

IRAQ QUESTIONS

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 29 2009

With American forces turning over security responsibilities to Iraqis as another step toward complete withdrawal from Iraq, I am searching for the war's lessons and am left mostly with questions.

1. What were the expectations of the most senior Bush administration officials about the governance of Iraq after the invasion deposed Saddam?
2. Would the presence of hundreds of thousands more US troops, as advocated by some, have prevented or merely postponed the insurgency?
3. Did the surge turn things around in Iraq or was it the exhaustion of the Sunni/Shiite civil war that brought a lessening of violence?
4. Will the Iraqi government have sufficient legitimacy and self-confidence to survive once the bulk of American combat forces have left Iraq?
5. What about after 2011 when all of US troops are supposed to be gone?

Well, I do have some opinions:

The limited planning that preceded the Iraq invasion would seem to indicate that the Bush administration thought that it was in invading Iraq doing something more like liberating France, which had a functioning bureaucracy and a government in exile, than conquering Germany, which would be left with no government and thus required an occupation.

More troops could have been sent to Iraq. Additional combat units were heading that way when the regime collapsed. The total force in the vicinity was approaching Gulf War size, but sustaining such a large force (400-500K) was impossible given the size of the US military which at the time was one third smaller than it was in 1991. There was a false hope that the Europeans would take on a peacekeeping role in Iraq to make amends for their opposition to the invasion. But it seems that an insurgency was part of Saddam's defense plans and something that al Qaeda anticipated as its opportunity. A big force that rotated out would have at best delayed the contest.

The importance of the surge of US forces beginning in early 2007 is confused by the fact that it comes after the bloody civil war (2005-6) had made it clear to the Sunnis that they were not going to hold much power or urban terrain in a new Iraq unless they aligned with the Americans. The surge was a pause in the US military's policy which was to hand security over as quickly as possible, remembering as the lesson of Vietnam that locals have no confidence in their own ability to control security because dependencies built up during a long US intervention. The problem was that we sought too soon to pass responsibilities over to the interim Iraqi government. In 2004 it was too early to pull away from the cities. The deteriorating security situation encouraged the rise of militias and the civil war.

Stability in Iraq depends upon an agreement among the Sunnis, Shiites and the Kurds, including a division of the nation's oil wealth. I can't imagine that there will be such a deal in the near term. Given the neighborhood and the geopolitical stakes, I also find it hard to believe that either the Iraqi government or the US Congress will want to force a complete cutoff of US involvement in Iraq post-2011. I see us leaving Europe before we leave Iraq.

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Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.