

What Trump's Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Means for Ending America's Endless Wars

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*The [Wall Street Journal](#) scoop on the details of the Trump administration's troop withdrawal from Iraq is welcome news. Reportedly, **President Donald Trump** is cutting U.S. troop levels by one-third, to about 3,500 troops from 5,200. This move would bring force levels back to where they were in 2015, at the height of the war against ISIL, which in and of itself demonstrates how unnecessary the troop level increases have been mindful of the decimation of the Islamic State.*

Yet, the Journal — and the media narrative around this in general — frames this solely as a decision born out of political pressures in Iraq and the United States. The Iraqi public wants the United States to leave — as demonstrated by the Iraqi parliament voting to [expel U.S. troops earlier this year](#) — and Trump seeking to deliver on his campaign promise to end the endless wars.

“But both governments have faced [political pressures at home](#) from critics who have complained that the U.S. may be engaged in an open-ended mission,” the Journal reports.

While political pressures for bringing American service members home certainly exist — a [poll](#) conducted by the Charles Koch Institute last month revealed that three-quarters of the public support bringing the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan — the media is mistaken in presenting this decision solely as a populist move devoid of a compelling strategic rationale. Indeed, America's global military domination and endless wars are the baselines; it's the decision to end wars and bring troops home that faces scrutiny, not deciding to wage war in perpetuity.

In reality, the strategic rationale for a withdrawal from Iraq is arguably the stronger card. After all, the withdrawal should take place even if public support for it was absent.

First, rather than fighting ISIL — which was the original rationale for the troop deployment in 2014 — Washington's unhealthy obsession with Iran keeps the American military stuck in Iraq and Syria. (Incidentally, there is no congressional authorization for Trump's flirtation with war with Iran). The Iran obsession, in turn, has taken resources and attention away from the fight against ISIL.

“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,” U.S. Central Command head **Gen. Kenneth McKenzie** said at an U.S. Institute for Peace event [this month](#). “Over the last seven or eight months, we have had to

devote resources to self-protection that we would otherwise devote for the counter-ISIS fight.”

Moreover, the Iraqis insist that they don't even need the U.S. active military's help against ISIL in the first place.

“We definitely don't need combat troops in Iraq, but we do need training and capacity enhancement and security cooperation,” Iraqi **Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi** [told reporters in Washington last week](#) following a White House meeting with President Trump.

Nor are U.S. troops needed to check Iran's influence in Iraq. That is, first of all, an Iraqi problem and American service members should not be put in harm's way to resolve regional quarrels that have little bearing on U.S. national security. Secondly, as my QI colleagues and I wrote [in a report](#) released this past summer:

“Rather than expanding Iranian influence in Iraq, the withdrawal of American troops will likely provide more room for Iraqi nationalism to unite Iraqi political factions against an outsized Iranian influence in the country. Currently, America's military presence tempers this natural desire for greater independence from Iran, as many political factions view Iran as a necessary partner to balance and contain America's military influence in Iraq.”

Indeed, keeping U.S. troops in Iraq appears to prolong and expand Iran's influence in Iraq while our obsession with Iran is turning Iraq into the battlefield between Washington and Tehran in a confrontation that neither serves U.S. interests nor Iraqi or regional stability.

U.S. troops in Iraq are practically sitting ducks. Contrary to Trump's claims, the assassination of Iranian **General Qassem Soleimani** has not deterred Iran, [as evidenced by rocket attacks](#) against U.S. bases in Iraq by Iran-aligned paramilitary groups on January 15, March 11, June 13, July 27 and August 15. Instead, the American troop presence has only put the U.S. one rocket attack away from a full-scale war with Iran.

Trump may very well be solely motivated by showcasing his base that he is ending the endless wars. But it still lies in America's national interest to bring the troops home.

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