



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Winning or Losing the ‘End State’ in Iraq”
Center for Strategic and International Studies
1800 K Street, NW, Washington DC
Tuesday, March 8, 9:00pm – 10:30am

On Tuesday, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted an event in which **Michael Corbin**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs for Iraq issues discussed the strategic challenges facing Iraq as the State Department prepares to take the lead on U.S. operations in 2012. **Anthony H. Cordesman**, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at CSIS moderated the event and made opening remarks.

Anthony Cordesman began by stating that the situation in Iraq has already drastically changed as the level of violence and overall number of casualties has decreased significantly. With this change, comes great opportunity, he states, but a successful transition requires U.S. aid. He noted that Iraq’s oil wealth is not as high as many assume it to be and stated that the transition is important as U.S. withdrawal without aid would leave a power vacuum in the country that others, such as Iran, would seek to fill.

Michael Corbin opened by stating that Iraq is undergoing two transitions: first, the U.S. operational transition from a military to civilian led operation and second, an Iraqi transition. On the first transition Corbin stated that the U.S. has had a huge security dominated footprint in Iraq that is rapidly decreasing as we shift to civilian operations. The military was operating in all areas and advising Iraqis on a number of different things. The challenge now is to figure out how to replace vast military resources with a relatively smaller foreign service.

Corbin stated that the civilian led operations would focus on programs such as the Police Development Program, which seeks to promote rule of law through investment and training of judges, prosecution, and police; a foreign military financing program similar to the one implemented in Egypt; and the traditional development assistance through USAID that grants funding and trains civil society groups. Additionally, embassies are going to be strategically placed in an attempt to head off sectarian and ethnic tensions.

On the second transition, Corbin notes that much has changed since the beginning of the war and since 2006, when it seemed to many that the country was falling apart. Iraqis have rejected violence and have invested their interests in the political system. **He states that though the government formation period was long, it was also important as it allowed the Iraqis time to negotiate and form an inclusive government that includes all the different political groups and factions.** While this will hinder decision making capabilities to some degree, Corbin believes that it is also fundamentally important for peace in the country. Nonetheless, we have seen maturity in their decision making, he said, pointing to the decision to open up the oil industry to foreign involvement.

Corbin also discussed Iraq’s attempt to establish wider relations throughout the region. **Iraq is trying to engage countries in a constructive manner and while each country plays a constructive role in the future of Iraq, the government has been cautious not to let any one of them attempt to dominate the dialogue.**

Finally, Corbin discussed the challenges facing the Iraqi government especially following Dr. Iyad Allawi's statement last week that he will not participate in the Iraqi government. He stated that thus far the Sunni bloc has remained in the government and he is hopeful that they will continue to do so. **Corbin stated that the protests which are taking place in Iraq are over corruption the lack of adequate provision of services.** The violent responses in some areas, he says, were a result of local governors' decision and not the central government. He also stated that these protests will likely continue and that the U.S. is continuing to monitor the situations. Other challenges include education, unemployment and corruption. On unemployment Corbin states that the government must expand the agriculture sector and argued that the rule of law programs the U.S. State Department wants to implement are important for combating corruption. Additionally, he states that a free and fair media is necessary to hold governments accountable.

Addressing a question on whether the State Department has adequate funding from Congress to implement its programs in Iraq, Corbin stated that we had congressional support for the plan in Iraq through the FY2010 Supplemental and is optimistic about receiving funding for FY2011. He stated that **"if we can succeed in Iraq it sets the stage for success in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen."** Additionally, he argued that due to recent developments in the region a stable Iraq is more important than ever. He also reaffirmed U.S. support and attention on Iraq in spite of the region's democratic uprisings.

In response to a question on what process would need to take place to have troops remain there during the State Department led initiative, Corbin said that there will need to a formal process on the Iraqi side where parliament and the councils will need to come to a decision on this issue. This process has not yet begun.

Corbin responded to a question on eradicating corruption by calling for free media to hold officials accountable and noted the importance of independent judiciary who can go after the corrupt officials and an executive who is willing to enforce rulings against its own ministers.

Discussing U.S. support for Iraqi calls for earlier elections, Corbin stated that municipal elections were supposed to be held in 2009, however due to organizational issues, they were not able to be held. However, the government is moving forward with them now and is relying on those civil society actors who organized and monitored elections last year to play an important in these upcoming elections.

Corbin also discussed **the importance of decentralization in the Iraqi government arguing that it provides checks and balances.** He stated that the National Council on Strategic Policies, which was to be headed by Iyad Allawi, was supposed to help ensure a consensus on decisions of strategic importance. He stated that **while it seemed that Nouri Al-Maliki was heading towards the path of centralized executive decision making, the recent unrests seem to underscore the need for decisions by consensus.** He also lauded the work of USIP in helping teach and train Iraqis how to form caucuses in government. Corbin also noted that granting power to the provincial governments is also proving to be successful and healthy endeavor as it prevents tensions and conflict.

Addressing a question on contractors, Corbin stated that to a large degree, contractors do the work that the State Department will be taking over and that many of those who remain will primarily be security contractors. He states that the State Department will also be managing them differently than the Department of Defense has in the past and that the most important thing is to make sure the contractors have a good relationship with the host government, as we are now seeing in Iraq.