

Text of memo from Col. Timothy R. Reese, Chief, Baghdad Operations Command Advisory Team, MND-B, Baghdad, Iraq, published in New York Times 31st July 2009

It's Time for the US to Declare Victory and Go Home

As the old saying goes, "guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days." Since the signing of the 2009 Security Agreement, we are guests in Iraq, and after six years in Iraq, we now smell bad to the Iraqi nose. Today the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are good enough to keep the Government of Iraq (GOI) from being overthrown by the actions of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Baathists, and the Shia violent extremists that might have toppled it a year or two ago. Iraq may well collapse into chaos

of other causes, but we have made the ISF strong enough for the internal security mission. Perhaps it is one of those infamous paradoxes of counterinsurgency that while the ISF is not good in any objective sense, it is good enough for Iraq in 2009. Despite this foreboding disclaimer about an unstable future for Iraq, the United States has achieved our objectives in Iraq. Prime Minister (PM) Maliki hailed June 30th as a "great victory," implying the victory was over the US. Leaving aside his childish chest pounding, he was more right than he knew. We too ought to declare victory and bring our combat forces home. Due to our tendency to look after the tactical details and miss the proverbial forest for the trees, this critically important strategic realization is in danger of being missed.

Equally important to realize is that we aren't making the GOI and the ISF better in any significant ways with our current approach. Remaining in Iraq through the end of December 2011 will yield little in the way of improving the abilities of the ISF or the functioning of the GOI. Furthermore, in light of the GOI's current interpretation of the limitations imposed by the 30 June milestones of the 2008 Security Agreement, the security of US forces are at risk. Iraq is not a country with a history of treating even its welcomed guests well. This is not to say we can be defeated, only that the danger of a violent incident that will rupture the current partnership has greatly increased since 30 June. Such a rupture would force an unplanned early departure that would harm our long term interests in Iraq and potentially unraveling the great good that has been done since 2003. The use of the military instrument of national power in its current form has accomplished all that can be expected. In the next section I will present and admittedly one sided view of the evidence in support of this view. This information is drawn solely from the MND-B area of operations in Baghdad Province. My reading of reports from the other provinces suggests the same situation exists there.

The general lack of progress in essential services and good governance is now so broad that it ought to be clear that we no longer are moving the Iraqis "forward." Below is an outline of the information on which I base this assessment:

1. The ineffectiveness and corruption of GOI Ministries is the stuff of legend.

2. The anti-corruption drive is little more than a campaign tool for Maliki
3. The GOI is failing to take rational steps to improve its electrical infrastructure and to improve their oil exploration, production and exports.
4. There is no progress towards resolving the Kirkuk situation.
5. Sunni Reconciliation is at best at a standstill and probably going backwards.
6. Sons of Iraq (SOI) or Sahwa transition to ISF and GOI civil service is not happening, and SOI monthly paydays continue to fall further behind.
7. The Kurdish situation continues to fester.
8. Political violence and intimidation is rampant in the civilian community as well as military and legal institutions.
9. The Vice President received a rather cool reception this past weekend and was publicly told that the internal affairs of Iraq are none of the US's business.

The rate of improvement of the ISF is far slower than it should be given the amount of effort and resources being provided by the US. The US has made tremendous progress in building the ISF. Our initial efforts in 2003 to mid-2004 were only marginally successful. From 2004 to 2006 the US built the ISF into a fighting force. Since the start of the surge in 2007 we have again expanded and improved the ISF. They are now at the point where they have defeated the organized insurgency against the GOI and are marginally self-sustaining. This is a remarkable tale for which many can be justifiably proud. We have reached the point of diminishing returns, however, and need to find a new set of tools. The massive partnering efforts of US combat forces with ISF isn't yielding benefits commensurate with the effort and is now generating its own opposition. Again, some touch points for this assessment are:

1. If there ever was a window where the seeds of a professional military culture could have been implanted, it is now long past. US combat forces will not be here long enough or with sufficient influence to change it.
2. The military culture of the Baathist-Soviet model under Saddam Hussein remains entrenched and will not change. The senior leadership of the ISF is incapable of change in the current environment.
 - a) Corruption among officers is widespread
 - b) Neglect and mistreatment of enlisted men is the norm
 - c) The unwillingness to accept a role for the NCO corps continues
 - d) Cronyism and nepotism are rampant in the assignment and promotion system

- e) Laziness is endemic
- f) Extreme centralization of C2 is the norm
- g) Lack of initiative is legion
- h) Unwillingness to change, do anything new blocks progress
- i) Near total ineffectiveness of the Iraq Army and National Police institutional organizations and systems prevents the ISF from becoming self-sustaining
- j) For every positive story about a good ISF junior officer with initiative, or an ISF commander who conducts a rehearsal or an after action review or some individual MOS training event, there are ten examples of the most basic lack of military understanding despite the massive partnership efforts by our combat forces and advisory efforts by MiTT and NPTT teams.

3. For all the fawning praise we bestow on the Baghdad Operations Command (BOC) and Ministry of Defense (MoD) leadership for their effectiveness since the start of the surge, they are flawed in serious ways. Below are some salient examples:

- a) They are unable to plan ahead, unable to secure the PM's approval for their actions
- b) They are unable to stand up to Shiite political parties
- c) They were and are unable to conduct an public relations effort in support of the SA and now they are afraid of the ignorant masses as a result
- d) They unable to instill discipline among their officers and units for the most basic military standards
- e) They are unable to stop the nepotism and cronyism
- f) They are unable to take basic steps to manage the force development process
- g) They are unable to stick to their deals with US leaders

It is clear that the 30 Jun milestone does not represent one small step in a long series of gradual steps on the path the US withdrawal, but as Maliki has termed it, a "great victory" over the Americans and fundamental change in our relationship. The recent impact of this mentality on military operations is evident:

1. Iraqi Ground Forces Command (IGFC) unilateral restrictions on US forces that violate the most basic aspects of the SA

2. BOC unilateral restrictions that violate the most basic aspects of the SA

3. International Zone incidents in the last week where ISF forces have resorted to shows of force to get their way at Entry Control Points (ECP) including the forcible takeover of ECP 1 on 4 July
4. Sudden coolness to advisors and CDRs, lack of invitations to meetings,
5. Widespread partnership problems reported in other areas such as ISF confronting US forces at TCPs in the city of Baghdad and other major cities in Iraq.
6. ISF units are far less likely to want to conduct combined combat operations with US forces, to go after targets the US considers high value, etc.
7. The Iraqi legal system in the Rusafa side of Baghdad has demonstrated a recent willingness to release individuals originally detained by the US for attacks on the US.

Yet despite all their grievous shortcomings noted above, ISF military capability is sufficient to handle the current level of threats from Sunni and Shiite violent groups. Our combat forces' presence here on the streets and in the rural areas adds only marginally to their capability while exposing us to attacks to which we cannot effectively respond.

The GOI and the ISF will not be toppled by the violence as they might have been between 2006 and 2008. Though two weeks does not make a trend, the near cessation of attacks since 30 June speaks volumes about how easily Shiite violence can be controlled and speaks to the utter weakness of AQI. The extent of AQ influence in Iraq is so limited as to be insignificant, only when they get lucky with a mass casualty attack are they relevant. Shiite groups are working with the PM and his political allies, or plotting to work against him in the upcoming elections. We are merely convenient targets for delivering a message against Maliki by certain groups, and perhaps by Maliki when he wants us to be targeted. Extremist violence from all groups is directed towards affecting their political standing within the existing power structures of Iraq. There is no longer any coherent insurgency or serious threat to the stability of the GOI posed by violent groups.

Our combat operations are currently the victim of circular logic. We conduct operations to kill or capture violent extremists of all types to protect the Iraqi people and support the GOI. The violent extremists attack us because we are still here conducting military operations. Furthermore, their attacks on us are no longer an organized campaign to defeat our will to stay; the attacks which kill and maim US combat troops are signals or messages sent by various groups as part of the political struggle for power in Iraq. The exception to this is AQI which continues is globalist terror campaign. Our operations are in support of an Iraqi government that no longer relishes our help while at the same time our operations generate the extremist opposition to us as various groups jockey for power in post-occupation Iraq.

The GOI and ISF will continue to squeeze the US for all the "goodies" that we can provide between now and December 2011, while eliminating our role in providing security and resisting our efforts to change the institutional problems prevent the ISF from getting better. They will tolerate us as long as they can suckle at Uncle Sam's bounteous mammary glands. Meanwhile

the level of resistance to US freedom of movement and operations will grow. The potential for Iraqi on US violence is high now and will grow by the day. Resentment on both sides will build and reinforce itself until a violent incident break outs into the open. If that were to happen the violence will remain tactically isolated, but it will wreck our strategic relationships and force our withdrawal under very unfavorable circumstances.

For a long time the preferred US approach has been to "work it at the lowest level of partnership" as a means to stay out of the political fray and with the hope that good work at the tactical level will compensate for and slowly improve the strategic picture. From platoon to brigade, US Soldiers and Marines continue to work incredibly hard and in almost all cases they achieve positive results. This approach has achieved impressive results in the past, but today it is failing. The strategic dysfunctions of the GOI and ISF have now reached down to the tactical level degrading good work there and sundering hitherto strong partnerships. As one astute political observer has stated "We have lost all strategic influence with the GOI and trying to influence events and people from the tactical/operational level is courting disaster, wasting lives, and merely postponing the inevitable."

The reality of Iraq in July 2009 has rendered the assumptions underlying the 2008 Security Agreement (SA) overcome by events — mostly good events actually. The SA outlines a series of gradual steps towards military withdrawal, analogous to a father teaching his kid to ride a bike without training wheels. If the GOI at the time the SA was signed thought it needed a long, gradual period of weaning. But the GOI now has left the nest (while continuing to breast feed as noted above). The strategic and tactical realities have changed far quicker than the provisions and timeline of the SA can accommodate. We now have an Iraqi government that has gained its balance and thinks it knows how to ride the bike in the race. And in fact they probably do know how to ride, at least well enough for the road they are on against their current competitors. Our hand on the back of the seat is holding them back and causing resentment. We need to let go before we both tumble to the ground.

Therefore, we should declare our intentions to withdraw all US military forces from Iraq by August 2010. This would not be a strategic paradigm shift, but an acceleration of existing US plans by some 15 months. We should end our combat operations now, save those for our own force protection, narrowly defined, as we withdraw. We should revise the force flow into Iraq accordingly. The emphasis should shift towards advising only and advising the ISF to prepare for our withdrawal. Advisors should probably be limited to Iraqi division level a higher. Our train and equip functions should begin the transition to Foreign Military Sales and related training programs. During the withdrawal period the USG and GOI should develop a new strategic framework agreement that would include some lasting military presence at 1-3 large training bases, airbases, or key headquarters locations. But it should not include the presence of any combat forces save those for force protection needs or the occasional exercise. These changes would not only align our actions with the reality of Iraq in 2009, it will remove the causes of increasing friction and reduce the cost of OIF in blood and treasure. Finally, it will set the conditions for a new relationship between the US and Iraq without the complications of the residual effects of the US invasion and occupation.