

How Soleimani's Killing Could Make a Stronger Iraq

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As Iraq signals its willingness to evict U.S. forces following the airstrike, the time has come for discipline and a focus on shared interests.

The targeted killing of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Iraq's most senior militiamen, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, justified by their orchestration of the deaths of hundreds of Americans, has led to a widespread fear of an imminent war with Iran that could cause untold loss of life and further destabilize an already devastated region. How Iran might respond is impossible to know (much less how the U.S. would react in turn), but I see the potential for a success in Iraq—if the U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi government can focus on their shared interests and continue to purge Iran's malign influence.

As someone who has worked in Iraq with every U.S. administration since 2003, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction and relief when Soleimani and Muhandis were killed, reflecting my own odyssey in Iraq, the friends and colleagues lost there to militia attacks, and the growing impunity of militia kingpins. I know that this feeling was shared across the U.S. government policymaking, military and intelligence communities dealing with Iraq. Most of us have a long history with Iraq and, indirectly, with the likes of Soleimani and Muhandis. Indeed, Soleimani's outsize influence in the region had been so great for so long that we convened a [roundtable \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/does-soleimanis-death-matter-findings-from-a-2019-workshop\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/does-soleimanis-death-matter-findings-from-a-2019-workshop) last spring that imagined what might happen if he were no longer in power.

The last two years witnessed Soleimani and Muhandis's shared victory in Iraq. Soleimani picked the prime minister and made sure he did not get in the way while Muhandis ran anything that mattered in the country. It felt good to break their stride, especially coming hot on the heels of popular protests in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon that indicated they may have overreached.

Now the U.S. needs to bank the win and adopt more-measured policies that show Washington's ability to pause, reflect on shared interests with Iraq and the coalition, and let the dust settle. And while careful deliberation and playing well with others are not the hallmarks of this administration, there are some causes for optimism.

The deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis arguably bring about the end of the post-2014 era of Iraqi-invited strategic and military partnership. On Sunday, Iraq's Parliament and prime minister each agreed in principle that the presence of U.S. combat forces should be ended, albeit without a clear process or timeline. There are many procedural hurdles that Iraqi politicians have used to hold off such actions in the past, and Sunday's parliamentary session was notable for the absence of all Kurdish MPs and most Sunnis. Other supporters of ongoing security cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition include Iraqi moderates, military professionals, technocrats, and (quietly) even a good proportion of Shiites.

Although shocked by recent U.S. actions, many Iraqis still want a new era of strategic cooperation with the U.S. and the other 80 nations of the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State, nations that have collectively adopted an "in with the U.S., out with the U.S." posture, meaning that they would not continue their in-country support without the U.S. alongside them. Everyone remembers what happened after the sudden, complete removal of foreign forces in 2011, and few outside the Iran-backed militias are keen to repeat the episode, which opened the floodgates for a revival of the Islamic State and the near-collapse of Iraq as a state. They also don't want Iran to have unfettered influence in Iraq.

A New Coalition-Iraq Framework

Sunday's parliamentary action in Iraq will be the beginning of a process in which both the U.S.-led coalition and Iraq need to revisit the terms of their cooperation because both parties have deep-seated grievances. Iraq is rightly alarmed that the U.S. has taken military actions inside Iraq, operations that targeted Iraqi citizens and were not authorized by the Iraqi state.

But there is plenty to be unhappy about on the other side as well. The U.S. and many key partners such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, France and Germany have grave concerns that Iraq's government has no qualms about Iranian violations of Iraqi sovereignty, that militias are grossly undermining security sector reforms and killing unarmed civilians, and that there is effectively no empowered government since Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned amid popular protests in October.

This should be the starting point of a conversation on creating a new era of U.S.-Iraqi strategic and military partnership, one founded on a common understanding. Whether Iraq falls to the Islamic State or to militia warlords and U.S.-Iran proxy warfare, the result will be the same: refugees, chaos, war.

The U.S. and its coalition partners are in Iraq to defeat the Islamic State, but they share another objective with many Iraqis that might provide an excellent basis for future cooperation: the survival of a sovereign, stable and democratic Iraq.

The presence of international troops is underwritten by an exchange of letters made in June 2014. If Iraq goes all the way in requesting the departure of U.S. forces, there will be a period of up to a year to make the withdrawal. In that interregnum, a new letter might be written, by which time Iraq may have held early elections and elected a new prime minister with a strong mandate to set new terms of cooperation. The new framework should be drafted by a contact group of Iraqis and coalition members. At one remove, working through trusted intermediaries, the Shiite religious establishment of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the followers of populist-nationalist Muqtada al-Sadr should also guide the new framework.

Rebuilding a Sovereign, Stable and Democratic Iraq

Iraq's new security framework with the coalition should not be limited to fighting terrorists. It should focus on ensuring Iraq is sovereign, stable and democratic—all conditions that are degrading rapidly in the country. If and when U.S. and Iraqi officials sit down to negotiate a new partnership, the American side has a number of things to offer that can promote these three pillars of a stronger Iraq.

Sovereign. Coalition countries must—and I believe will—give greater respect to Iraqi autonomy, which means accepting greater constraints on coalition forces. But the Iraqi government must first demonstrate greater even-handedness in its treatment of foreign countries.

To give just three examples: Iraq condemned the U.S. strikes on Kataib Hezbollah on December 29, but not Kataib Hezbollah's December 27 killing of a U.S. contractor that triggered the retaliation. Iraq's militia-dominated security forces strongly defended the Iranian Embassy from unarmed protesters for months, yet allowed Iran-backed militias to breach the International Zone of Baghdad in minutes to blockade the U.S. Embassy. Likewise, Soleimani entered Iraq illegally whenever and however he wished, while coalition officials observe immigration procedures.

If the U.S.-led coalition sees Iraq being evenhanded, it will readily accept stricter controls.

Stable. Iraq's security is only as good as its security forces, without which the Islamic State and militias would run rampant, driving both refugees and investors to flee the country.

The coalition has a powerful bargaining chip that it can use to induce the Iraqis to stand up to Iran's crippling sway over its internal affairs. Coalition forces donate well over \$1.5 billion in security cooperation to Iraq each year and put more than 5,000 of their troops in harm's way, but they can only justify this generosity if they believe Iraq's security forces are developing as strong institutions.

Today, they are not. Iran-backed militias are engineering the sacking of Iraq's best generals, like Counter-Terrorism Command head Abdel-Wahab al-Saadi and Baghdad Operations Command head Jalil al-Rubai. This has to be reversed.

Militias like Kataib Hezbollah, the U.S.-designated terrorist organization bombed by the U.S. on December 29, now run security and baggage-handling services at Baghdad International Airport. They control the diplomatic and government district. This is unacceptable to all Iraq's international partners and to many Iraqis.

The coalition also needs to listen to the changing nature of Iraqi needs. Providing mainly military assistance was the right call in 2014, with the Islamic State at Baghdad's gates. To avoid a future economic collapse under the weight of nearly a million new job-seekers each year, Iraq needs economic partnership, investment and private sector jobs. Representing 12 of the G-20 nations, the coalition is a ready-made "friends of Iraq" platform with unrivaled economic strength.

Democratic. The 2018 national elections in Iraq were viewed domestically and internationally as the least free and fair to be held since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003.

With a resigned prime minister and protesters calling for new elections, all 81 partners of the international coalition should support free and fair early elections before the scheduled 2022 polls, an outcome the United Nations has also called for. The coalition represents most of the world's economic and diplomatic giants, and when they speak with one voice, they can confer tremendous legitimacy on a new political process, or, alternatively, can disengage from a nondemocratic Iraq. Until Iraq has a relegitimized government, it will be a playground for militias determined to keep the chaos going and run the state in the power vacuum.

Removal of coalition forces is Iraq's choice, but that choice has portentous implications and may be passed on to a relegitimized new government. If foreign forces are allowed to stay in Iraq, and *if* they choose to do so, there should be a new framework to govern the new post-Islamic State stage of stabilizing Iraq.

Most Iraqi factions and, judging by the protests, most Iraqi people want real sovereignty and international partnership; real stability provided by professional security forces, not militias. They want real, not fake, democracy that results in new free and fair elections that give the younger generation a chance to get Iraq, one of the Middle East's most powerful nations, back on track.

Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on [the Politico website \(https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/05/soleimani-killing-stronger-iraq-093976\)](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/05/soleimani-killing-stronger-iraq-093976). ❖

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