

NATO MISSION IN IRAQ: ONE MISSION, MANY NATIONS

Noor Omer | April 4, 2024



Director's Special Note on the 75th Anniversary of NATO Creation

Even as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrates its 75th birthday, some question this multinational security alliance's validity and necessity. While those in the camp favoring its existence consider it to be the only platform that brings Europe and North America together every day, critics in the US, one of the largest donors to the Alliance, consider it to be a luxury item that the US doesn't need at this day and age.

NATO's mission has evolved, expanded, and, by some accounts, lost its focus with the change in the nature of global issues that its member countries have faced over its 75-year existence. "NATO's essential and enduring purpose is to safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means," as stated in the bylaws of the organization. However, some of the overseas missions the organization was involved in certainly fell outside of the definition and mandate set by its founding member states.

NATO's agenda has gradually expanded to include crisis management, disaster assistance, air and marine policing, counter-piracy, anti-drug trafficking, and filling the UN void in war zones like Kosovo and Darfur.

In Iraq, we find NATO Mission IRAQ (NMI) in non-combatant capacity-building, advising role. Responding to an invitation by the Government of Iraq, NMI established presence in Iraq in 2018 and expanded its role in 2023. "The scope of NATO Mission Iraq now also includes advisory and capacity-building activities in support of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and the Federal Police Command." A fact sheet on NMI's websites explains.

As the calls for ousting US and Coalition Forces in Iraq become louder, there is always a suggestion for utilizing NATO and NMI as an acceptable alternative to replace them. Such a move would require an extension of a new invitation by the Government of Iraq to NATO to once again change and adapt its mission. NATO, with its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, may be more palatable to Iraqi politicians with their ever-hardening position against the continued presence of US forces within the country's borders.

And even as this new prospect may take shape, there is the argument that the US's dominance over NATO, as one of the founding members and one of the largest donors and contributors to the Alliance with money, equipment, and personnel, may undermine the Alliance's neutrality. Certainly, those in the US government who are still in favor of maintaining membership in NATO see their country's contribution as a means that allows the United States to set the international security agenda.

Imad A. Farhadi

Executive Summary

- NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) is a non-combat advisory and capability-building mission in Iraq at the request of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and with full respect for Iraqi sovereignty.
- NMI advises Iraqi Security Institutions to enable long-lasting institutional change. NMI does not train members of the Iraqi Security Forces. NMI develops instructors, teachers and leaders.
- NMI is working with our Iraqi counterparts on their long-term objectives to create a safe and secure Iraq. NMI is a trusted and proven partner in helping to enhance Iraq's security, stability, and sovereignty.
- Through NMI, NATO seeks a long-term partnership with a stable and prosperous Iraq.
- NMI consists of international experts, both civilian and military, from NATO allies and partners, whose wide variety and depth of experience are able to advise and support Iraqi Security Institutions.

Note: this information can be found on NMI official website.

For iNOV8 Exclusive Interview conducted for this special report, [click here](#).

How NATO Mission Was Invited to Iraq?

After two decades of war and several episodes of security fragmentation, Iraq's security infrastructure is undergoing heavy repairs. Years of war have had an indelible impact on Iraq's armed forces (IAFs) affecting their force projection and capabilities. In 2014, in the wake of the Islamic State's (Daesh/ISIS) ascent, the Iraqi defense and security forces experienced a swift and catastrophic collapse. This event served as an important wake-up call to the political-military command structure that Iraq requires urgent reform of its armed forces. In the absence of a capable, credible armed forces, the International Coalition Forces intervened on behalf of Iraq at that critical period of time, working with Iraqi forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces to restrain Daesh. Recommended by the United States, the creation of the International Coalition Forces to defeat ISIS consisted of seventy-nine nations and institutions, including NATO, the European Union, and the Arab League. While some sent trainers or logistical support, others offered warplanes for aerial operations. The many battles of blood and sand came to an inconclusive end when Iraq's then Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS on December 9th, 2017.

Years of corruption, factional infiltration, and inadequate organization and training within the Ministries of Defense and Interior are the main causes of Iraq's subpar military forces. Iraq's appalling security infrastructure, benefiting from the lessons learned in the fight against Daesh, gained support from the Iraqi leadership who were convinced that the country needed to establish new, indigenous defense and security forces capable of reasserting its credibility to the Iraqi citizens and regaining the respect of Iraq's longstanding allies. The

proposal by the Iraqi government to reestablish reliable Iraqi Armed Forces that are able to defend Iraq's sovereignty marks the official start of NATO Mission in Iraq in 2018.

Establishment of NATO Mission in Iraq

In the July 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels, at the official request of the Iraqi Prime Minister, the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) was launched, and it was formally established in October of the same year. The key objective of NMI is to build an effective, inclusive, sustainable, and accountable national defense and security structure for Iraq. Consistent with Baghdad's needs, NATO Mission in Iraq has a non-combat nature- meaning that NATO personnel do not engage in operations. Nor do they ride along with Iraqi military during operations. It only advises members of the Iraqi security institutions and forces that are under the direct and effective control of the Government of Iraq (GoI). All NATO member countries alongside partner nations, such as Australia contribute to NATO Mission in Iraq. In February 2021, at the request of the Iraq government, the Defense Ministers of NATO member countries decided to expand the NATO mission. This was followed by another request from the Iraqi government in August 2023 to expand the scope of NMI to include advisory and capacity-building activities and was accepted by the North Atlantic Council.

Mandate of NATO Mission in Iraq

With careful consideration to which areas NATO can provide added value, the NATO Mission in Iraq has a clear mandate: a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission that assists Iraq in building more sustainable, transparent, inclusive, and effective armed forces and institutions. At the time, the mandate's key objective was to restore credibility to Iraqi forces so that they are better able to stabilize the country, fight terrorism and prevent the return of

ISIS/Daesh. Key Iraqi counterparts for NATO have been the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, the Counter-Terrorism Service, and the Office of the National Security Advisor.

The aim and contours of the mission supports training and capacity-building efforts in the following domains:

- Countering Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IEDs);
- Civil-military planning;
- Armored vehicle maintenance;
- Military medicine and
- Reform of Iraqi security institutions (Security Sector Reform SSR)

Prior to NMI established in 2018, limited advisory support was provided to Iraqi defense and security forces. In national security areas, training of Iraqi security forces was mostly conducted outside of Iraq. In Jordan, training was carried out in areas of countering improvised explosive devices, military medicine, civil-military planning, and military training of officers and non-commissioned officers. In Türkiye, Iraqi forces were trained in the area of cyber defense. With NMI's presence of civilian and military personnel in Iraq, training is delivered through periodic deployments of mobile training teams and through seminars and workshops conducted by members of the Core Team in Baghdad and subject matter experts and trainers. With the vision for a locally based training mission, NMI efforts on the ground will be more effective and sustainable.

NATO Mission in Iraq receives full financial support of NATO member countries provided through a NATO-run Trust Fund for Defense and related Security Capacity Building (DCB) efforts. The fund initially started at EUR 1.13 million in 2018 in support of training and capacity building efforts on demining, civil-military cooperation and the maintenance of Soviet-era armored vehicles.

An Evaluation of the First 5 Years of NMI (2018-2023)

The first deployment of NATO military and civilian personnel was challenging for the Mission due to several factors. First, lack of clarity from the Iraqi counterparts for how the NMI can engage and what needs they should meet. Scoping the requirements and needs of GoI took until September 2019 where NMI became fully operational to work with Iraqi counterparts and start the mission's advisory and capacity building mandate. Second, the troubled security situation in the first two years impeded operations. Third, the COVID pandemic led to a temporary halt of all operations as well. Lastly, the relatively short tours of most military and civilian experts for only six months compounded the problems. The short tours of duty were not enough time to get to know Iraqis and understand the problems they were facing.

The Government of Iraq's long-term objective for NMI is to provide the Iraqi forces a scalable progressive expansion through continuous efforts to recuperating Iraqi forces' operational capabilities. The NMI performs a key strategic role to wide-reform of Security Sector Reform (SSR) with the objective to:

- Fight corruption at all ministerial and institutional levels.
- Improve human resources, logistics, and management.
- Improve training management.
- Improve readiness.
- Formulate policy and strategy.
- Inform on law of armed conflict.
- Enhance leadership skills.
- Promote women, peace, and security.
- Advise and teach professional military education.

The NMI two key objectives in driving reform priorities are: enable Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MoD) to build a military force that can meet its strategic requirements and ensure the armed forces are a credible and reliable force capable of asserting Iraqi sovereignty and respected by its international partners.

5 Lessons Learned (NMI Magazine, Special Edition)

1. **Size matters, but not in the traditional way.** Bigger is not always better when it comes to military operations. For an advisory mission, the primary means for achieving the effect—information—is inherently scalable, so the number of people delivering it matters less than how good they are. It is better to send in a few experts with the right know-how than establish a larger presence of less suitable advisors. Even as NMI has evolved, this focus on high-quality and precisely targeted advising has enabled it to remain nimble and responsive to Iraqi needs.
2. **An alliance advising mission's strength is its diversity.** Advisory and capacity-building operations often involve personnel from several different countries, but usually in national teams—one country takes on transport, for instance, while another deals with logistics, and so on. The innovation for NMI has been to mix those individuals together, so that each advisory team offers a blend of diverse expertise from different countries, and from both civilians and military experts. Bringing diversity to the front line in this way adds credibility to the mission: advisors coming from different perspectives means they can correct each other, and the chance of an individual national agenda being pursued is much reduced.
3. **Training alone is not enough.** Iraq's security forces have already received extensive training from abroad, and have several impressive military academies of their own,

including branch schools and a defense university. Moreover, the experience they gained during the fight against ISIS—tens of thousands participated in the battle for Mosul alone—meant that a much more capable military force emerged from that fight than the one that existed when it began. Sending in more trainers to improve their tactical skills is no longer the priority. The much greater need is for strategic advice, including for foreign military experts who can diagnose Iraq’s institutions to suggest how they might do better. Tailored, strategic recommendations have much more impact than teaching generic skills that have been taught before.

4. **Shared objectives are essential.** NATO engages in Iraq only because the government of Iraq wants it to. The importance of local consent must guide the whole of any advisory mission, including its activities to improve host nation forces. NMI works to a defined set of long-term objectives, which have been agreed with Iraqi counterparts. Shared objectives allow for a shared program of work and minimize friction between the mission and its hosts.

5. **Corporate memory must be protected.** The importance of safeguarding institutional knowledge is not new, but it is a particular issue for personnel with relatively short tour lengths operating in complicated environments. NMI’s solution has been to develop “plans-on-a-page”—a program of future activities agreed with Iraqi interlocutors and set out on a single side of paper. Rather than reinvent the wheel each time someone new arrives, advisors can start where their predecessors left off. Advisory work has accelerated, and Iraqis have been relieved of the need to explain the same things to new faces every time people change.

Key Reforms and Activities Across Divisions

1. Ministerial Advisory Division (MAD):

The objective of the Ministerial Advisory Division (MAD) is to assist NMI in its undertakings to establish self-sufficiency for the Iraqi Defense (and additional relevant institutions) against threats, while maintaining constitutional oversight and implementing a self-sustaining reform program. MAD, comprising over sixty military and civilian advisors ranging from approximately fifteen countries, is tasked with advancing fourteen of NMI's twenty-one long-term objectives. Strategic formulation, defense planning, logistics, cyber, human resource management, intelligence, and financial reform are among its primary objectives. Its functions at both the service command and ministerial levels in support of sustainable development driven by Iraqis. The two primary oversight bodies of the Iraqi Security Sector- the Chief of Defense's Reform Committee and the Ministerial Reform Committee- are also significantly aided by MAD. The MAD future outlook seeks to establish a secure environment for Iraqi citizens by ensuring that security institutions are empowered to assume legitimate, democratically accountable, and effective roles in safeguarding Iraqi society through ongoing reforms in the security sector. The MAD key achievements between 2018-2023 include:

- Enhanced readiness of the Iraqi Armed Forces (IAFs)
- Significant progress in modernizing IAFs human resources and management.
- Development of a Planning Guide to direct how requirements for defense capabilities and force structures are set.
- Strengthened partnership with NATO member countries through improving the management of Out of Country Activities (OoCA) in which Iraqi personnel participates in activities in NATO member countries.

- Substantial progress in cybersecurity with full NMI support for operational delivery and formulating strategy & policy development provided to the Cyber Security Directorate at MoD since May 2023.
- Accomplishing Iraq's first written logistic support strategy to guide a a modern, robust and interoperable logistics system.
- Improved crisis management skills of the IAFs through the mandate of the National Security Council. The Iraqi Joint Operation Command has formulated the Iraqi National Crisis Management structure to increase IAFs' future resilience
- Strengthened civilian and constitutional control of the IAFs through embedding the culture of continued and measurable reform in civilian governance.
- Establishing NMI Service Command Advisory to enable IAFs to enter into a regular NATO partnership with a strategic selection of topics, such as: Human Resource Management, Logistics, Readiness, Force/Capability Development, Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Development, Protection of Civilians, and Women Empowerment in Defense.

2. Professional Security Education Division (PSE):

The Professional Security Education Division (PSE) has had a highly successful five years, during which it has refined its approach and steadily strengthened its relationships with the Defense University for Military Studies (DUFMS) and the Military Academy in order to enhance the capabilities of the institutions it advises. PSE is in charge of two of NMI's Long Term Objectives (LTOs): reform of the non-commissioned officer cadre (LTO 9) and curriculum, faculty, and institutional strengthening (LTO 11).

LTO 9:The goal of the multifaceted LTO 9 program is to significantly reform the organizational structure of Iraq's NCO cadre throughout all Service Commands. Matters like hiring NCOs, career advancement, personnel structures, rank-appropriate assignments, training needs, and promotion standards must all be addressed by these reforms.

LTO 11:includes all institutions that PSE advises, including DUFMS and the Military Academy. The PSE's LTO 11 has three lines of activities. First, Curriculum Development, which involves aiding in the evaluation and design of curricula to suit the requirements of Iraq's Armed Forces while also incorporating significant NATO initiatives like Women Peace and Security, International Humanitarian Law, and Protection of Civilians, is the first of LTO 11's three lines of activity. Second, Faculty Development aims to enhance learning standards by bolstering the capabilities of instructors and developers, incorporating modern learning methods and media, and providing training. Lastly, Institutional Development, which utilizes NATO's Systems Approach to Training to improve governance and quality assurance processes. Its objective is to ensure a lasting and sustainable improvement.

PSE Collaborations and Programs:

- **NATO's Defense Education Enhancement Program (DEEP):**allows PSE direct access to DEEP's network of institutions across NATO.
- **The Training Systems Development Program (TSDP):**working bilaterally NATO' individual nations, the TSDP is an industry collaboration with the UK, facilitated by the British Embassy in Baghdad, to conduct curriculum reviews and development, improve Systems Approach to Training (SAT) standards, and develop new war games.
- **The IT systems at the Education Cadre Development Centre (ECDC):**The provision of state-of-the-art equipment will significantly augment the educational experience

for students enrolled at the ECDC and facilitate its ability to disseminate vital instructor and trainer development courses through online platforms to the entire Iraqi Armed Forces.

- **Partnership between Iraq's Strategic Studies Research Centre (SSRC) and the Royal Danish Defense College (RDDC):** sharing of knowledge and research between the institutions through joint seminars and workshops.

3. **Training Development Division (TDD):**

In order to achieve the goal assigned to the Training Development Division (TDD), which is to review the curriculum and develop additional training capabilities with a focus on leadership and branch-specific training, the division relies heavily on its most valuable asset: its advisors. The TDD can rely on the combination of advisors and experts from the other Divisions that consist of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) in those cases where the TDD advisors' expertise are not sufficient. However, Mobile Advisory Training Teams (MATTs), which are based on the request of NMI advisors and their Iraqi counterparts, may strengthen NMI in situations where there is insufficient experience within NMI. MATTs have been used by TDD to assist in the advancement of its missions, such as:

- Intelligence Requirement and Collection Management (IRM & CM).
- Exercise Planning and Direction
- Intelligence Analysis Techniques
- Major Incident Medical Management
- Air and Ground Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) Course
- Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Warning and Reporting

- Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD)-Manually Probing and Detecting Improvised Explosive Device (IED)/Unexploded Ordnance (UOX).
- Faculty Education on Field Resuscitation

TDD's Cross Cutting Project Branch (CCPB): TDD's Branch Service Schools & Training Centers (BSS&TCs) through CCPB aims to enhance the practical skillset of its instructors. The primary focus of CCPB is the Combined-Arms Training Course (CATC), which attempts to enhance the IAF's understanding of cross-branch coordination and introduce them to the military decision-making process. combined effort between CCPB and IAFs aim at developing collaborative course development centered around:

- **Increase Combined Arms Warfare knowledge;**
- **Gain experience in practical application of Military Decision Making & Planning (Main Effort);**
- **Enhance interoperability by increasing knowledge of NATO Doctrine**

4. **Special Programs and Coordination Office:**

NMI's advisory efforts on International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law has been one of the main pillars of the Mission in Iraq. One of the long-term objectives of NMI covers IHL and IHRL, which stipulates "Human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), is implemented in strategies, policies, manuals, education and training." NMI's long-term objective (LTO) on IHL and IHRL has three lines of effort:

- Development and improvement of strategy, policy, manuals, and doctrine on this topic;
- Institutionalization of IHL legal structures within the Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF);

- Training and education of the IAF on IHL and IHRL.

5. **Strategic Communications, Representation and Outreach Division (SCRO) :**

The Division of Strategic Communications, Representation, and Outreach (SCRO) serves as the external interface for NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI). The division's roles include: (1) communicating NMI's key messages to target audiences; (2) advising Commander NMI and the larger NMI community about the mission's strategic and information environment; and (3) coordinating efforts to reform the security sector both internally and externally. The Prime Minister's Office, the Office of the National Security Advisor's Office, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the three main civilian interlocutors with whom the Senior Civilian and SCRO staff interact. Activities include the coordination of two NMI ambassador days annually with the NATO Contact Point Embassy, presently situated in Italy. Additionally, the Division hosted two information days organized for defense attachés from nations contributing troops for the first time. Over the previous years, SCRO attended Security Contact Group meetings on behalf of NMI. The Security Contact Group is an informal coalition of international organizations and stakeholders whose mission is to promote security sector reform in Iraq, such as:

- the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM-I),
- the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI),
- the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
- the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) of the Counter-Da'esh Coalition.

Conclusion

Established at the request of the Iraqi government, the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) is a capability-building and noncombat advisory operation in Iraq that aims to facilitate enduring institutional reforms within the Iraqi Security Institutions. NMI places its emphasis on the development of instructors, teachers, and leaders, as opposed to providing direct training to Iraqi Security Forces personnel. Anchoring NATO's dedication to bolstering Iraq's stability, security, and sovereignty, the mission seeks to assist Iraq in attaining its long-term goals of establishing a safe and secure country.

Author's note: this special report benefited from NMI official website and publications.



ABOUT

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