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Iraq Is Finally Writing Its Own Future

In 2009, I found myself at the center of an unusual diplomatic incident in Baghdad. It was the first hour of the first day after Iraqi authorities regained control of security in the International Zone, better known as the Green Zone, from American and allied forces. I was returning to the International Zone in an American diplomatic vehicle when Iraqi security personnel stopped us at a checkpoint. They wanted to search our vehicle. We declined. As American diplomats, we expected our vehicle to receive the protections afforded under international law. The Iraqi guards, meanwhile, had just assumed responsibility for security and were understandably determined to exercise their newfound authority. For roughly half an hour, we sat there, each side insisting on its position, until diplomacy prevailed and we were allowed to proceed.

Embassy security later told me that I was the first American diplomat, indeed the first diplomat from any country, to encounter the new arrangements upon entering the International Zone. We had become the first test of how the transfer of authority would work in practice. I remember the incident not for its inconvenience but for its historical significance. Iraqis were exercising sovereignty over their own capital, and they were taking that responsibility seriously. We Americans, who had wielded extraordinary powers in Iraq for years, were learning to adjust. It was an awkward encounter, but I welcomed what it represented.

On September 30, 2026, U.S. Central Command announced the completion of the American military withdrawal and the end of Operation Inherent Resolve's mission in Iraq. This marked a considerably larger transfer of responsibility than the one I witnessed in Baghdad seventeen years earlier. Following more than two decades of American military involvement, Iraqi forces now bear primary responsibility for their country's security. The United States will maintain bilateral security cooperation, while its counter-ISIS mission continues elsewhere in the region. I welcome Iraq's growing independence, and I remain optimistic about what lies ahead.

My optimism comes primarily from the Iraqis I came to know. I spent 2008 and 2009 in Baghdad directing a U.S. government program called "Tatweer," designed to strengthen the capacity of 16 Iraqi ministries and

executive offices. We focused on essential but frequently overlooked functions of government, including public administration, budgeting, procurement, civil service reform, and the management of national resources. These responsibilities rarely command the attention devoted to military operations or high-level diplomacy, yet they determine whether a government can deliver the services its citizens expect. In scope, Tatweer was the largest national capacity-building effort the U.S. government had ever undertaken anywhere in the world.

I worked alongside remarkably capable Iraqi men and women who were determined to rebuild their country, often at considerable personal risk. Their intelligence, resourcefulness, and commitment left a lasting impression on me. I never believed Iraq suffered from a shortage of talent. Quite the opposite. I encountered a seemingly inexhaustible supply of brilliant Iraqis, many frustrated by circumstances that prevented them from putting their abilities to work. Their country's difficulties stemmed instead from institutions weakened by decades of dictatorship, war, sanctions, political interference, both domestic and foreign, and corruption.

There is good historical reason for such confidence. The territory of modern Iraq was home to ancient Mesopotamia, one of the great cradles of human civilization, where some of the earliest cities, writing systems, and advances in mathematics emerged. It was also the land of Hammurabi, whose famous code of laws, dating to around 1750 BCE,

remains among the earliest surviving comprehensive collections of legal judgments.

Centuries later, Baghdad became one of the world's great intellectual capitals. During the Abbasid Golden Age, scholars from across the Islamic world and beyond gathered there to study mathematics, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, and literature. At the House of Wisdom, Al-Khwarizmi helped lay the foundations of algebra, while other scholars translated, studied, and expanded upon the works of classical Greek thinkers, including Aristotle, Euclid, Galen, and Ptolemy. Much of that scholarship was then unavailable to Western Europe, but Arabic translations and the original contributions of scholars working throughout the Islamic world would later help transform European intellectual life.

Baghdad was not merely preserving the knowledge of earlier civilizations. It was expanding that knowledge and helping shape the intellectual future of the world. Modern Iraq is heir to that extraordinary history and legacy.

I do not imagine Iraq can simply recreate the Baghdad of the ninth century, nor does its distinguished past guarantee a prosperous future. But its history offers a powerful reminder of what becomes possible when intellectual talent, political stability, and functioning institutions come together. Having witnessed the abilities of Iraqis firsthand, I would never underestimate their potential.

Iraq has made considerable progress since the darkest years of the war. Its citizens have participated in successive elections, rebuilt communities, and developed political institutions under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Yet corruption, political patronage, and armed organizations operating beyond effective state control remain formidable obstacles. Iraq's complicated relationships with Iran and the United States have also constrained its ability to chart a genuinely independent course.

The American withdrawal brings these challenges into sharper focus. Baghdad continues its efforts to bring armed groups under state authority, although several powerful militias have resisted disarmament. The government has extended its deadline for addressing Iran-aligned armed groups until June 2027. The question of who exercises military authority within Iraq's borders can no longer be resolved by American troops. Iraqis themselves must determine the answer.

For ordinary Iraqis, the stakes could hardly be higher. Reliable electricity, functioning schools and hospitals, clean water, employment, and personal security all depend on competent government. Families displaced by conflict need safe conditions in which to return, access to their property, and opportunities to rebuild their lives. According to the International Organization for Migration, 997,334 Iraqis remained internally displaced at the end of 2025. Their predicament is a sobering reminder of how long the human consequences of war can endure.

The American withdrawal will not resolve these difficulties, but it places greater responsibility for addressing them where it belongs: with Iraqi leaders and institutions. The country's democratic future depends on institutions that serve citizens rather than political factions, and on a government capable of protecting its population without relying on foreign soldiers or rival armed organizations. After everything Iraq has endured, achieving that future will demand patience, determination, and sustained political leadership.

The United States should welcome Iraq's growing independence. Washington has played a consequential role in the country's modern history, and there is ample reason to approach the relationship with humility. Future cooperation should emphasize diplomacy, education, economic opportunity, and effective public institutions, alongside security arrangements mutually agreed upon by the two governments. Iraq deserves to be treated as a sovereign partner with interests and aspirations of its own, rather than primarily as an arena for American competition with Iran.

I expressed much the same conviction while serving in Iraq. Addressing the Iraq Health Summit in Istanbul in February 2009, I emphasized that our work with the Iraqi Ministry of Health was intended to support an Iraqi vision, led by Iraqis themselves. We were helping strengthen health planning, budgeting, professional training, and the management of public services. The objective was to build a ministry capable of fulfilling

its own responsibilities, not one permanently dependent on American assistance.

Throughout my career, including assignments in Africa and Latin America, I have seen how readily international assistance becomes entangled in questions of national authority. Foreign governments may possess considerable expertise and resources, but they cannot confer the political legitimacy that comes from a government's relationship with its own citizens. In Iraq, I encountered people who understood that distinction and were determined to make their institutions work.

I retain a deeply personal interest in their success. I remember Iraqi colleagues who reported for work despite threats to themselves and their families, who recognized the shortcomings of their institutions, and who nevertheless believed their country could recover. Their determination impressed me then, and it remains one of the strongest reasons for my confidence today.

When I think back to that checkpoint in Baghdad in 2009, I remember Iraqi guards asserting authority over their own country's security and American diplomats learning to accommodate that reality. We were witnessing a country beginning to reclaim responsibilities that properly belonged to its people. The American military withdrawal marks another important stage in that long and difficult process.

I hope the United States will remain a friend and partner to Iraq, but the country's future belongs to its own people. I worked with enough brilliant Iraqis to have considerable faith in what they can accomplish when given the opportunity. Baghdad once helped illuminate the intellectual life of the world. There is every reason to believe it can make extraordinary contributions again.