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Retrenchment and Obama Iraq Policy

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Abstract: *New occupants of the oval office tend usually to be distinct in how they conduct foreign policy and President Obama is no exception. In this regard, Obama came to office largely because he promised to depart from his predecessor's unilateral and militaristic approach and to follow a more multilateral and restrained foreign policy. On the international stage, and in the Middle East more specifically, the Obama administration adopted a retrenchment approach that sought to cut back costly security commitments and avoided deeper involvement in emerging regional crises. When such crises called for American action, the instruments of choice for this administration ranged from multilateral sanctions, diplomacy and the reliance on regional allies to share in the burden of security. Nowhere was such approach more evident than in Iraq. This paper argues that President Obama adopted a retrenchment approach to his Iraq policy not only from commitments made by his predecessor, but also form commitments made by his administration at the beginning of his presidency.*
Keywords: *American foreign policy, Iraq, Obama, retrenchment.*
الملخص: عادة ما يسعى الرؤساء الأمريكيّون الجدد إلى التميُّز في كيفية أدائهم للسياسة الخارجية والرئيس أوباما ليس بالاستثناء. في هذا الصدد، يعود نجاح أوباما في الانتخابات الرئاسية إلى حد كبير بسبب وعوده لإتباع نهج مغاير في السياسة الخارجية عن سلفه والذي تميزت سياسته بالأحادية والتدخلات العسكرية. على الصعيد الدولي، وفي الشرق الأوسط على وجه الخصوص، اتبعت إدارة الرئيس أوباما نهج سعى إلى تقليص الالتزامات الأمنية المكلِفة وتجنُب التدخل العسكري في الأزمات الإقليمية الناشئة. عندما رأت هذه الإدارة حتمية التدخل، كانت الوسائل المستعملة تميل في مجملها إلى الدبلوماسية، استعمال العقوبات الاقتصادية، وإشراك الحلفاء الدوليين والإقليميين لا فتسام أعباء وتكاليف تحقيق المصالح المشتركة. تعتبر سياسة أوباما تجاه العراق مثال حي عن هذا النهج المُتّبع. هذه الورقة البحثية توضح وتُأكد أن الرئيس أوباما اتبع سياسة انكفائية لتخفيض الأعباء الأمنية والأعباء المالية في سياسته اتجاه العراق من خلال اتباع طرق اقل عسكرية وأكثر اقتصادية لحماية المصالح الأمريكية.

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الكلمات مفتاحية: الرئيس أوباما، السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية، سياسة انكفائية، العراق.

1. Introduction

Much has been written on the debate surrounding Obama foreign policy between those who argue that the president lacks strategic thinking or did not have a strategy at all, and those who advance that his strategy was a reaction to his predecessor's and centered around the wisdom of restraint. But within this larger context, few case studies were presented to advance each argument in the debate. Given its strategic place in official Washington's calculus, Iraq is a very relevant case in point to examine Obama's overall foreign policy.

The premise of this paper is that Obama adopted a retrenchment strategy to his Iraq policy, a strategy that calls for axing old commitments, abstaining from embarking on new ones, and implementing low-cost instruments to achieve policy objectives. Beyond the much-publicized withdrawal of troops, we argue that Obama undertook *measures of retrenchment* even from commitments he made to Iraq at the beginning of his presidency and despite the emergence of events unfavorable to U.S. interests and preferences.

In order to relate theory to empirical substance, this paper will be divided into two parts. The first will set a theoretical framework of retrenchment as strategy and the ways in which it is usually implemented. The second part provides empirical evidence of measures taken by the two Obama administrations and which advance the argument that Obama's retrenchment policy was a constant variable in an inconstant and a changing security environment.

2. Retrenchment: A Theoretical Framework

Though retrenchment as a foreign policy, and especially military, practice is as old as the nation-state system, its systematic study and development as a theory is relatively recent. One of the major works presented in this field is the "*The Twilight of the Titans*" by Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent (2018) in which the authors made the case that retrenchment is the most viable strategy for great powers to respond to relative decline. Unlike its opponents who argue that such a strategy would generate resistance at home and embolden adversaries abroad, the authors argue that retrenchment is the best choice for great powers in relative decline to regain their leading status in the international system. While most of the literature on retrenchment discusses *why* retrenchment occurs, this section will be mostly confined to review how scholars agree or differ on *how* states retrench.

Looking at retrenchment as driven mostly by international considerations, Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent contend that great powers in relative decline tend to "renounce risky ties, increase reliance on allies or adversaries, draw down their military obligations, and impose adjustments on domestic populations." Adopting one or all of these measures depend on the severity of decline, with states experiencing major economic and military setbacks steering more towards avoiding costly confrontations and relying instead on "compromise rather than conflict" to rebalance their commitments abroad. More generally, retrenchment centers around "decreasing the costs of foreign policy by

redistributing resources away from peripheral commitments and toward core commitments" (MacDonald & Parent, 2011: 9).

In the case of the United States under Obama, some grand strategy scholars advance the argument that after more than half a century of engagement, a constrained military budget and war-weary American public, the time has come for American leaders to adopt a strategy of retrenchment. Such strategy, in the view of scholars like Barry Posen, Stephan Walt and John Mearsheimer, consists of limiting American military presence overseas, curtailing its old security commitments and avoiding new ones, and relinquishing the ambitious and costly task of leading and sustaining the international liberal order (Brooks, Ikenbery & Wohlforth, 2012: 7)

From a historical and comparative perspective, the presidential scholar Steven Sestanovich distinguishes between "maximalist" and "retrenchment" presidents. The former, like Harry Truman, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan tend to "develop new ideas, generate new resources, make new commitments, [and] shake up the status quo" (Senstanovich, 2014: 8). Although structural changes were the primary driving force behind Truman's policy of containment, domestic agency, and especially the views of the President and his advisers, where critical in charting an aggressive approach towards the Soviet Union (Kerboua, 2018: 41). Presidents like Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Barack Obama, on the other hand, had to deal with the overcommitments generated by their predecessors and their task was "to calm an angry public, to shift responsibilities to friends and allies, to explore accommodation with adversaries [and] to narrow commitments and reduce costs" (Senstanovich, 2014: 8).

Collin Dueck (2015), the author of *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, contends that Obama's foreign policy was that of retrenchment and which he describes as a "way to reduce a country's international and military costs and commitments." Such objective can be attained by initiating cuts in defense spending, withdrawing from certain alliance responsibilities, scaling back military deployments overseas, and reducing international spending. Such approach does not mean avoiding strategic involvement altogether, but makes the reduction of costs and commitments the ultimate objective (Dueck, 2015: 15-16).

In practice, though the Obama administration adopted measures to reduce the country's international commitments, it was yet to fully embrace a multifaceted approach of retrenchment. Mindful of America's relative decline, officials in Washington and Congress initiated cuts in the military budget, resorted to multilateral institutions to deal with security problems, scaled back policy objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan and "led from behind" through an international coalition in Libya. A more acute form of retrenchment, however, would require more radical cuts in military spending, a reorganization of foreign policy priorities and a greater role of U.S. allies in the management of regional security. (MacDonald & Parent, 2011: 33)

In view of these perspectives, retrenchment as a grand strategy aims to strike a balance between ends and means, or between policy instruments and objectives. Looking at the overall patterns of his foreign policy, President Obama certainly adopted a policy of retrenchment that aimed to regain the country's economic strength so that it could compete more effectively in a changing international system. This objective was pursued through troops withdrawal from Iraq, a military drawdown from Afghanistan, the

resistance to deeper involvement in emerging crises in the Middle East and Europe, and the resort to multilateral and less costly alternatives in response to events at the periphery of American core national interests. In order to show how retrenchment was implemented more specifically through a case study of Iraq, this paper argues that Obama's retrenchment was not only a reaction to his predecessor's interventionist policy and was not limited to the process of troops withdrawal, but was rather pursued through scaling back other security commitments and America's civilian presence in the face of a changing security environment.

3. Retrenchment and Obama Iraq Policy

Beyond the much-publicized process of troops withdrawal, Retrenchment remained the guiding principle of Obama Iraq policy and is revealing of his overall grand strategy. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that this policy was a mere reaction to the his predecessor's militaristic policy and to the overextended U.S. military, empirical evidence shows that President Obama undertook *measures of retrenchment* even from commitments *he* made to Iraq at the beginning of his presidency and despite the emergence of events unfavorable to U.S. interests and preferences. This policy was pursued in line with the evolving national and security strategy and in reaction to a constantly changing security environment.

In its National Security Strategy of 2010, the White House set forth a grandiose objective for its Iraq policy which aimed to bring about an Iraq "that is sovereign, stable and self-reliant." Parallel to the drawdown of U.S. troops and the process of complete withdrawal, the White House promised to continue "train, equip and advise Iraqi Security Forces." Along with this mission, the strategy emphasizes that the U.S. "civilian engagement will deepen and broaden" through sustaining "a capable political, diplomatic and civilian effort to help the Iraqi people as they resolve outstanding differences." Thus, the drawdown from Iraq was seen as an opportunity to engage in other forms with that country and the whole region by maintaining a "robust civilian presence commensurate with our strategic interests in the country and the region" (National Security Strategy, 2010: 25).

The Iraq policy that was formulated at the beginning of Obama's presidency made certain commitments that range from the training of Iraqi security forces, the consolidation of American civilian presence and the increase of financial aid with the aim of replacing dwindling military presence and to attend to American interests and influence. Subsequent measures taken by the same administration, however, followed a retrenchment approach that went beyond the withdrawal of troops, and included the termination of the Iraq security program, the downsize of the Iraq civilian mission and the decrease of military and civilian aid. Such measures were taken despite the looming danger to American interests which called for expanding such commitments rather than scaling them back.

3.1 No Troops Left Behind

Despite the general consensus among White House officials on the need to deliver the promise of ending the war in Iraq, the Pentagon and many national security advisers pressed for leaving a residual force responsible for training and advising the Iraqi security forces. While Pentagon officials were pressing for at least 20,000 troops and devised

options for less than this figure, the President and his team considered a force of 10,000 as the highest number they can authorize. After eliminating the option of leaving 5,000 troops between the Arab and Kurdish borders, the White House settled on a force of 5,000 troops but insisted that any agreement with the Iraqi government must include legal immunities for American forces from Iraqi law and be ratified by the Iraqi parliament. (Baker, 2014)

Although Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri el Maliki offered to sign an executive memorandum of understanding that would provide for such legal immunities, the U.S. president insisted on the approval of the Iraqi Parliament. Colin H. Kahl, the national security advisor responsible for Iraq, recalled that for such an agreement to be binding, it had to be endorsed by the Iraqi Parliament which was the view of "every senior administration lawyer and Maliki's own legal adviser" (Kahl, 2014). As the previous Status of Force agreement was approved by the Iraqi parliament, it would be against common sense to have another without such official standing. While the Kurdish block in parliament was ready to embrace the agreement, the Sadrists rejected it altogether. Other political parties which formed the majority welcomed the idea of residual troops, but were loath to support a legal immunities provision. (Kahl, 2014)

James Jeffrey, the US ambassador to Iraq between 2010 and 2012, argues that there is more to Obama's decision not leave a residual force than the workings of Iraqi politics. The Iraqi security situation did not seem that threatening to require the presence of American troops and the aversion to U.S. presence went beyond Iraqi politicians and was rife among the Iraqi population at large. The argument that Obama could have used economic aid and arms sales as a leverage to influence the Iraqi government is unfounded, as this aid was sharply diminishing by then and arms sales were as critical to the Americans as they were to the Iraqis. (Jeffrey, 2014)

Obama's personal preferences were as strong as political imperatives on taking such decision. The president showed little enthusiasm to push through an unpopular decision that would go against his promise of complete withdrawal before his election. (Jeffrey, 2014). Even during his campaign and in his first year in office, Obama insisted on *a rapid* withdrawal from Iraq to pay more attention to Afghanistan, a country he believes is the hotbed of el Qaida and the real source of America's insecurity. He might also contend that "things will work out well enough on their own or even that an American presence is bound to make things worse" (Traub, 2016). At the end, Obama was as relieved as Iraqi prime minister Maliki to put an end to such a controversy and turn his attention to more pressing issues at home. While the former was working to construct the pacifist image that would promote his reelection, the latter was hellbent on consolidating his grip on power and maximizes his political gains.

3.2. Terminating the Police Development Program (PDP)

The management and the end result of the U.S. training program of the Iraqi police is revealing of a larger trend to ax American commitments to the Iraqi government. The program was first initiated by the Department of Defense and cost 8$ billion from 2003 to 2011 and involved 600 civilian police advisers. After the transition from a military to a civilian mission, the State Department officially inherited the program on October 1st, 2011, known officially as the Police Development Program (PDP) and planned its

expansion to a five-year scheme with an annual budget of one billion dollar. (Brennan, Ries, Hanauer, Connable, Kelly, McNerney, Young, Compell & McMahon, 2013: 191-192)

This program came under a larger framework for the transition of US presence from a military to a civilian mission. This presence was meant to promote American interests and maintain the relative influence American officials believe the military had accomplished during the occupation. In his remarks on February 1, 2011 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on this transition, ambassador James Jeffry noted that "a robust civilianpresence represents a significant savings for the taxpayers from the bills they have been paying for the past eight years" (Jeffrey, 2011).

Even before it became fully operational, the program faced daunting challenges which led to a repeated downsize in its scale and ambitions and eventually to its termination. Like in other transition programs, American officials complained about the lack of Iraqi official support. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law enforcement (INL), the State Department body responsible for the program, did not have very sufficient grasp of the qualitative capabilities and weaknesses of the Iraqi police and faced difficulties in recruiting qualified trainers due to the security environment. Providing for the security of these trainers was expensive which in turn raised the overall cost of the program and resulted in congressional opposition to approve its funding. (Brennan et al., 2013: P.193)

The program saw a sharp cut both in personnel and training sites. The initial plan was to engage 350 advisers in 28 training sites, but the staff was reduced to 150 in early 2011 and then to 115 in October of the same year. Even with this compromised figure, only 90 advisers were officially engaged to work on 21 sites. (Brennan et al., 2013) On May 22nd, 2012 the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Aid voted to eliminate funding for the program altogether, expressing security concerns after the withdrawal of troops from the country. The committee also criticized the appropriation of 88 percent of the program's fund for life support of the trainers and only 12 percent for the actual training. (Cornwell, 2012)

In his quarterly and semiannual report to Congress on July 30, 2012, the office inspector general for Iraq reconstruction cited similar challenges to the effective operation of the program, namely security conditions and the lack of support from Iraqi officials. The report also noted the closure of the program training cite in Basra and the relocation of its staff form the main training facility in Baghdad. The State department also planned to cut the PDP staff from 72 to 36, almost tenth of the original figure of 2011. (Special Inspector General 2012)

In an interview with *The Cable*, inspector general Stewart Bowen explained that the US government intended the PDP to be a *big project*, but the State Department did not have the capacity to carry it out. He also predicted that without Iraqi cooperation and its "*written commitment*," the program would very likely not last for more than six months. (Rogin, 2012) In his semiannual report of September 2013, the general inspector noted that thanks to the audits his office had conducted so far, the program was terminated altogether in March 2013. "Had the program continued", the report concluded, "support costs would have comprised 94% of the program's funding in FY 2013, and the cost for

each police advisor would have doubled from an already exorbitant $2.1 million to $4.2 million per year." (Special Inspector General 2013, P.28)

1.2 Downsizing the Iraq Mission

The downsizing of the US presence in Iraq affected also the Iraq diplomatic mission which the State and Defense departments planned to be the largest in the world, with 16, 000 employees (2000 direct hire and 14,000 contractors) active in 14 sites. The Department of State and the Department of Defense allocated $ 4.5 billion in FY 2010 for the transition from a military to a civilian-led mission and $ 4 billion for FY 2012. (Courts, 2012) The *Washington Post* described the Iraq mission as "a country within a country" that "has $6 billion budget, its own airline and three hospitals, and imports virtually all of its food." The newly inaugurated gigantic embassy in Baghdad, almost the size of the Vatican City, was meant to reflect the government intention for a robust civilian presence. (DeYoung, 2012)

Soon after the transition was completed, the State Department began a series of drastic reductions in the mission both in staff and operating sites. The reduction in the mission employees amounted to 61 percent in total, from 16,298 in January 2012, to 14,280 in 2013 and down to 6,320 in January 2014. The bulk of reduction was in the contractor staff responsible for life support services from 12,895 in January 2012 to 4,460 in January 2014. More specifically, the Office of Security Cooperation Iraq, responsible for training Iraqi security forces and the police, fell from 4, 067 to 184 in the same period. (Arango, 2012)

This reduction in staff was primarily the consequence of the closure of 9 sites in which the Iraq mission was operating. The Baghdad Police Academy Annex and the Consulate General Kirkuk were closed in September 2012 and the Office of Security Cooperation Tikrit followed suit in May 2013. 85 percent of the facilities in the Baghdad Embassy Prosperity Annex were also shut down in May 2013. Moreover, the Erbil Diplomatic Support Center was closed in July 2013, thus terminating more than 1000 contractor jobs. (Geisel, 2013). While these sites were in operation before their closure, the seven hundred-staff consulate in Mosul which was once envisioned by US officials never came to being due mainly to budgetary constraints. (Arango, 2012)

American officials cite a number of challenges that hindered the progress of the Iraq mission. The commitment of the Iraqi government to the mission was "*unclear*" as land-use, operation, and program agreements were never finalized and contractors often face obstacles in getting entry clearance. Moreover, Iraq is considered as "*a critical threat*" and mission personnel are often at risk of attacks and kidnapping. These conditions incurred extra security expenses and resulted in delays in the completion of building mission facilities and infrastructure. (Geisel, 2013: 28)

1.3 Decline in U.S. Aid to Iraq

Foreign aid is a critical benchmark of the U.S. commitment to other countries and a potent foreign policy instrument to exert influence. American aid to Iraq has been proportional to its military and diplomatic presence, rising sharply with the Bush administration and declining steadily during the Obama years. Different governmental agencies in different departments are involved in the process, with the Agency of

International Development (USAID), the State Department, and the Department of Defense being the main contributors.

At the height of U.S. involvement in Iraq in 2007, U.S. aid reached $3816 million but fell to $2252 million in 2009 and then down to $565 million in Obama's final year in office. The share of USAID also declined from $2137 million to $1107 million and down to $378 million in the same period, with an all-time low figure of 101 million in 2014. Due to the transition from a military to a civilian-led mission, the State Department assistance rose relatively from $360 million in 2007 to $763 million in 2009, but declined steadily to reach $187 million in 2016. (U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants)

U.S. military assistance saw also a sharp decline from $4143 million in 2007 to only $22 million in 2014. Foreign funds to Iraq in the last two years of the Obama administration were dominated largely by those of the Defense Department with a sharp increase to $1542 million in 2015 and to $4715 million in 2016 due mainly to the war on ISIS. In its fact sheet on the US security cooperation with Iraq in 2016, the State Department explained that a $2.7 billion was designated to Iraq as a Foreign Military Financing (FMF) loan which would "fund a wide range of Iraqi FMS (Foreign Military Sale) cases." FMF loan, according to the same source, enables "countries to pay for FMS purchases through borrowed funds which will be repaid over an eight-year period." (Office of the Spokesperson, 2017)

This decline in US military and diplomatic commitments to Iraq, especially between 2009 and 2014, occurred in the backdrop of what critics consider Iran's expanding influence in the country. Some even argue that such influence played out during the negotiations to leave a residual force. A senior adviser to the Iraqi prime minister commented that the decision took into consideration Iranian calculations. "We understand that there is a certain sensitivity," he explained, "and we do not want an excuse for the Iranians to intervene in Iraq on the pretext that you have American troops." The spokesman of the US embassy in Baghdad denied any Iranian say on the decision and asserted that the Iraqis "are sovereign because they did make their own decision." (Gatehouse, 2011)

1.4 Low-Cost Alternatives to Intervention

Along with the cutback in U.S. current and projected military and civilian commitments in Iraq, the Obama administration avoided embracing new ones dictated by a changing security environment. When the group known as ISIS swept the northwestern part of Iraq and occupied large swaths of territory in 2014, the president resisted calls for deep military involvement and turned instead to *less costly* alternatives in his campaign "to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS." The instruments of choice in this operation centered on a multilateral coalition where local allies and partners took the lead, a campaign of airstrikes, the deployment of selected troops for training and advisory missions and the reliance on local forces to bear the brunt of the fight.

While some observers consider this campaign as but an example of a continued interventionist policy inspired by the 'Washington playbook' (Thrall and Glaser 2017), others believe is a textbook example of Obama's retrenchment approach. Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph Parent writes that "retrenchment remains the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy" and that the tools, both diplomatic and military, of Obama's strategy

"are cribbed straight from the *retrenchment* handbook" which consists of "a modest counterterrorism campaign with a light military footprint and a heavier reliance on regional partners." In a broader historical context, Obama relied "on the same measures the retrenching states have used to fight brushfires for centuries – measures that emphasis frugality and flexibility." (Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph Parent, 2014)

The reliance on local actors followed the classic style of British colonialism which depended on local elites to rule a restive population (Benabdi, 2018: 28). While the Obama administration ruled out a "boots on the ground scenario", it helped form an international coalition of 66 nations worldwide with 7 countries from the region including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordon, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The military facet of the operation, nicknamed Operation Inherit Resolve, involved 12 countries. America's regional allies assumed a key role in the campaign. As a case in point, *The Washington Post* reported that the two runways of the Dhafra airbase in the UAE "launched more strike aircraft than any other military facility in the region." Participating with its F16 fighting falcons, the UAE "conducted more missions against the Islamic State since the air war began than any other member of the multinational coalition." According to the Congressional Research Service, "The philosophy underpinning the campaign appears to be that fighting the Islamic State requires a long-term campaign for which Iraqis and their neighbors should take the lead" while the US and its allies "focus on supporting Iraqis, Syrians, and others rather than taking on significant ground combat roles themselves." (McInnis, 2016)

Marshalling local forces in Iraq was an integral part of Obama's strategy to externalize the burden of war. Coalition forces were not only spared the burden of participating on the battlefield, but were also confined to conduct the training in military bases in order to minimize casualties and risk. This practice represents "a significant departure from training and mentoring models over the past decade and beyond, whereby military teams partnered and performed offensive operations with their local Iraqi counterparts." (McInnis, 2015)

2. Conclusion

The much-publicized troops withdrawal was only one facet of Obama Iraq policy which also entailed security commitments like the training of Iraqi security forces and the consolidation of American civilian presence to attend to American interests and to what remained of its post-war relative influence. Subsequent measures, however, scaled back even such less costly alternatives in the face of new security imperatives. Along with the complete withdrawal, White House officials put an end to the ambitious Police Development Program, cut by more than half the Iraq mission, and initiated drastic cuts in the U.S. military and civilian aid to the Iraqi government. When pressure mounted on the Obama administration to get involved in yet another complex environment, it avoided large military commitments and turned to an air campaign through a multilateral coalition, pressed its regional allies to share in the burden of security, and relied on local forces to take up the fight on the ground. Such measures of retrenchment were taken despite Obama's conviction that Iraq was yet to become a full partner with the international community or even with the United States, and when Iran's influence, America's fiercest rival in the country, was rife in almost every layer of the Iraqi political and military system.

But such strategy would come without surprise if put in the larger framework of Obama foreign policy in the region or globally. From the start of his presidency, Obama's foremost policy objective was to stop Iran from going militarily nuclear, an objective that trumped all other considerations even the expanding Iranian influence in the region. But what would be more informative to examine, however, is the influences, both international and domestic, that were in play to dictate the trajectory of Obama Iraq policy.

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