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U.S. Policy Options for Iraq
A Reassessment

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Cover photo: BAGHDAD, Iraq (AFPN) -- A member (bottom right) of the Combined Weapons Effectiveness Assessment Team assesses the impact point of a precision-guided 5,000-pound bomb through the dome of one of Saddam Hussein’s key regime buildings here. The impact point is one of up to 500 the team will assess in coming weeks. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Carla Kippes)

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Summary

Iraq is the most pressing foreign and security policy issue that the United States faces today. Continued failure to make Iraq stable and secure threatens to disrupt the Middle East not by catalyzing the spread of democracy but by exporting instability and conflict. If violence continues, Iraq’s neighbors will use the country as a theater in which to pursue their own goals, including those at odds with Iraqi and U.S. interests. Iraq will remain a training ground for terrorist groups, threatening U.S. and allied security. Continued conflict in Iraq not only will remain extraordinarily costly in terms of U.S. lives and resources, but will also damage the credibility of the United States and the efficacy of U.S. forces. It also feeds perceptions around the world that the United States is engaged in a “war on Islam.”

The U.S. government needs to consider alternative strategies and approaches for reducing the violence in Iraq. Even if policymakers choose not to make major changes, adjustments to current policies might help improve the effectiveness of the U.S. effort—though they can by no means guarantee success. The U.S. government should also begin considering next steps in Iraq in the event that the United States attains its policy goals and in the event that it does not.

Strategies

No effort to foster democracy and economic development in Iraq can succeed until the Iraqi people become more secure. Rising sectarian violence has supplanted insurgent and criminal violence as the great-
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est threat to Iraqis and to the future of the country. Putting an end to internecine violence demands policies different from those for defeating an insurgency alone: Reducing sectarian violence requires measures to prevent all groups from fighting, which differs from defeating an enemy. Incentives for undertaking violence as another form of politics must be reduced and eventually eliminated. No other effort or program will succeed unless violence is reduced.

Strategies the United States and its partners can undertake to reduce violence in Iraq fall into five broad categories:

1. Use overwhelming force to pacify the country and prevent further fighting.
2. Pick and support one or more “winners” of the civil war and help them gain control of Iraq, thus ending the conflict.
3. Help to partition Iraq into three separate states.
4. Leave Iraq and wait for one or more victors to emerge.
5. Maintain current efforts by seeking to broker a deal to reduce violence while Coalition troops focus on combating the insurgency and supporting the central government.

A force sufficient to subdue and disarm Iraq’s many combatants would have to be much larger (perhaps a total of 350,000–500,000 troops) than current foreign troop levels permit. It would also have to be highly proficient at peace enforcement. Iraqi forces will not be capable of filling such a role any time soon. Outside the United States, there are not enough foreign forces that would operate under the necessary rules of engagement, that have the capabilities, and whose governments would be willing to deploy them to Iraq to do this job. Even in the United States, the government and military probably lack the political and military capacity to successfully pursue a strategy of overwhelming force at this time.

Choosing and backing winners would almost certainly backfire, whether the United States seeks to support a single ruler for Iraq or partition the country. The very decision to support a given faction could well destroy it politically. Moreover, picking a winner would run counter to U.S. goals for a unified, democratic Iraq. Partition, how-
ever carefully negotiated, and its aftermath would likely intensify, not reduce, sectarian violence. Although partition may be the outcome of continued war in Iraq, efforts to promote it on the part of the United States would not be good policy.

Leaving Iraq will not end sectarian strife and may stoke it. A U.S. departure could encourage combatants in potential future interventions to battle peace enforcers rather than to seek accommodation. For these reasons, if the U.S. presence prevents current levels of violence from worsening, an argument can be made for staying. However, the longer sectarian strife rises despite U.S. efforts, the more appealing the option of withdrawal becomes.

The U.S. mission in Baghdad has sought to broker a deal among the key factions to reduce sectarian violence. But, even though a national unity government has been created, its leaders represent sectarian interests and hold incompatible visions of Iraq’s future. Although they all oppose violence in principle, some want to retain the capacity to use it in pursuit of their own ends. Moreover, the government does not incorporate all parties to the current fight, and many faction leaders do not control all the fighters in their factions. As violence continues, positions harden, and escalation and revenge make it harder to resolve disputes peacefully.

The Coalition is using the forces it has available to try to reduce sectarian violence. It has increased patrols in key regions, most notably Baghdad, utilizing Iraqi forces wherever possible. Recently, the United States has increased force levels in an effort to reduce violence in Baghdad. The U.S. mission has sought to include as many stakeholders as possible in the government and in discussions to reduce violence.

Because the other options do not appear likely to be implemented or to succeed, this current approach will likely continue until and unless violence escalates to the point that U.S. officials decide that withdrawal is preferable. Although we are not optimistic about success in the near term, as long as this continues to be the U.S. strategy, the tactics and approaches employed in pursuit of this overall strategy should be as effective as possible. We argue that an effective strategy must focus on reducing violence and ensuring that Iraqis are safe. This mission should be the first priority, taking precedence above all else. Better use of U.S.
forces, political suasion, diplomatic pressure, and aid dollars should all be geared to that goal for as long as U.S. efforts in Iraq continue. (See pp. 11–21.)

**Political Policies**

The United States can help prevent current levels of violence from rising by supporting a functioning national unity government, preventing a Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk, forestalling the formation of new autonomous regions, and ensuring that the central government continues to control oil revenue. Although U.S. influence on some issues is limited, it does have leverage with the Kurds. It also can use assistance and the influence it brings to strengthen central and provincial, rather than regional, authorities. The U.S. government also has some sway over international oil companies, which it should pressure to make their payments for oil through the central government.

Currently, Iraq’s neighbors have chosen their own champions in the conflict. The United States should seek to discuss Iraq’s future with all of Iraq’s neighbors, including Syria and Iran. Discussions on reducing support for parties to the conflict and containing violence should begin on a bilateral basis but ideally expand to multilateral discussions and, eventually, a formal working group. Such a working group should include the United Kingdom, Japan, others interested in Iraq’s stability, and the Iraqi government, as well as Iraq’s neighbors. The U.S. government should also support regional and UN initiatives that show promise of reducing violence, even if the United States is not asked to participate directly in them. (See pp. 23–30.)

**Security Policies**

For violence in Iraq to be reduced, Iraq’s own security forces must become less sectarian and more effective. Its Ministry of Interior (MoI), which has been implicated in a broad range of malfeasance and violence, must be thoroughly reformed. All security personnel should be
vetted by commissions staffed by representatives of all parties. Hiring boards and complete lists of MoI employees need to be developed. Specialized police units should undergo thorough investigations; Coalition and Iraqi officials should investigate all complaints. They should make the results of these investigations public. Units with records of abuse should be disbanded. Individuals complicit in abuse, including high-level officials and those tied to them, must be brought to justice. (See pp. 31–36.)

Better financial controls are needed throughout the government to prevent government funds from flowing to militias and other violent groups. To control the flow of funds to militias, it is not enough to simply transfer all government payroll functions to the Ministry of Finance. In an atmosphere of corruption and nepotism, establishing systems of transparency and oversight will be the only way to attain any success. (See pp. 35, 41–43.)

Coalition forces should always patrol with Iraqi units—no non-Iraqi force should patrol alone, and Iraqi forces, too, should be accompanied by mentors if they are not patrolling jointly. Joint patrols will reduce the perception of foreign occupation, improve communication with the Iraqi populace, and constrain Iraqi forces from abusing their power. Whenever possible, Iraqi police must be visibly in the lead on patrols and should handle as many cases related to violence, irrespective of its origin, as possible. Coalition involvement, though likely still needed for some time to come, should be as subtle—and hidden from view—as possible. U.S. assistance should focus increasingly on mentoring the police and the army, especially by embedding more mentors within units at all levels and by bolstering local policing capacity. (See pp. 36–39, 43–44.)

The U.S. government should increase funding and support to assist Iraqi courts and prisons to function more effectively and in accordance with international standards. Absent progress in this area, improvements in the Iraqi police forces will have little effect. (See pp. 40–41.)

The U.S. government should focus its assistance programs and efforts on winning the hearts and minds of Iraqi citizens for the Iraqi government, not for the Coalition. Iraqi spokespeople and offi-
Cials should speak first at press conferences and take the lead in providing information about the security situation in the country. (See pp. 45–46.)

Although the current Coalition focus on Baghdad is necessary to reduce violence, it is not sufficient, particularly if violence increases outside of Baghdad. If large numbers of troops continue to be needed to contain violence in Baghdad and if violence in other regions rises, the Coalition will have to send additional troops to Iraq to provide security to areas outside Baghdad—or accept failure in Iraq as a whole. We also recommend that, as long as combat operations continue, the joint force commander in Iraq consider curtailing air strikes, or at least the use of highly destructive weapons, in urban areas. (See p. 45.)

**Economic Policies**

To reduce the smuggling and resale of gasoline and diesel, which are primary sources of funding for insurgents and militias, the United States should press the Iraqi government to continue to raise, and eventually fully liberalize, the prices of these commodities. While price increases are never popular, a clear and transparent public information campaign can mitigate discontent. (See pp. 47–49.)

Improving and restructuring the operations of the oil ministry would result in increased production, exports, and government revenues. The U.S. government, in conjunction with the World Bank, should provide assistance in streamlining contracting procedures and encourage and provide technical assistance for restructuring the ministry along commercial lines, creating a professionally managed Iraqi national oil company. The U.S. government should also assist the Iraqi government in improving security for pipelines and terminals, in part by making greater use of private security providers and in part by improving the capabilities of Iraqi protective forces. (See pp. 49–52.)

While the United States should focus its assistance dollars on programs that can truly improve security, this should include appropriate spending to build the capacity of the Iraqi government to function and provide basic services. Programs to prevent the diversion of
funds to militias and other violent actors are also worthy of support. Other assistance programs should be postponed until and unless security improves. The Iraqi government should take credit for results of assistance programs and be seen as the provider of government services. (See p. 53.)

If—and Only If—Violence Declines

If Coalition policies prove effective and violence declines, policies and programs should be adopted to make sure that a stabilized Iraq does not slip back into civil conflict. The United States and the international community should pledge their support for the inviolability of Iraq’s borders and their commitment to Iraq’s security. The U.S. government should commit to continuing to provide security assistance to Iraq. If the security situation stabilizes, demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs should be undertaken to reduce and, eventually, disband militias and insurgent forces. As part of this process, a broad amnesty is advisable. The Iraqis may choose to engage in adjudication and reparations in conjunction with an amnesty, if peace becomes possible. However, such programs are not in the cards in the near future; at current levels of violence, they cannot work and would be a waste of resources. (See pp. 57–61.)

If peace breaks out, Iraq’s intelligence services will need to be consolidated and restructured, along the lines initially envisioned for the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, with limited authority and appropriate oversight. (See pp. 61–62.)

A sharp decline in violence would also enable Iraq to pursue economic policies that would create a foundation for solid growth to cement stability. The U.S. government could usefully provide assistance to improve the operations of the electric power industry and make Iraq’s welfare programs more effective. However, under any scenario, U.S. grant aid for infrastructure should end. Oil prices are sufficiently high that Iraq’s oil sector should be self-financing. In other sectors, Iraq, like most other global aid recipients, should seek project loans, not grants, for investments in infrastructure. (See pp. 62–65.)
If Violence Fails to Decline

If U.S. and other Coalition forces cannot reduce the violence, pressure to withdraw troops will become more and more difficult to resist. The best measure of whether violence is rising or falling is the number of Iraqis killed each month. The U.S. government has recently increased troop levels, and U.S. officials will argue that the new approach needs time to work. It should, however, be clear by summer 2007 whether the recent surge has been effective in reducing the Iraqi death rate.

If the United States undertakes a withdrawal of its forces, it will have to be phased, and it will take time. But, well before deciding on a withdrawal, much less before beginning one, the United States should prepare to manage the repercussions of withdrawal and a continuing and expanding conflict in Iraq. These include the increased involvement of Iraq's neighbors in Iraq's affairs, escalating violence, and refugee flows.

U.S. policies could help mitigate these problems. First, U.S. forces should, to the extent possible, withdraw without haste once the withdrawal decision is made. The U.S. government should first consult with its allies, including the Iraqi government, concerning the advisability and means of withdrawal. Once it has made a decision, the U.S. government should inform the Iraqi government and public, its allies, and Iraq's neighbors of its plans. Second, friends and allies should be reassured that withdrawal does not mean that the United States plans to evacuate other bases or reduce its commitments to friends in the region. The U.S. government should assist neighbors, such as Jordan, to respond to any spillovers from the conflict in Iraq. The United States should work with the United Nations to pass a resolution recognizing Iraq's territorial integrity. The administration should be prepared to help Iraqi refugees, both by assisting neighboring countries and by arranging for Iraqis who worked for or helped the United States to emigrate. The United States should not seek to keep troops in any part of Iraq either to maintain control over oil fields, pipelines, and export terminals or to intervene in Iraq's future affairs. Once it has made a decision to withdraw, the U.S. government should adhere to that decision. Finally, future Iraqi governments may not be to the United
States’ liking. Insofar as possible, however, the United States should seek appropriate relations with whatever Iraqi government (or governments) ultimately emerges. To the extent that Iraqi governments do not pursue policies antithetical to U.S. interests, the United States should consider continuing to provide assistance. (See pp. 67–74.)