



Peace and Security Summit

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WORKING GROUP: Iraq: Ready to Go it Alone?

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This Iraq working group considered how the emerging relationship between Iraq and the West should evolve over the coming years as U.S. military forces withdraw from the country. Specifically, it considered how the security relationship between these nations might take shape with a new government in Baghdad and with the current Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) due to expire in December 31, 2011.

Session 1: Summary

The first session sought to identify the key diplomatic, economic and political issues in Iraq today. The working group members felt the outcome of the parliamentary elections were problematic, without a clear winner it would take some time to form a government – at least two months. Panel members also felt strongly that neither the current Prime Minister (Nouri al-Maliki) nor the “winner” of the most seats in the house (Ayad Alawi) were likely future Prime Ministers. The general consensus was that a weaker personality would probably be the outcome of the coalition building process required to develop a parliamentary majority, as required by the Iraqi Constitution.

Domestic economic and social issues were also likely to remain unresolved for some time – particularly the issue of the status of Kirkuk and the associated petroleum distribution issues. The issue of oil in Kirkuk represents a major point of contention but will not be a roadblock for the country’s continued progress. Ethnic and religious strife would continue to present challenges, but in general would not slow the progress of democracy in Iraq. As Iraqis learn to hold the central government responsible, right of return and right to stay will be important domestic issues. As the state becomes stronger institutionally and reaches into the population, Iraqi national identity will be strengthened. A successful and functioning political system in Iraq rested upon an acceptance of a pluralist identity.

Session 2: Summary

The second session addressed the security situation in Iraq directly, specifically considering whether sectarian differences would drive Iraq to civil war and whether the U.S. would keep forces in Iraq because the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) would not be capable of maintaining border security and internal order. The two guiding documents in the US and Iraq relationship – at present – are the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA). The expected weakness of the new Prime Minister will make any renegotiation of the SOFA between Iraq and the United States highly unlikely. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine any delay in U.S. forces withdrawing from Iraq. From the U.S. perspective, it is unlikely that President Obama would be able to announce anything other than a U.S. withdrawal as scheduled. From the Iraqi perspective, many politicians have also campaigned on the desire to have U.S. forces leave.

Despite these positions, the working group felt that because the Iraqi security forces had been built in a way that they could not operate without additional support it is clear that some continuing support or residual force presence will be required in training or advisory capacities in Iraq. All felt, however, that negotiating any extension of U.S. military support would be highly risky for any future government. Some form of intermediate solution that permitted continued U.S. training and financial support yet ensured Iraqi sovereignty needed to be developed. In all discussions of security, Iran and its presence in Iraq also needed to be considered.

Session 3: Summary

In the final meeting, this panel discussed regional issues concerning the future of Iraq and specifically asked if some regional security architecture could fill some of the gaps identified in the last panel. Iran and Turkey present the largest regional influences in Iraq. In addition to political influence with Shia officials, Iran has developed significant “soft power” influence with the Iraqi people. Most panel members felt Iranian influence in Iraq will continue but it will not grow stronger. Still the developing strategy of Iran and its future role in Iraq remain cloudy. Improved relations between Turkey, the Kurdish Regional Government and the rest of Iraq reflect the growing and positive Turkish influence in the country.

Unfortunately there is no indication that there will be similar improvements in the strategic relations between Iraq and its Arab neighbours. With the withdrawal of US forces approaching, it is unlikely that any regional state will step up to act as a security partner with Iraq. Additionally, the working group members noted that water security and demographic tensions would present challenges to Iraqi stability in the next few years as well.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

Whether the U.S., Iraq's regional neighbours, or even the international community is ready, the security environment in Iraq is improving and the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the maturation of the democracy in Iraq will proceed apace. The forming of a coalition government and the selection of the next Prime Minister of Iraq will play important roles in securing domestic security and prosperity in the coming years. As the U.S. completes its withdrawal, we can expect at least a residual presence of the Coalition forces, for training and advisory purposes. Iran and Turkey will be the strongest regional influences on the government and people of Iraq. Still, there will continue to be border security challenges and internal sectarian tensions. The Iraqi Security Forces will need further training and additional equipment to adequately serve the needs of the country; the ISF remains dependent on outside help. Because the current Iraqi parliamentary structure will most likely not allow either Maliki or Alawi to be Prime Minister, the eventual leader of Iraq will likely be a weaker political powerbroker and he/she will find it difficult to negotiate a new security agreement. Either way, a new framework for international support for continued improvement in Iraq remains essential.