

Iraq after the Surge

Statement by
Dr. Stephen Biddle
Senior Fellow for Defense Policy
Council on Foreign Relations

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The American “New Way Forward” policy in Iraq, popularly dubbed “the surge,” saw a major reduction in violence by late 2007. As the term “surge” implies, though, the troop increase was always understood to be temporary, and is now on the way down. What does this mean for Iraq? Is the violence reduction merely a temporary lull created by an unsustainable US troop presence? Will Iraq return to the violence of 2006 as the surge brigades come home? And what does this mean for post-surge US strategy and troop levels? Should we return to our pre-surge approach of training Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and facilitating a transition to Iraqi conduct of the war? Should we continue the US drawdown to troop levels below those of 2006 or pull out altogether?

The answers to these questions turn on our understanding of what the surge accomplished and how this came about. If nothing fundamental changed in 2007, then there is no reason to expect post-surge Iraq to look any different from pre-surge Iraq – and that was a disaster.

But in fact the situation today *has* changed in important ways. Due partly to the surge and largely to fortunate events beyond our control, the strategic landscape in Iraq is now much more favorable than it was in 2006. The new situation is still a long way from stable or secure. But today’s conditions offer a much stronger *possibility* for a stable Iraq than has been available in a long time – *if* the United States resists the temptation to draw down sooner or deeper than necessary.

I advance this case in three 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.

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.

The parties to these local ceasefire deals have been variously termed “Awakening Councils” or “Concerned Local Citizen” (CLC) groups. As of January 2008, membership in these CLC organizations had grown from a baseline of essentially zero in early 2007 to more than 77,000 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 less than a year 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, were 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 January 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 has. 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 training, equipment, and logistics remain very uneven. Its key shortcoming, however, remains its politics rather than its proficiency. Shiite-led ISF units can secure Shiite districts, but are often distrusted by Sunnis and then have great difficulty functioning effectively in their neighborhoods. A few units have established a reputation for even-handedness and can 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.

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 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, Congo, 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 both parties. If one or both sides 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.

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. To date this has resembled a form of toe-dipping: the Maliki government has been unwilling to pass laws requiring it to fund or empower Sunnis, but as the environment has gotten safer the regime has been willing to experiment tentatively with compromise as long as it retained the ability to back off again later if the results were unfavorable. The result has been a modest degree of grudging movement toward compromise. It could be that continued progress in local ceasefires could add a new incentive if it begins to look as though the Baghdad government is being left behind in a grass-roots process of bottom-up reconciliation conducted without it; perhaps the government would then move in order to avoid being rendered irrelevant.

But it is also entirely possible that the near to mid-term future could see a weak and sclerotic central government unable to do 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 now.

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. But it is at least possible 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 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; in Congo, 17,000 UN troops suffice for a country of 65 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.

Conclusions and Implications

We may thus have an opportunity in Iraq that has not been available since 2003 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 to spread liberty through the Mideast or stand in alliance with America as a counterweight to extremist or hegemonic threats in the region. The result would look much more like the Bosnia or Kosovo of today than like the Germany or Japan of the Cold War. 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 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.

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 the case for cutting our losses in Iraq is much weaker today than it was as recently as six months ago. The rapid spread of negotiated ceasefires and the associated decline in violence since then has substantially 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 will not be risk-free. But neither is withdrawal. A US departure from an unstable Iraq risks 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 remain unattractive. But the option of staying and trying to stabilize the country is now much less unattractive than it has been in a long time.