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The Dangerous Consequences of Cutting and Running in Iraq

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The premature withdrawal of American troops from Iraq would have disastrous consequences for Iraq, for the Middle East, and for American foreign policy and would lead to a full-scale humanitarian disaster. Congress should reject outright calls for America to cut and run and instead should insist that the Bush Administration finish the job of training Iraqi security forces that are capable of supporting the government, dealing with sectarian violence, and providing for the safety of the civilian population.

Failure as an Option. There are at least five likely consequences that would flow from abruptly abandoning the people of Iraq. Such a shortsighted U.S. policy would be a severe blow to the Iraqi security situation, Iraqi oil exports, U.S. allies in the region, the global war against terrorism, and the future of all Iraqis.

Consequence #1: An Army Up for Grabs. A sudden U.S. withdrawal would raise the risks of full-fledged civil war and disintegration of the army into hostile factions. The defection of soldiers to various militias, taking with them their heavy equipment, would bolster the militias' firepower and capacity to seize and hold terrain. The result would be a bloody and protracted civil war such as the conflict in Bosnia following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Consequence #2: Energy Uncertainty. Growing anarchy in Iraq and the possible breakup of the country into autonomous regions would severely affect Iraq's oil exports. In 2005, Iraq produced about 1.9 million barrels per day (MBD) of oil and

exported about 1.4 MBD. By June 2006, Iraqi oil production had risen to 2.5 MBD, and the government hopes to increase production to 2.7 MBD by the end of the year. A U.S. withdrawal would undermine the security of oil pipelines and other facilities and increase the vulnerability of Iraqi oil production to sabotage. The resulting drop in Iraqi oil exports

would increase the upward pressure on world oil prices in an already tight oil market. Energy uncertainty would be increased further if Iraq splintered and Iran gained domination over a Shia-dominated rump state in the oil-rich south.

Consequence #3: Allies in Jeopardy. The chief beneficiary of a rapid U.S. pullout would be Iran, which

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- A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. support in Iraq would unquestionably guarantee failure, with disastrous results for Iraq, its neighbors, and U.S. national interests.
 - The Administration needs to finish the job of training Iraqi security forces that can support the government, deal with sectarian violence, and protect the civilian population.
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has considerable influence over the dominant Shiite political parties, which represent most Iraqi Shiites: about 60–65 percent of the population. If Iraq imploded, Iran quickly could gain dominance over an emerging “Shiastan” rump state endowed with the bulk of Iraq’s oil reserves. This would give Iran additional resources and a staging area to escalate subversive efforts targeted at the Shiite majority in Bahrain and Shiite minorities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These and other countries look to the United States to serve as a guarantor against an aggressive Iran. If the United States fails to follow through on its commitment to establish a stable government in Iraq, it will severely undermine its credibility. Abandoning Iraqi allies would erode the confidence of other allies in U.S. leadership and further fuel conspiracy theories about American plots to carve up Iraq to keep Arabs weak and divided.

Consequence #4: Al-Qaeda Triumphant. Osama bin Laden would trumpet an abrupt U.S. withdrawal as a victory for al-Qaeda and proof that America is a “paper tiger,” just as he claimed after the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1994. An unstable, failed state in Iraq would also provide al-Qaeda and other radical groups with a sanctuary for recruiting a new generation of suicide bombers and a strategically located staging area for deploying terrorists for attacks on Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere around the world. The recently declassified “key judgments” of the April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate, “Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States,” pointed out that a perceived victory for jihadists in Iraq would boost their strength and ability to threaten Americans.

Consequence #5: A Humanitarian Catastrophe. Iraq is a mosaic of ethnic, sectarian, and tribal sub-

groups. Baghdad and other major cities include significant intermingling of Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and other Christians. Instability and civil war would put many of these people to flight, creating a vast humanitarian crisis that would dwarf those seen in Bosnia and Kosovo and rival the scenes of horror and privation witnessed in Cambodia, Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan. Not only would Iraqis be put at risk of disease, starvation, and violence, but with the government unable to meet their basic needs, the Iraqi refugees would fall under the control of the sectarian militias, turning Iraq into Lebanon on steroids.

An Alternative to Failure. A continued U.S. military presence cannot ensure success in Iraq unless Iraqis cooperate in building an effective government, but a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. support would unquestionably guarantee failure, with disastrous results for Iraq, its neighbors, and U.S. national interests. The only winners would be an expansionist Iran and an increasingly lethal al-Qaeda.

The alternative is to insist that the Bush Administration finish the job it started by completing the training of Iraqi security forces, supporting Iraq’s new democratic government, beginning the disciplined reduction of American forces, and turning the future of Iraq over to the only people who can ensure the nation’s long-term success—the Iraqis.

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