

“Should We Stay or should We Leave?” U.S. Stuck in the Middle East, Devoid of Deterrence Power

U.S. is torn between leaving and staying and cannot decide what to do with the forces it still has in the region

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In yet another instance of American attacks against Iran-backed organizations in the Levant, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed in a statement on February 7 that it “conducted a unilateral strike in Iraq in response to the attacks on US service members, killing a Kata’ib Hezbollah commander responsible for directly planning and participating in attacks on US forces in the region.” The US drone strike targeted Abu Baqir al-Saadi, the influential commander of Iran-backed Kata’ib Hezbollah militia, suspected of carrying out the attack on an American base in Jordan. Yesterday, Yehia Rasool, the spokesperson for the commander in chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces, described this American military action as a “blatant assassination”, adding that the US-led international coalition in the country has “become a factor of instability”, and that “the American forces jeopardize civil peace, violate Iraqi sovereignty, and disregard the safety and lives of our citizens.”

On February 3 Washington started airstriking the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other targets in Syria and Iraq, as a response to the January 28 drone attack in Jordan that killed three American personnel. According to Pentagon deputy press Secretary Sabrina Singh, the attack had the “footprints” of the Iran-backed Kata’ib Hezbollah militia.

The assassination of the aforementioned militia commander, largely seen as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty (which it is), triggered wide condemnation and protests in Baghdad, thereby escalating US-Iraq tensions. As I [wrote](#), since last month top Iraqi authorities including Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani have been reiterating their calls for US troops to leave the country. And now Baghdad is seriously threatening to expel the American forces. Washington had already “left” the country but in a way paradoxically, as it

seems, it never really left.

The past American occupation of Iraq, complete with “nation-building” efforts, is often described as a (failed) [“neocolonial” endeavor](#). That occupation might have come to an end in 2011, after eight years, but the presence of US troops in that Levantine nation is still at the center of a major controversy. As I argued last year, an emboldened and empowered Islamic Republic of Iran emerged as [the main winner](#) of this US disaster in Iraq. Tehran in fact is arguably today’s main power in the Middle East – and not Washington. The Persian nation’s rising influence today is also felt in the wider West Asian region, as we have recently seen with regards to [Pakistan-Iranian tensions](#) over both countries having struck each other’s territory while targeting a terrorist group that operates on their shared border (the two nations have recently resumed their diplomatic relations).

Back to the series of attacks carried out by the United States in the Levant and also in the Red Sea, one can argue they are indeed part of an escalating US-Iran confrontation involving Iranian “proxies” or regional partners and the so-called axis of resistance. The rising tensions have much to do with Washington’s support for its Israeli ally: a large part of the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East today after all is about the escalation of the long going [“fuel war”](#) and of the so-called [shadow war](#) between Iran and the Jewish state. Today’s escalation is in any case mostly a spillover effect of the US-backed disastrous Israeli military campaign in Palestine, as I detailed [elsewhere](#).

Since 2011, that is, for over a decade, Washington has been mostly “withdrawing” from the Middle East, a trend that became abundantly clear ten years later, when its troops left Afghanistan in 2021 – the latest developments however could all arguably be seen as signs that it is making a “come-back” in the area. In a way, from Washington’s perspective, the region keeps pulling it back in – to a large degree thanks to an Israel ally the US cannot quite control or curb.

US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said on February 4 that the strikes against Iranian allies were “the beginning, not the end.” The problem, from an American perspective, is that such a retaliatory campaign has no deterrence effect. With regards to the ongoing Red Sea crisis, in particular, the world has recently learned that for about three months [Washington basically begged its Chinese rival to help](#) by pressuring Iran into curbing the Houthi rebels – in a clear display of weakness. Beijing, in any case, simply has no reason, as I’ve [explained](#), to exert too much pressure, the mess being largely a problem caused by American foreign policy mistakes.

According to a recent The Economist [piece](#), one of the reasons American deterrence against Iran is not working pertains to the fact that Washington, in the larger Middle Eastern context, simply cannot decide whether it will “leave” or “stay” and basically does not seem to know what to do in the region. The clearly [overburdened](#) Atlantic superpower could be described as being “stuck” in West Asia. As I [wrote](#) before, Washington, it appears, wishes to pivot away from the Middle East towards the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe plus part of Central Asia – even while its naval supremacy seems to be [coming to an end](#).

The idea that the Middle East should no longer be a priority for Washington began with former president Barack Obama and kept evolving under Donald Trump, to then gain clearer contours under Joe Biden’s administration. The United States however do not wish to give up its role of “global policeman”, as the American Establishment sees it, and thus it is faced

with a conundrum: according to Sedat Laçiner, a Turkish academic specialist on the Middle East, “given the geostrategic and cultural significance it embodies, it would not be an overstatement to assert that sustained global leadership is unattainable for any power that fails to exert dominance over the Middle East region in the long term”. Laçiner’s reasoning is that the North American superpower simply cannot “leave” the area, a center of oil and petrodollars. However it is not quite welcome “back” there, as the local actors are [pursuing new relationships](#).

According to the aforementioned The Economist [piece](#),

“in the Middle East America is torn between leaving and staying and cannot decide what to do with the forces it still has in the region.” Moreover, it desires “to pivot away from the region while simultaneously keeping troops in it”, thus maintaining a “military presence” that invites tensions but fails to “constrain” its Iranian rival. The world is a complex place with many points of tension, but an undecided declining superpower that [refuses to show restraint](#) certainly contributes a lot to bringing stability to the planet – including in the Middle East.

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