
The United States withdrawal from Iraq: what kind of future lies ahead for Baghdad?

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Summary : In July 2021, US President Joe Biden announced the definitive withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and the establishment of a new military cooperation between the two countries. While this departure has been made official twice, in 2011 and in 2021, to what extent is it effective and what consequences could it have on the political future of an Iraq torn by sectarian tensions? And can we really talk about a “withdrawal”? Because, on the ground, the United States continues to operate, particularly in the context of the international war on terrorism.

The U.S. invasion that ended Saddam Hussein's regime (1979-2003) turned Iraq into a constant source of regional instability and international concern, breaking the relative balance that had been achieved since the 1980s in the Persian Gulf through a triangle of influence between Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. From then on, the United States focused on managing a short-term threat in Iraq, rather than on developing Iraqi defense capabilities and the country's unity. Iraq's current instability is the result of deep structural problems stemming from two decades of war and severe political crises.

Under the pretext of democratising Iraq, the country became the ideal laboratory for the neoconservative doctrine of the "Greater Middle East," the forced "de-Baathification" of society and the demilitarisation of the state pushed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), under the leadership of the American Paul Bremer between May 2003 and June 2004. This resulted in the destruction of the foundations of the Iraqi state apparatus. While the administration and the main bodies ceased to function as they were deprived of their competent personnel, the "de-Baathification" led to growing resentment among the former members of the Baath party, the majority of whom were Sunnis. Dismissed from their positions, faced with unemployment and poverty, the ex-regime officials were ostracized by the Shiite authorities supported by Washington. Inter-religious revolts soon broke out and anti-occupation operations were organized. This opposition was composed of former Baath leaders and people close to Saddam Hussein. This was best illustrated with Ezzat Ibrahim al-Douri (1942-2020), general and friend of the dictator since 1979 and leader of the army of the men of the Naqshbandiyya (in reference to Sufism). Faced with the violence of almost daily attacks from 2004 onwards, the CPA went back on demilitarization, which had led to the dissolution of Iraqi military units and the abolition of conscription. The Security Forces were then created, whose mission was to ensure the security management of the country, preparing the ground for a future withdrawal of foreign troops.

The mistakes of the 2003 invasion of Baathist Iraq

Moreover, by removing Iran's main enemy, the United States gave Tehran the opportunity to extend its influence among Iraq's Shiite communities, as was already decided in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution. Through a network of Iraqis forced exiled in the Islamic Republic under Saddam Hussein, Iran's strategy aimed to carve out a backdrop for its participation in the reconstruction of the Iraqi political system. For instance,, Iran was able to influence the drafting of the new Iraqi Constitution voted in 2005, whilst strengthening its support for militias engaged in the fight against the occupation, such as the Hezbollah brigades or the Mahdi army. The negotiation of a status quo in 2008 between the United States and Iran encouraged the Americans to announce the withdrawal of their troops. The two governments agreed on the objective of fighting the Sunni militia insurgency and the movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr, the Badr Brigades, which competed with Iranian influence. The signing of the Vienna Agreement on Iranian nuclear power in 2015 solidified and perpetuated this status quo.

The emergence of terrorism revealed Baghdad's political and military flaws. The establishment of a "caliphate" by the Islamic State organization (ISIS or Daech) after the capture of Mosul in June 2014 took international observers by surprise by its magnitude, especially as Iraqi soldiers were ordered to abandon the fight. The weakness of the Iraqi response was, from the spring of 2015, blamed on Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), who was accused of surrounding himself with corrupt generals and stirring up sectarian tensions that led to the radicalisation of the Sunni opposition. This context allowed the jihadists to develop their strategy: the Islamic State, which emerged from the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda, succeeded in establishing itself as a potential alternative to a regime that was repressive towards Sunnis (1). The United States returned to Iraq at the head of a third international coalition at the invitation of the Nouri al-Maliki government. The bombing of the positions of the ISIS, coupled with the investment on the ground of Kurdish forces and local militias financed by Tehran, allowed for the retreat of jihadist fighters from 2017 and the elimination of the "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2014-2019) on October 27, 2019. Thus, while the joint struggle of the various factions against Daesh had

eased tensions, the victory of this coalition conditions the resurgence of quarrels between the parties-militias that control the future of the country.



Civilians flee fighting between Iraqi forces and Daech in West Mosul, 13 June 2017, ©Laurence Geai/SIPA

Donald Trump and the choice of disengagement

The United States withdrawal does not only concern Iraq; it is part of a more global strategy of disengagement from the Middle East in order to pursue an objective initiated by Barack Obama (2009-2017) in 2012: the pivot towards Asia. However, caught short by security issues in the region and the fight against terrorism, this U.S. departure was not really implemented. The arrival of Donald Trump (2017-2021) in the White House and his decision to leave the Vienna agreement in the spring of 2018 deteriorated U.S.-Iranian relations, whilst Iraq became the battleground of its two sponsors. The Republican president began a symbolic distancing from the Middle East with the signing, on January 27, 2017, of the Muslim Immigration Ban, an executive order intended to protect the United States from "foreign terrorists" and prohibiting entry to the territory to nationals of Yemen, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Iran, Somalia and... Iraq. Washington did not seem to have clear and determined long-term goals for this country. Donald Trump vowed to withdraw troops as quickly as possible: as early as the end of 2017, he pledged to reduce the presence by half after the coalition's official victory over Daesh in December, however, leaving some 5,000 troops stationed to prevent the resurgence of the organization, which remains active in neighboring Syria. Like military support, U.S. civilian aid is focused on short-term problems, including prioritizing minorities to recover from the massacres perpetrated by the ISIS.

Tensions with Iran on Iraqi soil are at their highest. The assassinations of General Qassem Soleimani, head of the special forces of the Revolutionary Guards (pasdaran) and Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, number two of the Popular Mobilization Units, by U.S. strikes in Baghdad on January 3, 2020, reawakened anti-American sentiment among the population. Two days later, the Iraqi Council of Representatives passed a non-binding law for the departure of foreign troops. The Kurdish and Sunni oppositions generally voted against this text in order to denounce Tehran's interference in the Iraqi political system.

Keeping the focus on the U.S. military presence and portraying the U.S. as an occupying force drowns out the emergence

of a deeper popular debate about the benefits of a U.S./Iraqi relationship that would undermine Iranian ambitions. In this sense, the main U.S. mistake is the failure to define broad, achievable strategic objectives to promote stability in Iraq. There have been no clear American efforts to reform a failing Iraqi government, stimulate the local economy, or ensure that areas destroyed by the fighting are rebuilt or effectively assisted in these efforts. The Americans have further failed to demonstrate to the Iraqi people the importance of their presence and the role of their advisors in defeating Daesh. This lack of communication and recognition has allowed Iran to build on the development of anti-American sentiment and to interfere in the spheres of power.

However, nothing can be taken for granted for Tehran, whose interference is raising a wave of protests from October 2019 onwards, carried by a precarious youth who aspire to the emergence of an Iraqi nationalism, beyond the cleavages between Sunnis and Shiites. The movement is calling for an end to corruption and to the system of distributing positions by ethnic and religious quotas. The mobilization was harshly repressed, but nevertheless succeeded in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi (2018-2020) and led to the organization of early legislative elections on October 10, 2021.



Speech by the President of the Islamic Republic, Ebrahim Raisi of Iran at the 77th Assembly of the United Nations, 21 September 2022,
©Lev Radin/Pacific Press/Shutters/SIPA

A symbolic withdrawal, a new cooperation

The election of the Democrat Joe Biden in November 2020 did not, at first, have much effect on the Iraqi policy conducted by Donald Trump. Both motivated by the implementation of the pivot to Asia, the decision of a military withdrawal is part of a series of factors, the first of which is the weariness of American public opinion, exhausted and worn out by the multiple interventions carried out since the attacks of 2001 (2). The objective is to put an end to the "endless wars" of the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009), which has cost the United States 8,043 billion dollars up to fiscal year 2022 and whose human cost is counted in thousands of lives. The failure in Afghanistan and the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021 reinforces the Democratic president's decision to end the American mission in Iraq.

Joe Biden's announcement of the withdrawal following the signing of an agreement with the Mustafa al-Kazimi

government in July 2021 (2020-2022) provides for the redefinition of a new phase in military cooperation between the two countries. Taken within the broader framework of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue, the White House wishes to give pledges of goodwill to the Islamic Republic. In reality, 1,500 men remain on Iraqi soil, whose status is changing from "combatant" to "advisor." Already since 2018, American soldiers were no longer involved in operations on the ground, but held positions in intelligence, drone attacks and missile launches from US Army bases. What remains is comprehensive cooperation on security issues and support for the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga.

On the domestic front, the conclusion of the Iraqi-American agreement allows Mustafa al-Kazimi to maintain dialogue with Washington while giving pledges to the pro-Iranian Shiite militias on which he wants to rely to run for a second term. This was without taking into account the result of the elections of October 10, 2021, which allowed the hypothesis of an intra-Shiite conflict to develop (3). Boycotted by a majority of the population (abstention reached 56.7%), the elections put the Sadrist Movement in the lead (10% of the vote and 73 seats out of 329), foreshadowing the beginning of a serious crisis. Moqtada al-Sadr is a leading figure in the fight against the U.S. occupation and a central figure on the Iraqi public scene. His commitment to the war against the ISIS ensures him a series of electoral successes and the favor of the street, making him an indispensable support for anyone hoping to form a government. Yet, his ambitions are regularly thwarted by his pro-Iranian opponents, whose aim is to isolate him.

Iraq has been going through a new phase of instability since the summer of 2022, which is part of the continuous upheaval that the country has been experiencing since the American intervention in 2003 and which appears to be the culmination of the tensions igniting the Shiite factions and from which the shadow of Tehran can be seen behind. Moqtada al-Sadr's announcement on 29 August 2022 that he was retiring from political life was the umpteenth attempt to give impetus to his majority union project in a context of tension by rallying the street in his favour. The same day, a major protest movement was organized by his supporters, who managed to storm the Palace of the Republic before being repressed. Nearly 30 people were killed and more than 350 injured in the clashes in the Green Zone between the Peace Brigades, close to Moqtada al-Sadr, and the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Units. On October 13, a vote in the Council of Representatives elected the Kurdish Abdel Latif Rashid as President of the Republic and appointed Mohamed Chia al-Soudani as Prime Minister.



Moqtada Al-Sadr announces his withdrawal from politics following the serious crisis in Iraq, 30 August 2022, ©Anmar Khalil/AP/SIPA

Baghdad at the center of the strategic game in the Gulf

For most American analysts, the U.S. policy in the Middle East remains uncertain. The announcement of the withdrawal of troops, if it manifests a lack of interest in the region, it does not mean a total disengagement. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which derailed the strategy of the pivot to Asia, the White House seems to be reviewing its priorities. At the July 2022 summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Joe Biden reaffirmed the American commitment to the region after having spent the beginning of his mandate focused on the war in Ukraine and on China's influence in Asia. He confirmed the interest of the United States in strengthening ties with the Gulf monarchies, which are concerned by the successive withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq. They are indeed too important to abandon, especially if it means abandoning Iraq to its fate, which is plagued by an explosive mix of communal tensions (which could lead to civil war) and terrorist groups. A strong Iraq appears to be a strategic priority to secure the Arabian Peninsula, ensure the stability of global oil and gas exports and fight both Iran and jihadism, while reassuring the Israeli ally. Aware of this role, Tehran wishes to maintain divisions within the political class and the population.

The United States must realize that its primary goal is to support Iraq's ability to be stable and independent. But this involves many challenges, including rebuilding the U.S. image, helping to rebuild Iraq's economy and political system to create an effective governance structure, and enabling an independent Iraq that can make a lasting contribution to security in the Gulf. In pursuing short-term goals over the past two decades, the United States has failed to perceive the importance of Iraq in the Middle East: rather than focusing on this essential role, Washington has preferred to focus on counterterrorism and divide the issues by prioritizing détente with Iran to stabilize Iraq. Withdrawing from the latter would mean relying on the strength of the national army alone for Iraq's internal security. Although trained by American advisors, the army is weakened by internal tensions and is unable to cope with the reorganization of the ISIS (4). As long as the Sunnis are not fully integrated into the Iraqi and Syrian state systems, since it is on this Syrian-Iraqi Sunni base that it relies to develop, Daech will continue to constitute a permanent international risk in the region, and therefore for American interests. However, this integration does not seem to be planned by the Iranian sponsor.

This short-term vision has also led the Americans to underestimate the strategic importance of Iraq for China and Russia, while obscuring the role that Baghdad could play in regional stability for oil exports. If Washington's strategy is to compete with Beijing as part of the pivot to Asia, Chinese investment in Iraq along with the New Silk Roads should lead the United States to maintain a sustained interest in the Mashreq. Along with trade agreements in recent years with several oil producers - including one signed in March 2021 with Iran - China has been banking on Iraq for its diversification of energy supplies. Between Tehran, Beijing and Washington, Iraq has not finished being at the heart of the games of influence. Thus, when Joe Biden reiterated, in July 2022, his support for Baghdad in the fight against terrorism and the need for "a strong Iraq capable of defending itself," some analysts speculated about a strategic revival. It remains for the Mohamed Chia al-Soudani government to prove itself in order to bring the country out of the political impasse in a sustainable manner.



The Jeddah summit that brought together Arab and American representatives on Middle East security, 16 July 2022, ©APAIMAGES/SIPA

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