

Not yet time to finalise Iraq strategy

By Anthony Cordesman

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Iraq is a case where it is all too easy to snatch defeat from the jaws of uncertainty. The debate in the US, Britain and other countries in the US-led coalition is becoming steadily more bitter, more polarised and more distant from the evolving facts on the ground. But George W. Bush was right when he said this week that the challenge is to find a success strategy rather than an exit strategy in Iraq.

There are two good reasons to avoid choosing either an exit or a “stay-the-course” strategy at this time. The first is political. The constitutional referendum now forces Iraqis to address the issues that will determine whether or not Iraq can hold together and develop a workable political process. All the key political issues are now on the table: federalism; the nature of the rule of law; the role of religion in the state; control of oil and national revenues; the power to tax; the relative strength of national and local government; the creation of national forces versus the role of militias; and human rights.

The December 15 election in Iraq will trigger a process in which a new government will either succeed in including a large number of representatives from the minority Sunni population or it will not. It may take several months to actually form a government and the final allocation of power in top offices will be far more important than the actual voting results. The new government will then have roughly four months to come to grips with most issues in the constitution or find compromises that can defer them.

If this political process fails, there may be civil war or the country may be divided. If so, coalition forces have little reason to stay. Yet, Iraqis should not be underestimated or judged by the small number of extremists that cause the worst violence. There is a good chance Iraqis will work things out. In any case, the political unity and inclusiveness necessary to defeat the insurgency will or will not exist by mid-2006. By then, coalition forces will know whether they have political reasons to stay until Iraq can function on its own, or to abandon a cause that outside powers cannot fix.

The second reason is that the same timing applies to the military situation. The effort to create meaningful Iraqi force capabilities did not even begin until the summer of 2004, and only received the facilities and necessary flow of equipment months later. It was not until this spring that Iraqi combat units gained the embedded training teams and coalition partner units they need to develop the leaders and experienced troops that could help them become independent. Even today, the effort to develop the regular police force lags behind efforts to develop an army and

special police units.

But the fact that Iraqi units are still of mixed quality and lack the support and logistic units they need to be fully independent may be deeply misleading. Far too much reporting on Iraqi forces is badly dated, impressionistic, or focused on the wrong metrics. The bottom line is that Iraqi forces now have 116 battalions versus three in autumn 2004, and this total grew by 22 battalions between July and November. There are 88 battalions in the army and special forces and 28 special police battalions. It will be four to eight months before enough new support units come on line to allow most Iraqi combat units to reach top readiness and have the ability to operate on their own. However, 36 army battalions and two special police battalions already are capable of taking the lead in counterinsurgency warfare; and 52 more army battalions and 26 special police battalions can play some role in fighting side by side with coalition forces.

The success and cohesion of the Iraqi force development effort is no more certain than Iraqi political success. Both must make significant progress by next summer if the coalition is to have a reason to stay, and to know it can sharply reduce its military presence. Even then, Iraq will still need years of political, economic and military aid and advice.

But why polarise the debate months before the basic indicators of success or failure are present? Fatigue, casualties, partisanship and uncertainty are excuses, not reasons. We cannot ignore the fact that Iraq has 27m people who desperately need help. The coalition should stay if there is a good chance that six months more patience can make things work. We should not stay if our best efforts cannot help Iraqis help themselves.

Having the wrong debate over the wrong issues at the wrong time also threatens more than the Iraqis. It could lead to a power vacuum in Iraq that would drag Iran in on the majority Shia side, the Arab Sunni states in on the Sunni side and isolate the Kurds. It could divide part of Islam and create a broad crisis in the Persian gulf region – which has more than 60 per cent of the world's proven conventional oil reserves and nearly 40 per cent of its gas. Pulling out of Iraq does not solve our problems, it simply broadens them. It forces us to find new solutions to Gulf security amid the struggle with Islamist extremism and terrorism. We must try to make things work in the months ahead, and decide when we see the outcome.

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