

Signposts for an Islamic State Comeback in Iraq

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

Despite the damage wrought by the U.S. withdrawal from Syria, the main drivers of Islamic State resurgence in Iraq can still be restrained by local U.S. engagement, which is now even more vital than before.

The gross uncertainty surrounding the future of counterterrorism operations in northeast Syria is raising understandable fears of an Islamic State comeback in Iraq. After all, the IS resurgence of 2011-2014 was partially driven by the chaotic war conditions in Syria, and suppressing the group there will be extremely challenging in the coming months amid [U.S. withdrawal \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trumps-troop-withdrawal-gives-turkey-access-to-syriaand-isis-space-to-rebui\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trumps-troop-withdrawal-gives-turkey-access-to-syriaand-isis-space-to-rebui) and [Turkish invasion \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next). Another resurgence in Iraq is hardly inevitable, however—the country is subject to different internal drivers, and the United States is still well-positioned to lead international support of Baghdad’s counterterrorism efforts. Yet Washington will need to stay engaged and urgently address new problems if it hopes to prevent another disastrous insurgency.

PAST DRIVERS THAT COULD REEMERGE

When the IS began to bounce back strongly in 2011, three of the four main drivers were domestic Iraqi factors unrelated to Syria. Granted, the lone Syrian driver was an important one: the IS presence there provided an adjacent safe haven, an operational training ground, a route for foreign recruits via Turkish airports, and a source of military-grade weapons, essentially incubating the force that first broke through the border and began the assault on northern Iraq. Yet the group’s broader success in Iraq depended much more on the other three drivers:

Sunni openness to armed uprising. Beginning in 2011, Sunni Arab communities in northern and western Iraq slipped into open revolt quite readily due to the sectarian policies of Shia prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. A powerful Sunni protest movement reflected this openness, and when IS defeated Iraqi government forces on the battlefield, Sunni residents were initially ambivalent, while Sunni elites in IS-controlled areas viewed the outcome opportunistically.

Politicization of the military leadership. When IS advanced to just forty miles outside the capital and captured Fallujah in January 2014, it met with zero military response. When it took Mosul five months later, six Iraqi divisions and numerous local police services disintegrated in under a week. These humiliating failures can be traced to the steady enfeeblement of the Iraqi military leadership, which the Maliki government and its supporting Shia parties had staffed with corrupt political cronies instead of capable professionals.

U.S. withdrawal. The removal of U.S. military forces from Iraq in November 2011 eliminated a key backstop in the fight against IS. First, it left Washington with no way to monitor or ameliorate the corruption of Iraq's military leadership, which accelerated immediately as U.S. forces left command posts. Second, the absence of U.S. advisors spurred the quick collapse of training and logistical support to the Iraqi security forces. Third, after losing the means to accurately gauge IS activity levels via broad intelligence collection on the ground, the Iraqi and U.S. governments fooled themselves into believing the group was finished. Fourth, the proactive hunting of IS leaders and car-bomb workshops ceased once U.S. Special Forces and intelligence capabilities departed, escalating the pattern of urban mass-casualty attacks in 2012-2014.

WHAT HAS CHANGED SINCE 2014?

Fortunately, none of these drivers is back in play in today's Iraq, at least not to the degree seen five years ago. Perhaps most important, the current generation of Sunni Arab adults has essentially given up on armed uprising. They do not appear to be feeding recruits into residual IS activities inside Iraq. Not even the spate of **[recent Shia demonstrations \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/as-protests-explode-iraq-must-get-serious-about-reform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/as-protests-explode-iraq-must-get-serious-about-reform)** in various parts of the country has moved them to major unrest. Sunnis citizens saw what IS did when it ruled their localities: the group's methods were brutal, dictatorial, and ultimately unable to defend them from an eventual flood of Shia militias and wartime destruction. Since then, Sunnis have been cutting any deal they can with militia or government forces just so they can resettle in their villages and have their men serve in local self-defense units. IS still has huge arms caches in Iraq (e.g., scores of suicide vests are found by security forces each month), but the group seemingly lacks the recruits needed to use these weapons or otherwise mount a strong insurgency.

Even so, some of the past drivers could be reactivated due to miscalculations on the ground, and other new drivers are raising serious concerns of their own. Most worrisome is the manner in which political blocs are sabotaging national security through actions such as empowering sectarian militias operating under the cover of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). If left unchecked, these trends will accumulate and eventually trigger another IS resurgence. Two troubling signs are already evident:

Baghdad is degrading its military leadership again. Influenced by pro-Iranian, Shia-led parliamentary factions such as the Badr Organization, the Iraqi government has taken a number of recent steps that threaten to weaken its military. For example, militia leaders have connived in the **[removal of various professional commanders \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/helping-iraq-take-charge-of-its-command-and-control-structure\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/helping-iraq-take-charge-of-its-command-and-control-structure)**, most notably Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi of the Counter Terrorism Service and Maj. Gen. Mahmoud Khalaf al-Falahi of the Anbar Operations Command. Meanwhile, the country's most effective army and counterterrorism forces are seeing a slow degradation of their budgets and political profile, to the benefit of Iran-backed militias.

Coalition forces are being shackled. The U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) has managed to weather a number of political storms in Iraq, and Baghdad seems to recognize that removing international assistance would send it back down the ruinous path of 2011-2014. Yet the task force is being placed under incremental restrictions that limit its effectiveness: Iran-backed militias have used rocket attacks and kidnapping threats to create a more hostile force protection environment for CJTF-OIR advisors; Iran-backed politicians have worked to cut off communication between CJTF-OIR and the U.S.-supported Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces based in the most intense IS operating areas; and coalition forces have had trouble flying drones and providing air support due to excessive airspace restrictions, again conceived by Iran's proxies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. withdrawal from Syria is a very negative development that will force Washington to double its efforts in Iraq. In 2011, U.S. withdrawal opened the way for Baghdad to seriously degrade its military leadership, hollow out its armed forces, and drive the Sunni population toward an uprising. This will happen again if Washington mulls another drawdown or fails to reverse the troubling trends described above. Iraq needs CJTF-OIR now more than ever, and the U.S.-led coalition needs a competent Iraqi partner if it hopes to meet its primary goal of keeping IS at bay. Going forward, the coalition should focus on the following imperatives:

Prevent new Sunni uprisings. Over time, the widows and sons of fallen IS terrorists may decide to join surviving fighters and associates in forming the nucleus of a new uprising. The United States and its large raft of coalition partners can help prevent such a resurgence by pushing the Iraqi government to:

- Permanently hire new Sunni recruits into local security forces, in part by detaching Sunni militias from the PMF
- Professionalize all security forces serving in Sunni areas
- Establish tighter command-and-control over all militias
- Accelerate the resettlement of Sunni Arabs in their home areas
- Release the many hundreds of illegally detained Sunnis, such as those kidnapped by the Iranian-backed terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah and held in its Jurf al-Sakhar base outside Baghdad
(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-in-iraq>)

Protect Iraq's military institutions. The coalition should shield the Iraqi Army and Counter Terrorism Service by pressing Baghdad not to undermine them at the budgetary or leadership levels. CJTF-OIR is a huge donor of security assistance to Iraq, and it must speak with one assertive voice to ensure that Iran-backed political blocs do not divert this assistance in the 2020 budget or otherwise corrode the capacity of the main security forces. Coalition officials should also urge Iraq to build up non-militia border forces facing Syria, and place all militias under a unified command structure led by officers who have been trained at staff colleges and espouse a clear patriotic commitment to Iraq, not to militias or political parties.

Protect CJTF-OIR. The only thing standing between Baghdad and an intensified urban bombing campaign is the U.S.-backed counterterrorism effort carried out by Iraq's professional armed forces. Senior Iraqi and coalition leaders should continue to warn militias against threatening CJTF-OIR, regularly reminding them that foreign advisors have the inherent right to self-defense and will exert it forcefully if necessary. Finally, coalition states should urgently and collectively press Iraq to restore their access to the Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces and ease airspace restrictions.

Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. In 2011-2013, he worked extensively with the U.S. government to present ground-sourced evidence of the IS resurgence. ❖

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