No One Talks About Liberating Mosul Anymore

by **Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)**

Aug 11, 2015
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/lam-yd-ahd-ythdth-n-thryr-almwsl)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)

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.

Articles & Testimony

It's time to let the U.S. military get creative with partners on the ground in Iraq, and let the Air Force unleash its full capabilities against ISIS.

As the Iraqi military fights grinding village-by-village battles in western Anbar province, gaining little more than hundreds of feet on good days, there is no doubt that the war in Iraq against the Islamic State is slowing down. The best that can be reasonably expected in 2015 is the stabilization of the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. No one even talks about liberating Iraq's second-most populous city, Mosul, anymore. At this rate, the United States will still be in Iraq when U.S. President Barack Obama leaves office -- an outcome no one, especially the president, wants.

The dominant explanations of this state of affairs focus on Obama's reticence to commit the necessary level of resources to defeat the Islamic State more quickly, or the inability of Iraqis to make good use of international support in the war effort. It is in some ways comforting to believe that the problems of this war are caused by a reluctant president or inept allies. The truth, however, is even more disturbing: The U.S. military has not been the ally it could be, because of its lack of imagination and flexibility.

From the beginning, the Pentagon has struggled to execute its mission of degrading and defeating the Islamic State in Iraq. "Leading from behind" is actually pretty difficult, and one of the U.S. military's key failings is that it remains stuck in a time warp where it is 2007, and it has 185,000 troops spread across every area in the country. Today's reality is different: There are only around 3,000 U.S. forces in Iraq, and they must mostly stay "within the wire" on secure bases.

The post-2014 U.S. presence in Iraq looks more like the small special operations forces outposts that have been used in the global war against terrorism, yet U.S. actions in Iraq have been shaped by the conventional military thinking of U.S. Central Command, or Centcom, led by Gen. Lloyd Austin. The Pentagon has continued to pursue massive train-

and-equip efforts even when it lacks the resources to complete its mission, and remains too inflexible to use its air power to its maximum effect. The conventional military approach has created a false dichotomy for Obama: Either the United States needs to ramp up its commitment massively, the argument went, or rely on the current resource level and take it slow.

One of Centcom's earliest initiatives was to push for an early attempt to liberate Mosul, the Islamic State's capital in Iraq. The Mosul-first strategy resulted in a big, clunky train-and-equip program aimed at building entirely new Iraqi Army assault brigades for Mosul. The Defense Department used a "cookie-cutter" approach to design the $1.6 billion Iraq Train and Equip Fund, a scaled-down version of the massive U.S. programs that created Iraqi duplicates of U.S. brigades in 2005-2008.

The ITEF, however, has underperformed -- only 9,000 of 24,000 troops that were due to be trained and equipped by June 2015 have actually been trained. This is in part because the United States is not back in 2005: It has neither the resources nor the time for a slow, trial-by-error approach to building whole units.

ITEF envisaged building very complex U.S.-style brigades, all of which would be supplied by whole sets of equipment provided by the United States. The Iraqis, however, signaled they could not absorb or maintain so much new equipment due to their rudimentary logistical capabilities. Much of the equipment the United States promised, meanwhile, was not even in its excess inventory -- for instance, only around 9,000 of the needed 43,200 M4 rifles can be found in U.S. stocks.

By adopting a big, clunky train-and-equip effort, the Pentagon has been hampered by its own procedural weaknesses. An extraordinarily bureaucratic model was established to execute ITEF acquisition of equipment from excess U.S. defense stocks, U.S. equipment manufacturers, and foreign vendors. As a result, equipment has dribbled into Iraq -- months late, in many cases -- holding up the fielding of new units.

CONSTRAINING AMERICAN AIR POWER

Air power is America's secret sauce: Nobody opens up a can of whoop-ass like U.S. combat aviators. But for the last year, the most powerful air force in the world has been hamstrung in Iraq by a combination of strict rules of engagement and too few trusted on-the-ground spotters for airstrikes.

The United States only assesses small numbers of U.S.-trained Iraqi and Kurdish special forces as trustworthy enough to designate targets. The power to call in American airstrikes, after all, is not something it wants to hand out lightly -- the Pentagon needs to know that Iraqis are not using American airpower to settle personal scores.

When these Iraqi or Kurdish special forces deploy to provide ground-level close observation, U.S. airpower can be devastatingly effective. But such instances only account for a tiny proportion of firefights. On Aug. 3, for instance, coalition airpower intervened in eight places in Iraq while the war raged across a more than 1,200-mile front line.

The real challenge to U.S. air power comes when the Islamic State has the initiative -- as they often do -- and America's allies try to call in help. That's when they fall victim to a lack of on-the-ground intelligence and restrictive rules of engagement. The resulting bottleneck means that troops in contact with the Islamic State are trying to suck an ocean of air support through a tiny straw.

The technical challenge of this war is how to provide flexible, "unpartnered" close-air support wherever the Islamic State is attacking allied ground forces. ("Unpartnered" is a military term of art for strikes when U.S. airstrike controllers are not on the ground.) Somehow, the United States needs to get more eyes on ground who are trusted enough to tell the U.S. Air Force to release weapons when its allies need help the most.

This is a problem that's not going away. Even if Obama or a future president does deploy U.S. special operators to Iraq, they will never have the coverage that 185,000 U.S. troops once provided. In future wars, a shrinking U.S. Army

and reduced tolerance for troop losses may make "unpartnered" strikes increasingly common. This makes it especially vital to find an innovative way to feed reliable data from on-the-ground sensors to U.S. warplanes fighting the Islamic State. This could mean building vetted Iraqi "air weapons teams," capable of embedding with a multitude of different types of unit -- Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga, and even vetted elements of the predominately Shiite Popular Mobilization Units and Sunni tribal fighters.

With more on-the-ground intelligence, the United States also needs to loosen its rules of engagement to allow the U.S. military to take calculated risks to save Iraqi lives. In Ramadi, restrictions on airstrikes limited the effectiveness of U.S. air power -- and subsequently hundreds of Iraqi men were executed in areas lost to the Islamic State. Do Washington's strict rules of engagement really avoid civilian deaths, or just avoid direct U.S. culpability for civilian deaths?

The U.S. military needs to get creative. This could mean adapting simple, off-the-shelf materials such as GoPro headcams, voice links, and GPS devices so vetted Iraqi and Kurdish special forces can give the coalition a ground-eye view of the battlefield. This is exactly what Pentagon initiatives like the Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Agency are supposed to do -- meet urgent operational requirements, as the JIDA website says, "with tactical responsiveness and anticipatory acquisition."

BECOMING A BETTER ALLY

U.S. civilian leaders need to encourage the Pentagon to do better -- but at the same time, America's military leaders need to think more creatively about how to speed up the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq. Big units and big programs should give way to more targeted assistance and innovation in niche areas, perhaps involving a greater role for solutions crafted by the U.S. special operations forces community. Iraq's leaders would welcome most, if not all, of these ideas.

Quick, affordable battlefield innovation is in the DNA of the U.S. military. When U.S. troops faced the 10-foot-tall hedgerows in Normandy in 1944, they welded blades to the tanks so they could go through the hedgerows without exposing the weak armor on the belly of the tanks to German weaponry.

That innovation is still in the U.S. military's DNA. The Pentagon adapted and innovated to gain success in Iraq half a decade ago during the "surge" and the counter-IED war. It's not too late to do it again.

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

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)