

Playing Politics With Boots on the Ground

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For many factions operating in Iraq, defeating the Islamic State is not priority number one.

The issue of sovereignty is a sensitive one in any country but particularly so in the Middle East. Governments have been critically weakened over the issue of allowing foreign troops too much leeway: for instance, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini made devastating use of the 1964 U.S.-Iranian status of forces agreement, which he claimed "reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog."

In Iraq, the scene of a prolonged occupation by a U.S.-led coalition, the government has recently pushed back on the presence of both U.S. and Turkish "boots on the ground," citing sovereignty concerns. But in both cases, the presence of such troops was nothing new: instead the controversy tells us more about the internal politicking between Iraqi Shia factions and how Iraqi groups and their foreign backers care more about the local power balance than defeating the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

A clash over the return of U.S. troops has been a long time coming. In June 2011, just months before the full withdrawal of U.S. military forces, Iran-backed militias killed 16 Americans to drive home the point that U.S. forces must leave.

Waking Nightmare for Iran

The return of U.S. and other Western forces to Iraq is like a waking nightmare for Iran and her proxies in Iraq, notably Badr, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

These militias (and others such as Muqtada al-Sadr's followers) have been levying threats against the 3,500-strong U.S. presence ever since it returned in 2014, threatening to kill U.S. advisers if they have crossed red lines such as in

the establishment of U.S.-only bases or the direct U.S. arming of Kurdish or Sunni Arab paramilitaries without Baghdad's involvement.

Most recently the Iranian-backed groups have started a sustained push to replace the U.S.-led coalition with Russia and Iran. This has included unsuccessful efforts to transfer the overall command post for the war from the Combined Joint Operations Centre (collocated with the coalition) to a new intelligence-sharing centre housing representatives from Iraq, the Shia militias, Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

Recent events have played into the hands of the groups trying to knock the U.S.-led coalition out of Iraq. On October 22, U.S. special forces took part in a Kurdish raid in Hawija, resulting in one U.S. soldier being killed, and since then other evidence has emerged of U.S. special forces sporadically undertaking sniper and mortar attacks on ISIL forces along the Kurdish front line.

On November 29, U.S. Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham visited Iraq and publicly touted ideas for an expanded U.S. presence of 10,000 personnel as part of a multinational ground force to counter ISIL and "to neutralise the Shia militia advantage to some extent," Graham noted

Backlash From Iranian-Backed Groups

These comments coincided with comments by U.S. Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter on December 1 that Washington would deploy "a specialised expeditionary targeting force to assist Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces...able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture [ISIL] leaders."

Though the Iraqi government was fully supportive on the special forces unit, one of a number of such groups already operating with Iraqi permission, the backlash from Badr and other Iranian-backed groups was sufficiently fierce that Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was forced to clarify his position on December 2, noting: "There is no need for foreign ground combat troops. Any such support and special operations anywhere in Iraq can only be deployed subject to the approval of the Iraqi government."

Later Abadi went further, adding that the Iraqi government "would deal with the presence of foreign ground troops in Iraq as though their presence were a hostile act and a violation of Iraq's national sovereignty."

Abadi has also been drawn into a serious dispute with Turkey since the media announced the presence of 150 to 200 newly added Turkish troops plus heavy equipment at a training base inside the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. These forces were deployed to the Zilkan base in November to join about 30 Turkish trainers who had already been working at the base since 2014 to train Arab policemen to take part in the recapture of nearby Mosul city.

In one of Iraq's quiet complexities, the Saddam regime and subsequent Shia-led governments have tolerated a large 15,000-strong Turkish ground force presence in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) area and constant Turkish aerial incursions since the early 1990s.

As long as the Turks were keeping Kurdish interests in check, there was little opposition to this presence from Baghdad. But Baghdad has become more critical of the presence since Turkey's role shifted to alliance with the KRG.

'A Violation of Iraq's Sovereignty'

On July 30, Abadi referred to Turkish air strikes on Kurdistan Workers Party sites inside the Kurdish region of northern Iraq as "a violation of Iraq's sovereignty." The addition of 150-200 troops plus 35 armoured vehicles at Zilkan led Abadi to declare on December 6 that the presence was a "serious breach of Iraqi sovereignty" and that Turkey needed to withdraw within 48 hours or face "all available options," including recourse to the UN Security Council.

The Turkish case is illustrative of the role that politics plays in the sovereignty debate. The October 22 Hawija raid

caused outrage among supporters of the Iranian-backed militias but at no point did such supporters seek to place any restrictions on the combat role played by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force or Lebanese Hezbollah special forces in Iraq.

Iran's proxies like Badr have established a parallel security sector with little connection to the constitutional Iraqi chain of command.

In contrast, U.S. President Barack Obama underlined that on April 16 the U.S. was committed to working exclusively through the Abadi government, noting "any foreign assistance that is helping to defeat [ISIL] has to go through the Iraqi government. That's how you respect Iraqi sovereignty."

Washington has consistently infuriated proponents of directly arming the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs by funnelling all its military aid via Baghdad.

What the current commotion over sovereignty and "boots on the ground" tells us is that many of the factions fighting ISIL have more urgent priorities than defeating the terrorist movement.

For groups such as Badr, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the urgency of defeating ISIL is low because the predominantly Shia areas cannot be overrun by ISIL any more.

The key fear for Badr and other Iranian proxies is now that ISIL will be dealt a series of defeats by rival forces -- the government of Iraq, the Iraqi army, the Peshmerga and the U.S.-led coalition.

This is what happened at Tikrit. This is what will happen at Ramadi and eventually Mosul as well. Groups such as Badr have an urgent imperative to drive out the U.S.-led coalition before the credit for victory goes to Abadi and the mainstream Shia political and religious establishment.

The Iran-backed groups are increasingly fighting "the next war" -- the struggle for control of Iraq -- before this war is even over.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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