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# Civilians to Take U.S. Lead After Military Leaves Iraq

By **MICHAEL R. GORDON**

WASHINGTON — As the United States military prepares to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, the Obama administration is planning a remarkable civilian effort, buttressed by a small army of contractors, to fill the void.

By October 2011, the State Department will assume responsibility for training the Iraqi police, a task that will largely be carried out by contractors. With no American soldiers to defuse sectarian tensions in northern Iraq, it will be up to American diplomats in two new \$100 million outposts to head off potential confrontations between the Iraqi Army and Kurdish pesh merga forces.

To protect the civilians in a country that is still home to insurgents with Al Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias, the State Department is planning to more than double its private security guards, up to as many as 7,000, according to administration officials who disclosed new details of the plan. Defending five fortified compounds across the country, the security contractors would operate radars to warn of enemy rocket attacks, search for roadside bombs, fly reconnaissance drones and even staff quick reaction forces to aid civilians in distress, the officials said.

“I don’t think State has ever operated on its own, independent of the U.S. military, in an environment that is quite as threatening on such a large scale,” said James Dobbins, a former ambassador who has seen his share of trouble spots as a special envoy for Afghanistan, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo and Somalia. “It is unprecedented in scale.”

White House officials expressed confidence that the transfer to civilians — about 2,400 people who would work at the Baghdad embassy and other diplomatic sites — would be carried out on schedule, and that they could fulfill their mission of helping bring stability to Iraq.

“The really big picture that we have seen in Iraq over the last year and a half to two years is this: the number of violent incidents is significantly down, the competence of Iraqi security forces is significantly up, and politics has emerged as the basic way of doing business in Iraq,” said Antony J. Blinken, the national security adviser to Vice President **Joseph R. Biden Jr.** “If that trend continues, and I acknowledge it is an ‘if,’ that creates a much better context for dealing with the very significant and serious problems that remain in Iraq.”

But the tiny military presence under the Obama administration’s plan — limited to several dozen to several hundred officers in an embassy office who would help the Iraqis purchase and field new American military equipment — and the civilians’ growing portfolio have led some veteran Iraq hands to suggest that thousands of additional troops will be needed after 2011.

“We need strategic patience here,” **Ryan C. Crocker**, who served as ambassador in Iraq from 2007 until early 2009, said in an interview. “Our timetables are getting out ahead of Iraqi reality. We do have an Iraqi partner in this. We certainly are not the ones making unilateral decisions anymore. But if they come to us later on this year requesting that we jointly relook at the post-2011 period, it is going to be in our strategic interest to be responsive.”

The array of tasks for which American troops are likely to be needed, military experts and some Iraqi officials say, include training Iraqi forces to operate and logistically support new M-1 tanks, artillery and F-16s they intend to acquire from the Americans; protecting Iraq’s airspace until the country can rebuild its air force; and perhaps assisting Iraq’s special operations units in carrying out counterterrorism operations.

Such an arrangement would need to be negotiated with Iraqi officials, who insisted on the 2011 deadline in the agreement with the Bush administration for removing American forces. With the Obama administration in campaign mode for the coming midterm elections and Iraqi politicians yet to form a government, the question of what future military presence might be needed has been all but banished from public discussion.

“The administration does not want to touch this question right now,” said one administration official involved in Iraq issues, adding that military officers had suggested that 5,000 to 10,000 troops might be needed. “It runs counter to their political argument that we are getting out of these messy places,” the official, speaking only on condition of anonymity, added. “And it would be quite counterproductive to talk this way in front of the Iraqis. If the Iraqis want us, they should be the demandeur.”

The Obama administration had already committed itself to reducing American troops in Iraq to 50,000 by the end of August, a goal the White House on Wednesday said would be met.

Administration officials and experts outside government say, however, that carrying out the agreement that calls for removing all American forces by the end of 2011 will be far more challenging.

The progress or difficulties in transferring responsibility to the civilians will not only influence events in Iraq but will also provide something of a test case for the Obama administration's longer-term strategy in Afghanistan.

The preparations for the civilian mission have been under way for months. One American official said that more than 1,200 specific tasks carried out by the American military in Iraq had been identified to be handed over to the civilians, transferred to the Iraqis or phased out.

To move around Iraq without United States troops, the State Department plans to acquire 60 mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles, called MRAPs, from the Pentagon; expand its inventory of armored cars to 1,320; and create a mini-air fleet by buying three planes to add to its lone aircraft. Its helicopter fleet, which will be piloted by contractors, will grow to 29 choppers from 17.

The department's plans to rely on 6,000 to 7,000 security contractors, who are also expected to form "quick reaction forces" to rescue civilians in trouble, is a sensitive issue, given Iraqi fury about shootings of civilians by American private guards in recent years. Administration officials said that security contractors would have no special immunity and would be required to register with the Iraqi government. In addition, one of the State Department's regional security officers, agents who oversee security at diplomatic outposts, will be required to approve and accompany every civilian convoy, providing additional oversight.

The startup cost of building and sustaining two embassy branch offices — one in Kirkuk and the other in Mosul — and of hiring security contractors, buying new equipment and setting up two consulates in Basra and Erbil is about \$1 billion. It will cost another \$500 million or so to make the two consulates permanent. And getting the police training program under way will cost about \$800 million.

Among the trickiest missions for the civilians will be dealing with lingering Kurdish and Arab tensions. To tamp down potential conflicts in disputed areas, Gen. [Ray Odierno](#), the senior American commander in Iraq, established a series of checkpoints made up of American soldiers, Iraqi Army troops and pesh merga fighters.

But those checkpoints may be phased out when the American troops leave. Instead, the United States is counting on the new embassy branch offices in Mosul and Kirkuk.

Administration officials had planned to have another embassy branch office in Baquba, but dropped that idea because of spending constraints.

“They will be eyes and ears on the ground to see if progress is being made or problems are developing,” Mr. Blinken said.

But Daniel P. Serwer, a vice president of the United States Institute of Peace, a Congressionally financed research center, questioned whether this would be sufficient. “There is a risk it will open the door to real problems. Our soldiers have been out there in the field with the Kurds and Arabs. Now they are talking about two embassy branch offices, and the officials there may need to stay around the quad if it is not safe enough to be outside.”

Another area that has prompted concern is police training, which the civilians are to take over by October 2011. That will primarily be done by contractors with State Department oversight and is to be carried out at three main hubs with visits to other sites. Administration officials say the program has been set up with Iraqi input and will help Iraqi police officers develop the skills to move from counterinsurgency operations to crime solving. The aim is to “focus on the higher-end skill set,” Colin Kahl, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, told reporters this week.

But James M. Dubik, a retired Army three-star general who oversaw the training of Iraqi security forces in 2007 and 2008, questioned whether the State Department was fully up to the mission. “The task is much more than just developing skills,” he said. “It is developing the Ministry of Interior and law enforcement systems at the national to local levels, and the State Department has little experience in doing that.”

Mr. Crocker said that however capable the State Department was in carrying out its tasks, it was important for the American military to keep enough of a presence in Iraq to encourage Iraq’s generals to stay out of politics.

“We need an intense, sustained military-to-military engagement,” he said. “If military commanders start asking themselves, ‘Why are we fighting and dying to hold this country together while the civilians fiddle away our future?’, that can get dangerous.”