

## A NEW MIRAGE IN THE IRAQI DESERT

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Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's meeting Monday with President Obama, their first in-person encounter since October 2009, is supposed to be an occasion to declare the successful end of the war in Iraq and the beginning of a "normal" relationship between two friendly states. Maliki and Obama are likely to reaffirm their commitments to non-military components of the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement — such as trade, education and investment — and discuss the limited ways in which the United States will continue to assist Iraqi forces after 2011.

This vision of relations will seem palatable to Americans and Iraqis who want to believe that all will be well after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. But the image is a mirage. It rests on inaccurate portrayals of the situation in Iraq and Maliki's policies. It also lacks a strategy to secure vital U.S. interests in the region.

Even after the last U.S. soldier departs, America's core interests in Iraq include:

- Ensuring that Iraq contributes to the security of the Middle East, rather than undermining it through state collapse, civil war or the establishment of a sectarian dictatorship;
- Ensuring that terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or backed by Iran cannot establish sanctuaries;
- Promoting an Iraq that abides by its international responsibilities;
- Containing Iranian influences that are harmful to U.S. interests in Iraq and the region; and
- Signaling U.S. commitment to the region at a pivotal moment in history.

Securing these and other U.S. interests requires two basic conditions: First, Iraq must be able to control, police and defend its territory, airspace and waters. Second, Iraq must preserve and solidify the multi-ethnic and cross-sectarian political accommodation that was established in 2008 and 2009 but that has been eroding since the formation of the current government.

Neither condition is likely to be met in the coming years.

Despite enthusiastic rhetoric from Maliki and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, Iraq is not able to defend its territory or airspace. Iraq has no military aircraft able to maintain its air sovereignty and will not for several years, Lt. Gen. Frank

Helmick, deputy commander of U.S. forces there, explained in a press conference on Dec. 7. He said that challenges facing Iraq include "external security threats, Iranian-backed militias, al-Qaeda, other violent extremist groups" and that "Iraqis must continue to put constant pressure on those groups." He said persistent "security gaps" include "their air sovereignty, their air defense capability, the ability to protect the two oil platforms, and then the ability to do combined arms operations for an external defense, synchronizing their infantry with their armor, with their artillery, with their engineers."

Iraqi security forces are unable to maintain their capabilities and equipment, much less meet new challenges. The only remaining U.S. training missions are for Iraqi police, and there are no agreements for training or supporting the military beyond year's end. "How they deal with that gap" in defense capabilities, Helmick noted, "is really up to them."

Even more troubling than the security weaknesses is the erosion of the fragile political settlement. Maliki has pursued a sectarian agenda focused on consolidating power and monopolizing control of the state and security forces under his Dawa Party. He wrote on this page last Monday: "The Baath Party, which is prohibited by the constitution, believes in coups and conspiracies; indeed, these have been its modus operandi since the party's inception. The Baathists seek to destroy Iraq's democratic process. Hundreds of suspected Baathists recently were arrested. . . . I refute characterizations that the detentions were a sectarian action based on political motives."

But it is difficult to square the descriptions of good security conditions in Iraq, as cited by U.S. military and administration officials and by Maliki, with the idea that mass arrests were necessary to prevent an imminent Sunni coup d'état. It is even harder to see how that alleged threat required Maliki to remove officials from the Education Ministry and fire or replace several general officers of known integrity, patriotism and national loyalty.

The reality is that Maliki has just announced a policy of prosecuting — in some cases persecuting — selected former members of the Baath Party (including many protected from such actions by the de-Baathification law because they never held high positions) and other political opponents in a way certain to fan the smoldering embers of sectarian fear. Maliki is unwinding the multi-ethnic, cross-sectarian Iraqi political settlement.

Obama administration policy presumes that Maliki generally shares U.S. interests and will pursue them even without significant American assistance. Were that true, Maliki would aggressively protect American civilian and diplomatic personnel who have been threatened by the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and recently targeted to such a degree that the embassy has restricted their travel. He would direct security forces to act against Iranian-sponsored militias in Iraq. Rather than abstaining, he would have supported the Arab League's vote to suspend Syrian membership. He would see to it that Ali Mussa Daqduq, the Lebanese Hezbollah operative responsible for the execution of American soldiers in Karbala in 2007, is transferred to U.S. custody or tried in Iraq and punished for his crimes. He would appoint a permanent minister of defense and an interior minister acceptable to Parliament rather than concentrating those powers in his office.

But Maliki has done none of those things.

Despite the withdrawal of U.S. forces, Washington has leverage to affect Iraqi behavior. Iraq is a signatory to numerous treaties and a member of international organizations obliging it to respect human rights, ensure due process of law, and refrain from arbitrary or political detentions. Responsible nations should insist that Iraq demonstrate its commitment to those obligations. The president should tell Maliki in no uncertain terms that Washington will hold him to account in the international arena if Iraq does not.

All bilateral military relations and security cooperation were governed by the expiring strategic agreement and must be established under new agreements. There is much that Washington could offer, including guaranteeing the security of Iraq's land, sea and airspace until Iraq is able to defend itself and establishing a program of collective military training, exercises and exchanges to improve the quality of Iraqi forces. Effective counterterrorism cooperation will require the negotiation of an intelligence-sharing agreement as well as transparent partnering with Iraq's counterterrorism forces.

An independent, stable and responsible Iraqi state is critical to U.S. interests in the Middle East. A substantive policy toward that end can result from a combined insistence that Iraq adhere to international laws and norms, pressure on Iraqi leaders to deepen the political settlements under such stress, and the positive incentives of genuine military cooperation. The objective would

not be to oust Maliki but to do what the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement specified: "support and strengthen Iraq's democracy and its democratic institutions as defined and established in the Iraqi Constitution, and in so doing, enhance Iraq's capability to protect these institutions against all internal and external threats." Such a policy would reflect U.S. values and could help ensure free, fair and inclusive elections in 2013, so the Iraqi people preserve the representative government to which so many in the Middle East aspire.

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