

Fall 2022 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

Securing the Insecure: Rethinking US-Iraq Relations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S. security policy in Iraq has failed. It is a policy that has been defined by an inflated threat perception. While it was designed to prevent the further proliferation of Salafi-Jihadists in the country, it has done more to support their emergence and led to further local instability and conflict that threatens sustainable governance. It has failed because U.S. policy has yet to appropriately address the different stimuli for instability – corruption, climate security, and lack of economic opportunity – that enables Iranian interference, unrest, and foreign terrorist activity. As a result, it is time for a shift in the current policy status quo in Iraq.

To make lasting gains for regional security interests in Iraq, the U.S. should adopt a strategy centered on diplomacy and cooperation instead of military force. This would be a way to create an equitable balance between diplomatic and military capabilities that can play instrumental roles in stabilizing Iraq. Through multilateral diplomatic engagement with strategic partners, allies, and other relevant bodies, the U.S. can further implement broader reforms to its policies in the region. On the part of the U.S., these reforms should include changes in defense posture and corrections to existing imbalances in foreign assistance programs that must match current security assistance contributions.

The Current Threat Paradigm Has Led to Misplaced Resources and Capabilities

Iraq is a country with a hot arid climate that neighbors Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria. It is also a country with the fifth largest proven reserves of petroleum. Despite this, significant oil wealth, the country has been prone to sectarian conflict and instability. This climate of instability threatens America's access to Iraq's energy, which has been a defining aspect of its policy in the country. However, the current threat paradigm has made it difficult to access this energy and undermined the integrity of Iraq's sovereignty.

Since 9/11, the threat-based paradigm in Iraq has become untenable for achieving what limited interests the U.S. may have in Iraq. It is untenable because it devalues local perspectives, complicating the U.S.'s ability to function effectively on the ground when it does engage with the Iraqis. It is also a paradigm that overinflates

the perceived capacity of non-state and Iran-backed militias to threaten U.S. interests in the region. Consequently, this means that the narrow focus on counterterrorism has led to the continued misuse of resources and capabilities.

The American presence in Iraq was the dominant articulation of U.S. policy during the Global War on Terror, which led U.S. policymakers to advocate for increased military engagement in the region as a form of deterrence. However, instead of countering the emergence of violent non-state actors, this approach inadvertently supported their proliferation and a climate for armed conflict. Despite the destabilizing consequences of this “shoot first, ask questions later” policy being clear, the U.S. continues to sideline alternatives that emphasize human security, diplomacy, and sustainable development.

Counterterrorism Has Defined U.S.-Iraqi Policy

Prior to the 1990s, U.S. military engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was rare and not as consistent as it presently stands. It was one that relied primarily on the provision of security assistance and rare interventions in Lebanon in 1958 and Iraq in 1991.¹ After 9/11, Congress approved the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMFs) which allowed the President to allocate the military to pursue actors directly responsible for 9/11. However, these AUMFs would eventually be broadly interpreted to not just apply to al-Qa’ida but to any associated force that was identified as a threat.² This would see the United States establish a continuous military presence in numerous countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Kenya.

While the emphasis on counterterrorism in Iraq started under the Bush Administration, it would not end with it. Successive administrations would likewise continue to exercise the belief that military action is the most sufficient counterterrorism tool that the U.S. can provide the region. However, present data suggests that the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq has not been impactful in deterring additional terrorist attacks as American policymakers once believed. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of

Maryland, the Salafi-Jihadist enterprise increased by 1,904 percent from 2002 to 2015 in countries where the U.S. conducted combat operations including in Iraq.³ This counterterrorism approach would likewise fail to prevent the proliferation of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). Of the many countries reviewed, Iraq had the most significant increase compared to Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria.⁴ Even with the Islamic State’s fall in Iraq, the Salafi-Jihadist enterprise continues to strengthen itself and expand across places such as Somalia.⁵

Figure 1

Terrorism Before and During the War on Terror: Average Number of Terror Attacks per Country, per Year

Nations	Before 9/11	After 9/11	Percent Change
War on Terror states (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen)	24	481	1,904
Muslim majority nations	12	17	42
Global average	14	13	-7

Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland

As additional data from the U.S. Department of State’s annual country reports on terrorism indicates, the number of Salafi-Jihadist FTOs operating also changed during this time period. According to the data, the number of Islamist-inspired FTOs and fighters in Islamist-inspired FTOs each more than tripled between 2000 and 2015.⁶ As some critics note, this is because a more aggressive U.S. counterterrorism policy in the MENA region has served to reinforce narratives of a conflict between Islam and the West.⁷ It has also disempowered regional allies and partners who have a far greater interest and need to combat terrorism than the U.S. which is geographically distant from the locales that organizations such as ISIS and al-Qa’ida operate in.⁸ This would mean that U.S. policy has not only become a unintentional driver for terrorism, but is counterproductive and a recalibration are urgently needed.

Under a new counterterrorism policy, the U.S. should de-emphasize the military as the leading counterterrorism force by repealing both AUMFs. In its stead, it must emphasize a return to a intelligence and law

enforcement paradigm instead of the current war paradigm. By doing this, the U.S. can better assess when FTOs can credibly threaten the U.S. and disrupt their activities through multilateral cooperation.⁹ This mixture of intelligence, law enforcement, and cooperation has been proven to work with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) having thwarted 176 terrorist attacks, including foreign-based ones from 1987 to 2010.¹⁰ Any further steps to prevent terrorism against the U.S. do not need to be implemented overseas outside of strengthening embassy security with U.S. allies and partners. They can be implemented domestically including strengthening security measures on America’s northern and southern borders.¹¹

Regime Change isn’t a Cost-Effective Security Strategy

The underlying principle of the Bush Administration’s foreign policy was rooted in an offensive realist approach, which argued that national security threats were products of the state system.¹² This strategy of pre-emption involved militarily engaging terrorists and changing the political institutions within “rogue” states such as Iraq that U.S. intelligence alleged had harbored terrorist groups such as the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) in the 1980s. Prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion, it is not likely that al-Qa’ida had a presence in Iraq under Hussein’s regime past the 1990s due to the fear of opportunism between the two.¹³ This was in part because of bin Laden’s concerns that Hussein would have betrayed him as he had done with the ANO in the 1983.¹⁴ However, this approach of “taking the fight” to the terrorists would prove to entail higher costs than rewards.

Since then, regime change including in Iraq had been a cornerstone of U.S. security policy that cost the U.S. approximately \$8 trillion in committed resources.¹⁵ It has also resulted in the death of approximately 929,000 civilians, service members, humanitarian aid workers, and journalists who were killed during military actions.¹⁶ In practice, regime change was meant to protect human lives, but had the opposite result in the long term. These interventions would provide advantages to U.S. adversaries and supported the instability that allowed both al-Qa’ida and Iran to constitute significant influence among local Iraqis where they had previously been unable to.

Figure 2: Iraq War Deaths

U.S. Military ⁷	2,324 ⁸	- ⁹	4,598 ¹⁰	- ¹¹	-	130	7,052
U.S. DOD Civilian ¹²	6	-	15	-	-	-	21
U.S. Contractors ¹³	3,917	90	3,650	19 ¹⁴	2 ¹⁵	511 ¹⁶	8,189
National Military and Police ¹⁷	69,095 ¹⁸	9,431 ¹⁹	45,519- 48,719 ²⁰	80,600 ²¹	- ²²	N/A	204,645- 207,845
Other Allied Troops ²³	1,144	-	323	13,407 ²⁴	-	-	14,874
Civilians	46,319 ²⁵	24,099 ²⁶	185,831- 208,964 ²⁷	95,000 ²⁸	12,690 ²⁹	N/A ³⁰	363,939- 387,072
Opposition Fighters	52,893 ³¹	32,838 ³²	34,806- 39,881 ³³	77,000 ³⁴	99,321 ³⁵	N/A ³⁶	296,858- 301,933
Journalists/ Media Workers ³⁷	74	87	282	75	33	129 ³⁸	680
Humanitarian/NGO Workers ³⁹	446	105	63	224	46	8 ⁴⁰	892
TOTAL	176,206	66,650	275,087- 306,495	266,325	112,092	778	897,150- 928,558
TOTAL (Rounded to Nearest 1,000)	176,000	67,000	275,000- 306,000	266,000	112,000	1,000 ⁴¹	897,000- 929,000

Source: Brown University Costs of War Project, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Direct%20War%20Deaths_9.1.21.pdf.

The consequences of this strategy have been acknowledged by the Biden Administration in its recently published 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), which disavows the idea of America’s “faith in force” to deliver results.¹⁷ In lieu of this faith, the administration acknowledges that the better approach to stabilizing Iraq would be to work closer with regional partners instead of acting as a substitute for regional states who should be serving as the prime guarantors of security in the region.¹⁸ It also opts to do this by broadly balancing diplomacy with security assistance and economic aid instead of military force to stabilize conflict-prone regions.¹⁹ Despite making this commitment in the 2022 NSS, the actual distribution of U.S. assistance to Iraq is imbalanced and not in line with what policy is being prescribed. According to the most recent available numbers, the U.S. has sent \$298,500,000 in security sector assistance to Iraq.²⁰ For every dollar of this security assistance, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has sent \$53,304,978 to Iraq in 2022.²¹ This imbalance is suggestive that U.S. military leadership in Iraq is at the very least a major interlocutor with the Iraq instead of the State Department.

Figure 3: US Aid to the MENA Region

Country	Peace and Security	Governing Justly and Democratically	Investing in People	Economic Growth	Humanitarian Assistance
Algeria	2,140,000	0	0	0	0
Bahrain	4,360,400	0	0	0	0
Egypt	1,292,140,000	12,700,000	55,360,000	58,040,000	0
Iraq	339,020,000	50,340,000	6,600,000	63,500,000	10,800,000
Israel	3,220,000,000	0	0	0	0
Jordan	534,780,000	62,020,000	213,520,000	519,880,000	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0
Lebanon	112,060,000	17,260,000	58,220,000	27,560,000	0
Libya (GNA)	25,320,000	14,400,000	0	5,960,000	0
Morocco	18,580,000	8,260,000	5,880,000	4,460,000	0
Oman	4,679,400	0	0	0	0
Qatar	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	7,400	0	0	0	0
Tunisia	82,820,000	30,540,000	0	39,660,000	0
Turkey	3,299,600	0	0	0	0
UAE	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen (ROYG)	16,460,000	9,880,000	17,620,000	3,120,000	243,620,000
Total	5,655,666,800	205,400,000	357,200,000	722,180,000	254,420,000

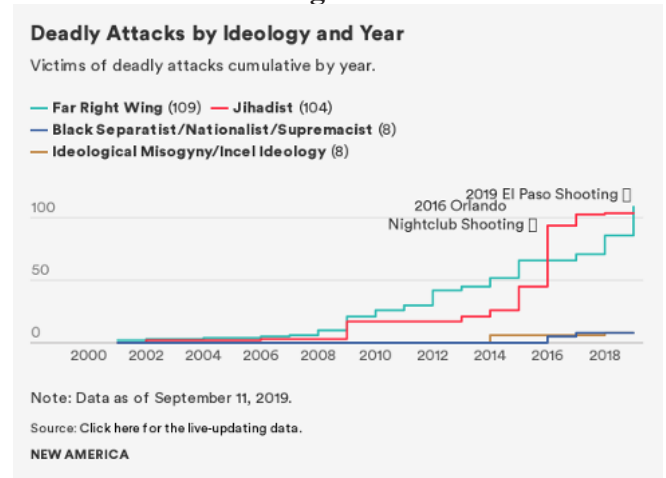
SOURCES: U.S. Agency for International Development, "Foreign Aid Explorer," webpage, undated; Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, *President Trump's FY21 Budget: Examining U.S. Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa in the Shadow of COVID-19*, Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2020.

U.S. Strategy has Deformed Perception of the National Interest

Thus far, Salafi-Jihadi groups in Iraq have rarely ever posed a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. While both groups may target the U.S. in propaganda, they continue to concentrate their resources on local or regional conflicts. The Islamic State has become more concerned with a potential shift to Africa, where the environment has become more volatile and lucrative than the Middle East.²² They may also be shifting away from Iraq due to a continued trend of resistance led by Iraqi nationalist groups with encouragement from significant political figures such as the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the late Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.²³ Within the U.S., there is an observable change in the number of individuals being directed by Salafi-Jihadist ideology in the U.S. as opposed to far-right, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE) and white supremacist extremist (WSE) actors which have increased in recent years.²⁴ In the majority of these attacks, the perpetrators disprove the argument that weak or failed states such as Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya would be "launch pads" for terrorists.²⁵ More recent studies into terrorism in the United States have shown that 81% of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the U.S. have been homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) that held U.S.

citizenship or were permanent residents.²⁶ In the few instances where there has been a Salafi-Jihadist attack in the U.S., they are more inspired than directed.²⁷

Figure 4



Similarly, there has been little evidence that Iranian-linked proxies such as the PMF have been able to stage a successful attack against the U.S. homeland. At present, they have presented a more significant threat to U.S. forces in Iraq than to the homeland. By the middle of 2021, the number of Iranian-linked proxy attacks against U.S. forces and assets increased.²⁸ It is likely that these proxies increased their attacks to force the United States to reconsider its present defense posture in the country, where over 2,500 troops are still deployed on an advisory status.²⁹ The impetus for these increased attacks are likely not being driven by Iran, but by the resurgent trend of Iraqi nationalism that has made it difficult for Iran to maintain control of these groups.³⁰ This inability to control organizations like the PMF has likely been worsened by the death of Qassem Soleimeini who was far more capable of controlling these groups than his current successor, Esmail Ghaani.³¹ This lack of control may be why Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has begun to more directly launch attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan.³² However, these activities still do not threaten U.S. interests more broadly including homeland security and do not justify the past or current levels of military engagement in the Middle East.

Modify Military and Security Commitments in Iraq

To reduce the prospect of lethal U.S. entanglement

in flashpoint areas like Iraq, the U.S. should re-examine the current U.S. defense posture in the Persian Gulf. Under the present posture, there is still a security environment that can bring the U.S. into conflict with Iran and hasten Iran's development of nuclear weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Changing this posture may disincentivize the vulnerability for conflict where Iran can strike U.S. troops that operate close to it compared to their ability to launch strikes in America.

As part of this change in posture, the Biden Administration should review the current number of troops operating in both Kuwait and Iraq where the combined number of U.S. troops is 16,000.³³ In the past, these troops have been used to advise regional partners and allies in confronting FTOs as well as to directly engage FTOs. However, current circumstances in Iraq may no longer necessitate this posture and it may inhibit the self-sufficiency of local forces which should be the priority for U.S. strategy in the Middle East. With a weakened Islamic State being stifled by local Iraqi resistance, it is more sensible to withdraw the majority of the 2,500 U.S. troops in Iraq except for those that are responsible for defending U.S. embassies and consulates. Any existing U.S. bases that these troops vacate should be formally transferred to the custody of Iraqi security forces as has been the case in the past. This will encourage self-sufficiency, reduce impulses for further U.S. military engagement with nearby Iran, and prevent a larger number of U.S. casualties in the region.

In the case of Kuwait, the current U.S. troop posture is arranged to still support massive surges into Iraq that have not taken place since 2014.³⁴ This posture in Kuwait may also hasten the prospect for war with Iran. It is additionally sensible to downsize the U.S. military presence and focus it on issues that are of mutual concern to the U.S., its allies, and partners such as maritime security.³⁵ As the 2022 NSS has articulated, U.S. security posture should be more focused on facilitating freedom of navigation among key waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab.³⁶ This can be accomplished through dialogues defense integration between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states which will reduce America's own need to continue its "high risk" commitments to Gulf partners on areas such as Iraq.³⁷ These allies and partners likewise have a far greater

interest in the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the implications it may have on their own security.

On the counterterrorism front, the U.S. should continue to cooperate with Iraq's security forces in accordance with the Security Framework Agreement (SFA) but modify how this cooperation is implemented.³⁸ To compensate for the reduced number of U.S. military assets being present to collect intelligence, the U.S. should emphasize requirements for cooperation on intelligence collection and sharing with Iraqi security forces. This can be effectively achieved without committing U.S. troops to Iraq by increasing training missions with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the U.S. through its International Military Education and Training Program (IMET).³⁹ To date, the U.S. State Department has annually provided the ISF with \$1.4 million for its cooperation in the IMET program which has also been integral in educating ISF officers with training in human rights, the law of armed conflict, and interoperability with U.S. forces.⁴⁰ This interoperability will improve intelligence sharing as well other strategies including continued U.S. efforts to develop and enhance capabilities for "over the horizon" counterterrorism responses.⁴¹ These responses would be coordinated between U.S. forces in Kuwait who may employ drones to provide limited assistance and support to the Iraqi military.

Under these modified commitments, America's preventive mission in Iraq would shift from an escalatory one to a more consultative one. This consultative mission would allow the U.S. to continue to strengthen its intelligence capabilities with fewer assets directly in Iraq. It would also encourage equitable burden sharing among allies and partners in the region that may have greater interest in Iraq's stability than the U.S. does. Through equitable burden sharing, fewer U.S. troops would be threatened directly and they could be allocated to attend to more pressing foreign policy issues that are in the national interest.

U.S. Policy in Iraq Neglects the Critical Drivers of Instability

Current policy neglects the critical drivers behind Iraq's ongoing instability. These drivers would include issues related to human security such as poverty, climate change, and challenges in governance

produced by corruption. Addressing these issues would be a far more conducive use of resources and capabilities than using Iraq as a theater for indirect clashes with Iran, which the United States has rarely been successful in doing.

Challenges in governance have long stood at the epicenter of insecurity in Iraq. During the colonial period, the British divided the country among strict ethno-sectarian lines in accordance with the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.⁴² This division of regions in Iraq did not consider how it may shape the influence of who would hold political power as much as it focused on British commercial interests such as those near major trading routes like the Silk Road.⁴³

This would later influence a series of coups in Iraq between different nationalist factions in 1958, 1963, and 1968 that would eventually culminate in the rise of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime. This regime, in turn would later be toppled by U.S. forces in 2003. In the aftermath, Iraq would be faced with a sectarian civil war between Shi'a and Sunni factions who sought control of Iraq's unicameral parliament. Even upon the conclusion of this civil war, the political structure of Iraq has remained volatile due to the various coalitions in parliament and has led to several clashes between different Shi'a factions in Baghdad's Green Zone where the government is headquartered.

The most recent escalation in clashes between the ISF, protestors, and militias occurred in July 2022 ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections.⁴⁴ These clashes would eventually culminate in supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's storming of Iraq's parliament to prevent the Coordination Framework, a series of Iran-backed political parties from forming a new government. Sadr, who has maintained significant influence among populist Iraqis since the collapse of the Ba'athist regime was able to eventually restrain his supporters and order them to return to their homes.⁴⁵ They complied, and the caretaker government resumed its preparations to host new elections in October 2022.

Corrupt to the Core: Iraq's Political Establishment Must Change

The recent clashes convey the continued feeling of

neglect among average Iraqis who rely on individuals such as Sadr to be an advocate for them. For many of the Sadrists who entered the Iraqi parliament during the clashes, it was their first time entering into a place that they have long felt has never served their interests. However, this reliance on Sadr who claimed he will not be returning to Iraqi politics is not sustainable for long-term effective governance. As previously noted, U.S. assistance to Iraq is imbalanced and within that imbalance much of the assistance provided does not place a significant enough focus on efforts to strengthen the Iraqi government's ability to govern justly or democratically.⁴⁶ According to Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Iraq ranks 157 out of 180 which means that the Iraqi government is seen as being more corrupt than Russia, Lebanon, and Iran.⁴⁷ With this perception of corruption, it is clear that U.S. efforts to advance accountable government should more critically examine and engage corruption's influence on Iraq's political processes.⁴⁸ The most appropriate way for the U.S. to achieve this would be the continued implementation of the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption, which leverages U.S. foreign assistance to achieve anti-corruption goals and strengthens institutional capabilities to address it.⁴⁹ By leveraging these resources, the U.S. will be able to encourage engagement between the Iraqi government and civil society organizations (CSOs) in developing best practices for accountability. It is urgent for policymakers to support stronger ties with government and CSOs who can support efforts to make government more receptive to public concerns as they do in other countries. This approach would also allow the U.S. to restrict how far it becomes entangled in the contentious dynamics of conflict in a country, where most Americans feel it does not have a responsibility to act.⁵⁰

Climate Insecurity Stifles Iraqi Society

Like other MENA states, Iraq is impacted by the global climate crisis. It is the fifth most vulnerable country to climate breakdown.⁵¹ This breakdown has been marked by rising temperatures, decreased rainfall, and water scarcity. Consequently, this water scarcity has caused challenges for agricultural management in rural Iraq and led to increased food insecurity.⁵² As of 2020, approximately 4.1 million Iraqis need human-

itarian assistance and of that 1.4 million, 920,000 of them have been identified as food insecure.⁵³ As this scarcity worsens, more Iraqis are likely to be drawn into conflict over resources which cannot be addressed effectively with weak internal governance.

To counteract this problem, the U.S. should continue its implementation of the 2020 Global Fragility Strategy (GFS) which promotes capacity building and responsible natural resource management.⁵⁴ As part of this implementation, the U.S. should encourage countries to contribute their knowledge and expertise in navigating water management issues to the Iraqi government. This would include countries such as Turkey, which shares a mutual interest in the Tigris and Euphrates River as the Iraqi government. This dialogue would be an important step because Turkey has developed effective strategies for retaining and storing water during brief periods of rainfall through its water basin management program.⁵⁵ An additional benefit of this dialogue would be that the U.S. could also encourage the establishment of a resolution on water access that has been restricted by Turkey's construction of the Illisu Dam in 2019.⁵⁶ Cooperative efforts such as this can complement reforms to foreign assistance which can not resolve Iraq's problems on its own.

As a result of both corruption and climate change, economic opportunity has been stifled in Iraq. The lack of economic opportunity benefitting Iraqis has often been a core driver of conflict that has allowed terrorist organizations to proliferate. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic 4.5 million Iraqis were being recorded as living in poverty with children making up most of that number.⁵⁷ Unemployment rates in Iraq have continued to rise at the same time and has disproportionately impacted younger Iraqis who are most susceptible to terrorist recruitment.⁵⁸ Present policies such as Iraq's National Programme for the Employment of Youth which offers loans to youth to start small businesses may not sufficiently address the issue.⁵⁹ More initiative needs to be taken beyond the provision of funds by government to support economic development. These initiatives should focus particularly on providing Iraqis with access to vocational training where they can acquire skills that would make them competitive in a global economy.

To effectively support these initiatives, the U.S.

should work closely with the EU and UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on developing reforms for its Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) program. TVET is a program supported by the EU, UN, and private sector companies to support the needs of employers in Iraq as well as providing their workers with the appropriate skills and knowledge to operate in a globalized world.⁶⁰

The U.S. Needs To Ensure Its Policy Ends Justify Their Means

The U.S. needs to reclassify its interests in Iraq which has been reluctant to do for twenty years. Terrorism and indirect engagement with Iran have been the core pillars of U.S.-Iraq policy and MENA relations more broadly since the Bush Administration. However, these are not major threats that require the number of resources the U.S. has committed since the start of the Global War on Terror. They can be countered through local allies and partners through defense integration and cooperation on numerous issues affecting the region including missile defense.⁶¹ That is something that the U.S. can more feasibly do without creating a climate that could lead to direct hostilities with Iran or indirectly encouraging terrorist violence by having an excessive U.S. military presence in the region.

As analysts have noted, the recent electoral violence in Iraq was calmed by respected figures in Iraqi politics and society such as Moqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who called for peace.⁶² While neither individual has directly supported the U.S., their actions and positions have indirectly aligned with U.S. interests such as combatting ISIS fighters and stability in Iraq. Both Sistani and Sadr issued decrees for Iraqis to engage in an armed resistance against ISIS and expressed the belief that they did not need U.S. assistance to do so.⁶³ However, while these individuals have indirectly helped U.S. interests, they will not always have a presence in Iraq or command influence among Iraq's various political factions. In particular, the 94-year-old al-Sistani cannot live forever. He will pass away and will leave Iraq with one less voice to potentially de-escalate hostilities when they may next erupt. It is not certain when he may do so, but it is a point that should become an important subject among U.S. policymakers who are concerned

about intra-Shi'a relations in Iraq. Likewise, Washington should be concerned about whether Sadr's claims of retirement from politics are genuine or part of a bid to gain further bargaining power in a later election.⁶⁴

In the event of Sadr's retirement being genuine or al-Sistani's death, the U.S. should reclassify its interests in Iraq to develop a new and robust human security strategy for Iraq. More specifically, this strategy must prepare the Iraqi government and society to be less reliant on singular individuals. This can be done with both U.S., Iraqi, and regional leaders agreeing to focus more on underdeveloped policies and initiatives that emphasize the human security paradigm within Iraq and the MENA region more broadly. This emphasis on human security would better serve U.S. objectives of combatting corruption, climate change, and poverty, all of which drive the instability in Iraq. It would also provide the U.S. an opportunity to "right-size" its approach to security and humanitarian assistance where there is a consequential imbalance that has yielded few positive outcomes on the ground. This would be a more appropriate way to conduct deterrence and diplomacy not simply for the sake of them, but because it has a distinct purpose of supporting people on the ground.

Conclusion

A failed threat-based paradigm that overinflates threat capabilities and emphasizes security assistance has left Iraqis in a less secure position while amplifying the stimuli for state fragility. As Iraqis continue to contend with intense political, economic, and environmental challenges, U.S. policy needs to change. Committing more to a human security-based paradigm with an emphasis on the Global Fragility Strategy and the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption can lead to better outcomes for policy. The U.S. may bear some responsibility for the crisis in Iraq, but that does not have to be the only thing it can be responsible for.

Summary of Recommendations

- The U.S. should further reduce its military presence in both Iraq and Kuwait, which has only furthered hostilities with Iran and made the Iraqi Security Forces less self-sufficient.

- Repeal the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs to reduce likelihood for future increases in U.S. military presence in the Middle East.
- Incorporate traditional allies and partners to assist on security cooperation in Iraq and elsewhere as part of an American shift from chief security guarantor in Iraq to security integrator.
- Return to a law enforcement and intelligence paradigm that emphasizes intelligence collection, law enforcement operations, and intelligence sharing between allies, partners, and the Iraqi government.
- Rebalance current disparities between the allocation of humanitarian assistance versus security assistance to Iraq as part of a broader strategy to address stimuli for instability and insecurity.
- Continue implementation of the 2020 Global Fragility Strategy which promotes capacity building and better management of natural resources including water.
- Encourage diplomatic dialogue between critical U.S. partners and allies such as Turkey, who may provide Iraq with assistance and guidance on natural resource management.
- Coordinate with civil society organizations and the Iraqi government to develop a framework for combatting corruption.
- Continue current implementations of the U.S. Strategy on Countering corruption including the allocation of foreign assistance programs.

Endnotes

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