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Scoring the Iraq Aftermath

Michael O'Hanlon & Adriana Lins de Albuquerque

HOW CAN WE tell if we are making progress in Iraq or not? If you already know what answer you want, it is easy to find someone to provide it. If you oppose the war, locate a prominent Democrat; if you prefer good news, find a Bush Administration official. In both cases, you are likely to hear accurate but, alas, highly selective and incomplete data. How do we move beyond the war of competing factoids to assess actual progress and to know when policies need to be adjusted?

One of the main obstacles to this is that the Bush Administration has been suffering from a perceptions gap of its own making. Prior to the war, administration officials frequently portrayed post-Saddam Iraq as a land of milk, honey, oil and bouquets being thrown at the feet of American soldiers as they packed their bags to head home quickly after the war. Another obstacle to a clear understanding of postwar Iraq, however, is the media. Negative news reports about individual acts of violence that are not placed in perspective by reporters, political analysts or the public at large greatly complicate matters. What is needed, therefore, is a framework within which we can assess trends over time, suggesting a means of monitoring future progress.

To be sure, this approach has its limitations, and they are stark. The Vietnam experience should remind us that assessing progress in any counterinsurgency through use of statistical measures is dangerous: the data can be incomplete, wrong or simply unrepresentative of actual progress in the broader political struggle that any counterinsurgency operation must wage. Body counts and estimates of "crossover points" at which one is killing the enemy faster than it can regenerate its ranks are particularly problematic.[1] But by establishing as broad a portfolio of data as possible, scrutinizing it for accuracy and remembering caveats about how it should be interpreted, one can still do better with data than without it.

The War of the Factoids

IS THE counterinsurgency and nation-building mission in Iraq going well or badly? There is substantial evidence on both sides of this question. That fact, plus the high political

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[1]For a good critique of how these kinds of metrics were previously misused, see Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988)

stakes in play as a presidential campaign approaches, explain why there is such discord in the national debate on the subject.

Clearly the Iraq mission today is encountering difficulties. Four tragic bombings dominated the August news, killing the UN's top administrator in Iraq and one of the country's most important moderate political leaders. A Governing Council member, Akila al-Hashimi, was assassinated in September, and a deputy mayor of Baghdad was killed in late-October. Oil outflows were slow to resume in quantity and remained below pre-war levels six months after the fall of Saddam. Economic opportunity in Iraq continues to be mediocre for most and unemployment remains high. By September, more Americans had died since May 1, when President Bush landed on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln to declare major combat operations over, than during the overthrow of Saddam, and the toll has continued since. Attacks on U.S. forces have steadily increased in number. Increasing ambushes of supply convoys and greater use of improvised explosive devices by Iraqi insurgents were among the more disturbing trends of the late summer and early fall. Synchronized truck bombs in Baghdad and a rocket attack on the Al-Rasheed hotel while Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was staying there in late-October capped off a month in which U.S. troop casualties from hostile fire reached a level not seen since July. And according to comments in early-October by Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, head of U.S. ground forces in Iraq, "The enemy has evolved. It is a little bit more lethal, little bit more complex, little bit more sophisticated and, in some cases, a little bit more tenacious."[2]

That said, the Bush Administration is at least partly and perhaps even mostly right when it announces that economic, political and security progress is being made. Indeed, as the administration claims, most of Iraq is now generally stable. By October's six-month anniversary of the fall of Saddam, national electricity levels had reached pre-war levels and were approaching that objective in Baghdad. Several thousand small businesses had reportedly opened by September—a modest number in a country of Iraq's size, to be sure, but a very healthy step in the right direction. Iraq also had an independent central bank and a new currency by October.

Politically, most Iraqi localities had their own indigenous ruling councils. The national Governing Council had been named and, in turn, chosen a cabinet. Nearly all of Iraq's 400 courts were functioning. All 65 institutes of higher learning and all 240 hospitals, as well as almost all primary and secondary schools and 1,200 health clinics, had also opened.[3] Water and phone services were about 80 percent of their prewar levels.

Equal degrees of progress are being made with regard to security. Several thousand Iraqi resistance fighters and almost three-fourths of the leaders on the famous deck of cards, are now dead or captured. Iraqi security forces numbered more than 100,000 personnel in early November—including police, army, border guards and a civil defense corps—with steady progress underway toward achieving a total near 200,000 within a couple years.

Toward a More Complete Picture

BOTH THE positive and negative spin of what is happening in Iraq are largely anecdotal—compilations of convenient facts with little analytic framework for putting them together. How do we know which news,

[2]Theola Labbe, "Enemy Is 'More Lethal', U.S. General Says, *Washington Post*, October 3, 2003, p. 15.

[3]See for example, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, "Iraq Six Months Progress Report: Talking Points", October 9, 2003, available at www.cpa-iraq.org and www.defenselink.mil.

the good or the bad, is more important? How do we detect trends? And how can we assess the importance of being so exposed internationally, with little help from key friends and allies, in the mission in Iraq?

There are no definitive answers to these questions, of course, but a few rules of thumb can increase the odds of seeing things clearly. The first is to track all the relevant data regardless of whether one wishes to sell optimism or pessimism. The second is to monitor all of this information over time so as to detect trends. And finally, with as much data in hand as possible, one must attempt to place it into proper perspective. This, however, requires a broader argument about how to succeed in a counterinsurgency. Such knowledge can help make the disparate data more than the sum of their confusing and contradictory parts.

TABLE 1: SECURITY INDICATORS IN IRAQ

Category/Month	April	June	August	October
Top 55 Ba'athis Still at Large	40	23	16	15
Typical Number of Daily Attacks on U.S. Troops	5–10	6	15	30
Available Iraqi Security Forces	0	25,000	48,000	85,500
Total U.S. Troops Killed Stabilizing Iraq	22	29	36	43
Annualized Murder Rate in Baghdad per 100,000 people (DC Rate = 46 per year)	100	135	185	140

TABLE 2: ECONOMIC TRENDS IN IRAQ

Category/Month	April	June	August	October
Unemployment Rate (%)	60+	60+	50+	50+
Oil Production Nationwide (million barrels/day)	N/A	0.7	1.4	2.1
Electricity Produced Nationwide (Prewar: 3,300 megawatts)	0	3,200	3,300	3,900
Electricity Produced in Baghdad (Prewar: 2,500)	N/A	780	1,280	1,250

The two tables below show snapshots of various data in these two categories, most of it provided by DoD and the coalition provisional authority, for the months of April, June, August and October. Again, the user should be warned about the difficulty of assessing progress in any counterinsurgency through statistical measures, but some data is probably better than no data—or selective, tendentious data—when trying to reach a broader judgment about how the war is going.

A successful counterinsurgency must have security and economic dimensions. In the security sphere, it is necessary to try to assess progress in the counterinsurgency: namely in neutralizing resistance forces, reducing crime rates and in building Iraqi security services. In the economic realm, it is necessary to have information relating both to quality of life—availability of water, electricity, cooking gas and so on—as well as to employment and economic recovery. Certainly, some information is more readily accessible than other kinds at this time, meaning that all calculations are works in progress.

A third category of effort in any counterinsurgency, politics is harder to track using quantitative data. That is especially true because Iraq has local governments throughout almost all of the country at present, in addition to a national Governing Council. Hence, future progress will be dependent more on how well Iraqi leaders do their jobs and how quickly they establish legitimacy among the population than on increases in their ranks. An imperfect proxy for this is polling data showing how the Iraqi population feels about the for-

eign presence in its country and about the general direction of political life within the country. Here the verdict remains mixed. Recent Gallup polls show that a clear majority of Iraqis want coalition forces to stay and believe that life will gradually improve in the post-Saddam era. But the majority also feels frustrated and worried about internal political trends, and, as should be quite obvious, a sizeable minority with the potential to do great harm opposes the entire course of events.

There is also a question of long-term sustainability. In the economic sphere, for example, a number of businesses have been created, and market activity is much more lively. Available data, however, do not yet show a substantial increase in employment levels. Nor can they demonstrate that Iraq yet has a notably healthier economic base that could survive the departure of the foreign presence and its associated large but artificial economic stimulus. The direction these trends take in the coming months will say much about Iraq's prognosis, but one principal question will linger: How do we evaluate progress when, as is likely to be the case, some data remain promising and other data remain troublesome? A broader analytical framework for understanding counterinsurgency is needed.

Principles for Waging Successful Counterinsurgency Operations

IN CONDUCTING a counterinsurgency, one is faced with the dilemma of defeating dedicated guerrillas while simultaneously reducing the proclivity of others to join their ranks. In theory, if the insurgent loss rate exceeds its pace of recruiting, time should be on the side of the counterinsurgency. In practice, as we learned in Vietnam, measuring these two respective trends is very hard. Accurate determination of the Viet Cong "crossover rate" (where losses exceeded new recruits) was extremely elusive.

The most numerous element of the insurgency facing U.S. troops is made up of former Saddam loyalists or Ba'athis—and they are a limited lot. Moreover, they are diminishing with time as coalition forces attack and arrest them. For example, in the region north of Baghdad, now run by General Ray Odierno's 4th Infantry Division, some 600 fighters have been killed and 2,500 arrested in recent months (with most of the latter remaining in custody). To be sure, not all of these are Ba'athis, but, with such attrition rates, a group of fighters that probably numbered 10–20,000 at peak strength will decline significantly over time. Around Tikrit, Hussein's hometown, and within other parts of the "Sunni triangle", for example, former regime loyalists have been weakened such that they require reinforcements from other parts of Iraq to continue many of their efforts.

That the number of insurgents will decline over time is especially true because the regime remnants have no appealing ideology with which to attract more members. We could, however, so mishandle the operation as to make anti-Americanism that rallying ideology. That prospect remains unlikely at present, given our plans to intensify reconstruction efforts and turn over power quickly to Iraqis. But the CIA has recently grown at least somewhat worried about the possibility of a snow-balling anti-American resistance movement, so the trend must be carefully monitored. At present, there is no nationalist ideology likely to appeal to most Iraqis of the type western powers faced in Algeria, Vietnam and elsewhere. Most Iraqis do not feel openly hostile to the U.S.-led foreign presence. Indeed, some 70 percent are optimistic about the country's future prospects according to recent polls. They are unlikely to join the cause of killing Americans if we can make progress on most material measures of success while also starting down the path toward withdrawal from Iraq.

Despite a dubious decision by Ambassador Paul Bremer to disband the Iraqi army and ban even mid-level Ba'athis from positions of influence, the Bush Administration generally has a sound strategy of trying to exonerate most Iraqis who cooperated with the former regime while punishing only the top leadership. As for the latter, most Ba'athis from the famous deck of cards are now off the street. Many second-tier loyalists of the former regime are also being arrested or killed daily. Common criminals are numerous, especially since Saddam opened the prisons last year, but they are unorganized and increasingly overwhelmed by coalition troops and the growing Iraqi police force.

The most serious problem facing the U.S. counterinsurgency come from jihadists, including members of Ansar Al-Islam and possibly of Al-Qaeda. This is perhaps the greatest reason for long-term worry, but there are means to deal with them. First, we can improve border security to force the jihadists to enter Iraq in smaller numbers, a policy already being implemented. Second, we can train Iraqi border guards to help. This policy is also being implemented, even if the 10,000 or so Iraqi border agents now fielded may be too small. (These numbers are more appropriate for patrolling intra-European borders than Iraq's much rougher and longer frontier.) Third, to the extent that the Ba'athi resistance can be contained while stability and a decent quality of life are restored to the country, coalition forces will be more likely to benefit from human intelligence—that is, from Iraqis providing information about the identities, locations and plans of terrorist elements. This last piece is, of course, a tall order, and it is another way of saying that success will develop its own momentum (if we can get to the point where we are widely perceived as succeeding).

The growing number of Iraqi security forces are already helping with patrols and protection of fixed infrastructure. This makes the overall operation more indigenous and thus presumably more legitimate in Iraqi eyes, while also reducing the number of missions putting U.S. troops at acute risk. In addition, U.S. troops are following much better practices to prosecute counterinsurgency operations than they did in Vietnam. Firepower is generally being used quite carefully, even if mistakes such as the accidental killing of some ten Iraqi policemen in September are sometimes made, and even if the coalition's initial raiding tactics were sometimes culturally insensitive. Regional commanders are hiring Iraqis to help with recovery and reconstruction, a key kind of foreign assistance effort that Congress must continue to support. Moreover, while insurgents have displayed the full range of standard terrorist tactics—truck bombings, assassinations, use of remotely detonated explosives, mortar and rocket attacks—they are not very sophisticated. Taken together, these factors provide grounds for guarded optimism.

THERE IS still much that can go wrong, however. A few more pivotal assassinations or devastating truck bombings of the type witnessed in August—or even several more periods of violence like those witnessed in late-October and early-November—and a sense of pessimism about the prospects of the U.S.-led effort could snowball, making it easier for Iraqi extremists to incite the public to violence. More delay in the economic recovery could have similar political effects. Foreign jihadists might be able to enter Iraq by the thousands and avoid quick detection. They might even escalate their tactics beyond the relatively simple and standard ones now in use. Iraq's Shi'a population may tilt in fundamentalist directions. More likely, Sunni Arabs, less than 20 percent of the population but

accustomed to having their own kind run the country, could resist a democratic form of government in which their influence (or at least their access to the spoils of power) may appear less than it was under Saddam.

But, once one accepts we are still at war and attempting what is among the most complex missions ever undertaken by the United States, the state of affairs in Iraq and recent trends in that country do not look so disconcerting. Things are gradually getting better even as we progress toward an exit strategy that should further defuse extremist sentiment. We have gotten fairly good at counterinsurgency and nation-building. (The latter skill of the U.S. military, ironically a legacy the Clinton Administration left to the Bush Administration, is proving enormously helpful right now.) Finally, the Iraqi insurgency is unlikely to have the broad appeal that has made certain guerrilla movements historically successful. All of these conclusions, however, are subject to revision as further events and information roll in, and we would all do well to view the facts with open minds—regardless of where our views on Iraq stand at present. If this mission does eventually show signs of failure, we must react and adjust our policies promptly, because failure in Iraq is not an option. □

Mission Accomplished—Truly

"Success will be if there's a private sphere where they have some real choice in what they do with their lives, and a public sphere where they can have some control over their destiny and the state doesn't visit arbitrary violence on them", he said. "This means some type of democracy. It won't be Jeffersonian democracy, with farmers plowing the godforsaken sands outside Nasiriya. Some would say, 'That's modest.' But it isn't. It will be huge. And it'll be something uniquely Iraqi. They don't have to love us, or even like us—why should they? We liberated them, but the fact that we had to do it adds to the trauma of coming out of decades of totalitarian rule. It's difficult for us. We look at ourselves and say, 'We have really good motives and try to do the right thing and why don't people appreciate it?' That's an American thing. Few Iraqis are ever going to step forward and say, 'I really love the [Coalition Provisional Authority].' They'll have to live here long after we're gone. They have legitimate interests, and we shouldn't treat them as children—they're not. If in five or ten years they can look back on this period and believe that they're better off, then things will be okay. We'll be able to move beyond this period to where things are normal between the United States and Iraq." He paused and shrugged. "In a way, success will be if the Iraqis don't hate us."

—Drew Erdmann
Former Acting Minister of Higher Education of Iraq,
as quoted by George Packer, "Letter from Baghdad"
The New Yorker, November 24, 2003, p. 85.