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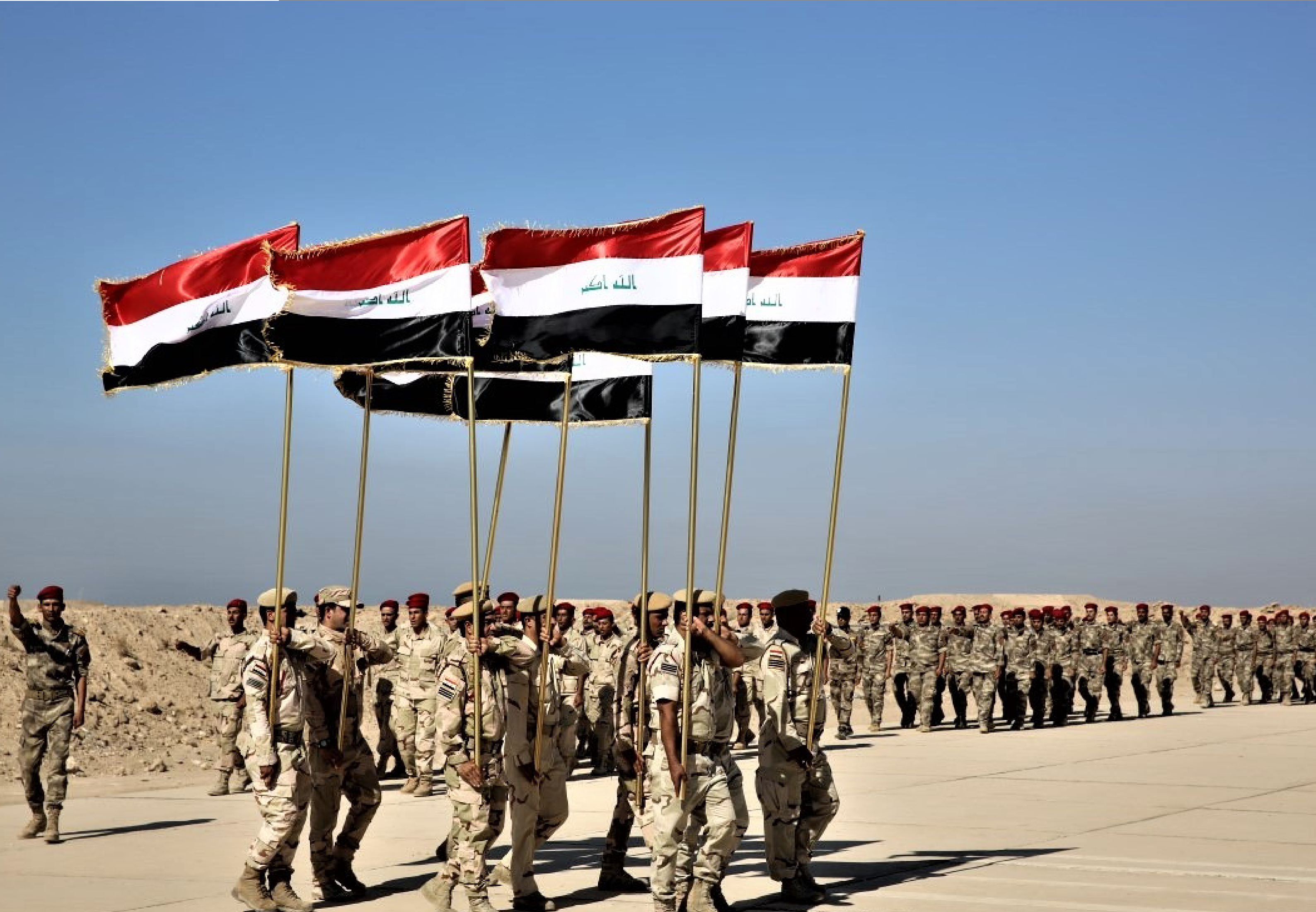
Remote Warfare Programme

IN FOCUS

IRAQ AFTER ISLAMIC STATE: DIVIDED WE STAND?



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Introduction

When then-Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al-Abadi announced victory against Islamic State (IS) on December 9 2017, he proclaimed that it was Iraq's "unity" that had won them the fight.[1] A year on, a referendum on Kurdish independence, widespread protest, and political powerplay over the Iraqi defence sector is putting that unity in question.

The indicators for security sector stability were not necessarily good even back in November 2017 when we got back from field research in Basra and Baghdad. We had originally planned to go to Erbil, but in the months leading up to our trip the Kurds held an independence referendum.[2] The ensuing Iraqi Army military campaign to retake territory that the Kurdish Peshmerga gained during the (at that point, still ongoing) anti-IS operations meant that the usual relative stability of Iraqi Kurdistan was less certain. Now, Basra is also experiencing popular unrest; protesters have been donning yellow vests in a nod to the "gilets jaunes" protest movement that has been rocking France in recent weeks.[3]

The question we have been asking is whether the conduct of today's military campaigns – often fought with international support for local frontline forces rather than with large numbers of Western boots on the ground – is feeding this sort of fragmentation. In a trilogy of recent reports on the legal, political and military implications of what we call remote warfare we found evidence of counter-terrorism outpacing other strategic objectives.[4] This was having adverse implications for stabilisation and reform efforts – particularly when it came to handling the long-term implications of empowering and equipping local armed groups to fight IS.

This briefing examines how choices made throughout the anti-IS campaign have contributed to several of the factors that are currently destabilising the Iraqi security sector:

- International support to the Kurdish Peshmerga was a significant factor in the success of the anti-IS campaign. However, it may also have encouraged the decision to call an independence referendum in September 2017, which has reversed any surge in goodwill between the government and the Kurds that might otherwise have followed the anti-IS fight.
- The proliferation of powerful armed groups, including the Popular Mobilisation Forces (al-hashd al-shaabi, or PMF) led to a certain level of ad-hoc decision-making among Coalition partners as to who to support and how to do so. Recent elections have revealed the political power that these groups now wield, contributing to the stalemate that means seven months after elections the cabinet has still not been confirmed.

There is little new in the idea that there is no such thing as a quick fix to complex problems like those facing Iraq. However, recent experiences should serve as a cautionary tale for those hoping that gains in building partner capacity can be easily converted into broader security sector stability, at least while counter-terrorism remains in the driving seat.

The Iraqi security sector: less than the sum of its parts

The Iraqi security sector has always had its problems. In a paper on “Iraq’s Future” back in April 2017, authors Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar opined that the Iraqi Army “is lucky if it can be considered the fourth strongest army in Iraq”[5] – behind the Peshmerga, the PMF and Iraqi tribal fighters. However, there is currently intense political wrangling over control of the two last cabinet positions to be filled seven months after the elections: the ministers of defence and the interior.[6] Decisions made in the coming months will therefore be crucial for the trajectory of the sector in years to come.

Dividing the Peshmerga

In September 2017 an independence referendum was held in the Kurdistan region and in the disputed areas seized by the Peshmerga in 2014 – including Kirkuk. In them, 92% of the roughly 3 million people who turned up voted for independence.[7] Following this, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) said the result “gave them a mandate to start negotiations with Baghdad.”[8] However, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi demanded that the result be annulled and that Kurdish forces withdraw from the areas they have controlled since 2014.[9]

In October, after they failed to do so, Iraqi pro-government forces retook the disputed territory held by the Kurds, in a “major blow to Kurdish aspirations for their own state.”[10] In the month following the referendum, they had retaken one-fifth of Kurdish-controlled territory.[11] Commenting on this, Abadi declared: “We have only acted to fulfil our constitutional duty to extend the federal authority and impose security and protect the national wealth in this city, which we want to remain a city of peaceful coexistence for all Iraqis.”[12]

The referendum hardened opinion against the Kurds in Baghdad, with one Iraqi politician we spoke to going as far as to deny that the Peshmerga had played any role in the anti-IS fight to begin with. While it may have been overly optimistic to expect the shared focus on defeating IS to translate into a lasting warming of relations, it is still stark just how quickly any gains were squandered.

The referendum and subsequent operations in Kirkuk also drove a wedge between Peshmerga forces from the two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Only KDP forces were present in Kirkuk for the Iraqi army advance – PUK Peshmerga members had left the city. This raised suspicions that a deal had been cut in retaliation for the KDP-led decision to call the referendum on Kurdish independence.[13]

Many high-level officials we engaged with complained behind closed doors that there was insufficient focus on the post-IS phase throughout the campaign, including when it came to the support that was provided to Peshmerga.[14] Much of the support given to Kurdish forces had a distinct counter-terrorism flavour. As described by the FCO:

“As part of the package of assistance provided by the Global Coalition to counter Daesh, we have provided the Peshmerga with military support, channelled through the Coalition and distributed based on requirements: UK training teams have trained over 57,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces, including 9,000 Peshmerga fighters; since September 2014 we have gifted £3 million of arms and ammunition to the Peshmerga; and the UK has given air support to the Peshmerga as part of the Coalition.”[15]

Despite renewed momentum behind reform at a recent “Peshmerga of the Future” conference in Erbil,[16] fragmentation of these groups may simply spring back to pre-IS levels and could even worsen if smaller Kurdish parties like the Gorran Movement follow through on their threats to create their own armed self-defence forces following disputed elections.[17] Whatever momentum towards unity had been created under the anti-IS coalition appears now less than certain.

The weakness of the central government

We were told by many of our interviewees in November 2017 that the Kurdish referendum had empowered the government to centralise control. They thought that this would mean renegotiating relationships with the Kurds (and other separatist elements such as those in Basra) from a position of strength.

Fast forward to July 2018 and protests were rocking the southern city. Demonstrations over the distribution of resources and provision of services renewed calls for regional autonomy, and the head of the Basra Provincial Council confirmed that 15 out of 25 members of the local government had signed a petition to establish an independent region of Basra.[18] By September the protests had turned violent, with several demonstrators killed by security forces[19] and a vast array of government buildings and offices belonging to pro-Iranian PMF torched.[20] The PMF leaders in Basra responded by creating Voluntary Reserves to confront “potential dangers within neighbourhoods.”[21] In December 2018, protests have erupted once more.[22] Expectations of increasing centralisation of control appear to have been premature.

This fragmentation was not helped by the ad-hoc international response to groups like the PMF. We were told, for example, that a decision had been made by the international military coalition to avoid direct support of the PMF due to the Iranian links of some of their units, but there was no clear answer when it came to what level of indirect support would be tolerated. Given the recognition of the PMF as part of the Iraqi security sector since 2016,[23] what this meant in practice for international air support to joint Iraqi Army/PMF operations is unclear. Major General Rupert Jones (then-deputy commander of the Combined Joint Task Force for Operation Inherent Resolve) recently acknowledged that the PMF, including its Iranian-backed brigades, were “incidentally” benefiting from Western “support provided to Iraqi security forces under the control of Baghdad.”[24]

The strong performance in the May 2018 elections of the Fateh Alliance led by Hadi al-Ameri, whose list represented many of the groups under the PMF, signalled that any effort

to reform the current status quo where the PMF exist as an "independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief"[25] is unlikely to be adjusted. Analysts have been quick to note that the word "independent" has allowed the PMF to co-exist alongside the rest of the Iraqi security sector, rather than being reformed and integrated.[26]

This is all taking place against the backdrop of a difficult election season which saw a five-month gap between voting in May 2018 and the eventual nomination of a new prime minister. Two months on, Abdul Mahdi has yet to succeed in forming a cabinet to bring together the political factions. The nominations for the ministries of defence and the interior have proven to be the major stumbling blocks, with the rejection of Falih Al-Fayadh, a former national security adviser and chairman of the PMF as the candidate put forward by Fateh by other Iraqi political factions.[27] If he does not succeed, Iraq will have to go back to the drawing board and name a new prime minister, a move that could lead to even more jostling between political factions.

Conclusions

In November 2017 there was a reluctance among many of our interviewees to engage seriously in discussion on security sector reform, citing that any decisions would have to wait until after the May 2018 elections. If it was political stability and certainty that they were waiting for, it has not materialised. We are now in December 2018 and it is not clear that the next few months will be any calmer. The legacy of the anti-IS operation poses real challenges for the security sector, and reversing the current trend towards fragmentation is going to take a lot of political will, broad popular consultation and international support. The more time that passes, the more momentum will be lost.

This will not come as a surprise to international partners like the UK who have clearly understood the need for broader security sector and governance reform for long-term stabilisation in Iraq. When giving evidence to the Defence Committee, then-Secretary of State for Defence Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon MP said: "Airstrikes are only one component in a military strategy which must be accompanied by a political solution to deliver long-term peace and security to the region."[28] The Conflict, Stability and Security (CSSF) fund also reports a spend of £10,650,000 on programmes in Iraq for FY17-18, with efforts focusing on stabilisation, community reintegration, advisory and governance support.[29]

However, the highly mobile security situation means that the small NATO training mission and U.S. presence in the country face real challenges when it comes to supporting their Iraqi partners. There are deep political fissures that are not easily papered over by technical training activity. It is not clear exactly how these complexities are being dealt with by an international training force that is trying to train Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces,[30] while presumably also grappling with how to deal with the PMF as part of the Iraqi security sector. Certainly, in the case of Iraq it is unclear how the fragmented security sector would do against a resurgent IS. This is a worrying thought given that the US Department of Defense stated in August 2018 that IS is likely to retain around 30,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria.[31]

In an era of low support for British intervention and the continued threat of terrorism, remote warfare may seem like an appealing approach to addressing such threats abroad. Its limited footprint and almost complete lack of British casualties has, for the most part, spared the UK government from intense scrutiny or public protest. However, it worth asking why current attempts to work with local military partners in these areas are taking place on the basis of narrow counter-terrorism objectives, even when the UK is evidently aware of the need to address broader issues. Continuing to hold off on serious conversations about security sector reform in Iraq is a risky strategy and waiting for a period of unbroken political stability to start tackling this question is not going to work.

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This report was written by staff at the Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme, formerly known as the Remote Control Project. We were set up in 2014 to examine changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This is the trend in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops.

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