



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Should the US Stay In Iraq or Pull Out?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** It takes only a quick read of the main articles featured in *al-Wifaq*, the Arabic language mouthpiece of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to grasp the complexity of US involvement in Iraq and the question it raises on whether the US presence abets or hinders Iranian control over Iraq.

From the perspective of the leader of Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia, and indeed of the Iranian political elite, which finances the mouthpiece and gives the militia the opportunity to disseminate its ideas, the US created groups from which ISIS emerged to justify a renewed US military presence in Iraq. The Iranian-backed Shiite militias accuse US forces of openly abetting ISIS, including transporting its people by helicopter to fight those militias. There is no mention of the role the US and its allies' air forces played in pummeling ISIS, the major threat faced by Iraq and by Iran, too, in the long run.

Yet the same newspaper also reports on its front page, albeit in a disparaging fashion, that Iraq will soon be hosting a prominent personality from Saudi Arabia for the first time since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. That visitor is rumored to be none other than Muhammad bin Salman, the rabidly anti-Iranian Saudi Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, who is undoubtedly viewed as Public Enemy No. 1 by the Iranian regime. The visit is perceived to be part of a process initiated in October 2017 to improve relations between the two states. That process reflects the desire of the head of the present Iraqi government, Haidar al-Abadi, to keep Tehran at bay. Iran's Saudi nemesis enjoys American backing, especially under the present US administration.

Then, in bewildering contrast, a third article appears in which the same Iraqi PM who wants a continued US presence in Iraq to stave off Iranian designs to turn Iraq into a vassal state reiterates his praise for the Hashd al-Sha'bi,

including, of course, Kata'ib Hezbollah, designating it as an integral part of the Iraqi state's war against the jihadists.

Clearly, just as the 2003 invasion of Iraq led to the disappearance of a regime that checked imperialist Iranian designs, so too did ISIS's initial defeat of the Iraqi army allow for the establishment of powerful Iranian-controlled militias in Iraq at the expense of an independent and strong Iraqi state.

These militias, their adherents, and their parliamentary offshoots are not going away. Even if the pro-Shiite militia al-Fatah coalition does not emerge as the largest coalition in the May elections and the "pro-American" Abadi maintains his hold over government, these militias have plenty of armed men to pose a challenge to the Iraqi state and keep Iraq within the Iranian orbit.

This state of affairs raises the question whether the US would be better off 1) leaving Iraq and trying to contain an Iranian-dominated Iraq from the outside by bolstering support for its Sunni allies, especially Saudi Arabia; or 2) continuing to attempt – through a very large embassy presence and over 5,000 military troops, most of whom act as advisors and trainers to the Iraqi federal army – to thwart Iranian attempts to turn Iraq into a vassal state. The latter, as the leader of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia warns, are likely to become targets of attacks and assassinations, with Iran's blessing.

The question whether or not to stay in Iraq also involves the Kurdish autonomous area in the northeast of the country. The Trump administration clearly sided with PM Abadi when he ordered his forces to oust Kurdish troops from Kirkuk and the surrounding area in retaliation for the Kurds' having held a referendum in which an overwhelming majority voted for independence. The US condemned the holding of the referendum and thereby signaled its support for the more centralized Iraqi state Abadi is trying to create.

Judging by the Lebanese precedent, in which the US backed Saad Hariri's Sunni party and his Christian allies and aided the Lebanese army in money, arms, and training against Iran, Hezbollah, and its domestic political allies, it is unlikely that US prospects in Iraq will succeed in the long term. The support of the US (and, even more overwhelmingly, the support extended by Saudi Arabia) did not prevent Iran and Hezbollah from dominating the Lebanese state and its armed forces.

Fortunately for the US, there is a crucial difference between the Lebanese precedent and Iraq.

Not only are the stakes of the conflict over Iraq so much greater than in tiny Lebanon, but Iraq's Shiite majority of some 20 million will be reluctant, to say the least, to share the country's massive oil wealth – 85% of which is produced

in the Shiite south around Basra – with 80 million Iranians. Iraq produces 4.6 million barrels daily against Iran’s 3.5 million, an increase from 3.2 mbd since 2014. This substantial increase took place despite the ISIS onslaught on the Iraqi army. Abadi and his allies know that only American support for Iraq prevents Iranian economic imperialism.

In the real world of difficult choices, the US is probably better off, at least in the short term, maintaining its presence in Iraq and bolstering Abadi’s attempts to centralize the Iraqi state. This is also the view of Iraq’s Sunni allies in the area, judging by their judicious silence on the question of an American presence in Iraq.

What the US must do, however, is reduce its war against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria.

Let the Iranians, their local Arab Shiite allies, and Syria bleed without American help as they meet the remaining jihadist threat. The Trump administration has possibly taken the first step in this direction: it has ordered the US company under US Department of Defense contract to stop maintaining and servicing the over 100 Abrams tanks it sold to Iraq to fight ISIS in retaliation for Iraq’s having allowed the Iranian-backed militias to use them. Reducing US air attacks against ISIS should be the next move. The US should be expending its efforts and resources in bolstering the border between Iraq and Iran instead.

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