Pfc. Brandie Leon, 4th Infantry Division, holds security while on patrol in a local neighborhood to help maintain peace after recent attacks on mosques in the area, East Baghdad, Iraq, 3 March 2006. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Ragucci, U.S. Army)

III Corps during the Surge: A Study in Operational Art

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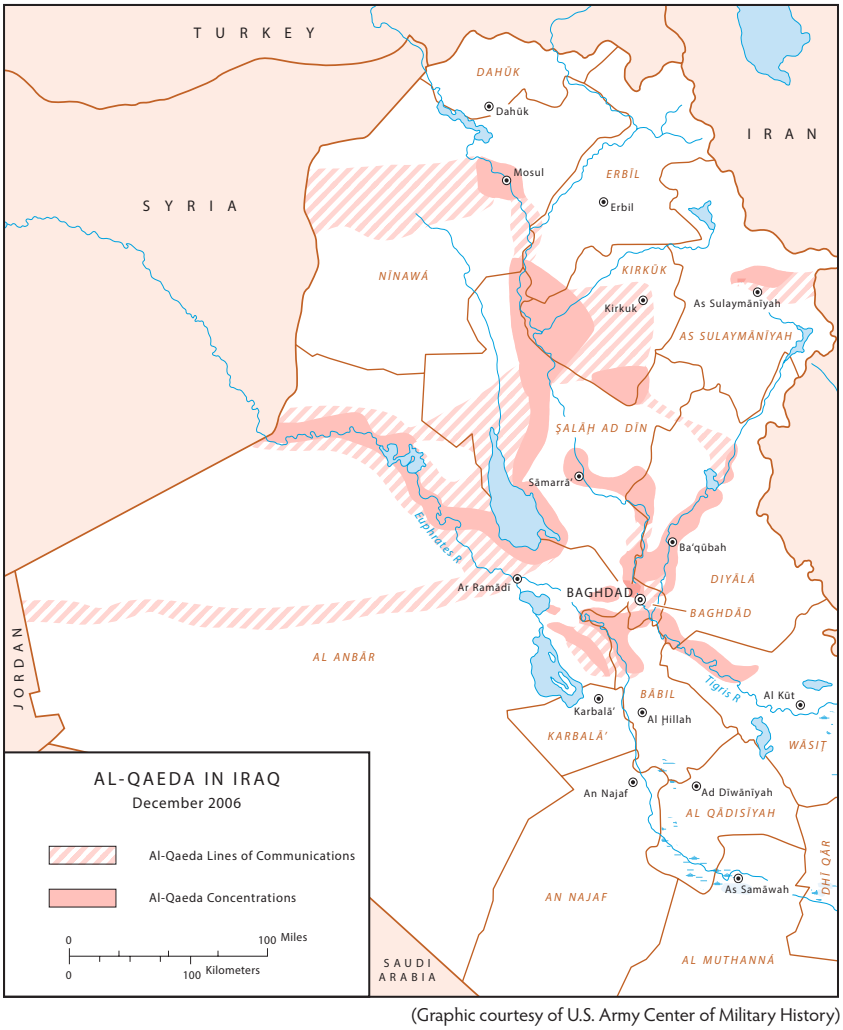
The role of Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno's III Corps as Multinational Corps–Iraq (MNC–I) has failed to receive sufficient attention from studies of the 2007 surge in Iraq. By far the most comprehensive account of the 2007–2008 campaign is found in Michael Gordon and Lt. Gen. Bernard Trainor's *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, which focuses on the formulation and execution of strategy and policy.[1] It frequently moves between Washington D.C., U.S Central Command, and Multinational Force–Iraq (MNF–I) while using tactical actions within Iraq in an illustrative manner. As a result, the campaign waged by III Corps, the operational headquarters, is overlooked in this key work.

The III Corps campaign is also neglected in other prominent works on the topic. In *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, Thomas Ricks emphasizes the same levels as Gordon and Trainor. However, while Ricks places a greater emphasis on the role of III Corps than is found in other accounts, he fails to offer a thorough

examination of the operational campaign waged by III Corps.[2] Kimberly Kagan's *The Surge: A Military History* delivers a predominately tactical portrait of the campaign, focusing on various brigade operations.[3]

A more personality-focused account is offered in Fred Kaplan's *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*; it recounts the Army's creating room for political progress such as the February 2008 "trifecta" package of legislation, which included the Provincial Powers Law, limited amnesty, and the 2008 budget.[6] Odierno's command laid the groundwork for successful campaigns in 2007 and 2008. Given the attention garnered by COIN doctrine and the Army's purported focus on the "graduate level of war," what is most striking about III Corps's operations was Odierno's use of concepts and terminology firmly rooted in conventional campaigns. III Corps's achievements as an operational headquarters were rooted in the successful application of operational art.



(Graphic courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Figure 1. Al-Qaida in Iraq, December 2006

Operational art is a way to conceptualize how to fight wars using campaigns of multiple, simultaneous, and successive operations across a theater of operations to achieve a unifying goal.[7] While neither downplaying nor minimizing the importance of Army COIN principles, a study of MNC–I's 2007 campaign in Iraq through the neglected prism of operational art suggests that the campaign's success was due to the successful application of already established operational principles rather than from a revolution in the profession of arms.[8]

In December 2006, Odierno's III Corps assumed responsibility for MNC–I from Lt. Gen. Pete Chiarelli's V Corps. The security situation in Iraq had deteriorated throughout 2006 (see figure 1). The 22 February 2006 bombing of Samara's Shia Askariya shrine, also known as the Golden Mosque, caused the nascent ethno-sectarian tensions to explode into open conflict. The bombings spurred large and violent protests throughout Shia neighborhoods in and around Baghdad as well as in other predominantly Shia cities such as Najaf, Karbala, and Basra. With this attack, the conflict devolved from an insurgency to a sectarian civil war that, in November 2006 alone, would claim 3,462 Iraqi lives.[9]

adoption of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine rather than the surge campaign.[4] And, because of his position as the executive officer to the MNF–I commanding general, Col. Peter Mansoor's *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* naturally gravitates toward Gen. David H. Petraeus.[5] None of these accounts examine the critical role that Odierno's headquarters played in the 2007–2008 surge campaign.

During its second tour in Iraq, III Corps achieved success in reducing the level of violence in Iraq and

Odierno was charged by the MNF–I commander at the time, Gen. George Casey, with breaking the cycle of sectarian violence. The incoming corps's operational approach was different than its predecessor's. The focus of Chiarelli's V Corps was to consolidate the coalition footprint. As Chiarelli later recalled, "I was told that my job was to get us down to fifty FOBs [forward operating bases] by the end of 2006. My instructions were pretty clear. You will not have 110 FOBs. There were 110 FOBs when I went in 2006."[10] The reduced U.S. presence would be accompanied by a rapid transition to the Iraqi Security Forces as the United States shifted to an overwatch role. This operational focus contributed to the V Corps campaign devolving into a series of disjointed and unconnected tactical actions. Tactically, the result was a failure to retain terrain, and it amounted to U.S. forces being forced to retake the same ground each day after surrendering it the previous evening (see figure 2).[11]

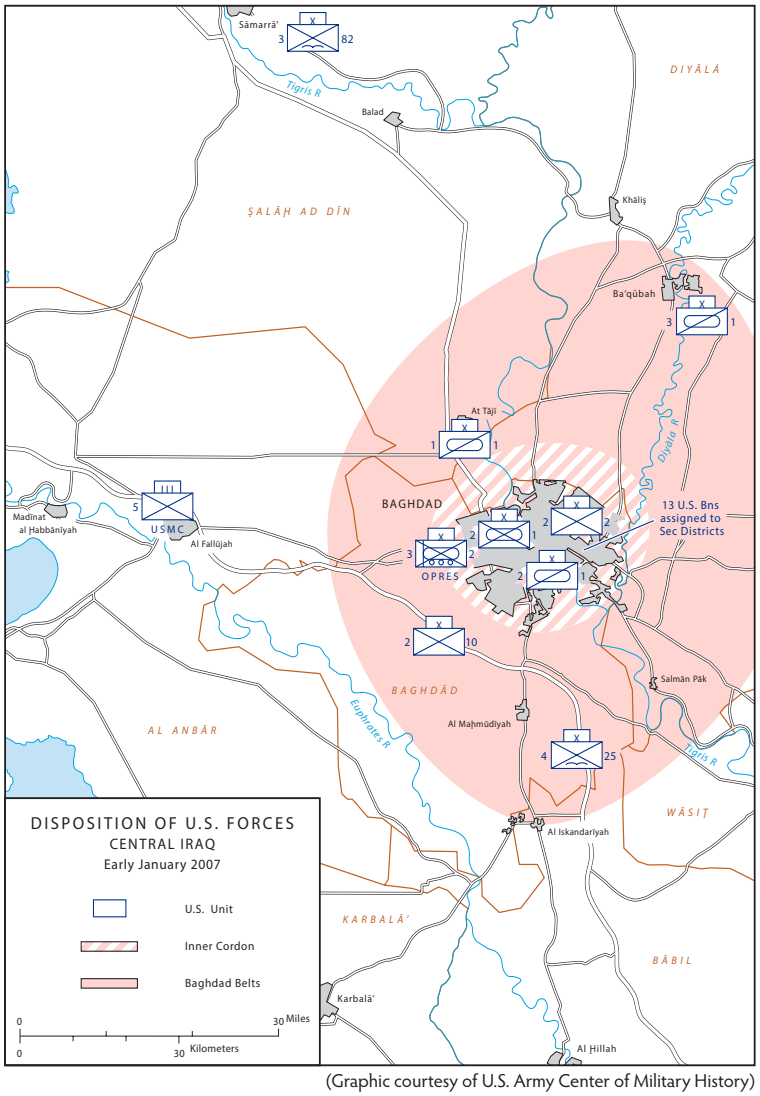


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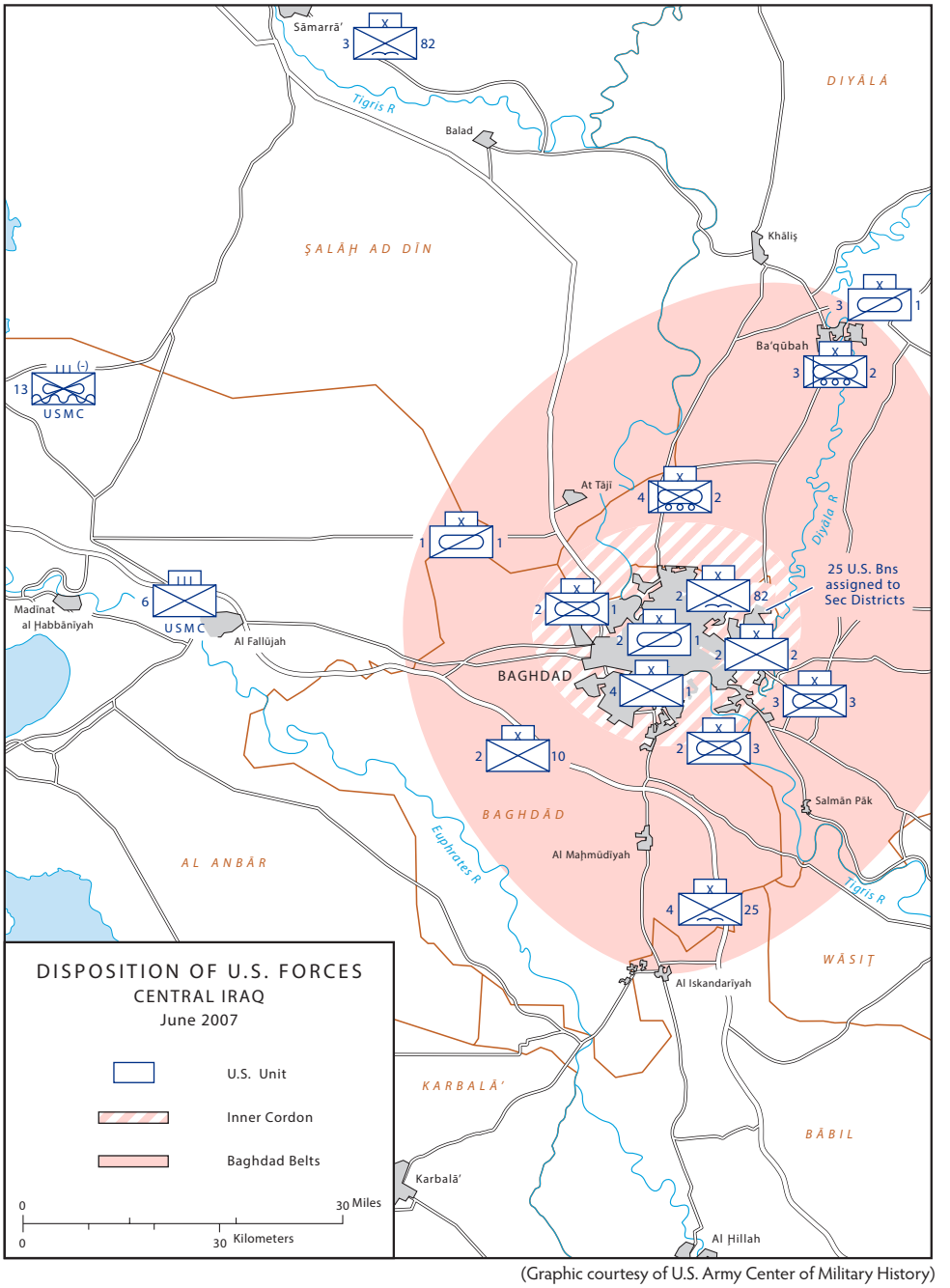
Figure 2. Disposition of U.S. Forces Central Iraq, Early January 2007

Odierno defined his first priority as securing the Iraqi people, which to him meant defeating an insurgency composed of Sunni and Shia extremists, most notably al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and Iranian-backed Shia Special Groups. The MNC–I operational concept now focused on how to seize and retain the initiative so that the coalition could defeat extremists. Though transition to Iraqi control and responsibility for security was still the eventual goal, MNC–I no longer emphasized it.[12]

While the difference may seem minor or semantic, the change in emphasis was profound, since it indicated that III Corps would no longer measure its progress through the reduction of the coalition footprint in Iraq resulting from the closure of bases; the off-ramping of unit deployments to Iraq; or the usage of sewage, water, electricity, and trash removal metrics. Though it continued to use logical lines of effort, under Odierno, MNC-I placed an increased emphasis on physical lines of operation.[13] At the tactical level, the change in emphasis alleviated the perceived pressure to concentrate onto fewer and fewer bases and allowed tactical units to live on small bases among the population as they had done in the early days of the war. III Corps took a traditional approach to its campaign in 2007 and the first two months of 2008.[14]

Even prior to the announced surge of five additional brigades to Iraq, Odierno planned to conduct multiple simultaneous operations throughout the country.[15] Past corps offensives had focused on a single problem area at a time, such as Fallujah or Najaf, and were in reality tactical battles rather than operations. These battles lacked a pursuit or exploitation phase, the absence of which allowed the enemy to retreat along its physical lines of operation in order to regroup in the safety of its support zones. In keeping with its objective of defeating



(Graphic courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Figure 3. Disposition of U.S. Forces Central Iraq, June 2007

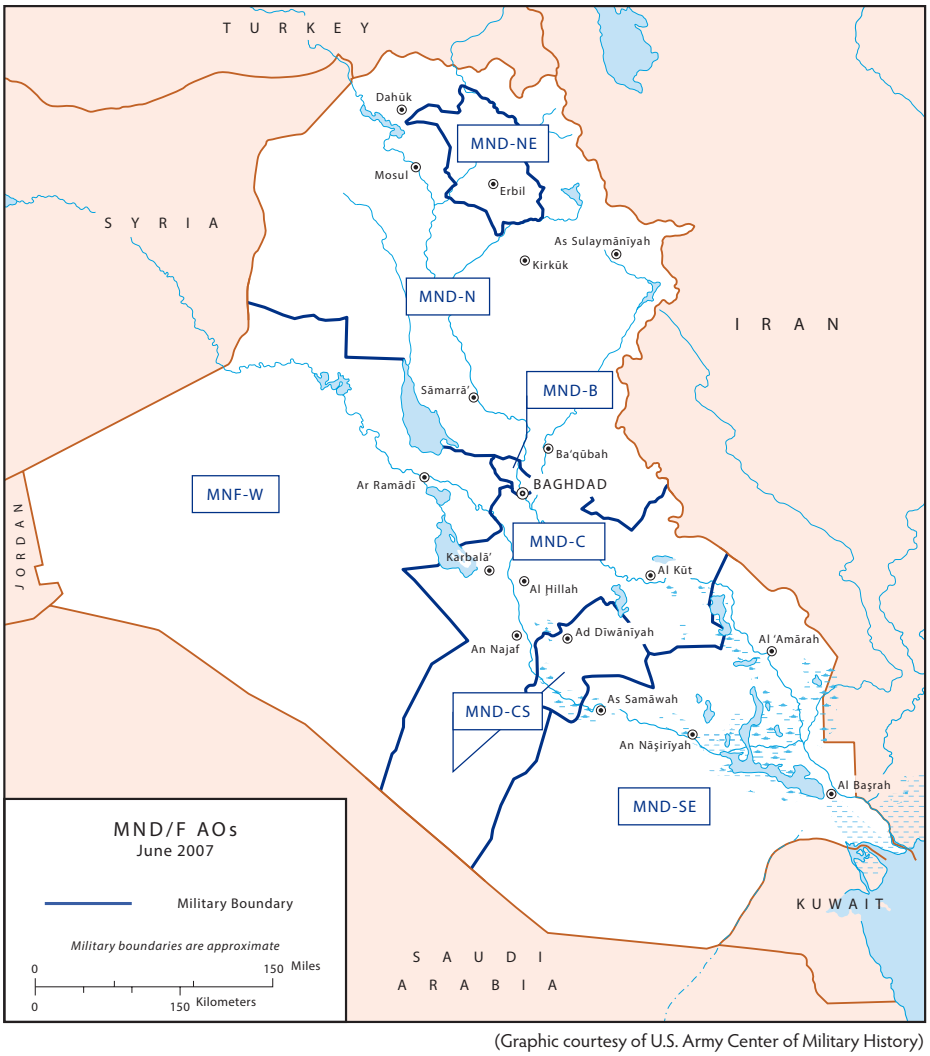
the insurgency, Odierno's corps launched a series of corps offensives to eject the enemy from territory and to retain the liberated terrain by maintaining forces there. These sustained offensives connected tactical actions across Iraq to better attain strategic ends, a key to the successful practice of operational art.[16]

III Corps's first offensive operation, Operation Fardh al-Qanoon (Enforcing the Law), focused on clearing and retaining terrain throughout Baghdad and its surrounding belts—those provinces encircling the city and controlling access to the capital. Supporting divisional operations in the belts interdicted the flow of accelerants—III Corps's term for the fighters, weapons, and explosives necessary to carry out the attacks and thus trigger the subsequent reprisals—into the capital through offensive operations designed to seize and hold terrain in these enemy support zones. This was Odierno's opening gambit in an attempt to transform the insurgent support zone around Baghdad into a coalition security zone and push extremists away from the capital (see figure 3).[17] In June, MNC–I followed up Fardh al-Qanoon with another corps-level offensive dubbed Operation Phantom Thunder that consisted of simultaneous operations in Baghdad and the surrounding belts. Phantom Thunder aimed to clear extremist support zones and rear areas. It was the first operation to take place with all five surge brigades in country, and the extra combat power allowed Odierno to hold the seized terrain, thus thickening his security zone and preventing the reestablishment of extremist support zones.[18]

By August, it was clear that MNC–I's series of offensive operations had produced an improvement in security throughout those areas of Iraq where the coalition had been able to surge. Odierno was concerned that the extremists planned to draw the coalition away from the areas that MNC–I had successfully cleared

and secured so they could return and fill the vacuum left by the coalition. This had been the fate of previous coalition offensives, where MNC–I's failure to conduct simultaneous operations or to pursue had allowed extremists to regroup. Odierno saw that an aggressive pursuit was the best way to dismantle the extremist networks.[19]

In order to both disrupt an expected enemy Ramadan offensive and keep AQI and Special Groups off balance, MNC–I launched Operation Phantom Strike on 15 August 2007. Phantom Strike consisted of "a series of targeted operations designed to intensify the pursuit of extremist elements across Iraq."[20] With the deployment of five additional brigades, a combat aviation brigade, and division headquarters, MNC–I possessed the forces necessary to both hold the already-secured areas and to conduct targeted operations throughout Iraq (see figure 4). The nearing end of the surge limited the time that the coalition had to take advantage of its full combat potential.[21] Operation Phantom Phoenix carried the pursuit deep into the upper Diyala River Valley and sought to set the conditions for the planned battle for Mosul. However, this battle did not occur after III Corps was replaced by XVIII Airborne Corps in February 2008 because events in Basra necessitated a shift in focus by the government of Iraq and MNC–I. Both of the exploitation and pursuit operations, Phantom Thunder and Phantom Phoenix, saw MNC–I take steps to extend its operational reach in order to allow it to disrupt the enemy in the few remaining areas of Iraq the coalition did not have enough combat power to control.[22]



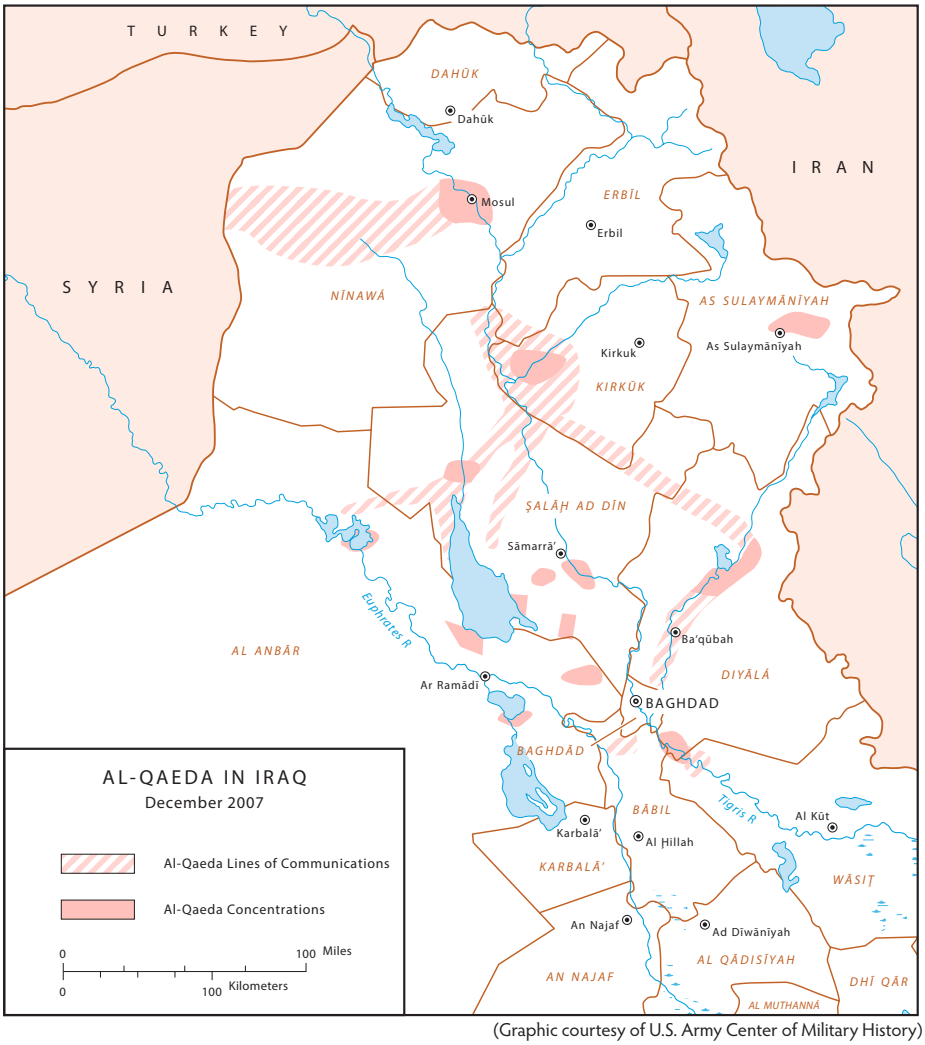
(Graphic courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Figure 4. Multinational Divisions (MNDs) / Forward Areas of Operations (FAOs), June 2007

Throughout all operations, a key part of MNC–I's campaign focused on stopping the movement of the accelerants of violence into Baghdad.[23] Analysis by coalition intelligence indicated that the extremists in Baghdad required a constant flow of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other accelerants in order to maintain the average of fifty attacks per day in the city. The fight to stop the accelerants rested on MNC–I's appreciation of terrain. III Corps's understanding of the enemy's use of terrain was aided by a 19 December 2006 raid conducted by the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division in the Taji-Tarmiyah area. This action resulted in the capture of

over five hundred gigabytes of documents and a map that detailed AQI's strategy to control Baghdad. It depicted an AQI battlefield architecture that was not entirely unconventional, with a support zone in the belt areas around Baghdad, a rear area, a forward line of troops, lines of communications consisting of hard-surfaced roads or improved dirt roads, and combat zones within the capital.[24]

The strength of extremist groups within Baghdad depended upon their control of both the lines of communication and support zones that ran through the belts. Often, the enemy would construct obstacle belts of large buried IEDs to deny the coalition access to these areas, while others had air defense systems to keep out helicopters. While the corps's main effort remained in Baghdad, outlying divisions mounted simultaneous sustained offensives throughout the enemy's depth (i.e., into the belts). This was a radically different appreciation of terrain than had previously existed. III Corps did not view terrain in terms of what could be turned over to Iraqi control, but rather through the prism of an operational system.[25]



(Graphic courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Figure 5. Al-Qaida in Iraq, December 2007

In order to successfully attack the enemy throughout its depth, MNC–I had to efficiently and effectively use all of the tools at its disposal. Despite the surge of forces into Iraq, the coalition presence was still not large enough to secure every area of the country. Under Odierno, MNC–I designated a Stryker brigade as the operational reserve, sometimes referred to as the "above ground strike force." Though the designation of such a force originated with V Corps, it realized its full potential under III Corps. The strike force was not a battle-space owner but was instead used to weight the main effort, such as during Fardh al-Qanoon when it was used to clear neighborhoods in order to facilitate the deployment of surge brigades into Baghdad, or later to conduct clearing operations in Diyala Province. The Stryker reserve added flexibility to Odierno's operations and allowed him to achieve a decisive combat power advantage wherever he chose to commit it. Another way that Odierno weighted offensive operations was by the efficient use of enablers. III Corps effectively supported the main effort with the limited available Army attack aviation, engineers, unmanned aerial vehicles, and intelligence assets.[26] Likewise, the additional forces generated by the surge of the Iraqi Security Forces, along with the Sons of Iraq program, allowed MNC–I to extend its operational reach and push further into

insurgent sanctuaries than would have possible with even the additional U.S. surge brigades.[27]

By the end of the III Corps's deployment in February 2008, the situation in Iraq was remarkably different than when it had assumed duty as MNC–I in December 2006. In January 2008, III Corps's last full month in country, there were six hundred war-related Iraqi fatalities throughout the country (see figure 5, page 7). This was a dramatic reduction in violence from when Odierno's corps arrived in November 2006 a month that witnessed nearly 3,500 Iraqis deaths in the war. This success was rooted in the successful application of operational art. Under Odierno's leadership, III Corps became an effective operational headquarters. It conducted a series of simultaneous and sustained offensive operations throughout the enemy's operational depth, which fragmented enemy support zones and disrupted their operations. The tempo of these corps offensives coupled with an active exploitation and pursuit kept the enemy off balance and prevented enemy forces from regrouping. Despite the focus on joint security stations at the tactical level, at the operational level, both the enemy and MNC–I viewed terrain in a conventional though noncontiguous way, with support and security zones, lines of approach and communication, rear areas, etc. MNC–I's ability to synchronize its operations in space and time was aided by Odierno's use of enablers, weighting of the main effort with his Stryker reserve, and extension of MNC–I's operational reach through the use of Iraqi forces.[28]

Despite the focus of much of the analysis of U.S. operations during the surge on a supposed COIN-dominated revolution in the profession of arms, MNC–I built its operational concept on a solidly traditional framework and owed its success to the effective application of some of the oldest, most well-established principles of operational art, rather than to a COIN-dominated leitmotif.[29] ■

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Notes

1. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

2. Thomas E. Rick, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

3. Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).

4. Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

5. Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

6. On 13 February 2008, the Iraqi Parliament passed three important pieces of legislation: the Provincial Powers Law, which defined the relationship between the federal and provincial governments; it also called for provincial elections by 1 October 2008 as part of the reconciliation process a limited amnesty was given to detainees in Iraqi custody; and the 2008 budget, which allotted $48 billion for capital expenditures and ensured that the federal and provincial governments had the financial resources for public spending.

7. The elements of operational art are end state and conditions, center of gravity, decisive points, line of operation and line of effort, basing, tempo, phasing and transitions, operational reach, culmination, and risk.

8. See, for example, Kaplan, *The Insurgents.*

9. Michael O'Hanlon and Jason Campbell, "Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq," Brookings Institute website, 28 January 2008, 5, accessed 19 December 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/index20080131.pdf; H. R. McMaster (former advisor to Gen. David Petraeus on the counterinsurgency field manual), interview by Steve Clay, 20 November 2009, transcript, Contemporary Operations Study Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 6–7.

10. Peter Chiarelli (former commanding general of V Corps), interview by Frank Sobchak, 6 May 2014, transcript, Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Study Group, 40.

11. Chiarelli, interview, 40; McMaster, interview, 13; Col. Dave Pendall, interview by Frank Sobchak, 6 March 2014, transcript, CSA OIF Study Group, Hanscom Air Force Base, MA, 14.

12. Raymond T. Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq: One Year Later," The Heritage Foundation website, 5 March 2008, accessed 20 December 2016, http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-surge-in-iraq-one-year-later; Raymond T. Odierno (former commanding general of III Corps), interview by Mike Visconage, 19 October 2007, transcript, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Baghdad, Iraq, 9.

13. For a discussion of lines of operation and lines of effort, see chapter III of U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11 August 2011) or chapter 2 of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 11 November 2016).

14. McMaster, interview, 11 and 14–15; Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq"; Odierno, interview, 19 October 2007, 9.

15. Surge brigade combat teams (BCTs): 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division (arrived 14 February 2007); 4th BCT, 1st Infantry Division (ID) (arrived 15 March 2007); 3rd BCT, 3rd ID (arrived 15 April 2007); 4th BCT, 2nd ID (arrived 15 May 2007); 2nd BCT, 3rd (arrived 15 June 2007).

16. Dale Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad* (Washington, DC: CMH, 2010), 21; Lt. Col. Jeff McDougall, interview by Mike Visconage, 7 July 2007, transcript, CMH, Baghdad, Iraq, 20–22.

17. Frederick Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, "The Patton of Counterinsurgency," *Weekly Standard*, 10 March 2008; Andrade, *Surging South of Baghad*, 21; McDougall, interview, 20–22; Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq."

18. Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq"; Department of Defense (DOD), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, "DoD Special Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, VA," GlobalSecurity.org, 22 June 2007, accessed 20 December 2016, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2007/06/mil-070622-dod01.htm.

19. Maj. Gen. James Simmons, DOD Bloggers Roundtable Subject: Operation Phantom Strike, 27 August 2007, 2; DOD, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, "DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, VA, GlobalSecurity.org, 4 March 2008, accessed 20 December 2016, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2008/03/mil-080304-dod01.htm; Odierno, interview, 19 October 2007, 6; and Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History*, 135.

20. Simmons, DOD Roundtable,1–2.

21. MNF–I CG SECDEF Weekly Update 12–18 August 07; MNF–I CG SECDEF Weekly Update 26 August–1 September 07; Odierno, interview 19 October 2007, 6; Maj. Gen. James Simmons, DCG Support, 4 and 27 August 2007, DOD Roundtable, 1-2; Kagan, *The Surge*, 135 and 152; Kagan and Kagan, "The Patton of Counterinsurgency"; William Epley, "Surge Paper," CMH files, 11.

22. Raymond T. Odierno, interview by Mike Visconage, 7 September 2007, transcript, CMH, Baghdad, Iraq, 7; Kagan and Kagan, "The Patton of Counterinsurgency."

23. Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq."

24. Nichoel Brooks, interview by Mike Visconage, 18 September 2007, transcript, CMH, Baghdad, Iraq, 57–59; James Hickey, interview by Steve Clay, 23–24 February 2010, transcript, Contemporary Operations Study Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 5; Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq"; and Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad*, 152.

25. Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad*, 17, 21; Hickey, interview, 6 and 26.

26. Col. Martin Wilson, interview by Mike Visconage and William Epley, 9 June 2007, transcript, CMH, Baghdad, Iraq, 47–48; Hickey, interview, 7–8.

27. Col. Paul Funk and Lt. Col. Patrick Michaelis, interview by Steve Clay, 4 February 2010, transcript, Contemporary Operations Study Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 38.

28. O'Hanlon and Campbell, "Iraq Index," 28 January 2008, 5; Michael O'Hanlon and Jason Campbell, "Iraq Index," Brookings Institute website, 31 July 2008, 5, accessed 20 December 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/index20080731.pdf.

29. Kagan and Kagan, "The Patton of Counterinsurgency"; Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq"; Lt. Col. Kent Strader, interview by Lt.

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