

MERIA

DISBANDING AND REBUILDING THE IRAQI ARMY: THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In 1921, the Iraqi Army was established in the British mandate, which had weak democratic institutions at the time of the first insurgency. The Iraqi public saw that its destiny was controlled by the British, whom it believed sought to exploit the country's natural resources. In a backlash of nationalism, the public projected its aspirations for complete independence on the growing army. After 2003, the Americans reestablished an army in a state with weak democratic institutions during a period of civil internal conflict, and 82 years after the British mandate, the United States controlled Iraq's destiny. Both the United Kingdom and the United States faced the same difficulties and produced the same reactions among the Iraqi public as they tried to create an Iraqi Army from "scratch."

"I am a Muslim and Islamic law lays down that no infidel shall rule over me... and because I am an Arab and Arabism forbids a foreign army to corrupt my country."¹

While this statement sounds as if it were taken from an Iraqi insurgent's communiqué after the 2003 Iraq War, the quote actually belongs to an Arab nationalist colonel, Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, who dominated Iraqi political life from 1937 to 1941. The "foreign army" to which he referred was that of the United Kingdom. In his words, "I detest Britain and all those who help it to enslave my people."² As a Muslim, al-Sabbagh opposed "infidel" British rule in a Muslim land. As an Arab nationalist, he rejected a foreign Western nation ruling Arab soil. He perceived the British mandate and Britain's interference in Iraqi affairs after its independence as an extension of imperialism at a time when the United Kingdom controlled the destinies of most of the Muslim Arab lands, particularly Mandatory Palestine. Paul Hemphill wrote that al-Sabbagh viewed the events in the Middle East as a continuation of a greater clash between Islam and Christianity: "The historical struggle between Christendom and Islam had never really ended, but was being fought on different battlefields and with

different weapons."³ Al-Sabbagh's vision of a new Crusade resonates with the neo-Crusader themes that proliferate the discourse of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, as well as with a variety of Iraqi nationalist groups in opposition to the U.S. role in their country.⁴ Finally, the colonel was a proud soldier who had served in the Ottoman military fighting the British and their allies. He resented taking orders from British advisors in the Iraqi Army.

Al-Sabbagh's views are no different from those of the soldiers and officers who discovered that their proud army had been disbanded after the 2003 Iraq War. Various military men viewed the United States in the same way that al-Sabbagh and his colleagues viewed the United Kingdom. A good number of them had fought in a war with the United States, either in 1991 or 2003. They regarded the American decision to dissolve the Iraqi Army, the largest military force in the Arab world, as a means of keeping Iraq weak and strengthening Israel. These disenfranchised soldiers joined anti-American insurgent groups for the same reasons that had motivated al-Sabbagh. As Muslims, they were opposed to "infidel rule," and many of them were ethnically Arab, opposing American occupation of Arab soil. Finally, like al-Sabbagh, they were proud soldiers who did

not want to join an army where they would have to take orders from Americans. Joining the insurgency was a means of addressing their humiliation and maintaining their dignity as fighting men.

The relationship among Iraq—after it was granted sovereignty in June 2004—its new military, and the United States resembled the situation in Iraq after its independence in 1932. Despite the formal independence of Iraq, the nature, structure, size, and mission of the Iraqi Army was ultimately determined in London (post-1932) or in Washington (post-2004). Like the United Kingdom, the United States was ultimately responsible for training the new Iraqi Army, while in the meantime the Iraqi state depended on foreign troops to protect a nascent government.

British policy in the 1930s and American policy after 2004 sought to create a strong Iraqi military that would safeguard the strategic interests of both London and Washington, but was often seen as “imperialist” interference in domestic affairs by Iraqi nationalist circles. In both cases, the military emerged as a symbol in the context of a critical discourse of the British or American role in controlling Iraq’s destiny. With the British experience, the Iraqi aspirations for complete independence were projected onto the army, and the army emerged as the guardian of what it perceived to be Iraq’s interests. The army asserted itself against a monarchy deemed too subservient to British interests—the same interests that the Iraqi Army was supposed to protect. An examination of how Iraqis view the armed forces after 2004 indicates that Iraq is following the same nationalist trajectory on which it embarked several decades ago.

THE 2003 IRAQ WAR AND THE DISBANDING OF THE IRAQI MILITARY

The United Kingdom engaged in a month-long war with Iraq in 1941 in order to carry out a regime change, as the United States did in 2003. However, there was a significant difference in how the victorious powers dealt

with the Iraqi military. The British did not disband the Iraqi Army, which had just fought a war with the United Kingdom, but rather purged it of nationalist officers loyal to al-Sabbagh’s junta (known as the Four Colonels). By gradually doing so, the Iraqi Army was still intact and could maintain internal security, particularly during the Kurdish uprising that erupted in the 1940s.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) resembled the role played by the British High Commissioner in Iraq in the sense that both were the highest authority in Iraq during that country’s transition to independence. Despite the similarities, it is difficult to find a sweeping action taken by the High Commissioner that comes close to the CPA’s order to disband the Iraqi Army given by its head, Paul Bremer, in May 2003. Bremer has incurred numerous critiques for disbanding the Iraqi Army. The focus on his action denies the role that powerful U.S. civilian politicians in Washington had in deciding to disband the military, since it is doubtful that Bremer could have made such a monumental decree without the approval of his superiors. The dissolution order revealed early on how American administrators and Iraqi nationalists held two diverging views on Iraq’s future and past. A document prepared by the CPA entitled *An Historic Review of CPA Accomplishments* merely devoted one line to this “accomplishment,” writing, “Iraqi Army formally dissolved May 23, 2003.”⁵ The failure to further elaborate on this act seemed to be an indirect acknowledgement of the severity of the CPA’s action. The CPA was correct in that for a “Historic Review,” its action would certainly affect Iraq’s future history. It also revealed the battle between the United States and the Iraqis over a contested history. The United States had envisioned Iraq embarking on a new linear history, abandoning the legacy of its past, which they conflated with Saddam Hussein’s rule. Yet Iraqis hold a cyclical view of history, wherein a foreign power, similar to the British Mandatory authority, sought to subjugate Iraq for “imperial” interests by dismantling the nation’s shield—its regular army.

Bremer justified his decision based on the argument that Saddam Hussein had oppressed Iraq's Shi'a and Kurds, and since the military served the Iraqi president, the Iraqi Shi'a and Kurds would therefore embrace the decision to disband the Iraqi Army. In his memoirs, Bremer wrote, "And in early meetings, Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani made it clear to me that the Kurds would 'never' accept a formula to reconstitute and re-arm units of the former Iraqi army."⁶ While this statement may have been true, Bremer could have argued that the Kurds already had their *peshmerga*, or militias, in place to maintain security in the north and that an Iraqi army would be needed to keep security in the center and south of the country. He could have offered a *peshmerga* force to be reconstituted in a security structure where a regional army of the north would exist alongside federal army units, which had become reality in any case by 2007. Jalal Talabani, then the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who became Iraq's president in 2006, declared that disbanding the military was a wise decision which "struck at the roots of the Arab nationalist militarism that plagued Iraq even before Saddam."⁷ The history of the Iraqi military was characterized by a nexus between militarism and Arab nationalism during the British involvement in Iraqi affairs. The connection between militarism and nationalism was cemented as a response to foreign intervention in Iraq, and thus it follows that an American decision to disband the Iraqi Army would only serve to increase the militarism and Arab nationalism in postwar Iraq to which Talabani had such an aversion.

Bremer also wrote that the Shi'a of Iraq opposed the Iraqi military as well: "The distrust the Shia population and leaders felt for the old army was, if anything, even deeper. They remembered the slaughter carried out by *Saddam's army* after the Gulf War, and many Shia felt lingering anger that America had not intervened to stop the killing" (emphasis added).⁸ Bremer, by referring to "Saddam's army," conflated the government of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Regular Army, which

had existed well before he came to power in 1968. In any conflict, a language of power emerges that is used to vilify the "enemy." While Saddam Hussein committed horrific acts against his people, "Saddam" has been employed as a demonized single-word concept in public discourse and in the media, and even this author had adopted such terminology in his past works. Nevertheless, other Middle East leaders, such as Hafiz al-Asad or Husni Mubarak were never referred to as simply "Hafiz" or "Husni" in the media. Furthermore, "Saddam's army" is often used without an explanation of the makeup of the Iraqi armed forces. Bremer failed to make the distinction among the Iraqi "armed forces" (or "security forces" or "military") during the Ba'hist era, which included all of Iraq's armed services in addition to the Republican Guard, Saddam's Fidayin, the Special Republican Guards, the Popular Army, and the military units attached to the intelligence agencies. However, the "Iraqi Army" specifically refers to the army that was founded in 1921. The army, along with the navy and air force, were subordinate to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, unlike the Republican Guard, which reported directly to the presidency. After 2003, the CPA's failure to differentiate between these terms had drastic consequences. To see the Iraqi Army as a monolithic unit, as Bremer did when he disbanded it, revealed a lack of knowledge of the tensions within the Iraqi armed forces.

Returning to Bremer's argument regarding Shi'a loathing towards "Saddam's Army," while some Shi'a regarded the military as an institution responsible for brutal domestic repression and discrimination in favor of Sunni Arabs, other Shi'a were loyal to this institution and even took part in Shi'a repression against fellow Shi'a. The Ba'ath government could not have survived as long as it did without Shi'a and Kurds taking part in the security forces to repress other "rebellious" Shi'a and Kurds. While historically the Iraqi military may have been dominated by Sunni Arabs, there were distinguished members of the Iraqi military that cut across the nation's ethno-sectarian mosaic. Sa'di Tuma Abbas al-Jaburi, a Shi'a, and Rashid Husayn Windawi al-Takriti, a

Kurd, were respected generals who remained loyal to Hussein throughout the Iran-Iraq War. Officers from the Shahwani family served as prominent Turkmens in the military, and the family suffered from taking part in a post-1991 coup. There were even prominent Iraqi Christian officers who served in elite units such as the Special Forces.

While Bremer argued that his decision was intended to placate Shi'a and Kurdish demands, it alienated members of the Sunni Arab community. Hatim Jasim Mukhlis, leader of the Iraqi National Movement, brought up a point that had been neglected when discussing the Sunni Arabs. Bremer, as well as many outside analysts of Iraq, observed that the majority of the officers in the Iraqi Army were Sunni and concluded that this community was the most supportive of the Saddam Hussein government. However, Mukhlis stated that it had been forgotten that most of the coup attempts against Saddam Hussein were led by Sunni Arab officers.⁹ If there was one group that suffered from repeated executions throughout Iraq's history, particularly under Saddam Hussein's rule, it was the Sunni Arab officers.

While the Iraqi Army could have been reconstituted in the power vacuum created after the war, its dissolution exacerbated the ongoing looting, organized crime, and political violence. It is difficult to say with the benefit of hindsight that if the Iraqi Army had remained intact, all the crime, looting, and violence in Iraq could have been avoided. Perhaps the Iraqi Army could have prevented these phenomena to a greater extent. What is more significant is that the belief that the U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi military could have prevented the postwar chaos had become ingrained in postwar Iraqi society. The decree provided Iraqis with more rhetorical ammunition to criticize the United States and the CPA. Even post-2004, former Defense Minister Hazim al-Sha'lan, who was working with the United States, declared that following the dissolution of the Iraqi Army, the problems of "anarchy" and "lawless behavior" were exacerbated: "Through this lawlessness, certain groups built dens of deceit, crime, and

corruption. Had the Iraqi Army remained, these things would not have happened."¹⁰ Al-Sha'lan's statements were made on the Iraqi channel *al-Sharqiyya*, which had been characterized as a medium at times sympathetic to the former Ba'th Party.¹¹ His critiques were broadcast on a channel that was widely watched in Iraq. The interview further reinforced the belief that the CPA decree fuelled Iraq's postwar chaos and further cultivated in the Iraqi public the notion that America's "liberation" was emerging into a nightmarish occupation.

"History" and the Former Iraqi Military

In a further defense of the disbandment decree Bremer wrote, "Any army needs barracks, bases, and equipment. But when Saddam's military melted away, barracks and bases had been demolished, stripped not only of all usable arms and equipment, but down to the wiring and plumbing, even the bricks themselves."¹² Many of Iraq's ministries were also looted bare, but most of them were not disbanded. The CPA and political circles in Washington failed to appreciate that even if the army's facilities were looted or the soldiers merely went home, the army still existed as a symbolic institution in the Iraqi historical imaginary.

Within the span of 30 years, Iraqi society had undergone several collective traumas ranging from the Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War to a decade of sanctions and the 2003 Iraq War, followed by the postwar chaos. The Iraqi Army served as one of the institutions that could have secured the nation after these traumatic events. The disbandment only aggravated this endless string of cataclysmic trials. In light of these traumas, the Iraqis searched for continuity with their past through institutions such as the army at a time when America was trying to rewrite a new future for the nation.

In the lead-up to the Iraqi national elections in December 2005, then interim Prime Minister Ali Allawi campaigned on the platform of restoring the dignity of the Iraqi Army. Allawi, as head of the National Iraqi

List coalition, addressed a group of former Iraqi Army officers, depicting the former Iraqi Army as an integral part of the nation's history: "In fact you are aware more than others that this army played an important role in the history of Iraq."¹³ He also declared that the institution was an "anchor" for the nation, incorporating all of its communities in its ranks: "You in the Iraqi Armed Forces are aware that the Army was composed of all strata of the Iraqi society and from all colors and forms. That is Iraq. It includes Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Turkmen; Kurds, and Arabs."¹⁴ His statement was reminiscent of the desire of Iraq's first king, Faysal, and first minister of defense, Ja'far al-Askari to create an Iraqi army that would unite all of the nation's communities. Allawi's final statement resembled the king's assessment in 1933 that Iraq could not survive without a strong army. Allawi concluded, "Iraq would never have stability unless there is a capable army that is able to defend Iraq's borders and the people of Iraq."¹⁵

In his interview with *al-Sharqiyya*, Iraqi Defense Minister al-Sha'lan reminded his audience of what had happened after every change in government: "During the coups d'états in the past, the Iraqi Army remained as it was; namely, that police work and security were maintained. Only the command used to change."¹⁶ Abd al-Muhsin Shalash, secretary general of the Free Iraqi Society Party, also made a statement similar to al-Sha'lan's in *al-Manar*: "In the case of a change of regime anywhere in the world the regular army remains intact, as it has nothing to do with political changes."¹⁷ The aforementioned points made by al-Sha'lan and Shalash were conveyed to the author by former members of the Iraqi military on repeated occasions. When discussing the dissolution of the Iraqi military, they would routinely delve into the history of Iraq's past coups; any new Iraqi administration would purge the army of its opponents but keep the institution intact.

Shalash also reverted to a trend in Iraqi history of stating how the Iraqi Army sought to emulate the Turkish Army. He said of the Iraqi Army: "It remains a neutral party and a

faithful guardian of the country, as in the liberal countries. Such examples are the Turkish Army and the Iraqi Army under the monarchy."¹⁸ While some circles in Turkey would disagree with Shalash that the Turkish Army is "a neutral party," especially prior to the July 2007 Turkish elections, he nonetheless followed a tradition in Iraq's past where Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh of the Four Colonels; Hikmat Sulayman, Iraq's Prime Minister in 1936; and General Abd al-Karim Qasim, who overthrew the monarchy in 1958, all admired the role of the army in safeguarding Turkey and hoped that the Iraqi Army could play the same role. Shalash finally concluded his statements by invoking the historical legacy of the Iraqi Army: "We hope that 6 January would remain the official day of the Iraqi Army, as it is undoubtedly a historical fact."¹⁹ While the history of the Iraqi Army was also characterized by episodes of internal repression that were hardly glorious, it nevertheless became an institution whose history was revised in light of Bremer's disbandment decree. As it was the only institution left that symbolized Iraq's sovereignty at the time, Iraqis went back in time to revive the image of the Iraqi Army and to distance it from the politicians of the past, most notably Saddam Hussein.

The Dissolution and the Insurgency

In analyzing Iraqi motivations for joining the insurgency, Ahmad Hashim quoted Isaiah Berlin, who wrote: "Nationalism is an inflamed condition of national consciousness which can be and has on occasion been tolerant and peaceful. It usually seems to be caused by wounds, some form of collective *humiliation*" (emphasis added).²⁰ To further his point, Hashim then quoted a former Army officer who joined the insurgency due to the "shame and humiliation at the dissolution of the army."²¹ The notion of humiliation after the disbandment of the Iraqi military emerged on numerous occasions and often in different contexts. In late January 2005, Iraq's former Defense Minister, al-Sha'lan, spoke of the dissolution of the Iraqi Army as follows: "It

implied humiliation and belittlement of the Iraqi Army. Frankly speaking, we could not tolerate this.”²² In a nation where honor (*sharaf*) often serves as a commodity more valuable than money itself, the disbandment decree was viewed as an insult to the honor of the oldest institution in Iraq and by extension to the Iraqi population at large, and finally as a violation of the honor of the individual Iraqi soldier.

Despite the considerable dangers associated with military work in postwar Iraq, former Iraqi officers and young Iraqi men enlisted in the armed forces, as it was one of the few sources of employment. The other challenge to recruitment was the security situation. After 2003, suicide car bombers targeted potential army recruits as they waited in line to enlist. Had the Army not disbanded, one former officer told the author, soldiers in the previous military would not have had to risk their lives to reenlist. Furthermore, if a recruit could enlist, he faced the daunting possibility of being killed in duty. The insurgency preyed upon inexperienced recruits, with insurgent gunmen often armed with more weaponry than the new Iraqi Army.

After 2003, the Iraqi armed forces began to absorb unofficial paramilitaries such as the Shi’a Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Predominantly Sunni Arab forces such as the Islamic Army in Iraq also infiltrated the various branches of Iraq’s military. Members of insurgent groups and sectarian and ethnic militias could join the military with relative ease. Iraqis hostile to the United States and the new Iraqi government took advantage of aggressive military recruitment and rudimentary background checks to acquire training and arms. Off duty soldiers sympathetic to the insurgency would cooperate with these groups, providing them with sensitive operational information. For example, in the summer of 2004, a staff member of General Amir Bakr al-Hashimi, the first chief of staff in the new Iraqi Army, gave information to insurgents that they used to assassinate another army officer.²³ The breach

of security ultimately led to the dismissal of General al-Hashimi.

REBUILDING THE NEW IRAQI ARMY

In its initial phases during the 1920s and 1930s, the Iraqi mandate army was designed as a force to maintain internal security, while the British took care of Iraq’s external defense. This is similar to the situation in Iraq in 2007, whereby the United States has been concerned that the Iraqi military at least be able to deal with internal security threats such as those from the insurgency and sectarian militias. During Iraq’s mandate era and post-1932 independence period, Iraqis were irritated over what they perceived as foreign infringement of Iraqi sovereignty by dictating affairs relating to the military.

Staff Brigadier General Khalil Nabil even made this historical analogy in an interview. When criticizing the CPA’s control over the Iraqi military, he said, “Are we going to revert to the disastrous formula of the British mandate, when there were two chains of command—an Iraqi one that served merely as a go-between and a foreign one that made all the decisions?”²⁴ The British Military Mission in Iraq established under the 1922 Treaty of Alliance resembled the post-2003 Iraq War Multi-National Transitional Security Command (MNTSC). Both institutions maintained considerable control over the Iraqi military and continued to do so after Iraq’s independence. In both instances, foreign control over army divisions and the influence of UK and U.S. military advisers stirred resentment among the Iraqi officers.

While much of the training and arms supply for the new Iraqi Army came from members of the Coalition, the new Iraqi Army also received some modest training and arms supplies from other Arab countries. This was also a point of contention to some who resented how a traditionally proud and strong nation such as Iraq was reduced to a mere recipient of aid and training from smaller Arab countries. For example, the decision to send Iraqi officers to Jordan for training was criticized by former Iraqi officers. The

Coalition had adopted the “train the trainer” approach, in which 700 Iraqi officers would receive seven weeks of training at Jordan’s Royal Military Academy. These trainees would return to Iraq to train other Iraqis. On January 3, 2004, Iraqi writer Imad Sha’ban ridiculed this decision in a commentary in the newspaper *al-Ittijah al-Akhar*, owned by Mishan al-Juburi, a politician who escaped from Iraq and founded the first insurgent satellite channel *al-Zawra*.²⁵ Sha’aban wrote sarcastically, “I beg your pardon, has anyone heard about the expertise of the Jordanian Army or read about the lessons that it has gained in the field of battle?”²⁶ The fact that the Jordanian Army perhaps performed better than any of the Arab armies in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War is forgotten by this author. However, Sha’aban meant to criticize the recent experience of the Jordanian Army: “So what has suddenly transpired that requires the officers of the fourth strongest army in the world to be trained by an army that was used only to suppress demonstrations and riots, crush the Palestinians, and protect the border with Israel?”²⁷ He then evoked the idea, used by past Iraqi commentators on the state of the military, that the developments were humiliating and reminded his audience of the past history of the Iraqi military: “What is happening is indeed humiliating.” Further, in an almost formulaic manner, as has been used by other Iraqis, he reminded his audience of the past history of the Iraqi military: “The glories of the Iraqi Army cannot be erased so easily.”²⁸

During the March 1921 Cairo Conference, it was agreed that an Iraqi army would be created along British lines, with training and equipment provided by the United Kingdom. Just as the Iraqi Army in 1921 was trained on British lines, so did Iraqis criticize U.S. efforts to train the Iraqi Army on American lines. In August 2006, the speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mahmud Mashhadani, argued that American training was not raising the performance level of Iraqi troops and was damaging the legitimacy of the Iraqi Army among the Iraqi populace. He said, “The training is done... the American way and in

accordance with the American mentality, which the Iraqi people hate. Thus, the Iraqi people view this Iraqi security force as one to protect the Americans.”²⁹ His statements revealed one of the greatest problems the United States has faced: that an Iraqi Army it had trained and armed would be seen by Iraqis as a paramilitary force that served the interests of an occupying power. Essentially, Mashhadani was criticizing what he perceived as an army protecting the “imperial interests” of the United States. After 2003, the United States found itself in a no-win situation. The Iraqi Army could not survive without American training and arms, yet its support of the Iraqi military hurt the latter’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqis.

Iraq’s first military academy under the British mandate was based on the model of the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in the United Kingdom. In this case, continuity with the British past remained, as this school at al-Rustamiyya reopened after the 2003 war. Even then in the 1920s, the British admitted that the school had been handicapped, as they rushed to train the Iraqis, often in an improvised way.³⁰ The hasty training for the new Iraqi Army organized by the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team also produced similar results. During the mandate, the talented graduates from the Iraqi military schools were given the opportunity to pursue their studies, including flight training in the United Kingdom.³¹ A bimonthly publication of the MNTSC entitled *The Advisor* detailed the training efforts of the new Iraqi military. Just as the United Kingdom had trained Iraq’s first pilots on British soil, one article described how a future Iraqi Air Force pilot would study at the United States Air Force Academy.³²

Ethno-Sectarian Cleavages in the New Iraqi Army

Ethno-sectarian alliances have challenged the cohesiveness of the new Iraqi military, and comparisons have been made with the Lebanese Army prior to 1975. In the initial years of the Lebanese Civil War, soldiers often joined forces with their respective

sectarian militias. Creating a multiethnic force in which national loyalty transcended the primordial had proved daunting for the new Iraqi Army, as it was for the former Iraqi Army after its creation.

Members of the Shi'a and Kurdish militias filled the ranks of the military units, particularly those stationed in the south and north respectively. In the words of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)'s military bureau, the peshmerga had evolved into a regular and disciplined "Army of Kurdistan" and thus was arguably no longer a "militia." The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) administers its own military academies, with one in Sulaymaniyya operated by the PUK and another in Zakho run by the KDP.³³ The KRG has proved reluctant to form multiethnic military units in the area it administers. A Kurdish colonel in the Iraqi Army opposed the central Iraqi government's efforts to "dilute" the Kurdish constituency of his brigade: "The Ministry of Defense recently sent me 150 Arab soldiers from the south. After two weeks of service, we sent them away. We did not accept them. We will not let them carry through with their plans to bring more Arab soldiers here."³⁴ A similar view was expressed by a member of the PUK, who said, "No Arab soldier should be assigned to Kurdistan and no Kurdish soldier should be assigned to the Arab regions. Soldiers from Ramadi ought to patrol the border with Saudi Arabia. And the North is too cold for Arab soldiers."³⁵ Ethno-sectarian cleavages affected overall cohesiveness of the armies during both the British and American rule during a transition period. The KDP and PUK have been reluctant to let Arabs join Iraqi military units in the north, and Kurdish soldiers have also refused to serve outside the KRG.

Both the British mandate army and American army suffered from troops deserting while training was in progress. Nine hundred men started training for the first battalion of the new army, but close to 480 quit due to the working conditions, low salaries, and their perceived humiliation.³⁶ The same crisis occurred when the British trained the Iraqis during the mandate. Yet the Iraqis then had joined the military out of economic need

rather than a sense of loyalty to the newly formed Iraqi state. In the 1920s, Iraqi troops were discontent with their working conditions and some wanted to quit in order to join the army of the newly formed Republic of Turkey.³⁷ In post-Ba'athist Iraq, soldiers deserted after receiving orders to deploy in areas far from their homes or to insecure provinces where the insurgency raged, such as the volatile "Arab Sunni triangle."³⁸ During a graduation parade at the al-Habbaniyya military base west of Baghdad, about 1,000 new Iraqi soldiers protested, some of them taking off their shirts, throwing them away in rage. They threatened not to carry out their military service at all after being informed that they would be serving outside their hometowns. Iraqi troops in the new army have proved reluctant to forgo ethnic and sectarian loyalties and to adhere to the commands of the central government. In certain cases, they refuse to combat ethno-sectarian militias whose members could include friends, neighbors, and family members. During the fighting in Falluja in April 2004, U.S. forces sent an Iraqi fighting unit comprised of mostly Sunni Arabs to suppress a revolt led mostly by Sunni Arabs. The Americans were frustrated, as this military unit went into Falluja, disbanded, and sided with the rebels.

This phenomenon was not new to Iraq, as the British and Iraqi governments had faced this problem in the 1930s. A British report in 1935 described a similar situation: "Many of the officers are believed to be in sympathy with the Government's opponents, and the majority of the rank and file, being Shi'ah.... some few officers actually refused to proceed to the front."³⁹ Conscripted resulted then in a military comprised of troops recruited among the rural tribes in Iraq. When these conscripts were deployed to fight against their fellow tribesmen in revolt in 1935, their loyalty to the tribes was stronger than their loyalty to an army they were forced join.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IRAQI MILITARY FORCES

The quality, mission, and role of the new Iraqi Army during the years following its creation did not settle doubts as to whether it could provide security for Iraq in the case of an American withdrawal. In addition to high attrition rates and desertions during combat, the Iraqi Army's performance in the field had been lackluster. One source documented how American trainers referred to an Iraqi habit of "Inshallah firing," meaning that if "God willed it," the soldier's bullets would hit their intended target.⁴⁰ While such comments made the Iraqi military seem totally incompetent, one also has to realize that they were being trained for an entirely new mission. The Iraqi military often fought in trenches during the Iran-Iraq War or in wide spaces during the 1991 Gulf War, and in some cases not at all during the 2003 Iraq War. While the military had been used for domestic repression in the past—bombing villages with artillery or haphazardly from the air—it rarely had a mission as an urban counterinsurgency force. The Iraqis were learning these tactics just as the American forces had to learn this style of warfare in Iraq after the end of the 2003 war.

In August 2006, Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmud Mashhadani declared, "Any armed group can defeat an Iraqi army brigade because it [the former] has sophisticated rockets and weapons."⁴¹ His assessment of the fragility of the armed forces also had a historical precedent. British High Commissioner Henry Dobbs had feared that the Iraqi military in 1925 could be defeated by one of the armed Iraqi tribes.⁴² In terms of weapons, Mashhadani also blamed the United States for intentionally providing the Iraqi Army with insufficient equipment for fear of creating a strong Iraqi Army that would be difficult to control: "The Americans have an obsession that if a strong Iraqi security force is established it may conspire against them. Therefore, the Iraqi forces are being armed and equipped with weapons that are not worth talking about."⁴³ His sentiment was also expressed in the mandatory and post-1932

independence eras in Iraq. Iraqis were convinced then that the United Kingdom wanted to keep the mandate army strong enough to maintain internal order to secure British interests, including oil fields and the overland route to India, while at the same time ensuring that this army would not emerge strong enough with advanced weapons to challenge the British presence in Iraq. For example, the British feared that giving the Royal Iraqi Air Force additional aircraft could challenge the air superiority enjoyed by the British Royal Air Force stationed in Iraq.

The Maliki Government and the Military

On September 6, 2006, the United States handed over control of the new Iraqi armed forces command to the government of Nuri al-Maliki. Iraq's prime minister, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, controlled the state's small air force and navy as well as the Iraqi Eighth Army Division, which the United States claimed had an entirely indigenous, autonomous chain of command. American officials hailed this move as a crucial milestone in Iraq's path to independence, but the Iraqi security forces were hardly self-sufficient at that juncture and in no position to take over the security of the entire country. The positive assessments were contradicted by a leaked review from the U.S. national security advisor which accused the Maliki government of seeding the military with Shi'a militia members and removing effective military commanders on an ethno-sectarian basis.⁴⁴ In June 2007, al-Maliki appeared to address such criticisms in a speech to the Iraqi Army:

I tell you in all frankness that the prerequisite of victory is making soldiers and officers patriots who care for nothing except Iraq, regardless of their affiliations. Focus on this doctrine, the doctrine of equality, the doctrine of the homeland, the doctrine that would spare the army sectarianism, confessionism, and political partisanship. The army must

not be involved in political partisanship and parliamentary life.⁴⁵

He urged the army to remedy the trends of sectarianism that were crippling the armed forces, although his government suffered from the same sectarian symptoms. Finally, he also made a reference to a persistent trend in Iraq's history: "The army cannot be politicized as happened in the past."⁴⁶ Essentially, he asked the armed forces to appreciate the lessons from Iraq's tumultuous military history and ensure that history did not repeat itself. However, his speech and other similar efforts could not placate al-Maliki's opponents in the government. The predominantly Sunni Arab Tawafuq Front decided to withdraw its members from the Iraqi National Assembly in August 2007, after accusing al-Maliki of failing to curtail the infiltration of Shi'a militia members in the military. The ethno-sectarian cleavages within the Iraqi armed forces seemed likely to handicap the Maliki government for the rest of its tenure. Another challenge facing the Maliki government was highlighted in a July 2007 U.S. Government Accountability Office report. The report stated that 190,000 AK-47 assault rifles and pistols given to Iraqi security forces in 2004 and 2005 were unaccounted for and most likely had fallen into the hands of insurgents.⁴⁷ One of King Faysal's fears had been that the populace had more arms than the Iraqi Army, and Ja'far al-Askari had stressed that the military's priority was to collect arms in the hands of civilians, the same problems al-Maliki faced decades later.

CONCLUSION

The historical similarities between the British mandate era efforts in training the Iraqi military and American efforts demonstrates a persistent dilemma facing both foreign powers in their respective experiences in Iraq. Both Iraqi armed forces at those times were dependent primarily on two foreign nations for technical military expertise and arms. In terms of legitimacy, dependence on foreign nations for training and weapons during an occupation

created the image that both militaries were mandate armies created to serve the interests of Western powers. In the 1920s and 1930s, the military had to prove its Iraqi nationalist credentials by revolting against what was deemed a pro-British government. The question remains as to whether Iraq's future army will do the same.

Granted, there are differences between Britain's Mandate experience in Iraq and that of the United States after 2003. The tenacity of the insurgency in Iraq post-2003 differed from that which began in 1920. The insurgency of the 1920s and 1930s was entirely an Iraqi phenomenon that took place in the rural plains of the south and the mountains of the north. The insurgency post-2003 has been mostly urban, with volunteers who are not entirely Iraqi and have no compunction about killing themselves along with civilians in order to further their cause. However, the comparisons between the British and American experiences do shed light on how Iraqis could use their past to make sense of the present. Citing the similarities between the two periods emphasizes the significance of the past for the Iraqis. What is achieved through this study is an attempt to understand how the Iraqis could utilize historical memory to criticize the American role in developing the Iraqi military. To understand Iraqi discontent with the U.S. presence in the country, one only needs to look at the events that transpired in the 1920s and 1930s, when Britain dominated Iraqi affairs, particularly those relating to its military.

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NOTES

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