

Reshuffling Iraqi Generals: Who Benefits?

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Brief Analysis

Three top commanders have been replaced in northern areas where Iran-backed militias are trying to outmuscle the regular security forces. Washington should find out why.

On May 29, the Iraqi government announced that its leading military commander in Mosul, Maj. Gen. Najim Abdullah al-Jabbouri, would be retiring in June. Replacing him as head of the Nineveh Operations Command (NiOC) is Staff Maj. Gen. Numan Abdul al-Zubai, who will transfer after briefly leading the Salah al-Din Operations Command. In his place at SaDOC will be Staff Maj. Gen. Abdul Mohsen al-Abbasi, who will vacate the Diyala Operations Command (DOC) to a division commander, Staff Maj. Gen. Ghassan al-Izzi.

The incoming officers are not necessarily bad choices. General Zubai, a Sunni, has a long record fighting the Islamic State (IS) with Iraqi army formations in Anbar province. Unlike his predecessor, he is not a native of Nineveh province, instead hailing from western Baghdad. General Abbasi, a Sunni combat commander from Kirkuk, has considerable experience leading the army's 14th Division near Fallujah. And General Izzi previously led the 11th Division in northeast Baghdad. The one thing all these commanders have in common is that they recently transferred from environments where they had to make daily accommodations with powerful militia leaders.

The circumstances and timing of the changes are more worrisome. General Jabbouri formerly served as police chief and mayor of Tal Afar, where his work alongside U.S. forces in 2005-2008 provided one of the first clear counterinsurgency victories against al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forerunner to IS. After being driven out of the country in

2009 by Shia elements in the security forces, he worked at National Defense University in Washington until 2014. He returned to Iraq in 2015, however, leading the effort to liberate and govern Mosul within his native Nineveh province. Although resented by some personnel for being an air defense officer in a senior army role, he was effective at recruiting local tribes for the anti-IS fight and partnering with the U.S.-led coalition. He also sought to implement the Iraqi government's policy of reducing the threat to local stability posed by Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militia elements in Mosul city and the Nineveh Plains. According to official explanations, he is now being retired due to age, even though many generals older than him have continued to serve.

General Jabbouri's discharge comes at a time when pro-Iranian elements within the predominantly Shia PMF have struck deals with local Sunni and Kurdish partners to elect Mansour Marid—a member of a PMF-associated political bloc—as governor of Sunni-majority Nineveh. This controversial action has split Sunni factions in both the provincial government and Baghdad. Alongside Jabbouri's retirement and the refusal of militias in the Nineveh Plains to comply with legal orders placing them under NiOC's control, the PMF's outsize role in the governor's appointment sends a worrisome message.

After all, this is how Mosul began to rot in 2011-2014, when the city slid downhill from relative stability to IS control. Just days after U.S. forces withdrew in late 2011, Iraq began to remove senior American-trained army officers from key commands. In the two years before Mosul fell, the area's top military officials were replaced no fewer than seven times, and the provincial police chief twice, with each change worse than the last. In contrast, one of former prime minister Haider al-Abadi's first steps upon assuming office in 2014 was to quickly restore Jabbouri and other U.S.-trained commanders, and the result was the liberation of two dozen cities in just three years.

Washington has a stake in Iraq's security, particularly in the leadership of the regular military forces, America's most important partners in the war against IS. The U.S. government should therefore devote more effort to early warning and assessment of senior command changes in Iraq, especially multiple replacements of officers with a proven track record of fighting IS or preventing its reemergence. The Combined Joint Task Force and the U.S. embassy should regularly report to Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi if new commanders give special favor to militias, are less cooperative than their predecessors, or refuse legal orders from Baghdad.

The Iraqi army's efforts to absorb and control militias in the Nineveh Plains may be an early test of success on this front. Learning who pushed the decision to remove Jabbouri—and why—is another important item to track down. Looking closely at the [Kurdistan Democratic Party's role in selecting Nineveh's new governor \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-kurdistan-chooses-a-new-president-but-internal-rifts-deepen\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-kurdistan-chooses-a-new-president-but-internal-rifts-deepen) may provide further insight on the reliability of U.S. partners. Only by doggedly highlighting negative conduct can Washington hope to prevent slippage in Iraq's military and civil leadership.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, has spent considerable time since 2003 embedded with the Iraqi security forces. Alexandre Mello is the lead security analyst at energy advisory service Horizon Client Access. ❖

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