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## From Green to Blue? Local Policing in Iraq Post-ISIL

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*Members of Ninawa's community police on patrol. Source: Mosul Community Police Media.*

Iraq's provincial police have faced an uphill battle to assert themselves as relevant, let alone reliable, in the post Saddam era. On a global scale, the police are often understood as comprising the key interface between state and society, and citizens' perceptions of police inform how they view the state and its legitimacy more broadly (something which the [Trump administration](#) – and indeed the UK government – should currently be pondering). In Iraq, most of the 60,000 strong police force deserted after the US-led invasion in 2003, and the Coalition spent much of the next decade rebuilding the institution. The fact that the US [Department of Defense](#), rather than the State Department, led on police training was fateful: the new force was conceived primarily in terms of counter-insurgency rather than community service. By the time US forces withdrew in 2011, the US had spent around [\\$8 billion](#) on training and equipping the Iraqi police.

Somehow, however, the provincial police – which are recruited and administered locally, but funded directly by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) – have remained marginalised. From 2005, the rapid politicisation of the new Iraqi national police (as well as the MoI) and the growth of sectarian violence prompted Coalition forces to shift their attentions to the [federal police](#) (created 2009 as a centrally coordinated gendarmerie-type force), the army, and the [counter-terrorist force](#), leaving [contractors](#) to conduct the bulk of police training.

Training has proven largely inadequate to prepare recruits for navigating Iraq's political marketplace or managing recurrent insurgencies, or indeed, the growing number of predominantly peaceful protests in Iraq. Recent research by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Yale University indicates that in practice, [public confidence in the police](#) varies enormously, in keeping local political and security-related conditions, but certain systemic problems affect the institution as a whole. In the new political system, political elites have used public sector employment as a means of distributing patronage to supporters, and police numbers have grown (on paper at least) up to tenfold since regime change. This apportionment, which operates at both provincial and national levels, has naturally led to party-political, ethno-sectarian and tribal affiliations amongst the police. At the same time, the real number of serving policemen is unclear: reports of 'ghost employees' on payrolls are rife. The provincial police have also struggled to assert their authority over an array of other justice and security actors within Iraq, or to compensate for the

shortcomings in the wider criminal justice system (including the process of criminal investigations, the courts and prisons).

In the early days of ISIL's devastating campaign across central, northern and western Iraq, many local police officers (like the army) in the predominantly Sunni provinces simply melted away, some out of sympathy for the militants, most out of fear for the safety of their families. In the aftermath of the 'liberation', Iraq's security arena was transformed again: the army assumed legal control over urban centres, while in many areas, the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) assumed de facto control. Acting virtually [autonomously](#) from the rest of the state security apparatus, a number of the PMFs have ignored repeated calls by the prime minister for them to [withdraw from urban centres](#).

In this context, demilitarising Iraq's security sector, and specifically transitioning 'from green to blue' i.e., from army, federal police, and emergency battalions to more service-oriented local police in urban areas emerged as one of the Iraqi Interior ministry's core stated goals, and in November 2018, the MoI's Police Affairs Agency, with UN advisory support, inaugurated the [Local Police Service Road Map](#). The document is designed to oversee the transition of security arrangements from Iraqi Security Forces to Local Police in post-ISIL Iraq, and to develop trust between the Iraqi Local Police Service and the public. Key objectives include improving the effectiveness of the Local Police Service and developing Community Policing.

To this end, the MoI, in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have expanded a pilot [Community Policing programme](#) launched in 2012. The programme has been incrementally scaled up through increased training to select members of the provincial police and establish Community Police centres across and Community Police Forums (CPFs) in over 100 separate sub-districts. These forums are explicitly designed to increase interactions with respected and influential members of the local community, and, in line with IOM priorities, have a special focus on addressing the rights of women and minorities.

Early assessments of the scheme indicate some level of success in achieving qualified goals, but anecdotal evidence based on qualitative interviews with Iraqis also suggests a large degree of uncertainty over what 'community-oriented policing' (COP) actually signifies, or should signify in the Iraqi context.

In Europe and North America, COP is commonly understood as a philosophy of police professionalism, which shifts the emphasis of policing from ‘the three Rs’: reactive policing, random patrols and reactive investigation to [‘the three Ps’](#): partnership, problem-solving and prevention. But this concept is still largely unfamiliar in Iraq. As an ex-authoritarian state, the notion that the police should serve the public rather than the regime is novel; as a society in which legal pluralism, customary laws and vigilantism are prevalent, it is often tribal, religious, and militia leaders that play more meaningful roles in dispute management than the police, and as a [conflict-prone society](#), the police have been almost inevitably militarised, which has restricted their ability to foster public trust.

Ultimately, community-oriented policing is not only about transforming the institution of the police, it is about the more monumental project of transforming Iraqi society itself. Of course, achieving this requires buy-in from Iraq’s troubled national government. But it also requires a much more lucid account of how local police officers understand COP, and how other community activists and stakeholders perceive their own roles in relation to the police. Working closely with Iraqi researchers in Anbar and Ninewa provinces, the MEC’s [‘Local Policing in Iraq after ISIL’](#) project in 2020/2021 sets out to provide exactly that.

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*Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.*

### About the author



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