



IRAQ THREAT ASSESSMENT

THE DANGERS TO THE UNITED STATES,
IRAQ, AND MIDEAST STABILITY OF
ABANDONING IRAQ AT THE END OF 2011

FREDERICK W. KAGAN



A REPORT BY THE CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT
OF THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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Cover image US Navy Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class James E. Foeh. Iraqi soldiers assigned to 2nd Company, Iraqi 6th Emergency Response Battalion move to a simulated target as part of an air assault exercise with US Special Operations Forces during Foreign Internal Defense training on November 19, 2010. US Special Operations Forces are currently assisting and advising Iraqi Security Forces in support of Operation New Dawn.

Key Findings

- The Iraqi Security Forces will not be able to defend Iraq's sovereignty, maintain its independence from Iran, or ensure Iraq's internal stability without American assistance, including some ground forces in Iraq, for a number of years. The negotiation of a security agreement extending the presence of US forces in Iraq beyond the end of 2011 is thus an urgent national security priority for the United States and Iraq.
- The absence of a US strategic partnership with and military presence in Iraq will weaken the Iraqi military and could lead to the breakdown of internal security and political gains, which in turn could cause renewed communal conflict and the reemergence of militant Islamist groups. Conversely, Iraqi response to the sense of being abandoned by the United States could lead Baghdad to launch a rapid buildup of Iraq's military to respond to regional threats, which would further destabilize an already unstable Middle East and badly damage essential efforts by the Iraqi government to meet the desires of its people for domestic progress.
- Iran's use of proxy military groups poses the most immediate and serious threat to Iraqi security. Combined with Iran's conventional, particularly missile, threat, the current military balance pitting Iraq by itself against Iran gives Tehran military dominance at every level of escalation.
- To counterbalance Iran's military dominance, Iraqi military planners would need to design and field a military capable of protecting the Iraqi state with or without US assistance. An Iraqi military designed to deter, repel, and retaliate against the range of Iranian military options would therefore be an imposing force in the region. Such an Iraqi military would rival that of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and even Syria, unsettling the current military balance and possibly sparking a regional arms race.
- The presence of US air power and ground troops in Iraq would assure Baghdad of its survival, and at less cost to Iraqi and regional security. The US military can provide Iraq with the ability to hold its own against Iranian proxy groups, to deter and defeat an Iranian conventional military attack or air attack, and to deter or retaliate against an Iranian missile campaign. Internally, the United States could continue to play an irreplaceable role in keeping the peace along the Arab-Kurd fault line in northern Iraq.
- A long-term strategic military partnership also benefits the United States. It would deter serious Iranian adventurism in Iraq and help Baghdad resist Iranian pressure to conform to Tehran's policies aimed at excluding the United States and its allies from a region of vital interest to the West.

- The United States must demonstrate that it is a reliable ally by negotiating the extension of some US military presence after 2011, maintaining its commitment to the long-term survivability of the unitary Iraqi state.
- Iraqi leaders must choose what kind of Iraq they want—an independent, fully

sovereign state beholden to no one, or a weak state, riven with internal tensions, subject to the constant manipulation and domination of its Persian neighbors. The decision will mark a fundamental bifurcation in Iraq's future and must not be taken lightly.

Introduction

Iraqis live in a tough region. Although none of their neighbors have been designing military forces specifically to target them, general tensions in the region and among Iran, Israel, and Western powers have led to the maintenance of regional conventional militaries that pose a significant threat to Iraq with its current armed forces, configured as they are exclusively for internal security missions. Those missions are made much more daunting by Iran's continued support for—and use of—armed proxy groups to influence Iraqi decision making and pursue Iranian interests. Even the task of keeping sufficient pressure on al Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni revanchist groups will strain the Iraqi military if it has little or no external support.

Iraq's military weakness will threaten American interests in one of two ways. Either Iraq will remain so weak that the internal security and, ultimately, political gains made since 2006 will be jeopardized, leading to the prospect of renewed communal conflict and the reemergence of militant Islamist groups, or Iraq will engage in a military buildup that in itself will be destabilizing in an already unstable region. The Iraqi Security Forces will not be able to defend Iraq's sovereignty, independence from Iran, and internal stability without American assistance, including some ground forces in Iraq, for a number of years. The negotiation of a security agreement extending the presence of US forces in Iraq beyond the end of 2011 is thus an urgent national security priority for the United States and Iraq.

The Iranian Threat

Iran poses the most immediate and serious threat to Iraqi security. It has been using a mix of military force—weighted toward unconventional forces, to be sure, but including naval forces, riverine forces, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—inside Iraq since 2003. Iranian-directed military groups such as Kitaib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al Haq, and the Promised Day Brigades have maintained and even expanded their abilities to conduct very significant attacks in Iraq, including rocket and mortar attacks in Baghdad. Attacks at current or even somewhat higher levels do not pose an existential threat to the Iraqi state, but they will become increasingly intolerable as Iraqis continue to try to reestablish normalcy. They badly undermine the ability of Iraq's political leaders to make decisions freely even about internal matters, let alone foreign policy. Left unchecked, this Iranian proxy warfare could reduce Iraq to a state of effective vassalage despite the clear desires of the Iraqi people—Sunni, Shia, and Kurds—to be masters of their own fate.

Defending against such groups requires both defensive and high-end offensive capabilities, as well as effective police and border police (which Iraq does not have now). Key facilities will continue to have to be hardened. Iraqis will also require the capability to strike quickly against these cells, using radar systems to detect the point of origin of the attacks, quick-response forces, and, ideally, air weapons teams (reconnaissance and attack helicopters, as well as UAVs) to strike back against rocket and mortar teams. Even these capabilities will not suffice against experienced mortar and rocket teams, which have developed techniques to survive against the capabilities of US forces. Preventing such attacks requires the ability to gather, analyze, and act on intelligence very rapidly and precisely to kill or capture the key

leaders, facilitators, and operators that compose these attack cells. Iraqi Special Operations Forces have some of these capabilities, but not all of them. They certainly do not have them in sufficient quantity to manage threats of this type without continued US assistance, and they will not have such independent capabilities by 2012. Nor have they developed necessary command-and-control structures or the cadre of leadership capable of planning and conducting complex counterterrorism and counter-irregular warfare operations on their own.

Iranian-directed groups have demonstrated the capability to emplace extremely sophisticated armor-piercing improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including the most deadly explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), which can cut through tank armor when properly constructed and emplaced. They also have small arsenals of antitank rifles and rocket-propelled grenades that can destroy lightly armored vehicles. US forces facing these threats developed both technological and tactical solutions, of which the Iraqis now have only some. Our mine resistant ambush protected vehicles (MRAPs) have allowed American soldiers to survive many IED hits. Iraqi forces now are mainly equipped with up-armored humvees, which are far more vulnerable to such attacks. Even our MRAPs are not a reliable defense against EFPs, however. The most reliable response to them has been combined aggressive operations against the EFP cells transporting and emplacing those weapons—again, a capability the Iraqi Security Forces will not have in sufficient quantity or quality on its own if US forces leave after 2011.

Current American combat capabilities in Iraq are thus an essential component to helping Iraqi Security Forces maintain freedom of movement in their own country and protect themselves from indirect

fire attacks. The complete withdrawal of those capabilities would leave Iraq significantly more vulnerable to concerted efforts by Iranian-directed groups to increase their operations to pressure Iraqi leaders to make important decisions that favor Tehran—a technique Iran's Qods Force commanders controlling these groups have relied on for years.

The conventional Iranian military threat to Iraq is somewhat harder to evaluate. It is less likely to be deployed, to be sure, particularly as long as Iranian leaders feel they can achieve their central interests in Iraq using the means outlined above. But conventional capabilities are never irrelevant to the planning of permanent military forces—or to the thinking of leaders, who have to consider what would happen should a conflict begin to escalate despite their desires to avoid escalation. Just as Iraq cannot truly be sovereign and independent if it cannot defeat foreign-sponsored proxy military groups in its own territory, neither can it be fully autonomous if its leaders know that opponents can escalate any conflict at their discretion to levels that ensure Iraqi defeat.

Iranian ground and air forces are not arrayed to support an invasion of Iraq on a large scale, and it is highly unlikely that the Iranian logistics system could sustain armored or even infantry forces very far from their bases for any length of time. Iranian military doctrine overall focuses on defending against Western attack—land invasion in the worst case and air strikes in the most likely case, from the Iranian perspective. The Iraqi military, therefore, faces no realistic requirement to repel a large-scale armored assault along the length of its border or a realistic drive on Baghdad.

Iranian Ground Forces Capabilities

Iranian ground forces are effectively divided into three services—the *artesh*, or conventional army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and the Basij (resistance) militia, which is now subordinated to the IRGC. These forces are nominally imposing, at least compared with Iraq's current

capabilities: the April 2010 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report to Congress on Iranian military power assessed the *artesh* forces to include some 220,000 personnel divided into four armored, six infantry, and two commando divisions, in addition to a number of independent and specialized brigades and other formations.¹ The IRGC ground forces supposedly number around 130,000, but their organization and deployment are less clear. Iranian military sources put the size of the Basij militia at over 10 million (around 12 percent of Iran's population), which clearly refers to the theoretical maximum recruiting base Iran could mobilize in the event of a total war. Iranian ground forces are equipped with around eight hundred relatively modern tanks (T-72, M-60, Chieftain, and T-62) and numerous older models. Their deployment remains oriented primarily toward the west, with multiple *artesh* and IRGC ground forces bases near the Iraq border, particularly in the south.

The Iranian conventional military nevertheless poses a significant threat to Iraq even in its current orientation. The 92nd Armored Division and the 45th Commando Brigade are fewer than ninety miles from the Kuwait border. Two more armored divisions, two additional armored brigades, a commando division, an airborne brigade, and an additional commando brigade are all within around three hundred miles of the same location. The Iraqi Army today maintains two infantry divisions (the 12th and 14th) near Basra, with another (the 8th) some two hundred miles away dispersed along the Central Euphrates. Such limited armored capability as Iraq now has (the 9th Armored Division fielding T-72s) is deployed in and around Baghdad, with its base at Taji, north of the capital. Iraq's infantry formations do not have armored vehicles, significant artillery, or antiarmor weapons. A rapid thrust by the Iranian 92nd Armored Division, supported by commandos and possibly airborne units, could cut Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf, including the oil pipelines through which Iraq exports the overwhelming majority of its oil. Even a temporary Iranian raid could do enormous damage to

Iraq's economy (and global oil markets) by destroying those pipelines and other key oil infrastructure in the area.

The Iraqi military as currently configured could neither stop such an advance nor force the withdrawal of Iranian forces established on Iraqi territory. Reflections on the failed Iranian attempt to take the al Faw peninsula during the Iran-Iraq War are not reassuring in the current situation. The Iraqi ground forces are weaker and, above all, have significantly less armor and mobility than did Saddam Hussein's forces in the 1980s. The Iranian ground forces, for all their flaws, are significantly more capable now than they were in the years immediately following the revolution that largely destroyed the shah's military. Iraqi military planners should assume that the current military balance could allow Iran to launch a short-notice armored thrust over the short distance required to block Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf for a significant period of time.

This scenario assumes that Iran does not take the time to mobilize for a more substantial assault. If it did, it could bring sufficient additional forces to bear to threaten the lines of communication between Baghdad and Basra and (with more difficulty) between Baghdad and Mosul. Such operations would be significantly more challenging for the Iranian ground forces because they would require sustaining offensive operations much farther into Iraqi territory and farther from Iranian logistics bases. Even so, the Iraqi military as currently constituted would be very hard pressed to stop raids along those routes if the Iranians managed to support them.

Iranian Naval Capabilities

The Iranian Navy has been superseded by the IRGC Navy for control and execution of important operations in the Persian Gulf. It consists of numerous fast-attack boats, three Kilo diesel submarines, a handful of frigates and corvettes, and a very limited amphibious capability. It is postured primarily for operations around the Strait of Hormuz and within

the Persian Gulf, although it now maintains a regular presence beyond the Persian Gulf as part of counterpiracy operations around the Horn of Africa.

Iraq's economic infrastructure is most vulnerable at the oil-tanker fueling stations south of Basra through which roughly 80 percent of Iraq's oil exports flow. Those fueling stations are within easy reach of Iranian naval facilities, and current Iraqi naval forces could not defend them. Iranian forces could attack the facilities from ships and shore-based air and missile platforms. They could probably also use their limited amphibious capabilities to seize the platforms. We will not consider here the possibility that the IRGC Navy might disrupt the movement of tankers carrying Iraqi oil through the Gulf without attacking Iraqi facilities because it is reasonable to assume that the US Navy would resist any such interdiction even without having any formal agreements with Iraq. It is quite possible that the United States would intervene against Iranian attacks on the oil platforms themselves if requested by Baghdad, again even without any formal agreement. The continual presence of considerable American air and naval power in the region makes the question of the deployment of US forces in Iraq itself irrelevant to this issue. The Iraqi government would have to decide whether to rely on the likelihood of particular US responses to such scenarios in the absence of a formal US security guarantee, considering the potentially fatal threat to Iraq's ability to function following such attacks.

Iranian Air and Missile Capabilities

The Iranian Air Force is a mix of fighter and attack aircraft, largely of 1970s vintage. The most significant platforms include the F-14, Su-29, Mirage, Su-24, and Su-25. The DIA report to Congress notes that "Iran has managed to keep a substantial portion of its fleet of US-supplied aircraft flying."² The air bases along Iraq's border (Tactical Air Bases 2 [Tabriz], 3 [Hamadan], 4 [Dezful], and 5 [Omidiyeh]) are homes mainly to older F-4, F-5, and F-7 aircraft,

although there is reportedly a squadron of MiG-29s at Tabriz and Su-24MKs at Hamadan. Iran's F-14s are deployed at interior air bases (Shiraz and Esfahan), and the remaining MiG-29s are stationed near Tehran. This deployment reflects the fact that Iranian military posture is primarily defensive and aimed at deterring and possibly countering a US-led air attack from the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, as well as defending key sites against a possible Israeli air strike.

Iran currently has complete escalation dominance against Iraq in the absence of US military support for Baghdad. The Iranian Air Force is quite capable of conducting rapid strikes against Baghdad, Basra, and most of Iraq's other major cities. Such strikes would be limited in effect—Iran does not have the capacity to turn Baghdad into Dresden. But it could cause widespread damage, and Iraq's only defense would be a reliance on the international community either to intervene militarily or to pressure Iran effectively to cease its attacks.

Iraq is incapable of protecting its own airspace, even to the extent of the normal civilian aerial policing missions required of any sovereign state. This weakness gives Iran another escalation option that it has used before—flying missions with manned or unmanned aircraft into Iraqi airspace to demonstrate Iraq's helplessness. Past Iranian maneuvers have included UAV overflights of Diyala Province, the brief seizure by Iranian ground forces of a disputed oil platform near the border, and fairly regular naval incursions into Iraqi territorial waters. The presence of US forces in Iraq has deterred Iranian

escalation beyond these low-level probes, but the complete withdrawal of US forces would be an invitation for further efforts at intimidation whenever Iraqi leaders seem likely to veer away from Tehran's preferred course of action.

The Iranian missile arsenal is even more dangerous. The most impressive part of its arsenal is the ballistic missile force, which the 2010 DIA report to Congress estimated to include around one thousand missiles with ranges of between 90 and 1,200 miles.³ The Iranian ground forces field a sizable array of tactical missiles and multiple-launch rocket systems as well. The deployments of these forces are not readily available in open sources.

A concerted assault by Iran's short- and medium-range ballistic missiles could do tremendous damage to Basra, most of Iraq's oil infrastructure, and a number of other important cities. Such an attack could do great damage to Baghdad as well. If conducted together with an air campaign, it could devastate the city. Iraq has no defenses against ballistic missiles, no ability to retaliate, no ability to preempt additional attacks by hitting Iranian missiles or airfields, and no ability to deter such an attack. Again, the comparison with the "missile war" during the Iran-Iraq conflict is not reassuring—the Iranian missile program is considerably more advanced now than it was then, as it has been a focus of Iranian military development and procurement efforts ever since that struggle. The Iraqi missile and air forces have been eliminated, and the air force is at a very early stage of reconstruction.

Iraq Alone

The current military balance pitting Iraq by itself against Iran thus gives Tehran military dominance at every level of escalation. Iran can use proxy groups and terrorist organizations within Iraq; Iraq has no ability to do so in Iran. Iran could conduct limited or medium-sized ground offensives into key terrain in Iraq; Iraq could not prevent, defeat, counter-attack, or retaliate against them. Iran could attack and occupy or destroy Iraq's most important oil infrastructure; Iraq could not defend or retake it. Iran could conduct air and missile attacks against Iraqi cities with impunity.

Iran has already demonstrated a willingness to operate among the first few rungs of this escalation ladder, supporting proxy forces and conducting very limited incursions into Iraqi air space and territory. The fact that Tehran has dominance at every level of escalation could put enormous strain on Iraqi leaders attempting to resist Iranian requests or demands. The likelihood of Iranian operations at the high end of this escalation ladder is low, primarily because Iraqi leaders who know they will lose are unlikely to resist any but the most unreasonable demands when backed with the threat of Iranian military force. Any professional Iraqi military planner would be remiss if he did not attempt to design and field an Iraqi military capable of protecting his state against such threats either with US-guaranteed assistance or, failing such a guarantee, with Iraqi forces alone.

The requirements for a prudent defensive posture based solely on Iraqi military forces are significant. We have already considered the challenges facing Iraqi operations against Iranian proxy groups within Iraq. The requirements for defense against an Iranian armored thrust to cut Iraq off from the sea are much more substantial.

To counter a short-notice limited attack (raid, most likely) by the 92nd Armored Division and the 45th Commando Brigade against the lines of communication between Baghdad and Basra, the Iraqi military would require a significant antiarmor and mobile protected counteroffensive capability. Iraqi infantry units in the south would require a large number of man-portable and vehicle-mounted anti-tank weapons that can reliably kill T-72s. Alternatively, or additionally, the Iraqis might be able to mine the frontier and approach routes heavily (if they have the capability to do so), but such an option would put Iraq athwart international conventions, hinder peaceful commerce, and pose a threat to local populations. Iraqi forces facing such an Iranian threat would also require their own armored vehicles—tanks and armored personnel carriers—to provide them with protected movement and firepower in the face of Iranian armor and air power. Since the Iraqi forces would be defending against Iranian armored units that probably have fairly limited skills in maneuvering and accurate targeting, two armored brigades with a mechanized infantry brigade could protect Basra and the lines of communication with a reasonable degree of confidence.

The patterns of the Iran-Iraq War, however, are graven on the minds of both Iraqis and Iranians. Attempts at limited thrusts were stopped repeatedly in that conflict but were followed by attempts to outflank the defenders to the north. Sound Iraqi defense planning would require the ability to stop any secondary Iranian attacks toward the Central Euphrates and Baghdad, or between Baghdad and Mosul. The Iraqi side of the border from Maysan Province to Diyala Province is almost entirely open desert. Only mechanized forces could be relied on to prevent Iranian movement through almost any portion of

that area. In addition to the armored division now stationed at Taji, therefore, Iraq would likely require another mechanized division around Kut. A mechanized brigade in Diyala would probably suffice in the more rugged terrain from there to the north, as long as it could be reinforced either from Baghdad or Kut. Iranian ground forces currently maintain an armored division, a mechanized division, a commando division, and a commando brigade within about 140 miles of the Diyala border. If the Iranians managed to press both toward the Central Euphrates and into Diyala by concentrating one or two additional armored divisions along the border in advance of operations, then even such Iraqi defenses could be overcome—always assuming that the Iranian military could sustain its armored forces away from their bases for any length of time.

A reasonable Iraqi defensive set, therefore, would add two armored divisions and possibly a separate armored brigade or two to the twelve infantry and one armored divisions Iraq already maintains. It would require that those infantry formations receive antitank capabilities and some protected mobility. In other words, Iraq would have to field around 480 tanks (in addition to those it already has) and around 400 armored personnel carriers, along with the logistical infrastructure to support them and maintain modern antitank systems in infantry formations.⁴ Iraqi fielded forces would probably face fairly limited threats from Iranian air power, since Iranian forces have not been trained or equipped to conduct close-air support missions to protect advancing mechanized forces. They would, nevertheless, require air defense capabilities, both man-portable air defense systems and vehicle-mounted surface-to-air missiles, as a minimum precaution.

Deterring or defending against the Iranian air and missile threat to Iraq's population centers and infrastructure would be much more challenging. The Iraqi military would have four basic options and would probably adopt some combination of all of them: build an extensive ground-based air defense system, field an air force capable of intercepting an Iranian air strike, field an air force capable of attacking

Iranian military and civilian targets, and deploy a ballistic missile force. The relative ease with which advanced air forces can now defeat the kind of integrated air defense system Saddam Hussein constructed in the 1990s makes the massive investment required to build such a system relatively unattractive. The Iraqi military would more likely adopt a point-defense system with some mobile capabilities that focus on protecting Baghdad and other key urban areas and infrastructure (similar, in fact, to the system the Iranians have developed).

Even such limited air defense systems are expensive to build and maintain, however, and they have the disadvantage of being relatively inflexible and offering only defensive capabilities. The Iraqi military has already seen the advantages of fielding a flexible air force (reflected in the current Iraqi request to purchase F-16s from the United States). A balanced air force built around interceptors and fighter-bombers would allow Iraq to defeat an Iranian air strike, but it would also allow the Iraqi military to carry the fight to Iranian territory and, assuming it could train to this level, provide direct air support to Iraqi ground units in combat. Iraq would, in fact, almost certainly combine these approaches—fielding point-defense surface-to-air missiles and multipurpose combat aircraft—as the best means to deter and defend against an Iranian air campaign.

Deterring or responding to an Iranian missile campaign would be even more challenging. The Iraqi military would require one of three capabilities—effective antiballistic missile defense, deep-strike air capability, or intermediate-range ballistic missile forces. Iraq will not obtain missile defense systems without a meaningful security relationship with the United States past the end of 2011. The requirement for deep-strike air capability stems from the unfortunate (from the Iraqi perspective) fact that Iran's major population centers are well to the east. Tehran is more than four hundred miles from the Iraqi border and is relatively well defended by both point-defense anti-aircraft systems and Iran's interceptors. To deter or retaliate against a missile attack, an Iraqi counterstrike would need to penetrate Iranian air

defense for several hundred miles, suppress Iranian air defenses enough to conduct its own attack, and be able to defend itself against Iranian aircraft. Iraq has never had that capability and is extremely unlikely to develop it anytime soon. The last alternative, therefore, is the most likely—fielding a deterrent/retaliatory missile force of its own. Iraq can field and modify Scud missiles or more modern variants to reach Tehran and other targets as it has done in the past, and it can acquire such weapons systems more easily and use them more rapidly than it could build and train an air force. And it could buy and maintain such a missile force much more cheaply than an air force.

An Iraqi military designed to deter, repel, and retaliate against the range of Iranian military options would therefore be an imposing force in the region—requiring around 480 tanks and 400 armored personnel carriers, around 100 multirole combat aircraft or perhaps 200 less-advanced fighters and attack planes, advanced air defense systems, and a significant ballistic missile force (at least 100–200 intermediate-range ballistic missiles to retaliate against Iran’s larger arsenal). If Iraq chose not to field a missile force (or were persuaded or prevented from doing so), it would require a significantly larger and more capable air force—more on the order of 300–400 aircraft, including ground-attack, interceptor, and some high-end multirole combat aircraft.

Such an Iraqi military could pose a significant threat to its neighbors. It would be larger than the Saudi military and equipped with a similar amount of armor and air power—albeit, presumably, at a much lower standard of materiel and training, at least for a while. Its advantage over the Saudi force

would be its ability to concentrate fairly rapidly against the limited forces the Kingdom now maintains in the near vicinity of the Iraqi border—including in the oil-rich Eastern Province—particularly as the Kingdom faces distractions and deployments in Bahrain and concerns about the stability of Yemen. If Iraq chose to acquire a ballistic missile capability in response to the Iranian threat, it could rapidly surpass the very limited arsenal the Saudis are believed to have now. Such an Iraqi armed force would obviously overmatch Kuwait, although there appears to be no end in sight to the US presence there. It would also overmatch Jordan and what Syria now maintains along its eastern border. Although the Syrian military overall fields much more armor than Iraq is likely to acquire, the overwhelming majority of the Syrian armed forces are concentrated on Syria’s southwestern frontier, and Syria’s internal instability will likely considerably diminish its military threat to Iraq for some time.

Is it credible to imagine an Iraqi-Saudi war? Perhaps. An Iraqi military built initially to defend against Iran could, in principle, be used in Iran’s interests by some future Shiite government in Baghdad more concerned with sectarianism than with Arabism or national interest. At least, the consistent repugnance with which the Saudi leadership has viewed the Iraqi Shiites’ rise to control of the state indicates that some Saudis fear the possibility of an Iraq-Iran détente at their expense. From the standpoint of regional stability, the likelihood of such a conflict is less important than the regional perception of the possible dangers. The Middle East is unstable enough already. It is desirable to avoid providing any additional reasons for states there to engage in arms races with one another.

Iraq with a US Strategic Partnership and Military Presence

Fortunately, there is a way to provide Iraq with much better assurance of its survival without having Baghdad build a military large enough to scare its neighbors or waste resources better spent on improving the lives of its people—and appeasing their growing demands for responsive governance in parallel with other parts of the Arab Spring. American air power and a relatively small US ground presence in southern Iraq would be enough to prevent any sort of lightning strike by Iran's 92nd Armored Division to cut Iraq off from the sea. Iranian mechanized forces cannot advance, sustain themselves, or survive in the face of US air power, and they cannot overcome American mechanized forces backed with that air power, even with great numerical superiority. If the United States chose to prevent Iranian military formations from advancing into Iraq, and if it had the requisite air power present in the theater, it could unquestionably do so. If Iraq could rely on US support in such a scenario, its leaders would have no need to build their own armored and mechanized forces to worrying levels.

The American military is even better positioned to deter, resist, and retaliate against an Iranian air strike or missile attack. The United States could, for example, provide Iraq with Patriot antimissile batteries and other antimissile technology to protect key infrastructure. US aircraft based in Iraq would eliminate the possibility of a lightning air raid. Should Iran choose to launch a concerted missile attack, US aircraft could respond by attacking Iran's missile launchers and retaliate by destroying Iranian military bases.

US forces in Iraq could also greatly assist Baghdad against Iranian unconventional warfare by providing key enablers that the Iraqi military simply cannot acquire soon. In particular, the United States

brings intelligence-collection and analysis capabilities that Iraq cannot build or buy. The American military has also spent billions of dollars developing counter-IED capabilities, and platforms that can use them, which are unavailable to the Iraqis without a continuing American partnership. And US armed forces have precision-strike capabilities that are not matched by any state in the world.

The US military, in other words, can provide Iraq with the ability to hold its own against Iranian proxy groups, to deter and defeat an Iranian conventional military attack or air attack, and to deter or retaliate against an Iranian missile campaign. With American backing, Iraq can regard the Iranian threat with equanimity. Without such backing, Iraq's position will be parlous for quite some time and disadvantageous for a long time to come.

From the US perspective, the advantages of providing such a guarantee are significant. It would dampen Iraqi enthusiasm for a costly and potentially destabilizing rearmament program. More importantly, it would deter serious Iranian adventurism in Iraq and help Baghdad resist Iranian pressure to conform to Tehran's policies aimed at excluding the United States and its allies from a region of vital interest to the West. It would also significantly reduce the likelihood of escalation of border conflicts or political (or religious) differences between Tehran and Baghdad. The American military guarantee and presence has kept the peace in Europe and East Asia for more than six decades. A similar guarantee and presence could also reduce potential sources of conflict in Mesopotamia.

Is an actual American military presence in Iraq necessary to achieve this effect? Almost certainly yes. A guarantee alone would not suffice for reasons both practical and political, or even emotional. Practically,

US air forces, both sea- and land-based, now in the Persian Gulf area are sufficient to retaliate against an Iranian air or missile strike. They are not positioned, however, to defeat or prevent an air strike launched with little warning from Iranian air bases closer to Baghdad than any the United States has outside of Iraq. US air forces based in Iraq would be able to do so. American air power could also almost certainly defeat a rapid armored drive toward Basra, but not necessarily before Iranian spearheads had managed to damage or destroy important infrastructure. American ground forces, even in relatively small numbers, could stop them. The United States could help Iraq against Iranian proxies with certain kinds of intelligence collection and analysis, but not all, from bases outside the country. American armed forces could conduct certain kinds of precision strikes from outside Iraq, but on a much more limited basis than if they were positioned at Iraqi bases. The United States could not—or, realistically, would not—provide the Iraqi military with its most advanced counter-IED capabilities without having a serious and formal military partnership agreement. These are some of the practical reasons why a security guarantee not supported by a permanent military presence would be inadequate to satisfy the concerns of a rational Iraqi military planner—or leader.

US ground forces, moreover, now play a critical and irreplaceable role in maintaining the peace along the Arab-Kurd fault line in northern Iraq. They are the glue that holds together tripartite checkpoints and that ensures clear communication between otherwise tense and sometimes mistrustful Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga troops. As they were in Bosnia, Kosovo, and many other places, moreover, they are a deterrent against serious escalation of localized conflicts by their mere presence. The withdrawal of US forces from these missions will place the stability of the Arab-Kurd settlement, already rattled by instability in Kurdistan and Arab Iraq, at great risk. It could become a single point of failure for the long-term survivability of the unitary Iraqi state. Eliminating these US peacekeepers would be an act of insanity for both Iraqis and Americans.

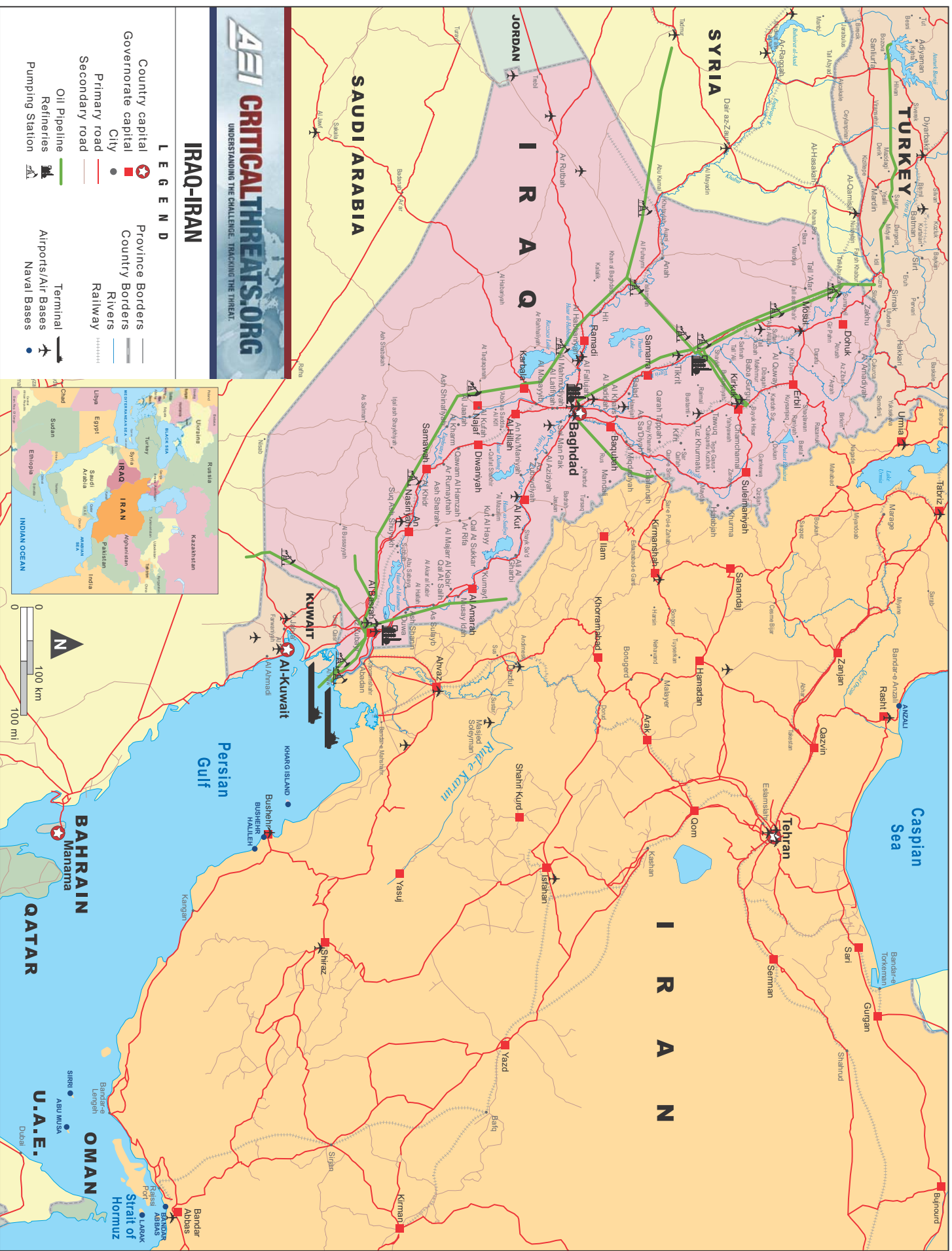
The large political and emotional reasons for keeping some US military presence in Iraq are, perhaps, even more important. Refusing to station US forces in Iraq would be in itself a positive statement of American lack of interest in Iraq in the context of America's relationships with its other critical allies. It would be an explicit rejection of a meaningful security partnership and a declaration to the world that the United States does not regard the defense of Iraq the same as the defense of Belgium. It is difficult to imagine that Iraqi leaders would feel confident enough in America's determination to defend them after such a rejection to abandon their own preparations to defend themselves. The United States has one chance to persuade Iraqi leaders to choose an entirely new path for the defense of their country that does not destabilize the region. We should take it.

So should the Iraqis. The cost of asking for and signing such an agreement will be high in Baghdad. Tehran has already demonstrated its intent to use force, at least by proxy, to bring all possible pressure to bear on the Iraqi leadership to prevent this outcome. Even without such overt external intervention, there would be opposition to such an agreement within Iraq. And we should be clear as well that Prime Minister Nuri Kemal al Maliki may himself be of two minds about extending the US military presence. He has shown increasing tendencies toward consolidating power in his own hands and re-forming a Kurd-Shia Arab alliance that largely excludes Iraq's Sunni Arabs from real participation in government. The United States has been and will remain an obstacle to attempts to undermine the current political settlement in Iraq or to erode Iraq's representative and balanced form of government. These are all powerful factors that may well deter Maliki from requesting an extension of the American presence, particularly without active US engagement with many political leaders in Iraq and the region to address them.

But Maliki and the Iraqi political leadership are now facing a stark choice, and they will signal to Tehran, their own people, and the world what kind of Iraq they really want by making—or failing to

make—this decision. If Maliki allows the United States to leave Iraq, he is effectively declaring his intent to fall in line with Tehran's wishes, to subordinate Iraq's foreign policy to the Persians, and, possibly, to consolidate his own power as a sort of modern Persian satrap in Baghdad. If Iraq's leaders allow themselves to be daunted by fear of Maliki or Iran, they will be betraying their people, who have shed so much blood to establish a safe, independent, multiethnic, multisectarian, unitary Iraqi state with representative institutions of government. Maliki and

Iraq's other leaders contemplating such a course should beware the persistent dangers of the Arab Spring to would-be autocrats and those who appear to place control of their countries in the hands of foreigners. Much is at stake for the United States in this decision. Even more is at stake for Iraq. This decision will mark a fundamental bifurcation in Iraq's future. Let us hope that Iraq's leaders can surmount their fear in this case as they have in so many others. America's leaders should stand with them rather than behind them as they make this difficult choice.



Notes

1. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran* (Washington, DC, April 2010).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. An armored battalion will usually have around 40 tanks; a mechanized infantry battalion will have perhaps 50 armored personnel carriers (APCs). Assuming a balanced mechanized force of two armored battalions and one mechanized infantry battalion per armored brigade, three such brigades per division would require 480 tanks and 300 APCs. This section also identifies a requirement for the equivalent of at least two additional mechanized infantry brigades' worth of APCs to be added to the already-fielded light infantry units.

About the Author

Frederick W. Kagan is a resident scholar in defense and security policy studies and director of the Critical Threats Project at AEI. In 2009, he served in Kabul, Afghanistan, as part of General Stanley McChrystal's strategic assessment team, and he returned to Afghanistan in 2010 to conduct research for General David Petraeus. He is coauthor of the report *Defining Success in Afghanistan* (AEI and the Institute for the Study of War, 2010) and author of the series of reports *Choosing Victory* (AEI), which recommended and monitored the US military surge in Iraq. His most recent book is *Lessons for a Long War: How America Can Win on New Battlefields* (AEI Press, 2010, with Thomas Donnelly). Previously an associate professor of military history at West Point, Mr. Kagan is a contributing editor at the *Weekly Standard* and has written for *Foreign Affairs*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other periodicals.

About the Critical Threats Project

The Critical Threats Project is an initiative of the American Enterprise Institute dedicated to tracking and analyzing key and emerging national security threats to the United States in order to inform the policy debate. The project primarily focuses on the threats posed by Iran and al Qaeda and associated movements in Pakistan and the Gulf of Aden.