

After ISIS black flags, Iraq faces 'White Banners' threat

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Iraqi forces began a military operation against militants who are threatening an oil route between Iraq and Iran, rekindling fears over the security of the country despite Baghdad's announcement of victory against the Islamic State (ISIS).

The military operation aims to secure areas between Kirkuk's oil fields and Khanaqin on the Iranian border, two Iraqi officials told Reuters on condition of anonymity before the operation started. The officials said six pro-government guards were killed by the militants south of the Hamrin Mountains.

"With the goal of enforcing security and stability, destroying sleeper cells and continuing clearing operations, an operation was launched in the early hours of this morning to search and clear areas east of Tuz Khurmatu," the Iraqi military said in a statement on February 7.

The Iraqi Army, special security units and the predominately Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) took part in the operation, which had US air support and coordination with peshmerga fighters, the Iraqi military said.

As part of its plans to boost oil exports, Iraq announced that it would be transporting crude oil via tanker trucks from Kirkuk to be refined in Iran. There are reports that an Iraq-Iran pipeline will be built to export oil from Kirkuk, replacing the one that heads to Turkey via areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It remains unclear which group the militants threatening the oil route are aligned with, ISIS or the mysterious al-Rayat al-Bayda (translated as the White Banners or the White Flags). The group's flag is white with the head of a lion in the centre.

The White Banners militants are reportedly made up of Kurds who objected to the control of the Iraqi central government over Kirkuk province and Tuz Khurmatu in Saladin province, which had been under KRG control for more than two years before being retaken by



At gunpoint. An Iraqi flag mounted on a military vehicle at an oil field in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk.

(Reuters)

Baghdad in October.

"The White Banners group [has] been accused of carrying out terrorist activities and targeting judiciary members," Al Arabiya reported.

Turkmen MP Jassim Mohammed Jaafar accused Kurdish leaders in December of supporting the group, Al Arabiya said.

The KRG denies links to the White Banners but central government officials have accused their Kurdish counterparts of not doing enough to fight the militants.

Abu Reda al-Najjar, a PMF commander, said the White Banners is a new group composed of Iranian Kurdish separatists, most notably the Kurdistan Free Life Party.

Other Iraqi officials told Arab

News that the group is not new but made up of militants from Ansar al-Islam, which includes predominantly Kurdish fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda.

There are reports that the group has welcomed former ISIS militants to its ranks.

The White Banners group is "said to be an alliance of former Islamic State militants and disgruntled Kurdish mafia members pushed out of the nearby town of Tuz Khurmatu," wrote Tom Westcott in the website Middle East Eye.

There are separate reports of Kurdish groups not affiliated to the White Banners taking up against the Iraqi Army and the PMF following the fallout between Baghdad and Erbil over the referendum

on Kurdistan's independence last September.

These groups, which call for the "liberation" of Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu from central government control, are made up of volunteers that are no longer affiliated with the peshmerga or the KRG.

"The myriad armed groups in Iraq are constantly emerging,

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merging and dividing. The list is as mutable as everything else in the country," wrote Wassim Bassem in the website Al-Monitor.

The fight against such militancy is likely to continue, albeit not in the same scale as that against ISIS.

"The fight against insurgency continues and goes beyond the full-on kinetic phase to address the many enabling structural factors behind Iraq's insurgencies (corruption, illicit money, uneven state capacity, unemployment)," Fanar Haddad, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore, told the National newspaper.

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Viewpoint



Majed Sameraei is an Iraqi writer.

Iraqi rulers' record since 2003 is hardly impressive

The parties in power in Iraq are more than happy and willing to repeat – over and over again – that ballot boxes have the last say.

They expect the citizens to believe they live in a democracy.

However, a quick look at the three most recent elections in Iraq reveals the incredible extent of cheating and the ugly reality of shady political wheeling and dealing. The array of manipulative tactics during election campaigns is amazing.

The best proof for this is that Iraq is living the same saga of failure after failure because the same players in the political arena are adamant on staying in the game by any means necessary.

During the initial phase of the democracy sham in Iraq, the chances of winning for any particular election list depended on how much Shia support that list enjoyed. The governing parties became experts at making local enemies based on sectarian discrimination and resorting to a variety of legal covers such as de-Ba'athification measures.

Such sectarian practices ruined the lives of Iraqi people. Now, after defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, everybody wants to reap the dividends of that victory and ride the wave of post-sectarianism.

However, victory over ISIS is the only real achievement in Iraq and it

must be credited to all Iraqis rather than to this official or that party.

In the coming electoral cycle, all Iraqis should ask themselves – in all fairness and without prejudice – about the achievements of the various Iraqi administrations since 2003.

Has the suffering in their daily lives lessened?

Is there less death and destruction in their communities?

Are they any safer in their homes or on the street?

With paramilitary militias roaming the streets and an absence of the state, are they safe from kidnapping, random arrests and murder?

We will not indulge in a comparison between pre-2003 Iraq and post-2003 Iraq. In 2003, the Iraqis were relieved of the shackles of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein but the Islamist parties of Iraq cannot claim for themselves that achievement. That is credited to the Americans and the Iranians.

Following that, the biggest achievement of the occupation forces was the dismantling of the Iraqi Army. That army belonged to the country and not to Saddam. It would have been a better choice to remove pro-Saddam officers and leave the army standing. Alas, once the army was gone, the gates were flung open for all agents of evil and destruction to overrun the country.

The most notorious achievement of the American occupation of Iraq

was the establishment of the quota system of power-sharing left by the infamous Paul Bremer. It was disastrous for Iraq. Let's not also forget the killing of hundreds of Iraqi scientists and the forced exile of thousands of doctors and engineers. The country's intellectual elite was gone and was replaced by illiterate opportunists with fake diplomas from Iran.

It was heart-wrenching to come across scores of talented Iraqi doctors practising in British hospitals. They spoke of the pain they felt for being deprived of the honour of serving their country. They've become valuable additions to the British health services, so much so that, a few years ago, the British Ministry of Health feared facing a crisis should those doctors decide to return to Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who incidentally once had British nationality, knows this.

Other examples of the "glorious achievements" of the corrupt political parties in Iraq's newly found democracy are easy to come by. Public education in Iraq has gone to pot. Illiteracy in Iraq was eliminated in the late 1970s and UNESCO ranked Iraqi public schools among the best in the world during the 1980s.

Recent statistics, however, show that the literacy rate in Iraq is approximately 60%. Six million Iraqis are completely illiterate and lecture halls in Iraqi universities have been

turned into shrines.

Women also have fallen victim to these "great achievements." As if the humiliation of the war and of retrograde practices were not enough, the great "progressive" parties of Iraqi democracy have eagerly pushed for a law allowing marriages with females as young as 9 years old. How is that for a great humanitarian achievement?

Whoever one looks in Iraq, there is corruption and failure. The son of the Najaf governor is selling drugs and billions of dollars have evaporated into fictitious contracts. Yet, Abadi dares at Davos to speak about his achievements. If the victory over ISIS is put aside, nothing of what Abadi mentioned is true.

Who would seriously believe that Iraq is experiencing "peace and stability that is the envy of the world" or that Iraq hasn't experienced such a "dazzling state since 50 years ago" or that he would "push through with implementing the cross-sectarian project?"

Abadi always puts forth his so-called anti-corruption campaign but it is known he wouldn't dare stand up to his friends, colleagues and influential members of his Dawa Party. He would like to convince people to judge him by his achievements post-2014 when he rose to power but just as Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nuri al-Maliki, who preceded him as prime minister, were, Abadi is the product of the Dawa Party.

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