

# Iraq and the Future of the U.S. Presence in the Gulf

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Since the capture of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, the United States has experienced a long and torturous yet necessary presence in the Gulf region. Although Americans tend to use 1979 as the benchmark year for our current regional engagement, Gulf states use many other events to define American involvement in the region—the 1953 CIA-managed coup in Iran, America’s long-standing support of Israel, the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88, the shoot-down of the Iran Air passenger jet in 1988, the liberation of Kuwait in 1990-91, the partially successful dual containment strategy against Iraq and Iran, U.S. support to the Afghanistan resistance during the Soviet war, and most recently, the defeat of Iran’s historic enemy, Iraq. Together, these events and the resulting perspectives shape today’s strategic environment and U.S. abilities to influence events in the region. The future U.S. presence in the Gulf cannot be viewed only in terms of Iraq; as history shows, Iran must also be factored into this analysis.

Why is it important to understand our departure from Iraq in terms of its impact on Iran and the Gulf region? Simply stated, if the withdrawal lacks policy foresight and the requisite support, the U.S. may well create the conditions for strategic failure at a very crucial time. Iran, the most populous state in the region, finds itself in a dilemma. The U.S. overthrew its sworn enemy, Iraq, but in doing so essentially completed the strategic encirclement of Iran.

Tehran’s response has been to increase support to several insurgent groups in the region and increase its efforts to master the nuclear fuel cycle, a necessary component to the development of nuclear weapons. The future of the U.S. presence in the Gulf will remain inextricably connected to both the future development of a stable Iraq and the continuing effort to deal with an irksome Iran. Our continued support of Iraq is a key tool in our regional strategy that seeks to engage Iran, end its support of terrorist groups, and halt its efforts to build a nuclear weapon.

America’s strategic approach to the region’s many challenges has sought to separate one from another, rarely attempting to understand or capitalize on the intricate relationships of the region. In this vein, the U.S. has sought to separate the challenges of Israeli-Palestinian peace from the challenges of Iran, a stable Iraq, free access to oil, or the tense Muslim religious schism. Any effort to understand the future of the U.S. presence in the Gulf must begin with a reframing of our general view of the region so as to see the linkages between its many actors and their issues. In today’s strategic environment, I define the “modern Gulf region” to include Israel, Jordan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, a way that expands the traditional view that only those states bordering Gulf waters constitute the “Gulf region.” Our ongoing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, which rely on our naval forces and logistics bases in the Gulf,

have essentially surrounded Iran. We must now recognize this expanded region presents more challenges to our interests and affords us few easy answers.

### **The Future Role of the United States**

With the arrival of the Obama administration, the United States began to reassess its strategic goals in the region after a confusing era of “democracy expansion” that had served as the basis of the Bush administration’s regional strategy, a revolutionary strategy that stretched U.S. capabilities, confused regional friends, emboldened enemies, and mired America in a perceived cultural conflict. Given the degree of uncertainty in the region today, the U.S. now seeks a more modest goal to establish and maintain regional stability.

Regional stability can mean many things but, in the context of U.S. interests, I offer the following as the essential characteristics of regional stability:

1. The containment of Iran as long as it pursues its policy of exporting revolution, evading transparency of its nuclear programs, and supporting terrorist groups;
2. Authentic movement toward establishing the two-state framework between Israel and the Palestinian Authority;
3. Continuation of the Afghanistan campaign to eliminate al Qaeda and the Taliban as threats to the government of Afghanistan;
4. Continued freedom of navigation through the Straits of Hormuz and the Gulf;
5. Continued engagement with and support for the government of Pakistan;
6. Improvement of regional confidence and security, to include the elimination of nuclear weapons from the region.

While there are other regional interests that the U.S. could pursue, this list forms the bedrock upon which all others must rest and, therefore, will drive the military requirements

for the United States in the Gulf after 2011, the year when Operation Iraqi Freedom will finally end. Additionally, we must take into account the interests of all regional states as these will impact our identification of military requirements and options. Some of our interests may well align with those of some Gulf states while other interests will diverge and create tension. Knowing those potential tension points will aid us in our strategic planning.

### **The Region’s Uncertain Future**

As U.S. military operations begin to conclude and U.S. forces depart Iraq, the U.S. should posture itself so it can pursue goals in a region that will remain volatile, complex and ambiguous. Within this expanded region, the U.S. must focus on its interests and resist the temptation of any action that would undermine our long-term goals. This would require America to develop a realistic set of expectations, appropriately structure its forces, and implement supporting diplomatic actions. Moreover, our strategic plans must provide for both resiliency and flexibility because we will surely be surprised by unanticipated events in the region.

Sound strategy requires having the flexibility and range of options that would permit us to deal with surprise. Because the region is rife with uncertainty from both state and non-state actors, we will face unanticipated actions and their consequences. Having the ability to change our perception of our strategic environment would allow us to develop fully strategic options that possess the flexibility to act in response to such surprises. The U.S. would be more prudent to over-prepare for surprise than under-prepare and risk a catastrophic event. We can recover from small surprises in a relatively short time if the recovery only requires, for example, a policy change, the movement of assets or some other similar scale effort. To recover from a “big surprise” is more difficult if our response requires an expansion of our force structure, the reestablishment of broken diplomatic ties or the discovery of a new technological breakthrough. Time may not be on our side.

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Many issues in this region are linked to one another, and our inability or unwillingness to accept such linkages may provide the “big surprise” that could undo our strategy. If the U.S. pursues a strategy of regional stability in the Gulf, we can hedge against the “big surprise” by crafting bilateral security agreements that afford U.S. forces both the sustainability and flexibility necessary to perform their missions. Unlike the period of 1953-1979 when the U.S. sought to build and sustain one strong regional ally, the shah’s Iran, we would be wiser to engage all regional states and seek select and appropriately structured agreements that would help us protect our strategic interests.

Security interests of regional states are as diverse as the states themselves. Some of their interests may converge with ours, in which case we would have common grounds for agreement and mutual activities. Some will not and may stand in opposition to our interests. Such incompatible interests may require some form of engagement between the U.S. and a particular state. If the engagement requires some form of military activity, in-place bilateral agreements with other states would enhance our ability to act. However, we must recognize that regional linkages exist on many levels and the U.S. may have to adjust both its diplomatic and military plans to achieve its goals.

The interests of other actors, like Russia, China, India, and Europe, cannot be ignored by our planners. Despite its business dealings with Iran, Russia views Iran as an emerging security threat. China’s interests include access to Gulf oil, readiness against a “big surprise” from Taiwan, and opposition to an India-Japan axis. Both Russia and China fear a U.S. hegemony that would place them at a distinct strategic disadvantage. India requires access to the Gulf oil and fears the existence of a Chinese “blue water” navy that surrounds the subcontinent. Finally, Europe needs the region’s oil and also wants to maintain stability in the region to ensure necessary access.

As the U.S. military withdraws from Iraq over the next two years, we must remember that the

war against extremist terror will not have ended. Our fight today is not the traditional one of state on state; rather, it requires a “whole-of-government” effort by actors representing the United States, ranging from military, special operations and police to those civilian actors skilled in the rule of law, governance, civil society, and economics. As the U.S. repositions its military, those forces positioned in the Gulf region must remain capable of combined and joint full-spectrum operations, capable of responding to demands ranging from the training of foreign militaries to stability operations to intense combat. Additionally, the U.S. should build up the capacities of its non-military entities so they can act in concert with or independently of U.S. military forces.

If Iraq successfully continues to develop its nascent democracy after this year’s national elections, remaining American combat brigades will withdraw while a more traditional military assistance mission forms to work with Iraq’s military to develop a national defense capability. Two U.S. combat brigades may remain to provide a rapid reaction force/security capability for the mission and two airbases are likely to continue operations in support of the training mission. These brigades would likely provide fire support, aerial tactical transport, intelligence support and tactical medical support to Iraq’s military. However, the bulk of the 40,000 troops will focus on the mission’s training and equipping tasks. Iraq’s Ministry of Defense plans for its forces to be fully responsible for its counter-insurgency mission by 2011 and be capable of providing for its own defense against any external attack by 2018.

### **Challenges for Iraq and the United States**

Iraq’s ability to fully rejoin the international community will depend on how well it handles its many development challenges. As the level of U.S. military activity decreases, the U.S. should not walk away from assisting Iraq to meet these new challenges. To do so risks making the mistake of 1994 when the U.S. walked away from Afghanistan. Iraq’s future will surely

become unstable if there is not significant progress in its rule of law, governance, civil society and economic sectors.

Iraq's economic sector is driven by its oil economy that in turn impacts its ability to deliver essential services to its citizens and generate revenue for other requirements, such as rebuilding its infrastructure and armed forces. Currently, it is exporting roughly 1.7 million barrels/day, more than it did prior to 2003. However, the drop in oil prices has reduced its revenue with resulting negative impact on both reconstruction projects and security issues. Because of falling oil revenues Iraq has not assimilated the sizable number of Arab Sunni militiamen into its security forces but has reduced their monthly stipends. Iraq's oil-based economy threatens its security because militiamen are now threatening to rejoin the ranks of insurgent groups.

Iraq's parliament holds the responsibility of crafting and enacting the laws necessary to reform Iraq's legal system but so far the Council has shown little progress in these matters. The various components of its Rule of Law (ROL) system, e.g., the police, court administrators, judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys, and the jails, are in various stages of recovery with the police proving the most complicated and destabilizing element.

Iraq's electoral process has shown some improvements since its first elections in December 2005. Voters appear to be rejecting the "politics of identity" and favoring the "politics of issues" although a strong tendency remains within the Arab Sunni and other minority communities to demand unrealistic political representation on the basis of group identity. The upcoming national elections in December 2009 hold promise for voters to continue their issues-based focus if the recent provincial elections are an accurate indicator.

The United States can play a positive role in terms of assisting the Iraqi government on two different levels. First, we must recognize that Iraq remains in a very early fragile stage of development, both as a modern state and

functioning civil society. Second, we must remember that Iraq—and the region, for that matter—function at a pace considerably slower than ours, thus setting the need for strategic patience on our part. Indeed, one former State Department official with extensive experience in Iraq has remarked, "Political cultures change much more slowly than regimes do," a clear reference to the need for patience and a subtle reminder of Iraq's past history of coups.

As an indicator of an emerging long-term relationship, the United States and Iraq entered into the Strategic Framework Agreement in November 2008 that established the consultative process on political/diplomatic, security, cultural, economic/energy, health/environment, information technology/communications, and law enforcement/judicial issues. While political and security issues dominate the early phases of the relationship, efforts to build effective governance and ROL will depend on progress with the other issues.

The U.S. can best assist Iraq's internal governance development by providing support to Iraq during its national elections and when it tackles the many issues related to disputed territories. The upcoming national election constitutes the highest priority of political and security cooperation for both Baghdad and Washington, and forms the basis for the presence of U.S. political advisors and combat forces, which serve as a hedge against the inherent uncertainty of the process.

The prospect for a successful emergence of Iraq's civil society depends on the successful outcome of many issues. The ability of Iraqis to reconcile their political differences remains the most important goal but Iraq's legacy of disputed territories remains the most crucial and potentially violent issue. Kirkuk, home to at least 13% of Iraq's proven oil reserves, remains the center of the disputed territories. A peaceful resolution of the Kirkuk issue will require several years of patient international assistance to build the necessary compromises between competing factions. Closely related to the issue of Kirkuk is the need to develop an effec-

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tive working relationship between Baghdad and Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish region of Iraq. With regard to this latter issue, the U.S. should avoid stationing American troops in the Kurdish region as this would only serve to antagonize Baghdad.

America's military involvement in Iraq has been far more costly than had been originally envisioned. The time has long passed for the military to lead the efforts to assist Iraq's recovery; the U.S. now needs a greater civilian effort. But sadly, America lacks the necessary experts and resources in the State Department and other federal agencies to provide this aid. A near-term fix remains elusive but the U.S. should act now to reform State and other agencies so their personnel are prepared for future engagements. Consideration should be given to crafting reform legislation for the State Department similar to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act that reformed the Defense Department's organization, responsibilities, and training. A failure to properly prepare American diplomats and reconstruction experts will adversely impact the new American strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Broadly speaking, the gains won in Iraq through military efforts can only be sustained by continuous nonmilitary investments within Iraq proper. Vital to this sustainment effort are the continued reform of Iraq's police forces and the continued growth of its rule of law (ROL) sector. In a state with a long history of dictators, the fragility of the ROL sector is of special concern. A lapse in its development will panic Iraqis and stress their new democracy to the breaking point. A mili-

tary coup would signal the failure of Iraq as an emerging democracy. If Iraq fails as a democracy, America's regional strategy will also fail.

In the international arena, the United States can provide more assistance than it can with respect to Iraq's internal issues. Iraq remains uncertain of its relationship with Europe and other economic powers, and vice versa. By encouraging other economic powers to engage Iraq through economic investments, the U.S. can help integrate Iraq back into the international economy.

### **Policy Implications**

The U.S. has to decide several policy issues in order to pursue and safeguard our national interests, such as:

1. Do we possess the political will to continue our military engagement in the region in time of war and in time of violent peace?
2. Do we have the necessary organizational structures and doctrine in place to ensure the U.S. can deploy skilled and motivated personnel, both military and civilian, capable of "winning the peace"?
3. Is our diplomatic corps properly trained to represent the interests of the United States in violent and dangerous situations?

America's posture in the Gulf after 2011 will remain closely linked to both Iraq and Iran. Our strategy must focus on the establishment of a stable region but with the understanding that our strategic goals will remain complex, resource intensive, and require all forms of U.S. national power to achieve them.

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