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Pan-Arab Task Force in Iraq: The Case for Regional Intervention

By Guillaume N. Beurpere

Synopsis

The security situation in Iraq remains tenuous despite recent tactical gains against the Islamic State. For both political and military reasons, Baghdad should agree to the deployment of a Pan-Arab task force to enforce peace in northern Iraq.

Commentary

CRITICS OF the US strategy in Iraq argue that its military commitment is either insufficient to defeat the so-called Islamic State (IS) or simply ill-advised given the complexity of the situation. But neither committing large-scale US forces to direct combat nor withdrawing from Iraq is an advisable option. The US should instead focus its efforts on mobilising regional governments to take greater ownership in Iraqi security.

Arab states are slowly coalescing around regional security issues. Saudi Arabia was able to muster an ad hoc Arab coalition to support its air campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen. The Arab League declared its intent to establish a combined defence force of roughly 40,000 troops for action against threats to peace and stability in member states.

Assessing the military situation

Although the Arab League has a dismal record of unified action, the security situation in Iraq may give life to a Pan-Arab initiative. The unilateral Iranian intervention is not only deepening internal Iraqi sectarian divisions but also upsetting the regional balance of power with Saudi Arabia. Additionally, large formations of adequately trained and equipped security forces will be required to stabilise the country in the long run. The Iraqi military and police are currently unprepared for this task.

The Iraqi military depends on a complex combination of Shiite militias, Iranian military assistance, loosely organised Sunni tribes, Kurdish Peshmerga, and US-led coalition bombing and training. The Iranian and Shia militia components, so-called Popular Mobilisation Units, are especially problematic for Baghdad. Their very presence and sectarian agenda directly undermine the legitimacy of the Iraqi government in Sunni provinces.

As the Iraqi Army progresses, large security forces will be required to secure liberated areas against IS counterattacks. Kurdish Peshmerga militia are holding the line from Kirkuk to Erbil. Al Anbar Province in the West is still heavily contested and IS remains firmly in control of Mosul.

The US train-and-equip mission has produced two Iraqi brigades so far. These brigades are trained for offensive operations and not to hold terrain or provide local security. Nine nations are supporting the US-led bombing campaign in Iraq, now into its seventh month. Jordan is the sole Arab contributor. According to the US Defence Department the air campaign has damaged or destroyed over 5,500 IS targets since September 2014. The assessment is that IS has lost roughly 25% of the territory it captured last summer.

IS may be on the defensive, but it remains a significant threat. It defended the city of Tikrit with tenacity and is still able to muster lethal counterattacks. Anbar Province and north-eastern Syria still provide sanctuary for IS fighters. Should Mosul fall, it is likely many fighters will either retreat behind the border or go underground in Iraq to wage a prolonged insurgency against the Iraqi government.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

The intervention in Iraq by a Pan-Arab security force provides critical benefits. Firstly, it immediately alleviates growing sectarian tensions. A Pan-Arab force operating in northern Iraq will help restore Sunni confidence in the security effort. Its presence also allows Baghdad to withdraw Shiite militias and limit Iranian presence on the front lines.

Secondly, a Pan-Arab force provides time and space for the long-term development of Iraqi security forces. Iraqi manpower and materiel are in limited supply. The existing capacity is needed for planned offensive operations in Anbar and Mosul. Meanwhile, rebuilding the Iraqi Army is a matter of years, not months.

Lastly, a Pan-Arab force contains Iranian influence in Iraq. Tehran is heavily invested in shaping the political-security apparatus in Baghdad. A tipping of the scales towards Iranian dominance in Iraq risks wider regional conflict with Saudi Arabia.

The biggest risk in deploying an Arab task force in Iraq is the reaction from Iran. The parameters of the intervention must be clearly defined and accepted by Tehran. Although a United Nations Security Council resolution provides broad international legitimacy, US statecraft will be indispensable in sealing the deal. In the short-term, agreement from Baghdad would send a strong diplomatic signal to Iran.

The funding and sourcing of a pre-deployment training programme are also critical. This mission could fall to the US-led coalition. Training should occur outside of Iraq in designated regional training centres. The model would resemble the US and EU missions to train troops for the African Union Mission in Somalia.

The combined military force should consist of roughly 10,000 troops. This number mirrors the current US training goal for Iraqi troops and would double the projected combat power available for near-term operations. Egypt and Jordan are likely candidates to lead the effort. Other Arab contributors could include Morocco, Algeria and possibly Tunisia. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would not provide ground forces but could help finance the effort.

Regional solution to regional problem

Unity of effort is paramount. The Arab task force headquarters should be subordinate to the Iraqi military while still responsive to national caveats. The area of operations for the combined force should be restricted to the northern Sunni provinces of Iraq. This is critical in assuaging Iraqi Shiite concerns as well as getting approval from Iran.

The task force should have offensive peace enforcement authorities. A primary objective should include the relief of Shiite militias from combat responsibility in northern Iraq. The sooner Baghdad

can disengage and demobilise these militias, the sooner it can reach an acceptable political outcome with Sunni tribes.

A Pan-Arab military intervention in Iraq, either under the Arab League or as a separate coalition, builds regional ownership for a regional problem. For Baghdad, it provides additional combat power that both eases sectarian tensions and assists in consolidating battlefield gains. For the US and the region, it contains Iranian military intervention and influence in Iraq.

The US can shape this effort through continued military support and active regional diplomacy. If the Iraqi Army endorses the concept it is likely to gain support in Baghdad. Regional support from key Arab states as well as Iran will then provide the foundation for introducing a UN Security Council resolution.

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