



The Surge Is Over. The Americans Are Going. I'm Leaving Iraq.

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BAGHDAD -- This month I received the long-awaited phone call from the International Organization for Migration telling me that they had put me on their schedule to leave Iraq within the next few weeks.

This will be the second time I leave Iraq for a lengthy period, but this time it might be forever.

I cannot deny that I have mixed feelings about leaving my country and going to another, one completely different from my own. But I am satisfied that going into the unknown is better than staying here, as Iraq has become a guinea pig for its leaders to test which security measures will succeed in stopping the mass killings of Iraqis. This, after 400 Iraqis were killed in three high-profile bombings during the last five months of last year.

Some will probably say that the government got rid of the sectarian violence, and here I will not debate to whom should we attribute that victory. But I would say that after six years we have the same results as if there were still a sectarian war going on: Iraqis are being killed in cold blood.

The first time I left Iraq was in January 2007, when I spent about 15 months in Syria while Baghdad became a sectarian war zone. In April 2008 I returned to find a capital that was improving under a series of steps taken by the American forces backed by the Bush administration. The year 2009 marked the victory of the American policy in Iraq, which paved the way for the Iraqi government to receive the security portfolio from the United States Army.

The Iraqi government celebrated the withdrawal of American forces in July 2009, describing it as a day of victory. However, the following months brought a worse situation for the Iraqi government, as Al Qaeda reappeared and carried out three bombings, leaving hundreds dead.

In addition, a few weeks ago there was an attack just next to the fortified Green Zone that was carried out using explosively formed penetrators (E.F.P.s), which have in the past been used by used by Iranian-backed Shiite armed groups, according to American military officials. These appear to be indications that Iraqi commanders are losing what the Americans achieved in security during 2007 and 2008.

I believe that there were three keystones behind the success of the American policy in Iraq. The first was the surge of the American troops, in which the United States military filled the gaps and deployed in areas that had been left vacant by Iraqi security forces.

The second smart step was the formation of Awakening Councils and the Sons of Iraq, around 100,000 Sunni fighters who worked with the American Army and pulled in Sunnis who had either sympathized with Al Qaeda, or who had been bystanders watching discreetly from a distance because they did not have any support to fight Al Qaeda. These Awakening Councils ruthlessly confronted Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia and the other Sunni insurgency groups.

The third factor was the intensification of American intelligence efforts, which led to the arrest of most leaders of the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militia that played a large role in the sectarian game and conducted many operations against the American troops in Iraq.

The surge was the opening for all later successes in Iraq. But as bases close and American units leave Iraq under the security agreement that went into effect last June, the Iraqi government seems to have sabotaged that achievement. It has conducted a systematic arrest campaign against the Sons of Iraq (although I am not saying that all those who joined the Awakening Councils were innocent), and, in what I believe is a mistake, the government has released of leaders of what is called the League of the Righteous, an Iranian-backed splinter group of the Mahdi Army.

The government held meetings with the group, giving the false excuse that it represented a national resistance against the American occupation and that the leaders' hands were not stained with Iraqi blood. This appeared to many to be a double standard.

There is no doubt that the United States military has passed through a bitter experience in Iraq from the beginning of the invasion in 2003, until 2007. But after 2007 it found the key to decreasing violence, and in the following years Iraq was more secure, enjoying a margin of stability for a short period of time.

But for sure there will be many developments in the coming months, and no one can evaluate what the future will look like here. Until then the big question will still remain: is it possible for Iraq to move on solo without the American crutch? Or will we see another period of darkness?

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