

**United States Policy Toward Iraq: Future Challenges**  
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**Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

**“Preserving Progress:**  
**Transitioning Authority and Implementing the Strategic Framework in Iraq, Part 2”**  
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Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Ackerman, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, thank you for inviting me here today to testify about Iraq. And let me take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of all who care about Iraq and its future for keeping Iraq in the public eye.

Events of recent weeks—intensified attacks on U.S. civilian and military personnel in Iraq, ongoing political and terrorist violence against Iraqis, and tensions related to the brewing debate in Iraq about the U.S. military presence beyond 2011—underscore the fact that 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."

While these events underscore that security is still job number one for the United States and the Government of Iraq (GoI), 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 influence developments there.

The U.S. military drawdown and the transition from Department of Defense to Department of State lead in Iraq have produced a decrease in situational awareness among U.S. personnel in Iraq, with:

- the decline in the number of military boots on ground;
- the lack of relative in-country experience (most diplomats are on their first or second tour in Iraq, while many military are on their third, fourth, or fifth tour);
- the failure to institutionalize Iraq experience at State (many of the State employees with the most experience on the ground are not career employees, but 3161s who are temporary hires), and;
- diminished freedom of movement due to the loss of military mobility assets, and Department of State travel restrictions due to security concerns.

The U.S. will also face a range of additional challenges in the coming years:

**Counterterrorism.** The ongoing activities of Iranian-supported special groups, the Men of the Army of the Naqshbandiya Order (JRTN), and al-Qaida, show that there is still much to be done here. The intensified activities of Iranian-supported special groups, which have ramped-up attacks on U.S. personnel in recent months, are a special source of concern. While it may be unrealistic to expect Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to speak out openly against these Shiite special groups (since some of these groups have ties to some of his coalition partners), it is essential that his actions demonstrate that the GoI is a full partner in efforts to target these groups. Maliki's willingness to do so is a litmus test of the kind of ally he is, and the kind of relationship the U.S. can have with an Iraq under his leadership.

**Countering Iranian Influence.** Iran's attempts to wield its influence in Iraq have thus far yielded only mixed results, though the formation of a new government that incorporates many of Tehran's closest Iraqi allies and the impending U.S. military drawdown or withdrawal from Iraq, will present new opportunities for Iran to enhance its influence. It remains to be seen whether Iranian influence will continue to be "self-

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limiting” (i.e., because Iranian pressure engenders Iraqi push-back) or whether this emerging reality will create new opportunities for Tehran to transform Iraq into a weak client state via a gradual process of “Lebanonization.”

Over the long run, the nature of the relationship between Iraq and Iran will depend largely on the security situation in Iraq, the political complexion of the Iraqi government, the type of long-term relationship Iraq builds with the United States, and the tenor of Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Iran relations in the Gulf in the wake of the Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain to quash popular unrest there. Moreover, Iraq’s reemergence as a major oil exporter and perhaps, as a patron for Arab Shiite communities in the Gulf, will almost certainly heighten tensions between the two countries.

Thus, while assessments of Iran as the big “winner” in Iraq are premature, they may yet prove prescient if the United States does not work energetically to counter Iranian influence there in the years to come—particularly Iranian “soft power” in the political, economic, religious, and informational domains, which may pose a greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence than Iraq’s current military weakness. For these reasons, Washington should:

- continue to support stabilization efforts by the Iraqi Security Forces;
- support coalition-building that marginalizes militant Sadrists and other extremists;
- build the kind of relationship described in the U.S.- Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement;
- aid in the development of Iraq’s economy—particularly its oil and energy sectors, and;
- quietly maintain open channels with the Shiite clerical establishment in Najaf to keep a finger on the pulse of Shiite opinion.

Furthermore, the public diplomacy section of the Embassy in Baghdad should be augmented by a Military Information Support (MIST) Team.<sup>2</sup> Nearly a decade of experience demonstrates that information operations that show how Iran and its surrogates operate in Iraq are among the most effective means of countering Iranian influence there.<sup>3</sup>

If the post-2011 level of U.S. engagement with Iraq is too modest, Iran—which enjoys closer, more varied, and more extensive ties with Iraq than does the United States or any state in the region—will almost certainly seek to expand its influence to confirm its position as the paramount outside power in Iraq. This will have adverse consequences for U.S. influence throughout the region and U.S. efforts to deter and contain an increasingly assertive Iran.

Such an eventuality can be averted, and U.S. interests in Iraq advanced, only if the United States continues to engage Iraq on a wide variety of fronts—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—and to counter Iran’s whole-of-government approach to Iraq with a whole-of-government approach of its own.<sup>4</sup>

**A Business Surge for Iraq.** The Strategic Framework Agreement commits the United States and Iraq to a broad-based relationship. One of the most important elements of this relationship is trade and investment, which can provide Iraq’s citizens with a modicum of prosperity, and help counter Tehran’s efforts to establish a relationship of economic dependency with Iraq, that will enhance its leverage over Baghdad. While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has encouraged U.S. businesses to invest in Iraq, U.S. actions lag

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<sup>2</sup> For more on MIST teams, see: Military Information Support Team, AFRICOM Fact Sheet, July 2010, at: <http://www.africom.mil/fetchBinary.asp?pdfID=20100719122755>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with senior U.S. military officials, Baghdad, Iraq, October 2009. A good example of these kinds of activities was the press conference held after the detention of Hizballah operative Ali Musa Daquduq and Iraqi special groups leaders Qais and Laith Khazali in July 2007. For more on this episode, see: Press Conference with Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Effects, Multi-National Forces-Iraq, July 2, 2007, at: [http://www.usf-iraq.com/?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=12641&Itemid=128](http://www.usf-iraq.com/?option=com_content&task=view&id=12641&Itemid=128).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, Ahmed Ali, *Iran’s Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole-of-Government Approach*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2011, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>.

behind words.<sup>5</sup> At present there are only two commerce department officials in Embassy Baghdad to facilitate business in Iraq, and no U.S. government representative in Iraq has a portfolio to facilitate broad strategic private sector engagement. This needs to change. Moreover, the U.S. government should provide tax incentives for companies investing directly in Iraq and do a better job of informing businesses of the range of insurance products available for firms and individuals, to help diffuse the risk of doing business there.<sup>6</sup>

**Preventive Diplomacy and Peacekeeping.** The U.S. military continues to play a critical role in managing tensions between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, centering on the city of Kirkuk and the so-called Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs).

Building trust and confidence and preventing violence along these potential flashpoints may be the best argument for an enduring, albeit much reduced U.S. military presence in Iraq. At present, only 1,500 of about 46,000 U.S. troops remaining in Iraq participate in this mission, in the form of the Combined Security Mechanism (300 in and around Kirkuk, and 1,200 in the rest of the DIBs), which consists of joint checkpoints and patrols involving Iraqi Army, Peshmerga, and U.S. Army elements.<sup>7</sup> Should the Gol asks the U.S. to maintain a military presence in Iraq beyond the end of this year, keeping these troops in place would not be a high price to pay for keeping the peace in Iraq.

To assist this effort, the U.S. should encourage intelligence sharing between the KRG and federal forces regarding their common al-Qaida enemy, support the integration of KRG Peshmerga Regional Guard Brigades into the newly formed Iraqi Army 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and find ways to work with the parties to fill the security and administrative vacuums that exist in the DIBs.<sup>8</sup>

**Upgrading Ties with the KRG.** The U.S. has an enduring interest in the continued stability of the KRG, which remains a pro-U.S. bastion in a part of the world where anti-Americanism is a staple of politics. To this end, it should remain engaged on the ground in the north to ensure that tensions between the federal government in Baghdad and the KRG are contained, and in any future efforts to resolve the problems of Kirkuk and the DIBs, and it should seek the continued integration of the KRG into federal Iraq to enhance the prospects for a successful post-conflict national reconciliation process.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing its importance for the stability of Iraq and the U.S., Washington should take a few modest steps to upgrade ties and intensify direct contacts with the KRG and its security forces (perhaps deepening mil-mil ties, to include broadened training of KRG forces, in coordination with Baghdad). Furthermore, it should encourage U.S. businesses to use the KRG as a base of operations for activities in north-central federal Iraq, and press the KRG to embrace political reforms that will ensure continued stability in the north, and ensure that standards of governance in the north are consistent with those in the rest of the country (for instance, by creating a public integrity commission in the KRG like the one in Baghdad, in order to combat corruption). In doing so, the U.S. will need to be careful to strike a balance between supporting the KRG, without feeding unrealistic aspirations for independence.

**National Reconciliation.** Iraq will have a better chance of avoiding another civil war if it goes through a formal national reconciliation process. Iraq, however, is not yet a true post-conflict society, and it has experienced only “tactical reconciliation”—the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former

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<sup>5</sup> MacKenzie C. Babb, “Clinton Encourages U.S. Business to Invest in Iraq,” U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Information Programs, June 3, 2011, at: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2011/06/20110603172921eiznecam0.9236719.html#axzz1PeCITONd>.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Meyer, “The Surge Iraq Really Needs: U.S. Business,” Reuters Great Debate Blog, June 2, 2011, at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2011/06/02/the-surge-iraq-really-needs-u-s-business/>. Meyer is a former PRT member who served in Mosul, Iraq.

<sup>7</sup> “Some Suggest Requesting U.S. Troops Stay in Disputed Areas,” *Kurdish Globe*, no. 305, May 21, 2011, p. 8, at: <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/get-pdf-file/KurdishGlobe-2011-05-21.pdf?ID=305>.

<sup>8</sup> Comments by Michael Knights, *Kurdistan and its Neighbors: A Trip Report*, Special Policy Forum Report, PolicyWatch No. 1816, June 15, 2011, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3369>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, and Michael Knights with Ahmed Ali, *Kirkuk in Transition: Confidence Building in Northern Iraq*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 102, April 2010, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus102.pdf>.

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, hopes have been pinned on “reconciliation through politics,” in which a broad-based governing coalition would give elements from every community a stake in the political order. Instead, Iraqi politics since the 2010 elections have exacerbated sectarian grievances, while recent heavy-handed GoI actions against peaceful protestors inspired by the Arab Spring have reopened old wounds, and raised questions about the authoritarian tendencies of the current government in Baghdad.

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 Washington should press the GoI to permit peaceful protests and to investigate, and if necessary punish, alleged human rights violations by its security forces. And it should indicate to the GoI that the quality of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship will be influenced by the GoI’s adherence to international human rights standards. Meanwhile, 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 the GoI can govern without infringing on its people’s rights, if Iraq can avoid another major round of ethno-sectarian blood-letting, and if its people can produce courageous, far-sighted leaders committed to national reconciliation—all big ifs—such a blueprint for national reconciliation could well be the most important legacy that the United States ultimately bequeaths to Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

**Conclusion.** Despite the catastrophic trajectory of events in Iraq a mere four years ago, it is remarkable that it is now possible to imagine an Iraq that is reasonably stable, and which is governed relatively democratically. Given the amount that the U.S. has invested in Iraq in blood and treasure—nearly 4,450 Americans killed and more than eight hundred billion dollars spent—it would be a shame to fail there for a lack of attention, focus, and resources.

To succeed, the U.S. needs to remain engaged in Iraq. In short, this means: 1) intensified joint CT operations; 2) continued preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping operations in Kirkuk and the DIBs (beyond this year if possible); 3) intensified efforts to counter Iranian influence; 4) enhanced support for U.S. business engagement; 5) upgraded ties with the KRG, along with pressure to reform, and; 6) pressure on the GoI to adhere to international human rights standards as a first step toward a viable national reconciliation process.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, *How this Ends’: Iraq’s Uncertain Path Toward National Reconciliation*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* No. 1553, July 17, 2009, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3091>.

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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