

How Iraqi Sovereignty Supports U.S. National Interests

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By providing a clear and consistent roadmap for American interests in Iraq and future international support, Washington can help Baghdad steer the country in the right direction after next month's elections.

On May 12, Iraqis go to the polls to choose their next parliament, after which officials will negotiate to appoint a prime minister and form a government. The country has been through an odyssey since its last general election in April 2014. The Islamic State (IS) overran a swath of territory that held more than three million people, twenty-two cities, and numerous oil fields, all of which have been liberated with the aid of militias and international military forces. Oil prices plummeted by half, and only strict austerity measures, foreign aid, and a partial price recovery saved the country from bankruptcy. The northern Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) approached financial independence and held a referendum on splitting away from Iraq, prompting Baghdad to seize Kirkuk's oil fields last October. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey signaled a new willingness to work with Iraq's Shia-led government as a means of offsetting Iranian influence.

In short, the electorate has suffered huge shocks, and they are now being joined by young voters who cannot even remember the Saddam era. These voters may have stronger ideas about Iraq's future than the candidates themselves.

Although campaigning officially began just this past weekend, the election's contours are already crystallizing. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has achieved more than any reasonable observer might have expected given the horrendous situation he inherited in 2014, and he can point to the fragile economic and military recoveries as reason enough to give him another term. Wary about asking too much of the electorate, he has seemingly submerged his crucial but painful economic reform plans for the time being. Yet he is still hinting at new possibilities for Iraq.

In particular, Abadi has called for making the country a neutral space in the region's evolving clash between pro- and anti-Iranian camps. With encouragement from international actors, he has signaled that he wants to represent all Iraqis, not just Shia Arabs—indeed, his electoral list is the only one competing in every province, including the KRG. If Baghdad can achieve this vision of an independent and stable nation at peace with its own peoples, it would align precisely with U.S. interests.

THE U.S. STAKE IN IRAQI SOVEREIGNTY

In 2005, the United States helped Iraqis formulate and ratify a new constitution so that their country could stand on its own feet. In 2009, President Obama laid the groundwork for withdrawing American troops by outlining a vision of "an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant." He then pledged to "forge a partnership with the people and government of Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region."

This vision is still achievable, but it is being tested by the aggressive growth of Iranian influence across the Middle East. Tehran's progress in Iraq has been slowed by the durable fabric of the state and the plurality of citizens who reject Iranian control, but dangerous signs abound. Since 2014, [Iranian-controlled militias have nested](#) within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), gaining access to a \$1.6 billion annual budget and making themselves a formal part of Iraq's armed forces. Tehran's track record in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen suggests it will try to gain as much influence as it can in Iraq, even if that means riding roughshod over democratic norms, minority rights, and the rule of law.

In contrast to Iran's expansionary aims, the U.S. goal in Iraq is defensive: to prevent Iranian hegemony and give Baghdad enough breathing room to recover its strength. Iraqi leaders—even senior Shia politicians—have told the authors that they value ongoing U.S. involvement because it gives them leverage to counterbalance Tehran's influence. They are keenly aware that this balance of power would be skewed disastrously if Washington stepped aside.

Iraqis have many reasons of their own to resist Iranian influence: after five decades of conflict, they do not want to be drawn into Tehran's wars like Lebanon has been; Iranian links could constrain their relations with Saudi Arabia and other neighbors, denying them vital investment and trade partnerships; Iran is their natural competitor in the fields of oil, gas, electricity, and petrochemical exports; [the dominance of Iranian imports](#) is causing resentment among Iraqi farmers, manufacturers, and traders; and last but not least, the Islamic Republic is a

religious competitor with the great Shia seminaries and pilgrimage sites of Najaf and Karbala, where Tehran may seek more influence when Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani passes away. Therefore, Iraqi (and American) strategic interests would be best served if the country is analogous to Finland in the Cold War, maintaining some degree of autonomy from Tehran as well as Washington.

THE U.S. ROLE DURING AND AFTER THE ELECTIONS

No foreign country has any business trying to pick a winner in Iraq's elections, and any direct intervention in the subsequent coalition-building process is liable to backfire. Instead, the best approach for the United States and its allies is to clearly frame the value proposition on offer if Iraqi politicians move toward inclusive government, smart security policies, economic reform, and regional neutrality. These are the very issues that Iraqis themselves have overwhelmingly supported in [reputable polls](#). The offer framed by Washington—and, ideally, other coalition partners—should be a package deal of security and non-security support, contingent on a friendly Iraqi government that is willing to address these issues.

One important element of that offer is a U.S. military training presence over the next few years, both for security purposes against a potential IS resurgence and as a political symbol. Even in the nationalistic afterglow of "defeating" IS, much of the Iraqi body politic recognizes how valuable U.S.-led international security cooperation has been. The removal of American troops in 2011 coincided with the regrowth of IS, while U.S.-led forces have been involved in almost all of Iraq's victories since 2014. No single action could better confirm Baghdad's relationship with Washington and its openness to Arab neighbors and Turkey than allowing coalition forces to remain.

The ongoing military presence should not be framed as an American obligation or right, but rather as a mutually beneficial arrangement guided by the same simple principles that have shaped Operation Inherent Resolve, namely:

- Ensuring that combat operations are conducted "by, with, and through" the Iraqi security forces.
- Avoiding unauthorized U.S. bases or unilateral operations.
- Forging a coalition with as broad a range of international partners as possible.
- Keeping the mission's size and activities adaptable according to Iraq's requirements.
- Accepting that existing Iraqi legal authorities are sufficient to continue a troop presence.

In addition, Washington should privately link security cooperation to broader implementation of the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement, which transcends military relations and forms the basis for bilateral economic, political, and [energy cooperation](#). U.S. officials need to remind Baghdad of the benefits that come with being a friend of America, including: help with obtaining IMF and World Bank assistance; mobilization of the international donor community, as seen this February [when Kuwait hosted](#) the International Conference for Reconstruction of Iraq; diplomatic support for engagement with countries like Saudi Arabia; technical and program-management support for critical infrastructure and economic projects, not least the Mosul Dam rehabilitation; and the host of ad hoc advantages that materialize when leaders have access to the "good offices" of the United States.

Finally, Washington should work with Turkey on a joint approach to the KRG, mainly as insurance if efforts to preserve Iraq's relative neutrality fail. Such cooperation on Kurdish defense, energy, and diplomatic affairs would signal that the United States has choices if Iran ever gains the upper hand in Baghdad. To keep this option open, Washington needs to continue acting as a fair broker between the central government and Erbil on revenue sharing, disputed areas, and security cooperation. On the latter issue, an ongoing U.S. and coalition military presence in Iraq and the KRG may reassure the Kurds that Washington has a strong stake in preventing future conflict between them and Baghdad.

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