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Policing Iraq: Protecting Iraqis from Criminal Violence

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Public opinion surveys show that Iraqis feel the greatest security threat they face is not the insurgency or sectarian conflict but pervasive criminal violence. For a people accustomed to a stifling regime security presence under Saddam Hussein—and the correspondingly safe streets—the post-intervention upsurge in murder, home invasion robbery, kidnapping, carjacking, and rape is fundamentally disturbing.

The inability, indeed, the seeming lack of interest, of the [Coalition Provisional Authority \(CPA\)](#) in controlling criminal violence angered ordinary Iraqis and fueled initial support for [the insurgency](#). The U.S. military's use of Iraqi police in counter-insurgency operations reinforced the impression among Iraqis that the United States was less concerned with their welfare than with implementing an exit strategy.

This impression was re-enforced when the U.S. military created a new Iraqi National Police composed of counterinsurgency units made up of former soldiers. These units performed well in combat, but were infiltrated by Shiite militias and have carried out [sectarian violence](#). Distrust of the police is widespread, particularly in Sunni areas.

Reducing criminal violence would advance stability in Iraq, increase popular support for Iraq's new government, and improve police-community relations. This would require focusing the Iraqi Police Service (the street cops) on fighting crime and protecting Iraqi citizens. It would involve improved training in conducting investigations and community-oriented policing, and new equipment to give the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) the ability to fight crime and to improve relations with Iraqi citizens. Doing this would pay dividends in the war against the insurgency, because citizens would be more likely to assist the police in tracking down insurgents. At the same time, the United States must make a concerted effort to reform the Shiite-dominated units in the Iraqi National Police. This can best be done by pressing the new Minister of Interior to reform his ministry through an effective program of U.S.-supported institutional development, something that was done by the United States in previous peace operations, but not, thus far, in Iraq.

Safe Streets Were Replaced By Criminal Violence

To ensure his rule, Saddam established an interlocking network of military and civilian organizations with different official missions, but with overlapping and redundant functions. The result was a pervasive and encompassing police state. At the bottom of this multilayered security bureaucracy were the 60,000 members of the Iraqi National Police (INP). This force was composed of an academy-educated officer

corps and a thuggish, uneducated, and largely untrained rank-and-file. Poorly equipped, badly led, and underpaid, the police were known for their brutality and petty corruption. Police did not patrol, but remained in their stations unless ordered to make arrests. The public viewed the police as the most immediate face of Saddam's repressive regime.

Despite the Iraqi police's reputation as Iraq's least effective security force, U.S. decision-makers assumed that [post-intervention public security](#) could be left in their hands. Unsurprisingly, however—at least to those who have studied other post-conflict situations—the Iraqi police left their posts and returned home when U.S. forces entered Baghdad on April 9, 2003. The weeks of looting that followed destroyed government ministries and most police stations. It also enabled organized criminal networks and the tens of thousands of criminals that Saddam had released before the war to exploit the chaos and prey on Iraqi citizens.

Faced with rampant crime and a complete breakdown in public order, the CPA invited the Iraqi police to return to duty. Those who came back lacked leadership, organization, and logistic support and were distrusted by the public. In May 2003, a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) police assessment team determined that the Iraqi police were incapable of restoring public order and would require substantial international assistance before they could assume responsibility for internal security. The team recommended the deployment of 6,600 international police, including a 2,500-member constabulary (gendarme force), plus a comprehensive program to reorganize, retrain, and reequip the police.

Unfortunately, these recommendations were not immediately implemented. The training program for new police recruits did not begin until December 2003 and only reached capacity in terms of numbers of faculty and cadets in Spring 2005. Of the recommended 6,600 international police advisors, only 50 arrived during the first six months following the intervention. A year later, there were only 375. Vital equipment did not reach the IPS until after March 2004, when President Bush signed NSPD 36, which formally assigned responsibility for police assistance to the Department of Defense (DOD).

The Civilian Police Advisory Training Team: Mixed Team/ Mixed Approach

The U.S. military's takeover of responsibility for training indigenous police was unprecedented. In the past, beginning with Operation Just Cause in Panama, responsibility for police training was assigned to the Departments of Justice and State. Given the circumstances in Iraq, however, it appeared to policymakers in Washington that only the U.S. military had the resources required to 'fast track' the police program. In March 2004, the Civilian Police Advisory Training Team (CPATT) was established under the Multi-National Security Transition Command (MNSTC-I). CPATT was led by an army general with a civilian (USDOJ) deputy and included both military and civilian personnel. The problem was that the U.S. military and State/DOJ civilian police advisors had markedly different goals for the Iraqi police. This divergence of views meant that there was no common understanding among U.S. agencies about the mission of the Iraqi police. It also meant a divergence between the training provided to members of the Iraqi Police Service and their utilization in the field.

State policymakers and DOJ police trainers were intent on creating an efficient, lightly armed, civilian Iraqi Police Service (IPS) that utilized community-policing techniques and operated in conformity with Western, democratic standards for professional law enforcement. DOJ police advisors argued that Iraq's security problems were best resolved by relying on investigations and arrests to remove terrorists and criminals. Curriculum at the DOJ-run police training facility in Amman, Jordan was based upon a training program developed for local police in Kosovo. However, the Kosovo program entailed five-months of classroom instruction and twelve weeks of follow-on field training; the Iraq program was reduced to ten weeks of class work and no field training.

Moreover, the eruption of the insurgency meant that the basic assumptions for the Kosovo-based training did not apply. Instead of a benign environment that permitted community policing, Iraqi police faced attacks from car bombs and gunmen with heavy weapons. The results were predictable and tragic:

Thousands of police officers died in the line of duty, with at least 600 killed this year. Hundreds more young men perished in attacks on police recruiting centers. Only within the past year was the emphasis for recruit training changed to "policing in a non-permissive environment," with the addition of classes on officer protection and defensive tactics.

Beyond utilizing the IPS in a counter-insurgency role, the U.S. military was determined to create an internal Iraqi security force that could protect itself and deal with the insurgency and hostile militias, ultimately permitting a U.S. withdrawal. U.S. authorities decided the solution lay in creating new Public Order Battalions, a Mechanized Police Unit, and an Emergency Response Unit. These were combined into the "Iraqi National Police" in 2006. Like the IPS, the INP was subordinate to the Interior Ministry, but was composed of 'heavy police units' that were recruited from former soldiers in Saddam's Republican Guard and other elite army units. The INP also included "Special Police Commandos" that were recruited directly by Iraqi MOI officials with little U.S. input and no vetting to remove criminals or terrorists.

Unfortunately, these units shared personal, tribal, or sectarian loyalties and were infiltrated by Shiite militias. Their largely un-vetted personnel were given military weapons and counter-insurgency training, but not the basic police course given the IPS. When provided with embedded U.S. military advisors and logistic support, these forces proved effective in fighting insurgents. However, as sectarian violence increased, these units were accused of torturing and killing religious and political opponents and of terrorizing Iraqi citizens. Iraqis also blamed these forces for the existence of secret prisons and night raids on homes by men wearing what appeared to be police uniforms.

The Ministry of Interior Needs Reform

More damaging than the failure by different U.S. departments to agree on the core mission for the Iraqi police was the U.S. failure to rebuild and rehabilitate the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), which manages and administers the police. In previous interventions, starting with Panama, the U.S. inserted institutional development experts into the interior ministries to advise and train police executives and administrative staff in management, strategic planning, budget, personnel, and other essential skills. Advisors also provided technical assistance to police academies in education management, curriculum development, and instructor training. During the CPA period, only a handful of U.S. police advisors were assigned to MOI. More recently, CPATT has created MOI Transition Teams composed of nearly 100 U.S. contractors provided by both DOD and Justice. These advisors work under separate contracts with different terms and conditions, participate in separate and different training programs, receive little U.S. oversight, and have no interagency approved plan for promoting MOI reform.

Also missing from efforts to rebuild the Iraqi Ministry of Interior has been consistent Iraqi leadership. On June 8, after months of political infighting, Iraq's new Prime Minister finally named a new Interior Minister, Jawod al-Bolani. His appointment followed a 'revolving door' of Iraqi interior ministers with the policy, direction, and key personnel changing with each new arrival. The previous incumbent, Jabr al-Zwbeidi, a Shiite, developed a reputation for unduly promoting the influence of the largest Shiite political party over the ministry itself and for allowing police units to be infiltrated by the Badr organization. The new minister must reverse the politicizing of the ministry and purge personnel and units identified with sectarian violence.

Iraq's "Year of the Police" is Off to a Rocky Start

In January 2006, DOD's declared "Year of the Police in Iraq," began with the dispatch of Police Transition Teams (PTT) composed of 2,250 U.S. Military Police and 570 (of a planned 750) State Department "DynCorp" contractors to inspect provincial and district headquarters and local police stations throughout Iraq. Their mission was to conduct a detailed assessment using a multi-page checklist of indicators and to provide remedial training where required. PTTs have visited 574 of Iraq's approximately 1,000 police stations. For security reasons, PTTs reside on U.S. military bases and make unscheduled visits to Iraqi police facilities for short periods. Although the assessment mission is incomplete, planning has begun for

transferring the police assistance program back to the State Department at the end of FY 07. This transition is not driven by conditions in Iraq, but by Washington-based interagency considerations and the budget cycle, which requires submissions for FY 08 in the near future. Given current uncertainties, planners admit that the FY 08 budget submissions will be based on their "best guess" about the future of the program.

Despite the importance of the mission, State, Justice, and DOD still have not agreed on the type of Iraqi police force they seek to create. In addition to the IPS and INP, the Iraqi Interior Ministry is also responsible for the Border Police. Each of these separate police forces requires different training, equipment, and institutional development. With no interagency agreed goals and objectives for Interior Ministry security units, it is difficult to determine the needs of the U.S. police assistance program two years in the future. It is also difficult to predict the circumstances under which U.S. advisors will operate, particularly the level of security and the type of logistical support that civilian police advisors will require if the U.S. military substantially reduces its numbers, withdraws into a few isolated bases, or departs.

MNSTC-I has established a goal of 188,000 trained and equipped Iraqi police. Recruiting and in-service training continues in Amman, the Baghdad Police College, and at seven regional training centers in Iraq. Some 70,000 Iraqi police recruits have completed the ten-week introductory course; 40,000 former-regime police have received three-weeks of Transition Integration Training. This orientation to policing in a democracy includes limited instruction in firearms, defensive tactics, patrol, and first aid. The job of developing the Iraqi police is far from finished. It is difficult to see how the State Department can resume responsibility given its previous problems in administering the program, its lack of personnel resources, and its likely need for full-time security and logistic support.

Reorienting the Police to a Counter-Crime Mission

Much could be achieved in terms of increasing popular support for the Iraqi government and for the U.S. presence by improving the ability of the Iraqi Police Service to control crime and protect Iraqi citizens. (The counter-insurgency mission would be left to the INP and the Iraqi Army.) Currently the IPS performs station, patrol, and traffic control functions. Effective crime control would require an additional capacity to conduct investigations and to make non-routine arrests. The U.S. would have to provide appropriate training, equipment, and, most importantly, experienced civilian police advisors. This effort would benefit from the creation of a major crimes unit, like our FBI, with national authority for confronting organized crime, narcotics, smuggling, and corruption throughout the country. Targeting criminals would not only reduce crime and improve the regime's popular support. Community-oriented police can gather intelligence at the street level that allows the arrest of terrorists before they strike. Community-oriented policing techniques have been shown to be effective in every counter-insurgency operation where they have been employed.

A counter-crime mission for the IPS would involve emphasizing community-oriented policing, utilizing approaches that have radically improved police-community relations and lowered crime rates in cities as varied as New York and Karachi. A community-oriented police program would start with a concerted campaign to explain the new approach through press reports on police activities, speeches by public officials, and interaction between citizens and police to make Iraqis aware that their government was concerned about their safety.

Redirecting the IPS to a counter-crime, community-oriented mission must be accompanied by a serious, U.S.-led effort to clean up MOI to reduce the influence of Shiite political parties, control corruption, and improve management. There is also a need to reverse the process of decentralization begun under the Coalition Provisional Authority and restore central authority over provincial level police. Devolution of authority to the provinces has resulted in differing standards and levels of performance in various parts of the country. Finally, there is a critical need for vetting the police commando units to remove militia members who are guilty of ethnic cleansing and criminal violence.

Reform of MOI can only be accomplished by applying U.S. political pressure on the Iraqi government and

by improving the number and effectiveness of American advisors in the Ministry Transition Teams. Currently, U.S. advisors receive only cursory briefings on Iraqi history, culture and politics with most of their pre-departure orientation spent on contractor-related administrative procedures, physical fitness tests, medical examinations and uniform fittings. Instead, U.S. advisors should receive a total immersion course that includes extensive training and practical exercises in dealing with Iraqis and training on the technical programs that the advisors will have to implement. This training program should reflect an interagency agreed plan for reforming the ministry. Among the plan's priorities should be the creation of an effective Inspector General to control corruption and a professional standards unit to deal with citizen complaints against the police.

Any attempt to improve the police must be accompanied with a similar program to improve the quality of courts and prisons, the other two parts of the justice system. A description of such an effort is beyond the scope of this brief paper, but essential to the success of its recommendations.

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- [The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Public Security in Iraq](#)
Special Report, April 2005
- [Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan](#)
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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Robert Perito](#), senior program officer in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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