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Iraq's New Security Forces: The Challenge of Sectarian and Ethnic Influences

Jeremy M. Sharp
Middle East Policy Analyst
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

This report analyzes the prospects for rebuilding an inclusive Iraqi security force that transcends Iraq's various ethnic and sectarian communities. U.S. policy makers and Iraqi officials aim to create a unified Iraqi security force; however, the predominately Sunni Arab insurgency has hampered this effort, and many believe that the new Iraqi security agencies will ultimately be composed of mostly Shiite and Kurdish recruits with both communities separately maintaining their own militias. As Iraqi officials attempt to build a pluralistic political system, an important challenge will be rebuilding an inclusive Iraqi security force that does not exacerbate relations between Iraq's ethnic/religious communities and increase the likelihood of civil war. For more information on Iraq, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance*, by Kenneth Katzman and CRS Report RS22323, *Iran's Influence in Iraq*, by Jeremy M. Sharp. This report will be updated periodically.

Introduction

The Bush Administration has deemed the rapid creation of an effective Iraqi fighting force as key to stabilizing Iraq and expediting the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. The rationale for this effort is that a well-trained, well-equipped Iraqi army can be effective in quelling the insurgency and can help smooth the process of restoring full sovereignty to a new Iraqi government. U.S. policy makers envision the new Iraqi security forces (ISF) to be representative of Iraqi society at large. A goal is for the new Iraqi army and police to transcend Iraq's religious and ethnic boundaries and keep the country unified while fighting an insurgency.

However, there is concern that the ethnic-sectarian nature of the burgeoning insurgency is undermining U.S. and Iraqi efforts to create a unified Iraqi security force that can prevent internal insurgent violence from metastasizing into a larger Iraqi civil war among Sunnis and Iraqi Shiites and Kurds. With violence unabated in Baghdad and Iraq's three main Sunni provinces, there has been considerable emphasis on recruiting, training,

and equipping Iraqi soldiers and policemen, but substantially less attention to the future ethnic/religious makeup of various Iraqi security entities.

Background

Since its creation at the hands of the British in 1921, the Iraqi army has never been able to effectively integrate the country's Arabs and Kurds, as the army has traditionally been a strong institution and a source of pride among many Iraqi Sunni and some Shiite Arabs. Sunni Arab officers, who had served in both the Ottoman Empire and the Arab revolt against that empire in World War I, formed the core of the nascent army, which was primarily designed to be an internal security force with little or no ability to project power beyond Iraq's borders. During the British mandate (1920-1932), the British effectively controlled the Iraqi army, but curbed its expansion by relying on British air power and an ethnically/religiously-based unit known as the Assyrian levies, which was controlled by the Ministry of the Interior and was used as a bulwark against Turkish meddling in the north and as a counter-insurgency force against rebellious segments of Iraqi society such as the Shiites and Kurds.

After Iraq obtained full independence in 1932, its Sunni army officers became outwardly more politicized, culminating in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 by Major General Abdul-Karim Qassim. Sunnis continued to dominate the officer corps of the Iraqi army and, by the early 1960s, Sunnis composed 70% of all officers in the Iraqi army (of whom 45% hailed from Mosul), with Shiites making up 20% and Kurds and other minorities 10%.¹ Relations between Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish officers were tense, due to repeated Kurdish revolts in northern Iraq and institutional discrimination against Shiites within the army.

Saddam Hussein, who himself had no formal military training, purged the army of anyone considered to be a potential threat to him and to the Baath party. He created a number of overlapping security agencies and filled them with members of his immediate family and larger tribe. Saddam largely ignored the regular Iraqi army, with the exception of the elite Republican Guard units, as power within his regime was based largely on his special security agencies which kept close tabs on Iraqi officers. Saddam continued the practice of relegating Shiites to low level positions and to conscripts within the regular army. Shiites took a disproportionate amount of casualties on the front lines of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980's. Ultimately, like other ruthless dictators, Saddam's preference for loyal internal security forces and elite military units succeeded in preventing regular army units from attempting to overthrow the regime.

Disbanding the Iraqi Army. Historians will most likely continue to debate the U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi army in May 2003. Many critics point to that decision (Order #2 -Dissolution of Entities) as the single most important factor in destabilizing Iraq after the cessation of large scale military operations. Although observers expected U.S. officials to prohibit the upper echelon of Saddam's security forces from rejoining the army, the initial decision to exclude regular army officers and conscripts surprised many analysts who had argued for the Administration to distinguish between Saddam's

¹ Ahmed S. Hashim, "Military Power and State Formation in Modern Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2003, Vol.10, Iss.4; p.29.

privileged inner core and the largely neglected regular army. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), defended the policy, noting the role the decree had in reassuring the Kurds that the CPA was serious about creating a united Iraq and convincing them not to secede.²

Current U.S. Training Efforts

U.S. policy has been focused on rapidly preparing Iraqi forces to take over security responsibilities in order to expedite the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. The Multi-National Security Training Command - Iraq (MNSTC) has been charged with training Iraqi security personnel. MNSTC is headed by Army Lieutenant General Martin E. Dempsey, who succeeded General David H. Petraeus in September 2005. During his tour, General Petraeus was credited with implementing a more realistic assessment of Iraqi troop readiness, embedding U.S. advisors with Iraqi units, and shifting more of the military's resources toward training. Nevertheless, critics charge that U.S. training efforts are hampered by a shortage of U.S. trainers and Arabic translators, corruption inside various Iraqi ministries, and regional and ethnic divisions inside the Iraqi Security Forces.

Prospects for a Unified Iraqi Army

As stated earlier, the effort to create a unified Iraqi security force mirrors and depends on Iraqi politicians' efforts to create a pluralistic political system that is representative of all of Iraq's ethnic and religious communities. While no exact breakdown of Iraqi recruits by religious/ethnic group has been cited in public sources, U.S. commanders have sought to create a security force that is roughly proportional to Iraq's various sectarian communities. The Sunni-character of the insurgency has hindered efforts both at the political and military levels, though some analysts caution against describing the situation as a burgeoning civil war. Other analysts believe that while the numerical strength of the Sunni insurgency may be small, the perception of a sectarian civil war could become a reality unless Sunnis are integrated into the Iraqi security forces in a significant way.

Sunni Participation. In 2005, U.S. and Iraqi officials increased their efforts to recruit Sunnis into the ISF with limited success. After the January 30, 2005, transitional parliamentary elections, some Sunni clerics issued *fatwas* (religious edicts) calling on Sunni males to enlist in the ISF. According to General Petraeus, there was a major U.S. effort to recruit Sunnis following the elections, which resulted in the recruitment of "several thousand" Sunnis with many of them joining the public order battalions of the Ministry of Interior (MOI).³

One of the most highly regarded Sunni units under the control of the MOI is a unit of Special Police Commandos, a counter-insurgency force that has actively fought alongside U.S. forces. The unit was formed in September 2004 by General Adnan Thabit,

² L. Paul Bremer III, "The Right Call," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 12, 2005.

³ The MOI is led by Bayan Jabr, a Shiite. It oversees Iraq's police forces and is considered to be largely Shiite. For a transcript of General Petraeus' remarks see, "Iraq's Evolving Forces," Remarks by Lieutenant General David Petraeus to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 7, 2005.

a 63-year-old Sunni and former intelligence officer in the Iraqi Air Force who was thrown in prison for plotting a coup against Saddam Hussein in 1996. According to press reports, the unit was initially formed without U.S. approval by Iraqi officials during the brief tenure of former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.⁴

The Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MOD), which is led by Sadun al-Dulaymi, a Sunni, also has made some progress in integrating Sunnis into its ranks. In November 2005, the MOD announced that former Iraqi officers up to the rank of major are eligible for reinstatement in the ISF. According to senior U.S. military officials, this process had already been under way for some time and the decision would hopefully return more mid-level officers to the Iraqi army.⁵ Officers from Saddam Hussein's Special Republican Guard units would still be banned from ISF participation. As of December 2005, the Defense Ministry's call for junior officers from the old army has drawn applications from 3,769 officers, with 2,662 of them accepted.⁶

Nevertheless, press reports from Sunni areas in Iraq indicate that there is still deep mistrust among Sunni tribal elements toward coalition and Iraqi forces. Over the past few months, several U.S. and Iraqi military commanders have conducted town hall meetings in several Sunni provinces in order to convince tribal leaders to encourage their members to join the ISF. Sunni Arabs have demanded that rather than working with existing ISF units, they be allowed to raise their own tribal militias. Iraqi and U.S. leaders have so far rejected such demands, as many analysts believe that tribal units from Sunni areas would be too susceptible to insurgent infiltration. Sunni recruits to the ISF are viewed as traitors by their fellow Sunnis, making it difficult to attract Sunni soldiers and police to the ISF.

In addition, continued attacks have further hampered efforts to recruit Sunnis into the ISF. On January 5, 2006, 50 people were killed in a suicide bombing attack aimed at an Iraqi police recruiting drive in the largely Sunni town of Ramadi, 70 miles west of Baghdad. According to press reports, the police recruits were part of a contingent being created for the Sunni province of Anbar. In 2005, the ISF police force in Ramadi dissolved after Iraqi officers failed to show up for work after a number of insurgent attacks against them. Sunni police forces also collapsed in Mosul and Fallujah during clashes with insurgents in November 2004.

Growing Sunni-Shiite Tensions. It has been widely reported that Shiites make up the bulk of the Interior Ministry forces (police) and much of the rank and file of the regular armed forces. With a shortage of reliable Sunni soldiers to patrol Sunni provinces, the U.S. and Iraqi governments have been forced to deploy mostly Shiite units to Sunni towns, which has only exacerbated inter-communal tensions. For example, the Iraqi army's 7th Division, First Brigade, a mostly Shiite unit, is stationed outside of Ramadi. During the recent December 2005 parliamentary elections, some Shiite soldiers had posters bearing the image of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr stuck on their chests or

⁴ "The Salvadorization of Iraq?" *New York Times Magazine*, May 1, 2005.

⁵ "Iraq Asks Return of Some Officers of Hussein Army," *New York Times*, November 3, 2005.

⁶ "Under U.S. Design, Iraq's New Army Looks a Good Deal Like the Old One," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2005.

fastened to the end of raised AK-47 assault rifles.⁷ In the past, other units have displayed pasted-up images of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on the backs of their pickup trucks while serving in Baghdad.

Sunni Distrust of Shiite Militias. However, more than anything else, ongoing violence between Shiite militias and armed Sunni insurgent groups has led to further ethnic and sectarian polarization. Although under CPA order #91 (June 2004), militias independent of the Iraqi armed forces were declared illegal, in an effort to combat the insurgency and increase the number of Iraqi forces serving in the field, Iraqi and U.S. officials early on allowed some militias to operate in the field independent of the regular Iraqi security forces, particularly to protect Shiite shrines. Since then, Shiite groups such as the Badr Brigade (controlled by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq - SCIRI) and the Mahdi Army (controlled by Muqtada al-Sadr) have contributed thousands of recruits to the ISF and have served as a reliable source of manpower, particularly when there was a major security vacuum brought on by the dissolution and disbandment of the old Iraqi army in 2003. Nevertheless, many observers have questioned the loyalties of militiamen to the central government in Baghdad.

The Badr Brigade is distrusted by many Sunni Arabs due to its association with Iran (Iran trained and equipped the brigade during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s). Sunnis accuse the Badr Brigade of conducting reprisal killings against Sunni civilians. One well known brigade in the ISF, the “Wolf Brigade,”⁸ has been singled out by Sunni critics for their brutal tactics in targeting suspected terrorists and Sunni insurgents. The Badr Brigade is believed to have contributed a number of soldiers to the Wolf Brigade, which is under the control of the Iraqi Interior Ministry.⁹

Sunni condemnations of organized political violence by Shiite militias came to a head in November 2005, when U.S. forces discovered a series of covert prisons in Baghdad allegedly run Shiite ISF members loyal to the Badr Brigade. Investigators uncovered evidence that prisoners, mostly Sunni Arabs, had been tortured at the clandestine facilities. The Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni Arab religious group, posted images of abused prisoners on its website in order to discredit the Badr Brigade.

The Mahdi Army, which took up arms against U.S. forces before integrating into the Iraqi police, has reportedly formed police units called “the Punishment Committees,” which harass civilians suspected of flouting Islamic law or their authority. According to one U.S. military officer, “the Mahdi army’s got the Iraqi police and Badr’s got the commandos...Everybody’s got their own death squads.”¹⁰ The Mahdi Army is

⁷ “Iraqi Official’s Visit to Sunni Province Underscores Depth of Distrust,” *Washington Post*, December 13, 2005.

⁸ The Wolf Brigade runs one of the most popular television shows in Iraq, “Terrorism in the Hands of Justice,” which routinely airs confessions of insurgents in order to discredit their cause.

⁹ See CRS Report RS22323, *Iran’s Influence in Iraq*, updated November 30, 2005, by Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁰ “Killings Linked To Shiite Squads In Iraqi Police Force,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2005.

reportedly strongest in the southern Shiite city of Basra, where it shares power with the Badr Brigade and the ISF.

The blending of Shiite militias with many units under the control of the Iraqi Interior Ministry has caused many Sunni Arabs to distrust Iraq's police forces. Extrajudicial killings and kidnappings are routinely carried out by militia members posing as police officers, a similar tactic that Sunni insurgents have used to attack U.S. and Iraqi forces. Since the transfer of sovereignty to Iraq in June 2004, observers note that U.S. advisors and trainers have worked more closely with Iraqi Ministry of Defense units, and there has been less oversight of Iraqi police forces.¹¹

Kurds in the ISF. Many analysts have questioned whether, over the long run, the ISF can successfully integrate Iraqi Arabs and Kurds. Since the start of U.S. efforts to rebuild the Iraqi army, the combination of the Sunni character of the insurgency in conjunction with the poorer quality of the Sunni and Shiite recruits forced U.S. and Iraqi officials to rely heavily on the Kurdish components of the security forces. According to U.S. military officials, Kurdish soldiers, due to the strength and experience of their militias or *peshmerga*, are better trained and more highly committed than other Iraqi recruits.

Many observers question whether Kurds can ultimately be fully integrated into the Iraqi security forces if Kurdish leaders insist on retaining their own militias. Some military analysts note that Kurdish recruits are more loyal to their tribal and political party leaders than they are to the central government in Baghdad, calling into question the viability of a single unified Iraqi army. The combination of a long history of Kurdish-Arab conflict, the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish villages between 1988-1990, and Kurdish desires for autonomy may have produced a strong antipathy among Kurdish politicians for a strong, centralized military force in Iraq. According to Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, one of the two main Kurdish parties, "We want to keep our *peshmerga* because they are a symbol of resistance...it's not a matter to be discussed or negotiated."¹² Other analysts note that Kurdish soldiers are most likely to serve in northern Iraq and are reluctant to be publicly identified as taking a major military role against Iraqi Sunni Arabs. According to Fareed Asasard, the director of the Kurdistan Strategic Studies Center, "don't think that because the *peshmerga* succeeded in Mosul, they know Anbar [province]... I don't think they would be successful in Fallujah or Ramadi. Personally, I have never seen Samarra or Ramadi or Fallujah — but I have seen Mosul."¹³

¹¹ The Iraqi Interior Ministry recently agreed to reform some of its operations, including firing certain commanders of Special Police Commando units, renaming the Wolf Brigade (now the "Freedom Brigade"), and giving the Justice Ministry control over Iraqi prisons. These changes were reportedly suggested by U.S. military and State Department officials. See, "Iraq Tackles Police Reform, *Washington Times*, January 11, 2006.

¹² "Kurds Vow to Retain Militia as Guardians of Autonomy," *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2005.

¹³ "Though Battle-Hardened, Iraq's Kurdish Militia Struggles for Role," *Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 2, 2005.