**Perspective**
EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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# WEIGHING U.S. TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

## STRATEGIC RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

May 2020

RAND CORPORATION

# Contents

# Executive Summary

In this Perspective, we assess the possible strategic risks associated with U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq and recommend policies to help the United States meet its strategic objectives in the Middle East. As of early 2020, the United States has several thousand military personnel in Iraq providing direct combat assistance to Iraqi security services and to U.S. forces in eastern Syria. Following the targeted killing of Iranian Major General Qassim Suleimani in January 2020, the Iraqi parliament passed a nonbinding measure calling for the ejection of foreign—and primarily U.S.—military forces from Iraq. This vote, and the concurrent rise in tensions with Iran, reignited the debate over the purpose of the U.S. military mission in Iraq. Why is the United States engaged in Iraq? What is the purpose of sustaining a military footprint there? What would happen if the Iraqi government expelled U.S. military forces, or if they were willingly withdrawn? If the U.S. military remains in Iraq, what should constitute this presence?

## Assessment

We examined the likely consequences of American disengagement from Iraq for stated U.S. strategies and policy objectives as set out in published, official U.S. government documents as of early 2020. Table S.1 summarizes our conclusions from the analytic comparison of five strategic U.S. interests and four prospective withdrawal options, ranging from no withdrawal to full disengagement.

## Recommendations

We make four policy recommendations based on this analysis:

1. **Support:** Continue to actively support the development of stability and democracy in Iraq.
2. **Stay:** Select optimal risk-benefit balance between no withdrawal and limited withdrawal.
3. **Endure:** Maintain an enduring advisory mission to help develop Iraq's security forces.
4. **Improve:** Help the Iraqi military improve civil-military relations over time.

TABLE S.1

Assessing Probable Harms to U.S. Interests Associated with Military Withdrawal from Iraq

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Countering the Islamic State | Very Low | High | Very High | Very High |
| Countering Iran | Very Low | Moderate | High | Very High |
| Competing with China and Russia | Very Low | Low | Moderate | Moderate |
| Economic prosperity and stability | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | High |
| Regional military force posture | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | Moderate |

## Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq

In this Perspective, we assess the possible strategic risks associated with a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq and, building from this assessment, recommend a set of policies and actions to help the United States meet its strategic objectives in the Middle East. Our analysis and recommendations are intended to help both policymakers and the public to consider both sides of this important issue.

Strong opinions have been offered for and against withdrawal by policymakers, policy analysts, military leaders, veterans, and members of the general public.[1] Present arguments generally align with those made during the peak 2006–2007 Iraq counterinsurgency period and during the period leading up to the 2011 withdrawal.[2] The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) adds a new element, as it asserts that the United States will shift its military focus from countering terrorism toward great-power competition with, primarily, China and Russia.

Some military professionals and policymakers have read the NDS as an almost binary directive: Refocusing on China and Russia requires a substantial withdrawal from the Middle East. However, the NDS also directs the U.S. Department of Defense to help maintain favorable regional balances in the Middle East, to deter regional adversary aggression, to defeat and deny safe haven to terrorists, to prevent hostile powers from dominating the Middle East, to keep energy markets stable and trade routes secure, and to counter Iranian malign influence.[3] These requirements reinforce the consistent language in U.S. strategic documents regarding Iraq and the broader Middle East since at least 2005.[4]

## Key Analytic Drivers

Because the 2018 NDS does not resolve the debate over Iraq policy even within the defense establishment, further analysis is warranted. Withdrawal might result from a range of different circumstances and policy decisions.[5] While the impetus of withdrawal has serious practical implications for the United States, Iraq, and for U.S. military forces, we focus our analysis on three major strategic drivers:

1. U.S. strategic objectives in Iraq derived from official documents and statements
2. withdrawal options, ranging from no withdrawal to full military disengagement
3. likely harm to U.S. strategic interests for each withdrawal option.

Our assessment and recommendations are built from a review of public, official U.S. statements on strategy toward Iraq, and what we derived from those statements to be the most common and most emphasized U.S. strategic interests in Iraq.

The 2018 NDS does not resolve the debate over Iraq policy.

## Past and Current U.S. Strategy on Iraq

One of the most oft-stated concerns about the continuing U.S. military presence in Iraq is the perceived lack of a clear regional or country-specific strategy to guide military purpose and action.[6] We agree that strategic clarity on Iraq is much needed, and we find that the stated official objectives are not sufficiently linked to consistent policies or justifications for U.S. military operations. Since the 2003 U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq, some Iraq policies appear to have been directly at odds with contemporaneous strategic statements.

But while policy and strategy are often not well aligned, there are many readily available official documents describing U.S. strategic interests in Iraq. Given a few necessary changes to reflect emerging conditions, these documents are generally consistent in tone and content from at least 2005 and into 2020. Since 2003, the U.S. strategy toward Iraq has been focused on establishing and sustaining a stable and democratic state. Table 1 provides a comparative set of quotes from strategic documents and official websites beginning with the 2005 U.S. National Strategy for Victory in Iraq and ending with the U.S. Department of State (DoS) official policy on Iraq in early 2020.

While there has been effectively no change in declared U.S. strategic objectives in Iraq since 2005, there has been a wide fluctuation in force levels. In 2007, at the height of the Sunni insurrection, there were more than 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. From 2011 to 2014 there were none. In early 2020, there are approximately 5,000 or 6,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. The 2011 withdrawal is considered by many Western experts—and quite a few Iraqis—to have been a mistake, reversing improvements in the Iraqi security forces and opening the way for the Islamic State.[7]

## Assessing Prospective Harms to U.S. Strategic Interests in Iraq

Given the variability between stated strategic objectives and the practical policies on Iraq, and given the shifting global environment, we distilled a set of five U.S. national security interests from recent and current policy documents to help drive our analysis. Table 2 describes the five categories of declared U.S. national security interests relevant to Iraq.

### Withdrawal Options

There are clearly stated U.S. interests in Iraq and practical interests in maintaining a military presence in Iraq. Questions remain regarding the level of presence needed and the degree to which the costs and risks of U.S. military presence might counterbalance perceived benefits. Answering these questions requires a practical look at different options for military presence and investment in Iraq. Treating military presence in Iraq as a binary all-in or all-out policy challenge obscures the difficult choices that will almost certainly have to be made in the middle ground.

Table 3 lists and describes four options for withdrawal from Iraq, including a no withdrawal scenario. Any of the withdrawal options could be dictated by the Iraqi government under cited agreements or selected as a shift in course by U.S. policymakers.[8] Or, the Iraqi government could, in

TABLE 1

## Published U.S. Strategic Objectives in Iraq, 2005–2020

| Source | Year | Selected Quote Summarizing Strategic Objectives in Iraq | Ways and Means |
|---|---|---|---|
| National Strategy for Victory in Iraq | 2005 | We will help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists | Military advising, advisors |
| Bush National Security Strategy (NSS) | 2006 | And in Iraq, we will continue to support the Iraqi people and their historic march from tyranny to effective democracy. We will work with the freely elected, democratic government of Iraq—our new partner in the War on Terror—to consolidate and expand freedom, and to build security and lasting stability. | Military advising, advisors |
| Obama NSS | 2010 | Our goal is an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. To achieve that goal, we are continuing to promote an Iraqi Government that is just, representative, and accountable and that denies support and safe haven to terrorists. The United States will pursue no claim on Iraqi territory or resources, and we will keep our commitments to Iraq's democratically elected government. | Military advising, advisors[a] |
| 2014: Nineteen Iraqi Army brigades and thousands of Federal Police break and flee in front of the Islamic State offensive. | | | |
| Obama NSS | 2015 | We will continue to support Iraq as it seeks to free itself from sectarian conflict and the scourge of extremists. . . . This requires professional and accountable Iraqi Security Forces that can overcome sectarian divides and protect all Iraqi citizens. It also requires international support, which is why we are leading an unprecedented international coalition to work with the Iraqi government and strengthen its military to regain sovereignty. | Military advising, advisors |
| Trump NSS | 2017 | We will strengthen our long-term strategic partnership with Iraq as an independent state. . . . We will retain the necessary American military presence in the region to protect the United States and our allies from terrorist attacks and preserve a favorable regional balance of power. | Military advising, advisors |
| Trump NDS | 2018 | We will develop enduring coalitions to consolidate gains we have made in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran. | Military advising, advisors |
| Department of State | 2019 | Iraq is now a key partner for the United States in the region as well as a voice of moderation and democracy in the Middle East. . . . U.S. security assistance supports the development of a modern, accountable, fiscally sustainable, and professional Iraqi military capable of defending Iraq and its borders. | Military advising, advisors |

SOURCES: U.S. National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2005; George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 2006; Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, May 27, 2010; Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 2015; Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2017; Mattis, 2018; DoS, "U.S. Relations with Iraq," bilateral relations fact sheet, November 13, 2019.

[a] The 2010 NSS stated that military advisors would support ISF development through the scheduled withdrawal period, but not clearly after that period. The Obama administration planned for DoS to lead Iraqi security forces (ISF) development after the military withdrawal, but the program for Title 22 advising under the Chief of Mission did not go as planned. Lack of access and insufficient funds to the DoS program led to its very limited progress. See Brennan et al., 2013, for more on this effort.

TABLE 2

## Categories of U.S. National Security Interest in Iraq

| U.S. National Security Interest | Description and Sources |
|---|---|
| Countering the Islamic State | The United States continues to pursue the defeat of the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)." This requires ongoing counterterrorism pressure and support actions, including partner support to regional forces battling the Islamic State and economic and other support to the governments battling against the Islamic State. |
| | Sources: 2017 NSS; 2018 NDS; DoS, "Joint Statement by the Political Directors of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS," Office of the Spokesperson, January 29, 2020; 2020 Operation Inherent Resolve website, undated. |
| Countering Iran | The United States seeks to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East, block Iran's financing of terror, and address Iranian weapons proliferation activities. In Iraq, the United States seeks to ensure Iraq's sovereignty and self-reliance. |
| | Sources: 2017 NSS; 2018 NDS; DoS, "U.S. Relations with Iraq," bilateral relations fact sheet, November 13, 2019. |
| Competing with China and Russia | Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the U.S. Department of Defense. China and Russia pose "new threats" to Middle East security and stability that must be countered. |
| | Sources: 2018 NDS; Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker, "China and Russia: The New Threats to the Middle East Security and Stability," October 8, 2019. |
| Economic prosperity and stability | The United States will "support the reforms underway that begin to address core inequities that jihadist terrorists exploit . . . [and] play a role in catalyzing positive developments by engaging economically, supporting reformers, and championing benefits of open markets and societies." The United States will maintain "vigorous and broad" economic engagement and help Iraq become a "self-reliant" country. |
| | Sources: 2017 NSS, p. 49; 2018 NDS; DoS, November 13, 2019. |
| Regional military force posture | The United States rebalances forces to compete with China and Russia while maintaining sufficient forces and access around the world to ensure regional stability and to prevent an imbalance of force that might lead to military crises. |
| | Sources: Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, *2017 Defense Posture Statement: Taking the Long View, Investing for the Future*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2016; 2018 NDS. |

TABLE 3

## Prospective Withdrawal Options for Iraq

| Level of Withdrawal | Description |
|---|---|
| No Withdrawal | Early 2020 force levels are generally sustained. If the Islamic State is further suppressed, the U.S. military can execute a gradual, conditions-driven transition from a mixed direct combat assistance and training advisory role to a training-focused advisory mission. |
| Limited Withdrawal | Tactical ground and air advise and assist units providing direct combat assistance to Iraqi military forces engaged in combat against the Islamic State are withdrawn from Iraq or reduced and redeployed to bases within Iraq to conduct on-base-only training missions. U.S. logistics operations and limited, noncombat air operations could continue. |
| Full Withdrawal | Both tactical ground and air forces *and* advisors providing training support to the Iraqi military on major bases are fully withdrawn from Iraq, ending military-to-military engagement beyond routine Chief of Mission activities. All U.S. military shared basing spaces in Iraq—including within the Kurdish Regional Government—are relinquished to the Iraqi government. |
| Disengagement | In addition to withdrawing combat assistance and advisory units and relinquishing borrowed physical space on Iraqi military bases, the United States ends its financial and material support to the ISF and Iraqi ministries. |

the future, establish such restrictive conditions that U.S. military presence would become untenable. This would effectively force a withdrawal while limiting damage to U.S.-Iraq relations. As of early 2020, there is no enduring status of forces agreement between Iraq and the United States.

**No Withdrawal** sustains the *approximate* force level in place in early 2020. These forces would continue both the combat assistance and the training advisory roles they currently fulfill. Periodic reassessment of the counter–Islamic State fight would allow for a prospective, gradual transition of combat assistance forces to training-focused advisory missions.

**Limited Withdrawal** removes or internally reassigns in Iraq those U.S. military teams providing direct assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the ongoing battle against residual Islamic State elements. This would include the retraction of direct combat intelligence assistance, ground-to-ground fire support, medical support, logistics assistance, and some air support. The United States would retain military presence on Iraqi bases for training activities.

**Full Withdrawal** removes all these direct assistance elements, as well as U.S. military advisors helping to train and equip the ISF in bases across Iraq. This would effectively end the military advisory program in Iraq, although civilian and coalition advisors might be used to fill in some of the ensuing gaps. Chief of Mission activities, including military financing and sales, would continue, although major support programs would necessarily be slowed because of lack of military-to-military engagement.

**Disengagement** ends all U.S. financial and military support to the ISF. This would entail cutting off all foreign military funding, including the multibillion-dollar Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF).[9] It would also include cutting off military support and financial support to Iraqi ministries responsible for national security, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior. Nonmilitary financial support to Iraq, including broader economic loans, might or might not continue.

Our comparative assessment of the five U.S. national security interests with the four withdrawal options focuses on the near term, through the end of 2020. It is possible that conditions might change significantly in Iraq by the end of 2020. However, even improved security conditions would have only limited impact on the very long-term interests of the United States in Iraq, or on the prospective benefits of sustaining a small military advisory footprint in Iraq indefinitely.

## Rubric for Assessing Harm to U.S. Strategic Interests in Iraq

We drew from existing RAND assessment methods, as well as U.S. Intelligence Community guidelines on the language of estimative probability, to develop a rubric for probable harm to U.S. strategic interests in Iraq for each of the four options.[10] We assessed harm to both the stability and security of Iraq—a stated strategic interest of the United States—and to broader U.S. interests as identified in strategic documents.[11] For example, full military withdrawal from Iraq would cause some harm to U.S. efforts to compete with Russia *in Iraq*, and it would also cause some harm to U.S. efforts to compete with Russia *worldwide* as a result of the competitive loss of influence in Iraq and the Middle East.

Table 4 explains the levels for strategic harm assessment. In general, the likelihood of results correlated with the likely impact of those results. In other words, an option that might present a very low chance of damaging U.S. strategic interests would also be likely to have very low negative impact if enacted. Therefore, assessment probabilities

TABLE 4
Strategic Harm Assessment Rubric: Explanation of Rating Levels

| Rating Level | Prospective Harm to U.S. Interests |
|---|---|
| Very low risk of harm | Little to no chance that U.S. interests will be harmed. If harm occurs, it will be minimal. |
| Low risk of harm | Little chance that U.S. interests will be harmed. If harm occurs, it will be manageable. |
| Moderate risk of harm | About even chance that U.S. interests will be harmed. If harm occurs, it will be damaging. |
| High risk of harm | Harm to U.S. interests will probably occur. If harm occurs, it will cause serious damage. |
| Very high risk of harm | Harm to U.S. interests is very likely to occur. If harm occurs, it will cause severe damage. |

and impact are combined in a single assessment rating. All assessments reflect the informed subject-matter expert judgment of the authors of this report, backed by the cited reference material.

Assessments are provided in each of the analytic sections below. All assessments are aggregated for comparison in the section titled "Comparative Analysis: Impacts Across the Four Withdrawal Options."[12]

## Impact on the Counter–Islamic State Campaign

Since 2014, policymakers have been primarily focused on the counter–Islamic State campaign in Iraq and in Syria. As of early 2020, the Islamic State no longer holds physical territory in either country.[13] Cells of Islamic State fighters continue to operate within Iraq's urban and rural communities, organizing and conducting more limited attacks than they were capable of in early 2019.[14] As an organization, the Islamic State still directs and inspires international terror attacks.[15] Islamic State leaders, and many of its fighters, are Iraqi, and the group retains an Iraqi orientation.[16] The killing of the previous Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, temporarily decapitated the group's leadership but did not end its functional or ideological existence.[17]

Current Islamic State leadership want the United States to withdraw from the Middle East, but the group's primary objectives are the destruction of U.S. regional partner governments and the creation of a Middle East caliphate.[18] Although the success of the Islamic State is, in early 2020, highly unlikely, purposefully abandoning the counter–Islamic State fight in Iraq and Syria would almost certainly give it space to reform or evolve into a new organization with similar objectives. Those objectives currently include—and almost certainly would continue to include—the denial of access for the United States to all areas under Islamic State control, the murder of U.S. citizens, the destruction of U.S-allied governments, and the disruption of Western states through terrorism and propaganda. Given events from 2014 through early 2020, this is not a threat to be taken lightly.

The primary purpose of the U.S. military forces in Iraq is to support Iraqi and Syrian partners in their ongoing operations against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.[19] U.S. forces are positioned across several bases in Iraq, from which they help train the ISF, provide direct combat support to Iraqi units engaged against the Islamic State, help to direct material support to the Iraqi Army and counterterror units, gather and provide intelligence on Islamic State fighters and leaders, and provide cross-border support to ongoing operations against the Islamic State in Syria.

Withdrawal of American troops from Iraq would have significant impact on the counter–Islamic State fight in both Iraq and in Syria. In Syria, the loss of support bases, surface-to-surface firing positions, intelligence collection activities, and logistics support in Iraq will require more of a standoff approach to counterterrorism activities.[20] In the full withdrawal scenario, U.S. support activities in Iraq would no longer be able to assist remaining U.S. ground forces or partner forces in Syria. Intelligence collection and supporting ground fires would cease to exist. There would be some inevitable degradation in the efficacy of counter–Islamic State operations in Syria. Given the lack of alternative nearby support areas to forces positioned

in northeastern Syria, the U.S. military mission in Syria would probably become untenable.

Specifically in Iraq, the limited withdrawal scenario would place greater burden on the ISF to continue to pursue and suppress remaining Islamic State forces. We found no publicly available, empirical estimate of the ISF's ability to accomplish this mission in the absence of U.S. direct combat assistance. However, there are many acknowledgments that dependencies similar to those developed between U.S. and Iraqi forces in the early 2000s have reemerged during Operation Inherent Resolve.[21] Implementing a *gradual* limited withdrawal would help reduce the likelihood of catastrophic setbacks. But some loss of capability against the Islamic State would be inevitable.

In the full withdrawal scenario—which would probably also include a reduction in European support personnel—Iraq would take responsibility for all of its military operations, from training to logistics to planning to fires and joint integration. Again, there are no clear, empirical assessments of Iraq's capabilities in these areas, but it can be safely assumed that Iraqi forces would suffer from possibly significant near-term degradation in capability.

Unless it was carried out over a number of years, the disengagement scenario would sharply reduce the efficacy of Iraqi forces that have become heavily dependent on U.S. financial and material support. Disengagement would further reduce U.S. and coalition efforts to address the refugee crises in Iraq and Syria. Tens of thousands of refugees from Islamic State–held areas are ripe for future recruitment, and the Iraqi government is not prepared to address this vexing and costly challenge without significant Western assistance.[22] Coupled with the complete withdrawal of ground forces, the degradation of capacity in Syria, and the contraction of all U.S. activities in Iraq to the embassy compound in Baghdad, this loss of visibility and access would effectively hand the counter–Islamic State fight to Iraq and Iran.

The primary purpose of the U.S. military forces in Iraq is to support Iraqi and Syrian partners in their ongoing operations against the Islamic State.

Would a nearly full transition of the counter–Islamic State fight in Iraq and Syria matter at this point? It might not matter if the Islamic State was an isolated organization focused only on disrupting these two states. It also might not matter if the United States did not have broader equities in the stability and success of Iraq as a nation state (more on that below). Given that the Islamic State is a global terrorist organization as well as a local insurgency, the inability to directly suppress, degrade, and deter it—or to do the same with a new force that might manifest thus-far-unresolved Sunni Arab disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria—would significantly increase the likelihood that the ongoing counter–Islamic State fight would fail.

## Conclusion: All Levels of Withdrawal Harm the Counter–Islamic State Fight

The no withdrawal scenario would allow the United States and its coalition allies to provide ongoing combat assistance support to the ISF while continuing to prepare Iraqis for eventual control of the counter–Islamic State fight. Periodic assessment of conditions might allow for a gradual, conditions-driven transition away from combat assistance missions toward greater focus on training and educating the ISF. However, risks in maintaining present force levels remain. At some point, conditions might require a limited, and perhaps temporary, *increase* in troop levels. A constant forward presence would reduce the likelihood of setbacks and also mitigate their impact. The limited withdrawal option would provide continuing capacity to support operations in Syria and to assist Iraqi forces, though some degradation in Iraqi forces would be inevitable. The full withdrawal and disengagement options would have potentially catastrophic consequences for the ongoing counter–Islamic State campaign in both Iraq and Syria.

To avoid a near-term collapse, full withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq would have to be conducted with exceptional care over a long period of time to allow the ISF time to adjust and wean itself away from extensive logistics, intelligence, fires, medical, and other dependencies.

The full withdrawal and disengagement options would have potentially catastrophic consequences for the ongoing counter–Islamic State campaign.

Even if great care were to be taken on the ground, the full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq or the disengagement scenario would probably remove the legal justification for the U.S. intervention against the Islamic State in Syria. Justifications for the use of force in Syria are complex, but they generally center on the need to protect Iraq.[23] Full withdrawal and disengagement should be associated with the purposeful abandonment of the counter–Islamic State fight in Iraq *and* in Syria. Table 5 depicts the assessment for probable harm to the counter-Islamic State fight across the four withdrawal options.

TABLE 5

Assessing Probable Harms: Countering the Islamic State

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Countering the Islamic State | Very Low | High | Very High | Very High |

## Impact on the Efforts to Counter Iranian Malign Influence

Iranian malign influence constitutes the second—though perhaps not now the second-most important—U.S. national security interest in Iraq. Beginning with the Iranian hostage crisis in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran and the United States have continually exchanged both overt and clandestine kinetic, economic, and informational attacks. Iran used its proxies to attack the U.S. Embassy and the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983, and killed and maimed at least hundreds of U.S. military personnel in Iraq during the 2003–2011 counterinsurgency.[24] Iranian leaders have repeatedly called for the destruction of the United States.

As of early January 2020, Iran has an active nuclear program that might lead to the development of a nuclear weapon. Iran directly supports terrorist groups that are indisputably tied to attacks on Americans around the Middle East. Iran is hostile to American allied states, including Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.[25] The United States labeled the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Iran's premier military intervention force, a terrorist organization in 2019.[26] The most recent tensions between Iran and the United States are emblematic of long-standing, low-level hostilities that periodically bring the two countries to the brink of war.

Iraq is a focal point for U.S.-Iranian adversarial competition. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iranian proxy group leaders, Iranian-influenced politicians, and Iranian leaders such as the late Qassim Suleimani pursued

Iraq is a focal point for U.S.-Iranian adversarial competition.

a strategy of influence and dominance in Iraq. Although the true nature of Iranian strategy in Iraq is hidden from the public domain, it is clear that Iranian leaders seek to maximize their influence over Iraq's parliament, prime minister, and cabinet; to reap economic benefits from Iraq's oil revenue and domestic economy; to exercise influence over the Iraqi energy sector; and to dominate Iraq's security sector through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, militias granted authorities or established in 2014 to combat the Islamic State), thereby challenging the monopoly over the legitimate use of force that rightly belongs to the sovereign nation of Iraq.[27] Iran has continuously leveraged this power and influence in Iraq to undermine U.S. interests there, and Iran frequently supports attacks on U.S. military and civilian personnel.

Gaining predominant influence in Iraq would greatly enhance Iran's ability to project power in the region, consolidating its position in Syria and Lebanon and increasing the threat to Iraq's other neighbors and Israel. It could also potentially reverse the current (albeit tenuous and uneven) trend toward Iraqi national unity, as the Sunni and Kurdish minority areas rejected the rule of an Iranian-dominated Shi'a Arab regime in Baghdad. Other regional states might

pile on to a fragmented Iraq, resulting in a multisided conflict on the Syrian model.

Since 2003, the United States has sought to minimize or at least counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq. U.S. military presence in Iraq enables the United States to do so, mainly by providing an alternative source of security assistance, providing economic support and policy advice, and mobilizing other sources of support from the region and beyond.

## Conclusion: All Levels of Withdrawal Harm Efforts to Counter Iran in Iraq and Beyond

Given overt Iranian malign intentions and continuing anti-American actions, even a partial withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq conveys some benefit to Iran. No withdrawal would signal to Iran that the United States and its coalition allies would be consistent and reliable partners to the Iraqi government, and that Iranian pressure would not achieve the desired result of a U.S. drawdown. Removing direct combat assistance to ISF

Even a partial withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq conveys some benefit to Iran.

combat forces leaves a gap that can be filled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard or by PMF proxies, strengthening the hand of Iran in Iraq's security sector and undermining Iraqi sovereignty. Full withdrawal would further open opportunities for Iranian advisors and agents to insinuate themselves into ISF training bases and recruiting commands. Disengagement by the United States would leave Iraq to pursue more robust financial and material support arrangements; these would inevitably include Iran. Table 6 depicts the assessment for probable harm to countering Iran across the four withdrawal options.

TABLE 6

Assessing Probable Harms: Countering Iran

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Countering Iran | Very Low | Moderate | High | Very High |

## Impacts on Competition with Russia and China

The 2018 NDS prioritizes great-power competition over counterterrorism activities. One of the arguments for withdrawal from Iraq is the need to realign U.S. military forces toward adversarial competition with China and Russia. This argument incorrectly suggests that competition with both of these great powers occurs only in Asia and Europe. Both states compete actively in Africa and the Middle East.

Increasingly, China views the Middle East as an essential part of its One Belt One Road economic expansion program. One Belt One Road is China's bid for global advantage, both for its own economic interests and in competition with other great powers. Russia is also expanding its interests across the Middle East and competing directly with the United States for political influence, access to markets, and control of the open battlefield in Syria. Increasingly, the Middle East is a focal point for great-power competition between the United States, Russia, and China across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic fields of interest. Iraq is one of several important nodes in this competition.

China has signed on to help rebuild some of Iraq's war-damaged infrastructure.[28] As of 2018, China was Iraq's second-largest trading partner, and China's trade volume with Iraq significantly exceeded that of the United States.[29] Iraq exported 22.4 billion U.S. dollars of crude oil to China in 2018.[30] According to the Chinese Ambassador to Iraq, China-Iraq trade across all sectors exceeded 30 billion U.S. dollars in 2018.[31]

Russia is competing with both the United States and China for the finite economic and military sales markets

The Middle East is a focal point for great-power competition.

in Iraq.[32] Russia and Iraq have a long-standing diplomatic relationship, going back to Iraq's relationship with the Soviet Union.[33] Currently, Russia seeks to strengthen its relations with Iraq to support its broader regional objectives: to be recognized as a major power in the Middle East, to strengthen its own economy, and to maintain regional stability in order to prevent a further rise in Islamic extremism.[34] Russia has enacted a transactional strategy across the region to achieve these objectives. This strategy is resource- and-opportunity-dependent. It seeks to maximize short-term economic, political, and security gains while reducing the advantages of strategic competitors for influence, such as the United States.[35] For Russia, Iraq represents an opportunity to erode U.S. influence and to complicate U.S. policy in the Middle East.[36]

Russia specifically seeks to strengthen its influence over the Iraqi military through arms sales and bolster Russia's economy through energy deals. Arms sales and trade have been linchpins in Russia's Iraq strategy. Between 2015 and 2019, Iraq ordered 48 Pantsyr-S1 mobile air defense systems, 19 Mi-28N combat helicopters, 24 Mi-35 combat helicopters, 10 TOS-1 multiple rocket launchers, four Su-25 ground attack aircraft, 300 BMP-3 armored personnel carriers, and 73 T-90S main battle tanks from Russia.[37] Trade between Iraq and Russia may exceed 1.5 billion U.S. dollars per year.[38] Russia's energy diplomacy in

Iraq has given it presence, as Russian companies such as Gazprom Neft and Lukoil operate in Iraq and, within Iraq, with the Kurdistan Regional Government.[39]

Russia will undoubtedly seek to take advantage of a potential U.S. withdrawal. Whenever possible, Russian leaders offer Russian military and economic power as an alternative to American military and economic power. In the case of a U.S. military withdrawal, Russia is likely to amplify its diplomatic and economic engagement with both Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government leaders in Erbil.

## Conclusion: Harm from Withdrawal Can Be Moderated, But China and Russia Will Gain

Of the four options, no withdrawal would provide the United States with the most physical presence and influence in Iraq. Both physical presence and influence with senior Iraqi military and political leaders are essential to gaining advantage in adversarial competition.[40] Increments of withdrawal across the other three options will necessarily reduce both presence and influence, thereby reducing prospective advantage against China and Russia in Iraq.

Chinese interests in Iraq are essentially commercial and not otherwise greatly incompatible with those of the United States, as China does not seek to play a security role in the region or to take sides in its many disputes. However, economic benefit that China accrues in Iraq will help to bolster its pursuit of advantage against the United States elsewhere around the world.

Russia, in contrast, might seek to fill at least part of the security void left by an American departure. Russian leaders would certainly offer increased arms sales and perhaps military advisors to the ISF. They might increase their direct combat assistance to the counter–Islamic State fight. Arguably, this might be better than leaving the field entirely to Iran, but it would also consolidate and expand Russia's influence throughout the region.

If used in Iraq, Russian tactics on display previously in Chechnya and today in Syria would almost certainly exacerbate minority disenfranchisement. This would perpetuate the likelihood of extremist resurgence and further destabilize Iraq and the Middle East. Given its transactional approach to its international relationships, Russia might then depart, leaving behind the fruits of its routinely poorly managed and ill-intended labors. Handing Iraq's security and development needs off to Russia is not a realistic policy option for the United States, and it would not be palatable for most Iraqis. Table 7 depicts the assessment of the harm to U.S. competition with China and Iraq across the four withdrawal options.

TABLE 7

Assessing Probable Harms: Competition with China and Russia

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Competing with China and Russia | Very Low | Low | Moderate | Moderate |

## Impacts on U.S. Economic Interests and Iraqi Economic Stability

The United States has several overlapping economic-related national security interests in Iraq. First, because it seeks to help Iraq develop into a stable and effective partner, the United States benefits from a strong and stable Iraqi economy. Second, U.S. interest in global economic growth benefits from stable global oil production. Iraq is the fourth-largest oil producer in the world, and stable Iraqi oil production benefits American economic interests. Third, the United States benefits from weapon sales to, and trade with, Iraq. Assuming a close relationship between the two states, the more Iraq can afford to spend, and the more robust its trade, the more the United States stands to gain.

Fourth, the United States benefits from the *absence* of the political instability that would almost certainly ensue from a collapsing Iraqi economy. If the Iraqi economy collapses, the millions of Iraqi youth who already have few reliable job prospects will face an even bleaker future. Economic drivers do not dictate participation in terrorism, but the lack of economic opportunity is one important factor in the decision to participate in terrorism.[41] Conversely, economic decline would diminish the capacity of the Iraqi state to suppress terrorist movements and limit radicalization of disaffected populations.

Presently, the Iraqi economy is in trouble. Oil makes up approximately 90 percent of Iraq's overall revenue, so budgets can and do rise and crash with the fluctuating world market.[42] Iraq continues to struggle with corruption, both as a legacy from the Saddam Hussein period and from new systems of corruption established since 2003.[43] It is exceptionally difficult for private entities to do business in Iraq, undercutting investment and, therefore, growth.[44]

Economic decline would diminish the capacity of the Iraqi state to suppress terrorist movements and limit radicalization.

Withdrawal of military financial and material assistance would place the Iraqi government in crisis. Iraqi leaders would have to choose to either continue to fund the nation's armed forces at the current level of performance, which would mean going immediately deeper into debt, or considerably reduce military capabilities.[45] If a cut in U.S. and other international funding accompanied a military withdrawal, as seems likely, a security crisis would almost certainly ensue.

A U.S. troop withdrawal could have a different, more devastating sanctions-related effect on Iraq: the prospective end of Iran-related sanctions waivers. Iraq has received waivers five times to allow it to continue purchasing electricity and natural gas from Iran, despite the maximum pressure campaign of the United States against Iran. These purchases supply about one-third of Iraq's electricity. The current waiver was to expire February 13, 2020.[46]

Electricity shortages have sparked widespread, violent protests in Iraq.[47] Without a troop presence, the United States may feel little incentive to allow Iraq to continue buying energy from Iran. Iraq would then have a dilemma: It could continue such purchases and avoid electricity

shortages—but risk getting sanctioned by the United States and potentially suffering severe economic harm—or it could end electricity purchases, suffering economic harm and perhaps exacerbating unrest.

If the waiver were to be lifted, one of the most important institutions that could be affected is the Trade Bank of Iraq, were it to conduct transactions with sanctioned Iranian entities.[48] This could cause great difficulties for Iraq. Not only does the Trade Bank account for 30 percent of Iraq's banking assets, but it is "Iraq's primary bank for financing imports and its transactions are largely government-related."[49]

There are other ways the United States could exercise its sanctions powers or regulatory oversight if it were no longer interested in a stable environment for its troops. The United States could increase its compliance enforcement regarding the distribution of dollars by the Central Bank of Iraq to make sure that dollars were blocked from sanctioned entities. Stepped-up enforcement could lead to dollar shortages in Iraq, which has a highly dollarized economy.[50] Such shortages would also make it more difficult for Iraq to purchase imports. Even worse for Iraq, Iraq's oil revenues go into an account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. These amount to billions of dollars at any one time. Were Iraq to lose the sanctions waiver, the United States could freeze these accounts, although doing so would involve a multistep process.[51]

A U.S. troop withdrawal would likely affect levels of both U.S. aid and global aid to Iraq. Iraq's reconstruction needs are immense, and foreign aid is seen as an important input into helping it recover from the war with the Islamic State.[52] An 80 percent reduction in the staff of the U.S. Agency for International Development mission in Iraq has already adversely affected program planning, management, and oversight.[53] To the extent that U.S. aid programs rely on a U.S. military presence, either indirectly for stability or directly for protection and movement, and to the extent that global efforts rely on the U.S. troop presence, a withdrawal would put these programs at risk.

## Conclusion: Little Economic Harm in Limited Troop Withdrawal, Considerable Economic Harm from Disengagement

There should be little to no economic harm to U.S. strategic interests from the no withdrawal and limited withdrawal options. A full withdrawal would be accompanied by decreases in external aid and vulnerability to U.S.-Iran related sanctions at a time when Iraqi security forces would be saddled with greater challenges and related costs. Disengagement would directly undermine the Iraqi government and force it to choose between maintaining a robust security force or damaging its own economy, while simultaneously increasing Iraq's dependence on China, Russia, and Iran. Disengagement would provide tangible economic benefit and opportunity to U.S. adversaries, and it would cause serious harm to Iraq's economy and stability. However, while the impact to Iraq's stability is high—therefore, presenting a serious threat to the U.S. strategic interest in maintaining a stable and productive Iraqi state—the overall economic impacts on the U.S. economy could be moderated by increased oil production from other states and from the limited trade relationship the United States has with Iraq. Table 8 depicts the assessment of probable economic harm across the four withdrawal options.

TABLE 8

Assessment Probable Harms: Economic Impact

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Economic prosperity and stability | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | High |

## Impacts on U.S. Regional Force Posture and Access

Finally, the United States has a stated interest in maintaining a capable military posture in the Middle East to deter adversaries, support allies, sustain freedom of movement for both military and economic purposes, counter terrorism, and, if necessary, fight wars. The security ramifications of an Iraq withdrawal, therefore, may not be felt only inside Iraq proper.

A second U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in less than a decade could have rippling effects for American power projection across the region if that withdrawal prevented the United States from supplying its other bases and assisting other forces in the region. Moreover, depending on what lessons both American allies and the American public took away from the Iraq withdrawal, it might shape both allies' willingness to host American bases on their territory and the American public support for forward posture more broadly.

As we alluded to in the section on countering the Islamic State, the primary impact of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq on regional posture would be in Syria. Given Turkey's opposition to American support to its Kurdish partners in Syria, access to bases in Iraq are essential to support any substantial American ground operations in Syria. A withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces would also make defending and reinforcing the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad more difficult. A concerted attack by Iranian-backed militias against the embassy would be particularly difficult to repel, should regular Iraqi forces choose not to intervene.

On the benefit side of the ledger, the limited withdrawal, full withdrawal, and disengagement scenarios would free up some resources that could be dedicated elsewhere. The approximately 5,000 to 6,000 troops in Iraq include some low-density, high-demand units (e.g., special operations forces) that could be quickly redeployed or returned to permanent bases to reduce stress on the broader force.[54]

Presumably, the funding previously dedicated to Iraq could in the disengagement strategy be repurposed to other allies and partners in other parts of the world. The relative size of this benefit depends on how many forces were withdrawn and the resources to be redirected. Therefore, disengagement provides more benefit than limited withdrawal, mostly because of the security force assistance funding the United States gives Iraq. Even on the high end, however, the total resources repurposed are still relatively modest compared with the overall size of the U.S. military. The benefits accrued would likewise be relatively modest.

Perceptions of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, whether fair or unfair, would likely contribute to the growing impression that the United States does not stand by its allies.

Other than in Syria, a U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq would probably not have much impact on American military presence in the broader Middle East. Even if Iraq denied the United States military overflight of its territory, the United States could still maintain unimpeded access to its other allies and partners in the region, including Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. And presuming that the United States could maintain overflight of Saudi Arabia, the United States could still resupply American bases in the Persian Gulf. Sea lanes of communication probably would be unaffected.

The larger, more negative impacts of a full withdrawal would be felt only in the longer term. A full withdrawal from Iraq would contribute to the already tenuous assumptions about the value of American partnership and allegiance. Perceptions of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, whether fair or unfair, would likely contribute to the growing impression that the United States does not stand by its allies. This might affect the crucial network of allegiances and bases that the United States depends upon around the world.[55]

## Conclusion: Withdrawal Would Severely Harm U.S. Posture in Syria and Would Undermine U.S. Regional and Global Credibility

Ultimately, the impact of a limited or full withdrawal of American forces on regional force posture is limited given the small size of the American presence in Iraq currently. Disengagement would not significantly add to the moderate harm caused by full withdrawal. Table 9 depicts the assessment of probable harms to U.S. regional force posture and access across the four withdrawal options.

TABLE.9

Assessing Probable Harms: Regional Force Posture

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regional military force posture | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | Moderate |

## Comparative Analysis: Impacts Across the Four Withdrawal Options

Viewed together, these five assessments of potential impacts of withdrawal on U.S. strategic interests are revealing. They show that sustaining current force levels or conducting a thoughtful and gradual withdrawal or internal repurposing of combat assistance forces—those U.S. military forces directly engaged in assisting the ISF and the Kurdish-led forces in Syria in the counter–Islamic State fight—would have relatively limited impact on U.S. strategic objectives. The greatest risks in limited withdrawal would be to the counter–Islamic State fight and to the effort to counter Iran.

Even a minor drawdown of forces while the Islamic State was active, and while Iran was pressing its advantage, would signal to Iraq, Iran, the Islamic State, China, Russia, and other states and nonstate actors that the United States was retracting from its oft-repeated commitments. It would reduce the effectiveness of Iraqi forces still struggling to suppress the Islamic State. On the other hand, a minor drawdown might also signal a deference to Iraqi sovereignty, thereby reducing current tensions between the United States and Iraq that have resulted from alleged Israeli strikes in Iraq against Kata'ib al-Hezbollah forces, U.S. strikes against Kata'ib al-Hezbollah, and the U.S. strike that killed Qassim Suleimani and others in January 2020.

A full withdrawal of U.S. combat assistance forces and training advisors would place both the counter–Islamic State fight and the efforts to counter Iran at serious risk. Counter–Islamic State operations would be placed at some risk of full failure unless the withdrawal were conducted with exceptional care, allowing Iraqi forces ample time and space to adjust. Threats to American global influence and economic interests would rise. Full disengagement from support to the ISF would have a high likelihood of crippling the counter–Islamic State fight and severely undercutting efforts to counter Iranian malign influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East. It would open doors for both Russia and China and create rippling economic disruption.

Disengagement would bring the U.S.-led counter–Islamic State fight across the Syria-Iraq arc to a halt. Iran would have a free hand in Iraq, assuming that the Iraqi people did not turn against Iranian influence. If the United States ended Iraq's sanctions waivers, it would seriously harm Iraq's economy and force it into the hands of Iran. If the United States did not end Iraq's sanctions waivers in this scenario, it would be tacitly endorsing Iranian malign influence in Iraq. All of these prospective harms are listed in Table 10.

Comparatively, the no withdrawal and limited withdrawal options pose far less risk to U.S. strategic interests than full withdrawal or disengagement. Disengagement would be immediately counterproductive to U.S. strategic interests in Iraq, the Middle East, and, according to the NSS and NDS, the world.

TABLE 10

Assessing Probable Harms to U.S. Interests Associated with Military Withdrawal from Iraq

| Strategic Interest | No Withdrawal (early 2020 force levels sustained) | Limited Withdrawal (combat assistance forces only) | Full Withdrawal (combat assistance + advisory teams) | Disengagement (all military forces + financing + materiel) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Countering the Islamic State | Very Low | High | Very High | Very High |
| Countering Iran | Very Low | Moderate | High | Very High |
| Competing with China and Russia | Very Low | Low | Moderate | Moderate |
| Economic prosperity and stability | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | High |
| Regional military force posture | Very Low | Very Low | Moderate | Moderate |

## Overall Recommendation: Commit to a Small Enduring Advisory Presence

Published strategic objectives on Iraq from 2005 through 2020 are consistent with one another and also with the broader U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East and around the world. Supporting a stable and friendly Iraq is in the continuing long-term interest of the United States. This *does not* require continuing the combat assistance mission in Iraq over the long run, but it does require maintaining a small force of military advisors to help train and develop Iraqi military capabilities so that Iraq can defend itself. Long-term presence also sustains U.S. influence in Iraq, which, in turn, can help to blunt Iranian, Russian, and other malign influence. Synergistic impact can be achieved by sustaining a modest but consistent military advisory presence and continuing to provide some form of military financial and material aid to the ISF. Coalition advisors will continue to play a critical role in helping to stabilize and strengthen Iraq. The nature of the advisory mission should shift over time—see below—but it should not be terminated.

Justification for this overall recommendation (to set a modest but enduring military commitment in Iraq) is explained in greater detail in *An Enduring American Commitment in Iraq* (Connable, 2020; www.rand.org/t/PE353). In that report, and above, we cite some arguments for what would amount to a full withdrawal or disengagement from Iraq. Although some of these arguments are well articulated, none provide a thorough explanation of what would be withdrawn, *and* how withdrawal would be safely implemented, *and* how withdrawal would explicitly affect other U.S. interests in the near term and over time. In our reading, none of these arguments successfully address the concern that another withdrawal from Iraq might precede another collapse, followed by yet another hasty and costly intervention.

Committing to an enduring low-cost, low-risk military investment is wiser than betting on an approach that has

already failed once. It is also wiser than investing in the faint hope that every American president in the future will remain committed to disengagement from the Middle East, and that current and future U.S. leaders will not come to regret yet another vaguely articulated strategic mistake in Iraq.

## Choose Carefully Between No Withdrawal and Limited Withdrawal

We recommend a careful selection between no withdrawal and limited withdrawal. Either approach would help achieve the recommended policy of enduring, small-footprint advisory commitment. The choice between these two options boils down to a simple risk and benefit calculation. No withdrawal sends a strong signal to Iran, to Iranian-backed militia leaders, to all Iraqis, and to the world that the United States will not be intimidated into retracting from a clearly and oft-articulated military commitment to an allied state. Maintaining current force levels in the near term will also prevent a reduction in combat capability against the Islamic State and maximize U.S. influence with the ISF. However, this approach also risks reinforcing arguments made by Iranian leaders and some Iraqis that U.S. military presence is an affront to Iraqi sovereignty. Arguably, it risks shifting some of the focus of ongoing antigovernment, anti-Iran protests toward the U.S. military.

Limited withdrawal represents an inverse approach within the overall policy of enduring, small-footprint commitment. Ultimately it still retains a small advisory presence. But it begins with a near-term and visible reduction in current troop levels. If this withdrawal is carefully packaged with appropriate messaging and diplomatic engagement, it might reduce current tensions with the Iraqi government and deflate Iranian efforts to shift the focus of protesters toward the United States. If reductions were limited to a few hundred troops, the prospective impact on ISF combat capabilities against the Islamic State could be mitigated. Coalition partner forces might help to fill some of the gaps left by departing U.S. military forces. However, the intended message of limited withdrawal would also signal some amount of weakness to Iran and other adversaries. Even a modest near-term withdrawal conducted solely for the purposes of messaging would inevitably undercut the ongoing counter–Islamic State campaign to some extent.

In either scenario, committing to enduring investment will also require continued strong diplomatic engagement with the government of Iraq with the goal of reaching a mutually acceptable and beneficial accommodation that will serve both nations' interests. Ideally, the United States and its allies would pay greater heed to Iraqi sovereignty and end unilateral military actions that might unravel an agreement for enduring military presence. The need for enhanced diplomatic action is emphasized in *An Enduring American Commitment in Iraq*.[56]

The following recommendations are derived from the present analysis, as well as from the subject-matter expertise of the authors and from the authors' existing, published, cited analyses on this subject.

## Specific Recommendations

The following specific recommendations support either a no withdrawal or limited withdrawal approach to U.S. military presence in Iraq.

### Maintain Consistent Strategic Objectives and Continue to Support Iraq's Democracy

President Trump's stated strategic objectives for Iraq in both the 2017 NSS and the 2018 NDS are clear and consistent. The United States should continue to pursue a strategy focused on helping Iraq to become a stable and friendly nation. The 2019 DoS bilateral relations fact sheet emphasizes efforts to "bolster Iraq's democratic institutions" as central to the U.S. assistance mission to Iraq.[57] Clearly, Iraqi democracy will be challenged by internal division, corruption, and Iranian meddling for many years, and probably for decades. However, Iraq does have a basically functioning democratic government with long-term potential. Maintaining a U.S. military presence in Iraq will not solve Iraq's problems, but it can help reduce the likelihood of state collapse and provide some stability to help encourage growth over time. Such growth would benefit the United States if the United States government assumes and maintains the role of a steady and reliable partner to Iraq.

#### Maintain Iran Sanctions Waivers for Iraq

Whichever approach is taken toward U.S. military presence in Iraq, the United States should not end sanctions waivers. Forcing Iraq to choose between Iran and partial economic ruin, on the one hand, and the inability to provide services to its population, on the other, would deepen Iraq's socioeconomic crisis. In turn, Iran would gain much greater influence and Iraq would be further destabilized, with potential negative consequences for U.S. partners in the region. Neither outcome meets stated U.S. strategic objectives as outlined in Table 1.

### Negotiate an Enduring Agreement to Sustain Security Forces Assistance Missions

The quickly evolving crisis in early 2020 centering on Iranian proxy force attacks and the killing of Qassim Suleimani revealed the weaknesses in current agreements. As negotiated in 2008 by the Bush administration, the Strategic Framework Agreement, relating to a wide variety of policy spheres, from security to culture and the environment, and the Security Agreement, relating to the status of U.S. military forces and now expired, were compromise documents intended to help transition U.S.-Iraq relations toward something more enduring and stable. These now 12-year-old documents served and have now outlived their purposes. The 2014 counter–Islamic State forces agreement is insufficient to support a long-term military advisory mission. A formal status of forces agreement might not be in the offing, and it might or might not be desirable. But if the U.S. and Iraqi governments wish to build and sustain an enduring partnered relationship, a new, more stable, and more formal agreement must be negotiated.

There is no need for the United States to build or maintain U.S.-leased or -owned bases in Iraq. Advising can continue on Iraqi bases, as long as the ISF are capable of helping to protect small U.S. advisory teams from harm; some capacity for immediate self-protection must

There is no need for the United States to build or maintain U.S.-leased or -owned bases in Iraq.

be maintained. Formal accommodations and access for some form of U.S. logistics and quick reaction capability—perhaps based at existing facilities in Kuwait—to support both advisors and diplomatic facilities should be made.

## Gradually Move to a Noncombat Assistance, Partner-Focused Mission in Iraq

Rapid change to the current mission or any kind of rapid military withdrawal from Iraq would be dangerous for both the United States and Iraq. The current force of several thousand advisors should be sustained, with combat assistance advisors gradually shifting to a safer and more sustainable training support role. If a modest reduction in forces is needed to achieve an optimally sized security force assistance mission, we also recommend a carefully considered and gradual transition and withdrawal of those forces. Drawdown should be strictly conditions-driven: Exposing the ISF to unnecessary risk in the near term in turn risks having to redeploy U.S. forces to Iraq, or perhaps ceding influence to Iran.

Over the long run, advisors should continue to advise and assist Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) but should shift focus of effort to building a moderately effective Iraqi Army that would be less prone to the kind of collapse that occurred in 2014. A moderately competent Iraqi Army and Federal Police service of over 200,000 soldiers and police would be far more capable of defending Iraq against a resurgence of the Islamic State, and against an unwanted military intervention, than the comparatively tiny 10,000-man CTS alone. Both forces are needed to work together to ensure the future stability of Iraq.

Recommendations for this approach, and for the focus on the Iraqi Army—while retaining support to CTS—are described in *An Enduring American Commitment in Iraq*.[58]

### Final Disposition: Routine Military Advisory Activities as Part of Routine Country Operations

What would this enduring, small-footprint advisory force look like? A team of U.S. advisors working with coalition allies from Iraqi-owned bases, supported by quick-reaction and logistics forces in a neighboring state, could effectively continue to advise the ISF, help professionalize the Iraqi officer and noncommissioned officer corps, deliver military material support, ensure freedom of movement for U.S. diplomats, counterbalance Iranian influence, support limited operations in eastern Syria, and avoid the kind of economic destabilization or loss of access associated with more-drastic options.

Security force assistance does not progress on a neat and linear upward trend line.

### Gradually Adjust Military Advice and Training to Help Iraq Focus on Enduring Stability

With coalition support, Iraq's security services executed a highly successful campaign against the Islamic State. Their tactical acumen has improved over time. However, this campaign has done little to convince many Iraqis that they are safe from their own government.[59] The Iraqi Army remains popular with Iraqis across the ethnosectarian spectrum, but neither the Army nor the other security services have dedicated much effort to civil-military activities.[60] Tactical success against the Islamic State should not be equated with stabilization, or with long-term stability.

Formalization of the Shi'a Arab–dominated, Iranian-backed PMF and its enduring presence in areas where it is not welcomed—such as the 99 percent Sunni Arab Anbar Province—undermine the government's image and its perceived monopoly on the use of force. In addition to helping to build up the capabilities of the Iraqi Army to help secure Iraq and offset the unhelpful role of the PMF, U.S. military advisors should, over time, assist the Army and other security forces in developing better civil-military capabilities in support of counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorism operations, and (what should be) gradually improving Iraqi government service delivery capabilities.

### Increase Collaboration with Coalition Allies in Iraq

As of early 2020, there are indications that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will assume a greater role for security assistance activities in Iraq.[61] This presents an opportunity to either reinforce success with a no withdrawal policy or mitigate consequences with a limited withdrawal policy. No matter which of the four options are selected, the United States should seek to accelerate its collaboration with NATO and non-NATO coalition allies in Iraq and sustain (and perhaps increase) funding to coalition advisory activities.

## Expect Some Modest, Temporary Reversals

Policymakers and the American public should expect some security setbacks in the future. Security force assistance does not progress on a neat and linear upward trend line. Additional troops might have to be temporarily added to the advisory mission from time to time. However, a consistent military presence in Iraq will significantly mitigate the impact of any setbacks and significantly reduce the likelihood that an emerging crisis like the one in 2014 might generate another regional and worldwide crisis.

# Notes

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This research was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

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ISBN-10 1-9774-0481-2
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-0481-7

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PE-362-OSD