
THE MILITARY DEFEAT OF DAESH IN IRAQ HAS TO BE BACKED BY POLITICAL REFORMS

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The only way to prevent a Daesh resurgence in Iraq is to integrate the poorest and most marginalised Iraqis into the economic and political structures of the country.

A bearded man in a yellow jumpsuit appeared onscreen. His eyes turned low, he sat against a black background and the local Iraqi news channel is blaring out his statement.

I pledged allegiance with Daesh, he began, my role was to distribute the weapons.

The man was Saddam al Jamal – considered one of the top commanders in Daesh, and one of its most dangerous. He was one of four Iraqis, and a Syrian fighter, who were rounded up at the Syrian border, near Deir Ezzor.

Iraq's intelligence worked with US-led coalition forces, and announced the captures on May 9, but the announcement was overshadowed by Iraq's elections a few days later.

The only thing that seemed to call attention to the arrests was a tweet from US President Donald Trump.

Iraqi local media said intelligence services lured the Daesh fighters to the border before arresting them. But details have been scarce. There are reports of explosions at the border and the Iraqi air force carrying out air strikes inside the Syrian border targeting suspected Daesh outposts.

For Iraq, despite the bluster of the end of Daesh in Iraq, there is still fear of a Daesh resurgence. While politicians are now debating fraudulent voting and scrambling to organise a ruling coalition to form a new government in the coming weeks, military intelligence and the US – coalition forces are fighting to keep Daesh fighters out of the country.

The arrests make Iraqi intelligence look tough on terrorism. But their operations are focused on minimising Daesh's ability to create new military strongholds in the country. It doesn't take into account the conditions that allowed Daesh to take root in the first place.

According to Jamal's statement in the video, there is dissent among the fighters, There's a lot of division, splits and conflict among Daesh members, he said, most of the fighters lost their will to fight.

He and other prisoners in the video blame poor decisions by their leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi –

who declared Daeshs rise in 2014 at a historic mosque in Mosul.

His whereabouts are still unknown.

But the dwindling of Daesh in Iraq and Syria is largely about territorial strongholds [] the splits in Daesh will help that fight—but that doesnt address the power vacuums in parts of the country.

Iraqs government still has a long way to go to gain the trust of its people [] even on the streets of Mosul, many feel if the Iraqi government isnt able to meet their needs or dispel sectarian divisions, another group will come in and fill the vacuum.

There were many Sunnis in Mosul who sympathised when Daesh took over simply because they felt the majority Shia-led government had ostracised them from the political process and allowed security forces to target them without cause.

Moreover, in Iraq, Prime Minister Haider al Abadi has integrated the Popular Mobilization Units, an Iranian back-armed group, made up of mostly Shia fighters [] as part of the security forces. Many of the PMUs oversee neighborhoods across the country and are participating in Syrian border operations.

When I spoke to the PMU spokesman, Mohanad Najim al Eqabi, he told me, Most of our members are protecting the borders. We dont have anyone inside Syria [] the ones we are paying are at the [Iraqi borders] not Syria.

But he did mention there might be groups [] who are not receiving direct funding from Iraq [] that are participating and coordinating across Iraqi-Syria lines.

Iraqis, and especially Sunnis, are concerned the presence of the paramilitary force creates greater sectarian tension.

Its created a wider debate in the country about foreign influence like that of the US and Iran [] whose support of Shia-led politicians has stirred sectarian division.

Economic analyst Mazin Shaiker, believes, however the problem isnt factions of Islam that are pulling people apart, but rather, their primary needs, The big division in the Middle East isnt Arab or Iranian, its secular versus Islamic, he told me, Iraq is a weak country because it doesnt have control over its own destiny, we need an independent economic government.

And the more people that are without jobs, food, education and other practical services, the more, Shaiker believes, they are susceptible to tribal groups, politicians or fighters who make promises to fulfill those needs.

Daesh may no longer have the military power it once did, but its tribal tactics do. And any militia group looking to target footsoldiers among the most vulnerable will find some success.

Right now, Iraq still has over three million displaced according to the United Nations. Many IDPs have been in camps for years with no resources to return home and for many, theyre homes are still buried under rubble in places like Anbar and Mosul. Theyre angry, they want to go home, they want to live their life and theyre disgruntled that government entities have ignored their requests.

Whats worse is parliamentary officials have decided that because of voting fraud accusations many of the ballots from the IDP camps may not be counted. The people wont see this as a step

forward.

Rebuilding wont be easy and it will take unity in the government and fair treatment of the poorest Iraqis to avoid what has become a quagmire of a civil conflict in Syria.

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