



After 18 Years, Bring Home America's Troops from Iraq

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President Joe Biden plans to keep U.S. forces in Iraq but out of combat, he hopes. At least that is what he said after representatives of the two governments met Monday in the latest "strategic dialogue." Americans and Iraqis alike are still paying the price for George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq.

The Islamic State, which overran much of the country only a few years ago, has been defeated. It remains a threat, but one that Iraqis can contain. The continuing divisions within Iraqi society pose a greater challenge to Baghdad. Although nominally at peace, Iraq is riven by sectarianism, violence, and corruption, which have inflamed popular frustration and anger, especially among the young, who are desperate for a better future.

Unfortunately, outside powers exacerbate internal problems. Geography and religion enhance the influence of Iran, which supports well-armed militias in Iraq. They operate outside of Baghdad's control and today direct much of their fire at US forces.

Although more distant, Washington has acted even more imperiously and recklessly. The Reagan administration supported Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, providing naval protection for oil shipments used to fund his murderous aggression against Iran. However, his 1990 attack on Kuwait turned Washington against him, leading to the first Gulf War. Then Bush used 9/11 as an excuse to invade Iraq. His claim that Baghdad possessed nuclear weapons was false, a striking pastiche of lies and misstatements, highlighted by calculated falsehoods from Ahmed Chalabi, a U.S.-subsidized expatriate who dreamed of seizing Iraq's presidency.

Bush's occupation of Iraq was as incompetent as his lies about Iraq were brazen, wrecking the country and triggering a sectarian war. The consequences were horrendous: thousands of dead and tens of thousands of wounded American and allied soldiers and contractors, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi civilians, millions of displaced Iraqis, widespread religious cleansing, slaughter and enslavement of religious minorities, establishment of sectarian rule by a corrupt Shia-dominated government, and extensive Iranian influence.

Having recklessly created a national miasma of anger, hatred, and violence, the US eventually helped buy off the newly oppressed Sunnis to defeat the insurgency, allowing Washington to withdraw its forces. Although the latter action is now much derided, the Obama administration left because Iraq's parliament refused to approve a Visiting Forces Agreement to govern a continued American deployment.

With the conflict seemingly over there was no cause for a continuing presence, which engendered hostility among both Sunnis and Shiites. Shia forces, represented by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, joined Sunni extremists in threatening Americans. Nor would a small continuing presence have prevented the rise of Islamic State, which was a reaction against ostentatiously corrupt and incompetent sectarian rule. Having bungled its Iraq policy at every turn, there was no reason to expect that Washington would suddenly begin performing miracles.

The US returned in 2014 after ISIS showed the expensive Iraqi military to be more cowardly sectarian oppressor than heroic national defender. Working in tandem with Iranian-backed militias American forces helped destroy the "caliphate" and recover Iraqi lands. Necessary today is political reconstruction, but that effort remains far from done. Large youth-driven demonstrations erupted in 2019, reflecting popular dissatisfaction transcending religious and political identification. Much of the ire was directed against foreign influences, most importantly Iran, which had intruded dramatically and violently in Iraqi politics. The militias responded with sometime murderous attacks on demonstrators.

After walking away from the Iran nuclear deal, the Trump administration treated Iraq with even less respect, considering Baghdad to be little more than a means to an end, another venue for imposing "maximum pressure" on Tehran. Washington pressured Iraq to sever its commercial ties with its neighbor. The administration only reluctantly granted waivers for essential trade, most importantly electricity and gas.

Of even greater consequence, however, last year the Trump administration assassinated Iran's Qassem Soleimani, commander of the infamous Quds Force, in a strike at Baghdad's airport. Also killed were five Iraqis, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, head of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia and deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces, an influential umbrella organization. The world was better but not necessarily a safer without Soleimani. Indeed, the attack was shockingly irresponsible. Although he was no friend of America, the administration presented no evidence that he posed an imminent threat, and changed its self-serving explanation when challenged. Officials like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo illustrated the old saying that you know someone is lying when his lips are moving.

The killing was a dramatic violation of Iraqi sovereignty and act of war against Iran. Imagine if the Soviet Union had fired a missile at the Frankfurt airport on the arrival of America's chairman of the joint chiefs of staff as he met with local German military commanders. Tehran retaliated with a rocket attack on a US base, demonstrating its capability to do harm without killing any American personnel. More serious, however, the militias, which had their own deaths to avenge, put American forces and facilities – including the US embassy – under regular fire.

Rockets continued to hit even after the Trump administration claimed to have "reestablished" deterrence. Tough-talking Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was reduced to threatening to close America's embassy unless it received better protection by the Iraqi government. His whiny performance could not have impressed Tehran, let alone Moscow or Beijing. Around year's end there were reports of a modus vivendi among the parties, that the militias would halt the attacks if the Iraqi government would promise to send the Americans home, as the Trump administration's time ran out.

Although connected with Iran, the militias remain independent and obviously have their own reasons to want the US gone. So attacks continued, with 50 so far this year – and more than 300 going back to 2019 – including another round after the Biden administration targeted militia sites in June. Indeed, Iraqi militias began using drones to hit American facilities. Reported the *Washington Post*: "Increasingly, militiamen are now turning to small, fixed-wing drones that fly too low to be detected by defensive systems, military officials and diplomats have said. A common strategy is to attach explosives to the drones and crash them into targets, defense officials have said."

In June the administration retaliated against militia facilities in both Iraq and Syria, but that ensures attacks on US personnel will continue. Kata'ib Hezbollah, whose commander was killed last year, was one of the targeted groups. The other was Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, which announced: "We will avenge the blood of our righteous martyrs against the perpetrators of this heinous crime and with God's help we will make the enemy taste the bitterness of revenge." Ironically, the Soleimani and Muhandis assassinations reduced Tehran's ability to restrain the organizations. Explained the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Hamdi Malik: "Because the Iranian control over its militias has fragmented after the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Muhandis, the competition has increased among these groups."

The militias are likely to continue their attacks as long as Americans are within reach. Even Iraqis concerned about Iranian influence oppose the US killing Iraqis in Iraq. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadimi criticized the US: "We condemn the US air attack that targeted a site last night on the Iraqi-Syrian border, which represents a blatant and unacceptable violation of Iraqi sovereignty and Iraqi national security."

Although al-Khadimi is both well-intentioned and -respected, his authority is limited. He has struggled to exercise greater control over the militias, which are theoretically but not practically under the military chain of command. Some militiamen apparently await trial, while others have been released under pressure. Despite popular dissatisfaction, little is expected to change with parliamentary elections scheduled for October. Observed the Century Foundation's Thanassis Cambanis: "Many powerful blocs in Iraq oppose the US presence, including the parties that

control the most unaccountable, Iran-backed militias, but also mainstream opposition leaders and the populist Sadr movement."

This was reflected on Monday when the two governments issued a short statement about Khadimi's visit. The text was intended to satisfy all sides, including the paragraph on security:

"The United States reaffirmed its respect for Iraq's sovereignty and laws and pledged to continue providing the resources Iraq needs to preserve its territorial integrity. The Government of Iraq reaffirmed its commitment to protect Coalition personnel advising and enabling the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and reasserted its position that all Coalition Forces are in Iraq at its invitation. The two delegations also emphasized that the bases hosting US and other Coalition personnel are Iraqi bases and are operating per existing Iraqi laws; they are not US or Coalition bases, and the presence of international personnel in Iraq is solely in support of the Government of Iraq's fight against ISIS. The delegations decided, following recent technical talks, that the security relationship will fully transition to a training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role, and that there will be no US forces with a combat role in Iraq by December 31, 2021. The United States intends to continue its support for the ISF, including the Peshmerga, to build their capacity to deal with future threats."

Despite the extensive verbiage, all that is envisioned is a personnel swap, with trainers substituted for fighters. Explained Politico: "Experts and former military officials say the announcement today was more of a symbolic gesture than a concrete shift, designed to boost al-Kadhimi ahead of parliamentary elections this fall." The Century Foundation's Aron Lund called it "a rebranding exercise designed to help [al-Kadhimi] politically and throw a bone to those Iraqi groups that have joined the push for a troop withdrawal."

Consider the reality behind the rhetoric. Washington does not respect Iraq's sovereignty. The US invaded that country, imposed an occupation government, created a constitution and laws in America's image, pushed US priorities on Baghdad even after ending the occupation, interfered with Iraqi economic ties with neighboring Iran, launched military operations against Iraqi citizens on Iraqi soil, refused to consider Baghdad's demand to withdraw US troops, and even threatened to impose economic sanctions in retaliation. The Iraqi government is incapable of protecting coalition forces. Militia members arrested in the past were quickly released and avoided prosecution.

Americans are not involved in combat today, and the 2500 currently stationed in Iraq offer minimal protection, meaning there is no need for their presence. ISIS is unlikely to reconstitute its conventional threat, remaining an irregular force that can damage but not control. It is less likely to draw support from Iraqis, who now recognize the danger. The Iraqi military is less sectarian and more effective than before, while the Iranian-backed militias, though possessing malign domestic political influence, remain an anti-ISIS bulwark. Moreover, virtually every Middle Eastern state and faction, ranging from Saudi Arabia to Iran, are determined to prevent an Islamic State revival.

Although the Iraqi forces no doubt would benefit from additional training and advice, the US has been so engaged since ousting the Hussein regime, with only indifferent success. Biden said

"Our role in Iraq will be as a – dealing with not – it's just to be available." However, others could fill this role. With a NATO mission in place, European nations also have been involved in such programs, and no Iraqi militias are firing missiles at their personnel. America's allies should take over.

In short, there is no reason for US forces to remain in Iraq. Certainly, there is no reason for Washington to maintain troops in Iraq *under fire*. No important American interests are being served. American retaliation harms *the US*, reinforcing the conflict spiral as Washington further entangles itself and inflaming antagonisms which create new enemies and encourage more terrorism.

Of course, US officials continue to talk tough. Pentagon spokesman Jessica McNulty said: "We seek to make clear to Iran and Iran-backed militia groups that there will be serious consequences if they continue to attack, or to arm, fund and train militia groups that attack our people." Alas, no one in Iraq appears to be listening, and no wonder.

After Washington launched yet another round in February, the New York Times reported: "Little is known about the group [bombed], including whether it is backed by Iran or related to the organizations that used the facilities the American air strikes targeted on Thursday. Some American officials contend that the group is merely a front for one of the better-known Shia militias." How do such inconclusive and incoherent actions serve US interests? By what legal authority does the administration wage war so widely yet unilaterally?

America's war on terror has been a double-headed mistake. The attack on 9/11 made a limited strike in Afghanistan inevitable, but a clueless, irresponsible George W. Bush turned tragedy into disaster by expanding the mission to nation-building and then invading Iraq. President Joe Biden appears ready to end the US combat mission in Afghanistan. He should apply the same good sense to Iraq and bring America's forces home from there as well. It is well past time to halt both these endless wars.

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