

# WebMemo



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## Charting U.S. Policy after Iraq's Elections

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Iraq's March 7 parliamentary elections will be a major milestone that will help determine that nation's future political evolution and prospects for security and stability. Additionally, these elections will significantly affect the Obama Administration's plans for a rapid drawdown of U.S. troops in Iraq.

The elections will hopefully produce a broad-based multi-party government capable of resolving Iraq's many problems. But if the election results are disputed or they exacerbate existing sectarian, ethnic, tribal, political, and ideological rivalries, then Iraq risks a plunge into a renewed civil war. Either way, the United States should actively facilitate deals between rival Iraqi factions and postpone the gradual drawdown of U.S. troops as long as possible, subject to the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiated in 2008.

**Election Prospects.** Iraqis have embraced democracy with a vengeance. Hundreds of parties have fielded over 6,000 candidates to compete for 325 seats in the parliament. According to recent polls, no faction is expected to win the 163 seats needed to form a government on its own. This would be a positive outcome to the degree that it encourages the emergence of a centrist multi-party coalition government.

But the extensive coalition-building negotiations and political horse-trading necessary to form a government will leave Iraq rudderless for many months. For instance, following the December 2005 elections, the new government took six months to form. This time the coalition-building process may take even longer given the break-up of some of

the former political blocs and the proliferation of small parties.

As intense as the campaign before the elections was, the post-election period is likely to be even more politically charged, especially if the losing political parties fail to accept the legitimacy of the election process. Already, Ahmed Chalabi's Accountability and Justice Committee has thrown a monkey wrench into the political works by disqualifying hundreds of candidates, mostly Sunni Arabs, on the grounds that they belonged to former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's Baathist Party. This has set back the prospects of many secular and nationalist parties and could significantly depress the turnout of Sunni voters, who largely boycotted the 2005 elections. Such an outcome could partially reverse the positive trends observed in last year's provincial elections, in which secular and nationalist parties made substantial gains at the expense of sectarian religious parties.

The elections will not by themselves settle crucial issues such as how to share oil revenues, how to balance power between the central and regional governments, or national reconciliation. The next government must resolve these persistent problems while tamping down longstanding ethno-sectarian tensions that could explode into violence.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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In particular, there is rising tension between Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Christian minorities over territorial and jurisdictional disputes in northern Iraq that could degenerate into open conflict unless durable political settlements can be hammered out. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in Iraq, Iranian-supported Shia militants, and other insurgent groups are likely to use terrorist attacks to fan the flames of sectarian resentment and undermine trust in the democratic political system.

**The U.S. Role in Iraq's Transition.** Iraq's elected leaders must resolve Iraq's problems, but in order to do so, they require substantial, continued support from the United States. A calming U.S. military presence will be needed to support Iraqi security services in combating terrorist threats, shoring up the rule of law, and mediating between rival armed factions, particularly in the north, along the disputed edges of the Kurdish territories. General Raymond Odierno, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, has correctly called for a "robust engagement" with Iraqi political and military leaders to ensure a smooth transition to the next government. In addition, the United States should:

- *Slow the timetable for troop drawdowns.* The Obama Administration wisely departed from the President's campaign pledge to withdraw one combat brigade from Iraq every month after entering office. Another adjustment in the drawdown timetable is necessary due to the fact that current plans to pull out approximately 10,000 troops every month, beginning in late spring, were based on the assumption that the Iraqi elections would be held by the end of 2009. The delay in the election timetable also requires a delay in the schedule for troop withdrawals so that adequate forces remain available during the sensitive post-election period.
- *Maintain adequate U.S. troops in sensitive and insecure areas.* General Odierno has reportedly

requested to keep a combat brigade in the disputed northern city of Kirkuk past the Administration's August 31 deadline for ending combat operations. This appears to be a necessary and prudent action in light of the continued potential for violence in that disputed region. U.S. troops in the past have prevented outbreaks of fighting there between the Iraqi army and Kurdish regional security forces, and a continued U.S. presence could avert a crisis and buy time for political leaders to settle disputes. Insurgent strongholds, such as the city of Baquba, also need the focused attention of U.S. military forces to backup Iraq's increasingly effective security forces.

- *Start thinking about negotiating with the new Iraqi government to postpone the deadline for a final troop withdrawal.* No expert believes that the Iraqi army and police will be ready to stand on their own by the end of 2011, when all U.S. troops are required to leave Iraq under the 2008 SOFA. Substantial U.S. air support, logistics, intelligence, reconnaissance, communications, training, and advisory support will still be required long after that date. After a new Iraqi government is formed, the Obama Administration should quietly work with that government to reach a new agreement that will enable American trainers and advisors to give Iraqis the tools they need to defend Iraq's fragile democratic system.

**Prudent Readjustments.** These prudent readjustments in U.S. policy can help ensure that a responsible drawdown in U.S. troops brings a successful transition to stability in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See also James Phillips, "Obama Administration Must Focus on a Successful Transition in Iraq, Not Just an Exit Plan," The Foundry, July 1, 2009, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2009/07/01/obama-administration-must-focus-on-a-successful-transition-in-iraq-not-just-an-exit-plan>.