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GCC Relations with Post-War Iraq:

A Strategic Perspective

Edited by

Omar Al-Ubaydli and Andrea Plebani

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By publishing this volume, the Gulf Research Center (GRC) seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the reader’s knowledge out of the Center’s strong conviction that ‘knowledge is for all.’

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Dr. Abdulaziz O. Sager
Chairman
Gulf Research Center

About the Gulf Research Center

The Gulf Research Center (GRC) is an independent research institute founded in July 2000 by Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, a Saudi businessman, who realized, in a world of rapid political, social and economic change, the importance of pursuing politically neutral and academically sound research about the Gulf region and disseminating the knowledge obtained as widely as possible. The Center is a non-partisan think-tank, education service provider and consultancy specializing in the Gulf region. The GRC seeks to provide a better understanding of the challenges and prospects of the Gulf region.

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- The GCC should serve as a mediator and integrate Iraq politically and economically.

Key Recommendations for Iraqi Policymakers:

- Foreign military presence cannot solve Iraq's internal security problems.
- The best policy is to achieve national reconciliation and stick to economy-first development strategy.

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1. The author is indebted to Professor Yahia Zoubir, Dr. Bashir Zain Al-Abdin, Dr. Omar Al-Ubaydli and the anonymous reviewer for their invaluable suggestions and advice on the early version; the research is supported by the program of National Social Science Foundation of China's Strategic US Military Base Deployment in the Middle East–Islamic Regions and Its Trend of Readjustment and the Program for New Century Excellent Talents in Universities (NCET), Chinese Ministry of Education.

Research Questions and Puzzles

For a long time, the Middle East has been the epicenter of ethnic conflicts, religious discord, terrorist attacks, territorial disputes, and other cross-border problems. Throughout the past centuries, the fate of the Middle East has been decided by external powers rather than the regional people. Due to its unique location as a "corridor" to the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, as well as its role as a "hub" of the world's oil and natural gas reserves, the region has been the playground for major powers competing for predominance.

The establishment of a foreign military presence is undoubtedly one of the most strategic ways for external powers to project their influence, grab regional resources, and deny other powers seeking hegemony.[2] By the early 21st century, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Japan have established dozens of military presence near the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole. Even India, an emerging economy, has built a military base in Tajikistan (as Japan has in Djibouti), and it may well be keen to establish a second base in the Middle East. Of the 21 countries in and around the Middle East, only three are without any apparent foreign military presence (Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan). The United States has a military presence in 13 of these countries, the United Kingdom in nine, and other external powers in nine Middle Eastern countries as well. Therefore, the external powers act as if they were "Gulf neighbors" due to their military presence power projection in this area.[3]

The US is a typical example of countries seeking hegemony through a military presence. Since the end of World War II, it seems to be a "rule" for the US to establish military bases in occupied states to project power and ensure regional predominance. For instance, the US-led coalition defeated Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan and after defeating these powers in 1945, Washington established permanent military bases in these countries to contain and establish a counterbalance to the communist bloc; since the end of the Korean War in 1953,

2. For more literature on military bases, please refer to Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the US Military Overseas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Mark L. Gillem, America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004).

3. J. E. Peterson, "Foreign Military Presence and Its Role in Reinforcing Regional Security: A Double-Edged Sword," in *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges,* ed., Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2008), 93.

US troops have been stationed in South Korea, resulting in the establishment of a strategic balance on the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis China and the Soviet Union; after the US-led coalition forces expelled Saddam's troops and "liberated" Kuwait in 1991, US built military bases in the Emirate; when the Kosovo War ended in 1999, the US crushed Serbia and maintained a balance of power vis-à-vis Russia in the Balkans by deploying military bases in Kosovo; since the end of the Afghan War in 2001, the US has succeeded in building military bases in the central Asian country, to deter the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Therefore, why did the Obama administration close its military bases and abandon its power projection "beachheads" in Iraq in 2011? Is Iraq an exception?

Hard Military Bases and Soft Military Presence: A Conceptual Differentiation

Power projection can be achieved not only by having military bases, but also by a soft military presence. Although the Obama administration closed hard US military bases in Iraq in 2011, a soft military presence still exists to maintain US power and influence in that country in an indirect way.

Power to countries is like currency to individuals, and the essence of a foreign military presence is power. As Karl Marx put it, land is sufficient for a regional encroaching regime, but waters are indispensable for an aggressive regime with world ambition.[4] Similarly, A.T. Mahan highlighted that, "the mysterious power… was not in this or that man, king or statesman, but in that control of the sea.[5]" Foreign military presence is an important means for states to project their power, interfere in regional affairs, spread their culture, safeguard their foreign interest, and enhance their political influence.[6]

In this chapter, foreign military presence refers to an area on land or on sea beyond a sovereign state's jurisdiction, where a certain number of armed forces are stationed and which has military activities, organized institutions, and military

4. Karl Marx, *The Inside Story of the Diplomatic History in 18th Century* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1979), 80.
5. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1895), 278.
6. Degang Sun, "Outpost for Power Projection: A Chinese Perspective of French Military Bases on African Continent," *Journal of Cambridge Studies* 6, no.4 (2011), 53.

facilities.[7] It is by nature the geographical and functional extension of a country's domestic military deployment.

Foreign military presence takes a great variety of forms. For instance, according to duration, they can be divided into permanent (with a long-term objective) or an ad hoc (with a short-term objective) presence; based on difference in functions, they can be divided into army, air, naval, logistic, communication, arsenal and intelligence presence, etc.

This paper divides foreign military presence into two types: hard military bases and soft military presence. The former refers to military areas on the open sea, colonies, departments, trust territories, or foreign territories, where a state deploys a certain number of armed forces, engages in military activities, and builds up certain institutions and facilities.[8] As of 2013, the US had 598 military bases and installations in 40 sovereign states (Army: 265; Navy: 116, Air: 197, Marine Corp: 20).[9] Its total foreign bases are almost as many as that of Roman Empire in 117 A.D. and of the British Empire in 1898 when the two empires were in their respective heyday. Besides, currently Britain has foreign military bases in Cyprus, Ascension Islands, Kenya and Falkland Islands, making it a world power as well.[10]

In the contemporary greater Middle East, the US has military bases in Qatar (with forward headquarters of the US Central Command), Bahrain (with headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet), United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Turkey and Djibouti; France has bases in the UAE and Djibouti; Russian bases exist in Kyrgizstan and Tajikistan, and Britain has a base in Cyprus.

Soft military presence is more dynamic and less visible, including ad hoc military deployment (such as rapid deployment troops), technical military stations, foreign arsenals, military supply sites, drone bases, small intelligence stations, reconnaissance sites, aerospace tracking facilities and so on. In a broader sense, broadcast relay stations, communication facilities, aerospace and aviation launchers,

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7. Professor Robert Harkavy admits that there are "definitional and semantic problems surrounding this subject (bases)," and scholars usually use facilities, basing access, among others, to refer to "bases." See Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Basing and the Great Powers,* 1200–2000 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.
8. China Encyclopedia Compiling Committee, *China Encyclopedia (Military)* (Beijing: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1989), 562.
9. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, *Base Structure Report,* Fiscal Year 2012 Baseline, 2012, 7.
10. Danica Sorber, "What Countries Have Overseas Military Bases?" *eHow,* May 2, 2011, available at: http://www.ehow.com/info_8342821_countries-overseas-military-bases.html.

and ground receiving stations are regarded as soft military bases as well.[11] According to statistics, in 2012, soft military presence represented 90 percent of all US military forces abroad, while big and medium-sized military bases made up only 6 percent of the total (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: US military deployment abroad (as of 2012)

	Large Bases	Medium-sized Bases	Soft Military Presence	Others	Total
Army Bases	5	8	272	31	316
Naval Bases	4	3	98	9	114
Air Bases	9	5	191	11	216
Marine Bases	3	2	10	5	20
Total	21	18	571	26	666

Source: Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2012 Baseline, 2012, 24.

The US military deployment in the Middle East is a case in point. Since the 9/11 incidents, Washington has maintained hard military bases in Turkey, Djibouti, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, among others, and a soft military presence in Algeria,[12] Israel, Iraq and Yemen. With terrorist threat mounting, the US rapid deployment troops have become a major type of soft military presence, which enjoys more flexibility, stronger mobility, lower cost, and what is more, less physical visibility to the host nations. Therefore, soft military presence can reduce the potential risk of "base politics."

From Hard Military Bases to Soft Military Presence: Case of Iraq

Since its invasion of Iraq, the US deployed a considerable number of troops, pooled in resources and contributed to diplomatic endeavor in the country to set a "democratic model" for other failed and failing Islamic states. To achieve that goal, the US paid a heavy price - 4,485 soldiers and officers died, 72,271 were injured,

11. Robert E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 27.
12. Although Algerian authorities have consistently denied any US presence in the country, there is evidence that the US enjoys a soft presence in the Algerian desert near the southernmost city of Tamanrasset.

and 2,097 public servants lost their lives. The enduring conflicts and chaos cost Washington a direct loss of $805 billion.[13] At one point the US deployment peaked at over 150,000 troops and over 100 hard military bases throughout the country. However, the question as to whether US should continue to run hard military bases or have a soft military presence in Iraq in the future caused continuous debate in Washington. As early as June 2006, a policy report by the Pentagon suggested that the US should continue to operate at least four big military bases in Iraq, mostly air bases, including Tallil in the South, Al-Asad in the West, Balad in Central Iraq, and Tal Afar in the North. Among the four, Balad air base was the largest; it boasted 20,000-25,000 American troops at the peak. The base was protected by a 25 km-long security zone and was the gateway to Baghdad.[14] Joseph Gerson, a historian of American military bases, commented that "the Bush administration's intention is to have a long-term military presence in the region... For a number of years the US has sought to use a number of means to make sure it dominates in the Middle East... The Bush administration sees Iraq as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for its troops and bases for years to come."[15]

In 2008, a report by the think tank RAND put forth a similar suggestion. The authors of the report argued that after the US troops were demobilized in Iraq, Washington should maintain one or two permanent military bases. For instance, US air bases in Balad and Al-Asad may be frequently used to deploy US Predator drones. Meanwhile, the report said, the bases could contribute to such military operations as air support, military rescue, assistance, and tactical airlifting. The two military bases would also be used to coordinate with the larger US Central Command military bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on issues such as intelligence, pre-warning, reconnaissance, aerial refueling, attacking high value targets, and military deterrence.[16]

The Obama administration's priority in the Middle East has been similar to that of the earlier administration's; its objective is to secure US regional leadership in the region. However, the means that President Obama uses to achieve this end is very different. During the Bush presidency, Washington attached great importance

13. Hannah Fischer, "Iraq Casualties: US Military Forces and Iraqi Civilians, Police, and Security Forces," *CRS Congressional Report,* June 11, 2010, 1.
14. David E. Thaler, *Future US Security Relationship with Iraq and Afghanistan: US Air Force Roles* vol. 681, RAND (2008), 115–16.
15. Deborah White, "An American Palace in Iraq and Four Permanent US Bases," *About.com,* http://usliberals.about.com/od/homelandsecurit1/a/AmerPalace.htm.
16. Thaler, *Future US Security Relationship,* 116.

to building and expanding military bases in the Middle East, a practice that was harshly criticized by the governments and people, particularly Islamic radicals and extremist groups. From 2001 to 2008, apart from Germany, Japan and South Korea, US military forces abroad were concentrated mainly in the Middle East and Islamic countries, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Djibouti, with the number of US armed forces in Iraq topping others in the early 21st century.

Table 7. 2: Cumulative time that individuals have deployed to Iraq between September 2001 and December 2011, by year

Years of Deployed Duty	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps
Not yet deployed	153,341 (27.3%)	108,021 (34.0%)	133,989 (40.9%)	77,233 (38.6%)
1 year (1 - 12 months)	131,057	141,232	118,035	66,459
2 years (13 - 24 months)	135,876	57,460	55,885	44,148
3 years (25 - 36 months)	94,574	9,479	15,498	10,584
4 years (37 - 48 months)	35,705	1,564	3,501	1,362
5+ years (49+ months)	5,959	368	1,029	161
Total	**554,512**	**318,124**	**327,937**	**199,947**

Source: Dave Baiocchi, "Measuring Army Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan," RAND Corporation Research Report Series, 2013, 5.

Since Barack Obama took office, the US government has attached greater importance to a small-scale military presence with stronger mobility and flexibility. This soft military presence, at facilities called Cooperative Security Locations (CSL) also referred to as "lily pads," is less offensive to the host governments and local residents, and therefore, can effectively reduce the chance of "politicization" of foreign military presence in the Islamic countries. This is the internal dynamics of the US deployment of a soft military presence in Iraq.

After much wrangling, the Iraqi Supreme Court passed a resolution on August 15, 2011, which denied diplomatic immunity to the US military forces in the country, and thereafter US troops were denied extra-territoriality in Iraq. Surprised and rather embarrassed, the Obama administration promptly decided to pull out all armed forces from Iraq and close all military bases there soon after. By the end of December 2011, both the United States and NATO stated that they had no troops stationed and no military bases to run in Iraq. Thus, the Western military operations

that followed the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 came to an end. On December 31, 2011, thousands of Iraqi civilians from all walks of life celebrated peacefully throughout the country the withdrawal of foreign troops. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki declared at a gathering in Baghdad that the day would be "Iraq Day", symbolizing the formal end to the nine-year-long US military occupation of the country. This is the external reason why the US has deployed only a soft military presence in Iraq.

Iraqi hatred of US military bases is multi-dimensional, and the most important factor is US sense of arrogance and superiority over the Iraqis. The United States "took on too many large projects and often did not consult sufficiently with the Iraqis about which projects were needed and how best to go about them," according to the people's complaints; Prime Minister Maliki also noted that one highly promoted project, the Basra Children's Hospital, ran far over budget and was still not finished. The project was more than 200 percent over budget and four years behind schedule.[17] After the withdrawal of troops, the US declared that its "mission" was fulfilled and President Obama had abided by the promise to "pull out all armed forces from Iraq" that he had made during his presidential election campaign.

Since assuming power, President Obama has readjusted the US military strategy. With a slogan of "implementing US smart power," the Obama Doctrine was less aggressive, relying more on allies and multilateralism and advocated the projection of a US global force in an intangible, flexible, and mobilized way. US soft military presence in Iraq, therefore, was smaller but more effective and useful in recent years.

By the end of 2011, the US had closed all hard military bases in Iraq, but its "soft" military presence remained using private security contractors, military and intelligence officers located in the US embassy and in US consulates, US military training officers and consultants, and deployed special operation forces. Such soft military presence is of great significance.

Forms of US Soft Military Presence in Iraq

Influenced by Obama's views on military deployment, Washington abandoned the previous scheme of "maintaining several permanent military bases in Iraq" and decided to close all military bases there by December 31, 2011, a goal it ostensibly reached. However, a careful study reveals a different version: Pentagon has not

17. Michael R. Gordon, "Report Details Mistakes Made by U.S. in Improvement Projects for Iraq," *New York Times, March* 6, 2013.

yet pulled out all the military personnel; instead, it has maintained a soft military presence in Iraq focused on a number of areas.

First, US soft military presence is in the form of private security contractors. On the one hand, Washington withdrew all troops from Iraq; on the other hand, the US still employs a number of private security contractors. The US government hired such private security contractors to maintain Iraqi security and escort American nationals in the country. These security contractors, albeit troublesome and even somehow harmful to US national image, are still an asset. Since US military bases were no longer visible, the soft military presence has minimized antipathy from Iraqi society. From August 31, 2010 to 2012, the US Department of State had employed over 6,000 private security contractors, a large increase from 2,700 in 2009. In December 2011, Academi, a Virginia-based US private security contractor, said it has trained 50,000 people and conducted more than 60,000 protective security missions around the world in the past seven years,[18] including in Iraq. By January 29, 2012, US private security contractors numbered 5,000 in Iraq, mainly performing such tasks as military preparation, security operations, peacekeeping, and security checks.[19]

Second, the US soft military presence is also in the form of security and intelligence officers at the Baghdad embassy and other consulates. After the new Iraqi government denied US military forces' diplomatic immunity and extra-territoriality, the Pentagon has to keep a certain number of security and intelligence officers in the US embassy and consulates in Iraq. Statistics show that the American embassy in Baghdad is the largest and the most expensive around the world; it served as a "green zone" and "bridgehead" for US power projection. The $730 million embassy, as large as the Vatican in Rome, covered an area of 104 acres and was equipped with its own water supply, electricity facilities, and drainage systems, making it virtually "a state within a state."[20] According to reports, it is the largest embassy in world history and the only building project in Iraq that is on time and on budget; is a bomb-proof super-bunker with a 15-feet thick perimeter wall; has 21 buildings and is the size of nearly 80 football fields; is equipped with state-of-the-art communications and surveillance technologies; was built at a cost of $592

18. Nathan Hodge, "Company Once Known as Blackwater Ditches Xe for Yet Another New Name," *Wall Street Journal,* December 12, 2011.
19. Eric Schmitt and Michael Schmidt, "US Drones Patrolling Its Skies Provoke Outrage in Iraq," *New York Times,* January 29, 2012.
20. James Denselow, "The US Departure from Iraq Is an Illusion," *The Guardian,* October 25, 2011.

million; has two huge blocks of offices for 8,000 US staff workers; and has the biggest swimming pool in Iraq.[21] One of the most vocal critics is anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, who demanded that Iraq open a similarly large embassy in Washington "in order to preserve the dignity of Iraq and to save the US Embassy (in Baghdad) from the fire of weapons that have not yet been laid down."[22]

As of 2011, the US Embassy in Baghdad boasted 16,000 staff and officers, including diplomats, military attachés, as well as security and intelligence officers, most of who were endowed with diplomatic immunity.[23] According to the Washington Post, after the military occupation of Iraq, Washington had dispatched about 300 intelligence officers and 500 intelligence staff, making Iraq an area with the largest number of intelligence personnel since the end of the Cold War, comparable to Sai Kung, South Vietnam in the late 1960s.[24] After the US withdrew its forces from Iraq in late 2011, there were still about 16,000 diplomats, security and intelligence officers in the embassy of Baghdad. In addition, the three consulates in Basra, Kirkuk, and Mosul, staffed with 1,000 people each, also had a certain number of security and intelligence officers.[25]

A third aspect of US soft military presence could be seen in military training officers and consultants. After conquering Iraq, the US dispatched military officers and consultants to help the Iraqi transitional government train combatants and the police. In 2008, Bradley L. Bowman, a Council on Foreign Relations international affairs fellow, argued that to lessen antipathy from the local Iraqi people Washington should rely on military training programs and encourage US combatants and intelligence officers to infiltrate Iraq, so that US presence can be less conspicuous.[26] Raymond Odierno, a US top military official in Iraq, admitted that after pulling out its forces, some US forces would remain in the Iraqi local security checkpoints. Their main task would be training, supervising, providing medical care, assisting in air traffic control, and giving helicopter support. The Office of Security Cooperation

21. White, "An American Palace."
22. Associated Press, "US Diplomatic Presence in Iraq Shrinking Fast," PhilStar.com, March 21, 2013; available at: http://www.philstar.com/breaking-news/2013/03/21/922357/us-diplomatic-presence-iraq-shrinking-fast.
23. Scott Stewart, "US Diplomatic Security in Iraq after the Withdrawal," *Security Weekly,* December 22, 2011.
24. Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," RAND Corporation, *Occasional Paper* 127 (2004), 7.
25. Denselow, "The US Departure from Iraq."
26. Bradley L. Bowman, "After Iraq: Future US Military Posture in the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2008), 83–84.

(OSC), for instance, was located in the US embassy in Baghdad, and was made up of several dozen American officers, to train Iraqi Special Forces. Cooperating fully with the Iraqi armed forces, these officers were both trainers and consultants. As Martin E. Dempsey, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff put it, although limited in number, the team of US trainers and consultants would help the Iraqi transitional government to improve their combat skills and carry out training programs, so that the Iraqi government would be ready for procurement of US arms in the future. US training programs concentrated on about ten Iraqi military bases; they not only trained Iraqi troops and police, but they also engaged in counterterrorist campaigns with their Iraqi counterparts.[27]

Due to the presence of American military officers and consultants, the US became the largest supplier of arms to Iraq, a position previously occupied by the Soviet Union/Russia and France. By 2011, the US and Iraq had signed about 400 military cooperation agreements with a total value of $10 billion. The deals included 18 F-16s with a value of over $2 billion as well as other $6 billion worth of weapons and military facilities. In that year, Washington and Baghdad embarked on negotiations for another arms deal with a value of $900 million.

According to the new agreements, the US would send 160 more civilians and military attachés to participate in various Iraqi training programs, and there were 750 more American civilians who would stay permanently in Iraq to supervise the US military aid program in Iraq. After leaving Iraq in December 2012, Washington left about $400 million worth of military facilities, and in 2012 the US offered Iraq about $6 billion worth of additional aid programs – these programs could not transact smoothly without coordination from the US military officers and consultants.[28] To improve its training in Iraq, the US set up about 10 offices in Iraq and dispatched 3,500 American staff for various programs. For instance, the US 402nd Army Field Support Brigade (AFSB) assumed the maintenance of Iraqi troops; this was obviously part of the military presence. Undoubtedly, US training officers and consultants will maintain their presence in Iraq, thus playing an important role in Iraqi security in the future.[29]

27. Walter Pincus, "After Iraq Pullout, U.S. Serves A Reminder to Iran," *Washington Post,* October 24, 2011.

28. Dennis Steele, "The Sun Sets on Operation New Dawn, but the Shadows Remain," *ARMY,* January 2012, 53.

29. Ibid., 54–55.

Fourth, US soft military presence was also in the form of special air forces. Despite the fact that the US had demobilized its armed forces in Iraq, the Baghdad air defense force was still under US control through a US special force. US top officials at the Pentagon reiterated time and again that the US was committed to Iraqi security and would reserve the right to combat Al-Qaeda cells in Iraq and jihadists, including the use of targeted killings of Islamic extremists and terrorists with drones. Apart from the larger drones deployed in Iraq by the US Department of Defense and the CIA, such as RQ-1 "Predator" and MQ-9 "Reaper" with 55-feet wing length, the US State Department itself also deployed over 20 small drones with wing length of 18 inches. Although they were not lethal, drones were extensively used for intelligence collection, communication, and for guaranteeing the physical security of diplomats.[30]

Functions of US Soft Military Presence in Iraq

In 2012, US military and security personnel numbered around 15,000 to 30,000, and such soft military presence would indubitably exert a far-reaching influence on US strategy in Iraq, in the Arabian Gulf and around the world.

First, at the state level, the US soft military presence on the ground would help the Obama administration to further influence Iraq. In the past decade, Washington has taken great pains to shape Iraq as a "model" for other failed and failing states, to demonstrate that "Islam and democracy are compatible." Therefore, with Iraq as an example, Washington highlighted that Western democracy and values were universal, and Islam and democracy has compatibility.[31]

Since it is located at the heart of the Middle East, a democratic and Western-style Iraq would have a strong symbolic significance and would produce a "spillover effect," for a successful Iraqi transition to democracy that would in turn set a model for other transitional Arab countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. Therefore, a stable, democratic and prosperous Iraq serves Washington interests, and US soft military presence would serve as a guarantee. On November 26, 2011, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani pointed out that US presence in Iraq after 2011 was a necessity and would be of great significance because Iraqi forces were still weak, ill-experienced, and poorly equipped, and particularly its navy and air forces were

30. Schmitt and Schmidt, "US Drones Patrolling Its Skies."

31. See Salim Cevik, "Myths and Realities on Islam and Democracy in the Middle East," *Estudios Políticos* 38 (2011), 121–44.

too feeble to defend the country.[32] A continuous US military presence, in the form of military and police trainers, consultants, and private security contractors would effectively prevent Iraq from becoming the target of terrorist attacks and sectarian conflicts, save a democratic constituency of the new Iraq, and consolidate US dominance of Iraq.

As mentioned before, military presence was an essential means for the US to stabilize and control Iraq, but hard military bases would only alienate local residents. Since 2003, the Iraqi people commonly regarded US military occupation and military bases as a form of Western colonial rule, claiming that US soldiers were invaders, not liberators, and Iraqi sovereignty and dignity had been violated. Since Washington's military occupation started a decade ago, Iraq Body Count (IBC) has documented 112,017-122,438 civilian deaths from violence between March 20, 2003 and March 14, 2013,[33] thus causing a serious humanitarian disaster that aroused hatred. That was the root of anti-Americanism and terrorism in the country.[34]

After the establishment of a transitional government in Iraq, the call for complete withdrawal of US troops and for closing all hard military bases became increasingly loud in the Iraqi parliament and among the masses. In addition to Sunni Iraqis, large segments of the Iraqi Shiites and Iraqi Kurds also requested that the US close all military bases. In 2008, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland carried out a survey, which showed that nearly 70 percent of Iraqi people hoped that the US could pull out its armed forces immediately.[35] In the same year, Bradley L. Bowman argued that US military bases in Iraq had induced Islamic radicals and terrorists to target the US clearly; US military bases in Iraq were not only unnecessary, but were also perceived to be offensive and hostile to the Iraqi people. Consequently, he pointed out that the US should close all its military bases in Iraq. He also argued that the US Central Command's military deployment in the GCC countries was powerful enough to

32. Alsumaria.TV, "US Presence in Iraq beyond 2011 Is a Necessity," available at: http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/48567/talabani-us-presence-in-iraq-beyond-2011.

33. IraqBodyCount.org, "The War in Iraq: 10 Years and Counting: Analysis of Deaths in a Decade of Violence," available at: http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/ten-years/.

34. Graf Hans-Christof Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 20.

35. Cooley, *Base Politics,* 268.

respond to any Iranian threat.[36] On the other hand, US soft military presence in Iraq since 2011 would not only guarantee US control over Iraqi security affairs, but also lower Iraqi people's dissatisfaction and antipathy.

Second, at the regional level, US soft military presence in Iraq helps to curb alleged Iranian aggression and maintain a strategic balance between the Shiite and Sunni sections in the Gulf region.

Pentagon's key concern was that, following the withdrawal of its forces, Iran might take advantage and "Finlandize" (i.e., "neutralize") Iraq, compelling Baghdad to seek a compromise with Iran.[37] The consequence of such scenario would be an imbalance of power between Sunnis and Shiites in the Gulf. The Obama administration firmly believed that Iranians would attempt to fill the power vacuum created by the US military withdrawal and infiltrate further into Iraqi Shiite heartland. If that happened, the US government reckoned, the Iran-led "Shiite Crescent," consisting of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hizbollah in Lebanon would materialize, a development unacceptable for Washington. For many years, Tehran was quite complacent with the chaotic Iraqi situation since that provided a barrier against US military intervention in Iran.[38] In November 2011, the United States and its European allies declared that they would implement a new round of sanctions against Iranian oil companies and financial institutions, a decision Tehran harshly decried. Iranians threatened that, if another round of sanctions is imposed, Iran might close the Strait of Hormuz and that oil prices would skyrocket by 50 percent. In the recent report *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* issued by the US Department of Defense in January 2012, the Pentagon made it clear that to contain Iran and stop its would-be destructive activities, the US would cooperate with the GCC countries and other allies to maintain a military presence in the Gulf.[39] By the end of 2012, almost all Iranian neighbors, such as Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia,

36. Bowman, "After Iraq," 79.

37. Pat Proctor, "The Mythical Shia Crescent," *Parameters* 38, no. 1 (2008), available at: http://www.google.com.hk/url?q=http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/08spring/proctor.pdf&sa=U&ei=atGvUsPQOqSwiQf16IDQAg&ved=0CDMQFjAD&usg=AFQjCNEmz66xOTtFwVSu3fvR8--TFlEjIA.

38. Edward P. Djerejian and Frank G. Wisner, co-chairs, proceedings from a working group co-sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy (2003), 13.

39. US Department of Defense, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (January 2012), 2, available at: http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

UAE, Oman, and Pakistan had US troops either in hard military bases or as a soft military presence. According to recent CENTCOM figures communicated to Al-Jazeera on April 30, 2012, the number of US troops stationed in close proximity to Iran is close to 125,000.[40] US aircraft carriers, literally floating bases, in the Gulf and in the Arabian Sea, are also part of the chain of military bases.[41] According to CENTCOM, around 15,000-20,000 soldiers are stationed on naval vessels in the Near East area. US soft military presence in Iraq is one of the links connecting those in the GCC countries and in Turkey, playing an essential role for Washington to keep its predominance in the Arabian Gulf. In December 2013, the US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel paid a visit to Bahrain and committed to maintaining a 35,000-strong force in the Gulf region regardless of the interim nuclear deal with Iran. He emphasized that the military footprint includes 10,000 US Army troops with tanks and Apache helicopters, roughly 40 ships at sea including an aircraft carrier battle group, missile defense systems, advanced radar, surveillance drones, and warplanes that can strike at short notice.[42]

Finally, at the global level, US soft military presence in Iraq is conducive to a US strategic shift from the Greater Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. On the one hand, the soft military presence in Iraq could help to cut the US defense budget and lessen US fiscal deficit so that Pentagon could pour more resources into the Asia-Pacific region. According to statistics, by 2011, US federal debt had exceeded $14 trillion, which virtually equals the US GDP of the same year, while the US debt per capita reached a historical record of $45,000. In 2010 alone, the US federal government paid $414 billion in interest on the federal debt.[43] With the slowdown of the US economy, on December 31, 2011, President Obama ratified an act deciding that the 2012 US defense budget would be $662 billion, a drop of $63 billion.[44] In January 2012, the Pentagon declared that in 2013, the US defense budget would drop to $613.4 billion.[45] President Obama also demanded that, in the next decade, the US defense budget should be cut by $450 billion, of which $78

40. Ben Piven, "US Bases Encircle Iran," Al Jazeera, May 1, 2012.
41. On floating bases in the Gulf, see Thom Shanker, "Floating Base Gives U.S. New Footing in the Persian Gulf," *New York Times,* July 11, 2012.
42. "US to Maintain 35,000 Troops in Gulf Region: Hagel," *Peninsula,* December 8, 2013.
43. Adnan Khan, "Is America Becoming the New 'Sick Man'?" *Khilafah,* March 15, 2009, 19.
44. David Nakamura, "Obama Signs Defense Bill, Pledges to Maintain Legal Rights of US Citizens," *Washington Post,* December 31, 2011.
45. In Fiscal Year 2014, US defense budget reached about $630 billion.

billion would be cut from 2012-2016.[46] To achieve that goal, the US must cut its foreign military expenditure, particularly in Iraq.

In the past decade, the US spent over $800 billion on the Iraq War and on combating insurgents in post-war Iraq. It took Washington over one billion dollars annually to run hard military bases in Iraq alone, which became an unbearable burden for Washington, especially if one adds other military expenditures. Compared with the previous hard military bases in Iraq, the soft military presence is cheaper and more flexible, enabling defense budget cuts. As the report Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense pointed out, although the US would cut the defense budget, US foreign military presence was required and this would be achieved in creative ways.[47] The soft military presence is one of those "creative methods."

Furthermore, US soft military presence in Iraq alleviated the US lack of armed forces in the global base deployment. President Obama underscored that the decade-long US anti-terror war had deviated from its direction and that the US must refocus on the Asia-Pacific regions, for the area was rising in global influence and the US had a big stake countering that influence. On November 17, 2011, President Obama delivered a speech to the Australian parliament, whereby he reiterated the two states' six-decade long strategic alliance. In his speech, Obama declared that the US would increase its military maneuvers in Australia, and US naval forces would be stationed in Australia. With foreign military bases in Australia as platforms, the US would strengthen its military preparations with its Australian ally and at the same time train Australian troops. Obama is convinced that a powerful US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region would reinforce the US rapid response and deployment capabilities and guarantee "regional peace and security." In 2012, the US planned to dispatch 250 marines to Darwin City, in north Australia, and the total US force in the military base would reach 2,500 in the years to come.

On January 5, 2012, President Obama further illustrated the US future military strategy "blueprint", which is three-fold. First, the US will reduce its military presence in Europe, Africa, and Latin America, while containing anti-US forces in the Middle East, particularly Iran. The US will also increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Second, US Army troops would be reduced from 570,000 to 490,000, while increasing the Navy and Air Force's power projection capabilities. Third, the US will reduce its large and permanent military bases and increase

46. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, *Base Structure Report,* 6.

47. US Department of Defense, *Sustaining US Global Leadership,* 2.

smaller and mobilized military presence abroad.[48] Since the Obama administration regarded the Asia-Pacific region as key to its military strategies, and since it was determined to consolidate US military bases in Australia, Guam, Japan, Okinawa, South Korea, Singapore the Philippines and Thailand, the US withdrawal of active troops from Iraq, opting instead for a soft military presence, would certainly help Washington to focus on East Asia.

Challenges to US Soft Military Presence in Iraq

As of 2013, US military presence in Iraq is further shrinking. According to the US Ambassador to Iraq, Robert Stephen Beecroft, US military and civilian personnel numbered 16,000 in early 2012, but dropped to 10,500 in March 2013, and by the end of the year 2013, the figure will be around 5,500.[49] The decline of US military presence implies a weakening of US manipulation power in the region. In contrast, dramatic changes have taken place in the Middle East, and Washington's decision to keep only limited soft military presence in Iraq is disputable and will probably sabotage US influence in Iraq and in the Middle East at large.

The first challenge is the worsening Iraqi situation, which has exposed the weakness of the US lack of hard military bases in the country. Since the Obama administration closed all the military bases in Iraq, the number of terrorist attacks has rocketed, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki has warned that the Sunni and Shiite conflicts are so intense that Iraq is on the verge of a civil war. Moreover, in 2012 and early 2013, violence attributed to Al-Qaeda in Iraq intensified, highlighting the group's attempts to exploit widening sectarian cleavages.[50] The US State Department strongly condemns the terrorist attacks perpetrated throughout Iraq and remains committed to supporting Iraq's efforts to combat and overcome terrorism,[51] but US military response and political resolve are quite limited due to its lack of hard military bases in the country. "Since the end of the Iraq War, many Iraqi insurgents from Anbar and Diyala provinces took sanctuary in Sunni areas of Syria, targeting the Al-Maliki government in Baghdad and the Assad regime

48. Thom Shanker and Elisabeth Bumiller, "Obama Puts His Stamp on Strategy for a Leaner Military," *New York Times,* January 6, 2012.

49. "US Diplomatic Presence."

50. Jonathan Masters and Zachary Laub, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (a.k.a. Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria," Council on Foreign Relations *Backgrounder* October 29, 2013, available from: http://www.cfr.org/iraq/al-qaeda-iraq/p14811.

51. Embassy of the United States—Iraq, "The United States Condemns the Terrorist Attacks across Iraq," April 16, 2013, available at: http://iraq.usembassy.gov/pr_april_16_2013.html.

in Damascus. The irony is that the US is protecting a pro-Iran Shiite regime in Baghdad against a Sunni-based insurgency while at the same time supporting a Sunni-led movement against the Iran-backed dictatorship in Syria."[52]

Before leaving his post, US Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta complained that the inability of the Obama administration to finalize an agreement providing for an American military presence in Iraq after 2011 had deprived the US of important political leverage in Iraq, and since the Iraqi government is adhering to pro-Iranian and pro-Russian polices, the US government is greatly concerned over Maliki's growing authoritarianism and increased tensions among Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.[53] The second challenge is Iraqi policy reorientation. Washington calculated that, so long as US maintains a soft military presence in Iraq, it would be a model of democracy for other Middle East countries. Iraq will not only be a beacon for Arab countries, but also a "US backyard." However, the Iraqi government's foreign policy reorientation is worrisome for the Obama administration. On the one hand, Al-Maliki administration in Baghdad seeks a strategic partnership with Iran, the US arch enemy in the Middle East, and helps build a "Shiite Crescent"; on the other hand, Baghdad has shown interest in purchasing arms from Russia. Iraq, according to a report, is negotiating with Russia to purchase air defense facilities.[54]

The third challenge is from the prolonged Syrian civil war. The Syrian situation is worsening, but US diplomatic and military influence is limited due to its lack of hard military bases in Iraq, one of the key neighbors of Syria.

To meet these challenges, the Obama administration seems to be probing the possibility of rebuilding hard military bases in Iraq. In October 2012, the Obama administration reportedly negotiated with the Iraqi government on restoring military deployment in the country. In the same month, a member of the Iraqi Parliament Kazzem Al-Shimri told the media that "given the existing challenges that the US is facing in the region, it is trying to find a base in Iraq and for that reason it is trying to return to Iraq's Al-Assad military base."[55]

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52. Tom Hayden, "US Special Forces Deployed in Iraq, Again," TheNation.com, September 5, 2012, available at: http://www.thenation.com/article/170158/us-special-forces-deployed-iraq-again.
53. Gordon, "Report Details Mistakes."
54. "American Special Forces Deployed to Iraq: US General," Press TV, September 29, 2012, available at http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/09/29/264108/us-special-forces-deployed-to-iraq/. In November 2012, Iraq's Prime Minister Al-Maliki declared the cancellation of the $4.2 billion arms deal signed with Russia.
55. "Iraqi MP: US Trying to Restore Military Presence in Iraq," *Islamic Invitation Turkey,* available at: http://www.islamicinvitationturkey.com/2012/10/08/iraqi-mp-us-trying-to-

In December 2012, despite the claim by the Pentagon that the US has only 157 soldiers in Iraq to implement its diplomatic mission, the Pentagon dispatched 3,000 troops (Army Special Operations) secretly from Kuwait to Iraq for missions pertaining to Syria, according to the western media. It is reported that these troops are "mostly stationed at Balad military garrison in Salahuddin province and al-Asad air base in al-Anbar province" to increase its military influence over Syria.[56] The US troops on the ground in Iraq are in response to concern in Washington over a possible chemical weapons attack against Syrian rebels by embattled President Bashar Assad.[57] It is still too early to judge whether the US is ready to restore some of its hard military bases in Iraq.

Conclusion

For a long period of time, the US sought to keep its predominance in the Arabian Gulf through military deployment. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq are the top three countries that hold the richest oil reserves in the Arabian Gulf and the world as well. The US soft military presence in Iraq, together with its hard bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, among others, has formed a "Persian Gulf Shield," which has consolidated the US hegemonic position in the volatile Gulf and transformed it into an "American Gulf."

Since the end of World War II, the US has habitually stationed troops and established military bases in occupied countries. Nevertheless, the Obama administration decided to close all military bases and pulled out troops from Iraq in a manner suggesting a neglect of the country's geopolitical importance. This paper categorizes foreign military presence into hard military bases and soft military presence, and finds that, although Washington closed all hard its military bases in Iraq, its "soft" military presence has remained, in the form of security contractors, military and intelligence officers in the embassy and consulates, military training officers and consultants, and special operation forces. The "lily pads" in Iraq provide easier mobilization and flexibility, reflecting Obama's "New Thinking" on military deployment in the Middle East.

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restore-military-presence-in-iraq/.

56. "3,000 US Troops Secretly Return to Iraq via Kuwait," Press TV, December9, 2012, available at: http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/12/09/277127/3000-us-troops-secretly-return-to-iraq/.

57. Carlo Muñoz, "DOD Denies Deployments of US Forces back to Iraq," *DEFCONHill*, December 10, 2012; available at: http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/operations/272049-dod-denies-deployments-of-us-forces-back-to-iraq-.

Since the closure of US military bases in Iraq in late 2011, the US Department of State and the Pentagon, through close-knit coordination, have planned for a civilian-led presence in Iraq consisting of 16,000-17,000 personnel at 14 sites starting in fiscal year 2012. The State Department had a scheme to reduce the presence to 11,500 personnel at 11 sites by 2013. Even with the reductions, the mission in Iraq would be the largest US diplomatic presence in the world. The Obama administration allocated an estimated $4 billion for the civilian-led presence for fiscal year 2012, 93 percent of which was for security and support costs. In addition, the State Department requested $1.9 billion in police and military assistance and $471 million in other foreign assistance for fiscal year 2012.[58] Washington has attempted to influence regional affairs through that soft military presence and avoid the resentment caused by large military bases, but the shortfalls of this approach are apparent. With the increasing influence of Russia, the chaos of Iraqi sectarian conflicts, the Iran-Iraq rapport and the worsening of the Syrian civil war, US soft military presence is "too soft" to control Iraqi, the Gulf, and the Syrian situations.

Apart from Iraq, Obama attempted to build a soft military presence in other parts of the world as well. For instance, in January 2012, the US declared that it would establish a soft military presence, i.e., drone bases, in Ethiopia and in the Republic of Seychelles.[59] On January 25, 2012, although Washington admitted that it had no interest in building military bases in the Philippines, it was interested in cooperation in joint military exercises, anti-terrorism, and combating piracy.[60] All these steps are in line with Obama's "light footprint" strategy, of establishing a soft military presence similar to the "lily pads" in Iraq.

58. Michael J. Courts, "Mission Iraq: State and DOD Face Challenges in Finalizing Support and Security Capabilities," US Government Accountability Office, June 28, 2012; available at: http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-856T.

59. Schmitt and Schmidt, "US Drones Patrolling Its Skies."

60. Craig Whitlock, "Remote U.S. Base at Core of Secret Operations," *Washington Post,* October 25, 2012.