

Leaving Iraq May Be Washington's Wisest Choice

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Articles & Testimony

Most forces could likely be withdrawn or moved to the Kurdistan Region without harming U.S. interests—in fact, Washington might have more leverage in Baghdad without a troop presence.

In retaliation for the killing of three U.S. soldiers in Jordan in late January, the United States launched two sets of airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias in Iraq earlier this month. While some in Washington [criticized \(https://twitter.com/GLNoronha/status/1754343517038559734\)](https://twitter.com/GLNoronha/status/1754343517038559734) the airstrikes as performative and widely telegraphed, the strikes—which targeted an Iraqi Shiite militia designated as a terrorist group by the United States—were a significant departure from the Biden administration’s longstanding restraint vis-a-vis Iran’s client forces in Iraq. As appropriate and overdue as the strikes against Iran’s proxies in Iraq were, they are generating significant political backlash in Baghdad, with unknown consequences for the U.S. military presence in Iraq.

Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, U.S. forces and diplomatic personnel in Iraq and Syria have been attacked nearly 180 times by Iran-backed militias that honeycomb the Hashd—also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, a network of more than 75 paramilitary groups that are part of the Iraqi military. In an effort to deescalate with Tehran and avoid diplomatic complications with Baghdad—and given the absence of American fatalities before the Jan. 28 attack—the Biden administration had acted with restraint. If it responded at all, it would typically retaliate against targets in Syria. On Feb. 2, however, U.S. forces hit 85 targets in Iraq and Syria, including two militia bases in Iraq’s Anbar Province, and on Feb. 5 assassinated a top leader of Kataib Hezbollah—the group responsible for the Jordan attack—in a drone attack in downtown Baghdad.

The U.S. strikes elicited a strong response in Iraq from friend and foe alike. Predictably, militia leaders and Iraqi allies of Iran have strongly condemned the strikes. But Iraqi government denunciations of the United States—and statements of support for the Hashd militias—have been equally forceful. The office of Iraqi Prime Minister

Mohamed Shia Sudani **described** (<https://www.themirror.com/news/us-news/west-facing-new-war-terror-332584>) U.S. operations on Feb. 2 as an “act of aggression against Iraq’s sovereignty,” and characterized Hashd soldiers killed by the U.S. for their role in attacking U.S. forces as “martyrs.” Sudani also **visited** (<https://twitter.com/Twelve313/status/1754130218447454340>) wounded militiamen in the hospital, **wished** (<https://en.964media.com/11488/>) them a “speedy recovery,” and **declared** (<https://twitter.com/RudawEnglish/status/1753789058902335937>) three days of mourning.

At the same time, the Iraqi government issued a **statement** (<https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1753721427176399008>) on X (formerly known as Twitter) accusing U.S. forces and the international coalition against the Islamic State of “endangering security and stability in Iraq.” Iraqi Armed Forces spokesman Major General Yehia Rasool **went further** (<https://twitter.com/IraqiSpoxMOD/status/1755503649202040956>), stating that U.S. actions that “jeopardize civil peace” would compel the Iraqi government to “terminate the mission of this coalition,” which “threatens to entangle Iraq in the cycle of conflict.” This sentiment was echoed by Sudani’s own Iran-backed political bloc, known as the Coordination Framework, which asked the government to end the international coalition presence.

To be sure, demands for an end to the U.S. military presence in Iraq are not new. Since the Trump administration adopted its maximum pressure campaign against Iran in 2018 and the subsequent territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2019, Hashd militias have been targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq in hopes of compelling a withdrawal. The intensity of anti-U.S. attacks has ebbed and flowed—spiking after the assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani and diminishing after the reclassification of U.S. troops from “combat” to “train and equip” forces—but the threat has been persistent.

Through it all, the safety of U.S. soldiers—deployed in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government as part of the international anti-Islamic State coalition—as well as American diplomats has been jeopardized not only by the militias, but by the inaction of the Iraqi government, which has demonstrated neither the will nor the ability to protect U.S. personnel. Sadly, this is understandable. Not only are the Hashd militias on the Iraqi government payroll, but some of these constituent militias—including U.S. designated terrorist organizations Asaib Ahl al Haq and Kataib Hezbollah—even sit in Sudani’s government coalition as his political partners.

Last month, Sudani **announced** (<https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4391371-iraq-moving-to-remove-us-led-military-coalition-prime-minister-says/>) that his government would soon commence negotiations with Washington to end the coalition presence in Iraq. It remains unclear whether Sudani himself favors a coalition pullout or, as an advisor told **Reuters** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-prepares-close-down-us-led-coalitions-mission-pm-statement-2024-01-05/>), his statement was merely intended to “appease angry parties within the governing Shi’ite coalition.” Only a year ago, Sudani expressed concern about the spillover of terrorism from Syria, where the Islamic State remains active—**opining** (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-prime-minister-supports-indefinite-u-s-troop-presence-11673785302>) in a *Wall Street Journal* interview that “we need the foreign forces.” No doubt the combination of Israel’s war against Hamas and the latest U.S. airstrikes on Iraqi soil have raised the political cost for Sudani of supporting the continued coalition presence.

If Sudani really does want U.S. forces to remain in Iraq, however, he has a strange way of showing it. In December, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski **praised** (<https://twitter.com/USAmbIraq/status/1735339150797045836>) Sudani and his administration for apprehending three individuals responsible for a rocket attack directed at the U.S. Embassy. It was a rare occasion in which Sudani arrested perpetrators of violence against Americans.

While Sudani has criticized the recent U.S. retaliatory strikes in Iraq, he appears not to hold the same contempt for the Hashd, employees of the state who have targeted American military and civilian personnel for many years,

purportedly in contravention of Baghdad's wishes. These unprovoked attacks by the Hashd are, at minimum, crimes under Iraqi law—if not violations of Iraqi sovereignty to the degree that the militias answer to Iran. And despite the government's reluctance to act—due to fear of the political cost or Iranian reprisal—killers of American soldiers are not immune from retribution just because they reside, unpunished by local authorities, on Iraqi soil.

The United States has devoted significant blood and treasure to Iraq, and the disposition of the Iraqi state remains of great interest to Washington. In February, the Iraqi parliament scheduled a session to vote on the continued U.S. presence, but it didn't achieve a quorum to convene. Baghdad may eventually decide it is time for the United States and the coalition to depart. Iraq can make that decision and manage the state's ongoing Islamic State threat on its own. Even if Sudani's government doesn't push the coalition out, however, a substantial U.S. military presence has clearly become untenable.

Twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, it's time for the Biden administration to start thinking about how best to downsize the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. The United States isn't leveraging its presence in Iraq to push back on expanding Iranian influence in Baghdad or to interrupt Tehran's line of communication to its proxy militia Hezbollah in Lebanon. And while U.S. troops in Iraqi Kurdistan serve as a critical node of logistical support for counter-Islamic State forces in Syria, this presence may also no longer be necessary if and when Washington **withdraws (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/pentagon-floats-plan-its-syrian-kurd-allies-partner-assad-against-isis>)** its small military contingent in Syria. Even if U.S. troops remain in Syria, Washington may be able to leave behind a small, residual presence in the Iraqi Kurdish region to support this counter-terrorism mission.

Outside the Kurdistan contingent, there is less and less utility in the ongoing U.S. military deployment in Iraq. To be sure, a precipitous, chaotic Afghanistan-style withdrawal from Iraq would be damaging to U.S. credibility. So, too, would a departure under fire. Leaving Iraq could also reinforce a pernicious regional perception of U.S. military retrenchment in the shadow of the pivot to Asia. Worse, the enormous U.S. American Embassy in Baghdad would be even more vulnerable to attack absent nearby U.S. forces, a very real concern given the Iraqi government's **penchant for ignoring (<https://time.com/5885388/us-embassy-baghdad-attack/>)** its Geneva Convention obligation to defend diplomatic facilities.

But the coalition's counter-Islamic State operation in Iraq is largely complete, and the continued presence of U.S. forces is doing little to prevent Iranian progress toward establishing hegemony over Iraq. Meanwhile, U.S. forces there present Iran and its local client militias with proximate targets—or perhaps more accurately, hostages in all but name. A lighter, consolidated footprint could help mitigate that threat, while still maintaining sufficient capabilities should the Iraqi military elect to continue bilateral military engagement, including routine joint exercises.

Paradoxically, moving the majority of U.S. troops out of harm's way in Iraq could put Washington in a better position vis-a-vis the Iranian-dominated Iraqi government—especially if troops remain in Kurdistan, where the United States is still welcome. Unburdened by concerns about force protection, Washington would be freer to engage Iraq about its relationship with Iran, sanctions violations, and endemic corruption. While a stable and sovereign Iraq remains a U.S. priority, Washington will have to rely on other tools of national power—particularly economic leverage—to press its interests in Iraq going forward. A phase-out or downsizing of Washington's longstanding troop presence does not imply the end of U.S. military engagement with Iraq, U.S. retrenchment from the region, or acquiescence to Iranian regional hegemony.

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(<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/26/us-iraq-iran-military-militia-attacks-sudani/>). ❖

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