



from the April 21, 2004 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0421/p06s01-woiq.html>

US turns to old foes to secure Iraq

The US has trained some 200,000 Iraqis, but Bremer says they are not ready to assume full control July 1.

By Scott Peterson | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BAGHDAD - A marked change in "atmospherics" is what American-led occupation chiefs say they want to achieve, when Iraqis wake up July 1, the day they are slated to regain sovereignty.

Handing security of the country over to newly minted Iraqi forces was meant to be one thrust of that change. But to help rebuild an army and stabilize the country, US commanders are now turning to those they once fired: Saddam Hussein's senior officers.

Critics - including many former Iraqi officers - say the order to dissolve the entire military, issued by US administrator Paul Bremer last year, was a fundamental mistake. They say it has added to the burden of stabilizing Iraq, provided well-trained recruits for the growing anti-American resistance, **and was contrary to the advice expressed in postwar blueprints created in Washington.**

"You prune [the military], you don't cut it down," says Ghassan Atiyah, **a pro-democracy analyst** in Baghdad. **"You are creating enemies - that's half a million people out of work, with their families, that you've made easy to recruit. You are handing them over to whoever will use them."**

After months of placing great hope on the budding US-trained army and security forces, recent fighting has set off alarm bells. **One newly formed Iraqi battalion refused orders to join US Marines in the Fallujah fight; Police have left their posts, in some cases joining the rebels.**

"It is clear that Iraqi forces will not be able, on their own, to deal with these threats by June 30 when an Iraqi government assumes sovereignty," Mr. Bremer said on Sunday, in an unusually candid assessment.

"Early this month, the foes of democracy overran Iraqi police stations and seized public buildings in several parts of the country. Iraqi forces were unable to stop them."

On paper, the US has trained 200,000 police, defense corps members, and soldiers. But former Iraqi officers say the only solution to the current unrest is resurrecting large parts of the old Iraqi military, before insecurity spirals further out of control - an idea that is gaining traction with US commanders.

"It's very clear that we've got to get more senior Iraqis involved - former military types involved in the security forces," said Gen. John Abizaid, the US regional commander, last week. "In the next couple of days you'll see a large number of senior officers being appointed to key positions in the Ministry of Defense, and the Iraqi joint staff, and in Iraqi field commands."

Former Iraqi officers boast that they could form an emergency committee at the Defense Ministry within 48 hours and restore order within a week. Such predictions may be wishful thinking, but these men have one refrain: Security can't be restored without them.

"The cat knows where the mouse is, but the lion doesn't know," says Colonel Saad, who asked that a pseudonym be used. "I won't go back to the army for the Americans - I can't shake their hands - but I would [go back] for an Iraqi government.

"[President] Bush promised to rebuild Iraq, and that every Arab will wish he were an Iraqi," says Colonel Saad **"They gave this idea of freedom, and Iraqis can't handle it. To them it means freedom to attack the Americans with stones and tomatoes."**

One reason was **the dismissal of the Iraqi army, a move that ran counter to the postwar prescriptions offered by State Department working groups.** A draft copy of the Democratic Principles Working Group issued Oct. 10, 2002 - a 2-inch-thick postwar blueprint **created by US experts and key Iraqi exiles - warned explicitly of the dangers.**

"The main issue here is that there could be substantial social and economic chaos created if a large number of military personnel are immediately

released," the draft reads.

What unemployed soldiers might do was another issue. The report highlights mistakes after the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, where the "haphazard reduction of laying off of security personnel in those countries lead to a rise in organized crime syndicates. We need to consider the effects of this in the context of Iraq."

An example that echoes here is next door in Iran, where Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led an Islamic Revolution in 1979 against the despised, Western-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi. "When they removed the Shah, [Khomeini] kept the same security systems and he succeeded - one by one, they kicked people out, without affecting the system," says Capt. Fouad al-Roukabi. "If the Americans did this in Iraq, we would not be at this level [of violence]."

Is it too late? "Only one statement on TV would bring the army back," says Captain Roukabi. "Security will return, the morale of the police will be back, and people will be reassured."

British newspapers report that the idea of appointing old regime officers was suggested by British officials last summer, and that the US "secretly changed tack" early this year, sending six major-generals and 20 other top officers to the US for training.

Not all are convinced. "What [Americans] want is only a symbolic army, one not even capable of protecting itself," says Sayed Saad, who works closely with a group of former officers called the Free Officers Movement. The US training is "only for the media," he asserts. "Now they are back at the Republican Palace [US headquarters], working as cleaners - nothing more."

"The Americans don't choose patriots ... those they are choosing are loyal to them, [but] this won't serve the Americans," says Brig. Gen. Abdulkadir Mohamed. "The Americans are now fighting small numbers, and they will drown if they fight bigger numbers."

"The most important thing is for Americans to listen to advice. It's a political problem, not a military problem," General Mohamed says. "I'm a soldier, the last card of politics."

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