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Report

Iraq: Challenges following Official U.S. Military Withdrawal

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On 21st October, President Barack Obama pointed out that the United States will complete the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the end of this year. This comes after the failure of Iraq and the United States to reach a new agreement on whether U.S. forces may remain in the country after the anticipated date of withdrawal as stipulated in the 2008 security agreement between the two countries.

Despite the desire of Washington and a faction of Iraqi opposition forces, there are several explanations for the failure of the talks. One of these explanations is that al-Maliki's government has come under huge pressure by Iran. Another is that the disparate and contending Iraqi political leaders have failed to agree on the extent and conditions of the proposed extension.

However, the final withdrawal of American troops from Iraq does not necessarily mean that Iraq will be free of U.S. military presence. It is very probable that several thousands of U.S. military personnel will remain in the country whether as experts training Iraqi forces or security contractors, or troops guarding the U.S. Embassy and its diplomats. Although it is now difficult to accurately assess the number of these troops, their presence does not refute the fact that the occupation has ended, and that with it also ended the system of legal privileges and the privileges to move around Iraq once enjoyed by occupation forces.

How the U.S. will strategically offset its withdrawal from Iraq to maintain a vital presence in the Gulf is certainly another matter. The most important issues now pertain to Iraq's ability to overcome this critical stage peacefully as well as to whether outstanding problems in the structure of new Iraq and its alliances have become intractable, and whether the emotional impact of U.S. withdrawal will exacerbate these problems and will drive Iraq into chaos once again. These are some of the challenges that Iraq should attend to during the few weeks and months to come.

The Regime and the State

Although Iraq has seen two successive parliamentary elections since the end of the transitional period, and although the current al-Maliki government is the second since the announcement of the legal end of the occupation, a large segment of the Iraqi people do not look favourably to the state structure and its ruling regime. While Iraqis have waited since the adoption of the constitution in a referendum marred by controversy for Iraqi political forces to agree on the amendment of this constitution, it seems clear that they have lost confidence in the ruling political class and in its ability to meet their aspirations.

Iraqis, especially Sunni Arabs, see the regime that was born during the period of the invasion and occupation as a Shiite sectarian regime and believe that the presence of non-Shiites in the regime and the state is in most cases marginal and misleading. Worse indeed is that, since 2003, Iraq has seen the closest convergence between the regime and state institutions thus rendering the state an entity controlled by Shiite political sectarian forces that control its resources and capabilities. Moreover, Iraqi Kurds in the north have withdrawn to their region and are happy with the quota granted to them in the government and central state institutions while they continue to seek the expansion of the geographical area of the region.

The Shiite political forces managed to tighten their grip on the regime and the state due to several major factors: first, the application of ethnic and sectarian quota systems since the birth of the occupation administration, and the implicit acceptance by occupation forces of the supposition that Shiites are the majority. For the past eight years, successive Iraqi governments have been reluctant to conduct a census on the basis of which parliamentary seats would be distributed among various provinces. Second, the occupation forces' desire to establish a sectarian Shiite regime in order to weaken Iraq and use "democratic Shiite Iraq" to incite the Iranian people against the rule of the Islamic Republic. The third reason pertains to the massive Iranian support

enjoyed by Iraqi Shiite political forces from before the occupation and throughout the following years.

Given that the state is still the most important tool of control and source of wealth and the main driver of economy, the sectarian nature of the regime and the state is manifest in all aspects of Iraqi life. For example, the provincial budget is divided in favour of Shiite-majority provinces; the academic curricula have been reformulated according to the views of forces in control of the government; the distribution of scholarships is carried out according to a clear sectarian bias; state bureaucracy, military forces and security apparatuses are being established to ensure the control of forces of political Shiism; and foreign policy with all its dimensions (political, economic, trade and transport) is administered from a sectarian standpoint.

This of course does not mean that the living standards in Shiite-majority areas are superior to those in Sunni-majority areas. Contrary to autonomous Kurdish areas, Iraq is experiencing critical deterioration of even the most essential of services due to the spread of financial and administrative corruption in all areas of the regime and the state. This is perhaps what provoked the widening scope of mistrust between the Iraqis and the ruling class.

The New Iraqi Army

There is no doubt about the vital role the Iraqi army plays today and had played since its birth in the early 1920s. Iraq's borders with two major non-Arab and four Arab countries and its vast area with its diverse populations made the army crucial to Iraqi nationalism and simultaneously the guardian of the country's security and independence.

An American report has quoted the Iraqi Army Chief of Staff, Babaker Zebari, in early November as saying that Iraq would not be able to protect its borders and airspace before at least 2020. A report prepared by Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction cited Zebari as stating that "Iraq may need several years before it is able to defend itself against external threats without the help of international partners". The report added that "Lieutenant General Zebari stressed that the (Iraqi) Ministry of Defence will not be able to repel any external aggression before the period between 2020 and 2024", explaining that "the decline in government funding is the most prominent reason for the delay".

Zebari further added that "Iraq will not be able to defend its airspace before 2020", noting that "an army without an air cover is an exposed army". Iraq had decided to purchase eighteen F-16 aircrafts from the United States, but the delivery of the aircrafts and their actual utilisation will take several years. It is believed in Iraq, however, that Iran has put pressure on Prime Minister al-Maliki to delay the signing of the deal to buy phantom jets due to the fact that it is not comfortable with the Iraqi army's acquisition of these arms at this stage.

However, this is neither the Iraqi army's only problem nor its the greatest problem. Furthermore, the sectarian quota system has impacted the structure of the army in which the country's leaders are trying to maintain a Shiite majority regardless of their efficiency or skills. Military training missions abroad are almost exclusively limited to Shiite officers, while admission into military colleges has been subjected to a strict quota system. Thus, army officers are divided most of the time into two uncooperative parts: professional national officers, most of which come from the former army, and those who have been integrated into army ranks by the process of absorbing gunmen from Shiite parties that had opposed the former regime and have neither military backgrounds nor significant training.

National officers consider those who have been assimilated into the military incompetent and unworthy of the positions they occupy, and regard them as agents of Iranian influence. Conversely, assimilated officers regard national officers, whether Sunni or Shiite, as the remains of the former regime. This divide undermines the efficiency and

capability of the army and raises doubts about its role in the defence of the country's borders and independence. It has usurped the army of its traditional role as an incubator for Iraqi nationalism. Meanwhile, the government of the autonomous Kurdish region controls the Kurdish military units in the region which are officially consider a part of the Iraqi army.

The Crisis of the Salah ad-Din Governorate

On 27th October, the Salah ad-Din governorate council voted with a large majority in favour of declaring the governorate an economic and administrative region. Despite preceding similar calls for the establishment of regions in southern provinces, this is the first step to be taken by an Iraqi province in this direction with the exception of the Kurdish region (which includes the three Kurdish-majority provinces), which considers itself to have a de-facto autonomous government that the central government or Iraqi people have no choice to accept or reject.

The step taken by the Salah ad-Din governorate was explicitly and angrily rejected by Prime Minister al-Maliki although the constitution warrants the formation of federal regions in one more provinces. Al-Maliki and those close to him regarded what happened in Salah ad-Din as a "move to divide the country", a "conspiracy against the government", and an attempt to establish a "safe-haven for Baathists and supporters of the former regime". What al-Maliki failed to mention is that he himself and all the representatives of Shiite political forces insisted on the inclusion of federalism in the current Iraqi constitution during the period of its preparation, and that this particular item had been rejected by most Iraqis, including Sunnis and Sunni political forces. However, when a Sunni-majority province chooses to become a region, the prime minister and his allies are angered.

The Salah ad-Din province was prompted to take this action by the explicitly sectarian policies pursued by al-Maliki's government and the increasing marginalisation of Sunni-majority provinces. In addition to the fact that these provinces did not get their rightful share of seats in the parliament, their share of allocated state budget is far less than what they deserve in terms of population and geographical area. The straw that broke the camel's back was the campaign of mass arrests carried out recently by security forces against those who described as Baathists plotting to overthrow the government; the majority of detainees were Sunni Arabs. Also, the Minister of Higher Education, who is a member of al-Maliki's party, decided to dismiss thousands of academics and staff at the University of Salah ad-Din using the lustration law.

Certainly, transforming the Salah ad-Din province into an administrative and economic region will increase its share of the provincial budget and liberate it from the command and control of the central government. However, the danger comes from the fact that other Sunni-majority provinces such as al-Anbar, Diyala and Nineveh will follow and, thus, all these regions together may turn into an administrative Sunni bloc. A similar step may be taken by Shiite-majority provinces in turn plunging the country into an atmosphere of division. If Iraq arrives at such a juncture, conflicts will explode on provincial borders (such as Karbala's demand for the area of Nukhayb, which is now part of al-Anbar). There will be tension over the rights of Shiites and Sunnis scattered in provinces in which they comprise the minorities respectively. Also, there will be struggles over the country's oil and water resources and over the future of Great Baghdad. This is in addition to the potential conflicts on the territory of Kurdistan whose leaders are seeking to expand towards Kirkuk, Mosul and "Khanaqin".

Surely, Al-Maliki's refusal stems from the growing confidence of Shiite political forces that they are in the process of tightening their grip on the entire Arab Iraq which they did not have upon drafting the constitution. However, it is unclear how al-Maliki is going to deal with the Salah ad-Din decision given that he does not have constitutional powers to counter it. The only party that can discourage the Salah ad-Din province from proceeding with its endeavour is Sunni public opinion, which has lost hope in the fairness of the current regime and the possibility of its reform.

Iranian Control

On 30th October, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, welcomed the intended withdrawal of U.S. forces from neighbouring Iraq, describing it as "golden triumph". The Iranian News Agency (ISNA) quoted the Iranian leader as saying, after a meeting with Massoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, that "the unified position of all tribes and religions in Iraq on American pressure for judicial immunity for its occupying soldiers and coercing American at the end to leave Iraq, is a golden page in the history of this country".

It is not certain that all Iraqis view U.S. withdrawal the way the Iranian leader sees it. Although Kurdish leaders prefer that the Americans remain in Iraq for several more years until the autonomy and independence of the Kurdish region are enhanced and the image of regional internal strife is made clear, Iran is itself a source of main concern to Sunni Iraqis and to a significant sector of Arab nationalist Shiites and Iraqi nationalists. Iranian leaders have made no secret of their vision in the past few months of Iraq as a strategic vacuum that will be filled by Iran after U.S. withdrawal.

What is prevalent about Iranian influence in Iraq is its association with the presence of Iraqi leaders of Shiite political backgrounds who have pledged their allegiance to Iran since the period of political opposition against Saddam Hussein's regime. This estimate is of course accurate and is reinforced by the sectarian nature of the regime and Shiite state leaders' feeling of the need for Iran's strategic support in confronting the Arab perimeter that is disconcerted about the sectarian predisposition of the new Iraq. However, Iran's influence in Iraq is not limited to the complex relationships that link it with Shiite political leadership.

During the past eight years, Tehran has worked very hard to infiltrate all Iraqi state circles and has supported Shiite political forces both openly and secretly. It is believed that the influence of the Iranian regime has reached the cruxes of the Iraqi military, security and intelligence agencies, and ministries of oil, trade and economy as well as the office of the Prime Minister, and most southern Shiite-majority provincial councils.

In addition to the close link between Tehran and organisations such as Hezbollah-Iraq, the semi-secret League of the Righteous and the unconcealed Badr organisation represented in parliament, it is believed that Iran's influence is significant in the Mahdi Army, the Sadrist movement, the Supreme Council and the Da'wah Party.

Iranian influence seizes the independence of Iraq's national decision. Alongside Iran's pressure on the Iraqi government to reject U.S. demands for the extension of U.S. military presence in the country, leading to final withdrawal at the end of this December, it is expected that American withdrawal (regardless of opinions on the number of remaining troops) will lead to the expansion and consolidation of Iran's influence in the regime and the areas and among Shiite political forces, and will increase Sunni nationalist reactions. What exacerbates the file of Iran's influence is that it involves regional dimensions.

Despite the feeling among Sunnis in Iraqi nationalists circles that Arab countries have left Iranian influence to prey on Iraq, and that Saudi Arabia in particular may draft a deal to share influence with Iran at the expense of Iraq, it is certain that the Arab regime (including Turkey) as a whole is not happy with the influence of Iran in Iraq, given its representation of an expanding map of influence in the Arab east. Concerned Arab countries and Turkey believe that there is no meaningful opportunity to confront Iranian influence in Iraq just yet, especially since American withdrawal coincides with the political earthquakes that have struck the whole Arab arena.

Regardless of the assessment of the Arab position, it is certain that the regional aspect of Iranian influence makes Iraq, whether willingly or unwillingly, a party in the escalating charge over the fate of the Iranian nuclear issue and Iran's relations with Western powers, and in the inevitable charge over the fate of Syria and its future, especially after

al-Maliki and Shiite political forces have shown sympathy for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Conflict over Syria

Iraq's relationship with Syria has not been well since the birth of the two countries whether for their occupation of one geopolitical field, their conversion into two centres of the Arab nationalist movement, or because they fall under two different wings of the Baath Party. Given the position taken by the Syrian government towards the invasion of Iraq and relations between Tehran, Damascus and Shiite political forces, Syria has played a multifaceted role in post-invasion/occupation Iraq. However, the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and the prospects for political change in Damascus, will have different effects on the previous balances.

Despite the tension that has marred Baghdad's relations with Damascus during the past few years, it is no secret that Syria's fear and opposition to American presence does not mean it is against Iran's interests in Iraq and its allies. It was clear during the dispute over the formation of the Iraqi government last year that the Syrian position was ultimately in favour of Iran's will. Syria had to support al-Maliki's coming to power in spite of earlier differences. It is difficult, despite views on the secular Syrian regime, to ignore the observation that there is a sectarian dimension to Syria's policy toward Iraq.

Given the sectarian nature of the rule in Iraq, and the strategic link between Iraq and Iran, a fundamental change in government in Damascus will be seen with a great deal of concern in Baghdad no less, if not more, than in Tehran. During the visit of Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to Baghdad, Damascus clearly expressed its intention to completely renounce its exclusive relations with Ankara and its intention to link up to the axis extending from Tehran to as far as Beirut. This reflects a new strategic vision for Assad's Syria, making it closer to the new Iraq and more linked to its destiny.

In the event of the collapse of the Syrian regime and the emergence of a rule more expressive of the will of the Syrian people, both Iran and the new Iraqi regime will lose an incredibly important ally and a centre of strategic significance that involves a number of lines of political charge in the east. The effect of this development is no less important than it had been before to a broad spectrum of Iraqi political forces that opposed the sectarian nature of the rule in Iraq, and works to rebuild the new Iraqi state on a national bases. No matter how the Syrians will solve the Kurdish question in their own country, post-Baath Syria will leave another effect on the overall Kurdish question in the east. Behind all of this, the map of alliances in the entire east will be redesigned, and thus Iraq will find itself in a new strategic political environment.

Conclusions

The occupation administration, Iraqi political forces and Iran's new allies in Iraq have all failed to help Iraqis establish a stable political regime in Baghdad with sufficient legitimacy and support from the popular majority. In the midst of a constitution that creates more problems than founds a stable government, a sectarian rule that jeopardises all the national gains of last century, a quota system that usurps the people's necessary confidence in their country and its political class, heated disputes over regions and borders, and open regional intervention in Iraqi affairs, Iraq is facing a series of challenges with different intensities and sizes while U.S. withdrawal approaching and the Arab vicinity is experiencing unprecedented variables.

For Iraq to overcome to these challenges, there is a need for sound reform in the structure of the state and the relationship of the state and society aiming for the reconstruction of Iraqi nationalism and a national consensus on the main orientations of the state and the rule. However, this is not likely to happen soon as most of the Iraqi political class is politically and morally unqualified to lead such a reform movement.

Therefore, it is certain that Iraq will face challenges in the next few months without having enough immunity to deal with them, and accordingly, the future of Iraq is open to several possibilities in the foreseeable future:

The current perturbing situation will remain as it is or explode into internal violence, either sectarian or ethnic, or on the borders of the regions. Al-Maliki's government will be overthrown or will persist due to the inability to find an alternative. Iraq will turn into an arena of regional conflicts, notably that of Syria's future and Iran's nuclear file, or the emergence of an implicit consensus among regional powers to neutralise it.

Certainly, however, the already intense feeling of Iraqis that their country is not in the best of conditions will become even more intense.

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