

INSIGHTS ON IRAQI FRAGILITY FROM THE GROUND

OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



Ketti Davison

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Last month, ISW Director of Tradecraft and Innovation, Colonel (Ret.) Ketti Davison, traveled to Iraq with a team of experts organized by the UNHCR. She got a first-hand look at some of the security and humanitarian conditions on the ground in IDP and refugee camps and met with government officials during her trip to central and northern Iraq. On this episode, Ketti shares her key takeaways from this trip and discusses the broader political dynamics that are currently shaking Iraq, a country that remains vital to U.S. national security interests.

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I'm your host for this episode. Last month ISW director of trade craft and innovation, retired Colonel Ketti Davison, traveled back to Iraq with a team of experts organized by the United Nations. There, she got a firsthand look at some of the security and humanitarian challenges on the ground and met with government officials in Baghdad and Erbil. On this episode, Ketti shares her key takeaways from this trip and discusses the broader political dynamics that are currently roiling Iraq a country that remains critical to American national security interests in the Middle East.

Ketti Davison:

So I'd like to share some observations that I made after spending a week in Iraq in December with UNHCR. And I think these observations are especially relevant with the current period of heightened tensions between the United States and Iran. So one of my major observations is the Iraqi state is very fragile. It faces huge rebuilding, reconstruction, and re-integration challenges after years of war. The government of Iraq is largely absent from many of these rebuilding and reconstruction efforts. And may even be complicit in some of the uneven progress.

It was also very obvious to me that Iraq's social cohesion is in tatters, with an almost complete breakdown of communal trust. And those sectarian groups are self segregating. They're forming enclaves with their own armed groups to protect their own communities. This is especially evident in the minority communities that still live across the Nineveh Plains. The Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, and Turkmen, just to name a few.

There are layers of checkpoints along the roads to control the population movements in and out of these self segregated communities. When I saw all of these checkpoints, it reminded me of how the Afghans described the warlord period before the Taliban emerged with individual warlords controlling territories and collecting transit fees from the people that they decided to let pass. And then denying the ability to pass to other people.

Iraq's Sunni minority is also divided between those who supported the Islamic state, those who endured the Islamic state, and those who fled from it. There's an ongoing debate inside of Iraq as whether perceived ISIS affiliation should extend to the fifth, or nine degree of separation, alienating the Sunni's even further from the governing Shia. Now, turning to the protests. The protest that started in October are still ongoing. The protestors original demands remain unmet and they may in fact be un-meet able.

The Shia street has lost patience with its political elite. And Iraq's structural problems are worsened by its youth bulge that has rising expectations. Even as capacity of the government to meet those rising expectations is falling. The acting government of Iraq right now is too weak to make any major decisions. The government does not control the popular mobilization forces. And the Iraqi army has been pushed to the sidelines. The Iraqi army feels set

up and helpless.

The people say they prefer one coherent national army over this proliferation of arms groups. But the political elite each have their own armed forces and this undermines this entire national concept of a force that is responsive to the state. No one is assuming responsibility for the violence against the protesters. While the protesters want accountability and justice. The popular mobilization forces themselves are in decline in the eyes of the people. They are no longer the heroes who defeated the Islamic state. But they are now viewed as thugs who openly fire on fellow Iraqis. And there is widespread fear that this generalized discontent may reach a point of no return. And so we may see a prolonged period of instability in Iraq.

Now, if you take the protestors perspectives, they see the prime minister as too slow. His deliberate and gradual approach is not delivering the kind of change that they're looking for. When they talk about grand Ayatollah Sistani, they feel he could do more. But they also have highlighted that the younger generation is increasingly disconnected from religious figures like Sistani because at the end of the day they ultimately disappoint them by not being able again, to bring about the type of change that the protestors are looking for. And what this larger trend is going to do over time is reduce, the influence and reach of the political religious parties that make up the political elite.

Muqtada Al-Sadr's attempt to call off the protests to become the face of them, is being rejected. Now this may mean that some of the street power that he used to be able to claim is being reduced. The protestors for the moment are unarmed. But they fear armed groups will hijack or derail their movement and what they are really seeking is reform and accountability. If you look at the political elite's perspective, they're worried. They don't have a consensus on the next prime minister or on the way ahead.

No one wants an inter Shia war, but the protestors demands and the political elites interests are mutually exclusive. It is unlikely that the elites will reform themselves out of power. The elites recognize that the current reforms on the table are not enough to placate the protestors, but there's a chance they might get lucky and the protestors will eventually die down and at the end of the day, the political elite have no other viable options but to play for time if they want to stay in power.

A number of them mentioned that they're worried about the impact on society that these protests are having because they've lasted so long. They're especially worried about the impact on the youth, which may now be coming revolutionary. And they fear that these recurring protests where the youth are asking the government to reform and meet the needs of the people may become the norm.

Now, a number of Iraqis that I talk to so that they're realists and they realize that they may need the United States for the foreseeable future. But the problem is this is not an environment where they can say so openly or publicly. Given the impact that we still see playing out from the drone strikes against Soleimani and Mohandas. It may be even harder for Iraqis to openly ask the United States to stay longer. Now, if you look at some of the minorities perspectives, the Sunnis think anything they do, or any action they take, will unite the Shia against them. So they're largely staying on the sidelines of these protests.

The Kurds fear losing influence, especially with the talk of possible constitutional amendments. They were relatively happy with prime minister Mehdi because they were able to work with him on the hard issues and they believed they had made some real progress in discussions over the Kurdistan regions budget allocation from the central government. But the problem is with the current situation, the entire budget process is up in the air. It's unlikely that the next prime minister will be as cooperative on Kurdish issues. The Kurds are concerned that Iraq

will move away from being democratic and federal. And their fear stems from rhetoric about doing away with the current constitution and shifting to a presidential system. Anything that puts the Kurdish regional governments semi-autonomous status at risk, is going to be resisted. And anything that involves the disputed internal boundaries is of great concern.

The memory that the Kurds have of losing Kirkuk, without going through the article one 40 process still lingers and still impacts their decision making. Now, there is one disturbing observation that I want to share. And that is, I came away after talking with a number of what I'm going to call average Kurds. Which means they're not part of either of the two ruling clans, that the Kurdish regional government might not be far behind from what the government in Baghdad is experiencing in terms of popular discontent. In Kurdistan, it's not what you know, but who you know that sets the conditions for success in your future.

Now I want to turn to another serious issue and that's refugees and displaced persons, which is placing an enormous strain on both the government in Iraq and the government in Kurdistan. Now, one of the things that surprised me when I visited the refugee camps and the IDP camps is that it's actually easier to integrate the Syrian refugees than the Iraqis that are internally displaced.

No one wants the Sunni's, with perceived ISIS affiliations, back in their communities. Iraq's internally displaced are the mother of all problems right now. There are up to 1.4 million Iraqis that may never return home. Their homes are damaged or destroyed beyond their means of repairing or replacing. Their communities are changed or altered to a condition where they are no longer welcome or wanted. Or their personal safety and wellbeing are threatened by this proliferation of armed groups or memories of the previous trauma that they experienced.

Three of the largest groups of the longterm displaced, include the Yazidis from the Sinjar area, the Sunni Arabs from Mosul and the Christians from the Nineveh Plains. Yazidi women returning from ISIS enslavement are welcome back into their villages, but their children are not. So the Yazidi women who want to raise their children but don't want to stay with ISIS, are part of the permanently displaced.

When you look at the Sunni Arabs that fled Mosul, they have this perceived affiliation with ISIS and so they can't return either. Many still live in camps. Their original communities and neighborhoods don't want them back and they live under this constant suspicion. The Christians that used to live across the Nineveh Plains have no plans to return because they can no longer trust their neighbors. Those who do remain in the country tend to live in the Kurdish region.

The most common themes I heard centered on the almost complete absence of the central government and how the displaced would be lost without the efforts of the UNHCR and other nongovernmental organizations. Now this protracted displacement is going to impact ISIS's ability to resurge. This perceived ISIS affiliation from either five, or nine degrees of separation, means that if your fifth cousin, was affiliated with ISIS, you are assumed to be affiliated with ISIS. And so it means that you are part of this non-integrated population set.

The conditions in the camps are not good for a healthy environment and society. And this feeds the tacit support for ISIS and even the active recruitment of fighters for ISIS. Some of the officials that we listened to spoke of concern that a Taliban generation is going to come emerging out of these camps. And this is going to feed into this extremist cycle that we see in Iraq.

So the implications are pretty profound. The fragile Iraqi state is simply not up to the task of dealing with the array of intractable problem sets at faces. Now is not the time though to throw up our hands and walk away. It will

take a coherent effort by the US and the broader international community to help Iraq weather this storm. Otherwise, Iraq will continue to devolve and further destabilize an already unstable region.

Maseh Zarif:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn more about ISWs work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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