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International Coalition Forces in Iraq: A Review of Withdrawal Concerns

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Introduction:

The withdrawal of Coalition Forces, notably the U.S. troops, from Iraqi territory has emerged as a significant issue that has recently taken precedence in the realm of domestic political concerns. The issue of the withdrawal of international coalition forces has been exerting pressure on the Iraqi government since the assassination of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander, General Qasem Soleimani, and the deputy head of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, by a U.S. airstrike in 2020. The Iraqi demands have not been satisfied with political and diplomatic means to resolve the matter. Iraqi resistance factions have adopted military operations targeting the bases of the Coalition Forces in Baghdad, Erbil, and the Anbar desert, which has agitated the United States and the nations participating in the coalition regarding the Iraqi government's approach to this issue. Frequently, the relationship has escalated into a state of ongoing conflict between the factions and Coalition Forces, culminating in the exchange of precisely targeted strategic strikes between both parties. The most recent of these was an airstrike on the 12th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces, resulting in the death of "Mushtaq Talib al-Saedi," known as "Abu Taqwa," a leader in the Al-Nujaba Movement. In this context, the announcement by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani on January 5, 2024,

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that the government is preparing to form a bilateral committee to schedule the final withdrawal of the Coalition Forces against ISIS from Iraq, affirmed that there would be no compromise on anything that would undermine national sovereignty.

Strategic Analysis:

Iraqi voices have risen against the presence of the international coalition during a very heated period in the Middle East due to the repercussions of the war in Gaza and the gravity of the crimes committed by the Zionist entity against the Palestinians. This outcry is also in light of the announcement of a general mobilization by the Iraqi resistance factions in coordination with the Lebanese and Yemeni resistance entities to target U.S. interests and bases in the region, especially Iraq and Syria, which are considered soft spots for the international coalition.

Despite the Iraqi Parliament's vote in 2020 to end the U.S. military presence, and the government's statement in mid-August 2023, through Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, that Iraq no longer needs coalition forces on its soil, the recent calls for the departure of U.S. forces come in a different regional context. They arise in the context of escalating military clashes between U.S. forces in the region and resistance factions against the backdrop of the war in Gaza. Military bases hosting international coalition forces in Iraq were subjected to dozens of attacks by drones and missiles in response to Washington's support for Israel in its war on the Gaza Strip.

In response, the U.S. bombed locations in Iraq and others linked to Iran in Syria, and also listed leaders of "Kata'ib Hezbollah" and "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada" in Iraq on its terrorism list. Along with the field escalation, political forces' calls to pressure against the interests of countries supporting the Zionist entity, foremost among them the U.S., have escalated.

Hence, the announcement of Iraq's formation of a bilateral committee to arrange and accelerate the end of the missions of the international coalition forces against ISIS can be understood in light of the internal pressures faced by the "al-Sudani" government to rid itself of coalition forces, and its inability to reduce the ongoing escalation – after a relative calm that lasted about a year after the government formation – and establish a balanced equation. On one hand, the Iraqi government cannot prevent these factions from attacking U.S. bases and their military bases in Syria and Iraq, and on the other hand, it cannot prevent Washington from responding to these attacks under what it calls (its right to self-defense) and protecting its interests in the region.

In the same context, the repeated statements by the Prime Minister of Iraq demanding the end of the missions of the international coalition forces come after the progress Iraq has made in the file of fighting ISIS, following the liberation of areas occupied by the terrorist organization in 2017. With the continuation of efforts to pursue the remnants of ISIS and its cells throughout the country, and the succession of security and military operations carried out by the Iraqi forces against dens and cells of the organization in many governorates, this led to a significant decline in the operational trend of ISIS activity within the Iraqi geography, and the loss of the organization's military capabilities, as well as its ability to recruit new elements.

Thus, Iraq has become one of the most successful countries in combating terrorism during the year 2023, as Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani stated to the American "CNN" network in September 2023 that "the ISIS organization has become nothing but groups chased in the desert, and no longer poses a threat to the country," while the Iraqi National Security Advisor, Qasim Al-Araji, stated on August 21, 2023, that "Iraq has triumphed over the ISIS

organization, but continues operations in the context of intelligence battles to maintain the security achievements made." Also, the commander of the "Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)" in the southern Mosul areas, Ibrahim Al-Marsoumi, stated on August 26, 2023, that "the ISIS organization has ended never to return, and is no longer able to move easily at all."

Domestic Implications

Several internal factors in Iraq are linked to the political and economic fields in the process of evacuating coalition forces very quickly and in an unorganized manner, as well as the situation that concerns the U.S. without prior arrangement and friendly agreement leading to evacuation, especially under the conditions previously discussed. Several matters become clear, including:

1. **Economic Impacts:** The security implications resulting from the withdrawal of the international coalition forces from Iraq are connected with potential negative impacts on the Iraqi economy, which will naturally affect efforts to combat terrorism. The repeated pressure from Iraq towards the forcible exit of U.S. forces without a satisfactory formula for both parties could generate a series of economic repercussions including:

A. The situation may prompt Washington to stop security and financial aid to Baghdad, signal economic sanctions, and seize billions from Iraqi oil revenues that go to the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. This mirrors the threat by the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump to impose significant sanctions on Iraq following the Iraqi parliament's vote in 2020 for the departure of U.S. forces. Repeating the same scenario could put the Iraqi government in a significant economic crisis, hindering its efforts to enhance and rehabilitate the capabilities of the security forces

concerned with combating terrorism, and its efforts to rebuild areas liberated from the grip of ISIS, especially since such efforts require substantial financial allocations, as well as completing service projects launched by the government, with large financial amounts allocated in the 2023-2024 budget.

B. The fear of repeating the financial scenario in Iran and Lebanon, in terms of the collapse of the Iraqi dinar against the dollar and the lack of Iraqi local production, which would generate a social disaster through the rise in financial and commodity inflation harming the purchasing power of citizens, especially amid the current dollar crisis that the Iraqi government is trying to fix through a set of internal and external measures. However, the Iraqi dinar's linkage to the U.S. dollar and oil revenues in the American Federal Bank due to Security Council Resolution 1483 in 2003, in turn, makes the process of providing "hard currency" (USD) to the Iraqi interior through the American Federal Bank, which has begun to reduce the volume of hard currency transfers required to Iraq for internal Iraqi political reasons and U.S. internal economic reasons "including debts and inflation", also raising concerns about the possibility of the U.S. reducing the size of the transfer, which would exacerbate the current crisis in Iraq.

C. The coalition consists of 86 regional and international countries, with Iraq having very significant economic, political, and diplomatic relations with most of these countries. Ending the work of the international coalition could reflect unfavorably in reducing the level of economic relations with these countries, especially the European countries in the coalition, especially when we know, according to the European Union figures, Iraq exported oil products and minerals worth €7.2 billion in 2020, which rose to €26 billion in 2022. Iraq's imports from the European Union

countries of equipment and raw materials in 2022 amounted to about €4.5 billion, which are significant figures in coalition trade with an important basic partner like the European Union, while the depth of these relations forms an important factor in forming the financial budget, as it accounted for about 22% of Iraq's financial budget for the year 2022.[1]

D. The U.S. may feel less constrained by the presence of its forces on Iraqi territory in the event of their departure from Iraq, and may impose financial and economic sanctions more freely on Iraqi public figures and institutions, especially Shia ones, as well as those accused by Washington of being linked to resistance factions or with the Islamic Republic, as happened with sanctions imposed on 19 private banks, notably (Al-Taif, Al-Mustashar, Al-Wakil... among others). U.S. sanctions could also target private institutions aiming to pressure the Iraqi economy, as recently happened with Fly Baghdad airline. The latest sanctions hinder the movement of Iraqi funds and the development of the private sector and the continuation of economic growth and reconstruction efforts, which are essential parts of the governmental action plan aimed to be achieved during its governmental term. Thus, this increases the burden on the ministerial formation, making the negative repercussions of this matter twofold: first, reducing capital in the private sector, which generates more unemployment and economic recession, and second, creating an unstable environment that hinders foreign and local investment in Iraq.

E. Regarding the import of gas and electricity from Iran, U.S. sanctions may be present to prevent Iraq from dealing with the Iranian side by ending the special exemptions from sanctions on Tehran, which could have sharp negative internal repercussions

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1. Moller Logistic. (n.d.). Trade between Iraq and Europe. Retrieved February 8, 2024, from https://mollerlogistic.com/en/blog/1/التجارة-ما-بين-العراق-و-أوروبا

on both the social and political levels, in addition to disrupting the relationship with Iran.[2]

2. **Political Effects:** The Iraqi government's announcement about ending the missions of the international coalition forces is not accepted by all components and influential political forces in the Iraqi scene. Sunni and Kurdish forces reject this withdrawal and demand the continuation of U.S. forces, as clearly manifested in the reception of the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masrour Barzani, on January 9, for the Commander of the International Coalition Forces in Iraq and Syria, General Joel Faul, where the meeting focused on the importance of protecting security and stability in Iraq and the region. The Kurdistan Region emphasized during this meeting the necessity of continuing the missions of the international coalition forces to assist the Iraqi army and Peshmerga forces in combating terrorism. In this context, some estimates suggest the possibility of the U.S. transferring its forces and military bases to the Kurdistan Region in case it is forced to withdraw from the interior (Arab) Iraq, which affects the nature of political stability of the components that occurred in the formation of the Sudani government, which could escalate disputes, especially between the region and the center, as well as Sunni forces that might reiterate strong demands for their protection, notably the "Sunni Region," which could gain international support, especially U.S. The variance in political disagreement on the matter of the coalition forces' departure becomes clearer among political components when translated into parliamentary attempts to enact it, as occurred during a special session of the Iraqi Council of Representatives to discuss and make decisions

2. Al-Khalifa, B. (2023, April 24). The American Domination over Iraqi Finance: The Role of the Federal Reserve. Draw Media. Retrieved from https://drawnedia.net/ar/page_detail?smart–id=12672

regarding the exit/stay, and repercussions of repeated strikes by the international coalition in Iraq on February 15, 2024. However, the absence of Sunni and Kurdish Parliamentarians, in addition to some Parliamentarians considered within the Shia component, prevented the required legal quorum for the session, forcing the council to convert it into a deliberative session only.[3]

3. **Security Effects:** Since the beginning of the situation in the Gaza war, Islamic resistance factions have been experiencing significant security tension between them and the U.S., where these tensions translate into repeated strikes carried out by the U.S. through the international coalition in Iraq against personalities and symbols of Islamic resistance in Iraq. Even if these strikes are precise in targeting and hitting only specific personalities, usually involved in the security-military side, they are impactful strikes affecting operationally and practically significant figures and personalities.

Implications of Local and Regional Security Stability

The presence of international coalition forces in Iraq and Syria has evolved beyond mere combat forces against the terrorist organization ISIS. It has become a balancing factor with regional and international powers through its presence, achieving interests in security, military, political, and economic stability. Thus, it can be said that the existence of the international coalition serves several purposes, including:

1. **Limiting Regional and International Adversaries:** Although the declared reason for the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq is to assist the Iraqi security forces in fighting the remnants of ISIS and preventing its resurgence, the presence of these forces far exceeds the issue of combating terrorism. It extends to the U.S.'s desire

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3. Iraqi Parliament. (2024, February 10). Session discussing assaults on Iraqi sovereignty. Retrieved from https://iq.parliament.iq/blog/2024/02/10/-مجلس-النواب-يعقد-جلسة-تداولية-بشأن-الاعتداءات-على-السيادة-العراقية/

to deter its regional and international adversaries and secure its interests in the Middle East. For Washington, Iraq is a primary and pivotal battleground for confronting Tehran's influence and reducing regional cooperation lines between resistance factions. It is also a crucial point in its geostrategic competition with China and Russia. In this context, the Pentagon's denial of any plans to withdraw its forces from Iraq following the Iraqi government's announcement of forming a bilateral committee to arrange the end of the international coalition forces' missions came to light. The Department's spokesperson, Patrick Ryder, stated that Baghdad had not informed Washington of such a decision, emphasizing that the latter remains intensely focused on the mission to defeat ISIS, with its forces present in Iraq at the government's invitation.

2. **Re-emphasizing the Centrality of the Middle East:** The recent regional escalation in the Middle East, linked to the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip and the preceding Middle Eastern, especially Gulf, response to the repercussions of the Ukrainian war, did not align with U.S. and European desires. This represents a miscalculation in U.S. strategic calculations regarding the diminished importance of the region on the agenda of U.S. policy priorities in favor of pivoting eastward to contain Chinese and Russian threats, thereby enhancing its regional presence, especially with the escalating risks associated with targeting its forces and interests in the region.

3. **Readiness of Iraqi Forces:** Despite significant efforts to strengthen the Iraqi armed forces in all branches, as proven by the war against ISIS and the declaration of victory, some negative effects remain, including the Iraqi forces' need for further training and qualification, especially in the air force and U.S. F16 fighter jets and Abrams tanks, where Iraqi capabilities are still weak in terms of maintenance, guidance, armament, and command.

4. **Resurgence of ISIS Activity:** Any withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq could potentially increase the risk of ISIS activity resurgence. Such withdrawal, especially if sudden and unplanned, could create a security vacuum that the organization's sleeper cells would exploit to escalate their activity within Iraq. Despite security strikes by Iraqi forces in cooperation with coalition forces over the past two years significantly curtailing the organization's activity and depleting its financial and leadership resources, this does not suffice to assert the end of ISIS's threat in Iraq. The organization still has active cells within the country, executing attacks against Iraqi army forces in several cities. Recent estimates by United Nations experts suggest that ISIS possesses between 5,000 and 7,000 personnel in Iraq and Syria, mostly fighters. The organization might have recently reduced its operations to "reorganize and facilitate the recruitment of new members into its ranks," thereby regaining its activity. Historical experiences have proven ISIS's significant ability to adapt to field changes and its flexibility in dealing with security strikes targeting its strongholds and different factions.

5. **Loss of U.S. Support in the Intelligence War Against ISIS:** A sudden or unfriendly withdrawal of international coalition forces from Iraq could result in the loss of intelligence efforts and advanced information provided by those forces to support the Iraqi army's operations against ISIS, especially aerial strikes against the organization's strongholds in rugged mountainous areas. After ISIS's territorial defeat in Iraq in 2017, the organization transitioned to scattered cells in different geographical areas, focusing on conducting attrition operations against Iraqi and coalition forces to prove its presence. It adopted a strategy based on executing limited attacks with a degree of complexity in tactics and scope of impact. This necessitated updating military and

security plans and tactics used by the security forces combating ISIS, shifting towards focusing on launching preemptive strikes against the organization's strongholds. Therefore, Iraq announced in late 2021 the end of the international coalition's combat roles, transitioning to advisory roles limited to supporting the Iraqi security forces in training, advising, and intelligence cooperation. Iraqi security efforts have primarily focused over the past two years on engaging in an "Intelligence Operations" to detect and monitor the movements of small ISIS groups and cells, preparing for their bombardment, thereby inflicting material and human losses that hinder them from executing operations targeting civilians in vital areas.

Conclusion:

Overall, the severity of the implications associated with the potential withdrawal of security forces from Iraq will depend on the mechanism of this withdrawal, whether it will occur wholly or partially, as well as the timeframe of this withdrawal and the degree of readiness of the Iraqi government and its plans to deal with its potential consequences, especially in terms of the risks of increased ISIS activity. It can be said that Iraq no longer needs the same level of support it required in the past to repel the threat of ISIS from its territory, given a set of driving factors:

1.   The notable development in the capabilities and response of the Iraqi security forces over the past two years, whether in terms of the readiness of those forces to execute precise qualitative operations that targeted and still target ISIS's centers of gravity across the entire geography of Iraq, or in terms of possessing strong units like the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service capable of delivering effective preemptive strikes against the organization's dens, and surprising and pursuing its members and small sleeper cells.

2.   Over the past year, the Iraqi government has taken a series of measures to enhance its ability to combat terrorism in the country, including the restructuring of the Iraqi security forces to improve the efficiency of security institutions.

3.   Recently, Iraq has moved to strengthen security and intelligence cooperation with the security agencies in the Kurdistan Region and with the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria (SDF) to close the security vacuum existing on the front lines between Kurdistan areas and Iraqi provinces, and on the Iraqi-Syrian border, preventing ISIS elements from exploiting it to infiltrate and plan their attacks.

Despite the successes achieved by the Iraqi forces in the issue of combating ISIS, some risks and challenges associated with the organization's activity remain. Iraq needs to devise a comprehensive plan to confront these, or at least minimize their potential impacts on the country's security and stability. This includes ongoing threats related to camps housing tens of thousands of ISIS members and their families in Northeast Syria, with growing concerns that the organization might breach these prisons and liberate some of its elements, thereby resuming its activity on the Iraqi scene.

Given the above, the exit of coalition forces should be predicated on preparing fertile ground through diplomatic and political means, through a series of formal and informal negotiations "via back channels" of the Iraqi government with political figures, security personnel, businessmen, and operative lobbies in the U.S., conveying specific messages that Iraq is an integral part of the regional security system and cannot pose a threat to the security and peace in the region and the world.

Iraq needs a security-political-economic plan to be a comprehensive strategy preceding the exit of international coalition forces from Iraq,

through several steps, including:

1.   Negotiating with the international community regarding economic reform and attempting to mitigate the negative effects of U.S. economic actions on Iraq.

2.   Working on scheduling the presence of international coalition forces between 3 – 4 years, with the presence of coalition forces being purely advisory, to ensure no military strikes and also ensure Iraq's continued presence in the regional security zone without being considered a security risk to the region.

3.   Increasing government efforts to mend the internal house by coordinating with political forces on one hand and resistance factions on the other, aiming to reduce media and military escalation against coalition forces. This involves drawing encouraging paths and also strong negotiation tracks with the U.S. side to ease punitive measures against Iraqi economic and political figures and institutions.