

# Securing Iraq: The Way Ahead

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Articles & Testimony

Institute senior fellow Michael Eisenstadt contributed an essay to the book, [\*\*Iraq and America: Choices and Consequences \(http://www.stimson.org/pub.cfm?id=309\)\*\*](#) (Stimson Center, 2006), edited by Ellen Laipson and Maureen S. Steinbruner. The following is an excerpt from Mr. Eisenstadt's essay. [\*\*Download \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/44ca1fec902e6.pdf\)\*\*](#) the full text in PDF format.

Much of the current public debate about US policy in Iraq is based on a flawed reading of Iraqi society and politics, an inadequate appreciation of the political, economic, and military constraints that limit US options, and misconceptions about the likely path to "victory." The result is a plethora of proposals that fail to address adequately the extraordinarily complex political realities and policy challenges that confront the US in Iraq.

Critics of American policy say that the US presence fuels the Sunni Arab insurgency and widespread anti-occupation sentiment, and that the withdrawal of US forces is a necessary first step toward stemming the violence and forcing the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to assume responsibility for the security of the country. This leads them to conclude that US forces should leave Iraq—the sooner the better.

While some of these assumptions may be true, this prescription ignores several factors:

1. the insurgency has entrenched itself throughout the Sunni triangle and will try to influence, infiltrate, and overthrow the Iraqi government, whether or not US forces remain in Iraq;
2. the US has adjusted its force footprint and rules of engagement to greatly reduce friction with the population, though some friction is inevitable in areas where US forces have the lead in providing security;
3. although most Iraqis want the US gone, they do not want the US to leave until a modicum of stability has been achieved; and
4. some Sunnis believe that the US presence, though onerous, constrains Shia revanchism and limits Iranian influence; this provides the US with a degree of leverage in Sunni circles. Seen in this light, the rationale for a rapid withdrawal is much less compelling.

In fact, the US effort in Iraq has, almost from the start, been hamstrung by a mismatch between means and ends, and

a variety of military, economic and political constraints. The US neither has sufficient forces in-country, nor the right kind of forces. In particular, it lacks linguists, intelligence and civil affairs specialists, and military police to properly prosecute its counterinsurgency strategy or to sustain the significant long-term presence required to see through its transformational agenda in Iraq. Human and material resources devoted to reconstruction have likewise been inadequate. Iraq's foreign aid has mostly been spent on security and not reconstruction. The Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP) was under-funded and commanders were not given enough leeway to use these funds as they saw fit and the initial emphasis on large, multi-year projects was misguided. Iraqi resentment of the occupation, flagging American domestic support for the war effort, as well as concerns that repeated deployments to Iraq could gut the volunteer Army, make a US drawdown, sooner or later, a political and military necessity. Paradoxically, such a drawdown may be the only way to sustain a long-term American commitment to Iraq, though too rapid a drawdown could greatly reduce prospects for success.

In any event, it is not at all clear that the Strategy for Victory in Iraq provides a formula for success against the insurgents and terrorists, or for a durable, lasting peace. A more likely outcome may be a military stalemate, leading to a negotiated settlement and an imperfect peace. It is also not possible to rule out the possibility of a protracted civil war, or the collapse of the central government and the breakup of the country into numerous semi-autonomous fiefdoms ruled by tribal and party militias and local warlords.

The implementation of US strategy in Iraq has thus far been less than optimal. But given the aforementioned military, economic, and political constraints, the current US approach probably represents the best use of the limited means available to coalition commanders on the ground in Iraq. It remains to be seen whether US policy objectives—the defeat of the terrorists, the cooptation or defeat of divergent strands of the insurgency, the revitalization of the economy, and the creation of a stable, democratic Iraq—can be achieved with the means available to the US and Iraqi governments.

A number of important decisions will likely be made in the coming year concerning the management of a US drawdown, Iraq's escalating sectarian violence, and the potential "end game." These decisions will occur in an extremely challenging policy environment, with the US seeking to make the most of its waning influence—as the last of its \$21.9 billion in reconstruction monies is spent—and it starts drawing down its forces. Finally, in considering US options, it should be kept in mind that even the simplest of things are difficult in Iraq. Accordingly, policy recommendations should be practical and expectations modest. ❖

Iraq and America: Choices and Consequences

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