

Despite Military Resistance, Our Footprint In Iraq Is Finally Shrinking

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Hubris, hypocrisy, and sanctimony are all constants of U.S. foreign policy. All came together in George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. Most foreign policy analysts, other than the neoconservative war enthusiasts who dominated Bush administration decision-making, recognize that America's unjustified aggression was a horrid bungle.

The U.S. broke international law, vilified European allies, wrecked Iraq, triggered sectarian war, victimized religious minorities, and empowered Iran. The human toll was hideous: Washington's war killed thousands of Americans, wounded tens of thousands of U.S. personnel, killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, and displaced millions of Iraqis. The invasion spawned murderous al-Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into the even more brutal Islamic State. Seventeen years later Iraqis are still dealing with their broken, sectarian government, bedeviled by powerful militias allied with Iran.

And American military forces are still occupying Iraq. Nominally there to prevent a revival of ISIS, they have been used by the Trump administration to confront Iran, the president's myopic fixation. Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action limited Tehran's nuclear opportunities and instituted an intrusive inspections regime, the administration killed the agreement and reimposed sanctions to destroy Iran's economy. The president insisted that Tehran would soon surrender after acknowledging U.S. (and, indirectly, Israeli and Saudi) suzerainty to win financial relief.

Instead, the Iranians contemptuously refused to even talk with the president. Iran also reduced its potential breakout time to build nuclear weapons, interfered with Gulf oil traffic, bombed Saudi oil facilities, cooperated with Venezuela, and fomented attacks by allied Iraqi militias on American troops. The latest rocket strikes on a U.S. base were less than two weeks ago. In the meantime, China cut an economic and political deal with Tehran while Europe continued to side with the Islamic Republic against the administration on the issue of UN sanctions. The U.S., not Iran, became more isolated. Rarely has a foreign policy backfired so spectacularly.

Washington's treatment of Iraq as occupied territory may be even more shocking. When the Iraqi parliament voted in January to request the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the administration flatly

refused. The State Department sounds like the British colonial office: “At this time, any delegation sent to Iraq would be dedicated to discussing how best to recommit to our strategic partnership—not to discuss troop withdrawal.” The president even threatened to impose sanctions on Baghdad.

The presence of American troops appeared to fulfill the original neocon fantasy of the spoils of victory over Saddam Hussein: permanent bases from which U.S. troops could attack Iran. Ignoring history, politics, culture, religion, and geography, American officials also wanted Iraq to cut economic ties with its majority-Shia neighbor.

Since then a new prime minister has been appointed. Mustafa al-Kadhimi appears committed to charting a more independent course and reining in the pro-Iranian militias. But it will be no easy task. In July Hisham al-Hashimi, a government adviser and critic of such forces (as well as of ISIS), was murdered outside of his home. Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein admitted: “The influence of Iran is there. This is part of the reality.”

Last week Hussein came to Washington for the latest strategic dialogue. He and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were all smiles, though the resulting statement leaned toward Baghdad. There was talk of economic, environmental, energy, and health cooperation. More important, the two governments declared: “the United States reaffirmed its respect for Iraq’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and relevant decisions of the Iraqi legislative and executive authorities.”

That would seem to preclude another declaration that U.S. forces were staying no matter what and threat to sanction Baghdad, let alone repeat of the Qasem Soleimani strike, which occurred on Iraqi soil and killed numerous Iraqis.

On security, the two governments lauded cooperation against ISIS and the “transition to a new phase focused on training, equipping, and supporting the Iraqi Security Forces. The Iraqi government expressed its gratitude to the Global Coalition and asserted its willingness to facilitate this transition and confirmed its obligation as host country to provide protection for the Coalition’s personnel and diplomatic facilities in Iraq. Adapting to the requirements of this new phase, the Global Coalition has been able to depart from some Iraqi military bases and reduce combat forces in Iraq. The two sides plan on separate technical talks to manage the timing and transition to the new phase, including any associated redeployments from Iraq.”

Baghdad’s promise to protect U.S. forces from Iranian-backed militias, is only that, a largely unenforceable promise. In return, Washington agreed to partial withdrawals and expectations of future redeployments. This was a dramatic reversal from January, though the administration provided no timetable.

President Donald Trump, who met with al-Kadhimi, said: “We have been taking our troops out of Iraq fairly rapidly, and we look forward to the day when we don’t have to be there.” He added: “We’ll be leaving shortly.” Much obviously depends on what “shortly” means. Pompeo said that would be “as soon as we can complete the mission.” In Afghanistan and Syria the president similarly pushed withdrawals against strong resistance within his administration.

Kadhimi focused more on purpose than numbers. He said: “We definitely don’t need combat troops in Iraq, but we do need training and capacity enhancement and security cooperation.” Hussein explained: “We decided both sides to reshape the existence of the American forces there. We need the Americans but in a different way.”

U.S. military leaders remained defiant, apparently hoping to remain. Despite regular attacks—there have been at least 32 over the last 10 months on American targets, in and out of the Green Zone—Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, commander of CENTCOM, insisted that “We’re not going to quit the region in response to Iranian pressure.”

But as long as Americans are in Iraq, they will remain at risk.

Last week a group of Iran-allied militias denounced the prime minister for “breaking his promise” and allowing Trump to “dictate its orders, and to pave the road for the U.S. to continue expanding domination on the region and stealing Iraq wealth.” They promised to continue their strikes on U.S. forces. Washington was uncharacteristically restrained, issuing no threat to retaliate, in contrast to the past.

In short, much has changed since January. The latest strategic dialogue talked more of troop withdrawal than military recommitment. After the Trump-Kadhimi meeting American forces pulled out of another Iraqi base, Taji, located just a dozen miles north of Baghdad. The U.S. footprint is inexorably shrinking.

It is time to bring the U.S. military home from Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. The region no longer can be considered vital. Israel is a regional superpower, well able to defend itself. The Mideast also has lost its energy stranglehold. If nations still dependent on Gulf oil traffic want to safeguard their supplies, they should work together with the sellers. There is no reason for Washington to provide escorts for Chinese petroleum shipments.

Although Iran is a malign authoritarian power, Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is even more repressive, reckless, and dangerous. Rather than take Riyadh’s side in the ongoing sectarian struggle, the U.S. should encourage development of a new regional balance of power.

In doing so, the U.S. also should encourage Kadhimi’s search for a new equilibrium with Iran. That is the best Washington is likely to get. He made clear he will not join the Trump administration’s anti-Iran crusade: Kadhimi visited Tehran before coming to the U.S., called Iran and Iraq brothers, and thanked Tehran for its past assistance. He emphasized that “Iraq is a country that won’t allow any aggression or challenge to Iran from its territory.”

The only vaguely plausible argument for staying in Iraq is to fight the Islamic State. That claim should remind the American people of the Bush administration’s counter-productive invasion, which gave the world ISIS. When members of the same neoconservative Greek chorus propose new foreign misadventures, whether under a second Trump term or first Biden administration, Americans should remember the source and say not just no, but hell no!

In any case, the U.S. never was necessary to defeat the Islamic State. Nor is Washington’s current 5,200-person deployment necessary today. The Islamist group was arrayed against every nation in the Middle East: Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and the Gulf States. They had far greater firepower, troop numbers, and wealth. However, Washington’s intervention allowed those powers to set other, largely hostile and destabilizing, priorities: Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates attacked Yemen, Syria and Iran focused on Syrian insurgents, Turkey targeted Syrian Kurds, and Israel bombed Iranian forces in Syria.

Although Iraqi units essentially collapsed in 2014 against the Islamic State, Baghdad's troops have done much better since then. They would benefit from additional training, but that does not require the presence of either combat troops or even Americans. Europeans, who have provided training in the past, could pick up the slack. After all, they created the artificial national boundaries which continue to contribute to today's "endless wars."

The U.S. is a superpower. It has many interests, but few are important, let alone vital. Such is the case of the Middle East.

The election-minded president desperately needs some foreign policy accomplishments. Three-quarters of Americans say they want the U.S. out of Iraq. It is time to finally and completely terminate George W. Bush's bloody blunder.

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