



THE REALITIES OF “GETTING OUT OF IRAQ”

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The long-awaited “Petraeus report” is now in Washington’s rear-view mirror and it does not appear to have changed many minds in Washington about the merits of the U.S. approach in Iraq. While September 2007 did not prove to be the turning point that many argued it would or should be, a significant drawdown of U.S. forces seems inevitable in light of political and military realities. The implications of a drawdown in Iraq for the United States are significant and depend to a large degree on what kind of drawdown takes place, how fast it happens, and what military forces, if any, remain in Iraq after the drawdown is complete.

For both political and military reasons, a drawdown of some kind will probably begin no later than shortly after a new president takes office. Public support in the United States for the war is low, and the war is already a centerpiece in the presidential campaign. With more than 160,000 military personnel in Iraq, a decision in 2007 to extend Army deployments to 15 months, and many soldiers on their second or third tour, American ground forces are under tremendous strain. Many senior military officials are pushing to reduce the number of troops in Iraq, both to restore the force in terms of equipment and readiness and to ensure that the country has sufficient combat-ready military forces available to address other potential national security challenges.

While the United States will not emerge from any kind of drawdown in Iraq completely unscathed, the strategic implications of a phased withdrawal

Although the United States cannot withdraw from Iraq without any negative consequences, there are better and worse ways a drawdown could unfold. A rapid withdrawal, which could result from a number of different factors, is likely to have negative strategic implications for the United States. If the U.S. military has to leave Iraq quickly—whether ordered to do so by the Iraqi government, or because widespread and uncontrolled civil war breaks out, or because the next U.S. president is elected on a platform to “end the war in Iraq”—the nation’s strategic position will be significantly weakened.

A quick pullout would be complicated in many ways, but would have two particularly important negative consequences for the United States. First, al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups would waste no time in painting a rapid withdrawal as a repeat of Saigon in 1975 and would use it to strengthen their narrative of a United States that is prone to surrender as soon as the going gets tough. This would be a significant strategic communications victory for the Islamic fundamentalists, and its impact should not be underestimated. Second, if the United States draws down its military presence in Iraq quickly, whether at its choosing or under duress, it will be difficult to leave in place

a military presence sufficient to secure vital interests in the region.

The United States cannot let Iraq become a safe haven for Islamic extremists, nor can it afford the outbreak of a wider regional war in the Middle East. To prevent Iraq from becoming a “new Afghanistan” for al Qaeda and to minimize the potential for a regional war, the United States needs in the near term and in the mid-term to have military forces in and around Iraq to conduct counterterrorism operations, to maintain Iraq’s territorial sovereignty, and to assist Iraq where possible in creating a balance of power among its ethnic and sectarian groups. Not only would a rapid withdrawal impede the U.S. military’s ability to leave in place a military presence sufficient to protect U.S. interests in Iraq; a rapid withdrawal might prove destabilizing in and of itself—raising the likelihood of a wider regional conflict.

The United States will not emerge from any kind of drawdown in Iraq completely unscathed. Still, the strategic implications of a phased withdrawal that gradually shrinks and ultimately removes the U.S. military footprint from Iraq are more favorable. A planned, phased drawdown of U.S. forces would undercut the

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Islamic extremist narrative of a cowed United States by demonstrating that the United States is leaving Iraq of its own volition, on its own terms, and on its own timetable. Denying al Qaeda and others who share its philosophy the psychological “shot in the arm” a rapid withdrawal would generate is crucial to the broader U.S. effort to contain and defeat Islamic extremism.

A more gradual drawdown would also allow the military to continue working with the government of Iraq to strengthen its borders, combat terrorists, and further develop the Iraqi Security Forces so that they can assume greater responsibility for Iraq’s internal and external security. In so doing, the United States has a better chance to secure its fundamental interests of eliminating terrorist safe havens and preventing a wider regional war.

A gradual withdrawal also would bring U.S. military forces home in an orderly fashion and mark the beginning of a much-needed effort to restore American ground forces to relative health and combat readiness. While this renewal could also begin in the wake of a rapid withdrawal, U.S. national security interests will be better served if the “visual” for the withdrawal is one of an orderly departure rather than a replay of soldiers clinging to helicopter landing struts.

Finally, a phased drawdown would position the United States to begin rebuilding its reputation in the international community and repairing essential relationships with strategic friend and allies. The U.S. involvement in Iraq has damaged the nation’s standing around the world—the United States has lost credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of its friends and has grown more vulnerable in the eyes of its enemies. A gradual drawdown, particularly if coupled with renewed, broader, and more genuinely multilateral diplomatic efforts to address Iraq’s security and stability, would demonstrate that the United States is beginning to restore its strategic position.

The strategic implications of a drawdown in Iraq are significant for the United States and will depend to a great degree on the speed, scale, and circumstances surrounding our departure. Whether the United States can salvage its strategic position—in the Middle East and in the world more broadly—depends on whether the nation can find a way to walk, rather than crawl, out of Iraq. ■