

**SEAN KANE**

E-mail: skane@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3891

WILLIAM TAYLOR

E-mail: wtaylor@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3871

The United States in Iraq: Options for 2012

Summary

- With U.S. military forces scheduled to depart Iraq in December of this year, the State Department and other civilian agencies are being asked to assume a scale of operational and programmatic responsibilities far beyond any other embassy in recent memory.
- The capacity of the U.S. civilian agencies to assume these responsibilities does not now fully exist. Notably, securing and moving U.S. civilians will require more than 5,000 security contractors. A limited U.S. military contingent post-2011 may well be more cost-effective than private security guards and could also relieve State and other civilian agencies of logistical and security responsibilities. This would enable them to focus on their comparative advantages: diplomacy and development assistance.
- Planning for the post-2011 U.S. mission in Iraq, however, remains hampered by uncertainty as to whether the Iraqi government will request an extension of the American military presence in the country. A small follow-on U.S. military force would appear to safeguard Iraqi stability and make the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives in Iraq more likely, but cannot be counted on. Should such a request not be received from the Iraqi government, the U.S. may need to reduce the planned scale and scope of its operations and goals in Iraq.

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The U.S. in Iraq Today

The U.S. role in Iraq is transitioning from military-led to civilian-led with ambitious goals that embody the once unthinkable hope for positive outcomes from a domestically polarizing conflict: an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, self-reliant and can contribute to peace and security in a region of the world vital to U.S. interests. With a December 2011 deadline looming for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the United States and the new Iraqi government are attempting to define how a long-term strategic partnership across the diplomatic, economic, security and cultural fields can further these goals.

This military-to-civilian transition in Iraq involves the State Department and a plethora of civilian agencies taking on tasks ranging from traditional diplomacy and development assistance to police mentoring, military modernization, and managing and providing protection to an estimated 17,000 employees and contractors in an improving but still lethal environment. Adding to an already challenging situation on the ground, the unique nature of the current fiscal cycle has further increased the degree of difficulty by creating uncertainty as to what resources will be made available to the State Department to accomplish its new multifaceted mission.

In a time of unparalleled financial and economic pressures at home, there are no easy ways to escape this conundrum. Yet the stakes are high. The success or failure of the military-to-civilian transition will determine not just whether the U.S. achieves some return on its costly eight-year investment in Iraq, but also represents a testing ground for the U.S.'s ability for war termination of the asymmetrical conflicts that defined the first decade of the 21st century. The lessons learned from winding down the Iraq war could help to inform the scheduled transition in Afghanistan by 2014, as well as future cases where civilian agencies take over from the military in post-conflict or post-disaster settings.

The New Diplomatic Mission

State Department officials¹ have described their complex new mission in Iraq as based on four pillars:

- *Broader Diplomatic Presence:* Faced with the daunting task of replacing the 126 military bases and 16 Provincial Reconstruction Teams when U.S. combat operations ended in August 2010, the new diplomatic mission will be the largest in the world. The plan publicly outlined in February by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey included 15 sites around the country, including two consulates, two temporary Embassy Branch offices, three air hubs, three police training centers and five Office of Security Cooperation sites. This broad diplomatic presence—still much less than the U.S. military presence even now—was described as necessary to give the U.S. government situational awareness around the country, manage political crises in potential hotspots such as Kirkuk, and provide a platform for delivering economic, development and security assistance. In the years to come, the State Department will likely face a similar operational challenge as the U.S. military in Afghanistan hands off security responsibility.
- *Development Assistance:* USAID development programs, USDA agricultural advice and the provision of American technical know-how to help Iraqis more effectively use their human and natural resources are symbolic of the new relationship Iraq seeks with the United States and the rest of the world. The Strategic Framework Agreement signed between the U.S. and Iraq in 2008 provides an aspirational roadmap for the delivery of American assistance under the new mission and is in many ways the bedrock of the future relationship between the two countries. A similar framework document to provide basic guidance on shared American-Afghan priorities on the civilian side could be helpful in organizing a future military-to-civilian transition in Afghanistan.
- *Police Development:* In October 2011, responsibility for training Iraq's police will shift from the Department of Defense to the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). INL, the Department of Justice and others will work on professionalizing police management and shifting the police from counterinsurgency operations to community policing and rule of law reform. The goal is a police force that, unlike in Egypt or Tunisia, protects the population rather than the state. Police development is therefore key to building a stable Iraqi democracy and is planned to include some 190 advisers around the country.
- *Modernization of the Iraqi Security Forces:* Later this year an estimated 200-person Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq (OSC-I) in the U.S. Embassy will take over from USF-I as the mechanism for providing assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The 650,000-strong ISF is judged as largely capable of maintaining internal security but as possessing key gaps in external defense, including an inability to maintain air sovereignty or to conduct the combined arms operations that would be necessary to defend Iraq's borders from an external attack.² The danger is not that Iraq will actually be invaded, but that its well-known external

vulnerabilities will leave it open to coercive diplomacy and interference in its internal affairs by the region. The OSC-I will help fill these gaps by managing a \$13 billion Foreign Military Sales program, training the ISF on weapons systems, carrying out joint U.S.-Iraqi military exercises, and implementing military exchange and professionalization programs. Some analogue to the OSC-I will likely be considered in Afghanistan in the coming years (a similar office already exists in the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan).

Even this short sketch illustrates why the State Department's top management official accurately describes the scale of the transition challenge in Iraq as "...a major endeavor...without precedent."³ In this context, it is important to constantly evaluate current plans and whether they represent the optimal alignment of American strategic interests in Iraq, the planned scope of the new diplomatic mission, and whether the resources are available to carry it out. Similarly, this challenging calculus will likely be repeated in Afghanistan after 2014, particularly if the current economic conditions persist at home.

Prior to performing this evaluation, it is worthwhile to briefly recall the significant tasks still being performed by the approximately 47,000 U.S. forces remaining in Iraq. Under Operation New Dawn, which began following the formal end of U.S. combat operations in August 2010, U.S. forces are:

- Training, equipping, advising and supporting the ISF;
- Conducting partnered counterterrorism operations with Iraqi forces; and
- Protecting and enabling U.S. and international civilian partners in their continued capacity building efforts.⁴

While the U.S. military is no longer engaged in conventional war fighting in Iraq, it is also not limited to the purely advisory security and defense cooperation role seen in other embassies around the world. Rather, under Operation New Dawn, the U.S. military is playing an operational role as enablers for the ISF and other parts of the U.S. government and international community.

U.S. Iraq Scenarios Post-2011

The central external uncertainty hanging over planning the military-to-civilian transition in Iraq is whether the Iraqi government will request a follow-on U.S. military presence after the current Security Agreement expires in December 2011. Such a request for a continued U.S. troop presence could have substantial implications for the scope of mission that the State Department is required to take on. Given Congress's greater propensity to fund Defense appropriation requests, it could also affect the total envelope of resources made available for U.S. government operations in Iraq. These basic uncertainties necessitate scenario planning for the two eventualities of either U.S. forces going to zero in December 2011 or a new Security Agreement being negotiated.

Scenario I—No New Security Agreement

The U.S. strategic objective of an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, self-reliant and able to contribute to peace and security in the region is potentially at risk if the USF-I reduces to zero in December. Ryan Crocker, former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, has stated that the civilian capacity does not exist to take on the "vast array of roles and missions" that the military has so far performed.⁵ Notwithstanding this, it remains important for the United States to demonstrate its respect for Iraqi sovereignty by continuing to honor commitments made in the Security Agreement to fully withdraw its troops on schedule unless otherwise requested.

In this scenario, additional steps are required to ameliorate risks to U.S. strategic objectives in Iraq. First, the under-resourcing of the U.S. Embassy, including OSC-I, USAID and the army

of private security contractors needed to protect embassy personnel, must be addressed. No diplomatic mission in recent memory has been asked to undertake the range of tasks the U.S. Embassy is expected to take on after December 2011 and the resources provided do not match the requirements.⁶ Second, a reduction in scope of the planned mission may be required as is reportedly already being considered with respect to the INL Police Development Program and the two proposed Embassy Branch Offices in Kirkuk and Mosul.⁷

The State Department's comparative advantage is in politics, diplomacy and development. Its management, contracting and logistics capability to operate 15 sites in an active war zone has already come under heavy scrutiny.⁸ Despite the potential loss to U.S. situational awareness, a less ambitious operational footprint around the country may enable the department to better concentrate on what it does best. Finally, the current American military presence in Iraq provides not just crucial air and intelligence assets to the ISF, but also promotes ISF professionalization and helps to moderate political fault lines, such as Arab-Kurd tensions in northern Iraq.

Contingency plans should be developed to mitigate the loss of these benefits such as expanding the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, substantially increasing the size of OSC-I, reviewing the theater reserve, and repositioning equipment in Iraq to facilitate crisis management during the transition.

Scenario II—New Security Agreement

While Iraqis understandably do not want foreign troops on their soil any longer than necessary, a limited follow-on U.S. military presence in Iraq after December 2011 would appear to benefit Iraqi stability and U.S. strategic objectives. However, it is not yet clear politically whether the Iraqi government will request a new Security Agreement on a basis that meets minimal U.S. requirements. In considering the terms of any Iraqi request, U.S. decision makers should be open to a time-bound agreement. U.S. commanders in Iraq have indicated that while the deadlines in the current Security Agreement presented uncomfortable tactical challenges, they also had strategically beneficial effects by driving better planning, forcing improved partnering with the ISF and civilian agencies, and sending a strong message regarding respect for Iraq sovereignty.

Under Scenario II, a limited U.S. military presence could take the lead on ISF modernization activities and continue to temporarily play an enabling role in ISF operations and filling external defense gaps. As it does under Operation New Dawn, USF-I could also provide force protection to the expanded American diplomatic mission. Given limitations in the State Department's budgeting and contract oversight capabilities, it is assumed that this option would prove more cost effective and accountable than the estimated 5,500 security guards that the State Department will require to protect and move its diplomats after December 2011.⁹

At present it is difficult to quantify the magnitude of any savings to the State Department's \$3.7 billion FY 2012 request for operations in Iraq that would result from the USF-I continuing to provide force protection. In order to better inform lawmakers and planning efforts, the State and Defense Departments should consider developing such an estimate. In addition to any direct cost savings, a USF-I security platform could better justify the remaining expenses associated with the 15-site plan by facilitating greater freedom of movement by American diplomats. Most importantly, freed from activities such as operating mortar defense systems and driving advanced mine-protection vehicles, State could better concentrate on its core diplomatic and development competencies.

Conclusion

Even while Iraqi leaders have expressed complicated views on security cooperation with the United States and clear reservations on requesting a continued American military presence in

the country, they have unambiguously called for deepening civilian ties as the foundation of a longterm partnership between the two countries.

The post-2011 U.S. mission in Iraq therefore needs to be structured around giving the State Department the best chance of delivering on the diplomatic, economic and development cooperation called for in the Strategic Framework Agreement. If Iraqis request a new Security Agreement, this could best be achieved through the U.S. military continuing to provide force protection and transport for the U.S. diplomatic mission in Iraq. If no new Agreement is negotiated, the least bad option may be for America to reduce the scale and scope of both its goals and operations in this strategically important country.

Endnotes

1. See "Testimony of Ambassador James F. Jeffrey and General Lloyd Austin Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate." February 1, 2011. Available at: http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jeffrey-Austin_Testimony.pdf.
2. See "Testimony of Ambassador James F. Jeffrey and General Lloyd Austin Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate."
3. Undersecretary of State for Management, Patrick Kennedy, as quoted in Warren Strobel, "State Dept. planning to field a small army in Iraq," McClatchy Newspapers. July 21, 2010.
4. See Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, Colin H. Kahl, "Breaking Dawn: Building a long-term strategic partnership with Iraq," Foreign Policy Online. August 31, 2010.
5. As quoted in Viola Gienger and Flavia Krause-Jackson, "U.S. Diplomats Take on New Iraq Security Role in Afghan Preview," Bloomberg News. November 10, 2010.
6. This is despite repeated entreaties by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton for Congress to take a whole of government approach towards funding Iraq appropriations. Lawmakers have been reluctant to fully fund the State Department's operational and foreign assistance requests for Iraq despite substantial savings in the Pentagon's Iraq budget as the troop withdrawal proceeds. State's Iraq funding request of \$6.2 billion for FY 2012 represents a substantial increase from its FY 2011 request of \$2.6 billion, but the Pentagon's budget for Operation Iraqi Freedom/New Dawn has fallen from \$94 billion in FY 2009 to an \$11 billion request for FY 2012. See Anthony Cordesmann, "Winning the War in Iraq: Creating and Funding a Strategic Partnership," Center for Strategic and International Studies. February 23, 2011.
7. INL reported to the Special Inspector General for Iraq that it is reducing the number of police advisors and scope of its training due to funding concerns. Likewise, while the State Department has received allocations for the approximately \$700 million in start-up costs related to the Kirkuk and Mosul Branch offices, it is uncertain of future funding streams for their expected hundreds of millions of dollars in annual operating costs. The Kirkuk office could be folded into the OSC-I site to be located at the Iraqi Airforce Base in Kirkuk and the Mosul office may not be opened.
8. See for example Commission on Wartime Contracting In Iraq and Afghanistan, "Iraq—A Forgotten Mission?" March 1, 2011. Available at http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/CWC_SpecialReport4.pdf; and Special Inspector General for Iraq Stuart Bowen, "U.S. Military Leaving Iraq: Is the State Department Ready?" March 2, 2011. Available at: http://www.sigir.mil/files/testimony/SIGIR_Testimony_11-001T.pdf#view=fit.
9. See for example "Iraq: The Transition from a military mission to a civilian-led effort," Senate Foreign Relations Committee, S. PRT. 2011 112–3. January 31, 2011. During an ensuing hearing,

ABOUT THIS PEACE BRIEF

This Peace Brief draws on the authors' experiences in Iraq and a two-day, off-the-record meeting co-hosted by USIP in February 2011. The meeting included nine government agencies—from the National Security Council to State to Defense to Justice and Commerce and others—and focused on progress made and challenges in the ongoing military-to-civilian transition in Iraq and how these emerging lessons could inform transition efforts in Afghanistan and beyond.

Senator John Kerry also directly inquired as to whether military-provided force protection would be more cost-effective option for the expanded diplomatic mission.

10. For example, in a December 29, 2010 *Wall Street Journal* interview where he expressed a belief that there was not a need for U.S. troops in Iraq after 2011, Prime Minister Maliki strongly endorsed the Strategic Framework Agreement, saying: "We have actually asked for this...It is scientific, commercial, economic, expertise, and training...we're insisting that it be activated because it's in Iraq's interest. America is a superpower with expertise and huge capabilities in science, trade and economy and Iraq needs such expertise."

**UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE**

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

www.usip.org

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For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725