Setting Realistic Expectations for Iraq's Security Forces

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Faced with both the Muqtada al-Sadr uprising and intense fighting in Ramadi and Fallujah, Washington announced that it will hold the number of U.S. forces in Iraq at the current level of 134,000 by delaying plans to withdraw some troops during the current rotation. The announcement is a recognition that Iraqi security forces are not yet able to handle civil emergencies and armed resistance on the scale being seen in central and southern Iraq. These forces have been sorely tested in recent incidents; the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) failed to warn about the attack on U.S. contractors in Fallujah, and it surrendered control of its police stations and vehicles to Sadr's Mahdi Army in cities from Baghdad to Basra. The Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC), designed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to provide paramilitary support to IPS and coalition forces, underperformed in its first major deployment in the Fallujah fighting and failed to prevent the collapse of IPS forces in the face of Mahdi Army pressure in the south. These incidents should prompt new analysis of what can be done to support the continued development of Iraqi security forces, and a realistic reevaluation of expectations regarding the role of these forces before, during, and after the upcoming transition period. Most important, these fragile forces should not be prematurely exposed to serious fighting or other situations that are likely to strain their loyalties.

Background

Currently, more than 220,000 Iraqi security personnel are active throughout the country. These forces include the following: 3,000 soldiers in the new Iraqi army (a slowly building force that has been designed for external defense); nearly 140,000 Facilities Protection Service (FPS) and border guard forces charged with static defense of critical infrastructure, government ministries, and borders; 66,800 IPS personnel; and 15,000 locally recruited and trained members of the ICDC.

The IPS is a fledgling law enforcement organization under severe strain because of the postwar collapse of the rule of law in Iraq, which spurred a rise in serious and organized crime while fostering the extreme militarization of Iraq's factional politics. Perhaps understandably, the IPS has failed on most occasions to stand up to well-armed militias, from which many of its members are drawn at a local level. Most recently, the IPS ceded its police stations and vehicles to Sadr's Mahdi Army. In part, the failure to resist aggressive militia activity is caused by a lack of confidence, partly derived from the historically low status accorded to the Iraqi police, but also because the IPS has

not yet received sufficient amounts of equipment (e.g., heavily armored vehicles, body armor, communications gear) that could help it feel like part of a stronger network of well-protected coalition security forces. Over the past year, more than 350 Iraqi police have been killed by insurgents and criminals (many died in five major bomb attacks on police stations between November and February).

The ICDC is similarly crosscut by local and sectarian affiliations, reducing its usefulness in local security crises while simultaneously hampering its ability to provide the paramilitary support needed by the IPS and the coalition. As shown in Fallujah, where two battalions of ICDC forces dissolved after refusing to take part in serious fighting, the organization does not yet have the confidence to operate alongside, let alone take the place of, coalition forces in such contingencies.

Realistic Expectations

Iraq's security forces are still fragile; they operate best when they are closely supported by coalition troops, but even then, they lack the ability to undertake offensive operations against strong resistance. Most of these forces -- particularly in the Shi'i community -- are also hesitant to fight their sectarian brethren, as witnessed at the Majar al-Kabir police station, where six British soldiers were killed on June 24, 2003, and more recently during Sadr's uprising. Like a number of Iraqi security forces, the loyalties of the IPS remain divided between local, sectarian, and national affiliations, and a considerable number of IPS personnel in the south appear to have assisted the Mahdi Army in consolidating its control over southern police stations and government buildings. Until Iraqi security forces can identify more closely with a sovereign Iraqi state and absorb the training and equipment needed to bolster their confidence, they should not be exposed to heavy fighting or to sectarian dilemmas that will strain their loyalties.

The ICDC and IPS should continue in the roles they have succeeded at so far: supporting and guiding coalition raids and performing the vital service of reducing normal crime. The CPA should also integrate both bodies into the broader interagency intelligence system. Though it may be unfair to demand that the IPS fight resistance forces or militias, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that Iraqi security forces provide warning of attacks or disturbances before or as they develop. There are strong indications that local communities were warned of certain attacks on the coalition beforehand (e.g., the November 2003 ambush at Samarra; the February 2003 police station attack in Fallujah; the recent killing of four Blackwater security personnel in the same town; the occupation of the governor's palace in Basra). The CPA originally considered stationing military intelligence officers at local police stations and building each post into a sensor that would feed into the broader intelligence system. Indeed, one must question why the IPS failed to generate useful warnings regarding attacks such as those listed above. In developing the newly established National Intelligence Service, the CPA needs to develop incentives for Iraqi security forces to provide early warning data -- perhaps based on the model used to encourage tribes to protect pipelines, where coalition forces have employed a strict performance-based system. Considering the large number of Iraqis attracted to security jobs by the relatively generous payments package, the CPA could afford to hire and fire according to performance. The coalition would then need to ensure that a communications network is created to support this flow of information.

Policy Implications

With the crucial transition period less than ninety days away, the lessons of Fallujah and southern Iraq must be absorbed and acted upon. Coalition forces may indeed need to be fixed at the current level in the coming months, and the process of withdrawal from city centers may need to be reversed. As CPA administrator L. Paul Bremer noted, the numbers of Iraqi security forces have already been successfully boosted; attention must now be turned to training these personnel. Special attention should be accorded to the integration of Iraqi security forces into an early warning network, so that even if Iraqi forces cannot or will not directly confront illegal activity or militia pressure, they are made to understand that their job security relies on reporting such activity to the coalition. Lacking regular

channels of communication, isolated Iraqi security forces currently suffer from low morale and cannot add to the coalition intelligence picture. Therefore, all efforts should be extended to the development of local security forces. In practice, this means speeding up the flow of resources to IPS and ICDC forces before the transition. In Diyala province, for example, the local coalition police trainer recently complained that $2.1 million worth of purchases of weapons, body armor, and communications equipment were trapped in bureaucratic logjams (specifically, these funds are being withheld until the CPA transitions into the new embassy in early July). Even without considerations of risk, it is surely cheaper to speed up the development of Iraqi forces than to retain far more expensive U.S. military forces in country.

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