

Think Local

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

It is interesting to be asked about what victory in Iraq might mean. It suggests, of course, that victory in Iraq might now be in our grasp or within reach. Apart from requiring a definition of victory, something that is not self-evident, this assumes that the path to success in Iraq is now clear and being pursued. On both counts, I am not yet convinced. I wish I were.

In the first instance, I am quite serious in saying that the meaning of victory is not so apparent. President Bush has declared that victory, among other things, would mean that Iraq will be our partner in the war on terror. That is simply not in the cards. While I fully accept that most Shi'a-led governments in Iraq will not be Iranian pawns or puppets, they will not be Iranian enemies, either. They will not challenge Iranian-backed terror in the region. It will be hard enough for them to ensure that Iran does not cause problems in Iraq. As a result, the Iraqi government will not behave in a way that gives the Iranian leadership a reason to show it the cost of opposing Iran.

Of course, there are more serious definitions of victory. Reuel Marc Gerecht, a thoughtful and well-informed observer of Iraq, believes that with a Shi'a-dominated, democratically elected government, stability and victory in Iraq will eventually be realized. For Gerecht, the Shi'a majority will govern on the basis of a "one man, one vote" principle and reflect the overall religious status quo led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Gerecht argues that long-term success in Iraq will be the result of "the collapse of Sunni hubris, not the triumph of Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation." And he believes that the effectiveness of the Petraeus counterinsurgency strategy is already beginning to produce this very dynamic.

Here is a definition of success in Iraq that basically says that the Shi'a have to win and the Sunnis have to accept their defeat. To be sure, it is a view that sees in the Sistani-led Shi'a religious establishment a moderate instinct and temperament, and that counts on U.S. forces being in Iraq for some time to come to help cement the Sistani-led Shi'a consensus embodied in the current government -- or that is at least accepted by the current government and its likely Shi'a successors. In this view, U.S. forces (and counterinsurgency strategy) remain critical for the foreseeable future to convince the Sunnis to accept the new realities of Iraq and for Moqtada al-Sadr not to challenge them.

If I were convinced that this could be the outcome, I too would define this as success. Sistani does support democracy in Iraq, which he sees as guaranteeing Shi'a empowerment and political dominance in keeping with their

natural numerical majority. Moreover, he also embodies what in time could become institutionalized in Iraq and ought to be our real objective: a roughly representative government that accepts diversity and provincial autonomy, is decent toward its people, and is not a threat to its neighbors.

So what's the problem? The problem is that such an outcome is not likely or even possible anytime soon. I am skeptical that the Sunnis have grasped the new reality, that their defeat in Baghdad is irreversible and leaves them with few choices. On the contrary, I worry that the more than 70,000 Sunnis in the Awakening Councils will remain committed to stabilizing the situation (and not fighting their Shi'a neighbors) only so long as we pay them and remain there to separate them from their neighbors. This is why I fully understand the Shi'a hesitancy to embrace the Sunnis in the Awakening Councils. But I am also convinced that the Shi'a will have to find a way to reach out to the Sunnis in some fashion. Otherwise, what happens to those Sunnis working with us, armed and helping to stabilize Anbar province, or trying to do the same now in Diyala province, if they are not integrated into the police or security forces and are not paid by the government? Will they simply accept that the Shi'a are stronger and more numerous, lay down their arms and accept whatever may be grudgingly offered them? I doubt it.

Given the deep suspicions the Shi'a have of the Sunnis, it is hard to believe that plans calling for the Awakening Councils to be absorbed into police or security forces will materialize. But there is certainly no reason for us not to press the Maliki-led government to pay all those Sunnis in the Awakening Councils. If they don't -- and at this point, they are continuing to find all sorts of reasons to avoid doing so -- the only alternative the Bush Administration has to offer is for us to remain in our current posture in Iraq for a long time to come.

But is that really an option? Leaving aside the politics here, which cannot be so easily discounted, General Petraeus knows that there has to be some meaningful drawdown of forces this year. Even if he and President Bush seek to minimize the pace and the scope of any withdrawal, the fact is that any significant withdrawals can threaten the achievements of the surge. It has produced increased security and lowered the level of violence, but withdrawals without some prior understandings between Sunnis and Shi'a at local levels may leave us back where we started in December 2006.

While I would like to see progress on reconciliation at the national level, I do not have high expectations that it can be achieved in the near term. (The newly adopted law on former Ba'ath officials actually seems to raise more questions than it answers.) Instead, I would focus for now much more on trying to fashion understandings in those areas from which we are contemplating withdrawal -- at least in those areas where there has been local empowerment and arming of Sunnis. Paying salaries to the Sunnis is one thing; making sure that money goes from the central government to meet local governmental needs is another. But we must also try to forge political bridges and understandings at the local level before we withdraw, lest our departure trigger local conflict between sectarian groups that are no longer separated by American forces.

This cannot be done on an ad hoc basis, and it won't simply happen by itself. It requires a more systematic effort to work at the local level, where the potential for friction and conflict after a U.S. withdrawal is the greatest. It requires us to exert leverage and to realize that our withdrawal can also be a lever, provided we don't lock ourselves into a rigid approach to it. For example, why not make clear at both the local and national levels that different groups can influence how we withdraw? With those who are prepared to cooperate with each other at the local and provincial levels, we will withdraw when, where and how they prefer, meaning that they will also benefit in terms of material support both economically and militarily. With those who are not prepared to forge understandings with each other and act on them, they must see that they will pay a price. They must see that others benefit materially while they do not, and that we will not withdraw in a manner they prefer.

In other words, even if withdrawal is a given, it can still be employed as part of a political strategy to forge political bridges at the local levels. General Petraeus always understood that the military surge could be employed as a means

to benefit some and punish others. If we want the surge to have a lasting political effect (and not simply serve as a temporary security respite), our approach to withdrawal must be governed by the same logic. This is not to say that we should give up efforts to forge understandings between national sectarian leaders. But even that might become more likely if we use withdrawal as a lever to affect political bridge-building at the local and provincial levels.

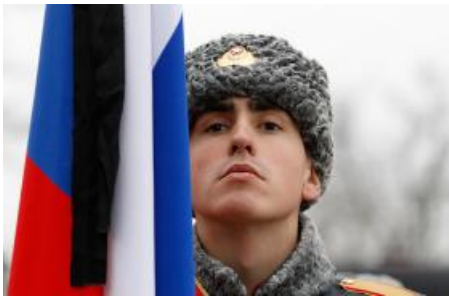
Leverage has always been the defining characteristic of statecraft done well. After all, it is the key to changing the behavior of those whose behavior must change. It is time we employed it strategically, not just tactically, in Iraq.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author, most recently, of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World \(2007\)](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>. ❖

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