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## Why American Efforts to Create Foreign Armies Fail

**For a foreign occupying force to create a unified and effective army from a disunified and disaffected populace was (and remains) a fool's errand.**

William Astore  
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Security forces in Iraq. (AP photo)

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In June, tens of thousands of Iraqi Security Forces in Nineveh province north of Baghdad collapsed in the face of attacks from the militants of the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), abandoning four major cities to that extremist movement. The collapse drew much notice in our media, but not much in the way of sustained analysis of the American role in it. To put it bluntly, when confronting IS and its band of lightly armed irregulars, a reputedly professional military,

American-trained and -armed, discarded its weapons and equipment, cast its uniforms aside and melted back into the populace. What this behavior couldn't have made clearer was that US efforts to create a new Iraqi army, much-touted and funded to the tune of \$25 billion over the ten years of the American occupation (\$60 billion if you include other reconstruction costs), had failed miserably.

Though reasonable analyses of the factors behind that collapse exist, an investigation of why US efforts to create a viable Iraqi army (and, by extension, viable security forces in Afghanistan) cratered so badly are lacking. To understand what really happened, a little history lesson is in order. You'd need to start in May 2003 with the decision of L. Paul Bremer III, America's proconsul in occupied Iraq and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), to disband the battle-hardened Iraqi military. The Bush administration considered it far too tainted by Saddam Hussein and his Baathist Party to be a trustworthy force.

Instead, Bremer and his team vowed to create a new Iraqi military from scratch. According to *Washington Post* reporter Tom Ricks in his bestselling book *Fiasco*, that force was initially conceived as a small constabulary of 30,000–40,000 men (with no air force at all, or rather with the US Air Force for backing in a country US officials expected to garrison for decades). Its main job would be to secure the country's borders without posing a threat to Iraq's neighbors or, it should be added, to US interests.

Bremer's decision essentially threw 400,000 Iraqis with military training, including a full officer corps, out onto the streets of its cities, jobless. It was a formula for creating an insurgency. Humiliated and embittered, some of those men would later join various resistance groups operating against the American military. More than a few of them later found their way into the ranks of ISIS, including at the highest levels of leadership. (The most notorious of these is Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a former general in Saddam's army who was featured as the King of Clubs in the Bush administration's deck of cards of Iraq's most wanted figures. Al-Douri is now reportedly helping to coordinate IS attacks.)

IS has fought with considerable effectiveness, quickly turning captured American and Syrian weaponry, including artillery pieces, Humvees and even a helicopter, on their enemies. Despite years of work by US military advisers and all those billions of dollars invested in training and equipment, the Iraqi army has not fought well, or often at all. Nor, it seems, will it be ready to do so in the immediate future. Retired Marine Corps General John R. Allen, who played a key role in organizing, arming and paying off Sunni tribal groups in Iraq the last time around during the "Anbar Awakening," and who has been charged by President Obama with "coordinating" the latest American-led coalition to save Iraq, has already gone on record on the subject. By his calculations, even with extensive US air support and fresh infusions of American advisers and

equipment, it will take up to a year before that army is capable of launching a campaign to retake Mosul, the country's second largest city.

What went wrong? The US Army believes in putting the “bottom line up front,” so much so that they have even turned the phrase into an acronym: BLUF. The bottom line here is that, when it comes to military effectiveness, what ultimately matters is whether an army—any army—possesses spirit. Call it fire in the belly, a willingness to take the fight to the enemy. The Islamic State's militants, at least for the moment, clearly have that will; Iraqi security forces, painstakingly trained and lavishly underwritten by the US government, do not.

This represents a failure of the first order. So here's the \$60 billion question: Why did such sustained US efforts bear such bitter fruit? The simple answer: for a foreign occupying force to create a unified and effective army from a disunified and disaffected populace was (and remains) a fool's errand. In reality, US intervention, now as then, will serve only to aggravate that disunity, no matter what new Anbar Awakenings are attempted.

Upon Saddam's overthrow in 2003 and the predictable power vacuum that followed, score-settling ethno-religious factions clashed in what, in the end, was little short of civil war. In the meantime, both Sunni and Shia insurgencies arose to fight the American occupiers. Misguided decisions by Bremer's CPA only made matters worse. Deep political divisions in Iraq fed those insurgencies, which targeted American troops as a foreign presence. In response, the US military sought to pacify the insurgents, while simultaneously expanding the Iraqi constabulary. In military parlance, it began to “stand up” what would become massive security forces. These were expected to restore a semblance of calm, even as they provided cover for US troops to withdraw ever so gradually from combat roles.

It all sounded so reasonable and achievable that the near-impossibility of the task eluded the Americans involved. To understand why the situation was so hopeless, try this thought experiment. Imagine that it is March 1861 in the United States. Elected by a minority of Americans, Abraham Lincoln is deeply distrusted by Southern secessionists who seek a separatist set of confederated states to protect their interests. Imagine at that moment that a foreign empire intervened, replacing Lincoln with a more tractable leader while disbanding the federal army along with state militias due to their supposed untrustworthiness and standing up its own forces, ones intended to pacify a people headed toward violent civil war. Imagine the odds of “success”; imagine the unending chaos that would have followed.

If this scenario seems farfetched, so, too, was the American military mission in Iraq. Not surprisingly, in such a speculative and risky enterprise, the resulting security forces came to be the equivalent of so many junk bonds. And when the margin call came, the only thing left was hollow legions.

## A Kleptocratic State Produces a Kleptocratic Military

In the military, it's called an "after action report" or a "hotwash"—a review, that is, of what went wrong and what can be learned, so the same mistakes are not repeated. When it comes to America's Iraq training mission, four lessons should top any "hotwash" list:

1. Military training, no matter how intensive, and weaponry, no matter how sophisticated and powerful, is no substitute for belief in a cause. Such belief nurtures cohesion and feeds fighting spirit. ISIS has fought with conviction. The expensively trained and equipped Iraqi army hasn't. The latter lacks a compelling cause held in common. This is not to suggest that ISIS has a cause that's pure or just. Indeed, it appears to be a complex *mélange* of religious fundamentalism, sectarian revenge, political ambition and old-fashioned opportunism (including loot, plain and simple). But so far the combination has proven compelling to its fighters, while Iraq's security forces appear centered on little more than self-preservation.

2. Military training alone cannot produce loyalty to a dysfunctional and disunified government incapable of running the country effectively, which is a reasonable description of Iraq's sectarian Shia government. So it should be no surprise that, as Andrew Bacevich has noted, its security forces won't obey orders. Unlike Tennyson's six hundred, the Iraqi army is unready to ride into any valley of death on orders from Baghdad. Of course, this problem might be solved through the formation of an Iraqi government that fairly represented all major parties in Iraqi society, not just the Shia majority. But that seems an unlikely possibility at this point. In the meantime, one solution the situation doesn't call for is more US airpower, weapons, advisers and training. That's already been tried—and it failed.

3. A corrupt and kleptocratic government produces a corrupt and kleptocratic army. On Transparency International's 2013 corruption perceptions index, Iraq came in 171 among the 177 countries surveyed. And that rot can't be overcome by American "can-do" military training, then or now. In fact, Iraqi security forces mirror the kleptocracy they serve, often existing largely on paper. For example, prior to the June ISIS offensive, as Patrick Cockburn has noted, the security forces in and around Mosul had a paper strength of 60,000, but only an estimated 20,000 of them were actually available for battle. As Cockburn writes, "A common source of additional income for officers is for soldiers to kickback half their salaries to their officers in return for staying at home or doing another job."

When he asked a recently retired general why the country's military pancaked in June, Cockburn got this answer:

"'Corruption! Corruption! Corruption!' [the general] replied: pervasive corruption had turned the [Iraqi] army into a racket and an investment opportunity in which every officer had to pay for his post. He said the opportunity to make big money in the Iraqi army goes back to the US advisers

who set it up ten years ago. The Americans insisted that food and other supplies should be outsourced to private businesses: this meant immense opportunities for graft. A battalion might have a nominal strength of six hundred men and its commanding officer would receive money from the budget to pay for their food, but in fact there were only two hundred men in the barracks so he could pocket the difference. In some cases there were ‘ghost battalions’ that didn’t exist at all but were being paid for just the same.”

Only in fantasies like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* do ghost battalions make a difference on the battlefield. Systemic graft and rampant corruption can be papered over in parliament, but not when bullets fly and blood flows, as events in June proved.

Such corruption is hardly new (or news). Back in 2005, in his article “Why Iraq Has No Army,” James Fallows noted that Iraqi weapons contracts valued at \$1.3 billion shed \$500 million for “payoffs, kickbacks and fraud.” In the same year, Eliot Weinberger, writing in the *London Review of Books*, cited Sabah Hadum, spokesman for the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, as admitting, “We are paying about 135,000 [troop salaries], but that does not necessarily mean that 135,000 are actually working.” Already Weinberger saw evidence of up to 50,000 “ghost soldiers” or “invented names whose pay is collected by [Iraqi] officers or bureaucrats.” US government hype to the contrary, little changed between initial training efforts in 2005 and the present day, as Kelley Vlahos noted recently in her article “The Iraqi Army Never Was.”

4. American ignorance of Iraqi culture and a widespread contempt for Iraqis compromised training results. Such ignorance was reflected in the commonplace use by US troops of the term “hajji,” an honorific reserved for those who have made the journey (or hajj) to Mecca, for any Iraqi male; contempt in the use of terms such as “raghead,” in indiscriminate firing and overly aggressive behavior and, most notoriously, in the events at Abu Ghraib prison. As Douglas Macgregor, a retired Army colonel, noted in December 2004, American generals and politicians “did not think through the consequences of compelling American soldiers with no knowledge of Arabic or Arab culture to implement intrusive measures inside an Islamic society. We arrested people in front of their families, dragging them away in handcuffs with bags over their heads, and then provided no information to the families of those we incarcerated. In the end, our soldiers killed, maimed and incarcerated thousands of Arabs, 90 percent of whom were not the enemy. But they are now.”

Sharing that contempt was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who chose a metaphor of parent and child, teacher and neophyte, to describe the “progress” of the occupation. He spoke condescendingly of the need to take the “training wheels” off the Iraqi bike of state and let Iraqis pedal for themselves. A decade later, General Allen exhibited a similarly paternalistic attitude in an article he wrote calling for the destruction of the Islamic State. For him, the people of Iraq are “poor benighted” souls, who can nonetheless serve American power adequately as “boots on the

ground.” In translation that means they can soak up bullets and become casualties, while the United States provides advice and air support. In the general’s vision—which had *déjà vu all over again* scrawled across it—US advisers were to “orchestrate” future attacks on IS, while Iraq’s security forces learned how to obediently follow their American conductors.

The commonplace mixture of smugness and paternalism Allen revealed hardly bodes well for future operations against the Islamic State.

### **What Next?**

The grim wisdom of Private Hudson in the movie *Aliens* comes to mind: “Let’s just bug out and call it ‘even,’ OK? What are we talking about this for?”

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Unfortunately, no one in the Obama administration is entertaining such sentiments at the moment, despite the fact that ISIS does not actually represent a clear and present danger to the “homeland.” The bugging-out option has, in fact, been tested and proven in Vietnam. After 1973, the United States finally walked away from its disastrous war there and, in 1975, South Vietnam fell to the enemy. It was messy and represented a genuine defeat—but no less so than if the US military had intervened yet again in 1975 to “save” its South Vietnamese allies with more weaponry, money, troops and carpet bombing. Since then, the Vietnamese have somehow managed to chart their own course without any of the above and almost forty years later, the United States and Vietnam find themselves informally allied against China.

To many Americans, IS appears to be the latest Islamic version of the old communist threat—a bad crew who must be hunted down and destroyed. This, of course, is something the United States tried in the region first against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and again in 2003, then against various Sunni and Shiite insurgencies, and now against the Islamic State. Given the paradigm—a threat to our way of life—pulling out is never an option, even though it would remove the “American Satan” card from the IS propaganda deck. To pull out means to leave behind much bloodshed and many grim acts. Harsh, I know, but is it any harsher than incessant American-led bombing, the commitment of more American “advisers” and money and weapons, and yet more American generals posturing as the conductors of Iraqi affairs? With, of course, the usual results.

One thing is clear: the foreign armies that the United States invests so much money, time and effort in training and equipping don’t act as if America’s enemies are their enemies. Contrary to the behavior predicted by Donald Rumsfeld, when the US removes those “training wheels” from its client militaries, they pedal furiously (when they pedal at all) in directions wholly unexpected by and often undesirable to, their American paymasters.

And if that's not a clear sign of the failure of US foreign policy, I don't know what is.