

The changing landscape of the international military presence in Iraq

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The international military presence in Iraq is moving from a combination of combat and non-combat activities to solely non-combat activities. Since 2014, the international military coalition Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) has fought Daesh alongside national Iraqi security forces. The combat mandate of OIR expired at the end of 2021 and the coalition is instead transitioning to a pure capacity-building mission committed to advising, assisting, and enabling Iraqi forces. At the same time, the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) is set to expand. NMI is a non-combat mission engaged in capacity-building, primarily for the strategic level of the Iraqi security sector. This memo depicts the ongoing shift in the international military presence.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN IRAQ

Iraq has been tormented by armed conflict ever since the US-led intervention in 2003. In the past decade, the main actor behind the devastation has been Daesh. In response to Daesh's territorial expansion and its acts of terror, the U.S launched a military campaign in 2014. Several U.S allies and partners joined the campaign, named Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (here referred to as OIR). Together with Iraqi security forces, OIR managed to push Daesh back and finally regained control over Mosul in 2017.

According to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), in 2021 Iraq experienced the highest level of violence since 2017. As demonstrated in Figure 1, both battles and explosions (including remote violence) have become more frequent. Thus, the situation is more fragile than it has been in recent years. Daesh is engaged in activities in especially the contested territories between the Kurdish region in Northern Iraq and those controlled by the Iraqi central government. The group has with recent attacks, from late 2021, yet again demonstrated that they pose a major threat to Iraq's stability.

Several complexities add to the fragility of the Iraqi security context. Apart from the threat of Daesh's resurgence, the strained relationship with the

semi-autonomous Kurdish region of Northern Iraq, sunni-shia tensions, a fragmented security sector, and weak state institutions all challenge the future stability of Iraq.

The rivalry between different external actors with interests in Iraq is likewise a source of instability. As an example, Iran-US tensions are displayed in the support they give to different factions in the government and different parts of the Iraqi security forces, thereby causing extended unrest between different branches of the Iraqi security sector.

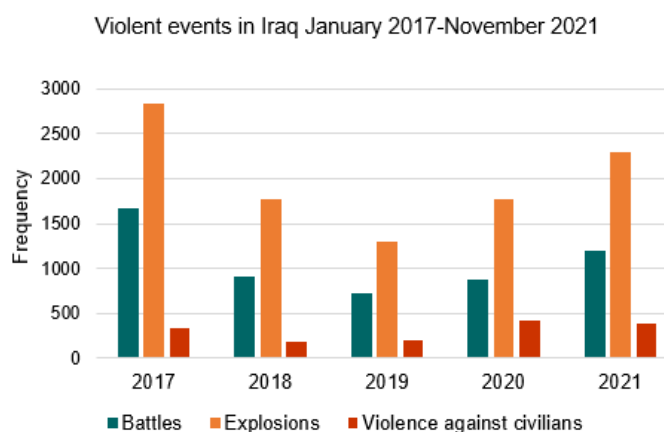


Figure 1: ACLED data on violent events inside Iraq, categorised by type of event, from January 2017 to November 2021

OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

OIR is often presented as the military wing of the Global Coalition, the civilian-military umbrella group that, in its own words, is “committed to tackling Daesh on all fronts”.¹ OIR is the world’s largest coalition in terms of the number of participating states and organisations. The main goal of OIR was to defeat Daesh and support stabilisation in Iraq in partnership with Iraqi national security forces. The Iraqi government claimed victory over Daesh in 2017 and the Global Coalition has stated that Daesh’s control of physical territory ended late 2019.

As the main goal has been achieved, negotiations with the Iraqi government have led to OIR’s shift from having a combat to a non-combat mandate. As a result of the end of combat activities, the number of OIR personnel is decreasing. The current role of OIR is to advise, assist and enable Iraqi security forces. When the OIR was established, Daesh was in territorial control of one-fourth of Iraq. Almost eight million Iraqi citizens have been liberated from Daesh’s control. The OIR has trained and equipped Iraqi and Kurdish security forces and fought Daesh with air power. According to Global Coalition estimates, by the end of 2020 around 50,000 Iraqi military and/or security personnel had participated in some form of training program. It is estimated that more than 30,000 airstrikes were launched by OIR-participating states between 2014 and 2020.

Several states, including the U.S., paused activities in 2020 because of Covid-19 and the heightened security tensions connected to the killing of Iranian Commander Qasem Soleimani, at Baghdad Airport. The same year, it was announced that a permanent withdrawal of troops would follow. OIR has therefore started to pull out troops from several bases. According to official accounts, between the fall of 2020 and the fall of 2021, troop numbers were halved, from 5000 to around 2500 soldiers. In October 2021, the Iraqi prime minister and the U.S. president declared that the OIR would shift its focus, from both training and airstrike support, towards a non-combat mission concentrated on providing advice and training. This transformation was expected to be finished by the

end of 2021. The commitment by the parties was confirmed in early November 2021, after a substantial decrease in both the military personnel and the equipment present in Iraq.

OIR has transitioned its bases to Iraqi control during the past year and is henceforth hosted by Iraqi security forces. In early December 2021, representatives of OIR declared that the remaining military staff had been divided into a military advisory group and a special operations advisory group; both groups are advising on the operational level in the Iraqi security forces. For example, the military advisory group advises Iraqi officers of the highest rank at the operational level on how to use their resources more effectively in the current context of fighting Daesh in rural and contested terrain. Hence, OIR provides and will continue to provide advice to several domestic security forces in Iraq, including Kurdish forces, on how to jointly reduce the risk of a Daesh resurgence. In disputed areas, between the semi-autonomous Kurdish region and Iraqi government-controlled territory, OIR has facilitated strategic meetings between local forces, with the intent to lower Daesh’s freedom of movement.

The Global Coalition has discussed directing some of its work towards fighting Daesh in other parts of the world (i.e., in West African states), which suggests that OIR may also shift focus in future.

THE NATO MISSION IN IRAQ

NATO, as an organisation, trained Iraqi military personnel even before the fight against Daesh had started. Several NATO members have also been prominent actors within the Global Coalition from the start, in 2014. In 2018, NMI was launched, by invitation from the Iraqi government. NMI is intended to help Iraq establish a self-sustainable security sector that is able to prevent the recurrence of Daesh as well as to fight other terrorist organisations. From December 2020 to mid-2022, NMI is being led by Danish Lieutenant General Michael Lollesgaard. Besides Denmark, other significant contributing states include the U.K., Spain and Turkey.

1 Besides countering Daesh by military means, the priorities of the Global Coalition include: “tackling Daesh’s financing and economic infrastructure; preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters across borders; supporting stabilisation and the restoration of essential public services to areas liberated from Daesh; and countering the group’s propaganda”. Please see the Global Coalition’s website for more details: <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>

The NMI is a non-combat capacity-building mission dedicated to training and advising Iraqi security forces and institutions on a strategic level (e.g., the Ministry of Defence). This is a long-term commitment. NMI advises Iraq on questions such as how to arm different units, how to train the army and how to develop capabilities within the Iraqi security forces. Representatives from NMI have specifically alerted publically the importance of Iraqi's shaping their own armed forces.

Besides advising senior levels in the Iraqi security institutions, NMI's work during 2020 also focused on supporting Iraqi military schools. Although Covid-19 paused some of the training activities, and parts of the mission were redeployed outside Iraqi borders, the NMI was active inside Iraq throughout the year. In April 2021, NATO members decided they would expand their commitment in Iraq. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that the mission would grow from 500 to 4000 personnel, with no specific date for reaching full deployment.

NATO underlines that all expanded activities are to take place in close cooperation with the Iraqi government, and will also include specialised tactical-level training for the Iraqi security forces. The NMI's commitments would also expand to include more strategic-level advising in the ministries. As Iraq still has weak security institutions, unstable financing and an un-organised military force (different factions belong to different ministries, for example), NMI's focus on supporting institution-building is arguably justified.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OIR AND NMI

As discussed above, the international military presence is changing from a combination of non-combat and combat activities to solely non-combat activities. OIR and NMI are set to continue supporting Iraqi security forces in what has been called a new phase of peacetime, as the large-scale war against Daesh has ended. OIR and NMI are envisaged as taking on complementary roles in these efforts.

Whereas NMI primarily supports the political strategic level, OIR supports the operational level of the Iraqi security forces. The OIR and the NMI are formed with a common principal goal: ending the threat of Daesh. Both the OIR and the NMI are striving to stabilise Iraq to prevent further insecurity

in the region. One difference that has existed up until 2021 is that OIR has relied on both combat and non-combat activities to counter Daesh, whereas the NMI has only relied on non-combat related activities.

At present, it remains unclear to what extent the OIR and the NMI coordinate their efforts. NATO representatives have commented, however, on the importance of coordinating work with the Global Coalition and the Iraqi government. Formal news reports from NATO suggest that meetings between NATO and the OIR do occur. Official documents also state that coordination between the NMI and other stakeholders, among them the OIR, take place. Similarly, the OIR leadership has stated that it is of importance to unify efforts on the ground.

RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAQI LEADERSHIP AND CITIZENS

OIR and NMI have both been deployed at the request of the Iraqi government. The mandates to act on Iraqi territory have existed since 2014 and 2018 respectively. However, signs of negative popular opinion about military missions in Iraq make it difficult for the Iraqi leadership to defend the given mandates. The presence of foreign military missions on Iraqi soil is in itself controversial. As one example, when NATO announced its increased involvement both in activities and troop numbers in early 2021, Iraqi news reports primarily fixated on the number of troops arriving.

Widespread demonstrations broke out in late 2019; some of them were met by violence from the Iraqi security forces. Although the main grievances of the Iraqi citizens are related to corruption and the weak state apparatus, voices against both American and Iranian involvement in Iraq's domestic affairs were also raised during these demonstrations. That OIR and NMI train and advise Iraqi security forces that at times treat citizens violently risks further undermining popular support. Several NGOs have demanded that OIR condemn the use of force against the Iraqi people during the protests.

Furthermore, the OIR legacy of using airstrikes complicates the attitudes among Iraqi citizens toward a continued international presence. One significant issue is the lack of recognition from OIR members that civilians have been killed in the airstrikes. The

previous lack of assistance in rebuilding Mosul, after having been the battle arena for OIR, Iraqi security forces and Daesh for months, is another source of criticism of international actors. More recently, the rebuilding of Mosul has become a priority for the Global Coalition. Clear and precise communication is crucial for the NMI and the OIR's being able to build a trustful relationship with the Iraqi leadership as well as the country's citizens.

CONCLUSION

The international military presence in Iraq is entering a new phase in 2022. The combat mandate has been removed from OIR and the mission is now concentrated on capacity-building and advising the highest operational level within the Iraqi security forces. NMI is instead designed to complement OIR, mainly by building capacity on the political strategical level, where their main partners are located, within the ministries of the Iraqi government. These efforts will take time and results cannot always be quantified (e.g., in terms of the number of persons being trained). Indeed, in order to be serious in this undertaking, OIR and NMI need to be ready to make long-term commitments and continue to ensure that advice is adapted to local circumstances in Iraq.

However, the complicated domestic situation in Iraq, in the political, economic and security arenas, adds to the risk that Daesh will re-emerge. Several experts warn that security vacuums, as in the territorially disputed areas between the Kurdish region and those of the Iraqi central government, are breeding grounds for Daesh and enable Daesh's terror cells to operate more freely. In the recent series of attacks starting late 2021 the group has again demonstrated their ability to not only cause destruction but

also being able to control minor territorial areas. Removing international combat capabilities risks sending a larger signal of an opportunity for Daesh.

The importance of popular support for the legitimacy and effectiveness of an international military presence should not be underestimated. Although the removal of combat units might appease some critics, a foreign military presence, as such, is at best tolerated rather than endorsed by considerable parts of the Iraqi population. The missions' ability, together with the government, to build popular trust will be key to achieving any sustainable results for Iraqi security and stability. For this to stand a chance, though, the use of Iraqi military units to counter domestic protestors must come to an end.

Besides the issue of cooperation and coordination between international actors and the Iraqi hosts, the development of an international military presence in Iraq may also reflect broader geopolitical considerations. One perspective on the military involvement of the U.S. in Iraq through OIR highlights U.S. relations with Iran. To take home all military staff and dismantle the OIR, in its totality, might have been expected, considering the defeat of Daesh. However, by retaining some of its military presence, the U.S. has the possibility of countering Iran's geopolitical influence but at the same time appeasing some of the critical voices inside Iraq against the military presence of the OIR.²

Finally, at the same time as the international military presence in Iraq is switching from partial combat to non-combat mandates, the level of violence inside Iraq is not decreasing. This contradicts the general idea of reaching a stable security situation in Iraq anytime soon. ■

² See for example Jane Arraf and Eric Schmitt in New York Times (2021-07-24). "U.S. to Announce Troop Drawdown From Iraq, but Little Is Expected to Change". <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/world/middleeast/iraq-biden-us-forces.html> [last retrieved 2022-01-14]