



BACKGROUND

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Moving Forward from Iraq

John Neffinger and Jessica Tacka, Truman National Security Project

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It has been five long years since our mission in Iraq began, and we are in a frustrating, confusing place. Five years ago, we won a quick and decisive victory over Saddam Hussein's army. But in the wake of that success, we found new enemies and new threats. Today, the American people are not always sure who we're fighting, or exactly what we're fighting to achieve. All we know for certain is that the violence continues.

In moments of frustration, some have said the war in Iraq is "lost." This is not true. The notion that we have "lost" grows out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict. We look at Iraq today and we see a confusing, frustrating disaster. But in reality, there is not one "war in Iraq," but three: three separate conflicts, with distinct sets of combatants, each with a different agenda.

- ♦ The first was our war against Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship, and we won it decisively.
- ♦ The second is the Sunni-Shi'a civil war that we failed to prevent and have been struggling to end.
- ♦ The third is the War on Terror, which arrived in Iraq when opportunistic Al Qaeda operatives came to fight U.S. forces. This fight against Al Qaeda gets worse the longer we stay in Iraq.

It is time for us to withdraw the majority of our military forces from Iraq. This must be done carefully, responsibly, and in concert with new diplomatic pressure to stabilize Iraq. We must redeploy our military resources to

address our most important security priority: fighting Al Qaeda where they are based and where they are regrouping, in Afghanistan.

Those who argue that we must "stay the course" in Iraq to protect America have it exactly backwards: we must leave Iraq to protect America and win the war on terror. First, only by leaving Iraq can we address the real terrorist threat in Afghanistan. And thanks to the Sunni "Awakening," and General Petraeus' success in turning Sunni Iraqis against Al Qaeda, the Iraqis who had been most likely to harbor terrorists have turned decisively against them. So when we leave Iraq, our conflict with Al Qaeda will likely leave as well. That will leave Iraqis in a much better position to resolve their remaining civil conflict.

Whenever someone speaks about "the Iraq war," the first question must be: which war? The war against Saddam that we won years ago? The civil war between the Sunnis and Shi'a, that is not ours to win? Or the war against Al Qaeda, that we must win—and that we only make worse by staying in Iraq?

The Three Wars in Iraq

War #1: The War Against Saddam Hussein. When we entered Iraq five years ago, our mission was clear: we had a ruthless dictator to depose who had launched a regional war and invaded neighboring countries.

That war is over. We won. And the world is a better place for being rid of Saddam Hussein, a monster who persecuted and killed his own people by the thousands and started unprovoked wars that led to more than a million deaths. He was one of history's most brutal tyrants, and we ended his reign of terror. We won that war overwhelmingly, fighting exactly the war our current military was designed for: taking territory from an identified enemy force.



War #2: The Iraqi Civil War. Unfortunately, defeating Saddam was as far as the Bush administration chose to see. Because of this Administration's lack of foresight, their failure to send enough troops to stabilize the country, and their decision to fire the Iraqi army with no alternative to provide public security, a new war sprang up: a civil war between Sunnis and Shi'a, fighting for control of the new Iraq.

This civil war started as a direct result of the Bush Administration's incompetence and failure to plan ahead. Because of that, America took on a moral responsibility to do our best to stop the civil war. Five years, 4,000 American troops killed and \$3 trillion later, no one can say we did not put forth enough effort.

But we cannot finish this civil war, for the simple reason that it is not ours to finish. We are not even parties to this battle. No amount of American military might can force Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis to live peacefully with each other, or make wise political decisions to share power. And our presence actually harms reconciliation efforts, by letting Iraq's political leaders blame the occupation for their disputes. As our Iraq theater commander General David Petraeus has said, there is no military solution to this conflict. Stopping their civil war is not fundamentally a military task, it is a diplomatic task, and fundamentally it is a task Iraqis must do for themselves.

We should still do what we can to help Iraqis on a path to peace and reconciliation, because it is the right thing to do, and because we all have an interest in peace in the region. But in the end, it is up to Iraqis to decide how to live with each other.

War #3: The War on Terror. We cannot make a wise decision about how to address Iraq's civil war without first understanding the third war. This is a war that gets a lot of lip service from Washington, but not a lot of leadership. This is the war, the fight against Al Qaeda terrorists bent on killing Americans.

The war in Iraq is now, and has always been, a damaging distraction from the real fight against terrorists, a detour on the road to finally catching those behind 9/11. Our involvement in Iraq has hurt us badly in the fight against Al Qaeda.

Consider all the ways that Al Qaeda benefits from our continued presence in Iraq:

- ♦ Our occupation of Iraq is now Al Qaeda's most powerful recruiting tool, their chief evidence that America is bent on destroying Muslim lands and can only be stopped by suicidal terrorism.
- ♦ Al Qaeda has been using Iraq as a graduate school to teach its new recruits how to kill Americans, schooling them in U.S. military tactics and learning the latest methods of designing and deploying improvised explosive devices and suicide bombs.
- ♦ And, of course, every day our military is tied down dealing with the Iraqi civil war is a day we are not in the mountains of Afghanistan, fighting Al Qaeda where they live.

To keep us in Iraq, Al Qaeda has deliberately inflamed the Iraqi civil war by sending suicide bombers to target Iraqi civilians to prompt recriminations between Sunnis and Shi'a. Al Qaeda has been behind many bombings in Iraq, including the mosque bombing in Samarra that kicked off the ferocious escalation of the Sunni-Shi'a fighting in early 2006.

Al Qaeda came to Iraq to keep our military tied down and to kill American troops. But if we leave, there will be no more American troops in Iraq to attack. And because the recent "Sunni Awakening" means Sunni Iraqis have dramatically rejected Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda has little hope of ever operating openly in Iraq the way they can in Afghanistan. In short, when we leave Iraq, Al Qaeda has little reason, or ability, to stay.

To put it simply, by staying in Iraq, we are allowing Al Qaeda to play us for fools. Our presence in Iraq is helping Al Qaeda recruit more terrorists. It is training those terrorists specifically in how to attack American troops. And it is overstretching our military and keeping them from fighting where it counts, in Afghanistan. By staying in Iraq, we also invite Al Qaeda to continue to attack Iraqi civilians and fan the flames of the civil war.

When we leave Iraq, we can be certain that Al Qaeda will pretend to have won a great victory by repelling the invaders. But it will be a heavy blow for them. They will have lost their best recruiting tool. And instead of being on the offense in Iraq, they will find themselves once again on defense in Afghanistan.



From Here to Victory

A clear understanding of the war in Iraq makes our path forward similarly obvious. Whenever someone speaks about "the Iraq war," the first question must be: which war? The war against Saddam that we won years ago? The civil war between the Sunnis and Shi'a, that is not ours to win? Or the war against Al Qaeda, that we must win - and that we only make worse by staying in Iraq?

From this perspective, it is clear there is a huge mismatch between our security priorities and the way we are spending our resources. We are spending literally trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives in an effort to give Iraqis a chance to end their civil war—a chance their leaders have refused to take. Meanwhile, the whole effort actually makes us worse off in the fight against Al Qaeda, which should be our top priority. We are paying dearly for the privilege of being distracted from the real threat to U.S. security.

What About the Surge? Isn't It Working?

Over the past year, our military embarked on a new strategy under new commander General David Petraeus. Gen. Petraeus oversaw the "surge," a temporary escalation in troop deployments well beyond sustainable levels. This short-term push was intended to quell the violence long enough to allow Iraqi leaders to negotiate a political reconciliation to end the Sunni-Shi'a civil war.

The surge is now ending; the first of the additional brigades withdrew in December, and troop levels are scheduled to decline from a high of just over 160,000 to 140,000 later this year. The results are in:

Violence went down. Undoubtedly, last year brought a welcome change of pace from the bloodbath of 2006. The causes were three-fold: The added pressure brought to bear by our armed forces; the temporary cease-fire called by Moqtada al Sadr, head of the largest militia in Iraq; and the Sunni "Awakening" that began to reject Al Qaeda in their midst. This reduction in sectarian violence is a great success not only for U.S. forces, but for the war-weary Iraqi people.

No national political reconciliation. Unfortunately, simply reducing the violence was not enough to jumpstart political progress in Iraq. As General Petraeus reports, "No one feels there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation." To make lasting gains in security, Iraqi leaders must stop their intransigence and agree to divide power in the country in a way each ethnic group accept. That means a political solution, not a military one. Iraqi leaders have continually refused to step up the plate. In this sense, the surge failed to accomplish its primary objective.

Sunni Iraqis turned against Al Qaeda. Critically, Sunnis themselves have changed their view of Al Qaeda in a way that helps us to leave Iraq responsibly. With the help of General Petraeus, Sunni leaders in one of Iraq's most dangerous provinces banded together to stand up to Al Qaeda, and Sunni public opinion has also turned substantially against Al Qaeda. This "Sunni Awakening" is a great victory in our fight against Al Qaeda, because it greatly reduces fears that Al Qaeda could operate openly in Iraq with Sunni protection after U.S. forces leave. With the Sunni population and leadership turned decisively against Al Qaeda's nihilistic violence, we can now leave Iraq confident that it will not become a safe haven for Al Qaeda like the tribal areas along the Pakistani-Afghan border.



It is time to realign our military deployments with our security priorities. This means a lot less focus on Iraq, and significantly more focus on Afghanistan. Americans would understand if we had spent \$3 trillion of taxpayers' money and sacrificed 4,000 American lives going after the people who perpetrated 9/11. But we have been going after the wrong people, in the wrong place. We're not even in the right country. This must stop.

We should begin withdrawing troops from Iraq while simultaneously engaging all the key parties in negotiations to cooperate on stabilizing Iraq and smoothing its transition to a peaceful state with a functioning government. We have yet to see a real aggressive diplomatic push with most of the players, including the United Nations. As General Petraeus' efforts with Sunni leaders showed, diplomacy can yield real rewards.

While realigning our strategic priorities must happen immediately, troop withdrawals are obviously dangerous and should not be sudden—it will take time to realign our forces on the ground. Military planners estimate that if conditions on the ground do not change dramatically, we can withdraw the majority of our troops within two years. We should commit ourselves to that timetable unless circumstances dictate otherwise: while it would be unwise to stick to the plan if conditions change, it would be equally unwise to delay if we can responsibly withdraw. In leaving, we must protect our own troops, minimize Iraqi civilian deaths, and take care of those Iraqis who have risked everything to work with us. And we have to decide how many troops to leave in the area—possibly in Kuwait as well—to deal with contingencies and/or pursue what remains of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

What then will become of Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'a? More Iraqis think a U.S. withdrawal would reduce the chances of an all-out Sunni-Shi'a civil war than think a U.S. withdrawal would bring more violence. The majority of Iraqis also think that more of the violence in Iraq today is due to the U.S. and Al Qaeda, than to their own Sunni-Shiite conflict.¹ And when we leave, our conflict with Al Qaeda will no longer be the Iraqis' problem. There are no guarantees, but after five years of failure trying to force reconciliation under U.S. occupation, it is time to give the Iraqis the chance to forge their future together on their own.

This is the path to victory where it counts: in the long fight against radical, violent terrorists glorifying themselves as warriors. And the sooner we begin, the sooner we will win.

¹ BBC/ABC/NHK survey, 9/07.

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Published by:

Truman National Security Project

1 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 333

Washington, DC 20001

Telephone: 202-216-9723

Fax: 202-682-1818

info@trumanproject.org

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