

## COMMENTARY

**Conditions-Based U.S. Withdrawals from Iraq**

Anthony H. Cordesman

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There is nothing wrong with setting broad goals for withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq. The U.S. wants to leave as soon as this is feasible, and Iraqis have long wanted us to leave. At least since 2004, Iraq's Kurds have been the only group in Iraq that showed a consistent desire for the U.S. to stay.

It also is impossible to be certain that the risks of early withdrawal will really be greater from the risks of staying. It is at least possible that acting on early timelines will force Iraqis to move towards political accommodation, to take hard decisions, and become more effective. In fact, if all goes well in Iraq, deadlines like 2011 may prove practical—particularly if such deadlines do not preclude a large number of U.S. military advisors.

At the same time, it is not a good idea to bet a country—and the outcome of a war—on the strategic equivalent of filling an inside straight. Political rhetoric almost always “bets on the come;” it also often loses the bet. Iraq still faces a large number of risks and problems where a U.S. military presence does more to stabilize the situation than destabilize it, and where both Iraqi and U.S. leaders will need to be careful and realistic about how quickly they can move.

**The Uncertain State of Iraqi Security Forces**

The U.S. may be reaping some of the consequences of exaggerating the real progress in Iraqi security forces. Both Iraqi and U.S. politicians now seem to take such reporting too seriously and be unaware of how much still needs to be done.

The growing numbers of Iraqi security forces are impressive, and Iraqi forces really are performing with growing effectiveness. However, there are still serious ethnic and sectarian divisions and tensions in the Army and National Police. For example, there are two Army divisions that are effectively Kurdish, Kurdish forces have recently failed to follow central government orders in Diyala, and the entire Kurdish police force operates totally independently of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and MNSTC-I advisory effort. Similarly, Shi'ite units have recently conducted rogue operations against Iraqi Sunnis in the same province.

There are many severe qualitative problems in Iraqi Army forces. There are major shortages of qualified officers and NCOs, and Iraqi Army forces (174,268) are still in the process of a major expansion. The bulk of the army is still more a group of battalions than a force that is yet ready to operate as full brigades and divisions without U.S. partner units, embedded advisors, help in logistics and support, artillery and armor support, air combat and helicopter support, and a support in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

For all of the reports of Iraqi battalions being in the lead, the fact is that almost all of these battalions are still “Category II” units that need U.S. aid and support. Only 10 percent or less of the units “in the lead” are really ready to operate on their own. This is why both the Iraqi Minister of Defense and the most senior U.S. military advisors have talked about timelines like 2012 for the Iraqi Army to take over the counterinsurgency mission. This mission also is not is scarcely the same as being able to defend and deter against foreign pressure or military action. In fact, there still is no clear plan to rebuild Iraqi Army forces as a true national army as distinguished from a counterinsurgency force.

Such problems are even more critical in the case of the Iraqi Air Force (1,886), Navy, (1,872) and National Police. The Air Force and Navy still do not have clear procurement plans to acquire the combat systems they need. They are making real progress, but they remain cadres that are years away from becoming mature forces. How many years? Once again, there still is no agreed plan to make them into the kind of forces Iraq needs to deter and defend.

In fact, Iraqi and U.S. leaders seem to have agreed on possible timelines for U.S. withdrawal without any clear plan or even examination of what it will take to ensure that Iraqi forces can and will be ready to operate without U.S. support and security guarantees. This will be a critical priority for action in 2009 if a 2011 deadline is to involve minimal risk. It also will mean

eliminate most of the 6 month delay in U.S. process of arms sales and deliveries—and the 12 month Iraqi delay in planning and executing them—that now places basic limits on force expansion.

What is equally serious is that Iraq needs effective police forces and a local rule of law to go from “win” to “hold,” and government services and local development and economic activity to go from “win and hold” to “win, hold, and build.” This is not happening. There was no “year of the police” in 2007 and there is no year of the police in 2008. The U.S. is still experimenting with how to train and equip the police and other security forces, and there are major shortfalls in police and other Ministry of Interior advisors, Iraqi leader, equipment, and facilities.

The National Police (39,544) do seem to be making progress, but only have around 40 percent of the officers and NCOs they need. The regular Iraq police—the core of local security—generally have only token training and token capability. The most recent public State Department reports show that total strength is 299,757, and only 62 percent are “trained”—even if all trained Iraqi police were still in service. The reality is that desertions and departures probably have reduced the number of trained forces actually in service to around 40 percent.

Worse, progress in creating effective mix of local courts, legal representation, and jails lags or is negligible in much of the country, and this helps create further sectarian and ethnic problems as well as helps lead to high levels of crime and corruption. It is still more dangerous to be a policeman than a soldier, and police facilities are inadequate. Even where sectarian and ethnic issues are not a major factor, the police still tend to be passive unless paid to act, and to force confessions rather than investigate and gather evidence.

Once again, Iraqi and U.S. leaders seem to have agreed on possible timelines for U.S. withdrawal without any clear plan, or examination of what it will take to ensure that Iraqi police forces and a local rule of law effective. This too will be a critical priority for action in 2009 if a 2011 deadline is to involve minimal risk. It also will mean eliminate most of the six-month delay in U.S. process of arms sales and deliveries—and the 12-month Iraqi delay in planning and executing them—that now places basic limits on force expansion

### **The Broader Problem of Stability**

Security forces are only part of the issues involved in shaping conditions-based U.S. withdrawals. The timing and nature of Iraq’s elections—both local/provincial and national—remains uncertain. What is certain, they will again lead to new tensions between Iraq’s sectarian and ethnic groups, and there will be new intra-Shi’ite and intra-Sunni power struggles as well. Neither Iraq’s exile party dominated central government nor its national Sunni parties have ever face true competitive elections where Iraq’s people get to vote for more than closed lists and largely unknown politicians.

Three key elements could turn violent: The Sadr movement and JAM, the Sunni “Sons of Iraq,” and the Kurdish, Arab and minority factions along the ethnic fault line in the north. There also are still major problems in mixed areas, particularly Baghdad, Diyala, and the greater Kirkuk and Mosul areas. Moreover, Al Qa’ida in Iraq has shown that it can sustain its past levels of potentially destabilizing suicide bombings in spite of its defeats and the reductions in virtually every other kind of attack.

U.S. forces may not be popular, but they do have a stabilizing effect that helps damp down the risk these power struggles will turn violent. This stabilizing effect is also likely to increase during the critical transition period for elections and political accommodation if it is clear to Iraqis that the U.S. is leaving, and their own forces and government are taking over. On the one hand, setting broad targets for U.S. withdrawal can help. On the other hand, enforcing the wrong targets could push U.S. forces and influence out too quickly if things do not go extraordinarily smoothly. If things go wrong, or there are delays, a year or two more of a limited U.S. presence might make all the difference.

Both Iraqi and U.S. leaders also need to be more realistic about the real glue that can bind Iraqis together into some form of stable political accommodation. Elections are important, but money and oil revenues are at least equally important and are the prize in Iraqi politics. Iraq is making slow progress in using its money, but it has no oil law, no accepted plan to develop its resources, and no ability as yet to spend on the overall development petroleum and electricity sectors. Iraq also has vast numbers of unemployed and underemployed young men and virtually all job creation comes from government spending on either the security forces or civil service and government-dominated industries.

At present, the Iraqi central government only seems to have spent about 18 percent of its development funds for FY2008, in spite of accounting tricks the Iraqi Ministry of Finance has used to claim that the Iraqi central government has brought the total up to 57 percent. The limited data available indicate that the flow of money has left key provinces like Anbar with little real spending, and that the critical oil and electricity ministries are counting “advances” that may not actually be spend until 2009 or longer after as actual expenditures.

U.S. troops are scarcely the answer to the lack of, or mismanagement, of government spending—although U.S. advisors are still critical to the reform and effectiveness of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. A combination of U.S. help in enforcing stability, and civilian U.S. advisors is, however, potentially critical to helping and encouraging Iraq to spend its money. U.S. influence has so far proved critical to push Iraq’s leaders to spend in ways that show all factions they can get a fair share, and buy time for the post-election mix of central, provincial, and local government officials to work a practical way to spend.

Here, it is critical to remember that money, governance, and government services are the critical “build” element in “win, hold, and build.” Until Iraq is successful here, it needs to be as cautious about eliminating a stabilizing U.S. presence as it needs to be about eliminating U.S. forces before Iraqi security forces and the rule of law are ready. Joint, real world U.S. and Iraqi planning and cooperation to achieve these goals will be just as high a priority for the next administration(s) as creating effective Iraqi forces.

### **Conditions-Based Withdrawals**

None of these points mean that the U.S. should not agree to Iraqi pressure to set potential goals for withdrawal, or that 2011 is a bad number. Once again, neither the U.S. or Iraq have reason to want U.S. forces to stay any longer than necessary, and creating a joint set of pressures for the U.S. to leave as soon as possible is likely to be more constructive than destructive. At the same time, both Iraq and the U.S. now need to develop far clearer plans for such a transition, determine what goals are really feasible, and be prepared for problems and delays.

The resulting mix of real world planning and real-world conditions in Iraq may well lead to pauses in U.S. withdrawals. It may well prove harder to go below the level of 4-6 U.S. combat brigades in a strategic overwatch role than the status of forces agreement calls for. Iraq may need U.S. air, naval, and IS&R support well beyond 2011, as well as large teams of U.S. advisors.

If so, it will scarcely hurt Iraqi sovereignty to wait a few years for total U.S. withdrawal. If the U.S. presence continues to be stabilizing, a slower pace might lead to more Iraqi political accommodation, allow the pace of development to increase, and give Iraqi forces time to become fully capable of defending the country without U.S. support. This may not prove necessary, and every month should see the Iraqi take more control and the U.S. carefully assess what troop cuts it can make. The history of states in Iraq’s present position, however, shows that time and patience is critical. Stability takes as long as it takes, and no one can win if the result of rushing forward is sectarian and ethnic violence, and/or politics that become conflict rather than produce lasting stability.

*Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*