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Iraq security strategy: a complex challenge

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by Peter Khalil

Executive summary

Rebuilding Iraqi security forces and security institutions has been of fundamental importance to the Coalition's strategic objectives in Iraq. An examination of the effectiveness of Iraqi security arrangements from May 2003 to January 2005 illustrates how far the US and the Coalition have progressed in meeting this objective. During this period, the Coalition has sought to build the capacity of the newly-formed Iraqi security institutions, including the Ministerial Council on National Security, the reconstituted Ministry of Interior and its national police and internal security forces, and the 'start from scratch' Iraqi Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence. The results, however, have been uneven: levels of capability and competence differ among the forces and institutions.

Changing Iraqi security arrangements, rapid political transition and a continuing insurgency throughout 2005 present a number of future security challenges. To ensure the implementation of a successful security strategy in the next year, the Coalition and Iraqis must adapt to changing and volatile circumstances.

A number of policy modifications are needed, including significant changes to elements of Coalition training to ensure that the right types of Iraqi forces are capable of taking on insurgents, increased efforts to build capacity and democratic practices in security ministries, and a fine-tuning of the complex security relationship between the Multi-National Force–Iraq and the Iraqi forces.

As part of Iraq's post-war army, Iraqi soldiers patrol a street in Baghdad. AAP/Sabah Arar © 2003 AAP

Introduction

The Iraqi national elections held on 30 January 2005 will not by themselves defeat the insurgency in Iraq. To be successful, the Coalition's Iraq strategy must push progress on the political transition, security, and economic reconstruction fronts.
The critical feature of the security element of the strategy is the training of the Iraqi security forces and the capacity building of the security institutions that support them. Australian Defence Force elements are tasked, as part of the Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF–I), with training the new Iraqi military. It is highly likely that US and Coalition forces will carry the main burden of security and remain in Iraq to combat the insurgency, at least over the next two years (assuming that a future Iraqi Government does not call for their immediate withdrawal). A realistic handover of security responsibilities from US and Coalition forces to Iraqi security forces in this period depends on the effectiveness of the training effort and on the improvement in the quality and capabilities of the Iraqi security forces and institutions.

An Iraqi woman after casting her vote at a polling station in Iraq 30 January 2005. AAP/Henghameh Fahimi © 2005 AAP

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This paper will assess:

- the effectiveness of Iraqi security arrangements from May 2003 to January 2005
- the dissolution of the old Iraqi Army and the rebuilding of the new Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF)
- Australia's role in the training of the new Iraqi Army
- changing Iraqi security arrangements throughout 2005 and future security challenges.

Iraqi security arrangements from May 2003 to January 2005: an assessment of effectiveness

Before this year's election, Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi worked with the Coalition Provisional Authority to develop policies for building the capacity and determining the direction of the newly formed Iraqi security institutions. These included the Ministerial Council on National Security (an executive decision-making body), the reconstituted Ministry of Interior and its national police and internal security forces, and the 'start from scratch' IAF and Ministry of Defence.

The Ministerial Council on National Security (MCNS)

The MCNS was developed before the transition to sovereignty as the critically important national security institution, facilitating and coordinating national security policy among the Iraqi ministries and agencies with national security tasks. It remains the main Iraqi forum for ministerial-level decision making on the full range of security priorities, and uses its capacity for interministerial coordination, risk assessment and intelligence fusion to respond. During the interim period, Allawi and the MCNS were central in developing strategies to counter terrorism and defeat the insurgency. Indeed, it was Allawi and the MCNS that pushed for and then gave final authority for the military operations to retake Samarra, Fallujah, Ramadi and other Sunni-triangle towns and bring them back under Iraqi Government control in late 2004.

Internal security forces and the Ministry of Interior

The roles of the Iraqi Police are law enforcement, public safety and community service. There are also specialised, nationally based, police commando units, which are being built with the required counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism capability. These forces are in various stages of development, but in the interim period they were entirely controlled and commanded by the Iraqi Interim Government, and had successes in the front line against the terrorist and insurgent threats.

The reconstituted Ministry of Interior formulates and oversees policy for the police and for border and facilities-protection forces. Unlike the old Iraqi Ministry of Defence and Army (which collapsed, were dissolved by the Coalition and have subsequently been rebuilt), the Ministry of Interior and its police forces have functioned continuously. However, the ministry has been extensively reconstituted: key Baathist staff from the Saddam regime have been dismissed and replaced. As a result, the Ministry of Interior has suffered from shortages of administrative and logistics staff, and has also suffered from a shortage of expert Coalition advisers. In addition, the initially decentralised training of the police forces led to many problems of uneven vetting and recruiting.

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During the interim period, police and internal security personnel began coordinating successfully with the Coalition and the IAF through a network of local, regional and national structures. For example, the MNF–I has been coordinating with interior and police services at the provincial level through Joint Coordination Centres, which have provided a command and control capability while Iraqi Police Service command and control centres are gradually established. The MNF–I has continued to transfer responsibility for security to appropriate Iraqi civil authorities as they have developed their capacity and as security conditions permit.

Iraqi Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence

The defining mission of the IAF is the defence of Iraq from external threats. It is a force built from scratch, but it includes ground, air and coastal defence elements and it will grow to around twenty-seven battalions or three divisions by mid-2005. In late 2004,

As part of Iraq's post-war army, Iraqi soldiers patrol a street in Baghdad. AAP/Sabah Arar © 2003 AAP

special forces units of the Iraqi Army (the Iraqi Intervention Force, currently nine battalions strong) were effective in military operations in Fallujah and Samarra alongside US Marines.

The Iraqi National Guard (currently sixty-five light infantry battalions) is a paramilitary force that has been integrated into the IAF. The National Guard was recruited and trained regionally as an auxiliary force, in a much quicker cycle (two to three weeks training) than the new army (which has eight weeks basic training). Limited training and uneven vetting of recruits have meant that it has been found wanting in taking on insurgents.

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A key area where progress has been made to date is capacity building within the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, which is now headed by a civilian Minister of Defence. The ministry was established in early 2004, with the primary role of providing strategic, administrative and logistical policy oversight of the IAF. A civilian-led Iraqi Ministry of Defence is critical, given the past history of civil–military relations in Iraq. During the Baathist regime, the Baath Party emptied the military of independent professional officers and replaced them with Baathist ideologues in uniform, some of whom held the key security posts in the cabinet. In turn, the Baathified military dominated the former ministry. In contrast, the new ministry has been built to be civilian controlled, transparent, professional, merit-based, and broadly representative of the Iraqi people.

The dissolution of the old Iraqi Army

Much has been made of the 'mistake' of disbanding the old Iraqi Army, but the decision to dismantle and rebuild was not the dire mistake many critics have

suggested. This is particularly the case in relation to the long-term effectiveness of the new Iraqi military and its ability to support a democratic state. There is ample evidence of the ineffectiveness of the old Iraqi army. Its performance was consistently bad, with inadequate and largely politicised leadership, tactical incompetence, a plethora of structural problems and a tendency, beginning all the way back in the 1930s, to be used to attack its own people, with a litany of massacres against Assyrians, Kurds and Shia.

The old Iraqi Army actually dissolved during and after the 2003 war. The 400,000 largely Shia conscripts of the regular Army deserted en masse, and they were not going to come back. Almost all Ministry of Defence and Iraqi military facilities were destroyed in the Coalition bombing campaign and therefore required major repairs and reconstruction to make them usable. In other words, there were no barracks or workable infrastructure for troops to return to. More important, however, was the fact that those Iraqi forces that might have been called upon, albeit in incomplete units with no logistical or administrative infrastructure, were largely elements of Sunni- (that is, Baathist) commanded divisions of the regular Army, and of the Special Republican Guard and the Republican Guard. These forces were unacceptable to the vast majority of the Iraqi people because of their Baathist politicisation, because of their use by the Baath regime as the foremost tools of repression against the Iraqi people, and because their primary function had been to protect the regime. They were not a foundation that could be built on: their structures were inimical to the requirements of a modern, capable, non-political defence force having the defence of Iraq and the Iraqi people in support of a democratic state as its main mission.

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The real mistake was not having sufficient US and Coalition troops in the immediate post-war phase to establish basic law and order and prevent the widespread looting that ensued. There were enough to win the war and remove Saddam's regime, but clearly not enough to ensure the peace. The grace period in which the Iraqi people welcomed the Coalition forces as liberators very quickly eroded as Iraqis observed the US-led Coalition's inability to provide basic security in the streets of Iraqi cities.

Australia's role in training Iraqi security forces

In addition to supporting the growing Iraqi security forces in internal security operations, one of the main missions of the MNF–I is training the newly formed and reconstituted Iraqi units. Australian forces have played a prominent role in this mission: so far, the bulk of the Australian contribution within the MNF–I has been dedicated to training the new Iraqi military.

Australia has recently announced the additional deployment of a new 450-troop Australian Task Force to provide security in the relatively stable southern province of Al Muthanna (which has suffered around thirty insurgent attacks, far fewer than some of the more volatile northern provinces). A battle group made up of most of the task force—about 360 personnel with forty ASLAVs (Australian Light Armoured Vehicles)—will work alongside 600 British troops to secure the province. They will

provide security support as necessary for the 600 Japanese engineering and support troops rebuilding the province's infrastructure and doing other humanitarian work. Doubts have been raised about the exact role that Australian forces will play and whether they have the required levels of preparedness and equipment—including helicopter support, an element which was part of the Dutch contingent they are replacing. The day-to-day operations of the Australian battle group in Al Muthanna will only become clearer closer to the date of deployment, because of the fluidity of security conditions and the need to coordinate and finalise operational and tactical tasks with British and Japanese troops.

Australia has consistently provided high-quality training to the Iraqi Army and Navy at military bases throughout Iraq over the past eighteen months.

However, what is more certain is the role of the approximately seventy to ninety Australian task force members who will form a team to train and mentor the Iraqi Army units operating in the province. Australia has consistently provided high-quality training to the Iraqi Army and Navy at military bases throughout Iraq over the past eighteen months. The task force trainers in Al Muthanna will continue this mission, albeit with an added element of direct mentoring of operational Iraqi units.

In the past eighteen months Australian trainers have already trained two Iraqi Army brigades, with a focus on combat operations. Australia has been prudent in ensuring that the training of Iraqi Army recruits has focused on core military operations such as defending Iraq from external aggression—a core mission that is required of a modern Iraqi army in the long term. There has been a significant amount of pressure both from Coalition military partners and the interim Iraqi authorities to use Iraqi Army units in internal security operations against the insurgents. In fact, special forces units of the Iraqi Army counter-insurgency wing, the Iraqi Intervention Force, have been effective in military operations in Samarra and Fallujah.

While the use of all available and capable Iraqi units is necessary during the current period of instability, in the long term Iraq will still require a capable modern Army with a role and mission focused on defending Iraqi territorial integrity. Australian training assistance has been integral in helping Iraqis meet this long-term goal. With this in mind, the current rotation of Australian trainers has shifted the training focus to providing specialist logistics skills training, with significant emphasis on 'train the trainer' programs to allow Iraqis to continue their own training.

Iraqis have been particularly amenable to the Australian style of training. This is largely due to the respect that Iraqis accord to trainers in uniform (although large numbers of US military personnel have been involved in training Iraqis, certain elements of the US training of the initial Iraqi Army battalions were conducted solely by contractors). The relative effectiveness of Australian trainers is also a result of sharing with Iraqis a common tradition and understanding of British doctrine and tactics. The Australians have shown they can connect with Iraqis through treating Iraqi culture with respect, the lack of which among contracted, non-uniformed trainers has been particularly criticised by Iraqis. The US military has since responded to these training weaknesses by boosting its role in direct mentoring and training of Iraqi Army recruits.

Iraqi security arrangements after 30 January 2005

A successful Iraq security strategy

The security strategy outlined by the US for implementation through 2005 and beyond is fundamentally sound, at least at the theoretical level. The aim is to train Iraqi security forces and have them take over responsibility for dealing directly with the insurgency, so that US forces can gradually withdraw.

The quality, not the quantity, of the Iraqi security forces (136,000 of whom are said to be trained and in uniform) is critical to a realistic transfer of security responsibility from US forces to Iraqi forces.

A US Marine trains an Iraqi policeman in Fallujah, Iraq.
AP via AAP/John Moore © 2004 The Associated Press

The devil is in the detail, however. The quality, not the quantity, of the Iraqi security forces (136,000 of whom are said to be trained and in uniform) is critical to a realistic transfer of security responsibility from US forces to Iraqi forces. Given that at present the vast majority of the Iraqi forces have not been given the required counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism training, and do not have the required capabilities to conduct offensive (or even at times defensive) operations against the insurgents, US and Coalition forces are likely to carry the main burden of security and remain in Iraq to combat the insurgency at least for the next two years.

Training internal security forces with the necessary capabilities to take on insurgents, with limited and declining levels of US support, must be made a priority.

Therefore, the development and particularly the effectiveness of Iraqi national security institutions and forces are crucial to the success of a gradual handover. Training internal security forces with the necessary capabilities to take on insurgents, with limited and declining levels of US support, must be made a priority. Competent Iraqi police forces are particularly important because of their specialised training and skill sets and their ability to combine intelligence, law enforcement and light infantry capabilities. They are also important because a heavy emphasis on Army internal security operations should be limited as far as possible. The Iraqi Police and National Guard performed well guarding polling centres on 30 January, because fixed point and cordon security are what they have been trained to do—not offensive operations against an insurgency.

US forces will gradually draw down from offensive operations only when a majority

of the specialised Iraqi Police units and Army special forces become operational. There are plans for thirty-three battalions of special police units, most of which are currently in training (in Iraq and in neighbouring countries). They are scheduled to become operational over the next twelve to eighteen months. Currently, the army has nine operational battalions of special forces with counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism training, and there are approximately ten to twelve operational battalions of special police commando units. These forces number about 15,000 out of the 136,000 Iraqis in uniform, and their numbers are growing. All of the 15,000 have the required capabilities to take on the insurgents effectively, although most of the remainder of Iraqi forces (largely National Guard and local police) play a critical supporting role.

Future security challenges

During the next twelve months, Iraq's greatest challenge—and the key to its future as an independent, capable state with effective governing structures—will be the stabilisation of the security situation. Iraqis have to achieve internal security while developing the permanent and effective security institutions and forces needed to ensure longer term security and stability without a reliance on Coalition forces. The fact that the newly elected Iraqi Transitional Government will also seek continued US and Coalition security assistance in these areas is apparent from comments by key Iraqi political leaders such as Dr Ibrahim Jaafari, who have made it clear they will not be seeking a withdrawal timetable from the US.

In the violent and volatile Iraqi security environment, particularly over the next twelve months, the insurgents will no doubt continue their attempts to derail the political process—particularly by trying to stir up sectarian strife. It will often be necessary for the stronger and better equipped military forces of the MNF–I to assist the police and interior forces, the vast majority of which are still training and developing their capabilities and capacity. The current threats of terrorism and violent insurgency put Iraq in a continuous state of emergency, and even fully capable and trained police and interior forces would need help from stronger military forces. The important military principle of unity of command underlies the operations of the MNF–I, and the IAF will be under the command and control of the MNF–I commander. This will undoubtedly affect the power of the Iraqi Transitional Government to direct decisions, but we cannot and should not assume that the Transitional Government will have no say in the matter as long as the MNF–I exists. Indeed, the Iraqi Transitional Government may exercise even more control over the growing Iraqi interior forces than did Allawi's Interim Government.

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In the immediate future, particularly leading up to the drafting of the new constitution and the referenda on it, insurgents using terrorist tactics to incite sectarian strife will pose an increasingly critical security challenge to the Transitional Government. The aims of the insurgents are far from any supposedly noble ideals of national resistance; in fact, one aim is to kill as many Iraqi civilians as possible, in the hope of derailing the political process over the course of 2005 by destabilising

Transitional Government and Coalition efforts to help Iraqis establish democratic governing structures.

A democratically elected Transitional Government must be able to use whatever means are at its disposal to achieve the objective of defeating major internal threats to the state and society.

The relationship developed between the Interim Government and the MNF–I command to develop strategic analysis and counter-terrorism campaign planning and to ensure close coordination between the various forces, will continue between the MNF–I and the Iraqi Transitional Government. However, it is planned and desirable that Iraqi reliance on Coalition assistance should decline gradually, both in operations and in Iraqi force building. A democratically elected Transitional Government must be able to use whatever means are at its disposal to achieve the objective of defeating major internal threats to the state and society. The support of the MNF–I for Iraq's not yet fully developed security organs is critical to achieving this objective. Combating the insurgency and terrorism threats on a tactical and operational level will necessarily involve Iraqi high-end and supporting security forces and the MNF–I for at least the next twelve months.

Important disclaimer

About the Author

Peter Khalil is currently a visiting fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. He spent 9 months in Iraq from August 2003 to May 2004 as the Director of National Security Policy for the Coalition Provisional Authority working to rebuild Iraqi security forces and institutions. Peter has also been an Executive Officer in the Iraq Task Force at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and a Strategy and Planning Officer at the Department of Defence. He has recently published op-ed pieces in the New York Times and the Australian.

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