

# US withdrawal from Iraq may trigger revival of internal conflicts

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December 21, 2011  
OPINION

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A United States soldier gestures as he crosses the Iraqi border into Kuwait as the last convoy of US troops leaves the country. But what have the Americans left behind? *Photo: Reuters*

According to the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement signed in 2008, all US forces were to be withdrawn from Iraq by December 31 this year. The last US soldiers [left Iraq](#) on December 18.

The Iraqi government is confident that it can rely on its own forces to manage its security and to deal with any eventual crises. However, there are several looming problems that could threaten Iraq's territorial integrity. These have previously been prevented by the presence of US forces. In their absence, these crises are likely to re-emerge.

First, a conflict between the Kurds and Iraq's central government, particularly Sunni Arabs, is a strong possibility. There has been "managed tension" between the Kurds and Arabs over Kirkuk and other disputed areas since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In a policy to Arabise the Kirkuk and other oil rich areas, the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein forced an estimated 200,000 - 300,000 Kurds from their homes. At the instigation of the Kurds, Article 140 was incorporated into Iraq's constitution, which allows for those displaced to be returned to their original homes, a census conducted and a referendum held to decide if Kirkuk wants to be part of the autonomous Kurdish state or remain under the control of the Iraqi central government. These processes were to be completed by the end of 2007, but as yet no meaningful action has been taken.

The Kurds are becoming more restless over this issue. They see Kirkuk as a historical part of Kurdistan and they claim to form the majority of the population, though this is contested by the Arabs and Turkmen.

Kirkuk is a red-line territory for the Kurds and no Kurdish leader can afford to make concessions on this. Nor is the Iraqi central government, which is adamant that Kirkuk should remain under its control, likely to offer any concessions on the issue. The main reason, however, that the Kurds have not resorted to force to occupy Kirkuk has been pressure from the US.

There has been tension in other disputed areas as well. Some of these are being controlled by the Kurds and the Iraqi military is not allowed to enter. On a few occasions, the Iraqi central government tried to exert control over these areas but was confronted by Kurdish forces. A war has been averted only with the mediation of US forces and by a compromise agreement for joint US, Kurdish and Iraqi forces to patrol the disputed areas. With the absence of US forces, the Kurdish and Iraqi troops will again confront each other. A small conflict would be enough to develop into a fully fledged war.

Second, there is a possibility of further tension between the Shiites and Sunni Arabs in Iraq. These two groups have previously been on the brink of a civil war on a few occasions. The Sunnis have still not come to terms with the fact that they have lost control over Iraq and must now live under majority Shiite rule. Arguably, it was only as a result of US and Kurdish efforts that a civil war between the Shiites and Sunnis has been prevented to date.

Anticipating the withdrawal of US forces and conscious of living under majority Shiite rule, Sunni Arabs are opting to form their own autonomous states. In October 2011, the provincial council in Salahaddin, Saddam Hussein's former home province, declared autonomy.

On December 13, 16 of 29 Diyala provincial council members [signed the request](#) to be granted regional autonomy. This might not be easily accepted by a Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and could add further pressure on an already tense relationship.

In fact, there are signs that tensions are emerging faster than anticipated. A day after the withdrawal of US forces, the Shiite dominated Iraqi government issued an arrest warrant for Tariq al-Hashemi, the Sunni Vice-President, and arrested several of his body guards. He has been accused of **involvement in terrorism**. This incident has created a political crisis, the consequences of which is yet to be seen.

These tensions could further be exacerbated by the **intervention** of neighbouring states. Countries such as Saudi Arabia have been supporting the Sunnis against the Shiites, while Iran has been supporting the Shiites against the Sunnis, with Turkey supporting the Turkmans against the Kurds.

So far, the US has been mediating between various Iraqi religious and ethnic groups. It has also applied pressure on its Arab allies and Turkey to avoid creating further tensions. Yet in the absence of an active American role in Iraq, particularly its military presence, all these problems could re-emerge.

The colonial powers, when drawing the political map of the Middle East, bundled up various ethnic and religious groups with contradictory interests that could only be held together through brute force. In Iraq, Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds with very differing interests were held together by various dictators by means of an iron fist. When dictatorship gives way to a more open society, it is less likely that such a society can continue its old structure.

A stable Iraqi state would have been more likely to develop through a confederation of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurdish states with a loose central government built on consensus, but that opportunity has now been lost.

The above issues indicate that Iraq, in its current political form, is less likely to survive without the presence of US forces.

Let's hope that any future directions that various Iraq's ethnic and religious groups take will be a peaceful one.

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