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## Political and Military Significance of NATO's Mission to Iraq

Wojciech Lorenz

*NATO plans to expand its presence in Iraq. Despite the initially small scale, the mission may have much political significance, facilitating the Alliance's adaptation to the Russian challenge. A significant increase in responsibilities for Iraq's security could, however, strain the Alliance's command structure, limiting its ability to carry out collective-defence tasks.*

On 14 February, NATO defence ministers agreed that the Alliance will start planning an increased presence in Iraq. The mission could involve up to 200 personnel and its mandate would be focused on training. One of the new proposals of this enhanced, long-term presence in Iraq includes the creation of an expert centre for countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Increasing engagement in NATO's southern operation area is an indispensable element of building consensus before the NATO summit in Brussels in July. The Alliance will then approve the decision to create two new commands to increase its ability to carry out collective-defence tasks.

**The Importance of the Mission to Iraq.** After the U.S. intervention in Iraq, which caused deep divisions in the Alliance, NATO agreed in 2004 to create a small training mission (NATO Training Mission-Iraq, or NTM-I). With the U.S. presence of up to 150,000 troops in Iraq, the NATO mission, which counted as many as 300 people, seemed to serve mainly political aims. However, according to Alliance data it has managed to train about 15,000 soldiers and police. In 2011, the U.S. and NATO withdrew from Iraq because of problems negotiating the conditions to remain in the country. The ensuing security vacuum was exploited by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which took over a significant part of Iraq and Syria.

The global coalition against ISIS, formed by the U.S. in 2014, has enabled the defeat of the extremists in Iraq and cutting of supply routes to Syria, which may facilitate the broader fight against the group. The priority for the Iraqi authorities is to create conditions for the reconstruction of the liberated areas and the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Iraq also needs support in training and equipping its security forces, which proved unable to stop the ISIS offensive at the start.

At the request of the authorities in Baghdad, NATO resumed its training activities in 2015, which include countering IEDs, military medical training, and the maintenance of Soviet-era equipment. The training was initially conducted outside Iraqi territory, including in Jordan. From January 2017, several NATO instructors have been conducting training inside Iraq.

**The Importance of the Mission for Transatlantic Relations.** Greater NATO involvement in Iraq may lead to the more even distribution of security-related costs between the European members of the Alliance and the U.S. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the allies declared they would increase their national defence budgets to at least 2% of GDP by 2024. Although most countries have increased their spending, only half are projected to reach the level suggested by NATO in the agreed period. Meanwhile, since Crimea's annexation, the U.S. has strengthened its military presence in Europe and for the fifth year in a row has increased spending related to it, from \$1 billion in 2015 to a planned \$6.5 billion in 2019, as suggested in the recent defence budget proposal. The U.S. can therefore expect more support from the allies to stabilise

the situation in the Middle East. The total contribution will increase the chances of steady financing and consolidation of the U.S. military presence in Europe.

NATO engagement in the Middle East has been one of the main causes of tension between Europe and the U.S. since the beginning of NATO. The Alliance's command structure and military capabilities were developed to ensure effective deterrence of the USSR, so European states have feared that NATO involvement in the Middle East will have negative consequences for security in Europe. This has led to the development of flexible mechanisms that support so-called out-of-area operations. The allies rely on European structures, coalitions of the willing, and cooperation with partner countries. Such flexible mechanisms have been successfully used in the fight against ISIS. The Alliance supported the global coalition politically and contributed early warning aircraft (AWACS). Some members of the Alliance have joined in air strikes on the extremists and in training and equipping Iraqi and Kurdish forces. The EU has supported the efforts to fight the extremists and stabilise the Middle East, including by offering humanitarian aid. In October 2017, the EU set up a civilian mission to Iraq that aims to support security-sector reform. The European countries' efforts are scattered, though, and, as a result, often overlooked by the U.S., leading to greater pressure on NATO involvement.

**The Importance of the Mission for European NATO Countries.** The mission to Iraq may be important for building consensus in NATO on further adaptation to the threats from Russia. Despite Russia's aggressive foreign and security policy, some NATO members perceive terrorism and uncontrolled migration as major threats. Therefore, the Alliance adapts simultaneously to challenges from different directions, which increases its usefulness for all its member states. Since 2014, apart from supporting the global coalition, NATO has set up a hub at its Naples headquarters to coordinate regional activities crucial for maintaining security in its southern operation area (which includes the Middle East, although this hub is still not operational for lack of necessary personnel). NATO also has supported the EU's *Operation Sophia*, which aims to limit smuggling of migrants to Europe via the Mediterranean. Increasing Alliance training activities in Iraq may be presented as additional support for the fight against terrorism and uncontrolled migration. As a result, the mission to Iraq should not raise as much controversy as in the past and may contribute to strengthening political cohesion between NATO members who have different threat perceptions.

**Mission-Related Risks.** The effectiveness of the increased mission to Iraq will depend on the situation inside the country. After parliamentary elections scheduled for 12 May, the next Iraqi government must ensure a stable agreement between Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Kurds to be able to introduce deep reforms, including in the security sector. NATO's experience in Afghanistan indicates that a lack of reform and corruption may seriously limit the effectiveness of its support for the local security services.

Although the NATO mission will be small, a larger force under the long-term commitment cannot be ruled out. If that happens, it may strain NATO's command structure, which is already responsible for planning and conducting the *Resolute Support* missions in Afghanistan and *KFOR* in Kosovo.)

In the last few decades, decreasing defence spending and cuts in the number of armed forces forced NATO to reform its command structure. The Allies decided to cut the number of HQs and reduce personnel but maintained the same level of ambition of being able to perform a crisis response and a collective-defence operation at the same time. After the reform, the headquarters, which are still not fully manned because of shortages of experienced officers across the Alliance, could deliver because they were involved only in crisis-management missions. Since Crimea's annexation in 2014, NATO has been trying to regain the capacity to conduct a collective-defence mission as well. In 2017, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the Allies conducted command-post exercises of a defensive operation involving more than 100,000 troops, which have put a heavy burden on the headquarters. A significant engagement in Iraq in the future could therefore have a negative impact on NATO's ability to conduct its collective-defence mission.

**Challenges for Poland.** It is in Poland's interest to continue to strengthen NATO cohesion, including through greater involvement in Iraq. At the same time, Poland should support and propose initiatives that limit the strain on the Alliance command structure. These include, for example, maintaining effective cooperation between the EU and NATO in Iraq and extending the mandate of the EU mission to police and military training.

It is also crucial for Poland to continue to support the adaptation of the command structure to assure the capacity for both crisis-management and collective-defence missions. Poland could support the increase of the NATO common budget, from which the command structure is financed. Nevertheless, this will not solve the problem of limited personnel across the Alliance. Poland, like many other countries, suffers from shortages of experienced officers who can fill NATO's command structures. It should, therefore, ensure adequate investments in its armed forces to be able to staff both the existing and planned new headquarters within the NATO command structure.