

Enduring U.S. Interests in Iraq: The Three No's

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After four years of war, the U.S. debate on Iraq has of late been dominated by arguments over surges, benchmarks, timelines, and deadlines. Lost in this partisan debate is a largely accepted but often unarticulated truth shared by many Republicans and Democrats, including most leading presidential candidates: Even as forces in Iraq are drawn down, the U.S. has enduring interests in that besieged country and the surrounding region, and these interests will require a significant military presence there for the foreseeable future. These vital long-term U.S. interests in Iraq can be boiled down to Three No's: no regional war; no al Qaeda safe havens; and no genocide.

• *No Regional War: The United States has an enduring interest in Iraq's internal chaos not triggering regional conflict, and in external actors not further exacerbating Iraq's civil war.*

• *No Al Qaeda Safe Havens: The U.S. has an enduring interest in preventing Iraq from resembling Afghanistan on September 10th, 2001.*

• *No Genocide: The U.S. has an enduring interest in preventing genocide in Iraq.*

To secure these enduring interests, U.S. forces and civilian agencies will need to perform a number of core missions: deterring or responding to cross-border incursions or aggression; counterterrorism; preventing or stopping genocide; gathering intelligence and conducting

surveillance; training and advising Iraqi security forces; and defending key assets (e.g., airports and the U.S. embassy). Unlike today, U.S. forces would not be focused on providing security to the population in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq. These missions will require the following military capabilities: U.S. combat forces including quick reaction forces; special operations forces; combat service and combat service support capabilities; intelligence support; military and civilian advisors and trainers; and U.S. naval and air support, including basing and overflight rights in Iraq and neighboring states.

Although the Three No's will require fewer U.S. troops than are in Iraq today, a robust military and civilian presence will likely be needed in Iraq for the foreseeable future. These forces will likely number in the tens of thousands.

The Bush administration should be held accountable for its many mistakes in executing this war and for failing to properly resource its overly ambitious goals. But an exit strategy that does not account for enduring U.S. interests and the requisite capabilities to protect them would worsen, not improve, America's position in the region and the world. As Congress continues this critical debate, it is worth considering the Three No's as a foundation on which to build a bipartisan consensus over the way forward in Iraq.

The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is an independent and nonpartisan research institution dedicated to developing strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies that promote and protect American interests and values. CNAS is undertaking a major study of U.S. interests and options in Iraq that will be published in July 2007.

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