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The Future of the U.S. Military Presence in Iraq

By Julie Montgomery

The dramatic improvement in security in Iraq has changed the U.S. policy debate. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are taking a bigger role, the Maliki government's capacity is improving and the U.S. is gradually stepping aside.

A major reduction in the U.S. role is on the horizon, yet critical questions remain. How much influence does the U.S. have on Iraqi internal affairs and on the Iraq it leaves behind? Are there buttons that Washington can push to accelerate political progress? Or is the best solution for the U.S. to get out of Iraq and focus on reallocating resources and shoring up its position worldwide?

These questions were addressed in a recent USIP public meeting, "The Future of the U.S. Military Presence in Iraq" by a panel of four Iraq experts:

- Kimberley Kagan, president of the Institute for the Study of War
- Colin Kahl, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security
- Charles Knight, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives at the Commonwealth Institute
- Rend al-Rahim, USIP Iraq fellow

Continue to Engage or Go Home?

Kagan argued that continued U.S. engagement is essential for the recent security gains to be sustained. According to her, the U.S. military must remain fully engaged at least through the upcoming provincial and national elections. She asserted that U.S. troops are needed to ensure free and fair elections and to provide the Iraqi government with the time and protection necessary to stand itself up. Only then should the U.S. consider substantially reducing its presence in Iraq.

Offering a very different view, Knight called the war a disaster for the U.S. and argued that Washington should disengage from the failed policies of the Bush administration and create a short timeline for withdrawal. He asserted that security gains from the "surge strategy" in Iraq have reached their limit and that future security gains depend on removing the irritant of remaining U.S. forces and thereby opening the way to bring rejectionist forces into a government of national reconciliation. Instead of a situation dominated by a bilateral relationship of the U.S. and Iraq, he called for the formation of an international support group (Iraq's six neighbors, a representative of the U.N. secretary-general and the five permanent members of the Security Council) to partner with Iraqi leaders from all sectors in

convening a pan-Iraqi conference for national reconciliation and in contributing to a variety of other steps supportive of stability goals.

Between Kagan and Knight were Kahl and Rahim, who agreed that the U.S. should stay engaged in Iraq, but only to a certain point. Kahl and Rahim focused on the need for the Iraqi government to step up to the plate and make tough decisions, such as integrating the “Sons of Iraq” (Sunni militia groups) into the Iraqi security forces, passing an oil law, resolving territorial disputes and addressing the issue of Iraq’s displaced population. These issues have direct bearing on Iraq becoming a stable, self-sustaining state after a U.S. departure, and are needed to, in Kahl’s terms, “lock in the security gains of the surge.” However, the question remains: how does the U.S. exert leverage on Iraq’s leaders to address these political issues?

U.S. Leverage in Iraq

The question of U.S. leverage on Iraqi leaders was one of the areas of greatest divergence in the panel. Knight’s proposal relies principally on non-military leverage gained through strong support of international agency, regional diplomatic engagement, support to refugees and displaced persons and employment of Iraqis.

Kahl and Rahim both argued that the U.S. should condition its military, economic and political support for the government of Iraq (GOI) to resolve critical political issues. Military support—both troop presence and critical enablers like logistics and air support—obviously provides the greatest amount of leverage and is the area in which Iraq is most dependent on the U.S. However, Iraq also relies heavily on U.S. governance and economic support, as well as political support in Iraq’s relations with other states and in international institutions. Only through a U.S. threat to end this essential support are Iraqis likely to make the tough compromises necessary for the establishment of a stable, secure Iraq.

Kagan agreed with Kahl and Rahim about conditional support and leverage, but only to a point. The U.S. must lean on Iraqi leaders to make certain political compromises, and even withhold support to pressure these leaders. However, she made a critical distinction that others did not: the U.S. should only condition support for Iraq in ways that are “non-fatal.” By this line of reasoning, no failure of leaders in the GOI to achieve political progress is so grave that the U.S. should be willing to “let Iraq fail.” Kahl and Rahim agreed that some necessary compromises are unlikely to occur unless Iraqi leaders’ political future is at risk. Kagan’s approach was, therefore, too lenient to be effective.

Breaking Down the Options

Knight’s proposal stood apart from the other three in several crucial respects. His plan for immediate, unconditional withdrawal places responsibility for stabilizing Iraq onto the shoulders of the Iraqis and international community. In his assessment, the risks of leaving behind a failed state are counterbalanced by the improvement in the situation that will occur without the U.S. military presence acting as a source of violence. Unlike the other panelists, Knight’s proposal was based on the assessment that the U.S. has played almost an entirely negative role in Iraq, and that the prospects for it to begin to play a positive one—other than simply leaving—are dim.

By contrast, the other three panelists agreed on many of the fundamentals, and their differences were largely a matter of degree and emphasis. All argued that the U.S. has a critical interest in establishing self-sustaining stability in Iraq; that the U.S. should condition its support for Iraqi leaders on their achieving the political compromises necessary for this stability; and that some U.S. military presence will be necessary for the near- to medium-term. However, while all three were in agreement that Iraq’s

future depends on some combination of U.S. commitment and the will of Iraqi leaders, Kagan argued that the U.S. has in the past achieved more leverage over the GOI by increasing its commitment and that threatening or offering to withdraw forces has decreased that influence. The willingness of the Iraqi leadership to follow U.S. interests increases with the U.S. presence on the ground, as the surge year of 2007 demonstrates. Accordingly, Kahl and Rahim are willing to use the threat of withdrawal and follow through on it if Iraqi will appears to be insufficient—and risk the chaos that could result from that decision—whereas Kagan is not.

A new U.S. administration will take office in January 2009. While no one can predict what policy direction it will pursue in Iraq, the new administration will want to weigh the pros and cons of the arguments delineated by Kagan, Knight, Kahl and Rahim.

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