

Don't Expect an Able Iraqi Army Soon

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Articles & Testimony

Two years ago, during the month of Ramadan, a bus carrying 50 Iraqi soldiers heading home on leave was ambushed outside Baghdad. The soldiers were led out of the bus, lined up on the pavement, and killed -- like so many other Iraqi soldiers, policemen, and recruits trained by the Americans since the occupation of Iraq began in 2003.

What happened? Why did they not defend themselves? Incredibly, the men were unarmed. Often, Iraqi soldiers being trained by the Americans are sent home on leave without their weapons -- for fear that they will use these to fight as partisans in Iraq's ongoing internal violence. But if the Americans can't trust these men to go home with their weapons, then what are they doing training them in the first place? Have they not vetted the recruits well enough? And if the United States military cannot trust recruits, what is it doing leaving the future of Iraq in their hands?

One thing that is increasingly clear is that American efforts to train and equip the Iraqi military have, thus far, been a miserable failure. This failure has its roots in several mistakes made by the US military and American policy-makers over the past few years.

First, the US military tried, initially, to make the Iraqi Army in its own image -- that is, a military oriented toward external threats. But the threats that Iraq faces are all internal. An Iraqi Army should have been built up, first and foremost, as a kind of internal security force. This would have hardly been a novelty in the Arab world: The historical mission of the military in most Arab countries, after all, is not to defend against foreign threats but to defend regimes against their domestic enemies.

This failure is highlighted by a primary mistake made by the Americans with regard to Iraq's intelligence service. When the US thinks of the role an intelligence service should play, it thinks of the role the CIA plays in America -- that is, it doesn't play a role. America's intelligence agencies are prohibited from gathering intelligence on Americans. But an intelligence service focused on the domestic population is exactly what Iraq needs.

As much as American politicians -- most notably, President George W. Bush -- would like to lay the blame for Iraq's troubles on foreign fighters and Iraq's neighbors, the grim truth is that Iraq itself has enough guns, ammunition, and grudges to fuel at least another decade of horrific violence, without any help from the outside. Foreign fighters play a role in Iraq's violence -- they are the ones most likely to conduct suicide operations -- but their numbers are small. The vast majority of the people who are killing Iraqis (and coalition soldiers, for that matter) are Iraqis.

These failures, of course, are amplified by the complete lack of planning for postwar Iraq, the disastrous decision to disband the Iraqi Army (the only national institution left following the invasion), and the low priority initially accorded to training and equipping the new Iraqi military. The recent report by the Iraq Study Group, however, placed new emphasis on training the military, with the authors arguing that that was where the bulk of American efforts in Iraq should be directed.

In fact, the US military had come to the same conclusion prior to the report's release, dedicating many of its

resources over the past year toward training American officers to become trainers and advisers in Iraq. A new school for this end was established at Fort Riley, Kansas, while the military's top counterinsurgency expert was sent there to oversee the process. It's about time, think some commanders. "What I need right now is not so much more American soldiers, but more Iraqi soldiers," one officer recently told me.

The American effort to train the Iraqi forces is likely to fail, however. American mistakes aside, Iraq is in the midst of a civil war. And as another American officer told me, every Iraqi officer knows that as soon as the Americans withdraw, as is widely feared, he and his family may be killed. Thus, there is little motivation to try and build up the army into a cohesive, lasting fighting force. For the American effort to succeed in training the Iraqi Army, therefore, a long-term presence is required not only to prepare soldiers and build up the military into a national institution, but also to provide security until the army can take over.

Instead, the Iraq Study Group has recommended that nearly all of the American combat units be withdrawn within the next year to be replaced by a more robust advisory presence. Militarily speaking, this is madness. The group's co-chairmen, James Baker and Lee Hamilton, cling to the hope that the violence in Iraq might yet decrease as American troop levels do the same. But this is wishful thinking along the lines of "we will be greeted as liberators."

In the event of a rapid US withdrawal, the adviser teams left in the country will become increasingly vulnerable, while the small remaining combat presence will struggle to cope with the inevitable worsening of violence. Furthermore, adviser teams will be forced to take sides as their units split along sectarian lines. But the Iraq Study Group was never about finding a military solution to Iraq. It was about finding a political way out of the mess that is the American involvement there. And when the Americans begin to leave -- as they probably will -- we can expect the Iraqi military to collapse in short order.

Maybe that's why the Americans don't trust the Iraqi Army. Rebuilding the army is like the Iraq war itself -- a half-hearted effort in which the Americans have never lived up to the lofty goals they set for themselves.

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