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## Mission unaccomplished

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The question still remains whether Iraq will become an Iranian satellite state.

Pulling out of Iraq may have been the lesser evil for the US, but questions now loom regarding the ability of the Iraqi state to function, and the withdrawal does not resonate well among some of America's allies in the region. In their eyes, the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq at this time is tantamount to unfinished business, eroding their confidence in the US.

"As we leave... you'll see various elements try to increase their freedom of movement and freedom of action," US top commander in Iraq, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, told journalists on the eve of the planned departure of the last American troops. "These are elements that are really focused on creating a Lebanese Hezbollah kind of organization in this country... if left unchecked, they will eventually turn on the government," Austin added.

Austin's comments represent a clear acknowledgment by a US military commander that the US mission in Iraq comes to an end at a time when Iranian influence in Iraq is perhaps at unprecedented heights, as exemplified by Iraq's Shia leadership's expression of support for the Shi'ite protest in Bahrain, the strengthening of economic ties with Iran, and the political and perhaps economic support that Iraq is providing Syria's Bashar Assad, Iran's ally.

Iran is already the outside force with the greatest influence in Iraq. The possible fall of the Assad regime and the rise to power of a Sunni-dominated regime is liable to evoke even greater Iranian attempts to increase involvement in Iraq, this time in order to “compensate” for the loss of an ally. In the short term, Iran will try to weaken the central government in Baghdad to make it easier to exert its influence, and in the long term it will attempt to thwart the development of a competing model: a moderate, secular Shi’ite state with some democratic characteristics.

These are not mere speculations; Iran will probably portray the American withdrawal as an Iranian success and has already begun to feel more confident in increasing its military activity within sovereign Iraqi territory. It also appears more comfortable challenging the Fifth Fleet’s ships in the Gulf and in recent months those elements that General Austin mentioned that Iran supports, such as “Hezbollah Brigades,” have stepped up attacks on US forces and have even fired Katyusha rockets toward Kuwait.

Babakir Zibari, chief of staff of the Iraqi army, has rightly said that without the support of the US, the Iraqi army will not be able to confront external security threats before 2020. Indeed, most of the 670,000- strong force is responsible for internal security. In addition, the loyalty of the security forces is largely a function of their tribal and sectarian affiliation.

The State Department, in order to protect US and Western diplomats after the withdrawal, has already signed contracts with private security companies, and the Iraqi government will most likely do so as well. While the use of these companies might provide some security, there are many problems associated with using them, such as their problematic reputation and obscure legal status.

The goal of Iran is to limit American influence in the region and use Iraq as a platform for greater regional influence. If this is materialized, Iran might soon, as the Jordanians and Saudis fear, knock on their door. A possible counterweight to Iran in this respect might be Turkey. While strongly objecting to the formation of an independent Kurdish state, the ability of Turkey to forge good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government has been one of the surprising developments of recent years.

Turkey’s influence in Northern Iraq will by no means diminish now that the US forces have pulled out. On the contrary, as tensions in

Iraq heighten, the Kurdish dependence on Turkey will increase. The strong level of cooperation at present between the US and Turkey, as well as growing Turkish-Saudi cooperation, might also prove a possible deterrent against Iran's ambitions regarding Iraq. However, despite growing alienation between Iran and Turkey over the Syrian issue and the NATO radar system, the sides still cooperate economically and in dealing with Kurdish rebels.

A combination of the use of private security companies, strong US-Turkish and Turkish-Saudi cooperation and the deterrent power of US and perhaps NATO presence in the Gulf can provide Iraq with some security. However, the question still remains whether this will prove enough to prevent Iraq from becoming an Iranian satellite state.

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