

## *Iraq's Future in Iraq's Hands*

**Christopher Preble**

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The Obama administration should be commended for rethinking the size and mission of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Iraq. It should carry forward with plans to significantly reduce the number of personnel who remain. Such a disproportionately large contingent is not needed to advance U.S. security, and not desired by either the Iraqi people or the American people. Iraq's future will be written by Iraqis, not by Americans.

The plan to maintain a huge, long-term U.S. civilian and contractor presence in Iraq never made sense. The personnel left behind were too few to exert any meaningful pressure on the Iraqi government, but more than sufficient to engender continued hostility and resentment.

For all its fractiousness, Iraq's political class spoke with one voice when it called for the removal of all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. And it has never wavered from that course. These Iraqis are equally suspicious of a U.S. diplomatic contingent that is allegedly 16,000 strong. Those Americans who want the United States to remain in Iraq indefinitely have never shared the secret formula that would create a political order there that was more amenable to such a large number of foreigners.

A small group of "true believers" who were instrumental in starting the war want to double down on that losing wager. They assert that a large U.S. presence might forestall a possible civil war, and counteract Iran's rising influence. In reality, they simply don't know if a U.S. presence would have this effect. But, as before, they are willing to risk the lives of U.S. troops, and the fortunes of U.S. taxpayers, to cover their high-stakes gamble.

But we would compound the errors of the past decade if we follow the pro-war faction and ignore the lessons from this unhappy affair. We lack the wisdom, the knowledge and the authority to build foreign nations, and Iraq always posed a unique set of challenges. Iraqis will always be responsible for governing Iraq. It is their country, and Americans were never more than uninvited guests. We have overstayed our welcome.