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## Exit Strategies: Iraq and the Republic of South Vietnam

by Robert Tollast

*Editor's Note. This essay is an interview with James H. Willbanks with initial commentary added by Robert Tollast. In 1972 James H. Willbanks was one of a handful of American advisers to the South Vietnamese Army at the battle of An Loc, one of the most desperate and fearsome battles of the entire war. A detailed account of this battle, as well as the political and military problems of Vietnamization can be found in his book Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its war.*

James Willbanks is now a distinguished historian of the war in South East Asia, and is keen to stress that his expertise does not lie with events in Iraq. Like many observers of events following the 2003 invasion, he couldn't help noticing uncanny similarities, which he mentions in the forward to *Abandoning Vietnam*. However, as a professional historian he understands the pitfalls of blandly comparing events separated by a gulf of time, distance and culture.

As David Petraeus wrote in the autumn 1986 issue of *Parameters*,

We should beware literal application of lessons extracted from Vietnam, or any other past event, to present or future problems without due regard for the specific circumstances that surround those problems.<sup>1</sup>

While being cautious, Petraeus states that there is still much to learn from Vietnam. Looking back at events since 2003, hard lessons have again emerged in the effort to build armies from societies defined by poverty and upheaval. It would seem that many of these issues have re-appeared.

A lot of these problems will be familiar to readers of the SWJ reading list. Corrupt security forces, often with a sectarian or ethnic prejudice, who intimidate the population. Corrupt governance, leaders who are appointed because of their connections and armies too young to cope with logistics capacity, are just some of these difficulties.

### ***The End of Combat Operations: Not the End of the War***

Colonel Phillip Battaglia of the U.S 1st Cavalry Division was recently quoted in Middle East online describing Iraqi Security Force's challenges, envisaging support will be needed well beyond the end of the advise and assist mission in December.

"A lot of work they need to do is in logistics - maintenance, training, repairing vehicles, (sourcing) vehicle parts, medical supplies and all forms of logistics."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Petraeus, David H. "Lessons of History and Lessons of Vietnam" in *Assessing the Vietnam War*. Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown eds., (Pergamon- Brassey's 1987), p.181

Likewise, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, Stuart Bowen Jr. recently reported that

Although the commands and bases to support logistics and sustainment are largely in place, maintaining the equipment and infrastructure and managing the resources to carry out the mission have remained a problem.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar way, the RVNAF was proven to have devastating logistical shortcomings both before and after U.S. support had departed. Abandoning Vietnam is full of examples of helicopters not arriving for airlifts because spare parts were missing and equipment was rusting in warehouses because of a military logistics failure. Even tanks ran low on fuel because it had been sold on the black market, and in some cases they stood idle during a Communist offensive.

There may be no apparent mortal threat to the ISF now, but Vietnam post 1972 shows us how an ally can seemingly be on top of the situation only to slide grimly into defeat when events change. Perhaps North Vietnamese General Tran Van Tra said it best when describing how depleted the N.V.A. were following the Easter Offensive. As he recalls in *Vietnam: History of the bulwark B2*.

There were continual reports about the difficulties, the shortages of troops, food and ammunition, and especially the fatigue of the cadres and men. The Military Region 9 Command sent a message recommending straightforwardly that the regional command order an immediate cessation of hostilities so that we could re-organize our forces. The troops were no longer capable of fighting!<sup>4</sup>

What Tra is essentially saying here is that he wants the United States and South Vietnam to take the pressure off his forces. By January 1973, his wish was granted as U.S. air power was withdrawn and U.S. financial aid to the South effectively fell off a cliff.

It is taking a liberty to compare the conventional North Vietnamese army to Al Qaeda in Iraq. But this is not a material comparison: the point here is that like the North Vietnamese in the summer of 1972, Al Qaeda is perceived to be highly degraded in their capability. Washington at the time hoped that by materially reinforcing the South, in conjunction with the Linebacker bombing raids, the RVNAF would hold out. Similarly, Obama hopes the ISF will be capable to deal with any residual threat that could jeopardize the civilian led mission in Iraq.

In a similar way, General Fred Weyand proudly proclaimed “mission accomplished” as the last U.S. combat troops departed Vietnam. Where have we heard “mission accomplished” before?

Likewise, the Iraqi Security forces have won plaudits and comments that they can be self-sufficient. But history shows us how corruption, combined with a failure to care for or account for military and government property, can pose a formidable threat to an army.

Iraq still faces a myriad of hard to quantify threats that could throw their forces off balance in years to come, from Kirkuk ethnic tension, to Iranian or even Turkish intervention, war over water or simply targeting U.S. interests. Recent events are another reminder of just how

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<sup>2</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZUhWapBY-7rX-7a9H2jpbc2\\_dC6p5g0S6GhMqeOW-4/edit?hl=en\\_GB](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZUhWapBY-7rX-7a9H2jpbc2_dC6p5g0S6GhMqeOW-4/edit?hl=en_GB)

<sup>3</sup> Concerns over ISF reported in Washington Post <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/30/AR2011013000005.html>

<sup>4</sup> Colonel General Tran Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the bulwark B2 Theatre Vol 5: Concluding the 30 years war*. (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe, 1982), p.6

unpredictable the Middle East can be. The I.S.F will soon have 140 M1A1 tanks to face these threats, but this is not an unbeatable machine if nobody can find the spare parts.

### ***Meddling Autocrats***

In another echo of Willbanks' book, Nouri Al Maliki has proven himself to have a penchant for heavy handed interference with military affairs, rather like Thieu in Vietnam.

This paid off in 2008's Operation Charge of the Knights, despite initial coalition concerns that the operation could go seriously wrong, as detailed In Thomas E. Ricks' book *The Gamble*. Even when the operation was proclaimed a success, Maliki failed to understand the extent of coalition assistance.<sup>5</sup> It still remains to be seen whether the ISF could respond to such a crisis without coalition forces in overwatch.

More alarmingly, Wikileaks cables reveal Maliki guilty of cronyism and sectarianism within Iraq's National Intelligence Service (M2) a year after Charge of the Knights, as reported by McClatchy.

According to leaked cables, Maliki tried to purge 36 officers from M2, but was hampered by its then director Alaa Al Amiri who reduced the list to 22. According to Al Amiri, Maliki's list included "mostly Sunnis and some of the most experienced officers in the M2."<sup>6</sup>

47 new officers placed within the agency were allegedly Shiites who had previously lived in Iran and may have had falsified credentials. According to Gary A. Grappo, then at the U.S Embassy,

"USF-I (the U.S. military), law enforcement, and U.S. intelligence observers have all raised concerns about these moves by Maliki, and their effect on the institutional strength of those agencies affected."

In terms of terrorism being the main current threat to Iraqi security, this is quite an allegation.

Again, *Abandoning Vietnam* shows how President Thieu continually interfered with the military chain of command, giving ambiguous and conflicting orders as well as displaying favoritism in appointments and dismissals, both politically and militarily. This undermined the legitimacy of his government, strengthening the insurgency and fatally weakening his military.

### ***Abandoning Iraq?***

In the conclusion of *Abandoning Vietnam*, Willbanks suggests that although Vietnamization was too little too late, it was also terminated before it had run its course.

We are left with an incomplete evaluation of Vietnamization's effectiveness. The process was, after all, not carried out to completion. The United States neither stayed the course (as we did and continue to do so in South Korea) nor provided the promised support to the South Vietnamese, thus truncating the program before it had been fully implemented.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ricks, Thomas E., *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin 2009), p. 278.

<sup>6</sup> Reported on McClatchy.com Dec.3 2010 <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/12/03/104726/us-cables-say-maliki-filled-iraqi.html>

<sup>7</sup> Willbanks, James H. *Abandoning Vietnam* (Kansas 2008), p.287.

Unlike in Vietnam however, America will be continuing its advisory effort to the ISF. But it is by no means “staying the course” as we see today in South Korea.

Support will be vastly truncated in the shape of the State Department Office of Security Cooperation Iraq (OSC-I) from the U.S Embassy in Baghdad, four new consulates in Erbil, Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk and friendly countries, as outlined by Ambassador James F. Jeffrey in his presentation to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

“It (OSC-I) is projected to have a full-time staff of 157 military and civilian personnel as well as hundreds of case-related specialists for Foreign Military Sales at any one time.”<sup>8</sup>

Considering the size and needs of the ISF however, this appears somewhat dependent on the security status quo. While it does not represent a rapid termination of assistance as in Vietnam, it could yet prove a serious truncating of support if the situation deteriorates. Supposing there are 500 staff at the OSC-I, this represents 1% of the personnel deployed for Operation New Dawn.

### ***It's the Economy, Stupid...***

With the State Department in Iraq already having had its budget cut before its big mission has even begun, the last big similarity is the economic fragility of the two Host Nation countries: both were dependent on an economically fragile U.S.

Vietnam had minimal income and was dependent on U.S aid which was massively cut following the 1973 Arab Israeli war and the Watergate scandal. Iraq of course, may see an increase in millions of barrels of oil exports, although some speculate their 12 million BPD target is something of a fantasy.

Already there are multiple Iraqi construction projects scheduled over the coming years such as the Al Faw grand port project and a drive for 2.5 million new housing units by 2015. 9 That is before we even consider foreign led investment.

Hopefully that should finally reduce unemployment, but if the government is perceived to be sectarian, as many still think, this could yet worsen security. This is all dependant on oil money and the oil infrastructure remains fragile.

Additionally, the public sector and defense expenditure of both nations was/is heavily swollen and there remain huge reconstruction challenges in Iraq.

Furthermore, Iraq today, like South Vietnam 40 years ago is haunted by the ever present threat of corruption, which also poses a challenge to economic development.

Lastly, Iraq, like South Vietnam, may struggle without continued support to effectively deploy expensive equipment that requires considerable technical skill to maintain.

I would like to sincerely thank James Willbanks for taking time out from his busy schedule to answer the following questions on this topic, and thoroughly recommend Abandoning Vietnam to members of the SWJ community.

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<sup>8</sup> From the State Department website <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/155827.htm>

Q: The Iraqi army will soon have a lot of high maintenance and high tech weapons systems in operation. In Vietnam, how critical was it that American support personnel for advanced weaponry like the F-5 had gone home when things got harder for the South?

J.W: In Vietnam, American support personnel were critical to assisting the South Vietnamese in maintaining advanced weaponry and sophisticated systems. This wasn't a problem as long as the numbers of U.S. personnel were sufficient to provide the necessary support to programs like CRIMP, ACTOV and ACTOVLOG, all of which provided vast amounts of new equipment and weaponry in the years between 1969 and 1973. However, providing this support became problematic as more and more U.S. troops were withdrawn. Right before the U.S. withdrew all its troops in 1973, there were two more programs, ENHANCE and ENHANCE PLUS, that provided even more equipment. However, with no U.S. support personnel left in country, much of this new equipment remained in warehouses because it could not be fixed, manned, and/or fueled. The North Vietnamese Army was the recipient of this largesse when it overran the South in 1975.

Q: In Abandoning Vietnam, we saw how RVNAF units fighting ability was severely curtailed by a struggle with logistics. It seems logical to me that even if the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) seem capable fighters at the end of this year, training of ISF logisticians simply has to continue, as some believe the ISF won't be up to standard in this area. What do you think?

JW: Logistics is always key to winning a war. Vietnam was no different, but it was not a lack of logisticians that felled the ARVN system, but rather a mix of that factor coupled with rampant corruption that led to fatal shortages. Whether ISF logistics systems are prepared to stand on their own remains to be seen.

Q: The Iraqi economy is growing, but their defense expenditure is now 8.6% of their GDP and they are still a developing nation. How serious was it for the Republic of South Vietnam that they possessed such a vast conventional army but were left with the budget of a developing country?

JW: By late 1974, the Republic of Vietnam has 1.1 million men and women under arms, but it was a country racked by inflation that received reduced amounts of U.S. military aid. President Thieu was relegated to fighting a "poor man's war." On the other hand, the North Vietnamese were on the upswing. With the cessation of U.S. bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in early 1973, most of the NVA (more correctly, PAVN) units decimated during the bitter fighting of 1972 were brought back to 100% and were armed with new (or nearly new) Soviet and Chinese equipment.

Q: It was recently alleged that in early 2009 Iraqi PM Nouri Al Maliki purged numerous effective intelligence personnel on the basis of loyalty and sectarianism, which is likely to have impacted ISF counter terror abilities. In your personal opinion, is it right that we get tough with Maliki on this, especially since Thieu's

interference proved so disastrous, or should we (the U.S and Britain) leave them to learn the hard way?

JW: In my personal opinion, there is not much to compare here. Thieu was essentially left to his own devices after the U.S. pulled out in 1973 and he made several fatal strategic blunders. The key question with regard to Iraq is how much influence we can bring to bear on the Maliki government before all of our troops have departed.

Q: In Iraq, we've also heard serious allegations of corruption from the top of the Iraqi govt. down. Were you aware of corruption in Vietnam and its effects when you served as an advisor?

J.W: As an advisor on the ground, I did not see much evidence of corruption in Vietnam. I am sure it existed, but I was at such a low level that I didn't see any manifestations of it in my AO. In my research, I have seen quite a bit of evidence of corruption during the period 1973-1975, even as the South Vietnamese were headed down the slippery slope to defeat.

*Other works by James H. Willbanks include the Tet Offensive: A Concise History and The Battle of An Loc.*

*Robert Tollast is an English Literature Graduate from Royal Holloway University of London and has published articles for the finance publication AccountingWEB. He became interested in events in Iraq through his late father, who was a Military Intelligence Officer in Iraq with General Sir Maitland Willson's Persia/ Iraq force (Paiforce) in 1942. He is currently learning Arabic and would be interested one day to visit Iraq, although he concedes this is currently quite an eccentric ambition.*

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