



THE MODERN SEVEN PILLARS OF IRAQ

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Over the past several months, the Bush administration has sought answers to why the greatest military force in history is unable to impose a politically acceptable finale to the Iraq War. There is an unspoken sense of shock that an underdeveloped nation, with an irregular insurgency, can absorb U.S. personnel and materiel resources at an insatiable pace yet continue to spiral into chaos. The resignation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the conclusions of the Iraq Study Group and the increasing tendency of the neoconservatives to distance themselves from the administration's Iraq policies, all speak to a grow-

An Iraqi tribal sheik leader asks for permission to speak during a reconciliation conference to denounce violence and unify Babil province in the summer of 2006.

ing objective realization that our tactics of the past four years are not accomplishing the mission to attain political stability.

There is bipartisan and military recognition that the security atmosphere in Iraq is degrading. Insurgent and criminal violence is on the increase. And yet, continuing the same policies of the past four years, except with a larger force package (a “surge,” as it is popularly described), is the primary course of action being floated by the civilian leadership. Clinging to the belief that more military force is the answer to Iraq’s internal political struggles, despite four years of that policy gradually failing, reveals a fundamental weakness in this administration’s understanding of Iraqi political and cultural priorities.

The wrong questions are being asked in the administration as to how to bring stability to Iraq, and accordingly, the answers to those wrong questions will not positively influence the political outcome in Iraq. The policy question is most frequently posed as: “How can we use our military to stop the increasing sectarian violence?” Under that narrow view, the logical answer is to increase the amount of kinetic force one can apply against the enemy in the increasingly unstable areas.

When the question is “How can we attain the strategic goal of political stability in Iraq?” a broader set of answers is required. Many of these answers are not politically palatable to the civilian leadership; thus the default unwisely returns to the U.S. military to fix an internal Iraqi cultural and political problem. The answer to the riddle begins with a political change of course from Washington, D.C., not a military buildup in Iraq.

As I worked with the Iraqis from the street to the ministerial level, seven lessons (or pillars) of Iraqi culture, which daily affect our reconstruction and stability operations, became clear. In order to have a chance for success, future



U.S. Army/Cpl. Michael Molinaro

U.S. policies and tactics cannot be based simply on more military force, but must incorporate the following seven pillars.

1—Iraqi society is based upon a strict patriarchal hierarchy under which a sheikh has absolute power over his tribe. The concept of civil government centralized at the provincial and national level is still relatively new (only a few decades old) to the Iraqis, whose social structure remains tribal. As such, the Western concept of democracy and the value of sharing power is an alien concept within their society. It is only important to Iraqi officials while the U.S. officials coordinating reconstruction efforts are in the room dispensing benefits.

2—The primary concern of Iraqi officials is not democracy or the political evolution of a successful Iraqi nation-state. It is the use of their position in government to gain personal wealth, as well as benefits for their extended family, tribe or sect. This observation is not a character attack, but merely reflects the reality that in a Bedouin society, where the foundational social unit is the tribe, one’s primary loyalty and goals run to that tribe. Saddam’s government was packed with his family and tribal members because they were loyal and because it was expected of him, within the culture, to bring benefits to his tribe by virtue of his prominence. Other Iraqi officials are no different in this regard; it is their cultural norm for the political leader to work in his self-interest and for that of his tribe.

3—If Iraqis do not value something, they will not fight for it. This is one reason why the Iraqi army made such poor showings in the Gulf War and in Operation Iraqi Freedom-1 (OIF-1). They melted away because they were being asked to fight for something in which they did not

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Backstory

During a one-year deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Lt. Col. Craig T. Trebilcock was in daily contact with pro-Coalition Iraqi officials, uncooperative Baathist officials, Coalition Provisional Authority bureaucrats and, most importantly, the average Iraqi in the street. His mission to coordinate reconstruction of Iraqi legal institutions required him to lead convoys throughout southern Iraq six days of the week and then travel to Baghdad to report developments to the relatively isolated policymakers in the Green Zone on the seventh. This experience provided him with a unique vantage point from which to observe Iraqi culture and politics. It led him to further deduce that policymakers from Washington, during their short Green Zone tours, had little sense of Iraqi culture and priorities, nor did they significantly consider how such factors might impede the success of their plans.

believe. Yet these same Iraqis are tenaciously fighting the world's predominant military power tooth and nail in their tribal areas and in their cities. What's the difference? The insurgents are now fighting for something they believe in—expelling foreign troops and sectarian enemies from the tribal areas and cities that they hold dear.

4—In a society that is evolving from a difficult Bedouin desert existence, where water and other base staples of life have historically been in short supply, the Iraqis have learned that the group that controls the resources of the province or nation lives; he who does not dies. Sharing of

resources or power with competing groups outside one's own tribe is an unfamiliar and foreign concept.

5—Individually, Iraqis are a warm and generous people. As the size of their group grows, however, whether as a family unit, tribe or an entire sect, their generosity to those not within their social circle wanes. The historic sense that one only takes care of his own—borne of their harsh desert life—minimizes their collective willingness to compromise or share resources or power. The lessons they have learned through centuries of desert survival is that only the strong get the resources and survive. As such, armed struggle for power, not compromise and democratic-style debate, is the norm.

6—Trading and bartering for personal or tribal gain is part of the Iraqi/Bedouin culture. Self-sacrifice for the general welfare is not. Accordingly, our frustration with “Why don't the Iraqis just try to get along for their mutual benefit?” is a Western, culturally based value judgment being applied to an Oriental society for whom violent conflict to gain advantage is the norm. If the current Sunni insurgency is to be stopped, therefore, we must demonstrate to the Iraqi insurgents that the personal benefits of a peace with the Shiites clearly outweighs the possible gain by continuing to fight for dominance. Increased U.S. military operations will inflame this struggle for political dominance, not diminish it.

7—Iraqis do not share Western concepts on the use, passage or value of time. They sincerely believe that if a matter is truly important, Allah will control the outcome, and the personal efforts of individuals are merely tangential to that outcome. This is a source of frustration for U.S. servicemembers who have served in Iraq and seen an apparent

A paratrooper with the 618th Engineer Support Company (Airborne) patrols the outskirts of Siniyah, Iraq, as fellow paratroopers construct a berm to isolate the city from insurgents.



U.S. Army/SSgt. Michael Carden

Sgt. Eric Hutchinson of the 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) patrols an Iraqi street during Operation Starlite.



U.S. Army / Capt. Amy Bishop

lack of resolve, follow-through or reliability from his Iraqi counterpart. The concept of *inshallah*—"God willing" or "only if God wills it, will it happen"—overshadows all aspects of Iraqi life, including reconstruction and political evolution. As such, the political resolution, if any, in Iraq will be achieved according to the glacial pace of Iraqi society, not based on a U.S. timetable. It is critical to recognize this concept if we wish to set realistic timetables for the continued presence and relevance of U.S. troops in Iraq.

Under these seven pillars, relying upon foreign military forces to impose a lasting political solution upon the Iraqis will not work. In truth, the military victory was won in 2003. It is the peace and the postconflict stability that is being lost daily by our civilian leaders' attempts to use the wrong tool (military force) to change Iraqi cultural values. Lack of political agility or introspection by U.S. civilian leadership is bringing us back to the brink of losing Iraq politically.

The perpetual weakness of Iraqi security forces is pointed to as a justification for continued and increased U.S. troop involvement. When we consider the first three pillars, however, it becomes apparent that the ongoing weakness of the Iraqi security forces (police and military) and their lack of reliability (in our eyes) are normal under the political circumstances we have imposed on the Iraqi people. As the concept of democracy does not have significant value in Iraqi culture, the people's willingness to fight and die for its success is virtually nonexistent. Instead, consistent with their cultural expectations, Iraqis will tend to use their official or security positions to gain personal and family advantage, even if "Rome" burns about them. The daily involvement of corrupt Iraqi police in kidnappings and extortion reflects this. Accordingly, the Iraqi troops we are training now will be enthusiastic to the extent they are being fed and clothed, as opposed to joining the 80 percent unemployment rate among young men in Iraq. It is naïve, however, to believe their willingness to serve is to preserve

An Iraqi national police officer searches through trash at an abandoned residence in Baghdad.



U.S. Army / Cpl. Robert Yde

democracy or the U.S.-backed central government.

We can provide all the military training possible, but only the Iraqis themselves can provide the necessary will to rid their country of foreign fighters and internal insurgents. Whether enthusiasm for food and a paycheck is a strong enough motivation for the fledgling Iraqi security forces to stand toe-to-toe with a zealous enemy motivated by principle remains to be seen. Our current policies appear to be placing all of our chips on this hope.

Iraqi troops fought for Saddam, albeit ineffectively, as death was the consequence for failing to do so. Under U.S. tutelage that is no longer the case in the Iraqi Army. The now forgotten Iraqi Freedom Forces of OIF-1 present an embarrassing example of the limits to training Iraqis to accomplish U.S. goals. Rather than mimicking the Free French of World War II, many of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Freedom Forces used their station to extort their fellow Iraqi citizens for money. They were quietly disbanded as a failed experiment when they did not prove to be liberty-loving patriots, but used their positions for personal advantage.

This history does not mean that Iraqis are not capable of securing Iraq in the long term. It does mean that it has to be done by Iraqis, on Iraqi terms and over values for which

An Iraqi policeman rides in the back of a police pickup truck during a joint patrol with U.S. soldiers on the streets of Muqadadiyah.

they are willing to fight. Self-preservation may be one of those values—democracy is not. Promoting the integrity and power of their respective tribes within a new Iraq is definitely such a cultural value. U.S. policies built on the premise that Iraqi officials and security forces will rally to Western political values if only we “stick it out a while longer” are naïve in the extreme and underlie our repeated shortcomings in trying to reconstruct Iraq.

It is against these seven cultural pillars that one can now evaluate the strategic merit of administration policies that rely on U.S. military forces to fight their way to a political resolution. Apparently, the logic runs that the Iraqi forces are not ready *yet*, but that with a few more months and some additional tens of thousands of U.S. troops all can yet be solved militarily—either by defeating the insurgents through the force of U.S. arms or by buying enough time for a meaningful Iraqi security force to stand up. This supposition, ignoring the seventh pillar, is based on hope, rather than cultural reality, as a cause of action. The policies to perpetuate and increase U.S. military involvement are underpinned with challenging phrases like “cut and run” and “not engaging in defeatism” to quiet critics, but are short on realism or appreciation of Iraqi culture.

The proposed surge also ignores the lessons of the past four years regarding the limits of what a PFC with an M16 really can and cannot accomplish on a street corner in Baghdad. The U.S. soldier or marine can secure his street corner, but he cannot make the Iraqis who walk past him care about their government. He can engage insurgents or criminals with effective firepower, but he cannot make the Iraqis willing to risk disclosing the locations of known insurgent cells when they do not believe in the U.S. mission. He cannot cause the Iraqis to forget hundreds of years of cultural hatred in order to accept that peace with one’s enemy is better than watching him die. Each of these goals is a necessary component for political stability in Iraq and must come from within, not from additional U.S. combat brigades.

And so, while there is not a square inch of Iraq that we cannot occupy and control at any time of our choosing, that fact is largely irrelevant for the long-term stability of a country that requires a political solution, not a military one. It is not the insurgency, with its roadside bombs, or criminals engaging in mass kidnappings that are defeating the U.S. mission. It is the fact that our civilian leadership has cast victory in Iraq as a stable, democratic government. Building the parameters for mission success upon values and goals that the Iraqis themselves do not care for is potentially leading us toward a political defeat, despite our strength of arms. Accordingly, the disconnect between a nondemocratic Iraqi culture and U.S. political goals will not be settled by sending more troops.



U.S. Army/Sgt. Armando Monroig

We have been squeezing the balloon with anti-insurgent operations for four years, clamping down on one area only to watch it bulge elsewhere. Today’s theory is that enough kinetic force exerted upon Baghdad and Al Anbar province will win the day or buy enough time for the Iraqis to “stabilize” and provide their own security. The fact that it has been tried before in Fallujah, Najaf and a variety of other Sunni Triangle hot spots, without resolving the long-term political problems, is not deterring the administration’s planners.

This deadly game of “catch the insurgent,” which the U.S. military is playing, will continue indefinitely until it is the Iraqis who are controlling their own streets and until the Iraqis have determined that they no longer wish to fight, based upon values important to their culture. There will be much more sectarian bloodshed before this happens—a hard fact the politicians do not want to recognize. Before stability can be restored it may require engaging our strategic enemies in discussions and deal making—another hard fact the administration does not want to recognize. It may even require partitioning the country into autonomous regions, a solution fraught with complexities that the administration will not even discuss in its rush to pump more combat troops into the mix.



Iraqi soldiers discovered this cache of munitions in a home in Biaj.

There is no easy solution in Iraq, but the discourse in Washington that considers no diplomatic or political avenues to resolve a political problem stands an excellent chance of seizing strategic political defeat from the jaws of our 2003 battlefield victory. Clausewitz stated that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Current U.S. civilian policymakers have morphed this into: “War is the only policy for political means in Iraq.” This short-sighted view is the most likely to lead to the very political defeat the administration fears.

My knowledge of Iraqi culture and politics is not based upon Green Zone PowerPoint briefings or intelligence reports prepared by State Department or CIA staffers. It was gained working in the field with—and sometimes against—the Iraqis. Some of the seven pillars I have learned are not comfortable to accept, and ignoring them is tempting. Unless those who have served outside the Green Zone in Iraq relate their knowledge and experience, without regard to backlash or stepping on toes, the next four years will make the past four years seem like “the good old days.” The one conclusion coming out of Washington that is directly on point comes from Recommendation 41 of the *Iraq Study Group Report*:

The United States must make it clear to the Iraqi government that the United States could carry out its plans, including planned redeployments, even if Iraq does not implement its planned changes. America’s other security needs and the future of our military cannot be made hostage to the actions or inactions of the Iraqi government.

This brief paragraph succinctly captures the most important lesson I learned in Iraq. Our continued—and proposed expanded—military presence in Iraq, in a backwards and unintended fashion, enables the violent status quo to be perpetuated, rather than fixing it. Our troops, while battling a largely Sunni-dominated insurgency, are the insurance policy for those same Sunnis that the Shiites, with

their three-to-one population advantage will not simply wipe the Sunnis from the map. Our continued presence provides a rallying cry and excuse for a violent insurgency killing its own people, which can be wrapped up in an attractive “defeat the American occupiers” wrapper.

Our continued presence is also the insurance policy for the lives of the Iraqi government bureaucrats who have sided with the Coalition. Despite their public pronouncements to their

people and to the United States that they wish to have U.S. forces depart, these Iraqi officials have little desire to see the American military disappearing over the horizon, leaving them alone with a weak government, an uncertain military and a combative civil population. In short, while our continued (or the proposed expanded) presence has outlived its usefulness and benefits both the insurgency and the weak Iraqi government, it does little to promote the long-term political stability in Iraq that is in our national interest.

In light of the seven pillars, if one ties the duration or size of the U.S. military presence to political progress by the Iraqi government, one better strap in for a mission of indefinite duration and perpetual sectarian violence. Conversely, if one wishes to jump-start Iraqi political progress, reducing the presence of U.S. troops or their active involvement in combat operations (accepting that this will lead to greater sectarian bloodshed in the short run) creates a possible incentive for the Shiite and Sunni desert traders to barter terms for coexistence—survival and preservation of their tribal social orders.

Our civilian leadership, desperately seeking to avoid the embarrassment of political defeat in Iraq, proposes to send in its military reserve, calling it “a temporary surge” for political consumption. From a military operational standpoint this will enable us to kick in more doors, kill more bad guys and secure more territory—in the short run. From the strategic political standpoint this will expose the inability of a weak Iraqi government to rule its own people, create more civilian casualties among an already embittered populace and likely become the final straw, rendering open domestic political opposition to our continued military presence in Iraq acceptable to a war-weary citizenry. In the end, by ignoring the cultural and internal political realities of Iraq in favor of a one-dimensional approach based upon military remedies, the civilian leadership of our military will likely win the battle and lose the war.

