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

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Summary

This report analyzes the prospects for rebuilding an inclusive Iraqi security force that transcends Iraq's various ethnic and sectarian communities. U.S. policymakers 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 the Kurds also separately maintaining their own militias. As Iraqi officials attempt to build a pluralistic political system in the aftermath of successful parliamentary elections, 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. Through past supplemental appropriations, Congress has funded the training and equipping of the new Iraqi security forces. The FY2005 supplemental spending request seeks \$5.7 billion to train the Iraqi security forces. For more information on Iraq, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance* and CRS Report RL31833, *Iraq: Recent Developments in Reconstruction Assistance*. This report will be updated regularly.

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 FY2005 supplemental spending request seeks \$5.7 billion to train the Iraqi security 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. policymakers envision the new Iraqi security forces to be representative of Iraqi society at large. A goal is for the new Iraqi army 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 various parts of Iraq, there has been considerable emphasis on recruiting, training, and equipping Iraqi soldiers and policemen, but substantially less attention on the future ethnic/religious makeup of various Iraqi security entities.

H.R. 1268, the House FY2005 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations bill (passed the House on March 16, 2005), provides \$5.7 billion for an Iraq Security Forces Fund. The \$5.7 billion would be divided among the front line security forces (\$3.1 billion), police and other forces (\$1.5 billion), support forces (\$810 million), quick response funding (\$180 million), and institutional training (\$104 million).

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 brutal dictators, Saddam's preference for

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

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 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 David H. Petraeus, who commanded the 101st Airborne Division in northern Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom and was sent back to improve the performance of the Iraqi security forces. Iraq’s new security agencies range in size and capability (see table below).

Table 1. Iraqi Ministry of Defense
(trained and equipped as of March 2005)

Armed Forces	Component	# of Weeks in Training	Estimated # of trained battalions
Iraqi Army (59,880)	Regular Army	8 weeks	12
	Intervention Forces	13 weeks basic and specialized	12
	Special Operations	17 specialized training	2
	National Guard	7 weeks	50
	Presidential Brigade	n/a	n/a
Air Force (186)		1-6 months	n/a
Navy (517)		8-12 weeks	n/a
60,853 Total			76 estimated

Source: State Department Iraq Weekly Status Report as of 03/08/2005, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

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

Table 2. Iraqi Ministry of the Interior
(trained and equipped as of March 2005)

Security Service	Component	# of Weeks in Training
Police (55,015*)	Regular Police	3-8 weeks
	Provincial Police	n/a
	Highway Patrol	11 weeks
Other (26,874)	Emergency response	8 weeks specialized training
	Dignitary protection	6 weeks
	Special Police Commandos	3 weeks specialized training
	Civil Intervention	5 weeks specialized training
	Customs/ Border Patrol	4 weeks specialized training
Total 82,072		

Source: State Department Iraq Weekly Status Report as of 03/08/2005, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

* Includes unauthorized absences personnel.

Many analysts and some Members of Congress have challenged Administration claims of over 140,000 trained Iraqi troops. Critics note that the majority of these forces are poorly trained national guardsmen or police, who do not count as a military force, and that as few as 7,000-11,000 Iraqi troops are capable of directly confronting the insurgents. According to Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “only some elements of the army, a few elements of the national guard, and the special security forces can take on insurgents in offensive operations with U.S. support.”³ Other U.S. military officials have acknowledged that the quality and extent of training varies for each individual Iraqi soldier or policeman. Many observers note that General Petraeus has had to balance the need to give new Iraqi recruits more time for training with the urgency to deploy Iraqi troops on the ground. General Petraeus has largely been credited with expediting the establishment of over 45 advisor and support teams, who consist of U.S. and multinational personnel attached to Iraqi units. Most Iraqi security force units still suffer from equipment shortages. Items in short supply include armored vehicles, heavy weapons, personnel armor, and communications equipment.

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. 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.

³ Testimony of Anthony H. Cordesman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Feb. 1, 2005.

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. Some analysts note that some Sunnis have joined the armed forces out of economic necessity, but Sunni desertion rates remain particularly high. Others believe that Sunni-Shiite tensions within the Iraqi armed forces have been exaggerated and that the more significant question of integration concerns Iraqi Arabs and Kurds. According to Army Capt. Timothy Jeffers, a military spokesman for the U.S. training mission in Iraq, "in the future, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense hopes to have a better grasp of this important cultural information on a workable database."⁴

On the one hand, U.S. officials have downplayed sectarian differences in the Iraqi security forces. When asked for a religious and ethnic breakdown of Iraq's security forces, General Petraeus stated that "first of all, I don't have a breakdown like that. We don't keep one... regional forces, both local police and, again, the Iraqi National Guard most prominent in that category tend to reflect the ethnic makeup of their community. We have no reason to question the loyalty of the forces that are out there wearing the Iraqi flag on their right shoulder, frankly."⁵

On the other hand, according to press reports and to some observers, the combination of the Sunni character of the insurgency in conjunction with the poorer quality of the Sunni and Shiite recruits have forced U.S. and Iraqi officials to rely heavily on the Kurdish components of the security forces. In the summer of 2004, General Amar Bakir al-Hashimi, a Sunni general in Saddam Hussein's army and the first chief of staff in the new Iraqi army, was fired after insurgents allegedly got key intelligence from one of his staff and used it to assassinate a high-ranking officer.⁶ He was replaced by a Kurdish general. 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 including those Shiites who had served in their own militias. Insurgent attacks against recruiting stations in Mosul also severely limited U.S. and Iraqi efforts to incorporate Sunnis from northern Iraq into the armed forces, making the Iraqi army even more dependent on Kurds serving in northern Iraq. In a recent *New Yorker* article, former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi was told by one Iraqi tribal leader that "in Mosul, we would prefer any forces, Americans or British - anybody but the Kurds. The occupation in Mosul is Kurdish."⁷

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,

⁴ "Sunni Role in Military in Iraq Falls Short of Goal," Washington Times, Jan. 24, 2005.

⁵ Department of Defense News Briefing, Lieutenant General David Petraeus, Commander, Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq, Friday, Feb. 4, 2005.

⁶ "Tribe Versus Tribe," Newsweek, Jan. 24, 2005.

⁷ Jon Lee Anderson, "A Man of the Shadows," *New Yorker*, Jan. 24-31, 2005.

and Kurdish desires for autonomy may have produced a strong antipathy among Kurdish politicians for a strong, centralized military force in Iraq. According to one Kurdish leader, “It’s not in our interests to have a strong Iraqi army, whether it has Kurds in it or not.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰

Varying Degrees of Integration. Many military experts who have served in Iraq assert that while the overall goal of U.S. and Iraqi policymakers is to create a unified Iraqi fighting force, ethnic/religious cohesiveness can be desirable at certain operating levels. Many Iraqi national guard units serve in areas close to their homes, which may help build trust and confidence between Iraqi forces and local communities, but also may make them and their families vulnerable to intimidation and kidnaping by insurgents. One recent press report noted that the Iraqi 305th battalion, or “Tiger Battalion”, was composed of 90% Shiite recruits, who displayed pasted-up images of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on the backs of their pickup trucks while serving in Baghdad.¹¹ Other military analysts note that U.S. commanders have had to ensure that mixed Arab and Kurdish battalions are sufficiently staffed with Kurdish officers due to the kinship bonds and trust Kurdish soldiers have for their fellow Kurds serving in the military.

Irregular Units. In an effort to combat the insurgency and increase the number of Iraqi forces serving in the field, Iraqi and U.S. officials have begun allowing “irregular units,” or military units composed of soldiers loyal to a particular commander or tribal/religious group, to operate in the field independent of the regular Iraqi security forces. Some estimates place the number of soldiers in these units at 15,000, with some brigades charged with protecting Shiite shrines, while others, such as the “Special Police Commandos,” follow the personal orders of top Iraqi officials. The existence of these units has challenged U.S. officials who are torn between respecting the policies of the Iraqi Ministries of Defense and Interior and preventing the emergence of independent militias who operate beyond the control of the central government. According to General Petraeus, “There is a tension between on the one hand encouraging and fostering initiative and on the other executing the plan for the Iraqi Security Forces that everyone agreed on...to be candid, I would err on the side of fostering initiative. I want to get the hell out of here.”¹²

⁸ “Kurdish Influence Grows in Fledgling Army Rebuilding Iraq, Financial Times, Feb. 12, 2005.

⁹ “Kurds Vow to Retain Militia as Guardians of Autonomy,” New York Times, Feb. 27, 2005.

¹⁰ “Though Battle-Hardened, Iraq’s Kurdish Militia Struggles for Role,” Christian Science Monitor, Mar. 2, 2005.

¹¹ “Pride, Pickups Help Forge New Model Army,” USA Today, Mar. 9, 2005.

¹² “New Factor In Iraq: Irregular Brigades Fill Security Void,” Wall Street Journal, Feb. 16, 2005.