

The Berlin Journal Fall 2007



ADAM HELMS, UNTITLED PORTRAITS, 2007

A TOUGH SELL

Rethinking US strategy in Iraq

by Stephen Biddle

IF THERE IS ANY way for the US to resolve the conflict in Iraq it will only be through a negotiated political solution rather than a US military victory on the battlefield. On this much all parties agree. Notwithstanding frequent charges that the Bush administration sees only military solutions, it has in fact been trying to negotiate a settlement among Iraq's warring factions since at least 2005. The problem is not a fixation on warfare; it is a lack of the leverage needed to make negotiations work and broker a deal. Iraq's factions reject reconciliation and will continue to reject it until outside pressure forces them to compromise. Real progress therefore requires some new and more powerful lever.

Many critics of the war now hope that a threat of US withdrawal will provide this

lever. Senator Carl Levin, for example, has long argued that the US military presence serves as a crutch that enables Iraqis to avoid painful compromise and hard bargaining, and that only a timetable for removing this crutch can compel them to face facts and swallow a settlement.

The administration, by contrast, sees its troop surge as the means to reconciliation. In its view, chaos in Baghdad has pushed politics aside in favor of sectarian self-defense and the vengeance of militias. By deploying enough troops to bring security to the capital, the administration hopes to

tant tool for negotiators. Such a strategy may require militarily protecting or assisting factions that have fought the Iraqi government and killed Americans – if these factions agree to change sides or observe a ceasefire. It may require withholding military assistance or defense for communities whose leaders fail to bargain in good faith and using force to disarm the militias of factions that refuse to negotiate, while tolerating or even assisting others that do cooperate politically.

Even if we do this, the odds are still against us. Reasonable people could cer-

have any chance of success, it is essential that US combat operations be tied much more closely to Washington's political strategy and create the kind of incentives, now lacking, that can move Iraq's factions toward a negotiated ceasefire across all of Iraq.

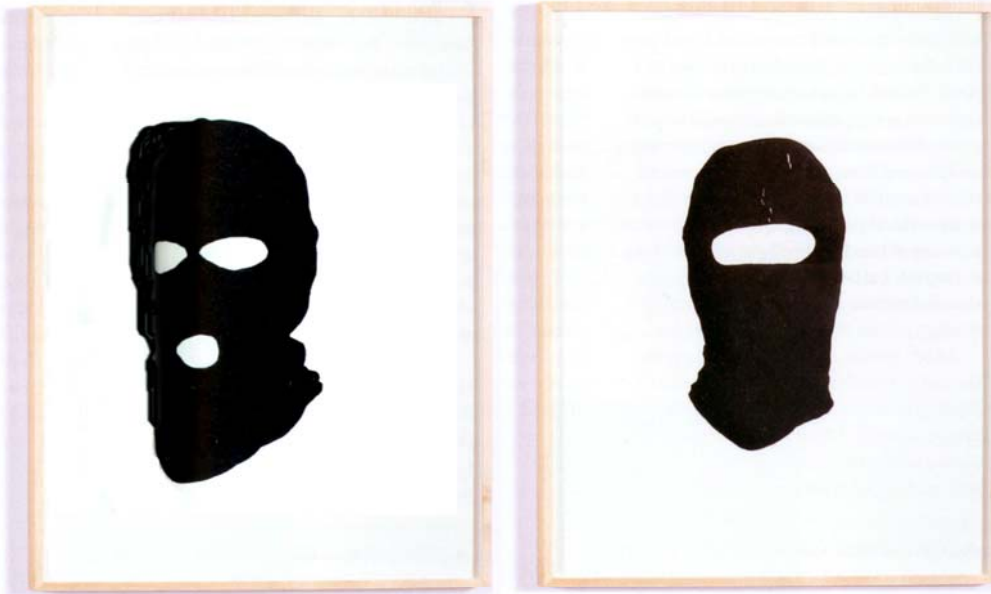
IT IS DIFFICULT TO see how any such deal can emerge from the strategies that have been most popular in Washington over the last year.

A timetable for withdrawal is too blunt an instrument. A withdrawal of US forces is a threat to some Iraqis but a promise to others. Muqtada al Sadr and some Sunni factions *want* the US to leave so they can try to seize control in its wake. A threat of withdrawal will hardly encourage them to accept an unpalatable compromise; on the contrary, it gives them every incentive to dig in their heels and destroy any compromise in order to hasten the departure of troops. Policies that encourage only one side to compromise while inviting the other to stonewall may actually reduce the odds of a deal.

Nor will creating breathing room in Baghdad be enough. If Iraqis wanted compromise and only violence in the capital stood in the way, then reducing the violence might enable an accord. But the problem is deeper than this. Real compromise is far too risky for Iraq's major factions to accept if left to their own devices. Each fears – with some reason – that its rivals intend mass violence against it if those rivals gain control of the coercive instruments of a modern state. This makes compromise very dangerous for Iraqis and is a recipe for stalemate.

If the US military could somehow defend all Iraqis from their rivals, then this dilemma would recede, and perhaps Iraqis could reach their own accommodation under a blanket of comprehensive US protection. But we will never deploy enough US soldiers to accomplish that. Even at full strength and used entirely for population security, the surge can at best secure Baghdad and Anbar province; but what about Diyala, Saladin, Najaf, Basra, and the rest of the country? Militants have already responded to increased US troop strength in Baghdad and Anbar by flowing outward into vulnerable communities elsewhere. We have seen this time and again.

We cannot solve the problem by making compromise risk free for Iraqis through comprehensive population security; ☞



create breathing room and a political space within which to strike a deal.

Neither view is sound. Instead, if there is any hope of a peaceful solution to Iraq's civil war, it will require a new strategy in which military force is tied much more actively to ongoing political negotiations. Rather than merely creating space for diplomats to talk, our military must provide the leverage they need to drive unwilling factions toward compromise.

The surge gives the United States 160,000 heavily armed troops in Iraq through perhaps the winter and spring of 2008. This is not enough to secure the whole country, but it is enough to provide some powerful incentives and threats. Used selectively to threaten factions that do not compromise and assist those that do, American military power can be an impor-

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tainly conclude that the chances of success in Iraq are now too low, and that the US should simply withdraw. But a long-shot gamble can make sense if the cost of failure is high enough, and the president has clearly decided to continue rolling the dice until he leaves office or until political realignment in Washington produces a veto-proof majority for withdrawal in Congress.

In the meantime, the US is committed to fight on in Iraq. If this long shot is to



we can only do it by persuading them to accept the risks by creating new costs for stubbornness and new benefits for cooperation – in short, by finding more powerful forms of bargaining leverage.

Some see this leverage in offers of economic aid, whether in the form of debt forgiveness or direct US or international aid. US reconstruction aid however is falling, not rising, and it is far from clear that other countries will fill the void. More important, though, are the incommensurate stakes for Iraqis. Factions that fear mass violence are unlikely to be persuaded to risk it in exchange for a few more hours of electricity or rebuilt clinics or restructured loans. Economic aid can help seal a deal, but it will never be enough by itself.

Perhaps this new leverage can come from Iraq's neighbors via a regional diplomatic strategy. Many now hope that Iran and Syria, in particular, may be persuaded to use their influence on Iraq's Shiite and Sunni factions to pressure them into an arrangement – or, at a minimum, that Iran might be induced to stop making things worse by arming Iraqi militias. There are ample grounds for skepticism, however. No one wants chaos in Iraq, but the preferred Iraqi endstate is very different for Syria, Iran, and the US. To persuade Syria and Iran to accept our preference rather than theirs – when Iraq is an immediate neighbor of theirs and a matter of vital national security interest to them – could prove expensive for us. Iran could demand US acquiescence to its nuclear ambitions. Syria will want the US to accept reestablishment of its influence in Lebanon.

And even if the US pays the price, it is far from clear that Iraq's neighbors have enough influence to compel a ceasefire. The stakes in Iraq are literally existential for Iraqis, and there are more than enough arms, fighters, and money inside the country today to fuel civil warfare for a long time, even if Iran and Syria were to withdraw their support altogether.

Given the stakes for the US if it fails in Iraq, diplomacy with Iran and Syria may

still be worth trying, even if the cost is high and the benefit unclear. But such diplomacy will probably not suffice.

ARGUABLY THE MOST POWERFUL potential source of leverage is military force. Selective use of US military power to reward compromise and punish intransigence should in principle be a powerful tool in an ongoing war. To exercise such leverage, however, would require a very different military strategy from what we followed from 2003 to 2006. It would require a military campaign designed not as a means of pacifying Iraq directly – or as a means of handing the fight off to an Iraqi surrogate. Rather, the military campaign should be a tool of a political negotiating strategy aimed at producing a ceasefire.

Anbar province shows both the promise and the challenges of this approach. A group of Sunni tribal sheiks there agreed to turn against al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQIM), whose brutality and interference with traditional tribal smuggling routes

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has alienated the tribes. To facilitate this turnabout and in return for a ceasefire agreement between the tribes, the US, and the government of Iraq, the US has assisted the sheiks in converting tribal militias that had once fought Americans into better organized, better equipped, officially sanctioned police forces for use in protecting the tribes against AQIM.

This realignment and its associated ceasefire is a potential model for negotiated truces elsewhere. Only by concluding a series of such local bilateral agreements

with particular factions can the violence in Iraq as a whole be brought under control.

The deal in Anbar, however, poses real risks both for the tribes and the government. AQIM has turned on the sheiks in full force. Indeed the bloody assassination this september of Sheikh Abdul-Sattar Abu Risha after his high-profile meeting with President Bush makes this all too clear. Sunni tribesmen worry that by siding with Maliki's government they risk oppression under what they see as a Shiite regime. And the government worries that it could be arming the enemy in the midst of a Sunni-Shiite civil war.

To convert this opportunity into a sustainable ceasefire will require tangible rewards for continued cooperation as well as a credible threat that backsliding will yield a worse fate. Economic aid can help, but given the survival stakes at risk here, only military tools are likely to offer enough leverage to make a real difference. The US must be prepared to follow through with selective training, equipment, and arms for Sunni tribal police who have agreed to cooperate. The US must also be willing to protect cooperative tribes with US troops if requested by Sunnis worried about Shiite violence. They must also be willing to threaten offensive action if necessary to disarm any tribal forces that break their ceasefire agreement or take action against the government.

The particulars will vary with Iraq's varied communal geography, but the military logic here holds everywhere. To groups considering a ceasefire, we must be willing to offer military aid or protection by US troops against their rivals – and this promise of assistance must be coupled with a threat of attack or the withdrawal of protection if they do not come around.

Some kind of selectivity is unavoidable in Iraq. We have always made decisions about whom to protect and whom to punish, if only because we cannot protect everyone or punish all malign actors at once. But if we are to succeed in Iraq, these decisions cannot be based chiefly on who most needs



the protection or which communities are easiest to defend. Our use of force must instead be guided by our search for leverage; we must send troops where their presence is most likely to persuade factions to accept ceasefires.

Of course the strategy I am describing is a very tall order and likelier to fail than to succeed. The application of military force is notoriously inexact, and large, far-flung military organizations are hard to control with the precision needed to distinguish between factions and subfactions. Unless implemented with deft diplomacy, such a plan could easily yield uniform enmity from Iraqis on all sides. Military aid or protection for Sunni factions could be diverted later into use in civil warfare against a Shiite gov-

ernment if a system of ceasefires policed by American troops does not avert this first.

Such a strategy could also be a tough sell politically – it replaces a clear, simple narrative of evil insurgents against a democratically elected government with a complicated story of intersectarian intrigue, shifting loyalties, and coercive leverage. The military itself prefers a clear role of defending the innocent and destroying the evil to a complex mission of manipulating rewards and punishments for bargaining leverage. And the expertise needed to understand Iraqi political dynamics clearly enough to move all parties simultaneously toward compromise may prove beyond us.

And yet we have reached a point at which all policies for Iraq are likelier to

fail than to succeed. To peacefully terminate an ongoing communal conflict such as Iraq's is inherently a long-shot gamble. There *are* examples of success; the ceasefires in Kosovo and Bosnia were obtained by interventions not unlike what I describe. These ceasefires are never easy, however, and Iraq is an especially hard case. Unless the US makes the most of every possible source of leverage, its chances of success could quickly go from slim to none. ☞

Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow for defense policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, was a C.V. Starr Distinguished Visitor at the Academy last May. An earlier version of this text was published in the *Boston Globe* in June.