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Civilians Will Make the Difference in Iraq

By [Daniel Serwer](#)
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As vice president for peace and stability operations at the U.S. Institute of Peace, Daniel Serwer has for three years supervised a Congressionally-funded peacebuilding effort in Iraq, after a decade spent on Balkans peacebuilding efforts both at the State Department and USIP. This USIPeace Briefing, prepared as testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, presents his personal views, not those of the Institute, which does not take positions on specific policies.

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Priority interests should determine the American course of action

Vital American interests should determine the U.S. government's future course of action in Iraq. In priority order, they are:

1. Stabilize a united Iraq and the region. The U.S. needs to tamp down the civil conflict and prevent it from spreading to, or involving, Iraq's neighbors.
2. Prevent terrorist threats to America and its allies: The U.S. must ensure that Iraq is not used as a platform for operations abroad by al-Qaeda or other terrorists.
3. Restore flexibility in the use of U.S. forces: The military is overcommitted today; its capacity to react to events elsewhere in the world needs to be rebuilt.
4. Return America to a preeminent global position: The U.S. needs to regain moral, military and diplomatic standing in a world that views it as compromised, weakened and ineffective.

The U.S. should renounce other interests in Iraq: it needs no guaranteed access to oil or permanent bases, and it must not take sides in a civil war or a broader Sunni/Shia conflict.

No simple solution

There is no simple course of action that will satisfy these interests. Precipitous withdrawal of American forces from Iraq might help us regain flexibility, but would not prevent parts of Iraq from being used as a terrorist platform. Nor would withdrawal stabilize the country or the region. Breaking Iraq up into sectarian zones would likewise allow parts of Iraq to be used by terrorists and would destabilize the region.

Military experts differ on the President's proposed surge, which is significantly smaller than most who advocated a surge would recommend, but few would disagree that *additional U.S. forces make sense only in support of a broader civilian peacebuilding effort aimed at political reconciliation and economic stabilization*. A surge in U.S. forces could open an opportunity for the Maliki government to work out the political deals necessary for national reconciliation, but it also risks sending the wrong signal to both Sunni and Shia, who have been relying too much on the Americans to provide security and need a wake-up call. The political situation in Iraq and in the U.S. will not permit American forces to continue combat for several years. Nor will the global situation, which requires U.S. forces to be available for contingencies elsewhere. *A military surge should be combined with a target date for turnover of combat responsibilities to Iraqi forces, who need to be motivated to prepare and train for their enhanced role.*

Increasing troop levels will not suffice—a broader approach is needed

So much attention has been paid to troop levels that other requirements to stabilize Iraq are not being discussed. The grave and deteriorating situation in Iraq is not due to military failure. Coalition troops have fought well and hard. It is due to indigenous political forces largely beyond American control, as well as planning, diplomatic and economic failures, all of which are civilian responsibilities. *If only the troop presence is beefed up, without intensifying civilian peacebuilding efforts, the situation will continue to deteriorate.*

Additional civilian resources are required. Only a fraction of the funds Congress has appropriated for Iraq has gone to civilian efforts—less than 10 per cent. *Future funding should include something like \$5 billion for civilian peacebuilding*. Five times the current level—below \$1 billion per year—this is still a small percentage of the total.

What can be done with new civilian resources? *The primary goal should be national reconciliation through strengthening rule of law and the moderate center*. Holding Iraq together will require increasing governing capacity at the central, regional and provincial levels—including the judicial as well as the executive and legislative branches—and building up civil society. We should support the many courageous Iraqis who are willing to reach across sectarian lines to build a democratic Iraq.

The U.S. Institute of Peace has been engaged since early 2004 in this work, devoting about \$5 million per year provided by Congress to preventing sectarian violence, building up the rule of law, and educating and training a new generation of leaders. For example, we support a network of 25 Iraqis who undertake inter-sectarian dialogue efforts in their own communities, demonstrably reducing violence. However, *USIP's funding for Iraq has been cut about 60 per cent in real terms for FY07*. Similar cuts are affecting the work of other organizations doing vital reconciliation work in Iraq.

What about the economic front? Jobs do not prevent terrorism. There is moreover doubt about the ability of the U.S. government to create jobs in the private sector at home, much less abroad. *The best that can be done for the Iraqis is to help with their oil sector, which they should run as a commercial enterprise in the interests of the whole country*. It is also important to provide micro-credits to small enterprises and funds to military commanders, embassy officials and provincial reconstruction teams, for small-scale improvements to stabilize local situations. But insurgents and militias would likely exploit a massive national jobs program for their own purposes.

Neither politics nor the economy in Iraq will go far on American money alone. *The Iraqis need to take on far more responsibility*. Prime Minister Maliki's "milestones" have now been published: there are agreed target dates for passage of the oil law, rolling back de-Ba'athification, and a clamp down on militias. He is already at risk of missing several of them. The U.S. government needs to convey a much more serious message about the need to meet milestones, and its willingness to assist, while remaining flexible about timing and realistic about the capacity of any leadership in Iraq today to meet expectations.

Diplomacy is an essential ingredient

Neither military nor civilian efforts will be successful inside Iraq without a regional diplomatic component. The U.S. needs help from friends and allies as well as self-interested cooperation from Iraq's neighbors, two of which are adversaries.

The diplomatic strategy should be multilateral. *There should be a "contact group" that includes all of Iraq's immediate neighbors.* It is within this multilateral forum that the U.S. should talk with Syria and Iran, as it has done with North Korea in the six-party talks.

The purpose of talking with Damascus and Tehran is to discover if there are areas of mutual interest, in particular in stabilizing Iraq as U.S. troops begin to withdraw. Both Syria and Iran stand to lose a great deal if Iraq comes apart. Neither is likely to be able to seal itself off—refugees and internal unrest (at the least among the Kurds and possibly among other groups, including the Sunni majority in Syria) will be enormous challenges. Neither Iran nor Syria is in good shape to meet them. While their concept of what contributes to stability may not coincide with that of the U.S., *there is a real possibility of finding some areas of mutual interest, as the U.S. did with Iran on Afghanistan.*

The only reason for not talking with Damascus and Tehran is hope that the regimes will soon change for the better. Regime change might be highly desirable, but there is no evidence it is imminent.

Conclusions

Here then is a recommended course of action for the U.S. in Iraq today that might hope to find support on both sides of the aisle in Congress:

1. Washington should commit itself to an intensified diplomatic, political, economic, and if necessary military effort over the course of this year to stabilize Iraq and to prepare for beginning to draw down U.S. combat troops by a date certain.
2. Civilian resources for Iraq should be increased sharply to \$5 billion per year, with a multi-year commitment to strengthening Iraqi institutions at all levels and supporting those in civil society prepared to contribute to peacebuilding.
3. The political effort should focus on reconciliation, helping the Iraqis to meet clearly defined milestones and building up governing capacity at all levels.
4. The essential diplomatic component should be multilateral and include direct talks with Damascus and Tehran. A presidential envoy—someone whom the president trusts to pursue U.S. interests with vigor—should be appointed for this purpose.

Even if these suggestions were fully adopted, the likelihood of stability would increase only marginally. The U.S. is in deep; getting out is not going to be easy or painless. Nor can the U.S. get out completely: it will have to remain engaged in Iraq for years, and in the region for the foreseeable future. How it handles Iraq will have repercussions for a long time. The next year is an opportunity for one last, best effort to achieve relative success. After that, there is no alternative to phasing out the U.S. combat role and allowing the Iraqis to cope for themselves, with—conditions permitting—training and other military assistance and a robust, continuing civilian assistance effort.

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- [Ground Truth from Iraq: Politicians, Police, and Pacifications](#) Event, June 29, 2006 (Audio Available)
- [Bridging the Public Security Gap: The Role of the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units](#)

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USIPeace Briefing, June 2006

- [The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Public Security in Iraq](#)
Special Report, April 2005
- [Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan](#)
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- [Enhancing International Civilian Police in Peace Operations](#)
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United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)