

## **Debunking Three Myths about the Obama Administration's Iraq Policy**

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These are exciting times for Iraq watchers and followers of U.S. policy in the Middle East. This Sunday, March 7, Iraqis will vote in national elections for the third time since the collapse of Saddam's regime, and the second time under the current constitution. They represent the first elections under an open list and outside the context of large-scale insurgency and sectarian violence, the first opportunity for the peaceful transfer of power under the current constitutional order, and a vital step forward in the consolidation of Iraqi democracy.

This major electoral event follows a series of extended election-related challenges, including negotiations over Iraq's 2010 National Election Law and, most recently, the de-Baathification controversy. Following elections, attention will turn to the newly elected Iraqi representatives as they negotiate to form their new government.

As Iraq undergoes its own political transition, U.S. leaders are working to responsibly drawdown our forces and transition U.S. military-led and funded projects and activities to the Government of Iraq (GoI), the State Department and other U.S. agencies, and the international community.

At stake during this major transition both for Iraq and the U.S. is not only ensuring that stability in Iraq is enduring and that the Iraqi government is able to meet the needs of its citizens, but also the consolidation of a long-term strategic partnership between the U.S. and Iraq that contributes to the region's peace and prosperity.

Given this variety of strategic issues, I'm here today to discuss the administration's policy toward Iraq. My presentation will address current security trends; remaining political drivers of instability and our strategy to address them; our plans for a responsible drawdown and transition to an Iraqi lead and an enhanced supporting role for the State Department; and the U.S. commitment to forging a lasting partnership with Iraq.

In covering these topics, my talk is structured to debunk *three* myths that have emerged in recent weeks regarding U.S. policy and the state of affairs in Iraq:

Myth 1: Iraq is about to "unravel."

Myth 2: The administration is not paying sufficient high-level attention to Iraq and the important transitions in front of us.

Myth 3: All the administration cares about is withdrawal, and defines success as disengagement.

### **MYTH #1: IRAQ IS ABOUT TO "UNRAVEL"**

Myth #1 emphasizes the fragility of gains in Iraq and warns that it is only a matter of time before Iraq falls back into a cycle of sectarian, retributive violence à la 2005-2006. Some proponents of Myth #1 go on to posit that this state of affairs will require a large number of U.S. troops indefinitely to ward off disaster. Myth #1 highlights specific negative trends such as recent high-profile bombings, the electoral de-Baathification controversy, and the related increase in sectarian rhetoric prior to the elections, which are legitimate concerns. However, highlighting only these issues ignores or downplays the broader trends and bigger picture: Iraq is emerging as a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant state.

While the situation in Iraq is not entirely rosy, by recent Iraqi standards it is far from disastrous. Consider the following differences from the situation in 2004-2007, when the country was gripped, first by a nation-wide insurgency and, then, spiraled into a bloody sectarian civil war:

***The number of violent incidents in Iraq remains at the lowest levels since the invasion.*** Despite infrequent spectacular bombings by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), generalized sectarian and ethnic violence levels remain low and overall civilian casualties are down considerably from the past. (See attached chart on trends in security incidents.) For example, there have been reports of a 40 percent increase in civilian casualties in February compared to January. This appears to be the case, but is highly misleading and we need to keep things in perspective: January, the baseline for this comparison, had the *lowest* civilian casualties of the entire war, and February had the *fourth lowest*. Moreover, there is no evidence of the Shia returning to militias or Sunnis turning to insurgency en masse for protection or revenge. The Iraqi population remains exhausted from fighting and reluctant to return to communal warfare. There has been no significant increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs), and, in fact, significant numbers of IDPs have returned home in each of the past two years.

***AQI, which previously represented a major threat to Iraqi stability and a significant accelerant for sectarian strife, is weaker than ever.*** The network is under heavy pressure, the tempo of joint U.S.-Iraqi operations against them remains high (keeping the pressure on the network), finances are strained, Sunni popular and tribal support for AQI remains low (and is unlikely to reverse), and there is no sign of large numbers of former insurgents among the Sons of Iraq (SolIs) returning to anti-Government violence. AQI is no longer an insurgency capable of sustaining a high tempo of activity and controlling territory—it is now a more limited terrorist organization that husbands its resources for periodic spectacular attacks. These attacks are horrible events and tragic for their victims, but they do not represent a strategic threat to the Iraqi government.

***The Shia militia threat has diminished and been transformed.*** Moqtada al-Sadr has disbanded the Mahdi Army, concentrating residual militant activities in a smaller group called the Promised Day Brigade (PDB). Both PDB and Ketaeb Hezbollah, another Shia special group, are backed by Iran, which provides money, training, and arms. Asaib al-Haq, a third Shia militant group, is observing a ceasefire, although the arrangement is fragile. These groups no longer target Sunni civilians on a wide scale, nor do they target the Iraqi government and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Instead, they focus on *mostly ineffective* attacks against U.S. forces. Moreover, although Iran has an interest in keeping these groups as a viable tool of influence and intimidation, they do not have an interest in restarting a civil war or overtly challenging the Iraqi government with large-scale violence. They learned in 2007-2008 that such a heavy-handed approach will fail and trigger a backlash from the Shia-dominated Iraqi government.

***The ISF are more numerous, more professional, and more trusted than in the past.*** To be sure, there are still challenges in the ISF, but the levels of professionalism and competency have grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. Sectarian impulses and potential conflicting loyalties linger in some units, but the ISF is not sympathetic to Shia militias in the way it was in 2005-2006, and polls suggest the population generally has confidence in these forces. Moreover, as U.S. forces have stood down, the Iraqis have actually stepped up. There are now fewer than 100,000 U.S. forces in Iraq for the first time of the entire war. We have withdrawn 40,000 forces since President Obama took office, 75,000 since the height of the surge, and U.S. forces withdrew from Iraqi cities in compliance with the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement last June. Yet, despite this significant drawdown, the ISF has been capable of maintaining generally positive security trends. Moreover, Iraq now has the most experienced counter-terrorism forces in the Middle East.

I hope these big-picture points demonstrate that the differences between today's Iraq and the darkest days of the war are profound.

Still, despite these positive trends, security progress is not yet enduring, and there are several remaining political drivers of instability that must be addressed to consolidate progress in Iraq.

***The first is successful national elections:*** Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is on track to run the election in a way that is deemed credible and legitimate as they did for the provincial elections in January 2009. However, sectarian and anti-Baathist tensions have ramped up considerably during the election campaign. To some degree this was inevitable and expected, as the elections are a high-stakes point of conflict between the old order and new order in Iraq. It has been worsened by the de-Baathification controversy, which undermined secular politicians, polarized election discourse, and boxed in Shia politicians like Prime Minister Maliki who have attempted to reach out to Sunnis and stakeholders of the old political order. As a result, election discourse has to some degree shifted -- at least at the elite level -- from a discussion of bread-and-butter issues like services and security toward being a referendum on the role of perceived former Baath party affiliates in the new Iraq.

Fortunately, despite the acrimonious atmosphere, the lead-up to elections has not produced a substantial increase in violence. Though one of the most popular disqualified Sunni candidates, Saleh al-Mutlaq, initially called for an election boycott, his appeal gained no traction among other Sunni leaders who learned the hard way in January 2005 that boycotts do not serve Sunni interests. He has since reversed his call for a boycott, and all political actors with sway among the public are calling for participation, a positive indicator for the perceived legitimacy of the outcome. The post-Awakening Sunni political class is well represented in a number of coalitions and, like the provincial elections, Sunday's national elections will likely be a step toward locking them in as long-term stakeholders in the new political order. The de-Baathification controversy may generate post-election allegations that the election was unfair, but we remain hopeful that, on balance, the elections will be held in a fashion that is viewed inside and outside Iraq as legitimate.

***Government Formation:*** Once Iraq holds elections, its next challenge will be to form a new government in a timely and inclusive fashion. After the December 2005 national elections, it took four months to agree on a prime minister and about six months total to form a government. Iraqi ministries ground to a halt and this governance vacuum played an important role in the escalating violence that gripped Iraq in 2006. This time around, a protracted government formation process poses less risk to the Iraqi state because Iraqi institutions and security forces are more capable and the Iraqi populace is reluctant to return to large-scale bloodshed. However, a lengthy government formation period could still increase instability and provide opportunities for extremists to stir up trouble. Thus, we continue to stress with Iraqi leaders the importance of timely government formation. Equally important is that the new Iraqi government be inclusive, adequately representing Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds. If any community is marginalized, the risk of a spoiler role, renewed violence, or rejection of the democratic process increases. The good news is that Iraqi politicians understand that excluding any major group risks undermining the country's progress and the most plausible scenarios for government formation suggest that all three major ethno-sectarian groups are likely to play a meaningful role.

***Sunni Insurgent Recidivism:*** Beyond elections and government formation, enduring stability in Iraq requires addressing the lingering risk of Sunni insurgent recidivism. The good news is that the same structural features that made the Sunni insurgency difficult to deactivate -- its hyper-localized, cellular nature -- now makes it unlikely to re-activate *en masse*. Moreover, changes in Sunni calculations make a return to large-scale insurgency unlikely: Sunni insurgents lost the battle of Baghdad and the broader violent struggle for supremacy in 2006-2007, and most know it. That said, some return to organized, armed opposition to the political process could occur if the SoIs are not fully integrated into the ISF and other government ministry jobs; if Sunni detainees are not absorbed into local communities; and if Sunnis believe they are shut out from the next government. However, on the positive side, the Iraqi government, with U.S. support, has continued to mostly live up to its promises on the SoI issue. More than 30,000

Sols in Baghdad have been transitioned into civilian ministries and municipalities, more than 13,000 nationwide have been transitioned into the ISF, and we are hopeful that the remaining Sols will be transitioned to security and non-security jobs in accordance with the Iraqi Government's commitments.

***Arab-Kurd Tensions:*** Arab-Kurd tensions represent by far the most serious long-term risk to security in Iraq. First and foremost is the contested status of Kirkuk and the other disputed territories. The central government has been pushing back against Kurdish positions in disputed northern Iraqi provinces, and friction between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and ISF could spark a violent confrontation in these areas. There are also second-order security effects of this tension, as the face-off between the Peshmerga and ISF has created security and political fissures that AQI and other militants seek to exploit.

In the political arena, the Kirkuk issue prolonged the passage of the 2008 Provincial Election Law and the 2009 National Election Law, with each side treating the legislation as an opportunity for political opportunism and to set precedents for the long-term resolution of the province's status in their favor. Disputes between Arabs and Kurds also remain on oil issues, particularly on the question of who manages oil resources in the Kurdistan Region and how revenue from the oil sector will be shared. The Kurds have unilaterally signed a number of contracts with international oil companies, and the Ministry of Oil in Baghdad rejects their right to do so. While the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has recently agreed to full transparency with the GoI on existing contracts, the management issue -- in addition to the important question about how to institutionalize oil revenue sharing -- continue to hold up the passage of legislation necessary to revitalize Iraq's oil industry. Oil, territory, and a number of less prominent but still divisive constitutional issues all revolve around the fundamental question of the relative power of the KRG and the GoI within a unified Iraq.

These political disputes represent significant challenges that must be overcome. But, as we think about the prospects for these political drivers of instability to unravel the situation in Iraq, it is worth remembering another key difference between now and the dark days of Iraq's recent past: a viable political process, accepted as legitimate by the large majority of Iraqi political actors, now exists as the enduring framework in which key questions of the distribution of power and resources can be resolved. The process remains messy and sometimes seems confusing from the outside, but that does not change the fact that it is this political system -- as opposed to violence on the streets -- that represents the primary forum for resolving Iraq's remaining disputes. While some actors may seek to influence this system through violence, no one is making a credible effort to overthrow it -- and that represents a fundamental, and I believe largely underreported, change from years past.

## **MYTH #2: THE ADMINISTRATION IS NOT PAYING ENOUGH HIGH-LEVEL ATTENTION TO IRAQ**

Purveyors of Myth #2 claim that the administration does not treat the situation in Iraq with sufficient urgency given the U.S. interests at stake and the volatility of the situation, and questions the level of engagement and serious thinking about this issue at high levels of the U.S. Government. I actually think the most likely reason for the prevalence of this myth is that the *media* has not devoted as much attention to Iraq as it has in previous years. This has created a self-fulfilling narrative about neglect: the information vacuum has created the *appearance* of a policy vacuum that does not exist. Indeed, this narrative could not be farther from the truth.

On his first day in office, the President tasked the military to prepare options to implement a responsible drawdown, fulfilling the President's campaign pledge to be as careful getting out of Iraq as we were careless getting in. At the same time, the interagency was tasked to conduct a comprehensive strategic review that produced political, regional, and refugee strategies aimed at consolidating our hard-fought gains as U.S. troops draw down.

The President's responsible drawdown plan was designed to take the Iraqi political calendar into account, give our commanders flexibility, and provide a force structure and posture capable of keeping security trends on track and supporting the Iraqi political process between now and the end of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement on December 31, 2011.

The Security Agreement, negotiated by the Bush administration in 2008, called for U.S. forces to be out of Iraqi cities last summer and requires remaining U.S. forces to depart Iraq as a whole by the end of 2011. Otherwise, it does not define the contours of the drawdown between now and then. On February 27, 2009, in a speech at Camp Lejeune, President Obama clarified those contours, calling for a drawdown to a transitional force of 50,000 troops organized around several Advisory and Assistance Brigades, and a change of mission away from combat and counterinsurgency toward predominantly support and stability tasks by August 31, 2010 – about six months from now.

The timing and trajectory of the drawdown outlined by the President at Camp Lejeune was based on recommendations by GEN Odierno and then Ambassador Ryan Crocker. The plan allowed for a more modest reduction in 2009, a pause at a fairly robust force level through the current elections and early government formation period, and then an accelerated drawdown to the transition force, which will start around May and continue through August. The timing gave our commanders the flexibility to account for the Iraqi political calendar and adjust to developments.

The transitional force in place as of the September 1, 2010 change of mission date will also be structured and given a mission set designed to support continued security progress and support our overall political strategy. As a result of the SA, U.S. forces already conduct all operations “by, with, and through” the ISF within the context of Iraqi rule of law. As U.S. forces complete their transition away from counterinsurgency and combat this summer, remaining forces will focus on a more limited mission set, including:

1. Providing force protection and enablers to U.S. civilian agencies and the United Nations Assistance Mission-Iraq (UNAMI) in their continued efforts to promote political accommodation and assist in capacity-building efforts at the national and local levels.
2. Continuing to train, equip, advise, and enable the ISF in order to build the capabilities and professionalism of the Iraqi Army and Police. Our continued partnership with the ISF also provides opportunities to leverage our relationship to build confidence among Iraq's ethno-sectarian communities, the most prominent example being the Combined Security Mechanism that U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I) has designed with the GoI and KRG to build trust and provide security in disputed areas.
3. Continuing to conduct joint, targeted counterterrorism operations to keep pressure on extremist networks.

As we conduct this responsible drawdown and change of mission in accordance with our commitments to the Iraqis, we are also planning for a smooth *transition and transformation* of our relationship with Iraq. There are really a number of transitions involved here, including the ongoing transfer of responsibility to the Iraqi government as we drawdown, and executing the transition of tasks from the Defense Department to the State Department and other civilian agencies. The interagency planning process for both of these transitions began almost immediately after the administration came into office, and it accelerated last summer as we began to develop the administration's FY2011 budget request.



**Addressing ISF Gaps:** On the military side of the equation, the responsible drawdown plan is complemented by a systematic effort to address lingering gaps in ISF capabilities.

The focus of U.S. efforts between now and the end of the Security Agreement is to work toward an ISF capable of providing for internal security while also developing a minimum foundational level of external defense to protect Iraq in a dangerous neighborhood. Although the ISF has made incredible progress over the past three years, there remain significant gaps in their ability to independently provide for internal security. These gaps – in logistics, enablers, equipment, sustainment, and training – have only been compounded by Iraq’s budget crunch. So, beginning last May, we systematically identified and prioritized these gaps, and used this assessment to shape our \$3 billion Iraqi Security Forces Fund request for the FY10 supplemental and the FY11 budget. This is a significant amount of money, but given all that the United States has invested in Iraq since 2003, it is a relatively modest additional investment -- about the cost of ten days of military operating expenses at the height of the war -- to address remaining shortfalls and establish the foundation for a long-term strategic relationship.

**DOD-State transition process:** While 80 percent of programs currently overseen by DoD will eventually be transitioned to the GoI, there will still be a substantial diplomatic and development presence assisting the Iraqis in a variety of sectors for years to come. Therefore, as part of our effort to normalize relations with a sovereign Iraq, we are also actively working on transitioning to the U.S. presence in Iraq to one consolidated under the Embassy’s Chief of Mission authority. Not only does the Vice President hold regular meetings to discuss transition progress, but a series of working groups in Washington and Baghdad are in daily communication to ensure that all activities are responsibly accounted for and transitioned appropriately to the Iraqis, State Department, or the international community.

One of the largest tasks is transitioning the Iraqi police training mission from Defense to State. Issues such as police training continue to require highly coordinated and synchronized efforts to assess and advocate for appropriate levels of resources, funding, and personnel – and, in addition to the money we are seeking for the ISF, we are asking for considerable resources (more than \$4.5 billion) for the State Department’s Iraq mission in the FY10 supplemental and FY11 budgets to ensure a successful transition.

Our broader *political strategy* in Iraq aims to complement this responsible drawdown and transition by assisting the GoI in addressing outstanding political drivers of instability. In the lead-up to elections, we have sought to discourage extremist rhetoric and violence, and we have worked with IHEC and UNAMI to ensure credible and secure elections. Success here has been mixed, but generally positive. There has been some increase in low-level violence and intimidation, but violence has not significantly spiked; the de-Baathification issue has turned up the sectarian rhetoric, but, unlike in 2005 when identity politics defined party platforms, most parties are campaigning on a mix of sectarian, nationalist, and governance-based issues.

During the government formation period, as I mentioned before, our twin goals are the timely establishment of an inclusive government. We expect the process to be contentious, and to appear messy from the outside, but the prospect for a new government that represents the three major ethno-sectarian groups is high. We have also taken steps to work with Iraqi ministries to ensure that the caretaker government continues to provide security and services during the government formation process.

To reduce the odds of a violent Sunni insurgent recidivism, we will continue to push for the integration of the predominantly Sunni Sols, and manage the continued release and transfer of detainees to minimize destabilizing effects.

We have also devoted considerable energy toward crafting a strategy to address Arab-Kurd disputes. The primary objective prior to the elections has been to remain actively engaged diplomatically to prevent overly heated rhetoric or local miscalculations from producing a clash. When elections legislation was stalled by disagreements over the status of Kirkuk in elections and the allocation of seats in the new Council of Representatives, U.S. and UNAMI mediation proved critical to the law's passage (a fact acknowledged by many Iraqi leaders).

The U.S. military has also helped implement a Combined Security Mechanism in the disputed areas of northern Iraq. This mechanism includes joint patrols, checkpoints, and a new command structure designed to build confidence between the ISF and Peshmerga, and deny violent extremists the opportunity to exploit gaps in security. Though not without bumps in the road, especially in Ninewa, establishing these joint structures is a major, ongoing success. It is an example of the U.S. playing an honest broker role and serving as a security guarantor. More importantly, the joint structures are intended to be the kind of bottom-up reconciliation and pressure relief that will give leaders on both sides the political space necessary to make compromises on key issues and minimize the risks that low-level incidents or miscalculation produce violent conflict.

After the elections, we plan to work with UNAMI to aid Iraqis in identifying workable resolutions to Arab-Kurd disputes. In this case, the government formation process, in particular the competition for Kurdish support to form a new government, may actually help by providing incentives for parties to put in place a process to resolve outstanding issues. This could work, so long as all parties avoid maximalist positions—a point U.S. and UNAMI officials make repeatedly in their interactions with key Iraqi leaders.

Some question whether we still have sufficient influence to execute this political strategy. While it is true that the reality of Iraqi sovereignty and our declining presence has reduced our influence, it has not eliminated it. For example, as our drawdown has revealed lingering ISF requirements, it has produced opportunities for improved cooperation (e.g., after the August bombings). Due to our substantial security and technical assistance, and the continued desire among most of Iraq's key political actors for a long-term strategic relationship with us, we continue to play an important role in Iraq. However, our commitment to Iraqi sovereignty and our awareness to Iraqi sensitivities mean that we must, by necessity, play a less visible and overbearing role in Iraqi affairs, working closely with UNAMI to facilitate Iraqi-led initiatives. In this context, as we have continued to live up to our commitments under the SA, it has actually increased our credibility as an honest broker.

Finally, contrary to claims that the administration lacks sufficient high-level focus on Iraq to navigate these complex challenges, in reality, implementation of our overall Iraq strategy receives an extraordinary level of high-level attention. Iraq is the only place on Earth that the President of the United States has appointed the Vice President as special envoy and overall policy coordinator. The President is deeply concerned about events unfolding in Iraq, and Vice President Biden works on Iraq nearly every day. The Vice President holds regularly scheduled principals' level meetings on Iraqi policy and transition issues, regularly calls Iraqi leaders, and has already traveled to Iraq three times in his new position. Indeed, the President, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State have all visited Iraq since the Obama administration took office.

Moreover, although some observers on major editorial pages seem unaware of it, there has been a steady stream of high-level Iraqi visitors from Iraq over the past year, including: President Talabani, Prime Minister Maliki, Vice President Abd al-Mahdi, Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, KRG President Barzani, as well as scores of lower level officials. Iraq's senior leaders have held extensive meetings with the President, Vice President, and other senior administration officials.

Finally, underneath this high-level engagement is a robust interagency coordination process, both in Washington and in Baghdad, designed to coordinate and implement our activities.

So every day, from the top to bottom of our government, in Washington and in Baghdad, achieving success in Iraq has been, and remains, a major focus on this administration.

### **MYTH #3: ALL THE ADMINISTRATION CARES ABOUT IS WITHDRAWAL**

Some argue that the administration defines success in Iraq solely in terms of withdrawing U.S. forces. This argument persists as a legacy of the U.S. political debate surrounding the Iraq war. President Obama was critical of the invasion of Iraq and the mismanagement of the war effort in the early years. His earlier positions, combined with distortions by some pundits and the fact that declining media coverage of Iraq roughly coincided with his taking office, have shaped the public misconception that the President does not appreciate the gains that have been made in Iraq and still thinks of it primarily as problem from which we must extricate ourselves.

One can only sustain this argument by ignoring what the President has actually said since taking office and what the administration has actually done over the past year. Consider the President's February 2009 speech at Camp Lejeune, which remains the guiding document for U.S. Iraq policy and a touchstone for all of us who work on Iraq inside the U.S. government. In that speech the President outlined our goals and it is clear from his formulation that the responsible drawdown of our forces is *not* an end in itself but is rather part of a comprehensive effort to achieve our broader objectives of a stable, sovereign, and self-reliant Iraq, with just and representative institutions, that is peacefully integrated into its region, and is a long-term partner of the United States. The President stated:

The United States will pursue a new strategy to end the war in Iraq **THROUGH** a transition to full Iraqi responsibility. This strategy is grounded in a clear and achievable **GOAL** shared by the Iraqi people and the American people: an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. To achieve that goal, we will work to promote an Iraqi government that is just, representative, and accountable, and that provides neither support nor safe-haven to terrorists. We will help Iraq build new ties of trade and commerce with the world. And we will forge a partnership with the people and government of Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region.

Thus, from the very beginning of the administration, the President's commitment to forging a long-term strategic partnership with Iraq that persists far beyond the drawdown of U.S. forces has been clear, and the President has continuously emphasized this point in his meetings with Iraqi officials.

Moreover, during his three visits to Iraq, the Vice President has consistently emphasized in private and public that the withdrawal of our forces does not represent U.S. disengagement from Iraq. On the contrary, Vice President Biden has made clear that we intend our engagement to increase even as the nature of that engagement shifts from the military to civilian spheres.

The precise contours of that long-term relationship with Iraq, including our security relationship, are beginning to take shape as we move forward in implementing the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), signed with the Iraq government at the same time as the Security Agreement in November 2008. SFA implementation will be further defined in the coming months once a new Iraqi government is formed and is ready to have more detailed conversations.



The State Department has the lead for implementing the SFA, which calls for joint coordinating committees co-chaired by Iraqi and U.S. officials on areas ranging from diplomatic, educational, scientific, commercial, and security cooperation. The majority of these committees are already meeting at the principal and working levels, and Embassy Baghdad is leading efforts to ensure continuity on SFA implementation through the period of government formation and seating. The SFA, as the roadmap for long-term relations, provides the framework for continued close security assistance and cooperation arrangements, within a normalized context, should the new GoI seek this from us.

Lastly, on the ground, the State Department has also taken steps to define our long-term diplomatic presence in Iraq, including an enduring provincial presence as Provincial Reconstruction Teams draw down.

## **CONCLUSION**

In sum, despite some heated rhetoric in the run-up to the Iraqi election, Iraq remains on the path toward greater stability and self-reliance. To be sure, some serious challenges remain in Iraq, especially on the political front. But, working closely with the Iraqi government and people and the international community, we remain confident that we can achieve our shared objectives: a peaceful and prosperous Iraq that is a long-term partner of the United States.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

# Security Incidents

