

COMMENTARY

The “End” of the War in Iraq?

Anthony H. Cordesman

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It is all too clear that most Americans want the war in Iraq to be over. A Gallup poll in October found that 75% approved of President Obama’s withdrawal of U.S. troops, although Americans divide sharply by party: 96% Democrats, 77% independents, and 43% Republicans. There are good reasons for such feelings. In spite of U.S. military successes in reducing the level of internal violence in Iraq, the war has been a strategic failure when its costs are compared to its benefits.

Tactical Victory and Strategic Failure

The United States went to war for the wrong reasons: there was no threat from Iraqi missiles and weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq was not linked to Al Qaeda or other terrorist attacks on the United States or its allies. The United States did not prepare properly for what would happen after Saddam fell. It tied itself to exiles whose claims and ambitions were not in line with the hopes and needs of the Iraq people and were often linked to Iran. It destroyed Iraq’s military forces and ability to deter and contain Iran. It had no plan to restore Iraqi governance and alienated Iraq’s Sunnis. It had to improvise an aid and development plan after it had already let Iraq’s government effectively collapse, and it never was able to make those aid efforts more than marginally effective.

In the years following 2003, the U.S. military adapted and created an exceptionally effective counterinsurgency capability. This partially compensated for the fact that U.S. actions let Iraq slide into a half decade of civil war, and but the United States only created the shell of an ineffective democracy that has left Iraqi governance weak and may lead Iraq back to governance by strong man.

As the reports of the special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction (SIGIR) make all too clear, some \$61.8 billion in U.S. aid, and \$107.4 billion in Iraqi funds overseen by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and the Iraqi capital budget, have all failed to produce any clear measures of effectiveness. Iraq remains one of the poorest countries in the world in spite of its oil wealth—ranking 161st in per capita income according to CIA estimates. It is striking that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—which seems determined to compete for the title of the most ineffective part of the federal government—has never produced a meaningful report on the impact and effectiveness of U.S. aid after more than seven years of war. But then, it has never produced a meaningful report on aid to Afghanistan after more than a decade.

The U.S. military was able to recreate Iraqi security forces capable of supporting U.S. forces in winning major victories in 2007–2008. The Iraqi budget crisis that began in 2008, however, crippled both the qualitative development of Iraq’s forces and its ability to implement its own development plan. The political crisis that began in 2009 has gravely weakened the efforts of both Iraq’s Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. The Iraqi armed forces are getting steadily better in spite of these problems, but at a much slower rate than planned, and they are becoming more politicized with key elements effectively under the personal control of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

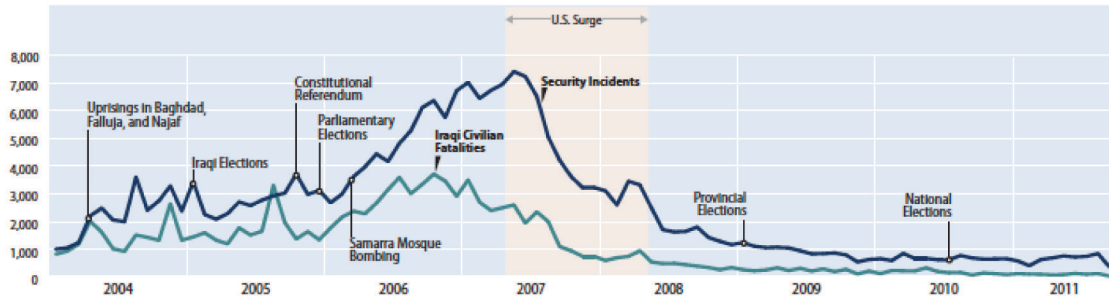
The police, however, are reverting to a local force wherein many trained police are leaving, and the local justice system and the quality and integrity of governance are uncertain. Iraq’s rule of law is subject to corruption and to sectarian, ethnic, and tribal influence. The United States’ and others’ efforts to improve the justice system have had a limited impact at best.

The U.S.-led tactical victories did little more than reduce the level of a conflict that earlier U.S. failures helped create. While they have reduced the level of “security incidents” in Iraq far below the peak in 2007, it is striking that other U.S.

data show that Iraq was still far more violent than Afghanistan through the end of 2010, the last period for which unclassified data are available.

U.S. Government Estimates of the Levels of Violence in Iraq: 2003–2011

MONTHLY SECURITY INCIDENTS AND CIVILIAN FATALITIES, 1/2004–9/2011



Note: Data not audited. Totals for September 2011 include data through September 23. "U.S. Surge" denotes period when at least 150,000 U.S. troops were in Iraq.

Sources: USF-I, responses to SIGIR data calls, 1/4/2011, 4/12/2011, 7/1/2011, and 10/5/2011; Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index*, 6/30/2010, pp. 3–4.

PEOPLE KILLED, INJURED, OR KIDNAPPED IN ACTS OF TERRORISM, 2006–2010

% of Worldwide Total

COUNTRY	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Worldwide	74,695	71,795	54,263	58,711	49,901
Iraq	38,817 (52.0%)	44,014 (61.3%)	19,077 (35.2%)	16,869 (28.7%)	15,109 (30.3%)
Afghanistan	3,534 (4.7%)	4,467 (6.2%)	5,479 (10.1%)	7,582 (12.9%)	9,016 (18.1%)

Source: DoS, "Country Report on Terrorism 2010," 8/18/2011.

Source: SIGIR, Quarterly Report, October 30, 2011, p. 58.

As for the cost of the war, the U.S. invasion did bring down a remarkably unpleasant dictatorship, but at cost of some eight years of turmoil and conflict, some 5,000 U.S. and allied lives, and 35,000 wounded, and over 100,000 Iraqi lives, hundreds of thousands more wounded, and millions displaced—often along ethnic and sectarian lines. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the dollar cost of the war to the United States alone will be over \$823 billion through FY2012, and SIGIR estimates that the United States and its allies will have spent a total of well over \$75 billion on aid, much of it with little lasting benefit to Iraq. The total economic cost to Iraq is probably higher, but there is no credible way of making a reliable estimate.

The Lack of an "End State" and Predictable Strategic Aftermath

The Obama administration cannot be blamed for most of the failures that led to the insurgency in Iraq and the problems Iraq now faces. It cannot be blamed for failing to negotiate an effective strategic framework agreement. It inherited a legacy of Iraqi anger, sectarian divisions, and Sadrist influence that was a product of U.S. decisions made before the Obama administration came to office. The same is true of the uncertain structure of Iraq's present government and politics, which are largely products of the rush to a constitution and elections without laying the proper groundwork.

The Obama administration also cannot be blamed for the fact that Iraq no longer has anything like the military forces necessary to deter and contain Iran. Iraq still had relatively strong forces in 2003—in spite of its losses in the Gulf War in 1991—but it only has token ground forces today and no meaningful air or air defense forces. Plans to build up Iraq's army to be able to handle external defense will take a decade, and its air defenses will take even longer.

The Obama administration can, however, be held accountable for the fact that the Iraq War has no meaningful end state, and no one can as yet predict its strategic aftermath. It is nice for President Obama and Prime Minister Maliki to join in thanking U.S. forces for their accomplishments and sacrifices. Thanks do not give these achievements strategic meaning.

Iraqi and Iranian Military Forces: February 2003 versus End-2010

Category	2003			2010		
	Iraq	Iran	Force Ratio	Iraq	Iran	Force Ratio
Active Manpower	424,000	513,000	8:10	191,957	523,000	2:5
Reserve Manpower	650,000	350,000	19:10	0	350,000	NA
Main Battle Tanks	2,200	1,565	7:5	149	1,613	1:10
OAFVs	1,300	815	8:5	505	725	7:10
APCs	2,400	590	4:1	1,479	650	23:10
Towed Artillery	1,900	2,085	9:10	0	2,010	NA
SP Artillery	150	310	1:2	0	310	NA
MRLs	200	889	1:5	0	876	NA
Combat Aircraft	316	283	11:10	0	312	NA
Attack Helicopters	100	85	6:5	0	50	NA
Major SAM Launchers	225	205	11:10	0	234	NA

Source: Adapted by Anthony H. Cordesman from IISS, *The Military Balance*, various editions; Jane's sentinel series.

The Obama administration can—and must—be held accountable for its success in achieving “clear” and measurable successes in recovering from the past failures to implement a strategic framework agreement. It must take action to encourage real representative government in Iraq that actually bridges sectarian and ethnic differences on stable basis. It must make efforts to ensure that Iraq does not become a Shi’ite state or see a new strong man emerge in Maliki or some other figure, and it should take action to make the United States a leading investor in Iraq’s oil sector and the rest of its economy.

The United States must succeed in limiting and countering Iranian influence in Iraq and in creating Iraqi forces that can defend the country. The United States must also restructure a mix of forward-deployed U.S. forces and ties to regional powers that can contain every aspect of Iran’s military forces and political ambitions.

Creating a strong U.S. embassy and consulates, a military Office of Security Cooperation, and a State Department–led Police Development Program can help Iraq make the improvements it needs in governance and security forces—but only if Iraq is both willing and has political leadership that will act effectively.

The announcements that will be made during the Maliki visit describe the programs the United States needs to support Iraq, but it will take a consistent, high-profile effort over a period of years by the administration (and support from Congress) if they are to have any chance of achieving a meaningful level of strategic success.

At present, “success” consists of committee meetings, a far smaller advisory presence than the United States desired and planned, and arms orders. The United States not only does not have forces or facilities in Iraq that Iraq has agreed can be used to help deter and defend against Iran, but it has not announced any public plans for restructuring its security presence in the Gulf. It has talked broadly about forces in Kuwait, but not its overall security posture—with or without a really meaningful strategic framework agreement with Iraq.

More broadly, the Obama administration has not provided any picture of the strategy it now intends to adopt in the Gulf region as a whole, or how it will deal with any aspect of the threat posed by Iran. It has not announced the U.S. force levels that must stay in the rest of region after U.S. forces leave Iraq, or how it intends to deal with its de-facto allies in the Southern Gulf and the rest of the Middle East.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq is not a “victory” in a war that has been a costly strategic failure. There is no end state in Iraq, even to the point where it can ensure its own internal stability. There is no map of how the United States intends to force a new strategic structure in the region. These are the real tests of the U.S. ability to transform the war into any form of future success, and none of these tests has yet been met.

The current state of Iraq security, government, and economics is summarized in a three-part CSIS publication entitled *Iraq and Strategic Partnership*, which is available on the CSIS website at <http://csis.org/publication/iraq-transition-us-transition-plans-and-aid>.

A detailed analysis of U.S. and Iranian competition in Iraq, and the role of other regional players in this competition, is available in a report entitled *The Outcome of Invasion: US and Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq*, which is also available on the CSIS website at <http://csis.org/publication/outcome-invasion-us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-iraq>.

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