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Future U.S. Security Relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan

U.S. Air Force Roles

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Summary

Iraq and Afghanistan arguably present the most pressing foreign and defense policy concerns for the United States today. Years after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States continues to expend considerable diplomatic, economic, and military resources—not to mention the personal sacrifices of U.S. troops and civilians—on pursuing security and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Much of the focus of the United States and its coalition partners understandably remains on near-term efforts to stabilize the two countries. However, even after more than six years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and more than four in Iraq, there is a lack of clarity within U.S. policy and planning circles and among the governments and peoples of the two countries and their neighbors about the United States' long-term intentions and objectives. Yet it is clear that lasting security and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan are critical to U.S. interests, which include promoting regional stability, ensuring access to resources, and defeating global terrorism. Advancing these interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the surrounding regions will require a long-term role for U.S. military forces, though one that probably falls short of the current military presence. Continued uncertainty about the types of long-term security relationships the United States intends to pursue—and the nature and degree of military presence they imply—can undermine these interests. Envisioning future security relationships in more concrete terms can (1) help communicate U.S. intentions; (2) build U.S. leverage, influence, and access; (3) guide current and future security

cooperation efforts; and (4) help plan future U.S. military activities in the Middle East and Central and South Asia.

Possible Future Security Relationships

Future roles for U.S. military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan will vary depending on a number of factors.

U.S., Iraqi, and Afghan National Security Objectives

All three governments currently share the vision of a future Iraq and Afghanistan that are stable, can manage their own internal security, and are cooperative in the region and with the West. However, the long-term political and security outcomes are uncertain. The United States must be prepared to deal with cooperative states, uncooperative states, and failed or failing states. Each outcome would involve very different threat perceptions and would demand different kinds of U.S. military involvement.

Threats to Iraqi, Afghan, and Regional Security

Even beyond the current security situation, there are several threats for which the United States and its security partners must be prepared. The most worrisome are the evolution of new forms of terrorism and insurgency and the breakdown of central authority and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan due to increased warlordism and sectarianism. Regional actors are further concerned about a spillover of jihadism and sectarian tensions from Iraq and Afghanistan into other countries. Iran also looms large as a threat to U.S. and allied interests in the regions, and its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is of increasing concern.

These threats intensify the need for long-term U.S. security relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan and participation in cooperative regional security arrangements. However, the United States must be careful to form security relationships that are both strong enough to address terrorism and insurgency and bolster partner governments' ability to promote stability and yet restrained enough to avoid inflaming local and regional sensitivities.

Prospects for U.S. Bilateral Security Ties with Kabul and Baghdad

The above analysis suggests that the United States should seek bilateral relationships that help Iraq and Afghanistan become more secure and cooperative with the West, establish credibility while taking local sensitivities into account, reassure regional actors by emphasizing transparency and balancing “hard” (e.g., combat) and “soft” (e.g., humanitarian) power in emerging Iraqi and Afghan military capabilities, and retain the flexibility to accommodate a variety of political outcomes in each country. U.S. bilateral relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan may range from formal defense pacts to strategic partnerships (which emphasize enduring cooperation on a wide range of interests), situational partnerships (which involve more-limited cooperation on specific issues), or minimal security ties.

Given the goals outlined above, an intensified strategic relationship with a cooperative Afghanistan—accompanied by a wide range of security cooperation activities—could serve U.S., Afghan, and regional interests well. A flexible situational partnership may be the most desirable long-term relationship with Baghdad, even in the best case of improving security and an Iraqi government outlook compatible with U.S. interests. A worsening of political outcomes in either Iraq or Afghanistan would call for the United States to scale back—but not necessarily to eliminate—certain security cooperation activities.

Future Roles of U.S., Iraqi, and Afghan Military Forces

The United States continues to employ its military forces in direct operations and in training, equipping, advising, and assisting (TEAA) activities to help bring about stable security environments and cooperative, moderate governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) plays a critical role in these efforts by helping build Iraqi and Afghan airpower and providing effective combat power and operational support to friendly forces. These and other USAF capabilities are likely to be in high demand in and around Afghanistan and Iraq for many years, even after substantial withdrawals of U.S. ground troops.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government and the Department of Defense

The United States must clarify its long-term intentions to the governments and peoples in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the surrounding regions. U.S. promises to stay “until the job is done”—and no longer—do not suffice; neither do “exit strategies” that fix a date of withdrawal but lack a context of future U.S. regional policy. The United States should communicate its vision by defining the types of multilateral cooperation it favors in the region and the bilateral relationships it desires with Iraq and Afghanistan. Below, we recommend specific steps the U.S. government (USG) and the Department of Defense (DoD) should take to clarify and develop their relationships in the regional and bilateral arenas. (See pp. 1–2, 126).

Regional Partnerships and Security Structures

The United States should cultivate a layered regional security framework that emphasizes bilateral and multilateral cooperation on common challenges. Over time, a cooperative framework should provide an attractive and more-stable alternative to the competitively oriented structures that traditionally have dominated the regions’ security environments. The United States should help build upon concepts for regional cooperation on “soft” issues that local actors are already exploring. Moreover, it should continue to encourage regional dialogue about the futures of Iraq and Afghanistan, including how states can encourage positive outcomes in these two nations and how the states might cooperate to mitigate the consequences of less-favorable outcomes. (See pp. 61–62, 127–128).

While the United States may not seek to engage Iran cooperatively in the near term on matters that transcend Iraq, the door must be left open to eventual Iranian participation in any cooperative regional security framework. In this context, for good or ill, Iran is a major player in the regions in which Iraq and Afghanistan are situated, and their bilateral relationships with Tehran will tend to be important shapers of events in both countries. U.S. actions that are seen as aimed at “containing”

or “freezing out” Iran are likely both to fail and to boomerang against U.S. interests in Iraq and Afghanistan. (See pp. 37–41, 127.)

U.S. Partnerships with Iraq and Afghanistan

The USG and DoD should take the following approach to developing long-term bilateral relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan:

- *Seek a more detailed, resourced strategic partnership with Kabul.* From Kabul’s perspective, the existing U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership is vague about Washington’s commitment to that nation. A stronger relationship should be defined with the Afghans that would be based on mutual interests and needs and that would reassure them that the United States has a long-term commitment to underwriting their country’s security and self-determination. Importantly, the parties should emphasize that the strategic partnership (and continued U.S. military presence supporting the partnership) is dedicated to securing Afghanistan, integrating it with the region as a stabilizing force, and helping address areas of disagreement as well as common concerns between Kabul and its neighbors—not attacking neighboring countries. (See pp. 71–73, 128.)
- *Prepare to offer Baghdad a strong situational partnership.* Even if Baghdad is inclined to cooperate with the United States in the long term, local sensitivities may lead to a less visible and robust relationship similar to a situational partnership. Reassuring Iraqis that the United States does not intend to maintain a major military presence in Iraq over the long term and generally clarifying U.S. intentions could mitigate such sensitivities. To that end, U.S. use of Iraqi military facilities should be based on mutual agreement and a common understanding of the security situation. (See pp. 71–73, 128–129.)
- *Offer a wide range of security cooperation activities to governments in Kabul and Baghdad willing to work with the United States.* U.S. planners should link initiation and continuation of specific security cooperation activities and programs to be offered to Iraq and Afghanistan to institutional progress, government behavior, and

the security situation. This approach can provide incentives to the governments and militaries of the two nations to cooperate with the United States and develop along positive trajectories. It can also provide planners with sequenced “waypoints” that help them determine when activities should be expanded—or scaled back in the event Iraq or Afghanistan slide into less-favorable trajectories that lead to outcomes that are less compatible with U.S. interests. (See pp. 79–88, 129.)

Recommendations for the U.S. Air Force

Given the central role that the USAF now plays and will continue to play in Iraq and Afghanistan, we recommend the following approaches to building partner capacity, conducting direct operations, and planning for the future.

Building Iraqi and Afghan Capacity for Independent Air Operations

The capabilities of Iraqi and Afghan forces affect the demands that U.S. forces will face in the future. Just as U.S. ground forces might withdraw as indigenous ground forces gain the capacity to operate independently and effectively, so too might the USAF be able to reduce its commitments as the Iraqi Air Force (IqAF) and Afghan Air Corps (AAC) stand up. *The greater the emphasis on building indigenous air capabilities now, the faster operational demands on the USAF may diminish.* The DoD and the USAF should seek to apply a wide range of security cooperation tools to help the air arms develop institutionally and operationally. The USAF can leverage numerous programs, including International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), the Counterterrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP), and the Air National Guard State Partnership Program.

Specifically, the USAF should take the following steps to building Iraqi and Afghan air capacity:

- *Advocate for increased, sustained resources for higher-priority development of the IqAF and AAC.* Increasing the emphasis on

airpower development will require higher levels of resources. The decision to give high priority to development of Iraqi and Afghan airpower does not rest with the USAF; neither does the USAF control the bulk of the resources that could be applied. USAF leaders participating in DoD and interagency processes should take any opportunity to make the case for an infusion of additional resources into these endeavors. (See pp. 93–97, 130.)

- *In the near to medium term, focus on building Iraqi and Afghan air capabilities that enhance government legitimacy and support indigenous ground forces.* Internal security continues to be a primary focus of all Iraqi and Afghan security services, and the air arms are no exception. Existing statements of Iraqi and Afghan security strategy describe future militaries that independently protect each nation while serving as a stabilizing force for moderation in the respective regions. Over time, an Iraqi Air Force and an Afghan Air Corps can be built that are capable of supporting such priorities and serving as models of national unity in Iraq and Afghanistan. The USAF is helping build their operational capabilities and strengthen their institutions. Initially, planners should emphasize intratheater rotary- and fixed-wing transport and a reconnaissance capability—as they now seem to be doing in Iraq—to support counterinsurgency efforts (including infrastructure and border security) and to enhance central government presence in outlying areas. (See pp. 97–106, 130–131.)
- *Exercise caution in introducing Iraqi air attack capabilities.* These capabilities might be developed to support Iraqi ground units in counterinsurgency operations, and later to support the army in defense of Iraqi territory. The USAF must strike a balance between, on the one hand, the need to involve the IqAF in providing fire support to Iraqi forces, to maintain U.S. leverage, and to retain visibility into Iraqi force planning, and on the other hand, the desire to avoid association with sectarian strife and to discourage Iraqi acquisition of capabilities its neighbors might perceive as “offensive.” The USAF therefore should encourage U.S.-Iraqi interoperability, a common targeting process, profes-

sionalism, and transparency in force planning and training. (See pp. 101–102, 131.)

- *In Afghanistan, help the AAC develop programs for education and basic airmanship.* At the same time, build reliable capabilities for airlifting government officials, Afghan National Army (ANA) troops, and humanitarian aid; evacuating casualties; and conducting rudimentary surveillance. These capabilities should be emphasized more in the near term because they are critical to establishing government credibility (especially in remote areas) and are less demanding in terms of training and equipping than other tasks like close air support and air intercept. (See pp. 102–105, 131.)
- *Ensure adequate plans for the long-term sustainment of IqAF and AAC capabilities.* This task is equally as important as developing the capabilities themselves. The USAF can help Iraq and Afghanistan appropriately equip their new air arms and advise their planners against assembling a “hodge-podge” force that will be difficult to sustain over time. Moreover, the USAF should continue to support the air arms in developing organizations, leaders, aircrew, maintainers, base support capabilities, and a sustainable training pipeline. (See pp. 99, 104–105, 131–132.)
- *Develop security cooperation plans that hedge against less-favorable political and security contingencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.* The USAF is now conducting security cooperation activities that are largely applicable to states that are cooperative; however, because the political and security outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan are uncertain, the USAF must ensure that it can adapt its TEAA activities in the event of less-favorable trajectories. This means identifying security cooperation activities or indigenous capabilities that the United States might need to limit in the event of changes in circumstances on the ground. This monograph provides guidelines to assist in this planning. (See pp. 79–88, 133.)

Direct Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

USAF force elements will continue to conduct direct operations in Iraq and Afghanistan into the foreseeable future. These assets will likely be asked to accomplish numerous operational tasks involving intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance; airlift; close air support; strikes on high-value targets; base support and force protection; and deterrence of external coercion and aggression. However, U.S. ground forces may begin withdrawing well before Iraqi and Afghan air arms are able to operate effectively and independently, leaving the USAF as the main provider of support to indigenous ground forces. To prepare for this role, we recommend that the Air Force take the following steps:

- *Assess the levels of U.S. ground forces needed to support U.S. air operations.* Requirements associated with coordinating operations with Iraqi and Afghan security forces and providing force protection to remaining U.S. assets may be high even after major drawdowns of U.S. ground combat forces. The USAF must work with the U.S. land components to ensure that it can continue to support U.S. interests in Iraq and Afghanistan even after major troop withdrawals. (See pp. 109–110, 112, 133.)
- *Eschew permanent basing in Iraq and Afghanistan and seek mutual agreement on access to in-country facilities.* Generally, the U.S. posture in Iraq and Afghanistan must reflect sensitivity and respect for local sovereignty. Yet the USAF will likely need access to one or two airbases in the near and medium terms in each country to enable responsive and persistent counterinsurgency operations at a reasonable cost in terms of operations tempo and resources. Moreover, as operations with Iraqi and Afghan forces become more commonplace, U.S. airmen will more frequently need to conduct planning, intelligence sharing, and tasking of missions with their Iraqi and Afghan air force and army counterparts at operational bases and in Baghdad and Kabul, not from a distance. The access issue should be negotiated with the governments in Kabul and Baghdad as coequals in the context of drawdowns of U.S. troops. (See pp. 115–116, 133.)
- *Develop contingency plans to prepare for the possibility of alternative outcomes in Iraq or Afghanistan.* The United States and its coalition partners are working hard to propel Iraq and Afghanistan toward security and stability. At the time of this writing, the most worrisome alternative is a failed- or failing-state outcome involving sec-

tarian violence (in Iraq) or warlordism (in Afghanistan). Such an outcome could require a high level of commitment from USAF assets. Airpower may be tasked extensively in such a scenario for peacekeeping or peace enforcement, providing humanitarian aid, protecting safe areas, and deterring outside intervention. In addition, the reemergence of authoritarian or dictatorial governments in either country could place varied demands on USAF assets across the regions. (See pp. 118–123, 133.)

- *Strongly advocate for a USAF seat at the theater “planning table” for operations and security cooperation, and assign the most experienced USAF planners to the theater.* Accomplishing tasks associated with direct operations and the development of indigenous forces requires a systematic approach to planning that involves all components of the theater command. To date, it is apparent from discussions with airmen that the USAF perspective has been relatively absent from joint planning. Improving this situation will require strong advocacy by the USAF leadership. Bringing airmen to the planning table will help ensure that airpower is employed effectively and that development of indigenous air arms receives a high priority. (See pp. 113–114, 134.)

Planning for a Long-Term Role

Given the wide range of important roles described in this monograph, the USAF will need to ensure that it is adequately prepared for a continued high tempo of operations in and around Iraq and Afghanistan. *The USAF should address the implications of ongoing high levels of demand now.* This includes preparing a rotation base to minimize problems associated with high personnel tempo and the emergence of low-density/high-demand (LD/HD) assets. It may involve shoring up manning in certain high-demand fields and expanding programs to increase the area and language skills of U.S. airmen in those career fields that involve training, advising, and operating with Iraqis and Afghans. (These programs would be useful as well over the long term for security cooperation activities in other areas of the Middle East and Central and South Asia.) The USAF should also begin exploring options to secure USAF modernization in the presence of endur-

ing operations and increasingly constrained budgets. As U.S. ground forces withdraw, there is a potential for a sort of “fatigue” to set in after billions of dollars have been spent on OIF and OEF. The USAF could be caught in the middle of this while having to meet other emerging demands in the region and elsewhere. Without adequate resources, USAF decisionmakers could find themselves mortgaging future capabilities to pay for expensive ongoing operations. On the other hand, preparing for and even embracing the Air Force’s essential role in Iraq and Afghanistan will go far toward setting the appropriate context in which the USAF plans and programs its forces in the years to come. (See pp. 134–135.)