

Why Drip-Feeding U.S. Support Won't Work in Iraq

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Jun 5, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/lmadha-ln-tnjh-syast-altnqyt-fy-twryd-almasadat-alamrykyt-fy-araq\)](#)

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

Without more decisive steps and a greater commitment of forces, the United States cannot expect to achieve its goals against the Islamic State.

In Paris this week, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken gave us his vision of the war effort: It will be a long war, but the right strategy is in place, and Washington is going to "redouble our efforts."

That last point is exactly the problem. The United States is constantly redoubling its efforts, because it's drip-feeding support to Iraq at a time when its enemy, the Islamic State -- and its competitors, Iran's militant proxies -- are outperforming Washington by a long shot.

The U.S. campaign in Iraq since 2014 has been a study in too little, too late half-measures that do not actually save American resources in the long term. Instead, Washington just ends up needing to deepen its investment anyway -- only, each time its allies trust it a little less, thousands more Iraqis have died, and irreplaceable communities and cultural artifacts have been lost forever.

Time is decidedly not on the side of the United States. As then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told me in March 2014, the Iraqi government had been requesting U.S. airstrikes and Special Forces assistance against the Islamic State since the end of 2013. The U.S. unwillingness to act then did not save it anything: Its Iraqi ally collapsed, and now it has been forced into another military campaign.

When U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter opined that Iraqis "showed no will to fight" in Ramadi, he demonstrated a complete lack of empathy for the situation of the Iraqi combat troops on the front lines against the Islamic State.

America's Iraqi allies are exhausted, and many units are barely hanging on. They've been demonstrating plenty their "will to fight" in the 12 months since Mosul fell, in the 16 months since Fallujah and Ramadi were overrun, and in the

decade since Iraqi forces came to outnumber U.S. forces as the main security force in Iraq.

No U.S. service member serving in Iraq ever had to stay in the combat zone for as long as the Iraqi troops have. Many of these Iraqis have no safe place to go on leave, allowing no respite for years on end. No U.S. unit in recent history has ever had to suffer the chronic lack of supply and near-complete lack of good officers that Iraqi soldiers live with every day.

If the United States can totally misunderstand the conditions its allies are experiencing, it's fair to ask what else it is getting wrong about how Iraqis are going to behave in the future.

America's Faulty Assumptions About Iraq

Assumption 1: *The more we do, the less they do.* President Barack Obama seemed to support this idea when he told the *New York Times*'s Thomas Friedman last year that, while the U.S. military can "keep a lid on a problem" for a long time, Iraqis themselves "have to make decisions about how they are going to live together." This might be true over the long term, but it bears no relation to today's battlefield realities in Iraq.

The reality today is that battalion- and brigade-level combat advising by embedded U.S. and international special operations forces is urgently needed to restore the offensive capabilities of the Iraqi units in Anbar. Providing Western airpower without Special Forces airstrike controllers is like lending someone your Porsche without giving them the keys. A presidential decision on the intensified commitment of U.S. Special Forces in Iraq is needed urgently.

Assumption 2: The Islamic State is a terrorist group, not an army. The White House likes standoff counterterrorism campaigns involving armed drones and raids that leave practically no U.S. footprint in the affected countries. But the Islamic State is not a cluster of terrorist cells that can be removed with surgical strikes. As some U.S. officials have been saying from day one, it is an army that needs to be defeated on the battlefield if its appeal and recruitment potential are to be shattered.

U.S. Special Forces should focus on helping Iraq win on the battlefield -- not just conducting raids on the Islamic State's senior leadership, as if Iraq were Pakistan's tribal areas. That means embedding U.S. Special Forces with Iraqi units and accepting some risk. The White House has to decide: Are we just pretending to support Iraqi forces on the battlefield, or are we really willing to do what needs to be done to defeat the Islamic State?

Assumption 3: We cannot want the stability of Iraq more than Iraqis want it themselves. As Obama said in that same interview with the *New York Times*, "We cannot do for [the Iraqis] what they are unwilling to do for themselves." However, if the U.S. continues to drip-feed its support, each Iraqi faction will take the easiest path toward achieving its own short-term interests.

In many cases, this will also be the most destructive path: The government in Baghdad will intensify its reliance on external actors like Iran and Russia, and the Kurds will continue to edge out of Iraq because the last remaining centripetal force holding them in the country -- their share of federal government oil revenues -- is being withheld by Baghdad. Sunni communities, meanwhile, are being forced to make an agonizing choice every day -- between sitting on the fence and daring to fight the Islamic State, even as the Americans vacillate and the Iraqi government shows no sign of being able to win the war. As a well-intentioned outsider to the conflict, the United States can often take a longer-term view of stability than do Iraqis themselves -- in other words, we often *do* want stability in Iraq more than Iraqi factions.

What "the Former Iraq" Might Look Like

Let's be clear: If current trends persist, there is no reason to believe the Islamic State will be defeated any time soon. In fact, Iraq could become an even greater nightmare for its citizens, the region, and the world in the years

ahead.

If the strategy remains the same, it is not hard to project what Arab Iraq will look like by the time the Obama administration leaves office in early 2017. The Islamic State will probably maintain its grip on Mosul, large swathes of Anbar, as well as the Jazira desert that lies between them -- not to mention its extensive territory in Syria -- providing it a major terrorist safe haven in the heart of the Middle East.

The Shiite-led government in Baghdad will have focused its limited military resources on securing the Shiite heartland -- Baghdad, the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, and oil-rich southern Iraq. Where Sunnis live inside the Shiite core, they will be ghettoized, a mirror image of the Shiite townships in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. A colonization zone will extend around all the Baghdad suburbs, Diyala, and Salah al-Din, in which predominantly Shiite paramilitary forces limit Sunni resettlement.

There will be a range of satellite Sunni protectorates in places like Tikrit and Ramadi, with the Baghdad government's relationship to them somewhat akin to Israel's relationship with the Palestinians. Sometimes relations will be mildly cooperative, with federal Iraq providing support and money to local allies -- but sometimes it won't be, resulting in political meddling, military incursions, and airstrikes. Further out, there will be the true Islamic State-controlled badlands -- most of all Mosul, a city that nobody bothered to liberate, because neither the Shiites, nor the Sunnis, nor the Kurds, nor the Americans were sufficiently committed to risk blood and treasure there. The United States will still be gamely drone-striking targets, with no end in sight and the Islamic State hitting back through lone-wolf attacks and airliner plots.

Sounds incredible? The incredible happens every day in today's Middle East, and these developments will be the new grim reality in just two years, if the United States does not raise its game.

Deliberation or Paralysis?

Is this really what President Barack Obama's administration wants to hand off to the next president?

If America is only in Iraq to kill Islamic State fighters, it is eventually going to face the reality of an unfixable collapsed state that will demand an open-ended counterterrorism campaign. The alternative is that the United States help Iraqis preserve the fabric of their nation to whatever extent is still possible. To do so will require a different outlook and greater decisiveness. Deliberation is understandable, but U.S. policy in Iraq has been verging on paralysis.

This is not rocket science: The U.S. options are clear. If the Obama administration wants to fully commit to the hard work of rebuilding Iraq, it should commit 3,000 to 5,000 U.S. Special Forces and support elements as combat advisers, so that Iraqi ground forces and coalition airpower can become far more effective. Secondly, it should use this intensified U.S. military commitment as leverage with Baghdad to win more sustained federal Iraqi government engagement of the Sunnis and the Kurds. Finally, it should accelerate the training of Iraqi forces to leave the next president with a better chance of responsibly downscaling the U.S. commitment in Iraq.

Without these steps, we should not expect to expel the Islamic State from Iraq. In the absence of undeniable U.S. commitment, our Iraqi allies may define victory down into something that looks more like defeat. And that is a risk that neither Iraq nor the United States can afford.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute and author of its January 2015 report [The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-long-haul-rebooting-u.s.-security-cooperation-in-iraq) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-long-haul-rebooting-u.s.-security-cooperation-in-iraq>). This article originally appeared on the [Foreign Policy](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/05/doubling-down-on-a-doubtful-strategy-iraq-islamic-state-isis/?utm_content=buffer0cebfb&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer) (http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/05/doubling-down-on-a-doubtful-strategy-iraq-islamic-state-isis/?utm_content=buffer0cebfb&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer).

[website \(http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/05/doubling-down-on-a-doubtful-strategy-iraq-islamic-state-isis/?utm_content=buffer0ceb&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer\)](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/05/doubling-down-on-a-doubtful-strategy-iraq-islamic-state-isis/?utm_content=buffer0ceb&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer) with the title "Doubling Down on a Doubtful Strategy." ❖

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)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-
analysis/iraq)