

Finding a Way in Iraq: Considerations for Future U.S. Policy

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Introduction

For most of the past two decades, U.S. foreign policy has been especially focused on, if not preoccupied with, the Middle East and North Africa region. The interminable “War on Terror” which continues today (Obama administration rebranding efforts notwithstanding) has seen the United States endure extended conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, pursue ongoing counterterrorism campaigns in the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere, and follow regional developments warily as events like the “Arab Spring” produced failed states that have become havens for Islamist extremist groups. These groups have exploited the weaknesses of the states in this region and used them as bases from which to conduct international terrorism. The localized conflicts in places like Syria and Iraq from which these terror groups have emerged have therefore become a top priority for U.S. policymakers who believe that denying these groups any safe haven from which to direct future terror plots will bolster American national security.

Therefore, there is little question that the security situation in Iraq will remain at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy into the new year, and it will be important to consider how the United States might orient its policy toward that troubled country. A new direction for U.S. policy in Iraq will require looking beyond many of the traditional assumptions and solutions which have governed U.S. action for the past decade and considering what policies will come next. After shifting its attention to other foreign policy areas in the years when Iraq was regressing towards a failed state, the Obama administration has been reluctantly forced to take action there after the rapid advance of the so-called Islamic State. The administration has taken an incremental approach to Iraq

policy, opting for tempered diplomacy and a gradually increasing military presence in the country. It has effectively deferred questions of U.S. involvement in post-conflict stabilization and rebuilding to the new administration and congress which will assume office early next year.

The next congress and presidential administration will inherit an Iraq beset by security, governance, financial, and humanitarian challenges. U.S. policy in Iraq will require careful consideration of the many variables contributing to these challenges and a deliberate strategy for achieving U.S. objectives there. Recent Iraq policy debates in Washington have often centered on the extent of military force the United States is currently employing there and whether it will be effective in “degrading and ultimately destroying” the so-called Islamic State. Unfortunately, these debates are too narrowly focused in scope and largely negate the myriad other challenges facing the country. They are also often overshadowed by unproductive partisan squabbles over the assignation of blame for the state of the country; to the extent that there are debates regarding the future of Iraq and strategies for stabilizing the country, they have been relatively muted. This briefing paper will focus more broadly on future considerations for Iraq policy in the United States government by identifying a number of issue areas which will likely determine the course of U.S. policy there. It will not be comprehensive in its discussion of these areas by any means, as they are all subjects of extensive academic study which lie beyond the scope of this paper. However, this paper will acknowledge that any future engagement in Iraq will face numerous daunting policy challenges without compelling chances for ideal outcomes. The next presidential administration will be forced to weigh

these challenges and more as it determines the extent to which the United States will remain engaged there in the future.

Operating Assumptions and Context

One of the primary challenges in producing a policy briefing of this nature is the inherent difficulty of forecasting the development of future events. Both Iraqi and American politics have been extremely unpredictable in recent months, and that trend will likely continue in the near future. This paper will therefore operate under a number of assumptions regarding political developments, particularly those here in the United States. One of the central assumptions of this paper is that security operations and the processes of conflict resolution and post-conflict stabilization in Iraq will continue well into the next presidential administration, so the analysis contained herein will be oriented toward that time period. This assumption obviously falls under the broader assumption that, barring unforeseen domestic or international events which necessitate a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy, the United States will remain deeply engaged in the region, both militarily and diplomatically.

The Continuing Fight against ISIS and the State of Iraqi Security Forces

For the past two years, the U.S. government's Iraq policy has been dominated by concerns over the expansion and operational capabilities of the so-called "Islamic State"

(hereafter, ISIS).^{1,2} That focus is remarkable considering its urgency and timing. While the United States has been engaged in a global fight against radical Islamist terrorism since September 2001, it has only more recently refocused on Iraq as a venue for this problem since late 2014. Emerging from the remnants of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and incorporating leaders from the antebellum Iraqi military, the threat the group posed to the stability of the Iraqi state was initially underestimated by the U.S. government. As the group was gaining in strength and expanding its territorial control in both Iraq and Syria in early 2014, taking control of major cities in both states, President Obama infamously dismissed the group, likening it to "a jayvee team."³ Yet by mid-2015, the group had taken control of much of northern and western Iraq and was threatening Baghdad itself, causing serious concern amongst policymakers in Washington that the fragile Iraqi state which had been hastily constructed and nurtured in the prior decade was on the verge of total collapse. The concerted air campaign against the group since that time has turned military momentum against the group. In May this year, experts estimated that ISIS had lost control of roughly forty-five percent of the territory it controlled in Iraq.⁴ Yet while ground gains against ISIS have progressed since late 2015, the pace at which they have done so has often been suboptimal at best. The Obama

¹ The group is widely known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), the latter of which the U.S. government continues to use as its official designation for the group.

² The ongoing campaign against ISIS spans areas on both sides of the international Iraq/Syria border. However, analysis in this paper will remain more narrowly focused on the Iraqi side for the sake of brevity and clarity as well as distinguishing the different approaches to policy in the two countries.

³ David Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>

⁴ Jim Michaels, "ISIS loses 45 percent of territory in Iraq, 20 percent in Syria," *Military Times*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/05/17/isis-loses-45-percent-territory-iraq-20-percent-syria/84512408/>

administration has been extremely reluctant to commit large numbers of U.S. ground troops to the mission of retaking Iraqi territory and securing the Iraqi state – a defensible political decision given the distinct unpopularity of the Iraq war and the proposition of returning large numbers of American troops to the country indefinitely. Thus the operational responsibility for retaking Iraqi territory from ISIS has fallen largely on Iraqi forces which have had some successes but have a very long road ahead.

The near-total collapse of the reconstituted Iraqi Army in the face of an ISIS advance in 2014 and the disjointedness of the counter-ISIS campaign have highlighted the scale of the challenge for U.S. military advisors attempting to rebuild Iraqi security forces into a competent fighting force. Institutionalized corruption within the forces (and the government in general) has proven difficult to eradicate for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and it continues to hinder the army's effectiveness as commanders worry more about paying bribes to secure promotions rather than managing the logistics required to continue the military campaign. Lower levels of the Iraqi security forces are still plagued by desertion and missing soldiers. Entire divisions which collapsed as ISIS advanced on Mosul have yet to be reconstituted.⁵ For those forces which are available for training, preliminary interactions with American military advisors have raised questions about their basic competence. Advisors have reported the Iraqi forces' incredulousness that American forces would not be taking the lead in operations and unfamiliarity with basic

⁵ Erika Solomon, "Iraqi forces make gains on Isis but old ways persist," *The Financial Times*, June 23, 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/ed6738f8-391c-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7>

first aid principles.⁶ Add to these problems sectarian division and infighting from which the Iraqi Army as an institution is far from immune, and serious questions arise as to the projected efficacy of U.S. training operations. U.S. policymakers should consider what sort of duration and scale would be required in the present to achieve better results than the previous eight-year training effort which produced a completely ineffective fighting force which crumbled when faced with an aggressive advance by a much smaller non-professional force. At the time of the United States' departure in 2011, that force was estimated to include some 800,000 personnel, of which 350,000 were regular Iraqi Army. However, that latter number may have dwindled to as few as 50,000 following the 2014 ISIS offensive, meaning that the current training and equipment effort will be forced to rebuild the majority of Iraq's professional military force.⁷

As the United States adds more support troops to the mission in Iraq (currently slightly over 5,000 and counting), it should consider the political dynamics of the decision-making process in Baghdad. The Iraqi security forces' campaign to clear the country of ISIS has often been slowed by highly politicized debates over how to proceed with operations. Foremost amongst these debates is the question of how government forces will clear and hold Mosul, the only remaining large Iraqi city currently under ISIS control. That operation has already experienced countless delays and setbacks, as Iraqi politicians and military leaders attempt develop a battle plan and post-conflict

⁶ Andrew Tilghman and Gidget Fuentes, "The U.S. is pushing a new strategy to make the Iraqis man up against ISIS," *Military Times*, April 24, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/war-on-is/2016/04/24/war-on-isis-us-advisers-train-iraqi-army-morale/83195920/>

⁷ Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud, "Iraq: Politics and Governance," Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 31, 2015, p. 10.

stabilization and security plan for the large city. That planning process has been torturous due to the government's lack of knowledge regarding the human terrain there. The failure of the government to conduct a census to determine the ethnic and sectarian makeup of the country has resulted in debates over how to pacify the population there based on anecdotal knowledge rather than empirical evidence.⁸ Given the considerable demographic knowledge gap and preparation which still needs to be undertaken before the operation, Mosul could remain under ISIS control for some time. As General Jack Keane recently noted, U.S. military advisors have recommended delaying the operation until more U.S. forces can be brought in to assist with training and air support, which could push the time frame for the operation to later this year or early next year.⁹

While gains against ISIS in the Iraqi countryside are important to the future of the Iraqi state, these gains will be for naught without a secure and stable seat of government. Indeed, some wonder whether the Iraqi security forces will even be able to ensure the security of Baghdad in the coming months. As Michael Knights noted in May of this year, elite Iraqi security forces are struggling to secure Baghdad in the face of an increasingly fierce suicide bombing campaign by ISIS. These forces are only operating in a limited capacity in the areas outside the city from which the attacks are emanating and are failing to secure the major avenues of entry to the city. He suggests incorporating new security technology and reinstating close cooperation between U.S. and other coalition

⁸ Dan De Luce and Henry Johnson, "Who Will Rule Mosul?" *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/29/iraq-isis-sunni-shiite-kurds-fight-mosul/>

⁹ General Jack Keane, "Looking Past Fallujah," *The Cipher Brief*, June 29, 2016, <https://thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/looking-past-fallujah-1091>

special forces and the elite Iraqi counter-terror forces which remain around Baghdad.¹⁰ Securing Baghdad would go a long way toward improving Abadi's image in the country and facilitating political discussion. Nevertheless, relative security in the capital will be extremely difficult to translate to productive politics given the entrenched resistance of many Iraqi politicians to reform.

U.S. officials have expressed hope that local forces will be able to hold the territory retaken from ISIS and provide stability. Whether that hope can be converted into a realized goal (and how quickly that could be accomplished) is another question and policymakers should continue to cast a critical eye upon rosy predictions by administration officials. Senator Bob Menendez provided a solid example of this necessary skepticism during a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing by asking whether the United States really believes that "Iraqi forces are going to have the ability to sustain and hold the places we have cleared so that we are not there for a third time."¹¹ These are exactly the sort of questions policymakers in Washington should be asking heading into the new year as the next president and congress work to find a viable long-term solution to instability in Iraq.

Any such long-term solution will need to account for the likelihood that ISIS will retain the ability to sow sectarian division and pose significant governance challenges within Iraq and the greater Middle East region for the foreseeable future. While the

¹⁰ Michael Knights, "The Liberation of Fallujah, the Fall of Baghdad," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/23/the-liberation-of-fallujah-the-fall-of-baghdad/>

¹¹ Luke Carberry Mogan, "Coalition fighters kill a new ISIS leader every three days. But is that enough?" *DefenseNews.com*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/military/2016/06/29/mcgurk-isis-progress-lingering-questions/86504992/>

Obama administration's stated goal in the campaign has been to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS, the parallel counterterror campaign against a resurgent al-Qaeda and its various terror affiliates around the globe demonstrates the difficulty of eradicating – or at the very least, severely limiting the influence and operational capacity – of these groups. American military commanders have acknowledged that, while ISIS will eventually be tactically defeated and driven from its strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa (in Syria), it will remain a potent insurgent force in Iraq for years to come.¹² The U.S. government will need to consider the extent to which it will remain committed to training and developing the Iraqi security forces which will bear the responsibility for providing security in the country in the future. Reflection on the previous eight-year effort and the approaching second anniversary of the revived training effort indicates that, in order to make a meaningful and lasting impact, the United States will need to retain a significant presence in the country for many years, if not decades.

There are also serious concerns as to the efficacy of the Iraqi criminal justice system which loom large over the anti-ISIS campaign. Even as the United States remained heavily involved in the state both militarily and diplomatically, the Iraqi criminal justice system struggled to conform to international standards. A 2008 Human Rights Watch report on the state of the Iraqi criminal justice system reached damning conclusions about the system's ability to effectively mete out justice for the country. It found that:

¹² Andrew Tilghman, "Top U.S. commander in Iraq says Islamic State group will 'morph into a true insurgent force,'" *Military Times*, August 10, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/08/10/top-commander-iraq-says-islamic-state-group-morph-into-true-insurgent-force/88522358/>

...the majority of defendants endured lengthy pretrial detention without judicial review, that they had ineffectual legal counsel, and the court frequently relied on the testimony of secret informants and confessions likely to have been extracted under duress.¹³

There is little evidence to suggest that the Iraqi judicial system has improved significantly since that time. Reforms implemented by Abadi's government in early 2015 largely targeted corruption at the top of the judiciary without meaningfully altering the entire judicial process.¹⁴ That process will need to be reformed to ensure due process and ethical treatment of prisoners as more individuals are arrested in counterterrorism raids.

The shortcomings of the Iraqi judiciary system are likely to be magnified by the ongoing campaign against ISIS. Much of the trouble for Iraqi government forces in the campaign stems from the difficulty of identifying combatants and civilians. This problem was clearly documented earlier this year by VICE News correspondents who embedded with the Iraqi Special Forces "Golden Division" as it cleared areas of ISIS control in its push toward Fallujah.¹⁵ Their 30-minute news documentary (first aired in June) shows the specialized Iraqi units clearing small villages of ISIS fighters and taking alleged combatants into custody. However, there are a number of salient problems in their process. Foremost amongst these problems is the fact that the commander of the unit

¹³ "The Quality of Justice: Failings of Iraq's Central Criminal Court," Human Rights Watch, December 2008, p. 1.

¹⁴ "Iraqi PM orders judicial reform in anti-corruption drive," Reuters, August 14, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-reforms-cleric-idUKKCN0QJ1G620150814>

¹⁵ The Golden Division has garnered considerable praise and fame as one of Iraq's most effective units in the fight against ISIS. They have been used extensively by the Iraqi government as the lead force in clearing operations, but they do not remain behind to hold territory retaken from ISIS.

relies heavily on the input of the local population in identifying ISIS fighters and sympathizers. The VICE correspondent notes that ISIS fighters often shave their distinctive beards and don casual clothes in efforts to blend in to the local civilian population when it is evident that they are going to lose their hold on the village. The Golden Division thus gathers the villagers into a central location and detains individuals the villagers single out, all of whom vehemently deny any association with ISIS. According to the correspondent, these individuals are then sent back to Baghdad and left in the custody of the Iraqi intelligence services, who will determine whether they are a threat to national security and whether to prosecute them.¹⁶

Imagining a scaled-up version of this process playing out repeatedly across Iraq as the Iraqi government (backed by U.S. forces) reclaims land from ISIS highlights major areas of concern. Regardless of whether these detainees are ISIS fighters or sympathizers, they are entering a fundamentally broken detention system. Iraq's prison system in particular has become infamous for abuses and as a breeding ground for extremism. Extremist detainees are often kept with the general prison population, allowing them to actively recruit potential fighters. That recruitment mission is aided by the frequent torture and abuse many Iraqi prisoners routinely face there. Reports by humanitarian groups have detailed the brutality which is rampant in these prisons, where thousands of prisoners are held either without trial or after perfunctory and unfair trials. According to

¹⁶ "Fighting the Islamic State with Iraq's Golden Division: The Road to Fallujah," VICE News documentary, June 7, 2016, <https://news.vice.com/video/fighting-the-islamic-state-with-iraqs-golden-division-the-road-to-fallujah>

reports, torture is committed “with impunity,” and prisoners are often beaten and raped.¹⁷ Iraqi women in particular have suffered under this sadistic system, as they face social stigmatization if and when they are eventually released from prison.¹⁸ It is therefore difficult to determine whether those sent to Iraqi prisons are more fortunate than those who are sentenced to death after cursory trials in front of the criminal court, as was the case for 24 defendants accused of participating in an ISIS slaughter of roughly 1,700 Shi’a military recruits.¹⁹ Even the application of these death sentences is mired in controversy, as legislation passed by the Iraqi parliament to streamline the appeals process met resistance from the presidency and opponents who argued that it would lead to the execution of more innocent prisoners.²⁰

Iraqi prisons have also been chronically unsecure, making them prime targets for insurgent groups like ISIS seeking to grow their ranks and sow chaos. It has long been an ISIS strategy to “liberate” these facilities, even before it began exercising control over large swathes of territory. Jailbreaks began in 2012 and expanded rapidly in scope, culminating in a large jailbreak at Baghdad Central Prison (formerly Abu Ghraib of the eponymous scandal) in July of 2013 in which as many as one thousand inmates were freed.²¹ That facility was widely regarded as the most secure detention facility in Iraq,

¹⁷ “Rape and torture prevalent in Iraqi prison system,” Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, December 22, 2013, <http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/2561>

¹⁸ “Women Tortured And Raped In Iraqi Prisons, Human Rights Watch Says,” Reuters via Huffington Post, February 6, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/06/iraq-illegally-detains-th_n_4735144.html

¹⁹ “Iraq: Civilians Pay Price of Conflict,” Human Rights Watch, January 27, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/27/iraq-civilians-pay-price-conflict>

²⁰ Mustafa Naser, “Stalled death sentences spur debate in Iraq,” Al-Monitor, July 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/execution-iraq-terrorism.html>

²¹ Aki Peritz, “The Great Iraqi Jailbreak,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/26/the-great-iraqi-jail-break/>

which raises serious concerns about the Iraqi government's ability to ensure both the safety of the state and the legitimacy of the judicial process. Addressing the security of these facilities will be paramount for the Iraqi government as the United States is unlikely to fill the void when it comes to detaining ISIS fighters. The Obama administration has repeatedly emphasized that it will not consider opening wartime detention facilities like those the United States military maintained for many years in Iraq. Only in very isolated cases has the U.S. taken custody of ISIS fighters, later transferring them to Iraqi Kurdish prisons.²² Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraqi Kurdistan have arguably been the United States' most reliable ground partner in the fight against ISIS. However, the limited transfer of detainees to these groups by the U.S. has recently been called into question, as news reports have raised concerns that the Kurdish units taking custody of the prisoners may not be treating ISIS detainees with the same humane standards as the United States would.²³

Questions of accountability for the many alleged war crimes which have taken place throughout the conflict further complicate this judicial crisis. ISIS brutality has been widely documented, as the atrocities it commits against those in territories it captures or oversees continue to generate international headlines. But there remains significant doubt as to whether any substantial portion of the group will face justice either

²² Charlie Savage, et. al., "Lack of Plan for ISIS Detainees Raises Human Rights Concerns," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/12/world/middleeast/lack-of-plan-for-isis-detainees-raises-human-rights-concerns.html?_r=0

²³ Shane Harris and Nancy A. Youssef, "'They're Being Tortured': U.S. Ally Accused of Abusing ISIS Prisoners," *The Daily Beast*, November 29, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/29/i-m-sure-they-re-being-tortured-u-s-ally-accused-of-abusing-isis-prisoners.html>

in Iraq or internationally for its countless crimes against humanity. While the U.S. State Department acknowledged earlier this year that ISIS had committed genocide against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'a in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. government has yet to take substantive legal action against the group, instead opting for airstrikes against its positions. Unfortunately, this will likely remain the case as barriers to legal action against individuals in this group remain extremely high. The International Criminal Court (ICC), which has been used sparingly and ineffectively in similar cases in the past, has no jurisdiction in Iraq, effectively eliminating it as a viable judicial option. Critics have also noted that were the ICC to be engaged, the judicial process could take decades to reach a conclusion – a prospect for which few of the involved parties have any appetite.²⁴

Though the Popular Mobilization Forces/Units (PMF or PMU) were formally incorporated into the Iraqi government structure under the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), the Iraqi government's control over these groups is minimal and will likely continue to be so for the foreseeable future. The PMC is little more than a figurehead organization and Iraqi officials in charge of overseeing the PMF groups are still unsure how to effectively transform them into a national institution which is directly beholden to the Iraqi state rather than individual outside leaders.²⁵ They have proven to be a particularly unwieldy tool for the Iraqi government, as they are notoriously prone to splinters, defections, and infighting as their leaders' political ambitions and strategic

²⁴ Timothy William Waters, "Yezidis vs. ISIS at the ICC," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-03-29/yezidis-vs-isis-icc>

²⁵ Christoph Wilcke, "Why Accountability for Iraq's Militias Matters," Human Rights Watch, May 27, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/27/why-accountability-iraqs-militias-matters>

objectives diverge.²⁶ Successfully incorporating these leaders into an Iraqi government bureaucracy will be exceedingly difficult and may require years of negotiation and political maneuvering.

Questionable PMF loyalty and control should be especially concerning for both Iraqi and U.S. policymakers, as the absence of accountability will hang like a cloud over future operations. While previously PMF members had been tried for crimes as civilians under a special division of the Central Criminal Court, the February 2016 order officially designating them as part of the military structure has thrown future judicial proceedings into question. The PMC has been slow to build a formal command structure capable of controlling the many disparate groups it nominally commands, much less holding them accountable for their actions. The different groups are therefore left to act with impunity and then point fingers in each other's direction if the government investigates any alleged criminal acts. These alleged criminal acts are mounting as PMF militias play a growing role in the counter-ISIS campaign. These groups have been accused of destroying whole sections of neighborhoods retaken from ISIS, "disappearing" large numbers of Sunni male civilians, and employing child soldiers as young as twelve.²⁷ The majority of these groups view Iraq's Sunni population with antipathy, as encapsulated by one Shi'a militia leader's speech to his forces prior to the Fallujah offensive in which he called Fallujah a "terrorist stronghold" and declared that "there are no tribal sheikhs, no patriots, no religious people there. This is our chance to cleanse Iraq by cutting out the tumor that is

²⁶ Muhannad al-Ghazi, "No end to the militias in Iraq," Al-Monitor, August 7, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/jaish-al-moumal-muqtada-sadr-iraq-iran-shiite-militias.html>

²⁷ "Civilians Pay Price of Conflict."

Fallujah.”²⁸ Accordingly, fears of increased sectarian tension resulting from PMF involvement in operations are well-founded.

Unfortunately, the Iraqi government has been inconsistent in its messaging and application of justice in these situations. For example, the government announced that it had made arrests following the alleged execution of dozens of Sunni men fleeing Fallujah by PMF fighters and vowed to prosecute those who were allegedly responsible. Government spokesmen also insisted that the protection of civilians was of the utmost importance.²⁹ But the government’s continued dependence on the PMF groups means that justice could be limited or non-existent, lest the government risk alienating them and discouraging their participation in future operations. The problem the Iraqi government faces on this front could be best summarized in a rhetorical question posed by Prime Minister Abadi when asked why alleged crimes by PMF groups were not being investigated more aggressively: “Do you want to see the militias fighting in the streets of Baghdad?”³⁰ Given the recent historical precedent of that scenario, both the U.S. and Iraqi governments are eager to avoid such an outcome. Thus how to hold these groups accountable for their actions while successfully incorporating them into a strong and centralized Iraqi state and command structure will remain an open question.

In the meantime, the Iraqi government will likely continue to downplay any alleged crimes these groups commit in the ongoing ground offensive against ISIS.

²⁸ Taylor Luck, “Why a loss in Fallujah may a win for ISIS,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 2, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0602/Why-a-loss-in-Fallujah-may-be-a-win-for-ISIS-video>

²⁹ Isabel Coles and Stephen Kalin, “Iraq makes arrests over reports of Sunnis executed in Falluja,” Reuters, June 13, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-falluja-idUSKCN0YZ17M>

³⁰ Wilcke, “Why Accountability Matters.”

Amidst questions surrounding the inclusion and alleged abuses of PMF groups during operation to retake Fallujah in June of this year, Abadi praised the actions of the security forces while dismissively saying that some “sick souls” could have committed crimes “here and there,” but that these were merely isolated incidents.³¹ Other Iraqi government spokesmen have repeatedly denied allegations of abuses and war crimes by humanitarian groups like Human Rights Watch (HRW), accusing them of having incorrect or incomplete information and questionable sources. But officials in these human rights organizations note that these denials are fairly routine among governments which have actively participated in or overseen abuses. As the executive director for HRW Middle East and North Division, Sarah Leah Whitson noted in an interview with Al-Monitor:

“It is difficult for the governments to accept criticism, especially when the violations committed by the government against its citizens are documented, and specifically in times of conflicts or wars. This makes the government more prone to danger. However, we are on good terms with several officials in the Iraqi government and we find them more open to discussion than other officials in other governments in the region. I do not believe they neglect our reports on purpose. We are grateful for the many positive comments made by Abadi, as well as his commitment to curb the abuses committed by militias, investigate and punish

³¹ Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, “Iraqi forces expel Islamic State from Fallujah,” *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-forces-expel-islamic-state-from-fallujah/2016/06/26/1bb2511e-3bb3-11e6-9e16-4cf01a41decb_story.html

those responsible for such abuses, and we hope he will abide by this commitment.”³²

The U.S. government can and should provide encouragement and advice to the Iraqi government to ensure that the rule of law improves and strengthens over time rather than allowing these abuses to accumulate and undermine the credibility of the Iraqi government. It should collaborate with those within the Iraqi government who acknowledge the important role human rights groups play in highlighting abuses and ensuring the fair application of justice.

Iranian Influence and Shi’a Dominance

One of the most salient factors hamstringing U.S. policy in Iraq to this point is the far-reaching influence of the Iranian regime over domestic Iraqi politics. Iran views the power vacuum left by the removal of the Saddam Hussein as an opportunity to exert greater leverage over its neighbor and longtime nemesis. Though U.S. and Iraqi policymakers initially envisioned replacing the Hussein regime with an inclusive Iraqi government that was largely representative of its demographic composition, in practice the system that they created empowered a previously little-known Shi’a politician (Nouri al-Maliki) to run an Iraqi government amenable to Iranian influence. Maliki’s government disenfranchised and often persecuted the Sunni minority, exacerbating problems of political recognition and reconciliation between the two sects. This Shia-

³² Mustafa Saadoun, “Why is Iraq challenging human rights reports?” Al-Monitor, March 7, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/human-rights-report-iraq-government-violations.html>

Sunni sectarian tension and identity politics remain at the core of Iraqi political dysfunction and are not areas in which the United States is particularly prepared to operate effectively.

The United States should understand that it is at a distinct disadvantage to Iran with regards to exercising influence in Baghdad. For all of its military power and history in the region, the United States is not bound by any regional proximity or religious affiliation to Iraq. Understanding the human terrain there is an ongoing learning exercise for U.S. policymakers which has only been undertaken with any urgency in the past thirteen years. By contrast, the political and religious ties between Iraq and Iran go back millennia and affect the populations of both states much more intimately. Iran has continually leveraged its influence over the Iraqi Shi'a population to influence the outcome of elections. For example, by encouraging Iraqi Shi'a to run on unified lists during the 2005 elections to the interim parliament, Iran ensured that the friendly, Shi'a-dominated United Iraqi Alliance won a majority of seats. That group was then able to use its commanding position to influence the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution.³³

Iranian influence on the current military campaign to defeat ISIS has been equally dominant and surprisingly transparent. Both the Iraqi and Iranian governments in recent years would be quick to deny any collaboration between the two, but it has become increasingly obvious to observers that Iran is heavily involved in the process. While the Iraqi government claims to be directing the operations of the PMFs, news reports have

³³ Alireza Nader, "Iran's Role in Iraq," RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 5.

indicated that many of these units may actually be under the direction of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Soleimani has been a major player in Iraqi politics for years, acting as an arbiter and kingmaker in disputes between Iraqi Shi'a factions and the Iranian government's point man for pro-Iranian policy advocacy in Baghdad.³⁴ He is therefore well-positioned to direct PMF units in upcoming military operations, which an Iraqi PMF spokesman effectively confirmed he would do in an August 6th announcement.³⁵ Iran has also increased the rate of its military aid to the militias it supports in Iraq. Over the course of 2014, Iran sold as much as \$10 billion in weaponry to Iraq for militia use with a high volume of supply flights landing in the country.³⁶ Many Shi'a militias are therefore equally or better equipped than regular Iraqi Army units which could pose a serious threat to the security of the state.

There is no question that U.S. policymakers should be especially concerned by the ascendance of Shi'a militias with close ties to the Iranian government. As these groups accrue greater power within the Iraqi government, it will be more difficult for the United States to exert diplomatic influence in Baghdad. This problem was manifested earlier this year as the Iraqi government prioritized operations to liberate the city of Fallujah before Mosul (rather than the reverse, as the U.S. advised) because Iranian leaders wanted to

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

³⁵ Amir Toumaj, "Qassem Soleimani to play 'major role' in Mosul operations," Threat Matrix, *The Long War Journal*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/qassem-soleimani-to-play-major-role-in-mosul-operations.php>

³⁶ Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iran eclipses US as Iraq's ally in fight against militants," Associated Press, published on Yahoo.com, January 12, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/iran-eclipses-us-iraqs-ally-fight-against-militants-071942725.html?ref=gs>

clear that area first to stem the flow of bombings in Baghdad.³⁷ This coup could be the first of many for Iran over the United States in the near future as it tightens its grip on political developments in Baghdad. The indispensability of PMF units in operations to secure the country and the close marriage between many of these militias and the Iranian government does not bode well for Iraqi sovereignty. Furthermore, there is no indication that these groups will demobilize following a defeat of ISIS, as they (and their Iranian backers) value their newfound power and influence over the government.³⁸ The Iraqi government thus faces the conundrum of finding a way to fully incorporate these groups into the government system to ensure the security of the state while retaining sovereignty and political initiative.

One reassuring factor for the United States is the aforementioned diversity of interests of these groups. Amongst the many Shi'a militias, there are considerable conflicting loyalties which also escalate tension within the PMF organization. While militias like Asa'ib al-Haq, Harakat al-Abdal and Kata'ib Hizballah are more direct proxies of the Iranian regime, others such as Firqat al-Abbas and Liwa Ali al-Akbar are loyal to Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shiite cleric who at times has been openly critical of Iranian influence in his country.³⁹ The tension between these groups reflects an ongoing

³⁷ Michael Weiss, "Fallujah and the Failed Iraqi State," *The Daily Beast*, June 6, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/06/fallujah-and-the-failed-iraqi-state.html>

³⁸ "The Destabilizing Role of Iraq's Shi'a Militias," TSG IntelBrief, The Soufan Group, May 10, 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-destabilizing-role-of-iraqs-shia-militias/>

³⁹ David Patrikarakos, "Will The Battle For Fallujah Heal or exacerbate Iraq's Sectarianism?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 25, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tracking-islamic-state-fallujah-battle-sectarianism/27757155.html>

debate in Iraqi politics regarding Iraqi national identity and the influence of Iran in the country.

The United States also should not make the mistake of assuming that because these Iranian-backed militias are also fighting against ISIS that they are by any means friendly actors or viable long-term strategic partners. Haider al-Amiri, leader of the powerful Badr militia, has been especially critical of U.S. policy in Iraq, saying that it has been “wrong” for decades and patronized groups which preceded ISIS, all while lavishing praise on Iranian efforts to counter ISIS and preserve the Iraqi government.⁴⁰ Yet al-Amiri’s assertions seem tame in comparison to other militia leaders’ reactions to U.S. policy in Iraq. In fact, many attempts to engage these units have often been met with open hostility. In one such instance U.S. Consul Steven Walker’s visit to a hospital treating wounded PMF fighters was vociferously denounced by a leader of an Iranian-backed militia who recorded a video calling Walker evil and accusing the United States of providing aid to ISIS.⁴¹ These militia leaders have also sought to undermine Abadi’s efforts at government reform, paving the way for the April storming of the Green Zone in Baghdad by protesters and followers of another highly prominent Iraqi Shi’a cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr also has a long history of open hostility toward the United States, as his ironically-named “Peace Brigades” militia (also “Peace Companies” in some translations) was responsible for some of the most brutal insurgent resistance and

⁴⁰ Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran eclipses US as Iraq’s ally in fight against militants,” Associated Press, published on Yahoo.com, January 12, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/iran-eclipses-us-iraqs-ally-fight-against-militants-071942725.html?ref=gs>

⁴¹ Michael Weiss, “Fallujah and the Failed Iraqi State,” *The Daily Beast*, June 6, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/06/fallujah-and-the-failed-iraqi-state.html>

sectarian warfare in Iraq in the post-invasion years. Sadr has reinvented himself a number of times in recent years in an attempt to exert greater influence over Iraqi politics, at times moderating his rhetoric to appear more pragmatic. However, he recently threatened violence against American troops coming into the country to assist the Iraqi government, saying they represent a “target” for his militia.⁴² Open hostility to U.S. government influence by these groups indicates that the United States will have a very difficult time advocating and advancing its nominal goal of a free and democratic Iraq, closely aligned with the United States.

Accounting for Past Expenses and Budgeting for the Future

One of the key challenges the U.S. government will face in the formation of Iraq policy in the near future will be accounting for any money which Congress appropriates for efforts to train Iraqi security forces and help rebuild the country. Indeed, whether Congress *should* even allocate further resources to help rebuild the country and the manner in which that money is provided will be questions meriting serious debate. As of April this year, the U.S. government had spent roughly seven billion dollars on the military effort against ISIS compared to only \$15 million towards stabilizing territory retaken from ISIS. That latter amount hardly registers against the estimated \$60 billion cost of rebuilding and rehabilitating the territory under ISIS control as of earlier this

⁴² “Iraqi Shiite Cleric Calls Additional US Troops a ‘Target,’” Associated Press, published on Military.com, July 18, 2016, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/07/18/iraqi-shiite-cleric-calls-additional-us-troops-target.html>

year.⁴³ That \$60 billion figure is also roughly equivalent to the entirety of the funds the U.S. government allocated to rebuilding the Iraqi state in the ten-year period between 2003 and 2013 – a substantial portion of which was found to have been wasted, according to a final 2013 report by Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction Stuart Bowen.⁴⁴ Bowen’s report should provide the foundation upon which any future Iraq policy is built; it was illuminating in a number of respects. Not only did it thoroughly detail the allocation and efficacy of congressionally-appropriated funds, but it also provided key takeaways which will be directly applicable to U.S. policy in Iraq in the near-term future. Bowen particularly emphasized the need to establish security on the ground before commencing any rebuilding projects as well as coordinating more closely with local authorities during the planning process to ensure that rebuilding projects are actually desired by the Iraqi government. Many of the wasted dollars included in Bowen’s report came in the form of contracts awarded for projects that went considerably over budget and were oftentimes later abandoned.⁴⁵ Neither the financially-struggling Iraqi government nor the U.S. government can afford further financial boondoggles in Iraq.

⁴³ “Preventing the Next Islamic State,” TSG IntelBrief, The Soufan Group, April 15, 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-preventing-the-next-islamic-state>

⁴⁴ Associated Press, “Much of \$60B from U.S. to rebuild Iraq wasted, special auditor’s final report to Congress shows,” CBS News, March 6, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/much-of-60b-from-us-to-rebuild-iraq-wasted-special-auditors-final-report-to-congress-shows/>

⁴⁵ Stuart W. Bowen, Jr. “Learning From Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction,” Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), March 2013, report accessed via the SIGIR archived site hosted by the University of North Texas, <http://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001083907/http://www.sigir.mil/learningfromiraq/index.html>, pp. 130-131.

Before any reconstruction projects can begin in earnest, however, the security situation in Iraq will need to improve dramatically. Though U.S., Iraqi, and allied forces have recently experienced tactical successes in the ground campaign against ISIS, converting these successes to enduring stability and security will be extremely expensive both financially and chronologically. As ISIS continues to lose territory and retreats to its insurgent roots, it will resort to many of the same tactics employed during its previous incarnation during the height of the insurgency in the mid-2000s. The group understands that the key to its survival is the continued weakness and instability of the Iraqi state. The most visible symbol (if not the *only* symbol) of law and order and a strong Iraqi state has been the Iraqi security forces. Recruiting and police stations have thus been a favorite target of insurgent groups for suicide attacks, killing dozens of current and future security officers and providing a powerful disincentive for civilians interested in joining. ISIS has specifically targeted these locations with car bombs and will continue to do so as it transitions from more conventional military tactics to guerrilla and terror attacks.⁴⁶ Successfully deterring and preventing these attacks will require the effective application of intensive training programs and expensive technology – bound to be a protracted process.

The rise of ISIS and the urgency of the assistance needed by the Iraqi government has breathed new life into U.S. assistance efforts in Iraq, particularly those directed to the Iraqi security forces. In FY 2015, Congress allocated \$1.6 billion for the new Iraq Train

⁴⁶ Euan McKirdy, et. al., “ISIS claims suicide bombings at Baghdad police station,” CNN, May 12, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/12/middleeast/baghdad-police-station-suicide-bomb/>

and Equip Fund, dedicated for the provision of weapons, military equipment, and the construction of training facilities.⁴⁷ That number has dropped in successive budget proposals from \$715 million for FY 2016 to a proposed \$630 million for FY 2017.⁴⁸ The key question which will need to be addressed by those formulating Iraq policy in the coming years is whether there is sufficient Iraqi motivation to commit to the sorts of long-term training programs the country's security forces desperately need. It will be incumbent upon U.S. policymakers to articulate why and how new rounds of training programs for the Iraqi security forces will be more effective than the programs which were implemented after 2003 and were eventually shuttered as the United States scaled back its engagement in the country. U.S. assistance and training missions like the Police Development Program cost \$700 million over two years. Prior to that program, Iraqi police training was conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense and averaged about \$1 billion per year for eight years.⁴⁹ The disappearance of these programs left Iraqi police forces without meaningful mentorship at a time when internal stability was highly tenuous at best. The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, which was responsible for overseeing assistance to the country, also saw steady budgetary declines from over \$3 billion in 2012 to \$647 million for fiscal year (FY) 2014, 88% of which was dedicated to security for the embassy itself.⁵⁰ An internal State Department review by its inspector general found that

⁴⁷ Schulz, "U.S. Factsheet."

⁴⁸ "Justification for FY 2017, Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Iraq Train & Equip Fund," Department of Defense Budget FY 2017, Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2016, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Spencer Ackerman, "U.S. Quietly Ends Iraqi Police Training, Its Last Major Baghdad Project," *Wired.com*, March 18, 2013, <https://www.wired.com/2013/03/iraqi-police/>

⁵⁰ Ellen Laipson and Russell Rumbaugh, "Measuring U.S. Impact and Influence in Iraq," *Stimson Spotlight*, The Stimson Center, February 28, 2014, <http://www.stimson.org/content/measuring-us-impact-and-influence-iraq-0>

these precipitous cuts did not “fully consider U.S. foreign policy priorities in Iraq.”⁵¹ It is important that a new presidential administration and congress clearly delineate “U.S. foreign policy priorities in Iraq,” and propose a clear strategy and budget for realizing those priorities.

Without thoughtful direction and critical oversight, current U.S. training efforts in Iraq could go the way of previous programs which wasted considerable sums of money. For example, an earlier 2012 report from Bowen’s office found that the U.S. State Department had wasted at least \$200 million on one training program for the Iraqi police force.⁵² That program, which was designed to be the biggest State Department program in the world at the time, would have provided a consistent U.S. presence in Iraq following the departure of the U.S. combat troops which had heretofore provided a measure of stability and security. But the United States failed to ensure commitment on the part of the Iraqi government and the program was largely shunned by Iraqi policymakers who sought distance from the United States for their own political benefit and even instructed some security officials to skip the training. Iraqi officials were either dismissively overconfident or in complete denial at the time, saying, “The Iraqi federal police went through many training courses, in many fields, and that resulted in having many experts and specialist academies. At this point, we don't need the American expertise because of

⁵¹ Jeff Gerth and Joby Warrick, “Promises unfulfilled: How a State Department plan to stabilize Iraq broke apart,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/promises-unfulfilled-how-a-state-department-plan-to-stabilize-iraq-broke-apart/2016/08/15/82e2324e-5a8c-11e6-831d-0324760ca856_story.html

⁵² “U.S. wasted \$200M on Iraq police training: Audit,” *The Associated Press*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-wasted-200m-on-iraq-police-training-audit/>

the expertise we have now.”⁵³ Any future training programs the United States undertakes will need to account for this Iraqi inclination to preemptively declare success and disassociate with American advisors while asserting its positive role there.

If the ISIS threat wanes in severity and urgency, Iraqi politicians may again question the necessity of continued American presence in the country. In turn, U.S. policymakers will have to evaluate whether the correct policy will to insist on an enduring U.S. presence in the country and what that presence would look like. Successful security cooperation between the U.S. and Iraqi governments will require commitment and continuity of leadership. Not only have Iraqi government figures previously dismissed the need for continued U.S. involvement in internal security, but they have recently experienced acute setbacks in terms of leadership. In July, Iraqi Interior Minister Mohammed al-Ghabban (responsible for overseeing internal security) resigned after an ISIS truck bomb ripped through a central Baghdad market, killing and wounding hundreds of civilians. His resignation, which cited a lack of “coordination among security systems” and a government admission that security services had for years been relying on bomb detectors widely known to be useless were embarrassing for the Iraqi government.⁵⁴ The next month, Minister of Defense Khaled al-Obeidi was impeached by the Iraqi parliament following a perfunctory investigation into corruption charges.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Tim Hume, “Iraq’s interior minister resigns in wake of devastating Baghdad truck bombing,” CNN, July 5, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/05/middleeast/iraq-interior-minister-resigns/>

⁵⁵ Saif Hameed and Stephen Kalin, “Iraqi defense minister sacked as Mosul battle looms,” Reuters, August 25, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-politics-idUSKCN1101KR>

Without competent leadership to partner with in Iraq, it is difficult to envision serious long-term effectiveness for training and equipping efforts.

Iraqi Domestic Opinions and Developments

If the United States is serious about continuing long-term engagement in Iraq, it will also need to consider Iraqi domestic political attitudes and demography and how those factors will influence the course of events there. In the years following the invasion, the U.S. government was haunted by its lack of foresight regarding these issues as it found itself caught in sectarian violence it had unwittingly unleashed. Any future involvement by the U.S. government in Iraq will require a tactful awareness of its limitations with regards to understanding and operating in a deeply sectarian environment. Though the government has made a concerted effort to understand the roots of extremism in domestic cases (i.e. its newfound focus on “countering violent extremism,” or CVE), it will need to make an even greater effort to expand its understanding in Iraq and the surrounding region as a whole. As Jacob Olidort noted in *Foreign Affairs*, the United States would be ill-served attempting to engage in debates over the nature of sectarian division in the country, whose roots far outdate United States involvement there.⁵⁶ Instead, the government should consider reviving programs like the erstwhile tribal reconciliation program which the U.S. Army administered before its

⁵⁶ Jacob Olidort, “The Truth About Sectarianism,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-01-25/truth-about-sectarianism?cid=nlc-twofa-20160128&sp_mid=50574245&sp_rid=a2RyZWFnYW45MEBnbWFpbC5jb20S1&spMailingID=50574245&spUserID=OTY3NzgZnJY4NjcS1&spJobID=843799575&spReportId=ODQzNzk5NTc1S0

withdrawal from the country.⁵⁷ There may be a role for the United States in helping to mediate tribal and sectarian divisions in the country without overstepping its bounds; there will be more on this subject later in this paper.

In addition to attempting to carefully navigate the treacherous waters of Iraqi sectarianism, the U.S. government will also need to overcome the perception that it is not completely invested in the country. While its profile has risen some recently thanks to its heavy military support in the anti-ISIS campaign, the years preceding the rapid rise of ISIS were marked by disengagement from the country and diplomatic missteps. Iraqi politicians were treated simplistically, like chess pieces which could be played strategically rather than representatives of diverse groups with divergent political aims who were intent on holding onto their newfound power. This was evident in the Obama administration's negotiations with Iraqi government officials in 2010 wherein the administration sought to rearrange the power structure of the country by installing different leaders in new positions. Those failed efforts then led directly to failed negotiations to maintain a significant troop presence in the country and the Obama administration's decision to bring all U.S. forces back to the United States.⁵⁸ Two years after the final withdrawal of combat troops from the country, then Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak was on the record saying: "No one thinks America has influence now in Iraq. America could still do a lot if they wanted to. But I think because Obama chose a

⁵⁷ Gerth and Warrick, "Promises unfulfilled."

⁵⁸ Michael R. Gordon, "In U.S. Exit From Iraq, Failed Efforts and Challenges," *New York Times*, September 22, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/world/middleeast/failed-efforts-of-americas-last-months-in-iraq.html?_r=3

line that he is taking care of interior matters rather than taking care of outside problems, that made America weak – at least in Iraq.”⁵⁹

One the most problematic and enduring legacies of the U.S. intervention in Iraq is the heavily-fortified “Green Zone” in central Baghdad which houses the Iraqi government, the U.S. Embassy, and other important buildings, including the residences of most the country’s high-ranking officials and elites. Many Iraqis (with good reason) see the Green Zone as a symbol of corrupt government which lives comfortably within its walls and is indifferent to the suffering of the general population.⁶⁰ The unprecedented storming of the zone and the Iraqi parliament by protestors in April and May of this year should refresh the U.S. government’s memory regarding the importance of this political dimension in Iraq. In order for future U.S. efforts in Iraq to be credible with the Iraqi civilian population, the United States will need to actively engage with the population outside the confines of the Green Zone.

Increased engagement by the United States government may help bolster a faltering Iraqi government. The Obama administration has repeatedly voiced support for Prime Minister al-Abadi and his government, but that rhetorical support has not translated to any measurable increase in support for al-Abadi amongst competing Iraqi political factions. While Abadi has remained relatively popular personally amongst the

⁵⁹ Ernesto Londoño, “A decade after invasion, America’s voice in Baghdad has gone from a boom to a whimper,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-decade-after-iraq-invasion-americas-voice-in-baghdad-has-gone-from-a-boom-to-a-whimper/2013/03/23/2f334826-9303-11e2-a31e-14700e2724e4_story.html

⁶⁰ Tim Arango, “Days of Chaos in Baghdad: Protest or Meltdown?” *New York Times*, May 2, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/world/middleeast/baghdad-iraq-green-zone-protests.html?_r=0

Iraqi populace, his struggles to implement reforms have pushed a restless society tired of government corruption and ineffectiveness to the brink. Rather than focusing solely on Abadi personally, some advisers have advocated the United States take a more decentralized approach, involving direct engagement with leaders of the three major Iraqi political factions.⁶¹ But deep-seated divisions and competing self-interest is rife amongst those groups as well, and, when combined with systemic corruption, finding reliable partners in developing a strong Iraqi state is proving increasingly difficult. To quote one former U.S. government official: “Iraq is becoming increasingly ungovernable. Non-state actors are stronger than the state. The government is paralyzed and corrupt.”⁶² The current gradual nature of the U.S. troop buildup in the country and reluctance to commit to an extended military presence may only be adding to Iraqis’ perception that the United States is not committed to any long-term presence there. Any U.S. efforts at diplomatic engagement in the future will need to allay these fears, account for internal struggles, and seek ways to promote engagement and progress within the Iraqi system.

Compounding the Iraqi government’s struggles are its budgetary woes. The Iraqi government is firmly dependent on oil revenues which account for about 90 percent of its revenue and so dramatically reduced oil prices have hit the already-weak Iraqi economy hard. The government has projected a deficit of \$25 billion this year on the assumption that oil prices would level out at approximately \$45 a barrel. However, if they remain

⁶¹ Greg Jaffe, “Protests in Baghdad throw administration’s Iraq plan into doubt,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/protests-in-baghdad-throw-administrations-iraq-plan-into-doubt/2016/04/30/759fadd4-0f03-11e6-bfa1-4efa856caf2a_story.html

⁶² Ibid.

below that amount for an extended period of time, it could potentially double the deficit.⁶³ In response to this budgetary crisis, al-Abadi has introduced a number of reforms and austerity measures including cracking down on government corruption and reducing government salaries. Experts have indicated that Iraq could save as much as \$10 billion per year by reducing the government payroll and incentivizing the private development of the energy sector.⁶⁴ But Abadi faces an uphill battle in a country where government corruption is pervasive and government jobs are seen as one of the only viable means of employment in the absence of a robust private sector. Iraqi citizens outside the government have grown increasingly frustrated by the lack of economic opportunity and a corrupt government which has consistently failed to provide basic services.⁶⁵

Polls within the country in recent years illustrate the Iraqi population's increasing frustration with the country's poor governance. Around the time the United States was withdrawing its troops in late 2011, a plurality of Iraqis polled by the National Democratic Institute believed that the country was headed in the right direction and majorities rated the country's economy and prime minister (al-Maliki) positively.⁶⁶ Despite the population's confidence at the time, the poll also highlighted areas of concern which could dramatically shift the public mood and foreshadowed political developments

⁶³ Loveday Morris, "Iraq is broke. Add that to its list of worries," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraq-is-broke-add-that-to-its-list-of-worries/2016/03/04/2cf42594-d4af-11e5-a65b-587e721fb231_story.html

⁶⁴ Luay Al-Khatteeb, "Iraq's Economic Reform for 2016," Brookings Institution, December 13, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/iraqs-economic-reform-for-2016/>

⁶⁵ Morris, "Iraq is broke."

⁶⁶ "Iraq survey shows growing optimism," National Democratic Institute, October 23, 2012, <https://www.ndi.org/Iraq-survey-growing-optimism>

to come. Many of the Iraqis polled expressed concerns about the government's ability to deliver basic services and as well as improve the economy and job market. Also, the country's minority Sunni population was decidedly more pessimistic about the direction of the country and was far more likely than the rest of the population to see the country as divided.⁶⁷ By the middle of last year, the Iraqi government had undergone a leadership change which installed al-Abadi as prime minister, but was still struggling to reduce corruption, improve its service delivery, and drive ISIS from its wide-ranging areas of control within the country. As a result, the Iraqi public's outlook shifted dramatically in the negative direction, and by August 2015 only a quarter of Iraqis believed the country was headed in the right direction.⁶⁸

Al-Abadi and the rest of the Iraqi leadership will have a long and arduous road to reforming the government away from an entrenched culture of graft and corruption which has long hampered its ability to govern effectively. The aforementioned negative public mood increases the difficulty of this mission as political discontent has made the population of the country increasingly restless. Fortunately, the Iraqi government appears to be slowly moving in the right direction, as it recently announced that it would partner with United Nations Development Program to receive mentoring on corruption investigations.⁶⁹ While encouraging, the effectiveness and application of this training will not be truly evaluable for many months to come. The Iraqi government also secured \$5.4

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood: August – September 2015 Survey Findings," Report by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, National Democratic Institute, available online at GQRR.com, p.5.

⁶⁹ Maher Chmaytelli, "U.N. says to help Iraq tackle rampant corruption," Reuters, August 11, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-corruption-idUSKCN10M0PZ>

billion in emergency funding from the International Monetary Fund earlier this year which was contingent upon the Iraqi government enacting sweeping reforms to its tax structure and government-owned enterprises.⁷⁰ Iraq's outlook may improve if it can enact these measures, begin to effectively manage its budget, and diversify its economy so that its fortunes are less dependent on high oil prices.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

Iraq's budgetary woes compound the difficulty for the government to address the pressing challenges of assisting and relocating the country's many refugees and internally displaced persons. A 2016 Human Rights Watch report estimated that since June 2014 the conflict in Iraq had displaced as many as 3.2 million Iraqis, while interrupting school and access to food, water, and medical for over three million Iraqi children. Those numbers now appear conservative, as they do not account for the further displacement of more people in the first half of this year.⁷¹ While ISIS's sweep through the Iraqi countryside created a refugee crisis as families fled the group's savagery, the refugee crisis has only deepened since the start of the campaign against the group. One of the sad but inevitable byproducts of the campaign against ISIS has been the dislocation of families in towns which had been controlled by the group. These families who, if they had not fled at the time of the group's arrival or feared they would be executed if they attempted to do so, are now fleeing the violence that comes with Iraqi forces' efforts to

⁷⁰ "\$5.4bn Iraq bailout to fight IS and tackle deficit," The New Arab, Al Araby, May 20, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/5/20/5-4bn-iraq-bailout-to-fight-is-and-tackle-deficit>

⁷¹ "World Report: 2016," Human Rights Watch (USA, 2016), p. 318.

reclaim the lost territory. As a result, aid organizations in the country attempting to assist with the refugee crisis are overwhelmed.

Exoduses of population groups in the country have routinely surpassed estimated numbers by wide margins. The recent battle to retake Fallujah from ISIS saw over 85,000 people flee the city – double the amount for which aid groups were prepared.⁷² The unprecedented scale of the refugee crisis has severely strained the budgets of humanitarian aid groups and local governments alike. The United Nations refugee agency recently cited “crisis level” budget concerns, 80% short of required levels.⁷³ At this time last year, Iraqi Kurdistan was burdened by the arrival of over one and a half million displaced Iraqis fleeing ISIS, severely straining the economy in that region. Around that time, the World Bank estimated in a press release that Iraqi Kurdistan would require an additional \$1.4 billion beyond its annual budget to stabilize its economy. The press release also noted that the estimate could go much higher should the refugee crisis worsen, which it did considerably since that time period, pushing that estimate towards the conservative end of the spectrum.⁷⁴

Of particular concern in the humanitarian crisis is the plight of Iraq’s religious minority groups, which have been marginalized under the Iraqi government and mercilessly persecuted by ISIS and Shi’a militia groups. International attention has been

⁷² Nabih Bulos, “Massive exodus of Iraqis from Fallouja overwhelms aid groups,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-fallouja-exodus-20160625-snap-story.html>

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Needs an Estimated US \$1.4 billion this Year to Stabilize the Economy,” Press Release, The World Bank, February 2, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/02/12/kurdistan-region-iraq-stabilize-economy>

drawn to this problem as horror stories of the experiences of minorities like the Yazidi community emerge. The Yazidis, a religio-ethnic group of between 500,000 – 700,000 native to northern Iraq have been executed or taken as prisoners and sex slaves by ISIS in large numbers.⁷⁵ In August of 2014, as many as 40,000 of the group's population were surrounded by ISIS on Mt. Sinjar in northern Iraq, precipitating a crisis as the international community feared a genocidal event. Luckily this outcome was avoided as most of the population was successfully evacuated to areas of Kurdish or Iraqi Army control, but thousands remained vulnerable to ISIS brutality.

Other notable religious communities under threat in Iraq include that of Iraqi Christians, whose population has declined steadily since the 2003 U.S. invasion from around 1-1.5 million to between 400,000 and 850,000 today.⁷⁶ These estimates will likely need to be adjusted further in the coming months to account for the significant displacement impact ISIS has had on this group. As the terror group pushed further into northern Iraq around Mosul in the summer of 2014, some 150,000 Iraqi Christians fled to other areas in Iraq and Syria under Kurdish control.⁷⁷ It is unclear whether these displaced Christians will return to their homes in any significant numbers, even if ISIS is defeated and the Iraqi government establishes some measure of governance and security in the area. Many of these Christians are not optimistic about the Iraqi government's

⁷⁵ Raya Jalabi, "Who are the Yazidis and why is ISIS hunting them?" *The Guardian*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains>

⁷⁶ Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud, "Iraq: Politics and Governance," Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 31, 2015, pp. 32-33.

⁷⁷ Balint Szlanko, Associated Press, "Christians say defeating ISIS won't make Iraq safe for them," *Military Times*, August 9, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/08/09/christians-say-defeating-isis-wont-make-iraq-safe-them/88484630/>

ability to ensure their protection and freedom of religion and would prefer permanent resettlement to another country.⁷⁸ Barring a massive humanitarian outreach program by the Iraqi government to ensure these populations are protected and represented, Iraq will become less ethnically and religiously diverse and more entrenched in its tri-sectarian identity.

Reconsidering Options for Long-term Political Solutions

One of the enduring subjects of debate in Washington regarding Iraq policy is whether the United States and its partners in the international community can ensure Iraq's long-term stability and viability as a state. Consistently negative news regarding the state of the country's economy, political dysfunction, humanitarian and fiscal crises, and security struggles have fostered pessimism and led to the revival of discussions surrounding potential divisions of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines. The aforementioned metastasizing Iranian influence in the country may only push Iraq towards even more bitter sectarian division if the Abadi government succumbs to internal and external pressure to make Iraq a Shi'a-dominated state closely aligned with Iran. If sectarian division in the country deepens, calls to permanently divide Iraq along these sectarian lines will grow louder. Although stating that negotiated political solutions to conflicts in Iraq are strongly preferred, the Obama administration has refused to rule out an eventual division of the country along ethno-sectarian lines. However, it has also

⁷⁸ Ibid.

noted the peril inherent when outside actors attempt to impose solutions on a local population without much regard for the consequences of these actions.⁷⁹

Proponents of a plan to divide the state also note the strong desire amongst Iraqi Kurds to unyoke their nation from Baghdad, particularly pointing to a 2005 referendum in which 98.7% of the local population voted to secede from the Iraqi state and declare independence.⁸⁰ That Kurdish desire for independence has not waned in the intervening years, as top Kurdish officials like Masrour Barzani, head of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Security Council (and son of KRG President Massoud Barzani) advocated earlier this year that Iraq be split into three separate states along sectarian lines.⁸¹ Abadi will need to continue building on some of the small successes in Kurdish relations achieved early in his term by allowing the United States to provide arms for Kurdish Peshmerga forces and sharing half of all revenue from oil fields in Kurdish lands with the KRG in order to mollify the Kurdish population.⁸²

The U.S. government's own relationship with Iraqi Kurds has long been complicated and presents its own challenges. While Iraqi Kurds have arguably been the most valuable and reliable partners for the United States on the ground in the fight against ISIS, the question of their independence is highly contentious. None of the Iraqi, Iranian, Turkish, nor Syrian governments would support an independent Kurdish state.

⁷⁹ Zeke J. Miller, "White House Doesn't Rule Out Iraq Partition," *Time*, June 23, 2014, <http://time.com/2912685/iraq-partition-biden-obama/>

⁸⁰ Michael J. Totten, "Let Iraq Die: A Case for Partition," *World Affairs Journal*, March/April 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/let-iraq-die-case-partition>

⁸¹ Maher Chmaytelli and Isabel Coles, "Post-Islamic State Iraq should be split in three: top Kurdish official," Reuters, June 16, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idUSKCN0Z20RY>

⁸² Muhamed H. Almaliky, "Mending Iraq: Can Abadi Bridge the Country's Sectarian Divide?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 16, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-01-16/mending-iraq>

Thus, the next congress and presidential administration will have to carefully calibrate U.S.-Kurdish relations to avoid over-legitimizing a non-state entity.

Critics of plans to divide Iraq along sectarian lines raise a number of counterpoints. They note that there are no clear lines which could be drawn between these communities, as they are highly intermingled in many parts of the country, particularly in major population centers.⁸³ Former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker has also voiced doubts about the partition of the country into separate states, arguing that it would ultimately result in “an Iranian dominated Shiastan in Baghdad and the south, a radicalized jihadistan without resources in the west, and a Kurdistan in the north under increasing Iranian influence and a highly problematic relationship with Turkey.”⁸⁴

Though he fails to offer any discernable alternative to that plan, his analysis is part of a greater critique of the current U.S. government approach to policy in Iraq (i.e. that defeating ISIS is a means to uncertain ends), and it is one that should resonate in future policy debates.

If the United States desires to keep Iraq together as a contiguous state, enfranchising the Iraqi Sunni population should be one of its primary goals. This will no doubt take a herculean effort by the U.S. government to improve its institutional understanding of Iraqi politics and engage with leaders of all factions, including those who may be tied to groups which were responsible for the post-invasion insurgency and

⁸³ Tom Shanker, “Divided They Stand, but on Graves,” *The New York Times*, August 19, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/weekinreview/19shanker.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all

⁸⁴ Ambassador Ryan Crocker, “At the Gates of Fallujah,” *The Cipher Brief*, June 24, 2016, <https://thecipherbrief.com/column/strategic-view/gates-fallujah-1089>

the deaths of American troops. To this end, some influential Iraqi Sunnis have made attempts to engage with U.S. policymakers and suggest proactive policies which could hold the country together rather than allow it to further divide along sectarian lines. Wealthy Iraqi businessman Sheikh Khamis al-Khanjar, along with two other former Iraqi politicians opened the Office for the Arab-Sunni Representative for Iraq in Washington, D.C. with the goal of advocating for a semi-autonomous Sunni federal region in Iraq. Some of their suggested measures include secularizing Iraqi state television so that it is not overly slanted towards the Shi'a population (it currently features a Shi'a call to prayer), banning public displays of affiliation or fealty to foreign political leaders (namely Shi'a Iranian leaders like Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei), and forbidding the flying of non-Iraqi flags to promote Iraqi nationalism and identity.⁸⁵ Though Khanjar and his colleagues have succeeded in gaining audiences with U.S. officials, they allege that their concerns and suggestions have apparently been largely dismissed as being too complicated. While some of these suggestions likely run counter to traditional American ideals surrounding democratic free speech, they could be considered as potential short-term solutions which might help promote state cohesion. Even if the suggested goals of these groups are unfavorable to the U.S. government, these Sunni leaders represent a valuable resource which could provide much-needed insight into Iraqi sectarian politics and U.S. policymakers would be wise to continue seeking their input.

⁸⁵ Michael Weiss, "Fallujah and the Failed Iraqi State," *The Daily Beast*, June 6, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/06/fallujah-and-the-failed-iraqi-state.html>

Other suggested solutions along these lines have included the creation of sort of National Guard along the lines of the PMUs and the development of local political governance guided by the United States with specific latitude from the central government.⁸⁶ Whether that latitude would be granted though is uncertain as the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad has asserted its sovereignty and insisted on directly overseeing assistance to all of Iraq, including mostly Kurdish and Sunni areas. Nonetheless, designating responsibility to the Sunni-dominated regions in a similar arrangement to the autonomy of the Kurdish region in the north is gaining support from Sunni parliamentarians who believe that formal partitions would foment further conflict and present too many logistical challenges.⁸⁷ These leaders would prefer to see the central government in Baghdad allow the Sunni communities to police themselves while also holding an equal seat at the table in Baghdad to work on resolving intra-national governance issues.

However, bringing the Sunni community together will be an extremely difficult task. Beyond sowing discord between the Sunni and Shi'a populations, ISIS has burned deep divisions within the Iraqi Sunni community itself. As *The New York Times* chronicled earlier this year, there have been many cases where Sunni forces fighting against ISIS have found themselves fighting against their own family members. And there remain significant differences within the Sunni community over how to deal with ISIS fighters and sympathizers within the community as the central government retakes

⁸⁶ Ambassador James Jeffrey, "As the ISIS Tide Recedes," *The Cipher Brief*, June 29, 2016, <https://thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/isis-tide-recedes-1091>

⁸⁷ Chmaytelli and Coles, "Post-Islamic State Iraq should be split in three."

territory. While some are hoping to rebuild the community and seek reconciliation, others are promising to take a hard retributive line which threatens the reconciliation process.⁸⁸

Iraq's Sunni population is similarly divided at the highest levels of politics. The questioning of Iraqi Defense Minister Khaled al-Obeidi before parliament in August of this year exposed cleavages in some Sunni blocs of Iraq's parliament and provided further evidence of that body's deeply dysfunctional state. Obeidi, a Sunni, returned accusations of corruption in kind, accusing senior Iraqi government officials (including Sunni Parliament Speaker Salim al-Jabouri) of passing bribes and asserting pressure to secure appointments for political allies.⁸⁹ Obeidi was later sacked from his ministerial position by the parliament.

The next presidential administration will also need to counter some Iraqi Sunni's perception that the Obama administration's Iran deal is the precursor to a greater U.S. plan allowing expanding Iranian influence in the region in exchange for rapprochement. In particular, they point to statements like that of Gen. Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who last year argued that increased Iranian influence in Iraq would be positive "as long as the Iraqi government remains committed to inclusivity of all of the various groups inside the country."⁹⁰ However, if Iran exerts greater influence over internal Iraqi politics, this notion of inclusivity will increasingly

⁸⁸ Tim Arango and Falih Hassan, "A War of Brothers in Iraq: 'I Will Kill Him With My Own Hands,'" *The New York Times*, June 18, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-sunnis-sectarian-falluja.html?_r=0

⁸⁹ Ali Mamouri, "Iraq's political leaders on quicksand as alliances fracture," *Al-Monitor*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/iraq-sectarianism-political-parties.html>

⁹⁰ Hendawi and Abdul-Zahra, "Iran eclipses US."

become more of a fantasy than an achievable reality. One of ISIS' chief goals has been to exploit and further stoke sectarian division in Iraq, fashioning itself the defender of the Sunni population which has been marginalized by the majority Shi'a population which controls the government. It has portrayed the government in Baghdad and the PMF as heretical Iranian puppets which will inflict severe reprisals on the Sunni population. To further this narrative, it has often fought from population centers and used the local civilian population as human shields, insuring civilian casualties at the hands of these government forces.⁹¹ It will be particularly challenging for the U.S. and Iraqi governments to counter this narrative as they push forward with the military campaign against ISIS. This effort should be accompanied by a massive public relations and pacification campaign to promote cooperation between the Iraqi government and the local populations in these predominantly Sunni areas.

Conclusions

Regardless of the outcome of this fall's election, U.S. government policymakers will face a number of salient foreign policy challenges in the coming year, including navigating the minefield of Iraq's myriad problems. Despite recent gains by Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi state remains critically insecure and under constant threat from ISIS, which is returning to its insurgent roots as it loses territorial control. The terror group has successfully amplified sectarian division in the country, destroyed significant portions of

⁹¹ "The Cities Held Hostage by The Islamic State," TSG IntelBrief, June 7, 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-cities-held-hostage-by-the-islamic-state/>

Iraq's territory, and displaced millions of its citizens. Areas and population groups ravaged by ISIS will require immediate assistance from the Iraqi central government, but the government's ability to deliver that assistance is doubtful. With severe budget deficits amplified by a global decrease in oil prices and endemic corruption and factionalism dividing Iraqi political parties, the Iraqi government is materially incapable of providing for both the physical and economic security of much of the state. Prior experience indicates that ISIS or a successor group will continue to operate both underground and in areas of the country with poor governance, outside the reach of the weak central government in Baghdad. The emergence of a government in Baghdad which can exercise control over the whole of the country (except for Iraqi Kurdistan) and successfully deliver services to Iraqis most in need either directly or via delegation to provincial authorities would ensure Iraq is back on a path to stability.

Ultimately, future Iraq policy debates will center on the extent to which the United States should commit to long-term support of the state-building effort in Iraq. The United States is undoubtedly capable of providing extensive support to some Iraqi government institutions in the form of military aid and training, and it will need to be an extended effort if it will successfully preserve a fragile Iraqi state. To this end, Congress has already allotted billions of dollars to the aforementioned Iraq Train and Equip Fund, and President Obama has deployed thousands of troops to Iraq to advise and train Iraqi forces. However, these funds will not provide long-term security in Iraq. They fall well short of the estimated total costs of rebuilding areas of the state which were largely destroyed by ISIS or in the campaign to retake them *from* ISIS, one of the keys to

ensuring the recovery and long-term security of the Iraqi state. Additional U.S. support at the requisite level would come with a hefty price tag – one much higher than the \$1.2 billion in humanitarian aid the U.S. government has spent in FY 2014-2016 on Iraq.⁹² U.S. policymakers would also need to find reliable partners in an Iraqi government plagued by corruption and leadership turnover to ensure that future assistance is durable. It would therefore be wise to tie future aid to progress on the Iraqi political front before making such a commitment. The United States should encourage continued Iraqi government efforts to root out corruption while also facilitating productive dialogue between competing Iraqi political factions. This will require a far more robust U.S. State Department presence and engagement with Iraqis outside of Baghdad to ensure their concerns are being adequately represented and addressed in the government.

The U.S. government should also understand that only a sustained effort at both diplomatic and military engagement in Iraq will endow the United States with any meaningful influence there. The United States ceded the initiative on both of these fronts to its rival Iran when it disengaged militarily (and also to a great extent diplomatically) from Iraq in 2011 and 2012. Iran now boasts far greater capacity to affect events there than does the United States – a highly problematic prospect for the U.S. government which seeks to mitigate Iranian regional influence in the Middle East. Iran has been able to leverage close relationships with many of Iraq's Shi'a militias to maintain a position of power in internal Iraqi politics. Those politics have been tumultuous in recent years and

⁹² "Iraq – Complex Emergency," Fact Sheet #6, FY 2016, USAID, September 30, 2016.

have made understanding the realities of the many crises there difficult for the United States. Without institutional knowledge of internal Iraqi dynamics and a working partnership with Iraqi leaders across various sects and factions, Washingtonian debates over the future of Iraq and any potential solutions to its crises will be moot.

A good starting point for policymakers in the new year would involve a re-examination of the 2008 “Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq.” That agreement ambitiously envisioned a close and cooperative relationship between the Iraqi and United States governments in multiple sectors which has not been realized. Renewed commitment and resources devoted to implementing the tenets of the agreement over an indefinite time period would solidify the U.S. – Iraqi relationship, which has withered in recent years. For example, the United States should seek to revive cooperation in key areas like the reform and development of the Iraqi judicial system, the deficiencies of which were highlighted earlier in this report. And it will be imperative that the United States maintain a more active role in the administration of any new programs, without prematurely ceding it to the Iraqi government. Despite the creation of the Judicial Development Institute in 2009 to train the staff of the Iraqi Higher Judicial Council in legal principles, that program was officially turned over to the Iraqi government only three years later in 2012.⁹³ If U.S. policymakers decide that the stabilization of Iraq and the development of closer ties between the two states is a

⁹³ “Final Handover of Iraqi Judicial Development Institute,” Iraq Business News, May 30, 2012, <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2012/05/30/final-handover-of-iraqi-judicial-development-institute/>

priority, they will need to think of the commitment as a decades-long prospect, not something which will be easily accomplished in just a few short years.