

IRAQ TRIP REPORT

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Parameters of the Trip

From July 17-25 we travelled extensively in central, western and northern Iraq. The trip was sponsored by the Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I) command and so afforded unparalleled access to U.S. and Iraqi military personnel. We spoke at length with the four principal American division commands in those sectors, as well as nearly half of the brigade commanders and their staffs, as well as several battalion and even company commanders. We also met with senior U.S. personnel from the Detainee Forces command, and from the training command known as MNSTCI, as well as a number of Iraqi police and army officers. Similarly, MNF-I saw to it that we were able to meet with key civilian personnel in a variety of PRTs/EPRTs, the U.S. Ambassador, the President's Special Envoy, the CIA station, the US AID mission, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq. Both through our own contacts and those of the military, we also were able to meet with a number of the seniormost members of the current Iraqi government (including President Talabani, Vice President 'Abd al-Mahdi, Foreign Minister Zebari, Deputy Prime Minister Salih, and National Security Adviser ar-Rubaie).

These various meetings were considerably bolstered by numerous “sidebar” conversations with Iraqis and Americans as well as meetings with a number of old friends, Iraqi and American. These helped us to check the veracity of points being made in formal briefings and by those we did not know well. Overall, the trip afforded us a good perspective on American and Iraqi military operations throughout this area, local level economic and political developments in many parts of it, as well as an adequate perspective on the state of play in the high-level political negotiations in Baghdad. Although we were able to meet with several dozen Iraqi civilians—from people on the streets to local shaykhs—because we were nearly always in the presence of American military personnel, we felt we had little ability to gauge the mood of the Iraqi people.

Overall Assessment

There is a great deal going well in Iraq but, unfortunately, also a great deal going badly. Points of view often heard in Washington, that the war is already lost on the one hand, or bound to be won if we are adequately patient on the other, seem at odds with conditions on the battlefield and throughout the country.

The greatest progress has been made in providing security to the Iraqi people in those areas currently under direct U.S. military supervision—namely, Baghdad, its outlying areas to north and south (the “Belts”), al-Anbar province in the West, and Ninawah and Salah ad-Din in the North. Overall, we felt that progress in security was actually greater than what we had expected given how recently the increase in troops as well as the change in U.S. and Iraqi strategy and tactics under General David Petraeus had occurred. We assessed that national, macro-level economic progress remained marginal, but there was some considerable local economic progress, typically correlated with the presence of

a fully-staffed provincial reconstruction team (PRT) or such a team embedded within a military unit (EPRT). We saw effectively no signs of progress in the high-level political discussions meant to effect national reconciliation.

Current U.S. strategy envisions the provision of greater security making possible local economic and political progress (of which we saw some modest but noteworthy evidence) and strategic-level national reconciliation or accommodation (of which we saw no evidence). Our observations suggest that the Coalition is making progress in accordance with this strategy—although it is very early in the process, there are still very significant hurdles to overcome, and there is no evidence that can prove that this strategy is destined to succeed. Nevertheless, especially given the difficulties of finding a viable alternative strategy (a “Plan B”) for Iraq that would safeguard U.S. interests, we conclude that the progress made so far argues for giving the surge and its attendant military and political strategies more time. However, we caution that the U.S. is not yet irrevocably headed for success in Iraq, so the Administration and the Congress should remain vigilant. The change in course in Iraq has produced enough success to warrant supporting its continuation at least through the remainder of 2007, but progress should be continuously reassessed, especially beginning again in early 2008.

U.S. Military Forces Performing Superbly in Counterinsurgency/Stability Role

We found a significant improvement in the morale of American forces in Iraq compared to previous trips to Iraq. In the past, we had often found American military personnel angry and frustrated—many sensed they had the wrong strategy, were using the wrong tactics, and were risking their lives and losing their friends in pursuit of an approach that could not work.

On this trip we felt that most soldiers and Marines were confident in General Petraeus and the team he had put together. They were equally confident in the strategy and tactics Petraeus has devised, and generally could point to tangible signs that these tactics were producing results. They also felt that the surge had provided them with sufficient forces to correct problems that had plagued previous American approaches—specifically the inability to hold terrain once it was cleared (leading to the “whack-a-mole” problem) and the inability to cover significant, flanking terrain in which Iraqi militants either found sanctuary or moved personnel and weaponry.

In contrast to many critics who believed that the U.S. military (and particularly the Army) would take years to adapt proper counterinsurgency (COIN) and stabilization techniques, American forces appear to have embraced them in just a matter of months. Every division, brigade and battalion staff we met with, as well as soldiers and Marine in the field, had internalized the principles of COIN operations. More impressive still, they had also grasped one of the most important and most difficult of those, which is the need to adapt all of the other principles to specific circumstances in each locality. We found that U.S. soldiers and Marines were applying the principles of successful COIN and stability operations to the conditions of very different provinces, cities, towns and neighborhoods with great sophistication and ingenuity. Across the force, Army and Marine units were focused first and foremost on securing the Iraqi population, working with Iraqi security

units, creating new political and economic arrangements at the grass-roots level, and working to provide basic services—electricity, fuel, clean water, and sanitation—to the people. However, in each place, in keeping with good counterinsurgency practices, operations were tailored to the specific needs of the community and the leaders they were trying to help.

In Ramadi, we saw an outstanding Marine captain whose company was living in the same complex with a (largely Sunni) Iraqi police company and a (largely Shi'ah) Iraqi Army unit. There were no barriers of any kind between the living spaces, and all seemed to interact freely and work and relax jointly. This arrangement had built trust across the sectarian and national divides and allowed all three groups to work together as a team. The Marines had also built an Arab style living room in their patrol base, where they could meet with the local Sunni shaykhs—formerly allies of al-Qa'ida and other Salafi jihadist groups—who were now working with them and against al-Qa'ida.

Ramadi is, to be sure, a badly damaged city. There has been hard fighting there for years, culminating in a major defeat for al-Qa'ida this March. But even in its bleakness, there were important signs of progress. For instance, the devastation requires legions of cleanup workers that American troops (though not yet the Iraqi government) have been able to hire and pay.

The additional American military formations brought in as part of the “surge,” General Petraeus’s determination to hold areas until they are truly secure before redeploying U.S. units, and the increasing competence of Iraqi security formations has greatly reduced the “whack-a-mole” problem. Unlike in previous trips to Iraq, we found that the American formations are remaining in place, refusing to leave their Iraqi partners. Indeed, we were impressed that a number of U.S. field commanders had told us that they had felt that they had the opportunity to clear larger swathes of their AOR but were expressly forbidden from doing so by higher headquarters because doing so would force them to thin or remove their forces from other areas that were not yet secure. In other words, U.S. senior commanders were emphasizing the importance of “hold” operations rather than just more “clear” operations. The failure to stick to these priorities had been a key reason for failure in the past, and the change in emphasis appears to be producing the desired effect. Especially in al-Anbar, it has largely eliminated the presence of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI, which is also often used as a shorthand for a variety of other Salafi jihadist groups) in most of the towns and cities of the Euphrates valley, and driven the remnants into isolated enclaves out in the desert.

There are other new tactics associated with the surge as well. As one case in point, we are now controlling more access points into Baghdad from the southeast. Doing so complicates Iran’s ability to supply al-Qa'ida as well as Shi'i militia forces with sophisticated deadly weaponry such as explosively formed penetrator devices. Unfortunately, on balance our progress in restraining Shi'i militias is not nearly as impressive to date as our strides against al-Qa'ida. But these types of measures appear to be reducing the sophistication and lethality of some bombs, helping explain the downturn in casualties.

Successful U.S. tactics have gone well beyond classic military measures. For example, coalition forces are now trying to remove nitric acid and urea from stores, since these are the ingredients for homemade explosives. As a result, when many car and truck bombs are detonated these days, they are often less powerful than before, further helping to explain the reduction in casualties (which appears to amount to roughly a one-third decline in the monthly rate since just before the surge began—meaning that while Iraq remains very violent, trends are clearly in the right direction at the moment). Of course, the adversary is learning too: U.S. forces warned us about the “dump truck bomb covered in gravel,” just like that which killed 28 in Tal Afar on August 6, after we had left Iraq. In Ramadi, where there is considerable rebuilding going on and so lots of dump trucks, the Marines and local Iraqis have decided to have local Iraqi Police (IP) units escort the dump trucks around town.

The Iraqi Army is Slowly Becoming a Helpful Partner to U.S. Forces

Possibly the most important development of all those we saw in Iraq is the slow but tangible progress of Iraqi security forces. On a previous trip in 2005, the vast majority of American officers felt that the Iraqi Army was a disaster: it was riddled with corruption and nepotism, split along clear ethnic and sectarian lines, improperly equipped, inadequately trained, and subverted by the insurgents and militias. Their American advisers did not trust the Army’s leadership or its unit cohesion, and most believed (with evidence to support that belief) that most formations were incapable of contributing to combat operations in a meaningful way and would likely collapse if ever placed in a demanding situation.

Today, significant problems remain and there is still a great deal of ground still to be covered, but the Iraqi Army is unquestionably making progress. In particular, several Iraqi Army divisions (specifically the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 8th) appear largely capable of controlling their own battlespace, along with a number of other brigades and battalions. In particular, American military officers generally appeared to have much greater confidence in the leadership of the Iraqi Army. A gradual process of identifying competent leaders, pushing for their promotion while simultaneously pressing for the removal of incompetent, corrupt, and/or disloyal officers has slowly borne fruit. For instance, the U.S. military has recently assessed over three-quarters of the Iraqi Army division, brigade, and battalion commanders in the Baghdad area as being both competent and reliable. Similarly, a U.S. military officer (an old friend) who had just finished up a year-long tour in northern Iraq where his battalion had been paired with and lived with an Iraqi battalion said that he was confident in all of the Iraqi officers he worked with except one—who was disliked and distrusted because he was a coward and a liar, not because he was corrupt or in the pay of a militia.

At the unit level, Iraqi formations have become more capable and dependable due to the combination of pairing Iraqi formations with American units and providing Iraqi units with American advisers (special forces or Military Transition Teams). In addition, far more Iraqi units possess well-integrated manpower pools. The Iraqi Army 3rd Infantry Division, for example, started out overwhelmingly Kurdish in 2005. Today, it is 45

percent Shi'ah, 28 percent Kurdish, and 27 percent Sunni Arab. We noted that its American advisers boasted that it was the best division in the Iraqi Army, something we heard from U.S. officers about several Iraqi divisions. In the past, it was unimaginable to have American officers bragging about the Iraqi units they were working with.

As a result, an increasing number of Iraqi Army formations truly are taking the lead in security operations. In the past, few Iraqi formations could do more than add a few soldiers to put a thin Iraqi face on largely American missions. Today, throughout central, western and northern Iraq, many Iraqi army units are able to plan and execute their own operations with only advice and support from small American teams. Others are not yet ready for that, but are still functioning as able partners for American units. In only a few sectors did we find American commanders complaining that their Iraqi formations were useless—something that was the rule, not the exception, in late 2005.

The growing capability and dependability of Iraqi Army formations is an important development because it is a key component of American strategy in both the medium and long-terms. In the medium term, the United States needs to reduce the number of American combat brigades committed to their current sectors. That is true in part because the increased military deployment to Iraq is unsustainable past March-April 2008 (necessitating a drawdown to the pre-surge level of about 130,000 U.S. troops) and in part because U.S. combat formations are needed to clear other parts of the country. Again, General Petraeus and his senior subordinates have rightly ordered field commanders not to take over additional terrain and population centers if doing so would mean jeopardizing the security of areas already under their control. But following the logic of a traditional “oil stain” COIN strategy, an increase in indigenous forces is necessary to allow the oil stain to spread. Over the long term, the United States must be looking to draw down its force levels in Iraq overall—probably to 100,000 or fewer troops--by about 2010/2011. The only way to do so without allowing the country to slip back into all-out civil war is if capable Iraqi security forces can take over that burden as American forces are reduced.

Again the progress with the Iraqi Army gave reason to believe that this strategy was practicable, although it is by no means a certainty at this point. Of greatest importance, Mosul—Iraq's third largest city—and neighboring TalAfar were previously two of Iraq's most unstable cities and together required a commitment of roughly one-quarter of all American forces in Iraq simply to keep them from imploding. Today, the presence of two competent and reliable Iraqi Army divisions and a competent and reliable Iraqi National Police (NP) division and a NP brigade have allowed MNF-I to reduce American forces within each city proper to just a few hundred men who serve as advisory teams and fire support teams to the Iraqis. The troops freed up have been redeployed to Diyala and al-Anbar to take advantage of the opportunities there. While this is only a first step, it is a very significant first step toward freeing up additional American formations both to pacify more parts of Iraq (spreading the oil stain) and eventually allowing them to depart Iraq altogether.

Another important example of a similar phenomenon is in al-Anbar province. In this case, the recent decision by the Sunni tribal shaykhs to cooperate with U.S. forces to eliminate the Salafist presence was also of critical importance. This cooperation from the shaykhs, coupled with the growing dependability of Iraqi Army formations, made possible the clearing operation in Ramadi in March. U.S. forces took down the city block by block, clearing individual streets and houses of weapons caches and improvised explosive devices, arresting and interrogating (with Iraqi help) suspicious young men, shooting back at those who shot at us. And then, once the “kinetic” phase was over, Iraqi police and army backed up by American forces moved in to stay (aided by concrete barriers between neighborhoods and sand berms built around the town).

As a result, American military commanders intimated that if these trends in al-Anbar continued, they could envision drawing down American forces there by 1-2 brigades at some point in 2008. This too is another example of how developments in Iraq are making progress and (very gradually) fulfilling some of the hopes for how the surge and the new COIN strategy might stabilize the country and enable the eventual withdrawal of American troops without leaving Iraq in a state of all-out civil war.

Of course, the Iraqi Army remains very much a work-in-progress. Its logistical capabilities are non-existent. The ministry of defense has little ability to meet the administrative needs of the Army without American support. Overall, the dependability of Iraqi security forces over the long term remains a major question mark. Indeed, if large-scale American support were withdrawn from the Iraqi Army at this time, there is little doubt that all of the progress made to date would evaporate. It is still going to take years before the Army is able to stand on its own and operate at current levels (let alone higher) without massive American assistance. However, the progress to date suggests that it is not unrealistic to expect that it will be able to do so at some point in the not too distant future.

Police Still a Disaster

With just a few exceptions (particularly the division in Mosul, and in places where local police have recently joined at the direction of their shaykhs in places such as al-Anbar province) the Iraqi National Police remain mired in sectarianism, graft, and incompetence. They do not appear to have made anything like the progress (limited though it still is) of the Iraqi Army. American military and civilian personnel continue to regard NP formations far more often as the enemy—or at least serious headaches—than as true allies. The NP and its parent Ministry of Interior (MOI) remain completely dominated by unreconstructed Shi'i chauvinists. The senior leadership is dominated by the worst elements of the Badr Organization while its rank-and-file remains infested with members of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). As best we could tell, a great many average Iraqis continued to see NP personnel as an object of fear, not safety.

The difference between the NP and the Army points to the considerable mistake the United States made in not maintaining the U.S. military as the principal partner for the NP, and not retaining large numbers of American military personnel within the MOI structure as was done in the MOD. The result is that the MOD leadership is mostly

professional (although not always the most competent) whereas the MOI leadership is thoroughly sectarian. Moreover, the MOD is better able to withstand the machinations of other Shi'i chauvinists in the government, particularly the efforts of the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (OCinC), a part of the Prime Minister's office led by Dr. Bassima al-Jaidri. The OCinC, and Dr. Bassima in particular, have regularly attempted to remove Sunni and Kurdish officers, or even Shi'i officers who have not shown adequate commitment to the goals of the worst Shi'i militias, and tried to replace them with rabid Shi'i chauvinists in league with Badr, JAM, and other groups. The NP has been thoroughly corrupted by these practices.

One solution increasingly being embraced across central, northern, and western Iraq is to try to stand up local police forces (called Iraqi Police, IPs) instead of relying on the NPs. In many sectors, this has been a very effective solution because the IPs are made up of people from the town or neighborhood, who know the people and the streets and are committed to working with the Americans and the Iraqi Army to provide security for their people. However, the MOI and the OCinC have tried hard to prevent Sunni neighborhoods from doing so, and tried to ensure that IP units created in Shi'i areas were controlled by officers loyal to their cause. They have denied authority to create the units, denied them pay, denied them equipment, and denied them leaders, to try to control the IP units. In response, some American formations have taken to forming neighborhood watch associations, called Iraqi Provincial Volunteers (IPVs), instead (U.S. policy precludes arming them, and of course the United States cannot itself hire them as Iraqi police, but it can organize them and offer them reward money for providing intelligence tips and the like). However, this is not as effective as creating IP units and the process is under attack by the MOI, which wants to control them as well.

Greater Progress Against Sunni Militants than Shi'i Militants

For the most part, Coalition forces are making much greater progress in extirpating AQI and other Sunni extremist groups than they are with their Shi'i opposites in JAM. To some extent this is a function of where U.S. forces are deployed—largely in central, northern, and western Iraq where the heaviest concentrations of Sunni Arabs lie. The only sizable American combat formations in the south are the five brigades of Multi-National Division South holding the southern belt of Baghdad and there are no large American formations in the Shi'i heartland of southeastern Iraq.

Another important element of progress against the Sunni extremist groups was simply good luck. The key to the change of heart in al-Anbar has been the growing popular animus against both al-Qa'ida and other Salafist groups. In the past 3-6 months, different parts of the country that had been dominated by these extremist groups have begun to rebel against them because they opposed their high-handedness and their draconian rule over the Sunni tribal population. Being Islamist fundamentalists, AQI and the other Salafists attempted to impose their own versions of Shari'a law, brutalized the locals to keep them in line, killed important local leaders, established their own courts, seized young women to marry off to their loyalists, and inflicted various other outrages on the population. The result was that in a number of areas the locals turned on the extremists and turned to the Americans for security and help. (And it is important to give credit to

U.S. forces as well: because the Marines had been so consistent in their efforts, this apparently assured the Sunni shaykhs both that they knew what they would be getting from the Marines and that it was something that they preferred to life under AQI.) This process still has a ways to go, for example along the Tigris River from Baghdad towards Tikrit and beyond, as reflected in the continued high number of suicide bombings, but the overall trend lines are quite striking and favorable.

This Sunni “awakening” is apparent, though to a lesser degree, in other key provinces. They include Baghdad, Diyala province northeast of Baghdad (which includes the city of Baquba, scene of intense recent fighting), Ninawah province to the north (including Mosul, Iraq’s third largest city, and Tal Afar), and Salah ad-Din (which includes Tikrit, Saddam’s hometown). We met with Sunni shaykhs and former Baathists now cooperating with American forces in and around several parts of Baghdad.

What is happening as a result of these new alliances is impressive. Iraqis are providing intelligence that allows U.S. and Iraqi forces to go on the offensive together. Most contact with the enemy now comes at a time and place of our choosing as a result. Again, al-Qa’ida overplayed its hand as much as we played ours well. For example, Sunnis in the southwest belts near Baghdad tell a story of two leaders of another Sunni extremist group, the 1920 Revolution Brigade, who were kidnapped by al-Qa’ida. After agreeing to release them, al-Qa’ida instead decapitated the 1920 Revolution Brigade leaders touching off a ferocious battle between the two terrorist groups.

It is worth noting how American and Iraqi leaders determine who is in al-Qa’ida. They do so primarily through human intelligence. The easiest part of the puzzle to solve comes from the foreign fighters, whom Iraqis detest and are more than happy to identify (or kill) themselves. Iraqi and U.S. forces also do network analysis, again mostly from human sources, determining who talks to whom. Of course some al-Qa’ida give themselves away by their words and their deeds. We can also occasionally find evidence of direct communication between Iraqi al-Qa’ida members and top al-Qa’ida outside Iraq. Not all individuals described as al-Qa’ida in Iraq are close devotees of Usama bin Ladin; few take their orders directly from him; many are Iraqis who are home-grown jihadists and who might never have contemplated joining such an organization absent the chaos that resulted from the U.S.-led invasion of their country. Nor is it obvious that most would, as the Bush administration sometimes claims, attack us here if we did not fight them there. But by their beliefs, their associates, and their tactics, they can accurately be grouped under the broad al-Qa’ida umbrella.

Overall, however, the considerable progress against al-Qa’ida has not yet been replicated in dealing with sectarian strife. The United States has done more to suppress ethnic cleansing than to eliminate it as a threat altogether. The aggressive deployment of American and Iraqi forces as well as widespread use of physical barriers and checkpoints has stopped many of the worst sectarian offensives. However, JAM is still able to make tactical gains in Baghdad, its pressure is relentless, and it has shifted operations, particularly to the main route from Karbala, through Mahmudiyah, to Baghdad to establish a Shi’ah corridor through which they can move. A fair number of Iraqi Army

units and nearly all of the National Police formations fall far short of the standards of impartiality and non-sectarianism needed to keep a lid on mixed neighborhoods absent a strong U.S. role. Many of the Sunni volunteers who want to now root out al-Qa'ida from their midst are not welcomed by the Shi'ah-dominated Iraqi government in Baghdad. JAM has already made Baghdad a largely Shi'ah city, and would undoubtedly try to complete the process if U.S. troops left (it also openly shells the Green Zone in Baghdad, and attacks U.S. forces in other ways, even as we hope that some elements of JAM can be viewed as "reconciliables" and brought back into the political process).

American and Iraqi forces have stopped the worst JAM offensives, particularly the JAM effort to obliterate the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad with a double envelopment from north and south. Some Shi'i towns in the southern belts have begun the process of making contact with Coalition forces and requesting assistance to stand up their own IP or IPV units and help them to keep JAM out. (U.S. commanders worry that these groups will quickly be targeted not only by JAM itself, but by its agents in the MOI and the OCinC.)

In addition, a few towns and neighborhoods in Baghdad are reportedly tiring of JAM in a fashion similar to what happened with the Sunnis of al-Anbar and AQI. JAM (or elements of it) can also be a fundamentalist-leaning organization that attempts to impose a harsh brand of shari'a law on the neighborhoods it controls, and also like AQI is largely made up of angry, dispossed, and unemployed young men, who create trouble wherever they are. Both of these features have apparently soured at least some Shi'i neighborhoods on JAM. JAM focuses its resources on the "frontline" neighborhoods, making sure that those leaning in JAM's direction or who just joined the fold receive electricity, sanitation services, medical care, food, and other basic services. They appear to do so, at least to some extent, at the expense of other neighborhoods which they consider more unequivocally in their camp. The result, according to U.S. and Iraqi military personnel is that some of these neighborhoods are beginning to put out feelers to the Coalition.

Nevertheless, while such progress should not be dismissed, it pales in comparison with that enjoyed by U.S. and Iraqi forces working against AQI and the other Salafi groups. Two neighborhoods we visited in Baghdad highlighted the challenges still posed by JAM, other Shi'i militias, Sunni insurgent groups, and al-Qa'ida. The combination produces a witch's brew of sectarianism, criminality, anti-Americanism, and mafioso-like behavior. West of the Tigris River and the Green Zone, in the West Rashid and al-Mansour districts of the city, we saw two different types of sectarian tinderboxes. In both places, JAM elements regularly move in, kill a few Sunnis and threaten the rest to convince them to leave, then rent out the vacant homes as a money-making venture—creating a self-sustaining method of enriching themselves, building support among fellow Shi'ah, and then figuring out which neighborhoods to hit next.

In West Rashid, coalition forces have attempted to stop these activities by attacking the JAM extremists behind such activities and trying to freeze in place the current demographics of the neighborhood. This effort is extremely manpower intense given the

checkerboard ethnic map. On the other hand, in al-Mansoor, just north of West Rashid, the Sunni and Shi'ah neighborhoods are large and distinct enough that they can be separated from each other via concrete slabs and checkpoints. Local volunteers can then be hired to man the checkpoints.

But even these latter tactics are manpower intensive. Moreover, they depend on at least some number of neutral, nonsectarian forces to help keep general order, a role now played by the United States. It is hard to imagine that Iraq will develop these capabilities without massive coalition assistance and several years to do so.

Economic Progress Slow and Spotty

Iraq's economy remains largely moribund. Because of its oil wealth, Iraq is not a desperately poor country. However, Iraq's theoretical richness creates outsized expectations on the part of the population that can be dangerous over time if they are unmet—as they have been in Iraq for the past four years. Unemployment remains sky high, at least 30 to 40 percent. Official electricity production remains little better than Saddam levels (though it may be starting to pick up). Water and sewer performance is mediocre. Health care systems work badly.

Some indicators suggest that the economic situation may be improving somewhat. Telephones and TV satellite dishes have become widespread. The informal electricity sector has picked up greatly; Bagdad residents may only get a couple or few hours of grid electricity a day, but many neighborhoods are aglow at night, as entrepreneurs sell power via jury-rigged distribution systems. American military and civilian officials are contributing to this trend. They have recognized that improving the national power grid is a decade-long project at least (further complicated and slowed by insurgent attacks), and so they have focused on setting up local generators instead. Agriculture is doing better in places, such as the regions around Mosul. And it seems possible that September will bring a strong wave of new school enrollments.

Perhaps the most important area of improvement is in how well the new embedded provincial reconstruction teams (ePRTs) are working. The four properly-staffed PRTs and ePRTs we spent time with had succeeded in developing considerable ties to local Iraqi elites, were creating jobs, helping to revive the local economy, and helping to build new political mechanisms. Moreover, the new emphasis on microloans and locally-generated projects was having success where the previous programs often merely built “white elephants.”

Unfortunately, State and other civilian agencies have done a poor job providing the needed manpower for the PRTs and ePRTs. Remarkably, in some places, we found that the surge has allowed the military to fashion their own ePRTs from battalion, brigade and division staffs. A surprising number of U.S. military officers who had once known little about governance or business had diligently and ably immersed themselves in the subjects so that they could accomplish what every division, brigade, battalion, company, and platoon commander has now internalized as their primary mission: provide the average Iraqi with a decent life. But the enduring problem of unemployment is not being

addressed adequately or sufficiently rapidly. The faster revitalization of state-owned enterprises, and even Works Progress Administration-style temporary job creation programs offering a modest wage to anyone willing to work, are necessary.

High Politics in Baghdad Moribund

At the top of Iraqi politics, the situation is awful. It is worse than stalemate; it is closer to open animosity and mistrust among leaders of different sectarian groups. Near-term prospects for measures such as passing a hydrocarbon law, reforming de-Baathification, and allowing Iraq's 18 provinces to hold new elections for local officials are poor. Such measures may get "passed" by the Iraqi Council of Representatives under tremendous pressure from the United States, but at this point it seems most likely that any measures that are passed will be ignored by the major parties.

Paranoia and backstabbing predominate among the various sects and even among the parties within them. A common perception among Shi'ah is that many Sunnis are unreformed or latent Baathists, waiting for an opportunity to try to regain power. The common perception among Sunnis is that the Shi'i government is in open collaboration with extremist militias, most notably that of Muqtada as-Sadr and known as Jaysh al-Mahdi (or JAM), which engages in Balkans-style sectarian killing as well as run-of-the-mill hooliganism. (The latter fear is probably more grounded in reality than the former, but both are pervasive.) The distrust is palpable. And there is little chance that Iraq can be stabilized over the medium to long term without some measure of sectarian accommodation.

If sectarian conditions remain as they are, we risk losing the gains made so far. For instance, if sectarian conflict heats up again, Sunni tribal shaykhs might once again find it necessary to make amends with al-Qa'ida and other Salafi groups because they will want ruthless allies against JAM and the Iranians. Ethnic/sectarian cleansing would likely resume in mixed neighborhoods if Washington tried to draw down American forces. Shi'ah-dominated security forces will probably overlook militia violence on the streets and could actively aid it. Sunnis may be tempted to try to retake the country, or at least strategic chunks of it, if they think they can. Perhaps such violence can be controlled. But it could also lead to mass sectarian violence, and in a worst case Iraq could splinter or the conflict there could spark regional conflict.

Recommendations

Decentralize and Focus on Local Efforts. The success of the PRTs and ePRTs in fashioning local economic and political solutions, the greater success of the Iraqi police and Iraqi provincial volunteers over the national police in the security sector, the progress made in al-Anbar, and the emphasis on local generators rather than fixing and protecting the national power grid all point to a critical reality in Iraq: progress is being made at local levels and is not being made at the national level. Consequently, it is a mistake for the United States to be focusing its main efforts and resources on the national government in Baghdad. It is badly deadlocked and the U.S. strategy should be to try to minimize the central government's influence and meddling throughout the country. The U.S.

government must make a maximal effort to push resources and authority out or away from the central government in Baghdad and out to provincial and local level governments where smart, flexible American military and civilian personnel are generally able to identify competent Iraqi partners and fashion specific responses to local needs.

An emphasis on decentralizing power and resources is important for several reasons. First, the days of the overcentralized (and consequently, largely dysfunctional) Iraqi state are over. If we are able to stabilize Iraq, that will require a highly decentralized federal system. (Note: we are not presupposing soft partition of Iraq into three regions. Although O’Hanlon favors such a plan, it depends on an Iraqi acquiescence which is very unlikely. But decentralization with greater focus on the existing provinces is appropriate regardless.) Second, as noted, only local solutions are working at this point in time and therefore it is essential that we “reinforce success, not failure.” We should concentrate on what is working, not the black hole of Baghdad—which in so doing threatens to undermine the entire effort. Third, local economic and political development can satisfy a great many of the demands of the populace which can buy time for the complicated negotiations surrounding national-level accommodation. Last, the more that local progress can satisfy the basic needs of the Iraqi populace, the less dependent they will be on the militias to do so, weakening the influence of the militias and thereby making them more likely to compromise. Thus, local progress could be a substitute for national accommodation for at least some period of time, and should make such a national accommodation more possible by changing the incentives of some militia warlords.

Finally, the utter stagnation of the “top-down” political process is made more obvious and more inexcusable by the relative progress being made from the “bottom-up” security and local economic/political processes. This argues for the need for a change in tactics in the near future. We believe that the best approach that the United States might adopt would be to begin to press for new national elections for the Council of Representatives (COR), complete with a brand new electoral system.

New National Elections. The current Iraqi electoral system is a disaster. Proportional representation is particularly wrong for Iraq because it excessively rewards party loyalty, virtually eliminates the responsiveness of parliamentarians to their constituencies, empowers fringe movements, and leads to badly fragmented parliaments that can only create weak coalitions. For this reason alone, new national elections with a new electoral system would be highly desirable because they almost certainly would return a very different cast of characters to the COR, who would be organized differently, and who might very well have much greater incentive to make the compromises that this COR clearly has not. In particular, a geographic electoral system like our own or Great Britain’s tends to favor centrist candidates. In particular, candidates elected from ethnically mixed areas will become a natural constituency for compromise measures.

The weakness and defections from the Maliki government could create the perfect opportunity to press him to call for new elections (especially, if as seems likely, the Iraqi government is unable to do much on the Congressionally mandated benchmarks). The

United States could very plausibly point out that he now lacks a ruling coalition and the current parliament is unlikely to furnish him or anyone else with one, circumstances which demand new elections. The threat of new elections might be sufficient to galvanize this group to start cutting deals. If not, which seems at least equally likely, new elections in late 2008—hopefully after continued progress with security and local economic/political development and with a new electoral system—could produce a new COR willing and able to do what this one has been unable to do, and reach the compromises necessary for a true national accommodation. Again, there is no guarantee of this, but given how dysfunctional the current leadership has shown itself to be, early national elections appears increasingly to be the only course of action that could produce a new leadership able to make the compromises necessary for national accommodation.

Better Information Flows to the Public. The Pentagon has done a poor job to date of explaining our progress in its major documents. For example, its latest Quarterly Report to Congress on the war, released June 15, stated that civilian fatalities for the spring had not declined at all relative to the winter. That was probably inaccurate even at the time, according to DoD data we saw in Iraq, and in any event the situation this late spring/summer has improved substantially. Overall levels of violence against civilians in Iraq have declined by about one-third relative to their pre-surge winter levels. This is not nearly enough progress of course. It means Iraq is still witnessing perhaps 2,000 deaths a month from all forms of violence, comparable to the levels of 2004 and 2005 before the civil war really heated up. But things are finally headed in the right direction, to be sure.

Nevertheless, the inability of the Pentagon (and the rest of the U.S. government) to disseminate relevant—and realistic—information to the American people is both part of the reason that the Bush Administration has lost credibility with the American people, and why so few Americans are even aware of the modest but important progress being made in Iraq, especially in the security sector. In a democracy, in the information age, this failing is inexcusable.

Give the Surge More Time, But Plan for the Worst Case. The nascent progress made so far is important and sufficient to justify sticking with the current approach in Iraq at least through early 2008 when progress should again be assessed. However, the Bush Administration must constantly guard against its predilection for overconfidence. The situation in Iraq remains grave. Success is not guaranteed, and some measure of failure is still quite possible if not likely. Consequently, the United States government should be examining fallback options—“Plan Bs”—for Iraq in the event that the current progress falters and Iraq resumes its slide into all-out civil war. It is equally important to explore how the United States might fall back from the current strategy in more limited ways, for example allowing ethnic consolidation and displacement in some zones that are hard to preserve in their current multiethnic form while preventing that process from escalating.

Unfortunately, such alternatives are hard to devise and harder to implement. But hard as they are, they are necessary given the seriousness of the situation in Iraq and notwithstanding the early, important progress made so far.