Evaluating Options for Partial Withdrawals of US Forces from Iraq

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Public support for the President's surge policy in Iraq is at a very low ebb. Yet many Americans remain reluctant to withdraw from Iraq altogether. The result has been growing interest in a variety of compromise proposals that would reduce US troop levels but stop short of total withdrawal. Are these sound choices for US policy?

The answer is no. Moderation and centrism are normally the right instincts in American politics. But Iraq is a very unusual policy problem. For Iraq, centrist policies leave us with force postures that reduce our ability to control the environment militarily, but which nonetheless leave tens of thousands of US troops in the country to serve as targets. The result is likely to be the worst of both worlds: even less ability to stabilize Iraq than the surge offers, but with greater casualty exposure than a complete withdrawal would produce. Given this, the strongest case on the military merits lies at either of the two extremes in the current Iraq debate – a stronger analytical argument can be made for either surge or withdrawal than for the moderate proposals in between.

I assess these proposals in seven steps. First, I briefly evaluate the case for the surge. I then consider the case for withdrawal. The remainder of my statement assesses four of the more prominent proposals for centrist options between these two extremes – in particular, I consider arguments for removing US combat brigades and switching to a mission of training and supporting Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); for withdrawing from Iraqi cities and switching to border defense; for withdrawing from Iraqi cities and hunting al Qaeda from remote bases in the Iraqi desert; and for withdrawing from central and southern Iraq and defending Kurdish allies in the north. I conclude with brief summary observations and recommendations – among the most important of which is a call for Congressionally-mandated Defense Department contingency planning for a variety of possible withdrawal scenarios from Iraq.

The Case for the Surge

The surge represents a long shot gamble that is much likelier to fail than to succeed. But the odds of success, although small, are not zero. Given the consequences of failure in Iraq, even a long-shot chance at averting this is a defensible choice.

Iraq is already deep in civil warfare, and has been for at least two years.[1] This civil war is currently being waged at relatively low intensity, and could easily escalate, but it is already a civil war all the same. The policy challenge in Iraq is thus civil war termination, not prevention. Unfortunately, efforts to negotiate peaceful settlements to civil wars rarely succeed prior to the military defeat of the weaker side. James Fearon, for example, who has performed perhaps the most rigorous empirical analysis of this problem, finds that of 54 civil wars since 1945, only about one-fourth ended in a peaceful negotiated settlement.[2] And many of these efforts were not saddled with the legacy of prior misdiagnosis, policy error, and accumulated loss of public confidence that the United States now confronts in Iraq. Taken together, this legacy of error, combined with the inherent difficulty of the undertaking, suggest a poor prognosis for the American project in Iraq.

The odds in Iraq are thus long. But success is not inconceivable. The most common indicators of progress in Iraq are mixed – increases in US casualties, for example, have been accompanied by decreases in sectarian murders. Given the difficulty of the undertaking, great caution is warranted in projecting optimism from such ambiguity. But mixed indicators make it hard to exclude possibilities altogether and assert absolute confidence in any given outcome, including failure.

More important, there are some indications that an unanticipated Sunni tribal rebellion against al Qaeda in Iraq in Anbar Province may be spreading elsewhere in the country. If so, this gives some degree of hope that a strategy of bilateral ceasefire negotiations with individual combatant factions might eventually cumulate into something resembling stability in Iraq.[3] Of course, continued pursuit of stability via negotiation in Iraq is inherently a long shot at this point – certainly the odds are well below the 25 percent success rate for such attempts historically. But to jump from this historical observation to a claim that the chances are zero is very hard to sustain analytically. A more reasonable prognosis is a small – but non-zero – chance of success.

A long shot gamble is never an attractive option, but it can make sense if the costs of failure are high. And failure in Iraq could pose grave risks to American interests. If one defines failure as the total withdrawal of American forces from an unstable Iraq, then

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[1] The standard definitions of "civil war" in the scholarly literature normally require that such conflicts (a) pit combatant parties internal to a state, (b) involve at least 1000 total battle fatalities, and (c) involve at least 100 fatalities on each side (thus distinguishing civil war from unilateral massacres or genocide): see, e.g., James Fearon and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (2003), pp. 75-90. By such criteria Iraq is clearly and unquestionably a civil war today, and has been since long before the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006 that some now see as the beginning of sectarian warfare in Iraq.

[2] James Fearon, Testimony to US House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, on "Iraq: Democracy or Civil War," September 15, 2006, p. 3.

[3] For a somewhat more detailed discussion, see Stephen Biddle, "Hard Bargaining," *Boston Globe*, June 3, 2007, pp. C-1ff.

among the likely consequences of this are a major humanitarian disaster and a significant risk that the war could spread to engulf Iraq's neighbors.

The humanitarian consequences, for example, could be quite severe. US forces in Iraq are insufficient to end the violence, but they do cap its intensity. If we withdraw them, the violence will rise accordingly. Most victims of this violence are innocent civilians. The bitter ethnic and sectarian roots of this conflict give every reason to suspect that the scale of killing that could result from US withdrawal could dwarf today's death toll. Some have argued that the ongoing sectarian cleansing of Iraq's mixed neighborhoods will largely exhaust the killing once it is completed and Iraq is, effectively, partitioned. But this is unlikely to end the violence – it will merely redistribute it to the frontiers of the now-cleansed regions as the displaced populations fight to regain their patrimony. Iraq's Sunni heartland in particular is economically unviable; Sunnis driven into Anbar or Salah ad Din by Shiite cleansing of Baghdad or Diyala would not simply accept what they see as a future of Gaza-style impoverishment in the shadow of what they would view as Shiite and Kurdish domination of Iraqi oil wealth. They have already demonstrated their willingness to fight rather than accept this. That fighting is now limited by the American combat presence; were that presence to disappear, the fighting would become a truly zero-sum struggle for survival among groups that see one another as potentially genocidal threats or as would-be agents of oppression and poverty. The resulting death toll could be horrendous.

But the stakes go beyond the humanitarian. Each of Iraq's neighbors have vital interests in Iraq, and those interests create a serious risk that the war could spill over into a regional conflict spanning the entirety of the Middle East's primary energy producing states. This danger of spread increases with time. Civil wars such as Iraq's often take a decade or more to burn themselves out. With some luck, Iraq's war could do this without spreading (and astute US policy could increase the chance of this, albeit only at the margin). But it is also distinctly possible that an increasingly virulent combination of refugee flows into neighboring states; the internal destabilization created by ill-housed, ill-fed, dispossessed and politically radicalized refugee populations; fears of regional domination by Iranian-supported Shiism; cross-border terrorism by Iraqi factions (especially the Kurds); and growing military capacity for intervention fueled by an ongoing regional arms race could eventually produce irresistible pressures for Jordanian, Saudi, Turkish, or Iranian state entry into the war. And if one of these states intervened, the resulting change in the military balance within Iraq would increase the pressures on the others to send troops across the border as well. The result could be a regionwide version of the Iran-Iraq War some time in the next decade, but with some of the combatants (especially Iran) having probable access to weapons of mass destruction by that time. Of course nothing about Iraq is a certainty, and the probability of regionalization is not 1.0. The likeliest case may well be an internal war in Iraq that ends in a deal made possible by mutual war weariness after years of indecisive civil bloodshed. But it would be imprudent to ignore the possibility of a much worse outcome – and the odds of that worse outcome, in the form of a major regional war – grow over time as refugee outflows, terrorist action, and arms racing unfold. Should the worst case of a regional war emerge, the security and economic consequences for the US and our allies could be very grave: the spike one could expect in world oil prices should Mideast production be targeted in such a war could produce a major global economic contraction, imposing suffering on all, but especially on those living

on the margins already, whether in the United States or abroad. And it is entirely possible that if confronted with such a disaster, the United States could be forced to re-intervene militarily in a conflict that will have gotten much harder still to resolve in the interim.

None of these prospects are certainties. But during the Cold War we worried enough about a very small risk of nuclear aggression by the Soviet Union to spend untold billions to reduce that small risk to an even smaller one. By comparison, the danger that we could catalyze an eventual regional war in the Mideast by failure in Iraq seems much more realistic. There is now no way to avert this risk with certainty, but the surge does offer at least a long shot chance to stabilize the country and thereby head off this prospect. As such it is a defensible, if unattractive, choice.

The Case for Complete Withdrawal

While a long shot chance at averting a possible disaster is defensible, so is the opposite. If the odds of success are now long, we are thus likely to fail anyway even if we try our best to avert this. And the cost of trying is painful: hundreds or thousands of American lives will be lost in the attempt that might otherwise be saved if we cut our losses and withdrew sooner. The likeliest outcome of the surge is eventual failure; this failure would lead to total US withdrawal anyway, but would postpone it until after many additional US fatalities were suffered. An earlier complete withdrawal of US forces ensures the failure but saves the added deaths.

The other chief advantage of complete withdrawal is an earlier recovery for the US military from the damage done by the war. The Army has estimated that it may take 2-3 years to replace or repair the equipment damaged by four years of continuous warfare in Iraq, even with the dedication of some $17 billion a year to the task.[4] Every additional year of fighting not only postpones this rebuilding task, it lengthens it by adding to the backlog of unrepaired damage and deferred maintenance. Whatever the outcome in Iraq, we will need a capable military to respond to other potential threats elsewhere for decades to come. And if the surge does eventually fail we will confront the danger of a possible regional conflagration in the Mideast and its potential for US military involvement. These are serious policy challenges that continued high operating tempos in Iraq make it harder for us to meet. It may well be worth the cost in deferred rebuilding if an extended US effort succeeds and thus averts risks such as a regionalized war. But the likeliest case is that the surge will leave us with these risks and a significant delay in rebuilding the American military to meet them. Given this, an important advantage of complete withdrawal is to hasten the process of resetting our military to deal with the challenges of the post-Iraq security environment.

The Administration has sometimes posed complete withdrawal as the only alternative to a surge, but used withdrawal as a strawman to encourage support for their policy. I agree with them that complete withdrawal is the best alternative to the surge, but I disagree with them on its merits: it *is* defensible, it is not a strawman.

This is not because it is risk-free or low cost. The dangers sketched above in the event of failure are real, and complete withdrawal sacrifices the chance to avert them via US-induced stability in Iraq. Moreover, the withdrawal itself is likely to be long, difficult,

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[4] Ann Tyson, "Military is Ill-Prepared for Other Conflicts," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2007, pp. A-1ff.

and dangerous. Even if we decide tomorrow to pull all US forces out of Iraq, it will take months to years simply to remove the many thousands of vehicles, weapons, pieces of equipment, and shipping containers of materiel that the United States has deployed to Iraq over the past four years. As we do so, we can expect to be attacked by Iraqi factions of all persuasions, whose incentives to prove themselves by demonstrating opposition to the defeated Americans will grow once we announce our departure. A United States departure from an unstable Iraq will probably be a fighting withdrawal.

But unless we succeed in stabilizing Iraq, those same difficulties and dangers await whether the withdrawal comes sooner or later. To fight our way out sooner means to avert the deaths we would suffer in a longer stay prior to the withdrawal; to delay is to add to the casualties of withdrawal the losses suffered beforehand.

Some withdrawal advocates claim it can be done without grave risk, either because the consequences of failure in Iraq have been exaggerated, or because US occupation troops are themselves the problem, or because withdrawal itself will motivate Iraqis to settle their differences. As I argue above, I think the risks of failure are real. Neither do I accept the claim that the fighting is chiefly nationalist resistance to foreign occupation and hence that if US troops left this resistance would disappear. The fighting in Iraq has probably never been primarily nationalist, but it certainly has not been for years – it is now profoundly sectarian and ethnic.[5] Hence a removal of foreign occupiers would not satisfy the primary *casus belli* driving Iraq's bloodshed today. Nor would the removal of a US security crutch motivate Iraqi deal-making. Most of Iraq's factions have already concluded that the US is leaving and are busy positioning themselves to wage the all-out version of today's low-intensity civil war that they see coming when we go. Iraqis' inability to compromise is not because they see no need as long as the United States remains – it is because they fear one another so much that compromise looks too risky. This makes US withdrawal a recipe for harder fighting, not quick negotiation. To support complete withdrawal is thus to accept its costs and risks – but also to judge that these are so likely anyway that the best course is to cut our losses en route by saving the lives that would be lost by an extended presence, and to accelerate the reconstruction of the US military capability we will need in the future regardless of the outcome in Iraq.

Partial Withdrawal with Reorientation to Training and Supporting the ISF

One of the most-discussed alternatives to either surge or complete withdrawal is partial withdrawal with the remaining troops reoriented away from combat missions and toward training and supporting the ISF. This is substantially less likely to succeed than the surge, however, and is likely to expose the US forces that remain to significant casualties all the same.

There are two chief problems here. First, since it is the US combat presence that now caps the violence level in Iraq's civil war, reducing that combat presence can be expected to cause the violence to increase accordingly. To be effective, embedded trainers and advisors must live with and operate with the Iraqi soldiers they mentor – they are not lecturers sequestered in some safe classroom. The greater the violence, the riskier their jobs and the heavier their losses.

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[5] For a more detailed argument on this point, see Stephen Biddle, "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon," Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 2-14.

Second, that same violence reduces their ability to succeed as trainers. There are many barriers to an effective Iraqi security force. But the toughest is sectarian factionalism. Iraq is in the midst of an ongoing communal civil war in which all Iraqis are increasingly forced to take sides for their own survival. Iraq's security forces are necessarily drawn from the same populations that are being pulled apart into factions. No military can be hermetically sealed from its society – the more severe the sectarian violence, the deeper the divisions in Iraqi society become and the harder it gets for Americans to create the kind of disinterested nationalist security force that could stabilize Iraq. Under the best of conditions, it is unrealistic to expect a satisfactory Iraqi security force any time soon, and the more severe the violence, the worse the prospects.

The result is a vicious cycle. The more we shift out of combat missions and into training, the harder we make the trainers' job, and the more exposed they become. It is thus unrealistic to expect that we can pull back to some safe but productive mission of training but not fighting – this would be neither safe nor productive.

Partial Withdrawal with Reorientation to Border Security

Another proposal calls for withdrawing US forces from Iraq's cities, drawing down total US troop strength substantially, then deploying the remainder to Iraq's borders. These border defenses would perform some combination of two missions: preventing Iraq's neighbors from sending troops, weapons, or supplies into Iraq to reinforce sectarian factions; and discouraging Iraqi refugees from leaving the country and thus destabilizing neighboring states.

There are several problems with this option. First, Iraq's borders are not equally defensible. The western frontiers with Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Jordan are long but relatively easy to defend, as they are mostly open desert with a small number of isolated crossing points. The eastern frontier with Iran, however, is long and hard to defend, with much of it in difficult terrain and with a larger number of crossing points, many of which are more populated. With a limited US force stretched very thin to cover such an extended perimeter, it is very unlikely that the difficult eastern border could be defended adequately. The result would be a more porous eastern frontier, with a much greater throughput of weapons and assistance for Iranian efforts to aid their Shiite allies than for Saudi, Syrian, or Jordanian efforts to aid Sunni allies across the better-defended western frontier. Aside from the obvious disadvantage of enabling the Iranians to expand their influence at the expense of America's Sunni allies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, this would also encourage Iraqi Sunnis to see the US as aligned with their Shiite enemies. After all, the net effect of the US mission would be to create a differential in the rate of external assistance that would systematically strengthen the Shiites relative to the Sunnis over time. And this would tend to drag us back into the conflict, as Sunnis increasingly seek ways to target the American presence whose effects are so disproportionately aiding their enemies. Whether this yields direct attacks on western border defenses (which would be easy for US forces to defeat in such open desert), or indirect attacks on US supply lines between its desert bases and its distant logistical hubs in Kuwait or elsewhere, the result would be an increasing prospect of combat for the reduced US posture left in Iraq.

Second, it is far from clear that US forces could legally prevent Iraqi refugees who wished to leave from doing so. We could encourage them to remain, perhaps by offering

housing and relief aid in large, US-run refugee camps in the border area. But Iraqis who wished to leave would be difficult to detain without creating something that looked a great deal like the Soviet bloc's efforts to prevent Eastern European refugees from fleeing to the West during the Cold War. And if we did persuade large numbers to remain voluntarily in US-run desert refugee camps we would create for ourselves an enormous logistical and security challenge in itself. Historically, refugee camps frequently become bases and recruiting areas for guerillas and terrorists. The inevitable use of US-defended camps as havens for guerilla fighters in Iraq's civil war would draw the US back into the conflict unless we ran them like concentration camps (and possibly even if we did). Moreover the supply lines for isolated desert camps housing potentially thousands to millions of people would run through Iraqi cities in which the war would be raging and from which US troops had been withdrawn.[6] Interdiction of these supply lines could lead to great suffering among large, disaffected refugee populations.

Third, the domestic politics of this option could be very difficult. This plan would leave tens of thousands of heavily armed US troops standing by a few miles away in the desert while Iraq's cities burned down in sectarian violence and thousands of innocent civilians died horrible deaths. The result would make for a very uncomfortable comparison with the Dutch standing by while Serbs slaughtered Muslim civilians at Srebrenica; our ability to sustain such a posture in the midst of such imagery could be very problematic.

Partial Withdrawal with Reorientation to Counter-Terrorism in Iraq

Several proposals call for a withdrawal from Iraqi cities, a reduction in US troops, and a reorientation of the remaining forces to a priority mission of fighting al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in order to reduce the danger of Iraq becoming a terrorist haven. Many have expressed concern that US failure in Iraq could enable al Qaeda to use the country as a base for planning terrorism against Americans; if we cannot stabilize the country at large, then perhaps we can at least prevent its use as a terrorist haven by continuing operations against AQI even as we withdraw the troops now engaged in other missions.

Here, too, there are several problems. First, our ability to fight AQI would diminish significantly if we withdrew our combat forces from Iraqi cities. The real challenge in counter-terrorism is finding the targets. And the chief means of doing this in Iraq is by persistent close contact with Iraqi civilians who have come to trust that US forces will remain to protect them against reprisals from AQI survivors if those civilians tip us off to AQI's locations. This kind of intelligence requires an extensive, long-term US troop presence in and among Iraqi civilians in the cities where they live. If we withdraw from those cities to remote bases in the desert, we thus lose our primary source of targeting information, leaving very few opportunities for those troops to engage AQI.

Second, it is unclear how much of a terror risk AQI really poses, especially for targets in the United States. The relationship between Osama bin Laden's global organization and AQI, whose membership is largely Iraqi and whose focus is on Iraq itself, is complex. It is not clear that an American withdrawal that left behind an escalating civil

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[6] Perhaps Iraq's neighbors could be persuaded to permit US-run resupply efforts to connect through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or Turkey instead. But the risk of bringing the conflict into the neighboring countries in this way could also dissuade some or all from agreeing to this.

war in Iraq would cause AQI to shift its focus from that immediate war in Iraq to terrorism against a distant America. Some have also speculated that al Qaeda outside Iraq would actually find its global campaign against the West undermined in the event of an all-out Sunni-Shiite civil war in Iraq, as its natural recruitment base in the Sunni Mideast turned from anger at the West toward anger at the more proximate Shiite enemy.

Moreover, AQI's ability to operate in Iraq rests on the willingness of Sunni Arabs to protect them with their silence, to provide safe houses and other support, and to tolerate their presence in their midst. If AQI lost this support, they would find it no easier to operate in Iraq than in any other state where they are an illegal organization without widespread support of the population. Yet AQI's support among Sunni Arabs is under challenge with the recent defection of the Sunni tribes that make up the Anbar Salvation Council. If these defections continue, AQI could find itself hard pressed even to sustain its position within Iraq, much less to establish a extensive base infrastructure for mounting attacks against a nation thousands of miles away.

Perhaps the Sunni tribal rebellion will spread to the point where Iraqi Sunnis will become so disaffected with AQI that they will provide us with intelligence even without a sustained US presence in their neighborhoods. If so, then such a withdrawal to the desert might not be as destructive of US intelligence prospects as one might normally suppose. But if so, then it is unclear why any significant ground forces would be needed in Iraq. If we can find the targets then we have plenty of ability to strike them even without significant ground forces nearby – air bases in Kuwait, Qatar, or elsewhere in the region would provide ample firepower for destroying terrorists whose location we can identify. The problem is identifying their locations. A plan to withdraw from Iraqi cities in order to fight AQI from desert bases is thus either impractical (if Iraqi Sunnis prove unwilling to provide intelligence without a promise of protection from nearby American troops) or unnecessary (if they offer intelligence even without the protection). Either way, it is far from clear that retaining substantial but reduced ground forces in Iraq and basing them in the open desert offers a meaningful capability to fight terrorism.

Finally, any plan to withdraw US troops from Iraq's cities and house them instead in desert bases is exposed to the same political disadvantages sketched above: it would leave heavily armed US soldiers standing on the sidelines nearby and watching passively as thousands of defenseless civilians are slaughtered in the cities we just left. To sustain such a posture in the face of the inevitable images on Western televisions could prove harder than we think.

Partial Withdrawal with Redeployment to Kurdistan

A final proposal would withdraw most US combat forces in Iraq but retain enough to defend our Kurdish allies. Kurdistan has been the most peaceful part of Iraq, and is the closest to functioning as a stable democracy. Even if we could not stabilize the rest of the country, perhaps it would make sense to retain enough military power in Iraq to defend this island of relative calm from the turmoil around it.

Here, too, however, there are important problems. As with other options that call for retaining US forces in Iraq but withdrawing them from Iraqi cities, a redeployment to quiet Kurdistan would pose major political challenges as those cities erupt in violence behind us.

Other difficulties are unique to the Kurdistan option. Among the more pressing of these concern US-Turkish relations, which have been deteriorating since prior to the 2003 invasion. A US withdrawal from the rest of Iraq to defend only Kurdistan would take a troubled relationship with Turkey and make it far worse. The Turks are deeply concerned with the threat of Kurdish separatism in southern Turkey. For years, Turkey has also been the target of Kurdish PKK terrorist attacks launched from Iraqi Kurdistan. While *we* might see a US withdrawal to defend only Kurdistan as a deterrent to Kurdish independence and PKK terrorism, *Turkey* is much more likely to see this as US defense for an independent Kurdistan against Turkish invasion; as a means of preventing Turkey from taking action to protect itself against the PKK; and as a major rallying point for Kurdish separatism in southern Turkey. The Turks already suspect that the United States hopes to replace them with an independent Kurdistan as the central American ally in the region; a US policy of abandoning Iraqi Arabs to their fate while establishing a US protectorate for Iraqi Kurds in the north would go a long way toward confirming this fear.

Some may argue that Turkish attitudes should take second place to defending a loyal US ally in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet Turkey is a nation of 71 million, a NATO ally, and a critical political, economic, and cultural bridge to Islam for the West. The damage to such an important relationship to be done by withdrawing US forces into Kurdistan must be weighed very carefully before turning to this as a means of justifying a middle-ground troop posture for Iraq.

Perhaps most important, however, it is far from clear that such a redeployment could be sustained logistically without Turkish support. Kurdistan is more than 400 miles from the US logistical support base in Kuwait. If US combat forces withdraw from Iraq south of Kirkuk, supplies for forces in Kurdistan would have to be moved over literally hundreds of miles of undefended roads engulfed in bitter internecine civil warfare. This resupply effort would be extremely dangerous and very costly if it could be sustained at all. Without active Turkish support, the only alternative would be to supply the US garrison entirely from the air. But the cost of an open-ended commitment to support tens of thousands of combat troops for years through an airhead hundreds of miles from the nearest US logistical hub would be enormous – and especially so if that garrison came under attack from Iraqi factions reluctant to accept a US protectorate atop one of Iraq's most productive oil regions. Whether we value the US relationship with Turkey or not, the Turks could dramatically increase the cost of a US deployment in Kurdistan simply by refusing to permit us to resupply it across their border. Our ability to ignore their interests could thus have important limits.

Conclusions and Implications

None of these options are attractive or appealing. Four years of errors and missteps have left us in a position where our choices are now severely limited and none offer a high likelihood of success.

Yet some choices are nevertheless worse than others. In particular, the middle ground options of partial withdrawal are largely either self-defeating or unsustainable. If the remaining troops are reoriented to training, then the absence of US combat troops will undermine the training mission. If the remaining troops are reoriented to border defense, they will only be able to seal one side's border, creating a growing incentive for the other

side to attack them. If the remaining troops are reoriented to counter-terrorism, the absence of US population security in Iraqi cities would deny us the intelligence we need to find targets for them. If the remaining troops are withdrawn to Kurdistan, the resulting damage to US-Turkish relations could undermine US interests in the region while possibly leaving us unable to support the garrison logistically.

On the whole, partial withdrawals thus tend to reduce our ability to control the environment militarily or stabilize Iraq – yet while leaving tens of thousands of US troops in the country to act as targets. The result is likely to be several more years of fruitless bloodletting in the midst of a deteriorating Iraq; if 160,000 troops cannot stabilize the country, our ability to do so with perhaps half that number must surely be far less. Partial withdrawal might – or might not – reduce the *rate* of American deaths in Iraq; there would be fewer Americans at risk, but if those who remain try to accomplish something then they could find their vulnerability greater in an environment that grows increasingly violent around them. Either way, however, partial withdrawal would not end American casualties. But it would make it even less likely that the lives we do lose would be lost for any purpose, or in exchange for any improvement in the future of Iraq. And any option that extends the US presence in Iraq also delays the rebuilding of the US military to meet other contingencies elsewhere. If this delay buys us a greater chance for stability in Iraq, then delay is defensible given the dangers of instability; but delays that do not buy us commensurate increases in the odds of success merely postpone US military reconstruction needlessly.

This is not to suggest that the extreme alternatives of surge or total withdrawal can offer a promise of low cost or strong odds for success, either. But the surge at least offers the greatest chances possible that the lives we lose would be lost for a reason. And total withdrawal at least limits the loss of American life to the greatest degree possible if we judge that the odds of success are simply too long. As such they offer advantages that partial withdrawals cannot.

Under the circumstances, perhaps the most important recommendation that can be offered is to urge the Congress to require by law that the Defense Department develop properly detailed, rigorous, comprehensive contingency plans for the possibility of US troop withdrawals from Iraq – whether partial or total. The United States began the occupation of Iraq with inadequate planning; it should not end it the same way. For now, however, it is widely believed that detailed planning for "Plan B" alternatives to the surge would be tantamount to an admission of failure and that the Administration will not support such an effort for fear that it would leak and undermine political support for the war. Such a planning effort, however, is a requirement of prudent policy making. Our best efforts to the contrary notwithstanding, we must face the real prospect of failure in Iraq, and we owe it to the American people to be as carefully prepared as we can be to mitigate the consequences of that possibility should it occur. Such preparation is extremely complex, and cannot be done well on short notice with military staffs that do not ordinarily maintain the kind of deep expertise in regional politics, diplomacy, or economics required to project the likely near- and long-term implications of varying approaches to managing a US departure from Iraq. This process must begin as soon as possible, with the strongest possible planning staff. If the Administration is unable to do this without risking a self-fulfilling prophecy, then the Congress should consider making this decision for them.