

GREAT DECISIONS

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Mr. Kagan thanks for joining us on Great Decisions. As you know the Obama administration set out a pretty ambitious agenda for Iraq in terms of troop withdrawal and draw down. All combat troops are supposedly going to be out of Iraq in less than a year; is the withdrawal of American forces on such a short timetable a mistake?

Well I think that it's unfortunate that we have had to commit to a specific timetable for the departure of combat force, American force is of course a decision that Bush made and that President Obama has accepted. I think that we saw with the transition to the out of the cities situation in June that giving the enemy a time line allows the enemy to play attacks accordingly and we did see a surge of attacks around the withdrawal of American forces from the cities. I think it is always unfortunate when you publicly announce or commit yourself to a timeline. That having been said I think that the timeline so far appears be reasonable,

I think that the big question will be "how long does it take to [seat] an Iraqi government after the Parliamentary elections and what of the aftermath, what of the effects of that. Because the withdrawal of most American combat forces is scheduled to begin a couple of months after that election and past evidence suggests that it might take longer than that so being on a hard timeline may turnout to be unfortunate.

What does a U.S. presence in Iraq look like without combat forces?

Well, General Odierno has made it clear with what he has in mind. He's designing and organization he's calling an advise and assist brigade and it remains to be seen what that looks like but the general concept is that it will be a force that will train and mentor Iraqi units and will also provide rapid reaction and other support at their request if they feel it necessary. Fundamentally, the purpose of that organization is to support the Iraqis as they continue to find whatever remnant terrorist or insurgent groups that are left.

And an assessment of those forces at this point in terms of capacity to deal with those elements?

The Iraqi security forces are doing pretty well. They were tested; they are still being tested as we speak in September. The enemy certainly has made it a point to go after them and expose all of their weaknesses obviously the enemy has gotten off a few successful attacks including the one of the Foreign Ministry. The Iraqi security forces I think have responded well, they have responded with restraint, they responded professionally, they have recognized when they have made mistakes, they are going through lessons to try and get better all of which is healthy. So I'm not at this moment terribly concerned about their ability with our support to handle the situation. I think it's too soon to make an estimate frankly about how things will be a year from now.

How about the political discourse here in the United States? It seems like much of the attention is moving to Afghanistan. Is there a danger that Iraq has been passed over in terms of political support here in Washington and in the public arena as well?

I think there is a real danger of Americans in general and the Obama administrations in taking its eye off the ball in Iraq and I think that it was distressing when the President gave a speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars in August and spoke very strongly on Afghanistan, the line on Iraq was still pretty much, end this war. What distresses me about that is that the war is ending as far as American involvement is concerned and frankly as far as fighting on the ground in Iraq goes. So the question that the President has to ask and answer is, not "when are we going to end this war?" but what are we going to do with the peace and what are we going to do to build on the sacrifices that we have made and what are we going to do on the success that we have achieved in order to try and develop an enduring partnership with Iraq

which I think could become a real key pillar in American policy in the region and a real force for a lot of things that we care about in the region. I'd like to remind people that there is no country in the world that has lost more soldiers and policeman in the fight against Al Qaeda than Iraq by a long margin. And there are very few countries in the world that are as absolutely committed in fighting that organization as Iraq is so considering the emphasis that President Obama has placed upon on making sure that we never give back to Al Qaeda ground that we have won from them.

Supporting Iraq is a very important but I'm afraid that as we focus on Afghanistan and as we have this hold over election era rhetoric about ending the war in Iraq that we may miss an opportunity that we won't be able to retrieve.

What about the long term relationship between the U.S. and Iraq? There is some skepticism on Capital Hill. Christopher Hill was here briefing some Congressman on the current developments in Iraq, concerned that Iraqis maybe aren't appreciative of U.S. efforts there

and that maybe this relationship doesn't have the capacity to be sustained in a positive way. What are your thoughts on that?

Well I think that if American leaders and Americans continue to look at the Iraqis and say what have you done lately to show us that you're interested in having a long term relationship with us and until you do something we are not interested. Then we're in the position of people who are waiting after you, "no after you."

The truth of the matter is that the Iraqis have done a variety of things that should give us a strong indication that they are interested in a long term partnership with us.

In particular, they have rejected just about every Iranian demand or request for how to orient their political policies, their military strategies, their military policies. The Iranians have been pushing Iraq to set a much more rapid deadline for American withdrawal, which now Prime Minister Maliki indicated that he might not be so sure that he wants us to leave entirely. The Iranians were pushing very hard for the Iraqis to not sign a security agreement of any variety with us. They did. The Iranians were pushing for a unified Shiite coalition in this election. The Iraqis did not. And in general terms I think it's very clear that Iraqis both Sunni and Shiite and of course the Kurds would like to maintain a strong relationship with the United States if only because that's the only way they can obtain a degree of independence in the region.

If they do not have a strong relationship with us then they will end up falling under the sway of Iran and despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, largely by people who have not spent a lot of time with talking to Iraqis and following the situation there.

Iraqis are Arabs and they are not at all pleased at the prospect of getting into thrall with the Persians. That's not okay with them. And the Iranians have been remarkably hand handed in the way that they deal with the Iraqis and make it clear to them that they expect to be able to give them orders that will be followed and so forth. So, for all of those reasons

I think there is a natural set among the Iraqi elite to desire some sort of close relationship with the United States. What exactly that will be remains to be determined but I think that there's enough evidence that we should be pushing from our end to know that this is in our interest and think of what is concrete that we can do.

In terms of beyond Iran, the U.S. draw down and Iraqi political developments, how will it impact the region in other aspects, the Gulf Arab States, Saudi Arabia etc.?

The emergence of Iraq as a responsible stakeholder in the region is something that we have no precedence in the last fifty years or so. Iraq has been either a basket case or a predator or in some other ways a threat to International order for going back to Saddam's coup and frankly

going back before that. So, actually having Iraq emerge as a reasonably stable polity that is not predatory and is not itself unstable and attempting to de-stabilize its neighbors will be in itself an extremely positive development in the region. On the other hand, it does distort equilibrium where the Saudis were one pole of the equation and the Iranians were another pole of the equation, now you have a third pole, if I may. Because Iraq will not be subservient to Saudi Arabia and in fact there will always be tension between Iraq and Saudi Arabia especially with a Shiite government in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. But Iraq is a very important powerful state in its own right. I think that the developing relationship can be very positive if we help to guide it in a good direction. I think that breaking up that bipolarity within the system is good for us and I frankly think that we have more interest in common with Iraq than we do with Saudi Arabia.

I think that in the long term we have a better prospect with a lasting and mutual beneficial relationship with Iraq than we do with Saudi Arabia so I think that there is a real opportunity here if we could get past this “end that war” rhetoric and start to think about what to do with the fact that we have succeeded I think that there is a lot of opportunities to transform the regional politics in positive ways.

Could you speak a bit more concretely on those common interests in Iraq?

I think it's very clear that the Iraqi government is and will remain much more committed with much less ambiguity or ambivalence towards the fight against Al Qaeda than the Saudi regime which is interwoven with Wahabi clerics will ever be. There will always be some division within the minds of Saudi leaders because of the nature of the state. There will probably not be any division within the minds of Iraqi leaders.

Both the Saudis and the Iraqis are very chary of Iranian influence in the region and liable to resist it. The Iraqis see themselves as serving as a bridge between Iran and the Sunni world and the United States. And as I talk to Iraqi politicians on both sides but especially Shia politicians they make it clear that they really do have a vision where they can be a conduit for conversation, they don't want to be a theater where a war is played out, they do want to be a go between and arbiter...something that stands a bit more in the middle than Saudi Arabia and that can be a very positive development as well. And then of course it's in our interest to have Saudi Arabia have less control over the percentage of the world's oil supply as it does and when you look at the reserves of Iraq and the potential reserves of Iraq if we can get far investments and are ready to develop the fields than we can reduce the Saudi monopoly on that or the Saudi preponderance of that which would be in everybody's interest as well. There are a lot of reasons that I think we have in common with Iraq and I want to stress that this is not just my reasoning about common interest. When you talk to Iraqis these are the things that they will tell you. When you talk to Iraqi political leaders these are things that they will say. They imagine a relationship based on these common interests. And since it serves us I think in effect they are holding a hand out to us. And we would be foolish not to grasp it.

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