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The Iraqi Army is Too Exhausted to Fight

Iraq's army grows smaller by the day. Sectarian militants are picking up the slack.

By MITCHELL PROTHERO

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The lightning seizure of the Iraqi city of Ramadi by the Islamic State doesn't just represent the loss of one of the last government-held population centers in Sunni Muslims areas of the country, but it laid bare the notion that Iraq's government is capable of facing the existential threat posed by the Islamic State's highly disciplined troops.

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter infuriated his Iraqi allies last Sunday when he blamed the loss of Ramadi on the Iraqi Army's unwillingness to fight, a bold and accurate statement by a U.S. official, perhaps the most candid and realistic I've heard from a U.S. official in the 12 years I've been covering Iraq. As harsh an assessment as that might have been, it still doesn't come close to recognizing the myriad of problems that any coalition hoping to free much of Iraq and Syria—where the Islamic State now controls three provincial capitals spanning two countries—must address.

About a month before Ramadi fell, in an effort to bring a realistic tenor to the debate about when an operation to liberate Mosul might begin, I pointed out that Iraq had perhaps 10,000 combat effective troops spread among three special forces units and that beyond that, the Iraqi security forces lacked training, equipment, leadership or even the basic logistical competence to put men

into combat and supply them with ammo, food and water, let alone coordinate operations in a coherent manner. Worse yet, I wrote that these effective units were exhausted after a year of being plugged into every military need that arose around the country. In the wake of Ramadi, I realized that I'd grossly underestimated their fatigue and flagging morale, as evidenced by their flight from Ramadi at the height of a battle. Today, the Iraqi government would be lucky if 5,000 of its effective troops are still in fighting shape.

Sec. Carter was correct in claiming that most Iraqi army units lack a will to fight, but in light of the horrible mismanagement, leadership and logistical support offered to an Iraqi army unit in combat compared to the professional and disciplined approaches of their opponents in the Islamic State, it's almost unfair to point it out. The troops in Ramadi, a mix of trained but battered and exhausted elite units, local police and Sunni tribal fighters were not resupplied with food, water or ammunition. Requests for air support—which already go through an overly cumbersome process before the U.S.-led coalition will act—went unnoticed or ignored, and most of the units in Ramadi were unable to coordinate with one another because of deep-seated distrust among units composed of soldiers from different sects. Every group was answering to its own Iraqi government officials and militia commanders, who together represent the most incompetent, venal and cynical people I have ever encountered in my life.

Contrast the performance of Iraqi troops, whose officers continue to steal their salaries, fail to deliver the basics in terms of food, water and ammunition or provide any confidence that there is a cohesive plan that means the units on your flanks will hold their ground and not leave without warning, with that of the Islamic State. I have studied countless hours of combat footage of the group and discussed these videos with half a dozen experts on light infantry tactics and irregular warfare. The analysis is always the same. Islamic State fighters always have ammunition, they have backpacks of food and water, they maneuver to contact, seemingly aware of the maxim that the best way to stop someone from shooting at you is to shoot at them, and they integrate heavy, medium and light weapons together in a way that close resembles the American military's combined arms doctrine, with the role of air support played by armored Humvees loaded with explosives and driven by suicide bombers.

I've heard it over and over again. "They're just better fighters," said one American former Special Forces officer. "They have fire discipline. They cover each other's advances. They keep moving. The Iraqis do none of these things."

In Kurdistan, the peshmerga, engage in daily combat much more successfully with the Islamic State in northern Iraq but they are fighting from a series of fixed and fortified positions that much more effectively integrate coalition air support. The Kurds, after initially being rocked back by the lightening fast maneuver warfare of the Islamic State, have essentially stabilized their lines in a way other Iraqi forces cannot replicate. The Kurds also maintain stronger unit cohesion—despite internal divisions that might well splinter in the future—because they're literally defending their homeland.

Kurdish fighters have a nationalistic passion for a nation that doesn't even exist (yet) called Kurdistan that the Iraqi people and leaders have yet to show they're capable of adopting. A Shiite soldier from southern Iraq simply will never fight for the mostly Sunni Ramadi, Tikrit,

Bayji or Mosul in the way a peshmerga fighter does for his own land. If the peshmerga lines crumble, the families of the men on the line will be under direct threat. While that has kept much of the Kurdish autonomous region safe—at the cost of about 1,000 dead Kurdish fighters—these motivations go out the window the minute the Kurds are ordered to take the fight deep into Arab territory, such as Mosul.

Or as one Kurdish friend put it to me, “[Kurdish President Masoud] Barzani can tell the mother and father of a dead peshmerga their son died for Kurdistan and the family will send three more sons. But all four sons will go home if you tell them they have to fight and die for Iraq in an Arab city like Mosul. Let the Arabs worry about [ISIL], we’re protecting our land, not saving Iraq.”

So when presidential candidates such as Sen. Rand Paul argue that the U.S. should further support the Kurds because they’re the only one’s fighting the Islamic State, he’s at least partially correct, but everyone needs to face up to reality: The Kurds have pushed about as far out of Kurdistan as they’re willing to go—for now—to establish defensive lines. All the military support in the world won’t convince them that they should send their sons to die for a state, Iraq, that virtually every Kurd hates deep inside their heart.

That same paradox afflicts the Shiite dominated government as it looks out across Sunni Anbar and Salahdeen Provinces, the tribal and ancestral home of both Saddam’s Baath Party and the Islamic State itself. With those original 10,000 combat effective Iraqi soldiers likely reduced to an exhausted 5,000 or so men, the government has already admitted from here forward it will be forced to rely on the Popular Movement, a coalition of belligerent Shiite militias trained, armed and led by Iran, who report to their own sectarian leaders and even Iranian officers well before any consider taking orders from a Baghdad government. As these militias embark on what they say will be a series of operations to ‘liberate’ Ramadi, Bayji and even Mosul, operations that have already been openly given sectarian Shiite names that call for revenge on Sunnis over centuries old rivalries, the question is what does the liberation of Ramadi mean to a Shiite militia fighter from Najaf?

Certainly it means removing the ability of the Islamic State to mount attacks on Shiite targets in Baghdad, Najaf and other southern cities. And, to be frank, revenge for Saddam and payback for a decade of car bombs in Baghdad and sectarian massacres by the Islamic State and its predecessor, al Qaida in Iraq. That is far more likely to bind the fighters going forward than any sort of Iraqi national identity, even as the increasingly weak government of Prime Minister Haider al Abadi calls for reconciliation with Sunni tribes—the only coherent plan for addressing the situation over the long term—the men on the ground doing the fighting are less likely to see it that way. The destruction of Sunni Iraq is all that can save the Shiite from another decade of bloodshed, in this view, and the past ten years have proven these groups are more than ruthless enough to do it without a moment’s regard for international outcry.

But even with that vicious motivation on hand, the Shiite militias have yet to prove an ability to fight effectively outside of their own areas; in the past year they’ve only been effective in defending Shiite areas or purging mixed areas of Sunnis. How they will fare in the hostile territory of Anbar and northern Salahdeen is far from certain and the chances that they will drive

millions of Sunnis who currently dislike both the Islamic State and the central government, into the arms of a renewed Sunni uprising against the government are at least as good as an effective military campaign against the Islamic State.

What's clear, however, is that one year after the fall of Mosul, there's little reason to think the nationalism for the Iraqi state will motivate soldiers in the coming months as two sides square off in the sectarian war they've both been hoping for and that the U.S. has completely failed in convincing them to avoid. I'm not saying there ever was a chance the U.S. could have avoided such a breakdown post the 2003 invasion, but here we are.

Ash Carter is correct. The Iraqi military no longer has a will to fight. But from here on out a war will be fought by men who do. A win by either is potentially disastrous from an American policy point of view.