Twenty Years After Saddam: The Future of the U.S.-Iraq Relationship

A Conversation with David Petraeus

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Gen. David H. Petraeus, who retired from the Army in 2011 after commanding U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, served as director of the CIA from September 2011 to November 2012.

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A former coalition commander joins Washington Institute experts to discuss the war's legacy, the country's current challenges, and how U.S. policy should evolve in response.

On April 6, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with David Petraeus, Bilal Wahab, Michael Knights, and Anna Borshchevskaya. General Petraeus served for decades in some of the most senior military and government posts responsible for U.S. policy in Iraq and the broader Middle East, from commander of the Multinational Force-Iraq to director of the CIA. Wahab is the Institute's Wagner Fellow and founder of the Center for Development and Natural Resources at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani. Knights is the Institute's Bernstein Fellow and cofounder of its ***Militia Spotlight platform (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)*** *. Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow in the Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

David Petraeus

It is still too early to write the final legacy of the past two decades of U.S. involvement in Iraq. It is certainly not what America hoped it would be, and various internal challenges persist under the current government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Many of these problems entail countering the centrifugal forces trying to pull the country apart, including Iran's influence, Baghdad's tensions with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and an increasingly dissatisfied youth population. Meanwhile, the government still cannot fully provide electricity services to its population despite being one of the top oil exporters.

Most of America's past mistakes in Iraq were on the military level, including the two biggest ones: dismantling the army and pushing the de-Baathification process. Nevertheless, it remains in America's national interest to preserve a military presence there and stay engaged. Stability is vital in such a multiethnic country, and losing it would cause spillover into other countries. The main objectives today are clear: continue fighting the forces trying to pull the country apart, help the central government improve its ability to allocate resources, and prevent Iraqi territory from once again becoming an incubator for Islamist extremists.

In the past, Iraq's *sahwa* (awakening) movement was effective because it centered on reconciliation with former Baathists, Sunnis and Shia alike. The process began in Mosul, the only place where the United States had the authority to attempt such an initiative. This was also the first U.S. military partnership with a local force to defeat al-Qaeda—a model later used to defeat the Islamic State. Yet America has not had the same level of success against Iran-backed militias. It did manage to destroy elements of these groups early on in Najaf, Basra, and Sadr City, forcing them to surrender and cease firing rockets into the Green Zone for quite some time. Yet militias have since embedded themselves within the government.

Ideally, the United States could use its current military and diplomatic relations with Iraq to help build an economic relationship. Yet this desire must be a mutual one. Moreover, substantial investments cannot occur until Iraq can provide assurances about rule of law, government integrity, and, above all, the security situation.

Regarding Iraq's role in great power competition, the United States should stay engaged in the region as a whole, since this will help determine the right level of attention and investment needed for Iraq. To better prevent and contain problems in the Middle East, the "pivot" to Asia should be thought of more as a "rebalancing."

The next twenty years of this relationship will require a renewed sense of responsibility, which has been lacking for the past decade or so. Sudani's premiership might be a turning point; in any case, those Americans who have engaged in this project over the past two decades are still hopeful.

Bilal Wahab

Although some of Iraq's problems from 2003 ago persist today, its top challenges are more forward-looking: namely, corruption, militias, and climate change. Iraqis have come to see corruption as a national security threat, and the United States has had some success in addressing it. For example, the U.S. Treasury Department and Federal Reserve effectively pressured Iraq's Central Bank to do away with the corruption-prone dollar auctions system, which had previously cost the country between $241 and $312 billion in laundered money.

On the climate front, Iraq is worsening the problem through major gas flaring, which Washington has been pushing it to stop. Besides contributing to climate change, this practice is wasteful and **keeps the country dependent (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/necessary-us-role-fixing-baghdad-kurdistan-energy-dispute)** on gas and power imports from Iran. In that sense, devoting more attention and pressure to this issue would help push Iraq's economy forward.

Michael Knights

Iraq's current trajectory is worrisome. In the past, bad actors have used periods of quiet to work from the shadows and hollow out the state, and this is now happening to a greater extent than ever before. Over the past eighteen months, Iraq has undergone a **de facto regime change (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/remaking-iraq-how-iranian-backed-militias-captured-country)** : the 2021 electoral results were overturned, the judiciary was fully politicized, and the militias have been massively empowered. The latter problem was illustrated

most recently by the formation of the **Muhandis construction company (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muhandis-company-iraqs-khatam-al-anbia)** , a militia-controlled conglomerate that is set on draining the last drops of blood from the Iraqi state by acquiring cost-free land grants and unprecedented commercial advantages.

General Petraeus has described Saddam Hussein's regime as "kleptocratic, autocratic, and murderous"; sadly, that situation is emerging once again under a new form of dictatorship. The Iraq that the United States invaded in 2003 had no hope for democratic elections, almost no freedom of speech, and an opposition that had largely been driven abroad. Many of these trends are coming full circle today, and militia capture of the judicial system will only accelerate them. Militias are eating away at Iraq's foundations faster than ever before—a danger that is easy to overlook because the photogenic facade of Sudani's government is so appealing. If current trends continue, the picture that is painted on the invasion's twenty-fifth anniversary will be a lot more negative than the one being painted today.

In essence, the United States has the friends it deserves in Iraq. The U.S. government is good at explaining the many benefits of U.S. friendship, but quite bad at leveraging those benefits. America's partners tend to enjoy the benefits no matter how they behave. Right now, almost every U.S. friend in Iraq is also looking for new friends at home, and in most cases these new friends are Iran-backed militias. Washington needs to be more inventive in using its massive advantages—particularly in terms of intelligence capabilities—to hurt those who act negatively while helping those who act positively. A good start would be an administration-spanning presidential finding that authorizes covert action to counter the growth of Iran-backed militias—not only in Iraq, but also in Yemen.

Anna Borshchevskaya

Iraqis have noticed Washington's shift in focus from counterterrorism to great power competition over the years, particularly when it has caused voids or imbalances in U.S. regional engagement. Indeed, Washington has not fully grasped how best to engage in such competition. Western analysts tend to believe that competition with Russia takes place mainly in Europe, while competition with China is mainly in the Indo-Pacific. Historically, however, the Middle East has always been a key arena for great power rivalries.

In the case of Iraq, most U.S. commitments have been made through the lenses of counterterrorism and democratic engagement. Yet Russia has made a large economic footprint there, especially in the energy sector. When Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visits the region, he tends to bring business-focused delegations, enabling both parties to more easily find a common language.

For their part, Iraqis do not want to choose between the United States, Russia, and China when it comes to foreign investment or foreign policy—they want all three. Yet the current U.S. narrative does not resonate with them as strongly as China's or Russia's; rightly or wrongly, many of them perceive America as unreliable, and others in the Middle East share this perception.

Washington has several options for fixing this image problem. For instance, it could put more effort into publicly showing regional audiences that Russian president Vladimir Putin is not reliable, contrary to the broad local perception of him. Clarifying and expediting U.S. support would help as well. When it comes to core security challenges, Washington's partners in Iraq understand that there is no substitute for the U.S. security umbrella, but they also know that the American system can be too slow to deliver—or, when it does deliver, that the result is not necessarily what they asked for. By contrast, Russia's authoritarian system enables one person to make quick decisions about weapons transfers and similar matters. Washington should understand that the weapons it provides in cases like this do not necessarily have to be the best; they just have to be there.

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