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Iraq's Security Forces: 150,000 or Bust?

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There are some good reasons to be positive about the situation in Iraq. They are not the ones President Bush quotes yesterday. The Multinational Command in Iraq reported that there were some 152,617 men in the Iraqi military, security, and police forces on April 6, 2005.

THE BAD NEWS IS THAT SUCH HEAD COUNTS SAY NOTHING ABOUT COMBAT POWER, AND ARE MEANINGLESS IN TERMS OF COMPARISONS TO US TROOP NUMBERS

The portion counted as military is only 67,000, and is counted as follows:

"Operational" Ministry of Defense Forces:*

Army (including low-grade National Guard Forces integrated into the Army in January	66,895
Air Force	186
Navy	521
Total Military	67,602

* Ministry of Defense Forces: Unauthorized absences personnel are not included in these numbers

Most of the Guard is still far too lightly equipped and trained to perform more than limited security missions, and only one operational battalion is something like the armor needed to fight in the highest threat areas. If one is counting manpower with some comparability to US forces the total is well below 67,602, and probably well below 20,000.

The rest of the 152,617 men are in the 85,015 "Trained and Equipped" men in the Ministry of Interior forces which at least one MNC reports actually include 30,000 men awaiting training.

There are some elements capable of dealing with insurgents and terrorists, but the vast majority are police and light security forces that in no way are comparable to US troops:

"Trained and Equipped Ministry of Interior Forces:**

Police and Highway Patrol	55,682
Other MOI Forces	29,153
Total	85,015

* Ministry of Interior Forces: Unauthorized absences personnel are included in these numbers.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT VERY REAL PROGRESS IS BEING MADE IN ORGANIZING A MIX OF FORCES THAT CAN DEAL WITH IRAQ'S CRITICAL CRIME PROBLEM, AND IN CREATING THE KIND OF COMBAT ELEMENTS WITHIN IRAQI FORCES THAT MAY BE ABLE TO TAKE ON INSURGENTS AND TERRORISTS WHEN THEY GET THE RIGHT LEADERSHIP, EXPERIENCE, AND EQUIPMENT:

There has been serious progress in generating the kind of Iraqi forces that both Iraq needs, and that can ease the problem of American overstretch:

- There was only 1 deployable battalion in July 2004; but 27 battalions in March 2007 trained as regular army, at a total 76 battalions if one included the National Guard.
- Iraq's 1st Mechanized Battalion became operational in mid-January, along with a tank company and a transportation battalion; the remaining elements of the 1st Mechanized Brigade were scheduled to be trained and equipped by the summer.
- Iraq's Special Operations Forces now included a Counter-Terrorist Force and a Commando Battalion, each of which has conducted dozens of successful operations.

Far too much of the writing on Iraq ignores the fact that it is criminal activity that is the most serious day-to-day threat and concern of the Iraqi people, and that many forms of counterinsurgency are best carried out by police, gendarmerie, and other police forces.

- The Iraqi Police Service had over 55,000 trained and equipped regular police officers in March 2005, up from 26,000 six months earlier. Of the nearly 30,000 police officers that had been trained in the last six months, over 13,000 were former police who underwent three-week transition course training and over 16,000 were new recruits who underwent eight-week basic training. More than 35,000 additional police were on duty and scheduled for training.

- Iraq's Special Police Forces had grown from zero operational battalions in June 2004 to 20 operational battalions by the end of February. Nine Police Commando battalions were now operational. Nine Public Order Battalions were operational.
- Additionally, the Mechanized Police Brigade, organized into two battalions, had recently completed training and began operations in late January, using fifty BTR-94 wheeled, armored vehicles. It had received the first two of 50 American-made armored security vehicles at the end of February. One additional Mechanized Police battalion was in training.
- Iraq's National Police Emergency Response Unit was fully operational and at full strength, and its elements had conducted successful operations in Baghdad, Fallujah, and Mosul.
- Iraq's First Special Border Force Battalion was operating on the Syrian border in western Anbar Province; the Second Battalion completed training in February and had begun its deployments, and a third was scheduled to begin training in March.
- Five provincial SWAT teams had been trained, three more were in training, and twelve more are scheduled for training over the next six months.
- More than one thousand Iraqi Security Force members have lost their lives serving their country since the transfer of sovereignty.

While no long-term force development plan has yet been made public, MNSTC-I has reported that a number of new Iraqi forces are completing their training, and that heavier forces are on the way.

- Three more Iraqi Army battalions should be ready to assume full-time duty between the end of March and May 2005.
- So will several former Iraqi National Guard battalions and three Public Order battalions.
- The final brigade of the three Division Regular Army, is scheduled to graduate on April 20th, and this will bring the number of operational combat brigades to 99.
- MNSTC-I plans to complete the 2nd mechanized infantry battalion of the 1st mechanized brigade, which will use BMPs, by summer 2005.

- The rest of the Iraqi armored division is projected to be trained and equipped by the end of the year and another mechanized division is planned for 2006.
- Iraqi police mechanized units are starting to receive delivery of the Armored Security Vehicles and began training with them in mid-March 2005.
- Logistics units at the division level -- and a brigade each of logistics, signals, MPs, and engineering forces -- are scheduled to stand up by 2006.

The key point as people rush out to talk about early exit strategies, and timelines for US withdrawal, is that creating Iraqi forces does not make them combat effective or capable of ending crime, and that it is far from clear how effective any given new element of Iraqi forces will be.

It is also still unclear how well the new US plan to help make up for a lack of combat experience, unit integrity, and leadership by placing large cadres of US advisors in new Iraqi units to train and “stiffen” them will really be. There also is no unclassified plan for actual withdrawal from Iraq and giving it all of the heavy forces it needs.

In short, the MNC and its training command need time and patience. Puffing up the very real good news with an inflated figure is almost certain to lead to demands to move too quickly and forget about quality and effectiveness.

These problems are compounded by the fact the new Iraqi government has been slow to form, and its capabilities for effective governance remain unknown. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that Secretary Rumsfeld just visited to Iraq to warn the new government not to purge the military and security forces out "Ba'athists" because of his firm confidence in the transition to new leadership, and new Ministers of Defense and Interior.

The same is true of governance at the province and local levels. Factional quarrels and struggles are anything but over, and civil conflict remains a possibility. It is also far from clear what economic progress Iraq is making, and can make once the fighting is over.

Attack Patterns

It is also of little value to talk about a short term, post- election decline in major attacks on US forces. Any real world count has to examine the number of attempts, both major and minor attacks, and the intensity of attacks. Even more important, it has to count attacks on Iraqis and non-violent sabotage.

The trends do seem to be positive, but it is largely meaningless to quote one metric out of context.

Where is the Trend Really Going?

We still have no tipping point and we face at least a tipping year. It is easy to be optimistic; but the real world challenge is still to create the conditions that make optimism justified. This may well happen by late 2005 to early 2006, but it has not happened yet.