

## Iraq: Transition to Embassy Lead – 2010-2012

*James Franklin Jeffrey*

United States Ambassador to Iraq, 2010-2012

The 2011 transition from a US military-centric American presence in Iraq to a diplomatic lead, requiring the build out of already the largest US embassy since Vietnam, was an extraordinary political and logistical effort, all but unparalleled in State Department history. The transition's success and its many challenges provide lessons for both the upcoming Afghanistan transition and 'expeditionary diplomacy' generally. It provides a model for diplomatic primacy in a conflict environment, but also cautionary lessons on the limits of diplomatic engagement in a war zone.

The strategic context for the transition was the relative success which the United States and Iraq had achieved in defeating insurgencies and stabilizing the country through a democratic government. Both countries believed that a close, long-term relationship, and continued US support, were essential, and mirrored this belief formally in the bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement of 2008. But the primary platform for US support was exactly these military forces, and their political-military activities beyond classic combat or kinetic missions. However, a parallel document, Status of Forces Agreement (or familiarly, "SOFA"), committed the United States to withdraw its military forces by the end of 2011. The embassy thus would have to take on many roles aside from kinetic operations previously undertaken by the military, in a country still plagued by violence.

After President Obama confirmed this mission to the new US team in August 2010, headed on the military side by General Lloyd Austin, and on the civilian, by me, we both concluded that we would have to work as a seamless team, and the US military would have to coach its 'relief in place' diplomatic organization. I could not have had a better partner.

Job One was to conceptualize our major tasks.

Shorthand for them was what we termed "the Five M's:" "Money" (eventually for FY 2012 alone over \$6.2 billion); "Months" (or "Minutes"—time pressure to get ready by the end of 2011); "Maliki," shorthand for the Iraq government's vision of relations post-2011, and buy-in to our extraordinary 16,000 strong presence, with large security forces and an aircraft fleet; "Missions"—what key jobs we'd focus on; and "Management"—the structures we would deploy to execute both the transition itself and the post-2011 presence.

Each "M" influenced the others, but the ultimate driver was "Missions." United States Force-Iraq\* under General Austin inventoried over 1,000 'beyond combat' missions his command was doing, the lion's share to go to the embassy. Fortunately General Austin deployed scores of uniformed staffers to reinforce embassy sections' preparation work, and he intervened on the scene, for example in Basra, to speed up construction.

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\* *Editor's Note: United States Force-Iraq (USF-I) was the military element responsible for defense and security cooperation as agreed with the Government of Iraq under the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement.*

The mission's transferring from the military began with the huge train and equip program (over \$10 billion in Foreign Military Sales, with 700 plus defense firm experts and trainers in country). We also were to take over police training, originally with 200 trainers. In addition, we had to assume major mentoring, advising, and information-sharing roles focused on building a strong Iraqi conventional force, and supporting the still ongoing counter-insurgency and counterterrorism missions. We also strove to maintain as broad a country-wide presence as possible, particularly in the oil producing areas and along the Kurdish-Arab fault lines. In terms of logistics, the embassy had little choice but to assume the military's Logistics and Civil Aviation Program (LOGCAP) and the Defense Logistics Agency's mega-contracts for everything from firefighting to shipping in food for 16,000 souls from Kuwait. Planning for all this was daunting; actually carrying it out initially a nightmare.

This enormous planning effort dominated much of the embassy's energy, while we simultaneously coped with our own security, did various diplomatic tasks, and continued an amazing program of government capacity building, economic development, infrastructure support, and democracy, human rights and refugee/displaced person programs through USAID, the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, and other organizations.

Three major challenges confounded our careful planning.

First, by late 2010 it was clear that our ambitious planning for field operations was not sustainable, given the huge security-driven costs of each local 'platform' (\$50-200 million annually), and Iraqi reticence at the size of our field presence. In the end, our diplomatic field locations were reduced from an overly ambitious seven to three. But we also had to put under overall embassy control six Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) sites.

Second, in mid-2011 the Obama administration and the Iraqi government agreed in principle on keeping after 2011 a residual US military training presence of a few thousand troops. This was much welcomed, but complicated planning; while continuing work on a mega-embassy, we simultaneously worked on a training presence under CENTCOM. It would have executed missions we had envisaged the embassy assuming—the train and equip function, and the various DOD logistical support contracts. It also would have provided legal authorities in which the US mission could remain embedded. In October 2011, this option floundered on the Iraqi refusal to grant the US military legal immunities in a new SOFA. To some degree this effort diffused our embassy planning and definitely diverted the top Iraq leadership from focusing on the embassy presence.

This leads to third issue, involving the Iraqi government. With Nouri al-Maliki and other political leaders spending much time on the politically volatile question of a residual military presence, they had little bandwidth left to focus on the 'other' contingency—the embassy assuming all these paramilitary functions while ballooning in size. The Iraqi political crisis further diverted attention, with one result—no permanent ministers of defense or interior—robbing us of key interlocutors and advocates for the transition. One

casualty: much of our police training mission. The United States and Iraq were only able to get down to the transition details in late November, just as the last troops left.

After dramatic exchanges at the highest levels, the Iraqis acknowledged the value of the embassy's capabilities as a substitute for the US military's non-combat roles, and accepted in principle the need for bilateral arrangements for our operations under the Vienna Convention. But 'principle' is not performance, and differing views on what the agreements should cover led to another crisis, with a near collapse of elements of our field presence due to the fear of inadequate privileges and immunities, and then another white heat round of negotiations led by the embassy with both the Iraqis and an irritated Washington over the December holidays.

In the end, new jury-rigged agreements, and 'creative' programs to adapt the Vienna diplomatic procedures to a wholesale operation involving tens of thousands of visas and thousands of food trucks, did the trick. By late January we were operating 'normally' without daily crises. This gave us room to start adjusting our pseudo-military standard operating procedures for air operations, border crossings, and personnel to models more acceptable to the Iraqis, and more in line with traditional embassy operating and logistics procedures—i.e. much more 'living off the land.' Here we were helped by the generally improving security situation. In the end, the embassy was able to take over essentially all the missions we had been tasked to assume. And, almost nine months after our troops left, it continues to meet tolerably well our strategic goals, while Iraq remains basically peaceful and democratic.

Most of the credit for this is due to the forbearance and efforts of the Iraqi government, and the flexibility and pure grit of embassy staffers and those in the military and in Washington backing us, who simply would not give up.

But there are a few lessons.

First, our Balkan experience of the (US/international) troops staying and the violence ending, is not a good guide to the Iraqi experience (and possibly of Afghanistan): US/international troops' presence ending and the violence—if reduced—staying. This is particularly relevant as force protection must remain Job One. But the security model our embassies have in war zones as an adjunct to the US military, hunkered down in hermetically sealed bases with US or other non-local contractor security and logistics, and the host government and population essentially excluded, is hard to implement once US forces and their legal authorities are gone. Then the embassy has to look more 'State Department' and operate under a restrictive Vienna Convention, as opposed to a liberal SOFA regime. A useful rule of thumb would be: If the stakes are important for us diplomatically, then international or US forces should not leave entirely as long as the violence continues.

Next, the embassy and US military command must enjoy utmost collaboration and mutual respect. Yet the US military must understand that the embassy can only do a small portion of the training, liaison, field presence, counterterrorism and intelligence

gathering/liaison that a robust uniformed force performs. But that ‘small portion’ may—and must—be enough to meet US strategic goals in a calmer security environment.

Finally, plans made in Washington to execute policy or meet budget cycles well may not coincide with the locals’ vision. And they have the decisive vote, it’s their country. Embassy efforts to replicate in scale and breadth of the US military’s ‘civil affairs’ functions simply might not be acceptable, and ditto with twisting the Vienna Convention, designed to establish status for handfuls of pinstriped suits, into a regime covering thousands. We can sell this model, but it’s painful, and requires high level intervention and incredible demands on our expeditionary diplomats and other government officials. They have shown in Iraq that they can meet these demands, but this is a model that should only be used in extraordinary circumstances.