

The Battle for Baghdad

Institutionalizing Army Lessons for Urban Combat

The history of the Battle for Baghdad is more than just the history of combat in a large city; it is the history of not one but several sequential battles that took place over phases. Each phase had its own focus and approach, and the United States adapted to each new phase. As the enemy's tactics and techniques evolved, so too did those of the U.S. military. Through these evolutions, U.S. soldiers and commanders learned many lessons—some specific to a given phase of the battle, others with a more universal application. This brief summarizes an in-depth examination of the Battle for Baghdad that catalogs the hard-won lessons of both civilian and military leaders so that U.S. soldiers can be better prepared in future conflicts and be less likely to repeat mistakes made in Iraq. Research for the study was completed in 2017.

The researchers built an extensive evidentiary base, drawing on a literature review that included both primary sources (memoirs of the key participants) and secondary sources (previous RAND studies and journalists' accounts and histories). In addition, the research team consulted records from more than 100 interviews conducted by other researchers and held discussions with 51 key military and civilian leaders, with the goal of representing a cross-section of perspectives.

The Phases of the Battle for Baghdad

As noted, the Battle for Baghdad was a series of distinct phases, not one homogeneous event. For the soldiers and civilians who directly participated in the Iraq War, the watershed moments of their experiences differ depending on where and when they were involved in the conflict. Researchers separated the Battle for Baghdad into five distinct phases. The first phase was the **prewar planning** that went on in both the U.S. government and the U.S. Army. That period was important not only for what it focused on but also for what it did not include. In particular, prewar planners did not anticipate several of the problems that were encountered after the intervention in Iraq, and, because the issues were not anticipated, they got no attention during the planning phase.

The second phase was the period of **initial occupation of Baghdad and early attempts to stabilize the city until April 2004**. This phase included the military situation after U.S. forces took control of key segments of Baghdad and the

Key findings:

- Defense Department war plans must include actions to ensure long-term stability.
- Capacity and capability matter, and the “whole of government” beyond the U.S. military could not provide them in Iraq.
- Robust and high-quality headquarters are critical.
- As the Army continues to perform the training and advising mission, developing competent advisers and understanding sustainable outcomes are key.
- The goal of building and advising foreign military and police forces should be to make them self-sufficient.
- Military transition teams and advisers are key to developing forces that provide sustainable security.
- The Battle for Baghdad offers insights about how to prepare for future urban combat.
- Army professional military education is critical in preparing Army leaders for the future.

shift from conventional operations to an urban counterinsurgency effort. Specifically, this second phase included the initial efforts to establish order, begin reconstructing damaged critical facilities, establish civilian agencies to help restore the Iraqi government (and some of the measures those agencies implemented), and rebuild Iraq's security forces.

Events in Baghdad from the summer of 2004 until early 2007 constituted the third phase, which included continued efforts to recreate Iraq's security forces and security institutions. The fourth phase involved **the Surge**, in which the United States committed substantial additional forces to the fight in Iraq—an additional five combat brigades.

The final phase—**the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq**—occurred in the aftermath of the Surge and involved the transitioning of Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) into United States Forces–Iraq (USF-I). The U.S. withdrawal led

to the new Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) becoming increasingly polarized, Iraq nearly collapsing in 2014, and the Islamic State capturing large swathes of the northern half of Iraq a mere two years after American forces withdrew.

Key Lessons Learned for the Army, by Phase

After looking across the five phases, the research team derived lessons that fell into three broad categories. The first category entails **lessons that the Army has the authority to institutionalize**. The second category involves **lessons that the Army does not have the authority to institutionalize but in which it has an advisory role**, such as the need to establish intergovernmental unity of command. For such les-

sons, Army leaders must provide expert military advice and attempt to influence decisions beyond their authority because those decisions have direct and indirect effects on the Army.

For the third category—**lessons that the Army must institutionalize through a combined effort with other actors**—the Army must be involved in a collaborative role with other actors. At the strategic level, these opportunities include analyzing the overall end strength of the Army within the joint force to accomplish missions specified in national strategies. At the operational level, the Army must anticipate what will happen in an operation when assumptions are not fully addressed and must plan for alternatives.

Table 1 categorizes the lessons by phase and category.

Table 1. Lessons for the U.S. Army

Lesson	Army Can Institutionalize	Army Cannot Institutionalize but Has Advisory Role	Army Must Institutionalize Through Combined Effort with Other Actors
Phase 1: Prewar Planning			
Start planning early, remain focused, and expect policy to cause friction.			◆
Establish unity of command.			◆
Resolve disputes among principals.		◆	
Question assumptions and plan for contingencies.	◆		
Combined arms training and mobile protected firepower are the essential ingredients of combat operations.	◆		
Phase 2: Initial Occupation of Baghdad and Early Attempts to Stabilize the City Until April 2004			
Plan early for an occupation and for a full range of contingencies.	◆		
Stabilize a situation as quickly as possible after combat operations are complete.			◆
Embrace the training of security forces and tailor the approach to the society.	◆		
Promote unity of the chain of command and positive civil-military relations.			◆
Focus on nonmilitary intelligence (e.g., the state of Iraqi society and how Iraqis would respond to the end of the Saddam Hussein regime).	◆		
Embrace the military’s role in an occupational government.			◆
Anticipate abnormality (e.g., trying to transition back to so-called normal relations with the Iraqis does not take into account that Iraq was not in a normal situation before the intervention).			◆
Strike the right balance between the desire for justice and the need for pragmatism.		◆	
Phase 3: Events in Baghdad from the Summer of 2004 Until Early 2007			
In complex urban environments, the factors causing an insurgency will have a powerful effect on whether military operations succeed or fail.			◆
Tactical adaptation and creativity are important if strategy and policy are to succeed.	◆		
Strong civil-military cooperation requires a concerted effort from all parties.			◆
The State Department has limited resources.		◆	
Outcome-based metrics need to be precisely tailored to the conflict.			◆
Build institutions around existing organizations rather than in an ad hoc fashion.	◆		◆
Adviser and training missions are key to success.	◆		
Setting up a foreign military requires an understanding of cultural influences in play.	◆		

Table 1—Continued

Lesson	Army Can Institutionalize	Army Cannot Institutionalize but Has Advisory Role	Army Must Institutionalize Through Combined Effort with Other Actors
Phase 4: The Surge			
Both quantity and quality are necessary when training indigenous forces.			◆
The Surge worked because of many factors, not simply an increase in troops.			◆
Sufficient manpower is essential for effective counterinsurgency operations.			◆
Consistent guidance and support for a “clear, hold, build” approach are necessary.	◆		
Without security, nation-building will not succeed.		◆	
Phase 5: Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Iraq			
Military presence matters beyond the lost ability to act against insurgent and terrorist threats.		◆	
Plan early for a Status of Forces Agreement.			◆
Understand the interaction between troops and politics.			◆
Military forces are needed to support diplomatic efforts.			◆
Expect policy to be uncertain and even confused, so the military must have multiple operational options for withdrawal.		◆	

Overarching Lessons from the Iraq War and Recommendations for the Army

In addition to identifying the specific lessons from each phase, researchers distilled some overarching, cross-cutting lessons from the Iraq War. Table 2 outlines the lessons, the

observations that drive those lessons, and the associated recommendations. All the lessons identified in Table 2 fall within the Army’s authority to institutionalize, and, in some cases, the Army is already doing so.

Table 2. Overarching Lessons and Recommendations

Overarching Lesson	Observation That Drives It	Recommendation
Defense Department war plans must include actions to ensure long-term stability.	U.S. forces did not immediately establish security in Iraq and had to spend years countering insurgency.	Resource and prepare the Army to provide combatant commanders with forces that can assist with postconflict security and initial governance.
Capacity and capability matter, and the “whole of government” beyond the U.S. military could not provide them in Iraq.	U.S. Central Command did not have the capacity to secure Iraq at the end of major combat operations.	Given that the Army will likely provide most of the postconflict and postdisaster security forces—as well as most of the civil affairs and military government capabilities—in similar future scenarios, build more capacity for the challenges the Army will likely face in the future.
	The Army lacked key capabilities needed to occupy, secure, and provide transitional military government in Iraq.	Continue efforts begun by the Institute for Military Support to Governance in 2013 to provide sufficient military government capabilities, specifically those plugging the functional specialty capability gap in U.S. Army Reserve–Civil Affairs units.
Robust and high-quality headquarters are critical.	The joint task force organized around the V Corps headquarters was not capable of executing the mission it was given.	Assess the need for more-robust division and corps headquarters—particularly for large-scale stabilization missions that can operate as deployed headquarters and as a parent organization for subordinate units that did not deploy.
As the U.S. military continues to perform the training and advising mission, developing competent advisers and understanding sustainable outcomes are key.	The Army did not adequately prepare or incentivize advisers to create sustainable Iraqi security forces.	Continue to institutionalize efforts to prepare trainers and advisers. In particular, draw on the six Security Force Assistance Brigades and the Military Advisor Training Academy that were established in 2017. These initiatives could institutionalize the train, advise, and assist lessons and ongoing efforts to bolster the ISF in the war against the Islamic State.

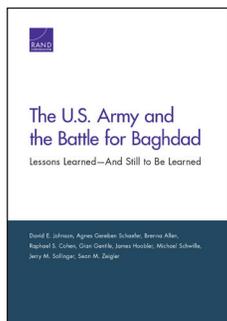
Table 2—Continued

Overarching Lesson	Observation That Drives It	Recommendation
The goal of building and advising foreign military and police forces should be to make them self-sufficient.	The ISF could not operate effectively without continued access to U.S. enablers.	When designing efforts to build indigenous security forces, account for their ability to operate absent large-scale U.S. support. Propose solutions that are politically and economically feasible to the indigenous state.
Military transition teams and advisers are key to developing forces that provide sustainable security.	Training and advising the ISF was a key mission that the U.S. military was not initially resourced or prepared to execute.	Consider institutionalizing advisory capabilities in Army training, culture, and leader development.
The Battle for Baghdad offers insights about how to prepare for future urban combat.	The Army used urban combat operations in the Battle for Baghdad and can draw on those experiences.	Continue work studying the broader question of urban operations and megacities but understand that, because each city is an independent entity, studies should focus on specific cases of where the Army might be engaged in urban combat and what types of adversaries it will likely face.
Professional military education is critical in preparing Army leaders for the future.	The U.S. professional military education system did not adequately prepare leaders for post-Saddam Iraq.	Provide future senior Army leaders with intellectual underpinnings to understand the tactical, operational, and strategic implications of a range of operational environments, using case studies and war games to teach officers vicariously about the Army's role across those operations.

Final Thoughts

Over the years of conflict in Iraq, the U.S. Army—largely trained, organized, and equipped in 2003 to “dominate land warfare”—adapted to meet the demands it faced on the ground after the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime. Tactical units generally adapted quickly, but they did not have a strategic or doctrinal framework to give that adaptation coherence or any linkage to policy objectives, which were initially unrealistic. Eventually, the Army as an institution caught up to practice in theater and provided the forces and capabilities needed to win the Battle for Baghdad.

These adaptations were extraordinarily broad-ranging: building and advising the ISF, advising Iraqi ministries, staffing provisional reconstruction teams, and accomplishing a host of other missions that the Defense Department and other U.S. government agencies had not sufficiently prepared for before Operation Iraqi Freedom. The challenge now is to shape the Army for the future detailed in 2014’s *U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World* while institutionalizing the hard-learned lessons of the conflict in Iraq. Instability and insurgency are almost certainly part of that future, and, if history is any guide, the United States will look to the Army to deal with these challenges.



This brief describes work done in RAND Arroyo Center documented in *The U.S. Army and the Battle for Baghdad: Lessons Learned—And Still to Be Learned*, by David E. Johnson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Brenna Allen, Raphael S. Cohen, Gian Gentile, James Hoobler, Michael Schwillie, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Sean M. Zeigler, RR-3076-A, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR3076). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10067. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2019

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