

Transition in Iraq: Withdrawing the BCTs

Robert Killebrew

A meeting with the JCS is the first item on President Obama's agenda after he takes office on 20 January. As reported in the national press, he intends to fulfill his campaign promise of withdrawing all remaining Brigade Combat Teams in Iraq within the next 16 months.

Assuming the present state of affairs in Iraq continues, getting the combat brigades out in 16 months should be a doable objective that American military leaders can wholeheartedly support. The reduction in violence, the progress of the Iraqi army, and the shaky but generally positive direction of the Iraqi government all seem to indicate that in a year or more the U.S. and allied contribution can have become mainly -- though not exclusively -- to support Iraqi security forces. This is not, however, "endex" in Iraq, and we can still lose this war if we fail to make a satisfactory transition from warfighters to supporters.

Our basic objectives in Iraq under an Obama Administration will almost surely remain what they have been under President Bush's; a generally democratic and secular Iraq, a U.S. ally at peace with its neighbors, and a bulwark against Iranian aggression at the head of the Persian Gulf. Whether those objectives, all or in part, are achieved depends on how we handle the transition from combat to support of the Iraqi government and its security forces. Some considerations:

First, the new Obama Administration starts with a clean slate with the Iraqi government and people. Regardless of the Iraqi attitude toward Saddam's regime, the Bush government was the author of an invasion of Iraqi soil, and that has to rankle even our best Iraqi friends. During the American presidential campaign, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki made a shrewd and ultimately correct decision to support the Obama campaign's call for a withdrawal of U.S. forces, so between the new Administration, and the new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the political and military playing field has changed significantly in Iraq over the past three months. On this playing field we must transition from warfighting to assistance in a way that continues firm military-to-military relationships between Iraqi and U.S. armed forces.

Second, the transition -- and it is indeed a transition, not a "withdrawal" or "retrograde" -- must take place against shifting priorities within the U.S. security and foreign policy framework. In the minds of the Administration and the American public, Iraq will shortly recede to a secondary theater relative to Afghanistan; other defense priorities may come into play. This will happen while the American commanders in Iraq will struggle with a daunting challenge -- to reconstruct a theater of war into a theater support role. To realize the enormity of the task, consider that the present warfighting organization is based on Brigade Combat Teams, which, in addition to being

combat units, are also hubs for advising, logistics support, command and control and virtually every other U.S. function in the theater. Take away the BCTs, and one has left a variety of support and logistics brigades designed for their support, plus the essential advisory transition teams working daily with Iraqi security forces -- but which now depend on the BCTs for virtually everything.

Transitioning from a BCT-centric theater to... something else... will require a retailoring of virtually the entire theater, filling the role played by the BCTs with either redesigned and reconfigured combat support outfit or some theater-organized intermediate headquarters. Supporting these pickup organizations with adequate staffs and support personnel will play hell with military personnel systems mainly designed for unit rotations, to say nothing of the increased need for top-notch people to fill critical advisory jobs that go face-to-face with Iraqis -- who will be watching to see whether the United States is really going to be a steadfast ally, or is bugging out as fast as decently possible.

Third, planners would do well to examine the logistics challenges facing the U.S. in the Iraqi theater as the transition begins. Two issues predominate. The first is the recovery -- as part of the theater transition -- of millions and millions of tons of U.S. equipment, a mind-boggling job for the Theater Support Command that, if mishandled or incorrectly portrayed, can affect negatively the whole "transition" theme of this phase of the war. Every commander in theater, and virtually every soldier, will be involved in some aspect of this strategic and challenging task.

The second challenge is the conversion of the U.S. command in Iraq, and all its constituent parts, ultimately into some form of an Office of Defense Cooperation or military assistance group that can continue the transition of the U.S. effort from occupier to supporter and ultimately to U.S. ally. A future military assistance relationship is clearly indicated -- Iraqi forces are already equipping themselves with U.S. gear -- the conversion to the M-4 rifle is about 60% complete, and Iraqi rolling stock will ultimately include M-1 tanks, armored HMWWs and C-130 aircraft, as well as other end items. Given the complex and often legalistic nature of managing military assistance programs over the long term, planners and commander should be preparing now to begin giving existing U.S. headquarters in the theater the appropriate military assistance capabilities.

Finally, all this must take place while we and Iraq continue fighting a war. Though the Iraqi armed forces continue to improve, U.S. combat support, and particularly U.S. advisors in "transition teams" will continue to be critically needed for the foreseeable future. The U.S. advisory mission during this period of transition deserves special emphasis. As U.S. combat units withdraw, and BCT commanders leave as well, maintaining effective personal relationships with Iraqi military leaders will become even more vital than at present. With the withdrawal of the BCTs, the American advisory mission will shoulder the entire main effort of U.S. operations in Iraq, and the selection, training and support of forward-deployed advisors becomes even more important than at present. Advisors generally succeed because of one or more of three factors -- political weight (the advisor can "rat out" incompetent counterparts), professional competence respected by the counterpart, or the ability to deliver -- supplies, medical evacuation, transportation, and especially firepower. As U.S. influence transitions, the ability to finger incompetent counterparts will decline, leaving professional competence -- a function of assigning

top-notch professionals to advisory jobs -- and combat support, which will be a function of how the "transition theater" is designed to support advisors in the field -- the main effort.

Military planners sometimes joke about the man who is always surprised by the arrival of lunch. The BCT drawdown has been forecasted long enough that no one should be surprised. But beyond the drawdown, the more serious planning and command challenge is the transition that the BCT drawdown represents, from warfighting to support, and from support to a more normalized military to military relationship with an Iraqi army with which the U.S. already has strong ties. Succeeding in this new phase of war is critical to capitalize on, and preserve, the gains won with such difficulty by U.S. and Iraqi soldiers to date.

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