THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE for Near East Policy

What Is Security Like Today in Iraq?

Featuring Michael Knights

Interview conducted by Joel Wing of the "Musings on Iraq" blog

July 31, 2012

Dr. Michael Knights is a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is also the Vice President of Olive Group, an international security company that works in Iraq. Knights has been researching, writing, and working in Iraq for the last three decades. He is one of the premier analysts on the security situation within the country. From 2005-2008 Iraq fell into a sectarian civil war that almost destroyed the nation. It has only been in the last few years that it has been able to claw itself out of this situation. Many are unaware of what security is like currently in Iraq, because the news is dominated by stories about bombings and killings. Today, violence has become very local with only select areas affected, which has allowed the majority of Iraqis to return to their normal lives. That doesn't mean that Iraq is anything like a normal country, but things are changing. Unfortunately, the country's political crisis is a major factor dividing the country, and creating a fertile environment for militants to continue to operate in. Below is an interview with Knights about what security is like in different parts of the country, what role politics plays in the situation, and the future of the insurgency.

1. It seems like the general public has a distorted image of Iraq, because almost all the news they hear about the country today is on violence that occurs there. In general, what is the security situation like within Iraq?

There are currently around 400-500 bona fide insurgent or terrorist attacks in Iraq each month that are reported by the media: I can surmise, by experience working directly with Iraqi Security Forces, that there are probably a further 300-500 or so serious incidents that are not captured by any system of collection. Let's say the worst case of around a thousand serious violent incidents were suffered a month. This is still a small fraction—about an eighth—of the violence being suffered at the height of the civil war-type conditions in the autumn of 2007. What does this kind of violence feel like at ground level? What does it do to society?

Let's look at some case studies. To take a place like Mosul city as an example of the extreme higher end of the risks: the city, which is 10 miles by 10 miles, suffers maybe 40-60 serious reported attacks a month, and probably suffers around a hundred actual attacks a month if unreported incidents are added. There are close to 1.8 million people in Mosul. Most of them will hear a number of distant explosions a month, because most explosions are smaller these days, are often highly localized under-vehicle bombs, and see some evidence of them (smoke, debris on the roads after attacks, rushing ambulances). They will read about lots of local violence, but see very few incidents, because most attacks are very sudden hit-and-run drive-by shootings or silenced pistol assassinations at odd hours of the day and night. Occasionally someone they know will be affected, most usually because their business will be extorted by a militant group, and only extremely rarely, because a friend or relative is injured or killed. Unless the citizen is someone involved in politics, they personally will not be in serious danger unless they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, a very unlikely occurrence. Even though violence does not directly

stare Mosul's hardened citizens in the face every day, it is a constant drain on the nerves, and a factor depressing the citizens, and imposing many small inconveniences on them.

Let's take a different case: the city of Kut, which is a semi-rural town of 370,000 south of Baghdad, strung out in the bends of the Tigris River, and about 5 miles' square. People in Kut very rarely experience violence nowadays, and the town goes about its business fairly normally. The town only suffers three or four major reported security incidents a month, and there is probably another three or four lower-profile incidents, politically motivated assaults or organized criminal extortion that are not reported. Every few months, a car bomb might be exploded somewhere in or near the city, maybe at a market. This is a source of worry for everyone, particularly when other attacks are happening in Baghdad or in other nearby cities like Hillah. The security forces sometimes check trucks as they enter the city, but only sporadically, and during periods of alert. Life goes on, and the people cannot be worried about a possible car bomb every day. Insecurity cannot stop real life. Every so often, a few times a month, people hear about a person whose house was damaged by a warning bomb put on their doorstep by a militia or hear about a local businessman whose wife and son were kidnapped and who had to pay a huge ransom to get them back.

These scenarios show that insecurity does not cripple the ability of citizens to get on with life, but nor is Iraq anywhere near a normal environment. As a Westerner, one could get away with a quick unannounced walk around many urban neighborhoods, but linger in some of the more active insurgent areas or set patterns and one would certainly be killed or injured. For an Iraqi who is a priority target of the insurgents, a politician or a local security force member, many areas of Iraq are as dangerous as they ever were, even at the worst times, and fear is a constant companion. For most Iraqis, insecurity is about inconvenience, frustration and the knowledge that there are things one must not risk, and places one must not go, and people one must not offend. This latter category resembles many people in post-conflict societies around the world and it comprises the majority of Iraqis.

2. You've said that violence in Iraq has become vary localized, could you explain what you meant?

Violence in Iraq has always varied significantly at the local level. One district can be very violent, and the one next door can seem strangely quiet. This aspect of Iraqi security has become more pronounced as violence has become concentrated in some key urban neighborhoods, towns, and rural areas since 2009. Far fewer communities are very violent, but some still are. The number of "oil spots" of violence on the map are thinning out, and most areas feel like post-conflict environments.

3. Levels of violence vary throughout the country. Baghdad has the most attacks, what is it like there?

The size of Baghdad and its bustling nature makes it feel like a normal Middle Eastern city, in fact, a very exciting and interesting city. Violence in Baghdad is a background factor for everyone to consider, and the security forces are very evident, which is a source of problems for some communities as the security forces do routinely extort and harass people. There are almost no skirmishes any more between militants or involving the security forces: violence is covert, hit-and-run and episodic, arriving suddenly and ending just as suddenly. In neighborhoods with significant militia presence like Sadr City, Hurriya, Shula, or Jihad or where relations with the security forces

are bad like Abu Ghraib, Ghazaliya, amongst many, there is a very tense feeling. In general, the city feels surprisingly normal.

4. What's the situation like in Kurdistan?

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) must be split into different types of threat environment if it is to be described accurately. Irbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniya, and most other cities within the KRG, are friendly and welcoming, and security is not a real constraint or consideration. These places face a terrorism threat in the same way that Amman or Ankara or indeed London does. Rural areas are beautiful, but can sometimes conceal hidden risks: mainly the explosive remnants of Saddam-era military operations and minefields. Locals know how to avoid these risks. The KRG becomes markedly less safe as one approaches its international borders with Iran and Turkey, where military action against Kurdish rebels is commonplace, and where militants are active. The internal border between areas of KRG and federal control can also be very dangerous, and the good security of the KRG invisibly blurs into the danger of the disputed areas.

5. You mentioned Mosul already. How is it in Ninewa in general, and provinces like Salahaddin, and Diyala?

These areas feel more like the old Iraq of 2008-2009. There is more tension, and significantly greater security force presence than in other governorates. Most of Iraq's violent incidents occur each month in these provinces, and no areas within these governorates are completely safe or quiet each month. Diyala is effectively under federal government-imposed martial law. In all three provinces there are tense crossing points between areas of KRG and federal control.

6. How does that differ from southern Iraq?

Southern Iraq suffers so few security incidents, and they are of such a local and constrained nature, a shooting, a grenade thrown over a garden fence at night, etc., that insecurity has very little impact on civilian life. The security forces are present, but they are not very alert typically, and are mainly a presence, on show, to demonstrate government control.

7. What's happening in Babil right now?

Babil, just south of Baghdad, is presently being pacified by a government security operation that has seen tougher commanders, and added forces sent to the province. The situation began to deteriorate in the first quarter of 2012 after a long slow build-up of violence in 2011. The cause seems to have been Al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) return to the area, on the back of a devastating campaign to kill off the Sons of Iraq leaders who originally drove AQI out of the area in 2008. Old AQI operating areas and tribal relationships were rekindled. This may have been stopped for now by very robust Iraqi government raids, and garrisoning of the area. Then again, the security forces can also boost insurgent recruitment if its tactics are too heavy-handed.

8. Most major attacks in Iraq automatically get blamed on Al Qaeda in Iraq, but there are other militant groups operating like the Baathist Naqshibandi. Could you explain who some of these other groups are?

AQI is a very real force, a real organization with a structure and goals, and formal membership, but Al-Qaeda is also a catchall phrase to describe "bad guys" as well, as you note. AQI does undertake the majority of insurgent car bombings, and pretty much all suicide attacks in Iraq, and

it does a lot of other smaller attacks on security forces and local political enemies in Baghdad and north-central Iraq as well. Another major force is the Naqshibandi movement, Jaish Rijal Tariqah al-Naqshibandi (JRTN). I published a detailed article on this very interesting movement, but suffice to say that the group is the only Baathist/nationalist insurgent group to have maintained its cohesion since 2008. It has a fairly limited core area, the triangle formed by southeastern Mosul, Kirkuk and Ad Dawr, near Tikrit, but seems to collaborate with groups more broadly, including AQI. Its areas of operation never really experienced the full forced of the US-led "Surge," and the movement has cleverly maintained the fiction that it only undertook anti-US attacks, and never killed Iraqi civilians. As a result, it has a lot of security within the Baathist strongholds it operates within.

9. The trial of Vice President Hashemi has brought up whether Iraq's political parties are involved in the daily violence in Iraq. A lot of the attacks these days such as shootings of officials using guns with silencers or planting sticky bombs on their cars appear to require a huge amount of intelligence and planning, and perhaps inside sources within the government. Do you have any inclination that Iraq's politicians are involved in any of these hits?

Almost all major parties were involved in militancy during the civil war-type conditions of 2006-2008. Security details associated with key politicians did harsh things, and were involved in tit-for-tat killings. This is a can of worms that no one really wants to open. Militias and criminal gangs even to this day, are used by political blocs to bring pressure on their rivals. So are shadowy parts of the security forces. Every major faction in Iraq has an armed wing of some description, though some are more distantly related to their political wings than others. Until Iraqi politics mature, this will continue to be the case. No one can afford to disarm fully or permanently, so armed groups play an important role in politics.

10. As part of the U.S. withdrawal they released all the prisoners they held. How did that affect security?

A minority of the detainees released by the U.S. were immediately scooped up by the Iraqis, and never released. Of those released out into society, many immediately rejoined AQI or other movements, or could not reintegrate into their communities due to things they had done to local people, and eventually wound a path back to militancy. Some went back to normal lives. Whatever the exact proportions, it is clear that AQI has benefited from an unprecedented infusion of trained terrorist manpower. Many of the released persons spent time planning inside detention facilities like Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper, specifically so they could launch a smarter, stronger insurgent effort one day.

11. Overall, what direction is the insurgency going, and what's their future?

The Sunni insurgencies (plural) are being kept on life support by the political problems in Iraq, the lack of reconciliation, the collapse of population-centric counterinsurgency, over-centralization of security decision-making, noxious sectarian and ethnic identity politics, and the perception of Iranian influence on the government. This will delay the day that they dissolve into fully criminal syndicates, and mean that the insurgencies will continue to look and feel like military efforts in some areas with "resistance" attacks using military firepower against government forces, basically a transition of resistance activities from anti-U.S. to anti-government. In the longer term, all insurgencies tend to die. I am worried that in some parts of Iraq, the aforementioned political factors could result in a situation where some Sunni areas become ossified as Bahrain-type

sectarian enclaves, albeit with Sunnis under the Shiite yolk, not the other way around, sullen, government-occupied villages where government forces fear to operate at night and where there is never any investment, in other words, the same way Saddam treated southern Iraq in the 1990s.

12. There are also plenty of gangs in Iraq who hardly ever get discussed. Could you talk about what they're involved in?

The overlap of criminality and the insurgencies has always been strong. It is not a new thing, and groups constantly operate on a sliding scale, doing more of one, less of the other. There are professional kidnap for ransom gangs unrelated to insurgent groups; that is also not new. There are neighborhood Mafiosi, usually tied to a militia, who tax businesses. In the worst areas, the local security forces also shake down people and display gang-like behavior. There is a lot of Mafiosi action related to oil smuggling, trucking, ports, the usual things that organized crime are attracted to. Gangs ideally cultivate political top cover from local politicians, but this is not always the case, particularly with smaller rackets and gangs. Criminals do have to be cautious and the stupid or poorly connected ones regularly get nabbed by the security forces.

13. How does the security situation in Iraq affect developing its economy?

The oil economy, which accounts for a huge proportion of Iraq's state income, is not really affected by insecurity. There are some incremental costs and delays associated with security, but it is not a major brake on development. The non-oil economy is bustling, it is not particularly affected either. Lack of government capacity to manage projects and undertake major infrastructure improvements is a more significant restraining factor.

14. The Americans used to stress the counterinsurgency capabilities of the Iraqi forces. You've said that the Iraqis have changed their tactics since the U.S. left. You also believe that many of their actions are counterproductive, how so?

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have a very long history of undertaking counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. They have basically been doing COIN constantly since the mid-1970s with very few breaks. First, there were long-running campaigns against the Kurds, and later these were joined by a parallel widespread military occupation of southern Iraq in an effort to suppress Iranian-backed militancy from 1980 onwards. The traditions developed during this time reflected the "Iraq style of COIN," which is reactive, punitive, and heavy-handed. This is the opposite of the population-focused COIN that the Coalition briefly practiced in 2007-2012. With such a short experience of population-focused COIN, and such a long track record of traditional COIN, it is not surprising Iraqi units have reverted almost immediately to the old ways. In Sunni areas, where local insurgencies remain active, the Shiite-led government is particularly disinterested in coddling the communities or building "soft security" through local engagement. Instead commanders are encouraged to teach the locals a lesson to dissuade them from supporting insurgents. Communities are harassed with blockades, arrests, red tape, local curfews, etc. Under these conditions, ISF corruption is often a problem because political decision-makers have given units carte blanche and are willing to turn a blind eye to abuses.

15. In many Middle Eastern states, the security forces tend to be loyal to the ruling regime rather than the people or the constitution and sometimes even interfere in democratic transitions. The U.S. tried to change that culture in Iraq, and create a force

that would support peaceful transitions of power. Which direction do you see Iraq heading in today?

In a centralized political system like Iraq, where all actors look upwards to the most senior circle of power and ultimately to the chief executive for decisions, there is a tendency for the security forces to follow government orders to the letter. This is particularly true since loyalist political appointees were seeded throughout almost all senior commands. The big test for the military will come during some future election when a sitting Iraqi prime minister fails to win reappointment and a peaceful constitutional transition occurs. Or it could happen if a prime minister is removed by a parliamentary no confidence vote, as might have happened this spring. At such moments, the military has a choice: follow the constitution or deviate from it. Of course the situation is rarely that clear-cut, and a clever chief executive could probably suspend the political process "temporarily" due to "emergency conditions." This is one of the problems of having an open-ended security crisis: it creates space for abnormal political behavior and bending or breaking of constitutional rules.

16. The big question today within Iraq is Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. There is a big debate both within and without Iraq about whether he is becoming an autocrat. What are your thoughts?

Autocracy is the rule in Iraq, not the exception, so it is unsurprising that Maliki would gather as much power to himself as the system will allow. In part, his accumulation of power is legitimate, under the circumstances. For instance, a strong hand was needed to guide Iraq out of its security crisis in 2008. This required some centralization and direct political control of security forces. Some power has accrued to the cabinet, because other institutions, notably the parliament, defaulted for years on end, causing deadlock. Autocracy is a systematic feature in Iraq: authority is sucked upwards in the system, as junior decision-makers lack the confidence to make choices and continually punt decisions up the chain.

On the other hand, centralization has arguably gone too far. The federal court system is no longer functioning as a check on executive power. Though the parliament is becoming more ready to play its role, the executive is hesitant to return legitimate powers to the legislature. Furthermore, the government is heavy-handed in its use of the security forces, and the constitution is regularly and seriously violated by the state. Many parties in Iraq and outside Iraq believe that two terms should be the limit on the premiership, because in a centralizing system like Iraq any leader can become an autocrat within a short number of years.