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Few GOP hopefuls have clear stance on Middle East

BY [MAX FREUND](#) | DECEMBER 01, 2011 7:20 AM

Ron Paul and Jon Huntsman want the troops home, period. The other Republican candidates for president, however, are not so enthusiastic.

But candidates aren't the only ones split on how to deal with the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Experts in the field take different stances about whether troops should be stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan — and how many it takes to do the job.

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, is the senior author of the Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan Index projects. In an interview with *The Daily Iowan*, he disagreed with some of the caucus contenders that troops should come home.

"I fundamentally disagree with Huntsman and Paul: somewhere between a major mistake, and simply irresponsible," O'Hanlon said. "To do that is to squander all efforts we made, just picking up and leaving in mid-mission, and in some ways a betrayal of the Afghan people we have been working with."

The Afghanistan and Iraq wars — which began in 2001 and 2003, respectively — have totaled over 6,000 U.S. troop fatalities.

The U.S. Department of Defense's budget has grown from just under \$300 billion in 2001 to over \$550 billion for the fiscal 2012.

The United States entered war in Iraq because Bush administration officials claimed then-dictator Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Saddam was hanged in 2006. The Afghanistan war, which began as a way to fight terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden on their own soil, hit a major milestone in this past spring, when U.S. Navy SEALs successfully killed Bin Laden.

President Obama announced in October that all combat troops will return from Iraq by the end of this year. In June, Obama promised he would pare down the number of troops in Afghanistan to 68,000 by the fall of 2012.

"My preference is we stay at 68,000 for all the fighting season of 2013," O'Hanlon said, noting that while he does not endorse any of the candidates, Mitt Romney appears to hold the same view.

"I think Mitt Romney is finding his voice a bit more and a bit more willing to commit to a longer presence in Afghanistan, and a longer presence than some people would like, and I am glad to hear that from Mitt Romney."

Ultimately, most of the GOP candidates have not come out with a concrete stance regarding troop numbers or the duration they should remain overseas, a tactic that O'Hanlon said he sees as political positioning.

"What you are hearing from most of the field is they are strong on national-security issues and will position themselves that way. If Obama shows any weakness or floundering, they want to be prepared to be stronger defenders of American security issues," he said. "But they don't want to defend war too vocally, because it has become so unpopular with the American public."

A longer presence in the Middle East is not something that all experts agree is the right decision.

Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies for the Cato Institute, said the fact that some candidates seem committed to retaining troops in Iraq and Afghanistan is an example of leaders being unable to learn from our experiences over the last 10 years.

"Has it been a shining success so we keep doing what we doing? Or do they say as a matter of fact a lot of what we have been doing hasn't worked out well, and it is not the fact that we did it wrong, but that the strategy itself is wrong," Preble said. "I am a little fearful [some candidates] have not come round to that position, because the American people clearly have."

One of those Americans is Mike Ferner, the director for Veterans For Peace.

"I am glad there are a couple of Republican candidates that are saying we have to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan because we certainly need to," he said.

Veterans For Peace is a national organization composed of veterans who claim to be "focused on abolishing war as an instrument of national policy" — a viewpoint Ferner said the candidates calling for increased presence in the Middle East do not understand.

"We are the best recruiting mechanism for terrorist groups of any sort, just by the way we conduct our foreign policy," Ferner said of the U.S. troop presence abroad. "I think candidates who think we are doing something good in Iraq and Afghanistan just don't understand what the implications are for our foreign policy."

But when troops do come back, experts point out that the U.S. needs to have a system in place to subsume them back into the economy.

"We are shrinking the military back to peace-time sizes, and that puts lots of people back into the workforce, into the present economy that may not be ready to absorb them," said John Mikelson, the University of Iowa veterans center coordinator.