

U.S. Out of Iraq? By All Means

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Iraqi Parliament has just passed a resolution calling for all American troops -- there are now 5,000 in Iraq -- to be withdrawn from the country. I quite agree. We should never have entered Iraq in the first place, but left Saddam, monstrous as he was, as a counterweight to the just as monstrous, and much more dangerous, regime of Shi'a clerics in Iran. The Iran-Iraq War lasted from 1980 to 1988, and for those years both countries' aggressive energies were focused on each other. From the viewpoint of Unbelievers, that war -- which petered out in a stalemate -- should have gone on forever.

In 2003, once the decision had been made by the U.S. to enter Iraq and destroy Hussein's regime, and that goal had been accomplished, with the capture of Saddam, whom the Iraqis subsequently executed, the killing of his two sons Uday and

Qusay, and the capture by the Americans of almost all of the 52 leading members of his regime who were then turned over to the Iraqis, we had done what we had initially sent out to do. We had removed a monstrous regime. But mission creep led us to do still more, to help Iraq conduct its first democratic election – with millions of Iraqis holding up their purple thumbs to proudly show that they had voted. And even that wasn't enough: we decided to spend billions on infrastructure projects to help the Iraqis to a better life. But we stayed until 2011, hoping that the government in Baghdad would finally offer good and stable government. It was not to be. The Americans discovered that the Shi'a and Sunnis were bitter rivals for political power and the economic benefits that flowed from that power, while the Kurds had their own desires, to keep and if possible enlarge, the autonomy they had enjoyed under American protection, for many years. The Sunnis were not about to acquiesce in their loss of political power after Saddam's regime collapsed, and the Shi'a were not about to relinquish the power that they had at long last acquired through elections (because the Shi'a constituted 60% of the population, three times that of the Sunni Arabs). The politicians are fighting still over how to share power in Baghdad, a conflict that continues without any foreseeable end.

The Shi'a Arabs in Iraq are not only much more numerous than the Sunni Arabs, but possess several different militias; some of those militias receive money, weapons, and training from Iran, while still others are nationalist in nature and resent Iran's presence in Iraq. The Western press reported that in Baghdad the Shi'a were out in force, lamenting the death of Soleimani, beating their chests, and calling for revenge against America. There were such crowds, but there were also – and this was not reported in the mainstream media – many Shi'a expressing their delight at the killing of Qasem Soleimani. These Shi'a are Iraqi nationalists, who resent the interference of Iran in Iraqi affairs.

And there were other crowds of Sunnis in Iraq who celebrated the news of Soleimani's death, shouting their approval, handing out sweets. His disappearance has not brought the country together against the Americans, but split it even further than it already was, between those who were crying and those who were laughing at the news of Soleimani's killing.

The meeting of the Iraqi Parliament that demanded the withdrawal of all remaining American forces in Iraq was not, it should be noted, representative of all groups in Iraq. Both the Kurds and Sunni Arabs chose to boycott this session. It was not "Iraq" telling the Americans to leave, but the "Iraqi Shi'a" demanding a full American withdrawal.

That's a demand that we should be happy to honor.

For in truth, Iraq has proved to be a great waste of American resources – men, money, materiel – ever since our invasion in 2003. We removed a dictator who was a useful bulwark against the Islamic Republic. We then decided that the removal of Saddam was not enough; that we should create democracy in Iraq. No one in Washington considered what the outcome of such a democracy would almost certainly be – a Shi'a-dominated country with close ties to Iran. The Shi'a were enthusiastic participants in the election, while the Sunnis took part with great reluctance, for they knew what the outcome would mean. There is now constant horse-trading in Baghdad, between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'a, but not any sense of a unified nation. The Americans did not understand how antipathetic Islam is to the Western notion of democracy. In the democratic West, a government's legitimacy depends on how well that government reflects the will of the people, as expressed in elections. In Islam, a government owes its legitimacy to how well it reflects the will of Allah, as expressed in the Qur'an.

There are two possible responses to this demand from Iraq's dimidiated Parliament. One is to point out that the Kurds and

Sunnis in Iraq were not represented in Parliament for that vote, and that while American forces are nowhere to be found in the Shi'a south, including Baghdad (a mixed-city but in a Shi'a dominated area), it should be up to the local populations in the north – the Kurds and Sunnis who were the very people not present in Parliament for the vote – to decide if they want the 5,000 American troops assigned to northern Iraq to remain, in order to help suppress any re-emergence of the Islamic State, and any threat, too, from Iranian-backed militias. Such an agreement with the Kurds and Sunnis, and a rejection of a decision by the Shi'a-only Parliament, would contribute to fracturing the Iraqi state into three parts, roughly akin to the three Ottoman vilayets of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, that the British spatchcocked together to create modern Iraq.

The benefits of such an arrangement are that Iran would not be able to spread its tentacles throughout northern Iraq and into Syria with those American troops present, and would be able to control only southern Iraq through local militias, where they already prevail. The continued presence of American troops in the north might encourage the Kurds to move from American-protected autonomy to an independent Kurdistan. Morally, such a state deserves to exist. The 35 to 40 million Kurds are the largest people in the world without a state. An independent Kurdistan carved out of northern Iraq, armed by, and to some extent protected by, the Americans, would be a great worry for the other countries with significant Kurdish populations – Syria, Iran, and Turkey. These all happen to be troublemaking enemies of the U.S. Syria, with a particularly murderous regime, is an ally of both Iran and Russia, and an enemy of the U.S. Turkey is still, ever more disconcertingly, a member of NATO, but under Erdogan, the country has been rapidly re-islamizing, and the neo-Ottoman dreams of Recep Tayyip Erdogan include the creation of a pan-Islamic army to destroy Israel. No friend of the West, Erdogan richly deserves to have a Kurdish threat re-kindled in his Anatolian

heartland. As for Iran, America's mortal enemy, a Kurdish independence movement in western Iran, encouraged by the existence of an independent Kurdistan in what had been northern Iraq, would be worrisome for the ayatollahs, both in and of itself, and because of how it might also prompt other separatist movements in Iran, including those of the Arabs in Khuzestan Province, where much of Iran's oil is produced, the Sunni Baluchis in Iran's far east, and the Azeris in northwest Iran, who are between 25%-40% of the population, and some of whom have shown an interest in breaking away to become part of Azerbaijan, given the way many Azeris have been treated by the Persians, which is captured in the phrase "Torki khar" (Turkish donkey), used by Persians in reference to Azeris, whom they regard as the "brawn" of the Iranian economy to be ordered about by Persian "brains."

An independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, protected by American forces, would thus be the single most effective instrument to weaken from within, and simultaneously, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran – all states that are, in various degrees, our enemies. It would require the American government to ignore Iranian and Iraqi threats, and upon the request of Iraqi Kurds, to station troops, even more than the 5,000 now there, in the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq. Those troops would have a twofold purpose: both to protect the Kurds and to suppress any reappearance of the Islamic State.

While there is much to be said for such an outcome, there is even more to be said for the other possible course of action: leaving Iraq, period. That means the Americans should accept the demand of the Shi'a parliament (boycotted by Kurds and Sunni Arabs) in Baghdad, for the prompt removal of their remaining 5,000 troops. Iraq is indeed the "ungrateful volcano" that Winston Churchill once called it. We have spent so very much, and accomplished so very little, in that country, but not for want of trying. We did get rid of Saddam Hussein, his sons, and his collaborators, who were part of a

grim game of 52-pickup, invented by the U.S. military, where the faces of the 52 most important men in the regime were put on cards, and those cards widely distributed; almost all of the 52 were eventually picked up by the Americans. We also stage-managed, several elections, though Western democracy never took hold. We did spend trillions to improve life in Iraq. The latest vote in Iraq's Parliament, demanding that we leave Iraq, all because we killed someone responsible for the deaths of more than 600 Americans and was plotting imminent attacks on still more Americans, indicates how little gratitude we have received.

Saddam Hussein was not only a threat to his own people. He was also a threat to Iran. And Iran has turned out to be a much more dangerous enemy of the U.S. in the Middle East than Saddam Hussein's Iraq ever was. We were wrong not to recognize his value in containing Iran. We tried to help fashion a quasi-decent government in Iraq. But we were insufficiently aware of the depth of hatred between Sunnis and Shi'a. Nor did we understand how adept the Iraqi politicians would turn out to be at siphoning off so much of the aid we lavished on that country. The American government spent trillions in Iraq, on both a massive military presence from 2003 to 2011, and on infrastructure projects to improve the lot of the people. During all this time, colossal corruption and mismanagement by the Iraqis in Baghdad have ensured the failure of those well-meaning efforts to help Iraq onto its feet. Having been told to leave, let's do so, in a spirit of relief that we can now bid goodbye to that "ungrateful volcano."

What will such a withdrawal of the 5,000 troops we sent to northern Iraq in 2015 do for the projection of American power against Iran? Nothing. The removal of those 5,000 troops will not lessen American pressure on Iran. Advanced drones, precision-guided missiles, and bombers can now deliver all the destruction the Pentagon wants or needs to inflict on Iran and its proxies. And if the Islamic State reappears? Let the Iran-

backed Shi'a militias in Iraq, and Iranian troops, too, deal with that problem all by themselves; after all, according to the Islamic State, the Shi'a are the "worst sort of Infidels." In the absence of the Americans, who proved so helpful before in fighting ISIS, the Iranians will have to devote many more resources of their own, and take more casualties, in staving off the fanatics of ISIS who will be trying to re-establish their "caliphate" in Iraq. That's not a bad thing, to tie Iran down fighting the Islamic State, just as it was tied down for eight years fighting Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Let the fellow fanatics fight for as long as it takes for both sides to lose.

Meanwhile, the Americans can turn the screws ever tighter on Iran's economy, which is already on the ropes. And as President Trump has said, any harm Iran now does to Americans, American interests, and American allies (Israel, Saudi Arabia) in the region, will be met with overwhelming force, with 52 targets in Iran already having been selected for such a massive reprisal. For all Iran's huffing and puffing, it doesn't dare trigger that response. There might be a handful of small cyberattacks, or they might lob a few missiles at an American base in Iraq, making sure not to kill anyone, but not much more by way of response to Soleimani's killing. Behind their bluster, Iranian leaders are scared of Trump.

The resulting multilateral murderousness among Muslims should be a welcome spectacle, with America no longer determined to "bear any burden, pay any price." Been there, done that. In Iraq as in Afghanistan, it didn't work out. In northern Iraq, there will remain the constant threat of a revived Islamic State. Elsewhere in Iraq, the Shi'a – the "worst of the Infidels" for ISIS – will remain the most threatened by those Islamic State fighters, pushing southward, where they will hope to conquer the Shi'a and spread the uber-Sunni caliphate all the way to the Persian Gulf. The Kurds in northern Iraq can sit this one out, leaving it to the Shi'a militias, and to Iranian troops in Iraq, to fight the Islamic State, while the

Kurds husband their resources, and perhaps take delivery of arms from America or Israel. Let the Iranians and their Iraqi proxies fight Daesh until both sides have exhausted each other. Ideally, that will not happen for many years to come.

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