

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**The Impending Withdrawal from Iraq and Its Implications.**

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**Q1: What are the most important takeaways from President Barack Obama's announcement of a gradual U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq?**

**A1:** There are two important ideas embedded in the president's announcement. First, Iraq's challenges are far from over. A smoldering irregular war will continue there for the foreseeable future. That war will pit competing sectarian and secular forces against one another. Nonetheless, the U.S. component of that war is now coming to a deliberate end. The United States has met an adjusted set of minimum essential security conditions that allows it to step back. Announcement of the U.S. withdrawal signals that our open-ended commitment to Iraq ends now and that future outcomes there are largely in the hands of Iraq's various contenders for power.

The second key idea is an acknowledgement of enduring U.S. interests in Iraq. Since 2003, Iraq's destiny has been inextricably linked to the success or failure of U.S. Middle East policy. Regardless of one's opinions about the intervention, it is impossible for the United States to fully divest from Iraq. It will remain a management challenge for U.S. decisionmakers. Going forward, outcomes in Iraq cannot be allowed to profoundly threaten core U.S. interests in the region. By necessity, this means that the United States will have to actively manage the positive and negative impacts of Iraq's evolution, posturing both politically and militarily to do so effectively at reduced levels of cost and risk.

**Q2: As the United States pulls back, what are its core "management" responsibilities?**

**A2:** First, in the limited time left, the United States must continue helping both the central government and the provinces become more self-sufficient. Any lingering dependency on the United States becomes more problematic by the day. Second, the United States must continue to underwrite the physical, political, and economic security of Iraq's most vulnerable populations. In the end, we must assure Iraq's minority populations that we will be an advocate for them and sanction those still bent on revenge. Failing to do either will irrevocably harm our prospects for recovering moral authority in the region and the world. Third and closely related, the United States must continue helping Iraq establish and maintain reasonably effective authority over its frontiers, territory, populations, militias, and security services. Any return to the bad old days of violent sectarianism threatens dangerous horizontal escalation of extremism and civil conflict.

**Q3: From the perspective of strategy, what is the most durable lesson of the U.S. war in Iraq?**

**A3:** Although it is far too early to close the book on the Iraq experience, it is clear that the Iraq war has been a clinic on the limits of U.S. power. To the extent that the United States again endeavors to address the purposeful or accidental collapse of an important state, it would be wise counsel to first anticipate the environment's complexity and then craft a long-term, risk-informed strategy targeted at achieving minimum essential strategic and operational objectives. Often conflict management will be more realistic than outright conflict resolution.

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