



Trump Is Showing Acumen in Iraq

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Trump is described, even by the few commentators who are relatively friendly towards him, as having no clear strategy in international affairs. This assessment does not hold true across the board. In the Middle East at least, his strategy is very clear.

The latest example of Donald Trump's single-minded purpose in the Middle East is his decision to continue to maintain a small but highly selective US military presence of some 2,000 troops in Iraq.

The official justification for this decision is the need to continue the fight against the remnants of ISIS across the northern reaches of Iraq. No one should be fooled by this as the threat that ISIS and its predecessors posed to the US was neutralized long ago by an effective homeland security agency.

ISIS poses a more palpable threat to the US's European allies, but President Trump and his voters feel it is high time those wealthy states take their security into their own hands rather than free-ride on American security protection.

No, the real reason why the US is staying put in Iraq is to prevent it from becoming an Iranian client state, as Lebanon has become and as Syria might soon become. The investment of 2,000 troops, most of whom serve as advisors and trainers of the Federal Army of Iraq, is worth its price in gold in achieving this objective compared to the 100,000 American troops who were on the ground before the massive withdrawal in 2010.

The push to maintain the US military presence comes from the government of Abidi, who, unlike his predecessor Maliki, wants both to accommodate the Sunnis – many of whom backed ISIS and similar Sunni fundamentalist groups – and to keep Iranian influence in Iraq at bay.

Iranian influence and interference in Iraqi affairs, an almost permanent feature of Iraqi political life since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, grew considerably with the rushed formation of Shiite militias in the summer of 2014 after the meltdown of much of the Federal army in the face of the ISIS threat.

Though the call to create popular militias to defend Baghdad emanated from Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a leading Iraqi Shiite cleric known for his critical views on Khomeini and the present leadership of Iran, it was the Iranians who had the knowhow and money to turn the call into facts on the ground. These militias, loosely federated as the *Hashd*, the Arabic acronym for the Iraqi popular forces, serve the same purpose as Hezbollah in Lebanon – to make sure that any government in Iraq serves Iranian interests.

The rivalry for control over Iraq between the US and its allies and Iran is not only military (with the US supporting the strengthening of the Federal army and the Iranians attempting to sap its strength by enhancing the power of the militias) but political as well.

In the recent elections, the US was clearly rooting for the success of Abadi's "Victory" coalition while the Iranians even more bluntly backed the "Conquest" coalition, headed by the leader of the largest Shiite militia, a former exile in Tehran and an Iranian stalwart.

The official results will only intensify the underlying rivalry between the two external powers. Abadi's coalition did less well than the Iranian-led coalition. Fortunately, Abadi has a slightly better chance of wooing the third-largest coalition of parties whose support is essential to forming the new government.

Unfortunately for the US, this third bloc is headed by a mercurial former Shiite militia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, who as leader of the al-Mahdi army in the first years of the American invasion fought bitter battles against US forces. Campaigning on an anti-Iranian ticket, he recently backtracked to attack Abadi for making a statement that Iraq will abide by the Americans' renewed sanction regime on Iran, a move that shows he is playing hard to get to increase the price of his coalition's loyalty.

The good news for the US and the coalition of Arab Sunni-led states anxious to contain Iran is that the Arab Shiites of Iraq wish to preserve their independence from Iran and fear their close foreign neighbor more than the distant US.

Rational economic interests go a long way towards explaining why this is the case. Iraq produces more oil than Iran, 4.3 million barrels per day compared to 3.2 million for Iran (though with smaller known reserves and significantly less

gas). Why would the 40 million Iraqis, hard pressed from long and bitter internecine fighting, want to share their wealth with 80 million Iranians?

Yet, more spiritual considerations (not entirely divorced from mundane material concerns) also indicate an Iraqi Shiite identity jealous of its independence from Iran and its clerical leadership. A search in Google Trends of Ali Sistani, the Shiite leader in Iraq, reveals almost total lack of interest in this personality in Iran, yet great popularity in Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon. Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideological principle of *vilayat-e-faqih* – the idea that all legislation and actions of the Islamic regime must be vetted by the Supreme Spiritual Leader – are highly popular in Iran but have little currency in Iraq.

This underlying quest for independence from Iranian tutelage justifies President Trump's wager that 2,000 troops might be worth maintaining to prevent the new fall of Baghdad. The least it could do is stave off the Iranians sufficiently for Iraq's government and citizens to decide for themselves what the nature of their relationship with Iran will be.

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