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In or Out

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When it comes to Iraq, September will be coming early this year — like now.

Democrats, and a growing number of Republicans, are determined not to wait until September for the president to report on whether the surge is working. The American people have had enough. They want out. As we move into the endgame, though, the public needs to understand that neither Republicans nor Democrats are presenting them with a realistic strategy.

Obviously, President Bush's stay-the-course approach is bankrupt. It shows no signs of producing any self-sustaining — and that is the metric — unified, stable Iraq. But the various gradual, partial withdrawal proposals by many Democrats and dissident Republicans are not realistic either. The passions that have been unleashed in Iraq are not going to accommodate some partial withdrawal plan, where we just draw down troops, do less patrolling, more training and fight Al Qaeda types. It's a fantasy.

The minute we start to withdraw, all hell will break loose in the areas we leave, and there will be a no-holds-barred contest for power among Iraqi factions. Our staying there with, say, half as many troops, will not be sustainable.

Look at the British in Basra. The British forces there have slowly receded into a single base at Basra airport. And what has happened? The void has been filled by a vicious contest for power among Shiite warlords, gangs and clans, and British troops are still being killed whenever they venture out.

As the International Crisis Group recently reported from Basra: "Basra's political arena is in the hands of actors engaged in bloody competition for resources, undermining what is left of governorate institutions and coercively enforcing their rule. Far from being a model to replicate, Basra is an example of what to avoid. With renewed violence and instability, Basra illustrates the pitfalls of a transitional process that has led to the collapse of the state apparatus."

We must not kid ourselves: our real choices in Iraq are either all in or all out — with the exception of Kurdistan. If those are our only real choices, then we need to look clearly at each.

Staying in means simply containing the Iraqi civil war, but at the price of Americans and Iraqis continuing to die, and at the price of the U.S. having no real leverage on the parties inside or outside of Iraq to negotiate a settlement, because everyone knows we're staying so they can dither. Today, U.S. soldiers are making the maximum sacrifice so Iraqi politicians can hold to their maximum positions.

Getting out, on the other hand, means more ethnic, religious and tribal killings all across Iraq. It will be one of the most morally ugly scenes you can imagine — no less than Darfur. You will see U.S. troops withdrawing and Iraqi civilians and soldiers who have supported us clinging to our tanks for protection as we rumble out the door. We need to take with us everyone who helped us and wants out, and give green cards to as many Iraqis as possible.

But getting out has at least four advantages. First, no more Americans will be dying while refereeing a civil war. Second, the fear of an all-out civil war, as we do prepare to leave, may be the last best hope for getting the Iraqis to reach an 11th-hour political agreement. Third, as the civil war in Iraq plays out, it could, painfully, force the realignment of communities on the ground that may create a more stable foundation upon which to build a federal settlement.

Fourth, we will restore our deterrence with Iran. Tehran will no longer be able to bleed us through its proxies in Iraq, and we will be much freer to hit Iran — should we ever need to — once we're out. Moreover, Iran will by default inherit management of the mess in southern Iraq, which, in time, will be an enormous problem for Tehran.

For all these reasons, I prefer setting a withdrawal date, but accompanying it with a last-ditch U.N.-led — not U.S. — diplomatic effort to get the Iraqi parties to resolve their political differences. If they can, then any withdrawal can be postponed. If they can't agree — even with a gun to their heads about to go off — then staying is truly pointless and leaving by a set date is the only option.

“It is one thing to try to break up a fight between two people who disagree; it is another thing to try to break up a riot,” said Michael Mandelbaum, a foreign policy expert at Johns Hopkins. “You just get sucked into the middle.”

We need to determine — now, today — whether this is a fight that can be resolved or a riot that we need to build a wall around and wait until it exhausts itself.

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