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26 July 2008

Al Faw Palace, Victory Base Camp, Baghdad

By (b)(3), (b)(6)

MNFI Historian

Abstract

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Most analyst and most of the Pentagon were firmly against a surge, and they attacked as an ideological resurrection of the neo-cons. Rumsfeld never understood what was happening. As things got progressively worst, Rumsfeld ignored it, and dismissed the insurgency, because he couldn't fit it into his mindset. The 11 July 2008 dinner with Keane and Rubaie laid out opposing viewpoints, and strange ones. Keep your expectations of Iraq grounded. I believe the SFA will get back on track. The elections law is vital. We have to have it. The situation has made an amazing and complete turnaround in the last year. 1:11:15

Interview

What is your background?

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And where did ya'll land?

6:20. Arkansas, Ft. Smith, Arkansas.

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On 9/11, I was a student volunteer helping with the mayoral race in the local election. We were outside at a booth when someone came up and said America was under attack. I then saw the second plane hit on TV. A couple of days later,

12:40. I remember very clearly I was sitting in a physical anthropology class, which was probably my favorite course next to international relations course, at Arizona, and that's when . . . the next day I went to my advisor and told him I wanted to switch my major.

Did anyone ever come question you or someone you knew because of your name or background?

13:10. Never. Ironically, no. I joke around with my friends that I never had any trouble, in going through the airport, anything. Ironically, a lot of my south Asian friends have. [laughter] Because of names, appearance, and I travel a lot. I travel a lot between the East Coast and the West Coast, so you would think that you would, but I never did. There was a lot of commentary that the situation has changed for Arab-Americans and south Asians as well, and Islamic background, but I never empathized with that because I never experienced it. Neither did any of my family members. No one harassed them, or my friends, so I always viewed the controversy that America had become more hostile or less welcoming as sort of a tempest in a teapot. It was hyperbole, and blown way out of proportion. If anything, I saw an outpouring of support for those communities. It is very telling of the essence of America, by itself, that

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that is the sort of response you would get. Imagine what would have happened if it had been France. There would have been race riots, or England, something on that magnitude.

How did grad school come about?

In my senior year, I took the GRE and did extremely well. I applied to a number of schools and was accepted at Georgetown, my first choice. This was all difficult for my parents to accept, entering the social science, because they did not know how that would translate into a future. Of course, I did not know the answer myself. I just knew this was the path that was right for me. Then, going to DC was a stretch because we did not know anybody there. We did not have any networks in Washington. 18:06. So I was kind of a double outsider, thrown into the mix of the beltway.

t sense of being a double outsider stick with you?

18:30. Yes, in a sense. Look, I'm proud of my history, and my background, and my name will always be (b)(6) and that's a good and positive thing and I feed off of that.

On 11 July, at the embassy annex, you told me Emma Sky once told you "Breathe, but don't inhale." When did she tell you that, and what does it mean to you?

20:15 Emma Sky is the senior political advisor to General Petraeus and LTG Odierno. She was relating to me advice that someone had given her, when all of a sudden you find yourself in the middle of this unique experience, with historical figures all around you, and for this to constantly be the state, here in a Iraq, here in the thick of it, and the advice given to her was "Breathe, but don't inhale" when you're around these centers of power. On the one hand, you have the ability to influence the policy of the greatest superpower on Earth by your proximity to the Commanding General in his dealings with Iraq, in managing the situation at hand. On the other hand, you're also around senior Iraqi figures, and you could influence their actions by any word that you say. So you asked me what is it like to be around these figures, and I said, well, it's kind of regular now, for me. I don't bat an eye. It's just, "oh, there's Muwafuq Rubaie." I try not to let it get to my head. It is a very Washington-specific phenomenon, you know "I work for this congressman; I work for the Secretary of State; I work for this senior individual." When you're around it and sitting with the CG or the 3-star or the senior Iraqi delegation, who are charged with negotiating this historic agreement between our two countries, the advice was to stay grounded when you find yourself in the middle of this incredibly improbable situation. I mean, two years ago I was sitting behind a desk worried about whether I was going to get an A on my essay. [laughter] Today I am in the middle of my generation's war with the potential of influencing its outcome in some small way.

How did you get from the desk to here?

23:00. It was a very long and windy road. I was accepted to Georgetown but I deferred starting for a year. In the summer of 2004, I came to Iraq to work with the Lincoln Group working strategic Information Operations. I stayed through the summer of '05, and then returned to Georgetown. When I finished two years later, I walked right into (b)(6) 10 US. They needed people with subject matter expertise in the region. Only in America. [laughter]. That was in May 2007. Literally, three weeks after

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graduation, I was back on a plane. So I only took a break from Iraq to go to school. I arrived on 26 July 2007

What were things like here from 2004 through 2005? Didn't it seem that things were off track?
26:45. Interesting enough, in the summer, after the first Fallujah, things were fairly calm. It wasn't until . . . right after the summer CPA handover, things were fairly calm. I would go have lunch and dinner in Iraqi cafes with Iraqi friends. We were able to do that. Wasn't until Nov-Dec, the time of the elections, that you could feel that things were heating up. We weren't looking at attack trends. We were looking at what people were saying, and what was in the newspapers that our translators were translating for us.

Was this because of Fallujah, or because of the run up to the elections in January '05?
28:20. I don't think the elections were the driving force behind the violence. There were many independent variables involved, and the elections just happened to occur at that time. The elections [January 2005] were a great success. I felt . . . a special pride seeing elections being held in Iraq, in the heart of the Arab world, which you just don't see, and that was the prism by which I judged them. Despite the violence and the growing ethno-sectarian tensions, despite the suicide bombings, seeing families bring their 90-year-old grandmothers and grandfathers, look you just don't have . . . the visuals of elections in the heart of the Arab world is just an especially powerful one for me. That was to set up the parliament, the council of representatives.

Did getting the assembly set up after the elections look pretty bad?
29:47. It was a complete mess, but it was politics at work among people who had never had to form an assembly before. There were having to set up the constitution, and it was very convoluted. It took a lot of forward leaning efforts by MNFI and the USMI. It was an organic process, where you started with, a few years back, a hard-line, Stalinist government, and now you had political coalitions forming, deals being made, nascent democracy forming in the most improbable of places in the Arab world. Yeah, it was messy, it still is messy, but it is functioning.

When you got on the plane that summer of '05, did you think things were on track?
31:00. It felt like things were on track but that they weren't. I mean, the violence was starting to spiral out of control, I'm talking about the Ethno-Sectarian Violence, not just the attacks . . . it was always . . . the murders and the forced evacuation of families from neighborhoods . . . it was . . . the insurgency always worried me. The Sunni insurgency, by then, had gathered full steam, that worried me, but not as much, because they did not have a political ethos. I knew that it would be a tough fight, but that it would burn out. The Ba'athist retreads and the jihadists would not gain the necessary traction to come back, to succeed, to force their non-vision on the people. So I didn't worry about the Sunni insurgency; I worried about the lasting impact of the Ethno-Sectarian Violence on the psyche of the population, which extremists were engendering.

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32:30. In the summer of '05, I returned to Georgetown, the School of Foreign Service, and it was a fascinating time at the height of the war. My professors had a lot of experience in foreign policy, Madeleine Albright was there, but only two professors supported what we were trying to do in Iraq. That was [redacted (b)(6)] who taught at the War College, a retired colonel, who taught the low-intensity conflict class.

In 2006, with the Samarra bombing, and the escalating violence through the year, and the continued escalation in 2007, was it hard to get on a plane and come back again?

34:30. By that time, it was interesting, being at the Pentagon, by that time we had a feel for the reality of the ground, from the statistical point of view, 150 attacks, 180 attacks, and then the Samarra bombing. At that point, to us, it was, I don't know, we were numb to the facts. I remember being one of the few . . . individuals, who took a steadfast position, given all the facts before you, who said, "Look, this can still work." At the darkest moment of our efforts in Iraq, I still believed it could work. At our nadir, I still had faith, 1) in Iraqis being able to turn it around, and 2) in our forces' ability to learn. We had made a lot of early mistakes, a lot, but there was a visceral feeling . . . there was no question of me coming back. My first day in class, I knew I was coming back to Iraq. That sort of megalomania attitude that I could still get away with in my early twenties, that notion that "I'm not going to lose my first war." [laughter]. I'm going to do everything I can.

What was the general reaction among analysts when the talk of a surge started? Did they say "Surge? This is over! We're leaving!"

36:40. Yes, yes, there was a lot of that, especially in the Pentagon. Look, the Joint Chiefs were against this. We were fighting a guerrilla war against our own bureaucracy, and our bureaucracy was fighting a guerrilla war against the command, because this was an untested strategy. It was a strategy to win, to invest more into an endeavor that people had written off as a sunk cost, so logically, taking a surface-level point of view, it just didn't make sense, right? So, that was certainly the . . . among the analysts and the bureaucracy among the Pentagon, and being there as an entry-level young analyst, that was the predominate sense that I got. Among analysts and the bureaucracy, they were almost all against the surge, and then as an extension of that, there was sort of a recrimination of people who supported it that they were being ideological, that the same ideological strain that led us into this war in the first place was now driving an even greater investment of our resources in what was ostensibly a lost cause.

It was the "return of the neo-cons"?

38:10. Yes. Yes. There was always the neo-con boogeyman, which I found to be ridiculous, and it was thrown around a lot, and so you had this visceral hatred for a few individuals in the administration manifest itself, writ large, to a sense where people opposed the surge as sort of a scheme hashed up in the dark corners of the Vice President's office. So I definitely got that sense. I wouldn't say it was dominate, but it was widely prevailing.

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It seems that one thing that was necessary to the surge was to have a purge in the Pentagon.
How did policy-making do this about face?

39:30. The bottom line is you had a President who was willing to move what seemed a Sisyphian struggle to gather the resources of the country and do what had to be done. There was just too much momentum against this thing within the government, without national stand behind the Commander in Chief, this thing would not have come about. I remember Petraeus sitting down at the American Enterprise Institute between General Keane and the (b)(6) this was between MNCSTCI and MNFI. The hall was packed, and they were unveiling the plan for the surge. They were making the pitch for it. I was sitting in the conference room. The media was there, and everyone who could fit in was there. And people just were not buying it, because people were projecting their prejudices of how this thing had been going up to that point into the future, how it would always be. "JSSs? What about our people? What about the sovereignty of the government? What about the ISF? They'll never have the incentive to stand up if we take a more forward leaning position, if we're on the front, if we're pushing the Gol towards reconciliation and purging non-aligned governments. In the end, if POTUS hadn't said, "This has to be done," it wouldn't have happened.

From your position in the 10 USC 404 and there is a strong perception that sometime in April 2003, Donald Rumsfeld was thr with Iraq, and he never again gave it the time of day. What indications have you ever that that was the case?

42:10. That he . . well, from his snowflakes that came down, a lot of times. He just . . he did not grasp the shifting nature of the insurgency and how it was cascading. He was very dismissive. Very dismissive. It was good thing, the change of leadership in the Department of Defense, couldn't have come at a better time. We had been seeing emergent trends that could have been mitigated, but were not because, again . . . the bottom line was Rumsfeld was entrenched in his paradigm that these were dead-enders, that these were just random sort of units coalescing, there was no insurgency, per se. I mean, the insurgency didn't just drop on our heads over night.

It appeared that Rumsfeld believed the only enemy that mattered was one that you could defeat with technology.

43:20. Absolutely. And, I can understand the leaner, faster military, but in the end, this was a counterinsurgency, from the very beginning, from the very beginning. I mean, yea, we had our honeymoon, four to six months, and then attacks slowly started trickling up, but it was a counterinsurgency from the very beginning after the commencement of conventional hostilities, and Rumsfeld was not able to shift his modalities, he did not have that flexibility. Well into the fight, ultimately that is what I fault him with. Look, from both a practical sense of realpolitik and from an ideological sense I supported the war. So, and Rumsfeld was certainly a crucial component of it, and so for me to come around to the position that . . this is not working out, our Secretary of Defense is not getting it, where the picture is being painted for him and we're not getting a response from his office, accordingly, there was just not that sense of urgency.

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Fast forward and tell me about Ema Sky.

45:40. She told me the phrase in her office; I would stop by in the mornings and we would exchange views and have a morning huddle on many political issues for the day, and that is when she brought it up.

What was the purpose of the 11 July dinner?

You had the senior Iraqi advisors. It included Abdul Mahdi, Fareed Yaseen, Zahar Hamoodi, the chief negotiator for the SFA, Mr. Hamuud, and NSA Dr. Muwafuq Rubaie, so this was the core intelligence for the Iraqi government. Then there was Keane and the (b)(6) and our group. We didn't know if Rubaie would come or not. We meet with Fareed Yaseen fairly regularly. We knew the SFA would be the primary issue. It was interesting that we jumped right into it, and Rubaie seemed to be on the defensive, immediately, when the issue was brought up by General Keane, on the necessity of US forces staying well into, possibly through 2013, in support of Iraqi security forces. Muwafuq Rubaie pushed back, saying they would be completely self-sufficient by 2010, which is just a fantastical idea and not grounded in reality. What stuck out in my mind about Rubaie is he said, "look, our success in the Basra operation proved that we, Iraqis, can through the ISF into the deep end, and they can survive." And when I heard him say that, I thought, 'wow, here we have the Iraq NSA saying this, a well-educated and well-traveled man, telling us that 'hey, we know Basra was not well planned, but it shows that we can risk everything and survive more or less.' That was a little troubling and disturbing. There was a little hyperbole in there, but I suspect it reflected some deeper thinking and a wider Iraqi view, which is dangerous. The Iraqi forces in Basra did a great job, obviously, but to go from that to the comment that, 'we can through our security forces into the deep end, as it were, and they can survive, and to use that as a pretext for policy going forward, was the key takeaway for me. It was interesting to hear it straight out of Rubaie's mouth, and what that could tell us about the future and about the PM's strategic calculus.

We also saw the notion pop up that evening that Iraqi security forces are getting too big and pose a potential threat to the GoI.

51:00. I never buy into that. I think that is exaggerated. Some corners of the GoI are questioning whether the PM is consolidating power and whether the ISF is becoming an institution unto itself. You're never going to have a return to military rule in this country; there are too many safeguards, too many press freedoms, too many political parties. There has been too much progress. The Iraqi people have 'tasted the fruit,' as it were.

One thing I found interesting is the way that the Iraqis and Americans seemed to trade positions. Rubaie's basic position was the US should withdraw sooner; Keane's was you need to stay longer. But then Rubaie said "pull back, but not too far, because we may need you," and (b)(6) responded that Maliki dared to go to Basra, but the military was steadfastly loyal, and the Arab head of state could dare to leave his capital in a crisis without the military taking a coup, hence the GoI could trust the ISF.

53:00. I'm glad you brought that up. That was very telling, and that is a story that is not often told in the press. I mean, look, for the PM to be sufficiently convinced of what needed to be done. . . look, in

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the Arab world, if you leave the capital for an extended period of time, you risk a coup, you just do, and if you put your military at risk for . . . for whatever reason, you're risking the very institution that is underwriting your rule. That is the reality of the Arab world, but Maliki overturns that existing template. There was a level of political risk that you would not see taken in any other Arab country.

But what about (b)(6) taking this alternative position that the ISF is capable and trustworthy, which strength PM and presumably lessens Iraqi reliance on CF.

54:20. Here we get into the nuances, which unfortunately gets lost in the public debate on these issues. Now, Rubaie, I was sort of looking at things from the social anthropological point of view, at his background, and his relationship to the PM. To me, Rubaie had to take a hardline position to prove his bonafides to the PM, because there is a back story of him having fallen out of favor with the PM, and by sort of feeding the machismo image of the PM's mode of thinking, Rubaie in his mind was building himself up as a trustworthy advisor. And I don't blame Rubaie, because he was surrounded by Americans telling him, "look, you weren't that successful in Basra." Well, the operation in Basra was a shot of adrenaline to the Iraqis, and it was real, all my Iraqi friends put it best when they say, 'we miss this. We miss this.'" So when we put things in the term we did, Rubaie was going to push back. In a way we were challenging his manhood and Iraq's victory was being challenged. That's not the case. This was a discussion among peers and allies seeking to help one another, but I appreciate Rubaie being a little defensive and pushing back on that issue.

With another reference to Emma Sky's advice, 'don't inhale' also seems a caution about getting caught up in excessive expectations.

57:19. Right. It can all be very anti-climatic in the end. In one sense, you're sitting in these high-level meetings, or the meetings are informal and low-key, but they could have an impact, and you think "wow, this is the future happening in front of me." I mean . . . yeah, I can see that interpretation. Look, you always have to ground your expectations, especially in Iraq, otherwise, professional disappointment will just suck the life out of you, and you have to learn to move with the situation as it flows. For example, just look at the other day, it seemed the rug was pulled out from under us with the provincial elections law, and the acrimonious debate in the Iraqi parliament over Kirkuk.

In the last two months, it seems the wheels have fallen off both the SOFA negotiations and the elections law. Now, I'm getting the impression that, "oh, it's a crisis," followed by "oh, it's not really a crisis." So, what's going on?

59:15. If it wasn't a crisis, it wouldn't be Iraq, on any given day. Let's put things in context, for the SFA, Iraqis realize they have to sign it. Maliki wants to be the stability candidate . . . the nationalist leader for his country. That is how he is framing himself, so it is a matter of signing the agreement on his own terms, and selling it to the people. That is a whole different issue from what is actually in the text itself. The Iraqis will get what they want in the text, and we also will get what we want in the text in an enduring relationship, a strategic relationship of security cooperation. The wheels seem to have fallen off the SFA, but in a sense they have not, and I'm confident there will be an agreement, especially in

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An SFA will be signed, one way or another. We shouldn't be overly distracted by the media's cognitive dissonance.

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1:00:45. In terms of the elections law, that is what probably concerns me the most. How much further can we delay, into '09? How patient are the former insurgents and the Iraqi people. An Iraqi friend said, 'we will carry our mothers on our backs to the polls. There is no longer a question of the founding pretext of the elections. People are questioning whether the process will be fair, whether the government will be representative, but the signs of progress are sure.

If these elections do not succeed, you will not have future elections, I fear.

Elections are mandated in the constitution, but the process and modalities are what is being debated in the CoR. The IHEC can proceed with elections this year without the law having passed, but that would not be easy, and I don't think it is likely, but it is possible.

What else would you add to sum up this period?

1:04:30. When I arrived in July 2007, VBC was being pounded with IDF. The IZ was being pounded. Tawafuq pulled out of the government. The government seemed to be collapsing. The Mahdi Army was fighting us throughout the south. Then, it got better. They hit that peak, and we had Operation Phantom Phoenix and the fight for the southern belts. Then, we moved into the period where Reconciliation was the buzzword. That was the main issue I was working for six months at Corps, and that was amazing, sitting down with (b)(6) of the Sunni insurgents, who had probably killed many of our men, who came in to talk. He was sitting there dejected, defeated, they had fought a four-front war, they had turned against Al Qaeda.

What was the four fronts?

Starting in late '06, we started seeing AQI imploding, before the surge, in Anbar, in Baghdad, elsewhere. It was proof of the hollowness of Al Qaeda's vision, and why I believed, in '05, they would not succeed. They would not . . . our defeat could only come from our lack of will and acceptance of their hubris.

Does that come down to they had no program except to blow things up?

1:07:10. Yes. Well, they had a program of establishing an Islamic caliphate, an Islamic state, which Sunnis rejected from the beginning. In essence, their defeat was not just operational, it was ideological, and that has wider resonance in the Arab world, and that is why our success in Iraq has shifted the course of history in the most contentious, probably the most important region, for the time being, at least, in the world.

What about Keane's statement about a new Iraq being a "dagger pointing straight at Iran," and the changes here changing the rest of the Arab world?

1:09. I think success here will have beneficial effects elsewhere. They will have to change, for the better, seeing what happens here.

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I agree with you, but my concern is whether that outcome is direct or indirect, and whether our efforts here should be spoken of as having direct consequences, given the probability that it would invite renewed opposition from those who fear or reject changed and reform.

1:10. What is interesting is that in '04 and '05, our enemies thought it was a direct path. I think Iraq's role in the region will be more indirect, which makes it even more threatening to hardline regimes in Tehran and Damascus, which do not want to see Iraq succeed. And that is why we can never leave Iraq to its . . . never leave physically, but emotionally and strategically, as an invaluable ally and a lynchpin for the region. 1:11:15.

The discussion at the end never got to the point I was trying to make: that calling Iraq "a dagger pointing straight at Tehran," was an ill-advised thing for an American presidential advisor to confide to an Iraqi leader who has no desire to renew the Iran-Iraq war.

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