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Dinner: DV Keane and Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie

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A private home in the International Zone, Baghdad

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Abstract

Casey and Abizaid had the wrong strategy. Security should always have been the first priority. Rubaie said national reconciliation has driven improvements. Keane says security drove national reconciliation. Rubaie wants to move beyond security discussions to cultural, economic, medical, educational exchanges, etc.

Discussion

The dinner was at the home of (b)(6) was also there. Dr. Rubaie joined the dinner unexpectedly. General Keane seemed taken aback by Dr. Rubaie's arrival. I did not take notes through most of the conversation, but I pulled out my book for these points. It was a heady evening, one whose finer points I described in 'Breathe, but don't inhale.'

Keane: I blame Abizaid and Casey for executing the wrong strategy.

Rayburn: General Abizaid accepted the notion that the insurgency was really nationalist and that the key thing was to just leave.

Keane: The 2004 Joint Campaign Plan did two things. First, it underestimated the enemy, overlooked the fact that violence was escalating. Even with US support, the ISF could not cope with that level of violence, but we kept transferring provinces and reducing. By the summer of 2006, Baghdad was on fire, and yet leaders kept saying the strategy was working. It was clear it was failing.

Keane: We realized we had to have security as a precondition to politics. On July 4, 2003, Bremer told me he had to have security before anything else. He was right, although he got every other decision wrong.

Rubaie: We [Iraqi forces] went into Hianiyah neighborhood in Basra. It is easy to flatten a neighborhood, but we went in and the people did not fight us. We can do that. You can't. You have this 'not-let-go' syndrome that is another problem.

I interjected at this point, explaining the 'not-let-go' syndrome was connected to a 'can do' attitude.

Rubaie: That is it. Hanging on creates a backlash risk and a dependency syndrome.

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Fred Kagan: I disagree completely.

Rubaie: Why has there been an improvement? First, the crucial factor has been national reconciliation.

Keane: Why did reconciliation happen? A Sunni leader said "because Bush occupied our national capitol." It was when the President made a national commitment that Sunnis turned to the winning side and turned on the losers, AQI.

Kagan: There were many mistakes and thousands of needless casualties. At the end of 2006, we knew more would die. We though interests and obligations demanded that commitment. We have to move beyond recriminations. But, sometimes there is too much criticism from the Iraq side. We must find ways to move beyond. This kind of conversation is very dangerous in today's American political environment.

Rubaie: Yes, we must move on, but we must also learn from our mistakes. I've south this since 1966. Our message is that we are heading west. We are seeking a strategic alliance. There are no two ways about it. That is not open for discussion. It is very important. We should not have lost lives unnecessarily. Let us not make similar mistakes by delaying and losing momentum. We must take risks and move forward. . . My grand vision is that we move on to economic, cultural, medical, and political exchanges. I want a program for 10,000 scholars.

UNK: PM Maliki announced a plan to send 10,000 scholars a year to the US and the west. We are trying to implement it.

Rubaie: We must move from security issues to other issues. Move to other issues. I want to move beyond security issues.

Fred Kagan: You need to say that publicly and frequently.

Yaseen: I know there is a rush to do things quickly, but it is important to move deliberately.

At some point, the conversation turned to 23 March and the PM's dramatic move on Basra. Kagan pointed to the audacity of that move, and the fact that with the PM out of the capital, the ISF stayed absolutely loyal. [What, they might have considered a coup, with the Americans all around them?] I interjected that the best historical example for Iraq is the French Fourth Republic—a constitutional basket case with a disloyal officer corps. The Iraqis, I said, "are not out of the woods yet." (b)(6) suddenly interjected, with a big smile and pointing straight at me, "I agree completely!"

[Addendum, 080717 at 10:09 AM] As I keep thinking about all the conversation, it seems to me that Rubaie expressed particular concern about the militarization of society, though I may be confusing this with (b)(6) I believe Rubaie specifically mentioning that he had heard the Iraqi Army was

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planning for its 17th Division. It currently has 14. "17!" Rubaie said. "Who decided this? Who discussed this? I am the National Security Advisor. Why was this not discussed with me?" He sees a broken bureaucratic system in which the Iraqi military is planning its own growth without check by civil authorities, and why is such a huge military necessary, Rubaie wants to know. Kagan and Keane would stress the final work of defeating the threat. Rubaie counters that operational successes in Basrah and Sadr City and Mosul show the government has popular support and Iraqis will not resist Iraqi forces, and Iraq is not going to fight Iran again. Iraq will engage Iran, and through engagement counter and smother the idea or potential of an Iranian threat. "Let Iran send one million pilgrims a year to Najaf and Karbala," Rubaie said. "Let them see our satellite dishes, our freedoms, our growth and prosperity. They will go back, and the mullahs will quake at the demands for change Iraqis will make of their own government because of what they've seen in Iraq." This does not, in Rubaie's mind, require a large Army, which he fears for what internal threat it could potentially pose itself in the future.

[Addendum, 080801 at 8:32 PM] Though I did not write it down in my notes, as I was listening at the time and not writing, I know I heard General Keane express the idea that what was happening in Iraq "is a dagger pointing straight at Iran." He said it with an earnest conviction. I took it in no way to mean he intended that Iraq should serve as a base for the launching of attacks on Iran. I took it to mean he was sure that a progressive, modernized and liberalized Iraq would be would so surpass mullah-led Iran that Iranians would throw off the theocracy and re-integrate with the rest of the world, thereby bringing and end to the Iraqi-Iranian conflicts with another victory for westernization. He conveyed the same idea about Arab states. His notion was that Sunni Arab autocrats would quake, falter, and then necessarily reform as a progressive Iraq out shown them all. Rubaie and others seemed amenable to the idea that Saudi Arabia and others fear the democratic, liberal power arising in Baghdad, the one that would eclipse their pretensions and be a shining light to the region. I think Keane screwed up terribly with the "dagger line." What could such a phrase possibly accomplish except make its way back through one Iraqi or another gathered here to Iranian government ears, and through those to confirm Tehran's worst fears, even invite greater belligerency? There is no other word for it: Keane, a man with access to the president, for all his accomplishments, in this was stupidity itself. The proper principal is this: as per the MNFI mission statement and campaign plan, our only objective is a stable Iraq, one that has a variety of traits like representative, progressive, developing, et cetera. We should not dare speak of anything beyond that that imagines solving the middle east without changes in Israel-Palestine. We should not be so stupid as to speak of "daggers" pointing at Iran. If we're wise, we should be conceive implicitly that positive, progressive developments in Iraq would tend to have beneficial effects vis-à-vis Iran, but we should do that without using any belligerent language toward Iran, or even couch the US-Iraqi relationship in terms that are even in the slightest sense anti-Iranian. So, make no mistake, I thought Keane an absolute strategic fool for such utterances.

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