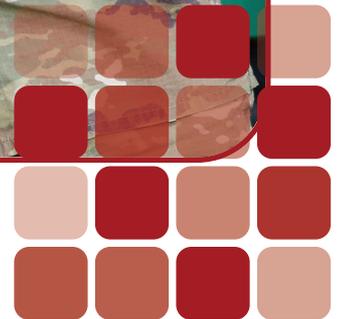


# US MILITARY PRESENCE IN IRAQ: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, TRANSFORMATIONS AND REPERCUSSIONS



WATHEQ AL-SADOON & MEHMET ALACA





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## 1. Introduction

The military presence of the US (United States) in Iraq has experienced various transformations by passing through many phases parallel to the political and military developments in Iraq and in the region since 2003. The military presence of the USA in Iraq, which has been on the agenda for a long time, entered a new phase after the killing of the commander of the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qassem Soleimani, and deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as the Hashd al-Shaabi militia group, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January in Baghdad. While the Iran-backed Shiite militia groups and Iraq increased their threats towards the American military presence in the country, following the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis, the US responded to this threat by using its military deterrence. Shiite militia groups close to Iran are to be blamed for the killing of American soldiers in the attack made on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March in Baghdad upon the Taji Military Base where the US soldiers were deployed. The US killed scores of militia members by making air attacks on the bases and warehouses of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia group, which is an Iraqi militia group known for its sympathy to Iran. In this process, where new militia groups considered to be close to Iran came into existence, the US gave an unexpected decision and withdrew from many military bases where it was deployed in Iraq and left the control of the bases to the Iraqi army. However, following the assassination of Soleimani, by deploying anti-aircraft missiles (the Patriot Air Defense System) to the Ain al-Assad Military Base in Anbar and to the Harir Base in Erbil, the US gave the message that it would not completely withdraw from the country.

Many probabilities and perspectives are being discussed with respect to the background of the decision the US took to withdraw from military bases. The new phase of the military presence of the USA in Iraq, which has gone through many transformations since 2003, has the capacity to influence the internal dynamics of Iraq as well as the regional equation. At this point, it seems useful to examine the existing situation and future of the military presence of the US in Iraq within the historical process for analyzing the direction in which the future of Iraq and the region will evolve. Thus, this study consists of three sections addressing the military presence of the USA in Iraq and discussing the last withdrawal decision given by the Pentagon, which is a strategic maneuver. While the first section will approach the historical background of US military presence in Iraq, the second section will evaluate the transformation of the military presence of the US in Iraq under the titles of Iraq delusion, territorial dominance, the alliance against ISIS and progressive intimidation phases. The third section will discuss the presence of the US in the country, which has been retransformed together with the attack made upon the Taji Base and the repercussions it has on Iraq and the region.

## 2. Historical Background of US Military Presence in Iraq

The story of US military presence in Iraq started in the year 2003 together with the occupation of Iraq under the leadership of the US and the United Kingdom (UK). The US-led coalition, having its war and support units (armored forces, infantry and artillery units, land rockets, technical knowhow etc.) from the US, England, Australia and some European countries composed of special forces, sent 173 thousand soldiers to Iraq at the first phase of the occupation.

This first phase started on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March and continued until the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2003. 150 thousand of this figure came from the US, 23 thousand consisted of British, Australian and Polish soldiers and later about 36 countries joined the US-led coalition.<sup>1</sup> The operation named “Iraqi Freedom” was launched on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2003 by this coalition which increased its soldier numbers in the forthcoming periods. Three weeks after the start of the ground campaign of the US forces, they entered Baghdad on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2003 following a number of conflicts with the Iraqi army and declared that the Saddam Hussein regime was toppled. Right after the end of the attack and the start of the occupation, the responsibilities of the occupation forces in Iraq were divided broadly into three<sup>2</sup>:

**The US:** Responsible for the capital Baghdad as well as for the central, western and northern regions.

**England:** Responsible for the southeastern regions of Iraq (Forces coming from Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Lithuania, Romania, the Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal, New Zealand and South Korea have taken place under the command of England.)

In addition, special units and small-sized special forces from the US Army have taken place in all the central and southern regions of Iraq that were under the command of British and Polish forces. Thus, the US forces served in the totality of the 18 provinces of Iraq during the years of occupation.

**Poland:** Responsible for south-central Iraq (Spain, Nicaragua, the Dominic Republic, Romania, Latvia, Slovakia, Hungary, El Salvador, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Honduras, Mongolia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Thailand, the Philippines have taken place under the Polish command.)

During the direct occupation of Iraq (2003-2011) the effective part of US forces was deployed to Baghdad, Anbar, Diala, Ninova, Salahaddin and Kirkuk while middle-sized forces were deployed to Erbil, Duhok and Sulaymaniah, which are provinces under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). In addition, special units and small-sized special forces from the US Army have taken place in all the central and southern regions of Iraq that were under the command of British and Polish forces. Thus, the US forces served in the totality of the 18 provinces of Iraq during the years of occupation.

Furthermore, the US forces which used the Tadjji camp in the north of Baghdad, the Balad and Qayyarah air bases in Salahaddin and the old bases remaining from the Saddam regime such as Habbaniyah and Ain al-Assad in Anbar during the occupation, also established new bases at the Baghdad International Airport, at the Umm Qasr Port in the Basra province, in regions permitted by the civil government of Iraq just as the bases were established in all the presidential palaces in the provinces.

Following the breakdown of the old regime, weaknesses of the representatives nominated by the US in directly governing Iraq were seen with prevalent chaos, violence, worsening security and bad services. Security and public services levels decreased continuously particularly during the first and second terms of President George W. Bush. As will be analyzed

in detail in the second section, during this process, ethnic and sectarian tension increased significantly in the country. While no suicide attack had happened in the country until the occupation, hundreds of suicide attacks, where thousands of persons died, occurred together with the occupation.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, starting from the first period of the occupation, the bad conditions in Iraq led to the increase of violence in general terms and especially to the increase of attacks aimed at US forces. In addition to some Shiite groups such as the Mahdi Army led by the Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, which holds the most powerful block today in the Iraqi Parliament and which also realized some attacks against US forces in the central and southern regions of Iraq, Sunni armed forces that were objecting to the US occupation in the provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Salahaddin, Kirkuk and Ninova and especially Baghdad, were organizing nearly 25 attacks per day. According to the statistics of the US Secretary of Defense, the number of US soldiers killed in Iraq reached 4, 421 during the time elapsed between the occupation in March 2003 and the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2010, when the first group of US soldiers withdrew, and 32 thousand persons have been injured as a result of operations.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in his book titled "My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope", Paul Bremer, the Provisional Coalition Administrator of Iraq nominated by the US to Iraq in the year 2003, confessed over and over that the effort of the US in governing Iraq had triggered anarchy since the beginning of the occupation and that many errors aggravating the situation in the country had been made.<sup>5</sup>

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) which covers strategic and security cooperation was signed in November 2008 between Iraq and the US, foreseeing that the combat forces

of the US would be completely withdrawn from Iraq by the end of the year 2011. This agreement also foresaw that a "limited" number of US soldiers would be deployed to a "limited" number of military bases in order to educate Iraqi security forces and provide logistical support.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the agreement, the terms of which have been implemented by both parties, an important part of US forces officially withdrew from Iraq by the end of the year 2011. However, after the rise of the terrorist organization ISIS in June 2014 and its control over big cities and lands in Iraq, the Iraqi government asked some help from the US to fight against the threats and risks deriving from ISIS. Therewith, the US provided military support to Iraq in the context of the implementation of the terms of the SOFA Agreement signed with Iraq in 2008. In this context, with participation of 82 countries against ISIS, a US-led international coalition, was established in September 2014. Subsequently, the conditions of the war against ISIS required an increase in the number of US forces and military bases in Iraq.

Indeed, when the war against ISIS ended in the year 2017, US soldiers with an estimated number of 5, 200 in Iraq were deployed to 14 military bases in the central, western and northern regions of the country under 8 main and 6 auxiliary bases:

#### **Main Bases:**

1. K1 (Kaywan) Base, Kirkuk (Includes a military airport)
2. Qayyarah Base, South of Mosul (Includes a military airport)
3. Balad Air Force Base, Salahaddin (Includes a military airport)
4. Ain al-Assad Base, Anbar (Includes a military airport)

5. Habbaniyah Base, Anbar (Includes a military airport)
6. Harir Base, Erbil (Includes a military airport)
7. Qaim Military Base, Anbar (Situated on the Iraq-Syria borders)
8. Camp Taji, North of Baghdad (Includes a helicopter airport)

#### **Auxiliary Bases:**

1. Besmayah Camp, South East of Baghdad (Limited number of US soldiers were deployed)
2. The base near Sincar (between Dohuk and Ninova states)
3. The base in the Atrush region (Dohuk)
4. The base in the Halabja region (Sulaimani)
5. The base in the Altunkopru region (between Erbil and Kirkuk)

6. Limited number of US forces deployed to the presidential palaces in Mosul.

Although, as of March 2019 the US withdrew from some of the bases that it had used intensively in its operations against ISIS and recently in those against the Iran-backed militia forces, and which are at the epicenter of the continuing and increasing discussions on the military presence of the US in Iraq, it has set the ground for the continuation of discussions in the forthcoming periods by deploying the Patriot Air Defense System to the Ain al-Assad Base in Anbar and to the Harir Base in Erbil. Even though the Iraqi Parliament adopted the decision to take the US forces out of the country on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, the Washington government refuses to withdraw its soldiers in the country. In this context, talks are planned to take place on June 2020 where strategic topics between the US and Iraq will be addressed including the future of the presence of American forces in Iraq as a



priority. It is expected that those talks would provide some signposts on the future of the US military presence in the country and set the direction of future discussions.

### 3. The Transformation Phases of US Military Presence in Iraq

Since April 2003, the military presence of the US in Iraq went through different phases according to the changing security and political conditions in Iraq and the region. All kinds of phenomena in the region have the capacity of directly influencing the presence of the US in the Middle East. The challenges and threats faced by US forces in Iraq did not show up in a single manner nor did they arise from a single local or regional source. US forces face new challenges, threats, risks and new enemies at each phase of US military presence in Iraq.

#### 3.1. The Phase of the “Iraq Delusion of the US”

The first phase of US military presence in Iraq started in April 2003 and continued until February 2006. This phase can be described as the “Iraq Delusion of the US” during which Americans thought they were on the right track in governing the country. The US, which is thought to have oversimplified the dynamics in Iraq during the occupation, tried to evaluate the country only by ethnic and sectarian identity (Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens). This is because the US thought that all the sects have been subject to injustice by Saddam Hussein and that, thus, the “disadvantaged” groups would welcome the US forces as their “saviors”. They thought that Sunni Arabs had not been subject to the oppressions of the Saddam regime as much as other groups and that therefore they might resist the military presence of the US. At this point, the US tried to overcome the problems it would face to obtain political and social attainments in the

new post-Saddam Iraq by taking advantage of the competition between sects. However, the events occurring in Iraq showed that the assessments of the USA of Iraq were not matching up with the realities in Iraq. On the other hand, it has also been argued that this was a policy implemented consciously by the US in order to push the region into a state of chaos through ethnic and sectarian wars.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2003, the US discharged about 400 thousand soldiers by disbanding the Iraqi army, pretending that its own military presence was sufficient. Even though the real reason of the decision was the concern felt about the return of the Saddam regime, this maneuver of Bremer created one of the strongest grounds of the opposition against US military presence.

Before the end of the war, retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner, the first official who took office in the occupation of Iraq, established an interim governing council with the leading 100 persons opposed to the Saddam regime including names such as Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani, Abdulaziz al-Haqeem, Ahmad Çelebi and Ayad Allawi. However, Shiites claimed that Garner assigned Kurds to important positions and that Sunnis formed the majority among the prominent appointees and created trouble arguing that the US did not abide by the promises it had given before the occupation. Then the Bush government removed Garner from office in a short time and

appointed Paul Bremer to his place.<sup>7</sup> Bremer, who took office on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2003 changed within one month the name and function of the interim governing council lead by Garner and became the most powerful decision-maker representing the US in Iraq by establishing the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The important authorities of Bremer became even stronger with the decision taken by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2003. This is because the resolution, nr. 1483, adopted with the approval of all the member countries of the UNSC defined the forces of the US and the UK in Iraq as "occupation forces" and decided that the country would be governed by the US and the UK until conditions stabilized in the country.<sup>8</sup>

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2003, the US discharged about 400 thousand soldiers by disbanding the Iraqi army, pretending that its own military presence was sufficient. Even though the real reason of the decision was the concern felt about the return of the Saddam regime, this maneuver of Bremer created one of the strongest grounds of the opposition against US military presence. Furthermore, the fact, that Bremer removed persons from office from almost all occupational groups in the framework of its policy aimed at deactivating the Baath Party in the country, disabled the bureaucracy and state mechanism while strengthening the participation in the armed resistance in the central and northern regions of the country. Baghdad-Tikrit-Ramadi were in the first place for this. In addition to the said decisions, a money amount of about 9 billion US dollars vaporized with corruption during the short term of office of Bremer. Indeed, after the expiration of Bremer's term of office on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2004, John Negroponte took over the political, security-related and economic ruin left by Bremer. How-

ever, when the Iraq Interim Governing Council (IIGC) established by Bremer on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2003 left its place to the Iraq Interim Government under the prime ministry of Ayad Allawi in June 2004, Negroponte continued with his office as the Baghdad Ambassador of the US. The US, which gave the priority to providing security in the country during this period, realized operations against Baath Party members and its supporters running their activities or living in Sunni regions. In addition to the fact, that the government led by Allawi acted under the control of the US but did not meet expectations, indications of civil war developed in the country and the actions of the private US security companies increased the reactions against Negroponte.

During the first general elections made in the country on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2005 following the occupation, Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens gave different reactions in the internal atmosphere surrounding the military presence of the US in Iraq. At this phase were Shiites and Kurds had gained some power. Continuous and increasing attacks occurred against the US forces under two main streams in Sunni Arab regions. In this context, the members of some Sunni Arab tribes, the former members of the Iraq Army and former Baath Party members resisted the presence of the US in Iraq under the title, "National Resistance Against the US". Arabs belonging to the Salafi-jihadi movement as well as Iraqis close to the related movement, who went to Iraq following the occupation of Iraq, made war against US forces under the title "Jihad Against the Attack of Americans-Crusaders". Over the course of this term, serious attacks occurred against US forces in Sunni regions such that nearly one third of the attacks made against US forces in Iraq

was realized only in the Anbar province.<sup>9</sup> Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad), that swore allegiance to the al-Qaeda organization in October 2004 and took the name of Iraqi al-Qaeda under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, realized actions and displayed a resistance having a tremendous impact against the US throughout this period. The organization, which bombed the Jordan Embassy in Baghdad in August 2003, attacked the United Nations (UN) building in Iraq with an explosives-laden car on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2003 and killed 21 persons, including the UN Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello.<sup>10</sup> The Sunni resistance, which was strengthened during this process laid the foundations that generated ISIS in the course of time, which turned into one of the reasonable justifications of the presence of the US in the country.

A certain part of the religious, political and social forces in Shiite Arab regions refused to go along with the attacks against US forces. Shiites used the US as a tool to obtain power and legitimize their presence. The fact that the US presence lasted a long time in Iraq gave the Shiite government the possibility to consolidate its power. Especially elite Shiite politicians, most of whom came from exile abroad and were strangers to the field, noticed that they could not hold power without the support of the US. Despite this attitude of the Shiites exhibited during the direct occupation, which ensured them a guarantee of control over public organizations and security services up to the present, it should be noted that some Shiite militia groups showed a strong resistance against the US. During this process, Iran supported the armed activities of anti-American Iraqi Shiites in order to increase the pressure on the USA. The Badr Brigades

that were established in 1983 as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), supported Iran against Saddam during the war lasting eight years between Iran and Iraq. The Badr Brigades took refuge in Iran after the war was over in 1988 and returned to Iraq following the breakdown of the Saddam regime in 2003 to benefit from the political vacuum. The Badr Brigades joined the resistance against the occupation. Even though the US considered the Badr Brigades to be an alliance element against the post-occupation resistance in the country due to its opposition against the Saddam regime, it requested that the SCIRI disband the Badr Brigades in a short span of time. Thus, despite its disarmament promise, the organization, which turned into a political party by changing its name to the Badr Organization, resisted the British coalition units especially in the southern part of the country. Furthermore, the Fatih Group, which was the second largest block in the parliament under the guidance of the leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi al-Amiri, and was known to have organized brutal attacks against the Sunni population in Iraq between the years 2004-2006, is taking the lead of the campaign aimed at removing the US forces from the country. At the same time, the Badr Organization is known to have close relations with Iran and continues today its military activities as the strongest wing within the Hashd al-Shaabi.

In addition to the Badr Organization, contrary to other Shiite actors, the young Shiite religious functionary Muqtada al-Sadr, who was very popular in the poor neighborhoods of Iraqi Shiites and who adopted the Iraqi nationalism discourse, also declared that he was against the presence of the US in Iraq during this period. In July 2003, Sadr established the Mahdi

Army which is the first militia force to have emerged on the territory of Iraq following the US occupation.<sup>11</sup> The Mahdi Army, which has been armed and equipped in a short span of time such as one year, reached thousands of well-trained militia in the Iranian and Iraqi territories. It is not possible to neglect the influence of Iran, which has much experience with militia forces, on the establishment process of the Mahdi Army. The establishment process of the Mahdi Army occurred rapidly and professionally and has been one of the groups that has inflicted the most damage to the presence of the US in Iraq during this term.

Nevertheless, the resistance of Shiite groups against the US forces could not reach the number and dimension of the attacks made by Sunni armed groups. Such that, during the time elapsed from April 2003 to April 2004, the total number of US soldiers killed in Shiite regions was 29 while it had been 2 thousand 472 during the same period in regions where Sunnis form the majority.

During this process it is even known that the Mahdi Army cooperated with some Sunni resistance groups against the US. Then the largest part of the powerful armed Shiite militia groups that emerged in Iraq left the Mahdi Army. Today, groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, that are highly active within the Hashd al-Shaabi, have quit the Mahdi Army and are continuing their anti-American political and military re-

sistance in Shiite regions. Nevertheless, the resistance of Shiite groups against the US forces could not reach the number and dimension of the attacks made by Sunni armed groups. This was such that, during the time elapsed from April 2003 to April 2004, the total number of US soldiers killed in Shiite regions was 29 while it had been 2 thousand 472 during the same period in regions where Sunnis form the majority.<sup>12</sup>

Kurdish regions had been atypical areas where no attacks were made against US forces during the direct occupation years. Even though no anti-American mass resistance had been observed in Kurdish regions, there had been individual participation. Especially Ansar al-Islam, which is thought to be close to al-Qaeda led by Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad, also known as Mollah Krekar, and the members of which mostly consist of Kurds, made various attacks against US forces. In fact, it had also been claimed that they had planned assassinations against the prominent names of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that acted together with US forces in the occupation of Iraq.<sup>13</sup> Besides this the Turkmens in Iraq adopted a state-centric attitude on the military presence of the US in Iraq. Even though a small community radicalizing denominationally and showing some denominational differences existed among Turkmens, generally Turkmens made some efforts during this process to take back their rights that they could not obtain and that had been taken away from them during the Saddam period and tried to get a place in Iraqi politics.

At this stage, it should be indicated that the presence of the USA in Iraq also had some repercussions in regional terms. Following the breakdown of the Saddam Hussein regime,

it had been expected that the next target of the US would be Syria and Iran. Since shortly before the occupation of Iraq, the US had classified the Iranian and Syrian regimes as being within the “axis of evil”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Tehran and Damascus, which were trying to prevent the success of the Iraq project of the US, played an important role in providing logistic support to armed groups to give further damage to the US forces in the chaos in Iraq. This was such that simultaneous attacks in Baghdad targeted the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs and Defense in August 2009 and caused the death of about 100 persons. The claim that some militants who realized the attacks were protected by Syria led to a diplomatic crisis where both countries called back their ambassadors mutually.<sup>15</sup> It is also known that, during this process, Iran and Syria tolerated even the other Salafi-jihadi organizations in Iraq and radical groups such as al-Qaeda. During the years when the US directly occupied Iraq, Syria had been an entrance door to Iraq for all the jihadists coming from all corners of the world.

Following the end of the term of office of Ambassador Negroponte, while this complex atmosphere dominated the country, Zalmay Halilzad took office in June 2005 during a period when insurgencies had increased seriously in the Sunni regions of the country. By contrast with his predecessors, Halilzad, who made negotiations with the parties on the founding constitution of the country, discussed in the Iraqi Parliament where the Shiite-Kurdish alliance was dominant and made efforts to provide the integration of Sunnis to the new system. However, while promises given to Sunnis, who were already furious, were not kept, a fierce civil war started between Shiites and Sunnis when the shrine of Imam al-Askari situated in Samarra, one of the most sacred places of Iraqi Shiites, had been bombed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2006.<sup>16</sup> During this term when al-Qaeda got even stronger in Sunni regions and especially in Anbar, a new era started when the US forces, which suffered serious losses during the civil war, also declared that they could not control the process.



The Qatar crisis is but one representation of the politico-ideological struggles between various rulers of the Gulf States. These struggles became more pronounced with the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

### 3.2. The phase of “the territorial dominance of the US”

Denominational violence, which showed a dangerous rise in Iraq together with the attack made on the Imam al-Askari mausoleum in Samarra, forced the US to transform its military presence in the country. The US forces found themselves in a civil war and resistance line where they were continuously becoming a target in sectarian conflicts that were getting deeper between Shiites and Sunnis.<sup>17</sup> The US, which considered the way to look for solutions that would guarantee them to quit the country with minimum losses during the first phase of the civil war, changed its strategy in 2007 by adopting the “territorial dominance” concept and the phase of the “territorial dominance of the US” started.

As a result of the eight-month-long effort of the commission tasked by the US Congress and named the Iraq Working Group, the Iraq Working Group shared the Baker-Hamilton Plan in 2007 where it suggested that US forces completely withdraw from Iraq as of the beginning of 2008 and that a dialogue would start with Iran and Syria during this process. However, after that, the Ambassador Halilzad had been nominated to the Permanent Representation to the United Nations as he was making intensive negotiations with

tribal leaders and former Baath Party members to stop the civil war. Ryan Crocker, who was nominated as the Baghdad Ambassador of the USA in one of the most challenging periods of the occupation in March 2007, applied the new policy of Washington defined as “surge” to quash the civil war together with David Petraeus, who had been charged as the head of the US forces in Iraq. In the context of this policy, where US soldiers with a number exceeding 160 thousand in Iraq went out of their barracks and became more visible in the land, the military capacity of the US in Baghdad and its vicinity had been strengthened. The US forces went out of large bases, shifted to patrols in the field and developed strategic relations with Sunni tribes.

In the framework of its new policy, the US established strong connections with Sunni tribal leaders. By this means the Sahva (Revival) Units were formed with Sunni Arab tribes with “financial, military and political” support for them to support the war against radical Sunni armed groups.<sup>18</sup> Sahva forces also included “nonradical” Sunni armed forces such as tribal groups and Baathist groups or groups connected to the former army that used to make war against US forces. At this stage, it is possible to argue that the Sahva project was successful to a large extent throughout Sunni regions, except Mosul where the attacks against American soldiers continued until the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011. The US experienced a lot of troubles as al-Qaeda was organizing very heavy attacks throughout this period in Diyala and Mosul was attracting much attention of organization members due to its proximity to the border.

On the other hand, during this term when great efforts were made to finish the tension

between Shiites and Sunnis and the fight against al-Qaeda continued, the US engaged in armed conflict with the Mahdi Army of Sadr. Throughout this process, the Iraq Working Group estimated that the Mahdi Army, which had become the symbol of resistance, had about 60 thousand members. The US, which endeavored to consolidate relations with Shiite groups, aimed to overthrow the Sadr movement. In fact, US and British forces gave reconnaissance and tactical support to Iraqi forces in order to apply pressure on the Mahdi Army in the Shiite regions of Iraq, including the Sadr city close to Baghdad, considered to be the home base of Sadr. In that period, Sadr, who had lost about 2 thousand militia, accepted the ceasefire on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2008 under the mediation of Iran on the grounds of continuing religious education and turned the focus of the Mahdi Army to the provision of social services instead of military operations. Furthermore, Nuri al-Maliki, who was the Prime Minister at that time, played a mediating role in various agreements between Americans and the Iran-backed Shiite militia, which organized attacks against US forces and wished to get the US out of Iraq. Within the context of those agreements, Qais al-Khazali, who had been arrested in 2007 by British special forces and was the leader of the militia group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq supporting Iran, that he had established in 2006 after quitting the Mahdi Army, was released.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Maliki did not exhibit the same approach for the militia of Sadr, who is the leader of Sairun, which is today the largest political group in the Iraqi Parliament.

During the civil war, which spread to a large area and cost the lives of thousands of persons, 2,5 million persons migrated within the country while about 2 million persons left the country. In fact, when the civil war lost its

influence, to a large extent, towards the end of the year 2007 and Maliki became prominent as a strong figure, the work of the US had been facilitated and it decided to decrease the number of soldiers in the country parallel to the suggestions of Petraeus. When Barack Obama, who brought forward the Iraq issue during his election campaign, became the President of the US in 2008, the mission in Iraq was built on withdrawing with minimum damage. Together with the appointment of Christopher Hill as the Baghdad Ambassador by Obama in March 2009, US forces started to withdraw from the cities of Iraq in the middle of 2009. This was in the context of the application of the SOFA Agreement made between Iraq and the USA in October 2008 during the Bush presidency and foreseeing completion of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. During the long government talks made following the parliamentary elections of 2010, it had been suggested during discussions that Iran was becoming strengthened due to the insufficiency of the US. James Jeffrey was nominated as the Baghdad Ambassador of the USA in August 2010, which was a critical process during which the USA would terminate its military presence in Iraq according to SOFA. During this term, even though discussions suggested that the security forces of Iraq did not have the sufficient capacity for the transitional period in the country, US forces officially withdrew from Iraq by the end of 2011 without declaring victory. A new phase started together with the attack organized upon the shrine of Imam al-Askari in 2006 coming to an end, although a certain part of US forces stayed in Iraq to train the Iraqi Army. The efficiency of Iran, which increased in time in the country, and the serious strengthening of ISIS started a new phase for the US.

### 3.3. The Phase of the “Alliance Against ISIS”

The terrorist organization ISIS based in Iraq-Syria, which arrived on the scene in June 2014 took control of some big cities and lands in Iraq. Therefore, upon the request of the Iraqi government, the US established an international coalition against ISIS with the participation of 82 countries in order to fight against ISIS, which was one of the largest military coalitions of the world, and increased its number of soldiers in Iraq as well as the capacity of its military activities.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a new phase started for the military presence of the US in Iraq, which can be defined as the “alliance against ISIS”. The US forces that became alliance forces under an international coalition and with the approval of the Iraqi government have been welcomed by most of the political and social forces in the country. The US provided equipment, weapons, critical intelligence, and close air and fire support which played a much bigger role in the success of Iraq in its fight against the organization until victory against ISIS had been declared by former Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi in December 2017.<sup>21</sup>

The existing US forces in Iraq did not experience any problem during their fight against ISIS with Iran-backed Iraqi political and armed actors. These were the same Iraqi political and armed actors which the US had fought against for a long time since the first phase of the occupation and even acted together with from time to time. Nevertheless, although it was not clearly accepted, the fact that the Iraqi Army as well as Hashd al-Shaabi was established with the support of Iran and trained by the commanders of the Iran’s IRGC and fought against ISIS in coordination with the US-led coalition forces during the fight against ISIS, was interpreted as an implicit cooperation

between Iran and the US. The US is considered to have tolerated the Hashd al-Shaabi despite its human rights violations in the field as it thought that the Iraqi Army was not sufficient in the ground war against ISIS. Although the US did not establish any direct relation with Hashd al-Shaabi during this process, it is also known that it was satisfied with the efficiency of the organization in the field. Indeed, Steve Walker, the Basra Consul General of the US, praised the fight of the organization against ISIS as he visited the injured members of Hashd al-Shaabi in a hospital in Basra on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, which is an indicator of the approach of the US to the organization and its alliance during this process.<sup>22</sup> However, this tactical alliance between the US on the one hand and Iran and Iraqi groups supporting Iran on the other hand was based on a mutual win-win principle which was terminated when the USA decided to resile from the nuclear agreement with Iran in May 2018 and to tighten its sanctions against Iran. Thus, the phase of alliance against ISIS left its place to a new high-tension phase in Iraq which became the center of the increasing tension between the US and Iran.

The US, in the context of the economic and political sanctions it applies against Iran, included on its list of terrorist organizations the IRGC carrying out the land operations of Iran in the Middle East. The US also applies sanctions in Iraq against militia leaders, businessmen and institutions known to be close to Iran.

### 3.4. The “Progressive Intimidation” Phase

After that the US resiled from the nuclear agreement made with Iran and the withdrawal of US military presence from Iraq came seriously on the agenda in military as well as political terms. The fact that US forces faced conditions similar to those in the direct occupation years between 2003-2011 together with this process announced a new phase with respect to the military presence of the US. This process can be defined as a reciprocal “progressive intimidation” phase where the military presence of the US in Iraq faced once more Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups and responded harshly. This is because, while Iraqi political parties close to Iran were making political maneuvers against US military presence in Iraq, Iran-backed militia groups were increasing their threats about starting attacks against the US forces in Iraq and were trying to put progressive pressure on the US.

Following the visit made by the president of the US, Donald Trump, to the Ain al-Assad base in Anbar on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 without notifying Iraqi officials, Iran-backed Iraqi political forces brought the withdrawal of the US forces from the country to the agenda in the Parliament but could not obtain any result.<sup>23</sup> The US, in the context of the economic and political sanctions it applies against Iran, included on its list<sup>24</sup> of terrorist organizations the IRGC carrying out the land operations of Iran in the Middle East. The US also applies sanctions in Iraq against militia leaders, businessmen and institutions known to be close to Iran. Indeed, the US, which put Harakat al-Nujaba (within the body of Hashd al-Shaabi) and its leader Akram al-Kaabi on its list of terrorists in February 2019, claimed that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Army supplied weapons to Iraq in August 2019 and also decided to apply sanctions to South Wealth Re-

sources Company and its two managers, claiming that they were procuring weapons for the department of the division of the IRGC in Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

In response to those maneuvers of the US, militia supporters of Iran also increased periodically the severity of their attacks against the US presence in Iraq and its bases. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, a US citizen died during an attack thought to be made by Kata’ib Hezbollah, one of the most important components of Hashd al-Shaabi, to the K1 (Kaywan) Base in Kirkuk where US soldiers were deployed. In response to this attack, the US attacked the Hashd al-Shaabi bases situated in the Anbar province and killed about 30 militia.<sup>26</sup> During the reciprocal “progressive intimidation” phase, where the sanctions applied by the US against Iran seriously penetrated the land of Iraq, the tension increased even more when the Hashd al-Shaabi militia groups attacked the Baghdad Embassy of the US. Keeping in mind that 52 persons had been held hostage for 444 days after the invasion of the Tehran Embassy of the US by armed groups right after the Iran revolution on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1979, the US declared that it would not step back from its presence in Iraq and, together with this selected trauma, it killed the commander of the Qods Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qassem Soleimani, and deputy chief of Hashd al-Shaabi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January.

Right after the attack, an extraordinary session was made in the Iraqi Parliament on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January under the guidance of the Sairun coalition led by the Shiite leader Mukteda es-Sadr, the Fatah group led by Hadi al-Amiri known to be close to Iran and the State of Law Coalition led by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki where it was decided by the

majority of votes to get the US and other foreign forces out of the country<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, right after the killing of Soleimani and Muhendis, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, the US included on its “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” list Asaib Ahl al-Haq known to be close to Iran and running its activities under Hashd al-Shaabi. It was placed on the sanction list while also included on the list of “Specially Designated Global Terrorists” (SDGT) were the leader of the organization, Qais al-Khazali, and the brother of Qais, Laith Hazali, in the context of the reciprocal intimidation policy.

Furthermore and lastly, the US also added Ahmad Hamidavi, Secretary General of Kata’ib Hezbollah, to its “global terrorist” list on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February.<sup>28</sup> While the US made a clear attack against Iran for the first time together with the Soleimani attack, in return Iran made

ballistic missile attacks on the US military bases in Anbar and Erbil on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January.<sup>29</sup> Iran indicated that the revenge of Soleimani was taken following the ballistic attacks it made and declared that militia groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq close to Iran, one of the most important components of Hashd al-Shaabi and Kata’ib Hezbollah, will not give up attacking the US presence in Iraq.

Iran also announced that the threat against the US presence in the country entered a new phase. In the next phase it was observed that Iran, which did not wish to engage in direct combat with the US, preferred to increase the tension by changing the mode of attack of militia groups within Hashd al-Shaabi while the US changed its strategy by withdrawing from some bases and deploying Patriot missiles to some bases.



#### 4. The Taji Attack and the Repercussions of the New Situation

Two Americans and one British soldier lost their lives while 12 soldiers were injured during the rocket attack carried out on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March on the Taji Military Base located at the north of Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. Following the attack, the US declared that three bases belonging to the militia groups close to Iran located in the Abu Kamal region of Deyr ez-Zor on the Iraq-Syria border were attacked and that about 30 militia lost their lives during the attack. The US organized many air attacks in Kirkuk, Babil, Karbala, Salahaddin and Anbar provinces upon Hashd al-Shaabi military quarters, which also contained Shiite militia groups close to Iran. However, the fact that a new organization named Usbat al-Thaereen (League of Revolutionaries) claimed responsibility for the attack made upon the Taji<sup>30</sup>, occurred parallel to the transition of the US presence in Iraq to a new phase. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, during a process where the government crisis was continuing in Iraq, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran,

Considering that the US did not decrease the number of its soldiers in Iraq while it withdrew from some bases in the country, that it deployed the soldiers existing in the bases to different points within the country, and that it deployed Patriot Air Defense Systems to the Ain al-Assad and Harir bases, it is understood that the withdrawal is rather tactical.

visited Iraq. Shamkhani was one of the persons declaring that the response to be given to the US following the death of Soleimani would not remain limited with an attack and that the revenge of Soleimani would be taken. Shamkhani drew attention as he was the first Iranian senior official to visit Iraq following the death of Soleimani. In this respect, it can be argued that Iran clearly challenged the US. Indeed, the fact that the Taji attacks came right after the Iraq visit of Shamkhani can also be evaluated as being an indicator of this challenge. This new situation can be evaluated as an indicator that, Iran-backed militia groups would not stop their maneuvers against the US. This is clear especially when Usbat el-Thaereen, which shared the drone displays of the Baghdad Embassy of the USA and of the Ain al-Assad Base, as well as imaginary militia groups such as Ashab al-Kahf and Qabdat al-Hoda show up and declare threats against the US presence in Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

The US, which wishes to take measures against those uncontrolled militia attacks in Iraq under this new situation, decided to withdraw from some bases. In this context, starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the US-led international coalition forces against ISIS left control to the Iraqi Army. This was done in a short while with different intervals at the Qaim Military Base and Takaddum Air Base in Anbar, at the Qayyarah Air Base in Mosul, at its garrison in the Presidential Palaces Complex on the eastern coast of Mosul, at its K1 Military Base in Kirkuk and finally at one garrison in Baghdad where French military consultants are deployed. However, considering that the US did not decrease the number of its soldiers in Iraq while it withdrew from some bases in the country, that it deployed the soldiers existing in the bases to different points within the country, and that it deployed Patriot Air

Defense Systems to the Ain al-Assad and Harir bases, it can be understood that the withdrawal is rather tactical. It is expected that the related maneuvers of the Washington government would have repercussions specific to Iran, Hashdi Shaabi, Iraq and the KRG and in general on Syria, the Gulf countries, Turkey and on the terrorist organization PKK/PYD.

#### **4.1. Repercussions on Iran, Iraq, Hashd al-Shaabi and the KRG**

The partial withdrawal maneuvers of the US should not be considered as a step back in its competition with Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups, which has a strategic dimension in its Iraq policies since the occupation in 2003. Iran, which is highly influential on the internal and external policy of Iraq in the last years, disconcerts the US considerably. The US consolidates its power in large bases such as Ain al-Assad by withdrawing from small bases that do not look secure, thinking that the tension it experiences with Iran would become even more localized over the militia. The US, which took a more secure position in the territory to put into practice its possible military options by withdrawing from the bases it found insecure, can be considered to be wanting to revise its presence in Iraq in tactical terms before making new attempts against Iran and the militia groups in Iraq. As the US deployed Patriot Air Defense Systems to the Ain al-Assad Base in Anbar and to the Harir Base in Erbil, where US soldiers were deployed, and against which Iran made a ballistic attack following the assassination of Soleimani<sup>32</sup>, the US emphasized that it would increase the level of attacks against Iran and Iran-backed militia forces and that it would not step back from its military presence in Iraq. Furthermore, by deploying a Patriot missile battery to Anbar situated on the Syria border, the US gives the

message that it would also continue to observe the activities of Iran in Syria from this region. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the US, which showed that it would not step back in military terms in facing Iran and that it would even increase the pressure, would try to strengthen its political and diplomatic position in Iraq. This is because the US, which closed its Basra Consulate in September 2018 and decreased the number of officials in its Baghdad Embassy by the end of 2019 due to the increasing threats of Iran and Iran-backed militia groups, wishes to reconsolidate those places. It can be considered that the diplomatic fortification efforts of the US in addition to the new military program it developed with its last maneuvers, will have a negative impact on the propaganda power of Iran, which perceives the presence of the US in the country as a simple target and makes propaganda in this context.

Since targeting Iran directly would have a heavy political and military cost, it is expected that the US will continue to respond to Tehran via Iran-backed Iraqi proxy groups. It is estimated that the USA, which responds with violent retaliatory actions to each attack against its bases, would develop more explicit and rigid policies against Hashd al-Shaabi, which is quite efficient in the security sector of Iraq and constitutes a part of the tension, which has continued for a long time between Tehran-Washington. The US, which showed to Iran as well as to Hashd al-Shaabi that it would not step back from its presence in the country by killing Soleimani and Muhendis, confirmed that it would be even more aggressive following the attacks against Taji and that, from now on, it would attack the organization in the open. The fact that the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, declared that they would not tolerate the Taji attack and that they came to

an agreement with Dominic Raab, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the UK, on calling the attackers to account, has been interpreted as the sign that stricter measures would be developed against Shiite militias.<sup>33</sup> Considering that groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba among the active groups within Hashd al-Shaabi as well as their leaders have been placed on the terrorism list, it can even be expected that, hereinafter, the US will make assassinations against militia leaders within Hashd al-Shaabi. By killing Soleimani and Muhandis, the US showed that this was always in the realm of possibility. It is also possible that some pressures are being made on political groups close to Hashd al-Shaabi. In this respect, the fact that militia groups within Hashd al-Shaabi continue their aggressive anti-American conduct can increase the breaking up among groups. Since, due to the disintegration occurring within the organization following the death of Muhandis, the organization could not determine his successor for about two months. Even though four big militia groups connected to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the religious authority running its activities in Iraq under Hashd al-Shaabi, did not consent, Abdulaziz Abu Fadak, one of the former commanders of Kata'ib Hezbollah, which is one of the largest groups close to Iran within Hashd al-Shaabi, has been determined as the successor of Muhandis on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. Thereupon, four groups named the Imam Ali Brigade, the Ali al-Akbar Brigade, the Abbas Combat Brigade, and the Ansar al-Marjiyya Brigade have quit Hashd al-Shaabi in April and got connected to the Armed Forces General Command in administrative and operational terms. It is known that the USA is also not comfortable with the decision of making Abu Fadak the Chief of the Staff of Hashd al-Shaabi. In this context,

it seems likely that Washington would put some pressure on the new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi for not approving the nomination of Abu Fadak. Especially the fact that Sistani and the US exhibit a similar attitude on this subject may also limit the efficiency of Iran on the organization or lead to the weakening of the organization.

The last withdrawal maneuvers of the US in Iraq and the fact that it deployed Patriot missiles to some bases refers to different paradigms with respect to the internal politics and security of Iraq. Together with the withdrawal of the US from some bases, Iraqi security forces may have difficulties in controlling the developments concerning ISIS and similar terrorist organizations, which lately increased their activity capacity within the country. This is because the Baghdad government, which needs the US in its fight against threats similar to ISIS and in the training of the Iraqi Army is in a tight situation due to the pressures of Iran and groups close to Iran. On the other hand, considering that the US spent more than 800 billion dollars in Iraq since 2003 for security, humanitarian aid and other aid<sup>34</sup>, it may be misleading to predict that it would easily leave the country. Bearing in mind that, during the 2018-2019 fiscal year alone, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) provided to Iraq a fund exceeding 700 million dollars and that, furthermore, it provided about 1,2 billion dollars per year for security and military assistance since 2014 through those funds<sup>35</sup>, it can be considered that abandoning the US is a hard option for Iraq. Iraq still experiences serious security problems and is on the verge of an economic crisis. Although it is known that the negotiations between the US and Iraq on the deployment of Patriot missiles started as of January 2020, the Iraqi party did not make any official dec-

laration indicating that they had given the green light to the deployment of Patriot missiles. While Iraqi authorities indicate that observation flights known to be operated by the US in Iraq and the attacks made against Iran-backed militia are unauthorized activities and that they are found incompatible with the sovereignty of the country, at the same time they clearly condemn the attacks against US bases as well. The obligation to take a position in political terms about the tension between the US and Iran also seems to be a challenging choice for Iraq, which struggles against the economic crisis, anti-government protests and the unending government crisis. Especially the anti-American as well as anti-Iranian protests, which showed up during the protest demonstrations that started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2019 and continued for a long time, can also motivate the Baghdad government to the point of restricting the military presence of the US in the country or reshaping it in the new term. This is because it can be observed that the military presence of the US is perceived as a sovereignty issue in the country where Iraqi nationalism is becoming more and more visible together with protests. In this respect, in case it would not be possible to find a formula that would satisfy the parties about the military presence of the US, including the protesters, the tension, which is becoming regionalized, can push the country into some messy crises.

The last withdrawal maneuvers of the US and the deployment of Patriot missiles to the Harir Base is important for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the position and prestige of the US gradually weakens in Iraq, where Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups organize attacks on the American staff and facilities, it should be noted that the KRG is an exception as it used to be in the past in

what concerns the American presence in the country. Kurds boycotted the extraordinary session where the decision to get US forces out of the country was taken on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January with only the participation of Shiite parliamentarians and they stood against the block close to Iran and other Shiite parties. Masoud Barzani, who indicated that the Baghdad government would fail at fighting against terrorism in case US forces are taken out of the country, said, "If the US forces leave the country, all coalition forces would also leave and no country would stay here. Six months later, ISIS would come back even stronger than before". Considering that ISIS increased its attack capacity even with the withdrawal of the USA from some bases in the country, the KRG sees the presence of the US as "sine qua non" for their own security. The fact, that the Harir Base has been one of the places upon which Iran made a ballistic attack following the killing of Soleimani, points out one of the other concerns of Kurds.

The international security perception, which started to be transformed, together with the occupation of Iraq reached different "worrisome" dimensions together with groups such as ISIS. Especially the perception that Iraq has been the source of threats developing towards the region since 2003 has been strengthened together with the presence of ISIS and Iran in the country.

In this context, as the US enlarged the Harir Base and deployed Patriot missiles and there are claims suggesting that it would establish another large military base on the

Iranian border, the US gave the message “I am observing you closely” while it gave signs about the future of its relations with the KRG. In this regard, the US, which gave training to Peshmerga forces and provided military equipment as support while also allocating 126 million dollars for the Peshmerga in the 2020 budget, is expected to strengthen even further its relations with the KRG in the political area as well as in the security area in the new term. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the probability that the KRG comes to the forefront as an alternative would increase as the room for maneuver in Iraq narrows together with the pressure of Iran.

#### **4.2. Repercussions on Regional Countries and on PKK/YPG**

The international security perception, which started to be transformed, together with the occupation of Iraq reached different “worrisome” dimensions together with groups such as ISIS. Especially the perception that Iraq has been the source of threats developing towards the region since 2003 has been strengthened together with the presence of ISIS and Iran in the country. Therefore, all kinds of transformations occurring in Iraq deeply interest Saudi Arabia, Syria, Israel and Turkey. The PKK having its military quarters in Iraq and YPG, the Syria wing of the organization, also takes a new position on the grounds that each transformation in the country has regional repercussions. The fact that the USA withdrew from some bases in Iraq and deployed Patriot missiles to two bases also interests the related regional actors particularly.

The relations that Saudi Arabia broke off with Iraq following the occupation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 became worse when the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 extin-

guished the state structure in Iraq. Saudi Arabia, which was seriously worried due to the withdrawal of the US from Iraq in 2011, started to struggle for developing its economic, political and diplomatic relations with Iraq as of the year 2015 and made important investments while it reopened its Baghdad Embassy after an interval of about 30 years. Besides this, Saudi Arabia, which used to support Sunnis in Iraq in the past recently, also negotiates with Shiite actors. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia, which wishes to strengthen once again its political and economic connections with Iraq, considers that Iran is the biggest obstacle in this regard. On the other hand, it is also concerned about the probability that the Shiite minority living in the border region of Saudi Arabia with Iraq and the Shiites living in Bahrain would be influenced from Iran. In addition to those reasons, due to the possible military and political threats of Iran with respect to the Gulf, the presence of the US in the region and particularly in Iraq is of vital importance for Saudi Arabia, which defines Iran as a regional threat and conducts a proxy war with Iran in Yemen. This is because Iran is considered to be the actor that can most easily compensate for the power vacuum that would occur due to the end of the US military presence in Iraq. This causes worry in the Gulf region. As one may remember, it had been claimed that the attacks made in September 2019 on Aramco facilities, the Saudi Arabian oil company, were carried out from the bases of Iran-backed groups within Hashdi Shaabi in Iraq and it had been argued that Iran was using Hashd al-Shaabi in the context of its anti-Saudi Arabian position. For this reason, it may be considered that the recent tactical withdrawals of the US from the bases in Iraq and the deployment of Patriot missiles to some bases have been welcomed by Gulf

countries, Riyadh being in the first place.

As one of the biggest allies of the Syria regime in the civil war is Iran, the archrival of the US, the military presence of the US in Iraq directly influences the security of Syria, where a civil war has continued for nearly ten years. The support that Iran provides over Iraq is of vital importance for Syria, which had close contacts with many leaders such as Nuri al-Maliki, who came to power in Iraq in the past. Syria is troubled with the future of the presence of the US in the region and particularly in Iraq due to the anti-Assad position it maintained for a long time during the civil war, its close relations with Kurds, as well as the attacks it makes continuously against Iran-backed groups together with Israel. It is expected that issues such as the deployment of Patriot missiles to the Ain al-Assad Base in Anbar by the US, which is especially an important region for Iran-backed militia forces and for equipment transfer, and the declaration that fortification works would be carried out in the base, directly influence Syria. This is because taking tighter measures over this base against Iran providing serious support to the Syrian regime can come into question. It should also be pointed out that the US would continue its support to the PYD/YPG against Assad over Iraq.

The presence of the US in Iraq and the region is of great importance for Israel for its own security and its anti-Iranian position. Israel, which did not perceive Iraq merely as a security issue, supported the occupation of Iraq from the very beginning on condition that the next step was made against Iran. The attempts of Iran to create a new Hezbollah from Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq and especially the fact that the presence of those actors was seriously felt during the civil war in Syria

strengthen the existentialist threat perceptions by Israel of Iran. According to Israel, the presence of the US in Iraq should continue to prevent that Iran establishes relations with Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria. Considering that Israel made attacks on the Hashd al-Shaabi bases in Iraq in close contact with the US during the summer months of 2019, these attacks had their source in the concern felt about Iran which recently increased its influence in Syria as well. These attacks were for the first time following the air attack it had made on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1981 on the "Nuclear Reactor of the 1<sup>st</sup> of July" that Iraq had built at that time. Israel, which considers that the US should not withdraw from Iraq to observe Iran, supports the last withdrawal maneuvers of the US and especially the deployment of Patriot missiles to the Ain al-Assad Military Base in Anbar. In this context, it can be expected that Israel will increase its pressures on Hashd al-Shaabi and Iran together with the US in the new term.

It is expected that the partial withdrawal of the USA and the deployment of Patriot missiles also have important repercussions on Turkey in addition to their regional repercussions. Due to each transformation of the American presence experienced since the occupation of Iraq by the US, security concerns and the upholding of the territorial integrity of Iraq, Turkey had to update its policies. While the disintegration of Iraq since 2003 and the probability that Iraqi Kurds might form a state keep alive the concerns of Turkey, its border neighbor. The fact that the activities of the terrorist organization PKK within the territory of Iraq also develop in parallel to the related transformations keeps the sensibility of Ankara with the Iraq issue always on the agenda.

Even though the strengthening of relations with the KRG during the last years relieved the concerns to some extent, the determination of the PKK has continued increasingly. Although the PKK increased once more its attack capacity when the Iraqi Kurds fortified their strength following the occupation in 2003, the expectations of the PKK may not be sufficiently realized with the new base strategy of the US. For the recent operations of Turkey and the increasing problems of the KDP with the PKK restrict the mobility of the organization. The position of Iraqi Kurds may be strengthened especially together with the deployment of Patriot missiles to Harir by the US and the more reserved attitude it has adopted with the PKK compared to the past due to the criticisms of Turkey. In this context, a stronger cooperation and convergence between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds would decrease the efficiency of the PKK in the region. Nevertheless, the deployment of the US in Erbil would mean that it would keep strong contacts with the YPG, the Syria wing of the PKK. It is expected that the US will continue its support to the organization during the new term, although Turkey stands against it. Thus, it is considered that the tension between Turkey and the US would keep Turkey occupied for a while. Nevertheless, it is considered that the total withdrawal of the US from Iraq is also not an option desired by Turkey. This is because turning Iraq, having a fragile state and security structure, into a competition area for regional actors, especially for Iran, would strengthen the room for maneuver of terrorist organizations such as ISIS and the PKK. Therefore, the presence of the USA in Iraq, which can balance the actors in Iraq and the region and restrict their competition, can even provide advantages to Turkey in the short term, es-

pecially with respect to security and the competition with Iran.

To conclude, it can be observed that, despite all the transformations that occurred about the presence of the US in Iraq after 2003 and especially the crises faced by Iraq during the last years, the US would not withdraw from Iraq and would only make a tactical/strategical change with its last maneuvers. Despite the decision adopted under the guidance of groups close to Iran in the Iraqi Parliament to take US soldiers out of the country following the Soleimani assassination, the US seems to be insistent on not stepping back about withdrawal. Since Iraq is an operational base for the US in its activities aimed at its allies and enemies in the Middle East, it is considered that the withdrawal would not be realized easily, even if Iraq insists. Especially the deployment of Patriot Air Defense Systems to the bases in Anbar and Erbil reveals the new deployment of the US in Iraq against Iran and the urgency of the tactical revision regarding this deployment. The negotiations planned to be made in the month of June between the US and Iraq would shape in a more transparent manner the future of its policies with Iraq in the fields of economy, politics and security. In case the US, which consolidated its presence in the country with Patriot missiles as well, convinces the Iraqi government in those negotiations, it would not be surprising to observe its efforts aimed at increasing its influence on the internal politics and security mechanism of Iraq in the new term. On the other hand, since taking the US out of the country by force would also alienate European and Gulf countries from Iraq in addition to the US and strengthen the status of Iran, the continuation of the US presence may be advantageous for Baghdad in the short term.

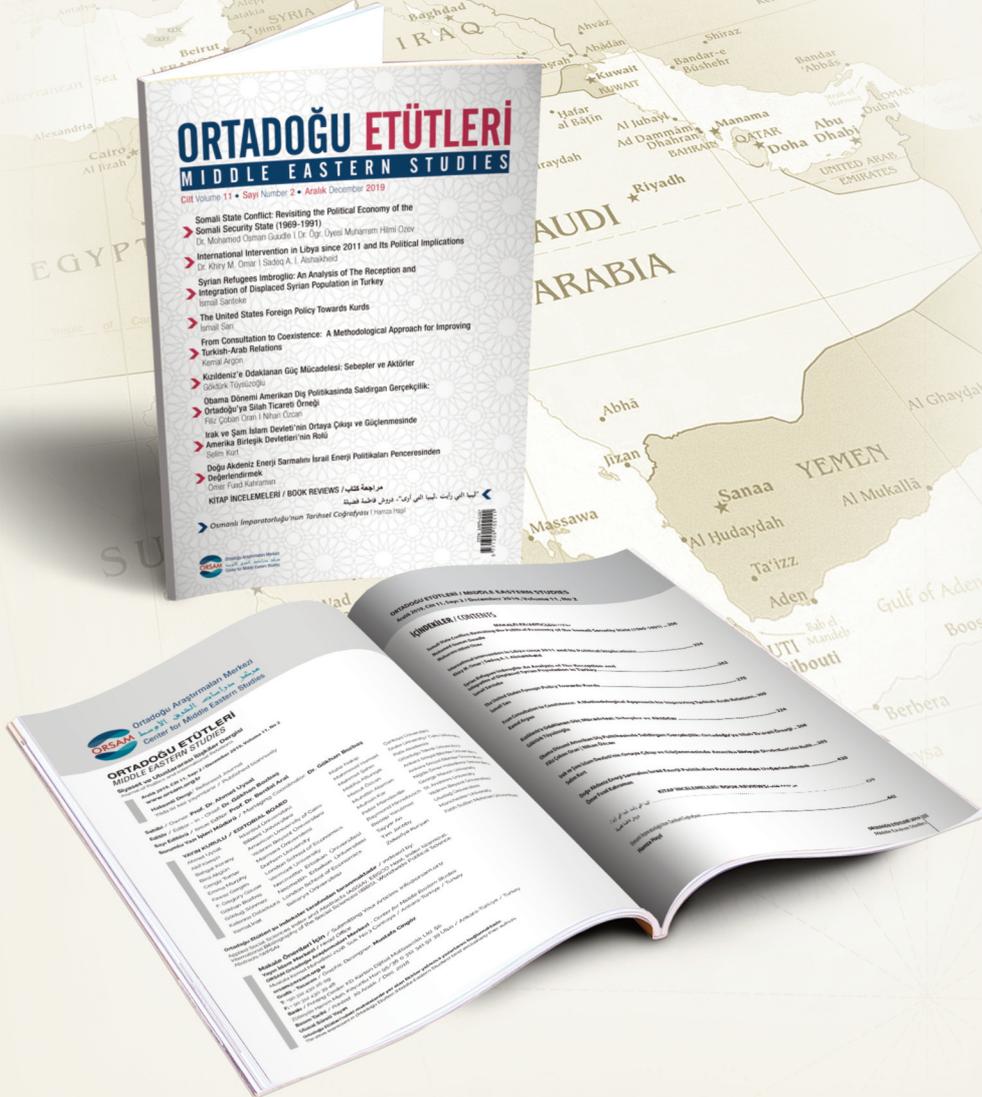
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