

Will a Major US Disengagement in the Middle East Lead to Conflicts Resulting in More Refugees and Migration?

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Key Points

- The US sent troops to Middle Eastern countries to enhance peace and political stability, yet generally, conditions have not improved.
- Internal wars continue in fragile states such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen as those countries do not contribute significantly to the fight against terrorism, extremism, and insurgency.
- As those countries depend on US troops for security, a US withdrawal would lead to weaker host-nation forces, allowing Daesh, Al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups room to grow.
- Increased migration from Middle Eastern countries to Europe, through Turkey, creates security concerns and potential terrorist activity.
- The Syrian and Afghan conflicts created the most refugees in the world. Despite periodic breaks in the fighting, most of these refugees remained displaced for years.
- A resurgence in terrorist activities will likely increase refugees and transnational migration, and generate devastating human conditions.
- Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen still very much need continued support from the international community, including the US and NATO, in both war and peacetime.

Introduction

Recent indicators stress a likely US gradual disengagement from CENTCOM's area of responsibility.¹ This likely US disengagement would affect key areas including national/regional security, the change in migration patterns, the affected countries' economic development, and trade. Disengagement is likely to deteriorate relationships and cause instability, while troop withdrawal would allow more terrorist activity and conflicts.

Background

Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen are AOR countries directly affected by US disengagement. These countries have faced internal wars from terrorist groups and long-term civil challenges. Terrorism and extremism in these countries is rapidly increasing. This situation has led to the displacement of millions of people.² Iraq, Syria,

¹ Hubbard, Ben, "As U.S. Exits Syria, Mideast Faces a Post-American Era," Jan 11, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/ar> (accessed Mar 11, 2021).

² Krieg, Andreas, "Trump and the Middle East: 'Barking Dogs Seldom Bite,'" *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 3 (2017): p 139-158.

Afghanistan, and Yemen all suffer poor governance, high unemployment levels, and significant corruption. Due to the growing population in these countries, pressure is building on their governments to better allocate national resources. This pressure has culminated into armed conflict and increased violent extremism.

Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan's governments have not sufficiently contributed to the fight against terrorism, extremism, and insurgency in their respective countries. The inability to control these conflicts causes these countries to be classified as failed states. The US has deployed its troops to counter terrorists and enable peace and stability, but the situation is not improving.

Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan have limited resources to address infrastructure and industrialization, economic development. The gross domestic product of these four countries is growing at a slower rate than other developing countries. Those countries and their international donors have invested substantially in weapons and troop deployments. However, even in the countries with significant oil resources, high poverty levels persist.² Despite significant security sector funding, few commercial industries are supported, creating few employment opportunities. This low economic activity generates minimal government revenue. Reduced security, high poverty levels, and high unemployment generates a disenfranchised recruitment pool for terrorist groups.

Analysis

Recent generations in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan have grown up in societies deeply rooted in ethnic and tribal differences, poor governance, and weak economies unable to meet their nation's needs. Migration, urbanization, and population pressures in these countries add fuel to existing internal conflicts. While populations are increasing, respective Gross National Products are dropping. For example, according to the United Nations Housing Fund, Iraq ranks second to Egypt as the most populous Arab country in the world.³ Insufficient revenues also mean minimal funds available for defense spending. Thus, the militaries will have obsolete weapons and fewer resources to maintain security, and are vulnerable to terrorist attacks.⁴ These nations are wholly incapable of providing basic peace and security for their populations.

The reduction and a withdrawal (Afghanistan) of US troops from the AOR would give terrorist and insurgent groups more space to operate. The withdrawal is likely to lead to an increase of internal conflicts between the hostnation governments and insurgent groups. For example, Iraq's government has recently experienced divisions, making it very weak and unable to provide effective governance. Sectarian division exacerbates this problem.⁵ Further, Iraq's government has significant issues with corruption. Substantial corruption negatively impacts all sectors of a

² Abas, Khadher, "Poverty in Iraq and the transformation from an economic phenomenon to a social and political impasse," Dec 7, 2020, <https://www.studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4863> (accessed Mar 12, 2021).

³ Edward, Fred, "Population explosion will suffocate Iraq, and no solutions are in sight," Sep 1, 2019, <https://7al.net/2019/09/01/freed/slide> (accessed Mar 26, 2021).

⁴ Abas, Khadher, "Poverty in Iraq and the transformation from an economic phenomenon to a social and political impasse," Dec 7, 2020, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4863> (accessed Mar 12, 2021).

⁵ Makhlof, Khalid, "Conflict of political blocs threatening the success of the Iraqi government," May 29, 2020, <https://arb.majalla.com/node/90341> (accessed Mar 26, 2021).

country, but most importantly the security sector.⁶ Frequently, corrupt officials have embezzled intended security sector funds through scams and sham projects. In 2014, Iraqi authorities investigated the ‘phantom soldier’s case’ upon discovering fifty thousand paid army and police personnel who maintain permanent leave in exchange for paying their monthly salaries to their corrupt military leaders.⁷ Another example was the report stating that soldiers killed in battle remained on monthly salary lists.⁸ Governments must root out this corruption if they are to strengthen their economies and ensure funds are directed to the most productive economic sectors.

Ineffective governments, terrorist groups, and militias all contribute to AOR conflicts. Many major factors cause persistent internal and regional conflicts which lead to long periods of instability among the people and the neighboring nations. Among these significant factors are erosion of a country's state control and insecure societies. Long histories of tribalism and increased regional divisions between Kurds, Iraqi Arabs, other ethnic minorities, and Sunni/Shia sectarian differences have also led to increased intra-Iraqi conflicts. Ethnic classes, religious groups, and different social classes compete to preserve their status or traditional autonomy.⁹ Many groups fear for their survival while others take advantage of the same internal weaknesses to better position themselves. Further, political-Islamic culture adds to these disputes. The most powerful individuals in these countries try to exploit citizens in the dysfunctional states. This has led to regional conflicts over time.¹⁰ Some long-serving regimes have fostered these conflicts. As a result, there are growing movements pushing for radical reforms that disrupt people's cultural norms, and foster social and ideological changes.¹¹

Unresolved Middle East political disputes increase regional tensions and the potential for new conflicts. In Iraqi, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, most of those in power are aging and will soon leave office. Significant questions remain regarding who will take power after these incumbents leave. Thus, it is uncertain who will ascend to lead these nations’ efforts to solve economic and social problems.¹²

Afghanistan

Afghans make up one of the largest groups of long-standing refugees in the world. Four decades of fighting has forced millions of Afghans from their homes. While some made brief returns during lulls in fighting, most were soon upended again by new outbreaks of conflict and violence.¹⁴ In some cases, successive Afghan generations have grown and lived in refugee camps long enough to form part of the local societal fabric.¹³ Currently, more

⁶ Özdemir, Özlem, "Forced migration and security threats to Syrian refugee women," Sep 1, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/09/01/forced-migration-and-security-threats-to-syrian-refugee-women> (accessed Mar 10, 2021).

⁷ New Khalij, "50 thousand ‘phantom’ soldiers in the Iraqi army," Dec 2, 2014, <https://thenewkhalij.news/article/6259> (accessed Mar 26, 2021).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ SPECIAL REPORT, "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," Mar 14, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploitingdisorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hamid, Shadi, "The struggle for democracy in the Middle East," Apr 26, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/ar/articles> (accessed Mar 11, 2021).

¹² Rush, Nayla. "UN report shows refugee system needs changes," Center for Immigration Studies, Jan 5, 2017, <https://cis.org/Report/UN-Report-Shows-Refugee-System-Needs-Changes> (accessed Mar 13, 2021). ¹⁴ Report, "Afghanistan's refugees: forty years of dispossession," Amnesty International, Jun 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

¹³ Ibid.

than 2.6 M worldwide refugees come from Afghanistan. This represents more than one tenth of all refugees (trailing only Syria).¹⁴ Pakistan currently hosts more than 1.5 M registered Afghan refugees and another 1 M unregistered Afghans.¹⁵ After Pakistan, Iran is home to the second largest Afghan refugee population. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates, there are 1.5 – 2 M “undocumented” Afghan refugees in Iran – many of whom have been in Iran for the past forty years.¹⁶

Since the US signed the peace deal with the Taliban, violence in Afghanistan has spiked along with poverty, high unemployment, and crime. Despite billions of dollars in international aid to Afghanistan since 2001, 72% of Afghanistan's 37 M people live below the poverty line (surviving on \$1.90 or less per day).¹⁷ Unemployment hovers around 30%.¹⁸ Residents of the Afghan capital of Kabul are terrorized by runaway crime, bombings, and assassinations. The UN Security Council has expressed concern at the targeted killings, aimed at civil society activists, journalists, lawyers, and judges.¹⁹ While the Islamic State has taken responsibility for many acts of violence, the Taliban and the Afghan government blame each other for the spike in attacks.²⁰ Afghanistan's Interior Minister Masoud Andarabi warned against a hasty US retreat from the war-ravaged country, noting that there are still relations between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. He further warned a rapid withdrawal would weaken global counterterrorism efforts.²¹ Without US presence, the Afghan forces might hold territories, but still lack resources and air support to maintain remote checkpoints.

Iraq

A future reduction of the US troops from Iraq would have a regional impact. Security throughout the region currently depends on US troops in Iraq.²² A US departure would lead to an opportunity for Daesh to grow. More terrorist groups would exert political, social, and economic influence, leading inevitably to more conflicts. Daesh would likely rise quickly due to reduced military resistance, leading to more killing and oppressing the Iraqi people. Further, Daesh expansion would displace more Iraqis to overstressed refugee camps. Worse, vulnerable and disenfranchised refugees are likely to join Daesh or other terrorist groups.²³ At a time when the US and coalition forces are redeploying from key Iraqi military bases, ISIS has been aggressively regrouping.²⁴ Further, Iran shows

¹⁴ Report, “How many refugees are there around the world?” Jun 18, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Report, “Economic News Release,” Mar 18, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Report, “Afghanistan's refugees: forty years of dispossession,” Amnesty International, Jun 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Associated Press, “Afghan Minister Warns US Against Hasty Retreat,” Mar 13, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/afghan-minister-warns-us-against-hasty-retreat> (accessed Mar 13, 2021).

²² ARTICLE, “Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” Oct 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-therise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state/> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

²³ Henry, Hani, “The psychology of terrorists and why young people join terrorist groups,” Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.aucegypt.edu/index.php/ar/node/2448> (accessed Mar 10, 2021).

²⁴ Ali, Ahmed, “Iran’s Influence in Iraq,” Apr 28, 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3364/> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).²⁷ Alaani, Thamer, “Economic and financial reform in Iraq,” Oct 21, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2576366> (accessed Mar 13, 2021).

no indication it will deviate from its efforts to maximize influence in Iraq. The Iraqi government must brace itself for the certain shock withdrawal of US forces would create.

Iraq's economic stability and prosperity would suffer from a US departure. Due to the likelihood of increased conflicts, the economy will be constantly impaired as conflict expands. The people produce less due to terrorism pressure, and therefore they contribute less to government revenues. Iraq would increase its dependency on foreign financial aid which, if reduced, would cause Iraq's dire situation to further deteriorate.²⁷ The US played a key role in Iraq's economic development. US military and financial support catalyzes positive developments by engaging economically, supporting reformers, and championing benefits of open markets and societies.²⁵ The US should continue vigorous and broad economic engagement to help Iraq become more self-reliant.

Syria

Ten years of war, social and economic devastation, and intertwined crises has left Syria a haven for various terrorist and extremist forces, and an arena for complex international conflicts and bargains. This destructive humanitarian crises struck all walks of Syrian life. After several US policy changes, and contradictions between US decision-makers, one might say the US now appears headed towards a withdrawal that would create space for a Russian-Iranian-Turkish struggle for influence in northeastern Syria.²⁶ This withdrawal is likely to reinforce the cohesion of the Syrian front represented by the Syrian Arab Army and the Kurds under Russian support. The situation will also reveal the Turkish-Iranian dispute over colonial ambitions in Syria. The first indications of this dispute began to appear immediately after the US withdrawal and when the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced its refusal to establish Turkey's military sites in Syria.²⁷ Concurrently, Israel views the permanent Iranian military presence in Syria as an unacceptable threat and is ready to take military measures to prevent it.²⁸

Over the last eight years, civil war in Syria increased due to different groups seeking government control. Fighting between anti-government rebels and government forces continues, signaling the need for the international community to intervene and protect innocent civilians. Primarily Iran and Russia support the Syrian government, while the US, France, UK, and others mainly fight the Islamic State. In 2014, the US launched an attack against Islamic State fighters in Syria to rescue civilians and reduce regional terrorist activities, and the UK government approved military action against Islamic state in Syria leading to coalition airstrikes.²⁹ In 2017, Arab fighters and Syrian Kurds joined forces and, backed by the US, seized Raqqa, the Islamic State's northwest Syria headquarters.³⁰

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mogelson, Luke, "America's Abandonment of Syria," Apr 20, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/27/americasabandonment-of-syria> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

²⁷ News Staff, "Iran refuses to establish Turkey's military bases in northern Syria," Oct 14, 2019, <https://rassd.news/468145.htm> (accessed Mar 16, 2021).

²⁸ Al-khalidi, Suleiman, "Israel intensifying air war in Syria against Iranian encroachment," Apr 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-intensifying-air-war-syria-against-iranian-encroachment-2021-04-22/> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

²⁹ Rush, Nayla, "UN report shows refugee system needs changes," Center for Immigration Studies, Jan 5, 2017, <https://cis.org/Report/UN-Report-Shows-Refugee-System-Needs-Changes> (accessed Mar 13, 2021).

³⁰ Reuters Staff, "UN report shows refugee system needs changes," Aug 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ai-syria-ah6idARAKCN1B405Q> (accessed Mar 13, 2021).

Due to continued conflict and unrest throughout Syria, millions of individuals escaped their homes to survive. Recently, the UN reported at least 5 M Syrian people escaped to neighboring countries, including Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, as another 6 M became internally displaced person.³¹ Turkey currently holds the largest number of registered Syrian refugees (over 3.6 M).³² As of December 2018, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims more than 360 K Syrians lost their lives due to Islamic State terrorist activities, with more than 13 M more needing critical humanitarian support.³³ The US has performed significant actions to reduce terrorist acts in Syria and to create a better climate for humanitarian existence and survival. Thus, US withdrawal from Syria will lead to increased destruction and property loss.³⁴ Further, this destruction, coupled with an Islamic State takeover of Syrian oil fields, could cause more refugees and mass migration to neighboring countries including Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. Keeping some US forces in parts of northeastern Syria, near the oil fields with the Syrian Democratic Forces, would help ensure that neither the Islamic State nor other terrorist groups control the oil, though no such policy has yet been decided.

Yemen

US President Biden recently announced that the US will terminate its support to Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen. The US is already out of the war, and has opted to move to a new and less destructive position.³⁵ President Biden not only ordered the withdrawal of Americans supporting offensive activities in Yemen's war, but also banned the sale of arms and weapons to Saudi Arabia, despite continued missile attacks, UAV strikes, and other threats by "Iranian-supplied forces" inside Yemen. However, the US will continue fighting terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, who threaten the US from within Yemen.³⁶ Since the reduction of US support, the Houthis increased attacks on Saudi Arabia and operations to take over the capital, Sana'a. The Houthis now occupy more territories and are strengthening their position for any future negotiations. Further, fighting and suffering in Yemen has increased and there are allegations that Houthis are raping and torturing Yemeni women.³⁷

President Biden's decision to stop supporting the Saudi coalition in Yemen will not help resolve the crisis. Instead, it caused increased attacks and led to many people losing their lives and being displaced from their homes. The subsequent Houthi militia attacks in the Ma'rib and Taiz regions not only caused many civilian deaths, but also severely damaged civilian infrastructure.³⁸ This caused further migration and internal displacements. Some displaced Yemenis are seeking refuge in southern Yemen as it receives aid and reconstruction support from Saudi Arabia.³⁹ Many refugees fled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates because these countries played such a

³¹ Calica, Timothy, "Improving the Refugee Crisis in Syria: A Comparative Analysis of Regional Refugee Policies," *Loy. LA Int'l & Comp. L. Rev.* 40 (2017): p 115.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alex Ward, "Biden's announcement on ending US support for the war in Yemen, explained," Feb 5, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22268082/biden-yemen-war-saudi-state-speech> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Hassan, Omar, "Killing, torture and rape. Testimonies documenting the Houthi militia's crimes against Yemeni women," Feb 21, 2021, <https://www.alroeya.com/60-63/2199058> (accessed Mar 14, 2021).

³⁸ SECURITY COUNCIL, "As Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis Grows, Yemen 'Speeding towards Massive Famine', Under-Secretary-General Warns, in Briefing to Security Council," Mar 16, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14470.doc.htm> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

³⁹ HB-KSC, "Bulletin of news of aid provided by the King Salman Center for Yemen," Dec 10, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HB_KSC_ARB.pdf (accessed Mar 14, 2021).

crucial role in handling the migration and internal displacement aid in Yemen.⁴⁰ Indeed, the GCC countries do not even call these Yemenis refugees, but rather grant them resident status. Further, the GCC hosts have provided these Yemenis with many advantages including free education, health services, the right to work, and freedom of movement.⁴¹ Though they are not signatories to the United Nations Refugee Convention and thus not obliged to accept refugees, GCC countries provide significant grants and aid to displaced people and refugees in various regions. The GCC countries generally fear that open border policies and introduction of huge numbers of refugees would import a dangerous security situation. Those countries now seek to reduce the number of foreign workers.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The US plays a significant role in maintaining peace in the AOR through its initiatives. These initiatives include providing support to the most affected countries of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Regardless of shifts in policy, the US and other western countries have a role in maintaining peace and unity among the less stabilized Middle East states. This vital role includes peacekeeping and protection of humanity against terrorists. A complete US pull-out could lead to more devastating human conditions, more terrorists' actions, and increased refugees and cross-border migration. Those countries still need continued and substantial support from the international community, including the US and NATO, in both war and peacetime.

Increasing migration of asylum seekers through Turkey to Europe poses serious security concerns, particularly refugees linked to terrorist groups. Many refugees have been blamed for enabling Islamic State militants who infiltrate through Europe to launch attacks. The international community should prevent this migration or implement measures to reduce and counter terrorist activities in Europe.

Middle Eastern governments must protect refugees by providing proper food and shelter. Refugee-hosting states must work with international bodies to develop a transformative vision, backed by sustainable political and financial support, to further protect refugee populations from the effects of government instability. International bodies should establish clear regional guidelines and frameworks to ensure cooperation, refugees' free movement, and access to job activities and amenities.

Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM

- Support international efforts to resolve the humanitarian crisis in IDP and refugee camps, and support early stage de-radicalization programs.
- Support the 2018 worldwide compact for Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework as the binding instrument to all member states of the United Nations to address the refugee crisis effectively.
- Maintain military support to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen to reduce terrorist activities and ensure peace and political stability across the Middle East.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Report, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the main donor countries for refugee relief programs," Dec 16, 2019, <https://saudiarabia.un.org/ar/28556-almmlkt-alrbyt-alswdyt-mn-aldwl-almanht-alryysyt-lbramj-aghathht-allajyyn> (accessed Apr 29, 2021). ⁴⁵ Sharef Bet, "Why do not the Arab Gulf states receive refugees?" Apr 5, 2017, <https://www.infomigrants.net/ar/post/2666> (accessed Apr 29, 2021).

- Monitor government activities in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen as well as militia groups and International organizations involved with law enforcement in these countries.
- Cooperate with international partners to develop an economic plan to support partner governments in the areas where they may not be able to handle the instability.