PROFESSIONALIZING THE IRAQI ARMY: US ENGAGEMENT AFTER THE ISLAMIC STATE

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While the US intelligence community worries about the emergence of "Da'esh 2.0," the US security cooperation community has to worry about the development of the "Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) 4.0" that will have to fight Da'esh and meet a broad range of other security and defense requirements. Here, the "4.0" refers to the facts that this is not the United States' first attempt to assist the Iraqis in building their defense capacity and the United States is not the first security partner to try. Britain and the Soviet Union also took their turns developing Iraqi military capabilities, both with similar results.

None of these difficulties, however, should be a surprise. A survey of Iraqi military history suggests a pattern of strengths, weaknesses, and performance that includes courageous soldiers, cohesive units, incompetent leaders, divided loyalties, poor combat support, and weak institutions that have, on occasion, risen to the defense challenge. As a result, the Iraqi Army continues to be plagued by a number of crippling deficiencies including a disunified command; endemic corruption; poor communications, intelligence, and logistics; and high rates of absenteeism, all of which are exacerbated by sectarian divisions inflamed and exploited by Iran.

Moving forward, the United States needs to first determine the purpose of this cooperation. Security cooperation with Iraq is not just about defeating the Islamic State or other terrorist groups. It should also not be about establishing a partner that can threaten Iranian interests. The Iranians and the Iraqis fought a long, bloody war and have no interest in doing so again. However, the United States stands to gain when Iraq can play a constructive security role as an accepted member of the broader regional and international community. Iran cannot get the Iraqi military to that point, but the United States can. Thus, the long-term goal of US security cooperation with Iraq should be to establish its military as a valuable security partner, capable of participating in regional security arrangements, much in the same way Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Oman does.

Now is the time to reinvigorate efforts to develop the Iraqi armed forces. Iraq's victory over the Islamic State has allowed it, for the first time in its history, to play the role of liberator in a way that bridges Iraq's sectarian cleavages. For the United States and its partners to take advantage of this opportunity, however, they will have to overcome significant challenges. Despite widespread protests against malign Iranian influence, Iran's control over the Iraqi government is undiminished and will constrain what kind of cooperation it can have with the United States. Moreover, despite the image of Iraqi soldier as liberator after the fight against the Islamic State, its role in suppressing widespread protests in southern Iraq risks mediating that image with that of oppressor. At the same time, the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a separate armed force threatens competition for roles and resources, which will undermine the Iraqi military's effectiveness.

On that point, it is often said when it comes to Iraq, the Iranians are playing chess while the United States plays checkers. That's not exactly true. The United States is playing chess. Like the Iranians, the United States engages a range of diplomatic, security, economic, and social actors and institutions. Unlike the Iranians, it does so to encourage them to set aside

sectarian difference and corrupt practices to build an inclusive, prosperous Iraq that is a contributing member to global society. More to the point, and again unlike the Iranians, it provides billions of dollars in reconstruction and security assistance and connects the Iraqi government to regional and international partners to further assist development of critical institutions.

Still, while the United States may be playing chess, it is more apt to say the Iranians are playing "Settlers of Catan." By playing chess, the United States seems to think that this "game" ends when it captures the king, or in the context of Iraq, when the Iraqi government behaves consistently according to US interests. Meanwhile, the Iranians will have built a road over the chess board taking not only the king, but the park in which everyone is playing. In the Iraqi context, however, this game never ends. But more to the point, losing one source of power or influence does not end the game, it just requires one have others to rely upon. Unlike the United States, Iran gains this influence by exploiting the sectarian differences and corrupt practices that the United States seeks to discourage.

Still all is not lost. The United States has a number of comparative advantages over Iran that, if used properly, can set conditions for a more professional army. Those comparative advantages do not just include superior weapons, equipment, and maintenance support. They also include superior intelligence and logistics support as well as, when appropriate, access to coalition air and indirect fire assets. After the experience of fighting Da'esh with US assistance, it will be difficult for Iraqi leaders to turn down the quality of equipment, support, and expertise the United States-led coalition can offer. This point suggests that a significant component of US security cooperation should emphasize interoperability where Iraqi forces can "plug into" US capabilities with relative ease so it can better support Iraqi military operations.

Additionally, partnership with the United States can facilitate greater connectivity to the international community, which will increase the resources available for development and which can, over time, bolster the country's legitimacy as a responsible, international actor. Though there is not necessarily a correlation between positive international engagement and an increasingly trusted and competent Iraqi Army, the benefits of such do serve as incentives for the Iraqis to make at least some of the necessary reforms.

In exploiting these advantages, the United States needs to ensure that whether support is offered or withheld, it is done so with specific behaviors in mind. Prior to the rise of the Islamic State, the United States withheld much critical support, especially intelligence, because of Iraq's relationship with Iran. What was missing from that dynamic was specific asks regarding Iraq's cooperation with Iran that could open up mutually beneficial space for the United States to better cooperate with Iraqis to prevent an Islamic terrorist resurgence. As a result, Iraqi requests for support often went unmet while there was nothing specific individual Iraqi partners could do to address US concerns.

At the same time, the United States also provided much critical support, including aircraft and major weapon systems in addition to an ongoing training relationship with the counterterrorism service (CTS). The result was predictably mixed. The Iraqi military had a number of high-end systems they could not maintain or use effectively while the CTS transformed into the Iraqi armed forces most capable unit. It may have been possible to expand that kind of positive influence, but only had the United States made provision of these systems contingent on access and minimum standards of professional behavior, including adherence to effective maintenance practices.

In addressing these concerns, the United States is not going to compete with Iranian influence using the same means as the Iranians. In fact, it is a strength of the US approach that it seeks to remove the corruption and sectarianism the Iranians exploit. This asymmetry in approaches, however, gives Iran the upper hand in the short term, as they are able to benefit individual Iraqi decisionmakers who use the Iraqi government as a source of revenue with which they can build their own patronage networks. Meanwhile, US efforts benefit the Iraqi state but individuals more indirectly. As a result, progress is slow to take hold and easily undermined.

However, as the protests in 2019 clearly demonstrated, the Iraqi people want to be part of a state that is not only more functional, but better integrated with the international community. Thus the protestors' demands place pressure on Iraqi leaders to make meaningful reforms. However, without the proper encouragement and support, there will not likely be sufficient collective will to withstand Iranian influence and overcome barriers to progress. In providing that encouragement and support, the United States should use its comparative

advantage to incentivize the following measures to address critical shortcomings that must be resolved if the Iraqi Army is to professionalize.

UNITY OF COMMAND

- Encourage the appointment of a non-sectarian and militarily competent Chief of Defense who would answer for all security services, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), to the prime minister.
- Recruit and train capable junior leaders who respond through the chain of command to the "clearly recognized leadership" of the Chief of Defense. US leadership can quietly identify such leaders and encourage the Iraqi government to appoint them.
- Identify alternative chains of command and continue to discourage their use by reinforcing the formal chain. To facilitate this effort, US advisors should reinforce ties between the Ministry of Defense, the National Operations Center, and the Chief of the Army.
- Identify overlapping areas of responsibility within the army and other services, including the PMF, and seek ways to make competing roles and responsibilities more complementary.

CORRUPTION

- Make US support, including training and equipment, contingent on units adopting accountability practices, in the same way the United States does end-service monitoring. The idea is to set up a dynamic where a relationship with the US Army brings sufficient benefit—tangible and intangible—such that abandoning corrupt practices will be worthwhile.
- Leverage US support to get the Iraqis to adopt procedures to reduce the opportunities for corruption, such as establishing individual bank accounts from which Iraqi soldiers would be paid.
- Leverage technology to the extent Iraqis can adequately absorb it to reinforce corruption-resistant procedures.
- Encourage senior Iraqi leadership to develop and promulgate a professional ethic compatible with Iraqi culture which establishes an Iraqi Army identity encouraging commitment to humanitarian ideals, competence, and effective stewardship of the profession.

POOR COMBAT SUPPORT: COMMUNICATIONS, INTELLIGENCE, AND LOGISTICS

- Encourage Iraqis not to use civilian communications infrastructure, especially cell phones, that is extremely unreliable and unsecure. Rather, encourage the use and maintenance of military communications.
- Improve intelligence sharing and, more importantly, interoperability of the US and Iraqi intelligence organizations to provide Iraqi forces with timely and actionable tactical intelligence.
- Discourage the use of intelligence and security services to monitor each other's activities.
- Encourage Iraqis to develop sustainable technical solutions that provide independent accounting for supplies, spare parts, and maintenance activities.
- Emphasize logistic interoperability so US logistics capabilities can assist the Iraqis quickly in times of crisis.

ABSENTEEISM, ADMINISTRATION, AND RISK AVERSION

- Improve administrative capabilities to ensure better accountability, resources, and pay for soldiers as well as limit opportunities to inflate unit rosters with "ghost soldiers." Better accountability will improve soldier quality of life and begin to build trust between soldiers and their leaders.
- Recruit college graduates, particularly those in technical fields, to assume roles as junior officers.
- Emphasize individual and small-unit skills with the aim to build a competent base of skilled soldiers and junior leaders while setting the conditions for developing capabilities for larger unit operations.
- Emphasize relationships between US professional military educational schools with Iraq's. These relationships should emphasize both tactical and operational skills and the standards associated with establishing and maintaining a profession. Additionally, the United States should attempt to reinvigorate Iraq's Defense Language Institute English language programs, as doing so would facilitate interoperability with US forces and the larger coalition.

SECTARIANISM

- Avoid zero tolerance policies regarding Iranian presence. Certain kinds of Iranian influence should limit US cooperation, but making the Iraqis always choose between a relationship with the United States and a relationship with Iran simply cedes space to the Iranians. Rely on US advantages the Iranians cannot replicate and make any support contingent on taking steps required to build a more professional, nonsectarian Iraqi Army.
- Publicize instances of malign Iranian influence.
- Discourage the Iraqi government from creating new security institutions and encourage it to place all security organizations under the direct operational control of either the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of the Interior, as appropriate.
- Maintain a relationship with and support for Kurdish Regional Guard Brigades. Play a role in building up the Regional Guard Brigades, but in a way that builds, or at least does not undermine, ties with Baghdad. Avoid the zero-sum game of Iraqi politics: supporting the Kurds could be seen as a threat by Baghdad and result in restrictions on its cooperation with the United States. Alienating Baghdad risks ceding more space to the Iranians, as good relations with Baghdad are necessary to contesting malign Iranian influence.
- Encourage more international cooperation to increase the resources available to the Iraqi Army and legitimate the US presence in ways the Iranians will not be able to replicate.
- Encourage a local role for the various militias similar to the model the British employed during the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman. In Oman, the British convinced the Omani sultan to establish *firqat*, which were platoon-to-company-sized organizations of tribal fighters who came from the same tribes that were rebelling. They were employed locally, had a few British Special Air Service advisors, and served as scouts, guides, and "home guards" that were able to consolidate regular Omani force gains.

With Da'esh no longer in control of Iraqi territory, the rationale for US direct action, large numbers of advisors, and robust intelligence and logistics support will disappear. This point is true from the perspectives of both the Iraqis and the United States. For the Iraqis' part, they will likely accept—and the Iranians will likely tolerate—only limited forms of US cooperation against Da'esh and any other militant groups that again threaten Iraqi sovereignty. For the United States' part, limited resources and growing global security challenges will likely divert its attention—and, with it, security cooperation resources—elsewhere. These points suggest whatever bilateral US cooperation survives in post-Da'esh Iraq will be inadequate to the task of wholly professionalizing the Iraqi Army, much less the other defense and security institutions.

Engagement will have to steady and successes will likely be small and incremental.

Despite this bleak assessment, all is not necessarily lost. It should be clear from this analysis that no external party, neither the United States nor Iran, will ever be in a position to entirely address the political, social, cultural, and economic factors that impede the Iraqi Army's ability to professionalize. But by directing attention to the conditions that facilitate the growth of a professional officer and noncommissioned officer corps, one can help develop institutions that communicate and expand expert knowledge as well as the factors that undermine trust. In this way, external actors can influence the Iraqi Army to make the reforms necessary to become an effective fighting force.

Moreover, the current moment in Iraq's military history gives it rare momentum to reform. As long as it does not embrace again its role in the suppression of domestic opposition, the Iraqi Army can capitalize on its image as national liberator and defender to attract the right kind of recruits as well as the urgency of its ongoing defense requirements to enact the right kinds of reforms. To support such efforts, the United States should engage in continued, steady efforts emphasizing the critical areas discussed above to set conditions for meaningful improvement when political and social conditions permit. Of course, no one measure is going to improve the Iraqi Army. But, taken together, these recommendations represent a good chance for US security cooperation efforts to achieve a "tipping point" that enables the kind of reform that can allow the Iraqi Army to move beyond its historic limitations.

As US security cooperators attempt to set those conditions on what will likely be a shoestring budget, getting to that tipping point will require implementing measures aimed at building trust within the Iraqi Army and with the other security services and the

civilian government. Building that trust will allow the Iraqi Army to better harness the resources it has, establish the kinds of institutions that can sustain its current momentum toward meaningful reform, and establish itself as a professional, effective military force in a region in desperate need of stability.

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