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W. Andrew Terrill Dr.

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THE DANGER OF SEEKING PERMANENT U.S. MILITARY BASES IN IRAQ

W. Andrew Terrill

In a June 25, 2005, address to the nation, President George W. Bush stated, “We will stay in Iraq as long as we are needed—and not a day longer.” This statement may initially appear unremarkable, but it is nevertheless an important and valuable assertion of policy that can be usefully applied to the concept of long-term basing rights in Iraq. Also, in an even more direct statement on the issue, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in September 2004 characterized the suggestion that the United States is interested in such facilities as “inaccurate and unfortunate.” While most senior policymakers are reluctant to rule out any option that they might like to rethink later, U.S. policy has been farsighted in ruling out long-term Iraqi bases.

Within the Iraqi context, the primary justification for retaining U.S. bases in Iraq would be to support the Iraqi governmental security forces after the majority of U.S. troops have withdrawn from that country. These are reasonable concerns, and it is important for the United States to stay in Iraq long enough to help address insurgency-related issues. Nevertheless, the reasons for staying will, in most circumstances, be strongly outweighed by the disadvantages associated with such a policy if they involve U.S. military assets that remain in the country after U.S. forces are no longer necessary to cope with the insurgency or if they involve a military presence that is clearly not directed at the Iraqi insurgents.

Any U.S. expressions of interest in long-term bases may seriously hurt the already fragile legitimacy of the Iraqi government, which the United States must seek to support. Resistance to basing rights by Western powers traditionally has been a central characteristic of Arab nationalist thought which is sensitive about issues of sovereignty and Western domination. In the current Iraqi political environment, such concerns cannot be casually disregarded by key Iraqi leaders. Even moderate Iraqi politicians fear that the United States may seek to dominate the post-Saddam Iraqi government. American bases could be seen as a central part of such a strategy, just as British bases were a key part of London’s ability to dominate Iraq until at least the 1940s. Additionally, anti-American radicals in both the Shi’ite and Sunni communities would be given the gift of a major issue with which to rally their followers. Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who has a strong following among Iraq’s most impoverished Shi’ites, has made opposition to U.S. influence in Iraq a central demand for his movement.

Perhaps most significantly, large and important Arab countries are seldom the most optimal places in which to place Western military bases. The presence of such facilities is widely taken to imply a certain higher level of Western influence over the government in question. Such a relationship is not only embarrassing with the public, but it is also a serious obstacle to seeking regional and Arab leadership and regionwide respect, especially at a time when anti-Americanism is high. Smaller Arab states, by contrast, have no serious chance of claiming Arab leadership, and this factor is not a consideration for them. Additionally, small wealthy states, such as Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, clearly see U.S. bases as an important source of protection from bullying and perhaps even military invasion by larger regional neighbors. These states are much easier to work with in time of crisis, and their facilities can meet the same operational requirement as bases in Iraq.