

New Police Force Finds Going Tough

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Officers face a host of complaints from ordinary Iraqis - and have a few of their own.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime last spring, Shamal Nuri was able to return to his home town of Kirkuk, a city he had been forced to flee as a Kurd in the Nineties. He wanted to serve his city, so joined the police force enthusiastically. "But my happiness did not last long," he said recently. "I soon began to face problems."

Nuri and other members of the 30,000-strong Iraqi police force say they are frustrated by a plethora of difficulties, including American interference in their police work, a lack of public respect and a shortage of resources. Meanwhile, cities like Baghdad continue to experience car-jackings, kidnappings, and house robberies.

The September 3 bombing of a police headquarters in Baghdad, which killed one officer and injured 13 others, appears to illustrate one of Nuri's complaints about American interference.

"Many times we catch Saddam's fedayeen [paramilitaries] and Ba'ath party members who are trying to spoil the peace and harass the people," he explained. But Iraqi police have to turn over all detainees to the American authorities, and, Nuri says, they are then often released, sometimes coming back to the arresting officers and threatening to kill them. Police at their destroyed headquarters speculated that the bomber could have been one of these men.

The force's lack of legitimacy amongst the public is also a problem. Many Iraqis believe that without an authoritative government to back it up, officers are seen as working for themselves or the Americans, not for a "real" Iraqi government.

Despite the Governing Council's appointment of cabinet ministers on September 3, it is not generally perceived as a working administration since there are no functioning ministries.

"A dirty shirt ought to be washed or removed. Iraqi police took off that shirt, dirty with brutality. The new Iraqi police are clean and want to work for us. But the people do not give them credit for what they do," said mini-bus driver Thamir Majid.

Another factor undermining their legitimacy is, ironically, the fact that Iraqis don't fear the new police forces, as they are barred from employing the sort of practices used by their predecessors. The latter kept the streets safe, but used brutal means - such as torture - to do so.

Though the majority of the new law enforcers are from the old force, the Americans hold training programmes to teach them respect for human rights - something that many officers support.

"I was pleased to join the training, for a man should always get new experiences," said Sergeant Mustafa Mudhir, who was a police officer for 14 years under the old regime. He was one of 250 officers who graduated on September 4 from a training course in Baghdad. "I learned a lot of new things that I never heard of during my days working under Saddam."

Mudhir is grateful for the 120 US dollars a month he earns, a huge improvement over the three to five dollars most police were receiving under Saddam.

While citizens don't fear the police as they once did, they still believe their level of professionalism leaves a lot to be desired.

"I see a lot of things with this new Iraqi police that astonishes me," said accountant Saz Jamal who fears her business will be attacked by armed men and wants police protection - but trusts the police little more than the criminals. "I doubt the educational and social background of these new police has been reviewed before they are recruited."

With unemployment running high, many jobless Iraqis are looking to get posts as law enforcers. During the September 4 police training graduation in Baghdad, a noisy crowd of perhaps 100 men gathered to protest outside the barbed wire at the main gate, knowing that high-ranking local and American officials would be present at the ceremony. The demonstrators say they had applied for jobs a month ago and have yet to receive any word about their applications.

"I was a soldier in the Iraqi army, and since it was dissolved I have been jobless," said Kadhim Muhammad. "The Americans are bringing in police from other countries, but we Iraqis are left jobless in the streets."

A further problem facing the police is that they are under-resourced - and many of the new recruits, initially enthusiastic about their work, seem to become disillusioned as soon as they are assigned to the streets.

"I am not satisfied with what I am doing," said one new Najaf city police officer, who claims he and his colleagues have not received the uniforms, weapons and uniforms the Americans promised them. "All I have as a weapon is a baton, which I bought with my own money."

He says he is so frustrated that he works for two hours a day and then goes home, leaving the street "to both the good people and the bad".

Ayub Nuri is an independent Iraqi reporter.

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