

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

9 /2012

January 2012

The US Military Withdrawal from Iraq

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The recent US military withdrawal from Iraq marks a turning-point for Iraq, the US and the Middle East. After almost nine years of military presence in Iraq the region has undergone a dramatic change: Saddam Hussein is not in power any more, there is no threat of WMD for the US and the rest of the world, an autonomous Kurdistan has been created, a constitutional democracy has been established in a formerly absolute dictatorship and an entirely new Iraqi army has been formed and trained. Yet, there are also open issues that the US policy in the region has not addressed adequately, such as the increasing Iranian influence in Iraq, the status of fragile democracy in the country and the strained relations between the Iraqi Shiite government and the major Sunni countries, primarily Saudi Arabia. For the US political scene per se this withdrawal is a victory for the Obama administration, because the US president managed to abide by his electoral promise to withdraw from Iraq. Nevertheless, has this withdrawal been in accordance with the US interests in the mid-term? Could the aforementioned open issues jeopardize stability in Iraq and the region?

In the US

Approximately 4500 American soldiers have given their lives serving in the Iraq conflict and thousands more have been wounded. Taken this hard reality along with Barack Obama's opposition to this conflict in 2002, the US President is now certainly proud to bring the Iraq war to a 'responsible end'. Nevertheless, this decision is not only a matter of keeping his word for the charismatic leader. It also reflects the will of American public opinion which has supported the return of American soldiers home. According to a poll conducted by Pew in November 2011, 75% of the respondents had been in favour of Obama's plan. As far as Democrats are concerned 90% approved the decision of US President. By contrast, Republicans were rather divided in their views. 48% supported it and 47% were against it. It total, however, 56% of Americans do believe the country has achieved its goals in Iraq.

Noting that 2012 is the year of the presidential election, what is of interest is to explore whether the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will help Barack Obama in his attempt to be re-elected. At a first glance, the answer seems positive. Nevertheless, an analysis of the stance of public opinion in the US demonstrates that the interest of American citizens in developments in Iraq is not impressive. According to a survey conducted by Pew in October 2011 only 30% of the respondents was closely following President Obama's announcement on this issue. Within the context of the global financial crisis it is the economy - and not US foreign policy - which will be the catalytic factor in view of the US presidential elections.

Inside Iraq

It is noteworthy that the US military withdrawal occurred in spite of the efforts of Washington to convince Baghdad to extent their presence in the country. This detail reflects the concern in the Obama administration about the fact that although political and security stability has been largely achieved in Iraq, this stability remains fragile. The Shiite-Sunni rivalry inside Iraq is ongoing and although a modus vivendi has been established, many doubt that this reconciliation process can last for long but it is rather the result of the US efforts to push things forward. The recent Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi's persecution came just a few hours after the US military departure from Iraq and suggests that things are more complicated than originally thought.

Expectedly democracy in Iraq is not stable and this results from the influence of Islam primarily and tribalism in the political mentality of the Iraqi statesmen. Although there has been much progress in the formation of a democratic consciousness amongst Iraqi statesmen and voters in the last eight years, it is natural that the establishment and consolidation of a democratic view and practice of politics is a demanding and long process in a country with no democratic records and historical tradition. The formation of multi-tribal and multi-religious political parties in the last elections was an effort by Iraqi politicians to show that the concept of democracy can flare at the expense of the traditional sectarian divisions. And this was quite promising. But could it last? Politics in Iraq remain highly polarized in a sectarian context. Old-rooted political concepts, ideas and practices cannot be liberalized in a single moment.

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Political polarization could also have a grave impact on the stability and reliability of the Iraqi army. Given that the majority of Iraqi army officials and soldiers are Shiites this creates a lack of trust between the Sunni minority and the Shiite majority in the army and the society. In case of an emergency, it is doubtful whether the Iraqi army can sustain its unity and perform its duties. Given that various outlawed but well-accepted militias retain their strong influence in the society, the unity of the Iraqi army could share the fate of the unity of the Iraqi political scene. It is quite clear that the Shiite-Sunni rivalry is ongoing and it will get worse in the next few months because this rivalry is fueled by other Muslim countries, in particular Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Acknowledging political instability in Iraq, opponents of US President have also criticized him for an additional reason. That is because he arguably contributed efficiently to the talks for a new security agreement with the country. For instance, there are concerns – as McClatchy Newspapers reported – that Barack Obama and Vice President Biden had remained disengaged from negotiations having had limited direct contact with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki before October 2011. Similar views are also advocated by think tanks such as The Foreign Policy Initiative.

In the region

Undoubtedly Iran is the country which has been benefited the most from the US intervention in Iraq so far. These prospects were looming already from the very beginning, prior to Saddam's deposal. Now with a Shiite-led government in Baghdad bilateral ties have been improved at an unprecedented scale and things show that they will improve further in the foreseeable future. Iranian influence in Iraq does not only result from the common form of Islam but also from the initial isolation and cooling welcoming that Baghdad has suffered from the Sunnite Arab League.

The political marginalization of Iraq's Sunnite minority could not go unnoticed by Iran's great rival in the region, the Sunnite Saudi Arabia. After the initial shock resulting from the Shiite emergence in Iraqi politics, Riyadh has been quite instrumental in balancing the Shiite supremacy in Iraq and has been the protector of the Iraqi Sunni minority's rights.

The regional struggle between Tehran and Riyadh is now focused on Mesopotamia. This struggle is going to be fueled by the US military withdrawal from Iraq. Although the United States is still in Iraq in terms of political advisors, security and intelligence groups as well as other aspects of non-military presence, it is plausible that their withdrawal will create a security vacuum which is highly questionable whether the National Iraqi Army can fill, sustaining a certain degree of stability in the country.

Epilogue

As a whole the US military withdrawal from Iraq has marked the end of the first phase of the transitional period that Baghdad has undergone since 2003. Now with the US army out, Iraqi politicians must carry out the difficult task to develop democracy further in a very complex geopolitical environment. In Iraq the democratization process and stabilization of the Iraqi army will be long with doubtful results because of the country's multi-faced society. It is obvious that Iraq has been and will not cease being the theater of an intense Shiite-Sunni rivalry with multiple geopolitical ramifications for the country and the region. As for the US, the withdrawal from Iraq may give an empty hand to Washington to handle other crises in the region, but it also poses a risk for the stability of a country which neighbors Syria and holds a leading role for the fate of Shiites in the region. In any case, the US continues to have vital interests in Iraq and it remains to be seen whether Barack Obama's decision to withdraw troops from the country has been a wise one in terms of security.

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