Iraq Returns to the Deadly Embrace of the US

US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi have signed an agreement officially ending the US combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021, more than 18 years after US troops occupied the country. Combined with Biden’s withdrawal of the last US troops from Afghanistan by the end of August, the Democratic president completes the US combat missions in the two wars that then-President George Walker Bush began under his watch.

Joe Biden and Mustafa al-Kadhimi met in the Oval Office for their first face-to-face talks in the United States-Iraq strategic dialogue. “Our role in Iraq will be to continue to train, assist, aid, and fight DAESH (a terrorist group banned in the Russian Federation) as it emerges. But we are not going to have a combat mission by the end of the year,” the American president said after meeting with the Iraqi prime minister.

There are currently 2,500 US troops in Iraq, supposedly focused on countering the remnants of DAESH. According to Pentagon officials, the US role in Iraq will shift entirely to training and advising the Iraqi military on self-defense. This “shift” is not expected to significantly impact because the United States has already shifted its focus to training Iraqi troops. The US-led coalition invaded Iraq in March 2003 based on far-fetched accusations from Washington that the government of then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqi leader was removed from power at the time, but no such weapons were found, which did not prevent the Pentagon from staying in that oil-rich country for a long time.

Let’s recall that the demand for the withdrawal of US troops came in the form of a bill in the Iraqi parliament in January 2020. The US assassinated Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and the deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Units, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, along with eight other individuals at Baghdad International Airport.
Although the bill was not binding on the United States, the approval of then Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi made it so, which meant that the US presence in the country would now be considered an occupation. The demand to end the occupation immediately was also supported by a march of Iraqis of several million people.

In May 2020, parliament elected al-Kadhimi to replace Abdul-Mahdi as long as he fulfilled his mandate to expel US troops. Since then, three rounds of dialogue between Washington and Baghdad failed to provide a timetable for the complete withdrawal of US troops from the Arab country. Instead, Baghdad issued statements that US troops would shift their presence from a combat role to a training or advisory role. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, who was recently in Washington, spoke to the media back home. He assured them that this time the talks would set a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops. However, some American military presence would be required for training, advisory purposes, and intelligence. Incidentally, this passage angered many parties in the Iraqi parliament, which prompted the Iraqi prime minister to act decisively. However, the American media suggest otherwise, and it seems that Iraq says one thing and the Americans say something else.

In particular, the well-informed New York Times claims that the Pentagon will withdraw only a small, unspecified number of US troops and retain the rest, again by reclassifying their role. The newspaper described the negotiations as a “diplomatic theater” to please the Iraqi side and, more importantly, the Iraqi parliament. Although the Pentagon says there are currently 2,500 US troops stationed in Iraq, the number has nevertheless been disputed. A heavily fortified huge American embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone, more like a medieval castle, guarded by a significant contingent of troops. There is no information to know precisely how many there are. The heavily fortified Ayn al Asad military base in western Al Anbar Governorate, occupied only by US troops, was not checked by Iraqi security officials. It is unclear how many troops are stationed at this base. There have also been numerous reports of troop movements between Iraq and Syria, so it is impossible to confirm the figure of 2,500 US troops. And besides, there is virtually no hard evidence that US “combat” troops participated in military actions on the ground against terrorists.

This raises the larger question of what exactly is the nature of the American occupation of Iraq? If US troops are helping the fight against DAESH, Iraq’s foreign minister has already stated that his country has enough forces to counter the terrorist group. And it should be remembered that this terrorist group was defeated in late 2017 by Iraqi troops led by the Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iraqi group of the Iraqi military that the US attacks from time to time. What is left of DAESH are sleeper cells that carry out attacks from time to time, and Baghdad certainly needs help to defeat them once and for all. Iraq has experienced such terrorist attacks since America invaded it in 2003, withdrawn in 2011, and returning in 2014. In other words, it doesn’t matter whether American troops are present or not. Thanks to their experience, only Iraqi intelligence agencies have reduced the number of these terrorist attacks.

The parties in the Iraqi parliament with the most significant number of seats elected by the Iraqi people have consistently claimed that the US plays a sinister role in Iraq. Among the many problematic aspects of the occupation, the US has been accused of inciting sedition among Iraqis, pitting locals against one another, and using the country’s airspace to spy on the Iraqi resistance, which has gained strength. Baghdad also accuses the United States of using Iraqi agents on the ground in coordination with the US Embassy and its diplomatic missions to conduct a disinformation campaign (mostly on social media) against neighboring Iran. The Iraqi leadership, for obvious reasons, does not want to quarrel.

Observers note that America’s primary concern has been the growing ties between Baghdad and Washington’s nemesis, Tehran. They say the US military presence could derail increased cooperation between these two neighbors and other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Of course, America’s allies in the region are the undemocratic ruling tribal monarchies, which have normalized relations with Israel (the United Arab Emirates). The other, Saudi Arabia, is widely believed to have secret ties with the region Israelis.

It is only natural that America cannot achieve its goals in the region from Washington; it needs its armed forces inside Iraq to carry out this mission. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Resistance says they will agree to nothing less than a complete withdrawal of troops according to a precise timetable. If this does not happen, the resistance factions say they will intensify their attacks against the American occupation, conducting more operations against American interests and more sophisticated procedures to end the occupation. They say it is necessary to preserve the territorial integrity of the country.

Thus, despite the agreement reached in Washington, the struggle of Iraqi patriots for the complete withdrawal of the American occupiers will continue and even be expanded. This struggle will continue until the last US soldier leaves the ancient land of Mesopotamia.

**Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern**
Outlook“.