

Bringing Iraq's 'Ghost' Forces Back to Life

by [Michael Knights](#)

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Patiently rebuilding the Iraqi Security Forces is key to defeating terrorism and cutting militias back down to size, but Baghdad may decide to move on Mosul before it is ready.

On December 1, 2014, Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi revealed that a partial survey of Iraqi military units had found over 50,000 "ghost" soldiers -- troops that were officially registered on the army payroll but which rarely reported for duty. This is not a new weakness: It was already a chronic problem in 2009, at the height of US government mentoring and ISF effectiveness.

Back then, the phenomenon of "ghost jundi" was well understood by everyone, from US advisers at the unit level to Iraqi generals and cabinet members. At the time, this endemic corruption was a less crippling factor because violence had declined, US troops were present and because Iraqi units were deliberately manned at up to 125 percent of their intended unit strength, in part to offset absenteeism.

Abadi's comments were only sensational because the lamentable state of the ISF was so poorly understood during the last five years. Two popular misconceptions surround the catastrophe suffered by the ISF in 2014: First, that the security forces were largely intact the day before ISIL took Mosul; and second, that the ISF was almost entirely destroyed in the week afterwards. In fact the deterioration of the ISF was a half-decade in the making, with unit cohesion and manpower beginning to decline almost as soon as US funding and mentoring began to ebb in 2009.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

By the start of 2013, the ISF was already suffering from chronic absenteeism and the effects of politicised

Bonnamand reappointments. Throughout the year, the ISF redeployed larger and larger increments of the southern-based Iraqi army divisions into Anbar and Nineveh provinces to offset the weakness of individual units. In April 2013, the ISF suffered a significant localised collapse in Kirkuk and northern Salah al-Din following a Sunni insurgent uprising that followed the killing of over 50 protesters by security forces.

During 2013, Shia militias also played an increasingly open role in security arrangements within Baghdad and Samarra, deploying fighters withdrawn from Syria by Iranian-backed militias.

These trends accelerated following the fall of Fallujah to ISIL in late December 2013. Government-tolerated Shia militia presence swamped cross-sectarian areas near Baghdad and in southern Salah al-Din and the Diyala River Valley.

When Mosul collapsed in June 2014, the resultant panic witnessed the collapse of around a quarter of the remaining active ISF strength. Prior to the fall of Mosul, the ISF still operated 100 understrength brigades of the Iraqi army, Federal Police, border and special forces, with each brigade often operating at half strength (2,000 troops not 4,000) due to absenteeism. This underlines that the collapse of the ISF was a multi-year process, with most of the damage done before Mosul fell.

In June 2014, the weakened ISF finally cracked: 19 Iraqi army brigades and six Federal Police brigades disintegrated, a quarter of Iraq's security forces. These losses comprised all of the Nineveh-based 2nd and 3rd Iraqi army divisions; the entire Mosul-based 3rd Federal Police division; most of the Salah al-Din-based 4th Iraqi army division; all of the Kirkuk-based 12th Iraqi army division; plus at least five southern Iraqi army brigades that had previously been redeployed to the Syrian border.

GRIEVOUS LOSSES

Yet, despite these grievous losses, a larger portion of the ISF -- comprising 36 Iraqi army brigades and 24 Federal Police brigades -- did, in fact, survive the fall of Mosul. According to data gathered for a forthcoming Washington Institute for Near East Policy study, ISF frontline fighting strength reached its zenith at around 380,500 in 2009. Today, the study found, ISF frontline fighting strength is just 104,000. To this number must be added around 120,000 Shia militia popular mobilisation forces and around 115,000 frontline Peshmerga troops of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Alongside these troops the United States plans to train and equip nine new Iraqi army brigades (totaling 45,000 frontline troops) plus three Peshmerga brigades (15,000 troops) and at least one Tribal Security Force brigade (with 5,000 troops in the first of these units). Germany is re-equipping at least two Peshmerga brigades. When these four-month training and equipping processes are completed, Iraq might re-approach its 2009 strength, albeit without over 100,000 US troops on the ground to provide back-up.

The key question is whether Iraq is willing to wait for these new forces to arrive before it starts the battle for Mosul and other key insurgent-held cities like Tikrit, Fallujah and Tall Afar. Already Iraqi government patrols are approaching the outskirts of Mosul district from the south, while Peshmerga and local anti-ISIL militias are closing the ring from the east and north. Momentum seems to be with the government: Under such circumstances, Iraqis tend to press on and test their luck. Momentum and panic is exactly how ISIL shattered Iraqi divisions in June.

HASTY ATTACK

The situation is reminiscent of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's deliberations over the risky attack on Moqtada al-Sadr's militias in Basra in 2008. Back then, the US cautioned patience and backed a deliberate, carefully prepared offensive, much as it is advocating for Mosul today.

Instead, Maliki ordered an immediate hasty attack, which almost failed, but was saved by massive US intervention, and then kick-started the defining military achievement of Maliki's career, the defeat of the Jaish al-Mahdi.

Today a hasty attack on Mosul would be a far riskier venture than Maliki's "Charge of the Knights" in Basra. The ISF is still recovering from not only the summer's reverses but a half-decade of chronic neglect and corruption. Iranian-backed Shia militias may not be as active in fights in Sunni Arab-dominated northern areas like Mosul and Tikrit.

The Americans are not prepared, politically or logistically, to undertake a sudden life-saving deployment of ground troops to stabilise any setback. And ISIL may present a much tougher challenge than the militias in Basra.

If anything, the fights for Mosul and Tikrit could resemble the large urban battles of Fallujah and Najaf in 2004 or the Iraqi army's re-entry into Sadr City in 2008 after years of exclusion. To the US, this suggests the need for patient preparation and the training and equipping of new forces that are up to the challenge of intense urban combat. Iraqis will be hoping that Stalingrad-type battles -- such as those that have devastated the great cities of Syria -- can be avoided with early, daring thrusts up the Tigris.

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