

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
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Commemorating the end of operations for TFBSO-Iraq, 31JAN2011

Today, in alignment with the planned transition of Department of Defense activities to the Department of State and the Government of Iraq, The Task Force for Business and Stability Operations ceases its operations in Iraq.

The Task Force was formed in June 2006 by then Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England, in response to a report from a small group of Pentagon business leaders about widespread economic devastation and its impact on local populations and the security of our men and women in uniform. That small group, which included me, Kris Haag, Bob Love, Dave Scantling, and Lt. Col. Thomas Snyder, visited Iraq to understand how the Pentagon's business practices were affecting the war-fighting mission of our armed forces.

What we found was a business environment in grave distress, with business and community leaders frustrated and angry with the lack of tactical support from the international community. What was most disturbing was the documented evidence of insurgents engaging in violence not for ideology, but for money after more than three years of unemployment since the invasion of 2003.

During that first visit, we received direct appeals from commanders for assistance, and as many other Americans have done in a variety of roles, we stepped up to help. At that time, the best estimates of nationwide unemployment in Iraq exceeded 50%. In some areas joblessness was far higher. Our Soldiers and Marines were taking on tasks they were never trained to do – from local development and governance to agricultural assistance and construction management. They took these activities on, in the face of daily violence, because the mission required it, and because they refused to yield their mission to the forces of terror and hatred that threatened Iraq and the entire region.

What was clear to each of us was the fact that we had a set of business skills that could augment their mission. And we each made a commitment to try to assist our armed forces.

Not one of the members of that first group of Task Force volunteers in Anbar Province could have foreseen what the next four-and-a-half years would entail for us. We presumed that our work would be short in duration, a temporary offer of advisory assistance during the peak of violence in Iraq. We presumed that our effort to reverse economic policies that had failed to create a free market in Iraq would be the limit of our engagement. Few of us had ever been in a war zone, experienced violence, or been exposed to our armed forces engaged in combat operations.

Each of us, however, believed that we could muster American and international private sector entrepreneurialism and expertise – to bring the most potent instrument of American power – our economic dynamism - to assist our young men and women in uniform. We were not wrong.

You, as a member of TFBSO, answered this call. Over 600 of you, including business leaders, engineers, accountants, geologists, legal advisors, and agronomists as well as military officers and government employees have contributed as part of TFBSO since June of 2006. You worked in every province of Iraq. Many of you were exposed to small arms fire, to daily rocket and mortar attacks, and to IEDs, operating outside of military bases or the infamous Green Zone. Some of you were injured as a result of this violence. Two of our team gave the last full measure of devotion to their nation, sacrificing their lives for our work.

We will always remember them.

Like any organization operating in a new culture in challenging circumstances, many of our early efforts struggled to gain footing. The steady support of our commanders, from GEN Casey and GEN Chiarelli through GEN Odierno and GEN Austin inspired us to maintain course, and not lose heart in spite of criticism from skeptics within and outside our government. Most importantly, the 2007 arrival of GEN Petraeus and the alignment of our efforts with his broader counterinsurgency doctrine, energized our efforts. Through his sponsorship, we expanded our work to encompass privatization of state-owned industry, Iraqi budget execution and transparency, agricultural development, private banking development, and foreign direct investment. As we learned the culture and how to operate effectively, our momentum and success began to multiply, and our missteps became increasingly rare.

Your achievements and accomplishments since inception of the mission serve as a remarkable testimony to your professionalism that impacted every sector of the Iraqi economy. Recent estimates of unemployment from reputable organizations including the IMF range from 15-20%, drastically lower than the 50% we faced in 2006. It is safe to say that the absence of widespread violence during the delays in government formation following the 2010 elections, and the tolerance of the Iraqi public for those delays, are in part a result of this improvement in everyday life for Iraqi workers since 2006.

This month, we hosted a group of senior TFBSO alumni in Baghdad as we closed down our operations. The purpose of this visit was, through video interviews, to capture our lessons learned, to understand how we operated, and to offer counsel to our successor organizations within the interagency community. I wish each of you could have been a part of this gathering. To see Baghdad today is a remarkable experience, especially for those whose work with TFBSO was limited to 2006-07, when few of us could imagine driving freely in the streets of a city packed in traffic and bustling with commercial activity everywhere you turn.

A few days before we gathered in Baghdad, I spent two nights in Basra in a downtown hotel. I sat on the balcony overlooking the Shatt Al Arab waterway with three members of our team after touring our remaining projects in the city. Sitting there, I recalled how, only two and a half years before, the violent militia Jaish Al Mahdi had complete control of daily life, and how difficult it was to accomplish our work in that critically strategic city. Today, the streets are teeming with activity, the markets are thriving, and in spite of many remaining challenges, the future appears bright.

The progress that is evident across Iraq is a testimony to the will and determination of our armed forces, who in the darkest hour refused to sacrifice Iraq to a future of violence and oppression. To

have played a small part in support of their mission, and to see the positive impacts their efforts have had, is our greatest honor.

In my final discussions with Iraqi governmental and business leaders this month, the gratitude and appreciation for our work was overwhelming. While most of you cannot experience that appreciation in person, please know that it is present and heartfelt among all of the Iraqis with whom we worked.

The other message from our Iraqi colleagues was one of concern about our departure. Our friends and colleagues in the interagency community are not tactically focused on business development – nor should they be - that is not their primary mission. Our relationships, understanding of the business community at every tier and across every sector of the economy, and the trust and confidence we've earned through our extended engagement with the Iraqi government since 2006 are not replaceable. But as the Defense Department, it is wholly appropriate that our efforts wrap up – Iraq is no longer a primarily military mission. As an organization within the DOD, we must move on.

Iraq today is not yet a free market, but has begun the inevitable transition to vibrant capitalism. Our role as a task force was not to create a free market utopia, but to rectify past policy missteps, restore normal economic life, and give the Iraqi people a chance -- an opportunity to join the international economic system, while removing economic motivators to commit violence upon our men and women in uniform. Much work remains before Iraq assumes its rightful place within the world economy, yet we have put in place the necessary initial conditions to enable Iraq to accelerate its economic development. I'm confident Iraq will meet the challenge, in their own unique way, in their own time.

I want to encourage each of you as individuals not to forget Iraq. Don't forget your friendships, don't forget your hard-earned understanding of the country, and its resilient people, and most importantly, don't disengage. Throughout the remainder of your careers, I encourage you to stay engaged in Iraq and in the region. The importance of relationships between Americans and Iraqis that are not based on politics or security cannot be overstated. I believe it is these relationships that provide the basis for long term beneficial engagement between our peoples. We've initiated many business activities among and between American firms and Iraqi business leaders. It is critical to our own national interests that these activities succeed and grow into long-term economic ties, not for our financial benefit – although that will accrue – but for a deeper understanding of each other in the face of endless misrepresentations of our respective cultures by those who would inspire hatred and violence.

There were many instrumental leaders within TFBSO who made our successes possible – it would be impractical to individually thank them all. Yet I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the tremendous contribution of Matthew Schoeffling, our gifted linguist, scholar, and stellar manager who accelerated our understanding of Iraqi culture upon joining the team in 2007. Matt led our strategic operations, managed key business relationships, and established and managed our successful operations in southern Iraq. I also want to specifically acknowledge Regina Dubey, who has served continually in Iraq for over three years, and who successfully managed our transition during 2010.

In his recent inspiring remarks following the terrible events in Tucson, Arizona, our President made the following statement:

"We are reminded that in the fleeting time we have on this earth, what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame - but rather, how well we have loved, and what small part we have played in bettering the lives of others."

We came to Iraq and began our work out of love for our men and women in uniform, which will always endure.

We stayed in Iraq and pushed on through violence, missteps, and endless challenges out of love for the Iraqi people, whose stubborn resilience in the face of decades of hardship we came to know and respect.

Through all the challenges, we have loved well, and we have bettered the lives of others.

That is all that matters.

Our work now continues in Afghanistan, where a team of like-minded Americans is now hard at work to create economic opportunity for the citizens of that long-suffering country. Many of you are already engaged in that effort, which is beginning to bear fruit after less than a year of engagement. Each of you, through your work in Iraq, created a roadmap that we now benefit from – accelerating our ability to generate positive momentum in support of our armed forces. This is also a legacy of your Iraq experience.

Thank you for creating that legacy.

As we reflect on that legacy, let us always remember the sacrifice of the families and loved ones of over 4,200 members of our armed forces who have died in Iraq, and the 32,000 wounded servicemen and servicewomen who will forever carry physical scars gained in service to our country. Working among our men and women in uniform in harms way has forever changed us all.

Never forget them.

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