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Iraq's Interior Ministry: Frustrating Reform

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In December 2006, the [Iraq Study Group](#) reported that the Iraqi Interior Ministry (MOI) was confronted by corruption, infiltrated by militia and unable to control the Iraqi police. In July 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Iraq's MOI had become a "federation of oligarchs" where various floors of the building were controlled by rival militia groups and organized criminal gangs. The report described the MOI as an eleven-story powder keg of factions where power struggles were settled by assassinations in the parking lot.¹ In its September 2007 report, the congressionally mandated Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq described Iraq's MOI as a ministry in name only, dysfunctional, sectarian and suffering from ineffective leadership. Even Iraq's Interior Minister, Jawad al-Boulani, has called for the comprehensive reform of his ministry.

Despite its problems, Iraq's MOI is responsible for providing policy guidance, training and administrative support for Iraq's four civilian security services:

- *The Iraqi Police Service*: A 275,300-member force, controlled at the provincial level, which provides basic police services throughout the country.
- *The Iraqi National Police*: A 32,389-member gendarmerie that is deployed in Baghdad and other parts of the country to assist U.S. and Iraqi military forces in counter insurgency operations.
- *The Iraqi Border Enforcement Service*: A 38,205-member force stationed at strong points along Iraq's borders that is charged with preventing infiltration, smuggling and illicit trafficking.
- *The Facilities Protection Service (FPS)*: A 150,000-member force of largely autonomous units that is responsible for protecting government ministries.

In total, MOI is responsible for an armed force of nearly 500,000 members—roughly three times as large as the new Iraqi army, navy and air force combined. It is also responsible for assorted civil functions such as nationality, passports, immigration control and regulation of private security companies. How did this severely troubled, but extremely critical institution come into being?

The history of Iraq's MOI in the post-Saddam era and the U.S.-led effort for institutional reform were discussed by two distinguished experts at a USIP forum on April 7, 2008 titled "[Fixing the Interior Ministry and Police in Iraq](#)." The principal speakers were Andrew Rathmell, director of the UK's Iraq MOI Reform Project, and Matthew Sherman, former advisor to Iraq's interior minister. [Robert Perito](#), senior program officer in the USIP [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) moderated the session. Following is a summary of the views expressed by the speakers and the audience.

From Backwater to the Frontline

In April 2003, with looters on the streets and fires burning in government buildings in Baghdad, the U.S. military issued a call for Iraqi police officers to return to duty. On April 14, joint patrols of Iraqi police and American soldiers made their first appearance on the streets of the capital. Under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Iraq's military and civilian internal security agencies were disbanded. Only the Interior Ministry and the Iraqi police survived, but their senior leadership and mid-level management were dismissed when CPA purged members of the Baathist party from the government. On July 13, the CPA appointed a 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC); Nouri Badran, from Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord, was named minister of interior. Six deputy ministers, representing the major Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties, were also appointed to insure no political faction gained control of the ministry.

MOI was reorganized and assigned new responsibilities. A Department of Border Enforcement was created to handle customs, immigration and border patrol, tasks that previously had been undertaken by the army or other ministries. Massive recruitment began to fill frontline policing positions and to staff new institutions such as the immigration service and border guard force. CPA was unable, however, to provide the hundreds of U.S. and international advisors that the State and Justice Departments believed were needed to facilitate this expansion and to train Iraqi personnel.

At the same time, the U.S. pressured the MOI to rapidly recruit, train, equip and deploy tens of thousands of new Iraqi police. Goals such as hiring 30,000 new policemen in 30 days were announced and implemented with little regard for the quality or vetting of recruits. Training was limited to three weeks for former police officers, with most classes taught by U.S. military police in police stations. In December 2003 a U.S. training facility for police recruits opened in Amman, Jordan, but its first graduates did not return to Iraq until spring of 2004. As the insurgency took hold and security deteriorated, the goal for recruiting American police advisors plummeted from 6,500, to 1,500, to less than 350 by spring of 2004.

In March 2004, President Bush signed a National Security Presidential Directive transferring responsibility for reforming the MOI and training and equipping the Iraqi police from the State Department to the Department of Defense and the U.S. military. This action was unprecedented, as State and the Justice Departments had trained local police in all previous peace operations Multi-National Security Transition Command (MNSTC-I) to take charge of the "train and equip" program.

"Revolving Door" Leadership Frustrates Progress

On April 6, 2004, CPA Order 71 decentralized authority in Iraq. Provincial governments were given expanded powers including responsibility for recruiting and supervising the Iraqi Police Service. Minister Badran challenged this action on grounds that the provinces were ill-equipped to assume this responsibility and it was uncertain who would control police in various parts of the country. Subsequently, Badran resigned and was replaced with a technocrat, Samir Sumaidi (Iraq's current ambassador to Washington). Sumaidi had no police experience, but he was a skilled administrator with a vision for reforming the MOI. In his two months in office, Sumaidi put in place measures to improve management practices, established a vetting procedure for the ministry's leadership, created an inspector general and supported militia demobilization. Unfortunately, he had neither the political support, nor the time in office to make lasting changes in the ministry.

In June 2004, CPA transferred sovereignty to the Iraq Interim Government. Under Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a new Interior Minister, Falah al-Naqib, was appointed by CPA. In his nine months in office, Naqib worked with General David Petraeus, then MNSTC-I commander, to increase rapidly the number of Iraqi police. Al-Naqib also sought to provide MOI with effective Iraqi constabulary forces following the poor performance of the police in battles against Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Army. He created "commando units" comprised of former soldiers from elite units like Saddam's Republican Guard. These units were commanded by al-Naqib's uncle, Adnan Thabit, a former army general, and were personally loyal to the minister. These forces were raised initially without U.S. involvement, were under MOI control and were outside the Civilian Police Advisory Training Team (CPATT) assistance program. Despite initial misgivings, the U.S. military provided arms and logistical support to these units, which proved effective under Minister al-Naqib's stewardship in fighting alongside U.S. forces against Sunni insurgents and Shiite militia.

On January 30, 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of Shiite political parties, won elections for the Iraq National Assembly. Ibrahim al-Jaafari became prime minister; Bayan Jabr, a member of the Supreme Council for the Islamic



An Iraqi special police vehicle in Baghdad. (AP Photo)

Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was named interior minister. The victors, particularly SCIRI, saw MOI as a prize. The Defense Ministry was under U.S. military control and American soldiers were embedded with Iraqi Army units. MOI had only a small number of foreign advisors and security forces that were largely under Iraqi control. Minister Jabr used his position to place members of the Badr Brigade (SCIRI's militia) in key positions in the ministry and to replace Sunnis in the commando units with Badr Brigade militiamen. After the February 22, 2006 terrorist bombing of the Shi'ite al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, police commando units were used to terrorize, torture and kill Sunnis.

On December 15, 2005, elections were held for a permanent Iraq National Assembly, but it was not until May 20, 2006 that Iraqi politicians formed a new government. Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister; Jawad al-Boulani was named to head MOI. Boulani, a Shia and former air force engineer, had no political base, but did have a reputation for administrative competence. He was given three powerful deputies from the Dawa, Badr and Kurdish factions to ensure that no single party would control MOI. Al-Boulani publicly acknowledged the problems in MOI and called for reform of the ministry and removal of sectarian factions from the police. The U.S. transitioned its State Department MOI advisory team to CPATT, forming a 100-member Ministry Transition Team of military and civilian advisors to help improve operations. In April 2006, MNSTC-I persuaded MOI to combine all of the police commando units in a single organization, the Iraq National Police. In October, the U.S. military began a purge of INP units that were involved in sectarian violence, arresting their leaders and subjecting the rank and file to vetting and training ("re-bluing") in civilian police skills.

In December 2006 the "Year of the Police," which had been proclaimed by the U.S. military, ended with the announcement that MNSTC-I had met its target of training and equipping 187,800 police and border patrol personnel. Achievement of this quantitative goal was impressive, but the reality behind the numbers was troubling. Neither the U.S. military nor the Interior Ministry could account for the number of trainees that had actually entered the police, the number of police currently serving or what had happened to the uniforms, weapons and equipment that had been issued to training center graduates. Anecdotal reports abounded of former trainees selling their side arms and uniforms on the black market and returning to their militia units or private life. Autonomous provincial police chiefs hired personnel without reference to MOI, or inflated budgets with lists of fictitious "ghost officers" and pocketed their salaries. Despite the appointment of a new minister, Shia militia continued to exert undue influence over all aspects of MOI's operations. The ministry also continued to suffer from widespread corruption and experienced severe shortfalls in planning, program management, personnel, procurement, logistics, communication and maintenance.

Despite these problems, MOI was given a major new responsibility. On December 27, 2006, Prime Minister al-Maliki ordered MOI to exert control over the estimated 150,000 members of the FPS that guarded ministries, public buildings and essential infrastructure in Iraq. The political parties that controlled the various government ministries had been allowed to recruit security units that were armed and issued badges and police-style uniforms. These private armies were a source of patronage jobs and a means of funding militia groups. The prime minister ordered MOI to supervise, downsize and retrain the FPS. This task was clearly beyond the capacity of an institution that already was overwhelmed by its existing responsibilities for nearly 200,000 employees and police personnel.

Misplaced Priorities and Political Rivalries Frustrate Reform

Beginning in 2006 and continuing to the present, al-Boulani and his Coalition advisors have worked to implement political and administrative reforms. Unlike other Iraqi ministries, which are often controlled by a single political party, MOI is controlled by political factions that normally pursue their own interests and occasionally cooperate to improve institutional capacity. Al-Boulani, whose authority stems from his relationship with the prime minister, must share power with his politically powerful deputies, independent power brokers and relationship networks that control various aspects of ministry operations. He has attempted to reset the internal political balance among the Dawa, Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (the renamed SCIRI) and Kurdish factions by restructuring the ministry, combining departments and appealing for cooperation from political leaders in the government. These actions have exacerbated internecine power struggles that occasionally have turned deadly since even relatively low-level positions control resources and patronage and provide opportunities to profit from corruption. The struggle for control within MOI reflects the larger political struggle and the power balance in Iraqi society. In the future, the ministry's politics may also be influenced by the influx of Sadrists and Sunnis from the Awakening Movement whose inclusion in the Iraqi police is sought by the U.S. military.

At the same time, the effort for administrative reform has made some progress. MOI now has a small but growing cadre of trained professionals who understand modern administrative procedures and are working to improve the ministry's performance. There have been noticeable improvements in MOI's capacity for planning, budgeting, procurement and personnel management. The ministry has a strategic plan that will be matched to the budget process next year. Efforts by U.S. advisors and Iraqi officials in the Internal Affairs Office have resulted in the removal or reassignment of some criminal elements. Responsibility for control of the police academies and police training has been transferred to the Iraqis, with international advisors playing a limited role.

Nonetheless, decentralized control of the police has raised problems concerning the relationship between the center and the provinces and has presented challenges in determining requirements and allocating resources. Within MOI, political loyalty or intimidation still trump efficiency and professionalism, with all but a very few officials unwilling to challenge authority or to put the general good ahead of self-preservation.

Recommendations

After five years, the U.S. remains far from its goal of creating an effective Interior Ministry and Iraqi police forces that can protect all Iraqi citizens, prevent terrorism and control violent crime. In the last year, progress is apparent, but more remains to be done, particularly in controlling corruption and protecting against abuse of human rights. Progress can advance more quickly by the following changes in the U.S. approach.

Focus primarily on ministerial reform: The key to creating an effective Iraq Police Service and National Police is a functional Interior Ministry. There is no alternative to the patient work of institutional reform. The U.S.-led, multinational advisory team should be increased and staffed with civilian police executives and specialists in management, personnel, procurement, budgeting and other functions. In this regard, the European Union through its EU Integrated Rule of Law Mission for Iraq program could be asked to play a larger role, drawing on its experience with institutional reform in Eastern Europe. This is a task for professionals who are skilled, experienced and specifically trained for their work in promoting institutional reform—not military personnel. The U.S. embassy must use its political leverage to encourage this effort and to prevent Iraqi political factions from gaining undue influence in the ministry.

Trade the fixation on numbers for an evaluation of results: Since 2003, the U.S. military has attempted to "ramp up" the Iraqi police at a pace that has overwhelmed both its own and MOI's capacity to control the process. Police have been recruited and trained with minimal regard for vetting to determine the loyalty, quality or future intentions of those who passed through the U.S. train and equip program. It is long past time for the U.S. to switch focus from quantity to quality and to focus on results. It is depressing that senior U.S. military leaders still call for short-term force generation rather than taking the time to help improve Iraqi management systems and procurement procedures. The U.S. should use the leverage provided by the MNSTC-I assistance program to insure that corruption is brought under control and past excesses are not repeated.

Broaden the sectarian composition of the police: The Iraqi National Police and much of the Iraqi Police Service remain largely Shia. These forces have a history of sectarian violence. There is a critical need to promote the inclusion of the Sons of Iraq (members of the Sunni Awakening Movement) in Iraqi police units that are responsible for protecting Baghdad and areas where there are substantial numbers of Sunnis. There is also a need to insure a balance of Shia factions within the police and MOI. The intent should be to create a national ministry and police, rather than institutions with sectarian or factional loyalties.

Notes

1. Ned Parker, "[The Conflict in Iraq: A Ministry of Fiefdoms](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2007.

Of Related Interest

- [Reforming the Iraqi Interior Ministry, Police and Facilities Protection Service](#)
Congressional Testimony by Robert Perito, March 28, 2007
- [Reforming the Iraqi Interior Ministry, Police, and Facilities Protection Service](#)
USIPeace Briefing, February 2007
- [Policing Iraq: Protecting Iraqis from Criminal Violence](#)
USIPeace Briefing, June 2006

This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Robert M. 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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