Biden’s Iraq Withdrawal: Will It Happen?

Whereas the US has almost fully withdrawn from Afghanistan, leaving it for Afghanistan’s neighbours to clean up the mess, the Joe Biden administration’s announcement to end the US military’s combat mission in Iraq is an ambiguous proposition, one that the administration is likely to use to conceal its active presence inside Iraq to combat and check Iranian presence and role in the region. An unambiguous and absolute US withdrawal from Iraq will only push it back into the Iranian orbit, consequently undoing the very reason for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was meant to steer Iraq decisively away from Iran and weaken the so-called ‘Shia crescent’ in the Middle East. That Iran, despite the on-going talks with the US to revive the JCPOA, remains a US target is evident from the two air strikes (in February and in June) the Joe Biden has conducted against Iran backed militias in Iraq since coming into power. The strikes show that Joe Biden administration is unlikely to stop chasing Iran even if the JCPOA is re-negotiated and re-implemented, and that Washington will continue to push against Iran to roll-back its influence.

Why? Because checking and countering Iran is the bedrock of the US policy for and presence in the Middle East. It is mainly by making up the ‘Iran threat’ that the US can continue to shape and re-shape the region to its advantage. Iran, on the other hand, is unlikely to budge under the US pressure. Like the US, it is unlikely to allow its talks with the US to revive the JCPOA to make it accept a compromise on some of the crucial strategic gains it has made during the Syria war. Therefore, even if talks on reviving the JCPOA succeed, Washington will continue to pish Iran to rollback its presence.

As it stands, while the Joe Biden administration has decided to ‘end’ the US military combat missions, it has not changed the nature of the US mission in Iraq, which, in the words of Donald Trump, involved “looking a little bit at
Iran. Accordingly, in announcing the ‘withdrawal’, Biden said that the US army will continue to ‘advise’, ‘train’ and provide ‘intelligence’ to Iraq to combat the Islamic State.

In other words, the US army will continue to exert direct and credible influence on the dynamics of Iraqi military and defense and even foreign policy to help it fight ‘terrorism’. Now, according to the US definition, Iran backed militias represent “Iranian sponsorship of terrorism in the region”, which need to be tackled to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria, thereby offering greater ‘protection’ to the US allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. In this context, the US airstrikes on the Iranian interests reflect the much deeper and broader currents of the conflict shaping their bi-lateral ties than merely the question of the revival of the JCPOA, or ending the US sanctions.

Washington is further perplexed by the arrival of a relatively more orthodox president in Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, who, the US officials seem to believe, will be more inclined to deploying hard Iranian power in Iraq and beyond than his predecessor. Therefore, while it was politically important for Joe Biden to fulfil his campaign promise to end the “forever wars”, it would have been strategically unwise, or even a folly as some political pundits seem to argue, to make an absolute withdrawal from Iraq, especially when the outcome of the JCPOA talks, too, remains uncertain. An absolute US withdrawal, in this sense, would have directly emboldened Iran on the negotiating table vis-à-vis the US.

In this context, the fact that Biden did not hesitate to order airstrikes while talks for the revival of the JCPOA were going on shows that the administration is bothered more by the Iranian presence in the region than by the necessity of reviving the pact itself. Secondly, the fact that the Biden administration is repeatedly targeting Iranian interests in Iraq and Syria also shows that Washington wants to keep the issue of Iranian presence in Iraq and Syria in its broader agenda of talks and ties with Iran. By keeping both issues alive, Washington aims to maintain a complex relationship with Iran, one that has enough flashpoints to allow it to project the ‘Iran threat’ as real, needing a US overwatch in the Middle East through direct military presence in Iraq and Syria.

A full and absolute withdrawal from Iraq, therefore, is not in the US interest. Since it is closely tied to the overall US objective of countering and “watching Iran”, it also explains why the Biden administration is not yet willing to end the so-called “forever war” in Syria. The Pentagon has confirmed that about a 1,000 US troops currently deployed in Syria will remain there for an indefinite period. The Pentagon has also confirmed that the Joe Biden administration does not have any plans to change the current status of the US military presence, or give them a new mission. Their mission very much remains ‘advising’ the Syrian Democratic Forces to help them fight the ISIS, as well as “watching” Iranian activity in and its active support for Hezbollah via Syria.

Therefore, there is no logical reason for the Biden administration to make a full withdrawal either from Iraq or from Syria in the short term. On the contrary, an indefinite and concealed presence in Iraq and Syria will allow the US to remain militarily entrenched in the region. It is through such direct military presence that the US can balance its withdrawal of air defense systems from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

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