

An Interview with Raymond T. Odierno



How would you characterize the threat to Iraq today? Does the potential for renewed violence or political divisions pose the greatest threat to Iraq succeeding as a viable state?

RO: With our Iraqi and coalition partners, we have made good progress in stabilizing Iraq's security situation, specifically over the last 3 years. Today, security incidents are down to levels last seen in 2003—and we continue to see slow progress toward normalcy across Iraq. From

a purely security perspective, there are three primary threats from groups still seeking to destabilize Iraq, the most dangerous being al Qaeda in Iraq [AQI]. While AQI started as a broad-based insurgency capable of sustaining significant operations across Iraq, our consistent pressure has degraded AQI, and they have had to morph into a covert terrorist organization capable of conducting isolated high-profile attacks. The Iraqi people have rejected al Qaeda, and the organization is no longer able to control territory. However, AQI remains focused on delegitimizing the government of Iraq, disrupting the national election process and subsequent government formation, and ultimately causing the Iraqi state to collapse. AQI remains a strategic threat. In addition to AQI, there remain Sunni Ba'athist insurgents whose ultimate goal is regime change and a reinstatement of a Ba'athist regime. Shia extremists and Iranian surrogates also continue their lethal and nonlethal efforts to influence the development of the Iraqi state.

However, today, the greatest threats to a stable, sovereign, and self-reliant Iraq are political—underlying, unresolved sources of potential conflict that I call “drivers of instability.” Iraqis have yet to gain consensus on the nature of the Iraqi state—an Islamist-based or secular-democratic government, the balance of power between the central and provincial governments, the distribution of wealth, and the resolution of disputed internal boundaries are some of the key

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issues they face. They are still dealing with lingering ethnosectarian histories and Arab-Kurd tensions. These are issues that will take time to resolve, and we are seeing incremental progress as the Iraqis learn how to solve these issues through dialogue and the political process. Groups such as al Qaeda in Iraq and other external actors seek to exploit these political fissures and impede Iraq's continuing progress.

In December 2009, the Iraqis passed an election law stipulating that, for the first time, Iraqis will have the opportunity to vote for individual candidates as well as political parties. The law itself took some time to ratify, but the important aspect was that throughout the political process, all parties worked to build consensus and draft an acceptable law. These are positive indicators of their continued commitment to

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the democratic process and their ability to independently conduct credible and legitimate elections in March 2010 and the subsequent seating of a new, representative government.

U.S. Forces-Iraq remains focused on assisting Iraq in building strategic political, economic, and security depth in order to provide a stable and secure environment. Our presence provides the psychological and physical support to allow the Iraqis the space required to continue dialogue and discussions, and ultimately reach political solutions to key issues. Overall, assisting Iraq in developing into a viable state will require strategic patience and continuous engagement well beyond 2011.

How will violence levels affect the withdrawal timeline for the remainder of 2010? Will all troops leave before the 2011 deadline?

RO: In accordance with our bilateral Security Agreement, implemented at the beginning of last year, we will withdraw U.S. forces by December 31, 2011. We are abiding by the Security Agreement, and will continue to do so. Additionally, per the President's guidance outlined in February 2009, we will end combat operations as of August 31, 2010, and transition to a training and advisory role supporting civil and military capacity-building, while continuing to conduct targeted counterterrorism missions within the Iraqi rule of law through the end of 2011.

We are currently executing this guidance, and I have confidence in our way ahead. Every indicator is going in the right direction. Security incidents are at all-time lows in Iraq: attacks, military and Iraqi civilian deaths, as well as ethnosectarian incidents, have all decreased. I want to point out that these positive trends have continued since we implemented the Security Agreement in January 2009 and began operating by, with, and through the Iraqi Security Forces [ISF] within the Iraqi rule of law—and again, after U.S. combat forces departed Iraqi cities on June 30, placing full responsibility for security with the Iraqis.

What many people do not realize is that over the past 1½ years—since the end of the surge—we have been drawing down. During the height of the surge in September 2007, we had approximately 175,000 U.S. and coalition troops on the ground in Iraq. Today, we have just less than 100,000. We have withdrawn over 75,000 troops and their equipment while continuing to accomplish our mission. Basically, we

have systematically thinned the lines in Iraq, deliberately and carefully turning over responsibilities to the Iraqi Security Forces with U.S. forces still assisting, training, and advising. Over time, as local security conditions improved, we have adjusted our footprint. Where we once had a brigade, we now have a battalion; where we once had a battalion, we now have a company. In fact, the Iraqis have responsibility for security throughout the country now, with our support to ensure success. We have been able to do this because of our solid partnerships, which continue to enhance the operational readiness and capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces.

Another important factor in reducing the violence has been the efforts of our civilian partners. Across Iraq, I have asked all commanders—working with Department of State Provincial Reconstruction Team [PRT] leaders—to understand the root causes of instability in their areas of responsibility and work with local Iraqi leaders to mitigate them. In many areas, our primary efforts are focused on assisting PRTs to help provincial governments provide essential services and economic opportunities for their citizens. We understand that a comprehensive approach is necessary to improve and sustain improved security over the long term.

U.S. forces have evolved from leading security efforts to partnering with and enabling Iraqi forces to overwatching independent Iraqi operations. We remain focused on sustaining the current security environment and enabling an increasingly capable Iraqi Security Forces to provide stability and security for their own people.

With the drawdown of U.S. forces, can civilian capabilities such as PRTs operate safely? Are more civilian capabilities needed as U.S. forces leave? What will be the

impact of reducing the number of PRTs from 23 to 5?

RO: Over the next 2 years, the number of PRTs will reduce slowly as our military reduces its presence. By August 2010, we will have approximately 50,000 U.S. troops essentially supporting 16 PRTs. By the end of 2011, the Department of State will reduce PRTs to five located in areas strategically important to the future stability of Iraq. This is another step in

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our evolving presence in Iraq—and an example of how we have continuously adapted to the strategic and operational requirements of this complex environment. Our hard-fought security gains have set the stage to transition from a focus on establishing security to a focus on developing Iraqi institutional capacities that will sustain the long-term stability of Iraq. Our efforts in Iraq fully embody a whole-of-government approach with a comprehensive interagency strategy focused on accomplishing our overarching goal as defined by President Obama in February 2009: a long-term and enduring strategic partnership between the United States and a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region.

At the end of last year, we—U.S. Forces—Iraq and U.S. Embassy Baghdad—published

our Joint Campaign Plan [JCP] that outlines strategic priorities, integrated goals along four lines of operation (political, economic/energy, rule of law, and security), and risks. The JCP synchronizes our civilian and military elements of the U.S. Government. It also importantly details the transition of enduring functions, once military-led, to civilian entities including the U.S. Embassy, other international and nongovernmental organizations, as well as the government of Iraq. As Iraq continues to build its governmental foundations, economic development and foreign investment become increasingly important, broadening the range and types of required civilian assistance—formal and informal—to the nation of Iraq.

Today, our military forces support the 23 Department of State–led PRTs. Staffed by over 500 personnel from agencies and departments including the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], State, Defense, Justice, and Agriculture, PRTs are focused on supporting Iraqi civil development. While providing security, the U.S. military also supports PRTs with military personnel including Civil Affairs and, as required, additional uniformed personnel with required expertise in fields such as engineering and rule of law.

Across Iraq, provincial capacity has matured, although this maturation varies depending on local conditions. Many areas do not require the same level of support as in the past. As a result, we are able to adjust our operational footprint and reduce the number of PRTs over time. However, the U.S. Embassy, in conjunction with U.S. Forces–Iraq, continuously reevaluates and prioritizes efforts and application of resources according to the ever-changing strategic and operational environment.

As we draw down and establish our transition force by September 1, 2010, we will

ensure our ability to continue to support civil capacity and ISF capacity-building. An important element of this transition is the establishment of Advisory and Assistance Brigades [AABs], which are structurally designed to coordinate and achieve unity of effort across the civil and security spheres to nurture the growth and capacities of Iraqi civil and military institutions while simultaneously providing force protection. By August, we will have AABs strategically located across Iraq whose *primary mission* will be to support PRTs, the United Nations, and other nongovernmental organizations, as well as to train and advise Iraqi Security Forces.

From what you have seen in Iraq, are military and civilian advising efforts meeting U.S. objectives, politically and operationally?

RO: Yes, given the courage, compassion, and commitment of our Servicemembers and civilians who have served—and continue to serve—in Iraq, I believe we are on a path to achieve our national goals. As I mentioned, the President clearly outlined our goals of a stable, sovereign, and self-reliant Iraq with just, representative, and accountable government—and an enduring partnership with an Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region. At the end of 2008, the United States and Iraq signed two historic bilateral agreements that reflect our maturing relationship and enhanced cooperation between our two nations.

Fully recognizing Iraqi sovereignty, the Security Agreement and Strategic Framework Agreement [SFA] guide our current operations and our future strategic partnership. As we implemented these agreements, we changed our mindset as well as how we operated and interacted with our Iraqi partners who increasingly

began leading their own civil and security efforts. Last year, Iraq marked a number of additional significant milestones including the successful provincial elections in January and the ISF assumption of security responsibility in urban areas in June.

For nearly 15 months now, we have conducted all military operations in Iraq with complete transparency, full coordination, and open communication with the Iraqis—all within the Iraqi rule of law. We have evolved from leading security efforts to partnering and advising. We also continue to mentor Iraqis at the national and ministerial level, with uniformed and civilian personnel embedded in Iraqi ministries, particularly key ministries such as oil, finance, electricity, in addition to the security ministries. As Iraqi civil capacity has increased, our civilian partners have also evolved to advising and mentoring. We have a ways to go, but the Iraqis continue to make progress.

The next step will be the transition from now through 2011 as we reduce our military presence. How we transition and draw down will be critical to enhancing the government of Iraq's political, diplomatic, economic, and security depth. The SFA, which defines our long-term government-to-government partnership, will be the foundation for our strategic partnership and the continued growth of Iraqi civil capacity.

What cultural changes are needed among military and civilian agencies to be more effective in joint operations (that is, State does not “do” irregular warfare, Defense does not “do” nationbuilding, and so forth)?

RO: In the future, none of our operations can or will be conducted without full inter-agency partnership. The complexity of the

environment requires a combined governmental approach. From a military perspective, we must understand the total environment and not simply focus on available military capabilities. It's about understanding how to best leverage our interagency capabilities. After assessing the operational environment, we must then thoroughly assess which interagency partner is best suited to address and solve particular problems. It's about learning how to achieve unity of effort without always having unity of command over all of the elements operating within an area. The overall level of

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security and stability will be a key factor in determining the amount of military involvement in nationbuilding and civil capacity-building. In Iraq, we have learned this through our embedded PRTs at the brigade level and the development of our Joint Campaign Plan at the U.S. Embassy and Force level.

Today's complexity requires much more of our leaders. We must be able to assess, understand, and adapt. We must have the ability to think through complex, multidimensional problems, taking into account the diplomatic, economic, military, political, and cultural implications of every action. As we've learned, battlefield victories alone do not equal strategic success, and effective solutions require both a thorough understanding of the underlying cultural, political, tribal, and socioeconomic situation and a unity of effort. These, plus mindset and cultural changes, are well under way today.

What institutional changes (in Washington and in the field) are needed to enable an improved whole-of-government response to complex operations in the future?

RO: Future success in Iraq relies on our whole-of-government involvement in building Iraq's capacity. It is important to understand that

as we move forward, it is imperative that other U.S. agencies have the appropriate funding and training to allow them to support expeditionary operations and achieve unity of effort in complex environments

U.S. engagement after 2011 is as important as our continued engagements, including military presence, prior to 2011. The Strategic Framework Agreement is about establishing long-term, non-military partnerships across the spectrum of our government beyond 2011. Through the SFA, we will help Iraq continue to build strategic depth in all their institutions—with an emphasis on economic, diplomatic, and security institutions—to develop into a stable state.

We have adapted and continue to adapt to ever-changing circumstances in Iraq. A perfect example is the Army's AABs, designed and structured to achieve a unity of effort as we transition to a primary focus on civil capacity-building. Given today's complexity, our collective challenge is to take what we have developed here and codify it in our educational institutions, doctrine, and leader development across our different institutions. I believe developing adaptive, creative, and fundamentally sound leaders is our cornerstone. Our institutions continue to adjust, incorporating current

lessons learned. For example, we continue to emphasize and encourage interagency interaction at our senior Service colleges—at a greater degree than in the past. The real question is not whether our educational institutions have adjusted, but whether they will continue to adjust. I have complete confidence that they will, but it is up to us as senior leaders to ensure this happens.

Institutionally, the Department of Defense has funding and training programs in place with resources dedicated to support an expeditionary military, run the organization, and continue the professional development of Servicemembers and Defense Department civilians. It is critical to fund all of these, including programs designed to prepare our leaders for future complex operations. In the military, we have built the capacity—scope, depth, and breadth—into our system to accomplish this, even during wartime.

As we move forward, it is imperative that other U.S. agencies have the appropriate funding and training to allow them to support expeditionary operations and achieve unity of effort in complex environments. This will require congressional recognition. We are placing additional burdens on the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Treasury, for example, in addition to other agencies because they have the expertise needed to address issues in complex operations such as Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. However, other departments are not funded to be expeditionary. We are asking them to send people to Iraq and Afghanistan, yet we have not increased their budget allowing them to hire more people so that they can continue with their institutional missions and these new requirements. One specific example is police training. Our Joint Campaign Plan outlines how the military will turn this over to the State Department—which runs foreign police training programs all over the world.

However, they require funding and the capacity to continue this program beyond 2011—when U.S. forces depart—to develop a fully professionalized Iraqi police force.

It has been argued that the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq [SOI] helped turn the tide in Iraq. Was U.S. support for the Sons of Iraq critical? How will a reduced U.S. presence in Iraq impact these groups?

RO: In 2006, the Awakening movement began to take hold in Anbar Province as tribally focused Sunnis began to reject AQI and became willing to stand up against extremists. However, they could not do this alone. With the surge, we increased our military presence allowing us to secure—and enhance the confidence of—the Sunni population and therefore set the conditions for the movement to solidify. Building on the success in Anbar, and because of our increased troop numbers across Iraq, we were then able to expand the awakening to other Sunni areas. From a tactical level reconciliation with Sunni insurgents operating in a predominantly Sunni area, we carefully shepherded this into a national, Iraqi-led reconciliation program. Today, the Iraqi government administers the SOI program—with our oversight—building overall confidence toward achieving future reconciliation of all groups as Iraq moves forward.

Last summer, the Iraqis began transitioning SOI into the Iraqi Security Forces and other nonsecurity ministries. However, as they began preparing for national elections, national and provincial leaders decided—with the concurrence of all parties—to slow down transitions in key areas, realizing that the SOI were instrumental to their overall security architecture. As

the Iraq government developed its 2010 federal budget, it struggled with the effects of fluctuating oil prices, but the first program it fully funded was the SOI program. This was an Iraqi-led prioritization, which says a lot about the commitment to moving forward. There are still some lingering tensions in various areas, but U.S. forces will remain engaged for nearly 2 more years, and we will continue to play the role of honest brokers and facilitate continued confidence-building measures leading to long-term national unity.

What are two of your key lessons learned from Iraq?

RO: First, we have learned that we must do a better job of fully understanding the environment in which we jointly operate. In 2003, nearly all of our military leaders had just a superficial understanding of the tribal, political, cultural, and ethnosectarian dynamics within Iraq itself and Islam as a whole. Today, military leaders at all levels work to understand the intricacies of the operational and strategic environment. With their civilian counterparts, they look for root causes of violence—the drivers of instability—and think through the

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second- and third-order effects. Taking into account the political, economic, cultural, historical, social, and security factors shaping the environment enables us to identify mitigating actions. Having seen the changing dynamics

over the past 6 years reinforces that the U.S. military is an incredible learning organization capable of boundless ingenuity and adaptation.

Second, having spent a significant amount of time as the Corps and Force commander, I have realized it is not about unity of command, but unity of effort of all capabilities and capacities on the ground. In Iraq today, we have the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, U.S. agencies and departments, U.S. military, and the government of Iraq. We must organize, plan, and synchronize all organizational efforts and assets to achieve our common goals and objectives. Today, we have junior leaders—battalion commanders and even captains on a smaller scale—who understand this imperative. It goes back to understanding what everyone brings to the table and figuring out how we can employ all of these talents to achieving our goals of providing stability in Iraq. As the military continues to draw down, unity of effort will be a tenet guiding our efforts.

Has Iraq become the “forgotten war”?

RO: In the short term, clearly national attention was diverted from Iraq as the administration focused on developing our strategy for Afghanistan. And, as we increase our military and governmental investment in Afghanistan, it will continue to garner significant attention. However, I do not believe Iraq has become the “forgotten war.” It has seen less attention for good reasons: our civil and military successes have allowed us to reduce our military presence as Iraq develops the capacities and competencies required as a stable, sovereign, and self-reliant state. Ultimately, the U.S. chain of command understands the long-term, strategic importance of Iraq, a country that remains vital to stability in the Middle

East having always played a significant role in regional security dynamics. While our combat mission will end in about 5 months, the U.S. Government remains committed to our Iraqi partner and our long-term partnership. Focusing primarily on stability operations, U.S. forces will continue to provide support to civil capacity-building missions with our interagency partners and the United Nations while conducting targeted counterterrorism operations by, with, and through the Iraqi Security Forces.

Iraq is a country rich in history with a culture steeped in tradition, yet it is also a state and a society under construction, struggling to define its identity and its place in the world after decades of oppression and violence. Our military presence through 2011 provides psychological and physical support to the Iraqi people, the government of Iraq, and the Iraqi Security Forces. The level and nature of U.S. engagement with the Iraqis will continue to change as we draw down our military forces and as the Iraqis build their own competencies. Through the Strategic Framework Agreement, the United States has a mechanism for supporting Iraq in developing its institutional and human capacity, essentially its strategic depth. Iraq has made steady progress but has a long way to go. Success will be defined by our ability to support Iraq’s developing institutional capacity—from governance to economics—that will sustain its long-term stability. We must have strategic patience.

We must also resource those agencies that will continue to have a presence and effect positive change in Iraq. Having demonstrated tremendous resiliency, I believe the Iraqis are determined to make their country different from what it once was. And the United States is committed to its enduring relationship with Iraq long after military forces have departed. **PRISM**