

Biden Takes Two Paths to Wind Down Iraq and Afghan Wars

The differences in how President Biden has handled the wars offer insight not only into America's strategic interests, but also in how he views the two conflicts.



By Annie Karni and Eric Schmitt

Published July 26, 2021 Updated Sept. 20, 2021

WASHINGTON — When it comes to winding down America's wars, the contrast between President Biden's handling of Iraq and Afghanistan is growing sharper.

At the White House on Monday, Mr. Biden promised Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi of Iraq that the United States would end its combat mission there by the end of the year. "We're not going to be, by the end of the year, in a combat mission," he said.

But the president also made it clear that most of the 2,500 American troops currently stationed in Iraq would remain, simply reclassified on paper into advisory and training roles. The United States' role, he said, would be "to continue to train, to assist, to help, and to deal with ISIS as it arrives."

In Afghanistan, however, the United States is making a far cleaner break, pulling out troops and formally ending its military mission by the end of August. Mr. Biden has also declared that the mission of denying terrorists a haven in the country had long ago been achieved and that leaving forces on the ground was no longer worth the cost of blood and money.

The different ways that the president has handled the two wars, which began after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, offer insight not only into America's strategic interests, but also into how he views the two conflicts.

In pulling out of Afghanistan, Mr. Biden said there was no longer any justification to believe that the United States could turn the country into a stable democracy. But in the conflict in Iraq, another decades-old war that many view as more costly than the one in Afghanistan, he sees an American presence as necessary, at least in part, to ward off the influence of Iran and the continuing threat of the Islamic State.

President Donald J. Trump also created political pressure for Mr. Biden to extricate the United States from Afghanistan. Biden administration officials said they were committed to honoring an agreement the Trump administration had signed with the Taliban in February 2020 for U.S. troops to pull out of Afghanistan. Mr. Trump made no such pact about a withdrawal of forces from Iraq.

The White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, declined to specify the number of troops that would remain in Iraq. "The numbers will be driven by what is needed for the mission over time," she said.

That mission is strategically important to the United States. Even though the Islamic State's physical caliphate is long gone, military counterterrorism officials estimate that the militant group still has 8,000 to 16,000 guerrilla fighters operating in Iraq and Syria.

The American forces in Iraq also support about 900 U.S. troops in neighboring Syria, where the American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces continue to carry out ground operations against the Islamic State in the country's northeast. If the United States were to withdraw from Iraq, it would make supporting the Syria mission much more difficult.

Many Biden administration officials are also haunted by the failed withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. The United States was pulled back in three years later after James Foley, an American journalist, was beheaded by the Islamic State in August 2014 for a propaganda video and the group seized the northern third of the country.

Sign Up for On Politics A guide to the political news cycle, cutting through the spin and delivering clarity from the chaos. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news

on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

As head of American forces in Iraq, General Lloyd J. Austin III oversaw the 2011 withdrawal mission. He now serves as Mr. Biden's defense secretary. Richard N. Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said a reluctance to exit Iraq altogether "might be a hangover from the Obama decision to leave only to have to re-enter."

And while American officials insist they are not keeping troops in Iraq to fight Iran or Iran-backed militias, the military presence there also allows the United States to monitor Iran more closely. The drone strike that killed Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, a powerful Iranian commander, for instance, was launched from Al Asad Air Base in western Iraq.

"U.S. troops in Iraq help in a political sense balance or contain Iran, which is a serious regional threat," said James F. Jeffrey, a former U.S. ambassador to Iraq.

The incentives to stay, combined with the lack of political pressure at home to leave, made Mr. Biden's announcement on Monday mostly a set piece of diplomatic theater that did little more than formalize the current state of play.

"The objective of both sides is for nothing to change and to keep about 2,500 U.S. troops there that would do things they are already doing," said Sarhang Hamasaeed, the director of Middle East programs at the United States Institute of Peace. "That's supporting Iraqi security forces, but not engage in combat."

U.S. troops no longer accompany Iraqi forces hunting remaining pockets of Islamic State fighters. Still, experts in the region said the announcement on Monday suited both the Iraqi and the American governments in their policy objectives, even if it did little to change the situation on the ground in Iraq.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"The Iraqi government can say we're less reliant on these foreigners, and the Biden administration can point to this as another example of how it is dialing down America's involvement in these long-term conflicts in the Middle East," Mr. Haass said.

Indeed, Mr. al-Kadhimi has been under pressure from Iraq's Shiite political parties to end the U.S. mission in Iraq altogether ever since the strike in January 2020 that killed General Suleimani and an Iraqi militia commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

"You leave Iraq, Iran will go deeper and deeper and dominate the state, giving them control over strategic energy reserves," Mr. Hamasaeed said. "That's not good for the global economy and stability and efforts to curb Iran's agenda in the region."

Mr. Biden has a long history with Iraq.

But the time Mr. Biden visited Iraq in November 2011, it was his seventh trip as vice president and his 16th during his career in politics.

As both a senator and vice president, he staked out a position as an influential voice on Iraq policy, cultivating close relationships with its political leaders. He developed a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of the country's tribal politics and speaks with relish about its tangled feuds and rivalries.

During the 2020 campaign, Mr. Biden falsely claimed that he had always opposed military intervention there from "the moment it started," despite voting to authorize military force in 2002. In reality, he was a critic of the Bush administration's handling of the conflict but did not oppose the intervention from the beginning. His campaign later clarified to The Washington Post that he "misspoke."

"He opposed the way we went to war and the way the war was being carried out," Antony J. Blinken, now secretary of state, said during the campaign. "He has for many years called his vote a mistake and takes full responsibility for it."

In early 2009, President Barack Obama assigned Mr. Biden the Iraq portfolio, a move that raised eyebrows because Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton seemed like the more obvious candidate. At the time, Mr. Biden's son Joseph R. Biden III, known as Beau, was serving in Iraq with the Delaware National Guard. His top commander was Mr. Austin.