



# Oil, a Deadline, and Syria: 6 Facts Left Out of Obama's Iraq Speeches

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Two and a half years after the Obama administration withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq — fulfilling one of the president's campaign promises — the American military reengaged in combat operations when two F/A-18 jets dropped 500-pound bombs on Islamic militants last Friday.

As U.S. Central Command reported that U.S. planes and drones have conducted a number of “successful” airstrikes “to defend Yazidi civilians being indiscriminately attacked” by Islamic State terrorists near Mount Sinjar, where thousands, or even tens of thousands of men, women, and children have taken refuge. U.S. airstrikes are aimed at breaking the siege so those families can be rescued, President Barack Obama noted in his weekly address on August 9. He specified, as he has on numerous occasions, that the United States “cannot and should not intervene every time there's a crisis in the world.” But “when countless innocent people are facing a massacre, as IS continues its systematic destruction of the entire Yazidis people” — action equitable with genocide — America must intervene, Obama reasoned. The defense of Erbil — a northern Iraqi city home to an American consulate and the capital of the oil-rich Kurdish Regional Government — is also paramount. The approach of well-armed IS guerrillas, who blew past U.S.-trained and equipped Iraqi government forces over the course of the last several weeks and now control much of the country, forced the Obama administration to step up U.S. involvement in the Iraqi conflict last week.

“Now, even as we deal with these immediate situations, we continue to pursue a broader strategy in Iraq,” stated the president in an August 9 update on the United States' unfolding military operations in the country. In other words, by providing humanitarian aid and targeted airstrikes on IS terrorists, the U.S. is both helping to “prevent these terrorists from having a permanent safe haven from which to attack America,” and allowing the “people of Iraq have the opportunity for a better future — the opportunity for which so many Americans gave their lives in Iraq in a long and hard war.”

The White House has published thousands and thousands of words on the situation in Iraq, but that slew of press releases leave a number of key questions unanswered.

## 1. What does the Obama administration hope to accomplish?

The Obama administration has said the ultimate goal is a stable Iraqi government. A stable Iraqi government must be one that represents the country's plethora of religious and ethnic minorities. "Once an inclusive government is in place, I'm confident it will be easier to mobilize all Iraqis against ISIL, and to mobilize greater support from our friends and allies," said the president Saturday. "Ultimately, only Iraqis can ensure the security and stability of Iraq," he added. "I think, a big mistake for us to think that we can, on the cheap, simply go in, tamp everything down again, restart without some fundamental shift in attitudes among the various Iraqi factions. That's why it is so important to have an Iraqi government on the ground that is taking responsibility that we can help, that we can partner with, that has the capacity to get alliances in the region. And once that's in place, then I think we end up being one of many countries that can work together to deal with the broader crisis that ISIL poses."

Therefore, what the United States must do, he explained, "is to preserve a space for them to do the hard work that's necessary."

Others would argue his administration's objections are more closely linked to oil. Sure, humanitarian aid will be dropped to the Yazidis. But "Obama's defense of Erbil is effectively the defense of an undeclared Kurdish oil state whose sources of geopolitical appeal — as a long-term, non-Russian supplier of oil and gas to Europe," wrote *The New Yorker's* Steve Coll, dean of the Columbia School of Journalism and intelligence and national security expert. The evidence of that interest, he noted, is Obama's decision to not evacuate citizens in that region but rather launch a bombing campaign, of undetermined length, to defend Kurdistan's status quo. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. set up a government that formalized the Kurdish semi-autonomous government, which has become a staunch American ally. The region's oil fields have boomed in the post-war years, attracting a number of drilling companies, including ExxonMobile and Chevron. The Kurds — a largely Sunni Muslim people who are involved in a century-long struggle for independence and suffered genocide under Saddam Hussein — have been fighting the Islamic State militants for two months with outdated weapons. The status quo will leave the Kurds a discontented participant in Iraqi nationality unity, a mission the Kurds must pursue because they are dependent on Baghdad for oil revenues. Given the United States' support of the Kurds, and the ease with which Americans living in the region — many of whom are involved in the oil industry — could be evacuated, Coll argued that Obama's justification of the airstrikes "seemed a little incomplete."

## **2. Are U.S. airstrikes enough to defeat ISIS in Iraq?**

The Iraqi government has said the airstrikes have been effective, according to *The Associated Press*. The Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights spokesperson Kamil Amin told *CNN* that as many as 20,000 Yazidi Iraqis have been rescued thus far, although thousands remain trapped on Mount Sinjar, subsisting on food and water dropped by U.S. airlifts. Meanwhile, Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona has called the airstrikes "ineffective." On Monday, the Pentagon said the four days of airstrikes have slowed the advance of IS toward Erbil, but the Sunni militants remain on the offensive. "We may have blunted some tactical decisions to move farther east to Erbil, but what I

expect ISIL to do is to look for other things to do,” Lieutenant General Mayville said in a Pentagon press briefing, using an alternate name for the terrorist organization. “In no way do I want to suggest that we have effectively contained or broken the effect of ISIL.”

But to really judge whether U.S. airstrikes will be effective, the administration’s goals must be further inspected. While the president’s stated objectives are clear enough, the “goals that animate the renewed U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq are a muddle,” as Benjamin H. Friedman, a Cato fellow in defense and homeland security studies, noted in a Friday analysis. He argued that evacuating Americans from Iraq, who were there primarily to help the Iraqis fight IS, could be done without bombing, meaning the administration has “some broader objective.” That broader objective is likely not humanitarian aid alone. After all, that objective can be easily incorporated into a broader mission. Or as Richard Betts — a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and director of Columbia University’s Institute of War and Peace Studies — argued almost twenty years ago, impartial humanitarian intervention is an ideal, not a reality. Furthermore, rescuing the Yazidi will not eliminate the danger faced by all Iraqi civilians, especially those who are an ethnic or religious minority. So, to ensure the humanitarian crisis is over, the Islamic State must be stopped.

Friedman’s assessment does not entirely undermine the reasons the Obama administration gave for launching airstrikes; he merely asserts that the president’s goals may not be as easy to accomplish, or as straightforward, as his numerous speeches suggest. “The logic that compels us to stop ISIS’ advance today seems likely to suggest bombing it continually,” he wrote. “If ISIS is our problem, we are probably on the wrong side of the Syrian civil war.” Washington has provided aid to the moderate opponents, meaning not those with ties to the Islamic State, in their fight against Bashar al-Assad’s government. As Obama said in his foreign policy-defining commencement speech at West Point in late May, America must “help the Syrian people stand up against a dictator who bombs and starves his own people.” By “helping those who fight for the right of all Syrians to choose their own future, we are also pushing back against the growing number of extremists who find safe haven in the chaos.” But by providing assistance to the rebels, the U.S. is weakening the very Syrian government forces that are pursuing IS. “We cannot foster insurgency in Syria and suppress one Iraq without contradiction,” Friedman noted.

Friedman identified another contradiction. Obama has said that bombing Iraq will empower the country to “confront the crisis” presented by IS by creating “a new government that represents the legitimate interests of all Iraqis,” and he has promised that once a new government is formed, U.S. aid will increase. However, that promise contains an implicit message: if Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is removed from office and efforts are made to make government more inclusive, more support will come. But Friedman argued that additional U.S. support may not foster a more inclusive Iraqi government. While Iraqi president Fuad Masum has formally nominated a candidate to replace Maliki, who is fighting to maintain power, any other Shi’ite leader would receive the same security from increased U.S. airstrikes, and that would only reduce their incentive to give representation to the Sunnis. Or, in other words, a stable Iraq government may be at odds with a unified government.

In conclusion, Friedman notes that, “Responsible policymaking requires choosing among competing objectives.” In his opinion, the president was right to withdraw troops from Iraq when he did so, but Obama cannot “insist that we sacrificed nothing in doing so.” The administration should take note that the United States has been bombing Iraq periodically for more than two decades, with the America’s leaders promising every time violence is renewed that a little more force will solve the problem.

Comparatively, Michael O’Hanlon argued in a piece for the Council on Foreign Relations that Obama’s critics should take a breath before criticizing the president’s goals in Iraq. “Obama’s restraint in providing major assistance to the central Iraqi government in Baghdad has likewise been prudent, since, by coming to the aid of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki too soon, the United States would squander the leverage it could use to persuade the Iraqi government to find a different and better prime minister,” he wrote.

### **3. What is the timetable for U.S. involvement?**

“I’m not going to give a particular timetable, because as I’ve said from the start, wherever and whenever U.S. personnel and facilities are threatened, it’s my obligation, my responsibility as Commander-in-Chief, to make sure that they are protected,” Obama said in his August 9 statement. But he added, “just to give people a sense, though, of a timetable — that the most important timetable that I’m focused on right now is the Iraqi government getting formed and finalized. Because in the absence of an Iraqi government, it is very hard to get a unified effort by Iraqis against ISIL. We can conduct airstrikes, but ultimately there’s not going to be an American military solution to this problem. There’s going to have to be an Iraqi solution that America and other countries and allies support. And that can’t happen effectively until you have a legitimate Iraqi government.”

Of course, the president’s insistence that U.S. involvement will be both limited to airstrikes and effective in stabilizing Iraq has not inspired confidence that the country’s military engagement will be short lived. A majority of Americans are opposed to restarting military operations in Iraq, and likely, their primary concern is how the U.S. role can remain limited. In June, a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll found that 45 percent of the American public supported launching airstrikes against Sunni militants in Iraq, while a 55 percent majority of respondents to a July Pew survey said the United States does not have a responsibility to do anything about the violence in Iraq.

“You just expressed confidence that the Iraqi government can eventually prevent a safe haven. But you’ve also just described the complications with the Iraqi government and the sophistication of ISIL. So is it possible that what you’ve described and your ambitions there could take years, not months?” a reporter asked the president at Saturday’s press briefing. In response, Obama said: “I don’t think we’re going to solve this problem in weeks, if that’s what you mean. I think this is going to take some time.” He then acknowledged that the U.S. military cannot solve Iraq’s unity problems.

### **4. Should the U.S. fear a terrorist blowback?**

The Islamic State has openly threatened the United States. In an audio message distributed in January, IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, warned Americans that “soon we will be in direct confrontation.” Last week, an Islamic State spokesperson vowed that “we will raise the flag of Allah in the White House.” That rhetoric is both chilling and bombastic at once, but IS has so far directed its efforts only toward the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, with the goal of capturing territory and forming an Islamic caliphate. Yet U.S. counterterrorism officials believe the group may now make attacking Americans a greater priority.

Evidence validating that concern can be found on Twitter and in radical Islamic forums. Jihadi media group, Tarjuman al-Asawirti, proposed targeting oil interest in the Persian Gulf, according to the *International Business Times*. “The Arabian region will be ignited, the oil wells and supply lines to the West will be blown up. You have entered a battle with lions of a different type. To kill America lies in oil. It must be cut to end the life of America. Destroying the destructive American economy will bring America to its knees, and this is through the supply lines in the Gulf,” read a recent tweet.

Such threats are “one of the downsides of U.S. involvement” in Iraq, Michael Morell, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told *CBS News* in June. “The more we visibly get involved in helping the [Iraqi] government fight these guys, the more we become a target.” Government officials would not comment to *Time* magazine whether the threat level has escalated since the bombings began. But, as Daniel Benjamin, a former top State Department counterterrorism official, told the publication, “U.S. strikes against ISIS may well raise that group’s interest in carrying out terrorist attacks against U.S. targets.” He did acknowledge that the “significance of that shouldn’t be overstated.” Experts agree that the threat is hard to calculate. Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy told *Time* that the Islamic State would likely plan “attacks whether the U.S. conducts targeted air strikes or not.”

## **5. How much is this going to cost?**

The United States has spent approximately \$800 billion tied to its operations in Iraq. In 2012 alone, the Department of State spent \$3 billion on its post-war mission, and as economists noted last year, a number of unforeseen political and security costs likely remain. Recent airstrikes could well fall into that category, even though the Obama administration has remained publicly confident in its decision to withdraw troops from Iraq, and refuses to cave into critics and admit that the U.S. left too early. Regardless of the debate over that decision, it is important to consider how much renewed military options will cost, as one reporter asked the president over the weekend. According to Obama’s reply, the United States is “operating within the budget constraints that we already have. We anticipate, when we make our preliminary budgets, that there may be things that come up requiring us to engage. And right now, at least, I think we are okay.”

## **6. Did the U.S. pull out of Iraq too soon?**

This is question that has been, and will be, long debated, and likely it will take many years before any consensus is reached.

One expert who has argued the U.S. left before its mission was complete is Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser in the first Bush administration. Scowcroft was a critic of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but he also believed that the U.S. owed it to Iraq to offer the post-Saddam state the support and breathing room to allow its leaders to build trust between communities that had long been in conflict. “Because I think Iraq still has a difficult time getting itself together and making the compromises that are necessary to have a functioning system,” he told *Voice of America* in January 2012, just weeks after the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops was ended. “Those compromises are probably easier to make in the embrace of a U.S. presence where they are likely to be willing to make adjustments. I’m afraid now that they are on their own, those adjustments might be harder to make. That’s what worries me.”

Comparatively, the Obama administration expressed a belief that that a continued presence of U.S. troops would have little impact on Iraq’s political future. “There is a risk of overstating the difference that American troops could make in the internal politics of Iraq,” President Obama’s deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes told *The New Yorker*, adding that a U.S. military presence “did not allow us to dictate sectarian alliances.” Of course, few would have argued that the U.S. had the ability to dictate sectarian alliances, although U.S. troops did have the leverage to shape political realities. Still, the Obama administration largely had the support of the war-weary American people; *Gallup* polling data from October 2011, a few months before nearly all troops left the Iraq, showed that 75 percent of the public supported his decision.

Now, just 61 percent of Americans believe withdrawal was the right choice. While that remains a sizeable majority, it is 14 percentage points below that late 2011 figure — a drop precipitated by the ongoing sectarian violence in the country. That political turmoil in Iraq has cast an ominous shadow over Obama’s planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

When asked by reporter to assure the American people that he was not “dragging” the United States into another long war in Iraq with “uncertain outcomes,” the president pledged once again that U.S. troops would not have boots on the ground in the country another time. “I’ve been very clear that we’re not going to have U.S. combat troops in Iraq again. And we are going to maintain that, because we should have learned a lesson from our long and immensely costly incursion in Iraq,” Obama said. “And that is that our military is so effective that we can keep a lid on problems wherever we are, if we put enough personnel and resources into it.”

He also asserted that the Iraqi government gave him no other choice but to withdraw American troops. “The Iraqi government, based on its political considerations, in part because Iraqis were tired of a U.S. occupation, declined to give the Obama administration assurances that our personnel would be immune from prosecution if, for example, they were protecting themselves and ended up getting in a firefight with Iraqis, that they wouldn’t be hauled before an Iraqi judicial system,” he stated at Saturday’s press briefing. Even if a small number of U.S. troops had remained in the country, Obama explained that, “We would have to now be reinforcing [them], I’d have to be protecting them, and we’d have a much bigger job.” Additionally, “we would [probably]

end up having to go up again in terms of the number of ground troops to make sure that those forces were not vulnerable.”

As for U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the lesson Obama learned from Iraq is not to be weary of making the exit the utmost priority, but that “different ethnicities, different religions, different regions” must “accommodate each other, otherwise you start tipping back into old patterns of violence.”