

On the Ground in Iraq

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Our Congressional delegation landed in Kuwait. It was 140 degrees on the tarmac. We were rushed off our Air Force jet to catch a military transport so we could meet with senior Iraqi leaders in Baghdad. It took three attempts to find a 1960s C-130 transport plane capable of flying us to Baghdad. Our mission was to see first-hand the state of U.S. military and political operations in Iraq. Our trouble finding a plane capable of getting us there underscored the tactical reality facing our military: the Bush Administration has exhausted our troops and military in pursuit of nation building.

My trip to Iraq was an important opportunity for me to see the conditions faced by our troops and to hear directly from our soldiers, Iraqi leaders, American diplomats and U.S. military commanders about the successes we have had and the challenges we face.

While in Iraq, I met with Florida soldiers, including Sergeant David Harvey, a Marine from Okeechobee who was stationed in downtown Ramadi. I cannot overstate the patriotism and caliber of our soldiers, whose courage and strength in the face of tremendous difficulties makes me proud to be an American. Our troops have gone above and beyond the call of duty. They removed a brutal dictator and have given Iraq the opportunity to form a peaceful democracy. They have done everything America asked them to do and like those who have served before them, they deserve our utmost respect and honor.

Iraq is a complex nation and our involvement is complex as well. Al Qaeda was the enemy of Saddam Hussein prior to the war. Due to Bush Administration's blunders, Al Qaeda came into Iraq with the support of Sunni tribal leaders as an ally in the inevitable religious civil war. As a result, Iraq has become a battleground in the Global War on Terror.

The good news is we have Al Qaeda on the run. What has changed in Iraq is the Sunni tribal leaders' realization that they formed an alliance with the "devil" and they want out. They have seen Al Qaeda's brutal thugs take over their businesses, assassinate their leaders and impose their radical form of Islam on their people. In Al Anbar Province, which the National Intelligence Estimate had written off as lost just months ago, we have seen a dramatic turnaround as a result of the tough military operations to rid the region of Al Qaeda and coupled with the civil stability that comes from the support of the people.

Iraq is also embroiled in a religious civil war between Sunni and Shiite fighting over who is going to control the country's enormous wealth. This civil war is generating over 85 percent of the violence today. During my meetings with Iraqi officials and U.S. military commanders, it became even clearer that the deteriorating situation in Iraq is due to political instability that results from the civil war. Iraq cannot be salvaged through military action alone. It is a political problem that needs a political solution.

Iraq lacks a functioning federal government that represents the Iraqi people. Currently, many elected leaders are

controlled by Iranian-backed Shiite militias. In order to move forward, the Bush Administration will have to admit that the elections that took place in December 2005 were premature and resulted in a parliament that elected Iranian-backed militia leaders. Both General Petraeus and Deputy Commander of the Iraqi Army Major General Adnan discussed the problems this situation creates. Iraq needs a Shiite Prime Minister who will use the Iraqi Army to destroy the militias and restore order. Until this happens, the Kurds and the Sunni minorities will never trust a Shiite led federal government

The reality is that the current troop level in Iraq is unsustainable - nothing short of a declaration of war and a draft would allow America to maintain current U.S. operations. What we need is a new course. I was heartened to hear General Petraeus discuss this point in our meeting. As I have said for over two years, the key is diplomacy. We need to get our troops out of policing a civil war and focus on destroying Al Qaeda. We need to continue training the Iraqi security forces and protecting Iraqi sovereignty. Finally, Iraq needs to hold new elections to get a truly representative government and a Shiite Prime Minister who is loyal to the Iraqi people, not the Iranian-backed Shiite militias. The time has come for straight talk and a real plan. We owe it to Sergeant David Harvey and all of our brave men and women in uniform.

Congressman Tim Mahoney

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