BEN CONNABLE

AN ENDURING AMERICAN COMMITMENT IN IRAQ

SHAPING A LONG-TERM STRATEGY WITH IRAQI ARMY PARTNERS

RAND
CORPORATION

Contents

Executive Summary

A clear-eyed look at the current situation in Iraq suggests that early 2020 could represent a turning point for U.S. policy. Recent events have rendered the future of U.S. military forces' presence in Iraq uncertain. Iran, Russia, and China are competing for influence in Iraq's economic, political, and security sectors. Setbacks in Iraq-U.S. relations should be viewed in the larger regional and global context: American interests will suffer if strategic competition in Iraq is abandoned. American policymakers should pursue a full and enduring commitment to Iraq before fleeting opportunities are lost.

The best way to establish that commitment is through robust, long-term, small-footprint assistance to the Iraqi Army.

Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) currently stands as the country's most competent and respected military organization. Iraq's regular army is relatively less effective and less reliable than CTS. Given the regular army's performance in 2014, when it collapsed in the face of irregular militia forces, some might question its future reliability. Weighting assistance to special forces is an appealing option. But four key factors favor weighting support to the Iraqi Army:

- **Generating military mass.** As of late 2019, the elite CTS fields approximately 10,000 soldiers. Direct U.S. support to CTS should continue apace; this is *not* a call to cut support to CTS. But this small, albeit elite, force cannot hope to secure the nearly 440,000 square kilometers of Iraq's interior, its nearly 4,000-kilometer border, or its nearly 40 million people. Iraq needs dependable military mass to prevent another disaster.

- **Supporting national unification.** In 1933, Iraq's King Faisal called the Iraqi Army the "spinal column of nation-forming." Throughout modern Iraqi history, the Iraqi Army has helped to unify the heterogenous Iraqi population. The Iraqi Army may be the only institution in Iraq that has a reputation for relative social, economic, ethnic, and sectarian neutrality. If the United States seeks long-term stability in Iraq, the Iraqi Army is the most logical institution for investment.

- **Reducing dependence on the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).** The PMF represents a challenge to the government's monopoly on the use of force. Iranian influence, internal divisions, and sectarian biases make the PMF the least suitable organization to help stabilize and unify Iraq in the long term. Security force assistance to the Iraqi Army is a minimally invasive way to help displace the PMF over time.

- **Gaining advantage against Iran, Russia, and China.** Iranian, Russian, and Chinese influence in Iraq is increasing. Leveraging existing relationships with the Iraqi Army can help to displace this influence and give the United States leverage in ongoing adversarial competition.

1. Introduction: Iraq's Army and U.S. National Security

This Perspective was written immediately before the early 2020 events that led to a reconsideration of the U.S. military presence in Iraq.[1] None of the most recent turns in the relationship between the United States and Iraq change the findings or recommendations in this Perspective. All the reasons to sustain military engagement in Iraq for the long term remain valid. All the opportunities that were available for a modest-sized but enduring American presence in Iraq in late 2019 will remain available in 2020 if American policymakers and diplomats can reach an accommodation with the leaders of Iraq's government. What follows is the original analysis.

This Perspective recommends an enduring American strategic presence in Iraq, centering on developmental opportunities with the regular forces of the Iraqi Army. Stabilizing Iraq, rebuilding American influence in Iraq, and further strengthening the partnership with Iraqi civil and military leaders will in turn help to stabilize the Middle East, counter malign Iranian influence, gain advantage for the United States against Russia and China, and ultimately reduce the recurring need for reactive military deployments to the region. Iraq's regular army is a readily available means to that end.

Present challenges in Iraq are substantial but surmountable. U.S. influence diminished after the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraqi territory in 2011. Influence has only been partly rebuilt since the return of U.S. military advisers after the 2014 collapse of the Iraqi Army. As of late 2019, the strongest U.S. relationships in Iraq are with the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly with the special operations services, the Federal Police, and the Iraqi Army. These relationships are the most practical and logical foundation for strategic development in Iraq. A successful Iraq strategy should be built around the continuing development of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), particularly the Iraqi Army.

The Iraqi Army has long been an equalizing and centralizing force in Iraq, a country that is periodically riven by ethno-sectarian and regional divisions. Although the Iraqi Army is perhaps the least dominant armed force in Iraq in late 2019—particularly when compared with the special operations units and the PMF (or Hashed al-Sha'abi)—it retains the underlying structure and historical reputation needed to (1) provide the necessary military mass to secure the entire country against the reemergence of terrorist or insurgent groups such as the Islamic State, and against foreign intervention; (2) help reunify Iraq after the divisive post-2014 period; (3) reduce the dependence on the Iranian-influenced PMF; and (4) provide the United States with enduring leverage in adversarial competition against Iran, Russia, and China in the Middle East. Developing a stronger Iraqi Army will also help reduce enduring demands on U.S. and allied funding and personnel without sacrificing stability.

Present challenges in Iraq are substantial but surmountable.

A Brief Note on Methodology and Organization

This Perspective builds on RAND's extensive work on Iraq and security force assistance. The author is a subject-matter expert who recently completed a detailed analysis of the Iraqi Army and is both supporting and leading ongoing research on the ISF. The present analysis builds on previous RAND research reports and congressional testimony. Arguments in these reports and in the testimony have been further articulated in a series of opinion articles published by the author between 2006 and 2018.[2] These published analyses establish a logical and practical basis for an enduring American commitment in Iraq centering on long-term strategic stability.

This Perspective begins with an overview of policy challenges and then presents a limited historical analysis of Iraq and its army vis-à-vis American foreign policy. It then builds to the present policy relevance of Iraq and its army. It next offers findings and policy recommendations. The final section presents additional information on the development of Iraqi Army combat effectiveness through security force assistance.

2. Iraq's Importance to U.S. National Security Interests

As of late 2019, Iraq lies at the heart of a debate over U.S. strategic interests, global force disposition, and a general shift of military resources away from counterterrorism toward adversarial competition with Russia and China. Policymakers and policy experts are asking important and timely questions about the ongoing American presence in Iraq, and about the return on the extensive investment the United States and its allies have made in the ISF. How many American service members are needed to remain in and around Iraq to keep it secure, and why? How far can security force assistance in Iraq be reduced before excessive risk is incurred? Would it really matter if the Iraqi Army collapsed again?

This last question might be seen by some to be rhetorical, but it must be asked and answered given the recent surge in cynicism about America's involvement in the Middle East, as well as the uneven global outcomes associated with security force assistance.[3] In the past decade, calls for strategic withdrawal from the Middle East have gone from outlier to mainstream. Most notably, in early 2019 former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Mara Karlin and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Tamara Cofman Wittes argued that the United States should begin "pulling back" from the Middle East, even at the cost of "painful and ugly" consequences.[4] Many other policy analysts have argued for some level of disengagement.[5]

While there may be strong cases to be made in support of disengagement, there are equally strong cases to be made in support of enduring commitment. Despite the increasingly widespread policy malaise regarding the Middle East, there will almost certainly be an American military presence in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.[6] Even Karlin and Wittes reluctantly curb their throw-in-the-towel argument, allowing for some ongoing but ill-defined level of security force assistance in the region.[7] Whatever prevailing expert opinion might suggest, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) requires the U.S. military to help

Iraq is the core battleground for regional influence against Iran.

keep the region stable to meet the security requirements in the President's 2017 National Security Strategy.[8] If the NDS is the guiding pillar for America's regional military strategy in the Middle East, then Iraq is—arguably—the locus of control for that strategy. But even without these guiding strategies, there are compelling arguments for enduring commitment in Iraq.

Iraq is the core battleground for regional influence against Iran. Iraq is where the Islamic State emerged from, and where it still persists as an international terrorist-insurgent force, lurking not so quietly in the shadows across the Sunni Arab arc into Syria.[9] Iraq is central to adversarial competition with Russia and China in the Middle East. Iraq is the fourth-largest producer of oil in the world, and its stability—or lack thereof—directly affects the American economy. The United States has fought the Iraqi Army twice in the past 30 years and rebuilt it twice more.[10] The Iraqi Army has played a prominent role in modern military conflict: Aside from the British Army, the Iraqi Army is the only army in the world to have fought in three major conventional, combined-arms ground wars in the past four decades.[11] All three of these—the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the 2003 coalition invasion—have had region- and world-altering consequences (see below). U.S. Army, Marine Corps, and special operations forces have more recent shared history with, and are perhaps more intertwined with, the Iraqi Army than with any other non-Western ground combat force worldwide.

Historical evidence suggests that Iraq has mattered for U.S. foreign policy, and it continues to do so. This Perspective will show that building and sustaining the Iraqi Army's will to fight to ensure that its combat effectiveness is an essential means for achieving the stated regional strategic objectives of the United States.

3. America's Experience with and in Iraq, 1979–2019

Some assume that the 2018 NDS seeks to weaken, or perhaps jettison, America's commitment to the Middle East.[12] But the public summary of the strategy mentions the Middle East nine times, Iraq twice, and Iran six times. It downplays terrorism relative to previous policy documents, but it still mentions terrorism 22 times (14 more times than the eight mentions of China).[13] Defense guidance for the Middle East requires the U.S. military to help maintain favorable regional balances, to deter aggression, to deny safe haven to terrorists, to prevent hostile powers from dominating the region, to keep energy markets stable and trade routes secure, to defeat terrorists, and specifically to counter Iranian malign influence.[14] This set of objectives is remarkably consistent with *broad* official American Middle East policy objectives for the past 40 years (as will be discussed, more-specific objectives have been less consistent). Iraq's importance to the success of these enduring and concrete objectives—only two of which specifically mention terrorism or counterterrorism—is equally consistent.

Iraq has been a fixture in American national security policy since the 1979 Iranian revolution. The overthrow

of Iran's Shah Reza Pahlavi and the creation of the Islamic Republic shifted the balance of power in the Middle East. A close and reliable ally that had served as a regional bulwark against the Soviet Union was rapidly transformed into a hostile state that held American citizens hostage, threatened America's regional allies, and, over time, propagated terrorism.[15] This drew the United States—whose policymakers had long treated the region as an economy-of-force area[16]—into the heart of Middle East geopolitical chaos.[17]

1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War

Within a year of the 1979 Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran. The United States provided intelligence support to the Iraqi armed forces during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war.[18] In 1984, President Ronald Reagan directed the U.S. government to identify ways to provide Iraq "enhanced intelligence" and to offer indirect overt and covert military support to the Iraqi armed forces through third-party governments.[19] In some cases, American officials directly warned Iraqi military leaders about impending Iranian ground attacks. As the war progressed, its adverse impact on the oil markets threatened global economic stability. In 1988, in response to attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, the United States sent warships into the region and ramped up its support for Iraq.[20] By the time the war ended in 1988, the United States and Saddam Hussein's Iraq were informal but ultimately unsuited allies. Figure 1 shows a map-based overview of the Iran-Iraq War.

1990–1991 Gulf War and the 1991–2003 Standoff

Just two years after wrapping up support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, the United States entered into a war that would lead it to decimate the Iraqi Army it had so recently supported. In August 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait. The United States deployed more than 500,000 troops to form the core of a coalition force of more than 700,000 to fight against an Iraqi joint military force of approximately 1 million people.[21] After a month of airstrikes and a short but intense ground invasion, the Iraqi Army withdrew in defeat. The war itself had immediate impact on the global oil and stock markets, and the impressive American performance changed Russia's and China's overarching approaches to military strategy and force design.[22] Arguably, their modern military forces are tailored to defend against and defeat the kind of American military power on display in Kuwait and Iraq in 1991.

Core elements of the Iraqi Army—particularly some of the vaunted Republican Guard divisions—survived the Gulf War. The continuing threat posed by Saddam Hussein to American interests contributed to the decision to permanently base U.S. Army ground forces in the Middle East.[23] From 1991 through early 2003, the United States was effectively in a low-intensity conflict with Iraq. U.S. presidents applied economic sanctions, cut off Iraqi airspace with Operation Southern Watch and Operation Northern Watch, periodically deployed additional military forces to deter Iraqi aggression, and fired missiles into Iraq in what might best be called deterrence-through-punishment operations. From 1991 through 2002, these operations cost the United States more than $11 billion in 2002 dollars.[24]

FIGURE 1
Overview of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–1988

SOURCE: U.S. Military Academy, map of the Iran-Iraq War, undated, with author overlay.

2003 Coalition Invasion and the Advisory Period Through 2019

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. Approximately 290,000 coalition troops faced an Iraqi Army that was much depleted from its pre–Gulf War zenith. Iraq was only able to muster approximately 400,000 active soldiers and 2,500 main battle tanks by 2003.[25] Coalition forces crushed the Iraqi Army but then faced a multifaceted insurgency that, by 2006, had all but consumed the U.S. joint force. While there is ongoing debate over the strategic value of the 2003 invasion, the costs of the war have been considerable. Operation Iraqi Freedom drew resources away from the ongoing war in Afghanistan and helped to give the Taliban insurgency there a second life.[26] The occupation of Iraq rapidly aged tens of billions of dollars' worth of U.S. military equipment, including generations of exquisitely expensive jet combat aircraft.[27] It reshaped the U.S. military from a conventional to a counterinsurgency force, leading to a crisis in conventional warfighting capability against great powers in 2019.[28] The invasion and subsequent insurgency caused thousands of casualties on both sides, opened the door for a civil war, and ultimately allowed the creation of the Islamic State.

4. Iraq at the Heart of American Foreign Policy: 1979–2019

Skeptics view this collective experience in Iraq as part of the composite argument for retrenchment. Other experts and policymakers, including Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, officially described continuing engagement in Iraq as an unavoidable necessity that could be addressed with security force assistance rather than large-scale operations. A case for continuing engagement in Iraq, and for providing continuing support to the Iraqi Army, is reinforced by the historical record.

Past is not necessarily prologue. But each of the cases described in the previous section makes plain the fact that Iraq has been central to American foreign policy since at least the 1980s. A review of American national security documents further reinforces the continuous strategic importance of Iraq and its army, whether as opponent or partner.[29] The post-1980 period builds from several complex decades of American involvement in the Middle East, centering on the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine, Richard M. Nixon's Twin Pillars policy, and the Carter Doctrine.[30] Each reinforced the importance of the Middle East to American national security.[31]

Iraq in American National Security Strategies: Nearly 40 Years, from Reagan to Trump

President Ronald Reagan's administration (1981–1988) emphasized Iraq's importance in a range of now-declassified policy documents written between 1981 and 1987.[32] In 1983, as the Iran-Iraq War began to affect oil tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf, Reagan issued a directive stating that the United States would "undertake whatever measures may be necessary to keep the Strait of Hormuz open to international shipping." He warned about both the "real and psychological" impacts of disruptions to the flow of oil from the Middle East, elevating Iraq and Iran in the national security priority list.

In 1987, Reagan published the first national security strategy required by the Goldwater-Nichols Act.[33] Although American Middle East strategy was often reactive and sometimes meandering, Iraq's unique importance was singled out in nearly every presidential national security strategy from 1987 through 2017.[34] Table 1 shows the emphasis placed on Iraq as a country of strategic importance.[35]

TABLE 1

Iraq in U.S. National Security Strategies, 1987–2017

Year	President	Number of Mentions of Iraq	Iraq Emphasis or Relevance
1987	Ronald Reagan	4	End Iran-Iraq War; stabilize Middle East; stop terrorism; block Iran
1988	Ronald Reagan	6	End Iran-Iraq War; stabilize Middle East; stop terrorism; block Iran
1990	George H. W. Bush	0	No mention of Iraq in March; Iraq invades Kuwait in August
1991	George H. W. Bush	19	Stop Iraq WMD; Iran complies with UN resolutions; refugees
1993	George H. W. Bush	2	Non-proliferation; UN mission in Iraq; forward deployed U.S. forces
1994	Bill Clinton	10	Dual containment of Iraq and Iran; stop Iraq WMD; stabilize oil; OSW
1995	Bill Clinton	12	Iraq threatens Kuwait; stop Iraq WMD; continue dual containment
1996	Bill Clinton	17	Stop Iraq WMD; dual containment; Iraq-Iran-North Korea key threats
1997	Bill Clinton	11	Stop Iraq WMD; Iraq on par with North Korea; OSW and ONW
1998	Bill Clinton	23	Stop Iraq WMD; sanctions; forward deployed troops, OSW and ONW
1999	Bill Clinton	22	Stop Iraq WMD; UN resolutions; sanctions; Operation Desert Fox
2000	Bill Clinton	25	"Country of particular concern"; containment of Iraq; stop Iraq WMD
2002	George W. Bush	1	One passing reference to Iraq; United States invades in 2003
2006	George W. Bush	57	Success is "vital"; defeat terrorism; stable Iraq; strong security forces
2010	Barack Obama	33	Transition; enduring relationship; stable Iraq; strong security forces
2015	Barack Obama	14	Decrease U.S. troops; "professional and accountable security forces"
2017	Donald Trump	6	Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; stop terrorism; long-term strategic partner with Iraq

SOURCES: National security strategy documents cited in this section.

NOTES: "Number of Mentions of Iraq" does not include mentions of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; WMD = weapons of mass destruction; UN = United Nations; OSW = Operation Southern Watch; ONW = Operation Northern Watch.
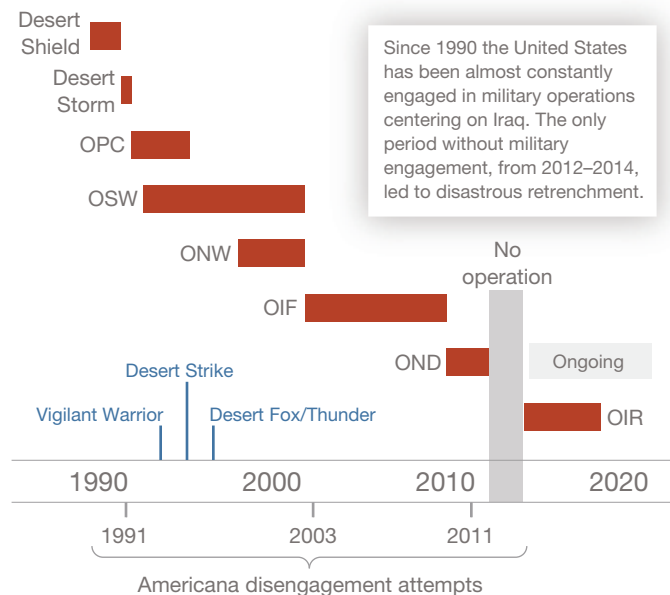
The only exception to this consistent trend is President George H. W. Bush's 1990 strategy. The complete omission of Iraq from this March 1990 document is all the more notable given Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent 1991 Gulf War. George W. Bush mentioned Iraq only once, and then only in passing, in his 2002 strategy, which was published one year before he ordered the invasion of Iraq.[36] His next strategy, in 2006, mentioned Iraq 57 times. It would seem that Iraq is ignored in strategic design and grand strategic debate at some peril.

Sunk Costs, Recurring Costs, and Constant Operations

Between 1990 and late 2019, the United States spent over $1 trillion on its collective operations centering on Iraq: Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Provide Comfort, Desert Thunder, Desert Fox, Northern Watch, Southern Watch, Vigilant Warrior, Desert Strike, Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, and Inherent Resolve.[37] As of late 2019, the United States has several thousand troops stationed in Iraq conducting security force assistance and direct combat support missions, as well as thousands of additional troops in the United States, Kuwait, Qatar, and other areas preparing to deploy, sustaining and transporting the force, and providing intelligence and combat air support.[38] As of late 2019, Iraq is one of only three countries in the world where several thousand American military forces are engaged in sustained combat support operations.[39] Figure 2 depicts this timeline from 1990 through 2019.

The bottom part of Figure 2 marks the three post-1990 efforts to disengage the U.S. military from Iraq. First, in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War the U.S.

Constant Engagement in Iraq and Centered on Iraq, 1990–2019

Since 1990 the United States has been almost constantly engaged in military operations centering on Iraq. The only period without military engagement, from 2012–2014, led to disastrous retrenchment.

NOTE: OPC = Operation Provide Comfort; OSW = Operation Southern Watch; ONW = Operation Northern Watch; OIF = Operation Iraqi Freedom; OND = Operation New Dawn; OIR = Operation Inherent Resolve; DoS = U.S. Department of State.

military withdrew the vast majority of its forces, leaving behind residual defense elements in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and a humanitarian assistance effort under Operation Provide Comfort. Within a few years, the United States was once again engaged in active operations, and by the middle of the 1990s Iraq was a central focus of daily U.S. military operations in the Middle East. A second withdrawal was attempted in the wake of the 2003 coalition invasion of Iraq, but ultimately U.S. forces remained in Iraq

to help counter a growing insurgency. By 2006, Iraq had become an all-consuming policy challenge for the Bush administration. In 2011, stability appeared feasible. Despite protests from the head of the Iraqi Army (who stated that the ISF would not be ready for independent operations until 2020), American policymakers ordered a withdrawal.[40] Less than three years later, the weakened, dependent Iraqi Army shattered, and U.S. forces were engaged in active operations in Iraq yet again.

Reading History for Policy: Is Iraq a Quagmire or a Necessary Strategic Foothold?

This returns us to the policy perceptions of Iraq. Two polar, dichotomous readings in current discourse can be summed up as follows: (1) Iraq is a quagmire that drains extraordinary resources while producing mostly failure, strategic distraction, and egregious opportunity costs, and (2) Iraq is a critically important country in the heart of the Middle East that is ignored only at significant strategic peril.

Read through the first lens, and taking into account all the arguments proposed by the "less is better" policy analysts, withdrawal might be enticing. Past withdrawals might not have worked, but a more focused effort—accompanied by willingness to accept "painful and ugly" consequences—might be more successful. It is certainly within the power of the United States to leave Iraq.

Consequences of withdrawal should be more carefully assessed than they were in 1991, 2003, and 2011.[41] The trends in the historical record should help inform this assessment. Consequences of withdrawal might include the rebirth of the Islamic State or the growth of a successor extremist group; an active and knowing self-fulfillment of the so-called Shi'a Crescent across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon; submission to Russia and China in the ongoing competition for Iraqi partnership and resources; and a future requirement for reactive and costly military deployments that might ultimately exceed the costs of a smaller, enduring presence.[42]

Read through the second lens, the historical narrative suggests that Iraq is a strategic inevitability. It will continually draw the United States back in, even if American policymakers seek disengagement. At the very least, the strategic risks of disengagement are too great.

On a positive note, Iraq offers a range of strategic opportunities. A friendly, partnered Iraq effectively expands a geographically congruent alliance network that includes Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi, Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[43] A strong partnership with a strong Iraq can be used to help stop the recurrent narrative of calamities that preceded Operation Inherent Resolve. Partnership with Iraq gives the United States leverage in global adversarial competition. The next section directly addresses the three dominant arguments in support of enduring strategic commitment to Iraq: (1) to dominate adversarial competition with Iran, (2) to prevent the rebirth of the Islamic State, and (3) to help dominate regional adversarial competition with Russia and, to a lesser extent—at least for now—China.

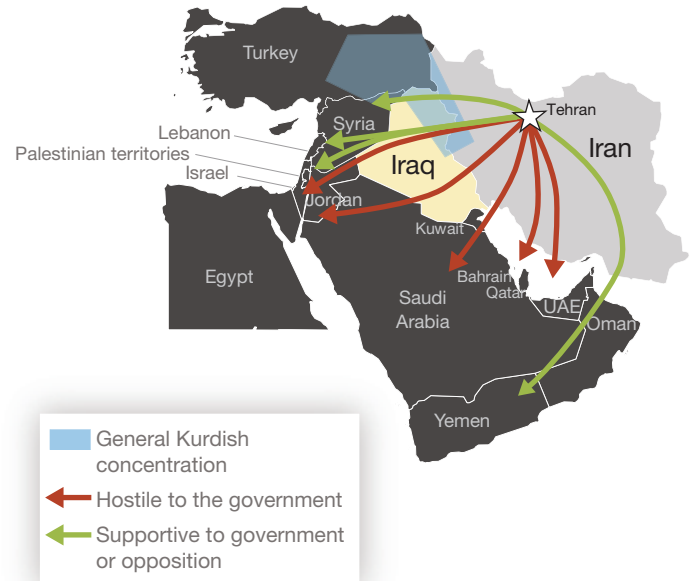# 5. Current Strategic Importance of Iraq and Its Army: Late 2019

Given the national security requirement to stabilize the Middle East and to build and sustain strong partners there, the emphasis on preventing Iranian malign behavior; and the requirement to prevent international terrorism from affecting American interests, Iraq plays an important role in current American national and military strategy. Iraq is also relevant to great power competition with China and Russia. The Iraqi Army is central to all of these efforts.

Iraq Is a Focal Point for Competition with Iran

Figure 3 depicts Iran's influence in the Middle East, most of which undermines or seeks to directly oppose American national security interests. Iran is hostile to American allied states, including Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.[44] Iran provides direct support to terrorist organizations, including Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas; Hezbollah has been directly implicated in attacks that have killed American service members in Lebanon and Iraq.[45] Iran supports the Syrian regime that is hostile to American interests, as well as the Houthi rebel faction that ejected an American-aligned government from the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Iran's premier military intervention force, was labeled a terrorist organization in 2019.[46] Iran's influence across the Kurdish area denoted on the map compounds an already difficult policy challenge for the United States.

Figure 3 shows Iraq's central geopolitical importance to American efforts aimed at countering Iranian malign

Iraq's Relevance to Countering Iran's Influence and Stabilizing the Middle East

General Kurdish concentration

Hostile to the government

Supportive to government or opposition

SOURCES: Derived from sources on Iran cited throughout this section.
NOTE: Iranian relations with Kuwait, Oman, Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar are complex and unsuited to simple labeling.

influence. It does not show the physical confluence of thousands of American service members with tens of thousands of Iranian-backed or Iranian-influenced militia members, as well as Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Quds Force operators. PMF militias fall under de jure Iraqi government control.[47] But this official policy is a fig leaf that does almost nothing to conceal the dangerous, overt competition between primarily Iranian-backed militias and the armed forces of the Iraqi government.[48] Iran is using its influence with these militias to undermine

the Iraqi government's monopoly on the use of force, a monopoly that has been and should be exercised primarily through the Iraqi Army and various federal and provincial police organizations.

Iraq may not be the ethno-sectarian fault line some make it out to be, but it is the regional friction point between Iran and the United States.[49] It is, in effect, the contact layer between Iran and the United States for adversarial competition.[50] Americans supporting Iraq's army are at the greatest risk of attack from Iranian forces, or proxy forces, during periods of intense competition or outright war.[51] These militias are also a direct threat to the sovereignty of Iraq. A stable, strong, and legally empowered Iraqi Army represents the Iraqi state's bid—and America's bid—to ensure that the Iraqi government maintains a monopoly over the use of force while reducing Iran's influence on state policy and security.[52]

Iraq Is a Key Battleground in the Fight Against International Terrorism

As of late 2019, the Islamic State no longer controls territory in Iraq or Syria. However, it still exists as a functional terrorist-guerrilla organization, it still directs and inspires international terror, and it still maintains a network of global *emirates*, or princedoms, that conduct terror attacks, destabilize nation-states, and operate directly against American interests worldwide.[53] Although the capital of the so-called caliphate was in Raqqa, Syria, the Islamic State has a clear Iraqi pedigree.[54] It remains an Iraq-centric organization. It is a contemporary incarnation of the (sometimes) Al Qaida–affiliated terror groups that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his successors built primarily
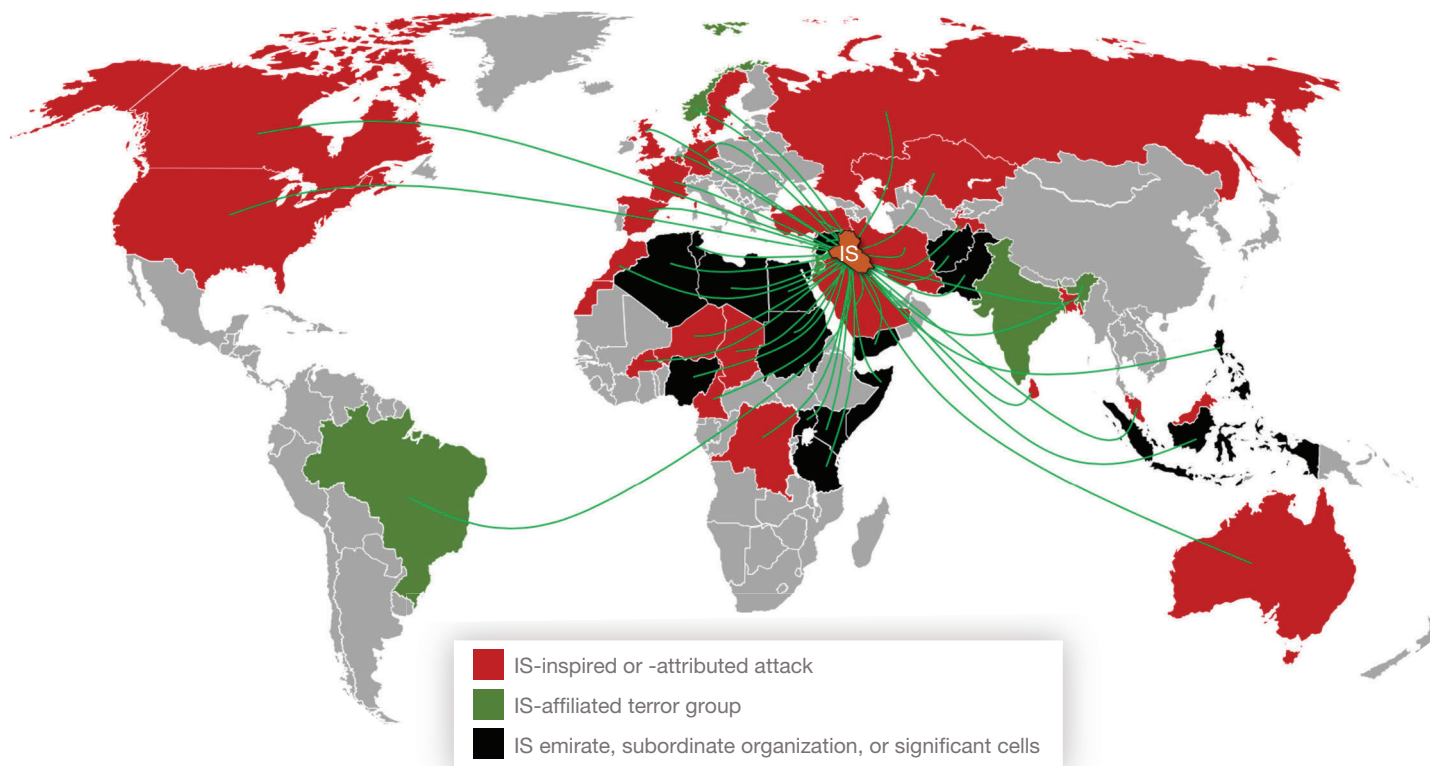
in the Sunni provinces of Iraq, and primarily with Iraqi junior leaders and foot soldiers. It is worth recalling that the Islamic State's previous incarnation was the Islamic State *in Iraq* and the Levant, with Iraq receiving intentional preeminence of title. The Islamic State's operations in Syria were significant, but its seizure and control of Mosul, Iraq—a city of over 1 million people—was one of the most shocking and strategically relevant actions by an extremist organization since 9/11.

Figure 4 depicts the global impact of the Islamic State from 2014 through late 2019. The figure shows where the Islamic State has conducted or inspired attacks, where it has gained the support of affiliated terror and insurgent groups, and where it has established self-proclaimed emirates with groups under its ostensible direct control. Note that attacks have also occurred in all the places where the Islamic State has supporting or subordinate organizations.

Iraq remains a focal point for the global American effort to contain and reduce the threat of international terrorism. The Islamic State might fade or even dissolve over time, but the failure of the Iraqi government—with necessary support from the international community—to address root causes in Iraq all but ensures that another group will rise in its place, posing the same threat that is currently prioritized in the U.S. national security and national defense strategies.[55] Iraq's army remains the primary input for American by, with, and through security force assistance efforts to address the regional and international terror threat in Iraq.[56]

The Islamic State could not have succeeded in the face of a strong Iraqi Army. It was specifically the relative weakness of the regular Iraqi Army in 2014—*not* in Iraq's special operations forces—that gave the Islamic State

FIGURE 4

Islamic State Attacks, Affiliates, and Subordinate Organizations Relative to Iraq

IS-inspired or -attributed attack

IS-affiliated terror group

IS emirate, subordinate organization, or significant cells

SOURCES: Compiled from data from Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, website, undated; Dian Triansyah Djani, letter from the chair of the United Nations Security Council Committee to the president of the Security Council pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011), and 2253 (2015) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities, January 15, 2019; Wilson Center, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," April 30, 2019; Judith Tinnes, "Bibliography: Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) [Part 4]," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 2018; Tim Lister, Ray Sanchez, Mark Bixler, Sean O'Key, Michael Hogenmiller, and Mohammed Tawfeeq, "ISIS Goes Global: 143 Attacks in 29 Countries Have Killed 2,043," CNN, February 12, 2018; Mina al-Lami, "Where Is the Islamic State Group Still Active in the World?" BBC, March 27, 2019; and U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations to Defeat ISIS," official website, 2019.

control of one-third of Iraq, that allowed it to reap at least tens of millions of dollars from Iraq's oil industry and from its people, and that allowed it to recruit or pressgang thousands of Iraqis into its ranks. After 2014, U.S. security force assistance was needed to rebuild and support the Iraqi Army. Eventually the Iraqi Army became a central instrument in the defeat of the Islamic State. However, the Iraqi Army's incapacity from 2014 to 2016 also required the

generation of the PMF from the Shi'i Iraqi community.[57] As argued in the previous section, the current influence of the Iranian-backed or -influenced PMF challenges the role of the Iraqi Army in Iraq's national security structure and, therefore, the sovereignty of Iraq.

Iraq Is at the Center of Regional Adversarial Competition with Russia and China

Modern strategic directives point the U.S. military toward great power competition with Russia and China. In some views, this obviates the need to focus on the Middle East, and on Iraq specifically.[58] These views tend to overlook the historical and ongoing role of the Middle East in great power competition. Iraq was central to great power competition during the Cold War.[59] In 1984, Leon Carl Brown argued that the Middle East was essentially an inescapable vacuum for the great powers:[60]

> For roughly the last two centuries the Middle East has been more consistently and more thoroughly ensnarled in great power politics than any other part of the non-Western world.
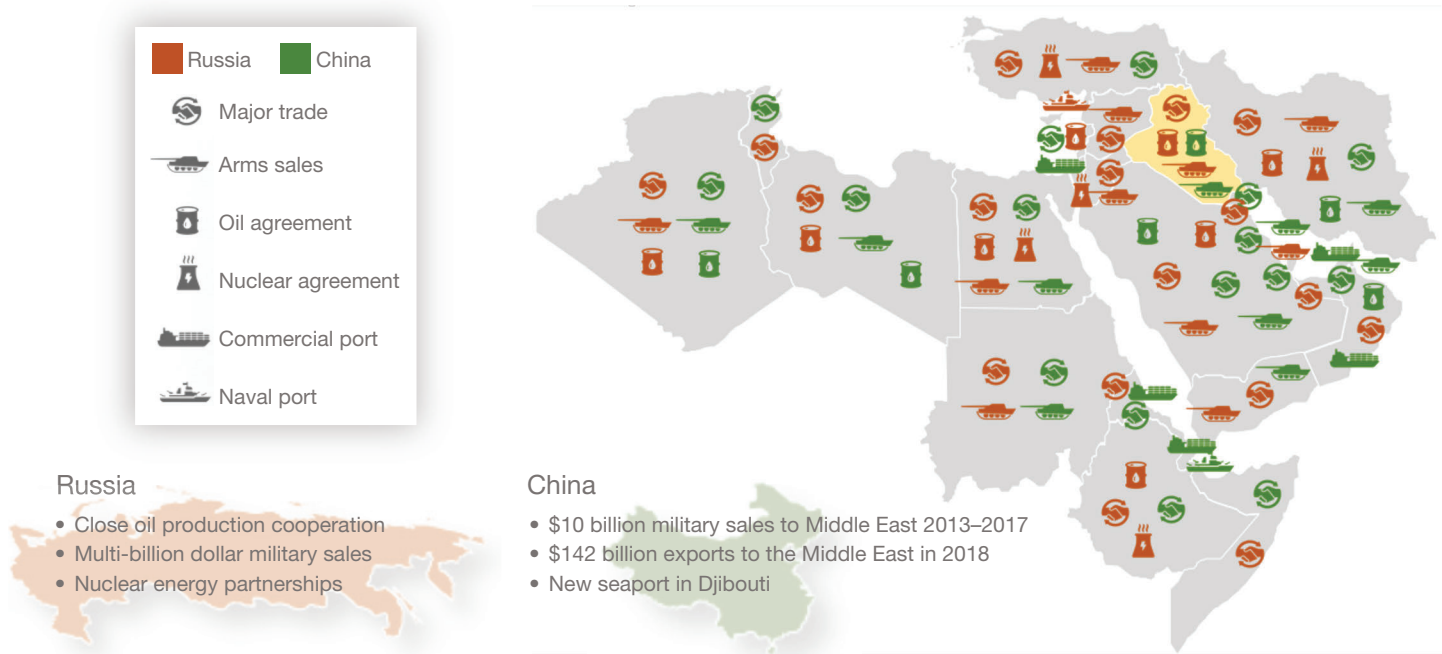
Both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China had active trading, cultural, and military equipment sales and partnerships with Iraq during the Cold War.[61] Soviet leaders attempted to influence Iraqi communist movements in their favor for decades.[62] The 1959 Soviet-Iraqi Cultural Agreements were exemplary of the Soviet efforts to mimic American soft power for global competition.[63] In 1972, the Soviet Union signed a 15-year Friendship Treaty with Iraq, and they sold or provided arms to various Iraqi administrations from at least the mid-1950s through the late 1980s. Russian activity in Iraq waned after the fall of the Soviet Union but has escalated since Russian President Vladimir Putin's reengagement in the Middle East beginning in approximately 2005.[64]

China's relations with Iraq also date to the rise of the post-monarchy, generally pro-communist Iraqi government in 1958. Chinese leaders implemented an aggressive outreach program in Iraq across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic lines of effort. For a time, China was the largest importer of Iraqi dates and a bulk consumer of Iraqi hydrocarbon resources. It sold Iraq hard-to-acquire industrial magnets for centrifuges used to enrich uranium.[65] Just before and during the Iran-Iraq War, China supplied Iraq with approximately $4.2 billion in arms, including at least 70 Chengdu F-7 fighter planes, B-6D bombers, thousands of artillery pieces, thousands of tons of ammunition, Silkworm anti-ship missiles, 2,000 Type 69 (T-54 equivalent) main battle tanks, and approximately 1,000 armored personnel carriers.[66]

Whereas the community of American policy experts may be racing for the exits from the Middle East in 2019, Russia and China are edging their way in to fill a perceived vacuum. Both Russia and China are active in Iraq in 2019.[67] Both seek to take advantage of Iraq's oil resources: Russia is pursuing extraction from the Kurdish regions in the north, and China views Iraq as part of its One Belt, One Road program. Figure 5 shows an overview of Russian and Chinese arms, oil, trade, nuclear infrastructure, seaport, and naval port development activity in the Middle East. Both countries have tens of billions of dollars invested across the Middle East and depend on oil-producing states, including Iraq and Iran, for market stability and imports.

FIGURE 5

Russian and Chinese Engagement in the Middle East, 2017–2019

Russia
- Close oil production cooperation
- Multi-billion dollar military sales
- Nuclear energy partnerships

China
- $10 billion military sales to Middle East 2013–2017
- $142 billion exports to the Middle East in 2018
- New seaport in Djibouti

SOURCES: Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru, eds., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, Challiot Paper No. 146, July 2018; Martin Russell, *Russia in the Middle East: From Sidelines to Centre Stage*, Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," 2018; Andrew Jacobs and Jane Perlez, "U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbor in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base," *New York Times*, February 25, 2017; Aisha Han and Rachel Rossie, *What Are the Implications of Expanded Chinese Investment in the MENA Region?* Atlantic Council, August 10, 2018; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, Washington, D.C., May 2019; Russian Foreign Trade data from 4th quarter, 2018; 2018 data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity website (A. J. G. Simoes and C. A. Hidalgo, "The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development," workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, 2011), 2018 data; World Trade Organization, "World Trade Statistical Review 2018," webpage, 2018; 2017 data from World Bank, "World Integrated Trade Solution," website, undated; World's Top Exports, website, undated.

NOTE: Port agreement symbols do not necessarily connote full ownership, only special access and national partnerships. All arms sales, oil agreements, and nuclear infrastructure agreements are in various stages of completion. This map does not show extensive diplomatic activity; infrastructure development, including railways and logistics facilities; mining; manufacturing agreements; or other significant national engagements.

Iraq's geographic position puts it at the core of regional great power activity.

Russia and, to a lesser extent, China are aggressively competing with U.S. military sales in Iraq. By extension, they are also competing for the diplomatic and military influence that accompanies those sales.[68] Between 2015 and 2019, Iraq ordered 48 Pantsyr-S1 mobile air defense systems, 19 Mi-28N combat helicopters, 24 Mi-35 combat helicopters, ten TOS-1 multiple rocket launchers, four Su-25 ground attack aircraft, 300 BMP-3 armored personnel carriers, and 73 T-90S main battle tanks from Russia.[69] Figure 6 shows a side-by-side comparison of the Iraqi Army's American-made M1A1M tank on the left and the Russian-made T-90S tank on the right.

Iraq purchased the Russian T-90Ss as replacements for the more complex American-made M1A1M tanks, many of which were destroyed or severely damaged during the war with the Islamic State.[70] This adjustment makes practical sense for the Iraqi Army, considering its long familiarity with Soviet and Soviet-style military equipment.[71] On the economic front, Russia has aggressively pursued trade deals with the Iraqi government. Iraq-Russia trade probably exceeds US$1.5 billion per year.[72] As of September 2019, Russian and American extraction companies were competing for rights in the Mansuriya gas field. Mansuriya holds an estimated 4.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.[73]

In 2014, Iraq ordered four CH-4 unmanned aerial vehicles from China.[74] These aircraft were delivered in 2015 and used against the Islamic State. The CH-4 is a direct

FIGURE 6

Old Iraqi Army M1A1M Tank (left) and New Iraqi Army T-90S Tank (right)

SOURCES: Left: Army photo by Spc. Eric Cerami; right: image from Iraqi Ministry of Defense, "The 35th Armored Brigade of the 9th Armored Division Is Equipped with the Russian Tank (T90)," video, June 6, 2018.

competitor to American-made unmanned aircraft, and it represents China's first major post-2003 foray into the Iraqi arms market. In addition to opening the Iraqi market, China has direct interest in helping Iraq tamp down the remaining embers of the Islamic State, an organization that contains a number of Chinese minority Uighur fighters.[75] Figure 7 shows a U.S.-manufactured MQ-9 drone armed with the AGM-114 Hellfire family of air-to-ground missiles on the left and, on the right, the remarkably similar Chinese-manufactured CH-4 drone with similar air-to-ground missiles.

Although China has far less in current military sales to the Iraqi government than Russia, there are no effective limits to its future opportunities. Chinese leaders have suggested further security cooperation between the two countries. The Chinese government is already leaping ahead on the economic front as part of the One Belt, One Road plan. Chinese leaders are currently pursuing opportunities to rebuild Iraq's war-damaged infrastructure.[76] China is Iraq's second-largest trading partner, ahead of the United States.[77] Iraq exported US$22.4 billion of crude oil to China in 2018.[78] According to the Chinese Ambassador to Iraq, China-Iraq trade across all sectors exceeded $US30 billion in 2018.[79]

Along with other arms sales from Russia and China, the T-90S and CH-4 acquisitions suggest vulnerabilities in American dominance in arms sales in Iraq. These sales support the argument that Iraq offers an opportunity

FIGURE 7

U.S. MQ-9 Drone (left) and Chinese CH-4 Drone (right)

SOURCES: Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson/U.S. Air Force; right: Kelvin Wong/IHS.

to the United States for global great power competition against Russia and China. Influence over the development and leadership of Iraq's army—the organization primarily responsible for securing Iraq's oil resources, its population, and its economy—is a reasonable anchor for this competition.

6. Iraq's Army as a Focal Point for Enduring Strategic Development

> Armies do not win wars by means of a few super-soldiers, but by the average quality of their standard units.
>
> —Field Marshal William Slim, 1956[80]

The previous sections provide evidence that, together, recommends an enduring policy commitment to Iraq. This enduring commitment to Iraq should help to prevent destabilization, counter malign Iranian influence, and reduce the threat of international terrorism; help the United States compete with Russia and China; and help Iraq develop toward a more stable and prosperous future so it can, in turn, help make the Middle East more stable and prosperous. These efforts all will ultimately benefit American interests in the region as they are described in the 2017 National Security Strategy.

Enduring investment in the regular forces of the Iraqi Army is the most practical and effective way to help meet these objectives. Two arguments against investing in the regular Iraqi Army are that (1) the regular Iraqi Army has a poor combat track record and it effectively collapsed in 2014, so further investments are likely to be wasted, and (2) Iraq's CTS has been successful where the regular army

has failed, so more investment in CTS is wiser. Evidence and analyses that follow address these two general counterarguments.[81]

The remainder of this Perspective examines the rationale for placing increased emphasis on the regular Iraqi Army, and on how investments in the army might best be made to achieve American national security objectives.

Influence and Reality in Iraq in 2019

Any effort to enhance partnership with Iraq should begin with the understanding that American influence over Iraqi governance and policy is significantly diminished from the 2003–2011 period. American policymakers are investing far less in Iraqi institutions and infrastructure than they were during that time frame. Coercive influence that accompanied those economy-changing investments has dried up. American diplomats and military leaders are still quite active in Baghdad but no longer as deeply embedded across the government and armed forces hierarchies as they were in the 2003–2011 period. While Iran probably has less influence in the Iraqi government and armed forces than some speculations suggest, the influence Iran does have has gradually displaced some American influence.[82] This offset was accelerated in the 2018 parliamentary elections, in which many Iranian-affiliated politicians took government office.

In contrast, American influence over the tactical elements of the ISF—particularly the special operations and regular Iraqi Army forces—has blossomed. American and Western European advisers are engaged directly with the Iraqi military outside Baghdad on a daily basis. American and allied aircraft fly direct support missions for the Iraqis.

American and allied medical support, artillery support, and intelligence support have been critical to Iraqi ground force combat success against the Islamic State.[83] Daily partner engagement is sharply reduced from the mid-2000s zenith, but much improved from the post-2011 nadir.

Balancing Investments with CTS and Other Iraqi Security Forces

As of late 2019, CTS and its Iraqi Special Operations Forces elements are the most respected and probably most effective military forces in Iraq.[84] Their pedigree builds from heavy American investment in training time, equipment, and funding. Special operations advisory teams helped to generate CTS and to support it during extensive combat operations after the rise of the Islamic State. David M. Witty, the author of a 2018 report on CTS, writes, "As compared to other ISF units, the CTS represents a significant return on U.S. investment, while also serving as a means to leverage U.S. influence in Iraq and counter Iranian penetration."[85] The service's core Golden Division is renowned for its combat performance. In the absence of a strong and capable Iraqi Army, the governments of both Iraq and the United States have come to rely heavily on CTS for tip-of-the-spear ground combat operations.

This reliance on CTS has been driven by practicality. As the need for aggressive ground combat operations waned through late 2019, what might be considered an overreliance on CTS vis-à-vis the other Iraqi security elements should be revisited.[86] All told, the service represents approximately 10,000 soldiers.[87] It is a force designed for countering terrorism, not for securing and defending large swathes of territory. CTS has limited capability to operate

as a combined-arms military force. It remains reliant on coalition-supplied intelligence information, equipment, and direct combat support. As of late 2018, there were plans to quadruple CTS to nearly 40,000 soldiers.[88] This now-shelved plan would almost surely have diluted the elite force while further draining the regular army of qualified leaders and soldiers. More importantly, even in this bloated state it would still have been insufficient to secure Iraq's territorial integrity (see below). CTS should be sustained and improved, but it cannot and should not be the answer to Iraq's broader security and stability challenges.

How Much Is Enough? Iraqi Army Forces and American Advisers

One of the main reasons CTS is insufficient to secure Iraq is the sheer scope of the national security challenge. Iraq has a total land mass area of nearly 440,000 square kilometers. Its security forces need to control nearly 4,000 kilometers of land borders, including 1,600 kilometers with Iran and 600 with Syria.[89] There has not been an accurate census in Iraq for many decades, but current estimates suggest a population of nearly 40 million people.[90]

Mass is a military necessity in stabilization operations, in counterinsurgency, and in conventional combat operations. If the United States seeks to help stabilize Iraq and its population, to counter insurgencies like the one driven by the Islamic State, and to defend itself against prospective conventional threats, then it must generate sufficient mass of at least basically competent forces. Contemporary U.S. security doctrine clearly acknowledges this requirement.[91]

Ideally, the United States could determine the required number of forces to secure Iraq with a proven formula. The

It is a question not of precisely how many Iraqi security forces are needed, but of what kind of forces are needed and on what general scale security should be provided.

2006 Army and Marine Corps field manual on counterinsurgency suggests a 20:1,000 or 25:1,000 ratio of security personnel to population.[92] If this calculation were taken at face value, securing Iraq would require at least 800,000 security personnel. In past eras, the government of Iraq was able to sustain this kind of force, but current budgets would not allow such an extravagant expenditure. Moreover, in its present state, Iraq's bureaucracy would be hard-pressed to build and sustain such a large force.[93]

Unfortunately, there is no accurate, proven, empirically derived formula that can be applied to determine the best troop-to-mission ratio to secure Iraq.[94] In the absence of a proven formula, previous American experience in Iraq might be informative. In 2006, the United States had approximately 130,000 military personnel in Iraq, while, contemporaneously, the ISF may have fielded 300,000.[95] Tens of thousands of additional coalition security forces and security contractors were also engaged in stabilization. But, at the same time, many experts judged that the mission to stabilize Iraq was failing.[96] An official U.S. Army history states plainly that "lack of adequate American forces and weaknesses in the Iraqi Army and police" were crippling operations through early 2007.[97] This same report states that the 2007–2008 surge of an additional 30,000 soldiers would have been insufficient without the approximately 100,000 Awakening militia members who joined the stabilization effort in the same period.[98] Therefore, in official estimates, the presence of least 500,000 security forces correlated with the stabilization of Iraq from 2007 to 2008.

What does this tell us about enduring troop requirements in Iraq? Perhaps not much. Force levels are generally irrelevant outside of their idiosyncratic contexts; the number 500,000 holds no special value in 2019.[99] The experience of the 2000s simply reinforces the broader RAND finding that physical coverage by security services does matter in most cases. As the authors of the cited reports argue, *mass* is necessary for most successful counterinsurgencies, and also for stability activities in perpetually difficult areas, such as Iraq.[100] Basic security missions, such as checkpoints, patrolling, and deterrence by presence, require lots of regular forces supported by police and, in many cases, militias.[101]

It is therefore a question not of precisely how many Iraqi security forces are needed, but of what kind of forces are needed and on what general scale security should be provided. Perhaps a buffed-up CTS might serve as a quick reaction force, darting around the country to shore up weak and insufficient army and police units that might be succumbing to renewed insurgent activity. Putting aside the questionable decision to grow CTS, this approach seems unlikely to succeed. First, a reactive tactical security policy makes failures in Iraq's rural areas—where previous

insurgencies grew, were sustained, and survived—more likely. Second, even a quadrupled CTS would have insufficient capacity to protect all of Iraq.[102] This approach, or one like it, would not prevent another 2014-like disaster.

A better approach would be to elevate the *combat effectiveness* of the regular Iraqi Army forces.[103] Even a basically competent Iraqi Army force, coupled with basically competent police forces, would provide enough physical coverage, deterrent posture, and reliable first-response capability to blunt a rebirth of the Islamic State or the growth of a new insurgency. For national stabilization, basically reliable coverage everywhere is better than outstanding capability on a spear's tip. Competent coverage everywhere *with* a CTS-like reaction force would be preferred.

Iraqi Regular Army Forces in the Counterterrorism Fight: Defense, Offense, Direct Support

CTS has played the central role in the war against the Islamic State. But CTS almost never conducted fully independent combat operations between 2014 and 2019.[104] Some elements of the coalition, Federal Police, and Iraqi Army were constantly in direct support of CTS during the counter–Islamic State fight. In cases where CTS forces conducted mostly independent operations, they suffered inordinately, and in one key case—Ramadi—they were effectively defeated. More than a year of defensive operations and the follow-on assault to retake Ramadi cost CTS many casualties and 200 tactical vehicles. David Witty argues that Ramadi showed that "CTS was ill-suited to static defense and that it needed proper support to be effective on the battlefield."[105] Urban defense and battlefield support are two of the key counterterrorism—or, arguably,

counterinsurgency—roles most suited to the regular Iraqi Army.[106]

Direct combat operations, including seizing and taking ground, required extensive support from the army. In the Mosul fight alone, the 1st, 9th, and 15th Iraqi Army divisions played key roles in clearing villages and urban areas of entrenched Islamic State fighters.[107] Army units worked with various police organizations to hold ground as their lead elements and CTS elements bounded forward. These holding positions were absolutely critical to the success, and the survival, of the forward elements, particularly as Islamic State units worked to find rear-area seams in the Iraqi defense to infiltrate fighters and suicide bombers. The Iraqi Army's competence in 2017 relative to its relative incompetence in 2014 was essential to the success of both CTS and the overall campaign. Golden Division soldiers deservedly reaped much of the glory for the Mosul fight, but the sacrifices in the regular army divisions were considerable.

It is difficult to determine how dependent special operations units were on the coalition and on the Iraqi Army logistics and fire support units. Only the complete absence of coalition support would expose the full range of gaps in CTS supporting infrastructure. In all likelihood, only the Iraqi Army could provide the kind of structured and redundant logistics and fire support necessary to repeat battles like those that took place in Mosul, Ramadi, Tal Afar, and Fallujah. In the future, as coalition support necessarily dwindles, widespread Iraqi Army intelligence gathering and analysis operations will be needed to help cover all of Iraq to detect and disrupt terrorist operations.[108]

Focus on the Iraqi Army: Key Considerations for Enduring Strategic Investment

Summing up the key findings in this Perspective: Iraq's army appears to be the most logical and most practical focal point for improving American influence and achieving American strategic objectives in Iraq and, arguably, in the greater Middle East. Building from the evidence above, four key considerations and two supporting considerations for an enduring strategic investment in the Iraqi Army emerge. To varying degrees, each of these addresses the regional national security objectives spelled out in the 2018 NDS. These objectives are to (1) maintain favorable regional balances, (2) deter aggression, (3) deny safe haven to terrorists, (4) prevent hostile powers from dominating the region, (5) keep energy markets stable and trade routes secure, (6) defeat terrorists, and (7) counter Iranian malign influence.

Geographic positioning anchors many of these arguments. Iraq is centrally positioned in the heart of the Middle East. If one accepts the narrative of the Iranian-dominated Shi'a Crescent, Iraq constitutes the second-broadest section of the crescent's arc next to Iran itself. Iraq also sits at a geographic crossroads, nearly equidistant from the westernmost part of Africa and the easternmost part of Asia, and from the southernmost tip of the Arabian peninsula to northern Scandinavia. An enduring relationship with the Iraqi Army would cement the expansion of the existing contiguous cluster of U.S. military partnerships at the crossroads of North Africa, Asia, and Europe.[109]

Concrete Advantage in Regional Strategic Competition Against Russia and China

Iraq rarely plants itself firmly in a Western or Eastern camp. In all likelihood, future Iraqi governments will equivocate and balance their relationships with the United States, Western European nations, Russia, and China. Weapon sales and training to the Iraqi Army represent a recurring historical focal point for great power competition. Opportunities will likely persist. Iraq is routinely ranked among the top five worldwide oil-producing nations, and it routinely maintains one of the world's largest armies; Iraq's army represents a potential windfall in military sales for Russia and China.[110] Influence accompanies military sales, along with opportunities to embed trainers and maintenance technicians. Where Russia and China succeed in gaining access, the United States will probably lose access and influence. In the ruthless and transactional world of great power competition, the Iraqi Army represents an effective zero-sum opportunity.

Countering Iranian Aggression

Iran is actively pursuing its interests in Iraq with the likely long-term intent of using Iraq as a buffer against U.S. strategic influence. The NDS clearly identifies Iran as an aggressive threat. Iran is part of the zero-sum competition for influence in Iraq, and with the Iraqi Army. As of late 2019, Iran is far more influential in Iraq than any competing state is, including the United States, Russia, and China. Currently, Iran may be more interested in cementing the role of the PMF as a counterbalance to the Iraqi Army than in influencing or penetrating the army itself.

Countering Undue Militia Influence

Both official PMF—Hashed al-Sha'abi—and unofficial militias constitute a serious and immediate threat to the Iraqi government's monopoly on the use of force. While the PMF has been officially drawn into the government, this was an act of compromise: Popular forces effectively saved Iraq from the Islamic State when the Iraqi Army failed in 2014, and they quickly expanded to the point that the Iraqi Army could no longer control them. As of late 2019, the Iraqi government continues to struggle with the future role of the PMF. In parallel, several unofficial militia groups have sprung up to establish their own local control in Iraq's rural areas and even in Baghdad. The Iraqi Army constitutes the only armed force in Iraq with the prospective to counterbalance the PMF and militias and, eventually, to return control of Iraq's security to constitutionally mandated ministerial institutions.

Building Iraqi Nationalism and Reducing Ethno-Sectarian Discord

Iraq's army is the only enduring government institution that is consistently respected by the Iraqi people. In 1933, King Faisal I described the Iraqi Army as "the spinal column for nation-building."[111] The army has been, and continues to be, the only institution that offers a reasonable standard for equitable treatment and personal opportunity to all Iraqis, regardless of ethno-sectarian identity.[112] Although polls in Iraq should be viewed with a greater degree of skepticism than polls taken in the United States or Western Europe, the data suggest a strong bond between the Iraqi people and their army. Helping to develop the Iraqi Army as a national institution can help the United States achieve its longstanding objective of a unified and stable Iraq.

Table 2 shows results from several polls about Iraqi trust in the Iraqi Army. The results generally show that the army is one of the most consistently trusted institutions in Iraq. The Iraqi Army routinely carries the trust and confidence of over 60 percent of the population across multiple polls, some representing longitudinal sampling waves. Even in 2003, shortly after the army's calamitous loss to the U.S.-led coalition, one poll found that 38 percent of Iraqis had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army as an institution.

Stabilizing Hydrocarbon Production Through Effective, Layered Ground Security

Given (1) Iraq's status as one of the top five oil-producing countries in the world, (2) continuing U.S. dependence on hydrocarbon resources for economic growth and stability, and (3) the vulnerability of U.S. hydrocarbon-byproduct-producing companies to oil price fluctuation, a stable Iraq with equally stable and secure oil infrastructure benefits American economic stability and national security. As of late 2019, Iraqi oil production is basically effective but inefficient and unstable. War damage to oil infrastructure and production, and the resultant fluctuation in global oil prices, demonstrate the potential impact of weak Iraqi security institutions on the American economy.[113] One Iraqi solution is to hire out oil infrastructure security to private military corporations. A better approach would be to establish a layered, centrally controlled security approach using the Iraqi Army to establish overarching national security to allow the Border Guard, Federal Police, and other federal and local forces to prevent

TABLE 2
Poll Results on Trust in the Iraqi Army

Years	Poll	Result
2003	ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK	38% have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army
2004	ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK	56% have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army
2004	Al Mustakella for Research	63% trust the Iraqi Army as an institution
2005	ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK	67% have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army
2007	ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK	69% have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army[a]
2008	ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK	65% have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Iraqi Army
2012	Arab Barometer Wave 2	69% have great or medium trust in the Iraqi Army
2014	Arab Barometer Wave 3	64% have great or medium trust in the Iraqi Army
2018	Al Mustakella for Research	83% trust the Iraqi Army as an institution
2018	1001 Iraqi Thoughts	83% (but only 43% of Kurds) have high confidence in the Iraqi Army
2019	Al Mustakella for Research	79% trust the Iraqi Army as an institution
2019	Arab Barometer Wave 5	63% trust the Iraqi Army as an institution

SOURCES: D3 Systems and KA Research Ltd., "Iraq Poll March 2008," conducted for ABC, BBC, ARD, and NHK, March 2008; Al Mustakella for Research, "Iraq 16 Years Later . . . Is the Country Still at War with Itself?" poll results, April 2019; Arab Barometer, Middle East poll waves, multiple years; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, "Results of a Nationwide Public Opinion Poll on Iraq's Upcoming Parliamentary Election," March 26, 2018.

[a] 2007 data for the ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK poll are averaged for two waves, one in February and another in August.

external and internal hostile forces from seizing or damaging Iraq's crucially important oil infrastructure.

Building Optimal Partnership Opportunities for Regional Security Operations

As of late 2019, the ISF struggles to gain and maintain internal security. However, the year-on-year institutionalization, training, and combat hardening of these forces suggests greater opportunities for regional partnered operations in the future. With better training and more doctrinal refinement, Iraq's army offers the prospective of tens of thousands of troops for UN peacekeeping operations; for a variety of irregular warfare missions including counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, stabilization, and foreign internal defense; and—with considerable capability development and increased American political influence—for ground combat operations in the event of a major regional war. When considering the feasibility of this last prospective mission, it is worth recalling that U.S.-partnered Egyptian and Saudi Arabian ground

combat forces both fought as part of the coalition in Operation Desert Storm against the Iraqi Army in 1991.[114]

7. A Policy for Enduring Commitment in Iraq

In 2017, RAND published *Beating the Islamic State: Selecting a New Strategy for Iraq and Syria*, which called for a new strategy in Iraq focused on a "patient, long-term U.S. effort to develop legitimate governance in Iraq."[115] Such an approach would match those called for in the 2005 National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, in the 2017 National Security Strategy, and in the 2018 NDS. The 2005 strategy still stands as the clearest and most detailed public policy document on Iraq, even though it contains some controversial flaws.[116] It provides a clear strategic objective:[117]

> We will help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

Iraq is currently a functional democracy, although its record on civil rights is poor. In 2014, the security forces failed to maintain domestic order or prevent Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. Their violent response to ongoing protests in late 2019 raise additional concerns.[118] The early 2005 strategic approach should be considered but revisited. *Beating the Islamic State* proposed an *end state* vision for Iraq. This statement can be repurposed as an *enduring vision* for a strategy of enduring commitment:[119]

> Iraq is a unified state capable of defending its borders from foreign invasion. The government maintains a monopoly on the capacity to use force; all members of paramilitary and militia organizations are incorporated into uniformed government services. Citizens from all ethnic, sectarian, geographic, and gender groups participate in the governance process through elections and free speech and are protected from oppression, discrimination, or other harms that might be applied or sanctioned by the government. Iraq's economy is sufficient to sustain a national budget, infrastructure improvement, and commerce with international support comparable to that for stable states of the same size. Terrorist activities inside Iraq are limited to the point that they can be addressed by law enforcement activities. No international terror group maintains sanctuary in Iraq, and no international terror attacks are planned or executed from Iraq.

As the RAND research team argued in 2017, an enduring commitment does not need to revert to U.S.-funded nation building. Some investment should be made in Iraq's infrastructure and economy to help regain influence and build government legitimacy, but in 2019 more focus can be placed on Iraq's army. Building from these previous strategies and analyses, and from the present analysis, a strategic statement of enduring commitment to Iraq might read as follows:

> The United States has enduring strategic interest in maintaining a close and productive relationship with the Government of Iraq and with the Iraqi people.
>
> Iraq represents a prospective anchor point for stability in the Middle East. With enduring support and engagement, Iraq can serve as a regional bulwark against terrorism; a hub for international commerce; a stabilizing force in the global hydrocarbons

industry; and as an important regional and global example of a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian democracy. Enduring partnership with Iraq will help to stave off the malign influence of nation-states and nonstate actors that seek to undermine regional stability and to erode a world order favorable to free and democratic peoples.

Iraq also represents a prospective source of disorder and violence in the Middle East and around the world. Under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, Iraq saw the oppression and slaughter of its own people; recurring warfare; and economic hardship that spread to other states. Without security, stability, and legitimacy in 2014, Iraq became a source of international terrorism that directly affected the United States, its citizens, and citizens of allied states. It is in the best interests of the United States and its allies that these conditions not be allowed to reemerge.

Enduring commitment will leverage diplomatic engagement and economic support in a more focused effort to help build and sustain Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). These forces—primarily the Iraqi Army, police, and counterterror units—will be capable of defending Iraq's borders and of preventing terrorism and insurgency. The United States will continue to help lead coalition efforts in support of Iraqi institutional, infrastructure, and industrial development, but it is up to the Iraqi people to lead and resource their recovery from the war with the Islamic State and, thereafter, Iraq's progressive growth.

American support to Iraqi democracy is essential to this enduring commitment. Ethnic and sectarian disenfranchisement—the sources of previous violent discord—must be reduced through programs that develop the legitimacy of Iraq's government. American diplomats will work with Iraqi leaders and nongovernmental organizations to continuously guide Iraq towards a more inclusive, less divisive future.

For security force development, by, with, and through remains axiomatic. Going forward, a well-resourced contingent of American advisers will stay in Iraq to help train and educate the ISF. A steady American advisory presence will help to ensure an equally steady and resilient ISF.

American support to Iraqi intelligence, counterterrorism, and security efforts will continue, with the level of effort commensurate to the need and the threat. Direct support will increase or decrease as needed to help ensure Iraqi success while minimizing dependency and costs.

Given the enduring nature of this commitment, this strategy sets out an *enduring vision* rather than an end state. [Enduring vision follows—see previous page.]

Whether or not this approach is adopted in full, the United States can improve its efforts to develop the Iraqi Army. The next section focuses on the development of Iraqi Army combat effectiveness to support these national objectives.

8. Building Iraqi Army Combat Effectiveness

Combat effectiveness—a term commonly used by military experts but not officially defined by the U.S. Department of Defense—generally refers to a forecasted likelihood that a military unit will be able to succeed in a given combat situation.[120] In other words, an army that is considered to have high combat effectiveness is believed to have a good chance of succeeding in combat, depending on the adversary and situation. The central post-2004 purpose of American security force assistance in Iraq has been to ensure that the ISF—particularly the Iraqi Army and counterterror forces—have high combat effectiveness. In 2010, the U.S. military assessed that the ISF would not be combat effective by the date of the scheduled end of Operation New Dawn in 2011.

Figure 8 shows the assessed readiness levels needed for the ISF to meet minimum essential capabilities for the ISF by the end of 2011. This analysis was conducted by the staffs of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn approximately one year before the withdrawal.[121] They determined that by the end of 2011 the army would be only partially capable of maintaining internal security, and that it would effectively have no capability to defend its own borders.

This official assessment exists in stark contrast to contemporaneous statements by U.S. officials.[122] It effectively shows that no part of the ISF, including the regular army and the counterterrorism forces, was expected to be able execute its required missions when American forces withdrew in 2011. Assessments in 2010 were validated in 2014,

when many units from the regular Iraqi Army and police effectively collapsed.

Figure 8 shows that it is possible to conduct reasonably accurate combat effectiveness assessments. In this case, the American advisory staff in Iraq successfully assessed the expected performance of the Iraqi Army.

Trending Iraqi Army Combat Effectiveness over Time: 1980–2019

The relatively untested Iraqi Army may have been on the verge of annihilation in the early 1980s as it reeled backward in the face of the Iranian counteroffensive in the Iran-Iraq War. By 1988, the army had reached a zenith of combat effectiveness, but within only two years the massive debts accrued during the war led to a sharp drawdown. The 1991 Gulf War effectively destroyed the regular Iraqi Army, while leaving some of the Republican Guard divisions intact. Postwar sanctions further crippled the army. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi Army was ripe for defeat. It gained some capability and competence from 2004 through 2011, only to slump again as it suffered from politicization and the withdrawal of American combat support. Since the collapse of four divisions in 2014, the army has gradually improved. However, in late 2019, the Iraqi Army is as dependent on U.S. support as it was at the end of 2011. Where it goes from late 2019 is largely dependent on American strategy and support.[123]

FIGURE 8

## Minimum Essential Capabilities for Iraqi Security Forces, 2010 Estimate
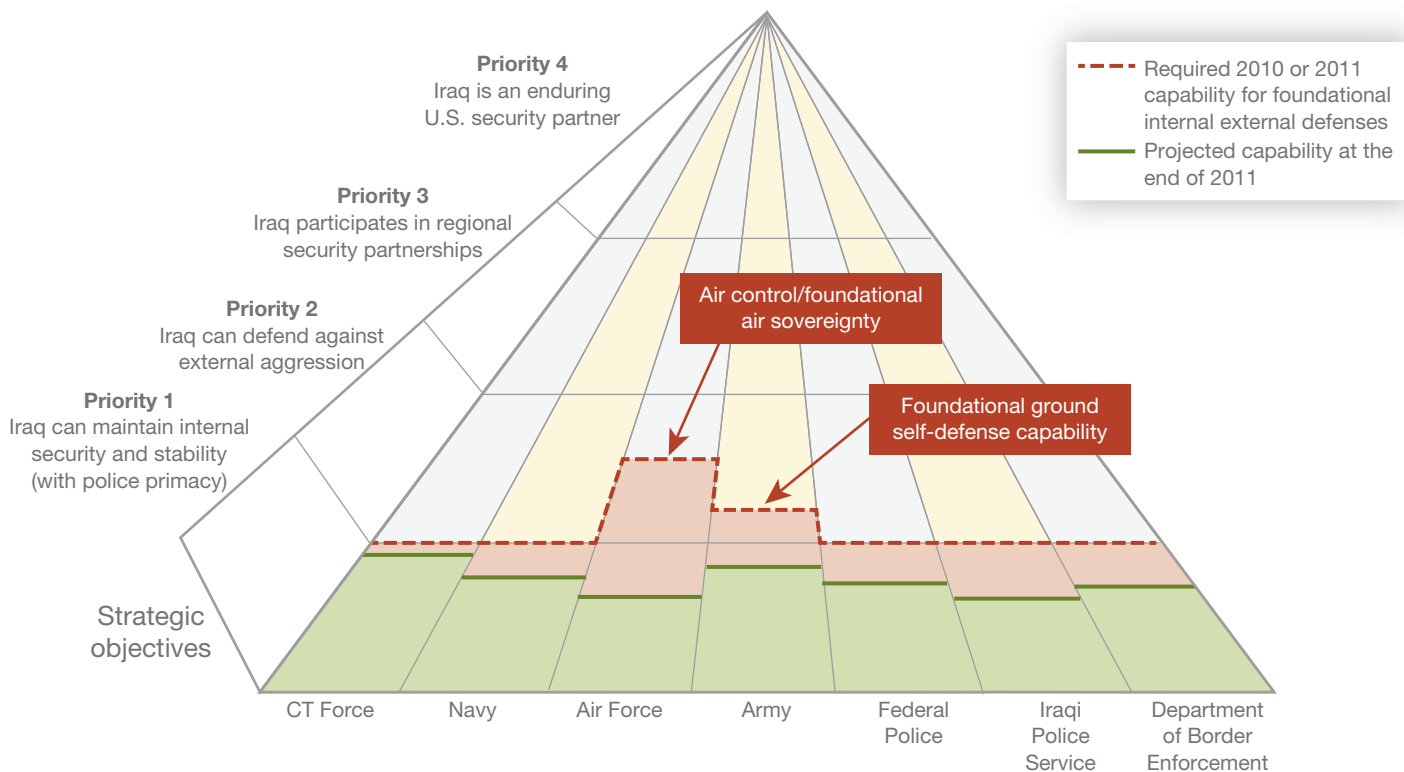
SOURCES: Brennan et al., 2013; official U.S. military documents.

Figure 9 depicts the relative combat effectiveness of the Iraqi Army from 1980 through 2019.[124] This analysis represents a subject-matter expert's interpretation of the historical record cited throughout this Perspective.

This interpretation of Iraqi Army combat effectiveness shows steady improvement from the 2014 collapse through late 2019. However, this improvement came with one incumbent risk: a renewed and perhaps increased dependence on the U.S. military and all of its enabling capabilities. Even with a significantly reduced footprint from the 2003–2011 period, the U.S. military has provided extensive training and close-in combat support. In the Mosul battle, U.S. Army units provided direct combat support, including medium mortars with effective range of less than 6 kilometers; the adviser-advisee relationship is both metaphorically and physically close.[125]

FIGURE 9

Relative Combat Effectiveness of the Iraqi Army, 1980–2019
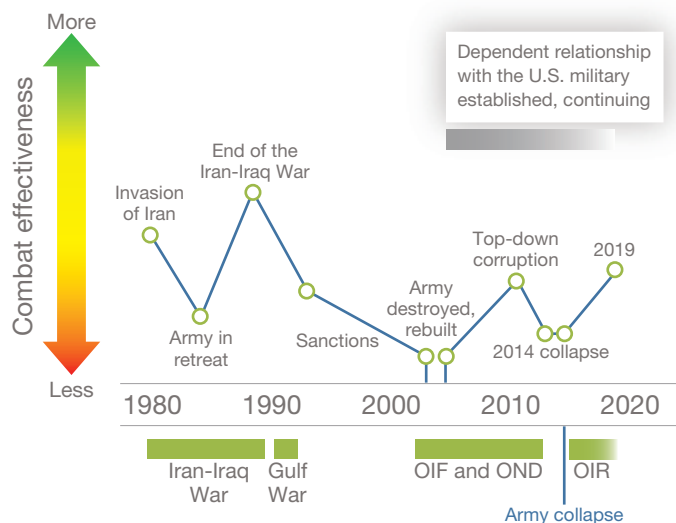
SOURCE: Sources cited on the history of the Iraqi Army cited in this section.
NOTES: OIF = Operation Iraqi Freedom; OND = Operation New Dawn; OIR = Operation Inherent Resolve.

Where the Iraqi Army goes next—up or down in effectiveness—is heavily dependent on the level, type, and consistency of the support provided by the United States.

Building Iraqi Army Combat Effectiveness to Support American National Security Policy

There are several immediate and enduring steps the United States can take to improve the combat effectiveness of the Iraqi Army. Some of these are direct explicitly tied to ongoing operations and security force assistance missions. Others are indirect but no less important.

It is important to note that, as of late 2019, the United States operates in Iraq under the existing Security Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation Between the United States and the Republic of Iraq (SFA). This agreement, in force since January 1, 2009, is specifically tailored to ensure that the government of Iraq can expel U.S. military forces at any time. It prohibits the United States from using "Iraqi land, sea, and air as a launching or transit point for attacks against other countries," and it states that the United States cannot "seek or request permanent bases or a permanent military presence in Iraq." It does call on the United States to provide a broad range of support to the Iraqi state, economy, and military. There is no current Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and Iraq, although negotiations are ongoing.

There are two overarching themes to these recommendations. First, although Iraqi Army dependence on the United States precludes safe and quick withdrawal, dependence can be beneficial to U.S. interests. Dependence offers tremendous opportunity to rebuild American influence to stabilize Iraq and to compete with regional and global adversaries. Strategic dependence—institutional relationships—can and should be enhanced, while tactical dependence—military-to-military relationships—should be temporarily increased and then adjusted to keep security force assistance costs low. Second, U.S. policy should be built around a concept of enduring commitment to Iraq, similar to the diplomatic and lasting military commitments in Japan, South Korea, Germany, and the United

The United States can make concrete efforts . . . to ensure that its investments in the Iraqi Army are properly directed and employed.

Kingdom, all of which remain partly dependent on U.S. military support and guarantees.

The recommendations presented here build from the analysis presented in this Perspective, as well as previous RAND analyses on Iraq cited throughout this document.[126]

Recommendation 1: Increase Diplomatic and Economic Activity in Iraq

The United States can make concrete efforts to rebuild influence to position itself to compete with Iran, Russia, and China and to ensure that its investments in the Iraqi Army are properly directed and employed. U.S. Department of Defense leaders can support all U.S. Department of State efforts to enhance capabilities within the U.S. Embassy, Baghdad, and to expand the U.S. military diplomatic footprint across Iraqi ministries. Particular attention can be paid to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, where more U.S. military presence can pay the greatest dividends. Increased presence can improve enduring American integration into Iraqi Army recruitment,

training, and military operations. Better oversight can help prevent the violation of military equipment end user agreements.

The United States is already executing humanitarian aid and economic programs in Iraq. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is executing nearly $600 million in Iraq through fiscal year 2019, working with the UN, UN World Food Programme, and a variety of other organizations and implementing partners.[127] But more than 1 million Iraqis remain internally displaced. Officially, youth unemployment is nearly 20 percent; it is probably much higher. Many Iraqi cities remain severely damaged after years of war, and Mosul is effectively destroyed.[128] There are endless opportunities for the United States to invest in Iraq. While a reciprocal requirement for aid is not recommended, supplying more aid and directing more aid through the government of Iraq may help to build the influence necessary to carry out the next steps.[129]

Recommendation 2: Building on Improved Influence, Renegotiate Military Presence in Iraq

Current restrictions under the SFA place the U.S. military in a tenuous situation. This was highlighted in 2019, when some members of the Iraqi parliament sought to expel all U.S. military forces from Iraq.[130] Although a new SFA will not prevent the government of Iraq from expelling American forces, it can help set better expectations for the U.S. military role in Iraq. A new SFA can be negotiated with the objective of granting the U.S. military greater leeway for operations and a less tenuous, more enduring presence. Permanent basing might or might not be addressed, but investments in long-term-leased bases can be pursued. Increased effort can be placed on obtaining a SOFA to

ensure the security and safety of U.S. military personnel supporting the Iraqi Army and other ISF.

As of late 2019, these are lofty goals. The United States is probably not well positioned to win these kinds of concessions from the government of Iraq. Many current parliamentarians have anti-American sentiments, and the Iraqi population is still wary of American military forces. Iranian influence, particularly influence through the most aggressively anti-American militias, makes progress toward a more favorable SFA and a new SOFA difficult. Successful actions in Recommendation 1 should be considered prerequisite for the success of actions in Recommendation 2.

Recommendation 3: Maintain Force Levels and Shift to Enduring Training Relationships

As of late 2019, there are several thousand U.S. ground combat advisers, security personnel, and support troops in Iraq. These force levels can be reexamined in detail, but they might be most effective if generally sustained. A recurring rotation of several thousand military personnel is an absorbable cost if it precludes another Iraqi Army collapse and helps to build enduring American influence. Enduring ground presence can provide several benefits to the United States. Ideally, it would (1) help ensure near-term stability as the Iraqi Army continues to build capability, (2) enable a sustained training mission with the Iraqi Army, (3) provide immediate early warning of renewed hostilities and an existing footprint for any necessary expansion of forces, and (4) deter external aggression against Iraq. Current force design can be reshaped for advisory roles at all levels of the Iraqi Army and the Ministry of Defense.

Recommendation 4: Shift Focus of Effort from Iraqi Special Operations Forces to the Regular Iraqi Army

Currently, Iraqi Special Operations Forces—particularly the CTS units, all of which fall outside of ministerial control—receive a significant proportion of American training and equipment. They have also rightfully benefited from the best American combat support, considering their frontline role in retaking urban terrain from the Islamic State. Now that major combat operations against the Islamic State have ended, a policy shift in security force assistance from CTS to the regular army can be considered. This *would not* mean ending support to CTS: American special operations advisers can help CTS transition away from its urban ground combat role and back to its primary purpose of countering terrorism. American security force assistance and foreign internal defense missions can help maintain, and to improve on the existing American-CTS relationship. This recommendation *does* call for a reallocation of both focus and resources.

CTS may have fewer than 10,000 soldiers, all told.[131] This is a woefully insufficient force to protect the entire country of Iraq. The Iraqi Army must be able to provide security to all of Iraq's approximately 40 million people.[132] Given that the army is currently far less capable than CTS, and far less capable than it should be given the original Operation New Dawn minimum essential capability assessments, and given that the weakest units in the Iraqi Army constitute an unacceptable vulnerability to renewed extremist violence, the regular army can and should be built up and equalized in terms of combat effectiveness.

The United States can take two complementary actions to effect this shift. First, it can reallocate its own military training and equipping resources to find the weakest links

Full commitment can and should be made now, before fleeting opportunities are lost.

in the Iraqi Army and seek to improve their combat effectiveness. Building toward a universal minimally acceptable capability—a capability level that needs to be reassessed (see Recommendation 6)—is a prerequisite step to elevating the combat effectiveness of the entire force. Second, the United States can encourage and incentivize the government of Iraq to reallocate resources away from special operations forces to the regular army. This will be an uphill battle, with success heavily dependent on the improvement of influence recommended above.

Recommendation 5: Increase Military Assistance and Sales to the Iraqi Army

The United States currently bases its entire bilateral relationship with Iraq on the security force assistance mission with the Iraqi security forces, including the army, CTS, police, and other organizations.[133] Congress, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the U.S. Department of State already invest considerable resources in the Iraqi Army both through normal military sales and financing channels and through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip (CTEF)

fund.[134] Although it may have played an essential role in the success of the recent Iraqi military campaign, CTEF is authorized by Congress only to defeat the Islamic State. This program may at some point be reduced or transitioned to traditional security force assistance programs.

More can and should be done to focus these efforts on an *enduring* Iraqi Army capability. American policymakers can take every opportunity to invest in the regular Iraqi Army through both financed programs and sales programs. The purposes of this increased investment are to (1) increase the combat effectiveness of the Iraqi Army, (2) displace Russian and Chinese equipment sales, (3) provide better access and influence within the Iraqi Army and Ministry of Defense, and (4) counterbalance Iranian-influenced militias by returning the monopoly of the use of force to the Iraqi ministerial system.

Recommendation 6: Rewrite Combat Effectiveness Assessments

RAND's existing research on will to fight—the disposition and decision to fight, act, or persevere when needed—shows that the U.S. military needs to improve its understanding of combat effectiveness.[135] Ongoing research into the Iraqi Army's combat effectiveness for the U.S. Army reinforces this finding. The U.S. Department of Defense can (1) clearly define combat effectiveness for security force assistance, (2) improve assessment methods and prepare advisers to apply these methods in the field, and (3) establish formal mechanisms to translate assessments into investment decisions—in this case, for the Iraqi Army.

9. Summing Up

A clear-eyed look at the current situation suggests that late 2019 represents a potential turning point for U.S. policy in Iraq. American military and diplomatic influence is as strong as it has been since the 2011 withdrawal, but Iraq's need for American military assistance may not endure. Competition from Iran, Russia, and China is fierce, and all three of these countries may offer more appealing deals than the United States. At the very least, Russia and China are ready to sell weapons without precondition.[136] This kind of transactional relationship is particularly attractive in comparison to the many-strings-attached policies of the United States. Full commitment can and should be made now, before fleeting opportunities are lost.

The ISF represents the only realistic leverage point in the government of Iraq. A special relationship with CTS is good, but it will not lead to national-level influence, and it will not stabilize Iraq or help to meet any of the other long-term American policy objectives. Iraq's navy and air force are too small to matter. Only Iraq's army holds the respect, influence, and potential power to change the game in favor of the United States. Given increased combat effectiveness and confidence—capabilities that can be built through American and allied security force assistance—the Iraqi Army can offset the dangerous growth of militias and provide enduring stability for the Iraqi people.

Notes

1 For example, "Qasem Soleimani: Iraqi MPs Back Call to Expel US Troops," BBC News, January 5, 2020. As of January 6, 2020: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50998065

2 These include, but are not limited to, Ben Connable, "A War That Abhors a Vacuum," *New York Times*, December 18, 2006; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-965-MCIA, 2010; Ben Connable, "The Deeply Mixed Results of the Iraq War," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 21, 2013; Ben Connable, *Defeating the Islamic State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-418, 2014; Ben Connable, "Partitioning Iraq: Make a Detailed Case, or Cease and Desist," *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2016b; Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1003-A, 2016; Ben Connable, "Iraq Reconciliation Requires American Help," *National Interest*, May 4, 2016a; Ben Connable, Natasha Lander, and Kimberly Jackson, *Beating the Islamic State: Selecting a New Strategy for Iraq and Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1562-OSD, 2017; Ben Connable, *Redesigning Strategy for Irregular War: Improving Strategic Design for Planners and Policymakers to Help Defeat Groups Like the Islamic State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, WR-1172-OSD, 2017; Seth G. Jones, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1912, 2017; and Heather M. Robinson, Ben Connable, David E. Thaler, and Ali G. Scotten, *Sectarianism in the Middle East: Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1681-A, 2018, Chapter 3.

3 For example, Amos C. Fox, "Time, Power, and Principal-Agent Problems: Why the U.S. Army Is Ill-Suited for Proxy Warfare Hotspots," *Military Review*, March–April 2019; and Greg Myre, "America's Middle East Scorecard: Many Interventions, Few Successes," National Public Radio, August 25, 2014.

4 Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2019. The world witnessed a preview of these painful and ugly consequences in Syria in October 2019.

5 Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2016; Mohammed Ayoob, "It's Time for America to Disengage from the Middle East," *National Interest*, June 30, 2016; Jeffrey D. Sachs, "US Military Should Get Out of the Middle East," *Boston Globe*, April 3, 2017; Toby C. Jones, "Don't Stop at Iraq: Why the U.S. Should Withdraw from the Entire Persian Gulf," *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2011; and Emma Ashford, "Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2018.

6 Despite the past three administrations' efforts to withdraw from the Middle East, all three have increased American presence there after initial attempts to withdraw. Most recently, the United States reinforced its extensive Middle East presence with an additional 14,000 troops. See all the policy documents cited in Section 2 to understand the clear stated intent of the present administration regarding Middle East military stabilization, deterrence, competition, and counterterrorism requirements (Dan Lamothe, "U.S. to Send 1,800 Additional Troops to Saudi Arabia to Boost Defenses Against Iran," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2019).

7 *Foreign Affairs* published an interesting debate over the Karlin and Wittes article in mid-2019: Robert Satloff, Ian S. Lustick, Mara Karlin, and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Commitment Issues: Where Should the U.S. Withdrawal from the Middle East Stop?" *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2019.

8 James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018.

9 Despite claims to the contrary, the Islamic State remains a functional organization as of late 2019. Many active U.S. military commanders with direct responsibility for the Middle East region, and for the counter–Islamic State campaign, have confirmed this fact. For example, Joseph L. Votel, *Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command—Great Power Competition: The Current and Future Challenges in the Middle East*, February 5, 2019; Missy Ryan, "CENTCOM Commander: Islamic State Disrupted, but Likely to Adjust in the Wake of Baghdadi's Death," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2019.

10 This references the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 coalition invasion of Iraq, the 2003–2011 security force assistance, and the security force assistance mission begun in 2014.

11 Since 1980, the United Kingdom fought in the 1982 Falklands War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 invasion. The United States fought in the Gulf War and 2003 invasion of Iraq and in smaller operations

against armies not fielding effective combined arms in Grenada and Panama.

[12] For example, see commentary in Daniel Manaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Enduring American Presence in the Middle East: The U.S. Military Footprint Has Hardly Changed Under Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2019; "United States Risks Losing Military Edge, Report Says," *DW*, November 15, 2018.

[13] Some of these refer to the reduced emphasis on terrorism in the strategy.

[14] Mattis, 2018.

[15] For analysis of the relationship between the United States and Iran, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, New York: Random House, 2004.

[16] *Economy of force* is a military term that describes an area of minimal importance that can be secured with limited resource investment.

[17] The United States had been involved in the Middle East since the end of the 18th century, but it consistently placed greater emphasis on other regions. For an overview of American policy in the region, see Bacevich, 2016; James F. Jeffrey and Michael Eisenstadt, *U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2016, pp. 24–25.

[18] Most of the secondary sources cited in Section 4 provide some insight into America's relationship with the Iraqi government during the war. For a specific example of intelligence sharing, see Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 250. Joyce Battle provides a summary of declassified intelligence reports relevant to the American-Iraqi relationship during the war. This citation does not necessarily endorse Battle's interpretation of these documents (Joyce Battle, *Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein: The U.S. Tilts Toward Iraq, 1980–1984*, February 25, 2003).

[19] The White House, *Measures to Improve U.S. Posture and Readiness to Respond to Developments in the Iran-Iraq War*, National Security Decision Directive 139, April 5, 1984, p. 2.

[20] For a contextual analysis of the crisis and the American response, see Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, Volume II: *The Iran-Iraq War*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990.

[21] For official force estimates, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress, Chapters I Through VIII*, Washington, D.C., April 1992. Counting Iraqi forces is a somewhat subjective endeavor. It requires assessing the role of forces both in Kuwait and in Iraq, determining the role of the approximately 250,000 Popular Forces militia, and taking into account the unverifiable reporting of the Iraqi government. Also see Pesach Malovany, *Wars of Modern Babylon: A History of the Iraqi Army from 1921–2003*, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2018, Parts III and IV; and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq's Military Forces: 1988–1993*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 1994.

[22] Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Desert Storm and Its Meaning: The View from Moscow*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-4164-AF, 1992; Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Long Shadow of the Gulf War," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2016; Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "Moscow and the Gulf War: Decisions and Consequences," *International Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Spring 1994; Patrick Lee, "Impact of the Gulf War: Crude Plunges; Gasoline Prices to Dealers Cut," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 1991.

[23] Historical information on U.S. ground force locations, and particularly in the Middle East, are notoriously poor. For a good summary of historical sources, see Walter L. Perry, Richard E. Darilek, Laurinda L. Rohn, and Jerry M. Sollinger, eds., *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1214-A, 2015, pp. 16–22. RAND researchers conducted a detailed analysis of available data from 2017 through part of 2019, including data from the U.S. Central Command Historian and the Army's Center of Military History. The permanent stationing of U.S. Army forces in Kuwait after the Gulf War effectively represents a first-of-its-kind action in the Middle East. Previous exercises, operations, construction projects, and intelligence activities were either impermanent or of much smaller scale. See, for example, Heritage Foundation, *2017 Index of Military Strength: Middle East*, Washington, D.C., 2017; Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Han, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017; and various data Defense Manpower Data Center databases.

[24] This figure includes Operation Southern Watch, Operation Northern Watch, Operation Provide Comfort, Operation Desert Strike, Operation Desert Fox, Operation Intrinsic Action, Operation Desert Spring, and

Operation Desert Thunder (Nina M. Serafino, *Peacekeeping and Related Operations: Issues of U.S. Military Involvement*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 18, 2006, p. 16).

[25] See Perry et al., 2015, and Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of the Iraq War: Main Report*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 21, 2003.

[26] See, for example, Bruce Riedel, *Afghanistan: The Taliban Resurgent and NATO*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, November 28, 2006.

[27] Todd Harrison, *Impact of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the US Military's Plans, Programs and Budgets*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009; Lawrence J. Korb, Loren B. Thompson, and Caroline P. Wadhams, *Army Equipment After Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, April 2006.

[28] See, for example, David Johnson, "An Army Trying to Shake Itself from Intellectual Slumber, Part II: From 9/11 to Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, February 6, 2018.

[29] For a review of U.S. policy toward Iraq from 1958 through 2008, see Abbas Kadhim, "Opting for the Lesser Evil: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iraq, 1958–2008," in Robert E. Looney, ed., *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations: Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2009.

[30] Nixon's policy is referred to as the *Nixon doctrine*, the *Twin Pillar doctrine*, and the *Twin Pillars doctrine* in various sources. For readers interested in pre-1980s American policy in the Middle East, and particularly in these policies, see Peter L. Hahn, "Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, March 2006; Jeffrey Kimball, "The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, March 2006; and Bruce R. Kuniholm, "The Carter Doctrine, the Reagan Corollary, and Prospects for United States Policy in Southwest Asia," *International Journal*, Spring 1986.

[31] Howard Teicher and Gayle Radley Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flawed Vision in the Middle East from Nixon to Bush*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave a speech in January 1957 in which he stated that the United States supported "without reservation the full sovereignty and independence" of every nation in the Middle East (Dwight D. Eisenhower, special address to Congress, January 5, 1957). He viewed increasing Soviet interest in the region with concern. Eisenhower specifically stated that "a threat to the territorial integrity or political independence of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan or Turkey [by any communist power] would be viewed by the United States with utmost gravity." He went on to establish an overarching security force assistance policy for American allies in the region; his 1957 policy underpins the U.S. approach in Iraq today. Nixon issued National Security Decision Memorandum 92 in November 1970 (Richard M. Nixon, *U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf*, National Security Decision Memorandum 92, November 7, 1970). In it, he established the so-called Twin Pillars policy that pursued stability in the Middle East by promoting cooperation—really, seeking a workable détente—between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Nixon sought to use this balancing act to put the Middle East on the strategic back burner so he could focus his efforts on China and the Soviet Union. Some argue that this approach fed the ultimate collapse of Iran and the subsequent, further destabilization of the Middle East, including the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War.

Carter's 1980 State of the Union address recentered the Middle East in American national security policy, emphasizing the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the risks inherent in losing control of the world's primary oil supplies (James E. Carter, "State of the Union Address," January 23, 1980). Coming on the heels of the Iranian Revolution and the embassy hostage crisis, Carter's speech was understandably Iran-centric (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The Iranian Hostage Crisis," webpage, undated). Iraq was not highlighted, but its geopolitical importance in the Carter Doctrine was unavoidable. Carter effectively bridged the gap between the failed Twin Pillars policy and the Reagan era.

[32] See the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum's digital library for available digital archival materials, some of which are directly cited in Section 4.

[33] Public Law 99-433, Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, October 1, 1986.

[34] Strategies have not been published every year, as required by Public Law 99-433. Ronald W. Reagan, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1987; Ronald W. Reagan, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1988; George H. W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, August 1, 1991; George H.W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 1990; Bill Clinton,

A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, Washington, D.C.: The White House, July 1, 1994; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, July 1, 1995; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 1996; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1997; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1998; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1999; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2000; George Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States,* Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 2002; George Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 2006; Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, May 27, 2010; Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 2015; Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2017.

[35] Abbas Kadhim discusses the various American efforts to remove Saddam Hussein. For example, he cites the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, signed by President Bill Clinton, that made it "the policy of the United States to seek to remove the Saddam Hussein regime from power in Iraq and to replace it with a democratic government" (Kadhim, 2009, p. 480).

[36] Clearly, many in the George W. Bush administration had a desire, and even rough plans, to invade Iraq at the time that the National Security Strategy was being written.

[37] This includes over $40 billion for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, approximately $136 million for Operations Desert Thunder and Desert Fox, and nearly $40 billion for no-fly zone operations in northern and southern Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom cost an estimated $822 billion, and Operation Iraqi Resolve cost an estimated $23.5 billion, including regional operations in Syria (Serafino, 2006; Neta C. Crawford, *United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY19: 5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated*, Providence, R.I.: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, November 14, 2018. Also see Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014, Summary; and U.S. Department of Defense, "Quarter 2 Cost of War Update as of March 31, 2018," briefing, March 31, 2018.

[38] This is a round estimate extrapolated from 2017 U.S. Department of Defense data and from official accounts of troop deployments from various U.S. military websites, including www.dod.mil and www.inherentresolve.mil. Absent official data, RAND cannot provide an accurate estimate of troop numbers in theater. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Defense ceased publication of official statistics for troop levels in Iraq (Tara Copp, "Pentagon Strips Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria Troop Numbers from Web," *Military Times*, April 9, 2018). Also see Sean J. Ryan, "Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing by Col. Ryan via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq," press briefing transcript, U.S. Central Command, November 27, 2018.

[39] The other two countries are Syria and Afghanistan.

[40] Negotiations over a Status of Forces Agreement collapsed in late 2011, in part because of foot-dragging by the Obama administration and in part because Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's ruling coalition depended on support from parties that opposed continuing American troop presence (James F. Jeffrey, "Behind the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq," Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2, 2014). Lieutenant General Babaker Zebari stated that the Iraqi Army would not be ready for independent operations until 2020 ("Iraq General Says Planned U.S. Troop Pullout 'Too Soon,'" BBC, August 12, 2010).

[41] In general, past arguments for withdrawal have been heavy on negative argumentation and thin on consequence management and forecasting. Critics of the U.S. involvement in Iraq tend to be particularly damning about the lack of planning and poor management of the 2003 war effort, but ironically quite reluctant to provide detailed plans and consequence management ideas for a purposeful withdrawal. The author of this report has argued against such poorly conceived arguments in the past (Connable, 2006, 2016b; Connable, Lander, and Jackson, 2017).

[42] On the so-called Shi'a Crescent, see Patric Clawson, Hanin Ghaddar, and Nader Uskowi, "Middle East FAQs Volume 1: What Is the Shia Crescent?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 17, 2018; and Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Fall–Winter 2008.

[43] Arguably, Lebanon is also an active partner despite the domineering presence of Hezbollah. Oman takes a middle-ground approach and is more closely aligned with the United Kingdom than with the United States.

44 The current Iranian regime has more complex relationships with the Kuwaiti, Omani, and Qatari governments. See, for example, Giorgio Cafiero, *Iran and the Gulf States 40 Years After the 1979 Revolution*, Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, February 8, 2019.

45 As of June 2019, the U.S. Department of State labels both of these groups terrorist organizations (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," webpage, undated). Also see U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the DoD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act*, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1983; Joseph H. Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means,"* West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, October 13, 2008; "U.S. Accuses Hezbollah of Aiding Iran in Iraq," *New York Times*, July 2, 2007; and Michael Knights, *Iran's Ongoing Proxy War in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 1492, March 16, 2009.

46 See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, undated.

47 "Iraq's Shi'ite Militias Formally Inducted into Security Forces," Reuters, March 9, 2018; Michael Knights, *Helping Iraq Take Charge of Its Command-and-Control Structure*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 30, 2019c.

48 Michael Lipin and Rikar Hussein, "Pro-Iran Shiite Militias in Iraq Expanding Despite Iraqi Leaders' Efforts to Curtail Them," *Voice of America*, September 22, 2019; Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 7, August 2019b; Renad Mansour, "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay," *War on the Rocks*, April 3, 2019; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Pitfalls of the Paramilitary Paradigm: The Iraqi State, Geopolitics, and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, June 2019.

49 See, for example, Mike Giglio, "The Flash Point Between America and Iran Could be Iraq's Militias," *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2019.

50 *Contact layer* is a term used in the 2018 NDS. It refers to the conceptual space that reflects daily adversarial competition.

51 Giglio, 2019; Ahmad Majidyar, *Iran-Backed Iraqi Militias Step Up Threat of Violence Against US Forces in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, February 7, 2018; Michael Knights, *Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 21, 2019a.

52 Julian Pecquet, "US Singles Out 'Mafia'-Like Groups as Key Threat to Iraq's Future," *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2019.

53 See, for example, "IS 'Caliphate' Defeated but Jihadist Group Remains a Threat," BBC, March 23, 2019.

54 For a detailed analysis of the Islamic State's history, with additional citations, see Connable et al., 2017.

55 This argument is presented in detail in Connable et al., 2017.

56 For brief summaries of by, with, and through, see Michael J. McNerney, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Calin Trenko-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-350-A, 2014; Diana I. Dalphonse, Chris Townsend, and Matthew W. Weaver, "Shifting Landscape: The Evolution of By, With, and Through," *Real Clear Defense*, August 1, 2018; and Cheryl Pellerin, "Mattis Highlights Working By, With, Through Allies," *DoD News*, October 12, 2017.

57 For a primer on the PMF, see Ranj Alaaldin, *Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, December 2017.

58 For example, see Karlin and Wittes, 2019.

59 Peter Sluglett, "The Cold War in the Middle East," in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 62–78.

60 L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, London: I. B. Tauris and Co., 1984, p. 3. For a quick historical bibliography on the same subject, see Keith Jeffrey, "Great Power Rivalry in the Middle East," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4, December 1982.

61 See Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Aid to and Presence in Iraq*, declassified intelligence analysis, No. 1613/66, October 25, 1966; Central Intelligence Agency, *China and the Iran-Iraq Conflict*, declassified intelligence report, EA M 86-20131J, September 19, 1986; Francis Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and Iraq Since 1968*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, N-1524-AF, July 1980; and Hafizullah Emadi, "China and Iraq: Patterns of Interaction, 1960–1992," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 53, December 31, 1994.

[62] Ilario Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq: The Iraqi Communist Party, Workers' Movements, and the Left 1924–2004*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2003 (tr. 2005); Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq,* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Peter Sluglett, "The Iraqi Communist Party, 1934–1979," *Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914–1974*, Reading, UK: Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2006.

[63] See Karen Dawisha, "Soviet Cultural Relations with Iraq, Syria, and Egypt 1955–1970," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 1975.

[64] James Sladden, Becca Wasser, and Ben Connable, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-236-RC, 2017.

[65] Richard A. Bitzinger, "Arms to Go: Chinese Arms Sales to the Third World," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Fall 1992.

[66] Bitzinger, 1992, pp. 87, 92, 107; Central Intelligence Agency, *Chinese Arms Sales and the Iran-Iraq Conflict*, declassified intelligence report, undated; Central Intelligence Agency, *Iran-Iraq: Buying Weapons for War*, declassified intelligence report, May 1984.

[67] See Sladden, Wasser, and Connable, 2017; Michael Singh, "China in the Middle East: Following in American Footsteps?" *Middle East in London*, June–July 2018; and Tim Arango and Clifford Krauss, "China Is Reaping Biggest Benefits of Iraq Oil Boom," *New York Times*, June 2, 2013.

[68] All sales figures were derived from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018. For information on the M1A1M sale to the government of Iraq, see Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Iraq-M1A1 and Upgrade to M1A1M Abrams Tanks," news release, September 2008.

[69] Pantsyr is an advanced air defense system capable of countering many advanced U.S. military capabilities. The Mi-28N and Mi-35 are direct competitors with the American AH-1 Cobra and AH-64 attack helicopter series. TOS-1 competes with the American M-270 Multiple-Launch Rocket System, and it is capable of firing advanced munitions that present a capable threat to advanced ground combat forces. Su-25 aircraft are equivalent to the American A-10 Thunderbolt II ground attack aircraft, and the BMP-3 is an advanced armored personnel carrier that generally competes with the M-2 and M-3 series Bradley infantry fighting vehicles.

[70] Some of the American-supplied M1A1Ms were reportedly captured by the Islamic State, and the U.S. Department of State reported in 2017 that pro-Iran militias are operating others. See Lead Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve Operation Pacific Eagle—Philippines*, official report, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, 2018, p. 119; and David Axe, "Made in America, but Lost in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2018.

[71] Between 1979 and 1989—just before and just after the Iran-Iraq War—the Iraqi Army acquired more than 6,000 armored vehicles and artillery pieces from the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact arms producers (Rachel Schmidt, *Global Arms Exports to Iraq, 1960–1990*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, N-3248-USDP, 1991, p. 19).

[72] This assumes some growth from late 2018 data. See "Iraq-Russia Trade Reaches $1.4 Billion per Year: Envoy," *Kurdistan24*, September 29, 2018.

[73] Ben Lando, Samya Kullub, and Ben Van Heuvelen, "Iraq Seeks Minority Partners to Develop Massive Mansuriya Gas Field via State Company," *Iraq Oil Report*, August 31, 2019; Simon Watkins, "U.S. and Russia Battle It Out over This Huge Iraqi Gas Field," *Oilprice.com*, September 14, 2019.

[74] Scott W. Harold, *Defeat, Not Merely Compete: China's View of Its Military Aerospace Goals and Requirements in Relation to the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2588-AF, 2018.

[75] Christine Wormuth, *Russia and China in the Middle East: Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-511, 2019; Mathieu Duchatel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem," *War on the Rocks*, January 25, 2019.

[76] "China to Contribute to the Rebuilding of Iraq," *Kurdistan24*, April 16, 2019; "Iraqi Officials, Experts Optimistic About PM's Upcoming Visit to China: Report," Xinhua, September 9, 2019.

[77] 2018 data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity website (Simoes and Hidalgo, 2011).

[78] 2018 data from World Top Exports, undated.

[79] "China-Iraq Trade Exceeds 30 Bln USD in 2018 Amid Increasing Cooperation: Chinese Ambassador," Xinhua, May 6, 2019.

[80] William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, London, UK: Cassell, 1956, p. 547.

[81] These counterarguments emerged during the peer-review quality-assurance process. They also are evident in some of the cited works, such as Karlin and Wittes, 2019.

[82] Tim Arango, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. 'Handed the Country Over,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 2017; Rikar Hussein, "U.S. Official: Iranian Regime Wants Iraq to Become a Province of Iran," *Voice of America*, March 12, 2019; Aaron Magid, "Iraq Is Not an Iranian Vassal State," *Foreign Policy*, May 17, 2019.

[83] See, for example, Kyle Rempfer, "About 60 'Brave Rifles' Troopers Earned Combat Badges on Patrol and Pounding ISIS with Artillery," *Army Times*, June 19, 2019; C. Todd Lopez, "5 Things to Know About Operations in Iraq," fact sheet, U.S. Department of Defense, December 11, 2018; U.S. Central Command, "CJTF-OIR Strike Summary April 21–May 04, 2019," press release, May 7, 2019; and Tara Copp, "Marines Provide Artillery Support for Iraqi Forces in Mosul Attack," *Stars and Stripes*, March 24, 2016.

[84] For more information on CTS, see Michael Knights, *The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2015; David M. Witty, *Iraq's Post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2018; and Michael Knights and Alexander 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, 2017b.

[85] Witty, 2018, p. 2.

[86] Witty, 2018, makes this observation, as do Knights and Mello, 2017b.

[87] Witty, 2018; Knights and Mello, 2017b; and others.

[88] Witty, 2018, p. 64.

[89] These numbers are drawn from Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Fact Book: Middle East: Iraq," webpage, July 2018 estimates. The precise numbers are 438,317 square kilometers; 3,809 kilometers; 1,599 kilometers; and 599 kilometers, respectively.

[90] This broad estimate is also drawn from the CIA World Factbook webpage on Iraq. Previous RAND research shows that there are no contemporary, accurate counts or estimates of Iraq's population (Robinson et al., 2018, Chapter Two).

[91] For example, Joint Publication 3-07, *Stability*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 3, 2016, p. 33; U.S. Department of Defense, *Military Support to Stabilization, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations Joint Operating Concept*, Version 2.0, Washington, D.C., December 2006.

[92] U.S. Department of the Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, December 15, 2006, p. 1–13.

[93] See, for example, James M. Dubik, *Building Security Forces and Ministerial Capacity: Iraq as a Primer*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2009; and Renad Mansour, *Rebuilding the Iraqi State: Stabilization, Governance, and Reconciliation*, Brussels: European Parliament, 2018.

[94] See Connable and Libicki, 2010, pp. 127–140.

[95] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: November 2006*, report to Congress, Washington, D.C., November 2006; Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009, p. 9.

[96] An official, contemporaneous U.S. Marine Corps intelligence report stated plainly that Al Qaida in Iraq was the dominant force in Al Anbar Province, despite the presence of tens of thousands of marines and ISF personnel (First Marine Expeditionary Force G-2, *State of the Insurgency in al-Anbar*, declassified intelligence report, August 17, 2006).

[97] Nicholas J. Schlosser, *The Surge: 2007–2008*, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2017, p. 15.

[98] Schlosser, 2017, p. 92.

[99] See Connable and Libicki, 2010.

[100] Another 2010 RAND report found that effective and *widespread* security efforts by a large body of competent security force personnel was necessary for successful counterinsurgency (Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-964-OSD, 2010).

[101] See Connable and Libicki, 2010, for more analysis of the trends in successful counterinsurgency operations.

[102] For example, it took nearly all the CTS forces, thousands of Federal Police, thousands of U.S. soldiers, and at least two supporting Iraqi Army divisions to retake Mosul from the Islamic State. CTS alone would have been woefully insufficient.

[103] The final section of this Perspective describes the concept of combat effectiveness and suggests ways to improve it in the Iraqi Army.

[104] There are no clear open-source reports on fully independent operations. This statement simply leaves open the possibility that they might have occurred. All available public sources show some level of joint and combined integration in combat. Witty, 2018, suggests that CTS defended Ramadi without any support for a year and a half. However, Iraqi paramilitary police were active within the city, and Iraqi Army units were active around the city during that same time period (around 2015). The author of this report was in contact with individuals communicating with the police commander serving in Ramadi during that period.

[105] Witty, 2018, p. 7.

[106] Although current policy describes the Islamic State as a terrorist group, and operations to defeat the Islamic State as counterterrorism, the group clearly fits within the U.S. Department of Defense definition of an insurgent organization, and U.S. efforts in Iraq to defeat the Islamic State clearly fall within the definitional guidelines of counterinsurgency. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff define insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region." Counterinsurgency is defined as "the combination of measures undertaken by a government, sometimes with United States Government (USG) and multinational partner support, to defeat an insurgency" (Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, pp. ix–x).

[107] For a detailed analysis of the Mosul battle, see Mosul Study Group, *What the Battle for Mosul Teaches the Force*, U.S. Army, 2018; and Michael Knights and Alexander Mello, "Defeat by Annihilation: The Islamic State's All-Out Defense of Mosul," *CTS Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 4, April 2017a.

[108] For more on Iraqi military intelligence, see, for example, Louis Vega, Jr., "Intelligence Training and Advisory Group Establishes Presence in Iraq," press release, U.S. Air Forces Central Command, March 7, 2018. There is limited information on Iraqi Army intelligence in the public domain.

[109] Other partnered countries include Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Lebanese Republic, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Turkey, and Georgia.

[110] Crude oil production and reserve ratings vary by year and source. For example, see Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Country Comparison: Crude Oil: Production," 2016 data; British Petroleum, *Statistical Review of World Energy*, 2019.

[111] Faisal I bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi, unpublished memorandum, March 1933, in Hanna Batutu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 26.

[112] All of the cited polls show greater fluctuation in regard to trust and confidence in other national institutions, including the Federal Police and the ministries of the federal government. For examinations of the role of the Iraqi Army in Iraqi society, see all of the previously cited references on the Iraqi Army, particularly Malovany, 2018, and Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, Elizabeth A. Nathan, Laila Sabara, and Ana M. Venegas, *Saddam's Generals: Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War*, Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2011.

[113] The links between war and oil production are complicated. It is not necessarily true that a drop in Iraqi production has led, or would lead, directly to a rise in global prices. In fact, the opposite correlation occurred in 2014 *after* the Islamic State successfully captured large swaths of the Syrian and Iraqi oil infrastructure. Broader trends related to supply and demand, as well as the growth of hydraulic fracturing in the United States, overwhelmed the potentially devastating effects of this regional war. It is also worth noting that the Islamic State continued oil production from its captured assets. It is sufficient to understand that threats to Iraqi oil production can lead to unpredictable and far-reaching consequences, even if direct cause and effect cannot be extricated from the interwoven holistic mass of global economic data. For more information on oil, war, and American national security, see Charles L. Glaser, "How Oil Influences U.S. National Security," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Fall 2013; Amy Myers Jaffe and Jareer Elass, "War and the Oil Price Cycle," *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, January 1, 2016; Kenneth Rogoff, "What's Behind the Drop in Oil Prices?" *World Economic Forum*, March 2, 2016; and Robert J. Samuelson, "Key Facts About the Great Oil Crash of 2014," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2014.

[114] Other regional military forces, including those from Syria, Turkey, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar also participated in Desert Storm.

[115] Connable, Lander, and Jackson, 2017.

[116] See Connable, Lander, and Jackson, 2017, for more analysis of the 2005 strategy.

[117] U.S. National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2005, p. 1.

[118] Beginning in October 2019, Iraqis around the country undertook large and often spontaneous protests against the government. Several hundred protestors were injured or killed by Iraqi security forces in the ensuing weeks. See, for example, John Davison and Raya Jalabi, "Iraqi Forces Push Protesters Back to Main Square, Kill Five," Reuters, November 9, 2019.

[119] Connable, Lander, and Jackson, 2017, pp. 46–47. In a related working paper, the author of this report argues that the term *end state* is not appropriate for irregular warfare operations and proposes the term *enduring vision* in its place (Connable, 2017).

[120] Literature on combat effectiveness is voluminous and contested. See, for example, Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness—1948–1991*, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002; Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 4, August 2004; Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Autumn 2001; and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

[121] Richard R. Brennan, Jr., Charles P. Ries, Larry Hanauer, Ben Connable, Terrence K. Kelly, Michael J. McNerney, Stephanie Young, Jason H. Campbell, and K. Scott McMahon, *Ending the War in Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of United States Forces—Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-232-USFI, 2013, p. 161.

[122] See then–Brigadier General Jeffrey J. Snow, quoted in Wayne V. Hall, "Operation New Dawn Kicks Off with Clear Focus," *The Advisor*, Vol. 7, No. 9, September 2010, p. 4; Brennan et al., 2013.

[123] For a detailed analysis of the history of the Iraqi Army, see Malovany, 2018.

[124] This assessment is derived from the author's subject-matter expertise and from research in support of an ongoing historical case assessment of the Iraqi Army's will to fight for the U.S. Army. Sources on the Iraqi Army's performance in war, and on its combat effectiveness, can be found in Pollack, 2002; Cordesman and Wagner, 1990; Malovany, 2018; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988; Eisenstadt and Pollack, 2001; Pollack, 2019; Pierre Razoux and Nicholas Elliott, tr., *The Iran-Iraq War*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015; Murray and

Woods, 2014; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, London: Grafton Books, 1989; Rob Johnson, *The Iran-Iraq War*, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011; Woods et al., 2011; Gary Sick, "Trial by Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Spring 1989; Hanns Maull and Otto Pick, eds., *The Gulf War*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989; Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, eds., *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983; Caitlin Talmadge, "The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2013.

[125] For a photograph of U.S. Army personnel providing direct fire support to the Iraqi Army, see Jason Hull, "U.S. Army Mortars Support Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul Fight," U.S. Central Command Photo Gallery, March 18, 2017.

[126] Recommendations here are informed by, but may not directly coincide with, the recommendations from any of these previous reports. All reports can be found at www.rand.org/topics/iraq.html.

[127] U.S. Agency for International Development, *Iraq—Complex Emergency, FY19, Fact Sheet #3,* June 2019.

[128] See U.S. Agency for International Development, 2019; Christopher M. Blanchard, *Iraq and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 11, 2019.

[129] There will be some incumbent risk of increased corruption. This trade-off should be carefully considered.

[130] Geneive Abdo, "Iraq Prepares to Evict U.S. Troops," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2019.

[131] See, for example, Knights and Mello, 2017b; and Witty, 2018.

[132] There is no population estimate of Iraq that is known to be accurate. This estimate is taken from the Central Intelligence Agency's World Fact Book, with a date of estimation of July 2018.

[133] This statement on the U.S. Department of State website on Iraq policy summarizes this approach: "The SFA between Iraq and the United States provides the foundation for the U.S.-Iraq bilateral relationship" (U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Iraq: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," November 13, 2019). Also see David Vergun, "Task Force Commander: ISIS Forces Degraded from Caliphate to Caves," defense.gov, December 11, 2018.

[134] For more on CTEF, see Office of the Under Secretary for Defense (Comptroller), *Justification for FY 2019 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Counter–Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)*, Washington, D.C., February 2018. Also see Michael Nguyen, "Investments Through Divestments," U.S. Army website, September 2, 2019.

[135] Ben Connable, Michael J. McNerney, William Marcellino, Aaron Frank, Henry Hargrove, Marek N. Posard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Natasha Lander, Jasen J. Castillo, and James Sladden, *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2341-A, 2018.

[136] For example, see Ben Connable and Becca Wasser, "The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East," commentary, RAND Corporation, May 10, 2018.

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About the Author

Ben Connable is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, a member of the faculty at the Pardee RAND Graduate School, and a retired Marine Corps intelligence and Middle East Foreign Area officer. He focuses on warfighting, European regional, Middle East regional, and national strategy issues in support of U.S. Department of Defense sponsors. Connable received his Ph.D. in war studies from King's College London War Studies Department.

About This Perspective

n this Perspective, senior political scientist Ben Connable argues that the United States should make a full and enduring commitment to Iraq by providing robust, long-term assistance to the Iraqi Army. A clear-eyed look at the current situation in Iraq suggests that early 2020 could represent a turning point for U.S. policy. U.S. military and diplomatic influence is arguably as strong as it has been since the 2011 withdrawal, but Iraq's urgent need for U.S. military assistance may not endure. Competition from Iran, Russia, and China in Iraq and across the Middle East is fierce. All three of these countries may offer more-appealing deals than the United States. It is time to make a full and enduring commitment to Iraq before fleeting opportunities are lost. Risks and benefits should be weighed carefully, but quickly. The best way to establish that commitment is through robust, long-term assistance to the Iraqi Army.

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