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Withdrawing from Iraq

Alternative Schedules, Associated Risks,
and Mitigating Strategies

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*Cover photo: The Iraqi flag flutters as a soldier of the 5th Squadron, 4th Cavalry regiment, salutes during the transfer ceremony of the JSS Ghazaliyah IV security station to full Iraqi Security Forces control in the Ghazaliyah district of Baghdad on February 14, 2009.
Ahmad Al-Rubayel/AFP/Getty Images*

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Summary

In late 2008, Congress asked the Department of Defense to have the RAND Corporation assess the feasibility of two alternative schedules for the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq. Since then, the Obama administration has announced a timeline for the drawdown of U.S. forces. This report accordingly looks at three alternative schedules, one matching the administration's intentions, one somewhat faster, and another slower; judges the risks associated with each; and recommends ways to reduce those risks.

The Alternatives

We consider three alternatives: one in which combat units are drawn down in 12 months, one in which combat units are drawn down in 16 months, and a third one that retains some combat units for 32 months. In each alternative, all U.S. military forces will be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of December 2011, in accordance with the Security Agreement between Iraq and the United States.¹ We assume a start date of May 1, 2009, for all three alternatives.

The 16-month alternative is our version of how the administration's August 2010 goal might be achieved. In addition, we offer two additional drawdown schedules: one faster than the administration's and another slower. We include these additional alternatives to consider the feasibility of altering the administration's withdrawal framework in the event a faster drawdown is desired or if risks to the security of the departing U.S. forces or the Iraqi population require a slower-paced drawdown.

We recognize, however, that the selected schedule will become the basis for personnel and logistics planning. Although attempting to substantially alter the selected schedule once a drawdown schedule has been selected is possible, doing so would likely entail major financial and readiness costs. Abruptly switching from one alternative schedule to another would also have detrimental effects on security and diplomacy in

¹ Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities During Their Temporary Presence in Iraq, signed in Baghdad on November 17, 2008.

Iraq and the region, greatly increasing the probability that some of the risks discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six of this monograph will arise. We did not examine these costs in our study.

The force remaining after the drawdown of combat units varies with each alternative. In alternative 1, the force is referred to as the *residual force*. This force consists of enablers, support personnel, and trainers. Its mission is to advise and assist the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and to protect ongoing U.S. civilian and military efforts within Iraq. In alternative 2, the force remaining after combat units have departed is referred to as the *transition force*. It is composed of advise and assist brigades (AABs) supplemented by additional training, enabling, and support personnel. Its mission is to advise and assist the ISF, to conduct counterterrorism missions in coordination with the ISF, and to protect ongoing U.S. civilian and military efforts within Iraq. In alternative 3, combat units remain through the end of the Security Agreement period, along with enablers, trainers, and support forces.

Alternative 1: Combat Units Depart by April 30, 2010

In this alternative, all U.S. combat units will depart within 12 months of the start of the drawdown (May 1, 2009). The departure of combat units will leave 44,000 U.S. troops, who will subsequently be drawn down. This force will consist of units that perform key enabling functions and training for the ISF as well as the support forces necessary to sustain these forces (to include base support) and support limited ISF counterterrorism operations. This residual force will depart no later than December 2011, a departure date in line with the Security Agreement between the United States and Iraq. The following describe alternative 1:

- **Rationale:** This alternative offers the administration an option to remove all combat units early if desired. Although at present there appears to be no reason to expedite the drawdown in this way, conditions may change: For example, U.S. forces may be needed to support conflicts elsewhere in the world, the Iraqi government may call for a faster removal of U.S. forces in response to a changing political climate in Iraq, or the economic situation in the United States may dictate the need to reduce costs by bringing our forces home early.
- **Planning:** Initiating this plan would normally take 90 days to allow for the necessary planning. However, the planning conducted as part of the current plan can provide for the initial redeployments in this alternative, cutting the lead-time requirement by about 30 days to a decision in early June. Additional planning that is necessary can take place as the initial units begin to redeploy.
- **ISF support:** Under this alternative, the ability to partner U.S. combat units with their ISF counterparts for training purposes will end in April 2010. However, the full, pre-drawdown complement of trainers (3,500) will remain in the residual force through April 2011. These trainers comprise the mobile training

teams (MTTs), and they conduct much of the training of the Iraqi Army. There are 16,500 enablers available to support ISF operations through the end of April 2011; the enablers will then draw down through the end of the Security Agreement period in December 2011.

- **Security:** Because of the short timeframe to draw down all combat units from Iraq in this alternative, the number of combat units available through February 2010 to help secure the Iraqi election process is fewer than in alternative 2.² Compared with 2003, when many U.S. Army support units were not prepared to provide their own security, these units are now better trained and armed to protect themselves. This may reduce the need for U.S. combat units to be present in Iraq to provide force protection to support forces.
- **Unforeseen contingencies:** After April 2010, the ability of the remaining forces to engage in combat operations is greatly reduced. Contingency operations will likely be conducted primarily by the ISF.
- **Leaving Iraq:** Combat units will depart at a sharp pace from May 2009 through April 2010. Once the combat units have departed, the remaining forces will draw down through December 31, 2011. By the end of December 2011, the last U.S. military personnel will have departed and all U.S. bases will have been closed or transferred to the Government of Iraq (GoI).

To mitigate some of the potential risks, the United States could take the following measures:

- Reassign some U.S. personnel from combat units to MTTs and other organizations to train the ISF.
- Base U.S. combat units (e.g., two combat brigades) in a nearby nation, such as Kuwait, to provide a quick-reaction capability. (Understandably, this would require a negotiated agreement between the United States and Kuwait, but if successful, it would provide a good hedge against risks generated by the departure of combat units from Iraq.)
- Shift some security functions and ISF training inside Iraq to contractors.
- Leave behind some U.S. equipment in the combat units for the ISF for training and future operations.

Alternative 2: Mission of U.S. Forces Changes After August 2010

This alternative is RAND's interpretation of the administration's goal to change the mission in Iraq from combat operations to advising and assisting the ISF after all combat units have departed in August 2010. The U.S. force presence will drop to

² By the Iraqi election process we mean the elections in December 2009 through the seating of the newly elected Iraqi government sometime in February 2010.

50,000 troops by that time, and the remaining forces will constitute a transition force. It will consist of AABs and additional training, enabling, and support personnel. The following describe alternative 2:

- **Rationale:** This alternative reflects the essentials of the administration’s goal for withdrawing from Iraq. Our view is that the President is attempting to fulfill his promise to “responsibly remove our combat brigades [from Iraq].”³ Sixteen months is seen by the administration to constitute sufficient time for an orderly, secure drawdown.
- **Planning:** The initial portion of this plan is exactly the same as in alternative 1. Consequently, to execute the initial phase as described in this report would require a decision in early June 2009. The remainder of the drawdown would not require accelerated planning.
- **ISF support:** The ability to partner U.S. AABs with their ISF counterparts for training purposes will continue, almost to the end of the Security Agreement period. The number of trainers remaining in the transition force remains constant at 3,500 (predrawdown levels) until February 2010. Brigades currently slated to replace units in Iraq will be configured as AABs. Therefore, fewer trainers may be required as these units replace redeploying units. The enablers remain at predrawdown levels until May 2010 and then begin to fall off as some of the enabling activities are assumed by the AABs. Because the AABs retain most of their combat equipment, they will also be able to partner with the Iraqi Army for training purposes.
- **Security:** The initial drawdown of 12,000 personnel leaves approximately 12 combat brigades in Iraq in November 2009 to provide security for the December national elections. Further force reductions are then halted until February 2010. This will provide the “robust force” GEN Raymond Odierno, Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I), needs to ensure a safe election process. After August 2010, we assume approximately six AABs will be available in the transition force along with a small number of other security forces.
- **Unforeseen contingencies:** In addition to providing a security force to protect U.S. military and civilian personnel still in Iraq, the AABs can also serve as a contingency force because of their ability to resume combat missions rather easily.
- **Leaving Iraq:** From May through October 2009, approximately 12,000 combat and support forces will depart from Iraq. The 130,000 remaining personnel will stay until February 2010, at which time the drawdown resumes. Once the combat units depart, the military mission will change to assisting and advising the ISF. In this alternative, by May 2011, the total number of troops will have dropped to roughly 35,000. This provides ample time to draw down the rest of the force by

³ Obama, 2009a.

December 2011. The pace of that withdrawal will depend on the situation on the ground at that time.

The drawdown/re-rolling of U.S. combat units from Iraq by September 2010 will have some effect on the security of the remaining forces (depending on the evolving security situation). However, unlike alternative 1, in this alternative, the creation of the AABs retains the ability of the U.S. forces to partner with and train the ISF and provide additional security if required. In addition, the AABs will provide a significant hedge against the possibility that violence could reemerge and threaten the U.S. personnel who remain in Iraq. The risk-mitigating measures described in alternative 1, such as shifting personnel in combat units to perform ISF training and shifting security functions to contractors, are not necessary in this alternative.

Alternative 3: Maintain Combat and Noncombat Units Through December 2011

In this alternative, combat units organized as brigade combat teams (BCTs) remain in Iraq until the December 2011 departure deadline. This alternative adds flexibility by not requiring a fixed date for the removal of combat units and changing the mission of the remaining force before the end of the Security Agreement period in December 2011. Also, it does not require the re-rolling of BCTs at any time in the drawdown process. In addition, the longer drawdown schedule provides more flexibility in sequencing the departure of combat units. With additional time, it is easier to plan for the removal of units from relatively secure areas first.

- **Rationale:** This alternative provides the most flexibility. If some or all of the potential risk factors described in detail in the body of this report come to pass, the retention of some combat units to the end of December 2011 allows the command in Iraq the opportunity to respond militarily. In addition, this alternative provides a better opportunity for the command to sequence the redeployment of combat units consistent with security requirements throughout Iraq.
- **Planning:** As in alternative 1, initiating this plan would normally take 90 days given the estimated planning lead time. However, the planning conducted as part of the current plan can provide for the initial redeployments in this alternative, cutting the lead-time requirement by about 30 days to a decision in early June. Additional planning that is necessary can take place as the initial units begin to redeploy.
- **ISF support:** The ability to partner U.S. combat units with their ISF counterparts for training purposes will continue almost to the end of the Security Agreement period, but at an increasingly reduced number. As in alternative 1, the number of trainers in the force (in MTTs) remains at approximately 3,500 until the beginning of May 2011. Unlike alternative 2, in this alternative rotational units will not be configured as AABs, and trainers will be needed longer. Enablers remain

at their predrawdown level until February 2010, and their drawdown rate starts slowly from then.

- **Security:** The initial drawdown in this alternative is approximately five BCTs with their associated support elements. This will demonstrate to the Iraqi population that the U.S. is fulfilling its commitment to leave Iraq in a more dramatic way than in alternative 2. However, it also means that the number of combat brigades available to secure the election process in December 2009 and through the seating of the new government will be three fewer than in alternative 2. The fact that there will still be three combat brigades in Iraq in March 2011 in this alternative ensures a capable remaining force.
- **Leaving Iraq:** This alternative draws down approximately five BCTs and their associated support personnel and equipment before the Iraqi national elections to demonstrate U.S. resolve to remove its forces from Iraq as agreed. Once the drawdown resumes in February 2010, we assume a linear drawdown through the end of 2011, the end of the Security Agreement period. The remaining nine BCTs will depart at an average rate of approximately one BCT every two months. As in alternative 2, the exact drawdown rate will depend on the security conditions in the country at the time. However, the absence of a deadline for the removal of all combat units except the December 2011 deadline gives the command in Iraq the ability to implement a flexible sequenced redeployment based on the security situation in various parts of the country.
- **Unforeseen Contingencies:** The remaining BCTs in this alternative are not configured as AABs and their mission does not change. Hence they are fully capable of responding to contingencies.

Unlike alternative 1, U.S. support forces, trainers, and enablers in alternative 3 will be less dependent on the ISF for their security because some U.S. combat units will remain until almost the end of the drawdown. The remaining BCTs will be able to continue partnering with the ISF units almost to the end of the Security Agreement period as well. This implies that there will be no need to take the various risk-mitigating steps described in alternative 1. However, with this alternative come the costs of supporting a large contingent of U.S. forces in Iraq for longer than in alternatives 1 and 2. It also incurs the opportunity costs of not being able to use the forces elsewhere.

Also, the maintenance of a large U.S. force in Iraq through the summer of 2011 may lead some Iraqis to conclude that the United States is continuing its occupation of the country. Therefore, a risk mitigation step in this alternative could be to develop an information campaign to explain why U.S. combat units are remaining through the full Security Agreement period.

Additional Drawdown Factors

We next focus on the other factors that must be considered in implementing any drawdown plan. These include such procedural issues as unit rotation schedules, the phasing of the drawdown, and the geographical sequencing of unit withdrawal. In addition, we describe the evolution of the ISF, and how the outcome of the Security Agreement referendum might affect the U.S. drawdown.

Unit Rotation Schedules

To the extent possible, the drawdown in each of our alternatives would be accomplished through the non-replacement of redeploying units. This is what is contemplated by the MNF-I as it plans its drawdown. To a large degree, the pattern has been to rotate the entire military force in terms of units about every 12 months. However, the drawdown and the overall U.S. military presence differ from rotating units in and out of Iraq. Units take only part of their equipment to the theater, receiving the rest in Iraq from a pool of equipment referred to as Theater Provided Equipment (TPE), which remains in Iraq. This equipment will have to be withdrawn in any drawdown. If a unit redeploying is not to be replaced, then all of its equipment will have to be removed, creating a considerable burden on the logistics system.

Sequencing the Drawdown

The sequencing of the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq needs to take into account the varying security levels around the country. The tension between the GoI and the quasi-independent Kurdish northern portion of the country suggests that U.S. forces should depart at a somewhat slower rate from that region. Similarly, due to the criticality of Baghdad, U.S. forces should depart the capital at a slower rate compared with other portions of the country. However, given the fragile peace in most of the country, the MNF-I must remain flexible enough to respond to a changing security situation. The report includes a proposed sequence, summarized below, based on current security conditions. All alternatives discussed above should take sequencing into account as the combat units draw down, but alternative 3 provides the commanders on the ground the most flexibility.

Status of the Iraqi Security Forces

Two Iraqi organizations are central to Iraq's ability to establish a stable and secure country: the Iraqi military and the National Police (NP). Therefore, the projected improvement in their proficiency in the months leading up to December 2011 is central to the drawdown schedule for U.S. forces engaged in training these forces. As of December 2008, approximately two-thirds of the Iraqi Army was at the upper levels of readiness. The NP's overall readiness is significantly lower. Several factors can affect the pace of

improving and maintaining ISF readiness: the number of U.S. trainers, the presence of U.S. combat units and enablers, and the rate at which the forces improve.

The Security Agreement Referendum

The Security Agreement allows for a popular referendum to endorse its terms; the target date for holding this referendum is July 2009. Were the agreement to be rejected, U.S. forces would be obliged to withdraw within 12 months. This would undercut the deliberate planning envisioned by the MNF-I for the drawdown and eventual complete withdrawal of U.S. forces, and it would obviate all three of the alternative drawdown schedules presented above. It would also drive the command into an intensive withdrawal process that is barely attainable under the best of circumstances. However, interviews with Iraqi and MNF-I officials indicate that the prospect of the Security Agreement referendum being defeated—or even taking place at all—is low for three reasons: (1) a legislative framework has to be developed for the referendum to take place, (2) even if the referendum is held, there is no indication that the agreement would be rejected, and (3) even if the referendum is held, it would likely be delayed by at least several months, during which time the command would be moving forward with its own withdrawal preparations so that the 12-month deadline would be that much less demanding.

Logistics Considerations

To determine the feasibility of each of the alternative drawdown schedules, we estimated the amount of time it would take to redeploy U.S. military forces and their equipment from Iraq onto ships for movement out of the region. We also estimated the amount of time it would take to close or transfer bases. This entailed determining how much has to be moved, the redeployment throughput capacity and routes, and the time required to complete base closure. To mitigate timeline risk, especially where alternatives are just barely feasible, we also developed some risk-mitigation actions that would reduce the risk of bottlenecks developing and, in some cases, could increase the speed of withdrawal, if desired.

Drawdown consists of two major elements: the movement of units and their equipment out of Iraq and the closure of bases. Some contract support personnel and their equipment will likely be drawn down as the combat units withdraw, but there is flexibility in the degree to which this needs to occur by the combat unit drawdown target dates. It will also be economical to donate some or perhaps much of the contractors' government-owned equipment. Thus, the alternatives create two overlapping phases: (1) the redeployment of combat units and associated support units and (2) the redeployment of units and the closure (or transfer) of bases. The requirements for "phase 1" activities are more immediate and need to be started sooner. These activities are very demanding and may involve bottlenecks.

The redeployment of units consists of moving equipment and personnel and preparing them for transit out of the region. We further divide moving unit equipment, including items procured specifically for current operations, into the following two broad categories: (1) military vehicles and (2) all other items, most of which are transported in containers. Capacity for moving units out of Iraq appears to be sufficient for each of the three alternatives. However, the aggressive portions of the drawdown schedules (or of any other compressed drawdown plan) require very high-capacity utilization. With high-capacity utilization, very small amounts of process variability or disruptions can create delays. Generally, there are three ways to increase or “protect” capacity for redeploying units:

- actions that either increase capacity or provide low-cost ways to help ensure assumed capacity is achieved
- actions that reduce demands for transportation and on base closure or that shift movement from peak periods to smooth out workload
- actions that shift demand from military convoys and processing facilities to alternative modes, providers, and routes.

Although redeploying units from Iraq presents a large, demanding logistics problem requiring significant resources, logistics capabilities are unlikely to constrain operational and strategic drawdown planning with respect to the flow of forces out of Iraq provided that a decision to draw down combat units is made at least a year before the withdrawal deadline. While all three alternatives are logistically feasible, any further delay in the start of a fast-paced redeployment schedule later than February 2010 for alternative 2 will make the achievement of the August 2010 deadline doubtful. However, to hedge against logistics execution risk, there is a wide variety of options across the three categories just mentioned either to increase capacity or to ensure that process-throughput capabilities meet expectations. Only one of these mitigating actions, however, “self-redeployment” of units, could allow for a couple of additional months of delay in initiating a large-scale drawdown alternative while preserving the ability to keep the August 2010 target date for the withdrawal of combat units.

Large base-closure and transfer requirements could impose a long-lead requirement on overall drawdown planning. But closing or transferring large bases should—given early enough start dates—be possible within both the timeframe called for in the Security Agreement and any other timeframes the administration and the military have publicly discussed.

Stability and Security Issues

Three principal categories of dangers may threaten Iraq's internal security and stability during and after the drawdown of U.S. forces:

- extremists, who reject the emerging political order and would use violence to drive Iraq back into chaos
- mainstream armed opposition groups, who now participate in the political order but have the capability and may be tempted to turn to force to gain political advantage and control of resources
- politicized ISF, characterized by the GoI's growing heavy-handedness and potential use of the ISF to crush political rivals or a coup.

U.S. drawdown plans and risk-mitigation policies should focus primarily on keeping the major actors in the political process and preventing them from wanting to use force rather than on the more likely but less important threats of extremism and terrorism. The U.S. government will need to make a sober assessment of the ways in which the GoI and the ISF could play harmful as well as helpful roles in improving security and stability in Iraq.

Extremists have been weakened politically and militarily but will likely continue to attack U.S. forces and others. Less likely but far more consequential is the risk that one or more of Iraq's main factions may abandon peaceful political pursuit of goals in favor of violence. U.S. withdrawal of combat units could make this more likely insofar as opposition groups see greater opportunity or need to resort to force, especially if the ruling regime and its forces continue to grow in power. However, this problem may not disappear by December 2011, and the United States should be prepared to maintain its honest broker/mediator role without a large military force on the ground.

A more authoritarian GoI, with a more muscular ISF as its partner, puppet, or puppet-master, would likely be resisted by militias tied to the Sunni, the Kurds, and excluded Shi'a political factions. The resumption of armed resistance on the part of the Sunni or stepped-up encroachment by the Kurds could spawn greater concentration and abuse of power by ruling Shi'a parties. The likelihood of the ISF being used to oppress or coerce the Sunni population is mitigated by both the fact that the ISF are mixing ethnic groups (at least Sunni and Shi'a Arabs) in their major formations and the fact that most of the experienced officers are Sunni. This should act as a brake on the ISF coercing the Sunni minority and provoking a violent response. While not likely, a spiral of more-violent opposition and harsher authoritarianism could imperil Iraq's new order and important U.S. interests.

The likelihood and severity of extremist violence is, for the most part, insensitive to the speed of the U.S. drawdown. In contrast, because U.S. forces have helped to moderate the behavior of the main opposition groups and their forces—i.e., al-Sadr and Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), the Sunni and the Sons of Iraq (SoI), and the Kurds and

the *Peshmerga*—and of the GoI and the ISF, the speed of combat force withdrawal could affect the decisions and actions of these organizations. Moreover, because these actors control significant armed power, the decision to pursue violence by one or more of them would be more consequential for Iraq's security and U.S. interests than would extremist violence. It follows that drawdown planning should be shaped by how the drawdown could affect these actors' choices.

Rapid withdrawal of combat units would likely not increase the danger of JAM violence because al-Sadr is substantially weakened politically and JAM itself is already overmatched by the ISF; under these conditions, reverting to violence would entail major costs. It follows that a rapid withdrawal of combat units from predominantly Shi'a areas would not markedly increase insecurity and instability in these parts of Iraq. Moreover, early withdrawal from the Shi'a south could be welcomed by al-Maliki and al-Da'wa, who could claim yet another success. Finally, with a moderate to high risk of direct attack on U.S. forces in areas where Iranian-supported Special Groups operate, and given the fact that the U.S. "occupation" is one of the rallying points for opposition groups, there could be security and political advantages in the early departure of U.S. combat units.

A slower withdrawal would be indicated for Sunni and mixed-Arab areas. The SoI trust the U.S. military more than they do the GoI and the ISF. A rapid U.S. departure could make them feel, and actually be, vulnerable to government neglect or oppression. Moreover, assuming that the Sunni realize that the ISF are steadily gaining a fighting advantage over Sunni fighters, they will be less inclined to resort to force with the passage of time. U.S. forces could leave western Iraq, which is largely Sunni, fairly rapidly without endangering stability. A more gradual departure of U.S. forces from mixed Sunni-Shi'a areas could provide the time needed to settle the future of the SoI, continue to promote Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation, and leave the ISF better positioned to counter a new insurgency. The most important of these mixed-Arab areas are Baghdad and its belts. A small number of U.S. forces should remain in those areas for some time.

The greatest threat to stability would be an Arab-Kurdish conflict, which could arise from a potentially dangerous combination of unsettled issues. The status of Kirkuk is still contentious. The Kurds regard this important city and oil-rich region to be traditionally part of their territory. Continued Kurdish encroachment into this and other contested areas could lead to conflict that could be started by an incident that, though minor itself, unleashes a chain of uncontrollable events and eventually leads to conflict. Tensions could rise to a dangerous level if the Kurds are marginalized in the GoI and in the ISF. A Sunni-Shi'a Arab alliance that manifests itself in a federal government that excludes Kurdish parties or in a de facto exclusion of Kurds from ISF units outside of the Kurdish region could create conditions for conflict over the contested areas. If the Kurds also conclude that their military position relative to the ISF will deteriorate, eventually leaving Kurdistan vulnerable, they could deduce that the next few years

present the best, and last, opportunity to secure the long-term freedom, safety, and prosperity of Iraqi Kurds, including by obtaining Kirkuk and other disputed areas. The departure of U.S. forces from contested areas in the north could leave the Kurds feeling less secure yet less constrained. Accordingly, maintaining significant U.S. forces in this area for some time, while transitioning to an embedded presence, would be prudent.

Although violent extremists, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Special Groups, have been too weakened to derail Iraq's political process, they can be expected to threaten departing and remaining U.S. military and civilian personnel during the drawdown. Both groups would like to be able to claim that they caused the United States to retreat. The AQI threat is likely to be concentrated in Mosul and southward through Baghdad and to take the form of suicide bombings. The Special Group threat is likely to be concentrated in Baghdad and southward through Basra and to take the form of attacks involving improvised explosive devices, rockets, mortars, or small arms.

This analysis of Iraq's internal security and stability suggests a time-tailored withdrawal: first from the Shi'a south and the Sunni west; then from the mixed center in and around Baghdad, leaving a few forces in key areas; and finally from the contested north and the few places in Baghdad where forces remain. Maintaining a presence through either embedded personnel or a stand-alone entity to act as honest broker and mediator will likely prove more critical in the north than maintaining large numbers of combat forces. Arguably, combat forces play a more critical role in contested areas around Baghdad, and in Mosul (due to the lingering AQI presence); nonetheless, they must be out of Iraqi cities by mid-2009. Maintaining some forces as a deterrent in mixed areas until the new government is established seems wise.

This analysis suggests that forces in the south and west could be extracted as soon as feasible. Forces in and around Baghdad and Iraq's north could be extracted gradually, with the pace governed to some extent by events such as continued Sunni-Shi'a (SoI-GoI) progress. When combat units are removed from the center and the north in particular, a significant training and advisory mission should replace them. Non-combat forces would remain through the Security Agreement timeframe (and perhaps longer if the Iraqis so desire).

Regional Issues

Our analysis focuses on five of Iraq's regional neighbors with respect to how the withdrawal might affect them and vice versa: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and Israel. The first four play the largest roles in their ability to affect the withdrawal positively or negatively. Although Israel is not a major player with respect to the drawdown, its regional actions and the effect of the drawdown on Iran's regional role will affect broader U.S. regional interests.

Jordan and Kuwait also border Iraq, but we did not single them out for analysis because neither of these countries has the level of capability or motivation to intervene in Iraqi affairs that is possessed by the other four states. To the extent that they do possess these capabilities or motivations, we expect such intervention to largely align with U.S. interests. That said, because the drawdown can exacerbate the Iraqi refugee challenge within Jordan, we consider that aspect of the drawdown's effect on Jordan in our discussion of mitigation measures.

Taking our analyses of individual countries into account, we arrive at the following summary conclusions for U.S. withdrawal in general, and not for individual withdrawal alternatives.

The withdrawal's effect on the region need not harm U.S. interests. While the Middle East will continue to face a number of serious challenges in the wake of the U.S. drawdown from Iraq, many of these challenges will either have existed or grown with the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq or have existed independently of a U.S. presence in Iraq. Moreover, the withdrawal's effect on key regional challenges, such as the spread of terrorism, is likely to be marginal. A U.S. drawdown may even improve the prospects for more-extensive regional and international cooperation on counterterrorism efforts. It could also enhance the development of a regional security structure that could, in time, reduce the requirement imposed on the United States to provide security. The withdrawal could also improve the prospect of garnering greater regional support, particularly from wealthy Gulf states, to contribute more resources to promote Iraqi stability and to support international organizations assisting with the Iraqi refugee populations.

Overt military intervention by Iraq's neighbors (except Turkey) is less likely than covert, unconventional, or political efforts to exert influence. To the extent that destabilizing scenarios in Iraq lead Iraq's neighbors to intervene, we find an important distinction between the types of intervention we can expect. While a Turkish intervention, if it occurred, would likely be overt, conventional, and specific to the Kurdish question, the other three critical actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) are more likely to intervene in a manner that is covert, unconventional, and more broadly aimed at cultivating general influence within Iraq.

The nature and future evolution of the GoI and the political reconciliation process in Iraq are more critical than effects produced by the drawdown. The most critical factor in shaping future regional calculations toward Iraq has much less to do with the U.S. drawdown than with how the Iraqi system itself evolves. If the Iraqi state is viewed as developing along sectarian lines with a government in Baghdad dominated by Shi'a, this will likely antagonize the Sunni states that border Iraq. At the same time, if Iraq were to be seen as remaining very much subject to U.S. influence, this would antagonize the Iranians and increase their determination to meddle in Iraq. Consequently, the evolution of a politically inclusive yet independent and nationally oriented Iraq that is stable enough to maintain internal security but not strong enough to threaten

its neighbors again will be most conducive to (1) maintaining a balance of influence within the region and (2) reducing the risk of external intervention. Promoting such a balance will be a central consideration for U.S. security assistance to the Iraqi state.

The consequences of a U.S. drawdown from Iraq are understandably viewed by Iraq's neighbors primarily through their own domestic prisms. The Kurdish risk is a problem because of the significant Kurdish population in Turkey; to a lesser degree, Iran and Syria see the Kurds as a potential risk to their own domestic stability. Similarly, concerns over the spread of sectarianism worry Arab neighbors because of minority (or, in some cases, majority) Shi'a populations in their own countries that are perceived as a challenge to ruling regimes and thus are often marginalized and repressed, whether in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia or in small Gulf states, such as Bahrain.

Continued U.S.-Iranian hostility will significantly increase the costs and risks associated with drawdown, particularly if the hostility intensifies. Given Iranian interests in Iraq, a successful U.S. drawdown and a stabilizing outcome for Iraq are more likely to benefit from cooperation or coordination with the Iranians as opposed to their active opposition. Iran has at times during the U.S. occupation sought to use levers within Iraq—including lethal force—against the United States. This occurred primarily during periods of high tension between the United States and Iran. It is worth attempting to reduce such tensions through a U.S.-Iranian engagement process with the aim of inducing Iran to support a reduction of violence in Iraq and the maintenance of stability. There is no guarantee that Iran would cooperate, although it might do so if it believes it would gain influence by assuming the role of a protector of Shi'a interests. Such an engagement process would have to take place across the full range of U.S.-Iranian issues. It is most unlikely that Iran would cooperate with the United States in Iraq if other elements of the relationship were still at a high level of tension, or if Iran perceived itself to be under imminent threat (e.g., from Israel).

In any event, uncertainties about regional security on the part of U.S. friends and partners, notably Israel and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, call for the continued presence of U.S. military and other assets in or near the region for the purpose of providing security reassurance and (possibly) security guarantees. In addition, the U.S. departure from Iraq may provide an opening to launch new cooperative forums and a new security structure for the Persian Gulf region, although such efforts would be difficult to implement and would require significant investment by the United States and other Western countries.

Major Findings

This report contains many detailed observations on areas related to the three alternatives for the drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq. Here, we list the major findings we drew from our analysis:

- **Drawdown timelines.** The United States can meet the drawdown timelines for the April 30, 2010, August 31, 2010, and December 31, 2011, drawdown dates. There are logistical risks associated with the April 30, 2010, and August 31, 2010, deadlines that can be mitigated.
- **Arab-Kurdish armed conflict.** The greatest threat to Iraqi stability and security comes from an Arab-Kurdish armed conflict over contested areas.
- **Iran.** Iran has limited but significant potential and incentive to destabilize Iraq, regardless of the timing of U.S. withdrawal. Its actions will be significantly influenced by the overall state of U.S.-Iranian relations.
- **The ISF.** The development, professionalism, and accountability of the ISF are critical to the country's long-term stability.
- **Reconciliation and development.** The success of the U.S. drawdown will require continued efforts, by the United States and others, to promote reconciliation and development within Iraq.

Recommendations

As part of our analysis, we identified measures that would smooth the drawdown of U.S. forces or mitigate some of the potentially detrimental consequences of the drawdown discussed in the report's chapters. We group those consequences into three risk categories: (1) risks to U.S. forces during the drawdown, (2) risks to Iraqi security and stability resulting from the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and (3) risks to regional political and military stability. The body of the report describes ways to mitigate a number of related issues (e.g., refugees, populations at risk). Below, we summarize mitigation measures in the form of recommendations focused on issues that pose the most risk in the three categories just described.

Arab-Kurdish Conflict

The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG's) aspirations for greater autonomy and its desire to incorporate more territory into the KRG endanger Iraq's unity and could spark serious internal conflict or provoke a response from one of Iraq's neighbors. The future status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories presents the most serious threat to internal stability in Iraq. These issues are unlikely to be fully resolved by 2011, and this area is therefore likely to remain a dangerous flashpoint after the last U.S. troops depart. Consequently, we recommend

- phasing the withdrawal of combat units so that those nearest the contested areas are the last to leave. The United States must be careful not to create false expectations among Kurdish leaders that U.S. troops might remain after December 31, 2011.

- exploring the possibility of a UN peacekeeping or military observer force moving into the Kirkuk/Arab border areas once all U.S. troops depart.
- coordinating diplomatic strategies for the region with Turkey and, if possible, Iran and Syria.

Iranian Subversion

Iran, operating largely through client organizations or operatives in Iraq, has the capability to cause considerable mischief. Whether it has the wish to do so remains a question. In many ways, its interests in Iraq align with those of the United States, and it is not clear that Iran would wish to delay the U.S. withdrawal in any case. Consequently, we recommend that the United States

- ameliorate this issue by opening a dialogue with Iran, perhaps making bilateral relations contingent on Iranian behavior in Iraq
- increase its surveillance of Iranian-supported groups in Iraq and bolster efforts to disrupt Iranian clients in Iraq by stemming the flow of money to them.

The Sons of Iraq Return to Violence

The SoI were instrumental in reversing the spiral of violence in Sunni areas and at one point numbered about 100,000 fighters. They remain numerous and well equipped. Should the SoI become frustrated with the rate and degree to which they are being incorporated into Iraqi society, they have the potential to cause serious destabilization in Iraqi society. Consequently, we recommend that the United States

- employ diplomatic efforts aimed at ensuring that the GoI meets its commitments vis-à-vis the SoI
- seek ways to train the SoI and provide them new economic opportunities
- work with the GoI to forestall any destabilizing local measures, such as forced disarmament or local discrimination in housing or other benefits.

The Iraqi Security Forces

In many ways, the future of Iraq rests on the skill of its security forces, particularly the Army and the NP. If they are unable or unwilling to preserve the gains made in security and stability, the country could slide back into chaos. While these forces are much improved, they still have serious shortcomings, especially in such enabling capabilities as long-range fires and air support and logistics. Consequently, we recommend that the United States

- keep the U.S. personnel embedded with Iraqi security organizations in the country for as long as possible

- encourage the Iraqi Army to transfer its operations centers to the Iraqi police organizations so that they can assume the internal security duties that are properly their responsibility
- consider recasting its rules on foreign military sales so that the Iraqis do not have to deliver full payment up front, at least as long as oil prices remain low
- consider increasing funding for Iraqi officers to train in the United States as a way of improving the professionalism of Iraqi military leaders
- encourage the Iraqi Army to shift some of its forces from combat units to logistics to begin development of the supply capabilities it sorely needs.