

INTERVIEW

What is driving Iraq back to the brink? - The U.S. is winning the military battle against ISIS, not the political battle to stabilize or bring peace to Iraq

Tuesday 3 May 2016, by [GOPAL Anand](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2016).

The political crisis that has been simmering in Iraq, almost completely unnoticed by the U.S. corporate media, boiled over last weekend when anti-government protesters mobilized by supporters of Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr poured into the so-called “Green Zone” in the capital of Baghdad and stormed the country’s parliament. Meanwhile, the U.S. war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), carried out in coordination with the Washington-supported government in Baghdad, rages on.

Journalist Anand Gopal is author of the award-winning book *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* and of numerous articles about U.S. wars and occupations in the Middle East for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Nation*, among other publications. He has been on assignment in Iraq, writing for *The Atlantic* about the U.S. war on ISIS—his article “The Hell After ISIS” [[1](#)] explains how the Iraqi state collaborates with Shia militias against ISIS, while repressing and terrorizing the Sunni population.

After a recent return from Iraq—and while the latest confrontation was taking shape—Gopal talked to Ashley Smith about the U.S. war against ISIS and the chaos it is causing in the country and region. Gopal will be speaking on “The Rise of ISIS” at Socialism 2016 in July.

Ashley Smith - WHAT ARE conditions like in Iraq today?

Anand Gopal - THIS IS the 13th year of the endless violence precipitated by the American invasion of the country. An extraordinary number of civilians have been killed by ISIS, U.S. air strikes against ISIS, Shia militias and the Iraqi army.

We hear about ISIS violence, but rarely about the other forms of death and destruction. Just a few days ago, for example, a friend told me that his brother-in-law and his family was killed in an American air strike in the town of Hit—but it was never reported in the international media.

In fact, the Pentagon claims it has killed only 41 civilians in the thousands of air strikes over the last two years. The real number of civilians killed is probably 50 times more than that.

So the bloodshed remains high right now. There is fighting on a daily basis, and there are ISIS suicide bombings in Baghdad.

The pivotal conflict is between the U.S.-backed Iraqi state and ISIS. With American air cover, the state has used its army and Iranian-backed Shia militias to push ISIS out of the areas it conquered in 2013 and 2014. ISIS has lost about 50 percent of its territory since then.

Some of those areas have been taken by Shia militias, which have committed atrocities against local populations. With these militias, Iran—whose Shia-led government is allied with these forces in Iraq—has been able to expand its influence in a dramatic way over the last two years. This situation has, however, not brought stability to the country, but even more political crisis.

In fact, the Iraqi state is reeling amid a new crisis. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces threats from two sides. On one side, the Iranian-backed Shia parties are trying to remove him. They want to protect their sectarian domination of Iraqi politics.

On the other side, a popular movement of Iraqis across sects wants to throw him out for very different reasons. Initially secular, this movement is demanding the end to sectarian quotas system and to patronage appointments of corrupt officials. It is born out of the frustration at the immense amount of corruption plaguing the state.

There is a real chance that Abadi will be ousted from power. So Iraq today is a tinderbox, and it's ready to explode.

MOST OF the U.S. media coverage has focused on ISIS and Obama's war against it. Why and how did that develop?

FIRST, WE need to distinguish between ISIS in Syria and ISIS in Iraq. These are actually slightly different phenomena.

ISIS originally emerged in Iraq from the chaos and the upheaval caused by the U.S. occupation of the country. That created the conditions for ISIS to develop.

The U.S. waged a brutal counterinsurgency against all opponents of its conquest of the country following the 2003 invasion. As part of that counterinsurgency, its forces went house to house, especially in Sunni communities, arresting people merely on the suspicion of opposing the occupation, and sending them to jails like Abu Ghraib where many were tortured.

Many future leaders of ISIS met each other in those prisons. When they came out, they joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq or similar groups, which played a destructive and sectarian role within the Iraqi insurgency. These groups targeted not just the American presence, but also the Shia population and its religious sites. This provoked Shia forces within the new state and its militias to turn on the Sunni resistance and broader population, triggering the sectarian civil war.

As Al-Qaeda in Iraq came to dominate the Sunni insurgency politically and financially, the local Sunni elite found itself having lost twice over: to the Shia-dominated Iraqi state and to Al-Qaeda in Iraq. So it essentially switched sides and joined the U.S. This was the so-called Sunni Awakening. The U.S. handed out guns and money to back Sunni tribal militias to fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

While that dealt Al-Qaeda in Iraq an enormous setback, the U.S. backing of the Sunni militias made another civil war more likely. The Sunni militias viewed the Iraqi state as a Shia sectarian formation that would refuse to integrate them into a political settlement.

So a new civil war burst forth in 2013. It grew out of a protest movement throughout Sunni regions where people began demonstrating against the Iraqi state's sectarian treatment of Sunnis—particularly the arrest and torture of Sunnis accused of “terrorism.”

The movement demanded an end to American occupation laws such as de-Baathification that enabled the Iraqi state to discriminate against Sunnis. The protests wanted repeal of the counterterrorism law that gave the state carte blanche to arrest anybody, hold them without due process, and torture them.

This all began as a peaceful movement, which some even called the Iraqi Spring. It was split into roughly three wings. One element demanded reforms to sectarian laws that discriminated against Sunnis, like de-Baathification and the counterterrorism legislation. Another wing demanded that Sunnis be granted territory, like the Kurds in the north, within a federated country. And a third group agitated for a revolutionary seizure of the Iraqi state.

Recognizing the movement as a threat, then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki turned to brute force to suppress the movement. He ordered his troops to open fire on unarmed protesters. Just like Assad's repression of the Syrian Revolution forced it to become militarized, Maliki's assault on peaceful protesters drove them to take up arms.

As the movement grew militarized, the secular voices got drowned out by those with access to weapons and funding. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, now rebranded as ISIS, became the dominant player by the end of 2013. The Sunni communities were then faced with a choice of siding with ISIS or the Iraqi state.

Many chose ISIS. The group thus seized power in large parts of western Iraq with the support of Sunni communities, which viewed them as the lesser of two evils. After it seized control of Mosul in 2014, ISIS found itself in power over the predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq. It then repressed all other forces in the rebellion and imposed its reactionary rule.

Some of those who run ISIS have experience in Saddam Hussein's old Baath Party. During the 1990s, Saddam tried to promote Islam as a way to legitimize his ruthless rule, and it appears that some future ISIS leaders became Islamicized during this period.

After the occupation, they lost any vestige of their secular Baathist past—everything except perhaps their military and intelligence know-how—and embraced fundamentalism. So ISIS's roots are in the policies of Saddam, the utter chaos and destruction of Iraq wrought by the US, and the sectarian state it helped bring into being.

WHAT IS the U.S. strategy to combat ISIS? Is it working? What impact will it have on Iraq's stability?

OBAMA'S STRATEGY is to relentlessly bomb ISIS targets, provide military trainers and advisers to the Iraqi Army, and support the army and its associated Shia militias to retake territory controlled by ISIS. Under that barrage, ISIS is beginning to crack, not only because of the military pressure, but also for other reasons.

One reason is the international collapse in oil prices. ISIS depends on selling smuggled oil as one of its principle sources of funding, so the drop in prices has eaten away at its finances. It has less money to pay its fighters and administer services in areas it controls.

Another reason for ISIS's new weakness has been the failure to conquer new territory. The reason for this is not only military, but political. It can't appeal to communities beyond the Sunnis because

of its reactionary sectarianism. Without new conquests, ISIS has lost the steady stream of funding through confiscating houses, cars and other plunder that it distributed to their supporters. And the collapse of the economy in Islamic State territory means the group is running low on tax revenue.

The U.S. is thus winning the military battle against ISIS. I fully expect that ISIS, as a military force in Iraq, won't be able to hold territories for much longer. A year from now, it will likely have lost most of its territories in Iraq.

Yet the U.S. is not winning the political battle to stabilize or bring peace to Iraq. Because it relies on bolstering the existing state and sectarian militias, that means keeping in place the political conditions that gave rise to ISIS in the first place. Therefore, there will likely be violence and chaos for a long time to come.

SO ALL the U.S. claims about making progress in overcoming sectarianism are untrue?

COMPLETELY UNTRUE. The U.S. has made some progress in improving the fighting competency of the Iraqi army, which now manages to actually fight, instead of run as it did when ISIS launched its 2014 offensive.

But the U.S. has not changed the sectarian nature of the Iraqi state and its military. To do would require dismantling the very state the U.S. established with the occupation. And they are not going to do that.

Of course, U.S. officials have talked a lot about reforming the Iraqi government and ridding it of sectarianism. But in practice, they have done the opposite. They have indirectly empowered Shia militias, and even supported some of them. This is stoking more intense sectarian divisions. The Shia militias go into areas that been "liberated" and terrorize the local populations.

Sometimes, the Iraqi army does the same. Last year, it went house to house in a few towns in Babil, south of Baghdad, and arrested every single male Sunni over the age of 18. They haven't been seen since.

The U.S. government's main goal is counterterrorism, and it's willing to subvert everything else to that aim, including reforming the government's sectarianism and stopping the brutality of its army and allied Shia militias.

THE U.S. has celebrated better conditions in the Kurdish section of the country. Have they actually granted Kurds the right to self-determination and improved their conditions?

HISTORICALLY, THE U.S. has opposed the creation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. That hasn't changed, despite the fact that U.S. Special Forces are working with the Kurdish Peshmerga militia in Iraq to retake Mosul and the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in Syria in an effort to retake territory from ISIS.

Regardless of this collaboration, the U.S. has again made it clear that it opposes the Kurdish right to self-determination. And all the hype about Iraqi Kurdistan as a model for the rest of Iraq is foundering on the collapse in oil prices. The regional government is out of money and has been forced to adopt austerity measures even more severe than those of the central government in Baghdad.

EARLIER, YOU mentioned the developing movement protesting the corrupt government that the U.S. supports in Iraq. What are the prospects for this struggle?

THIS IS the most encouraging development in some years. It started last summer, which was especially hot, with temperatures reaching 120 degrees. In the middle of that hot spell, electricity went out in Baghdad and other parts of the country. For many Iraqis, that symbolized the state's utter corruption and its failure to deliver even basic services.

Fed-up Iraqis took to the street, particularly in Baghdad. The first mobilizations were almost entirely secular and led by liberal and left-wing organizations. They set up an encampment every Friday in Tahrir Square in Baghdad and staged growing protests that took up economic and political demands.

One of their main demands was to end the sectarian quota system that has shaped Iraqi politics since 2003. They also demanded an end to the austerity measures that the Iraqi state has been pushing to save money lost with the drop in oil prices. They also protested various appointments of bureaucrats linked to corrupt Islamist parties.

This last demand is really important. When the U.S. invaded, it set up a state staffed with officials who had been living outside the country for decades and therefore had no political base inside the country. These officials therefore relied on patronage and cronyism to buy support, which corrupted the Iraqi state. Most of these figures—particularly those in the Islamist parties—are very resistant to give up the privileges that they have gained in the last 10 or 12 years. The protest movement has demanded an end to that corrupt system.

While it began as a mainly secular and left-wing movement, the more nationalist wing of the Shia parties, especially those led by Moktada al-Sadr, have increasingly come to dominate it. While this has made it a truly massive movement, it also has drowned out the secular forces.

On the other hand, Shia Islamist parties that have benefitted from the patronage system are doing all they can to preserve the system. Former Prime Minister Maliki is spearheading this effort. There were even rumors that these forces were prepared to organize a coup against Abadi to protect their privileges.

So right now you have a very tense situation in Baghdad. It is hard to say what is going to happen, but it is very unstable. The government could very well fall in the coming months.

IS THAT why Secretary of State John Kerry recently rushed off to Baghdad for a surprise visit with Abadi?

YES, THAT'S exactly the reason. Both the U.S. and Iran have decided that it's better to keep Abadi in place at the moment than see him toppled by the movement. So the government's only base of support is the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Iran. Without their backing, Abadi would fall, either to the movement or to Maliki's forces.

In a surprise twist, the U.S. and Iran are both supporting Abadi. This is one of the many examples of de facto collaboration between these two previously antagonistic states in the wake of their nuclear deal. They are both support stabilizing the existing state in Iraq while they fight ISIS.

WHERE DO you think the whole situation is heading in Iraq and Syria?

IT'S CLEAR that major foreign powers are determined to stabilize the regimes they support and eventually crush ISIS. In Iraq, the U.S. as well as Iran are propping up Abadi's regime. In Syria, Russia and Iran are backing Assad's regime, no matter what the human cost.

But these states are the principal forces that defend the existing sectarian order, which was the root cause of the emergence of ISIS to begin with. So they are only stoking the flames of sectarian

conflict.

The real hope is popular struggle in Iraq and Syria—and particularly, the Syrian Revolution, which amazingly is continuing despite unbelievable amounts of repression and violence. However, the endless bombing by Assad and outside powers makes conditions so dangerous that it is very difficult for a secular, cross-sectarian protest movement to sustain itself.

Nevertheless, when there is any stop in the carnage, we can see the hope of the movement from below. So, in 2010 and 2011 in Iraq, there was a momentary blossoming of anti-sectarian politics. We saw this again this past year in Baghdad when it was relatively secure, following the previous summer when ISIS was pressing at the gates.

In Syria, during the recent partial cessation of hostilities, you saw revolutionaries coming out in protest against Assad's regime in city after city. In some cities, they also protested against the al-Qaeda franchise, the al-Nusra Front, showing hostility to Islamist sectarianism. I believe that points to the real possibility of uniting people and overcoming the divisions of sect and ethnicity.

This depends, however, on outside powers not using Syria for their own ends. Most Syrians believe that both the Americans and the Russians are trying to destroy the revolution, using "terrorism" as an excuse. The U.S. is even growing closer to the Assad regime, which it sees as a lesser evil to ISIS.

This means that the need for solidarity with the Syrian Revolution, which is maligned on the right and left in racist and Islamophobic terms, is greater than ever. Amid the tragedies of the region, this struggle is really the only solution.

P.S.

* Socialist Worker (USA). May 2, 2016:

<https://socialistworker.org/2016/05/02/what-is-driving-iraq-back-to-the-brink>

* Transcribed by Denise Herrera.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/05/the-hell-after-isis/476391/>