



# NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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## Commander's Perspective CJTF-OIR Operations in Iraq and Syria



### Insights from **LTG Paul E. Funk II** **Commanding General, III Corps and CJTF-OIR**

27JAN18 Interview with CALL and 20<sup>th</sup> Military History Detachment

Students run to greet Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service members at a primary school, Mosul Dam Village, Iraq, Nov. 12, 2017. The breadth and diversity of Coalition partners demonstrates the global and unified goal of defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria. CJTF-OIR is the global Coalition to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Tracy McKithern)

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LTG Paul E. Funk II is the 60th Commanding General of the III Armored Corps at Fort Hood, Texas. In August 2017, III Corps transitioned to the Combined/Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), with LTG Funk assuming command of the 75-member Coalition. Throughout his career, LTG Funk served in a variety of Armor and Cavalry units. He deployed six times and led Troopers in combat during Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. LTG Funk served as the Combined/Joint Force Land Component Command (CJFLCC)-OIR commanding general from 2014-2015.

***Q: How has the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) changed since you were here as the CJFLCC Commander during the dark days of 2014?***

**LTG Funk:** Well, first of all, that is a great question, and it's really a great news story and a tribute to the Coalition's efforts to increase the Iraqis' will to fight for themselves. In 2014 when I got here, the Iraqis were jumping out of the equipment we gave them [during Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and NEW DAWN,] and were running away as opposed to standing their ground and fighting. They had numerical superiority, yet they didn't have the will, they didn't believe in themselves, or they didn't think that they had the competence to beat the enemy...so they would literally run away. For example, in Ramadi in [May] 2015, when the Iraqis gave up the city, they actually drove out of the city. Two big vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) had gone off on bridges; one around the Iraqi Army Headquarters, the other one downtown. Only one hundred Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters attacked and seized Ramadi, but because the Iraqi will to fight was gone after holding the city for ten months, they drove out of the city to regroup. Eventually, later in the year, the Iraqis came back and retook Ramadi [in December 2015].

But, flash forward to when I returned to Iraq in September 2017. ISIS tried to execute nearly the exact same plan by detonating two VBIEDs on two bridges on both sides of the city while they attacked with approximately one hundred fighters. This time however, the Iraqis immediately fought back, stood their ground, and killed all the ISIS fighters in less than ten hours. Not only did they drive ISIS out of their city, but they also identified and neutralized six VBIEDs headed for the city. The Iraqis caught the VBIEDs on the road using their own identification networks, prevented them from entering the city, and destroyed them. That's the difference. The Iraqis gained that confidence over three years, culminating in the battles preceding the nine-months of tough fighting to liberate Mosul.

**Q: The U.S. was here training the ISF during Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and NEW DAWN (2003-2011), and then after 2011 we were out of the picture with respect to training the Iraqis, do you think that had an effect on their performance?**

**LTG Funk:** It absolutely did. It's important to remember that the Iraqis had two year enlistments, so the guys we trained in 2011 and earlier, most were already out of the army by 2014. Additionally, the Iraqis that joined the army from 2011 to 2014 were not well trained. For example, by and large, new recruits did not even shoot their weapons at basic training because all weapons training had been cut. They learned how to march, maybe. Basically, the officers were not committed to their soldiers or their army, so trainees were left to their own devices. Consequently, Iraqi soldiers had no confidence in themselves, their weapon systems, their doctrine, or their training. So naturally, they all ran away when the fighting started. They were untrained guys fighting a vicious enemy that was skilled and highly motivated – and that's why they ran away. Most of the lower level soldiers through mid-grade officers that we trained from 2006 to 2011 were gone. Most of them had already left the Iraqi Army.

But, let's consider this – the Iraqis went from running away, abandoning their equipment; basically the army could not conduct any effective offensive or defensive operations. But three years later they are executing a division level attack – over 120 kilometers from Baiji all the way out to the border. They conducted this division level attack after only three years of training. It was well coordinated, and they used their own intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and their own fires. The Iraqis had some (advise, assist, accompany, and enable) A3E with them, but our guys didn't impose.<sup>1</sup> The Iraqis got out to the border, and they set themselves up well. They are now controlling their own border. That's pretty impressive.

**Q: Do you think the A3E had an effect bigger than simply sending over more U.S. troops?**

**LTG Funk:** There's a morale component...a Maslow's hierarchy of needs component. There's a self-fulfilling prophecy element and there's a pride component. There are truly a lot of components that link up. If they think that we're doing this for them, then it's us doing this for them. If they do it for themselves with our help, then it's not us doing it for them – they're the ones who did it for themselves. In Mosul, they cleared the city house-by-house, street-by-street, and block-by-block. It's pretty remarkable. The world hasn't seen combat in such dense urban terrain since WWII. This is why the pride has returned within the ISF. They truly believe in themselves. They walk with pride knowing that they

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<sup>1</sup> **Advise** — The use of influence and knowledge to teach, coach, and mentor while working by, with, and through a partner. *I am providing you with a recommended and proven (rooted in doctrine and experience) way to do it.* **Assist** — Directly or indirectly support partners to enhance their ability to deliver desired effects. *I am helping you do something better that you can already do.* **Accompany** — Move with and be present with the partner. *I will go forward with you.* **Enable** — Use of coalition capability to enhance the partners' desired effects where their organic means may be insufficient. *I am helping you do something that you cannot effectively do — I can help you with our assets. (What the Battle for Mosul Teaches the Force, CALL Pub. 17-24, pg. 52)*



can fight and win against a determined enemy.

**Q: You mentioned Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where do you believe the Iraqi forces are?**

**LTG Funk:** Do I think they've self-actualized? No, but I think the Iraqis see themselves as a leading contender to be a regional power. I think they see themselves there and aspire to be there, but they have not quite actualized that concept. Even though they're not there yet, the basic needs of security, food, ability to care for family are there. Iraqis know that it is now their responsibility to defend their nation. It's really a much broader nationalistic view than what they had before.

This is a generational issue, and while aspirational, it boils down to leader development. They still have the "old" guys leading their force. Well, now there's a group of young leaders, young mavericks, who are really focused on being nationalistic and want to be part of the solution. No matter if you're a Sunni, a Shi'a, a Christian, it doesn't matter; if you're carrying your weight, you're carrying your ruck, and you move forward into battle, you're on our team. That's out there now. That's different than it was in 2014. Why is that? It's because of the confidence we've given them in their doctrine, their equipment, their training, and their leaders. That was not resident in the ISF when we first returned.



Figure 1: ISF fire a BM-21 Grad rocket near Rawa, Iraq, Nov. 17, 2017. The strikes targeted ISIS terrorists and were conducted as part of Iraqi-led operations to liberate Iraq from ISIS. The operations were supported by Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, the global Coalition to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Torrance Saunders).

**Q: What do you find the most challenging about being the CJTF-OIR commander in contrast to your previous role as the CJFLCC commanding general?**

**LTG Funk:** It's scale; as the CJTF Commander I also have the fight in Syria to lead. There's a lot more up and out for the CJTF Commander than there is down and in for the CJFLCC Commander. There is an element that you're not as close to our partners and you're dealing more in the ministerial area than with the *jundi* themselves in the ISF.<sup>2</sup> So, it's a much broader role. We are talking to U.S. European Command, over to Afghanistan, down to Jordan, and all over the region. Although we have a very specific fight here in Iraq and Syria, the actual broader components of CJTF are extensive.



Figure 2: U.S. Marines with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit fire an M777 Howitzer during a fire mission against ISIS targets in northern Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, March 24, 2017. The unit provided 24/7 support in all weather conditions to allow for troop movements, to include terrain denial and the subduing of enemy forces (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Zachery C. Laning).

**Q: A lot of units we talked to are stretched thin. People are operating two or three pay grades above what they're wearing on their chests. How have you seen your soldiers respond?**

**LTG Funk:** First of all, the American Trooper – and I use word Trooper to refer to all our Joint forces – has been magnificent. They are operating above their paygrades. They're constantly stretching beyond their comfort zones...and that's ok. That is what makes us different. We can broadly understand our goals and objectives, use mission command to give left and right limits, and watch our people excel and get the mission done. The American Trooper will always, always, overachieve.

The uniform of the American Trooper means two things around the globe – hope and

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<sup>2</sup> *Jundi*-Arabic for soldier.

fear. It's hope for the downtrodden, those that have been affected by a natural disaster, and those that have been disadvantaged in some way. And, it's also fear in the hearts of our enemies. They know when the American Trooper hits the field, there is no doubt of the outcome.

**Q: Recognizing that this is a different operational approach, what lessons have you learned in conducting this campaign “by, with, and through” our partners?<sup>3</sup>**

**LTG Funk:** The “by, with, and through” strategy has enabled us to really understand the depth of the quality of the men and women in our services. One of the important lessons we’re learning is that everybody has a unique skill and we need to find it instead of buttonholing people into certain positions. Instead of just filling slots on personnel charts, we must take advantage of each slot to achieve an effect. It is a unique opportunity to see us operate on the forward edge of freedom and really understand what makes the team successful. It’s always been, and will always will be, about the people.

Understanding the depth of our organization is something we need to really further study. We do not manage our talent very well, and we’re often engaged in discovery learning. For example, I had a staff sergeant who worked in my Key Leader Engagement cell. You think staff sergeant when you see his rank, but he’s a Harvard trained lawyer with real-world experience. Taking advantage of those unique opportunities and those unique people that we have throughout the total force is incredibly important. We need to refine how we assess our people and the questions we ask before they join the team [in order to effectively manage the latent talent in the force].

**Q: Can you describe the information environment across the Combined/Joint Operations Area and the CJTF’s ability to compete in that environment?**

**LTG Funk:** This is America’s first foray into an information war. We’ve always used information as a supporting means to war, but this is a war about using information, so it’s entirely different. I’m telling you right now, our enemy attacks to have an immediate impact on the news cycle. Our adversaries and competitors use the information domain to drive their narrative and to manipulate public perceptions to their advantage. What our adversaries and competitors understand, that we don’t recognize very well, is that in this culture that relies primarily on word-of-mouth communications, it is critical to understand that the interlocutors use word-of-mouth as a weapons system.

For example, ISIS used to go to a town, capture somebody, cut off their head, put it on the internet, and stream it on live TV to build their aura of invincibility. Their fear tactics worked on the psyche of the Iraqi forces. Iraqis believed that if they got caught, they were going to be executed. ISIS was skilled and effective at leveraging the information

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<sup>3</sup> “By, With, and Through” as an operational approach entails the conduct of military campaigns primarily through the employment of partner maneuver forces with the support of U.S. enablers, through a coordinated legal and diplomatic framework.

space, to include social media, and their techniques were exponentially more effective than our press releases. Graphic pictures on the internet have a far greater impact than any press release that goes out in a newspaper. Some kid from Ramadi is not reading the *Washington Post*, but he is on social media and sees ISIS propaganda. He is constantly inundated with pictures and stories of ISIS killing everyone who opposes them, and thinks to himself that the best option for his survival is to give up and go away. This happened. Iraqis were abandoning their guard posts because they were alone and afraid. They didn't have the right kind of leaders in the Iraqi Army, and it had a devastating effect on the country.

***Q: Have you seen your Iraqi counterparts embrace information operations?***

**LTG Funk:** Iraqis understand the power of the information space, which is why they stood up the War Media Cell. They understand how to effectively compete in the information environment and how to look through the lenses of what people understand. They have harnessed the power of the information sphere. Now, they don't have quite the same constraints and permissions that we have which does make a difference. When I first got here in 2014, they didn't have a War Media Cell, and they rapidly identified the need and the impact it would have. CPT Abdulla Mizead, my cultural advisor, helped set up the first War Media Cell when we were here as the CJFLCC Headquarters.

***Q: Can you describe your relationships with Iraqi Generals, and how they have developed and changed over the last 15 years?***

**LTG Funk:** It has been remarkable to watch them, and I'm actually quite proud of them. I don't think people realize just how well they've done. They built their country. They fought a war twice, and some would say they've been fighting continuously for quite some time. But, they've been able to maintain focus, with the exception of a lapse of three years during which the guys that we worked with pre-2011 were driven out by [former Prime Minister Nouri] al-Maliki (2006-2014). Watching them over the years, I've seen the Iraqi general officer corps gain more confidence. I've seen them take matters into their own hands and actually start leading their force. They understand how to drive operations, the warfighting functions, where they are trying to get to. So I've watched them grow in combat and the same is true with the Prime Minister [Haider al-Abadi (2014-present)]. And I've seen it now from the tactical to the strategic level. It is pretty remarkable. People have a tendency to forget that we didn't form our democracy overnight. These guys are on the same trajectory. They're working their way through it; it's not easy. This is a major fight. It's going to be awhile.





Figure 3: LTG Paul E. Funk II and Iraqi Maj. Gen. Najm Abdullah al-Jibouri, commander of Nineveh Liberation Operation, walk through a busy market near the University of Mosul, Oct. 4, 2017. The second largest city in Iraq, Mosul was liberated in July 2017 after three years of ISIS occupation. Since then, more than 255,000 civilians have returned to their homes in Mosul (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Avery Howard).

**Q: What is CJTF-OIR doing to steer the ISF, CTS, Federal Police in procuring equipment they need versus what they want (big items such as AH64 Apaches, etc.)?**

**LTG Funk:** That really is an Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) question.<sup>4</sup> We are trying to work with the Iraqis to find the right size for their force and to get it in front of the enemy. We are trying to change how they utilize their operations commands, and we're trying to really focus on the existing command and control structure that they have and then enhance them through bringing our expertise into their commands. We're also feeding our intelligence to them. Of course, there will be some things that we have to compartmentalize but it's much more about us working "*by, with, and through*" in an advise and assist role at the operations commands where we can bring all the various security forces together to achieve effects on the battlefield. We do this so that Iraqis will have the training needed to prevent an ISIS resurgence.

Thank God OSC-I was here in 2014. They made a huge difference because they already had programs in place. They understood how to change the programs and restructure them so that we could start the big war machine and start moving equipment and things to help shape the force. Even in the midst of combat operations, the Iraqis have changed their force structure. They now have Quwat Khasah (Rangers). They've

<sup>4</sup> After the departure of U.S. military forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I), under the direction of the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, continued to develop the relationship between the U.S. and Iraqi militaries, conducted the training and equipping missions, as well as facilitated foreign military sales.

integrated at the operations command level of Counter-Terrorism Service, Federal Police and the regular army, and some of the security intelligence forces. The Peshmerga are coming along and becoming a professionalized force. None of those things happen if you're afraid of innovation or of adapting. The Iraqis have managed to do that. It's pretty remarkable. OSC-I gave the Iraqis that capability because they had a consistent relationship. They were still in the relationship business with the Iraqi Army even when we were gone from 2011-2014. They were here. The Office of Security Cooperation was the interface between the U.S. and Iraqi militaries. Fortunately, they had some relationships that we were allowed to take-in and take-on and help grow.



Figure 4: Members of ISF 61st Brigade egress from a cleared building at the conclusion of the culminating training activity at Camp Taji, Iraq, Jan. 22, 2018. The curriculum at building partner capacity sites includes: leadership, ethics and law of war training and instruction. Additionally, the recruits are taught land navigation, basic medical training, infantry skills and small unit tactics (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Audrey Ward).

**Q: Why do you serve?**

**LTG Funk:** Well, it's a family tradition. My Dad is a soldier for life and my father-in-law was a soldier for life as well. For me, it's about being part of a great team. I've played team sports my whole life. Even when I was an individual wrestler I was on a team with other wrestlers. I played football and baseball, and grew up being part of the Army Family. I was a Captain and my Dad was actually my Division Commander in Desert Storm. My father-in-law was the Army Commander, LTG John Yeosock. My Dad commanded the 3rd Armored Division, my father-in-law commanded Third Army in Operation DESERT STORM.

I'm a son of the U.S. Army – the greatest fighting force ever assembled. I serve for my wife and kids, my parents, my extended family, and all those that can't because somebody has got to do it. I am amazingly touched that every time I hear a young man

or a woman explain why it is they joined this great institution. For me, when I get up and put on this uniform I feel like Superman. I do. I truly believe what I said, that this uniform means two things around this globe. I really do love it. I serve because somebody has to, and I am proud to be that somebody.

Tell you what, I love being a soldier. I have loved it since I was 10 years old. When I started I wanted to be a Cavalry Squadron Commander. That was the highlight of my career. That's what I wanted to do and I got to do that. I got to command 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry when it was a divisional cavalry squadron in the 1st Cavalry Division and in my opinion the best task organized force we ever had. I was also privileged to serve in the 3rd Cavalry when it was a regimental cavalry outfit. That was an incredibly powerful organization; we were task organized all the time and had the ability to conduct multiple missions at once over huge pieces of terrain.

I am never going to be a retired civilian. I will always be a Soldier for Life. I wholeheartedly believe that Soldier for Life is the Army's most important program. I tell these young men and women that they're the true professionals. You can talk about sports heroes or personalities, or actors and actresses, and famous people...but the true heroes are the men and women of the U.S. military. They raised their right hands and swore to an ideal. That's how we roll.



Figure 5: "The uniform of the American Trooper means two things around the globe – hope and fear. It's hope for the downtrodden, those that have been affected by a natural disaster, and those that have been disadvantaged in some way. And, it's also fear in the hearts of our enemies. They know when the American Trooper hits the field, there is no doubt of the outcome." – LTG Funk (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Avery Howard).