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Correcting America's Grand Strategic Failures in Iraq

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Press reports indicate that the U.S. is soon to have yet another meeting with Iraq on establishing some kind of future strategic relationship. Unless this meeting makes a dramatic break with the past, it will be a dismal failure and do more to empower Iraq's divisions and Iranian influence than to serve U.S. and Iraqi interests or to help bring any kind of security and stability to the MENA region.

There are twelve reasons why the U.S. may fail, and all of them are issues that the U.S. has so far failed to address at the grand strategic level.

1. ***Thinking tactically, rather than strategically:*** From 2003 onwards, the U.S. has focused on dealing with the threat of the day, rather than on creating long-term Iraqi unity, development, and defense capabilities. The U.S. has talked about integrated civil-military plans as well as longer-term civil and security goals, but it has focused primarily on dealing with extremist threats rather than creating some effective longer-term plans to create effective Iraqi military, internal security, and police forces as well as some kind of economic aid program tailored to uniting its Arab Shi'ites, Arab Sunni, Kurds and minorities under one effective structure of governance.
2. ***Underestimating Iraq's strategic importance:*** The U.S. has consistently failed to give Iraq its proper strategic value. It focused on engaging Islamic extremists rather than Iraq's critical role in containing and deterring Iran; preventing Iraq from becoming a strategic bridge between Iran, Syria, and the Hezbollah that would link Iraq to the Arab Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt; limiting Turkish pressure and interference; and limiting Russian and Chinese influence.

The U.S. has also confused the reduction in U.S. petroleum imports with a reduction in the strategic importance of the Gulf – although the Gulf exports some 20% of world petroleum. It has understated Iraq's strategic importance to China and Russia as well as the extent to which it is critical in providing the stable flow of energy to Asian exports to the United States. These exports now make up a critical percentage of U.S. trade and the U.S. GDP.

3. ***Focusing on the wrong enemies:*** The U.S. did need to focus on Islamic extremists, Al Qaeda, and ISIS. The main threat, however, has always been Iran, the expansion of Iranian influence, and how Iraq's relations with Syria will evolve – a threat now compounded by Russia's role in Syria as well as Russia's efforts to expand its role in Iraq and the Gulf. The U.S. has failed to understand Iraq's grand strategic military importance; its critical potential role in bringing stability and security to the MENA region; and the fact that its failed and corrupt governance, internal ethnic and sectarian tensions, and growing economic collapse were the real enemies.
4. ***Rushing in and rushing out:*** The U.S. invaded in 2003 with no clear plan for the future beyond removing Saddam, and it originally planned major withdrawals within a year. The U.S. never created stable plans for the future once it had created a new war with Iraqi Sunni extremists. It then rushed out of Iraq in 2011, ignoring many of the limited plans it had made in 2010.

ISIS forces then took advantage of the near U.S. withdrawal in 2011 and conquered most of Western Iraq. This then led the U.S. to rush back in, only to rush out again once the ISIS “caliphate” had been broken up in 2018. The U.S. only had a nominal 3,500 troops present in the spring of 2021, although the surviving cadres of ISIS fighters had become increasingly active, and new threats were emerging from the PMFs and Iran.

Moreover, the U.S. left large numbers of largely Sunni Popular Mobilization Forces behind (many with ties to Iran). It effectively empowered Iran and increased the threat to the limited number of U.S. forces and other personnel that remained.

5. ***Providing erratic and poorly focused security assistance:*** After invading in 2003, the U.S. relied largely on its own military forces to fight the rising Iraqi extremist forces from 2004-2009. It also obtained allied help and coalitions. The U.S. was, however, far too slow in its efforts to build up Iraq’s military forces and proper government leadership as well as the management of these forces. From 2004-2009, the U.S. relied far too much on a massive buildup of U.S. ground forces.

This U.S. build-up also only worked because the first round of Iraqi extremists was so extreme in dealing with fellow Sunnis that they alienated large portions of the local population. This created many anti-extremist Iraqi Sunni volunteers like the Sons of Iraq, and they played a major role in defeating the first round of such extremists. Iraqi government forces were still far too much of a hollow shell when the U.S. largely withdrew most of its forces in 2011.

6. ***Failing to sustain key military support and train and assist efforts:*** After U.S. forces returned to deal with ISIS in 2014, the U.S. did focus far more on developing Iraqi ground force development and on providing forward-deployed train and assist efforts that often directly supported Iraqi government land forces in combat. The U.S. created important new initiatives like the Security Force Assistance Brigades, new uses of Special Forces, and intelligence personnel to support Iraqi units in combat – while relying heavily on unmanned airstrike and intelligence systems. These shifts also reduced the cost of U.S. efforts to far lower levels in casualties and dollars.

The U.S. did not, however, create longer-term plans or train and assist structures that would make Iraqi forces fully effective once the “caliphate” was broken up. The U.S. repeated its mistakes in Vietnam by leaving Iraq land and air forces grossly overdependent on U.S. combat armor and aircraft that they could not sustain. This made Iraqi government forces steadily more dependent on Russian arms and on the older arms they had imported from the Soviet Union. It also did virtually nothing after 2010 to help develop more effective Iraqi police forces.

7. ***Failing to address the causes of Iraq’s internal violence:*** The U.S. failed to understand that defeating the first round of extremists by 2010, and then returning and breaking up the ISIS caliphate would never achieve lasting results unless the U.S. dealt with the causes of violent extremism rather than the latest form of extremist violence.

The U.S. focused almost exclusively on the active extremist symptoms to the near exclusion of dealing with the actual disease: the lack of civil progress; the failures in almost every aspect of governance, political corruption, and factional interest; and the high levels of sectarian and ethnic tension and violence. Leaving in 2011, returning in order to defeat

the “caliphate,” and the leaving again after 2019 – with many ISIS fighters still active and after empowering pro-Iranian militias – all helped raised these levels of tension and violence as well.

8. ***Failing to address Iraqi governance, politics, and corruption:*** U.S. efforts to remake Iraq in its own image from roughly 2003 to 2009 had little real success or lasting effect. Worse, these U.S. efforts to address Iraq’s civil problems were replaced from roughly 2010 onwards by only very limited and poorly focused aid programs.

Financial aid kept Iraq solvent, but other forms of aid were often poorly managed, wasted, stolen, or had very limited effectiveness. The U.S. made little effort to make aid and other support conditional on its proper use. It did not halt support when Iraqis proved to be corrupt and ineffective. It also failed to use aid to create strong aid incentives and options to unite the Sunnis and Shi’ites as well as the Arabs and Kurds.

9. ***Failing to provide adequate and effective economic aid and support economic reform:*** The U.S. has never seemed to realize that Iraq’s economic stability and development have been the critical second half of any meaningful security effort. Economic reform and aid is as important – if not more – than the security force’s reform and aid. It is also the critical potential tool in uniting the Sunnis and Shi’ites as well as the Arabs and Kurds, in reducing the critical forces that shape corruption, in creating new jobs, in winning popular support for the government and reducing popular protests, and in undermining Iranian and others’ efforts to gain control over key parts of Iraq’s economy.

10. ***Focusing on a narrow, self-seeking U.S. strategic partnership rather than meaningful regional stability:*** The U.S. needs to realize that it cannot turn a divided Iraq – caught between Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the Southern Arab Gulf states – into a clear strategic partner of the kind the U.S. now has with the Southern Arab Gulf states.

The U.S. needs to focus on creating a strong and independent Iraq: one with an effective government, developing economy, and enough security forces to both deal with internal security as well as to defend and deter against neighbors like Iran and a post-civil war Syria. This is the best way to unite Iraq, to get broad Iraqi support for U.S. efforts, and to limit Iran’s success as much as possible. Once again, encouraging Iraqis to act in ways that benefit Iraq is far more likely to succeed.

11. ***Failing to work effectively with our allies:*** One key way to help accomplish these military goals is to make them as multilateral as possible. Bringing European allies into the military and security assistance efforts – even to the point of organizing a NATO military support or train and assist efforts – to defuse Iraqi resentment of past U.S. mistakes and to make it clear that the end goal was a stronger and independent Iraq. Nations like France and Italy also have far more experience in creating effective paramilitary forces and in dealing with challenges like the Iraqi PMFs.

A second key way to accomplish such goals would be to internationalize economic aid on a stable basis and to use the World Bank to help in economic development instead of the State Department and USAID. The UN has become too political and divided to run a major aid program, and USAID’s strength in emergency and project aid have never been matched in its modern efforts at economic development and reform.

The World Bank would have to adjust its efforts to focus on governance and reducing the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq. It would have to enforce conditionality on aid as long as Iraq remains as corrupt as it is today. However, the World Bank does seem to have a real-world approach to addressing Iraq's governance, economic, and development programs, and it has developed some excellent assessments of Iraq's critical, structural economic problems. This is also an area where the U.S. might be able to work with the EU – focusing on the potential to meet common objectives, rather than working on divided efforts.

12. ***Understanding that the U.S. faces three sets of enemies and not just one:*** Finally, the U.S. needs to learn a lesson that it should have learned as early as its intervention in the Philippines from 1899-1913, and one that it should certainly have learned in fighting the Vietnam War. A focus on grand strategy and long-term outcomes is critical to avoiding long wars that have no positive ending.

Defeating the immediate enemy is only part of a campaign that has a successful grand strategic ending. The U.S. needs to address all such conflicts with the understanding that it faces three sets of enemies and not just one. The first enemy is the obvious threat posed by direct opponents. The second enemy is the weaknesses, divisions, and corruption of the government and military forces of the country the U.S. is trying to help. The third is America's ignorance of the country, failure to address the complexity of the tasks involved, and the learning curve in developing effective ways to aid a given country at both the security and civil level – as well as its ability predict whether U.S intervention can actually be effective.

In virtually every such cases, major changes are needed in the host country at both the security and civil levels. Letting the country continue to make the same mistakes by doing it “their way” will not work. However, the U.S. also can only succeed where another state can eventually make real progress in transforming its own goals and values. The U.S. will virtually always fail when it tries to go from providing such aid to trying to transform another country and culture.