



Should the U.S. Withdraw Its Troops from Iraq and Syria? - Joshua Landis (part 1/2)

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Talia Baroncelli (TB): Hi, you're watching *theAnalysis.news*, and I'm your host, Talia Baroncelli. I'll shortly be joined by Joshua Landis, who is an amazing historian and expert on the Middle East. We'll be speaking about the strike that killed three US service members in Jordan, as well as numerous other strikes in Syria and Iraq.

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I'm very excited to have Joshua Landis here with me today. He is the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and a Professor at the University of Oklahoma. He's a non-resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Thanks so much for joining me today, Joshua.

Joshua Landis (JL): Talia, it's a pleasure.

TB: Why don't we start off with the U.S. troop presence in the Middle East? We've been seeing lots of strikes both in Syria and in Iraq. I should also mention that there are 900 U.S. troops in Syria, as well as 2,500 U.S. troops in Iraq, to give some context there. We also, unfortunately, saw three U.S. service members killed in a drone strike on a U.S. base in Jordan. In retaliation, one of the senior leaders of Kata'ib Hezbollah was killed in a drone strike in Baghdad recently. As a result of this, one of the Iraqi army spokespersons said that the U.S. should definitely withdraw, that their presence in Iraq is a source of instability, and such strikes in a very densely populated area in Baghdad obviously aren't welcome. So, given these recent strikes, do you see the U.S. drawing down their forces anytime soon?

JL: Much depends on what happens with these negotiations of the strategic position of the United States in Iraq. The Prime Minister, Al Sudani, has started this initiative to ask the United States to leave, or at least to renegotiate its position, which would draw down forces and restrict what they can do. Now, the United States has a lot of leverage in Iraq, and the Iraqis, many Iraqis, do not want the United States to leave because they are a counterbalance to Iran. Also, the United States has many weapons they can use against Iraq, such as sanctions.

We know that Syria is under very strict sanctions, and so is Iran. Both countries use Iraq, particularly the Iranians, as a lung to enter into international banking through Iraqi banks. The United States has been adding sanctions on various Iraqi banks that have been helping the Iranians get dollars and access the international banking system through Iraq. Were the United States to leave and be pushed out, they might very well begin to sanction Iraq in a much more comprehensive way, which would hurt Iraqi politicians. Iraq has to be very careful. Of course, the Kurds in the north do not want the United States to leave. There are many actors in Iraq who don't.

Iraq, as we know, is an extremely divided country. There are people who want Americans, but in general, killing top Iraqi officials and, of course, just regular Iraqis; these strikes killed 16 Iraqis, a number of civilians, and 24 more were wounded, which infuriated the Iraqis. They don't want their sovereignty constantly jeopardized through these American strikes, and particularly, they don't want to become, as they reiterate over and over again, to become a battleground between Iran and the United States. The United States is there to help their military build-up, to help them fight ISIS, but all this other stuff that causes the deaths of important politicians is infuriating for Iraqis. The pressure to push America out is building. That will damage America's position, and it'll hurt. It's going to help Iran, obviously, and the Iranian, much of the Iraqi political interests are very pro-Iranian. They're sharpening their knives and hoping to drive this tit-for-tat war up to a crescendo where Iraqis will say, "Get out." One of the main objectives of Iran and the Iranian militias that are connected to Iran in Iraq and Syria is to get America out of both Syria and Iraq. I don't think they're going to stop until they achieve their ends.

TB: You recently wrote a piece for the Quincy Institute in which you said that it's not just Iran who wants the U.S. to leave the region but also Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. That begs the question, why is the U.S. there in the first place? I know that initially, a lot of those troops that were sent to Iraq and Syria were there in order to fight ISIS. Can you even tenuously argue that mandate is still valid, and that's why they're still there? Or has the goal changed now, where it's just a matter of self-preservation and self-perpetuation to try to preserve their presence there for the sake of it?

JL: Well, I think you're absolutely right, Talia. You put your finger on it because the original mission was to overturn Saddam Hussein in 2003, which led us into Iraq in the first place. America withdrew under President Obama, largely; then, ISIS exploded because America was helping to organize the overthrow of Assad's government in 2011, when the Arab Spring

broke out in Syria. The United States was pumping billions of dollars by 2012 into an effort to build up Syrian opposition groups. America's allies, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and others, were also sending in billions of dollars and lots of arms. America was trying to orchestrate this through the CIA centers, both in Turkey and in Jordan. But that caused the Syrian army to almost collapse, and it had to withdraw from all of Eastern Syria. That meant that Eastern Syria became a playground for these various militias. ISIS, which had been Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had been largely suppressed by American forces, sprung up in Syria and could spread out along the Euphrates, take Raqqa, set up ISIS as we saw in 2015, spreading back into Iraq, 2014, and building a state the size of Great Britain.

Then, America remobilized and had considerable sympathy from the Iraqi government in helping to destroy ISIS. Of course, it infuriated Turkey because it meant America's strategy was to arm the Kurds in Syria and to build a Kurdish-led militia, which is now called the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are connected to a virulent anti-Turkish movement inside Turkey, the PKK. Turkey looks at this as America stabbing them in the back and supporting a terrorist organization. Turkey is dead set against America being in the region, having its bases, and training and paying for these Kurdish forces to be strong. So you're right. Syria is dead set against it because America's policy has metastasized and changed, as you indicated, to no longer being an anti-ISIS. It does have an anti-ISIS element to it, but it's largely there to punish Assad and keep him weak. America has taken all of Syria's best oil and gas fields, which are in the northeast, as well as its best agricultural land. It has turned that over to the Kurds, which supports the American effort and American proxy army that is there but is denied to the Syrian people.

The Syrian government doesn't have enough oil or gas to run its own electric stations. Syrians get about an hour or two hours maximum of electricity a day. They live without refrigerators. They're freezing in the wintertime. I talked to my wife's family, who are Syrian and are all in Syria. When we talk to them now, they're sitting in their winter jackets, freezing in their houses because of no heat. They have to go shopping at certain times of the day so that if they get chicken, they can eat it immediately because the butcher only slaughters chicken at four o'clock in the afternoon, ready for dinner time because the chickens will go bad. They don't have refrigeration. The whole place is a mess. They blame this in part on the Americans for taking their oil and gas, supporting this Kurdish quasi-independence movement, building up an army there, and depriving them of important resources. The Syrian government doesn't want them. The Iraqi government increasingly doesn't want them. The Turkish government, excuse me, doesn't want them. Of course, the Kurds do because the Middle East, as you know, is extremely divided along these ethnic and religious divisions. America has got more and more enemies on its hands who are looking to drive it out and are encouraging groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, whose leader was just killed by America, to attack the bases and try to drive them out. Iran, of course, doesn't want them there for the obvious reasons.

The United States is staying there in part because it doesn't want to lose in an election year when President Biden would be accused of being weak and where Kurds would be hurt if

America pulled out just the way the pro-American Afghans were hurt. He doesn't want an Afghan, too, on his hands before an election. He does not want to leave, and we're trying to stay. That cycle of America coming up with these new reasons to stay in a place where their job, defeating ISIS, is largely completed. It must be said that in the long run, the only way to keep ISIS from growing again is to have strong central governments with competent police forces that can police their countries. This was a situation before America invaded Iraq. Obviously, they were distasteful dictators, but there was no ISIS. There was no Al-Qaeda. Those were introduced to the region when America destroyed the central governments. The central government of Iraq, where there was no government, and of course, Al-Qaeda just poured into the country, as did these other jihadist groups, and they metastasized.

Anyway, in the long run, both the Syrian government and the Iraqi government are going to have to take care of ISIS, and they are largely capable of doing it today. If America wants to assist them in doing that, it can do so from Qatar, Turkey, from neighboring countries like Kuwait. It does not have to have troops inside Iraq and Syria. Keeping them there is going to endanger American troops because these are small bases scattered around in these desert areas, and they're sitting ducks with a neighborhood that does not want them there.

TB: Yeah, they're sitting ducks with technological systems that are perhaps failing if the drones were able to get through those defense systems, whereas the groups that are attacking them are able to regroup and to move around, whereas the service members on the bases can't do that. As you said, they're sitting ducks.

JL: They're sitting ducks. But America's technology has been very good. In Jordan, the base that was attacked evidently did not have the appropriate technology to see these drones coming in. Somehow, I think that because the base was in Jordan, America thought it would not be attacked, as were the bases in Iraq and Syria, where there are much more sophisticated anti-aircraft radars and other technologies. These anti-American-Iraqi groups found a vulnerability, and they exploited it by getting their drone into that base in Jordan. I'm sure that American generals are thinking, "Well, we can patch this up. We can get that technology into our bases in Jordan, and we can keep America safe." I'm sure that's a counter-narrative going on in the American military, and that's probably what's going to happen because Biden is not going to withdraw if he can help it before the elections.

TB: Well, I do want to pick up on something you mentioned earlier, and that was the ethnic as well as sectarian tensions that exist in the Middle East. You're a historian, and I'm sure you would know that some of these are also, in a way, propped up by different military presences within the region. For example, during the war in Iraq, the U.S. also gave money to various groups to side with them, and in a way, that created the conditions for ISIS to come in. I'm not a historian, but I would assume that also played into a lot of the divisions that existed, exacerbated, or shifted them around. It's not like we're dealing with fixed categories here. You often hear people say that people in the Middle East have been hating each other and killing each other for thousands of years, so they're just going to continue doing so

without looking at the actual political and economic factors that are playing into these conflicts. I wonder what you make of that.

JL: Well, you're absolutely right, Talia. You're absolutely right. The United States, like all imperial powers, has used divide and conquer as a primary weapon in order to insert itself there. That's what America did in defeating Saddam Hussein. Our most crude and simple strategy in 2003, when we conquered Iraq and destroyed the central state, was to throw the Sunni Arabs who dominated Saddam's Ba'athist government. Saddam was a Sunni from Tikrit, the Ba'ath Party, and the military; the top positions were dominated by Sunni Arabs, who had ruled under the Ottomans and continued to rule under the Faisal regime, the Hashemite Kingdom, and then under the Ba'ath Party. The majority of the population, of course, were Shiites, whom America looked to and catapulted from the bottom of society to the top. The Shiites had been badly discriminated against under the Ottoman Empire and discriminated against under the Ba'ath regime. America catapulted them to the top of society. Today, and ever since America has been there, the Prime Minister has been a Shiite. This kindled a terrible civil war. That's why Al-Qaeda and ISIS were various incarnations of fighting groups that were trying to put the Sunnis back into power and were highly discriminatory against the Shiites.

[Abū Muṣ'ab al-] Zarqāwī, who led Al-Qaeda in Iraq, was virulently anti-Shiite. This sectarian tension had not existed at that level in Iraqi society before America entered. The Civil War just drove this hatred. Of course, America privileged the Kurds and gave them autonomy in the north, which they enjoy, and the Iraqi army doesn't go into the north. The Kurdish regions have their own Peshmerga army. Iraq has been severely divided, and one group has been pitted against each other. We see something very similar happen in the effort to overturn President Assad in Syria. The sectarian animosities and ethnic animosities are high pitched today in Syria because of that fighting and that civil war that came from having a weak state, which was overturned, where each group began to fight each other and was motivated, really trained to distrust each other. It has become infinitely worse, as you know, since America's attempt to build power, sharing, and democracy. If we're going to credit America with those ambitions in going in, they certainly failed, and they've only created a very divided Middle East.

TB: Well, what do you think the game plan is now? Secretary of State Lloyd Austin said that they're engaged in negotiations with Iraq to potentially discuss a drawdown of troops. But after this attack, do you think the attack on service members in Jordan spells the end of any of those negotiations, or is that a pretext to say, "Oh, we're not going to withdraw any troops, and in fact, we might even send more troops to the region?"

JL: Well, I think the Prime Minister, Al Sudani, is engaged in these talks, and he has asked America to leave as well, but he's never set a date. He is trying to thread this needle of responding to popular outreach and to these militias, the Islamic resistance militias, which are part of the Iraqi government. We have to understand they're part of the government, and they support Sudanis, so he has to listen to them. They could potentially bring down his

government. So he's beholden to them, but at the same time, he doesn't want America to be pushed out entirely. He wants to keep the goodwill of America and balance Iranian influence with it. He's in a very difficult position, and I think he's trying to throw this to committees and speak one thing on one hand and do something different on the other hand. America is clearly discussing how it can reduce the number and shift some of what it's supposed to be doing there. The trouble is, as long as there are American soldiers there, the pro-Iranian groups are going to attack them. They want them out altogether.

The government in Iraq is weak, and it has been weak. That's what you get when you have a weak government: they can't control all these different factions. Foreign countries, like America and Iran, can play, and Turkey can orchestrate their own groups and their military presence to keep the country very divided and weak, which allows it to become a playground for these proxy wars. That's what's happening because Gaza has inflamed the entire world, the entire Middle East, and the Arab world, in particular, against America. It's hurting America tremendously. This whole escalation is in the name of Gaza. Of course, people are using it for their own ends, as Iran is. The Gaza situation has definitely ratcheted up anti-American feelings and has helped Iran tremendously. It's helped the whole resistance front with these pro-Iranian militias, from Hezbollah through the Assad government to Kata'ib Hezbollah and the others in Iraq who used to be criticized by people throughout all three countries. Today, there's much less criticism because they found a new legitimacy in standing up against Israel and America and on the side of the Palestinians. Many Syrians and Lebanese scoffed at Iran and these pro-Iranian groups, saying, "You're not doing anything for Palestine. You're just trying to take control of our countries." You don't hear that. I'm sure there are people who still feel that, but they can't express those feelings because they're outraged about what's happening in Palestine.

TB: You've just been watching part one of my discussion with Joshua Landis. If you'd like to hear a segment on the proposed ceasefire deal, you can click on part two. Thanks for watching.

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