



## General Mattis and Iraq: Motivations and Apprehensions

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The appointment of retired US General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense comes during cautious times for both Iraqis and Americans. The Iraqis are anticipating new developments in the battle for Mosul and the consequences of the fighting taking place on the east side of the city, which was recently liberated from ISIS. The government of Iraq is committed to liberating the entire city of Mosul and its surroundings from ISIS, liquidating ISIS presence in the region, cutting off the routes between Iraq and Syria and securing the border, and finally winning the confidence of the predominantly Sunni local population.

These are not aims that can be attained easily. In fact, they are so difficult and complicated that the Iraqi government cannot fulfill them without close coordination with the Americans.

### **Mattis' Relations with Iraq**

General Mattis has a history in Iraq. He fought there fiercely in 2004, 2006, and 2008 against the Iraqi insurgency, stormed Fallujah, and was present when Iraqi Sunni tribesmen fought Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and forced them out.

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Iran-supported militia—and Iran itself—are unhappy with General Mattis' opposition to Iranian influence on the Iraqi government. There were allegations that, in the past, the Iraqi government exerted pressure on the Obama Administration to call General Mattis back and replace him.

As the US Secretary of Defense, General Mattis is now the leader and chief executive officer of the American military establishment, one who leads the international coalition to fight ISIS. Thus, his new position imbues him with authority to plan and execute policies and military strategies to defend and assert American national interests in the region as directed by President Donald Trump. It is now clear that American plans for and interests in the region are on a collision course with the Iranian project there, in which Iraq is pivotal.

After President Trump was sworn in, he embarked on a mission to fight ISIS and eradicate its presence, asking the Pentagon to prepare a plan to attain that aim within 30 days. The mission is for the military to fulfill, but due to General Mattis' experience with Iraq, AQI, and ISIS, he is planning to visit Iraq to meet Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the American military stationed there to discuss this matter. Until recently, the declared role of the American military was to extend

air cover to the Iraqi armed forces and the Peshmerga paramilitaries in the battle for Mosul, advise the Iraqi generals and field command, and train and arm Iraqi forces. President Trump's solicitation for plans to defeat ISIS will take a lot more, and it certainly requires field involvement. Addressing the situation in Syria will be required as well.

### **Difficulties in Iraq**

Friction between Washington and Baghdad is inevitable, considering Iran's influence on the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the role those forces are playing in the battle for Mosul. The established American position opposes any involvement of these forces in the battle, a stance which Turkey also shares. The PMF were denied the opportunity to fight in Mosul due to previous atrocities they committed in the Sunni cities after their liberation from ISIS, and the subsequent refusal of the population to involve the PMF in the future. Considering the public's refusal, with US support, the PMF were allotted the task of liberating Tal Afar, a Sunni majority Turcoman city to the west of Mosul with a Shiite minority.

Their involvement in Tal Afar will likely lead to the widespread persecution of the Turcoman Sunni majority, and create a rift that would lead to enmity between the two Turcoman factions (Shiites and Sunnis) living in the city, which will be like the existing rift between Iraqi Shiite and Sunni Arabs. Turkey has also opposed any involvement of the PMF in Tal Afar and Mosul.

There are many reasons for the government of Iraq, the Shiite parties, and the militias to be concerned for the imminent visit by General Mattis, who is familiar with the corrupt government, the corrupt political process, the deep involvement of militias in the torture of Sunni Arabs, and Iran's friends' adherence to the Iranian *wilayat al-faqih*. On the other hand, General Mattis has been known to oppose Iranian meddling in the affairs of its neighbors and believes that Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq makes it responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American troops.

In April 2016, General Mattis [told an audience](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that Iran poses four specific threats to the United States and its allies, apart from its nuclear program, which he enumerated as:

1. Its continued development of missiles capable of one day reaching Israel and Europe.
2. Its ongoing threats to close the strait of Hormuz.
3. Its increasing cyber-attack capabilities.
4. Its support for armed proxies ranging from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, to the Houthis who now control Yemen.

He indeed said that “[t]he Iranian regime... is the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East” and that Iran has had a consistently disruptive behavior since its revolution in 1979.

## Future Possibilities

Officially, the United States [deploys](#) 5,000 soldiers in Iraq, but many observers believe that the number is much higher and that their operations are not restricted to consultancy and training, but that fighting forces can be deployed in light of the 2006 US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The US-Iraq SOFA that was signed during George W. Bush's second presidential term gives the US the right to deploy any forces needed to fight terrorism, insurgencies, and threats to American and Iraqi interests. Considering this agreement, Iranian involvement and meddling in Iraq could be perceived as a threat to these interests. In this context, the proxy Shiite militias supported and directed by Iran through General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Forces, are enough proof of the destabilizing and threatening Iranian interference. A vast component of the Iraqi population has the same perception. They think that many current problems in Iraq are the direct result of the Iranian meddling. The Iranian-backed militias are a source of terrorism, and the atrocities and persecution committed by them in liberated cities provides proof that the militias may be the other side of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Secretary of Defense appears to share the same perception.

On the political side, the imminent visit may project a new US strategy for Iraq, indicating an American insistence to regain control of Iraq, which has been projected by President Trump himself, both during his electoral campaign and after his election.

Faction-wise, it is likely that most of the Sunni and Kurdish populations will welcome any American move to curb Iranian influence in Iraq, though the Sunni Arabs will continue to oppose any form of American control of Iraqi oil and other sovereign assets. The Shiite Islamist parties and the Iranian-backed militias certainly will oppose, if not confront and even fight, an American permanent presence in Iraq. Thus, to ensure success in Iraq, the Pentagon must ensure total containment of the Iranian project in Iraq and the Arab Middle East.

One cannot imagine that the current campaign for Mosul and the coming battles will lead to the same outcome as the previous invasion operations: destroying what remains of Iraq to hand it over to Iran.

Let's wait and see.