

The Multinational Divisions in Iraq:

Lessons Learned

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Madrid's determination to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, combined with the collapse of some multinational forces during recent fighting, poses serious questions about the contribution that such forces can make to security during the period leading up to the June 30 transfer of power.

Background

The performance of the two coalition multinational divisions (MND) varied widely during the recent Muqtada al-Sadr uprising. The British-commanded MND South-East proved effective in weathering Mahdi Army attacks, defending key points, and acting quickly to recover lost terrain. When al-Sadr's militiamen occupied the Basra governor's headquarters, British forces compelled them to leave, while Italian troops undertook a series of assaults to recover control of strategic bridges in Nasariyah. In sharp contrast, the Polish-led MND South-Center failed to defend many key points or to respond to direct attacks on Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) compounds. Instead, U.S. troops from the Sunni triangle were required to drive out militia forces throughout the south-central sector, even though these troops were needed to secure areas around Baghdad.

Causes of Failure in the South-Central Sector

MND South-Center did not fail in its mission due to lack of support from NATO, which has provided logistical, communications, and intelligence support since the division's establishment. Although the entire coalition military structure was surprised by the speed at which the threat posed by al-Sadr escalated, the CPA and the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force 7 headquarters arguably blindsided the Polish-led division by stepping up actions against al-Sadr without fully consulting the division.

Still, MND South-Center did display a number of intrinsic weaknesses. Comprised of twenty-three national contingents -- communicating in seventeen languages and fusing units with little experience working together -- the division lacked the cohesion needed to respond quickly to the uprising. Moreover, the division leadership does not appear to have maintained effective control over its forces, with some contingents phoning their native countries for

guidance. Many MND South-Center forces were consequently limited to non-combat roles that did not include either aggressive patrolling or holding and recapturing terrain claimed by militias. Most concerning, however, was the failure of multinational forces to defend CPA compounds, forcing the CPA to withdraw from all but one of its provincial outreach stations (Najaf) in south-central Iraq. Individual contingents refused to fire on mortars targeting CPA compounds and to target militiamen firing rocket-propelled grenades at CPA buildings, other than those that they were personally defending. Indeed, the rules of engagement used by MND South-Center forces appear to have been so narrow that they restricted the ability of coalition soldiers to fire unless they were personally targeted. In some cases, the response of MND South-Center troops was limited to calling for assistance from the Iraqi Police Service.

Multinational Forces in the Transitional Period

Along with the development of the new Iraqi security forces, which also suffered major setbacks in recent fighting (see [PolicyWatch no. 854 \(templateC05.php?CID=1732\)](#)), multinational forces are key to the speed at which the number and profile of U.S. forces in Iraq can be reduced. The Sunni triangle area will require U.S. forces for the foreseeable future, but multinational divisions can replace U.S. divisions elsewhere in the country. Spanish and Bulgarian forces -- deployed in south-central Iraq -- may withdraw in the coming months. In the southeast, the British-led division is largely self-sufficient, and key force providers such as Britain, Italy, and Japan have shown resolve in the face of recent kidnappings aimed at forcing the withdrawal of their troops. In the meantime, a new multinational division may materialize in northern Iraq. On April 15, the newly elected South Korean government quickly reaffirmed the country's commitment to send 3,600 troops to join other multinational forces taking over the U.S. 101st Air Assault division sector there; however, these forces will principally assist with reconstruction and not engage in offensive security roles. The Korean government backed away from the deployment of its troops in the dangerous environment of Kirkuk, where multinational troops are badly needed.

As the June 30 transition approaches, both northern and south-central multinational units may lack contingents capable of acting robustly against security challenges, suggesting that U.S. forces may again be drawn in to handle the periodic crises likely to punctuate the transition period. A new UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) may attract more capable troops from advanced military nations, but unless these contingents adopt more aggressive and committed rules of engagement, their utility will be strictly limited to non-crisis situations. Each major city or densely populated province in Iraq is typically controlled by a 2,000- to 3,000-strong coalition brigade combat team. It is imperative that in the MND areas, each of these teams has at least one unit capable of performing a quick reaction force (QRF) role, reinforcing threatened areas or counterattacking to recover occupied locales. Such a capability was present in British and Italian-controlled areas, but not in south-central Iraq, where coalition control quickly disintegrated. To reduce the need to regularly engage in QRF operations to recover lost ground, other coalition forces need to adopt standardized rules of engagement that allow them to carry out broader self-defense.

Policy Implications

U.S. and coalition support provided to multinational forces should be enhanced. For example, outgoing U.S. forces have been careful to transfer lessons learned to incoming U.S. troops during the current rotation; this kind of support should be expanded to current and future multinational partners. Ultimately, however, the strengthening of multinational forces in Iraq needs to be discussed within both the NATO and UN contexts. NATO could provide much of the command and control structure for multinational divisions and the training support for contributor nations, beginning with a formalization of its role in MND South-Center; this should be discussed at the alliance's Istanbul summit on June 28-29.

A new and robust UN resolution would undoubtedly help attract new or maintain existing multinational force contributions to Iraq, which would be useful as the six-month tours undertaken by most multinational forces expires

in June. A relatively modest resolution -- one that does not add much to UNSCR 1511 (which authorizes a multinational force under unified command to use "all necessary means" to achieve stability) -- might attract new and better trained forces to Iraq from advanced military nations (e.g., France, India) as well as from other countries. It could also make force providers more comfortable with placing troops fully under divisional control, where each state would have a national representative as opposed to merely retaining a veto option on actions through direct communication with field units.

Finally, the coalition needs to ensure that each multinational brigade combat team has a unit that can serve as a reliable QRF, one that is willing to broadly interpret its self-defense mandate and is capable of offensive operations. Until Iraqi security forces can undertake extremely sensitive missions -- against local militia leaders, for example -- the United States should maintain its ability to dispatch small strike groups to each MND that will act in this capacity, remaining mindful of the need to avoid blindsiding coalition allies during future crisis periods.

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