

# The U.S. Withdrawal Was Too Much Too Soon

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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## The U.S. military mission in Iraq started with a deliberate skewing of intelligence and ended that way too.

**W**hen President Obama entered office in 2009, the United States had just achieved a great feat of arms in Iraq: a highly successful shift to population-focused counterinsurgency and the most lethal counterterrorism campaign in the history of warfare. But these gains were understood to be temporary unless they were cemented with long-term U.S.-backed political reconciliation and power-sharing, as well as prolonged hands-on U.S. security assistance to the Iraqi military. The United States was in the position of a man who had pushed a huge boulder up a tall hill and was nearing the top. At enormous investment in blood and treasure, momentum had been generated. Could the man afford to stop pushing and hope the boulder would keep on rolling over the crest? Or would it roll back over him and cancel out his efforts?

We know now that not nearly enough momentum had been created to allow America to withdraw safely from Iraq as completely as it did between 2009 and 2011. But I believe that a number of administration officials understood this very well between 2009 and 2011. Once withdrawal was adopted as the paramount strategic objective of U.S. policy in Iraq, all other considerations were sidelined. The decline of U.S. leverage in the country, the growth of Iranian influence and the likelihood of security deterioration were all clearly foreseeable, and many experts warned that these results were likely if the U.S. pulled out too hastily and too completely. An irony of the U.S. military mission in Iraq is that it started with a deliberate skewing of intelligence and it ended that way too.

All this being said, the question of "who lost Iraq" -- and whether it is indeed lost -- requires some perspective. In 2003, Iraq was led by an erratic dictator who frequently invaded neighboring states, needlessly causing more than a million deaths and retarding his country's development for more than three decades. Now, Iraq presents no threat to its neighbors. Under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi government frequently suppressed its Kurdish population with maximal brutality, including the use of chemical weapons and mass disappearances. Despite Arab-Kurdish tensions,

an ethnic holocaust is thankfully unthinkable -- Hussein's victims now rule Iraq and recall their common suffering. Meanwhile, Iraq's much-needed oil and gas reserves were locked away under sanctions due to the regime's bellicosity, but now they are coming on strong, with the country aiming to contribute a record-setting 3.4 million barrels of oil per day to global markets in 2014. And whereas a minority ran Iraq under Hussein's Baathists, Iraq is now subject to majority rule -- with all its drawbacks.

So some things have been lost, notably the abnormal degree of U.S. influence that accompanied military occupation. If we are honest, some things were also never truly gained, such as social harmony, which we erroneously conflated with successful elections. And whatever was gained came at horrendous cost. But Iraq is changed, and in many ways for the better. So not all is lost.

*Michael Knights, a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, has worked in every Iraqi province as an advisor to government, industry, and the national security forces. This article is part of the Politico series "Is Iraq's Mess America's Fault? Twelve Takes on Who's to Blame for the Country's Downward Spiral"; [read the other contributions \(http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/is-iraqs-mess-americas-fault-101993\\_Page4.html#ixzz2q0SYSDwJ\)](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/is-iraqs-mess-americas-fault-101993_Page4.html#ixzz2q0SYSDwJ).* ❖

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