

# Twin Pillars of US Policy Puts Iraqi Dialogue at Risk

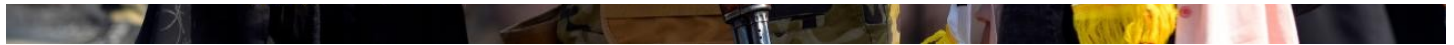
A new strategic dialogue between US and Iraqi governments is meant to place the bilateral relationship on a sustainable basis. But current US policy towards the region will make this tough to achieve.

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—Iraqi students pose for selfies with a member of the security forces during anti-government protests in Diwaniyah. Photo by HAIDAR HAMDANI/AFP via Getty Images.

After the drone assassinations of senior Iraqi politician Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Iranian general Qassim Soleimani, Washington hopes that agreeing issues of mutual economic interest will result in Iraqi calls for immediate troop withdraw to disappear.

But the hype surrounding these talks overlooks profound problems in the relationship. US foreign policy under Donald Trump is frankly incoherent and, beyond the bluster, focused on reducing US commitments across the Middle East, which has led to a rapid decrease in America's diplomatic presence in Baghdad.

Added to this is that Iran has steadily increased its influence over Iraq's ruling elite to the point where there is a distinct lack of freedom of action. Finding a meaningful way to reboot Iraqi-American relations will be difficult at best, and may be impossible.

Despite the obstacles, the dialogue began with the aim of updating the Strategic Framework Agreement - signed under the premiership of Nuri al-Maliki and President George W. Bush in 2008 - as well as negotiating a new agreement under which US forces can retain some form of presence in the country.

## **Pressing need for new relationship**

The 2008 agreement attempted - along with a now lapsed Status of Forces Agreement - to place US–Iraqi post-occupation relations on a sustainable basis going forward. But the pressing need to find a new basis for relations was highlighted by the resolution passed in the Iraqi parliament in January calling for all foreign troops to be removed.

This was, in effect, an outraged response to the killings of al-Muhandis and Soleimani two days earlier. But the extent of the crisis was indicated by the then prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi recommending this action to parliament, and then saying after the vote he would quickly draw up a legal document to implement the decision.

The assassinations were a result of increasing tension between Iran and the United States ever since the US pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 and implemented its policy of ‘maximum pressure’ towards Tehran.

As Iran sought to respond and anxieties across the region rose, Iraq became a major focus for Tehran’s aim to reduce US influence, and its militia allies became the main tool to force the US out of Iraq.

Using low-tech short-range missiles, Iranian-aligned militias harassed the US embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone and military bases across the country known to house substantial concentrations of American troops.

The pace of attacks steadily increased, reaching a peak in December 2019, when an attack on the K1 military base in Kirkuk killed one American citizen and injured several. In response, the US air force attacked five Kata’ib Hizbollah bases, three in Iraq and two in Syria. And the assassinations were a further US escalation, an attempt to signal its resolve and raise the costs for Iran and its allies in Iraq of strikes against US forces.

However, the use of drones to assassinate senior foreign government functionaries is unprecedented in recent American history and did not restore the strategic deterrence hoped for by the Trump administration. Attacks on US forces and the embassy have continued - albeit at a reduced tempo – and, much more damagingly, the assassinations distracted public opinion away from the most sustained civic protest movement in Iraq’s post-regime change history.

The movement, both overtly anti-Iranian and anti-American, was attempting to rally a secular Iraqi nationalism against the corruption and sectarianism at the core of Iraq’s political system. The killings of Muhandis and Soleimani allowed the pro-Iranian militias, whose legitimacy was directly threatened by the protests, to regroup and once again assert their anti-American rhetoric and claim it was they who represented and protected the Iraqi nation.

The Trump administration’s ‘America First’ approach to foreign policy means the US diplomatic footprint in Iraq has been drastically reduced along with its ability to influence the politics of the country.

In the face of the missile attacks on the embassy and military bases, the American military has ‘repositioned’ a large number of its troops, consolidating its forces into a smaller number of more easily defended bases.

In this context, the idea that a renewed strategic dialogue will somehow bolster America’s influence in Iraq, or put it on a sustainable footing, appears optimistic. If the Trump administration continue to pursue its maximum pressure policy towards Iran, both countries will play a major role in destabilising Iraq.

This will create the space and justification for Iranian-aligned militias to continue acting with impunity in the face of a weak Iraqi state undermined by a regional struggle for power beyond its ability to influence.

Current US policy towards Iraq is based on the idea that senior Iraqi politicians should choose between Tehran or Washington – this overlooks the multifaceted influence Iran has built up across Iraq since 2003, and can easily bring to bear on the country’s politicians.

A rebalancing of the relationship between the US and Iraq, away from the military and towards the diplomatic and economic, is a sensible goal for the strategic dialogue. But the ability of diplomatic negotiations to achieve this is undermined by the twin pillars of current US policy towards the region - namely maximum pressure and America First.

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