

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1871  
March 28, 2008

## Iraq: Pause in Troop Drawdown Makes Sense

*James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and James Phillips*

In recent days, there has been an uptick of fighting in Iraq. Shiite militia groups have battled with government security forces in Basra, and the fighting has spilled over into Baghdad and other cities. In contrast to the spiraling violence two years ago, when Iranian-backed extremists and al-Qaeda terrorists tried to goad the country toward a sectarian civil war, this round of fighting reflects the deep divisions among various factions within the Shiite community.

While Iraq has made remarkable progress over the past year in virtually every category including security, economic growth, and humanitarian issues, the recent troubles demonstrate that political stability at the national level is still in doubt. A proposal by General Petraeus, the military commander on the scene, to pause the reduction of U.S. troops after the surge runs its course and subsides this summer therefore makes eminent sense.

**U.S. Forces Are Needed.** The U.S. military presence is an indispensable stabilizing force; its effective employment in training and supporting Iraqi security forces, defeating al-Qaeda, and improving security conditions so that refugees can return to their homes is important in helping the Iraqis achieve peace and stability. While the long-term presence of American combat troops is not in the interests of the United States or the Iraqi government, *how* U.S. troops leave Iraq (when the country is clearly on the path to peace and stability) is much more important than *when* the troops come home. The Bush Administration and Congress should fully

support the recommendation on force levels from the commander on the ground.

The fighting in Basra has clearly revealed the continuing dependence of Iraqi security forces on American forces, which were drawn more deeply into the fighting after the Iraqi government offensive bogged down. The Basra violence also exposed the vicious jockeying of rival Shiite political parties that reflexively mix politics with the brazen use of force as a bargaining tool. Iraq's government, dominated by Prime Minister Maliki's own Dawa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, now has come down hard on the Mahdi Army militia of the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and an assortment of criminal gangs that have flourished in the chaotic environment created by the premature withdrawal of British troops from Basra.

Moqtada al-Sadr thus far remains curiously detached from the conflict. He remains in seclusion, reportedly in neighboring Iran, where he ostensibly is receiving religious training to burnish his limited scholarly credentials. Rumored to be in ill-health, he appears to be increasingly indecisive and is losing control of his own Mahdi Army militia. While many of his own militia commanders publicly call for the end of the cease-fire he proclaimed last year,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Iraq/wm1871.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Iraq/wm1871.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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al-Sadr has yet to declare himself on that important issue. The longer the fighting in Basra persists, the greater the chances that the Mahdi Army will revert to its previous armed opposition to the Iraqi government and coalition forces.

**U.S. Interests.** Winning in Iraq and helping the Iraqis get on the road to peace and stability is clearly in America's interest. The eruption of a full-blown civil war in Iraq and a widespread humanitarian crisis could further destabilize the region. Abandoning the people of Iraq would enable Iran's regional expansion and al-Qaeda's effort to establish a sanctuary in the heart of the Middle East. Turning its back on Iraq would lead America's other friends and allies, including those trying to finish off al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to question American commitment and resolve. Finally, a stable and prosperous Iraq would do much to stimulate progress

throughout the region or at least help to prevent it from becoming even more unstable.

There is no way to achieve these important goals without patiently aiding the Iraqis by putting men and women in uniform in harm's way. The Bush Administration and Congress must give the commander on the ground the resources to get the job done. Both should weigh carefully the recommendations of General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker when they testify before Congress next month.

—James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Assistant Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Senior Research Fellow in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, and James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Allison Center, at The Heritage Foundation.