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## Reports

# Iraqi - U.S. Relations: Post- Withdrawal Balances

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When the Americans occupied Iraq, they announced that they were going to stay there for decades, and that they would make Iraq their main base that would replace the US base of Incirlik and even that of Al-Siliyya. The United States began direct or indirect preparations to occupy Syria and then Iran. The US publicly announced its intentions because it considered both countries in the Axis of Evil.

However, the Iraqi national resistance, which began its operation on the 10th of April 2003, and with the speed of its unexpected response, undermined all plans and forced the US Administration to change many strategies in the Iraqi quagmire, ending with the exit strategy or "Cut and Run" in 2009 and culminating with the tactical withdrawal strategy and leaving Iraq for Iraqis. Both Bush and Obama administrations were able to introduce the tactical withdrawal strategy with an international legalization that cannot be objected nor considered as a result of the defeat suffered by U.S. troops in Iraq.

The Status Of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was signed in 2008. A long-term agreement, SOFA comprises two treaties. The first one organizes the U.S. troops withdrawal from Iraq according to a set timetable that started in June 2009 and should end with the withdrawal of the last American soldier by the end of 2011. The second treaty, however, is a Strategic Framework Agreement for cooperation between the two countries at all levels, especially in the field of information technology. Through the agreement and the strategic withdrawal, the U.S. administration will achieve the two important goals, for which it had waged an illegal war on Iraq and destroyed an emerging country that was deemed developed – at least when compared to the other Middle East countries. The following two objectives are:

1. To achieve an advanced presence status in the Middle East with a base or a number of bases in Iraq, which enjoys a geo-strategic location in the region.
2. To benefit from the geo-economic importance of Iraqi oil reserves to control the global markets and avoid an expected U.S. energy crisis over the upcoming years.

One thing is certain. The United States was forced to accept the exit after rejecting it, and that happened for two reasons: the first is the resistance, and the second is high costs burdened by the US at a time when its budget suffers the largest and most dangerous deficit in history. Thus, the end of the year 2011 is supposed to witness a full withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Iraq. The withdrawal, however, will have a significant impact on Iraq, the first party in the equation, and on the influence and presence of the United States in the region, being the second party.

## **America between Withdrawal and Influence**

It can be said that many analysts, especially those who opposed the occupation and still oppose it, stand against the US influential presence in Iraq. They believe that the withdrawal will not happen, but will be replaced with other forms that ensure a continued U.S. influence. Therefore, the occupation will be changed from its military form to a political and diplomatic one. They support their opinion with proofs and analyses. For example, they say that the United States, which had planned to occupy Iraq quite a long time ago, did not enter to leave so easily, and that what the US did in Iraq was not for the sake of Iraqis but for the sake of America and Israel only. This view is based on what was written by Zbigniew Brzezinski, US former national security adviser, in his book, *Second Chance*, that the United States went to Iraq for oil and for bringing an end to the Iraqi threat to Israel. The analysts stress that the most important evidence is in Condoleezza Rice's recent statement that "The United States did not go to Iraq in order to bring democracy."

Another evidence can also be found in what was said by Israeli former minister of national security, Avi Dichter, about Israel's role in Iraq after its occupation in 2003. "We have achieved in Iraq more than we planned and expected," Dichter said. The analysts also depend on what is now being published about keeping twenty thousand U.S. troops

in Iraq for training purposes, in addition to about 30 to 50 thousand foreign fighters working with private security companies. These troops will ensure a continued U.S. influence in Iraq. According to leaks from some circles associated with the Pentagon, more than 14 U.S. military bases deployed in secret places were planned to be built at the beginning of the occupation, with an aim to control the entire Middle East, and that is enough for the U.S. to achieve widespread influence in the region – not to mention the largest U.S. embassy in the world. All this is sufficient evidence, in their opinions, that the United States exists and dominates in this region through a strategic heart that cannot be ignored.

Those analysts add that the fact that the U.S. administration did not work on forming an Iraqi army capable of protecting the country after nearly nine years of occupation is further proof of keeping Iraq in need of an American presence. Last but not least, the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq to neighbouring Kuwait, is proof of the U.S. administration resolve to return to Iraq at any time.

However, we can add three ideas to the aforesaid views:

1. The first idea: leaving Iraq and the region at this time means to unleash the Iranian influence and let it rise in the region at a time when Israel and the United States are striving to curb that influence.
2. The second idea: one important reason for the occupation of Iraq is to protect the security of Israel and get Iraq completely out of the Arab-Israeli struggle – a goal that will not be achieved if Iraq is left under the rule of religious parties that are loyal to Iran and Hezbollah, and this will have a certain negative impact on the Israeli security .
3. The third idea: oil is another key reason for occupation. The severe economic crisis seen in the United States reinforces the need for oil. It is unreasonable that the United States is ready to leave Iraq and the major oil investments without securing them, in case the elections in Iraq give way for a government that may revoke these privileges, especially with a strong opposition to stepping back from the nationalization, which took place in the 1970s, and the voices that call for getting rid of the foreign monopolies and the U.S. investments in Iraqi oil, whose extraction cost is the world's least (the cost of extracting a barrel of oil in the United States amounts to something between sixty and seventy dollars, while the cost of extracting Iraqi oil is between one and two dollars only), knowing that Iraq's oil reserve in only one field (Majnoon) is equal to the whole US oil reserve.

Regardless of what has been said previously, the end of this year will bring important and influential developments, and even significant challenges for both Iraqi and American administrations.

For the Iraqi administration, the first challenge lies in testing the military capacity. The year 2012 will present a real and serious test for the aptitude and full readiness of the national guard (army) and local police to defend the country – whether against "terrorism" and interior chaos or external aggressions – and to maintain security and stability in the whole country. The call of Babakar Zebari, Iraqi Chief of Staff, for delaying the U.S. withdrawal because the Iraqi military might not be ready to take control, provided a clear estimation of the readiness of Iraqi forces. His call set a long period extending to 2020 for Iraqi military to be ready with the support for the United States.

The second challenge involves the potential for civil wars when the Iraqi governorates demand the right to form autonomous territories with independent budgets and administrations, away from the central authority and its political conflicts.

The third challenge appertains to the conflict between current governorates and administrative formations to join disputed areas as stated in the Iraqi constitution. Thus,

conflicts – such as Arab-Kurdish, Kurdish-Turkmen, Sunni-Shiite, Shiite – Shiite, Sunni-Sunni, etc. – may surface or be replenished. There is also the challenge of facing the armed militias, which will try to control the streets again. In this regard, the commander of U.S. troops in Iraq said: "Shiite militias who are still targeting departing U.S. troops could become a threat to the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki once U.S. forces withdraw." Moreover, there are the severe political conflicts among the various political parties. Not to mention the tension between the central government and the authorities of Kurdistan region. There is also the challenge of the rampant corruption in the country, and the failure to form a complete government since 2010 until now, as well as the issue of neighbouring countries' intervention. We can, hence, imagine the magnitude of challenges that face the central authority in Baghdad after finalizing the U.S. withdrawal.

As for the U.S. administration, the first challenge, which is also the largest challenge, will be to counter Iran's already-existing attempts to control Iraqi politics. Iran's senior advisor to the general commander of the armed forces, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, said in a speech in Qom on 26 November 2011: "Iran's influence in Iraq is far greater than that of America and Iran is the largest regional power that enjoys security and stability as well as a big influence in the region and the world." This challenge is reflected through the Iraqi government's attempt to join the Iranian-Syrian axis, which opposes the United States.

The second challenge is reflected in the emergence of an Iraq that is drowned in turmoil and shattered in sectarian conflicts. This may lead to daily fighting that will not be limited to Iraq, but will go beyond to neighbouring areas, especially southern Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and western Jordan – two regions among those which the United States works hard to keep away from turbulence.

### **Towards New Balances**

The relationship between Iraq and the United States after the withdrawal is supposed to turn from dependency into cooperation between two parties of equal sovereignty and independence. Consequently, Iraq will be able, in theory, to make independent decisions that are not subject to U.S. pressure. The question that arises here is: will the U.S. administration allow that to happen? Especially when we know that Iraq has recently made a decision, which contradicts the U.S. strategy in the region, by abstaining to vote on suspending Syria's membership in the Arab League, voicing reservations on the Arab economic sanctions against Syria in November 27, 2011, and rejecting to implement them, at a time when the United States announced its support of the Arab sanctions after the UN Security Council failed to adopt similar resolutions. And if the United States tolerated such decisions, how would it react if the Iraqi government made more serious decisions as a result of its alliance with Iran that might affect the Arab-Zionist conflict? Will the United States keep away from intervention? Will Iran accept that its allies in Iraq also keep away?

The Iraqi - U.S. relations could witness a significant change after withdrawal that they might be directed more towards pragmatism – especially towards arranging the regional powers in the Middle East. As America needs Iraq, the United States will not disengage from this country. Iraq is currently the only economically stable nation in the region at a time when Syria and Egypt – and perhaps Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – suffer turbulences. From the U.S. standpoint, Iraq should restore its power to be able to face Iran and not be subject to it (the United States strives to find a way to help Iraq stand against Iran to deprive the Islamic Republic of using Iraq's capabilities against Israel). Similarly, Iraq will remain in need for the United States to support the construction and stability factors. Certainly, the shape and direction of U.S. relations with Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan will reflect on the level and nature of U.S. relations with Iraq.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring revolutions will impact post-withdrawal Iraq – maybe slowly, and maybe not for political reasons but for reasons that pertain to the widespread financial and administrative corruption at all levels of the Iraqi state and the government's failure to curb it. Add to that, the killing, displacement, detention and lack



of security and safety, as well as the lack of services, and the money wasted and stolen in billions, whose news appear in American sources. All this will lead to a revolution on the current situation in Iraq, holding both Iraqi government and U.S. administration responsible for failing to fight these phenomena. It will be a popular demand rather than a governmental or political one.

Last but not least, how would the U.S. react if hard-line Islamic parties in Iraq were successful in dominating the country, and the secular parties failed? A terrifying situation for the United States and Israel that could, after withdrawal, undermine all that has been planned by the two states – especially after the what happened in Tunisia and Egypt.

## Post-Withdrawal Scenarios

The requirements for a realistic analysis reveal qualitative differences that will govern the U.S.-Iraqi relations after withdrawing the troops. These differences can be considered new in the international interaction equation, and they can be described in the following three scenarios.

- The first scenario, in the short term, is in the form of relations of cooperation and friendship to the extent of dependency. Here, we will find Iraq subject to the American will, based on the current Iraqi political system and mindsets and behaviour of Iraqi politicians. When these politicians see the U.S. administration as their saviour and rescuer from any external or even internal aggression, the relationship between the two countries will certainly turn into a master-and-servant one. What can enhance this form of relationship is: firstly, the signing of more long-term economic and military agreements. Secondly, the tendency of Kurdistan region leadership (Barzani and Talabani) to adhere to the American presence with the willingness to give everything it requires – even if it was to accept U.S. military bases in the autonomous region.

Thirdly, the increased demand for establishing autonomies in the Arab regions, as allowed by the constitution. If these attempts succeeded, the central authority would become weaker and would be in greater need for U.S. support. Fourthly, the political instability and increasing conflicts over official posts will turn the United States into a tool used by parties to deter each other. The losing parties will continue to stick to the U.S. solutions, and will even resort to the U.S. influence making it a continuing influence in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda is another factor that pushes to strengthen the US-Iraqi relations in the future. Al-Qaeda will tend to change its strategy in Iraq from direct attacks on U.S. troops to focusing on Iraqi forces, in order to turn Iraq into an Islamic emirate. This will be done by activating al-Qaeda's sleeper cells in Iraq, forcing the Iraqi government to request the United States' assistance to implement the joint security agreement, which will make the U.S. presence active in Iraq and will keep the cooperative relations between the two countries in its strategic framework (fighting international terrorism).

- The second scenario is a wavering relationship that ranges between cooperation and defiance (disobedience). This scenario is achieved in the medium term and requires that Iraq be a fully competent, independent and sovereign state that makes free decisions about foreign policy and has a technocratic government far from the sectarian division, making Iraq's supreme national interest the basis for dealing with the United States, the regional powers and neighbouring countries other than the Arab depth within a strategy of maintaining Iraq's national security. With such a relationship, there will not be eternal conflict nor eternal cooperation, but mutual respect and interests with limits that the U.S. cannot exceed to make Iraq an American base both politically and militarily. This scenario, however, requires Iraq to be strong politically, economically, militarily and in security with a well defined strategy and objectives.

What fuels the conflict in this form of the relationship are two issues: first, Iran's influence on the process of Iraqi decision making as indicated above. Second, Iraqi-Saudi relations and relations with the GCC in general suffer a special tension at present

because of unignorable sectarian reasons and the undeniable, incessant Iranian influence tide in Iraq. There are political parties with weak influence in the decision-making process that prefer relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the purpose of counterbalancing the Iranian influence. The United States also finds the Iraqi - Saudi convergence a strategic factor with higher feasibility and gains than if Iraq falls into Iran's lap.

This scenario makes it imperative for Iraq to reduce reliance on the United States, and the Iraqi government should open other channels for cooperation with countries that are more capable in economic terms to increase their investments in Iraq. That was reflected by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's visits to both China and Japan, and the talk about greater openness towards Southeast Asia. It even appeared in the military domain through evidences about Iraq's attempts to open up and cooperate with NATO, aiming to reduce the reliance on the U.S. as regards to training and equipping the Iraqi forces. Perhaps a good proof here is Iraq's agreement with the NATO in 2009 to develop the security and military capacity and skills as well as to help provide training, consulting and support to build efficient Iraqi security forces – particularly after the United States showed reluctance to provide the Iraqi army with much needed weapons.

Politically, there are indications that the U.S. administration has begun to lose ability to impose its opinion and control over the Iraqi government. Perhaps the failure of Vice President Joe Biden's seven visits to Iraq during the government crisis period as well as his calls for national reconciliation, forwarding proposals to form a government on partnership basis, is a clear proof of the Iraqi's government rejection of Washington's intervention in the country's internal politics. Al-Maliki even announced his government's refusal to Washington and its ambassador Christopher Hill's intervention in the legislative elections that took place in March 2010, showing Iraq as if it left the U.S. guardianship. Not to mention that this scenario requires that there be a wise, moderate and independent Iraqi foreign policy based on considering the national interest as a fundamental for dealing with the United States.

- The third scenario, in the strategic long term, will see the return of the confrontational relations, with a national unity government that will work on building peace, security and the state with concepts of change from inside and depending on the national forces that refuse to turn Iraq into a strategic base for the United States. If such a government was formed, it would certainly hold the United States and all its Iraqi and Arab allies responsible for what happened in Iraq, and perhaps even it would go to international courts to demand that the United States compensate Iraq and the Iraqis for all that happened in the country during the years of occupation. Perhaps even more, this government would go back to the 13 years of the unjust embargo that was imposed on Iraq and its people, in particular with the fact that international organizations, and even European investigation committees have begun to investigate the pretexts voiced by the United States and its allies, especially the UK, to justify the occupation of Iraq.

The first scenario, however, remains the most likely one for the coming years. All the current indicators confirm that Iraq cannot disengage from its strategic alliance with the USA. The relations that political officials from both Iraqi and U.S. administrations point to confirm that the mutual interest and friendship will be the basis for the real relations between the two countries. Biden's visit to Baghdad on November 30, 2011 to celebrate handing Iraq over to the Iraqis and officially announce the U.S. withdrawal, confirms this point when he expressed the US intention to support Iraq in all fields.

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