



The Hours and Misfortunes of Iraqization (2003-2008)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

It is difficult to find a victorious outcome to a war in the midst of populations without the troops of the sovereign state taking the fight into account. It is still necessary to know what form this fighting force should take between respect for the local military culture, at the risk of contradiction with allied forces and objectives, and mimicry, at the risk of maladjustment to the environment and therefore inefficiency.

The case of Iraq is a good example of the difficulties of this arbitration.

Potemkin's army

In the "new Iraq" as dreamed of in 2003 by the Bush administration, there is little room for a national army, apart from that of allied Kurdistan. The American forces are quite sufficient to face all the threats and the Iraqi army, guilty of seven coups d'état in 80 years, appears above all as a destabilising factor. At most, after having suppressed Saddam Hussein's army with the stroke of a pen, does Ambassador Paul Bremer agree to reform a small force of 30,000 men without heavy equipment? Conscription is excluded but also recruitment on ethnic or tribal bases, thus violating traditional Iraqi operating principles.

In the neo-liberal logic of the moment, the training and equipment of this small army are entrusted to private American companies. For more than 300 million dollars, the company "Nour USA" undertakes to provide vehicles and individual equipment, but one year later, the contract, which was not fulfilled, is cancelled. As for the Vinnel Corporation instructors, very few speak Arabic and none of them live anywhere but in hotels, at least not with local recruits paid 70 dollars a month. The Iraqi battalions have no cohesion and the rate of absenteeism frequently exceeds a third of the personnel, not to mention desertions. But since this army is outside the Coalition military command, that doesn't alert anyone.

Faced with the appearance of a large-scale rebellion movement, the Coalition quickly realized that its units were too few in number and too unsuited to the milieu to deal with it alone. The State Department still refuses to commit Iraqi battalions to internal affairs, so the Pentagon itself creates its own army in the form of a national guard and a force to protect sensitive points, in order to protect itself. After a few months, it became clear that these new structures were finally proving to be more apt to serve as a reservoir of resources for the rebels than to fight them. In the spring of 2004, the Coalition finally obtained authorization to use the regular army.

The crisis of April 2004 (Mahdist revolt in the South, resistance in Fallujah) shattered the village of Potemkin. The first Iraqi battalion engaged against the rebels was deployed a few kilometres from Fallujah, while throughout Iraq, a third of the national guards and half of the policemen deserted. In desperation, the Americans try for the first time to play the ethnic card by forming an ad hoc brigade of Sunni veterans to take the security of Fallujah into account, but it only takes a few weeks for this new brigade to take up the rebels' cause. Only the clandestine cells used by the CIA to hunt down former dignitaries and then rebel leaders (the "Shahwani commandos") are effective.

The Salvador option

Faced with this disaster, the Americans understand that they will never succeed in eradicating the various guerrilla movements and that the only strategy to last without suffering too many casualties is for the Iraqis themselves to take the fight into account. From a source of destabilisation, the Iraqi army then becomes the solution to all American problems. This time, it is the Pentagon that takes into account the formation of this new avatar of a national army and forms for this purpose a specific command entrusted to General Petraeus with a budget of about seven billion dollars per year.

The problem is that it takes years to train an army and that in 2004 the situation is critical just a few months before the American presidential and Iraqi legislative elections. As a matter of urgency, two other forms of Iraqisation of the conflict then spontaneously take on considerable proportions. Firstly, private military companies, whose numbers exploded to exceed the American contingent in 2007, massively employed armed guards (25,000 in 2006, double that number at present), many of whom were obviously Iraqis. By offering higher salaries to the national army, the SMPs thus attract a good part of the available human resources.

Above all, the provisional government of Illyad Allawi, set up in June 2004, decided to create its own troops under the cover of the Ministry of the Interior. The first of these is the Special Police Force, entrusted to the minister's uncle. Unlike the battalions of the national army, this unit, recruited according to tribal and clan ties from among former Sunni soldiers, is disciplined and effective. Petraeus is faced with a fait accompli, but he decides to "try this horse" and help him. The Special Force (10,000 men in 2005) is then of all the reconquest battles, acting as a second curtain of American troops to "clean" the reoccupied areas of all the rebel cells that remain there.

For the time being, this solution seems to have only advantages and the Special Force is being emulated. Irregular units are multiplying until they deserve the nickname "pop-up" (mushrooms). Formed on ethnic bases and under the command of a reliable leader, they are highly cohesive and effective. However, some are beginning to express fears about this "Salvador option", in reference to the use of paramilitary groups in this country. These units, like the SMP, maintain uncertainty and confusion in an already complex conflict. Moreover, by monopolizing most of the resources of the Ministry of the Interior, they

leave the urban police in a deplorable state conducive to infiltration by Shiite organizations, primarily the Mahdi army.

Pandora's Box

The coming to power of the Shiites, on the occasion of the 2005 elections, opened Pandora's box. To begin with, the new government proceeded to a new debaathification by replacing the special Sunni units by its own brigades, including the formidable "Dhib" (Wolf), and placing them under the control of the Badr organisation, the armed wing of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the main Shiite party. These special police forces, which have their own prisons and have a strong tendency not to distinguish between rebels and opponents of the regime, then take on increasingly marked shades of death squads. At the same time, the street police, particularly in Baghdad, are coming under Mahdist control and are vying with Badr for control of the neighbourhoods.

The change of power also accelerates the radicalisation of the Sunni jihadist movement which, under the impetus of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), multiplies the massacres of Shiites and the assassinations of Sunni personalities accused of wanting to return to the political game. At the end of 2005, this policy of the worst thus led to a new rift, this time within the Sunni front, with tribes and nationalists being exasperated by the actions of AQI. We thus find ourselves with five fighting federations (Kurds, Sunni nationalists, jihadists, Mahdi army, Badr) fighting each other on inter- and intra-ethnic fault lines and in a capital that tends to become a black hole of violence likely to drag the rest of the country down with it.

The army of sand

At that time, the Iraqi national army had just reached maturity at a cost of \$20 billion and the commitment of hundreds of teams of American advisors. On paper, the overall picture is impressive with more than 115,000 men and 85 battalions; but in reality, this army, which has almost doubled in size every year (160 battalions at present), is mostly a frog turned ox. An Iraqi brigade rarely commits more soldiers in the field than an American battalion and with less equipment. Except for the 9th Mechanized Division, the battalions are in fact hardly better armed than the rebels they are fighting. Logistical support depends almost entirely on the Americans and looting is widespread (more than a billion dollars of equipment is said to have been diverted). In fact, most battalions disintegrate rapidly in the combat zones.

Moreover, this army continues to arouse mistrust both from the Sunnis, since it was first created to fight against them, and from the Maliki government, which sees it as the Americans' thing and the possible instrument of its downfall. So, like Saddam Hussein, he prefers to rely on his own militias.

Placed in retreat alongside American forces that have themselves largely withdrawn to large bases, the Iraqi military is powerless to witness the deAs the civil war developed, particularly in Baghdad, where no one could be trusted, self-defence militias multiplied under the control of extremists on all sides. The city is then the scene of a war that is half criminal, half ideological, in which Mahdist and Salafist gangs confront each other with rackets, kidnappings, assassinations and attacks. Faced with the abyss, the Maliki government is forced to call on American forces and the Iraqi army to restore the situation. It then takes more than a year and the sending of 28 brigades (18 Iraqi and 10

American), not to mention various militias, to eradicate the jihadist networks and drive back the Mahdists, whose leader cautiously decrees a truce.

Gulliver tied up

In the spring of 2007, this mobilisation of the 'Surge', but also the assassination of several important Sunni personalities by AQL, ended up convincing the tribes and the main Sunni nationalist movements to join the so-called 'Surge' movement." (Sahwa) movement, founded by the sheikh of the Rishawi tribe against the jihadists but with American support. The situation in Anbar is thus evolving spectacularly in favour of the Americans against whom attacks are decreasing by 10% each month. The Sahwa's experience was then extended to other provinces. Against the whole policy of absorbing militias into government forces, the Americans agreed to finance more than 300 local groups comprising 100,000 "sons of Iraq".

This reversal of alliance has, with the truce of the Mahdists, largely contributed to the good record of General Petraeus, but it is undoubtedly also synonymous with a creeping Lebaneseization. Apart from the uneasiness that many Americans feel in fighting alongside former adversaries, many wonder about this policy of "war on terror": arming a new ethnic army (82% of the "sons of Iraq" are Sunni) almost as numerous as the regular army. Several Sahwa groups violently oppose the Kurds in Kirkuk and Mosul but now also the government security forces in some provinces.

Caught between all these contradictory forces that they helped to liberate without controlling them, released by a "Coalition of the Wills" less and less willing, the Americans now appear like a Gulliver tied up by the Lilliputians. They thought they were manipulators in the region, they have become manipulated as, according to the old Arab adage, when magic takes hold of the magician. Nevertheless, they have a significant asset: replacing Saddam Hussein in this role, they have become the keystone of a nation that is disintegrating but without them would fall completely into chaos. They can play this position of referee between communities which, contrary to their rhetoric, all seek American alliance or neutrality, in order, at best, to hope for an honourable exit.

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