

THE DANGERS AND IMPLICATIONS OF A PROBABLE FULL US WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

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Abstract: Strategic dialogue between Iraq and the US (United States) came to the conclusion that coalition troops should be withdrawn on 31 December 2021, with the coalition's mission becoming a purely advisory role. However, there remain a number of reasons that could push the US to end its advisory support as well and fully withdraw from Iraq. This brief argues that there are three key factors that might push US and coalition forces to a full withdrawal from Iraq. First, the continuation of attacks from Iranian-backed militias against US forces in Iraq, especially if the next Iraqi government is dominated by pro-Iranian political elite and/or the new prime minister is a pro-Iranian character. Second, the US failure to build a stable and democratic system may prove another factor influencing a full US withdrawal. Third, the powerful desire within the Biden Administration to reduce US involvement in the Middle East, including withdrawing forces from the MENA region, could prove to be the nail in the coffin. Considering the abovementioned factors, the probable full US withdrawal from Iraq will have serious implications for both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. In this regard, a full withdrawal would pose even further domestic and regional challenges for Iraq, which even now is unable to avoid being pulled into its neighbors' regional rivalries.

Introduction

The specter of full US military withdrawal from Iraq, and its potential consequences, are matters which have been the subject of much discussion. Since 2020, the US and Iraq have held four rounds of strategic dialogue to restructure their relations and determine the future of US military presence in Iraq.¹ In the third and fourth rounds held from April to July 2021, both sides agreed to a withdrawal of all foreign combat troops and a shift in the mission of any remaining US troops, limited to approximately 2,000 to 2,500 soldiers,² to an advisory and training role. These forces were mostly repositioned to the Baghdad airport, and the Ain al-Asad (in Iraq's Anbar province) and Kurdistan regions.³ As such, the coalition commander John W. Brennan, in a statement on 9 December 2021, stressed that the mission of the coalition combat troops had been completed and that the purpose of any remaining coalition troops would shift 'to advise, assist, and enable the ISF (Iraqi security forces), at the invitation of Republic of Iraq.'⁴ In reality, though reduced, the continued US presence provides the Iraqi government military and political support in the face of ISIS threats. Indeed, Iraq still requires US military and political engagement in order to ensure its sovereignty.

The possibility of a full US withdrawal: a serious matter

Despite the US.-Iraq strategic dialogue agreeing on the continued presence of advisory troops, there are a number of reasons that could push the US to finally remove the entirety of its troops from Iraq.

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First, the pressure from Iran and its proxies in Iraq constitute a key factor that could push the US towards full withdrawal. Under the Trump administration, the conflict and tension between Iran (and its proxies) and the US significantly increased, especially after Trump withdrew the US from the nuclear deal with Iran,⁵ imposed maximum economic sanctions on Iran in May 2018, and then assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds Force at Baghdad Airport in January 2020.⁶ In this regard, Tehran-aligned groups within the Popular Mobilization Units increased their military pressure against the US. The attacks from pro-Iranian Shiite militias, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, forced the Trump Administration to abandon several of its military bases, such as al-Qaim military base, Qayyarah and K1 in Iraq, and reposition to areas such as Ain al-Asad and Erbil.⁷ It is expected that if Iran can influence the formation of a pro-Iran government in Baghdad in the coming period, despite the massive decline of support for pro-Iranian Shia parties in the October 2021 elections, the pressure for US full withdrawal would increase, not only from sections of the Iraqi parliament and armed militia groups but also officials from the government.

Second, the US's failure to build a stable and democratic system since the start of its occupation of Iraq over 18 years ago may prove another factor influencing a full US withdrawal. Since 2003, the US has attempted to build a secure political system in Baghdad which would enhance the US position, preserve its interests in the region and contain Iranian influence. In pursuit of these goals, the US has spent more than 2 trillion dollars in Iraq and has seen thousands of its troops killed or wounded.⁸ Yet Iraq remains unstable with a fragile democratic system and the deep influence of Iranian armed groups, which today play a central role in Iraq's political affairs. It is true that the pro-Iran political bloc including Fatah Alliance suffered a resounding defeat in the October 2021 elections which granted it only 17 seats, compared to its 48 seats in the 2018 elections.⁹ However, Iran-backed groups have not lost their military influence. The post-2003 failure of the US, with its limited ability to make significant changes and a lack of willingness on the part of Iraqi authorities to act towards the fulfillment of the US vision, is clearer than ever.

Third, a desire to see the end of the seemingly endless wars in the Middle East could bolster voices calling for a full US withdrawal. There is a powerful desire inside the Biden administration to reduce US involvement in the Middle East, including withdrawing US forces from the region.¹⁰ Continuing US troop presence increases the economic pressures on the US budget. Moreover, reducing or withdrawing US troops could reduce the anti-US sentiment in the region, and would give the US a free hand to deal with the threats coming from Russia and China. In particular, US policy focus is increasingly moving towards China and the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, after the recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, Iraq could soon be next in line.

The potential consequences of a full US withdrawal from Iraq

One key concern over a probable US pullout from Iraq is that it would increase the influence of Iranian-backed militias, further undermining the position of the formal Iraqi forces, among other consequences. Since 2003, the US has exerted enormous efforts and resources to strengthen Iraq's military institutions, and maintain the country's security, stability, and sovereignty. However, a full US withdrawal would significantly damage these still-weak military institutions, and perhaps even result in the total collapse of the Iraqi army, such as what happened in the areas of the country during the first rise of the ISIS terror group in 2014. In turn, this would pave the way for Iran to remodel the Iraqi state along Iranian revolutionary lines.¹¹

Growing ISIS attacks in Iraq could be another consequence of US withdrawal. The Iraqi army remains weak and incapable of confronting ISIS alone. The Iraqi authorities have issued warnings in this regard. Nechirvan Barzani, the KRI president, issued a statement on 31 October, stressing that ISIS is still a serious threat to Iraq's stability and security.¹² It is worth mention that US troops left Iraq in 2011 at the request of Iraqi authorities, believing the Iraqi army to be strong enough to defend Iraqi security and stability.¹³ However, with the incursion of ISIS into Iraq and the collapse of the Iraqi army in 2014, Iraqi authorities were only able to defeat ISIS by requesting urgent assistance from the US and the international community, which included the return of US troops to Iraq. Hence, with the absence of US military support, and increasing pressures from Iranian proxies, the Iraqi army's capacity would be significantly undermined, setting the stage for a return of ISIS especially in Sunni-majority areas and the regions disputed between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government of Iraq.

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Moreover, a US departure from Iraq could spark increased ethno-sectarian conflict between the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish sectors of the population. Sunni areas are still under the control of Iran-backed Shia militia groups. With a full US withdrawal, the pressure from these militias on Sunni Arab Iraqis and their political figures would further increase, particularly against those who have publicly opposed Iran's policy in Iraq in the past, such as during former prime minister al-Maliki's tenure. Iraq's Sunni majority areas and disputed territories, which neighbor Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, are geopolitically important for Iran and its proxies, as they form a key corridor for Iran to transfer weapons and militias to Syria and connect Tehran all the way to Lebanon. This corridor gives Iran the ability to exert leverage against the regional state system.

The complete collapse of Iraq's political system is another possible implication of a US exit. Despite the fragility and many defects of Iraq's democratic system, Iran and its allies have hitherto avoided attempting to completely undermine Iraqi democracy. This is largely due to the US military presence and the support of the international community. As has been seen since the October 2021 elections that resulted in the defeat of Iran's allies, attempts have been made to undermine the electoral process. Without strong and continual US engagement, there is little that could be done to prevent Iran and its proxies from completing dominating Iraq's political system.

Similarly, Iraq's rebalancing policy, which has been recently pursued particularly under the administration of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, would be in grave danger. Under the al-Kadhimi government, and with support from the US, Iraq has taken steps to improve its relations with neighbors and regional powers in defiance of heavy pressure from Iran.¹⁴ With a full US withdrawal, Iraqi foreign policy would inevitably be drawn into the Iranian orbit, and Iraq could regress to being part of the Iranian regional axis, and a source of instability and serious threat for US allies, increasing the risk of drone strikes or more protracted conflicts with states such as Israel and Iraq's other neighbors.¹⁵ Furthermore, US military withdrawal could lead to intensified regional competition over Iraq.¹⁶ In this regard, Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, is very likely to become a battleground for regional clashes.

Consequences for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

On 28 December 2021, US President Joe Biden signed into law a budget which allocated \$260 million for the Kurdish forces fighting ISIS in Iraq.¹⁷ Nonetheless, there is no guarantee of US support to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) beyond the war against ISIS. The KRI would perhaps be the region of the country most negatively impacted by a full US withdrawal. Without US backing, including boots on the ground, Kurdistan's hard-won degree of self-determination will be in danger, as the KRI's regional and international position remains

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fragile. Its concerns are not only domestic, with the threat of force from the federal Iraqi government and armed militias, but also from regional neighbors such as Iran and Turkey. These internal and regional dimensions should be given proper consideration in light of a possible US departure from Iraq and its Kurdistan Region.

From the Kurdish uprising in Iraq in 1991 until today, regional hegemony has been a critical factor in the KRI's political process. Both Turkey and Iran have had concerns over the KRI, because of the presence of Turkish and Iranian Kurdish armed opposition groups based there. Turkey has carried out regular cross-border attacks against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) for decades. However, in recent years it has begun to establish a more sustained presence with a growing number of bases and checkpoints dotting the mountains of northern Iraqi Kurdistan. There are more than 5,000 Turkish forces currently deployed in Iraqi Kurdistan and Bashiqa,¹⁸ an area under Iraqi central government control to the east of Mosul.¹⁹ According to a [map published](#) in July 2020 by the Turkish Presidency's Directorate of Communications, Turkish forces have established almost 40 "military points" in the KRI, including four in the major cities of Erbil, Duhok, Soran, and Zakho.²⁰ Since 2014, the Turkish presence in Iraq has caused tensions with both the Iraqi government and Iran-backed militia groups in Bashiqa and Sinjar. The post-2003 US presence in the KRI has contributed to an understanding of sorts between the KRI and Turkey on one hand, and Turkey and Iraq on the other. A US withdrawal is very likely to pave the way for Turkey to expand its operations and penetrate more deeply into the KRI. It is true that Turkey has been carrying out military operations in the KRI since the 1990s, yet during the US military presence in Iraq there was a degree of coordination between the US and Turkey on military operations in Iraq.

The second concern is Iranian pressure on the KRG. Iranian involvement in the KRI is not new. Even before the US invasion, Iran had leverage in the region and maintained good ties with both of the region's main parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Iran also meddled in the fierce armed conflict that took place between the sides from 1994 to 1996. Iran's current priority is to expel Iranian opposition groups, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), from the KRI.²¹ Shortly after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani relayed to the Iraqi foreign minister Fuad Hussein that Iran "asks the Iraqi government to take more serious moves to expel these [opposition] groups from Iraqi Kurdistan, so that Iran does

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not have to take preemptive actions against the wickedness of armed terrorists.”²² Iran has regularly bombarded villages in the border areas of the KRI's Erbil province and has recently increased its attacks through “suicide drones” with the expulsion of opposition groups as its goal. In August, Mousa Babakhani, a senior official in the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I), was found dead in a hotel room in Erbil. The Erbil airbase, which houses US troops, has also come under drone attacks several times.²³ Without the US presence, the KRI would be subject to much greater pressure by Iran and its proxies, which have many cards to play against the KRG. For example, Iran can threaten the KRI through militia groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, which have clear links with Iran's Quds Force.²⁴

Consequences for Iraq-KRG relations

Stable Baghdad-Erbil relations are essential for a stable Iraq. Without their cooperation, especially on the level of counterterrorism, there is a strong risk that terrorist groups will reemerge in the region, especially in the areas contested between Baghdad and Erbil. In December 2021, ISIS attacks on areas disputed between Erbil and Baghdad left over twenty soldiers dead and several others injured.²⁵ Since 2011, KRG-Iraqi government relations have deteriorated, especially under the tenures of al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi. While Adil Abdul-Mahdi and al-Kadhimi have contributed to reestablishing stable relations between the sides, the leverage of Iran-backed militias, especially the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in Iraq's political, legal, and security institutions pose a continued challenge for Iraq-KRG relations. Since 2017, PMF members have played an influential role in the Iraqi parliament, placing obstacles in the way of solving contentious issues between Iraq and KRI, including budgets, the status of disputed territories and internal borders, and oil revenue-sharing. It can thus be argued that US role of peacemaker between Baghdad and Erbil is crucial for Iraq's stability.

The consequences for minorities

The 5 January parliamentary vote calling for US withdrawal dismissed the opinions of minorities, including Sunnis and Kurds. The Kurdish parties boycotted, and only a handful of Sunni MPs were present, including the Speaker of Parliament Mohamed al-Halbousi.²⁶ In reality, it was merely a demonstration of the Shia elite's monopoly on national decision-

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making. Today, particularly the Yazidis and Christians of the Nineveh Plains still suffer from the aftermath of the ISIS invasion, and continue to have a lack of trust in the Iraqi security forces to protect their areas, which remain dominated by militia groups. For example, since 2017, the Sinjar district has been under the control of groups affiliated with the PMF and the PKK.²⁷ While the Sinjar Agreement between the Iraqi government and KRG stated that only Iraqi federal forces should operate in Sinjar, and all other armed groups must leave the town, both governments have struggled to extend their authority into Sinjar.

There are still 698,902 IDPs (internally displaced persons) of different ethnic and religious backgrounds living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a small part of whom reside in camps.²⁸ Many Christians and Yazidis have lived as internally displaced persons in the KRI. Wishing to return to their homes, they require support from the Iraqi government, KRG, and the international community. However, a possible withdrawal of US troops will leave these minorities under the threat of both ISIS and militia groups, destabilizing the region and triggering even greater ethno-sectarian tensions among Iraq's population.

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