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Shaping the Iraq Inheritance

By Colin H. Kahl, Michèle A. Flournoy, Shawn Brimley

Center for a
New American
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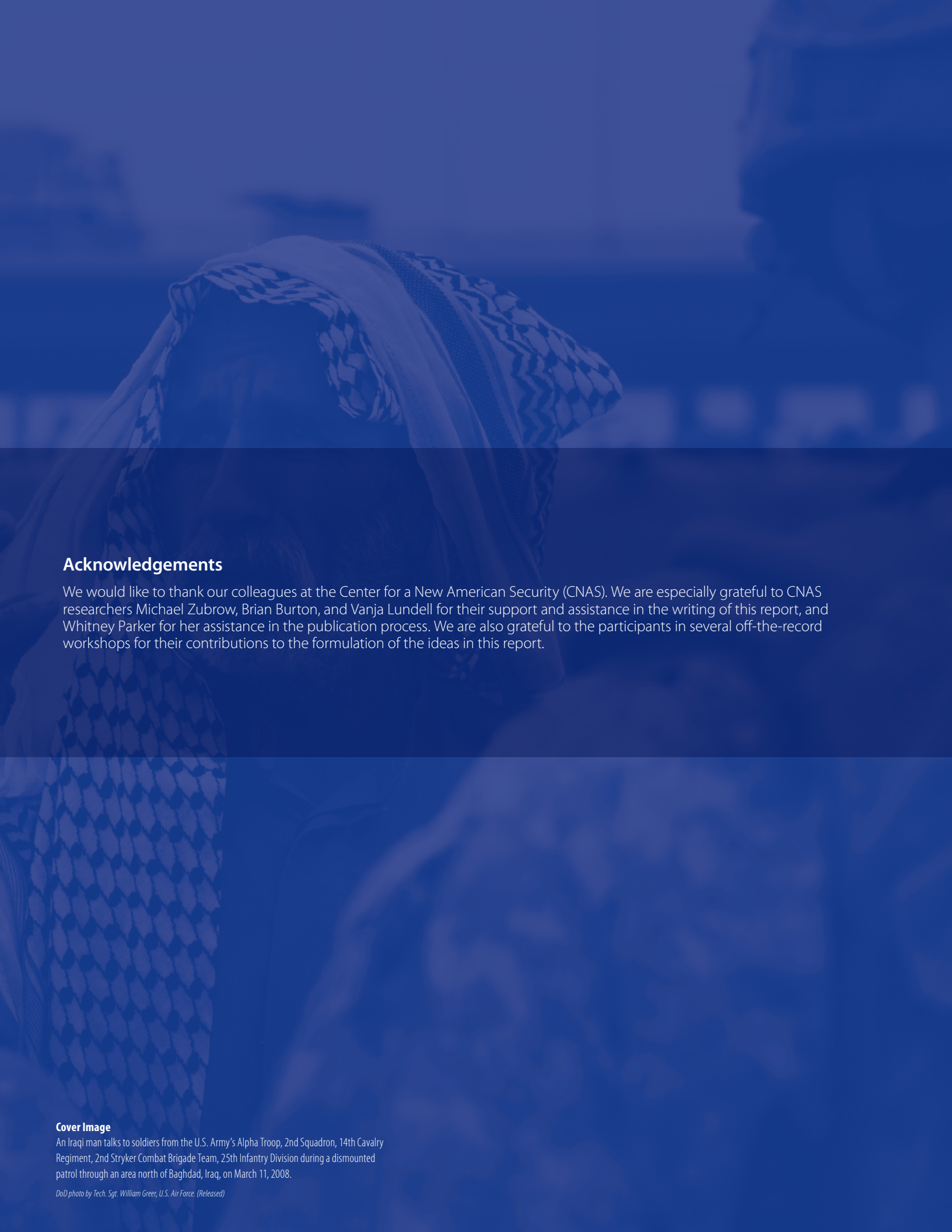

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Cover Image

An Iraqi man talks to soldiers from the U.S. Army's Alpha Troop, 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Stryker Combat Brigade Team, 25th Infantry Division during a dismounted patrol through an area north of Baghdad, Iraq, on March 11, 2008.

DoD photo by Tech. Sgt. William Greer, U.S. Air Force. (Released)

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About the Authors

Colin H. Kahl is an Assistant Professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a Fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

Michèle A. Flournoy is President and Co-Founder of CNAS.

Shawn Brimley is the Bacevich Fellow at CNAS.

Shaping the Iraq Inheritance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American policy in Iraq will undergo two critical transitions in the months ahead: movement to a new U.S. posture in Iraq; and a wartime transition to a new administration. It is vital that both are handled in a way that best advances U.S. interests in Iraq and the region. Yet neither is being paid sufficient attention.

There has been significant improvement in the security situation in Iraq since early 2007. Four elements have combined to help reduce violence: the influx of additional U.S. troops utilizing improved counterinsurgency techniques; the Sunni Awakening and the emergence of the so-called Sons of Iraq; the decision by Muqtada al-Sadr to curtail his Jaish al-Mahdi militia; and prior sectarian cleansing which separated the warring parties in Baghdad. But recent security gains remain tenuous and reversible, and other potential crises, including a territorial dispute over oil-rich Kirkuk, loom on the horizon. There are no military solutions to these challenges, and, even if there were, strains on the U.S. military preclude a "re-surge." Therefore, as the surge ends, consolidating and building upon security gains requires progress in the political sphere — progress that has been slow to materialize.

In Washington, the Iraq debate continues to be dominated by tactical issues: the number of troops in Iraq; levels of violence in particular provinces; how the various Iraqi actors behave in a given month; and how much money has been spent. There has been far less productive debate on key strategic issues: the nature of America's basic interests in Iraq and the region; the level of risk America incurs by keeping the preponderance of its ground forces deployed in Iraq; and the nature of America's long-term relationship with Iraq.

America's goals in Iraq need to be balanced with and assessed against other interests in the region and around the world. U.S. interests in Iraq intersect with three broader vital concerns: combating international terrorism; preserving stability in the Gulf region; and maintaining America's position of global leadership. Viewing policy in Iraq through the prism of these vital interests suggests that the United States must simultaneously attempt to avoid a failed state *in Iraq* while not strategically over-committing *to Iraq*.

The goal for U.S. policy in Iraq should be "sustainable stability:" a level of stability in Iraq that is sustainable with a substantially reduced American troop presence and, eventually, a complete U.S. withdrawal. Achieving this end-state requires political accommodation and improved governance in Iraq. But, as far as U.S. interests are concerned, political accommodation in Iraq must come first. Without political compromises that address simmering tensions, perpetuating an unconditional American embrace of Iraq's government could produce negligible or even negative results. Thus, the critical issue for U.S. policy is how best to push Iraqi leaders to make tough political choices while simultaneously reducing America's strategic overcommitment in Iraq.

In this context, there are four strategic options: unconditional engagement in Iraq, typified by the Bush administration's current approach; a pledge to unconditionally disengage from Iraq by withdrawing all troops on a fixed, unilateral timetable; a policy of conditional disengagement that would set a timetable from Washington for the withdrawal of all troops, but leave open the possibility of keeping a residual force if Iraqis make progress toward political accord; and conditional engagement, a policy that would negotiate a time horizon for U.S. redeployment as a means of pushing Iraqi leaders toward accommodation and galvanizing regional efforts to stabilize Iraq.

A policy of conditional engagement offers the best chance of producing lasting progress in Iraq. Under this strategy, U.S. policymakers would make clear that Iraq and America share a common interest in achieving sustainable stability in Iraq, and that the United States is willing to help support the Iraqi government over the long term, but only so long as Iraqis move toward political accommodation. The premise is continued engagement, not disengagement, but in contrast to the Bush administration's current approach, America's support to Iraq would not come for free.

Conditional engagement offers a means to encourage accommodation under the assumption that the Iraqi government actually wants to accommodate, and a means to pressure them if this assumption proves false. As such, it should be the approach adopted as the next administration charts its strategic course in Iraq. This strategic shift is most likely to succeed, however, if it starts now. In the remaining months of its term, the Bush administration must use the opportunity provided by ongoing talks to establish a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) to push Iraqi leaders toward political compromise.

Steps must also be taken to smooth the handover of Iraq policy from this administration to the next. The Bush administration must prioritize preparation in three areas over the next six months: the development of an interagency transition plan; enhancing the situational awareness of both the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates and their top national security advisors on Iraq; and hand-tooling personnel transitions for senior positions critical to Iraq policy and operations.

The administration should also instruct the U.S. military to begin planning now on two fronts: first, for how best to support stability, security, and political accommodation in Iraq during the U.S. presidential transition and into mid-2009 (when the new president's senior national security team should be in place); and, second, contingency planning for possible changes in U.S. policy that would significantly alter the contours of the American military posture in Iraq. Planning should be done in the context of a larger interagency transition plan, and should begin now.

Finally, Congress can play an important role by providing oversight of ongoing SOFA and SFA negotiations, and by conditioning U.S. assistance to Iraq on demonstrable progress by the Iraqi government toward political accommodation. Congress should also pressure the administration to plan for the transition, while itself preparing to expedite confirmation hearings for key incoming Iraq-related posts as quickly as possible after the inauguration in January 2009.

The next President — Republican or Democratic — will shoulder the most challenging national security inheritance in generations. This President must do everything possible to positively shape this troubled bequest.

Shaping the Iraq Inheritance

A TALE OF TWO TRANSITIONS

The Bush administration is neglecting to sufficiently shape the Iraq inheritance. With only months to go, not enough is being done to ensure that the next administration — Republican or Democratic — will inherit an Iraq policy that has laid the groundwork for the critical transitions ahead.

Throughout the remainder of this year and into 2009, American policy in Iraq will undergo two critical and risky transitions: movement to a new U.S. posture in Iraq; and a wartime hand-off to a new administration. It is vital that both transitions are successful while minimizing the risk to recent security gains in Iraq.

The first transition is already occurring. The United States reached the peak of its military involvement in Iraq during 2007 and early 2008 when over 160,000 U.S. troops deployed to the country. This number will likely decline to about 130,000 by the end of 2008. Regardless of who is elected in November, there will be compelling pressures to shift toward a more sustainable posture during the next administration. Such a transition will most likely involve shifting the role of American military units from leading population security to a more limited set of missions. But how quickly and under what conditions this transition occurs is still very much undecided.

Equally important, this strategic transition will involve moving into a new relationship with the Iraqi government. This relationship is already evolving as a consequence of U.S.-Iraqi negotiations to craft a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) outlining the legal contours of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, and a broader Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) that will describe the nature of the bilateral relationship moving forward. While such negotiations will not bind the next administration, they have the potential to facilitate a transition to a new strategy rooted in conditional engagement with the Iraqi government. The negotiating process is a unique window of opportunity for the Bush administration to push Iraqi leaders toward much needed political accommodation and send clear signals that the American people are not prepared to support Iraq's government unconditionally. If handled correctly, this could enable the next administration to reconfigure U.S. policy, negotiate a phased redeployment of U.S. forces from Iraq, and condition residual U.S. support for the Iraqi government on continued political progress.

"This President's Iraq legacy will be heavily influenced by how the tale of these two transitions is told by future historians."

The second critical transition deals with the key question of how best to execute a wartime handover from one U.S. administration to the next. A typical peacetime change in administration tends to create a "no one home" phenomenon, as current officials leave their posts while their successors wait for months to be confirmed and receive security clearances. The country cannot afford to take a similar approach during a time of war. Current policymakers in the executive branch, Congressional leaders, and senior military officers all must focus on the need to ensure that the transition from this administration's Iraq policy to the next is as seamless as possible.

This President's Iraq legacy will be heavily influenced by how the tale of these two transitions is told by future historians. And, considering what this administration will leave its successor, it has an obligation to do more than coast to the finish. This report outlines U.S. interests in Iraq and the intersection of these interests with broader regional and global concerns. The report then evaluates current security and political progress in Iraq, and the requirements for moving the country toward sustainable stability. It outlines four strategic options — unconditional engagement, unconditional disengagement, conditional disengagement, and conditional engagement — and argues in favor of conditional engagement. Finally, the report discusses steps the Bush administration, the U.S. military, and Congress should take to prepare for the critical transitions ahead, setting the stage for a significant change in strategy in 2009.

THE STAKES: U.S. INTERESTS IN IRAQ AND BEYOND

Any discussion of future Iraq strategy must begin with an articulation of U.S. interests and a concept of strategic success. A statement of U.S. interests must resist the tendency to define them in an overly Iraq-centric manner (ignoring or downplaying broader concerns), and avoid defining success in Iraq in such maximalist terms that it is unlikely to be achieved at acceptable cost.

After five years of war in Iraq (and nearly seven years in Afghanistan), cracks are appearing in the foundation of America's political, economic, and military power. Such strains highlight the need to not only examine our policy in Iraq, but also reassess how Iraq fits within the broader constellation of U.S. regional and global interests. As tensions with Iran increase, and challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan demand more attention, it is important to consider the relative importance of the various threats to American interests.[1] America has important interests within Iraq and the broader Middle East, but they need to be balanced within and assessed against other vital concerns. Specifically, the war in Iraq intersects with three broad U.S. national interests: combating international terrorism; preserving stability in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East; and maintaining America's global leadership (see Figure 1).

Combating International Terrorism

First, America has a long-term national interest in combating international terrorism. Within Iraq, this requires preventing the establishment of safe havens designed to export terrorism. Put another way, Iraq must not become the equivalent of Afghanistan on September 10th, 2001. The prospects of this happening have declined markedly over the past year and a half. In the aftermath of the "Sunni Awakening," Iraq's Sunni Arabs have decisively turned against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Moreover, Iraq's Shia majority and Kurdish minority populations clearly continue to have a profound interest in eliminating the threat posed by AQI and other Sunni jihadist movements. Consequently, although AQI remnants still possess the capability to carry out periodic spectacular attacks within Iraq's borders, the danger of AQI establishing safe havens for international terrorism in Iraq is receding. In a March 2008 report, Frederick Kagan, an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, astutely observed:

> AQI's position in Iraq collapsed in 2007… Iraqis of both sects and many ethnicities have openly and violently rejected al Qaeda and its ideology. Al Qaeda's image in the country is so negative that Iraqis now tend to blame almost every bad thing on al Qaeda, whether or not AQI is responsible. The prospect of establishing a meaningful 'Islamic State in Iraq' (ISI) with its capital somewhere other than a cow-shed in some nameless remote village has become extremely remote.[2]

Echoing these sentiments, Ambassador Ryan Crocker said in May, "You are not going to hear me say that al Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now."[3]

Al Qaeda in Iraq is likely to remain on the run so long as the Iraqi government maintains an effective counter-terrorism posture, and Iraq does not descend back into all-out sectarian warfare of the type seen in 2006 and early 2007. An Iraq backsliding into widespread civil strife is the one scenario that might encourage Sunni Arabs to renew ties

[1] An instructive example from history can be found in the two conferences held between America and its key allies during World War II in Quebec City. The conferences, held in August 1943 and September 1944, were designed to determine which theatres would constitute the main effort and which issues would receive the preponderance of attention and resources.
[2] Frederick Kagan, *Iraq: The Way Ahead*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2008, pp. 17–18.
[3] Quoted in Lee Keath, "US Ambassador: "Al-Qaida Close to Defeat in Iraq," *Associated Press*, May 24, 2008.

"A continued large-scale U.S. military presence in Iraq also plays into a key pillar of al Qaeda's global strategy: the desire to bog American military power down and thereby produce economic and strategic exhaustion."

to AQI as a self-defense mechanism against ethnic and sectarian rivals. Advancing America's broader interest in combating international terrorism, therefore, requires preventing Iraq from becoming a failed state.

However, policymakers must be mindful of the negative externalities and opportunity costs that arise from the commitment of such a high proportion of U.S. military and intelligence assets in Iraq for the wider war on terrorism. As the April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq made clear, America's continued large-scale presence in Iraq remains a "cause célèbre" for the jihadist movement worldwide, "breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement."[4] In January 2007, Paul Pillar, former National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he agreed with the NIE's conclusions, "as I believe would almost any other serious student of international terrorism."[5] Beyond the boon for recruitment, a continued large-scale military presence in Iraq also plays into a key pillar of al Qaeda's global strategy: the desire to bog American military power down and thereby produce economic and strategic exhaustion.[6]

The opportunity costs for the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan — an area Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell described as particularly important to al Qaeda — are also particularly acute.[7] In Afghanistan, the Karzai government is chronically weak and the Taliban and al Qaeda are resurgent.[8] Analysts suggest that success in Afghanistan requires increased manpower and the commitment of additional critical enablers — such as Special Operations Forces (SOF) and mobility, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets — currently devoted to Iraq.[9] The United States incurred a substantial strategic risk by failing to consolidate gains in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, choosing instead to commit to a war of choice in Iraq. Ultimately, as terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman told Congress last year, "with America trapped in Iraq, al Qaeda has had us exactly where they want us. Iraq, for them, has

[4] *Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States dated April 2006*: 3, available online at: http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf.

[5] Paul Pillar, Regional Dimensions of the War in Iraq: Statement to Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate January 9, 2007: p.3.

[6] In a statement released on jihadist websites on December 27, 2004, Bin Laden declared: "All we have to do is to send two *mujahidin* to the furthest point East to raise a cloth on which is written 'al-Qaeda,' in order to make the [U.S.] generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without achieving for it anything of note . . . so we are continuing this policy of bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy."

[7] Michael McConnell, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Armed Services Committee," February 27, 2008.

[8] See Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Make Afghan Stability a Distant Goal," *The New York Times* (May 22, 2008), and Karl Inderfurth, "Afghan Alarm," *The Baltimore Sun* (March 25, 2008).

[9] See Anthony Cordesman, *The Afghan-Pakistan War: A Status Report*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 12, 2008. Also see Caroline Wadhams and Lawrence Korb, *The Forgotten Front*, Center for American Progress, November 2007.

been an effective means to preoccupy American military forces and distract U.S. attention while al Qaeda has re-grouped and re-organized since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001." [10]

Al Qaeda has reestablished a safe haven for international terrorism in Pakistan. As the July 2007 NIE on the terrorist threat warned, "[Al Qaeda] has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), for its operational lieutenants and its top leadership [including Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri]." [11] The growing jihadist challenge to the government in nuclear-armed Pakistan also risks destabilizing South and Central Asia, generating a myriad of potential contingencies that may require future U.S. military action. [12]

In short, the need to address the problem of al Qaeda in Iraq needs to be put in the context of the continued global threat posed by al Qaeda and its associated movements elsewhere. Although AQI has experienced significant setbacks over the last year, as a consequence of U.S. actions and changing circumstances in Iraq, the continued presence of the preponderance of American combat power in Iraq risks perpetuating al Qaeda's ideological narrative, long-term strategic objectives, and complicates counter-terrorism efforts elsewhere. Therefore, while the U.S. must strive to prevent the emergence of a large-scale al Qaeda safe haven in Iraq, the struggle against international terrorism also requires that America downsize its presence in, and eventually leave, Iraq.

Preserving Stability in the Middle East

Second, the United States has a significant geopolitical and economic interest in preserving stability in the Middle East and particularly the Persian Gulf. Global energy markets remain dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and America has important and long-standing relationships with key states in the region.

Regional stability requires preventing a full-fledged civil war in Iraq. An Iraq in chaos could easily become the location for a regional conflagration. Saudi Arabia would be tempted to overtly support Iraq's Sunni community, Iran would likely escalate its lethal assistance to Iraqi Shia militias, and Turkey might intervene in the north to preempt Kurdish secession from a failed Iraqi state. There is also a danger that resumption of large-scale ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq would produce spill-over effects — including a new tidal wave of refugees or a bleed-out of jihadists — that would contribute to cascading instability across the region. [13]

Regional stability also requires preventing Iranian hegemony in Iraq, but there is a significant difference between hegemony and influence. Geographic realities and long-standing religious ties mean that U.S. policymakers must accept that Iran will inevitably exercise significant political, economic, and cultural influence in Iraq. At the same time, recent Iraqi government responses to Iranian provocations in Basra and Sadr City suggest that nascent Iraqi nationalism (even among its Shia population) will likely prevent total Iranian dominance.[14] American policy should

[10] Bruce Hoffman, "Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command Posed by the Global Terrorist Threat: Al Qaeda on the Run or on the March?" Statement before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities February, 14 2007: p.18.

[11] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Press Release: National Intelligence Estimate — The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland*, July 2007, available online at http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf.

[12] For a recent description of instability in Pakistan, see K. Alan Kronstadt, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*: Congressional Research Service Report RL33498, 28 April 2008.

[13] For a discussion of how civil wars can spill-over into neighboring states, see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War*: Brookings Institution, 2007, especially pp. 1–26.

[14] Both a strong sense of Iraqi nationalism and a wariness of Iran's growing influence were evident in meetings Michèle Flournoy had with numerous Shia officials in central and southern Iraq in February 2008.

Figure 1

AMERICA'S INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE IRAQ

Interests	Objectives Inside Iraq	Objectives Outside Iraq
Combat international terrorism	• Prevent AQI safe haven	• Free up more resources for Afghanistan and other contingencies • Undermine AQ ideology/appeal worldwide
Preserve regional stability in the Middle East/Persian Gulf	• Prevent Iraq from becoming the location for a regional war or the source of cascading instability • Prevent Iranian hegemony over Iraqi affairs	• Counter Iranian influence in the region • Make the U.S. deterrent more credible vis-à-vis Iran
Maintain U.S. leadership	• Prevent genocide	• Avoid long-term "occupation" • Avoid strategic exhaustion and "breaking" U.S. ground forces • Enhance ability to respond to global crises

therefore focus on curtailing lethal Iranian assistance to Iraqi militants and preventing the emergence of a power vacuum in Iraq that Tehran might fill.

It must also be recognized that Iran has been the largest strategic beneficiary of the removal of Saddam Hussein, and that a long-term, large-scale U.S. military presence in Iraq continues to benefit Tehran.[15] Such a presence limits rather than enables American strategic options in the region, hindering our ability to check Iran's wider geopolitical ambitions or effectively deter Iranian aggression. Restraining Iranian influence in the region therefore requires checking Tehran's destabilizing actions in Iraq while simultaneously avoiding the kind of strategic overcommitment in Iraq that plays into Iran's hands.

Maintaining U.S. Global Leadership

Third, the United States has an important interest in renewing and preserving its position of global leadership. After five years in a deeply unpopular war, America's standing in the world has shown significant signs of erosion. In terms of both hard and soft power — from the enormous strain on our ground forces, to an international image at an historic nadir — America's position as world leader and steward of the international system is in peril. Addressing the erosion of U.S. hard and soft power requires recognizing that an open-ended commitment in Iraq negatively affects both, while also acknowledging the danger of leaving Iraq in a manner that produces a large-scale humanitarian disaster.

[15] See Vali Nasr, "Who Wins in Iraq? Iran," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2007, and Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

An unsustainable commitment of U.S. military resources in Iraq generates significant risks to America's hard power. The risk of strategic exhaustion—the inability to rapidly respond to global contingencies and the enormous strain on our ground forces and economy produced by the war—is real and must be factored into future Iraq policy. The United States simply cannot sustain a level of military investment in Iraq that leaves us vulnerable to strategic surprise, nor can America continue to ask its all-volunteer armed forces to endure a deployment tempo that risks hollowing out the U.S. Army and Marine Corps.[16]

The Iraq War has also proven to be enormously damaging to America's soft power, increasing anti-American sentiment and creating a crisis of confidence in American leadership.[17] Due to the widespread and unfavorable perception around the world that the United States continues to "occupy" Iraq, drawing down the American military presence in Iraq is critical to renewing our moral leadership over the long term.

At the same time, any U.S. withdrawal must be carried out carefully so as not to further erode America's moral standing. Although it is beyond the ability of the United States to prevent all ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq, the United States has a profound national interest and moral obligation in avoiding genocide.[18] An emerging balance of power between ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq makes such an outcome unlikely, but there is still an incredible capacity for violence in Iraqi society. Minimizing the risk of genocide therefore necessitates taking steps to prevent a renewal of full-fledged sectarian warfare and the failure of the Iraqi state.

Summary

A comprehensive understanding of U.S. interests that properly situates Iraq within a broader context of regional and global concerns suggests that U.S. policy must simultaneously attempt to avoid a failed state *in Iraq* while not strategically over-committing *to Iraq*. Balancing these interests means moving away from maximalist definitions of success or unachievable notions of "victory" toward a more pragmatic and achievable goal of "sustainable stability:" a level of stability in Iraq that is sustainable with a substantially reduced American troop presence and, eventually, a complete U.S. withdrawal. As detailed below, achieving sustainable stability requires more than short-term improvements in security. It requires meaningful political accommodation among Iraq's competing ethno-sectarian communities and much improved governance throughout the country.

"U.S. policy must simultaneously attempt to avoid a failed state in Iraq while not strategically over-committing to Iraq."

[16] For example, while all of the Army's brigade combat teams (BCTs) deployed or deploying overseas are considered ready, the Army has only one ready BCT in reserve should other contingences arise. This increases America's level of strategic risk. On the strain on America's ground forces see Michèle A. Flournoy, "Strengthening the Readiness of the U.S. Military," Statement to U.S. House Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2008.

[17] See the work of the PEW Global Attitudes Project, summarized in Andrew Kohut and Richard Wike, "All the World's a Stage," *The National Interest Online,* May 6, 2008, available online at: http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=17502.

[18] For a discussion of preventing genocide in Iraq, see James N. Miller and Shawn W. Brimley, *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq,* Center for a New American Security, June 2007, pp. 20–21, 38.

PROGRESS IN IRAQ?

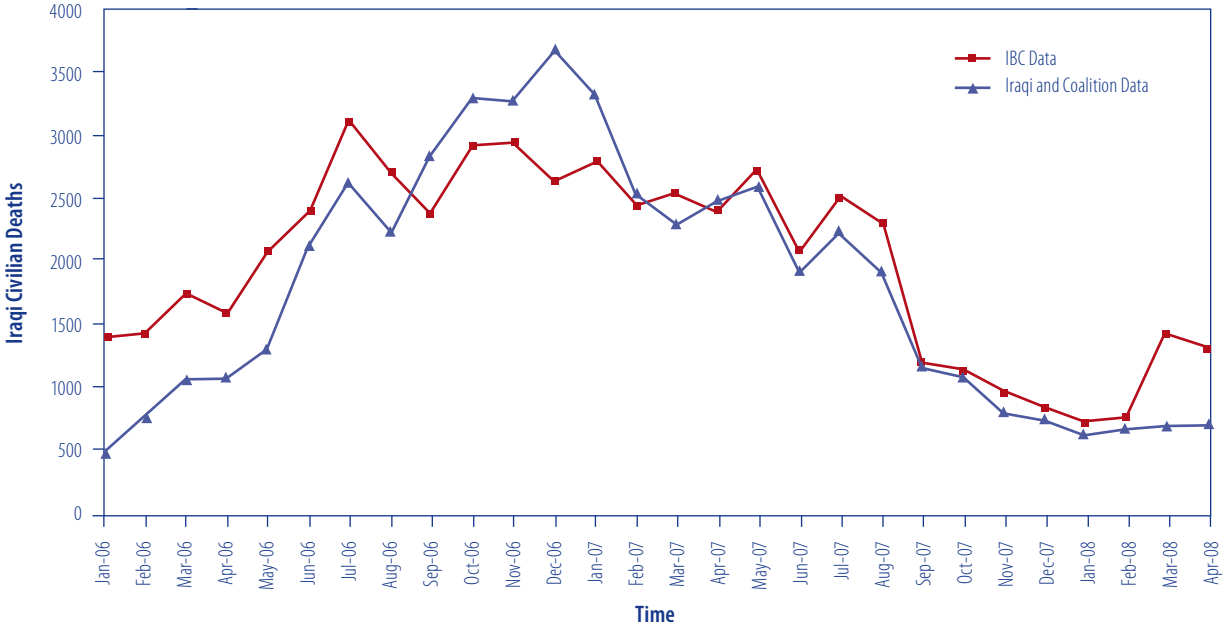
When President Bush announced the "surge" in January 2007, the stated goal was to tamp down sectarian and insurgent violence in Iraq to pave the way toward political compromise. The security situation has improved dramatically since then, but political progress remains slow.

"There has been significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation since the surge began."

Security Progress

There has been significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation since the surge began. The clearest evidence for this is the declining level of Iraqi civilian casualties. Figure 2 provides two sets of estimates. The first is derived from Coalition and Iraqi ministry tallies provided by Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I). The second estimate comes from Iraq Body Count (IBC), a non-profit organization that tracks civilian fatalities reported in the media. The estimates suggest different magnitudes, with IBC mostly higher, but both reveal similar trends. Civilian deaths skyrocketed in 2006 after the February bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samarra tipped Iraq into sectarian civil war. In early 2007, violence began to decline somewhat, albeit unevenly, before dropping dramatically beginning in August. Since December 2007, civilian death rates have stabilized at roughly

Figure 2: Iraqi Civilian Deaths



Sources: Iraq Body Count, available online at: www.iraqbodycount.org (includes pending and preliminary data for March-April 2008 provided to authors); and Multi-National Force-Iraq (numbers for March-April 2008 do not include deaths in Basra and Sadr City).

Figure 3: Security Incidents

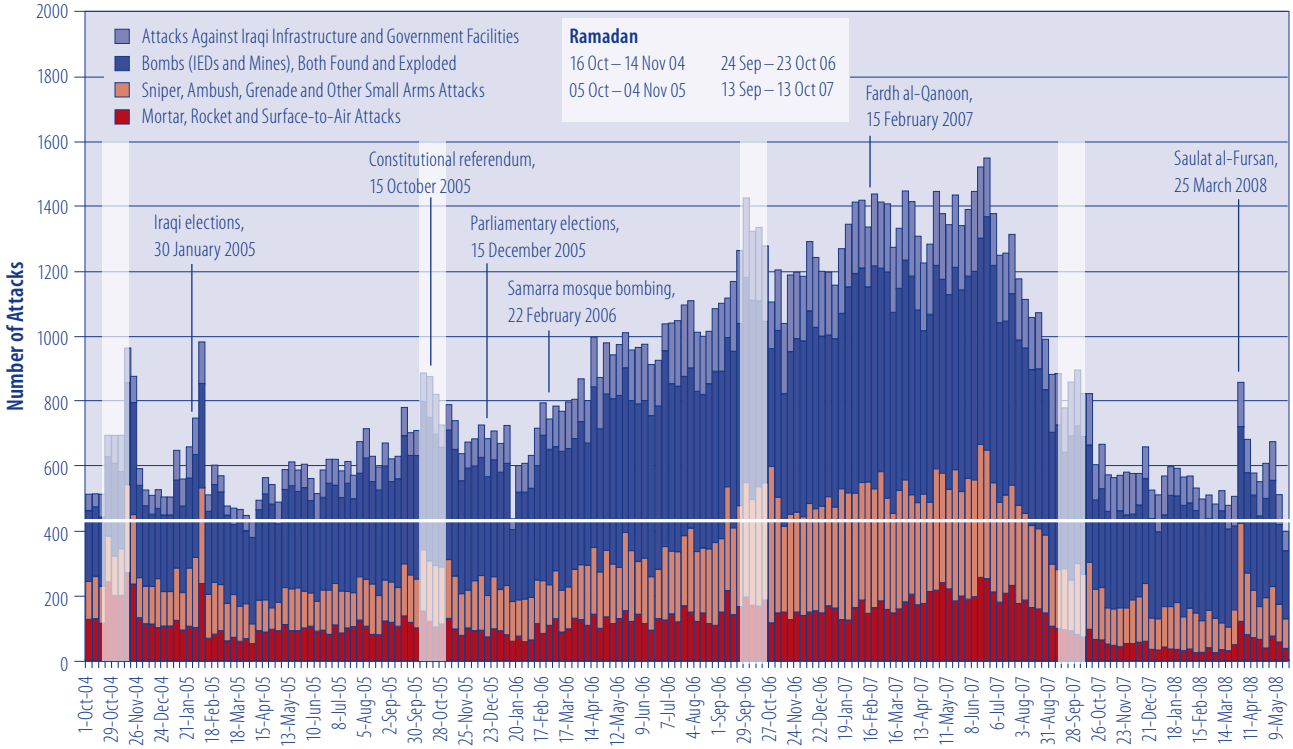
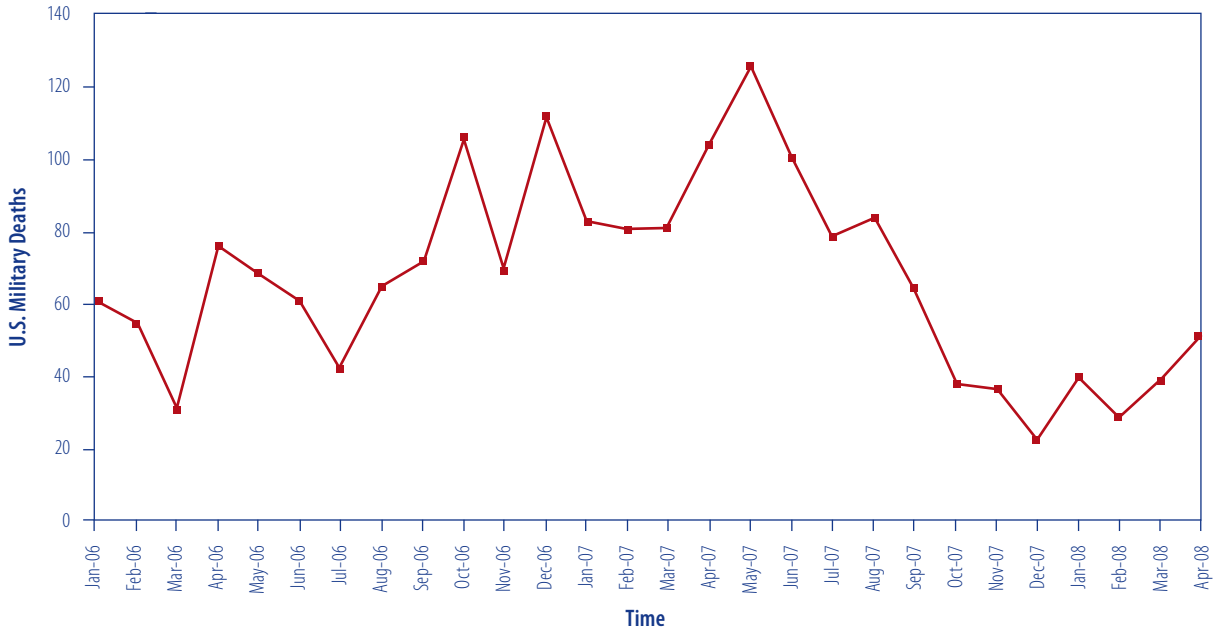


Chart includes potential attacks (IEDs/mines found and cleared) and executed attacks.

Source: Multi-National Force-Iraq.

Figure 4: U.S. Military Deaths



Source: Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, available online at: http://www.icasualties.org/oif/.

pre-Samarra levels (although clashes in Basra and Sadr City have contributed to a recent uptick). In addition, as Figure 3 indicates, the total number of all types of attacks on U.S. forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and Iraqi civilians have significantly decreased since the surge began, eventually declining to 2005 levels.

Falling American casualty rates also suggest an improvement in the security environment. Overall, 2007 was the deadliest year in Iraq for the U.S. military, but, as Figure 4 shows, casualties fell substantially in the latter part of the year. From a peak three-month total of 331 U.S. troops killed in April-June 2007, the numbers declined by 70 percent to 98 in October-December, the lowest three-month total of the entire war. Fatalities have increased somewhat thus far in 2008, but are still at levels not seen consistently since 2003.

Finally, U.S. and Iraqi forces have made great strides against AQI. According to U.S. commanders, AQI has been crippled in Baghdad and Anbar since the beginning of 2007.[19] AQI remnants continue to be active in some areas, especially in mixed-population areas that border Iraqi Kurdistan, but MNF-I data suggests that the capability, numbers, and freedom of movement of AQI and other Sunni insurgent groups has been substantially degraded during the period of the surge (see Figure 5). Moreover, as a consequence of ongoing U.S.-Iraqi operations in Mosul, AQI's largest remaining urban stronghold, the organization is likely to see its fortunes decline further.[20]

Four Sources of Security Progress

Four factors have combined to improve the security situation in Iraq over the past year-and-a-half. The first factor is the surge. The surge married 28,500 additional U.S. forces with better counterinsurgency tactics and a much-improved "Joint Campaign Plan" designed by MNF-I Commander General David Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker.[21] As additional troops began to arrive in mid-February, the military kicked-off Operation Fardh al-Qanoon ("Enforcing the Law"). American troops fanned out into dozens of joint security stations and combat outposts, and partnered with Iraqi forces in volatile neighborhoods to provide 24/7 population security.

At the same time, the U.S. military continued to target Sunni insurgents (especially AQI cadre) and began to move more aggressively against "rogue" elements of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia. The U.S. military also stepped up activities in the "Baghdad belts" — including northern Babil, eastern Anbar, the southern outskirts of Baghdad, and portions of Diyala province — in an effort to eliminate insurgent sanctuaries, interdict the flow of militants and bombs into Baghdad, and isolate the capital. Then, in June, as the final installments of the surge arrived, the U.S. military launched "Operation Phantom Thunder," a series of large-scale clearing offensives against AQI strongholds and Shia militants in the belts. Phantom Thunder, a corps-level operation, was the single largest coordinated offensive since the invasion. This was immediately followed by "Operation Phantom Strike" and "Operation Phantom Phoenix," corps-level offensives aimed at pursuing AQI remnants

[19] Thomas E. Ricks and Karen DeYoung, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Reported Crippled," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2007; and Damien Cave, "Militant Group is Out of Baghdad, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2007.

[20] Eric Hamilton, "Operation Lion's Roar," Institute for the Study of War, May 12, 2008, available online at: http://www.understandingwar.org/commentary/operation-lion's-roar.

[21] David Kilcullen, "Don't Confuse the 'Surge' with the Strategy," *Small Wars Journal Blog,* January 19, 2007, available online at: http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/01/dont-confuse-the-surge-with-th/; and Ann Scott Tyson, "New Strategy for War Stresses Iraqi Politics," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2007.

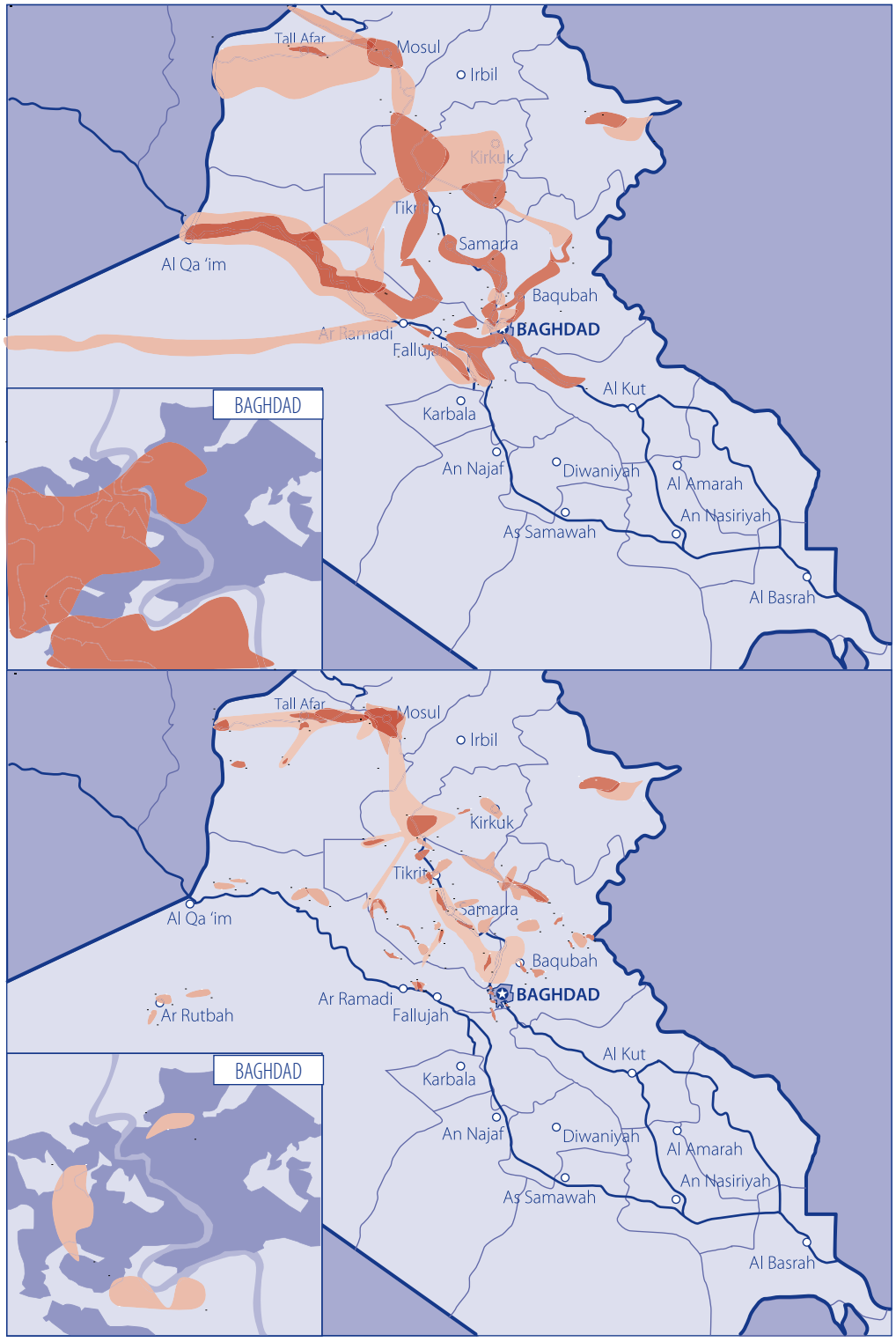
Figure 5: Areas of Support and Sanctuary for Al Qaeda in Iraq and Sunni Insurgents

December 2006

- Areas where insurgents are capable of carrying out operations
- Areas where insurgents are able to transit

March 2008

- Areas where insurgents are capable of carrying out operations
- Areas where insurgents are able to transit



Source: Multi-National Force-Iraq

fleeing north and west of Baghdad. And, in a change from past practice, U.S. and Iraqi forces have attempted to hold areas vacated by AQI and other insurgents to prevent reinfiltration.[22]

The second, and perhaps most decisive, reason for improved security is the Sunni Awakening: the successful effort to recruit Sunni tribes and former insurgents to cooperate with U.S. forces against AQI. Although there had been periodic attempts by U.S. forces to engage Sunni tribes since the beginning of the war, the Awakening as we know it began in late 2006 in Ramadi with the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council. The Council represented a group of tribal sheiks that revolted against AQI affronts, atrocities, power grabs, and encroachments into (often illicit) tribal economic activities. The beginning of the movement predated the surge and was spurred, in part, by increasing concerns that U.S. forces might withdraw and leave Sunnis vulnerable to AQI and Shia militias (see the case study below for more details). Nevertheless, nimble U.S. commanders effectively exploited the growing wedge between Sunni tribes and AQI to forge cooperative arrangements, and the tribes responded by providing thousands of men to serve in auxiliary security forces.[23] The result was a dramatic reduction in violence in Anbar, once the hotbed of the Sunni insurgency.

Although the surge did not spark the Awakening, the new American approach did help it spread outward from Anbar. Even here, the real cause was not the additional troops *per se*, but rather a change in strategy associated with the surge. (Indeed, Awakening movements spread into a number of areas that had little or no increase in troop presence.) In late May, 2007, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, then the number two commander in Iraq, announced the U.S. military's intent to apply the Anbar model elsewhere. Odierno estimated that 80 percent of Sunni and Shia militants in Iraq were "reconcilable," and U.S. military commanders were given wide discretion to reach out to these groups.[24] This spurred a rapid proliferation of ceasefires and financial arrangements (usually rooted in large cash payments) with tribal sheiks, former insurgents, and other community leaders to cooperate with U.S. forces, go after AQI, and recruit auxiliary security forces. The effort has since spread to many neighborhoods in greater Baghdad, Diyala, Salah ad Din, Ta'min, Ninewa, Babil, and Qadisiyah provinces, contributing to the rapid growth of "Sons of Iraq" (SoI) groups. Approximately 91,000 individuals currently participate in SoIs, 80 percent of which are Sunnis. Most SoI members receive a monthly stipend from U.S. forces averaging $300 to man checkpoints and patrol neighborhoods.[25]

The Awakening has coincided with a dramatic consolidation and politicization of the Sunni insurgency. Significant portions of the long-fragmented Sunni resistance have coalesced into three Sunni Insurgency Councils: the Reformation and Jihad Front, the Jihad and Change Front, and the Supreme Council for Jihad and Liberation.[26] These councils represent loose national-level coalitions that oppose AQI (and its self-declared Islamic State in Iraq) and seek to protect Sunni

[22] Kimberly Kagan, "How They Did It," *The Weekly Standard*, November 11, 2007; and Scott Peterson, "Iraq Offensive: Clear Out Militants — And Stay," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2008.
[23] Greg Jaffe, "How Courting Sheiks Slowed Violence In Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2007; Dave Kilcullen, "Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt," *Small Wars Journal Blog*, August 29, 2007, available online at: http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/; and Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April-May 2008), pp. 67–94.
[24] "DoD Press Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon," May 31, 2007, available online at: http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3973.
[25] General David H. Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq," April 8–9, 2008.
[26] Evan Kohlman, "State of the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq," The NEFA Foundation, August 2007, pp. 15–22; Muhammad Abu Rumman, "Iraq: The Politics of Sunni Armed Groups," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Vol. 7, Issue 5, September 2007; and Bill Roggio, "The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandiyah Order," *The Long War Journal*, October 4, 2007, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/10/al_douri_forms_natio.php.

communities against Shia militia groups. Elements of the Reformation and Jihad Front and the Jihad and Change Front have also created the Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance, the first attempt by Sunni insurgents to form a political umbrella organization.[27]

As a consequence of these changes, many segments of the Sunni insurgency have stood down or begun to cooperate with U.S. forces against AQI, either directly or through intermediaries. Indeed, many of the SoIs, especially in Baghdad, appear to represent front organizations for these groups. In conjunction with tribal realignments, the altered disposition of Sunni militants has played a huge role in security improvements in many areas. But it is important to recognize that the decision by Sunni tribes and, especially, insurgents to cooperate with American forces does not necessarily signify a fundamental change of heart toward the U.S. presence in Iraq. The new umbrella organizations within the Sunni insurgency, for example, represent a growing rift with AQI, but most of these groups still vehemently oppose the American "occupation." On the whole, the Sunni Awakening can best be understood as an effort by Sunni groups to eliminate the proximate threat from AQI, reverse their current political marginalization, and position themselves vis-à-vis the Shia (and their presumed Iranian patrons).[28]

"In conjunction with tribal realignments, the altered disposition of Sunni militants has played a huge role in security improvements in many areas. But it is important to recognize that the decision by Sunni tribes and, especially, insurgents to cooperate with American forces does not necessarily signify a fundamental change of heart toward the U.S. presence in Iraq."

A third factor contributing to improved security has been the decision by Sadr to curtail the armed activities of his militia. When the surge was announced, Sadr instructed his forces not to directly challenge the Baghdad security plan (although elements of JAM continued to attack the Coalition).[29] Then, on August 28, 2007, a ferocious gun battle erupted between JAM and the Badr Organization — the rival militia associated with Sadr's principal rival, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) — during a festival in Karbala. The clash killed dozens and wounded hundreds. The following day, Sadr announced a six-month freeze on all armed actions by JAM in an attempt to "rehabilitate" his organization. In February of this year, the truce was extended for another six months.[30]

[27] "Iraqi Fighters Form Political Group," *Al Jazeera*, October 13, 2007, http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/739E1A85-1F25-41AA-9B5F-EBD595177845.htm.
[28] John F. Burns and Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. Arming Sunnis in Iraq to Battle Old Qaeda Allies," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2007.
[29] Sudarsan Raghaven, "For U.S. and Sadr, Wary Cooperation," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2007.
[30] Joshua Partlow and Saad Sarhan, "Sadr Orders 'Freeze' on Militia Actions," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2007; and Leila Fadel and Qassim Zein, "Radical Iraqi Cleric Asks Militia to Stand Down for 6 More Months," *McClatchy*, February 22, 2008.

The motivations behind the freeze remain unclear. In part, Sadr's decision may have been intended to improve JAM's image in the face of growing accusations of criminal behavior. Sadr has also been facing fierce competition from extremist factions within JAM, and he seems increasingly wary of Iranian influence within his organization. Although Sadr's movement has received considerable support from Iran, this does not distinguish the Sadrists from their chief political rivals—ISCI, the Dawa party, and, to some extent, the Kurds—who have also maintained close ties to Tehran. Moreover, unlike many members of the current governing coalition, Sadr did not spend years in exile in Iran, and he remains fiercely nationalistic. Consequently, one major motivation for Sadr declaring the freeze in the first place may have been his desire to limit the amount of Iranian influence over his organization by looking the other way as U.S. forces targeted Iranian-backed "special groups" who ignored the freeze.[31] According to a U.S. Embassy official, "They said, 'Look, we have two foreign influences that are battling for control of Iraq: Iran and the American occupation. And of the two, we need to be more concerned with Iran."[32] Whatever the precise motivation, General Petraeus and others have credited the JAM freeze with producing a substantial reduction in sectarian violence.[33]

The fragile ceasefire was shattered this spring as a consequence of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's decision to launch an offensive in Basra. The resulting escalation of fighting between JAM and U.S. and Iraqi forces in Basra and Sadr City pushed the Sadr ceasefire past the breaking point. In an effort to maintain the illusion that the freeze was still in place, and thereby give Sadr room to back down, U.S. and Iraqi officials went to great lengths to frame fighting as confrontations with Iranian-backed special groups, "criminals," and "outlaws." Yet there is overwhelming evidence that rank-and-file JAM members were also involved in the fray, especially in Sadr City.[34] A pair of truces (brokered, in part, by Iran) has since calmed the situation, but the "peace," such as it is, remains precarious.[35]

The fourth and final reason for the reduction in violence is prior sectarian cleansing. Since the beginning of the war, more than four million Iraqis have fled the country or become internally displaced. This process accelerated in 2006 and early 2007 as sectarian cleansing exploded. Hundreds of thousands have been pushed out of Baghdad, and many formerly mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhoods are now dominated by one sect.[36] Sectarian cleansing had the perverse effect of driving down subsequent violence by reducing the pool of potential victims and segregating groups into defensible enclaves—enclaves that have increasingly been walled off from one another by concrete barriers erected by Coalition forces.[37]

In sum, there has been real security progress since early 2007. The current level of Iraqi civilian deaths now approximates pre-Samarra levels, overall attacks are down, American casualties have

[31] Sam Dagher, "Iraq's Sadr Uses Lull to Rebuild Army," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 11, 2007.
[32] Quoted in Amit R. Paley, "Sadr's Militia Enforces Cease-Fire with a Deadly Purge," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2008.
[33] Ann Scott Tyson, "Petraeus Says Cleric Helped Curb Violence," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2007.
[34] Ned Paker, "Iraqi Militia Commanders Harden Stance Toward U.S.," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 2008; Tina Susman, "In Iraq, U.S. Walks Tightrope with Sadr," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2008; and Amit R. Paley, "U.S. Deploys a Purpose-Driven Distinction," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2008.
[35] James Glanz and Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. and Iran Find Common Ground in Iraq's Shiite Conflict," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2008; Scott Peterson and Howard LaFranchi, "Iran's Role Rises as Iraq Peace Broker," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 14, 2008; Alissa J. Rubin, "Truce Holds in Sadr City Amid Patrols by Iraqi Army," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2008.
[36] International Organization for Migration, *Iraq Displacement: 2007 Year in Review*, 2007, available online at: http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/media/docs/reports/2007_year_in_review.pdf; and Kristele Younes and Nir Rosen, *Uprooted and Unstable: Meeting Urgent Humanitarian Needs in Iraq*, Refugees International, April 2008.
[37] Mark Tran, "US Builds Wall to Keep Sunnis and Shias Apart," *The Guardian* (UK), April 20, 2007; and Ned Parker, "Iraqi Civilian Deaths Plunge," *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 2007.

declined, and AQI is on the ropes. Some of this progress is directly attributable to additional U.S. forces and improved counterinsurgency practices. Other gains are due to decisions by Iraqi combatants to (at least temporarily) switch sides or stand on the sidelines — decisions that have been exploited and expanded by savvy U.S. commanders and diplomats.

Regardless of the cause, however, security gains appear to have leveled off. Current trends suggest that we may have reached what Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategy and International Studies refers to as the "irreducible minimum" level of violence in Iraq that can be produced by available U.S. forces.[38] Moreover, the four major sources of security progress remain tenuous and reversible. Population security gains may not survive the transfer of responsibility to ISF units; Sunni SoI members may become frustrated at the slow pace of integration into the Iraqi police and army; Sadr may decide to tilt toward JAM extremists who favor confrontation or lose control of his movement altogether; and the return of refugees and internally displaced people may spark new sectarian clashes. And, on top of all this, looming crises over disputed territories, especially Kirkuk, could escalate into ethnic strife between Arabs and Kurds in the months ahead if some compromise is not reached.

Inadequate Political Progress

There are no military solutions to these challenges, and, even if there were, strains on the U.S. military preclude a "re-surge." Thus, as the surge ends, preventing reversals on the security front and producing sustainable stability requires progress in the political sphere — progress that has been slow to materialize.

In contrast to clear security gains, progress on the political front has been more mixed. There have been a number of high-profile symbolic engagements between Shia and Sunni leaders.[39] Maliki's decision to take on elements of JAM in Basra and Sadr City has also helped improve relations (at least momentarily) with Sunni and Kurdish politicians who have long criticized the prime minister for not cracking down on Shia militants.[40] But a spirit of genuine ethno-sectarian comity still eludes the Iraqi political leadership at the national level. Iraq's "unity" government remains disunited and dysfunctional, and decision-making too often reflects narrow ethno-sectarian and personal agendas rather than Iraqi interests as a whole.[41] Moreover, the most significant example of "bottom-up" reconciliation — the Sunni Awakening — represents an accommodation between Sunni combatants and U.S. forces rather than a fundamental accommodation between Sunnis and the Shia-dominated government.[42]

The Bush administration and the U.S. Embassy in Iraq have attempted to frame *de facto* revenue sharing, leniency toward former Baathists and insurgents, and local and provincial empowerment as evidence of political progress. It is also meaningful that the Iraqi parliament recently approved de-Baathification reform, amnesty legislation for detainees, and a provincial powers

[38] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Victory and Violence in Iraq: Reducing the "Irreducible Minimum,"* Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 25, 2008, available online at: http://www.csis.org/index.php?option=com_csis_pubs&task=view&id=4345.

[39] See, for example, Joe Klein, "The Ramadi Goat Grab," *Time*, October 25, 2007; and "Cleric Renews Call For End to Sectarian Violence," Associated Press, November 28, 2007.

[40] "Iraq's al-Maliki Wins Rare Kurdish, Sunni Support," *Associated Press*, April 6, 2008; and Eric Westervelt, "Sunni Bloc to Re-Join Iraq's Shiite-Led Government," *Morning Edition (National Public Radio)*, April 23, 2008, available online at: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89871099.

[41] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy,* Middle East Report No. 75, April 30, 2008.

[42] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape,* Middle East Report No. 74, April 30, 2008. This point was consistently made by Sunni community leaders from Baghdad to Anbar in interviews with Michèle Flournoy in February 2008.

law.[43] But the devil will be in the details — which remain vague — and in the implementation of this legislation. Sunni politicians, for example, fear that the ambiguous de-Baathification reform law may actually be used to further purge their ranks from the ISF.[44] Implementation of the provincial elections established by the provincial powers law may also prove problematic and set the stage for more inter- and intra-sectarian conflict.

Furthermore, a host of issues crucial for political accommodation and improved governance remain unresolved. These include: the integration of SoIs into the Iraqi army and police; the political co-optation of moderate elements of the Sadrist movement and JAM; passage of hydrocarbons legislation; resolution of territorial disputes; the framework for provincial and national elections; improved delivery of essential services; and a comprehensive plan to address the plight of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. Ultimately, as an April 2008 report by the International Crisis Group concludes:

> Observers may legitimately differ over how many of the [Bush] administration's so-called benchmarks have been met. None could reasonably dispute that the [Iraqi] government's performance has been utterly lacking. Its absence of capacity cannot conceal or excuse its absence of will. True to its sectarian nature and loath to share power, the ruling coalition has actively resisted compromise. Why not? It has no reason to alienate its constituency, jeopardise [sic] its political makeup or relinquish its perks and privileges when inaction has no consequences and the U.S. will always back it.[45]

[43] Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 8, 2008.
[44] Amit R. Paley and Joshua Partlow, "Iraq's New Law on Ex-Baathists Could Bring Another Purge," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2008; and International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, pp. 18-21.
[45] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, p. ii.

ENCOURAGING POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION

Recent improvements in security have at least made it possible to envision achieving sustainable stability in Iraq. But this outcome will not magically appear on its own. It will take determined efforts by the United States to push Iraqi leaders toward political accommodation, as well as assistance in improving governance at both the national and provincial levels.

Integrating SoIs

Sustainable stability will be impossible to achieve without coming to terms with the Sons of Iraq. The Sunni Awakening is a complex movement. Many members of Awakening Councils and SoIs represent average Sunnis attempting to reclaim their neighborhoods. But it is no secret that many of the Sunni groups now cooperating with U.S. forces are also populated with unsavory characters ("former" insurgents, smugglers, common criminals, and would-be warlords) whose loyalties and motivations may not be benign. Overall, it remains unclear whether the SoIs are primarily a "defensive" movement that seeks nothing more than to protect Sunni localities against AQI and Shia militias, or whether many of these groups have "offensive" and expansionist aims to exact revenge, reclaim Sunni neighborhoods lost in 2006–2007, and topple the Iraqi government.[46]

Abandoning cooperative efforts with these groups based on fears of potential "blowback," however, would not reduce risks of Sunni revanchism. On the contrary, now that these groups have organized, severing relations with them is more likely to drive them into open conflict with U.S. forces and the central government. Instead, a comprehensive strategy that capitalizes on the clear short-term security benefits SoIs have produced, while managing the medium- and long-term risks associated with SoI mobilization, must be implemented. The defensive motivations of these groups must be addressed by allowing them to ensure security for their neighborhoods while limiting their ability to carry out offensive operations. This means preventing SoIs from acquiring heavy weapons, tightly restricting their jurisdictions and movement, and closely monitoring them for compliance so that they do not rub up against rival militias. It also means that the U.S. military must continue to rigorously collect their biometric information to deter and, if necessary, respond to actions taken against the Iraqi government.[47]

But the single most important step in managing the SoIs is integrating them into the Iraqi army and police, or otherwise providing them gainful employment through ties to the central government. Forging financial and institutional dependencies will help dissuade SoIs from reverting back to being insurgents, and, by giving the Iraqi government leverage, will help minimize anxieties among the Shia that the Sunni SoIs will do so. Integration and economic outreach would also send a powerful signal that the Maliki government is moving decisively away from sectarianism, and thus would be an important step toward genuine reconciliation with Iraq's Sunni community.[48]

At the moment, however, this reconciliation remains elusive. Although the Iraqi government initially welcomed the Sunni awakening in

[46] Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Meet Abu Abed: The U.S.'s New Ally Against al-Qaida," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2007; Jon Lee Anderson, "Letter from Iraq: Inside the Surge," *New Yorker*, November 19, 2007; Jonathan Steele, "Iraqi Insurgents Regrouping, says Sunni Resistance Leader," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2007; Brian Bennett, "Arming Iraq's Future Street Gangs?" *Time*, February 1, 2008; and Alexandra Zavis, "Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites Work Together, Distrustfully," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2008; Nir Rosen, "The Myth of the Surge," *Rolling Stone*, March 6, 2008; and Alexandra Zavis, "Sons of Iraq? Or Baghdad's Sopranos?" *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 2008.

[47] The U.S. military claims that the vast majority of SoI recruits have had their biometric information recorded. Leila Fadel, "U.S. Sponsorship of Sunni Groups Worries Iraq's Government," *McClatchy*, November 29, 2007.

[48] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, p. 22.

homogenous Anbar province, the anxieties of the Maliki government have grown as the movement has spread into mixed areas.[49] After considerable cajoling, Maliki has agreed to integrate 20–30 percent of current SOI members into the ISF, and provide the remainder with non-security related employment. But the government has been very slow in carrying out this pledge, especially in Baghdad. General Petraeus testified in April that 21,000 SoI's had been "transitioned." Outside of Anbar, however, only 8,200 have been accepted into the ISF, while 4,700 have been provided non-security jobs.[50] Compounding matters, the 20–30 percent figure may prove insufficient even if it were fully implemented. As Shija al-Adhami, the head of the Awakening force in Baghdad's Ghazaliya neighborhood, told the *Washington Post* in February, "This is a big failure — either they take us all in or this is not going to work." Echoing this concern, Tariq al-Hashimi, Iraq's Sunni Vice President, recently asked, "What sort of risk are you going to take if this 100 percent is stripped to 20? We cannot afford to lose all this success, which is paid by the blood of the people."[51] Ultimately, it is difficult to know whether the 20–30 percent figure is the right number *in theory*. But, in practice, there is a real danger that the individuals who most want to receive security-related jobs — former Baathists and insurgents — will be the least likely to make it through the Maliki government's vetting procedures, especially in light of recent de-Baathification reform legislation.[52]

Given the slow pace of integration, the U.S. military is hedging its bets by continuing to pay SoIs and by establishing a civilian jobs corps to absorb the tens of thousands of SoI members that may not be hired into the ISF. The goal is to transition them into public works and vocational training programs.[53] But this is, at best, a quick fix. Creating the needed relationships and demonstrating good faith with Sunni volunteers will require the Iraqi government to carry through on, and expand upon, its commitments. If the Maliki government fails to adequately reach out to SoIs, one U.S. Army officer warns, "it's game on — they're back to attacking again."[54]

Co-opting JAM

Disarming and demobilizing all militias in Iraq should remain a long-term objective, but, in the short term, attempts to marginalize extremist elements and manage their role in providing local security may be more realistic. This is true of Sunni SoIs, and it is also the case with JAM.

Despite growing anti-Sadrist sentiment, Sadr and JAM continue to enjoy considerable popular support, especially among impoverished Shia. The Sadrist Trend maintains one of the largest political blocs in the Iraqi parliament. The various Offices of the Martyr Sadr and JAM are also a linchpin of street-level governance in many areas, providing security and basic services in Sadr City

[49] Christian Berthelsen, "U.S. Commander in Iraq: Sectarian Bias Limits Police," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 2007; Michael R. Gordon, "Iraq Hampers U.S. Bid to Widen Sunni Police Role," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2007; Hoda Jasim and Rahma al Salem, "The Awakening Council: Iraq's Anti-al-Qaeda Sunni Militias," *Asharq Alawsat*, December 29, 2007; Peter Spiegel, "U.S. Shifts Sunni Strategy in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2008; Solomon Moore, "Ex-Baathists Get a Break. Or Do They?" *The New York Times*, January 14, 2008; and Sholnn Freeman, "The Challenge of Creating a Lasting Peace," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2008.

[50] Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq."

[51] Both quoted in Sudarsan Raghaven and Amit R. Paley, "Sunni Forces Losing Patience With U.S.," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008.

[52] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, pp. 19–21.

[53] Karen DeYoung and Amit R. Paley, "U.S. Plans to Form Job Corps for Iraqi Security Volunteers.," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2007.

[54] Quoted in Ricks, "Iraqis Wasting an Opportunity, U.S. Officials Say," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2007. See also, Patrick Cockburn, "'If There is No Change in Three Months, There Will Be War Again'," *Independent* (UK), January 28, 2008; and Matt Sherman, "Iraq's Sunni Time Bomb," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2008; and Sholnn Freeman, "The Challenge of Creating a Lasting Peace," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2008

and much of southern Iraq.[55] As such, Sadrists cannot be ignored or completely eliminated. Instead, they must be gradually co-opted into the political process.

In part, this entails the Coalition working with the Iraqi government to weaken popular support for extremist and criminal elements within JAM. That means continuing to hold informal talks with Sadr representatives and mobilizing elements within Shia communities that are fed up with JAM factions engaged in criminal extortion. In some Shia-majority neighborhoods, moderate elements of JAM should also be integrated into the ISF and placed under the same restrictions as Sunni SoIs. For example, in Baghdad's Rashid district, once a majority Sunni area and now mostly populated by Shia, U.S. forces have engaged moderate elements of JAM to guard outdoor markets and pick up trash, and they have even managed to craft a reconciliation agreement between Sunni and Shia residents in Rashid's Jihad neighborhood.[56]

Taking steps to maintain security improvements in mixed areas is also an indirect way of peeling off support for extremist elements within JAM. If the U.S. military and ISF are able to protect Shia civilians from AQI attacks, they may be able to continue chipping away at the appeal of JAM as a self-defense organization.[57] Together with continued efforts by U.S. and Iraqi forces to *discriminately* target Iranian-backed special groups and others that refuse to comply with Sadr's cease-fire orders, this may tilt the playing field in favor of moderate factions within the movement.

At the same time, the Iraqi government should be discouraged from adopting further actions that will be viewed as targeting the Sadrists as a whole. Regardless of whether Sadr's willingness to reach truces in Basra and Sadr City reflect current weakness or strength, his actions likely reveal that centrist elements within his movement still prefer, all else being equal, to remain part of the political process. But this could change if the Maliki government seeks to extinguish Sadr's movement altogether. Any effort to block the participation of Sadrists in the upcoming provincial elections unless JAM is completely disbanded, for example, risks pushing Sadr toward extremist factions or creating such intense conflict within JAM that the movement splinters into a thousand violent pieces.[58] Under either scenario, there would likely be a dramatic escalation of violence in Baghdad and across southern Iraq.

Passing Hydrocarbons Legislation

Passing comprehensive hydrocarbons legislation is also essential to resolve simmering ethnic and sectarian disputes and lay the economic foundation for a viable Iraqi political order over the long-term. Oil is the lifeblood of the Iraqi economy. Legislation outlining the management of the country's oil and gas fields is therefore essential to attract desperately needed investment in Iraq's oil industry, including investment in the exploration and development of new oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan (a major concern for the Kurds).[59]

A revenue-sharing law is also necessarily to institutionalize the equitable division of Iraq's oil wealth, an issue of particular concern to Sunni

[55] Reider Visser, *The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South of Iraq: The Most Unpredictable Political Fore in the Gulf's Oil-Belt Region?* Norwegian Institute of International Affairs 2008, May 2008, available online at: http://www.historiae.org/sadrists_basra.asp; Spencer Ackerman, "The Insurgent as Counterinsurgent," *Washington Independent*, May 2, 2008, available online at: http://www.washingtonindependent.com/view/the-insurgent-as; and Wayne White, "Iraq: Muqtada al-Sadr Still in the Game," *MEI Commentary*, May 13, 2008, available online at: http://www.mideasti.org/commentary/iraq-muqtada-al-sadr-still-game.

[56] Parker, "Iraqi Civilian Deaths Plunge."

[57] Alissa J. Rubin, "A Calmer Iraq: Fragile, and Possibly Fleeting," *The New York Times,* December 5, 2007.

[58] "Maliki Threatens to Bar Sadr From Vote," *Reuters,* April 7, 2008.

[59] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, pp. 4–10.

Arabs. The vast majority of Iraq's oil is located in the south and north of the country, where Shia Arabs and Kurds are the demographic majority, respectively. Currently producing fields are concentrated in Basra and Kirkuk, and there is also limited production in fields located in Baghdad, Diyala, Maysan, Mosul, and Salah ad Din. There are some undeveloped fields scattered throughout most of the country's other provinces, except in Anbar, Babil, Dahuk, and Diwaniyah. Sunni Arabs, who make up about 20 percent of the Iraqi population, control land with only about 10 percent of the country's oil resources. An equal share of oil revenue is therefore necessary to make Sunni areas economically viable.[60] *De facto* revenue sharing through the annual budget process addresses this problem at the moment. But because this arrangement is vulnerable to the changing whims of the Shia-dominated government, it is ultimately insufficient to engender faith among Sunnis that they will continue to receive their fair share of the pie. In the absence of credible hydrocarbons legislation, Sunnis will face continued incentives to try to violently capture the central government.

Resolving Territorial Disputes

Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution outlines a process for resolving the status of several disputed territories within Iraq. Most consequential here is governance over oil-rich Kirkuk, which could potentially become a flashpoint for ethno-sectarian bloodshed. Kurds have a strong cultural and emotional attachment to Kirkuk and seek to absorb it (and its oil fields) into the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In contrast, Kirkuk's Arab population, including many who resettled there during Saddam's rule, generally favor continued governance from Baghdad. A referendum on Kirkuk, called for under Article 140, was originally scheduled for the end of 2007 before being postponed by six months. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the referendum will happen at all.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has assumed the lead mediation role vis-à-vis Iraq's disputed territories in an effort to find a consensus-based solution. In this context, the decision to postpone the Kirkuk referendum temporarily avoided a showdown between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen, and provided some breathing space to reach agreement on the process for determining Kirkuk's fate. The prospect for a peaceful political settlement was also given a boost when the Arab bloc in the province ended a year-long boycott last December and returned to the provincial council. Kurdish leaders have since initiated a new round of dialogue with Arabs and Turkmen.[61] At the same time, however, tensions between the Kurds and the central government have emerged over oil contract disputes and, in January, a bloc of Iraqi parliamentarians proposed eliminating the referendum altogether and imposing a decision on Kirkuk's status from Baghdad.[62]

The United States should continue to support the UN's consensus-based approach. However, if a stalemate persists, it may ultimately be necessary for the United States to intervene more assertively in the process to pressure the Kurds to accept a power-sharing arrangement that falls short of placing Kirkuk under the exclusive authority of the KRG while pushing other parties to make concessions (perhaps in the rules governing oil contracts and the classification of oil fields under KRG control) that favor Kurdish interests in order to make this bitter pill easier to swallow.[63]

[60] Kamil al-Mehaidi, "Geographical Distribution of Iraqi Oil Fields and Its Relation with the New Constitution," *Revenue Watch Institute* (Iraq), May 2006; and Edward P. Joseph and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Case for Soft Partition in Iraq*, Brookings Institution, Saban Center Analysis, Number 12, June 2007, pp. 21–22.

[61] Lauren Frayer, "Sunni-Kurdish Deal a Try for Iraq Unity," *Associated Press*, December 5, 2007; Basil Adas, "Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds Start Talk on Kirkuk Future," *GulfNews.com*, December 6, 2007, http://www.gulfnews.com/region/Iraq/10172902.html.

[62] Ned Parker, "Kirkuk Referendum Needed, Kurdish Leader Says," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2008; and "Iraqi Alliances: Shifting Sands," *Asharq Alawsat*, January 28, 2008.

[63] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, pp. 26–28.

IMPROVING GOVERNANCE

Political accommodation is necessary for sustainable stability, but it is not sufficient. Sustainable stability will also require a continued commitment by the United States and the international community to help build Iraqi governance, legitimacy, and security capacity at the national and local levels.

Bolstering Government Legitimacy Through Elections

The February 2008 provincial powers law calls for provincial elections to take place in Iraq by October 1 (although the date may be pushed back to later in the fall).[64] Because most Sunnis (and many Sadrists) boycotted the 2005 provincial elections, they are currently underrepresented in many provincial councils. As new leadership figures have begun to emerge especially in Sunni areas, new elections are vital to enhance government legitimacy at the local level and provide non-violent channels for political competition. For provincial elections to have this effect, however, they must be held under a formula that levels the playing field for newcomers in their competition with the parties that currently dominate the Iraqi government: ISCI, Dawa, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). Many observers believe this will require an "open list" or hybrid system for provincial elections instead of the current closed-list proportional representation system.[65]

The United States must also make clear that provincial elections should be conducted in a way that is relatively free of intimidation by all parties. Here, the recent Iraqi government offensive in Basra contains troubling signs. There was certainly a legitimate interest on Maliki's part for cracking down on Iranian-backed groups and rampant criminality in Basra. But the particular focus of the operation seemed to suggest that less honorable motivations were also at work. Many analysts saw the offensive as at least partly an attempt by ISCI and Dawa to use the ISF to deligitimize and weaken Sadrists in southern Iraq. Maliki's follow-on threat to exclude the Sadrists from provincial elections altogether gave additional credence to this interpretation.[66] Militias should not be allowed to intimidate voters in the lead-up to the elections—but neither should the government.

Similar concerns will have to be addressed in the lead-up to national elections for Iraq's Council of Representatives currently expected in late 2009. The national elections represent an important milestone. They will provide a referendum on the ethno-sectarian parties that currently dominate the parliament and an opportunity for a new generation of leaders to move Iraq forward. UNAMI is providing technical assistance for both the provincial and national elections, and they seem likely to recommend an open-list format (at least for the latter). The United States should make clear that it will not take sides among competing Iraqi parties in these elections, and Washington should exert pressure on the Iraqi government to accept the formula that emerges from the UN-supervised process.[67] Moreover, depending on the progress of the ISF over the next year and the willingness of the Iraqi government to conduct fair elections, the U.S. military should be prepared to support the ISF in securing election sites and preventing intimidation in the country's most volatile areas.

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[64] Thomas Ricks, "Petraeus Expects to Recommend Troop Cuts This Fall," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2008.

[65] Ibid., pp. 14–18.; and Michael Knights and Eamon McCarthy, *Provincial Politics in Iraq: Fragmentation or a New Awakening*, Policy Focus #81, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2008, pp. 35–37.

[66] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge II*, p. 16; Juan Cole, "Why al-Maliki Attacked Basra," *Salon*, April 1, 2008, available online at: http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2008/04/01/basra/; and Visser, *The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South*.

[67] Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Failed Crocker-Petraeus Testimony and a 'Conditions-Based' Strategy for Staying in Iraq," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 10, 2008, available online at: http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4432/type,1/.

Resettling Refugees and Displaced Persons

Another challenge that must be addressed is the plight of returning refugees and internally displaced persons. As a consequence of growing economic hardship abroad and improved security in Baghdad, Iraqi refugees have begun trickling back into the country. Other internally displaced individuals have also sought to take advantage of a more secure environment to return home. Many have arrived to find families from a rival sect occupying their houses. The Iraqi government currently lacks a mechanism to settle property disputes or otherwise prevent the influx of returnees from sparking a fresh round of bloodshed.[68] The Iraqi government also appears to have no plan to provide shelter, food, or other essential services for these people, and what little aid is provided is widely perceived to favor the Shia population. In the absence of adequate services for displaced persons, Shia and Sunni militias are filling the void, strengthening their appeal.[69]

The Iraqi government—in conjunction with the United Nations, the U.S. Embassy, and local non-governmental organizations—must develop and implement a comprehensive plan to provide returning families with compensation for family members who were killed and property destroyed, as well as humanitarian assistance and help in resettling. However, at least initially, it may be better to encourage families attempting to return to fault-line neighborhoods, especially in Baghdad, to settle elsewhere. This obviously risks ratifying previous sectarian cleansing, but the alternative is to create thousands of flashpoints for renewed strife by attempting to aggressively "reverse engineer" mixed areas.[70]

Providing Essential Services and Building Capacity

The Iraqi government's failure to provide for the basic needs of displaced persons is symptomatic of a wider problem: the lack of essential services. As a fragile calm has descended in some neighborhoods, concerns among residents have migrated from safety to "quality of life," but the government has not kept up with their rising expectations.[71] In 2007, the national and provincial governments executed 55 percent of their capital budgets (double the 2006 rate), but the Iraqi government has made little headway in improving the delivery of electricity, clean water, sanitation, health care, and other basic services.[72] This failure has been so pervasive that it is producing frustration in both Sunni and Shia communities, putting recent security gains at risk.[73]

Furthermore, in many areas, improvements in budget execution have not translated into significant advances in the delivery of services due to lingering sectarian bias in the targeting and execution of programs.[74] Whether or not the biggest problem is one of capacity or political will, the *perception* that the absence of services reflects governmental bias is dangerous. One U.S. military commander stationed in Arab Jabour, a former AQI safe haven south of Baghdad, warned in March, "The risk in the next six to twelve months

[68] Michael R. Gordon and Stephen Farrell, "Iraq Lacks Plan on the Return of Refugees, Military Says," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2007; and Cara Buckley, "Refugees Risk Coming Home to an Unready Iraq," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2007.

[69] Younes and Rosen, *Uprooted and Unstable*.

[70] Anna Badkhen, "U.S. Army to Baghdadis: Do You *Really* Live Here," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 2008.

[71] Amit R. Paley and Karen DeYoung, "Iraqis' Quality of Life Marked by Slow Gains, Many Setbacks," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2007; and "Iraqis Demand Better Life Amid New Calm," *BBC News*, December 17, 2007, available online at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7147162.stm.

[72] Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2008, March 7, 2008, p. 9.

[73] Flournoy interviews with Sunni leaders in Ameriyah, Baghdad, and Shia officials in Hillah and Karbala, Iraq, February 2008. See also, Alissa J. Rubin and Damien Cave, "In a Force for Iraqi Calm, Seeds of Conflict," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2007; Charles Levinson, "Fallujah Safer But Residents Still Lack Basic Services," *USA Today*, January 23, 2008; Michael Gordon, "In Sadr City, Basic Services are Faltering," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2008.

[74] DoD, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2007, p. 11.

is not [that we will] see al Qaeda's re-emergence but the emergence of another Sunni insurgent group based on frustration due to lack of government support. The government doesn't care about [Arab Jabour] because that was where some of Saddam's people came from."[75]

Sustainable stability will thus require the United States to assist the Iraqi government in developing the capability to execute budgets, as well as American pressure to push the Iraqi government to deliver services more equitably. Currently, civilian-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are the focal point for U.S. capacity-building efforts at the local level. PRTs include a mix of experts from the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), military personnel, the Department of Justice, the Department of Agriculture, the Gulf Region Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and contract personnel. Some PRTs are stand-alone organizations, while some smaller "embedded" PRTs (ePRTs) are integrated into U.S. Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs). There are also a handful of Provincial Support Teams (PSTs) that operate out of bases at the local level in the south-central portion of the country. Currently, there are 11 PRTs, 13 ePRTs, and seven PSTs. These teams work with governors, provincial councils, and provincial representatives of government ministries to help forge linkages and cooperation between the national and local governments. Their primary focus is to improve the management of public finances, the execution of planning and budgeting, and the implementation of projects and essential services using central government funds, although they are also involved in grassroots reconciliation and rule of law efforts.[76] Assuming an adequate security, the PRT mission should continue. Steps should be taken to ensure PRTs are adequately resourced and that their activities are fully synchronized with other capacity-building and development efforts at the local level carried out by the U.S. military and USAID.

At the national level, U.S. capacity-building efforts target central government ministries. Iraqi ministries are responsible (in theory) for providing security and basic services to the Iraqi people, but, across the board, they face immense challenges. Most ministries lack adequate numbers of qualified personnel in part due to the violence-induced exodus of skilled professionals to other countries. They are also plagued by corruption and sectarian bias, undermining the development of a truly professional civil service. Building additional capacity and weeding out corruption and sectarian bias is thus crucial to the viability of the Iraqi state.

Existing U.S. ministerial capacity-building efforts have both short term and long term objectives. In the short term, the goal is to help Iraqi ministries plan programs, effectively spend their capital budgets, and deliver essential services. In the long term, the objective is institution building so that the Iraqi government can execute its responsibilities on its own. The most significant progress in capacity building has occurred in the Ministries of Defense and Interior, but it has been much slower elsewhere. An October 2007 Governmental Accountability Office study suggests that major problems with the U.S. effort include: an inadequate number of advisors; the absence of a single U.S. government entity to provide guidance and integration for the myriad State Department, Department of Defense (DoD), and USAID programs aimed at capacity building; a tendency to prioritize short-term over long-term objectives;

[75] Quoted in International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, p. 21.

[76] Nima Abbaszadeh, et al., *Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons and Recommendations*, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, January 2008; and Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2008, p. 4.

and limited opportunities for U.S. advisors to train and mentor ministerial staff due to poor security.[77]

If the Iraqi government commits itself to reducing sectarianism and corruption, U.S. efforts to professionalize and build the capacity of Iraqi ministries should continue. State, DoD, and USAID programs should be fully resourced so long as they develop and implement an integrated capacity-building strategy in consultation with the Iraqi government. And, where feasible, U.S. Embassy security protocols should be adjusted and personal security details enhanced to facilitate more regular contact between advisors and their Iraqi counterparts.[78]

"If the Iraqi government commits itself to reducing sectarianism and corruption, U.S. efforts to professionalize and build the capacity of Iraqi ministries should continue."

Professionalizing the ISF

Sustainable stability in Iraq will be impossible without a capable and *neutral* Iraqi Army. There are currently more than 180,000 individuals in the Iraqi Army. According to the Pentagon, 77 percent of all formed Iraqi Army units are rated as being able to plan, execute and sustain operations with minimal or no assistance from Coalition forces.[79] In his April Congressional testimony, General Petraeus indicated that this represented more than 100 Iraqi combat battalions.[80]

In recent months, there have been some signs of accelerated progress in Iraqi Army capabilities. The Iraqi Army's ability to move substantial numbers of forces to Basra to conduct successful operations (despite a ragged start that included widespread desertions), and its willingness to take the lead in Sadr City and Mosul, suggest that the Iraqi Army may be starting to find its feet.[81] Still, independent assessments suggest that the Iraqi Army will likely require substantial U.S. assistance—including air and fire support, intelligence, logistics, equipment, training, and leader development—for the foreseeable future even as it takes on greater responsibility for population security.[82]

Furthermore, enhanced Iraqi Army capabilities by themselves are not enough for sustainable stability. The army must continue to evolve into a truly national, non-sectarian guardian of the state that can provide security in mixed neighborhoods and regions and police the seams between rival groups as U.S. forces withdraw. The professionalism of the Iraqi Army has improved in recent years, but some units remain prone to sectarian tendencies.

[77] Governmental Accountability Office, *Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq: U.S. Ministry Capacity Development Efforts Need an Overall Integrated Strategy to Guide Efforts and Manage Risk*, October 2007.
[78] Ibid.
[79] DoD, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2008, p. 33.
[80] Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq."
[81] Stephen Farrell and Ammar Karim, "Drive in Basra by Iraqi Army Makes Gains," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2008; "Iraqi Forces in Mosul Begin Searches for al Qaeda Militants," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2008; and Michael R. Gordon and Alissa J. Rubin, "Operation in Sadr City Is an Iraqi Success, So Far," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2008.
[82] General James L. Jones (Ret.) (Chairman), *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq*, September 6, 2007, chap. 4.

Therefore, as the surge ends, more U.S. military resources should be shifted to training, advising, and support missions through a mix of enhanced military "transition teams" and re-tasking BCTs from a combat to a support and partnering role.[83]

The 30,000-man Iraqi National Police (NP) appear to be much more problematic. Historically, the NP have been heavily infiltrated by personnel with sectarian agendas and complicit in gross human-rights violations.[84] Under pressure from the U.S. Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq, the Iraqi government has made some strides in reducing the NP's sectarian tendencies.[85] But the number of U.S. advisors embedded in the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and NP should be increased to enhance their ability to detect and prevent abuses, and all U.S. support to the MoI should be conditioned on respect for the rule of law. The NP's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions should also be shifted over time to the Iraqi Army.

Finally, security at the local level often rests on the capabilities and behavior of the 275,000 members of the Iraqi police. The quality and ethno-sectarian inclinations of the police vary tremendously across the country.[86] In contrast to national-level security forces, however, the most important issue at the local level is not ethno-sectarian balance but rather confidence that the police will protect the community and not commit atrocities. In some homogenous areas, local police will overwhelmingly be from one ethnic group or sect. This can be comforting to locals who may inherently trust members from "their" group without necessarily being a threat to other communities elsewhere. But to maximize commitment to the rule of law, American forces should continue to be involved in training local police and monitoring their behavior, especially in mixed areas and neighborhoods where sectarian abuses are most likely and most politically consequential.

Accommodation First

Sustainable stability in Iraq requires both political accommodation and improved governance, but, as far as United States interests are concerned, accommodation must come first. Without political accommodation and confidence that Iraqi leaders will not engage in behavior that runs counter to American national interests, helping to build the capacity of the Iraqi state may produce negligible or, in the case of enhanced security capacity, even negative results. Moreover, given competing strategic commitments and growing strains on the U.S. military, the United States also needs an Iraq policy that balances risk at the global level. The critical issue for U.S. policy, therefore, is how best to push Iraqi leaders toward tough political compromises while reducing America's strategic over-commitment in Iraq.

[83] For a discussion of some of the ways to expand transition teams, see James N. Miller and Shawn W. Brimley, *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq*, Center for a New American Security, June 2007, pp. 43–49.

[84] Jones, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq*, chap. 9.

[85] DoD, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2008, pp. 40–41.

[86] Jones, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq*, chap. 8; and DoD, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2008, p. 40.

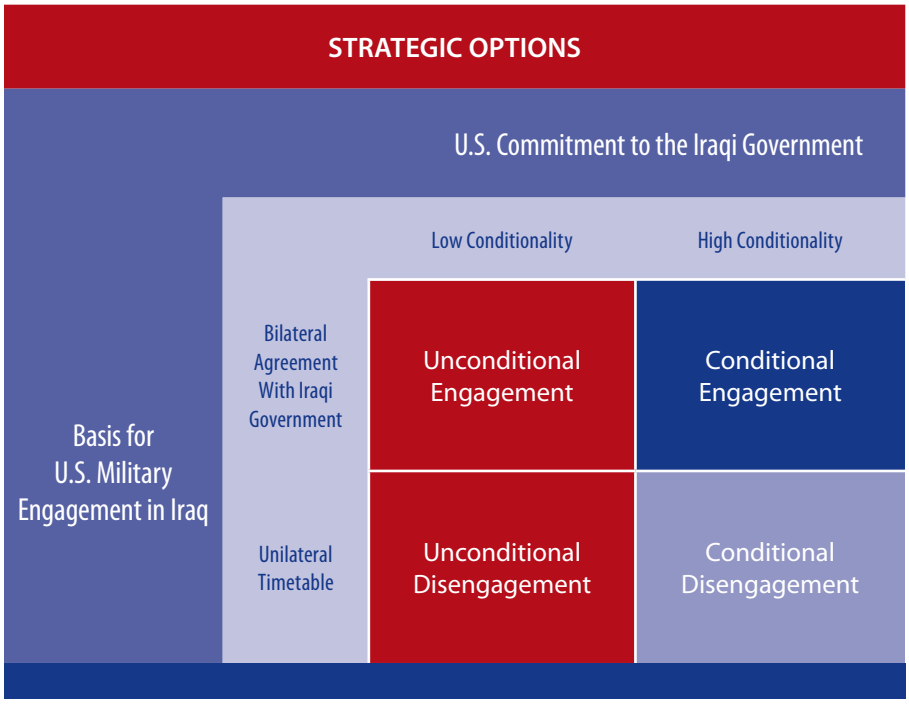
FOUR STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Effectively encouraging political accommodation and improved governance in Iraq will require a new strategy by the Bush administration and its successor. There are numerous ways to characterize the possible range of American strategic options. Figure 6 presents them in terms of two dimensions: one political, the other military. The first dimension is the basis for U.S. commitments to the Iraqi government. Specifically, it maps options based on the degree to which U.S. policy places clear and credible political conditions on the Iraqi government. The second dimension defines policy choices in terms of the basis for the continued engagement of U.S. military forces in Iraq. The U.S. force presence can be determined by a bilateral agreement negotiated between the U.S. and Iraqi governments, or a unilateral timetable set in Washington. This matrix produces four strategic options: unconditional engagement; unconditional disengagement; conditional disengagement; and conditional engagement. None of the four guarantees success; all involve risks and trade-offs. Nevertheless, given the current security and political landscape in Iraq, some options are clearly more likely than others to protect and advance core U.S. national interests.

Unconditional Engagement

One possible strategic option is to continue the Bush administration's policy of unconditional engagement. This approach would keep the maximum available number of U.S. forces in Iraq until circumstances on the ground permit their removal, and maintain a residual presence in Iraq for an indefinite period of time based on a long-term agreement with the Iraqi government. Proponents of unconditional engagement contend that a sizable U.S. military presence may be required for

Figure 6



many years to serve as neutral peacekeepers and "armed mediators." In this role, U.S. forces would continue to police fragile ceasefires and provide population security until the ISF is capable of taking over.[87]

Defenders of this approach, including the Bush administration, argue that the strategy is "conditions-based," in the sense that future troop withdrawals would be based on conditions *on the ground*. But the ground-level circumstances that would allow a significant U.S. redeployment remain maddeningly vague, and the strategy places no explicit conditions *on the Iraqi government* for delivering on steps necessary to move the country toward reconciliation and improved governance. Moreover, while the current Joint Campaign Plan in Iraq calls on U.S. military commanders and diplomats to use one-on-one pressure and tactical conditionality to push Iraqi leaders toward political compromise, this approach often lacks credibility in the absence of conditionality at the strategic level. Indeed, under the current policy, it is unclear that any pattern of behavior would seriously call into question the Bush administration's support to the Iraqi government.

Continuing a policy of unconditional engagement is unlikely to advance American interests at an acceptable cost. The unconditional embrace of the Iraqi government is predicated on the debatable assumption that Iraqi leaders, especially those within the dominant Shia coalition, want to accommodate their rivals and simply need more time to put aside their differences. But if this assumption proves false, there is no mechanism for success. As such, this approach ultimately holds U.S. policy hostage to the decisions made by Iraqi leaders — decisions that are too often rooted in sectarian interests and personal agendas — and it relies on the hope that Iraqi leaders will compromise instead of bringing credible pressure to bear on them to do so. A policy of unconditional engagement in Iraq is thus all carrots and no sticks. Moreover, by requiring a large-scale U.S. presence in Iraq for an indefinite period of time, it risks the kind of strategic exhaustion that plays into al Qaeda's hands, diverts critical resources away from Afghanistan, and leaves U.S. ground forces ill prepared to address emerging contingencies.

Unconditional Disengagement

In light of these and other criticisms, some analysts have offered a diametrically opposed position: unconditional disengagement. This policy would set a firm deadline for the complete removal of all U.S. forces from Iraq. Some who take this stance believe that nothing the United States does in Iraq can be of positive and lasting consequence to U.S. interests or the Iraqis. Others believe political reconciliation is possible — but only if we leave and thereby force the Iraqis to resolve their own disputes.[88]

A policy of unconditional disengagement is deeply problematic. It ignores the very real contribution U.S. forces are making to preventing the emergence of a failed state and renewed civil strife in Iraq. Somewhat ironically, it also shares the flaw of the unconditional engagement approach in offering few incentives for Iraqi leaders to accommodate. While unconditional engagement offers no sticks, this approach offers no carrots. If nothing Iraqi leaders do will affect the pace of an American withdrawal or alter the degree of U.S. support for the government, why would they take the risks needed to reconcile? Under this scenario, Iraqi factions seem much more likely to fall back on their narrow ethnic and sectarian identities and adopt

[87] Stephen Biddle, "Patient Stabilized?" *National Interest*, March/April 2008; and Kagan, *Iraq: The Way Ahead.*

[88] Brian Katulis, Lawrence J. Korb, and Peter Juul, *Strategic Reset: Reclaiming Control of U.S. Security in the Middle East*, Center for American Progress, June 25, 2007, available online at: http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/06/strategic_reset.html; John Podesta, Lawrence J. Korb, and Brian Katulis, "Strategic Drift," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2007; Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, pp. 57 – 76; and William E. Odom, "Rush to the Exit," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008.

parochial self-help strategies aimed at preparing and defending their own communities against their rivals. This is a recipe for a failed state that would benefit AQI and Iran; renewed bloodshed on a potentially massive scale; and cascading regional instability—perhaps requiring renewed intervention by U.S. forces down the line.

Conditional Disengagement

Unconditional strategies of either stripe are likely to fail. American policymakers should instead explore other options rooted in various formulas for making U.S. support to the Iraqi government conditional, mixing carrots and sticks at both the strategic and tactical level in an attempt to incentivize Iraqi leaders to move toward accommodation.

"American policymakers should explore options rooted in various formulas for making U.S. support to the Iraqi government conditional, mixing carrots and sticks at both the strategic and tactical level in an attempt to incentivize Iraqi leaders to move toward accommodation."

Most of Iraq's key political players—including the ruling Shia coalition, many Sunni politicians and tribal sheiks, and the two dominant Kurdish parties—desire continued American support. Others, namely Sadrists and some nationalist Sunni insurgents, resent the presence of the U.S. military and want a time horizon for departure, but do not necessarily want the United States to leave right away if, in doing so, Iraq is left a failed state and they are left vulnerable to their adversaries. In this political landscape, the best way to push groups toward compromises on thorny political disagreements is to establish a broad framework for withdrawal—but also demonstrate a willingness to leave some residual U.S. forces to support the Iraqi government and other cooperating groups if accommodation is reached. Implementing this approach requires a credible threat to abandon allies if they fail to move toward compromise, while providing a credible promise to continue supporting them if they do move in this direction. This could conceivably be done by setting a timetable for withdrawal from Washington or negotiating this withdrawal with the Iraqi government.

The first route would represent a policy of conditional disengagement. Under this approach, Washington would establish a unilateral timetable for the redeployment of U.S. combat forces from Iraq, but reserve the right to pause the redeployment at a pre-determined date, leaving in place a residual U.S. presence and continuing to support the Iraqi government *if and only if* the Iraqis make substantial progress toward political accommodation.[89] This approach is superior to both unconditional strategies. In contrast to

[89] A version of conditional disengagement was discussed by Senator Jim Webb (D-VA), "Iraq After the Surge: Military Prospects," Hearing Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 2, 2008.

unconditional engagement, it provides incentives for the Iraqi government to take responsibility for security and make tough political decisions (rather than simply assuming they will take these steps if given enough time). And, in contrast to unconditional disengagement, it provides some assurances to the Iraqi government that, if they make political progress based on an American-imposed timeline, they will be rewarded with the residual U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic support they desire. This enhances the prospects that Iraqi leaders will be willing to assume some risk in moving toward reconciliation. Outside Iraq, a policy of conditional disengagement also has the significant benefit of reducing the perception of an American occupation, freeing up much-needed U.S. resources for Afghanistan, and lessening the strain on U.S. ground forces.

Nevertheless, while it is better than the first two options, conditional disengagement is still not ideal. Setting a hard and fast timetable for withdrawal is likely to prove too inflexible in the face of changing events and conditions on the ground in Iraq. Moreover, by unilaterally setting a schedule for withdrawal from Washington, it misses an opportunity for U.S. diplomats to leverage negotiations with the Iraqi government (and neighboring countries) over the time horizon for redeployment to more effectively encourage political accommodation.

Conditional Engagement

Although there are no perfect solutions to the U.S. strategic predicament in Iraq, the best option moving forward is a policy of conditional engagement.[90] Under this strategy, the United States would not withdraw its forces based on a firm unilateral schedule. Rather, the time horizon for redeployment would be negotiated with the Iraqi government and nested within a more assertive approach to regional diplomacy. The United States would make clear that Iraq and America share a common interest in achieving sustainable stability in Iraq, and that the United States is willing to help support the Iraqi government and build its security and governance capacity over the long-term, but only so long as Iraqis continue to make meaningful political progress. The premise is continued engagement, not disengagement, but support would not come for free.

[90] Colin Kahl and Shawn Brimley, "The Case for Conditional Engagement in Iraq," Center for a New American Security Policy Brief, March 2008, available online at: http://www.cnas.org/en/cms/?1888; and Cordesman, "The Failed Crocker-Petraeus Testimony and a 'Conditions-Based' Strategy for Staying in Iraq."

Conditional Engagement: Lessons from the Anbar Awakening

The Sunni Awakening began in Anbar province more than a year before the surge. The first experiment with successful tribal cooperation occurred in the fall of 2005 in al Qaim, near the Syrian border, when members of the Albu Mahal tribe took up arms and fought with U.S. Marines against AQI.[91] The Awakening took off in the fall of 2006 in Ramadi — long before extra U.S. forces started flowing into Iraq in February and March of 2007.

Enemy-of-my-enemy logic has dominated Sunni decision-making throughout the war. From the beginning, Sunni Arabs have seen three "occupiers" as threats: the U.S., the Shia (and their presumed Iranian patrons), and the foreigners and extremists in AQI. Crucial to the Awakening was the reordering of these threats.

When American forces first arrived in Anbar, they were viewed as the principal occupier who had turned the Sunni-dominated social order upside-down. Heavy-handed tactics by some U.S. forces reinforced this negative image. Because AQI fought U.S. troops, they were seen by the tribes as convenient short-term allies, despite deep distrust of AQI's foreign lineage and fundamentalist ambitions. Consequently, in the rank order of threats, the United States topped the list, followed by the Shia/Iranians, with AQI a distant third.

This ordering changed in 2005–2006. American forces became more effective and discriminate in their counterinsurgency activities and AQI became more brutal and indiscriminate. Atrocities committed by AQI reached their height in the fall of 2006, when their campaign of murder and intimidation became so widespread and arbitrary that tribes had to defend themselves. Simultaneously, AQI declared the "Islamic State in Iraq," asserting political and economic hegemony over Anbar and other provinces with significant Sunni Arab populations. They demanded women for marriage, forced conscription, enforced harsh fundamentalist social norms, and (perhaps most importantly) started to cut into tribal smuggling revenues. Thus, AQI's status as an "occupier" and threat to both the tribes and to nationalist Sunni insurgent groups dramatically increased.[92]

But while these dynamics were necessary for the tribes and former insurgents to "flip," they were not sufficient. The United States also had to convince Sunnis that Americans were not occupiers — that is, that did not intend to stay forever. Here, the debate over U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in the United States, and especially the November 2006 Democratic take-over of both houses of Congress, played a very important role. In a recent interview, Maj. Gen. John Allen, the Marine Corps officer with responsibility for tribal engagement in Anbar in 2007, said that the Democratic victory and the rising sentiment to leave Iraq "did not go unnoticed. When I arrived in early 2007 they [the sheiks] were still talking about it. They talked about it all the time." The debate sparked by the Democratic victory helped convince the Anbaris that U.S. troops were not staying forever. According to Allen, the Marines from top-to-bottom reinforced this message by saying "We are leaving … We don't know when we are leaving, but we don't have much time, so you [the Anbaris] better get after this."[93]

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[91] Colin Kahl interview with Lieutenant Colonel Julian Alford, Quantico, VA, March 10, 2008.
[92] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, pp. 4, 7, 12–13, 16–18.
[93] Colin Kahl phone interview with Major General John Allen, March 3, 2008.

Consequently, in the rank ordering of threats to Sunni interests, the United States became a distant third behind AQI and the Shia/Iranians. A U.S. Army intelligence officer told the *Christian Science Monitor* last May, "Everyone is convinced Coalition forces are going to leave and they are saying, 'We do not want al Qaeda to take control of the area when that happens.' For them, al Qaeda is a greater threat long term." [94] An insurgent sympathizer interviewed by the International Crisis Group in December 2007 noted a similar concern, and linked it to fears about Iran:

> Why at a certain stage did we choose to side with the Americans rather than Iraqis belonging to al Qaeda or acting in its name? Because we understood that the murder of our religious leaders, our fighters and our people could only serve foreign [Iranian] agendas. We realised [sic] that we couldn't do with al Qaeda and the Americans realised [sic] they couldn't do without us. [95]

Thus, the risk that the U.S. forces might leave — generated by heated political debate in Washington — pushed the Sunnis to cut a deal to protect their interests while they still could. As Major Niel Smith, the operations officer at the U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center, and Colonel Sean MacFarland, the commander of U.S. forces in Ramadi during the pivotal period of the Awakening, wrote recently in *Military Review* "A growing concern that the U.S. would leave Iraq and leave Sunnis defenseless against al Qaeda and Iranian supported militias made these younger [tribal] leaders [who led the Awakening] open to our overtures." [96]

Contrary to Bush administration claims, this process began before the surge and was driven in part by growing domestic calls to withdraw. At the same time, according to Allen, the fact that U.S. troops did not leave immediately allowed U.S. commanders to make the argument to Sunni sheiks that they would be their "shock absorbers" during the transition. In other words, the surge and the threat of withdrawal interacted synergistically: the threat of withdrawal made clear that the U.S. commitment was not open-ended, and the surge made clear that U.S. forces would be around for a while. Together they provided a strong incentive for the Anbaris to cooperate with the United States and turn on AQI.

Moving forward, convincing the Iraqi government to make tough decisions requires following the same logic that drove the Anbar Awakening — leveraging the risk of withdrawal to generate a sense of urgency, while also committing to protecting groups that make tough choices.

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[94] Quoted in Sam Dagher, "Sunni Muslim Sheikhs Join US in Fighting Al Qaeda," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2007.
[95] Quoted in International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, pp. 17–18.
[96] Major Niel Smith and Colonel Sean Macfarland, "Anbar Awakens," *Military Review*, March/April 2008, pp 41–52..

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION: BEGINNING THE TRANSITION TO CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

At the moment, the biggest impediment to political progress in Iraq is the lingering sectarian inclinations of the Iraqi government or, more specifically, the country's dominant Shia parties that seek to run the Iraqi state solely on their own terms. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe political compromise is possible. Because the Sunnis lost the battle for Baghdad in 2006–2007, the costs of ignoring them declined, reducing the Maliki government's incentives to compromise. At the same time, however, American outreach to Sunni tribes and former insurgents alarms the regime—and this very alarm should create more, not fewer, incentives for the Maliki government to reach out if they want to avoid further bloodshed. The events of 2006–2007 have also convinced many former Sunni combatants that they cannot defeat the Shia in a civil war. This is good news because it encourages Sunni groups to shift from offensive, power-centered goals to predominantly defensive, security-centered ones. This should increase their willingness to make a deal and settle for less, as long as doing so does not leave them completely defenseless against a potential onslaught by Shia militias or the ISF.[97] Lastly, although Iraq's Kurdish parties have some expansionist ambitions, their fundamental interests are defensive—they wish, above all else, to maintain their relative autonomy. As long as their basic economic and security interests can be protected or compensated for, accommodation across the Arab-Kurd divide should be possible.

"At the moment, the biggest impediment to political progress in Iraq is the lingering sectarian inclinations of the Iraqi government or, more specifically, the country's dominant Shia parties that seek to run the Iraqi state solely on their own terms. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe political compromise is possible."

The conditions are thus ripe for the United States to push Iraqi leaders toward compromise. But this pressure will only work if the Bush administration uses its remaining leverage with the Iraqi government, and the next administration follows through with a full implementation of conditional engagement.

In its remaining months, the Bush administration must take advantage of ongoing talks aimed at shaping the long-term U.S.-Iraq relationship. One set of negotiations centers around a Status of Forces Agreement delineating the legal rights of U.S. forces in Iraq. A separate Strategic Framework Agreement outlining the general contours of the relationship is also being negotiated. The SFA talks, in particular, offer opportunities to push Iraqi leaders toward accommodation.

[97] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, p. 24.

On November 26, 2007, President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki signed a Declaration of Principles outlining the goals of each party in SFA negotiations. The document clearly reveals the Iraqi government's desire for U.S. security assurances against external aggression, protection against internal terrorist threats to the government, and continued support for the ISF. In the economic sphere, the Iraqi government wants continued assistance in renegotiating the country's debt obligations, encouraging foreign investment, and supporting further integration into international financial organizations.[98] The fact that Iraqi leaders from Dawa, ISCI, IIS, PUK, and the KDP have all requested a long-term relationship and are participating in ongoing negotiations gives the United States a rare and significant opportunity for leverage. In this context, American negotiators should exploit continuing discontent among Democrats in Congress, public dissatisfaction over the war, and the impending presidential election to signal that a SFA will not be politically sustainable unless there is further tangible evidence of accommodation. Given the strong desire on the part of Iraqi leaders to forge a long-term relationship with the United States, this type of pressure is likely to be highly effective. Indeed, to the degree that minimal political progress has occurred over the past year, it can be at least partly attributed to the ability of the administration to play "Good Cop, Bad Cop," using the prospect that the Democratic Congress might force a withdrawal to keep the heat on the Maliki government. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted last April, "The debate in Congress … has been helpful in demonstrating to the Iraqis that American patience is limited."[99]

The presidential candidates from both parties should reinforce this strategy by publicly endorsing the conditions the Iraqi government must meet in order to affect the pace of future U.S. withdrawals and to gain their administration's support for the Iraqi government in the years ahead. This will help send a clear signal to Baghdad. It will also generate public expectations that strengthen the Bush administration's bargaining position during SFA talks now and help set up the new administration for a credible shift toward conditional engagement, once it takes office.

[98] "Declaration of Principles for a Long-Term Relationship of Cooperation and Friendship Between the Republic of Iraq and the United States of America," November 26, 2007, available online at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071126-11.html

[99] Quoted in Ann Scott Tyson, "Gates Says Iraqi Shake-Up Could Aid Reconciliation," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2007.

THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION: FULLY IMPLEMENTING CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

General Petraeus has indicated he is likely to recommend further reductions of U.S. forces levels below the pre-surge level of 15 combat brigades this fall shortly before leaving his MNF-I post to take over U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).[100] Nevertheless, because of the time it will take to redeploy these units and the pressure to keep extra forces in Iraq for the provincial elections, the next administration will still likely inherit a force of roughly 130,000.

Eliminating the "Open-Ended" Commitment to the Iraqi Government

Starting from this level, the new administration should signal its intention to transition toward a support or "overwatch" role by announcing the near-term reduction of U.S. forces by several brigades and signing a formal pledge with the Iraqi government stating unequivocally that it will not establish a "permanent" or otherwise "enduring" military presence in Iraq. Taken together, these actions would signal to the Iraqi government that the U.S. commitment is no longer open-ended while still maintaining enough forces in the near term to prevent a major reversal of security progress.

These steps would also signal to groups strongly opposed to the occupation inside the Iraqi parliament (e.g., the Sadrists), as well as organizations representing the nationalist wing of the Sunni insurgency, that the United States does not intend to stay forever. This might open up additional avenues for bringing them into formal and informal negotiations. Sadr, for example, has long railed against the occupation and demanded a clear time horizon for a U.S. departure, but he also recognizes that an American redeployment will necessarily be a gradual process.[101] Similarly, based on recent interviews with Sunni insurgents, the International Crisis Group concludes: "Although insurgents insist that nothing short of full withdrawal will do, they accept that this inevitably will be a protracted and complex process whose details and modalities would have to be negotiated. Finding ways to show the military presence is not open-ended without committing to a timetable … could help in that regard."[102]

Negotiating Redeployment

Simultaneous with this decision for an initial phased withdrawal, the new administration should initiate negotiations to establish the broad time horizon for the transition of the remaining U.S. forces to a residual overwatch role and establish the conditions for continued U.S. support to the Iraqi government (see Figure 7). Through these negotiations, the United States should aim to transition to a new posture by mid- to late 2010. American negotiators should make clear that, over the long run, the United States intends to redeploy all of its remaining forces as circumstances on the ground permit.

As U.S. forces draw down and thin out, they should shift from the lead in population security missions to a focus on advising and supporting the ISF. At the outset of the redeployment, U.S. troops should begin with a phased withdrawal from more homogenous, stable areas in the north, west, and south, leaving behind a small footprint of Special Operations Forces and intelligence assets to work with local allies to target AQI remnants. A small number of conventional forces stationed in or near these areas may also be required as a quick reaction force. Remaining U.S. troops should then be

[100] Thomas E. Ricks and Karen DeYoung, "Petraeus Expects to Recommend Troop Cuts in Iraq This Fall," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2008.
[101] Visser, *The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South of Iraq*, p. 19.
[102] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, pp. 25–26.

consolidated in the mixed "core" of Iraq (Baghdad, southern Salah ad Din, western Diyala, and northern Babil) where the fragility of current ceasefires, lingering sectarian disputes, and insurgent attacks present the greatest risk of reigniting large-scale civil strife and precipitating a failed state.[103] A sizable portion of residual U.S. forces in the core should be partnered or embedded with, and provide critical enablers for, the ISF. In particular, a more robust advisory effort—through some combination of enhanced transition teams and a re-tasking of remaining brigades to a support role—should assist the Iraqi Army in enforcing ceasefires and securing the fault lines between sectarian combatants. In addition to these roles, residual U.S. forces would serve as a deterrent against genocide and overt military aggression by Iraq's neighbors.

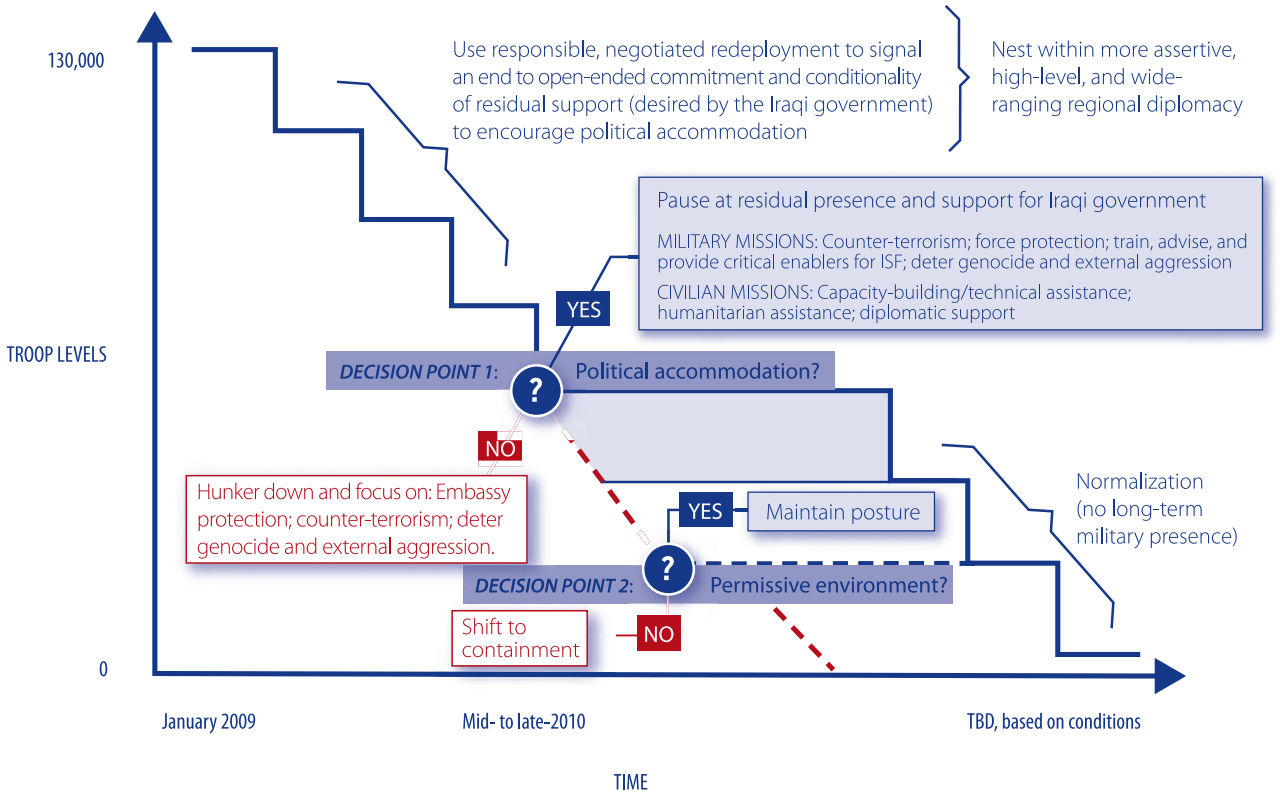
Civilian missions should also continue and, security conditions permitting, be expanded. The focus of the effort should include: capacity building and technical assistance at the national and provincial levels; an enhanced advocacy and mediation role in reconciliation efforts; humanitarian assistance; and international diplomatic support for the Iraqi government.

"Conditional engagement offers the best chance for success in Iraq. Because the phased redeployment will occur over a responsible period of time, this approach facilitates reconciliation under the assumption that Iraqi leaders actually want to accommodate. However, it also provides a means to pressure them if this assumption proves false."

As the pace of U.S. redeployment and the nature of U.S.-Iraq bilateral ties are negotiated, the United States must emphasize that residual military, economic, and political support (all of which the Iraqi government deeply desires and requires) hinge on continued progress toward political accommodation. To enforce strategic conditionality, the negotiations should establish a series of decision points for evaluating this progress and reevaluating the U.S. posture inside Iraq. The metrics for measuring progress should be jointly agreed upon by the U.S. and Iraqi governments and rooted more in process and achieving the desired effects than particular pieces of legislation. Greater conditionality at the strategic level should also be complemented with more assertive conditionality at the tactical level, especially with regards to U.S. military support for the ISF. The administration and MNF-I should establish clear redlines, and only provide critical enablers to Iraqi security operations that are consistent with American interests. Furthermore, continued training and security assistance at all levels should be conditioned on progress toward professionalization and commitment to the rule of law. American advisors and partnered units should closely monitor Iraqi army and police forces and ministries, and the U.S. military should calibrate its support to deter and dissuade human rights violations and sectarian behavior.

[103] The geographic scope of the "core" is open to debate and may change based on conditions on the ground. But based on current trends we expect that U.S. forces would likely concentrate in these areas and not be needed in large numbers in other mixed areas such as Mosul and Kirkuk in the time period considered here.

Figure 7: Conditional Engagement



Conditional engagement offers the best chance for success in Iraq. Because the phased redeployment will occur over a responsible period of time, this approach facilitates reconciliation under the assumption that Iraqi leaders actually want to accommodate. However, it also provides a means to pressure them if this assumption proves false. Nevertheless, prudent policymakers must recognize, and plan for, the possibility that conditional engagement will fail. If, by the time the United States reaches a new overwatch posture, the Iraqis have made substantial progress toward reconciling, the United States should be willing to stay in Iraq for several years to support the Iraqi government and continue capacity-building efforts (Figure 7, "Decision Point 1"). But if the Iraqis prove unwilling to move toward accommodation, then the strategic costs of maintaining a significant presence will likely outweigh the benefits. Under these circumstances, the new administration should consider shifting to a "hunkering down" model of concentrating U.S. forces on a smaller set of defensible bases to conduct a very narrow set of missions that advance U.S. interests, including embassy protection, targeted counter-terrorism operations, and deterrence of genocide and regional aggression.[104] If the security situation is such that even this more limited posture cannot be maintained at acceptable cost (Figure 7, "Decision Point 2"), the administration should shift to a "containment" or "over-the-horizon" model that seeks to limit the regional and global spillover effects from internal strife in Iraq from bases outside the country.[105]

[104] For a discussion of deterring genocide, see Miller and Brimley, *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq*, pp. 37–39.
[105] See Byman and Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover From an Iraqi Civil War.*

Regional Diplomacy

Last, but not least, a policy of conditional engagement must be nested within a wide-ranging and assertive effort at regional diplomacy, including talks with Iran and Syria. Tough and direct diplomacy with Iran is particularly important. After helping "dial up" violence by supporting elements of JAM fighting coalition and Iraqi forces in Basra and Sadr City, Iran then helped "dial it down," brokering ceasefires in both places. This chain of events reveals the depth of Iranian influence with all sides — including not only JAM but also Shia and Kurdish factions within the ruling government coalition — and shows that there is no pathway to sustainable stability in Iraq (or a viable U.S. exit strategy from Iraq) that excludes Iran. Tehran has sought to carefully calibrate strife to increase the costs of the current American military presence in Iraq, and thereby reduce the prospects of both a U.S. attack on Iran and enduring American bases on Iran's border. But Iran's actions have also clearly demonstrated that they have an interest in avoiding a failed state in Iraq by keeping intra-Shia competition from spiraling into all-out civil war.[106] And, as the Maliki government has pushed Tehran to definitively choose sides in the ongoing intra-Shia political contest, the Iranians seem to have (at least temporarily) turned against Sadr.

In a May 14 speech, Secretary of Defense Gates emphasized the need to engage Iran, noting the importance of issuing demands *and* offering incentives for changes in Iranian behavior:

> I think that the one area where the Iraq Study Group recommendations have not been followed up is in terms of reaching out [to] the Iranians… We need to figure out a way to develop some leverage and then sit down and talk with them. If there's going to be a discussion, then they need something, too. We can't go to a discussion and be completely the demander, with them not feeling that they need anything from us.[107]

In this context, a policy of conditional engagement combined with tough regional diplomacy may prove to be a game changer. Providing residual support and assurances to the Iraqi government against external aggression, and continuing to leverage Iraqi nationalism by highlighting Iran's "malign" activities, will help keep the Iraqi government "on side" and prevent a decisive tilt toward Tehran. At the same time, because both the United States and Iran ultimately have an interest in an American departure from Iraq that avoids leaving behind either a failed state or permanent U.S. bases, negotiating a time horizon for U.S. redeployment with the Iraqi government will also help establish the conditions for a potential *modus*

"A policy of conditional engagement must be nested within a wide-ranging and assertive effort at regional diplomacy, including talks with Iran and Syria."

[106] James Glanz and Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. and Iran Find Common Ground in Iraq's Shiite Conflict," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2008; Hannah Allam, Jonathan S. Landay, and Warren P. Strobel, "Iranian Outmaneuvers U.S. in Iraq," *McClatchy*, April 28, 2008; and Peterson and LaFranchi, "Iran's Role Rises as Iraq Peace Broker."

[107] Remarks by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the American Academy of Diplomacy, May 14, 2008. In his recent confirmation hearing to become CENTCOM commander, General Petraeus also advocated diplomacy with Tehran. See Karen DeYoung, "Petraeus: Diplomacy, Not Force, With Iran," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2008.

vivendi with Iran. Through direct diplomacy, the United States would aim to create a verifiable end to Iranian lethal assistance to Shia militants in Iraq in exchange for American assurances that U.S. military forces in Iraq would be drawn down and that the United States would not initiate attacks on the regime in Tehran absent provocation.[108]

Regional diplomacy should also seek to win more support from Sunni Arab states for the Iraqi government, including debt forgiveness, diplomatic support, and greater investment—and here too a policy of conditional engagement would be helpful. For years, the United States has tried to get Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors to embrace the Iraqi government. Yet no Sunni Arab country currently has an embassy in Baghdad (only Bahrain has committed to establishing one), and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the only head of government in the entire region to visit Baghdad since the invasion.[109] Arab states have also failed to follow through on promises to write off Saddam-era debts. Since approximately half of Iraq's remaining $56–$80 billion debt is owed to Gulf states, this creates a significant economic burden and barrier to improved relations. American and Iraqi officials have pushed for a reconsideration of these policies during a series of regional meetings, but to no avail.[110]

Rectifying this situation is crucial to reintegrating Iraq into the region, encouraging long-term stability, and avoiding the kind of regional isolation that promotes closer ties between Baghdad and Tehran. Greater cooperation with Sunni Arab states is also important in reducing support to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. Although the Syrians are widely (and rightly) criticized for continuing to allow foreign fighters to cross over the border into Iraq, most volunteers and funds transiting through Syria actually originate in Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states.[111]

A U.S. policy of conditional engagement will help spur greater regional support for the Iraqi government in at least two ways. First, encouraging the Maliki government to take further steps toward reconciling with Iraq's Sunni population will help allay some of the anti-Shia anxieties driving Sunni Arab states' current foot-dragging[112] (Maliki's newfound willingness to stand up to Iranian-backed militias will also help in this regard.) Second, beginning a phased withdrawal will help end the "free rider" problem limiting regional cooperation. The Bush administration has pushed Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors to counter Iranian influence, but by keeping a large-scale, open-ended military presence in Iraq, the administration is also giving them an excuse not to do so. At the present time, Sunni Arab states are more than happy to pass the buck to the United States, counting on U.S. forces to prevent the collapse of the Iraqi government and check Iran. Only in the context of a phased withdrawal from Iraq and more assertive diplomacy will Iraq's neighbors come to realize that they will have to forge their own ties to the Iraqi government if they wish to avoid a failed Iraqi state and counter-balance Iran.

[108] This would not take all future military options off the table, but it would preclude a strike specifically aimed at toppling the regime.
[109] Leila Fadel, "Visit By Iran's President Shows Depth of Iraq's Divisions," *McClatchy*, March 2, 2008.
[110] Karen DeYoung, "Iraq's Neighbors Noncommittal on Aiding Government," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2008.
[111] International Crisis Group, *Iraq After the Surge I*, p. 9.
[112] Andrew Hammond, "Arab Angst Over Shi'ite Power Underpins Iraq Position," *Reuters*, April 22, 2008.

PLANNING FOR THE TRANSITION TO A NEW ADMINISTRATION

A shift to a new Iraq strategy is only one of the two critical transitions that must be managed in the months ahead. Handing off a war from one administration to the next is, in and of itself, a challenging and risky enterprise. When the next U.S. President takes office in January 2009, some 130,000 American troops will probably still be deployed in harm's way in Iraq, and the conflict will likely remain far from resolved.

Regardless of the course the new administration charts in Iraq, a great deal of thought and effort must be expended *now* to smooth the transition to the next American president. Managing the Iraq War at a time of presidential transition will be a daunting and high-stakes endeavor — one made particularly challenging due to the fragility and volatility of the situation on the ground, the sheer complexity of the dynamics driving the conflict, and the difficulty of getting key Iraqi parties to move toward the political accommodation necessary to underwrite long-term stability.

Even if the Bush administration and the incoming administration differ fundamentally on their policy prescriptions on Iraq, they will nevertheless share a common interest in ensuring that this transition goes as smoothly as possible. Any significant crisis in Iraq early in the new President's term would be characterized as a failure of the Bush administration to achieve sustainable progress in Iraq. For the new Commander-in-Chief, having to deal with an early crisis in Iraq, especially without the benefit of having key advisors confirmed and in place, would likely derail or at least postpone critical efforts to set a new course for the country and define a new national security agenda.

A smooth transition is unlikely if the parties involved take a business-as-usual approach to the coming change of administrations. In most transitions, incumbent officials depart by January 20 and seldom interact with their successors. While they may leave behind transition documents designed to help orient the new team, these typically receive little attention and quickly find their way into the "circular file" as a new administration seeks a fresh start. Meanwhile, only a handful of the most senior national security officials are likely to be confirmed by the end of January 2009. In fact, among recent transitions, the best case was for the new President to have only two dozen of his most senior appointees confirmed by April 1. As a result, transitions usually involve a "nobody home" period in which the President may have his Cabinet in place, but few Presidential appointees below them.

"Any significant crisis in Iraq early in the new President's term would be characterized as a failure of the Bush administration to achieve sustainable progress in Iraq."

Given the vital interests the United States has at stake in Iraq and the broader Middle East, and the imperative to keep Iraq from sliding back toward civil strife and state failure, the coming U.S. presidential transition must be handled differently. Ensuring a seamless hand-off will require an unusual degree of preparation on the part of the executive branch, the U.S. military and the Congress — preparation that will shape the Iraq inheritance and must begin in earnest now.

Executive Branch Preparation

In order to lay the ground work for managing the smoothest possible transition of our operations in Iraq, the Bush administration must give priority to preparation in three critical areas over the next six months: the development of an interagency transition plan; giving both the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates and their top national security advisors deep situational awareness on Iraq; and hand-tooling personnel transitions for senior positions critical to Iraq policy and operations, both in the field and in Washington.

First, the Bush administration should immediately begin developing an interagency transition plan for U.S. operations in Iraq. The primary objective of this effort should be to create and sustain in Iraq as stable a situation as possible and as much momentum toward political accommodation as possible from November 2008 through the spring of 2009. This will be critical to give the new President a chance to get a new Iraq team in place and develop a plan for the future. The transition plan would develop a whole-of-government strategy for achieving this objective, laying out in detail the roles and responsibilities of each of the departments and agencies involved in the war effort. It would also aim to highlight and frame the critical choices that will need to be made early in the new administration and to develop alternative courses of action for the new President's consideration. Importantly, the plan should identify the most critical positions in the field and in Washington that will likely change over, and tailor a hand-off strategy for each one. Furthermore, the plan should identify areas in which Congressional cooperation will be essential, such as expediting the confirmation process for senior officials critical to the Iraq effort and gaining Congress' acquiescence to allow these nominees to begin meeting with their predecessors prior to confirmation, and undertake an outreach effort to gain that cooperation over the coming months.

Second, President Bush should encourage senior members of his administration to reach out to the presidential campaigns in both parties in order to enable the candidates and their top national security advisors to begin to deepen their understanding of the state of play in Iraq, the challenges ahead, and the choices they may confront in 2009. While the Bush administration has begun to make such overtures, and should be applauded for doing so, these interactions should be expanded substantially in the coming months. Such an outreach effort should include in-depth briefings to the candidates and their advisors on the situation in Iraq, current U.S. efforts, and assessments of how the situation may evolve over the coming 12–18 months. In order for this approach to work in the midst of a heated election season, both the administration and the campaigns would have to agree to certain rules of the road: the administration, for its part, would agree to provide identical information and access to both campaigns, avoiding both the reality and any perception of advantaging one side over the other; and the campaigns, for their part, would have to agree not to disclose the information obtained or use it for political purposes.

In addition to hosting an ongoing series of briefings and discussions, the Bush administration should encourage and enable key advisors from both campaigns to travel to Iraq in the coming months to gain an on-the-ground perspective on the situation and to give them opportunities to interact with Iraqi decision-makers and with senior U.S. military and civilian officials in the field. Supporting such travel for the President-elect and/or senior national security advisors will be particularly important in the transition period between Election Day and Inauguration Day.

Third, the Bush administration must pay particular attention to managing the transition of key positions with policy, execution, or oversight responsibility for Iraq, including senior personnel

in country and in Washington. As noted above, identifying the universe of positions that are critical to a smooth hand-off and developing a strategy for transitioning each of these portfolios should be a priority element of the interagency transition plan. In addition, the administration should endeavor to stagger anticipated transitions of key personnel in theater so that the American leadership team in Baghdad does not turn over *en masse*. On the military side of the house, the transition from General Petraeus to General Odierno as the MNF-I Commander appears timed to occur well before the U.S. election. This is beneficial because it will ensure that the new MNF-I commander is well established and ready and able to advise an incoming administration.[113]

On the civilian side, Ambassador Crocker and his senior team should be kept in place until a new U.S. Ambassador to Iraq arrives in theater. This may require asking Ambassador Crocker to delay his announced retirement. Ideally, this transition would include a significant period of overlap to enable the new Ambassador and his senior team to gain situational awareness and be introduced to all the key players in country before taking charge of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Putting a new U.S. Ambassador to Iraq in place — and keeping Ambassador Crocker there until then — should be among the top priorities of both the next President and the next Congress, as it will be absolutely critical to avoiding a costly gap in the U.S. senior leadership team in country at a time of heightened risk. This particular transition should also be seen as a potential opportunity to overhaul the organization of the largest U.S. embassy in the world to make it more agile and responsive to the evolving needs of the mission in Iraq.

The Bush administration should also take pains to ensure smooth transitions for personnel in Washington who are central to the Iraq effort. Specifically, the administration should develop a list of positions with critical policy, execution, or oversight responsibility for Iraq on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, in the Departments of State and Defense, and in other agencies. It should then engage the Majority and Minority leaders of the House and the Senate, as well as the Chairs and Ranking Members of the Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Armed Services Committee, to gain their commitment to an expedited confirmation process for these personnel. It should also direct key elements of the executive branch, such as the Office of Personnel Management, the FBI, and the security offices of various agencies to be ready to undertake fast-track vetting and clearance process for personnel nominated to these positions. Finally, President Bush should personally request that those who currently hold these positions stay on until their successors are in place and work closely with them to ensure a smooth hand-off. In cases where this is not

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[113] If the important position of CENTCOM Commander were not vacant, one could argue for waiting to make this switch until after a new administration is firmly in place. But under the circumstances, it is important to fill this critical theater command job sooner rather than later, and before the turmoil associated with the changing of the guard in Washington begins.

possible, the President should take pains to identify qualified senior civil servants or military personnel to fill these roles as stewards during the transition. On the NSC staff, where senior officials do not require Senate confirmation, the National Security Advisor should invite the new President's picks for key NSC positions on Iraq to begin shadowing their counterparts starting as early as November, so that the new President's own staff will be ready to manage Iraq-related issues on day one.

Some of these measures are unorthodox, even highly controversial—and President Bush and his team should expect to take some heat for implementing them. But these steps are absolutely essential to mitigate the risks associated with a wartime presidential transition, particularly in handing off operations in a place as complex, volatile, and consequential to U.S. interests as Iraq.

Preparing the U.S. Military for the Transition

Presidential transitions are always anxiety-inducing for U.S. military leaders as they anticipate the arrival of a new Commander in Chief, a new Secretary of Defense, and a new team of civilian appointees in the Pentagon. But the coming transition is provoking a particularly high degree of angst among uniformed leaders as the Presidential candidates espouse very different visions for U.S. engagement in Iraq. Typically, the military culture deals with uncertainty by planning for the range of plausible contingencies. But in a politically-charged election season, such contingency planning can be sensitive and difficult.

In this climate, political caution can be the enemy of the prudent preparation required for a smooth transition. It is imperative that the U.S. military begin planning now on two fronts: first, for how best to support stability, security, and political accommodation in Iraq during the U.S. Presidential Transition and into mid-2009 (when the new president's senior national security team should be in place); and, second, for possible changes in U.S. policy on Iraq that would significantly alter the contours of the American military posture there. Planning should be done in the context of a larger interagency transition plan, and should begin right away.

Although planning for potential changes to U.S. policy in 2009 might appear premature or even politically risky, planning for the eventual drawdown of U.S. forces and their transition to an overwatch role is entirely within the realm of prudent military planning given several inescapable realities.[114] First, no matter who wins the election in November, the next President will inevitably preside over further reductions in U.S. troop levels in Iraq. Senior Army leaders have testified repeatedly that the current tempo of troop deployments in Iraq is unsustainable.[115] Consequently, some drawdown of U.S. troops in Iraq is probably structurally pre-determined. Second, as noted above, there is a growing need to rebalance our strategic risk on a global basis. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen recently told Congress: "There is risk that we will be unable to rapidly respond to future threats to our vital national interests."[116] There is growing discomfort with having only one Army BCT ready and available should a new crisis or contingency arise. And there are also growing demands for additional U.S. forces in Afghanistan.[117] Sufficient forces are currently unavailable, and will likely have to be shifted from forces planned for Iraq. Third, the

[114] For a description of what is meant by shifting to a posture of tactical and operational "overwatch," see General David Petraeus' testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 11, 2007.

[115] See the testimony of Army Chief-of-Staff General George Casey before the Senate Armed Services Committee February 26, 2008, and Army Vice-Chief-of-Staff General Richard Cody before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 1, 2008.

[116] See the testimony of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 6, 2008.

[117] Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. to Bolster Forces in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2008: A04.

eventual drawdown of U.S. troops and their transition into an overwatch role, as conditions on the ground permit, is already envisioned by MNF-I's campaign plan as a desirable development in Iraq. Given these realities, it is only prudent for the U.S. military planners in Iraq, CENTCOM, and the military services to begin fleshing out the force requirements and other implications of different redeployment scenarios.

It is also vital that the military flesh out the concept of overwatch itself—what it looks like and what types of capabilities it will require—in much more detail to inform the mix of forces and capabilities the services may be required to provide over the coming year or two. Transitioning to an overwatch posture will involve removing U.S. combat forces from the lead role in population security missions and putting them in a support role, providing critical assistance and enablers to Iraqi forces undertaking those missions. Although there are different models for how this shift in mission might occur, it is clear that a transition to overwatch would change U.S. force requirements in Iraq. Most crucially, it will require the U.S. military to plan and prepare to reconfigure the primary role played by remaining BCTs and possibly "surge" additional advisors to Iraq. As U.S. Army and Marine units hand off control of key areas to the ISF, some residual U.S. forces will likely remain partnered with or embedded within Iraqi units for some period of time to monitor and mentor them, and coordinate critical enablers. These advisors may come in the form of enhanced military and police transition teams. As U.S. forces begin to redeploy, remaining BCTs may also be re-tasked to a support role in which subordinate units within each BCT—battalions, companies, and platoons—are partnered with larger ISF units or provide back-up as quick reaction forces. In reality, any shift toward overwatch will probably involve a mix of these models.

In sum, the U.S. military must begin contingency planning now to implement a drawdown of forces at a tempo and in a manner to be decided by the next president. The services—and the Army in particular—must also start building the capacity to shift toward a substantially enhanced advisory and support mission sooner rather than later should the new administration choose to move in this direction.

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The Critical Role of Congress

Congress has a central role to play in enabling a rapid and smooth transition, and in shaping the Iraq inheritance for the next administration. In the near term, Congress should urge the Bush administration to begin laying the groundwork for the Presidential transition and request that the administration produce reports on its progress in this regard. This could be done by passing a resolution calling on the administration to begin planning and preparing for managing Iraq amidst a presidential transition or through quiet conversations with members of the administration. Such support from Congress could provide useful bipartisan political top cover for the administration to take the critical, but politically difficult, steps described above.

"One of the best ways to reduce the level of risk is to plan and prepare for the transfer of responsibilities in advance."

In addition, leaders from both parties in the House and Senate, along with the Chairs and Ranking Members from key Senate Committees involved in the confirmation process, should meet to discuss how best to expedite the confirmation process for senior officials central to the Iraq effort. These key members and their staffs should develop a plan, in consultation with the current administration and both Presidential campaigns, for reviewing and voting on these nominations as quickly as possible after the inauguration. They should then seek to develop strong bipartisan support for this approach as a way to meaningfully reduce the risks associated with a wartime Presidential transition.

Congress can also play an important role in shaping the Iraq inheritance by providing critical oversight of ongoing SOFA and SFA negotiations, and by beginning to condition U.S. assistance to Iraq on the ability of the Iraqi government to demonstrate progress toward political accommodation on a number of fronts. For example, U.S. assistance to help organize, train, and equip the Iraqi security forces could be made conditional on the integration of more Sunni SoIs into the ISF such that the demographics of the Iraqi military reflected those of the country as a whole. As noted above, this would address a key grievance of the Sunni community and help avoid one of the flashpoints that could cause a return to civil war. As it considers future requests for assistance to Iraq, Congress should seek to condition U.S. funding to Iraq on such concrete steps toward political accommodation.

Summary

Presidential transitions in time of war are fraught with risk. One of the best ways to reduce the level of risk is to plan and prepare for the transfer of responsibilities in advance. The Bush administration, the U.S. military, and the Congress all have significant roles to play in making the coming hand-off on Iraq as steady as possible. In so doing, they also have an opportunity to shape the Iraq inheritance in ways that can help prevent the worst outcomes in Iraq and set the stage for a new way forward.

AN OPPORTUNITY AND AN OBLIGATION

The war in Iraq intersects with vital U.S. national interests, including combating international terrorism, preserving stability in the Middle East, and restoring America's position of global leadership. These interests include Iraq, but also go far beyond Iraq. In order for United States to reorient its focus and rebalance its strategic risk, U.S. policymakers must embrace a broader view that aims to establish sustainable stability in Iraq while lowering, and eventually ending, the large-scale deployment of American ground forces there.

The current policy of unconditional engagement in Iraq should be replaced by one that makes U.S. military, economic, and political support to the Iraqi government conditional on progress toward political accommodation. Accordingly, President Bush must not allow Iraq policy to coast until his successor arrives in the Oval Office. Steps should be taken now in the context of ongoing SOFA and SFA negotiations and the impending U.S. presidential election in November to put more pressure on Iraqi leaders to make tough political compromises. This will help set the stage for a fuller shift toward conditional engagement by the next administration. Simultaneously, the administration, the U.S. military, and the Congress must establish the conditions for a seamless transition to a new team.

In the absence of these policy changes and preparations, the next President will likely inherit not only some 130,000 troops in Iraq, but also a series of unresolved issues and potential crises that place American interests in Iraq, the region, and the globe in jeopardy. The next President — Republican or Democratic — will shoulder the most challenging national security inheritance in generations; this President must do everything possible to positively shape this troubled bequest.

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Center for a New American Security
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Suite 403
Washington, DC 20004

TEL 202.457.9400
FAX 202.457.9401
EMAIL info@cnas.org
www.cnas.org

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1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Suite 403
Washington, DC 20004

TEL 202.457.9400
FAX 202.457.9401
EMAIL info@cnas.org

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