

By Lauren Williamson

Next year's final withdrawal of US troops from Iraq could pose a serious security threat to the burgeoning democracy. In Middle East Report No. 99, released in October 2010, the International Crisis Group deconstructs the country's complex security framework, outlining ambiguities in protocol and inefficiencies in coordination. Arguing that the country's most significant threat is now internal, the report recommends the Iraqi government act quickly to unify its people and fill any gaps created by the withdrawal of US forces.

The 2008 Status-of-Forces Agreement requires all US forces to fully withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011. With just over a year before deadline, there is much work ahead to ensure Iraq can operate solo. In a recent report by the International Crisis Group (ICG), the think tank deconstructs the country's security framework, outlining ambiguities in protocol and inefficiencies in coordination. The ICG argues that Iraq's future success depends on: 1) unifying and integrating the security forces, and 2) implementing stronger government oversight and accountability measures. But these recommendations are premature, as the March elections have left Iraq's government in political paralysis. The parliamentary tensions must first be addressed before Iraqi leaders shift focus to the country's security forces.

Since the March elections, Iraq's parliament has remained deadlocked in choosing a new leader. Incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki trailed only slightly behind secular Shi'ite candidate Ayad Allawi. US-supported plans for creating a power-sharing government between the groups have not been well-received. Maliki's attempt to secure reappointment has led him to align with Moktada al-Sadr's anti-American Shi'ite Islamist bloc, which analysts say indicates Iran's expanding influence over Iraq. This political environment is sure to stymie any attempt by Iraqi leaders to pursue the ICG's recommendations, as constructive as they may be.

In the report, the ICG carefully details the security framework explaining the various armed entities and six separate intelligence agencies operating within Iraq. A daunting point made by the ICG is that "who controls these various agencies is unclear." Although each agency was individually created to handle differentiated tasks, there exists much overlap which leads to inconsistencies and inefficiencies. Additionally, rivalry has developed between the groups. Such problems link to the US's initial response to the insurgency. To quickly quell the violent upsurge during the civil war years 2005-2007, the US increased quantity – not quality – of security forces. There were no background checks or assurances in loyalties. The ICG argues reversing that trend by focusing on quality of forces, should be the course of action over the next year.

But such efforts would be hampered by the existing inner tensions and public mistrust of the government, particularly amidst Maliki's power grab since 2008. Many Iraqis feel he has exploited the weaknesses in the country's 2005 constitution and that he manipulates security forces to further his own autocratic tendencies and harass political opponents. The ICG suggests the government enforce a hierarchy among the security bodies and set consistent protocol while limiting the political power of any one individual. Yet, if Maliki does secure reappointment, it is doubtful his government would readily support such measures.

Beyond this, the corruption in the country must be addressed. Iraq must therefore combat the problem of ghost soldiers, or soldiers who do not work but take in pay. They must thwart the increase in bribery through which jailed criminals are easily freed and insurgent attackers bypass security checkpoints. The ICG's report does not specifically make recommendations to solve these issues, but it is clear that the government must create an incentive structure that will yield liberal behaviour from citizens. Iraqi quality of life and available economic opportunities must be fruitful enough and legal consequences intimidating enough to make corrupt activities less appealing.

Paternalistic US support may have inadvertently contributed toward stunting the progress of Iraq's internal security. The fear is that when US forces leave in 2011 – taking funding, logistics and equipment with them – it will kick away the crutches too soon. The ICG's report labels the US military as Iraq's "primary bonding agent," but says US military support provides the perfect incentive to offer in return for the Iraqi government adopting a stronger regulatory framework. But this enticement does little to help Iraq create its own bonding agent, and a squabbling parliament is unlikely to easily agree on new regulations which need to be in place before the end of 2011.

Achieving comprehensive security requires a more holistic approach than the one provided by the ICG. One in seven Iraqi men is armed, and the report recommends continued integration of former insurgents into existing forces or public sector employment. However, there are profound ramifications of handling such a surplus of fighters. If quality, not quantity is the way forward, as the ICG suggests, Iraq is facing a significant challenge in reabsorbing former fighters into civilian life. Not only does the country need to offer appealing employment opportunities, but to achieve successful reintegration it must also emphasize re-education. The archetypal grandeur experienced during warfare does not lose its attraction when a war ends, and this psychological desire is hard to quench through the non-combatant roles civilian life offers. It is possible that these individuals will seek fighting elsewhere, becoming liabilities to Iraq's internal security.

The report states "no external threat appears on the horizon" for Iraq. The ICG maintains that insurgent groups are not strong enough to topple the government. Such statements may be harmful if they contribute to a false sense of confidence about the capabilities of the deeply divided government. Iraq's internal tensions might make the country more vulnerable to external threats.

While the report offers a solid analysis of Iraq's security workings and provides recommendations for reviving the regulatory architecture that governs them, it is insufficient in setting a path for achieving total security for the burgeoning democracy. Solving the political deadlock and attaining inner cohesion should be the top priority. In fact, the Strategic Framework Agreement of 2008, which roughly outlines the longer-term Iraqi-US relationship, may need to be amended as troops depart, to allow for a more comprehensive approach in achieving security for the country.

This article was originally written for and published by [The Majalla](#) .

The International Crisis Group report can be accessed [here](#) .