

US analyst derides ineffective US-created Iraqi military

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The Bush administration has repeatedly asserted that the soldiers and police of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are taking the lead in fighting the armed opponents of the US occupation and the US-backed Iraqi government. Announcing the deployment of 21,000 additional American troops to Iraq on January 10, Bush declared that the “well-defined mission” of the US forces would be “to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs”.

In March, the theoretical strength of the new Iraqi Army was 177,000 troops, organised into 10 divisions and 112 battalions, as well as 17 “Strategic Infrastructure Battalions” (SIBs) dedicated to protecting oil fields and pipelines, two special forces battalions, a token air force and a small navy. The regular police had 135,000 officers on its payroll. The paramilitary national police fielded 24,000. The Border Police and other specialised units under the Ministry of Interior had 28,000.

On paper, therefore, a total of 364,000 trained and equipped Iraqi security personnel are available to fight alongside the 140,000 American troops in the country. However, as with everything else the American people have been told about the Iraq war, the White House’s claims that Iraqi forces are “stepping up” to replace US troops in front-line combat are a combination of lies and self-delusion.

A detailed exposure of the state of the ISF was undertaken in March by Anthony Cordesman, a leading American military analyst working for the US thinktank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). His paper was substantially updated on April 26, with contributions from another military analyst, Adam Mausner. The 297-page document, “Iraqi Force Development and the Challenge of Civil War,” is available from the CSIS website in PDF format.

Cordesman’s document is written from the standpoint of a supporter of US imperialist objectives in Iraq. In doing so, however, he criticises scathingly the Bush administration’s claim that Iraqi forces are taking the “lead”. “It is never quite clear whether these exaggerated reports of progress in ISF force development are the product of ‘spin’ and the search for political advantage, the desire to avoid seeing the US accept defeat, or self-deception on the part of those doing the reporting. The reality is, however, that virtually nothing the US officially says about Iraqi force development can be taken at face value,” his report stated.

Iraqi units are completely dependent on the US military for air support, armoured support, artillery, medical facilities and even supply and logistics. The Iraqi soldiers are given just five weeks of basic training before being assigned to a battalion. Their weapons and equipment are sub-standard. As a consequence, they suffer high casualties when thrust into combat operations. At least 5,300 Iraqi soldiers and police have been killed and possibly as many as 40,000 wounded over the past four years.

Few soldiers have any motivation to fight for the central Iraqi government and even less to fight for the US military. Most of the troops and police who were recruited in Baghdad and southern Iraq are Shiites with sectarian loyalties to parties such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) or the Sadrist movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. They see their role as primarily defending Shiite communities and provinces from attacks by Sunni extremists. Entire battalions have refused orders to deploy into offensive operations.

In Sunni areas, the army and police are generally viewed as nothing more than Shiite militia in uniform. Sunni Arabs, who constitute over 20 percent of the population, dominated the officer caste under Saddam

Hussein and provide the greatest support to the anti-occupation insurgency. They currently make up less than 10 percent of the new Iraqi security forces.

The army divisions in northern Iraq were overwhelmingly recruited from the Kurdish *peshmerga* militia and have their first loyalty to the Kurdish nationalist parties that have established a de-facto autonomous state in Iraq's three northern provinces. In cities such as Mosul and Kirkuk, Kurdish troops have been accused of carrying out ethnic cleansing operations against the Arab and Turkomen populations.

Cordesman drew attention to the divisions and general morale crisis afflicting the Iraqi security forces: "Men who did not volunteer for demanding combat missions, particularly in complex sectarian or ethnic environments or outside their home areas are being pushed into combat. They often have poor facilities, equipment and weapons that are sharply inferior to their US counterparts, are at least partly excluded from the command and intelligence loops to preserve security. They are treated as second best or unreliable partners.

"Some Iraqis are truly motivated. Most are not, but are asked to fight as if they were truly motivated to support the national government, rather than signed up to earn a living and survive. As was the case with the ARVN [South Vietnamese Army] in Vietnam, their [US] advisors often are not trained and lack the language skills to monitor pay, equity in promotion, conditions in quarters, food supply, and the other material conditions critical to real world morale and motivation."

Even at the best of times, most Iraqi army battalions are at only 60 to 75 percent strength due to institutionalised leave absences. Iraq has no functioning banking system so soldiers have to be given time off each month to take their pay home to their families.

Desertions are rampant. Two Iraqi divisions sent to the volatile western Anbar province to fight alongside US troops against insurgents last year were reported to be 5,000 soldiers short. It is not uncommon for army units sent into combat to have less than 50 percent of their nominal strength.

The McClatchy news service reported in January that Kurdish soldiers had deserted in large numbers when their units were ordered to move from the north to assist US forces in the current Baghdad security operation. One of the Kurdish fighters declared: "I joined the army to be a soldier in my homeland, among my people. Not to fight for others who I have nothing to do with." Another stated: "I don't know why we should interfere in this Sunni-

Shiite war. If I am going to face a difficult situation in Baghdad, I will leave the army for ever."

The crisis in the Iraqi military found a political reflection last week. The Iraqi presidential council re-instituted the death penalty for desertion and three years imprisonment for being absent-without-leave. The Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported: "The harsh penalties come following reports of large-scale desertion from army ranks in the wake of the latest surge in rebel attacks against US and Iraqi forces." Hundreds of Iraqi soldiers now face the choice of being killed fighting on behalf of the US occupation, or being executed by their own commanders.

In opposition to the hype of the White House and the Pentagon, *Washington Post* journalists cited by Cordesman estimated in November 2006 that just 10 Iraqi army battalions—less than 10,000 troops—could be considered effective and capable of operating independently of US forces.

Little has improved in the months since. Cordesman concluded: "US and Multi National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I) plans that called for Iraqi regular military forces to allow significant Coalition troop reductions in 2006 have failed. Worse, the effort to develop the Iraqi police and security forces has gotten badly out of balance with the effort to develop regular forces and lags more than a year behind it... Real-world Iraqi dependence on the present scale of US and allied military support and advisory efforts will continue well into 2008 at the earliest and probably to 2010. *Major US and allied troop reductions need to be put on hold indefinitely.*" [emphasis added]

While the majority of the American people want troops withdrawn, Cordesman's report sheds light on the discussion taking place in US political and military circles about the war in Iraq. The US ruling elite will never be able to rely on a loyal, local puppet army to repress the opposition of the Iraqi people to the country's reduction to an American client state. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers will be required for that task into the indefinite future.



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