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The New Strategy in Iraq

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The new strategy for Iraq has entered its second phase. Now that all of the additional combat forces have arrived in theater, Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno have begun Operation Phantom Thunder, a vast and complex effort to disrupt al Qaeda and Shiite militia bases all around Baghdad in advance of the major clear-and-hold operations that will follow. The deployment of forces and preparations for this operation have gone better than expected, and Phantom Thunder is so far proceeding very well. All aspects of the current strategy have been built upon the lessons of previous successful and unsuccessful Coalition efforts to establish security in Iraq, and there is every reason to be optimistic about its outcome.

The first phase of the new strategy unfolded over five months--between the president's announcement of the "surge" on January 10 and the arrival of the last of the five additional Army brigades and Marine elements in early June (though critical enablers for those combat forces have only just arrived). As the new units entered Iraq, commanders began pushing forces already in the theater forward from their operating bases into outposts in key neighborhoods of Baghdad and elsewhere. The purpose of these movements was to establish positions within those key neighborhoods and to develop intelligence about the enemy and relationships of trust with the local communities.

Also during this first phase, additional Iraqi security forces were deployed to Baghdad in accordance with a plan developed jointly by the U.S. and Iraqi military commands. All of the requested units were provided. The Iraqi military has just completed its second rotation of units into Baghdad; as before, all of the designated units arrived, and they were generally closer to being fully manned than in the first rotation.

The new U.S. troops have increased the available combat power in Iraq by about 40 percent, from 15 brigades to the equivalent of 21 brigades. Generals Petraeus and Odierno allocated only two of the additional Army brigades to the capital. The other three Army brigades and the equivalent of a Marine regiment they deployed in the surrounding areas, known as the "Baghdad belt." There, under the guise of Operation Phantom Thunder, they are now working to disrupt the car-bomb and suicide-bomb networks that have been supporting al Qaeda's counter-surge since January.

But this second phase is designed primarily to support the clearing and holding operations in Baghdad itself, which will continue for many months. It is those operations that are meant to bring lasting security to Iraq's capital and thus create the space for political progress.

The United States has not undertaken a multiphased operation on such a large scale since the invasion, so it is unsurprising that many commentators are confused about how to report and evaluate what is going on. Indeed, the current effort differs profoundly from anything U.S. forces have tried before in Iraq. As Coalition forces begin the attempt to

establish sustainable security in Baghdad and its environs, it is worth reviewing past major combat operations in Iraq, since their clear lessons have informed planning for the current, much larger campaign.

Falluja, 2004

The U.S. Marines fought two big battles in Falluja, the easternmost major city in Anbar province not far from Baghdad, in the spring and fall of 2004. The enemy was a dense network of al Qaeda fighters and Sunni Arab insurgents who had prepared defensive positions throughout the city and had considerable support from the local population. The initial assault was ordered on short notice after the kidnapping and execution of several American contractors, whose bodies were prominently displayed from a bridge.

The Marines were not given adequate time to prepare for the attack. They could not establish forward outposts in the city, develop adequate intelligence about the enemy, or gain the trust of the population. The American command did not fully prepare the Iraqi government for the intensity of the battle or the controversy it was bound to generate. As a result, the Marines' initial assaults resulted in heavy casualties and collateral damage. The Iraqi government was shaken, and the Marines were ordered to abandon the effort and rely instead on local forces to restore order in the city. Lacking troops, training, and support, the local allies were quickly either turned or slaughtered, and al Qaeda and the insurgents strengthened their hold on Falluja and Anbar generally.

The second Marine attack, in the fall, was much more successful. The local units were reinforced and given time to develop a much clearer intelligence picture, as well as to obtain local allies, although those were still few and unreliable. The much better-planned attack cleared the city, although with considerable collateral damage resulting largely from the sophistication of the defenses the enemy had been able to establish during the pause between the two attacks.

The Marines were not allowed to follow up on their success in Falluja, however. No effort was made to clear and hold Ramadi or the Upper Euphrates Valley for more than a year. In the meantime, the area between Falluja and Baghdad, including the Abu Ghraib neighborhood on the western outskirts of the capital, was left largely devoid of American forces and remained a major Sunni Arab insurgent and al Qaeda base. Nevertheless, Falluja was fairly stable for many months after the Marine attack, only slowly sinking back into chaos and enemy control.

Najaf and Sadr City, 2004

The summer of 2004 also saw the only major combat between Coalition forces and Moktada al-Sadr's Mahdi army, or Jaysh al-Mahdi. This took place in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and the Baghdad neighborhood of Sadr City. The Sadrist uprising followed close on the heels of the first Battle of Falluja, and it seemed briefly that the Coalition might be defeated simultaneously by Sunni insurgents and Shia militias across Iraq. But U.S. forces rapidly regained control of the situation in Sadr City, where Major

General Chiarelli's 1st Cavalry Division restored order. Fighting in Najaf was greatly complicated by the fact that the Sadrists took up positions in and near the Imam Ali Mosque, one of Shia Islam's most sacred sites. Skillful Coalition military operations dislodged the Sadrists from those positions without significant damage to the shrine, and killed many Sadrist fighters in the process.

The battles of Sadr City and Najaf continue to influence the situation in Iraq today. Sadr appears to have learned from these battles that his militia cannot stand up to American forces in pitched battles. He has avoided situations that might lead to such fights, preferring hit-and-run attacks, the use of IEDs (and now EFPs, explosively formed projectiles), and death-squad attacks on Sunni Arabs after the bombing of the Samarra Mosque in February 2006. The successes in Najaf and Sadr City were fleeting in another respect, however. U.S. forces left both areas quickly, and the Sadrist militias retook control of them within months. The Sadrists remain largely in control of Najaf and were long uncontested in Sadr City, although recent events have greatly complicated their situation there.

Tal Afar and the Upper Euphrates, 2005

After the uprisings of 2004, the United States focused its efforts on moving the political process forward in Iraq and on training the Iraqi army and National Police. It was widely expected in the government and especially in the military leadership that political progress would translate directly into improved security. It was also believed that the onus for conducting what military operations were necessary should fall on the nascent Iraqi military to the maximum extent possible.

Nevertheless, the Coalition command understood that only U.S. forces could provide the short-term security necessary for elections. The command requested and received significant reinforcements to this end in late 2005. The most dramatic battle before the elections came in September 2005, when Colonel H. R. McMaster's 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment cleared Tal Afar, a city in Nineveh Province between Mosul and the Syrian border.

Tal Afar was a stronghold of the Sunni Arab insurgency and al Qaeda on the road from Syria into the heart of Iraq. As in Falluja, the enemy had prepared sophisticated defensive positions and terrorized the local population into providing support. McMaster had a number of advantages over the Marines in Falluja, however. He had a larger number of trained and reasonably reliable Iraqi soldiers, the first fruits of a new effort to build an Iraqi army capable of conducting counterinsurgency efforts. He was also able to establish outposts in and around the city, develop a sophisticated intelligence picture, and shape the situation to his advantage before beginning the major clearing operation. The result was a marked success. The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment isolated the city with a berm to control access and then cleared it house-to-house in conjunction with the Iraqi army. Some insurgent cells fought back determinedly, but the Coalition forces cleared the city without destroying it, and gained the support of the population in the process.

Tal Afar had been cleared twice before September 2005, and both times had immediately fallen back into the hands of the insurgents. Although U.S. forces in the area were again reduced sharply after this operation, the situation did not deteriorate rapidly or completely. Promised reconstruction aid from the Iraqi central government arrived in Nineveh only a few months ago, and tensions rose in the city in 2006, in part because the Iraqi government replaced several key provincial leaders with Shia extremists. Nevertheless, Tal Afar has not been retaken by the insurgents, and a spectacular suicide truck bomb in March 2007 did not trigger a renewal of sectarian strife. A few days of tit-for-tat sectarian killings followed, but the local government and Iraqi police and army units with very little Coalition support managed to bring the situation under control and stop the killing.

Nineveh Province today is held by 18,000 Iraqi army soldiers, 20,000 Iraqi police, and a small number of Americans. Al Qaeda and Sunni insurgent cells operate in the province, particularly in Mosul, but have not been able to take it over or establish uncontested safe havens. Operations in 2005, although inadequately followed up and sustained, created a lasting change in a critical province of northern Iraq.

Ramadi, 2006

Early in 2006, the U.S. military command withdrew the additional forces introduced to support the elections, and thereafter resisted all suggestions of a more active posture or a larger American presence. In 2006 the focus was on training the Iraqi military and transitioning responsibility for security to the Iraqis. It was hoped that the results of the 2005 elections would lead to the political progress that was seen as the key to reducing violence, and Generals John Abizaid and George Casey believed that an active American presence was an irritant that caused more trouble than it cured. They also feared that American forces conducting counterinsurgency operations would allow the Iraqi forces to lie back and become dependent on the Coalition. The overall U.S. posture in the first half of 2006, therefore, remained largely defensive and reactive, and the military command aimed to reduce the number of American forces in Iraq as rapidly as possible.

In the meantime, the situation was deteriorating dramatically. Al Qaeda terrorists destroyed the Golden Dome of the al-Askariya Mosque in Samarra (a Shiite shrine in the predominantly Sunni Arab province of Salahuddin), and a wave of sectarian violence swept Iraq. Within days more than 30 mosques had been bombed, and death squads began executing civilians across the country in large numbers in tit-for-tat sectarian murders.

The failure to follow up either on the successes in Falluja in 2004 or on the beginnings of clearing operations in the Upper Euphrates in 2005 allowed Anbar Province to sink deeper into the control of Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda terrorists. As late as August 2006, the Marine intelligence officer for the province declared that it was irretrievably lost to the enemy.

Nevertheless, the Marines and Army units in Anbar began a series of quiet efforts to regain control that ultimately led to spectacular and unexpected success. They began to engage local leaders in talks, particularly after al Qaeda committed a series of assassinations and other atrocities against tribal leaders and local civilians as part of an effort to enforce their extreme and distorted vision of Islamic law. U.S. forces under the command of Colonel Sean MacFarland also began a quiet effort to apply the clearing principles honed through operations in Falluja, Sadr City, and Tal Afar to Ramadi. There were never enough forces to undertake such operations rapidly or decisively, and success never appeared likely, at least to outside observers, who focused excessively on the force ratios.

But the effort was successful beyond all expectations. The tribal leaders in Anbar came together to negotiate an accord that ultimately produced the Anbar Awakening, an association of Anbar tribes dedicated to fighting al Qaeda. Recruiting for the Iraqi Security Forces in Anbar increased from virtually zero through 2006 to more than 14,000 by mid-2007. As the 2007 surge forces augmented U.S. troops in Anbar and began to change the political dynamic in Iraq, efforts to clear Ramadi and bring overall violence in the province under control also peaked. As New York Times reporter John Burns noted after a recent visit to Ramadi, Anbar's capital has "gone from being the most dangerous place in Iraq, with the help of the tribal sheikhs, to being one of the least dangerous places." And the Anbar Awakening movement has spread to Sunni tribes in neighboring areas. Parallel organizations have developed in Babil, Salahuddin, and Diyala provinces, and even in Baghdad. As the new strategy of 2007 took hold, U.S. forces found that they could even negotiate and work with some of their most determined former foes in the Sunni Arab insurgency--groups like the Baathist 1920s Brigades that once focused on killing Americans and now are increasingly working with Americans to kill al Qaeda fighters. Coalition operations in Anbar, which looked hopeless for years, have accomplished extraordinary successes that are deepening and spreading.

Baghdad, 2006

The worsening sectarian violence after the al-Askariya Mosque bombing led General Casey to conduct two operations aimed at restoring stability in Baghdad. Dubbed Operations Together Forward I and II, they involved surges of fewer than 10,000 additional U.S. troops and a relatively small number of Iraqis into the capital to conduct clearing operations. Inadequate planning and preparation for the movement of the Iraqi battalions into Baghdad led to the refusal of many of those units to show up. The plans, moreover, relied on Iraqi forces to hold cleared neighborhoods on their own, while U.S. forces moved on to other troubled areas.

These operations failed. Six months of intense sectarian conflict had led many members of the mostly Shiite Iraqi police into death squads. They were not and could not be effective bulwarks on their own against sectarian violence of which they were a part. The fact that most Iraqi army formations did not show up reduced the force ratios necessary to clear neighborhoods and deprived the Iraqi command, which was poorly organized, of resources vital to holding areas that U.S. forces cleared. The very small increase in

American combat power (two additional brigades in Baghdad, but no overall increase in the American force levels in the theater) was inadequate to gain control of the situation. Sectarian killings dropped during the first two weeks of the second, and larger, operation, but then rapidly rose above pre-operation levels and continued to rise for the rest of the year. By November, Operation Together Forward II had mostly ground to a halt, having made no lasting improvement in the situation.

Lessons of the Past

A number of clear lessons drawn from these operations have informed the current strategy. First, political progress by itself will not reduce the violence. From May 2003 through mid-2006, the Bush administration and the military command focused on political progress as the key. The transfer of sovereignty in mid-2004, the election of a Transitional National Assembly in January 2005, the approval of a new constitution by referendum in October 2005, and the election of a fresh National Assembly in December 2005 were all expected to subdue violence by creating an inclusive and balanced government. Throughout this period, American armed forces tried to stay in the background, keeping their "footprint" minimal and pushing the nascent Iraqi Security Forces into the lead. Violence steadily increased. Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda terrorists dug into cities that U.S. forces left open, and Shia militias took control of abandoned Shia lands.

When local American commanders took the initiative to clear insurgent hotbeds, they were generally successful. These operations produced measurable improvements in important areas that decayed only slowly, despite the absence of follow-up or adequate continued presence. U.S. forces honed their skills in such operations, allowing them finally to clear insurgent-held cities without destroying them or excessively alienating the local population. Political progress and political solutions are essential to ultimate success in counterinsurgency, but they must often be complemented by major military operations sustained over a long time.

Second, all American efforts to establish local security in Iraq have been hindered by the paucity of U.S. troops there, yet some have succeeded even so. Colonel McMaster could muster nearly one Coalition soldier (American or Iraqi) for every 45 people in Tal Afar, which helps explain the speed and success of the clearing in that city. But General Chiarelli restored order in Sadr City in 2004 with fewer than one soldier per 100 inhabitants, and the Marines and Army units in Anbar cleared Ramadi slowly with similarly poor ratios. More soldiers and Marines, to say nothing of more trained and reliable Iraqi troops, would have made every operation proceed more rapidly and smoothly, but the evidence suggests that critical clearing operations can succeed even at these lower ratios. There are now well over 350,000 Coalition forces, including Iraqis, in the country, whose population is around 25 million--an overall ratio significantly better than what sufficed to restore order in Sadr City and Ramadi.

Third, rapid reductions in Coalition forces after clearing operations undermined the success of almost all past operations. In Sadr City and Najaf, the withdrawal led to the

complete if quiet restoration of the militias that had been driven out. In Falluja and Tal Afar, rapid reductions in Coalition forces led to slow deterioration, although not to previous levels of insurgent and terrorist predominance. Turning control of cleared areas over to Iraqi forces prematurely--as in Falluja after the first battle and in Baghdad after Operations Together Forward--generally led to rapid failure. The Coalition must plan to maintain a significant presence in direct and indirect support of Iraqi forces after clearing operations are complete in order to sustain success. The model is Ramadi, where Coalition forces have remained in strength even as the situation has improved, helping to deepen the positive trends underway there. The capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces have improved steadily, but it is highly unlikely that Coalition forces can leave areas as soon as they have been cleared without seeing security deteriorate.

Fourth, every successful operation was preceded by commanders' taking the time to develop a good intelligence picture of the situation. To do this, they moved forces into the area and made contact with the local population. Advance forces help shape the environment by occupying bases from which subsequent operations can proceed and by establishing relationships with local leaders that will be exploited in subsequent phases. This also helps commanders and planners refine their estimates of the forces required in the clearing operation. Especially operations on a large scale, involving the physical movement of many forces, require significant preparation.

Fifth, Coalition casualties generally increase at the start of major clearing operations, when Coalition troops move into areas previously held by the enemy, especially where the enemy has prepared sophisticated defensive positions. As the enemy realizes that a major attack is underway, he often launches counterattacks, in an attempt to blunt the offensive and/or weaken the will of leaders in Baghdad and Washington. Depending on the scale of operations and the resilience of the enemy defenses, this period of increased violence can last for days or weeks. As clearing proceeds to its conclusion, however, violence generally drops and Coalition casualties begin to fall. This pattern has occurred in almost every successful clearing operation, including Sadr City, Najaf, the second Battle of Falluja, Tal Afar, and Ramadi. Higher force ratios combined with solid preparation can reduce the intensity and duration of this spike in violence and casualties, but cannot eliminate it.

Operation Phantom Thunder in Context

The new strategy for securing Baghdad was designed with all these lessons in mind, as well as lessons from other successful and unsuccessful counterinsurgency operations elsewhere. So far, the campaign has the hallmarks of past successful operations; and it has a number of promising new elements. One of these new elements is Operation Phantom Thunder itself.

Many advocates of the new strategy--and many critics--bemoaned the staggered arrival over five months of the additional combat forces, which delayed the start of major clearing operations and seemed to threaten a ragged and uneven launch. But Generals Petraeus and Odierno put the time to good use. They immediately began to push U.S.

forces that were already in Iraq off of their forward operating bases and into the neighborhoods to be cleared. In some areas that were sufficiently stable to begin with, the mere movement of forces into permanent positions in the neighborhoods had the effect of a rapid clearing operation, even though the aim was only to gather intelligence and set the conditions for the clearing to follow.

More important, previous clearing operations in Iraq were not part of a coherent plan to establish security in a wide area, but rather reactions to violence in particular places. Thus, U.S. commanders made no extensive efforts to contain the accelerants to violence--vehicle-bomb factories, insurgent safe houses, training grounds, smuggling routes, and weapons caches--located outside the cities being cleared. By contrast, the current strategy aims to establish security across greater Baghdad, and Petraeus and Odierno have added a phase between the preparation phase and the major clearing. This is Operation Phantom Thunder, which aims to disrupt enemy networks for many miles beyond the capital, as far away as Baquba and Falluja. What's more, Phantom Thunder is striking the enemy in almost all of its major bases at once--something Coalition forces have never before attempted in Iraq.

Al Qaeda's operations in Baghdad--its bombings, kidnappings, resupply activities, movement of foreign fighters, and financing--depend on its ability to move people and goods around the rural outskirts of the capital as well as in the city. Petraeus and Odierno, therefore, are conducting simultaneous operations in many places in the Baghdad belt: Falluja and Baquba, Mahmudiya, Arab Jabour, Salman Pak, the southern shores of Lake Tharthar, Karma, Tarmiya, and so on. By attacking all of these bases at once, Coalition forces will gravely complicate the enemy's movement from place to place, as well as his ability to establish new bases and safe havens. At the same time, U.S. and Iraqi forces have already disrupted al Qaeda's major bases and are working to prevent the enemy from taking refuge in the city. U.S. forces are also aggressively targeting Shia death-squad leaders and helping Iraqi forces operating against Shia militias.

Still ahead, of course, is the challenge of completing the clearing and holding of a city of 6 million. The establishment of security, moreover, is a precondition for further political progress, not a guarantee of it. The enemy may find a way to disrupt the current operations, or to derail or defeat the subsequent clear-and-hold operations. It is possible that Iraqi Security Forces will prove unable to develop the numbers and capabilities required to maintain security once it has been established. And unpredictable disasters can always drive a well-designed strategy off course.

But there is every reason to believe at this stage that the current operation and its likely successor will dramatically reduce the level of violence in Baghdad, and do so in a way that will prove sustainable. That accomplishment in itself will be a major contribution to American security, in that it will entail a major defeat for al Qaeda and its allies, now surging in response to our stepped-up operations. And it will create an unprecedented situation in postwar Iraq: one in which Iraq's elected government can meet and discuss policies in relative security in a capital returning to normal; in which Sunni and Shia can afford to compromise without fear of an imminent sectarian explosion; and in which Iraqi

forces can become increasingly responsible for maintaining the security that they have helped to establish. The current strategy is on track to produce that outcome--which is why it deserves to be given every chance to succeed.

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