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IRAQI SECURITY FORCES AND LESSONS FROM KOREA

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The creation of a viable Iraqi security force has been the sine qua non of our success in Iraq (and the withdrawal of our military). The key question is, is this still feasible? This is not the first time we have undertaken such a task. Some succeeded (the Balkans and El Salvador), some failed (Vietnam), and some are ongoing (Afghanistan). But it was in South Korea, after its liberation at the end of World War II, where we first attempted to build a national security force from the ground up. And the effort was successful. Indeed, we undertook this task twice in South Korea, first before the Korean War; and, second, to rebuild the destroyed armed forces during and after the Korean War. While the failure of the young South Korean army to stem the tide of the North Korean attack on June 1950 had more to do with the failure of our policy to build an adequate military force against a conventional attack, it also obscured the success of the South Korean security forces in conducting counterinsurgency operations against the widespread North Korean-supported leftist insurgency in the south. There is much to be learned from our experience in Korea that should inform our current efforts in Iraq.

The key lesson of South Korea for Iraq is that by accident, fate, and design, the fractured South Korean polity at liberation in 1945 became a homogeneous entity by 1950. The security forces also had rid themselves of divisive elements, thus becoming a cohesive national force. The deep and intense regional, ethnic, and sectarian fault lines in Iraq are the greatest obstacles to creating a viable security force, as well as an Iraqi nation. Our current plans for creating the Iraqi security forces do not seem to face this issue squarely. The consequences might be that either we will have to stay in Iraq for the long term in order to prop up the security forces or, after our departure, Iraq will inevitably fracture into three parts after a bloody civil conflict.

The American efforts to build a security force in South Korea began almost immediately after the occupation began in September 1945 after liberation as a Japanese colony. There was no "Korean Army," but a large colonial police force existed, predominantly manned by Koreans. As a measure of expediency, the colonial police force, minus the Japanese, was kept largely intact by the U.S. military government. This created an explosive political situation, because the colonial police was the primary and the most despised instrument for colonial oppression and the Koreans who served in it were considered to be traitors and collaborators. The legacy of that decision, among other American actions, continues to serve as fodder today for the growing anti-Americanism in South Korea. A lesson from this experience may be that the controversial decision to dismantle the Iraqi Army actually may have been the right one. A society that had been repressed violently by the state, an experience that would have left a searing memory connecting the institutional apparatus of that repression, its security forces, with the regime may require those institutions to be broken down completely and rebuilt from the ground up if we are to have a security force that can earn the trust and confidence of the populace.

The founding of the Republic of Korea in August 1948 marked the end of the American occupation and the withdrawal of occupation forces. The United States established a military group to advise and train the newly established armed forces and the national police. Prior to August 1948, we organized a constabulary force to augment the national police primarily to conduct counterinsurgent operations against leftist guerrillas. The advisory group, known as

the Korea Military Advisory Group (KMAG), established a structure similar to what we have in Iraq today, advisors down to battalion level and military schools.

By June 1950, on the eve of the North Korean invasion, the security forces were successful in gaining the upper hand over the insurgency. While the records of their operations are controversial, the insurgency largely was suppressed by June 1950.

But the road was rough, and the toughest challenge was the fractured polity that constituted South Korean society. Politically, there was a broad split between the Right and the Left. Political fault lines were exacerbated further by regional, religious (Christians versus the Communists), and class divisions. The pattern of a fractured society as a nation is born is worthy of comparison. The more important lesson is not that Korea contained so many lines of division, but that those divisions soon were separated and aggregated into two different geographical and political entities, North and South Korea, and, more importantly, the security forces did not mirror that division. The police and the Army (the navy and the air force being insignificantly small as it is in Iraq) were dominated by the Right. The most important factor for this outcome was the north-south division that concentrated the Right in the south, including the movement of millions from the north. Another critical factor was the purge of leftist elements from the Army between 1948 and 1950. The purges were unsavory and possibly involved KMAG, but it led to a more cohesive force. The failure of the South Korean army against the North Korean attack had more to do with American policy on the kind of equipment and training provided than its cohesion and will.

The lesson for Iraq is this. The creation of mixed security force units that reflect society can only mean a Shia majority unit. Regionally based military and police units are now predominantly single sect-dominant units. Such a force suggests serious potential lines of fracture that can undermine national identity, loyalty, purpose, and will. The mutinous soldiers in South Korea formed the core of the insurgency that, in fact, started a Korean civil war well before June 1950. The sectarian Iraqi security forces are now forming the core elements of Iraq's civil war.

There is no easy solution for Iraq, but the lesson of South Korea suggests that unless we find a way to mitigate the sectarian divisions, divisions that have far deeper ethnic, historical, and cultural roots than those of South Korea in the late 1940s, our current plans will only delay the inevitable civil war, another Yugoslavia in the making. In the end, only a divided Iraq may prove to be stable.

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