



Executive Summary

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THE U.S. ARMY IN THE IRAQ WAR: VOLUME 2 SURGE AND WITHDRAWAL

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The U.S. Army in the Iraq War was commissioned by Chief of Staff of the Army General Raymond Odierno in 2013 to serve as the initial Army's operational level history of the conflict. While he instructed that the review should be held to the same academic and evidentiary requirements of previous historical studies, other aspects would be fundamentally different. Believing that a classified review of the war would not be circulated sufficiently to engender organizational learning and change, General Odierno directed that the final product should be a readable, unclassified narrative. He also challenged the authors to maturely address topics previously considered taboo. In order to meet these intents, thousands of hours of interviews were conducted, and tens of thousands of pages of documents were declassified—ultimately resulting in a product cleared for public release by the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review. This manuscript also includes assessments that at times will strike a critical tone that some readers find unusual for an Army study.

Given the operational level focus of the study, our attention primarily settled on the corps and theater level commanders whose responsibility fell in creating campaign plans that translated strategic political guidance into tactical direction and that blended the various elements of national power toward a strate-

gic goal. Our objective was to understand not only the decisions that were made and when, but why they were made and the process through which they were determined. At times, our focus shifts up to the strategic level when new guidance was reviewed and issued, and down to the tactical level when changes at that level affected the operational level. Although the book is titled as an Army history, it includes considerable information about the contributions of our coalition allies, the U.S. Marine Corps, and special operations forces. The Army has not fought a conflict unilaterally in recent history, and the Iraq War is no exception. An operational level review that failed to examine the critical contributions of these elements would have tremendous gaps in trying to fully understand the conflict.

This volume, the second of two, begins with the realization by U.S. national leaders that Multi-National Force-Iraq's (MNF-I) transition strategy had failed and a new plan of action was required. The search for a new strategy eventually settled on what was coined "the surge," a radically new approach that rebalanced the mission's ends, ways, and means. Five additional brigade combat teams and two marine infantry battalions were ordered to Iraq. American forces reversed course on the policies of the previous 2 years by vastly expanding the coalition footprint and taking the lead,

at least temporarily, for establishing security. The situation these new forces faced was dire. In late 2006, Iraq was in the throes of a civil war, with government ministries and security forces barely functioning. Rival militias controlled many of the neighborhoods in Baghdad and vast elements of the Iraqi security forces were controlled by sectarian elements or were ineffective. Civilian casualties were at the highest levels of the entire war, with bodies displaying evidence of torture appearing in the capital and downstream in the Tigris each morning. Iraq was tearing itself apart and its survival as a united state was in question.

To reverse these trends, coalition leaders prioritized protecting the population as the centerpiece of their new strategy. Rather than defer to Iraqi forces, who were at times complicit in the sectarian killing, coalition forces took the lead in combating the accelerants of violence, acting as honest brokers between the warring factions. These additional forces spread out across Iraq and reestablished bases of operations inside Baghdad's neighborhoods and its "belts"—creating a permanent presence that increased their situational awareness and reduced the carnage. These actions allowed Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) to systematically gain control of large sections of the capital and further enabled reconstruction efforts. A methodical series of offensive operations pushed sectarian elements farther and farther from Baghdad.

At the same time, coalition leaders recognized the value of the organic Sunni Awakening, itself at least partially a result of al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) brutal methods and tactical overreach. By underwriting this risky effort to engage former insurgents, some of who had undoubtedly killed Americans, coalition senior leaders empowered one of the major turning points of the war. As the alliance of Sunni militants shifted in favor of the coalition, a major source of sectarian violence was diminished and coalition manpower grew exponentially. This proved beneficial in two ways. Sunni groups launched fewer and fewer attacks and coalition forces were able to shift their efforts to combat the ability of Shi'a militants to inflame tensions. With both insurgencies under increasing pressure, peace slowly returned to central Iraq and the coalition set its sights on what appeared to be the last stronghold of Sunni extremism in Mosul.

By the end of 2008, Iraq's Sunni insurgency had been subdued, as former insurgents joined the coalition as Sons of Iraq. Similarly, Iranian-backed Shi'a militias had been defeated across southern and central Iraq. Even the militia stronghold of Sadr City was returned to government control. The surge's military gains were indisputable, setting the stage for

coalition military forces to shift from combat to stability and support operations. What remained to be seen was whether the hard-fought operational gains would translate into a stable and secure Iraq through political improvements.

Initially, there appeared to be grounds for optimism. The provincial elections of January 2009, in which Iraqi voters in almost every Arab province elected parties running on a nationalist law and order platform, boded well for political stability. The Combined Security Mechanism, a de facto peacekeeping force designed to prevent Arab-Kurd conflict, was organized along the Green Line and proved effective. However, improvement in Iraq's situation brought paradoxical changes at the strategic level, eventually allowing both Sunni extremist groups and Iranian sponsored militias to recover and again threaten the Iraqi state. As Iraq's security situation improved, its government exerted more independence over its own future. Many of the decisions made by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki during this time proved to be more beneficial to his own political standing and that of supportive Shi'a parties than to the long-term viability of the Iraqi state. As a result, the George W. Bush administration was unable to obtain a long-term security agreement to allow U.S. forces to remain in Iraq long enough to ensure the country remain on its path to recovery.

While coalition and Iraqi leaders struggled to secure hard-fought military gains through political progress, political support in the United States for this effort had waned. The "Washington and Baghdad clocks," about which General David Petraeus had often warned his staff, had run out. Successive Presidential administrations reduced the number of troops in Iraq. As a result, MNF-I, and later United States Forces-Iraq (USF-I), raced against time to prepare the Iraqi military to take responsibility for their nation's security. This task was made infinitely harder due to the provisions of the 2008 security agreement. The agreement stipulated that, in addition to the requirement that U.S. combat troops leave Iraq by the end of 2011, coalition forces had to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 2009, thereafter required to coordinate all operations through their Iraqi military and police counterparts. Iraq's improved situation also provided justification to the administration of President Barack Obama—elected on a platform of decreasing American involvement in the Middle East—to carry out that very policy. The speed of the drawdown accelerated significantly, culminating in an unexpected and complete withdrawal in 2011.

What followed was tragic, but not unexpected. PM Maliki's sectarianism and authoritarianism only increased as the U.S. presence decreased. Following the complete withdrawal of forces in December 2011, his actions hollowed out the Iraqi security forces and alienated the Sunni communities, leading some of its members to rejoin militant extremists in fighting the central government. The U.S. Embassy and the under-resourced Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq were unable to influence PM Maliki and arrest the downward spiral of the Iraqi security forces. Month by month the situation worsened, as Iraq's civil war, which had been smoldering since the departure of U.S. forces, reignited. As Iraq's security forces collapsed in the face of an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) offensive, U.S. forces were to return less than 3 years after they had departed.

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