

The Iraqi Security Forces: A Status Report

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

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Brief Analysis

On June 3, 2011, Michael Knights, Lachlyn Soper, Andrew Lembke, and Barak Salmoni addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Knights is a Lafer fellow with the Institute and author of [The Iraqi Security Forces: Local Context and U.S. Assistance \(/templateC04.php?CID=344\)](/templateC04.php?CID=344). Ms. Soper is a social scientist for the U.S. Army Human Terrain System at Fort Leavenworth; between November 2009 and December 2010, she was embedded with U.S. Division-Center in Baghdad. Maj. Lembke is an infantry officer in the U.S. Army and has completed four combat tours since 2001, including three in Iraq. Mr. Salmoni, a culture and foreign language advisor with the U.S. Army, served as a visiting defense fellow at the Institute, where he authored [Responsible Partnership: The Iraqi National Security Sector after 2011 \(/templateC04.php?CID=343\)](/templateC04.php?CID=343). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; the views expressed by Soper, Lembke, and Salmoni do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army or Department of Defense.

NOTE: Due to technical error, audio of Mr. Salmoni's remarks and the audience Q&A session was not recorded.

Michael Knights

Although many Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) leaders agree that the U.S. military presence should be extended, they are unsure how many U.S. forces are required, what these forces should do, or whether a new bilateral security agreement is needed to authorize their presence. Most ISF commanders are already accustomed to conducting counterterrorism operations with minimal U.S. military assistance, yet this situation has resulted in decreased effectiveness and stagnating security gains. In addition, these commanders still rely on low-profile U.S. Special Forces and intelligence-collection assets, which are vital to the prosecution of terrorist cells. And ISF development on border security and external deterrence has been limited by the lack of a clear Iraqi policy on Iran, complicating efforts to guard the border and build a minimum deterrent force capable of preventing Iranian incursions.

Accordingly, Iraqis of almost all political allegiances hope to maintain a U.S. military presence in order to prevent

further ISF degradation, deter internal military clashes, curb politicization of the military, and suppress federal-Kurdish tensions along disputed boundaries in the north. More broadly, ISF leaders and Iraqis in general have expressed a need for symbolic reassurance that the United States will continue to underwrite Iraqi security. The U.S. government should therefore offer maximal reassurance through public pronouncements, joint exercises, defense strategy and planning support, procurement support through Foreign Military Sales, establishment of a robust Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I), and fuller implementation of the Strategic Framework Agreement.

The need for more U.S. military trainers throughout Iraq as well as the necessity for joint confidence-building activities along the federal-Kurdish lines are by themselves worthy reasons to discuss a continued U.S. military presence. Yet, if an extension proves unobtainable, Washington should make creative use of the Strategic Framework Agreement and OSC-I to promote the narrative that it has not abandoned Iraq.

Lachlyn Soper and Andrew Lembke

Iraqi Army (IA) officers continue to share two key concerns: corruption and politicization. Yet these issues must be viewed in light of the significant progress made in reconstituting the IA, which is on a positive trajectory overall.

Many U.S. Army officers explain away corruption and politicization as part of Iraqi culture. Yet in numerous recent interviews, IA officers universally viewed the former problem -- which includes checkpoint bribes, arrest extortion, purchasing of promotions, and skimming from the soldiers' life sustainment fund -- as wrong. Indeed, corruption undermines security (e.g., checkpoint bribes can be used to bring car bombs into large cities) and facilitates politicization of the IA.

Such politicization can take several forms. First, after Coalition Provisional Authority Order 91 was issued in June 2004 as a means of integrating Iraqi militias into the ISF, large numbers of individuals with connections to key political, tribal, or militia personalities were given positions throughout the IA despite lacking formal military education or training. Some of these positions were fairly senior. In many cases these new officers could not even properly wear a uniform and were perceived by their professional counterparts as party hacks.

In addition, large numbers of senior officers (brigade commander and above) have been appointed on an "interim" basis without parliamentary approval, further politicizing senior commands. Leading politicians have also repeatedly interfered with military decisionmaking.

Unregulated institutions are another symptom of IA politicization. Political gridlock has impeded Iraq's ability to pass critical legislation, let alone appoint IA general officers. In response, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has unconstitutionally appointed several interim commanders, invoking his responsibility for national security as commander-in-chief. Moreover, several extraconstitutional organizations function without proper oversight, such as the Ministry of State for National Security Affairs and the Office of Information and Security within the prime minister's office. And although the "Baghdad Brigade" is technically under the IA's 6th Division, in reality it reports solely to the prime minister.

Collectively, these problems represent a significant challenge to the ISF's long-term development. The United States can counteract them by increasing the number of positions available for Iraqi officers in the U.S. professional military education system, from the service academies to the National Defense University; by sponsoring exchanges between training directorates so that they can share best practices; and by pointing out to Iraqi officials that corruption and politicization undermine not only faith in the security forces but also public security -- which is key to foreign investment and Iraq's economic well-being.

Barak Salmoni

Ongoing problems in Iraq's national security sector threaten Washington's "responsible drawdown" policy. At

present, the ISF lacks the means to defend the country's airspace and territorial waters or blunt a major conventional attack; even quashing a domestic insurrection would require the ISF's entire weight. For its part, Baghdad lacks an overarching national security strategy to drive defense strategy and subsequent force development programs. It also lacks capable national security institutions to engage in strategic planning. As a result, Iraqi force development is shaped almost entirely by domestic politics, budgetary considerations, U.S. advice, and lobbying by U.S. and international arms manufacturers.

Part of the problem lies in the overlapping authority and responsibilities within Baghdad's national security institutions, which leave them unable to coordinate and share information. This arrangement has also encouraged a highly personalized style of command-and-control; for example, the prime minister can bypass cabinet ministers and military headquarters in his use of national security organs.

Currently, Iraq's national security architecture consists of the Defense Ministry and its forces as well as the Interior Ministry's Federal Police forces, both theoretically accountable to the parliament and judiciary. It also includes extraconstitutional bodies reporting solely to the prime minister. The Office of the Commander-in-Chief, for example, has been staffed with Maliki's close political allies and used to exert direct administrative and operational authority over security matters. It also controls two key units: the Baghdad Brigade, which operates in the capital and beyond, and the Counter-Terrorism Service, which controls the army's most effective unit, the Iraqi Special Operations Forces.

Given these and other problems, the Pentagon has projected critical deficits in the ISF's minimum essential capabilities beyond 2011. The United States must therefore extend its withdrawal timeline in order to give the Iraqis more breathing room, helping them strengthen the ISF to the point where a substantial American presence is no longer needed while further developing and reforming the national security institutions. This sort of "responsible partnership" -- entailing an attenuated U.S. drawdown -- can help preserve internal stability, deter interstate conflict, and ensure that Iraq achieves its potential as an energy producer.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖

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