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Iraq: Time for a Change

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War in Iraq has lasted more than four years. It has required far greater resources than anticipated. The longer-term goals are still far from realization. The price the United States and Iraq are paying in blood and treasure continues to mount. The time has come to chart a clearer path forward, taking into account the regional and global contexts. Americans want an approach that protects U.S. vital interests and can therefore be supported across a wide range of the political spectrum.

As Washington prepares for a critical debate in Congress this fall on what should be done in Iraq, the United States Institute of Peace convened over the summer a group of experts with many different political affiliations to consider next steps over a three-year time horizon. This USIPeace Briefing, prepared by [Daniel Serwer](#), USIP vice president for peace and stability operations, describes their main conclusions. Areas of serious disagreement are noted. Those participants in the discussions wishing to be identified are listed at the end.

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The Political Situation Remains Stalemated Despite Security Improvement

As suggested in a number of recent reports, the security situation in Iraq is still grave but no longer deteriorating in all respects. Though violence remains at high levels, increased American military presence and refocused strategy and tactics have marginally reduced instability in parts of the country, most notably Baghdad, from the worst days of 2006. Local initiatives are helping to stabilize limited areas. In Anbar, American support to Sunni tribes fighting al-Qaeda has led to improved security. Terrorists have been forced to the periphery, where they continue to execute horrendous actions mainly against Iraqi civilians. Some militias have stood down to avoid confrontation with U.S. forces, but Shia-on-Shia violence has flared in Basra and elsewhere in the south.



President Bush salutes Gen. David Petraeus, commanding general of the multinational forces in Iraq (left), and CENTCOM commander Adm.

The situation remains fluid, but a window has opened, fleetingly, for Iraq to proceed with political reconciliation.

William Fallon, right, during a surprise visit to Iraq September 3, 2007. (Photo: AP)

Iraq's national politicians have been unable to take full advantage of this opportunity. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has lost support from some Shia and Sunni political forces, whose representatives have left their cabinet posts. Despite progress in the Constitutional Review Commission on key issues, none of the proposed amendments have been approved in the Council of Representatives, which has also failed to act on de-Ba'athification, distribution of oil revenues and other benchmarks the U.S. and Iraq identified as important. Militias and insurgents are still more powerful than Iraq's civilian institutions, which themselves are often divided or dominated by sect and ethnicity. The numbers of internally displaced people and refugees has continued to climb. U.S. troops are still required in many areas.

The Regional Situation Has Deteriorated

The massive exodus of Iraqis is creating enormous economic and social problems for Iraq's neighbors, especially Jordan and Syria. These threaten to get significantly worse if instability in Iraq continues.

Despite the signing of the Iraq Compact and regional talks that include the U.S., Iraq's neighbors have not taken decisive action to support its national government or assist reconstruction. Turkey has stood down from the threat to invade Iraqi Kurdistan, but none of Iraq's neighbors have done all they could to ensure its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Iran supports Prime Minister Maliki, but they also provide assistance to various Shia militias, contributing to sectarian division and raising the specter of Iranian dominance, a specter that haunts Iraq's Arab neighbors, who have continued to allow support to flow to Sunni insurgents.

U.S. talks with Iran in Baghdad have not convinced Tehran to use its influence in favor of a sovereign, non-sectarian Iraq. Sunni insurgents continue to enter Iraq from Syria.

The Hezbollah/Israel war in Lebanon was not helpful to the situation in Iraq, where the conflict hardened popular opposition to the U.S. and exacerbated Sunni/Shia tensions at the leadership level. In the wake of Hamas' takeover of Gaza, the U.S. is trying to restart a Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. If successful, this move would be an important development, prodding Arab states to provide more support to U.S. efforts in Iraq, but the odds still appear long.

The U.S. Military Effort Unlikely to Be Sustained with Waning Political Support

The worldwide demand for U.S. forces already exceeds significantly their supply. The "surge" of about 30,000 troops initiated last spring increased U.S. forces in Iraq to a total of more than 160,000 men and women at present. U.S. forces cannot be sustained at these levels without significant changes to the rules governing deployment (such as tour-length or the pace of reserve and national guard mobilization). Political support for such changes is lacking, and changing the rules would exacerbate recruitment challenges and retention problems. With the current rules in place, military experts believe the U.S. must begin withdrawing by April at a pace of about one brigade combat team per month.

Even maintaining the pre-surge deployment of 130,000 entails significant risks to the quality and preparedness of the force, as well as worrying limits on U.S. resources available to deal with other military challenges. While it might be possible to expand manpower and equipment to sustain higher levels in Iraq, the large increases in funding required are not likely to be forthcoming. The expansion of the armed forces currently being contemplated does not offer near-term relief from current constraints.

U.S. withdrawal also has limits. Under extreme circumstances, U.S. forces could come out of Iraq quickly. But too rapid a withdrawal would cause the loss of valuable equipment and could create instability. The

maximum pace of an orderly drawdown in a permissive environment is likely one brigade combat team of troops per month. The issue of force levels therefore comes down to the question of whether U.S. withdrawal, which in any event appears to have to start by April 2008, should continue at that pace past September 2008, when the force will return to its pre-surge level.

The force levels required in Iraq once the surge forces are withdrawn should depend on U.S. interests in Iraq and the military missions required to protect those interests.

U.S. Interests Should Determine Washington's Next Steps

The decisions that the United States faces in Iraq should be taken in accordance with U.S. national interests. Five are paramount, according to the experts participating:

1. [Prevent Iraq from becoming a haven or platform for international terrorists](#)
2. [Restore U.S. credibility, prestige and capacity to act worldwide](#)
3. [Improve regional stability](#)
4. [Limit and redirect Iranian influence](#)
5. [Maintain an independent Iraq as a single state](#)

These interests represent a significant shift from the goals outlined by the National Security Council in the Administration's November 2005 Victory in Iraq strategy. While it is apparent that the Administration's goals have shifted, it would be useful in generating domestic and international support to make the change explicit.

We discuss below the strategies required to achieve each of these five U.S. interests. The challenges are daunting, but the odds of success would be significantly improved if the Administration made Iraq its near-term top priority, temporarily subordinating or postponing the achievement of conflicting foreign policy objectives in favor of the immediate need to stabilize Iraq. Such is not the case today, even after four years of war. The Administration needs to ensure that all the elements of national power are applied to the challenge in the near term, in order to free up resources in the future.

It is clear that U.S. aims in Iraq cannot be achieved if the humanitarian crisis in the region were to widen. It is therefore vital to U.S. security interests to continue and expand steps necessary to prevent such a disaster.

1. Prevent Iraq from becoming a haven or platform for international terrorists

In addition to supporting the Iraqi Army and police, the U.S. should continue to partner with Sunni indigenous forces and local populations in pursuing al-Qaeda in Iraq. Doing so will strain U.S. relations with the national Shia leadership, which needs to be persuaded to incorporate these Sunni forces into Iraq's army and police while at the same time bringing more Sunni leaders into the political process. Success will mean close U.S. cooperation with local Sunni leaders in the near term and a decline in the number of terrorist attacks over the mid- to long-term. The U.S. will also need to maintain for some time special strike forces in Iraq, linked to a capability to gather actionable intelligence.

Police will ultimately be vital to the fight against terrorists and to reducing violence in Iraq. This will require eliminating from their ranks Shia death squads, even as more Sunnis are incorporated. This will be a difficult and lengthy operation requiring policy direction from a reformed, non-sectarian and professional Interior Ministry as well as effective management at the provincial and municipal levels. Training and mentoring both police and ministry officials will need to be bolstered and continue well past the three-year time frame.

Iraq's borders remain porous. International terrorist networks have found it easy to inject operatives and

resources. The border police need to be greatly strengthened and backed more effectively by the Iraqi Army and U.S. capabilities.

The fight against al-Qaeda should not be conducted exclusively by security forces. Using its Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the U.S. needs to help Iraqi officials and civil society organizations counter insurgent and al-Qaeda messages, communicate the vision of a more equitable and prosperous future for all Iraqis, and foster an environment that reduces fear, thus allowing economic development and spread of alternatives to extremist ideology and theology. The PRTs will also need to intensify efforts to reconcile moderate Sunnis with Shia-dominated central, provincial and local governments. Far too little has been undertaken in this area.

2. Restore U.S. Credibility, Prestige and Capacity to Act Worldwide

The enduring crisis in Iraq has taken an enormous toll on U.S. credibility, prestige and capacity to act worldwide. Completing the Iraq campaign in a way that serves the U.S. interests is important. There are too many U.S. interests at stake elsewhere that the Iraq effort undermines. The U.S. has severely constrained military capacity to react to contingencies elsewhere, including Afghanistan, and it has reduced its ground strength in South Korea and elsewhere below levels required for credibility. Restoring full-spectrum American military capacity is critical. The world notices when Gulliver is tied down.

It is vital to restore Arab—especially Egyptian and Saudi—confidence in the U.S. Progress on the Middle East peace process would be particularly helpful, but so too would demonstration of U.S. sincerity in listening carefully to Arab partners.

Proposed U.S. arms sales may help, but it is the political front, including America's relationship with the public in Muslim countries, that requires most attention. Closing the prison at Guantanamo would be an important step, as would clear U.S. commitment to abide by international law when conducting all interrogations. The U.S. also needs to reach out far more effectively, not only with its "message" but also with visas, scholarships and dialogue.

3. Improve Regional Stability

The modest results so far from dialogue with and among Iraq's neighbors should not discourage the effort. If stabilizing Iraq becomes the clear U.S. priority, there will be prospects for a functional forum involving the important regional actors. Such a forum will be vital to developing a coordinated approach that leads to policy convergence, in particular on preventing support from flowing to extremists.

Iran and Syria are important to regional stability. The U.S. needs to prioritize its strategic interests with these two countries and decide what price it wants to pay for their cooperation. Iran, which has been greatly strengthened by the Iraq crisis, is discussed below. Syria is in a weaker position but may ask for the re-opening of talks on the Golan Heights. This has long been foreseen as part of the Middle East peace process. Syria does not appear to have linked Iraq to the Hariri investigation or to Lebanon, issues that should not be allowed to stand in the way of dialogue between the U.S. and Syria on Iraq.

It will be impossible to prevent violence spilling over to Iraq's neighbors if the humanitarian crisis inside Iraq gets worse, creating more displaced people and refugees. The U.S. must take a leadership role in ensuring food, shelter, medical care and protection of people in areas where they are minorities, as well as in neighboring countries. This is both a moral imperative and a security requirement. The plight of Iraq's Christian, Yezidi Shabak and other minority communities merits particular attention. The U.S. should also ensure that Iraq is not a threat to its neighbors by preventing its territory from being used as a base for

terrorists, including those who act against Iran, as well as against Turkey.

Increasing international community involvement in Iraq is important to preventing spillover. UN and EU presence are crucial, both for the capabilities they bring and for the signal their engagement sends. The new UN Security Council resolution (1770) is a good step, but the UN is still hesitant. More needs to be done to enable it to execute its new responsibilities and the EU to bring its state-building talents to bear. The new UN mission chief in Iraq has a vital role, as does an enlarged EU presence.

4. Limit and redirect Iranian influence

Iran will almost certainly remain the most influential of Iraq's neighbors by virtue of size, location and power, as well as historical and religious ties. While the Iraqi Shia are in many respects distinct from Iranians and control the major shrines of Shia Islam, there has historically been a flow of people, ideas and goods across the Iranian/Iraqi border. Important elements of the Iraqi Shia political spectrum have spent much time in Iran and continue to receive funding and military assistance from Tehran.

While the U.S. cannot aim to prevent Iran from having some influence in Iraq, it should seek to block Iranian political control, especially in the south, and to maintain an independent and sovereign Iraqi state. U.S. policy and actions should also encourage Iran to conclude that its interests are served by cooperation with other regional powers in a common effort to ensure stability in Iraq. As long as the U.S. and Iran engage in a zero sum contest for influence, Iraq will remain in turmoil and the U.S. will be bogged down.

The U.S. will need to continue to talk directly with Tehran and accommodate some Iranian interests while countering Iran's misbehavior. The U.S. should not hesitate to interdict Iranian arms shipments and to draw attention to Iranian trouble-making. Reduction in U.S. and Iraqi casualties attributable to equipment coming from Iran is a key objective and a critical test of Iranian intentions.

Some of the experts feel that gaining Iran's cooperation requires a major change in the dynamics of U.S./Iranian relations, one that eliminates regime change as U.S. policy and moves towards a "grand bargain" in which sanctions would be dropped and diplomatic relations restored. Others believe this option would entail unacceptable risks with little prospect of gain.

5. Maintain an independent Iraq as a single state

There is debate over the desirable degree of decentralization of the Iraqi state, and whether it should be on a geographic or sectarian basis. The U.S. should seek to maintain an independent Iraq as a single state, leaving to Iraqis the question of decentralization or sectarian separation. Maintaining Iraq as a single state will require political accommodation on key issues, more effective governance at all levels and professional, non-sectarian national security forces, including both police and army.

The Iraqi government and Council of Representatives have thus far proven ineffective at reaching the kind of political accommodation required. It is time for the UN, with support from the U.S. and other Perm Five powers as well as Iraq's neighbors, to initiate intense negotiations at the highest political levels that will not be permitted to conclude without an agreement on major issues, including power-sharing, the constitution, oil, de-Ba'athification, Kirkuk and provincial elections. Unofficial efforts to define and refine the issues for treatment at the summit should precede this official negotiating effort.

Iraq's governments at all levels require professionalization. The goal should be for professional qualification, not sect or political faction, to determine hiring and firing. A true power-sharing arrangement would require joint decisions and end parceling out of ministries as sectarian or party fiefdoms.

The Iraqi Army has made progress in rooting out sectarianism and integrating its forces. The police still lag far behind. The U.S. police training effort in Iraq has been plagued by problems, none of which will be solved by the planned shift of responsibility from the Defense Department to the State Department. It would be preferable to shift responsibility to the Justice Department, but in any event the Ministry of Interior needs to be completely restructured and professional international police monitors from other countries must be embedded with the Iraqi police at all levels.

Conclusions

The United States faces too many challenges around the world to continue its current level of effort in Iraq, or even the deployment that was in place before the surge. The question is what to do to enable the drawdown of U.S. troops to continue after the pre-surge level is reached in September, to a level commensurate with the U.S. interests discussed above. This future level is likely no more than half the current level within three years, with a view to removing all units within five years, when all U.S. bases should be turned over to the Iraqi government. Civilian assistance for state-building by an integrated and well-trained expert team—one better trained and equipped than is available today—will have to continue, likely even beyond the five-year time frame.

With its resources limited, the U.S. should recalibrate its objectives in Iraq while improving coordination between U.S. military and civilian efforts. The debate over troop levels does not capture the breadth of issues on which decisions are needed. It is particularly important to avoid harm and concentrate on shaping the political environment rather than dictating the outcome.

The entire U.S. government should assign first priority in the near term to Iraq and bring to bear all the elements of national power. Working through an official with political stature, authority, credibility and visibility, the Administration needs to seek an accommodation with Congress that will allow pursuit of vital U.S. interests through civilian as well as military means and permit the pace of withdrawal to be decided on the basis of conditions on the ground in Iraq and the region.

From the U.S. perspective, the Iraqi government has continued to disappoint, as have Iraq's neighbors. Washington must make it clear to all concerned that the U.S. is determined to achieve its interests, as redefined above. But it must also reduce its troop commitment. Only when the Iraqis and their neighbors perceive the real prospect of U.S. withdrawal will they feel the need to take on greater responsibility.

Below is a list of those experts who participated in the discussions that led to this paper and are prepared to have their names associated with it:

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