



Time for a Heavier Footprint

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General John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. Central Command and the man with overall statutory responsibility for conducting the war in Iraq, testified last week in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Before coming to Washington, Abizaid had spent several days in Iraq, consulting with the military commanders on the ground. Considering the importance of this testimony and the effort Abizaid made to prepare for it, it is unfortunate that he offered an inadequate proposal for change in response to the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

Abizaid has been in command of this war for three years. General George Casey, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Abizaid's direct subordinate, has had his command since mid-2004. Both men remember

the war in Iraq at its lowest point--when the Sunni Arab insurgency raged unchecked, insurgents controlled Falluja, Shiite troops under Moktada al-Sadr seized Najaf, and Shiites in Sadr City rose. They watched Iraqi troops flee battlefields and refuse to fight. They watched as U.S. Marines engaged in clearing Falluja were forced to desist because of political pressure from a weak Iraqi government. All of that happened in 2004.

Since then, they have seen improvements. Falluja was cleared in late 2004 and has been held. Tal Afar, cleared unsuccessfully twice before, was finally cleared and effective government established in 2005. Mosul soon followed. The Iraqi military that failed in 2004 was disbanded and replaced by Iraqi units that have subsequently fought well

in Tal Afar, Ramadi, Baghdad, and elsewhere. No major Iraqi cities are under the control of insurgents as Falluja and Tal Afar once were. The Iraqi government has supported a number of clear-and-hold efforts around the country, including in many neighborhoods in Baghdad. All these developments are important and even heartening judged against the calamitous situation we faced in 2004.

But Abizaid and Casey are now captive of their successes. They are rightly impressed by these improvements and hope that continuing the policy that brought them will lead to further successes. They see validation for their conviction that victory lies first, last, and always with the Iraqis. They also have an almost theological devotion to the "light footprint" theory that U.S. troop presence and visibility need to be minimized, and to the "dependency" theory that too many U.S. troops provide an excuse for Iraqis not to step up.

Abizaid and Casey haven't rethought these views even as they've been mugged by the reality that lack of security does more damage than a heavy footprint, and that failure is more of a threat to responsible Iraqi behavior than dependency. But, just as important, they underestimate the changes that have occurred in Iraq since the February bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra--changes that threaten to unravel the successes achieved so far. In response to the clear fact that sectarian violence is unhinging the effort to turn responsibility for security over

to the Iraqis, Abizaid simply demands an acceleration of that transition. This is a recipe for disaster.

The good news, at least, is that Abizaid and Ambassador David Satterfield, the State Department's Coordinator for Iraq, rejected outright any notion of immediate reductions in American forces in Iraq. Any such reductions, they declared, would seriously undermine the Iraqi government, spur sectarian violence, create safe-havens for al Qaeda, and lead to a humanitarian catastrophe. For similar reasons they rejected any idea of partitioning Iraq, which would lead to unacceptable violence and human suffering. Abizaid also rejected out of hand any notion of "re-deploying" U.S. forces to Guam, Kuwait, or anywhere else. A reduction in the American military presence in Iraq, he declared, would lead to rapid defeat.

He then proposed a solution to the crisis in Iraq today that seemed to many senators--most notably, John McCain--wholly inadequate. He listed a number of things that the Iraqi government must do--purging the Iraqi Army and National Police of those who would incite rather than control sectarian violence, disarming militias, accelerating the training and equipping of Iraqi forces, and so on. He identified only one thing that the United States must do: increase its efforts to train and equip the Iraqi military. To that end, the only concrete suggestion he offered was to increase the number of U.S. soldiers embedded in Iraqi military units. He specifically rejected the idea that the United States

should undertake expanded efforts to establish security in Iraq, declaring that the Iraqis must do that for themselves, and he stated that it was the "professional opinion" of his commanders in Iraq that no more American soldiers were needed there.

The senators pressed Abizaid about the timeline for success. He said that it was important to get Baghdad under control within four to six months, and that the Iraqis must do it. But it is very hard to be sanguine that the situation in Iraq will hold for half a year at the present level of violence in the capital. We must also keep in mind that violence in Baghdad--and around the country--has been rising, rather than falling. Abizaid's confidence that we can afford to wait six months to address this problem is unfounded and misplaced.

His optimism about the Iraqi military's ability to accomplish the tasks he is setting for it is also misplaced. It will take time to locate and train additional U.S. soldiers to embed with Iraqi units. It will take more time for those embedded soldiers to bring the Iraqi units to a higher level of military capability. Providing equipment to the Iraqis, including the necessary spare parts and ammunition, will take time. Familiarizing them with the equipment and with how to use it effectively in combat will take more time. Developing the logistical systems necessary to sustain Iraqi units in combat will take still more time. Even if Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed tomorrow to purge the Iraqi

army and police of rogue elements, doing so would take time, as would finding replacements and retraining units distorted by the presence of such leaders. A significant increase in the capabilities of the Iraqi military and security forces is almost certain to take months. Only then, according to Abizaid, should the clearing and holding of Baghdad begin. That process will take additional months--we've been working on it, after all, since August 8, when the most recent effort, Phase II of Operation Together Forward, began. So Abizaid's Iraqi-centered scenario for progress is, simply put, unrealistic in the short term.

And that's only with respect to Baghdad. Apart from Falluja and Ramadi, the largest cities in the province, to be sure (see Michael Fumento's "Holding Ramadi" elsewhere in this issue), al Anbar is largely out of U.S. and Iraqi government control. Pressed about the need to work on that province while improving the situation in Baghdad, Abizaid declared that Baghdad was the main effort and Anbar would have to wait. So for at least the next six months, while we and the Iraqis focus on Baghdad, the insurgency in Anbar province will continue to thrive.

The continuation of the insurgency in Anbar is more important than Abizaid is making out. It may be a secondary effort for us, but the fact of an uncontrolled Sunni Arab insurgency is the most important factor preventing Maliki from disarming Shiite militias. We are caught in a vicious circle. Because we have not

effectively suppressed the Sunni Arab insurgency, the Shiite communities in Iraq demand protection. We refuse to provide it to them, so they turn to militias. Those militias, in turn, victimize the Sunni Arab population. That victimization fuels the insurgency. It is a straightforward cycle that seems to be escaping our military leaders. Demanding that Maliki break it by disarming the militias is folly--as long as the Sunni Arab insurgency continues to burn, no Iraqi political leader will be able to convince the Shiite community to abandon the forces it sees as essential for its self-defense. And as long as the Shiite militias continue to victimize Sunni Arabs, it will be incredibly difficult to bring the Sunni Arab insurgent leaders to the negotiating table, even if they could bring their followers with them. The U.S. military is the only force in Iraq capable of breaking this cycle by bringing security to the country, and Abizaid and his senior commanders in Iraq continue to reject that solution.

The question of troop levels in Iraq is fundamental. With the forces currently deployed, according to Abizaid's own testimony, the United States is unable to accomplish the following tasks all at once: Train Iraqi troops as quickly as necessary, support them in their efforts to clear and hold Baghdad, and reduce the violence in Anbar. Indeed, Lieutenant General Michael D. Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, also testified last week. He stated that, despite all of our joint efforts, the Sunni Arab insurgency has actually gained strength and

capacity. Operation Together Forward II, he declared, has achieved "limited success." Sectarian violence decreased in August, when the operation began, but "as armed groups adapted to the Coalition presence, and the I[raqi] S[ecurity] F[orces] was unable to exert authority once Coalition forces moved on, attacks returned to and even surpassed preoperational levels." In other words, the operation has failed so far because there are not enough U.S. forces to support Iraqi efforts to hold the cleared neighborhoods.

How can one say that there are enough troops in Iraq now in these circumstances? The only way to make that argument is to assume that we have time to take things slowly--time to train Iraqis, time to let them make the inevitable mistakes and suffer the inevitable losses and defeats, time in which we can allow the insurgency to spin out of control and the violence to escalate. We do not have such time. The sectarian violence is rising, the insurgency is strengthening, and the control of the Iraqi government over its people and state is slipping. And America's will to continue the fight is breaking.

In fact, most serious people now concede we need more troops. The backup argument for not sending more troops is that we don't have them to send. Abizaid alluded to such concerns. It is true we should have expanded the military long ago. It is true that it is urgent that we do so now. And it is true that surging 50,000 more troops--with the equipment they need--into Iraq

in the coming weeks and months will strain a strained military further. But it is also true that we can do it--if we think success in Iraq is a national priority--by extending tours, moving troops from other theaters into Iraq, and calling up expanded numbers from the Guard and Reserves.

None of this will be easy to do. Nevertheless, if more troops are needed for success in Iraq, we must bear the strain now--while making up for lost time in expanding the military. There is every indication that the men and women of the U.S. military are willing to tackle this extra burden--if they believe we have a strategy to win, and that help is (finally) on the way. Incoming defense secretary Robert Gates should have no higher priority than providing this help--in addition to directing his commanders not to let self-imposed constraints prevent us from winning the war in Iraq. Win the war and expand the military, both as soon as possible--that's Gates's task. Meanwhile, the military commanders need to think and speak in an unconstrained way to our political leaders about what has to be done now.

We cannot, in the end, control how quickly Iraqi forces become ready to fight. We cannot control whether or not Maliki makes the necessary political and military decisions. What we can control is security. When U.S. forces in adequate numbers, together with Iraqi troops, cleared Tal Afar, Mosul, Falluja, Sadr City, and Najaf in 2004 and 2005, levels of violence in those areas dropped enormously. Economic activity picked up. Political leaders, rather than militia commanders, took charge. We know what success looks like, and we know what it demands--more U.S. troops, operating together with such Iraqi forces as are available, to establish security above all else. And we know what failure looks like--waiting for the Iraqis to take the lead they are not capable of taking and allowing the violence to continue in the meantime. Abizaid and Casey have good reason to be proud of the improvement in the situation they have overseen, but better reason to be fearful that it will not last if they do not change course dramatically. We must change our strategy to reflect the new reality, and we must send the military resources needed to achieve that strategy. If we do not, it is likely that we will fail in Iraq.

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