

How to Contain Iraq

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When one visits the Middle East today, Arab leaders and commentators are quick to criticize the Bush administration and its actions, particularly in Iraq, and look ahead to 2009. But they also express concern about what the next president will do. Few will be sorry to see President Bush's term end, but many -- the Saudis, Jordanians, Lebanese, and those in the smaller Gulf states -- are fearful that America's next president will be inclined to disengage from the area. In part, this stems from their fear of Iran and their desire for the United States to provide a counterweight to it. But it also stems from a deep and abiding concern that, following a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, those who went to Iraq to fight the Americans will return home to threaten different Arab regimes.

These concerns are not mere abstractions. Already some of those who went to Iraq to fight us may be slipping out with the refugees who have gone to Jordan and Syria. The fighting between the Lebanese government forces and Fatah Al Islam in Tripoli may be symptomatic of what could be coming: Fatah Al Islam is not only a jihadi group, with at least loose ties to Al Qaeda, but some of its members have been to Iraq and learned their craft there.

And that is the trouble. Think back to Afghanistan: No one knew who Osama Bin Laden was before he went there to fight the Soviets. We are likely now to find a whole new class of jihadists -- battle tested, newly skilled in urban warfare and bomb-making, and convinced of the necessity for struggle -- returning from Iraq. We may not have needed to fight in Iraq because of the war on terrorism, but we had better begin to prepare for what we and others may have to contend with in the aftermath of our involvement there -- even if that is some years away.

So what needs to be done? In theory, the surge was designed to create a secure environment in which Iraq's sectarian leaders could feel safe enough to bridge their divide and forge a national compact. Hard political compromises would be hatched, and a different, more hopeful future for Iraq would emerge. But the Shia-led government (and militias) are not operating according to the theory. Instead they behave as if they fear losing power at any moment and are therefore disinclined to compromise with the Sunnis on key issues such as sharing revenue, integrating Baath Party members into the government, and revising the constitution. And the Sunnis are still emotionally hard-pressed to accept being led by the Shia. Perhaps compromise will come eventually, but probably not before complete exhaustion sets in. And, despite the current terrible conditions in Iraq, the point of exhaustion is, I'm afraid, still far away.

Given that reality, our central objective must be to contain the conflict. We do not want it spreading outside Iraq, and we do not want jihadists being able to move into and out of the country. But no containment strategy can depend solely on the U.S. military; on our own, we would never have enough forces to seal the Iraqi borders. We need Iraq's neighbors to have a stake in this. While neither the Iranians nor the Syrians will pull our chestnuts out of the fire in Iraq, they will intervene to protect their own.

How can we create such an incentive? As I have often said, statecraft is about leverage. Much like in negotiations, one does not want to say that you need the other side more than it needs you. When we seemingly plead with the Iranians and Syrians to help establish stability in Iraq, we actually increase their incentives to create trouble. It is that trouble that leads us to seek their help.

But Syria and Iran would have a stake in Iraq's stability if they see that the alternative in Iraq is a convulsion that fragments the country, produces several million more refugees, and triggers all of Iraq's neighbors to feel compelled to intervene. Do the Iranians really want Saudi Arabia and Jordan intervening to shore up the Sunni tribes? Can the Iranians be so sure that the Shia won't fragment, given the rivalries between the Badr organization and the Mahdi army? Do the Saudis want to be in a position where they must save the Sunnis?

And so a statecraft approach to containment would emphasize that we will not remain in Iraq forever; we will not keep the lid on forever; and Iraq's neighbors will have to live with the consequences of the United States getting out. Redeploying our forces, reorienting ourselves to a training mission, and reducing our combat presence will probably begin gradually next year, even before the end of the Bush administration. We can either shape an approach to our disengagement that works for everyone's interests -- or only our own desire to leave.

While Iraq's neighbors can't agree on what they want for Iraq they can agree on what they most fear. Containment probably requires forging an agreement in the first instance between the Iranians and Saudis to prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state, and then having the other neighbors join in. Here is a starting point for limiting the conflict to Iraq and for agreeing on mechanisms for controlling Iraq's borders. Rather than focusing on our own bilateral talks under the umbrella of the regional conference, a smart containment strategy would have us working quietly to promote the critical understandings between all the neighbors -- Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait.

The best may no longer be possible in Iraq, but we do need to think about preventing the worst. And, as we look ahead, that involves not only preventing the conflict within Iraq from engulfing the region, but also preventing a new generation of Osama Bin Ladens from leaving out of Iraq and spreading their jihadi acts of terror throughout the region and beyond.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.

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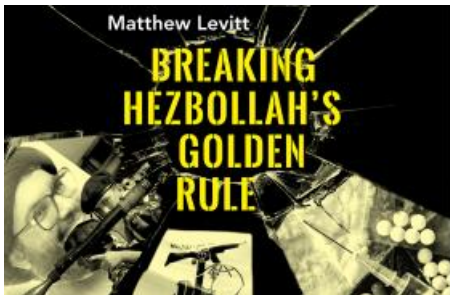
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