

# WebMemo



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## Obama's Iraq Speech Should Stress a Resolute U.S. Security Commitment

*James Phillips and Lisa Curtis*

President Obama's televised speech on Iraq will mark the "official" end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq and the transition to an "advise and assist" mission. The President undoubtedly hopes to assure voters ahead of the November elections that he is winding down the war. The irony is that current progress in Iraq was enabled by the Bush Administration's surge policy, which President Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and many members of this Administration opposed.

But the President should now make every effort to avoid squandering the hard-won security gains of the surge by withdrawing too many troops too fast. Iraq still needs substantial U.S. military, diplomatic, and political support to defeat various insurgent groups, stave off a possible return to civil war, and contain Iran's expanding influence.

**Needed: A Resolute Commander-in-Chief.** Obama's speech should soberly acknowledge that the war in Iraq continues and is not yet won. Iraq remains afflicted by a low-grade insurgency, chronic terrorism, and simmering sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias, Kurds and Arabs, Muslims and Christians, and other minorities.

The President should present a realistic picture of the situation and clearly proclaim his Administration's commitment to finishing the job: stabilizing Iraq to protect vital American interests. He should reassure anxious Iraqis and U.S. allies in the region that he will not complacently declare victory and abandon the struggling Iraqi government, leaving a

vacuum that would inevitably be exploited by Iran, Syria, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and other Islamist extremist groups.

The President's speech will mark the transition from Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation New Dawn, in which many of the 50,000 remaining U.S. troops (down from more than 170,000 at the height of the surge) will be embedded with Iraqi security forces to train, advise, equip, and assist them in their efforts to secure and stabilize Iraq. In truth, the Administration's self-imposed "end of combat" is a semantic distinction that does not adequately reflect the situation on the ground. Hostile Iraqi and foreign forces in Iraq have not ended their attacks on allied forces. American troops will remain in harm's way and must be ready to defend themselves and support Iraqi security forces.

The President should acknowledge Iraq's urgent need for continued American military backing. On August 12, Iraq's top military leader, General Babaker Zebari, warned that Iraqi security forces will not be able to fully secure their own country until 2020. "If I were asked about the withdrawal," he said, "I would say to politicians: The U.S. Army must stay until the Iraq Army is fully ready in

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2020.” The general’s warning came a week after the former foreign minister of Saddam Hussein’s regime complained that the U.S. was “leaving Iraq to the wolves.”

Iraq is still roiled by waves of political violence. Insurgent networks have been battered but not defeated. AQI and its affiliated groups have made a comeback and continue to slaughter policemen, government officials, and civilians on a daily basis. Nearly 500 civilians were killed in July, the highest monthly death toll since 2008—although the carnage remains far below the peak of violence experienced during 2006–2008.

Last week insurgents launched a campaign of terrorist attacks across the country, killing hundreds of innocent civilians, police, and government officials. On Wednesday—the same day insurgents launched coordinated attacks on 13 cities and towns throughout Iraq that claimed 51 lives—an insurgent Web site proclaimed, “The countdown has begun to return Iraq to the embrace of Islam and its Sunnis, with God’s permission.”

**The Continuing Need for U.S. Military Involvement.** Almost six months after Iraq’s March 7 parliamentary elections, political leaders have been unable to cobble together a new coalition government. The Shia majority fear a return to the past, in which Iraq was dominated by a Sunni-led dictatorship. The Sunni minority fears the future, which could marginalize and exclude them from power. The Kurdish minority fears both the past—in which they suffered terribly in a genocidal campaign launched by Saddam Hussein’s regime—and a future in which their desire for greater autonomy, if not outright independence, is violently rejected by Iraqi Arabs as well as neighboring regimes in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, as each fear a rebellion by their own Kurdish minorities. The distrust among Shia, Sunnis, and the Kurds is so great that they trust the U.S. military more than they do each other.

The longer the political paralysis persists, the more Iraq’s rudderless government will be discredited in the eyes of the increasingly exasperated Iraqi people—a situation that will, in turn, hand insurgents a better opportunity to reclaim the initiative and create a yawning power vacuum that would

invite escalating interventions by Iran, Turkey, Syria, and foreign Islamists.

In recent months Iran has built a fort inside Iraqi territory and attacked Iranian Kurdish opposition forces that have found sanctuary in northern Iraq. Turkey has attacked Kurdish separatists who have established bases across the Iraqi border, and Syria continues to allow Iraqi Baathists and Sunni Islamist extremists to use its territory as a sanctuary.

**Next Steps in Iraq.** To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, the President should signal that the U.S. remains firmly engaged as a dependable ally of Iraq and dispel the growing perception that Washington is intent on a quick exit regardless of the dangerous consequences of such a gamble. To help resolve the political stalemate, the Obama Administration should proactively work behind the scenes to facilitate Iraqi political compromises, thereby ensuring the emergence of a broad-based, inclusive government capable of addressing Iraq’s many problems.

The President should also reassure nervous Iraqis that he will maintain adequate numbers of U.S. troops to shore up Iraq’s gradually improving security forces, protect American officials and civilians, and work closely with Iraqis to keep the heat on AQI and other hostile groups. The Administration wisely abandoned Obama’s campaign pledge to withdraw one combat brigade from Iraq every month after entering office. The protracted efforts to form a government after Iraq’s postponed elections have reinforced the continuing need for U.S. military forces to backstop Iraqi security forces and help prevent a plunge into a civil war fueled by Sunni Islamist extremists and pro-Iranian Shia militants.

Once a new Iraqi government is formed, the Obama Administration should quietly negotiate a revised status of forces agreement (SOFA) to postpone the deadline for a final troop withdrawal. It is clear that Iraqi security forces will not be ready to stand on their own by the end of 2011, when all U.S. troops are required to leave under the 2008 SOFA. Substantial U.S. air support, logistics, intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, communications, training, and advisory support will still be required long after that date.

The Administration should also reconsider its decision to transfer hundreds of tasks from the military to the State Department, some of which—such as training Iraqi police—Foggy Bottom is ill equipped to accomplish.

These prudent revisions in U.S. policy can help ensure that a responsible drawdown of U.S. troops brings a successful transition to stability in Iraq.

**An Opportunity to Shore Up Public Support for Afghan War.** Tuesday's address also provides President Obama a critical opportunity to explain why and how U.S. forces must succeed in Afghanistan. U.S. force levels are ramping up in Afghanistan as the last of the 30,000 additional troops arrive in theater, mainly in the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand.

Yet just as the new counterinsurgency strategy is getting underway and the Afghanistan war is finally receiving the kind of resources, troops, and leadership it deserves, American public support for the war is dipping. A recent poll revealed that nearly six in 10 Americans oppose the Afghanistan war and only 38 percent (down from 46 percent in March) support expanding the war effort.

American public questioning of the war is in large part attributable to President Obama's failure to explain on a regular basis his Administration's strategy and to remind the American people why it is so critical for the U.S. to prevail in the fight. On the few occasions when he has talked about Afghanistan and Pakistan, he has correctly stated that rooting out international terrorism from both countries is important for U.S. national security, but he has failed to explain how sending more U.S. troops to Afghanistan supports that goal.

**Drop Timeline.** President Obama should clarify U.S. policy on Afghanistan and state that he is determined to bring the troops home with honor by achieving success in Afghanistan. The President made a major strategic error by establishing a July 2011 timeline for beginning the drawdown of U.S. troops, which has encouraged Afghan insurgents, discouraged Afghan allies, given Pakistan greater incentive to maintain ties with Afghan insurgents to maximize its influence in Afghanistan after a U.S. withdrawal, and undermined the

prospects for success of General David Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy.

Retiring Marine General James Conway told reporters last week that the July 2011 withdrawal date has given a morale boost to Taliban insurgents who now believe they can simply wait out NATO forces. President Obama should assure the American people that his Administration is united behind the current counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and that he and his team are committed to success.

President Obama should use the speech to make clear that troops will be withdrawn according to conditions on the ground as appraised by the capable General Petraeus, not according to arbitrary and unrealistic deadlines imposed from Washington. Clinging to a July 2011 withdrawal timeline would hamstring counterinsurgency efforts and set General Petraeus up for failure. The Administration should avoid making the same mistake it made by retaining its unrealistic deadline for closing down the Guantanamo detention facility long after it knew that the deadline could not be met.

The President should also explain that the al-Qaeda threat spans the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and that uprooting Taliban influence on both sides of the border is essential to destroying al-Qaeda's network and power base. President Obama should reiterate that the leadership of the Taliban and al-Qaeda are still allied and that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would embolden al-Qaeda and make the U.S. more vulnerable to future attacks. He should link the failed Times Square bombing attempt—as well as the other terror plots that have been exposed in the last few years—to stabilizing Afghanistan.

**Explain Pakistan Policy.** Achieving U.S. objectives in Afghanistan would also help ensure stability in Pakistan by increasing pressure on that country to:

- Deal with terrorist groups within its borders,
- Work as a partner in demobilizing the Taliban, and
- Recognize the importance of normalizing relations with India.

In this vein, the President should explain his policy toward Pakistan and address whether the Administration has been able to garner the Pakistan

government's sincere cooperation against the Afghan Taliban and related groups fighting U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Officials within the Obama Administration have trumpeted their success in convincing Pakistani military leaders to go after terrorists that attack the Pakistani state. While this is a welcome development and one that is important for Pakistani stability, the American people want to know if Pakistan is helping or hurting the U.S.'s ability to succeed in Afghanistan. The coordinated attacks on two U.S. bases in eastern Afghanistan over the weekend—reportedly undertaken by militants directed by the powerful Haqqani network located in North Waziristan—will raise fresh questions about how the U.S. should address terrorist sanctuaries on Pakistan's side of the border.

**Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Future of U.S. Security.** Winning in Afghanistan would ensure that that country does not again serve as a safe haven for terrorists intent on attacking the U.S. homeland. By defeating those Taliban allied with al-Qaeda and bolstering the Afghan authorities' ability to resist these elements on their own, America would guard

against the potential for future terrorist attacks in the U.S. Winning requires renouncing any predetermined timeline and fully resourcing the U.S. military counterinsurgency strategy.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, bolstering the security of local allies is crucial to the long-term success of U.S. policy in both regions and in the broader war against terror. And U.S. troops should be part of this effort for many years to come. As a candidate, Barack Obama could afford to indulge in irresponsible rhetoric about “ending” the war in Iraq without regard for the disastrous consequences of losing that war. But as President, Obama should act decisively as the nation's commander-in-chief and protect vital American interests by successfully finishing the jobs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*