

A U.S.-Iraq Security Partnership: Avoiding the Pitfalls Just Ahead

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Mar 13, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Nationalist sentiment and Iranian pressure have led some Iraqi legislators to oppose a continued U.S. military presence, but Washington could make things much worse if it overreacts.

The dust of last year’s final campaign to destroy the Islamic State “caliphate” had hardly settled before talk of expelling U.S. forces began to circulate in Iraq’s newly seated Council of Representatives (COR). This percolating sentiment was unsurprising in a body that for the first time included substantial numbers of often deeply anti-American militia members. Yet it exploded into public view following White House moves that deeply agitated the hypersensitive strain of nationalism blooming within Iraq’s body politic. When a subsequent bid to demand that U.S. forces depart gained fifty signatures in parliament, it raised the specter of 2011, when nationalist antipathy was a major factor in dooming a bilateral agreement to keep a small U.S. military presence in the country. Whether that happens again depends on the near-term course of the COR’s nationalist sentiment, Iran’s ability to exploit that sentiment, and the tenor of Washington’s reaction.

WHAT IS DRIVING THE CALL TO EXPEL U.S. FORCES?

Two key elements will determine whether the parliament’s current draft bill to remove U.S. forces gains traction.

There is Iranian influence. Tehran's national security perspective favors an Iraq that is isolated, institutionally weak, and dependent on Iranian help—a goal furthered by the outsized role that Shia militias played during and after the war against the Islamic State. An American military mission aimed at strengthening Iraq's professional security forces works against that Iranian goal, while also bolstering Baghdad's relationship with Washington. Accordingly, as U.S. sanctions tighten the noose on Iran, the Islamic Republic's interest in flexing its muscles in Iraq will only increase. A rancorous bilateral dispute over a COR vote fits the bill beautifully.

The second potential driver is the rising sense of nationalism and sovereignty among the Iraqi political class (most prominently Muqtada al-Sadr) and the wider public. This broad-based populist trend is a potent force, as the [September 2018 mob action in Basra \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/washington-should-reverse-its-retreat-in-basra\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/washington-should-reverse-its-retreat-in-basra) demonstrated. Yet the public's attention is predominantly focused not on the presence of U.S. forces, but on bread-and-butter economic issues and corruption. These issues represent Sadr's political comfort zone, despite his occasional posturing against "all foreign troops."

In contrast, the COR's composition makes it much more susceptible to nationalist fervor specifically aimed at the U.S. military presence. A full 200 of its 329 members are first-term, and around 50-60 of them are affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces militia network. Such members have already been inflamed by incidents such as President Trump's December trip to Iraq, when he visited al-Asad Air Base but did not meet with any political officials. Tehran was quick to exploit that incident—on December 28, Iranian ambassador Iraj Masjedi pointedly questioned Washington's motives in keeping troops in Iraq, then claimed that Iran's own forces had already left.

For the moment, little of the COR's feverish withdrawal sentiment has spilled over into the public, which may serve as a temporary brake on dramatic legislative action. Yet this brake could easily fail if Washington takes further "provocative" steps, or if Iran and its proxies make a more determined push in parliament.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

Scenario One: The COR's draft bill fails to advance

Prospects: The most likely outcome—for now

Impact: Highly beneficial

Response: Baghdad should help this scenario along while Washington stays quiet

The draft bill calling for U.S. withdrawal may not see the light of day once more urgent issues grab the COR's attention (e.g., Basra, one of several pressing matters discussed by former National Security Council director Douglas Ollivant in a January 16 article for War on the Rocks). This seems probable at the moment because unlike in 2011, U.S. troops are largely out of view and have become a fringe issue for the public. For a while, denouncing U.S. forces was the only matter on which the two major Shia blocs—Sadr's Sairoon and Hadi al-Ameri's Fatah Alliance—could find common ground, but their focus is turning elsewhere as they fill the new government's last few cabinet seats.

The COR's extremely cumbersome process for initiating a bill has likewise stalled the momentum of anti-American factions. No draft law has been formally proposed yet; even if launched, it could die in the relevant parliamentary committees, which are obliged to consult with stakeholder ministries and institutions.

Iran and its allies in the COR are still strongly inclined to push toward scenario two or three, however, so President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi should launch a quiet but focused effort to steer key COR members away from formally drafting the law in question. These two seasoned Iraqi leaders know better than most just what the country would lose if the U.S. military mission were abruptly cut short.

Scenario Two: A watered-down bill passes the COR

Prospects: Less likely

Impact: Undesirable to dangerous

Response: Baghdad takes the lead; Washington practices patient diplomacy and avoids emotional reactions

The COR could pass legislation or a nonbinding resolution instructing the government to “toughen” the terms under which U.S. advisors operate. Charged language aside, such a bill could simply tell the government to do what it is already doing (i.e., ensuring U.S. forces respect Baghdad’s sovereignty and operate in full coordination with Iraqi forces). More problematically, it could require the government to enter into formal arrangements securing the same conditions, going beyond the 2014 exchange of letters by which Baghdad asked for U.S. troops to return and fight the Islamic State. That development would spring-load the trap of a required two-thirds COR vote to approve a Status of Forces Agreement.

Former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki tried to avoid this same peril in 2011 by seeking a pre-vote among Iraq’s major political chieftains, yet the highly sensitive sovereignty issue of judicial immunity for U.S. troops killed the draft agreement. The Trump administration is prudently not pursuing such a course at the moment, but Baghdad must still take the lead in heading off other threats—namely, by confirming that U.S. forces operate in Iraq only through the sovereign government, and by deflecting calls to negotiate a more formal arrangement, which could interrupt U.S. capacity-building of Iraqi forces in the face of a resurgent Islamic State. The challenge is convincing U.S. leaders to ignore provocative anti-American language in the COR and letting Baghdad lead so as to avoid adding fuel to the populist fire.

Scenario Three: A bill passes directing the expulsion of U.S. forces

Prospects: Unlikely for now, but almost certain to resurface

Impact: Calamitous if Washington overreacts

Response: The prime minister informs the COR that the government is not in a position to enact the law on national security grounds; President Trump’s advisors urge him to refrain from unhelpful retaliation

This worst-case scenario is more likely to emerge from U.S. pressure on Iran than internal Iraqi dynamics—though it could also materialize if Washington commits another diplomatic misstep that further whips up the COR. To be sure, this outcome would not tie the prime minister’s hands, since the government could challenge the new law’s constitutionality in court or urge the security establishment to legitimately contend that it cannot implement the law. Yet scenario three would still threaten U.S.-Iraqi interests by sending an inflammatory political signal to Washington, with the bill’s raucous passage almost certainly spurring President Trump to issue a decision-by-Twitter—perhaps including the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops and assistance, much as he did with Syria.

CONCLUSION

Each of these scenarios would test the agility of U.S. and Iraqi leaders vested in an enduring security partnership, and successfully navigating them is crucial for both countries’ national security interests. In addition to building Iraq’s capacity to curb the Islamic State’s resurgence, the U.S. defense relationship **anchors a wide array of international actors (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/international-engagement-in-iraq-is-tied-to-military-presence>)** to the larger effort of reintegrating the country into the regional community. Breaking Iraq out of its isolation and helping it regain stability through deepened economic and political relations with Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf would give Baghdad the means to regain full sovereignty over its affairs and resist Iranian interference. While many of the Iraqi characters in the 2011 political drama that ended the U.S. military presence remain in place, Washington has a wholly different cast of policymakers set to repeat—or, hopefully, avoid—that mistake.

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