

AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE: CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN POST-SADDAM IRAQ

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The self-proclaimed Islamic State's takeover of Mosul in the summer of 2014 was a dark moment for Iraq's military and civilian leaders. In the immediate aftermath, each side blamed the other for the rapid disintegration of four well-armed military divisions. Military commanders accused civilian leaders of failing to provide adequate guidance and funding, whereas the latter accused their military counterparts of rampant corruption, high rates of absenteeism, low training standards, and poor cohesion. Both sides were correct, but the deeply flawed civil-military relationship was the main cause of the army's collapse. Civilian control rested in the hands of the prime minister alone, without any checks or balances, and the military had become a sectarian and inefficient institution. Rather than create shared defense responsibilities, generate a balanced exchange of military expertise and civilian resources, and apply principles of accountability, meritocracy, and limited interference in each other's affairs, a system based on distrust, interference, and exclusion emerged.

Fearing a political challenge from the officer corps, then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who held the premiership between 2006 and 2014, sought to establish his tight, personal control over the army. To achieve this, he exploited the regular need to assert effective civilian control in order to interfere with a wide range of military affairs. Maliki meddled directly in military matters ranging from personnel to equipment decisions, while also sidelining other political and institutional actors nominally responsible (but too weak to exercise authority, such as the Ministry of Defense and the parliament's Security and Defense Committee) for managing civil-military relations. By reducing the armed forces' say over defense policy and management, he weakened their institutional capacity and combat capability, robbing himself and the government of necessary expertise.

Iraqi army commanders were equally unwilling or unable to perform their defense management role for several reasons.

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The armed forces had been dissolved wholesale in 2003 for their association with the regime of former president Saddam Hussein, yet large parts of the officer corps had to be brought back after 2005 because the construction of the new Iraqi army was proceeding too slowly amid a worsening armed insurgency and deepening civil violence. But although their return injected badly needed expertise, it also came with negative consequences: corruption, alienation from newer troops, and an inability to tolerate constructive input and feedback. These recalled troops distrusted U.S. military doctrine and methods used to build the new Iraqi army between 2004 and 2011. Consequently, these recalled officers were unable to establish a constructive relationship with the executive branch or to relay their expertise and institutional memory to the new government.

Lastly, the establishment of political sectarianism weakened the armed forces beyond repair. Ethnic and religious identities suddenly became the cornerstones of Iraq's post-2003 government, and the election of officials and recruitment of public servants began to fit this pattern. Quotas, or *mubasasa*, henceforth determined the appointment of every post in the armed forces and other state institutions, running counter to the meritocratic principles necessary to manage an effective military. This particularly affected the officer corps' upper echelons—which were largely composed of Sunni Arabs—and Shia Arabs and Kurds began to outnumber Sunnis for quota purposes.

CONSTRUCTION DEFECTS AND THE LEGACY OF INVASION

The threefold transformation of Iraq's civil-military relations after Saddam's removal occurred as armed resistance against the U.S. occupation and the new political order began in late 2003. Because the United States had from the outset planned to withdraw its troops by 2007, the Iraqi army was forced to build up its institutions very quickly all while fighting a mounting insurgency. In a vicious circle, the military could not combat the widespread violence because it was not yet prepared for the task, but this same violence blocked its ability to actually complete the much-needed preparation.

Training and recruitment efforts were stepped up in 2005; by 2007, when the level of violence reached insurgency proportions, the Iraqi security forces' recruitment surged. Fourteen thousand men were brought into the new Iraqi army every five weeks. In six years, the Iraqi military quadrupled in size, reaching nominally almost 200,000 active members. But while almost all Iraqi troops have received some form of U.S. training, it has typically lasted only three to five weeks—essentially little more than basic training.¹

The rushed recruitment process hurt the officer corps in particular, as it takes years or decades to train middle- and higher-ranking officers. In 2008, only 73 percent of officer and 69 percent of noncommissioned officer posts were filled, a gap that will not be closed until at least 2018.² Officers are vital to any military force because they steer the organization as a whole. In units created from scratch, as was the case with Iraq's post-2003 units, the officer corps becomes even more important in determining whether the military's cohesion will be maintained.

As U.S. General Martin Dempsey, at the time responsible for training the Iraqi army, stated in 2007: “We’ve been growing young second lieutenants through the military academies for about three years, but it’s really difficult to grow majors, lieutenant colonels, and brigadier generals. It simply can’t be done overnight. So we’ve had to rely heavily on officer recalls and retraining programs. However, the pool of qualified recalls is beginning to thin out.”³ Needing experienced officers, the United States began to rely on officers who had served in the previous Iraqi military—70 percent of the officer corps, and almost every general, had formerly served in Saddam Hussein's armed forces.

The Security and Defense Committee (whose size has hovered between sixteen and seventeen members since 2005) was unable to steer the army's development. Committee members rarely met in parliament because violence made the trip to and from the legislature a dangerous one; in 2007, a bomb went off inside and killed one member of parliament. The explosion underscored the fact that even within the well-fortified Green Zone, security remained elusive in post-2003 Iraq.

During its first post-Saddam term of office, the parliament had to adjourn several sessions because less than one-quarter (not even half of a quorum) of its members had shown up.⁴ In addition, boycotting the parliament's session (not to mention elections altogether, as many Sunni voters had done in the 2005 parliamentary election) became a tool to express dissent. Representatives of the bloc supporting Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, al-Iraqiya party, and the pro-Kurdish parties regularly declined to attend parliamentary sessions for this reason.

Consequently, Iraq's government officials went largely unchecked in the years between 2003 and 2008. Only toward the end of that period, after violence had fallen to an acceptable level, did governmental institutions begin to assume (a fraction of) their oversight role.⁵ The Iraqi parliament summoned only a handful of officials and continued to grapple with absenteeism and disunity. The divisive 2010 election, which resulted in a government led by Maliki's State of Law Coalition, paralyzed parliament for almost all of that calendar year. As in prior years, neither the Security and Defense Committee nor the parliament as a whole acted as an institutional watchdog over the defense sector. Attendance rates have improved progressively since 2010, reaching two-thirds in 2011. The Islamic State's takeover of large swaths of Iraqi territory caused attendance to rise to 87 percent.⁶

The Ministry of Defense's reconstruction faced the same constraints as other institutions in post-2003 Iraq. Although the Coalition Provisional Authority originally planned only to reform the ministry, it instead built the institution from scratch. It became the first Defense Ministry in Iraqi history to be staffed with civilians, rather than military personnel. This may have been a step forward in terms of asserting civilian control, but it also meant there was no longer any institutional memory to draw on and no precedent for what the Defense Ministry's role should be. In addition, the understaffed Ministry of Defense had to grapple with a rapidly growing military institution—leading to U.S. and Iraqi concerns that the ministry would not be able to exercise its authority in defense matters. The ministry was built in six months and staffed without Iraqi input; as a result, it was

neither cohesive nor mature enough to prevent manipulation, and Iraqi leaders felt no ownership over it.⁷

It was against this backdrop of violence and rapid institution-building that Iraqi civil-military relations were distorted by civilian and military leaders alike, reinforced by society as a whole.

COUP-PROOFED TO DEATH: GUTTING THE IRAQI MILITARY FROM ABOVE

Maliki, who had assumed office just months before the United States relinquished its control of the Iraqi military in 2007, shared his U.S. patron's concern over the army's potential to extend its reach into politics.⁸ He, like most of his elected peers, knew all too well that the Iraqi military had maintained a prominent political role for most of Iraq's modern history. In Maliki's lifetime alone, three governments have been toppled by military means; since Iraq's independence in 1932, six coups and countercoups—as well as seven failed attempts, three of which happened during Saddam Hussein's tenure—have shaken the country. Maliki sought to restrain the military from any further attempts.

Even before Maliki assumed office, Iraq's leadership had sought to “coup-proof” itself, focusing its efforts in particular on the command of the reconstituted Iraqi army. Yet Maliki's measures went much further, centralizing military decisionmaking under him and exploiting personal loyalties or sectarian affiliations to exclude other elected political actors. He created paramilitary groups as a counterweight to the armed forces—and established security agencies to monitor the military. Maliki also sought to prevent collective action by interfering directly in the relationships between officers and their soldiers.⁹

Maliki's main tool to consolidate control over the armed forces was the Office of the Commander in Chief, which he used to bypass other state institutions theoretically involved in civil-military relations. Originally designed as a coordinating

body chaired by the prime minister, the office was headed by Farouk al-Araji, an ally of Maliki who had served in Saddam Hussein's army and was promoted to the rank of general and adjutant general of the armed forces.¹⁰ In this capacity, al-Araji oversaw (and overrode) the Ministries of Defense and Interior, effectively controlling all security matters in Iraq. Operating outside any legal framework, al-Araji was accountable only to the prime minister.

Once Maliki had taken over the minister of defense and minister of interior portfolios in 2010, the Office of the Commander in Chief became the de facto executive body for the whole security sector, sidelining the relevant ministries.

Although there was civilian opposition to Maliki's consolidation efforts, it was too weak and inexperienced to pose a real challenge. Oversight mechanisms were not adequately developed, and deteriorating security shifted attention elsewhere. Those who actively opposed Maliki's executive overreach were

often punished and sidelined. Then defense minister Abdul Qadir Obeidi, who sought to depoliticize the ministry and armed forces, found himself barred from the 2010 election for alleged ties to the Baath Party—an unfounded accusation.¹¹ Opposition to Maliki's activities in the security sector also came from Muqtada al-Sadr and Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani. Sadr, a Shia cleric heading a large politico-military movement and a one-time ally of Maliki, frequently criticized the prime minister publicly. By 2008, Sadr was exiled and his militia fully disbanded.¹²

Yet upon Sadr's return to Iraq in 2011, he resumed his critiques and issued "a final warning to the government to assume its duty of protecting the people" and to "prosecute and expel incompetent and disloyal members of the security corps who are only after power and recognition."¹³ Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, meanwhile accused Maliki of being authoritarian and of seeking to exercise sole control over the armed forces. In 2012, Barzani ended his cooperation

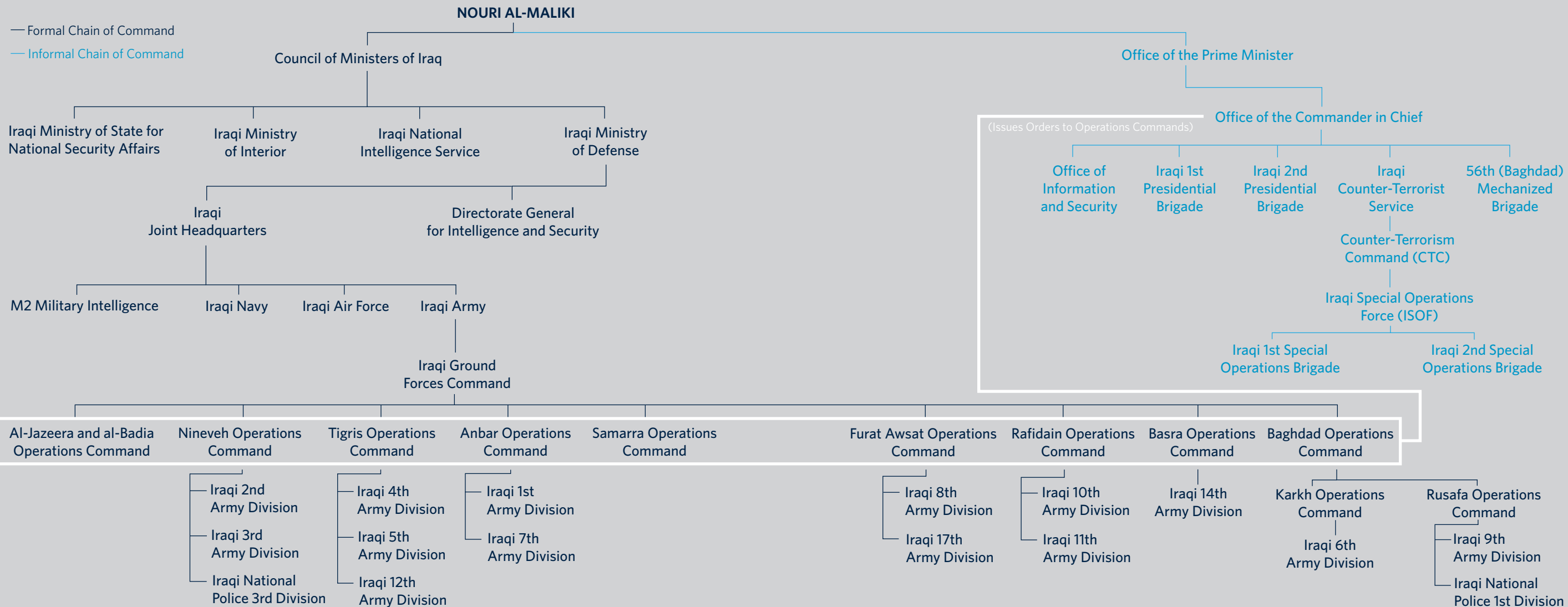
with Maliki and raised the prospect of Kurdish secession. As Al-Monitor reported, he called for “the dissolution of the Iraqi army’s leadership because it is unconstitutional” and criticized Maliki’s control over the security sector. Barzani also called out the president, the head of parliament, and the cabinet “for not confronting Maliki’s dictatorial methods.”¹⁴ Together, Barzani and Sadr supported a parliamentary no-confidence vote on Maliki’s cabinet in 2012, but this failed due to a lack of a quorum.

In the absence of effective civilian opposition, Maliki established control over the security sector through a series of measures. He created regional command centers bringing together all military and police operations in each of the nine provinces hit hardest by violence in 2007, placing them under generals loyal to him. Maliki then used these centers, which were directly attached to his office, to bypass other decisionmaking bodies, including the Ministries of Interior and Defense.¹⁵ Rather than go through the official command structure, he

established an informal one (see figure 1) by issuing direct orders to officers, sometimes even calling them personally. Maliki also upset battle plans at will by moving troops around and ordering the arrest of dissenting individuals.¹⁶

Under Maliki, the Office of the Commander in Chief also brought several elite units under its control, such as the Fifty-Sixth Brigade of the Iraqi army’s Sixth Division (also known as the Baghdad Brigade). This undermined the Ministry of Defense’s authority. The Special Operations Forces’ headquarters was also moved from the Ministry of Defense to the Office of the Commander in Chief, and it was increasingly used as Maliki’s personal security agency, tasked with targeting his political opponents. The forces quickly gained the nickname “Fedayeen Maliki,” echoing the earlier Fedayeen Saddam, the regime-maintenance paramilitary force set up in the 1990s by the former Iraqi strongman. Before the office’s establishment, targeting an individual needed the approval of the Ministerial Committee for National Security, the prime

Figure 1. **Maliki's Formal and Informal Chains of Command**



Source: Marisa Sullivan, "Maliki's Authoritarian Regime," Middle East Security Report no. 10, Institute for the Study of War, April 2013, 10, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Maliki-Authoritarian-Regime-Web.pdf>.

minister, the chief of staff of the Iraqi military's joint headquarters, and the ministers of justice, interior, and defense. By 2010, Maliki began to refer to himself as the commander in chief, a post assigned to the prime minister in the Iraqi constitution, but for which enabling legislation was never passed and whose powers remain undefined. Undeterred by this, Maliki claimed nearly absolute authority in his "capacity as commander in chief," demanding an election recount in 2010 and the dismissal of senior officials from the anticorruption Commission of Integrity.¹⁷

Maliki also meddled with the military's personnel policy to create a network of officers loyal to him. He appointed and promoted officers without the required parliamentary approval by designating these decisions as temporary, and he recruited individuals with little or no military expertise into the officer corps (they were called *dimaj*, or integration officers). Their function was to maintain a network of Maliki informants in the military institution. Experienced senior commanders were also forced to step aside or had their decisions frequently overruled, and officers who had tried to curtail Shia militias were dismissed without regard to official procedures and chains of command. Kurdish officers were purged from Mosul's two army divisions and replaced by Maliki loyalists. Officers close to the prime minister were not held accountable for failures, such as botched investigations into terrorist attacks.¹⁸ These appointments, promotions, and dismissals hollowed out any semblance of meritocratic principles in the Iraqi military.

Maliki's measures had the desired effect: the armed forces were no longer in a position to stage a coup. However, once the time for large-scale combat came during the Islamic State's advance on Mosul in June 2014, the military was incapable of conducting effective warfare. Dempsey, by then the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, reflected this sentiment when he said in September 2014 that only around half of Iraqi combat brigades could be deemed "reputable partners." He added that "they seem to have a certain cohesion and a commitment to the central government," before warning that the remaining brigades have problems with "infiltration and leadership and sectarianism."¹⁹

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES: FRUSTRATION WITHIN THE INSTITUTION

The armed forces and defense establishment also contributed to the emergence of distorted civil-military relations in post-2003 Iraq. From the outset, the officer corps was split on several fronts, which rendered the military incapable of openly communicating with the civilian leadership.

The divisions in the Iraqi military's officer corps were the result of the flawed rebuilding process. Recalled officers were concentrated at the ranks of colonel and above, unlike new recruits who were almost entirely found in junior or middle-ranking posts. This resulted in a generational sandwich, where high-ranking officers were mostly Sunni and had been trained in a Baathist-Soviet military culture, while the military's lower ranks were younger, U.S. trained, and at least 50 percent Shia.²⁰

Both groups responded differently to the new circumstances: younger officers with little or no previous military experience adapted to decentralized U.S. command methods, whereas older officers resisted this new direction. As expected, seasoned Iraqi officers approached their profession based on their past military experiences—including the wars against Iran (1980–1988), Kuwait (1990), and the international coalition (1990–1991). This entailed stiff hierarchical structures, heavy use of artillery, and little feedback.²¹ According to two researchers, "By the time many officers reach the senior levels, their confidence in their own judgments has been established, exercised, and rewarded. As a result, they tend to put more faith in their own intuition than empirical evidence presented to them."²²

Effective military training, which could help overcome resistance to outdated methods, took place on a limited scale and only at lower-level ranks. The Iraqi National Defense College and the Iraqi War College, which would have trained high-ranking military personnel, only became operational in 2011.

Even then, the defense college had only a few high-ranking military officers among its 30-member student body.²³ The few U.S. attempts to bridge gaps between the different Iraqi officer layers were “designed to end the old regime’s authoritarian, brutalising culture, and instil greater respect for human rights and rule of law,” as an International Crisis Group report put it.²⁴ But the upper ranks resisted these efforts, viewing them as incompatible with their own military tradition.

The highest ranks in the Iraqi military, responsible for communicating with the civilian leadership—and the executive branch in particular—were incapable of conducting frank and constructive dialogue. Distrust of the sectarian political leadership, unease with the new and imported U.S. military culture, and a perceived national humiliation in the disbandment of the Iraqi military influenced how army leaders approached their job. Instead of building something new, Iraqi military leaders reverted back to a military culture shaped by punitive disciplinary measures, little tolerance for constructive criticism, and concentrated decisionmaking in the hands of the executive. The officers—described in one paper as a corps of “yes men”²⁵—proved unwilling in post-2003 Iraq to assume decisionmaking responsibilities or to exercise independent thought, robbing the civilian leadership of useful military expertise.²⁶

As a result, the officer corps was not able to play the constructive role expected of a healthy and democratic security sector. Occasionally, it attempted to proffer advice or frank criticism, such as warning that the army was not ready to cope with the 2011 U.S. withdrawal.²⁷ Or, for example, when the commander of the Seventeenth Division resigned in 2013, complaining very publicly of “non-professional orders, wrong policies by senior military leaders, and random decision-making.”²⁸ But by and large, the officer corps remained silent, and senior officers perpetuated the type of civil-military relations they had learned under Saddam Hussein.

THE SECTARIANIZATION OF THE IRAQI MILITARY: THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The rampant sectarianization of Iraqi politics following the U.S.-led occupation also distorted Iraq’s civil-military relations. Although sectarianism existed as a social and silent phenomenon before the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, the new political system institutionalized it. The Coalition Provisional Authority’s ethnic- and sect-based appointments to the Governing Council, along with its unchecked de-Baathification campaign, led to an uptick in sectarian rhetoric and violence. Politicians began to play the sectarian card to gather votes, and violence quickly turned sectarian. As a result, citizens began to vote increasingly along ethnic and religious lines. An outcome of these dynamics, Iraq’s ethnic and confessional quota system also institutionalized the practice of recruiting divisions locally, which led to the creation of homogeneous units and thus tarnished the army’s image as a national institution. The ethno-religious quota system has been enforced both officially and unofficially, but only for the officer corps—in contrast, 75–80 percent of enlisted personnel are Shia.²⁹ Article 9 of Iraq’s 2005 constitution states that “the Iraqi armed forces will be composed of the components of the Iraqi people with due consideration given to their balance and representation without discrimination or exclusion.”³⁰ Selection is meant to take place in an ethnically fair manner, as the constitution states, but what constitutes “fair” is not specified.³¹ While this applies only to cadets entering the officer corps, an unofficial quota, or balancing, system applies to all others as well. In contrast to Lebanon’s army, Iraq’s has not earmarked every command post for a specific religious group, which theoretically minimizes Iraq’s sectarian considerations. But in practice, military and political leaders place a large emphasis on sectarian affiliation regardless, making the process less transparent than Lebanon’s more formal institutional sectarianism.

What made fair representation so difficult was the uneven historical distribution of ethnicities and sects among the various military ranks. Although Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shia Arabs were more or less balanced in the middle ranks, most officers above the rank of colonel during the reconstruction years of 2005 to 2008 were Sunni. In order to recalibrate this imbalance, Shia officers were promoted quickly in the post-2003 period, which frustrated their Sunni peers.³² As one army colonel put it: “We even have seen Sunni officers pretending to be Shiites.”³³ The shift away from the heavy recruitment of Sunnis in Saddam Hussein’s officer corps to Shias after 2003 reflected increasing sectarianism in the wider social context; it also reflected the continued practice of using appointments in the security sector to secure political power. Ethnic- and sect-based quotas are not intrinsically problematic—but lowering entry criteria for Shias has led Sunni officers to question their peers’ merit.

In locations where the population differed ethnically or religiously from the majority of troops stationed in those areas, violence has been reported. One example is the largely Shia Fifth Division, which has been accused of committing atrocities after being deployed in the largely Sunni Diyala Governorate.³⁴ However, Iraqi units operating in areas where they share the same ethnic or religious composition is certainly no guarantee of success. For example, predominantly Shia units collapsed in 2008 in the largely Shia province of Basra.

Rather, success depends on whether an environment is supportive of the military campaign’s objective (such as south of Baghdad) or not (such as Basra, Fallujah, or Mosul). Support or opposition is independent from the population’s ethno-religious composition.³⁵ How the local population views each Iraqi unit will make or break its cohesion, especially in the absence of effective leadership.

Not only do mono-ethnic units develop less of a national outlook, they are also susceptible to sectarian political influence. The largely Shia Eighth Division was said to be influenced by Maliki’s Dawa Party, the Fourth Division by former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan,

the Seventh Division by the Sunni Iraqi Awakening Party, and the Fifth Division by the Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.³⁶ Units in these divisions have been known to carry explicitly Shia, Sunni, Arab, or Kurdish banners and slogans. The only exceptions to this pattern of local recruitment were the Second and Fourth Divisions, which are between 50 and 80 percent Kurdish and have been moved around the country more than other units.³⁸

Both Maliki and Babaker Zebari, his Kurdish chief of staff at the time, argued against the deployment of a largely Kurdish force across the country—although each for different reasons. Maliki chiefly wanted to avoid purely Kurdish units that could later serve as building blocks for an independent Kurdish military, whereas Zebari was more concerned about military cohesion.³⁹ The chief of staff noted that “we should not apply the principle of ‘people of the region in the region’ . . . in a radical way, because it is incompatible with the idea of a national army. I am for an intermediate solution: we need, in every governorate, a certain balance between locally recruited personnel and those who come from other regions in order to ensure a balance between [the] centre and [the] periphery.”⁴⁰ (Emphasis in the original.)

Lastly, vocal political support for the Iraqi military as a national institution is not very pronounced. Although the importance of a national military is clear to many, statements praising or defending the military on Army Day (January 6) were already muted before the Islamic State’s assault in the summer of 2014. In a highly sectarian environment, there is neither the broader narrative of Iraqi nationalism nor the particular praise for the armed forces as an all-Iraqi institution—although both exist, if only as lip service, in the more pluralistic Lebanon.⁴¹

The main problem extends beyond the armed forces and pertains to how Iraqis relate to the post-2003 state. Kurdish politicians are uninterested in a strong, national Iraqi military as their long-term goal is independence. Sunni politicians are still struggling with a political system that does not treat them as equals and how to voice opposition and negotiate

improvements within it. Shia politicians know that their numerical dominance guarantees them majorities if they continue to appeal to sectarian sentiment.⁴²

This does not imply that nationalism is absent in Iraq—indeed, the political party al-Iraqiya has presented itself as nationalist and gained a considerable following, surpassing Maliki's coalition in the 2010 election with 24.7 percent⁴³—but sectarianism has come to define the Iraqi government. For the Iraqi army, sectarianism has dampened the motivation to fight. Explaining the rationale of some soldiers who refused to fight the Islamic State, one commanding officer in the Second Division was quoted as saying, “No one wants to die for something he doesn't believe in.”⁴⁴ The lack of trust in the military institution is hindering the ability to establish an effective, national armed force.

CONCLUSION

A year after Mosul's fall to the Islamic State in June 2014, the Iraqi parliament released a report concluding that 30 senior officials were chiefly responsible for the military's failure to thwart the attack. The officials, awaiting trial as of September 2015, included former prime minister Maliki, the governor of Nineveh Province (of which Mosul is the capital), former defense minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi, Zebari and his deputy, the commander of the Iraqi land forces, and the Nineveh operations command chief. The report recognized that defense is a shared responsibility, and that disciplinary action must therefore extend beyond a handful of officers.

The report's release is the latest step taken to reform Iraq's political system, particularly the defense sector. Over 300 officers were dismissed from the Ministry of Defense and the armed forces for dereliction of duty in the summer months of 2014 whereas deserting lower-ranking officers were pardoned on condition that they resumed their service. Maliki's Office of the Commander in Chief was abolished, a campaign against corruption was launched, and U.S.-led training efforts were resumed on a large scale.⁴⁵

Upon assuming the post of prime minister in September 2014, Haider al-Abadi initiated further reforms. These included decentralizing governmental structures, combating corruption, abolishing the multiple posts of vice president, and declaring an end to political sectarianism. If implemented, these reforms will go a long way to improving civil-military relations in Iraq. An empowered parliament and Defense Ministry could ensure that the armed forces are brought under civilian control. Ending the sectarian and partisan quotas would also enhance professionalism in the military. Most importantly, reforms might not only rehabilitate the image of the new, new Iraqi army but also repair how Iraqis relate to their state as a whole.

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