



What We Need Next in Iraq

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Op-Ed With Secretary of Defense Robert Gates
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Over the past year, we have seen that Iraqis are committed to affirming their own sovereignty. The Iraqi army and police are taking the lead in providing security over much of the country. Iraq is building relationships with other nations in the Middle East. The Iraqi people want to meet their own needs and control their own destiny. And they desire a more normal relationship with the United States.

Our troops and diplomats have made untold sacrifices to help put Iraq on the path to self-sufficiency. A crucial phase in this process will unfold in the coming months, when our ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, begins negotiating a basic framework for normalized relations with the Iraqi government -- to include what is known as a "status of forces" agreement. We encourage Congress and the public to support the efforts of our senior diplomats and military officers as they forge ahead with these talks -- which we believe are essential to a successful outcome in Iraq and, by extension, the vital interests and security of the United States.

First, some background. Whenever American troops are stationed or temporarily present on foreign soil, a number of legal questions arise, ranging from the overall scope of their mission to the minutiae of day-to-day life -- from authority to fight to rules for delivering mail. In more than 115 nations, we have individually tailored status-of-forces agreements. These agreements are crafted to take into account circumstances in each host country as well as the unique requirements and missions of our forces there.

In Iraq, the presence and role of the United States and our coalition partners have been authorized by U.N. resolutions. The current U.N. authorization expires at the end of this year, and Iraq has indicated that it will not seek an extension. It would rather have an arrangement that is more in line with what typically governs the relationships between two sovereign nations.

There is debate here at home about the future presence, composition and mission of U.S. forces in Iraq. It is clear, however, that U.S. forces will need to operate in Iraq beyond the end of this year for progress in stabilizing Iraq to continue.

In these negotiations, we seek to set the basic parameters for the U.S. presence in Iraq, including the appropriate authorities and jurisdiction necessary to operate effectively and to carry out essential missions, such as helping the Iraqi government fight al-Qaeda, develop its security forces, and stem the flow of lethal weapons and training from Iran. In addition, we seek to establish a basic framework for a strong relationship with Iraq, reflecting our shared political, economic, cultural and security interests.

Nothing to be negotiated will mandate that we continue combat missions. Nothing will set troop levels. Nothing will commit the United States to join Iraq in a war against another country or provide other such security commitments. And nothing will authorize permanent bases in Iraq (something neither we nor Iraqis want). And consistent with well-established practice regarding such agreements, nothing will involve the U.S. Senate's treaty-ratification authority -- although we will work closely with the appropriate committees of Congress to keep lawmakers informed and to provide complete transparency. Classified briefings have already begun, and we look forward to congressional input.

In short, nothing to be negotiated in the coming months will tie the hands of the next commander in chief, whomever he or she may be. Quite the contrary, it will give the president the legal authority to protect our national interest -- and the latitude to chart the next administration's course.

There is wide recognition of the need for a normal bilateral relationship of this type. It has the support of moderate political forces from all of Iraq's communities -- Sunni, Shiite and Kurd. A bipartisan group of senior senators have called for it -- among them Carl Levin, John Warner and Richard Lugar. And it has been promoted by bipartisan panels such as the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, chaired by retired U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones. Similarly, the Baker-Hamilton commission advocated a series of longer-term missions that would require an agreement of this sort.

There is little doubt that 2008 will be a year of critical transition in Iraq as our force levels continue to come down, as our mission changes and as Iraqis continue to assert their sovereignty. But to continue the success we have seen in recent months, the Iraqi people and government will continue to need our help. Iraqis have requested a normalized relationship with us, and such a relationship will be part of a foundation of success in Iraq -- a foundation upon which future U.S. administrations can build.

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