

The Implications of a US Withdrawal from Iraq for USCENTCOM Priorities and Great Power Competition

Author: LTC Octavian Dorobantu, ROU Army, CSAG CCJ5

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Key Points

- To best analyze the implications of a US withdrawal from Iraq, an accurate determination must be made of the current level and required level of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) capabilities to deter Iran and counter terrorism.
- The Iraqi Security Forces have improved, but still lack the capability to prevent Daesh resurgence, and resist Iranian influence, without substantial US support.
- To mitigate Daesh's resurgence and growing Iranian influence, the US must maintain a capable military posture in the Middle East to deter adversaries, support allies, sustain freedom of military and commercial movement, and counter terrorism.
- An ill-timed US withdrawal would be interpreted internationally as the US being less willing or less able to globally intervene militarily. In GPC terms, China and Russia would welcome this perception.

Introduction – Background Information

Due to economic changes and the loss of American popular support for long wars, the Trump Administration designed a plan to withdraw troops from Iraq.¹ If the Biden Administration were to act along the same lines, a withdrawal could cause significant harm to US national security interests at home and in the Middle East. In 2018, the US National Defense Strategy changed the order of the US' priority threats. Countering the threat of terrorism was supplanted by Great Power Competition (GPC). This change was the harbinger of a reduced US military footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Trump Administration changed the US's foreign policy, implementing a less nuanced manner of assessing achievements and costs.²

The US initially stated its reasons to deploy troops to the Middle East were to fight and defeat regional terrorism, and to protect the American people, its territories and allies from attacks.³ The timing of deployments also

¹ Baldor, Lolita C, "Trump to order troop cuts in Afghanistan and Iraq," APnews.com, November 16, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-troop-reduction-afghanistan-iraq-92e43910a8822160ce45f950139ae048>, (accessed 11 February 2021).

² Medar, Sergui, Monitorul.apararii.ro, "Democracy- an expensive bussinesfor the US in the Middle East," 6 Aug 2020, <https://en.monitorulapararii.ro/democracy-an-expensive-business-for-the-us-in-the-middle-east-1-32873>, (accessed 12 January2021). ³ State.gov, "Country reports on terrorism," Bureau of Counterterrorism, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism2019/>, (accessed 10 January 2021).

appeared to indicate that the US sought economic benefits by securing Iraqi oil.³ However, US interest in Iraq's energy resources waned over time as the shale boom fostered US energy independence.⁴ In terms of distribution of resources, the Trump Administration assessed that US troop deployments in Iraq were not cost effective, and the resources used could better serve US interests elsewhere without compromising national security.⁵ This cost analysis perspective matched the Trump Administration's isolationist approach. In its war against terrorism, the US spent almost 6.4 trillion dollars since 2001.⁷ Others have noted the high cost to life of recent US military intervention in the Middle East. Notably, the Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University reports that in the Middle East's military conflicts, more than 801,000 people,⁶ including many civilians, and regional and American service members died as a direct result of fighting.

The US intervention in Iraq provides an excellent case study of the achievement of medium and long-term objectives. While violence has been reduced, the country unfortunately remains plagued by endemic instability, fueled by the permanent struggle between Iraqi political and sectarian factions. If the US substantially withdraws its troops, the US will likely struggle to counter Iranian influence, and be unprepared to prevent or respond to a Daesh resurgence. Decision makers must understand that the mission in Iraq is more important than the numbers.

Analysis

To best analyze the implications of a US withdrawal from Iraq, an accurate determination must be made on the current level and necessary level of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) capabilities to deter Iran and counter terrorism. US officials stated that it depends on the operational factors of quality of Iraqi air-ground integration and logistics sophistication; and political factors.⁷

The USCENTCOM commander, General McKenzie, said in September 2020 that ISF are better now than two or three years ago.⁸ He further stated the reduced footprint of US forces in Iraq allows the US to continue advising and assisting Iraqi partners in rooting out and defeating the final remnants of Daesh. However, General McKenzie also emphasized the need for American and other NATO forces to maintain "a long-term presence" in Iraq, both to help fight Islamic extremists and to check Iranian influence in the country.⁹

³ Nafedz, Ahmed, The Guardian, "Iraq invasion was about oil", 20 Mar 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earthinsight/2014/mar/20/iraq-war-oil-resources-energy-peak-scarcity-economy>, (accessed 17 January 2021).

⁴ Medar, Sergiu, Monitorul.apararii.ro, "Democracy - an expensive bussines for the US in the Middle East," 6 Aug 2020, <https://en.monitorulapararii.ro/democracy-an-expensive-business-for-the-us-in-the-middle-east-1-32873>, (accessed 12 January 2021).

⁵ Medar, Sergiu, Monitorul.apararii.ro, "Democracy - an expensive bussines for the US in the Middle East," 6 Aug 2020, <https://en.monitorulapararii.ro/democracy-an-expensive-business-for-the-us-in-the-middle-east-1-32873>, (accessed 12 January 2021). ⁷

Macias, Amanda, cnbc.com, "America has spent \$6.4 trillion on wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001, a new study say by Amanda Macias," 20 Nov 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/20/us-spent-6point4-trillion-on-middle-east-wars-since-2001-study.html> (accessed 09 January 2021).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Williams, Katie Bo, Defenseone.com, "Is Iraq's military good enough for US troops to leave", 28 Oct 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/10/iraqs-military-good-enough-us-troops-leave/169621/>, (accessed 15 January 2021).

⁸ Schmitt, Eric, New York Times, "US to reduce troop level in Iraq to 3000", 9 Sep 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/politics/iraq-troops-trump.html>, (accessed 15 January 2021).

⁹ Schimtt, Eric, New York Times, "Top general in the Middle East said troop levels will drop in iraq and Syria", 20 Aug 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/world/middleeast/american-troops-iraq-syria.html>, (Accessed 19 January 2021). ¹²

Centcom.mil, "Command Priorities", <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/COMMAND-PRIORITIES/>, (accessed 5 January 2021).

Implications for Deterring Iran

Two of CENTCOM's primary security objectives in Iraq are to counter Iranian influence and to deter Iranian aggression.¹² After 17 years of fighting in Iraq, US officials say, support for Baghdad and its security forces remains essential to counter Iran.¹⁰ Iraq is the country, in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), where indirect US/Iranian confrontation is most visible. After the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Iranian proxy group leaders, Iranian-influenced politicians, and Iranian leaders such as the late General Qassem Soleimani pursued an influence and domination strategy in Iraq.¹¹ Although Iran's true Iraq strategy is not publicized, Iranian leaders have signalled the following objectives: maximize their influence over Iraq's parliament, prime minister, and cabinet; reap economic benefits from Iraq's oil revenue and domestic economy; exercise influence over the Iraqi energy sector; and dominate Iraq's security sector through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (militias established in 2014 and granted authorities to combat Daesh).¹² Iranian objectives directly challenge Iraq's legitimate sovereign force monopoly.¹³ Iran has continuously leveraged this power and influence in Iraq to undermine US interests there, and support attacks on US military and civilian personnel.¹⁴

A US withdrawal would embolden Shia loyalists in Iraq and further alienate the Sunni community from the Iraqi government. Any withdrawal would also strengthen Iran's expansionist agenda in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Even with a US presence, Iran has demonstrated its ability to dominate the Iraqi political, security, and economic sectors.¹⁵ Additionally, Iran was able to extend its influence while acting as a shadow government throughout Shia dominated regions of Iraq.¹⁶ As Iran gains primacy in Iraq, its ability to project power in the region will greatly increase. Thus, Iran would consolidate its position in Syria and Lebanon, and increase its threat to Israel and other regional neighbors. Although the Iraqi people have criticized US interference, they would not likely welcome such a scenario as Iraqis have equally criticized Iranian interference.¹⁷

Given Iran's overt malicious intentions and continued anti-American actions, even a partial withdrawal of the US forces would benefit Iran. Removing direct ISF combat assistance leaves a gap likely to be filled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or PMF proxies. The gap further opens opportunities for Iranian advisors and agents to integrate themselves into ISF training bases to educate, recruit, and undermine Iraqi sovereignty. Thus, even a limited withdrawal will negatively impact USCENTCOM Commander's priority number 1: deterring Iran.

¹⁰ Vanden Heuvel, Katrina, Washington Post, "It is time to leave Iraq once and for all," 4 Feb 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/04/its-time-leave-iraq-once-all/>, (accessed 10 January 2021).

¹¹ Michael Eisenstadt, Kori Schake and David Deptula, Washingtoninstitute.org, "US strategy toward Iran: restoring deterrence, enabling diplomacy," 14 Feb 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-strategy-toward-iran-restoring-deterrence-enablingdiplomacy>, (accessed 7 January 2021).

¹² Falk, Thomas O, ALJAZEERA, "What the US troop withdrawal means for Iraq," 22 November 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/22/what-the-us-troop-withdrawal-means-for-iraq> (accessed 7 January 2021).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Michael Eisenstadt, Kori Schake and David Deptula, Washingtoninstitute.org, "US strategy toward Iran: restoring deterrence, enabling diplomacy," 14 Feb 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-strategy-toward-iran-restoring-deterrence-enablingdiplomacy>, (accessed 7 January 2021).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Khairuldeen Al Makzumi and Minatullah Alobaidi, Washingtoninstitute.org, "The dangerous consequences of US withdrawal from Iraq," 3 Feb 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dangerous-consequences-us-withdrawal-iraq>, (accessed 7 January 2021).

¹⁷ Noack, Rick, The Washington post, "Here's what might happen if the US were to suddenly quit Iraq," 10 Jan 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/09/heres-what-might-happen-if-us-were-suddenly-quit-iraq/> (accessed 22 January 2021).

Implications for Countering Violent Extremist Organizations/Preventing Daesh Resurgence

The US objective under its 'Building Partnership Capability' mission is to prepare ISF to defeat terrorists while ensuring Iraqi sovereignty.¹⁸ Since 2014, US policymakers have primarily focused on the counter-Daesh campaign.¹⁹ A US-led coalition provided crucial air support as Iraqi forces (including Iran-backed militias) regrouped and drove Daesh out through the execution of a costly multi-year campaign.²⁰ Although the ISF has since become more operationally independent, the country still faces threats from anti-government factions, rampant corruption, and political divisions that pervade the Iraqi security apparatus. All of this highlights that foreign, especially US, support remains necessary.²¹

While ISF's combat capabilities have improved in the past few years, further improvement is needed. Just last year, US military officials stated Iraqi forces were "okay with ground maneuver," but not sufficiently skilled at integrating their fixed-wing air power with their ground capabilities.²² The 2020 third quarter assessment report from the Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve found that Iraqi airpower demonstrated limited ability to support counter-Daesh operations.²⁶ USCENTCOM stated that Iraqi aircraft maintenance crews still required substantial US support to perform mission critical maintenance, repair, and resupply functions.²³ Additionally, USCENTCOM cited a lack of Iraqi capacity in its intelligence-driven targeting capabilities from April to September 2020.²⁴

In the same report, the CJTF-OIR Commander stated gains in ISF's capability to conduct regular search and clearance operations.²⁹ The report stated that through routine operations and larger operations such as Heroes of Iraq, the ISF was able to deny Daesh terrain from which it has previously operated. Additionally, CJTF-OIR stated that the ISF conducted ground clearance operations after kinetic strikes against Daesh for post-strike analysis.

As of early 2021, Daesh no longer holds physical territory in Iraq.²⁵ Cells of Daesh fighters continue to operate within Iraqi communities, organizing and conducting more limited capability attacks than in early 2019.²⁶ However, Daesh is still able to organize deadly attacks. On 21 January 2021, two suicide bombers detonated their explosive vests in the busy Bab al-Sharqi outdoor market in central Baghdad, killing at least 32 people and injuring

¹⁸ Centcom.mil, "Iraq Coalition partnership", 18 Mar 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/VIDEO-ANDIMAGERY/VIDEOS/vidoeid/666159/>, (accessed 10 January 2021).

¹⁹ Ben Connable, James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Raphael S. Cohen, Becca Wasser, Rand.org, "Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Strategic Risks and Recommendations," [www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE362/RAND](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE362/RANDPE362.pdf)(accessed 8 January 2021).

²⁰ Kullab, Samya, Stars and Stripes, "How could US drawdown In Iraq aid ISIS, Iran?," 3 Dec 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middleeast/how-could-us-drawdown-in-iraq-aid-isis-and-iran-1.654016>, (accessed 6 January 2021).

²¹ Kullab, Samya, Stars and Stripes, "How Could US drawdown in Iraq aid ISIS and Iran," 3 December 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/how-could-us-drawdown-in-iraq-aid-isis-iran-1.654016>, (accessed 7 January 2021).

²² Katie Bo Williams, Defenseone.com, "Is Iraq's military good enough for US troops to leave", 28 Oct 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/10/iraqs-military-good-enough-us-troops-leave/169621/> accessed 15 January 2021) ²⁶

Dodig.mil, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress July 1, 2020 - September 30, 2020 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2402679/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-i-quarterly-report-to-the/>(accessed 8 January 2021).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁹

Ibid.

²⁵ BBC "Trump hails fall of Islamic State Caliphate in Syria," 23 March, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47682160>, (accessed 6 January 2021).

²⁶ Katherine Bauer, Matthew Levitt, and Aaron Y. Zelin, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "After Baghdadi: How the Islamic State Rebounds," October 28, 2019 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-baghdadi-how-islamic-state-rebounds>, (accessed 6 January 2021).

110.²⁷ The raid killing previous Daesh leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, temporarily decapitated the group's leadership, but it did not end its functional or ideological existence.³³

The current Daesh leadership wants the US to withdraw from the Middle East to facilitate the group's objectives of the destruction of US regional partner governments and the creation of a Middle East caliphate.²⁸ Although Daesh's ultimate success currently appears highly unlikely, abandoning the counter-Daesh fight in Iraq would provide Daesh opportunity to reconstitute and pursue its objectives. These objectives include: the denial of US access to all areas under Daesh control, the murder of US citizens, the destruction of US-allied governments, and the disruption of Western states through terror attacks and propaganda.²⁹ Daesh's murderous record attests that the Daesh threat is perennial and underestimating the likelihood of resurgence would be dangerous.³⁶

The ISF vulnerabilities that first enabled Daesh's rise remain. These vulnerabilities come from poor joint service coordination and rampant corruption.³⁰ Tensions within the military have increased as Iranian-backed Shiite militias (PMF) have accumulated increased power. In Baghdad, senior Iraqi military officials maintain the withdrawal of 500 American troops will have only minor impact,³¹ but outside the capital where reconstruction and services restoration have lagged, local officials fear American departure will cause a security vacuum.³²

In Iraq, even a limited US troop withdrawal would place a heavier burden on the ISF to defeat remaining Daesh forces. Senior coalition and Iraqi officials say that Iraqi forces will continue to rely on US air support, reconnaissance, and intelligence gathering for the foreseeable future.³³ A rapid and complete US withdrawal would likely lead to a reduction in European support. In that event, Iraq would take responsibility for all training, planning, operations, and logistics.³⁴ The ISF currently lacks these capabilities and could likely suffer near-term degradation.³⁵ Thus, withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will negatively impact USCENTCOM Commander's priority number 3: maintain the defeat Daesh campaign in both Iraq and Syria.

²⁷ Al Monitor, "Iraqi PM vows security changes after Baghdad bombing," 22 January 2021, <https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/01/iraq-bombings-kadhimi-baghdad-intelligence-isis.html>, (accessed 23 January 2021). ³³ Peter Baker, Eric Schmitt, and Helene Cooper, New York Times, "ISIS Leader al-Baghdadi Is Dead, Trump Says," October 27, 2019 (accessed 6 January 2021).

²⁸ Ben Connable, James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Raphael S. Cohen, Becca Wasser, Rand.org, "Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Strategic Risks and Recommendations," www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE362/RAND, (accessed 8 January 2021).

²⁹ *Ibid.* ³⁶

Ibid.

³⁰ Associated press, "How could US drawdown in Iraq aid Iran and ISIS," December 3 2020, <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/brooklyn/ap-topnews/2020/12/03/explainer-how-could-us-drawdown-in-iraq-aid-is-iran>, (accessed 21 February 2021).

³¹ Al Jazeera, "US announces plans to cut troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq," 17 Nov 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/17/pentagon-announces-drawdown-of-us-troops-in-afghanistan>, (accessed 6 January 2021).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Dodig.mil, "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress July 1, 2020 - September 30, 2020," <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2402679/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-i-quarterly-report-to-the/>(accessed 8 January 2021).

³⁴ Dodig.mil, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress July 1, 2020 - September 30, 2020 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2402679/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-i-quarterly-report-to-the/> (accessed 8 January 2021).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Implications for Great Power Competition

While the fight to deter Iran and destroy Daesh has occupied Western powers' focus, GPC is now a higher priority and is a growing concern in the AOR. China and Russia have accelerated their investments across the Middle East and specifically in Iraq. Russia seeks to dominate Iraqi arms sales in order to increase its revenues and its national influence in Iraq.³⁶ China depends on a steady supply of Iraqi Basra Light Crude oil. On January 2, 2021, the Director General of Iraq's state oil company announced a \$2 billion oil supply contract with partial prepayment terms awarded to a Chinese buyer.³⁷

Chinese leaders also view Iraq as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. In June 2020, Gen. McKenzie described the region as a "Wild West" arena of GCP in which China is using its economic heft to establish a long-term strategic "beachhead;" while at the same time, Russia is using "pretty high-intensity" military actions "to throw sand in [America's] gears."³⁸ An American withdrawal from Iraq would leave open opportunities for China and Russia and further threaten other US Middle East interests. The US and its partners can collectively mitigate these risks by helping to build strong, fully functioning, democratic institutions, along with increased Gulf investments in Iraq.

A US withdrawal from Iraq would also increase the regional perception that US power and influence are declining in the Middle East. The US would be seen internationally as less willing or less able to globally intervene militarily. In GPC terms, China and Russia would welcome this perception. Some regional US allies may become less open to US influence. If they see the US as less willing and able to defend them, they may decide to make alternative security arrangements.

Conclusion

The previous administration's plan for US withdrawal from Iraq appear to be a political decision, not fully supported by the military.³⁹ The US needs to maintain a capable military posture in the Middle East to deter adversaries, support allies, sustain freedom of military and commercial movement, and counter terrorism. US military withdrawal from Iraq will likely cause a ripple effect and weaken US regional power projection.

Withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq as quickly and responsibly as possible could be popular at home and allow the US to focus its counter-terrorism efforts elsewhere. However, the US would then be unable to directly support Iraqi stability, counter Daesh, or combat Iranian influence from inside Iraq. A conditions-based withdrawal or internal rearrangement of combat assistance forces would limit the impact in the fight against Daesh and on deterring Iran. USCENTCOM must mitigate the consequences of a shrinking US footprint in Iraq while Daesh is reinvigorating and Iranian influence is growing.

³⁶ Ben Connable and James Dobins, "Competition in Iraq", Rand.org, June 5, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/06/competition-iniraq.html>, (Accessed 28 Jan 2021).

³⁷ Saadi, Dania, "Iraq awards \$2 bn. Oil deal to Chinese buyer" Spglobal.com, January 2, 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/010321-iraq-awards-2-bil-oil-deal-to-chinese-buyer-withoutdestination-restrictions-somo>, (accessed 28 Jan 2021).

³⁸ Middle East Institute, "CENTCOM and the shifting sands of the Middle East: a conversation with CENTCOM commander Gen Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.", June 10 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/events/centcom-and-shifting-sands-middle-east-conversation-centcom-commandergen-kenneth-f-mckenzie>, (accessed 21 Jan 2021).

³⁹ Barbara Starr and Zachary Cohen, CNN, "US military anticipates Trump will issue order to plan for further troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq," 16 Nov 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/16/politics/trump-afghanistan-iraq-troop-drawdownorder/index.html>, (accessed 21 January 2021).

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- Maintain OIR and the current Coalition as a bridging force to support ISF while setting the conditions for a transfer of authority to a NATO Mission in Iraq.
- Encourage and support regional allies' security cooperation activities while continuing to ensure and enhance ISF's planning, command, and control capabilities.
- Maintain sufficient access, basing, and overflight in order to maintain area power projection.
- Continue supporting ISF and the Peshmerga in their fight against Daesh, while advocating the need for enhanced coordination, cooperation, and unification against common threats.
- Continue urging Iraq to resist Iranian malign influences.
- Engage the UN, EU, and individual nations to support the appointment of an independent Higher Electoral Commission in Iraq, while continuing to support good governance, delivery of basic services, anti-corruption measures, and private-sector growth.