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Insecuring Iraq

Daniel Byman

WHEN Saddam's regime collapsed last year, security for Iraqis collapsed with it. Saddam's brutal rule may have offered Iraqis few benefits—but crime was low and civil strife was largely contained.

In the chaos after the collapse, violent crime soared. Foreign jihadists slipped unimpeded across unsecured borders and Iraqi insurgents began attacking not only coalition forces but ordinary Iraqis as well. One year after the liberation of Iraq, the situation remains abysmal. Iraqis still fear to walk the streets, and in April 2004, the simmering insurgency boiled over, producing the bloodiest month yet for coalition forces.

Security is essential for Iraq's political and economic reconstruction. Without it, Iraqis may look to warlords or thugs who can offer security even at the price of good governance. Democracy cannot take root if voters are afraid to go to the polls or if citizens believe they cannot trust "strangers" from other tribes or communal groups to protect them. Compounding the problem, few investors want to risk their money in a country torn by violence. The "normalcy" most Iraqis long for is still lacking.

Coalition troops cannot depart Iraq in any great numbers, however, until they can hand off their mission to Iraqis. But Iraqi forces are poorly trained, demoralized and penetrated by the insurgents. Not surprisingly, they have added little to Iraq's security and may have made things worse, as President Bush himself noted in April 2004.

Yet success carries its own perils. Creating a competent Iraqi security force

increases the risk of a coup d'état down the road, particularly if Iraq's post-Saddam government is weak, venal and inept. Building up Iraq's security while guarding against a coup requires a delicate dance. It demands money, time and a substantial U.S. commitment—all of which may be lacking.

Security Forces Problems

IRAQ HAS FIVE major security forces: the Iraqi Police Service, the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC), the army, the border patrol and the Facilities Protection Services. On paper, recruiting Iraqis has not been a problem. The Pentagon reports that almost 80,000 police officers have been hired, along with approximately 25,000 for the ICDC, while another 93,000 or so have signed on to the Facility Protection Service, the army and the border patrol. Because Iraq's economy is in disarray, working for the security sources is one of the few sources of a regular paycheck.

These forces, however, are poorly equipped. After the war's end, Baghdad police officers reportedly stole cars so that they could have something in which to patrol: in today's Iraq, crime prevention begins sometimes with a criminal act. Today, some Iraqi forces still lack uniforms and communications gear, in addition to automobiles. Despite its importance, the United States did not respond promptly to this problem. In March, the Bush Administration had to cancel a \$327 million contract that was awarded to the Virginia firm Nour USA Ltd. to equip Iraqi security forces because the contract

bidding process was flawed. Training has also been limited. At the end of April 2004, only 22 percent of the police were partially or fully trained (though all the ICDC members were). And policemen who served under Saddam received at most limited training, with the incorrect assumption that they already knew their jobs and thus could be put directly on the street.¹

The limited competence of the Iraqi security forces is being sorely tested, as they are constant targets for Iraqi insurgents, making it hazardous to be a (loyal) member. Hundreds of Iraqi police and security forces have died from bombings and assassinations throughout Iraq, and Iraqi deaths now probably exceed those suffered by the coalition.

Not surprisingly, it has proven particularly difficult to get Iraqis to fight anti-coalition insurgents. In part, this is due to a strong sense of nationalism. This problem became acute when the chips were down this past April. In Baghdad, 50 percent of Iraq's security forces stood by, quit or changed sides during the fighting. When U.S. Marines needed assistance in Fallujah, Iraqi forces did not rush into the breach. Members of the Iraqi battalion told the U.S. security force commander at the time, "We did not sign up to fight Iraqis."

The problem is worse than cowardice or a squeamishness to shoot fellow Iraqis: The Iraqi security forces have been penetrated by individuals loyal to the anti-coalition opposition. There have been reports that the four American security contractors waylaid by insurgents in early April—whose murder and mutilation in Fallujah prompted the current military operation there—were led into an ambush by members of the ICDC that the contractors had believed were reliable. Such penetrations are one of the few areas of skill of former regime loyalists.

Many among the police who are not loyal to figures from the Ba'ath regime

are drawn from various militias loyal to different Iraqi leaders. Not surprisingly, some police gave their weapons, cars and police stations to Moqtada Sadr's "Mahdi Army" when it clashed with coalition forces. After the surge of violence in April, coalition forces increased their reliance on communal and local militias for day-to-day security responsibilities.

Finally, the police are not part of a larger law enforcement system. Without judges, courts and prisons, the police cannot ensure security. Yet Iraqi judges top the list among those targeted for assassination. Meanwhile, Congress did not approve much of the requested funding for new prisons, wrongly viewing spending on prisons as a luxury item for Iraqi prisoners rather than a fundamental one for security in Iraq. The consequences are debilitating for the overall effort to establish security. Police who are not confident that the criminals they catch will be prosecuted are tempted to mete out summary justice or simply to turn the other way, neither of which serves U.S. purposes. The problem may worsen, as the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison are likely to lead to even fewer Iraqis being incarcerated and many of those imprisoned being released.

EVEN IF THE insurgents are contained or defeated, the security problem will shift, not disappear. The Sunni rebels in Fallujah and the Mahdi Army loyal to Sadr are only a few of the

¹Important security duties under Saddam were given to the intelligence services or others of proven loyalty—the police were the least important security element of the regime. Similarly, Iraq's military forces also were far from professional. Not only did these forces collapse in the face of U.S. attacks, but the Iraqis had a dismal track record when fighting the Kurdish insurgency in the 1970s and 1980s. To win, Iraqi forces resorted to unspeakable levels of brutality, an option thankfully that is no longer available to them.

many armed groups in Iraq today. Many are currently allies of the coalition. The Kurds, for example, have tens of thousands of fighters with arms. Others are loyal to a local leader or faction. These large militias will remain a concern to any central government seeking to control its territory, just as it is in Afghanistan today.

Quelling these threats by establishing a strong security force should remain a top priority. Yet as this capacity is developed, it poses a new risk to the future of Iraq's nascent democracy.

The Iraqis who take control after June 30—and the ones who will eventually rise to power in the coming years when a new government is elected—may rule in name only. For now, Iraqis remain loyal to their parochial leaders, not to the central government. Security is often in the hands of faction leaders or local militias. No national leader has emerged who can unite Iraqis of all stripes.

The likely structure of a new regime—decentralized and federal in composition—compounds this problem. As a way of keeping all the various factions satisfied, almost all of Iraq's major religious, ethnic and tribal groups will share various government agencies and other prerequisites of power—but this means that the central government will be weak.

Yet if the security services and the military become strong enough to stop the insurgency and bring order to Iraq, they could also easily topple any future government. Iraqi history is replete with strongmen using their position in the military and security services to secure power. Military leaders also may seek to take power if the new civilian regime is inept.

The challenges to be faced by the new Iraqi government are staggering. It must reconstruct a devastated economy, reform a corrupt system, establish the rule of law after decades of tyranny, and satisfy Iraq's myriad communal factions—all while fighting an insurgency and securing Iraq's

borders in a dangerous neighborhood. Many Iraqis might initially applaud as a new strongman takes power, promising to end corruption and abolish a weak regime—especially if it is viewed as an American puppet. Certainly, no coup is possible as long as tens of thousands of American troops remain present in Iraq, but eventual withdrawal is a goal shared by both Iraqi and American publics.

Walking the Tightrope

THERE ARE NO simple answers to the broader question of how to improve security—but there are better answers.

Curbing crime and stopping the Mahdi Army are the first steps to making sure the problems do not get worse. The April attacks suggest the insurgency is spreading and that Sunnis and Shi'a might at times work together, if only to counter the Americans. If the United States loses the support, or more accurately the acquiescence, of Iraq's Shi'a community, it will fail in Iraq.

In the short term, more U.S. forces are necessary to assure security in Shi'a areas. But a larger U.S. presence is at best a band-aid. The more the counterinsurgency effort becomes Americanized, the less likely that Iraqi forces will take the painful steps necessary to become more effective.

Yet the Iraqis cannot take these steps without substantial U.S. assistance. As we accelerate the transfer of political power, we need to decelerate the transfer of security. Haste is the enemy of effectiveness. If anything, the training process should be far longer than that for Western security forces. Iraqis have far more to learn, and the tasks they will be called on to do—fighting an insurgency as well as crime—are among the most difficult for any security force. Proper vetting also takes months, not simply a few weeks. One officer who works for the other side can dev-

astate U.S. efforts to fight the insurgency, and poses a direct risk to U.S. forces.

Such an effort will cost far more. As of March, the United States planned to spend \$3.2 billion to improve security in Iraq. Two billion dollars is earmarked for the police—the largest police training program ever. This figure may grow considerably if we seek to put competent police officers on the street rather than just large numbers of them.

U.S. officer rotations to work with Iraqi security forces should also be extended. Gaining the trust of the Iraqis takes time, and the constant rotations destroy the personal relationships that are so important to effective law-enforcement. One of the problems the United States has faced in getting Iraqis to act in Fallujah was that the U.S. liaisons with the Iraqis had only been on the job for a few days.

Training must also be differentiated. Police are often wrongly viewed as simply a lower-echelon security force for fighting an insurgency. But most police duties should still focus on law enforcement, particularly as crime is the most pressing concern for most Iraqis. Moreover, because the police are only as good as the overall law enforcement system, investment in courts and prisons is vital.

These measures to improve security must go hand in hand with efforts to minimize the risk security forces will pose to an elected Iraqi government. The Iraqi police and security forces need a change of culture. This requires not only constant refreshers on how to treat citizens, but also a new leadership cadre. Training must focus on keeping the security forces and military apolitical and responsive to civilian control. Those who will not reform must be discarded, requiring the United States to identify junior officers who are worthy of promotion and work closely with them.

Finally, the United States must recognize that even as political reform and reconstruction depend on security, the process goes both ways. If Iraq lacks strong institutions and stalls economically, Iraqis will be more likely to support the insurgents, while the risk of a coup will rise greatly. This is the true nightmare, undermining both U.S. credibility and any short-term successes the United States has accomplished in Iraq. □

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