

DRAWDOWN IN IRAQ: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON U.S. TROOP REDUCTION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The [U.S.'s decision to cut troops in Iraq](#) is both a relief and a challenge to the Iraqi government. It is a relief because public opinion in Iraq is increasingly against the continuing presence of U.S. troops in the country, particularly after the [assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani](#) in Baghdad in January. Iraqi lawmakers passed a non-binding resolution after the assassination, asking the government to oust the Americans. The new government of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has stated that it does not want U.S. troops in combat operations. But he has asked for training services and other assistance. Now that the U.S. is cutting troops from 5,200 to 3,000, Mr. Kadhimi could argue that his government is committed to seeing the full withdrawal of the U.S. troops. It is a challenge because the U.S. troops had played a key role in the war against the Islamic State (IS), and with the drawdown, the Iraqi forces would have to share a greater burden in the fight against jihadists. The American political leadership has long wanted to pull troops out of Iraq. President Barack Obama had set a timetable for the pull back and withdrew most troops by 2011, but he had to send thousands of soldiers back to Iraq after the rise of the IS. President Trump promised to end the "endless wars" during his campaign. Now that the IS has been driven out of the major population centres of Iraq, he could claim victory and draw down troops.

While the U.S.'s decision is part of the Trump administration's larger policy of bringing back American troops home, the local factors cannot be overlooked. The U.S. found it increasingly difficult to station a large number of troops in Iraq. At the height of the war, the U.S. had over 1,50,000 troops in Iraq. But in recent years, it found stationing even 10,000 troops risky. This is partly because of the hostile political environment and partly due to the growing influence of Iran and Shia militias in Iraq. In January, the U.S. killed Soleimani after Shia militias attacked American troops. Iran retaliated by launching ballistic missile attacks on a U.S. air base in Iraq, injuring some 100 American soldiers, while the Shia militias continued attacking U.S. troops. In March, three of the coalition troops, two of them Americans, were killed in such an attack. Since then, the U.S. has repositioned troops, and the drawdown will reduce risks of such confrontations in the future. While the Americans leave, the Iraqi government should be careful of not letting any security vacuum being filled by jihadist groups. Though the IS has been driven underground, at least 10,000 IS fighters are still active in Iraq, according to UN assessments. The sectarian policies of the Nouri Al-Maliki government, coupled with the security vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, allowed Al-Qaeda in Iraq, with battle experience from the civil war-stricken Syria, to exploit Sunni resentment in northern Iraq and build the IS. The Iraqi government should not allow history to repeat itself.

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