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To Defeat ISIS, Iraq Forced to Accept Iran's 'Suffocating Embrace'

Baghdad must make unsavory choices as the U.S. sits out a key battle to retake a strategic town from the Islamic State group.



Iraqi fighters flash the sign of victory as they take part in a military operation on the western outskirts of Tikrit, Iraq, to retake control of the city from the Islamic State group on March 11.

By [Paul D. Shinkman](#)

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[Containing Iran's influence](#) in the Middle East has been a key U.S. policy goal for decades. But President Barack Obama's refusal to be dragged back into [another messy land war](#) has forced a desperate Iraqi government to accept the help of its eastward neighbor as it attempts to beat back the Islamic State group, which [now occupies](#) as much as a third of the country.

A few thousand Iraqi government soldiers deployed in recent weeks to [retake the town of Tikrit](#), an Islamic State stronghold and critical point on the road to defeating the extremist network. That force, however, is bolstered by an overwhelming cadre of 20,000 Iranian-backed and trained [Shiite Muslim militiamen](#), led by veteran Iranian commanders of shadowy forces well trained to lead the corps of like-minded believers.

Manpower thus far has proved crucial, as Tikrit, the birthplace of Sunni Muslim leader Saddam Hussein, was heavily fortified with extremist fighters, embedded explosive devices and experienced snipers. By most accounts, the Iraqis have had more success repelling the Islamic State group in the two-week battle than in [attempts last year](#) to turn back the militants.

But the U.S. has not dropped one bomb in support of this mission, despite its eagerness for the regular army it stood up and trained to achieve some sort of victory after falling apart during the Islamic State group's initial onslaught last summer. Even now, the Pentagon is not planning airstrikes despite Iraqi

officials' claims [the offensive has stalled](#) and requires coalition airpower.

U.S. detachment, Iranian opportunism and Iraqi dysfunction have converged on Tikrit ahead of a much larger operation in Mosul, whose size of more than a million residents may require some form of U.S. military support if it is to be wrested from Islamic State group control. The presence of foreign Shiite fighters, taking their [cues from Tehran](#), is, however, complicating what U.S. officials for months had touted as their singular effort to help Iraq retake its sovereign territory.



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when U.S. "surge" troops engaged in brutal fighting against Iran-backed Shiite militias, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's paramilitary Mahdi Army.

Even among Iraq's Shiite leaders, there is little appetite for ceding to Iranian influence – the tradeoff that accompanies the success of Iran's proxy fighters.

"You must help us avoid the suffocating embrace of the Persians," Shiite leaders in Iraq's government have told their American counterparts in closed-door meetings, according to some in leadership roles during the last war there, warning of the contractual allure of accepting Iranian aid.

The arrangement now appears to be Iraq's best chance for survival.

Tikrit represents the first major attempt by the Iraqi military and the Iran-backed Shiite militias to retake ground seized last summer, following multiple unsuccessful attempts by the local military last year to win back the city. The Pentagon's top officer has no doubt of coalition success in retaking ground in Iraq from the Islamic State group. He also does not doubt that success is tied to Iran's involvement.

"I am concerned about how they can wield that influence," Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week. According to Dempsey's assessment, roughly 1,000 Sunni Muslim tribal fighters, a brigade of roughly 3,000 regular Iraqi troops, and a few hundred Counter-Terrorism Service commandos were fighting to retake Tikrit at the time, in addition to the 20,000 Shiite militiamen.

It remains unclear specifically why the U.S. is not more involved. Some reports indicate the Iraqi government never requested U.S. air support. Others stipulate the U.S. was too concerned about the chance of an accidental Iranian casualty and the effect that would have on the [tense ongoing negotiations](#) over Tehran's nuclear program.

Pentagon spokesman Army Col. Steven Warren confirmed on Monday the U.S. absence from this operation but refused to offer specifics on the reason, citing confidential communications with the Iraqi government. He also offered a much brighter appraisal of the battle there than the Iraqi assessment that it has "stalled."



Cooperation among these actors, in any form, is not going to be easy.

The Iran-backed Shiite militias' benign title of "popular mobilization forces" masks a potent corps that, at least to many who led the last U.S. war in Iraq, offers an immediate reminder of dirty, bloody and protracted battles that led thousands of young American troops and countless Iraqis to their deaths.

"It's a little hard for us to be allied on the battlefield with groups of individuals who are unrepentantly covered in American blood," says Ryan Crocker. The career diplomat served as U.S. ambassador to Iraq from 2007 to 2009, key years during the war

when U.S. "surge" troops engaged in brutal fighting against Iran-backed Shiite militias, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's paramilitary Mahdi Army.

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"Offensive operations like this have a rhythm to them. After a fairly significant movement that we've seen our friendly forces execute, there's always going to be a requirement to regenerate combat power, to consolidate and reorganize, before the next phase," he said, emphasizing such "friendly" forces do not include Iranian fighters.

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But no previous experience can fully prepare the U.S. for this fight. As officers who have fought in the region say, if you think you understand the complexities of ethnic tensions there, rest assured that you don't.

This time, the expeditionary arms of Iran's theocracy have emerged from the shadows. Operatives such as the elusive Gen. Qassim Suleimani, commander of the zealous Quds Force, and others from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps have for decades operated subversively, building clandestine armies in places like Lebanon and Syria. Now, they publicly admit they advise and assist the Iraqi army and the precarious Shiite militias.

"The Iraqi government has requested them to be present in order to help the commanders," explains Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian nuclear negotiator, now a visiting fellow at Princeton. "Whenever they demand Iranian military forces to be present in Iraq, there is no objection from the Iranian side."

Mousavian says Iran is likely ready to cooperate with the U.S. also in fighting terrorism, in the form of the Islamic State group, its previous patron al-Qaida, or other networks still operating in Syria like Jabhat al-Nusra. But the U.S. must first understand what he describes as Iran's "legitimate interests" in the stability of Iraq, with which it shares an almost 1,000-mile border.

The recognition of Iran's national security concerns could be part of why the U.S. has accepted Tehran's involvement in Iraq, says J. Matthew McInnis, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who specializes in Iran.

"We're more consciously allowing Iranian activity in an area of our own national interest in a way that we would have resisted much more in the past," McInnis says. "At the same time, I think part of it is reality that it's impossible not to have Iran involved in this situation given that ISIS was actually threatening their own borders, so any nation's going to take a certain degree of action for self-defense purposes."

Under the White House plan, the U.S. wants to be the chief backer of an Arab coalition working to defeat the Islamic State group, but not leading it from the front. Obama wants few, if any, U.S. troops on the ground, but acknowledges some form of ground forces are the only way to ultimately defeat the Islamic State group.

The Iraqi military, however, is [not yet up to the task](#), Dempsey recently admitted.

"As this battle goes on, it's clear we want to own the battle, but we don't want to be in it," says William Luers, director of the nongovernmental organization The Iran Project and a former senior State Department official.

"The Iranians, I think, understood early on that by them being overtly involved, it would make this much more of an ethnic war, a secular war, a religious war, than if they laid back. But they realized that laying back is not what's needed right now," he says. "If our only ground option depends on getting the Iraqi military ready, this may be a long, long battle. The fact that the Shiite militias, with some Quds Force assistance, seems to be increasing the pace on Tikrit, and may do so on Mosul, it becomes less of an American war."



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These militias' style of fighting also differs inherently from how the U.S. taught the Iraqi military to wage war. Militias by definition are not disciplined, regular forces, says former Army Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger, who led the U.S. training effort in Iraq from 2005 to 2006.

"These are a bunch of guys in pickup trucks chasing another bunch of guys in pickup trucks around. This is the way people over there prefer to fight," he says.

Iran – like America – has demonstrated repeatedly its willingness to involve itself in Iraq's affairs. Its influence is largely attributed to bolstering fellow Shiite Muslims, like notoriously polarizing former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. But Shiites in Iran, and more recently in Iraq, share mutual and deep

distrust for Iraq's Sunni Muslim population, following decades of wars that each side views at least in part as an attack on the other's ethnic sect.

The question now is precisely how loyal any Iraqi, but particularly Shiites, have become to the Iranian government. Despite shared religion, Iraqi Shiites are still Arabs and traditionally distrust their Persian counterparts.

Iran's interest in Iraq stems from its historic clashes with Sunni Muslims, including Saddam Hussein, who began a bloody eight-year war between the two nations in 1980. Further meddling could break Iraq along sectarian lines, creating fissures that could not be mended and solidifying power among Shiite allies of Iran, strengthening the influence of the Islamic republic in the region and supplanting America's patronage.

"The argument can be made that we actually enabled the Iranian military by simply being absent, not militarily in this campaign, but everything that led up to it," Crocker says. "We have not been engaged politically at a high level. But the Iranians have, politically and militarily."

Amid the proven threat of persecution, none of Iraq's ethnic groups can afford to be selective about whose help they accept.

"Certainly some Sunni Arabs from the region are supporting this Iranian-led offensive, because they'd ally with the devil if it gets them their land back," Crocker adds. "Where it gets really interesting, of course, is what happens afterward."

The Shiite militias, too, have wrought havoc in Iraq, most recently during the last U.S.-led war, and they were likely incensed by the Islamic State group's slaughter of Shiites during its initial run on Baghdad last summer. America and its allies now wait to see whether they allow Sunni families to move back into their homes and help restore basic services there, or alternatively, as Dempsey said, provoke "atrocities and retribution."

"I'm concerned about what happens after the drums stop beating and ISIL is defeated," Dempsey told Congress last week. "The Tikrit operation will be a strategic inflection point, one way or the other, in terms of easing our concerns – or increasing them."

Preliminary reports indicate these ethnically aligned militias "are settling scores like they always do," says Bolger. The retired general describes a "militia warlord" mentality among these fighters, who enter enemy territory with a list of names and start killing people.

Iran is likely content to allow the U.S. to squirm under international sectarian pressure, while its operatives maintain headline space and continue to win regional hearts and minds.

But it wouldn't have to remain as such. Perhaps ironically, the U.S. successfully defeated al-Qaida in Iraq (the Islamic State group's precursor) in part due to a strategy called the "Sunni awakening," in which top generals succeeded in convincing Sunni tribal leaders to join the new U.S.-backed coalition government. A similar approach today could help ensure Iran and its proxies do not emerge as the sole victor.

Any solution begins with the latest operation.

"Tikrit is the litmus test," says Sajjan Gohel, an expert on Islamic extremism with the London-based Asia-Pacific Foundation. "How well trained is the Iraqi army in carrying out this operation? How balanced is the equation between the Iraqi army and the Shiite militias? And, effectively, how long is the whole process going to take?"

"However long it takes in Tikrit, Mosul is going to take substantially longer," Gohel says.

Whether politically, militarily or even rhetorically, the question remains: Will the U.S. get more involved? Or will Iran?

Teresa Welsh contributed to this report.

Clarified on March 17, 2015: This report has been updated to clarify the context of Seyed Hossein Mousavian's remarks.

TAGS: Islamic State, Iraq, Iran

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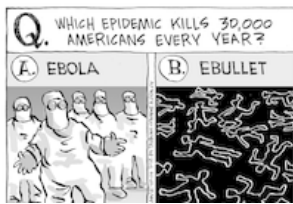


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