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In search of an Iraqi army

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In the midst of a suffocating Iraqi summer, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi approved court martial proceedings against several army commanders who had abandoned their posts, allowing Islamic State fighters to take over the city of Ramadi. Against a backdrop of intense fighting, increasingly complex conflict dynamics and palpable anxiety in the West regarding the best strategy to follow, this decision has come as a reminder of the deep dysfunctionality of Iraq's military, which remains very troubled more than a year after the start of the jihadist offensive.

While the collapse of Ramadi has been the most momentous development, accompanied by a wave of popular demonstrations accusing the central government of failing to protect civilians, among other grievances, the debate on the army's negligence is not new. Nevertheless, it has become more accentuated recently. Indeed, it has been the desertion of regular forces, coupled with indignation against their well-known abuses and trends toward politicization, sectarianism, repression, and corruption, that facilitated the brutal and spectacular advance of the Islamic State. The ability of Iraqi authorities to fight this existential threat has been called into question, with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki openly singled out for his deleterious role during his eight years in office.

At a time when Iraq needs it most, the army is exhausted and obviously incapable of properly fulfilling its role. For a decade, its members have received weaponry and training from the United States, whose military advisers and instructors today assist them in large numbers. To the great displeasure of his Iraqi partners, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter emphasized in May 2015 that Iraqi soldiers had shown no real will to fight the enemy in Ramadi or in other areas. This remark was politically daring, but accurate, and a remarkable admission from a high-ranking American official twelve years after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Placing these events in their historical context, it appears quite evident that the decision of the Bush administration to disband the Iraqi army in 2003 contributed significantly to this state of advanced decay and will probably continue to do so. Officially, Iraq has about 271,500 available armed forces, spread between regular, security, and special units. Faced with the challenges generated by the Islamic State assault, they remain desperately short of equipment, training, leadership, and even the least logistical competence required to fight battles and ensure smooth operational coordination. Worse, the Iraqi armed forces manifestly lack energy following months of setbacks against a determined, professionalized, and disciplined terrorist organization.

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This fatigue has forced the Iraqi military and security apparatus to seek support from other, more informal belligerents – most notably the Kurdish peshmergas, Shiite militias and, to a lesser extent, some tribes. These players can mobilize only limited resources, often from external sponsors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar), and are direct and active stakeholders in the conflict. Some, like the Sunni tribes, have had their requests for air support and armament ignored by both Baghdad and the anti-Islamic State coalition. The army and elite government security units are, moreover, affected by major internal cleavages regarding modes of action, which contrasts with the relative unity of the peshmergas and militiamen. Mutual distrust is widespread within the army's ranks, tinted with ubiquitous sectarianism and linked to conflicting partisan allegiances.

At the time of his accession to power in late 2014, Haider al-Abadi had committed to significant reform of the military. He reiterated this commitment in August 2015 in launching a campaign intended to be decisive in the fight against the Islamic State. Iraq's Prime Minister has enjoyed renewed support from the United States, which is concerned with rebuilding a national army and containing chaos. Equally crucial has been Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's backing, a guarantee of legitimacy and authority. Such expressions of solidarity are critical, as al-Abadi needs, more than ever, loyal forces around him and a strong and independent chain of command. Rapid improvement in security is vital at a time when popular revolt is brewing, with people demanding an end to corruption, political privileges, the patronage system, and sectarianism mostly inherited from the Maliki era. While many players oppose change, starting with the militia leaders that al-Abadi would like to gather within a National Guard under government control, the Iraqi army must regain its role and serve the purpose of long-term reconciliation. In this respect, it benefits from a palpable revival of nationalism and intercommunal mobilization.

For the moment, despite some internal reorganization within the army and several dismissals at the highest level, too many officers and soldiers are still missing, some having left the country out of disillusionment with Baghdad's failure to reinforce them. Lacking adequate armament and resources, they have failed to provide the efforts necessary to restore security and protect the population. Left to fend for themselves, including in "liberated" territories, many citizens have been forced into a massive exodus. In the absence of a consistent plan and redefined strategy, the army and security forces will likely continue to provide only derisory resistance to the heavily armed and highly trained jihadists who are engaged in a war of attrition that defies conventional tactics. The aptitude – or not – of the army to recompose itself will exert a fundamental impact beyond the military level; it will also affect the survival – or not – of Iraq within its recognized borders.

About the author

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