

18 YEARS LATER:

STAYING IN IRAQ WILL NOT FIX MISTAKES OF THE PAST



Our View

The war in Iraq has been a strategic blunder from the beginning. The conflict has cost America dearly in lives and resources but has not made us safer and has actually benefitted rivals. The United States has few vital interests in the Middle East—principally, preventing major, long-term disruptions to global energy supplies and foiling terrorists with the intent and capability to strike America. Staying in Iraq is not crucial to defending either and puts our troops at unnecessary risk. With ISIS' territorial caliphate defeated, it is time to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq as we reduce our broader Middle Eastern military footprint and focus on more important priorities elsewhere.

Background

Based on the mistaken belief that the Iraqi government had developed Weapons of Mass Destruction, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein. Pursuing regime change was disastrous. The war and occupation through 2011 unleashed sectarian violence, strengthened Iran, and cost the United States the lives of over 4,500 servicemembers and nearly 2 trillion dollars. U.S. troops returned in 2014 to train and equip Iraqi security forces against ISIS and still remain despite the group's defeat.

No Clear Mission, Clear Risks:

With ISIS' territorial caliphate crushed, our troops in Iraq have no clearly achievable objectives. However, the U.S. presence allows rivals like Iran to cheaply target our servicemembers through proxy militias. Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed Iraqi security forces have [cooperated](#) with and in some cases even [equipped](#) Iranian-backed militias known for attacking U.S. servicemembers.¹ The clashes between Iranian militias and U.S. forces in late 2019, early 2020, and throughout 2021 show our Iraq deployment's clear dangers to our troops and its potential for escalation. Instead of risking deeper involvement in a mission that no longer serves U.S. interests, it is high time for Congress and the President to bring our troops home.

Myth vs. Fact:

MYTH: U.S. troops must remain in Iraq to combat terrorism—withdrawal would put America at unacceptable risk.

FACT: *As the 9/11 Commission Report revealed, strong coordination between law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and our allies is the most important method for stopping terrorists with both the intent and capability to strike America. Deploying troops to Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East to fight regional terrorists or insurgencies focused on regional goals is not necessary to keep America safe. At the same time, such deployments help our enemies recruit and offer much easier opportunities to harm Americans than otherwise.*

MYTH: Leaving Iraq will allow Iran greater influence in the country.

FACT: *The United States' decision to invade Iraq guaranteed Iran more influence in Iraq. Toppling Saddam Hussein's Sunni-led government in a Shia-majority Iraq ensured Iran would have greater sway in the country. Continuing our train-and-equip mission does not counter this influence and can actively harm U.S. interests: U.S. equipment given to the Iraqi Army has historically fallen into the hands of ISIS and/or subsequently been captured by Iranian-backed militias or even supplied to them by Iraqi security forces.*

MYTH: U.S. troops must remain in Iraq to prevent ISIS from re-emerging.

FACT: *Every country in the region and strong non-state forces like the Kurds have strong interests in preventing ISIS from rising again. Without its caliphate, ISIS has been severely degraded and can be contained by regional forces. While there are complex social and political issues that helped fuel ISIS' rise, the U.S. military is not the tool to solve these problems, nor is doing so the United States' responsibility.*

