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Getting the Big Ideas Right: The Strategic Concepts that Helped Achieve Substantial Progress in Iraq

General David Petraeus

Thanks very much for that kind introduction and for those generous words. I've noted on numerous occasions that those kinds of words can only be accepted on behalf of all of those who really turned big ideas at the strategic level into operational reality at the tactical level, and I was pleased to meet before this introduction with some of those who have had sons and daughters serving in Iraq. A number of people have noted that they are the new greatest generation; in fact, Tom Brokaw was the first of those to say that, to use his term with that modifier in front of it, and I very much agree with that. And therefore, again, I can only accept that on their behalf.

I would observe, though, also when hearing kind words like that, as I mentioned to some folks yesterday, you're reminded of the old saw that I wish my parents could've heard it; my dad would've loved it, and my mother might've actually believed it.

But it is great to be with you. It's a wonderful audience; again, some awfully distinguished folks from our governmental organizations over the years, and also an organization that of course has contributed enormously to policymaking and policy-watching. And so it's a real privilege to be with you today.

What I wanted to speak about today was, of course, Iraq and then perhaps the future and the daunting responsibilities in the Central Command area, which is quite a vast one, as you know, and has a number of the world's other problems in addition to Iraq and its neighbors. As was mentioned, I just finished about

Talking Points

- The bottom line in Iraq today is that U.S., coalition, and Iraqi forces have made substantial and durable progress in providing security and stability for the Iraqi people. The assessment should be tempered by an understanding of the numerous remaining challenges the Iraqis must still address.
- The addition, or "surge," of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq provided a significant symbol of commitment that encouraged the substantial growth in Iraqi security forces—including over 100,000 Sons of Iraq, an improved security situation overall, an information campaign to defeat the extremist ideology of al-Qaeda, and the beginning of the return of displaced families.
- Security is a vital but insufficient foundation for maintaining the hard-fought successes achieved to date. The Iraqi government must continue to develop a comprehensive plan encompassing economic, diplomatic, political, informational, rule of law, and capacity building as major tenets for lasting security.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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three weeks ago a tour of a little over 19 months as the Commander of the Multi-National Force—Iraq, from February of 2007 to September 2008, having had two previous tours there, one as the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division in the first year during the fight to Baghdad and then subsequently up in northern Iraq.

And then going back, at the request of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, first to do an assessment of the security situation of security forces in the spring of that year and then to establish what came to be known as MNSTC-I—an acronym he loved, I might add—the Multi-National Security Transition Command in Iraq, and also the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, positions I was privileged to hold for a little over 15 months. We took a look at the security training effort there and came back and offered some thoughts and some recommendations, including one which is very relevant as I look to the future. That was that Afghanistan was going to be the longest campaign of the long war, and having been back there recently, I still subscribe to that view.

The Surge: A Strategy for Success

The topic, though, first is Iraq. I wanted to give a little update on where we are in Iraq. I wanted to talk about, in a sense, what the surge was in terms of both forces and the ideas that accompanied the deployment of those forces, show you some of the metrics that we use to track the progress in Iraq and then talk a little bit about the future challenges. I'll start with the bottom line up front: substantial progress, yet still fragile and reversible; however, the progress is less fragile today than in May.

This is indeed the bottom line. I don't think there's any question about the nature of the progress there; an awful lot of the metrics are down by about 80 percent. Attacks, 180 back in June of 2007, are somewhere between 20 and 30 now for a period of about four months. Civilian deaths, our casualties, and so on are all down very substantially.

But as Ambassador Ryan Crocker and I have noted on a number of occasions—including in April when we came back for our testimony—and as General Ray Odierno and I testified in the confirmation hearings in May and have each stated since then,

that progress does remain fragile, and it does remain reversible. This is the case because of the challenges that lie on the horizon for Iraq and that they are now coming to grips with. But I would add, perhaps, that this progress is a little less fragile and a bit more durable than when Ambassador Crocker and I were here in April, certainly, and even than when General Odierno and I testified in May. But that is, again, very heavily qualified by noting that there are enormous difficulties that Iraq still has to deal with.

I wanted to talk a bit about the “surge” because the surge was more than what the most prominent element of it in most folk's mind was: the addition of some 30,000 U.S. forces over time, the combat elements of which were five U.S. Army brigade combat teams, two Marine battalions, a Marine expeditionary unit, and then a number of enablers, including a division headquarters, some additional aviation engineers, MP assets, intelligence forces, and others. These forces tend to be the focus, but the surge was also a major signal of commitment from the United States and some other coalition countries that added forces; Georgia, most prominently, added 2,000 additional soldiers during that period, and some other countries made more modest increases as well.

In many respects, the surge enabled the growth in Iraqi security forces to about 135,000 today and growing. The Iraqi army, Iraqi police, Iraqi national police, and border forces all grew substantially and became more professional during that period as well. This was important because some of these forces had become hijacked by sectarian interests—the national police, in particular.

You will recall General Jim Jones recommended that Iraqi security forces be disestablished last summer, but through a nearly two-year process, every leader from the national commander, the division commanders, the brigade commanders, and about 80 percent of the battalion commanders were retrained to help instill professionalism. More recently, the Italian Carabinieri has begun helping as well with this important program. All of that has helped turn the national police into a force that is now quite a credit to Iraq and one that our commanders—and that's the ultimate measure—actually want to see working with them in their areas of responsibility.

As force levels grew, the security situation improved. When before 50 to 55 bodies were showing up in Baghdad a day, our other efforts became less difficult as this violence began to subside. At a time like that, you're not going to get legislation or other activities accomplished because the sole interest is survival.

This growth was joined with the hiring of over 100,000 Sons of Iraq, the product of the awakening of Sunni and also Shia tribes. One of these was stood up before the surge even started—in one case, way before the surge started. However, it died still-born because it could not be protected adequately. But these tribes were raising their hand to reject extremism and al-Qaeda in Iraq. They were unhappy with what al-Qaeda had done to their neighborhoods and did not want any more of it. We assisted their efforts with an information campaign that we tried to hang around al-Qaeda's neck. I believe it was successful.

This enabled the employment of counterinsurgency concepts. It was not just additional forces, but how those forces were employed that proved to be important. One would enable the other. What you have in a situation like this is either a downward spiral or an upward spiral, and there is no single factor that propels you upwards. There are many factors that conspire together or actually complement each other.

Implementing the Big Ideas

The job of strategic leaders is first to try to get the big ideas right; then it's to communicate those big ideas to subordinate leaders and hopefully be so persuasive that they embrace them. This is very much in partnership with the "Big O Show," as we call him, General Ray Odierno. General Odierno, who has taken my place as the Multi-National Force—Iraq Commander, was the Multi-National Corps—Iraq Commander for that first year that I was back there as the force commander. He was the operational architect of the surge during that time and an important contributor to it.¹ Our country is fortunate to have someone like that who would be

willing to go back after only being home about eight or nine months after his second tour.

The first big idea was that we had to secure and serve the population. The decisive terrain in counterinsurgency is not necessarily the high ground or the bridge or the usual focus of military operations, but the human terrain. You have to understand the people. You have to have a nuanced appreciation for the organizing structures, the tribes, the religious elements, the political parties, how the system is supposed to work, and how it really works. We now even have human terrain teams with every one of our brigades that assist us with this task.

But the idea of focusing on securing the people was of enormous importance, because we had reached a point where the security challenges were so large that we could not transition those challenges to the Iraqi forces. General Casey and Ambassador Khalilzad recognized this in December in an assessment at that time. The importance of the human terrain was a reason that we had to focus on securing the population.

The only way to secure the population is by living with them. You cannot secure the people of a neighborhood from a large base by driving through it a couple of times a day and returning to that large base. You have to locate with them, you have to share risk with them—and this in partnership with Iraqi forces. If this is done, then relatively quickly they will start to provide you information on who the bad guys are in the neighborhood. This enables you to conduct more precise operations over time. This will start a spiral, and you can start picking up the bad guys and getting others on the run.

You can also put up T-walls. Gated communities in America cost a great deal of money, and we've provided these for Iraqi neighborhoods in Baghdad free of charge. This is a very important population-control measure and is hugely significant in the effort that we employed to secure the population. There are still innumerable fault lines that exist between these different areas in Iraq's capital city, but you have to be there with them; it is the only way that you can secure them.

1. See Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq: One Year Later," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 1068, March 13, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1068.cfm>.

Unity of Effort

You obviously have to have much more than just a security plan. Security is an absolutely vital foundation, but it is not sufficient. You have to have a plan that encompasses what we call lines of operation: economic, diplomatic, political, informational, rule of law, and capacity building. Ambassador Crocker and I worked very hard to develop and refine the Joint Campaign Plan that focused on securing the population and the other lines of operation. We then sought to execute it as a team. In fact, our offices were only about 30 feet apart and separated only by the waiting room and some administrative offices. Whenever we met Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or congressional delegations that came in, we always did so together in addition to testifying together in September 2007 and in April 2008.

The Joint Campaign Plan was very important. We spent a lot of effort on it. We brought in a Joint Strategic Assessment Team, did comprehensive security reviews and assessment boards about every six to eight weeks, and tweaked it several times during our time there.

As you link arms and go forward, you do not have unity of command. The ambassador reports to the Secretary of State; the military commander obviously reports up through a military chain to the Secretary of Defense. So, understandably, you're not going to achieve that. But what you do have to strive to achieve is unity of effort and unity of purpose. We tried very hard to do this as well. This has to be done all the way down through the organization, which means all the way down to about the brigade level where you have civilian provincial reconstruction teams, AID² elements, and a number of other partners. Everyone has to strive to work together, to have a common vision, common objectives, and then try to link arms and make their way together.

You have got to stay after the enemy. We had to go after and take away their strongholds and safe havens. We knew where al-Qaeda in Iraq's strongholds and safe havens were in the winter of 2006–2007, and we had to go in and not only clear them out, but hold them after we were finished. Another

element in the spiral upwards is to get local markets, the schools, and the provision of basic services working again.

All of that reinforces each of the other elements. It gets you more intelligence, more information, and more support from the people. Over time, you start to drive down the level of violence. Ultimately, you can even get folks to live together again by fostering local reconciliation. But you've got to get your teeth into the enemy. We talked about trying to get into their jugular and stay after it with every means available.

There is an important distinction between simply clearing and leaving and clearing and holding. Our clearing operations were huge. It took us a month to clear the city of Ramadi, which had become the capital of the new caliphate, and then Baqubah subsequent to that. Even with the growing support of the people in Anbar Province that started as early as the late fall of 2006, it still took us until mid-March of 2007 before we had the sufficient plan, power, structure, and so forth to clear and hold Ramadi.

Once operations had commenced, it still took us a good month to do it from stem to stern, a city of only about 350,000–450,000. Then we were able to hold it. During this particular operation, you literally could see from patrol base to patrol base, or combat outpost to combat outpost. You would have to isolate each neighborhood with barriers to prevent vehicles from moving in before you could actually move in and clear it. That is the kind of challenging operation that was required to accomplish this.

Promoting Reconciliation

We had from the beginning an intellectual construct that talked about promoting reconciliation at the local level. If you find tribes that are willing to reject al-Qaeda, then we sought to embrace and support them. We even parked tanks out front of Sheikh Sattar's house, who was the Awakening leader of most significance in the fall and early winter of 2006. He was very important in the developments in Anbar Province over time. Tragically, he was later assassinated, showing you the threat that these individuals are under and the risks that they take.

2. U.S. Agency for International Development.

We had an explicit intellectual construct of identifying and separating the irreconcilables, the hardcore Taqfiri, from the rest of the population and then trying to reconcile with as many as there were left. You don't end these operations by killing or capturing your way along the line. What you do is, you end up getting rid of the hardest of the hardcore and then trying to make the others part of the solution instead of a continuing part of the problem.

We used the British experience in Northern Ireland quite effectively in this regard. I had a deputy who had to sit down across from Martin McGuinness, a noted IRA brigade commander. He wanted to reach across the table and grab him by the throat because Martin McGuinness's men had killed some of this individual's men in 22 SAS.³ But, of course, what eventually happened is they all reconciled, which has helped to achieve a relatively enduring settlement there. Ironically, Martin McGuinness is now on an inspirational speaking tour with some other leaders from South Africa and elsewhere and showed up in Baghdad to tell us about reconciliation at one point earlier this spring.

When I took command, we wanted to continue the process of transitioning security responsibilities to the Iraqis. A number of provinces had already transitioned, and others were in the works. But you cannot transition to the Iraqis a problem that is bigger than we can handle, given that their capabilities were much less. This was all the more true given that some of their organizations had actually been hijacked by sectarian interests.

The local police are also very vulnerable in such situations. The Ministry of Health, for example, had been completely hijacked by militia interests. In my first month back in Iraq, Prime Minister Maliki turned to me one time and asked me to detain his Deputy Minister of Health. I realized then the severity of the situation. We later had to do the same with the sky marshals at Baghdad International Airport and with a number of other elements. This becomes a life-and-death matter for people. To survive, some of them had to end up at least acceding to supporting militia or Sunni extremist al-Qaeda interests.

We worked very hard to lay out objectively and realistically what was going on there on the ground. At various times, I had former mentors, various study groups, and different individuals come to Iraq where we would brief and spend time with them. In the spring of 2007, it was not uncommon for them to comment that we had a strategic communications problem. I would say no; actually, we have a results problem. As long as the situation is what it is on the ground, there is no strategic communication strategy that can convey anything but the fact that this is a very serious time in Iraq. When you have 180 attacks a day, this is not about spinning the news; it's about showing the results on the ground. The level of violence starts to come down as we go after al-Qaeda, take away their sanctuaries, support reconciliation, deal with the militia, and eventually they cease fire because of the losses that they took from us and because of the losses they were taking in the eyes of the Iraqi population. Their worst fear is losing the support of the people.

Combating Sectarian Violence

As the al-Qaeda threat diminished, the militia population came to be seen as a mafia element in the midst of those neighborhoods. Over time, the extortion of money from shopkeepers, the kidnapping for ransom, the linkage to assassinations of two southern governors and several police chiefs, and then the violence that they precipitated in the holy city of Karbala led them to realize that their reputation was severely tarnished and that they needed to "take a knee" to regroup. Prime Minister Maliki personally led a 100-vehicle convoy down there the next day with his special operators to deal with that situation. He did the same after the violence of March and April of this year, and they have actually now made a very strategic decision to turn the bulk of the militia into a social services organization and to return to the roots of the movement, a respected movement in Iraq, based on the martyr Sattar who was dedicated to serving the poor and most down-trodden in that country—a reason that they had the support of a number of the people.

There was a report that it mattered whether the bullet hit the front of the head or the back of the

3. The 22 Special Air Service Regiment is a special-forces regiment within the British Army.

head to be classified as sectarian violence. We brought the reporters out and said we were declassifying our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Only the military could have a two-page SOP for determining whether something is or is not sectarian violence. We laid it out. We declassified the metrics, and we stand by those; Ambassador Crocker and I stand by our testimony from September, April, and May. We endeavored to let the facts speak for themselves and to offer caveats and try to keep expectations measured. That's fairly difficult in an election year, but, again, our job was to try to lay that out and then let journalists, think tankers, and others draw their own conclusions.

We fought very hard in this country for values that we place great stock in, and even though we're engaged in a war with an enemy who rejects those values and who carries out barbaric and horrific attacks, we must stay in line with our values. At one point, when I had some concern about this, I put out a letter to our troops that laid out that rationale and described how we had to very intently focus on living our values. When I was in a previous assignment where we had responsibility for a number of different institutions on the institutional side of the Army that included doctrine in our school system and education for leaders and training centers, we put out the field manual on interrogation operations. We absolutely adhered to that in Iraq. I can tell you that, by and large, it worked. We obviously lived our values.

Most of this you learn from interface with captains and others who are out there turning broad concepts into operational reality on the ground. I saw a sign in a command post that said, "In the absence of orders or direction, figure out what it should have been and execute aggressively." To be truthful, that was exactly the kind of attitude that we were trying to foster, and it is something we just kept refining during the course of this last tour over there.

Our captains got it, and we wanted them to move out in line with their understanding of our intent for them that cascades down from the force commander through the corps, division, brigade, battalion, and so on. By and large, I think you can be very proud of the way that they did just that.

Refining, Adapting, and Learning

It is hugely important in an endeavor like this that you never, ever stop refining your concepts, adapting to the enemy, learning, and, again, reviewing and assessing. This is an enemy who may be barbaric, may carry out absolutely heinous activities, but is also a very savvy enemy and a very lethal and determined enemy. We have to continue to learn. We have to continue to assess the situation on the ground and always continue to refine our approach. What works in Baghdad today won't work in Baghdad tomorrow. It won't work in Anbar today. So you have to come back to that nuanced understanding of a situation, work very hard to develop it, and then to retain it as the situation continually evolves.

I laid out to Congress last April in the testimony the approach that you have to take to deal with an organization like al-Qaeda in Iraq. It's not just al-Qaeda in Iraq; it's Ansar al-Sunna, Ansar al-Islam, Jaishul Islami, all of these other Sunni extremist organizations that grew up in Iraq during the course of the period after the initial liberation and got a foothold in some of these Sunni areas in which there were grievances and perceptions of being disowned, disrespected, and out of jobs—all these challenges that accrued over that time.

What you need to do is make sure that you attack their structures so that you limit their access to weapons and explosives. You cut down the number of foreign fighters that come into the country—in this case through Syria. That has very much been done; they are down from over 100 to less than probably 20 a month now. Keep in mind that is a lot of suicide bombers in particular. You have to take away their strongholds and safe havens, not allow them to lick their wounds.

You can have a lot of success in individual operations, but unless you do all this, you are not going to take that organization down. We killed Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, a very effective and charismatic and good operational leader, and the level of violence actually went up because they still had these areas in which they could recoup, start to rebuild, and then plan and conduct more operations.

You have got to try to reduce the level of support for insurgent groups in the population, take on their ideology and all of its different forms. This includes the Internet. In your strategic communications efforts, you have to try to degrade their ability to command and control in the country and try to reduce their links to the al-Qaeda senior leadership, which of course is in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or the border areas of western Pakistan, North-West Frontier Province.

You have to try to take away as much of the oxygen from the movement as you can, and the oxygen is money. They are in many respects a mafia-like organization in Iraq and elsewhere where they generate revenue through extortion and a variety of other illicit schemes, and many members of their organization are in it for money. Those at the top and some others are in a sense the true believers of what is an extremist ideology.

But it takes more than the kinetic operations. Our special operations forces may carry out the most important five to 15 operations in a 24-hour period, along with some increasingly very effective Iraqi special operations forces, but that's not enough. You need large conventional forces, with increasing help from Iraqis, to take away and hold their strongholds and safe havens. You need political activity to complement what you're doing to capitalize on the security gains down at the local level, these tribal awakenings, which played such an important role and which we sought to foster actively and then to support and secure when they were courageous enough to raise their hand, recognizing that in many cases the hands wouldn't go up until we had actually cleared some of these areas because of the threat to them until that point. But whenever it was they raised their hands—if it's before the operation, after it, or during it—you want to embrace them and give them an opportunity to help hold those areas. That's where we hired the Sons of Iraq, over 100,000 over the course of time, now down from that number.

You have to try to reduce the reasons that they embrace al-Qaeda in Iraq—the pressure from militias, perhaps sectarian pressures, if there are Kurd-Arab issues, whatever it might be—you have to try to ameliorate those, to reduce them so that there's

no reason why a Sunni Arab would throw himself into the camp of al-Qaeda in Iraq. And then at the national level, of course, you eventually want laws that start to cement some of this, or at least to solidify it a bit. Some legislation has been enacted, but there is a lot more that has to be done.

Enormous efforts in intelligence drive this. You have to fight for intelligence; everything you do has to be determined to gain information that will help you. The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles over the years now has been very helpful, and the most important development in this world is not one breakthrough in any one discipline—there have been a number of those; Bob Woodward was alluding to one of the very important ones, and indeed it has been—but the real breakthrough, I would argue, is in the fusion of the products of all the different disciplines: human intelligence, signals intelligence, imagery intelligence, measurement intelligence, and applications that enable you to put all that together and to analyze it very rapidly and provide actionable intelligence to our forces.

Detainee Operations

We had to completely revamp what we did in detainee operations. We discovered that we were allowing in these compounds of 800 to 900 detainees the training of the terrorist class of 2007 and 2008, because there were Taqfiri in there, very hard-core extremists who would intimidate, recruit, motivate, and train right in those compounds. You have to envision a huge penned-in enclosure, and you have to conduct counterinsurgency operations inside the wire where you identify and isolate the irreconcilables, get them out of the general population, and then you provide training, education, job skills, and other opportunities for those in the rest of the population so that when they are reintegrated into society, now with a judicial pledge and a tribal support apparatus, the re-arrest rate goes down. In fact, it is down since September/October, when we finally finished implementing this. It is down to below one percent compared with double digits before that time.

During Ramadan alone this year, we just finished a release of, I think, over 2,600 detainees. We brought it down now from a peak of somewhere around

26,000 to below 18,000 now and coming down. The big news is, without the kind of re-arrest rate that we experienced before because we have separated these hard-core out of the rest of the population.

Now, you've got to do other activities, the so-called non-kinetics. Try to reduce the reasons that there are unmet expectations by improving opportunities for jobs, education, and basic services. You have to be active out in cyberspace. You've got to be legal, you've got to do it in line with our values, but you cannot just cede that space to the enemy and allow him to operate there with impunity. You have got to try to get source countries to support you so you make it tougher to fly on a one-way plane ticket from Tripoli to Damascus as a military-age male. Saudi Arabia over the last four years has undertaken a very comprehensive counterinsurgency, really counter-extremist program that has produced very impressive results as well.

And then, in this case, you've got to work the borders, still an area that needs work in Iraq in a major way, and try to get the country through which these foreign fighters travel to help you a bit more. The record there is still certainly very mixed, although the numbers are way down in large part because of what we've done to the networks inside Iraq and what source countries have done to help as well.

From January 2004, the first uptick in violence occurred when you had the first Fallujah and the militia uprising. Beyond that, it stayed roughly around that, other than Najaf, Fallujah, the elections each time, and then absolutely took off in the wake of the Samarra bombing of February 2006 that set off a cycle of sectarian violence that became horrific by the winter of 2006–2007. There were some 50 to 55 dead bodies every 24 hours at the height of that sectarian violence just in Iraq's capital alone in December 2006.

Reducing the Levels of Violence

General Odierno and I in the spring of 2007 said this would get harder before it got easier, and the violence did go up because now we were going after al-Qaeda in its strongholds and its safe havens, and they fought back. So the level of violence peaked in the early summer time frame as we launched the surge of offenses, and then, as we started to make

progress against al-Qaeda, it started to go down. Then we had the first militia cease-fire in the wake of the violence in Karbala when they took a knee to try to repair the damage to their image with the people. There was a little uptick again with Ramadan, although it was much less this year. This is the most peaceful Ramadan that Iraq has had, although certainly there were some terrible attacks at the very end in Baghdad. But from a historical perspective, violence is significantly less.

This year, violence levels continued to fall, increasing only when Prime Minister Maliki ordered the operations against the militia in Basra and then ultimately in Sadr City. Some very tough fighting occurred by our troops, in support of and then in the lead as well, with our Iraqi partners for the last four months at levels not seen since early 2004, as I mentioned, coming down from a peak of somewhere around 180 attacks a day in the June 2007 timeframe to an average of about 25 or so right now. In fact, this week it has been below that, although areas of concern still remain.

Now, if you're focused on security of the population, you have to focus on violent civilian deaths. There is a discrepancy between the Iraqi data and U.S. data. The difference is because the Iraqis had much greater visibility until we started creating all of the additional bases in places like Baghdad—77 additional joint security stations, patrol bases, and combat outposts in Baghdad alone so that we could indeed live with the people. Over time, the differences in reporting started to converge. Civilian deaths due to violent activity have been reduced very substantially since their height in the winter of 2006 and into 2007.

We did focus a great deal on ethno-sectarian violence, and when it comes to Baghdad, it was really sectarian violence. It was Sunni extremist al-Qaeda on Shia, and then the Shia militia on the Sunni population. The violence was ethno-sectarian in some cases when it was Sunni on Kurds or Arabs on Kurds, Yazidi Christians, Turkoman Shabaq, and so forth as well as on Shia. In Baghdad, a very, very substantial reduction occurred as our forces went into its neighborhoods. Between the period of December 2006 and August 2007, a very dramatic reduction in sectarian violence took place in Baghdad.

That came about because our forces went into those areas, tried to sit on the violence, to stabilize it, to bring it down, to go after the bad guys, to promote local reconciliation, and then to start to deal with some of the other conditions in there in terms of markets, local commerce, and local governance. There are still many mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad; certainly, some neighborhoods became more Sunni or more Shia, became hardened in their sectarian composition. But there are innumerable fault lines throughout the city over which there would still be fighting had it not been for the actions of our troops and the actions of our Iraqi partners to deal with this sectarian violence, to employ population-control measures, and to stop fighting across those sectarian fault lines.

The sectarian composition is quite a mix throughout Baghdad, albeit with some neighborhoods very heavily Shia, some very heavily Sunni, but with numerous ones of each interspersed throughout. In fact, a report, I think, in today's *Post* or *Times* talked about the process that has been ongoing of people returning to their neighborhoods. It started in a trickle this spring and has now grown a reasonable amount over the course of the spring and into the fall.

We still need to work very hard on car bombs, suicide car bombs, and suicide vests. In either the month that I took back over or the month after I took back over command of Multi-National Force—Iraq, I remember 42 car bombs in Baghdad. It went up from there. We brought those numbers down very substantially with our Iraqi partners going after the network, but there are still car bombs, and suicide vest attacks now are a particular problem, with women carrying them out. Although they are down very substantially, a good bit more work is needed in this particular area. Assassinations are another area that we have to focus on with our Iraqi partners because it presents a very pernicious activity in a situation like this.

When we go after weapons caches and move into the neighborhoods, all of a sudden the Iraqi population will tell you where the weapons caches are. As you go into the al-Qaeda strongholds, the Sunni extremist strongholds, and eventually the militia strongholds, you pick up more and more weapons

and explosives caches. You can see, for example, that in 2007 we found more than in the previous two years combined, and we've already found more in 2008 than we found in all of 2007, although the numbers are starting to come down as we are literally running out of the major strongholds and safe havens, the major militia areas, and so forth. Certainly, there are still some out there, but that number has started to fall as those numbers have ceased to exist in the same way that they did before.

Reducing the al-Qaeda Presence

I want to show you where al-Qaeda was in the winter of 2006–2007 and where it is now. In Baghdad in 2006–2007, there was a substantial al-Qaeda presence in the western part of the city, south center, and then over into what's called Otamia and that district there. This significant presence caused very severe problems with the continuation of car bombs and suicide attacks. In the Euphrates River Valley and Anbar Province, there were very high levels of violence at this time. The Euphrates River Valley is a dagger pointed at the heart of Baghdad. The southern routes out of Baghdad, southeast, south—this was the so-called Triangle of Death southwest of Baghdad on the major route south to the holy cities of Karbala, Najaf, and ultimately to Basra. Up the Diyala River Valley, Baqubah was starting to supplant Ramadi gradually as a new stronghold for al-Qaeda in early 2007; up the Tigris River Valley, Za'ab Triangle, Mosul and Ninewah.

Currently, al-Qaeda has a very reduced presence in Anbar Province. They're trying to come back, and they will still conduct occasional attacks, but a very significantly reduced number. In the southern belts, they are also trying to come back. There is still some residual presence, but it doesn't quite register in the way that it did before. In Baghdad, there are still some pockets of al-Qaeda because it is very hard to root these out, to identify them in these neighborhoods that may have 50,000 people in them. Although they do swim among the people, they don't swim as well because the people will turn them in now when they identify them at a vastly greater extent than before.

There is a reduced presence in Diyala, although up in the so-called Hamrin Mountains, there are

still some challenges there. In Samarra, the presence is reduced. The city of Kirkuk is a very challenging area because of the Arab–Kurd dynamics there, as you may know, and sorting out the eventual status of that city is very much a source of political tension and friction. In Mosul and Ninewah Province, there is still a presence that is very troublesome, and although the level of violence in Ninewah Province may be down by a half or so from what it was six months ago as a result of some significant operations, there is still considerably more work to be done.

Shia militia had quite a substantial presence in Sadr City, the eastern part of Baghdad, northwest, and then some in other disputed areas, three neighborhoods in Basra in particular, a city of about 2 million people, and then in the southern areas, of course, the Shia-populated areas, Maysan Province, and then some of the other major cities and a bit up in the Diyala River Valley as well. As a result of the operations, in particular, ordered by Prime Minister Maliki starting in March and then, certainly, others that were carried out prior to that, you see a much-reduced presence in Sadr City, certainly, and some of these other neighborhoods that were historically friendly and supportive. Their presence was also substantially reduced in Basra. We must watch for the return of these militias.

A big help during this time has been the Iraqi security forces. If you look at the Iraqi army combat battalions, there are 167 combat ones now. This does not include transportation, engineer battalions, and others. Our commanders on the ground assess that about 116 or so of those are actually in the lead in their areas for operations. The sheer growth alone is an endeavor that is people-intensive. It takes a lot of forces to guard the kinds of infrastructure and so forth from attack, but 200 total combat battalions now compared with about 90 back in the summer of 2005.

Reconstruction

There are a number of examples of our reconstruction efforts which offer a microcosm of our larger efforts.

In the intellectual heart of Baghdad known as Mutanabi Street, where Iraqi booksellers and the

intellectuals tended to congregate, a reconstruction project was recently completed after the area was blown up by al-Qaeda in the spring of 2007.

A very historic bridge in the center of Baghdad, connecting the west to the east, was blown up by al-Qaeda in the spring of 2007. The Iraqis vowed to rebuild it. They did it with their construction materials, engineers, and workers, and it has recently reopened.

Another metaphor for our effort in Iraq is the electrical towers that had been blown down for as long as three years in some cases. One in particular was down in that area on the edge of the “Triangle of Death” south of Baghdad. It eventually became one that I got a report on every single morning in the morning update—it was that keen a focus that we put on it—and eventually it was rebuilt after the area was secured and the Ministry of Electricity personnel were able to go in and repair it. The whole 400-kilovolt structure is now up, and in fact they’re building a good bit of redundant structure.

There is progress on the economic front. It’s frustrating. It is never as fast as we want to see; there are enormous challenges beyond just the security challenges of operating in Iraq, but also all the structural challenges of a country transitioning from a very centralized command economy to one that allows some free enterprise and investment. There are actually quite a few investment deals, hotels, and so forth now ongoing.

Five countries have named ambassadors, and some actually have them in Baghdad. The Arab League named an ambassador after, I think, a year and a half without one. UNAMI, the U.N. Mission in Iraq, has increased its presence and activities after the horrific bombing early on [August 2003] after which they had to close their presence there. Iraq is really seen to be engaged now and not a country to be shunned, although some reservations still persist by some of the countries in the region, without question.

There has been political progress. Disagreement did not keep government officials from agreeing on different laws, some of them quite important, including Iraq de-Baathification reform, the budget that distributed the oil income equitably to all provinces and different ethno-sectarian groupings,

amnesty, provincial powers. The Sunni ministers rejoined the government after having walked out over a year ago, and there's a very good Sunni prime minister now as well. They discovered supplemental budgets, \$22 billion in a supplemental—no earmarks yet. Just yesterday, the Presidency Council approved the provincial elections law that had previously been approved by the Council of Representatives and on which they were unable to agree prior to their recess for August.

Although there has always been lots of friction and disagreement—"Iraqcracy," as we call it—there has been some political progress, and we can be very thankful to have some terrific diplomats. Ambassador Ryan Crocker has led the way to help with this process, along with others from coalition countries and the U.N. assistance mission in Iraq.

The Challenges Ahead

But there are numerous challenges out there, and I would like to highlight them. As I mentioned, we hired some 100,000 Sons of Iraq—about 80,000 of those were Sunnis and 20,000 Shia—and integrated them into Iraqi security force institutions, jobs, retraining programs, education. About 54,000 of them were just taken control of by the government in the Baghdad security districts. Their payday comes due on November 1, and we will see how that works out.

It has been difficult, and I think you have to understand, if you walked a mile in their shoes, why it's difficult. These are people that were shooting at them, shooting at us; they have our blood on their hands in some cases, but this is how you end these kinds of conflicts. There was no alternative but reconciliation and, in our view, to hire some of them as well once they raised their hand and said they wanted to keep their areas clear of al-Qaeda. Their experiences with al-Qaeda convinced them of the need to do that.

There are a lot of expectations out there on behalf of the population. They think they should be the Japan of the Middle East, and they ought to be. The blessings Iraq has are extraordinary. Not only do they have officially the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, since there's been no exploration in recent decades, they could have the second largest.

Some folks actually think, from Texas, they have the first largest. We'll see. But whatever they have, it's extraordinary. They just completed a big deal to capture flare gas that could be very significant. They're producing only about half the electricity that they need right now. It is up about 10 percent from last year, but is still not adequate.

There are still certainly ethno-sectarian tensions—Sunni–Arab, Arab–Kurd—and a variety of different challenges in minority issues. They have to deal with that with the provincial elections law. The possible return of the two major sources of violence in Iraq also poses problems. These include the Sunni extremists, al-Qaeda in Iraq and their Sunni, if you will, extremist insurgent allies and partners over the years, and the Iranian-supported Special Groups. These are elements associated with the militia that were specially called out, brought into Iraq, trained there on special and very lethal improvised explosive devices called EFPs (explosively formed projectiles) and the use of rockets, mortars, RPG-29s, and so forth.

Most of the Special Group fighters went back to Iran or to Lebanon or Syria, and much smaller groups to the latter two, following the violence of March and April when they decided again this is a fight they could not win and the people were overwhelmingly rejecting them because of what the violence was doing to their neighborhoods. We have to keep an eye on that. The Iraqi government is determined not to let them come back and resume their activities, and they have been very active in picking them up as they do see them come back. We remain concerned about it.

Displaced families are returning, as I mentioned. This is an enormous problem: 2 million people were displaced internally, 2 million more displaced out of the country. They have been returning because of the improved security situation and because they are running out of money in places like Syria and elsewhere. So far—touch wood—it has gone reasonably well with relatively few incidents, but certainly there have been some, and the potential is there for more.

We also need to extend the legal authority for U.S. forces and then for some other coalition coun-

tries; this is the strategic framework and status of forces agreement.

Conclusion

A number of challenges lie ahead for Iraq in a situation in which there is a lot of ongoing political discussion among the various parties as some of the alliances that have served them over the past year or year and a half have started to be redrawn, and so we'll see how that plays out in the weeks and months ahead.

At the end of the day, it comes back not just to the U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and civilians of the Defense Department, State Department, and other agencies, but also to our coalition partners and then very much increasingly to our Iraqi partners.

They do it for each other because of the special brotherhood of the close fight that they are part of. They do it because they believe they are serving an

important cause, working in important missions around the world as our uniformed services always have done. There is no compensation that can ever be enough for them, but I can tell you that the support of the American people, regardless of their views on Iraq and Afghanistan, is something that America has very much gotten right. I want to thank you for that, because many of you in this room have played a key role in the support for our soldiers and for their families, who have sacrificed a great deal since 2001 in particular.

I would close by saying, as I told them in a letter to them on the last day that I was in command, that I can imagine no greater privilege than having served as their commander in Iraq for that last 18-month period. Thank you very much.

—General David Petraeus is former Commander, Multi-National Force—Iraq. Since delivering this lecture, General Petraeus has assumed the command of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

General Petraeus's presentation to The Heritage Foundation included PowerPoint slides. They can be viewed at this link:

<http://www.slideshare.net/RobertBluey/gen-david-petraeus-presentation-at-heritage-presentation?type=powerpoint>