

EXTENDING THE U.S. MILITARY ROLE IN IRAQ

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), signed in 2008 by outgoing President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, requires the U.S. military to completely withdraw from Iraq no later than December 31, 2011. However, Iraq is failing to maintain internal security, continues to experience serious external defense deficiencies, and has unresolved political disagreements that could threaten stability. The national security interests of the United States and Iraq require extending the SOFA and retaining a smaller but still substantial U.S. military footprint in Iraq. The U.S. has signaled its willingness to extend its presence if requested by Iraq. Although Iraq's leaders increasingly recognize the necessity of extending the Status of Forces Agreement to permit U.S. military involvement beyond 2011, political obstacles have precluded them from initiating a domestic debate on extending the SOFA. As a result, it is necessary for the United States to take on a proactive and leading role when engaging with Iraq's leaders, and to communicate the importance and value of a new security agreement.

IRAQ'S CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE

The debate on the upcoming U.S. withdrawal from Iraq captured the attention of Iraq's political mainstream following the April 2011 visit by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Immediately after, tens of thousands of loyalists of Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr flooded the streets in Baghdad to mark the eighth anniversary of the ousting of Saddam Hussein, while demanding for the withdrawal of U.S. forces by the year's end. The Sadrists threatened to reinstate the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia. A wave of political assassinations followed this spring. Although the perpetrators are unknown, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards - Qods-Force used the same drive-by assassination tactics in 2007 and 2008. Iraqi politicians and generals, therefore, face serious and increasing political and security risks should they support an ongoing U.S. military presence in Iraq. Short-lived, high-profile visits by senior American officials may, therefore, not suffice to convince Iraqi political leaders to take the risk of asking to extend the status of forces agreement.

Two overarching problems reduce the likelihood that the Iraqis can respect to a SOFA renewal. First, because Iraq's political parties are fragmented, Iraqi leaders lack the capacity and political will to lead on renegotiating the SOFA with the United States. At this moment, Iraq's political actors neither believe that they are responsible for confronting the issue, nor perceive that the benefits for leading as outweighing the risks for publicly disclosing their supportive position. As a consequence, a stalemate exists in Iraq on moving the debate forward. Second, the negotiations for a new security agreement are bound to be shaped by the politics and interests of multiple domestic and regional players. The complexity of the negotiations will make them slow moving, at best, and they will not be completed quickly enough to ensure that the military can maintain the necessary footprint.

MALIKI'S RESPONSIBILITY?

In late 2010, after having secured another term as prime minister, Maliki had indicated that the final withdrawal date for U.S. forces in Iraq was “not subject to extension, not subject to alteration.” In considering the domestic and regional audiences, he has publicly expressed his opposition towards an extended U.S. military presence by reiterating the same set of talking points during each visit by senior U.S. officials: Iraqi security forces are capable of handling the internal security portfolio, and Iraq’s sovereignty is not endangered by external threats.

Recently, however, Maliki has acknowledged that on “external defense” on sovereignty and borders, Iraq “still suffers from shortages.” Though this recognition indicates a departure from his previous inflexible positions in public, the prime minister still seems unwilling to play a leading role in pushing for a new security agreement. He has a reasonable political rationale for hedging his bets. Maliki’s does not have as much domestic political support as he did in late 2008. His political reliance on the anti-American Sadrism Trend and Iran’s sponsorship, along with the emergence of the rival Iraqiyya bloc, has effectively limited the extent to which he can act decisively in the SOFA debate. Should the prime minister come to back a U.S. troop extension, the removal of Sadr’s political support might jeopardize his premiership.

As a result, Maliki is wary about the politicization of the SOFA issue and its use as a tool against him and his nationalist image. He has warned others that he will not allow the extension of any U.S. presence to be blamed squarely on him. Instead, Maliki and his allies have downplayed the extent to which the central government is responsible for arranging a new agreement, while stressing that parliament holds the central role in emending changes to the existing SOFA. He has gone on to emphasize that the ultimate decision should be realized by a “unified” and “national agreement,” where a comfortable threshold is reached by a large political majority. By essentially placing responsibility for the decision with other major political leaders in parliament, Maliki hopes to deflect the potential political risks and consequences for extending the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Iraq’s other political actors are also reluctant to take ownership in leading and pushing for discussions on the SOFA, even among those who privately favor an extended U.S. presence. Iraqiyya members have expressed mixed interests, ranging from outright opposition toward an extended presence to a more cautionary outlook of the consequences of U.S. withdrawal. However, a consensus has taken shape within the Iraqiyya bloc on the appropriate political process, following the lead of Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi: first, as the commander-in-chief, the prime minister and his central government are the responsible parties for arranging a new security agreement with the United States; and second, the parliament’s role will be limited to only carrying out an up-or-down vote on the agreement emerging from government-to-government negotiations.

The security and political interests of the Kurdish region are aligned with maintaining a continuing U.S. military footprint, particularly in northern Iraq along territories that are under dispute. Kurdish officials have not taken the leading role they ought in seeking an extension of the SOFA. Rather, Kurdish representatives, recognizing Iraq’s sensitivities toward foreign interference, initially sought quietly to convey the consequences of a premature U.S. withdrawal while stressing that Baghdad holds the ultimate decision over the presence of U.S. forces. However, in May 2011, a growing number of Kurdish officials have disclosed their explicit support for a new security agreement. Recognizing that many of Iraq’s leaders privately back a U.S. military role beyond 2011, the Kurds have become more confident in expressing arguments against a U.S. withdrawal.

Accomplishing a new security agreement with Iraq will require extensive negotiations amongst the various Iraqi political blocs and between Iraqi and U.S. officials. Since early May 2011, there have been some efforts to initiate more formal discussion on the subject amongst various Iraqi leaders. Prime Minister Maliki has expressed his desire to call together Iraq's main political parties in the near future to query them on their position regarding a renegotiated SOFA. These initial discussions among Iraqi officials must be coupled with enhanced more serious U.S. approach, which has thus far been pursued inadequately.

In the final analysis, Prime Minister Maliki remains the most significant actor on the fate of the remaining U.S. forces. The basis for his final calculation will still be centered on the risks, rather than the potential benefits, in choosing to support or reject the stay of the U.S. military.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **At the individual level, U.S. policymakers should focus on articulating effective arguments for an extended U.S. presence that are tailored to the interests of the particular Iraqi leader.** Iraq's politics are largely local and parochial. The interests and perceptions of what constitutes a cost or benefit with regards to the U.S. withdrawal are diverse across the demographic and political spectrum. Iraqi leaders who privately favor an agreement are in need of persuasive arguments that are relevant to their particular constituents on why an extended U.S. presence is in their best interests. These suggestive reasons should be communicated privately so that Iraqi leaders can publicly and more effectively articulate them to the Iraqi people.
- **At the domestic level, the U.S. should adopt an integrated and bottom-up approach that focuses on building confidence and consensus amongst Iraq's various actors.** Rather than a Maliki-centric, top-down strategy for engagement, the U.S. should quietly focus on Iraq's other political groups and personalities first. This approach requires U.S. policymakers to directly engage, in a "hub-and-spoke" fashion, the individual party leaders that represent the various factions within the coalition blocs. However, for this approach to be effective, it should work on building confidence and consensus between the Iraqis themselves. An approach that is disconnected, which mainly focuses on isolated discussions between U.S. and Iraqi officials, will have little effect on integrating the party leaders under a single position. In order for Maliki to move forward on a new security agreement, he needs prior assurances from Iraqis, not the U.S., that adequate political support is organized and prearranged.
- **At the regional level, the United States should adopt an out-to-in approach by engaging Iraq's neighbors in order to utilize mutual interests and more influentially target Iraq's domestic actors.** Similar to the government formation process in Iraq, negotiations to extend the U.S. military presence will inherently involve regional actors. Iran is playing a prominent role to prevent a new security agreement from emerging. The U.S. should intensify engagement with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Gulf States – all of whom share strategic interests in an ongoing U.S. presence in Iraq for the purposes of maintaining stability and balancing Iran's growing regional influence. Their leverage over key individuals and constituencies within Iraq is significant, and their added diplomatic weight can help reassure and mobilize the various factions to favor an agreement.

- **U.S. diplomacy is more likely to be successful in obtaining a new security agreement if policymakers choose a more subtle and softer approach toward engagement, with private meetings and lower-profile visits. The U.S. should strongly convey the necessities for continuing an ongoing presence, and should urge Iraq's leaders to act.** Though some policymakers have sought to demonstrate their commitment for a U.S.-Iraq partnership, the various visits by senior U.S. officials have worsened the political environment in securing an extended troop presence. This overt line of engagement has stoked suspicions of U.S. intentions and intensified nationalist sentiments, causing massive demonstrations across Iraq. This has given anti-American elements, such as the Sadrists, opportunities to manipulate the political environment to their advantage by painting these visits as efforts to strong-arm Iraqi politicians into accepting an ongoing foreign occupation. Any public statement by senior U.S. officials must be carefully gauged to inhibit them from being manipulated by elements that seek to prevent a continued U.S. presence. Physical meetings with Iraqi leaders should be led by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and not by U.S. officials visiting from Washington. It is more effective for policymakers in the U.S. to engage Iraqi leaders by way of telephone and video conference.
- **Convey a single, coherent message from U.S. policymakers.** U.S. engagement on securing a troop extension appears ad-hoc, resulting with incompatible messages over the timetable for the Iraqi leadership to decide on an agreement and the size and role of a continued U.S. presence in Iraq. Moreover, senior U.S. defense officials have demonstrated a pro-active desire for a continued U.S. military role after 2011, while the White House appears less committed to push for of a new security agreement.
- **Define and articulate positive objectives for U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and a vision for a bilateral strategic relationship beyond 2011.** Too many Iraqis perceive the U.S. as lacking both commitment and priority toward Iraq, leaving them with growing doubt about the future of the relationship. This uncertainty has weakened the overall U.S. position, undermining its credibility when attempting to communicate the consequences of a premature U.S. withdrawal.
- **Engagement with the Iraqi leadership should involve discussions that unfold over an extended period of time, and not be curtailed by ultimatums by U.S. officials.** Policymakers must nevertheless recognize that Baghdad's political clock does not correspond with Washington's withdrawal timetable. Therefore, issuing ultimatums or deadlines for prompt action does not take into consideration the political sensitivities surrounding the presence of U.S. forces. This hard-lined approach is undermining the U.S. objective in seeking a new security agreement.
- **In addition, engagement by the U.S. must also involve long-term and sustained commitment communicated by the highest authority.** Iraq is situated at the center of a volatile region with various regional players involved in its politics, security, and economy. The Iraqi leadership needs reassurance that the U.S. is a long-term partner and is both serious and invested in the outcome of Iraq. Without the President of the United States personally making such assurances, which are then continually followed by actions, Iraq's political actors are likely to rely more on the sustained engagement of its neighbors, including Iran.

➤ **On a broader level, the U.S. needs to better engage and induce the Iraqi people by framing the central rationale behind the U.S. presence as essential for laying down the foundation for a future where Iraq is a thriving power in the region.**

- **An ongoing U.S. military presence allows for the development of conditions that will yield a more autonomous and sovereign Iraq in the future.** In reality, the withdrawal of U.S. forces does not lead to a more sovereign Iraq that is able to behave independently in pursuit of its own interests. Without a sufficient external defense capability free of U.S. troops, Iraq's foreign policy and domestic politics will be more constrained by the influence and interests of other regional actors. Some Iraqi politicians, including Maliki, have publicly argued that Iraq does not face external security threats. Though foreign invasions of Iraq are highly unlikely, without a deterrent-capable military, Iraq will remain vulnerable to coercive measures sought out by its neighbors to hinder its rise as a regional military and economic power.
- **A rising Iraqi power will depend on the quality and training of forces in modern warfare systems so as to present a credible military that serves as a deterrent against foreign intervention by regional players.** The U.S. must make it clear to the Iraqis that numbers alone does not translate into strength. The large size of the Iraq army has very little effect on the valuable use of capabilities in the technological and information age of military power. Iraq's forces still possess deficiencies in intelligence and logistics, as well as external defense capabilities in protecting its borders, ports, and airspace. A robust modern capability will be required if Iraq is to assume a role as a regional leader.
- **Sustained U.S. engagement can help facilitate advancements on Iraq's political impasses and continuing security disparities, thereby suitably hastening the potential for its oil and gas reserves to translate Iraq into an influential economic power.** It is uncertain how Iraq's politics and security will unfold post-2011. At this stage, the U.S. military is effectively taking on a peacekeeping role, in which the psychological effects of their near presence helps deter against ethnic conflict in northern Iraq and deterioration of politics in Baghdad. Sustaining some level of certainty and assurance in Iraq's political and security environment is important for its economic development, and better facilitates the potential of Iraq challenging Saudi Arabia in the world oil market.
- **The continuing presence of U.S. forces allows for an opportunity to deepen the bilateral partnership with the United States.** The Iraqi people desire greater economic, political, and cultural cooperation with the United States. But many Iraqis have been disappointed by the level of engagement thus far on the Strategic Framework Agreement. The prospect and potential for securing and enduring these "soft power" ties with the U.S. is less certain beyond 2011. Like the cases of Japan and South Korea, by agreeing to a new security agreement, Iraqis can preserve and safeguard greater U.S. engagement and interest in the healthy progression of Iraq's politics and economy.

The national security interests of the United States and Iraq require extending the two countries' bilateral agreement in order to keep some U.S. forces in Iraq beyond December 2011. If the United States does not fulfill its leadership responsibilities in guiding the discussion of the SOFA renegotiation, it is unlikely that the agreement will be extended. This will take persistent, delicate, and creative diplomacy by the United States, as well as sound commitment to the future of Iraq signaled by the highest levels of authority.

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