What Model Should Iraq Follow after U.S. Forces Withdraw?

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Introduction

Even as they disagree on how long American forces will remain in Iraq, U.S. officials and foreign policy experts suggest a number of scenarios for what Iraq might resemble after coalition forces eventually pull out. President Bush has proposed the so-called South Korean model, a long-term residual troop presence to prevent civil war from breaking out. Many have also likened the conflict to Vietnam, where the fall of Saigon did not unleash the massive “domino” effect many predicted. Others have offered Lebanon, which suffered from a long civil war before an uneasy truce was inked, as a more accurate template. Then there are those who say Iraq should become a federalized state, akin to post-1995 Bosnia. Experts disagree over the degree to which the conflict in Iraq could spread to neighboring countries.

The South Korea Model

Over fifty years after the Korean War, some thirty thousand U.S. troops remain stationed along the DMZ, which divides the peninsula between North Korea and South Korea (the number is expected to diminish to 24,500 next year). The U.S. forces are there to keep an uneasy peace between the two Koreas and prevent war from erupting again. The analogy to Korea is meant to portray the Iraqi conflict as a long-term one that requires a residual “over-the-horizon” military presence, mainly to support indigenous forces and keep the peace. “The idea is more a model of a mutually-agreed arrangement, whereby we have a long and enduring presence, but one that is by consent of both parties and under certain conditions,” Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates told reporters in early June. He also said the Korean model stood in contrast to the aftermath of the Vietnam War, where “we just left lock, stock and barrel.”

Still, some opponents of the war, including several presidential aspirants, have seized on this comparison as a justification for keeping U.S. forces in Iraq indefinitely. This CFR.org issue tracker examines the positions of current 2008 candidates. Democratic presidential candidate Bill Richardson, for instance, has called for “zero troops,” including residual forces, as well as for a withdrawal of embassy staff if the security situation worsens.

Others say Korea is a faulty model, and a residual force will only embolden Islamic radicals and arouse suspicions that U.S. interests are related more to oil than democracy promotion. “Any U.S. bases remaining in Iraq, either to keep a finger on the oil, or to act as a jumping off point for attacking Iran, will similarly quickly come under withering attack from Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaeda,” writes Ivan Eland of the Independent Institute, a public-policy research organization.

The Lebanon Model

Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war illustrates that long and violent factional fighting can draw regional countries into a wider war. But some experts say Iraq is different and argue the sectarian violence would stay relatively contained and not spread to neighboring countries. “Such meddlers tend to seek advantage in their neighbors’ civil wars, not to spread them, which is why they rely on proxies to do their fighting,” write CFR’s Steven Simon and Ray Takeyh in the Washington Post. “You can already see that pattern at work in Iraq today.”

The Lebanon Model was promoted by some White House officials back in 2004 as a blueprint for dealing with Iraq. Before last summer’s war, Lebanon was seen as an example of how a failed state could transition into a relatively stable democracy in the Arab world, held together by a power-sharing arrangement, however tenuous. “It works in a sort of way,” Michael J. Totten, a Beirut-based journalist, wrote in the Wall Street Journal in January 2006. “But what makes this place unique is that the Lebanese political system is nearly incapable of producing dictatorship.” Although eighteen months later, Lebanon teeters on the brink of sectarian war, some experts say its power-sharing agreement between sectarian camps with competing agendas and claims to land may provide a model, however flawed, for Iraq to follow.

But other analysts fear Iraq may result in something worse than Lebanon at its nadir in the 1980s. “Lebanon’s simmering civil war eventually burned itself out and left a coherent, albeit weak, state in its ashes,” writes Christopher J. Fettweis of the U.S. Naval War College in the Los Angeles Times. “Iraq could soon more closely resemble Somalia in the 1990s, an utterly collapsed, uncontrollable, lawless, failed state that...
destabilizes the most vital region in the world." Democratic presidential candidates, similarly, regularly refer to the prospect of "genocide" in postwar Iraq.

**The Vietnam Model**

The Vietnam War ended in a four-year-long withdrawal of U.S. forces followed by the fall of Saigon and the rest of South Vietnam to the North Vietnamese. In Vietnam, the U.S. military slowly handed over combat duties to local forces as part of its "Vietnamization" campaign. Some analysts say employing a similar strategy in Iraq would be complicated because the conflict is more of a communal civil war, not an ideological struggle for national liberation. "Such a policy," writes CFR's Stephen Biddle in *Foreign Affairs*, "might have made sense in Vietnam, but in Iraq it threatens to exacerbate the communal tensions that underlie the conflict and undermine the power-sharing negotiations needed to end it." Some say the lesson of the "Vietnam model," as it applies to Iraq, is to maintain a U.S. presence and economic aid to support a political solution. "The shame of Vietnam is not that we were there in the first place, but that we betrayed our ally in the end," wrote former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird in *Foreign Affairs*. Adds Henry Kissinger, a former secretary of state, in a recent op-ed: "The essential prerequisite for such a political solution is staying power in the near term."

Fetweis says Vietnam is an apt comparison to Iraq because both represented major strategic mistakes in U.S. foreign policy, turning public opinion against the White House and against interventionism in general—what became known as "Vietnam Syndrome." But he says the significance of pulling en masse out of Iraq, like Vietnam before it, may prove to be overplayed by the war’s architects. "[T]he war's critics predicted in the 1960s, Vietnam turned out to be strategically irrelevant," he writes. "Saigon fell, but no dominoes followed; the balance of Cold War power did not change."

**The Bosnia Model**

The "nation building" parallels between Iraq and Bosnia are manifold. The *Iraq Study Group*, among other sources, has advocated a Dayton-like peace process to bring in Iraq's neighbors to cooperate on border control and security operations. Moreover, Iraq's Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites have made fitful attempts to reach a power-sharing agreement, much as the various ethnic factions did in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the mid-1990s. Troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have been compared to foreign troop proportions deployed to keep peace in the former Yugoslavia (to meet the troop-to-civilian ratios applied in Bosnia, the coalition would have to deploy 258,000 thousand forces to Iraq). And Bosnia may give development specialists a blueprint on rebuilding Iraq's economy, particularly regarding how much foreign aid to give per capita.

But the main use of the "Bosnia model" has come from advocates who favor a looser federation rather than a centralized state, not unlike Bosnia post-1995. "The idea, as in Bosnia, is to maintain a united Iraq by decentralizing it, giving each ethno-religious group—Kurd, Sunni Arab, and Shiite Arab—room to run its own affairs, while leaving the central government in charge of common interests," wrote Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-DE) and the Council on Foreign Relations' President Emeritus Leslie H. Gelb in the *New York Times*. "In effect, Iraq is already becoming Bosnia," adds Michael E. O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, writing in the *Washington Times*. Decentralization in Iraq, like Bosnia, would require land swaps, the separation of ethnic groups, and a political agreement that disperses powers to the regions, while keeping a unitary state. "Ethnic relocation is distasteful and not free from risk but if carried out with care as government policy, it can occur with less trauma than in the Balkans," adds O'Hanlon.

Yet others disagree. More than a decade after the Dayton Peace accords, some say that Bosnia's Serbs, Croats, and Muslims still do not share a unified vision for the country as a whole. "Of all the ironies of the American adventure in Iraq, perhaps none is larger than using the success of Bosnia as a model to solve the sectarian violence now raging in Baghdad," write Don Hays of the U.S. Institute of Peace, R. Bruce Hitchner of the Dayton Project, and Edward P. Joseph in the *International Herald Tribune*. "The Dayton legacy of balancing power at the central, cantonal, and local levels is hopelessly dysfunctional." They say Bosnian Serbs, emboldened by Kosovo's push for independence, may be poised to pull out of the Dayton arrangement. Moreover, Bosnia, given its porous borders, remains a lawless haven for drug and arms traffickers, terrorists, and other organized crime elements.

**The Northern Ireland Model**

The top U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, has characterized the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq as a long slog and likened it to the decades-long struggle by British forces to quell Northern Ireland. "Northern Ireland, I think, taught you that very well. My counterparts in your [British] forces really understand this kind of operation... It took a long time, decades," he told the *BBC*. "I don't know whether this will be decades, but the average counterinsurgency is somewhere around a nine or a ten-year endeavor." In Northern Ireland, conflict has raged for years between Catholics and Protestants over whether to merge with Ireland or remain a part of the United Kingdom. Similarly, in Iraq Shiites, Sunnis, Arabs, and Kurds have competing views of what kind of future state Iraq should resemble (i.e. decentralized versus centralized, secular versus religious, pro-Arab versus pro-Iran). Yet some critics of Petraeus' comments point out that the roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland stretch back centuries, not decades, a template that bodes for a long and bloody U.S. occupation in Iraq. "Here's the problem of using the Northern Ireland analogy: For how long did a band of less than a thousand IRA militants keep peace at bay?" asks one blogger. "We're not dealing with a few hundred insurgents in Iraq."

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