

MNC-I TOA Ceremony
14 February 2008
General David H. Petraeus

Good morning, salam alekum, sabah al hair, and chukrun jazeelan. Thank you all for joining us this morning for the Multi-National Corps-Iraq Transfer of Authority ceremony.

Today, we say "Well done" and "Godspeed" to Lieutenant General – Promotable – Ray Odierno, Command Sergeant Major Neil Ciotola, and the superb III Corps Headquarters that has been the nucleus of the Multi-National Corps–Iraq Headquarters for the past 14 months. This morning, we also say Mabruk, "Congratulations," and "Welcome back," to Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, Command Sergeant Major Joe Allen, and the XVIIIth Airborne Corps Headquarters that today takes on the responsibility of being the core – c o r e – of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq Headquarters.

This ceremony marks a significant transition, one of considerable importance to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and civilians of the 26 nations that compose the Multi-National Corps–Iraq. It is also an occasion of importance to our Iraqi partners and to the shabil Iraqi, the Iraqi people, whom we all serve together. Indeed, the presence of so many Iraqi leaders and Coalition Commanders, Command Sergeants Major, ambassadors, and diplomats underscores the significance of this event. And the presence of such a significant number of distinguished guests and flag officers reflects the enormous respect that so many of us feel for General Odierno and his team. It is a particular honor to have with us this morning Iraqi Minister of Defense Abdul Qadr; Iraq's senior military officer, General Babakir Zebari; the Deputy Commanding General of the Iraqi Armed Forces, General Nasir Abadi; and the Commander of the Baghdad Operations Command, General Abud Kanber, as well as Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the best diplomatic partner any commander could have; General Dick Cody, the US Army's Vice Chief of Staff; and Mr. Arnold Fisher of the Fisher Foundation and Intrepid Center. Thank you all for attending.

Before going further, I also want to thank the officers and non-commissioned officers who organized today's ceremony as well as the Multi-National Division-Baghdad Band and the members of the Task Force Dragon Color Guard. These individuals helped make this ceremony the impressive and professional event that it is, and they deserve our thanks. Please join me in a round of applause for them.

When LTG Ray Odierno and his III Corps Headquarters assumed the task of leading the Multi-National Corps-Iraq fourteen long months ago, the situation was very difficult. In the wake of the bombing of the Samarra Mosque in February 2006, sectarian violence had spiraled upward alarmingly. By the 14 December 2006 Corps Transfer of Authority ceremony, the bloodshed had reached horrific levels. Indeed, the very fabric of Iraqi society had been torn. Al Qaeda-Iraq held sway over large swaths of Anbar and Diyala Provinces and controlled a number of Baghdad neighborhoods. Al Qaeda also had significant safe havens in the so-called belts around Baghdad, in the Tigris River Valley, and in Ninewah Province. From these sanctuaries, Al Qaeda was launching barbaric attacks into Baghdad and other cities, attacks that were designed to achieve maximum loss of innocent life and to add fuel to the cycle of sectarian violence that was ripping Baghdad apart. In turn, militia extremists and Iranian-supported Special Groups were using Al Qaeda's attacks to justify

their criminal activities, and they, too, were carrying out acts of violence, sectarian displacement, and worse.

In many areas -- especially those in which the situation was virtually out-of-control -- Iraq's Security Forces were unable to deal with the violence. Some Iraqi units had been completely intimidated and rendered ineffective; others were themselves participating in sectarian attacks. The Iraqi government was struggling, the people were suffering terribly, and the country was on the brink of all-out civil war. It was clear that something had to be done.

Shortly after assuming command, LTG Odierno was asked to provide his recommendations for dealing with the violence. In response, he forthrightly requested additional forces, and he and his staff began developing an operational concept for their employment. General Odierno's recommendations for what came to be known as the "surge" forces have since been proven correct, and his leadership in developing and implementing the plans for employing the surge forces has been brilliant. His plans drew on all the lessons we've learned -- including many we've learned the hard way -- during our time in Iraq. They demonstrated a keen understanding of counterinsurgency operations. They reflected a mastery of the operational level of war. And they explicitly laid out the concepts that have guided our forces over the past year, making security of the population the top priority; understanding that securing the population requires living with it, together with our Iraqi brothers; and recognizing the importance of identifying and separating the so-called irreconcilables -- such as the hard core AQI extremists -- from those deemed reconcilable. This latter point was a reflection of our keen awareness that you cannot kill your way out of an insurgency.

Implementing these concepts has not been easy. The plans that General Odierno and his staff developed entailed hard fighting and tough sacrifice, as our forces moved to the sound of the guns in order to take safe havens from Al Qaeda Iraq; to conduct targeted operations against other threats to security; to establish hundreds of Joint Security Stations, Patrol Bases, and Combat Outposts where the violence was the worst; and to capitalize on the security gains by pursuing a variety so-called non-kinetic endeavors. Through it all, Gen Odierno has directed -- and driven -- a relentless campaign to pursue AQI tenaciously.

The courageous, resolute efforts of Coalition and Iraqi troopers have produced significant progress. While that progress is tenuous and fragile in many areas, the achievements of the past 7 months in particular -- guided by General Odierno's steady hand, clear vision, and aggressive spirit -- have been very significant. They have, above all else, enabled Iraq to draw back from the brink of an all-out Civil War and to start to come to grips with some of the fundamental political issues that must be resolved for the new Iraq to succeed. And on that note, I want to congratulate Iraq's leaders on the Council of Representative's passage yesterday of three important pieces of legislation: the Provincial Powers Law, the 2008 Budget, and an Amnesty Law.

The progress we've achieved on the ground has been clear. Working in close partnership with our Iraqi comrades-in-arms and led by exceptional commissioned, warrant, and noncommissioned officers, our troopers have taken away many Al Qaeda sanctuaries and killed or captured innumerable AQ leaders and fighters. They have capitalized on increasingly widespread Sunni Arab rejection of AQ's indiscriminate violence, extremist ideology, and oppressive practices by developing and partnering with nearly 90,000 Abnaa al

Iraq, or Sons of Iraq. They have dealt with a number of the militia extremists who violated their leader's cease fire order. And they have helped the Iraqi Security Forces achieve a marked increase in their capabilities -- an effort that took on added significance over the past year, as the Iraqi Security Forces conducted a surge of their own that generated over 100,000 additional soldiers, police, border forces, and members of other elements. Beyond the fighting -- indeed, while still fighting -- our leaders and troopers also worked with local Iraqi leaders on countless initiatives to reestablish local markets, repair damaged infrastructure, support the development of local governance, refurbish schools, restore basic services, and foster economic revival. Our troopers understand that these initiatives will ensure that the security they and our Iraqi partners have been establishing can be sustained over the long term.

Now, as General Odierno and his staff prepare to depart, levels of attacks, civilian casualties, and sectarian violence are all significantly lower than they were at the height of the sectarian fighting in late 2006. That progress notwithstanding, we are all conscious of the numerous challenges that lie ahead. Those challenges notwithstanding, a new sense of hope now exists in Iraq. It has been rekindled among a populace that was in despair just over a year ago.

So as we bid farewell to the men and women of the Phantom Warrior Corps Headquarters, I want to publicly recognize and applaud their tremendous achievements over the past 14 months. Ray, you and your team have guided operations in Iraq. You have built teams and teams of teams, seamlessly transitioning divisions and brigades into and out of Iraq without ever losing the precious momentum we fought so hard to achieve. You have been masters of the kinetic and the non-kinetic, and you and everyone who has served in the Corps Headquarters over the past 14 months should be extraordinarily proud of what has been accomplished during your time on watch in the Land of the two Rivers. I suspect that your work in Iraq over the past year will be written about and studied for years to come.

I also want to take this opportunity to personally thank my partner and operational wingman, Gen Odierno. Ray, when I returned to Iraq a year ago, I firmly believed you were the right man at a pivotal time in Operation Iraqi Freedom. That assessment has been proven correct time and again. All of us who will carry on here will miss your exceptional feel for the situation on the ground, your steadfast leadership, your superb judgment, your wonderful sense of humor, and, of course, your unmistakable presence. The Iraqi Officers with whom you served so effectively will miss you, too... In fact, I understand that many of them will continue to shave their heads in your honor long after you depart. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to once again command with you in Iraq our coalition countries' greatest assets -- their sons and daughters, and I wish you and Linda all the best as you prepare to move to Washington this summer and, assuming Senate confirmation, take up your new duties as the 32nd Vice Chief of Staff of the United States Army.

As we say mah ah salama to Ray Odierno and his Phantom Warriors, we also say welcome back to Iraq to LTG Lloyd Austin and his Dragon Corps Headquarters. It is often said at this point in ceremonies such as this that "no one is better qualified for this position than the man who has just taken command." Well, I can say that with absolute conviction this morning, and I base my assessment on personal knowledge from multiple tours together with General Austin. Trust me when I tell you that his impressive qualities extend far beyond the unmistakable presence that he shares with General Odierno; neither is vertically challenged!

Lloyd, you are admirably suited and very well qualified for the command you have just assumed. The experience you gained in demanding positions such as the Assistant Division Commander of the great 3d Infantry Division as it spearheaded the fight to Baghdad, as the Commander of Combined Joint Task Force-180 in Afghanistan, and as the Chief of Staff of the US Central Command will stand you in good stead here in Iraq. Your preparation for this mission and the preparation of your headquarters for its return to Iraq have been thorough and comprehensive. All who know you are confident that you will guide the Multi-National Corps with a steady hand, a clear vision, and iron determination, as we all work together to build on the momentum and accomplishments of the past year and strive to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves in 2008. Welcome back.

Again, thanks to all of you for being here today to honor General Odierno, CSM Ciotola, and the Phantom Warrior Headquarters and to welcome back General Austin, CSM Allen, and their Dragon Corps team. Phantom Warriors, Airborne, thank you very much.