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QI Panel:

Iraq and the United States: Return to the Status Quo or Calm Before the Storm?

June 17, 2024
2:00-3:00 PM EST

Adam Weinstein 0:33

Welcome, everyone to today's panel, we're gonna give people maybe another 30 seconds to filter in to the Zoom Room and then we'll get started. Okay, welcome everyone to today's panel, Iraq in the United States returned to the status quo or calm before the storm hosted by the Quincy Institute if you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, where a think tank based in Washington DC, and our approach to US foreign policy is rooted in restraint or the idea that the United States should focus on diplomacy and consider use of force as a option of last resort. So today, we're joined by a very esteemed panel, and in no particular order. I'm going to introduce them. We have Sajad Jiyad, he is a fellow at the at Century International and director of the Shia Politics Working Group and Iraqi political analyst based in Baghdad. He is the managing director of bridge Iraqi non Iraqi NGO and consultancy focused on development projects for young people. His main focus is on public policy and governance. And he's frequently published, he recently published the book God's man in Iraq, The Life and Leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani. And that's one of the most accessible books for an English reader on on arguably the well not arguably the most important Shia theologian in our time, so I highly recommend everyone read it. Next, we're joined by Simona Foltyn, who is an independent journalist and documentary maker based in the Middle East, in 2018 2023. She was based full time in Baghdad, covering the end of the war against ISIS and the fallout between the US and Iran aligned groups. Her writing has been published in The Guardian, the Financial Times The Intercept political and foreign policy among others. As a director, producer and onscreen correspondent, she has produced TV reports and documentaries for all Jazeera English grants 24 on PBS. She also has also published exclusive investigations and partner with tight tight in partnership with tape investigations, and the Pulitzer Center, which are both great organizations. Next, we have Mohammed Shummary. He is a professor at all North Korean University in the College of Political Science and bug God, and he's chair chairman of the Samaria foundation for international affairs, which is an Iraqi nonprofit, an independent foundation that focuses on enhancing Iraq's relations with its neighbors.

And then last but not least, we're joined by our own Stephen Simon. He is a professor of practice in Middle East Studies at the Henry Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He's a senior research fellow here at Quincy. He previously served as executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies for the US and Middle East. And from 2011 to 2012. He served on the National Security Council as Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs. He also served on the NSC staff from 1994 to 1999 on counterterrorism in the Middle East, his most recent book, Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East was published in 2023. And I highly recommend everyone
read that, especially if you want to know, practitioners history of our often beleaguered policies in the Middle East. And with that, I'll get started. I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East program, and today I'll just be serving as the moderator. So we're gonna go straight in the q&a. And my first question is for Stephen, Steven, Ambassador Romanovski, his tenure is coming to an end. What would you say has been the change in US policy towards Iraq during her tenure? And what is that policy? In other words, what is the US doing in Iraq? What does the US want with Iraq? What are our ambitions in Iraq?

Steven Simon 4:55

Sure, I mean, I'm a little disappointed that no one else is going to have a chance to to speak in this session, because it'll take me a while to cover all those points. But perhaps we can communicate what with them later in writing. I'm just pulling your leg. Ambassador Roman housekeys tenure in Iraq, I think has been a productive one, it happened to coincide with a change in US policy. And that was more, you know, a matter of accident and, you know, deliberate planning, Matt Tueller, her predecessor was on his way out to retire from the Foreign Service and, and Alina was teed up as his replacement a while before. A while before the change in US policy toward Iraq had and had emerged. And that change, in a nutshell, was to shift from a primarily military relationship with Iraq, that was focused very much on defeating the ISIS threat in that country, in and to some extent, was on automatic pilot, as a consequence of the 20 year war on terror and the long occupation of Iraq. When when Alena Roman ASCII arrived, she essentially unveiled the new US policy, which was a meant to restructure the relationship, the bilateral relationship with Iraq, on on if I could put it this way secular lines, that is to say, a normal bilateral relationship between the United States and a friendly foreign state, not not set in the context of wartime operations. But I having a much broader agenda that would essentially be similar to the agenda that the US might have with other countries in the Middle East, let's say Egypt, for example, none of these, none of these examples or parallels are perfect, but but they'll have to, but they'll have to do. The one of the things that made this possible was the crushing of the ISIS threat, which removed an indigenous threat, as it were, in Iraq, that was also an enemy of the United States, and which the United States had fought in the latter half of the latter quarter really, of the long run on terror. The new new relationship focused on energy, good governance, essentially, on the kind of agenda that the IMF would typically pursue in a country, like Iraq, particularly in a post conflict phase. So I think this transition, as been executed, rather deftly, under a Roman housekeys, a tenure as ambassador for an ambassador to avoid, you know, serious problems in his or her tenure in Iraq. I mean, historically speaking, would have been kind of difficult because the relationship itself was rocky in that the United States competes with another foreign state for influence in Iraq. And and that was kind of problematic for US foreign policy, which does not value sharing, if mean, sort of what is required and the United States isn't especially adroit at that of the fact that they're Iraq has a hybrid army, which is also difficult for the United States to manage terms of a satisfactory relationship didn't didn't help matters in the fact that the army was a hybrid by virtue of the relationship of its malicious structure, which wasn't turned linked to Iran and adversary of the United States didn't make things easier, either.
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But Ambassador Romanovski I think avoided some of the pitfalls that that might have marred her tenure. The new ambassador, the incoming ambassador, who hasn't been confirmed yet. I don't believe there’s Tracy Jacobson. She's also she's she's unlike Alina romanovski, a career diplomat who served in at least a half a dozen posts prior to her nominee. nation as ambassador to Iraq, in her brief nomination remarks at her at her hearing the remarks that couldn't have taken more than five minutes to deliver, she said at least 10 things that angered Iraqis across the political spectrum. That was a remarkable accomplishment for her for the drafters of her witness statement. But, you know, she, she did the sorts of things that Washington, in a congressional setting really needs to hear that the United States is on, on Iran case that the United States is on the case of any group in Iraq, in in Iraq, that sides with Iran. Particularly, she appeared to conflate the malicious, especially those linked with Iran to to ISIS, not in any kind of operational sense, but grouping them both as adversaries in the United States that the US would attack, she said, with all the means, or any of the means at its disposal. You can imagine how this struck a somewhat discordant note at a sensitive moment, but that was really destined for Congress, you know, the members of Congress were the audience for that remark for those remarks, and not and not Iraqis. So just to sum up at them, you know, from my perspective, I think the US is on a pretty good trajectory, with with Iran with Iraq, and I have to say that a Sudanese visit to Washington was quite successful. Very little of it concerned military issues, at least, that's my understanding of how the meetings played out. He met a wide array of us constituents, particularly in the business sector, and he had some quality time with the President. This is pretty good in the context of a bilateral relationship, especially a problematic one or burdened one. Let me put it that way, like that, between the United States and Iraq. I'll stop there, Adam. Thanks.

Adam Weinstein 12:25

Thanks for that. Steve. Mohammed. I was just in Baghdad about a month ago, and I was lucky enough to meet with you and meet with Sajjad, I have two questions for you, Mohammed, you know, Steve talks, Stephens talking about how the ambassador nominee is talking tough in Congress, which is necessary for domestic US politics, but then we have a softer tone when it comes to our relations inside Baghdad. So my first question is, do you think Iraqis, especially Iraqi elites, who are making decisions understand that dynamic? Do they understand the different tone that exists in Washington and Baghdad? And the reasons behind that? Or does it cause problems in the relationship? And my second question is, you know, just anecdotally, if you walked through Baghdad, and you didn't know anything, you would think the United States had never been there. You just don't see evidence of the US presence in Baghdad, you do see evidence of Iran's presence in Baghdad, what is the role of the United States in Iraq today from from an Iraqi perspective? So those are my two questions for you.

Mohammed Shummary 13:37

Thank you, Adam. Thank you for having me in this panel. First, yeah, you know, here in Baghdad is very complicated in, in dealing with any statement comes from the United States, especially from a new ambassador. Everybody here talk about the role of US
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ambassador here in Baghdad and how it is involving in different things, how it's, you know, some some talk about a negative role of the ambassador here in intervening in Iraqi politics. So, any statement comes from the new ambassador directly talk negatively and many talk about the the negative messages or the new policy that is raises attention inside Iraq. In addition to that, there are who who use this kind of statements here in Baghdad in their propaganda and try to, to show that that the United States want a A to struggle with especially with Iran here inside Iraq. And it's not the about Iraq about developing relations with with Iraq and very few people, very few members of the elites here in Baghdad understand the dynamics in the the United States, especially among Shia elites. And this is this is, you know, I can connect that with with your second question, I believe that, then the United States didn't do a lot. Marketing, let's say or talking about things other than then politics, security, military issues, the role of Iran, the role of militias, and all those things are the main topics in the in the American propaganda, let's say our American statements here in Iraq, the current ambassador tried to do her best to show that there is our our side of the US Iraqi relations, but unfortunately, among all the, the, you know, the tensions, the escalation, the regional escalation, he she couldn't do a lot. So, you know, with the memory that Iraqis have, from the American direct presence in Iraq, the tanks in the streets, soldiers, everything remind Iraqis with with the security role of the United it says, The United States, the United States, and unfortunately, no other side, no other face, let's say, to the American role in Iraq, in the minds of Iraqis and many groups here in Iraq uses use this to, to, you know, for for some political goals.

Adam Weinstein 17:12

Thanks for that, Mohammed. Simona, you were you came to Baghdad, as ISIS was being defeated, and really on its last legs. And you saw the transition of ISIS as a group that was a holding significantly Iraqi territory, to a group that was really on the run. And of course, what we had this kind of tacit partnership, or I wouldn't call it a partnership. But to put it this way, US troops, Iran, aligned militias, the Iraqi military, were all working in parallel against ISIS. And then as that threat was removed, we began to see them turn on each other. Would How would you describe the transition from 2018 to the present in U.S.- Iraq relations based on your view from the ground?

Simona Foltyn 18:02

It's an excellent question. And I can actually offer an anecdote to illustrate how the relationship has evolved. So in 2018, about a year after ISIS was declared territorial, defeated, I traveled for the first time to Iraq's border with Syria to alkine, which is where these tensions between the PMF and you know, the United States were kind of coming to a head. And at that time, he was kind of, you could see that, you know, they had taken over our time, they had divided the territory with, you know, the US aligned forces to the north of the river and the Iran aligned one to the south of the river. And already, this tension was beginning to build, but it hadn't really resulted in confrontation. And already, at that time, you had the PMF groups who were based there, they would already accused the US of using their ISR, their surveillance capabilities to monitor them. And they would even accuse the US even at that time when it wasn't the case
yet, of targeting the PMF. And I remember putting this question to a lieutenant colonel who was based in our time at that time, and what he told me and I was actually just going back to the interview, in preparation for this discussion, what he told me, We have absolutely never targeted the PMF. It is not in our interest to do this, because they are part of the Iraqi security forces. This was in 2018. Fast forward a year, and that dramatically changed. And since then, the relationship really has gone south with frequent tit for tat attacks between the two sides. But it just goes to show how you went from, you know, 2018, where you still had kind of, you know, this this post ISIS coexistence, to you know, the years that followed by you had open confrontations. And, you know, fast forward to February of this year when I went back to a crime in the wake of the US strikes on the PMF actions that were based there. You had the United States openly targeting the PMF. And this is not as you know, the Department of Defense was claiming that these were Iran allied militias that were not part of the PMF. No, the truth was that they were actually targeting brigade 13 of the Popular Mobilization Forces, forces, which are part of the security apparatus. So you really saw over, you know, these, you know, these years a significant deterioration of the relationship, but also it became evident how this US presents under this umbrella of the coalition that is meant to fight ISIS. And it's, you know, it's a refrain that, you know, you always hear coalition officials reiterate, those they don't really like we are here at the invitation of the Iraqi government to fight ISIS. But in reality, what was happening is that, you know, this presence was really being used for another purpose. And that's what I think, made it increasingly unsustainable.

Adam Weinstein 21:03

Thanks for that, that those anecdotes, I think, illustrate illustrates the dysfunction we're at quite well, I remember a friend of mine, who I served with in the Marine Corps was part of the was involved in an advisory capacity in the retaking of Mosul, and I remember he shared a picture with me, where he's right next to a high shelf shabby flag. So people, you know, that's unimaginable today, in many ways. So that's my anecdote. That's actually not really my anecdote, but it was related to me. So John, you wrote the English language book on, on his eminence, Ali Sistani. And, of course, he issued a fatwa that called on Iraqis to join the Iraqi military, the Iraqi security forces, not necessarily the militias. But what of course, what that resulted in was the formation of the email the militias, some of which became the Iran aligned militias. Now at the time that Sistani issued that fatwa, back, ISIS was literally on the doors of Baghdad, there was a real people forget what the, the feeling was at that time. But the feeling, the feeling was ISIS had swept across northern Iraq. And they really could take Baghdad, or at least subject Baghdad to street the street fighting if they weren't stopped. And so it was all hands on deck. And of course, one of the reasons for that was because the US had withdrawn from Iraq. And the Obama administration, at least at the beginning, was hesitant to reenter Iraq. The Iraqis, in some sense, were on their own. But of course, the cost of that is that ISIS was defeated. But now we have the reality of Iran aligned militias. So you have this kind of history in Iraq. I think this is my own opinion of the US solving one short term security problem or perceived short term security problem and then creating another for itself. Do you think that's true? And is are the Iran aligned militias, something that Washington just has to accept as a fact
on the ground? Or are they being delusional when they tried to contain them? Or is it resist them? Or is it just something that's here to stay?

**Sajad Jiyad 21:03**

Thanks. So I mean, the groups that the US has a problem with existed before 2014. So clearly, the United States had accepted that as facts on the ground. So Khattab Hezbollah was created before 2014, better Isabell Hackett Valley, no Java, these all existed before June 2014. So firstly, there's a deep linkage between that and the feds? Well, because the most problematic groups are the ones that were already there before the federal The second thing is the United States had already accepted that these groups were going to be involved in the case of, for example, Assam and how we're going to be involved in politics. They started a party they took part in elections, they, I think in 2014, they had a Member of Parliament as well. So the reality is that some of these groups are playing politics, which I guess is acceptable, and Iraq's contexts are better. So they have party members, they have they run elections, they have MPs, they have cabinet positions. They're involved in sort of formal politics, and I guess that's acceptable to the US as well. The issues with the groups that do not want to play politics that want to seek power through other means, groups like Kitab, Hezbollah like najiba like itama, Valley City, shout the others. They do not have parties, they don't want to take part in elections. They're not interested in playing formal politics. And I think that's what concerns the Iraqi Government first and foremost, and Iraqi policymakers but also it is a concern to the United States that it finds it very difficult to said that there are groups outside the control of the Iraqi government that are supported by the Iraqi state infrastructure that are members of the PMF. Payroll, for example, access to equipment, the legitimacy they have. And yet, they are willing to occasionally target the United States as part of a, as part of what they call the Resistance Axis target the axes because they're occupied in Iraq, as they, as they put it, or for their support for for Israel, for example, or in revenge for revenge or engaging into for tat, tit for tat attacks.

So what will the US do with these very problematic groups, so attacking them and taking them completely off the board, I don't think is realistic and impossible. So let's try to use that in the past contain them has tried to pressure the Iraqi government to undertake more severe actions to try to limit these groups capabilities. But the reality is they've developed they're financially independent of Iran, they are now capable of at least, you know, organizing complex cross border attacks, they have begun to manufacture their own sort of drones, and light weapons. I think Iran has prevented them from having ballistic missiles. But in the future, they may be able to access some of this technology. So it doesn't look like they're getting any weaker. It looks like they're developing and becoming stronger and stronger. So really, the question isn't, you know how to contain them. Us is already trying to contain them, as is already accepted that they exist. But it's what next, if the US is there in Iraq, focused purely on Iran, then, at some point, it's going to clash with these groups. There's, there's no, there's no hiding that fact, if the US agrees a deal with Iran, just like Saudi agreed to deal with Iran, these groups become much less problematic. We were in this. We were in this position a few years ago, when we had the JCPOA. Suddenly, at that time, these groups were no longer direct daily threats to the United States. Because the United States and Iran got on well, for a small period of time. Therefore,
these groups, we're not only targeting the United States, and I think that's the situation where we are today is, as the US and Iran remain at loggerheads. The battleground will be Iraq, there's just there's no other way to to put it. So for now, I think the US has to be concerned about, you know, these groups potentially escalating again, the issue of troop withdrawal is obviously not making much progress at this moment. And I think it is very possible in the next 18 months, in two years year or so that we will see another round of attacks by these groups against US presence in Iraq.

Adam Weinstein 27:41

Steven, so as Sajad pointed out, many of the more problematic groups existed before the ISIS crisis before Sistani is fatwa even though the narrative the popular narrative in Washington is often that they they took advantage of the ISIS threat and the and now we have essentially the see this this coalition of Iran aligned militias. How does the US deal with these these facts on the ground, so to speak, given that they're a reality that's not going away?

Steven Simon 28:12

So yeah, that's a good question. And I figured you were gonna ask it after the previous interventions. I think the United States has to deal first of all, with two, you know, big problems, some of which essentially has no control, by definition. The one is that the United States has elections every four years. You know, many Americans probably lament that fact. But, you know, as a practical matter, you know, it gets in the way of conducting consistent foreign policy. And, you know, since the United States invaded Iran, there have been several administrations, and they have had different approaches, different policies, different attitudes toward towards Iraq. Okay. So maintaining continuity under those circumstances is just extremely difficult. It's a structural factor, you can't get around that. The second issue is political shock, you know, intervening variables that appear to come out of nowhere, and, and that the United States, you know, can't really even shape and an example would be Gaza, which impelled military attacks by these by these groups against the United States, ultimately killing three US military personnel, which was going to necessitate a harsh response. There was no way around that now that that response happened to be actually, you know, inconsistent with the general thrust of the Biden administration's policy towards Iraq. But nevertheless, there was no choice but to conduct that response. And I think administration officials were relatively pleased with it precisely because it was contained. And, and the US attacks as we know, they were harsh, and they were widely distributed. And they probably hit more groups than were involved directly in the attacks against the United States because of because of Gaza. But nevertheless, the clashes died down. They they ended with informal truces.

Now, you know, I'm not typically optimistic about about things in, you know, in the region, let alone in Iraq, but I thought that, that the way that that Tempest, was contained to the teapot was a favorable sign of, let's call it maturity on, you know, on the part of, of the combatants in in the fray, I have no doubt, as the other speakers have, you know, have expressed that there could be more political shocks like this in the future. And I also agree that, you know, it really you run
here, I, I kind of hesitate to say this, maybe, but it's the independent variable. You know, it's because it depending upon what Iran does, the United States will react in one or another. Ways that would impinge on its relationship with, with Iraq, it's, it's generally I don't think the United States that starts these things, but getting back that's just gets us back to the original point about lack of continuity, okay, because Trump kind of changed things by by killing Soleimani. In and that was, that has been kind of problematic. And now we see publications like foreign affairs, coming out under the byline of Graham Allison and Mike Morel, who was a former acting director of CIA, saying, Well, you know, we really got to worry about, you know, Iraqi terrorism in the United States. Well, why? Well, because the US killed Soleimani and put Iran on the spot of having to retaliate for the loss of a popular and important commander. So, you know, these, these dynamics, as the previous speaker, you know, call them can be, can be pretty squirrely, and wrapped both Iraq and the United States in a kind of a difficult situation without much warning.

Adam Weinstein 32:58

Thanks for that. I'm going to ask a question to our to Iraqi panelists. And for the sake of time, I'm going to ask Sajad, Mohammed that you keep your answers to two minutes if you can. It's a bit of a provocative question. Do Iraqis want the US military to stay or leave? We'll start with Sajad.

Sajad Jiyad 33:20

The Iraqi public or the Iraqi leadership?

Adam Weinstein 33:24

Just go through the gamut

Sajad Jiyad 33:27

I mean, I would say the Iraqi politically probably is, is concerned about the US withdrawing and then the relationship between the US and Iraq deteriorating. So they're looking for slow negotiated reduction in troops while maintaining a good relationship with the US. They don't want the US to sort of punish Iraq by forcing US troops out of the country. And instead, they're looking for sort of a long term security, engagement, continuation of provision of, of services that are essential for the Iraqi armed forces, but also, you know, things that the ROK does not have the capability for, you know, surveillance, for example, monitoring the third form ISIS, provision of certain military technologies. And the fact is the rock economy depends on us. So political lead, recognizes that it needs to have a good relationship with us, across the board from from all backgrounds. The public, I think the relationship is obviously more complicated, I would say. Probably the majority of the public are not happy with the fact that the US is present in Iraq in terms of troop numbers. And I think the the war on Gaza highlighted some of the things that people have a problem with us is providing cover for Israel that the US is willing to undertake breaks it against Iraqi civilians inside Iraq, while Iraqi citizens inside Iraq in civilian areas while it
is hosted by the government. I think that situation is just untenable. And clearly, you know, we have communications from the prime minister saying, We didn't authorize these attacks by the US, for example, we were not happy with them. They're in violation of sovereignty. I think that messaging gets to people that people are aware, the fact that the US is undertaking actions in Iraq that the government doesn't approve, that is not welcome. Obviously, they're in response to being attacked, we understand that the US has targeted in bases in Iraq, at the embassy in the past, US servicemen were killed in the Jordan Syria border. But the fact is, it's undertaking actions that are not acceptable to the Iraqi public inside Iraq. And so I think, you know, from the public's perspective, I would say, maybe a majority, the, you know, not an overwhelming majority, but a majority of people are unhappy with the situation, not necessarily on, you know, exact trip number count. We're not saying we need to come down from 5000 troops to 1700. It's not anything scientific in that sense. But they're just unhappy with the fact that the US seems to be able to do what it wants, inside Iraq. And Iraq is not able to sort of maintain sovereignty, the same public are very critical. So for any actions and Turkish actions. So it isn't just one way, it isn't just being critical of the US while being completely welcoming to the interference and the actions of Turkey and Euro.

Adam Weinstein 36:15

Do you think it's safe to say, I mean, Steve Simon's argued this in some of his writing, that there's a concern that if the US were to completely leave, it would make it easier to economically isolate Iraq?

Sajad Jiyad 36:28

I mean, if the US leaves and it leaves on bad terms, let's say, Absolutely, that's what it will do sanctions make accessing Iraq's compete, you know, all our sovereign wealth is is held by the United States. It's in his in Federal Reserve in New York. So all our money is there, all our cells go over there. So if, if we're on bad terms with U.S., we can expect a massive economic repercussion from it.

Adam Weinstein 36:54

Okay, Mohammed, please feel free to ask my, to answer my oversimplified question with all the nuance you want. Do Iraqis want the US to stay or leave militarily?

Mohammed Shummary 37:06

I think it depends on who Iraq is we are talking about, are we talking about Shia Sunni Kurds, but the public, the the politicians, the government, each of those groups, let's say, have have or has has its own motivations, its own vision about the American prisons. But the common, let's say, since after October 7, is that the role of the American forces in Iraq is kind of an any stability element in Iraq, it provides kind of justification for the military, the the armed groups to, to attack to do, you know, to use this presence as as a justification for their, their their actions.
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This is on one side, for the for the government. I believe that there is kind of policy for the government to normalize the the international situation of of Iraq, it's part of what the government wants to do, for example, with with the tsunami, you know, all those extra ordinary situations, let's say or frameworks that, that Iraq was put in, because of the, you know, the invasion in 2003. The the War on Terrorism era, the government want to change, including the role of the international coalition and the American prisons for the courts. It's different because maybe find the the American prisons is kind of cover for for for them are a protection for them in their relation with with Baghdad, I can say there is no one position, but in general after October 7, the level of of let's say calls or positions against if this presence increase, and that also, you know, was and always increased with with the with the level of escalation regionally but mainly internally in Iran.

Adam Weinstein 39:52

Kkay, thank you for that. Simona, we've mostly talked about security today. You're one of the few journalists of for foreign journalists who stayed in Iraq after the major ISIS campaign, and I think it's safe to say you really got to know the country in various different dimensions, and you haven't just focused on security, you haven't just focused on ISIS, you've conducted investigations on corruption on climate. If you had a chance to advise the Biden administration, or any other foreign government that has has a diplomatic mission in Iraq, what would you tell them? are the top three or four things that they actually they should be focused on in terms of Iraq's long term stability and the world's relations with Iraq?

Simona Foltyn 40:47

Well, I mean, I would not advise any government as a journalist. But you know, it's struck me when I was reading the statement of the designated US Ambassador to incoming one, where she mentioned that the biggest threat to Iraq stability are these quote, Iran aligned militias. And it just always strikes me as so far removed from reality, and so overly focused, if not obsessed with with Iran's influence in Iraq, because that's just not how many Iraqis will see it right. We have other issues that are much greater threats to Iraq stability, including climate change, including the drop and drop epidemic, that it's really consuming a big part of Iraq's youth, youth unemployment, corruption, which is practiced not just by Iran aligned elements, but the Kurds, the Sunnis really, through the entire political spectrum. And these are really the issues that undermine Iraq stability. And you know, if we want to talk about foreign intervention in Iraq, why not mentioned the fact that Turkey has now well over 100 military outposts inside Iraq's territory, but because Turkey is a member of NATO, this is not really mentioned. And I think, you know, the problem ultimately boils down to that. I think any administration doesn't have a very good grasp of how it is perceived, how its policies are perceived in Iraq. I mean, this this gap has always struck me, you know, throughout my years, I mean, I remember having this conversation with a US diplomat once when we spoke about type Hezbollah, which is part of the so called Axis of Resistance. And, and I was trying to explain, you know, the motives why these groups maintain their arms and are still attacking US troops. And this diplomat said, like, what resistance? What are they resisting? And I think it really goes to show that, you know, American
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Memory is very short. And that's in part because of the election cycle. But for Iraqis, it's very long, the US left in 2011 as an occupying power, they returned in 2014, as part of a coalition, three years in between, that's nothing, the US thought they had turned the page from occupier to ally, but for Iraqis, not really much had changed. You know, and when you have a situation where, despite insisting that US forces are part of this coalition to fight ISIS, then at the same time they use these capabilities to strike these groups, you can't really blame them that they have still this notion, or this is still an occupying power. You know, it's not that far fetched, really. And that's why we have statements like this, you know, the biggest threat to Iraq stability, are Iran aligned groups, you know, it really kind of sounds almost a little bit hypocritical, because that's just not how a lot of actors will perceive it on the ground. So. So I think it really needs to, and I think part of it, part of the reason why there is this perspective is perhaps there is not enough interest, or perhaps it's because of the physical isolation of the US Embassy, that maybe there is just not enough intermingling and collection with, with Iraqi society to better understand, you know, what are the actual threats to Iraq stability, I think the average Iraqi youth on the street, you know, unless they're politically active and they're opposing those groups, yes, then in that case, they will be in trouble. But the average Iraqi youth will worry about not having a job about not being able to sustain their family about not having enough money to get married. That's what they worry about. And that is where I think the greatest threat to Iraq stability lies.

Adam Weinstein 44:36

Okay, thank you for that. Someone in the chat, asked if Brad in the chat asked is the US providing humanitarian aid to Iraq? This is a statement from April 2024 from the State Department, and it reads, The United States remains Iraq's most significant partner in economic development and humanitarian assistance. And since 2014, the US has invested nearly $3.5 billion in humanitarian and, and development assistance to Iraqi, so in short Brad, yes they are, the US is providing humanitarian aid to Iraq. We have another question. I'll direct this one to you Sajad. Tom O'Connor is asking is saying that a number of militias have signaled that they're running out of patience with the US timeline for withdrawal, do you think that's that's true? Or is that just rhetoric for their supporters or directly or meant for Iran itself? Or is there a genuine impatience in the time with the timeline from some of the Iran aligned militias?

Sajad Jiyad 45:37

Well, the issue is there is no clear timeline. There is a process which they call the HMC the Higher Monetary Commission, which is Prime Minister Committee, which is aimed at negotiating the terms under which the US will begin to withdrew withdraw troops and transition to a post coalition mission. But I think we all understand that this is a political decision, it's something that is decided by the NSC and agreed by the White House on when, if and how US troops will withdraw. It's not something that is agreed by a bilateral committee. And unfortunately, I don't think any progress on this issue will be made before elections in November, for obvious reasons. And then it whether there is a new president in the White House or not, the US government will also want to wait and see who's going to be the Iraqi Prime Minister posts, November 2025. What kind of government will be in Iraq? If there is an agreement to be made,
then who is the partner that they're going to make with if it's Rouhani, he may only be in office for another year and three, four months? And so I'm not sure we'll have significant progress on the issue of troop withdrawal this year, or even next. And so potentially, we're in a scenario where maybe another two years before we see any significant progress on the issue of troop production. Can these armed groups, militias, resistance groups, can they wait for two years? Can they continue supporting the prime minister or not supporting But accepting the Prime Minister's appeal that negotiations and diplomacy is the best way forward? On the part of a Resistance Axis? And aren't they supposed to be supporting efforts by other groups in Yemen and Lebanon? So what is it these groups are doing in Iraq? If they're not targeting the US? That's their raison d'être at the moment? So I think it's very difficult to see next 18 months to two years without some sort of escalation. I think these groups are frustrated at the progress of talks on withdrawing troops. But I think they at the moment, they are under pressure from the Iraqi government, from Iran as well, I think that was the reason why there was a ceasefire, because the rains pushed very, very hard for these groups to stop undertaking unauthorized actions. The attack on 2022 was without any knowledge or approval or support. And so you have this point where these groups feel, you know, they're under pressure from several fronts from the US from Iran from the Iraqi government. But I honestly I think it's a matter of time before they decide to to undertake, you know, actions that are likely to escalate or destabilize. Because waiting for two years while governments sit in committees to discuss withdrawal, I don't think it's something that's acceptable today.

Adam Weinstein 48:28

I'm going to stay with you on this for a moment. So Jordan and I have follow ups from Mohammed and and Steven, but, I mean, you're the reason that of these militias is attacking US troops. It is a source of instability. As we've all discussed, there's a potential for flare ups that are unpredictable, as we saw with October 7. And then as a, you know, escalation happens. Yes, maybe we were lucky enough that after tower tower 22, there was a certain maturity is Stephen called it between the belligerents. And so we've seen things settled down, but there's no guarantee that that will remain the case. So I guess my question for you Sajjad is do you think in the long term USC rocky relations would be more stable if US troops ultimately left assuming they leave in an organized manner? And what could a future us Iraq relationship look like without US troops on the ground?

Mohammed Shummary 49:21

Yeah, I mean, so that's contingent upon the the nature of the US-Iraq relationship, if troops withdraw, if the British have is still positive, then I think the net outcome is going to be positive for right. But if the US withdraws, not have its own sort of wishes, under fire, potentially, potentially a rash decision by a new president, for example, then I think the you know, it's not going to be good for Iraq, and it's better US troops stay where they are. So it really depends on how, how negotiated the troop withdrawal is. I think it's better for Iraq to have obviously less foreign troops. Have no foreign troops in the country. I think that's the ideal situation. But how we get to that is probably the most important thing is how do these countries negotiate the right
outcome? If it is just one country dictating to the other, I don't think it's healthy. If the US is just insisting that it's going to remain, because CENTCOM or the NSC is convinced that it needs to maintain a physical presence in Iraq, then I think that's not healthy for for Iraq. And if Iraq is just pushing the US, regardless of the future, and wants to push us troops out, that I think also that's not healthy, because obviously the US is in a stronger position to, to, you know, to retaliate through other means. So, depends on how we get to that situation. But yes, we do need to see foreign troops reduced, and eventually, you know, pull out completely. At the same time, Iraq also needs to show that it's able to control its borders, it has the ability to to put down any efforts by groups like ISIS to launch an insurrection, that it's not going to be a threat to other countries security, like Iran, like Turkey, like Saudi Arabia. So these go hand in hand, it's not like they're independent of each other, they need to happen at the same time, convincing the international community or at least regional countries, that it can maintain its own security, and at the same time negotiating the best outcome for the country without facing any serious repercussions.

Adam Weinstein 51:20

Actually, I had a follow up from Mohammed and Steven, but I'm gonna go go back to you for a moment Simona. Because the world is a lot bigger than the United States in Iraq. How do you think the region and also European countries that have an interest in Iraq view the US military presence there? Do they view it as a force of stability? Do they view it as something unpredictable? Do they view it as I mean, I'm sure there's different views. So how do you think the region and of course some of the US has close European partners view that continued US military presence in Iraq?

Simona Foltyn 51:54

Well, I think if you look at Western government, they look at it as you know, a necessary for stability, and you know, all of these, a lot of these countries that are present in Iraq, they are also part of the coalition, and everybody is aware that the United States military is the backbone of this coalition. So they're very much dependent on them. And I think a lot of governments are also fully aware that if the United States were to fully withdraw, then, you know, they would have to seriously reconsider their presence. And they would have to reconsider the presence of certain NGOs and international organizations. So a full withdrawal, which I don't think is very likely, partly for that reason, would have a serious knock on effects for the presence of Western organizations in Iraq. And with that, of course, you would have a huge economic impact, right. So it would have a ripple effect on jobs on contracts that are being ordered, which benefit a very wide spectrum of players, including some of those Iran aligned actors. So, you know, from an economic perspective, and from a, you know, it's I don't think it's in the interest of anybody that the United States leave. And, you know, from, from a political and security perspective, I think there is consensus among Western governments that the United States should stay to be able to protect and support other diplomatic missions and other international organizations. And then, you know, if you look, you know, at the region, you know, you have, obviously, a very big variety of actors with different ideologies and alignments, if you look at visually any entity that is part of this, so called acts of resistance, they would like to see the us leave. So, you know, so it's
Correctly pointed out, it is also quite varied, if you look at the different components of Iraqi society and of the political spectrum. So it is it is quite a complicated picture.

Adam Weinstein 54:01

Okay, so we've discussed how due to political, domestic political reasons in the US, and frankly, domestic political reasons in Iraq, it's unlikely that there's going to be a withdrawal in the immediate future, let's call it one year. And I agree with that assessment as well, that it's that it's politically unlikely. Somebody asks him in the chat, how many US troops are in Iraq, it's approximately 2500. Although it will fluctuate slightly with rotations. They're they're in an advisory capacity, unlike the troops and in northeastern Syria that do involve themselves directly in combat, although it's largely viewed that some of the, you know, unofficially, it's viewed by some folks that some of the troops in Iraq are more involved than perhaps we'd like to admit. I'll leave that for people speculation. But, you know, at some point US troops will leave Iraq, I think it's unlikely that US troops are going to be there and perhaps 10 years due to the other political forces that we've talked about. And the currents in Iraqi public opinion and even US public opinion. So this is a question for Mohammed and Steven, we only have four minutes left, please try to be brief, maybe one to two minutes, max, we'll start with Mohammed, and then go to Steven, what would a positive U.S.- Iraq relationship look like without US troops on the ground?

Mohammed Shumary 55:21

I think I think it's important to go to the old way of building relations. I, you know, there's a problem in both sides in Iraq, that we don't have a clear definition, what, what is the, the means us an enemy about this definition. And on the other side, I think, in the United States, they understand the Iraq as part of the confrontation with, with Iran. So this gap affects the the the future of the relationship between the the two countries, I believe that having a policy for Iraq is very important. Be, you know, be corage in supporting in encouraging us companies to to come to Iraq, be patient, you know, with the developments in Iraq, which I think it's very positive developments for the future, and to change the way that the United States talk to Iraqis, especially talking to to the new generations, I believe that will help a lot in shaping a new face a new level of relation for the future, for the relation between the two countries.

Adam Weinstein 56:58

Steven, the last word is yours.

Steven Simon 57:01

I, you know, I think Iran is is such an important variable in this equation. And it's, it's, it's hard to come, it's just odd to contemplate a scenario, at least in the near to medium term where there are not whether or not US forces, but I do I do, I do want to say, as a general matter, the United States likes to have bilateral relations across the board, ties to all the government institutions, you know, in play in whatever country we're talking about. And that includes the military. And I
think even if there's no permanent military presence in Iraq, I know military bases of the United States and Iraq will probably still want to see us forces flow in for periodic exercises, training and so forth. And you'll have elements in the security establishment in Iraq, like the CTS, the counterterrorism service, that highly value the US presidents will be arguing from within on the Iraqi side for continued U.S., U.S. presence, but I think, you know, just to conclude a US-Iraq relationship, minus the military dimension, you know, in the future, could work out very nicely. And I certainly, you know, hope it does.

Adam Weinstein 58:36

Hey, thanks for that. Steven. Thanks for everyone who joined us today. It was a good turnout. I do encourage all of you to read Sajad’s book called God's man in Iraq. And also to check out Simona’s reporting investigations, including including the documentary she's been involved in, if you just Google on Google her name, they'll come up and she has a web page as well. Sumeria Foundation is doing great work and and please check out some of our briefs and articles and responsible statecraft and on the Quincy Institute website. And I just like to thank all of you, especially those who are doing this later in the evening and Baghdad, for joining us today and offering your insights. I wish we had another hour it feels like we've just begun to scratch the surface as usual. I always come away from these things feeling like I have more questions than answers, but I guess the important thing is that we keep talking. So thanks again for joining.