

Future of US Troop Presence and Iraqi Security Uncertain as Strategic Dialogue Begins



Featuring Katherine Lawlor, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou

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The future of the roughly 5,000 US military personnel in Iraq is a key topic in a strategic dialogue that recently began between US and Iraqi negotiators. Iraqi opinion is split between those who oppose the continued US presence and those who believe it remains essential to Iraqi security. In the background, Iran and its Iraq-based political and militant proxies are pushing for the complete withdrawal of US forces. In this episode of Overwatch, Katherine Lawlor, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou discuss the present state of affairs in Iraq and the implications of a possible US force withdrawal.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast by the Institute for the Study of War. The U.S. Military has approximately 5,000 personnel providing training, assistance and support for counter ISIS operations in Iraq. The future of this force presence is the main topic of discussion and a strategic dialogue that recently began between U.S. and Iraqi negotiators. Many Iraqis oppose the U.S. presence, but others believe it remains essential to Iraqi security. In the background, Iran and its Iraq-based political and militant proxies are pushing hard for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.

With me today to discuss these and other issues are Research Assistants, Katherine Lawler, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou. Thank you all for being here.

Katherine Lawlor:

Thanks Jacob.

Brandon Wallace:

Thanks Jacob, great to be here.

Jason Zhou:

Thanks Jacob, I'm excited to talk about this topic with you all.

Jacob:

Kat, I'd like to start with you. How is the U.S. presence interacting playing out in Iraqi politics and who is for the presence and who's against it?

Katherine:

That's a good question. Some political blocks, including the one led by former prime minister, Haider al-Abadi and cleric Ammar al-Hakim, have expressed support for some limited U.S. force presence in Iraq. Those are both Shia blocks. The majority of Kurdish and Sunni members of parliament are strongly in favor of maintaining a U.S. force presence and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi is also likely in favor of some continued U.S. force presence. But Iran's political proxies are all calling for the expulsion of all foreign troops, and especially U.S. troops from Iraq.

Jacob:

Is there any room for compromise here, and if so, what might that look like?

Katherine:

There may be some room for political compromise between the more moderate blocks and Iran's proxies. For

example, the leader of Iranian proxy militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazali, recently issued a series of statements that were premised on the idea that U.S. forces might actually remain in some capacity in Iraq, which is pretty different from previous rhetoric coming from Khazali and others. So there may be some room for Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi to strike a deal between the more moderate Shia, Sunni and Kurdish blocks and Iran's Shia proxies. But we have not yet seen indicators of what that might look like.

Jacob:

Speaking of Kadhimi, how committed is the new prime minister to the U.S. military presence in Iraq? He seems to have a lot of cloud on the issue. Do you think he will spend political capital to try and maintain a U.S. presence?

Katherine:

Kadhimi is committed to establishing a strong and stable Iraq. That's his sort of first priority, and that is in line with U.S. policy but is frankly contradictory to Iran's preferred end-state for Iraq. Iran wants a stable Iraq, but it has to be weaker than Iran. The leadership of the Iranian regime and the IRG senior commanders were all shaped fundamentally by their experiences in the Iran-Iraq war, and that formative experience of brutality and conflict is sort of imprinted in the DNA of the Iranian regime. So a stable and strong Iraq is an existential threat on Iran's border. Keeping that in mind for Kadhimi to reach his goal of establishing a strong and stable Iraq, he understands that defeating ISIS is a prerequisite. Creating a professional Iraqi military is a prerequisite.

And so he will be able to keep NATO trainers and likely some U.S. support without too much difficulty because most rational actors in Iraq understand that the current Iraqi security forces could not defeat ISIS on their own. So as we look into this strategic dialogue that has begun recently, it's more likely that we'll see Kadhimi establish a longer term timeline for complete U.S. withdrawal and in the medium term to keep U.S. trainers and support for the anti-ISIS fight.

Jacob:

Understood, but in the meantime, numerous elements have continued to attack and harass U.S. forces. Are there any concrete steps that Kadhimi and his top officials can take to protect U.S. forces while they remain in Iraq for whatever period that may be?

Katherine:

Yeah, I mean, historically there has been very little that the Iraqi government has been willing or able to do to protect U.S. forces. Kadhimi has taken small, but symbolic steps toward curving... Sorry, toward curbing militia violence toward U.S. forces in Iraq. He probably doesn't have the political capital to crack down on the most powerful proxy militias that are integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus like Kata'ib Hezbollah, but he may be able to negotiate some sort of political settlement with proxy groups, for maybe an accelerated timeline for U.S. withdrawals in exchange for fewer attacks on U.S. forces. And in recent days, Iraqi security forces have actually issued much stronger than usual statements in response to rocket attacks on U.S. facilities and have been more proactive than usual in actually finding the source of those attacks. There haven't been any arrests, but their rhetoric has become more threatening and their condemnations have increased. Condemnations that is of the Iranian proxy militias that are likely conducting these attacks on U.S. forces.

Jacob:

Specifically, which Iranian backed Iraqi groups are most likely to present threat to U.S. forces in Iraq and why.

Brandon:

Hi Jacob, I'd love to jump in and answer this. So as Kat noted, the group, which has most lethally and repeatedly targeted the United States inside of Iraq in recent months, is Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iranian backed proxy militia group. But it's important to note that the Iranian proxy militia network inside of Iraq, is a constellation of many different types of groups. And that many of these groups are a direct threat to U.S. forces and U.S. non uniformed personnel. Some of them outside of Kata'ib Hezbollah are likely responsible for at least some of the more than 20 attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities since the turn of this calendar year. And that constellation of many different groups is also different categories. There are groups which are formally part of the state apparatus, groups outside of the state. Some are sanctioned by the U.S. Some are not sanctioned.

And Iran has even gone so far as to cultivate new militias, which we sort of colloquially refer to as shadow militias. Which have announced their presence following the U.S. strike, which killed the Iranian RDC Quds force Commander Qassem Soleimani, and the important Iraqi proxy leader and head and founder of Kata'ib Hezbollah, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. And so, although most of these attacks that Iran directs its proxy network to conduct are in the form of mortar, small rockets IED's, we do know that Iran has provided more advanced weapons and systems to these groups which include rockets and even shorter range missiles.

Jacob:

So, regarding these more advanced weapons, which they haven't used, I assume because, well, correct me if I'm wrong, but they don't include mortars small rockets or IED's, they include more powerful weaponry. What would trigger the use of these weapons by Iranian backed groups specifically against the U.S. military in Iraq, and would the perception be that the U.S. is making gains with regard to Iran or against Iran in the strategic dialogues that just started? Could that be a trigger for Iranian and backed groups to launch kinetic attacks against the U.S. military in Iraq?

Brandon:

You're right. The Iranian proxy militias in Iraq are committed to the position that all U.S. forces must leave Iraq as soon as possible. That's a different objective, a different desired end state than some of the other Iraqi actors whom Kat mentioned that are generally displeased with long-term presence in the country, but there is room for some type of negotiation or compromise. So the Iran back groups will respond if they feel that their objective is compromised during the negotiation. Last week, we actually saw three rocket attacks targeting U.S. or U.S.-Iraq joint facilities, which is a sharp inflection from the pace that we had been on of roughly one to two attack, one to two attacks every month since April. And these groups are committed to attacking the United States. They have a variety of options to exercise on a range of lethality, that does not mean that they will escalate to such radical options.

Indeed as Kat noted, some gives that the proxy network could get from the Iraqi government during this dialogue, which could tamper attacks. So we might see the central government allowing for some proxy military presence at key junctures or choosing not to crack down on a particularly lucrative extortion system or checkpoint or something like that. There are lots of options available for horse trading.

Jacob:

Just for the sake of discussion. What's the worst thing that could come of this, regarding the threat that Iranian backed Iraqi groups pose to the U.S. military and to U.S. personnel in general in Iraq.

Brandon:

I think the most dangerous course of action for the Iran backed groups is similar to position that they found

themselves in earlier this year, after that U.S. strike which killed Qassem Soleimani and Muhandis. However, there are some changes in place which do alter the calculation slightly, but the most dangerous course of action is still

pretty much the same. Iran could, in theory, direct its proxies to launch a coordinated set of near simultaneous and lethal attacks against U.S. persons, uniformed personnel, diplomats in Iraq. It could try to really raise the cost of U.S. presence in the region, at a point where it's too high for the U.S. to sustain or choose to sustain. But since that early January period of this year, the U.S. has consolidated our forces from a number of different bases to larger facilities. And has deployed a Patriot missile systems, which counter missile systems and those are accompanied by another system called the CRM, which is a counter rocket artillery and mortar system to try to deter and prevent such attacks.

But the most dangerous course of action of course, is not synonymous with the most likely course of action. And in fact, most likely we'll probably see the Iranian backed network voicing their dissent in the negotiations by conducting these sort of low impact indirect attacks, which do have the effect of serving as a sort of warning or implicit threat to shape the talking points of those who are directly involved in the strategic dialogue. This will be especially true in the coming weeks ahead as we have several weeks of talks before any concrete agreements emerge. We're still in the virtual early sessions of the strategic dialogue.

Jacob:

Understood. Now that being said, when it comes to harming U.S. forces and personnel, the Iranian backed proxies are not the only game in town because ISIS is still very much alive in the area. What threat does that group pose to U.S. forces in Iraq?

Jason:

Hi, Jacob. Yeah, that's a great point and I'd be happy to answer this question. So right now, the threat from the threat actors from ISIS towards U.S. personnel in Iraq is actually pretty low. We haven't seen any, or like concentrated concerted attempts by ISIS to attack U.S. forces in Iraq in recent times. However, this is probably due to a lack of capability rather than a lack of desire. We did see U.S. partner forces in Northeast Syria actually break up an ISIS plot to attack a coalition base in the beginning of 2020. So ISIS does intend to, and would like to attack U.S. forces, but we haven't seen them actually be able to mount any real plots recently.

Jacob:

I see and I mean, other than being less capable, how does the ISIS threat to U.S. forces in Iraq differ from the threat posed by Iranian backed Iraqi groups?

Jason:

Right, so in terms of force protection, the threat is actually much greater from the Iranian backed groups, which have shown a capability as Wallace and Kat described, to actually target U.S. facilities. There have been several U.S. casualties at the hands of ISIS over the last several months, but those have mainly been during U.S. backed coalition raids of ISIS mountain strongholds in fairly rural parts of Iraq. So the threat towards bases is much more at the hands of the Iran backed militias, but there is some danger that, that U.S. forces do go into as we are advising our partner Iraqi forces in some of their operations.

Jacob:

So I think that brings us back then to the core question that is at the center of the strategic dialogue that just started. Which is, can the Iraqi forces operate on their own, can they take on the burden of fighting ISIS without coalition or U.S. support?

Jason:

Yes Jacob, I agree that is a super important question. And I would say that at the moment, Iraqi forces are not capable of managing the threat posed by ISIS wholly independently, without any coalition support. Of course, the U.S. had begun rebuilding the ISF after its collapse against ISIS, during ISIS's conquest, Northern Iraq in 2014, mid 2014. And over the recent years, we've made a decent amount of progress, but there are still several deficiencies. The DOD assessed in September of 2018 that the ISF, the Iraqi Security Forces, would require long-term training for years, if not decades, to be able to manage the threat posed by ISIS independently.

And there has been a decent amount of additional progress made over the last couple of years, such that earlier this year, the coalition assessed that they could reduce the tactical training provided to the ISF because of its increased tactical capabilities. However, the ISF does still have limited, especially ISR, which is Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities, and are still fairly dependent on the coalition for assistance in terms of surveilling the enemy and in terms of sort of processing and analyzing intelligence. Then they also have some centralized control issues, in that they have over centralized control within some offices and among generals and do not allow sufficient discretion to lower level officers.

Jacob:

So aside from those organizational issues, how effective have anti-ISIS operations been since the coalition made that most recent assessment earlier this year?

Jason:

Yeah, that's a great question. So we did see several major anti-ISIS operations in late 2019 under the name Operation Will of Victory. There were eight operations throughout various parts of Northern and Western Iraq from July to December. And those operations were fairly effective in disrupting ISIS operations, but they did not manage to root out ISIS from these areas. In particular, the ISF has a limited ability to control the rural areas of Iraq. So, these clearing operations resulted in a number of explosive devices and ISIS hideouts that were dismantled or discovered, but only arrested or killed a small number, usually around 20 ISIS operatives per operation and were unable to sort of secure control over these rural areas. In some cases we did see a sort of down check or a decrease in attacks shortly after these operations, but ISIS was able in some cases to conduct attacks within a week or within a couple of weeks of these operations.

Jacob:

Okay. So correct me if I'm wrong. But based on what you, Jason has just said, and what Kat and Brandon have also said, it seems like with the nature of this strategic dialogue that is happening right now, and just politics in general at the moment, that the question of U.S. forces and perhaps by extension coalition forces whether or not they're going to leave the country is less a question of if and more a question of when and how quickly. So with that in mind, how do you expect a possible draw down of U.S. forces to affect the fight against ISIS?

Jason:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think that a possible drawdown of U.S forces would reduce visibility in a number of areas where ISIS is operating, particularly some of the rural areas where ISIS is operating and limit our ability to see exactly and understand fully what is going on in those areas. For instance, some of the bases that we've already withdrawn from in Iraq include the Al-Qa'im base in Western Iraq, from which we were able to observe ISIS activity on the Iraq-Syria border, as well as the K-1 Air Base near Kirkuk which we were able to use, to understand ISIS operations in Southern Kirkuk Province to Northern Saladin Province and along Iraq's disputed internal boundaries. So I expect that continued drawdowns would limit our ability to fully understand what is going on in

some of these areas and respond accordingly and assist our Iraqi partners in defeating the ISIS threat in those areas.

Jacob:

And on that note, I want to thank you all for being here for taking the time today, to talk to me about these issues. Thank you all.

Katherine:

Thank you so much, Jacob. It was great to hear from you all.

Brandon:

Thanks so much everyone.

Jason:

Thank you.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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