



The Path to a Stable Iraq

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With the Islamic State group on the march again and Baghdad under new threats, it is a good time take care of some unfinished business in Iraq.

The domestic political blame game over the rise of the Islamic State group centers on the Obama administration's failure to leave a residual force in Iraq after pulling American forces out in 2011. The White House argues that it would perhaps have been strategically sound to keep a limited force in Iraq, but this was not possible without a signed status of forces agreement.

The 2008 agreement expired in 2011. Negotiations had been underway over a successor agreement, but the Iraqi government insisted on unacceptable provisions, such as trying American service members in Iraqi courts for future alleged crimes. According to the White House, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would not budge on this and other issues, and with the cut-off date approaching, frustrated American negotiators pulled out of the process. The last U.S. troops left Iraq two weeks before the Dec. 31, 2011, deadline, and President Barack Obama declared the coalition was leaving behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant" country.

Events since then have shown that Iraq is not stable or self-reliant and now only partially sovereign. Former Defense Secretary and CIA Director Leon Panetta, in his new memoir "Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace," describes in detail the political infighting over the failed status of forces agreement negotiations. From his telling, the White House was mainly to blame, "so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests." Panetta and others in the administration had argued that this was short-sighted, and that a new agreement was vital. He believed if Iraq "split apart or slid back into the violence that we'd seen in the years immediately following the U.S. invasion, it could become a new haven for terrorists to plot attacks against the U.S. Iraq's stability was not only in Iraq's interest but also in ours."

Three years later, we can see the results. The Islamic State group has seized vast swaths of territory in Iraq. The Iraqi Army is not the professional fighting force it needs to be to counter the threat. Kurdish and Shiite militias are fighting back, less for the sake of a unified Iraq as for their own national and sectarian goals. The American-led limited air offensive has not been as effective in degrading the Islamic State group as was hoped or promised.

Last weekend, there were reports of up to 10,000 Islamic State group fighters poised to assault Baghdad. Sabah al-Karhout, the president of the provisional council of Anbar Province, warned that an attack on the capital was coming, and other reports had jihadi fighters in or nearing the Baghdad suburbs. Iraq's new prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has so far ruled out the return of any foreign combat troops, though there are currently 1,500 American military advisers in-country. If the Islamic State group launches a Tet Offensive-style assault on the capital, those advisers will be engaged in combat regardless of their official status.

Under the circumstances, it is a good time to revisit the status of forces agreement issue. In 2011, Iraq's government was complacent, and the White House was in a hurry to leave. Both sides seemed to think they could simply walk away, and there would be no consequences. They were wrong. Now, with jihadi fighters massing at the gates of Baghdad, the United States has a great deal more leverage than it did in 2011. There will be less debate over where to draw the lines of criminal jurisdiction and other arcana when the alternative is Baghdad under Islamic State group rule.

Negotiating a new status of forces agreement will send a signal to the jihadi fighters and other disruptive forces in the region – such as Iran – that the United States is serious about maintaining stability in Iraq. It will demonstrate good faith to Baghdad as well as to the hundreds of thousands of veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom who were seeing the fruits of their service and sacrifice thrown away. And it would give the White House an opportunity to show that on occasion they are the gang that can shoot straight.