



Army Building and Nation Building

By Vance Serchuk

While the White House and its critics continue to spar over the war in Iraq, there is broad consensus that the success or failure of the U.S. enterprise there increasingly turns on the Pentagon's ability to stand up indigenous security forces. These efforts have typically been described in technocratic terms—a matter of tangible, material inputs such as American trainers and advisers, equipment, and infrastructure. But the challenge of transforming Iraq's military establishment is more than a matter of mixing manpower, munitions, and money. On the contrary, it is inextricably linked to the larger task of transforming the country's governance.

For nearly two years, the United States has predicated its long-term counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq on the creation of indigenous security forces there. It was not until the highly visible and embarrassing collapse of Iraq's fledgling army and police in April 2004, during the first battle of Fallujah, that the Bush administration at last began to approach this task with the necessary fiscal and intellectual rigor. Just a few months earlier, in fact, U.S. Central Command planners and their counterparts at the Coalition Provisional Authority had insisted that the Iraqi army be designed strictly for territorial defense, not used internally. It took nearly a year of guerrilla warfare to break this assumption—an end of innocence given institutional imprimatur with the establishment of the Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq (MNSTC-I).

The encouraging contributions made by Iraqi soldiers at the second battle of Fallujah in November 2004 seemed to confirm the wisdom of Iraqification. Consequently, by early 2005, the incoming commander of American ground forces, Lieutenant General John Vines, told the *New York Times* that he considered the training of Iraqis to be his “number one job.”

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“The most desired course of action is that there be rapid progress in training and preparing Iraqis to assume responsibility for security in every province,” he explained.¹

The focus on the development of Iraqi security forces, like the war itself, is the product of several overlapping yet distinct strands of thinking. At its best, Iraqification reflects the Bush administration's belated recognition of what a successful counterinsurgency campaign actually entails and the fact that there are nowhere near sufficient American troops to wage one. While the catchphrase of “clear, hold, and build,” suggests that the White House finally grasps what it must do to win in Iraq, it also implies an intrinsically protracted and manpower-intensive set of missions—missions that American land forces, at least as they are currently configured, simply cannot accomplish on their own.

President George W. Bush implicitly acknowledged this calculus during his December 7 speech at the Council on Foreign Relations when he said, “[It] used to be that after American troops cleared the terrorists out of a city and moved onto the next mission, there weren't enough forces—Iraqi forces—to hold the area. We found that after we left, the terrorists would re-enter the city, intimidate local leaders and police, and eventually retake control.”²

This, of course, begs the question: why, if there were insufficient Iraqi forces to hold a given area, didn't American soldiers assume this responsibility themselves, at least as a stopgap measure? The answer is that there simply have never been enough U.S. troops to garrison the population centers in the Sunni Triangle—especially as these same forces have also been responsible for conducting offensive operations against insurgents, supporting reconstruction projects, handling tens of thousands of detainees, and other tasks.

A professionalized Iraqi military, working in close cooperation with its U.S. counterpart, is the economy-of-force solution to this manpower problem. Like numerous expeditionary powers before it, the United States has discovered that relying on locals is less expensive and more sustainable than constantly rotating its own troops in and out of the theater of operations. Additionally, as President Bush has remarked, "Iraqi troops bring knowledge and capabilities to the fight that coalition forces cannot. Iraqis know their people, they know their language, and they know their culture."³

More than Guns and Butter

But what does it take to transform a mass of human beings into an effective, professionalized military force? Although much has been written about the blunders and missteps that have dogged America's army building efforts in Iraq, these critiques have tended to look at the undertaking in largely technocratic terms, focusing on measurable, material inputs such as the number of U.S. military trainers and mentors, investments in infrastructure, and the provisioning of equipment.

These are certainly important variables, but military power is more than a matter of mixing manpower and munitions. Oil wealth and a succession of cozy relationships with great-power sponsors ensured that the predecessor of the current Iraqi army rarely lacked for resources in the period between World War II and the Gulf War, yet most military historians adjudge its performance in the conflicts it fought during this interval to be notable mostly for the consistency of its incompetence. In his study of Arab militaries from 1948 to 1991, Kenneth Pollack notes that "regardless of the opponent or the situation, Baghdad's junior officers performed very poorly. Iraqi commanders from platoon to brigade (and often division) level repeatedly showed little aggressive initiative, little willingness to innovate

or improvise, little ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, and little ability to act independently."⁴

In many cases, furthermore, these were wars in which the Iraqis enjoyed significant advantages over their adversaries in firepower, force size, and other measures of conventional military strength. At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, for instance, Baghdad had 2,750 tanks, 1,040 artillery pieces, 2,500 armored personnel carriers, and 300 fighter-bombers against Teheran's 500 tanks, 300 artillery pieces, and less than 100 aircraft.⁵ During the 1961–1970 Kurdish uprising, similarly, the Iraqi army faced a relatively small number of ill-trained and poorly armed guerrilla fighters, who nonetheless succeeded in repeatedly humiliating Baghdad's numerically superior forces.

To the extent that Iraq's old army did excel, it was as an instrument of terror against the country's civilian population; the use of chemical weapons during the Anfal Campaign in the late 1980s and the massacres of Shia and Kurds in the aftermath of the Gulf War are just two of the bloodiest episodes in a dark and brutal history. This was an army that practiced counterinsurgency as ethnic cleansing: the death of noncombatants was not collateral damage; it was the point. In part for this reason, the internal organization of the force tended to mirror the hierarchy of the thuggish regime it served, with an overwhelming Sunni Arab officer corps screened for its loyalty.

Just as there were parallels between the nature of the Baathist state and that of its military, so too is the fate of the country's new army bound up in the character of the society that is emerging in post-Saddam Iraq. The values that U.S. trainers seek to instill in recruits—discipline, loyalty, professionalism—and the qualities by which the force will be judged—ethnic and sectarian integration, meritocracy, respect for the rule of law—represent as much a break with the military culture of the Iraqi past as parliamentary democracy and elections mark a new era in its politics. Both endeavors are also fundamentally about state and nation building, creating participatory institutions that can bind together the disparate and at times fissiparous communities that inhabit Iraq and cut across the narrower, more parochial loyalties that divide them.

The deep and abiding fissures that run through Iraqi society have, of course, already found considerable expression in its politics. The most vociferous and entrenched arguments at the national level have tended to polarize along communal—not ideological—

lines, and parties organized on an explicitly ethnic or sectarian basis have been successively rewarded at the polls, suggesting that the pride of place awarded to these sub-national identities is ingrained not only in the minds of the country's elites, but among ordinary citizens as well.*

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In part, this is what democratic institutions are meant to do. The divisions and disagreements in Iraqi society are real, and after decades of authoritarian rule, they are raw. The key question is not whether they are given public expression, but how well the country's emerging institutions can succeed in containing, accommodating, and moderating them. The mere existence of national political dialogue, in this regard, is a hopeful development.

Considerably more worrisome is the extent to which Iraqi society's divisions are being replicated in the country's emerging military institutions. An army, after all, is not a parliament. The latter is nurtured, even strengthened, from debate, negotiation, and a constantly shifting landscape of power. These same characteristics, however, are an anathema to the trust, cohesion, and discipline required in a professional military body.

American trainers attached to the Iraqi army have repeatedly acknowledged the dangerous influence of sub-national identity in the emerging force. "In America, we have this national ethos; you identify with the Pledge of Allegiance and the flag, the stars and stripes," said Major General Paul Eaton, who was responsible for training Iraqi forces prior to mid-2004. "In Iraq, that is overshadowed by tribe, imam, family, and ethnicity. I talked to countless young soldiers who said, 'My name

is Muhammad, and I am a Turkoman,' or, 'I am a Sunni,' or, 'I am a Shiite.'"⁶

Echoing these remarks, one Marine wrote in an e-mail last year: "Due to the fact that Saddam murdered, tortured, raped, etc. at will, there is a limited pool of 18–35-year-old males for service that are physically or mentally qualified for service. Those that are fit for service, for the most part, have a DEEP hatred for those not of the same ethnic or religious affiliation."⁷ Or, as T. X. Hammes has succinctly put it: "The thing that holds a military unit together is trust. That's a society not based on trust."⁸

Although U.S. officials have repeatedly (and one would hope, disingenuously) claimed that they do not have precise data on the ethnic and sectarian mix of the Iraqi army, informal observation and common sense strongly suggest that the force is overwhelmingly Shiite and Kurdish. One analysis of the December 15 voting patterns drawn heavily from the security forces found 45 percent of ballots cast in support of the main Kurdish coalition, 30 percent for the main Shia coalition, and only 7.5 percent for the three major Sunni parties.⁹

Less important than each group's share of the total force, however, is its representation in individual units. An Iraqi army brigade that is overwhelmingly composed of Kurdish *peshmerga* or Shiite militiamen is more likely to place its loyalties with political factions in Sulaymaniyah or Najaf, rather than the elected government in Baghdad. Instead of forming a cohesive national military, homogenous units threaten to make the Iraqi army little more than a loosely allied collection of militias.

Of course, the strength and persistence of Iraq's existing militias—from the Kurdish *peshmerga* to the Badr Brigade and Madhi Army to the various Sunni insurgent groups—are themselves additional evidence of the link between the fragmentation of the country's society on the one hand, and the fragmentation of its military power on the other. Baghdad's national army, irrespective of its own internal schisms, does not enjoy anything near a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Just as many Iraqis are voting at the ballot box to endorse political power organized on an ethnic or sectarian basis, so too many appear to be voting with their feet for military institutions structured on similar lines.

History Lessons

There is, of course, the temptation to characterize these divisions as the intractable, even deterministic,

* This is not to suggest that the Kurdish, Shiite, or Sunni populations are themselves monolithic; on the contrary, each is riddled with its own set of internal disagreements—a warren of informal, opaque patronage networks. Iraq, in this regard, offers ample evidence of how the constituent parts of "civil society" are not always complementary to good governance; on the contrary, they can actively detract from it.

products of Iraqi culture and history. At its kindest, this argument proceeds from the observation that Iraq is in fact just three Ottoman *vilayets* thrown together by British bureaucrats in the wake of World War I; as such, it has no meaning as a unitary state, and the people living there should not be expected to behave as though it is one. A particular group may seize control of the capital and use state instruments to oppress the rest of the country—as the Sunni Arabs did under Saddam—but any attempt to stand up voluntary, participatory national institutions, including an army, is doomed by the absence of an overarching sense of identity.

The first flaw in this analysis is that there is nothing uniquely Iraqi, or even Middle Eastern, about the phenomenon it describes. The fragmentation of military power by divisive social structures is a problem that has occurred in numerous Western and non-Western polities throughout history; it is also a problem that many polities have overcome. In point of practice, effective institutions and good governance have proven capable of uniting some of the most disparate and diverse of peoples; dysfunctional institutions and self-destructive politics, similarly, have proven capable of shattering even the most homogenous of ones. This is not to deny that these institutions are themselves shaped by underlying social or cultural constructs, but simply to point out that the relationship is not deterministic. It is also to recognize that policy decisions matter: the choices made by leaders in Washington and Baghdad about the Iraqi army over the coming months, in particular, have the potential to create a bulwark against the country's disintegration or accelerate it.

One of the most dramatic examples of how effective military institutions can help bind together a diverse society can be found in India, which, under the Mughal Empire during the early modern period, was splintered among various highly militarized subkingdoms. Historian Dirk Kolff writes: "In such a society, no government, however powerful, could even begin to think of achieving a monopoly on the use of force. In some respects, the millions of armed men . . . that the government was supposed to rule over were its rivals rather than its subjects."¹⁰ Harvard political scientist Stephen Peter Rosen, in his own magisterial study of Indian military history, similarly characterizes Indian society under the Mughals: "Pervasive internal tensions among groups, including subcaste groups, led to constant internal violence . . . and to large numbers of armed militias. . . . The Indian army of the Mughal period was not

estranged from Indian society and social structures but their product."¹¹

As the already-weak central power of the Mughal rulers further declined during the first half of the eighteenth century, the internal divisions in Indian society deepened, with subkingdoms breaking off on the periphery of the empire and lawlessness increasing throughout it. Such was the situation that confronted the British East India Company (EIC) as it appeared on the geopolitical stage in the 1740s and slowly began to expand its dominion over the subcontinent. Remarkably, within the space of barely fifty years, it had succeeded in establishing itself as the dominant military force across much of India to the point that it was actually able to *export* military power to neighboring parts of the British Empire.

The explanation for rapid British conquest was not Western technological superiority—in fact, India and Britain were at similar levels of development in the mid-eighteenth century—but rather, the EIC's breathtaking effectiveness in raising and training indigenous Indian armies. Particularly crucial was its importation of a European mode of military organization that separated soldiers from their surrounding society and systematically professionalized and disciplined them. Not only was such a system capable of teaching soldiers how to "act in a cohesive, coordinated, and directed manner on the battlefield," it also succeeded in its ability to "take men from disparate groups and even nations and mold them into a fighting force."¹²

Once built, these professionalized indigenous armies then allowed the British to establish a monopoly on the use of force over India's fissiparous society. Notes Rosen: "It was not that caste division went away under British rule in India. The EIC, however, introduced a number of changes . . . that had the effect of systematically disarming the Indian population. What happened under British rule was the elimination of the huge numbers of militia-like groups of soldiers subject to non-state control."¹³

It bears noting that this revolutionary mode of military organization that the British introduced to the subcontinent was relatively new in Europe as well, which, just two centuries earlier, looked considerably more like India under the Mughals than the neatly ordered collection of nation-states that exist today. In Europe, the source of social division was not caste, but loyalty to rank, religion, and chivalry; nonetheless, the effect was similar. As historian C. V. Wedgwood notes,

“Although the term nation existed, and although some nation-states—England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain—were already recognizable entities, the modern concept of the nation . . . had hardly developed. Older loyalties contended perpetually with the comparatively new idea of loyalty to the nation.”¹⁴

Military power in Europe was, at least until the sixteenth century, similarly balkanized. As in Mughal India, bands of criminals thrived in such an environment. Fernand Braudel writes, “No region of the Mediterranean was free from the scourge [of brigandage] . . . It cropped up everywhere, in various guises, political, social, economic, terrorist . . . Italy, a mosaic of states, was a brigands paradise: driven out of one place, they would take refuge somewhere else.”¹⁵

What, then, changed? As in India, the creation of professionalized armies, separated from society and systematically trained, allowed for the gradual disarmament of European society and the development of what subsequently came to be known as nation-states. As Rosen notes, “In Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the division of society into social orders did not end, but these social orders did cease to have their own independent military capabilities.”¹⁶

Implications for Iraq

“Beware historians bearing false analogies,” Walt Rostow warned, and indeed, it is important not to take a comparison too far. It is useful to remember that the British, even as they built military institutions to serve their interests, remained a classic imperial power in India, bounded by the time-honored principle of *divide et impera*. Thus, when policymakers in London noted of the Indian army that “it is found that different races mixed together do not long preserve their distinctiveness,” it was with the understanding that too much national unity on the subcontinent could be very dangerous. This was especially true in the decades after the Great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, when Whitehall actively sought ways to “preserve that distinctiveness which is so valuable and which, while it lasts, makes the Muhammadan of one country despise, fear, or dislike the Muhammadan of another.”¹⁷

For the Bush administration, on the other hand, success in Iraq depends not on its ability to divide and conquer, but to unify the country and then draw down.

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If anything, the link between army building and nation building is stronger in the contemporary Iraqi context than in the case of the *raj*.

In practice, this means that the Bush administration needs to stop thinking about the Iraqi army strictly as an instrument of counterinsurgency—a replacement force for withdrawing U.S. soldiers—and instead, as a mechanism for creating national unity. More specifically, it must devote considerably greater attention toward creating incentives for the ethnic and sectarian diversification of the Iraqi military.

The good news in this regard is that Sunni Arabs appear to be increasingly willing to participate in the country’s security forces, having recognized that their boycott was simply not serving their interests. The question for the Pentagon now is whether the influx of Sunnis over the coming months can be used as a bridgehead to begin building genuinely mixed military units or if it will merely deepen the existing trend toward separate, homogeneous units.

The Bush administration need not look to the seventeenth century for inspiration in this respect, either. For more than three years, the U.S. military has adopted precisely the right approach as it has sought to build an indigenous army in Afghanistan. There, the force that the United States began assembling was initially dominated by a single faction, the Panjshiri Tajiks, who formed the core of the Northern Alliance and who captured Kabul after the fall of the Taliban. It was against Panjshiri objections that the U.S. military successfully insisted on imposing rough quotas on the Afghan army. The resulting force is arguably Afghanistan’s first national institution—visible proof that the country really can work as a cohesive, unified body, and thus, a major symbolic victory for President Hamid Karzai’s central government.

“The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan once noted. “The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”¹⁸ Three years after the invasion of Iraq, it still remains unnervingly uncertain whether the Bush administration’s attempt to transform the greater Middle East will succeed or fail. What is increasingly clear, however, is the extent to which the military challenges confronting the United States in Iraq, such as standing up an indigenous army, are inextricably bound up in the broader political aspirations there.

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Notes

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17. See Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39.
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