# Projecting stability in practice?
# NATO's new training mission in Iraq

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Since the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the notion of projecting stability has made a return to NATO's policy discourse. A central tenet of this agenda is the idea of securing the Alliance by stabilizing its periphery: "If our neighbours are more stable, we are more secure", says the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. At the core of this approach is therefore an attempt at shaping the security environment in NATO's neighbourhood, relying to a significant extent on partnership with individual countries and other international organizations.

But how does projecting stability work in practice? Can NATO develop a type of small-footprint, large-effect interaction with partners in its periphery? How can potential interest asymmetries between NATO and partners be addressed in this context?

The new NATO training mission in Iraq, formally announced at the 2018 Brussels Summit, is an important test case. Drawing on experiences from the first NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I), as well as security force assistance more generally, what are the challenges the NMI is likely to face? And beyond the specific case of Iraq, what are the larger implications for NATO's ap-

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proach to the Strategic Direction South under the headline of projecting stability?

## NATO returns to Iraq

NATO's partnership with Iraq is rather new. Up to the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein following the US-led invasion, the country did not have formal relations with NATO. When Iraq asked for assistance from the Alliance in June 2004, this request revived some of the bitter political divisions among Allies with respect to the American operation. In particular, France and Germany voiced concerns about a potential NATO mission in Iraq and about the plan to put this mission under US operational command. These divisions were only overcome in September 2004 and the first NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) finally took up its activities in February 2005. Under the umbrella of NTM-I, NATO trained about 15,000 Iraqi officers up to the conclusion of the mission in 2011.

*Control over the Iraqi security sector is only partially in the hands of the state*

NATO's partnership with Iraq has since developed in several stages. Following the initial training effort – largely in support of the parallel and much larger US mission – Iraq was granted formal partner status as a Partner across the Globe (PatG) in 2011 and an Individual Partnership Cooperation Program (IPCP) was signed in 2012. In July 2015, a Defense and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) package was announced, leading to the first out-of-country training of Iraqi officers in Jordan as of April 2016. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit it was decided to extend this training effort to in-country training and a team of NATO military

and civilian personnel was posted to Baghdad in January 2017 to coordinate training activities, while mobile training teams were dispatched throughout the country to deliver tailored assistance.

The current NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) was finally formally announced in July 2018 at the Brussels Summit. To be led by Canadian Major-General Dany Fortin, this non-combat mission will provide technical advice to Iraqi defence and security officials. The mission will comprise 580 personnel, 250 of whom will be provided by Canada, and will cooperate mainly with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA), as well as professional military education institutions.[1]

The mission is significant for a number of reasons. Coming in the context of renewed emphasis on projecting stability, this new effort can be seen as a test of the extent to which NATO will be able to employ the tools of the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) initiative in pursuit of the wider projecting stability agenda. If successful, it could serve as a blueprint for similar potential missions elsewhere, most notably in Libya.

## Security force assistance as a principal-agent problem

Programs of security force assistance often suffer from what one recent study has called a 'small footprint, small payoff' problem.[2] In general, security force assistance is a mechanism by which one actor attempts to outsource responsibility for the provision of security to another. The United States and NATO train and assist Afghan forces, with the ultimate aim of being able to withdraw from the country once the conditions permit; the European Union and Italy train the Libyan coastguard in order to enable the Libyan government to control and contain irregular migration. Both parties to such relationships have specific interests and the degree to which these interests converge is an important condition for the success of assistance initiatives.

NATO's efforts in Iraq are no different. Ultimately, NMI aims to "help Iraq eradicate terrorism and increase the long-term stability of Iraq and the region" by "building more effective and sustainable defence and security related structures, increasing the professionalism of the Iraqi forces and helping them to fight terrorism, improve security, and prevent the re-emergence of ISIS/ Daesh."[3] The Alliance thus hopes to secure its own interest in greater political stability in the region by way of intensified cooperation with Iraq as a Partner. This arguably models one key ingredient of the projecting stability agenda.

NATO's training efforts in Iraq and security force assistance programs in general can be thought of as a specific case of a principal-agent relation. A principal – the provider of security force assistance, NATO in the case of NMI – pursues specific interests by supporting an agent – the recipient of security force assistance, in our case the government of Iraq, or specific actors in the Iraqi security sector. Principal-agent theory, a body of theory first developed in economics, suggests that such relationships can be fraught with problems, especially if the interests of principal and agent do not fully align. Principals might invest significant political and financial capital in an assistance program, yet they might not reap the corresponding benefits because agents pursue their own interests.

The problem of interest asymmetry between a principal and an agent can, in theory, be overcome if the principal is able to monitor the behavior of the agent and can impose sanctions should this behavior divert from the agreed-upon course of action. In the specific context of security force assistance, however, principals' monitoring capacities are weakened by concerns of national security and sovereignty, significantly limiting the extent to which assistance providers are in control of the process.

These concerns are of more than academic interest. NATO's approach to partnership with Iraq (and with other countries in the South and beyond) relies on the idea that promoting the capacity of security sectors will contribute to political stability and therefore to Alliance security. This reading presupposes a high degree of interest alignment between the Alliance and the recipients of capacity building. Whether such an alignment actually exists, however, is an open question.

1   "Canadian Major-General Fortin named head of NATO training mission in Iraq", *The Defense Post*, 22 August 2018.

2   S. Biddle *et al.*, "Small footprint, small payoff: the military effectiveness of security force assistance", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(1-2), 2018.

3   "NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)", NATO Factsheet.

## Security sector governance and paramilitary groups

Two points are likely to be crucial to the success of NMI: one is the type of security sector governance and the form of political control over the security sector; the other is the related issue of inclusiveness, especially with regard to renegotiating the position of paramilitary groups. NMI should therefore be supported by a clear vision of what an effective and accountable Iraqi security sector under civilian political control would look like.

The first NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) trained around 15,000 Iraqi officers between 2005 and 2011. Following the dissolution of the Ba'athist army by the US Coalition Provisional Authority in May 2003, NTM-I focused on addressing the shortage of trained officers within the context of a larger US Training and Assistance Mission.

Assessments of this training effort are mixed. Rebuilding an entire military from scratch is no easy task to begin with, and the achievements of both the US-led efforts and the complementary NATO Training Mission are to be assessed against this background. Nevertheless, two specific criticisms persist: a preference for quantity over quality, possibly stemming at least in part from political pressure to deliver; and the failure to address larger issues of security sector governance – in particular the issue of inclusiveness. Both factors are likely to have contributed to the lack of cohesion shown by the Iraqi security forces when confronted with the advances of the Islamic State (or Daesh) in 2014, with reports suggesting that the Iraqi military lost as much as one fifth of its initial manpower due to desertions in the early period of expansion by the Islamic State.[4]

One effect of the partial disintegration of the Iraqi military in the face of the Daesh offensive in 2014 was the growing importance of paramilitary forces – in particular the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi), but also Kurdish Peshmerga groups. The term Hashd al-Shaabi refers to a variety of paramilitary groups set up by Shia politicians in an attempt to counter Daesh. With the recent military defeat of Daesh, different leaders within the Hashd moved (back) into the political arena, winning some seats in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. Others have begun to expand into economic activities. Peshmerga groups, in turn, have profited from external assistance from different members of the Global Coalition against Daesh.

From a formal perspective, the Hashd were given legal status by the Iraqi parliament in November 2016, and Law 40 of 2016 places them under the National Security Council (NSC) and declares them "an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief."[5] In practice, however, Hashd leaders have sought to combine recognition by the state with a degree of political independence.

This has important implications for the issue of security sector governance. To begin with, control over the Iraqi security sector is only partially in the hands of the state – even after the formal recognition of the Hashd. As long as the number of men under arms controlled by a given actor determines the extent of political influence, an accountable and transparent security sector is hard to achieve. Under the current circumstances, control over parts of the security sector is a source of political influence – rather than the other way around, with different militias affiliated with different Shia or Kurdish political factions. Finding a political formula acceptable to all major actors is therefore a precondition for effective political control.

For NMI, these considerations matter on a more practical level as well. One of NMI's main cooperation partners in Iraq is the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA), a body reporting to the National Security Council and which formally controls the Hashd. Furthermore, several NATO member countries have cooperated with Peshmerga forces. In fact, until his dismissal in August 2018, Falih al-Fayyadh combined the positions of head of the Hashd and National Security Advisor. His sacking by former Prime Minister al-Abadi – which engendered protest from Iran – must be seen as part of an ongoing tug of war over the future role of the Hashd in the Iraqi security sector. Under Law 40, the Hashd are formally subordinate to the Prime Minister in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief, with the chain of command running through the NSC and the ONSA, thus bypassing the Ministry of Defense.

The variety of different groups represented

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4   "18 things about ISIS you need to know", edited by Zack Beauchamp, *Vox*, www.vox.com/cards

5   Quoted in International Crisis Group, "Iraq's paramilitary groups: the challenge of rebuilding a functioning state", *Middle East Report* No. 188/6, 2018.

among the Hashd further complicates the issue. Some groups have a pro-Iranian agenda and even maintain strong ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRCG) of Iran and Iranian foreign intelligence. Some observers have therefore gone as far as suggesting that training Iraqi security forces means "training an IRGC Quds Force proxy."[6] While this assessment does not take into account the actual diversity of political allegiances represented in the Hashd, it serves as a useful reminder that the agendas of some actors in the Iraqi security sector might not be particularly well aligned with those of the Alliance.

It would be a mistake to see the entire Hashd as an Iranian proxy, however. Groups associated with Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani prioritize the defense

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of Shia places of worship and have signaled their willingness to disband or be integrated into the formal military. Others follow Shia power-broker Muqtada al-Sadr who has been critical of Iran and has followed his own agenda. Moreover, the Shia political scene is also divided on the issue of paramilitary groups with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki advocating wide-ranging autonomy while Muqtada al-Sadr calls for the dissolution of the militias.[7]

Given this context, it will be important to watch which of these tendencies will be in control of security-related positions under the government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, newly appointed in October 2018.

This complex landscape has two main implications. First, in order for NMI's training efforts to be sustainable, larger issues of security sector governance need to be addressed at the political level. NATO should use what influence they have to push for a pragmatic accommodation. Absent such a political accord, training and reform efforts are likely to be undermined by the continuing politicization of the security sector in a manner reminiscent of the fate of NTM-I. Second, given the multiplicity of groups in the Iraqi security sector, understanding the precise agendas of specific actors is key. NMI should therefore develop a strategy for choosing cooperation partners based on a larger vision of a reformed Iraqi security sector.

## Projecting stability through training?

Reflecting on the US experience with security force assistance in a 2010 speech, then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued that the US was more successful when it came to training and equipping partners, than with "building the institutional capacity […] needed to sustain security over the long term."[8] This observation is crucial and points to the challenges the newly-established training mission in Iraq and NATO's larger projecting stability agenda are likely to face.

While NATO has substantial experience with the technical aspects of capacity building, getting security sector governance right is crucial. Experience from NTM-I and other training missions suggests that progress in capacity building can hardly be sustained if security sectors are politicized or otherwise governed poorly. In Iraq and elsewhere, building partner capacity in the interest of projecting stability will only succeed if the overall political context is supportive. If this is not the case or it is shaky, then what NATO can achieve is unlikely to go beyond technical capacity building, thus limiting the extent to which such efforts can contribute to larger strategic objectives.

6   J. Hammond, "NATO training mission faces challenges in Iraq", *Al-Monitor*, 30 August 2018.

7   R. Mansour and F. A. Jabar, "The popular mobilization forces and Iraq's future", Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017.

8   Speech by Secretary of Defense R. M. Gates, The Nixon Center, Washington, D.C., 24 February 2010.