

The New Iraqi Army: Problems and Prospects

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Brief Analysis

According to a June 23, 2003, coalition administration announcement, recruitment for the new Iraqi army is to begin shortly. This is a potentially momentous step with major long-term implications for the future of the state. It will not be easy to create a new army to support a democratic Iraq, and certain difficulties will have to be addressed from the very beginning of the process. Success or failure in establishing the basis for an Iraqi military with strong values as well as capabilities will have a significant impact on the future stability of Iraq.

The Future Force

The new Iraqi army will apparently consist of some 40,000 personnel organized into three infantry divisions of 12,000 troops each. At least one of these divisions is to be of the light infantry type. Presumably, the remaining 4,000 personnel would be used as headquarters and service-support staff. The new army's stated missions will include "guarding the borders" and "installation protection." Recruitment is said to be open to all former members of the Iraqi military except those of high rank, those of the regime security services, and those complicit in human rights abuses. Training for the new force is to be provided by contract staff, including former U.S. military personnel, under a \$48 million deal with the Vinnell Corporation. According to one Coalition Provisional Authority official, the new army "will be professional, nonpolitical, militarily effective, and truly representative of the country." Establishing the force will take an estimated three years.

Missions

This is a very small force for a country the size of Iraq, given the state's history of internal and external warfare and its current domestic problems. From a military perspective, the missions designated for the army seem both too large and too small.

Guarding Iraq's borders with a field force of 36,000 infantrymen would be a very challenging mission in the current regional environment. As planned, the new army will be a minor force for a major state, a state that, historically, has played a key role in the region and will likely have to reassume such a role in the future. In addition to its small size, the new army will have limited capabilities to carry out its proposed missions. It will be an infantry force in a region with extensive tank and mechanized infantry units. Most of Iraq's neighbors will possess significantly larger

militaries: Iran with some 520,000 military personnel, Turkey with 515,000, Syria with 380,000, and Jordan with 100,000. Although none of these states is likely to initiate a military confrontation with the new Baghdad, a militarily weak Iraq is a distortion in the regional situation, one bound to have unforeseen consequences for stability.

Added to these problems is the fact that the new Iraqi army will have to do more than protect the borders. Protecting government installations will require diverting troops, further weakening border defense capabilities. Other potentially important missions such as national integration and nation building have not been addressed. Similarly, no mention has been made of internal security, a task that will need to be undertaken by some organization in Iraq if a new democratic state is to survive. The new army will almost certainly be a factor in the internal situation, even if only by default. Yet, the projected size and character of the force is unlikely to deter serious dissident elements; after all, the Kurds and the Shi'is were willing to take on even Saddam Husayn's heavy formations and air power. The Kurds already deploy relatively high-quality, experienced, and numerous light infantry personnel of their own (the Pesh Merga). The new Iraqi army will have to define relationships with both the overtly and covertly armed elements in Iraq; the national army cannot afford to be intimidated by such elements.

Capabilities

The announced plans for the new army appear to be missing some potentially important pieces. There is no mention of long-range mobility assets (potentially critical in a country with Iraq's size and borders), no planned air component (at the very least, helicopters and transports should be included), and no provision for an intelligence service. With a small army, it is all the more important to know what and where the threats are, and to be able to reach them relatively quickly.

Recruitment issues will also be crucial. There is an old saying that every army reflects the society it is drawn from, and Iraq is, in many respects, a shattered society. The timing of the announcement of the new army suggests that one of its goals is to get some of the thousands of former soldiers off the streets. This should relieve some of the real and potential problems caused by unemployed soldiers, but it cannot be the basis for a long-term recruitment policy. With an army of only 40,000, the emphasis should be on recruiting the best troops and officers possible -- those without the baggage of the old regime and its pronounced antidemocratic traditions, but with a high degree of experience and professionalism. Issues of religion, ethnicity, tribalism, and regime complicity will have to be faced as well. For example, will the new battalions be recruited on a national, regional, or local basis? Will religiously and ethnically differentiated personnel be kept together, or will integrated units be established? These questions will be critical to the new army's future cohesiveness, discipline, and responsiveness to democratic institutions. Especially important will be the recruitment and selection of the officer class. Saddam's military had a core of capable soldiers, and, assuming they are not complicit in the crimes of the regime, some of them could serve as the foundation of a new officer corps. Careful vetting will be necessary to prevent regime diehards from infiltrating the new military. There are no easy answers to these recruiting issues, but the choices that are made now will affect the army and the state well into the future.

Implications

Unless peace descends suddenly on the Middle East, Iraq will require protection. If the new Iraqi army is too small or ill equipped to protect the country's borders, then an effective regional security arrangement will have to be put in place in order to meet the security needs of Iraq and its neighbors. Alternatively, U.S. or coalition forces will have to protect Iraq in some manner for the foreseeable future.

Iraq will also need an internal security force, since the most salient threats to the new government will likely emanate from within. Unless parallel measures are taken to create effective internal security apparatuses (police, intelligence, and security services), the coalition will have to remain involved in this role indefinitely. Although a

long-term coalition presence would help to guarantee Iraqi security, it would also raise questions concerning Iraqi sovereignty and become a target for political opposition and armed attack.

For the long term, then, Iraq will likely need a military that is strong enough to accomplish both its initial missions and other important national tasks. Although an infantry-based force of 40,000 is a good start, it should be viewed as the basis for building, over time, a larger and more capable Iraqi military, one that reflects the values of the new democratic state and can protect it from enemies both foreign and domestic.

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