Iraq: Afghan Lessons and Reality

It may only be a matter of time before the states of the Middle East, whose instability has been embodied by the West led by the United States, begin to feel the echoes of the Taliban’s rapid conquest of almost all of Afghanistan. The consequences of the Sunni Islamist triumph will not be lost on non-state actors and militant nationalists active in countries where the US still has troops. The Afghan armed forces ostensibly trained and equipped by the Americans were unable to hold the line of defense against a lightning offensive by the Taliban, as city after city fell in quick succession. The Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul quickly collapsed like a house of cards, paving the way for the second era of victorious Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation) rule, just 20 years after the first. The main lesson that other militant groups are likely to learn from the failed withdrawal, or, more likely, cynical fleeing of American troops from Afghanistan is this: if they can hold out long enough against the superior technology and firepower of the Western enemy, the latter will eventually tire and flee, dooming their client regimes to destruction.

That is the view of the leaders of the Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi militia in Iraq, who have long and firmly demanded the withdrawal of American troops, and sooner or later, it will happen in that troubled country. After all, there is a relatively recent precedent of a rapid insurgent offensive quickly overwhelming the Iraqi military and driving them out of cities. In the summer of 2014, DAESH (banned in the Russian Federation) managed to conquer a third of Iraq, including its second city of Mosul, with the Iraqi army, which was much larger and better armed, retreating without a fight. Although Baghdad was able to retake most of these territories by 2017 with extensive US support, the campaign against DAESH spawned a new force, the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces), which may have proved capable of toppling the Iraqi government at the time.

Hashd al-Shaabi, which now includes up to 40 organizations and 128,000 fighters, was formed in 2014 to fight
DAESH after the army’s infamous failure to defend Mosul. The umbrella organization, predominantly Shiite militias, continued to liberate large swaths of largely Sunni areas of Iraq and was later legally incorporated into the Iraqi security apparatus. However, some of the most influential groups within this organization have long been equipped and funded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to advance Iran’s military and political goals at home and in the region. Many experts not unreasonably fear that these groups could outgun the regular Iraqi army and turn into a powerful mini-state within the state, reminiscent of Hezbollah in Lebanon. They have a large stockpile of surface-to-surface missiles supplied by Iran, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles, which have recently been actively used to strike US military targets in Iraq. Fortunately for the Baghdad government, burdened with the task of balancing the interests of both American and Iranian patrons, the Joe Biden administration does not appear to be in as much of a hurry to withdraw from Iraq as it has been with Afghanistan so far.

In addition, according to political analysts, there are several key differences between the two scenarios, which the Taliban (banned in Russia) insistently propose, such as the takeover of Iraq by pro-Iranian militias, if not soon, then at least in the future. However, the situation in Iraq is such that these factions have much to gain from maintaining the status quo. “Pro-Iranian factions of Hashd al-Shaabi do not want to take power. Their goal is to join the ruling parties and get their share of the state, both legally and illegally,” says Joel Wing, an Iraq analyst based in California who runs the blog Musings on Iraq: “They are already an official part of the security forces, which means government funding. But they need more fighters getting paid. They want contracts and bribes.”

Alex Almeida, an Iraq security analyst at energy consultancy Horizon Client Access, is also skeptical that Hashd al-Shaabi will try to seize power in Iraq. “Barring a repeat of 2014, or some militia coup scenario, or a siege of the international zone (in Baghdad), it is doubtful we will see a similar situation in Iraq. Primarily because we will be dealing with the militias as a pariah of the Iraqi state rather than an external takeover by an insurgent force,” said this specialist. Roger Baker, Senior Vice President of Strategic Analysis, Stratfor, US, agrees and notes that many Hashd al-Shaabi groups are “integrated into Iraq’s security forces, not just outside the insurgency,” like Taliban militants in Afghanistan. Therefore, they are not necessarily seeking to overthrow the regime but rather to assert their frequent Iranian interests in Iraq. He is also more confident in the capabilities of the Iraqi army compared to the Afghan army and security forces, noting that the Iraqi armed forces “have undergone a significant transformation since its major collapse during the early offensive of DAESH” in 2014.

There is another significant difference between the current situation in Iraq and the situation in Afghanistan before the Taliban took it over. It is no secret that Pakistan’s powerful military intelligence has long supported the Taliban, often to the detriment of US strategic objectives. However, experts believe that Iran is keeping its Iraqi militias “on a much shorter leash,” dictating the limits of their activities. Iran’s support for these groups is much more vital than Pakistan’s support for the Taliban. In addition to arming and training militias, Iranian officials openly meet with the leadership of Hashd al-Shaabi groups in Iraq.

Nevertheless, Baghdad should draw some general lessons from events in Afghanistan to ensure that it does not suffer the same fate as Kabul. Perhaps the most crucial lesson, analysts say, is the importance of rooting out corruption in government at all levels and ensuring cohesion among different ethnic, regional, and sectarian groups in government. Afghanistan’s lack of internal cohesion was apparent to all in the hours before the fall of Kabul. Several senior officials, including President Ashraf Ghani, decided to flee while others negotiated with approaching Taliban units. Others, such as Ahmad Masood, armed themselves and headed into the mountains to begin a new phase of resistance. The lack of cohesion and perception of corruption has caused many Afghan citizens to distrust the government, and the same can be said of officials and security forces.

Perhaps the most critical difference between the two countries is that the US is not planning a complete withdrawal from Iraq anytime soon, says Joel Wing. “The attacks by the Pro-Tehran groups complicate this because Americans are focused on protecting themselves, not on helping Iraqis right now. But even then, there’s no indication that they want to end the mission.” Almeida believes the disastrous retreat from Afghanistan will make the Biden administration much more cautious about handling the mechanism of further US troop withdrawals from Iraq, especially with a small diplomatic staff without military support inside the country. For his part, Baker believes the decision to leave Iraq “will be based more on a US strategic reprioritization than on the political implications of troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.” But at the same time, these experts unanimously note that the greater risk for Iraq is long-term regional and sectarian divisions, as well as demands for more federalism or power-sharing. Furthermore, economic resources are unevenly distributed throughout Iraq, and these geographic differences will continue to shape the future environment of security and stability.

Thus, analyzing the current situation in Iraq, the author must admit that, unlike Afghanistan, Joe Biden’s
administration won’t hurry to withdraw troops from the country which it brazenly invaded in 2003 under the false pretext of having nuclear bacteriological weapons there. And secondly, Hashd al-Shaabi, which could have defeated the Iraqi army and taken power in its own hands, like in Afghanistan, prefers to integrate into the structures of the current state apparatus and stake its claim.

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