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Washington should keep away from Iraq

The United States does not have a solution to the Iraqi crisis and it should stay out of the country.

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The recent flare-up in Iraq's western Anbar province has drawn US media attention to Iraq and sparked a controversy on whether the United States should re-engage in the war-battered country two years after its last troops left.

Some American politicians and media pundits are even suggesting that the Obama administration should actively intervene, probably by considering sending troops back to Iraq to help the Shia-dominated government in combating Al-Qaeda-linked fighters.

Although there are plenty of reasons to make the United States pay for its follies and crimes in Iraq, most obviously during its protracted occupation of the country, Washington is poorly qualified to help stabilise Iraq and engage in state-building in the devastated country. While the present escalation is increasingly turning deadly and threatens to shatter the ethno-sectarian divided country, it is out of the question that most Iraqis would want to see US troops back in their beleaguered nation.

However, Iraq does not seem to be a pressing issue for the Obama administration, and the partisan rhetoric about Iraq seems to be mostly a blame-trading game between the Democrats and the Republicans over the administration's approach towards the country before the mid-term elections.
It will be interesting to see how US President Barack Obama, who is facing charges by his opponents of being reluctant to take hard foreign-policy decisions that disturb his base, will tackle post-Anbar Iraq.

If Obama contemplates interfering in Iraq, he should deal with four contradictory positions. While most Americans, and in particular in his Democratic base, remain opposed to intervention, his Republican critics want him to be more actively involved in Iraq.

Meanwhile, in Iraq itself Shia Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki is seeking US political support, weapons and training of the security forces, while the country's Sunni community wants Obama to halt support to Al-Maliki and increase pressure on him to abandon his sectarian policies. Thus far, the Obama administration has been reluctant, or too confused, to put on display any concrete policy towards Iraq apart from the usual meaningless statements. As the present crisis began unfolding, the administration voiced support for Al-Maliki's government and accelerated deliveries of military equipment to Iraq to help it fight militants in the Anbar province.

It was also looking to provide additional shipments of Hellfire missiles, as well as ten ScanEagle drones and 48 Raven drones.

Secretary of State John Kerry made it clear that help to Iraq did not include US "boots on the ground," explicitly noting that "this is their [the Iraqis'] fight."

Some Democrats in the US Congress are proposing to repeal the authorisation, known as an AUMF, which was used by former president George W. Bush to wage the war to oust former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The bill would cut off any US attempt to intervene in Iraq militarily. On the other hand, critics of the White House have blamed the security deterioration on Obama for failing to agree on a deal with Al-Maliki's government to leave a residual US force behind after withdrawing all American troops from the country at the end of 2011.

They argue that when the last US combat troops departed from Iraq in December 2011, they left behind a defeated Al-Qaeda and an Iraq where Sunni and Shia Muslims were sharing power in what they described as a democracy.

One of Obama's vehement critics, Senator John McCain, has even proposed that the president should send David Petraeus, a retired four-star general who ran the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, back to Iraq in order to help deal with the growing unrest in the country. McCain also suggested that Washington provide weapons such as Apache helicopters and logistical support to help quell the spiraling violence in Iraq. But McCain said he opposed sending combat troops back to Iraq.

For his part, Al-Maliki has asked the United States for new arms to beat back the resurgence of Al-Qaeda-linked militants in Anbar and training of Iraq's counter-terrorism forces by US forces. He categorically brushed aside the idea of inviting American forces back into Iraq. As for the Iraqi Sunnis, the crisis in Anbar has strengthened their focus on what they perceive as the Shia-dominated government's marginalisation of their community, which they also blame on US policies in Iraq.

During a trip to Washington last week, Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Al-Mutlaq warned the US government that supplying the Iraqi government with weapons was not the solution to defeat Al-Qaeda.

"Obama said he would withdraw from Iraq, but in a responsible way, and I don't believe his withdrawal was responsible. He left so many problems that he should have solved before he left," he told the US news outlet the Daily Beast.

Chief among those problems, Al-Mutlaq said, was the failure of the Al-Maliki government to share power with Sunni politicians. He repeatedly told audiences and journalists that the United States, which he accused of "destroying" Iraq, should do more to rebuild it. These are conflicting positions, and there are questions about how Obama will attempt to reconcile them in order to take a viable policy approach to Iraq without choosing one side over another.
Certainly, Iraq is on a threshold, and its collapse as a state would constitute a national security challenge to the United States.

But no one wants US troops back in Iraq. The idea of sending back Petraeus or reviving the so-called "surge" strategy seems misplaced.

The surge remains America's most misleading myth in Iraq, and its catastrophic results proved that it was nothing but another strategic blunder in the disastrous war the United States waged on the country in 2003.

Atrocities by US soldiers during the nearly 10-year occupation fueled the anti-American resistance in the country and represented a moral, political and military setback for the United States, as well a catastrophic human disaster.

The publication of gruesome photographs that appeared to show US Marines burning the dead bodies of Iraqis last week revived memories of the shocking war crimes perpetrated by American army personnel.

Some of the photos published on the website TMZ.com showed Marines pouring liquid from a petrol can on two decaying bodies. Two other photos showed the bodies on fire, and two more showed the charred remains.

The Obama administration's thinking on Iraq will not clarify until some of the other major uncertainties in the Middle East are resolved. These include the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Iran's nuclear deal, and the crisis in Syria, all of which remain key preoccupations for Washington in the Middle East.

A breakthrough in all these three conflicts is not clear, and conceivably events including continued violence in Iraq may become a catalyst for renewed regional tensions that are increasingly taking on a sectarian dimension.

For most Iraqis, debating whether Obama should wield a longer or a smaller stick to deal with the conflict in their violence-torn country is irrelevant.

Given the fact that the Obama administration does not have a clear-cut strategy on Iraq, it is difficult to imagine that it could help to save the Iraqis from their tragic misfortunes. On the contrary, any US intervention will rekindle memories of the invasion and the destruction and humiliation it inflicted and will most certainly make matters worse and add more fuel to the fire in Iraq.