

THE PATH TO SUSTAINABLE SECURITY AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN IRAQ

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**THE PATH TO SUSTAINABLE SECURITY AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN
IRAQ**

by

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ABSTRACT

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THE PATH TO SUSTAINABLE SECURITY AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN IRAQ

“In 2006 Iraq was a failed state. In 2008 it’s a fragile state. We’ve got to move it to a stable state...toward trying to help the Iraqis achieve full sovereignty.”¹

General Ray Odierno
Commanding General, Multi-National Forces – Iraq

Today Iraq stands on the cusp of monumental and lasting change. The U.S.-led “surge” of forces and new doctrine in 2007-2008 resulted in remarkably improved, albeit not sustainable security that characterizes a stable state.² Rather than an end itself, the success of the surge bought time and space for the Government of Iraq to attain enduring strategic gains. Indeed, a window of opportunity has opened for political progress, reconciliation, economic development, and effective rule of law to take hold. Concomitant with this opportunity remain significant challenges and the risk of failure, but the recently concluded U.S. – Iraqi bilateral Security and Strategic Framework Agreements offer a realistic path to sustainable security in Iraq. It is now within the reach of U.S. and Iraqi leaders to attain a sovereign, secure and stable Iraq, committed to just governance and regional stability, and a long-term strategic partnership. For the U.S., the achievement of these objectives would further enhance American reputational authority and power that could be leveraged globally and throughout the region. Simply put, success in Iraq is a U.S. strategic imperative.

While many questions continue to surround the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, prolonged argument about the necessity or course of U.S. actions during that time are not germane to policymakers’ primary considerations today. Analysis and debate of the events leading to U.S. intervention in Iraq will no doubt provide lessons for future

decision-making, and such matters will provide ample fodder when the historical record is clearer. For the time being however, decision-makers cannot allow themselves to be drawn into prolonged consideration of the *casus belli* of the war in Iraq; they must act given the cotemporary conditions on the ground to advance national interests through the formulation of a coherent, forward-leaning strategy.³ Continued progress in Iraq will require further U.S. political will and commitment, to capitalize on the success that has already been realized. In short, it is time to look forward, not backward, and galvanize the gains that have been earned through tough U.S. sacrifices during the past six years.

As 2009 unfolds, joint U.S. – Iraqi implementation of the Security Agreement, supported by the broader and enduring Strategic Framework Agreement, allows the U.S. to responsibly transition and reshape its mission in Iraq while supporting its long-term national interests. Ryan Crocker, the out-going U.S. Ambassador in Iraq, best summarized the U.S. strategic situation in the post-surge environment:

I think the first thing that Americans need to understand is how profound the changes have been in the 18 months since the surge got underway. The second thing is how high the stakes are here. We are making substantial progress, but this isn't over. We have to be sure we don't lose focus, we don't lose attention, and we don't let our strategic enemies regain an initiative.”⁴

The stakes in Iraq are indeed high, but among the challenges are strategic opportunities that the U.S. can prudently pursue to secure its national interests.

A Strategic Imperative for the U.S.

Iraq is a strategic imperative for the United States for many reasons. Importantly, success in Iraq, through the establishment of an enduring strategic partnership, can eliminate a source of persistent regional violence and instability. Besides gaining an important Middle Eastern partner to fight terrorists, the achievement of stability in Iraq

deals a major blow to the Sunni-based Salafist brand of extremism that had made Iraq its refuge. Al-Qaeda second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri in his 2005 letter to then al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi noted that Iraq was the central front on terror. He further highlighted that al-Qaeda's goals were to (1) expel the Americans from Iraq, (2) establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq, (3) extend the jihad wave to Iraq's secular neighbors, and (4) effect the clash with Israel.⁵ The surge's dominant counterinsurgency operations significantly degraded AQI and denied Zawahiri's goals, but AQI maintains a credible threat and a foothold in northern Iraq. With Syria to the west and Iran to the east, a successful U.S.-Iraq partnership provides the *sine qua non* to neutralize AQI and prevent its destabilizing influence to expand in the region.

While AQI's brutality has captured the media spotlight, the long-term threat to sustainable security in Iraq is the malign influence of Iran. For many in Iran, including those who direct Iranian policy toward Iraq, the brutal, eight year Iran-Iraq war still has not ended.⁶ Iran's goals in Iraq are twofold: first to defeat the U.S. in Iraq, and second to dominate a weak, Shia-led Iraq.⁷ Success in Iraq deters Iran's hegemonic designs in the region and balances Iranian influence, particularly the expansion of Hezbollah-like extremism marked by attacks such as the 1983 Beirut bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks.

From a geographic and cultural standpoint, Iraq's location makes it key strategic terrain.⁸ Iraq boasts an ancient history as a bellwether nation for the entire region. Sitting astride the traditional trade and communication routes of Mesopotamia, Iraq lies at the heart of the Muslim world. Today it is a nation with large Arab populations, both Sunni and Shia, as well as containing Kurdish and other minority groups. The ability of

these diverse peoples to fashion a modern state that is on friendly terms with the U.S. will go far as an example to other publics in the region. Such a relationship also demonstrates that the U.S. can pursue common goals and interests with large Muslim societies. Moreover, Iraq's borders physically extend between two long-standing groups of U.S. allies: the Gulf Arab states in the south, and Turkey and NATO in the north. Hence, a secure and stable Iraq that is closely partnered with the U.S., provides unique opportunities for building new alliances with states in the region as well as non-state actors during the years ahead.

Next, U.S. success in Iraq demonstrates global leadership. It shows the international community that the U.S. does not abandon its friends who pursue democracy. In addition, it demonstrates U.S. strength and influence while showing respect for a fully sovereign nation. Perhaps most importantly, continued U.S. involvement in Iraq ensures commitment from international organizations such as the United Nations Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), non-governmental organizations and charities, and the NATO Training Mission – Iraq (NTM-I), that all contribute to stability.

Furthermore, the attainment of U.S. objectives in Iraq boosts global commerce and has enormous economic potential. In a region of state-controlled economies, it promotes free market practices and opens the door to a new trading partner. Additionally, it adds Iraqi hydrocarbon resources to the global energy market and provides reliable, long-term benefits for both the U.S. and Iraq. With more efficient civil aviation air corridors already open, it also has the potential to establish a road and rail bridge that connects the Middle East to Europe for even more commercial exchange.

Finally, success in Iraq establishes a preeminent example of representative government and budding prosperity for the downtrodden in a region that has seen little of either for many decades. By implementing the rule of law that seeks to operate in consonance with the universal and natural rights and principles of the United Nations, Iraq can serve as a model of governance in a region characterized by autocracy and state-control. Moreover, it introduces a constructive partner with a moderate voice for regional and international engagement with organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the United Nations.

Iraq's Equities

In many respects, U.S. successes are Iraqi successes and vice versa. However, there are also unique equities that benefit Iraq. Chief among them is achieving full sovereignty. Although Iraq has *de jure* sovereignty today, it will require additional time and considerable capacity improvement before it achieves *de facto* sovereignty. Many different models exist that describe the elements of sovereignty, but its essential elements include the capacity to maintain internal order, control various instruments of power, affect the environment, enter into obligations with external representation, and maintain self-preservation.⁹ Iraq enjoyed such sovereignty under Saddam Hussein, albeit to the detriment of many of its citizens and regional neighbors. However, in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's overthrow followed by years of insurgency, and under the auspices of Chapter VII United Nations Security Council resolutions, Iraq was rendered unable to exercise full sovereignty without external assistance.

With the dramatically improved security situation in the post-surge era, Iraq now has a tremendous opportunity to achieve full sovereignty. The Government of Iraq

(GoI) made a monumental step in that direction by concluding a bilateral Security Agreement and a Strategic Framework Agreement with the U.S. in early December 2008.¹⁰ Importantly, this coincided with the expiration of the U.N. chapter VII mandate (UNSCR 1790) on December 31, 2008. As noted in the opening quote by General Odierno, the U.S. is committed to helping Iraq achieve full sovereignty, and this commitment resonates with the Iraqi people.

Although security is vastly improved across Iraq, it is not yet enduring. A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces now would surely result in security vacuums and political fissures that al-Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-supported surrogates would seek to exploit. The GoI realizes that it needs the presence of U.S. forces to help maintain and improve security while it seeks to transition to a stable state.¹¹

The terms and three-year timeline of the Security Agreement provide a horizon for the continued development of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Proven in combat and partnered with U.S. forces, the ISF is well on its way to being able to maintain internal order. However, challenges and shortfalls in areas like logistics, combat enablers (artillery, engineers, intelligence, etc), and ministerial capacity remain. Especially important, Iraq has the tremendous opportunity to adapt its military and police into professional forces that operate competently under civil control, a novelty for this part of the world. Likewise, with continued U.S. assistance, the ISF can progress from a counter-insurgency force into a conventional force, enabling police primacy within its borders, and freeing the army, navy, and air force to focus on external defense and the preservation of Iraq's territorial sovereignty.

During negotiations and since ratification, the bilateral Security Agreement (often mistakenly called the SOFA or Status of Forces Agreement) has garnered most of the media attention. However, the more important accord is the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which was negotiated in parallel. The SFA affirms the desire of both the U.S. and Iraq to establish a long-term relationship of cooperation and friendship based on the principle of equality in sovereignty.¹² Its eleven sections call for cooperation in a diverse and mutually beneficial array of areas to include economics and energy, health and environment, technology, culture and education, and law enforcement.

Section III of the SFA calls for defense and security cooperation to “enhance the ability of the Republic of Iraq to deter all threats against its sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.”¹³ This particular section is extremely critical because Iraq’s air force and navy will not yet be ready to stand on its own within the three years of the Security Agreement with the U.S. through the end of 2011. With 70% of its GDP out-loaded from off-shore oil terminals near contested waterways with Iran, Iraq has a vested interest in building a strong, self-reliant navy. With long, open borders in vast deserts and limited road networks, it also has a crucial interest in an air force that can quickly respond to external threats. Finally, successful militaries must be able to modernize and adapt to changing environments, especially in volatile areas like the Middle East. With the defense and security cooperation clause in the SFA, Iraq has a mechanism in place that ensures it will be able to upgrade its military capabilities and maintain a qualitative edge over potential adversaries.

Section II of the SFA is also of particular significance. It states that the U.S. and Iraq “share a common understanding that their mutual efforts and cooperation on political and diplomatic issues shall improve and strengthen security and stability in Iraq and the region”.¹⁴ Collaboration in these areas is extremely important in facilitating Iraq’s transition from a fragile state to a stable state.

First, political cooperation (not direction) can help Iraq resolve its internal conflicts with the U.S. acting as an honest broker and ensuring Iraqi political leaders remain peacefully engaged. Left on their own, the various power brokers have historically had significant difficulty in engaging one another, whether it is KRG vs. Gol, Sunni vs. Shia, or Arab vs. Kurd. When this happens, political tensions fester and have the potential to incite violence. However, U.S. encouragement has been able to cut through Iraqi impasses and will continue to go a long way to keep Iraq’s difficult issues inside the political arena.

Second, in terms of diplomatic cooperation, U.S. involvement plays a key role assisting Iraq expand its diplomatic relations and solicit foreign investment. The number of foreign ambassadors appointed to Iraq has steadily increased as security has improved, but much broader representation is desired and needed. A strong U.S. presence encourages other nations, as well as international and regional organizations, to support Iraq. During the late 2008 Manama Dialogue, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made a plea to Iraq’s Arab neighbors: “I strongly encourage those nations that have not yet taken steps to restore full diplomatic relations with Iraq to do so. Iraq can only play a constructive role in this region if it is on an equal footing diplomatically.”¹⁵ Normalized relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members,

as well as Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt present numerous opportunities for business, trade, tourism, energy, security, and more. Significantly, it would also balance Iranian influence and provide Iraqi leaders with alternatives to Iran on a host of issues that it does not currently enjoy.

In summary and as stated in its national security strategy, the GoI endeavors to achieve self-reliance, full security responsibility, and normalized diplomatic relations through equitable treaties and agreements.¹⁶ Between the Security Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement, Iraq has the potential to progress from a fragile state to a stable state, and then sustain those gains for the long-term. Mutually beneficial to co-equal sovereign partners, the Security and Strategic Framework agreements represent wise strategic choices for Iraq, as well as the U.S.

Drivers of Instability and the Nature of the State

The environment in Iraq today remains extremely complex and dynamic, and is perhaps best succinctly characterized by Ambassador Ryan Crocker: “Shia fear the past. Sunnis fear the future. The Kurds fear both.”¹⁷ Although security gains in Iraq have been dramatic, Iraq remains a fragile state because the underlying sources of conflict – to include political, economic, and cultural disputes -- have yet to be resolved. To appreciate Iraq’s multifarious challenges denying it durable stability, one must not exclusively focus on immediate security threats such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-supported proxies. Rather, thorough environmental analysis requires a broader, holistic approach that accounts for the motivations and fears of Iraq’s diverse, multi-ethnic population that persist from over thirty years of societal devastation under Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Acknowledging Iraq's complexities and deep-rooted tensions, General Ray Odierno has recognized that he requires detailed and timely information on a wide variety of socio-political factors that could potentially reignite violence and reverse security gains. Shortly after assuming command of Multi-National Forces – Iraq (MNF-I) in September 2008, he provided guidance to his staff and subordinate elements to refine his critical information requirements – the reporting on which a commander bases his decisions. While knowledge of enemy intentions and incidents of violence remain important, they alone do not paint a complete picture of the full nature of civil society. To develop well-founded assessments and make effective decisions, General Odierno realized that he required quick and accurate bottom-up reporting from his “strategic corporals” on more than just security incidents.¹⁸

Seeking to spur a change of mindset among his troops, General Odierno refocused his subordinates and staffs on “drivers of instability”. Evolving as events on the ground unfold, the drivers of instability serve as early indicators of potentially larger problems across multiple lines of effort – political, economic, rule of law, governance, etc – rather than the military's traditional focus on security. For instance, General Odierno requested that any allegations of election irregularities be immediately reported so that they could be relayed to Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and appropriate Government of Iraq (GoI) authorities. These irregularities included items such as candidate intimidation, formation of ad hoc security groups, and exclusion of women and minorities from the electoral process. The drivers of instability are extremely wide-ranging and continue to be refined to include events such as any changes in status of major legislation, formation of large crowd gatherings, major

shortfalls in the delivery of essential services, and the break-up of political blocs.

Fundamentally, he sought to address the early symptoms of potential problems before they spun out of control and into crisis.

Constant analysis of the drivers of instability allows insight into the major political issue facing Iraq today: a lack of commitment from its leaders toward a shared, common vision for the future of their nation. In other words, a sense of nationalism understood and embodied by leaders and led alike, is maturing, but still weakly held. Communal and factional agendas representing various sects, ethnicities, parties, and tribes supersede national priorities leading to disagreement on the nature of the state. In the near future, Iraq's major power brokers must develop and agree to a unified vision in order to deal with its complex problems, whether it is Article 140, the hydrocarbon law, or other issues.¹⁹

However, while it is important to note that individual agendas frequently take precedence in the Iraqi political landscape, the GoI has taken the step to define and publish a credible Iraqi national vision. Iraq First, the GoI's National Security Strategy, states:

The Iraqi national vision fulfills the Iraqi people's aspirations for establishing a unified, democratic, federal state, in which both security and stability prevail; all citizens have equal rights and responsibilities under a constitutional government; all look forward to building a prosperous economy opened wide to the world; and the country is an active member in regional and international organizations.²⁰

Unfortunately, this vision is not being fully pursued because of internal fear, mistrust, and political tensions among competing factions of Iraqi society. As a result, strong potential exists to reignite violence.

The drivers of instability that undermine unity and commitment to Iraq's national vision can be grouped into three general categories: internal political tensions, lack of civil capacity, and immature external relations. The factors driving the mistrust and feeding the fear are numerous, complex, and interwoven. A nascent democracy, Iraq is best characterized as a society coming to political terms with its past. There are no easy or quick solutions to such divides and Iraqis of all statures must ultimately resolve these political tensions. The presence of U.S. forces under the SA will help mitigate ensuing flashpoints and provide a calming influence to keep political discourse within established venues short of violence.

The first category of drivers of instability, internal political tensions, includes a number of strained relations: between the GoI and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), between Arabs and Kurds, between Shia political parties vying for power, and the long standing Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. Recently, intra-Sunni tensions are also beginning to appear. Contributing to this atmosphere of mistrust is a perception that the central government is consolidating power at the expense of Iraq's eighteen provinces, resulting in heated debate. Finally, reconciliation, which gained traction as a bottom-up process during the surge of 2007 and 2008 is not complete and requires further accommodation from the central government and those who might reconcile.

These political rows are manifest in stalled progress, such as the hydrocarbon law which has yet to be agreed upon after years of debate, and present grave potential to escalate into violence. However, impartial U.S. presence, dialogue and encouragement have thrust politics over bloodshed as the primary method of dispute resolution. Though extremist groups continually seek to stoke the political tensions,

constant pressure and pursuit by U.S. and Iraqi security forces on extremist networks has negated a return to violent behavior. Continued efforts by U.S. and Iraqi forces will be required for the foreseeable future because of the slow and uneven progress on key legislation, disputed boundaries, rule of law, and ministerial capacity. In other words, the institutions required to support a sovereign democracy are still developing, and the processes will require continued patience and protection.

Adding to Iraq's fragility is the second category of drivers of instability: lagging civil capacity perhaps being the major obstacle to sustainable security. Delivery of essential services -- water, fuel, electricity, sewer, trash, health, etc -- is unable to meet public demand. Considerable funding has been allocated by the GoI for reconstruction and infrastructure improvement, but more is required. The Iraqi people want the same things people everywhere desire -- basic services, jobs, and safety for their families. Failure to meet the people's needs feeds the insurgency and undermines the credibility of the government. Thus, it is extremely critical that the GoI improve budget execution, repair and modernize infrastructure, increase economic development, and advance the rule of law.

The third category of drivers of instability that contribute to Iraq's fragility is its immature external relations. Still nascent, Iraq's diplomatic relations are underdeveloped and in some cases non-existent. Even among some of its neighbors with whom it shares borders, Iraq has yet to normalize relations. Although Iran has sought to endear itself to Iraq, its motives are questionable. Iran seeks to dominate a weak Iraq through the preservation of a Shia majority that is sympathetic to Iranian ambitions. Iran does more than promote cultural and religious heritage. It also actively seeks to

destabilize the GoI through the sponsorship of extremist groups. The resulting Iranian malign influence and nefarious activity inside of Iraq undermines the GoI. Iran also seeks to exploit Iraqi vulnerabilities by maintaining an enormous trade imbalance, and also uses this cover to smuggle weapons and ammunition into Iraq for use by its proxies.²¹ While there should be mutually favorable relations between the two neighboring countries, current Iranian behavior does not facilitate the attainment of sustainable security, equitable trade, and full Iraqi sovereignty.

Normalized relations between Iraq and its Arab neighbors would go a long way in balancing Iranian influence. However, Iraq's history as an antagonist in the region, coupled with the perception of Iranian domination causes many of Iraq's neighbors to yet be wary. Although diplomatic relations are slowly improving, as evidenced by the arrival of several Arab ambassadors over the past year, further progress is needed, to include Iraq's reciprocity with installing ambassadors abroad. Additionally, trade and investment between Iraq and its Arab neighbors must be encouraged to promote free market economies and provide Iraqis with suitable alternatives. The U.S. plays a critical role in this regard because it is seen by the Pan-Arab world as an essential facilitator of favorable conditions for diplomatic and economic engagement with Iraq. Without normalized relations among its Arab neighbors, Iraq has little chance for becoming a stable, prosperous, and fully sovereign nation.

Central to achieving sustainable security in Iraq is the careful oversight of the drivers of instability, necessitating continued U.S. involvement as an honest broker. While the drivers of instability potentially threaten the viability of the state, understanding and proactively addressing Iraq's political, civil capacity and external

relation challenges is critical to the emergence of a secure and stable nation. Left unchecked, the drivers of instability could easily lead to re-emergence of widespread violence. However, Iraq is making the correct strategic choices and the Iraqi people are increasingly shunning violence and utilizing the political process. Through careful attention to the drivers of instability and continued cooperation, the U.S. and Iraq are well-postured to negotiate the critical events and challenges in the coming years that mark the path to sustainable security.

2009: A Pivotal Year of Transition

2009 will be a pivotal year of transition in Iraq. It includes five separate elections, a long overdue national census, implementation of the Security Agreement, a national referendum on the Security Agreement, a U.N. report on the disputed boundaries, and possible U.S. force adjustments. All of these events will occur in concert with a new U.S. administration, unresolved Iraqi political tensions, a global financial crisis, low oil prices, and the ever-present threat of AQI and Iran.

The year began with provincial elections in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces at the end of January 2009. District and sub-district elections, as well as elections in Kirkuk and the 3 Kurdish provinces are to follow, with national elections scheduled for the end of 2009. Unlike the last Iraq elections in 2005, greater voter representation is expected, particularly among Sunnis and Sadrists who boycotted them last time, and this has already bore itself out with the provincial elections. Also unlike the last elections, open lists are being used instead of closed lists, so voters know by name for whom they are casting their votes. From the Iraqi standpoint, it is critical that the elections are deemed

credible and legitimate internationally, and U.S. forces in Iraq are working diligently with the GoI and the ISF to ensure this is the case.

On a positive note, the elections represent positive political progress and should result in more equitable representation of the people. However, with each election comes a corresponding transition of power, and many new leaders are expected to win office. As a result, the potential exists to further burden the lagging civil sector with new, inexperienced local and provincial governments. Moreover, with an extremely high number of candidates and parties participating, there is potential for unfulfilled expectations. Although the January 31st provincial elections passed without violence, one cannot rule out post-election violence due to dissatisfaction among the losers, and this is also the case for the remaining elections. Finally, the elections will most likely result in a re-balancing of power, leading to shifting alliances that will impact Iraq's political environment. Overall, though, the elections are a step in the right direction toward achieving stability and full sovereignty.

Implementation of the Security Agreement is underway and represents a change in the operating environment, but not a change in the mission. As part of its terms, the GoI assumes authority for the International Zone and detainees, but both are being transitioned in a deliberate, responsible manner. By the end of June 2009, all U.S. combat forces are to withdraw from the cities, and with the exception of Baghdad and Mosul, this withdrawal is generally complete. In Baghdad, U.S. training teams will remain with their partnered ISF units to continue the enabling and advising mission, but all bases will be turned over to Iraq. In fact, some bases in Baghdad have already been turned over, showing good faith on the part of the U.S. With on-going combat

operations in Mosul, the Gol may request continued U.S. combat presence to assist against al-Qaeda in Iraq, but that decision would be made at a later date based on the security conditions. In terms of combat authorities, U.S. forces must obtain warrants and must turn over detainees to a competent Iraqi authority within 24 hours of arrest. Although these procedures seem burdensome, the flexibility and adaptability of U.S. forces are enabling, in close coordination with ISF partners, a successful transition to the new procedures.

As part of the ratification process in the Gol's Council of Representatives, a national referendum on the Security Agreement will be held in June 2009. If it passes, then the Security Agreement will remain in effect. If it fails, then Iraq is required to give twelve months notice to revoke the treaty, which would result in the departure of all U.S. forces by summer 2010. Both AQI and Iran will try to discredit U.S. forces to cause the referendum to fail, and then exploit the security vacuums that develop. Thus, it is enormously important that U.S. forces conduct all operations in accordance with the terms of the security agreement and in total respect for Iraq's sovereignty, as well as the honor and dignity of its citizens.²²

Transitions also represent periods of vulnerability, and al-Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-supported Shia extremists are patient and focused on the long-term. 2009 is replete with opportunities, but must be closely managed with careful, deliberate decisions to preserve security gains and move Iraq to a stable state. The threats and uncertainties posed by the drivers of instability make this an even more challenging endeavor. How 2009 closes will tremendously shape the future of Iraq. It is absolutely critical to get it right, for there may never be another chance as good as this one.

The Way Ahead

Recognizing that no two places in Iraq are the same, and that different areas require different solutions, the current situation in Iraq nonetheless provides the U.S. with the opportunity to recalibrate its approach. With security greatly improved, more focus can be placed on political, economic, diplomatic, governance, and rule of law progress. During the surge, coalition forces tended to lead all counterinsurgency efforts with their partnered ISF units. However, a more capable and confident ISF now allows coalition units to deliberately transition to a role of enabling and advising the ISF from positions of overwatch. With less emphasis on leading combat operations and more emphasis on preserving security gains, coalition units are also better postured to support the efforts of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), international organizations, and non-governmental organizations to build civil capacity.

The employment of modular U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) and U.S. Marine Corps Regimental Combat Teams (RCT) has proven tremendously effective in a counterinsurgency environment. However, in the coming years – from the transitions of 2009 to end of the security agreement in 2011 – the mission will increasingly evolve to more stability operations and less offensive and defensive operations. During the surge, Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) were ideal for the application of “hard power”. Their primary tasks were to protect the population, defeat extremists, and lead combat operations with the ISF. Transitioning to the new operational environment, our future brigades will have to work by, with, and through the ISF while simultaneously supporting civil capacity development.²³ Although BCTs are designed for full spectrum operations,

refinements can optimize them for the application of “soft power” to better facilitate stability operations. Considerations for U.S. force employment include:

- Rename BCTs as “Advisory and Assistance Brigades (AAB)” -- the term “BCT” sends the wrong message to the Iraqi people and is not indicative of their primary focus.
- Change in mindset from being a “supported” unit to becoming a “supporting” unit.
- Re-prioritize pre-deployment training for the new environment: enable and advise the ISF, support interagency and international organizations, and support civil capacity development.
- Organize self-reliant partnership teams that accommodate ISF operational boundaries and hierarchies, yet reside under AAB command and control.
- Augment the AAB with 8-15 extra Lieutenant Colonels and Majors to lead the ISF Brigade and Division partnership teams, since they will primarily be advising senior Iraqi officers (generals and colonels).
- Develop a training cadre, separate of the partnership teams that can develop and execute collective training for the ISF; include expertise within the AABs to adequately train and advise all branches of ISF ground forces.
- Augment the S-9 Civil Affairs sections with specially trained and experienced personnel, and staff it with a Lieutenant Colonel or a senior Major.
- Create flatter, more responsive headquarters that are fully joint and capable of addressing the range of stability missions.
- Ensure that AABs are closely integrated with Department of State and other U.S. government interagency partners on fewer, but strategically critical bases.

Like the BCTs, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) were also effective during the surge, but as a supporting effort to the BCTs. The challenges facing Iraq today require a continued PRT-like capability, but on an expanded scale much beyond what their name implies: provincial reconstruction. More robust interagency involvement is both needed and desired to ensure unity of effort on multiple fronts: governance, rule of law, economic development, agriculture, essential services, health, etc. In many respects, the areas of cooperation of the Strategic Framework Agreement lend themselves to what these teams, in conjunction with the AABs, should be capable of advancing. However, that capacity does not currently exist.

As a potential solution, 5 to 7 multifunctional, regionally-based teams could be organized by combining existing PRTs and augmenting them with additional interagency expertise. Renaming them as Joint Interagency Support Teams (JIAST), the teams could be partnered with AABs at joint regional support bases that include airfields capable of handling large planes. The JIAST would be responsible for a set number of provinces, perhaps just 1 if it was Baghdad and maybe 3-4 for sparsely populated areas, and also coordinate the efforts of all other tenants on the regional support base such as USAID. With the AABs supporting the JIASTs and simultaneously enabling and advising the ISF, the U.S. effort in Iraq could gain greater synergy and synchronization in building civil capacity.

Key to the JIAST capacity is the ability to help Iraqis develop long-term sustainable programs, which is a shift in focus from the immediate impact projects done in earlier years. As an example, apprenticeship programs to train skilled workers like electricians, carpenters, and plumbers would facilitate civic self-reliance instead of a

dependence on foreign contracts. Such a shift is akin to the old adage of “give a man a fish and feed him for a day, but teach him to fish and feed him for a lifetime”.

Another important aspect of the JIAST concept is that it must be able to help the GoI effectively and efficiently spend Iraqi funds instead of relying on U.S. monies. Although affected by falling oil prices, Iraqi resources are available and the GoI allocates funds to its provinces and for special purposes like reconstruction. However, the GoI is beset by poor budget execution and corruption, and must reform its business practices so that it can assume a greater cost burden. JIASTs, properly staffed with financial and budget experts, could go a long way in helping Iraqis bring stability to Iraq while significantly reducing U.S. resource expenditures.

U.S. military support in Iraq remains crucial, although future force reductions are possible. Indeed, the U.S. military commitment has already shrunk from 20 BCTs and over 170,000 troops at the height of the surge to 14 BCTs and approximately 140,000 troops in early 2009. Using an enable and advise approach, continued ISF professionalization & development is vital. The ISF have made monumental improvements, but are still years away from being the sole guarantors of Iraq's internal security and territorial sovereignty. Additionally, elite U.S. forces must continue the counter-terrorism mission with Iraqi special operations forces against al-Qaeda in Iraq, Iranian proxies engaged in nefarious activity, and other extremists.

Two points of caution are in order before additional U.S. force off-ramps are undertaken. First, the political climate in the U.S. coupled with military requirements elsewhere in the world will not support another surge to Iraq, so forces withdrawn from Iraq should be considered as permanent reductions. Second, the completion of the

critical events of 2009 warrant a healthy U.S. military presence before an accelerated drawdown should occur. This is not to say that additional force reductions could not happen in 2009, but that any decisions should be done in a careful and responsible manner with regard to sustaining the hard-earned security gains.

Although beyond the scope of AABs and JIASTs, it bears noting that the U.S. serves as the most important interlocutor in facilitating political and diplomatic dialogue, which is absolutely necessary to move Iraq to a stable state. Senior American leaders at the U.S. Embassy and MNF-I have jointly done unheralded, but brilliant work in bringing together competing Iraqi leaders for political discourse. Examples include multiple sessions of the Presidency Council involving Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki (Shia – Dawa Party), President Talabani (Kurdish – PUK Party), Vice President Hashemi (Sunni – IIP Party), Vice President Mahdi (Shia – ISCI Party), and KRG President Barzani (Kurdish – KDP Party). Without strong American encouragement and resolve, these power brokers would be extremely hesitant to sit together at the discussion table. U.S. encouragement has also opened up tripartite talks between the U.S., the GoI with KRG representation, and Turkey, which have become mutually beneficial for all involved parties. Such political and diplomatic discussion is essential to sustaining security and moving Iraq beyond its fragile nature.

Finally, for symbolic, political, and public diplomacy reasons, it is nigh time to change the name of the U.S. mission in Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom – OIF – was appropriate for an invasion intended to overthrow a brutal dictator. However, it is now six years later and Iraqis have their freedom. It should be re-named something to indicate the U.S. commitment to helping Iraq realize its full sovereignty, such as

“Sovereign Horizon”. The military planners can develop appropriate alternatives, but the new name’s Arabic translation and effect on the Iraqi and Pan-Arab populations should be the major consideration.

Conclusion

The many transitions in 2009 make it a pivotal year. Much security progress has been made at great sacrifice, but the gains are not yet irreversible and Iraq remains fragile because the underlying sources of political conflict have yet to be resolved. However, nothing is easy in Iraq and continued progress requires further patience, resources, and will. The complex and dynamic nature of the operational environment requires a multifaceted solution set – ISF partnership, civil capacity development, support of interagency teams and international organizations, counterterrorism operations, information operations.

The advent of the Security Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement pave the way to move Iraq from a fragile state to a stable state. A sovereign, secure, and stable Iraq committed to just governance in a strategic partnership with the U.S. represents success. The benefits to be gained from the attainment of these goals are crucial to the United States – an imperative for our national interests. Lesser alternatives invite a resurgence of extremism and instability while potentially handing a victory to the enemies of Iraq and the United States.

Endnotes

¹ GEN Ray Odierno, interview by Jim Michaels, *USA Today*, September 29, 2008 two weeks after he assumed command of all multi-national forces in Iraq on his third tour since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

² The “surge” refers to not only a reinforcement of troops, but a change in tactics that called for U.S. forces to protect the Iraqi population with the establishment of Joint Security Stations

and “safe neighborhoods” in accordance with General Odierno’s intent as the Multi-National Corps – Iraq Commander, Dec 2006-Feb 2008.

³ Discussion with LTC Bradley T. Gericke, U.S. Army strategist and former history professor at the U.S. Military Academy, on the merits of debating the *casus belli* of the Iraq War.

⁴ Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, interview by Brian Hemmer, Fox News, October 21, 2008.

⁵ Ayman Al-Zawahiri, letter to Ayub Musab al-Zarqawi, July 9, 2005. Originally posted on the Office of the Director of National Intelligence website on October 11, 2005, but since removed. Available at http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf (accessed March 3, 2009).

⁶ Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, interview by Brian Hemmer, Fox News, October 21, 2008.

⁷ Summarized from the author’s personal notes collected during a research trip to Iraq from October 2008 to January 2009.

⁸ Discussion with LTC Gericke on the merits of including cultural geography in addition to physical geography when discussing Iraq’s strategic importance.

⁹ John Lenczowski and David Klocek, lecture on September 29, 2008 at the Institute of World Politics, Washington, D.C. on the characteristics of sovereignty.

¹⁰ U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari signed the bilateral Security Agreement (SA) and Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) on November 17, 2008 in Baghdad, Iraq. The agreements were ratified by the Gol’s Council of Representatives on December 4, 2008 and went into effect on January 1, 2009. The SA governs the temporary stay of U.S. forces in Iraq and is limited to a 3 year timeline from January 1, 2009 to December 31, 2010. As stated in the SA, the Gol requests the temporary assistance of U.S. forces for the purpose of supporting Iraq in its efforts to maintain security, ostensibly until the ISF are self-reliant. In contrast, the SFA is a broader, open-ended treaty that calls for cooperation on a number of mutually beneficial areas well beyond the scope of security cooperation activities.

¹¹ Bilateral Security Agreement between the U.S. and Iraq, Article 4, 3, http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/CGs_Messages/security_agreement.pdf (accessed February 4, 2009).

¹² Strategic Framework Agreement between the U.S. and Iraq, Preamble, 1, http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/CGs_Messages/strategic_framework_agreement.pdf (accessed February 4, 2009).

¹³ Ibid, Section III, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, Section II, 2.

¹⁵ Robert M. Gates, Manama Dialogue speech, December 13, 2008, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1333> (accessed February 9, 2009).

¹⁶ Government of Iraq, *Iraq First*, Iraq National Security Strategy 2007-2010, 8.

¹⁷ Ambassador Crocker often uses this phrase to describe the political climate in Iraq where the Shia are still fearful of Baathist repression, the Sunnis fearful of Shia domination of Iraq, and the Kurds fearful of both.

¹⁸ The term “strategic corporal” comes from General Charles C. Krulak’s article “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War” in *Marines Magazine*, January 1999.

¹⁹ GEN Ray Odierno, interview by Brian Kilmeade, Fox News, October 13, 2008.

²⁰ Government of Iraq, *Iraq First*, Iraq National Security Strategy 2007-2010, 5.

²¹ Assessment of a joint ISF/Coalition border monitoring team during a visit to Wasit Province in December 2008 that manages a primary Port of Embarkation (POE) along the Iraq-Iran border.

²² GEN Ray Odierno, Commanding General, Multi-National Forces – Iraq, letter to the troops on ratification and implementation of the bilateral security agreement, <http://www.mnf-iraq.com/> (accessed February 4, 2009).

²³ Ibid.

