

**“The Impact of U.S.-Constructed Security Architecture on State-Building and Social Cohesion in Post-Intervention Iraq”**

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## The Impact of U.S.-Constructed Security Architecture on State-Building and Social Cohesion in Post-Intervention Iraq

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Iraq in the twenty-first century has been described by many as a “failed state”, with the primary cause cited being the American-led intervention to depose Saddam Hussein. In particular, the security architecture designed by the United States in preparation for the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 has drawn attention concerning its effectiveness in ensuring the security and stability of the country.

In this paper, I will make the argument that this “security architecture”, hereafter defined as “the ensemble of military and police forces tasked with ensuring the security of the state and civilians”, has overall proven ineffective and has contributed to the destabilization of the country during and after the official U.S. military intervention. I will first summarize the objectives of the implementation of this architecture; then, based on the recent literature on U.S. policy in post-intervention Iraq and in the Middle East, as well as on International Crisis Group reports from the 2010-2015 time frame, I will assess the performance of security forces in Iraq and their impact on state-building and on sectarian divisions in the country. I will look in particular at the ways in which security forces fell short of their stated goals, the appropriation of security forces by the Maliki government in the consolidation of power, and the impact of religious divisions between security forces and civil society. I will conclude by reflecting on the outlook for Iraqi security architecture in light of the new Western intervention taking place today.

### **I. The Effect of U.S. Security Architecture on State-Building in Iraq**

#### *A. Official Objectives*

The objectives of the implementation of U.S.-designed security architecture in Iraq were outlined in the “Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq”. Signed in 2008 and used as the official framework for

security cooperation between the two countries until 2011, the agreement details the following parameters:

The Parties agree to continue close cooperation in strengthening and maintaining military and security institutions and democratic political institutions in Iraq, including, as may be mutually agreed, cooperation in training, equipping, and arming the Iraqi Security Forces, in order to combat domestic and international terrorism and outlaw groups, upon request by the Government of Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

The initial reconstruction of the Iraqi police force was overseen by the U.S. State Department, through the “Civilian Police Assistance Transition Team” and through the “establishment of advisory missions to both” the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MOD) and to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI).<sup>2</sup> In the early stages of the Western intervention, this structure became the “Multi-National Security Transition Command-I”, overseen by multiple members of the international coalition;<sup>3</sup> in 2010, however, the training and re-structuring of the Iraqi security forces was transferred to “US Force I”.<sup>4</sup> The rebuilt Iraqi security architecture, then, constituted the MOD, the MOI, and the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), the latter directly overseen by the prime minister;<sup>5</sup> especially as of 2010, the recruitment and construction of these bodies was primarily conceived of and managed by the United States.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this training was also in function of key threats that the U.S. had identified to Iraqi security, as well as the “minimal essential capabilities” needed to assure internal stability.<sup>7</sup> According to Toby Dodge, the rebuilding and training of the Iraqi army and police forces cost the United States \$24.5 billion.<sup>8</sup> This constituted a substantial investment by the U.S.: by 2012, Iraqi security forces in the country employed “12% of the total population of adult males”, and Iraq had become the “world’s biggest defence [sic] spender by percentage of GDP”.<sup>9</sup>

### *B. Performance of Security Forces*

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<sup>1</sup> State Department. *Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq*. p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Brennan et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 328.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 346.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 347.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 329-330.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 120.

However, an assessment of the performance of the new Iraqi armed forces is mixed at best. A report published by the International Crisis Group in October 2010 highlights several issues that call into question the effectiveness of the army and the police forces, notably internal political divisions, ineffective government oversight, and enduring corruption. The report questions the readiness of Iraqi security forces to assume full responsibility for the security of the country for numerous reasons, because of “questions of [...] the army’s loyalty, cohesion, politicization and balkanization”,<sup>10</sup> and notes that “In this sense, security forces can only be as strong and cohesive as the state itself”.<sup>11</sup> Later reports indicate the failure of the Iraqi security forces to overcome these obstacles: the Iraqi police did not intervene during violent clashes between protesters in Baghdad in June 2011, leading the International Crisis Group to call it a “regime-supported action”.<sup>12</sup> In the same report, security forces are described as killing demonstrators in anti-government protests earlier that year.<sup>13</sup> Similar incidents appear in later reports: members of al-Iraqiya, a largely secular opposition group, are described as being subjected to “intimidation and arrest by security forces”, with “de-Baathification and anti-terrorism” cited as justification, in a July 2012 report;<sup>14</sup> most notably, escalating protests led Iraqi security forces to “raid a protest camp” in Hawija, “killing over 50 and injuring 110.”<sup>15</sup> This is in spite of the fact that the U.S. attempted to apply its own “model” to training the Iraqi army in particular, which included training in “human rights and rule of law.”<sup>16</sup> The often sectarian nature of these clashes— with Shiites making up “75-80%” of the Iraqi army<sup>17</sup> – led to “the perception among Sunni Arabs that security forces and notably the army are Shiite-dominated instruments of sectarian domination rather than national protection.”<sup>18</sup> This increased religious divide contributed to deeply weakening state unity.

Finally, U.S. private security companies represent a particular challenge, as they recall what Elizabeth Picard describes as “the search for security” that “transcends the legitimate space of the state”<sup>19</sup>. Their violations have been highly documented: Blackwater in particular was

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group. *Loose Ends: Iraqi Security Forces Between Drawdown and Withdrawal*. p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group. *Failing Oversight: Iraq’s Unchecked Government*. p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group. *Iraq’s Secular Opposition: the Rise and Decline of al-Iraqiya*. p. i.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid. Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State*. p. i.

<sup>16</sup> *Loose Ends: Iraq’s Security Forces between Drawdown and U.S. Withdrawal*. p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Dodge. *Op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group. *Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State*. p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Picard, “Armée et sécurité au cœur de l’autoritarisme”, p. 305.

involved in numerous human rights violations, notably the shooting of seventeen civilians in the Nisour Square incident of 2007.<sup>20</sup> The presence of these actors alongside state security forces and the violence that they committed is significant in the context of attempted state-building, as it calls into question the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, as theorized by Max Weber, and therefore undermines the strength of the state. Their actions also served to further erode the validity of American presence in Iraq and of the security architecture the U.S. was attempting to put into place.

### *C. Reinforced Authoritarianism and Centralized Control of Security Forces*

One of the characteristics of the evolution of the security apparatus conceived by the United States is its consolidation in the highly centralized government of Nuri al-Maliki, despite U.S. attempts to install a federal system. The concentration of power and control of the Iraqi security forces by the Iraqi government has been a source of political instability: the International Crisis Group, noting an “escalating political crisis” in a July 2012 report, points out Maliki’s “centralizing and authoritarian tendencies”, and that [his] critics [...] accuse him of bringing security forces under his direct personal control.”<sup>21</sup> According to Joel Rayburn, Maliki’s government “consolidated control of national security institutions, beginning with key units of the Iraqi Army” and also brought the “Special Operating Forces”, the U.S.-trained counterterrorism force, under direct control of the prime minister.<sup>22</sup> The use of security forces to suppress political opposition, as we have seen above, highlights their function as a tool to consolidate central power: This echoes Picard’s theorization of the consolidation of authoritarian power through security, which operates in part by virtue of an “amalgam of the nation and the defense of the nation as sources of legitimacy of rulers”.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Maliki, however, this process had the opposite effect, and the legitimacy of his government was increasingly undermined as a result. The use of the security apparatus to consolidate centralized power was not an intended consequence of U.S. policy; however, it is indicative of a failure on the part of the United States to install a working federal system, with an appropriate role for Iraqi security forces within the federal government.

<sup>20</sup> Jose Gomez del Prado. “Impact on Human Rights of a New Non-State Actor: Private Military and Security Companies.” pp. 154-156.

<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group. *Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq’s Escalating Political Crisis*. p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*. pp. 55-56.

<sup>23</sup> Picard, *Op. Cit.*, p. 306.

## II. Effect of U.S. Security Architecture on Sectarian Divisions

The security architecture put into place in Iraq by the United States ended up relying heavily on a new political order that deepened fractures along sectarian lines: believing that Sunni Arabs were a dominant and oppressive minority under Saddam Hussein, the U.S., through the Coalition Provisional Authority, “implemented de-Baathification policies that essentially treated Sunni Arabs as representatives of an oppressive state structure in need of dismantling.”<sup>24</sup> The entrenchment of sectarian divisions is also evident from the imposition of the Iraq Governmental Council, a temporary government “whose composition was explicitly sectarian with a ratio of thirteen Shia representatives, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkmen and one Assyrian”.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as we saw above, the Iraqi security forces have tended to be heavily Shi’a, and many concerns have been raised of violence directed particularly against Sunni Arabs<sup>26</sup>. The United States was not unaware of this dynamic, particularly in the use of security forces – on the contrary: Tareq and Jacqueline Ismael also point to the “use of Shia and Kurdish paramilitary forces” to repress opposition early in the coalition-led occupation.<sup>27</sup>

This had a profoundly negative effect on social cohesion in the country: International Crisis Group reports from 2010 to 2015 note in general an increasing sectarian divide, leading to, in the case of Falluja, a perception of the Iraqi government “as a sectarian, Shiite occupation no less pernicious and imperial than its U.S. predecessor.”<sup>28</sup> This is significant: as Jean-Pierre Filiu argues, among the consequences of the “de-Baathification” campaign led by the United States in Iraq was an “[amalgamation of] the worst of two colonial experiences at state-building in the 1920s mandates: the forceful British integration of the three governorates in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, on one side; and the French sectarian re-partition of power in Lebanon [...] on the other.”<sup>29</sup> Toby Dodge, writing in 2012, notes that “Sectarian rhetoricism, far from being treated, has become entrenched,” remarking in particular the evocation of the “Baathist threat” by Nuri al-Maliki “as a key part of his political strategy to unite the Shia electorate behind his continued

<sup>24</sup> International Crisis Group. *Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State*. p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ismael and Ismael, *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State*.

<sup>27</sup> Ismael and Ismael, *Op. Cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group. *Iraq: Falluja’s Faustian Bargain*. p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, pp. 240-241.

rule.”<sup>30</sup> A May 2015 report emphasizes the Obama administration’s apparent inability to appreciate the consequences of this aspect of Maliki’s governance, particularly:

Maliki’s growing authoritarian bent, based on a mixture of patronage and repression; [...] the pronounced Shia’isation of state institutions that deepened Sunni distrust of whatever political process remained; and ever more repressive and violent security operations in predominantly Sunni Arab areas.<sup>31</sup>

This ignorance of the impact of supporting Maliki, as well as the increasing control of Iraqi security by Shiites, contributed to greater disillusionment and to the weakening of the legitimacy of the U.S.-backed security architecture in the country.

There were further unforeseen repercussions of the entrenchment of sectarian divisions by means of the security forces: as Fanar Haddad argues, an “Iraqi Sunni Arab identity” emerged in response to the institutionalization of sectarian divisions. Viewing sectarian relations as “competing subnational mass-group identities”,<sup>32</sup> he proposes that “The centrality of sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq meant that, for the first time in modern Iraqi history, an explicitly Sunni Arab identity had to be formulated and articulated to serve social and political ends”,<sup>33</sup> noting further that “the salience of sectarian identity was such that political majorities were formulated [...] on ethno-religious lines, thereby furthering the politicization of communal identities and inflaming sectarian relations.”<sup>34</sup> Lastly, the consolidation of the Shi’ite government and security apparatus supported by the United States unexpectedly created room for greater Iranian influence in Iraq, through increased “support to Shi’a political parties”<sup>35</sup> and furnishing of arms to “allied Shi’a militias in Iraq”,<sup>36</sup> this created further religious tensions and undermined the legitimacy of the Iraqi security forces. Considering these unforeseen consequences, it may be possible to identify how Daesh, in the aftermath of Western occupation and attempts to install a functional government and security architecture, came to be seen as a legitimate actor by some in the country. Their success has come, at least in part, from both playing into the aforementioned “Sunni Arab identity” and from opposition to sectarian divisions in the government, security forces, and Iranian-armed militias.

<sup>30</sup> Dodge, *Op. Cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> “International Crisis Group. *Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*. p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Fanar Haddad, “Sectarian Relations and Sunni Identity in Post-Civil War Iraq,” p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> Haddad p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Brennan et. al., *Op. cit.*, p. 314.

<sup>36</sup> Ismael and Ismael, *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

### **III. Iraqi Security Architecture in Light of a New American Intervention**

In view of the rise of Daesh, Western powers, particularly the United States, have felt compelled to return to Iraq. Noting that “The U.S. in particular after its troop withdrawal adopted a low profile in pursuit of modest objectives: nominal Iraqi stability through minimal engagement”,<sup>37</sup> the International Crisis Group shows how the U.S. and other Western powers have been eager to provide arms to Iraq’s Kurds in the fight against Daesh, as this allows the West to avoid further “boots-on-the-ground” interventions. This “intervention by proxy”, however, has consequences for the Iraqi security architecture, as it not only nourishes further ethnic divisions in the country and therefore undermines the unity of the Iraqi state;<sup>38</sup> it also reflects the failure of the Iraqi security architecture, as constructed by the United States, to ensure the lasting stability of the country. It also shows a seeming inability on the part of the Obama Administration to learn lessons from the past: as we saw above, arming Iraqi Kurds and other select groups further entrenches sectarian divisions, which arguably contributed to the initial success of Daesh in the first place; and as we also saw, Western interventions are likely to continue to be seen through the prism of colonial and neo-colonial occupation patterns, which would only further undermine their validity in the eyes of civilians. Because of the phenomenon of “intervention by proxy” and the profoundly weakened legitimacy of the United States in Iraq, its participation in the fight against Daesh does not bode well for the future of the Iraqi security architecture inasmuch as it entrenches existing divisions in the country, undermines state unity, and undermines the Iraqi security forces themselves. The future of the security architecture in Iraq in the face of transnational Islamist movements such as Daesh and continued U.S. intervention, therefore, remains uncertain at best, as it seems likely that Western interventions will continue to invite the same reactions on the part of Iraqi civil society.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the United States, in the lead-up to the withdrawal of its remaining troops in 2011, attempted to put into place a security architecture in Iraq capable of preserving national security and state unity. An assessment of this security apparatus, however, proves negative overall: not only did the security architecture fail in many cases, but it was also appropriated by

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> “*Ibid.* p. 21.



Nuri al-Maliki in his consolidation of power, which entrenched existing sectarian divisions and undermined the unity of the Iraqi state. In some cases, the U.S.-designed security apparatus had the opposite of the intended effect, leading to greater insecurity and popular resentment in Iraq, as it fit in with pre-existing models of colonial occupation that resonated negatively with civil society. As a result, the unity of Iraqi society, already fragile, was easily shattered by the resurgence of transnational Islamism in the form of Daesh, which beckoned the return of U.S. military involvement. It seems apparent, therefore, that the state-building model used in “Operation Iraqi Freedom” was inadequate, and that the future of Iraqi security relies less on further Western military interventions than on greater opportunities for civil society participation – if it is not too late.

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