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Iraq 'Fails' Upward

Iraq's security deal with U.S. shows gains amid 'failure' mantras.

One of the least attractive features of the recent Presidential campaign was the Democratic Party's characterization of the war in Iraq as a complete, total and irredeemable failure. Essentially, theirs was an exercise in political nihilism. Notwithstanding a large American political and military commitment overseas, the Democrats chose to argue that *nothing* good had come of this.

On Sunday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's cabinet approved by a 21-7 vote a status of forces agreement with the U.S. It says that U.S. forces will withdraw from Iraq's populated areas by June 2009 and all forces will withdraw by the end of 2011.

We have our own misgivings about the limits on U.S. forces suggested by the 2009 date. We suspect both sides understand the need to revisit this if conditions on the ground change dramatically. With George Bush gone, though, Mr. Maliki may have a harder time getting President Obama to approve U.S. troops leaving their bases, no matter how badly needed.

This still won't satisfy the Democratic left in Congress or in the blogosphere, but now they will be President Obama's problem, as he transitions from campaign rhetoric to international realities. To that end, we offer a brief compendium of campaign myths about "failure" in Iraq that are belied by the Maliki government's security deal with the U.S.

Foremost among the nothing-works-in-Iraq charges was that the government there was hopelessly divided and would never get its act together. Competence, however, is precisely what it reflected in this deal.

The status of forces agreement now moves from the cabinet to Iraq's parliament, where it must receive at least 51% approval. By all reports, that is considered almost certain. The parliament's two major parties -- representing Shiites and Kurds -- have the votes to approve the deal. On votes this fundamental, though, the Maliki government has sought strong majorities to broaden support for the government, which means support from Sunnis in parliament. That, too, looks likely. As one Sunni parliamentarian, with succinct logic, told the Wall Street Journal: "Under this security agreement, Iraq is in control; and under the U.N. mandate, the U.S. was in control, so which deal is better?"

The Iraq-as-failure lobby also insisted that Prime Minister Maliki, a Shiite, was a pawn of Iran, and that the Iranians effectively dominated the Iraqi political process. With this deal, as with the Maliki-ordered routs -- by the Iraq army -- of Shiite militias in Basra and Sadr City last spring, the Prime Minister established his bona fides as an independent player. Iran almost surely will try to blow up this agreement.

American voters were given to understand that the ungrateful Iraqis don't deserve U.S. support. Setting aside the historically poor results of American pull-the-plug policies toward allies (think Iran since the Khomeini revolution), the agreement's 2011 timetable makes clear that Iraqis understand that a U.S. presence is crucial to preserving their government's achievements.

As recent press reports make clear, those achievements are real. The Iraqi military has proven its ability to secure and pacify the cities. Civic activity has returned. Oil production has resumed. Nearby nations -- Jordan, Bahrain, the UAE -- are engaging Iraq diplomatically.

Not least, it is evident the Iraqi government wants a continuing relationship with the U.S. Indeed the first of the agreement's two separate parts normalizes the relationship indefinitely. This contradicts the failure mantra that we "never belonged there." *We are* there, and the successful completion of this task by the American military makes likely, for the first time, a permanent political U.S. presence in the Gulf region. This is a new platform that can be put to good purpose amid competitive pressure from our friends in Russia and China.

Mr. Obama's foreign policy advisers are capable of taking issue with each of these assertions of progress. Yes, fragile democracies can buckle and break. Pot-shotting, however, is a pastime for out-of-power parties. The new Obama national-security team will bear responsibility for building on the concrete gains of the Bush-Petraeus military surge and of Prime Minister Maliki's government.

Failure to capitalize on this progress would pitch the new Obama Administration's Gulf policies back into the arms of the rejectionist wing that ran the party's campaigns. For the good of the U.S.'s reputation as a reliable partner, and of the Iraqi people, we hope their judgment will be to build forward rather than walk away.

A good start would be to ensure that the U.S. will be there in substantial numbers at least through Iraq's elections early next year. More than security, we can help assure the different factions that the election is fair -- a value even our own factions can agree on.

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