

The perils of the U.S. withdrawal of Iraq, the Nixon Dilemma

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In recent weeks, there has been a hot debate over the American troops in Iraq. Democrats, argue that the best thing that could happen now is for the American troops to pull out as quickly as possible of Iraq, force the Iraqis to take control of their destinies and compel the oil-rich Gulf States in the neighbourhood to get off the sidelines, “that could save the 10\$ billion a month that it is being spent on the war and rescue the U.S. army and Marine Corps before they both collapse”.¹ On the other hand the counter position is that the only possible course is to remain there to fight for as long as it takes.¹ Arguing that the withdraw will hand Al Qaeda and Iran huge victories, destabilise the Persian Gulf and empower territories everywhere to attack the U.S. and its allies. However 4 years after the U.S. invaded Iraq, neither approach makes much sense. United States’ military presence has not prevented massive human suffering, in fact at least 100,000 civilians have already been killed in sectarian killing and several million have already been forced out of their homes. A quick withdrawal, however, would inevitably lead to an increase of the destabilization.

The main point here is that the majority of the voices say that it is time for the U.S. troops to leave Iraq. But as in the Nixon dilemma in Vietnam, how does the U.S leave in a way that maximizes the good that can still be achieved and minimizes the damage that will inevitably occur? The position of the American public is clear, “in a world of bad options, a phased withdrawal is the least bad one out there”.² Nearly 7 in 10 Americans think the war is going badly, and more than half wish the U.S. had stayed at home.³

Democratic senators Carl Levin and Jack Reed, suggest beginning to withdraw the bulk of U.S. troops within 120 days and leaving an undetermined number behind to go after terrorists and protect the U.S. embassies in Bagdad, pressing the Iraqis to take greater responsibility for their own security and future.⁴ However it took the Soviets nine months to pull 120.000 troops out of Afghanistan and they were simply going next door, losing more than 500 men on the way out. Some experts at the Pentagon affirm that pulling out 10 combat brigades, roughly 30.000 troops, along with their gear and support personnel, would take at least 10 months.

This is just an example of how badly the U.S. elite understands the war they are fighting. The theory of Counterinsurgency (COIN) broadly developed during the XX Century firmly suggests the necessity of manpower to fight insurgencies. Hence, if until now the Americans have not been able to defeat insurgents with the troops they have, and they have not been able to protect the Iraqis, and offer them security how do they think they are going to be able to do it with less that a half of the resources they have now? Once the U.S. decides to pull its forces back, the security risk to troops leaving the battlefield would increase, as fast as the security of the civil population decreases. At the same time sending a signal of complete withdraw could encourage some elements in every faction in Iraq to now impose their own agenda and as “the Times” says the worst case scenario is a “Somalia-ization of Iraq”. At the same time in those circumstances the external support will be parabellum for the different factions and the conflict could become a regional one. Sunni sympathisers in the region, most notably in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria, would funnel weapons and cash to their “brothers” in Iraq to counter the Shiites “quietly” helped by Iran. Ahmadineyad warns of an emptiness of power that Iran and Arabia will occupy.⁵

Anthony Cordesman, a security analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, says the U.S. military estimates that the Al Qaeda in Iraq accounts for only about 15% of the attacks in Iraq (Other Sunni groups account for 70%, with Shiite militias responsible for the remaining 15%) but Cordesman says, those attacks are the most deadly and “probably do the most damage in pushing Iraq toward civil war”, leaving Iraqi people at war with themselves. Withdrawal would leave civilians at the mercy of corrupt, inept and sectarian leaders and security forces, so only the 35% of the Iraqis says they want the troops out now.

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For General Petraeus, American senior commander in Iraq, Iraq is still a violent mess. That is why Americans should not leave yet and also why bringing the troops home too soon would result in disaster. This is basically what he stated in his speech on Capitol Hill in September 10th, 2007. At the same time Ryan Crocker, American ambassador to Iraq, argues in the same report "... if America removes its forces while Iraq remains in its present condition, the Iraqi future is indeed likely to be disastrous."¹

Endnotes:

¹ *Times*, July 30th 2007.

² *Times*, April 2, 2007.

³ At: <http://www.senate.gov/~levin/newsroom/supporting/2006/Iraqamdt.061906.pdf>

⁴ *ABC*, miércoles 29 de agosto de 2007.

⁵ "Why they should stay", *The Economist*, September 15th 2007