

IRAQI FORCE DEVELOPMENT

Conditions for Success, Consequences of Failure

A Report of the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

Anthony H. Cordesman
with Adam Mausner

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Center for Strategic and International Studies

1800 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006

Tel: (202) 775-3119

Fax: (202) 775-3199

Web: www.csis.org

Executive Summary

There is no way to summarize Iraqi force development in simple terms. Iraq is already in a state of limited civil war and may well be escalating to the level of a major civil conflict. The current combination of insurgency, Sunni Arab versus Shi'ite Arab sectarian conflict, and Arab versus Kurdish ethnic conflict could easily cause the collapse of the current political structure, leading to a Shi'ite or Shi'ite-Kurdish dominated government with strong local centers of power, and an ongoing fight with Iraq's Sunnis.

These civil conflicts could escalate to the breakup of the country, take the form of far more serious ethnic and sectarian conflict, and/or result in the violent paralysis of efforts to create political conciliation and unity. They have already led to widespread ethnic cleansing in urban areas by militias and death squads of all three major ethnic and religious groups.

Key Challenges for Iraqi Force Development

The U.S. failure to prepare for stability and operations before the war, the uncertain and conflicting policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the failure to anticipate the seriousness of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian tensions, and the delays in taking the development of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) seriously until 2005 have all wasted time and resources that the United States and Iraq did not have. Mistakes have been made in many aspects of the U.S. mission in Iraq, and although adaptations have been made to the development of Iraqi security forces, time is working against the United States, its allies, and Iraq.

The immediate problem facing ISF development is creating an effective bridge between tactical victory and lasting strategic impact, even if political conciliation does move forward. Giving Coalition and ISF tactical victories lasting meaning requires the following additional elements:

1. ***Iraqi Army forces must begin to take over meaningful operations without U.S. embeds and U.S. partner units and without dependence on U.S. reinforcement and support.*** There does seem to be increasing Iraqi Army capability here, but Coalition reporting does not provide a meaningful picture of progress—merely grossly inflated figures on areas of responsibility and total numbers of battalions in the lead.
2. ***Iraqi police and local security forces must establish a lasting security presence in the areas where tactical victories are won and do so credibly in ways that give ordinary Iraqis security.*** There can be no “win” without “hold.” So far, despite claim after claim to have secured cities after winning tactical battles to control them, the United States has never actually established lasting security in even one of them. The most critical problem has been the lack of active, combat-capable police, with-

out corruption and sectarian and ethnic ties. Falluja and Samara are only the most obvious cases of such failures.

Coalition reporting had talked about the number of police posts established and the value of U.S. embeds. It had not reported on the ability to provide lasting security using Iraqi police in parts of Baghdad or anywhere else. It also has not reported on the ability to support police efforts with an effective local criminal justice and court system or to screen detainees in ways that do not breed local hostility.

The Coalition also needs to focus on who actually does provide local security and stop treating militias, local security forces, and police hired locally without Coalition training, as if they were always hostile or did not exist. In the real world, these forces—and not the “trained and equipped” police—are the real local security force in most of Iraq. There has to be a credible plan to use, absorb, or contain them.

3. ***The Iraqi government must follow up security with a meaningful presence by providing steady improvements in services.*** “Winning hearts and minds” does not come from public information campaigns and propaganda. It comes from providing real security for ordinary Iraqis and showing them that the government cares, is present, and can steadily improve services. Once again, promise after promise has been made in past campaigns, and the central government has yet to show it can follow up in even a single case. If the central government is able to provide an effective mix of presence and services, even in the “secured” areas of Baghdad, no one has yet said so. How it can happen in Diyala or other high-threat areas is unclear.
4. ***There must also be effective local government.*** The liberation of various areas often has seen the emergence of local leaders willing to work with the Coalition—although often with little faith in, or ties to, the central government. In most cases, however, they have become targets, and the effort has broken down in local factional disputes or because of lack of effective government support and problems in Coalition civil affairs efforts. Once again, if progress is being made in creating stable, survivable, effective local government, none of the details are clear.
5. ***There has to be economic aid and progress.*** Iraqis have to give priority to physical security and key services, but unemployment, underemployment, and shut or failed businesses affect some 60 percent or more of Iraqis nationally, and the figures are even higher in high-threat and combat areas. The strategy President Bush announced in January 2007 advanced proposals for accomplishing such an effort in Baghdad. Once again, there has been no meaningful Coalition reporting on broad progress in such efforts in the secured areas of Baghdad, and past promises that such aid would be provided in “liberated” cities like Samara and Falluja were not kept.
6. ***There must be an end to sectarian and ethnic cleansing and displacement.*** There is no near-term and perhaps midterm answer to suicide bombings and atrocities, and to attacks on sacred shrines and critical facilities. No mix of security forces can stop even small cadres of extremists from occasional successes. No tactical victory has meaning, however, unless Iraqis can be secure in neighborhoods and areas where they are in the minority, and can reach across ethnic and sectarian lines and barriers in ordinary life.

One of the greatest single failures of the current U.S. and ISF approach to fighting in Iraq is that it did not focus on preventing sectarian and ethnic separation and displacement and make ending this on a local and national level at least as important as halting major attacks and killings. It may take years to make Iraqis secure from Islamist extremists and the worst elements of Shi'ite gangs and militias. There can be no meaningful tactical success, however, unless Iraqis can be safe from their own neighbors and begin to lead ordinary lives in their own neighborhoods.

There is no way to predict Iraq's future or the exact role Iraqi forces will play over the coming months and years. All that can be predicted is that the search for Iraqi security and stability is likely to fail unless the United States and Iraq honestly and systematically address each of the current failures in Iraqi force development identified in this report at a pace that produces an effective and meaningful result. This means major progress in a matter of months, not years. Events have moved beyond plans and promises; only performance counts.

In the case of Iraqi security forces, this means reconfiguring the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior; creating Iraqi regular forces designed to fight serious counterinsurgency battles and end civil fighting on a national level; and giving the Iraqi police the aid and advisory resources necessary to make them effective and far less divided and corrupt. It also means ensuring the Sunnis their fair representation in the security forces and purging the present ISF of the elements that support the Sadr militia and sectarian cleansing. It means accepting the fact that the regular police and local security forces will not be truly national in character but largely local, with a sectarian and ethnic character in many areas and their primary loyalty to sectarian, ethnic, and tribal factions.

At the same time, U.S., allied, and Iraqi government policy can succeed only if all recognize that there is no near-term prospect of withdrawing MNF-I forces without serious risk to Iraqi force development. Moreover, the full development of independent ISF forces can succeed only if the MNF-I provides active combat support well into 2008 and major advisory and aid support through 2010.

This will require strategic patience on the part of the United States. The goal should not be to rush U.S. forces out of Iraq as soon as possible without regard to the realities of Iraqi force development and the political conditions and levels of civil violence under which the ISF must develop and operate. The goal should be to diminish the active combat role of U.S. and other Coalition forces as soon as practical, and to refocus U.S. efforts on reinforcing ministerial and institutional development and on enhancing the role of transition teams.

The odds of success are less than even and may be as little as one in four. The development of effective Iraqi forces is also only one of the steps necessary to bring stability and security and roll back the forces that can lead Iraq toward more violent forms of civil war. It is clear, however, that it is one of the critical elements of success.

Iraqi Force Development If Things Go Well

If things go well, Iraqi forces will steadily improve with time and play a critical role in bringing the level of security Iraq needs to make political compromise and conciliation work.

Iraqi forces will largely replace Coalition and other foreign forces, seeking at most aid and limited assistance. Iraq's military will shift its mission from counterinsurgency to defense of the nation against foreign enemies, Iraq's National Police will defend the nation's internal security interests and not those of given ethnic and sectarian groups; they will deal with counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency; and they will focus on crime and corruption. Iraq's other police and security forces will act like the police and security forces of other nations, focusing on crime, local security issues, and securing borders against smuggling and low-level infiltration.

Things can go well, however, *only if Iraq can create a working compromise between its sects and ethnic groups, and if U.S. and other outside powers have the patience and will to support Iraq for at least two to three more years of active fighting as it develops into such a state.* Iraq will also need massive additional economic aid to help it unify and develop. Major assistance and advisory programs will need to be in place until at least 2010, and probably 2015.

Iraqi Force Development If Things Go Badly

The present odds of such success are less than even. In fact, Iraq is more likely to have one of three far less positive futures:

- ***Years of turmoil—no side truly wins:*** The nation does not devolve into all-out civil war or open forms of division or separation. The result will be an agonizing extension of the status quo in which real political conciliation fails and every new compromise is the source of new tensions and fighting. Warring sectarian and ethnic groups struggle for local control and dominance, dividing the country internally by city and governorate.

The Iraqi people lose faith and hope, struggling only to survive. The military, National Police, regular police, and other instruments of government become an awkward mix of sectarian and ethnic enclaves and struggles for power and control. The nation, governance, and economy will splinter, with a few secure ethnic and sectarian enclaves, but will be largely dominated by internal tension, insecurity, and crime.

The United States and other outside powers keep some form of presence in Iraq and seek to maintain a partial state of order, but every effort to produce lasting solutions and true national unity will collapse.

- ***Internal separation, ethnic cleansing, and the façade of unity:*** Civil conflict leads to the de facto separation of the nation into Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurdish enclaves on either a regional or a local basis. The nation maintains the appearance of unity, but the reality is a level of soft and hard ethnic cleansing that divides most

governorates on sectarian and ethnic lines, and most cities into sectarian and ethnic neighborhoods.

Most governorates and major cities are dominated by Shi'ite or Kurdish control. An impoverished Sunni enclave will exist in the western part of Iraq, continuing to present at least low-level security challenges. Every "national" decision will be an awkward and unstable compromise. Compromises over key issues like development and modernizing Iraq's energy industry and infrastructure are sectarian and ethnic nightmares with Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurd all seeking their own advantage and that of their respective enclaves.

The Iraqi people are forced into clear sectarian and ethnic divisions, each tending to aid the extremist elements in its own group. The military, National Police, regular police, and other instruments of government are divided into clearly defined sectarian and ethnic enclaves. The United States and other outside powers withdraw all or virtually all forces and reduce aid to token levels. Iraq becomes the scene of constant outside struggles for influence between Turkey, Iran, and the Arab Sunni states.

- ***Outright division with at least continuing sectarian and ethnic fighting:*** The central government diminishes to total impotence and/or collapses under the pressure of civil conflict. The softer forms of sectarian and ethnic cleansing that take place in the previous scenario are replaced by vicious fighting for control of given governorates and cities, mass killings, mass forced relocations and migrations, and the ruthless control of remaining minorities.

Iraq has openly split into three parts, dominated by Shi'ite and Kurdish control in most areas, Shi'ite domination of the central government and most of the country, or a Shi'ite-Kurdish federation of convenience whose reality are the same. An impoverished Sunni enclave exists in western Iraq, struggling to survive, continuing to present at least low-level security challenges and dependent on outside aid from Sunni states. Economic development and efforts to modernize Iraq's energy industry and infrastructure are divided on sectarian and ethnic lines, with the possible exception of pipelines and some limited infrastructure that crosses Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurdish zones. Export capabilities, ports, and water will all be continuing sources of contention.

The Iraqi people will be forced into clear sectarian and ethnic divisions, each tending to aid the extremist elements in its own group. The military, National Police, regular police, and other instruments of government will divide along clearly defined and possibly warring sectarian and ethnic lines. The economy steadily declines if it does not implode. The United States and other outside powers withdraw all or virtually all forces and reduce aid to token levels. Iraq becomes the "sick man" of the Gulf and the scene of constant outside struggles for influence among Turkey, Iran, and the Arab Sunni states.

The Future

All these points illustrate the fact that the success of Iraqi force development depends at least as much on Iraqi political progress as on the strength and quality of Iraqi forces. Iraqi force development is problematic in many areas, but its future ultimately depends on Iraqi efforts at political conciliation and effective governance. The ISF development effort cannot succeed without major progress in both of those areas, any more than it can without the creation of effective Iraqi forces and Iraqi popular belief that the MNF-I forces will leave as soon as possible and Iraq will be truly sovereign.

If Iraq is to avoid splitting up and full-blown civil war, it must do far more than create effective security forces. The Sunni insurgency, the Shi'ite militias, and Kurdish separatism cannot be controlled by force, and the ISF will never be able to secure the nation by such means. Real security and stability can come only if Iraqi leaders forge a lasting political compromise between Iraq's key factions—Arab-Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd—while protecting other minorities. Political conciliation must also address such critical issues as federalism and the relative powers of the central and regional governments, the role of religion in politics and law, control over petroleum resources and export revenues, the definition of human rights, and a host of other issues. Security cannot come through force alone. The creation of a strong and capable ISF may even do more harm than good if it is used to further narrow, sectarian goals.

The most important developments in making Iraqi forces effective have nothing to do with the forces themselves or with the nature of the U.S. support and advisory effort. Rather, they are about the ability to create levels of political compromise and conciliation that deprive the insurgency and Iraq's civil conflicts of their popular base. This means actually implementing the following:

- Establishing an oil law and technical annexes that assure all major Iraqi factions of an equitable share in today's oil revenues and the future development of Iraq's oil and gas resources.
- Giving the Sunnis real participation in the national government at every level and creating ministries and government structures that fairly mix Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, Kurd, and other minorities.
- Achieving re-Ba'athification by allowing Sunnis who have been unfairly excluded from government, the ISF, and professional positions to play their proper role in Iraqi society and by giving a clean slate or amnesty to all who served under the Ba'ath who are not guilty of violent crimes.
- Amending the constitution to create a structure that protects the rights of all Iraqis and that creates viable compromises that allow Iraq's factions to live together in security even in areas where there are serious sectarian and ethnic divisions.
- As part of this, working out an approach to "federation" that will avoid civil conflict in the Arab Sunni-, Arab Shi'ite-, and Kurdish-dominated areas that will be controlled largely by a single faction.
- Creating and implementing local election laws, particularly at the provincial level.

- Disbanding or assimilating militias, or creating retraining centers and funding programs to deal with militia members.

Much depends, however, on the United States as well as on Iraqi leaders. Both political conciliation and Iraqi force development will also depend on sustained U.S. aid.

As the January 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq warned, without reservation, a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces in the next 12 to 18 months “almost certainly would lead to a significant increase in the scale and scope of sectarian conflict in Iraq.”¹ Every element of ISF development still requires years of effort and support, and any successful policy toward Iraq that offers serious hope of avoiding massive increases in sectarian and ethnic violence, and continued insurgency, requires an honest recognition of this fact.

It also seems unlikely that Iraqi force development can reach the level necessary to deter and defend against threats from Iraq’s neighbors without a mutually acceptable long-term security arrangement that can provide for the interests of Iraq and the United States while the ISF develops to the point where it can deal with external as well as internal threats.

As the United States’ experience in Afghanistan has shown, the United States can win in Iraq only if it is willing to fight a “long war.” Rushing Iraqi forces in, and U.S. forces out, is a strategy where “exiting” is given a far higher priority than is success. That strategy may provide a cosmetic rationale to disguise failure and defeat, but it will not prevent them and it may well make them happen.

To put it bluntly, this means that the U.S. government must stop exaggerating the true nature of Iraqi readiness and the Iraqi force development and must seek bipartisan agreement on a longer-term program based on patience, persistence, actual progress, and adequate resources. The Bush administration can only do more harm to Iraqi force development if it continues to exaggerate Iraqi capabilities, expands Iraqi forces too quickly, and transfers responsibility before Iraqi forces can do the job.

The late Col. Harry Sommers summed up the U.S. defeat in Vietnam in his recounting of his brief exchange with a North Vietnamese officer after the war. Sommers had pointed out that the United States had won virtually every tactical encounter with both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. The Vietnamese officer had replied, “Yes, but that was irrelevant.”

The new U.S. Army manual on counterinsurgency recognizes that reality and virtually all of the points made above. Any form of broad success in operations, creating effective Iraqi forces, and giving them the political and economic context to win meaningful victories takes time. Historically, any campaign that has had to begin with as weak a foundation as the surge strategy began with in January 2007 took at least a year to seriously take hold and several years to either achieve success or to conclusively fail. An Iraq in political turmoil, in local economic collapse, and without security even for senior officials and members of parliament will not move quickly—especially in a Baghdad summer.

The U.S. team in Iraq and the Bush administration need to show the American people and the Congress that they understand those realities, are acting based on such policy priorities, are making real progress, and have detailed and credible plans for a sustained effort, with honest assessments of cost and risk. “Spinning” the importance of tactical success does not do that. As this report has described in detail, there are many very real successes in ISF development, and the ISF has great potential if the Iraqi political system can achieve the level of conciliation that makes a military effort both feasible and effective.

Partisanship and spin can make the all too real possibility of failure a certainty. The nearly meaningless unclassified metrics and reports of success the administration has presented have done far more to discredit the ISF development effort than to build support. Credibility and transparency are the price of any realistic chance of victory. Without them, the twilight of this administration will end with the United States choosing the wrong options in Iraq, failing to provide adequate time and resources, and withdrawing U.S. and allied forces because of political decisions made for the wrong reasons. Like all elements of a successful U.S. strategy, Iraqi force development needs to be based on honesty and realism, not “spin,” unrealistic claims, and political expediency.

At the same time, both the media and outside analysts need to focus far more on the full range of actions it takes to succeed, and do so with patience and objectivity.

It is reasonable to demand credible plans and transparent and meaningful reporting—and credible goals and plans for U.S. force cuts—something that the Bush administration has not yet provided. It is not reasonable to demand instant progress or focus solely on the level of U.S. troops in Iraq or casualties in the fighting.

Above all, partisanship and a narrow focus on U.S. troop levels and casualties could make the entire ISF development effort pointless if the U.S. political system cannot adapt to the reality that any form of success in Iraq—albeit with what may be much lower U.S. troop levels—will require an effort that extends at least several years into the next administration. The odds are bad enough, given Iraq’s problems. The odds may well be hopeless if the United States cannot provide the necessary time and bipartisanship.

Notes

1 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Prospects for Iraq’s Stability: A Challenging Road Ahead,” National Intelligence Estimate, January 2007, p. 7.