

SPAIN LEADS NATO MISSION IRAQ

Lieutenant General José Antonio Agüero Martínez assumes command of the advisory mission to the Iraqi armed forces



Lieutenant General Agüero is presented with the NATO flag, symbolising the change of command in the advisory mission to the Iraqi armed forces.

DURING a ceremony held in Baghdad on 24 May 2023, Lieutenant General José Antonio Agüero Martínez assumed command of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI-I), taking over from Italian Lieutenant General Giovanni M. Iannucci, who had been in the post since May 2022.

The handover ceremony was chaired by Admiral Stuart B. Munsch, Commander of Allied Joint Force Command Naples, and was attended by Lieutenant General Fernando García González-Valerio, Chief of the Joint Defence Staff (JEMACON). During his speech, Lieutenant General

Agüero Martínez emphasised NATO's collaboration in training the Iraqi armed forces. He expressed his gratitude to his predecessor for the outstanding work done and conveyed his commitment to advancing in the ongoing objectives. "Our Iraqi colleagues have their own history, culture, organisation and tradition", the new mission commander remarked. "It is up to them to organise their national security framework. Through NATO mission Iraq, we will continue to adapt our advice to their specific needs".

Approved at the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels, NMI-I is a non-combat advisory

and capacity-building mission. "Its primary objective is to aid Iraq to build its security institutions and make the Iraqi security forces even more effective and sustainable, so that they themselves are able to stabilise their country, fight terrorism, and prevent the return of *Daesh*", Lieutenant General Iannucci said. All the activities undertaken have the explicit consent of the Iraqi government and are conducted in complete respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In early November of last year, the Council of Ministers promoted José Antonio Agüero to the rank of Lieutenant General after his tenure as Chief of Staff of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps-Spain (NRDC-ESP) in Bétera, Valencia, a post he held for eleven years. Born in Toledo and aged 59, he previously served in the 7th Brigade *Galicia*; the *Castillejos* Division; the Infantry Academy; and the Spanish Army Personnel Directorate. He has also participated in international missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Afghanistan.

In one of his initial engagements as commander of the mission in Iraq, General Agüero met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the organisation's headquarters in Brussels on 3 May 2023. Also in attendance were the Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador Federico Torres Muro, and the Spanish Military Representative to NATO and EU Military Committees, Lieutenant General Francisco Javier Fernández Sánchez. According to the Defence Staff (EMAD), during the meeting, discussions were held on matters concerning the situation in Iraq and other territories in the region, as well as future opportunities and challenges, NATO's commitment to the Iraqi people and the expansion of the mission to other areas.

OPERATION SUPPORT TO IRAQ

Spain contributes to both of the main operations being carried out in Iraq. With 178 service members, Spain stands as the largest contributor to NMI-I, which involves all 31 NATO allies, as well as Sweden and Australia. Based in the capital city of Baghdad, its headquarters serve as a base for allied instructors and advisers who assist the Iraqi government in the field of national security structures and the development of their military education system. The Spanish contingent provides

support and protection to these advisers at the headquarters, as well as during their journeys to Iraqi training centres or other institutions. The current contingent, which comprises units of the General Command Headquarter in Ceuta, was deployed to Iraq at the end of May and will remain there for six months. It is made up of a Force Protection unit —which includes troops from the 54th Group of Regular Forces and the 2nd Legion Tercio *Duque de Alba*— and the logistical units of the National Support Element (NSE).

Furthermore, Spain has an additional 139 service members assigned to the international coalition combating *Daesh* as part of Operation *Inherent Resolve*, led by the United States. Since 2015, this coalition has been training the Iraqi army to prevent the reoccupation of their territory by *Daesh* terrorists. Task Force *Toro*, a helicopter unit deployed at Al Asad air base, is part of this contingent. Its primary mission is to provide air transport to allied troops, utilising four *Cougar* helicopters of the Spanish Army Airmobile Force (FAMET). Spanish instructors also contribute to this operation from the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Centre, where special operation units of the coalition provide training to Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) personnel.

VIDEOCONFERENCE

On 1 June 2023, Defence Minister Margarita Robles conducted a videoconference with the Spanish contingent of Operation Support to Iraq. She extended her congratulations to them on the occasion of Spain's Armed Forces Day and highlighted the importance of the mission, describing it as one of the "most significant" within NATO. "We are strongly focused on Ukraine, but the missions in Iraq are also crucial", said the defence minister. She was

With 178 troops, Spain is the largest contributor to this mission, initiated by NATO in October 2018



Lieutenant General
José Antonio Agüero
Martínez.



Major General
Aroldo Lázaro
Sáenz.



Vice Admiral
José María Núñez
Torrente.



Brigadier General
Santiago Fernández
Ortiz-Repiso.

In command of four operations

Spanish generals hold key posts in international missions led by the UN, NATO and the EU

THE Spanish Armed Forces are currently commanding four international missions: Lebanon, Mali, Iraq and the Horn of Africa. These missions are conducted under the flags of three different organisations: the UN, the EU and NATO. This unique situation marks a significant milestone in Spain's nearly 35-year history of participating in international operations.

Major General Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz leads the 10,000 blue helmets from 45 countries who comprise the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). He assumed this post on 28 February 2022, for a period of two years.

Since March 2019, Spain has also been in command of the operational headquarters (OHQ) of EU Operation *Atalanta* based at Naval Air Station Rota, Cádiz. The current commander is Vice Admiral José María Núñez Torrente, who was appointed on 23 February 2021. Spain is the only EU country that has participated continuously in this operation that combats piracy in the waters of the Indian Ocean and provides escorts to World Food Programme vessels off the coast of Somalia. The OHQ is staffed by 100 service members from 19 different nations. Spanish nationals comprise 40 per cent of the staff.

Brigadier General Santiago Fernández Ortiz-Repiso has been in command of the European Union mission in Mali, for a one-year term, since 15 December 2022. This is the fourth time that Spain has been in command of this mission. The Spanish Armed Forces have a total of 316 soldiers deployed in Mali. Spain is the largest contributor to this operation, which primarily focuses on training local security forces.

In two of these missions, other Spanish generals also hold prominent positions. In Lebanon, Spain commands one of UNIFIL's two Multinational Brigades: Sector East. There are over 3,500 troops in this brigade from nine different nations, including the Spanish contingent with 600 soldiers. Brigadier General Luis Jesús Fernández Herrero assumed the post on 26 May 2023 and will serve as commander for the next six months. In Iraq, alongside Lieutenant General Agüero, the new commander of NMI-I, another Spanish Army general holds the post of Chief of Staff of the mission and commander of the Spanish contingent in Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan. Since August 2022, Brigadier General Ricardo Esteban Cabrejos has been serving in that role.

INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

accompanied by Vice Admiral Iñigo de la Puente, Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the Operations Command (MOPS).

During the videoconference, Lieutenant General Agüero was joined from Iraq by Brigadier General Ricardo Esteban Cebrejos, Chief of Staff of NMI-I, and Colonel Javier Fernández Conde, the NMI-I liaison officer for Operation *Inherent Resolve*.

The new commander outlined the tasks of NATO's mission, which he described as a "high-level advisory rather than training mission" and stressed that its main objective is to assist Iraq in building its security institutions and making the Iraqi armed forces more sustainable and effective, so that they themselves can stabilise the country and fight terrorism. "Our presence is crucial as it enables a connection with the Western world", emphasised General José Antonio Agüero. In turn, General Esteban pointed out that the mission is "in the spotlight" of the North Atlantic Alliance, and he remarked on the "strong cohesion" that exists within the Spanish contingent.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY SITUATION

Lieutenant General Agüero presented the minister with an assessment of the geopolitical situation in Iraq, including its evolution and medium to long-term prospects. The response of the official Iraqi government, backed by the international coalition, resulted in 2019 in the collapse, after three and a half years, of the terrorist-held caliphate in the Arab nation.



Members of task force *Toro* pose next to one of the four *Cougar* helicopters deployed at Al Asad airbase as part of Operation *Inherent Resolve*.

Following the parliamentary elections in October 2021, a state of deadlock and political turmoil emerged, which was significantly intensified by the power struggle between supporters of Shiite leader Al-Sadr and pro-Iranian Shiite parties. This escalation resulted in fierce battles in Baghdad in late summer 2022. The period culminated with the establishment of a new government led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudan, which was

officially approved by parliament in October of last year. The current cabinet's top priorities are combating corruption, tackling unemployment, supporting vulnerable groups, reforming the economic and financial sectors and enhancing public services (reports a press release from the Department of National Security).

In the economic sphere, there have been recent announcements of agreements with international companies aimed at boosting the production of oil, gas and renewable energies. Tensions continue to exist, however, regarding the distribution of oil revenues between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Regarding security, the Kurdish-Turkish conflict has continued intermittently, with sporadic military operations by Turkish forces against Kurdish armed groups on the country's northern border. Furthermore, there has been significant progress in fostering cooperation between Iraq and Iran to ensure that the security of Iran is not threatened from Iraqi soil, as well as to strengthen their mutual borders.

Finally, the persistent threat of terrorism from *Daesh* remains a significant challenge for the country, particularly in rural areas and especially in the provinces of Kirkuk, Salaheddin and Diyala.



Rubén Samonte/WIDE

Defence Minister Margarita Robles speaks by videoconference with Lieutenant General José Antonio Agüero and Brigadier General Ricardo Esteban on 1 June 2023.

Victor Hernández
Photos: EMAD