



# Iraq needs to walk before it can run

By Ranj Alaaldin

In his first State of the Union speech, President Obama reasserted his February 2009 promise that US combat operations in Iraq would end August this year, as part of a self-imposed withdrawal deadline which should see most of the 142,000 US troops out of the country. 'This war is ending, and all of our troops are coming home', said Obama. But despite the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) requiring a complete US withdrawal by the end of 2011, and despite Obama's commitment to the August withdrawal, when America's war in Iraq will actually come to an end is by no means certain and withdrawal, in any case, may not be a welcome development.

The word 'combat' has a somewhat flexible, conditional quality to it when it comes to the US troop presence in Iraq – and the devil is always in the details. Back in June last year, troops withdrew from Iraqi towns and cities as part of the initial phase of SOFA. Celebrated as a day when Iraq finally regained the first pieces of its sovereignty back, the reality, however, soon kicked: US troops were situated in military bases technically 'outside' urban areas, but nevertheless nearby and visible from the urban centres; US soldiers continued to patrol the streets with their Iraqi counterparts; US logistical operations continued; and US training and mentoring teams were guarded by their own combat soldiers. Finally, US intelligence and counterterrorism experts continued providing surveillance and mobile interception data, while, critically, any 'on-duty' forces had the right to defend themselves militarily when operating in Iraqi towns and cities.

This time round, the remainder of around 35,000 to 50,000 troops is expected to carry on in 'advisory' capacities, a status that may surpass the SOFA deadline, be acceptable to Iraqi and American officials and also be code for 'on

standby' if things get really bad. Obama has consistently maintained that on-the-ground developments and military heads will dictate the withdrawal of US forces and it is the continuing, deteriorating, events in the volatile northern areas of Mosul, Kirkuk and Diyala that are likely to keep US forces busy over the next five years and, therefore, beyond SOFA.

Disputes in these areas revolve around land and power but largely between Arabs and Kurds, meaning they could easily make the transition from local disputes to a wider, explosive, ethnic war. What gets largely unnoticed is that in these territories, confrontations between local Kurds and Arabs or Baghdad army forces and Kurdish Peshmerga forces have occurred on umpteen occasions, and continue to occur with the capacity to escalate into full-scale war which becomes avoided only as a result of US mediation.

Mosul, a traditionally Baathist stronghold, is headed in the provincial council by a Baath-affiliated group, al-Hadba. It is where the insurgency remains at its most ferocious and where it makes the most of Kurd-Arab tensions; checkpoints in the province, which was previously under Kurdish control after the Sunnis boycotted the 2005 elections, constitute demarcation lines with Arabs on one side and Kurds on the other. Diyala, meanwhile, is another one of the terrorist hotbeds where remnants of the insurgency, including Shia militias (or offshoots) of the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) army of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr have their backs to the wall but nevertheless remain as defiant and audacious as ever.

Individually, any one of these two areas could warrant a continued US presence in the country. But it is the oil-rich province of Kirkuk that constitutes the so-called 'mother of all disputes'. Its status remains unresolved, with both

the Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Regional Government looking to bring the ethnically mixed, but Kurdish-dominated, province within their administrations. Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution provides for a referendum to decide its status but this has been repeatedly postponed out of fears it could open up a plethora of potentially irreparable problems; problems, that is, the US and its allies would rather not confront (at least not yet). That the issue is not expected to be resolved any time soon suggests the US intends to maintain a prolonged troop presence in the country in any capacity necessary and acceptable, with the critical reason being that Kirkuk could decide whether Iraq collapses or survives.

## *The sad reality is that Iraq continues to be both a victim of its past and its diversity.*

In anticipation of the March 7 national elections, joint US-Kurd-Arab patrols were initiated in Diyala and have expanded to the other territories. Although set-up temporarily, this could be extended beyond the elections if it proves successful. It may indeed be a glimpse of things to come in the future.

The security situation in the north is merely a reflection of the sorry state of Iraqi politics. The sad reality is that Iraq continues to be both a victim of its past and its diversity. Having said this, elections in March could make diversity its greatest asset.

The last time Iraq held national elections in 2005, the contest was essentially an ethno-sectarian one; the Shia groups and individuals amalgamated into one list, the Kurds as another and the Sunnis were also grouped together (though many boycotted). This time round cracks are starting to appear.

Political scientists often highlight that division within majority identity groups is essential for stability in highly diverse societies. The Shias, the majority group in Iraq, ran as a single bloc back in the 2005 elections under the United Iraqi Alliance. This time round, the alliance, running as the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), failed to include the now major figure and current Iraqi premier Nouri al-Maliki and his Islamic Dawa Party (IDP). Further divisions

should follow the elections since the INA is essentially an alliance of convenience whose members have conflicting ideologies and political views but who nevertheless believe it is only collectively that they can dislodge the IDP from power (given its strong performance in last year's provincial elections). Moreover, it has many strong personalities vying for the premiership, which could become another dividing issue.

With respect to the Sunnis, who should vote en masse this time around, the Unity of Iraq Alliance (UIA) is led by Interior Minister, and Shia, Jawad Bolani; the alliance includes major Sunni figure Ahmed Abu Risha, the leader of the Anbar Awakening force who commands significant respect among the Sunni population. Elsewhere, the Iraq National Movement (INM) is headed by former premier, and Shia, Ayad Allawi and prominent Sunni figure Salih al-Mutlaq (who was recently banned from contesting the elections because of his Baath connections but might still take part after appealing the decision).

The Kurds will contest the elections with two main groupings, the Kurdistan Alliance front headed by both the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the new opposition party Change. The Kurds, however, are almost certain to remain unified on the outstanding issues.

What all this means is that no one group will win a parliamentary majority which emboldens mainly the Kurdish parties but also the UIA and INM, who will be lobbied to become coalition partners. But more importantly, it means parties could be susceptible to compromise over the outstanding disputes.

Iraq has, therefore, gone a long way since the grab-all-you-can exercise among its various factions in the aftermath of 2003. As the country matures and recovers from the torment of dictatorship, it is almost certain that politics will do so too. But it is likely to do so under US supervision only. Though security is improving, the insurgency is morphing, and has morphed, in accordance with this changing reality on the ground, as the recent and sporadic high-profile, mass-terror attacks have shown. Iraq is no longer at the brink, but will be a whisker away from it for some time to come. ■

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