
CONTESTING FACTS ON THE GROUND IN IRAQ

-

26.08.2016

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

War on the Rocks, AUGUST 25, 2016

Two recent articles on the conflicts of the Middle East by a pseudonymous author published here at War on the Rocks touched a nerve with its core message that poor policy choices on Syria and Iraq are flowing from exaggerated Western characterizations of Sunni persecution and Shia militia excesses.

Im not qualified to talk about Syria (Emile Hokayem responded to the Syrian side of the equation yesterday), but I found the authors portrayal of the conflict in Iraq to be deeply unconvincing, particularly its treatment of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces or PMF). The author claims stewardship of facts on the ground but those facts did not line up with what Ive seen in Iraq, especially on some important points of detail and emphasis.

Thats not to say that I disagree with everything in the piece. For instance, I think the author is spot-on when they complain that Western characterizations of Iraqs PMF can be exaggerated and shrill. In particular the author makes a valid point that many Western analysts seem to think that just because a security force is majority-Shia that it will somehow be unable to resist killing and persecuting Sunnis. Exactly!

I would go further: Some Western analysts also seem to think that there is a Manchurian Candidate-style mental control switch inside every Shia soldier that an ayatollah in Tehran can activate with a flip of his finger. This fallacy has one logical conclusion: that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), guarding Shia-majority Iraq, have to be purged of Shia. Even Saddam did not go this far in his suspicions of the Shiites.

The author also airs an uncomfortable truth that whilst the Shia militias hiding amongst the PMF have undoubtedly committed atrocities, the wars in Iraq since 2003 have been chock-full of atrocities committed by the security forces, including right under the nose of the well-meaning U.S.-led coalition. The author might be using this observation to justify further arguments about

the acceptability of a permanent PMF, which I emphatically do not agree with, but the point is fair and draws attention to the double standards often applied to Sunni Iraqi militias (who we now like) versus Shia militias (who we don't like).

The author also makes good points that sectarianism and nationalism in Iraq are more complex than commonly understood in the West, and that Moqtada al-Sadr in particular is a fascinating example of this complexity. He effectively reflects the Iraqi government view of why Fallujah had to be liberated, getting inside the heads of the local leaders fighting the war.

Finally, Cyrus, makes another touchy but analytically brave point that Sunni persecution is not universal but rather contextual. In my experience, there is a patchwork quilt of sectarian vignettes taking place in Iraq at any time. In cross-sectarian areas in the grip of civil war conditions, such as Diyala, persecution of the Sunni is universal and severe. In some areas, like Baghdad, conditions have resulted in fragile mutual restraints whereby the Sunni carefully calculate what behaviors they can risk and where the Shia authorities make sparing use of coercion. In still other Sunni-majority areas (like western Anbar) the Sunni are frequently left to their own devices.

What Cyrus fails to note is that the above truths are quite well appreciated by the U.S. officials actually making policy on Iraq. All the senior U.S. policy makers and soldiers I know understand the above complexities pretty well. Where U.S. policy has been lacking, it was not because of illusions on these points, but rather because of a mental block that saw the Obama administration under-resource Iraqi stability until mid-2015.

Accepting the Pro-PMF Narrative

Alongside the authors well-made points, there is also a lot in the essays that I don't agree with, and which I sense senior U.S. policymakers and military leaders would disagree with as well. In country analysis, the devil is in the details and the emphasis is usually placed on some details rather than others. The author makes confident claim to the custodian of facts on the ground, as do many of us analysts (*mea culpa!*), but I would argue many of his facts are debatable at best. As someone who has worked closely with Iraqi security forces and politicians for many years, including inside the planning processes for the war against ISIL since 2014, I can tell you that the authors characterization of the PMF is unbalanced and misinformed.

Some points of detail were inaccurate. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr's militia, Saraya Salam, is not under the PMF chain of command, as is inferred. Some statements are confidently made on the basis of no evidence, for instance that PMF do not engage in any more violations than the forces the American-led coalition supports.

On other points the author has uncritically accepted views associated with the advocates of a permanent PMF. It is simply incorrect that all PMF are part of the Iraqi state, coordinate with the ISF, and answer to the Iraqi prime minister. I've spoken to almost all the key Iraqi Shia leaders within the last six months on this exact issue: They do not share the authors confidence that all PMF elements are under state control, so why should anyone else?

The author claims that the PMF grew out of a sudden and immediate threat, and while narrowly true (the PMF were formalized after the fall of Mosul in June 2014) the most potent military units that now make up the PMF had been operating for nearly a decade. Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq were busy killing Americans, other coalition members (and Iraqis) from the mid-2000s. These groups were expanding and sending contingents to the Syrian Civil War throughout 2013 and 2014.

You don't have to be a tin-helmet fantasist who sees the Iranian Revolutionary Guard under every bed to recognize that important elements of the PMF are dangerous terrorist actors under the direct control of Iran's security agencies who are executing foreign policies independently of the Iraqi state. Senior Iraqi security officials understand this only too well.

Misreading Iraq's Battles

The best example of the author's own failure to grasp facts on the ground is the article's uncritical adoption of pro-PMF propaganda regarding Iraq's key victories against the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

In Tikrit, Cyrus infers, the Iranian-backed units of the PMF liberated the city. But in fact Tikrit was a watershed moment in which those Iranian-backed PMF failed at huge cost in lives to take Tikrit city and where the Iraqi government was forced to step in to stop the slaughter and turn stalemate into victory. Iraq's chain of command called in the U.S.-led coalition backed by Iraqi security forces including some pro-coalition PMF units, who subsequently took the city within days and with minimal losses.

In Ramadi, Cyrus argues the battle might have been swifter and less destructive if Shia PMF had been involved to augment the weak Iraqi security forces executing the battle. But the experience of Tikrit, and also of Bayji and other battles, suggests that the PMF would have fared no better in Ramadi than the Iraqi Security Forces and indeed would have achieved less because of the presence of Iranian-backed terrorist actors within the PMF who themselves reject the coalition's air support, even were it to be offered.

But it is on the issue of Fallujah's liberation where the author hangs some stunning findings about the inevitability of a permanent PMF on an exceedingly slender reed. The PMF were not the key actors in that battle, as he asserts. Rather, it was the Counter-Terrorism Service that did the heavy fighting in Fallujah city. PMF elements only came in at the tail-end of the battle to occupy areas of northern Fallujah after ISIL resistance had collapsed.

Furthermore, the author presents a very misguided characterization of the PMF as a clearing force that liberates territory and moves on. In fact, the PMF is mostly a holding force, while the army, federal police and Counter-Terrorism Service have taken the lead on the liberation of territory since the Tikrit battle in March 2015. The image of Shia PMF elements genteelly handing off to local Sunni forces just doesn't track with the reality in many cross-sectarian areas such as Yathrib, Saadiya, northern Babil and rural Tuz Khurmatu. Instead, predominately Shia PMF stay to dominate the local scene and observe the Sunni populations, while actively discouraging Sunni local security forces from coalescing.

Off-Target Policy Implications

Having lamented the poor policy choices made by Western decisions, Cyrus then offers a couple of policy prescriptions that are not particularly credible.

His first idea is to bring Shia PMF into more of Iraq's battles to liberate ISIL-held terrain. Those battles are mostly behind us and the remaining ones are in the most vigorously anti-Shia areas of Iraq. In any case, the PMF are less capable than the Iraqi Security Forces of making a valid contribution in complex urban battles like Mosul.

Next, he suggests that in order to force the Iraqi government to pressure PMF into compliance with the laws of armed conflict, the international community should withhold funding to rebuild places some elements of the PMF destroyed, forcing Iraq to shoulder more of the cost. Militia hardliners would laugh twice as loud as they passed the gasoline can and fired up the bulldozer.

Its a matter of opinion, but I would also take issue with the supposedly poor policy choices the author highlights, principally the selective support the United States has given to PMF elements. I would argue this was actually a good policy choice that paid off in Tikrit and which will pay off hugely in northern Iraq and western Anbar as Sunnis are reassured that hardline parts of the PMF will not lead the liberation of their cities. Bad PMF elements like Kataib Hezbollah are different from other Iraqi former insurgents because such Iranian-backed groups present a clear future threat to state stability, democracy, and sovereign Iraqi control of the country. By denying air support to Iranian-backed terrorist actors in the PMF wherever possible, the United States raised the profile and relative performance of pro-government PMF elements such as the shrine militias of the Al-Abbas Combat Division and the Sunni PMF units.

The U.S.-led coalition didnt slow down battles like Ramadi, but rather saved many hundreds of Shia volunteers from being fed into the meat-grinder in pointless politically-motivated assaults ordered by Iranian-backed politicians such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hadi al-Amiri, and Qais Khazali. Last year, I sat with former PMF who were attending the coalitions Iraqi Army training program at Taji. They explained that they joined the army because they were fed up being slaughtered and left to starve without supplies.

The author also cites the involvement of Sunnis in the PMF as a factor that should give comfort, but what Cyrus overlooks is the pretty obvious fact that the stand-up of Sunni PMF units was driven by the United States and coalition members. The U.S. Congress designed the \$1.6 billion Iraq Train and Equip Fund so that it mandates Sunni recruitment into the Iraqi Security Forces and specifically sets money aside for tribal security forces. The coalition has kept prodding and pushing to make Sunni PMF a reality.

There have indeed been poor U.S. policy choices in Iraq, but they have not resulted from a misreading of facts on the ground. Rather, they are the result of ideological blocks that prevented the U.S. government from reacting appropriately to Iraqs worsening security crisis throughout most of the 2009 to 2015 period. Putting it bluntly, once President Barack Obama decided to really commit to Iraqi security (in the autumn of 2015!) the right policies started to flow from this basic presidential decision. Arbitrary self-imposed limits on the numbers of U.S. personnel in Iraq were fudged, allowing more training and advising; extremely restrictive rules of engagement for airstrikes were relaxed; and U.S. artillery units and special forces were put on the ground, close to front lines, to directly target ISIL.

Cyrus overarching criticism of a Western narrative of sectarianism as the root of poor policy choices in Iraq is quite misleading. The exaggeration of the Shia militia threat and the extent of Sunni persecution is not, in my experience, a narrative that influential American policymakers subscribe to. On Iraq, at least, extremist talking heads, think tankers, and TV pundits have no impact on policy and are dismissed by policymakers with a wrinkling of the nose and a contemptuous wave of the hand.

The reality is that exaggeration and misrepresentation – the myths that Cyrus claims to dispel – are rife on both extremes of the pro-Shia and pro-Sunni lobbies. If you want to understand Iraq (and probably other places too), then read the work of one of the more workmanlike, un-sensational analysts who has been working specifically on a given country for many years. Ditch the charlatans.

I clearly remember messaging with one advocate of a pro-Sunni Iraq policy and putting forward a middle-of-the-road analysis that trod the median between the pro-Sunni and pro-PMF views of Iraq. He retorted that policymakers didn't want nuanced positions. He was wrong, and so is Cyrus.

When myth is summoned to fight myth, you end up with the blind attacking the blind. Far away from this strange arena, oblivious to the contest, Western officials are making grown-up policy choices on Iraq that are reasonably good under the circumstances. This is just my opinion, but at least my name is on the piece and you can tell where I am coming from.

Kaynak/Source: