

ISIS' Success in Iraq: A Testimony to Failed Security Sector Reform

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(Originally published on July 22, 2014)

On August 8, the United States began a series of targeted air strikes against the Islamic State of Syria and al-Shām in Iraq. This blog post by Andreas Krieg was originally published on the SSR Resource Centre in July 2014. While written prior to these recent events, the piece offers critical insight on why the Iraqi Army proved so ineffective against this extremist group and has therefore been republished here as part of the CSG Insights series.

The pace with which the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shām (ISIS) was able to seize territory in Iraq since June 2014 has been mindboggling. What has been a stunning military success for the foreign *mujahedeen* of ISIS, can only be described as a humiliating defeat for Iraq's security sector. The images of Iraqi security forces abandoning their posts, leaving behind weapons, vehicles, and uniforms are evidence of a failed security sector reform (SSR) effort in Iraq.

With the excess of 100 billion USD being invested into establishing – at least numerically – one of the most potent security sectors in the region, almost ten years of training, education and procurement paid for mostly by US taxpayers might have been in vain. Western SSR in Iraq after the 2003 invasion has created a security sector infested with the same diseases as those that mar the security sectors in neighbouring countries, defined by politicization, patrimonies, and patronages. Widely, ISIS' success is the testimony to a failed policy of the interrelated political and security sector reform in Iraq.

In recent years, the Maliki regime deviated from the US-advanced ideals of inclusive governance, democracy, and social justice. On the premise of fighting domestic insurgencies and terror, Maliki increasingly consolidated his autocratic control over ministries, security forces, and civilian

institutions. Yet, ever since the last US troops left Iraq in 2011, Maliki has struggled to provide security inclusively across sectarian fault lines. The inability of the Iraqi state and its security forces, both the constabulary and the military, to guarantee the security of all its citizens only contributed to the fragmentation of the security sector.

The legitimacy of the Maliki regime has steadily vanished in light of the deteriorating security situation. Iraqis no longer feel protected by the statutory security sector and turn towards local or sectarian non-statutory security providers for protection. Religious militias, neighbourhood watches, and tribal insurgent groups have filled the vacuum left by an incapable and sometimes reluctant statutory security sector. Maliki's extensive interference in the security sector has obstructed the development of a professional meritocracy while also

undermining the formation of liberal civil-security sector relations (CSSR).

Similar to other state institutions under the Maliki regime, the security sector has been tied into a wider patronage network centring on Maliki as the patron. Concerned with regime security rather than inclusive public security, Maliki has rearranged the statutory security sector in a way so as to maximize his own personal control over the hundreds of thousands of policemen and soldiers under arms. Since November 2011 Maliki has been acting as the Minister of Interior and Defence, directly monitoring constabulary, military, and intelligence services.

Apart from that, Maliki also created the Office of the Commander in Chief, which has developed into his personal channel to bypass democratic control and oversight on the strategic level by directly micromanaging operational and tactical tasks. Maliki's system of micromanagement has been most astute when it comes to Iraq's Special Forces and Counterterrorism Units, which have functioned as his private army when it comes to the silencing of potential threats to regime security.

Maliki's patronage network revolves around key decision makers on the strategic and operational level that are chosen based on sectarian, mostly Shia, loyalties to the prime minister. Sectarian favouritism has particularly affected elitist units from which Sunnis have been purged and replaced by loyal Shia commanders. Loyal commanders are rewarded by the regime with the privilege to run battalions, brigades, or divisions as personal fiefdoms extracting revenues from procurement deals or collecting 'taxes' from subordinate ranks.

Those security institutions Maliki cannot directly control, he controls indirectly through the diversification of the security sector. In the case of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), which had become increasingly critical of Tehran's influence on the Maliki regime, Maliki merely responded by creating multiple rival intelligence services that undermined the monopoly of the Central Intelligence Agency-created and funded INIS. Finally, Maliki has integrated non-statutory security providers into the regime's security strategy. By relying on sectarian militant groups such as the Iranian-backed Shia militia Asaib Ahel al-

Haq to provide public security locally, the regime in Baghdad fosters the widespread sentiment of its sectarian exclusiveness.

In terms of CSSR, the effects of Maliki's personalization of the security sector have been detrimental. Those Iraqis already feeling marginalized by the regime's socio-economic policies, most notably Sunnis and Kurds, have been further alienated by a statutory security sector they believe is unfit to provide public security inclusively. Run by corrupt, predominantly Shia commanders, promoted based on bribes or loyalty rather than merit, police and military units neither enjoy public support nor unit cohesion.

With rank and file underpaid, under-equipped, understaffed, and under-trained, those acting as the security sector's face to the public have little faith in their capabilities or sense of duty towards the public. Most junior ranks in the police and the military are preoccupied with maintaining a livelihood by extracting bribes and rents from the local population. Neglected by their own superiors and the regime in general, a military covenant has never been established in post-Saddam's Iraq. Consequently, many policemen and

soldiers alike do not share a military ethos committing them to the provision of public security for the benefit of society and state.

In contrast, those units receiving special attention from Maliki's regime, such as Special Forces or Counter-terrorism forces, have developed an ethos based on sectarian loyalties rather than an inclusive concept of loyalty to the public at large. However, these units cannot rely on public support, as Kurds and particularly Sunnis have come to regard them as Maliki's private Shia army; arresting, maltreating or even killing regime opponents with impunity. The disrupted bond between the regime and its military protégés on one hand, and junior ranks and the society at large on the other, has only weakened the regime's legitimacy as the public security provider.

As a consequence, alternative security providers in Iraq have been on the rise for years. The Sunni insur-

gency originating in Anbar Province has its roots in the regime's failure to provide security inclusively. It is this insurgency that has provided ISIS with the centre of gravity for its ongoing operations. Relatively small in number, ideologically motivated, with effective lines of communication and battle-hardened fighters, ISIS has repeatedly defeated numerically superior Iraqi security forces in recent weeks. Without any commitment to the people it ought to protect, without faith in its capabilities and shaken by the fear of ISIS terror, Iraq's highly politicized security sector stands little chance against the wave of Sunni insurgency on which ISIS rides – at least in Sunni majority areas. As a security sector where loyalty, profiteering, and sectarian group affiliation rank higher than professionalism and effectiveness, Iraq's military and police requires the reinforcements of Shia militias in the south in order to defend Iraq's capital and the Shia heartland.

A proper reform of Iraq's security sector in the future requires first, the dismantlement of the Maliki system; second, a cross-sectarian recruitment strategy; third, a disarmament of all militia and insurgent groups; fourth, the development of an inclusive Iraqi military and police ethos; and fifth, the installation of a merit-based remuneration and promotion scheme. Obviously, such a reform is only relevant if the people of Iraq retain their faith in the mutual benefit of Iraq as a united multi-sectarian nation-state.

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