

Why Iraq still matters

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WASHINGTON — Last week in Baghdad, on his maiden overseas trip as U.S. Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta pressed Iraqi officials on whether they wanted American forces to remain in the country after 2011. Until a few weeks ago, Iraq was largely out of the public spotlight and a low priority for most U.S. policymakers and legislators as a result of the successful “surge” strategy undertaken by the United States after 2007 and the joint U.S.-Iraqi decision in 2008 to withdraw all U.S. forces by December 31, 2011. Today, the process of U.S. withdrawal is well underway, with only about 46,000 military trainers and advisors remaining in Iraq, down from a peak of more than 150,000 just three years ago. However, signs of Iranian support for radical Shiite militia groups, the need for further training of Iraqi security forces, and differences within the current Iraqi coalition government over the United States’ presence have started to refocus Washington’s attention.



The American presence in Iraq is also being affected by ongoing budgetary battles in the U.S. Congress, as legislators prepare this year’s Foreign Operations appropriations bill. Congress may well seek to drastically reduce funding for ongoing activities in Iraq, where the United States plans to double the size of its embassy to 16,000 personnel, and for which the State Department has requested \$6.2 billion. Although that figure seems high (but is merely a fraction of what was being spent just a few years ago), the State Department will be the U.S. government entity responsible for all U.S. civilian efforts in Iraq when 2012 arrives. It also has to fund its own embassy operations and that of its consulates in a high-risk country, one in which nearly a quarter of the Iraqi government’s own budget is spent on security. In May, recognizing these concerns, the four previous U.S. ambassadors to Iraq sent a letter to Congressional leaders in which they stated that the situation in Iraq “remains fragile and potentially reversible,” and failure to properly fund U.S. efforts going forward “puts at risk the investment America has already made to establish a democratic, peaceful, and economically stable government in this most important region.”

Their argument is spot on. Underfunding post-2011 activities in Iraq will hurt the United States in many ways. It will enable Iran to exert more pressure on the Iraqi government by supporting insurgent efforts, and will allow radical anti-American Shiite groups to have a say in the country’s future. The U.S. transition in Iraq will also serve as a bellwether for its mission in Afghanistan, with underfunding sending the wrong signals to stakeholders in that conflict regarding reconciliation, the transition to Afghan control, and reconstruction and development efforts. Finally, it risks further damage to the United States’ reputation for not being able to finish the job. U.S. policymakers and legislators need to prevent Iraq from becoming another Afghanistan or Pakistan, where American abandonment in the late 1980s contributed to the rise of forces that directly threatened the security of the United States and its allies.

The Foreign Operations appropriations bill will probably not be taken up for a few weeks, if not several months. While this is a telling indictment of how the American public views the importance of U.S. engagement around the world, it does give time for a serious discussion in Congress on how to fund U.S. civilian-led efforts in Iraq and, if necessary, an extended military mission. The fact is that it is in U.S. national and regional security interests for the United States to maintain a robust presence in Iraq and prevent it from falling into the Iranian security sphere. An enduring U.S. military presence that supports Iraqi Security Forces — if requested by the Iraqi government — will help ensure that Iraq remains a success story, a fledgling democracy aligned with the United States and the West. Congress and the American people have an obligation to prevent Iran from threatening U.S. interests and allies in the greater Middle East, demonstrate that the United States has the stomach to get the job done, and ensure that the battles fought, dollars spent, lives transformed, and souls forever lost in these efforts were not in vain.

Daniel P. Fata is a Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington. From 2005 to 2008, he served as the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO Policy.

Photo courtesy the U.S. Army.