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Time for a New Strategy

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On 10 January 2007, during an address to the nation, President George W. Bush announced the United States' third strategy to achieve several goals in Iraq. The goals were to improve security conditions; develop Iraqi Security Forces' capabilities and transfer security responsibilities to the Government of Iraq (GoI); assist GoI efforts to draft, enact, and implement key legislative initiatives; assist full expenditure of budgets; and help the GoI provide essential services to its people. This strategy, known as The New Way Forward or more commonly as the Surge Strategy, established a 12- to 18-month timeframe to achieve these objectives. The strategy reiterated the Administration's long-term goal of a unified, federal, and democratic Iraq that could govern, defend, and sustain itself, and be an ally in the war on terrorism.

As the Surge Strategy comes to an end, Iraq has achieved many of these goals. More importantly, Iraq has reached a tipping point with its increasingly competent security forces and government administrators, the political confidence and clout of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the near defeat of al Qaeda, the marginalization of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia, a substantial budget surplus, significant Iraqi nationalism, and large scale anti-Iranian sentiment. After five and a half years, America's mission is largely accomplished in Iraq. Now is the time to significantly reduce the US presence in Iraq and temporarily supply the technical assistance and security training Iraq needs to solidify the hard-earned achievements and gains of recent years.

Pre-Surge Iraq

Without belaboring what is already well-documented, multiple missteps helped to create a poor security environment, including the lack of Phase IV planning, insufficient forces assigned for post-invasion tasks, and the Coalition Provisional Authority's shortsighted orders to disband the Iraqi

Army and remove government officials who belonged to the Ba'ath party. The Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006 led to a sharp increase in sectarian violence that already-stretched Coalition and poorly trained local security forces could not quell.

Between October 2003 and January 2007, the United States pursued two main strategies. The Security Transition Strategy called for the accelerated training of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and transition of security responsibilities to them.¹ The objective was to neutralize the insurgency, develop the ISF, and allow a gradual drawdown of Coalition forces. Combined Joint Task Force Seven, the predecessor of Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), attempted to hand over security responsibilities in February 2004 and failed. In March 2004, there were approximately 203,000 ISF—including 76,000 police, 78,000 facility protection officers, and 38,000 citizens in the civilian defense corps. In April 2004, insurgent attacks increased, and Iraqi police and military units responded poorly. While some Iraqi forces successfully fought alongside Coalition forces, many ISF units across the country collapsed during the uprising. The primary causes of this collapse were related to problems in training, vetting of potential members, and equipping the ISF.

From 2004 to 2006, MNF-I took its guidance from a series of campaign plans and the November 2005 *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* document.² None of which anticipated the level of violence that followed the Samarra mosque bombing. Attacks against Coalition forces and ISF quickly increased and remained at an unprecedented high until December 2006. Various insurgents, terrorists, death squads, and militias also increased their attacks against civilian targets, largely based on sectarian divides.³ By December 2006, many Baghdad neighborhoods had become isolated along Sunni and Shia lines. The violence essentially erased any of the limited political gains of the previous three years.

The Surge

Following President Bush's announcement of the Surge Strategy in January 2007, US force levels increased from 132,000 in December 2006 to

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169,000 in August 2007. That September President Bush announced the United States would withdraw surge forces by July of 2008, marking the completion of the Surge Strategy. The end result will be a reduction from 20 to 15 Brigade Combat Teams, leaving a force level of approximately 140,000 troops.⁴ The strategy has achieved most of its announced goals.

Improve Security Conditions

The Surge Strategy, combined with the Awakening Movement (also called Sons of Iraq), a JAM ceasefire, and the increase in ISF capacity and capability, resulted in significant reductions of violence throughout the country. The largely Sunni Awakening Movement organizations turned against their former al Qaeda allies, resulting in an almost complete defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq. Anbar, Salah-ad-Din, Diyala, South Baghdad, and North Babil were once al Qaeda-dominated areas; now they are largely pacified or are experiencing significantly reduced levels of violence. At one time, Sadr City was controlled by JAM with US forces not attempting to enter the area. Now, ISF controls this JAM stronghold. The ceasefire reduced JAM attacks against US forces and ISF, providing sufficient time to build Iraqi capability. The United States instituted a more comprehensive training regime in 2005 that was able to focus on partnering US training personnel with Iraqi units because there was less demand for forces to combat a diminished insurgent threat. Also, the size of the Iraqi Army and police increased from 142,000 in March 2005 to 566,000 by May 2008.⁵

In a news conference in July 2008, General David Petraeus, MNF-I commander, stated that attacks in recent weeks were at the lowest they had been since March 2004. Enemy-initiated attacks decreased by 70 percent from June 2007 to February 2008. Between June and November of 2007, the average daily number of attacks declined from approximately 180 to about 60 (they declined to 50 by February 2008). By March of 2008, reductions in violence enabled a return to normal life for many Iraqis and a concomitant growth in local economies. Violence directed at Iraqi civilians declined by approximately 80 percent during the past year. Use of explosively formed projectiles linked to Iran also dropped by nearly 70 percent in spring 2008.⁶

Additionally, the JAM militia, a once widely respected organization, has lost popular support due to its abuse of power. Iraqi forces, with aid from Coalition forces, have shattered Muqtada al-Sadr's once powerful JAM organization and weakened its Iranian ties. In many areas where Prime Minister Maliki ordered ISF operations, people are relieved to have government troops present and to be rid of JAM militias. Overall, the Sadrist Trend has a significantly weakened militia and is a less viable political force. Many of the leaders have been killed, captured, or driven into hiding. The GoI's declara-

tion that no political party could take part in the upcoming elections without first disarming their militias negated any chance of the Sadrist Trend competing as a legitimate political entity.

Develop Iraqi Security Force Capabilities

ISF capabilities have significantly improved. Lieutenant General James Dubik, who recently retired from leadership of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, the organization responsible for training Iraqi Army units, stated during testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in July 2008 that Iraqi ground forces could become fully qualified between April and August of 2009. Of the more than 140 Iraqi battalions, 12 were capable of independent operations and rated at the highest levels of readiness; a unit competent to plan, execute, and sustain counterinsurgency operations. General Dubik also announced that 90 other battalions were rated at the second highest level and were “fighting well.” These are units that are capable of planning, executing, and sustaining counterinsurgency operations with ISF or Coalition force assistance.⁷

General Dubik went on to elaborate how ISF were far better at executing independent operations. ISF have successfully planned, led, and executed major operations in Basra, Sadr City, Mosul, and Amarah. The Iraqi government has ten of 18 Iraqi provinces under Iraqi government control without major support by US forces. With the exception of possibly two, the remaining provinces will be transferred to ISF control by December 2008.⁸ On 17 July 2008, in an increasing show of Iraqi government confidence, National Security Adviser Mowaffak Rubaie said Iraq hopes to achieve control of security across the country by the end of the year.

What the Iraqis were missing in this rapidly evolving military and police force were experienced leaders and the ability to train all recruits. Units that had less than 50 percent of their leadership positions filled last year now average almost 70 percent of their leadership fills.⁹ To meet the challenges associated with near or full capacity training facilities, the Ministry of the Interior has expanded training centers from four to 17. Throughout 2008, the Iraqi Army will develop new facilities that will allow them to train an additional 2,000 soldiers per cycle.

The ISF will continue to expand. Military, police, and special operations forces have the potential to reach objectives as high as 646,000 members by 2010. The Iraqi police service, national police, and Directorate of Border Enforcement are projected to grow to approximately 389,000 personnel. The Iraqi armed forces will add several more army divisions and support forces, 1,500 navy personnel, 4,000 air force personnel, and 5,750 counterterrorism forces. As a result, the US military has shifted from a

largely combat role to providing intelligence, airpower, artillery, command and control, and other needed support. There are still problems with the ISF counting soldiers who are deceased or absent without leave. Given the dramatic increase in numbers of soldiers, even after deducting any absent personnel, the size of the ISF will show significant growth. While ISF capacity and capability have increased, Iraq's military still lacks aviation and other specialized capabilities.¹⁰ For example, the Iraqi air force has only three C-130 transport planes and a few helicopters.¹¹

Draft, Enact, and Implement Legislative Initiatives

In May 2008, the White House reported satisfactory progress on 15 of the 18 congressionally mandated benchmarks, almost twice the number achieved in the previous year. These benchmarks are specific objectives for the Iraqi government to meet with regard to national reconciliation, security, economic performance, and governance. The Bush Administration recognized that the GoI had reached several new agreements critical to easing sectarian tensions, including legislation to grant amnesty to some prisoners and to permit former Ba'athists to regain jobs and pensions. One benchmark, however, had mixed results; the Iraqi Army is capable of enforcing the law and providing security while the Iraqi police is still plagued by sectarianism. The remaining benchmarks—disarming of the militias and distribution of oil revenues—were deemed as unsatisfactory.¹²

Since May 2008, ISF—Army and police—have conducted several operations designed to disarm militias in Sadr City and Amarah; specifically JAM. As a result, JAM control has declined dramatically. While not all militias have been disarmed, the primary militia threat, from JAM, has been significantly reduced.

Also, the GoI continues to make progress, albeit slowly, on the sensitive and emotionally charged issue of oil-revenue sharing. This agreement essentially determines how much each ethnic group receives from the sale of Iraqi oil. To illustrate how important an issue this is to the various groups, oil exports generate about 90 percent of total government revenues. Most of Iraq's oil rests in the Kurdish north or Shia south, not in the Sunni heartland. The 30 April 2008 Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* states that Iraq's 2008 budget was developed on the assumption that Iraqi oil would garner \$57 per barrel. As of mid-July 2008, Iraqi crude oil was selling at about \$130 per barrel. Between 1 January and 31 March 2008, Iraqi oil income exceeded \$18 billion. If prices would have continued to rise or stay at mid-July levels, oil revenues for 2008 would easily have surpassed \$80 billion.

Assist Efforts to Spend Budgets

In April 2008, the inspector general report stated that the GoI executed 67 percent of its overall 2007 budget, a significant improvement compared to 2006, when it executed just 23 percent. Failure to execute the budget has been linked to corruption. In January 2008, Prime Minister Maliki noted the importance of Iraq's economic situation and highlighted 2008 as the year of reconstruction and anticorruption. Earlier this year, Maliki remarked during trade talks in Belgium with the European Parliament that Iraq was a rich country; Iraq did not need funds but required technical assistance. The United States continues to provide technical assistance to the GoI related to budget execution.

Provide Key Essential Services

In the past five years, approximately \$113 billion has been spent or approved for Iraq's reconstruction. In 2007, the lead for reconstruction funding shifted from the United States to the GoI. In 2007, Iraq allocated \$9 billion and in 2008 \$13 billion for reconstruction. Since November 2005, approximately 25 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) and embedded PRTs have assisted provincial and local Iraqi government officials to effectively govern and manage their own reconstruction. The PRTs help local and provincial governments to provide the administration necessary to meet the basic needs of the population; encourage political and economic development; promote increased security and rule of law; and develop a transparent and sustained capability to govern.¹³

Present Conditions

On 12 April 2008, President Bush stated that the United States would continue to support the ISF, continue to transfer security responsibilities to them, and eventually move to an overwatch role. The President highlighted the fact that Iraq had assumed responsibility for almost all funding for reconstruction and that US security costs were dropping. Additionally, he praised Iraq's efforts to conduct elections as a way for Iraqis to settle disputes through the political process instead of violence.

Presently, Iraq has met most of the goals outlined in the Surge Strategy and has reached a point where it is ready to take charge of its own future. ISF are largely able to conduct operations with specialized support from the Coalition required only in a few instances. The overall threat environment is low; while not deemed capable in some US eyes, ISF are skilled enough to maintain security against a diminished threat. Most benchmarks have been met or are progressing satisfactorily, budget execution is improving, and

Iraqis are now in the lead in providing essential services. Some other factors beyond the Surge Strategy also demonstrate the improved conditions in Iraq.

Prime Minister Maliki enjoys significant popular support. The military campaigns against Shia extremists in Basra, Amarah, and Sadr City and against Sunni al Qaeda in Mosul give him the appearance of an Iraqi nationalist rather than an American or Iranian crony. For example, Maliki launched the Amarah operation for the purpose of taking control away from militias operating outside the law. His main rival, JAM, is now a weak, disorganized entity as a result of these military operations. Al Qaeda is severely disrupted and disorganized. Prime Minister Maliki has reached out to tribal leaders and is using them as an extension of security and governance in areas throughout Iraq. Finally, the Iraqi legislature passed the General Amnesty Law in February 2008, as part of Maliki's effort to draw more Sunnis back into the political process. This law provides amnesty for former insurgents, the majority being Sunni. After a yearlong boycott, Iraqi lawmakers approved the appointment of six Sunni cabinet ministers; a significant political victory for Maliki, adding to his reputation as a national leader who transcends sectarian lines. As Kimberly Kagan recently wrote, "These surprising successes—which resulted from Maliki's initiative and occurred over initial Coalition objections—have raised Maliki's stature in Iraq to a level never before seen. The change is palpable."¹⁴

Prime Minister Maliki has been a tough negotiator with the United States on the Status of Forces Agreement, a move which has increased his standing throughout Iraq. Additionally, Maliki has felt so emboldened that he announced in July 2008 that the GoI wanted a timetable for an American withdrawal of forces. During a visit to the United Arab Emirates, he said, "We are looking at the necessity of terminating the foreign presence on Iraqi lands and restoring full sovereignty The current trend is to reach an agreement on a memorandum of understanding either of the departure of the forces or a memorandum of understanding to put a timetable on their withdrawal."¹⁵ His military offensives, combined with anti-US sentiment in Iraq and the threat of a timetable, have ameliorated Iraqi perceptions that his administration is weak and ineffective. The Prime Minister's insistence on a timetable for a US withdrawal only increases his stature in a country that largely wants US forces out and believes that Iraqis are ready to provide their own security.

Due largely to Maliki's increased credibility, improved security in Iraq, and a desire to counter Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Egypt have increased their diplomatic and economic support for the Shia-dominated government

in Baghdad.¹⁶ The UAE became the first Gulf Arab country to forgive all of Iraq's debt, roughly \$7 billion. In July 2008, Kuwait named its first ambassador to Iraq since Saddam Hussein's forces invaded the oil-rich country in 1990. Kuwait is the third Arab country to name an ambassador to Iraq, after Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have promised to send ambassadors. In another sign of Iraq's expanding regional ties, Saad Hariri, the Sunni leader of Lebanon's parliamentary majority, visited Prime Minister Maliki in Iraq. The week prior, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was in Baghdad, the first Turkish leader to visit in 18 years.

Anti-American feelings run high in Iraq as well as throughout the region. Repeated polls in Iraq show that most Iraqis dislike the fact that their country is occupied by US forces. As negotiations continue for some form of security agreement, Iraqis fear acquiescing to what they see as a colonial relationship that would permit American forces to operate permanent bases under special laws. From a broader regional standpoint, America is viewed unfavorably by 82 percent of people in Arab countries.¹⁷

A New Strategy

As of July 2008, the Surge Strategy is ending. The last of the surge brigades is departing and with it the supporting strategy also comes to an end. Iraq has reached a tipping point. Violence is below 2004 levels; the ISF is increasingly capable; the GoI is more competent; al Qaeda, while a threat, no longer enjoys broad support. Al Qaeda will not be back in the strength it had; its brand of Islamo-puritanism and murderous ideology that advocates killing Muslims has little appeal in Iraq. What next? How should the United States configure future military operations in Iraq? It is time for a new strategy based on the drawdown of US military forces.

As part of this strategy, the United States should not resist the GoI's demand for a timetable but rather embrace it as a sign that Iraq is ready for the next step in its journey. Despite repeated statements from the Bush Administration that American forces would leave Iraq when asked, until very recently, the United States has refused to acknowledge that the GoI is making such a request. Staying in Iraq with anywhere near the current force levels goes against the will of the sovereign GoI, the sentiments of Iraqi and American people, and the greater security interests in the Middle East.

On 19 July 2008, President Bush agreed to "a general time horizon" for withdrawing American forces from Iraq; a statement that reflects the recent progress in Iraq and the growing opposition to the war in the United States and Iraq. Critics argue that a timetable strengthens the enemy or pro-

vides them with an advantage. This should not be cause for concern; timetables can always be changed based on conditions or the broader regional situation. Despite multiple polls showing that a majority of Iraqis want US troops to leave, only a minority want American forces to depart immediately. The GoI is also unlikely to demand a precipitous withdrawal of American forces that might risk the security gains achieved during the past year.

The United States should announce a broad, phased withdrawal of Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) over a one-year period, starting on 1 February 2009; with three to five BCTs remaining in an overwatch position to provide in extremis support. One to two BCTs would be stationed in northern Iraq, one or two in southern Iraq, and one in central Iraq. Another basing possibility is the potential for some BCTs to be stationed outside Iraq but with the same areas of focus. Between February 2010 and summer 2011, in conjunction with the GoI, the United States may reduce or redeploy these three to five BCTs as the security environment dictates.

The United States would continue to provide training teams to the Iraqi Army, police, and border forces for the following two to three years. This assistance will be tied to the phased withdrawal of the final BCTs. The United States would use its Special Operations units to train additional Iraqi Special Forces. These Iraqi Special Forces units have proven quite capable, and they would continue targeting extremist elements throughout Iraq. Because ISF are increasingly more capable as a fighting force but lack many support functions, the United States would continue to provide Iraqi-requested support in logistics, intelligence, aviation, and joint fires. For example, America would continue to provide logistic military advisory teams that focus on mentoring senior leaders, warehouse operations, ammunition management, petroleum operations, and life support. The United States would also provide the ISF with more modern technology as well as training to support these systems.

This strategy deflates Muqtada al-Sadr's call to arms against US forces because they would have announced their departure. Fighting the American occupiers has largely been the *raison d'être* for JAM. Also, this strategy would reduce Iranian fears that the United States wants to stay in Iraq in order to conduct military operations in the region. Iran has reason to feel insecure and, like all countries, has legitimate security needs. Such a strategy would help alleviate anti-US sentiment in the Middle East by reducing our military presence in Iraq. This plan would also permit the United States to re-appoint BCTs to Afghanistan as well as reset Army and Marine forces. Finally, this strategy bolsters Iraqi pride and acknowledges the nation's sovereignty.

What About Iran?

A more secure Iraq is seen by its neighbors as the key to countering the influence of an increasingly powerful Iran. Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors are taking an increased interest in relations with Iraq. None of these Sunni neighbors want to see a hegemonic Iran and, much like they did with Saddam Hussein, they will work with Iraq's current government to be a bulwark in the effort to thwart Iranian hegemonic ambitions. Bolstering this effort is the fact that the Iraqi populace is very anti-Iranian.

Over the past two years, United Nations, European, and unilateral US sanctions limited Iran's access to international capital markets, blocked it from acquiring advanced American and European technology, and hurt Iranian businesses. This has led to a begrudging realization that Iran's best approach is to increase its diplomatic efforts rather than make bellicose statements and threats. Despite the recent missile launches as part of an Iranian military exercise, the United States did conduct a brief face-to-face negotiation with the Iranian government regarding Iran's nuclear program. Although the nuclear discussion ended inconclusively, it represented one of the most important encounters between Iran and the United States since 1979. For the first time in almost three decades, the United States is considering establishing an American diplomatic presence in Iran in the form of an interests section.

Domestic power struggles are also affecting Iranian strategy in Iraq. In a sign of internal tensions, Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign policy adviser to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned in a newspaper interview in July 2008 against "provocative" statements on the nuclear impasse—statements often associated with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran, long a pariah nation, is concerned about its deteriorating relations with the rest of the world.¹⁸ Additionally, attacks in Iraq using explosively formed projectiles supplied by Iran have dropped significantly. The commander of Multi-National Corps-Iraq said that he had not seen any recent evidence of increased activity in terms of the numbers of munitions flowing across the Iranian border.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Surge has been a success. The ISF are able to provide security, in most instances by themselves and in a limited number of cases with American assistance. The GoI has satisfactorily achieved most of the 18 benchmarks. An emboldened Prime Minister Maliki is working to improve relations with his Arab neighbors. He is skillfully cooperating with the myriad tribal and political actors within Iraq and is strengthening his position and standing as a

secular Prime Minister. Recently, the Iraqi government launched a job creation program in an effort to address unemployment and revive the economy. While not perfect, the Iraqi government is making progress in executing its significant oil surplus monies. The Iraqi people want US forces out of Iraq without reversing the security gains of the past year. The United States and Iraq are on guard against Iranian actions in Iraq, and Iraq's Sunni neighbors are extremely concerned over Iran's regional intentions. It is time for a new strategy, one that acknowledges the latest situation on the ground, that reduces the US military footprint, and provides military support for the ISF and nonmilitary technical expertise to assist GoI ministries. This is a strategy that does not simply withdraw forces. It is a strategy that meets the desires of the sovereign Iraqi government and its people and provides assurances of continued US support.

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