

**August Trip to Iraq**  
**Dr. Mary Habeck, SAIS**

- I was in Iraq August 13-26 at the invitation of LTG John Vines, commanding general MNC-I, to help the Corps staff understand jihadist ideology.
- I am a military historian, with eleven years experience teaching in the history department at Yale. After July 1 I became an associate professor at SAIS. I have published four books, the latest on jihadist ideology.
- I can only comment on the military's part in the war; I did not meet with any Iraqi political leaders or any Coalition officials working specifically on political issues.

**Meetings**

- GEN George Casey, commanding general MNF-I
- LTG John Vines, commanding general MNC-I
- LTG 'Abd al-Qadir Jassim, Iraqi Ground Forces commander
- MG Rick Lynch, Deputy Chief of Staff MNF-I
- MG Richard Zahner, C-2 MNF-I
- BG Peter Vangiel, Effects MNC-I
- MG Angelo Pacifici, Deputy Commander MNC-I
- MG Jeong, commanding general MND-NE
- Many members of the MNC-I staff, including the C-2, C-3, C-9, and IO Effects staffs
- Ambassador Daniel Speckhard, Director IRMO

**Observations**

- The Corps is winning its part of the war.
- The Corps knows that the center of gravity for this war is the political process, i.e. the creation of an independent, free and democratic Iraq through the constitutional referendum, the December elections, and the establishment of an independent military that can protect the new state.
  - The Corps has prioritized protecting the political process and military and predicated reconstruction efforts on their significance for the political process.
- The Corps is committed to winning the military piece of the war through the counterinsurgency tactics successfully used by Gen. Creighton Abrams; that is, they are committed to "clear and hold," not attrition warfare.
  - The problem is that there are not enough US and Coalition forces on the ground in Iraq to clear and hold the entire country.

- But this is a necessary condition. The US could commit another 200,000 troops to Iraq and pacify the country, but this would destroy a significant part of the political process: the creation of an independent Iraqi military that can protect its own state.
  - Iraqi ownership of the war must begin now, not as US and Coalition forces are leaving the country.
  - *Contra* Andrew Krepinevich, the Corps and Force have committed serious resources to creating a strong Iraqi army and police force and to integrating them into Coalition military efforts.
    - The Military Transition Teams (MiTT) are just one expression of this seriousness.
    - When I arrived in Iraq on 14 August, each day saw 1-2 actions (patrols, raids) by Iraq Security Forces (ISF) with US units. By the time I left on 26 August, ISF was participating in a minimum of 5-6 actions every day.
    - The active participation of ISF in the battle at Tall 'Afar was a natural result of this growing partnership.
    - Iraqi units will now be used to hold Tall 'Afar and eventually to clear and hold other cities as well.
    - The Corps has set up an Iraqi Ground Forces HQ within Camp Victory, created an Iraqi Joint Operations Center, and held command post exercises with the Iraqi high command; in other words, there is now an Iraqi military operational leadership to take over their part of the war.
    - There are enough resources in country and in place to create a viable, strong and independent Iraqi military—the only necessity is time to train and equip the ISF for the task ahead.
- The Corps has developed a modification of clear and hold to use until ISF is strong enough to take over the war effort.
  - They have been “clearing and holding” tribes, sub-tribes and clans rather than terrain or cities.
  - This allows them to control cities without large numbers of Americans.

- The clearest example of this strategy can be seen in Ramadi, Samara, Fallujah and other central Sunni cities that were once hotbeds of insurgent activity.
- Ramadi is the perfect example of how this strategy works.
  - The Corps has won over three of the four sheikhs who control the city. The result has been a huge reduction in attacks in the area.
  - The attacks that do occur are due entirely to the hold-out fourth sheikh. He is not actively participating in the fighting, but is allowing al-Qa'ida forces to use his territory as a safe-haven and, in return, al-Qa'ida carries out attacks away from his territory.
  - The Corps is now working to convince the hold-out sheikh—through carrots and sticks—to stop granting al-Qa'ida safe-haven. Once this happens, Ramadi will be pacified.

○ The result of the Corps' commitment to the political process is that, of the original four insurgencies (the Shi'a, Saddamists, Sunni rejectionists and al-Qa'ida), three have been mostly neutralized.

- The Shi'a and Saddamists are basically neutralized (although a few major Ba'thist figures remain potent enemies), the first through the promise of political power and the second through attrition.
- The so-called Sunni rejectionists have also been mostly neutralized—primarily by the promise of political power through the coming elections.
- The remaining insurgency, and the only one still at full-strength, is the foreign fighters (the jihadis loyal to Zarqawi and through him al-Qa'ida).
  - Defeating this insurgency is much more difficult and may be a longer-term proposition than the other three, since it folds into the larger global war on jihadism.
  - However, their primary recruiting tool is the American presence in Iraq and the creation of an independent Iraq should disarm them. Of course this could potentially push their recruits back to their home countries, where they may create serious problems for their own governments and even for our own homeland security.
- I should note that according to their own statements, the jihadis and the Sunni rejectionists have made the Shi'a, not the Americans, their primary target. This helps to explain why there are comparatively fewer attacks on US personnel.

- The Corps and the Force know that this is an ideological struggle, and both have set up serious mechanisms for dealing with this part of the war.
  - It is too early to say if these have been successful, but the fact that the Corps and Force have committed serious resources to winning “hearts and minds” is significant.
  - Of course the most important part of the struggle for hearts and minds remains the political process. See e.g. the seismic shift within Iraq and the region after the January elections.
- One brief comment on the attritional side of the war: I believe that the Corps has been successful in seriously attriting the “middle management” of the insurgencies.
  - This is not a criticism. By getting rid of the “semi-senior” leadership, the Corps has ensured that the insurgencies are not learning from their combat experiences.
  - This can be seen most clearly in the inability of the insurgencies to improve the effectiveness of their attacks. Only about 10-12% of all attacks are effective, a rate that has not changed over the past eight months.

### **Suggestions For Improving US Performance in Iraq**

- Despite the favorable assessment given above, there are three areas that create concern.
  - First, there is not enough institutionalization of the lessons that the military is learning from the experience in Iraq.
    - There is a database of best practices and lessons learned available for forces new to Iraq and GEN Casey is considering the creation of an in-country training base to provide new troops with counter-insurgency training specific to the Iraq war.
    - The key question is: has there been provision made to change basic training in the US, alter officer training courses, or amend ROTC to reflect the lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq (or Bosnia, for that matter)?
    - If not, the result will be the same as it has been for every counter-insurgency that the US has fought: only those officers and men who participated directly in the fighting will learn anything, while the next generations of the military will need to learn the same lessons again at a high price in national blood and treasure while courting defeat.
  - Second, there is not enough cooperation between the Corps and State in Iraq.

- I was at the Corps two weeks and never met anyone from State or the Embassy. This is despite the fact that many of the tasks that the Corps has taken on (such as reconstruction on the ground, negotiations with local leaders (sheikhs and imams in particular), and the entire ideological struggle) could benefit from State support.
- None of the civilians at the Embassy that I spoke with during a two-day conference (except one political appointee and the USAID representatives) had been outside the Green Zone. The major reason for this is security concerns and the cost of using contractors to provide the extra security required by State. Of course, this was a rather small sample of Embassy personnel and may not be typical.
- It was apparent that one reason for the conference was to acquaint the new director of IRMO (Ambassador Daniel Speckhard) with reconstruction efforts by the Corps and troops on the ground. No one at the Embassy had any idea what the Corps had been doing.
- Third, there was not enough cultural preparation for Corps staff before they came to Iraq.
  - This was not for lack of trying: LTG Vines had several experts speak to his staff before deployment, had at least one of the experts develop a reading list to prepare the staff for Iraqi and Arab culture, and BG Vangjel had an extra week-long seminar for his IO staff.
  - The problem is, rather, one of conceptualization of the problem before deployment, and is rooted in our understanding of the war on jihadism.
    - The US military must recognize the relationship of the jihadis to the religion of Islam.
    - Training in Islamist and jihadist thought and practice is key for ordinary officers and men on the ground, and especially for the IO staffs.
- I can also second retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey's comment that Corps public relations are a disaster, although I place the blame squarely on the belief by the American presses that only death and destruction deserve front-page coverage.

### **Conclusions**

- We are winning the war in Iraq.
  - Of course, we can still lose if any number of things go badly:

- The American people might talk themselves into giving up;
  - The US might withdraw too quickly, leaving a weak and unstable Iraq behind;
  - Or a civil war might break out between the rival Badr Corps and Mahdi Militia or between the Shi'a and Sunnis.
- These imponderables should blind us neither to the good progress made so far, nor to the positive trajectory that the war is taking.
- My positive assessment of progress in the war is largely predicated on the work done by GEN Casey and LTG Vines. The importance of the skill, intelligence and personality of these two men for winning this war cannot be overstated. LTG Vines in particular just gets it.
  - He explicitly links military, political and cultural understandings of the war. Kinetic operations are never given the priority unless they will have a positive political effect.
  - He understands the complexity of the sectarian, tribal and ethnic issues involved in this war and is actively working to win over Iraqis based on this knowledge.