

Political Reconciliation, Not Military Progress, Key in Iraq

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In Brief

The only way to achieve our goals in Iraq is through political consensus and reconciliation within that country.

Recent discussions of isolated military successes in Iraq are distracting from the need to focus on the tenuous political situation facing the ruling al-Maliki government.

The lack of political progress in Iraq is an increasingly compelling demonstration that the entire theory of the surge is flawed.

Michael E. O'Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution ignited a firestorm when they pronounced significant military progress in Iraq and skewered critics of the Bush Administration's Iraq policy as "unaware of the significant changes taking place." ("A War We Just Might Win," op-ed, *The New York Times*, July 30, 2007) Regrettably, their entire basis for claiming progress in Iraq is fundamentally flawed and a distraction from the sober analysis America sorely needs of our ongoing involvement in this intractable war.

Nearly two centuries ago, the great Prussian philosopher of war Karl von Clausewitz argued, "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose." Indeed, as the American victory during the 1968 Tet Offensive demonstrated, a military success can even contribute to political defeat.

O'Hanlon and Pollack ignore this most basic tenet of strategy when they argue, "We are finally getting somewhere in Iraq, at least in military terms." This statement is utterly meaningless in the context of serious analysis.

Quelling the bloody insurgency for a period of time in a small piece of Iraq is certainly a good thing, but in and of itself means little. Victory in Iraq is not possible if the Iraqi people cannot arrive at a political consensus and forge a government that is willing and able to act on that consensus. This is the goal on which we must focus.

At the tail end of their otherwise effusive op-ed, O’Hanlon and Pollack concede, “Iraqi politicians of all stripes continue to dawdle and maneuver for position against one another when major steps towards reconciliation – or at least accommodation – are needed.” In fact, just this week Iraq’s largest Sunni bloc, the Accordance Front, walked out of the government of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki because of its failure to make any meaningful progress on political reconciliation.

If we are to have a thoughtful dialogue on Iraq, we must reject two common arguments that muddle the concept of progress. First, we must stop confusing means and ends. Our ability to affect political developments in Iraq is minimal regardless of anything we do militarily. No localized improvements in security due to military activities, no matter how great, can contradict this argument.

Second, we must distinguish between genuine metrics of success and wishful theories. General David Petraeus is operating in Iraq under the theory that improvements in security will give Iraqi political elites space to solve their disputes. If this were true, we would expect to see political progress in Iraq in the wake of security improvements. In reality what we see is the already wobbly political structure in Iraq deteriorating even as security reportedly improves. The lack of political progress is an increasingly compelling demonstration that the entire theory of the surge is flawed.

At present, operating on the security-will-lead-to-reconciliation theory, we are arming all sorts of militias and other irregular forces to provide security. This will surely come back to haunt us, just as it did when we armed the mujahidin in Afghanistan during that country’s war with the Soviet Union. The arms we are giving to each of these groups to help create space for dialogue will soon enough be the weapons they use to fight each other – or worse.

One cannot realistically expect people to act against their interests, and virtually all pronouncements of progress in Iraq are based on the assumption they will – some day. However, the Kurds are not reconciled to the idea of being ruled by Baghdad. Iraqi Sunnis are not comfortable with being in the minority. And the nation’s Shiites are not ready to accept constraints and share power.

O’Hanlon and Pollack effectively portray General Petraeus as charismatic and talented. But charisma and talent are beside the point. What really matters is the leadership of Iraqi politicians in forging a new national consensus. Absent that consensus, military “progress” on the ground is inconsequential.

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