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It's Time For American Troops To Leave Iraq

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U.S. troops should leave Iraq. America's job is done.

Baghdad has no WMDs — there never were any to seize. Al-Qaida only showed up *after* America's invasion, and has been largely destroyed. Saddam Hussein long ago was captured, convicted, executed and buried. Democracy, such as it is, has been established and its survival does not depend on a foreign military presence.

Washington should close its 86 bases and bring home its 47,000 troops, 63,000 civilian contractors and mountains of military equipment.

The Obama administration's attempt to keep U.S. forces in Iraq is further evidence that America has become an empire. Not in the traditional sense of conquering territory. But certainly in the sense of garrisoning foreign lands to extend Washington's influence and creating advanced bases to impose Washington's will.

World War II mercifully ended 66 years ago. U.S. troops are still spread about Europe and Japan. The Korean War thankfully concluded 58 years ago. American forces continue to provide a security “tripwire.”

Serbian troops were ejected from Kosovo 12 years ago. U.S. soldiers are still on station. If it hadn’t been for the killing of 18 rangers in Mogadishu, American personnel probably would still be in Somalia nearly two decades later.

The Afghan war blazes after a decade and American officials say some troops undoubtedly will remain after the formal withdrawal planned for 2014. Despite their promise to pull U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, American officials are browbeating the Iraqi government to accept a continued occupation.

It’s an odd spectacle: representatives of the American people begging another government to let Washington spend more money and risk more lives for nothing. In the case of America’s other major security commitments, the allies do the begging.

The Europeans, Japanese, and South Koreans all enjoy their very cheap (if not quite free) defense rides. They know that if U.S. troops came home they would have to spend more themselves. Far better in foreign minds for American taxpayers to continue picking up the defense check.

At least these military commitments grew out of the Cold War. America’s friends once were weak, even helpless, while America’s adversaries looked strong, even deadly. But Washington stayed well past this moment of vulnerability, allowing allied nations to under-invest in their defense well after they had recovered economically and surpassed their enemies.

Now the U.S. government wants to stay, potentially forever, in a land where values, histories, religions and cultures divide rather than unite and in a country which never mattered much to American security. “What has ever been must ever be” seems to be the Defense Department’s motto.

Even after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said no to extending Washington’s military role, Defense Secretary Robert Gates expressed his hope that U.S. forces could remain in Iraq for “years to come.” Pentagon officials said they were awaiting “an answer,” meaning the answer they desired. Late last month Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insisted that Baghdad must decide “within weeks” because of the logistics involved in withdrawing or maintaining U.S. forces.

Exactly what the Pentagon wants to keep on station it won’t say. Secretary Gates said “It just depends on what the Iraqis want and what we’re able to provide and afford.” Providing bipartisan support for preserving America’s imperial presence was House Speaker John Boehner, who visited Iraq earlier this month.

For what purpose would U.S. troops remain? President George W. Bush and his aggressive neoconservative allies apparently expected to establish a permanent presence in the Middle East with which Washington could wage any number of other wars, such as against neighboring Iran.

The idea that the Iraqi people would willingly host foreign forces to bomb, invade, and occupy their neighbors and nations beyond was merely one of the Bush administration's many foolish fantasies about the conflict. Yet the imperial dream lives on. Wrote Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations: "Having active bases in Iraq would allow us to project power and influence, counter the threat from both Iran and al-Qaida, and possibly even nudge the entire Middle East in a more pro-Western direction."

The Obama administration speaks in less grandiose terms, with unnamed military officers talking of a "power vacuum," "regional instability," and warding off "threats." Iraq lacks adequate forces, especially heavy equipment, to secure its frontiers and airspace. Of course, this problem was created by the invasion. Saddam Hussein had a sizable military and helped constrain his neighbors, most importantly Iran. By blowing up Hussein's Iraq, Washington wrecked the balance of power and left the new Iraq temporarily weak.

Still, the possibility of smuggling or similar border incursions against Iraq shouldn't worry Washington: even if U.S. troops remained, they presumably wouldn't be used as border guards. More important, none of Baghdad's neighbors seem likely to embark upon a war of conquest.

Iran is bedeviled by a domestic political crisis, requiring the regime to focus on internal security. Moreover, the two nations' extensive religious, personal, and cultural ties discourage conflict. Boot worried that Tehran might possess "an extra element of coercive leverage," but Iraq shows no signs of slipping into an Iranian protectorate.

No one else is a plausible aggressor. Syria's attentions also are diverted within. Turkey cares about little more than Kurdish issues. Saudi Arabia has to worry about preserving its dysfunctional authoritarian monarchy. Jordan and Kuwait are small players militarily. American troops aren't necessary to guard Iraq against any of these countries.

The Kurds would like Washington to stick around, mostly to protect their autonomy *from* the Iraqi government. Such is the reality of America's new ally: it has enduring interests and faces persistent conflicts which run contrary to U.S. preferences. But to intervene on behalf of a group fighting Baghdad would put Washington at war with the new government over stakes largely irrelevant to American security. U.S. forces in effect would be working to destroy the very government they had helped create at enormous cost.

The only logical purpose of leaving troops in Iraq is to intervene in internal disputes, but on behalf of the Shia-majority regime. While no organized insurgency has reemerged, violence is ubiquitous and bombings and assassinations have returned. Sunnis remain disaffected while radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr remains an unpredictable member of the

governing coalition. The “Arab Spring” has generated extensive protests, some violently suppressed.

Although Iraq is nominally a democracy, the Maliki government long has exhibited thuggish tendencies, which have worsened with rising discontent. Disagreements between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi imperil the “unity” agreement between the two. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) worries that “Iraq could go to hell.”

Attempting to sort out such a mess could keep Washington busy for a long time. Although American troops no longer are on patrol, they remain in the middle of Iraq’s unruly power scramble. In mid-May Special Forces raided a provincial headquarters of Sadr’s group. And nowhere are Americans secure. In April the State Department warned: “Violence and threats against U.S. citizens persist and no region should be considered safe from dangerous conditions.”

Now the American troop presence is turning into another bitter political issue. Maliki has proved to be among the slipperiest of politicians, insisting that U.S. forces leave before announcing a “consultation” to achieve a consensus within his political bloc. He explained: “The government is a partnership government, so everyone is responsible for the decision. The government, the Parliament and political blocs, it’s everyone’s responsibility, and all must bear this responsibility.”

Some Sunni as well as Kurdish leaders want America troops to stay. Sadr, an important Shia member of Maliki’s coalition, insists that U.S. forces leave; he threatened to return his movement to violence if they remain. Sadr may be bluffing, but he could further roil Baghdad’s politics.

J. Scott Carpenter, an assistant secretary of state in the Bush administration, observed: “The basic agreement that led to the governing coalition — that allowed Sadr to throw his support behind Maliki — is now breaking down.” Baghdad University Professor Hakeem Mezher went further, noting that if Sadr “walks out on this fragile alliance, it will encourage other blocs to do the same. Such a step will definitely collapse the government, or at least it will be considered illegitimate to sign any new pact.”

The situation is unpredictable and combustible, which is all the more reason to leave it to the Iraqis. There’s no need for the U.S. military to garrison every trouble spot around the globe.

The only good news is that Americans suffer fewer casualties these days. The new killing zone is Afghanistan, where the troop “surge” has led to rising deaths and injuries. However, Americans can ill afford to pay for another permanent occupation with no important benefit to them.

One can imagine continuing intelligence cooperation in Iraq, but that requires only a very small “footprint.” Iraqi forces would benefit from additional training. However, that

sounds like a good job for the Europeans, who continue to shrink their militaries even as Washington continues to defend them from phantom threats. Or Baghdad could use its growing oil revenue to hire a private military contractor or two. And the Iraqi government can order needed military equipment without accepting an American military garrison.

Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Iraq in January and told American forces that Washington wanted to leave behind “a country that was worthy of the sacrifices” made by U.S. personnel. No amount of “stability” will be worth the 4500 dead Americans, perhaps 200,000 dead and far more wounded and displaced Iraqis, and two or more trillion dollars the war ultimately will cost the American people.

The Bush administration originally hoped for permanent bases, but the Iraqis said no. In seeking a long-term military presence President Barack Obama again has morphed into his predecessor. However, the American people should say no thanks even if the Iraqi government asks Washington to stay. The U.S. was created as a republic, not an empire. Americans should keep it that way.