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After Zarqawi: The Way Forward in Iraq

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President Bush meets with senior advisors this week to assess the next steps in Iraq following the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Bush Administration should stick to its strategy for achieving a free and stable country, standing down U.S. forces as the Iraqis stand up to address the security threats in the country. If the President is to leverage the opportunity created by Zarqawi's elimination, four essential tasks require particular emphasis.

Priorities for Progress

U.S. policy must focus on actions that will enhance security, strengthen civil society, reduce sectarian violence, and lay the foundation for economic expansion and conditions that facilitate the further withdrawal of Coalition forces. Four tasks top the list:

1. **Push for Political Solutions.** Zarqawi could not have flourished without at least the tacit cooperation of some indigenous factions. They aided foreign terrorists for a reason: The big issues, they believe, are still unresolved. Initially, Sunnis mostly opted out of the political process. They remain concerned about the distribution of oil revenues, regional autonomy, and the role of Islam in governance. Violence was a way to secure a place at the table. But Sunni participation in recent elections, the new broad coalition government, and

Zarqawi's death offer an opportunity to turn in the "violence card." The United States should work behind the scenes to foster consensus in addressing the tough outstanding political issues.

2. **Fix the Police.** Progress is impossible without security. After years of trial and error, solid advances are being made in standing up Iraqi military forces. The police are another matter. They are under-equipped, under-trained, and infiltrated by militiamen. At best, they are untrusted by ordinary Iraqis. At their worst, some police contribute to the violence. Community policing is essential to make the streets of Iraq safe. The United States must push for more effective oversight from the Interior Ministry and rapid progress towards building a professional, non-sectarian, and effective police force.

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3. **Deal with the Militias.** The age of independent, armed militias in Iraq must end. After Zarqawi, many consider these militias the greatest security threat. They must be disarmed. The Iraqi government must put together strategy—a package of security, economic, and political incentives—that will culminate in disbanding the militias in a manner that lessens, rather than increases, communal violence. The United States must provide the support and resources necessary to get the job done.

4. **Promote Good Governance.** The United States has little to show for the billions invested in Iraqi reconstruction. Throwing more money at the problem will not make things better. There will be little hope for progress until there is strong consensus on a way forward among Iraqi leaders and a significant improvement in the overall security situation. The United States should focus its efforts on building up the effectiveness of the Iraqi government ministries—fighting corruption and increasing the competency and capacity of ministry staffs. If the U.S. is successful, the government will be in a better position to lead when security conditions improve.

Promoting an Iraqi government that can address political problems, improve security, and then deliver goods and services to Iraqis are the key to successfully completing the U.S. strategy. The President must ensure his Administration is focused on these tasks.

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