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W. Andrew Terrill

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Strategic Insights: Would a Post-2011 Residual U.S. Force in Iraq Have Changed Anything?

February 9, 2015 | Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

Currently, U.S. policy analysts and governmental leaders are examining the rise of the Islamic State (IS) organization, particularly its seizure of vast expanses of Iraqi territory in the summer of 2014. People legitimately ask what could have been done and would a residual U.S. force in Iraq have prevented the spread of IS from Syria to Iraq or at least its seizure of northern Iraq? Opponents of the decision to withdraw all U.S. forces often contend that a U.S. residual force could have prevented or mitigated the IS offensive in northern Iraq. Supporters of the decision to withdraw usually point out that the Iraqi government would not agree to a Status of Forces agreement (SOFA) that allowed U.S. forces to remain in that country without being subordinate to Iraqi domestic law. The second argument seems to accept the views of the critics, while suggesting that the withdrawal was required as part of an effort to respect Iraqi sovereignty. Both sides seem to agree that a residual force in Iraq was a good idea. They disagree on why it did not occur.

But would a U.S. force in Iraq have really made a serious difference? To answer that question, one needs to consider why IS gained supporters and enablers in Iraq in the first place. While U.S. observers often consider the main political conflict in Iraq to be between the advocates of democratic vs. authoritarian government, it is probably much more useful to look at how the Iraqi government has addressed the country's deep sectarian divide from May 2006 until September 2014 when Iraq's former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki governed Iraq. Maliki maintained strong U.S. support throughout most of his time in office for a number of reasons. He was extremely hard-working and largely free of Iraq's pervasive corruption, but he was also fatally flawed as the leader of a diverse society. Maliki grabbed every opportunity to enhance his power and that of his Shi'ite

loyalists, while marginalizing Sunni Arabs and Kurds. As part of this effort, Maliki fired professional generals and civil servants and replaced them with individuals loyal to him. He moved to corrupt the Iraqi judicial system, which barred his chief rivals from participating in March 2010 elections.¹ Perhaps most importantly, Maliki defunded the mostly Sunni Awakening Movement militia forces, which had been instrumental in defeating the Islamic State of Iraq, an al-Qaeda affiliated predecessor of the Islamic State. Maliki also frightened Sunni Muslims with his exceptionally friendly attitude toward the Iranians and his strong effort to build comprehensive ties between the two countries. To preserve the illusion of democracy, Maliki moved to eliminate leading Sunni politicians, while leaving powerless Sunni nobodies in some high profile positions to serve as sectarian ornaments.²

Without much subtlety, Maliki stepped up his sectarianism as the United States prepared to withdraw its forces. In October 2011, Iraqi authorities arrested at least 240 individuals who they claimed were former leading members of the Ba'ath party or important members of Saddam Hussein's army. The *Iraqiya* political bloc, which was led by a secular Shi'ite but supportive of Sunni political rights, was harshly critical of the arrests and demanded the release of "all detainees held on false charges."³ Later, 1 day after the last U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, Maliki moved against one of his most important Sunni critics and rivals by issuing an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi for running a death squad. Hashemi's bodyguards provided the "evidence" for these crimes after they were arrested and eventually confessed to a variety of charges. The former vice-president claimed that these confessions were obtained through coercion and that one of his bodyguards died under torture.⁴ Understanding his situation, Hashemi fled abroad, was tried in absentia, and sentenced to death by hanging in an Iraqi court. Shi'ite leaders suspected of terrorism would never have faced such a travesty of justice in Maliki's Iraq.

The sectarian struggle reached a new level in April 2013 when Iraqi security forces stormed a Sunni protest camp in the town of Hawijah, where approximately 40 civilians and three Iraqi soldiers were killed. Three Sunni cabinet ministers resigned over the incident, and many Sunni demonstrators and tribal leaders issued a call to arms. Many Sunnis throughout Iraq were now primed to at least consider IS as an alternative to the Baghdad government, despite the concerns of tribal leaders that IS would try to replace them. Any relationship with IS would be uneasy, but Baghdad had now rendered the intolerable to be at least somewhat more palatable. Sunnis had to choose their poison carefully.

In surveying the wreckage of Maliki's policies, it is clear that Iraq would have remained a deeply troubled country with or without a U.S. residual presence. A U.S. residual force could not have prevented Maliki from ruling in a blatantly sectarian manner, although it could probably have helped the United States pressure the Iraqi prime minister into

administering a less pure form of sectarian politics and violence. Vice President Hashemi may have merely remained marginalized rather than have been convicted in such a questionable manner and forced to run for his life. Excesses such as the mass arrests may have been toned down as a result of a strong U.S. presence, but Maliki would never share power with strong, independent-minded Sunni politicians. Due to Maliki's sectarianism, Iraq's Sunnis were comprehensively alienated from the government when IS swept through northern Iraq in 2014, and that mindset probably could not have been prevented by a U.S. residual force. Moreover, Sunni tribes that did stand up to IS usually did so alone, with no serious support from the Iraqi government. Under these circumstances, many Iraqi Sunnis chose not to start anything that they could not finish regarding IS. Superficial attempts by the Iraqi government to reach out to these groups in the summer of 2014 was seldom taken seriously because of Baghdad's past record.

The most important positive result of a residual force might have been the opportunity for U.S. military officials to have gained a deeper understanding of the shortcomings of the Iraq military, although this is not certain. Understanding how a foreign military force will behave in combat is often difficult to assess in a noncombat environment, and this problem only becomes worse with a highly sectarian military. U.S. advisors may have seen many of Iraq's military weaknesses, but it is uncertain that anyone in such a position could fully understand that Iraq's army in the north was merely a house of cards. A U.S. residual force may have helped slow or mitigate IS successes, but it would not have cured Iraq of the fundamental sectarian sickness that led to victories by the Islamic State. The most likely outcome of a U.S. residual force presence would have been to transform an Iraqi train wreck into a slower motion Iraqi train wreck, unless Washington sought to oust Maliki, which it was not prepared to do until after the summer 2014 IS offensive. Now, with Maliki gone, Iraq has a chance, but this kind of damage is not easily undone.

These issues remain relevant for contemporary policy since the United States is now using airpower and ground military advisors to prop up a new Iraqi government. Such actions are containing the Islamic State while buying time for a new Iraqi government to recreate itself as a more inclusive and tolerant body. Such fundamental change is an extremely tall order. While Iraq's current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has advocated a number of liberal and farseeing policies, he has also received a great deal of pushback from powerful Iraqi Shi'ite politicians backed by Iran. Some of Iraq's most powerful cabinet members have strong ties to Shi'ite militias and view Iran as their most important strategic ally. These people view the world in much the same way as Maliki and are not likely to seek compromise with Sunnis. Abadi must therefore prevail in the political struggle against his own hardliners, otherwise Iraq will probably not remain one country and IS forces in Iraq are unlikely to be fully defeated, even if a U.S. residual force were to be placed in that country forever.

ENDNOTES

1. Ali Khedery, "Why We Stuck with Maliki—and Lost Iraq," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.
2. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Brussels, Belgium: ICG, 2013, especially pp. 15-16.
3. "Allawi Says Iran Headed for 'Sectarian Autocracy'," *Kuwait Times*, December 29, 2011.
4. "Iraqi Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi Charged with Murder," *BBC News*, April 30, 2012.

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