The Strategy is Working in Iraq…for Iran

Joseph R. Núñez

Secretary Ash Carter, under questioning from Sen. John McCain this week, Defense acknowledged his concern when McCain asked if it alarms him that Iran “has basically taken over the fight.” “It does. It does,” Carter replied, adding, “We’re watching it very closely.” Watching, but not participating.

Yet top US military officials are actually sanguine, in many respects, about the presence of Iranian advisers. They know that they’re there – and what’s more, they add, these Iranian-backed forces might actually be able to help. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, endeavored to explain why to outraged lawmakers this week.

“It’s worth reminding ourselves, Iran and its proxies have been inside of Iraq since 2004,” General Dempsey noted during his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee this week. “Frankly, it will only be a problem if it results in sectarianism.”

- Christian Science Monitor article extracts

The U.S. strategy in Iraq is not working, but Iran is doing very well. Hoping that Iran will neither add to the sectarian divide nor expand its influence and control is more than fanciful. Iran has been thwarting Iraqi sovereignty and American efforts to foster security, democracy, and development for more than a decade despite what political, military, and diplomatic leaders might argue. We are either delusional or naïve about Iran’s actions and ambitions in Iraq and throughout the region.

In a nutshell, U.S. strategy and policy implementation have been like a pendulum, swinging too far in each direction. From an ill-timed and poorly executed invasion in 2003 – especially the post-invasion operations – to pulling all of our troops out of Iraq in 2011, we are an inconsistent and impatient power. Our inconsistency is due to the growing domestic political divide that has now poisoned national security and strategy. We are wrong to walk away from Iraq or to rely on major U.S. military units to reclaim territory for Iraq. American impatience is part of our political culture, something that Alexis de Tocqueville documented over 175 years ago. This strange duality confounds our allies and inspires our enemies.
On the other side, Iran is consistent and patient. Though there long has been significant friction between Arabs and Persians, this has been ameliorated by the Shiite Islam connection. Over time, Iraq’s population has become more Shiite and that is now reflected in the national government. When Sunni insurgents rolled into Iraq last summer, the first ally on the scene was Shiite Iran, and they immediately reinforced security when the Iraqi Army collapsed from corruption, incompetence, indiscipline, and lack of training. Like other rogue, emerging, and unitary states, Iran does whatever needs to be done on the front end, often through covert means, but they are not shy about “exact[ing] payments” on the back end. Witness the cases of Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

The Persian buffer now extends to the Mediterranean; this rising hegemon is encircling Saudi Arabia, along with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Given Iraq’s geostrategic position and natural resources, not to mention important Shiite shrines, Iran has no intention of taking a backseat to Iraqi sovereignty or any other power trying to aid this troubled country on its western border. The United States believes it can coexist with Iran inside Iraq, but that view is not shared by Iraq’s Arab neighbors.

The American military response to Iraq’s invasion was far too slow. While American intransigence may have helped push PM Nouri al-Maliki aside, its larger impact was to create a security vacuum that Iran was only too happy to fill. The ubiquitous Iranian Quds Force General Qassem Suleimani has led Iraqi Shiite militias in many battles, just as he assisted them to kill American soldiers going back more than a decade. Clearly, he is emblematic of Iranian consistency and patience as their “poster boy hero” in Iraq while maintaining a light footprint.

The American plan is to – once again – train Iraq’s Army so it can take the fight to the Islamic State and reclaim Mosul, a very sore point for Iraq. As the second largest city, it also reflects the atrocities committed against minorities, such as Christians, and the destruction of important archaeological sites. The U.S. plan looks fine on paper, but the pressure is on to get forces out to fight as Iranian military leaders direct Iraqi Shiite Militias in battle to reoccupy Sunni areas now. Compounding this pressure and frustration is the reality that it is going to take more than several weeks to recast Iraqi soldiers as effective fighters.

What to do? Well, contrary to “Big Army” bureaucratic thinking, we could also employ an unconventional strategy to get positive impact on the ground – recognizing that air power does not control terrain – right now. When Iraqi Minister of Defense Khalid al-Obaidi, a Sunni from Mosul and former Iraqi General, is touting Iranian contributions to the assault on Tikrit, it is time for the United States to regain influence on the ground to materially shape combat outcomes. If Iraqi Army units are lacking in senior leadership, bold and creative American officers – preferably from elite Special Operations units – could be inserted as leaders, mentors, and trainers until Iraqi officers step up. That would accelerate military unit availability for the fight, thereby bolstering the U.S. position as effective ally.

The American strategy rests on motivating disparate religious and ethnic groups to cooperate and recognize national authority. Two important groups, Kurds and Sunnis, have not gotten the support they deserve from Baghdad or Washington. Whether Peshmerga or al-Sahwa, neither of these forces have what they need, equipment and training, to serve as fully effective components of the security force equation. Bluntly stated, the Shiite government in Baghdad is wary of the Kurds and Sunnis, so they have been content to drag their feet, whether it is paying Peshmerga or nationalizing al-Sahwa. Sympathetically, the United States endorsed this stance by not directly supporting the Kurds and kept quiet while al-Sahwa leaders were assassinated and their fighters were abandoned by their government. This is illogical and contrary to American goals.

Kurds and Sunnis are frustrated with Baghdad, and Washington helps maintain this poor relationship by
its lack of action to balance forces to better reflect the multi-ethnic/religious realities. Worse yet, the Kurds have been strongly pro-American for many years, and have done more to advance democracy and capitalism than the rest of the country. As for the Sunnis, they developed a pro-American stance during the surge, but clearly feel abandoned today. In the fight against the Islamic State, Kurdish and Sunni troops are needed for their martial skill, ethnic and tribal motivation, and their legitimacy in the west and north, respectively.

Hmm…how successful will the occupation of Sunni Tikrit be if it is carried out by Shiite militias and their Iranian advisors? Can Mosul be taken without a better equipped Kurdish blocking force? Supporting irregular forces used to be a core competency for our Special Forces. True, they are in Iraq, but their ability to serve as a force multiplier against insurgents has not yet been properly weighted to change the equation on the ground by leveraging Kurdish and Sunni martial potential.

Interestingly, Jordan has begun to provide arms to Sunni militias in Anbar Province. This will help, but much more is needed and as soon as possible. More Arab countries need to pitch in on the ground. Egypt’s leader, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (former general and U.S. Army War College graduate) has recommended creating a standing Arab force to fight the Islamic State and other insurgent threats. Clearly, such a unit would be very helpful to balance, legitimize, and win in Iraq, and then Syria. It will take U.S. support to make this a reality, and it is in our interest to back this force.

About the Author

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