The Stance of Religious Movements and Parties on Foreign Military Presence in Iraq

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مركز الفيض العلمي
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Although Iraqi religious movements and parties unified in their stance on the importance of ending the foreign military presence in Iraq, they face internal and external challenges that have influenced their positions on the U.S. withdrawal. The regional reality has presented challenges, particularly on the Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian fronts, in addition to escalating conflicts and a lack of unity in positions with political partners on this issue and several others.

This study aims to identify the positions of Iraqi religious movements and parties on the foreign military presence in Iraq and their efforts to withdraw these forces after the security stability the country witnessed, through five main axes.

Axis 1: The Stance of Religious Movements and Parties Before 2003 on the Presence of Foreign Forces in Iraq

The relationship between religious and non-religious political parties and the United States during the opposition era differed, with some supporting the U.S. role in overthrowing the previous regime and others opposing this intervention. This debate extended into the post-occupation phase after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, with a division among religious and non-religious movements regarding their stance on the U.S. occupation and how to deal with it. Part of these movements rejected the use of military force to rid Iraq of dictatorship, preferring to work from within Iraq to overthrow the regime, while others supported military intervention, believing it was the only solution to overthrow the regime and free the Iraqi people from the oppression and tyranny of the dictatorial regime. The lack of unity within the Iraqi opposition led to a widening gap between Iraqi parties and their fragmentation, resulting in a lack of coherence in their decisions.

Several conferences were held by the opposition, including the London Conference on November 14, 2002. Despite the participation of many Iraqi political parties, the conference saw reservations from some Islamic political parties that rejected foreign intervention in overthrowing the regime and preferred Iraqis to handle the regime's downfall. Additionally, some Islamic movements and their parties did not participate in four of the conferences held by the Iraqi opposition: the London Conference in 2002, the Salahaddin Conference in 2003, the Nasiriyah Conference, and the Baghdad Conference in 2003. These parties did not participate because they believed these conferences did not represent all Iraqi factions and that there was no conducive environment for an independent Iraqi decision free from external pressures

Axis 2: The Role of Religious Movements and Parties After 2003 in the Presence of Foreign Forces

The post-2003 period saw the emergence of numerous political parties and movements with various ideologies (Islamic, non-Islamic, liberal, leftist, and nationalist), some of which were in exile and significantly influenced the political landscape, while others were formed or re-established within Iraq.

These parties participated in forming the Iraq Interim Governing Council on July 12, 2003, by decision of the Coalition Provisional Authority and its head, Paul Bremer. The sectarian and ethnic nature of the Governing Council had a significant impact on the stance of these parties toward the occupation authority, weakening their ability to confront the decisions of the civilian administrator, including the issue of U.S. military presence. Some religious parties and movements sought to offer an alternative approach to dealing with the foreign presence by using political means and peaceful efforts to expel the occupying forces and presenting a clear vision for the Iraqi situation.

Despite the political participation of these parties and movements, they were unable to address the political, social, and security instability in Iraq due to the limited powers of the Governing Council, as well as the negative public perception regarding the way the Governing Council was formed.

Furthermore, these parties and movements adopted a different approach from political parties in democratic countries, as they promoted sectarian and ethnic tendencies within Iraqi society by adopting sectarian and nationalist agendas instead of a national ideology based on shared values such as citizenship and collective national identity. This approach led Iraqi political parties and movements into a cycle of political instability, without giving priority to the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq or the future of U.S. presence in the country.

Axis 3: The Stance of Religious Movements and Parties on the International Coalition during the War Against ISIS

The failure to complete the training and equipping of Iraqi forces, alongside sectarian quotas in military appointments and the growing phenomenon of corruption within the Iraqi army, as well as the conflict between Sunni and Kurdish political forces during Maliki's second government, all negatively affected Iraq's security situation. This ultimately led to the collapse of the security system and the takeover of several Iraqi cities by the terrorist group ISIS in 2014, creating a massive displacement crisis and a security vacuum. This situation prompted the Iraqi government to seek assistance from the international community.

As a result, there was a need for U.S. support to defeat ISIS. According to the Strategic Framework Agreement signed between the two sides, which outlines support for Iraq and its democratic process as defined in the Iraqi constitution, the agreement also emphasizes providing security assistance to enhance Iraq's ability to protect its institutions from internal and external threats. In this context, the U.S. sought to form an international coalition in September 2014, consisting of 87 countries, to strengthen support for the Iraqi government and its continued fight against terrorism.

Axis 4: The Stance of Religious Movements and Parties on the Presence of Foreign Forces in Iraq Post-2020

The political instability in Iraq, particularly the conflict among the diverse Iraqi political parties, has negatively impacted the ability to form a unified stance on the U.S. withdrawal process. The conflict shifted from sectarian and ethnic tensions—between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish parties—over several issues to intra-sectarian conflicts, including the crisis of forming a government in 2021. The difficulty in reaching consensus and forming coalitions between Shia political forces, Islamic movements, and other political entities ultimately shifted the focus away from the issue of U.S. troop presence.

Despite the agreement among Iraqi Islamic political forces within the government led by Prime Minister Sudani on the U.S. withdrawal, some factions within the Coordination Framework and their affiliated militias differ on the methods of implementing this withdrawal. Some support allowing the Sudani government to negotiate with the U.S. to achieve the withdrawal, as they believe the government holds the legitimacy to do so. On the other hand, certain factions argue for severing ties with the U.S. and demand a complete and total withdrawal to achieve Iraqi independence from American interference. Meanwhile, Kurdish and Sunni political forces oppose the withdrawal, fearing the security vacuum left by the departure of U.S. forces and the unpreparedness of Iraqi forces to fully control all regions of Iraq. As a result, the government has held several meetings with U.S. officials to negotiate the timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal, with plans for the withdrawal to begin in early 2025, as stated by the Iraqi Minister of Defense. The withdrawal is expected to be gradual, spanning over two years. However, it is clear from these meetings that the U.S. withdrawal will not be complete, and some U.S. advisors will remain, operating under NATO's umbrella for training and advisory purposes.

Axis 5: The Status of U.S. (Foreign) Forces in Light of the Ongoing War in Gaza and Southern Lebanon

The ongoing regional conflict, particularly the Israeli aggression against Gaza and Lebanon, and Iraq's potential involvement, has created a tense and uncertain situation for Iraq, raising fears of instability and the country's potential entanglement in this conflict. This has led the Iraqi government to adopt a position of neutrality, distancing itself from actions not representative of the Iraqi government's official stance, as expressed by the Prime Minister.

Consequently, the issue of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq has reached a stalemate due to the regional crises that have affected Iraq, as well as the change in U.S. leadership with the Republican administration, which holds different views on withdrawal compared to the previous Democratic administration.

As for the Iraqi Islamic movements, the regional situation has left these groups uncertain in their stance regarding the U.S. withdrawal, as they await the outcomes of the Gaza and Lebanon conflicts and the new strategy of the United States under President Donald Trump, especially regarding the Middle East and Iraq.

The study reached a set of conclusions, the most important of which are:

1.The political and social instability in Iraq, caused by the conflict between political parties and forces and poorly planned policies, led to distorted outcomes in the democratic process in Iraq. This negatively affected the overall stability of the country and created opportunities for regional and international interventions.

2.Most religious movements and parties in Iraq agree on the necessity of the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq.

3.The religious movements and parties in Iraq did not object to cooperation in training and advisory roles between Iraq and major countries.

4.The regional instability in the area contributes to the continuation of cooperation and the presence of non-combatant forces in training and advisory services.

5.Iraq still needs the efforts of the international coalition against terrorism in areas such as intelligence cooperation and combating ISIS terrorist cells.

1.Religious forces and parties in Iraq remain divided and lack a clear consensus on the approach to be taken regarding the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq.