

Iraq - The Central Battle Line

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On June 30, 2009, Iraq reached an important milestone in its recovery with the withdrawal of American forces from Iraqi cities and towns. This first crucial step was stipulated within the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), signed between the United States and Iraq last November, which outlines the future of military engagement between the United States and Iraq together with the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which outlines non-military forms of engagement. The transfer of security responsibility to Iraqi forces is an important step in normalizing relations between the United States and Iraq and in restoring Iraqi sovereignty. It is part of a process that began many months ago and will continue for many months—and even years—to come. It is the process of stabilizing and reconstituting Iraq as a free and secure country at peace with itself and the outside world.

With the help of the United States, Iraq's security forces have made the substantial progress that created the necessary conditions to make the withdrawal on June 30 possible. In the last two years, Iraq has achieved remarkable improvements in its stability and security. Just a couple of years ago, Iraq was on the verge of sectarian war. Today, sectarian attacks are rare, and terrorism has been considerably reduced. The democratic process has gained legitimacy, with all communities participating in it, and violence has largely been discredited as an instrument of political change. Many of the terrorists, insurgents, militias, and criminal gangs who once operated freely in some parts of the country have found their activities increasingly curbed.

However, despite substantial improvement, dangers and threats still remain, as demonstrated by a series of high profile/high casualty terrorist attacks in Baghdad, Diyala and Mosul. These necessitate continued attention and help from the United States. The vested interests of the United States and Iraq require both countries to ensure that Iraq becomes a successful, independent nation. In the “new Iraq,” the United States still has an important, albeit different, role to play.

The withdrawal of US troops is going according to plan. Under the SOFA all US combat troops will leave Iraq by 2011, and the role of US forces will change from combat to support and training. In the meantime, US troops will be available to assist Iraqi security forces should extra support be needed. For the most part the majority of the country is relatively safe and secure, and Iraqi forces are competently and independently doing their jobs, with little or no help from the American forces. Where help is required it is usually in logistical support, air cover, communications and the more technical end of intelligence gathering. Challenges still exist, especially in the areas of training, equipment and the purging of unsuitable elements. However, progress is being made on all of these fronts, and as things stand today, it looks like we will be able to implement the SOFA completely on schedule.

While the United States may now be optically out of view in Iraq, in reality they are still engaged in many ways, not least, politically and diplomatically. Focus is shifting to the Strategic Framework Agreement. As the United States draws down its forces, it will be important that its relationship with Iraq continues to evolve beyond military engagement to encompass other important spheres of cooperation: economic, political, diplomatic, educational and cultural.

Economic development in Iraq will be crucial to Iraq's future. Many sectors of Iraq's economy are in a state of total disrepair following so many decades of war, abuse and neglect. Economic investment in Iraq's reconstruction could be a bulwark against extremism and terrorism by providing jobs, infrastructure, and prosperity for Iraq's citizens. Iraq offers an opportunity for investors to, quite literally, build a country. Iraq needs everything from roads and hospitals to schools and power plants. These spheres are all ones in which the United States may assist and invest. Economic development, and the opportunities that come with it, will only aid Iraq's recovery and its emergence as an independent, secure nation.

Iraq still needs US support in many arenas. The United States can help to resolve some of the structural and political problems in Iraq—some inherited from the previous regime and some exacerbated or introduced by the United States' intervention and therefore necessitate continued US involvement. On the national level, the United States can help to promote constructive reconciliation between Iraq's diverse political and ethnic groups and aid Iraq in developing its own democratic institutions. On a regional level, the United States can help to support Iraq's diplomatic ties with the larger world and normalize its position in the community of nations. The United States can assist Iraq's development by helping to remove Iraq from Chapter 7 sanctions. These sanctions were placed upon Iraq during Saddam's regime, when the country was seen as a "threat to international peace and security." However, there is no longer any justification for their continuation while they are hindering Iraq's reconstruction and development. Removing Iraq from Chapter 7 sanctions will restore Iraq as a responsible member of the international community—one that can fully participate in world affairs.

Essentially, the perception of Iraq needs to shift from a trouble spot to an opportunity, hence the shift in emphasis from the SOFA to the Strategic Framework Agreement. The SFA instituted a High Committee jointly chaired by Iraq's Prime Minister and the US Secretary of State, along with subcommittees made up of various ministers from Iraq and their relevant counterparts in the United States. The aim is to find areas where cooperation is possible between the United States and Iraq on anything from transportation and communications to agriculture and basic infrastructure. Meetings have already been held in Washington, and proposals for US-Iraq cooperation on a variety of measures are underway.

Every indication is that the United States understands the importance of active engagement in Iraq. During Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki's recent trip to Washington, DC this July, both President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden pledged their

continued support to Iraq. It is clear they appreciate that, despite the gains made, Iraq is not yet out of danger, and that it is vitally important to ensure a good outcome in Iraq.

There will be more challenges ahead in Iraq for some time to come. Attacks will continue as remaining terrorist groups attempt to re-assert their ability to cause pain and suffering. Attacks, like the one on August 19, 2009, targeting several of Iraq's ministries, may tempt those monitoring Iraq's progress to claim that Iraq has failed, slipping back into sectarianism, or that the US withdrawal has been too hasty. However, it is important, in terms of Iraq's progress, to suspend our need for instant gratification. Iraq is a work in progress. It is a country that is seeking to rebuild itself after decades of war and repression. Success will be incremental, and will not happen over night. But it is now within reach.

It will only be by strengthening Iraq internally and institutionally that the country will build the cohesion necessary to withstand attacks and interference from external actors. The stronger Iraq is, the more safe, free and successful it will be. By aiding Iraq in non-military forms of engagement, the United States can help Iraq develop the institutions needed to ensure Iraq's stability and security.

American intervention in Iraq was not particularly well managed; it is crucial that we ensure that disengagement from Iraq is. To allow the situation in Iraq to unravel after so many years of sacrifice of lives and treasure on both sides would be catastrophic for everyone concerned. It would, however, be a victory for al-Qaeda, international terrorists, religious extremists and organized crime. All of these would thrive and, flush with oil money, would pose a mortal threat to the Iraqi people, regional stability and vital American interests. Such an outcome would likely result in a regional conflagration, and at a minimum, gross interference if not domination by neighboring powers. It would set back the cause of freedom and democracy in the region for decades. When you consider all of the consequences, this scenario is unthinkable.

On the other hand, a successful Iraq would be a force for peace and stability in the region. It would be an engine of economic growth benefiting its neighbors as well as our other partners. It would represent a visible living example of building democracy in the Middle East and would deal an important strategic blow to al-Qaeda and the ideology of extremism.

Iraq has always been a pivotal country in a strategically important region. What happens in Iraq will have global repercussions. Now we have a real opportunity to build Iraq in the way its people want it: free, democratic, federal and peaceful, and as such, a reliable long-term friend and ally of the United States of America.