

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

What the United States Can Leave Behind in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

In recent weeks, a number of deadly terrorist attacks in Iraq have highlighted the fact that even after seven years of counterinsurgency and stability operations, the United States still faces major challenges in realizing its long-term goal of establishing an Iraq that is, in the words of President Barack Obama, "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant."

Although these events -- including a series of coordinated attacks on August 25 that killed more than 50 people in 13 cities across Iraq -- underscore that security is still job number one for the United States in Iraq, several other factors will affect Washington's ability to work with Baghdad to preserve the security gains of recent years, build a strategic partnership with the government and people of Iraq, and shape and influence future developments there.

In transitional democracies, the second election often determines whether nascent democratic processes will take root and prove sustainable. Iraq's first parliamentary elections under its new constitution were held in December 2005 and led to the formation of the current government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The second elections were held in March 2010 and produced a draw; no single party received enough votes to form a government on its own, and none has proven willing in the seven months since then to make the compromises necessary to form a coalition government. Some U.S. officials have hinted darkly that continued political gridlock could inspire a coup led by military officers who are frustrated with Iraq's squabbling politicians (although a coup is unlikely to occur as long as U.S. forces remain in Iraq).

To avoid further instability, Washington is pushing for an Iraqi government that is "inclusive, representative, and accountable to the Iraqi people," according to U.S. officials in Baghdad. The U.S. government has also reportedly floated a power-sharing plan that would trim the powers of the prime minister and expand those of the Political Council for National Security in the hopes of speeding up the government formation process by increasing the size of the political pie that could be divided among the contending parties.

Iraq's immediate future will be determined by the country's elected leaders. And although the United States cannot compel them to form an inclusive government -- or even any government at all -- it can indicate that failing to do so will undermine U.S. support for the kind of long-term partnership desired by nearly every major Iraqi party (with the exception of the Sadrists, who reject such a partnership with the United States). That said, the status quo could continue for some time.

U.S. influence will be more effective once a new government is formed. Yet U.S. influence in Iraq is not what it was when Washington had billions of reconstruction dollars to spend (although, even then, effectively wielding this influence was often more easily said than done). Today, the United States needs to be more resourceful in identifying sources of influence, more focused in applying this influence, and more modest in what it tries to achieve with the influence it still commands.

The United States still retains the authority to bring Iraqis together to resolve problems and is uniquely positioned to help Iraq normalize its ties with its Arab neighbors and the international community. Moreover, many Iraqi military officers believe that their country needs the kind of close security relationship with the United States that has brought stability to other Arab countries. This provides Washington with a card to play in dealing with Iraq's political leadership.

Perhaps the greatest potential source of U.S. influence in Iraq is the fear that many Iraqis harbor about their country's future. Many see a relationship with the United States as the only insurance policy against a return of sectarian militias and al Qaeda in Iraq, government repression and unilateralism (for example, on the issue of disputed internal boundaries), a military coup, a Baathist revival, or undue Iranian influence. But translating this influence into tangible political results will remain difficult -- as even Tehran's diplomats, who have failed to achieve several of their major objectives in Iraq, have learned.

Washington's ability to influence developments in Iraq will be further complicated by the civilian drawdown that has accompanied the U.S. military drawdown. Even as the U.S. embassy in Baghdad has assumed the lead in representing U.S. interests in Iraq, it has reduced its footprint in the provinces. The number of provincial reconstruction teams dropped from 23 in 2009 to 16 this year; over the course of 2011, those teams will morph into just two temporary embassy branch offices in Mosul and Kirkuk, which will remain open for three to five years before themselves closing, and two permanent consulates in Erbil and Basra. As a result, the United States is losing critical situational awareness, potentially leaving the embassy in Baghdad dangerously in the dark on developments in the provinces. Moreover, the unsettled security situation in several critical provinces is likely to continue to constrain the freedom of movement of U.S. diplomats, further exacerbating this problem.

As a result of having spent seven years on the ground and carefully cultivating relationships with major local leaders, the U.S. military possesses a wealth of information regarding Iraqi society and local politics. This knowledge and these relationships are critical to the future U.S. role in Iraq and need to be transferred to the U.S. diplomatic team -- although it is unclear whether this is happening to the extent that is desirable.

This diminution of situational awareness will entail significant risks. For this reason, it could make sense for the U.S. embassy in Baghdad to retain the services of a small group of mid-level military officers who have served in the provinces and whose contacts throughout the country may prove useful in the coming years.

Yet no U.S. strategy can be truly effective without tackling Iraqi corruption. According to Transparency International, Iraq is one of the most corrupt states in the world, ranking 176 out of 180 countries. Stuart Bowen, the U.S. special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, has called corruption in Iraq "the second insurgency."

The impact of corruption is pervasive. It undermines security, as insurgents and terrorists bribe Iraqi soldiers, police, and even judges to ignore their activities and to release detainees; it corrodes faith in the political system, thereby threatening long-term prospects for democracy; and it weakens the legitimacy of mainstream political parties and creates grievances that extremist parties are able to exploit. Since corrupt officials often distribute their ill-gotten gains to cronies sharing a common ethnic or sectarian identity, corruption also feeds ethnic and sectarian resentments and tensions.

For these reasons, the United States should continue pressing the Iraqi government to enforce existing anticorruption laws and regulations, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and pass new laws and regulations where appropriate. These efforts will enjoy only limited success, however, as long as Iraq's civilian and military leaders tolerate or benefit from corruption.

The Obama administration has consistently framed the U.S. military role in Iraq in terms of the impending U.S. troop withdrawal mandated by the security agreement between the two countries. It is time to move beyond this narrowly framed view of the military relationship. Iraq's potential role as a player in the Levant and a central actor in the Gulf means that a long-term security relationship between Washington and Baghdad is in the U.S. national interest. Moreover, senior Iraqi military officials have expressed doubts about the ability of Iraq's security forces to maintain order in the country without U.S. support, while Iraq's air force, which lacks modern combat aircraft, will not be ready to secure its airspace by the 2011 withdrawal date.

Therefore, the United States has an interest in maintaining a residual military presence in Iraq after 2011 -- perhaps one or two brigades with 5,000-10,000 soldiers -- if, of course, the Iraqi government asks for it. But Iraq's leaders must also understand that the American people will support a post-2011 security relationship only if they believe that Iraq has an effective government that is responsive to U.S. concerns.

Washington should be careful not to ask Baghdad to take on more security responsibilities than it can handle. The United States should focus on improving Iraq's ability to confront terrorism within its borders and helping to deter intervention by meddling neighbors such as Iran -- but it should not, at this time, enlist a still fragile Iraq as an ally in containing Iran.

The history of post-conflict states suggests that Iraq will gain political strength and cohesion, and will have a better chance of avoiding renewed civil war, if it goes through a national reconciliation process. Iraq, however, is not yet a true post-conflict society. Continuing attacks by al Qaeda are likely to further entrench sectarianism as a factor in Iraqi politics and society and have the potential to spark even further violence.

To date, Iraq has experienced only "tactical reconciliation" -- the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former Sunni and Shiite insurgents. It has not experienced the kind of broad-based national reconciliation process that took place, for instance, in Argentina, El Salvador, and South Africa.

For now, Iraq's best hope may be "reconciliation through politics," in which a broad-based governing coalition would give elements from every community a stake in the political order. But it is just as easy to imagine Iraqi politics spawning a new round of ethnic and sectarian violence should key Sunni or Sadrist politicians be excluded from a coalition government, or should tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil boil over once U.S. forces leave. Preventing such violence may be the best argument for an enduring, albeit much reduced, U.S. military presence in Iraq.

The sine qua non for a successful national reconciliation process is courageous, far-sighted leadership. Iraq currently lacks such leaders, although that does not mean steps cannot be taken now to lay the groundwork for reconciliation. To this end, the U.S. military and the U.S. embassy should work with the government of Iraq, international and Iraqi nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations to draw up a blueprint for a national reconciliation process that incorporates lessons from elsewhere but that also reflects Iraqi cultural values, preferences, and political realities.

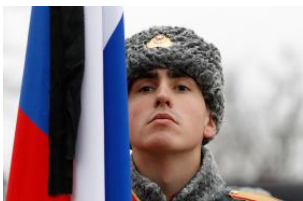
If Iraq can avoid another major round of sectarian blood-letting and produce courageous, far-sighted leaders committed to national reconciliation -- both big ifs -- such a blueprint for national reconciliation could well be the most important legacy that the United States ultimately bequeaths to Iraq.

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