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Iraq - A Year After the Withdrawal of International Forces

Iraq's security forces have managed to maintain a degree of stability since American combat troops left the country, writes Alex Mackenzie. He reminds us, however, that Baghdad's security problems are far from over. A growing sectarian divide and political unrest in Syria are just two of them.

By Alex MacKenzie for ISN

The United States' nine year occupation of Iraq came to an end on the 18th December 2011. Since then, Iraq's 700,000 strong security forces have been primarily responsible for securing the state and safeguarding its fragile democratic institutions. But just how effective have they been in maintaining order in the year since the withdrawal of international forces? Statistics suggest that Iraq's security forces have been partially successful in maintaining a degree of stability. However, the country nevertheless remains in a fragile condition and needs to overcome many challenges before it can claim to be a safe and truly democratic state. For instance, tensions between Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities continue to grow amid concerns that the current political leadership is marginalizing the Sunni minority. In addition, there are also mounting worries that the conflict in Syria may further complicate Iraq's already precarious security situation. There are also concerns that some of the terrorist groups that blighted the early years of the United States' occupation of Iraq are regaining lost ground.

Current 'State'

American troops left behind them an emerging political crisis between the parties in the coalition government, and Sunni discontent with the politics of Iraq was growing. With the Americans gone, there was widespread concern that [Iranian influence](#) would continue to spread throughout the country. Furthermore, at the time of the US withdrawal, it was estimated that 350 people were dying every month as a result of the continuing violence.

In 2011 alone, [4,136 Iraqi civilians](#) were victims of communal violence and political unrest. But while this figure had increased to [4,380 civilians](#) towards the end of 2012, this comparatively modest rise nevertheless suggests that Iraqi security forces have been able to maintain a level of stability over the past year.

At the same time, concern has grown that the Iraqi Prime Minister [Nouri al-Maliki](#) is showing authoritarian tendencies. In September, for example, he issued an arrest warrant for the Sunni Deputy Vice-President, [Tareq al-Hashimi](#), who was accused of having links to terrorism (which he

denies). This was viewed by some as al-Maliki attempting to rid the government of senior Sunni politicians. His control of the Iraqi military is perhaps of greatest concern: he personally handpicked many of the commanders, resulting in the Iraqi special operations forces being described as a 'praetorian guard' (dubbed 'Fedayeen al-Maliki'). It is also speculated that al-Maliki has used the armed forces to depose of his political rivals. In short, [fears are growing](#) that Iraq may come to resemble Vladimir Putin's Russia: a state in which the tools of democracy are allegedly used for the maintenance of power at all costs.

Tensions also continue to mount between the majority Shia and Sunni minorities of Iraq. Indeed, these have been growing ever since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein provided opportunities for Iraq's Shias to dominate the country's domestic politics. Since then, Iraq's Sunni minority has staged a number of [protests](#) opposing what they believe to be attempts by the Shia-led government to marginalize them from mainstream politics.

Finally, there are a number of regional and international problems that may influence Iraq's stability in the not too distant future. These undoubtedly include the civil war raging in Syria, where [the Sunni majority is attempting to topple a Shia government](#) backed by Iran.

In short, Iraq faces many domestic and international challenges to its future. There are clear fault-lines between the country's Sunni and Shia communities, and although this has not yet resulted in real sectarian conflict, rising ethnic and cultural tensions may prove to be the greatest threat to Iraq's future security.

Terrorism and Insurgency

During the occupation of Iraq, terrorist and insurgent groups eventually lost ground and were beaten back by American and Iraqi forces. The US [negotiated with certain Iraqi tribes](#) (a movement known as the Awakening), who then aided the Americans by helping to fight al Qaeda in Iraq. This allowed American forces to focus on combating violence in and around Baghdad, while al Qaeda was, to some extent, driven back by tribes who could no longer tolerate the excesses of terrorist organizations. However, with American forces gone and a deteriorating political situation, there are signs that terrorist groups may be gaining in ground and popularity, in part due to the declining fortunes of Iraq's Sunni minority.

While civilian casualties do not appear to have grown significantly since the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the country nevertheless experienced a [dramatic 'surge' in terrorist violence](#) during July 2012. In one day alone, more than [107 Iraqis were killed in attacks](#) coordinated by the Islamic State of Iraq, an al Qaida affiliate.

There are also suggestions that terrorist groups that lost ground during the US occupation are starting to re-assert themselves and gain back territory. In July 2012, for example, [the leader of al Qaeda's offshoot in Iraq](#) stated that the militant network was returning to strongholds lost during the American occupation.

But while such statements are largely propaganda, they should not be ignored, especially because many terrorists that were once active in Iraq have [crossed over to Syria](#) to help combat Bashar al Assad's government. In the longer term, if al Assad is deposed, it is likely that Syria would move towards its Sunni allies and away from the predominantly Shia Iraq.

As a result, the civil war currently raging on Iraq's doorstep may also contribute to greater destabilization. Communal violence in Iraq may escalate in 2013, with internal friction between the Sunnis and Shias becoming ever more prevalent, especially if al-Maliki continues to be seen as being

authoritarian and responsible for marginalizing the Sunni minority.

Maintaining an Outside Presence

Under the terms of the November 2008 US-Iraq Security Agreement, the US was to drawdown the number of combat troops it maintained in Iraq, leaving a residual force of 50,000 for the training of Iraqi forces. Yet, with the deadline for withdrawal rapidly approaching, attacks remained stubbornly high and the Iraqi security forces were perceived as suffering from a number of deficiencies. This prompted Washington to consider renegotiating the US-Iraq Security Agreement in order to continue the US presence past the original withdrawal date. However, a number of domestic and political factors prevented the US from maintaining its training presence past December 2011, a decision which attracted criticism in both Washington and Baghdad.

However, the series of attacks in July not only shook the Iraqi leadership's confidence in the country's security forces, it also reinforced the importance of security co-operation with the United States. Accordingly, in December 2012, both sides agreed to a five year Memorandum of Understanding which identified a number of areas for enhanced security cooperation. Yet, Iraq has also sought to diversify its sources of arms and military hardware. On 8 October 2012, for example, Iraq signed a \$4.2 billion agreement with Russia to purchase helicopter gunships and air defense missiles. However, Baghdad is currently reviewing the agreement in light of allegations of corruption.

Indeed, the uncertainty surrounding the Russian arms deal further reflects that Iraq's political and security environment remains highly volatile, with tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities perhaps providing the greatest threat to stability. Such tensions are likely to persist as long as the Sunnis continue to feel marginalized by the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that Iraq's security has not deteriorated as far as some worst-case scenarios had predicted. However, Iraq has a long way to go before it can be considered a stable country. This is likely to take many years, if it happens at all.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Mission Iraq: State and DOD Face Challenges in Finalizing Support and Security Capabilities](#)
[Iraq After the US Withdrawal: Staring into the Abyss](#)
[To Iraq and Back: The Withdrawal of the US Forces](#)

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