



## Lessons from Tikrit

By: Ioannis-Sotirios Ioannou\*

Watching the war evolve in Iraq, between the military forces of the country and the Shiite militias on one hand and the jihadists of the Islamic State on the other, one inevitably realizes the domination of Iranian policy in Iraq. In social media, like Twitter, the 'selfies' photos of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani with soldiers are becoming massively viral. At the same time, the Iranian propaganda constructs heroes, such as the Ayyub Faleh al-Rubai who was interviewed by the AFP; a Shiite 'super-soldier' who fights ISIS. His page on Facebook has over 300,000 "likes". The Popular Mobilization Units, backed by Tehran and the Lebanese Hezbollah are the cutting edge of the Iraqi offensive against Mosul. The scenario on the ground speaks for itself: the Iranian involvement in the fight against ISIS takes place at the same time as the negotiations between the West and Tehran regarding the latter's nuclear program. The Americans and the West in general have realized that this is a reality that cannot be avoided. Similarly, they understand that this 'unholy alliance' could work as a step forward in the US-Iranian relations after a possible agreement between Washington and Tehran. They are wrong.

### **An old veteran**

Iraq is a special case. The experience of the sectarian conflict between Sunni tribes and Shias after Saddam Hussein's removal is not linked solely to the US involvement. It dates back to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the tit-for-tat bilateral relations, and the military clashes between Baghdad and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. Iran's influence in Iraq is a natural blending across the borders of the two countries, while the clashes during the 1990's, when Saddam Hussein was still in power, between the Mek, (Mujahadeen-e-Khalq) the Shiite opposition created by Baghdad, and the Badr Corps, an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary backed by Tehran, was a long-standing proxy war. Hadi Al-Ameri, the current minister of transportation of the new Iraqi government is the leader of the Badr Organization. It is no coincidence that he has also become a star on Twitter (he was also interviewed by Vice News). Al-Ameri is a veteran. He led Badr as a fully operational brigade (armed with 10,000 men in the 1980-1988 War). He did it again against Saddam in 2003. Now he fights

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Daesh. Since last June, in northern Diyala area, close to the Parwezkhan border, there is a direct supply line between Tehran and Badr.

It must be noted that Al-Ameri is not simply a war veteran. He is also a Diyala native, born in the Khalis area near the Baghdad-Kirkuk region. Now he fights in a paradoxical parallel with the US-led international coalition against ISIS, exactly as he did with the US occupied armed forces after Saddam's fall. Back then, after 2003, he ensured that his men will be the officers of the so-called, by the Americans, Iraqi 5<sup>th</sup> Army.

### **Atrocities**

War crimes are not only committed by ISIS. Shias have, in two cases, massacred over 106 Sunnis in the past year: on August 22, 2014 at the Musab bin Omair Mosque and on January 26, 2015 in Barwana. The sectarian hate has returned to Iraq. And even if the ISIS retreats from Iraq, a new war between Shias and Sunnis, especially in the whole Mesopotamia area, is a highly plausible scenario. The oppression of the Shias over the Sunnis can be clearly seen in the mixed villages of the area freed from ISIS control. Sunnis were not allowed to return; on the contrary they were forced to abandon their land and properties. The Badr forces are now controlling a huge area (around 5,000 square miles) from the outskirts of Kirkuk all the way down to northern Baghdad. As the battle of Mosul is going to be the next effort against the elimination of ISIS in Iraq, it remains to be seen whether the Badr forces will seek to play an important role again, and what they will actually win from the outcome of this battle in the long run.

### **What's next**

In Iraq the only efficient way to avoid sectarian clashes or atrocities is to build the capacities of folding Shiite paramilitary units into the structure of a national army. This is a difficult challenge but not an impossible one for the Iraqi government to handle. The worst-case scenario would be the rise of a new Hezbollah in Iraq. Hezbollah fighters took the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon some years ago. Today they control parts of Lebanon and they "export" fighters to Iraq. In Syria they helped Assad to remain in power after four years of fierce fighting. The collapse of the Iraqi army last summer, during the blitzkrieg by Daesh in Iraq, is still considered as an embarrassment, especially among Shiites and the local population. But despite the Iranian propaganda, the battle of Tikrit has not created a strong narrative, a myth like the battle of Kobane and the Kurdish YPG fight against ISIS on the Syrian-Turkish borders... as it has not complicated further the environment. Thus, the

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situation is quite clear: if the international community does not assist Iraq and Syria to get rid of the Sunni extremism and the ISIS threat, they will be replaced by Shia extremism. And the sectarian hate will create several monsters, like ISIS, each time leading to another 2005-2007 war. Iraq is not Lebanon. It has four times the Lebanese landmass. And the cost, especially for the stability in the area, would be tremendous to stabilize such a huge area.

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