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"The Next Phase in America's Relationship with Iraq"

Center for a New American Security

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The Center for a New American Security held a conference focusing on the changing role of the U.S. in Iraq, in light of the continuing drawdown of U.S. troops to 50,000 by September 1. **Nathaniel Fick**, CNAS's Chief Executive Officer, moderated discussion by two leading Administration officials on Iraq: **Michael Corbin**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq; and **Colin Kahl**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East.

Nathaniel Fick opened the conversation by noting that **"huge challenges and questions remain" regarding Iraq's future, noting that "the Iraqi government seems deadlocked five months after national elections,"** and mentioning the recent breakdown in negotiations between **Nuri al-Maliki's** State of Law coalition and **Iyad Allawi's** Iraqiyya bloc. Fick observed that **President Obama** has said that the U.S. has not seen the end of American sacrifice in Iraq, pointing to a long-term U.S. role in the country.

Michael Corbin spoke first, stating that the U.S. State Department is **"highly focused" on executing a "collaborative transition process" in U.S.-Iraqi relations to a traditional, bi-lateral relationship** based on an array of interests including education, culture, health, and the economy, rather than solely security concerns. Corbin called the military-to-civilian transition **"key"** to achieving the administration's goal of a **"sovereign, stable, and self-reliant"** Iraq. Regarding political development, Corbin **argued that the Iraqi people have made "real accomplishments," pointing to the municipal elections in 2009, in which many incumbents were voted out, as "enormously encouraging" and a "sign of decentralization" in Iraqi politics.** Noting that the March 7 national elections recorded a participation rate of over 60%, he said that the electorate has moved toward voting for individuals rather than along strictly sectarian lines. Corbin added that the political situation in Iraq in 2010 is **"vastly different"** from the 2006 scene, stating that **"Iraqi leaders are working together to form a government," and adding, "We see serious compromise and serious negotiation going on."**

Moving on to discuss the new **"civilian partnership"** the administration is seeking with Iraq, Corbin emphasized that **"the economy is key,"** highlighting oil investment and agriculture as crucial avenues for growth and job creation. He also underlined the importance of health and education for Iraq's development, pointing to the strong USAID presence in Iraq, in that regard. Corbin concluded by listing **two primary tools for American diplomatic efforts going forward: the planned American consular presence in both the northern and southern regions of Iraq; and a U.S. program to train a regular Iraqi police force to address ongoing issues such as corruption and organized crime.** He called the diplomatic mission in Iraq a **"tough challenge"** on par with the Marshall Plan in scope.

Colin Kahl identified the 2009 U.S.-Iraqi security agreement as the starting point of the transition to a civilian-led initiative, with September 1 representing its “culmination.” Kahl stressed that the transition does not represent a strategic disengagement from Iraq, but a “milestone in the changing nature” of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. In that regard, he highlighted **the need to ensure that stability in Iraq endures and that the Iraqi government “continues to build its capabilities to meet the needs of its own people.”** Arguing that the “underlying security trends” in Iraq remain “positive” despite setbacks in forming a government, Kahl said that both Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army no longer represent “a threat to the viability of the government of Iraq,” adding that 80% of the populace now expresses faith in Iraqi forces’ ability to provide security. Turning to the political process, Kahl stated that **“we now have a viable political process in Iraq,”** arguing that **despite the stalemate in government formation, it is significant that all major Iraqi political parties remain committed to addressing their grievances through the political process.**

On the other hand, Kahl also highlighted some challenges facing Iraq, including **the need to ensure that any Iraqi government eventually seated is inclusive, pursues national reintegration, and lives up to its commitments to the Iraqi people.** He also mentioned the Arab-Kurdish issue and disputed internal boundaries as a critical unresolved question. Finally, Kahl listed four missions for the remaining U.S. forces in Iraq: force protection; training and equipment of Iraqi security forces; partnership with the Iraqis on counterterrorism; and continuing the responsible drawdown of troops through 2011.

Fisk opened the question and answer session, suggesting that the troop withdrawal might simply be a “diplomatic fan dance” in which the U.S. would “pretend” to leave Iraq so that the new Iraqi government would then ask the Americans to stay. Fisk also asked what concrete steps the administration is taking to combat the perception that an exploitable power vacuum will emerge following the military pullout. He concluded with **a question about the vision for Iraq as a partner for U.S. in the region, and what metrics the administration will use to measure success in that regard.**

Kahl and **Corbin** both dismissed the idea that the U.S. withdrawal was mere show, with Kahl arguing that the timeline for the pullout is clear, adding **that the “vast majority” of prominent political actors in Iraq want a long-term partnership with the U.S.** Affirming this statement, **Corbin** cited “clear indications” that Iraqi politicians want to see the U.S. engage in Iraq through traditional tools of cooperation.

To combat the perception of a power vacuum and the potential for radical elements or foreign actors to interfere in Iraq, **Corbin** said that **the administration is focused on ensuring that the interim Iraqi government can continue to provide services and security and make key policy decisions.** He noted that foreign involvement in Iraq from actors such as Iran and Turkey has already occurred, arguing that Iraqis are “standing up” to such interference. **Kahl** pointed out that many Iraqis did not believe the U.S. would honor the security agreement and actually pull out, adding **that through living up to its withdrawal commitments, the U.S. has increased its status as an honest broker in Iraq.**

Regarding the overall goals for the country, **Corbin** reiterated President Obama’s vision of a stable, self-reliant, sovereign Iraq, at peace with its neighbors and working constructively in the region. **Corbin** mentioned **Iraq’s new draft law on civil society—which permits NGOs to operate without registering their members and without reporting whether they receive foreign funds – as a**

unique and significant achievement. He said that the U.S. will continue to support Iraqi political actors as they address internal issues, noting that various metrics will be used to measure success in the myriad fields the U.S. and Iraq will partner on.

Kahl added his assessment **that Iraq may have a role to play in the emerging cooperative network of states in the Gulf**, since Iraq shares common concerns with these countries. Regarding metrics for success on the security side, he said that the U.S. so far has not seen any cause for alarm, since levels of violence remain low, and public confidence has grown in Iraqi security forces.

In response to a question from the audience regarding the timeline for withdrawal, **Kahl** said that the U.S. is not being driven out of Iraq by the American public, but is adhering to the terms of the security agreement made by the Bush Administration with a sovereign Iraqi government. Asked about foreign influence, **Corbin** said that Iraq has pushed back against foreign actors on issues such as the Mahdi Army and the PKK. **Kahl** argued **that Iran specifically has not been successful in using shi'a blocs in Iraq's parliament to exercise influence, stating that Iran's failures are due to in large part to Iraqi nationalism.** Asked about reintegration issues and the Sons of Iraq program, Kahl said that the U.S. will push the new government to fulfill its pledges and reintegrate the remaining half of the Sons of Iraq.

Turning to the political and legal systems, audience members asked whether the Iraqi Constitution or any national laws stipulate deadlines or offer any mechanisms for compelling the formation of a government, and also requested information about Iraq's judicial system. **Corbin** said that the Iraqi Constitution requires the Council of Representatives to meet 20 days after certification of the election results, pointing out that the Council has fulfilled this obligation and remains in open session. He indicated **that no other deadlines are laid out in the Constitution; however, Corbin suggested that a deadline would come from the Iraqi people**, whose growing dissatisfaction with the current deadlock is putting increased pressure on political actors. On the judicial system, **Corbin** said **that rule of law is a crucial issue, noting that Iraq faces a "big challenge" of corruption. He said that judges training programs will be a U.S. priority**, and praised the Iraqi courts for ruling that the elections were valid despite political pressure to change the results.

A final question asked what work still needs to be done to address negative perceptions of the U.S. among Muslim communities worldwide since the invasion of Iraq. Corbin responded **that the U.S. must keep meeting its commitments in Iraq, as it has thus far**, to deal with this issue.