

Toby Dodge

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Report

Original citation:

Dodge, Toby (2010) *Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: Bush's war: drawdown in Iraq*. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR003. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43582/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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Bush's War: Drawdown in Iraq

Toby Dodge is Reader in International Politics at Queen Mary, University of London and Senior Consulting Fellow for the Middle East at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Iraq, the central issue that destabilized George W. Bush's time in office, has provided Obama with a rare success story during his first year in the White House, whilst the US unemployment rate has proven stubbornly resistant to his bold economic policy initiatives. A major push on healthcare reform has forced this idealistic president to confront the compromising realities of doing politics within the belt way. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has openly undermined President Obama's call for a freeze on house building in the occupied Palestinian territories, in effect, removing the central plank of Obama's Middle East peace initiative. Finally, after a prolonged period of embarrassing vacillation and indecisiveness, the Obama Administration has inherited an Afghan policy that George W. Bush would be proud of. On Iraq, however, Obama has managed to successfully implement his key election promise of quickly reducing American commitment to the country, drawing down US combat forces and the money spent on reconstruction. To date, this has been achieved while politically motivated violence across Iraq has continued to drop. However, has this rare success story during Obama's first year been delivered by the new president's courage and commitment or has he simply benefited from the legacy of his predecessor and the policy initiative implemented in the last two years of Bush's second term?

CAMPAIGN PROMISES

In both the Democratic Primaries and the Presidential election, Barack Obama's policy on Iraq appeared to be unambiguous, bold and brave. It became his 'signature issue' during the primaries and clearly helped him win a decisive victory over Hilary Clinton with her more complex, if not mendacious, policy on the future of US involvement. During the election, the Iraq issue allowed Obama to draw a stark comparison with Senator John McCain. In doing so he convinced a large section of the American electorate that he could deliver peace with honour in Iraq, portraying McCain as being detached from both American and Iraqi realities. McCain was overtly criticised for simply continuing with the Bush approach, thereby tainting himself with all the problems that surrounded the president.

In contrast, Obama boldly stated that on his first day in office he would give the Joint Chiefs of Staff "a new mission that is to end this war". Obama's strict timetable for pulling out two brigades of US combat troops a month would mean that none would remain in the country by the summer of 2010. This formed the core of his plan: Turning the page in Iraq, launched in September 2007. The only caveat placed on this commitment was a "residual force" to be left in Iraq after the main bulk of American combat troops had left. Its role would be to train the Iraqi military, fight al Qaeda

and deal with the “potential re-emergence of Shia militias.” For a war-weary American electorate, Obama offered a seemingly unambiguous exit, a road home from the arduous and costly Republican adventure in Baghdad that had cost so much blood and treasure.

INHERITING THE BUSH LEGACY

It can be persuasively argued that two of the policies pursued by George W. Bush from January 2007 onwards made it possible for President Obama to successfully extricate America from Iraq without the country descending into another internecine conflict. At the height of the Iraq civil war, in January 2007, 3500 Iraqi civilians were murdered in one month. This forced George W. Bush to announce a new policy, a ‘surge’ in the number of US combat troops and their aggressive repositioning amongst the Iraqi population. This change in US policy and troop posture resulted in a steady decline in Iraqi civilian deaths. All those organisations collating casualty figures in Iraq agree that 2009 has seen the lowest death toll since the invasion in 2003. The Iraqi government estimates that 6,772 people were killed in 2008 and 3,492 in 2009 compared with 13,896 in 2006. This still makes Baghdad one of the most dangerous cities in the world and means that more people in Iraq are killed by terrorism than any other country. However, compared with the all-out sectarian carnage of 2006-7, this decline in the death rate does represent a major step forward and has facilitated Obama’s ability to rapidly reduce US troop numbers.

A second major legacy that Obama inherited from George W. Bush clearly aided his disengagement plans. On 27 November 2008, the Iraqi parliament ratified a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and a Strategic Framework Agreement. This formally codified relations between the Government of Iraq and the United States for the first time since the invasion. It was the passing of these two agreements at the end of 2008 that set the date for the end of the American occupation of Iraq.

The lengthy and at times antagonistic negotiations that resulted in the SOFA were indicative of how relations between Washington and Baghdad had been transformed long before Obama was elected. The process began in 2007, when President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki committed their respective governments to a legal agreement that would formalise long-term relations between the two countries in the aftermath of the invasion and regime change.

In March 2008, the US government sent a large team of lawyers to Baghdad to begin the negotiations. The complete rejection by Baghdad of the American lawyer’s first treaty draft signified how much the US had misunderstood the transformation of Iraqi politics over the course of 2008. By the time substantive negotiations on the SOFA began in Baghdad, Prime Minister Maliki had secured his grip on power and had boosted his popular support by repeatedly playing the nationalist card. As SOFA negotiations dragged on, Maliki increasingly couched his opposition to some of its more objectionable clauses in terms of Iraqi national sovereignty. The popular approval this won him encouraged an even tougher negotiating stance. In Washington, President Bush became ever more eager to conclude an agreement before he left office, bringing a degree of closure to the

most contentious issue of his presidency. The American presidential cycle and the growing confidence of the Iraqi Prime Minister combined to give much greater leverage to Iraq. The final agreement saw the Iraqi government achieve the majority of its demands and the US were forced into making a series of significant and far-reaching concessions.

The most important concession extracted from the US by tough Iraqi negotiating was an unambiguous timetable for US troop withdrawal. The final document left no room for doubt. First, all US combat forces were withdrawn from Iraqi cities, towns and villages by 30 June, 2009. As a result American troops ceased to have a sustained security presence in Iraq and were instead redeployed to a limited number of designated bases outside heavily populated areas. Once US forces were withdrawn to these bases, the agreement gave them two and a half years to leave the country. Article 24 of the treaty states that "all US forces are to withdraw from all Iraqi territory, water and airspace no later than the 31st of December of 2011."

The degree to which the Iraqi-American treaty, negotiated by George Bush, directly facilitated the successful realisation of Obama's Iraq policy is indicated by the fact that the SOFA goes much further than Barak Obama's own electoral promises. Obama's commitment to pulling US combat troops out of the country was balanced by his commitment to leave behind a 'residual force' of US troops. This force of around 30,000 would train the Iraqi military, fight al Qaeda and deal with Iraqi militias. Under the SOFA however, no US troops with any combat role can remain in Iraq after 2011. A training mission is certainly permissible but a US role in actively fighting al Qaeda or the Shia militias is expressly forbidden, effectively placing major constraints on Obama's own stated policy in Iraq.

IRAQI REALITIES

The final dynamic that has greatly aided Obama's ability to implement his Iraq policy has little or nothing to do with the influence of US policy. Instead, from 2007 onwards, Iraqi politics have been so transformed that a US troop presence became largely irrelevant. The first aspect of this transformation was the effect the civil war had on sectarian demographics in Baghdad. Those analysts who remained sceptical about the success of President Bush's surge instead blamed widespread population transfers triggered by the sectarian warfare that dominated Baghdad until 2007 for the reduction in violence. The Shia militias, the Badr Brigade and Jaish al Mahdi, deliberately set out to drive Sunni residents from mixed neighbourhoods and from Baghdad altogether. Estimates vary on how many people were displaced in this sectarian warfare but the US military estimates 350,000. Of these, an Associated Press survey carried out in March 2009 estimated that only 16 percent have returned to their former homes. This argument suggests that once the surge began in early 2007, the civil war had already succeeded in dividing Baghdad, driving a large number of Sunnis from the city. It is this sectarian division of the city that analysts argue reduced inter-communal violence. Thus, Obama could agree to the rapid reduction in the US troop presence across Baghdad since the Shia death squads had succeeded in creating religiously homogeneous communities. Those backing this explanation would point to an increase in bombings in March and April 2009, suggesting this was caused by the removal of a small number of security walls by the Iraqi government.

The second change in Iraqi politics that allowed Obama to reduce US troops without a return to civil war was the rapid increase in the power of the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the coherence of the Iraqi state. Nuri al Maliki became Prime Minister after months of negotiations in the spring of 2006. For the first three years, his premiership was chronically weak, beset by numerous plots to unseat him, a set of powerful cabinet ministers over which he had little control and a widespread perception that he was little more than

an American puppet. However, the extent to which Maliki consolidated power in the office of the prime minister became apparent in March 2008. Without US approval Maliki moved 30,000 Iraqi troops south to Basra to retake the city from the Shia militia, the Jaish al Mahdi. They met much stronger opposition than had been anticipated and defeat was only avoided by heavily reliance on American combat advisors and air power. However, the eventual re-establishment of government authority in Basra struck a widespread popular chord with an Iraqi population long subject to criminality and sectarian violence. Maliki went on to bolster his new found popular appeal in May 2008, by regaining control of the Sadr City area in Baghdad, the huge slum that had until then been dominated by the Jaish al Mahdi.

Maliki used this new-found Iraqi nationalism and his role as the champion of a strong Iraqi state to win the December 2008 provincial elections. He named his coalition, Dawlat al-Qanoun (State of Law), to remind the population that the Prime Minister's policies and actions had brought increased law and order to Iraq. On the campaign trail, Maliki stressed the success of the military campaigns in Basra and Sadr City as well as his role in challenging the Kurdish Regional Government's attempts to gain control over areas along its boundary with the rest of Iraq. In a key campaign speech, he set himself against the decentralised federal agenda championed by US Vice-President Joe Biden and damned the policies of key US allies in Iraq, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and their partners in government, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Amongst a generally fractured and diverse result, this statist and nationalist approach saw Maliki's coalition win the largest slice of the popular vote in nine out of the 14 participating provinces. Once the seats were allocated, State of Law won outright majorities in both Baghdad and Basra. It only failed to win Sunni-dominated Anbar, mainly Sunni Salah Al-Din, Shia-dominated Karbala, and the mixed provinces of Diyala and Nineva.

The increasing confidence of Prime Minister Nuri al Mailki and his assertiveness in negotiating a

very favourable Status of Forces Agreement with the United States indicates how Iraqi politics were transformed in the final eight to twelve months of George W. Bush's presidency. It is this transformation and the dramatic reduction in violence across the whole of the country that has allowed President Obama to successfully pursue his Iraq policy in a comparatively trouble-free way. Obama's electoral platform on Iraq was indeed bold and unambiguous. It allowed him to distance himself from the myriad foreign policy failures of George W. Bush whilst portraying his rival for power, John McCain, as both detached from the mainstream of American domestic opinion, offering little more than a continuation of previous Republican policy.

That Iraq has given Obama one of the few policy successes of his first twelve months in office is somewhat ironic. Success in Baghdad has been largely built upon decisions taken by his predecessor and the actions of Iraqi politicians, Nuri al Maliki amongst them, over which the new President has had little or no influence. If Iraqi politics continues to head in a positive direction over what is left of Obama's first term, then the President's good fortune begins to look like astute political planning. However, if violence starts to increase in Iraq and if the national elections scheduled for March this year do not go well, then Iraq will be once again be thrust onto the centre stage of American politics. Then Obama, who has greatly benefited from his predecessor's policies, is in trouble as he appears to have little by way of contingency planning if things do not continue to unfold in a comparatively benign fashion. ■