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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Tolerable or Awful: The Roads Left in Iraq

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I had to submit this column before knowing the results of yesterday's election, but here is one thing I know already: this needs to be our last election about Iraq.

The Iraq war has turned into a sucking chest wound for our country — infecting its unity at home and its standing abroad. No one can predict what Iraq will look like 10 years from now. I wish it well. But in the near term, it is clear, nothing that we'll feel particularly proud of, nothing that we'll feel justifies the vast expenditure of lives and treasure, is going to come out of Iraq.

Our only two options left today in Iraq are “tolerable” and “awful.” “Good” is no longer on the menu. When you read stories from Iraq saying that all we need to do is get rid of all the police there, get onethird of the soldiers in the Iraqi Army to actually report to duty regularly, and replace all the ministers who are corrupt, you know why “good” is not on the menu anymore.

It's time to make a final push for the tolerable, and if that fails, quit Iraq and insulate ourselves and our allies from the awful. This can't go on.

That's sad. Iraq was always a struggle of hope against history. After 9/11, and the Arab Human Development Report detailing the increasingly dysfunctional Arab-Muslim world — which produces way too many terrorists — we had a real interest in collaborating with Iraqis to try to build one decent, progressive, democratizing society in the heart of the Arab East.

But to succeed we needed to establish a secure order in Iraq and prevent the murderous Sunni/Baathist attacks on Shiites. The Bush team, arriving in Iraq with too few troops and no plans, failed to do

either. And therefore the natural tribalism of Iraqis surfaced and the minimal trust between citizens needed to forge a real democracy never emerged. Now we have a tit-for-tat civil war.

The “tolerable” outcome that might be self-sustaining and stable would require reshaping Iraq as a loose federation of predominantly Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni zones. To make even that work, though, would probably require cutting a new deal with Iran and its Iraqi Shiite clients, and Syria and its Sunni Baathist allies, and the Kurds. Iraq would retain a central government in Baghdad, but power and oil income would be more radically decentralized among the different sects. Democracy would be subordinated to stability.

A small U.S. or U.N. force could remain in Iraq to police the boundaries between the three communities and make sure the ongoing violence is contained. To produce even this, though, the U.S. will probably need to set a date and threaten to leave. Otherwise, the parties won’t negotiate seriously.

“Awful” would be carrying out that threat to leave Iraq by a fixed date because Iraqis prove too angry and atomized to reach any deal. The fires of madness now raging in Iraq — people beheading each other, blowing up each other’s mosques — would all intensify.

A U.S. withdrawal under such conditions would be messy and shameful. But when people are that intent on killing each other there’s not much we can do. As bad as we’ve performed in Iraq, what Iraqis have done to each other, and the little that other Muslims have done to stop them, is an even bigger travesty.

Still, we’d need to give visas to Iraqis who wanted to flee the madness; we’d need to give a security umbrella to the Kurds, so that Syria, Turkey or Iran did not invade them if we left; and we’d need to protect Jordan from the spillover.

But there would be some strategic benefits. Syria would have to support the Sunnis in Iraq, and Iran would have to back the Shiites, so these two “allies” would be on opposite sides of the civil war. Iran would also have to manage the chaos in southern Iraq, particularly the Shiite militias, and this would be a permanent migraine for Tehran. U.S. troops would no longer be in range of Iranian retaliation, and therefore would be much freer to confront Iran’s nuclear challenge. The U.S. would also be able to extract itself from the Abu Ghraib/occupation syndrome and could start combating Islamist radicalism by being the best America rather than the worst.

Finally, Iraqi instability would push oil to \$80 a barrel. That would mean more people buying hybrid cars and investing in alternative energy, so that we end our dependence on this region sooner.

These are our real choices in Iraq now: tolerable and awful. It's time we choose. No more expending lives and treasure for nothing good. The only way we can pursue good in the world again is by either shrinking our presence in Iraq, if Iraqis will step up, or leaving entirely, if they won't.