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US Policy in Iraq – Four Steps Back, Two Steps Forward

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After continuously backing a centralised Iraq, often to the detriment of the country as a whole, in the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act the United States (US) finally recognised that Iraq is made up of three main communities with different goals. It now remains to be seen how far this new policy will go and whether the US will back an entirely federal Iraq.

Background

The United States (US) [National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016](#) is a watershed moment for US policy in Iraq. It finally takes on the federal elements of the Iraqi constitution and offers support for Sunnis and Kurds if fair redistribution is not followed by the central government. Arguably, if the US had supported the 2005 Iraqi constitution and its federal elements from the beginning, rather than a centralised state, Iraq and its territorial integrity would not face the threat it does today.

In 2003 the US invaded Iraq – [for various reasons](#) – with a policy of regime change and ending authoritarianism in Iraq. Although [mistakes were made with regards to post conflict planning](#), clear and consistent policy ideas remained. The [2005 Iraqi constitution](#) recognised the Kurdish region as an autonomous federal entity and allowed for other federal regions to be created. Joe Biden, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [proposed creating Sunni and Shiite federal regions](#) alongside the already established Kurdish region. However, this proposal was rejected by the US, and a strong centralised state was continually promoted.

One step back

In January 2009 Barak Obama became US president; as part of his presidential campaign he had [promised to end the war in Iraq](#) and withdraw the US troops. Obama’s desire to withdraw troops meant that he

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pursued policies of handing over security regardless of whether Iraqi officials were ready or not. This permitted the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to begin gaining power and control, which in turn allowed him to start [disbanding the Sunni Sahwa forces](#) – who were responsible for all but defeating al-Qaida in Iraq and helping to end the civil war – without properly integrating them within the state’s systems.

Two steps back

Following the 2010 elections the US backed Maliki to stay in power, despite the fact that his [electoral list did not win the most votes](#). Moreover, both Iraqi and US advisors [urged the government to cease support for Maliki](#) as the growing sectarian nature of Maliki’s politics were becoming evident. Backing Maliki was a huge mistake and between 2010 and 2014 Maliki’s [centralisation turned to authoritarianism](#). Yet, the US continued to back him despite the fact that his authoritarianism denied the Sunnis and Kurds their role in decision-making and prevented the rule of law.

Three steps back

In 2011 the US withdrew its troops from Iraq honouring an agreement signed by the previous president, George W. Bush, to withdraw by this date. [Essentially, neither Maliki nor the Obama administration wanted the troops in Iraq](#); unsurprisingly negotiations for an extension of the deadline failed. The US had a duty to withdraw responsibly and not leave Iraq with unresolved issues and a power structure reminiscent of Saddam’s regime. However, despite Maliki’s growing authoritarianism and clear sectarianism, they did not do enough to ensure Iraq’s stability before they withdrew. As a sign of things to come, the day after the US troops withdrew Maliki [issued an arrest warrant for the Sunni vice president, Tareq al-Hashimi](#). Maliki acted to further consolidate his power in Iraq and took control of both the political and military spheres. Maliki’s actions created a set of very favourable circumstances that enabled the relative rapid rise of the Islamic State (IS). This was only further compounded by [Maliki sending in the military to deal with political protestors](#), thus ending any chance of a political solution.

Four steps back

The rise of IS caught the US’ attention and brought their focus back to Iraq. Thus, in the 2014 elections the [US did not back Maliki](#) despite the fact that he won the most votes this time around. The US finally woke up to the threat of Maliki towards the unity of Iraq. However, the US quickly fell into the same trap of backing one man in its blind endorsement of consensus candidate Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. The US focus has been on trying to defeat IS militarily, but has failed to address the structural failures in Iraq that led to its rise. [Abadi lacks the capacity or support to address these issues](#) and all his attempts have failed to make it past parliament.

One step forward

The US House Armed Services Committee’s report on the draft bill H.R.1735 — National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 reads:

[This section](#) would require that the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Sunni tribal security forces with a national security mission, and the *Iraqi Sunni National Guard* be deemed a *country*, which would allow these security forces to directly receive assistance from the United States ... [emphasis added].

The final bill, signed by the president, omitted the term ‘country’, but still recognised Sunnis and Kurds as separate entities. This bill finally moves the US away from supporting one man and a centralised Iraq and towards recognising that Iraq is made up of three main communities with different goals. However, it took

the rise of IS for this to happen. This bill signifies that the US realised that backing a strong centralised state actually divides Iraq to the point of destruction, whereas backing a federally divided Iraq can maintain unity.

Two steps forward

As Abadi's weakness and failure became evident, the US finally circumvented Baghdad and [supplied the peshmerga with significant direct aid](#). This is enabled by the above mentioned [National Defense Act](#), which clearly states that if aid is not appropriately distributed, the US will directly provide aid bypassing the existing laws with regards to [arms exports](#) and [foreign assistance](#). This action is important as it demonstrates that the US is beginning to follow through on its new policy of supporting a federal Iraq. Consequently, the tools for a more balanced policy in Iraq were there, it was the political will that was lacking.

Two steps to go

Going forward, if the US supports Abadi they need to ensure he upholds the constitution and shares power appropriately. The US also needs to follow the new direction laid out in the 2016 Defense Act and support both the Sunnis and Kurds if Abadi fails to do so. Only through strengthening Sunnis politically, creating something along the lines of the 'Iraqi Sunni National Guard' – [from the current Sunni militias](#) – and enabling them to become a federal region will the lasting defeat of IS be possible, as Sunni forces and Sunni political backing are intrinsic to defeating IS in Mosul. At the same time, the US' support for Sunnis and Kurds should be under the proviso that they too respect the constitution and do not extend themselves beyond its federal elements. What happens over the next few months will decide the future of Iraq, whether that is federalism, confederalism or the breakup of Iraq remains to be seen. One thing that is clear is that the US has a role to play and needs to back the constitutionally guaranteed federalism in order to reverse some of the damage done by its support for Maliki.

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