Security in Iraq

Emerging Threats as U.S. Forces Withdraw

After years of bitter and violent fighting, Iraq is finally becoming more stable. The main partisan political groups—Sunni, Kurd, and Shi'a—are cooperating to confront common concerns. The new, nonviolent political order, with the government of Iraq at its core, is winning growing popular support. Extremist groups, such as al Qaeda in Iraq, lack, at least for now, the ability to incite factional fighting. U.S. troops have begun their drawdown.

But the security situation is still shaky, and the end of U.S. occupation could bring consequences that could destroy Iraq's hard-won progress. Iraq's future stability and security depend mainly on two factors: first, whether the main political groups continue to engage peacefully in the political process and second, whether the Shi'a-led government of Iraq wields its growing political and military power responsibly.

As the United States departs, a new RAND monograph, *Security in Iraq: A Framework for Analyzing Emerging Threats as U.S. Forces Leave*, offers decisionmakers a conceptual model to help assess the risks ahead—particularly of fighting among Iraq's main groups, many of which are sufficiently well armed to throw the country into a new cycle of violence. The book suggests that the most likely dangers are not necessarily the most consequential and points to what the United States can do to help guard against a renewed upsurge of large-scale factional conflict that would undercut both Iraqi and U.S. interests.

The Analytic Model Helps Anticipate Possible Dangers as the United States Withdraws from Iraq

The model portrays Iraq's political system (see the figure). It illustrates that, although Iraqi political parties will continue to disagree on significant issues, the country will remain stable as long as those parties with sizable military forces resolve
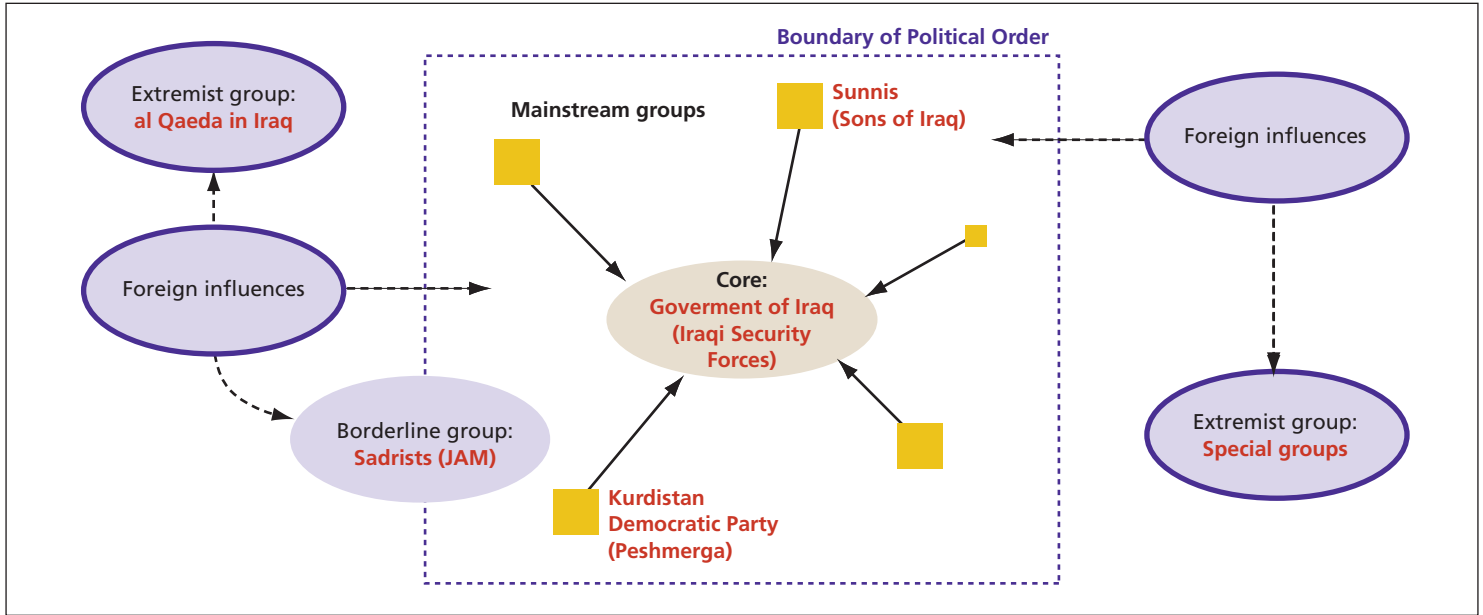
Key findings:

- The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could bring consequences that could destroy Iraq's hard-won, but still shaky, stability.

- Extremist terrorism is the most likely danger, but also the least consequential for both Iraqi and U.S. interests.

- The most consequential danger is also a less likely one: ethnic conflict between Kurdish forces and the Iraqi state.

- To help avert this danger, the United States must endeavor to keep mainstream political groups in the Iraqi political system and away from force.

- It should also help Iraq build strong, professional security forces able to coexist peacefully with the Kurdish military wing.

their differences within the political system rather than reverting to violence. Those fringe actors who will almost certainly use violence to achieve political goals are not sufficiently strong to throw the country back into civil war, unless they can incite one or more of the major parties to resume violent actions. The figure shows the foremost political parties and groups today, along with the military wing of each (in parentheses). It also depicts where they are currently situated within the Iraqi political order.

While the basic structure of this model will remain constant, the positions of the groups may not. Should major players leave the political process—the boundary of which is depicted by the dotted line—Iraq would be much more likely to descend back into large-scale violence.

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Model of Iraq's Political Order

The model with this configuration of actors suggests three principal risks to Iraq's internal security during the U.S. withdrawal:

- extremist violence
- use of force by one or more main opposition groups
- use of the Iraqi Security Forces to coerce or crush political opponents.

For the meantime, the main opposition groups have chosen peaceful participation in the political process to advance their interests. But Iraq's future stability also depends on what choices the Iraqi government and security forces make. Should the government become authoritarian or the security forces attempt a coup, the stable political core would fracture, and the strategic calculations of the major parties would change.

Extremist Terrorism Is the Most Likely Danger But Also the Least Consequential

Of the three types of danger, extremist terrorism is the most probable: Militant extremist groups have not lost their taste for violence. But at present, no extremist group in Iraq possesses the physical resources, popular support, or foreign backing to perpetrate large-scale violence or instigate fighting among Iraq's main groups. Because extremist aggression will not be able to tear apart the basic political order, this will be the least consequential to U.S. interests of the dangers now facing Iraq, even if an appalling one.

The Most Consequential Danger Is Less Likely: Ethnic Conflict Between Kurdish Forces and the Iraqi State

Although less probable than extremist violence, armed conflict between any of the mainstream parties in the Iraqi political system carries the most severe consequences for U.S. interests, because it could explode the entire political order. The greatest danger in this category is the possibility of an ethnic clash between Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi state.

The U.S. drawdown is creating a window in which the Iraqi Security Forces have not yet effectively replaced U.S. troops and other groups' forces are still relatively strong, compared with the government's. This security gap presents a formidable period of uncertainty. Although the Sadrists' militant arm seems already overmatched and the Sons of Iraq are quickly losing ground, the Kurdish Peshmerga could still effectively counter the Iraqi Security Forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. Should the Kurds calculate that force offers a better option than peaceful politics to achieve their goal of a self-governed Kurdistan in Iraq, they probably have the ability to hold off the Iraqi Security Forces in Kurdistan in the near term. Any event that makes them feel isolated or threatened could tip them in that direction—a local incident, loss of political leverage in Baghdad, a Sunni-Shi'a coalition leading to Kurdish marginalization, or consolidation of power by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Oil wealth is also at stake.

Because the Kurds would need to act before the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces become superior to the Pesh-

merga's and the odds shift against them, the main danger is in the next few years. The consequence, should the Kurds take this step, could be the break-up of Iraq.

The United States Must Play Multiple Roles to Help Avert the Most Serious Dangers

Abuse of power by the government of Iraq, supported by its military, would likely provoke not only the Kurds but other opposition groups to respond with force. Even if their militaries were outmatched, none of these groups would choose submission. Should the Iraqi Security Forces act independently in a bid for power, the results would be similar.

This possibility places the United States in a delicate situation: While it needs to help Iraq strengthen its security forces to be able to counter threats to the new state, it also needs to cultivate restraint and professionalism to keep that strength from being misused. Accordingly, long-term cooperation between the United States and Iraq should simultaneously build

- **Capability**: Provide the Iraqi Security Forces with training, equipment, advice, and operational support.

- **Character**: Promote the professionalism, accountability, self-discipline, and institutional capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces and their governing ministries.
- **Confidence**: Foster transparency and open communication between the government of Iraq's forces and those of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Doing so will entail embedding within the Iraqi forces well-prepared, relatively senior professionals who promote responsible behavior in the interests of a unified Iraqi state. At the same time, the United States needs to encourage amity between the Kurdistan Regional and Iraqi governments.

In sum, although extremist violence will continue to be a threat, U.S. policy should focus on two other, more consequential, issues. First, it should aim to keep mainstream groups in the political order and away from force, which would endanger both U.S. personnel and U.S. interests. Second, it should help Iraq build security forces that are capable, professional, and able to coexist peacefully with the forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government. ■
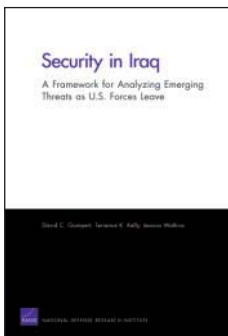
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