Welcome to the Shadow War

by Michael Knights **(/experts/michael-knights)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

The pullout of U.S. forces in Iraq threatens to unleash a dangerous and deadly struggle with Iran and within the Iraqi army.

"The last American soldiers will cross the border out of Iraq -- with their heads held high, proud of their success, and knowing that the American people stand united in our support for our troops," President Barack Obama announced last week. "That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end."

But the American departure marks the beginning, not the end, of the struggle facing the Iraqi Army. Iraq's military remains divided by conflicts between its traditional, nationalist officer corps and Iran-sponsored interlopers, and paralyzed by the dysfunctional politics in Baghdad and the withdrawal of U.S. military support. If Iraq is to develop into a strong and secure nation, capable of guiding its own affairs, much depends on its army's ability to overcome these hurdles.

I recently spent a period of three weeks embedded with Iraqi Army headquarters in the south of Iraq. Though one has to be careful drawing conclusions about this large, varied country from observations gathered in any one of its regions, the view from southern Iraq is particularly relevant at this time. The south is Iran's backyard -- the part of Iraq where Tehran's ambitions are focused due to its political, religious, and economic connections to the predominately Shiite population, and where its influence is most keenly felt. Iraqi Army headquarters in the south have also been operating largely autonomously of U.S. or British support since foreign troops drew down to low levels in 2009 -- making them a window into the future of the Iraqi military after the U.S. exit.

Obama's announcement may have marked a milestone for many Americans, but in the view of Iraqi security leaders, the United States has been gone for a long time in much of the country. The die was cast as soon as the 2008 U.S.-Iraq security agreement -- in effect, the U.S. withdrawal timetable -- was ratified by the Iraqi cabinet on Nov. 16, 2008. From that date onward, it became increasingly difficult for both U.S. and Iraqi forces to arrest, detain, or

prosecute Iraqi suspects because only Iraqi warrants carried legal weight. Though U.S. forces have gradually drawn down, their physical presence on their bases has meant less and less to Iraqis because U.S. capability to influence security on the ground had been legally and politically neutered.

The slow fade-out of the U.S. presence has left Iraqi Army leaders exposed to political attacks. Numerous interviews with Iraqi officers paint a picture of the shadow war being fought within the Iraqi security sector on the eve of U.S. departure. On one side is the class of Shiite Arab political appointees seeded throughout the security establishment since the ascendance of a predominantly Shiite government in Baghdad. Many of these individuals were members of Badr Corps, the agency formed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to pit exiled Iraqi Shiites against Saddam Hussein's military. Others are current supporters of Shiite hardline politician Moqtada al-Sadr, or breakaways from his movement. These groups oppose any U.S. influence over the Iraqi government and security sector, and support a clerical role in government similar to that practiced in Iran. Within their narrative, attacks against U.S. military targets are not considered criminal actions -- they are only interested in pursuing former Baathists and al Qaeda terrorists.

The other side -- currently beleaguered and perpetually looking over its shoulder -- is the class of traditional Iraqi nationalists that still makes up a considerable portion of the Iraqi army leadership in the south. Many of today's generals fought at the tip of the spear in the long and bloody Iran-Iraq War, as young lieutenants and majors. Due to their service in Saddam's military, these men can easily be targeted for investigation of suspected Baathist ties. Indeed, before the March 2010 elections, the so-called de-Baathification committee produced a list of over 70 senior officers, smearing them as alleged Baathists. These career officers deeply resent the presence of *demaj* (meaning "amalgamation") officers -- political appointees from the Islamist parties who were given rank after 2003 without graduating from military academies. Due to the operational security problem posed by these newcomers, the veteran officers banded together, forming tight command groups comprised exclusively of their old war buddies -- sidelining the *demaj* officers to less important jobs, and encouraging them to take extended periods of leave.

These nationalist officers have a complex attitude toward the United States that cannot be described as either love or hate. "When I am on duty as an Iraqi soldier, it is my duty to work with Americans," one Iraqi officer told me. "When I am on leave, as a civilian, I cannot even look at an American vehicle because I am so angry."

Nevertheless, nationalist officers recognize that the United States and Iraq share a common problem -- Iran's influence in the region. Iraqi military officers have to be subtle in their support for U.S. military efforts against Iranian-backed militants. Behind the scenes, however, their actions are often instrumental in enabling U.S.-led raids against the worst offenders.

Unfortunately, the Iraqi military -- with or without U.S. support -- is not structured to confront the ongoing presence of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. Though some training is underway to enable Iraqi armed forces to protect the country from external military threats, the day-to-day business of the military is still the restoration of basic security within the country. Many provinces still have dense networks of checkpoints manned by Iraqi Army soldiers (*jundi*s in the local vernacular). The military doesn't like or want this job, but it is trapped in the role because the paramilitary police forces are neither sufficiently numerous, nor trusted by the military or the federal government.

To make matters worse, the declining U.S. involvement in Iraqi security has frozen the development of new security initiatives. This situation has been exacerbated by the near-paralysis of Iraqi national politics, and the government's inability to appoint fully-empowered security ministers for the last 14 months. With Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki also serving as the overstretched caretaker minister of defence and minister of interior, neither agency can take a step. For instance, as the U.S. and British military involvement in southern Iraq thinned out in 2009, the Iraqi military simply stopped taking new initiatives to secure the country's borders. Plans for troop redeployments, the creation of new barriers, and the establishment of new electronic surveillance systems have gathered dust for lack of

funds and Baghdad's sign-off.

Even at the tactical level, signs of progress are hard to come by. Once upon a time, U.S. military engineers could pick up and move entire fortified checkpoints from one part of a road network to another, in order to adapt to militant activities. Now, the checkpoints sit where they were last placed by the Americans -- whether or not those locations make sense any more.

Without U.S. advisors on hand, the Iraqi military has fallen back on old habits. It has become a more reactive force, waiting for attackers to show themselves and then arresting all witnesses and potential culprits. The problem is not that the army lacks bite: Each Iraqi Army division has a number of on-call commando units, which are capable of mounting professional ambushes and strike operations -- and they frequently do so. The real problem is that the southern militants backed by Iran or associated with Sadr's movement are politically protected by the same people who run Iraq's civilian and police intelligence agencies. This is why all security incidents in the south are blamed on al Qaeda -- even Iraqi intelligence analysts cannot risk committing to paper the real names of Iranian-backed groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

As a result, the army's ability to suppress the militants is hamstrung. Hard intelligence on militants is scant, raids are foiled because the suspects are forewarned, and those that are captured are often released before they have even been interrogated due to weaknesses in the judicial system or the susceptibility of political and judicial figures to intimidation. These factors forced the U.S. military in Iraq to return to unilateral patrols and arrest operations after 14 U.S. soldiers were killed by Shiite militant groups in Iraq during June 2011.

On the eve of the U.S. withdrawal, the nationalist core of the Iraqi Army still hopes for a strong and independent Iraq -- but it believes that only a political earthquake can shake Baghdad from its stupor. As one young officer told me: "Iraq will balance Iran again: this is the natural order of things." But military men are frustrated by Iraq's apparent subordination to Iranian interests. The same young officer noted that the military was deeply discouraged when planned purchases of F-16 fighters were delayed and downsized by the Iraqi parliament in spring 2011. "A member of the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guard spoke on television against it one day; then the Iraqi parliament voted it down the next day," he recalled.

For many officers, the solution is another autocrat -- not Saddam, a Sunni from a parochial tribal background, but a Shiite or a non-sectarian nationalist who can stand up to Iraq's foreign and domestic enemies. Some would say Maliki is such a man -- but the current political impasse has created doubts. "Weapons and training are needed but first politics must be fixed by a strongman, only then can an army emerge," one major told me.

The plight of the Iraqi Army poses a conundrum. It has historically posed a threat to democratic rule and to Iraq's minorities, and could do so again. Yet, it is also a sacred vessel in which Iraqi nationalism burns brightly, and where technocrats are still in charge. The military has proven to be one of the government institutions least susceptible to Iranian influence, and will probably continue in this vein. Though the road ahead will be tough, the ties forged in battle by the U.S. and Iraqi militaries are worth fighting for.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute and author of **The Iraqi Security Forces: Local Context and U.S. Assistance (/templateC04.php?CID=344)** . ❖

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