Iraq Trip Report
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I travelled to Iraq for two weeks, from October 11 to October 25. I went as part of a 14-person Joint Campaign Plan Assessment Team, created by Ambassador Hill and General Odierno to provide an outside critique and evaluation of the latest version of the Iraq Joint Campaign Plan—the fully integrated political-military-economic-diplomatic approach to be pursued by all U.S. military and civilian personnel to achieve the President's objectives in Iraq over the next 3 years. As part of this effort, the team had numerous meetings with members of the U.S. military, embassy and other personnel; members of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq; as well as a wide variety of Iraqis, most connected to the Iraqi armed forces, the government or the political system in some way. In addition to my time in Baghdad, I traveled to Irbil, Basra, and Najaf to observe the situation in those cities. Other members of the team traveled to Ramadi, Diyala, and Kirkuk and reported back on the situations they found there.

Overview: Progress and Lurking Problems
Despite the August 19th and October 25th bombings (the latter occurred hours before I departed Baghdad), the mood and "feel" of Iraq continue to improve. Both the capital and the country at large continue to enjoy growing security and a creeping sense of normality. Traffic is now thick on the roads, and goods and people appear able to move relatively easily—and with minimal fear of crime. Iraqis are ever more focused on the inability of their government to deliver on basic needs like electricity, sanitation and jobs than they are on security. The level of griping has probably remained constant, but the fact that the target has shifted is still an important sign of progress.

Average Iraqis still evince the same "anti-establishment" mood that prevailed at the time of the January 2009 provincial elections. There appears to be widespread disgruntlement with the politicians running the country, who are seen by average Iraqis as "wolves in sheep's clothing:" the warlords and criminals who engineered Iraq's civil war, now forced to act like statesmen because the American and Iraqi militaries prevent them from acting in their wonted fashion. Maliki is a partial exception to this rule, but there does seem to be a sense that the bombings have tarnished his reputation as the man who managed to pull off the feat of bringing Iraq law and order and ushering out the American occupation. It was my strong sense that if the Iraqi people were able to choose truly new political parties, they would overwhelmingly do so, but the dominant parties continue to use all means at their disposal to prevent the emergence of most new parties.

This point gets at the larger problems remaining with Iraq. Historically, states that have undergone a major civil war such as Iraq's have a disconcertingly high likelihood of a relapse within five years, especially if they possess valuable natural resources like gold, diamonds and oil. Thus, Iraq is fighting the law of historical averages. The same scholarship also demonstrates that the one escape from the civil war trap is for an external great power (typically the former colonial power), to act as mediator and peacekeeper for many years until the warring factions are reconciled and the institutions of governance and security are strong enough to

prevent the re-emergence of a security vacuum. It is the emergence (or re-emergence) of a security vacuum that causes intercommunal civil wars like Iraq's—and Bosnia's, Congo's, Afghanistan's, and Lebanon's—to occur and recur. In 2007-2008, the change in U.S. strategy, tactics and force levels allowed the United States to finally fill the security vacuum we created after toppling Saddam. Slowly, we have given way in place of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), whose ability to substitute for the United States remains the hope and concern of every Iraqi.

The fear common to these situations remains pervasive in Iraq, lying just below the surface for elites and commoners alike. In particular, Iraqis remain fearful that the United States is disengaging quickly and completely and that the ISF is neither politically nor militarily reliable enough to take over for the Americans as the disinterested enforcer of law and order. Thus, the vast majority of Iraqis want the American troops to leave, but are also afraid they actually will. Consequently, tales of political violence spread like wildfire across the country. There certainly are incidents of assassination, extortion, kidnapping, and intimidation of rival parties in the lead up to the January elections, but nothing like the levels seen before the 2005 elections. Nevertheless, Iraqis seem to believe that they are far more common than U.S. intelligence believes. Although this undoubtedly reflects the diminishing situational awareness of American forces after the withdrawal of U.S. combat units from Iraq's cities in June, it also is doubtless driven by Iraqi fears that the bad old days of 2005 and 2006 are returning. Consequently, a critical challenge for the United States mission in Iraq moving forward is to convince Iraqis that the U.S. will continue to ensure that the ISF remains apolitical, that Iraqi political parties are forced to play by the rules, and that no group will be allowed to use violence to pursue its political objectives even as we draw down our forces in Iraq and turn over responsibility for combat operations to the ISF next year. This is not only a daunting task, but a vital one if Iraq is to avoid the civil war trap.

The Need For Movement at the Top

Another, related, challenge that Iraq faces is the need to effect some form of reconciliation among the formerly warring factions. There is a widespread misunderstanding among Americans that this will require some sort of formal event at which Iraqis make amends with one another—a Bonn conference or Truth and Reconciliation council. This is neither likely nor necessary. What <u>is</u> necessary is for Iraqis to put the anger and fear born of past events behind them and work out the very real political differences among the different factions to allow the government to get on with the business of running and rebuilding the country. It means dealing with issues like central vs. provincial authority, the status of the Kurdish Regional Government within the Iraqi state (including the future of Kirkuk, the Peshmerga and Kurdish oil reserves), the return of 2-4 million displaced Iraqis, the establishment of a new commercial/economic architecture, and the resolution of a series of issues with various Iraqi neighbors, all of which continue to be major sources of division among various Iraqi groups.

To a considerable extent, this process of reconciliation is already beginning to occur through Iraq's democratic political process. In many cases, sectarian parties are losing support to more secular, or at least nationalist, parties, forcing them to make compromises that cut across sectarian lines. For Sunni-Shi'ah animosity, this process is fast taking hold and promises to overcome those differences perhaps entirely. Indeed, it is likely that three of the four major electoral blocs going into the election will include both Sunni and Shi'ah parties, even though the

Shi'ah are likely to dominate at least two of the three. Over time, as long as democratic processes continue to progress in Iraq, this trend is likely to continue and may very well obviate the need for any formal reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'i Arabs. However, there are extremist groups on both sides, and then there are the Kurds. All of these groups will need some special program of reconciliation if they are to be brought on board. For the extremist groups, those that can be reconciled will need meaningful amnesty laws (those passed so far have not been properly honored) and a process like that for the Sahwa groups to reintegrate them into society. Others will prove irreconcilable and will need to be hunted down and brought to justice as criminals. The Kurds will need a separate process of negotiating the many difference between the KRG and the central government. That will not be quick or painless, but it will be essential if the Iraqi state is to survive. Thus, some reconciliation is taking place as a "natural" part of the democratic politics taking hold across the country, but other aspects will require separate processes of negotiation.

The uneven progress of reconciliation points up the uneven progress in the Iraqi political system more broadly. The Bush Administration never properly explained what the "Surge" strategy was meant to accomplish, possibly because they did not understand it themselves. It was never going to create the space for national reconciliation, as is still routinely claimed in the media. Instead, what it was meant to do—and succeeded in doing—was creating a bottom-up process of political reform that allowed local governments to play a greater role in providing for the needs of their constituents and created democratic pressures on the politicians in Baghdad to do the right thing: to act responsibly, make compromises, and lead the country rather than raping it. In so doing, it put pressure on Iraqi politicians at the top of the system, but could not force them to reconcile and reform the system from the top down. This is an equally necessary part of the process of creating sustainable stability and functional governance in Iraq. Thus the process in Iraqi politics has largely been of the bottom up variety, although some of the bottom-up pressure has forced Iraqi politicians to make a number of important compromises producing the provincial powers law, a new de-Ba'thification law, three years of budgets, several election laws, and most recently a new investment law. These were difficult compromises and important steps forward for Iraq, but they do not represent a transformation to the kind of normal politics that Iraq requires. Thus, what is desperately needed over the next 1-3 years is top-down political progress to match the bottom-up political progress Iraq has made over the past 2-3 years. Again, without it, it is likely that the Iraqi political process will run off the rails, risking the resumption of civil war when the government is unable to govern, militias are able to re-assert themselves, and the people can no longer turn to the government for protection or basic necessities.

Prospects for the Elections and Beyond

The passage of the election law this past weekend was no small feat, and credit should be given to the efforts of both Ambassador Hill and the Iraqis. Not only does it appear that the elections will be held in January, as constitutionally mandated, but they will be held with an open-list system.[1] Open lists were critical if Iraq was going to continue to move forward in strengthening

[1] In an open list system, voters vote for specific candidates for each set in their province. They may choose different candidates from different parties. Thus, individual candidates must run for office and are beholden to their own constituency. In a closed-list system, the voter simply votes for a political party and its slate of candidates without the ability to choose among the list, or mix candidates from different lists. As a result, in a closed-list system, the candidates are principally beholden to their party bosses, not the voters themselves. The latter system, employed by

its political system because they ensure that individual politicians are answerable to their constituencies, which in turn helps subvert party discipline and encourage defections by individual lawmakers to encourage compromise and break political logjams. The open list system was the principal reason that Iraq's January 2009 provincial elections were uniformly considered highly constructive—and highlighted why Iraq's 2005 elections, which employed closed lists, had been so destructive to the country. Average Iraqis widely saw this issue as a bellwhether for the political system, and it was expected that turnout would have been dismal if the politicians had opted for a closed-list system. Indeed, reflecting the people's will, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani had issued a fatwa demanding open list elections. This, plus the active campaigning of the United States appears to have won the day.

At present, four blocs are emerging as the main competitors in the election: an alliance between the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement, Maliki's Da'wa and a collection of smaller parties hoping to ride his coattails, the Kurds, and a centrist-secular alliance led by Ayad Allawi, Rafe al-Issawi and Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani.

- Iran put together a "shotgun marriage" of the Sadrist movement and ISCI, who largely detest one another and have fought repeated street battles since 2003. The Iranians had hoped to bring Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa party in as well, and recreate the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) of years past, encompassing all of the major Shi'i parties. Such a bloc would likely win 45 percent or more of the vote and thus dominate the government. Moreover, because of the differences among them, the Iranians might gain tremendous influence by playing the role of mediator—at the very least, this was Tehran's expectation.

- For this reason, Prime Minister Maliki's refusal to bring Da'wa into the INA has been critical to preserving political fluidity. Maliki has repeatedly insisted that ISCI and the Sadrists agree that he would be the prime minister again after the election as his price for joining the INA: a reasonable demand given that he remains the most popular politician in the country. So far, ISCI and the INA have refused to do so, largely because the August 19 and October 25 bombings have eroded Maliki's popularity, and they hope that popular dissatisfaction with the country's state of affairs and glacial political progress will further cut the prime minister down to size. Meanwhile, Maliki has assiduously courted a wide range of potential coalition partners, Sunni, Shi'i, and secular, and reportedly has begun secret talks with the Kurds. The prime minister intends to run as a nationalist, the only man who has demonstrated he can bring law and order to Iraq, and a figure above sectarian politics. While this position still has considerable appeal, the high profile bombings have made many Iraqis worry that the decision to have U.S. troops leave Iraq's cities on June 30 was premature and the Iraqi security forces are not yet ready to handle the task. Given the prime minister's association with this state of affairs, it could hurt him at the polls if Iraqis decide that they are worse off today than they were a year ago. As a final point, the PM continues to negotiate with the INA, and is likely to continue to do so right up to election day to see how good a deal he can get.

Israel, as an example, encourages political logjams and makes compromise difficult. It is an unwieldy system for a mature democracy, and potentially disastrous for an immature democracy such as Iraq.

- The Kurds will once again band together as a united list and so will likely emerge with a similar proportion of the seats in the next CoR as they garnered in the last, about 20 percent. Because the Kurds expect to be able to enforce party discipline, this solid bloc will give them considerable political power within the CoR. The Kurds expect, and many outside observers suspect, that they will be able to play "kingmaker" after the elections; They won't be able to form the government themselves, but they will get to choose who does. Unfortunately, the expectation that they will get to pick the winner—and so will be able to extract any price they want, like Kirkuk—has reinforced the obstreperousness of some Kurdish factions.

- Finally, an interesting alliance is emerging among former prime minister 'Ayad Allawi (the leader of the largest secular bloc in the CoR), moderate Sunni leader and current deputy prime minister Rafe al-Issawi, and Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani. Bolani and Allawi are both Shi'ah, but are considered entirely acceptable to Sunnis, Bolani because he performed the Herculean feat of reforming the Interior Ministry, which had been little more than a façade for Shi'i death squads. Issawi is a medical doctor, the former director of Fallujah hospital, and so the only blood he has on his hands was from the many patients whose lives he saved. As deputy prime minister he has been seen as smart, competent, and deeply opposed to sectarian politics. In short, this group has potentially far-reaching cross-sectarian appeal. The key will be how badly the prime minister's star has dimmed because of the security problems. This troika cannot claim his achievements and so if he remains popular, they likely would be overshadowed. But if Iraqis have soured on Maliki, then the Allawi-Issawi-Bolani combination might be an obvious alternative for Iraqis sick of sectarianism and political deadlock.

At this point, it is too soon to tell how the election will play out. However, the most likely scenario based on current trends would be for all four of these blocs to secure roughly 20 percent of the vote, with the remainder going to smaller parties (particularly regional ones) that would be natural coalition partners for the big blocs. This could be an extremely precarious result since no bloc could claim a clear mandate and all of them would be jockeying to bring the others on board. Moreover, any alliance of two would likely be blocked by a counter alliance of the other two, and there would be a scramble to secure the smaller, independent parties which would give them leverage far beyond their actual popularity. The result could be a protracted period of stalemate in which Baghdad was unable to make decisions (let alone compromises) because a new government could not be formed. The alternative might be a weak coalition in which minor parties held disproportionate sway, as in Israel, and so badly distorted Iraqi politics. Both outcomes would be very dangerous in terms of maintaining Iraq's psychological momentum, and thus scenarios that the United States needs to be ready to help along if they come to pass.

Is the State Department Up to the Challenge?

Iraq's crucial January elections are just one aspect of what is likely to be the critical piece of the Iraqi puzzle moving forward: Iraq's domestic politics. All of the most dangerous threats for a resumption of civil war stem from a breakdown in Iraq's domestic politics: Arab-Kurd conflict, the re-integration of the Sahwa (the Sons of Iraq), the treatment of tens of thousands of mostly Sunnis detained by the U.S.-led Coalition prior to 2009, re-integrating millions of displaced persons, the Sunnis re-embracing extremist groups like al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the Sadrists returning

to violence, and large-scale violence stemming from the elections (before or after). Consequently, the most needed progress now lies in Iraq's domestic politics as does the greatest threats to its peace and stability.

It is thus appropriate that the principal American effort in Iraq will shift from the U.S. military to the U.S. Embassy over the course of the next 3 years. However, it is not yet clear that the Department of State and the Embassy will be up to that task.

- There has been a tremendous turnover of staff in the Embassy, especially at higher levels, and the new leadership cadre lacks the same experience with Iraq as its predecessor.

- The shift from the Green Zone to the new embassy complex (NEC) has actually made it harder for American personnel to interact with Iraqis. Previously, American officials had considerable contact with Iraqi leaders (although rarely with the wider populace) because both Americans and Iraqis shared the Green Zone. But the NEC is much smaller, Iraqis are mostly kept out, and the security rules for leaving the NEC are onerous. As a result, American officials below the Ambassador and his immediate deputies appear to have considerably less contact with Iraqis than in the past.

- At present, the U.S. has 23 provincial reconstruction teams throughout the country. While their quality and impact is uneven, they have nonetheless helped build Iraqi governmental capacity throughout the country, provided important sources of information on developments beyond the upper reaches of the Iraqi government, and served as liaison between Iraqi civil society and the U.S. (and Iraqi) governments. Over the next 2-3 years that presence will be cut down to less than one-third its current size. What's more, many of the remaining PRTs will be greatly reduced in size, although the demands on them are not expected to diminish accordingly. Indeed, it would be a mistake to circumscribe the mission of the PRTs because it is critical that the United States remain engaged with Iraqi civil society and the Iraqi political structure at all levels. If the U.S. is to continue to guide Iraq's political (and economic) development in the manner necessary to prevent a slide back into civil war, maintaining such a presence throughout Iraq will be critical. Confining our efforts to Iraq's senior leadership in Baghdad would be a recipe for disaster.

More troubling than all this is the attitude among many U.S. officials in the embassy that the U.S. should stop nation-building, stop trying to guide Iraqi politics, stop trying to force Iraqi political actors to "play by the rules," and simply let the Iraqis do what they want. Too often, embassy officials discussed critical developments in Iraqi politics in the passive voice—suggesting that there was nothing that the United States can or should do about it. Too many programs were being pre-emptively discontinued or downsized either in expectation that the Congress would not fund large programs run by the State Department, or because the officials in question simply weren't interested in running them.

This attitude is monumentally misguided, as well as running entirely contrary to the policy of the President. As Ambassador Hill has rightly observed, Iraq is not a normal country and so cannot be treated as such. It is certainly true that the Foreign Service lacks the personnel with the ideal

skill sets to continue guiding the Iraqi political system toward stability and out of the civil war trap, but the United States does not have another agency that is better equipped to do so. Indeed, the U.S. military was equally unprepared and ill-suited to these tasks, but it took them on with gusto and adapted to them brilliantly. It will be critical for Ambassador Hill to convince his people to adopt these responsibilities with the same commitment as the military, and to help them learn these assignments in the same way. And again, as with the military, those unable or unwilling to adapt will have to be removed promptly and replaced with those who can and will.

Although American resources in Iraq are declining, the importance of the American mission there has not diminished one jot. Were Iraq to return to civil war, it would be disastrous for American interests throughout the Middle East and could add new problems for our slowly recovering economy. Without continued American assistance, particularly in continuing to guide the Iraqi political system, the most likely outcome would be for Iraq to slide back into civil strife and chaos. As the military draws down, the civilians (led by the State Department) must step up. This does not necessarily mean more resources (although some additional funding would be very helpful), it simply means using the resources still committed to Iraq—and our many residual sources of leverage—more actively and more cleverly than we did in the past, when our authority to act as viceroys of Iraq obviated the need for subtlety or tact.

Preserving Situational Awareness

A final, critical issue that came up repeatedly on this trip to Iraq was both the need and the difficulty of preserving American situational awareness over the course of the military drawdown. The drawdown in military forces from 130,000 troops to about 50,000 means the loss of roughly 80,000 HUMINT collectors in that all of these troops were sources of information for American intelligence in Iraq. Moreover, since the residual force of American troops will have to remain peacekeepers—especially in preventing violence between Kurdish Peshmerga and ISF formations—but will have to do so with considerably fewer forces in country, it will become more important to know about dangerous situations sooner to be able to apply resources against them before they escalate. Paradoxically, the smaller the American military presence becomes, the greater the need for rapid information-gathering and constant situational awareness to employ those reduced assets better and faster.

The military leadership in Iraq is well aware of this challenge and appears to be moving aggressively to deal with it as best they can. However, so great a reduction in assets, coupled with the need for more intelligence platforms in Afghanistan, means that it simply is not possible to find a complete solution to the problem. At some level, the U.S. simply is going to have a reduced level of situational awareness, and our planning will have to anticipate it. However, Washington should begin a high-level review to determine what additional national assets, particularly civilian HUMINT assets, can be devoted to Iraq to preserve current levels of situational awareness.

While some Democrats may balk at the idea of providing <u>any</u> additional resources for Iraq, it would be foolish for them to not do so. First, the President has repeatedly made clear that he does not intend to walk away from Iraq and is willing to maintain a relatively high commitment of American resources to ensure that Iraq does not fall apart. Second, the one choice that Barack Obama does not want to have to confront is the one that comes two years from now when an aide

walks into the Oval Office and asks him whether he would prefer to allow Iraq to slide back into civil war or redeploy 100,000 troops there to stabilize it. That is the worst possible outcome in Iraq for this Administration, and thus the smartest move is to make the necessary efforts now to avoid putting President Obama on the horns of that dilemma.