



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

Prospects for strategic partnership between Iraq and NATO

By Ali Ziad al Ali



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By Ali Ziad al Ali*

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO – is a strategic intergovernmental military alliance with considerable global leverage by virtue of its strategic strengths and capabilities, as well as, the military capabilities of its 29 member states, mainly the United States. NATO has been involved in many counterterrorism operations in Iraq, and also participated in the Global Coalition against Da'esh, which had a significant impact on the outcome of combating Da'esh. In total, twenty-three NATO members have participated in the training and support of Iraq's military, through the provision of financial aid and military funding and equipment. NATO considers Iraq its strategic partner in the Middle East. NATO has started its strategic relationship with its training mission of 2004, known as “NTM-I” (NATO Training Mission – Iraq), where NATO trained more than 15,000 Iraqi officers.

First: the evolution of the strategic relationship between Iraq and NATO

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The strategic relationship between Iraq and NATO began in 2004 at Istanbul summit, when several protocols were signed for joint military cooperation, including the training of Iraq's security forces, particularly the Special Forces, as well as mapping out NATO's role in raising the readiness of Iraq's security forces (both army and police).¹

In 2011, NATO granted Iraq partner status, and in 2012 the two sides signed an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, providing a framework for political dialogue and strategic cooperation. Subsequently, in 2012, Iraq became a full NATO strategic partner.² The Partnership aims to broaden the scope of military cooperation in order to upgrade Iraq's strategic military capabilities.

The relationship was given a further boost at the 2014 NATO Summit, when NATO members expressed their readiness to consider a raft of measures towards Iraq within the framework of the NATO Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, on the margins of a visit by Prime Minister Haider Abadi to the headquarters of the Alliance in Brussels, where he requested an increase in military cooperation and an increase in the volume of military assistance for Iraq's forces in the war against Da'esh. The DCB package for Iraq was formally agreed in July 2015 following a request from the Iraqi government, which included defensive capacity-building measures and the provision of assistance in a number of key military areas, such as tactical training for units of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces.³

NATO subsequently announced a further initiative called the "Strategy Focus Team" to train and enhance the readiness of Iraq's forces, especially following their campaign against Da'esh, whereby NATO stepped up military training and the development of the capacity of the security forces in other areas, such as explosive ordnance disposal and demining.

At the NATO Summit of 2016, Allied leaders agreed on providing direct support for the Global Coalition to Defeat Da'esh and authorised the use of NATO-AWAC surveillance and refuelling aircraft and agreed on further training and capacity-building in counterterrorism. In 2017, a joint team of Iraqi intelligence and military personnel was established at NATO headquarters in Baghdad to coordinate training activities and capacity-building to support Iraq's security forces and institutions.⁴

NATO and Iraq are engaged in strategic framework and practical cooperation aimed at developing the capacity of Iraq's security forces, its defence and security institutions, as well as its national defence academies. Following the defeat of Da'esh in Iraq and the restoration of sovereign control over all its territory in late 2017, NATO scaled up its training and advisory efforts in Iraq at the government's behest.

Secondly: the substance of the strategic cooperation between Iraq and NATO

We have already mentioned that NATO plays a major role in the training and rehabilitation of Iraq's security forces, where it has adopted numerous strategic and tactical programmes specifically tailored for the needs of Iraqi forces, especially in the fields of counterterrorism and demining, urban warfare and the rooting out of terrorist cells and electronic warfare. The NATO Training and Capacity Building activities in Iraq currently underway may be summarised as follows:

1. Counterterrorism

NATO provides Iraq with support in its fight against terrorism, enhancing its ability to launch a comprehensive series of military operations against Da'esh with the participation of several NATO members. This series includes operational planning and the optimal use of military capabilities, based on an integrated military

structure. As a first step, NATO has developed its own counterterrorism strategy which requires strong commitment from all NATO member states to support Iraq in this initiative, now that Iraq is a strategic partner in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East.⁵

2. Military planning

The success of Iraq's security apparatus in their fight against terrorism has depended on the strategic management of joint operations with NATO and the Global Coalition, providing a qualitative shift in managing the theatre of engagement with Da'esh, especially in urban warfare. Planning, organisation, issuing of commands, coordination and observations are all essential for the operational partnership between Iraq and NATO within the global coalition mechanism⁶.

3. Restructuring the Military and Security Sectors

NATO is engaged in professionalising armed forces, conducting continuous professional development programmes at the NCO Academy in Iraq, and completing its strategic mission to develop Iraq's military doctrine. It is also providing training for other segments of Iraq's forces, particularly the Special Operations Forces, contributing significantly to a greater readiness of the Iraq's security forces.

4. Defence and cyber-security

NATO is working on building and developing Iraq's cyber security and defence capacity to enhance protection against risks emanating from digital technology, given its increased use for terrorist purposes. NATO is focussing its training on protecting the confidentiality of data and information belonging to Iraq's strategic security institutions. Through its training teams, NATO is helping Iraq to address security-based risks, as well as cyber threats.⁷

5. Fighting corruption

NATO is playing a major role in building Iraq's capacity to combat security and military corruption by intensifying training guidance to address corruption in Iraq's security institutions by introducing e-governance into security administration and oversight in order to consolidate transparency of national security institutions.

6. Maintenance of military equipment

NATO is training special units within the security institutions, namely the Ministry of Defence, to maintain military equipment, especially in the field of electronic maintenance. Based on the fact that Iraq uses a variety of equipment used by NATO forces as well, it benefits from NATO's trainers in improving the skills of its combat troops in dealing with modern military weapons and equipment, especially electronic weapons systems.⁸

7. Professionalisation of armed forces through training

NATO's challenge was in transitioning from being a training provider to developing and guiding Iraqi trainers, which is ultimately meant to build Iraq capacity to independently organise and direct the training of its own security forces as part of the broader strategic relationship with NATO.

After 2010 – which marked the beginning of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq – Iraq's armed forces and the Ministry of the Interior assumed additional security responsibilities. NATO's main responsibilities during the transition period were to unify the training of security officers, to train the federal police force, to provide assistance to the Border Security Directorate, and to improve the operational capacity of Iraq's Special Forces.⁹

Third: The future of the bilateral strategic partnership

The future of the strategic partnership between Iraq and NATO is illustrated by the announcement of the Commander of the US Central Command in the Middle East, General Joseph Votel, that NATO intends to open a military base in Iraq in the autumn of 2018.

In a press statement, Votel added that the base will be mainly used for additional training missions and other purposes, aiming at enhancing the training capabilities of Iraq's security forces and also contributing to the overall reforms of the security sector in Iraq. NATO forces arriving in Iraq will establish a military base in the country, which will eventually accommodate more than 250 troops and trainers, as well as armoured vehicles, helicopters and drones.¹⁰

The military base in Iraq will provide additional means for the strengthening of the strategic partnership between Iraq and NATO, within the framework of sustaining military assistance; the development of training techniques for Iraqi forces, providing support for the building of a more effective national security structure and establishing new military schools. There are also ongoing Iraqi-NATO consultations to form a special task force to carry out special operations against the remnants of Da'esh in Iraq and Syria, which will constitute a turning point in Iraq's security capabilities in the Middle East.

Conclusion

NATO's role in Iraq has evolved from tactical role into a long-term bilateral relationship. Since the formation of NATO's Training Mission in Iraq in 2004 – at the request of Iraq's Interim Government – and in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1546 – the aim of the Mission has been to assist Iraq in developing the capacity and structure of the security forces, and to train Iraqi forces so that Iraq can have an independent, effective and sustainable

capacity to meet the challenges posed by terrorism.

NATO's mission has never been a combat mission; it was strategic both in performance and functions. It was formulated to be more of an advisory and training mission. The Mission's activities have always been coordinated with the Iraqi Government and the Deputy of Guidance and Training at the General Command Office. NATO's members and allies also established an Iraq trust fund to provide financial and military assistance, which is an important step towards enhancing Iraq's military capacity.

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