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Iraqis Show Us The Door

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For those like myself who oppose the "surge" in Iraq and seek a timetable for withdrawal, the hard question is: what happens if all hell breaks loose?

What happens if the removal of U.S. troops leads to large-scale massacres, to a regional war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, to Kurdish-Arab-Turkmen fighting in Kirkuk, to a Turkish invasion of Kurdistan? Conservatives have a right to ask: why advocate a withdrawal that could lead to genocide in Iraq?

The first part of a response is to doubt President Bush's premise that a buildup is necessarily the best way to avoid a cataclysm. Iraqis themselves don't think so. On the contrary, one poll last fall found that 78 percent of Iraqis believed that American troops provoked more violence than they prevented.

Another poll, conducted by the State Department and reported by The Washington Post, found that nearly three-quarters of Baghdad residents would feel safer if American forces left Iraq. So if our aim is to avoid catastrophic bloodshed in Iraq, it may well be that we're more likely to accomplish that by leaving rather than staying.

A second point is that the bloodshed can end only after Shiite leaders make political concessions to Sunnis, and our presence may be impeding that kind of political settlement. Once we set a deadline for departure, the Shiite leaders will look into the abyss -- the prospect of Iraq, on their watch, splintering forever -- and that may encourage moves toward a political settlement.

In any case, it doesn't work when we want to stay in Iraq more than the Iraqis want us there.

Not only do polls show that Iraqis overwhelmingly want U.S. troops gone within a year, but Iraqi leaders themselves are cool to Mr. Bush's surge. "The problem is not more troops or less troops," the Iraqi vice president, Adil Abdul Mahdi, told me over lunch last month in Davos.

We shouldn't send our troops into harm's way unless Iraqis are pleading for them. If we're the ones begging for the opportunity to shed blood in Baghdad, it's time to come home.

There are a few other steps we can take to reduce the chance of large-scale massacres. David Scheffer, a former U.S. ambassador at large for war crimes issues, suggests putting the Iraqi government on an "atrocities watch": warning Iraqi leaders that they can be prosecuted if Shiite militias and the Iraqi police slaughter Sunnis with impunity. All this might lead Iraq's leaders to restrain their militias.

Then there's diplomacy: we have to get the help of Iraq's neighbors, especially Iran, to pursue our common interest in a stable Iraq (just as we had Iran's cooperation five years ago in overthrowing the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan).

Instead we are going down a path of escalation. Two of the Iranian officials arrested by the U.S. recently were actually in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government to try to bring stability, Mr. Mahdi told me.

I've been asking experts what they think the odds are that the U.S. will strike Iranian nuclear sites in Mr. Bush's remaining two years in office. A common answer is about a 30 percent chance (plus maybe a 20 percent chance that Israel will strike). If that happened, Iran would make our troops pay a horrendous price in Iraq and Afghanistan alike.

Speaking of Afghanistan, a thoughtful new report from the Council on Foreign Relations notes that Iraq is siphoning off so many resources that we could end up failing in Afghanistan as well. The report warns that Iraq is all-consuming and makes it difficult for the U.S. to address other priorities.

"U.S. interests in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region can be more effectively advanced if the United States disengages from Iraq," the report declares. "Indeed, the sooner Washington grasps this nettle, the sooner it can begin to repair the damage that has been done to America's international position. Staying longer means more damage and a later start on repair."

So at the end of the day, genocide is possible in Iraq, but there's no crystal ball to tell anyone what will happen if we stay or go. Keeping troops in Iraq has steadily increased the risk of a bloodbath. The best way to reduce that risk is, I think, to announce a timetable for withdrawal and to begin a different kind of surge: of diplomacy.

A majority of Iraqis may well be right in thinking that we are part of the problem rather than the solution -- and maybe a phased withdrawal will nudge Iraqis back from the brink and make a cataclysm less likely.