After Afghanistan, Iraqis Fear They Could Be Next

by **Bilal Wahab (/experts/bilal-wahab)**

Aug 19, 2021
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/alraqywn-ykhshwn-yaty-dwrhm-bd-afghanstan)

Also published in ***Foreign Policy***

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bilal Wahab (/experts/bilal-wahab)
Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner fellow at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

Similarities between the two cases include heavy patronage politics and militia intimidation, but Baghdad has advantages that could help it avoid Kabul's fate.

Perhaps no one is more shocked by the debacle in Afghanistan than the people of Iraq. More than anyone else, they worry their country could face a similar fate.

Even before the U.S. withdrawal morphed into the Afghan state's total collapse and complete Taliban takeover, many Iraqis I talked to during a visit there in July and August were deeply wary of what the impending U.S. pullout would mean for Iraq. Would the United States end its 2,500-troop presence in Iraq too? If it did, would it lead to an Iranian militia takeover, a resurgence of the Islamic State, or a possible civil war?

The desperate scenes at the Kabul airport on Sunday stirred feelings of déjà vu and premonition among Iraqis. It reminded them of how, in 2014, the U.S.-trained and equipped Iraqi military and police melted down and lost three provinces to the Islamic State. The United States had withdrawn in 2011 but had to return to Iraq to stop the Islamic State's onslaught and slaughter of Iraqis. Iraqis also fear renewed discussions in Washington and Baghdad over a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. As in 2011, Iran is pressuring the Iraqi government to ask U.S. forces to leave. Just as it was then, Washington may be more than willing to comply.

The parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan are easy to list. Like Afghanistan, Iraq has a divided government that prioritizes patronage politics over competent security force governance and other government services. If anything, the Iraqi government and the collapsed Afghan one competed over which was more corrupt. Like in Afghanistan, the Iraqi government and military are unwilling to stand up to unruly militias threatening Iraq's sovereignty and stability and attacking Iraqis. As in Afghanistan, it's not a matter of ability but of political will—U.S. officials complain Baghdad commands the region's premier counterterrorism service but deploys it only against the Islamic State, not

the militias. Like the Taliban, these thuggish militias, despite public and international pressure, are more than willing to patiently strive for power. They're playing the long game with Iran at their backs—while Iraqis doubt the United States will be as steadfast.

Many also fear the withdrawal debate in Baghdad—egged on by Iran—will find an open door in Washington, not least because the team that withdrew from Iraq in 2011 is back in the White House. Iraqis worry the Biden administration could live with an Iraqi government led by militias if they cease attacks on U.S. interests. Many Iraqis fear the implications of the administration's deadline to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2021. To be sure, Washington's shifting priorities and fatigue with Iraq are not just a Democratic position. It was the Trump administration that threatened to shutter the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad after militia attacks on U.S. military and diplomatic personnel increased. Further, the sharp political and policy swings in Washington confuse its friends and partners in Iraq, many of whom have begun looking for alternative foreign patrons—say, Ankara or Abu Dhabi—to counter Tehran's influence.

Despite such real and perceived similarities, Iraq is, of course, a very different country, which gives it a chance to avoid Afghanistan's fate. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq has a history of robust national institutions. There is U.S. bipartisan support for staying the course in Iraq, leading the anti–Islamic State coalition to keep the terrorist group from resurging and advancing economic relations. Moreover, the United States cannot afford to ignore the threat to the region posed by Iran's expansionist agenda in Iraq. And U.S. interests aside, Iraq has a better chance at curbing militia rule given local antidotes to Iranian influence—including a popular protest movement; outspoken Iraqi Shiite leadership in Najaf wary of losing religious authority to the clerics in the Iranian religious capital, Qom; and Kurdistan leaders who fear they are the militias' next target after the Sunni provinces. Unlike the Taliban, Iraq's diverse militias lack unified leadership and nationwide acceptance. Moreover, the success of the U.S. mission against the Islamic State and al Qaeda in Syria depends on the United States' presence in Iraq.

Still, Iraq could go Afghanistan's way unless both Iraq and the United States recalibrate their relationship. The first order of business is to maintain but also diversify the counterterrorism profile of U.S. commitments in Iraq. As long as U.S.-Iraqi ties hinge on the number of U.S. military personnel, Iran and its proxies will aspire to end the relationship by forcing those troops out. The militias have demonstrated their wherewithal and will maintain their attacks on the U.S. presence, knowing the United States lacks both patience and deterrence.

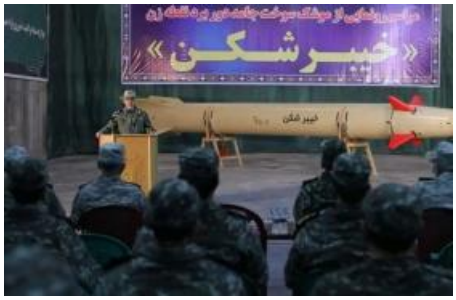
For the U.S.-Iraqi relationship to endure, it needs to shift its focus toward investing in building Iraqi security forces' military and institutional capacity for counterterrorism and other purposes. Capacity rather than a timeline should be the benchmark for progress. To sustain such a mission, moreover, the U.S. presence in Iraq needs to be depoliticized. Washington needs to clearly communicate that redesignating its military presence in Iraq as an advise-and-assist mission will not mean abandoning Iraq. Crucially, the Iraqi people need to feel the benefits of the relationship in areas like trade, health care, and education. A series of U.S.-Iraqi strategic dialogues have attempted to arrive at such a goal.

Moreover, Washington must not let the Iraqi government off the hook. Iraqis may find solace that Biden seems unwilling to risk images from Baghdad International Airport similar to those we've seen from Kabul. However, U.S. priorities are indeed shifting away from the greater Middle East, and the onus lies first and foremost with the Iraqi government to take responsibility and invest in a robust relationship with the United States. Counterterrorism alone won't sustain the relationship. U.S. messaging should be clear: The transition of its mission from a combat role to an advising one does not mean the withdrawal of U.S. commitments to Iraq or abandoning the anti–Islamic State campaign. The 2,500 military advisors will anchor the U.S.-Iraqi relationship and signal continued international and NATO support for Iraq. But they must not be the entire relationship.

After Afghanistan, Iraqi leaders may complain that the United States has become an unreliable partner. However,

seeking to replace it with other patrons—be it Iran, Turkey, or another country—would only deepen Iraqi dependencies on even more unreliable partners. Instead, Iraqis must look to Baghdad for fixes to the government. Finally, the debacle in Afghanistan is a reminder that Washington, Baghdad, and Erbil should recognize pervasive Iraqi corruption as a true national security challenge—and not just some negative side effect of a democratic transition. Washington must therefore demand accountability for the funds and equipment it provides to Iraqi security and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. ❖

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

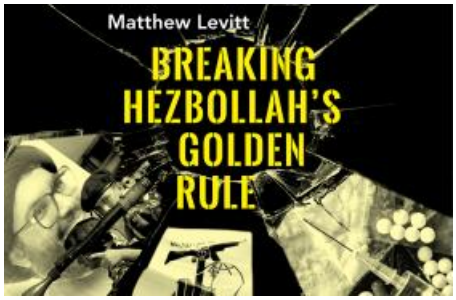
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

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)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Iran's Foreign Policy (/policy-analysis/irans-foreign-policy)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)