the initial wave of Sunni tribal disaffection in Anbar was met with an immediate campaign of bombings and assassinations from AQI against the leaders and foot soldiers of the rebel tribes. Previous rumblings of Sunni tribal disaffection with AQI in Anbar had been reversed by such counterattacks. Now, however, the rebel tribes approached American forces whose strength in Anbar and Baghdad was growing, and whose mission was changing to emphasize direct US provision of population security through aggressive patrolling and persistent combat presence (as opposed to the previous mission of limiting US exposure while training Iraqis to take over the fighting). After much initial wariness, the Americans decided to support this realignment and joined forces with the tribes against AQI in Anbar. With American firepower connected to Sunni tribal knowledge of who and where to strike, the ensuing campaign decimated AQI and led to their virtual eviction from Anbar Province. The result was a province-wide ceasefire under the auspices of the Anbar Awakening Council and the US military.

This outcome provided a model for similar ceasefires elsewhere. Sunnis outside Anbar understood their Baghdad defeat's military implications at least as well as the western sheiks had. As the arrival of US surge brigades and their extension of American security capabilities made it possible, more and more local Sunni leaders thus opted to stand down from combat against the Americans and to make common cause with them instead, enabling their new allies to hunt down AQI operatives, safe houses, and bomb factories. The result was a powerful synergy: the prospect of US security emboldened already-motivated Sunnis to realign with the US; Sunni realignment as CLCs enhanced US lethality against AQI; US defeat of local AQI cells protected realigned Sunni CLCs; local CLC ceasefires with the Americans reduced US casualties and freed US forces to venture outward from Baghdad into the surrounding areas to keep AQI off-balance and on the run.

Ceasefires with Sunnis in turn facilitated ceasefires with key Shiite militias. These militias began largely as self-defense mechanisms to protect Shiite civilians from Sunni attack. But as Sunni insurgents ceased offensive operations and as AQI weakened, the need for such defenders waned and the JAM in particular found its support base among Shiite civilians weakening. This loss of support was exacerbated by the growing criminality of many militia members, who had exploited their supporters' dependency by preying on them with gangland control of key commodities such as cooking fuel and gasoline for economic extortion. Rising criminality in turn created fissiparous tendencies within the militias, as factions with their own income sources grew increasingly independent of the leadership and Sadr in particular. Meanwhile the American military

presence was strengthening with the arrival of the surge brigades in Sadr's home base of Baghdad, and those Americans were increasingly freed of the need to fight Sunnis by the growth of local ceasefires, posing an increasing threat to JAM military control in the capital.

Taken together, this created multiple perils for Muqtada al Sadr. In previous firefights with the Americans, he had sustained heavy losses but easily made them up with new recruits given his popularity. But Shiites' growing disaffection with his increasingly wayward militia, coupled with declining fear of Sunni attack, threatened his ability to make up losses with new recruitment. At the same time, tensions with other Shiite militias, especially the Badr Brigade in southern Iraq where JAM was weaker but where much of Iraq's oil wealth was concentrated, posed a threat from a different direction, and his weakening control over rogue elements created a danger of the organization gradually slipping out of his hands. When Shiites were unified by a mortal threat from Sunni attack and the Americans were tied down with insurgents and AQI, these internal problems could be managed and Sadr could afford to keep the JAM in the field and killing Sunnis and Americans. But as the Sunni threat waned, Shiite support weakened, the JAM splintered, and the Americans strengthened, Sadr's ability to tolerate a new battle with the US Army was thus progressively diminished. Of course, Sadr is notoriously hard to read, and it is impossible to know exactly why he does what he does. But at least one plausible hypothesis is that the effect of Sunni ceasefires added to other mounting internal pressures to persuade Sadr that he had to stand down himself rather than taking another beating from the Americans. Hence the new circumstances drove the JAM, too, to observe a ceasefire.

The result was a major change in incentives for both the Sunni insurgency and the key Shiite militia. Of course, this decline in violence is still far from a nationwide ceasefire – hard fighting remains, especially in parts of Diyala, Salah ad Din, and Ninawa Provinces where AQI's remnants have taken refuge and where the CLC movement is still taking shape. But if the strategic logic described above holds, then there is at least a chance that the local ceasefires of January 2008 could continue to expand to cover the remaining holdouts. This does not mean sectarian harmony or brotherly affection in Iraq. But it does mean that cold, hard strategic reality increasingly makes acting on hatred too costly for most Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias – which has translated into a rapid spread of local ceasefires in accordance with the new interest calculus.

Yet this has not produced national reconciliation among Iraq's elected representatives in the capital. Why not?

In time it may. For now, however, the Maliki government's incentives differ from Muqtada al Sadr's. Sadr needs peace to avoid further deterioration in his internal position and to avert casualties he cannot replace in a costly battle with the Americans. Maliki, by contrast, is not fighting the Americans – the surge is no threat to him. On the contrary, US reinforcements and weaker Sunni opposition reduce the cost of continued warfare for Maliki's ISF. For Maliki, moreover, peace is politically and militarily riskier than war. Reconciliation along American lines requires dangerous and politically painful compromises with rival Sunnis: oil revenue sharing with Sunni provinces, hiring of former Baathists, Anbari political empowerment, and other initiatives that Maliki's Shiite allies dislike, and which Maliki fears will merely strengthen his sectarian enemies



militarily. A predominantly Sunni CLC movement adds to these fears. *Sadr* needs peace because war now risks his political status; *Maliki*, conversely, runs greater risks by compromising for peace than by standing fast and allowing the war to continue. Thus the Shiite government makes little progress toward peace even as Shiite militias stand down in ceasefires.

Worse, Maliki may have an incentive to overturn pledged ceasefires in order to seek political advantage against internal rivals. For most of his tenure, Maliki had been dependent on the Sadrist movement for his legislative majority. Recently, however, Maliki has realigned with Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's competing Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). ISCI has been competing with Sadrists for control of the Shiite south, and especially the oil production and export centers around Basra and Um Qasr. ISCI now controls much of the local government and police there, but Sadrist gains among the region's dispossessed Shiite poor threaten this control, and the upcoming provincial elections scheduled for this fall could realign power in the south to Sadr's benefit and Hakim's disadvantage. Maliki now enjoys an unusual freedom of maneuver for his ISF by virtue of the combination of Sunni ceasefires and US surge brigades. This offers him a potential window of opportunity to use the ISF to weaken Sadr in the south under the guise of suppressing illegal militias. By pressing an offensive against JAM elements in Basra now, Maliki has a chance to kill or arrest Sadrist gunmen who might otherwise be available to intimidate voters in the fall, arrest Sadrist officials, ransack Sadrist offices, and intimidate potential Sadrist voters. The ISF offensive in Basra that began on March 25 may well have sprung from such motives, though its apparent failure suggests that the government's ability to *achieve* such ends is very limited. Of course, events in Basra are ongoing and too little is yet known to establish with any confidence just what is happening or why; I discuss the possibilities in more detail in section IV below. But there is reason for concern that the Maliki government may now have less interest in ceasefire than its opponents do. If so, it is imperative that the United States act to prevent the government of Iraq from overturning ceasefires without being able to replace them with real security of its own (see section IV). And either way, the government has limited incentives to pursue costly, risky programs for national-level reconciliation via compromise.

This is not to deny any progress by the government. It has been distributing revenue to Sunni provinces even without a Hydrocarbon Law to require this. It recently passed a new de-Baathification law making it easier to hire Sunnis into some government jobs, and had been doing such hiring anyway even without a legal mandate. The result has been a modest degree of grudging movement toward compromise. Perhaps this will eventually produce an accommodation sufficient to resolve Iraq's communal differences politically.

But it is also entirely possible that the near to mid-term future could see a weak central government unable to monopolize violence, control its territory, or do much more than distribute oil revenue while the real dynamic of Iraqi security devolves to localities, where a patchwork quilt of local ceasefires in response to the shifting incentives of combatants in the field meanwhile produces an end to the fighting – for a time.

### **III. What is to be Done?**

This brings me to the second requirement needed for ceasefires to hold long enough to end communal civil wars. An outside party is typically needed to serve as a peacekeeper to enforce the deals.

This is because such deals are neither self-enforcing nor inherently stable. Even where peace is in the mutual self-interest of the majority on both sides, there will still be spoilers who will seek to overturn the ceasefire and renew the war. Rogue elements of Shiite militias, for example, profit from the fighting and will seek to restore the instability within which they flourish. And AQI has no interest whatever in stability. Though hurt badly and on the ropes in Iraq, AQI is not annihilated and even small numbers of committed terrorists can still bomb selected marketplaces or public gatherings.

Such spoilers hope to catalyze wider violence by spurring the victims to take matters into their own hands and retaliate against the historical rivals that many will blame for such attacks. In an environment of wary, tentative, edgy peace between well-armed and distrustful former combatants, even a few such attacks can lead to an escalatory spiral that quickly returns the country to mass violence and destroys any chance of stability.

Alternatively, the central parties to the ceasefire may try to expand their area of control at the expense of neighboring CLCs or militia districts. Ambitious Sunnis with dreams of Baathist restoration may use the lull to build strength, probe their rivals for weakness, then launch a new offensive if they discover a vulnerability. Shiite militia leaders unsatisfied with a limited role in a weak government could push the limits of their accepted status at the expense of Sunnis or rival Shiite warlords.

In this context, outside peacekeepers play a crucial role in damping escalatory spirals and enforcing ceasefire terms. As long as the underlying strategic calculus favors peace, then an outside military presence allows victims of spoiler attacks to wait rather than retaliating – they can afford to delay and see whether the Americans will take action against the perpetrators rather than jumping to immediate violence themselves. This enables their historical rivals, in turn, to stand back from preempting them the first time a bombing takes place. The peacekeepers' ability to enable victims to wait and see thus reduces the virulence of the escalatory dynamic in the aftermath of the inevitable bombings and terrorist strikes.

Similarly, if CLC leaders and militia commanders know that a US combat brigade is going to enter their district and arrest any leader whose followers violate the terms of the agreed ceasefire – and if the provision of biometric data and locating information for all CLC members means that the Americans know who the violators are and where to find them – then the underlying mutual interest in ceasefire is less likely to be tested. And if the victims of a rival's expansion know they can call on a US combat brigade to penalize their assailants they will be less prone to retaliate themselves and incur the cost of unnecessary fighting and casualties to their own followers.

This is not war fighting. It does require troops who can fight if they have to. And some fighting would be needed, especially early on, to punish spoilers and ceasefire violators and thereby to discourage further violence. But success in this mission means

that the parties quickly understand that continued wary tolerance suits their interests better than renewed warfare, making the foreigners' role one of maintaining a ceasefire rather than waging a war. Soldiers are needed – but the casualty toll of combat should not be.

Peacekeeping of this kind is, however, labor-intensive, long term, and would almost certainly have to be a US undertaking, especially in the early years of a ceasefire. We are the only plausible candidate for this role for now – no one else is lining up to don a blue helmet and serve in a UN mission in Iraq. We are not widely loved by Iraqis; among the few things all Iraqi subcommunities now share is a dislike for the American occupation. Yet we are the only party to today's conflict that no other party sees as a threat of genocide – we may not be loved, but we are tolerated across Iraq today in a way that is unique among the parties. Nor are Iraqi attitudes toward Americans fixed or permanent: Sunni views of the US role, for example, have changed dramatically in less than a year. Marine patrols in Falluja that would have been ambushed a year ago are now met with kids mugging for photos from Marines carrying lollipops along with their rifles. Of course, what goes up can come down; attitudes that change quickly for the better can change just as quickly for the worse, and one should not misinterpret friendly words in English for real attitudes expressed only to intimates in Arabic. But it is at least possible nevertheless that the United States could play this role, whereas it is very unlikely that any internal party within Iraq could. And it is just as unlikely that any international actor other than the United States will agree to do so any time soon.

Whoever does this is going to have to do so for a long time: perhaps 20 years – until a new generation, which has not been scarred by the experience of sectarian bloodletting, rises to leadership age in Iraq. A US role will clearly be important for at least part of this time, but it may not be necessary for the United States to do this alone the entire time. If 2-3 years of apparent stability makes it clear that the Iraq mission really has become peacekeeping rather than war fighting then it is entirely plausible that others might be willing to step in and lighten the American load, especially if they can do so under a UN or other multinational banner rather than a bilateral agreement with the United States or the government of Iraq. So we need not assume a 20-year US responsibility alone. But a long term presence by outsiders of some kind will be needed. And it would be imprudent to assume that we can turn this over to others immediately.

The number of troops required could be large. The social science of peacekeeping troop requirements is under-developed, but the common rules of thumb for troop adequacy in this role are similar to those used for counterinsurgency: around one capable combatant per 50 civilians. For a country the size of Iraq, that would mean an ideal force of around 500,000 peacekeepers – which is obviously impossible. But some such missions have been accomplished with much smaller forces. In Liberia, for example, 15,000 UN troops stabilized a ceasefire in a country of four million; in Sierra Leone, 20,000 UN troops sufficed in a country of 6 million. It would be a mistake to assume that such small forces can always succeed in a potentially very demanding mission; but it would also be a mistake to assume that because the United States cannot meet the rule-of-thumb troop count that the mission is hopeless.

Some now hope that lesser measures will suffice to stabilize Iraq's ceasefires. The US leadership in Baghdad, for example, hopes that it can create a financial incentive for

CLCs to behave by making them Iraqi government employees with the Maliki regime paying their salaries. The regime, however, is resisting this, and it is far from clear that Sunni CLC leaders would trust Maliki to pay them if the US withdrew most of its troops. Nor would this solve the problem anyway: spoiler violence is inevitable even if the CLCs behave themselves, and without US troops in sufficient force to respond effectively such attacks would be dangerously destabilizing.

Perhaps financial incentives alone will suffice all the same; certainly they would help. But to rely on them in the absence of a robust peacekeeping presence would be very risky. The strongest assumption is thus that more is better when it comes to the post-surge US troop posture: the larger and the longer-term the peacekeeping presence, the greater the odds of success; the smaller and the shorter-term the presence, the weaker the odds. And this in turn means that if the United States reduces its troop levels in Iraq too quickly or too deeply, the result could be to endanger the stability prospects that have been bought at such cost in lives and treasure. We cannot afford to keep enough troops in Iraq to provide the ideal peacekeeping force. But to leave Iraq without an outside power to enforce the terms of the deals we have reached is to make it very likely that those deals will collapse in the face of inevitable spoiler violence, ambition, and fear. The right troop count depends on the technical details of just what the United States can sustain in Iraq given the demands of equipment repair, recapitalization, troop rest, retention, and recruitment. But the right number is the largest number that we can sustain given these constraints.

#### **IV. Overreaching for a Centralized Iraqi State**

This is clearly not an ideal prognosis. Americans want to bring the troops home, not maintain a peacekeeping mission of unknown duration and considerable cost in Iraq. It is widely hoped that a more effective Iraqi government with an improved security force can take the reins and enable American troops to withdraw. As the President once put it, as they stand up, perhaps we can stand down. To do this, however, would require a real monopoly of force and the ability to assert control over sub-state militias. The US has in the past encouraged the Maliki government to do just this – to use the ISF to suppress and ultimately disarm Iraq’s various militias, and especially the Shiite Jaish al Mahdi.

For this reason, some Americans, including the President, applauded Maliki’s recent offensive against JAM elements in Basra and elsewhere. As I note above, this offensive is ongoing and its ramifications are as yet unclear. There are ways in which it could indeed enhance stability in Iraq. But it could also upset the system of ceasefires that largely produced the violence reductions of the last year. Even if well-intentioned, this offensive is a dangerous gamble. And it may not be well-intentioned. Either way, it illustrates the danger of over-reaching in pursuit of a strong, centralized Iraqi state that is unattainable for now.

The Administration and the Maliki government have described this offensive as aimed only at criminal, renegade elements of the JAM who have failed to observe Sadr’s announced ceasefire. If so, then this operation is nothing more than an extension of longstanding US and Iraqi government efforts to crack down on “rogue JAM” cells that had broken away from Sadr’s control. These efforts have killed or captured large numbers of rogue cell leaders over the last year, and contribute to stability by eliminating

factions unwilling to make peace, thereby rendering the JAM as a whole more amenable to a controlled ceasefire under Sadr's command. Sadr has tacitly accepted such strikes in the past, as this actually benefits him as much as it does the US or Maliki. And Sadr's muted reaction to Maliki's offensive suggests that he is, so far, interpreting it as aimed chiefly at rogue elements beyond his control: not only did Sadr not order the mainstream JAM to war, he recently ordered it explicitly to stand down from combat with the government or the Americans, effectively reinforcing his prior commitment to ceasefire. All of this is consistent with the notion of a limited offensive meant only to target rogue JAM in support of Sadr's ceasefire.

It is also possible, however, that the Basra offensive's motives may have been less pure or limited. As I noted above, the combination of upcoming provincial elections, Sunni ceasefires, and US surge brigades created a potential incentive for the Maliki government to press a temporary advantage in order to weaken the mainstream Sadrist movement in Basra to the benefit of Maliki's political allies in the competing ISCI bloc. If so, this would represent an empowered government unilaterally breaking a ceasefire with the JAM in order to exploit a window of opportunity for partisan internal political advantage.

If the ISF were actually strong enough to crush the whole JAM, such an offensive might offer an alternative route to stability in Iraq: a monopoly of force under the Maliki government. After all, the JAM has been Iraq's strongest internal military force – it was largely the JAM that defeated the alliance of Sunni insurgents and AQI in the Battle of Baghdad. If the ISF could defeat the JAM, and if Maliki's political interests now motivated him to fight them (which he had been unwilling to do heretofore), then perhaps the ISF would now be strong enough to beat Iraq's other internal armies, too, and to centralize power accordingly.

But the evidence in Basra suggests otherwise. By all accounts, the ISF has been unable to defeat the JAM. After nearly a week of fighting, press accounts were reporting that less than a third of Basra was in ISF control. Even with Coalition air and artillery support and reinforcement by US Special Forces teams on the ground, the ISF still proved unable to oust the JAM and secure the city. The ISF is apparently still not able to monopolize violence in Iraq – even with active Coalition support in the critical sector, and the passive support of 18 brigades of US ground forces elsewhere to free ISF troops for offensive action in Basra. Stability under a strong central state is thus not forthcoming any time soon in Iraq.

Worse, a failed *attempt* to monopolize violence under Maliki could now have grave consequences for the entire country. Hopes for stability in Iraq today rest chiefly on the system of local ceasefires in which former combatants have voluntarily stopped shooting in exchange for a pledge that they will not be shot. But if the Maliki government is now seen as ignoring these deals and attacking piecemeal those who now observe them, starting with the JAM in Basra, then all such commitments will evaporate. Any faction who waits quietly until the ISF finishes off the others one by one before getting around to them is either foolish or suicidal; a truce that only one side observes will soon be observed by no one. The result would be a rapid return to the violent days of 2006 and early 2007 – but with declining US troop levels, not increasing ones.

If we are to stabilize Iraq from the bottom up, via local ceasefires among willing factions, then we must be prepared to observe the terms ourselves *and* to compel the Iraqi government to do so, too. And that means accepting the continued existence and security of the local factions that agreed to stop fighting – unless they break the ceasefire terms themselves. To change the terms in the middle of the deal by trying to centralize power involuntarily over the objection of armed factions who cannot be destroyed at tolerable cost is to invite a return to mass violence as each strives to defend itself by attacking its neighbors once more. Bottom up stability and the pursuit of a powerful, centralized state by force of arms are thus incompatible.

We can and must strive to persuade Iraqi factions to join a unified Iraqi political process peacefully. In the long run this process may succeed. But if we try to short cut a glacial process of peaceful accommodation by disarming militias involuntarily in the meantime – or if we permit an Iraqi government to try this itself for whatever motives it may hold – the result could be a return to mass violence with neither bottom up nor top down reconciliation in the offing.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Iraq's system of local ceasefires may thus offer an opportunity to stabilize the country and avert the downside risks of failure for the region and for US interests. To realize this opportunity will not be cheap or easy. And it will not produce the kind of Iraq we had hoped for in 2003. A country stabilized via the means described above would hardly be a strong, internally unified, Jeffersonian democracy that could serve as a beacon of democracy in the region. Iraq would be a patchwork quilt of uneasy local ceasefires, with Sunni CLCs, Shiite CLCs, and Shiite militia governance adjoining one another in small, irregularly shaped districts; with most essential services provided locally by trusted co-religionists rather than by a weak central government whose functions could be limited to the distribution of oil revenue; and with a continuing need for outside peacekeepers to police the terms of the ceasefires, ensure against the resumption of mass violence, and deter interference from neighbors in a weak Iraqi state for many years to come.

Moreover there are many ways in which such a peace could fail even if the United States and the key Iraqi factions play the roles described above. Long term peacekeeping missions sometimes succeed, but peacekeepers can also become occupiers in the eyes of the population around them. If the US presence is not offset or replaced in time by other tolerable alternatives under a UN or other multinational banner, nationalist resistance to foreign occupation could beget a new insurgency and a war of a different kind. If spoiler violence or early challenges to the peacekeepers' authority are not met forcefully and effectively, then the volume of challenges could overwhelm the availability of enforcement and the effort could collapse into renewed warfare. If ongoing operations do not keep AQI from regrouping, or if today's growth of negotiated ceasefires does not ultimately spread through the remainder of Iraq, then the US mission could remain that of war fighting without any peace to keep. If Sadr eventually loses patience with the Maliki government's offensive in Basra, or if he loses control of enough of the JAM splinter groups now under assault, then today's entire system of local ceasefires could unravel.

There are no guarantees in Iraq. And given the costs and the risks of pursuing stability, a case can still be made for cutting our losses now and withdrawing all US forces as soon as it is logistically practical.

But none of the options are cost or risk-free in Iraq, including withdrawal. A US departure from an unstable Iraq risks an escalation in violence, the prospect of regional intervention, and a much wider war engulfing the heart of the Mideast's oil production – any responsible proposal for troop withdrawals in Iraq must contend with their risks, which are substantial. *All* US options in Iraq thus remain unattractive.<sup>2</sup> But we must choose one all the same.

And the case for cutting our losses in Iraq is weaker today than it was a year ago. The rapid spread of negotiated ceasefires and the associated decline in violence since then has improved the case for remaining in Iraq and paying the price needed to maximize our odds of stability. It will not be cheap, and it is hardly risk-free. But in exchange for these costs and risks we now have a better chance for stability – not a guarantee, but a better chance – than we have seen for a long time.

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<sup>2</sup> See Biddle, “Evaluating Options for Partial Withdrawals from Iraq,” for a more complete discussion of withdrawal alternatives.