

The Fight Against ISIS: Shiite Militias and the Coalition Effort

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Brief Analysis

A longtime expert on military affairs, a researcher on Shiite militias, and a retired U.S. Army colonel discuss optimal partners for defeating ISIS and the heavy risks associated with allowing Iran-associated actors to expand their influence.

On February 6, 2015, Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth, and P.J. Dermer addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Knights is an Institute Lafer Fellow and author of the Institute study [The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq](#) (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus137_Knights4.pdf). Smyth is a researcher at the University of Maryland and author of the Institute study [The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects](#) (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138_Smyth-2.pdf). Dermer is a retired U.S. Army colonel who served multiple tours in the Middle East, including two in Iraq. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Michael Knights

The war against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq is winnable, and the United States is now on a slow trajectory toward victory. The current order of battle for Iraqi forces has most of its troops concentrated in and around Baghdad. Fewer than 10,000 troops can deploy over long distances, and Iraqi forces generally lack combat-effective brigades. These factors make the U.S. train-and-equip program for nine brigades vital for future operations, particularly the eventual operation to retake Mosul.

While ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, will eventually be rolled back based on the current trajectory, the key question is: "What if we defeat ISIS but lose Iraq in the process?" The numerous Iran-backed militia groups fighting ISIS have the capacity to overtake Iraq's security sector, leading to a "Hezbollahization" of Iraq as a proxy for Iran. As during the Yalta Conference in 1945, the United States is now in the middle of a war and must ask tough questions about how the war ends, why it's fighting, who its allies are, and how these allies will act when the conflict is over. While the current Iraq fight is worthwhile, it is complex and made more so by Iran's extensive influence.

U.S. allies in Iraq are remarkably divided and resentful of one another. The United States needs to carefully evaluate its positions on the various militias operating in Iraq, from the Kurdish Peshmerga forces to the national populist (Iranian) forces. While the United States has traditionally favored Sunni groups like the Kurds, all militias have the potential to cause further instability if left unchecked.

The involvement of Shiite militias in particular poses such a risk for two reasons: one, their involvement will lengthen the war against ISIS by creating friction with and undermining Kurdish forces; two, if these groups operate unchecked, they will undermine Iraq's strategic independence. These groups are transnational with substantial Iranian backing, and have the capacity to supplant Baghdad's monopoly over Iraq's security sector. The solution is to work with the moderate Shiites in Iraq's senior leadership who recognize the threat posed by these groups. These Shiite ministers support Iraqi unity, not sectarianism and not increased Iranian influence. Such a stance is evidenced by the recent passing of the National Guard Act, although its implementation will be challenged by the Badr Organization and militias seeking to exploit and undermine the act.

Washington has allies in Iraq with which it can work, but it must outperform Tehran as a security partner. The United States must demonstrate its commitment through a long-term reengagement plan with the Iraqi government, reinforced by information operations that advertise the positive U.S. role in the conflict. Losing Iraq to Iran would mean losing a vital regional partner, and preventing this outcome will require a concerted effort. Altogether, defeating ISIS and securing Iraq will necessitate a major buildup of the Iraqi security forces, a clear demonstration of U.S. commitment to Iraq, and the ousting of Iran's influence in Iraq's security sector.

Phillip Smyth

Until now, the Shiite jihad in Syria has mostly flown under the radar. Shiite militias in Syria represent a transnational jihadist network controlled by Iran, drawing fighters from throughout the Middle East as well as Europe and Africa. Numbering in the many thousands, these militias have an advanced, open, and efficient online recruitment structure that exploits social media and radical imagery. These groups have existed for many years, advocate velayet-e faqih ("rule of the jurisprudent," the doctrine granting the Iranian Supreme Leader his authority), receive advanced training in Iran, and are directly controlled by Tehran. They engage in brutal tactics not dissimilar to those of ISIS.

The narrative of this jihad began with the threat posed by Sunni militants to Shiite holy sites in Syria -- particularly the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, near Damascus -- which provided the pretext to enter the conflict. According to the narrative, Sunni extremist groups are part of a broader U.S.-Israel conspiracy to wage war against Shiites in Syria by creating havens for al-Qaeda. Iran is marketing itself as the protector of all Shiites, as well as other regional

minorities targeted by Sunni takfiri organizations. While Iran has played a central role in building up and maintaining these Shiite groups, it has been careful to downplay its geostrategic objective of keeping the Bashar al-Assad regime in power.

A complex but interconnected web of Shiite militias has emerged in Syria, including Iran's "standard-bearers" Lebanese Hezbollah and the Badr Organization, as well as splinter factions of Sadrist groups like Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud and Iraq war holdovers such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq. The biggest and most influential Shiite militias, however, have been those based out of Syria. Among these, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) comprises the largest network in Syria, with several associated organizations and splinter groups operating under its leadership.

Iran's militia network has been instrumental in securing Damascus and Assad's continued rule, effectively taking over the Syrian government in the process. It has established a new Golan front against Israel, infiltrated the Iraqi government, and greatly advanced Iran's narrative that it is a powerful regional actor responsible for protecting Shiites. If the past is precedent, Iran will seek to expand its sphere of influence throughout the Levant and to the Gulf. It is an unfortunate reality in today's Middle East that Iran's Shiite jihad is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

P.J. Dermer

U. S. actions do not always reflect the complex reality of the many historic divisions in the Middle East, a region in which the nation-state system is not always the principal reality. A key is the U.S. train-and-equip program, an effort that faces many serious challenges. Both ISIS and the Shiite militia network are grave, organized threats, complete with modern weapons, sophisticated technology, and entrenched positions.

To best combat ISIS, the situation should be assessed first and foremost at the strategic level, not the tactical level. That means factoring in the sectarian fault lines in the Middle East -- especially divisions between Arabs and Iranians, and Sunnis and Shiites. During the Iraq war, after 2003, this latter division was mitigated by the new government's attempts to recruit technocrats into the military and senior positions in civil society instead of corrupt party members (Baath or otherwise) and sectarian sympathizers. However, the influence of religious parties and Iran still ultimately permeated Iraq's government.

Given these fundamentals, the question for Washington is how to best operate in this environment. The challenge is further complicated by the religious nature of the conflict. The United States has historically worked alongside less-than-reputable groups in Iraq, but has had to exercise caution when sectarian factors have come into play, such as with the Sadrist groups early in the 2008 fight in Basra and Baghdad.

The United States needs to get in the big game in the Middle East, looking not only at the threat posed by ISIS but also at the even greater specter of increasing malign Iranian influence and dominance. Iran has the ability to project its influence across the region using tools such as the IRGC-Qods Force and its militia network. The United States needs to outdo its Iranian rivals in reach and impact, aggressively engaging in Iraq to undercut Iran's influence there.

Finally, the United States must understand that this is a fight that will be won in capitals, not on fringes. U.S. priorities must be in Baghdad, Damascus, and Riyadh, not in Kobani or Mosul. Battlefield successes cannot be sustained without ongoing and intense diplomatic engagement with U.S. regional partners. One of the biggest forthcoming challenges will be transforming Iraq post-ISIS into a stable, lasting U.S. security partner.

This summary was prepared by Ian Duff. ❖

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