



## Iraq's Strategic Significance to the United States after 2003: Interest and Decline

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The study aims to understand the strategic importance of Iraq for the United States after 2003, and to what extent Iraq still holds the same significance today as it did during the US occupation in 2003. Additionally, the study examines the possibility of the United States abandoning Iraq or remaining involved for various reasons defined by its national interests.

**Methods:** The study employed the national interest approach as its foundation, relying on the ideas and propositions of the realist theory in international relations.

**Results:** The study concluded that Iraq's relative strategic importance for the United States has declined due to several factors, some related to internal American issues and others to Iraq itself.

**Conclusions:** There is a decline in Iraq's strategic importance for the United States, but the US will remain interested in playing a role there and will not completely abandon it. Therefore, what America needs today is a policy of clarity in Iraq that reduces uncertainty and removes confusion, accompanied by practical steps and a comprehensive vision for all Iraqi issues.

**Keywords:** American strategy, Iraq, interest, retreat, withdrawal, survival.

### أهمية العراق الاستراتيجية للولايات المتحدة بعد 2003: اهتمام وتراجع

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#### ملخص

**الأهداف:** تهدف الدراسة لمعرفة أهمية العراق الاستراتيجية بالنسبة للولايات المتحدة ما بعد عام 2003، وإلى أي مدى لا يزال العراق اليوم يتمتع بنفس الأهمية التي كان يحظى بها في السابق عند احتلاله من قبل الولايات المتحدة عام 2003. كما تبحث الدراسة إمكانية تخلي الولايات المتحدة عن العراق أو بقاءها فيه لجملة من الأسباب تحددها مصالحها القومية. **المنهجية:** قامت الدراسة بتوظيف منهج المصلحة الوطنية كأساس للدراسة، من خلال الاستناد إلى أفكار النظرية الواقعية في العلاقات الدولية ومقولاتها في هذا الشأن. **النتائج:** توصلت الدراسة إلى نتيجة مفادها هي أن العراق اليوم قد تراجعت أهميته الاستراتيجية النسبية بالنسبة للولايات المتحدة بفعل جملة من العوامل بعضها يتعلق بالداخل الأمريكي والبعض الآخر يتعلق بالعراق نفسه. **الخلاصة:** هناك تراجع في أهمية العراق الاستراتيجية بالنسبة للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، ولكن ستبقى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية مهتمة بلعب دورا ما فيه ولن تتخلى عنه بالكامل. لذا، ما تحتاجه أمريكا اليوم هو سياسة الوضوح في العراق التي من شأنها أن تقلل من حالة الشك وتزيل الارتباك، مصحوبة بخطوات عملية ورؤية شاملة لكل قضايا العراق. **الكلمات الدالة:** الاستراتيجية الأمريكية، العراق، الاهتمام، التراجع، الانسحاب، البقاء.



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## Introduction

Iraq has long been occupying a distinguished position in American politics until recently, due to its strategic location and distinguished natural resources, the most important of which are oil and natural gas, which are among the basics of human life in the modern era. In addition, Iraq is located on a strategic road in a region that is most important to the United States, which is the Middle East. Hence, the United States interested in Iraq and gave it top priority over other countries in the Middle East. Indeed, it is one of the reasons why the American Administration, led by George W. Bush, invaded Iraq in 2003.

In fact, since President Barack Obama took office in January 2009, American interest in the Middle East region in general and Iraq in particular began to decline and recede, and priorities and goals changed. President George W. Bush left deteriorating international conditions to his successor, President Obama, as a result of his policies towards various international issues, most notably the war on Iraq and terrorism. Therefore, the features of a new phase began to appear, the slogan of which is "change". The vision of decline was greatly strengthened with the withdrawal from Iraq and continued with the Donald Trump Administration as well, and it is expected to continue with the Joe Biden Administration.

Nevertheless, this orientation does not mean that the United States will abandon Iraq completely. It will maintain a degree of interest in this country for several reasons, the most important of which is that the United States is a major power in the world and will remain interested in playing a role in the Middle East, including Iraq.

## The study problem and its questions

The problem of the study is that Iraq's strategic importance has declined relatively to the American decision-maker for some time. Simultaneously, this does not mean that the United States will abandon Iraq or leave it completely, but rather it means that its relative importance has declined according to the differences in the interests of the United States in the world. Accordingly, the main question of the study revolves around:

Q1: Does Iraq still have the same strategic importance that it previously enjoyed when it was occupied, or its importance declined for the United States of America?

From this main question several sub-questions emerge:

- Q1.1 What are the goals of the United States in Iraq? Have those goals changed? Or did it remain constant?
2. What are the reasons for the decline in Iraq's strategic importance to the United States in recent times?
3. Can the United States disengage from Iraq permanently? Or are there reasons for maintaining a certain amount of interest in Iraq?
4. What are the repercussions of Iraq's declining importance to the United States?

## The Objectives of the study

In light of the questions raised, the objectives of the study are summarized as follows:

- 1- Knowing the interests of the United States in Iraq after 2003.
- 2- Analyzing the reasons for the decline in Iraq's strategic importance to the United States.
- 3- Analyzing the extent of the United States' desire to abandon Iraq, and whether there are motives and reasons for it to stay or not.
- 4- Identifying the most important effects and consequences that the United States' abandonment of Iraq could have.

## The significance of the study

The scientific significance

This study hopes to be a contribution to the field of international relations in general and specialized studies in the field of strategies in particular, as the Arab library still needs more analytical studies in this field, and studies that deal with the relationship between two variables of this are rare and do not address them in a comprehensive manner, where most of these studies either covered a specific period of time or dealt with specific issues of the study, and there is no integrated study that covered all aspects.

The practical significance

The practical importance of this study stems from its focus on an important event, which is the change that accompanied

the US strategy, specifically during the period of President Barack Obama towards Iraq and the idea of abandoning it. Hence, this study attempts to describe the strategic transformation in the US policy during the era of President Obama, the reasons for that transformation, the factors affecting it, and its dimensions.

**The study's hypothesis:**

The hypothesis of the study is based on the existence of a correlation between the decline in Iraq's strategic importance and the US withdrawal and abandonment according to profit and loss calculations (national interest).

**The limits of the study:**

Temporal limits: The temporal scope of the study is determined within a period of time starting from the year 2003 and continuing until the present time.

Spatial limits: applied to Iraq.

**The study's methodology:**

The study uses the national interest approach as a basis for analyzing international relations in general and foreign policy in particular. This approach derives its statements from the assumptions of the realist school in international relations. Realism is based on a main premise, which is that international politics is a struggle for power and every country seeks to achieve its national interest. Therefore, any foreign policy that would support and increase the strength of the state is a desirable policy, and decision-makers formulate and implement the decisions related to it, while a policy that does not lead to this goal is an undesirable and rejected policy.

By applying the concept of national interest, according to realist theory, to the subject of the study, it becomes clear that the US behavior in Iraq could be explained and understood. In fact, the use of power against Iraq by the Bush Administration in 2003, and in clear challenge to the UN Security Council and the widespread global rejection of that war was due to the United States' possession of the elements of material power, enabling it to act, as it wants. This is an application of the arguments of the realist theory that a state's external behavior is affected by its position in the international system, especially by its possession of elements of material power (the question: What are the goals of the United States in Iraq).

Even when the Barack Obama Administration opposed the continuation of its wars in the Middle East, especially the Iraq War, and took a decision governed by realistic calculations to withdraw from Iraq based on its study of the available alternatives, it chose the withdrawal decision because it was compatible with the American national interest. This administration decided not to waste huge resources in Iraq, so that it could invest them in other regions of the world, such as Asia and the Pacific region (the question what the reasons for the American withdrawal from Iraq).

The Obama Administration decided to return to Iraq, although this return was limited. This was due to the execution by ISIS of American and Western journalists and relief workers in Mosul. As a result, the Obama Administration faced intense pressure, both politically and popularly. This time, American public opinion tended towards a military action, in response to the killing of journalists and relief workers. This return was limited to air attacks in Iraq, without ground military involvement, and through a multiple international coalition led by the United States. The decision was based on internal factors stemming from the environment of the American regime, factors related to the psychological environment, the vision and motives of the American decision-maker, President Barack Obama, and American interests in Iraq and its allies in the region (the question of disengagement from Iraq, between interest and retreat).

Therefore, the American strategy in Iraq stemmed from theoretical principles that were closely linked to realism, which is characterized by its focus on pragmatism.

**The study's division**

The study was divided into three main sections:

The first section: The goals of the United States of America in Iraq.

The second section: The reasons for the decline in the strategic importance of Iraq to the United States.

The third section: Iraq between interest and decline in the US strategy.

**Previous literature review**

Most studies in this regard focus specifically on the relationship between the decline or continuation of the strategic

importance of the Middle East for the United States, and not on the decline or continuation of the strategic importance of Iraq for it. The most significant of these studies are:

**1) Steven Sinmon's book (2023) entitled: "Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East"**

The idea of the book revolves around the great illusion, motives, strategies, and shortcomings of every American presidential administration, starting from President Carter to President Biden, and how the process of making Middle East policies is often governed by partisan wishes and calculations.

In another part, the book indicates that Washington is rapidly losing its influence in the Middle East, as evidenced by China's success in mediating the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that the decline of US influence came gradually with Biden assuming office and completing the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

This was according to a purely self-interested perspective based on a realistic view of American interests in the Middle East (the realist method in international relations).

**2) The study of by Seth Cropsey and Gary Roughead (2019) entitled: "A U.S. Withdrawal will Cause a Power Struggle in the Middle East"**

The study argues that the United States still has strong interests in the Middle East, most notably ensuring oil's continued flow to its allies in Europe and Asia, defending Israel, and preventing conflict between regional powers. If the United States withdraws from the region and hands over responsibility for these issues to other powers, this will certainly lead to the emergence of other dominant powers in the region hostile to the interests of the United States. This would cause the United States to lose its status as a superpower. The study also used the realist approach in international relations.

**3) The study of Steven Simon and Adam Weinstein (2023) entitled: "How to withdraw from Iraq within five years".**

The study argues that despite the passage of two decades since the US invasion of Iraq, there are still many problems facing the United States in Iraq. Therefore, it must balance its interests in Iraq with the costs resulting from its continued military intervention there, which also requires a balance between withdrawal and remaining in Iraq.

This study focused on the role theory in foreign political behavior, which deals with the main functions that the United States performs abroad over a long period, in its pursuit of achieving its foreign policy goal

**4) The study of by Mohamed Kamal and Khalid Hashem (2017) entitled: "Obama and Transformation Strategy from the Middle East to the Asia – Pacific Region"**

The study focused on the declining importance of the Middle East compared to the increasing US interest in the Southeast Asia region. This shift came as a result of a number of factors, including the decline in the importance of oil and the increased American interest in economic opportunities in Southeast Asia. This transformation has been witnessed since Obama took office, and it continued with Trump.

The study also focused on using the national interest approach in foreign policy by comparing the concepts of classical and new realism in international relations.

**5) Safinaz Mohammad Ahmed's study (2024) entitled: "Iraq between the American withdrawal Negotiations and Targeting the (T22) base in Jordan".**

The summary of the study is that ending the American presence in Iraq may take a long time due to the intertwining of American files related to a network of huge interests in Iraq, which begin with security and military interests, and end with economic interests. This may prompt the United States of America to set a number of conditions before its withdrawal from Iraq as a result of the intertwined internal and regional situations.

**6) Nermin Saeed's study (2024) entitled: "The Exit of Coalition Forces from Iraq: between the Risks of Withdrawal and the Repercussions of Remaining."**

The study confirms that the exit or withdrawal of American forces from Iraq is a popular Iraqi demand amid political division. Therefore, any sudden, unplanned exit will harm Iraqi interests and may be similar to the scene of the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Hence, the issue of withdrawal should be arranged in a way that ensures a state of gradual disengagement that guarantees the interests of both the Iraqi and American parties.

## **1. The objectives of the United States in Iraq**

### **1.1 The objectives of the United States in Iraq before 2003**

Since the end of the 1960s, Iraq has been considered hostile to Western interests, and then it became a source of concern for the United States in the Middle East region, in which the United States seeks to guarantee its interests, and all countries in the region to be submissive and meek to American dictates. This concern increased after the strategic balance that Iraq achieved with Israel following the Iran-Iraq war on the one hand and its effective regional roles in influencing the Arab regional system on the other hand (Al-Khazraji, 2014: 13-14).

Thus, the United States found that it is necessary to strike the power of Iraq, remove its danger over its interests in the region, and control the security of the Gulf and its oil, taking advantage of its hegemony over the international system under the shadow of the absence of its traditional competitor, the Soviet Union. In reality, the American strategy towards Iraq during that period was built on two basic goals: not to make Iraq a source of threat to American interests and to create from Iraq the traditional enemy for which the United States is looking (Ahmed, 2021: 58).

The United States took advantage of the Gulf Crisis and then the First Gulf War (1990-1991) to impose its hegemony over the Security Council and its resolutions, and to lead an international military Campaign to destroy Iraq. This was confirmed by James Baker, the former US Secretary of State, that Iraq has become a stumbling block on the path to peace in the Middle East and achieving the United States' interests. Arguably, the Second Gulf War provided the United States with its strategic goals that it had been planning for a long time. In fact, the United States' objectives were easily attainable by the War. Therefore, it worked hard to exploit it by various means and in various directions, keeping in mind its interests and allies' interests (Hashem, 2020: 78).

In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, and as part of integrated strategic objectives, the United States, through its full control over the Security Council, imposed unprecedented economic sanctions on Iraq. On August 2, 1990, US President George Bush froze Iraqi government assets, and then the United States urged the Security Council to formulate resolutions to impose international sanctions on Iraq in the name of international legitimacy. These sanctions represented in siege, economic and trade boycott, as well as an air and sea embargo. The United States' goals were to prevent Iraq from benefiting from its oil wealth and to prevent it from humanitarian aid through a policy of economic blockade (Gordon, 2018: 19-20).

In the same vein, the Bill Clinton Administration, which succeeded the Bush Administration, adopted the dual containment strategy. The stated goal of this new strategy was that the United States would abandon the old method of balancing power, that is, supporting Iraq or Iran in order to balance each other (Quant, 1993: 4), by isolating them in an attempt to keep them as weak states using a combination of military force and international economic and diplomatic sanctions because the two countries pose a double threat against American interests and pro-Western countries in the Middle East region. The blockade imposed on Iraq prevented Iraq from benefiting from oil revenues that Iraq could use to continue developing weapons of mass destruction programs, and prevent it from obtaining capabilities that would qualify it to perform a regional role in the future, and thus threatening vital American interests and the security of Israel, the strategic ally of the United States in the region (Mardan, 2007: 141).

US ex-president Bill Clinton defined the objectives of the containment strategy towards Iraq as follows: (Al-Majdoub, 1999)

1. Maintaining a strong military presence in the region while preparing to use military force in four cases: the Iraqi regime's attempt to rebuild weapons of mass destruction, attacking its neighbors, challenging allied aircraft and not respecting the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq, or attacking the Kurds in northern Iraq.

2. The continuation of economic sanctions and depriving Iraq of the resources that enables it to spend on rebuilding the Iraqi army, while continuing to support the oil-for-food program, which will provide 10 billion dollars annually to purchase food and medicine.

3. The return of the International Committee and the International Atomic Energy Agency to Iraq to follow up the UN mission, on the condition that Iraq first takes clear, concrete and positive measures.

4. In the long term, it is necessary to end the threat posed by the Iraqi regime by appointing a different government for

Iraq. In addition, the United States will intensify support to Iraqi opposition groups through the "Iraq Liberation Law", which was approved in 1998.

The long-term goal of the American strategy towards Iraq in that period was to overthrow the ruling regime in Baghdad and establish a new government. This was a strategic goal for the American Administration, and it materialized in the 'Iraq Liberation Law', and the allocation of \$97 billion in order to carry out the process of political change inside Iraq by supporting Iraqi opposition (Gause, 2003: 18). This became clearly visible when the United States moved unilaterally to carry out the process of regime change in Iraq and occupy it through a massive military campaign in 2003.

### 1.2 The objectives of the United States in Iraq after 2003

The American strategy, through its influential action in the international arena, reached a high level that it has never reached before. This was embodied in achieving its goal of occupying Iraq. The declared objectives of the United States for occupying Iraq were three: (Bassil, 2012: 49)

**Firstly**, disarming Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that the American administration believed Iraq possessed, thus threatening international peace and security.

**Secondly**, Overthrowing the Iraqi regime on the pretext of supporting terrorism by providing, or potentially providing, terrorists with conventional or non-conventional weapons, in addition to logistical and financial support.

**Thirdly**, Liberating the Iraqi people through spreading democracy and human rights principles.

In reality, the underlying objectives of the American occupation of Iraq can be summarized as follows (Al-Kharrat, 2004: 144-148):

**Firstly**, the economic goal: This is one of the most prominent reasons that prompted the United States to occupy Iraq, which has huge oil reserves<sup>(1)</sup>, and which, according to oil experts, is destined to keep the last barrel in the world under its territory after global oil dry up (Ahmed, 2014).

Hence, the occupation of Iraq by the United States will achieve more than one goal. On the one hand, it will provide the United States with a huge and cheap oil source (Al-Annani, 2006: 144-147). On the other hand, it will make the United States a major player in determining oil prices through its control of Iraqi oil production (Arafa, 2006: 56-57). In addition, Israel would have a share of Iraqi oil due to its support for the United States during its war on Iraq. So, more than one source spoke about the reopening of the Iraqi pipeline that starts from Kirkuk and exports oil via Haifa, which was closed decades ago.

Accordingly, the United States did its best to increase Iraqi oil production to earn more sources of income, in addition to supplying any of its allies with Iraqi oil, but according to American conditions. Thus, the United States uses Iraqi oil as a strategic pressure paper on its allies (Awad, 2017: 186).

**Secondly**, The strategic security goal: US ex-president Carter announced his doctrine regarding the Arabian Gulf region, which stated that the United States would use military force, if necessary, to defend its national interests in the Arabian Gulf, and the establishment of the Rapid Intervention Forces for this purpose. From that moment on, the total number of American forces deployed in the Gulf region began to increase, beginning with the Iraq-Iran war, passing through the Kuwait War in 1991, and ending with the repercussions of the global American campaign against what it calls terrorism. Given American forces were deployed in all Gulf countries except Iraq, the United States had to find the opportunity to complete the deployment of its forces in Iraq. Therefore, the United States waged the war on Iraq in 2003, which led to the deployment of advanced American forces in the northern Gulf for the first time in the history of the region.

Aside from the goals that prompted the United States to wage its war on Iraq is that Iraq has great strategic importance for the United States, and this importance is what prompted it to launch a war against Iraq (Cramer and Thrall, 2012:102-104).

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(1) The percentage of fixed Iraqi oil reserves is estimated at 112.5 billion barrels, which is equivalent to 12% of the total global reserve. Some experts believe that if Iraq was able to explore for oil, it would have twice its current reserves, but exploration work has been unsuccessful since the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. It returned slowly after the occupation of Iraq in 2003, in addition to another important advantage, which is that the cost of producing Iraqi oil is very low compared to others.

Therefore, choosing Iraq, as another target for the American project in the war against terrorism after Afghanistan, was based on careful calculations and many reasons mentioned by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld in the minutes of the National Security Council on September 14, 2001. The most significant of these reasons is that Iraq is located in the heart of the Middle East, which is vital to American interests, threatening traditional friends of the United States (Hassanein, 2004: 345). It also neighbors Iran and Syria. By occupying Iraq, the United States drove a wedge between the two countries hostile to the United States, and Iraq was the missing link in the chain of American military deployment in the region. Therefore, the occupation of Iraq represents a continuation of the American presence in the region (Hashem, 2000). The overthrow of the Iraqi regime also served the security and interest of the strategic ally of the United States, Israel. This explains why Iraq was chosen to justify the idea of transforming it into a democratic state as a model for other Arab countries.



A map of the Middle East showing the strategic location of Iraq

Source: [https://ar.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81:Map\\_of\\_Middle\\_East.png](https://ar.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81:Map_of_Middle_East.png)

## 2. Reasons for the decline in Iraq's strategic importance to the United States

With the win of US President Barack Obama in the 2008 US presidential elections, American interest in the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular began to decline and recede. In 2012, an important strategic document was issued by US Department of Defense in January 2012, talking about a shift in the priorities of the United States from the Middle East and Europe to the Asia - Pacific region. (US Department of Defense, 2012). The second period of Obama's rule witnessed

a significant decline in American interest in Iraq, as a result of its decline in the Middle East. This decline continued and became one of the basic postulates of American (Kamal, 2016: 112).

### **2.1 The role of American think tanks and opinion makers.**

In fact, ideas that prompted the United States of America to think about withdrawing from Iraq and reducing interest in it cannot be understood without referring to a group of thinkers and opinion makers in the United States, who called for that withdrawal, and reducing or mitigating the role of the United States in the Middle East region.

The Iraq Study Group, a body composed of a number of members of Congress from both the Republican and Democratic parties, and headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, prepared a report containing a set of recommendations. It was published in December 2006. These recommendations motivated President Obama to adopt the idea of withdrawing from Iraq. The report's recommendations urged the American Administration to take four steps: withdrawing American forces from Iraq, increasing the number of American forces in Afghanistan, revitalizing the Arab-Israeli peace process, and finally launching a diplomatic dialogue with Iran and its partner, the Assad regime in Syria, based on the fact that these two regimes share two goals with Washington: bringing stability to Iraq, and defeating Al-Qaeda and other Sunni jihadist groups. The Obama Administration was greatly influenced by the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton report, and it became a blueprint for Obama's strategy in Iraq (Baker and Hamilton, 2006).

Stephen Walt, a professor at Harvard University, presented a set of ideas about the American policy that should be followed in the Middle East region, including Iraq. Many American Administrations were influenced by these ideas. Walt believes that the Middle East is in the middle of a profound revolution whose future path has not yet been determined, and that the conflict in the Middle East includes multiple parties such as Sunnis against Shiites, Arabs against Kurds, secularism against Islam, democrats against authoritarians, etc. In the context of this complex and incomprehensible situation, United States should play the role of arbiter, or try to impose its preferred political vision on these events, and the best strategy for the United States in the region should be based on reducing its presence there (Hashem, 2020:122).

In his book entitled "The World Order", which was published in 2014, Henry Kissinger, the former US Secretary of State, talks about the similarity today between the conditions of the Middle East and the period of the Thirty Years' War that prevailed in Europe in the 17th century, which took place in the period from 1618 to 1648, especially the overlap between religious and political conflicts, which led to wars that claimed the lives of thousands of people. Therefore, the continuation of this situation in the Middle East today will lead to the ignition of confrontation there, similar to the religious wars that prevailed in Europe in that period, which means a state of disintegration and collapse, that many disintegrated countries, such as Iraq, (Kissinger, 2014). Kissinger proposes new ideas, inspired by the principles of the Westphalian system, which was based on respecting state sovereignty, refraining from interfering in its internal affairs, and limiting excessive intervention of states. Kissinger believes that relations between states must be based primarily on the concept of interests, and not the considerations of ideologies and values prevailing in the Middle East region (Kamal, 2014).

Additionally, Richard Haass, Head of the US Council on Foreign Relations, in his article entitled "The New Thirty Years' War", noted that the Middle East is now experiencing the early stages of a contemporary version of the Thirty Years' War, where religious and political loyalties are fueling conflicts within and between countries. Haas stated that the region is prepared for more turmoil, as the political and economic capabilities of most of the peoples of the region are weak and they do not have a future vision. Also, the lines dividing the sacred and the worldly are ambiguous and controversial, and national identity was overwhelmed by religious one, in addition to the spread of terrorism and armed militias. Haas believed that conflict would be prolonged, costly and deadly, and situation will grow seriously hard in the future (Kamal, 2015: 72).

Hence, a number of thinkers in American think tanks are convinced that it is better to leave the countries in the Middle East region that suffer from extremely difficult and complex conditions to go through the major transformation process without intervention. These countries will be plagued by turmoil and instability for a long period of time, and this is inevitable. They believe that excessive interference by the United States in the affairs of these countries will not change the process of transformation, So, It is better to leave these countries to experience democratic transformation on their own (Abdel Aty, 2021: 206).



Obviously, Iraq has suffering from difficult circumstances and division since its occupation until today due to American intervention.

## **2.2 Reasons for the decline of Iraq's strategic importance for the United States**

Among the main goals that called on the United States to occupy Iraq is the economic goal represented by oil and its vital importance to the United States, in addition to the position and great strategic importance of Iraq in the Middle East region, which is one of the most important regions for the United States at that time.

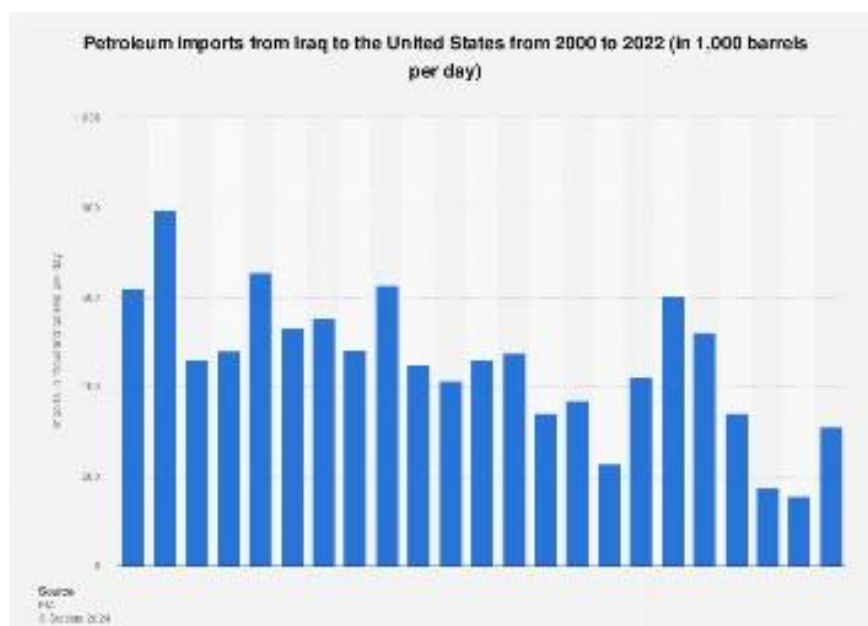
The new changes, whether related to the situation in the Middle East region, especially after the so-called “Arab Spring” revolutions, or those related to the orientations of the United States and the change in its global priorities, led to a change in the American strategy towards the Middle East region in general and Iraq in particular, thus declining American interest in Iraq. The reasons for this decline are:

**Firstly**, Iraq no longer enjoys the relative importance it previously enjoyed when it was occupied in 2003, when oil was one of the reasons for the United States to invade and occupy Iraq. Since 2008, the United States has begun producing “shale oil” and extracting it according to economic standards. Between 2007 and 2012, shale oil production increased by more than 50% every year, and the United States’ need for oil from abroad began to decrease gradually (Al-Saeed, 2019), Which will lead the United States to reach a state of energy self-sufficiency in the near future.

In 2020, the United States exported more energy than it imported, for the first time since 1953. In 2023, the United States produced more crude oil than any other country at any time, according to international energy statistics, as the average crude oil production in the United States reached 12, 9 million barrels per day (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). According to estimates, the United States is likely to be a net exporter of energy during the year 2050 (Egan, 2019), and thus there is no longer a need to import oil.

Therefore, the United States no longer needs to import oil from abroad, especially from Iraq. In addition, the United States has diversified its sources of oil imports, and relied more on sources from outside the Arabian Gulf region, such as Canada, Mexico, and Nigeria.

This development led to the gradual decline of the United States in the Middle East region, especially Iraq, whose historical existence has been linked to the goal of securing oil sources for American markets. Therefore, the decline in the United States’ need for oil as a strategic commodity has begun to affect the degree of its interest in Iraq.



Petroleum imports from Iraq to the United States from 2000 to 2022

Source: Statista Research Department, 25 August, 2023, available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/191210/petroleum-imports-into-the-us-from-iraq-since-2000/>

**Secondly**, the decline in Iraq's strategic importance to the United States was also a reflection of the orientations of American public opinion, which no longer gets excited about American intervention in Iraq as a result of the heavy economic and human price that the United States paid in its invasion and occupation of Iraq (Williams and Schake, 2023). In addition, many successive US Administrations had a deep conviction that the ability of the United States to influence the course of affairs in Iraq has become limited and is not welcomed by the majority of Iraqi political forces, especially the ruling ones. In reality, the US role in Iraq and the region was viewed with suspicion and lack of credibility (Hashem, 2019).

Accordingly, Decision-making circles have reached realistic convictions that the American role in Iraq was limited and was not welcomed. Consequently, there was no need to play such an excessive role.

**Thirdly**, the decline of American interest in Iraq cannot be separated from the decline of its interest in the Middle East region as a whole. On the other hand, the United States moved to increase its interest in the Asian continent economically and strategically. Many observers believe that the United States' move towards South and Southeast Asia can be attributed to its growing importance in the global economy, thus leading to a considerable decline in its interest in the Middle East region (Nasr, 2013: 155).

After Barack Obama came to power, an important strategic document was issued by US Department of Defense in January 2012, talking about a shift in the priorities of the United States from the Middle East and Europe to the Asia - Pacific region. Consequently, American interest in the Middle East has retreated, especially since the second term of President Obama's Administration. On the other hand, American interest in the Asian continent has increased whether to participate in the fruits of growth in this economically promising continent, or to confront the escalation of Chinese strategic influence there, which threatens the American presence in the Asian continent. This led to the emergence of the strategy of rebalancing towards Asia - Pacific region (Campbell, 2016: 223).

**Fourthly**, reducing military spending was another reason for the decline in American interest in Iraq. In light of the high level of the budget deficit as a result of the Iraq War, and the war on Al-Qaeda and ISIS, The United States was not willing to engage in new wars, as the United States has lost more than 4,600 American soldiers, and the economic cost amounted to about \$2 trillion (Haass, 2023).

The United States found itself exhausted as a result of these wars, thus reformulating its strategic goals in the Middle East region. Instead of the traditional goals related to maintaining the flow of oil, the security of Israel, preventing nuclear proliferation, and confronting Russian influence, the focus has become more on how to achieve stability and confront the rise of terrorist groups.

Therefore, the United States adopted a strategy of restructuring the Middle East region, which serves the new American interests without direct involvement in its issues. The United States adhered to the option of not getting involved militarily in the region, and focused on dealing with the region's crises selectively. It also confirmed that the issues and crises of the region should be addressed by its countries directly and not relying on the American role. Additionally, The United States sought to change the strategic environment of the region, as it changed the pattern of the relationship with Iran from a state of hostility to a state of cooperation, leading to normalization of relations between both countries in the long term (Hashem, 2022).

Accordingly, relations between the main powers in the region and the United States entered a new phase, in which the traditional alliance was mixed with suspicion of the American Administration's orientations. Consequently, the American withdrawal from the Middle East prompted some Arab countries to reformulate their alliances with other international powers.

### **3. Iraq between American interest and retreat.**

The decline in Iraq's strategic importance to the United States came as a result of growing frustration with American interventions over more than two decades in the Middle East region which is full of problems and conflicts. In addition, the United States faces greater challenges and priorities in other regions of the world, most notably Southeast Asia. Despite this decline, US interests in Iraq cannot be disappeared. Therefore, it is unlikely that the United States will leave Iraq entirely.

#### **3.1 Reasons for not disengagement**

A complete and final disengagement of the United States from Iraq is unlikely for the following reasons:

**Firstly**, The United States has entered the field of oil production and possesses large quantities of oil, but Iraq is still at the top of the ranking of countries that possess huge oil and gas reserves, enabling it to restore its oil production to pre-war levels. Iraq is also expected to be the third largest contributor to oil supply growth by 2030. Iraq ranks fifth in oil reserves in the world after Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Iran. These reserves also constitute 14% of the oil reserves in the Middle East and 12% of OPEC reserves. The International Energy Agency expects Iraq's oil production to reach 6 million barrels per day by 2030, surpassing Canada as the fourth largest producer in the world. Furthermore, Iraq plans to increase its oil production to 8 million barrels per day in the next two decades (Nakhle, 2020). It is worth noting that Iraq plans to increase its oil production to 8 million barrels per day by the end of 2027 (Al Jazera Net, 2022).

Iraq's huge oil capability gives great wealth and power to the state that controls it. Therefore, the strategic importance of Iraq and the necessity of keeping it out of hostile hands will remain an urgent and required matter for the United States.

**Secondly**, there is a possibility that Iraq's problems will impact the United States, if left unaddressed. Consequently, the United States may back off from that withdrawal under worse conditions and higher costs in the future. This became abundantly clear in 2014, when President Barack Obama, after celebrating the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq in 2011, was forced to return them to confront the terrorist threat of ISIS (Baker and Schmitt, 2014). Furthermore, larger numbers of refugees would have flowed into Europe and beyond, and major centers of oil production near the Arabian Gulf would have been threatened.

ISIS still poses a threat, even if they are no longer control territory in Iraq (O'Hanlon and Allawi, 2020). It is certain that the quantity and intensity of attacks that ISIS could carry out will increase in the absence of US military pressure. The United Nations estimates that ISIS still has reserves of up to \$300 million to continue its terrorist campaign (Pollock, 2020). Therefore, the United States' complete abandonment of Iraq is unlikely under the current circumstances.

**Thirdly**, it is an illusion to believe that the United States can separate from Iraq without dire consequences. It still has pressing interests there. Given these interests require American protection, relative American interest in Iraq will continue. The growth of Chinese and Russian influence, and Iran's hegemonic ambitions, are all real challenges that pose a threat to the United States.

China and Russia are seeking to gain economic and political influence there. Consequently, the United States is trying to face their joint efforts. Both countries have already made significant efforts to increase their influence in Iraq at the expense of the United States. It is possible that the United States will cut off its financial investments in Iraq if Chinese or Russian companies come to replace American ones. Also, if the United States abandons Iraq and leaves it to Russia and China, the United States' allies in the Middle East will think that the United States is an unreliable partner (Kaltenthaler and Dagher, 2020).

As for Iran, there is no doubt that the American exit from Iraq strengthens the Iranian regime, which has serious repercussions for the national security of the United States. Just as it was proven that the United States' withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 was a grave and costly mistake, an American withdrawal today would also be a mistake for its forces and its support for the Iraqi government. Hence, it would have a major impact on American interests in Iraq and the region (Al-Shammari, 2022: 13-15). On the other hand, the American withdrawal from Iraq would strengthen Iran's regional influence. Iraq represents a land bridge between Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, and is a means to expand Iranian power and influence in the Middle East against potential regional competitors. If the United States withdraws now, this will pave the way for Iran to achieve what Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian Commander of the Quds Force, wanted before his death (Cordesman, 2020).

**Fourthly**, The American withdrawal from Iraq will leave an impression of the United States' failure to build a stable democratic system in Iraq. There has been an American considerable interest in promoting democracy and human rights in Iraq. Therefore, it is impossible for American officials to ignore Iraq, which is one of the United States' tools for global influence and attraction.

The United States has tried to build a secure, democratic system in Iraq that would strengthen the position of the United States and preserve its interests in the region. To achieve this goal, it spent more than \$2 trillion in Iraq and witnessed the death or injury of thousands of its soldiers. However, Iraq remains unstable with a fragile democratic system. Obviously, the United States failed to achieve the desired democratic model after more than two decades, and its capabilities were

limited to make major changes, in addition to the fact that the Iraqi authorities were not prepared to achieve the American vision (Mansour, 2023).

If those American values are damaged, American perceptions of its military and industrial capabilities to achieve any of what it set out to do in Iraq may also be damaged (Ahmed and Abdullah, 2020). In the global context, undermining the democratic model promoted by the United States in Iraq will present Sino-Russian “techno-authoritarianism” and state-dominated capitalism as an alternative model of governance. In reality, the Middle East is a contested region in this context of universal values (Katulis and Juul, 2021).



Geographic map of Iraq

Source:

[https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%AC%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82](https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%AC%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82)



### 3.2 Repercussions of the decline of American interest in Iraq

It is clear from all of the above that the American commitment to Iraq in terms of interest and retreat lies somewhere between commitment and withdrawal, and between stay and departure. It is also embodied in the difference between official American statements, which emphasize commitment and survival in Iraq, and intentions and actions that confirm the opposite.

In general, the decline of American interest in Iraq has major repercussions, and the process of predicting those repercussions is risky and not easy, but there are some possible consequences of this decline that can be listed as follows:

**Firstly**, the decline of American interest in Iraq and the lack of willingness to intervene will create a perception among the United States' opponents that it has no desire to intervene or re-intervene. This will generate conviction among those adversaries (Such as Iran, Turkey, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS), that opponents succeeded in expelling the United States from Iraq, and that they are also capable of expelling it from other regions (Al-Makhzoumi and Al-Obaidi, 2020).

**Secondly**, US allies, both local and regional, will not be affected by US influence and decisions if they feel that the United States is not willing and able to defend them. They may decide that they need to take alternative security measures away from the United States. These measures include preemptively attacking their opponents, trying to reach a temporary settlement with them, or seeking other allies as an alternative to the United States (Harrison, 2019: 72-82). Given these open-ended scenarios, even attempting to implement any of them could increase volatility in Iraq which is already a volatile region.

**Thirdly**, US disengagement from Iraq will create a perception that American power and influence in the Middle East are declining, just as that sentiment prevailed when the United States withdrew its forces from Indochina at the beginning of 1973. The United States will be seen, internationally and domestically, as less willing or disable to intervene militarily. This, of course, will be welcomed by some the United States' opponents and some of its dissatisfied friends, and unwelcome by its friends who now fear that the United States will not protect them from their opponents (Al-Araibi, 2021: 202). Therefore, Washington will have less influence if the American withdrawal from Iraq continues. In particular, The United States may be under intense pressure to control events there if sectarian violence erupts again. It is true that US partners in Iraq could do a lot to deal with these problems if they arose today, but they clearly remain unable to do so without significant US support (Cordesman, 2020).

**Fourthly**, Leaving Iraq will do nothing to alleviate many of the region's other problems, including the rise of extremism and terrorist groups, foreign intervention and political instability. On the other hand, the American presence in Iraq will do nothing to alleviate these problems either. In other words, there are many problems in the region that are likely to continue regardless of what the United States does in Iraq, whether it withdraws or remains.

### Conclusion

The study concluded that the basic hypothesis was correct, which is that the strategic importance that Iraq previously enjoyed in relation to the American strategy no longer exists today at the same level. The study also reached a number of results, the most important of which are:

**Firstly**, The United States' occupation of Iraq in 2003 was not because Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction or the world to be safer after overthrowing the Iraqi regime or to the Iraqi people. The Iraqi people become more liberated, and democracy and human rights are brought to them, but rather economic interests were the main driver of this occupation, as Iraq has huge reserves of oil. In addition, the United States had security and strategic goals, namely tightening the American grip on the region by occupying Iraq and subjecting it completely to American control.

**Secondly**, the importance that Iraq previously enjoyed when it was occupied is no longer present today for many reasons, foremost of which is the self-sufficiency of oil as a result of the enormous discoveries of shale oil in the United States, as well as the American orientation towards Asia as a result of the growing importance of this region economically. In addition, American public opinion is no longer enthusiastic about American intervention in turbulent Iraq as a result of the high economic and human price that the United States paid there.

**Thirdly**, this orientation, however, does not mean that the United States will abandon Iraq completely. It will maintain

a degree of interest in Iraq. Despite the decrease in the United States' need to import oil, it will remain keen on the continued flow of Iraqi oil to its allies at moderate prices because any disruption occurs in the production or export of Iraqi oil will lead to a rise in the price of oil in global markets, in addition to the fact that oil wealth grants great wealth and power to whoever controls it. Furthermore, the moral responsibility of the United States resulting from its occupation of Iraq in 2003 imposes on it the necessity of preserving the political system that it created there.

**Fourthly**, the United States' utter abandonment Iraq without consequences is not possible. The US still has interests there in light of growing Russian and Chinese influence, Iran's hegemonic ambitions, the potential return of terrorist organizations, and political instability.

To conclude, the American role in Iraq will witness further decline, but this decline does not and will not mean the United States completely abandoning Iraq. The United States will maintain some interest. But what is certain is that Iraq's strategic importance to the United States is continuing to decline, and therefore, its desire to get involved in its affairs or to play a leading role regarding its issues is also continuing to decline.

### **Recommendations**

In fact, Iraq needs a United States committed to its security, and the United States needs Iraq that views the United States as a partner and friend. Both sides have every reason to define a new relationship that could lead to a lasting and real strategic partnership. To achieve this, the following is required:

**Firstly**, The United States should deliver messages to Iraq and the Iraqis that it will not abandon them. Even if the United States significantly reduces its forces in Iraq, it does not mean that the United States will be uncommitted to Iraq's security and safety or unwilling to promote and maximize its interests in Iraq. The United States' focus on political and economic participation there will serve as confirmation that it is not only present in the military field, but it is present at all levels. Despite the positive messages that the United States has sent since US President Joe Biden took power, most notably the United States will not leave the region and will not abandon its friends and allies, the question will remain: How to do this, under what conditions, and for what political purposes? Therefore, it is necessary to have a more comprehensive and clear approach to influence in the region. This approach includes more diplomatic and economic standards. In reality, clarity reduces the risks of starting a conflict.

**Secondly**, the state of vacuum that will be created in Iraq due to the American withdrawal from it, as we explained, will give different messages to both America's allies and its enemies alike in Iraq. America's enemies will feel emboldened and its allies will feel more disappointed.

What America needs today is a policy of clarity in Iraq that would reduce the state of doubt and remove confusion, accompanied by practical steps and a comprehensive vision for all issues of Iraq.

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