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# **The Collapse of the Iraqi Army's Will to Fight: A Lack of Motivation, Training, or Force Generation?**

By Maj. Adam Scher

Much of the commentary on the Iraqi Army collapse of 2014-2015 centers on the motivations of individual soldiers and the general concept of a “will to fight” among the military institution as a whole. Most alarming about the Iraqi Army’s collapse was that it came less than three years after an American and coalition investment of eight years and at least \$25 billion dollars in training and equipment.<sup>1</sup> Before expending more time and money, America and its allies must examine the root causes of the Iraqi Army’s failure in order to better leverage our resources and influence in the fight against ISIS.

Conventional wisdom claims that ISIS fighters are sadistic militants, deviants who are committed to violence, or brainwashed by radical religious ideology. Conventional wisdom also states that the Iraqi Army is the product of an incompetent government that lacks the efficiency to generate adequate military forces. There is some truth to this, but conventional wisdom too often attributes the Iraqi Army’s lack of motivation to cowardice or culture, two things that no amount of training or equipment can change. This view was apparent when Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, describing the collapse of the Iraqi Army forces at Ramadi, said, “What apparently happened is the Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight...We can give them training, we can give them equipment - we obviously can’t give them the will to fight.”<sup>2</sup>

While conventional wisdom may absolve us of responsibility related to the Iraqi Army’s collapse, such a view is neither reasonable nor strategically sound. Worse, this belief promulgates a misinformed perspective on the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi people. The “will to fight” may indeed result from a combination of factors, including spirit, pride, honor, courage, and bravery. These intrinsic motivations also have more pragmatic complements: training, equipment, and administration.

The quality of equipment and training directly influence soldiers’ confidence in their team and their unit. While serving in in Tikrit, Iraq, in 2005-2006, I told the soldiers in my platoon before every one of our over 250 combat patrols that they should trust in their equipment, trust in their training, and trust in the soldier on their left and right. I could say this with confidence, because our platoon completed multiple team and squad live fires, various platoon level field training exercises and numerous small arms and indirect fire ranges prior to deployment.

Our Iraqi partners then and my Iraqi partners today lack all of those things. The Iraqi Army lacks trust in its equipment, training and its soldiers because between 2011, when coalition forces left Iraq, and 2014, when ISIS attacked, the Iraqi Army executed almost no training, effectively recruited no new soldiers, and broke or sold the majority of the military equipment it had acquired between 2004 and 2011.

With no training and broken equipment, would we expect our own soldiers to “die in place” rather than fleeing to live and fight another day, especially when leaders in their formations are also abandoning their defensive positions? From 2011-2014 many commanders in the Iraqi Army allegedly accepted bribes (kept percentages of soldiers’ salary) to allow soldiers to go on leave, failed to report AWOL status so they could keep pay, sold military equipment to include spare parts on the black market for personal gain, and kept units in checkpoints harassing a local Sunni populace.<sup>3</sup> Various reports confirmed this practice within the Iraqi Army.<sup>4</sup> When faced with ISIS, a battle-tested, determined enemy that trusted its equipment, training, and fellow fighters, is it any wonder that the Iraqi Army folded? Add to this the cultural challenge of a predominantly Shia Army from other parts of Iraq



who were not embraced by the people of Anbar or Ninewa because soldiers spent years neglecting the locals and couldn't separate the civilian population from the ISIS fighters, and ask again why the Iraqi Army collapsed?

As Iraqi forces tossed their weapons, abandoned their vehicles, and fled the battle, many blamed the Iraqis for a lack of motivation without investigating the myriad administrative and logistical failures that set the conditions for even the bravest fighters to flee the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> Abbas and Trombly counter that point of view: "corruption, neglect, and a shortfall of combat-effective resources and personnel crippled the Iraqi military's capability and widened ISIS' range of strategic options in Ninewa province."<sup>6</sup> On paper, the Iraqi Security Forces look like a modern fighting force, but years of corruption and resource mismanagement have made the military undermanned, undertrained and under-equipped, despite false reports to the contrary.

One of the first things the Iraqi Army changed when coalition forces left in 2011 was the electronic fund transfer (EFT) pay system.<sup>7</sup> The Iraqi Army ended EFT to individual soldiers and returned to an analog system in which the Ministry of Defense pays commanders, who in turn distribute salaries to soldiers.<sup>8</sup> This shift provided unscrupulous commanders with an incentive to provide deliberately misleading reports and keep dead or absent soldiers on their unit rosters. Further, this system also allows commanders to functionally accept bribes from soldiers in exchange for more leave. Since there is no reliable banking system, soldiers have to return home to give their families money. Commanders allow soldiers to extend their leave in exchange for less pay, again allowing commanders to pocket the difference.

Lack of effective administrative procedures directly contributes to a lack of cohesion within Iraqi Army units. Even the most spirited individuals will find their motivation sapped by administrative practices that promote desertion, dishonor, and deceit.

Another key administrative aspect of the will to fight is the belief that one's family is protected during the fight and will be taken care of if the soldier makes the ultimate sacrifice. Between 2011 and 2014, Iraqi Army soldiers were not trained in proper first aid or medical evacuation procedures, meaning they had almost no confidence they could survive a battlefield injury, and a lack of a veterans health program means that any soldier who dies in battle effectively economically cripples their family. ISIS exploits this failed administrative system by specifically targeting family members of the Iraqi military:

ISIL capitalized on soldiers' fear that they and their families would be targeted if they fought as rumors spread. Soldiers had little faith in the military's ability to protect them, their families, or prevent infiltration ... reducing [the Iraqi army] to a state where innuendo and psychological operations could push units towards collapse without prolonged direct combat.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, Shia militias funded and backed by Iran, along with the Peshmerga, who have been fighting since at least 1991 to defend the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), emerged as the most successful forces at stopping the ISIS advance. Both the Shia and Kurds chose to fight to defend their respective homelands: Baghdad and the Shia south, and Irbil and the rest of Kurdistan. These forces made concerted efforts to maintain their equipment, recruit soldiers, and prepare to fight. The Shia militias actually had the least amount of training and equipment, but the Iranians filled the gap with arms and embedded advisors from the Quds force to supplement a lack of training and provide needed weapons and vehicles.<sup>10</sup> The will to fight among these organizations is a combination of spirit and culture of defending one's homeland along with the more pragmatic and measurable aspects of training and equipping. In essence both the Shia militias and the Kurds followed a force generation model of recruiting, preparing, and deploying fighters in a systematic way that Iraqi Security Forces lack.

Leadership is vital to maintaining a soldier's will to fight. Time and again reports from the front lines indicate junior and senior officers in the Iraqi Army are either not present or begin to withdraw from the fight; soldiers simply follow suit. "We felt like cowards, but our commanders were afraid of Daesh. They were too afraid to lead us," said Shehab, 43.<sup>11</sup> Different units in the Iraqi Army exhibit different levels of motivation and the will to fight



that can endure the hardship of limited supplies and faulty equipment. Unfortunately, this organizational culture is the exception in the Iraqi Army that proves the rule: “the Iraqi military is not rotten to the core. It was rotten at the top.”<sup>13</sup> The Iraqi Army culture does not focus on training, combat readiness, tactical proficiency or inspirational leadership. Instead, senior Iraqi military commanders gain their position through political nepotism, tribal or family relationships, or through routine bribery and corruption.

The Iraqi Army’s lack of will to fight results from a combination of inadequate governance, unsuccessful combat readiness programs, and widespread corruption, rather than any inherent cultural pathology. The will to fight is strengthened by unit cohesion, confidence in training and equipment, and fair and transparent administrative procedures. The Iraqi Army’s choice to abandon a basic force generation model in 2011, the lack of a coherent strategy to maintain combat readiness, and the decision to become a garrison Army choosing to defend outposts by fixed position only, led to the loss of much of its motivation.

To enhance Iraqi Army motivations to defeat ISIS in battle, significant security sector reform must occur. As a member of 3rd BCT 82nd Airborne Division serving as the BCT S7 – Iraqi Security Forces Development Officer, I experienced our reform efforts first-hand.

In early 2015, 3/82 deployed with approximately 1300 paratroopers on a mission to train, equip, and prepare five Iraqi Army brigades to lead a counterattack against ISIS forces that had captured Mosul and parts of Anbar province in 2014. As one reporter described the endeavor: “during the deployment, the brigade formed in teams and helped to train about 12,400 new Iraqi army soldiers. The teams also worked every day with Iraqi Ground Forces Command.”<sup>14</sup>

As the first brigade combat team deployed with the specific mission to train Iraqi forces for combat against ISIS, COL Curtis Buzzard, the 3/82 commander, was directed to build partner capacity sites at locations formerly controlled by the U.S. military during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The soldiers from 3/82 joined Iraqi units based in Taji, Besmaya, and Baghdad International Airport.

Col. Buzzard and his team immediately realized they were responsible for creating a training program that would resonate with the Iraqi Security Forces. “What we were all concerned about was that after these first five brigades were trained, would others come to the training sites? Would the Iraqis see value in the training?” Buzzard said.<sup>15</sup>

Col. Buzzard challenged his staff and subordinate battalions to not only train the Iraqi Army to fight, but also to simultaneously advise and assist Iraqi leaders to adopt a force generation model that could help sustain Iraqi Army combat power and enhance soldiers’ will to fight through better organization and process. He embraced and conveyed to his staff a philosophy that advisors would set the pace for the Iraqi Army training and development. By this Col. Buzzard aimed to challenge the Iraqi Army to reform and conduct sustained rigorous training. Unfortunately, doing so in the middle of a conflict presents its own challenges; I therefore make these recommendations even though they are not easily implemented in a war zone, in accordance with the vision Col. Buzzard provided.

- 1) Encourage the Iraqi Army Ground Forces Command to create and manage a “patch chart” that allows its maneuver brigades and battalions to spend a determined time on the front lines of the fight followed by a reset and refit phase that prioritizes maintenance of equipment, soldier recruitment, and training on individual and collective tasks.
- 2) Develop and maintain a maneuver training center where brigades and battalions in the reset and refit phase of force generation complete a culminating training event that is rigorous and real-world (live-fire) before returning to the front line.

Real world training will help validate Iraqi Army leaders and reduce the likelihood that leaders will



desert when faced with direct combat against the enemy.

- 3) Ensure the Iraqi Ground Forces Command (IGFC) functions in a similar capacity to the U.S. Army Forces Command, tracking readiness and providing mission-capable forces to meet the needs of various regional and operational commands.

Under the current system, the IGFC competes with the Combined Joint Operations Center for command and control of training and deployment, which prevents optimal use of operational forces and prevents adequate management of units' training, deployment, and reset cycles.

- 4) Establish an Iraqi National Guard and police force that incorporates local tribes into the Iraqi security force.

This would effectively allow Sunni tribal militias to serve in a national army capacity but only with duty in defense of their communities (non-deployable, primarily Anbar / Ninewa). National Guard forces need to participate in the force generation training model. This will require considerable political will within the Iraqi government. A bill supporting the creation of the Iraqi National Guard was stymied in 2014 by the predominantly Shia Iraqi parliament due to concerns about creating what would be a primarily Sunni force.<sup>16</sup>

- 5) Support the synchronization and unity of effort between Ministry of Defense military forces and Ministry of Interior police forces by establishing "fusion centers." Representatives from these two entities can come together to share successful tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as intelligence about ISIS and local tribal dynamics.

- 6) Develop officer training and certification that promotes leaders based on demonstrated proficiency and war-fighting skills.

This type of program would promote Iraqi commanders based on competence and battlefield success rather than the current system, in which political patronage and tribal status drives position and promotion.

- 7) Select senior leaders for the Iraqi Security Force that are willing to set aside personal gain and factional interests in favor of national policy objectives.

While some of these officers are already in leadership positions, advise and assist units can support Iraq's political leaders in identifying and developing these officers.

As military professionals we should understand that our societies grant us great autonomy to be expert managers of lethal force and violence because we have functional democracies where the threat of a coup has been rendered obsolete. As we advise, assist, and build partner capacity, we must not lose sight of the fact that enhanced military proficiency has historically been a recipe for government overthrow, in Iraq specifically and the Arab world in general. A fragile Baghdad regime may be reluctant to embrace sophisticated military training based on the fear that the more qualified and experienced military leaders in the country are not personally loyal to the government.

The will to fight must be built from both the top-down and the inside-out. The pragmatic elements—administration, logistics, pay, and equipment—begin from the top-down, and the culture of small unit cohesion, inspirational leadership, and combat experience has to be shaped inside the organization and cannot be imposed by outside advisors or partners. Motivated, effective battalion and brigade commanders should be rewarded for contributing to a culture of shared sacrifice with their soldiers.

These competent leaders must be the ones selected for senior command in the Iraqi Army in order to



maximize the impact of the intangible and the practical components of a military's will to fight. It is this type of motivation that Secretary of Defense Carter refers to when he says, "if we give them training, we give them equipment, and give them support, and give them some time, I hope they will develop the will to fight..."<sup>17</sup> In order to meet the Secretary of Defense's call it is vitally important that U.S. Army formations deployed to the build partner capacity and advise and assist missions in Iraq are reminded that it takes shared adversity and trust to build cohesion, develop confidence, and display courage in the face of a ruthless enemy. Even the most committed soldiers shouldn't be expected to sustain the fight without an institutional commitment to regular live fire training, maintenance of weapons and equipment and honest force generation and readiness evaluations. While the coalition can support training and provide weapons and equipment, without long-term security sector reform, the Iraqi Army of the future may be doomed to suffer the same fate as the Iraqi Army of 2014.

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## NOTES

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