

# **Iraq's National Elections 2010: The Parties, the Issues, and the Challenges for American Policy**



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## Iraq's National Elections 2010: The Parties, the Issues, and the Challenges for American Policy

Iraq's elections in March 2010 will be the most important of the several held since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. They will help determine whether Iraq will continue its current advance toward greater stability and political inclusiveness, or revert to the zero-sum politics of fragmentation and ethnic violence.

This much is certain: the elections will reshape the national government and perhaps the top political leadership as well. A new parliament, a new cabinet, and possibly a new prime minister and president will be seated in the government formation process to follow. More important, the elections bid fair to yield a new Iraqi politics, should voters choose on the basis of candidates' stands on the issues at the expense of narrowly-defined sectarian identification.

There are more troubling alternatives: a possible reversion to the repression and authoritarianism of the past, or even a systemic breakdown that would spur increasing civil strife in the absence of an overarching national political compromise. These disparate outcomes highlight what is at stake: not only the future political trajectory of Iraq, but also its status and general orientation within the region.<sup>1, 2</sup>

In addition, the election will be a defining point in Iraq's relations with the United States. Given the thousands of lives and the hundreds of billions of dollars America has invested in the military intervention in Iraq—including many millions more devoted to the promotion of democratic values and civil society—the elections and their aftermath demand an effective policy response by the United States to strengthen the bilateral relationship and continue to help build Iraq's democracy.

The question is whether the United States will make the needed commitment to Iraq. The Obama administration has at times seemed ambivalent. In announcing his "new strategy to end the war" to an audience of Marines at Camp Lejeune in February 2009, President Obama pledged to work toward an Iraq that is "sovereign, stable and self-reliant," but scaled down U.S. objectives in Iraq, set a goal of withdrawing all "combat troops" by the end of August 2010, and declined to mention democracy as a goal. A year later in his State of the Union speech Obama characterized military withdrawal as the chief feature of U.S. policy. He noted that "we are responsibly leaving Iraq to its people... We will support the Iraqi government as they hold elections, and we will continue to partner with the Iraqi people to promote regional peace and prosperity. But make no mistake: This war is ending, and all of our troops are coming home." Vice President Biden reiterated this point in a televised interview, saying "I'm very optimistic about Iraq. I mean this could be one of the great achievements of this administration. You're going to see 90,000 American troops come marching home by the end of the summer."<sup>3</sup> The focus on U.S. withdrawal increasingly appears to be the aim of our policy toward Iraq in and of itself.

That would be a mistake. The United States will need to remain involved in Iraq's political future. The stability that the United States seeks cannot easily be achieved without the legitimacy that democracy confers. If Iraq slips back toward the divisive and authoritarian politics of the past, the fragile political entente among the various factions, sects and ethnicities could be destroyed, Iraq's international supporters and investors alienated, and the country pushed back toward the intense civil violence of earlier years. But too little attention has been paid in Washington to this turning point in Iraq's history, a fact which bodes well neither for the future of America's interests in the Persian Gulf nor its Iraq policy.

A complete review of this policy is warranted after the election. It should take a comprehensive look at whether the United States has the diplomatic and financial resources it needs to advance its objectives; concentrate on the democratic imperative; determine how to implement the strategic framework the United States signed with Iraq in 2008; and decide how to use the massive residual forces the United States is likely to leave behind after the Administration's self-imposed deadline for the withdrawal of combat troops by August 31, 2010. In addition, the United States should decide how best to employ its influence to assist Iraq in managing its internal political disagreements, while helping Iraq reintegrate into the Arab world. This is a daunting task. But it is one that is necessary to the defense of U.S. interests in a volatile region.

### **Electoral Controversies and Compromised Solutions: Iraq on the Cusp of Elections**

Given the high stakes, many of Iraq's communities and parties believe this year's election will influence their political fortunes and the direction of the country for years to come. It thus is no surprise that they fought each step of the way over the modalities and even the parties allowed to participate. Two major controversies placed their stamp on the electoral season, illuminating fractures in Iraqi society and highlighting the difficulties the U.S. faces as it considers the post-election landscape and long-term U.S. policy.

The first major controversy involved a lengthy battle over the Iraqi electoral law. While ostensibly centering on the procedures governing the vote, in reality the fight touched on issues that speak directly to the future of Iraq's national unity and democratic system.

Two main issues dominated this debate. The first was whether to use voter rolls from 2004 or 2009, an issue of critical importance to Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen vying for control of the oil-rich Kirkuk region. The second was whether to use an "open list" system that would allow voters to choose individual candidates or a "closed list" system that would allow choices only among political parties.

The issue of the voter rolls was perhaps the most bitterly contested. Iraq's Kurdish parties insisted on using the 2009 voter rolls to reflect the influx of Kurds back into the Kirkuk region since Saddam's fall and especially since 2005. (This migration essentially reversed the effects of Saddam's "Arabization" policy, which had displaced Kurds from

the region and effected the settlement of Arabs there.) The area's Arab and Turkmen residents, fearful of being dispossessed, demanded in turn the use of the 2004 voter rolls. These would have recorded a smaller Kurdish population. In the end, a compromise was reached that met the minimum requirements of all three parties, mandating the use of the 2009 rolls while allowing broad scope for challenges to and verification of the results.

The second issue, whether to use an open or closed list, was also resolved through a protracted struggle and a compromise that reflected broad support among political parties and even the voters themselves.

The 2005 parliamentary elections employed a closed-list system, which allowed voters to cast their ballots for a party but not individual candidates. This served to protect politicians from assassination by keeping their names secret. The system's great disadvantage, however, lay in strengthening the hand of generally unrepresentative parties, who picked which of their candidates would receive seats in Iraq's parliament, the Council of Representatives (COR), according to previously, and privately, arranged precedence lists. The voters, in essence, did not know whom specifically they were electing to office.

An open list system, on the other hand, enables voters to choose either a party or a specific candidate and his party. In other words, voters can simply pick a party slate or choose a party while indicating preferences among candidates on its list, thus influencing the candidates' chances of landing a seat in the COR. This makes it easier for voters to overcome the wishes of party bosses and seat representatives on the basis of issues, experience, and the like, potentially mitigating the role of sect and ethnicity in the process. The open list was used most recently in the provincial elections of 2009 and is preferred by the Iraqi public. It was also endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who at key moments has thrown his weight behind the democratic process. In this case, a public statement from Sistani in favor of the open list was decisive in securing parliamentary approval for its use in 2010.

The Iraqi parliament finally approved the election law in November 2009 after a lengthy period of inaction, a year-long parliamentary impasse over the actual legislation itself, a veto by Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, and a follow-on struggle concerning the distribution of seats in the newly-expanded COR. The drama necessitated postponement of the elections from January until March 7, 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The most recent controversy to afflict the coming elections—a sweeping ban on numerous candidates and parties on questionable political grounds—was the most serious yet, threatening as it did to call into question the election's outcome and legitimacy. In January 2010, a committee of parliament called the Justice and Accountability Commission (JAC) barred nearly 500 candidates and nine political lists from running on suspicion of pro-Ba'athist views, pursuant to constitutional articles that outlaw the Ba'ath Party. While the ban involved only a small fraction of the approximately 6,500 candidates in the running and affected both Shi'a and Sunni politicians, the committee's decision appeared to fall most heavily on several high-profile Sunnis and their lists,

including Salah al-Mutlaq and his Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, a key member of the largely secular Iraqi Nationalist Movement, or Iraqiyya.<sup>5</sup> Dhafer al-Ani, the third most senior candidate in Iraqiyya, was also disqualified.

The process leading to the candidate ban was opaque and legally dubious. (President Talabani insisted that the Commission had not been formally approved by the COR and requested a Supreme Court review of the decision.) It was also viewed as politically suspect due to the fact that the JAC was run by a Shi'a politician, Faisal Ali al-Lami, with close ties to Ahmad Chalabi, who headed the government's controversial De-Ba'athification committee and also sat on the JAC. As candidates themselves, al-Lami and Chalabi were also seen as having irreconcilable conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Maliki vocally supported the legality and the results of the JAC's deliberations, and fought to uphold them.

The disqualifications came as a shock to the political system and evidently to the United States as well, which according to some accounts had been aware that the commission was considering barring candidates but was taken aback by the scope of the committee's decision. Vice President Biden traveled to Baghdad to discuss the issue with the Iraqi government. In public he stressed the importance of a "fair and transparent" election process. But he refused to criticize the committee's decision and stressed that the United States "fully supports" Iraq's constitutional ban on the Ba'ath Party. Biden's spokesman told reporters in Baghdad that "it's not for any outsider to tell the Iraqis how to resolve this issue."<sup>6</sup> Privately, Biden pushed for a solution that would allow the banned candidates to run and resolve their status after the election. But the tenor of the Vice President's diplomatic mission was indicative of the "hands off" attitude the Administration has taken so far in pursuing its Iraq policy.

A murky series of legal events ensued. An Iraqi appeals court reversed the candidate ban on February 3, a decision that was itself partially reversed a few days later. Little more than a week following that, after personal intervention in the judicial deliberations by Maliki, an appeals court once again acted, absolving 26 candidates of the charges against them while allowing the ban on the others to stand, including al-Mutlaq and al-Ani. Mutlaq in turn announced in late February that his party would boycott the election altogether.

Whatever the final outcome, this development cast a pall over the looming election. An indelible impression has been left that the electoral process is being manipulated by the Shi'a parties to the detriment of Sunni interests. The effect on Sunni turnout and attitudes has yet to be determined.

### **The Parties and Their Platforms**

These controversies over the conduct of the elections have set the stage for a potentially bitter and disputed contest, and heightened tensions among Iraq's main ethnic and sectarian groups. Uncertainty was already on the rise due to the 2009 breakup of the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the ruling Shi'a coalition that had dominated the

government for the previous four years, and the formation of new political lists that offered solid alternatives to Maliki and brought important new political players onto the scene.

At the time of this writing, six main coalitions (among more than a hundred others) are likely to contend for dominance in the next Iraqi government.<sup>7</sup>

- **State of Law.** Strains within the INA, comprising Maliki's Dawa party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), prompted the prime minister to break from the Alliance and assemble an inter-sectarian coalition prior to provincial elections in 2009. Maliki calculated that such a party, running on a platform of security and a strong and united Iraq, would prove popular with voters tired of parties whose main appeal lay in their religious orientation but who failed to deliver public services or security. The gamble paid off, and candidates associated with Maliki won significant victories in the provincial vote. The State of Law coalition, reformulated for this year's election, includes Dawa along with a mixture of Sunni tribal leaders (among them the Anbar National Salvation Front, the smaller of the two Anbar Sunni parties that sprang from the province's Awakening movements), Shi'a Kurds, Christians and independent politicians. The coalition advocates the same platform it did in the 2009 provincial elections—security, public services and national unity. State of Law is likely to become the strongest party in the 2010 COR. Maliki is favored to remain as prime minister, although his chances have dimmed of late due to the electoral controversies and accusations of authoritarianism.
- **The Iraqi National Alliance,** though weakened by the break with Dawa and losses in the provincial elections, will remain a vigorous competitor. The Alliance now comprises ISCI along with supporters of the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, former prime minister Ibrahim Ja'afari, Ahmed Chalabi, the Shi'a party Fadhila, and a scattering of Sunni political figures. The coalition's main point of attack is opposition to Maliki and an appeal to Shi'a solidarity. Its greatest weakness, however, is its lack of a demonstrated record of effectiveness on issues most Iraqis care about, its inability to appeal more broadly outside the Shi'a community, and its perceived closeness to Iran.
- **Kurdistan's two main parties,** the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) led by regional President Masoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan headed by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, form the third major political alliance. The Kurdish bloc sees the 2010 elections as crucial to maintaining Kurdistan's virtual autonomy and privileges. Thus, the KDP and the PUK have maneuvered for every advantage in the run-up to the elections. They will seek to maximize their kingmaking power in Baghdad and increase their leverage on issues of interest to the Kurds, particularly the future of Kirkuk and control over oil resources and revenues. Their ability to do so, however, may be limited by a new political party, Goran (or Change), which won about 25 percent of the seats in the elections for the Kurdish regional parliament in 2009. If Goran does well in March 2010,

Kurdish political maneuvering vis-à-vis the central government may be circumscribed.

- **The Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiyya).** Former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite, joined with senior Sunni politician Saleh al-Mutlaq, Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi (Sunni) and two other Sunni parties to run on a non-sectarian platform. The alliance intends to campaign on a theme of national unity. The JAC's decision to ban Mutlaq, al-Ani and others from the election has thrown the coalition into disarray. Despite this, it is still seen as the most potent challenger to Maliki and State of Law.
- **Tawafuq (the Iraqi Accordance Front),** is a predominantly Sunni Arab list which since the 2005 elections has repeatedly splintered and now consists mainly of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), the Iraqi Peoples Gathering and various tribal leaders. It is headed by IIP Secretary General Osama Tikriti and COR Speaker Ayad al-Samurraie. The party is expected largely to reflect Sunni interests on equitable sharing of resources and constitutional reform intended to guarantee Sunni political rights.
- **Unity Alliance of Iraq.** Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani, a Shi'a, and Ahmed Abu Risha, the head of the Anbar Awakening and a top leader of anti-al Qaeda Sunni tribal sheikhs, joined with others to form a broadly multi-sectarian group running on a platform of secular nationalism. Bolani and his allies formed the Alliance after failing to come to an agreement with Maliki on joining State of Law. Maliki and his supporters subsequently mounted a political attack on Bolani in an unsuccessful effort to force him step down from his government post. The group remains perhaps the most genuinely inter-sectarian political list, and intends to run on a platform of secular nationalism.
- **Other players** in the March electoral sweepstakes include tribal leaders and small minority parties representing sects and ethnic groups such as the Assyrians, Christians, Faily Kurds, Sabeans, Shabak, Turkmen, and Yazidis, who are expected to wield local influence and ally with other parties to ensure their interests are protected.

### **The Role of Outsiders**

Foreign powers—notably Iran, the Gulf states, Jordan and Turkey —will take a keen interest in the outcome of the elections as well, and will likely seek to influence them by backing favored parties and politicians. Jordan and several of the Gulf States did just that in 2005 in an attempt to protect Sunni interests and thwart what they perceived as growing Iranian influence. This effort largely failed. Few of the candidates they backed with money and political favor proved successful, due in large part to the Gulf states' lack of “eyes on the ground” in Iraq—embassies and effective intelligence operations — that possessed real insight into Iraqi politics and could capably pick winners and losers. Sunni Arab politicians who chose to make their obeisances in Gulf capitals were their

main source of information; the skewed intelligence, special pleading and highly partisan agendas they retailed there were an important factor in the Gulf's poor choices.

Tehran had considerably more success in its own efforts in 2005, since many of the leading Shi'a politicians of ISCI and Dawa had spent years in Iranian exile. They were politically indebted to Tehran and lavished with money and other forms of support. This time around Tehran is expected to be active as well, but times have changed. To an important extent, being seen as Tehran's ally has become a drawback for Iraqi parties, and Iraq's traditional nationalism (with its anti-Persian overtones) has emerged more strongly in recent years. Strident criticism of Iran from Sunni Arabs may have found a more effective political outlet now that some of them have joined with Shi'a electoral lists. Recent incidents of aggressive Iranian demands on Iraq, such as the short-lived occupation of Iraq's al-Fakka oil wells by Iranian forces in December 2009, have also helped inflame suspicions of Iran. And Tehran's own internal crisis has made it something less than a role model for Iraq's democrats and distracted Iran's leaders from mounting the type of effort to influence the elections they might have made just a few years ago. In short, the Iranian moment in Iraq's politics may have passed.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Turkey will do what it can to influence the results, although its scope of activity extends almost exclusively to northern Iraq and the protection of Turkmen interests. Turkey has sought better relations with both the KRG and the central government during the last year; its efforts in the election will be neither decisive nor disruptive.

### **The Major Issues**

Outsiders, then, will not be the determining factor in the election. Iraq's tribal, ethnic and religious loyalties, local concerns, and various forms of political skullduggery are likely to play a bigger role, as they have in the past. And this year, particularly in a time of global recession, economic worries—jobs and delivery of basic services—are very much on voters' minds and command the attention of all the parties. However, two major issues overshadow this election: security and nationalism. A third issue, Maliki's rising tendency to authoritarianism, and the implications for the future of Iraqi democracy, has rapidly become a touchstone as well.

Regarding the first issue, security, Maliki's coalition in the January 2009 provincial elections ran largely on the major gains the prime minister had presided over since the U.S. "surge" in 2007. These included his government's success in confronting lawless Shi'a militia in Baghdad and Basra. As security is the major preoccupation of most Iraqis, the State of Law coalition has once again made use of it leading up to this year's national elections. In response, al-Qaida remnants and unreformed insurgents launched a pre-election campaign of violence centered on spectacular suicide bombing attacks in Baghdad and other major cities. These are designed to discredit the government's security claims, provoke infighting among security agencies, and intimidate voters from participating in the election. While the spike in violence may succeed in denting Maliki's image and limiting State of Law's electoral gains, it is unlikely to disrupt the conduct of

the elections themselves, for which the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are well-prepared. But security will remain a preoccupation for the electorate as the vote approaches.

Related to security is the second broad issue, Iraqi nationalism. As the end of the U.S. military presence has come into view, many politicians, Maliki included, have positioned themselves to take credit by bashing the “occupiers.” The prime minister made an early foray into establishing this as a campaign theme when he publicly boasted that the security transfer from the U.S. to Iraq in June 2009 was a “victory” for the Iraqi people, ruffling some feathers in Washington. Maliki unexpectedly called last August for a referendum on the U.S.-Iraq status of forces agreement, known officially as the “Withdrawal Agreement,” to run concurrently with the parliamentary elections. Legislation setting the terms for such a referendum was never enacted and little has been heard about it since. Still, Maliki’s political point was made. Other electoral lists, especially Iraqiyya and the Unity Alliance of Iraq, have also campaigned on nationalist themes.

A corollary to political nationalism, anti-Ba’athism, has emerged in the last six months. The rise in attacks in Baghdad and elsewhere has prompted Maliki to decry the alleged resurgence of the Ba’athists and their purported designs to take power once again through military coup or other means. The issue strikes a chord with many Iraqis, but especially with the prime minister’s Shi’a constituency. His skillful appeal to fears of a Ba’ath comeback has enabled Maliki to position himself as the guarantor of the Iraqi state, a stance seen by many in the Shi’a community as a fundamental national issue but taken by Sunni Arabs as a codeword for suppression of Sunni rights and political power. Anti-Ba’athism may well work to bolster support for the State of Law coalition among the majority Shi’a population, but at a cost to intra-ethnic political trust and the credibility of the elections.

Maliki’s growing reputation for authoritarianism, amplified by anti-Ba’ath rhetoric, has become a third overarching issue of this campaign season. The controversial candidate disqualifications and Maliki’s involvement in them has underscored a deep current of unease with the prime minister and provided his antagonists a powerful line of attack.

Increasing public concern over the prime minister’s misuse of the Iraqi Security Forces to intimidate political opponents has reinforced these criticisms. Over the last year the prime minister has engaged in various purges of the ISF in an apparent effort to cement his control over the security forces and weaken his political opponents, mainly Interior Minister al-Bolani. Security elements under Maliki’s control have intervened in provincial political squabbles and arrested opponents of the State of Law coalition. Some see Maliki’s actions as part of an effort to increase the effectiveness of the Iraqi state after a long period in which its writ held little sway beyond the Green Zone in Baghdad, an exercise in securing the authority granted to the government by the constitution. Nevertheless, Maliki’s actions are seen by many as increasingly authoritarian in style, and they will be exploited by many political lists to enhance their own democratic and nationalist credentials. The basic question of what sort of state Iraq wants to become is very much on the table.

Given all this, what sort of political landscape can be expected in the election's aftermath? First, Iraq's existing balance of forces will be dramatically altered, with two major blocs (State of Law and the Iraqi National Alliance) competing to represent the majority Shi'a community. On the secular nationalist front, Iyad Allawi's Iraqiyya (despite the ban on running mates al-Mutlaq and al-Ani) and al-Bolani's Unity of Iraq will probably make significant showings. The two major Kurdish parties will hold their own but might lose a share of their vote to the new Kurdish party, Goran, complicating internal Kurdish political calculations as well as negotiations over their share of power in the new government. Tawafuq may also do well, especially if Sunni voters, worried by perceived assaults on their interests, decide to take refuge in communitarian solidarity. Thus, from five to eight blocs may be actively competing for the major ministerial positions, including the post of prime minister, with Maliki's future in doubt.

All in all, Iraq faces a period of intense political uncertainty and protracted wrangling to put a new government in place. The country's political stress points and unresolved issues, magnified by the election, will be painfully raw. This is the picture the United States will face as it sets about shaping its policy toward Iraq for the coming period.

### **Beyond the Elections: Reimagining the U.S. Role in Iraq**

The issues on which these elections are being contested, the identity of the electoral lists that have formed to take part, and the controversies that have shaped them have deep implications for the nature of the Iraqi state and its future political path. Both Iraq and the Obama administration see the elections as starting the countdown to the final U.S. withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011. From any perspective, the election will have a major impact on U.S. policy toward Iraq and ultimately the region.

The biggest challenge for Washington in the upcoming year will be to grasp the importance of this period, avoid a sense of drift, and seize the opportunities presented—and there are several. To do this, the United States must reimagine its role in post-election Iraq.

The task is vital to the development of a coherent U.S. strategy for dealing with many regional challenges, notably Iran. As former State Department Counselor Eliot Cohen has noted,

The US must have a broad policy for the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Such a policy should—must—work Iraq into a broader pattern of relationships. The emergence of a free Iraq offers great opportunities. A relatively stable, representative Iraq and secular Iraq would help counterbalance Iran, support moderate regimes such as Jordan, and fuel a world economy that, however climate conscious, will need oil. Simply to talk about “responsibly leaving Iraq to its people” is, in fact, irresponsible. Iraq will need care and attention to stay on its current fragile trajectory to success. But it is also an opportunity not to be neglected.<sup>9</sup>

The Administration should start by conducting a full review of its policy toward this important country, as it has twice for Afghanistan. The aim must be to craft a durable U.S.-Iraqi partnership that will enhance Iraq's democratic transition and support American national interests, especially the stability and security of the Persian Gulf region. Forging such a partnership will require real diplomatic energy to leverage America's assistance programs, powers of persuasion, and relationships with Iraqi leaders.

The following elements should be among the conclusions of any policy review.

- ***Build America's Commitment to Iraqi Democracy.*** Support for Iraq's democratic institutions and process has been a cornerstone for U.S. foreign policy since the war in 2003. About 66% of the Obama Administrations' assistance request for Iraq in FY 2010 is designated under the State Department's "governing justly and democratically" rubric, a six percent increase from FY 2009. The request also proposes an increase for human rights/rule of law programs as well as good governance. These are laudable objectives. However, there are some troubling questions of priority raised by the budget request. For example, the Administration would cut funding for the development of civil society organizations by 54% and programs that support political competition and consensus building by a lesser amount.<sup>10</sup> The overall budget request therefore seems to signal a lesser focus on strengthening the real building blocks of representative democracy.

As Iraqis take greater control over their political destiny and the American military footprint wanes, the United States will have fewer avenues through which to influence Iraq's political development. Democracy promotion is one of them. The U.S. should direct more resources in its assistance program to encouraging party-building, development of independent NGOs, cross-sectarian alliances, judicial capacity, and other such elements vital to a strong and functioning democracy. To this end the Administration would do well to push for greater involvement and resources from the international community, particularly the European Union and the United Nations.

In addition, the United States should elevate the importance of democracy building in its bilateral dealings with the Iraqi government. Washington should make clear that the consolidation of Iraq's democracy is a top foreign policy priority. Among other things, this will require a shift in America's public rhetoric. Iraqi leaders, like other rulers in the region, are adept at deciphering spoken and unspoken messages from Washington. If democracy remains unstated among U.S. goals, the Iraqi leadership will take notice and act accordingly.

- ***Focus the Necessary Diplomatic Resources and Attention to Succeed.*** In many important respects Iraq is the forgotten war, defined by the Obama Administration's insistence on a "responsible withdrawal" as the primary determinant of U.S. policy interests in Iraq. The Administration appointed an

accomplished and experienced diplomat as ambassador, Christopher Hill; however, he arrived in Baghdad without expertise in Iraq and the Arab world. According to several observers, he views his charge as winding down American military involvement, not helping manage Iraqi political quarrels or setting the stage for a new bilateral relationship.

At the State Department, management for day-to-day Iraq policy has been returned to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, with its many other distractions, and the office of the Special Coordinator for Iraq has been eliminated. Under Bush the official serving in this role reported directly to the Secretary of State and routinely participated in meetings with the President.

In the intelligence community, personnel are migrating to the Afghanistan account, which today is seen as more career-enhancing.

In the White House itself, Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, formerly the Deputy National Security Advisor in charge of Iraq and Afghanistan, has been shifted to focus exclusively on Afghanistan. No one has replaced him in the Iraq function. The NSC office that has primary responsibility for Iraq has been downsized and the senior director has been given authority for Persian Gulf countries as well. President Obama no longer meets routinely with Prime Minister Maliki via secure video teleconference as did President Bush (who did so weekly in his last year in office), preferring instead to utilize Vice President Biden as his Iraq point man. This in itself is problematic. Given Biden's previous support for the partitioning of Iraq into sectarian states, his ability to talk Iraqi politicians into compromise is suspect.

The emphasis on the 2010 force withdrawal at the expense of all else, combined with the lack of consistent high-level focus, poses a significant risk of policy drift. Iraq may increasingly want for American political attention and merely become one more budget bone to be fought over. As the International Crisis Group's Joost Hilterman observes,

Whether the State Department can obtain money to shore up political institutions will depend on the mood of Congress and, behind it, the American public. Some US officials rightly fear, as one ruefully phrased it, that the new approach toward Iraq 'will be driven by financial resources, not policy,' i.e., by how much money will be available. Instead, he said, Washington should set clear priorities about what it seeks to accomplish in the final year.<sup>11</sup>

In short, there is a lack of credible high-level diplomatic involvement in Iraq that reduces the United States' ability to react in a timely fashion to important political developments and effectively deploy the influence the United States still has. Iraq should once more be placed at the heart of the American agenda in the region, with the attention it deserves.

- ***Help Iraq Solve Key Internal Conflicts.*** The U.S. footprint is shrinking, and the United States soon will have far less capacity to insist that Iraq make progress toward the many vital political goals captured in the 18 “benchmarks” proposed by the Bush Administration and passed into law by Congress in 2007.

Nevertheless, the United States is well positioned to play a major role on certain key issues that will help shape Iraq’s future. Chief among these is the dispute over the city of Kirkuk, which reflects ongoing bitterness over Saddam Hussein’s efforts to change the ethnic makeup of the area. This is an aspect of the growing tensions between the Kurdish region and the central government, which also manifests itself in security problems along the “fault line” between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, as well as the question of how much autonomy the KRG will be able to exercise. Given the strong relationship the United States has built with Kurdish leaders over many years, the U.S. could play an important post-election role by helping to mediate among the parties with an eye to settling this complex and divisive issue in a way that will strengthen Iraq’s unity. The United States has made a start by bringing together the Kurdish peshmerga militia with the ISF to discuss security issues. But security is only one aspect of the overall problem.

Other issues too may benefit from the exercise of the United States’ good offices, such as the wrangles over constitutional revisions pertaining to the rights of Sunni Arabs and national sharing of petrochemical revenues. The Administration must sort these out as part of a general policy review and identify areas in which it could be most helpful.

- ***Fully Implement the Strategic Framework with Iraq.*** The agreements the Bush administration and the Iraqi government signed near the end of 2008 outline a far-reaching political, economic and military relationship between the United States and Iraq.<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, unprecedented in U.S. relations with the countries of Arab world. But scant attention seems to have been paid over the last year to the full implementation of this framework beyond a focus on troop withdrawal. The United States should embrace the opportunities these agreements afford to expand and deepen relations with this pivotal Arab country. For example, the United States should build on the framework to broaden the U.S. defense relationship with Baghdad and position Iraq as a force that can be integrated into the growing Persian Gulf security architecture sponsored by the United States.

The Administration should also evaluate the role of our residual force presence. General Ray Odierno, the U.S. commander in Iraq, has noted that approximately 50,000 American troops will remain in the country after August 2010, and perhaps until the formal withdrawal date specified in the agreements with Iraq, December 31, 2011, . The planned mission of these troops—or “advise and assist brigades,” as it has been termed—is to provide the ISF with support and training, conduct certain counterterrorism operations, and provide military force protection as well as defend U.S. civilian employees.

But what other roles, if any, will they fill? Does their presence extend to deterrence of Iran, guaranteeing Kurdish autonomy, or affording insurance against a coup? And if the elections usher in further domestic strife—what then must the U.S. do, and can it afford to keep to its rigid withdrawal plan? Finally, what happens in 2012? Will Iraq and the United States require only a standard-issue military cooperation office, as we have in many overseas missions, or will there be a mutual need to negotiate a more robust military presence? These and other questions must be addressed as part of any policy review.

- ***Continue to Help Iraq Forge a New Relationship with the Arab World.*** The election should afford an opportunity to display a new Iraqi polity to the Arab world—one with more, and more genuinely, representative lawmakers, and an increasingly sovereign Iraq on the downslope of a major U.S. military presence. Whatever the flaws of these elections, the United States should press ahead on the diplomatic front to effect Arab reconciliation with Baghdad. Such an effort has been long in the making, with painfully limited results so far. But it remains essential to binding Iraq into the regional network of political alliances and military relationships the United States has built over decades to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf. By and large, the Arab states have failed to reciprocate Iraqi overtures and U.S. diplomatic efforts, often on the dubious grounds that Iraq has become a Persian vassal. This is not only wrong-headed, it is dangerous. The Arab states must be made to understand this and move toward improved relations with Baghdad.
- ***Encourage Early Government Formation.*** After the election in December 2005, five months of indecision and political horse-trading followed until Nouri al-Maliki was named Prime Minister and a cabinet formed. The interim was filled with backroom deal-making and the dangerous assertion of Iranian influences. A similar delay this time will present even greater opportunities for mischief from Tehran and will encourage political drift and infighting at a moment neither Iraq nor the United States can afford it. This time Washington should offer its good offices to help the parties come to an earlier agreement on government formation. While the U.S. cannot dictate to the Iraqi parties, and must not play favorites in the process, its views still carry weight. Skillful, persistent diplomacy—backed by the highest levels of the U.S. government—can play an influential role in determining the outcome.

### **Where Then From Here?**

The United States and Iraq both need the election of March 2010 to serve as a launch pad for a positive transformation of Iraqi domestic politics, the bilateral relationship, and Iraq's regional role. Proactive American diplomacy to help bring this about will be essential. But benign neglect—simply leaving Iraq to the Iraqis without a strategic plan to encourage the country's political advancement—would be risky. It is worth recalling that the U.S. lack of attention to Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet defeat in the 1980s helped give rise to anarchy and eventually the Taliban.

However much Americans may wish to believe the war is over once U.S. troops depart, the reality is quite different. Internal conflicts will continue, potentially becoming worse and adversely impacting regional stability. U.S. engagement in Iraq—with the diplomatic attention, financial resources and military strategy to back it up—is needed to keep these conflicts in check and maintain a strong relationship between the two countries. Achieving this objective will help lay the foundation for maintaining America’s influence in the Persian Gulf for decades to come.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Iraq’s possible different political trajectories, see Charles W. Dunne, “Iraq Going Forward: Threats to its Sovereignty, Prospects for its Future Role in the Middle East,” edited by Meghan L. O’Sullivan and Mitchell B. Reiss, Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations, College of William and Mary, May 2009

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough look at Iraq’s political transformation, including elections from 2005 until the present, see Kenneth Katzman, “Iraq: Politics, Elections and Benchmarks,” Congressional Research Service, January 15, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Biden interview with Larry King, CNN, February 10, 2010 ([http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2010/02/11/biden\\_iraq\\_will\\_be\\_one\\_of\\_obamas\\_great\\_achievements.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2010/02/11/biden_iraq_will_be_one_of_obamas_great_achievements.html))

<sup>4</sup> Basic facts and answers to frequently asked questions on the 2010 COR elections are available at the U.S. Embassy and UN websites (<http://iraq.usembassy.gov/iraq-national-elections-faqs.html>) and ([http://www.uniraq.org/documents/ElectoralMaterial/280110/UNAMI\\_EAO\\_Fact%20Sheet\\_2010%20CoR%20Elections\\_20100128\\_EN.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/ElectoralMaterial/280110/UNAMI_EAO_Fact%20Sheet_2010%20CoR%20Elections_20100128_EN.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> Other prominent politicians affected by the ban included Saad al-Janabi and his Populist Gathering of Iraq, a key Sunni list, and leading members of the Iraqi Islamic Party, another major Sunni grouping. See Marina Ottaway and Danial Kaysi, “De-Baathification as a Political Tool: Commission Ruling Bans Political Parties and Leaders,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 26, 2010 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=24778>)

<sup>6</sup> Jim Loney, “VP Biden flies into Iraq amid Baathist row,” *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2010 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/22/AR2010012202470.html>)

<sup>7</sup> A detailed summary of the key parties, personalities and their electoral strengths and weaknesses can be found at the Carnegie Endowment’s “Iraqi Elections 2010” (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/special/misc/iraqielections2010/>)

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Iran’s changing fortunes in Iraq, see Charles W. Dunne, *ibid.*, p. 7-9

<sup>9</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, “Taking the Measure of Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2010 (accessed at [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703481004574646080636258614.html?mod=WSJ\\_Opinion\\_LEFTTopOpinion](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703481004574646080636258614.html?mod=WSJ_Opinion_LEFTTopOpinion))

<sup>10</sup> Stephen McInerney, “The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2010: Democracy, Governance and Human Rights in the Middle East,” Project on Middle East Democracy and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, July 2009, pp. 28-29

<sup>11</sup> Joost R. Hiltermann, “Iraq on the Edge,” *The New York Review*, November 19, 2009, p. 20

<sup>12</sup> The foundational documents of the U.S. –Iraq relationship for the next critical year and beyond are the “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”, and the “Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq,” November 2008. Both may be accessed at, inter alia, [GlobalSecurity.org](http://GlobalSecurity.org).