Devils You Don't Know

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The Iraqi government's fight against ISIS is less important than how it deals with the impending economic crisis and the complex political and sectarian issues that drive the country's various militias.

The following Q&A with Dr. Knights originally appeared on the blog Post-War Watch **(http://postwarwatch.com/2015/09/08/devils-you-dont-know/)** *.*

Q: Over the last month Iraq has witnessed widespread popular unrest, sparked by Baghdad's inability to provide adequate electricity during the hottest summer months. Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi responded by announcing a series of sweeping reforms on 9 August. Yet the country has experienced protests over the systemic inadequacy of service delivery before. How does the current crisis illuminate underlying power dynamics driving Iraqi powerbrokers?

A: Something different is happening this year from what happened during previous summer electricity crises. A fairly substantial-looking raft of reforms has been rolled out, while in the past Iraq emerged from similar summers with no lasting changes in government structure or practices.

This year is unique due to the relative unity of groups that support reform. A range of Shia conservative figures and factions have pulled together to fight common threats: Iranian-backed militia elements like Kata'ib Hizbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, political parties like the Badr Organization, and elements of the Dawa Party still loyal to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. All these entities have started to present a critical threat to the Shia political and religious mainstream. There is a good chance that these elements could gain a high level of momentum in the upcoming 2017 provincial and 2018 national elections, and might ride on the coattails of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units, or PMU) phenomenon.

In this fashion they could very well change the balance of power within the Shia political establishment --

overpowering key players like Haidar al-Abadi's larger side of the Dawa Party, sidelining groups like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and overshadowing the core parts of Muqtada al-Sadr's movement. It is not unlikely that a range of younger, militant, Iran-backed Shia clerics could grow in prominence through the PMU. Their rise could provide the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps an opportunity to become a permanent part of the security system in Iraq.

These clerics and the political forces from which they draw support could present a long-term threat to the religious establishment (Hawza) in Najaf and Karbala. They could one day change the system of religious governance in Iraq, from the current quietist version backed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and other members of the Najaf Hawza, to something resembling the Khomeinist Vilayet-e Faqih model seen in Iran. Ultimately, this summer's movement did not represent an Arab Spring style uprising. Rather it appeared as a series of linked protests -- boosted significantly by some genuinely nationalist and liberal elements in Baghdad -- but primarily supported by the Shia religious leaders in Najaf. The real story behind these uprisings is that the Shia political and religious establishment wanted to pre-empt a power grab by the up-and-coming Iran-backed elements in the country.

Q: Although government forces appear powerless to reverse Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) advances, the PMU have experienced success in partially reversing ISIS advances. They have attracted large numbers of unemployed young Shias, who could measure their gains against the shortcomings of politicians locked within the Green Zone. Many of these youth are now at the forefront of current demonstrations. What political role are the PMU assuming in Iraq, and how are various faction leaders influencing the central government's decisionmaking?

A: There is a wide variety of military forces under the PMU umbrella, or ancillary to the PMU, but which undertake similar types of roles. The PMU is a formal commission of the Prime Minister's office, with a segment of the 2015 national budget devoted to it. Groups that are both within and without this governmental institution are taking "popular mobilization" against ISIS.

Some groups covered by the budget are associated with the Shrine Foundations in Najaf and Karbala. These entities are quite sizeable-- well over 10,000 personnel under arms -- and are funded in part by the Prime Minister's commission, but also by religious tithes. These "Shrine Militia" are working alongside the US-led coalition; they are not as well armed as some of the other PMU elements, and are under the command and control of religious foundations in Najaf and Karbala. From the Western perspective they are considered moderate and trustworthy.

Other PMU elements are associated with militia or terrorist movements that killed many US, UK, and other coalition soldiers between 2003 and 2011. These organizations have funding from the Prime Minister's commission, but also receive money directly from the Iranian Government through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- along with heavy weapons, light weapons, directly-embedded trainers, and Iranian air support. A number of IRGC commanders have been killed fighting alongside these PMU. This support from a neighboring country is what makes Kata'ib Hizbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Militias so militarily effective, able to undertake offensive operations against ISIS. They are thus very attractive for young Iraqis: not only do they provide a reliable paycheck, but they produce slick propaganda, enjoy good equipment, and are incredibly easy to join. Unlike in the Iraqi Army, these militias have fairly lax discipline. They are dynamic-looking institutions, unlike the old and tired formal Iraqi armed forces. Finally, their fighters are not held accountable under the same military code of justice as true soldiers.

Militarily the PMU have been involved in a number of stout defensive actions in which they held their ground. The fact that Samarra did not fall, and that Baghdad was never seriously assaulted by ISIS, was due to the PMU. Diyala was largely recaptured; Jurf al-Sakhr was liberated from ISIS; the Shia pilgrimage routes remained open during Ashura and Arba'een; Karbala and Najaf have remained safe -- these are all PMU successes. However, they cannot win every battle in which they are fighting: PMU elements are currently struggling to push ahead in Baiji; they were

unable to retake Tikrit until the Iraqi Army and international air forces stepped in; and they are not leading the fight for Ramadi.

These successes and failures are not the product of one "type" of PMU or another. The organization is mixed. Today there is almost no battlefield on which only one militia or category of militias is operating. The Badr Organization has the strongest PMU forces in the Diyala River Valley and along the Baghdad-Kirkuk Road; Moqtada al-Sadr's forces are strong in Baghdad, Samarra, Najaf, and Karbala; Shrine Militias are very strong around the holy cities and in the flank towards al-Anbar province. Kata'ib Hizbollah and Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq are dotted around many different battlefields, either playing or claiming to play a leading role there. The Abadi government has generally been able to generate a degree of control over PMU elements and subordinate them to his broad action plan. Tikrit was the best example of this ability; in the western Euphrates River Valley, the PMU has only played a limited supporting role.

In Baghdad, however, the situation is more interesting and complex. Most of Iraq's combat strength -- well over half of the Army and Federal Police brigades -- is concentrated very close to the capital and its rural outlying districts. The Islamic State is not constantly threatening to overrun or penetrate Baghdad in a serious way. Rather, there is no trust that the federal security forces could push north or west while leaving the PMU to maintain control in the capital. The Government understands that it needs to maintain substantial military force to over-ensure Baghdad's security, so that nobody will mistake the PMU for the primary security force in the country. The entire war against ISIS is being shaped by the fact that there is considerable tension between the PMU and Federal Government. This rivalry is handicapping progress toward Mosul or up the western Euphrates River Valley.

Q: Since the June 2014 ISIS incursion into Mosul, the Shiite political leadership has seen its legitimacy plunge as it proved impotent against ISIS takeovers of Sunni-populated areas. How can Abadi's current legislative moves be contextualized within his broader attempts to reassert control over the current situation?

A: Abadi's reform efforts are a complex mix of different initiatives, each one of them pushed forward by distinct motivations. Many itches are being scratched in one big reform process that is similar to a ball of string -- it is very difficult to untangle.

First, there is an anti-corruption drive. This effort might mark the beginning of a genuine anti-corruption program, but it is more likely to get used in a targeted, factional way. Many of the people who should be removed -- but are very close to Abadi's wing of the Dawa Party -- will remain. Many of those who are disposable -- such as Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Baha Araji -- will be easy to expel. A great number of Abadi's enemies -- people who are loyal to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or some of the less acquiescent PMU, for example -- will also be among the first targeted by anti-corruption measures. Perhaps after these figures are replaced Abadi's government might conduct more non-factional investigations.

Second, Abadi's plan includes a set of military reforms, which are quite patchwork and unintegrated. Put alongside each other, though, several common themes emerge: to get rid of old, ineffective leadership in combat, logistical, and administrative positions; to identify and remove "ghost soldiers" who do not exist except on the payroll; and to strip out the massive private security details employed by key politicians. This last policy will essentially generate more than 10,000 armed, military age males who can be rolled into the state's armed forces. Alongside these strategies aimed at trimming away military waste, the government re-instituted the military code of justice for commanders who were derelict in their duties during the battles of Mosul and Ramadi, thus creating a price for ineptitude.

Third, Baghdad aims to establish a set of austerity measures. These efforts, which will take longest to unfold, will be encapsulated in the 2016 budget. Abadi is preparing the Iraqi people for a tough budget based on a very conservative oil price -- Oil Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi stated it might be as low as $40 per barrel, that is, the same sort of prices as

in August 2015 (with the discounts Baghdad puts on its oil, the August price was $39 per barrel). Hopefully these prices will rise, but the government cannot count on that happening. Likewise it is building a budget based on a conservative amount of oil export -- perhaps as low as 3 million barrels each day. Last year's budget was based on an export volume of 3.3 million barrels at $56 per barrel, each day.

Although the 2016 budget is much smaller -- 3 million barrels per day, at $40 per barrel -- the government hopes it will not need to make swinging cuts to employment or public services. By addressing public administration inefficiencies it is possible to make do with less revenue, as has been proven in the last few years. And when a third of the country is under ISIS control, that means a third of the country does not generate many costs. Similarly, when ministries and provinces are unable to execute more than 80 percent of their yearly budget -- and often much less -- perhaps there is no need for 100 percent of the sums hitherto allocated there.

Abadi has stated that Iraq will face a tough 2016 budget, but his first action was to cut his own and his minister's salaries by 40 to 50 percent, along with those of inner circle government workers by 30 to 40 percent. He also reduced the cabinet's size from 33 to 22 posts, and eliminated three Deputy Prime Minister positions and two Vice President roles. Ultimately, he is indicating that austerity must start at the top of government before he asks his people to themselves suffer a bit of pain to put the economy on the right track. For example, electricity price reforms might mean that an average Iraqi would have to pay more for his electricity. At the moment electricity is so heavily subsidized that it is a massive drain on the national economy. If Iraqis pay even a fraction of what is paid in other countries across the region, they could help restore the country's capacity to provide adequate power.

These three baskets of reform -- anti-corruption, military, and austerity -- complement a web of administrative and parliamentary alterations. Some of these policies are commonsensical: for example, MP's who miss too many parliamentary sessions can now be dismissed. Others, however, are more interesting. On 27 August Parliament unanimously passed the Political Parties Law, which would put limits on who could form parties, where they receive financing, and what activities they are authorized to undertake. On the other hand, this law expands the definition of de-Baathification to include extremely junior Baath Party members. These individuals will be banned in perpetuity from forming political parties. Even if they are extremely moderate Sunni Arabs from Tikrit, for instance, who want to form a liberal democratic party, they are banned from such action. This aspect offsets the positive functions the law has to limit abuse in the political system.

Q: The relationship between the PMU and the United States has been tense. What opportunities exist for American policymakers and military leaders to engage with these various militia organizations, both within and without the central state framework?

A: The United States is committed to working through the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Prime Minister's Office. For example, there are good reasons to send weapons directly to the Kurds. Yet the US Government has gone the extra mile to ensure that all shipments are routed via Baghdad Airport, where they can be inspected by the Defense Ministry.

There have already been high levels of cooperation between Washington and various PMU elements. Sometimes American officials will refer to these groups as "good PMU" -- the Shrine Militias and elements of Moqtada al-Sadr's movement. These groups have a level of understanding with US and international coalition members with regard to military operations and cooperation. Take, for instance, the problem of coalition air support for the PMU. If a US warplane accidentally hits one of these units, will the militia understand that collateral damage incidents occur during times of war, or will they claim such an accident as proof of American malevolence and retaliate? There needs to be a level of trust before Washington will engage with a given PMU group.

The US also works on battlefields where other unfriendly PMU are operating. Washington will be loath to provide

direct air support to these units. However, it will work with the Iraqi government headquarters covering a given sector of battle, which can direct US air support to parts of the Army or Federal Police while keeping American warplanes away from "bad" PMU areas. This method was used during the operations in Tikrit, for example.

Q: The crisis in Iraq represents part of a larger international conflict, sweeping across neighboring Syria and threatening to directly affect Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, among other actors. What metrics can analysts use to measure military and political progress inside Iraq?

A: The defeat of ISIS is arguably one of the least important problems facing the Iraqi government today. There are several broad challenges that should take priority. First among these concerns is the impending economic crisis that threatens the ability to create any lasting stability post-ISIS. How can the Iraqi government move from barely funding itself at $100 per barrel to doing so at $50 per barrel or less, perhaps forever?

Second, the PMU phenomenon and resultant factional battles could undermine Baghdad's ability to establish cohesive leadership across the country. These dynamics could shape the future of Shia Iraq: either the Federal Government maintains control, or Iraq could experience a movement similar to Iran's Islamic Revolution, albeit more slow-burning. How might Iraqi leaders prevent or manage such a transformation?

Third, the Iraqi Kurds may separate from the Iraqi state. Under what circumstances can Iraq and the Kurds live next to each other without necessarily living one under the other?

The answers to these questions are at least as important as the solution to defeating ISIS.

Q: Although Iraqi actors have seemed content to patiently degrade the country's primary enemy, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition is in a different posture at the moment. Airstrikes are more frequent and ISIS has had to adjust its operational tempo in response. What challenges exist in terms of coordinating both the desires and operations of foreign military actors with Iraqi abilities or strategy?

A: The Iraqis have fought just about as hard as they could from the beginning of the current conflict. The US and its coalition partners, however, have been extremely restrained in their operations. Whether American officials authorize eight airstrikes per day or 20, the result is still pathetic. The Iraqis are not overwhelmed by such limited military assistance. Baghdad realizes that neither the US nor its partners care enough about this war, and is thus looking for allies who do care. In Iran they seemingly have found one. The recent American delivery of F-16s is a tangible symbol, at least; the battle for Ramadi is heating up. Yet these efforts will likely only return Washington to the point at which it started in March 2015.

Mosul presents the most difficult coordination challenge. Yes, the city is a complex battlefield comprising multiple ethno-sectarian groups; it is very far from Baghdad, and 12 times as large as Tikrit and three times as large as Ramadi. However, these factors are not the primary problem. The future battle for Mosul will be such a huge undertaking simply because no group truly wants to go there. There is no organization willing to lose 2,000 casualties to liberate the city. As a result, the international coalition will probably have to play a leading role pumping up enthusiasm for the fight in Mosul, and making the battle achievable enough that conventional actors will feel it worthwhile to recapture it. And only then will Baghdad confront all the other political and social challenges to getting there, winning the fight, and devising a post-liberation plan for reconstruction.

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