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Iraq From the Inside

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Predictions for Obama's Iraq

By ERIC OWLES

BAGHDAD — We're less than two weeks away from president-elect Barack Obama taking command of the American military in Iraq. Below are some predictions for what type of war he will inherit.

Will it be the Iraq where 4,213 American service members and an estimated 90,000 Iraqis have been killed? Or will it the Iraq where post-surge violence have dropped to their lowest levels since the start of the war in 2003? When talking to the news media, Gen. David H. Petraeus, the overall commander of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, likes to repeat that "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist, I am a realist." Which category do prognosticators see for Iraq in the first year of Mr. Obama's presidency?

Thomas E. Ricks, the former Washington Post military correspondent, runs down a few of the [predictions](#) in his new national security blog for Foreign Policy magazine.

General Petraeus, in his 2008 farewell letter to the troops: "The year ahead will contain significant challenges, among them: provincial district and national elections; resilient enemies still carrying out deadly attacks; lingering ethno-sectarian mistrust and competition; malign external influences; and a national referendum on the US-Iraq Strategic Agreement."

Ayad Allawi, the former Iraqi prime minister, in a speech over the weekend: "I did not imagine the political process would eat itself from inside or that it would abandon the rule of law and establish political sectarianism."

Mr. Ricks offers two predictions of his own: "Obama's first year in Iraq is going to be tougher than Bush's last year." And: "Despite the conventional wisdom that the war is nearly over, Obama's war in Iraq may last longer than Bush's, which clocks in at a robust 5 years and 10 months."

Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution, writing in the Wall Street Journal, says: "A number of extremely dangerous scenarios are emerging from Iraq's fluid new politics, including the potential for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or some other leader to try to make himself dictator, the potential for Iraq's rebuilt military to mount a coup, and the potential for one or more Iraqi militia parties to subvert the political process and establish itself as a permanent majority. All of these could spark renewed conflict as different elements of Iraqi society would doubtless fight to prevent them."

Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking on CBS's 'Face the Nation,' remained optimistic saying: "We are close to achieving most of our objectives. We have a significant reduction in the overall level of violence."

The Baghdad Bureau Blog will decline making its own predictions and instead rely on the wisdom of baseball manager Casey Stengel: "Never make predictions, especially about the future." But readers braver than us can offer their predictions for Iraq in 2009 in the comment section below.