

# Restructuring Iraqi National Security Institutions in Sudani's Government

by [Fawzi al-Zubaidi \(/experts/fawzi-al-zubaidi\)](#)

Jan 25, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/aadt-hykt-mwssat-alamn-alqwmy-fy-hkwmt-alswdany\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Fawzi al-Zubaidi \(/experts/fawzi-al-zubaidi\)](#)

**Dr. Fawzi Al-Zubaidi** is a strategic expert and researcher based in the United Arab Emirates. He is an expert in political analysis and strategic planning in the field of national security policies, and has in-depth experience in Iraqi and Iranian affairs and related issues. His most recent



Brief Analysis

## Structural reforms in Iraq's security services are difficult but necessary to implement to bolster the country's national security.

One of the most significant challenges today for Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's government in Iraq is restructuring Iraqi national security institutions, which include the Joint Operations Command, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of the Interior, intelligence services, and numerous other operations in Baghdad. For Iraqi citizens to be truly assured of the sovereignty and solidity of the state and the enforcement of Iraqi laws, new policies and radical reforms in national security institutions are desperately needed, especially if Iraq hopes to be brought back into the regional fold as a key pillar of security and stability. In order to identify practical strategies and solutions to modernize and develop these institutions both politically and structurally, however, it's important to first understand the current weaknesses and failures of the institutions as they exist today.

Security institutions in Iraq are currently plagued by a variety of problems, many of which can be traced back to the tradition of sectarianism and cronyism in Iraqi politics. Case in point, most security institutions are highly politicized, since their leadership is appointed by ruling political parties as per the electoral balance of political blocs in the Iraqi Council of Representatives. The leaders of these agencies are therefore obliged to carry out the agendas of the parties that put them in their posts, preventing the national security institutions from operating according to professional standards and national objectives. Between agencies, there is an unproductive competition to suggest and implement strategic objectives for national security—something that has been a feature of the Iraqi state since it was founded in 1921—and there is petty competition over various deals, contracts, and budgets. For example, the Ministry of Defense avoids supporting Iraqi military manufacturing since arms dealers offer the ministry generous commissions, keeping the country dependent on importing arms from abroad.

As a result of being political appointees, most leaders of security institutions do not have the necessary qualifications

—a reality made clear by their poor performances. Even top leaders have only traditional military expertise. The Ministry of the Interior in the Sudani government, for example, is led by military officers with no experience in the fields of security, police, or law. The intelligence service has likewise been headed by criminal law judges with no intelligence experience. As a result, Iraq national security policy has struggled since 2003 to move beyond the limitations of this traditional approach.

Instead, Iraq has been playing a game of catch up. In the field of counterterrorism, designated counterterrorism services are unsatisfactory, to say the least. These agencies will wait for information—the coordinates at which an ISIS cell is located, for example—in order to root out the cell, and then will announce with much fanfare that it has carried out a special counterterrorism operation. What these entities largely ignore, however, is the basic fact that counterterrorism encompasses other activities beyond small-scale combat operations. More specifically, effective counterterrorism activities should involve removing funding sources for terrorism, countering extremist discourse, and altering the conditions that contribute to youth becoming involved in terrorism. Counterterrorism should also include the rehabilitation and reintegration of families of terrorists into society. In Iraq, counterterrorism services' efforts have thus far been severely lacking in every aspect except combat operations.

Beyond a lack of expertise, Iraqi security institutions have also suffered from the rampant corruption that has plagued practically every corner of the Iraqi state. This corruption is caused by the party quota system that fills posts in these institutions, as well as the lack of oversight and legal accountability built into said system. Due to the poor distribution of mid- and top-level leadership positions and the corrupt use of state money, security infrastructure has largely declined with regard to arms, security technologies, and other sophisticated tools required for national security operations. Overall, the security conditions in Iraq remain precarious, and despite signaling steps forward, security agencies have failed to effectively wipe out major threats such as ISIS cells.

If Iraqi national security institutions are to be effectively restructured, this process will require detailed policy planning from several angles. Most importantly, the new Iraqi prime minister will have to reach political consensus among all political blocs that he has a mandate to radically reform security institutions. To prevent potential security pitfalls, this will have to happen without any interference from party or quota-based political dynamics. It will help that the prime minister currently represents the largest political bloc within the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

With regard to legislation, it will be necessary to pass a new national law regarding the national security adviser position—one precisely delineating the scope of the advisor's powers, responsibilities, and objectives. Future legislation also needs to specify the qualifications required for national security leadership, the strategic dictates of Iraqi national security, and the mechanisms for coordinating among and sharing information between national security institutions.

With regard to technology, institutions need to draw upon the significant capabilities of youth in specialized fields such as artificial intelligence and hacking, and other internet-related matters such as the deep and dark web. Special departments that are devoted to these matters and led by open-source intelligence experts should be established, as well as a dedicated (encrypted) digital system for communicating information between security departments. Another system should be developed to issue alerts of a sensitive and urgent nature as well as a system with sophisticated mechanisms for making decisions in crisis and disaster scenarios. Departments for special combat operations, marches, and cybersecurity should also be launched within the intelligence service, national security, military security, and counterterrorism agencies. The command apparatus for all these departments should be unified and consolidated through joint coordination.

Leaders of security institutions should be selected according to their qualifications for the position and their experience in the field, rather than their military background or ties to political leaders. Officials should be highly suited to the roles in question and should bring something new to the security institutions that they will oversee. Iraq

also needs to launch new systems within the context of maintaining security within the directorate across all national security agencies using sophisticated methods to ensure the security of personnel, documents, work sites, and a high level of professionalism. Assessment systems should also be implemented to ascertain the loyalties of personnel and their capacity to keep secrets.

The key structural obstacles for security reform facing the government of Sudani include the lack of political consensus and conflicts, the ambiguity of the political future of the Sudani government, rampant corruption, the sagging administrative system in Iraq, and the absence of professional co-ordination among the national security institutions. Nevertheless, although the obstacles are many and the proposed reforms expansive and complex, whether Iraq can implement these reforms will determine whether Iraq's national security sinks or swims amidst increasingly dire regional and global contexts. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Transnational Muqawama Show Disapproval Via Warithuun Attack on Al-Tanf](#)

Jan 24, 2023

◆  
Michael Knights,  
Hamdi Malik,  
Crispin Smith

[\(/policy-analysis/transnational-muqawama-show-disapproval-warithuun-attack-al-tanf\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Assessing CENTCOM's Posture in 2023](#)

Jan 24, 2023

◆  
Nathan P. Olsen

[\(/policy-analysis/assessing-centcoms-posture-2023\)](#)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

## Civil Society in Tunisia:

*Resetting Expectations*

Jan 23, 2023



Sabina Henneberg

(/policy-analysis/civil-society-tunisia-resetting-expectations)