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ENDING

THE U.S.

WAR IN

IRAQ

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Executive Summary

On December 18, 2011, the final U.S. forces stationed in Iraq under Operation New Dawn (OND) crossed the Iraq-Kuwait border, bringing to a close the transition and withdrawal of U.S. Forces–Iraq (USF-I) that is the focus of this study. The U.S. war in Iraq is over. As characterized by USF-I Commanding General Lloyd J. Austin III, U.S. forces completed one of history's most complex handovers of authority and retrograde of U.S. personnel and equipment with "honor and success." The extraordinary effort, which began with detailed military and civilian planning in early 2009, was over. For Iraqis, of course, elevated levels of violence and political instability unfortunately continue.

Among Iraq's new challenges, the most immediate is the civil war in Syria, which has the potential to engulf Iraq in a broader regional sectarian conflict fuelled both by Shi'a and Sunni hatred and mistrust and by activities of such regional and global powers as Turkey; Saudi Arabia; Russia; Iran; and the Iranian proxies, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib al-Haq, which have recently entered the war to support the Asad regime. Experienced fighters from al Qaeda in Iraq have joined the Syrian rebels, aligning themselves with the Islamist "Al Nusra Front." The escalation of violence in Syria poses numerous threats to Iraq and has the potential to place Baghdad once more at the epicenter of a regional Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

Moreover, while the war involving the United States and Iraq has ended, conflict in Iraq is not over. Tensions over power-sharing, the remnants of the Sunni insurgency, other unresolved issues that aggravated the Iraqi civil war, and external support for violent actors remain challenges the Iraqis will have to solve themselves. Thus, the Iraqi transition from wartime activities to peace and stability will take much longer to realize, and could yet spiral downward into a new civil war.

At its peak in 2011, the transition involved virtually every military and civilian American stationed in Iraq, as well as hundreds in Washington, in Kuwait, and at U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) headquarters. The result—the retrograde of U.S. forces after an eight-year presence during which both Americans and Iraqis worked diligently to place the country on a path toward stability—marked a pivotal point in U.S.-Iraqi relations. While the future of the relationship is uncertain, all U.S. officials

who contributed to the successful implementation of the transition and the safe departure of U.S. forces can take satisfaction in their contributions to U.S. national interests.

A History of Transitions

The study summarized here focuses on the story of how U.S. forces stepped back from broad engagement in Iraq, drew down force levels, and handed off the myriad activities for which they had become responsible. Even though the Iraq conflict was among the longest the United States has engaged in, the legal basis for the presence of forces and nature of our interactions with Iraqi authorities was in constant flux throughout.

In this overall context, *transition* has meant many different things, to different stakeholders, at different times. The term has referred to institutional transitions, such as those from the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), from CPA Combined Joint Task Force 7 to Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I), from MNF-I to USF-I, or from USF-I to the U.S. embassy. For the U.S. military, *transition* has also referred to functional transitions—for example, from combat to counterinsurgency, to training and advising, and to broad-based reconstruction and economic development.

Over more than eight years, the functions and activities the military undertook in support of Iraqi government and U.S. civilian authorities variously expanded, transformed, changed hands, and were reclaimed by the Iraqis and other U.S. agencies. The success of the final transition was a tribute to extraordinarily productive working relationships between the U.S. military and the U.S. embassy. However, a unified interagency approach was not the norm for earlier transitions. The first truly joint campaign plan (JCP) in Iraq was not developed until 2006. Joint civilian-military planning improved substantially after the 2008 security agreement (SA) and its companion Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) specified an end to the U.S. military presence,[1] at which point both organizations became increasingly focused on the shared goal of preparing the U.S. embassy to operate successfully after the departure of U.S. troops.

In almost no case, however, did Iraqi transitions proceed as planned. In part, this was because much U.S. transition planning relied on assumptions and performance measures that ultimately proved overly optimistic. Transitions were also affected by the highly dynamic internal situation in Iraq; as security deteriorated, the nature of key transitions evolved, and the time lines for performance goals slipped.

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[1]   United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, "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," November 17, 2008a, and United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, "Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq," November 17, 2008b.

The war began with U.S. forces conducting traditional combat operations against Saddam's army but with relatively limited plans for postconflict activities. Over time, however, U.S. forces would come to perform a remarkably broad array of functions, shouldering substantial responsibility for the development of Iraqi security, political, and economic institutions and establishing the foundation for a long-term strategic partnership with the United States.

This volume focuses on the transition as U.S. forces drew down force levels, stepping back from these responsibilities and handing them off to Iraqi and embassy civilian authorities.

USF-I planners established several novel internal organizations and processes to develop and adjudicate the command's positions and policies related to the transition of military activities to other U.S. government agencies and to the government of Iraq. For civil-military planning and implementation of OND transitions, the command utilized existing multilevel interagency structures. Interagency "rehearsal of concept" drills were crucial to the command's ability to test the efficacy of its major operations order and to synchronize it with other U.S. military and civil agency plans. The uncertain political environment in Iraq and assumptions about a residual U.S. force in Iraq posed serious challenges to USF-I planners.

Security Challenges

Transition planners expected that 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 the ability of the U.S. embassy to operate effectively in what would remain a hostile environment. These challenges were well known, although the specifics were tough to address definitively prior to the departure of U.S. forces. Planners assessed that there were four interrelated drivers of instability that would affect Iraq after the transition: communal and factional struggles for power and resources within Iraq, insufficient capacity of the government of Iraq, the activities of violent extremist groups, and external interference from such countries as Iran and Syria. In particular, USF-I considered that violent extremist groups, if left unchecked, posed an existential threat to emerging democracy in Iraq. Almost to its final days in country, USF-I continued to assist Iraqi counterparts to address this threat through partnered operations and the provision of key enablers. Contingency plans envisioned the U.S. military continuing to provide the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) with some level of technical support to fill gaps beyond 2011.

In addition, the transition planners appreciated that one of the most important lingering challenges would be managing Arab-Kurdish tensions. The concern was that, although some of the structures USF-I and the embassy had put in place to manage Arab-Kurd frictions might endure, their long-term viability would be in question. In

particular, planners asked, would the Iraqis or the U.S. diplomatic contingent be able to manage force confrontations with no one filling the "honest broker" role U.S. forces had played?

By the time U.S. troops withdrew, ISF had sufficient capabilities to handle most of the internal security threats violent extremist organizations posed. This is especially true for Sunni violent extremist groups, which the government of Iraq has shown a willingness and ability to target. However, Sunni nationalist extremist groups, as well as al-Qaeda in Iraq, retain the capacity to strike at government and Shi'a civilian targets, posing a long-term risk to Iraqi stability. The government of Iraq must address these groups in a manner that does not increase the level of popular support they have with the Sunni population. Indeed, one of the successes the U.S. military began to achieve in 2007 was to drive a wedge between Sunni extremists and the Sunni population, largely eliminating the base of support necessary for a successful insurgency. Unfortunately, actions Prime Minister Maliki has taken since the departure of U.S. forces have weakened this wedge and provided more fertile ground for an insurgency to regenerate.

An equal security challenge for the Iraqi government is to garner the political will to take on Iraqi Shi'a extremist groups, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, both of which continue to receive weapons, equipment, training, and funding from Iran. Doing so, however, would both threaten the political coalition that keeps the Maliki government in power and antagonize Tehran, which uses the groups to alter Iraqi political dynamics by dialing the level of violence up or down. Although the groups appear to have been less active inside Iraq since U.S. troops—their principal target—withdrew, they will no doubt remain capable to engage in sectarian attacks as long as they continue to receive support from Iran. The recent involvement of both Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib al-Haq in Syria working at the behest of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Quds Force suggests that these organizations will remain violent Iranian proxies for the foreseeable future.

A Diplomatic Outpost Like No Other

The Department of State (DoS) broke new ground by undertaking the transition to a diplomatic outpost that would be self-sufficient and that would assume some of the functions similar to those a U.S. military force ten times its size had undertaken. U.S. transition plans envisaged an "expeditionary embassy" of unprecedented scope and scale to maintain U.S. influence and help the Iraqis maintain their security, political, and economic gains. Many embassies have operated in difficult security environments, depending on armored vehicles and security guards. But 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.

At a tactical and operational level, many aspects of the transition to a stand-alone embassy went well. Despite earlier challenges attracting qualified personnel to Iraq, DoS had relatively little difficulty finding Foreign Service staff willing to take positions in 2011 and 2012. The department established comprehensive medical and air transportation capabilities on schedule, working through obstacles created by the need to let large new contracts, unclear legal authorities, and uncertain funding. It secured aviation and support agreements with multiple countries in the region. Despite doubts about whether DoS would be able to manage large-scale contracts for security, life support, medical operations, and other necessary functions, the department improved its contract oversight capabilities, trained all deployed Diplomatic Security officers in contract oversight, and made short-term use of Department of Defense (DoD) contract managers to fill gaps. Transition planners—particularly those on the ground in Iraq—demonstrated considerable flexibility by recognizing midstream that the embassy would benefit from a robust knowledge management initiative that would ensure it could benefit from DoD's considerable collections of information.

Transition planners encountered tactical challenges as well. Although DoS and USF-I had agreed at senior levels to transfer excess DoD equipment to the embassy (such as housing units and generators), the uneven implementation of these agreements created problems for DoS that led to construction delays and short-term operational and security shortcomings. Compounding these challenges was DoS's contracting process, which is far less flexible than DoD's, making it difficult to adapt rapidly to changes. Congress's unwillingness to fully fund the Police Development Program required DoS's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to scale the program back dramatically. After the departure of USF-I, increased security threats limited the ability of even the reduced numbers of trainers to get to training sites or demonstrate their effectiveness to U.S. or Iraqi stakeholders, and the program was even further reduced. It is important to note that the Coalition Police Assistance Training Team that the CPA started in 2003 was also unable to effectively train the numbers of police required. Taken together, the failure of both the Police Development Program and the Coalition Police Assistance Training Team calls into question whether civilian organizations have the capacity to manage a training program as large as what was envisioned in Iraq. In retrospect, the skepticism of appropriators about plans for a large civilian footprint seems prescient. More than officials directly involved in the military-to-civilian planning, appropriators were in tune with the concerns of influential Iraqis and doubted the feasibility of an extraordinarily robust U.S. civilian presence in Iraq from 2012 forward.

However, the single biggest obstacle to standing up an effective diplomatic mission in Baghdad may have been the lack of political support on the banks of both the Potomac and the Tigris. In Baghdad, the Iraqi government quickly made clear that

it did not want a large-scale, highly visible official American presence in the country. Senior Iraqi officials objected to the embassy's proactive security initiatives and pressured the United States to reduce the embassy's 17,000-person footprint. As a result, mere weeks after the military's departure, DoS was forced to plan drastic cuts to embassy staffing and consider whether to close some embassy facilities. This raised concerns in Washington about whether the transition process needlessly spent billions of dollars on construction, security measures, and outside contracting for a presence that was not sustainable.

Moreover, after eight years of outsized U.S. military influence, Iraqi officials in 2012 eagerly asserted Iraq's sovereignty in ways that complicated U.S. goals. For example, the shift of the embassy personnel and logistic operations from being under the umbrella of a large-scale military presence operating under very liberal "wholesale" status-of-forces-agreement procedures to being under a traditional Vienna Convention legal regime did not go smoothly. At the time U.S. forces left Iraq, Embassy Baghdad was ten times larger than even a "normally" huge American embassy, conducting extraordinary operations, such as air movement, security, and convoy logistics. The Iraqis were not prepared for instituting new procedures for requesting visas, obtaining contractor work permits, clearing imports, and dealing with other routine matters from which the embassy was previously exempt. A more-concerted effort to engage Iraqi officials in transition planning might have generated a greater and quicker measure of host-nation support (or at least alerted the United States to the potential for future hurdles), although the contemporaneous political gridlock at senior levels of the Iraqi government meant there were no clear, empowered interlocutors with whom the embassy could collaborate. The focus of both sides on the political debate over a possible residual force made Iraqi planning all but impossible. Eventually, literally facing a possible administrative meltdown of the U.S. mission in late December 2011 through February 2012, the Iraqis (with much embassy support and assistance) managed to put workable, if cumbersome, procedures in place.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the embassy was generally prepared to assume the lead U.S. role in Iraq in December 2011. However, the long-term success of the "expeditionary embassy" created by this transition process is not guaranteed as long as Iraq remains dangerous and politically unstable. Unless the embassy's operating environment improves, DoS may have to revisit a number of central tenets of the transition plan.

The Final Retrograde of U.S. Forces

Starting in July 2011, USF-I began the operational maneuver of forces out of Iraq. This final operation entailed closing over 50 bases, including the seven large bases and logistical hubs at Taji, Victory Base, Al Asad, Kalsu, Echo, Basra, and Adder. To

complete the transition, USF-I had to move 1.8 million pieces of equipment out of Iraq, requiring the movement of over 20,000 truckloads of equipment. Simultaneously, approximately 50,000 military and more than 56,000 contractors had to safely and responsibly exit Iraq by December 31, 2011. To accomplish the extremely complex mission, USF-I developed an operational maneuver plan whereby the force would slowly collapse on itself as forces departed, much like a rearward passage of lines. Each unit conducting the tactical movement was proceeded by engineers providing route clearance. Units then received ground escort from either U.S. or Iraqi forces that controlled the geographic area; priority for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support within Iraq; and aerial escort from attack helicopters. Fixed-wing air cover was available within minutes of units' locations, should they be attacked.

The 1-8 CAV Squadron was the first of 24 battalions to make this tactical movement out of Iraq on October 6, 2011. The three-day movement began in Northern Iraq in western Diyala province and continued south through Baghdad and Nasiriya through Khabari border point with Kuwait (K-Crossing), after which it transitioned into an administrative convoy movement. During the three-day movement toward Camp Buehring, Kuwait, all U.S. and Iraqi units along the route were given the mission to protect the force moving through their respective sectors. After 1-8 CAV crossed into Kuwait on October 9, it assumed the USF-I strategic reserve mission, which it and its parent organization 2/1 Cavalry Division maintained until the USF-I operational maneuver was completed on December 18, 2011. The tactical movement would be repeated another 23 times. By the end of the operational maneuver, all forces successfully completed the retrograde, suffering only one fatality, the result of an improvised explosive device on November 14, 2011, just one month before the end of the operation.

Departing Iraq with honor and success was defined to mean that military bases and facilities were turned over to the Iraqis in better condition than when they were initially occupied. It also meant transfer and transit of remaining military equipment would be completed in a manner consistent with U.S. laws and best practices of property accountability. The orderly movement of forces was completed on a time line the United States determined unilaterally. From General Austin's perspective, it meant the last soldier had to leave Iraq safely, with his or her head held high, knowing that the United States did all it could to help Iraq secure a better future for its people.[2]

The Transition's Aftermath

Iraq began its post-transition future with a raucous political system, an uneven security force structure, and (fortunately) a growing economy. Iraq's situation reflects the myriad contributions Americans and other coalition allies have made since 2003.

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[2] GEN Lloyd J. Austin III, oral guidance given to staff, al Asad Air Base, October 15, 2011.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi people and their elected representatives must address a wide range of challenges in the years ahead, a task made more difficult by the internal struggle for power among competing groups and factions; high levels of corruption; acquiescence to Tehran on some issues affecting regional security; and an unwillingness on the part of the Maliki government and the Iraqi political system to address critical issues associated with reconciliation, reintegration, and repatriation of the Sunni minority. The growing conflict in Syria is presenting the government of Iraq with a new set of challenges as Iraqi Sunni refugees who fled to Syria to escape the violence of the Iraqi civil war are now returning to their homeland to escape the violence in Syria. These returning refugees have returned as internally displaced Sunnis, a community that could serve as a breeding ground for a future insurgency should the Maliki government not take proactive steps to reintegrate them into Iraqi society. This problem has recently been compounded by Syrian Sunni refugees, who are fleeing to Iraq to escape the civil war in their country.

The Uncertainty of the End State

The final transition for U.S. forces in Iraq was hindered by uncertainties, which made it difficult for agencies to ensure DoS would be ready to assume sole leadership of the mission on January 1, 2012. Key decisions were frequently revisited or left open-ended; necessary Iraqi approvals could not be secured because empowered Iraqi interlocutors did not exist or were not disposed to make decisions in politically uncertain times; and funds were appropriated months after programs were supposed to have started. None of these factors, by themselves, posed insurmountable obstacles, but the Iraq transition was so complex and so hemmed in by deadlines that it was difficult for agencies to adapt.

On one level, the desired end state of the transition was clear from the outset: The SA, signed by the United States and Iraq in 2008 and ratified by the Iraqi Council of Representatives shortly thereafter, provided that "all United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011."[3] The companion SFA anticipated a long-term strategic relationship between the two nations, with economic and political components, scientific research, cooperation between cultural and educational institutions, and the many other aspects of a normal bilateral relationship between two friendly nation-states.[4] Yet the two agreements were ambiguous about whether there would be an enduring security relationship beyond 2011 and what form it would take after January 1, 2012.

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[3]   United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, 2008a.

[4]   United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, 2008b.

The transition was thus dogged by uncertainty of Iraqi and U.S. interest in a follow-on U.S. troop presence. Neither the U.S. administration 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, neither side could agree on the missions any enduring force might undertake. Most important, it was unclear whether Iraq would be prepared to enter into a second security agreement to provide any remaining U.S. troops with legal protections, a U.S. precondition for any enduring military presence.

The necessity for a two-track effort to plan for both possible outcomes complicated U.S. transition planning. Given the President's clear statement at Camp Lejeune that "I intend to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011,"[5] USF-I and embassy planners prepared for a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces. At the same time, however, compartmented contingency planning efforts considered a range of possible follow-on options to provide the President with flexibility should the United States and Iraq agree on a post-2011 mission.

Iraqi officials similarly tried to straddle the fence. Driven by overwhelming popular opposition to an enduring U.S. military presence, Iraqi leaders from all parts of the political spectrum issued public statements opposing the continued deployment of U.S. forces—even though many of these same leaders privately confided to U.S. officials that they believed an enduring presence would contribute positively to internal security and hoped the two governments would find a way to extend the mission.[6] Ultimately, in August 2011, all major political factions (except the Sadr Trend) agreed in principle to support an appropriately scaled "training" mission but refused to grant immunities and protections, on which U.S. officials had insisted.[7] Unable to reach an agreement on immunities that both sides could accept, President Obama announced definitively on October 21, 2011, that "the rest of the troops would come home by the end of the year."[8]

The uncertainty about whether there would or would not be a follow-on presence affected transition planning in important ways. For example, planning guidance initially established June as the decision point where U.S. forces would have been directed to initiate the withdrawal of U.S. forces beginning in September and the transition of responsibilities to Embassy Baghdad and the Office of Security Cooperation

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[5]   Barack Obama, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," remarks, Camp Lejeune, N.C., February 27, 2009.

[6]   Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, "Obama's Iraq Abdication," *Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2011, and Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Rebecca Santana, "Iraqis Want U.S. Trainers, Without Immunity," Associated Press, October 4, 2011.

[7]   Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "Despite Difficult Talks, U.S. and Iraq Had Expected Some American Troops to Stay," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011.

[8]   Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq," Washington, D.C.: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 21, 2011.

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in Iraq (OSC-I). This timing would have enabled U.S. military and civilian officials to work through any unanticipated challenges while USF-I remained in Iraq. This earlier timing would also have focused the entire USF-I and DoS effort toward the transition instead of continuing to balance competing efforts with limited staffs and resources. But to allow time for the U.S. and Iraqi governments to negotiate a follow-on agreement, the decision point to execute the final phase of the overarching Operations Order (OPORD) 11-01,[9] continued to shift "to the right," 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 and the President decided to proceed with the redeployment, what had initially been envisioned as a gradual withdrawal of forces became a steep "waterfall." When USF-I, OSC-I, and the embassy identified unanticipated transition-related challenges in November and December, there was little USF-I could do to assist in resolving these issues because of the immense requirement to reposture the force and exit Iraq in a responsible manner. Perhaps more important, given the requirements for USF-I to conduct the operational maneuver out of Iraq, USCENTCOM should have assumed responsibility for providing assistance and support to OSC-I during the last months of the operation much earlier in 2011 rather than allowing USF-I to do so until its departure.

The waterfall of U.S. force departures was designed to keep as many forces as possible in country as long as possible, both to continue the advise and assist mission and to preserve options for the President.[10] USF-I identified forces, locations, and equipment that might be involved in a follow-on mission and released them for final disposition only in the last stages of the transition. As General Austin put it: "Quite frankly, we're not pushing the Iraqis to ask us for help. All we're saying is if they are going to ask us for help, [they should know] that sooner is better for us because it will not cause us to disassemble things that we might have to spend money to reassemble at a later date."[11]

The uncertainty about an enduring presence meant that planning for Embassy Baghdad OSC-I was somewhat delinked from other transition planning processes and did not receive much senior-level attention until mid-year 2011. A security cooperation plan—crucial for guiding normal defense relationships with partners around

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[9] The first two numbers of an operations order indicate the year it was published, and the second set of numbers refer to the sequence. Thus, OPORD 11-01 is the first operations order published in 2011. An operations order can be modified and published as "Change 1 to OPORD 11-01." Alternatively, a new operations order can be published, such as OPORD 11-02, indicating the second OPORD published in 2011.

[10] Ambassador Jeffrey explained that USF-I also wanted to keep significant forces in the north committed to the Combined Security Mechanism along the line between Arabs and Kurds as long as possible to mediate any possible disputes. RAND team interview with Ambassador James Jeffrey, Arlington, Va., March 12, 2012.

[11] Jim Garramone, "Austin Gives Insight into Drawdown, Possible Aid to Iraq," American Forces Press Service, July 11, 2011.

the world—was not finalized until late in 2011.[12] Moreover, a USCENTCOM exercise program that included Iraq was not developed until late 2011—well outside the normal window for developing, scheduling, and funding this portion of a security and cooperation program.[13]

The Political Transition

There have been few, if any, comparable military-to-civilian transitions on such a scale as OND, and none was completed under such less-than-ideal security conditions. The careful process of "binning" activities to be transitioned, the 2010 JCP, and the execution of activities under OPORDs 10-01, 10-01.4, 11-01, and 11-01 Change 1 ensured comprehensive oversight of the activities being transitioned, adjustment to changing circumstances and opportunities, and fostered close civil-military cooperation throughout.

It is perhaps ironic, therefore, that a consequential factor related to the success of the "transition" was an erstwhile "line of operation" that was not transferred at all: the political aspect of the U.S.-Iraq relationship. The transition plan did not include elements of the political line of operation because the 2010 JCP made clear that they were already the responsibility of the embassy, leaving no political tasks to transition.[14] The embassy had the lead for political engagement with the government of Iraq. However, the decision to delink these activities from the transition process had unintended consequences: Transition plans failed to identify and assign measures to support this critical component of the overall 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.

That is not to say that the embassy was unaware that the withdrawal of forces would likely have unpredictable political consequences within Iraq. For example, in January 2011 Ambassador James Jeffrey delivered a presentation at USCENTCOM's Washington Transition Conference in which he discussed what he considered the "five Ms of transition": money (budget and authorities), missions (what the embassy would have to do with a focus on USF-I's binning process), months (time available before December 2011), management (the tools available to do this along with the overall magnitude of the operation), and Maliki (shorthand for the actions the government

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[12] Interview with former DoD official, January 17, 2012.

[13] Interview with USF-I J5 staff officer, Baghdad, July 1, 2011.

[14] As we describe in the body of this book, the 2010 JCP and OPORD 10-01 actually dropped references to the political relationship as a line of operation, on the basis that USF-I had little direct effect on it. Instead, the 2010 OPORD approved three lines of operations: strategic partnership, operations, and civil support and theater sustainment.

of Iraq would have to take to transition from an embassy operation under what was essentially a status-of-forces agreement to an embassy operating under the Vienna Convention).[15] However, planning for this political transition was not a focus either in Baghdad or in Washington.

The primary U.S. political objectives for Iraq in 2010 and 2011 were interrelated: to help ensure the success of government formation following the 2010 national elections with a broad-based, stable government; to ensure Iraq's security and territorial integrity; and to preserve and enhance a strategic U.S. relationship with Iraq.

It had been evident to planners that the transition, especially the planned complete departure of U.S. military forces, would influence the Iraqi political process, affecting various groups in divergent ways. For the United States, the challenge was, as Ambassador Jeffrey stated at his confirmation hearing, to "reinforce in words and deeds that the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces in no way signals a lessening of our commitment to Iraq."[16] Vice President Joe Biden's November trip to Iraq for a meeting of the U.S.-Iraq Higher Coordinating Committee (as provided for under the SFA) and meetings with Iraqi political leaders were part of this reassurance effort,[17] a process that culminated with President Obama's invitation to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to visit Washington December 12–13, 2011.[18]

Yet the day after the last U.S. soldier departed, a prosecuting judge and Interior Ministry personnel precipitated one of Iraq's most significant political crises of the last few 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. While Prime Minister Maliki disclaimed responsibility for the arrest warrant, he was most likely aware of its significance. An important question about this crisis is whether it was precipitated or aggravated by the final withdrawal of U.S. forces and, if so, whether the transition could have been managed in such a way to attenuate such a political effect. As is typical in such political analysis, it is not possible to know for sure what the counterfactual would have been. And in Iraq, even when U.S. forces were at peak levels, crippling political crises had emerged. Nevertheless, the dramatic Iraqi political events that followed the transition were sobering reminders of the limitations of the transition.

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[15] Email correspondence between Ambassador James Jeffrey and Charles Ries, January 11, 2013.

[16] James F. Jeffrey, "Statement by Ambassador James F. Jeffrey: Senate Foreign Relations Committee," July 20, 2010.

[17] Amy Dudley, "Vice President Joe Biden: 'In America, and in Iraq, the Tide of War Is Receding,'" blog, Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2, 2011. See also United States of America and the Republic of Iraq Higher Coordinating Committee, "Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq Higher Coordinating Committee," Washington, D.C.: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 30, 2011.

[18] "Obama and Maliki Back Iraq Post-War Future," *BBC News*, December 12, 2011.

Iraqis and the Scale of the U.S. Civilian-Led Presence

Complicating the transition in Iraq was the evolution in Iraqi attitudes toward the U.S. presence. The U.S. "occupation" of Iraq and its symbols, such as large military convoys, aerostats around U.S. facilities, and the ever-present armored High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicles, had always been distressing to the Iraqis, who are strong nationalists across the political spectrum.[19] Memories of the 2007 Nisour Square incident, in which a U.S. contractor protective detail killed Iraqi bystanders, hardened Iraqi opposition to the aggressive and highly visible U.S. security posture.

While the formal occupation of Iraq legally ended in 2004 with the establishment of the interim Iraqi government, U.S. and British forces continued to operate in Iraq with the legal authorities of occupation forces in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolutions through the end of 2008. For Americans, the sense of the U.S. military as an occupying force ended *de jure* on January 1, 2009, with the implementation of the SA, and to a more tangible extent on July 1, 2009, when U.S. forces moved out of Iraqi cities in accordance with the SA's provisions. Even so, U.S. officials and many classes of contractors, as well as equipment and supplies, routinely entered and exited the country without inspection by Iraqi authorities. Helicopters and aerostats remained highly visible. To most Iraqis, therefore, Iraq did not fully regain its sovereignty until the last U.S. forces left the country in December 18, 2011.

As December 2011 approached, senior American and Iraqi policymakers were focused on discussions about the scope, privileges, and immunities for a possible follow-on U.S. military training mission. But also on the to-do list was the need to secure land-use agreements for the U.S. government to be able to construct facilities at a few locations chosen to support a civilian-led presence. Yet Iraqi policymakers—distracted by internal political crises, without permanent ministers of Defense and Interior, and under no deadline pressure themselves—were unwilling to authorize the U.S. diplomatic mission the land use it needed. Such a bifurcation of incentives could also apply in future stabilization mission transitions.

The lack of land-use agreements, however, was but a symptom of a broader political problem affecting the follow-on U.S. civilian presence: a widespread Iraqi allergy to the scale of the envisaged U.S. civilian footprint. Ambassador Jeffrey bluntly described this public sentiment in March 2012 by stating, "Iraqis hate us for having occupied the country for eight years, and they don't want to see us around anymore."[20]

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[19] RAND interview with Ambassador James Jeffrey, Arlington, Va., March 12, 2012.

[20] RAND interview with Ambassador James Jeffrey, Arlington, Va., March 12, 2012.

Posttransition Goals Were Overly Optimistic

The signing of the SFA and the associated SA can be viewed as the final terms of settlement of the U.S. war in Iraq. The SA established the terms of reference guiding the conduct of the U.S. military in Iraq, including ending the combat mission and moving out of the cities in 2010 and the retrograde of US forces in 2011. However, what both policymakers in Washington and planners in Iraq largely missed was that the years following the signing of the SFA and the associated SA should have been viewed as a period of political and diplomatic change that would result in a new U.S.-Iraq relationship, requiring a fundamental reassessment of U.S. policy and strategic goals in Iraq.

At the macro level, the transition was a carefully planned deliberate handover of responsibilities for activities that the U.S. military had previously conducted. The overarching strategic and policy goals that the 2006 to 2010 JCPs established remained constant. It was not until October 2011, during a war termination assessment, that military planners fully recognized that the goals and objectives contained in the JCPs would not be viable once USF-I was no longer on the scene.

Just as the redeployment of USF-I had unforeseen political ramifications within Iraq, the end of U.S. military presence in Iraq would also have a critical impact on what the United States would be able to achieve in Iraq, especially in the short term. What gradually occurred between 2008 and 2011 was a widening gap between established strategic goals and the means and resources available to achieve them. A fundamental reassessment of the U.S. strategy for Iraq given the overall situation in Iraq and the region may have identified the resource/objectives mismatch. Such a strategic review was not undertaken, leaving Embassy Baghdad and USF-I the challenge of attempting to accomplish overly optimistic strategic and policy goals with insufficient resources. The new OSC-I was tasked with a mission set for which it was woefully under resourced. Moreover, OSC-I lacked the necessary authorities to accomplish its assigned tasks because it had to operate under the Vienna Convention framework. While an October 2011 USF-I J5 assessment identified a large number of authorities that would end with the departure of U.S. forces, there was insufficient time left to develop a transition plan for authorities. If viewed as a process, the transitions that accompanied the end of OND were part of a phase change that should have required a new strategic vision with achievable goals developed by the interagency and USCENTCOM. That type of fundamental strategic reassessment did not take place until well after the departure of USF-I.

Implications for Future Military to Civilian Transitions: Key Insights and Recommendations

The following insights and recommendations are presented as strategic- and policy-level lessons learned that military planners and policymakers should consider when crafting strategies for transitions and posttransition relationships. These insights and recommendations relate to relations with host countries and priorities for security assistance and include more-technical recommendations on civil-military coordination and cooperation, planning horizons, contracting, and knowledge management. To be successful, all these elements of successful transitional planning require long lead times and high-level commitment.

Recommendation 1

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 and objectives 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 objectives, and (4) identify authorities that the embassy and its Office of Security Cooperation will require to operate within the country.[21]

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 requirements and limitations of the Vienna Convention operating framework. The Iraq experience 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. A fundamental transformation of the mission took place in Iraq. While a programmatic approach to what can and should be transitioned from military to civilian organizations (including an Office of Security Cooperation, within the embassy) is necessary, planning should start by identifying U.S. strategic goals for the era after the transition and only then considering how a civilian-led embassy can be set up to accomplish these goals. An approach that transfers functions "as is" from the military to the embassy may not be as effective as an approach that plans a fundamentally new mission from scratch and only looks at functional transfers once this new planning foundation is established.

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[21] After reviewing the draft manuscript, Ambassador Jeffrey prepared a personal assessment for us, which we have enclosed as Appendix A at his request. Email correspondence between Ambassador James Jeffrey and Charles Ries, January 11, 2013.

Recommendation 2

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, in the context of U.S. foreign and security policy goals and in conjunction with normal budget planning cycles.

Transitions in force posture do not always imply transitions from war to peace. 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. The embassy and OSC-I sites needed to operate in an insecure environment with limited force-protection capabilities and restricted movement options. Of more than 180 bilateral U.S. embassies in the world, Embassy Baghdad is the only one to have a "sense and warn" radar system, aerial surveillance drones, or a fleet of mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles for quick-reaction rescue of personnel *in extremis*.

In July 2010, the independent, congressionally chartered Commission on Wartime Contracting identified 14 "lost functionalities" to be expected with the departure of U.S. forces. USF-I and Embassy Baghdad identified an additional seven critical functions that the military performed that the U.S. embassy would need to assume. While such requirements and related funding authorizations were small from a DoD perspective, they were enormous from a DoS perspective because of the department's more modest resources.

Normally, U.S. executive branch agencies begin developing their budgets two years ahead of time. Furthermore, DoS and the U.S. Agency for International Development face far greater political obstacles than DoD does in getting large appropriations or supplemental appropriations to cover contingencies. Moreover, if planning efforts do not anticipate all costs, DoS and the U.S. Agency for International Development do not have anywhere near the flexibility that DoD has to reprogram funds within existing budgets to meet needs. Planning should, therefore, include options driven by different potential funding levels, and budget proposals should incorporate foreseeable requirements.

As responsibility shifts from DoD to DoS, it is also important to make sure the U.S. embassy has all the legal authorities it needs to operate after the drawdown. This did not occur during the Iraq transition and caused a number of problems that came to the surface immediately after the departure of USF-I. These included the initial inability of contractors to enter Iraq to support embassy operations, the requirement to gain Iraqi government approval for the movement of food and other goods into Iraq, the inability of the chief of OSC-I to obligate funds, and the requirement to license embassy vehicles to operate in Iraq—to name just a few. These challenges regarding authorities highlight the transformational nature of the transition from a DoD to a DoS mission.

In the Iraq transition, congressional committees consistently rejected the Obama administration's requests for increased funding to support expanded embassy opera-

tions in Iraq. In retrospect, congressional committees appear to have correctly anticipated U.S. domestic—and Iraqi public opinion—constraints on U.S. posttransition presence better than the administration (and Baghdad-based) planners did.

Recommendation 3

Policymakers and military transition planners should initiate work early with the host nation to identify posttransition requirements and to reach firm agreements with the host nation to ensure the smooth transition and success of posttransition U.S. presence. The parameters of 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 to build flexibility into plans and programs. Such dialogues should be buttressed by outreach to other political interest groups and should be integrated with public diplomacy efforts.

In the future, posttransition circumstances and programs will depend on the security situation, U.S. objectives, and agreements with the host nation regarding the residual U.S. footprint after the military force draws down. This will require extensive engagement with senior host-nation officials and other political interests and extensive public-diplomacy efforts to ensure wider understanding of U.S. goals and objectives. For a variety of political and practical reasons, such consultations do not appear to have been systematically undertaken in the case of Iraq.

Recommendation 4

Military and civilian planners both in theater and in Washington should make a fundamental reassessment of campaign goals and objectives well before the departure of forces, recognizing that previously established campaign goals likely will not have been achieved by the end point of the transition process. Therefore, planning should rigorously prioritize efforts in advance to set the critical conditions for the success of the organizations that will assume some of the military force's responsibilities rather than aim to achieve all the goals and objectives established during the campaign planning process. In particular, with respect to the crucial task of training security forces, *minimum essential capability* for host country forces is the "good enough" functionality required to fulfill basic responsibilities, not equivalence to U.S. forces capabilities.

In Iraq, the mantra was that OND's JCP was conditions based and time constrained. In reality, the JCP was conditions based and resource constrained, with time being the limiting factor. In building the ISF, the successive U.S. military transition commands operated on the basis of defining, then seeking to help the Iraqis achieve, a "minimum essential capability" for each discrete function (air, naval, special forces, combined arms, etc.) it was assumed that Iraq would need to maintain its security and sovereignty. While USF-I stopped using the term *minimum essential capability* in late

2010, when it assessed that the goals were unachievable in the time remaining, the focus remained on providing a minimal capability deemed as a necessary foundation for future development of an external defense capability. Once the security agreement made it clear that U.S. training would come to a close (or at least change significantly) at the end of 2011, the U.S. changed its aspirations for the ISF. Instead of striving to develop requirements-based competencies, U.S. officials worked to develop the minimum capabilities that would permit U.S. forces to depart, defined in practice as whatever was possible by the end of the time-constrained U.S. military presence. In the end, the capabilities identified were driven more by the reality of time available rather than the achievement of the goals established in the JCP (and approved by both DoS and DoD). However, at no time were the JCP goals and objectives modified to meet the time and resource constrains. Moreover, neither policymakers nor planners conducted the type of campaign plan reassessment that was necessary to establish achievable goals and objectives during and after the period of transition.

Recommendation 5

Military planners should make institution-building a priority effort to ensure that the progress made through training, advising, and assisting will be sustained after the transition. In planning for sustainable host-country posttransition security, the human resource functions of recruitment, training, and professionalization are more important than providing equipment and modernization. Institutional capacity must ensure that the equipment provided can be successfully used and maintained after the departure of U.S. forces.

Of greater concern than achieving tactical and operational skills competencies, however, was whether the ISF would continue on the path to professionalization. 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 was placed on creating the type of institutional capacity that would ensure the continuation of this training by the ISF after the departure of U.S. forces. While there were some success stories, at the time of the transition all ISF elements had serious institutional deficiencies in their training capabilities and thus in their abilities to sustain the process of recruiting, training, and fielding professional military and police forces.

Recommendation 6

Prior to fielding equipment packages for a host nation, military planners should critically assess the long-term capacity of the partner nation to independently sustain the equipment and systems after the departure of U.S. military, contractors, and funding. Planning for sustainable host-country posttransition security, the life-cycle management of the equipment, and the capacity and capabilities of the host country are just as important as the intended purpose of that equipment.

The gap in the ISF components' ability to sustain their equipment and systems with a mature logistics system was well known. While the USF-I Deputy Commanding General for Advising and Training, ISF, and other agencies worked to close this gap prior to USF-I's transition, the complexity of the equipment, numerous variants, and logistics management programs and processes made the task that much greater. 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 worked together to impede progress.

Recommendation 7

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 and senior civilian in country working together in partnership.

Civil-military cooperation in Iraq throughout the last transition was exceptionally good, and this is clearly one of the major reasons it went as smoothly as it did. The cooperation was due in large part to the commitment of the ambassador and the USF-I commanding general. They made it clear that they would take all key decisions together and demanded comparable cooperation from their subordinates. The cooperation was also a result of the increasing convergence of the core missions of USF-I and Embassy Baghdad. In particular, after U.S. forces left the cities in summer 2009, USF-I's combat mission was largely limited to counterterrorism and force protection. As a result, the primary mission of USF-I from that point forward was to set the conditions for the Iraqi government and U.S. embassy to succeed after USF-I departed. Such unity of effort is critical to a successful transition.

The Iraq security assistance transition effort began as a small cell in Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq well in advance of the actual transition, with a planning team that was not involved in current operations and could therefore focus on the long-range planning. However, the planning team did not have access to senior-level officials, the authority to task MNF-I (later USF-I) or USCENTCOM staffs for support and information, or a direct civilian counterpart at the embassy. These shortcomings caused challenges and delays in the cell's ability to plan for post-transition security assistance and security cooperation at the level of detail required.

Recommendation 8

A single office to manage all contracts and contractors should be established in theater early in the operation. The USCENTCOM Contracts Fusion Cell estab-

lished for Iraq is a model that could usefully inform other U.S. efforts to develop and maintain a common operating picture for the state of contracts, as well as to coordinate with and among contract owners. In addition, a mechanism must be developed to ensure individual accountability of all contractors in country to help facilitate their departure along with the military forces they support.

Since the U.S. military relied heavily on contractors, it spent a great deal of time planning for the demobilization and redeployment of tens of thousands of civilians, as well as uniformed military. Planners need to account for contract provisions for ending services and getting contractors and their equipment out of the host nation in ways that support and do not hinder the military drawdown. However, at no point in the eight-year operation did the military ever have an accurate accounting of the individual contractors who were in country. This was largely due to the fact that contractors are paid for services provided, not on the basis of the number of individuals it takes to provide the services.

Thus, the military headquarters from the initial outset of the contingency operation must oversee, manage, and prepare to terminate or hand over contracts managed by several organizations (e.g., Corps of Engineers, Logistics Civil Augmentation Program, USCENTCOM Contracting Command) both during and after the transition. Doing this well requires in-depth knowledge of major U.S. government contracts in the host nation, a designated staff lead, and a commitment to transfer that knowledge to the succeeding embassy-led team.

Recommendation 9
Transition planners should engage host-nation officials in planning for use of third-country contractors following departure of U.S. forces because immigration restrictions and political constraints may limit an embassy's ability to use contractors for specific support functions.

The remaining civilian presence in Iraq is also dependent on contractors for security and base support and, if agreed, to provide training and other services to the Iraqis. New contracts had to be in place to support the embassy well before the transition. Embassy Baghdad's reliance on private-sector support also required awareness of host-nation political sensitivities to large numbers of foreign contractors. Contractors cannot be a staffing solution unless the host nation agrees.

Recommendation 10
Future transition efforts should undertake a systematic knowledge management survey and ensure that all databases (military and contracted civilian), key leader engagement logs, assistance project files, and other vital information remain accessible to the follow-on civilian mission.

As responsibility for many functions is handed over from U.S. forces to civilian officials, there is a danger that critical information could be lost. Furthermore, it is

important for staff planners and operators to get the right information when short-falls cannot be made up with manpower and money. As a result, a robust knowl-edge management effort is very important during and after the drawdown period. The knowledge management effort that Embassy Baghdad and USF-I developed provided a means of identifying and ensuring access to a wide variety of data without collecting it all in one location.

Recommendation 11

Policymakers and commanders in future transitions should resist the temptation to delay final decisions on ending operations to such an extent that rapidly ret-rograding forces create a power vacuum like the one that may have occurred in Iraq. A more-gradual "waterfall" of troops, contractors, and equipment not only would have been more logistically manageable but might also have contributed to greater political stability in Iraq.

The delay in making the final decision regarding residual forces had multiple causes, the most important being the inability to reach a U.S.-Iraq consensus on the mission of, size of, and protections afforded to any U.S. Title 10 military personnel who might remain beyond 2011. Moving the decision point forward from June to October 2011 not only created a monumental logistical challenge associated with the sharp retrograde of military personnel, contractors, and equipment and the accelerated handover of military bases to the Iraqis but also likely exacerbated a power vacuum in Iraq that Prime Minister Maliki and others immediately exploited to gain power over political adversaries. Although the exact motivations are not known, the government of Iraq initiated preemptive measures that had not been attempted previously (e.g., arrest warrants for Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mut-laq, and others) in the immediate aftermath of the retrograde of U.S. forces. A more-gradual departure of U.S. forces might have reduced both the opportunity and incen-tives to make such sudden and destabilizing moves.

Recommendation 12

Policymakers, commanders, and planners should use the lessons derived from the final two years of USF-I and its transition efforts to inform critical decisions and time lines required to end large-scale military operations successfully in the future.

Making a decision to go to war is profound. Wars often change combatant coun-tries' internal political and social dynamics and affect regional and international secu-rity. How a war is fought will contribute to the postwar security environment. Finally, history shows us that 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. The preponderance of literature about war focuses

on how and why wars begin and, once initiated, how battles and campaigns are fought. This study on how the United States ended the war in Iraq is a first attempt to bridge the gap in strategic and policy thinking regarding how wars end. DoD, the broader national security community, and academia should use these lessons learned to conduct policy relevant research and analysis, including the development of joint doctrine that focuses on the strategic and operational aspects of how wars end.

Summary

It took roughly two years to wrap up a long-term, countrywide military presence in Iraq that, at its peak, involved more than 170,000 American troops; a comparably sized army of supporting contractors; and 505 bases and outposts. Political, operational, bureaucratic, and fiscal challenges arose from both the U.S. and Iraqi sides, but Embassy Baghdad was prepared to undertake its primary diplomatic missions when U.S. forces departed. More than a year later, and despite hardships and political upheaval, the embassy continues to manage a multifaceted bilateral relationship that advances the shared political, economic, and strategic interests of both nations—something that was not possible a mere ten years earlier.

It has often been said that all conflicts are *sui generis*. Each conflict has its own set of dynamics that are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. Each transition therefore must be planned for given the unique opportunities and constraints associated with the particular conflict at hand. However, while the transition process will vary, the key lessons learned from Iraq should be used to inform policymakers and military planners as they devise future transition plans for operations given the particulars of the specific conflicts; U.S. interests; and a broader assessment of the ends, ways, and means necessary and/or available to advance the U.S. interests. The USF-I transition process was uniquely developed for Iraq, but the policy and strategic lessons learned provide important data points that can inform how to end future conflicts.