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NATO in Iraq: Not a Surge

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Brief Analysis

NATO stands ready to increase its commitment in a slow and steady manner consistent with Baghdad's needs, but careful communication will be crucial, as will a more strategic discussion on how to combine different assistance efforts.

On February 18, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg announced a decision to increase the size of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) from 500 personnel to as many as 4,000. Although he noted that such deployments would be “conditions-based,” “incremental,” and subject to Baghdad’s authorization, the troop numbers were the only element of his announcement widely reported inside Iraq, resulting in swift political pressure on the government to explain the seemingly steep increase.

In fact, there is no imminent NATO “surge” planned in Iraq, but rather a greater openness and general intent to gradually provide more advisors capable of [assisting local authorities with security sector reform](#) (SSR). When

handled appropriately and combined with other efforts, this initiative can create good opportunities for quiet, persistent security cooperation that helps strengthen the Iraqi state, evolve multinational military relations beyond the campaign against the Islamic State (IS), and spread the burden of support more broadly among U.S. allies.

Iraq's Reform Requirements

Iraq has a plethora of SSR needs and a pantheon of partners helping to address them. The sector's most pressing challenges today are:

- Underdeveloped security ministries and other institutions that have been weakened by corruption, factional penetration, and insufficient training and organization.
- Dwindling financial resources, suggesting the need for rationalization.
- Duplicative roles and missions for different intelligence agencies and security forces (e.g., the Defense Ministry's armed services, the Interior Ministry's police forces, the Counter Terrorism Service, the Popular Mobilization Forces).
- Absence of a national reserve capacity, resulting in permanent mobilization of all security forces regardless of current needs.

Baghdad recognizes the sector's weaknesses, which were demonstrated most clearly when IS seized a third of the country in 2014. Various partners have enabled Iraq to offset some of these deficiencies. The U.S.-led coalition—formally the thirteen-nation Military Advisory Group (MAG)—provides lethal support and nonlethal advising at the operational level to help hunt down IS cells. NATO and the European Union provide strategic advice to Iraq's Defense Ministry and Interior Ministry, respectively. Some European states, like France, maintain bilateral military training programs in the context of the IS fight. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and the UN Development Programme have also provided training in SSR and justice sector reform, for instance to strengthen local policing. The main Iraqi interlocutor with these diverse partners is the national security advisor's office, which has long coordinated SSR activities in partnership with the prime minister's office.

A Brief History of NATO in Iraq

NATO's first deployment to Iraq—a small contingent of well under a hundred advisors—began in 2004 and ended in 2011 when U.S. forces withdrew. During that period, the mission trained over 5,000 Iraqi military personnel and 10,000 police. NATO gradually resumed its training and capacity-building activities in 2014 at Baghdad's request, first from Jordan (at the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center) and later through eight personnel deployed to Baghdad in 2017. Meanwhile, the alliance joined the Global Coalition to Defeat IS and provided direct operational support through its AWACS surveillance aircraft fleet, mostly operated by Germany.

Following the disintegration of the so-called IS "caliphate" and the progressive restoration of sovereign control over Iraqi territory, NATO leaders decided in 2018 to launch a new training mission, NMI, at Baghdad's request. Canada assumed command of this mission for the first two years, contributing up to 250 personnel before handing leadership over to Denmark in November 2020. Before the COVID-19 pandemic forced NATO to freeze its training activities, the mission included proximately 500 personnel, with significant contributions from Britain, Denmark, Spain, and Turkey.

Options for NMI

At its February 2020 Defense Ministerial meeting, NATO decided to explore NMI expansion in order to satisfy Iraq's requirements for SSR assistance under a new title, and also to meet the Trump administration's pressure for greater burden-sharing. COVID-19 outbreaks and militia attacks on multinational bases significantly slowed down military planning over the subsequent year, but the recent announcement indicates that NATO remains committed to meeting Iraq's requests later in 2021 and beyond. Comments by Stoltenberg suggest the following

options are now on the table and have received Iraqi support:

- **Expansion to single-service commands.** Presently, NMI only works at Defense Ministry headquarters in Baghdad's International Zone. The next step may be a small increase of advisors and "enablers" (support personnel) to interact with the army, air force, navy, and other services individually—perhaps around 150 personnel this summer and 70 more in the autumn.
- **Expansion into other ministries.** When Stoltenberg noted on February 18 that NMI could reach out to "more Iraqi security institutions," he was referring to potential cooperation with the Interior Ministry and Justice Ministry in 2022-2023, and possibly other agencies in the years beyond.
- **Expansion outside Baghdad.** Stoltenberg's mention of NMI cooperation in "areas beyond Baghdad" referred to the possibility of working with the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and other security agencies in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The high-end figure of 4,000 NMI personnel was not intended as a near-term target. Rather, it relates to the force levels that NATO would need to commit if the MAG completely withdraws the enablers currently responsible for communications, medical support, force protection, and other tasks. If MAG personnel levels remain as they are, international partners will need to address the looming issue of available living space for an expanded NMI in 2022. Likewise, extending NATO training activities beyond Baghdad could prove challenging given the closure of outlying U.S. bases last year.

Policy Implications

NMI has not achieved much during its short tenure, so the time has come to "go big or go home." Several principles should guide the mission's future evolution:

- **Make the NATO mission's nature clear to all Iraqi stakeholders.** The local response to the February 18 announcement is a reminder that news about NATO can be echoed inside Iraq in an alarmist manner if not carefully calibrated. Stakeholders should also understand that NATO cannot replace the counterterrorism mission conducted by the MAG or the tactical training provided bilaterally. Whatever shape its evolution may take, NMI will remain just one piece in the larger puzzle of international efforts to support Iraq's security forces.
- **Communicate more in private, less in public.** Private communication with the Iraqi government must be intensive, and all news about NMI should be communicated to Baghdad before it is announced publicly.
- **Develop multiyear plans.** Impetus is growing to formulate longer-term plans that span each two-year NMI command (currently held by Lt. Gen. Per Pugholm Olsen of Denmark). Doing so would be a smart way to show Baghdad that engaging with NATO is worth paying the domestic political costs given the substantial midterm commitments on offer. A multiyear agreement could also serve as a bridge to the next Iraqi government in 2022.
- **The Turkey factor.** Although Ankara is a key NATO member and will no doubt offer to contribute to the mission, any high-profile Turkish role inside NMI could complicate matters—whether by raising the hackles of anti-Kurdish Shia militias, bringing to mind Turkey's intensive bombing of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) forces in northern Iraq, or both.
- **Don't rush to failure.** NMI needs to plant each foot carefully on what will hopefully be a long path of engagement with a key regional power—one whose stability can profoundly affect refugee flows and security issues in Europe. This means that controversial proposals (e.g., cooperation with [the Popular Mobilization Forces militia network](#)) need to be considered very carefully before any steps are publicized or taken by NATO.

NMI also presents a modest opportunity for renewed dialogue between Washington and Europe. Now that the United States has reduced its military footprint to 2,500 personnel, Denmark's decision to assume leadership over the

mission and send 285 military personnel shows that European allies are willing to step up their efforts in order to prevent the reemergence of IS.

An increased European footprint in Iraq's security sector can also be useful at the regional level. Because of their relative neutrality, European forces can help maintain strong international support to Iraq while decreasing the [risk of escalation](#) between Iran-backed militias and U.S. troops.

To be sure, some degree of U.S. military backing (e.g., force protection, airlift, intelligence, base access) will still be required at first if international security assistance is to be sustainable and credible. But Washington should view this short-term investment as the best way to lighten U.S. commitments in the midterm.

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