

# To Iraq and Back: The Withdrawal of the US Forces

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“There will probably be unfinished business for many, many years to come.”

Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, Commander,  
United States Forces – Iraq, November 21, 2011

It is now final: the withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq was completed in late 2011. The US administration and military commanders in Iraq had hoped to leave several thousand soldiers there in order to continue to train and assist Iraqi security forces, especially in protecting the borders and airspace, separating the Kurdish area in the north from the Arab area, and gathering intelligence. This is also what most Iraqi leaders wanted, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite. Yet domestic US pressure and pressure from Iran precluded an agreement on the continued presence of US forces in Iraq, and in the fall of 2011 the Obama administration decided to remove the last of the forces – some 45,000 soldiers – by the end of the year.

The decision in principle to withdraw the forces from Iraq was taken in 2007, during the Bush administration. The years 2004-2007 were the most difficult ones in Iraq, with over 820 US soldiers and 20,000 Iraqi civilians killed in the course of each year. The multiple casualties strengthened the feeling in the United States that the occupation of Iraq was an error and its objectives were not fully achievable, which increased the pressure on the administration to end the Iraqi affair. Yet implementation of the decision was postponed for fear that what had been achieved would be erased, terrorism in Iraq and the surrounding area would increase, and

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the United States would lose its credibility among its friends and enemies. Indeed, since 2007, US forces, with the assistance of Iraqi security forces, have succeeded in significantly reducing the level of violence in Iraq: the number of casualties among US forces has fallen from a peak of some 900 fatalities in 2007 to 54 in 2011, and the number of casualties among Iraqi civilians has declined from a high of 34,500 in 2007 to some 2,500 in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the military achievements, the decline in violence, the building of Iraqi security forces and their relatively successful integration into operational activity, and the start of construction of democratic institutions in Iraq gave rise to hope that the processes would continue, which enabled the withdrawal of forces. Against this backdrop, the United States and Iraq signed basic documents in November 2008 that defined the future of strategic relations between the two countries and determined that US forces would be withdrawn gradually from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Both Iraq and the United States paid a heavy price over the nine years. The United States lost some 4,500 soldiers in Iraq – only 160 of them during the conquest of the country and the rest afterwards – and some 32,000 were wounded. Other coalition forces suffered some 300 killed, most of them British. War expenditures are estimated at 900 billion to 1 trillion dollars. The results for Iraq are much more serious. The number of Iraqi citizens killed is estimated at 100,000–120,000, if not more, and some 10,000 members of the Iraqi security forces have been killed. The large majority of Iraqis killed were injured by Iraqi militias and organizations. The Iraqi economy has been damaged severely, and in spite of the country's oil wealth, its GDP per capita has fallen in rank to 158 in the world. Some 2.25 million Iraqis have fled the country, primarily to Jordan and Syria, and a similar number have been uprooted from their homes within Iraq.

### **The Iraqi Problem: The Level of Violence**

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, the United States set several goals for itself in shaping Iraq and the regime that would govern there. The administration sought to build Iraq as a stable democratic state with a moderate government that would not be another base for terror and a threat to its neighbors, and would be a long term strategic partner. To what extent has the United States achieved these goals, or will achieve them in the future?

The key to achieving these goals lies in Iraq's internal stability. The massive number of refugees and people killed in Iraq and the serious damage to the Iraqi economy are an outgrowth of the fighting by various organizations – such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Promised Day Brigade, a Shiite militia headed by radical leader Muqtada al-Sadr – in their effort to drive the US forces out of Iraq. But even more so, they reflect the hostility and animosity that erupted in the wake of the US military intervention among the three main communities in Iraq. The Sunnis, who ruled Iraq for generations despite their constituting only 20 percent of the population, have now been driven from power. Reluctant to accept this lesser position, they continue to fight for their status. The Shiites were oppressed in Iraq for generations despite their being the majority, but the fall of the Saddam regime and the process of democratization led by the United States created an historic opportunity for them to seize positions of power, and they do not intend to cede them. The Kurds, who seized upon the 1991 Gulf War as their historic opportunity to build an autonomous region, aspire to strengthen and expand it. The hostilities and the large number of casualties also reflect the fundamental weakness of the central government in Iraq, under which each of the sectarian groups has established armed militias to fight one another, although the civilian population constitutes the principal victims.

The conspicuous drop in the number of attacks and casualties in Iraq since the middle of 2007 is a result of both US operational activity and the establishment and training of Iraqi security forces, with close assistance from the United States. These forces grew from 30,000 in June 2003 to 800,000 in June 2011, of whom 270,000 were in the army and the rest in the police. The Iraqi army, in cooperation with US forces, played an important role in reducing the violence in Baghdad between 2005 and 2007. US military commanders agree that the Iraqi security forces are gradually improving and are better prepared than in the past to maintain internal stability, even independently. The encouraging aspect is that since mid-2010, US forces have engaged not in combat but in consulting, training, and provision of logistical and intelligence aid to Iraqi security forces. Only a small number participated in joint patrols and manned joint checkpoints with the Iraqi army, and the task of fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq and other opposition forces was given to the Iraqi security forces. Evidence of the growing effectiveness of the security forces is that the

number of terrorist attacks and the violence did not increase during this period.

What is likely to change after the withdrawal of US forces? In spite of the significant improvements in the Iraqi security forces, there is no guarantee that this performance will continue once the US forces depart. Starting in early 2012, Iraqi forces have begun to shoulder the burden of internal security by themselves. They are required to operate in uncertain and problematic situations, without the safety net of the US presence in times of serious distress and with the turmoil in the Middle East adding to this uncertainty. The Iraqi forces have learned to cope with organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and extremist Shiite and Sunni militias, but al-Qaeda in Iraq remains a dangerous organization with the ability to rehabilitate itself and carry out serious terrorist attacks. Anti-terror activity depends on high quality intelligence, and the withdrawal of US forces is liable to limit the ability to obtain such intelligence. US forces played an important role in stabilizing the border between the Kurdish and Arab areas, but it is doubtful if Iraqi forces can cope with conflicts between Kurds and Arabs – which are an additional burden beyond the sectarian tensions within the Iraqi forces themselves. Finally, continued US aid for training, force preparation, and intelligence gathering will require substantial budgets, and it is not clear if the money will be found.

On the eve of the completion of the evacuation of US forces from Iraq, the commanding general, Lloyd J. Austin III, estimated that extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq or al-Sadr's militia will attempt to fill the vacuum that will be created in the wake of the withdrawal. As a result, the level of violence in Iraq will likely rise, although no dramatic breakdown in the security situation is expected.<sup>2</sup>

### **Whither the Political Arena in Iraq?**

The toppling of Saddam's regime and its political infrastructure, and the US attempt to build a democratic regime in its stead changed Iraq's political arena entirely. The democratic process propelled the Shiite majority, which constitutes 60 percent of the population, to become the most important political player in Iraq; the Sunnis are fighting for their former positions of power, sometimes by means of terror; the Kurds have extended their control in their autonomous region in the north and have also been integrated into the country's leadership (for the first

time, Iraq's president is a Kurd); and the central administration in Iraq has been severely weakened but must cope with armed militias from the three communities chipping away at its strength and authority, while weathering a difficult economic situation. In addition, outside elements, mainly the United States and Iran, are deeply involved in Iraq.

As a result, the Iraqi political system does not function properly at any level and suffers from partial paralysis. The process of building the coalition that is the foundation of the current government continued for eight months, and the ministries of defense and the interior remained without a minister for a long time because of disputes between the sides. The government is under heavy pressure from various elements and is divided between rivals. The two senior leaders in Iraq do not speak to each other, and the assumption is that it will take years until the political system functions effectively. All of this has resulted in a serious erosion of public confidence in the leadership and the new political system.

The key to the stability of the Iraqi political system is genuine reconciliation among the three sectarian groups. Several important steps have been taken in this direction in recent years, some of them with the encouragement of the United States. However, the reconciliation process thus far is still superficial and is liable to be undermined, mainly by inter-sectarian violence. Even if the level of violence has declined since 2007, on the order of 2,000-3,000 people killed every year, as was apparent in 2009-2011, it is still high. If General Austin's assessment is correct, the level of violence is likely to rise even further after the withdrawal of US troops. The three communities have an interest in preserving the cohesiveness of Iraq, yet each of them believes that promoting its interests depends on reducing the power of the others, and they are prepared to compromise on some of their power and aspirations and cooperate among themselves only if they believe the new regime will guarantee their interests. This means that it will take years until a serious reconciliation is achieved between the sides.<sup>3</sup>

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The democratization process led by the United States was tied to this. This process had several achievements. Millions of Iraqis have voted in parliamentary and municipal elections several times since

2005, a constitution was drafted, and many institutions have been built under the new regime. But elections and a constitution alone are not a democracy. The democratic process is still shaky and not sufficiently rooted, and its future will depend on the degree of social reconciliation and inter-sectarian violence. If the inter-sectarian reconciliation does not deepen and the violence increases, and if the central administration remains weak and unstable, the democratic process will also fail. Some think that the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will aid in deepening democracy because it will force the Iraqis to take responsibility for their future. However, it is difficult to assume that the very fact of the withdrawal from Iraq will aid in democratizing the country. The United States did not obstruct democratization, but provided encouragement, and as long as the country has deep inter-sectarian divisions and the level of violence and terror attacks remains high, it will be difficult to promote the democratic process. If the democratic process fails, the possibility that a dictatorship would come to power, even a radical dictatorship, cannot be ruled out.

In 2006–2007, at the height of the violence in Iraq, there was a major fear that Iraq would be divided into two or three states based on sectarian makeup. This did not occur, and the possibility of this division appears even less likely today. Most Iraqis are eager to prevent the dissolution of Iraq, which would leave it small and weak; the various communities, and particularly the Shiites and the Sunnis, are heavily involved with one another, and it would be difficult to separate the populations; and it would be difficult to divide control of the oil resources, especially when there is no oil in the Sunni regions and their economy is dependent on the other communities. However, even if Iraq does not dissolve, it will not be the unified state under a strong government that it was in the past. The Iraqi constitution states that the country will have a federal structure, and the question is what balance will be created, what the division of power will be between the central government and the sectarian elements, and how the government will cope with the armed sectarian militias.

### **Iranian Involvement in Iraq**

Along with the reversal in the internal system in Iraq, the most significant result of the US occupation of Iraq is Iran's success in penetrating the Iraqi arena and expanding its influence. This result was apparently not

anticipated by the US administration. On the contrary, after the US intervention in Iraq, Iran was fearful that it would be the next target of a US military move; this fear gradually declined, though it recurs periodically. Furthermore, Iran quickly realized the advantages of the new situation. From one point of view, eliminating Iraq from the Gulf region as a central military player removed a longstanding significant strategic threat to Iran. As Iraq was also the only regional actor with the ability to offset Iran, there is now no regional player that can fill this role. In addition, and from a no-less-important perspective, Iran also identified the possibility of becoming an influential player in Iraq itself. This possibility depends on having the Shiites the leading players in Iraq; on the weakness of the central government; and the rivalry among the armed militias.

Iran's involvement in Iraq has several objectives. First, Iran sought to encourage the establishment of a Shiite majority government that would be under its influence. To this end, Iran pressured Shiite leaders to bring about the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq as soon as possible and prevent the formation of long term strategic ties between the United States and Iraq. For Iran, the importance of expanding its influence in Iraq has increased further because this has become its main battlefield with the United States. This is due to Iraq's importance to the construction of the Shiite axis, and because the connection to Iraq could be some sort of substitute for an alliance between Iran and Syria if the Assad regime falls and Syria is dismantled. Thus it is important that Iraq not become a renewed strategic threat that can compete with Iran. At the same time, because Iran fears that instability in Iraq could spill over into its own territory, it is eager to see Iraq as a stable and unified state.

Iranian influence in Iraq rests on Iran's ties with the Shiite community, including parties, armed militias, political leaders, clerics, and economic institutions. In order to strengthen these ties, Iran has been sending the Shiite militias money and advanced weaponry since 2003, and through members of the al-Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards and Hizbollah who have infiltrated into Iraq, assists them with training, technical and logistical help, and intelligence. Iran has also been a partner in attacks on American

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soldiers. According to American estimates, Iran was behind specific attacks, including the murder of Iraqi administration officials, mortar and rocket attacks, and the kidnapping of American soldiers. Iran is deeply involved in Iraqi politics and has influenced the elections, the formation of political blocs, and the appointment of the prime minister. At the same time, Iran has ties to Kurdish organizations, and even to Sunnis. Iran is also building official ties with the government of Iraq through economic investments, is playing an ever larger role in the Iraqi economy, and is infiltrating the Iraqi security forces.

Iran's achievements in Iraq are significant. Although it was unable to prevent the signing of the strategic agreement between Iraq and the United States in 2008, it did succeed in having a clause included in the agreement prohibiting use of Iraqi territory to attack other states. Beyond Iran's connections with many institutions in Iraq, the government of Nouri al-Maliki, which was established in 2010, includes many Iranian allies and affords it new opportunities. Iran played a role in pressuring the al-Maliki government not to extend the presence of US forces in Iraq beyond 2011.

On the other hand, there are limits to Iranian influence in Iraq. Iran's attempts to build ties with many institutions created a conflict of interests and alienated some of the organizations that are connected to it. There are important groups in Iraq that oppose Iranian influence in the country, particularly among the Sunnis and the Kurds, but among the Shiites as well. The traumas of the Iran-Iraq War have not been forgotten by either side, and Iran's limited military incursions into Iraqi territory in recent years, especially in the Kurdish north, have not increased the Iraqis' trust in Iran. There is also Turkey, which is certainly disturbed by Iranian intervention in Iraq and perhaps will find a way to cooperate with Iraqi elements and the United States in order to curb Iranian influence.

Thus far, the United States has not succeeded in curbing the increase in Iranian influence in Iraq, despite its efforts. This has become more difficult after the withdrawal because without a military presence, US influence ebbs, and Iran has closer ties to Iraq than does the United States. The very fact of the withdrawal is an achievement for Iran: it pursued this end for many years, and the withdrawal from Iraq will reduce the US threat to Iran. No less important, the withdrawal will turn Iran into the most important external actor in Iraq – if it is not already – and will



provide it with additional ways to expand its influence there and in the region. There is no doubt that Iran will attempt to exploit any vacuum or weakness in the Iraqi system to promote its influence.

In the longer term, Iran's position in Iraq will depend on two complexes of factors. One is the Iraqi government's approach and the internal situation in the country. Critical factors will be the Iraqi government's ability to build a long term strategic partnership with the United States, in the spirit of the agreement between them; to maintain its independence from Iran; and to stress Iraqi nationalism. The security situation and the violence in Iraq will also affect this dynamic, as will the tension between the Shiites and Sunnis. The more these grow and the weaker the government of Iraq, the greater will be the need of various Iraqi elements for Iran, and vice versa. On the other hand, the efforts by the United States are also likely to have an impact on Iran's position in Iraq. If the US government harnesses its capabilities to curb Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony, it will be possible to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq. After adjusting for these factors it appears that in any case, Iran will be able to retain a significant amount of influence in Iraq in the future as well.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Future of US-Iraqi Strategic Cooperation**

US forces have withdrawn from Iraq, but there will continue to be a civilian presence there and a military presence in its neighborhood. A total of 10,000–15,000 American civilians will remain in Iraq – diplomats, private security company employees, and military and economic advisers – who will deal with issues of security, training, and economic development. NATO countries are also likely to assist Iraq with training. Following the withdrawal from Iraq, the United States will place larger forces – as yet their size is unknown – in several Gulf states, in order to aid Iraq in crisis situations, to deter Iran from taking aggressive steps, and to strengthen the security of the Gulf states.

Most Iraqi leaders and military commanders realize that Iraq needs security aid and guarantees from the United States. Security forces are still very dependent on the United States for internal security needs, especially in logistics, intelligence, training, and force buildup. The state of defense against external enemies is much more serious. Iraq currently has no real ability to protect itself from external enemies. The

Iraqi army now includes thirteen infantry divisions, and it is building its first mechanized division. It has only some 150 M-1 Abrams tanks that it received from the United States, and it intends to purchase additional tanks. As yet it has no air force to speak of. Iraq is supposed to receive 36 F-16s starting in 2014–15, and it is seeking to purchase a total of 96 such planes. It lacks artillery capability, not to mention rocket and missile capability.<sup>5</sup>

According to US estimates, it will take at least ten years and significant financial resources for Iraq to build an effective military force. Building this capability has been delayed by budgetary problems in Iraq and in the United States, and the withdrawal of US forces is liable to delay it even further. For the time being, no attack on Iraq by one of its neighbors is expected, and the United States serves as a deterrent toward external threats. However, Iran and Turkey from time to time conduct limited incursions into Iraqi territory in the Kurdish area, exploiting Iraq's military weakness. Furthermore, the US administration will need to consider what military strength it is prepared to build in Iraq, considering the possibility that a radical regime may rise to power and threaten its neighbors or become a satellite of Iran. Moreover, on the eve of the withdrawal from Iraq, the commander of US forces stated that he is not sure if the Iraqi government will ask for this aid or request it from other countries – evidence of US skepticism of the Iraqi government's willingness to fulfill the strategic agreement with the United States, and disappointment with the government's performance and with Prime Minister Maliki, regarding both the relationship with the United States and inter-sectarian reconciliation.

The future of US-Iraqi strategic relations will depend on the Iraqi government. It is not clear if the government has decided how to build its military capabilities, what American aid it will request, and how it will seek to implement the strategic framework agreement with the United States. Given the internal tensions in Iraq, the pressure from Iran, and the reservations of some elements in Iraq concerning continuation of the relationship with the United States, it remains to be seen how the framework agreement will be implemented. In the meantime, the sides have agreed to continue training police forces, but agreement has not yet been reached on training the army after the US withdrawal. Even once

this is agreed on, the question of funding will remain, as the United States cannot fund most of Iraq's security needs.

### The Significance of the Withdrawal for the United States

On the eve of the withdrawal, General Austin stated that the conditions for withdrawing the troops are the best they have been since 2003. Indeed, the United States is withdrawing its forces when the level of violence has dropped significantly, democratic institutions and security forces are under initial construction, and agreements have been made on strategic ties with the United States. From this vantage, the United States can claim that its intervention in Iraq has not failed because it laid the foundations for a new Iraq, and that henceforth, the future of Iraq will be in the hands of its government and citizens.

Yet the picture is more complicated. The United States will need to ask itself if the results of its intervention in Iraq justified the heavy price that it – and the Iraqis – paid in blood and treasure. In a comprehensive perspective, the Bush administration believed that toppling Saddam's regime would leave a better Middle East: have the changes in Iraq and the surrounding area actually built a more stable and better strategic situation? It will take at least a few more years to examine the results of the US intervention in Iraq, and it is doubtful that the balance will appear favorable. The goals of the intervention were not clear from the beginning. As a result of the al-Qaeda attack on the United States, the Bush administration sought to topple the Saddam regime because in its assessment, the regime was connected to terrorism and was involved in developing weapons of mass destruction. It quickly became clear that the Saddam regime was not connected to al-Qaeda, and no signs were found that it continued to develop WMD after the 1991 Gulf War. The goals of the intervention in Iraq were therefore redefined: the goal was to topple the Saddam regime because it was one of the sources of evil in the Middle East, and to establish a moderate stable regime in its stead that would be tied to the United States and the West.

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The United States laid the groundwork for achieving these goals, but thus far, it has done no more than that. Saddam's regime was toppled quickly, and this was an important demonstration that the United States was determined to use force to protect its interests. However, the US administration had no clear idea how to build a new government and society in Iraq, and it did not sufficiently take into account the sectarian rift in Iraq, the outbreak of inter-sectarian violence, and the possibility that Iran would exert its influence in Iraq. Thus, the United States laid democratic foundations in Iraq, but they are still shaky, and so far they have brought the Shiites to power and increased inter-sectarian tensions. In addition, a radical regime in Iraq that threatens its neighbors is not out of the question. Although the level of violence has dropped, it is still high and likely to erupt again. The US administration has no solid approach to curb the increased Iranian influence in Iraq. Finally, the future of the strategic connection between Iraq and the United States is not in the hands of the US administration, rather in the hands of an ineffective Iraqi government that is subject to pressures, and Iran is doing its best to interfere with this relationship.

Since 2003, Iraq has been struck by wide scale terrorism, more than any other country in the Middle East. Thus far, the terrorism has been directed inward, at the inter-sectarian conflict and against US forces. Once US forces are stationed outside Iraq, terrorism will not be directed against Americans, other than at several thousand American citizens who are supposed to help the government of Iraq and who are a likely target for terrorist attacks. The open question is whether the terrorist energies that have amassed in Iraq will seek new targets outside Iraq, namely, moderate Arab regimes, US targets in the Gulf, or Israel. The possibility cannot be ruled that thousands of jihadists who gained experience in Iraq will turn to other targets, as happened after the evacuation of Russian forces from Afghanistan.

Iraq's moderate neighbors – Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Jordan, and Turkey – are also worried by the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. They fear both that the violence and instability will spill over into their territory, and that Iraq will become an important link in the Shiite axis led by Iran, especially against the backdrop of the turmoil in the Arab world. Several regional states in addition to Iran are involved in Iraq in order to protect their interests. Turkey carries out occasional military actions

in northern Iraq against Kurdish opposition strongholds, and serves an important economic function in northern Iraq. Saudi Arabia is apparently transferring funds to Iraq in order to strengthen Sunni organizations. But the main expectation of the moderate states is that the United States will continue to work to stabilize Iraq and contain Iran, not only in Iraq but in the region as well, with the Iranian nuclear program commanding the primary attention. They are therefore likely to ask the United States not to cut itself off from Iraq and to maintain large forces in the Gulf region.<sup>6</sup>

Will American credibility and standing in the region likely be harmed as a result of the Iraqi affair? This will first depend on developments in the region not intrinsically tied to the US: the level of violence and stability in Iraq, the character of the regime and the development of democracy, and mainly the extent to which Iraq develops strategic ties with the United States at the expense of Iranian influence. To this should be added future developments stemming from the turmoil in the Arab states. The second variable is the future activity of the United States to strengthen its standing and deterrent capability, and its main test will be the Iranian issue, especially in the nuclear context and Iranian influence in Iraq.

The issue of American use of force is connected to this. In 2003, the United States showed resolve by sending a large military force a significant distance in order to bring about the fall of a regime that in American eyes had crossed a red line. A year-and-a-half prior to that, it did the same in Afghanistan. However, its entanglement in these two countries and the heavy price that it paid significantly reduce the possibility that it will do so again, especially considering the special circumstances that prompted it to launch these two operations, i.e., the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States. Once the US is no longer entangled in Iraq, its soldiers stationed there are no longer a target for an Iranian response. Nonetheless, despite its importance, the withdrawal from Iraq in and of itself will likely not change the US approach to attacking Iran because the administration still has other significant reasons to avoid an attack. Unless mitigated by other factors, these reasons will likely continue to block US military action in Iran.

### **Significance for Israel**

Israel is not a direct party to events in Iraq. It cannot in any way influence internal developments in Iraq, Iranian intervention in Iraq, or US

conduct on this issue. Nevertheless, Israel has been and will be affected by developments in Iraq. It achieved its main strategic gain from the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 when Iraq disappeared as a military player and was thus removed from the map of threats to Israel. Lacking an army of any substance and an ability to defend itself from an external enemy, Iraq today is not at all equipped to attack any country.

There will be no threat from Iraq toward Israel for many years to come because building military power will demand an extended period of time, and even then Iraq will likely not be able or permitted to build strategic capabilities in weapons of mass destruction for a further period. Iraq's diplomatic position and economic situation will also remain damaged for years. The United States has begun to arm Iraq to provide it the ability to defend itself against external enemies, especially Iran, and thereby reduce Iranian influence in Iraq. However, the US administration will presumably not supply Iraq with far reaching military capabilities that would threaten its neighbors, as long as it is not clear that at the Iraqi helm will be a moderate regime that will maintain ties with the United States and not become an Iranian satellite. Other states, especially Russia, might

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arm Iraq if it severs ties with the United States, but such a process would be slow and continue for many years. Iraq's shaky economy will not allow it to build significant strategic capabilities in the coming years, including non-conventional capabilities.

Nevertheless, the regional implications of the situation in Iraq and the withdrawal of US forces are likely to have a negative effect on Israel's interest. First and foremost, Iran's regional standing and influence have been strengthened, and they are likely to grow even stronger in the wake of the US withdrawal. Second, the weakness of the Iraqi government provides freedom of action not only to Iran, but also to other radical elements. As long as the limited freedom of action applies to Iraq itself,

the impact on Israel will be minimal. Nevertheless, if the radical camp in the region is strengthened, this will have a negative impact on the moderate Arab camp, especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and thus on

Israel as well. Third, the instability in Iraq and the Iranian influence are likely to spill over into Jordan, especially considering the turmoil in the Arab world, which has already sparked protests in Jordan. An unstable regime in Jordan would have a negative impact on Israel, and if terrorist elements operating in Iraq begin to turn outward, Israel is a likely target.

The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq carries additional meaning for Israel. One of Israel's considerations vis-à-vis a military action against Iranian nuclear sites is the need to coordinate such action with the United States because Iraqi airspace was a theater of operations for US forces. The significance of this consideration will now be greatly reduced, even if it does not disappear entirely, when the United States is no longer responsible for Iraqi airspace and there is no Iraqi air force.

Finally, the question of the United States regional position now faces a new challenge. The evacuation of forces from Iraq and the reduced responsibility of the United States for events taking place there will enable the US administration to deal with other problems, and its main test will be how successful it is in handling the Iranian threat. However, if in the coming years it becomes clear that the credibility and deterrent capability of the United States have been harmed because the Iraqi affair is deemed a failure and Iran is not contained, this will have a negative impact on Israel as well, especially regarding the Iranian challenge.

## Notes

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- 2 Liz Sly, "U.S. Commander, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, Predicts Turbulence in Iraq," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2011.
- 3 See Ephraim Kam, "Marching Johnny Home: Evacuating the American Forces from Iraq," *Strategic Assessment* 8, no. 4 (2006): 13-20.
- 4 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011).
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