Viewpoints
No. 76

Stark Choice in Iraq

Marina Ottaway
Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center

U.S. officials have been deluding themselves that they can fight ISIS in Iraq without cooperating with the Shi'a militias and Iran. The defeat in Ramadi proves them wrong. The goal of the new intervention in Iraq is to defeat ISIS. The United States needs to focus on that goal and work with the militias, or get out.

May 2015

Middle East Program

Wilson Center

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The takeover of Ramadi by ISIS on Sunday, May 17 highlights the stark choice the United States faces in Iraq. If the United States wants to substantially degrade ISIS and loosen its territorial grip on much of Iraq, it has to accept that the Iraqi-backed Shi'a militias will play a central role in that fight. Washington has been unwilling to face this choice and deluded itself that it could fight ISIS without the Shi'a militias. This led to the loss of Ramadi. While this setback may be temporary, there will be more setbacks unless the United States is willing to accept reality.

The Obama administration's strategy of only using airpower and relying on Iraqis to provide the indispensable boots on the ground is not flawed in itself, but it can only work if Iraqis provide those troops—no other country will. There are three sources of Iraqi fighters: the Iraqi military, the Shi'a militias, and the Kurdish *peshmerga*.

The Iraqi military collapsed in June 2014 in the face of ISIS's first large-scale assault in Iraq, surrendering Mosul and most of Nineveh province—much of the western Anbar province was already controlled by ISIS long before then. The United States has been betting that it can retrain and reorganize the Iraqi military into an effective fighting force. But what it cannot do, as the debacle in Ramadi shows, is give the Iraqi army the motivation to fight. Once again when confronted by ISIS, the military units withdrew, leaving many of their weapons behind to the undoubted delight of ISIS fighters.

The Shi'a militias, on the other hand, have shown their willingness to fight. They are probably not as well trained as the military units, although many of their members are among the recruits the United States trained over the years who later disappeared from the military—this is probably true of many ISIS fighters too. The Shi'a militias are also probably less well equipped—recently published photos show heavy Iraqi military equipment heading out of Ramadi and pickup trucks loaded with militia members rushing toward it. The equipment of the militias may be worse, but their morale and determination are higher.

The problem with the Shi'a militias is that the major ones have ties to Iran, some of which go back to the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. The militias are armed and trained by Iran through the al-Quds Force, and are only nominally under the control of Baghdad. On the other hand, Sunni militias, which theoretically could and should play the central role in the liberation of Anbar or Mosul, do not exist on a significant scale so far. Sunni ambivalence about both ISIS and the Iraqi government, in conjunction with Baghdad's fear that mobilized and armed Sunni militias could turn against it and possibly join ISIS, have contributed to keep whatever tribal militias have emerged small, disorganized, and, in the battle for Ramadi, ineffective.

The Kurdish forces—the *peshmerga*—have proven to be effective. They are highly motivated to fight to protect Kurdistan and secure the contested territory around its periphery in the Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Saladin provinces, but Kurdish leadership has declared repeatedly that the *peshmerga* will not be deployed in other parts of Iraq. They will thus not be a factor in Anbar, but they nevertheless deserve more U.S. support through the direct delivery of weapons because it is important that ISIS make no further inroads in the areas they defend, particularly in the Kirkuk oil fields.

The Obama administration and the Pentagon have been deluding themselves that the battle against ISIS can be won without the participation of the Shi'a militias. Testifying in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 26, General Lloyd Austin, head of U.S. Central Command, declared that the United States had entered the battle for Tikrit by bombing ISIS targets only after the Iraqi government had agreed to order the Shi'a militias to withdraw. "I will not, and I hope we never, coordinate or cooperate with Shi'a militias," he added.

Victory in Tikrit briefly appeared to vindicate the U.S. contention that the Iraqi military could do the job alone (although it is not certain that the militias withdrew completely). When the battle moved to Ramadi, the United States again made its airstrikes conditional on the exclusion of the militias from the battle. They were, and Tikrit fell. The United States finally accepted the need for the Shi'a militias, although hiding behind the fiction that the militias would be under the control of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. In reality, if the militias are close to any Iraqi leader, they are close to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, now openly anti-American and pro-Iranian, and not to Prime Minister Abadi.

With the help of the militias and stepped up U.S. bombing, and if Baghdad manages to rally its troops to reenter the battle, Ramadi will eventually be taken back. ISIS does not appear to have sufficient personnel to indefinitely resist against a sustained assault. As in the case of Tikrit, it may decide to leave Ramadi and take the battle to a different location.

But even if Ramadi turns out to be only a temporary setback, as optimistic Pentagon and State Department officials have repeated, the lesson is clear: in the fight against ISIS, Baghdad at present is dependent on the Shi'a militias, particularly in areas where the *peshmerga* will not fight. As a result, so is the United States, unless it decides to send U.S. troops into combat instead.

This is not a good situation. Participation of Shi'a militias in the fighting in Sunni provinces will exacerbate sectarian tensions, although the predominantly Sunni leaders of the Anbar provincial council are desperate enough to have asked for their intervention. Baghdad urgently needs to encourage the formation of Sunni militias. At the same time, it must open a dialogue about a future governance structure for Iraq that gives a greater role to Sunnis, thus giving the Sunnis something to fight for. It is not clear that the United States can do much to influence the Iraqi government to take those steps, particularly while Prime Minister Abadi's power remains shaky and Maliki is becoming increasingly vocal. What is certain is that if the United States wants to succeed against ISIS it has to coordinate and cooperate with the Shi'a militias and Iran.

The United States returned to Iraq, reluctantly, because of the threat posed by ISIS and that is what it must concentrate on, not on a new futile effort to change Iraq. From 2003 to 2011, Washington attempted to rebuild Iraq into the country it wanted it to be, and it failed. It lost the battle for influence in Iraq to Tehran long ago—already in 2003 Iran was embedded in the Iraqi militias and political parties it had helped set up. This is a reality the United States has to accept.

So the choice now is simple, but unpleasant: either the United States works with the Shi'a militias and Iran, however indirectly, in degrading ISIS; or, once again, it withdraws from Iraq. Neither choice is good, but the former is less bad.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule
Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation
Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections
Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies
Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power
Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?
Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy
Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women
Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations
Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demons Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip
Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?
Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?
Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation
Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right in Elections Across the Mideast
Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray
Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt
Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013) by Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over
Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013) by David Ottaway

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election
Viewpoints No. 18 (January 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Future
Viewpoints No. 19 (February 2013) by Caryle Murphy

Sanctions and Medical Supply Shortages in Iran
Viewpoints No. 20 (February 2013) by Siamak Namazi

The Nuclear Issue: Why is Iran Negotiating?
Viewpoints No. 21 (February 2013) by Bijan Khajehpour, Alireza Nader, Michael Adler

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is Pushing Lebanon to the Brink
Viewpoints No. 22 (February 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties
Viewpoints No. 23 (March 2013) by Marina Ottaway

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintery
Viewpoints No. 24 (March 2013) by Adeed Dawisha

Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition
Viewpoints No. 25 (April 2013) by David Ottaway

Learning Politics in Tunisia
Viewpoints No. 26 (April 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Morocco: "Advanced Decentralization" Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative
Viewpoints No. 27 (May 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani's Surprising Election
Viewpoints No. 28 (June 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon's Existential Threats
Viewpoints No. 29 (June 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani
Viewpoints No. 30 (June 2013) by Various Authors

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent
Viewpoints No. 31 (July 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Mohamed ElBaradei From Vienna to Cairo: A Transition
Viewpoints No. 32 (July 2013) by Michael Adler

Can Rouhani Resolve Iran's Economic Conundrum?
Viewpoints No. 33 (July 2013) by Bijan Khajehpour

Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon
Viewpoints No. 34 (August 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis
Viewpoints No. 35 (August 2013) by Jubin Goodarzi

Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hope for U.S.-Iran Dialogue
Viewpoints No. 36 (September 2013) by Barbara Slavin

Back to the Drawing Boards
Viewpoints No. 37 (September 2013) by Nathan J. Brown

The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq
Viewpoints No. 38 (September 2013) by Joseph Sassoon

American Policy in Lebanon: Stabilization Through Dissociation
Viewpoints No. 39 (September 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.-Saudi Ties to the Test
Viewpoints No. 40 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?
Viewpoints No. 41 (October 2013) by Mark N. Katz

American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough
Viewpoints No. 42 (October 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Tunisia's Islamist-Led Democracy Founders
Viewpoints No. 43 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

Confrontation Over Iran's Nuclear Program
Viewpoints No. 44 (November 2013) by Michael Adler

Breaking Taboos
Viewpoints No. 45 (November 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Iraq's Kurdistan Takes a Giant Step Toward Independence
Viewpoints No. 46 (December 2013) by David Ottaway

The Egyptian Constitution: Mapping Where Power Lies
Viewpoints No. 47 (December 2013) by Marina Ottaway

A Dream Constitution
Viewpoints No. 48 (December 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Can the Iranian Nuclear Issue be Resolved?
Viewpoints No. 49 (January 2014) by Bijan Khajehpour

The Hague Tribunal and the Hariri Assassination
Viewpoints No. 50 (January 2014) by Amal Mudallali

Egypt's Referendum: The Constitution is not the Issue
Viewpoints No. 51 (January 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Reflections on Iran's Tumultuous Revolution: 35 Years Later
Viewpoints No. 52 (February 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections
Viewpoints No. 53 (March 2014) by Joseph Sassoon

Iranian Nuclear Talks Plow Ahead
Viewpoints No. 54 (March 2014) by Michael Adler

Egypt: The Closing of the Political Space
Viewpoints No. 55 (June 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani: Mixed Bag One Year Later
Viewpoints No. 56 (June 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon without a President: Can Lebanon Weather the Neighborhood Storm?
Viewpoints No. 57 (June 2014) by Basem Shabb

The Jordanian Regime and the Muslim Brotherhood: A Tug of War
Viewpoints No. 58 (July 2014) by Tareq Al Naimat

Turkey after Erdogan's Non-Victory
Viewpoints No. 59 (August 2014) by Henri J. Barkey

Barbarians: ISIS's Mortal Threat to Women
Viewpoints No. 60 (August 2014) by multiple authors

Rouhani and the Potential Failure of Nuclear Talks
Viewpoints No. 61 (September 2014) by Farideh Farhi

A New Chapter in the Tangled U.S.-Saudi Relationship
Viewpoints No. 62 (September 2014) by David B. Ottaway

We Bomb ISIL: Then What?
Viewpoints No. 63 (September 2014) by Marina Ottaway

The Coming Tunisian Elections: What Will Be the Role of Women?
Viewpoints No. 64 (October 2014) by Lilia Labidi

A Bloodless Transition: Tunisia's Legislative Elections
Viewpoints No. 65 (November 2014) by Robert Worth

Iran and the Syrian and Iraqi Crises
Viewpoints No. 66 (November 2014) by Jubin Goodarzi

What Next For Iran and the P5+1
Viewpoints No. 67 (November 2014) by multiple authors

Saudi King Abdullah: An Assessment
Viewpoints No. 68 (January 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Egypt's Fight Against FGM: Is There Hope After All?
Viewpoints No. 69 (January 2015) by Moushira Khattab

Mohammed bin Nayef: Washington's New Favorite Saudi Prince
Viewpoints No. 70 (January 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Forming the New Tunisian Government: "Relative Majority" and the Reality Principle
Viewpoints No. 71 (February 2015) by Lilia Labidi

Is Tunisia's Moderate Center in Danger of Collapse?
Viewpoints No. 72 (March 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Elusive as Ever: The State of Iranian-Russian Cooperation
Viewpoints No. 73 (March 2015) by Mark N. Katz

Saudi Arabia Forms a Pan-Arab Sunni Alliance Against the Houthis
Viewpoints No. 74 (March 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Watch Out Washington, the Saudi Hawks Are in Ascendancy
Viewpoints No. 75 (April 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Julia Craig Romano
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars