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The Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq

A Critique

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Let me note that I was one of several briefers to the Commission, and provided it with analysis and background detail. I did not, however, participate in the final drafting.

That said, many key aspects of the report and its findings track with my own impressions and analysis. There are few areas where the report raises issues or problems in ISF development that I have not seen independently confirmed by visits to Iraq, discussions with Iraqi and US officers working on these issues, and other reports. I believe the Commission is accurate in saying that ISF development can succeed in many areas if the US is patient, willing to put in years of further effort, and realistic in its goals and efforts.

At the same time, accurate and useful as most of the Commission's findings are, it does not properly link its recommendations and analysis to the level of civil conflict in Iraq, and the importance of political accommodation as a precondition for the success of the US effort. There also are several other serious problems and issues that it does not fully address.

1. ISF Overall Assessment

The report raises a critical point in noting that any success will require a patient, large-scale effort well into the next Administration. This, however, will scarcely be enough.

The most serious overall problem in the report – which may be the result of the Commission's mandate -- is that it does not address the degree to which all elements of the Iraqi Security Forces from the Prime Minister's office down have links to Shi'ite efforts to retain and expand power and carry out sectarian cleansing in mixed areas.

Like many other US government reports, it focuses on the campaign against Al Qa'ida, rather than the overall problems in stability and security in Iraq, and on major acts of violence – as counted by MNF-I – rather than the overall process of sectarian and ethnic cleansing and division. For example, see pp., 27-29, which ignores developments in Diyala and the northeast.

These problems becomes critical when the report addresses plans to transition power to the ISF. Page 30 discusses the Shi'ite militias but makes no effort to map their growing influence and broad control over most of the southern provinces in Iraq. The discussion and map on pages 39-41 ignore the steady loss of central government influence and ISF control over much of the south since January (an area with more than 30% of the population, and responsible for 80% of its oil export earnings and 70% of its government revenues).

The report does discuss some of the issues involved in pp. 42-46, but does not come fully to grips with their implications for ISF development. The recommendations relating to provincial Iraqi control (pp. 128-129) ignore the sectarian and ethnic divisions in the country raised in many other parts of the report.

The Commission report is accurate in stating that there are truly national elements in virtually every part of the Iraqi security structure, many that act with great courage and integrity. Many, particularly in the Iraqi Army, are promising if -- and only if -- Iraq can achieve the level of political accommodation/conciliation that can hold the various sectarian and mixed areas together.

The fact is, however, that visits to US units in Baghdad and around it, and other parts of the country, make it clear that the ISF structure still has many elements throughout its force structure that see Iraq in terms of a sectarian power struggle. They usually support the Arab Shi'ite side, often tolerating or supporting sectarian cleansing and activity by local elements of the JAM and Badr Organization. Furthermore, US-led security efforts that focus on Al Qa'ida and only attack the most extreme elements of Shi'ite militias compound this problem in some areas by weakening Sunni forces in ways that Shi'ite "cleansers" can exploit without high profile violence.

If the pro-Shi'ite characterer of the ISF cannot be sharply constrained, and if serious political accommodation/conciliation does not take place, the ISF development effort will end in strengthening Shi'ite and Kurdish power at the expensive of the Sunnis. The ISF may well divide into Shi'ite and Kurdish factions. At the same time, current efforts to create Sunni tribal and other tribal security forces may well end in creating other competing Sunni and mixed tribal forces in a sectarian and ethnic power struggle.

2. The Ministry of Defense

The Commission's assessment of the MoD addresses several important problems, but does fully not address how difficult it will be to overcome the massive ongoing problems in the Ministry's ability to function, to assume responsibility for independent action, and to take over sustainment. The suggestions the Commission does make are good, but the timelines, resources required, and probability of success are not really assessed. (pp. 47-54)

The report fails to highlight the need to eliminate activities that favor the Shi'ite cause and sometimes sectarian cleansing. The problems in fixing the Ministry are described, but understated, perhaps because the Ministry of the Interior is so bad by comparison.

3. The Army and Special Forces Assessment

The report badly understates the sectarian and ethnic divisions in the Army, and does not address just how important providing a larger share of real power sharing with the Sunnis will have to be to make accommodation/conciliation work. The assessment of the transfer of responsibility is dangerously flawed both by this omission and the failure to examine the reality of Iraq's ongoing divisions into Arab Shi'ite, Kurdish, and Arab Sunni dominated zones, and the power of Shi'ite and Kurdish factions within the Army.

The Commission does not seem to have spent adequate time in visiting failed or passive Army units, ones with sectarian problems, or units that experience problems in cooperating with US forces. There are many real successes, but the report does not scope out the level of problems and failures.

Like much of the unclassified reporting on ISF readiness and capability, it does not properly address the true level of readiness problems in combat units, the ties officers often have to sectarian cleansing (which is a key reporting element of US assessments in the field), and the lack of PM and MoD support for officers that act in a truly national way. (pp. 58-60)

Far too little attention is paid to the problems in giving units in the field proper support in terms of supply, weapons and equipment, and proper facilities. Difficulties in transferring training and support activities to Iraqi control are understated, and so are human factors like the lack of effective medical services, disability pay and services, and death benefits.

It correctly identifies the need for new leaders and more than 12-18 months of additional effort, but does not highlight one of the most critical failures in the current US strategy: the lack of a clear and affordable plan to provide the level of enablers needed to replace US intelligence, armor, artillery, mobility, air support, emergency reinforcement support, and sustainability.

As is the case with the Air Force and Navy, the report does not really address the lack of any clear US plan to look beyond counterinsurgency and to eventually create forces capable of independently defending the country. The problem is touched upon in pages 37-38, but the Commission does not address the need for clear plans to deal with the issue, timelines, costs, and the level of US support required.

Moreover, the section on the Army calls for many further expansions in its roles and missions for counterinsurgency without discussing timelines, practical requirements, and the overall *affordability* of the resulting force. (pp, 60-70) Asking for more is always easy. Getting it tends to be the problem.

4. Air Force

The Commission findings are fine as far as they go, but only briefly touch upon the lack of any clear US plan to look beyond counterinsurgency and to eventually create forces capable of independently defending the country (pp. 72-74). Moreover, while the Commission addresses serious problems in its discussion of overall air force direction and progress, it is not clear at any point what a fully functional “counterinsurgency air force” would be, and what it would take to create even this level of capability (pp. 76-77).

5. Navy

The Commission findings are fine as far as they go (pp. 79, 81-82, 84), but again do not fully address the lack of a clear US plan to look beyond counterinsurgency and to eventually create forces capable of independently defending the country. It is also unclear what combined mix of Navy and Coast Guard capabilities are really needed and affordable, and the lack of clear plans to create such a force mix is not fully addressed.

6. Ministry of Interior

The Commission criticisms of what is a failed Ministry are accurate. . The MoI’s deep ties to sectarian cleansing and abuses are discussed (pp. 87-89) but the Commission does not fully highlight the level to which the Ministry of the Interior is tied to sectarian cleansing and is now part of the “threat” rather than the solution. It does not frankly assess the timelines, level of US effort required, or probability of success in the “slow and often frustrating work of reforming the MoI” that it sees as a crucial task in making the ISF effective. (p. 90)

The Facilities Protection Service is addressed in passing, but the fact that some 100,000 pay slots are divided into a mix of largely incapable forces is not addressed, nor are suggestions made as to how such forces can credibly be restructured and made effective. (pp. 91-92)

7. National Police Assessment

The Commission findings (pp. 111-115) highlight critical problems. These problems are well recognized by US and Iraqi officers in the field, but some senior US officers and officials seem to be in a state of denial, unwilling to confront the scale of central government involvement in sectarian cleansing, and seeking a triumph of hope over experience.

The Commission report does highlight the role of the National Police in sectarian cleansing on page 30, but does not fully address how its actions relate to the role of other elements of the ISF in sectarian cleansing.

8. Iraqi Police Service

The Commission findings provide a list of real problems, but do not address the key issue of whether the present approach to creating an Iraqi Police Force is actually workable. (pp. 93-108) Many findings could only apply if Iraq was a united country, sectarian and ethnic tensions and violence were not critical, and the central government was actually in full control of the country. This part of the report is often decoupled from the fundamental realities of civil conflict in Iraq.

The key challenges are not restructuring the national organization and training of the police. Corruption and inefficiency are unavoidable facts of life in every aspect of Iraqi governance, coupled to rigid inefficiencies, structural or organizational problems, stovepiping, favoritism, and nepotism. There is zero chance this will be eliminated in any aspect of Iraq political life, governance, and the Iraqi security forces during the time the US plays a major role there. The best that can be done is to limit it.

The real problem -- largely unaddressed by the Commission -- is that the present efforts to make the police "national" may well be fundamentally unworkable. Police activity already is local in most of the country, and is -- *and will be* -- driven by local politics, and ties to tribes, sects, and ethnicity. The brutal process of ongoing sectarian and ethnic cleansing, the displacement of some 4 million Iraqis, and the creation of sectarian and ethnic zones in most of the country are facts of life. So is the need to find solutions in terms of police and local security in the combat or high risk areas that are mixed or are on the sectarian and ethnic fault lines.

Moreover, local enforcement is so intermingled in given areas with various militias, tribal forces, armed elements with some ties to current and former insurgents, or Kurdish militias that the real challenge is to create effective local "police" and paramilitary security forces that keep abuses, sectarian cleansing, and corruption/favoritism to levels that allow Iraq to function with some degree of local security and stability.

Many Iraqis and US officers in the field recognize this and also recognize that the regular police are now often either passive in the face of competing local security forces or tied to sectarian and ethnic cleansing. The Commission also does not address the problem of where the Iraqi military should end, paramilitary forces function, and police services begin. This is particularly critical because the difference between political and religious factions, organized gangs, and local extortion and criminal activity is so limited.

It only touches upon the problems created by the lack of an honest, functional, local court system and rule of law, which tie to national laws and legislation. This is further complicated by an ineffective Ministry of Justice, a sectarian Ministry of the Interior, the lack of elected local and provincial authorities, and the lack of any meaningful central government presence and services in many areas.

A mix of key security and stability elements in “hold” and “build” are missing and this cannot be corrected by changes in the Ministry of Interior without a high degree of success in Iraqi political accommodation or conciliation.

9. Border Security Assessment

The Commission findings set some key force improvement priorities (pp. 116-124), but do not discuss the reality that no effort to create such forces is likely to fully secure Iraq’s borders. It does not fully address the impact of several key challenges that are highlighted earlier in the report, such as Syrian tolerance of Sunni Islamist extremist infiltration, infiltration and pressure from Iran, and infiltration and pressure from Turkey. (pp. 31-33)

The report also does not address the fact that that the border security efforts that are possible will be highly dependent on creating local Iraqi support of a kind that can only come through a high degree of success in Iraqi political accommodation or conciliation.

10. Overall Capacity Building

Once again, the Commission findings are accurate. Its findings, however, omit a critical failure in US policy and planning. There is no public US plan that describes the level of activity and resources that the US must devote to ISF activity over the coming years, the planned linkage between ISF development and US force levels in Iraq, and the linkage between success in creating the ISF and success in Iraqi political accommodation or conciliation.

US officials have publicly stated that some elements of such a plan exist in classified form. Congressional support, and support by the American people, cannot, however, be based on good intentions and a request for a blank check. Moreover, the long history of past failures in ISF development requires public examination of the current and future effort, and far more objective measures of time, level of effort, cost, and effectiveness.