

# WebMemo



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## A Message for Maliki: Bush Must Make Clear Iraq's Responsibilities

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Tomorrow President Bush meets Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki for a two-day summit to discuss security in Iraq and other issues. Both Bush and Maliki are under pressure to craft a joint policy that will restore momentum to efforts to build a stable and democratic Iraq. President Bush should use the summit to start work on a comprehensive plan to dampen Iraq's growing sectarian tensions, expand the capacity of Iraq's fledgling government to defend Iraqis from anti-democratic insurgents and militias, establish the rule of law, and gradually transfer security responsibilities from coalition allies to the Iraqi government. This will require long and extensive negotiations with the Iraqi government, but it is important that this process start with a clear understanding of what is required of both governments.

### **A Strong Message for Maliki**

Bush's message should be that the United States will play an important supporting role but that Iraqis must take the lead to contain and ease sectarian strife, to build a broad-based ruling coalition that can undercut Sunni Arab support for the insurgents, and to marginalize, demobilize, and disarm the various sectarian militias that threaten stability and the rule of law.

Bush must be clear that the United States can help build state institutions, but only the Iraqis can build a nation. If Iraqis are unable to strike a power-sharing formula that addresses security, political influence, and an equitable share of oil revenues, the situation will deteriorate regardless of U.S.

actions. The United States cannot save Iraqis from themselves. If the slide towards a full-blown civil war continues, the American people will become increasingly unwilling to continue their sacrifices of blood and treasure that have made possible the gestation of a fragile democratic government in Iraq.

Maliki's highest priority must be to hammer out a stable power-sharing agreement with other Iraqi leaders to rein in the power of militias, drain away support for the Sunni Arab-dominated insurgency, and reduce the intensity of civil violence to manageable proportions. Realistically, insurgent attacks will plague Iraq for years to come. But it is important to reduce the scale of the violence to halt the slide towards a full-blown Sunni-Shia civil war.

The mushrooming of such a sectarian conflict would undermine the rationale for maintaining U.S. military forces in Iraq. While the defeat of the various insurgent groups is an achievable goal if the Iraqi government can co-opt Sunni Arab moderates and drive wedges between Islamic radical insurgents and less militant groups, a raging civil war offers little hope of a plausible victory. Bush should tell Maliki that the United States is willing to fight for a stable outcome, but a sectarian solution that

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unduly favors Maliki's Shiite supporters will risk continuing U.S. support.

### **U.S. Strategic Goals**

The United States did not intervene in Iraq to remedy historic Shiite grievances against Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime or to build democracy (although this became a supplementary goal after the war). President Bush should return to the basics and remind Prime Minister Maliki that the U.S.'s primary goal was to neutralize the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to keep such weapons out of the hands of terrorists. Although no recently produced WMD caches were found, Iraq's prohibited WMD programs were dismantled and no longer pose a threat to the world.

Winning the global war against terrorism must remain the highest U.S. priority. Washington must prevent Iraq from becoming a base of operations for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups that target Americans. Washington has a vital interest in building an Iraq that is an ally in the war on terrorism, not an adversary. The United States must also prevent Iraq from falling under the influence of Iran and Syria, two of the world's most dangerous state sponsors of terrorism.

The Bush Administration had hoped that democratic elections would boost stability in Iraq, but they have not yet had a calming effect, in part because many of the sectarian political parties have exacerbated tensions. A stable, democratic Iraq remains a worthy long-term U.S. goal, but this project now rests primarily in Iraqi hands. If the Iraqi government can inch toward political stability while containing the insurgency and denying terrorist groups a base for international operations, that would be a net victory for the United States, even if Iraq remains a far-from-perfect democracy.

### **Four Key Recommendations for President Bush**

When President Bush meets Prime Minister Maliki in Jordan tomorrow, he should act on four objectives:

1. **Press Maliki to purge government institutions of members of sectarian militias and to disband the militias.** The infiltration of militia members into government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior and national

police force, has undercut support for the government. Bush should ask Maliki to prepare a detailed timetable for purging government institutions of sectarian influences and demobilizing and disarming the militias, particularly the Mahdi Army controlled by radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The Mahdi Army has played a major destabilizing role by lashing out against innocent Sunni Arabs after terrorist attacks that targeted Shiites. This kind of vengeance only exacerbates the downward spiral toward open civil war.

2. **Urge Maliki to reach out to moderate Sunni Arab leaders and negotiate a sustainable power-sharing agreement.** Sunni Arab leaders have reasonable concerns about the equitable distribution of oil revenues, amending Iraq's constitution, and gaining a strong voice in a national unity government. These must be addressed. A national consensus is needed to mobilize greater popular support for the government and undercut support for insurgents and militias.
3. **Negotiate mutually acceptable benchmarks for the gradual drawdown and redeployment of U.S. troops.** A rapid U.S. troop pull-out would be a strategic, moral, and humanitarian disaster. Although Iraqi forces are increasingly effective, the U.S.-led coalition forces are now the chief barrier to an increasingly bloody civil war. President Bush should negotiate benchmarks for the handover of security responsibilities to Iraq's army and police forces. These benchmarks could include the size, effectiveness, and degree of training of Iraqi forces and the security situation in a given province.

The aim should be to gradually redeploy U.S. forces out of Iraq's cities and out of roles best filled by Iraqis as soon as the Iraqis are able to replace Americans in those areas. U.S. military forces would retain the lead in counterterrorist operations and provide strong support to Iraqi forces fighting the insurgency, but Iraqi forces should increasingly take the lead in defending Iraqi civilians, government facilities, and economic infrastructure. Over time, American forces would act as SWAT teams, not as street

cops. This would allow for a gradual drawdown of U.S. forces. However, U.S. servicemen would still be needed for expanded military training, air support, logistics support, and special operations for years to come.

4. **Emphasize training, vetting, equipping, and supporting Iraq's army, internal security forces, and police.** U.S. programs for training Iraqi military and police forces were initially neglected and made only slow progress. Iraqi police still lack sufficient training and professionalism. American advisers should be embedded in Iraqi police units, just as they have been embedded in Iraqi military units with good results. Close mentoring could increase the effectiveness of Iraq's notoriously lax police forces, while reducing corruption and human rights abuses.

## Conclusion

The situation in Iraq could worsen quickly if the United States succumbs to wishful thinking about the consequences of a rapid withdrawal. Adopting such a negligent policy could result in a failed state that would be much more dangerous than Afghan-

istan as a base for al-Qaeda and other terrorists. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq lies in close proximity to the heart of the Arab world and the center of gravity of world oil production. Iraq has become a central front in the global war against terrorism.

Prime Minister Maliki's elected government, only six months old, needs time to build up Iraq's security forces, impose the rule of law, and deliver better services to the Iraqi people. The United States must remain actively engaged to give the Iraqi government a fighting chance to defeat the insurgency and avert a full-scale civil war. Maliki's government must take the lead in disarming and demobilizing militias, with the U.S. in a supporting role. Maliki needs to know that if Iraqis fail to break the power of the militias and halt the momentum toward a civil bloodbath, the United States cannot save Iraqis from themselves.

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