Smooth Transitions?
Lessons Learned from Transferring U.S. Military Responsibilities to Civilian Authorities in Iraq

When the last departing U.S. military personnel stationed in Iraq under Operation New Dawn crossed into Kuwait late one December night in 2011, the United States brought to a close one of the most complex handovers of responsibilities from military to civilian authorities in history. After eight years—during which U.S. forces had come to perform a remarkably broad array of functions in Iraq and had shouldered substantial responsibility for developing the country’s security, political, and economic institutions—the United States simultaneously closed one chapter of its involvement and opened another.

How did the U.S. military step back from broad engagement in Iraq, draw down force levels, and hand off the myriad activities for which it had become responsible? RAND researchers recently examined the transition of authority from military hands to civilians in the U.S. and Iraqi governments, looking for lessons that could smooth the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and guide similar transitions in the future.
Many studies have been conducted about the U.S. involvement in Iraq, covering such areas as the intelligence failures that led to the initial invasion in 2003, the rapid success on the battlefield, the establishment of an interim government, the Iraqi civil war and long counterinsurgency, and the efforts undertaken in what has been the largest nation-building effort since World War II.

But few investigations before this RAND effort looked at factors associated with the transition away from military engagement. This shift represented a historic turning point in modern Iraqi history and in U.S. policy in the Middle East. Not since Vietnam had the U.S. military withdrawn its forces from a zone of conflict and left civilian diplomats to lead the U.S. presence in such a hostile security environment.

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During the eight-year U.S. effort in Iraq, the term transition came to mean many different things to different stakeholders at different times. Most basically, the term referred to institutional transitions, such as transferring responsibilities from military authorities to the U.S. embassy or the Iraqi government. At the same time, however, transition also referred to changes in the functions that the U.S. military oversaw—from orchestrating combat operations to conducting counterinsurgency efforts, advising and assisting Iraqis, and administering broad-based reconstruction and economic development efforts. Viewed in this light, the transition that took place in 2011 was the last in a succession of transitions that began shortly after the U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq in March 2003.
No textbooks guided planners through the complexities. Starting in July 2011, USF-I began the process of departing, and in October 2011 military forces began the operational maneuver of forces out of Iraq. The multiyear effort brought a range of civic, economic, and security responsibilities to a close or transferred them to U.S. embassy staff in Iraq, to the Iraqi Security Forces, to the U.S. Central Command, and to other government departments or agencies.

At its peak in 2011, the transition involved virtually every military and civilian American stationed in Iraq, as well as hundreds working elsewhere in the region and in the United States.
FACTORS COLORING THE 2011 TRANSITION

Among the issues affecting the success of the 2011 transition, several stood out in the RAND team’s analysis.

- **Security challenges.** Transition planners in both USF-I and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad expected Iraq would face a number of enduring security threats that would test its ability to stand on its own without U.S. military assistance and challenge the ability of the embassy to operate effectively. The assessment was that Iraq would remain dangerous because of communal and factional struggles for power and resources, insufficient capacity of the Iraqi government, attacks from violent extremist groups, and external interference from such countries as Iran and Syria.

- **A diplomatic outpost like no other.** The transition plan envisaged a self-sufficient “expeditionary embassy” in Baghdad of unprecedented scope and scale to maintain U.S. influence and help the Iraqis maintain their security, political, and economic gains. Never before had an embassy managed support functions of this size and scale: field hospitals, a small airline, military-style life-support mechanisms, and a small army of security guards to protect facilities and ensure secure movements of personnel. However, after the departure of the U.S. military, the Iraqi government made clear that it did not want a large-scale, highly visible official American presence in the country and pressured the United States to reduce the embassy’s 17,000-person footprint. As a result, mere weeks after the military’s departure, the Department of State was forced to plan drastic cuts to embassy staffing and consider closing some embassy facilities.

- **An uncertain end state.** Uncertainties hindered the final transition and made it difficult for agencies to ensure that the Department of State would be ready to assume sole leadership of the mission on January 1, 2012. One was whether there would be a follow-on U.S. troop presence that would continue training Iraqi security forces, assist Iraqi special operations forces in conducting counterterrorism operations, and assist in preventing Kurdish security forces and the Iraqi military from engaging in combat along the contentious boundary between the Kurdish region and the remainder of Arab Iraq. Neither the United States nor the Iraqi government had a clear position on the desirability of a follow-on presence when transition planning began in earnest in 2009 and 2010. Moreover, it was unclear whether Iraq would continue to provide remaining U.S. troops with legal protections from Iraqi prosecution, a U.S. precondition for any enduring military presence. This uncertainty affected transition planning in important ways. To allow time for the United States and Iraq to negotiate a follow-on agreement, the decision point to execute the final phase of transition continued to shift later, with October 15—the date by which the laws of physics required the redeployment to begin for it to be completed by December 31—becoming the final deadline for a decision. When time for negotiations ran out, what had initially been envisioned as a gradual withdrawal of forces became a steep “waterfall.”

- **An unpredictable Iraqi political environment.** The transition plan assumed that the U.S. embassy had the lead for political engagement with the government of Iraq and, therefore, that no political tasks needed to be transitioned. As a result, the transition plan did not include measures to support this critical aspect of the mission, which likely contributed to the U.S. failure to anticipate the full effects of the rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces on the already fragile Iraqi political arena. This led to a sobering reminder of the limits of the transition that surfaced just one day after the last U.S. soldier departed: A prosecuting judge and Interior Ministry personnel precipitated one of Iraq’s most significant political crises in recent years by issuing an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and other Sunni leaders, which in turn led Sunni leaders to boycott Iraqi political institutions.

- **Gaps between established goals and the time and resources necessary to achieve them.** During the three years leading up to the transition, the gap between the strategic goals the United States had established with respect to Iraq and the means available to achieve them widened. By 2010, it was evident to USF-I staff that not enough time and resources were available to achieve assigned goals by the end of 2011. Consequently, unless an agreement was reached to maintain a residual presence, many goals would not be achieved. If the United States had conducted a fundamental reassessment of its Iraq strategy in light of the agreed-on departure of U.S. forces, it might have flagged this mismatch. But such a strategic review was not undertaken, leaving the U.S. military and embassy leaders with the challenge of seeking to achieve overly optimistic strategic and policy goals with insufficient resources.
Policymakers should initiate a multiagency planning process under the direction of the White House national security staff well in advance of the anticipated transition to (1) define enduring U.S. interests in the country, (2) establish realistic goals that an embassy operating under the requirements and limitations of the Vienna Convention can achieve, (3) assess follow-on military presence and resources required to achieve desired goals, and (4) identify authorities that the embassy and its Office of Security Cooperation will require to operate within the country. An embassy-led presence is fundamentally different from a military-led mission and must be designed to be consistent with global U.S. foreign and security policy interests and with the operating requirements of the Vienna Convention framework. Iraq illustrated that a transition from a U.S. presence dominated by a major military command to one managed by a U.S. embassy is not just a matter of scale but also of kind.

Pretransition planning should be launched several years ahead of the transition deadline, led jointly by a general officer and a senior civilian, staffed with capable planners who are not involved in current operations, and granted all necessary authorities. Moreover, effective transition planning must proceed on the basis of seamless top-level collaboration between the senior military commander and senior civilian in country. The civil-military cooperation in Iraq leading to the 2011 transition was exceptionally good, and this was a major reason the transition went as smoothly as it did. The cooperation was due in large part to the commitment of the U.S. ambassador and the USF-I commanding general, who made it clear that they would make all key decisions together and demanded comparable cooperation among subordinates.
Policymakers should secure support from relevant congressional committees on the nature and likely cost of an enduring civilian-led mission well in advance of the departure of military forces. After the U.S. military departure, Embassy Baghdad was expected to begin performing functions that no other U.S. diplomatic post in the world must undertake. Congressional committees consistently rejected the Obama administration’s requests for increased funding to support expanded embassy operations in Iraq. In retrospect, the committees appear to have correctly anticipated U.S. and Iraqi domestic constraints on U.S. post-transition presence better than the administration and Baghdad-based planners did.

Policymakers and military transition planners should initiate work early with the host nation to identify posttransition requirements and to ensure the smooth transition and success of posttransition U.S. presence. The scope and functions of the U.S. presence should be identified early, and, when possible, agreements should be crafted to support U.S. and host-nation needs, possibly even accommodating future variations in the footprint. Future transitions should involve extensive engagement with senior host-nation officials and other political interests and extensive public diplomacy to ensure wider understanding of U.S. goals. For a variety of political and practical reasons, such consultations were not systematically undertaken in Iraq.

To avoid a repeat of the eleventh-hour “waterfall” exit of troops, contractors, and equipment that occurred in Iraq, policymakers and commanders in future transitions should resist the temptation to delay final decisions on ending operations. In Iraq, a more-gradual departure of U.S. forces might have helped avoid many logistical challenges that arose in the final months of the transition from the abrupt exit of military personnel, contractors, and equipment and the accelerated handover of military bases. A more-gradual departure might also have minimized the power vacuum that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and others exploited to gain advantage over political adversaries.

GOALS FOR THE CAMPAIGN AND THE HOST NATION FOLLOWING THE TRANSITION SHOULD BE REALISTIC FOR THE LONG TERM

Military and civilian planners both in theater and in Washington should fundamentally reassess campaign goals well before the departure of forces, recognizing that previously established campaign goals likely will not have been achieved by the end of the transition. In building the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the successive U.S. military transition commands sought to help security forces achieve a “minimum essential capability” for each function (air, naval, special forces, combined arms, etc.) they would need to maintain Iraq’s security and sovereignty. When it became likely that U.S. training might come to a close at the end of 2011, USF-I focused on helping the Iraqis acquire minimum combined arms capabilities that they could build upon should the mission end in 2011. However, while these types of tactical changes occurred, the optimistic goals and objectives contained in the Joint Campaign Plan were never modified to be consistent with the time-constrained transition. Moreover, interagency policymakers and planners did not conduct the type of campaign plan reassessment that was necessary to establish achievable goals and objectives given the time and resources available during and after the transition.
Military planners should make institution-building a priority to ensure that the progress made through training, advising, and assisting will be sustained after the transition. The U.S. military training and advisory mission focused significant effort on individual and small-unit skills necessary to conduct tactical operations. However, much less effort went into creating the type of institutional capacity that would ensure ISF could continue this training after the departure of U.S. forces. While there were some success stories, the training capabilities of all ISF elements had serious institutional deficiencies at the time of the transition and thus in their abilities to sustain the process of recruiting, training, and fielding professional military and police forces.

Prior to fielding equipment packages for a host-nation military, planners should critically assess whether partner nations can independently sustain equipment and systems after U.S. forces and contractors depart and Department of Defense (DoD) funding ends. The departure of U.S. military advisors, contractors, and funding exposed a lack of Iraqi capacity to independently sustain much of the modern equipment and systems the United States had provided. Nowhere is this more evident than in logistics and maintenance, where both institutional failings and cultural norms have impeded progress.

**ALL THE RAMIFICATIONS OF USE OF CONTRACTORS NEED TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT**

**Policymakers should establish a single office—such as the U.S. Central Command’s Contracts Fusion Cell—to manage all contracts and contractors in theater.** As a result of its heavy reliance on contractors, the U.S. military spent a great deal of time planning for the demobilization and redeployment of tens of thousands of civilians, as well as uniformed military. However, at no point in the operation did the military ever have an accurate accounting of the individual contractors who were in country. In future conflicts, U.S. military headquarters staff must oversee contracts from the outset and prepare to terminate or hand them over during or after the transition to other organizations, such as the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Central Command, the Department of State, or other interagency partners.

**Transition planners should discuss with host-nation officials plans to use contractors after U.S. forces depart.** Host-nation immigration restrictions and political constraints may limit a U.S. embassy’s ability to use contractors. As a result, U.S. and third-country contractors may not be a viable posttransition option to provide embassy security, base support, training, and other services. New contracts with third parties may be needed well before the transition.
DoD, the broader national security community, and academia should conduct further policy-relevant research and analysis, including the development of joint doctrine, that focuses on the strategic and operational aspects of how wars end. Making a decision to go to war is profound. Wars often change a country’s internal political, social, and economic dynamics and affect both regional and international security. How a war is fought will contribute to the postwar security environment. Perhaps the most important part of a war is how it ends, for that will set the stage for what is to follow. Despite the importance of understanding how wars end, this topic has received far less attention from historians, social scientists, and military strategists than other phases of war.

Future transitions should undertake systematic knowledge management and ensure that all databases (military and contracted civilian), logs, project files, and other vital information are accessible to follow-on civilian missions. As responsibility for many functions passes from U.S. forces to civilian officials, it is vital to retain critical information. Robust knowledge management efforts are essential during and after the drawdown period.

A message in chalk identifies the last armored vehicle out of Iraq, seen here after its arrival at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. U.S. Army photo by David Ruderman.
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