



## FPI Bulletin: Bringing the Iraq War to an Irresponsible End?

December 14, 2011

**From FPI Executive Director Jamie M. Fly and Policy Director Robert Zarate**

When President Obama delivers a speech today before U.S. troops at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, he will surely praise the sacrifices and accomplishments of the brave men and women who served in the Iraq War—and rightly so. Of the one million American servicemen and servicewomen who have served in that conflict since 2003, 4,500 of them gave their lives, and many thousands more were wounded.

The President is also likely to repeat the claim that he is bringing the Iraq War to “a responsible end,” a phrase that he used repeatedly in his campaign for the presidency. However, it is far from certain whether this is true.

Prior to [President Obama's decision](#) on October 21, 2011, to remove all U.S. forces from Iraq, it was hoped—if not expected—that Washington and Baghdad would negotiate a new “security agreement” to permit a residual force of U.S. troops to remain in Iraq after this year. The current agreement, which was negotiated by the Bush administration in November 2008, [requires](#) the United States to withdraw all U.S. troops from the country before 2012 in the absence of a follow-on accord.

For much of this year, however, the Obama administration did not appear to be earnestly pursuing talks for a new security agreement with Iraq. As the Institute for the Study of War's Ramzy Mardini and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan [wrote](#) after their July 2011 visit to Iraq:

“The initial U.S. position to hold off on negotiations until Iraq formally requested a continued U.S. presence was a gross misreading of the realities of Iraqi politics and how decisions are ultimately made in Iraq. Many Iraqis voiced criticism of the defensive posture the U.S. had initially taken regarding a new security agreement. They believed such a negotiating style had ignored the experiences of government formation and arranging the 2008 Security Agreement. Waiting for others never prompts action in Iraq. The political sensitivities and the disputes between rival Iraqi political factions made it highly unlikely that the Iraqis themselves would publicly request a troop extension prior to any extensive private negotiations. As a result, months of negotiating time have been lost.”

Indeed, *McClatchy Newspapers* [reported](#) that President Obama and Vice President Biden had little direct contact with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki this year prior to the October 2011 withdrawal announcement, and remained disengaged from the diplomatic process of negotiating a new security agreement.

There are potentially grave consequences to the Obama administration's failure to forge a post-2011 security agreement. As the Institute for the Study of War's Kimberly Kagan and the American Enterprise Institute's Frederick Kagan [wrote](#) in the *Washington Post* on December 11, 2011, the United States continues to have vital interests in Iraq, including:

- Ensuring that Iraq contributes to the security of the Middle East, rather than undermining it through state collapse, civil war [among religious and ethnic lines] or the establishment of a sectarian dictatorship;
- Ensuring that terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or backed by Iran cannot establish sanctuaries;
- Promoting an Iraq that abides by its international responsibilities;
- Containing Iranian influences that are harmful to U.S. interests in Iraq and the region; and
- Signaling U.S. commitment to the region at a pivotal moment in history.

A continued American military presence in Iraq after 2011 would have assisted the United States in securing these vital interests. As the Foreign Policy Initiative [argued](#) in September 15, 2011:

“Given that Iraqi Security Forces still heavily rely on American capabilities for logistics, intelligence gathering, and naval and airspace defense, if the United States does not leave adequate forces in Iraq, it will leave Iraq more vulnerable to internal and external threats, thus imperiling the hard-fought gains in security and governance made there in recent years. It is also essential that the U.S. military maintain a significant troop presence at multiple places along Iraq’s ‘disputed internal boundaries’ to allow the United States to assist Kurds and Arabs in the disputed zones with confidence-building.”

With the United States heading for the exits, however, Prime Minister Maliki is already moving to consolidate his hold on power, arresting hundreds of Sunni Iraqis who are alleged to be former members of the Ba’ath Party, and expelling Western companies from the fortified “Green Zone.” Indeed, there are fears, especially in Sunni and Kurdish quarters, that when the U.S. military leaves, Iraq may spiral once again into civil war.

Moreover, as the United States withdraws from Iraq, Iran—which provides significant weapons and financial assistance to Shiite militia groups in Iraq—is moving to solidify its influence on Baghdad’s Shiite-dominated government. As Iran makes steady progress toward a nuclear weapons capability and faces the potential loss of its ally Syria, its interests are well-served by America’s withdrawal from Iraq.

Nonetheless, Vice President Joe Biden insisted in a recent interview on MSNBC’s *Rachel Maddow Show* that Iran’s influence in Iraq has not increased: “I would argue that I see no evidence—no evidence that Iran’s influence has produced a de facto alliance with Iraq, nor has their influence grown in the last three years under the President’s policies in the region.” A denial of Iran’s growing influence on Iraq is no substitute for a coherent policy.

Now that all U.S. troops are scheduled to leave Iraq by the end of this year, safeguarding America’s vital national security interests in Iraq and in throughout the wider region will require Washington to find new ways to partner with and influence Iraq. It is therefore imperative that the Obama administration, at a minimum, work with Baghdad to forge new legal arrangements for military, intelligence, counterterrorism, and other security cooperation between the United States and Iraq.

The Iraq War divided the nation, but the fledgling democracy that the United States and its allies have helped create has become representative of what others in the region can aspire to. As the citizens of Iraq’s neighbors take to the streets to demand freedom, the United States should

be showing that it will support and stand by new democratic allies, not abandon them. As Obama's December 12th press conference with Maliki drew to a close, a reporter asked the President whether he still thought that the Iraq conflict was "a dumb war." Obama responded, "I think history will judge the original decision to go into Iraq." But history, too, will judge his handling of Iraq.