Iraq's Ministry of Interior: NATO, Capability Building, and Reform

Andrea Malouf
ABSTRACT: The ongoing, 20-year effort to reform Iraq’s Ministry of Interior through capability building is an underreported but critical aspect of NATO’s mission. This article identifies 10 strategic errors or “lessons” from this mission related to ends, ways, means, and assumptions. NATO’s involvement was flawed from design to delivery, including its myopic focus on training, systemic disregard of politics, relegation of civilian expertise, and inadequate measurements of its effects. As a result, police legitimacy in Iraq eroded, potentially exacerbating instability. Capability building is becoming more attractive as a non-kinetic tool; the success of future NATO missions—in Iraq and elsewhere—will, therefore, rely on avoiding similar mistakes.

Keywords: Iraq, Ministry of Interior, institutional reform, security sector reform, NATO

Changing State Structures in Iraq

From the perspective of the US-led “coalition of the willing,” reforming Iraq’s state structures was a novel endeavor. To Iraq, however, Western experts had been reforming its state structures since the 1922, when the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty gave Britain direct control over Iraq’s military and foreign policy and influence over the rest of the state.

Prior to the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in 1917, it administered three provinces (or wilayat) in present-day Iraq: Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. The British government installed Faisal I as king of Iraq in 1921 and confirmed him as the constitutional monarch in a 1922 treaty, laying the foundations for consolidating Iraq’s three wilayat into a single state and developing administrative structures.

British advisers were stationed in key ministries, including “important posts in the police and army . . . staffed by British and Indian officers on contract.” Under Gertrude Bell’s vision, bureaucratic reforms went alongside profound economic reforms. British actions aimed to centralize state power and transform the largely nomadic society into a settled agrarian society. These were significant changes in a limited space of time.

Reforms to Iraq’s political, social, and economic order created new fissures. They eroded the traditional powers of the tribal chiefs, whom the king attempted
to placate, first by vesting them with greater local administrative powers, then by gifting them state land. Locally, policies created a rift between tribal leaders and ordinary tribal members: leaders began to amass land and power, but citizens lived in relative poverty.³

The monarchy's attempt to build legitimacy and control the executive also created fissures between the king and the executive and between the executive and the local government. In 1958, after the monarchy was overthrown and army officers executed Faisal II, rival political factions began to vie for state control. Saddam Hussein ultimately emerged victorious in 1979.⁴

**Iraq's Ministry of Interior**

Under Saddam, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) remained “a relatively small organisation” with limited security and budgeting functions. It managed approximately 60,000 staff with a “fairly easy life, policing routine crime.” It was also responsible for quotidian public order tasks, such as regulating traffic, public works, and issuing residence permits. Major security threats were handled by the 8,000–strong Iraqi Intelligence Service (the Mukhabarat) and Saddam’s Republican Guard.⁵

Initially, corruption was also limited, but the country’s coffers were drained by the Iran-Iraq War, which killed between 250,000 and 500,000 Iraqis, particularly poor southern Shia, and cash-for-oil sanctions pushed the economy to its knees. These sanctions essentially created state-sponsored, monopolistic organized crime networks to smuggle goods. This situation fuelled corruption, exacerbated wealth inequality, increased dependency on the state, and centralized and empowered Saddam. Since then, these networks arguably formed the foundations for al-Qaeda, the Hashd al-Shaabi, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and doubtless many such organizations to come.⁶

After the 2003 US-UK coalition’s invasion of Iraq, the ill-judged de-Ba’athification policy (especially disbanding all security institutions) created a new security problem for the state. It also vastly degraded human capacity across all state structures and left lucrative government positions open to political and militia appointees with no experience, and little interest, in public administration. This “deliberate exclusion of a section of Iraq’s society . . . . [and] the exclusive elite bargain imposed on the country by the United States and its formerly exiled Iraqi allies” increased corruption and incompetence and precipitated the civil war.⁷

In this context, in an inversion of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum, politics became an extension of war by other means. Competition over state
resources abounded, and with the United States controlling the country’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Counter Terrorism Service, the MoI was the only security structure under rival Shia factions’ control. The MoI was the structure through which militias would grant themselves weapons licenses, receive political and administrative cover, and exact retribution on rivals of all sects, in Baghdad and beyond. It became a site for bloody internal battle for control among rival militias, with regular shoot-outs in its corridors and parking lots.  

Enter the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), essentially the coalition’s occupation administration—staffed largely by American and British technocrats and army officers—which sought to rebuild state institutions wholesale. The profound challenges the CPA would face—especially the push-pull relationship between central government and provincial (and tribal) authority—were seeded in UK involvement in Iraq from the early twentieth century.

Reforming the Ministry of Interior in Iraq

This may seem an impossible task in any environment . . . we must not kid ourselves about the scale of the task we have set ourselves and our Iraqi counterparts.  

United States and United Kingdom coalition partners initially led MoI reforms then transferred control to NATO. NATO’s involvement in security sector reform (SSR) began in 2004, when the Alliance began working with the MoI and MoD, and largely comprised capability building and partner-force assistance. SSR evolved into the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (or NTM-I) under the overall NATO Mission Iraq (NMI, or “the mission”), a noncombat-training and capability-building effort intended to strengthen Iraq’s security forces and stability and resilience to terrorism.  

The mission’s strategy and scope was most recently designed in 2017 and 2018 through a so-called NATO “activity” and work with Iraqi and Allied partners. At the time, NATO focused on developing demand for—and defining the scope of—assisting the MoD. NATO also supported MoI assistance led by the EU and the United Nations Development Programme. In 2021, Allies agreed to increase the mission’s size and scope. The Alliance wished to increase personnel from 500 to 4,000, broaden its work beyond Baghdad, and enhance its support of the MoI and the Ministry of Justice.  

Then, as now, NATO channeled the bulk of its efforts toward the MoD. Within the realm of MoI support, NATO mainly directed support toward the Federal Police with some assistance going to the Facilities Protection Service
In August, NATO establishes training implementation mission; deploys a team of 50 officers.

In December, authorizes additional 300 trainers and staff; changes mission name to NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

Assessment describes NATO’s presence as comprising a team of 85 personnel in Baghdad and 12 in Brussels. Same assessment credits NMI with training 516 officers in Iraq and 126 officers overseas (Lynch, 2006). Unclear which portion of those trained hailed from the Ministry of Interior (MOI).

Introduces gendarmerie-type training to the Iraqi Federal Police to bridge the gap between routine police work and military ops.

Expands its navy and air force leadership program.

Agrees to provide specialist training on oil policing (led by Italy).

In April, grants Iraq “partner” status December, discontinues NMI due to disagreement on the legal status of NATO troops in Iraq.

Iraq submits its individual partnership and cooperation program to NATO in June. One-year NATO transition sell established to identify capability gaps. NATO provides limited training support on countering terrorism, counter-improvised explosive devices, and defense institution building.

In April, provides international security force (ISF) training in Jordan for 350 officers. In July, agrees to start training and advising ISF forces and institutions in Iraq (Warsaw Agreement).

Deploys core team from headquarters to coordinate in-country training and capabilities development.

In July, launches noncombat training and capabilities development mission following US Secretary of Defense request for NATO support to scale up training and advisory.

Support paused following the Soulimani assassination. Government of Iraq requests expansion in training and advisory mission.

Decision taken to increase the mission’s size and expand its training activities.

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Figure 1. Basic timeline of NATO security sector reform support in Iraq, focused, where possible, on the Ministry of Interior and informed by a 2018 NATO fact sheet and a 2021 topic paper (Source: Created by author)
NATO had trained approximately 15,000 individuals by 2011, though a hiatus in substantive activities followed from 2011 to 2018. The United Kingdom and United States also heavily supported the MoI through the CPA and their own bilateral activities. Despite these efforts, capability building yielded limited results. Multiple reviews found corruption endemic and described the continuing lack of 1) a clear organizational structure, 2) basic management functions, 3) a clearly defined mission, 4) a strategy for policing, and 5) a culture of accountability and transparency.

Much ink has been spilled unpacking the reasons behind failed security sector reform in Iraq. The focus has been on the “chaos” of the Iraqi system and the intercommunal nature of the conflict or its political settlement. Governance in Iraq is complex, but focusing on this factor has orientalized and “primordialised” Iraq, its government, and institutions and has given cover to international actors for their limited achievements, thereby absolving them of blame. Critically, foreign forces threw many resources into a conflict context, which further destabilized the country.

This article demystifies some of the reasons for the MoI reform efforts’ limited success, considering specifically the factors within NATO and Allied control. The remainder of the article is structured against the four interrelated tenets of any successful strategy: clarity of ends, ways, means, and assumptions (see figure 2). Colonel Arthur Lykke Jr. developed the first three components of this strategic planning framework in 1989, deployed here as a device to structure this article.

![Figure 2. Visualizing basic strategic components.](Source: Adapted by author)
Ends: Defining a Clear and Coherent End State

Lesson 1

The political factors that triggered NATO’s involvement in MoI reforms in 2004 significantly constrained its ability to determine clear, coherent, and relevant objectives for this reform. This failure limited the nature, scope, and effectiveness of support.

In 2004 and in 2018, NATO’s interventions were triggered by a desire to downscale US and UK efforts rather than an independent or problem-driven strategy. In 2004, the US and UK governments wanted to reduce their commitments to the Iraq War. This goal required them to build Iraq’s security structures and involve more allies in defense capability building.

NATO inherited America’s design-related baggage in its takeover of reform efforts, specifically, a myopic focus on quantity: the numbers of officers recruited to the MoD and MoI and of individuals trained. This quantitative focus had profound consequences on building the muscle, not the mind, of the MoI.  

Two interrelated imperatives prompted the 2017–18 activity: a desire to relieve pressure on the Counter-Daesh Coalition (CDC) so that it would focus on tactical counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and a need to lower the American profile to maintain support for the CDC. Stakeholders also understood that a training mission would require a longer time commitment to Iraq, which would be more appropriate for NATO than the CDC.

Sir John Chilcot outlined the absence of a coherent strategy for SSR reform in the UK public Iraq Inquiry (known as the Chilcot Inquiry). This inquiry found that “there was no-one in Whitehall pulling together knowledge of policing to design the kind of police operation needed in Iraq” and that the United Kingdom could not engage or influence the United States to create a coherent approach. Instead, the United Kingdom agreed (as others had) to provide a “small number” of police to provide training and advice on SSR. The Chilcot Inquiry argued that this lack of a strategy precipitated failure.

Guillame Lasconjarias reinforced this point in his review of the use of partner-force training in Iraq and Afghanistan to project stability. Lasconjarias argued that instead of delivering support in a strategically coherent way, all actors “moved away from the strategic level to the tactical means at hand . . . [and] the aim became to find ways to ensure a proper ‘exit strategy’ out of Iraq . . . leading to a misunderstanding about what should eventually be done.”
NATO’s deficient capability gap analysis occurred squarely within a framework focusing on training as an objective rather than a means to an end. An effective strategy would have outlined “the desired operating standard for each function” and stated “how that differs, if at all, from what exists.” Doing this legwork early paves the way for analyzing the resources and methods needed to bridge the gap.\(^{21}\)

Ultimately, NATO focused on the numbers of individuals trained and failed to define a robust or coherent organizational end-state for either the police or the MoI; it then grew those structures so quickly that its numbers outpaced the MoI’s organizational progress and security institutions’ broader developments.\(^{22}\)

**Ways: Training, Political Will, and Trust in the Security Sector**

**Lesson 2**

The focus on training came at a cost to holistic institutional reform. “Holistic” did not need to mean “more”; it could have meant “better” or “better integrated.”

Rather than taking a training-driven approach, institutional development is the only way to generate any consequential or sustainable results in SSR. This development is needed because developing institutions that shape the state’s local, individual, and personal experiences (such as policing, health care, and education) is unlike—and vastly more complex than—developing institutions “insulated from society and/or with a narrow technical function, such as militaries and central banks.” The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) reinforced this idea in a report finding that MoI reform was more difficult than building the entire MoD from scratch. That point was lost on NATO structures staffed largely by military officers.\(^{23}\)

By 2007, with the incorporation of the Facilities Protection Service (until then, an independent unit responsible for critical national infrastructure), the MoI had to manage more than 500,000 employees and was responsible for internal security, internal planning, and budgeting. The MoI needed to carve out an effective role in Iraq’s complex, and often confusing, partially decentralized model. In this context, its legal and practical mandate was unclear. To add to this complexity, in part motivated by America’s influence over the MoD, actors vied for influence in the MoI to accumulate resources and project their own power. Even so, training efforts did not adequately account for MoI’s vast scope and mandate and treated it like the MoD, applying similar tools.\(^{24}\)
It is beyond this article’s scope to consider the many institutional development models that exist. At their core, these models include the need to identify and align relevant events or actions, knowledge, systems, incentives and processes, and norms necessary to shift organizational culture and practice. Technical assistance and strategic planning are only minor components of effective institutional development; instead, intervening actors must also engage on security-sector governance, systems (including procedures and law and regulations), and the norms that incentivize denial of error or failure and corruption.25

As with the United States and United Kingdom, NATO was unfamiliar with institutional reform and failed to adopt a comprehensive, systematic, or even integrated approach to its intervention. As Robert M. Perito argued, the “failure to reform Iraq’s interior ministry resulted from a failure to understand the ministry’s role and the steps involved in successful ministerial reform.” In this context, training risked being irrelevant or ineffectual at best and destabilizing at worst.26

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**Lesson 3**

Donors failed to identify and focus efforts on areas where training would have the greatest impact and value.

NATO’s deep expertise in training-based capability building has meant that it has taken supply-centric rather than problem-driven approaches to capability building. These tool-led approaches hindered MoI development. Even within the training rubric, NATO’s wheelhouse is defense, and much support has been directed toward the Federal Police. With the MoI lacking in competent mid-level management, operational training was of a much lower value and yielded poor results. Despite some Italian-led Carabinieri-type training that developed capability beyond the merely operational, the scope remained narrow and took place within a problematic counterterrorism framework (see lesson 5).

Leading with existing tools rather than a clear understanding of how training could create behavioral change in defined areas (beyond improving knowledge in the abstract) would be key. As Kevin Koehler stated, both parties in an assistance-based relationship have specific interests “and the degree to which these interests converge” bears heavily on the success of the intervention. The framework in figure 3 helps deconstruct or interrogate the convergence of interests. Three core tenets of organizational development and effectiveness are: political will, organizational interest, and technical capacity. Reform is most likely to be effective and sustainable where there is a convergence of political will, organizational interest, and technical capacity.27
For a successful intervention, two of these three variables must be conducive to change. Technical capability building will, therefore, only succeed where there is political will and organizational interest to reform. Conversely, focusing training or capability building on areas of internal organizational interest or technical gaps (usually identified through the very narrow training needs analysis, or TNA), diminishes the likelihood of success.

Lesson 4

The focus on technical training turned politics into an irritant to be managed, rather than a force to lean into. This statement is not intended to diminish the Iraqi security sector’s complexity but to outline the opportunities this complexity creates.

The MoI’s internal political dynamics are complex. Even at a superficial level, a minister must share power with deputies, independent influential ministry figures, and influence networks. This power distribution results in inertia and organizational pushback against reforms that threaten—or are perceived to threaten—“the interests of other parties, key individuals or patronage networks in the ministry,” and “[m]any decisions are therefore negotiated rather than directed.” Security structures are also complex business networks, with clear equities at all levels among “officers” in Iraq’s security, human resources, and military-industrial complex.

Toward the end of its 2011 mission, NATO continued to provide MoI capability development and broader SSR support even while politically motivated assassinations were taking place in the ministry’s stairways and parking lot. This support was a stoic attempt to ignore politics and “continue the good work.”

Figure 3. Convergence of political will, organizational interest, and technical capacity
(Source: Created by author)
Evidence has shown, however, that when project or program staff embraced complexity, they identified areas for genuine and longer-lasting or sustainable reform. For example, in the late 2000s, a British effort identified “organisational discipline” (primarily in Baghdad) as an area in which Iraqi and British interests aligned. The MoI wished to instill greater organizational discipline among its staff and police, while the United Kingdom wished to reduce the volume of arbitrary attacks on Sunni community members by local police. Although the motives behind the alignment differed, interests converged, and the United Kingdom helped establish an internal discipline system granting police leaders some command and control across the hierarchy. Coalition Provisional Authority representatives believed this policing reduced indiscriminate attacks against Sunni community members.\textsuperscript{30}

This scenario contrasts with the more sweeping UK and US efforts to “modernize” MoI systems. For example, much money and time was directed toward improving governance through increasing management capacity by promoting merit-based recruitment, procurement, and promotion through workshops, training courses, study courses, and drafting new procedures. The effort was judged a failure: “We knew the political economy, we just couldn’t really impact it,” said one stakeholder.\textsuperscript{31}

The successful counter-Daesh effort reinforced the effectiveness of problem-driven approaches to targeting capacity development. This effort demonstrated the unity that could be achieved across the political, institutional, and individual spheres in response to a shared threat and a focus on a distinct problem set in a defined time frame and geographical scope. Focusing on distinct micro-level problem sets (for example, communications, trust, gun licensing, targeting Daesh leaders, and response times) requires thoughtfully exploring priorities to identify practical areas where political will and organizational interests converge. The impulse to lead with the usual tools, such as training (which may or may not be relevant to the problem at hand) must be avoided.

Finally, objectives for change must intersect with an area where consensus is possible, that is, where MoI powerholders can and want to progress. International donors should also be willing to support this effort through parallel political influencing. NATO and others must go with the grain to identify and agree upon clear (problem-driven) change areas with local stakeholders. Changemakers must not hide behind the cover of so-called politicization and complexity. Institutions function in their own ways—they evolve and adapt; actors either choose to understand them on their own terms or cease trying to change them.
Lesson 5

The focus on training may have had counterproductive consequences, principally, reducing police legitimacy among the public.

Focusing on police force development in terms of numbers and physical infrastructure without an equal emphasis on developing the systems, incentives, norms, and management capacity necessary to manage enlarged forces resulted in a Popeye-like structure with more muscle than mind. There is evidence that the ministry and its police structures have been used to mete out group-level reprisals. In 2005, then Brigadier General Karl Horst found a secret MoI detention facility in Jadariya in which 169 individuals—166 of whom identified as Sunni—were held and tortured.32

The focus on brawn has significantly affected public trust in the state, undermining the very stabilization objectives that the United States, United Kingdom, NATO, and other allies had sought. As Robert Byrd warned, this approach to police development encouraged:

... corruption, apathy, poor leadership and counter-productive business practices.
In the short-term, the process undermines public support for the government when citizens view the police, arguably the most visible representation of a fledgling government, as dishonest and incompetent. Over the long-term ... negative habits that form due to rapid and unbalanced development [of the MoI] become institutionalized, which makes future course correction more difficult.33

The need for public support of the police was recognized as one of five priority areas for MoI development in a 2009 UK government paper. Failure to mainstream and link public trust and accountability into the training effort overlooked an additional level of influence on the police and MoI: it insulated the structure from public accountability and reinforced the inaccurate narrative that the demand for competent and less corrupt institutions was driven by external actors rather than by Iraqi citizens.34
Means: Applying Human and Financial Resources

Lesson 6
The focus on counterterrorism training naturally resulted in an inappropriate overreliance on trainers and mentors (“experts”) with a military background and the relegation of civilian or diplomatic expertise. The early and appropriate use of individuals with a broader suite of skills is critical to success.

Support to Iraq’s security structures was driven by the need to “get security quick” in 2004 and to increase resilience against Daesh in 2018, which naturally resulted in an overreliance on defense personnel with a defense or wartime mindset to deliver training. This overreliance is inappropriate for developing a public-facing institution with a public security responsibility.35

Historically, individuals have been selected due to their narrow technical expertise; they have often lacked an understanding in institutional reform and have been unaware of Iraq’s complex framework of laws, regulations, and norms that enable or limit the MoI’s sphere of operations. As such, the international community has delivered many MoI courses and strategy papers with little regard for their practicality.

The lack of appropriate pre-deployment training, coupled with short rotations, has increased the probability of staffers operating as “pioneers,” all with their own assumptions about the best way forward, missing opportunities to multiply effects across training silos and taking valuable institutional memory with them when they leave.

To carry out responsible and effective SSR in any context, it is critical to have individuals in place who are trained and able to invest time in relationship-building and identifying areas of genuinely overlapping interests. Crucially, individuals who understand the basic principles of institutional reform must be placed in leadership positions and empowered to drive a coherent plan accordingly. Once appropriate staff are identified, prior to their deployment, time must be invested in training, “forming, norming, and storming” experts.
Lesson 7
Staffing levels and expectations about commitment timelines must be commensurate with the scale of the task; instead, optimism bias has pervaded.

Had training been the most effective and appropriate way to increase Iraq’s stability and resilience to terrorism, the support was disproportionate to the challenge. Instead, support to the MoI has been beset by the so-called “small footprint, small payoff” problem common to security sector assistance programs.\textsuperscript{36}

A US Department of Justice pre-war assessment, on which the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported in 2009, had recommended that 5,000 international police advisers be deployed to Iraq to reform the system, but the US National Security Council planners rejected this recommendation on the basis that Iraqis would better administer Iraqi law. Frank Miller, then head of the National Security Council’s Iraq group, later said: “We had bad intelligence. . . . We believed that the Iraqi police were a corrupt, but generally efficient police force. It turns out they were both corrupt and not a particularly efficient police force.”\textsuperscript{37}

In May 2003, a team of 25 experts arrived in Iraq to find the MoI and police stations across the country looted and destroyed. The CPA recommended deploying 2,500 international police officers to restore order and recruiting 360 professional trainers and 6,600 international police advisers. This recommendation was entirely rejected. Instead, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III requested funding for 1,500 police advisers, including 1,000 American advisers; it is unclear how many were then deployed.\textsuperscript{38}

The ambition was to train 70,000 police officers in three months, and efforts focused on Baghdad. Driving home the pervasive optimism bias, the budget for Iraq’s entire police force in 2003 stood at a mere $2.4 million, and the MoI was expected to fund its training as part of this budget. By the April 2004 uprising, 200,000 Iraqi security personnel had been rushed into service, but no more than 5,000 were fully trained and equipped.\textsuperscript{39}

NATO inherited the United States and United Kingdom’s optimism bias. As the Chilcot Inquiry found in 2005, the United Kingdom seconded 11 personnel to the NATO training mission. Instead of recruiting these individuals to surge overall Allied capability, the United Kingdom could have re-badge them from Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq.
(MNSTC-I) involved in basic officer training as NATO personnel. This decision effectively robbed Peter to pay Paul.\textsuperscript{40}

By 2010, Lieutenant General Michael D. Barbero warned of a significant manpower shortfall in the NATO training mission. He described the mission as “a relatively small tactical force of 177 personnel representing 14 member states at four deployed locations in Iraq.” He also warned that NATO’s estimated 2011 trust fund requirement of EUR 5.73 million was a “very small contribution compared to the strategic benefit to the Alliance and Iraq.” By the end of 2011—for political reasons—NATO’s mission was over.\textsuperscript{41}

Staffing is part of the problem, but culture and planning is a greater challenge. NATO and allies failed to internalize the expectation that even the most basic capability building should be planned on a 5-to-10–year time frame, which cascaded appropriately with plans and budgets put in place accordingly. On a sub-strategic level, NATO employees should take a long-term view and understand that deployment and planning timelines need to be appropriate to Iraq rather than to NATO.\textsuperscript{42}

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\textbf{Lesson 8}

Inadequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems resulted in a lack of clarity of the actual effect of the international effort’s support to the MoI.
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By the end of the so-called “Year of the Police” in 2006, the United States had trained 187,800 Iraqi police and accumulated around 100,000 advisory hours. NATO had also trained more than 5,000 military staff and more than 10,000 police at a cost of more than EUR 17.5 million, equivalent to EUR 1,166 per person trained.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite these on-paper results, the reality was “troubling.” According to the Chilcot Inquiry, until 2009, the United Kingdom could not qualitatively measure the effectiveness of training; instead, the quantitative focus on the number of officers trained “was simplistic and gave a misleading sense of comfort.” In relation to the US effort, the SIGIR report (referenced here by Robert M. Perito) found that “[n]either the U.S. military nor the MOI could account for the number of trainees who had actually entered the police, the number of police currently serving, or what had happened to the uniforms, weapons, and equipment that had been issued to training center graduates.”\textsuperscript{44}
Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a perennial problem in security sector assistance. Even the most transparent and effective partners hesitate to open their security apparatuses to domestic scrutiny, let alone to external inspection. Countries with a complex history of monarchy and authoritarianism are more reluctant still.45

The transparency challenge compounds the problem that comes with the usual focus by international actors on first-order effects, essentially the “countables,” meaning the money and time spent training and the number of people trained. In development jargon, this result-class is known as “output.”

Interventions have tended to ignore the second-order effects of capability building, which are more complex to quantify but give a material sense of effect: they require monitoring skills, whether training is being used at all, let alone in the right \textit{way} and at the appropriate \textit{time}. This level of change is also known as the “outcome.” Monitoring whether the relevant skills are used at the appropriate time is key to understanding whether the effort has a meaningful effect on the ground and ensuring that skills and technology are not misapplied in a way that erodes at human rights.

Finally, few security sector reform models have attempted to consider the higher-level effects of change, including risk or threat reduction and the public perception of the security sector. Predictably, this type of result in a theory of change or results chain is called the “impact.”

Discussing and agreeing on monitoring systems at the outset is critical even to the most basic understanding of change and impact. Where external monitoring systems are challenging to implement, as in the MoI, they are better embedded within a partner organization’s checks and balances (for example, via human resources and parliamentary oversight mechanisms, such as the Defence and Security Committee, and so on). Discussing and appropriately embedding monitoring mechanisms bolsters the effects of training and emboldens the usually emaciated accountability structures and checks-and-balances systems in Iraq.
Interrogating Foundational Assumptions and Complementing Partner Efforts

Lesson 9

Failures to improve security institutions’ capacity are rooted in and stem from a failure to interrogate the primary assumption implicit in capability building—that improved knowledge results in better practice.

Weak M&E processes mean that the assumptions behind the logic chain of international support to the MoI have been inadequately interrogated and, therefore, have remained weak.

The NATO intervention’s implicit “logic chain” can be summarized as follows:

> if we improve knowledge in the MoI and MoD, then
> we will increase the professionalism of the Iraqi security forces and improve Iraq’s security and ability to fight terrorism. This thereby prevents the re-emergence of Da’esh while also building sustainable defence and security related structures.

This type of logic chain is common to interventions that focus on capability building (many also focus on improving management capacity, and some focus on maturing internal systems and processes). The primary assumptions here are that training is effective, that training improves knowledge or increases professionalism, and that improved knowledge will be applied and will result in appropriate behavior at the relevant point in time. The most important element here is timeliness. Despite many years of training, the MoD disintegrated when confronted by Daesh. Knowledge, therefore, failed to translate into behavioral change. Simply put, a more knowledgeable police officer is not necessarily a changemaker, whereas a police officer who applies certain practices, policies, or procedures (whether or not the officer understands why these practices matter) is a changemaker.

Other critical and unchallenged assumptions underlying these interventions and precipitating their failures are that the political climate will enable the translation of knowledge into action, that the MoI has the right incentives in place to enable the use of that knowledge, and that training is provided in the areas most conducive to change (see lessons 2 through 5).
Lesson 10

With other partners also working with the MoI on organizational change—principally the EU and United Nations Development Programme—allies’ work must be carefully shaped. NATO should have ensured that member states’ independent activities cohere and that they amplified the mission’s objectives.

The EU has been perceived to be more successful than NATO in its engagement with the MoI. The Minister and Deputy Minister of the Interior have both been described as active and proactive in working with the EU on strategic reforms. Reasons for this collaboration are complex; the EU is perceived to be more supportive of the Iran nuclear deal, perhaps making them more positively received, and it has engaged more consistently and concertedly with the MoI. It remains unclear whether the EU’s focus on strategy development will create any practical changes.47

Beyond the EU, the United Nations Development Programme has also attempted to coordinate all SSR activities in Iraq, working to improve security sector governance and supporting community policing through work with the MoI. The United Kingdom and the United States have also intermittently supported security sector reforms through specific units, with a focus on MoD.

In relation to the MoI, the need remains great, and there is a gap between linking strategic planning and action on specific priority areas to strengthen the MoI’s command and control over the police and enhance both structures’ public credibility. NATO could helpfully contribute to this area.

To be effective, NATO needs a clear and robust strategy and must engage with other actors to further its objectives. Although the NATO mission’s strategy is independent of member states’ activities, NATO must influence member states and multilateral partners to cohere their activities with the NATO mission. In practice, NATO must take a proactive intellectual lead in designing support and influencing member states.

Recommendations

This article outlined 10 NATO and Allied failures that have stymied efforts to reform Iraq’s police and MoI. These failures corresponded to four tenets of good strategy: ends, ways, means, and assumptions. In Iraq, the scale of the challenge is such that international actors could help the MoI mature into a more credible, effective, and trusted institution that supports peace rather than being a destabilizing force.
Any future support to the MoI must course correct, starting with identifying and analyzing problem sets through an institutional reform and systems-based approach and determining a clear, even if ambitious, end-state. This analysis requires experts in institutional reform and systems-based thinking.

Once a certain end-state is defined, actors must identify specific, discrete convergences of political will and technical interest to orient and prioritize efforts. These areas might include licensing systems, intelligence sharing with the police, arbitrary arrests in a certain province, or counterterrorism operations against a specific group. There should then be further analysis to understand what entrenches that problem. This analysis should be based on systems thinking and consider the 1) specific behaviors manifested; 2) trends and context; 3) systems and structures (including laws and reporting processes); and 4) institutional and social norms shaping the environment.

With the MoI’s relative caution about working with NATO (rather than with the MoD, for example) it is important to understand and interrogate the areas in which national, political, and technical interests converge with Allied interests and to prioritize accordingly. NATO must also leverage the strength of its partners (direct and indirect), such as the EU, to further common objectives.

NATO and other actors must avoid the trap of defining a problem to meet the tools already in place or through the political prism of a member state. At a time when NATO contributions must be prioritized ruthlessly, this process may require adeptly and diplomatically holding member states at bay to avoid wasting critical resources or even undermining broader strategic effects. Once actors have set their objectives, defined specific problems, and identified where their priorities intersect with national ones, they can develop and define their methods to move the needle in the right direction.

In terms of applying the tools in its arsenal, NATO and its allies must recognize that improving knowledge may not be unnecessary, and is entirely insufficient for improving practices, and NATO actions should reinforce, amplify, and be reinforced by member states’ actions. Developing an effective and credible police force and MoI that promote stability could only succeed if training occurred within a coherent SSR effort. Actors should ensure that direct actions (such as training) and supporting actions (such as political engagement) address these issues systematically. NATO must then shape its mission and the staff or cadre it selects and support the actions needed to effect change.
Critically, any SSR effort must focus on public perception. As Perito argues, security and legitimacy cannot be decoupled:

SSR is the key to security and to establishing the legitimacy of the state. The police are the face of the state to its citizens, and if citizens have confidence that the police will protect them and provide emergency services, citizens are likely to be loyal to the state. Similarly, if citizens believe they can rely on the judicial system to provide justice, they are likely to view the state as legitimate and worthy of their support. . . . If the ministries that support the police and the judges are dysfunctional, corrupt, or politicized, police and courts will have little chance of fulfilling their missions and will impede efforts to rebuild the state.48

The focus on public perceptions must, therefore, be foregrounded and run through the way NATO and others prioritize activities and how they implement their SSR support. NATO must then systematically ignore output-based reporting and have laser-like focus on outcome-based and impact-based change. This process includes measuring public perception related to the reform being supported.

A well-trained cadre is rarely (if ever) an acceptable end unto itself, and even the best training must be scrapped if it does not result in the desired operational changes (for example, reduced terrorist attacks in a designated location, increased intelligence sharing in specific areas, a decrease in weapons licenses issued, and so on). A common argument for focusing on activities such as training and outputs such as improved knowledge from the training sessions is that outcomes take years to achieve. This argument must be rejected. Change is rarely linear, and taking an adaptive, problem-driven approach to reform will increase the pace of change and enable teams to see evidence of second-order change taking root.

Finally, NATO must remember the public. Strengthening a security structure that undermines the state, alienates the public, enhances corruption, or further depletes public trust is counterproductive. NATO must, therefore, measure public perception toward the institutions it supports and ensure that its efforts increase trust rather than empower bad actors or undermine the public perception of state institutions. Whether NATO wishes to, or can, provide the reforms necessary to support effective capability development is to be seen.
NATO’s capacity-building efforts will likely play a more prominent role as the Alliance shores itself up and supports its allies in the coming decade. At its best, NATO capability development can cohere and align activity, enhance collective security, distribute and reduce risk, and amplify effects. NATO training missions must reorient radically and ensure that they have the right mix of staff with extensive civilian and academic capabilities to design and deliver interventions. Otherwise, capability building is unlikely to be effective, except possibly in the narrowest in-classroom sense.

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Endnotes


12. For example, the December 2018 NATO fact sheet summarizing these efforts described activities as being with the Ministry of Defence, the Office of the National Security Advisor, “and relevant national security institutions” and made no explicit mention of the MoI. Return to text.
13. Kevin Koehler, “Projecting Stability in Practice?: NATO’s New Training Mission in Iraq,” NATO Defense College Research Paper, No. 5 (May 2019): 4–15. Note that this model has been widely criticized for being deficient or incomplete—but it is a reasonably good device for the purposes of structure. The inclusion of “assumptions” is mine. Return to text.


16. Arthur Lykke, “Defining Military Strategy = E + W + M,” Military Review 69, no. 5 (May 1989): 2–15. “In Iraq, the USG [US government] instituted wildly ambitious and unrealistic hiring programs in the fall of 2003, such as ‘30,000 in 30 days’ and ‘60,000 in 60 days.’ In these two instances, the USG ordered military commanders to hire 30,000 and 60,000 IPS [Iraqi Police Service] in 30 and 60 days, respectively, which they did with the utmost of zeal. Though this approach resolved the short-term problem of getting unemployed Iraqis to work, it was the beginning of the end of any coherent plan to carefully and deliberately assemble the IPS,” in Rathmell, Iraq’s Internal Security, 5. Return to text.


21. For an illustration of the complexity, see Robert M. Perito, The Interior Ministry’s Role in Security Sector Reform (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2009), 7, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Special%20Report%20223_The%20Interior%20Ministry%20Role.pdf. See also James A. Baker III, Lee H. Hamilton et al., The Iraq Study Group Report (New York: Random House, 2006), 6, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-IRAQSTUDYGROUP/pdf/GPO-IRAQSTUDYGROUP.pdf. According to the Iraq Study Group, the Iraqi Police Service numbered about 135,000 individuals responsible for local policing but without the authority to conduct criminal investigations or the clout to tackle organized crime; the National or Federal Police numbered around 25,000 trained in counterinsurgency rather than police work; Border Enforcement numbered 28,000 individuals; and Facilities Protection Services numbered 145,000 uniformed and armed Iraqis to guard various ministries and national infrastructure with differing capabilities and broad alliances. Return to text.

22. Byrd, “Foreign Police,” 1; Committee of Privy Counsellors, Iraq Inquiry, vol. 10, para. 420, quoting then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s message to then President George W. Bush: “The numbers in the police are there. But not the quality or equipment, e.g. only 7,000 of the 80,000 police are Academy trained: 62,000 have no training; only nine percent have proper body armour; only 30 percent of the required vehicles are in place. Apparently, the logjam on resources and equipment is now broken.” Return to text.


27. Technical capacity includes knowledge, systems, and processes. See Koehler, “Projecting Stability,” 2. Return to text.

28. Rathmell, *Iraq's Internal Security*, 9. This is particularly the case in the MoD where commissions are known to be purchased and chains of corruption follow the chain of command but exists also in the MoI. Return to text.

29. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). Return to text.

30. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). Although even this example of impact has been disputed by those who argued that the civil war was winding down in the late 2000s, so the reduction in intercommunal violence in Baghdad was part of a larger nation-wide trend. Return to text.

31. Author interviews with a former high-ranking British Coalition Provisional Authority member (phone-based, August 2022). This was reinforced by multiple conversations with CPA occupation officials in Iraq in research trips between 2016 and 2018. Return to text.


34. See Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 216, para. 715, discussing the importance of building public support along with improving operational and technical capability. The strong sentiment against corruption was again evident in the October 2019 protest movement and its violent suppression in Baghdad and across the south of Iraq. Return to text.


38. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, 125; and Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 85, para. 96 outlined how challenging it was for the United Kingdom to deploy police officers. Return to text.

39. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, 127; by 2004, this budget had become 122.4 million. See also Committee of Privy Counsellors, *Iraq Inquiry*, vol. 10, p. 114, para. 262; p. 217, para. 723; and p. 423, para. 40. On p. 194, para. 631, the same report states that the NATO mission had trained 10,000 police officials in the seven years up to 2011. Return to text.


42. About 10–15 years would be a more appropriate time frame for more sustainable partnerships and results. Return to text.


46. See “NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)”; and “NATO in Iraq.” Return to text.

47. Author interview with former high-ranking NATO official (phone-based, August 2022). This information is reinforced by observations from the author’s work on an EU-funded SSR project between 2016 and 2017. Return to text.


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