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Iraq After America's Withdrawal: The War Does Not End

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After 23 years, the American military presence in Iraq has come to an end. The last remaining U.S. troops have departed, closing a turbulent chapter that began with the invasion of 2003. Washington now expects Iraq to assume primary responsibility for its security, while the American relationship shifts towards more limited forms of cooperation. There is something deeply paradoxical about the American departure.

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq

The war began with the assertion that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and represented a threat to international security. The United States assembled a formidable coalition, launched *Operation Iraqi Freedom* and unleashed what became known as the “shock and awe” campaign. Baghdad was bombarded, Saddam Hussein’s regime collapsed, the Iraqi army was disbanded and much of the existing political and administrative architecture was dismantled.

The question is not simply why the Americans have left. The more important question is: what did they leave behind? The principal justification for the 2003 invasion was the alleged existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The subsequent Iraq Survey Group investigation produced a very different picture. It found that Iraq had destroyed its undeclared chemical-weapons stockpile in 1991 and found no credible indications that Baghdad had resumed production thereafter.

The central premise of the invasion was, therefore, flawed. But the consequences could not be reversed. Iraq was invaded. Its government was overthrown. Its institutions were dismantled. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died over the years of conflict, while more than 4,500 American service members also lost their lives. The American military victory was remarkably swift. The difficult part came afterwards. Washington attempted to construct a new Iraq based on western model of democratic institutions, elections, a new constitution and security forces trained with extensive foreign assistance. The expectation was that an Iraq ‘liberated’ from dictatorship could become a stable, democratic and Western-oriented state. But societies cannot simply be reconstructed by changing their political architecture.

Iraq had its own history, sectarian divisions, tribal structures, political traditions and regional relationships. The dismantling of the old order created a vacuum that competing political and armed groups rushed to fill. The result was insurgency, sectarian violence and terrorism, followed eventually by the emergence of the ISIS. The irony was profound. The United States had gone into Iraq ostensibly to eliminate a threat. Years later, it had to return because another threat had emerged.

From Withdrawal to Return: The ISIS Threat

Americans tried to leave. The first American withdrawal came in 2011. It did not last. When

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ISIS fighters swept across large parts of Iraq in 2014 and captured Mosul, Iraqi forces collapsed in several areas. The United States returned as part of an international coalition to fight ISIS.

The mission was now fundamentally different. Washington was no longer trying to topple the then incumbent government of the country. It was helping it defeat a terrorist organization and rebuild its security institutions. The so-called caliphate was eventually destroyed. But defeating an organization militarily is not the same as eliminating the conditions that produce insurgency. That distinction remains important today.

Iraq's Security Responsibility after America's Departure

The American withdrawal in 2026 marks another turning point. Iraq is now expected to assume full responsibility for its own security. The country possesses functioning political institutions, armed forces with substantial combat experience and considerable economic resources. But it also faces continuing challenges: ISIS sleeper cells, powerful armed groups, political fragmentation and the complicated relationship between Baghdad, Washington and Tehran. The American departure therefore does not mean that Iraq's security problems have disappeared. It means that Iraq must now own them.

Iraq is Not Afghanistan

There is an obvious temptation to compare Iraq with Afghanistan. The comparison is justified to an extent, although the two cases are far from identical.

In Afghanistan, the United States spent two decades attempting to construct a political and security order that ultimately collapsed with extraordinary speed after the American withdrawal in 2021. The Taliban returned to Kabul, while the Afghan security forces, despite years of Western training and enormous expenditure, largely disintegrated.

America departed Afghanistan, leaving behind a political order that could not sustain itself. Iraq is different. Its state institutions have survived. Its political system continues to function. Its security forces have fought a

major war against ISIS. Iraq also possesses substantial oil resources and occupies a strategically important position at the heart of the Middle East.

Yet there is a common thread between the two experiences: *military power can destroy an existing order much more easily than it can construct a sustainable replacement*. That may be the most important lesson of both wars. The limits of externally constructed systems

The Limits of Externally-Constructed Governance Systems

Political systems cannot easily be imported. The West can provide constitutions, elections, advisers, weapons and billions of dollars. But legitimacy cannot be imported. It must develop within society. Institutions must be accepted by the population. Security forces must regard the state, rather than a foreign patron, as their source of authority. Political elites must develop mechanisms for compromise. Competing communities must believe that the system offers them a stake in the future. Without those ingredients, even an impressive institutional structure can remain fragile.

The Iraqi experience demonstrates the limits of the belief that once an authoritarian regime is removed, democracy will naturally follow. It does not. There is another irony in America's Iraqi adventure.

Washington invaded Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein, one of Iran's most formidable regional adversaries. The resulting political transformation created greater political space for Iran and its allies. Iran subsequently developed substantial influence in Iraq through political relationships and armed groups. Iranian-aligned militias have welcomed the end of the American military presence, seeing it as the conclusion of a long period of American intervention.

Thus, one unintended consequence of the American intervention was that the regional balance in Iraq moved in a direction Washington had not intended. History is often full of such ironies.

The Weakening of One Adversary can strengthen another.

Who Triumphed?

It would be tempting to ask who won the Iraq war. Perhaps that is the wrong question.

America leaves after spending enormous resources and sacrificing thousands of lives. Iraq has endured invasion, occupation, insurgency, sectarian conflict, terrorism and enormous human suffering. Iran has acquired greater influence. ISIS emerged, controlled territory and was eventually defeated. The Iraqi state survived—but at enormous cost. There may, therefore, be no conventional winner. There are only different degrees of loss, survival and influence.

The most significant feature of the American withdrawal is not the departure itself. It is the transfer of responsibility. For twenty-three years, Iraq's security has been deeply intertwined with American military power. That chapter has now ended.

The Iraqi government must demonstrate that it can maintain the security gains achieved against ISIS, prevent armed groups from becoming states within the state, manage its relationship with Iran and maintain a workable relationship with Washington.

Most importantly, Iraq must demonstrate that it can eventually become a country whose security is determined primarily by Iraqis. These questions cannot be answered on the day American troops leave. They will be answered over the years ahead.

Iraq's Stronger Post-America Starting Point than Afghanistan

There is reason to make a distinction. Iraq is not Afghanistan. Despite its many problems, Iraq is not experiencing the kind of wholesale political and military collapse

that accompanied the American departure from Kabul. The state has survived, political institutions continue to function and Iraqi security forces have accumulated two decades of combat experience. Iraq therefore has a stronger institutional starting point than Afghanistan had in 2021.

But challenges remain. ISIS has not disappeared completely. Militias retain influence. Regional rivalries can still destabilise the country. Iraq may consequently be more at peace with itself than Afghanistan was when the Americans departed. But peace should not be confused with *stability*, and *stability* should not be confused with *reconciliation*.

The War's Long Shadow

There is perhaps a final irony. The United States went into Iraq claiming to protect international security from weapons that were never found. It destroyed a regime. It attempted to create a new political order. It fought an insurgency. It withdrew. It returned to fight ISIS. It helped rebuild Iraqi security forces. And now, after twenty-three years, it has left again.

The Americans may have departed Iraq, but the consequences of the invasion will remain for generations.

The real measure of the intervention will therefore not be the number of bases closed, aircraft withdrawn or soldiers brought home. It will be whether Iraq can eventually build something that neither Saddam Hussein nor the American occupation could provide: a stable state capable of governing itself, defending itself and living with its neighbors without becoming the battlefield for somebody else's war – Iraq must write the next chapter itself.

