

Policy Watch: What now in Iraq?

Published: Dec. 8, 2006 at 10:18 AM

MARK N. KATZ

The recently released Iraq Study Group report has warned against "an open-ended commitment to keep large numbers of (U.S.) troops in Iraq." It calls for the withdrawal of all American combat brigades by early 2008, and for the U.S. mission to "evolve to one of supporting the Iraqi army, which would take over primary responsibility for combat operations." The Report further recommends that, "If the Iraqi government does not make substantial progress toward ... national reconciliation, security, and governance, the United States should reduce its political, military, or economic support for the Iraqi government."

What all this means is that the United States should make one final effort to stabilize Iraq in 2007, but if this does not succeed, it should begin to draw down its involvement there in early 2008 -- ahead of the American elections later that year.

President Bush has already indicated that he may not accept this recommendation. He and other supporters of the war effort have previously warned that an American withdrawal from Iraq before "completing the mission" will lead to negative consequences.

President Bush is certainly right about this. There will indeed be negative consequences if the United States withdraws from Iraq. Four of the most important of these will be:

First, the Iraqi civil war will intensify, especially between Arab Shiites and Arab Sunnis.

Second, whether the Bush Administration heeds the ISG's call to talk with Tehran or not, Iran is highly likely to seize upon an American withdrawal from Iraq to step up its own involvement there in support of its Iraqi Shiite allies.

Third, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and perhaps Kuwait are likely to assist Iraqi Sunni forces in order to prevent Iran and its allies from completely dominating Iraq. Their involvement, along with Iran's, raises the possibility of the Iraqi civil war turning into a regional inter-state war.

Fourth, the U.S. withdrawal will be seen -- both in America and abroad -- as a humiliating defeat. Just as occurred after the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina in 1973, this will encourage and embolden America's adversaries elsewhere.

Despite all this, the United States should indeed withdraw by early 2008 if Iraq cannot be stabilized in 2007. And it probably cannot be. Here's why:

First, as the Iraqi Study Group report pointed out, the American military presence has not been able to prevent the situation in Iraq from deteriorating. Although the Bush administration does not want to admit it, there is now a fierce civil war going on there which neighboring states, including Iran, are already intervening in. America cannot prevent groups determined to fight each other from doing so.

Second, while Iran will undoubtedly step up its involvement in Iraq after an American withdrawal, there is no reason to think that Tehran will be any more successful at pacifying that country than Washington was.

Third, while several Arab governments might aid Arab Sunnis and others inside Iraq to prevent Iran from dominating it after a U.S. withdrawal, they do not want to get involved in a war with Tehran or to directly engage in the fighting inside Iraq. Their fear of Iran will likely induce them to seek American help and protection despite their annoyance with the United States both for intervening in and then withdrawing from Iraq.

Fourth, the perception that the United States was defeated in Iraq will lead to the decline in the unfortunate fear that the Bush administration's interventionism gave rise to among so many, including America's allies, of the United States as being "the greatest threat to peace." America's adversaries will indeed celebrate what they regard as America's defeat and seize upon the opportunities they think this presents. As others fear the policies of America less and of its adversaries more, they will once again turn to the United States for help.

In other words, while the consequences of an American withdrawal from Iraq may appear to be highly detrimental to American interests, the normal operation of the balance of power in international relations will serve to mitigate its effect. Just as American overextension resulting from the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq benefited its adversaries, the overextension of its adversaries that is likely to follow an American withdrawal from Iraq will ultimately benefit America.

--

(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

© 2006 United Press International, Inc. All Rights Reserved.