

Iraq Needs U.S. Aid Now

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Washington can provide counterterrorism advisors and air support without being dragged back into war.

On December 31, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) -- al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq and Syria -- took over the centers of Ramadi and Fallujah, the two largest cities in Iraq's Anbar province. Two weeks later, the terrorist movement still controls Fallujah, the site of titanic street battles between al-Qaeda and the U.S. Marines in 2004. The center of al-Qaeda's self-declared caliphate is just 35 miles from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and only 25 miles from the runway where airliners land in Iraq's capital.

Fallujah is an iconic location for other reasons. In 2004, 122 U.S. troops were killed and over 650 injured evicting al-Qaeda from the city. Now Fallujah may again become an emblem of al-Qaeda's resurgence in Iraq as the Iraqi government is forced to clear the city without the benefit of U.S. forces.

Three scenarios loom over Fallujah, none of them good. If significant civilian deaths are caused by the military, Sunni Arabs in Iraq may become even more alienated from Iraq's Shia-led government and intensify their insurgency. Lacking U.S. forces by their side, the Iraqi Army could crack under the strain of brutal street-fighting, risking a humiliating collapse on the capital's doorstep. Or al-Qaeda could slip away, claiming a propaganda victory and retaining the ability to repeat its seizure of Fallujah. U.S. interests would be damaged by any of these outcomes, which could strengthen an al-Qaeda affiliate that seeks to establish an Islamist state stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.

The good news is that this moment is also an opportunity to improve the situation in Iraq. Al-Qaeda's resurgence has led the movement to fall back on old bad habits -- terrorizing Sunnis, taxing them, and forcing strict Islamic law on areas they control. In 2006 these practices turned the tribes against them and it is happening again. In Ramadi insurgents fighting the Iraqi government turned their guns on ISIL within hours of the al-Qaeda takeover of city

streets. In the cauldron of Fallujah, ISIL is choosing to fight in the open, risking military defeat.

In 2006, the last time these conditions existed, the United States forced the Iraqi government to seize the opportunity with both hands. The result was tribal-military collaboration that gutted al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2006 to 2008 in one of the most successful counter-terrorism campaigns in history. But as the U.S. drew down its commitment to Iraq from 2009 onwards, the Iraqi government backpedaled on commitments to protect their tribal allies and left them to be picked off, one by one.

Last week, the U.S. government strongly encouraged that al-Maliki repeat the formula of tribal-military collaboration with a string of telephone calls involving U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and other administration officials. U.S. intelligence and precision-guided munitions are being rushed to Iraq to enhance Iraqi military capabilities in the near-term. Though very worthy, these efforts only serve to highlight the limited U.S. ability to help Iraq as it once again fights on the hallowed ground of Fallujah.

A key problem is the unfortunate special status of Iraq in U.S. foreign policy. Under the Obama administration, complete U.S. military withdrawal began as an electoral promise but ended as a surrogate for long-term strategic objectives. Making a full withdrawal the strategic objective in Iraq has made it nearly impossible to provide Iraq with the same kind of support that we would give to any other major U.S. ally with an al-Qaeda enclave on their capital's doorstep. The U.S. remains highly resistant to deployment of special forces or the use of armed drones or strike aircraft in Iraq, tools that American routinely employs in pursuit of terrorists elsewhere in the world, from Somalia to Pakistan.

It is time for Iraq's special status to end. Providing counter-terrorism advisors and air support during crises such as the present one does nothing to invalidate President Obama's claim to have ended the U.S. military occupation of Iraq. "No boots on the ground" should not be taken to extremes. And if a post-occupation Iraq cannot openly ask for help from its recent occupier, this should not stop the U.S. from occasionally pursuing terrorists in Iraq when they become vulnerable. After all, is al-Qaeda in Iraq any less threatening than al-Qaeda's ideologues in Pakistan, where America risked undermining the government of a nuclear-armed Islamic state to kill Osama bin Laden without the host government's permission?

Ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is a worthy objective, but wars don't necessarily end when the U.S. military leaves. Indeed they are particularly unlikely to end if the U.S. military is withdrawn entirely and enjoys no flexibility to operationally support their erstwhile partner in the future. These are factors that should weigh heavily on administration plans for re-engagement in Iraq and concerning the drawdown in Afghanistan.

Michael Knights, a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, has worked in every Iraqi province as an advisor to government, industry, and the national security forces. ❖

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