

# U.S.-Iraq Relations at a Crossroads: Policy Options

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Brief Analysis

## Washington should smartly employ tougher love in the coming months, working with other nations and Iraqi moderates to improve the country's chances of recovery from militia rule.

In recent days, U.S. officials have repeatedly indicated that the relationship with Iraq is at an inflection point, but the current crisis has been a long time coming. Iran-backed militias, most prominently Kataib Hezbollah, have effectively taken over key areas and responsibilities, including the prime minister's office, the government center/diplomatic district, Baghdad airport, various highway routes connecting Iran and Syria, and management of the country's airspace. Meanwhile, the government allowed militias to kill scores of Iraqi protestors last year to stop them from reaching the Iranian embassy, yet stood aside when militias attacked the U.S. embassy on December 31.

## THREE U.S. OPTIONS

If U.S. policy toward Iraq is in fact at a crossroads, what are the potential paths Washington might take?

- **Continuity.** One option is to continue the current approach, which entails leaving Iraq's protestors, religious leaders, and moderates largely on their own as they try to drag their derailed democracy back onto the tracks. In this scenario, the United States would respond only to serious attacks on American citizens or facilities, [turning a blind eye to nonlethal harassment attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/escalation-in-iraq-how-to-limit-the-damage-and-reestablish-sovereignty\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/escalation-in-iraq-how-to-limit-the-damage-and-reestablish-sovereignty) as it did prior to the December 27 militia rocket strike that killed a U.S. contractor.
- **Tougher love.** Many U.S. officials are now hinting at a second path that would involve intensified punishment and deterrence of anti-American elements in Iraq. This includes sanctioning a far broader list of politicians and militiamen

for their role in launching/facilitating attacks on U.S. facilities or committing human rights violations against Iraqis. Washington could also withhold sanctions waivers on Iraqi purchases of Iranian gas and electricity if Baghdad fails to protect U.S. persons and property. In the kinetic sphere, the United States might take “preemptive” measures in the future to protect its bases (as Defense Secretary Mark Esper noted on January 2), perhaps even against Iran directly (as President Trump warned on December 31).

- **Separation.** A third potential route is separation, either at Iraq’s request or because Washington decides to suspend security, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. No one in the U.S. government is currently advocating this route, but it could become necessary if the Iraqi government orders American personnel out via new legislation or fails to protect them from militia attacks. In either case, the consequences could be severe, whether temporarily or for the long term. Security cooperation against the Islamic State would mostly cease, and the non-U.S. members of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) would depart along with U.S. forces—including most of the G20 nations, Baghdad’s most powerful allies. Iraq’s diplomatic significance would diminish enormously, and economic cooperation could cease as well (e.g., U.S. protection of Iraqi assets from lawsuits; Iraqis’ ability to conduct transactions in U.S. dollars). At the same time, potent new policy options could open up. Sanctions would likely increase with less reason for restraint. Military options against Iran’s proxies would also increase, not only for the United States but also for Israel, making Iraq more similar to the counterterrorism free-fire zone in Syria. U.S.-designated terrorists active in Iraqi politics would become more exposed to kinetic targeting.

Given the long list of attacks and other abuses aimed at the American presence, the U.S. government has seemingly—and rightly—concluded that continuity is not an option, and that tougher love is therefore worth trying for a while. If the results are not satisfactory, however, Washington appears prepared to move toward some form of separation. Accordingly, finding the right blend of continuity and tougher love is the order of the day.

## U.S. PRIORITIES IN IRAQ

Like the majority of the international coalition, Washington’s goal is to help establish a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. A range of important Iraqi actors share this vision: Shia leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, President Barham Salih, Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi, most of the ongoing nationwide protest movement, and many moderates in the parliament, political parties, and security forces. Washington can help them bring this vision back into focus by taking the following steps:

- **Ignore the withdrawal campaign.** U.S. officials should not waste any further effort countering the militias’ continued effort to bring a parliamentary motion on removing U.S. forces. If such legislation is passed and implemented, so be it—Iraq has every right to remove U.S. forces, and military separation is an option Washington can live with. Fortunately, the government is unlikely to evict U.S. troops, as shown by the three failed efforts to do so in 2019.
- **Secure U.S. persons.** Trump administration officials should continue to send strong signals that serious attacks on U.S. facilities and personnel—not necessarily just lethal attacks—will be met with painful retaliation at a “time, manner, and place of our choosing,” as Secretary Esper put it. This message was clearly communicated by the severe damage that U.S. airstrikes inflicted on Kataib Hezbollah bases on December 29, but it must be continually reinforced. At the same time, preemptive strikes should only be launched under certain circumstances—namely, when attacks on U.S. facilities are imminent, when video evidence of such threats can be quickly declassified and provided to underline the rationale, and when collateral damage risks are negligible.
- **Punish bad actors.** Beginning this month, the U.S. government should increase the available manpower for Treasury Department efforts to sanction a wide range of Iraqi politicians and militia leaders under counterterrorism authorities and the Global Magnitsky Act. The best way to open that campaign is by sanctioning Faleh al-Fayyad, the longtime national security advisor responsible for abetting a range of attacks on Iraqi protestors and U.S. sites. As for far-reaching economic sanctions or other actions that might be seen as collective punishment, they should be reserved

as a deterrent against major attacks. The United States should also push European allies such as Britain—whose troops were killed by Kataib Hezbollah prior to 2011—to designate that group as a terrorist entity.

- **Restore security inside the International Zone and airport.** Days before the U.S. embassy attack, the Iraqi government handed responsibility over the zone’s security to militia officer Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (birth name Tahseen Abid Murat al-Abboudi), a member of the Iran-backed Badr Organization who serves as the prime minister’s advisor on Popular Mobilization Force affairs. Washington should call on countries with embassies in Baghdad to signal their reasonable expectation that he be replaced with a trustworthy professional officer. Likewise, the current director of Baghdad International Airport is Ali Taqi, a Badr intelligence officer who recently awarded ground handling services to a Kataib Hezbollah front company.
- **Restore command-and-control.** Many professional officers have been purged from Iraqi military commands as a result of militia pressure, including Counter Terrorism Service head Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, Anbar Operations Command head Mahmoud al-Falahi, and Baghdad Operations Command official Jalil al-Rubaie. If capacity-building efforts are to be continued, the United States should work with key CJTF-OIR partners—Australia, Britain, Canada, France, and Italy—to review security cooperation, restore purged commanders to appropriate roles, and press for the removal of malign commanders.
- **Relegitimize the government.** Until Iraq has a permanent government under a new prime minister and a refreshed cabinet, the militia shadow state will continue to run the country. In fact, constitutional deadlock is likely the preferred end-state of Iran-backed militias, since it would leave them as de facto rulers. The December 24 passage of a new election law has given Iraqis a powerful tool for revitalizing their political system, since protestors can now use it to enact their demands through democratic choice. In order to boost this effort and facilitate early elections, Washington should keep working with the UN, EU, and individual nations to support the appointment of an independent Higher Electoral Commission in Iraq. Finally, the best way to signal American support for reform is via well-publicized efforts to foster good governance, delivery of government services, anti-corruption measures, and private-sector growth.

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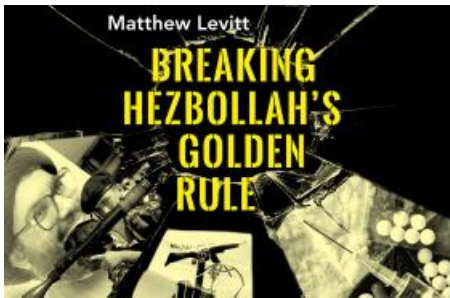
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