

Are U.S. Partnerships Around the World in Jeopardy?

Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Ketti Davison and Maseh Zarif



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Maseh Zarif and ISW Director of Innovation and Tradecraft Colonel Ketti Davison (U.S. Army, Retired) discuss regional destabilization in the Middle East in the wake of the crises in Iraq and Syria. They further address how the U.S. withdrawal from Northeastern Syria will have grave consequences for the future of U.S. security operations and partnerships.

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.

It's 6:00 PM on Thursday, October 10, 2019, here in Washington, D.C. I'm sitting down with my colleague Ketti Davison. Ketti is a retired U.S. Army Colonel who's now ISW's Director of Tradecraft and Innovation. Ketti and I will discuss the twin crises in Iraq and Syria, tapping into her experience in, and knowledge of, the broader region.

So we're going to discuss the situations in both Syria and Iraq. Both independently, but also how they're converging right now. So just as a scene setter, in Iraq we've had unrest and protests, there have been over a hundred deaths now. Several thousand have been reported wounded, and the scale of the protests in the streets of Baghdad and other large cities has started to recede a bit but the underlying tensions still remain. Some of the protesters demand relate to economic opportunities, basic services, broader governance related issues.

Across the border in Syria, we have now a long-threatened Turkish incursion that has started into Northern Syria. The Turks have previously pushed into Northern Syria. They hold some terrain along with their Syrian proxy forces. So it's not the first time they've made a move in, but it's a new move in. The targeting of the Turkish forces is in part the ground force partner the United States has had in the Anti-ISIS Campaign, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are not exclusively but are largely led by Syrian Kurdish forces. So this has created, in effect, crises in both countries at the same time where the United States obviously has a range of interests tied into the trajectory of where these two countries are going.

So let's start with Iraq first. So Ketti, you spent a significant part of your military career deployed to Iraq or working on issues related to the country. So I want to ask you, first of all, have you seen anything like the kind of unrest that we've witnessed?

Ketti Davison:

So the short answer is no. And we saw the brutality of the sectarian civil war and then the flare-ups of the ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds and we saw the senseless and extreme violence of the Islamic State. But what we are seeing now is something that's altogether different. The Iraqi state is fragile and struggling to meet the demands of its people and the people are speaking out. The protesters are largely young Shi'a males who seek better employment opportunities and hope for a brighter future. Their demands include a change in the current government and reform of a system that is riddled with corruption. So what we have now is the Shi'a street that is protesting to change the Shi'a-dominated central government. That is what is most remarkable. This is the first time in Iraq's history that it has been ruled by its Shi'a majority.

That this government has lost the consent of its governed is extremely concerning and no one is more concerned than Iran. This may not be just another Arab Spring. In fact, it demonstrates many of the characteristics that

we are watching closely in the Hong Kong protests that China is struggling to deal with. It appears to be spontaneous and decentralized, so there may be no leaders to bargain with and no way to end this by decapitation. The Iraqi protesters are increasingly finding ways to get their message out. The intermittent shutdown of the internet is forcing the protesters to learn and adapt. This should worry Iran as millions of Iranian pilgrims who enter Iraq to commemorate Arba'een may carry this learning back home with them. Iran's worst nightmare would be the spillover of this popular uprising in Iraq back into Iran.

Maseh Zarif:

So I'm reminded in some ways of the period after the end of 2011 when United States forces withdrew from Iraq. You had a couple of years under the administration of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq where there was growing popular backlash against governance failures, sectarianism in part that was driven by Iran, and other issues. Obviously today the circumstances aren't the same, but how would you compare and contrast what's happening today in terms of the popular backlash and what we saw during 2012 to 2014.

Ketti Davison:

Well, the popular backlash against former Prime Minister Maliki was sectarian in nature. It was primarily the marginalized Sunnis protesting against the heavy-handed treatment by the Shi'a-dominated government and its security forces. The current protests are intra-Shi'a. The Shi'a political elite are no longer in a position of strength. They are the focus of the protests. It is their political offices that are being burned in the provinces by their people, the ones that they're supposed to be representing. Now the Sunni Iraqis appear to be sitting this one out. They fear incurring a harsh government response if they participate, as they have experienced in the past. And at the same time they fear both being labeled ISIS and doing anything that might cause ISIS to return.

Maseh Zarif:

So it's interesting that you're describing what is an intra-Shi'a struggle now. Know that for a lot of us who've been concerned about the degree of Iranian influence in Iraq's political and security structures, this moment reminds us that the downside for the Iranians in this case is that, when there are failures, that the Iranians themselves are a target given the role that they're playing in the country. So as you've been watching the lead-up to this protest, was there an isolated trigger to this current wave of protests or were there actually deeper systemic issues that have been building up?

Ketti Davison:

The match that may have lit this fire was the removal of the Deputy Commander of the Counter-Terrorism Services, Lieutenant General Saadi. He was broadly regarded as an Iraqi hero in the fight against the Islamic State. But deeper systemic issues had been building up over years. There's some suspicion that Saadi was removed to pave the way for increased Iranian influence in the security forces. Many Iraqis did not welcome additional Iranian influence in their sovereign country. And we've heard much about the need to rebuild the Sunni areas that were devastated in the fight against the Islamic State. But investment is needed in the Shi'a south as well. These areas were largely neglected as the state was - probably rightly - preoccupied with driving out the Islamic State. The Basra protests last summer called attention to this need of reconstruction and investment in the Shi'a south, but the state has been very slow to respond.

Maseh Zarif:

Looking at the current situation, you have to figure that Iran has to be nervous in this moment. The Iranians see Iraq as a critical node and a broader regional project. So what do you think the Iranian regimes calculus is with the prospect of a destabilized Iraq?

Ketti Davison:

Iran has long sought a weak but friendly and ideally Shi'a-led government in Iraq. It actually had achieved this goal with Iraq's current government led by Prime Minister Mehdi. Now a popular uprising in Iraq capable of toppling its central government would be perceived as an existential threat to Iran. We already saw indications that Iran was sending Iranian forces into Iraq, even before Iran's IRGC spokesman admitted that they were doing it. And these Iranian forces were sent to work side-by-side with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces to quell the Iraqi protests. Unfortunately, Iranian attempts to impose order might actually incite larger unrest, as Iranian influence in the government and over Popular Mobilization Forces are part of the protesters' list of grievances. Anti-Iranian slogans and signage have been common occurrences since the beginning of these protests.

Now the overt entrance of these Iranian forces is going to place a great deal of stress on an already fragile system. The Iraqi Prime Minister is going to incur additional anger from the protesters if he admits that he invited Iranian forces into Iraq to be used against the Iraqi people. On the other hand, the Prime Minister is going to look weak if he's forced to concede that the Iranian forces came into Iraq and linked up with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces without his invitation or consent. He's in a no-win situation, and meanwhile the Government of Iraq is losing legitimacy. And should the current Iraqi government system fail, there is no force powerful enough to impose order for long enough to put another one together again. There is a potential for state collapse with all that is going on right now.

We've seen the coexistence of the nationalistic Iraqi Security Forces and the more Iranian-leaning Popular Mobilization Forces was already very tenuous. The additional weight of these Iranian forces on this relationship may cause it to break. So the loyalty and cohesion of the Iraqi Security Forces are things that we are watching very closely. If the Iraqi Security Forces are sidelined, they may fracture. With some supporting the protesters, some aligning with the Popular Mobilization Forces, and still others opting to go home and just wait it out. Iran may actually believe it has the answer to the Iraqi protests. But the heavy-handed way that the Iranians employed tactics to quell the 2009 Green Revolution will not work in Iraq. We may see a temporary lull in protests. But it's going to be like putting a lid on a pressure cooker. It's only a matter of time before it erupts.

Maseh Zarif:

That's certainly a situation that we'll be watching closely. So let's move across the border into Syria. So with the Turkish advance into part of Northern Syria, you now have a situation where the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which include the Syrian Kurdish YPG, they're in a moment of scrambling to try to deal with this event. If you've already heard some reports, our colleague John Dunford was describing the deployment of some SDF forces up the Euphrates River Valley from Eastern Syria. What vulnerabilities does this type of a move by the Turks open up in different parts of Syria, particularly in the east there?

Ketti Davison:

What does it risk is the enduring defeat of the Islamic State and the loss of security in the one-third of Syria that's relatively stable. Our primary counter-ISIS partner, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, pulled out of the U.S.-led CT fight. But this threatens to reverse the gains made against the Islamic State. It calls into question the status of Islamic State foreign fighters and detainees that the SDF had been holding as well as the status of tens of thousands of Islamic State family members in the Al-Hawl Refugee Camp. But the SDF does not have the manpower to guard all of these facilities while simultaneously fighting off a Turkish invasion. The territorial manifestation of ISIS was defeated, not the bulk of its forces. Should more ISIS fighters and family members be freed to carry on their Islamist extremist agenda and recreate a physical caliphate, it will embolden and inspire jihadists worldwide. We will see acts of terror spike across the globe.

There's this thought out there that we can just bomb the Islamic State whenever it comes back. But the simple answer is if you could defeat terrorism with airpower alone, after two decades of strikes, we shouldn't have any terrorists left. Airpower without forces on the ground has limited utility. It lowers the fidelity of intelligence that we have. It makes us less able to keep up with the shifting dynamics on the ground. And it increases the risk that we're going to strike the wrong targets or cause collateral damage. And when you start killing innocent civilians, this ends up creating more terrorists that we are just going to have to fight later. So airpower is a very important component of the overall fight, but it is not going to be decisive against terrorism on its own.

Maseh Zarif:

So how do you see the pro-Assad camp, including the Russians and the Iranians, reacting to what the Turks are doing? I know that in the initial reporting of the Turks moving in there was some indication that they had discussed with, if not cleared it with, the Russians, and that there might be a coordinated move from the pro-Assad side. How do you think they're watching this operation and how do you think they think they can exploit it?

So Turkey's alone in this. Iran is opposed to Turkey's violation of Syria's territorial integrity. Russia's concerned that Turkey's actions will undermine the political settlement to the Syrian conflict that Russia has spent years working towards. And the Syrian regime is obviously against losing more of its territory to an invading and occupying Turkish force. Turkey, Iran, and Russia were not natural allies to begin with. They have extensive histories of fighting with each other. Should this weaken their cooperation with Syria, we may unfortunately see the Syrian Civil War, that has already killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and displaced millions, protracted even further.

So let me try to bring the two countries together now and talk about both how the border area plays out amidst these two crises and how you see the situations converging. I view Eastern Syria and Western Iraq as almost one system in terms of the way that jihadists views it, in terms of the way that Iran views it as part of its land bridge across the region. How do you see the security situation in that area evolving if the SDF loses control and Iraq continues to go down this path, potentially even getting worse in terms of destabilization?

Ketti Davison:

So the Turkish invasion of Syria and the Iranian response to the Iraqi protests are further dividing an already fragmented region. Both Iran and Turkey may have bitten off more than they can chew and may in fact cause what they both fear most to emerge. Turkey seeking that buffer zone along its border that's free of this Kurdish threat that they perceive as a terrorist threat. And Turkey intends to resettle approximately three million Syrian refugees, changing the demographics and creating an Arab belt in what is now a Kurdish-majority area. The Kurdish fighters are battle-hardened, well led, and fighting on their own turf, and this may be a tougher fight than Turkey's expecting. The U.S. is no longer in the area to moderate the actions of the Kurdish force. So the Kurdish SDF has limited options and given that the Kurdish targets of the Turkish invasion have branches, not just in Syria, but in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran as well, we may see a regional mobilization of Kurdish fighters.

Refugees may flow away from the conflict, but Kurdish fighters might actually flock to it. Now, the Kurds already lost Afrin to the last Turkish operation and Kirkuk to the Iraqi Security Forces. And we're already seeing protests against this most recent Turkish invasion occurring in Iraqi Kurdistan. Without the United States, and with the Kurds feeling attacked on all sides, we may see a rise in Kurdish militancy, which is the last thing Turkey is trying to bring about. And with Iran's heavy hand in Iraq, they might actually cause the protests to spread and potentially spill over into Iran. This security vacuum might arise especially in the areas that were formerly controlled by the Islamic State, as the Syrian and Iraqi Security Forces are distracted by invasions and protests. This does not bode well for the stability of the Iraqi-Syrian Border or for the stability of the entire region.

Maseh Zarif:

So you're describing, at least in the case of Iran, some potential natural limits to what they would like to do in Iraq and Syria. What other challenges do the Iranians face? What are the primary obstacles that are preventing them from realizing the maximum of what they would like in Iraq and Syria?

Ketti Davison:

Well, it remains to be seen just how much support Iran can afford to give Iraq while also supporting its efforts in Syria. Iran may be overstretched militarily and financially. Maintaining an armed presence in Iraq is an additional burden that Iran almost certainly didn't budget for and the Syrian regime still needs significant assistance. It's struggling to maintain control of the reconquered areas in Western Syria and maintain pressure on that last rebel stronghold up in the north in Idlib. Iran's going to have to think through how it pursues its broader regional agenda as it also deals with these new crises.

Maseh Zarif:

If you were imagining a group like ISIS or Al Qaeda or some other groups similar watching the situation in Iraq and Syria, how do you think they are trying to position themselves? Would you imagine a scenario where they very rapidly try to strike or are they waiting and watching and seeing where the opportunities are? How do you think they approach this?

Ketti Davison:

So the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition relied on two primary defeat mechanisms on the ground and in the fight. They were the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The future of both of these is in question right now. Given the risk of the fracture in the Iraqi Security Forces and the feelings of betrayal throughout the Syrian Democratic Forces, it's doubtful that either of these two will emerge from their current crises strong enough to defeat the Islamic State again. The Islamic State and Al Qaeda are both savvy enough to recognize an opportunity that is unfolding before them. They have the experience to plan their next steps and the patience to wait for the time to act. When they decide to act, the United States may have no one capable or even willing to partner with us in this next fight, and the next fight will occur.

Maseh Zarif:

So there is an argument that we've been hearing since this decision that it's a potential step toward ending an endless war. That it somehow extricates the United States from the Middle East. In some cases, the follow-on argument is that it allows us to focus on other issues like China. What's your response? Do you think this is a step toward ending an endless war?

Ketti Davison:

So I think we're being presented with a false choice. It's not focus on the great powers and all the other problems of the world will go away. We actually have to focus on the problems across the entire spectrum. If we didn't have national interests at stake, we wouldn't be in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan. Because we have a national interest at stake and because the threats emanating from these regions have the intent and are working on the capability to attack our homeland again, we can't just walk away from these wars. We might want them to end. We have not taken away the intent of actors from these areas to attack us and we have to pursue a sustained suppression or disruption of their capability to attack us. So there's this challenge that we have. We do not understand what actors that the United States is deterring by having a forward presence until we are no longer deterring them.

And that is exactly what we are seeing with Turkey. We pulled back. We may or may not have intended for this invasion to occur, but the fact that we physically pulled back allowed it to happen. Now, it may not be too late to

stop the worst of Turkish actions. Turkey may pride itself on the ability to balance East against West, but I don't believe it's prepared to be isolated by both. We may be seeing something similar in Iraq because we have been very clear that we want to get out of these endless wars.

We may have actually green-lighted Iran's freedom to move forces inside of Iraq and co-locate with Popular Mobilization Forces that is putting at risk the Iraqi Security Forces we have spent decades building. So our challenge is how to assess the actors and actions that we are deterring while we're on the ground without pulling out and watching events unfold in the chaotic way they're unfolding. Now, one of the long-term implications that the U.S. is going to have to manage is the broken trust. Who will trust us again? Which partner on the ground will fight beside us? And which nation will enter into a coalition with us again?

Maseh Zarif:

So we've heard American officials talk often, not just recently, but over the last few years. One of the big concerns about what policy steps the U.S. takes is the safety of our forces in theater both inside of Iraq and in Syria. Obviously, the safety of U.S. forces in Northern Syria was one of the drivers of this decision. Given the crisis that's unfolding inside of Syria and the destabilization within Iraq, how concerned are you about the safety of American forces in those two countries?

Ketti Davison:

So I think we should be concerned. The U.S. presence on the ground in Iraq and Syria has a purpose. It's to ensure the continued defeat of a resilient and brutal Islamic extremist group. It has demonstrated its intent to regroup, resurge and expand globally. Turkish invasion and the Iranian intervention, both in Muslim Arab countries, will add fuel to the Islamic State's fire. We're going to see recruits flock to its ranks. The long-term viability of U.S. presence in Iraq and Syria is certainly at risk. The U.S. CT partnership with the SDF has been put on hold by the SDF due to this Turkish invasion. And Kurdish fighters who've lost brothers in arms fighting the Islamic State for the United States feel betrayed by what they perceive was this green-light from the US to Turkey to launch the invasion.

Some may either refuse to protect or even lash out against their former U.S. partners. In Iraq, the combination of ongoing protests, violent responses to them, new Iranian forces on the streets, and the potential fracturing of the Iraqi Security Forces will all increase the risk to U.S. personnel in the country. These two interacting crises could not have come at a worse time for the region.

Maseh Zarif:

In both Iraq and Syria, and I would argue the broader Middle East region, there are a range of actors, both allies and partners and adversaries and enemies, who are watching what the United States is doing and will make decisions on the basis of where they perceive the U.S. going and how committed the United States seems to be to defending and standing up for its own interests. Who's the type of actor that you're watching for that could potentially be a wild card, that could be shaping these situations but that isn't necessarily at the forefront of news reporting when it comes to watching this situation?

Ketti Davison:

So that is a great question because what I'm looking for are those opportunists that had been laying low and organizing and see that now is the time to act, now is their chance. Al Qaeda in Iraq, nobody had heard of them until they formed, when an opportunity was presented, and they saw a chance to act. The Islamic State, it also formed once it saw an opportunity to be able to act and pursue an agenda. I promise you that there are opportunists in this region right now that have been laying low and that will use this chance to organize and try to

advance their agenda. So it's the ones that we don't know the names of yet that concern me the most.

Maseh Zarif:

Let me ask you about a role of allies and partners, because you obviously spent time in the Middle East working with local forces. How important have local forces been really in the entire post-9/11 period to helping achieve U.S. objectives, including preventing the next attack on our homeland?

Ketti Davison:

So there's a quote by Field Marshal Slim that I hope I get right, and that is, "The only thing worse than fighting in a coalition is trying to fight a war without one." And I've had two deployments in Iraq, two in Afghanistan, and one in Kuwait, and we couldn't take a step without our allies and our partners. Our coalition warfighting ability is fundamental to our ability to assert any kind of influence on the ground, militarily or politically. And anything that puts that at risk I think does harm to American interests.

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 ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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