

Iraq Withdrawal Deadline:

Subtle Shift in U.S. Mission

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

According to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the U.S. military will complete its withdrawal from Iraqi cities on June 30, 2009. The redeployments have both real and symbolic importance, and will mark a milestone in the Obama administration's cautious drawdown of Washington's military commitment. Nonetheless, the U.S. military will continue to play a vital role in consolidating and extending security gains throughout the country, particularly in the rural provinces.

The Status of Forces Agreement

The SOFA was approved by Iraq's cabinet, parliament, and presidential council during November and December 2008 and is supposed to be ratified in a national referendum by July 30, 2009, a date that may be allowed to slip to coincide with the January 2010 national elections.

The agreement's timeline is unfolding smoothly. Since its ratification, U.S. forces have begun to comply with its requirements to obtain an Iraqi warrant for military raids and to hand over new Iraqi detainees to the country's security forces within twenty-four hours. The international zone and most Iraqi airspace were returned to Iraqi sovereignty on January 1, 2009.

Article 24 of the SOFA mandates the next stage of the U.S. drawdown. Clause 2 requires all U.S. forces to "withdraw from Iraqi cities, villages, and localities" by June 30, 2009. Clause 3 explains that the U.S.-Iraqi Joint Military Operations Coordination Committee (JMOCC) will define the bases at which U.S. forces will reside. Clause 2 of Article 5 allows the U.S. military to continue using any facility that the Iraqi government permits.

The June 30 deadline is seen as a waypoint toward a full U.S. military withdrawal. Although not required by the SOFA, the Obama administration has signaled its intent to draw down to a "residual" force of thirty-five thousand to fifty thousand personnel in Iraq by August 2010. According to Article 24, Clause 1, of the SOFA, "All United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011." Either side, however, can terminate the agreement at any time by simply providing the other party with written notification of its intent to do so (in which

case the agreement would terminate one year after notification). If neither side exercises this option, the agreement expires on December 4, 2011, which means that long-term basing of U.S. forces and equipment in Iraq would need to be authorized by a new agreement signed prior to that date.

Symbolic or Substantive Change?

The U.S.-led Multinational Forces Iraq (MNFI) negotiated the SOFA and is also the lead planner for the Obama administration's military drawdown in Iraq. Although many of the requirements of the withdrawal from the "cities, villages, and localities" were fulfilled weeks or even months ago, the real impact of the deadline will be felt in Iraq's inner-city neighborhoods, where routine U.S. presence at vehicle checkpoints will cease. Iraqi forces at such outposts will operate without close U.S. supervision, as has been the case across large swathes of Iraq throughout 2009. "Unilateral" U.S. patrols will cease within these municipal areas, although local Iraqi commanders can approve joint patrols on a case-by-case basis. In many places, U.S. forces have already undertaken steps to reduce their footprint within Iraqi communities, including switching to nocturnal resupply missions, restricting daytime use of heavy vehicles, and surrendering the right of way to Iraqi civilian vehicles.

Despite these changes, much will remain the same. In some cases, the JMOCC's definition of Iraq's "cities, villages, and localities" means that U.S. forces have to move only one or two miles outside city centers; many U.S. forward operating bases were already located on the outer limits of Iraqi municipal areas. As a result of broad consensus between U.S. and Iraqi delegates on the JMOCC, U.S. forces can continue to send embedded trainers into the cities to support Iraqi battalion, brigade, and divisional headquarters. U.S. logistical, intelligence, medical, surveillance, and transport assets will continue to support Iraqi forces in urban areas. Such "detached" U.S. forces have "the right to legitimate self-defense" when operating within Iraqi cities, according to Article 4, Clause 5, of the SOFA. Some friction will undoubtedly result when militants -- based within, or retreating into, urban areas -- target U.S. forces.

Symbolically, the U.S. withdrawal has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, Iraqi resentment toward MNFI may be lessened by a lower U.S. profile. On the other hand, many Iraqis are concerned that their country's security forces cannot be trusted to deliver services evenly to all communities, due to the forces' ethnic and sectarian imbalances. Iraqis will need time to be convinced that Iraqi security forces can perform as effectively as their U.S. counterparts, such as with the screening of suicide bombers. In urban areas, U.S. forces have often been the "glue" that bound together different elements of the security system, including the provincial and district leadership, the police and police auxiliaries, the Iraqi army, the Sons of Iraq (Sunni militias), and the intelligence services.

A final negative consequence of the June 30 deadline is a problem inherent in any withdrawal timeline: adversaries will seek to ramp up their operations before the deadline in order to falsely claim credit for "pushing out" or at least "outlasting" U.S. forces. This phenomenon can be seen most clearly in Baghdad, where the situation is more dangerous today than it was three months ago. The number of reported incidents in Baghdad dropped as low as 191 in February 2009 -- the lowest level since 2003. From March until the last week of June, the average number of reported incidents per month in Baghdad has been around 270.

An Evolving U.S. Military Role

The U.S. military still has plenty to do in Iraq's provinces. In Mosul, Kirkuk, and Diyala, the U.S. military plays a significant peace enforcement role through its ability to embed units in Kurdish and Arab security forces, and to monitor and defuse tensions before they turn into violence. Without U.S. advisors on hand in September 2008, violence occurred in Khanaqin between feuding Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi army forces; in March 2009, the rapid embedding of U.S. forces with Kurdish and federal forces near Kirkuk prevented an even more serious incident from happening. The continuing commitment of U.S. forces to these areas would be a highly economical way of

preventing a major erosion of political and security gains in Iraq.

The United States also has a key role to play in rural counterinsurgency and border enforcement, two vital missions in which Iraqi forces are currently unable to take the lead. Although urban counterinsurgency is difficult, the dense population of cities quickly becomes an asset once the population has turned against the insurgency. Rural counterinsurgency is slower: the population is sparse and susceptible to intimidation, and the maintenance of a permanent security force presence across large areas of rugged terrain is difficult. In such areas -- for example, along the Iranian and Syrian borders and in rural Diyala, Anbar, and Maysan -- U.S. forces will likely be a full operational partner to the Iraqi military beyond August 2010 and possibly into 2011.

Michael Knights is the Lafer International Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. ❖

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