

Rebuilding U.S. Influence in Iraq One Meeting at a Time

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The Strategic Framework Agreement offers an unspectacular but important roadmap for the recapitalization of U.S. influence in Iraq, particularly in terms of security, energy, and capacity-building commitments.

This week's Washington summit between Secretary of State John Kerry and Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari also marks the fifth meeting of the Political and Diplomatic Joint Coordination Committee (JCC), one of seven thematic JCCs established under the bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) signed in November 2008. Intended to provide a means of maintaining close contact between Washington and Baghdad after the U.S. withdrawal, the SFA sought to develop a "durable and mutually beneficial relationship" that would at the same time "protect U.S. interests." But the agreement could also provide a slow, workmanlike method of rebuilding U.S. influence in Iraq.

REVISITING THE SFA

The eight-page SFA established the following JCCs to push bilateral relations forward:

- *Political Affairs and Diplomatic Cooperation.* This committee aims to "support and strengthen Iraq's democracy and its democratic institutions," a strong formulation intended to keep the United States engaged in Iraq's internal affairs. The committee also supports Baghdad's efforts to develop positive relations in the region and has met at least once a year since 2009, most recently when Zebari and U.S. assistant secretary of state Elizabeth Jones co-chaired discussions in Baghdad on September 2, 2012. Commonly recurring issues handled by this committee include U.S. support for Iraqi elections, UN Chapter VII items, relations with Kuwait and Syria, and refugee issues.
- *Security and Defense Cooperation.* This committee aims to foster closer defense relations primarily through overt

means such as arms sales, training, and exercises. Counterterrorism and intelligence assistance has likely been handled behind closed doors by the U.S. intelligence community under Title 50 of the U.S. Code (as opposed to Title 22 authority, shared between the State and Defense Departments). The committee has met frequently, including two summits led by the secretary of defense last year.

- *Energy Cooperation.* This committee aims to strengthen Iraq's economy and power sector, and to serve U.S. economic interests by ensuring that Iraq lives up to its potential as the largest source of new oil in the global market over the next two decades. Surprisingly, it met for the first time on April 23, 2012, and has not formally convened since. Nevertheless, bilateral energy collaboration has progressed steadily in the background, covering issues such as critical infrastructure protection and the diversification of hydrocarbon export infrastructure.
- *Law Enforcement and Judicial Cooperation.* This committee aims to develop Iraq's criminal justice system, police, and anticorruption capabilities. Although police training efforts have been drastically scaled down due to funding shortfalls and security constraints, the committee continues to provide support to judicial projects, most recently at a June 4 meeting in Baghdad.
- *Cultural and Education Cooperation.* This committee aims to preserve Iraq's heritage and build stronger bilateral educational and professional exchanges. It has met once or twice a year (most recently on December 17 in Baghdad), executing a busy roster of higher education, exchange, and heritage projects.
- *Services, Technology, Environment, and Transportation Cooperation.* This committee aims to strengthen Iraq's infrastructure and service delivery capacity. It appears to have met for the first time on November 28, 2012, and has not met since. Yet it has a significant potential contribution to make through capacity-building in vital sectors such as health, agriculture, sanitation, drinking water, and private-sector job creation.
- *Trade and Finance Cooperation.* This committee aims to help Iraq diversify its economy and integrate into the global economic system. Meeting once a year (most recently in Baghdad on March 6), it focuses on bilateral business links, private banking, and microfinance.

The SFA also led to the establishment of the Higher Coordinating Committee (HCC), a top-level body intended to oversee the work of the other committees. It last met on November 30, 2011, in Baghdad, with Vice President Biden and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki co-chairing.

THE KERRY-ZEBARI MEETING

During this week's summit, U.S. and Iraqi officials will no doubt discuss the ongoing crisis in Syria as well as Baghdad's relations with Iran -- particularly Iraq's growing role as a loophole through which Tehran can lessen the impact of financial and energy-related sanctions. The meeting is an opportunity to show Baghdad that Washington will play a more robust role in Syria, and to highlight how Iraq can help mediate the crisis. Down the road, the JCC might also be able to draw Baghdad and key Gulf states like Saudi Arabia closer together, making Shiite-led Iraq feel more welcome among its Sunni-dominated Arab neighbors while reducing sectarian tensions at home and throughout the region.

In addition, the meeting is a chance to begin setting the context for Iraq's vital 2014 national elections -- the first since the U.S. military withdrawal. The importance of these elections cannot be overstated. Many Iraqis believe that the United States helped tip the government formation process toward Maliki following the 2010 elections, appearing to back the incumbent for stability's sake; the result has arguably been greater instability. This time, Washington must show Iraqis that it stands behind the democratic process rather than any particular outcome. This is the moment to begin emphasizing -- consistently and insistently -- that the next elections be free, fair, and punctual. The two-month delay of provincial elections in Anbar and Ninawa must not become a test case for postponing national elections on security grounds. After all, the United States can draw on tremendous credibility --

having literally been there and done that -- by noting that three sets of polls were held on time in 2005 under security conditions no better than today's.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Local sensitivities to U.S. interference and the dearth of additional U.S. funds for aid spending will necessarily complicate any effort to strengthen relations with Iraq. Yet Washington seems to sense that enough time has passed since withdrawal, and that Iraq may be ripe for reenergized relations through the SFA. For example, the Obama administration has noted that key JCCs should meet on a quarterly basis; although this has not yet been possible due to scheduling difficulties, it is the right idea.

Indeed, influence can be rebuilt one meeting at a time. Persistence pays in Iraq, and the United States has a lot to offer a country where every sector of the economy lacks technocratic capacity, and where U.S. prowess is still fresh in the memory of many officials. Regular meetings are better than losing momentum, even if some must be held via video conferencing (e.g., Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attended the first HCC meeting that way).

The United States also has a bevy of opportunities for high-impact projects. A determined effort is already under way to encourage (but not fund) development of Iraq's north-south strategic oil and gas pipeline system and facilitate export spurs to Jordan and Turkey. Less obviously, Washington could help Iraq engage consultants to guide its refining sector; local expertise on this issue is limited due to the retirement of veteran professionals, and the sector received relatively scant treatment in Baghdad's recently released Integrated National Energy Strategy. U.S. advice may also be welcome regarding the design and operation of maximum security prisons following nearly a dozen major jailbreaks in the past year. And in local governance, the late June amendment of Iraq's provincial powers law will transform a number of governor's offices into multi-billion-dollar spending units -- a responsibility for which they are entirely unprepared. To increase their spending capacity and reduce waste and corruption, a major Iraqi-funded, U.S.-designed local capacity-building program is desperately needed.

Finally, the United States should make sure that a Higher Coordinating Committee meeting is held this year, presumably in Washington. No HCC meeting was held in 2012, a clear symbol of Iraq's political deterioration and the White House's distractedness, if not aversion to Iraqi affairs. Amid a deepening security crisis, Iraq's political leaders are tentatively pulling together, so Washington should back this process by clearly signaling its commitment to the country's future. Ideally, this would mean President Obama and Maliki themselves participating in the next HCC meeting, timed to coincide with banner commitments on security, energy, and capacity-building. Iraq's 2014 elections could be a make-or-break moment for Iraq and for U.S. interests in the region. Ramping up bilateral engagement before then is the best way to begin rebuilding U.S. influence in this vital country.

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