



Don't Abandon the Iraqis

(Published in [*American Enterprise Institute*](#), May 28, 2007)

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Colaboraciones n° 1739

June 1, 2007

From time to time, nations face fundamental tests of character. Forced to choose between painful but wise options, and irresponsible ones that offer only temporary relief from pain, a people must decide what price they are willing to pay to safeguard themselves and their children and to do the right thing. America has faced such tests before. Guided by Abraham Lincoln, we met our greatest challenge during the Civil War and overcame it, despite agonizing doubts about the possibility of success even into 1864. The Greatest Generation recovered from the shock of Pearl Harbor and refused to stop fighting until both Germany and Japan had surrendered unconditionally. A similar moment is upon us in Iraq. What will we do?

America has vital national interests in Iraq. The global al Qaeda movement has decided to defeat us there--not merely to establish a base from which to pursue further tyranny and terror, but also to erect a triumphant monument on the ruins of American power. Al Qaeda claims to have defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and its recruiting rests in part on that boast. If America flees the field of battle against this foe in Iraq, al Qaeda will have gained an even more powerful recruiting slogan. That is why al Qaeda fighters from across the Muslim world are streaming into Iraq and fighting desperately to retain and expand their positions there. Al Qaeda does not think Iraq is a distraction from their war against us. Al Qaeda believes Iraq is the central front--and it is. To imagine that America can lose in Iraq but prevail

in the war against jihadism is almost like imagining that we could have yielded Europe to the Nazis but won World War II.

Al Qaeda is not our only enemy in Iraq, however. Iran has chosen to fight a proxy war against us there, determined to work our defeat for its own purposes. Iranian weapons and even advisers flow into Iraq and assist our enemies, both Sunni and Shia, to kill our soldiers and attempt to establish control over Iraq itself. This Iranian support is not the result of a misunderstanding that could be worked out if only we would talk to the mullahs. It is the continuation of nearly three decades of cold war between Iran and the United States that began in 1979 with an Iranian attack on the sovereign American soil of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The states of the Arabian Gulf are watching closely to see who will win. If Iran succeeds in driving America from Iraq, Iranian hegemony in the region is likely. If that success is combined with the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon, then Iranian hegemony is even more likely. Dominance of the Middle East by this Iranian regime would be very bad for America. And a nuclear arms race in which Arab states tried to balance against Iranian power would also be very bad for America.

These are the obvious American stakes in the fight in Iraq, and they are high enough to justify every possible effort to succeed there. But there are reasons to keep fighting even beyond these geopolitical considerations. On a recent trip to Iraq,

I saw the human stakes in this struggle. I spoke with the commander of the 8th Iraqi Army Division in Diwaniyah, Major General Othman. He is a Shia, commanding a heavily Shia unit in an entirely Shia area. I asked him what was the most serious challenge he faced. He answered at once: Shia militias. General Othman stands strongly for an Iraq ruled by law, in which the government holds a monopoly on the use of force, and in which Sunni and Shia are treated equally. He has put his beliefs to the test of battle. When he saw that members of Moktada al-Sadr's Shia militia, the Mahdi Army, had taken control of the city of Diwaniyah, he conducted a large-scale clearing operation with the help of American forces and drove them out. General Othman now holds Diwaniyah, where the people can breathe free again, subject neither to that militia nor to any other. There is no turning back for General Othman. The Mahdi Army is determined to kill him and his family, and they will do so if we do not continue to support him. The life of this decent man is in our hands.

In Iskandariyah, I met Major General Qais, the commander of the Babil Province police forces. I asked him the same question, What is your greatest challenge. Without hesitation, he, too, said: Shia militias. The Iraqi police are known to be infiltrated by Shia militia fighters, but General Qais has molded a force that he uses against those very militias on a daily basis. He has survived attempts on his life, and he and his family are under constant

threat. They, too, rely on America to help them fight the agents of Iran who seek to defeat us. Across Iraq today, decent people are standing up and identifying themselves. They are reaching out to us, working with us, and fighting alongside us against our enemies, even against the powerful Shia militias. If we abandon them now, they will be tortured and killed, along with their families, by the militias. We will have exposed every decent person in the country to destruction.

For the fact is that the democratic government of Iraq is an ally--and a strong ally--against al Qaeda. Against al Qaeda, Iraqi leaders from government, civil society, the military, and the police are implacable. Even the Sunni Arabs, who once provided al Qaeda safe haven and support, have turned against the terrorists. Thousands of Sunni Arabs in Anbar, Salahaddin, Diyala, Babil, and even Baghdad have reached out to the Coalition and the Iraqi government, offering to fight the takfiris, as they call al Qaeda. Anbar Province, whose Marine intelligence officers had virtually given it up only last year, is now lost to al Qaeda. Thousands of Iraqis have died fighting al Qaeda. When al Qaeda attacks recruiting centers, health clinics, government buildings, and military and police outposts, the Iraqis do not run home. They run back into the battle, to fight harder. But they continue to need our help. If we abandon them, al Qaeda terrorists will barbarically punish those who have opposed them. They may even so terrorize the people that they are able to es-

tablish a home in part of Iraq. That is certainly their aim. We cannot allow them to succeed.

But the stakes are even higher than these. I had the chance to walk through the market near Haifa Street the other day. Only in January, the streets of this mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhood featured day-long gun fights between al Qaeda terrorists and U.S. and Iraqi soldiers. American forces have not yet finished clearing the neighborhood. Nevertheless, I walked through the market with Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, commander of Multi-National Corps-Iraq, retired General Jack Keane, Colonel Bryan Roberts, the local brigade commander, my wife, Kimberly Kagan, Colonel H.R. McMaster, and several other American soldiers and civilians. With a handful of armed soldiers as escort, and attack helicopters circling overhead to guard against snipers known to be in the area, we walked through the meandering market. The American brigade commander was well known to the locals, who greeted us all, "Salaam aleikum, wa aleikum es-salaam." Smiling children darted through our group, surrounding us, begging for candy, for my wife's sunglasses, for one of General Odierno's stars ("Just one, please--you have three"). We walked through a crowded pool hall and past tables of men playing dominoes. Pool players patiently tried to make their shots despite our interruption; old men slammed dominoes on the table triumphantly and tried to get us to play with them.

But the most moving scenes were in some of the worst neighborhoods of the city. Our uparmored Humvees rolled through Ghazaliyah and Dora, two Sunni neighborhoods heavily infiltrated with al Qaeda and under pressure from Shia militias. There are few services in these neighborhoods, and IED attacks and killings had been regular features until very recently. We walked through raw sewage in the streets and saw bullet and bomb holes in the buildings. But to my amazement, we also saw children in those streets who did not glare or run or stand dourly as the occupiers passed. Instead they smiled and waved, asking for candy or just saying hello. Even in the worst places in Iraq, we have not lost the children. They still look to us with hope. They still expect us to deliver them from death and violence. They still be-

lieve that we will honor our commitments to their parents.

What will happen if we abandon these children? Death will stalk them and their families. Al Qaeda will attempt to subjugate them. Shia militias will drive them from their homes or kill them. And they and their neighbors, and everyone in the Middle East, will know we left them to their fate. Everyone will know, "Never trust the Americans." Everyone will warn their children, "The Americans will only betray you." We will cement our reputation as untrustworthy. We will lose this generation not only in Iraq, but throughout the Middle East. And we will have lost more than our reputation and our ability to protect our interests. We will have lost part of our soul.

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