

The New York Times.

Grim Sequel to Iraq's War

By [PETER BAKER](#) JAN. 8, 2014



Iraqis fleeing violence waited on Wednesday at a checkpoint in Falluja. Sunni Islamist militants have taken over parts of the city. Reuters

WASHINGTON — For two years, [President Obama](#) has boasted that he accomplished what his predecessor had not. “I ended the war in Iraq,” he has told audience after audience. But a resurgence by Islamic militants in western Iraq has reminded the world that the war is anything but over.

What Mr. Obama ended was the United States military presence in Iraq, but the fighting did not stop when the last troops left in 2011; it simply stopped being a daily concern for most Americans. While attention shifted elsewhere, the war raged on and has now escalated to its most violent phase since the depths of the occupation.

The turn of events in a country that once dominated the American agenda underscores the approach of a president determined to keep the United States out of what he sees as the

quagmires of the last decade. In places like Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya and Syria, Mr. Obama has opted for selective engagement and accepted that sometimes there will be bad results, but in his view not as bad as if the United States immersed itself more assertively in other people's problems.

The president's methods have come under new scrutiny in recent days with flags of [Al Qaeda](#) hoisted over Falluja and Ramadi, two names with deep resonance for a generation of American veterans who spilled blood there. And the criticism was fueled by a new memoir by former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates describing an ambivalent commander in chief who did not believe in his own military buildup in Afghanistan and wanted mainly to get out of Iraq.

"The vacuum of American leadership certainly is felt there," said Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, the top Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, who last visited Baghdad in August. "It felt as if the administration thought that Iraq was checked off the list and it's time to move on. And because it was checked off the list, there really was no reason to maintain the kind of relationship that would have been helpful."

Critics complain that Mr. Obama squandered the military success achieved by President George W. Bush's 2007 troop "surge" and should have done more to persuade Baghdad to accept a residual American force beyond 2011. They say he should have been more active in restraining Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#), whose Shiite leadership has alienated many Sunnis, fueling the latest uprising.

But if Mr. Obama has pulled back from Iraq and other global hot spots, so has the American public. The president's decision to withdraw troops from Iraq remains popular in surveys, and even his strongest critics generally do not advocate sending ground forces back in. After years of crushing guerrilla warfare, Obama advisers argue the president has simply recalibrated American policy to be more realistic, and many Americans seem content to let Iraqis fight it out themselves.

"There was never a sense at the White House that this is a wrap, that we've somehow resolved all the conflict in the country and the U.S. could pull back," said Julianne Smith, a former deputy national security adviser to Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. who is now at the Center for a New American Security. But for all the effort, she added, "we have to be clear-eyed about the limits of U.S. engagement."

She continued: "At the end of the day, the United States does not control what happens in Iraq."

Douglas Ollivant, a former national security aide to both Mr. Bush and Mr. Obama, said the administration could not have pushed Mr. Maliki to do more, while the Iraqi leader is "getting a bad rap" since he faces an active Qaeda insurgency. "At least they're not fighting over us," Mr. Ollivant said, now that the American presence is no longer an issue.

The strife in Iraq today has turned into part of a larger regional battlefield tied to the civil war next door in Syria. In recent months, American officials said, as many as 50 suicide bombers a month have slipped over the border into Iraq, greatly complicating the nature of the conflict. The

Qaeda assaults in Falluja and Ramadi came after a year in which 7,800 civilians and 1,000 Iraqi security troops were killed in attacks, according to the United Nations, the highest levels in five years.

Some Republicans acknowledged the complicated set of dynamics at work. “Is there some responsibility for the United States for this chain of events? Yes,” said Representative Mac Thornberry of Texas, the vice chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. “Is it the sole cause? No.”

Mr. Obama has made no public comment about the developments in the Iraqi province of Anbar, leaving the matter instead to Mr. Biden, his point person on Iraq. Mr. Biden called Mr. Maliki on Wednesday in their second conversation in three days, pressing for more outreach to disaffected Sunnis.

The administration is sending Hellfire missiles and surveillance drones to help Iraqi forces and has stepped up efforts to persuade the Senate to permit the lease and sale of Apache attack helicopters. Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, the Democratic chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, has held up the Apaches while demanding that they not be used against civilians and that Mr. Maliki take steps to stop Iran from supplying Syria’s military through Iraqi airspace.

After months of waiting, Mr. Menendez received an urgent call from William J. Burns, the deputy secretary of state, on Tuesday promising a response, and Mr. Menendez signaled Wednesday that he may lift his hold. “Provided these issues are sufficiently addressed, Chairman Menendez will be ready to move forward,” said his spokesman, Adam Sharon.

Even so, other senators may still be wary. “I think we have to be very careful,” said Senator Saxby Chambliss, the ranking Republican on the Intelligence Committee. “All of that could fall into the wrong hands.”

And even once it is approved, it could take months for the first of the leased Apaches to arrive, and pilots would need to be trained, officials said. More broadly, the administration has made it clear that Baghdad should not expect the United States to come to its rescue. Secretary of State John Kerry emphasized last weekend that “this is a fight that belongs to the Iraqis,” using the words “their fight” four more times in the course of comments to reporters.

The White House denies that it has neglected Iraq.

“It’s an important relationship that we have with the government of Iraq, with the Iraqi people, and our commitment to assisting them in this effort I think is represented both by the military assistance that we’re providing and speeding up but also by the kind of discourse that we have with Iraq’s leaders,” said Jay Carney, the White House press secretary.

Other officials said they have quietly helped guide Mr. Maliki’s response, intervening to stop him from launching an army assault on Ramadi, which they feared would only lead to a blood bath.

Instead, they encouraged him to reach out to Sunni tribal leaders and approve payments to those fighting Al Qaeda.

In doing so, they said, the Iraqi government and its allies have recaptured much of Ramadi in just a week. They hope to try something similar in Falluja, but conceded it is more of a challenge because the city has long been friendlier to Islamic extremists.

“In cases like this, we have to choose between the least bad options,” said Anthony H. Cordesman, an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies who just completed a long study of Iraq. “The whole idea that we have some magic wand hasn’t worked out all that well.”

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.

A version of this news analysis appears in print on January 9, 2014, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Grim Sequel to Iraq’s War.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/09/world/middleeast/grim-sequel-to-iraqs-war.html>