

Pivoting to the KRG: Restructuring the U.S. Military Presence in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, a defining element of American policy has been the importance of the political and territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. In light of the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani, subsequent retaliation from Iran, and continued violence in Iraq—most recently manifesting in an unclaimed attack against the U.S. embassy—the U.S. government must now reconsider the viability of its current policy towards Iraq.

The current government in Baghdad has repeatedly demonstrated that it is not a reliable partner of the United States by its dereliction of basic duties, including its inability to protect U.S. personnel abroad. For example, the government showed it is either unwilling or unable to protect the U.S. embassy from violent demonstrators and attacks. For weeks, [Baghdad has failed to prevent the shelling of U.S. diplomats, forces, and private contractors \(http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/267322-baghdad-must-take-actions-after-strikes-on-us-interests-washington-says\)](#), who were invited to facilitate the training the [Iraqi army \(https://apnews.com/55186831b0eb475882844ce37036ca31\)](#)—which resulted in the recent killing of the U.S. private contractor and the wounding of other [U.S. contractors and soldiers \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/us/politics/american-rocket-attack-iraq.html\)](#).

[The recent controversial vote \(https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-01-05/iraqi-parliament-expel-u-s-military-qassem-soleiman\)](#) by the Iraqi Parliament to expel U.S. troops from Iraq confirms the writing that has been on the wall for months, if not years—the Iraqi government in Baghdad is dominated by pro-Iranian elements. This vote further demonstrates a toleration for the continued existence of militias outside the control of the state—such as Kata'ib Hezbollah—and therefore, a willingness to ignore the rule of law.

Additionally, this vote is reflective of the deep-seated sectarianism divisions within the Iraqi government. A majority of the Shia representatives in Parliament voted to expel U.S. forces, while other [Iraqis still oppose Iranian interference \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/world/middleeast/iraqi-protest-najaf-iran-burn.html\)](#). Most notably [\(https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/01/can-iraqi-evict-us-forces.html\)](#), Iraqi Sunni and Kurdish politicians were absent from the Parliamentary voting. The solidarity of Shia politicians, displayed by the strengthening of the army and state institutions, demonstrate an unwillingness to secure the welfare of the entire Iraqi state, above their own community. Moreover, [Moqtada al-Sadr's \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/moqtada-al-sadr-and-the-international-coalition-common-ground-and-fault-lin\)](#) million-man march last week demonstrates that the most likely kingmaker in the formation of Iraq's new government has little inclination or interest in maintaining a U.S. military presence in Iraq, though he also seeks to reduce Iranian influence in Iraqi politics.

Thus far, U.S. Policymakers have delineated two possible responses to the recent developments. One response envisions remaining in Iraq and [mending relations \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2020-01-07/us-iraqi-relationship-can-still-be-salvaged?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_content=20200107&utm_campaign=FA%20Today%20010720%20U.S.-Iraqi%20Ties%20Can%20Be%20Salvaged%2C%20Stopping%20Libya%27s%20Collapse%2C%20Congress%27s%20Power%20to%20End%20War&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%2012017\)](#). The U.S. justifies this response for the considerable human capital and resources invested in Iraq, as well as Iraq's future role in combating the return of ISIS and containing Iran. However, mending ties requires a legitimate Iraqi partner. And the formation of a new government may take months to achieve, as the Iraqi government is in a state of flux after the resignation of the Prime Minister. The longer the United States waits for a new government to form, the greater the risk for additional attacks on U.S. officials, soldiers, and private contractors by militias.

Similarly, Iran and its proxies will continue to resort to unprecedented levels of violence to remain in power. Thousands of [demonstrators \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraqi-protesters-on-the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani-the-protests-will-conti\)](#) in Iraq and Iran have already been killed, wounded, or imprisoned in the past several months. The U.S. embassy, military bases, and private citizens are likely to continue to be targeted by pro-Iran factions hoping to unite its base around anti-Americanism, in response to Iraq's [predominantly Shia protesters \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/polling-insights-on-iraqs-shia-revolt\)](#) continued rejection of both Iranian political influence and the Iraqi government writ large.

The second possible outcome is an end of U.S. [military presence Iraq \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2020-01-03/death-us-iraqi-relationship\)](#). The Trump administration's promise to reduce the number of troops overseas and avoid more Middle East conflicts may materialize, if the violence against U.S. targets continues. However, U.S. withdrawal would embolden Iran and its proxies, question U.S. resolve both regionally and internationally, potentially result in a resurgence of the Islamic State.

However, a third or middle of the road option remains. The United States can drastically reduce its presence in Baghdad without retreating from the region by deepening its relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (KRG). Strengthening our military relationship with a reliable partner will offset the perception of a weak U.S. presence in the region, empower the U.S. to pursue its regional objectives, and weaken the pro-Iranian government in Baghdad.

Strengthening the U.S.-Kurdish relationship and increasing military presence in Iraqi Kurdistan will allow the United States to remain visibly committed to The [Global Coalition to defeat ISIS \(https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/mission/\)](#). An increased military presence in Kurdistan will also allow the United States to apply maximum pressure on the Iranian government and its militias until a more comprehensive nuclear agreement is achieved. Ultimately, U.S. allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates will welcome this development in the wake of a withdrawal from Baghdad.

In contrast to politicians in Baghdad, [there is also no love lost between the leadership of the KRG and Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iran-and-iraqi-kurdistan-heading-towards-confrontation\)](#), despite the necessity of the KRG to coordinate with its eastern neighbor due to Iran's regional power and proximity. Because of Iran's own restive Kurdish population, Iran abandoned the Kurds to Saddam Hussein on several occasions and opposes Kurdish independence.

With U.S. forces centered in the KRG, the United States will also be able to avoid any the potential fallout from the unlikely but not impossible future fractionalization of Iraq. It is by no means certain where the ongoing protests and counter-attacks in Baghdad and other major cities will lead, and their devolution into a civil war given the violence already exhibited should not be written out.

But in such a case of fragmentation, a strong relationship with the KRG and the long-term maintenance of U.S. forces may push the United States to eventually look to officially

recognize Kurdish statehood—a long sought-after goal that foundered in September 2017, when the KRG’s independence referendum easily passed but failed generate international support. Were Baghdad to become solidified as an Iranian proxy, Kurdish independence would add additional financial pressures to a government already struggling to balance its books, further demonstrating the good sense of refocusing U.S. forces in the Kurdish Region of Iraq now.

The developments within the last few weeks demonstrate that the United States must seriously consider saying goodbye to Baghdad and hello to a more committed embrace of military cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government. This strategic re-adjustment—representing the middle ground between staying in Baghdad and getting out—is likely to be of the most benefit to U.S. interests in the Middle East writ large, and help maintain stability within the region as well. ❖

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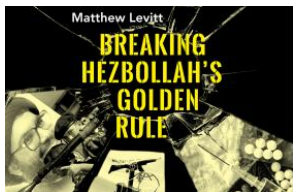
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