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The Iraqi COIN Narrative Revisited: Interview with Douglas A. Ollivant

by Octavian Manea

The fundamental truth of the Iraqi settlement is that the sectarian civil war ended—and the Sunni lost. Upon realizing this defeat, the Sunni went into damage control mode to reach a settlement….In short, the Sunni had reached what military scholar Stephen L. Melton calls looming demographic collapse, a threshold of casualties which convinces one side in a conflict that it has lost and that suing for peace is the only means of ensuring group survival.

-Douglas A. Ollivant, Countering the New Orthodoxy

How would you see today the rationale behind the 2007 Bagdad surge? To act as a buffer between the Iraqi sectarian, ethnic pressures and ontological (group extinction) fears? To protect a Sunni population that could not be protected by the formal Iraqi security forces (either because of weakness or because the Sunnis didn't trust them) and setting the stage for the next level-a rational political space?

Protecting the population is important. But the sad fact is that by early 2007 in Baghdad, the Sunni groups had been pushed back to small enough enclaves that it was fairly easy to protect them, save in Southern Baghdad, where the cleansing continued well into the fall of 2007. The continued cleansing in South Baghdad made me skeptical that things were working until very late in 2007, despite the obvious reduction in violence elsewhere in the city as of late summer.

So yes, protecting the population is important. But I don't think that we could have done much to protect them in mid-2006. The civil war had to burn itself out—the Sunnis had to realize that they had lost and the Shi'a had to realize that we had won—before a settlement could be reached.

I do think that the presence of additional U.S. troops in the urban areas tamped down the end of the civil war faster than it might otherwise have happened. U.S. forces worked with the local trend to accelerate it, and did not impose a totally foreign agenda. Had we started the "surge" plan in Sadr City, for example, I think the outcome might have been much less favorable. I have come to a more tempered view of what military forces are able to accomplish, as I tried to lay out in my Washington Post piece on the "three wars" in Afghanistan.

The Iraqi surge hardly happened in a vacuum. Could you list and explain, which were in your opinion the other conditions or pieces of the puzzle that contributed to the drawdown of the violence, but actually set before the surge? And for which the surge provided a galvanizer, accelerator or a booster?

First, Iraq is a much more favorable place to try an outside intervention. It is a twentieth-century society, with education, infrastructure, roads, civil servants, bureaucracies, a military tradition, rivers, and a seaport (and lots and lots of oil). And as I said earlier, I think the fundamental trend in Baghdad is the end of the civil war. Were the civil war not already ending, even ten brigades and three Dave Petraeuses wouldn't have brought order to Baghdad. And for that matter, had we been able to stop the civil war before it was brought to a conclusion accepted by both sides, then Iraq might still be unstable today. Given that the outcome of civil war was clear, then the activities taken by MNF-I during the "surge" period—flooding the zone with troops, building Joint Security Stations, working with the Iraqi Security Forces, building more police stations, putting up concrete walls, assisting with political negotiations, bringing in the nationalist Sunni insurgency, stepping up the campaign against AQI and the Shi'a "special groups"—all these things were helpful and probably did make Baghdad stable faster. But again, had we not been taking the Iraqis in the direction that they already wanted to go, I don't think we would have experienced success—and certainly not on a politically acceptable timeline.

Which was in your opinion the most plausible trigger for the "Anbar Awakening"? And how important was the so called "Lawrence of Arabia moment" of the US military in this process (I am referring to the efforts of thinkers like Captain Travis Patriquin in engaging the tribes and building trust bonds with their sheiks)?

I consider the Patriquin Power Point on "How to Win in Anbar" to be the most important single document produced during the 2004-2007 period. In a very simple and irresistible format, Patriquin makes you think differently about what you are doing and how the problem should be approached. He forces you to see Iraq from the perspective of the natives. Now, I think he was just a touch naïve (or was deliberately so in the document) about the good intentions of the Sheiks, and I think that fear of Baghdad government played a much larger role than those who worked the Anbar problem like to admit. It isn't far from Fallujah to Baghdad, and Baghdad had a lot of Sunni refugees from the 2004 Second Fallujah battle living as refugees. I believe the Anbar sheiks were painfully aware of the sectarian cleansing occurring in Baghdad and that this fact was very high in their calculus. But from the perspective of those working the problem in Anbar, the motivation of the sheiks really isn't all that important. What is important is that there is now an opening to change the dynamic of the insurgency, and the usual suspects mentioned in the Anbar account deserve credit for grabbing that opportunity, even if they didn't necessarily create it.

To what extent could we see the success of the COIN campaign (with the surge as the vanguard) as a catalyst for spreading the spirit of the "Anbar Awakening" and, at the end of the day, fundamental in triggering the Sunni tribal revolt-the Sons of Iraq movement?

I think that would be a mistaken interpretation. I would instead give primary agency to the Shi'a militias who defeat the Sunni insurgency in Baghdad, and then to the mid-level U.S. Commanders who are alert enough to work with this new dynamic. I don't think battalion commanders like then-Lieutenant Colonels Dale Kuehl in Ameriya and Kurt Pinkerton in Abu

Ghraib get quite enough credit. Again, they didn't have agency and the answer essentially presented itself to them. But had they not been mentally agile enough to see the change in dynamic and work with it, they could have kept it from happening.

In your paper you warned against learning "the wrong lessons" from the Surge period (that a "COIN strategy + the surge in troops + enlightened leadership" is the silver bullet). Which are the right lessons that should be a critical part in waging future stability operations?

The right lesson is that you have to approach each problem as a unique one. I think there are almost no tactical and operational lessons to be brought forward from Iraq to Afghanistan, and the beginning of wisdom in a new "small war" is to realize that your experience in the last one may well be a handicap.

I would bring only a few very general geopolitical lessons. The locals have primary agency; if you don't find a local trend to work with, you are unlikely to be successful; the intervening power and the local government have to want the same thing (more or less); the third party is not staying there forever and everyone knows this and factors it into their calculus; armies are only really good at building other armies.

You have served as a counterinsurgency adviser to U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan. Does counterinsurgency work in Afghanistan? At least from what you have seen. It seems that in South, in Helmand and Kandahar, it really made a tactical difference.

I would say that counterinsurgency can work in some places in Afghanistan. Bing West's magnificent new book The Wrong War looks at the Army trying to do COIN in the Korengal and the Marines trying to do it in Helmand and concludes that COIN doesn't work. I would instead conclude that it doesn't work in Korengal and Helmand. That doesn't mean it can't work in more fruitful areas where the local dynamics are more promising and where there are positive local trends to work with and accelerate.

"You can't kill your way out to victory" became the hallmark of a military organization that until 2007 was perceived as being too conventionally minded, too kinetic and enemy-centric focused. Has the U.S. Military succeeded in balancing this culture of being too enemy-centric and becoming more comfortable with the drinking-tea and doing windows side of the spectrum? Or is it in the danger of going too much in the other side?

I think those who worry about the military losing its fighting edge discount the basic sociology of the military, and particularly the infantry forces of the Army and Marines. They join to fight, whether corporals or colonels, and that will always be their default option. When in doubt, they will revert to a kinetic, enemy-focused approach.

I'm generally of a pessimistic outlook, but I am just unable to understand the panic about losing combat skills. Doing coordination at a brigade level is doing coordination at a brigade level, and if you can coordinate multiple sources of development projects, I think you can coordinate multiple types of fires, with a few days refresher on the particularities of capabilities and systems. I am sensitive to some highly technical skill sets atrophying, but these can and should be preserved in the training base so that we have a cadre to retrain them when needed.

As a final thought on this point, I was in the Army of the 1990s that some seem so nostalgic for, and I don't remember it being all that. I recall entire exercises at III Corps being built around maximizing the deep strikes of Apache battalions, a tactic we have now learned is

just silly. We had almost no air-ground integration. And soldiers had almost no experience with live ammunition, save in very controlled conditions on very rote ranges. I prefer battalions that have trained for and experienced real operations, however low intensity, to those who have trained for just the NTC fight (which had its own peculiarities and peccadillos).

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