

Obama should ignore calls to get more deeply involved in Iraq

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With the Iraqi government struggling to put down an insurgency with suspected ties to al Qaeda, Sen. John McCain on Sunday urged President Obama to send retired Army General David Petraeus and former Ambassador Ryan Crocker to try to help. But such calls ignore the reality on the ground in Iraq, and here in the United States. U.S. involvement is unlikely to turn the tide against the insurgency, but risks drawing the country back into a war that Americans don't want to fight.

Certainly, sending Crocker and Petraeus would be a far cry from boots on the ground, but the dynamic duo does not possess a magic elixir to fix Iraq's broken politics. Even Petraeus's former executive officer doubts that Americans could make much headway with Maliki. As retired Col. Peter Mansoor wrote last week, fighting al Qaeda in Iraq is Maliki's problem, not America's, and the United States should only support an Iraqi government that is "worth supporting."

But, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, you have to engage with the negotiating partner that you have, not the one that you wish you had. And that means dealing with Maliki.

Which is why McCain's call for Petraeus and Crocker to return to Iraq is so misguided. Maliki ignored the two Americans at the height of the surge, and is likely to do so again. In March 2008, Maliki sent his forces on an ill-conceived assault in the southern city of Basra. U.S. troops were eventually dragged into an operation that Petraeus had opposed, but was unable to stop.

Petraeus and Crocker were similarly unable to convince Maliki to reconcile with the minority Sunni community and former Saddam Hussein loyalists in 2008 and 2009. Iraqi Sunnis had oppressed the majority Shiite population for decades, and there was little appetite among Maliki's constituents to let bygones be bygones. Attitudes haven't changed much in the ensuing half decade. Were Maliki to make concessions to his political opponents today, it would open him up to a challenge from within his governing coalition, only a few months before a new round of parliamentary elections.

Petraeus and Crocker couldn't even convince Maliki to sign a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States. Such agreements are standard in nearly every place where U.S. troops are stationed, and afford crucial legal protections to America's men and women in uniform. Sen. McCain and others suggested leaving U.S. troops in Iraq without a SOFA, which would have exposed U.S. troops to the vagaries of Iraqi justice. The Obama administration wisely ignored that advice, correctly interpreting Iraq's refusal to negotiate a SOFA in good faith as a sign that Iraqis were tired of American meddling in their internal affairs.

It is not a coincidence that today's most fervent advocates of deeper U.S. involvement in Iraq were the most vocal boosters of the war in 2002 and 2003. They systematically ignored, and at times suppressed, the knowledge of regional experts in the CIA and State Department who warned that Iraq was almost certain to descend into civil war after the dictator's ouster. *The Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol quipped in April 2003 that fears that Iraq's Shiite and Sunni populations couldn't get along was just so much "pop psychology." "There is almost no evidence of that at all," he said.

The past decade has revealed the war advocates' ignorance of Iraqi politics. But recent events confirm that they are equally ignorant of U.S. politics. They lament that President Obama wasn't prepared to leave U.S. troops in Iraq indefinitely, but neither were the American people. And Americans are even less inclined to become embroiled there again.

Sen. McCain and other advocates of deeper U.S. involvement in the Iraqi civil war seem to be aware of U.S. public opinion. The current proposals do not resemble a replay of 2003, with tens of thousands of U.S. troops being sent back into the maelstrom. They could ultimately end up that way, however. Such risks are particularly unwise given that the prospects of success are dim.

Although some in Washington harbored fantasies about nation building in Iraq, Americans never intended to solve that country's problems, in part because they understood that we lacked the ability to do so. That remains the case today. The Iraqi government has a fight on its hands, and it is a fight that it must win on its own terms.