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The Day after the US Withdrawal from Iraq

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Due to the variety of interests that it represents, the Iraqi government was unable to devise a formula that would allow an American military presence after January 2012. It refused to grant legal immunity to US forces, even though Iraqi military leaders supported a continued US presence in order for Iraq to remain on its feet. Over the past weekend both the US and Iraqi heads of state confirmed that the withdrawal of US troops will take place as planned, and by Christmas no American forces will remain in the country. Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki can thus announce the end of the "occupation," while President Obama can boast the fulfillment of his campaign promise to withdraw all the troops from Iraq. The withdrawal of US troops will occur irrespective of progress in democratization processes, ethnic tensions, or the rise in Iranian influence.

The withdrawal of US military forces since January 2009 (from the 140,000 soldiers then in Iraq) until today (now numbering 40,000 soldiers) has been largely related to President Obama's desire to keep his political commitment. The president can also cite the faltering US economy and the difficulty in financing war expenditures (the cost of keeping one US soldier in Iraq is \$1 million a year). Nonetheless, the situation on the ground reveals a bleak picture: in spite of some \$1 trillion in war expenditures and nearly 4,500 US soldiers killed, the Iraqi army is not enforcing its authority throughout the country, and most of the force is in charge of internal security. In addition, the loyalty of the security forces is largely a function of their tribal and ethnic affiliation, and some have become an arm of the prime minister, who still retains the defense portfolio and is using them to settle political accounts.

For Iraq's Arab neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, the upcoming US withdrawal appears to be no less than "abandoning" Iraq and leaving the field open to Iran. Iran is already the outside force with the greatest influence in Iraq, evidenced by Iraq's expression of support for the Shiite protest in Bahrain, the strengthening of economic ties with Iran, the economic and political support that Iraq is apparently providing to Bashar Assad, and even Iraq's siding with Iran in its struggle in OPEC against Saudi Arabia. For its part, Iran has

begun to feel more confident, and along with Turkey is increasing its military activity within sovereign Iraqi territory. It appears more comfortable challenging the Fifth Fleet's ships in the Gulf, and in recent months militias that it supports, such as the Hizbollah Brigades, have stepped up attacks on US forces and have even fired Katyushas toward Kuwait.

Iran's involvement in Iraq, based on its view that this state lies its natural sphere of influence, is driven both by anxiety regarding the future character of the Iraqi state and its aspirations for regional hegemony. There have been increasing reports of an Iranian attempt to establish a new Iranian-Iraqi-Syrian axis, perhaps as a counterweight to the Saudi attempt to head an alliance of Sunni monarchies. In Iraq Iranian objectives include an attempt to use Iraq as a platform to increase Tehran's regional influence, prevent the growth of a threat from the direction of Iraq, and limit American influence there. In the short term, Iran is eager to weaken the central government in Baghdad and make it easier for Iran to exert its influence over it, and in the long term, to thwart the development of a competing model: a moderate secular Shiite state with democratic characteristics.

Recent events in Syria are likely to strengthen this trend. The possible undermining of the Asad regime and the rise to power of a Sunni-dominated regime is also liable to evoke increased Iranian involvement in Iraq, in order to "compensate" for the loss of an ally.

Despite their concerns, Iraq's Arab neighbors refuse to take a more active part in the struggle over the state's future character. The largest of them, Saudi Arabia, withdrew from the Iraqi political arena given its sense that Iraq's government is completely identified with Iran. Thus, what will have the most influence on Iranian policy in this context is the future of the American-Iraqi relationship.

The fear that the US withdrawal will increase Iran's drive to become more involved in Iraqi affairs and make Iraq fall into line with Iranian interests is not without foundation. True, the evacuation of American forces will leave the Shiite militias in Iraq without targets for their attacks. It will allow the Americans to deter Iran more reliably with their forces free from possible harm. A complete withdrawal will also allow the Iraqis to focus on negative Iranian influence in their country without another "occupier." Moreover, it is difficult to see how the presence of several thousand US soldiers in an instruction and training capacity would contribute to positioning Iraq as a buffer against Iran if a more massive presence did not previously help.

The tension between Obama's promise to bring all the troops home, especially when the United States is entering an election year, and the need to assure that Iraq can defend itself from itself and from its neighbors, is likely to be solved by maintaining a "civilian" American force. Leaving several thousand employees of private security firms who can work from "Iraqi" bases is likely to make it easier for al-Maliki and Obama to avoid

domestic criticism and fill some of the vacuum that will be created when the troops leave. With NATO assistance, this force will help to secure the wide-open borders, the territorial waters, and Iraqi airspace, as well as train the Iraqi pilots who are eventually expected to receive F-16 aircraft. At the same time, American forces in Kuwait will apparently be reinforced in response to the possible operational needs that will arise in Iraq and the Gulf.

The fear that leaving a small force in Iraq will erode the modest gains of recent years is not completely justified, as even a larger force would have a hard time serving as a significant counterweight to Iran's ability to influence events in Iraq through "hard" or "soft" means. Even a larger American military force would not improve the economic, political, or social situation in Iraq, where infrastructures are shaky, corruption has spread to all areas of life, a large portion of the population has no access to clean water or electricity, and the level of personal security is still low, which all sparks increased public protest. If this grows stronger and an Arab spring reaches Iraq with full force, Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite whose supporters are mostly Sunni – and is already calling for new elections – may well receive a future opportunity from the voters, a step that in and of itself will somewhat weaken Iran's influence.

In any event, a further weakening of the image of American power is a process with dangerous and perhaps irreversible consequences. There are those who say that more than anything it symbolizes the end of the current US role in the region. Regardless of the number of troops that remain, the US goals, which include Iraq as a functioning democracy, a US ally in the coming years, and a buffer against Iran's power, appear to be harder than ever to achieve.

