

National Interests of the United States in the Global Coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Its Geopolitical Implication: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Although the Iraqi government declared its military campaign against ISIS concluded in 2017, and the Pentagon officially acknowledged this in 2019, the United States has maintained its military presence in Iraq. This study examines the underlying motives behind the continued U.S. involvement in Iraq under the justification of "fighting ISIS." Adopting a critical perspective on national interest, it explores the intersection between U.S. strategic objectives and the agendas of powerful economic actors, while situating this within the broader geopolitical landscape. Employing qualitative methods, the study analyzes secondary data from journal article, books, online media, news sources, and official government reports. The evaluation of U.S. national interest focuses on three key dimensions: security, economy, and politics. In terms of security, the U.S. has struggled to establish long-term stability in Iraq or to enhance regional safety, particularly in light of intensifying rivalries with regional powers such as Iran and Turkey. Economically, while the U.S. invested significant taxpayer funds in the conflict, the primary beneficiaries have been major oil and defense corporations, reflecting the entanglement between foreign policy and corporate interests. Politically, U.S. influence in Iraq has waned, challenged by both growing domestic opposition and the expanding geopolitical footprints of competing actors, notably Iran, Russia, and China. Given these findings, the study argues that the United States must reassess whether its ongoing military engagement in Iraq aligns with its broader strategic interests amidst the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East.

Keywords: Critical Foreign Policy, US Military, Security, Economy, Political Interest.

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1. Introduction

ISIS is a derivation of Al-Qaeda, formally declared in Iraq in 2013. Initially, the group called itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or *Daesh* (Arabic acronym), as its operations were centered in Iraq and Syria. ISIS became infamous worldwide for extreme violence, particularly its campaign of mass killings targeting Yazidi, Shia, and Christian communities in Iraq and Syria (Hawley,2017). The roots of ISIS can be traced back to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other insurgent factions. After the death of Zarqawi, these groups united under the Mujahideen Shura Council, which later evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI's ideology promoted brutal strategies against civilians, especially Shia populations. Over time, the movement expanded beyond Iraq, developing networks in Libya, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, and affiliating with groups across North Africa and South Asia (Abdullah & Daud,2025). With its global recruitment and attacks carried out in Western countries such as France and the United States, ISIS became a major international security concern.

Since 2014, in response to ISIS atrocities in Iraq and Syria, the United States formed an international coalition known as the "Global Coalition Against ISIS." This coalition, comprising 85 members, sought to combat ISIS through military and strategic operations. To this day, U.S. military forces remain in Iraq. According to U.S. Central Command (2023), in November 2023 alone the coalition conducted 40 operations in Iraq and Syria, killing four ISIS members and arresting 33 others. U.S. officials reiterated in January 2024 that there were no plans to withdraw troops from Iraq (The Cradle,2024). Although Baghdad and Washington have begun negotiations for a gradual drawdown, the coalition has not been dissolved.

The Iraqi government, however, has repeatedly insisted that foreign troops are no longer necessary. On January 18, 2024, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani declared that the ISIS threat had been significantly reduced, justifying the removal of foreign forces. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos alongside NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Sudani argued: "Justification for the existence of an international coalition is to face ISIS, and at present, the organization does not represent threats to the Iraqi state" (The Cradle,2024). Nevertheless, in January 2025, U.S. CENTCOM reported that coalition forces continued operations in both Iraq and Syria in support of the ongoing Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS) campaign.

Beyond military activity, the Global Coalition has expanded its mandate to dismantling ISIS networks, cutting financial resources, halting cross-border movement of foreign fighters, stabilizing liberated areas, and countering extremist propaganda (The Global Coalition, n.d.). The persistence of coalition operations, despite ISIS's territorial defeat, raises critical questions about U.S. national interests in Iraq.

A number of studies have analyzed different aspects of the coalition. Some argue that coalition intervention had legal justification and directly contributed to preventing mass atrocities in Iraq and Syria (Azzam & Hindawi, 2016). From a humanitarian law perspective, the intervention did not violate international norms as it was framed as protecting human rights and supported by UN Security Council Resolutions 2249 and 2170, which explicitly called for action against ISIS (Aditya & Muslimah, 2016). Others highlight that U.S.-led actions could be seen as a "Responsibility to Protect" mission, with approval from the Iraqi government to defend the Yazidi minority (Bellamy, 2014; Putri & Sidik, 2020).

Further research has pointed to political drivers behind coalition participation. Saideman (2016) argued that states joined partly out of fear of repeating the resurgence of Afghan-style terrorism, compounded by direct ISIS-linked attacks on their own soil. Setiawan and Alfajri (2018) identify three factors legitimizing coalition action: the appeal of democratization, the weakness of regional organizations, and the centrality of military intervention. Comparative studies have also shown differences in coalition participation—Australia following its tradition of active support for U.S. operations, while Poland adopted a more cautious stance (Doeser & Eidenfalk, 2019). Ruys et al. (2019) emphasize the role of national parliaments in shaping foreign troop deployments within coalition members. This study critically examines U.S. national interests in the Global Coalition Against ISIS. As the coalition's dominant force, the United States has played a decisive role in its establishment and continued military engagement, even after ISIS was declared territorially defeated. The article identifies three dimensions of U.S. national interests—security, economic, and political—and explores how these interests intersect with broader geopolitical implications in post-ISIS Iraq.

2. Methodology

The article is based on a qualitative research design to address the U.S. national interests in Iraq through the lens of a critical approach to foreign policy. Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research is the best method of researching issues that require a thorough investigation of human behaviors, social processes, and environmental factors. In qualitative research, the researcher gets rich descriptive information that shows how his subjects think and relate, their motivation, and their history. The document-based research was conducted on secondary sources, which comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, think-tank reports, and other credible media publications that were published between 2014-2025. These were found in academic databases (e.g., JSTOR and Scopus) and official websites of the U.S. government institutions and international organizations. A qualitative content analysis was then carried out on the data. All the documents were thoroughly read and coded into the categories of analysis in accordance with the three key dimensions of national interests that were identified in the literature: security, economy, and politics. In each category we made comparisons and contrasts, found common patterns, and followed causal connections between U.S. activities and the overall geopolitical consequences. Such a combination of data triangulation of various types of sources and critical foreign policy analysis as the prism of analysis guarantees the depth of analysis and reliability in this study. This methodological strategy allows us to go beyond the descriptive narratives and critically evaluate the ways in which U.S. interests collide with corporate actors, regional power politics and changing geopolitical frameworks in post-ISIS Iraq.

3. Conceptual Framework

3-1. National Interest

National interests are the goals of meeting a nation-state's needs through their state's or ideologies' ideals and foundations. Each nation-state has different interests from each other depending on the conditions and needs needed by the nation-state. In the national interests, the state's role as a central actor who takes decisions and takes important actions in global politics will later affect every matter in the country, society, state boundaries, infrastructure, and superstructure (Nuechterlein, 1976). This perspective aligns with Thomas Hobbes's view that the state serves as a protector of its territory, population, and way of life, as it is essential to the

well-being of its citizens (Jackson et al.,2019). Therefore, the absence of the state in ensuring security and prosperity would disrupt social life, limiting the nation's autonomy and placing its affairs under state control and regulation.

According to Hans Morgenthau, national interests show unchanging character and achieve consensus between political factions and exceed the duration of any government administration. The goals of foreign policy should be articulated based on the principles of the national interest (in Burchill,2015). Furthermore, Jack C. Plano and Roy Olton (1986) interpret national interests as the main fundamental and determination goals for state decision-makers in taking action on their foreign policy. Foreign policy attitude is based on conceptions specifically formulated from important elements in sovereign countries: independence, regional integration, economy, military, and security (Jackson et al.,2019). Based on these considerations, national leaders develop distinct policies aimed at ensuring the state's survival, fostering cooperation, or, when necessary, engaging in armed conflict.

Realists such as Morgenthau view power pursuit as an intrinsic quality that drives states because they consider it the fundamental reason that shapes their conduct. As Morgenthau established, states are governed by persons who naturally seek power, thus demonstrating an endless desire for power. States continuously search for ways to gain dominance over competitors because they aim to secure absolute power rather than seek only relative power positions. Morgenthau explains how humans seek strategic supremacy because their instincts drive them to do so (Burchill,2015).

Following Marx and other thinkers, critical analysis finds that a true "national interest" is non-existent. Current mechanisms use the false depiction of collective norms to present social class interests as national interests, which will continue until capitalism ends (Burchill,2005). Magdoff, Chomsky, and Zinn also criticize the concept of national interest. National interest frequently merges with powerful economic groups that manipulate policies to gain benefits for themselves (Magdoff,1978). Zinn (1997) establishes that the myth that political leaders share interests with ordinary citizens alongside the wealthy elite and the poor members of society remains a false belief. The illusion works in favor of the powerful to maintain their authority by gaining public backing for economic structures and social institutions, thus sustaining present-day social and economic

stability. In his view, Chomsky identifies "national interest" as a deceptive concept that hides how states deploy their policies. A nation contains multiple groups of people who maintain different interests that sometimes oppose each other, as well as interests which spread beyond domestic boundaries. A state includes multiple powerful groups with the capacity to direct substantial or even total control over governmental policy decisions and ideological structures. Their specific agendas succeed in being interpreted as being of national interest (Chomsky,2004).

National interests demonstrate connections to a country's crucial characteristics, including security, economic, and political interests. Maintaining freedom as an independent country, safeguarding institutions, protecting people, and protecting fundamental values and security interests are the highest priorities within national interests. A state sustains permanent interests because crucial national assets, such as strategic maritime paths, port access and economic resources, always remain essential to the state (Burchill,2015).

Recent studies also emphasize that national interest is not a fixed or universally agreed concept, but rather a contested construction shaped by domestic and international dynamics. As Lee (2024) shows, domestic distributional roots of national interest tend to be the priorities of the powerful political and economic factions in a society, and not a national agreement. Mokry (2024), on the same note, points out the reconstruction of national interest by the states based on grand strategies, which react to the changing global situations. This is in line with the direct question of Ogo, et al. (2024) who inquires whose interest is actually embodied in foreign policy to emphasize that what is termed as the national interest might actually be serving the elite or certain ideological views. In the specific case of Iraq, recent scholarship argues that U.S. objectives have consistently been framed as national interests, yet in practice they often served strategic and economic goals.

A 2023 analysis of U.S. strategic goals in Iraq found that interventions had justifiable rhetoric on security grounds, but were fundamentally bound up in regional hegemony and energy resource access (Wasko-Owsiejczuk,2023). These observations reinforce our claim that the idea of national interest in the U.S. coalition against ISIS has to be evaluated very critically, not as an objective that is an unbiased state priority but rather as a disputed concept that is influenced by relations of power, corporate interests, and geopolitical

conflicts. In this article, the authors identify the US national interest in security, economic, and political interests in leading the coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

4. Results and Discussion

4-1.Chronology and Dynamics of ISIS

The forerunner of this group was named Tawhid al-Jihad, formed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jihadi Salafi from Jordan. This group then began to operate in 2004 after being billed to Al-Qaeda. Beni and Ezzati (2023) concluded that the US occupation of Iraq, combined with the empowerment of the Shia majority and the exclusion of former Ba'ath Party members from the new government, caused deep divisions that ignited a Sunni insurgency driven by both ideological and sectarian motives. Salafi jihadists joined forces with former Ba'athists, Islamists, and nationalists to resist the foreign occupation and the newly established Shia-led authorities, which eventually gave rise to the Islamic State and later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was then declared dead in 2006 by the US military, and then the command turned to Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir (Byman, 2016). Soon after that, there was a change of leaders in the hands of Abu Umar Al-Baghdadi. With his Tawhid Al-Jihad group, Abu Umar quickly managed to control several regions in Iraq. In the same year, Tawhid al-Jihad formed a variety of tribes in northern Iraq, such as al-Dulaim, al-Jabbur, al-Ubaid, Qays, Bani Zayd, Al-Mujama', Bani Shammar, Al-Suwaidah, and other groups. The results of the rigging then became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) movement, as well as lifting Abu Umar al-Baghdadi as a leader. Abu Umar was later killed after a military operation in 2010 by the US (Gomes & Mikhael,2018).

With the death of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the leadership moved to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's hands. In 2012, Al-Baghdadi then used the momentum of the Arab Spring to expand its network to Syria. (Wang & Fan,2015). He sent an invitation to Abu Muhammad Al-Jaulani to help and develop Syrian militias, Jabhat Al Nusra, as part of Al-Qaeda. Not long after that, the Jabhat Al-Nusra movement was able to control many regions in Syria. Here, Al-Baghdadi then separated from the Al-Qaeda movement and chose to establish an ISIS movement in 2013 and declare itself as a separate force from Al-Qaeda. In 2014, Al-Baghdadi called on himself as a "khalifah" (Islamic-imperium leader) and changed the name of the movement to the

Islamic State because he wanted a wider control area than the territory of Iraq and Syria (Hilmi,2014). ISIS carried out its territorial invasion by violence. Starting from the threat to the local population to the murder of those who fight them. ISIS is a group that combines the ideology of jihadism, military, militancy, and violence (Hilmi,2014).

In 2017, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced at a conference in Baghdad that Iraqi forces had fully secured the Iraqi-Syrian border. This border area had been the last remaining territory under the control of the Islamic State (IS) after the group lost the town of Rawa in November. The U.S. State Department welcomed the end of what it called ISIS' "vile occupation" in Iraq while emphasizing that the fight against the group would continue. Iraq's declaration came just two days after the Russian military claimed it had successfully completed its mission to defeat IS in Syria. The jihadist group had seized vast territories in Syria and Iraq in 2014, declaring a self-proclaimed "caliphate" and enforcing its rule over approximately 10 million people. However, relentless offensives by various factions—including the U.S.-led coalition, Iraqi military forces, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which RAND report described as having "played a critical role in the fight against the Islamic State"—ultimately led to IS losing control over key strongholds, such as Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and Raqqa, its de facto capital in northern Syria (BBC,2017; Egel et al.,2023).

However, ISIS still maintains a force of between 5,000 and 7,000 members across Iraq and Syria, the majority of whom are combatants. In northeastern Syria, around 11,000 suspected ISIS fighters are currently detained in facilities run by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including over 3,500 Iraqis and approximately 2,000 foreign fighters from nearly 70 different countries (Lederer,2023).

4-2. United States of America's National Interest

The US's position as a dominant country, among others, is seen from the fact that the US initiated the formation of the Global Coalition and became a leader in it. Then, in 2014, several countries that were members of the Coalition were involved in air strikes, and the US carried out more than seventy percent of the strikes (Cameron & Glenn,2016). The US contributed to the Coalition more than other countries and utilized the most military assets. The role of the US in the coalition is not only fighting in the field but also training local rebels in Syria who are members of the Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF), a combination of Kurdi-Arab militia, including among the opposition groups that have the support of US (Cameron & Glenn,2016).

In the perspective of realism, every US' activities in the Middle East are certainly driven by the interests and benefits of the US itself. The former US President, Barack Obama, once said the US would follow every problem in the Middle East because they had a significant role in the region (Blanchard & Humud,2018). President Obama stated that the main interest of the US in the region was related to the counter-terrorism program, control over nuclear weapons, free trade, maintaining regional security and peace, as well as defending Israeli security, including efforts to reconcile the Arab-Israel (Minardi,2016).

US policy about combating terrorism in Middle East started after 9/11 in 2001. The Bush administration to enact a policy to overcome worldwide terrorist networks by removing their protected areas and fought against terrorism origins along with protecting the homeland with defensive security actions. The Bush administration adopted a logic which stated that short-term operations against al-Qaeda and similar organizations would cut down their operational strength but aggressive action in the medium term would prevent new organizations and state sponsors from engaging and long-term solutions addressing ethnic conflict and corruption along with political oppression and poverty would eliminate terrorist root causes. The Obama administration maintained this policy after Bush (Thrall & Goepner,2017).

As said before, in 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister and Russia announced the completion of their military mission against ISIS, and the Pentagon welcomed this announcement. However, in 2023, US CENCTOM stated that the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS, along with local partners, continues efforts to eliminate key leaders, repatriate fighters and their families, and stabilize liberated areas. The Coalition's mission includes military support in Syria through local allies like the Syrian Democratic Forces and an advisory role with the Iraqi Security Forces. Efforts also focus on providing essential services, education, and job opportunities to encourage displaced persons to return and prevent extremist recruitment. Additionally, the U.S. and coalition partners are working to find solutions for tens of thousands of displaced persons, many linked to Daesh/ISIS, in the al-Hol and Roj camps. They assist countries with repatriation logistics, rehabilitation, reintegration, and legal processes. In 2023, over 3,000 foreign

nationals were repatriated from northeast Syria, matching the total from the previous three years combined (US Department of State,2023).

With respect to Iraq specifically, the United States currently maintains around 2,500 troops under an advisory and training mission to support the Iraqi Security Forces. Although Washington frames its role as limited and cooperative, the U.S. position in Iraq remains highly contested. On one hand, segments of the Iraqi leadership view U.S. involvement as necessary to sustain military capacity and to balance Iran's influence. On the other hand, powerful political blocs in the Iraqi parliament—particularly Shi'a factions allied with Tehran—have repeatedly called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops, especially following the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Baghdad. Such a twofold perception puts the U.S. in a very ambiguous situation: on the one hand, it is a formal ally of the Iraqi state, but, on the other hand, an object of domestic dissatisfaction and militia aggression. These dynamics make the definition of the U.S. national interest in Iraq difficult and support the importance of a critical analysis of whether its further stay in Iraq indeed serves the American strategic objectives.

The lingering question is: What precisely constitutes the U.S. national interest? Is it limited to the interests officially expressed by the elite (i.e., maintaining security) or, as conveyed by critical thinkers, such as Magdoff, that national interest frequently merges with powerful economic groups manipulating policies to benefit themselves? In the following section, the authors will analyze the three factors of national interests: security, economy, and politics.

4-2-1.Security Interests

Threats in the contemporary international world are no longer discussing armed wars between countries as before the Cold War, for example, the Second World War. After the Cold War ended, for the US, the global threat changed into a new phase, namely terrorism. External groups have sprung up to change the worldview if a threat that needs to be a significant concern is not just a country but also armed groups that can threaten the existence of the state. The US then mentioned that the threat, especially terrorist groups, must be "eliminated" to maintain world peace (Wechsler et al.,2016). The US has developed defense systems that can overcome the threat of terrorism. On September 11, 2001, the US faced a major terrorist act, namely the attack on the WTC Building, which, according to the official US

statement, was carried out by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda based in Afghanistan. The tragedy made the international world assume that the threat of terrorism could occur anywhere. After 9/11, the US launched the War on Terror and became a pioneer in eradicating terrorism in the world to realize world security (Gomes & Mikhael, 2018).

Thrall & Goepner (2017) argue that US military intervention against terrorism since 2001, both direct and indirect, has pursued three main objectives. First, it aims to eliminate terrorists, dismantle their networks, and prevent attacks through preemptive strikes, as outlined in the 2002 National Security Strategy. Second, military force serves as a deterrent, demonstrated by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to punish state sponsors of terrorism and assert US resolve. Third, interventions seek to support weak governments and prevent terrorist groups from establishing safe havens, as seen in Libya.

However, the authors contend that these interventions have done little to curb lone-wolf attacks in the US and have, instead, fueled terrorism and anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. Rather than eradicating terrorist groups, US actions have coincided with an increase in global terrorism, suggesting that foreign intervention has ultimately made Americans less safe. They argue that withdrawing troops, halting drone strikes, and shifting focus to intelligence and law enforcement would be more effective.

Mullins (2023) made a similar conclusion that many analysts have depicted America's counterterrorism approach in Iraq and Syria as a failure through decades of attempts. The US has not succeeded in defining its strategic goals, achieving long-term stability in Iraq, or gaining backing from local populations. The strategy faces a critical failure because it cannot correctly control 10,000 ISIS prisoners in Syrian territory, which represents a dangerous security risk to American forces and their international partners.

In addition, Zakeri and Haji Yousefi (2024) believe that the inability to eliminate ISIS is an indicator of poor political divisions in Iraq. According to this point of view, instead of mere marginalization, the dynamics in Sunni communities are more properly interpreted as a political contest and, in certain groups, a desire to reclaim the dominant position previously occupied under the previous regime.

Here the American security interest in Iraq is not so much the immediate destruction of ISIS but rather the maintenance of a long-term

counterterrorism posture in the Middle East. Iraq offers an ideal location to collect intelligence, military logistics and to deploy troops quickly in the region. Through the presence of bases and advisors in Iraq, Washington aims at ensuring that large-scale terrorist groups that may pose a threat to U.S. allies or the homeland are not re-established and also in order to deter other players like Iran. Iraq therefore serves as a forward operating base in the larger War on Terror as well as a buffer zone to assert American power in the area.

4-2-2. Economic Interests

The cost of the US war on terrorism is enormous. Carnegie finds that the comprehensive budgetary costs of the US post-9/11 wars include overseas contingency operations (OCO) of the Department of Defense is \$2,101 billion; the cost of homeland security prevention and response to terrorism is \$1,117 billion; interest on OCO borrowing is \$1,087 billion; increases to Department of Defense base budget is \$884 billion, veterans' medical care and disability is \$465 billion, and State Department OCO appropriations is \$189 billion (Carnegie,2023).

According to other research, the United States government is projected to have spent over 5.4 trillion US dollars on the global war on terror since the September 11, 2001, attacks. This estimate accounts for all budgetary expenditures related to the war between fiscal years 2001 and 2020. However, it does not include the ongoing costs of medical care and disability benefits for veterans beyond FY 2020, which are expected to add another one trillion US dollars by FY 2059 (Korhonen,2024).

With such vast amounts of money spent by the US on war, it is only logical to wonder what the economic benefits of US domination in the Middle East are. One of the answers is to safeguard access to oil and gas pathways in the Middle East for the US and its allies' interests. Since many of the US and its allies are advanced capitalist countries focusing on mobilizing the industrial sector, they have become the world's largest consumers of oil and gas. The US in 2018 became the largest energy consumer in the world, more or less using 2,331.6 million tons of oil or around 22.8% of world energy consumption. Other countries such as China, Japan, Russia, Germany, and Britain also consume world energy. This need will make the US mobilize its focus to meet domestic energy needs. The US Department of State overviews the Arabian Peninsula as world history's most significant source of strategic and material forces. That made the US aware of the need to

control and maintain world civilization through the Arabian Peninsula (Blanchard & Humud,2018). The US is interested in oil refineries and petroleum drilling in connection with Iraq. That is because Iraq is one of the countries with significant oil and gas resources. Even the 2003 US versus Iraq conflict was allegedly an energy issue, not an issue of democratization and chemical weapons (Minardi,2016). As the largest oil and gas consumer, the US will try to secure the oil strategic path if the country cannot be invited to work directly. This heavy dependence makes the US try hard to eliminate ISIS in Iraq because the terror organization controlled Iraqi oil fields. For the US, if the supply of oil and the availability of oil reserves become limited, it will be a big problem that disrupt its industrial sector.

Related to Syria, although it is not a leading oil or gas producer in the Middle East, the outcome of the Syrian uprising could influence the future regional energy landscape. Its strategic geographic position provides Mediterranean access for landlocked entities looking to export hydrocarbons and for countries aiming to reach European markets. The new government in Syria will open new opportunities for this project (Husari,2013).

Furthermore, the research indicates that war offers advantages to companies producing arms and defense equipment. The military-industrial complex follows a continuous pattern where weapon manufacturing and production address each other through actual military engagement. The United States has repeatedly launched military operations throughout the world by claiming the need to deal with global security risks. The unexpectedly high military spending detected in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine continues despite prolonged military histories in each of these nations. The pattern between increasing demand and newer weapons technologies creates ongoing needs for military equipment and advancements. Defense expenditures in prolonged conflicts stay unchanged because they include ongoing maintenance, upgrades, and the development of next-generation military technologies (Ansari,2024).

The Pentagon's war money flows to weapons companies. Each year, five major corporations—Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon—collectively receive over \$150 billion in Pentagon contracts, accounting for nearly 20 per cent of the total Pentagon budget (Lanlan,2023).

This imbalance of the public expenditures and the individual profit is a strong indication that the economic interests are not by-products but the key

factors of the U.S. policy in Iraq. Although the official discourse presents the interventions as the means of preserving international security, the circulation of profits to energy corporations and defense contractors suggest that the influential economic forces contribute to the maintenance of these wars. From this perspective, what is described as the “national interest” in Iraq often overlaps with the corporate interest of maintaining access to oil reserves and expanding markets for arms production.

Critical scholars such as Magdoff (1978) and Chomsky (2004) have long argued that U.S. foreign policy serves to protect capitalist structures and the privileges of dominant corporations. The Iraq case reinforces this argument: while the public bears the fiscal and human costs of war, private companies benefit from contracts, concessions, and strategic access to resources. This trend reflects that economic interests especially energy security and profitability of the defense industry play a significant role in explaining the U.S. national interest in Iraq, other than the proclaimed counterterrorism.

4-2-3. Political Interests

For decades, the United States has maintained its dominance in the Middle East primarily through a network of alliances and partnerships. This dominance is aimed at achieving the US national interest in the Middle East, namely "Israel's security." This notion of national interest has been conveyed many times by elite US officials, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth in 2025, who said, "The United States remains 100 percent committed to Israel's security" (US Department of Defense, 2025).

Washington uses various means to maintain Israel's security, including by assisting Arab countries that want to normalize relations with Israel. For example, Egypt has received over \$87 billion in foreign aid programs in the form of military and economic assistance from the United States have operated since 1946. The foreign aid to Egypt sharply increased after the signing of the Camp David Accords that led to a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Nowadays Egypt stands as one of the biggest beneficiaries of U.S. foreign aid within the Middle East region right behind Israel. Jordan received enhanced U.S. monetary help coupled with debt reconciliations following the 1994 Wadi Araba Treaty that allowed diplomatic ties and trade exchanges and tourism between the nations (Salhani, 2025).

More recently, in 2020-2021, the US facilitated the Abraham Accords, which led four Arab nations to formalize diplomatic ties with Israel. The

other strategy the US employs to maintain its influence in the Middle East and safeguard Israel is by supporting opposition groups in countries that are hostile to both the US and Israel. The most important case study in this issue is how the US, which was initially fighting Al Qaeda, actually provided support to Al Qaeda-affiliated militias in Syria in order to overthrow the government of Bashar Assad, who was seen as a threat to Israel. This is evident from a report compiled by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), an independent arms tracking organization. It provides disturbing information, namely that weapons purchased by the US military in 2015 ended up in the hands of ISIS fighters within two months. According to CAR, the discovery of an anti-tank missile tube in Ramadi—as well as other cases of weapons procured by US suppliers from European manufacturers—provides evidence that a significant number of arms delivered to U.S.-backed Syrian rebel groups were ultimately diverted to ISIS. It is also revealed that the CIA maintained a secret program that provided weapons to rebel groups opposing Syrian regime forces until the Trump administration reportedly terminated it in July. Although President Donald Trump mentioned the program on Twitter this year, US government and military officials have consistently declined to acknowledge its existence officially (Joselow, 2017).

Regarding ISIS, the US employs two strategies. First, the US military tried to reduce the threat caused by ISIS through direct US military power through the formation of a global coalition and supporting local partners as an alternative to large and direct applications of US military force (Blanchard & Humud,2018). During the Syrian War, the US and other Western countries trained, equipped and paid Syrian rebels to fight the Assad government and, at the same time, fight ISIS (Rolandsen & Selvik, 2023). Second, after ISIS was declared defeated, the US military remained in Iraq and Syria, supported by Congress, which approved funds for the continuation of US military operations against the Islamic State, for the continued training and equipping of partner forces, and for the stabilization of areas recaptured from the Islamic State (Blanchard & Humud,2018).

However, extending the presence of troops in the area caused discomfort among locals, who began to show opposition. In 2020, Iraqi lawmakers voted to force out international forces. In December 2023, a US airstrike resulted in the death of an Iraqi security officer and left 18 others injured, including civilians. According to Al Jazeera (2023), the Iraqi government

viewed the assault as a break of national sovereignty that threatened to sabotage diplomatic links between the nations.

Opposition against the US military presence in Iraq has become significant enough to make the US evaluate if it should continue its deployment there because it no longer satisfies strategic goals.

4-3. Geopolitical Implications of US Foreign Policy in Post-ISIS Iraq

Geopolitically, the United States insistence of maintaining its presence in Iraq is not merely a counterterrorism measure, but part of a broader strategy to shape the regional balance of power and secure its long-term strategic interests., Iraq holds a highly strategic position in the Middle East—due to its vast oil reserves, complex demographic makeup, and geographic location bordering key regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the continued U.S. presence in Iraq reflects an ongoing geopolitical contest for influence over the country in the face of its rivals. One of the most prominent geopolitical dimensions is the intense rivalry between the United States and Iran. Before 2003, the large U.S. military presence in the Gulf was mainly aimed at containing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. However, since Saddam's removal left Iraq militarily weakened, the primary focus of U.S. forces in the Gulf has shifted to countering Iran (Katzman,2021). Iran's involvement in Iraq in confronting ISIS began when Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa calling for jihad to mobilize citizens to rise up against ISIS. At that time, Baghdad was on the verge of falling to ISIS, while the Iraqi Security Forces had collapsed. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki formed the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or Alhashd Alshabi, to organize these volunteers, and Iran, through the commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, provided advisory, military, and financial support. Later, in 2016, the Iraqi Parliament passed legislation that officially recognized the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a legitimate legal entity (Dury-Agri et al.,2017; Anbori et al,2024).

The United States considered the PMF an Iranian proxy and a threat to its regional hegemony despite the fact that the existence of the PMF was consistent with the U.S. mission of destroying ISIS. The latest discussions of the Iraqi parliament regarding the PMF Law have only intensified this tension as the lawmakers aimed to re-establish the role of the group in the state security apparatus. As the Iraqi factions continue to debate whether the PMF should be incorporated fully into the Iraqi Armed Forces or remain a separate entity, Washington has repeatedly voiced concern that legalization

of the PMF would consolidate Iranian influence in Iraq and subvert American attempts to have a balanced security structure in the country (Schenker,2025; Toomey,2025; Mahmoud,2025).

In response, the U.S. maintained its military presence to balance Iran's influence. The U.S. administration aimed to form alliances both within and beyond the region as part of a strategic effort to counter Iran. It engaged in bilateral cooperation with regional leaders and groups that opposed Iranian influence. One such initiative was the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), proposed by the Trump administration in 2017 and primarily involving the six Gulf monarchies—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain—along with Jordan and Egypt (Coffey & Phillips,2020) MESA was envisioned as an “Arab NATO” to coordinate defense, counterterrorism, energy security, and collectively contain Iran’s regional influence. However, the initiative faced significant political obstacles—such as inter-Gulf mistrust and disagreement over threat perceptions following the Qatar crisis 2017 (Farouk,2019). Nevertheless, the U.S. continues to rely on bilateral security arrangements and arms sales with Gulf States as partial substitutes for the unrealized alliance. Establishing a wide international coalition against Iran was also a central objective of the ministerial meeting held in Poland on February 13–14, 2019 (Katzman,2021).

Beyond military alliances, Iraq’s evolving economic infrastructure also plays a crucial role in this geopolitical rivalry. Another strategic factor is the development of the Faw Grand Port, which aims to transform Iraq into a critical trade and energy corridor. According to Jaffarinia, et al. (2023) the Faw Grand Port project reshapes Iraq's economic direction while making critical maritime entryways a focus of intense worldwide power struggles. The United States needs to secure control over this strategic infrastructure because it protects both its regional counter-balance against Iran's expansion while securing broader Middle Eastern economic interests and security objectives.

The American military presence in Iraq generates significant geopolitical effects which affect Turkey along with Kurdish organizations. U.S. officials want to sustain their strategic alliance with Turkey because this NATO member plays an important role in supporting regional stability. American backing of Kurdish groups such as Iraq's KRG and Syria's YPG has put strain on Ankara because Turkey regards them as national security threats due to PKK affiliations which Turkey has officially declared as terrorist

(McCool,2021). The United States partners with Kurdish forces in order to fight ISIS and other mutually threatening entities. Turkey views this strategy as a step toward tolerating terrorism because it threatens their national sovereignty. Washington faces a strategic dilemma because its backing of minority allies can degrade its partnership with major state partners such as Turkey.

Furthermore, the U.S. military presence in Iraq belongs to a larger global struggle against Russia and China's expanding power in the Middle East which they construct through economic deals and diplomatic relationships and military endeavors. In the United State's view, Iran maintains an active role through proxy groups across Iraq and other regional territories which results in extreme instability (Garamone,2021). The U.S. maintains troops in Iraq primarily as a method to block Iranian political dominance in the area. If the United States were to withdraw from Iraq, the regional balance of power would shift significantly. Scholars have argued that such a move would expand Iran's influence through the PMF and allied political factions, while Turkey might intensify unilateral operations against Kurdish groups (Connable et al.,2020; Dorobantu,2021). Russia and China are also positioned to fill the vacuum through energy investment, arms transfers, and infrastructure projects, weakening US leverage (MacDonald & Parent,2024; Hazbun,2023). From the US's perspective, its withdrawal could exacerbate domestic divisions between pro-Iranian and nationalist blocs, while reducing external support for the Iraqi Security Forces (Moorman,2024) and opening up greater opportunities for an alternative security arrangement from Iranian-backed networks under the "Axis of Resistance."

5. Conclusion

This paper reviewed the ongoing military occupation of the United States in Iraq in the context of the Global Coalition against ISIS. Although the involvement of the U.S. is officially explained by the counterterrorism campaign, the analysis shows the involvement has other national interests that extend to the security, economic, and political realms. In terms of security, the fact that ISIS has lasted all these years of intervention highlights the weakness of American counterterrorism strategy and begs the question of whether the outside military remedy can work in resolving the political divisions in Iraq. The close relationship between foreign policy and corporate interests can be witnessed economically, as the oil and arms corporations are disproportionately enjoying the fruits of their labor at the

expense of U.S. taxpayers. On the political front, the deteriorating role that Washington plays in Iraq and the increasing demands by the parliament to withdraw the troops and the increasing resistance by the locals is a manifestation of a loss in the legitimacy and bargaining power of the U.S. in the region. In addition to these results, the research has three implications. To start with, the U.S. policy in post-ISIS Iraq shows that a sheer realist security justification is insufficient, with local legitimacy and internal political rivalry being the ultimate determinants. Second, the overlap between economic and strategic interests implies that the idea of national interest usually conceals the interests of influential corporate and geopolitical forces, which justifies critical views on foreign policy studies. Third, the centrality of Iraq in Middle Eastern geopolitics suggests that the presence of the U.S. military is not all about ISIS but rather the counteraction of Iran, control of the relations with Turkey, and limiting the increasing power of Russia and China. Combined, these observations imply that Washington needs to rethink the sustainability of the costs of further military presence in Iraq or the strategic rationale of its continued involvement in the country. To the scholars, the example of post-ISIS Iraq demonstrates that critical approaches to national interest should be combined with empirical studies of local politics. To policy makers, it highlights the need to end open-ended military commitments in favor of policies that focus on regional diplomacy, economic growth, and inclusive governance in Iraq.

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7. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest and that they have fully complied with all ethical issues of research, including avoiding plagiarism, publishing or submitting articles more than once, repeating the research of others, data fabrication or falsification, source fabrication and falsification of sources, uninformed consent of the subject or researched, misconduct, etc.

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