

IRAQI LEADERS REACT TO THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL

On October 21, 2011, President Barack Obama announced his decision to withdraw all of the remaining 39,000 U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of the year. The complete pullout of U.S. forces satisfies the final phase of the withdrawal timetable established by the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement signed in December 2008 by outgoing President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The decision comes after negotiating efforts failed to reach a new security arrangement with Iraq that would have allowed for a continued U.S. military presence beyond 2011. This document compiles and analyzes many of the reactions of Iraq's leaders to the cessation of negotiations and the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

DOMESTIC ACTORS POSTURE FOR WITHDRAWAL

Maliki and his political supporters in the State of Law coalition have sought to assuage Iraqis' fears regarding the U.S. withdrawal by reassuring them that the government is capable and has been responsible for providing security since last year.¹ Although the Iraqi military and police took control over security in Iraq's cities in the summer of 2009 and combat missions in the summer of 2010, they remain deficient and in need of training in combined-arms, air and naval capabilities, border protection, logistics, and intelligence. The concern for the professionalization of Iraq's forces and how the U.S. withdrawal could further politicize the use of Iraq's armed forces by the prime minister may be important.

In an effort to confront cautious statements by opposing political actors and demonstrate confidence about the government's capabilities, Maliki's allies sought to lessen concerns. MP Ali al-Musawi, the media advisor to Maliki, believed the final decision was attuned to the appropriate timing of the training and readiness of Iraq's security forces. "This is a victory for both sides," Musawi suggested, "Iraq has recently managed to secure its defense and rely on its sole capacities in preparation for the schedule deadline stipulated by the withdrawal agreement. Just the same, the US side was able to fulfill its commitments."²

An Iraqi defense official allied with Maliki, Ministry of Defense Spokesman Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-Askari, said, "All of the security apparatuses' capacities have been employed to fill the security gap and implement the U.S. withdrawal plan as designed. Therefore, we are very confident about the internal security situation after the US troops' withdrawal."³

However, despite Iraq's modest ability to carry out internal security operations, Iraqis and political actors are uneasy about the likely increase of interference by regional actors in Iraq's affairs. "The government should not tolerate any Iranian interference, as our anger against them only gets worse when we hear about their deeds," said Fouad Karim, a Shi'a who works as a sheep trader in a town near the Iranian border in Diyala province. In defense, State of Law MP Kamal al-Saadi said that the U.S. military's presence have done little to prevent foreign intervention, highlighting continuous Iranian and Turkish shelling and incursions into Iraq.⁴

Maliki's political rivals in the Iraqiyya bloc also warned about Iran's creeping influence in Iraq's various spheres. "Obama's announcement to withdraw all U.S. troops is a victory for the Iraqis, but we have to be aware of Iranian influences and their attempts to exert control over Iraq," said Haidar al-Mulla, an Iraqiyya spokesman.⁵ Fellow

Iraqiyya member Osama al-Nujaifi, the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, also hinted at Iran's likely growing role and activism in Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal. "Iraq now suffers from points of weakness," Nujaifi said to reporters, and if "neighboring countries see that Iraq is weak and incapable of protecting its borders and internal security, then definitely there will be interference. This interference does exist now."⁶

In response to some fears of Iraq's internal security challenges, Maliki's allies have also sought to display confidence that armed groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shi'a militias would be dealt with in 2012. MP Salman al-Moussawi, who is considered a close associate of Maliki, stated that "during the next phase," Baghdad will terminate all remaining "excuses and covers for the work of these militias or armed groups."⁷ Immediately after Obama's decision, Shi'a firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr designated the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to be an occupier after this year, and therefore, subjected to resistance.⁸ During a recent interview with *Al-Arabiya TV*, Sadr implied that the resistance against the American occupation would continue: "[The U.S. withdrawal] will not be complete. Yes, it might be reduced in number. Let us put it this way: There are at least 5,000 people at the embassy, several thousand as part of the security companies, 6,000 trainers, and so on. That makes up about 25,000 soldiers that will remain in Iraq. Their current number is 40,000, so their number will only be reduced to less than half. Thus, it is a partial withdrawal, not a complete one."⁹

Given the ongoing operational capacities of various militant groups and Iraq's deficient external defense capabilities, some senior Iraqi military figures have argued that Iraq's security forces are still unable to effectively handle the security portfolio after this year. Iraq's army chief, Lt. Gen. Babakir al-Zebari, a Kurd, warned that Iraq's military would be incapable to fully defend Iraq's sovereignty before 2020. "An army without an air force is exposed," an October 2011 report issued by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction quoted him as saying. "While we have no enemies, we also have no real friends."¹⁰ Some politicians have blamed Maliki for not yet securing adequate training to Iraq's forces, which most Iraqi politicians, including Maliki himself, believe is still necessary. "The American position was clear that no

soldier will stay in Iraq without judicial immunity," says Muayyid Tayyeb, a spokesman representing the Kurdish bloc. "The Iraqi government must take responsibility and study the possibility of finding a replacement to complete the training of the Iraqi army."¹¹

In explaining the breakdown of negotiations, Maliki pointed to the U.S. insistence on immunities for troops. "When the Americans asked for immunity, the Iraqi side answered that it was not possible," Maliki said to reporters in Baghdad. "The discussions over the number of trainers and the place of training stopped. Now that the issue of immunity was decided and that no immunity to be given, the withdrawal has started."¹² Maliki's political allies defended foregoing a new security agreement, insisting that Maliki had not yielded a deal to provide adequate training to Iraq's military. "As we said before, the [Status of Force Agreement] is totally different from the trainers issue, which is still under negotiation, because we have said that there is a necessity for trainers," said Sami al-Askari, an advisor to Maliki.¹³ "Iraq is well aware that its forces need training, so I think that an agreement will be reached in the coming weeks," said State of Law MP Izzat Shabandar, a close associate to Maliki. "Our aim is to find alternatives for the absolute judicial immunity required by the U.S., such as a relative immunity limited to the nature of the work of the trainer."¹⁴

Most of Maliki's rivals in the Iraqiyya bloc privately supported a new security agreement with the U.S. military based on a training and support mission, despite their accusations of partiality and a lack of positive engagement from the Obama administration.¹⁵ Following the decision to withdraw, however, Iraqiyya's public rhetoric toward the U.S. presence evolved from what was initially a cautious tone to one that is more content with the U.S. exit. For example, Omar Jubbori, a member of Iraqiyya, said it would be better for the U.S. to support Iraq going forward through economic and "other channels, rather than a military presence, about which Iraqi public opinion is clear."¹⁶

While members of Iraqiyya continue to hold concerns about Iranian-backed militant groups and Iran's growing influence in Iraq's politics, they have become largely uncertain about the positive aspects of the U.S. military's

REACTIONS FROM THE IRAQI STREET

“The day of their departure represents a historic moment and I will be the happiest person with the exit of the occupier from our country.”¹ -Abdulrahman Munshid al-Assi, a leader of the al-Ubaid tribe in the northern city of Kirkuk, October 22

“The Iraqi people are the winner because a few months from now, we will walk in the streets without seeing U.S. troops and this is a source of joy to us because Iraq has restored its full sovereignty.”² -Saif Qassim, a Sunni Arab from Mosul City, October 22

“As an Iraqi citizen, I say to Mr. Obama, you will leave Iraq without accomplishing your mission. No security, an unstable political regime, sectarian tensions and weak security forces, that’s what America will leave behind.”³ -Munaf Hameed, account manager at a private bank, October 21

“I would be very happy with this withdrawal if our military and security forces are ready to fill the gap of the American forces. But I don’t believe they are. We can’t deceive ourselves. Our forces are still not capable of facing our security challenges. I’m afraid this withdrawal will allow al-Qaeda and the militias to return.”⁴ -Ziyad Jabari, a Baghdad shoe shop owner, October 21

“The security elements are not loyal to Iraq but to parties and militias therefore the security situation will be very bad after the withdrawal.”⁵ -Dhia Abdullah, a Shi’a Arab from eastern Baghdad, October 22

“This is a message to the Iranians to come and take over Iraq. The Iraqis are the real losers here because they have replaced the U.S. occupation with Iranian occupation.”⁶ -Adel al-Dulaimi, Sunni Arab from northern Baghdad, October 22

“I think the fighting between the political blocs will increase because the U.S. presence was a safety valve for security and political issues.”⁷ -Muntadhir Abdel Wahab, a merchant in Baghdad, October 21

“[The U.S. withdrawal] represents a victory for the Iraqi resistance and all those freed who suffered from American policy in Iraq.” “But the government and politicians must be united and stand in the face of any regional intervention, and they must focus on the development of the security forces.”⁸ -Aslan Abdulrahman Ahmed, a Turkoman in Kirkuk City

“Neither the Iraqis nor the Americans have won here.”⁹ -Adnan Omar, a Sunni Arab from Kirkuk City in northern Iraq.

REACTIONS FROM IRAQI OFFICIALS

STATE OF LAW

“When the Americans asked for immunity, the Iraqi side answered that it was not possible. The discussions over the number of trainers and the place of training stopped. Now that the issue of immunity was decided and that no immunity to be given, the withdrawal has started.”¹⁰ -Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister and head of State of Law bloc, October 22

“This is a victory for both sides. Iraq has recently managed to secure its defense and rely on its sole capacities in preparation for the schedule deadline stipulated by the withdrawal agreement. Just the same, the US side was able to fulfill its commitments.”¹¹ -Ali al-Musawi, State of Law representative and media advisor to Prime Minister Maliki, October 21

“Iraq is well aware that its forces need training, so I think that an agreement will be reached in the coming weeks. Our aim is to find alternatives for the absolute judicial immunity required by the U.S., such as a relative immunity limited to the nature of the work of the trainer.”¹² -Izzat Shabandar, State of Law representative, October 22

“The U.S. military’s presence has done little to prevent foreign intervention. Just look at the incursions by Turkish and Iranian forces within the country when U.S. forces are still present.”¹³ -Kamal al-Saadi, State of Law representative, October 24

IRAQIYYA

“We have serious security problems in this country and serious political problems. Keeping Americans in Iraq longer isn’t the answer to the problems of Iraq. It may be an answer to the problems of the U.S., but it’s definitely not the solution to the problems of my country.”¹⁴ -Ayad Allawi, leader of the Iraqiyya bloc, September 21

“Iraq now suffers from points of weakness,” and if “neighboring countries see that Iraq is weak and incapable of protecting its borders and internal security, then definitely there will be interference. This interference does exist now.”¹⁵ -Osama al-Nujaifi, Speaker of the Council of Representatives and Iraqiyya representative, October 21

“The withdrawal of U.S. troops will have no affect on the security of Iraq. The Iraqi Security Forces received the country’s security dossier more than a year ago and have been responsible for security matters for quite some time.”¹⁶
-Hamid al-Mutlaq, Iraqiyya representative, October 22

“It would be better for the U.S. to support Iraq going forward through economic and other channels, rather than a military presence, about which Iraqi public opinion is clear.”¹⁷ -Omar Jubbori, Iraqiyya representative, October 23

“Obama’s announcement to withdraw all U.S. troops is a victory for the Iraqis, but we have to be aware of Iranian influences and their attempts to exert control over Iraq.”¹⁸ -Haidar al-Mulla, Iraqiyya representative and spokesman, October 22

WHITE IRAQIYYA

“The Obama administration has done nothing to prevent the attacks from neighboring countries like Turkey and Iran in order to force the Council of Representatives to agree on the necessity of an ongoing U.S. military presence with immunities beyond 2011.”¹⁹ -Alia Nassif, White Iraqiyya representative, October 23

KURDISH ALLIANCE

“I don’t believe that there will be security breaches in Iraq after the U.S. forces leave.”²⁰ -Masoud Barzani, Kurdistan Regional Government President, November 2

“Personally, I no longer want them to stay. It’s been eight years. I don’t think having Americans stay in Iraq will improve the situation at all. Leaving would be better for them and for us. It’s time for us to go our separate ways.”²¹ -Mahmoud Othman, an independent Kurdish representative, September 21

“It is true that the Iraqi army still needs more training, yet we thought it is unnecessary to keep American troops in the country for this reason and give them legal immunity as requested by the United States. Iraq’s soldiers are morally and technically ready to face terrorism and all other internal challenges. Special forces have been trained and armed for this purpose.”²² -Rosch Nuri Shaways, Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq and a Kurdish representative, October 26

“The American position was clear that no soldier will stay in Iraq without judicial immunity. The Iraqi government must take responsibility and study the possibility of finding a replacement to complete the training of the Iraqi army.”²³
-Muayyid Tayyeb, a Kurdish spokesman, October 22

IRAQI MILITARY

“All of the security apparatuses’ capacities have been employed to fill the security gap and implement the US withdrawal plan as designed. Therefore, we are very confident about the internal security situation after the US troops’ withdrawal.”²⁴
-Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-Askari, Spokesman for Ministry of Defense, October 21

“An army without an air force is exposed. While we have no enemies, we also have no real friends.”²⁵ -Lt. Gen. Babakir al-Zebari, Iraq’s army chief, October 31

REACTIONS FROM RELIGIOUS FIGURES

“[The U.S. withdrawal] will not be complete. Yes, it might be reduced in number. Let us put it this way: There are at least 5,000 people at the embassy, several thousand as part of the security companies, 6,000 trainers, and so on. That makes up about 25,000 soldiers that will remain in Iraq. Their current number is 40,000, so their number will only be reduced to less than half. Thus, it is a partial withdrawal, not a complete one.”²⁶ -Muqtada al-Sadr, Shi’a cleric and leader of the Sadrist Trend, November 2

“The American occupation will stay in Iraq under different names. I say to the American soldier: Get out for good.”²⁷
-Muqtada al-Sadr, November 4

“America is not only occupying Iraq but also other Islamic countries. Occupying Iraq means occupying what is around Iraq, and then to control the Middle East.”²⁸ -Muqtada al-Sadr, November 4

“It is absolutely necessary that all U.S. forces be withdrawn from Iraqi soil by the year-end deadline. Most of the political parties and factions agree on the necessity of this in the continued progress of Iraq. As long as American forces are here, Iraqi citizens will be reminded of the blood that has been shed.”²⁹ -Ammar al-Hakim, Shi’a cleric and leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq

presence for their short-term interests. Iraqiyya's relationship with Washington had gradually deteriorated since the Maliki government was formed late last year. By the spring of 2011, in a measure to regain negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Maliki, Iraqiyya had coupled its support for a possible U.S. troop extension with U.S. efforts to ensure that Maliki would fully implement the "Arbil Agreement."

Brokered late last year, the Arbil accord served as a power-sharing arrangement that effectively ended the nine-month government formation process initiated by the March 2010 parliamentary election. But as Iraqiyya members and bloc leader Ayad Allawi became frustrated and discouraged with failed U.S. efforts to urge Iraqi leaders to implement real power-sharing, considerations for supporting an ongoing U.S. military presence lost value. "We have serious security problems in this country and serious political problems," Allawi said in September 2011. "Keeping Americans in Iraq longer isn't the answer to the problems of Iraq. It may be an answer to the problems of the U.S., but it's definitely not the solution to the problems of my country."¹⁷

Iraq's Kurds were the most vocal and harmonious of Iraq's three main communities in support for an ongoing U.S. military presence beyond 2011. The security and political interests of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Arbil have been largely aligned with maintaining a continuing U.S. military footprint in Iraq, especially along the many "disputed territories" across northern Iraq. However, Kurdish rhetoric regarding a U.S. presence lost its prior enthusiasm, especially as the prospects for a new security agreement dwindled. "Personally, I no longer want them to stay," senior Kurdish MP Mahmoud Othman said in an interview a month before Obama announced his decision. "It's been eight years. I don't think having Americans stay in Iraq will improve the situation at all. Leaving would be better for them and for us. It's time for us to go our separate ways."¹⁸

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Rosch Nuri Shaways, a senior Kurdish political figure, recognized that Iraq endured disparities on external defense capabilities. However, he did not define the U.S. pullout as consequential toward Iraq's stability. "It is true that the Iraqi army still needs more training," Shaways said, "yet we thought it is

unnecessary to keep American troops in the country for this reason and give them legal immunity as requested by the United States." While expressing some apprehension that terrorist attacks might concentrate on targeting Iraqis in the future, Shaways ultimately believed Iraq's forces were "morally and technically ready to face terrorism and all other internal challenges. Special forces have been trained and armed for this purpose."¹⁹

KURDS HEDGE REGIONAL BETS

In early September 2011, while speaking at a conference in Arbil to Kurdish representatives that serve abroad, KRG President Masoud Barzani called on the central government in Baghdad to sign a new security agreement with the United States. Recognizing that Iraq's security forces were not ready, Barzani stressed that a U.S. presence was necessary to prevent civil sectarian war and deter foreign interference in Iraq's internal affairs.²⁰ Although Barzani continued his warnings of civil war after Obama's withdrawal decision, his actions and language have altered, suggesting his recognition of geopolitical realities and a weakening U.S. position in the region. On October 24, days after the official White House announcement, the Iranian media announced that Barzani would lead a KRG delegation to Tehran to begin on October 29.²¹ According to Faisal al-Dabbagh, Barzani's media advisor, the three-day visit was arranged after Barzani accepted an invitation from the Iranian government.²²

On his arrival, Barzani held a press conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi. Asked how the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq will affect security, Barzani responded, "I don't believe that there will be security breaches in Iraq after the U.S. forces leave."²³ Barzani later met with Saeed Jalili, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, who expressed Iran's readiness to assist Iraq.²⁴ On October 30, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei received Barzani and KRG officials and discussed the political, security, and economic interests. Despite his well-known and deep suspicions of Iran, which stretch back to Tehran's conflicting role in the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s, Barzani described Iran as "a close ally of the Iraqi people" and a "friendly country," for which "we will not forget the assistance of the Iranian people and

government during the hard times passed by Iraq.”²⁵ For his part, Khamenei stated his belief that the “united resistance of the Iraqi people of all tribes and religious sects against U.S. pressure and the refusal to grant immunity to U.S. occupying forces, which eventually forced the U.S. to leave Iraq, is a golden page in the history of Iraq.”²⁶ The next day, Barzani and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad discussed ways to develop bilateral relations and strengthen cooperation in various spheres, including border security.²⁷

IRAN'S SELF-ASSURED RHETORIC

The upheavals ushered in by the Arab Spring threatened the regime of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and Iran's geostrategic position in the region. While serving as a linchpin for Iran's reach to the Arab world, including Lebanese Hizballah, the consequences of the regime in Damascus collapsing carry significant strategic implications for Tehran. Over the summer, Iran's concerns had run deep enough to push Iraq's domestic actors to back Assad's regime through financial and economic deals.²⁸ With the U.S. now forgoing a new security arrangement, Iranian leaders perceive that Iraq can likely substitute Syria should the Alawite regime in Damascus collapse.

Given the remarks by various Iranian officials, Obama's decision to scrap negotiations and withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq likely has given Tehran a renewed confidence and certainty on the part of its position in the region.²⁹ Just over a week after Obama announced the complete pullout of the U.S. military from Iraq, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi made an official visit to Iraq. Interested in solidifying bilateral relations after the U.S. withdrawal and signaling Iran's will and readiness to deepen ties, Salehi stated that “Baghdad-Tehran mutual cooperation is going on well and the agreements between the two sides will reach ideal results in all fields.” Referring to the mutual cooperation with Iran as a possible “role model for resolving regional problems,” Maliki said, “We try to have the best and the broadest relations with Iran in all spheres to reach firm and strategic ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran via these relations.”³⁰ During Salehi's meeting with his Iraqi counterpart, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari stated that Baghdad was committed to prevent attacks directed

towards Iran. Zebari also reiterated Baghdad's promises to Tehran to expel from the country all members of the Mujahedin al-Khalq, an Iranian dissident group.³¹

During Barzani's official visit to Tehran, Khamenei conveyed to him that Iran was “satisfied” with the current conditions in Iraq, implying his content regarding the U.S. withdrawal and Iran's position.³² Around the same time, Iranian Defense Minister Brig. Gen. Ahmad Vahidi responded to warnings made by U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta about Tehran about its meddling next door, stating the “meddlesome remarks stem from their [the U.S.] deep fear of seeing the two nations (Iraqi and Iranian) united.”³³ Days later, Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami, a senior commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, commented that there was no longer “any secure place for the U.S. and its puppets and allies” to operate in the region, forcing the U.S. “to travel secretly.”³⁴

In addition, General Hassan Firouzabadi, the chairman of Iran's Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that the U.S. needed to disengage from the region in light of domestic economic constraints on its ability to project power. “The withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq should be a prelude to the pullout of all U.S. forces from the region,” Firouzabadi said. “The expenses of the presence of U.S. military forces in Bahrain, the Sea of Oman, and the Persian Gulf are so high that the problems will not be cleared up even if Americans retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan.”³⁵ The perception of a defeated adversary was unambiguous for Iranian allies in the region, particularly when it was apparent that the U.S. was attempting to renegotiate a new security agreement. In a televised interview, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Lebanese Hizballah, regarded the U.S. withdrawal as an achievement for the resistance groups and compared the U.S. pullout to the Israeli troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000.³⁶

TURKEY INVESTS IN MILITARY POWER

Turkey's break from its foreign policy based on “zero problems with neighbors” and change in behavior toward the Syrian regime in late spring 2011 also deeply alarmed Iran. As Iraq's largest trading partner, Turkey is competing

REACTIONS FROM REGION

IRAN

“The united resistance of the Iraqi people of all tribes and religious sects against U.S. pressure and the refusal to grant immunity to U.S. occupying forces, which eventually forced the U.S. to leave Iraq, is a golden page in the history of Iraq.”³⁰ -Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, October 30

“The withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq should be a prelude to the pullout of all U.S. forces from the region,” Firouzabadi said. “The expenses of the presence of U.S. military forces in Bahrain, the Sea of Oman, and the Persian Gulf are so high that the problems will not be cleared up even if Americans retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan.”³¹ -Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, chairman of Iran’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, October 29

TURKEY

“We made a decision to inform and consult each other in every work we conduct, including the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq so that we can prevent a power vacuum there.”³² -Ismet Yilmaz, Turkish Defense Minister, November 2

“The atmosphere seems to be that Turkey did indeed receive a positive reply from the U.S. that some of those ‘Predators’ currently in Iraq will be transferred to Incirlik [Air Base] and potentially made available for the use of the Turkish military.”³³ -Sinan Ulgen, former Turkish diplomat, November 7

“Erdogan offered his country’s full readiness to cooperate in training Iraqi forces, since the Turkish army is largely armed by the U.S. arsenal, as is the case with Iraq.”³⁴ -Tariq al-Hashemi, Iraqi Vice President reporting on a meeting he had with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 28, 2011.

“Turkey is ready to do its best to help Iraq’s stability.”³⁵ -Turkish government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, October 30

with Iran over political influence and economic interests in Iraq. The summer 2011 opening of a Turkish investment front in the southern Iraqi province of Basra is part of Turkey’s intention to build an economic corridor that cuts vertically through Iraq and reaches the Gulf States.³⁷ But with the U.S. withdrawal now a certain feature of Iraq’s security environment, Turkey is looking to empower its military capabilities in hopes of effectively confronting potential security gaps that threaten its interests, especially its war against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, a Kurdish-separatist group operating from Iraqi territory.

Less than a week after Obama announced his decision, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Alexander Vershbow led an interagency delegation to Ankara to discuss a wide range of regional security issues related to the U.S. exit from Iraq.³⁸ Some of the bilateral issues included reallocation of military equipment, intelligence sharing and combating terrorism, and the deployment of an early warning radar system in southern Turkey. Ankara has also made the controversial request to purchase Predator

drones, which can be equipped with satellite-guided bombs and Hellfire missiles. U.S. defense officials have already announced plans to sell three AH-1 Super Cobra helicopters to Turkey.³⁹ Following discussions with Panetta on November 1, Turkish Defense Minister Ismet Yilmaz said, “We made a decision to inform and consult each other in every work we conduct, including the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq so that we can prevent a power vacuum there.”⁴⁰ A Pentagon spokesperson recently reiterated that the U.S. was “committed to continuing our engagement and consultation with Congress on Turkey’s defense needs.”

Recently, Ankara appears to have received a commitment from the U.S. regarding the use of U.S. Predator drones. According to former Turkish diplomat Sinan Ulgen, “The atmosphere seems to be that Turkey did indeed receive a positive reply from the U.S. that some of those ‘Predators’ currently in Iraq will be transferred to Incirlik [Air Base] and potentially made available for the use of the Turkish military.”⁴¹ Ankara had long requested the weaponry system, but only recently had received positive signals

from Washington. The major factor in Washington's calculus, Ulgen suggests, was Turkey's recent decision last September to drop its opposition to host an early warning NATO missile-defense system that looks to counter ballistic missiles from Iran.⁴² Another likely factor has been Turkey's favorable policy and role toward the crisis in Syria.

As Turkey seeks to increase its role in Iraq by utilizing mutual interests with a U.S. declining in regional influence, Turkish officials have offered to train the Iraqi security forces following the U.S. pullout. On October 28, in a meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, the former expressed Turkey's willingness to train Iraq's security forces should negotiations fail to secure a training mission after the departure of the U.S. military. "Turkey is ready to do its best to help Iraq's stability," an anonymous Turkish official said. In a statement issued, Hashemi conveyed that "Erdogan offered his country's full readiness to cooperate in training Iraqi forces, since the Turkish army is largely armed by the U.S. arsenal, as is the case with Iraq."⁴³

However, Baghdad has refused Ankara's willingness to train its military, recognizing the regional competition that could be intensified in Iraq. While speaking on condition of anonymity, an official in Maliki's office stated, "Both Tehran and Ankara offered to train Iraqi forces, but we did not accept either due to the sensitivity of the situation. We cannot accept one state without another. We prefer that the training of forces be outside the framework of neighboring countries."⁴⁴

After returning from Iran, Barzani traveled to Ankara, after Erdogan reportedly insisted for discussions with the KRG President on confronting the PKK. The fallout of the visit indicates deepening collaboration between the Turkish military and Kurdish *peshmerga* forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. Erdogan has been persistent in Turkey's offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq, particularly after the PKK attack that killed 24 Turkish soldiers last month. On November 5, Turkish officials requested Barzani's *peshmerga* forces to intensify security of airport controls in Arbil and to utilize intelligence given by Ankara to arrest PKK members and seize cargos used by the organization. According to a report, Turkish officials furnished to Barzani a "red

file" that consisted of updated intelligence concerning the PKK's movements and cadres operating inside northern Iraq.⁴⁵ In the past, PKK militants retreat as *peshmerga* forces approach. Turkey, however, has requested that the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces engage the militants and offer more field intelligence to Ankara.

CONCLUSION

Following Obama's decision, Iraq's domestic actors and neighboring countries publicly reacted and prepared for a diminishing U.S. presence in the region. Although the Iraqi street has mixed feelings about the pullout, as portrayed in its depiction of U.S. troops as occupiers or protectors, many of Iraq's politicians have largely come to recognize that it is now in their best interest to publicly convey their acceptance of the U.S. withdrawal. This mood is reflected by the clear public statements of Iraqi figures, whose caution and ambiguity months ago signaled their recognition for the necessity of a U.S. training mission.

With the United States and Iraq set to enter a more normalized relationship in 2012, security is likely to become a political issue between the two major blocs of State of Law and Iraqiyya. While Iraqiyya politicians have publically accepted the U.S. withdrawal, they warned about creeping regional interference in Iraq's politics and security. Maliki's allies have tried reassuring the public that Iraq's security forces are capable for providing security, while maintaining that negotiations on defense trainers are still ongoing. Maliki likely recognizes that if security deteriorate next year, his rivals will take the opportunity to blame him, as they had when he prematurely removed protective concrete blast walls just before the infamous "Bloody Wednesday" bombings in August 2009. "You have done much for Iraq, but Iraq remains in the circle of danger," Maliki said to security officials at the start of the Eid al-Adha holiday last Sunday. "It needs more attention and care to confront those who want to damage security, who are plotting to turn this Eid, the Eid of happiness to Iraqis, into the Eid of blood."⁴⁶

On the regional front, Turkey is situating itself to improve its regional position and influence following the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq. Turkey recognizes that the U.S. departure will raise Turkey's significance for the U.S. to

maintain engagement in the region and toward Iraq. Ankara's offer to train and assist Iraq's security forces suggests a desire to diversify leverage in Iraq and expand outside the sphere of economic influence. Iran will continue to diversify its political reach and court Iraqi actors from across the political and sectarian spectrum. This comprehensive approach, in effect, will seek to limit the extent to which factions and individual personalities are dependent on other neighboring powers. Barzani's rare visit to Tehran does not demonstrate that the U.S. has lost its strongest ally in Iraq. It does, however, suggest that Barzani recognizes a key feature of post-2011 Iraq, that is, the decline of U.S. power in Iraq, which necessitates maintaining good relations with Iraq's eastern neighbor.

NOTES

- ¹ *Al-Mustakbal*, October 27, 2011, translated from Arabic, <http://www.almustakbalpaper.net/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=12285>
- ² Al-Iraqiyah TV, Baghdad, in Arabic, October 21, 2011.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Al-Baghdadia, October 24, 2011, translated from Arabic, <http://www.albaghdadia.com/n/iraq-politics/32563-2011-10-24-20-58-49.html>
- ⁵ Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "U.S. scales back diplomacy in Iraq amid fiscal and security concerns," *New York Times*, October 22, 2011.
- ⁶ "Iraqi speaker warns of neighboring countries meddling after U.S. troops leave," Associated Press, October 24, 2011.
- ⁷ "MP: Government will deal with militias and al-Qaeda," AK News, October 24, 2011.
- ⁸ Reidar Visser, "Sadr demands resistance against the US embassy in Baghdad," *Iraq and Gulf Analysis*, October 22, 2011.
- ⁹ Al-Arabiya TV, Dubai, in Arabic, November 2, 2011.
- ¹⁰ "Iraq can't defend itself fully before 2020 – general," Reuters, October 31, 2011.
- ¹¹ "Iraqi politicians criticize circumstances of U.S. withdrawal," AK News, October 22, 2011.
- ¹² Lara Jakes and Rebecca Santana, "Iraq PM: Immunity issue scuttled US troop deal," Associated Press, October 22, 2011.
- ¹³ "U.S. troops a future possibility for Iraq," UPI, October 22, 2011.
- ¹⁴ "Iraqi politicians criticize circumstances of U.S. withdrawal," AK News, October 22, 2011.
- ¹⁵ Ramzy Mardini and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, Iraq Trip Report, Institute for the Study of War, August 4, 2011.
- ¹⁶ Raheem Salman and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Iraq eager to see U.S. troops leave," *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2011.
- ¹⁷ Yochi J. Dreazen, "Iraqi leaders urge U.S. against extending troop presence," *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Yochi J. Dreazen, "Iraqi leaders urge U.S. against extending troop presence," *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2011.
- ¹⁹ "Qaeda unlikely to dominate Iraq, Kirkuk vital for stability: Iraq Deputy Premier," Al-Arabiya News, October 26, 2011.
- ²⁰ "Barzani calls Baghdad government to extend US troops presence in Iraq," Al-Sumaria TV, September 7, 2011.
- ²¹ "President Masoud Barzani to visit Iran," *Tehran Times*, October 24, 2011.
- ²² <http://thecurrencynewshound.com/2011/10/30/barzani-and-khamenei-discuss-iraq-after-the-u-s-withdrawal/>
- ²³ "President Barzani meets supreme leader Khamenei and president Ahmadinejad in Tehran," *Kurdish Globe*, November 2, 2011.
- ²⁴ "President Barzani, Jalili discuss bilateral ties," PUK Media, October 31, 2011.
- ²⁵ "Iran is a friendly country, we need it, Barzani," *Aswat al-Iraq*, October 30, 2011.
- ²⁶ "Withstanding U.S. pressure a golden page in Iraq's history: Leader," Mehr News Agency, October 30, 2011.
- ²⁷ "President Barzani meets with Iranian President," PUK Media, October 31, 2011.

²⁸ Ma'ad Fayad, "Iran orders Iraqi allies to support Syrian regime financially," *Asharq al-Awsat*, August 3, 2011; Michael S. Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, "Iraqi leader backs Syria, with a nudge from Iran," *New York Times*, August 12, 2011.

²⁹ For additional reactions by Iranian leaders, see Will Fulton and Maseh Zarif, "Iranian reactions to U.S. withdrawal from Iraq," Iran Tracker, American Enterprise Institute, November 4, 2011.

³⁰ "Iraq's future is clear through sympathy: Salehi," IRIB, October 31, 2011.

³¹ "Baghdad committed to preventing any action against Iran: Iraqi FM," Mehr News Agency, October 31, 2011.

³² <http://thecurrencynewshound.com/2011/10/30/barzani-and-khamenei-discuss-iraq-after-the-u-s-withdrawal/>

³³ "US uses arrogance to hide desperation," Press TV, October 30, 2011.

³⁴ "IRGC commander: nowhere secure for US-led West," Fars News Agency, November 2, 2011.

³⁵ "People in region want to see the back U.S. forces: commander," *Tehran Times*, October 29, 2011.

³⁶ "US pullout from Iraq, historic defeat," Press TV, October 24, 2011.

³⁷ "Turkey uses Basra launchpad for financial assault on the south," AK News, July 2, 2011.

³⁸ "Ambassador Vershbow visits Turkey to strengthen cooperation against the PKK," U.S. Embassy – Ankara, October 27, 2011.

³⁹ "US agrees to sell three helicopters to Turkey," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 2, 2011.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Turkey eyes U.S. drones in PKK fight," RFE/RL, November 7, 2011.

⁴² Ibid; "Turkey backs NATO missile defense shield against Iran," *The Daily Telegraph*, September 2, 2011.

⁴³ "Hashimi: Turkey expressed its willingness to train the Iraqi armed forces," NINA, October 30, 2011.

⁴⁴ "Iraq declines regional military training," Agence-France-Presse, November 1, 2011.

⁴⁵ "Turkish officials give 'red file' to Barzani," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 7, 2011.

⁴⁶ Bushra Juhi, "Bombs kill 8 in Baghdad market, Iraqi police say," Associated Press, November 6, 2011.

REACTION NOTES

¹ "Iraqis voice happiness over U.S. withdrawal decision," Agence-France-Presse, October 22, 2011.

² Lara Jakes and Rebecca Santana, "Conflicted Iraqis face future without US troops," Associated Press, October 22, 2011.

³ Waleed Ibrahim, "Iraqis fret about security after U.S. withdrawal," Reuters, October 21, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lara Jakes and Rebecca Santana, "Conflicted Iraqis face future without US troops," Associated Press, October 22, 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Waleed Ibrahim, "Iraqis fret about security after U.S. withdrawal," Reuters, October 21, 2011.

⁸ "Iraqis voice happiness over U.S. withdrawal decision," Agence-France-Presse, October 22, 2011.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lara Jakes and Rebecca Santana, "Iraq PM: Immunity issue scuttled US troop deal," Associated Press, October 22, 2011.

¹¹ Al-Iraqiyah TV, Baghdad, in Arabic, October 21, 2011.

¹² "Iraqi politicians criticize circumstances of U.S. withdrawal," AK News, October 22, 2011.

¹³ Al-Baghdadia, October 24, 2011, translated from Arabic, <http://www.albaghdadia.com/n/iraq-polotics/32563-2011-10-24-20-58-49.html>

¹⁴ Yochi Dreazen, "Iraqi leaders urge U.S. against extending troop presence," *National Journal*, September 21, 2011.

¹⁵ "Iraqi speaker warns of neighboring countries meddling after U.S. troops leave," Associated Press, October 24, 2011.

¹⁶ Iraqi Media Net, October 22, 2011, translated from Arabic, <http://www.imn.iq/news/view.7642/>

¹⁷ Raheem Salman and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Iraq eager to see U.S. troops leave," *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2011.

¹⁸ Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "U.S. scales back diplomacy in Iraq amid fiscal and security concerns," *New York Times*, October 22, 2011.

¹⁹ Al-Baghdadia, October 23, 2011, translated from Arabic, <http://www.albaghdadia.com/n/iraq-polotics/32503-2011-10-23-09-04-34.html>

²⁰ "President Barzani meets supreme leader Khamenei and president Ahmadinejad in Tehran," *Kurdish Globe*, November 2, 2011.

²¹ Yochi J. Dreazen, "Iraqi leaders urge U.S. against extending troop presence," *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2011.

²² "Qaeda unlikely to dominate Iraq, Kirkuk vital for stability: Iraq Deputy Premier," Al-Arabiya News, October 26, 2011.

²³ "Iraqi politicians criticize circumstances of U.S. withdrawal," AK News, October 22, 2011.

²⁴ Al-Iraqiyah TV, Baghdad, in Arabic, October 21, 2011.

²⁵ "Iraq can't defend itself fully before 2020 – general," Reuters, October 31, 2011.

²⁶ Al-Arabiya TV, Dubai, in Arabic, November 2, 2011.

²⁷ "US military: American service member dies in Iraq," Associated Press, November 4, 2011

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Al-Alemya, September 15, 2011, translated from Arabic, http://www.alalemya.com/alalemya_news/0_2011_5_/11_/11_9_1/15-9/amm-ar_al_hakim.html

³⁰ "Withstanding U.S. pressure a golden page in Iraq's history: leader," Mehr News Agency, October 30, 2011.

³¹ "People in region want to see the back U.S. forces: commander," *Tehran Times*, October 29, 2011.

³² "US agrees to sell three helicopters to Turkey," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 2, 2011.

³³ Turkey eyes U.S. drones in PKK fight," RFE/RL, November 7, 2011.

³⁴ "Hashimi: Turkey expressed its willingness to train the Iraqi armed forces," NINA, October 30, 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.