

# OPINION

**T**he convergence of private-sector and military force protection has been the subject of much criticism and international debate. As military forces are stretched beyond capacity and political agendas call for troop withdrawals, the commercial market has increasingly been called upon to fill the gaps, with many key military functions migrating to the private sector.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in Iraq, where many force-protection missions are currently undertaken by private security companies. The professional competence and performance levels of private operators, however, can be mixed and military commanders face a major challenge ensuring seamless integration of security operations.

The reconstruction of Iraq's oil sector is a case in point. Oil is Iraq's main resource, traditionally providing around 95 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings. If it is to succeed – and bolster efforts to rebuild the Iraqi economy – military and private security must be able to co-ordinate effectively.

Much of Iraq's oil infrastructure was left intact following the coalition invasion in 2003. None of the country's eight refineries was seriously damaged in the conflict.

Despite relatively minor wartime damage, however, looting and sabotage after the 2003 invasion was highly destructive, accounting for approximately 80 per cent of the total damage to the oil infrastructure and crippling the Iraqi economy. As a result, more than USD1 billion has been invested to rejuvenate the oil infrastructure and product transportation lines, often in the face of significant turmoil.

The reconstruction of Al Fatha can be considered a case study of effective co-operation between private-sector contractors and military forces, while also underscoring the importance of engaging the local Iraqi security forces in protection efforts. As the international community looks ahead to the imminent investment by up to 35 Western oil companies in Iraq, such a model of organisational convergence presents a possible template for effective security operations.

Al Fatha bridges the geographic gap between the Kirkuk oilfields, most of the Northern Oil Company critical infrastructures and the Baji oil refinery: a vital link that had been disrupted by the bombing of the Tigris river pipeline by coalition forces in 2003. Occupying two sides of the Tigris River, which itself presented significant seasonal challenges, insurgents focused consistent attention on the project, at times shelling the work site and living area several times a day.

Initially led by KBR, the strategic pipe-laying project was taken on by a joint venture led by WorleyParsons and Parsons (Parsons Iraq Joint

## Co-operation still key to Iraqi reconstruction



**Military and private-sector force-protection organisations are working together more closely than ever in post-conflict environments, but the Iraq experience points to the need for proper co-ordination, argues Mike Blyth**

Venture, PIJV). Sabotage, small-arms fire and industrial hazards from leaking pipelines tested Western engineers and required the deployment of more than 450 Kurdish Peshmerga, 120 Fijian and 80 expatriate private security personnel by PIJV. This led to the establishment of a series of concentric and heavily fortified defences, reminiscent of military outposts in Vietnam, where engineering operations could be undertaken with relative safety.

Local operating conditions presented a fluid and volatile risk environment that hampered reconstruction efforts: a challenge made even more difficult by vulnerable and limited supply routes that principally had to pass the insurgent stronghold of Riyadh.

In late 2005, a liquid petroleum leak required emergency evacuation from the site by more than 100 project staff, as well as many of the mixed Iraqi and expatriate private security force. The evacuation was quickly supported by the local US military commander, who immediately deployed dozens of armoured vehicles and combat troops to enable a series of well-organised phased withdrawals while also supporting the safe return to operations several days later. US officers fre-

quently supported the controlled detonation of unexploded insurgent mortar shells; made available medical facilities to treat both minor and major medical emergencies; and provided vital stores, supplies, aviation assets and convoy security escorts on a daily basis.

As the project neared completion, a US infantry company, as well as amphibious assets, were co-located into a unified security and logistics organisation with private security personnel, establishing an integrated organisation that operated hand-in-glove to effectively police and protect both the work site and outlying areas.

Al Fatha was arguably the largest and most difficult critical infrastructure reconstruction project undertaken within Iraq and illustrates how the proper integration of private and military efforts can bring about a positive outcome even under the most difficult operating conditions.

The experience also underscored the need to make Iraqis part of the solution. The Al Fatha project drew together Kurdish and Arab employees, Iraqi Army and police, US military assets and Western private security groups into a unified organisation.

With the Middle East accounting for approximately 30 per cent of global oil production, more than 40 per cent of oil exports and an estimated 65 per cent of the planet's known reserves, Iraq could be the only region able to satisfy the substantial rise in world oil demand. Successful integration of private and government security sectors, whether US or Iraqi, will be a strategic decision point for much needed foreign investment as well as determining the success levels for the subsequent and sustained development of the country's oil sector.

*Mike Blyth has 18 years' experience in international security and risk management*

**The reconstruction of Al Fatha can be considered a case study of effective co-operation**