

Eight Reasons Why the United States and Iraq Still Need Each Other

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

Jan 9, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/thmanyt-asbab-lmadha-la-tzal-alwlayat-almthdt-walraq-bhajt-aly-bdhma-albd\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

A host of crucial multilateral interests are baked into the U.S. presence, from keeping the Islamic State down, to protecting vulnerable regional allies, to preventing Iran from taking Iraq's oil revenues.

The assassination of Qasem Soleimani has brought the tensions in U.S.-Iraqi relations to a boil, with militia factions strong-arming a parliamentary resolution on American troop withdrawal and various European allies contemplating departures of their own. Before they sign the divorce papers, however, officials in Baghdad and Washington should consider the many reasons why staying together is best for both them and the Middle East.

TO SAVE THE VICTORY AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE

A continued U.S. military presence in Iraq, modest as it may be, is essential to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. Conversely, if Soleimani's death leads to the withdrawal of U.S. troops involved in local operations against the group, it would constitute a major blow to the fight against terrorism. Even after the Islamic State lost the last vestige of its territorial caliphate in March 2019, it was still able to conduct 867 terrorist operations in Iraq alone during the remainder of the year. The quantity and severity of such attacks would surely rise in the absence of U.S. and allied military pressure. Ongoing operations against the group's equally active vestiges in Syria would be fatally undermined as well. The UN estimates that the Islamic State still has up to \$300 million in reserves to sustain its terrorist campaign, and Kurdish officials note that the group is now reorganized underground in Iraq with "better techniques and better tactics."

All of this is precisely why ministers at the November 14 meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS pledged to keep supporting the Iraqi government in order to "secure an enduring defeat of the terrorist organization." To fulfill that pledge, the United States must remain in Iraq; otherwise it risks repeating the mistakes of 2011, when

premature withdrawal led to the rise of the Islamic State in the first place.

TO DENY SOLEIMANI A POSTHUMOUS VICTORY

There is a direct link between Soleimani's death and his longstanding policy priority of forcing America out of Iraq. If the United States withdraws now, he will have achieved in death what he tried in vain to do in life. This would be much more than a symbolic and moral failure; it would be a major political defeat for Washington, and a victory for Iran. Conversely, if U.S. leaders remain steadfast in Iraq, they would underline Soleimani's epic failure, further eroding Iran's international stature while enhancing Washington's own.

TO KEEP IRAQ FRIENDLY, AND BALANCE IRAN

Iraq suffers greatly from Iran's interference, but the U.S.-Iraq relationship is demonstrably not a lost cause. Evidence for this abounds in the past few days alone: President Barham Salih, Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi, and the Iraqi Foreign Ministry publicly denounced Iran's ballistic missile strike on bases housing U.S. forces; fully half of Iraq's parliament boycotted the January 5 vote to oust U.S. troops; President Salih issued a statement noting that "the United States is our ally. Iran is our neighbor"; and leaders of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government recommitted—publicly and privately—to cooperate with the United States.

If U.S. troops stay in Iraq, they would greatly reinforce America's position there and help counter Iran's malign influence throughout the region. But if they leave, Iraq would be at immediate risk of slipping back into the destructive isolation of the Saddam era, with even less ability to resist Iran's predatory policies. Most Iraqis rightly dread that thought (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-reactions-to-soleimanis-assassination>). The hundreds of thousands of anti-Iranian protestors who have taken to Iraq's streets in recent months, especially in Shia areas, drive home this point. They would much prefer an Iraq that is sovereign, peaceful, pluralistic, and fully integrated into the international community. A continuing U.S. diplomatic and military presence would help bolster those prospects. As such, Washington can reasonably expect Iraq's government to offer terms that make this presence useful to both parties.

TO PREVENT IRAN FROM EXPLOITING IRAQI OIL

Beyond its geostrategic and political value, Iraq is now one of the world's top oil exporters, with huge reserves for the long term. If the U.S. presence remains intact, the American, Iraqi, and global economy would share in those benefits. If the United States leaves, however, Iran would effectively gain increasing control of vast energy and financial resources, diverting them from Iraqi development in order to evade sanctions and greatly assist its own hegemonic ambitions.

TO HELP ENSURE JORDAN'S SECURITY AND STABILITY

A U.S. departure would force Jordan to contend with a new set of security challenges. The kingdom's military and intelligence resources, already stretched thin along the border with Syria, would face the extra onus of protecting the even longer and much more remote border with Iraq. Jordanian officials have long expressed grave concerns about the presence of Iran and its proxies in both neighboring countries. And unlike Israel, Amman's ability to push back against that presence is severely limited.

More broadly, withdrawal would reinforce Jordan's concerns about U.S. credibility and staying power, which first emerged in force during the Obama administration. Security relations with the United States and Israel would continue for lack of any better options, but political ties would fray. Coupled with Jordan's tough economic prospects, such a development would threaten the stability and friendship of a key, long-term U.S. ally sandwiched directly between Israel and Iraq, with adverse effects on all parties.

TO ENABLE BURDEN-SHARING WITH GULF ALLIES

Almost all of the Gulf Cooperation Council states perceive U.S. forces in Iraq as the foundation for the American military units they host on their own soil, and as vital to their self-defense against Iran. Beyond just governments or elites, recent [public opinion polls in Kuwait \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kuwaiti-public-including-shia-minority-still-anti-iran-but-wary-of-conflict\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kuwaiti-public-including-shia-minority-still-anti-iran-but-wary-of-conflict), [Saudi Arabia \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/New-Saudi-Poll-Shows-Just-One-Fourth-Back-Moderate-Islam-or-Count-on-U.S\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/New-Saudi-Poll-Shows-Just-One-Fourth-Back-Moderate-Islam-or-Count-on-U.S), and other GCC countries prove that dislike of Iran, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and Tehran-backed actors such as Hezbollah and the Houthis is widely shared across the Gulf. In recent years, GCC support for Iraq has been reluctant and parsimonious despite Washington's arm-twisting. But after the latest decisive U.S. action against Iran in Iraq, there are better prospects of more generous help and more robust diplomatic relations.

Later this year, the GCC is expected to start supplying Iraq with electricity so that it will not be as dependent on Iranian supplies. In time, if the United States stays in the game, Iraq may even switch from threat to partner with other Arab allies in the region. If America withdraws, however, some governments and their publics would view Iraq as even more of an Iranian satellite, both because of its Shia majority and because the key counterbalance would be gone. Their readiness to rely on U.S. guarantees, already in some doubt, would waver still more. All of this would increase pressure on the GCC to appease Iran, essentially snatching an American defeat from the jaws of victory.

TO LIMIT ISRAELI INVOLVEMENT

Unlike Iraq's immediate neighbors, Israel is not directly tied to recent events in that country. Nevertheless, U.S. withdrawal would create additional threats to Israeli security. Both Iran and the Islamic State would have a freer hand to operate inside Iraq, likely spreading across the porous border into Syria and ultimately to Israel's own frontiers. American credibility would also suffer a new setback.

As a result, Israel might feel obliged to increase its forays against terrorists and Iranian proxies inside Iraq, which would strain its capabilities, further unsettle the fragile situation in Iraq, and risk greater retaliation. The aggravated threat to Jordan, with which Israel shares a long border and a peace treaty, would be of serious concern as well.

TO GET MORE SUPPORT FROM EUROPEAN ALLIES

U.S. withdrawal would drastically limit the ability of European forces to continue training Iraq's counterterrorism forces. Germany and Canada, for instance, have already announced they are removing part of their small contingents due to current insecurity, though France is planning to remain.

In contrast, if the United States upped its game in Iraq—not just militarily but also politically and economically—then burden-sharing with allies would likely be enhanced. Moreover, the broader goal of the Western military presence in Iraq is to tackle some of the issues that laid the groundwork for the Islamic State's emergence: namely, insecurity, Sunni marginalization, and absence of economic development. This helps explain why European capitals have reacted so cautiously to Soleimani's assassination, pointing out his initial responsibility for the escalation while also calling on all parties to de-escalate going forward.

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra. He would like to thank several of his Institute colleagues for contributing to this PolicyWatch, including Ghaith al-Omari, Oula Alrifai, Elana DeLozier, Sarah Feuer, Simon Henderson, Barbara Leaf, Matthew Levitt, Charles Thepaut, and Aaron Zelin. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Jordan \(/policy-analysis/jordan\)](/policy-analysis/jordan)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)