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REVIEW & OUTLOOK**Maliki's Withdrawal Card***July 9, 2008; Page A14*

A year ago, the conventional Beltway wisdom had it that Iraq was a failed state. Today, the same wisdom holds that it is less chaotic but still fragile, dependent entirely on a U.S. presence to survive. But judging by recent comments from Nouri al-Maliki, even this view may be out of date.

Addressing Arab ambassadors in Abu Dhabi on Monday, the Iraqi prime minister made headlines by saying his government was "looking at the necessity of terminating the foreign presence on Iraqi lands and restoring full sovereignty." Mr. Maliki has also been playing hardball with the Bush Administration in concluding a status-of-forces agreement by the end of the year, when the current U.N. mandate authorizing the U.S. presence in Iraq expires.


Mr. Maliki's comments are an assertion of confidence in his country's stability – and not without cause. Fully nine of Iraq's 18 provinces are now under domestic security control. Al Qaeda is being smoked out of its last urban refuge in Mosul. The Iraqi army has performed with increasing skill and confidence against Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which has also been ousted from its urban strongholds. Iraq will take in some \$70 billion in oil revenue this year. T. Boone Pickens, the Texas oil magnate, told us yesterday that Iraq could double its current production, to five million barrels a day, in coming years.

More important, Iraq seems to have been able to consolidate the security gains achieved by the surge, even as the last of the surge brigades deployed in 2007 are now returning to the U.S. That makes further reductions in U.S. force levels look increasingly plausible, a further validation of President Bush's "return on success" strategy.

Mr. Maliki's comments were also designed for domestic Iraqi political consumption – another sign of that country's robust democratic debate. With elections scheduled for the autumn, Mr. Maliki wants to show he's nobody's pawn, especially not America's. The Sadrists continue to play the nationalist card, even as they are themselves pawns of Iran. The rise of Iraqi nationalism is inevitable and largely welcome as a unifying national force. Remember all of those who said an Iraqi Shiite government would merely be a tool of Iran?

The Prime Minister is also making it clear to his Arab neighbors that his government is not about to collapse. Apparently, they believe him: Jordan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have

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announced plans to break the Arab diplomatic embargo of Iraq and return their ambassadors to Baghdad; the UAE has also forgiven \$7 billion of Iraqi debt. Perhaps Saudi Arabia and Egypt will follow.

The significant question now is the pace and extent of any U.S. withdrawal, and the nature of any long-term U.S. military presence. Despite Mr. Maliki's comments, Iraqi National Security Adviser Mowaffak al-Rubaie was quick to add that the call for a timetable for U.S. withdrawal was "conditioned on the ability of Iraqi forces to provide security," according to the Associated Press. In other words, Mr. Maliki is not endorsing the Barack Obama agenda of immediate U.S. withdrawal starting on January 20.

Our view is that Iraq and Mr. Maliki would benefit from striking a security agreement this year while Mr. Bush is still in office. Despite Iraq's impressive security gains, Iran can still do plenty of mischief through its "special group" surrogates. The U.S. can help deter Iranian trouble, especially with Iraq elections scheduled for this year and next.

Inside Iraq, a significant long-term U.S. presence would also increase the confidence of Iraq's various factions to make political compromises. And outside, it would improve regional stability by giving the U.S. a presence in the heart of the Middle East that would deter foreign adventurism. This is the kind of strategic benefit that the next Administration should try to consolidate in Iraq after the hard-earned progress of the last year.

Our sense is that, with the exception of the Sadrists, all of Iraq's main political factions want the U.S. to remain in some significant force. Iraq is now a democracy, however, and perhaps as their confidence grows the Maliki government and Iraq public opinion will think differently. But that kind of withdrawal timetable should be mutual – and not imposed by a new U.S. President acting as if the Iraq he'll inherit in 2009 is the same as the Iraq of 2006. That would mean U.S. forces could be withdrawn with honor, and in victory.

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