

A Violent New Year in Iraq

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Feb 17, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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.



Articles & Testimony

The U.S. troop withdrawal is a less significant driver of recent Iraqi violence than Washington's policy of giving Prime Minister Maliki a blank check in his campaign to consolidate power.

There has been a rapid and widespread deterioration of security in Iraq since the mid-December end of the U.S. military mission there. Yet a detailed analysis of the upsurge in violence reveals that withdrawal of U.S. troops was a less significant driver of violence than the U.S. policy of providing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki with a blank check in his campaign to consolidate power.

Tracking Iraq's Regression

Perceptions of security in Iraq are often based on the number of mass-casualty attacks -- such as car bombs and suicide-vest attacks in crowded places -- undertaken in high-visibility locations like Baghdad or the number of deaths reported by the Iraqi government. According to Washington Institute for Near East Policy metrics sourced from the Iraqi security forces, Iraq witnessed thirty-six confirmed attempted mass-casualty attacks in January 2012, a significant increase on the average of twenty-three attacks a month in the quarter ending December 2011. Officially reported deaths are also increasing, with 340 civilian deaths reported in January 2012 compared to 155 in December 2011.

Yet a closer look at violence in Iraq's provinces produces an even dimmer view of what has occurred since mid-December 2011. Mass-casualty attacks tell only part of the story of violence in Iraq, and mortality statistics overlook the targeted nature of violence in today's Iraq, where a high proportion of victims are local progovernment community leaders. For every one person of this kind who is killed, an exponential number of others are intimidated into passive support for insurgent groups.

Analysis of general incident levels across the country is a better means of tracking these trends, but it is precisely

this kind of data that the U.S. government no longer receives due to its military disengagement in Iraq. In effect, the U.S. government is slowly going blind in Iraq due to the military drawdown and the U.S. embassy's inability to get out and about. According to Washington Institute for Near East Policy metrics derived from ongoing security-liaison relationships in Iraq, there were 561 reported attacks in January 2012, an increase from the 494 in December 2011 and well above the 302 incidents in November.

A year-on-year comparison is particularly instructive. In the year since the new Maliki government was formed in late 2010, the number of reported incidents has increased, largely as a result of the spike in violence since mid-December. Indeed, a year-on-year comparison shows that reported violence was a third lower in January 2011 (376 attacks in the Washington Institute's datasets) than it is now. This figure is highly significant: reported violence is rising despite the removal of all U.S. military targets from Iraq's roads in the last quarter of 2011 and despite a steep decline in the standard of incident reporting as Iraqi forces took over. Accounting for these factors, it is not a stretch to say that the incidence of Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence has doubled since November 2011.

Provincial Security Metrics

In Iraqi security, the devil is always in the details. To understand the nature of violence and the drivers that are sustaining it, one must look at the provincial or even district level. Violence is rising sharply in three key areas:

- *Mosul.* Due to its high concentration of former regime military officers and its proximity to the Syrian border, Mosul has always been a key hub of the Sunni insurgency. In November 2011, the province was quiet, with twenty-one security incidents. By January 2012, that monthly total had jumped fivefold to 105 attacks.
- *Sectarian melting pots.* There are numerous Shia-Sunni melting pots in Baghdad and the provinces immediately surrounding the capital. Violence is gradually rising in all these areas, either in the form of anti-Shiite mass-casualty attacks or, far more frequently, Sunni insurgent slayings of Awakening and Sons of Iraq leaders.
- *Ethnic fault lines.* Violence is sparking all along the so-called "trigger line" that separates federally administered Iraq from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In addition to sharp security deterioration in predictable powder kegs such as Kirkuk, many smaller areas along the disputed line have begun to witness violence after sustained periods of quiet since 2009.

It is clear that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is now experiencing something of a renaissance in the country. The movement is smaller but smarter. It has learned the lessons of its near defeat in 2007 and is now integrated to a far greater extent with Sunni nationalist insurgent groups. AQI has exploited the Iraqi government's decision to end support for the Sons of Iraq police paramilitaries by launching a stick-and-carrot campaign that combines regular assassinations with periodic amnesties for Awakening members who agree to provide active or passive support to the terrorist movement. Following U.S. military withdrawal, al-Qaeda -- not the Iraqi government -- has been the fastest to grasp the concept of a population-centric military campaign. Indeed, AQI's vision of the Iraqi government as an Iranian-backed Shiite dictatorship is squarely in line with the feelings of the Sunni Arabs following the mid-December crackdown by the Maliki government on Sunni leaders and provinces.

U.S. Policy and Destabilization

Much that happens in Iraqi politics has nothing to do with decisions made in any foreign capital. Nevertheless, it is strongly arguable that the recent security deterioration in Iraq has been deepened by an unfortunate combination of U.S. military withdrawal with a hands-off U.S. approach to Iraqi politics at precisely the moment Iraqis need reassurance and, in the Iraqi government's case, restraint.

U.S. military withdrawal alone did not destabilize Iraq. In fact, in the two years since U.S. forces began to ebb away, incidents of violence decreased. In November 2008, when the U.S.-Iraq security agreement was signed, there were

1,488 attacks, with this total dropping to 302 by November 2011. The final U.S. military withdrawals may have been the proximate cause of this moment of political fragility, but the post-December surge of violence in Iraq was not inevitable. In fact, it was eminently predictable and might have been offset by U.S. diplomatic action.

What went wrong? When successive Iraqi governments were formed in Iraq between 2004 and 2010, Washington consistently supported consensual politics and the emergence of broad "governments of national unity." Though these political compacts were deficient in many ways, they were vital for stability; at this early stage of Iraqi political development, they created a system in which there were no absolute winners and no absolute losers in Iraqi politics.

U.S. policy seems to have quickly shifted away from this model since December 2011. Though the United States has pushed for a national conference to solve the political crisis, the weight of U.S. support seems to stand firmly behind Prime Minister Maliki and his effort to centralize power over the cabinet, the security services and the federal courts. Maliki is prevailing in the present political crisis, splintering the Sunni Arab politicians of the Iraqiya bloc and setting the conditions for a majority government in which some Sunni political groups and provinces are undisputed losers. This is fertile ground for a reinvigorated insurgency, the leading edge of which we are already seeing.

What can the United States do? Iraq's postwithdrawal years are likely to be raw with emotion and witness some anti-U.S. backlash. This does not mean that U.S. influence in Iraq has collapsed; rather it shows that political capital needs to be invested thriftily to influence the issues that matter most (an approach that Iran smartly adopts in Iraq). Prime Minister Maliki has risked taking on all Iraq's factions simultaneously precisely because he believes Washington is one of the external powers standing firmly behind him (the other one, ironically, being Tehran). Maliki clearly returned from Washington emboldened in mid-December, without having received a single cautionary reproach from the Obama administration on any of the issues of concern that should have merited a demarche, such as extraconstitutional appointment of security leaders or mass arrests of alleged Baathists.

The United States should publicly reverse this uncritical acceptance of Maliki's behavior. The White House should have put Maliki on warning during his mid-December visit to Washington, and the next U.S. ambassador to Iraq should take a tougher line from the outset. The administration may be only temporarily backing Maliki to maintain stability in Iraq and to keep the country out of the headlines in this election year. Even so, both of these outcomes are more likely if Maliki is looking over his shoulder instead of running rampant.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. As a consultant to the private-security industry, he worked closely with the Iraqi Security Forces in a number of provinces in 2011 and continues to collate security metrics directly from the Iraqi government following the U.S. withdrawal. He is the author of [The Iraqi Security Forces: Local Context and U.S. Assistance](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=344) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=344>). ❖

National Interest

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)