

Determinants of a U.S. Drawdown

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Articles & Testimony

Though committed to dramatically different Iraq policies, Barack Obama and John McCain -- the presumptive Democratic and Republican presidential nominees, respectively -- will likely be compelled to tread generally similar paths when one or the other is sworn in as president in January 2009. Obama has promised to start withdrawing US forces immediately upon taking office at the rate of 1-2 brigades per month. At this pace, US ground forces could be out of Iraq within 12-15 months of inauguration day. McCain, by contrast, has predicted that by the end of his first term in 2013 most US military personnel will have been withdrawn from Iraq.

If, however, the security gains of the "surge" can be preserved, Obama would likely be subject to intense pressures by senior US generals and diplomats and key US allies to go slow with any prospective withdrawal and to leave a significant residual force in Iraq to secure the gains of the surge and deter renewed civil war.

Moreover, it may not be possible to withdraw forces at the rate of 1-2 brigades per month while simultaneously conducting stability operations, without abandoning large quantities of munitions and equipment (thereby stoking any renewed civil violence) or destroying them in place. For these reasons, the pragmatic Obama will likely have to revise some of his Iraq campaign promises prior to or after elections. Conversely, McCain could be forced, for political and military reasons, to draw down forces quicker and deeper than he might prefer.

As the surge ends and US forces in Iraq draw down, the central question becomes: will the presence of fewer US troops create new opportunities for those intent on attacking Iraqi civilians and coalition forces? Logic would seem to say yes; the statistics so far say no. Levels of violence have continued their dramatic downward march -- though it may be too early to tell. There is, moreover, still much that could go wrong, with Kurds and Arabs in Kirkuk, Sadrists in Basra and Sadr City, and with the former insurgents of the Sunni Arab tribal awakening councils in Anbar province, Baghdad, and elsewhere.

A rapid US drawdown entails the risk of renewed civil war. Obama has stated that he might consider intervening in the event of "genocide." This could ensure that US forces remain engaged in Iraq should the drawdown coincide with renewed sectarian or ethnic violence. On the other hand, renewed civil war could lead Washington to conclude that Iraq is a hopeless case, and to accelerate the withdrawal of US forces -- regardless of who is president.

A reduced US presence is likely to consist of several elements: special forces engaged in the hunt for Mahdi Army and/or al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists, transition teams training and advising the Iraqi Security Forces and residual ground and air forces providing support and overwatch for the ISF and protecting key US military and Iraqi government facilities in Baghdad and elsewhere.

As it draws down, the US will likely increase its reliance on air power in conjunction with remaining US and Iraqi ground forces. In fact, the US is already moving in this direction, with a surge in air operations accompanying the surge in ground forces in 2007-2008. Increased emphasis, therefore, needs to be put on enhancing Iraqi intelligence gathering capabilities, improving US-Iraqi air-ground coordination, and refining tactics and procedures for targeting insurgents, sectarian militias and warlords from the air. Still, there is ultimately no substitute for effective Iraqi ground forces -- and this will be the decisive factor in determining the implications for Iraq of the US drawdown there.

Finally, it seems unlikely that the US and Iraq will sign status of forces (SOFA) or "strategic framework" agreements before the next US president takes office. These negotiations are shaping up to be a contentious affair, for historical as well as contemporary reasons. Under the monarchy (1921-1958), British influence in Iraq was formalized through two treaties: a 1922 treaty that provided for the appointment of British advisors to the Iraqi government and a 1930 treaty (signed shortly before independence) that allowed Britain to station troops and use air bases at Shu'aybah and Habbaniya, permitted British forces to transit Iraqi territory and made Iraq dependent on Britain for weapons and training.

Britain's enduring influence and the privileges awarded it under these treaties were a matter of controversy in Iraqi domestic politics and a perennial source of tension between the crown and nationalist politicians. An attempt in 1948 to extend the 1930 treaty another 25 years led to widespread riots, the resignation of the cabinet and the repudiation of the so-called Portsmouth Treaty by the new Iraqi government.

There are cautionary lessons to be learned from elsewhere in the region as well. A 1964 SOFA agreement between the United States and Iran that granted legal immunity to US personnel and (unusually) their dependents produced a harsh anti-American backlash. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini condemned the agreement -- acridly noting that the SOFA granted an American dog in Iran more rights than an Iranian citizen -- and attacked the shah and the United States, leading to Khomeini's exile to Iraq. This was a key event in Khomeini's rise to prominence and power, and it is not hard to imagine some Iraqi politician using this issue to discredit establishment politicians and gain political advantage.

Indeed, the ongoing negotiations have already provoked demonstrations by Sadrists (who are demanding that any agreements be put to a referendum), the intervention of Ayatollah Ali Sistani (who reportedly has insisted that any agreements be ratified by parliamentary vote) and the ire of Iranian officials (who have agitated against these agreements). Likewise, concerns that the Bush administration intends to commit the US to a long-term security relationship with Iraq without legislative approval have raised suspicions in Congress. For this reason, both sides might eventually conclude that it is more expedient to obtain another UN resolution, ensuring that this is likely to be one of the first issues that the next administration will have to deal with upon taking office.

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