

U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ: WHAT ARE THE REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS?

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JAMES F. DOBBINS: Director, International Security and Defense Policy Center, RAND Corporation; former assistant secretary of state and special envoy to Afghanistan; author, *After the Taliban: Nation Building in Afghanistan*

I'm going to go through fairly briefly the risks associated with leaving Iraq, and then some strategies to reduce those risks. This will be a good introduction to several of my colleagues here who will be going into more detail on some of these specific risk factors. The categories that I will talk about are, first of all, logistical risks; second, risks associated with al-Qaeda and terrorist groups; third, risks associated with the major Iraqi groups; and fourth, risks associated with the neighboring countries.

I think the logistical risks are probably the most manageable. Logistically, in some ways, leaving Iraq is easier than staying. The American practice is to rotate our troops every year. So if you have 130,000 troops and you are not withdrawing, it means you have 260,000 men moving; you have 130,000 men leaving and 130,000 men arriving over the course of the year. If you are leaving, you will have only half that number of transits because you're taking out 130,000; you're not putting any in. There are, of course, complications associated with some of the heavier equipment that stays and is used by one unit after another. So I'm not suggesting there is no logistical challenge to withdrawing, and there are the challenges associated with closing bases and that sort of thing. But basically under the withdrawal plans as the administration has articulated them, this doesn't seem to be a particularly difficult risk.

The second risk is that associated with al-Qaeda and other non-Iraqi terrorist groups that might seek to complicate the withdrawal, embarrass the United States in the course of the withdrawal, and plunge Iraq back into civil war. This risk, too, seems manageable as long as the major Iraqi groups themselves don't for one reason or another go back into conflict. The terrorist group al-Qaeda in Iraq seems to have been largely marginalized; they are much less active, and the Iraqi security forces are probably capable of dealing with them as long as they don't find support within the Sunni community.

So the major threat is that, in the context of the American withdrawal, the major Iraqi groups themselves will, for one reason or another, resume the civil war, which largely, but not entirely, ended in 2007. The major groups concerned are the Sunnis, in particular those associated with the Sons of Iraq, the former insurgents who were put on the U.S. payroll and whom we are now trying to transfer to the Iraqi government payroll; the Kurds; then the Shia, of which there are several major groupings. There is what used to be called SCIRI, which is part of the largest of the political parties; it is one of the ones with its own militia, the Badr Corps, and the one that historically was most closely associated with Iran. Their militia has largely been incorporated into the Iraqi security forces, and they have lost some prominence politically. The second of the major groups is the Dawa party headed by the current prime minister, which has gained somewhat, largely due to his record and embrace of nationalism as opposed to more sectarian themes. There are the forces associated with Muqtada al-Sadr, the Jaish al-Mahdi, or JAM, which has been largely quiescent and thus less prominent and is not likely to make a strong comeback.

Finally, there are the special groups that were originally part of al-Sadr's Jaish alMahdi, but have achieved a certain degree of autonomy and were supported by - and, some people speculated, directed by - Iran, and were among the most destructive of the forces back in 2006, 2007. They were largely defeated and have drawn back, and the Iranians are providing less support and encouragement for these groups. There is the danger that the government dominated by the Shia will not adequately integrate the Sunni minority politically and also to some degree militarily - that is, accept the Sons of Iraq, put them into a certain proportion of military-security positions and ensure the others have some form of livelihood. And there is the danger that the Shia groups could potentially begin fighting among themselves. But probably the greatest danger is the danger inherent in the Arab-Kurdish disputes over disputed territories along the border between the Kurdish region and the Arab majority provinces. Kirkuk and other disputed areas are still flashpoints. So, if you are looking at where civil war in Iraq might resume, that could be the most dangerous and the most difficult to manage.

In terms of external actors, all of Iraq's neighbors are going to interfere in one way or another. They would be foolish not to. After all, they are the ones who are going to get the refugees, the commercial disruption, the terrorism, endemic disease and the criminality that flows from having a failed state on their doorsteps. So they are going to interfere. Left to their own devices, this kind of interference often has exactly the opposite effect of what the neighboring states would ideally like. They tend to interfere by backing their own favorite champion as the factions within the country maneuver for power and influence, and thus they feed potential conflicts. Successful management of external actors requires that, to the degree they interfere, they interfere in ways that are convergent and helpful rather than divergent and unhelpful.

Saudi Arabia is going to provide some support to Sunni groups as long as the Sunni groups are being adequately integrated into the polity in Iraq. This essentially means support for political activities, which - while it might not meet American standards - is probably inevitable and not all that unhelpful. Syria has been a traditional pathway for the

entry of suicide bombers and aspiring terrorists; that traffic has diminished significantly. It is not clear whether that is because Syria is cracking down or because there is a reduction either in the supply of such people or in the demand for such people in Iraq.

Turkey is the only one of the neighbors in which a conventional military intervention is feasible or even conceivable. To the extent other neighbors interfere, they will interfere surreptitiously, politically, economically, covertly. The Turks have repeatedly intervened with conventional military forces, and they could do so again, provoked either by Kurdish terrorism, by a Kurdish-Arab dispute over Kirkuk, or by Kurdish abuses of Turkish or Turkmen minorities in those disputed areas. An intervention by Turkey is a serious possibility, though not a likelihood.

Iran is the country that probably has the greatest capacity to destabilize Iraq as the United States withdraws, to embarrass the United States and to deny America what should be its objective, which is to leave behind an Iraq that is at peace with itself and its neighbors. Whether Iran does so or not will probably depend more on the state of U.S.-Iranian relations than on the state of U.S.-Iraqi relations. Iran's interests in Iraq per se are not inconsistent with America's interests. It doesn't want the country to break apart, but it wants it to be governed by the majority, who happen to be Shia. So it doesn't have an inherent interest in destabilizing Iraq. But it might see an interest derivative of the state of its relationship with the United States. That is a significant risk factor.

In terms of strategies to reduce the risk, there are a number, most of which I think the administration cognizant of and is following. First, it is important that American combat forces leave the most volatile areas last, and the most volatile area between the Kurdish and Arab parts of the country in the disputed territories in that region. The United States is currently playing an important role in maintaining dialogue between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi security forces, containing disputes that could rise to the level of conflict if there were no mediator with embedded personnel capable of speaking to both sides. They are playing an important role in keeping that area quiet, so leaving last from those kinds of regions is one way to reduce the risk. Second, following the withdrawal of combat forces, which is scheduled to be completed by next August, make sure that there are enough American forces in the country to continue to train and partner with Iraqi security forces, and to provide adequate force protection for the American troops that remain.

As we train and equip the Iraqi security forces, we also need to be conscious that they are another risk factor. The Iraqi security forces must not become so powerful and so autonomous that they begin to abuse that power and usurp constitutional functions or allow somebody - the prime minister, for instance - to usurp constitutional functions. The Iraqi security forces themselves are at the moment a force for stability, and one of the main objectives of American policy is to improve those forces. But that has to be done in the context of continued support for constitutional rule, for a balance among all of the ethnic and sectarian groups in the country, and for the development of the professional military that understands its limits and constraints. So the Iraqi security forces themselves

are both a part of the solution, but they are also potentially a part of the problem and one has to be conscious of that.

There are other strategies for reducing the risk. First of all, adhere to the SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement]. Make clear to the Iraqi public that we are leaving in accordance with pre-agreed arrangements that respect Iraqi sovereignty. Continue to dampen conflict in the most volatile areas, particularly those between the Arabs and the Kurds. Engage all of the neighbors as constructively as one can; particularly engage the neighbors that are in a position to make the most trouble. Syria and Iran could make the most trouble and therefore are the most important to engage.

Finally, begin to give some consideration to what kind of relationship the United States wants with Iraq and with Iraq's neighbors after the withdrawal of all American forces in 2011. There will be some elements of the Iraqi security force that won't be self-sustaining at that point. They won't have a combat air force; they won't be able to control their airspace. The logistical capabilities of some of their forces will be somewhat limited. There will be areas in which they simply haven't become fully self-sustaining, and there will be risk of conflict, particularly between Arabs and Kurds where you have conventional military forces on both sides. While the Iraqi security forces will probably be adequate to handle threats from Jaish al-Mahdi and the special groups, al-Qaeda and those kinds of groups, they are still going to be pretty evenly matched with the Kurdish security forces.

So the possibility of a conflict is there, and so the United States will have to think about how to continue to remain engaged, perhaps by having observers or other engagement with both sides along that divide so that even after the U.S. forces leave, there is still somebody who is mediating disputes and ensuring that misunderstandings don't give rise to something more serious.

We have security-assistance relationships with lots of countries in the Middle East in which we don't have any troops stationed, and we need to look at some of those other models and decide what kind of relationship we want with Iraq. That also gives us an opportunity to look at security relationships in the region as a whole, and to use the withdrawal from Iraq as a basis to engage in a broader dialogue with the neighboring countries about what the region is going to look like in the aftermath of an American withdrawal from Iraq.

There is some thought that we might withdraw from Iraq but go somewhere else in the region. As a practical matter, there is nobody else who is going to accept a large number of American troops. So we're not going to put 100,000 troops or anything close to that anywhere else in the region. We will continue to maintain a major offshore presence, and perhaps some headquarters and refueling and other capabilities in the region. But this is a withdrawal not just from Iraq. It is a withdrawal from the Middle East in terms of large-scale ground-combat forces, so we do need to think about what that means for the geopolitics of the region as a whole. This is an opportunity to engage those countries in a

multilateral dialogue in which they talk to each other more candidly than they have to date about what things can look like.

I think it is worthwhile to remember that, for 30 or 40 years, there were no Western forces in the Middle East, and the area was more or less in equilibrium. The British left in the '50s. American ground forces didn't come into Iraq until the first Gulf War. So you've got a prolonged period during which there were no Western forces, no American forces, in the region. It was a region largely at peace during that period, and it wasn't Iran that drew us into the region; it was Iraq.

The Iranian revolution occurred in '79, and that didn't become a basis for stationing American forces in the region. It was Saddam Hussein and his invasion of Kuwait. So if you fix the Iraqi situation, there isn't necessarily an inherent long-term requirement for a major American presence, and we ought to think about how one could return to that earlier situation. We ought to at least aspire to establishing some kind of internal equilibrium in the region that doesn't require a significant American or Western troop presence.

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ELLEN LAIPSON: President and CEO, Stimson Center; former vice-chair, National Intelligence Council

I will address the question of the region from four different vectors. One is some broad principles of how we should think as observers of the region. The second is to look more practically at the level of security and military cooperation between Iraq and its neighbors. The third is to look at the special case of Kuwait and the anomalies of the past. Lastly, to think a bit about the future, where I very much agree with what Jim said about this being an opportunity for rebalancing of America's security relationships in the region.

On the broad principles, let us bear in mind a couple of things. One is that the withdrawal will happen over a period of time. It is a little like the frog in the water: you get adjusted to a slight change in temperature over time; it does not happen overnight. We just passed a very important milestone, the withdrawal from the major cities - at least most of them. It is something that is happening incrementally, and there is time; it is happening in stages. It is transparent, and the neighbors are being briefed on it. This is not a surprise or something that will be happening very abruptly for them.

The first instinct on the part of the neighbors is to have some concern that, once again, instability in Iraq could spill over to them. So, if they make the judgment that Iraqi forces are not up to the task of maintaining law and order and keeping Iraqi troublemakers inside Iraq's borders, they will view this development more negatively than positively. But I do think that both at the popular level and among some of the governments of the

region, there is some positive reaction to the end of American occupation of a major Arab country. This is a positive political development in terms of Arab pride and Arab experience. They even have some expectation that they will get a little more attention from Washington and that there will be a redistribution of time, energy and resources to other problems in the region. So, certainly, some of the states in the region think that the end of this period of the exceptionalism of American engagement in Iraq could be a net positive for our ability to attend to other issues of concern.

We should, however, recall that the larger historical context is that most of Iraq's immediate neighbors - with the exception of Iran - did not feel that the U.S. decision to go in and topple Saddam was good for them. They are still dealing with a largely negative perception that this decision - whatever motivated the United States and whatever our priorities were - was not done in full consideration of what would really enhance stability in the region or be in the national interest of each of them.

For the traditional Sunni Arab countries, the rise of Shia majority rule in Iraq is very unsettling. It makes them feel that Iran is even closer or that the potential of Iranian influence has spread in territorial terms. Based on the deep tradition of personalized politics in the Middle East, they simply don't know who the new actors are. Some of Iraq's new leaders were unknown, even though Prime Minister Maliki had lived in Damascus. My understanding is that he was a rather minor Dawa figure whom the Syrian regime did not see as a likely future leader of Iraq and did not spend a lot of time cultivating.

So there is this problem of getting to know the new leaders, developing trust, developing some mutual understanding, and that does take time. We know, for example, that the Saudi leadership's relationship with Iraq is among the most brittle, whereas in many of the other cases it is starting to normalize. Let us be honest: Some of the regimes in the Middle East were perfectly happy with Saddam's iron grip on the country. They might have preferred a strong authoritarian state in Iraq to either the chaos of the immediate post-Saddam period or a feisty and unpredictable democracy. So even Iraq's success breeds a level of uneasiness in some of the other Arab countries. But the change in how the neighbors engage with Iraq and think about an Iraq without American troops will happen on their timetable, not ours. We cannot insist that the regional states adapt their policies towards Iraq quite as fast as we had hoped. But I think it is happening over time.

Let me focus a little bit on some of the practical dimensions of the neighbors' engagement with Iraq, particularly the security dimension. For at least two or three years now, we have seen a fairly steady improvement in Iraqi neighbor relations: exchanges of interior ministers to look at border issues, to track bad guys, to try to stop the transfer of weapons and third-party actors across the border. We know there are intelligence exchanges, and slowly but surely, ministers other than the intrepid Hoshiyar Zebari are now showing up in Arab capitals. Just this month, Egypt and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding that addresses security cooperation as well as trade and commercial activity. Last month, Turkey and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding that talks about military training and science and technology cooperation and calls on Turkey to maintain the American

equipment that is left behind. So Turkey will have that special role to play. In May, the United Arab Emirates hosted an Iraqi delegation and talked about military security cooperation, and Jordan for a number of years now has been in partnership with the United States helping train the Iraqi police and some of the other security forces. So there is a practical level at which normal professional-counterpart interaction is occurring.

But there is the interesting case of Kuwait. Since the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Iraq has been under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, which puts it in a penalty box and says that it will not be treated as a member in good standing of the United Nations until it addresses all of the outstanding claims from the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1991: reparations totaling \$50 billion, the fate of the missing prisoners of war, the return of stolen property and demarcation of land and maritime borders.

When the Iraqis informed the United Nations last year that they really wanted to get out of Chapter VII and no longer be under UN resolutions that essentially authorized the American occupation of Iraq, there was still this unfinished business of whether they had met Kuwaiti demands and expectations. There is a negotiation going on now between the Iraqis and the Kuwaitis. At the state level, the Kuwaitis seem somewhat sympathetic to the desire to resolve this issue and get back to a normal relationship. But in the Kuwaiti parliament and certainly among the families of the missing and the prisoners of war, there is still a lot of emotion. This is unresolved business at the society level in Kuwait. So I do think the Kuwaiti government is somewhat constrained in moving very quickly to a resolution of Chapter VII. The United States, including our ambassador in Kuwait, is very much trying to facilitate this process and resolve the outstanding issues.

Let me just finish with a couple of thoughts about the future. One of the things that will affect the neighbors quite a lot is something that Jim alluded to, which is whether Iraq reemerges as a strong state. There is every possibility, given the quality of the training that it is getting from the United States, the infusion of new methods, more modern leadership, et cetera, that Iraq will make up for lost time and be a little bit ahead of its neighbors in creating a military that performs to higher standards. Obviously, using your military in active contingencies depends on what kind of threats you face. But I think there is still a question to address of whether the rest of the Arab system wants Iraq to return to the role it once played as a kind of praetorian state, a state that was respected for the quality of its military, and the perception that Iraq was a strong state.

The neighbors over the next few years will be very sensitive both to perceptions that Iraq is too weak and also to the prospect that Iraq could again become strong. And the United States, I'm sure, will play a role in trying to manage these relationships. Over time, there is an opportunity, as the United States withdraws, not necessarily to find another friendly venue for a large American troop presence, but to rethink security relationships in the region, to think freshly about how one facilitates and enhances the capacity of the states themselves to address their own security.

HELENA COBBAN: Publisher, JustWorldNews.org; author, Re-Engage! America And the World after Bush

The Middle East Policy Council is a really important institution here in the nation's capital. It has always been a beacon of light promoting sound, empirically based scholarship on matters of vital interest to the United States in the Middle East. In 2001-02, it notably stood aside from the echo chamber of anti-intellectual know-nothingism that resulted in our country's getting drawn into the invasion and occupation of Iraq. So I think this kind of really broad-ranging discussion is always important to have, and I think that MEPC has played an important role in that.

Our country's military has now been in Iraq for more than six years. Our country has lost more than 4,300 people there and hundreds of billions - perhaps more than a trillion - dollars of our taxpayer revenues. Iraq has lost hundreds of thousands of its people, perhaps as many as a million, as a result of our intervention there to conflict-derived causes, mainly, but also the ongoing destruction of the national infrastructure. More than 10 percent of the population has been displaced from their home communities to locations either inside or outside the country. If you imagine what that would be like in our country, you can imagine the trauma that Iraq's people have gone through. So before I proceed with my analytical presentation, if there are any Iraqi friends here in the audience, I just want to say, I'm sorry that my country and government did that to your country. I know my saying "sorry" doesn't make any difference, but it is my sincere desire that our government find ways to work to try to heal the wounds it has inflicted on Iraq's people, just as it tries to heal the wounds that President George Bush's invasion decision inflicted on our people here in the United States as well.

We are now at the stage where the drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq has begun. The withdrawal from the cities was carried out by the agreed deadline of June 30, and more or less in compliance with the terms of the November 2008 withdrawal agreement, also known as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). That was an agreement between our government and the government of Iraq. The next big deadlines we see in Iraq are the elections in the Kurdish areas next month, the nationwide elections next January 30, and then the deadline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country 23 months after that on December 31, 2011, under the terms of the SOFA. Of course, President Obama also has his interim deadline for the withdrawal of combat forces, but the terms of the SOFA state that all U.S. forces will be out by the end of December 2011.

Obviously both these processes - the insertion of a significant U.S. force into Iraq and now its much slower evacuation from the country - have had and are continuing to have huge consequences for the country's six neighbors and for the other countries of the overlapping regions in which Iraq lies. Regarding the neighbors, all six of them are being strongly affected by the current drawdown. Perhaps the most attention in this country has been given to Iran and Saudi Arabia, two large regional powers that are frequently painted in this country as being engaged in a momentous zero-sum contest of wills, one a regional power that is both Persian and Shi'ite, the other a power that is both Arab and Sunni.

In this view, Iraq is seen as threatening to become a battleground between these two powers. In reality, the situation inside Iraq and the region is much more complex. First, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have many reciprocal concerns and fears about each other; but they have also for many years now had a basic modus vivendi with each other in the Gulf region. They are involved in a serious but limited contest over the nature of the state in Iraq, but they are not involved in a relentless "take no prisoners" struggle for regional power at this point. Secondly, Iraq's Arab population - we can speak about the country's small Kurdish minority later - are not simply passive objects of the external power struggles of outsiders. They have their own views, their own interests and their own very complicated history as Iraqis of dealing with these issues of Sunnite-Shiite relations, relations between rich and poor, relations between the cities and the countryside, amongst themselves as a united citizenry.

Americans who neatly divide Iraq's very complex population into the three watertight boxes of Shiite, Sunni and Kurd, and who think that the policies that Saudi Arabia and Iran pursue inside Iraq play neatly into that, miss the point of the way that Iraqis deal with each other. And when they are in policy positions here in Washington, their error in this respect has a potentially very serious and destabilizing consequence for Iraqis and for the region. I would just like to recall the immense and widespread public exultation we saw in all of Iraq last weekend after the country's national soccer team played an international match for the first time since 2003 on its home turf in Baghdad's al-Shaab stadium. The players came from all three population groups; probably there were some Christians among them as well. Certainly the crowds (all apparently male, which of course I see as a problem) came from every section of the Iraqi society, and the exultation that they experienced seeing their team play on its home turf was deeply heartfelt. There is a resource of Iraqi national unity and pride that we Americans should all hope that our government can hold up and strengthen over the complex 30 months ahead.

The chaos and suffering that Iraq has endured over the past six years have deeply affected all their neighbors both through the normal human empathy that people have for each other and that neighbors have for each other, as well as the empathy that fellow Arabs or Muslims have for each other. Nearly all of the neighbors watched aghast as Iraq descended into its particular style of hellish violence in 2005-06. And the outpouring of support for Iraq's people from all the neighbors, except perhaps from some Kuwaitis, was widespread and genuine. In addition, that violence in 2005-06 had the demographic spillover effect of sending waves of Iraqi refugees into most of the neighboring countries, especially Jordan and Syria. Syria received them with particular hospitality, Jordan with what we could describe as a limited degree of hospitality. In Jordan, we had in addition the spillover of violence in the form of the ghastly hotel bombings of November 2005, perpetrated by very angry and very desperate Iraqi refugees.

I want to use the rest of my time here this morning to look at the effects the American withdrawal from Iraq might be expected to have on Iraq's relations with two northern neighbors, Syria and Turkey. The Turkish border is fairly short but very strategically significant. The Syrian border is long and very strategically significant. The relationships

that Syria and Turkey had with the Baghdad government and other forces inside Iraq are textured and important ones. These are relationships that, as our government withdraws its forces from Iraq, can be very valuable in helping to ensure that the handover to full and effective Iraqi sovereignty works out as well as possible for everyone concerned - and, of course, to ensure that U.S. troops can manage to exit Iraq with a minimum number of additional casualties between now and December 2011 .

I was recently in both Turkey and Syria and was able to have good conversations about the situation in Iraq with foreign-policy specialists in both countries. In Syria, I conducted a formal interview with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem. One of the most notable things I took away from the interview was that, when he listed the issues of common concern between his country and the United States, he put Iraq at the top of his list, above Israeli- Arab peacemaking or anything else. In conversations with Foreign Minister Muallem and with other Syrians in and out of government, it became very clear that they have a real fear that any re-eruption of the kind of deep social chaos that happened in Iraq in 2005-06 - the Arabic word is fitna - could all too easily spill over the borders into Syria, which has a lot in common with Iraq.

One thing we should all remember is that the new political forces that have taken over in Iraq since 2003 are all from movements and parties whose leaders had, prior to 2003, spent a lot of time in Syria, more time for most of them than they had spent in Iran and certainly a lot more than in Washington or other Western capitals. Whether we are talking about the present Kurdish leaders in Iraq or leaders of the various ethnic Arab parties and movements, they nearly all have relationships with Syria that go back a long way. That is a resource if we are thinking in terms of trying to help Iraqis build a robust and stable political order over the next 30 months - a resource that we Americans should try to draw on. As Foreign Minister Muallem and many other Syrians told me, this is something that they see as being in their interest. It is not something we need to persuade them to do; it is something we should encourage them to do and something that our diplomacy should also seek to synergize with.

For the past couple of years, Damascus has hosted the security cooperation and coordination committee or contact group that brings together representatives of Iraq, the United States and all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran. Though these meetings have been low key and held at a relatively low level, they have been a valuable forum for starting to sketch out the possibilities and requisites of security coordination among these eight countries. They should, in my view, be significantly upgraded. Of course, it is very important for this and other reasons that the Obama administration get an ambassador back to Damascus as soon as possible.

Syria is not a trivial player in Iraq or in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. The Bush administration pursued towards Syria a policy that teetered on the brink of outright regime change. As part of Obama's reordering of our diplomacy in the region, that needs to change and change rapidly. Having Senator Mitchell visit Damascus last month was one good step, as was announcing that an ambassador would be sent back to Damascus sometime soon. We need to see that ambassador nominated, confirmed and deployed as

soon as possible. The administration should work a lot harder at including Syria in the political and diplomatic as well as security-related aspects of its planning for Iraq's continuing transition to full independence.

Many Syrians went to pains to underline to me in private conversations that they have a noticeably different view from their long-time Iranian allies of what a desirable political order in Iraq should look like. They want to see an Iraq that is secular, nationalist and Arab, whereas the Iranians want to see an Iraq that looks more like Iran, certainly one in which sectarian affiliation is a big factor in the staffing, and possibly also the constitution, of the country's political institutions. They suspect that the Iranians are happy with the present American-implemented system of fairly strict sectarian apportionment of leading political positions (a system the Iraqis call mahasasah) and that the Iranians possibly want to see this written even more deeply into the Iraqi constitution. The Syrians, by contrast, want to see an end to mahasasah altogether, fearing that it sets Iraq up for many further decades of sectarian strife, as in Lebanon.

Moving north to Turkey, this is also a country with a lot to contribute to the process of internal and external political reconciliation that Iraq's people so desperately need. Many in the United States tend to look at Turkey's relations with Iraq only through the lens of its often-problematic relationship to the question of Kurdish claims and aspirations. As we know, Kurdish populations straddle the Iraqi-Turkish border, as they do the Iraqi-Syrian and Iraqi-Iranian borders, though in each of these countries, the Kurdish question manifests itself in a significantly different way. However, it would be quite untrue to say that the government in power in Ankara looks at all matters Iraqi only through the lens of the Kurdish question or that its own policies are irredeemably anti-Kurdish. It is worth noting that, inside Turkey, the ruling AK Party got strong support, perhaps even majority support, from the country's ethnic Kurdish population during the last election, in 2007. The AKP is really a new development in Turkish politics, a party that is determinedly Islamist, determinedly moderate in the way it operates, and determinedly pro-Western.

The present foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who was previously foreign-policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdogan, is a notable intellectual whose watchword for the country's foreign-policy stance has been "zero problems with the neighbors." The AKP has deliberately eschewed the ethno-nationalist political affiliation of all the earlier governments of modern Turkey dating right back to Ataturk. This means that the AK government has had a considerably new way to pursue diplomatic and peace-making openings to all the regions of which Turkey is a part. The Middle East is certainly one of these, as we saw when Davutoglu was the key player in the proximity talks that Turkey facilitated and hosted between Israel and Syria throughout most of last year.

Turkey's AK government has also done remarkably well in reaching reconciliation with the government of Armenia, including by agreeing with Armenia to the formation of a joint historical commission to examine what happened to the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915.

In Iraq, Turkey evidently shares the desire of nearly all other regional powers that the central government in Baghdad be as strong and empowered as possible and that the powers of the Kurdish regional government be as circumscribed as possible. But that has not made Turkey implacably hostile to the KRG. Turkey has long had commercial ties with the KRG. This past March, Turkish President Abdullah Gül made his first visit to Erbil, giving the KRG a welcome degree of recognition from their large neighbor to the north.

Turkey has two significant levers of power over all Iraq's parties; one is water, which flows south from Turkey into Iraq, and the other is natural gas. There was recently some fascinating news that Turkey and four of its neighbors to the west have now agreed to go ahead with the construction of the Nabucco pipeline, named, of course, for the important Iraqi forefather Nebuchadnezzar. Nabucco will run from eastern Turkey to Austria and will provide a way for several Central Asian producers to get their gas to European markets without going through Russia. Iraq said just this week that it also expects to feed gas from its significantly sized gas fields into the Nabucco system when it opens in 2013 or so. And the Turks have said that they will be happy to consider pumping Iranian gas through Nabucco as well, once they can sort out the details with the EU customers to the west.

Beyond these mundane, though important, levers of raw physical power, Turkey has a considerable amount of soft power it can deploy to good effect both within Iraq and with all of Iraq's neighbors. Regarding the situation inside Iraq, for example, we could look at a potential Turkish role in helping to monitor, mediate and resolve the simmering conflict over Kirkuk regarding the outside actors. The base of Arab resentment of the Ottoman past is now largely over. Political elites in most Arab countries recognize that the current Turkish government is not an heir to the bullying and repressive Ottoman Empire, nor is it the same kind of ethno-nationalist government that Turkey has known since Ataturk came to power. Among Arab Muslims, as among many other Muslims elsewhere, there is a degree of fascination about how the ruling party has put forward the values of Islamic piety and social conservatism at the same time that it modernizes successfully, governs effectively, and maintains very good relations with the West. The demonstration effect of Turkey today, allied with the very smart AK foreign policy of zero problems with the neighbors, gives Ankara considerable ability to deploy soft power with regard to the Iraq question. Turkey has good relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. It has good relations with the United States, being a valued member of NATO at the same time that it earned considerable brownie points with Iraqi nationalists by resisting the Bush administration's urgings in 2002-03 that it allow U.S. forces to transit Turkey as they invaded the country.

I would like to note in conclusion that, in December 2006, the Iraq Study Group the Baker-Hamilton commission - urged the establishment of a contact group that would bring together all of Iraq's neighbors along with the Iraqi government and the government of the United States precisely to provide a forum where all these issues of regional stability and sensitivities could be discussed away from the limelight. The Bush administration responded to that by, in a very quiet way, establishing that group. That is the security-coordination commission that Damascus has been hosting. If the Obama

administration wants to maximize the chances of a satisfactory transition in Iraq, with minimal U.S. casualties and leaving a stable and robust government in place, then drawing on the resources of this kind of a contact group is absolutely necessary. Syria and Turkey will both be valuable participants, as I have tried to outline here, but of course the big issues also involve Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Syrians want to see an Iraq that is secular, nationalist and Arab, whereas the Iranians want to see an Iraq that looks more like Iran, certainly one in which sectarian affiliation is a big factor in the staffing, and possibly also the constitution, of the country's political institutions.

LAWRENCE KORB: Senior fellow, Center for American Progress; former assistant secretary of defense

There is a saying, particularly in sports, that it's better to be lucky than good, and in terms of what's happening in Iraq, we are very lucky. The Iraqis demanded that we sign the SOFA, which set a date for us (a) to get out of the cities and (b) to get out of the country. Had the Bush administration left office without having signed the SOFA, and had the Obama administration come in - whenever they left, if things did not go well, we would have had the same debate we are still having about Vietnam: Who lost Vietnam? Democrats are being blamed for having put restrictions on foreign assistance; if you read some of the Nixon tapes, it was clear that he was responsible for what happened. A lot of military people - particularly my generation, who served in that war - still think that if the country had just stayed there, we would have been able to achieve our objectives. We don't have to go through that, so we are very lucky in Iraq.

The SOFA agreement was good for the American people, good for the U.S. military, good for the Iraqis and good for the region. Why is it good for the United States? We are leaving because we've been asked to do so by another sovereign country. I don't have to go into all of the financial costs of that war, or what it did to our reputation in the world, as well as the fact that it has diverted us from other problems.

If you read any of the books that have come out about the Bush administration, you'll see it was Iraq, Iraq all of the time. I just finished reading Bradley Graham's new book on Donald Rumsfeld, *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld* - you need to take your whole summer vacation to read it, it is 700 pages. You see Rumsfeld just consumed with Iraq, not paying attention to Afghanistan or the problems happening in the Department of Defense. And there are many other problems and other challenges in the world.

So the SOFA is good for us. They set the date; we agreed to it. So it is not going to be "who lost Iraq" if it doesn't end up the way that we would like. I think it is also very good for the U.S. military. This is the first extended conflict we've ever fought in which we not only didn't raise taxes - actually, we cut them - but we didn't have a draft. Remember that our volunteer military was not set up to fight long wars. In fact, we have a comparatively small active-duty army. The guard and reserve are supposed to be a bridge to

conscription if you get into a long war. This is why we made men register when they turn 18. We didn't do that, and I think the country, our political leaders and our military leaders all let down those brave men and women. What did we do? We had to violate our own policies. The policies we established back when I was in government were that for every day you spend in the combat zone, you should spend two days at home. So if you're there for a year, you should have two years before you go back. That didn't happen. After Gates extended the tours to 15 months, you had people going back after 12 months. The guard and the reserve were supposed to not be called up more than one year out of every six. A lot of them were called two, three, four times.

What have the consequences been for this? Well, the RAND study says that some 350,000 people who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have mental problems. The Defense Business Board just put out a study saying that, if you served more than 25 months in the combat zone over the last six years, you are "overstressed."

The policy also forced the ground forces particularly to lower their standards and take in people that they normally would not accept. Again, it is not their fault. The country turned against the war, and the military was then asked to get Americans to send their sons and daughters to serve in a war that the people had decided was not worth fighting. So I think it's good we are withdrawing.

The other thing is that it will allow the military to send forces to Afghanistan, the forgotten front. All of a sudden, we are now paying attention to Afghanistan. It has been there all of this time, getting worse and worse and worse as we focused everything on Iraq. I would argue that, had we not had the surge in Iraq and instead surged in Afghanistan, we would be better off, overall, as a country. I think, when history is written, you'll find that the deals we made with the so-called "Sons of Iraq" - and al-Sadr laying down his arms - were as important as sending more troops. We can now focus on Afghanistan.

I don't expect us to get to the number of troops in Afghanistan that we had in Iraq, but I would not be surprised if we end up with about 100,000 Americans in Afghanistan. It is 68,000 right now, according to the Obama plan; but, given what General McChrystal seems to be indicating, we might end up with close to 100,000.

A lot of people ask whether we can get out of Iraq in this particular period of time. Yes, we can. One of the things the U.S. military does exceptionally well is logistics. Remember that in the campaign, Obama said one to two brigades a month. If you look at when he came into office and count the combat brigades and the rest of the forces, you've got the equivalent of about 52 brigades. If you have over 36 months, you will be able to do it.

As Jim Dobbins mentioned, you're not replacing as many people as you are taking out. That doesn't mean you take out every port-a-potty when you leave or anything like that, but you can take out your vital equipment. It is also very good for the U.S. military and for the country that we had to leave the cities at the end of June. What I worried most

about was Maliki's trying to use U.S. forces to deal with his own challenges rather than with people who are trying to destabilize the country. We've already seen indications of his using the Iraqi security forces to go after his political opponents. The last thing you want U.S. forces to do is to be caught in that type of conflict rather than dealing with the real threats to the country. Now that we're out of the cities, I think the likelihood of that happening is much lower.

I'd say our leaving is also good for the Iraqis. Why? As long as we were there, whatever government was in power was going to be seen as a creature of the United States. Whatever your feelings about the war, the fact of the matter is, the Iraqis did not welcome us. They did not want us to be there. The polls have been very, very consistent that we were seen as outsiders. This also gave an excuse to countries in the region to interfere. Al-Qaeda said, now Iraq is the central front on the war on terror because you've got the Americans there. They were able to get a lot of foreign fighters to come in and partner with the Sunnis, who felt that they were being denied their fair share of the country's resources.

Our departure is also important because it gives the Iraqis the incentive to undertake the political reconciliation that is necessary to create stability. It doesn't matter how long you stay, because if the Iraqis do not undertake this political reconciliation, they are going to have problems, at least internally. It is going to be up to them to do it, and now they can't have any more excuses or incentives. The clock is ticking. They know we are leaving, and to the extent that they don't deal with their internal problems and political reconciliation, they can't count on us to deal with the situation. Can the Iraqis maintain internal security? General Odierno thinks so, and it seems to me 600,000 people in the Iraqi security forces should be more than enough to maintain internal security. Having looked at that over the years, my view is that it is never really going to be a question of capabilities; it's motivation. Do they want to? I think they won't want to unless you have the political reconciliation that's necessary to create a unified Iraq.

I think our leaving is also good for the region. Iran no longer has an excuse to intervene in Iraq, nor a justification. At the Bonn Conference of December 2001 that set up the Karzai government, if the Iranians had not worked with us, that conference would not have succeeded, according to Ambassador Dobbins. What was their reward for helping us in Afghanistan, particularly at the Bonn Conference? They got put in the Axis of Evil the next month. Therefore, one can see why they assumed that, if we were in Afghanistan and in Iraq, they in fact would be surrounded. When we are out of there, they no longer have that excuse.

I have a personal experience that relates to this. In September 2001, when the attacks occurred, I was working in New York at the Council on Foreign Relations. The Iranian ambassador called and asked me and a couple of my other colleagues to come over for dinner about two weeks after the attacks. The Iranians don't have an ambassador here, but they do at the United Nations. The UN ambassador asked us to convey to the U.S. government that they were willing to help in Afghanistan. You may remember, Iran had candlelight vigils after the attacks. They were one of the few Muslim countries that

condemned them outright. Then, of course, the ambassador called me after the Axis of Evil speech and - rather than inviting me for dinner this time - just said, "what is going on?" With us out of Iraq, they will no longer have an excuse. I would also argue, given what has happened in Iran - their election and its aftermath - they are no longer going to be seen by many people in Iraq as a model to follow. Whatever soft-power influence they may have had in Iraq or in the region has been diminished by the recent events.

The United States is not leaving the region. Jim Dobbins said we're not going to have 150,000 ground troops in Iraq, but we are still going to have forces and bases in Kuwait. In the Cold War, we were sensitive about putting American forces in the Middle East, so the Saudis built bases to conform to our specifications. In the First Gulf War, when we went in, it was just like going to an American base. We had forces in Kuwait; we will also remain in the Persian Gulf with the carrier battle group and the Marine Corps expeditionary force there. Whatever happens in Iraq, if they should be invaded by a foreign country, we would be able to apply power. If conflict were to spill over into the region, we will be there to play a role.

Let me conclude with this: Whenever things settle down in Iran and we start thinking about talking to them - and I think we have to at some point - one of the things I would like to see us do is get a Law of the Sea agreement like the one we had with the Soviets in the Cold War. It is very important for our naval forces in the crowded Strait of Hormuz to have rules of engagement so we don't have an accidental incident that could lead to an excuse for one side or the other to take action. There have been a number of incidents there, and if other countries that have forces there want to join with us, I think that that is the way to go. By staying in the region, working with other countries, talking to Iran, I am confident that we can prevent whatever happens in Iraq from destabilizing the region.

DR. MATTAIR: Picking up on what you said, Larry, even after Iran was put on the Axis of Evil list, it still offered a grand bargain to the United States. The Iranians actually proposed to negotiate over the entire range of issues outstanding between us and to make some compromises. At the time, Khamenei was the supreme leader, so he must have endorsed that. And, by the way, even after Ahmadinejad became president, the United States and Iran did talk. The ambassadors talked, and recently, Ahmadinejad met with Karzai from Afghanistan and Zardari from Pakistan and agreed to cooperate on regional security issues. So Larry, do you think that even after this election in Iran, there is a good prospect to negotiate with Iran and to reach some mutually advantageous agreements? It seems that everyone has an interest in a united and stable Iraq. But, if we were talking to them about that and not making any progress on the nuclear file or Arab-Israeli issues, what would you think would be the prospects for our discussions with Iran and their future behavior in Iraq?

MR. KORB: There is no doubt about the fact that we missed an opportunity in 2003 to sit down with them and have the grand bargain that they talked about. My understanding is that the Bush administration felt that we were riding high then and that they could control the situation without worrying about Iran. At some point, you have to sit down and talk to them. Given the events that have happened there, the Obama administration is not going

to be able to do that as quickly as they might have liked. I think it will be very difficult, given some of the things that Iran has done internally. But I do think, at some point, we will have to sit down with them and talk about a whole host of issues and this would be one of them. What the Iranians want in Iraq is a government that is not a threat to them. As long as that government is not a threat to them and there are no U.S. forces there, it seems to me that they don't have an interest in creating instability. If nothing else, they would have refugees coming into their country. The other thing is, let's assume that they muddy the waters and it leads to a Sunni takeover. That is the last thing they want. So you're going to have a Shia-dominated government.

It's amazing to me that we took Iranian hostages in Iraq even though they weren't doing anything - just as a bargaining chip. They had diplomatic immunity. I don't know who was responsible for that, but it certainly didn't help.

DR. MATTAIR: Ellen Laipson, can you be more specific about Saudi Arabia? Saudi Arabia is concerned about Iranian influence in Iraq, and it must view the situation of Sunni Arabs there as unsatisfactory. Iraq's Sunni Arabs haven't really been brought into the central government in the way they expected to be. I don't know if you read it the same way I do, but as I look at the violence in Iraq over the past three or four months, the Shias seem to be the primary victims. So maybe there is a lot of Sunni Arab discontent there. What do you think Saudi Arabia could do to help us stabilize Iraq? Talk to Sunni Arabs, help them get some satisfaction, and consequently limit Iranian influence in Iraq?

MS. LAIPSON: I agree that part of Saudi anxiety about Iraq is related to Iran, but I don't think that is it exclusively. I think that, at the leadership level, there is a real absence of trust, and it has gotten worse, not better. There is an antipathy at the top, and that matters hugely in a system where the signals from the top shape how the lower levels behave. I think we've got a structural problem that is not just about Sunni-Shia; it is about the lack of trust between the leaders more generally. I have perceived that King Abdullah was trying very hard to not have just a Sunni policy towards Iraq. I think that on the rare occasions when he has articulated views on Iraq, he has tried to put it in a category of state-to-state interest, and not sectarian interest. But, within Saudi Arabia, you have other forces that do see this as a command issue, that do believe that the Sunnis need special help. My understanding is that the Saudis turned down a number of overtures by the Sunni tribes to fund militias, to fund various activities. They didn't want to get drawn in at that level.

The Saudis have been the least generous of any of Iraq's neighbors during the refugee crisis. They have taken in virtually no one; they have a very sealed border. They can certainly say, "we have a sealed border for our own safety and security," but there is a lack of easy human interaction between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. I'm not sure the United States could dictate to Saudi Arabia what it should do vis-à-vis Iraq. This is a deeply inter-Arab story. I don't think there is much that the United States can or should do to try to influence it or shape it.

DR. MATTAIR: Helena, you said that Syria views stability in Iraq as its number-one issue. Are they going to be willing to cooperate with us in stabilizing Iraq, irrespective of what is happening in Arab-Israeli peacemaking? Let us say it is going nowhere; would that influence their willingness to cooperate? I know they did receive a U.S. military delegation recently to talk about cooperation along the Syrian-Iraqi border.

MS. COBBAN: What I actually said was that Foreign Minister Muallem said that Iraq was the number one issue on the agenda with the United States, not their number one issue globally, but it possibly could be. I don't think it is. Regarding whether they would be prepared to cooperate regarding Iraq even if there is no progress in their track of the Arab-Israeli peace process, I think it is possible. What they really want to see is an improvement in U.S.-Syrian relations at the political level. And, as you noted, back at the beginning of June, a military delegation from this country went to Syria and talked about issues of common security concern regarding Iraq. But that was only made possible by the fact that there was a very cordial prior phone conversation between Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Muallem. I interviewed him shortly after that phone conversation; he was very encouraged by it, and full of praise for Secretary Clinton's talents as a diplomatic leader. So it is only in the context of the Syrians feeling that they're being taken seriously at the political level that all this, if you like, technical stuff becomes possible. What the Bush administration had been trying to do was have their cake and eat it. Condi Rice would periodically go on the news and wag her finger at the Syrians and say the Syrians know what they have to do. They resolutely refused to return an ambassador to Syria, even after Syria had withdrawn wholly from Lebanon and recognized its independence, sent their own ambassador to Lebanon, and all these other things that were on the agenda. There were many things that came close to being regime-change policies. And, at the same time, the Bush administration wanted to have security cooperation on Iraq.

So I think now we're at a different stage. Secretary Clinton called Prime Minister Muallem; that was good. The Obama speech in Cairo was pretty good, although he didn't say the words Syria wanted to hear, which was "a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and all its Arab neighbors." But Senator Mitchell did go to Syria, and now Fred Hof has been in Syria. I think they feel they are being taken a lot more seriously, and that regime change is no longer on the Washington agenda. This is what they lived through, during most of the Bush years. But they need to see that political strengthening continue, primarily by having an ambassador sent, but in other ways as well.

As to how that relates to progress in Israeli-Arab peace making, from the point of view of Damascus, their agenda with Washington on bilaterale is the most important thing. Of course, they are also hoping for progress in peacemaking with Israel.

DR. MATTAIR: You said Turkey could play a role in resolving the issue over Kirkuk, which seems to be getting hotter. The Kurds have written a constitution that claims Kirkuk, and, of course, that's opposed by the central government in Baghdad. I think it is also opposed by everyone in Turkey. It would make them a little too strong for Turkey's appetite. If I am correct about that, how would they mediate?

MS. COBBAN: Kirkuk, as everybody probably knows, is a very complicated issue. There was an article in the constitution of Iraq specifying that a referendum be held in Kirkuk last December, I think. So the Kirkuk issue is definitely on the front burner, particularly as American troops withdraw from the country. And it is true that most people in Turkey probably wouldn't like to see the Kurdish regional government have control of Kirkuk, because it has a lot of oil resources. It is also connected with the oil legislation in Iraq; that is, are the oil revenues to be tunneled to the populace through the central government, through the regional governments or through the provincial governments?

There is a whole complex of issues that come together around this that I don't think have been finally resolved by the Iraqi constitution. In fact, when it was written, some of these issues were deliberately fudged and left for subsequent discussion. Turkey can play a role - maybe not the lead role, but a good facilitating role - in helping to bring together the parties necessary for some kind of Kirkuk arrangement. A lot of people have done a lot of thinking outside the box on how this could be done. It has to do also with the status of the KRG in general: whether it gets to run its own foreign policy and whether it needs the revenues to do that. It is potentially a real problem for U.S. power that we have opened this can of worms. If it does explode, we're going to be right in the middle and we're going to be blamed for it.

I don't think we are home free yet in terms of what Larry was saying - "Phew, we just dodged one by getting the SOFA agreement." Kirkuk is a bullet we haven't yet dodged. As to what the Turks could do, I mentioned the visit that Abdullah Gul made to Erbil. He is a very statesmanlike person, actually, a bit more so than his prime minister, who has a bit of a tendency to mouth off.

Q&A

Q: Would Turkey feel any incentive to intervene militarily in the North of Iraq if things were to destabilize further between the Arabs and the Kurds, just as we saw a little less than two years ago? Could they use that option to give them leverage in possibly resolving the Kirkuk issue, threatening that if things did not get resolved, then they would have to take certain actions in their national interest that wouldn't be in the interest of any Iraqi?

MS. COBBAN: They have obviously intervened militarily against alleged or actual PKK safe havens in the KRG. That is one of the particular reasons it is important that Gül made the visit to Erbil. It looks as though that cooperation is pretty steady on anti-PKK or PKK-containment policies. As to whether they would use the threat of military intervention if there were some kind of destabilization or eruption around Kirkuk or any other Arab-Kurdish conflict, my sense is that the AX government would be very reluctant to do that, because of its policy of zero problems with the neighbors. When they were bombing the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq to deal with the PKK, they did so in a very limited way. They didn't send in ground forces and seek to occupy land. It was very

restrained. Of course, this has also to do with the relationship between the AK party and the military in Turkey, an important and evolving relationship. But this government in Turkey, which looks as though it is going to be around for quite a while, is not a militaristic government that seeks to use its power. The fact that they have the relationship now with Erbil and a strong and ongoing relationship with Baghdad means that they will be very reluctant to come in with military power.

Q: Who did Gul speak to in Erbil? Kurdistan is not a uniform political entity?

MS. COBBAN: I think he spoke with Barzani as sort of his counterpart.

Q: It is clear from public-opinion polls that we are not looked upon favorably in the Arab world and in the region. Could you address the challenges and opportunities for public diplomacy in the coming years, especially with Iraq and Iraq's neighbors?

MR. KORB: I think the fact that the United States agreed to the terms of the SOFA is going to help our image in the Arab world, because the perception was that we were going to be occupiers, that we were going to stay. One of the problems we had after the first Persian Gulf War was that we stayed in Saudi Arabia after the war. Bin Laden used that as a rallying cry. So I think it'll help. Obviously, if you're not there in the midst of some of these internecine squabbles, you can't be blamed by either side. It is certainly going to help our image. People will say, "They are the first great power that came, said they were going to leave, and they did." That is certainly going to help, because there was a sense of mistrust.

MS. LAIPSON: There is new University of Maryland polling data that show a shift the Obama effect is starting to show up in the numbers. But they caution that there is still a trial period for the president. He's personally very popular, but there are still misgivings about whether U.S. policies will change. They are still waiting to see whether he will follow through, particularly on questions related to Palestine, and certainly the end of occupation would be a significant step in the right direction.

MS. COBBAN: They could scarcely go lower than what they were.

DR. MATTAIR: I also think Palestine is an important issue. The polls generally show that it is one of the most important reasons for Arabs to have a negative view of the United States. Obama has spoken more eloquently about that than anyone since Jimmy Carter, in my opinion.

Q: Regarding sovereign control over Iraq's airspace, large numbers of U.S. concentrated forces on the ground prefer that their own air force control the air above them. If the United States has retained that power in Iraq, to what extent can one truly refer to Iraq as having obtained its national sovereignty and full political independence? Secondly, as the drawdown occurs and various security, maintenance, logistics and operational functions are transferred to civilian contractors, to what extent is a country perceived as less

occupied if it is still occupied by tens of thousands of civilians from another country, performing some other functions that the armed personal performed previously?

MR. KORB: My understanding of the airspace is that we have it for our planes but not for other countries. The Iraqis insisted that nobody could transit the country other than us. My guess would be that they did not want to see Israeli planes flying over on their way to Iran. They were adamant about that in the negotiations.

MS. LAIPSON: On the question of contractors, I think the Iraqis have already asserted themselves, saying that they will be the employers of any of these private-sector security vendors, providers, et cetera. That gets very tricky. The supply of those folks may diminish as American companies decide that there is not enough legal protection. Should bad things happen, what about the legal process these folks would be subjected to? The Iraqis are going to have to decide, do we want to lighten up a little bit on the control in order to get these services provided or might they go to non-U.S. vendors. I could easily imagine them, over time, bidding out some of these service contracts and finding that there are other firms internationally that can compete for that business. But I don't personally think that's a big marker of sovereignty. The Iraqis have already transitioned to saying, "we get to decide what private firms provide these services." The U.S. military may say, "for as long as we are physically in-country, we will hire the cooks and the various support services that belong on a base," but I don't consider that to be at a high threshold of sovereignty sensitivity.

Q: If the United States did not control the totality of airspace over the United States, that would indeed impugn aspects of U.S. sovereignty.

MR. KORB: I don't think they will have recovered their complete sovereignty until we're out of there completely. That is why they insisted on the deadline. In fact, all the combat brigades were to be out by August 2010, but they're going to stay there until the election. The brigades replacing them are going to be what they call AAB - advisory and assistant brigades - not combat brigades. So I think you're right; until we leave completely, there are obviously going to be limitations on Iraqi sovereignty.

MS. LAIPSON: But is that different than any country that has permitted an American base on its presence, where the base has certain rights to conduct operations, but the host government has agreed to those terms? The host government is still functioning as a sovereign state but has agreed to the terms of security cooperation. I'm wondering whether what you are describing is any different than our bases in Japan or in any other alliance relationship in another country?

MR. KORB: You're right. That is why you have all those agreements. During the war in Vietnam, we could not use Japanese territory to launch attacks. The planes had to take off from Okinawa, land in the Philippines, which allowed us to do it, and then attack. There are these agreements also with Germany.

DR. MATTAIR: In this particular agreement, it is Iraq that gives the United States permission to use its airspace, but only for the purpose of implementing the agreement. Then it goes on even more specifically and says that land, sea and air may not be used to launch attacks against any other country. So we have accepted that legal constraint imposed by them. It doesn't fully address the issue of sovereignty, but it is a negotiated agreement whereby we received permission for operations according to certain constraints.

Q: One of the main reasons for our intervention in the Middle East was to dismantle or eliminate at-Qaeda. But, since we have seen that it is able to operate in relatively small independent enclaves and that offshoots have sprung up all over the world, do you think that, even with the establishment of democracy in Iraq or Afghanistan, this objective could ever be accomplished?

MS. COBBAN: I think we should be very careful about using the word intervention. It can mean a wide range of things, including sending humanitarian aid to people. I'm always concerned when people use the term as a shorthand for a military intervention. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, there was a military invasion. Just to call it an intervention clouds the issue and the very salient international humanitarian-law considerations in which military power can be used.

Ever since 9/11, I have argued that the way to combat al-Qaeda-type violence is to look at the social context of people who commit these outrageous anti-human acts, in which they become accepted and even glorified on occasion. Every society has sociopaths in it. We had Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and various sociopaths. But if I am sitting in a cafe and I hear some guy sounding off, saying, "I'm going to strap on a suicide vest and go to the federal building in Oklahoma," I wouldn't hesitate to go to the police. The civil powers could take care of that, you would hope. So the Unabomber had to live a very bizarre life in a cabin in the woods someplace, not talking to anyone. This is why it took a long time to find him. In the case of Islamist fundamentalist violence, you have large communities in which somebody might say, "I've got this crazy idea - I am going to fly some planes full of fuel into the Twin Towers." And some people say, "Ah, sounds like an interesting idea," or "How can I sign up?" I'm not saying this is true of the whole of the Muslim world, but in sections of it, what you don't have is people who say "That is a really terrible idea, and I'm going to turn you in to the civil powers."

In essence, the problem is not the crazy individuals and the networks they create, it is the condoning community. How can you turn a community of condoners into a community that feels it has a stake in international stability and the well-being of Americans in our homeland? That means addressing a lot of long-held grievances at the same time as you're launching police operations to hunt down these heinous planners and killers. We have seen that using a blunt military instrument has not been effective, and now we are trying to diplomat our way out of the problems that that caused in Iraq. I hope very soon we will figure out how to diplomat our way out of the problems that we continue to have in Afghanistan.

DR. MATTAIR: That is a great question. The answer is a comprehensive policy towards the Middle East, so that we're not inflaming passions all the time. We understand now that air strikes in Afghanistan that kill a lot of civilians aren't very good for drumming up popular support in Afghanistan, so we're trying to find a new strategy there to root out the Taliban without killing civilians. Withdrawing from Iraq undoes some of the damage of all the civilian deaths there. We are never really going to persuade the leadership of al-Qaeda and other movements to embrace us. The best we can probably do is make it much harder for them to recruit people to follow them, trying our best to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and to promote political reform in the region, so that people feel they have a little more political space under these regimes. Everything all together is necessary to drain the swamp to reduce the pool of recruits that leaders can attract.

Q: What we can do to shape that environment in a way that, when American forces have largely pulled out of Iraq, you have a situation in which there is reconciliation, compromise over Kirkuk, and no massive Turkish involvement over the border? What should we do now while our strength is still high to shape that? And what do you see as the ideal balance of power in the region for American interests, and how do we get there?

MS. LAIPSON: On the Arab-Kurdish problem, I would not want to link our leverage to just our troop strength. The United States has a very deep and abiding relationship with Turkey, so U.S. diplomacy and U.S. political relationships are of value in trying to engage Iraqis and Turks together in useful conversation. I think there is an Arab-Kurdish problem that will be an enduring part of the new Iraqi identity. As you know, the Kurds argued in the early framing of the constitution to not call Iraq an Arab country. The compromise was to call Iraq one of the founders of the Arab League. It is essentially a binational state, and this dates back decades. Even Saddam Hussein in theory accepted the concept of autonomy for the Kurdish region. He didn't do a very good job of implementing it, but it was on the books. So the multiculturalism of Iraq is still in play. I see this as part of the story of the new Iraq. Sometimes the Kurds overreach. They were very comfortable for a while. Now they are nervous that we are not going to be completely on their side, that we're going to see things through a broader lens. But I think that there is a formal way in which the United States can use its political leverage and prestige. I would not want it to be a coercive thing, where the troop presence is somehow the intimidating factor. I'm not sure that I would make that connection the way you have.

There is a big debate about whether we should just put aside some of these concepts, such as balance of power. There is an imbalance in the region that has to do with rising Iranian ambition or with Iran's natural attributes, which are just larger than those of any one of the Arab states. So this is a region in which I'm not sure what the natural equilibrium would be. I could imagine a long-term understanding that is not unlike what we have in Northeast Asia, where the U.S. presence, under carefully negotiated agreements with individual states, is a balancer. Our presence somewhat mitigates or evens out some of the regional rivalries. We are not a party to any of those rivalries directly, but our presence contributes a little bit to countries' not taking big risks to try to prevail over their local competitors.

That is, at least for the medium-term, one way to achieve some stability. But we still haven't conceptually grappled with how to find a regional arrangement in which Iran would be more integrated and tension would be defused with respect to Iran's ambitions. Some of that is part of the geography and history of the region. The U.S. presence can't completely mitigate that, but it can certainly contribute.

MR. KORB: I think it is important to keep in mind why we're there. It's oil! Sometimes we forget that. This is the thirtieth anniversary of Carter's malaise speech, and there's a new book out about it. He formulated the Carter Doctrine, which said, the United States has to have access to oil from this region, and we will do what is necessary to ensure that that happens. That is still our position. We will still have a carrier battle group in that area with the Marine expeditionary forces, and we will have facilities in places like Kuwait. We won't let anybody dominate the region. Obviously, you would like to have stability in the region, and that gets to the whole question of Iran's nuclear power and, as Tom mentioned earlier, dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli situation. We have to be involved in those. But I think it is important to keep in mind why we are that concerned about the region.

MS. COBBAN: On the question of Arab-Kurdish relations, I think we need to be aware that, since 1991, among Iraq's population, the Kurds have been systematically privileged by U.S. policy. I know they suffered a horrible trauma in 1991, when so many of them were expelled to Turkey and then they went back, but they had a safe haven from 1991 onwards that received a lot of support from the United States. They were able to establish their own school system, so there is now a whole generation of Kurds growing up who don't even speak Arabic. They had problems among themselves; the inter-party problems in 1996 were resolved to a certain degree, and they have been able to build all kinds of institutions - at a time when the entire Arab population was under extremely strict and debilitating sanctions that killed hundreds of thousands of young Arab Iraqis. Then, when the war happened in 2003, the effects fell disproportionately again on the Arab Iraqis. The fact that they're all downstream meant that the collapse of the watermanagement systems affected the public health and the degradation of the Arab population's living conditions and security conditions much more than it affected the Kurds. They had already had resiliency and were not so much affected by the fighting of 2003.

Now, in 2009, there is a Kurdish minority that is, in many respects, in a better situation in terms of living conditions and functioning institutions. They still have a lot of problems in their governance; they have a lot of problems of human-rights abuses by their Kurdish regional-government forces and the Peshmerga, which has been systematically supported by the United States for a long time. They were used as a major instrument of U.S. power in governing the rest of Iraq over these past few years and received a lot of financial and technical support.

So when U.S. power recedes, this has huge consequences for the Kurds, who will be left as a small, land-locked minority reliant on their relations with all the surrounding powers. That has to be a sensitive set of challenges for them. They're going to have to deal with

Turkey, with Iran, with Syria, although their fellow Kurds are being oppressed in all of these countries.

There is a kind of an interesting dynamic here. National sovereignty is something that is strongly valued by just about every single Arab Iraqi. The national independence of Iraq is not necessarily welcomed by the Kurds. I'm not sure whether U.S. strategic thinkers are now thinking that that gives us the opportunity to have some kind of special relationship with the Kurds or some form of continuing basing arrangements in Kurdistan. I don't think a special basing arrangement in Kurdistan would work at all. But there may be something that happens in terms of special relations between the KRG and Washington. It may have potential implications in terms of our relationship with Baghdad, which is going to have to be the central relationship.

DR. MATTAIR: Regarding the balance of power and American military forces, what Carter had in mind was a rapid-deployment capability, the ability to get into the Gulf quickly, if necessary. But, over time, because of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the concerns of the GCC states, and because of Iran's modernization of its armed forces, we have accumulated a very large physical presence there. This is one of the major grievances that Osama bin Laden talks about, the physical presence of American forces in the Arabian Peninsula. In negotiating with Iran, I think we're going to have to try to find a solution that satisfies the security concerns of the GCC, so they don't feel they're being abandoned, and yet alleviates concerns that Iran has about this large military presence in its neighborhood that could be used against it. It might even be one of the reasons why Iran might feel that it needs nuclear weapons - to deter the proximity of large physical American military forces. All these considerations should be taken into account when we negotiate with Iran and keep the GCC states informed of what we are doing - to try to find a way to reduce our forces to the point where the GCC is satisfied and Iran is relieved, and we still have something over the horizon that allows us to get into the Gulf quickly as necessary. Of course, you are never going to satisfy Osama bin Laden with any formula.

MR. KORB: That is why I mentioned the idea of concluding the same type of arrangement we have had with the Soviet Union about the naval forces.

DR. MATTAIR: To regulate incidents and accidents at sea, especially where the Strait of Hormuz is so narrow.

Q: The constraints on the role of Turkey in Kirkuk are pretty severe. The Iraqis are very sensitive about any foreign intervention, and the recent UN report was received but really hasn't made much progress. Second, the Turks are regarded as partisans of the Turkoman, who think they are the ones who should control Kirkuk. Third, the KRG's relations with Turkey are not so bad, but they're not so good either. There is a lot of distrust. In addition, you have to be careful about nomenclature. The agreement negotiated between Iraq and the United States was a withdrawal agreement, not a Status of Forces Agreement. It has provisions that deal with the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the circumstances that pertain until then. It says at the end of 2011, there will not be any

U.S. troops in Iraq. That is just not a plausible condition to apply, for some of the reasons that Larry mentioned. First of all, there will be, at best, an incipient Iraqi air force and navy, and there's the whole question of follow-on: for whomever we leave behind as trainers, we will really need to have a SOFA and set out the arrangements. This directly relates to the future of Gulf security as we think about what comes next. Are we going to rearm Iraq with a major air force and naval capability? What does this mean to the Saudis and Kuwaitis? Are they going to accept that? What does it mean to the Iranians?

MR. KORB: I think you're right; it wasn't a Status of Forces Agreement. The reason they called it that is, they did not want to send it up to the Senate for ratification. So they did play games. Those questions have to be dealt with, and hopefully if we do, we will have a debate in this country by getting it ratified.

MS. LAIPSON: We agreed to call it that, and it is the status of our forces at least through 2011. But there is a built-in requirement, in a way, that we will have to have another agreement to supersede it.

Q: The title did say "Status of Forces."

DR. MATTAIR: No, it is not in the title, but there are many provisions in the agreement dealing with the status of forces. It is essentially an agreement about the withdrawal, how it will be managed and in what phases it will take place.

Q: We have four defense-cooperation agreements - with Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE - and those are more neutral-sounding and mutually beneficial, with reciprocally rewarding content to them. These might be a satisfactory set of examples. Then there is the earlier one with Oman, the access-to-facilities agreement. These five have withstood the winds of anti-Americanism and demonstrations, and the polling that shows the anger towards U.S. policies. Defense-cooperation agreements: you can't get much more bland and innocuous than that, with possible pre-positioning, possible training, possible joint maneuvers and ongoing consultation. That is in everybody's interest.

Q: How might the problems of some of Iraq's neighbors involve Iraq? If the talks over an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program fail - and Israel has been talking about attacking Iran - how would that affect the stability and security of Iraq?

MR. KORB: You remember when Israel and Hezbollah had their conflict, Maliki spoke out condemning Israel. My feeling is that, were an Israeli attack to occur, the Iraqis would be outraged at Israel - and, by association, at us - because people would assume, even if we tell the Israelis not to do it, that we are responsible for it. It would lead to a great deal of anti-Americanism in Iraq and make it very difficult for us to conclude any type of security arrangement with them after 2011.

MS. COBBAN: I have thought and written about this quite a lot over the last few years. It seems clear to me that there are strategic planners in Iraq who are quite happy to have U.S. forces strung out along very vulnerable supply lines in the Gulf as well as in

Afghanistan. They are, in essence, sitting ducks for an Iranian retaliation against an act of war against itself. Let's remember that a military strike against another country is an act of war. And under international law, that gives justification for retaliation. If Israelis are planning to launch any kind of sizable military attack against Iranian facilities, it would involve going through American-controlled airspace one way or another. This is why the American troop concentrations and their supply lines would immediately become vulnerable to Iranian retaliation. You can argue the international law questions as to whether that retaliation is justified or not. But by the time you get to a court of law, a lot of American soldiers may well have died, and the whole region might be on fire. It is not just the Iranians who don't like the idea of Israeli bombers attacking wherever they want.

My friend Hussain Agha, a strategic analyst in London who is of joint Iraqi and Iranian heritage, has written that the Iranians want to see American troops kept in Iraq to be that kind of tripwire or sitting-duck force. Assuming that the Iranians want to see U.S. troops kept in Iraq as a sitting-duck force, the idea that they would be in cantonments or barracks outside of Iraqi population centers makes them a much more viable target, from the Iranian point of view, than if they were dispersed throughout Sadr City and different parts of Baghdad. I am not sure whether the Iranians have an incentive to keep American forces where they are, in bases outside of Iraqi cities, for longer than the withdrawal agreement allows. That would be in the absence of the diplomacy that might result in a U.S.-Iranian standoff over nuclear and other issues.

I think we have seen real leadership from the Bush administration, primarily Secretary Gates, and from the Obama administration in reining in any talk by the Israelis that they might take out the Iranian facilities if the Americans don't want to go in. Secretary Gates, in particular, has always been very cognizant of the fact that it is our troops who are on the front line with Iran, not Israel's troops. It is not Israel's population on the frontline with Iran. It is our troops.

DR. MATTAIR: The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has told the Israelis that. There is also the question of the timetable. Even under the best of circumstances, it is two-and-a-half years between now and the withdrawal of forces from Iraq. I wonder who is willing to wait that long for resolution of the Iranian nuclear file. If our troops are vulnerable for two-and-a-half years, that is how much time we theoretically have to resolve the nuclear issue with Iran, but they might be on track to have a weapons capability prior to that. Can we sustain the negotiations for two-and-a-half years to try to resolve it before our forces are gone?

And al-Maliki is not the only one who is incensed about the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006. Muqtada al-Sadr is, too; he said he would attack American forces if Israel attacked Iran. That is why the agreement between the United States and Iraq specifically excludes its airspace from being used as a transit route for an attack on another country.

Q: I question the two-and-a-half-year timeline for resolving the nuclear issue with Iran. We will continue to have forces in Kuwait, not to mention American allies that would be potential targets of retaliation from the Iranians.

DR. MATTAIR: Even if we were to withdraw from Iraq in two-and-a-half years, we have other forces in the region that would be vulnerable to the covert, asymmetrical retaliatory capabilities of Iran.

Q: Has there been any detectable urgency on the part of any state in the region to directly influence the situation in Iraq or Iraq's progress - with the possible exception of Iran - either for a specific national interest or for regional prestige? Since '79, one of the key pillars of U.S.-Saudi relations is that they would also help us contain Iran. And we feel that they have a similarly strong incentive today, as we scale back our presence and our direct role in Iraq to, if not take over for us, then to help influence policy there to serve our interests. Has any state in the region tried to influence Iraqi politics?

MS. COBBAN: I think you can detect attempts by both Saudi Arabia and Syria to do so, but neither is great at implementing diplomacy. They have a sort of a passive-aggressive attitude toward what is obviously a very threatening development for them - that is, the one-person, one-vote democratic system in Iraq gave the Shiites a kind of blanket majority, and the Americans had structured the whole thing in very ethno-sectarian terms. You had a combination of the Shiite parties themselves at that stage being united and the U.S. administrators looking at the Shiites as a bloc. That was very disturbing for the Saudis, who saw the marginalization of their long-time Sunni allies. There are large numbers of tribes that straddle the border; people who are big players in the Iraqi political system have brothers who are big players in the Saudi tribal system just on the other side of the border. This was a visceral issue for many Saudis. The king has tried to channel that and use a constructive approach to protect the interests of the Sunnis in Iraq. But Saudi Arabia is going through a prolonged succession crisis of its own right now, overlaid on many other disfunctions that hamper its ability to pursue an effective diplomacy. The situation of the Iraqi Sunnis is rather bad, although they have a lot of cross-sectarian alliances now with people in the Shiite community, including Muqtada al-Sadr. This is potentially constructive.

In Syria, as I mentioned, they have tried to steer Iraqi politics away from Shiite institutional sectarianism, the role of ayatollahs and all that. When I spoke about Syria's many links with Iraq earlier on, I didn't really focus on the fact that they have links with Iraqi Baathists as well. Most of them are not the pro-Saddam Iraqi Baathists. There was a split in the Baath movement internationally. But that gives them yet another level of potential power - people who are in the current political opposition in Iraq, and who want to see the constitution changed in a secular-nationalist direction - as well as levels of covert people who are in power in Iraq.

Other powers have tried as well. Qatar hosts just about the entire leadership of Saddam's Baath party and their families and has very good links with many, many Iraqis. Over the past few years, Qatar has expelled nearly all the Egyptian professionals who were running all their services in Doha and replaced them with Iraqis. It is a real center for Iraqi political organizing.

Given what has happened in Iran - their election and its aftermath they are no longer going to be seen by many people in Iraq as a model to follow.

We understand now that air strikes in Afghanistan that kill a lot of civilians aren't very good for drumming up popular support in Afghanistan, so we're trying to find a new Strategy there to root out the Taliban Without killing civilians. Withdrawing from Iraq undoes some of the damage of all the Civilian deaths there.