



Iraq Unravelling? An Interview with Emma Sky

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Emma Sky, former advisor to the US military in Iraq, discusses her experience in Iraq and the challenges currently facing the country.

Q. Did your experience of Iraq change your perceptions of the military and, if so, how?

Prior to Iraq, I had never worked with the military nor really met people in the military - and my views of the military were not positive. In Iraq, I worked closely with some officers in the US military who were highly educated, capable, and intellectually curious. I grew to admire their commitment, their professionalism, and their values. I saw the best of America in them.

Q. Why do you feel the strategy employed by the coalition in Iraq in the 2007-2009 period was so effective?

It took the Coalition time to understand the different dynamics in Iraq and to realise that the root cause of instability was the struggle between different communities for power and resources within a failed state. In the 2007-2009 period, the Coalition finally had the right strategy, leadership and resources.

I also think by that time, the Sunnis realised that they were losing the civil war. This was one of the factors that drove them to turn against al-Qaeda in Iraq and establish the Awakening which provided an honourable way out of the insurgency - and into the political process.

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Q. You've been highly critical of Obama's rapid drawn-down policy in Iraq. What do you think was the logic behind Obama's approach to Iraq?

Obama came to prominence due to his opposition to the Iraq war. He campaigned on that platform. And when he became President, he issued an order for a responsible end to the war.

Under Obama, the emphasis was on bringing home the troops – and this meant insufficient attention to the political process which directly affected the security situation.

Obama was not closely involved with day to day matters in Iraq. He delegated to Vice President, Joe Biden, his point man on Iraq. With Biden, the echoes of Vietnam ran deep. The US Ambassador was new to the region and saw everything through the prism of the Balkans. These two failed to appreciate that the security gains in Iraq post Surge were fragile and dependent on a political solution among the elites. Following the 2010 elections, they pushed for the US to maintain the status quo, continuing to support Nouri al-Maliki, despite his failure to win. This resulted in a missed opportunity to broker an agreement among the elites and to help the country move beyond the sectarianism that bedeviled it.

Q. Nouri al-Maliki's politics have been cited as laying some of the foundations for the rise of Islamic State. But another factor often raised is the failure of the Iraqi security services to effectively face and deal with the threat despite the heavy US investment they previously received. Why did the Iraqi army prove to be so ineffective against Islamic State and what could the US have done to better prepare them?

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After Maliki secured his second term as Prime Minister, he accused the Sunni politicians of terrorism and drove them from the political process, he reneged on his promises to tribal leaders who fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq, he subverted the judiciary and the independent institutions designed to keep a check on the executive. This created the conditions that enabled ISIS to rise up out of the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq and proclaim itself as the defender of the Sunnis against the Iranian-backed sectarian regime of Maliki.

The Iraqi army collapsed in the face of ISIS due to weak leadership and poor morale. Maliki had replaced leaders in the Iraqi army who he believed were too close to the Americans with officers loyal to him. The military, therefore, became politicised. Officers pocketed the funds that were supposed to be used to buy ammunition and food for the soldiers. They were not present with their troops and did not give them orders to fight ISIS. The troops took off their uniforms and deserted.

After the withdrawal of US forces in 2011, the US lost leverage at the strategic level to ensure military appointments and promotions were based on merit – and to push back on politicisation.

The US assumed that the Iraqi military would be apolitical as in the US. The “train and equip” effort paid insufficient attention on how politics in Iraq can affect the leadership and morale of the military.

Q. The Kurdish militias in Iraq were among the most effective fighters against Islamic State and the international support to the Kurdish Peshmerga was a significant factor in the success of the anti-IS campaign. However, this empowerment of the Kurds has yielded several problems in

post-ISIS Iraq. Do you feel that the West has learned any lessons from its past history of working with the Kurds?

The US has been focused on defeating ISIS and hence supported the Peshmerga as effective fighting forces. There was little consideration of the second order effects in terms of the Iraqi Kurds taking control of the disputed territories and pushing for independence; or of the Syrian Kurds carving out an autonomous region over the objections of Turkey.

US policymakers are in office for a short period which leads to short-term, narrow policies rather than prescriptions for longer-term solutions which address the root causes of conflict.

Q. A year after Islamic State was declared defeated, Iraq now faces a series of problems that are fragmenting the country. Clearly there are no easy solutions to this complex situation, but should the international community be playing a greater role in steering Iraq towards stability?

The challenges facing Iraq relate to kleptocracy and corruption, the lack of elite agreement on how the state should be governed, and the devastation from years of war.

There is no “international community” as such – rather an array of external actors who pursue their own interests in Iraq. This arena of conflicting interests overlaps with the arena that makes up the fragmented domestic landscape. However, long-term engagement by the US and UK can help balance Iranian influence. It can also help mediate at local levels to repair social fabric, strengthen civil society, support private sector, and train Iraqi security forces.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

About the interviewee



Emma Sky is a Senior Fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs and author of *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*. She served in Iraq from 2003 to 2004 as Governorate Coordinator of Kirkuk and from 2007 to 2010 as Political Adviser to General Raymond Odierno, then Commanding General of U.S. forces in Iraq. Her forthcoming book *In a time of Monsters: Travels Through a Middle East in Revolt* will be published on 7 February 2019.

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