

**FOREIGN
AFFAIRS**

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

April 4, 2010
SNAPSHOT

Stay the Course of Withdrawal

When Should the United States Leave Iraq?

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Having held parliamentary elections on March 7 and endured a protracted period of vote counting focused on the arduous process of government formation. As this Iraqi drama unfolds, U.S. military preparing to redeploy according to the U.S.-Iraq security agreement of November 2008 and President Obama's announced timetable for withdrawal. The impending drawdown -- from 96,000 troops to 50,000 on September 1, 2010, and zero on January 1, 2012 -- will require the United States to define Iraqis as they dictate their own future.

This, in turn, requires that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continue their development. The increase in the ISF is a main reason why, though Iraqis will continue to endure grievous violence in coming years, longer a broad-based insurgency that poses a strategic threat to the political process or the government progress is relatively new: although President George W. Bush said in 2005 that "as the Iraqis stand down," the ISF has only recently achieved a substantial level of operational independence.

Over the past year, the United States has drawn down more than 40,000 troops while turning over population centers to the ISF. In September 2009, the Department of Defense reported that the Iraq combat battalions, most of which qualified as being "in the lead" for the purposes of conducting operations. Relatively few of those battalions have achieved Operational Readiness Assessment (ORA) Level 1; they are logistics-capable units with the ability to function wholly independently. The vast majority of battalions have achieved ORA Level 2; they can plan, execute, and sustain counterinsurgency operations with U.S. assistance.

Taking an overly pessimistic view of the current political environment and appraising the ISF's progress, some U.S. commentators have recently been urging the Obama administration to reconsider its strategy. They argue that its implementation would destabilize Iraq at its moment of greatest vulnerability. But this assessment of Iraq's current predicament is decidedly unrealistic about the country it purports to describe. In Washington to seek to abrogate its withdrawal commitments -- and thereby suggest that an extended stay back on the agenda -- would not enhance security but would undercut the Iraqi government and reignite renewed violence. There is simply no political space for such an eventuality. Moreover, these commentators misunderstand the role of U.S. troops in Iraq, which focuses on training, advising, and assisting the Iraqi security forces. Given the ISF's increasing independence, these tasks can be carried out by the residual U.S. troops envisioned.

The ISF displayed that independence during the recent elections, when it took the lead in providing security and did not require any unplanned assistance from the United States. U.S. forces played a background role and do not depend on large numbers of U.S. military personnel.

In the future, even the most forward-deployed U.S. forces (based in northern Iraq along internal borders and by Arabs and Kurds) will not rely on large numbers of troops. Under current plans, those forces will consist of advisory and assistance brigades constituting approximately 7,000–8,000 troops. The commander in northern Iraq, Major General Anthony Cucolo, recently indicated that he may need 800 additional troops to constitute a sufficient presence along the region's fault lines. But even with those additional troops, the U.S. presence would be well within the parameters of the Obama administration's plans and existing U.S.-Iraqi agreements.

The past months have shown that violence levels are remaining on a positive overall trajectory even at this tense moment of transition. Although Baghdad witnessed a series of spectacular terrorist attacks in the summer and fall that targeted symbols of government, the sensitive period of campaigning, voting, and voter turnout has not seen such devastating attacks or coordinated insurgent activity. This is particularly noteworthy, considering that when the ISF has taken greater responsibility and when terrorists would be especially motivated to disrupt the political process by executing spectacular attacks.

Despite all this, the ISF continues to have glaring deficiencies in the realms of logistics, intelligence gathering, and border control. In light of these shortcomings, it is possible that Iraqi leaders may request security assistance that goes beyond the scope of the current binding framework to include help controlling airspace and land routes, protecting critical maritime oil infrastructure, and conducting counterterrorism operations. Under the terms of the current agreement, any such request for assistance would have to be initiated by the Iraqi government, not the U.S. If Iraq makes such a request, the Obama administration should give it a fair hearing, balancing its security commitments with other pressing U.S. concerns around the world and considering the potential ramifications.

a continued U.S. presence.

This would rule out a South Korea-style military commitment or the establishment of permanent bases, which would be anathema to Iraq's emerging political culture and unwise in light of current Middle East conditions. Instead, such a mission would be limited to temporary advice, assistance, and support, all of which contingent on ISF self-sufficiency. At a minimum, such a mission would require an Office of Security Cooperation based in the U.S. embassy, which would be similar to other arrangements Washington has in other countries where teams of fewer than 1,000 uniformed military personnel manage foreign military sales and programs. Even the upper limit of any such effort -- possibly including military transition teams (U.S. forces that live with and train Iraqi counterparts), air support, and intelligence programs -- would be in nature, restricted in size to under 10,000 troops, and not intended to establish a strategic beachhead or project U.S. power.

Policymakers and analysts too often measure U.S. influence in Iraq according to troop levels. In fact, the United States has become better able to develop a productive relationship with Iraq by abiding by the territorial integrity agreement in good faith -- which means reducing troop levels and withdrawing from Iraqi population centers. The U.S. military did last June. Because of these actions, the U.S. presence was a relatively minor issue in the recent elections, whereas in the recent past it was the central issue that drove Iraqi politics and fueled a bloody insurgency. U.S.-Iraqi cooperation is only sustainable if Iraqis do not fear long-term U.S. plans. The United States will be able to play a stabilizing diplomatic role in Iraq's ongoing political transition only if Washington and Baghdad continue along the path of normalizing bilateral relations. In this sense, it is the very act of withdrawal that will allow the United States to become a strategic partner for the emerging Iraqi state.

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