



Exit Iraq and Rethink America's Middle Eastern Footprint

The 20th anniversary of the Iraq War warrants reflection on American strategy in the Middle East. Core U.S. security interests in the region are narrow—chiefly, preventing major, long-term disruption to global energy supplies and foiling terrorists with the intent and capability to strike America. Neither the U.S. presence in Iraq nor a significant permanent ground presence across the Middle East is necessary to protect either of these interests.

THE ISSUE

The war in Iraq has cost America dearly without making us safer. The ongoing U.S. military presence in Iraq distracts from greater strategic priorities and exposes our troops to frequent and unnecessary danger, benefitting our rivals. With ISIS' territorial caliphate crushed, the [2,500 U.S. troops in Iraq](#) no longer have clearly achievable objectives. What's more, [Iran and its proxies retain ties](#) to the very Iraqi security services U.S. forces train and equip. It is high time for Congress and the President to end a mission with few attainable upsides and clear escalation risks by bringing our troops home.

Beyond Iraq, policymakers should reevaluate U.S. deployments across the region. The United States has [over 30,000 troops in the Middle East](#) and is engaged in or supporting open-ended conflicts disconnected from our national interests and without clearly achievable objectives in Syria, Yemen, and nearby in the horn of Africa. Amid growing economic constraints at home and rising multipolarity abroad, maintaining our current footprint simultaneously across the Middle East, Europe, and Asia will be increasingly untenable. Policymakers need to prioritize U.S. security interests and can significantly reduce troop levels in the Middle East without compromising our top regional objectives.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

POWER OF THE PURSE | In the FY 2024 Appropriations cycle, Congress should embrace the same Constitutional prerogative it used to help end the Vietnam War by [zeroing out funding for future U.S. deployments in Iraq and Syria as well as further logistical support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen](#).

REALIGN U.S. FORCE POSTURE WITH U.S. INTERESTS | Policymakers should gradually draw down U.S. troop levels across the Middle East, reflecting the region's declining importance to vital American interests. Our current basing footprint and personnel levels are not necessary to secure our vital regional interests, and at worst can paradoxically contribute to instability. Policymakers should realign U.S. basing and troop deployments to Cold War levels, [concentrating on defending the commons and staying ready to launch over-the-horizon counterterrorism strikes as needed against threats with the intent and capability to target the United States](#).

UNLEASH U.S. ENERGY ABUNDANCE TO REDUCE MIDDLE EAST DEPENDENCE | The U.S.'s increasing energy production in recent decades has been a strategic boon, reducing the Middle East's relative importance to the U.S. and freeing up resources previously spent in the region that are needed elsewhere. [Policymakers should support our national interests abroad by removing regulatory barriers to energy abundance at home](#).

Last Updated: Jan 2023