

Behind the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The spectacular success in early 2014 of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, an offshoot of al Qaeda in Iraq, is often blamed on the failure of the Obama administration to secure an American troop presence in Iraq beyond 2011. As the U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2010-12, I believed that keeping troops there was critical. Nevertheless, our failure has roots far beyond the Obama administration.

The story begins in 2008, when the Bush administration and Iraq negotiated a Status of Forces Agreement granting U.S. troops in the country legal immunities -- a sine qua non of U.S. basing everywhere -- but with the caveat that they be withdrawn by the end of 2011.

By 2010 many key Americans and Iraqis thought that a U.S. military presence beyond 2011 was advisable, for security (training Iraqi forces, control of airspace, counterterrorism) and policy (continued U.S. engagement and reassurance to neighbors). The Pentagon began planning for a continued military presence, but an eight-month impasse on forming a new government after the March 2010 Iraqi elections delayed final approval in Washington.

In January 2011, once the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was formed, President Obama decided, with the concurrence of his advisers, to keep troops on. But he wasn't yet willing to tell Prime Minister Maliki or the American people. First, Washington had to determine the size of a residual force. That dragged on, with the military pushing for a larger force, and the White House for a small presence at or below 10,000, due to costs and the president's prior "all troops out" position. In June the president decided on the force level (eventually 5,000) and obtained Mr. Maliki's assent to new SOFA talks.

The Obama administration was willing to "roll over" the terms of the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement as long as the new agreement, like the first, was ratified by the Iraqi Parliament.

Iraqi party leaders repeatedly reviewed the SOFA terms but by October 2011 were at an impasse. All accepted a U.S. troop presence -- with the exception of the Sadrist faction, headed by the anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which held some 40 of Iraq's 325 parliamentary seats. But on immunities only the Kurdish parties, with some 60 seats, would offer support. Neither Mr. Maliki, with some 120 seats, nor former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, the leader of the largely Sunni Arab Iraqiya party with 80 more, would definitively provide support. With time running out, given long-standing U.S. policy that troops stationed overseas must have legal immunity, negotiations ended

and the troop withdrawal was completed.

Given the success in winning a SOFA in 2008, what led to this failure? First, the need for U.S. troops was not self-evident in 2011. Iraq appeared stable, with oil exports of two million barrels a day at about \$90 a barrel, and security much improved. Second, politics had turned against a troop presence; the bitterly anti-U.S. Sadrists were active in Parliament, the Sunni Arabs more ambivalent toward the U.S., and polls indicated that less than 20% of the Iraqi population wanted U.S. troops.

Could the administration have used more leverage, as many have asserted? Again, the main hurdle was immunities. The reality is that foreign troops in any land are generally unpopular and granting them immunity is complicated. In a constitutional democracy it requires parliament to waive its own laws. An agreement signed by Mr. Maliki without parliamentary approval, as he suggested, would not suffice. (The legal status of the small number of "noncombat" U.S. troops currently redeployed to Iraq is an emergency exception to usual SOFA policy.)

Some suggest that the U.S. could have made economic aid or arms deliveries contingent on a Status of Forces Agreement. But by 2011 the U.S. was providing relatively little economic aid to Iraq, and arms deliveries were essential to American and Iraqi security. Was the 5,000 troop number too small to motivate the Iraqis? No Iraqi made that argument to me; generally, smaller forces are more sellable. Could someone other than Mr. Maliki have been more supportive, and were the Iranians opposed? Of course, but with or without Mr. Maliki and Iranians we faced deep resistance from parliamentarians and the public.

Could President Obama have showed more enthusiasm? True, Mr. Obama seemed to feel he couldn't force an unwanted agreement on the Iraqi people, and he didn't work with Mr. Maliki as President Bush had. But Mr. Obama spoke or met with Mr. Maliki three times in 2011, and Vice President Joe Biden was constantly in touch. What counted most with Mr. Maliki was not rapport but the coldblooded calculus of pluses and minuses affecting his political fortunes. On the other hand, the negotiations were disrupted repeatedly by White House staffers with public statements inaccurately low-balling the troop numbers and misinterpreting Iraqi decisions.

The withdrawal of troops allowed President Obama to declare that he was "ending the war in Iraq" -- oddly, since it was the Bush administration's military victories and successful negotiation of the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement that had set the timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal. Later, during the 2012 presidential debates, Mr. Obama inexplicably denied that he had even attempted to keep troops in Iraq.

Could a residual force have prevented ISIS's victories? With troops we would have had better intelligence on al Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS, a more attentive Washington, and no doubt a better-trained Iraqi army. But the common argument that U.S. troops could have produced different Iraqi political outcomes is hogwash. The Iraqi sectarian divides, which ISIS exploited, run deep and were not susceptible to permanent remedy by our troops at their height, let alone by 5,000 trainers under Iraqi restraints.

*James F. Jeffrey, the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute, served as former U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2010-2012. **[Read his accompanying study on the Iraq troop-basing issue and its implications for current regional crises. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-iraq-troop-basing-question-and-the-new-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-iraq-troop-basing-question-and-the-new-middle-east)*** ❖

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