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The Taliban's control of Kabul and the extension of its sovereignty over the majority of Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of US forces, have raised debates regarding the fate of the US forces in Iraq. Is Washington going to withdraw from Iraq as well, particularly in light of previous US threats to do so, or will the Afghan experience not be repeated in Iraq?

Alarming Indicators

There were a number of alarming indicators reflecting the possibility of Washington's withdrawing the US army from Iraq, even prior to the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan, which can be clarified as follows:

1- Obama's previous withdrawal: Former US President Barack Obama concluded an agreement with the government of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to withdraw US forces from Iraq, which took place by December 2011. Although this withdrawal ended the US occupation of Iraq, which began in 2003, Washington withdrew at a time when the Iraqi political system was suffering major crises, due to differences between most Iraqi political blocs and parties over fundamental issues, such as the

state's management, the distribution of resources, etc.

Washington's withdrawal also came at a time when the Iraqi forces were incapable of maintaining their security and were unable to deter Iranian interference. This was evident in 2014, when these forces collapsed before ISIS, which managed to control nearly a third of the Iraqi state.

2- Leaks of US officials: Prior to the fourth round of the strategic dialogue between US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi dated July 23, 2021, US officials leaked information that Washington is dissatisfied with the incompetence of the Iraqi military and security forces in securing the US embassy as well as US forces deployed in various Iraqi bases from attacks

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launched by the Iragi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), backed by Iran.

Washington then threatened Iraq that the US army might turn to withdraw entirely from Iraq unless the latter provides better protection and manages to curb Tehran's militias. So far, the Iraqi government has failed to subdue Tehran's militias, as evidenced by at least eight drone attacks targeting the US presence since Biden took office in January 2021, in addition to other 17 missile attacks, according to international coalition officials in Iraq.

3- Terminating combat missions: After the fourth round of the strategic dialogue in Washington, Biden and Al-Kadhimi agreed to schedule the US withdrawal from Iraq and to end the combat operations of the US army by the end of this year. Then, the role of the US forces in Iraq would be limited to training, providing advisory services, assistance as well as the exchange of intelligence information.

The two sides agreed to return to the implementation of the "Status of Forces Agreement" and the "Strategic Framework Agreement" approved in 2008, which stipulated that the tasks of the US forces that remain in Iraq after the end of 2011 are limited to training Iraqi forces and not participating in combat missions.

Notably, the decline of the US military role in Iraq may result in the withdrawal of the US army in the end, particularly given that the US Congress is tending to cancel two authorizations that give full approval for the use of military force in Iraq, namely the authorization issued in 1991, when Washington led an international coalition to get Iraq out of Kuwait, and the 2002 authorization, which gave Washington the green light to occupy Iraq in 2003.

This means that the Biden administration will require congressional approval to be able to launch any future strikes in Iraq. This is no major limitation on Biden's ability to launch military strikes in Iraq, if needed. Nevertheless, this reflects the prevalent mood in Washington, of Congress and the US administration alike, as they both want to avoid any military involvement in combat operations.

4- Withdrawal of US companies: Several US companies decided to sell their stake in some Iraqi oil fields to foreign companies. ExxonMobil announced exiting one of the largest Iraqi oil fields, the West Qurna 1 oil field, due to the turbulent security situation in Iraq, particularly with the escalation of attacks launched by Iranian agents against US interests in Iraq.

Iraq, however, rejected a Chinese offer to acquire the share of the US company, aiming to initiate talks with other US companies to buy ExxonMobils stake, with the desire to follow a policy of diversifying investing companies. So far, the extent of the success of these endeavors remains unclear.

Strategic Implications

In case the US forces withdraw from Iraq, this will have prolonged strategic repercussions, not only on Iraq, but also on the US presence in the region, which may be illustrated as follows:

1- Intensifying internal congestion: Iraq suffers from several internal divisions, particularly the divisions between the anti-Iran Shi'ite forces and those affiliated with it. One of these divisions is the dispute between the brigades and military factions close to the religious authority in Najaf, which are affiliated to the Popular Mobilization, and are considered to be with the pro-Iranian wing within the Popular Mobilization as well.

This was evident in the accusations of Hamid al-Yasiri Commander of the Ansar Marjaiya Brigade, describing those affiliated with Iran in Iraq of being impostors and traitors. This came as an implicit response to the statements of Faleh al-Fayyad, head



of the PMF, which he announced from Iran calling for replicating the Revolutionary Guards model in Iraq.

In late July, Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist movement in Iraq, stressed the necessity of halting military action against the US forces after their fulfilling the conditions for withdrawal from Iraq. This position contrasts sharply with that of the Popular Mobilization militias loyal to Tehran, which supports the need to target the US presence in Iraq until Washington withdraws all its forces, including those that provide advisory services to the Iraqi army.

It seems that Al-Sadr realizes that the US presence in Iraq may limit the negative repercussions of Iranian influence, particularly since there was news circulating in 2019 that Al-Sadr received threats of liquidation from Qasem Soleimani, the Former Commander of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, due to his adoption of policies opposing Tehran.

Undoubtedly, in case Washington withdraws from Iraq, Iran will seek through its armed militias to seize control over Iraq and to eliminate all opposing forces, particularly since the Iraqi army does not yet possess sufficient capabilities to monopolize power and control the internal security scene.

Sunni and Kurdish forces express similar concerns. On June 24, during a press conference in Erbil, a group of Iraqi Sunni Arab political and tribal forces and figures issued a statement affirming their firm rejection of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq now, as this would plunge Iraq into chaos due to the Popular Mobilization militias. The statement confirmed that the government has no authority over the militias affiliated with Iran, which carried out parades of heavy weapons and drones, and threatened Al-Kadhimi to cut off his ears.

This was also emphasized by Foreign Relations Department in the Kurdistan region in a press statement on July 26, where it stated that Iraq is still afflicted with the absence of stability and the interference of other countries in its internal affairs, in reference to Iran, and that it lacks stable military power that would enable it to avoid the repetition of previous experiences, referring to the occupation of large parts of Iraqi territory by ISIS.

2- The rise of ISIS: Iraq occasionally witnesses the escalation of terrorist operations carried out by ISIS. They were further able to carry out terrorist operations in the governorates of Anbar, Kirkuk, Diyala, Nineveh and Salah al-Din, in addition to Baghdad.

The US withdrawal from Iraq will encourage ISIS to expand in Iraq and try to recruit additional supporters, particularly within the concerns regarding the brutality of the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization militias, which may repeat the 2014 scenario, when ISIS took control of large parts of Northern Iraq and Northeast Iraq.

Moreover, the Taliban's ability to seize control of Afghanistan may tempt ISIS to repeat the same model in Iraq, specifically since ISIS was following similar strategies to the Taliban.

3- Failure to prevent regional hegemony: One of the major powers> interests in the international system is to prevent the emergence of a rival that seeks regional hegemony. This is true of the US policy towards Iran, which has sought to control several Arab countries, particularly Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen through the deployment of its armed militias in them. Washington>s withdrawal from Iraq will undoubtedly enable Iran to enhance its regional influence.

Washington will also lose its ability to influence the developments of the Syrian conflict, as the US military deployment in Syria depends on its bases in Kurdistan, Iraq. In this case, the ability of the US to play an active security role in Middle East interactions will diminish severely, which will also create a vacuum that other international powers will seek to fill, particularly Russia and China.

On the other hand, if this withdrawal takes place, it will push Washington's regional allies to seek other allies, in addition to them continuing to play an active role in curbing Iranian influence in the region.

In conclusion, it can be said that Washington's withdrawal from Iraq is unlikely, since it may threaten the US position and interests in the Middle East, and may open the door for other international powers, namely, Russia and China, to play a greater security role. However, Iraq's ability to confront Iranian influence depends not only on the continuation of the US presence in Iraq, but also on the ability of the current Iraqi Prime Minister to continue in his position, since the success of the political forces affiliated with Iran to take the lead in the parliamentary elections next October may tempt Iran and its affiliates to demand Washington to withdraw from Iraq in order to effect the desired strategic repercussions.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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