

## Iraq Update: An Interview

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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.

**T**his interview was conducted for *Global Politics* by Robert Tollast, a graduate of Royal Holloway University of London who has interviewed various diplomats for Small Wars Journal.

*In March, the Iraqi government imposed tight security restrictions on Baghdad to host the Arab League summit, the first to be held there since 1990. While security measures for the summit took no chances, the fact that it went ahead in a city that was so recently torn apart by violence is itself an undoubted achievement.*

*In March 2006 for example, an estimated 1500 people died a violent death in Baghdad according to Iraq Body Count, and that was not the capital's worst month. In sharp contrast, official figures show a civilian death toll of 112 across all of Iraq for March 2012.*

*However, the question remains as to whether the improved security is sustainable, and to that end the Arab League summit is important. Events in Syria, as well as relations between Sunni and Shia majority states in the region, have proved critical to Iraqi security in recent years. Did the recent summit herald rapprochement or merely highlight division?*

*To discuss the summit and other issues throughout March, I spoke with Dr. Michael Knights, a specialist on the military and security affairs of Iraq. Dr. Knights has wide ranging experience in the Middle East, having worked with the Washington Institute for Near East policy and the US Department of Defense. He received his PhD at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and is the author of three books on Gulf security. Currently Director of Analysis and Assessments at The Olive Group, Dr. Knights has been a regular contributor to the Economist and the Financial Times.*

ROBERT TOLLAST: The Arab League Summit passed without a major security incident, and seeing Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah of Kuwait in attendance in the same spot where Saddam apparently planned his 1991 war was quite incredible. Yet the absence of other Sunni majority Gulf States represents a sad rebuke for Baghdad's attempts at rapprochement.

In attendance however, were interim administrations of the Arab Spring, and within the Baghdad declaration was an apparent call to curb news reports that inflame sectarian feeling. In another break with the past, Maliki called for a halt in arms supplies to any side in the Syrian civil war, in contrast to the Saudi / Qatari position. Seen in that light, the summit showed a degree of unity in the new Middle East, while the absent Gulf States looked like the regimes of

old, complaining on the sidelines. Did the Gulf States miss out on a summit that heralded the new Middle East, or is something more serious afoot?

**MICHAEL KNIGHTS:** The security operation surrounding the Arab League was gargantuan in scale and ambition, incorporating a complete shutdown of Baghdad's telecommunications systems and a determined effort to close off all ingress to the city by vehicles during the summit. The measures underline how much security decision-making authority is concentrated in the new Iraq. Even with these measures in place, insecurity will have been one factor weighing against the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states sending their leaderships to Baghdad. It is worth remembering that these states mostly do not maintain diplomatic posts in Baghdad, but instead maintain their representative offices in Jordan, partly due to security concerns.

I do not quite follow the logic that Iraq and the new governments were on the same sheet: for instance, Libya's new government has been vocal in its support of rebel forces in Syria, and Gulf monarchies like Qatar and the UAE wield considerable influence in the new Libya. I would not expect Yemen to emerge closer to Iraq either: the new government will undoubtedly be strongly influenced by Saudi Arabia and will probably continue the security campaign to pacify the Houthi rebels in the north, which the GCC states characterize as agents spreading Iran's influence in the Gulf region.

### **RECONCILING IRAQ'S RADICAL SHIAS**

**RT:** Shia militia groups from Lebanon to Iran base a lot of their popular support on a narrative of heroic resistance. In Iraq however, they face a quandary: politics is not as glamorous as guerrilla resistance and they may soon find, with the US embassy mission scaled back and no US troops to shoot at, that their cause has lost some of its sheen. As recently as December, al-Sadr fumed that the presence of American diplomats would be occupation by other means, but he now seems to have gone silent, reduced to calling off protests during the coming Arab League summit and discussing a new sports stadium in Sadr city.

Conversely, Sadr's opponents in the ISCI and al-Dawa have not based their power on resistance to America, although they share a resistance heritage against the Ba'athists. Has the American withdrawal taken the wind out of al-Sadr's sails? He must envy Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who at least has the proximity of the Israeli defence forces to rally supporters.

**MK:** Moqtada drew some strength from the presence of US forces, but he was, in fact, less reliant on anti-occupation messaging than his rivals within the Sadr movement such as the aforementioned AAH, led by Qais Khazali, a more credible clerical successor to Moqtada's father. Moqtada's message is anti-government populism, and it can survive the loss of a visible US presence. Moqtada has always sought to build parallel social welfare and political arms to his movement. Simultaneously he has sought to limit and restrict the military wing of his movement since 2005 and his own militant followers have played very little role in the southern insurgency since 2008. His attempts to restrict militancy are why movements like AAH split away.

The real challenge posed by US withdrawal is to militant movements like AAH. It appears that the way forward for AAH (after the US has left) is to become a mechanism for splitting Moqtada's political base yet further, drawing on support from Iran and from the Maliki government to enter the political spectrum and emerge as a street-level mass mobilization movement to rival Moqtada.

However, all these movements are only a decision away from using force, and indeed Moqtada's supporters and AAH have been skirmishing in the streets of Baghdad throughout the last year. Either or both could turn their force against remaining US government outstations in Iraq at any time: if Iran is ever bombed by Israel or the United States, hundreds of rockets will rain down on US diplomatic facilities and the US presence in Iraq will thin out and lock down. The kidnap risk posed to US citizens in Iraq by Iranian-backed militants is acute.

## **THE "EMO KILLINGS"**

RT: This month we have seen a disturbing spike in violence against young Iraqis who are guilty of nothing more than sporting western style fashions, which the Iraqis have dubbed "emo" (after the American music genre.) They are only the latest group to be targeted by religious extremists, alongside barbers deemed un-Islamic and homosexuals. Iraqi religious leaders have been united in condemning attacks against "emos" notably al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani.

The violence is also specific to Iraq, since these fashions are banned in Iran, but were briefly popular and not punishable by death. There is clearly a new generation in Iraq who are desperate to move on from war and oppression, and they are being targeted by men who are simply after the next person to kill, now that their local Sunnis have fled and the US has departed. Perhaps this is what the reconciliation of groups like Asaib ahl-Haq will look like: they will always find something to violently resist. Can the Iraqi government reasonably expect to rehabilitate groups like AAH, who could well be behind a lot of these killings?

MK: Anyone familiar with the "loss" of Basrah to the militias in 2006-2007 will shudder to see the same trends writ large across Baghdad and southern Iraq. In Basrah, the first targets for the Shiite vigilantes were the alcohol vendors, the music shops and eventually the university campuses. Some horrific things happened back then and this most recent set of attacks on youth is a reminder that religious vigilantes remain a major threat to personal security and liberty in Iraq. Back in 2006-2007 in Basrah, the British effectively surrendered the city to the vigilantes; now groups like AAH have greater license to operate because they are starting to side with the government in national politics.

The lesson from Basrah is that the militias do not stop after they target the minorities and niche groups: they keep pushing until they begin to rival the government and threaten the public perception of the government's "monopoly of force." When that day comes, the government is forced to smash the militants back down to their roots again, as occurred in Basrah and Baghdad in 2008. Getting back to your question, it is clear that reconciliation efforts should, as a prerequisite, only involve movements that have frozen their involvement in violence. AAH has never fully recanted violence: even when the United States was seeking to de-militarize AAH, the movement would not agree to any of the preconditions that other insurgent groups accepted (providing an oath to renounce violence, surrendering biometric data, etc.). Building up AAH -- which is the real Iraqi counterpart to Lebanese Hezbollah, unlike Moqtada's scattered followers -- is a dangerous game for any government to play.

## **STUMBLING TOWARD STABILITY?**

RT: There has been more discussion this month of colossal foreign investment in Iraq- \$55.6 billion in 2011 alone, as oil exports hit 3 million bpd for the first time since 1979. Huge oil revenues are being plowed into infrastructure, housing and other projects like the aforementioned sports stadium in Sadr city. Many of these projects will no doubt face big hurdles such as corruption, bureaucracy, poor security, shoddy planning etc. Many of them may even simply fall by the wayside for those reasons, and the difficulty of doing business in Iraq is a real threat to further investment (Iraqi insistence that oil companies use Iraqi oil police rather than private contractors is only one recent example.)

However, for every western company that wants to pull out, there is a Chinese, Russian, Turkish or Indian one waiting to step in, and for every major project that fails, another will muddle through. When we look to the future, a picture of the new Iraq emerges: Autocratic, badly run, troubled by a containable terror threat but ultimately a nation that is growing, haphazardly, to a better future. Do you think this outlook is too optimistic?

MK: There are many different kinds of investment in a country: some are genuinely long-term and speculative, reflecting a belief that the country can muddle through, get better and eventually will be a very attractive market. Investment in hotels in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala is a good example of this kind of investment; 20+ year oil contracts are another example, particularly for east Asian states who view Iraq in terms of energy security. Then

there is involvement in the country that is strictly short-term and focused on performing services for cash. Much of the investment in Iraq is still in the latter category, particularly involving Turkish / Indian / Russian companies who view Iraq as a place to make money by providing services that Iraqi companies cannot yet provide. Many non-Western companies can move faster than their Western counterparts, navigate corrupt environments more easily, and operate with less security. These companies will naturally get a lot of business in Iraq.

The outlook for Iraq that you present is probably accurate. The issue of a better future is obviously a comparative standard, but compared to what? Compared to Iraq in the 1970s, an extraordinarily optimistic and promising place for large parts of its population? (Though not the Kurds, importantly.) Or compared to Iraq in the 1990s, hobbled to a despotic regime on life support and with no future?

At present, Iraqis tend to remain optimistic in polling, when one cross-references answers and polls to get at their real meaning. Anecdotally, most Iraqis one meets believe that their country and their own lives now have more potential than they had in the last decades of the Saddam regime. This is probably a good way of thinking about Iraq: the removal of Saddam unlocked Iraq's potential -- the potential to become a unique regional powerhouse that harnesses its diversity successfully, or to become a Balkan-type patchwork quilt of uneasy neighbours forced to live under the same roof.

### **THE RIGHT TOOLS TO FIGHT TERRORISM**

RT: The difference between an insurgency and a terrorist crisis may seem unclear at times, but the Iraqi security forces (ISF) clearly face a significant hybrid threat. And yet, in recent years we have seen colossal conventional arms purchases made by the Iraqi government. You mention in the Washington Institute for Near East Policy report no.4 (June 2011) that: "the 'primary mission' identified in Iraq's 2005 NSS (National Security Strategy) was 'the defeat of terrorism and insurgency.' To a considerable extent, this remains the ISF's main job." Looking at events such as the Haditha attack, plus continued acts of terrorism, the situation has not changed. Lt. Gen Ron Burgess, head of the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence agency recently said Iraq needs a lot more help with its counter-terrorism capability. What we see instead is the ISF acquiring M1 Abrams and F-16s, and the State Department police training mission being hugely scaled back. In fairness, I doubt Iraqi special forces are being neglected but I can't help thinking: Is the ISF equipping itself for the wrong fight? It strikes me that coalition special forces using policing skills were more useful for stopping AQI (al-Qaida in Iraq) than M1A1 tanks or F-16s.

MK: At the present time the US and Iraqi defence establishments are letting the dust settle from the occupation era of bilateral relations. This is a natural pause whilst the Iraqi government demonstrates its independence and the US resets the strategic relationship. During this phase there is arguably a place for both highly visible defence sales and lower-profile counter-terrorism support.

On the first count, the sale of M1 main battle tanks and F-16 combat aircraft is about more than the delivery of weapons systems. Each of these programmes, and their extensive support services, have a long "tail" that will see the US and Iraqi defence establishments cooperating over 15-20 year timeframes. They are, for want of better options at the moment, a means of maintaining continuity in the military side of the strategic relationship.

These sales are also important for Iraq as it seeks to establish the bare minimum of defensive capability to be able to hold their heads up internationally and say that they are able to defend their airspace and confront incursions into their territory. This is what I called the "pushback force" in my June 2011 study, a set of military capabilities that will probably not be used but are required for a country of Iraq's importance and are the starting point for the development of defence forces befitting a future energy and strategic behemoth.

Separate from such defence sales, the Iraqi government will also pursue internal security-related procurement to get a better grip on the counter-terrorism campaign. As you note, in some parts of Iraq, counter-terrorism verges on

counter-insurgency still. In fact, I would argue that some parts of Iraq are sliding back down the slope from a narrow counter-terrorism threat (small groups of isolated militants forced to act clandestinely) to a broader counter-insurgency threat (larger militias with a modicum of passive or active support from local communities).

Equipment procurement is an aspect of this fight, and the ISF surely do miss the US capacity to undertake signals intelligence, aerial surveillance, precision air strikes, cellphone and document exploitation, weapons intelligence (on bombs) and crime scene forensics, and biometric intelligence gathering. However, much of this capability is something the US would rather Washington was requested to supply as an ally -- as opposed to something the Iraqis can do in a free-standing way, cutting the US out. Some equipment of this kind cannot be exported by the US to Iraq, and in time the Iraqis will seek such systems from other vendors (European, Russian, and so on). Iraq will end with a hodge-podge of internal security hardware and systems.

Setting equipment aside, the Iraqis need to make a mindset change and accept training if they are to be capable of really incisive counter-terrorism capabilities -- to be able to detect and pre-empt attacks before they happen. At the moment, the most capable US and British-trained Iraqi intelligence operators are the least trusted by the government, precisely because of their close contact with Western intelligence agencies.

The ISF now displays many of the worst characteristics of the Saddam-era intelligence services and the clandestine movements that fought Saddam, namely a focus on providing politicized intelligence that fits what the national leadership wants to hear. On the streets, the ISF displays many of the characteristics of the Coalition in 2003-2006, exacerbating tensions rather than reducing them, and deepening the pool of potential insurgent recruits. For me, the equipment Iraq is buying or not buying is of secondary importance to these underlying issues in how the ISF approaches security missions. ❖

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