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Halting the Descent: U.S. Policy toward the Deteriorating Situation in Iraq

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Iraq is not heading in a good direction. Administration talking points attempt to deflect criticism from the president by comparing conditions today with conditions at the height of the violence (and the surge) in 2007. Vice President Biden's National Security Advisor Tony Blinken recently noted that weekly security incidents had fallen from 1,600 in 2007 and 2008 to 100 today. He and other officials point to the continuation of politics in Baghdad as proof that the situation is stabilizing. They dismiss the notion that Iraq is heading toward resurgent insurgency, terrorism, and civil war. Those are talking points. Reality is different.

The discussion about security incidents is, in fact, misleading. No one suggests that Iraq today is as bad as it was at the very height of violence. Neither is it true, however, that violence is continuing to fall. Dr. Michael Knights, the Lafer Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, recently noted that, according to the incident database produced by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (which fuses reporting by the Iraqi Security Forces and open sources), violence in February was nearly double what it had been in November. The Iraq Body Count database showed January 2012 as the most violent month since August 2010, and, again, close to double the violence of November 2011. Comparing violence today with violence in 2007 misses the point. The fact is that violence has been increasing since the Obama Administration announced that it would be withdrawing completely from Iraq, and the trends are getting worse.

These measures of violence are also misleading because they are not apples-to-apples comparisons. At the height of the surge there were close to 165,000 American troops in Iraq constantly patrolling. Their "weekly security incident" roll-ups included IEDs that were found and cleared as well as those that detonated—more often than not aimed at U.S. convoys and military installations. The complete withdrawal of those forces has naturally denied insurgents hundreds of thousands of targets but has also denied us access to information. The figures we now have are almost entirely Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence, which is the metric that we need to be watching in order to see indications of incipient civil war.

And we can see such indications in the locations in which violence is flaring. According to Dr. Knights, violence is increasing significantly in the areas that were traditional sectarian flashpoints and bases for both al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Ba'athist insurgents. Diyala Province is increasingly unstable, with violence in both Sunni and Shi'a areas. Historical AQI bases in Fallujah, Taji, and Abu Ghraib appear to be re-activating. Another traditional AQI base in Suwayrah in northern Wasit Province has been re-activated and is being used to project terrorism into the southern Shi'a heartland. And what used to be known as the Triangle of Death, including the historical operational hub at Jurf al Sukr, is re-emerging as a flashpoint and facilitation area for attacks into Baghdad.

This activity suggests that what we had predicted would occur after the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces has begun. Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which had been badly damaged by Iraqi and Coalition operations during the surge, are reconstituting in their historical safe havens. We see a spectrum of violence including ISI attacks against "collaborators" and former Sons of Iraq, ISI attacks against Iraqi government and security officials, conflict within Moqtada al Sadr's movement, and conflict along the Arab-Kurd seam and particularly in the disputed territories. Three months after the withdrawal of American forces, it is far too soon to declare that civil war is not coming to Iraq, particularly in light of these indicators suggesting that it is.

At least some of this instability is being driven by an increasingly sectarian political struggle in Baghdad. Maliki has been moving to consolidate his power and drive his opponents out of government and the security services for years. He regained the premiership after failing to secure a plurality of the votes in the 2010 parliamentary election by agreeing to a number of conditions that would have ceded real power to a wider cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic coalition including Iraqiyya, the party that did win the plurality, and the Kurds. This concord, the Irbil Agreement, has been unilaterally scrapped by Maliki, who has refused to abide by its conditions or implement its provisions.

Worse still, Maliki has accelerated a pattern of sectarian and political purging within the security forces and the highest levels of the Iraqi government. On the plane back from Washington after meeting with President Obama, Maliki ordered the extra-constitutional arrest of Sunni Vice President Tariq al Hashemi and sent his son, Ahmed Maliki, with the Baghdad Brigade to surround Hashemi's house. Hashemi fled and is now sheltering in Kurdistan while Maliki-influenced courts prepare to try him in absentia. Maliki subsequently deposed Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Mutlaq and banned him from participating in the Council of Ministers even though he did not obtain a parliamentary vote of no-confidence as the constitution requires. Maliki has promoted loyal Iraqi Security Force commanders by appointing them in acting positions, avoiding the requisite parliamentary approval. At the same time, he has fired or arrested hundreds of current and former security force personnel over alleged ties to Baathism or terrorism.

The Obama Administration now believes that Iraqiyya is no longer viable—which is true, since the Administration facilitated its collapse. The U.S. signally failed to stand up for the implementation of the Irbil Agreement, has taken no position on Hashemi's arrest or Mutlaq's ouster, has been silent about purges within the ISF, and pressured Iraqiyya to end its boycott of Parliament and the Cabinet, which it had begun in protest of the violence being done to its members, without receiving any concessions from Maliki.

This development is hardly positive for Iraqi democracy. Iraqiyya was a seriously flawed coalition, and its Shi'a leader, Iyad Allawi, is stubborn, ineffective, and uncooperative. These traits have contributed powerfully to Iraqiyya's failure to gain power despite having won the election. But Maliki's moves—and America's—have not been directed against Allawi. They have, rather, fallen on two of the central Sunni leaders of Iraqiyya who have historically been extremely pragmatic—if not entirely savory—players in the Iraqi political system. The net result of these moves has been destruction of anything resembling a meaningful loyal opposition and the de facto subordination of Parliament to the whims of Maliki and to the single-party rule of his Da'wa Party. It would be one thing if the Administration had worked to replace the flawed Iraqiyya Party with a less-flawed coherent, cross-sectarian, opposition that had the power meaningfully to check Maliki. But the rump Iraqiyya based on the factions of Osama Nujaifi and Rafe al Issawi does not have such power and is exclusively Sunni. It cannot form a meaningful check on Maliki's actions but is likely rather to become the Sunni fig-leaf for his increasingly authoritarian one-party state.

The Arab Sunni population in Iraq is now under great and growing pressure. Maliki disbanded the Awakening Councils—and stopped efforts to incorporate Sons of Iraq into the government or security forces—as U.S. forces were withdrawing. The elimination of Hashemi and Mutlaq from government strips the more conservative—and centrally-located—Sunnis of emblems of their representation. Increasing ISI and “Ba'athist” activity has been met with increasing Iraqi Security Forces activities in Sunni areas, including widespread arrests, targeted strikes, sweeps, and the removal of local commanders in Anbar and elsewhere. Maliki has also attempted to weaken and fracture provincial councils in Diyala and Salah-ad Din, prompting them to declare their intention to seek federal status. Anbar has followed their lead (as have a number of Shi'a provinces, most notably Basra). Maliki has denounced these attempts to exercise powers explicitly granted to the provinces by the constitution and used force to prevent them from moving forward. In this context, it is not surprising that elements of the Sunni population may be feeling increasingly disenfranchised, vulnerable to violent groups, and more susceptible to the blandishments and intimidation of insurgents and terrorists.

This is exactly the Iraq the United States did not want to leave behind. Presidents Bush and Obama wanted an Iraq that was no longer a safe haven for terrorists, but the terrorists are returning. Worse still, AQI has begun projecting violence from Iraq into Syria, reversing the historical ratlines that had supported its attacks against the U.S. in Iraq. The U.S. wanted an Iraq in which the Sunni minority felt that its stake in government was safe and effective, in which

elections mattered, and in which violence would not be used to revise political settlements. Instead, the U.S. has tolerated and even encouraged the over-turning of an electoral result and stood by the Maliki government as it has used force to revise political settlements it had agreed to.

Tony Blinken, Vice President Biden's national security adviser, said that Iraq today is "less violent, more democratic, and more prosperous, and the U.S. more deeply engaged there than at any time in recent history." The fact that Iraq is less violent, more prosperous, more democratic, and with more U.S. engagement than it was under Saddam Hussein is the result of the efforts of the previous administration, not this one. But Iraq is more violent, less democratic, and the U.S. less engaged than it was six months ago. And it is poised on the knife's-edge of a civil war. The United States has not achieved its core national security objectives in Iraq.