



***Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq***

**By Emma Sky**

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Reviewed by CPT Sam Wilkins

Emmy Sky's *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* presents a timely narrative of the American involvement and ultimate failure in Iraq. Sky, a British native and graduate of Oxford, served in Iraq as the representative of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Kirkuk from 2003-2004 and as the political advisor (POLAD) to GEN Raymond Odierno from 2007-2011 in spite of her vocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Sky's unique perspective and deep understanding of Iraqi political culture make *The Unraveling* a valuable contribution to the evolving historical narrative of the campaign in Iraq. Her astute analysis and observations offer the most cogent explanation, to date, of the failure of the American "endgame" in Iraq from the sectarian fissures under Nouri al-Maliki's government to the consequential rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) or Da'ash.

Sky's work begins in the strategic city of Kirkuk in 2003. Located on the ethnic fault lines between the resurgent Kurds and Sunni Arabs and lying astride vast quantities of oil, Kirkuk represented a microcosm of the difficulties facing the American occupation in 2003. Sky illustrates with skill and wit the deep historical animosities between the Kurds and the Arabs. Her cultural acumen and political savvy earned her the moniker "Miss Bell" among the Iraqis, in reference to the legendary female anthropologist and political officer Gertrude Bell. Following her time in Kirkuk and with the CPA, Sky returned to Iraq for an unprecedented four years with GEN Odierno, the corps and later theater commander of U.S. forces in Iraq.

As the political advisor to GEN Odierno, Sky witnessed the struggles of the pre-Surge campaign, the hard fighting and eventual success of the Surge, and the eventual unraveling of American interests during the precipitous 2011 withdrawal. Unlike many triumphalist military memoirs emerging from the Iraq campaign, *The Unraveling* provides a balanced, nuanced, and skeptical view of the campaign, coalition leaders, and of the U.S. Army. Her poignant criticisms of coalition policies, such as releasing airstrike footage (which she called "American jihadi videos") and framing the conflict in Manichean terms by "lumping together all the violent actors as AIF (anti-Iraqi forces)," helped shape GEN Odierno's guidance and implementation of the Surge.

The bottom-up Sunni rejection of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) proved to be the tipping point of the Surge campaign. While American military commanders at all levels quickly recognized the value of the reconciled Sunni insurgents, attempts to institutionalize reconciliation by including Sunni formations into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) faced fierce opposition from the suspicious Maliki regime. Maliki, Sky explains, “viewed the volunteers as insurgents who might turn on him at any moment.” GEN Odierno noted privately to Sky in late 2007 that “while I constantly stand up for him in public, in my heart I think he is truly sectarian.”

Maliki’s resistance to reconciliation foreshadowed the eventual downfall of his regime and collapse of the ISF at the hands of Da’ash seven years later. The U.S. Surge strategy assumed that once sectarian violence stopped, political reconciliation would follow. This assumption, Sky notes, depended on “the same politicians who had instigated much of the violence in order to serve their own narrow interests.” The American-led reconciliation of the Sunni insurgency and the security gains from the Surge of forces allowed for temporary peace, but the sectarian competition for power continued in the political arena. Iran played a critical role in this competition. In February 2010, GEN Odierno noted that his “greatest fear is that we stabilize Iraq, then hand it over to the Iranians in our rush to the exit.”

The pervasive effect of Iranian influence became apparent during the electoral stalemate that followed the March 2010 national elections. Iranian pressure eventually broke the deadlock between the secular, non-sectarian Allad Allawi and the increasingly divisive and authoritarian Maliki. Sky astutely notes that “the formation of the government was perceived as a battle between Iran and the U.S. Everyone realized this except for the Americans.” However, according to Sky, President Barack Obama’s administration’s sole interest in Iraq “was ending the war.” The administration ignored GEN Odierno’s advice that Maliki had become a “genuinely feared” leader whose refusal to heed the election results and resign illustrated his authoritarian and sectarian nature. The administration backed Maliki and thereby “renege[d] on promises it had made to Iraqis to protect the political process.” “Instead,” Sky continues, “it had reverted to supporting the status quo” that accelerated the U.S. withdrawal but “was not tenable.”

While Sky’s official tenure ended with GEN Odierno’s change of command in August 2011, she remained close with her contacts from Iraq and returned many times to visit her old friends and acquaintances. From this perspective, she witnessed the Sunni uprising against the Maliki regime and the lightning success of Da’ash in the summer of 2014. While the Syrian conflict reinforced many of the sectarian narratives inside Iraq, Sky places the campaign in the context of a larger Sunni revolt against the excesses of the Iranian-controlled Maliki regime. This campaign, like the 2006 civil war in Iraq, represents a brutal struggle for political power in the guise of a religious conflagration. Sky notes that “the moustaches and the beards have come together against Maliki,” referring to the unlikely alliance of Baathists and the Islamists against the Shia-dominated Iraqi government.

This book is a useful tool for Soldiers and leaders as the U.S. Army continues to advance American interests in the challenging operational environment of Iraq. Infantrymen would do well in future operations to emulate the deep cultural understanding, genuine rapport building, and enduring commitment that characterized Emma Sky’s campaign in Iraq.