

Iraqi Security Forces: Status and Prospects

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The change in American strategy in Iraq announced by President Bush on January 10, 2007 requires a fundamental re-evaluation of every aspect of America's approach to the war. This requirement is nowhere greater than in our view of the Iraqi Security Forces and our evaluation of their progress. For three years, America's civilian and military leaders have seen and presented developing the ISF as a means to an end—as a way to hasten the reduction in and ultimate departure of American troops from Iraq. This conception of the purpose of ISF training created a short-term focus that has hindered the development of a self-sufficient Iraqi military and police but that has been successful in putting more than 135,000 trained soldiers and tens of thousands of trained police in the field. The misconception of the purpose of developing the ISF also created unrealistic expectations. It was always unreasonable to imagine that a fledgling force, created from scratch beginning in 2004 in the midst of an insurgency and then a growing sectarian conflict, could take the lead in restoring peace and order in Iraq. From the outset, it would have been wiser to see the ISF as a force that could assist the coalition in suppressing the Sunni Arab insurgents, al Qaeda and related terrorists, and then Shi'ite militias, but that would, above all, be able to maintain order once it had been established. The president's new strategy has embraced this more realistic view, and events on the ground are beginning to validate this approach.

Iraqi Army

Let there be no doubt, the training of the Iraqi Army between 2004 and the present has been a remarkable achievement. Coalition partners from many countries helped the Iraqis develop an army of 10 divisions and more than 135,000 soldiers. To put this achievement into perspective, let us recall that this force is now larger than the standing armies of France and Great Britain. It is an all-volunteer force, and the system of monthly leaves means that soldiers in the force in effect re-up every month (since desertion is so easy).

The Iraqi Army's battle record is impressive for such a young force. Efforts to rush Iraqi soldiers, barely trained and poorly equipped, into combat in 2004 were largely unsuccessful. By 2005, some Iraqi units were able to operate effectively in areas of mixed ethno-sectarian make-up in partnership with American forces—the clearing of Tall Afar in September 2005 being a notable example. In 2006, Iraqi Army units continued to operate in partnership with coalition forces across Iraq, although efforts to bring additional Iraqi Army units into Baghdad during Operations Together Forward I and II largely failed through lack of planning and preparation. The planning and execution of the reinforcement of Iraqi Army units in Baghdad in support of Operation Enforcing the Law, the Baghdad Security Plan the president announced in January, has been excellent.

All nine of the additional Iraqi Army battalions called for in the plan have arrived, the last several at between 90 and 100% programmed strength. Iraqi Army units are operating in partnership with American forces throughout Baghdad, in Sunni and Shi'ite neighborhoods, against al Qaeda targets and rogue Shi'ite militias. They are taking casualties, inflicting casualties on the enemy, and helping to maintain and establish peace for the people of Baghdad. At the level of infantrymen in combat, the Iraqi Army has already demonstrated that it can deploy from posts around the country to Baghdad and fight well against determined foes.

The Iraqi Army's ability to sustain itself independent of American assistance remains limited, but it is growing in critical areas. The early emphasis on getting light infantrymen into the field to permit the more rapid reduction of American forces in Iraq hindered the development of Iraqi logistical and command and control systems. The rapid turnover in Iraqi governments (four between 2004 and today) has hindered ministerial capacity building across the board and made it difficult to develop a professional military bureaucracy capable of supporting the Iraqi armed forces. Such disruptions are no more than might have been expected, and with a stable, elected Iraqi government in place since May 2006, much progress is being made in correcting these deficiencies. In the meantime, coalition and especially American forces resolved the dilemmas posed by the weakness of central government institutions by providing life-support to the Iraqi combat formations both in the form of logistical aid and in command-and-control. It is worth noting that Iraq is by no means the only American ally that relies heavily on the U.S. for such services. America's armed forces have no peer in the world in logistical and command-and-control capabilities, and many U.S. allies prefer to subcontract essential life-support and even C² capacity to our military.

The Iraqi Army will nevertheless need to develop the capability to feed, house, and move itself around its own country, as well as to plan and control its own military operations before the U.S. military can withdraw its support. U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq have therefore begun to work harder on helping the Iraqis to develop these capabilities. Iraqi transportation units are forming and training even as coalition advisors work with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (and other ministries) to help create the central bureaucratic basis needed to support combat forces. The Council of Representatives has recently passed laws laying the basis for a military justice code and military judicial system—both essential to creating the necessary legal foundation for a functioning military bureaucracy. The Iraqi government has formed the Iraqi Ground Forces Command, which is taking operational command and control of the Iraqi Army's fighting formations. As part of Operation Enforcing the Law, Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al Maliki designated an Iraqi general, Abboud Gambar, to command the Iraqi forces in the capital, and Gambar controls an articulated command hierarchy that is maneuvering Iraqi forces in partnership and close coordination with American troops on the ground. Iraq now has numerous functioning military academies and training grounds to process new recruits. Using the Foreign Military Sales program, the Iraqi MoD has begun placing large orders for modern equipment. U.S. soldiers are working with Iraqis at all levels to develop the administrative structures necessary to provide Iraq's soldiers with essential

services and supplies. The Iraqi Army, in other words, is coming closer and closer every day to being an independent, self-sustaining military organization.

The completion of this process will take time. Training soldiers and officers, building administrative structures, developing standard operating procedures both militarily and bureaucratically, creating a military system that links the Prime Minister to the lowest private—these are not things that happen overnight. Creating this military instrument in the midst of ethno-sectarian conflict, insurgency, and terrorism is even more difficult. It is highly unlikely that the Iraqi Army will be able to function completely independently for several years, although the level of coalition support required may begin to drop significantly in 2008. A key factor in that equation is the security situation in Iraq.

The Bush administration's previous emphasis on building the Iraqi Army rapidly to minimize the use of American forces in a purely counter-insurgent role allowed the security situation in Iraq to deteriorate between 2003 and the beginning of this year. The deterioration of the security situation dramatically increased the difficulty of forming the Iraqi Army. Poor security led to attacks on recruiting stations and the intimidation of recruits, which in turn led to ethno-sectarian imbalances in Iraq Army units (imbalances that are being corrected in some units today). Poor security and inappropriate priorities led to the premature commitment of Iraqi forces to battles they could not win, harming morale in the Iraqi force and tarnishing its image in Iraq and in the U.S. Continuing insurgent attacks on the families of Iraqi soldiers encouraged desertion and refusals to deploy. The worsening security created an environment of growing friction that delayed the development of the Iraqi military. The establishment of security will permit the completion of that development in a more timely manner.

Iraqi Police

The story of the development of the Iraqi police forces has been less encouraging than that of the Iraqi Army. This fact is not surprising for several reasons. To begin with, neither the U.S. nor its NATO allies have yet figured out a good way to train indigenous police forces. Efforts to do so in the Balkans and in Afghanistan have encountered serious setbacks. American difficulties in this regard are not surprising. The U.S. does not have a federal police force similar to the Iraqi National Police or the Afghan National Police forces it has been trying to help create. Sending senior officers from the NYPD to Iraq (or Afghanistan or anywhere else) does not resolve the problem that an Iraqi policeman has a very different mission from a New York City cop. Iraq needs a strong, centralized national police force capable of conducting paramilitary operations against terrorists and insurgents—but that also has an appropriate ethno-sectarian balance, is loyal and responsible to whoever holds legitimate power in Baghdad, and is not infiltrated by the hostile forces it is intended to control. These are requirements for which there is no American equivalent. There are some European equivalents (many European states have national police forces; some have paramilitary capabilities), but even such European states seem unable to help create and train indigenous forces in other countries—European trainers have been in the lead in these efforts in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and have been heavily involved in Iraq. It is time to recognize that building

indigenous police forces is a task that NATO as an alliance is not prepared to undertake readily, and to begin to redress this important gap in alliance capabilities.

Beyond these difficulties, the challenges of building an effective national police force in the context of ethno-sectarian conflict, terrorism, and insurgency are daunting. Military forces are often recruited from across an entire country, and can be used as integrating schools of a mixed state. Half of Iraq's Army divisions were recruited in this fashion; the other half were recruited locally. But police are, almost by definition, local forces. An effective police force must reflect and represent the ethno-sectarian make-up of the population it is policing. A national police force must be able to maintain an appropriate balance. The ongoing Sunni Arab insurgency made the recruiting of Sunni Arabs into the police forces almost impossible until recently, and the sectarian imbalance within the police seriously degraded their ability to operate effectively as part of the counter-insurgent and, especially, counter-militia effort.

In addition, the inclusion of Moqtada al Sadr in the government and the importance his Mahdi Army gained in the absence of security by posing as the defender of the Shi'ite people permitted Sadr to infiltrate the Interior Ministry (among others) with his followers. As long as the Sunni Arab insurgency appeared to rage unchecked, as long as the Iraqi government and people believed that the U.S. would withdraw without bringing order to the country, Maliki found it impossible to clear out the MoI or the police force even to remove individuals engaging in death-squad activities or actively supporting them. Failure to establish and maintain security seriously harmed an already-problematic effort to create effective national police forces. As a result, although there are more than 180,000 people on the rolls of the various Iraqi police forces (including border guards, national police, local police, and strategic infrastructure brigades), it is impossible to know for sure how many regularly show up for work (or are even still alive), and what role they have been playing in the ongoing violence.

The start of Operation Enforcing the Law has coincided with some important positive trends even in this difficult area, however. Iraqi police formations in Baghdad are operating in close conjunction with coalition forces and Iraqi Army units, and are therefore much less prone to engage in sectarian violence and death-squad activity. Maliki has leveraged the influx of American and Iraqi Army forces into the capital to clear Sadrist out of important positions in the MoI, where 3,000 people were recently dismissed (as well as the Health Ministry, another Sadrist stronghold), and to re-vet and retrain a number of Iraqi National Police units.

A fortuitous development has changed the equation profoundly in Anbar province. Several unspeakable al Qaeda atrocities have finally alienated prominent Sunni Arab sheiks in that province, who have turned on al Qaeda and reached out to Maliki (who reached back with a recent dramatic visit to Ramadi). The symbol of their disenchantment with al Qaeda has been the enrolling of their sons in local police forces. Thousands of Anbaris have entered police training programs in Jordan and elsewhere, and the police forces of Fallujah and Ramadi are now over-strength with local, Sunni Arab recruits. They are actively fighting al Qaeda operatives in those cities and helping

to drive al Qaeda out of its bases in Anbar. Just a few days ago, 500 Anbari police went door-to-door in Ramadi looking for terrorists and weapons caches—and finding some. It appears that this effect is spilling over into Iraqi Army recruitment as well, and that heavily-Shi'ite IA units based in Anbar are working to correct their sectarian balance with local recruits. In Ninewah province, home to Tall Afar and Mosul, a single American brigade has been maintaining reasonable order in that province with the assistance of 18,000 Iraqi police and 20,000 Iraqi Army soldiers. U.S. forces in Mosul, a mixed city of 1.8 million people, are now down to one battalion—under 1,000 soldiers.

This is all good news. The continued operation of Iraqi police with IA and coalition forces in Baghdad will also help improve their capabilities and their professionalism. Continuing to clear out and revamp the MoI and the police ranks will be a significant challenge for the Maliki government, and will require persistence and patience. But the actions of both the government and the Iraqi people suggest that success is possible even in this difficult endeavor.

Conclusion

Looked at from an objective, historical perspective, the creation from scratch of a 10-division Iraqi Army and a partially effective Iraqi police force in a few years has been an extraordinary accomplishment. It took the American revolutionaries two years, much outside professional assistance, and great luck to win their first battle in 1777. It took nearly as long for the Union to manage a victory at Antietam significant enough for Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, a book was written in the 1980s (*America's First Battles*) on the long and inglorious tradition of American forces losing the first battles of every war they fought before the Gulf War. Initial difficulties and even defeats are the normal lot of young, inexperienced forces. They say little about the ultimate outcome of the struggle.

The setbacks and difficulties the Iraqi Security Forces have encountered since 2003 should have surprised no one. They have acquired an importance beyond their real significance because of the exaggerated hopes of the Bush administration and many Americans resulting from the mistaken notion that training Iraqis was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The reversal of American strategy in this regard in January 2007 has already yielded dividends in the improved effectiveness of both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi National Police. We must continue to support this strategy, both with regard to the effort to establish security and with regard to the completion of the Iraqi Security Forces' training, development, and institutional support. Above all, we must avoid both artificial timelines and unrealistic expectations. Success is possible—it is, indeed, occurring. We must give it the time and the resources required to see this important task all the way through.