# Factors Affecting Stability in Northern Iraq

By Ramzy Mardini

IRAQ ENTERED A NEW security environment after June 30, 2009, when U.S. combat forces exited Iraqi cities in accordance with the first of two withdrawal deadlines stipulated in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Signed in December 2008 by President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the SOFA concedes that December 31, 2011 will be the deadline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. President Barack Obama, however, has signaled his intention to withdraw U.S. combat forces by August 2010.

Iraqi Security Force (ISF)-capability has improved remarkably since the 2007 implementation of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. Nevertheless, successfully pacifying Iraq without the ground presence of U.S. forces is contingent on a number of factors, not all related to ISF-readiness. This article highlights an array of critical factors that are likely to shape the new security challenges facing Iraq: the current unstable political and security environment in Mosul, rising Arab-Kurdish tensions over disputed territories and the possible politicization of the upcoming January 2010 parliamentary elections.[1]

### Continued Violence in Mosul

The withdrawal and relocation of U.S. combat forces outside of Iraq's cities represents a major change in the country's security environment. With a less proficient ISF patrolling Iraq's streets, "deterrence by denial" is less of an effective strategy; dissuading insurgents from challenging the government by demonstrating that they hold a grim likelihood for success is less credible absent U.S. forces. For this reason, insurgents are testing the ISF on its capability, resolve, and credibility as a fair and non-sectarian institution.

This litmus test is most likely to occur in Mosul, the capital of Ninawa Province. In its current political and security context, the city is best situated for insurgents to make early gains in propagating momentum. Geographically located 250 miles north of Baghdad along the Tigris River, Mosul is Iraq's second largest city with a population of 1.8 million.[2] Described as an ethnic tinderbox, the city is approximately 70% Sunni Arab and 25% Kurd. The remaining population is composed of Shi`a, Turcoman, Yezidis, and Christians.[3] The city's large Sunni Arab population makes it an attractive base for recruiting Sunni insurgents. Before Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, for example, Mosul was home to a sizeable Ba`athist presence, with some estimates suggesting that as many as 300,000 inhabitants were willing to contribute to military, security, and intelligence efforts under Saddam Hussein.[4]

In 2008, as much of Iraq reached an improved level of stability, Mosul continued to witness a high level of violence. On January 23, 2008, for example, a massive 20,000-pound bomb killed and wounded more than 300 people.[5] The next day, during inspections of the bombing site, a suicide bomber killed Ninawa's police chief.[6] As a result, al-Maliki sent additional Iraqi forces to the city in January 2008 to engage in a "decisive" battle against the remnants of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI).[7] Al-Maliki's "decisive" battle, however, achieved questionable success against AQI and other terrorist elements. In March 2008, the chief of special operations and intelligence information for Multi-National Force-Iraq called the city the "strategic center of gravity" for AQI.[8] Months later, in a new Mosul offensive directly commanded by al-Maliki called "Lion's Roar," the lack of resistance among insurgents disappointed some commanders who were expecting a decisive Alamo-style battle.[9]

Today, AQI and affiliated terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq, still possess a strategic and operational capacity to wage daily attacks in Mosul.[10] Although the daily frequency of attacks in Mosul dropped slightly from 2.43 attacks in June 2009 to 2.35 attacks in July 2009, the corresponding monthly death tolls have increased from 58 to 79.[11] This can be attributed to AQI's motive of executing more high-profile attacks since June 30.[12] On August 7, for example, a suicide bomber in a vehicle killed 38 people in front of a Shi`a mosque just outside the city.[13] A second attack near Mosul in Khazna village brought the total number of killed and injured to 400 in the Mosul-area in a 10-day period.[14] Speaking to Pentagon reporters via satellite at the time, Army Major General Robert Caslen suggested that the increased violence in Mosul was a sign that AQI had reconstituted its capability in the city:

> What has increased, however, is the capability (of al-Qaeda and its allies) to conduct the high-profile attacks…So you see an increase in the numbers of casualties post-30 June.[15]

1 Iraq has other major problems, including power shortages, unemployment, corruption, crime, and the many political disagreements, such as on a national oil law. The factors stated here, however, are considered most critical for affecting Iraq's new security environment because of their influence in potentially contributing toward nationwide destabilization and Iraqi death rates. One major security factor not discussed in this article is the slow government integration of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi security and civil sectors. For recent reporting on the latter issue, see "Slow Sunni Integration a Risk to Iraq Security – US," Reuters, July 31, 2009.

2 Eric Hamilton, "The Fight For Mosul," Institute for the Study of War, April 2008.

3 Ibid.

4 Eric Hamilton, "The Fight for Mosul," Institute for the Study of War, June 2008.

5 Ibid.

6 Sam Dagher, "Al Qaeda Goes North: Police Chief Killed in Mosul," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 25, 2008.

7 Joshua Partlow, "Maliki Sending Troops to Mosul," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2008.

8 William Selby, "Coalition Focuses on Clearing Mosul Terrorist Networks," American Forces Press Service, March 4, 2008.

9 As one report indicated, "the lack of significant resistance among the hardened fighters who had been operating in Mosul suggested the insurgency was offering Maliki and his American backers a message of their own: we fight on our terms, not yours." See Mark Kukis, "Maliki's Mosul Offensive," *Time Magazine*, May 16, 2008.

10 Jane Arraf, "Stabilizing Iraq: Why Mosul is a Special Case," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 24, 2009.

11 For statistics, see "Mosul Remains As Violent As Ever," Ground Truth, August 11, 2009.

12 This was the reasoning offered by U.S. Major General Robert Caslen. See "Al Qaeda Shows Resilience in N.Iraq-US Commander," Reuters, August 11, 2009.

13 Qassim Khidhir, "Talks Between Kurds and Hadba End Unsuccessfully," *Kurdish Globe*, August 14, 2009.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

It is likely that insurgents have altered their methods and adapted to the U.S. counterinsurgency posture. Open urban warfare has become less of an advantage for insurgents because the switch toward population-protection has motivated local Iraqis to collaborate and share information with the U.S. military. In response, political assassinations might become a more attractive tool for insurgents in undermining opponents, instead of battlefield engagements with the goal of taking and holding territory.[16] Suicide attacks have also increased since the United States withdrew from Iraq's cities.[17]

Only by demonstrating quick and decisive victories and denying the enemy success in Mosul can the ISF deter the sprout of insurgents elsewhere. If the ISF does not quickly establish itself as a capable and non-sectarian institution, perceptions about its weakness could solidify and gain momentum in the minds of insurgents throughout Iraq.

### Rising Ethnic Tensions in the North

A second major factor affecting stability in Iraq is continued ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds. In late July 2009, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, told reporters that tensions between Arabs and Kurds is the "No. 1 driver of instability" in Iraq.[18] The conflict is concentrated over the issue of "disputed territories," to which UN Representative to Iraq Staffan de Mistura claimed had "infected almost every aspect of the political scene."[19] The Kurds demand the political execution of Article 140, a constitutional provision seeking the reversal of past Ba`athist "Arabization" campaigns committed in northern Iraq.[20] Through a legal procedure of normalization, census and referendum, residents will determine whether the area under dispute will be under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Arbil or remain under the authority of the federal government in Baghdad. The oil-rich city of Kirkuk is at the heart of the dispute. Yet al-Maliki has purposefully delayed the implementation of Article 140 while maneuvering to escape his political dependency on the Kurds by courting Sunni Arab nationalists and southern Shi`a tribes.[21]

Today, Kurdish leverage over al-Maliki is waning. They fear that U.S. withdrawal will permit al-Maliki to behave more assertively in marginalizing them, even by violent means. As Dr. Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to KRG President Massoud Barzani, asserted: "If the problems which exist now cannot be resolved in one or two years, the withdrawal of the American army will lead to unrest in Baghdad and perhaps a return of sectarian fighting."[22] After a January 22, 2009 military move by al-Maliki to send the army's 12th division north toward Kirkuk, many Kurds viewed it as an operation to militarily encircle and cut off the city from being influenced by the surrounding Kurdish provinces.[23] By February 2009, fearful rhetoric suggested the possibility of an Arab-Kurdish civil war.[24] The debate over Article 140 would not be as problematic if the disputes were over an issue other than territory. According to one report, the Kurds claim somewhere between 30-40 disputed territories inside Iraq.[25] To date, not one has been resolved.

Growing tensions in Mosul between Kurds and Sunni Arabs is another major concern.[26] As Philip Zelikow, former counselor of the State Department, stated in February 2009:

> As important as Anbar is in the "Sunni story," Mosul may turn out to be much more significant for the future. The United States could find itself caught in the middle between Kurdish friends, local Sunni nationalists, and a central government in Baghdad that might be tempted to win Sunni friends by "dealing" forcefully with the Kurds.[27]

Violence in Mosul has increased since the provincial elections of January 31, 2009. The results of the elections in Ninawa Province shifted the balance of power away from the Kurdish parties toward the majority Sunni Arabs, the latter of whom had largely boycotted the previous provincial elections in January 2005. The winning Arab nationalist coalition, al-Hadba, has refused to appoint Kurds to any cabinet positions even though the Kurdish party carried one-third of the vote.[28] In response, Kurdish officials, including Ninawa mayors, have withdrawn from their posts in boycott.[29] The Kurds have refused to recognize the authority of the newly-elected Sunni governor Atheel al-Nujaifi over all of Ninawa.[30] They are concerned about his connections to

16 See the story on the recent political assassination of Harith al-Ubaydi, head of the Sunni parliamentary bloc, the Iraqi Accord Front: Rod Nordland and Abeer Mohammed, "Sunni Lawmaker Assassinated in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 12, 2009. For information on the rise of assassinations in Iraq, see Arraf. Also see Fatih Abdulsalam, "Assassinations Become Trademark of Iraq's New Political Epoch," *Azzaman*, June 14, 2009.

17 Omar al-Mansouri, "Suicide Bombers' Comeback Unnerves Iraqi Government," *Azzaman*, August 14, 2009.

18 Anne Gearan, "Gates: Kurd-Arab Friction Top Problem in Iraq," Associated Press, July 29, 2009.

19 Staffan de Mistura, "Challenges on Iraq's Election Day," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2009.

20 The Ba`athist Arabization campaigns were policies adopted by the Baghdad government to reduce the number of Kurdish inhabitants in areas deemed of strategic and economic value. Beginning in 1963 and commencing again in 1974 and 1984, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were systematically deported or killed and replaced with outside Arab families. The Kurdish language and other forms of Kurdish culture were outlawed and replaced with Arabic.

21 In August 2007, al-Maliki's government was saved from political paralysis by the formation of a Quartet Alliance, which involved along with al-Maliki's Dawa Party the two main Kurdish parties and the Shi`a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. For al-Maliki's political maneuvering to escape his dependency on the Quartet Alliance, see Anthony Shadid, "New Alliances in Iraq Cross Sectarian Lines," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2009; Scott Weiner, "Maliki Makes a Play for the Southern Tribes," Institute for the Study of War, November 6, 2008; Jeremy Domergue and Marisa Cochrane, "Balancing Maliki: Shifting Coalitions in Iraqi Politics and the Rise of the Iraqi Parliament," Institute for the Study of War, June 2009.

22 Eli Lake, "Kurds Anxious Over U.S. Withdrawal," *Washington Times*, April 17, 2009.

23 Ramzy Mardini, "Rising Arab-Kurdish Tensions Over Kirkuk Will Complicate U.S. Withdrawal From Iraq," *Terrorism Focus* 6:6 (2009).

24 Rahmat al-Salaam, "Kurdish Officials Warn of Potential Kurd-Arab War," *Asharq Alawsat*, February 19, 2009.

25 "Article 140 Must be Adhered To, Say Kurdish Officials," *Kurdish Globe*, December 4, 2008.

26 "Kurdish-Sunni Tensions In Nineveh," *Entrepreneur*, May 25, 2009.

27 Philip Zelikow, "The New Strategic Situation in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2009.

28 Quil Lawrence, "Arab-Kurd Conflict Deepens in Mosul," National Public Radio, July 2, 2009.

29 Ibid.

30 Sam Dagher, "Tensions Stoked Between Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis," *New York Times*, May 18, 2009.

powerful Arab tribes, members of the Ba`ath Party, and allegedly insurgents.[31] Some areas within the province are under the control of *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) forces because Kurds have labeled them "disputed" territories under Article 140. Yet al-Nujaifi has denied them the right to administer those areas, claiming in a February 2009 interview:

> The existence of disputed areas in the province does not imply that the Kurdish Region can put them under its control until a resolution is reached. These areas should be under one authority, that of Ninawa Province, which is controlled by the central authority in the capital city of Baghdad.[32]

In May 2009, Kurdish forces prevented the governor from entering Bashiqa, a town northeast of Mosul that was administered by Kurds. Al-Nujaifi claimed the Kurds had issued a "shoot to kill" order on him if he were to enter the area.[33] A similar episode occurred when Kurdish forces stopped the Ninawa police chief from crossing a bridge into a disputed territory.[34] A statement released by the KRG blamed the al-Hadba leadership for the recent deaths of 2,000 Kurds in Ninawa, claiming that they were "adopting a policy of national, sectarian and religious cleansing in Ninawa."[35] According to *Azzaman*, an Iraqi news source, Arab parties in Ninawa have decided to form a joint anti-Kurdish front to "deny Iraqi Kurds a say in the forthcoming parliamentary elections."[36]

In attempting to lower the heightened tensions in northern Iraq, on August 17 General Odierno proposed a tripartite deployment of U.S., ISF, and *peshmerga* forces to disputed areas in Ninawa.[37] Holding insurgents accountable for the upsurge in violence, Odierno blamed AQI for exploiting the discord between Arabs and Kurds. The deployment was described to be short-lived and directed toward protecting the local population and serving as a trust and "confidence-building measure" between the ISF and *peshmerga*.[38] The proposal, later to be discussed in high level meetings in September, comes at the backdrop of a January 2010 national referendum to be held on the continued U.S. presence stipulated in the SOFA, essentially making the redeployment of U.S. forces in Ninawa a complicated balancing act.[39]

### The Unstable Shadow of Elections

Another source of instability is the current period leading to the parliamentary elections in January 2010. The domestic challenge presented by this circumstance is two-fold: 1) the risk that securitization might be politicized by al-Maliki's government; and 2) the possibility that violence is used among political factions in hopes of undermining the other's electoral prospects. Unfortunately, both have occurred in the past.[40]

Today, al-Maliki has staked his 2010 electoral prospects on two performance goals in the eyes of the Iraqi public: 1) stabilizing and providing security to facilitate reconstruction and economic growth; and 2) solidifying his status as the national leader by ending the U.S. occupation. Iraq's former precarious environment, however, had placed these two goals in zero-sum terms: security was only maintained when U.S. forces remained engaged in Iraqi neighborhoods while patrolling the streets. The current decrease in violence inside Iraq has allowed al-Maliki to rapidly consolidate and centralize his power at the expense of parties advocating federalism, such as the two main Kurdish parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party—and the Shi`a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) headed by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.[41] Al-Maliki's first place finish in nine out of the 14 provinces that took part in the January 2009 provincial elections have instilled deep concern among Kurds and some Sunni and Shi`a parties over their waning ability to check al-Maliki's growing strength.[42]

One concern amidst increasing violence in Mosul and elsewhere is that al-Maliki may be hesitant to call for the assistance of U.S. troops stationed outside Iraqi cities. Hoping to stay consistent with his campaign message of achieving both security and sovereignty, such a situation forces the prime minister to make an unattractive trade-off: security versus credibility. As suggested by one U.S. military officer, "The last thing we want is to see this area fail because of some question of Arab pride in not being able to ask for our help."[43]

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31 Ibid.

32 Adel Kamal, "New Ninawa Governor Rejects Kurdish Allaince," *Niqash*, February 24, 2009.

33 Dagher.

34 Ibid.

35 "KRG Blames Hadbaa for Murder of Kurds, Displacement of Christians in Mosul," *Aswat al-Iraq*, August 14, 2009.

36 Jareer Mohammed, "Arabs Form Anti-Kurdish Bloc in Iraq's Mosul," *Azzaman*, August 10, 2009.

37 According to an Associated Press report, Odierno "said the deployment of the U.S.-Iraqi-Kurdish protection forces would start in Ninevah province, which includes the volatile city of Mosul, and then extend to Kirkuk and to Diyala province north of the capital." See Kim Gamel, "U.S. Iraq Boss Wants Troops in Disputed Land," Associated Press, August 18, 2009.

38 Liz Sly, "U.S. Troops May be Sent to Iraq's Arab-Kurdish 'Trigger Line,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2009.

39 Odierno has not stipulated the number of U.S. soldiers to be deployed in the new proposal. If the Iraqi people do not approve the SOFA in a referendum held on the same day as the January 2010 parliamentary elections, U.S. soldiers will be forced to leave a year earlier than the December 31, 2011 deadline agreed to in the SOFA. For recent reporting on the referendum, see Ernesto Londoño, "Iraq May Hold Vote On U.S. Withdrawal," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2009.

40 The use of the Iraqi Army has been suspected of serving al-Maliki's political goals in the past. In August 2008, al-Maliki gave direct orders for the Iraqi Army to enter the disputed city of Khanaqin, forcing out *peshmerga* forces from the area and raiding offices belonging to Kurdish political parties. Kurdish observers viewed the maneuver as an attempt to marginalize Kurdish influence in Diyala Province ahead of the 2009 provincial elections. For al-Maliki's suspicious and political use of the army, in particular before the 2009 provincial elections, see "Kirkuk and Khanaqin on Alert," *Kurdish Globe*, January 22, 2009. For more information on the standoff between the government and the Kurds in Khanaqin, see Ramzy Mardini, "Iraqi Military Operation in Diyala Province Risks Renewal of Kurdish-Arab Conflict," *Terrorism Focus* 5:33 (2008).

41 Al-Hakim's interest in federalism is based on the desire to form a semi-autonomous Shi`a region, similar to that of the Kurdish region, consisting of nine southern Shi`a provinces.

42 Iraq has a total of 18 provinces, but only 14 participated in the January 2009 provincial elections. The three provinces belonging to the semi-autonomous Kurdish region conducted their own provincial elections on July 25, 2009. Because of the political sensitivities surrounding the disputed city of Kirkuk, its province had not commenced provincial elections. The national parliament has yet to come to agreement on an election law for Kirkuk.

43 Arthur MacMillan, "US Army Commanders Say Pullout From Mosul Mired in Confusion," Agence France-Presse, June 18, 2009.

Reports already indicate that al-Maliki will leave his political bloc—the Shi`a United Iraqi Alliance, which is dominated by the federalism-advocate ISCI—in hopes of establishing a national coalition with Sunni Arab tribes and Shi`a parties devoted to a strong central government.[44] A broad-based alliance in the new 2010 parliament will decrease the chance of the Council of Representatives removing al-Maliki from power if he seeks further centralization.

Parties from all major ethnic groupings may come to believe that with the exiting of all U.S. combat forces in August 2010, elections earlier that year may become the last credible chance at balancing al-Maliki. The consequences that may result from the elections offer an enormous incentive for challengers threatened by Baghdad's drift to a strong central government to undermine the prime minister. Without the U.S. active in patrolling Iraqi cities, electoral politics may revert back to Iraq's violent politics when politicians engaged one another via militias on the urban battlefield.

**Conclusion**

Although violence has decreased significantly since the 2006-2007 highs, Iraq remains a fragile state riddled with poor institutions and intense subgroup identities. The security environment is no longer characterized by the constant presence of the "American pacifier." Today, the prospect for stability in Mosul and elsewhere are determined by an array of volatile factors.

The critical factor, however, toward satiating the power gap inherited in the new security environment is not only the capability and readiness of the ISF, but their integrity as a national and unitary institution dedicated toward the protection of all Iraqis. The local population's collaboration and trust in the ISF is critical for continuing a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Yet political developments in Mosul, rising Arab-Kurdish tensions, and conflicting interests—both foreign and domestic—toward the upcoming parliamentary elections risk politicizing ISF missions by suggesting them as a means for achieving political ends. Such prospects will permeate mistrust between the different ethnic segments of the population and the government. This could cause a security dilemma leading back to sectarian violence.

To alleviate the influence such factors could have, the United States must play the central mediating role. In particular, a power-sharing agreement between Kurds and Arabs in Mosul and in the Ninawa provincial government is crucial to the stability of northern Iraq. Even if a provincial power-sharing agreement is accomplished, however, northern Iraq is unlikely to remain stable if the problems surrounding Article 140 remain unresolved. In general, bringing about reconciliation between the contentious parties is the only guarantee of long-term stability absent the presence of U.S. forces.

*Ramzy Mardini is an analyst on international security affairs. He currently writes on Iraq affairs at The Jamestown Foundation, a foreign policy think tank in Washington, D.C. Mr. Mardini has served at the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, the Executive Office of the President, and the Center for Strategic Studies in Amman, Jordan. He holds an M.A. in international relations from the University of Chicago.*

44 For recent reporting, see Ammar Karim, "Iraq PM Set to Break with Shiite Coalition in January Polls," Agence France-Presse, August 13, 2009. For further reading about al-Maliki's strategy for a national coalition, see Shadid; Weiner; Domergue and Cochrane.