

# [***Opinion: Get US troops out of harm's way, now***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BT6-WKG1-DY7V-G006-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

April 15, 2024 Monday 8:51 AM GMT

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**Length:** 1218 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The subject of finally concluding America's counter-ISIS mission in Iraq has been the plot of ongoing deliberations between Washington and Baghdad [*for the last three years*](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/middleeast/us-iraq-combat-mission.html). Monday's [*White House meeting between*](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/defense-relationship-part-us-iraq-talks-washington-next-week-us-official-says-2024-04-11/) President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani must be the moment that the story is finally brought to a conclusion. Iran's attack on Israel this weekend only strengthens the case.

Withdrawing [*the roughly 2,500 US troops*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/30/us-troops-mideast-jordan-iraq-syria/) that remain in Iraq to combat ISIS, which has been [*relegated to a low-level insurgency*](https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2024%2F92&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False)[*with a dwindling support base*](https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90221) is a testy subject in Washington and Baghdad alike. In Iraq, Sudani is under [*pressure from his ruling Shia-led coalition*](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2024/01/06/iraq-preparing-to-remove-us-led-coalition-says-pm/) to cut military ties with the US, which is still seen as an occupying power, or at the very least reorient the bilateral relationship from dependency to normality. Sudani [*has reportedly expressed his desire*](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/09/iraq-us-troops-removal-00134564) to keep US forces in the country for the foreseeable future to ensure ISIS doesn't resurge, a request his hardline coalition partners will be hard-pressed to support.

At the same time, a troop withdrawal is generally viewed warily in the US foreign policy establishment, particularly if it's based on a timetable rather than conditions on the ground. As the US ambassador in Iraq [*said*](https://www.reuters.com/world/islamic-state-still-threat-iraq-us-ambassador-says-2024-03-24/) last month, "In the past we have left quickly only to come back, or only to need to continue, so this time I would argue we need to do this in an orderly fashion."

Understandably, the US is looking for an optimal scenario before pulling the plug on the US troop presence. But back in the real world, optimal scenarios are few and far between. If the Biden administration's approach is to wait for the perfect time to get out, then it will wait for eternity.

It's worth remembering why the United States sent troops to Iraq in the first place. In 2014, the Islamic State terrorist group was at its peak, [*ruling about 10 million people*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-comes-after-isis/#:~:text=His%20group,%20which%20he%20renamed,Qaida%20and%20other%20jihadi%20groups) stretching [*tens of thousands of miles*](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/after-the-caliphate-us-strategy-isis#:~:text=At%20its%20peak%2C%20Daesh%2FISIS,than%2040%2C000%20foreign%20terrorist%20fighters.) across parts of Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi security forces, rife with abuse, corruption and poor leadership, [*were falling apart*](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/13/world/middleeast/american-intelligence-officials-said-iraqi-military-had-been-in-decline.html). The Iraqi government at the time was led by Nouri al-Maliki, an increasingly autocratic figure [*who marginalized Iraq's Sunni minority.*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25559872) In June 2014 [*when ISIS took the city of Mosul*](https://www.cnn.com/2014/06/10/world/meast/iraq-violence/index.html), [*a predominately Sunni city*](https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/05/20/mosul-after-islamic-state-kurdistan-region-s-strategy-pub-63615), some of the its residents [*viewed the Iraqi army's route as a liberation*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states). Others at the time saw ISIS [*as a better alternative to the Iraqi state*](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/13/world/middleeast/iraqis-fled-mosul-for-home-after-militant-group-swarmed-the-city.html).

The US bombing campaign that [*began in August 2014*](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president) was designed to relieve the pressure on the Iraqi security forces and then eliminate the ISIS territorial caliphate. As President Barack Obama [*said at the time*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-obama-us-degrade-ultimately-defeat-isis-al/story?id=25261946), "You initially push them back, you systematically degrade their capabilities, you narrow their scope of action, you slowly shrink the space, the territory that they control, you take out their leadership, and over time, they are not able to conduct the same kinds of terrorist attacks that they once could."

Throughout the war, the US Air Force [*served as Iraq's hammer in the sky*](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA300/RRA388-1/RAND_RRA388-1.pdf), striking ISIS compounds, killing its leaders and increasing the probability of successful Iraqi ground operations. ISIS' territorial caliphate shrank in 2015 and 2016 as the Iraqi army, Iraqi-backed militias [*and US special operations personnel*](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/world/middleeast/us-to-send-1500-more-troops-to-iraq.html) successfully dislodged the terrorist group from multiple cities.

By the summer of 2017, ISIS l[*ost control of Mosul*](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/09/world/middleeast/mosul-isis-liberated.html). The Iraqi government declared victory against the group [*five months later*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42291985). And in March 2019, ISIS was swept out of its last territorial stronghold [*in the Syrian town of Baghouz*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html). The mission - eliminating ISIS' territorial caliphate - was achieved.

The United States, however, refused to take success for an answer. Instead of withdrawing, the Trump administration reportedly chose to stay in Iraq and Syria (where some 900 US troops are based) for reasons [*that were unrelated*](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/30/iran-hawks-botched-trump-syria-policy-james-jeffrey-turkey/) to the counter-ISIS mission, like undermining Iran's influence in Iraq, severing Iran's supply lines in Syria and using the US troop presence to prevent Syrian dictator Bashar Al-Assad from capturing Syria's [*oil-rich eastern region*](https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/13/trump-troops-syria-oil-pentagon-070567).

Yet all of those objectives ranged from unlikely to delusional. In Iraq, [*the Iranians made significant inroads in Iraqi* ***politics***](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-iraq) after the US overthrew the brutal Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein who nonetheless provided a bulwark against arch-rival Iran. In fact, Sudani relies on support from [*the Coordination Framework*](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias-captured-the-iraqi-state/), a coalition of parties allied with Iranian-backed militias. [*Iran also has a secure, four decades' long alliance with*](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/) Syria, where Assad's forces have [*regained most of the country*](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/13/syria-war-bashar-assad-prospers-9-years-barbarity-confusion/4939671002/) courtesy of scorched-earth tactics, Russian air power [*and Iranian-backed ground forces*](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-quds-force-in-syria-combatants-units-and-actions/). The notion the US could reduce Iranian influence there was always a heavy lift.

The Biden administration also deserves blame for broadening the net to a seemingly impossible ask: "[*the enduring defeat*](https://www.voanews.com/a/us-iraq-to-start-talks-on-end-of-coalition-presence-/7456992.html) of ISIS." This proved to be a major error because it transformed the entire mission from one that could be measured - the territorial defeat of the ISIS caliphate - to one that couldn't.

Why does any of this matter? Because it shows how US policy is now governed mostly by fanciful goals.

US troops [*should be pulled out*](https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/withdraw-us-troops-from-syria-and-iraq) of Iraq and Syria now. As a State Department official [*remarked*](https://www.state.gov/the-islamic-state-five-years-later-persistent-threats-u-s-options/) in March, "ISIS has been defeated territorially and Iraqi forces are in a stronger position than ever to suppress the remaining threat."

ISIS has [*alienated its previous Sunni support base*](https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90221), which has no intention of being subjugated by the jihadists a second time. ISIS has no friends on the ground and a lot of enemies; Turkey, Russia, Assad and Iraq [*all have a self-interest*](https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/reset-us-syria-policy) in ensuring ISIS doesn't regenerate. And just because Iran and Russia would like the US to leave the region doesn't mean Washington should stay. Doing so would amount to giving its adversaries a veto over foreign policy.

Some may take issue with the notion that ISIS has been defeated. After all, the group is still planning and executing attacks as we saw most recently on March 21, when four gunmen claiming an affiliation with the Islamic State's branch in Afghanistan [*killed more than 140 people*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68645755) in a Moscow concert hall.

But using the word "defeated" in the terrorism context is a road to endless warfare. The world can't defeat terrorism any more than it can defeat bad weather. The best a country can do is monitor the threat, ensure it has the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in place to detect an imminent plot and take measures to prevent it.

The US should withdraw for another reason: to eliminate, or at least reduce, the risk to US forces in the event of an Israeli counterstrike against Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government [*has stated*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/14/middleeast/israel-iran-attack-response-intl/index.html) that Iran will pay a price for the [*more than 300 projectiles*](https://x.com/IDF/status/1779503384434819454) - drones and missiles included - Tehran is believed to have launched at Israeli territory. If Israel proceeds with a counterattack on Iranian soil, the prospects of Iranian retaliation against US bases in the region goes up. Far from removing US leverage, withdrawing would undermine Iran's.

The US doesn't need a perpetual ground presence to accomplish its objectives.

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**Load-Date:** April 15, 2024

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