



IRAQ: THE ROAD AHEAD

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“Do not try to do too much with your own hands. It is their war, and you are to help them win it, not to win it for them.”

- T.E. Lawrence, AKA “Lawrence of Arabia”



Doctors describe the services they provide at the base hospital (top photo); Chairman Hoekstra and Rep. Gutknecht thank the C-130 flight crew for their service (bottom photo).



Like most Americans, I have spent the past three years watching news reports and learning about Iraq from others who have been there. I’ve seen the carnage on television, and I’ve heard the stories from the soldiers who returned. On July 13, I traveled to Iraq to see first-hand what is happening there. I went to learn more about the progress being made on the ground. I went to ask questions and investigate for myself.

I went with two primary objectives. First, to thank our troops. I get a lump in my throat when I think about the professionalism and dedication of our brave Americans in uniform. They are working long hours under very difficult circumstances and doing a fantastic job.

Second, I wanted to see progress. The future of Iraq is balanced on a three-legged stool: safety in the streets; a healthy, independent political system; and economic opportunity. I wanted to see what has been accomplished on all three fronts.

Without a doubt, there is political progress. They now have a functioning parliament, a strong prime minister and a full cabinet. Despite threats of violence, Iraqis voted in large numbers. Despite enormous personal risk members of parliament serve and carry out their duties.

There is also some economic progress. The number of cars and satellite dishes have increased. Reconstruction is going forward, but very slowly. Several experts suggested that economic problems may be a factor in escalating violence in Baghdad. To be candid, considering the \$322 billion we have spent, I expected to see more results.

But the greatest disappointment was on the security front. My conclusion is that rather than progress, the security situation in Baghdad is worse today than it was three years ago. This situation was contrary to what I had expected and is disturbing. We have trained more than 262,000 Iraqis in military/police functions. They are picking up more of the load and taking the security lead in several provinces but progress is slow.

An immediate withdrawal of all our forces would be disastrous. A specific timetable would embolden those who think nothing of killing hundreds of innocents in the public square. If, however, I am correct that the Iraqis are already too dependent on the U.S. for their security, it would be just as big of a mistake to send 25,000 more Americans to patrol Baghdad. If anything, I believe we should reduce the number of Americans performing security functions.

Why? To send a message to the Iraqi leaders: we believe *you* are ready to fight for *your* future. We have given you a chance, the rest is up to you. Lawrence of Arabia was right. It is their war. Iraq must become a graveyard for terrorism as Prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has vowed. The Iraqis should take more control of the day-to-day fighting and we should bring more troops home as this occurs.

The bright spot of my trip was our final stop in Erbil, the regional capital for the Kurds in Northern Iraq. What we found was an oasis of peace and prosperity. All of the progress I had looked for in the South, I found among the Kurds in the North. It was an amazing contrast.

The Kurdish Prime Minister thanked us profusely for liberating them from Saddam Hussein. He told us 182,000 Kurds died or are still missing as a result of his brutal dictatorship. Yet today, their streets are safe and their businesses are booming. The Kurdish parliament is fully integrated, with women comprising 16 percent of the body. They are building a new international airport and luxury condominiums.

Without question, there are strong cultural differences between the Kurds and Iraqis. But the difference in levels of progress comes down to the simple question of responsibility. In the North, the Kurds took responsibility for policing their own streets. They appreciate the umbrella of security that U.S. air cover provides, but they have taken charge on the ground.

I believe success leaves clues. The Kurds have developed the blueprint for peace and prosperity for all of Iraq. If the Kurdish model is imprinted on the rest of Iraq, both Iraqi and American children will live in a safer world. And our forces can come home to the hero's welcome their sacrifices have so richly earned.



A North Dakota unit explains how to disarm an IED (top photo); Rep. Gutknecht with Dr. Michael Yaszemski, a spinal surgeon from the Mayo Clinic (middle photo).



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