



**“BY, WITH, AND THROUGH”: HOW THE U.S.-LED COALITION DEFEATED THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ USING TACTICS WITHOUT COHERENT STRATEGY FOR CONFRONTING IRANIAN INFLUENCE**

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*The United States has engaged in several years of war in Iraq against the Islamic State (IS) since launching Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve in October 2014. The United States estimates that they have killed more than 60,000 IS members, conducted more than 22,000 airstrikes and trained more than 100,000 security forces throughout Iraq. The successful U.S. campaign is in contrast to past operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere and is best encapsulated in the “by, with, and through” approach of letting Iraqis lead operations. This bottom-up approach is tactically successful but is short on strategy, opening the door for Iranian influence in Iraq. The United States is modeling other counterterrorism operations throughout the world on its Iraq success with other “build partner capacity” programs. Based on two years of fieldwork and interviews, this article examines both the tactical successes and policy implications of the U.S. successes against IS in Iraq.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On October 17, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense established Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to confront the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS), which had conquered a third of Iraq, including its second largest city and many areas inhabited by Sunni Arabs. It took more than a year for the operation to achieve major results in Iraq in Ramadi in December 2015. By the summer of 2016, the increasing tempo of operations and competence of Iraqi security forces led to planning for an assault on Mosul, and by the fall of 2017, IS was largely defeated in Iraq.

The U.S.-led coalition of around 68 countries<sup>1</sup> has focused on defeating IS and channeled U.S. resources successfully toward that goal, even as the U.S. administration of Barack Obama transitioned to Donald Trump in January 2017.<sup>2</sup> Brett McGurk, U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to counter the Islamic State, who was appointed in October 2015, remained in his position under Trump. This provided continuity to the successful operation.<sup>3</sup>

In Syria, Inherent Resolve has established military bases, successfully warded off Turkish threats to invade areas run by U.S. Kurdish allies in the People’s Protection Units and Syrian Democratic Forces, and launched a major operation to liberate Raqqa in June 2017. Throughout the campaign in Iraq, U.S. officers have stuck to extraordinary message discipline in numerous interviews conducted. “The strategy is by, with, and through; they [Iraqi security forces] are doing it with us behind them and advising. They are the A-team, doing this, so it requires close coordination,” according to Brig. Gen. Andrew Croft, Deputy Commanding General for Air of the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command (CJFLCC) of OIR.<sup>4</sup> Instead of the United States making plans or leading the way, the decisionmaking is largely left up to the Iraqi forces, or the Kurdish Peshmerga when they had active frontlines up until October 2016. The Americans generally concede that they could have done the operation faster had it been left up to them, but the concept of this war has been to have a small footprint and let the local country lead the way.

The result of this in Iraq has been that there is no overarching or coherent American strategy from the top-down, except defeating IS. That is evidenced by the growth in influence of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a group of Shi'i militias that answered the call of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in June 2014 to help defend Iraq from IS. Over time, the diverse group of militias, which number up to 100,000 men, came to be an official part of the Iraqi paramilitary forces in the fall of 2016.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. policy is not to work with these forces and to “de-conflict” from them when operations overlap, such as during airstrikes in Anbar province.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the U.S. lip-service paid to the tradition of Clausewitz-style policy, which has underpinned American strategic thought historically, the U.S. role in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere--such as Libya, Africa, or Afghanistan--does not seem to have overarching political or coherent strategic and policy goals.<sup>7</sup> This has led to U.S. policy on the ground coming into conflict with U.S. diplomacy in places such as Turkey, where locations of U.S. bases in Syria were leaked to the media in June 2017.<sup>8</sup> As the Pentagon takes the front seat in Iraq and elsewhere, the U.S. State Department and CIA are sidelined. From a tactical perspective of achieving goals such as defeating IS, that has proved successful; but guidance from the White House on the overall strategy is lacking.

The absence of strategy and the addiction to successful “by, with, and through” tactics has been a boon for various train and equip or build partner capacity and advise and assist programs, and especially for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Founded in 1987, it has grown from around 43,000 personnel in 2001 and a \$3 billion budget to 70,000 and \$10 billion budget in 2017.<sup>9</sup> Like OIR, its mission looks to work closely with partner countries which are fighting terror. General Raymond Thomas III told the U.S. House Armed Services Committee in May 2017 that on a daily basis SOCOM was “a deployed or forward stationed force of approximately 8,000 across 80 plus countries.”<sup>10</sup> Among those things the Special Operations Forces (SOF) does, according to General Thomas is “engage in counter aggressive Iranian behavior that not only destabilizes the Middle East, but also stokes sectarianism.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, in Iraq, the SOF works with American forces that partner with the Iraqi Security Forces, which include Iranian-backed militias.

The role in Iraq is symbolic in many ways of the concept behind many of these operations. It emphasizes a limited military goal, without the burden of the democracy building of the 2003 war or too many ideals and values guiding the policy.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the policy is often not guided by other clear goals. In Iraq, the principle beneficiary of this has been Iran, whose forces have entered the vacuum left by IS. Although Iran is hostile to U.S. interests, the United States has not put forth any policy regarding how its military goal of aiding Iraq to defeat IS might erode its political goal of not wanting to strengthen Iran. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, who also led U.S. forces in Tal Afar fighting the Iraqi insurgency in 2005, wrote in his 1997 book *Dereliction of Duty*: “The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington D.C. even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war.”<sup>13</sup>

Emblematic of the failure of U.S. policy to advance its political goal of rolling back Iran, which Trump enshrined in an October 13, 2017, speech, was the tepid response to Iraq's takeover of Kirkuk from Kurdish forces. “When you look at the death and destruction inflicted in Syria, Yemen and Iraq by Tehran and its proxies, the threat is clear,” CIA Director Mike Pompeo said in a speech at the University of Texas in mid-October.<sup>14</sup> However, the United States did nothing to oppose the role of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force Commander Qasim Sulaymani in brokering a deal by which Iraq and Shi'i militias Asaib Ahl al-Haq overran Kirkuk and took it from Kurdistan Peshmerga the same month.<sup>15</sup> Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called on “Iranian militias” to leave Iraq on a trip to Saudi Arabia on October 22, 2017. Yet any practical implications of that were lacking during the October 2017 Kirkuk crises, as U.S. allies in Kurdistan were threatened and Iran's IRGC empowered.

The question today for U.S. policymakers is whether they are winning the battles but losing the larger war. U.S. forces are successful, and the multiplicity of programs they engage in are successful.

The conflict in Iraq has learned from its past mistakes, but does it have a strategy for the future? Examining its challenges and successes sheds light on these questions.

## FROM BUSH TO COIN

Since the U.S.-led coalition and Operation Desert Shield was formed in August of 1990 to protect Saudi Arabia from Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the United States has played a substantial role in Iraq. This has gone through numerous operations and deployments. These include Desert Storm (1991), Provide Comfort (1991-1996), Operation Desert Strike (1996), Operations Northern (1997-2003) and Southern Watch (1992-2003), Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003), Operation Vigilant Resolve (2004), Operation Together Forward (2006), Operation Phantom Thunder (2007), Operation Phantom Strike (2007), Operation Phantom Phoenix (2008) and Operation New Dawn (2010).

U.S. forces left Iraq in December 2011, after around 4,500 soldiers had been killed in nine years.<sup>16</sup> The origins of the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 could be seen in retrospect emerging with the U.S. withdrawal. IS had carried out its first bombings and attacked Iraq’s Central Bank in June 2010. Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni vice president of Iraq, fled Baghdad in 2011, the day after the U.S. withdrawal, after facing arrest. The sectarianism that fed IS and the ability of Sunni jihadi groups to terrorize the country grew in parallel with the U.S. drawdown and immediately after the withdrawal in 2011.

U.S. doctrine and policy, especially relating to counterinsurgency or COIN, has been tied closely to lessons learned in Iraq. “The relative paucity of strategic thinking about counterinsurgency since Vietnam doubtless contributed to our difficulty in grasping the emergence of the insurgency in Iraq,” Lt. Col. John Nagl wrote in 2006.<sup>17</sup> He advocated against an over-reliance on military force, and for gathering intelligence from the local population. He argued that the long process would mean “integration of all elements of national power, military diplomatic, economic, financial, intelligence and informational, to accomplish the tasks of creating and supporting legitimate host governments that can then defeat the insurgency.”<sup>18</sup> He ascribed the terror campaign to “enemies of freedom in Iraq” whose suicide bombs “make a virtue of their randomness.” Nagl seemed to miss the fact that insurgent attacks were not random, but carefully targeted minorities, or sectarian enemies. Despite its difficulty, which he acknowledged, he also argued for “turning every rifleman and tank driver into an intelligence collector and analyst.”<sup>19</sup>

In 2006, General David Petraeus and then Marine Lt. General James Mattis helped create the new edition of U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 on counterinsurgency. It, and its successor JP-3-24, was supposed to relate to a comprehensive civilian and military effort taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes or “core grievances.”<sup>20</sup> A U.S. Government Interagency Counterinsurgency initiative booklet from 2009 notes,

American counterinsurgency practice rests on a number of assumptions: that the decisive effort is rarely military (although security is the essential prerequisite for success); that our efforts must be directed to the creation of local and national governmental structures that will serve their populations, and, over time, replace the efforts of foreign partners; that superior knowledge, and in particular, understanding of the ‘human terrain’ is essential; and that we must have the patience to persevere in what will necessarily prove long struggles.<sup>21</sup>

The Petraeus doctrine that was hyped in 2009 was discredited by the ease with which IS took over part of Iraq and captured thousands of Iraqi army vehicles, many of them purchased or supplied by the United States.<sup>22</sup> The Iraqi army, which had numbered 645,000 in 2009 and cost \$23 billion in U.S. appropriations to help rebuild, failed to stop IS in northern Iraq, a far weaker force.<sup>23</sup> The rot that U.S. reviews had noted, such as desertions, inability of a third of the army to plan and execute

maneuvers, and religious sectarianism led to 2014.<sup>24</sup> It also was a lesson to Pentagon planners of OIR and how to best carry out an advise and assist and “build partner capacity” program.

Robert Lamb at the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues that the 2006 COIN manual was “fundamentally flawed” and made the wrong strategic assumptions.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, “improving the host-nation’s capacity to deliver services to populations will not necessarily make the government more legitimate--the key strategic objective of COIN. Building government legitimacy requires at least as much attention to politics as it does capacity.” That means that the “ambitious societal and institutional transformations” that are required might take generations, and the American public and politicians may not have the will to stick with a project that entails “fixing another country’s problems.”<sup>26</sup>

## RETURN TO IRAQ 2014

The U.S. forces that returned to Iraq in 2014 as part of OIR came with a very specific mission of “defeating IS in designated areas in Iraq and Syria and sets conditions for follow-on operations to increase regional stability.”<sup>27</sup> In some ways, this is reminiscent of the Powell doctrine of 1991. They were tasked with the use of military force towards a clear objective, not an endless counterinsurgency and not a Bush era democracy promotion or “pre-emption” mission. However, unlike 1990, the forces that were deployed were always to have a small footprint and let the Iraqis lead. Many of the policymakers had prior experience in Iraq, including General John Allen (2003, 2007), General John Kelly (2008), James Mattis (2003), H.R. McMaster (1991, 2004-2005), and others. Even for those in government and the Pentagon who hadn’t served in Iraq, the quarter-century U.S. involvement there was a formative experience in many of their lives. As the United States deployed back to Iraq in 2014, it would contrast its new role with the “surge” of 2007 and other experiences.

Emblematic of this difference can be seen in contrasts made by Lt. Col. John Hawbaker, a commander in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, who served in Iraq in 2005-2006 and returned to fight in Mosul in 2017:<sup>28</sup>

I was in Anbar [province] and also in Baghdad. Our enemy then was al-Qa’ida led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It’s interesting, and I try to relay this to my folks, ISIS is the direct descendent of them; same barbarism, evil, and cruelty has been passed on to ISIS to a much larger and conventional threat. We were doing counterinsurgency with the U.S. leadership. The difference now is the ISF conducts a fight not as a counterinsurgency but against a conventional force, but it’s the same evil.

He also contrasts the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) today with 2006: “In those days, the Iraqis were limited and limited in capability; the Federal Police [today] have extreme professionalism and are disciplined and capable, and that’s one of the biggest differences from 10 years ago.” He adds that the junior officers of the ISF have made major strides and--assisted by U.S. fire support, air strikes, and intelligence--they are taking back their country.

It took two years to get to this point. In January 2014, IS conquered Fallujah. It was seen as an “al-Qa’ida group” at the time, and the nature of its insurgency and extremism was not appreciated.<sup>29</sup> On June 10, 2014, Mosul fell to IS, which was still perceived as “insurgents.”<sup>30</sup> The next day Tikrit was also taken. On June 16, the black flag rolled into Tal Afar, and Shi’i Turkmen fled. At the end of June, it declared a “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria. On August 3, 2016, they launched a new offensive on Yazidi areas in Sinjar and on August 7 against Christian towns in Nineveh, taking Qaraqosh. As IS advanced on the Kurdish Regional Government capital of Erbil, the United States launched airstrikes. U.S. President Barack Obama described these as seeking to prevent the fall of Erbil and stop the “systematic destruction of the entire Yezidi people.”<sup>31</sup> On September 5, 2014, Obama sought

to create an anti-IS coalition in a speech at a NATO summit. On September 23, U.S. airstrikes against IS in Syria began.

There was discussion in the United States about what this campaign would entail. Nathan Frier, a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote in June 2014 that the “by, with and through” approach “to complex civil conflicts in the Middle East is running headlong into the reality of flawed partners.”<sup>32</sup> He warned of an Iraqi government that was more aligned with Iran and Syria than the United States but concluded “the U.S. can and should take two major military steps now to help stabilize the situation and secure a minimally acceptable and manageable outcome.”<sup>33</sup>

## THE FIRST YEAR

The U.S. intervention in August 2014 stemmed the tide of IS almost immediately, helping to stop them near Mosul Dam, Haditha Dam, near Rabiah, and also on the road from Makhmur to Erbil. U.S. involvement had begun slightly earlier in June 2014, when Obama sent 300 advisors to assist the Iraqi army.<sup>34</sup> The only major IS offensive that was effective in Iraq after the fall of 2014 was when IS took Ramadi in May 2015. The liberation of Iraq proceeded through Sunni Arab districts in 2015-2016. Tikrit was liberated on March 31, 2015. Sinjar was recaptured in November 2015 by Kurdish Peshmerga, and Ramadi was retaken by Iraq in late December 2015. In June 2016, Fallujah was liberated. On October 17, 2016, the Mosul offensive began.

The initial phase of U.S. airstrikes was limited, with only 200 used by September 23, 2016.<sup>35</sup> At the same time the United States expedited the shipment of \$650 million supplies to the ISF, including Hellfire missiles, tank ammunition, rifles, and millions of rounds of ammunition.<sup>36</sup> There were also advisors on the ground. According to Defense Department spokesman John Kirby, “those teams are now advising teams. There are 12 of them. Seven are advising higher headquarters in and around Baghdad. The other five are up near Erbil. So they are now advising teams.”<sup>37</sup> Kirby also said the United States was targeting IS “sanctuaries” and working to “degrade and destroy their capabilities.” Strategic infrastructure was defended: “the Mosul Dam matters to them [IS] and Haditha Dam matters to them and why Baiji matters to them, because it's sources of revenue.” By the end of 2014, more than \$1 billion had been spent and 1,371 airstrikes flown (799 in Iraq and 572 in Syria), with the United States flying 82 percent of the missions of the coalition.<sup>38</sup> The United States said its mission was to strike IS command and control and resupply assets and degrade its ability to “conduct maneuvering.”<sup>39</sup>

By the end of July 2015, one year into the operation, there were 3,300 U.S. troops on the ground alongside 1,200 from other members of the coalition, mostly involved in training.<sup>40</sup> OIR had carried out 5,946 airstrikes (2,657 in Iraq), hitting 10,684 targets, including 119 tanks and 1,200 vehicles, at a cost of \$3.21 billion. ISIS had lost 30 percent of the area it controlled, around 6,500 square miles.<sup>41</sup> Iraq had also received 250 MRAPs, 2,000 Hellfire missiles, 10,000 M-16s, and 22 million rounds of ammunition to ISF and the Peshmerga.<sup>42</sup> Special forces were also more active in Iraq. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter told the House Armed Services Committee in December 2015 that special operations forces were a “standing force” in Iraq and there would be a slow “ramp-up” of them from their 2015 numbers, which was around 50, to more. “These special operators will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL [sic] leaders.”<sup>43</sup>

## 2016: UPPING THE TEMPO

U.S. combat deaths in Iraq showed the increasing role Americans were playing, especially alongside Kurdish Peshmerga. In October 2015, Master Sgt. Joshua Wheeler, a Delta Force commando, was killed in battle near Hawija, west of Kirkuk. Peshmerga said around 30 Americans were aiding them near Kirkuk. U.S. Central Command in Baghdad said the United States “is not

conducting a combat mission. We continue to conduct an advise and assist mission.”<sup>44</sup> In March 2016, Staff Sgt. Louis Cardin from the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit was killed by indirect fire near Makhmur. In May 2016, a U.S. Navy SEAL was killed in battle in Tel Skuf while “advising” Peshmerga.<sup>45</sup> American commanders stressed that the U.S. forces “won’t go off and conduct any type of mission on their own.”<sup>46</sup> By April, there were 4,087 U.S. troops in Iraq and more equipment for them, including AH-64 helicopter gunships were being deployed.<sup>47</sup> They deployed at Q-West, the Qayarah air base after it was captured in July of 2016.

The increased use of special forces and the deployment of the M777 Howitzers to Fire Base Bell near Makhmour in March 2016 is documented partly by the U.S. Defense Department’s daily strike reports.<sup>48</sup> On March 27, the reports indicate the use of ground-based artillery.<sup>49</sup> The artillery was used almost every day (263 times from March to December 2016) in anti-IS operations. Airstrikes also systematically destroyed IS equipment, targeting 641 VBIEDs from October 1, 2014, to December 31, 2016. More than 1,000 mortars were hit, 515 oil installations, 600 vehicles, and 200 buildings in Iraq and Syria. Over half of the strikes took place in Iraq.<sup>50</sup> Only from September 2016 do the strike reports show targeting of IS-held buildings.

## THE MOSUL OFFENSIVE

From October 2016 to July 2017, the United States supported the ISF and the Peshmerga to carry out the Mosul offensive. The United States had been engaged in Mosul in the past, fighting insurgents, but as Hawbaker noted above, the October 2016 offensive was a conventional war involving more than 50,000 ISF and Peshmerga against around 5,000 IS members. The city of Mosul and its environs stretched over a large flat plain and was once home to two million people.<sup>51</sup>

The offensive opened with the United States conducting more airstrikes than at any time during the campaign.<sup>52</sup> The coalition spokesman noted, “We have advisors with the Peshmerga and ISF and we speak with the military leaderships every day and coordinate our fire to support their advance and sequence their attacks with their own capability and supplement it with ours.”<sup>53</sup> On the front line, the footprint was light. U.S. military vehicles did not fly U.S. flags.<sup>54</sup> U.S. forces were rarely visible, and their airstrikes and artillery support were rare enough that their presence was not felt except in sectors where they were most needed.<sup>55</sup>

As the battle increased and entered the urban areas of west Mosul, U.S. special forces and other coalition partners increased their presence and activity. In the battle for east Mosul, the United States set up Tactical Assistance Areas behind the Iraqi line with Paladin mobile artillery. Lt. Micah Thompson, a platoon leader, said in April 2017:

We have the capability to address all targets. The point of the Paladin is a mobile artillery system. The fight that we bring is the precision munitions capability. We are able to program and set those fuses and provide rounds downrange in rapid time in order to accomplish [our task].<sup>56</sup>

Around 450 U.S. personnel were engaged in the “advise and assist” part of the campaign, deployed in more forward positions than at any time during the campaign.<sup>57</sup> The United States advised Iraqis on the “tempo” of the operation, assisting with indirect fire, mortars, coordinating airstrikes, intelligence sharing, and monitoring the location of forces.<sup>58</sup>

The air campaign in Mosul was a challenge for the United States because of the presence of civilians. According to Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Croft, the deputy commander for Air, Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command, “the challenge we faced is were operating in a city of 1.8 million, the size of Philadelphia and the enemy was embedded in the civilian population and we did everything we could to protect civilians.”<sup>59</sup> This was the most precise war in history, according to Croft. It was closely coordinated with the ISF on the ground. The campaign in Mosul consisted of

the whole array of the latest U.S. technology, including UAVs with infrared cameras, all networked with ISF on the ground and U.S. operators. Croft, like other coalition personnel interviewed, stressed that this was “letting the Iraqis do the fighting and the planning.” This is “by, with and through,” which means the Iraqis are “the A-team.” The battle for Mosul was successful and had very few friendly-fire incidents. Croft also discussed the coordination with the PMU. The Shi’i militias had been kept out of the battle for Mosul, but U.S. airstrikes in other areas, such as Anbar or Tal Afar naturally occur near their lines. “We de-conflict, so our effort is to know where they are so we don’t end up in a bad situation, we coordinate with the ISF and obviously sometimes they are part of the ISF.”<sup>60</sup>

During the battle for Mosul, the Iraqi air force was also active. This allowed them to target civilian structures that the United States was wary of. They had their own independent intelligence gathering and strike operations.<sup>61</sup> The success of the Mosul offensive led to the quick collapse of IS in Tal Afar during an Iraqi offensive in the last week of August 2017. In late September, the Iraqi army continued its model of using overwhelming force and large-scale operations including armor, infantry, Federal Police, and PMU to conquer Hawija in two weeks.

## **BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY**

In a 2014 thesis, Major Anthony F. Heisler argued that “building partner capacity (BPC) is a cornerstone of America’s post-9/11 security strategy.”<sup>62</sup> He also examined how it was a key mission of U.S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF). “BPC has become a buzzword to define the broad, and sometimes vague, American enterprise to build stronger partners with the ultimate objective of achieving shared and U.S. national security interests.”<sup>63</sup> Over time the Department of Defense has taken a lead in this sector, even though the State Department and U.S. Aid play a role as well. Heisler asserts that U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has played a key role within the Department of Defense (DOD).<sup>64</sup> The primacy of the defense department in this program was enshrined in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2005, which provided for a global “train and equip” program and provided the Secretary of Defense the authority to execute it for counterterrorism and stability operations.<sup>65</sup> To do this, the United States developed a concept of “Security Force Assistance (SFA)” to provide support for Foreign Security Forces (FSF). Through organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising, the United States was able to create a force to work “by, with, and through.” The flexibility needed in the post-9/11 world meant the United States would also work with non-military organizations or paramilitary groups.<sup>66</sup>

The bureaucracy and alphabet soup behind the U.S. role in training Iraqi and Peshmerga forces is important, because it often put tactical needs before doctrine to fill the gaps in the Iraqi line created by 2014.<sup>67</sup> The United States sought in March 2015 to equip eight Iraqi Brigades in their 2016 budget, around one third of the Iraqi army.<sup>68</sup> In the 2017 budget request made in February 2016, the DOD sought to procure equipment for 20,000. Within the request, they noted the procurement would support the army, Peshmerga, Ministry of Interior police, border security, Emergency Response Division (ERD), Counter-Terrorist Service (ISOF), and Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>69</sup> The 2015 request noted that the failure to provide funds “could spread conflict in the region and further the Sunni/Shia divide.”<sup>70</sup> In 2016, the request notes that the funding would further U.S. influence in Iraq and “reassure Iraqi Sunnis of their importance to the fight and Government of Iraq.”<sup>71</sup> A June 2017 inspector general report on OIR notes that “Iran took significant steps this quarter to increase its influence in Iraq and Syria, mainly through its support for Shia militias operating in both countries.” The United States is attempting to ensure that the Iranian-backed militias “do not benefit from US military support.”<sup>72</sup>

While the United States paid little attention to the power of the Shi’i militias, they did sign a special Memorandum of Understanding between the DOD and the Ministry of Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Regional Government in July 2016 to support 36,000 Peshmerga. Of the ISF numbers

trained, 40,000 were from the army, 17,000 were police, 14,000 members of the ISOF or CTS, and 10,000 were in the Tribal Mobilization Forces.<sup>73</sup> The latter forces are mostly Sunni Arabs.

Overall, the training appears to have been effective, including among the Kurds. At a training base in Bnaslawa, one of three Kurdish training facilities working with the coalition, thousands of men trained in infantry tactics, mine-sweeping, anti-tank weapons, and use of mortars.<sup>74</sup> Seven partner nations helped train the Kurds, producing complete battalions of men with standardized uniforms, M-16 rifles, MRAPs, and Humvees, a significant step for the Peshmerga who previously lacked standardized equipment.<sup>75</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES**

On the ground in Iraq, the campaign against IS has been successful. U.S. Special Forces have performed well and suffered limited casualties. Tactical assistance has kept a low profile while delivering the support. In the air the United States has coordinated closely with the Iraqis and aided the defeat of IS. Within the various training programs, the United States has produced several competent units, such as the ISOF and the ERD. Defined by its own terms, OIR has succeeded.<sup>76</sup>

In the broader strategic context, it has addressed neither the “core grievances” nor attempted to address the Iranian threat to obtain regional hegemony. Evidence of this can be found in U.S. operations at its Tanf garrison, the Euphrates valley, and Anbar province.<sup>77</sup> In each case the United States has “de-conflicted” from Syrian regime forces and other Iranian-backed forces, emphasizing that it is solely concentrated on IS. In addition, the United States has wrapped up most parts of its CIA-backed program to arm Syrian rebels. The long-term affect is pro-Iranian forces coming to control large areas of Iraq outside the major cities, and swaths of areas in Syria along the border with Iraq.

Yet in his May 2017 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, the commander of SOCOM claimed, “SOF are also engaged in countering aggressive Iranian behavior that not only destabilizes the Middle East, but also, stokes sectarianism.”<sup>78</sup> He mentioned support of the Gulf Cooperation Council in this context. He emphasized that all of SOCOM’s work “requires focused effort to secure and hold our gains by empowering local entities within and among the populations that terrorists exploit.”<sup>79</sup>

U.S. operations abroad since September 11 have learned from failures and successes in Iraq and have been influenced by Iraq. In many places the “by, with, and through” approach has been implemented.<sup>80</sup> This role of the United States has also been critiqued, with its increased DOD and CIA forces abroad described as a “killing machine,” with commandos the tip of the spear of foreign policy.<sup>81</sup> In short, they focus on killing the enemy without a larger long-term strategy. This has led to questions about what U.S. missions--such as the one in Niger where four U.S. servicemen were killed in an October 4, 2017, battle with up to 50 fighters from an IS affiliate--are accomplishing. An incisive example showing how the Iraq model led to mission creep in the culture of how bottom-up policy was affected may be the Philippines, where Cole Livieratos served with a Military Information Support Team with SOCPAC (Special Operations Command Pacific). He argues that “overall deference from political leaders to military leaders has increased dramatically after 9/11.”<sup>82</sup> With special forces more often in “direct action” than before and “more likely to emphasize violent operations than they have before,” he concludes there is a failure of special operations forces “to enact a strategy that correctly aligns means with ends.”<sup>83</sup>

This will be the real challenge after OIR defeats IS in Iraq. As a model for defeating a specific terrorist group, it worked well. It supplied the right amount of air power, integrated high-tech networking, artillery, special forces, and training. Casualties were low, and damage to civilian infrastructure was relatively limited given the challenge. As a strategic model, the operation has not addressed the larger issues, including the increasing power of the Iranian-backed PMU in Iraq, or the Syrian regime stepping into the IS power vacuum in Syria. In many ways, this is a result of the



perceived failures of Bush’s nation building in 2003 and the surge in 2007. In the long term, it is also related to continued U.S. fears about Vietnam. However, the United States has been involved in Iraq and Afghanistan longer than U.S. forces were in Vietnam. From a strategic and policymaking point of view, it isn’t clear how the inability to defeat Islamist extremism is dramatically different than the failures in Vietnam, except that casualties are lower. U.S. policymakers have not asked what the broader strategy is beyond OIR, and whether stated concerns regarding Iranian influence have been addressed.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The number is sometimes given as 73.

<sup>2</sup> Michele Kelemen, “Tillerson: Defeating ISIS No. 1 goal for US, but Others Should Do More,” NPR, March 22, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/03/22/521125250/tillerson-defeating-isis-no-1-goal-for-u-s-but-others-should-do-more>.

<sup>3</sup> “Obama Names Brett McGurk As Envoy to Coalition Fighting Islamic State,” Reuters, October 23, 2015. McGurk was General John Allen’s deputy prior to taking over.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Brig. Gen. Andrew Croft by phone, August 11, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Renad Mansour and Faleh Jaber, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

<sup>6</sup> Croft interview, August 2017.

<sup>7</sup> On Clausewitz, see Col. Jim Helis lecture at U.S. Army War College, September 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSF\\_UtEWnKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSF_UtEWnKg).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Harvey and Tylan Bilgic, “Turkish Report Exposes Locations of US Troops in Syria,” July 19, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-19/turkish-leak-of-u-s-positions-in-syria-seen-endangering-troops>.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Altman, “SOCOM at 30 Has Evolved into Small Command with Big Global Impact,” April 15, 2017, <http://www.tampabay.com/news/military/macdill/socom-at-30-has-evolved-into-small-command-with-big-global-impact/2320395>.

<sup>10</sup> General Raymond Thomas III to House Armed Services Committee, May 2, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20170502/105926/HHRG-115-AS26-Wstate-ThomasR-20170502.PDF>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> The United States maintains its values in terms of keeping civilian casualties to a minimum and investigating incidents. While the coalition attempts to guard human rights, the same cannot be said for Iraqi or other local partners, such as the Shi’i militias in Iraq.

<sup>13</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 333-34.

- <sup>14</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “Could Kirkuk Crises Change U.S. Views on Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq?” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Could-Kirkuk-crisis-change-US-views-on-Iranian-backed-militias-in-Iraq-507509>.
- <sup>15</sup> Jennifer Cafarella, Omar Kassim, and Najjam Malik, ‘The ‘War After ISIS’ Begins in Iraq,’ *Institute for the Study of War*, October 15, 2017, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.co.il/2017/10/the-war-after-isis-begins-in-iraq.html>.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Logan, “Last US Troops Leave Iraq, Ending War,” Reuters, December 18, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal-idU.S.TRE7BH03320111218>.
- <sup>17</sup> John Nagl, “A Better War in Iraq,” *Armed Forces Journal*, August 1, 2006, <http://armedforcesjournal.com/a-better-war-in-iraq/>.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Joint Publication 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations, October 5, 2009, [https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3\\_24-2009.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_24-2009.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> United States Government, Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, January 2009, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> “ISIS Captured 2,300 Humvee Armoured Vehicles from Iraqi Forces in Mosul,” *Guardian*, June 1, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/isis-captured-2300-humvee-armoured-vehicles-from-iraqi-forces-in-mosul>.
- <sup>23</sup> Curt Tarnoff, *Iraq: Reconstruction Assistance*, Congressional Research Service, April 2009, p. 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 19.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Lamb, “Is Revised COIN Manual Backed by Political Will,” February 6, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/revised-coin-manual-backed-political-will>.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve webpage, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-Us/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Lt. Col. John Hawbaker, March April 2, 2017, at Tactical Assistance Area Hamam al-Alil base.
- <sup>29</sup> “Fallujah Falls under Al Qaeda Control in Blow for Iraq Security,” January 4, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10550563/Fallujah-falls-under-Al-Qaeda-control-in-blow-for-Iraq-security.html>.
- <sup>30</sup> Martin Chulov, “ISIS Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul,” *Guardian*, June 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul>.
- <sup>31</sup> U.S. President Obama statement, August 7, 2014. The White House, Officer of the Press Secretary.
- <sup>32</sup> Nathan Freier, “Crises in Iraq and Military Options, by, with and through Who?” CSIS, June 13, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crisis-iraq-and-military-options-%E2%80%9C-and-through-who%E2%80%9D>.
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- <sup>34</sup> Some give the number as 275.
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- <sup>36</sup> Department of Defense Briefing by Admiral John Kirby, October 21, 2014, Department of Defense transcript, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript->

[View/Article/606949/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-admiral-kirby-in-the-pentagon-briefing/](#).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Luis Martinez, “US Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria Cost \$1 Billion,” *ABC News*, December 19, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-airstrikes-iraq-syria-cost-billion/story?id=27728260>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. According to Lt. Gen James Terry, commander of the CJTF: OIR.

<sup>40</sup> Luis Martinez, “6,000 Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria: A Look at the Numbers,” *ABC News*, August 7, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/6000-airstrikes-iraq-syria-numbers/story?id=32956745>

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<sup>48</sup> Daily strike lists, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/OIR/Airstrikes/?Page=16>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve, Targeted Operations to Defeat ISIS, <https://www.defense.gov/OIR/Airstrikes/?Page=16>.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Col. John Dorrian, coalition spokesman, October 23, 2016. Total airstrikes by May 2017 was 21,910 in Iraq and Syria. See CJTF-OIR Public Affairs post July 7, 2017 report, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/News-Releases/Article/1239702/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-monthly-civilian-casualty/>.

<sup>53</sup> See interview with Col. John Dorrian, Seth J. Frantzman, “Inside the US-Led Coalition Helping Destroy ISIS in Mosul,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Jpost-on-the-frontline-Inside-the-US-led-coalition-helping-destroy-ISIS-in-Mosul-470775>.

<sup>54</sup> Author observation, March 31-April 2, 2017, Mosul.

<sup>55</sup> Author observations October 20-23, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Lt. Micah Thompson, Hamam al-Alil, April 1, 2017. Seth J. Frantzman, “In Battle for Mosul, New Strategy Takes Shape,” *The Jerusalem Post*, April 14, 2017, <http://b2.jpost.com/Middle-East/In-battle-for-Mosul-new-US-strategy-takes-shape-486941>.

<sup>57</sup> The 450 number comes from an email to the author by Captain Jessica Jackson, CJFLCC Public Affairs, August 23, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Hawbaker interview.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Croft, August 11, 2017. Seth J. Frantzman, “Inside the Air Campaign Against ISIS in Iraq,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Inside-the-battle-against-ISIS-in-Iraq-502213>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Anthony M. Heisler, “By, with and Through: The Theory and Practice of Special Operations Capacity-Building,” thesis submitted 2014, the Naval Postgraduate school, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a620833.pdf>, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 24. Only in 2006 did DOD “define” the concept of BPC, and Heisler notes that they eventually dropped the word “partnership” from the terminology in favor of “partner.”

<sup>65</sup> Nina Serafino, “Security Assistance Reform: ‘Section 1206’ Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22855.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Heisler, “By, with and Through,” p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>68</sup> Around 38,000 M4 rifles were in the request along with 600 mortars. Office of Secretary of Defense, Department of Fiscal Budget, Fiscal year 2016, Overseas Contingency Operations, Iraq Train and Equip. March 2015, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY16\\_ITEF\\_J\\_Book.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY16_ITEF_J_Book.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> Office of Secretary of Defense, Department of Fiscal Budget, Fiscal year 2017, Overseas Contingency Operations, Iraq Train and Equip, February 2016, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY17\\_ITEF\\_J\\_Book.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY17_ITEF_J_Book.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> 2016 DOD request, p. 9. By 2017, the request (for the 2018 financial year) had reached \$1.3 billion for Iraq. See Inspector General Report, Operation Inherent Resolve, Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1-June 30, 2017, [https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/other-reports/quarterly\\_oir\\_063017.pdf](https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/other-reports/quarterly_oir_063017.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> 2017 DOD request, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> Inspector General Report, Operation Inherent Resolve, Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1-June 30, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Captain Jackson of CJFLCC Public Affairs email to author, August 23, 2017. See also Inspector General Report for Overseas Operations, p. 24, [https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/other-reports/quarterly\\_oir\\_063017.pdf](https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/other-reports/quarterly_oir_063017.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “Inside Kurdistan’s Anti-ISIS Training Camps,” *The National Interest*, July 27, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Author visit, Bnaslaw training base, July 2016.

<sup>76</sup> For a history of Operation Inherent Resolve, in the words of those running it, see their “history” document on their website, [http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY\\_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793](http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793) (accessed August 26, 2017).

<sup>77</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “The More Things Change, the More Iraq Stays the Same,” *The National Interest*, April 18, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-more-things-change-the-more-iraq-stays-the-same-20248?page=2> (accessed August 26, 2017).

<sup>78</sup> General Raymond Thomas III to House Armed Services Committee, p. 19 (accessed August 26, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Chesney, “Mali, the Way of the Knife, and Working ‘by, with and through others,’” *Lawfare Blog*, May 1, 2013, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/mali-way-knife-and-working-and-through-others> (accessed Aug 26, 2017); Robert Chesney, “Boots on the Ground in Somalia: Acting ‘by with and through’ local partner to minimize friction,” *Lawfare Blog*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/boots-ground-somalia-acting-and-through-local-partner-minimize-friction>.

<sup>81</sup> Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army and a War at the Ends of the Earth*, (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Cole Livieratos, “A Cultural Failure: US Special Operations in the Philippines and the Rise of Islamic State,” *War on the Rocks*, July 3, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/a-cultural-failure-u-s-special-operations-in-the-philippines-and-the-rise-of-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*