

**Iraq: what happens next?**  
by Lydia Khalil

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On 15 August 2011 forty-two coordinated, violent attacks rocked Baghdad and surrounding provinces. It was one of the deadliest attacks in many years in Iraq; eighty-nine were killed and 115 wounded from a staccato succession of suicide bombings, car bombings and small arms attacks.

In addition to the terrible death toll, the coordinated attacks spread a sense of disquiet in Iraq due to their highly coordinated nature and claim of responsibility by al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an organisation whose influence and capabilities many believed had waned. Throughout 2010, it was reported that thirty-four out of forty-two members of AQI were killed or arrested in Operation Breaking Dawn, a joint US–Iraqi operation. Also throughout 2010, security services had been claiming that the threat of a renewed insurgency had dwindled. It was only days prior to this latest attack that Iraqi security forces announced the arrest of high-ranking members of AQI, declaring that they had disabled their leadership.

But an attack of this scope and sophistication suggests that radical Sunni elements still retain the capacity to inflict the type of damage they did during the dark days of the sectarian violence in 2006–07. As evidenced clearly by the most recent attacks, AQI has the will and capacity to rejuvenate its leadership and mount coordinated assaults, threatening the fractured Iraqi Government and putting the integration of Iraqi Sunni Arabs and the consolidation and capacity building of the Iraqi Government in jeopardy.

More troubling still is that violence from AQI is not even the most severe security threat facing Iraq. Serious and simultaneous threats are facing a fragile nation, including potential violence along disputed territories, unresolved sectarian tensions and a fragile indecisive governing coalition, at a time when US combat troops have already fully withdrawn and Iraqi forces are as yet unable to preserve security on their own.

Moreover, the remedy to this problem, the potential retention of US or other international military advisors, trainers, and peacekeepers is causing the uptick in terrorist violence, threats of a renewed insurgency, and adamant political opposition among some members of Prime Minister Maliki's coalition, namely the Sadrist trend, threatening to destabilise an already precarious government.

The antidote has become the poison. Since the prospect of a renegotiated security agreement allowing US troops to remain, no matter how practical the need, is fraught with so many difficulties and potential for renewed violence, the international community must find a different way to assist Iraq as it transitions to a post-US military era. As an allied partner and formerly key member of the military coalition in Iraq, Australia can play a significant role through both military and diplomatic channels to assist Iraq in this precarious transition.

### **Mission accomplished?**

In the beginning of September 2010, President Obama declared the US combat mission over. The last combat brigades had already left, leaving only a residual force of 50,000 troops, whose mission it was to advise and assist Iraqi security forces. Now these 50,000 trainers and advisors are due to leave by December 2011, but hovering in the background was the prospect of a new security agreement. The August 15 attacks occurred only two weeks after Iraqi government officials announced what had been long suspected, that they were negotiating with US forces to retain a presence in Iraq in order to continue to train and support Iraqi forces, despite an earlier security agreement that stipulated the withdrawal of all troops.

Members of the Obama administration, chiefly, the then CIA director Leon Panetta and most of the military brass, have advocated for a residual troop presence to continue to train Iraqi security forces. The *New York Times* reported that the former CIA director, now Defense Secretary, has been pushing a plan that would keep 3,000–4,000 troops inside Iraq (down from the 14,000–18,000 recommended by the military).<sup>1</sup>

But while the coordinated attacks could be a clarion call from insurgents signalling that they plan to be resurgent *after* the United States' official withdrawal, the attacks are more likely a sign that Iraq should expect more of the same if the opposite happens—if the United States or its allies reach an agreement with the Maliki government to retain a troop presence in Iraq.

Prior to the latest violence, many believed that Iraqi security forces could withstand the departure, believing that despite the ability of AQI to continue sporadic attacks, it had lost the ability to do damage on a strategic level. According to one recent assessment by the International Crisis Group, 'Violence, albeit still far above what ought to be tolerable, has levelled off in the past two years. Iraqi security forces have taken the lead in several important operations. Recently, they have withstood three noteworthy tests: the departure of close to 100,000 US troops since January 2009; the March 2010 parliamentary elections; and, over the past several months, political uncertainty prompted by institutional deadlock. If insurgents remain as weak as they are and find no fresh opportunity to exploit political fractures, security forces operating at less-than-optimal levels still should face no serious difficulty in confronting them.'<sup>2</sup>

But in light of recent events, and given the precarious condition of Iraq's governing coalition under Prime Minister Maliki, this was an overly optimistic assessment. The danger to the security forces is not just the terrorist and insurgent attacks themselves, but the political fallout of those attacks.

The current Iraqi Government remains extremely fragile. The tortured negotiations to form a new government after the very close elections in 2010 are but one indication of the Iraqi Government's weakness and indecisiveness. The means by which Maliki has secured another term has engendered deep distrust, especially among supporters of the *Iraqiya* bloc led by Ayad Allawi (who actually received more votes than the Maliki bloc) and who counts among its supporters many Sunni Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Maliki's grip on power absent parliamentary oversight is also a source of tension and instability. If you add to that an increase in violence, the current Iraqi

Government is unlikely to hold and Iraq's stability and security are plunged in further jeopardy.

The *New York Times* reported that the day after the August 15 attacks, political tensions had already begun to flair. In the wake of the attacks, Prime Minister Maliki appointed a member of his own party to act in the Minister of Defense slot despite promises that it would be given to a member of the *Iraqiya* bloc, a bloc supported by many in the Awakening movement. Maliki had promised, as part of the political agreement reached last December, that the *Iraqiya* bloc could appoint the Minister of Defense and run a national strategic policy council in exchange for joining his government. But the deadline to appoint a minister had passed, the strategic policy council was not formed and the wave of attacks forced Maliki's hand to appoint a defence minister.

According to Ahmed Sliman, a member of the *Iraqiya* bloc, 'The security breach that we witnessed ... is due to the fact that we don't have qualified leaders running our security forces. They have taken so long to fill these positions, and look at what the results are... They have been delaying this for a long time so they could appoint a weak minister so they can control him.'<sup>4</sup>

This is only the beginning of how continued insurgent attacks can affect the fragility of the current Iraqi Government. If this tenuous government breaks down due to the stresses of insurgent attacks, the security forces, who remain full of conflicting loyalties to various political trends and sectarian groups, may also break down because their 'bonding agent,' the US military, has been removed.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sadrist opposition**

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia is not the only oppositional force that the United States, the Iraqi security forces and the Maliki government have to contend with. A far more powerful trend, the Sadrist movement led by the formidable Moqtada al-Sadr, has unequivocally indicated his opposition to a negotiated agreement to retain a foreign military presence in any form.

In June, Shia militias determined to force out foreign troops on schedule killed fifteen American soldiers. June 2011 was the deadliest month for the US military in two years all because Shia militias believed to be associated with Iran are firing last shots at the back of US troops to make sure they don't turn around.

Moqtada al-Sadr, emerging from his religious cell in Qom, posted warnings on his website aimed mostly at fellow Iraqi politicians interested in negotiating another security agreement allowing US trainers and advisors to remain. He repeated his threat that he would have thousands of his followers attack foreign troops who stayed past the 31 December 2011 deadline. 'They will be treated as anyone who stays in Iraq, as a tyrannical occupier that must be resisted by military means, ... The government which agrees to them staying, even if it is for training, is a weak government.'<sup>6</sup>

The Sadrists are the wildcard that have once again managed to manoeuvre themselves into a position of outsized influence. The Sadrist bloc has only forty members in parliament but has five ministers in government. Sadrist support is necessary to maintain the governing coalition under Maliki, but Sadr's opposition to a continued foreign troop presence could bring the end of the Maliki government, a government whose formation was deeply fraught with problems and delays. A Sadrist pullout could bring further uncertainty, instability and political gridlock, not to mention additional violence against security forces at a time when they do not have the logistical and intelligence support of the US military to back them up.

There is no doubt that Sadrist opposition to an extended US presence is encouraged by Iran. In anticipation of full US withdrawal, Iran has stepped up

its arms smuggling efforts to various Shia militias and has continued to cultivate various Iraqi political trends. Both Iran and the United States and its allies, including Australia, view Iraq as a vital part of maintaining influence in the region. Each country views the other as an obstruction to their interests.

But just because they are cultivated by Iran does not mean that Iraqi politicians are beholden to Tehran. Because of the very real and practical need to retain military advisors and trainers, the Sadrist and AQI opposition to a continued US advisory presence is not a view shared by most other Iraqi politicians and officials, despite what they may say in public. Iraq expert Joost Hiltermann relayed his private conversations with Iraqi politicians, 'whatever they may be saying in public, many politicians, apart from the Sadrists, insist in private that it is too early for the [US] troops to pull out in full.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Kirkuk and disputed territories**

Without the buffer of US military advisors and trainers, sustained violence could also return to Iraq in the form of conflict along and within disputed territories. Kirkuk is the most significant and precarious disputed territory. Sitting atop large amounts of oil, home to an ethnically diverse population that all claim Kirkuk as their own and the subject of territorial claims by the Kurdistan Regional Government, Kirkuk is the hottest flash point in Iraq right now.

As it stands, US troops have succeeded in organising functional joint Arab–Kurd checkpoints and patrols along disputed territories. The success of these joint patrols has been one of the few things holding back violence, but with the US due to pull out by year's end, the functionality of those patrols will be tested and the trust built alongside a third party nurturing it along will be tried.

Though a premature resolution is not advisable, the longer the issue of disputed territories linger, the more likelihood that small skirmishes could erupt into serious conflict if lines of communication between Arab and *peshmerga*, the Kurdish security force, commanders break down.

This happened in February, 2011 when the Kurds sent *peshmerga* to southern Kirkuk ostensibly to quell demonstrations, violating the combined security mechanism. Kurdish parties used the demonstrations as an opportunity to gain an additional foothold in Kirkuk and it was only because of US pressure that they withdrew. In the absence of a clear agreement or process, the strongest actor will move first. In this case, it is clearly the Kurds. Any additional unilateral move absent the US security presence in places like Kirkuk is highly likely to trigger armed conflict. It is for this reason that Kirkuki politicians, and indeed most Kurdish politicians, are calling for the retention of US troops in the area or at the least an international peacekeeping capacity.

### **What this means for Australia**

Australia has not had a significant troop presence in Iraq since about 2008. The last thirty-three troops guarding the Australian Embassy were withdrawn on 11 August 2011 and replaced by a private security firm, the Unity Resource Group. Only two military advisors remain with the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). It is unlikely that the Australian Government would entertain a return of its military under a US military leadership presence in Iraq, even in the event of a flare up along disputed territories.

However, Australia could and should support mediation efforts in Kirkuk and other disputed territories through the UNAMI process and should consider promoting a UN-backed international peacekeeping mission in disputed territories to maintain the joint Iraqi national government – Kurdish patrol and reporting system. Pushing for a peacekeeping presence in Kirkuk and other disputed territories would do a

great deal to consolidate the gains made by US troops among Arab and Kurdish security forces.

In the meantime, disputed territories, especially those with mixed Arab, Kurd and other minority populations, will not be resolved via ethnically based referenda but rather through negotiated solutions among political and ethnic leaders.

As an allied partner, Australia should not advocate a swift solution to disputed territories, particularly Kirkuk. While the conventional wisdom is that violence will increase in Kirkuk if a resolution is not reached soon, there is greater likelihood of violence if a resolution on Kirkuk is forced too soon. All sides in the conflict want to see an early resolution in their favour and pushing an early resolution is dangerous given the stakes and high emotions of the stakeholders. Instead Australia should continue to support the current go-it-slow approach by UNAMI. Advocating an approach that focuses on governance, instead of the status, of disputed territories will go a long way towards easing tensions, much more so than coming to a premature resolution.

Australia, in its diplomatic dealings with Iraq, should also reiterate the need for government consolidation instead of adding additional layers of government or positions to appease political blocs. While the days of foreign administration are long over, Iraq would still benefit from technical advisors and Australia should make them available should the Iraqi Government request this assistance. Australia has considerable expertise to offer Iraq in the fields of agriculture, irrigation, policing and mining. Helping Iraq to strengthen its governance and economic capacity in all of these areas can positively affect the security environment and contribute to the cohesion of Iraqi national institutions and government.

## Conclusion

As it is with most matters relating to Iraq, the United States, its allies, and the Iraqi Government, are left deciding between unsavory and difficult choices. The Iraqi Government and its allied partners, including Australia, must make a calculation. They must decide which scenario will contribute least to the reoccurrence of violence—the retention of foreign troops and trainers to assist the still nascent Iraqi security and intelligence forces despite clear and violent opposition from Sunni and Shia militants, or the void left behind in the absence of foreign advisors and trainers that cannot yet be filled by the Iraqi security forces on their own. This is the binary choice the Sadrist opposition has presented to the Maliki government, the Obama administration and the governments of international allies of both countries that could be called on to help, including Australia.

However, there is no denying that the Iraqi security services still require a substantial amount of assistance in their mission. There is a very real possibility that following the withdrawal of foreign troops the fault lines of conflict in Iraq—sectarian tensions, political stalemate, disputed territories—would break open. However, the mere presence of international troops can become another one of those fault lines. Unless the Maliki government can make the Sadrist trend acquiesce to the idea of retaining military advisors, there is little chance of any foreign military returning. But convincing the Sadrists to change position is very unlikely. When asked whether he would consider negotiating directly, or indirectly with US troops to retain a training mission, Sadr replied simply, 'No, there will be war.'

Both leaders of Iraq and the United States face political and security pressures to withdraw all US troops. President Obama made it a promise to fully withdraw and Prime Minister Maliki owes his position to the support of the Sadrist trend, a political trend that politically and violently opposes a US presence. But both countries also understand the need to maintain hard won security gains and cannot escape the practical need for continued US military support and training. As a result the political leadership of both countries have not acted, each waiting for the other to make the

first move. The Obama administration has publically stated it will stick to its plan of zero troops by December absent a request from the Iraqi Government. The Iraqi Government has not made this request because of Sadrist opposition.

There is a potential way out of this either-or choice and the resulting inaction. Would the Sadrists be as opposed to an international peacekeeping operation or other military advisors besides American ones? This is an unknown, but it is an option that should be explored through the United Nations. Whether or not an international peacekeeping presence materialises, Australia can contribute through offers of technical expertise to shore up Iraqi governance and it can also offer indirect military assistance through offers of officer training in Canberra instead of in-country.

In anticipation of full withdrawal, the United States is preparing for an increase in action against Iranian manoeuvring in Iraq. This is something that Australia should assist with. The US has relied on Australia as a mediator, given that Australia maintains an embassy in Tehran. US government officials have indicated that while they plan to step up covert action, they are also seeking to improve communication with the Iranian military so that 'self defensive' actions are not misconstrued and trigger a wider conflict.<sup>8</sup> Australia can play a role in this mediation effort in addition to intelligence assistance.

## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/07/world/middleeast/07military.html?hp>
- 2 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/iraq/099-loose-ends-iraqs-security-forces-between-us-drawdown-and-withdrawal.aspx>
- 3 <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67019/reidar-visser/baghdads-phantom-power-sharing-plan>
- 4 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/17/world/middleeast/17iraq.html?hp>
- 5 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/iraq/099-loose-ends-iraqs-security-forces-between-us-drawdown-and-withdrawal.aspx>
- 6 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/world/middleeast/08iraq.html>
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