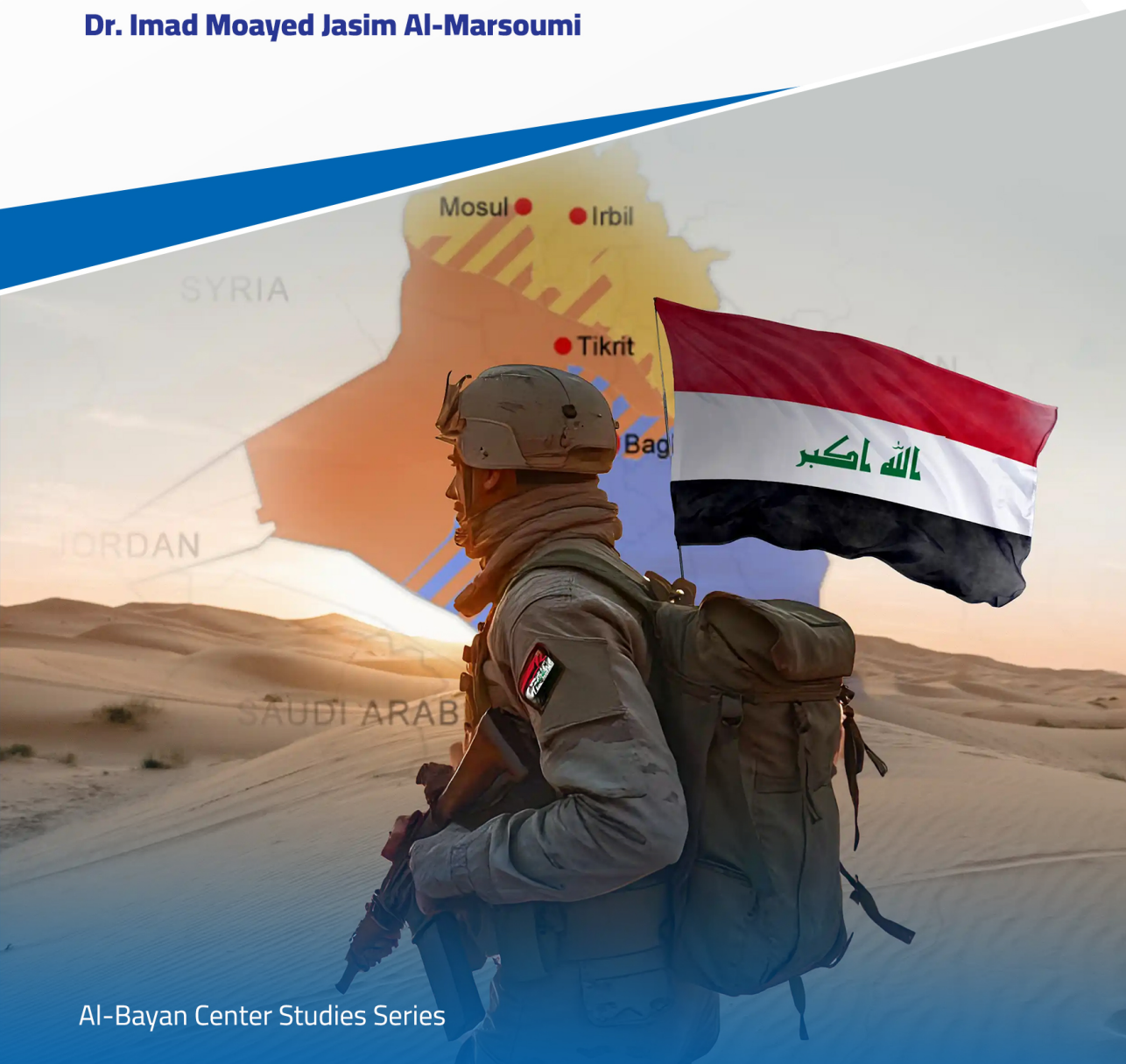مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

Security Sector Reform in Iraq
Past Experiences and Current Realities

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About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

Introduction

When the Islamic State (ISIS) seized parts of northern and western Iraq in mid-2014, the Iraqi government, in collaboration with the international community, provided assistance to popular and tribal groups that volunteered to fight the organization. This assistance, administered through official state institutions, included training programs, equipment, and supplies to arm these volunteer forces against the imminent threat posed by ISIS.

The security turmoil experienced by such countries, coupled with their liberation efforts, creates a favorable environment for the empowerment of groups that played a central role in the liberation process and in repelling threats.[1] This empowerment often enables these groups to gain access to the official military establishment or integrate into the political system, including entry into parliament and positions of power. Consequently, countries that endured a war crisis with a terrorist organization occupying parts of their territory for years, and where the government's military efforts to reclaim these areas relied on popular support and volunteer contributions to the armed forces, often face the challenge of managing a complex relationship with these newly empowered actors. Navigating the post-liberation phase requires finding appropriate ways to address the evolving security and political landscape that emerges after the conflict (Post-Conflict Environment).

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have introduced a new qualitative element to the Iraqi military structure, as their formation was ideologically driven and rooted in a religious fatwa. However, their emergence has brought about contentious issues stemming from the duality they created within the security sector. This duality has begun to effect significant changes in the balance of political and military power in the country.

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1 Ranj Alaaldin, Security Sector Reform In Complex Conflict Environments, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Issue Brief, October 2022, At: https://bit.ly/3zzCkxp

Although the Iraqi parliament passed Law No. 40 of 2016, which established the Popular Mobilization Authority as an independent entity with legal personality and designated it as part of the Iraqi armed forces under the authority of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, as stipulated in Article 1 of the law[2], the gradual institutionalization of the PMF within the state apparatus has not been sufficient to alleviate the tensions surrounding its presence in the military-security sphere.

This authority has faced resentment from certain political forces[3], and elements within the traditional armed forces have also been less than welcoming. Their concerns largely stem from fears of a security structure comprising a regular army juxtaposed with a powerful paramilitary entity.[4]

On this basis, the complexity the state faced within the security sector and the evolving security environment extended beyond finding a compromise between the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Iraqi army. This duality not only provoked significant external opposition but also introduced new challenges to the state's efforts to reform the security sector. These reforms were intended to progress alongside the war on ISIS and evolve further after its conclusion.

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2 Ministry of Justice. (2016, December 26). Iraqi Gazette, Issue No. (4429).

3 We can highlight some of the reactions expressed by Iraqi politicians following the announcement of the Popular Mobilization Law, which underscored the depth of the crisis surrounding its establishment and approval, as well as the initial opposition it faced. For instance, the head of the Popular Mobilization Authority, Faleh al-Fayyadh, warned politicians opposing the law about the consequences of continuing their criticism, emphasizing that the Popular Mobilization Forces had become an integral part of the official military institution. Similarly, Mowaffaq al-Rubaie, a representative of the National Alliance, threatened legal action against any individual or media outlet that referred to the Popular Mobilization Authority as "militias," stating that such descriptions would be subject to Iraqi law. For further details, see: "Popular Mobilization Law: Will it place it under the authority of the law," Russia Today (RT), November 29, 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/3N3K1io.

4 Riccardo Redaelli, The Osmotic Path: The PMU and The Iraqi State, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), October 26, 2018, At: https://bit.ly/3N1NRZv

In addition to addressing the flaws within the traditional security sector—flaws that had been a major factor in ISIS's expansion and occupation of parts of Iraq—the state was also tasked with developing an institutional relationship with the Popular Mobilization Forces. This necessitated finding an appropriate solution to integrate them into the broader security reform project, ensuring alignment with the state's objectives for a cohesive and effective security framework.

The reform process was challenging and complex, experiencing halts or suspensions over time due to the multilayered nature of its implementation. These complexities unfolded across three levels: the first level concerned the Peshmerga forces, supervised by the international coalition forces; the second involved the federal security establishment, managed by the government in Baghdad; and the third addressed the challenge of integrating reform initiatives between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the federal government. Additionally, the process had to tackle the unique status of the Popular Mobilization Forces and establish a structured relationship between them and the traditional security establishment.

On this basis, this study aims to evaluate the reality of past attempts and limited efforts to reform the security sector, as well as the obstacles they encountered, in order to provide an objective assessment of the policies needed to reform and enhance the sector. It is important to clarify that this study does not aim to define the operational policies the armed forces should adopt in response to specific threats. Instead, its focus is on identifying the organizational and operational requirements that the security sector must fulfill to address the deficiencies that have weighed on it in previous years.

First: The Federal Security Sector Reform Experience

During the initial security reform process led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in 2017-2018, under the supervision of the National Security Advisor, the government struggled to formulate a coherent strategy for reforming the security sector. The anticipated difficulty arose from hesitation within the institutions responsible for the reform. As noted by Safaa al-Sheikh Hussein, who served as Deputy National Security Advisor during the terms of Mowaffaq al-Rubaie and Faleh al-Fayyadh, reforms inevitably create winners and losers. Therefore, in order for leaders in each ministry or institution to succeed, they must oversee the implementation of reforms to overcome internal resistance in the most effective way.

The second obstacle stemmed from the opposition of some political parties, who viewed security sector reform as a direct challenge to the existing power dynamics. Reform, by its nature, addresses issues of power distribution, meaning its success hinges on close cooperation with local elites.[5] This highlights an undeniable reality: Security Sector Reform (SSR) can only be effectively implemented as part of a broader, long-term political restructuring. Short-term solutions are likely to exacerbate risks in Iraq's fragile and crisis-prone system. In other words, SSR requires a long-term strategy, involving political confidence-building measures, security guarantees, and economic alternatives to address the concerns of the many parties that might block progress.

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5 Safa al-Sheikh Hussein, Iraq's security sector: Twenty years of dashed hopes, In: Iraq 20 years on: Insider reflections on the war and its aftermath, Chatham House essay collection, Chatham House, April 17, 2023, At: https://bit.ly/3zPlb2C

In early January 2018, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense announced a plan to restructure the army in cooperation with international coalition forces. This signaled that the reorganization of the Iraqi military had become an urgent necessity following years of fighting against the terrorist organization ISIS. Additionally, improvements in armament, equipment, and the combat performance of military formations, divisions, and leadership highlighted the need for reform. The necessity of this reform was further emphasized by the changing internal and external security challenges, which differed significantly from the situation during the formation of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense after 2003. These evolving challenges now require a reevaluation of how the organizational structure of the Iraqi military aligns with the plans and objectives outlined in the Iraqi National Security Strategy for 2019.

From 2019 until the end of 2022, no significant action was taken to reorganize or reform the Iraqi military institution, primarily due to the turbulent political conditions in Iraq and the global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the Security Sector Reform (SSR) program, which had been in progress, was halted and not reactivated until Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani assumed office in October 2022. The new government demonstrated a clear focus on security issues from the outset, which was reflected in the dismissal of several security leaders and an emphasis on enhancing the capabilities of the security forces. The SSR program was revived with the approval of the Security Sector Reform Strategy on March 27, 2024, during a meeting of the Supreme Committee for Security Sector Reform.

Although the security reform project within the conventional forces was halted during the years 2019-2022, this does not diminish the fact that former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi took significant steps regarding the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

After the PMF became a military organization parallel to the army, it developed its own operations command in each governorate, functioning alongside the Joint Operations Command. This situation prompted Abdul Mahdi to attempt to organize the military structure of the PMF as a new institution, albeit one that faced challenges, including overlapping powers and the expansion of directorates with similar names.

Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwani Order No. (237) on July 1, 2019, which mandated that all Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) operate as an integral part of the Iraqi armed forces, with all provisions applicable to the armed forces extended to them. The order required that all PMF factions abandon the names they had used during the fight against ISIS, replacing them with military titles such as division, brigade, regiment, etc. Additionally, specific camps were to be designated for the assembly of the PMF, similar to those assigned to other branches of the armed forces. The order also stipulated that all PMF faction headquarters, whether located in cities or outside them, be closed.[6]

This Executive Order sparked differing viewpoints. Some, like Muqtada al-Sadr, supported the decision and expressed his readiness to disassociate his faction, Saraya al-Salam, from the Popular Mobilization Forces and integrate it into the military establishment. However, others raised reservations, arguing that the decision required more time for proper implementation, citing a lack of agreement between the leadership of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the army leadership. As a result, some factions opposed the order and declared their intention to maintain their affiliation with the office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, rather than integrating into the traditional military structure.These factions interpreted the order as a result of external pressure on Adel Abdul Mahdi.[7]

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6 To view the text of the Royal Decree No. (237), please refer to the following link: https://bit.ly/4f0UYxl

7 * Natiq, L. (2019, July 30). Will the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq comply with the decision to incorporate them into the army? Al Jazeera Net. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3N2qgrB

* Shakara, A. A. R. (2019, July 10). A careful reading of the Diwani Order No. 237: Requirements of the stage and strategic challenges. Al Mada Newspaper, Issue No. 4468. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3TMi1DE

Two months later, in September 2019, the Prime Minister's Office issued Executive Order No. 328 to restructure the Joint Operations Command.[8] More significantly, Adel Abdul Mahdi assigned himself direct leadership of the Special Operations Command in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, signaling his strong commitment to the issue and his readiness to use his political influence to reform the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The order also stipulated that either Adel Abdul Mahdi or his representative, Lieutenant General Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah, would oversee all formations under the Joint Operations Command at the operational level, including the PMF. Meanwhile, the security services would retain administrative control over their respective units, including recruitment, training, and equipment.

Since the aforementioned order granted the Joint Operations Command exclusive control over all appointments in the army and the Popular Mobilization Forces from the rank of brigade commander and higher, it was viewed as a crucial decision aligned with the post-ISIS phase. It aimed to organize the status of various military formations and unify a multi-party system. The order was expected to contribute to strengthening the principle of unity of command and control over the military and security resources of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. It also sought to unify the security and military efforts and resources of the Iraqi defense system under the command of the Joint Operations Command, especially with the inclusion of representatives from the Popular Mobilization Forces Authority and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs in the Joint Operations Command.[9]

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8 Mawazin News. (2019, September 15). Official document: Decree to restructure the Joint Operations Command under the leadership of Abdul-Mahdi. Mawazin News.
 https://www.mawazin.net/Details.aspx?jimare=64958
9 Michael Knights, Helping Iraq Take Charge of Its Command-and-Control Structure, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch (3193), September 30, 2019,
At: https://bit.ly/3Y1sY6J

Days later, Executive Order No. (331) was issued, in which Adel Abdul Mahdi approved the organizational structure of the Popular Mobilization Authority (PMF) and canceled all titles and positions that conflicted with the approved structure. Additionally, the order granted the head of the PMF the authority to appoint acting directors and officials within the organization, with the appointments subject to approval by the Council of Ministers.[10] The new, large-scale organizational structure adopted a traditional format, with the PMF now having a president and a chief of staff. Under the president, there were office departments and a general secretary, along with 10 logistical directorates and 8 operational military commands. Under the chief of staff, there were 5 main deputy positions, including operations and intelligence, 25 directorates, and 8 operational commands across various provinces of the country, excluding the southern provinces.[11]

Although the maturation of this structure took a long time and required extensive discussions within the military establishment, Executive Order No. 331 resolved the dilemma of the Popular Mobilization Forces structure. As a result, the position of Chief of Staff and Deputy Chairman of the PMF Authority became the first field commander of the PMF. Meanwhile, the position of Chairman of the Authority granted significant powers, which redefined the leadership structure of this institution.

Second: The Peshmerga Reform Project in the Kurdistan Region

At the level of the Kurdistan Region, the security reform process has been equally challenging and complex. The issue of unifying Kurdish forces into a single military formation has been under discussion since the region gained a degree of self-administration separate from the former Iraqi regime

10 Al Arabiya Al Hadath. (2019, September 21). Abdul Mahdi issues a decree regarding the restructuring of the Popular Mobilization Forces. Al Arabiya Al Hadath. https://bit.ly/3N7buQ8
11 Al-Akhbar. (2019, September 23). The Popular Mobilization Structure Decided: Adel Abdul Mahdi Victorious for Al-Fayyadh. Lebanese Al-Akhbar Newspaper. https://bit.ly/47NjCyW

in 1991.[12] This issue has remained on the agenda of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since 2006, but significant progress in this project has yet to be made. Despite the efforts of four Peshmerga Affairs Ministers and three Prime Ministers, a unified, non-partisan force has not been established, highlighting the ongoing tension between Kurdish factions over the unification of the Peshmerga forces.

During the war against ISIS from 2014 to 2017, the Peshmerga emerged as crucial local allies of the United States and its international partners, playing a significant role in the eventual defeat of ISIS. Following the war's conclusion in 2017, the international coalition, led by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands, initiated a program to reform the Peshmerga forces. The goal was to establish a strong and unified defense force.

The KRG entered into an agreement with these countries consisting of 35 provisions focused on institutional reforms. A key aspect was integrating the forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) into the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to enhance military unity.

The coalition countries hoped that financial support, training, and the leverage of a potential military withdrawal by the US-led Combined Joint Task Force (Operation Inherent Resolve) would serve as critical incentives to drive and sustain these reform efforts.[13]

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12 Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Mario Fumerton, Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Regional Insight, December 16, 2015, At: https://bit.ly/47Ob0b9
13 Myles B. Caggins, Peshmerga Reform: Navigating challenges, Forging Unity, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 31, 2023, At: https://bit.ly/3Y1CruO

The Peshmerga of the Future plan outlined 35 detailed proposals aimed at comprehensive reform. Key provisions included developing an official security strategy for the Kurdistan Regional Government, complemented by a military strategy to define the size and structure of the Peshmerga forces. The plan proposed establishing a unified general command for the Kurdistan Region's armed forces, integrating the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) with those under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, and creating a cohesive military doctrine. Merit-based recruitment was emphasized, requiring all personnel to hold only one position, thereby addressing the prevalent issue of dual employment. Additionally, the plan called for a comprehensive overhaul of the payroll system, a more systematic and effective training approach, and the adoption of a unified weapons system across the Peshmerga forces.[14]

According to unofficial statistics, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controls approximately 50,000 Peshmerga troops, operating independently of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Similarly, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) maintains control over around 42,000 troops, or slightly more. Together, these forces—aligned with the two major Kurdish factions—comprise the majority of the Peshmerga, whose total number is estimated to approach 100,000 soldiers.[15]

Most of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) forces are part of the 80th Brigade, which includes the Zerevani, a military police force affiliated with the party. Additionally, the KDP effectively controls the Roj Peshmerga, a group of Kurdish fighters based in Syria. In contrast, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) operates the 70th Brigade.

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14 Kurdish government approves coalition proposal to restructure Peshmerga ministry, Rudaw News, May 14, 2017, At: https://bit.ly/4gJVPUr
15 Peshmerga unification process 'difficult', requires 'long-term investment:' Netherlands, Rudaw News, October 14, 2023, At: https://bit.ly/3Y1C1od

Both factions also maintain various support, intelligence, and counter-terrorism units, all of which remain outside the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.[16]

No single force, including the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), appears to have full control over all Peshmerga forces. Even the forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are not unified under a single command, highlighting a decentralized structure within the two parties. A foundational principle of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was the equal division of administrative positions between the two parties, with each receiving 50%. However, this balance has weakened over time as the KDP sought to enforce a 57%-43% distribution in its favor. This stance was explicitly articulated by Abdulkhaliq Babiri, the Chief of Staff of the KDP's Ministry of Operations, in a statement made in June 2023: "Now and in the future, the phenomenon of the 50-50 division will not be implemented in terms of personnel, logistics, administration, and financial aspects, because it has no basis in the laws in force in the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs."

These conflicts highlight two key obstacles severely constraining reform efforts in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. First, the ongoing soft civil war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both parties view maintaining their independent Peshmerga forces as vital to their political influence and power. Second, the Peshmerga's celebrated status as legendary heroes within Kurdish society complicates efforts to transform them into a "normal" military force. The international coalition's approach in recent years appears to have misjudged priorities by emphasizing security reform in Kurdistan without addressing the entrenched political divide between the KDP and PUK.

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16 Surkew Mohammed, "There's not even 1% chance that Kurdistan will have a national army," senior commanders, Kirkuk Now, July 22, 2023, At: https://bit.ly/3zqEr6I

As Sardar Aziz aptly describes it, this is akin to "putting the military cart before the political horse," a scenario in which meaningful progress on the Peshmerga reform project is unlikely.[17]

The political division and the deepening rift between the KDP and PUK proved to be so influential that they remained formidable obstacles to the Peshmerga reform project, despite the years that had passed since its initiation. The international community could no longer conceal its frustration with the parties' repeated delays and procrastination in implementing the required reforms.[18] However, in 2022, a significant turning point in the cooperation between the United States and the Kurdistan Region was reached with the signing of a new four-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA). This MoU laid down stringent conditions and established a clear timeline for reforms, underscoring the international community's unwavering commitment to Peshmerga reform. As a joint statement from the Pentagon and the MoPA stated, "The MoU outlines progress on critical institutional reforms and the MoPA's commitment to undertake additional reforms to enhance the professionalism of its forces."[19]

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17 Sardar Aziz and Andrew Cottey, The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga: military reform and nation-building in a divided polity, Defence Studies, Vol (21), No. (2), 2021, PP 226 – 241.

18 Reforms are significantly stalled or behind schedule on key issues, including the establishment of two additional headquarters for the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Plans for these new headquarters have yet to be approved, with uncertainties surrounding their actual locations and the scope of their operational control. Additionally, there remains no final agreement on the reorganization of the authority structure of the Ministry's Peshmerga Brigades 70 and 80. For more details, refer to Myles B. Caggins, Peshmerga Reform: Navigating Challenges, Forging Unity, Op. cit.

19 U.S Department of Defense, Joint Statement on the Renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding Between the Department of Defense and the Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, September 21, 2022, At: https://bit.ly/3BnbeKx

According to the memorandum, the coalition's support for Peshmerga reform is expected to continue until 2026, with the aim of unifying all Peshmerga units within the timeframe outlined in the agreement. Despite the United States providing the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs with $20 million per month to cover the salaries of unified Peshmerga units, which include fighters loyal to both major Kurdish parties, the reform process has progressed slowly. This financial incentive is intended to stimulate the reform process by offering regular salaries. However, progress remains limited. The international coalition is continuing to emphasize that a positive assessment of the reform's progress will be a key factor in determining whether or not to extend the military mandate to provide further support to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Additionally, the coalition is working to convince the Kurdistan Regional Government that reform will not only enhance the capabilities of their military forces but also provide a significant opportunity to strengthen the region's international standing in an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment.[20]

International partners, particularly the United States, have repeatedly warned the Kurdish authorities that they risk losing support and funding for the Peshmerga if the 70th and 80th Brigades are not brought under the control of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. In late August 2023, Jacco Berends, the Dutch Consul General in Erbil, told Rudaw that both the Peshmerga and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) could lose international support if reforms within the forces were not implemented.[21]

20 Kamaran Palani, Peshmerga Reform: High Stakes for the Future of Iraqi Kurdistan, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), September 15, 2022, At: https://bit.ly/3XJoT62
21 Julian Bechocha, Peshmerga 'will lose' international support if unification fails: Dutch consul, Rudaw News, August 29, 2023, At: https://bit.ly/3Y0jkl1

Despite continued pressure from the international coalition to reform and unify the Kurdistan Region's armed forces under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA), both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are increasingly maintaining military forces outside the ministry's control. While both parties claim to support the coalition's reform efforts, they show little interest in strengthening the ministry or relinquishing power to it. Instead, their focus remains on bolstering their own party power. By the second half of 2022, the two parties had unified less than half of the required forces. According to Major General Hazar Ismail, senior advisor to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, there were only 20 unified Peshmerga brigades and support units in the Kurdistan Region, as part of the Peshmerga Unification Program. This means that only 40-50 percent of the Peshmerga forces now fall under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.[22]

Third: Policies required for reforming the security sector

The occupation of large areas of Iraq by ISIS has become part of the historical memory of both society and the state, making it impossible to ignore in any process aimed at evaluating the security-military sector. This event revealed the extent of the damage that disfigured Iraq's military institution and highlighted the need for comprehensive reform in the security sector and the reorganization of its forces across various categories, aligned with the nature of the challenges and potential threats. As a result, this reform has become a major concern for decision-makers after the war's conclusion.

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22   Wladimir van Wilgenburg, 40 to 50 percent of Peshmerga forces united under Ministry of Peshmerga: senior advisor, Kurdistan 24 News, July 8, 2022, At: https://bit.ly/3Bq2jb0

Reforming the security sector is a difficult and gradual process that requires sequential procedures and a timeline that may extend for several years. It is primarily an organizational issue, as it involves defining a set of foundations and operational rules that security and military institutions are expected to follow. Therefore, the desired reform, which aims to enhance the performance of military-security forces and ensure the sustainability of their transformation into professional institutions, should proceed along two tracks: first, fulfilling the organizational requirements; and second, developing a set of strategies aimed at advancing the security-military sector.

1.   **Organizational Framework for Military-Security Work Rules**

At the end of March 2024, the Supreme Committee for Security Reform approved the Security Sector Reform 2024-2032 strategy during a session chaired by the Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. According to a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Media Office,[23] the committee's approval of this strategy aligns with the components and requirements of democratic systems, aiming to achieve accountability, transparency, and adherence to human rights principles. The Security Sector Reform Strategy 2024-2032, designed to implement a comprehensive overhaul of the security system, focuses on meeting five key requirements: (Adhering to human rights principles. Defining roles and responsibilities across military and security formations. Enhancing the capabilities of security services. Establishing necessary legal frameworks for all security sectors and services. Integrating technological advancements into the security sector.)

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23 The media office of the Iraqi Prime Minister on the (Facebook) platform at the following link: https://bit.ly/482D5Ml

Although precise details regarding the procedures or program to be adopted for achieving the required reforms have not yet been published, the objectives outlined in the strategy—such as observing human rights, defining tasks and duties, and strengthening the legal framework for the security services—indicate that this strategy is aligned with a critical goal. This goal involves fulfilling the requirements of organizational work rules, namely establishing a legal framework or fundamental organizational arrangements. These arrangements underscore the urgent need to reevaluate the institutional and organizational structure of the military institution to address and rectify the shortcomings and challenges that have arisen over the past twenty years.

Requirements for Reviewing the Organizational and Institutional Structure of the Security-Military Sector:[24]

First: Civilian Oversight

In any reform process aimed at building robust security institutions, civilian oversight must play a central role in guiding the security sector. The primary purpose of this oversight is to protect security services from partisan influences, thereby safeguarding their professionalism and neutrality in performing their duties and implementing procedures. To achieve this, it is essential to establish a framework of distinct agencies staffed by professional bureaucrats rather than politicians. These agencies should operate under the leadership of independent, non-partisan ministers within each security sector agency. Such a framework enhances political accountability, ensures responsible governance, and reinforces the performance of the security sector in alignment with the principles of transparency and good governance.

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24 See: Sumit Bisaria and Sujit Chowdhury, Security Sector Reform in Constitutional Transitions, International IDEA Policy Paper No. 23, 2021, at: https://bit.ly/4emyqqD

Second: Separation of Duties

It is essential that the constitutional and legal framework clearly distinguish between the roles and institutional structures of the various security agencies. For example, the military institution should be responsible for national defense and protecting the country from external threats, while the police should focus on enforcing the law and maintaining public order. Intelligence agencies, on the other hand, should limit their tasks to collecting information related to the national interest and assessing internal and external security threats. In this context, no security agency should be assigned tasks beyond its functional jurisdiction. Such measures not only overburden the agency but also dilute its efforts, diverting it from performing the core tasks for which it was established. An example of this is the decision taken by former Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi to assign the Counter-Terrorism Service the responsibility of controlling border crossings to combat smuggling and financial corruption in these areas.[25] This decision exceeded the agency's original mandate.

Third: National Security Councils

The establishment of National Security Councils underscores the critical importance of these institutions in coordinating security activities and facilitating the exchange of intelligence information among various security agencies. This coordination strengthens the government's ability to address threats efficiently. The success of these councils depends on several fundamental conditions. One key condition is ensuring that the majority of their members are independent civilians unaffiliated with political parties, thereby upholding democratic accountability.

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25 Ahmed Al-Suhail, Border Control: A New Challenge for Al-Kadhimi's Government, Independent Arabia, July 4, 2020, at the link: https://bit.ly/4gHHdFg

Additionally, clear regulations and work programs must be developed to balance the need for operational secrecy with the imperative of establishing appropriate oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability.

In general, a constitutional and legislative framework must be formulated that defines the powers and tasks of the various security sector agencies, in addition to establishing a distinct institutional structure that ensures the security agencies are not under partisan control. These laws and regulatory procedures aim to achieve two main objectives: first, to remove the security agencies from the realm of politics and prevent their involvement in political conflicts, and second, to prevent the security agencies from being exploited by bureaucratic authorities for partisan purposes.

2.   At the level of work strategies

By work strategies, we refer to the policies and arrangements that Iraq must adopt to reorganize its security forces at both the structural and operational levels. This includes reducing certain roles, defining new tasks, and adopting rehabilitation and development programs aimed at enhancing the combat and morale capabilities of the forces, as well as strengthening their sense of belonging to the institution. Among the most important policies in this context are those that address the problems that accompanied the security situation after the liberation battles, how to deal with developments in the security environment, and how to overcome the effects and negative consequences of the previous stage. As mentioned earlier, these strategies are not primarily concerned with determining the policies the armed forces should follow in the face of specific threats, but rather with the operational construction requirements the security sector must meet in order to address the shortcomings that have weakened it in the past years. The importance of these strategies lies in the fact that merely rebuilding the organizational and legislative framework is insufficient.

There must also be clear strategies and work programs aimed at restructuring and rehabilitating the security forces in a manner consistent with the requirements of the next stage.

First: Accepting the duality of the traditional military structure and achieving gradual institutionalization

The period coinciding with the occupation of Iraqi territory by ISIS (2014-2017) witnessed harsh events that left many victims and led to the widespread destruction of infrastructure. However, this period also left clear imprints on the reshaping of the Iraqi military and security structure. Volunteers responded to the fatwa of jihad and were organized into a formation known as the "Popular Mobilization Forces" (PMF), which became a force parallel to the official traditional military structure. The Iraqi security forces regained confidence in their capabilities after the Popular Mobilization Forces joined the battlefield. During the military operations that took place in the occupied areas and cities between 2016 and 2017, the Iraqi security forces and the PMF were able to coordinate their activities under the supervision of the Iraqi government. At the beginning of the operations, the PMF units were responsible for securing the external borders of the front and surrounding the areas where terrorists were present, while the Iraqi security forces, especially the 16th Division of the Iraqi Army and the Counter-Terrorism Service, launched attacks on the cities, supported by airstrikes from the international coalition.[26] In those locations, the PMF units appeared to be subordinate to the regular army hierarchy.

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26 Erica Gaston, Iraq After Isil: Mosul, The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), August 21, 2017, At: https://bit.ly/3N19UPY

The regular forces in the security and military establishment have benefited greatly from the presence of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in developing their capabilities and boosting their combat morale. The integration of various factions into the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units during the summer of 2014 contributed to changing the nature of the battles fought by the regular forces against the terrorist organization, as the conflict shifted from defense to offense.

As the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) stated, "The Popular Mobilization Forces contributed significantly to repelling the advance of the Islamic State, whose insurgents were on the verge of forcing the collapse of the Iraqi army, trained by the United States."[27]

However, the results of the post-ISIS period showed that Iraq now has four main defense forces of varying sizes and capabilities: the Counter-Terrorism Service, the Iraqi Army, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Peshmerga Forces. This forced the government to develop flexible mechanisms to regulate the relationship between these formations on the one hand, and their relationship with the state on the other. Both the Iraqi Army and the Counter-Terrorism Service are typical formations, as they represent the conventional armed forces that most countries possess. In terms of numbers and manpower, the Iraqi Army is by far the largest of these four forces. In addition, its annual budget is the largest compared to the rest of the formations. For example, the budget allocated to the Ministry of Defense for the fiscal year 2023 amounted to more than "nine and a half" trillion Iraqi dinars.[28]

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27 Inna Rudolf, From Battlefield to Ballot: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2017, At: https://bit.ly/3N6JrAC

28 Law No. (13) of 2023: The Federal General Budget of the Republic of Iraq for the fiscal years (2023, 2024, 2025), Iraqi Gazette, Issue No. (4726) on June 26, 2023, at the link: https://bit.ly/3Bkwpwu

The Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) is a specialized military unit in Iraq, consisting of around 10,000 to 12,000 fighters. While it is smaller in size compared to the Iraqi Army, it has proven to be highly effective in counterterrorism operations, particularly in the fight against ISIS. The service is directly under the authority of the Prime Minister and has been a crucial component in Iraq's security efforts post-ISIS.[29]

Clearly, one of the most prominent dilemmas facing Iraq in managing and organizing the work of its forces is the multiplicity of centers of military power, as highlighted in the Security Sector Reform Strategy, which emphasizes the need to develop legislation that defines the tasks and responsibilities of different military formations. This multiplicity becomes problematic due to the ongoing political disagreements over the roles assigned to each of these forces, further complicated by the intricate relationships between political authority and military power. There is a perspective suggesting that the Iraqi government and its international partners should openly acknowledge that the monopoly of the traditional army and police over the use of force at the local level is neither feasible nor desirable at this time.[30] Such exclusive control by one entity may be perceived as a threat by others. To address this issue, the notion of a single center of coercive authority in Iraq must be abandoned, at least in the short to medium term. Instead, the diversity of military forces should be accepted, with the primary focus on institutionalizing the work of these formations as an essential step toward their eventual integration.

One compelling justification for this proposal is that the complex political environment and the prevailing mistrust among the various actors make it impossible to achieve meaningful military reform without accompanying political reform.

29 The Federal Budget Law for the fiscal year 2023 indicates that the number of employees in the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) exceeds 23,000 individuals, with a budget allocation of approximately 800 billion Iraqi dinars. see the previous source.
30 Sardar Aziz and Erwin Van Veen, a State with Four Armies: How to Deal with The Case of Iraq, War on the Rocks, November 11, 2019, At: https://bit.ly/3TM2ynb

Therefore, it is crucial to first accept the reality of multiple security force systems in Iraq and proceed with reforming the military sector based on this understanding. This can only be achieved through careful negotiation of roles and interests, alongside efforts to build mutual trust between the four main Iraqi military forces. This would lead to greater clarity regarding their respective roles and responsibilities, and ultimately to a more effective organization. While this approach would imply that Iraq will maintain a pluralistic security landscape for the foreseeable future, it should be viewed as a necessary transitional phase. During this phase, political reform should progress in tandem with military reform.

Second: Focus on the Counter-Terrorism Service

Michael Knights, a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, stated that while the Iraqi army and federal police have regained some public trust since the collapse in June 2014, when Mosul and several other cities fell to ISIS, two forces have consistently retained the trust of the Iraqi people throughout the war. These forces are the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), also known as the "Golden Division," and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU).[31] The CTS, in particular, is highly regarded for its performance in countering ISIS, making it one of the most trusted military entities in Iraq.

The Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) is an independent, sub-ministerial-level organization, separate from both the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior. Originally established with U.S. support, the CTS has a three-tiered organizational structure: the Counter-Terrorism Service Headquarters, the Counter-Terrorism Command, and three Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) brigades.

31 Michael Knights and Alex Mello, The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service and The Long War Against Militancy, War on The Rocks, July 19, 2017,
 At: https://bit.ly/4dpo1cE

The CTS Headquarters is responsible for providing strategy and policy, overseeing combat operations, and managing resources. It also serves as the primary liaison with the Iraqi government and controls the CTS budget. For the United States, the CTS is a vital component of its Middle East strategy, aimed at strengthening local capabilities to combat insurgents and terrorists.

In June 2010, the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) had 5,725 personnel, representing just 62% of its planned strength. Despite offering lucrative salaries, with CTS members earning more than their counterparts in the Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Interior, the service faced two major challenges in reaching its target recruitment numbers.

The first challenge was the source of recruits, while the second was the strict training standards required for service members. These rigorous standards[32] meant that few could meet the criteria, limiting the number of recruits. By 2013, however, the service had reached its peak strength of around 13,000 personnel.[33]

The total number of Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) personnel fluctuated significantly during the war against ISIS. By January 2015, the force had decreased from its peak of 13,000 recruits in 2013 to approximately 6,500 due to casualties. By January 2016, the force's numbers increased to around 10,500. In October 2016, when the CTS began the battle for Mosul, its strength was about 11,000. By December 2017, the force's strength was around 10,000[34], although some reports, like Michael Knights' in July 2017, indicated that the service's actual strength at the time was closer to 7,600.

32 David M. Witty, The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service, Center for Middle East Policy, Brooking Institute, March 2015, P 13, At: https://bit.ly/4dnXfkJ
33 Ibid.
34 David M. Witty, Iraq's Post - 2014: Counter Terrorism Services, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus (157), October 2018, P 22, At: https://bit.ly/4eEVm4c

Knights also noted that the service was supposed to have approximately 13,920 personnel that year, indicating that it was operating at only 54% of its intended strength due to significant human losses during the battle against ISIS.[35]

The Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) has faced sensitivities related to its ties with the United States, particularly in terms of training, equipment, and intelligence cooperation, which have sometimes created friction with other military organizations in Iraq. A prominent example of this occurred during the battle to liberate Mosul (2016–2017), where General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, the CTS field commander, gained significant media attention and was dubbed "the Rommel of Iraq" in reference to the famous German military commander Erwin Rommel and his tactical acumen.

This media spotlight led to rival security force leaders exerting political pressure to prevent al-Saadi from commanding the CTS in the subsequent battle for Tal Afar. As a result, Staff Lieutenant General Sami al-Aridi replaced him as the field commander for that operation.[36] This internal rivalry continued after the battle for Tal Afar, with al-Aridi eventually taking over the leadership of the CTS in September 2019, succeeding al-Saadi, who was transferred to the Command Directorate in the Ministry of Defense by Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. The change in leadership was one of the factors that contributed to the protests in Iraq in October 2019,[37] as it symbolized the ongoing conflict between the military and political factions in the country.

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35 Michael Knights and Alex Mello, The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Op.cit.
36 Who is the commander of counter-terrorism in Tal Afar, Buratha News Agency, August 20, 2017, at the following link: https://bit.ly/4dnXLzb
37 Walid Badran, Who is Abdul Wahab Al-Saadi who sparked controversy in Iraq, BBC Arabic website, October 3, 2019, at the following link: https://bbc.in/3ZJ2zw3

Such concerns are acknowledged by the military leadership of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which perceives the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) as a military formation with strong American ties and patronage. This perception is particularly reinforced by the fact that, in its 2018 budget proposal, the U.S. Department of Defense recommended increasing the CTS personnel to 20,000 recruits over the next three fiscal years.[38] The United States allocates millions of dollars annually in military aid to the CTS, in addition to the funding the service receives from the Iraqi government.

To achieve the goal of building a professional and sustainable force, Iraq must prioritize a unified national objective by setting aside political disputes and focusing on strengthening the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS). As a proven model for special operations, the CTS is vital in confronting terrorist threats. Iraq requires highly effective, specialized counter-terrorism forces supported by the most advanced intelligence capabilities from the international coalition. These forces are essential for pursuing ISIS elements in Iraq's desert regions, border areas, and remote hideouts.

Third: Intelligence and advisory cooperation

The international support Iraq received from the coalition played a significant role in rebuilding its armed forces, particularly from 2014 to 2020. During this period, the coalition trained approximately 225,000 personnel across various branches, including the army, police, air force, Peshmerga, and other forces. The training focused on countering ISIS, improving combat skills, detecting explosives and mines, and enhancing coordination between aviation units for airstrikes. It also included developing inspection techniques to find evidence and documents.

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38 Office of The Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense Budget: Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, May 2017, At: https://bit.ly/3ZMU7f5

As a result, the Iraqi security forces became better led, equipped, and trained, and their capabilities outmatched those of the remaining ISIS elements, according to Myles Caggins, a spokesperson for the international coalition.[39]

The successful experiences of international cooperation with Iraq highlight the significant benefits these partnerships bring to the fight against terrorism. However, this cooperation should extend beyond support and training alone. Iraq must also focus on developing a robust intelligence-sharing system with multiple countries, emphasizing not just the exchange of information but also the training and qualification of personnel working in this critical field.

Given the continuous evolution in intelligence technologies, methods, and strategies, it is crucial to stay ahead of emerging threats by adapting to changes and enhancing the skills and techniques used to verify information and evidence. This will enable Iraq to build a more effective and responsive intelligence community capable of tackling the evolving challenges posed by terrorism.

The fall of Mosul in 2014 to the Islamic State (ISIS) was, before it was a military setback, an intelligence failure. There was no real assessment of the seriousness of the situation, not only in terms of the attacking terrorist forces but also in terms of understanding the true capabilities of the army as the defensive force tasked with repelling these attacks.

39 International Coalition: Multiple axes in dialogue and the Popular Mobilization Forces partnership is essential, Iraqi News Agency, June 11, 2020, at the
 link: https://bit.ly/3ZMU0jF
Coalition members have also helped raise over (20) billion dollars in humanitarian and stabilization assistance to support the Iraqi and Syrian people, and have trained and equipped over (220) thousand security and police personnel to stabilize local communities: See: Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS foreign ministers' meeting: joint communiqué, 14 November 2019, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, The United Kingdom Government, November 15, 2019,
 At: https://bit.ly/4doRG5B

It is well known that bilateral relations with the countries of the international coalition represent a valuable source for exchanging intelligence regarding the tracking and monitoring of terrorist organizations' funds. This means that cooperation in the field of intelligence must place exceptional importance on the ways in which terrorist organizations use various financial tools to fund their activities.

Iraq could focus more on bilateral cooperation programs in the areas of military security preparation and training, which it has established with international bodies. NATO launched its mission in Iraq, at the official request of the government, under the name NMI in October 2018, with the aim of providing training, advice, and capacity-building efforts for the Iraqi security forces. In addition, the United Nations, through its various agencies, most notably the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), supported the Government of Iraq in refocusing its national security strategy around the concept of human security.

 Similarly, in 2017, the European Union launched the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Iraq to support the civilian aspects of security sector reform.[40] Although these military engagements have revived old tensions related to foreign presence, it is necessary to activate these partnerships within working contexts that preserve the concept of national sovereignty, with the aim of developing the security sector and preventing plans to expand advisory and training missions for foreign teams from clashing with local security dynamics.

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40 Irene Costantinia and Dylan O'Driscoll, Twenty Years of Externally Promoted Security Assistance in Iraq: Changing Approaches and Their Limits, International Peacekeeping Journal, Vol (30), No. (5), 2023, P 576.

Even as the Iraqi government and the United States continue to spar over the role of U.S. forces in training the army, it would be wise to reframe the relationship between the two parties on the basis of joint bilateral cooperation, supported by joint military committees that define the powers and duties of U.S. military missions within the framework of training and advice, all under government supervision.

Fourth: Reviewing Army Preparation Programs: Focus on Type, Not Size

When the United States withdrew at the end of 2011, it left behind an army and security forces in Iraq that numbered more than 700,000 individuals. However, these numbers faced a major setback in the face of the terrorist organization, which cast doubt on the military training and rehabilitation programs, as well as the money spent by the U.S. Army on equipment. These efforts failed to build a new army capable of maintaining security.[41] This highlighted the need to review these programs and adopt a gradual and steady approach, focusing primarily on building the army's will to fight, alongside developing its technical capabilities and operational skills.

Most countries in the world today are moving towards creating armies that are described as modern or contemporary, which are small in size and emphasize the role of technology. This reality does not negate the need for the human factor, which remains an important element in management, leadership, and organization. However, the strength of an army should not be measured by simply increasing the number of individuals. For example, China has a population of more than 1.4 billion people, but its army does not exceed 3.5 million individuals.[42]

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41 Ben Connable, Building Iraqi Army Will to Fight to Prevent Another Disaster, Lawfare Media, February 20, 2022, At: https://rb.gy/u2iaun
42 China Military Strength 2024, Global Firepower, At: https://rb.gy/6bwf7d

It is futile to adopt military policies or models that have proven to be ineffective. By this, we mean focusing on size instead of quality, a policy driven by chaotic conditions that forced many military and security leaders to prioritize size over quality and efficiency. This brings us to the fact that training and selecting disciplined personnel are two key factors in achieving military efficiency for the army. Additionally, the ability to prepare an army of a certain size facilitates the process of building military doctrine and developing combat morale. Ben Connable of the Atlantic Council discussed and analyzed one of the worst American efforts in the field of military cooperation—the efforts to train the Iraqi army since 2003—and described the core issue as one of brittleness: where forces simply collapse when exposed to a strong blow because they were not properly prepared.[43] This underscores the need to seriously reconsider military training and qualification programs on the one hand and to focus on building specialized units on the other.

The process of preparing and establishing the Counter-Terrorism Service can be seen as a success story that demonstrates the efficiency of a small but highly trained force. For many years, the number of personnel in the service did not exceed around 13,000 individuals. In comparison, the Iraqi army, along with the federal police forces and the local police present in Mosul at the time of its fall to ISIS, formed a combat force of more than 50,000 individuals. However, this larger force was unable to repel the terrorist organization's attack. The small size of the Counter-Terrorism Service means that it uses strict criteria similar to those employed to recruit special operations forces, particularly in terms of selection and training.

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43 Ben Connable, Building Iraqi Army Will to Fight to Prevent Another Disaster, Lawfare Media, February 20, 2022, At: https://goo.su/UcEBIKm

A notable example is a training program in May 2008, where only 401 individuals out of 2,200 candidates succeeded in passing and graduating as soldiers, equivalent to 18% of the total applicants.[44] These harsh standards have proven effective in terms of combat capability and operational efficiency. Moreover, the small size of the force has fostered a strong spirit of teamwork.

At the level of the security forces, it is imperative to rehabilitate them in a more precise and controlled manner, prioritizing quality over quantity. The focus on quality, while essential for the army, is perhaps even more urgent for the forces responsible for maintaining security, internal order, and law enforcement.

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44 Michael Knights and Alex Mello, The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service and The Long War Against Militancy, Op.Cit.

Conclusion:

After the end of the war on ISIS in 2017, reforming the military-security sector in Iraq became necessary to meet its requirements and conditions. The idea of reform was driven by two main factors: The first was the fall of three governorates into the hands of the extremist organization, the causes of which could not be ignored, nor could the factors that led to it under any circumstances. Therefore, once it was determined that the state of fragmentation within the military institution was a major reason for this collapse, it became crucial to overcome these negatives and correct the flaws that had distorted the institution. The second factor was the emergence of the Popular Mobilization Forces as one of the military authority structures, which must be integrated into the chain of command. As a result, one of the government's priorities within its reform program was to define the role of this new entity within the structure of military relations.

Although these variables strongly pushed for the necessity of starting the reform process, the complexity of the political and security circumstances after ISIS made it neither easy nor smooth, especially after regional and international factors intervened in an attempt to build a new security structure in Iraq. Previous governments (those of Abadi and Abdul Mahdi) made attempts to reform the security sector, but these were limited to facilitating the integration of the Popular Mobilization Forces into the military structure and preserving its independence. However, these attempts did not go far enough to restructure the forces clearly or to establish new controls. There were also insufficient efforts to address the number of forces, their training programs, and the nature of their connection to policies.

The reform process is still at a standstill and lacks many clear features. One factor that has increased the complexity of the reform process is its division among various groups. The international coalition undertook the task of reforming the Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, facing some obstacles in this experience, while the reform process within the federal security forces has come to a halt. Additionally, the presence of international coalition forces, particularly the American forces, initially playing combat roles and later shifting to advisory roles, has been a source of turmoil and tension in the relationship between the United States and Iraq. This has necessitated prioritizing the management of this complex relationship over the issue of following up on security reform.

The government of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has outlined its security sector reform program over an eight-year timeframe (2024-2032). While the timeframe suggests a degree of seriousness, reflecting a commitment to adopting a diligent program and gradual steps for implementing reform, the lack of disclosed details and policies makes it difficult at this stage to evaluate the program's potential for success.

For an Active state
and a participating society