

Iraqification: Losing Strategy

By Fareed Zakaria

Iraq, everyone agrees, is not Vietnam. In Vietnam the United States lost dozens of troops for every one it is losing in Iraq. The Viet Cong guerrillas had broad popular support. They were being supplied by great powers. And so on. But there is one sense in which the analogy might hold. Frustrated by the lack of quick progress on the ground and fading political support at home, Washington is now latching on to the idea that a quick transfer of power to local troops and politicians would make things better. Or at any rate, it would lower American casualties. It was called Vietnamization; today it's called Iraqification. And then as now, it is less a winning strategy than an exit strategy.

Everyone seems to be in favor of Iraqification. The president has urged an accelerated training schedule for the Iraqi army. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld says that more Iraqi troops, and not Americans, would be the best answer to his problems. Members of Congress from both parties cheer the idea, as do most columnists. On the political side, the administration has speeded up its timetable to transfer power. Where once it spoke of a three-year process of constitution-writing and institution-building, now it wants to hold elections and turn things over in 18 months at most. American troops would number fewer than 100,000 by next summer, and fewer than 50,000 by 2005. Even the French love the new, improved schedule. What could possibly be wrong with it?

This new impulse has less to do with Iraqi democracy than with American democracy. The president wants to show, in time for his reelection, that Iraqis are governing their affairs and Americans are coming home. But it might not work out that way.

Putting more Iraqi soldiers and police on the ground makes sense. By taking care of routine policing and security, they will free the U.S. Army to conduct raids, pursue leads and fight the guerrillas. But the desperation to move faster and faster is going to have bad results. Accelerating the training schedule (which has already been accelerated twice before) will only produce an ineffective Iraqi army and police force. Does anyone think that such a ragtag military could beat the insurgency where American troops are failing?

When we speak of sending "Iraqis" on raids into the Sunni Triangle, who would these soldiers be? Sunnis? They might not want to hunt down Baathists, or might easily be bought off. Shiites and Kurds? That would galvanize the Sunni populations in support of the guerrillas. If the goal is to stabilize Iraq, fomenting intergroup violence might not be the best path.

If the American footprint is reduced, it will not make the guerrillas stop fighting. ("Hey, Saddam, we've scared the Americans back into their compounds. Let's ease up now and give them a break.") On the contrary, the rebels will step up their attacks on the Iraqi army and local politicians, whom they already accuse of being collaborators. Iraqification could easily produce more chaos, not less.

The idea of a quick transfer of political power is even more dangerous. The Iraqi state has gone from decades of Stalinism to total collapse. And there is no popular national political party or movement to hand power to. A quick transfer of authority to a weak central government would only encourage the Shiites, the Sunnis and the Kurds to retain de facto autonomy in their regions and fragment the country.

For the neoconservatives in the Pentagon, a quick transfer fulfills a pet obsession, installing in power the Iraqi exiles led by Ahmad Chalabi. Last week the Philadelphia Inquirer quoted a senior administration official as saying, "There are some civilians at the Pentagon who've decided that we should turn this over to someone else and get out

as fast as possible.” But every indication we have is that the exiles do not have broad popular support.

There are no shortcuts out. Iraq is America’s problem. It could have been otherwise, but in the weeks after the war the administration, drunk with victory, refused to share power with the world. Now there can be only one goal: success. The first task of winning the peace in Iraq is winning the war—which is still being waged in the Sunni heartland. And winning it might take more troops, or different kinds of troops (send back the Marines). It might take a mixture of military force and bribes—to win over some Sunni leaders. But whatever it takes, the United States must do it. Talk about a drawdown of troops sends exactly the wrong message to the guerrillas. In the words of one North Vietnamese general, “We knew that if we waited, one day the Americans would have to go home.”

“The central problem in Vietnam,” says Brookings’s Kenneth Pollack, “was that we had a corrupt and ineffective local government that did not inspire either the allegiance or the confidence of the Vietnamese people. Whatever happened militarily became secondary to this fundamental political reality.” We don’t have that problem in Iraq. But a hasty Iraqification will almost certainly produce it.

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