



USIPEACE BRIEFING

Iraq in the Obama Administration

December 2008

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President-elect Obama has stated his commitment to withdraw combat brigades from Iraq within 16 months, leaving a residual force of unspecified size for counterterrorism operations, training and equipping Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and protection of Americans. Judging from his statements during the campaign, it appears that the President-elect would like to leave Iraq's internal problems to the Iraqis and treat Iraq as part of overall regional concerns rather than being his central focus. He aims to reduce America's Iraq commitments and restore U.S. credibility, prestige and capacity to act worldwide.

Nonetheless, as the president-elect himself has pointed out, the U.S. should get out with more care than we got in. Vital U.S. interests are still at stake in Iraq and the region. U.S. withdrawal should not create a situation even more costly to American interests than the war so far has been. The Obama Administration will have an opportunity to establish with Iraq a relationship that serves U.S. interests in a country with which we will be involved for a long time to come.

A smooth transition between the Bush and Obama Administrations on Iraq policy and continuity in engagement with Iraq are therefore critical. Recent gains in Iraq are significant, but nonetheless fragile and reversible. There are potential trouble spots on the horizon in 2009 for which the new administration should be prepared. The president-elect should pay urgent attention to Iraq, as the situation could quickly deteriorate and pose major obstacles to his withdrawal plans. Moreover, due to declining U.S. leverage, the Obama Administration will be best positioned to affect the situation in Iraq during its first year.

Meeting over the past three years, a group of experts who span the political spectrum in the U.S. has come together to offer occasional assessments and advice on the situation in Iraq.¹ This is the expert group's most recent effort, one intended to provide the incoming Administration with the best available bipartisan expertise on the situation it will face in Iraq and on what can be done to ensure that vital American interests are protected. The U.S. Institute of Peace does not take positions on policy issues. USIP staff members Daniel Serwer and Sam

Parker prepared this paper. Those whose names are listed at the end have participated one way or another in the discussions on which the paper is based, but do not necessarily agree with it in its entirety.

Iraq has repeatedly defied predictions. Preparing for contingencies is not only prudent but also necessary. The U.S. will find it difficult to refocus in the way that President-elect Obama intends unless Iraq continues on a relatively stable path towards a more normal and mutually beneficial relationship with the U.S.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following U.S. interests underlie any U.S. consideration of policy toward Iraq and should guide the Obama administration:

- Restore U.S. credibility, prestige and capacity to act worldwide
- Improve regional stability
- Limit and redirect Iranian influence
- Maintain an independent Iraq as a single state
- Prevent Iraq from becoming a haven or platform for international terrorists

These interests cannot be fully achieved without continued U.S. engagement, even as the level of American forces needed to maintain security declines. Iraq is important to the U.S. Ignoring or hastily abandoning Iraq could risk a collapse with catastrophic humanitarian and political consequences that the new Administration would not be able to ignore.

President Obama should consider:

- Meeting in his first months in office with top Iraqi leaders to underline his support for the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and his commitment to supporting Iraqi institutions, so long as they meet reasonable expectations.
- Ensuring that high-level Iraq-related positions in the U.S. government remain filled without gaps.

- Making it clear that he is prepared to follow through on the 12-month withdrawal commitment in the SOFA if the July 2009 popular referendum on the SOFA fails.

The U.S. Government needs to:

- Immediately develop a contingency plan in case the Iraqi government exercises its new powers to prosecute U.S. contractors or troops in Iraqi courts.
- Be ready to intervene militarily if unacceptably extreme violence results from the withdrawal of U.S. forces from all populated areas, now scheduled to be completed by June 2009.
- Focus on critical areas (including Baghdad, Mosul and Diyala) in anticipation of the January 2009 provincial elections.
- Apply lessons learned from the provincial elections to the development of a strategy for national elections, slated by the end of 2009.
- Support peaceful power transitions at both the provincial and national levels following elections.
- Continue the current robust train and equip mission of the Iraqi Security Forces.
- Continue to press the Maliki government to pay the “Sons of Iraq” (SOI) and integrate greater numbers of them into the ISF and other government posts.
- Press for a comprehensive settlement between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government.
- Take the lead in ensuring that substantial resources are devoted to aid for refugee communities in Syria and Jordan and seek their earliest safe repatriation.
- Establish trilateral U.S./Iraq/Turkey talks to buttress territorial settlement efforts and to deal with security concerns.
- Reinvigorate trilateral U.S./Iraq/Iran talks begun in the Bush Administration and expand diplomatic efforts with all Iraq’s neighbors and other concerned powers.

- Seek enhanced engagement in Iraq by the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU).

While violence will continue to be a problem in Iraq for the foreseeable future, the biggest challenges there over the next year are likely to be political. As the U.S. military draws down, there will be a compelling need for U.S. civilians and other internationals to help with the transition to a stable Iraq.

SECURITY IMPROVED, POLITICS TENSE, THE ECONOMY REVIVING

The last two years have witnessed a significant improvement in security in Iraq. This is a consequence not only of the additional troops and improved strategy and tactics associated with the “surge,” but also the ceasefire of the Sadr movement (and successful U.S.-Iraqi military operations against it), the “Awakening” of Iraqi Sunnis against Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), and the growth in capabilities and confidence of the ISF.

Some political progress has occurred, even if slower and more uneven. Groups that previously resisted the new Iraqi political order have begun to take part in the political process and will contest elections over the next year. This includes both Sunni ex-insurgents and Shia followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. The parties in power—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Prime Minister Maliki’s Da’wa party and the two main Kurdish parties—have been reluctant to share power with emerging political actors. As the threat of state collapse has receded, the risk of an increasingly repressive and authoritarian Iraqi regime has come to the fore. Additionally, if the imbalance in representation is not ameliorated during upcoming elections, the threat of instability could well revive.

Other political tensions have appeared in recent months. ISCI and the Sadrist, who backed Maliki as prime minister three years ago, have had second thoughts as the prime minister aims to build his own power base in the campaigns for provincial elections, due to be held January 31, 2009, and national elections, due

to be held before the end of 2009. The Kurdish parties have also grown increasingly wary as central government security forces have challenged Kurdish forces (peshmerga) in areas Kurds would like to absorb into the KRG, the so-called “disputed territories.” Maliki’s centralist, anti-Kurdish rhetoric has escalated. Established Sunni political parties are jockeying for position, not only with each other but also with the “Sahwa” (Awakening).

This year’s high oil prices brought a substantial but temporary windfall to Iraqi government coffers. Budget execution has improved, due in part to the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The economy, which was already growing strongly, strengthened further as security improved in much of the country. Even with today’s lower prices, Iraq is sitting on oil resources that would be the envy of any medium-sized country.

THE STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT DEFINES THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL BASIS FOR U.S. FORCES

The U.S. has now signed a SOFA with Iraq that requires withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraqi “cities, villages and localities” by July 2009 (albeit with significant latitude in application understood) and total withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. According to the agreement, the withdrawal process can be speeded up but not extended; the President-elect is committed to a faster time line for the withdrawal of U.S. combat brigades but foresees a residual force of unspecified size.

The SOFA is the defining legal and political document for the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Resistance to the agreement in Baghdad came mainly from those who say they would like to see a more rapid withdrawal and more Iraqi control over U.S. forces. The current climate among Baghdad political elites is intense nationalism and triumphalism at driving the U.S. out with the SOFA negotiations. While some of the anti-Americanism is merely political posturing,

the SOFA is a clear statement of Iraqi political will on the subject of U.S. military forces and should be regarded as a touchstone by the U.S.

It is clear the Iraqi Security Forces will not be able to operate after 2011 without the kind of support the U.S. is currently providing. There is no prospect for Iraq to be able to operate the navy and air force it needs by that date without U.S. training and other assistance. This will require either a new agreement with the U.S., or Iraq finding another regional or international power such as Russia or Iran to satisfy these needs, which would not serve U.S. interests. A commitment to a longer-term—though not indefinite—U.S. defense cooperation mission would be concordant with the President-elect's stated policy, and it is necessary to ensure vital U.S. interests as well as Iraq's long-term security. Several high-level Iraqi officials have indicated they will cross that bridge when they get to it.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION SHOULD RECONFIGURE THE U.S./IRAQ RELATIONSHIP

The Iraqi government is still in many respects dependent on U.S. forces, but U.S. influence in Iraq—while still substantial—is declining. This was apparent in the SOFA negotiations, which produced an accord closer to what the Iraqis wanted—including a time line and commitment to withdrawal, as well as some jurisdiction over U.S. troops and contractors—than what the Bush Administration initially sought. On withdrawal, the outcome is also closer to what candidate Obama wanted.

The President-elect has an opportunity to reconfigure the U.S./Iraq relationship, relying in part on the SOFA. The Bush Administration gave Prime Minister Maliki largely unconditional support from 2006 onwards, because the future of the political process was in doubt and the overarching priority was for the government to stand up and fill the security and governance void. Maliki became increasingly confident that there was no alternative for the U.S. but to support him.

The time has come for the U.S. to take a more institutional approach to support for Iraq, one in which Washington communicates clearly that it will implement the SOFA respectfully, effectively and transparently and that its support is not linked personally to the Prime Minister, but is instead intended to help build a stable Iraq that meets reasonable expectations:

- Power sharing and integration of disenfranchised groups into government institutions;
- Respect for basic human rights and the rule of law;
- Resolution of disputed internal boundaries;
- Cooperation with international efforts to fight terrorism.

This approach is not intended to restore U.S. influence, which inevitably will continue to decline, but rather to use the influence that remains most effectively in the pursuit of a future stable Iraq that meets U.S. interests, which are broadly consistent with the political objectives that the Iraqi parliament adopted when calling for a referendum on the SOFA.

- *Recommendation 1:* President Obama should meet in his first months in office with not only Prime Minister Maliki but also the president and two vice presidents to underline his support for the SOFA and his commitment to supporting Iraqi institutions, so long as they meet reasonable expectations.

This meeting should launch an on-going strategic dialogue through the Higher Coordinating Committee created in the Strategic Framework Agreement. President Obama should tell Iraqis clearly of his intent to withdraw U.S. combat forces faster than the SOFA requires, subject to adequate progress on political and security matters. As Vice President-elect Biden is strongly associated in Iraqi minds with proposals to partition Iraq, which are vigorously opposed in the Arab population, it will be important to clarify that this is not Obama Administration policy (based on the campaign statements of the president-elect).

KEY TROUBLE SPOTS MERITING U.S. ATTENTION

The next year will witness many challenges in Iraq, some of which can be anticipated.

A possible lapse in engagement: Due to the complexity of the transition, pressing concerns elsewhere in the world and the current relative stability in Iraq, a lapse in engagement with Iraq could occur. Such a lapse would pose serious risks in a still precarious situation.

- *Recommendation 2:* Ensure that high-level Iraq-related positions, particularly U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad as well as the Iraq-related leaderships at NSC, State and Defense remain filled without gaps.

SOFA implementation: Implementation of the SOFA poses three potential trouble spots for the U.S. in 2009:

1) *Iraqi jurisdiction over U.S. citizens:* The Iraqi government may quickly exert its authority under the SOFA to prosecute U.S. contractors or even troops in Iraqi courts, especially given the current high pitch of nationalist sentiment in Iraq.

- *Recommendation 3:* Immediately develop a contingency plan, drawing on experience with neighboring countries. These generally allow quick repatriation of U.S. citizens.

2) *The June withdrawal from cities:* Areas in Baghdad, Diyala and Mosul will see significant strains and may witness ethnic, sectarian or other violence.

- *Recommendation 4:* U.S. forces, which should expect to live with a measure of violence, need to be ready to intervene quickly if violence reaches unacceptably extreme levels. This must be weighed against the

political consequences (in both Iraq and the U.S.) of doing so, which could be damaging.

3) *The July referendum on the SOFA*: The Iraqi legislation ratifying the SOFA stipulates the holding of a popular referendum by July 30, 2009. A negative result would trigger a clause within the SOFA which allows either the U.S. or Iraq to end the SOFA at any time, followed by a 12-month withdrawal of all U.S. forces.

- *Recommendation 5*: President Obama will need to make it clear that he is prepared to follow through on the SOFA's 12-month withdrawal commitment if the referendum fails.

Increasing the pace of U.S. force withdrawal to the maximum possible between January and July would increase the chances of an affirmative result, and, in the event of a negative result, would facilitate the 12-month withdrawal by reducing the numbers in advance. But it could leave the U.S. without sufficient forces to meet election-related contingencies.

Provincial and national elections: Iraqi provincial elections are scheduled for January 31, 2009, and national elections are due to be held by the end of 2009. These elections present the possibility of a greater portion of the Iraqi electorate—including constituencies formerly part of the insurgency, primarily Sunnis—rejoining the political process and thereby enhancing its legitimacy and staying power. This would further transform the military conflict into a political one and contribute to long-term stability. At the same time, these elections pose a potentially serious risk of violence, particularly if they are perceived as rigged in favor of the established parties or if results fall short of challengers' high expectations.

Demonstrably free and fair elections should therefore be a priority in U.S. policy. The U.S. has so far remained largely disengaged on this issue, effectively

deferring elections issues to the UN. While the UN has provided technical assistance to the Iraqis, it lacks the presence and the mandate to take on a more proactive role. To the extent U.S. military forces are needed to enable demonstrably free and fair elections, they should be maintained in Iraq until the end of 2009.

Two obstacles will likely prevent demonstrably free and fair provincial elections from occurring in January:

1) *Established parties control security and resources:* The police and other Iraqi forces responsible for security before and during the elections tend to be loyal to established parties and are thus not neutral. The U.S. does not have the forces to play this role and is not seen as a neutral player.

2) *Adequate election monitoring is unlikely.* International organizations that monitor elections have indicated that they will not come to Iraq for security reasons. Sufficient numbers of Iraqis trained in election monitoring do not exist, nor is there time between now and January 2009 for such training to occur, especially since, to be effective, observers need to be in place well in advance of elections. Even if monitors were in place, the U.S. or some other international actor would have to be prepared to respond to malfeasance.

Given the very short time frame, U.S. options to assist in the conduct of free and fair provincial elections, which may well provide the Obama Administration with its first major challenge in Iraq, are limited. We propose:

- *Recommendation 6:* Focus on critical areas, including Baghdad, Mosul and Diyala as the Sunni boycott in 2005 undermined the legitimacy of their provincial institutions, contributing to continuing violence.

The U.S., which still has a strong force presence in these areas, should prioritize preventing election intimidation and manipulation prior to election day, when U.S.

forces should remain in readiness to intervene in support of the ISF to ensure a safe and secure environment, if need be. To the extent possible, the U.S. should be prepared to facilitate UN and Iraqi logistics needs in these critical areas.

- *Recommendation 7:* Support peaceful power transitions at both the provincial and national levels.

The election results are unlikely to please all those currently holding provincial and national power. The new Provincial Powers Law vests substantial new powers in provincial governors and provincial councils, which should lie with the elected majority.

- *Recommendation 8:* Apply lessons of provincial elections to national elections:

The U.S. still has time to develop a strategy for national elections scheduled at the end of 2009. Capable international observers as well as training for multi-party Iraqi election observers are likely to be needed. Broader international support for logistics and monitoring, including a more proactive role for the UN, will be needed to ensure the transparency of these elections.

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF): The ISF, particularly the Iraqi Army, have improved in numbers and capability over the past two years, a major success for Iraq and the U.S. However, the ISF's capability to suppress a major outbreak of violence is untested. An even greater cause for concern is how cohesive the Iraqi Army and the various other ISF forces are, and to what degree they are loyal to the state. If, as is commonly believed, these forces are tied to the current ruling parties, any democratic transition of power is deeply problematic.

- *Recommendation 9:* Continue the current robust train and equip mission.

Particular attention should be paid to chain of command issues and blocking the efforts by various parties—ISCI, Maliki, the two Kurdish parties and perhaps

others—to cultivate loyalty to parties rather than the state. The U.S. should work closely with Iraq to develop a sound strategic vision for the long-term development of the ISF, based on a realistic assessment of Iraq’s needs to defend itself and what level of military capability is sustainable in the long term.

The “Sons of Iraq” (SOI): The SOI—mostly former insurgents contracted by the U.S. military to combat Al-Qaida and provide security—have been critical to the gains of the past two years. In some areas, like Anbar province, the SOI have been substantially integrated into local security forces. However, the Maliki government has resisted integrating them in other key areas, particularly Baghdad and its suburbs, and has waged a campaign of persecution against them in Diyala province. It is not clear whether the government will keep its commitment to paying them.

In the past, the threat that the SOI would return to fighting against the Iraqi government was a serious concern. The SOI have become less of an immediate security concern and more an issue of political accommodation. It is critical for long-term political stability that communities marginalized by the current government—particularly Sunnis—be represented in state security institutions.

- *Recommendation 10:* Continue to press the Maliki government to pay the SOI and integrate greater numbers of them into the ISF and other government posts.

Kurdish territory and autonomy issues: In the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion and during the chaos that followed, the two main Kurdish parties sought to secure their long-term advantage vis-à-vis Baghdad. Peshmerga seized territory, including much of oil-rich Kirkuk province, which fell outside Kurdish-controlled territory in the 1990s. Kurds also dominated the drafting of the national constitution, resulting in a decentralized state structure, near total autonomy for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and a referendum in disputed territories on whether to join the KRG.

With no referendum yet held, tensions between the KRG and the Baghdad government are mounting. The Kurds are clinging to the territory they hold and are trying to extend their reach, displacing minorities who resist their authority, in particular Christians in the Ninewa Plain. In Mosul, a province with a Sunni Arab majority, Kurds dominate government institutions, and peshmerga make up the lion's share of the security forces, both in the police and army. What is popularly perceived as a "Kurdish-American occupation" has allowed the insurgency to hang on in this area. Meanwhile, the central government, particularly Maliki himself, has grown more nationalistic in rhetoric and has begun to rattle the saber. In September, Iraqi Army units faced off with peshmerga in Khanaqin, a Kurdish-controlled disputed territory in Diyala province. The problem there was defused only with U.S. military mediation.

As with Iraqi elections, current U.S. policy on the disputed territories is to defer almost entirely to the UN, which will soon release a report recommending procedures for assigning the status of the disputed territories on a case-by-case basis. This report will be invaluable in providing a template for future settlement, but the Kurds are likely to see it as exacting too many concessions while the Arabs will view it with a mixture of ambivalence and uninterest, born of the feeling that time may be on their side.

Violence between Kurdish and Iraqi central government forces could bring serious consequences, not only for Iraq but also for the region. U.S. forces have usefully acted to reduce tensions on a number of occasions. Kurdish territory and autonomy issues will continue to be important for some time to come.

- *Recommendation 11:* The U.S. should press for a comprehensive settlement based on the UN recommendations between the KRG and the central government (of which the Kurds are also a part).

This will likely require a U.S. role as diplomatic guarantor of an agreement encompassing Kurdish autonomy roughly along the lines stipulated by the constitution, oil revenue sharing and provisions for Kurdish security.

Refugees and internally displaced people: Iraq's displaced population, perhaps 20 per cent of the total, has the potential to sow long-term political instability both inside Iraq and in the region as a whole.

Displacement within Iraq has left large numbers of people living in miserable conditions, often not far from their original homes. Their desire to regain their property is likely to be an important driver of local violence and political discontent for some time to come.

A large number of members of the former middle class and ruling elite, primarily Arab Sunnis and Christians, have been driven into exile primarily in Jordan and Syria. If these groups remain unable to return home, and are left out of a new political order, they could form the basis of an opposition exile movement committed to undermining or overthrowing the Iraqi government, possibly with the cooperation of neighboring regimes. Moreover, there are signs that Iraqi refugees are spreading sectarianism throughout the region, and they could constitute recruits for future terrorist activity.

- *Recommendation 12:* The U.S. should be in the lead in ensuring that substantial resources are devoted to aid for refugee communities in Syria and Jordan and seek their earliest safe repatriation. It should focus efforts within Iraq on supporting efforts to sort out property rights expeditiously.

The regional role: Iraq's Arab neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, have begun to play a more positive role in Iraq. Saudi Arabia has supported Sunnis prepared to fight AQI. Kuwait, Jordan and Syria have established diplomatic relations and are taking a more positive attitude towards an Iraqi government that has

established a modicum of security. While infiltration from Syria seems to remain a problem, Damascus appears more vigilant than in the past.

While intervening militarily from time to time against Kurdish guerrillas (PKK) hiding in KRG territory, Turkey has managed to improve relations both with Baghdad and with the KRG. Turkey has strong interests in preventing an independent Kurdistan, countering the PKK, protecting the Turkoman minority in Iraq and benefiting commercially from Iraq's reconstruction.

- *Recommendation 13:* Establish trilateral U.S./Iraq/Turkey talks to buttress territorial settlement efforts and to deal with security concerns, particularly the PKK, a Kurdish terrorist group based in KRG territory.

Iran is the most problematic of the neighbors from the U.S. perspective. It has funded, supplied, trained and encouraged military action against U.S. forces in Iraq. It encouraged Iraqi resistance to the SOFA as well as toughening of its provisions against U.S. interests. While Tehran would not want total chaos in Iraq, which would likely spill over into Iran, it wants to maintain military pressure on the U.S. and maintain its own influence, not only in the Iraqi Shia-dominated south and Baghdad but also in Kurdistan.

That said, Iran can also be helpful, provided the right incentives. It intervened to help end fighting between Sadrists and ISF in early 2008, once it was clear that its "special groups" within the Sadrist movement were losing the battle. Tehran appears, for the moment, to have reined in violence by special groups, although training activities are continuing. The U.S. and Iran share to some degree an interest in a stable Iraq governed by a popularly elected parliament and prime minister, but the U.S. wants a strong Iraq while Iran wants a weak one.

In general, the incentive structure facing neighboring regimes is changing. For much of the Iraq war, several of Iraq's neighbors either actively undermined U.S. efforts in Iraq or merely declined to play a positive role out of fear of a long-term

U.S. presence and of further efforts at regime change throughout the region. Now that it is apparent that these developments are not likely, supporting stability in Iraq has become a more prominent concern.

The SOFA's formal commitment to U.S. withdrawal and a new U.S. president who has been critical of Bush Administration policies in the Middle East present an opportunity for the U.S. to capitalize on this change in incentive structure and secure more robust regional cooperation in Iraq. Iraq is and will inevitably continue to be the scene of competition between the Arab regimes and Iran, and the potential for Turkish incursion in northern Iraq is a perennial concern. Despite the competing and conflicting interests in the region, there is also a mutual interest in stability and in keeping Iraq's problems contained.

- *Recommendation 14:* The U.S. should reinvigorate trilateral U.S./Iraq/Iran talks begun in the Bush Administration and expand diplomatic efforts with all of Iraq's neighbors and other concerned powers.

The priority for these talks is establishing common interests and identifying possible flashpoints of violence in Iraq where the neighbors can play a constructive role.

It is inevitable that other issues—primarily Iran's nuclear ambitions and the Israel/Palestine conflict—will from time to time overshadow Iraq-specific issues. Increased regional engagement on Iraq could be held hostage to other concerns. But that does not diminish the potentially positive effect a successful regional diplomatic effort on Iraq would have on other, higher priority concerns.

The broader international role: The international community has an important role to play in these diplomatic efforts. Over the past two years, the U.N. has returned to Iraq and played a role on sensitive issues. It needs more personnel and more capability to move around the country. The European Union (EU), which has provided funds but engaged relatively little on the ground in Iraq to

date, has significant interests in a stable Iraq (particularly energy and commercial deals) and a great deal to offer in institution and capacity building.

- *Recommendation 15:* Seek enhanced engagement in Iraq by the EU and the UN.

CONCLUSIONS

Experts generally agree that maintaining stability in Iraq faces serious challenges over the next year. However, they differ on the need for U.S. forces to maintain stability during this period. They also disagree about the degree to which a long-term U.S. defense cooperation mission in Iraq serves U.S. interests and about the proper duration and scope of this mission.

Some believe that President Obama should keep to the 16-month time line for withdrawal of combat troops he proposed as a candidate, at least at the beginning of his term. Only if seriously deteriorating circumstances in Iraq threaten vital U.S. interests should the pace be slowed, provided commanders in the field believe doing so will help the situation. Such experts tend to believe that the implicit promise of U.S. military intervention following an outbreak of violence allows Iraqi leaders to avoid making political accommodations, and perpetuates a state of dependency of the Iraqi government on the U.S., which works against U.S. interests elsewhere.

Others believe that President Obama should slow the initial withdrawal of combat brigades, while keeping to the bilateral commitments to redeploy out of population centers by the end of June 2009 and to withdraw combat brigades by the end of 2011. This would mean maintaining whatever level of U.S. forces their commanders think are necessary to maintain stability over the next year.

Such experts tend to be less willing to risk instability in Iraq, and see a long-term defense cooperation mission in Iraq as critical to broader U.S. interests.

Whichever course of action is chosen in the near term, the U.S. needs to mobilize more civilian effort immediately, as part of a broader shift toward to civilian assistance: bilateral, multilateral, and private sector. A number of the recommendations included here require such greater civilian effort: elections support, resolution of Kurdish/Arab disputes, and return of displaced people. U.S. military forces have carried the burden in Iraq for too many years. Their contributions need to be accompanied by a more intensive political, diplomatic and capacity building effort, one that respects Iraqi sovereignty and provides the support and encouragement Iraq needs to complete its transition to peaceful means of settling its many internal conflicts.

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The Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations designs and manages the Institute's efforts in areas emerging from conflict. The Center also conducts research, identifies best practices, develops new tools for post-conflict peace and stability operations, and supports related training and education efforts. [Daniel P. Serwer](#) is the vice president of the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations.

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¹ [Iraq: Time for a Change](#). Daniel Serwer, USIPeace Briefing, September 2007; [Iraq After the Surge: Options and Questions](#). Daniel Serwer and Sam Parker, USIPeace Briefing, April 2008.