Research Brief

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The United States Should Reassess Priorities and Consider Next Steps in Iraq

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Abstract

In light of the continuing violence in Iraq, U.S. policymakers continue to reexamine policy options and their repercussions. This RAND Project AIR FORCE brief summarizes a monograph that assesses approaches that the U.S. government can consider in its efforts to reduce sectarian violence and stabilize Iraq and presents recommendations that may help increase the likelihood of success. It also considers possible next steps to take, including if the United States fails to achieve the desired results.

Iraq is the most pressing foreign and security policy issue the United States faces today. Sectarian violence, insurgency, and rising crime threaten not only Iraq's cohesion as a state but also the security and stability of its neighbors. U.S. lives, resources, and credibility also have fallen victim to the escalating conflict. The U.S. government needs to reassess its approaches in Iraq and to consider next steps, including what should be done if changes in policy fail to achieve desired results.

A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study concluded that sectarian violence has supplanted insurgent and criminal violence as the greatest threat to Iraq. Unless levels of sectarian and other violence are reduced, the U.S. government will fail to attain its goals for Iraq, including defeating foreign insurgents and indigenous militias, creating a stable state, and fostering economic growth. Putting an end to internecine violence demands measures to prevent all groups from fighting, rather than defeating a single enemy. It requires eliminating the incentives for the use of violence as a political tool.

Although the authors of the monograph are not sanguine about prospects for success in the near term, they argue that approaches could be improved if the United States were to orient its political persuasion, security policies, and economic assistance in Iraq toward the single goal of reducing sectarian and other violence.

Political Persuasion. Insofar as the United States seeks to support the Iraqi national unity government, it should work with that government to

- prevent a Kurdish takeover of oil-rich Kirkuk
- prevent the creation of additional autonomous regions within Iraq, which could lead to the partitioning or breakup of the country along ethnic lines
- help the central Iraqi government maintain control over oil revenue, which is essential to fund Iraq's security forces and Iraqi government operations.

These approaches are becoming less viable as the political situation in Iraq develops. The United States must therefore be prepared for their failure. Regardless of how Iraq's government evolves, however, the United States should also engage Iraq's neighbors—including Iran and Syria—in efforts to reduce support for violent groups in Iraq and to cooperate with Iraq and the coalition.

Security Policies. Current strategies call for Iraq's security forces to take a growing, and ultimately primary, role to contain sectarian, insurgent, and other violence. These forces are largely, and increasingly, composed of former or current members of the very groups they are to restrain. If the effectiveness and credibility of Iraq's security forces are to improve, the United States should help the Iraqi government to

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- recruit and vet security forces to make them less sectarian and more effective
- purge employees of the Ministry of Interior and the security forces who have been implicated in malfeasance and violence
- implement better financial controls throughout the government to prevent government funds from flowing to militias and other violent groups
- ensure that coalition forces patrol with Iraqi units—not alone.

U.S. efforts should focus not on ingratiating the coalition with the Iraqi public but on winning Iraqis' support for their own government.

Economic Assistance. The United States should focus its economic aid policies to help the Iraqi government increase stability and reduce sectarian violence. Other programs should be postponed until stability is improved, as they are wasteful of resources and ineffective under violent conditions. In particular, the United States should

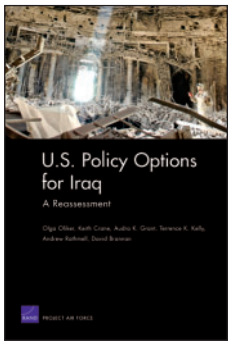
- press the Iraqi government to continue to raise and eventually fully liberalize gasoline and diesel prices to prevent sectarian militias and insurgents from profiting from black markets for these commodities
- improve and restructure the operations of the Iraqi oil ministry and provide technical assistance to create a professionally managed national oil company, which will increase oil production, exports, and government revenue to support efforts to quell the violence
- help the Iraqi government improve security for pipelines and terminals, both through private security providers and through more capable Iraqi forces.

In addition to identifying alternative approaches and policies to help reduce the violence in Iraq, this monograph recommends that the U.S. government begin considering next steps. Some policies should not be undertaken unless violence declines. Other policies will become necessary if and when the United States determines that its attempts to reduce violence in Iraq have failed and decides to withdraw.

If—and only if—violence declines, the United States should adopt policies and programs to ensure that a stabilized Iraq does not slip back into conflict. If violence declines, the United States should commit to continuing to provide security assistance in Iraq. It also should encourage the international community to pledge its support for the inviolability of Iraq's borders and to commit to Iraq's security. If the security situation stabilizes, the United States should support Iraqi government efforts to demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate those active in sectarian militias and insurgent groups into peaceful society. A sharp decline in violence would also enable the United States to provide greater economic support to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure and reform its social welfare programs, helping to cement stability. However, none of these policies can effectively be undertaken while violence levels remain high. Attempts to pursue such policies under conditions of continuing conflict will waste resources and likely backfire.

If the violence fails to decline, pressure to withdraw troops will become more difficult to resist. Well in advance of any decision to withdraw, the U.S. government should prepare to mitigate the consequences of continuing violence and of its curtailed presence. If the United States decides to withdraw, it should

- inform the Iraqi government and public, Iraq's neighbors, and U.S. allies, of U.S. plans
- reassure U.S. friends and allies that withdrawal from Iraq does not mean that the United States plans to evacuate other bases or reduce its commitments to other countries in the region
- stage the withdrawal such that it can be undertaken safely and deliberately
- work through the United Nations to obtain guarantees of Iraq's territorial integrity
- assist Iraqi refugees by supporting neighboring countries, assisting in resettlement efforts, and helping specifically those refugees who worked for or helped the coalition
- be prepared to build and maintain friendly relations with whatever Iraqi government (or governments) ultimately emerges. ■



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