

The New York Times® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY



August 10, 2010

# U.S. and Iraqi Interests May Work Against Pullout

By **TIM ARANGO**

BAGHDAD — In a recent speech [President Obama](#) took credit for delivering on his promise to end the official combat mission on schedule, and vowed to meet America's next deadline of moving all American forces off Iraqi soil by the end of 2011. "As agreed to with the Iraqi government, we will maintain a transitional force until we remove all our troops from [Iraq](#) by the end of next year," the president said.

The reality in Iraq may defy that deadline, because many American and Iraqi officials deem the American presence to be in each nation's interest.

"For a very long period of time we're going to be on the ground, even if it's solely in support of its U.S. weapons systems," said [Ryan C. Crocker](#), who was the American ambassador in Baghdad until 2009 and helped to negotiate the [agreement](#) that tethers the two countries and mandates that all American troops leave Iraq by the end of 2011.

Even as that deadline was negotiated, he said, a longer-lasting, though significantly smaller, presence of American forces had always been considered to be likely.

At the moment, five months after national elections, there is still no Iraqi government to begin talking about what any post-2011 arrangement might entail. But many Iraqi officials deem it quietly necessary on a number of fronts: Iraq is buying more and more sophisticated American weapons, like tanks and warplanes, and will need Americans here for training and maintenance. At the same time, training is intensifying for the Iraq Army to learn not only how to battle internal insurgents, but also how to protect its national borders — a project that will

take many years.

And many Americans, most notably Vice President **Joseph R. Biden Jr.**, have long argued that it is not in America's interest to withdraw completely — even if Mr. Obama rose to national prominence opposing the Iraq war and ran for president promising to end it.

The decision will bear directly on the payoff America could yet reap for all its spent blood — more than 4,000 American lives — and treasure, in the form of a democratic ally in a combustible region that would be a check on Iranian power and offer American access to Iraq's vast oil reserves.

A sustained American presence, at relatively low cost, could prevent Iraq, a country with a long and violent history of coups and tyranny, from slipping back into civil war.

But the decision could be politically perilous for both sides. For Mr. Obama, a deepening commitment to a conflict he opposed could alienate his supporters who helped win him the presidency, especially as his party slowly abandons him on the war in Afghanistan.

Iraq's leaders face a public that wishes to be free of the American military's grip, but the deficiencies of the country's armed forces are obvious.

"Our country will not be able to defend against foreign aggression for a long time," said **Hoshyar Zebari**, Iraq's foreign minister. But he demurred on the question of whether the Americans should stay: "It's up to the government to decide if they see a need for it."

When the security agreement was negotiated in 2008, it was politically essential for Iraqi officials to establish the sovereignty of their country by setting a deadline for an American exit, even as it was widely acknowledged that the agreement could be amended later.

"The current running through the latter phase of 2008 was the Iraqi refrain that there will be a need for an American military presence for an extended period of time, but that Iraqi politics required us to drive a stake through the occupation," Mr. Crocker said.

Even though Iraqi soldiers and policemen are still dying at the hands of insurgents, the focus of the American advisory mission will shift toward preparing Iraq's national defenses. Hundreds

of thousands of Iraqis died in the war with Iran in the 1980s.

“What we’re doing over the next 17 months is, you’ll see significantly more training on the capabilities we think they need to protect externally,” Gen. **Ray Odierno**, the top United States military commander in Iraq, said recently. In addition to the tanks, the Iraqis have purchased M-16 rifles, and Navy vessels, and are seeking to acquire F-16 fighter jets from the United States..

At the least, the purchases are likely to require contingents of American troops and private contractors to remain in Iraq beyond 2011 as trainers and advisers.

Amid the searing heat at an Iraqi Army base in south Baghdad in an area once called the triangle of death, a small unit of American soldiers are training Iraqi soldiers in a mission that will be far from complete by the end of next year: preparing the country to face foreign enemies.

“The I.A. is transitioning from a counterinsurgency fight to a national defense army, like a normal army, to defend from external threats,” said Lt. Col. Edwin J. Fiske, of the Third Infantry Division’s First Brigade, using the abbreviation for the Iraqi Army.

Colonel Fiske is the officer in charge of an American unit that is training Iraqis to use American Abrams tanks, weapons whose destructive capability was seen firsthand by Iraqis during the invasion in 2003. The Iraqi government has bought 140 of the tanks for about \$200 million, and the first few recently arrived in Umm Qasr, in southern Iraq.

Beyond the 2011 deadline, Colonel Fiske said, “I can’t foresee them not asking for some sort of assistance from us.”

American forces continue to leave here, to reach the president’s goal of being down to 50,000 troops by Sept. 1. It is a process that has played out during the summer against a backdrop of political paralysis and the recognition by Iraq’s political class that Mr. Obama is increasingly invested in the war in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the war’s legacy and the United States’ future relationship with Iraq is unsettled.

“Everybody considers 1 September, we’re abandoning Iraq,” General Odierno said. “We’re not

abandoning Iraq. What we're doing is changing our commitment from a military-dominated commitment to one that is more civilian-led. Which is what I think they need more."

*Duraid Adnan contributed reporting.*