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Looking in All Directions

NATO Mission Iraq and the Alliance's Role on Its Southern Flank

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Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO is once again focusing its attention on classic alliance defence on the eastern flank. While this shift is right, NATO should not lose sight of other threats. Above all, this applies to fragile states on the alliance's southern periphery. With its advisory mission in Iraq, NATO is looking for ways to stabilise the region with a moderate use of resources – and to define the role the alliance itself wishes to play overall in the southern neighbourhood in the future.

NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is the last NATO mission outside European territory. In times of strategic reorientation – away from crisis management on the southern flank and towards classic deterrence and alliance defence on the eastern flank – it is a relic of the out-of-area missions of past decades. The mission has been active in Baghdad since 2018 and aims at strengthening Iraqi security institutions in order to support Iraq in its fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS).

NATO's renewed concentration on its eastern flank has made it necessary for the alliance to contemplate what role it wishes to play in its southern periphery in the future with respect to fragile states, terrorism, wars and crises. Besides robust crisis management measures, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept primarily envisages civil-military support for partner states deemed strategically important in order to strengthen the resilience of these countries. Unlike the previous mission, NATO Training Mission Iraq, or the major missions in Afghanistan, NATO Mission Iraq is purely an advisory mission. With NMI, NATO aims to provide answers to the challenges it is facing on its southern flank and to fulfil the ambition it formulated in 2015 of maintaining a defensive posture based on a 360-degree approach. But is that proving successful in Iraq, and can the mission be a model for future missions to other countries?

NMI as Part of the 360-Degree Approach

After the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and the onset of the Russian war of aggression in

Ukraine in 2022, there has been a major shift in NATO's focus from its southern flank to its eastern flank. This shift is important and necessary. Yet, it is not in NATO's interests to abandon the skills in crisis management and out-of-area operations it has gained over the last two decades or to neglect its southern neighbourhood. Carlo Masala for example argues with regard to foreign missions of the German armed forces: "The reasons why foreign deployments may be necessary have not disappeared overnight. The world has not suddenly become safer in this respect. In our security considerations, we cannot neglect to include both territorial and alliance defence on the one hand and foreign deployments on the other hand."¹ The same is true for NATO as a whole.

The alliance is pursuing a 360-degree approach ratified in the June 2015 defence minister meeting in Brussels that entails the ambition of meeting security challenges on both its eastern and southern flanks.² Traditional alliance defence and deterrence are supposed to go hand in hand with out-of-area missions, the fight against terrorism and international crisis management. Despite this aim, NATO's focus on its eastern flank, formalised in June 2022 with the new Strategic Concept, has forced it to reduce its ambitions in its southern periphery.

To assert its security interests on the southern flank NATO has developed the concept of "projecting stability".³ By connecting crisis management missions with the principle of cooperative security, NATO aims to stabilise its southern

periphery. The approach envisages cooperation with selected partner countries that are to be enabled to guarantee their own security and thus contribute to the stabilisation of the region overall.⁴ While NATO has focused on either training missions at the tactical/operational level, such as NATO Training Mission Iraq (NTM-I) and the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, or on combat missions such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the past, NMI focuses on the strategic level and provides advice to Iraqi security institutions.

The decision for NATO Mission Iraq was taken in July 2018 at the NATO summit in Brussels. The set-up of NMI began in August of that year in Baghdad. The mission's goal is to support Iraq in establishing sustainable, transparent, inclusive and effective security institutions and forces that can stabilise the country, combat terrorism and prevent a resurgence of IS.⁵ The mission encompasses around 600 soldiers, among them 150 advisors, with contributions from all NATO member states and NATO partner Australia.⁶ The German Bundeswehr is contributing some 45 soldiers. NMI is in Iraq at the request and invitation of the Iraqi government and is advising Iraq's Ministries of Defence and Interior, the Office of the National Security Advisor, the National Operations Centre and professional military education institutions assigned to the defence ministry.⁷ Advisory tasks focus on training, personnel, logistics and standardisation. For example, NMI involves German Bundeswehr officers advising professional Iraqi military education institutions on the orientation of training for Iraqi soldiers. NMI's long-term goal is a comprehensive reform of the Iraqi security sector.⁸

NATO Mission Iraq differs significantly from its predecessor. NTM-I was a classic training mission in Iraq from 2004 to 2011 that contributed to the training of about 5,000 Iraqi officers and 10,000 policemen. Compared to the far greater engagements by the US and the Multi-National Force Iraq, NATO, unlike in Afghanistan, always played a minor role in the country at the time. One of the reasons for this was the rejection on

the part of member states such as Germany of the war in Iraq. Following the withdrawal of the US Army, Iraq became an official NATO partner in 2011, forming the basis of today's NMI advisory mission.

20 years after the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq is still a fragile state.

Unlike ISAF, NMI is not a combat mission. It also has a much smaller footprint (fewer soldiers) than the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. This gives it low public visibility, making it politically and militarily less vulnerable and therefore more flexible. The advisory mandate of the mission is limited to the alliance's core military expertise and is clearly defined, so that the mission can precisely target areas where Iraqi security forces have the greatest need to catch up.⁹ The mission also combines military and civilian elements and is strongly oriented towards Iraqi needs. In times when NATO is tied to its eastern flank, NMI thus represents an attempt to efficiently and effectively project stability into areas on its periphery while maintaining a low political profile and using few resources. But is this sufficient, given the major challenges Iraq is facing?

The Challenges in Iraq

In the Middle East, and thus NATO's southern periphery, Iraq holds special geostrategic significance. Its 40 million inhabitants make it the third-most populous country in the Arab world. Iraq's size means that developments there have an impact on the entire region. The country can be both an anchor of stability or a factor of instability. It borders on Turkey and thus shares a direct border with NATO. There is therefore a great interest in a stable Iraq closely tied to NATO – especially given the 2015 refugee crisis and the terror attacks by al-Qaeda and IS in Europe. However, the country's challenges are tremendous and exemplify the insecurity

factors NATO is facing on its southern flank. From a security policy perspective, three of these challenges are particularly important:

1. Iraq's weak statehood,
2. Islamic State's continued presence in the country, and
3. the influence of external actors, especially Iran.

20 years after the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq remains a fragile state characterised by a low degree of statehood. Although the country has stabilised in the last few years, it is still near the top of the Fragile States Index.¹⁰ Iraq has experienced repeated phases of complete state failure as a so-called failing state since 2003.¹¹

The democratic system in Iraq is young and a democratic culture still not firmly established. State institutions are weak and characterised by corruption and nepotism. The ethnic/religious fragmentation of the political system has also contributed to state fragility.

An expression of Iraq's limited statehood in the past few years has been its weak security institutions. While Iraq now has control over its entire territory for the first time since 2014 – a noticeable advancement – a long-term strengthening of the army and police force remains one of Iraq's major challenges given the security situation. What is more, there are the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella of militias that is nominally under Baghdad's



Gaping void: After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the US-led forces largely dissolved his security apparatus – initially creating a security vacuum. The picture shows Firdaus Square in the centre of Baghdad with the pedestal that bore a statue of the Iraqi dictator until 2003. Photo: © Mohammed Jalil, dpa, picture alliance.

command, but is de facto not completely integrated into the country's security sector and is partially controlled by external actors such as Iran and by local political and religious leaders. These militias have an ambivalent relationship with the state. While they support the state to some extent (in combatting IS, for instance), they are often in competition with it and form their own parallel structure.

Iraqi and international forces are currently maintaining military pressure on IS and limiting its radius.

In recent years, weak Iraqi statehood has created a vacuum in the region, one that other actors have exploited. For instance, the weakness of Iraq's security forces, in conjunction with the civil war in Syria, facilitated the rise of IS in 2013. IS is essentially an Iraqi terror organisation that controlled about one third of Iraqi territory between 2014 and 2016, including Mosul, which is home to millions. The international coalition against IS, made up of 86 partners including Germany, succeeded in destroying the IS territorial caliphate, but IS itself has not disappeared.

The organisation has succeeded in morphing back into an underground insurgency movement with asymmetric means and maintains structures and cells in Iraq while executing regular attacks on Iraqi and Iraqi-Kurdish security forces. Its areas of operation are in central Iraq south of Kirkuk and in the hard-to-control desert areas on the Iraq-Syria border. Iraqi and international forces are currently maintaining military pressure on IS and limiting its radius, preventing it from executing larger, more complex attacks. However, if this pressure subsides, IS might regain its strength and once again pose a threat to Europe.

In addition to the rise of IS, weak statehood has also promoted external actors' influence in Iraq. Since 2003, Iraq has become the arena for

geopolitical and regional power struggles. This primarily pertains to conflicts between Iran and the US in the Middle East. Iraq is an essential component of Tehran's strategy, which involves creating a Shiite axis from the Mediterranean to Central Asia in order to consolidate its geo-strategic position and expand its influence in the international system by establishing a military threat posture. The targeted establishment and expansion of militias has enabled Iran to become the most important external actor in Iraq.

Opposing Iran is the US, the second important actor in Iraq, whose policy is aimed at containing and isolating Iran. Iraq oscillates between these two poles, with each side attempting to assert its interests in the country. This confrontation has incrementally escalated since the terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023. Militias affiliated with Iran have executed more than 150 attacks on US positions in Syria and Iraq since mid-October 2023. The US, which still has 2,500 soldiers stationed in Iraq, has responded with retaliatory strikes against these militias.

At global level, too, Iraq is increasingly becoming a theatre for geopolitical competition. China and Russia in particular, at times in cooperation with Iran, are attempting to expand their influence in Iraq at the expense of the US and its allies. During his visit to Moscow in October 2023, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani expressed an interest in joining the BRICS format during his talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹² For Iraq, whose current government is pursuing a neutral foreign policy course, this would mean turning away from the West and towards the East, which would undermine attempts to connect the country closer with the US and Europe.

Difficult Tasks and Initial Successes

With respect to the three challenges – weak statehood, IS persistence and external influence, especially by Iran – NMI operates in an extremely volatile environment. This volatility

has been intensified since December 2023 with a renewed discussion in the country about an end of the international coalition against IS and the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, which control military bases in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and in central Iraq.

Actors in the country who favour Iran, and tend to come from the Shiite Arab spectrum, tradi-

tionally call for a withdrawal of American forces to strengthen Tehran's position. Repeated US military strikes against Shiite militias on Iraqi territory have given renewed vigour to these voices. The Iraqi government has so far been cautious. Yet there are also efforts within the government to end combat missions by foreign troops in Iraq. The main reason for this has to do with reputation: Iraq is to prove that it is



Weapons seized from IS: The Islamist terrorist organisation has been significantly weakened in Iraq in recent years. However, it has by no means disappeared. Photo: © Hadi Mizban, AP, picture alliance.

a safe, “normal” country that is no longer reliant on external military support in its struggle against IS.

In Iraq, NATO standards are considered the highest and best.



NMI has not yet been the target of withdrawal demands. This is insightful in terms of NMI’s successes in meeting the challenges in Iraq and promoting NATO’s security interests in the southern periphery. First of all, it is clear that the mission is held in high esteem by Iraqi decision-makers, who particularly appreciate NATO’s expertise. In Iraq, NATO standards are considered the highest and best. The government in Baghdad hopes for Iraqi security forces to benefit from this. Owing to great Iraqi demand, NMI was already enlarged once, in 2021, and the advisory mission was expanded to include the Ministry of the Interior in the summer of 2023 at the request of the Iraqi government. This makes sense from a practical perspective – the paramilitary Federal Police, comparable to the Italian Carabinieri or the French Gendarmerie, have repeatedly assumed military tasks, especially in the fight against IS – but also demonstrates the trust NMI has built up among Iraqis over the last five years. Second, NMI benefits from having only an advisory and no combat mission, as well as from not being perceived as US-dominated.

At the same time, it is clear that NMI cannot meet Iraq’s challenges on its own. They are too large and complex. Reforming the Iraqi security sector is a colossal task and politically difficult to execute, since a large number of veto players are involved. Nevertheless, the NMI mandate is the right one for the challenges in Iraq. It explicitly aims at strengthening state structures. In this area, NATO works with the civilian European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq), which has been in the country since 2017, and with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Overall, the mission is bearing its first fruit five years after its inception. Practical support for Iraqi security forces has allowed them to stabilise greatly over recent years. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq has traditionally had strong state security institutions. In the 1980s, the Iraqi army was deemed to be one of the strongest in the region. But the conflicts of past decades and especially the complete dissolution of the army after 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority, have left their mark on Iraqi security forces.

The partial collapse of the Iraqi army in its fight against IS in Mosul in the summer of 2014 represented a low point in Iraq's recent history and bore testimony to the weakness of the Iraqi security sector; a sector that was plagued by corruption and mismanagement in the mid-2010s.

NATO can apply important skills to the task of further stabilising the Iraqi state.

Since then, Iraq's security forces have consolidated again, including in the course of the recapture of territory originally occupied by IS and thanks to international support. Today, NMI representatives attest to a good state of the Iraqi army with respect to equipment and tactical-operational training. What the security forces are missing is organisation and long-term orientation in peacetime. This strategic level is precisely where NMI, unlike the international coalition against IS, is directing its work at. This ensures that a potentially greater effect can be achieved with less personnel deployment. That Iraqi statehood has, according to the Fragile States Index, improved since 2017, especially in the area of security forces, is partially due to NMI.

At the same time, realism is needed, since NMI is faced with three strategic challenges and one operational one. First, reforming security forces remains the task of the Iraqi government. One advantage of this is clear ownership; at the same time, it makes NMI dependent on Baghdad's political will. While Iraq has stabilised politically since the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani took office in October 2022, the situation continues to be fragile and the country politically fragmented. Navigating the complicated political context in Iraq is a challenge for all international actors.

A second challenge is related to this: NMI aims to establish state structures, which are repeatedly undermined by Iran through the infiltration of the security sector by Iran-friendly militias

and the creation of parallel structures. Tehran has no interest in sustainable security sector reform, nor is it interested in strong regular Iraqi security forces, given the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. This means that the mission's success not only depends on the will of the Iraqi government, but also indirectly on Iran's willingness to cooperate, and this last point limits the mission's scope.

The third challenge is that NMI has so far been limited to the forces of Iraq's central government. Reforming the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga is the job of the international coalition against IS. Efforts have been stagnant for years due to inter-Kurdish upheavals.¹³ This also stymies NMI's long-term success.

The fourth challenge is the short time on the ground for NATO advisors in Baghdad (generally six months), which entails great operational challenges. The mission is being carried out in a region where personal relationships play a crucial role, and its success is therefore in many ways dependent on trust between advisors and representatives of Iraqi security forces. Short advisor stays hamper relationship sustainability and the advisory success on the whole.¹⁴

Overall, NMI closed a gap in Iraq that had existed between the training of the Iraqi and Iraqi-Kurdish security forces at the tactical-operational level by the international coalition against IS on the one hand, and the support of comprehensive security sector reform by the EU and the UNDP at the political-administrative level, on the other. NATO can apply important skills to the task of further stabilising the Iraqi state. But it is also clear that success in combating IS was largely due to US military support as part of the international coalition against IS. NMI's mandate would not allow it to close the gap left by a possible US withdrawal from Iraq; its advisory mission means that it will always remain a complementary instrument. Moreover, the extent to which a possible withdrawal of the international coalition against IS, which provides logistical support to NATO, would impact on NMI, remains to be seen.

Politically, NMI strengthens Western presence in Iraq and secures important channels of communication. At the level of the political elite, it thus represents a meaningful component of the relationship between Iraq and the Western states. If NMI is successful in helping to further strengthen state authority in the country, the vacuum in Iraq that enables external influence and the persistence of IS, will also dwindle, thus strengthening the country's overall sovereignty. NMI's successes in the past few years are encouraging with regard to this goal.

Is NMI a Model for Further Missions in NATO's Southern Periphery?

In NATO's 75th year of existence, the focus has returned to the threat that prompted the alliance's formation: an attack by Russia on its eastern flank. Deterrence and conventional alliance defence are the order of the day. But NATO must maintain the expertise that it has built up over the last two decades in crisis management and out-of-area missions and keep an eye on its southern flank. Given limited resources, it will be a challenge for the alliance to fulfil its aspirations of maintaining defence based on its 360-degree approach, especially since the Indo-Pacific may well become a third theatre in the future.

NATO Mission Iraq shows how NATO can contribute to stabilising its southern periphery. Experiences in Iraq are positive and can serve as a model for similar NATO missions in other parts of the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel. The concept of a small, flexible advisory mission with a low political profile and decreased political and military vulnerability, a tightly defined mandate and a concentration on NATO's core competencies and the needs of the host country has so far proven useful in cooperating with NATO's partner, Iraq. This approach affords NATO the opportunity to work with other actors to counter the complex threats on its southern flank and support strategically important states in a targeted manner, while remaining realistic about the complexity and magnitude of the challenges in those countries.

NATO's limitation to an advisory mandate makes the alliance itself an interesting partner for other countries and allows it to secure important channels of communication and visibility as part of the West's larger "Global South" approach. From a German perspective, missions such as the one in Iraq offer a way of contributing to burden-sharing within NATO at comparatively little cost, thus improving transatlantic relations.

The increasing spread of terror organisations could make states in West and East Africa particularly suitable spots for similar missions in the future. This would require political will and clear ownership on the part of such partners. For NATO, establishing a partnership on eye level would be critical. Moreover, its aspiration should not be to solve political problems with advisory services. Missions such as NATO Mission Iraq can only ever be part of a comprehensive approach. Nevertheless, they represent an instrument that the community of Western nations should increasingly employ in NATO's 75th year of existence.

– translated from German –

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