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# An Interview with **Raymond T. Odierno**



U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

GEN Odierno greets Defense Secretary Gates upon his arrival in Iraq

**JFQ:** *How important was the role of the Awakening/Sons of Iraq in the success of the surge? How do the Sons of Iraq fit into a united, multiethnic Iraq capable of standing on its own two feet?*

**General Odierno:** In 2006, the tactical-level reconciliation with former Sunni insurgents, known as the Awakening, made a huge difference in Anbar Province. Al Qaeda had clearly overplayed its hand with tribally focused Sunnis, creating a seam that our leaders could exploit. Seizing that opportunity, they also assumed risk by building cooperative relationships with Sunni leaders—many of whom had previously conducted attacks against U.S. forces—to reduce the violence. And it worked; it improved security. Later, the Sons of Iraq program was one of the multiple, simultaneous approaches that contributed to the overall success of the surge.

At the operational level, we set the right and left limits of the program and allowed tactical commanders across the battlespace to nurture local reconciliation. So while the Awakening movement began as a local rejection of al Qaeda, we were able to carefully shepherd this into a national, Iraqi-led reconciliation program. Today, the government of Iraq administers the Sons of Iraq program—with our oversight. It is part of their overall security architecture, and this past summer they began transitioning program members into other ministries. Granted, it took the Iraqi government some time to embrace this program, but it is now integral to the country's future. In fact, earlier this year as the government struggled with the effects of the downturn in oil prices on their national budget, the first program that the government fully funded and supported was the Sons of Iraq program. That says a lot.

**JFQ:** *On June 30, 2009, U.S. combat forces departed Iraqi cities. What are our forces doing now? What do you think this will do for our short-term and long-term progress in Iraq?*

**General Odierno:** On June 30, we turned over security responsibilities in the cities to the Iraqi Security Forces [ISF]—as outlined in our bilateral security agreement

that governs our military presence in Iraq through 2011. It was the right thing to do, and it happened at the right time. It has provided the ISF a psychological lift and has made clear our intent to abide by the agreement. Three years ago, we tried transitioning security responsibilities when the security situation was significantly worse, and the ISF simply were not ready. Since then, we have had an 80 percent reduction in security incidents, and through coalition partnership, training, mentoring, and advising, we have seen steady progress in ISF capabilities.



**GEN Raymond T. Odierno, USA, Commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq**

Although our combat forces have moved out of the cities, we still have small numbers of troops in the cities to train, advise, enable, and coordinate support for ISF operations. Outside the cities, our forces continue to conduct full-spectrum operations—by, with, and through the ISF. So regarding immediate security concerns, I think the June 30 milestone actually propelled us toward a more effective security posture. The ISF are fully responsible for the cities; this allows U.S. forces to reposition to the belts around the cities and on the borders. Operating in the belts allows us to disrupt logistics, training, and freedom of movement for insurgent elements, and our increased emphasis on the border will

impact the flow of illegal weapons, persons, and materiel. This is another step in recognizing Iraq's sovereignty and moving toward the government taking full responsibility for security.

Regarding long-term progress in Iraq, June 30 was a seminal event for the Iraqis. The psychological effect cannot be overstated as they fully embraced security responsibilities. They feel empowered and in control—and, again, they are ready for this task. Our visible movement out of the cities confirmed America's commitment to recognizing Iraqi sovereignty. In fact, I'd say that by abiding to our bilateral agreement, even in the tough areas such as Mosul, we took the wind out of the sails of many extremist and insurgent groups who have recruited based on false propaganda that America will not live up to its commitments. Overall, we assumed some tactical risk for strategic gains, and so far it is working out fairly well. I believe the calculated risks are worth the strategic gains of having a long-term, stable partner in the region.

**JFQ:** *How would you characterize the threat in Iraq today?*

**General Odierno:** The greatest threats to a stable, sovereign, and self-reliant Iraq are political drivers of instability. With security incidents down to levels last seen in 2003, we have helped set the conditions for the Iraqi political process to move forward. Iraqis are learning how to build alliances, generate consensus, and solve issues through dialogue and compromise. However, despite the significant progress, many underlying sources of conflict across Iraqi civil and political society have not yet been resolved—many issues take time. Iraq is a nascent democracy emerging from over 30 years of authoritarian rule based on ethno-sectarian privilege. Iraqis are still dealing with lingering ethno-sectarian histories, Arab-Kurd tensions, and violent extremist groups such as al Qaeda and other external actors who seek to exploit any fissures. The Iraqis are still determining the nature of their federal state and the balance of power between the central and provincial governments.

**General Raymond T. Odierno, USA, is Commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq.**

**Colonel David H. Gurney, USMC (Ret.), and Dr. Jeffrey D. Smotherman of Joint Force Quarterly interviewed General Odierno at his headquarters, Camp Victory, in Baghdad, Iraq.**



Until the Iraqis solve key issues such as the distribution of wealth and disputed internal boundaries, the government will remain vulnerable. We will continue to support the government and ISF in providing a stable and secure environment, allowing them space to develop political solutions. Across Iraq, I have asked all commanders—with their 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. With security as it is, in many cases our primary efforts are focused on assisting PRTs to help provincial governments provide essential services and economic opportunities for their citizens.

Having said this, I remain concerned that security is improving, but not yet enduring. Our sustained, combined pressure has degraded al Qaeda, but it is still capable of conducting isolated high-profile attacks—

**JFQ:** *You've talked about reconciliation and ISF development. Surveying the last six years in Iraq, what have been the three most significant developments affecting our mission and goals for Iraq?*

**General Odierno:** The self-perpetuating cycle of ethno-sectarian violence was one of the most significant developments. Frankly, we were slow to recognize the budding insurgency and were unable to deal effectively with many of the “accelerants” fueling spiraling reprisal attacks. When I returned to Iraq in 2006, General [George] Casey—the Multi-National Force–Iraq commander at the time—challenged me to find a new approach to reduce the violence. We knew we had to break the cycle of intimidation, coercion, and extortion—and we had to protect and regain the confidence of the Iraqi people. We implemented the “surge,” which was much more than simply a surge of

The third most significant development is undoubtedly the signing of two historic bilateral agreements with the government of Iraq in December 2008. The security agreement now governs our military presence and cooperation through 2011. Recognizing Iraqi sovereignty, it establishes a new operating environment of complete transparency within the Iraqi rule of law. This has paid huge dividends for our partnership with the ISF, their continuing development, and for overall security. The ISF are increasingly assuming more and more responsibilities—including security in urban areas. Essentially, we are shifting away from security-centric operations to stability operations and a long-term bilateral relationship guided by the Strategic Framework Agreement. Most Iraqis are also shifting their attention to the Strategic Framework Agreement and the roadmap for our enduring strategic partnership. This clearly demonstrates our maturing relationship with Iraq.

GEN Odierno speaks with local leader of citizens group that provides security around city of Hawr Rajab



U.S. Army (Curt Casbour)

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**JFQ:** *You mentioned shifting from security-centric operations to stability operations. With about 130,000 troops in Iraq today—the vast majority located outside of cities—how does support to the ISF work through the prism of counterinsurgency [COIN] doctrine? What about support to the civilian interagency efforts? Have there been any lessons learned?*

**General Odierno:** COIN involves a combination of offense, defense, and stability operations. Across Iraq, the emphasis on each may be different, depending on the established security conditions. I would actually say that across Iraq we are transitioning from COIN-focused operations to stability operations—and I consider this an extremely positive sign of our continued progress in Iraq. I mentioned earlier that—with the ISF responsible for security in the cities—U.S. forces are able to focus on the

continuing its tactics of killing innocent civilians in order to try and prevent Iraq from moving forward peacefully. There are also still Sunni-based insurgent groups and Shi'a militant groups conducting operations in Iraq, but we are beginning to see more and more of these groups interested in moving forward politically. Therefore, the government is experiencing some success reconciling with some of these groups and bringing them into the political process.

forces—it was a surge of new ideas and integrated approaches. I would say this change in mindset is the second most significant development. Our change of strategy and tactics focused on protecting the population and exploiting the positives of the Awakening movement, and applying constant pressure on extremist and insurgent networks to neutralize their influence and try to bring some of them into reconciliation talks with the government of Iraq.

belts surrounding the cities to eliminate extremist support zones and safe havens, as well as on the border regions to stop the flow of lethal aid. In all these operations, we operate by, with, and through our Iraqi partners in completely transparent operations. In many cases, the Iraqis are leading successful operations with our support—and subsequently gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people—a main objective for COIN operations.

Given the security gains to date in many areas, our Brigade Combat Teams [BCTs] are actually taking a supporting role, enabling both the ISF and our partnered State Department PRTs, which have proven absolutely essential in Iraq's development. One of our earlier challenges in Iraq was unity of effort through unified action. We have worked very hard to come together—the U.S. Embassy Baghdad, Multi-National Force–Iraq, the United Nations, and nongovernmental organizations. Together, we developed a Joint Campaign Plan [JCP] signed by the Ambassador and me. This is our base for synchronizing, coordinating, and integrating our activities—working toward our common goals of a stable, sovereign, self-reliant Iraq with a just, representative, and accountable government that contributes to the peace and security of the region. We established a process to regularly assess and update the JCP.

We have developed a scheme focused around Advisory and Assistance Brigades [AABs] that will ultimately replace our BCTs. Built around BCTs, AABs will be trained and provided enablers that focus them on stability operations and support to our interagency partners. The first AAB deployed was the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne Division, in September 2009, and it is a converted BCT organized to advise and train the ISF and support civil capacity-building. On the ground today, 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division—while not structured as an AAB—has successfully implemented this concept across portions of southern Iraq for many months.

What also helped us is the emphasis on developing strong interpersonal relationships with our counterparts—from my relationship with the Ambassador down to the relationships between those deployed across Iraq. We have a generation of young leaders who have grown up thinking through not only joint, but also interagency, solutions—and they have

developed relationships that will pay dividends in the future. The challenge now is to take what we have developed here and codify it in our educational institutions, doctrine, and leader development across our different institutions.

**JFQ:** *You mention that security is high in the southern parts of Iraq. What about in the north? Do Arab-Kurd tensions complicate the security situation there?*

or seams. Some of the major issues fueling the Arab-Kurd tensions include the disputed internal boundaries, including the status of Kirkuk, as well as federal versus regional authorities and hydrocarbon issues. However, the United Nations Assistance Mission–Iraq is actively promoting a process that provides a forum for dialogue and political solutions. We fully support its efforts, most notably through security confidence-building measures



President Obama speaks with GEN Odierno at Camp Victory during President's first trip to Iraq

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**General Odierno:** I see Arab-Kurd tension as the greatest single driver of instability in Iraq—and it does complicate the security situation in the north to an extent. While our combined operations have degraded al Qaeda, there is still a presence in the north, and those cells work to exploit any tensions

between the ISF and the Kurdish *peshmerga* and police forces. Our goal is to establish a joint security framework that will reduce the chances of any tactical miscalculations—by either force—turning into strategic incidents. I am confident that our efforts will help bid time for the political process to move forward.



Both the Embassy and my team are very focused on this issue.

**JFQ:** *Some pundits claim that the Armed Forces do a poor job of producing strategic thinkers. Looking back on your experiences in Iraq, have you detected deficiencies in this realm, and would you suggest changes in the way joint professional military education institutions produce strategic thinkers?*

**General Odierno:** Today's complex world creates an environment that requires much more of our leaders. It is not enough to be technically and tactically proficient. We must be able to assess, understand, adapt, and yet still be decisive. We have to think through complex multidimensional problems, taking into account the diplomatic, economic, military, political, and cultural implications of every action. And we have to do all of this in an age of instantaneous global communication, an age in which the flow of information and its influence on the local and global audience is often just as important as military action in determining the outcome of operations.

This is especially true in Iraq—and success in this environment requires a certain type of strategic thinker and leader. As we've learned, battlefield victories alone do not equal strategic success, and effective solutions require a thorough understanding of the underlying cultural, political, tribal, and socioeconomic situation.

I believe that our institutions continue to adjust, which allows for the development of our adaptive, creative, and fundamentally sound leaders. The real question is not whether they 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.

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**JFQ:** *In a report recently published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies [Strategic Forum 245, Iraqi Security Forces after U.S. Troop Withdrawal: An Iraqi Perspective], Major General (Ret.) Najim Abed Al-Jabouri anticipates the prospects of the ISF after the U.S. troop withdrawal in 2011. He asserts that "supporting and strengthening the national character of the ISF is the best hope for a stable and integrated Iraq," and goes on to describe the major challenges facing the ISF. He opines that the ISF could become politicized by ethno-sectarian parties and thus might not be capable of maintaining security following a U.S. withdrawal. What are your thoughts on this assertion?*

**General Odierno:** I believe that view is dated and based largely on his observations from 2005 to 2008. It does not accurately reflect the current state of the ISF. As a task force commander just south of Mosul in November 2004, I experienced first-hand the near collapse of the just developing Iraqi police and to a lesser degree the Iraqi army. Starting nearly from scratch, coalition forces, along with brave men such as General Al-Jabouri, were left with the daunting task of rebuilding the ISF. When I left Iraq in September 2005, we had, as General Al-Jabouri describes, a semifunctional ISF challenged by corruption, sectarianism, weak rule of law, and lack of professionalism. However, through the combined efforts of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq and the government of Iraq, we have made tremendous progress in addressing these challenges through training programs, professional development courses, and partnerships.

Iraq's increasingly professionalized military depends on both the trust of the people and a fully functioning judiciary system. Establishing rule of law is fundamental to Iraq's long-term success. The transition to a confessions-based to an evidentiary-based judicial system is an ongoing process that requires hard work throughout—from the point of capture to the courts. We continue to develop training programs with the ISF and judicial officials designed to teach them the use of advanced forensic techniques, such



GEN Odierno briefs press on security operations in Iraq as foreign allied troop levels decrease and Iraqi forces assume greater responsibility



GEN Odierno talks to Iraqi army officer

as biometrics, and to reduce the potential for corruption.

The reduced corruption, decreased sectarianism, improved professionalism, and adherence to the rule of law have all contributed to recent ISF successes in providing security for the Iraqi people and are reflected in the increasing public confidence in the ISF. According to a July 2009 Multi-National Force–Iraq poll, over 70 percent of the public believe the Iraqi army, and 60 percent believe the Iraqi police, are prepared to perform their respective duties. These confidence levels have increased over the last 4 months. Additionally, 60 percent of the Iraqi public believe the army and federal police are not influenced by sectarian interests, and only 20 percent of Iraqis believe the police are sectarian, a sharp decrease from just 1 year ago. Finally, over 65 percent of Iraqis believe the army is effective at preventing or stopping sectarian violence, and nearly 70 percent believe the police can protect their neighborhoods.

Tempering sectarianism is a key component of U.S. and Iraqi efforts to build ISF professionalism. We have made great progress in the past few years helping the ISF develop into an effective and professional force. Both the army and police are integrating professional standards of conduct into training and day-to-day operations. The army's promotion board system is an example of efforts to improve professionalism and overcome sectarianism. The board itself is composed of officers representing the demographic diversity of the entire country. It considers officers for promotion from a pool of candidates representing all of Iraq's tribes, provinces, and ethnic communities. Candidates must meet strict standards: they must have at least 3 years of service, have served in the field at their current rank, and have been recommended for command—and are then only promoted based on merit. A recent selection board for promotion to brigadier general, conducted in July 2009, was fully automated for the first

time. The Iraqi senior army officer, who is a Kurd, remarked the board was the best he has seen in the last 3 years and that it was totally impartial to religious or ethnic affiliations.

General Al-Jabouri raises important points in his article. He has identified many of the same challenges to Iraq's stability as we have in our joint campaign plan, and we have made tremendous progress in addressing them. What is emerging from our joint efforts with the Iraqi government and people are distinctly Iraqi solutions to Iraqi problems. Make no mistake—we still have work to do in overcoming the issues that General Al-Jabouri identifies. But the government of Iraq and ISF have made tremendous progress, and are coming closer every day to achieving the strategic goal of building a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq that is just, representative, and accountable, and that contributes to the peace and security of the region. **JFQ**

#### GEN Odierno briefs news media on security conditions in Baghdad



U.S. Army (Curt Cashour)