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Security in Iraq

A Framework for Analyzing Emerging
Threats as U.S. Forces Leave

David C. Gompert, Terrence K. Kelly, Jessica Watkins

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

A critical question surrounding the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq is Iraq's internal security and stability. Although the U.S. withdrawal plan is designed with care to avoid weakening Iraq's security, the end of U.S. occupation may alter the strategies of the main Iraqi political actors, each of which has enough armed power to be able to shatter Iraq's domestic peace. In view of the potential for insecurity in Iraq, the United States cannot afford to take a passive or reactive stance. To anticipate dangers and act purposefully, U.S. policy-makers need a dynamic analytic framework with which to examine the shifting motivations and capabilities of the actors that affect Iraq's security. This monograph offers such a framework.

Because the vantage point for this framework is U.S. interests, it is important to define them. We distinguish between the safety of Americans (civilians and troops) and other U.S. interests, which include Iraq's unity; its economic and democratic development; security of and access to energy resources in Iraq and the Persian Gulf; containment and defeat of violent jihadism; peace between Iraq and its neighbors, including Iran and Turkey; and U.S. standing in the Middle East and the Muslim world.

The prospects for these U.S. interests in Iraq are better now than they have been since the occupation began in 2003. By every measure, Iraq has become more secure and stable following its paroxysm of violence in 2006–2007. Over the past two years, most Sunni tribes have turned against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the U.S. troop surge has helped curb sectarian killing in Baghdad, Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi

Army (Jaish al Mahdi, or JAM) has observed a cease-fire, and Iraqi security forces with U.S. support have suppressed militant Iran-backed Shi'a special groups (SGs). The main political factions—Sunni, Kurd, and Shi'a—have largely, though not irrevocably, eschewed violence in favor of political engagement to pursue their agendas, even cooperating to confront their common concerns, including extremist terror. While the thirst of extremists (e.g., AQI and SGs) for violence against Americans and fellow Iraqis is unquenched, they lack (for now) the physical means, popular support, and foreign backing to re-ignite large-scale factional fighting.

If extremists are committed to violence but lack the means, the major factions have ample armed capabilities to plunge Iraq (again) into civil war and even to threaten the survival of the new Iraqi state. There are as many as 100,000 Sunni ex-insurgents, or Sons of Iraq (SoI), 75,000 Kurdish Peshmerga, and 40,000 members of JAM. With all main factions now participating in the Iraqi political system, including in the government of Iraq (GoI) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), hostilities among them are improbable. An order exists—shaky, but increasingly resistant to being blown up, figuratively and literally, by rejectionists and extremists outside it. Growing popular support for this non-violent order can be discerned from recent provincial elections, in which Sunnis voted in large numbers, GoI law-and-order policies were rewarded, and secular parties fared well.

In sum, extremist violence appears more likely but less consequential than violence among the Iraqi groups now engaged in the political process. The country's stability and security depend mainly on (1) whether the main opposition groups, especially Sunni and Kurd, continue to compete within the political system and forgo force and (2) whether the Shi'a-led GoI wields its growing political and armed power effectively, responsibly, impartially, and constitutionally. Either a temporary security gap caused by the withdrawal of U.S. troops before ISF can effectively replace them or a pattern of GoI abuse of power could tempt or impel main opposition groups to choose force over peaceful politics.

For these groups, the choice of peaceful politics over fighting has been a matter of strategic calculation rather than of outright defeat

or transforming enlightenment. Factors that could cause any of them to re-think this choice are political disaffection, electoral failure, economic hardship or inequity, disputes over land and resources, shifts in the balance of armed power, and harsh treatment or provocation by the GoI or the ISF. Although extremist attacks alone are unlikely to trigger fighting among Iraq's main groups, they could fan and exploit it.

In assessing the danger of fighting among Iraq's main groups, a key consideration is that, as U.S. forces withdraw and ISF capabilities grow, the latter will gain advantages over all other armed forces in Iraq—i.e., JAM, SoI, and the Peshmerga. Furthermore, some of the parties have foreign support that may not decrease as U.S. forces withdraw. At the same time, because U.S. military capabilities will decline more rapidly than effective ISF capabilities (as opposed to mere numbers) will grow, a security gap could appear. A critical question is how this potential security gap may affect the strategic calculations of the three groups that possess large forces: Sunnis and SoI; Sadrists and JAM; Kurds and the Peshmerga.

To the extent that U.S. military power helped contain or deter these factions, U.S. withdrawal could increase their opportunities to achieve their goals through force, especially if the ISF is not yet up to the task of defeating them. For groups to which U.S. forces have provided reassurance, such as the Kurds and, lately, SoI, U.S. withdrawal could cause edginess and even recklessness. Because extremists will use force in any case, a security gap will have less relevance to and effect on their violence—though, again, this is unlikely to destabilize Iraq.

In sum, the danger of fighting among core opposition groups and the GoI could grow as U.S. forces are replaced by the less capable and less reliable ISF. Though unlikely, this danger could be compounded by the dynamics of how these actors relate to one another in capabilities, perceptions, and conduct. Even as they share the political order, enough distrust persists among Sunnis, Shi'as, and Kurds that miscalculation could produce a new cycle of violence.

To be more specific about dangers in Iraq, while the Sadrists retain some ability to mobilize deprived Shi'as in Sadr City and elsewhere, their armed wing, JAM, is already overmatched by the ISF. While this does not preclude sporadic, low-grade violence, it makes large-scale

JAM violence less promising for the Sadrists and so less likely. Moreover, there are signs that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is moving to accommodate or co-opt the Sadrists into the political process. Provided that this does not increase GoI sectarianism in the process, it could reduce militant Shi'a threats to U.S. personnel, lower the risk of intra-Shi'a fighting, deny the GoI an excuse for abusing power, and reduce opportunities for Iranian intrigue.

For their part, Sunnis are expanding their involvement in the political order, provincial governance, the parliament, the GoI itself, and the ISF. With this trend, and barring a GoI crackdown on SoI and Sunnis in general, the resumption of a broad-based Sunni insurgency looks unlikely. AQI appears to have lost its ability to instigate Sunni violence, and, if it targets moderate Sunni leaders as it has in the past, AQI is more likely to cause SoI wrath than cooperation. If Sunnis continue to accept Iraq's new political order and gain political strength, a Sunni bloc may be poised to replace the Kurds in a ruling coalition with Shi'a parties.

While desirable, Sunni-Shi'a rapprochement could aggravate Kurdish marginalization from an increasingly Arab-dominated political order and the ISF, making Kurd-Arab conflict more probable. Iraq could thus break along ethnic instead of sectarian lines, with an Arab core determined to exercise control of the Iraqi state—and Arab interests—and the Kurds equally determined to resist. In such combustible conditions, ample opportunities exist for sparks to ignite hostilities, especially with oil wealth at stake. While neither Iraqi Kurds nor Iraqi Arabs may want warfare, both could be swept toward it by events or boxed in by mutual intransigence. Kurd-Arab conflict is the most dangerous of the plausible cases of the break-up of Iraq's core, and potentially of Iraq.

If confronted with major Kurd or Sunni challenges—the ruling Shi'a groups, especially Maliki's Da'wa al-Islamiya party, could harden and expand their governing powers, exceed constitutional limits on state authority, and use the instruments of power at their disposal to intimidate or crush opposition—in effect, controlling the political system. While extremist violence or the existence of militias may be used as a pretext, the regime's chief targets in this scenario would

be its main political rivals. Prime Minister Maliki already appears to be trying to extend his power through the placement of reliable allies in the security forces, the creation of parallel security organs and direct lines of authority through executive decree rather than legislation, and the creation of tribal-support councils (TSCs) across the country.

While the line separating legitimate and illegitimate use of state power may be fuzzy, there are indicators to gauge whether it is being crossed. An obvious one would be GoI use of the ISF against parties that oppose it non-violently (even if they possess the armed capability to do so violently). Another red flag is the GoI bypassing proper ministerial channels, procedures, and checks and balances for ordering and controlling security operations. While the first sign of abuse of power is not now visible in Iraq, the second one is. Of particular concern are steps taken by the prime minister to exercise direct control over forces and operations, to circumvent cabinet decision-making (as required by the Iraqi constitution), and to create intelligence and commando capabilities outside the Ministries of Defense and Interior, reporting directly to the prime minister.

The danger of large-scale violence on the part of Iraq's main opposition groups could climb rather than fall with GoI abuse of power. While the ISF may eventually become so strong and Shi'a dominated that the Sunnis and Kurds must yield to Shi'a rule, that day is far off, especially with economic constraints on the GoI's ability to build powerful armed forces and ethno-sectarian tensions within the army leadership. Meanwhile, the United States should firmly oppose authoritarian tendencies, for the sake not only of the U.S. values but also of the U.S. interests for which it has fought hard and sacrificed much in Iraq.

A critical factor in assessing the potential of dangers involving core actors is the shifting balance of armed power, both in fact and in the perceptions of the decision-makers of the core groups. The ISF can already contain but cannot, for the foreseeable future, completely defeat extremists, who can melt temporarily into the population or neighboring countries. The ISF can also contain and soon will be able to, if they cannot already, defeat organized JAM threats. The ISF also have the ability to contain SoI violence and may be able, before long,

to defeat the SoI, except perhaps in predominantly Sunni-populated areas. The ISF should soon be able to keep the Peshmerga from seizing contested territory by force but will be unable to defeat the Peshmerga on Kurdish soil for years to come.

This analysis suggests that the greatest danger, combining likelihood with significance, is that the Kurds will calculate that force offers a better way than peaceful politics to realize their goals, provided that they do not delay until the ISF can decisively defeat the Peshmerga. At the same time, large-scale SoI violence cannot be excluded, though the window is small and the outcome is unpromising. JAM's chance to gain from using force may have passed.

Such strategic calculations depend heavily on ISF capabilities, as well as on how the ISF are used by the GoI. While stronger ISF would discourage main opposition groups from resorting to force, the use of the ISF to crush or coerce political opposition to the Shi'a-led GoI could provoke a violent reaction, even against worsening odds. The balance of armed power in Iraq will not shift so sharply in favor of the ISF that the Kurds and Sunnis will become submissive.

Dangers to Iraq's security may be compounded by how specific threats interact. For instance, the resumption of Sunni insurgency—e.g., by SoI—could lead the GoI to tighten its control, extend its authority, and use the ISF more aggressively, at least against Sunnis.

Moreover, large-scale Sunni violence is likely to provoke Shi'a militancy and violence. Alternatively, a more authoritarian, possibly more unified (Shi'a-Sunni) GoI would cause Kurds to draw back from the Iraqi political order, pull forces and commanders out of the ISF, and pursue a stronger, more autonomous, and larger Kurdistan. These risks underscore the need for dynamic analysis of Iraq's internal security.

In addition to the potential risks to its strategic interests, the United States is concerned with the security of its troops and civilians in Iraq. There is a high probability of direct attacks on U.S. withdrawing forces from extremist groups (AQI and SGs) that have the most to gain from being seen as forcing a U.S. retreat. AQI is particularly dangerous from the north to Baghdad, the SGs from Baghdad to the south. AQI would favor suicide bombs; SGs would rely mainly on roadside bombs, mortars, and rockets. Both could attack remain-

ing military and civilian personnel if given chances. Yet, neither AQI nor SGs have the capability to sustain attacks or seriously disrupt U.S. withdrawal. Moreover, to the extent that they expose themselves, both are vulnerable to high losses from U.S. forces and the ISF.

JAM is unlikely to mount major attacks on U.S. forces as they withdraw and would be exposed to defeat if they tried. SoI would do so only if it perceived U.S. force supporting the ISF against them or against Sunnis in general. Although the Peshmerga are by far the least likely to target U.S. forces, hostilities between Kurd and GoI forces could threaten any Americans caught in the middle, such as embedded advisers and civilians. At the same time, keeping U.S. advisers with the several Iraqi armed forces could serve to build confidence and avert conflict.

Meanwhile, Iraq's current economic difficulties could affect these dangers. The decline in the price of oil and resultant weakening of Iraq's economy could reduce government and private investment, increase unemployment, and constrict funding for security, including enhancement of the ISF. Economic hardship in Iraq could increase the propensity for violence, especially if inequities are severe and competition for money and oil intensifies. At the same time, low revenues could retard GoI acquisition of ISF capabilities that the Kurds would regard as especially threatening—e.g., air power and tanks.

In any case, the United States faces the sober reality that its ability to prevent large-scale conflict between the main political players has limits and will decline as the U.S. military presence does. The greatest U.S. leverage will be from its support for improved ISF capabilities and operations. But this will contribute to Iraq's security and stability only if the strengthened ISF behave responsibly, apolitically, and in the interests of a unified Iraqi state rather than those of would-be Shi'a rulers. The fact that the current prime minister is usurping control over key security functions and forces suggests that the danger of a strong but partisan ISF may get worse, presenting the United States with a difficult and delicate task.

In this light, the long-term U.S.-Iraq military cooperation, extending beyond the withdrawal of U.S. forces, if mutually agreed, should have three missions:

- capability-building: aiding in the training, equipping, advising, and operational support of ISF
- character-building: partnering in the promotion of professional qualities, accountability, restraint, and institutional capacity of the ISF and the ministries that govern them
- confidence-building: transparency and open communications.

The third mission, confidence-building, pertains especially to the two state forces in Iraq provided for constitutionally: the ISF of the GoI, and the internal security forces (i.e., Peshmerga) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The potential for hostilities between these forces, if and as Kurd-Arab disputes fester and tensions rise, is great enough that the United States (alternatively, the United Nations) should offer to embed significant numbers of personnel with both forces to help avert misunderstanding, miscalculation, incidents, and crises.

Fulfilling these three missions will not require that U.S. combat formations remain in Iraq beyond the agreed deadline for withdrawal. Rather, it will require well-prepared and well-placed, relatively senior professionals at every level; development of long-term relationships with Iraqi counterparts; and, possibly, a newly agreed mandate.

This analysis leads to the following conclusions:

- Extremist terror will continue, regardless of U.S. withdrawal. But it is unlikely to precipitate large-scale conflict unless one or another of the main groups reacts excessively and indiscriminately to especially provocative acts of terror (e.g., on mosques or leaders). Given how hard it is to prevent such acts, the United States should use its diplomatic and military influence to maintain consensus to avoid such reactions.
- More generally, keeping the main groups in the political process is critical to ensuring that they pursue their interests peacefully. U.S. policies and actions should be judged based on their effect on this objective.
- In this regard, the danger of Kurd-Arab conflict is great enough that the United States must retain and use whatever influence

it can to induce both the KRG and the GoI to avoid fighting between the Peshmerga and the ISF. This includes diplomatic involvement in the settlement of KRG-GoI disputes, a deliberate pace of withdrawal from contested areas, and planning for long-term military advisory and confidence-building relationships with both forces, with the agreement of all parties.

- Encouraging further Sunni-Shi'a rapprochement should remain a priority. Fair treatment by the GoI of SoI, including training for civilian livelihood, is imperative. The Sunni population at large is not presently susceptible to extremist agitation. Despite withdrawal and declining influence, the United States can help keep it that way.
- The U.S. military should not become so fixated on the capability of the ISF to replace U.S. forces that it loses sight of the danger that the ISF could be misused either by the GoI or by their own commanders.
- The U.S. military should design a three-mission approach to future U.S.-Iraqi military cooperation, building capabilities, character, and confidence. The United States, the GoI, and all the core actors should, when the time is right, address the basis for and particulars of U.S.-Iraq defense cooperation upon the completion of the withdrawal.

With such efforts, the United States should be able to contribute to continued strengthening of the internal security and stability of Iraq even as it withdraws its forces.