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Win, Lose, or Draw: Iraq Decisions Await President-Elect

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When Barack Obama assumes office on January 20, 2009, the president-elect will face many pressing issues. The strategic case for careful and active management of Iraq policy, however, remains strong. Iraq has at least 115 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (9.3 percent of the world total) and borders Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. This vital Middle Eastern country could become a terrorist thoroughfare and the scene of future regional wars or it could become a stable and prosperous U.S. ally. What matters now is not how U.S. presence in Iraq started, but how it will change in the next four years. It may be far more economical to finish stabilizing Iraq under the relatively favorable present conditions compared to the unknown and potentially unfavorable situation of the future. Iraq retains the potential to contribute to U.S. policy objectives in the Persian Gulf region and the broader Islamic world. It could yet emerge as a strong democratic state at the center of the Middle East.

Responsible Withdrawal

President-elect Obama faces a challenge that no modern occupant of the White House has faced: namely, disengaging from the occupation of an important country that, unlike Germany, Japan, and Korea, has not achieved full stability. The hasty disengagement of European imperial powers from their mandates and colonies during the mid-twentieth century demonstrates the kind of destructive legacy often left by withdrawal strategies that overlook their repercussions in the newly independent states. Like the European nations, the United States will be judged for decades according to how it discharges its responsibilities during this critical disengagement period. And especially since the Arab world has been victim to previous abrupt retreats, "Do no harm" must be a guiding principle of a responsible withdrawal strategy.

Important national interests are driving the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq. Most importantly, Iraq's sovereign government has expressed a desire to reduce the profile and role of the U.S. military since capable Iraqi forces under federal government command are already leading the security effort in most provinces. From a U.S. perspective, it is important to alleviate the strain on the U.S. armed forces, reduce casualties and expenditures associated with the Iraq war, and free up military capacity for other war zones (Afghanistan) or as a deterrent in other areas (Iran, North Korea, or China).

Balanced against these considerations, the United States also has a strong strategic imperative to negotiate for continued military access and influence in Iraq. There are arguably few places in the world that need a U.S. military presence more than the unstable parts of Iraq. This fact is often overlooked as the U.S. role has diminished in areas where integrated Iraqi security forces and provincial councils consisting of the right ethnic and sectarian blend have emerged.

In other areas, the U.S. military needs to finish its job as an honest broker and peacemaker. Focus should be maintained through well-resourced mentoring, training, and Provincial Reconstruction Team programs in areas where representative government and security forces are still not in place (for example, in the multiethnic Ninawa and Kirkuk provinces, and in the sectarian and ethnic melting pot of Diyala province). Although it may seem logical to move the residual U.S. military presence to Iraq's borders to deter foreign

intervention, peace enforcement remains critical in several heavily populated areas.

Iraq's Election Year

The president-elect will be building relationships with the Iraqi leadership at a very tense time in the Iraqi political calendar. Fresh out of his election cycle, the new U.S. president needs to be aware of the pressures that Iraqi leaders face in 2009 as they approach their own provincial and national elections. For this reason, Obama should not expect too much from the outgoing Iraqi administration and must keep in mind that Iraqi leaders are likely to be especially uncompromising in public and multilateral settings throughout 2009. Iraq is experiencing familiar post-colonial dynamics, as its politicians lean toward hyper-nationalism and reflexive resistance to U.S. initiatives, at least in public and especially during the upcoming election year.

As a result, Washington's strategy toward Iraqi leaders should be broad-based, forward-looking, and behind closed doors. The next Iraqi prime minister will probably head a diverse coalition due to the increasing fractionalization of Iraq's political scene. Since the distribution of seats in provincial councils will likely broaden at the local level, the U.S. government should build contacts with Iraq's established, as well as its emerging, political factions. The new administration should carefully survey Iraq's evolving political landscape, closely assess the results of provincial elections, support political polling, and meet with a broad range of political figures.

Guiding Iraq's Political Development

If the United States and the international community disengage from Iraq's political development, the country stands a good chance of slipping back into two of the most negative aspects of its recent political tradition -- authoritarian military rule and adversarial Arab-Kurdish relations. Therefore, diplomatic efforts should focus on the following: ensuring fair elections and ongoing reform of the elections process, including support for a permanent Iraqi elections law (the current provincial elections law only covers the 2009 elections); bolstering civilian control over the military and providing ongoing support to the civilian prime minister; and supporting national unity by encouraging Iraq's leadership and the United Nations to tackle the Kirkuk and Kurdish Regional Government expansion issues in a phased manner over the next four years (U.S. forces working in these dangerous multiethnic areas are currently operating in a policy vacuum).

Normalizing Iraq Policy

With the U.S. election now over, the new administration should seek to normalize its Iraq policy as a strategic issue. Iraq is a country of tremendous political, economic, and military significance, and deserves serious ongoing U.S. commitment as well as creative diplomatic and military policies. Iraq can still be a win, a loss, or a draw for the United States.

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