Troop Withdrawal from Iraq isn’t an ‘American Retreat’

The US president is reportedly in talks with Iraq’s Prime Minister to bring the current level of US troops in Iraq down to the level of 2015. This change will see troop number coming down from the current 5200 to about 3500, indicating a US ‘drawdown’ from Iraq following the Iraqi parliament’s resolution to force all US troops out of the country. While, on the face of it, these talks indicate a massive ‘respect for the Iraqi sovereignty’ and Trump’s resolve to end the US ‘endless wars’, a deep look at the wider regional and American core strategic interests indicates that not only America’s wars are not ending, the ‘drawdown’ does not mean ending region’s militarization too, although it does have some significance for Trump’s own domestic political interests ahead of elections.

For Trump supporters, he is fulfilling yet another of the promises he made during his previous campaign. He is withdrawing from Afghanistan, is bringing home thousands of troops from Germany and has already withdrawn 500 troops from Syria. While this may bode well politically, strategically he is still continuing America’s wars, particularly against Iran. This was indeed what Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the Pentagon’s Central Command, said in a virtual conference organized by the United States Institute of Peace. To quote him:

“As I look at the theater, we remain focused on Iran as our central problem. This headquarters focuses on Iran, executing deterrence activities against Iran, and doing those things”, adding that “The threat against our forces from Shiite militant groups has caused us to put resources that we would otherwise use against ISIS to provide for our own defense and that has lowered our ability to work effectively against them.”

McKenzie’s comments are very much consistent with what the Trump administration has been trying to do against Iran in the form of re-imposition of arms embargoes, a stubborn insistence that has already become a fiasco,
indicating how fast the US is losing its ability to unilaterally design global scenarios. It is, therefore, imperative to understand that bringing US troops level down does not indicate a step towards an imminent US-Iran normalization. For instance, even if the US troops were there to check Iran’s influence, the US is still very much into establishing its political and economic tentacles in Iraq through non-military means. This is evident from the expanding US economic presence in Iraq to supposedly reduce Iraq’s dependence on Iran for meeting its energy needs.

Five US firms, including Chevron Corp, have already signed agreements with the Iraqi government. These agreements were signed on the sidelines of Kadhimi’s recent visit to the US where he discussed with Trump the future of US troops in Iraq and the continuing need for the training of Iraqi troops. Chevron has already been drilling oil in Iraq’s Kurdistan region. With the second largest US oil company now set to establish itself in the mainland Iraq as well, there remains little gainsaying that the US is rapidly allowing for replacing Iraq’s dependence on Iran with Iraq’s dependence on the US. This is straightforward case of adding Iraq’s economic dependence to its already military dependence on the US.

According to US officials, this move towards increasing Iraq’s indigenous energy and electricity capacity is a part of the larger plan to wean the country away from Iranian influence and connect it more deeply with Arab countries. “It is vital that Iraq’s electricity grid be connected to the GCC. We’ve been working on this, as I’m sure you know, and there’s more work to be done. And so that will continue,” a US official was quoted to have said.

Doing this is crucial for the US as Iraq’s dependence on Iran is seen as the key to the latter’s influence in the former. Iraq’s energy sector is dependent on imports from Iran, and even after the US slapped sanctions on Iran’s energy exports, Iraq continues to import natural gas and electricity from Iran under a special waiver that the US has regularly extended. The US wants to change it.

The US State department has already affirmed that “The Government of Iraq, Gulf Cooperation Council, and United States have renewed their full support for the Gulf Cooperation Council Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) project to connect the electricity grids of Iraq and the GCC. The United States is committed to facilitating this project and providing support where needed. This project will provide much-needed electricity to the people of Iraq and support Iraq’s economic development, particularly in the southern provinces.”

Accordingly, while announcing commercial agreements worth as much as US$8 billion between US energy companies and the Government of Iraq, the US Secretary of Energy Brouillette emphasized the critical role U.S. private investment will continue to play in Iraq’s energy future and stressed the need for “rapid progress towards energy independence from Iran.”

There is as much no denying that the US presence in Iraq, military or otherwise, remains Iran-centric. A troop drawdown does in no way indicate a US ‘retreat’ from Iraq because of continuous military tensions and rocket attacks by Iran backed militias. While Iran’s influence in Iraq goes way beyond the Iraqi regime, an enhanced US presence indicates that the US will continue to push against Iranian influence through military (the US would still have more than 3000 troops in Iraq) and politico-economic means.

*Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*