



## Iraq: Why We Are Winning

By General Jack Keane

*In June, General Jack Keane spoke at an AEI conference, stating flatly that we are winning in Iraq and that the momentum is irreversible. He spoke in detail about the four factors that allowed him to make this claim: the defeat of al Qaeda, the capitulation of the mainstream Sunni insurgency, the marginalization of the Shia extremists, and the improvement in the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Other reasons for his optimism include improvements in the political and economic situation in Iraq. Excerpts from his remarks follow.*

I visited Iraq in March. I made multiple trips there in 2007. When I go there now, I spend more time with the Iraqis than I do with the Americans because, after all, it is about them. I visit schools, clinics, marketplaces, people's homes, tribal leaders, sheiks, insurgent leaders who are now working with us, government officials, our own generals and military officials, and, of course, our great soldiers.

Everything in Iraq is really hard. It has always been a challenge. Some of that will continue. But we can say with some degree of certainty that we are winning and that we have an excellent opportunity to achieve the objectives that we set for ourselves.

Those objectives are a stable Iraq with a government elected by its people, capable of securing those people while not being a threat to its neighbors and having a relationship with the United States over the long term. In my judgment, we are going to achieve this. That is a stunning turnaround given the disaster and crisis we faced in 2006 when we had hundreds of people being killed each week on the streets of Baghdad, when all essential services were shut down, when schools were closed. The government was relatively ineffective, having just taken office in the spring after the 2005 general election. The fact

that this has turned around in such a short period of time is a remarkable achievement that will be studied for years to come.

I was with the British chief of defense recently. Counterinsurgency has been the coin of the realm for the British to protect the empire for two hundred years. The British got very good at it, he said. But, he continued, the Americans have done something in Iraq that has gone past all the standards and norms the British achieved or set for themselves. It will take awhile for us to understand just what the Americans have accomplished, he said. There is some sense of it now, but it will take more study.

The momentum we have now is not reversible. So, we need to ask ourselves: how can we make this kind of claim? From a security perspective, there are four things that support it. All the data you see in the newspapers point in a positive direction. Civilian violence, U.S. casualties, ethno-sectarian violence, and Iraqi deaths are down. These data are telling in themselves, but they do not come close to telling the real story.

### Four Reasons for the Claim

First, al Qaeda operations have been defeated. I said that in 2007, and I meant it, but no one wanted to say it because al Qaeda is a terrorist organization always capable of doing terrible things. But al Qaeda can no longer conduct

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sustained operations effectively. That is not possible. They do not have the infrastructure, and they are geographically limited to Mosul and its environs. By the end of the summer or fall, the residue of what is left will be eliminated, but what is left is no longer operationally significant.

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Central Command (CENTCOM) will not say this, but it is the reality. And it is well known in the Arab-Muslim world. Al Qaeda talks openly about defeat in Iraq and how they have suffered. They are having difficulty getting foreign fighters to go to Iraq because it is a hopeless situation. In the past, foreign fighters would come through Syria and be picked up at the border, transported safely, and then safeguarded by the operational cell commander until they were ready to carry out their mission—either as suicide bombers or as operational fighters. Most of the time, they would not be impeded. Now, they are at risk from the moment they cross the border. They know they may not be able to carry out their missions. They may not even make it to the operational site. That is a demotivator for them.

Al Qaeda's defeat and what caused it are important to understand. The Sunnis were no longer willing to support al Qaeda. This is a major event in the Arab-Muslim world, and it has been underreported and underappreciated. Millions of Sunnis walked away from radical Islam, something that has not happened anywhere else in the Arab-Muslim world. It is a portent of better things to come. It is a major defeat for al Qaeda in the Arab world. We addressed this through aggressive special and conventional operations. What Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno were able to do is the second part of that story, and eventually the details will be told.

The second important factor is that the mainstream Sunni insurgency has capitulated. This is also underreported in the United States. We have hardliners out there to be sure, but the mainstream insurgents are now seeking their objectives in the political process. They are no longer using violence to achieve their objectives. This is how insurgencies go away. Insurgents do not

usually surrender. There are no treaties. They do not raise white flags. They walk off the battlefield and start seeking some kind of political accommodation.

I talked to some of the people who have been involved in this and asked why it happened. They believe it happened for a number of reasons. The most significant thing is that the Sunnis knew they could not win. They were fed up with the violence. One of the former insurgent leaders framed the issue for me this way: "When the Americans occupied Baghdad, they [the insurgents] knew there were major problems ahead for them." They realized that something different had happened as a result of the president's decision on the surge. I never looked at it as *occupying* Baghdad until that insurgent leader mentioned it to me, but to look at it from his perspective, that is what we did. And the problems they were having with their own people who were fed up with violence contributed, as did the number of people they were fighting: the Shia militia, the American forces, the ISF. They knew they were never going to be able to achieve their objectives, so they made a strategic decision to leverage U.S. power while we had enormous influence over the Nuri Kamal al Maliki government and to seek the best political accommodation they could get. That is a major event, in the sense that they have surrendered. We do not talk about it in those terms. We do not want to humiliate them.

What the media talk about are the Sons of Iraq, the ninety thousand youngsters between the ages of eighteen and thirty, 60 percent of whom are former insurgents who were fighting us. They refer to this as the "Sunni Awakening," and it is important. I do not want to minimize it. But it is a manifestation of the strategic decisions that were essentially a political decision no longer to use armed violence to seek objectives.

The fact that we have ninety thousand people who were fighting us at one time but are helping us now is extremely significant. Some say this is really dangerous because this is a militia-in-waiting with the potential to overthrow the country. I do not think so. First of all, we have retina-scanned and fingerprinted all ninety thousand. We have dossiers on all of them—their parents, their backgrounds, their friends, their neighborhoods. We have lots of information on all of them, and they know we have it. They are not the insurgent leaders; they are young people, foot soldiers, so to speak. Maliki will bring about 20 percent of them—a fair representation of the Sunni population in Iraq—into the ISF. People ask what will happen to the other 80 percent.

Will they come back to take over the regime? That is not going to happen. The insurgent leaders know there is staggering unemployment in the country. They understand the issue. They know that a lot of these people cannot be vetted and become part of the ISF. Some have criminal backgrounds; some do not have the qualifications. The government does not want all of them in the ISF. There is a general acceptance of that reality. The media makes a big deal of this, but I do not think it is a big deal. There is another issue there. Maliki will start paying for all these people soon. We are paying for them now.

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The third issue is Shia extremism, which was the focus of 2008. We are all aware of what took place. But they have been weakened and somewhat neutralized. Moqtada al Sadr has been politically isolated, which is a major achievement in itself. The Iranian influence in the country has subsided much faster than many expected. The weekend I left Iraq, General Petraeus had a meeting on Friday night with U.S. and Iraqi leaders describing the Iranian threat—the only strategic threat left—exposing its comprehensive nature in political, economic, diplomatic, and military terms. Within forty-eight hours, Maliki was running south. He strapped on his weapons and took three brigades. He is very impulsive. Petraeus could not stop him, but it turned out to be a good thing.

General Petraeus wanted to be deliberate about it—to set conditions, to get the agency and our classified forces down there to get tactical intelligence, and then to start building up to it. But Maliki achieved surprise tactically, and it was a major strategic victory for him. As a result, he has enormous political support from Shia moderates and Sunnis who never expected him to deal with the Shia extremism problem. Because he is a Shia himself, the Sunnis thought he would never take on Iran's influence in the south. The fact that he has done it has earned him genuine political support he did not have in the past. Despite getting off on the wrong foot, the Iraqi forces performed pretty well throughout the operation. When the Brits pulled out, there was a vacuum. Violence, criminality, and thuggery went up. There were two Hezbollah-trained battalions running free in Basra. When I spoke to

the police chief there in March, he said 60–70 percent of his force had been compromised by a militia relationship. He told me not to count on them if the United States came down. He wanted us to work without their help because he said they were not going to be able to do anything effective.

The last thing that has helped so dramatically in terms of the security situation is the improvement of the ISF themselves. It has not been revolutionary. It has been a steady improvement ever since General Petraeus got his hands on the helm when he was a three-star general. He put together a program that had a foundation. The socialization process of taking a civilian and making him a soldier is not very difficult. The real challenge is training the leaders and the organization to perform effectively. All of that took time. When we knew we had to face the reality of a failed strategy, we doubled the size of the requirement. The fact that this was put on fast forward and that we were able to maintain quality was quite an accomplishment. It still is. General Petraeus has had two successors in that job, three-star generals named Martin Dempsey and James Dubik. They have performed the herculean task of helping the Iraqis. But the Iraqis deserve a lot of credit. There has been a steady improvement in their force. The last time I was there, I did not find an operational commander who did not make many, many references to Iraqi units in terms of the quality of their performance. This gives us tremendous confidence because they are our exit strategy. They are a major factor in the improvement of the situation.

## The Political Realities

The political reality that enables me to make the claim that I just did about winning and achieving our objectives arises from several things. Congress and the administration browbeat the Maliki government into a national legislative patch, the so-called benchmarks. We insisted on eighteen benchmarks that the Iraqis had to accomplish. The rationale was that by forcing national legislation, political reconciliation with the Sunnis would occur. No one thought this could come about in any other way. So with the external push, the government accepted the responsibility. They have achieved all but two of the benchmarks.

Let me mention two that were critical. One is the modification of de-Baathification law that now allows the Sunnis to enter into the social fabric of life in Iraq, to be part of security services, to be part of the government,

to work as engineers or college professors again. All these privileges had been taken away from them because they were like Communist cardholders in the Soviet Union. People who held these positions were members of the Baath party. They were Sunnis and Shias. We took that away from them when Paul Bremer, director of Iraqi reconstruction after the invasion, promulgated that policy, and we have struggled to recover from it ever since. Take into consideration the political risk that Maliki took by allowing the Sunnis to rejoin society. It is similar to our civil rights legislation that took one hundred years for us to pass after the Civil War. That is what this struggle really is about—civil rights for the Sunnis to participate in political life.

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The other critical change is the amnesty law. There are thousands of people in jail who will be free because of the amnesty law. Maliki knows this. He is going to put them back on the streets as a commitment to the Sunnis that this war is ending and that he is willing to let bygones be bygones. He has not had full agreement on this within his government, but the Council of Representatives passed the law, and the military is supporting it. There will be a vetting process. But this is another remarkable achievement in a short time frame.

Provincial elections are coming in December. These will be a major undertaking because they will change the government from a centralized Sunni model to a decentralized one. Everything from trash removal to running the universities to running oil distribution and production is now run by twenty-one central ministries. The Iraqis are now going to adopt the Shia model and decentralize. The provinces will have their own budgets similar to other systems around the world. They will decentralize and share power. This is a major undertaking, and it will change Iraq significantly.

The other political reality is that the reconciliation process took place from the bottom up on the initiative of the Sunnis, with the Sunni Awakening reaching out to us and to the Shia-dominated government Maliki was

running. It is a significant reality. Initially, the government was cautious about it. You can understand that after thirty-five years of repression under the Sunnis. They have insecurities about dealing with this, but they have accepted the risk and moved forward. Reconciliation has been taking place for months. There will not be a ribbon-cutting called “reconciliation.” It will evolve gradually.

Politically, Maliki is much stronger. He had no executive experience. He did not know how to organize or run anything. Many of the Iraqis do not understand the art of compromise. They understand the art of revenge. They resolved differences using violence. But how you work together to form coalitions or a council of representatives to achieve objectives is a new and huge struggle for them. But as we deal with Maliki today, he is strong, and he has support he did not have before.

Economic progress is slow. There are some positive signs. The currency is relatively strong. Economic growth will be around 7 percent in 2008. Oil industry production is back to prewar levels. Oil companies are coming back. Microloans are helping small businesses. Foreign investment is beginning to trickle in, starting with state-owned enterprises. It will improve. The U.S. Department of Defense had a great program there, led by Paul Brinkley, to stand up these factories so that they could employ more people. Unemployment remains staggeringly high—in the high 30s, low 40s. There are many challenges. A lot of suffering goes on in everyday life in Iraq. You can see that as you travel. They have a long way to go. But they have money. Most of the countries we have helped in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not had money, but Iraq does. They will solve most of the economic issues long after we are gone. They need help from the world and the region and from us.

## Summing Up

How did this all happen? First, the administration faced the truth that the strategy we had used for three years had failed. They did two major things. They changed the strategy and changed the leaders who would execute it. Both were decisive decisions that had dramatic effects. A new secretary of defense, a new CENTCOM commander, a new commander in Iraq, and a new ambassador were crucial. General Odierno’s presence there was one of the great accidents of life—he is one of the best generals the U.S. Army had.

The new strategy is decisive. It is not just about force levels. If we had just increased the force levels and given

them to the old team, things would have stayed the same. It was the change of strategy on the ground that made the difference, using proven counterinsurgency tactics that required more forces to execute the strategy. These new leaders were the very best that were available. Ambassador Ryan Crocker is amazing. The embassy had been dysfunctional for two years. He transformed it. People wanted to win. The malaise was gone. Crocker handpicked his deputies, but it took six months to get them in place. The State Department did not want to move them until summer because of the school cycle! And we were fighting a war!

The other major factor that helped to turn the situation around is the Iraqi people themselves. They were fed up with the violence, and they wanted change. When there were instruments put there for them, they reached out for them. You have to give the Iraqi leaders real credit, too, for taking the risks they took. The Iraqi troops themselves have improved.

The last key factor has been the performance of our troops. Their performance has always been extraordinary. When they had a winning hand, they became exponentially better than anything I have ever seen. I went in with the lead units in Baghdad in February. And many in the states were wringing their hands because there was concern that our troops were going into bad neighborhoods and that they would be vulnerable as a result. Our thought was that they would be safer. The security blanket is the people themselves. Once the people there knew our soldiers were there and willing to die for them, they informed on the insurgents when they started to come in and helped our soldiers in other ways. Our soldiers knew they had a winning hand, and they were very aggressive about it. They deserve great credit.

In terms of the way ahead, the big issue politically is the provincial elections. The political process is crucial. If we secure the elections, if we give people a voice, the provincial governments will all be different. Then there are the national elections in 2009 at the end of the year. They will produce a new government. Ninety percent of Sunnis in two independent polls have said they will participate in the provincial and general elections. That is staggering. They did not participate before. The 2009 national government will be stronger as a result of their participation. The election will represent the people. Policy and execution will be better.

We cannot squander the security gains we have made. Continuity is key. The administration has made a crucial decision in keeping Petraeus and making him the CENTCOM commander. He will not take that job until September when some of the critical phases are complete. General Odierno will be back in Iraq in Petraeus's job in September. These are two tough-minded, savvy generals who are committed to success. This continuity is critical to policy execution regardless of who is elected.

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The next part about security is force levels. Everyone is focused on it. Two variables will drive force levels: enemy capability and ISF capability. I do not think the force levels will be that different. People will be surprised. We have had so much success, but because of what has happened in the past, they will be cautious about the levels. They do not want to squander gains that have been made. But the truth is that force levels will come down dramatically in 2009. We may be able to transition the mission in 2010. By that I mean that we would no longer be in the lead conducting significant combat operations. We will only be performing a support role. I do not know that for sure, of course. I would not have said that a year ago, but it is a real possibility now. If that is true, with the success that has taken place, the next administration will just be arguing over sequencing out brigades over certain periods of time.

We also need to work on regional partnerships. Other countries in the region have to get involved. The administration is working on that. We have to continue to check Iranian influence in Iraq. They are not giving up. We have checked it now. The Quds Force leader is savvy and ruthless. He has been in charge for twelve years, and he has a political, economic, diplomatic, and military strategy to gain a foothold in southern Iraq to drive us out so that the United States and Iraq are not allies. They will try to destabilize the situation. They will not give up on those objectives.