

Strengthening the Iraqi Security Forces

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Brief Analysis

Iraq's existing security institutions need bolstering, and the Popular Mobilization Forces can be incorporated into that process with the coalition's help.

On December 9, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi officially declared victory in Iraq's war against the Islamic State (IS). When he first took office in 2014, the group controlled a third of the country, including two dozen cities, three million people, and several oil fields. As he ends his four-year term, however, IS has been pushed out of all major population centers and oil fields. The key actor in this spectacular turnaround is the Iraqi security forces (ISF), comprising the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), Army, Federal Police, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Peshmerga, tribal auxiliaries, local police, intelligence agencies, and the border and facilities protection forces. Recently, Chief of Staff Gen. Othman al-Ghani stated that 2018 will be "the year of rebuilding" the ISF, and Abadi has emphasized a vital task that could facilitate this process: bringing all of the weapons distributed during the war back under state control.

FUTURE ISF CHALLENGES

Since 2014, the ISF have learned to mass forces against an enemy that was concentrated in a handful of cities and rural pockets, mostly along populated river valleys with good road networks. The next stage of the fight—less a war and more a counterinsurgency/counterterrorism campaign—will likely take place in mountain, desert, and jungle-like river delta locations that are difficult to access and may span the border with Syria. IS forces will spread

out, and the ISF will need to mirror this dispersal. Rather than bringing enemy forces to battle and eliminating them, the main challenge will be protecting and winning over local Sunnis in areas of IS influence in order to gain intelligence on the group and limit its recruitment. The recent emergence of a rebranded IS faction in Diyala province (the "Steadfast Ones with White Flags") indicates that the job of destroying the group is far from complete.

In addition to fighting IS remnants, the Iraqi government needs to address some important security issues that were left to fester during the war. One pressing problem is the threat posed by militias, criminal gangs, and armed tribes in Basra, a crucial province that exports 3.5 million barrels of oil per day and generates over 95 percent of current Iraqi government revenues. Since the withdrawal of local Army forces in 2014, the province has witnessed intense tribal feuding, with fighters using rocket-propelled grenades and mortars at the edge of major oil fields. Some Basra militias have also begun to steal oil, claiming affiliation with the PMF while actually operating over 400 miles from the nearest battlefield. The last time this happened, in 2006-2007, the problem quickly escalated into a multi-billion-dollar smuggling racket that necessitated a major ISF campaign—Operation Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights)—to free Basra of militias.

Another rapidly developing security challenge is the risk of Kurdish insurgency in disputed areas such as Kirkuk, where federal forces recently reestablished a military presence. These areas urgently need joint security mechanisms that allow federal and Kurdish units to share security responsibilities in ethnically mixed areas that remain disputed under the Iraqi constitution.

ISF RESTRUCTURING AND THE PMF

A common thread runs through all of the missions described above: Iraq needs professional security forces that are trusted by each of the country's ethnic and sectarian groups. Currently, the most trusted forces are the CTS, Army, and Federal Police, but each of them will require significant restructuring and modernization in the coming years. Many of their units are manned at less than 60 percent of their intended strength, and all of them need more training, serviceable equipment, and spare parts. The shortfall is particularly acute in "enabler" units such as logistics, intelligence, artillery, air support, and medical services.

The Iraqi government's most likely solution will be to rationalize the hundred or so under-strength brigades into a smaller number of better-equipped, fully-manned units. This will reduce duplication of headquarters and logistics units and make combat formations more functional. One early example of this approach involved the bodyguard battalions allocated to many senior politicians prior to 2014. During the war against IS, these units were deemed a drain on resources and were dissolved so that their personnel and weapons could be folded into the ISF.

Today, the PMF should be broken up in a similar manner and incorporated into the military forces overseen by the Interior Ministry, Defense Ministry, and CTS. The PMF include some of Iraq's best troops, and they deserve the support that only these ministries can offer, such as training, medical services, military housing pensions, and access to international assistance. It makes no sense to embark on building a new security institution for the PMF when Iraq's existing ministries are already well on the road to recovery and are starving for trained manpower, weapons, logistics, and money. Incorporating PMF personnel into the military as individuals rather than whole units is also the only way to ensure that the state retains control over them permanently.

Likewise, it makes no sense for the PMF to continue holding heavy weaponry such as artillery rockets, antitank guided missiles, recoilless rifles, and armored vehicles. This equipment should be recalled immediately and redistributed among the existing ISF ministries as part of next year's proposed logistical consolidation. Warehousing these potentially destabilizing weapons under state control is the only way to ensure that they remain inside the country and out of the hands of illegal militias or foreign operatives.

Thus far, significant segments of the PMF—such as the "Atabat" shrine-based units and Moqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-

Salam (Peace Companies)—have signaled that they are willing to surrender their weapons and be incorporated into ISF ministries as individuals. Yet the process needs to be undertaken slowly and carefully so that PMF troops adopt the culture of the ministries and not the other way around. One way to achieve this is to roll parts of each PMF unit into the ministries every few months. This way, all PMF units can be gradually drawn down together, as opposed to quickly demobilizing the least threatening elements while the more worrisome foreign-backed units remain fully mobilized. When PMF troops enlist, they sign rolling ninety-day contracts, so the government can simply let certain contracts expire and transfer a constant trickle of troops from the PMF payroll to that of the ministries. These personnel can then be sent to military academies for individual enlistment, training, and qualification.

Iraq has already witnessed encouraging precedents for this process. Since 2015, hundreds of individual recruits from the PMF have passed through coalition training courses, joined new Army brigades, and fought in major battles such as Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul. This model allowed recruits to be woven into truly multiethnic, cross-sectarian units that are loyal to Iraq, not tied to individual PMF commanders. As the government pursues a similar process of incorporation over the coming years, it should scale down the mission and armament of PMF units while completely reshuffling their leadership.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COALITION PARTNERS

Although the ISF need a lot more development, they are headed in the right direction, and the coalition can help them keep that bearing. Drawing together six G-8 countries and numerous other advanced militaries, the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) is the most powerful collection of allies Iraq has partnered with to date. The coalition excels at providing foundational support to the security ministries, so it should now focus on several related tasks within the Interior Ministry, Defense Ministry, and CTS:

- Embed senior coalition advisors in each ministry in order to build up Iraqi leadership capacity
- Continue providing direct intelligence and advisory support to the Iraqi Joint Operations Command
- Encourage ministry officials to formulate an authentically Iraqi doctrine of counterinsurgency best practices
- Support the development of Iraq's Defense Language Institute in order to steer a new generation of leaders toward foreign exchanges and professional military education.

CJTF-OIR has already helped Baghdad turn individual PMF members into Army graduates. With coalition support, the ISF can continue this process at locations such as the Besmaya Range Complex, the Interior Ministry training base in Baghdad, and the noncommissioned officer academy, artillery school, and training base at Taji. Transferred fighters can then receive the full scope of benefits and support services that other ministry troops receive. Finally, if the coalition sustains a presence in Iraq, it can help the ISF place competency at the heart of recruitment centers, military academies, and officer selection boards.

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