

# The Iraqi Security Forces (Part II): Challenges and Concerns

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## Brief Analysis

The U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) have had to confront both bureaucratic red tape and insurgent terrorism in their effort to recruit, train, and equip the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Nevertheless, progress is being made. Equipment is arriving, ISF personnel are being trained, and the flow of new recruits (motivated by the prospect of stable employment and, in many cases, patriotic pride) continues in the face of terrorist attacks on ISF personnel and facilities. Ultimately, however, success in creating a relatively stable, if not peaceful, Iraq will depend in part on whether the ISF can surmount the operational challenges it is liable to face in the coming months and years, both in conjunction with coalition forces and, ultimately, on its own.

## Near-Term Challenges

The ISF will face major challenges as it assumes growing responsibility for security in Iraq and a greater role in coalition operations to pacify insurgent-held areas. Among these challenges are obtaining actionable operational intelligence; overcoming a lack of proven leaders and experienced personnel; and dealing with the complex and volatile political-military environment in Iraq.

**Operational intelligence.** Counterinsurgency operations are intelligence driven. Currently, coalition intelligence is limited by a shortage of linguists, lack of familiarity with Iraqi politics and society, and rapid turnover (tours of duty generally last seven to twelve months), all of which hinder the human intelligence operations that are so important in fighting insurgencies. For their part, Iraq's intelligence services lack a doctrine and a large cadre of experienced professionals proficient in intelligence tradecraft. Winning the intelligence war will therefore require a joint effort. Among the main hurdles to such progress: penetrating the ranks of highly disciplined, secretive, and compartmentalized insurgent networks and organizations; and lifting the pall of fear that has settled over the Sunni Triangle, preventing many residents from openly cooperating with the Iraqi intelligence services or the IIG due to fear of retribution at the hands of insurgents.

**Inexperience.** Although the ISF counts numerous police and army veterans in its ranks, it is also filled with many fresh recruits and newly minted officers. All personnel are serving in new organizations, alongside new colleagues, using (in many cases) unfamiliar equipment under new and unfamiliar circumstances. They will have to hone their

individual and collective skills and build cohesive teams while on the job and under fire.

For now, most ISF units can be relied on to conduct patrols, man checkpoints, and defend their facilities against hit-and-run attacks, but little more. A few seasoned ISF units (e.g., some of the special units within the police and armed forces) are capable of offensive action, with some actually performing quite well in this capacity. The number of units with such capabilities should increase over time.

All of these factors argue for an incremental approach in which the ISF is backed up by coalition forces and allowed to gain confidence and accumulate experience through tough, realistic training and exhaustively planned and rehearsed operations of ever-greater complexity. Coalition forces could play a supporting role in such operations or assume the lead when confronted with challenges that exceed the capabilities of the ISF. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be preserving the cohesion of ISF units (particularly those recruited locally, such as the police and National Guard) tasked with combating militias or insurgent groups with whom their members share primordial (tribal, sectarian, ethnic) or political ties. Picking the appropriate units for such sensitive missions will be critical to success.

The political-military environment. The counterinsurgency campaign plan being followed by coalition forces and the ISF reflects an understanding of two key lessons: first, that Iraq's political environment imposes significant constraints on the use of force by the coalition and IIG; and second, that successful counterinsurgencies are won by the patient, sustained, and concerted application of political, economic, and military levers over a period of years, not through decisive battles or brief, violent campaigns.

A major lesson of April 2004 is that the use of force must advance, not undermine, the political transition in Iraq. Success hinges on successful elections, and a delicate balance must be maintained between competing political factions and forces within Iraqi society and the IIG. Consequently, force must be used selectively, with care and precision, in ways that do not produce heavy civilian casualties or create an atmosphere that precludes successful elections. Moreover, the coalition and the IIG will have to reconcile competing political and military imperatives: on one hand, the need to conclude major military operations well before elections, and on the other hand, the need to avoid committing the ISF before they are ready, while deferring the retaking of Falluja and other hot spots until sufficient ISF forces are available to secure "liberated" regions.

The retaking of insurgent-controlled areas is only the first step toward the pacification of these areas. Such action will not expunge the attitudes, ideologies, or political circumstances that gave rise to and sustained Iraq's insurgencies, nor put an end to political violence in the country. Even if many insurgents are co-opted, others are likely to lay low, regroup, and take up arms again after identifying new points of coalition and Iraqi government vulnerability.

Therefore, the larger problem for the coalition and the Iraqi government will be the keeping, not the retaking, of liberated areas. Success will depend in part on the ability of the ISF to withstand attempts to subvert it or oust it from these contested areas. The coalition and the Iraqi government will also need to pacify retaken areas by isolating the insurgents, inducing residents to participate in the political process (e.g., creating conditions whereby they are able to do so without fear of retribution), providing these residents with tangible and immediate economic benefits, and ensuring elections whose outcome is accepted by the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. The initial retaking of insurgent-controlled areas is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success in what promises to be a long and difficult struggle.

#### Long-Term Concerns

Although coalition and Iraqi military planners are understandably focused on near-term challenges, there are a number of other issues that are best dealt with sooner rather than later, to ensure that steps taken now do not have

unintended adverse consequences in the future. These issues include the potential politicization of the army, “coup-proofing” the ISF, and establishing criteria for “right-sizing” the armed forces.

Avoiding politicization of the army. For the foreseeable future, the Iraqi army will by necessity be involved in internal security operations. Yet, in order to ensure that history does not repeat itself—that is, in order to preclude the military’s intervention in politics or its use as an instrument of political repression—the United States should encourage the Iraqi government to strip the army of internal security responsibilities as soon as is feasible.

Admittedly, this will not be possible for some time to come. Baghdad should also consider eventually reassigning the Iraqi National Guard, whose primary mission is internal security, to the Ministry of the Interior.

Coup-proofing the ISF. There is little prospect of a coup in Iraq as long as the new government remains weak and U.S. forces remain in-country. The threat could increase, however, if the government strengthens its grip on power and U.S. forces leave. Under these circumstances, insurgents or antidemocratic forces in the military might try to use penetrated or disloyal ISF units to launch a coup. Even if such an attempt did not succeed, it could spark a fight among ISF units, leading to greater instability. In light of Iraq’s long history of coups, such an eventuality cannot be ignored.

The coalition and, subsequently, the IIG have taken a number of steps to coup-proof the ISF. They have attempted to create an apolitical, professional officer corps; vetted out former Baathists (though there has been some backsliding on this effort recently); integrated regular army units on a tribal, sectarian, and ethnic basis; and proscribed political activities by members of the armed forces. (Regarding the latter two efforts, it should be mentioned that many National Guard units have a particular tribal, sectarian, or ethnic complexion, and others consist of personnel with past or current ties to party militias.) Such nominal coup-proofing measures may not be sufficient in the future, however.

Arab regimes have used a variety of measures to protect themselves against coups: establishing praetorian units to defend their capitals, along with parallel military organizations to counterbalance the regular armed forces; filling sensitive positions with individuals related by blood or marriage to senior political leaders; appointing political commissars to monitor the chain of command; creating multiple, overlapping intelligence organizations to monitor the armed forces; and imposing logistical constraints on potential coup-making units by limiting access to ammunition and fuel. Not all of these measures would be appropriate for a professional force in a pluralistic, democratizing Iraq. Nevertheless, the United States might suggest that the Iraqi government consider and implement whatever additional measures it deems appropriate when the security situation permits.

Right-sizing the armed forces. For the foreseeable future, it is in U.S. interests to ensure that the Iraqi armed forces are relatively small, logistically constrained, and incapable of projecting power much beyond Iraq’s borders, while still capable of defending against external meddling in the country’s internal affairs. Such an arrangement could facilitate the establishment of normal relations between Iraq and its neighbors. It would also mitigate risk if efforts to create a stable, democratic Iraq failed and the country reverted to authoritarian rule and an aggressive posture. In any case, financial and manpower constraints, including the cost of rebuilding Iraq, will ensure a small, constrained military for years to come.

Moreover, the traditional tendency of the Iraqi armed forces to see themselves as a counterbalance to the Iranian military should not be encouraged. Such a vision would feed aspirations for a larger force than can be afforded or is desirable at this time. Even under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi armed forces were ill suited to counter Iran’s most worrisome capabilities: the capacity to subvert its Arab neighbors, disrupt freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf, and use weapons of mass destruction against its enemies. This remains the case; for the foreseeable future, it will fall to the United States to counter Tehran’s capabilities in these areas. To the degree that Washington retains influence over such matters, plans to right-size the Iraqi army should be driven by the need to secure and defend

Iraq's borders, not by a desire to have Iraq to play its oft-ascribed role of regional counterbalance to Iran.

## Conclusion

In the coming weeks, the ISF will face its first major test since April with the likely quickening of efforts to retake Falluja and other insurgent-held areas prior to elections in January 2005. The performance of the ISF, along with the outcome of the elections, promises to have a dramatic impact on Iraqi politics and provide a key early indicator of the long-term prospects for U.S. success in Iraq.

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