



Implementing the President's Plan: An Outline for Action in Iraq

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Barack Obama campaigned on a policy of ending U.S. military involvement in Iraq. There is speculation today about how President Obama's campaign stance will be transformed into actual policy now that he sits in the Oval Office. Based on recent press reports, there is reason to suspect that there may be an effort underway to revise or soften President Obama's 16-month timetable for withdrawing U.S. forces.

This paper outlines how the President can responsibly execute his policy of removing U.S. combat forces from Iraq within 16 months. It proposes a workable U.S. redeployment schedule that would result in 100,000 total U.S. troops remaining in Iraq by the end of 2009; 35,000 to 65,000 support troops remaining in Iraq by July 2010, when the President's 16-month timetable would end if it is initiated in April 2009; and less than 1,000 troops remaining by December 2011, when the U.S.-Iraqi security agreement (commonly known as the status of forces agreement or "SOFA") mandates that all U.S. forces be out of Iraq.

WHAT HAS BEEN SAID?

During his campaign, President Obama talked repeatedly of removing all **combat** forces from Iraq in approximately 16 months at a rate of one to two brigades per month. This position was staked out during the "surge" when there were 20 brigades in Iraq and withdrawing one to two per month fit a 16-month timetable. Today, in the wake of the surge, there are approximately 14 brigades in Iraq. However, the President has stuck by the 16-month timetable rather than the one to two brigades per month withdrawal rate that would more closely align with a 10- to 11-month timeline given today's post-surge troop level. This situation provides more flexibility than has been recognized.

Candidate Obama did **not** say he would remove all U.S. forces from Iraq within 16 months. Rather, he spoke of removing all **combat** forces and specifically said some support troops would remain to provide logistical assistance and training for Iraqi forces, to hunt down al Qaeda in Iraq, and to protect the U.S. embassy and other U.S. personnel and assets.

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WHAT TO EXPECT?

Military planning to meet the President's objectives began before the inauguration, albeit reluctantly. The CENTOM commander (General David Petraeus) and the U.S. commander in Iraq (General Raymond Odierno) appear to be developing options cued to a slower redeployment timetable probably aimed at compliance with the status of forces agreement (SOFA) signed by the United States and Iraq in late 2008. Unlike the President's 16-month timetable for removing combat forces, the SOFA mandates the removal of **all** U.S. forces by the end of 2011. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are likely to adopt a position somewhere between the President's campaign pledge and the field commanders' plan for slower redeployment.

If the President's timeline -- with normal caveats about circumstances on the ground -- is to be implemented, the review process is expected to be completed so that the start date for beginning the 16-month withdrawal would be around April 1. This would put the redeployment of all combat brigades on track for completion by the end of July 2010. While some on the left and right, for different reasons, will call such a schedule a broken campaign promise, the precise details are less important than the overall direction of U.S. policy.

A more complex issue is the nature and number of forces left behind as U.S. combat brigades are redeployed. A key question is 'What constitutes a brigade?' The definition is flexible. The number of combat personnel in a brigade is 3,200 to 3,500 troops. If "organic" support and maintenance forces are included, 5,000 is a better number. If one includes an allocation of other support forces in a "brigade slice," the number is closer to 7,000. So, depending on which of

these figures is used, withdrawing 15 brigades, a base number used in this paper, will reduce the current force of 142,000 to 89,500, 67,000, or 37,000, respectively. (For the calculations below, the authors use the 5,000 troops per brigade figure). The actual force level will depend on how many support forces remain in-country to support Iraqi and remaining U.S. units; how many training forces remain and whether these are increased to expand the number of "trainers" with Iraqi forces; the level of special operations forces; and the numbers needed to protect U.S. personnel and assets.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

To meet the President's plan, three brigades should be redeployed and not replaced when they rotate home by June 30, 2009 (**see page 4**). This will provide resources to support the increased effort in Afghanistan. It also might help convince the Iraqi voters in their upcoming referendum that the U.S. occupation is ending and encourage them to support the U.S.-Iraqi SOFA agreement that specifies a timetable for the withdrawal of American forces. If the SOFA is rejected in the referendum, all U.S. forces, combat and otherwise, would have to be withdrawn within 12 months.

An additional three brigades should be redeployed and not replaced by the end of September 2009. After that, only one combat brigade should be redeployed and not replaced between October and December 2009 in order to have enough combat forces in-country to help prevent violence during the planned December national parliamentary elections. This redeployment of seven combat brigades and some "division slice" support forces should bring the U.S. force level below 100,000 by the end of 2009.

The location of the remaining troops during this initial redeployment phase is as critical as the size of the remaining force. U.S. forces should be deployed in the areas of greatest potential instability: the region around Kirkuk and other potential Kurd-Arab flashpoints; al Anbar province, to give the Sunni, especially the Sons of Iraq, confidence and a sense of security; and the border areas.

The final eight combat brigades can be redeployed and not replaced over the first seven months of 2010 in order to meet the President's plan to have them out on or about July 2010.

Again, where the forces are left must be determined by the locus of instability. It must be determined how much logistical and training support the Iraqi military needs and how much of that support needs to be based in-country. The number of "trainers" assigned to Iraqi combat units must be planned and projected to decrease over time. The need to hunt al Qaeda in Iraq should also diminish over time. Since the SOFA prohibits launching attacks on third-party countries from Iraq, no permanent U.S. bases or combat units should be required or accepted. These steps should gradually shrink the U.S. support footprint. While there may be 35,000 to 65,000 U.S. personnel still in Iraq in July 2010, that number should, under the SOFA agreement, shrink to zero by the end of 2011.

Clearly, even in this scenario there still would be hundreds of U.S. military personnel in Iraq after 2011 in the form of Marine guards at the U.S. embassy, defense attaché personnel, and a Military Assistance Advisory Team to oversee U.S. military sales to Iraq. But the specifics of this situation are not viewed uniformly by key officials. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

predicted that after 2011 he expects to see "perhaps several tens of thousands of American troops" as part of a residual force in Iraq. Others have discussed loopholes in certain SOFA provisions such as withdrawal from the cities, permanent bases, and residual forces. There certainly will be negotiations on these issues, with all of the attendant political intrigue that implies.

WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?

As outlined in the 2006 Iraq Study Group report, political stability and reduced violence in Iraq cannot be achieved by military force alone. A strong diplomatic surge is needed. There will be flare-ups of violence no matter how many U.S. troops remain in Iraq. Policymakers need to accept that fact. They also need to accept that diplomatic and economic initiatives can increase the chances for stability and for reducing outbreaks of violence. It is in the interests of all Middle Eastern countries that Iraq not return to violence and civil war. What is needed is a security arrangement acceptable to all Iraq's neighbors. That means balancing Saudi and other Arab interests with Iranian interests and finding a balance that protects U.S. interests as well.

Such a strategy means that the United States cannot revert to its 1980s policy of trying to use Iraq as a military counterweight to Iran. If employed, this flawed strategy could split the Shia factions in Iraq and create political instability. Iran has to accept that the United States will have significant residual interests in Iraq, at least in the near-term. The United States has to accept that Iraq, the first Shia-ruled Arab country in several centuries, will be under significant Iranian sway in the long-term.

Given these realities, the United States needs to undertake an all-fronts diplomatic

initiative to engage the nations of the region to help stabilize Iraq. This includes addressing the internal tensions between and among the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds, especially at flash points such as Kirkuk. Funding must be found to resettle the five million or more internal and external Iraqi refugees. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States need to help the Iraqi Sunni population with economic development so the Sunnis can play a strong role in Iraqi politics.

There will never be a Victory in Iraq or “V-I” Day. Americans were not greeted as “liberators” at the war’s beginning, and will not be treated to parades at the war’s end. Division and sectarian conflict hopefully should continue to diminish over time despite periodic flare-ups. A more authoritarian regime may emerge or perhaps one less secular than the United States would prefer. Iraq will look a lot like Iran, its Shia cousin, though without the overarching power of ayatollahs.

WHEN WILL IT BE OVER?

PROPOSED U.S. REDEPLOYMENT SCHEDULE FOR IRAQ

Period	Redeployment	Force Level Remaining	Notes
February 2009 to April 2009	n/a	~142,000	Beginning of President's 16-month timetable
April 2009 to June 2009	3 combat brigades (~15,000)	~127,000	Will free up resources for troop increase in Afghanistan
July 2009 to September 2009	3 combat brigades (~15,000)	~112,000	After this, withdrawals should slow temporarily for Dec 2009 Iraqi elections
October 2009 to December 2009	1 combat brigade (~5,000)	~100,000	Includes removal of some additional "division slice" support forces
January 2010 to July 2010	8 combat brigades (~40,000)	~35,000 to 65,000 support forces	Completion of President's 16-month timetable; force level depends on number of support forces redeployed
August 2010 to December 2011	Remaining support forces	Hundreds	Negotiations needed to decide status of U.S. support forces in 2012 and beyond



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Proposed U.S. Redeployment Schedule for Iraq

