

Troops wait to attack insurgents as part of
Operation Al Fajr in Fallujah

Did the Coalition Need More Forces in Iraq?

Evidence from Al Anbar

By CARTER MALKASIAN

U.S. Marine Corps (Ubal Chavarrin)

Numerous scholars, military officers, and policymakers have argued that the United States deployed inadequate numbers of forces to secure Iraq.¹ They generally agree that by trying to secure the country with only 150,000 troops, the coalition allowed the insurgency to grow. The argument rests on an assessment that successful counterinsurgency is inherently labor-intensive. A standard back-of-the-envelope formula for the number of security personnel per civilian needed to suppress

an insurgency is 20 per 1,000. The formula prescribes 500,000 troops for Iraq.² According to this camp, successful counterinsurgency requires securing the population through foot patrols, checkpoints, urban outposts, blockhouses, sniper operations, ambushes, curfews, and systematic management of population databases.³ These techniques demand ample forces, particularly infantry. They are meant to prevent insurgents from controlling the population by impeding their freedom of movement. This method is known as the *clear-hold-build approach*, or presence.

The opposing argument is that the United States deployed adequate forces to Iraq. According to this camp, the presence of U.S. conventional forces only worsened the insurgency by presenting an image of occupation.⁴ Congressman John Murtha (D-PA) is the most famous proponent of this argument. In his words, “Our troops have become the primary target of the insurgency. They are united against U.S. forces and we have become a catalyst for violence.”⁵ Many in this camp argue that a different approach to counterinsurgency could have enabled success with fewer forces. This alternative focuses on developing indigenous forces with a small number of advisors. Indigenous forces, not

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American forces, protect the local population themselves, providing the numbers for successful counterinsurgency. A concept of embedding small cadres of advisors with indigenous forces has worked in previous counterinsurgency campaigns, such as Oman and El Salvador. Accordingly, the phrase “less is more” has been applied. This method has sometimes been called the *indirect approach*.

Empirical evidence collected in Al Anbar province suggests that the United States indeed dedicated inadequate forces to secure Iraq. The evidence was collected while the author worked as an advisor to I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) from February 2004 to February 2005 and from February to August 2006. It compares the effectiveness of operations that used substantial U.S. forces to secure the population to those that did not. If operations involving relatively few forces experienced success, then the coalition might have been able to secure Iraq with fewer rather than more forces. This was not the case. Such operations generally could not suppress large-scale insurgent activity. When forces were meager, insurgent activity noticeably increased. Operations that saturated cities with coalition forces enjoyed a much stronger record of success.

The comparison implies that more forces, rather than fewer, would have improved the situation in Al Anbar and perhaps Iraq as a whole. Scarcity of forces was the major limitation on directly protecting the population. Until reinforcements arrived in late 2004 and mid-2005, the coalition lacked the forces to provide security in even the key cities. Progress in Iraq might have been accelerated if the population could have been protected in these cities in 2004. The comparison also offers insight into the likely effects of an American withdrawal from Iraq. If the surge fails, a reduction in U.S. forces in key cities and the implementation of an indirect approach may allow insurgent activity to increase and impede efforts to develop indigenous forces.

Case Studies of the Indirect Approach

Al Anbar province is overwhelmingly Sunni and an infamous center of insurgent activity. I MEF took responsibility for Al Anbar in March 2004. Three key cities—Ramadi, Fallujah, and Al Qa'im—needed to be held, along with eight other towns. With roughly 11 battalions in March 2004, I MEF could not hold every city with adequate forces,

so it dispersed its strength near these cities, viewing them as key terrain. Iraqi forces under I MEF for most of 2004 consisted of seven locally recruited Iraqi National Guard (ING) battalions, plus police forces totaling perhaps 2,000.⁶ Other than one ING battalion and one ING company, Sunnis manned all of these forces. With the exception of a single company, the ING battalions could not be moved from their home area. The Shi'a-dominant Iraqi army was still being trained and would not arrive until November 2004.

The ratio of 20 security personnel per 1,000 civilians far exceeds what the combined coalition and Iraqi indigenous forces could

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provide in Al Anbar. Thirty-one U.S. battalions would have been required to attain this ratio in just the 11 cities. A traditional operational method for mitigating scarcity of forces has been to concentrate troops over the key population centers and then expand outward, similar to an oil slick. As population centers are secured, indigenous forces are developed. Those forces eventually can take over security, freeing other forces to move on to secure a new area. Yet it is hard to see how the oil slick method could have succeeded in Al Anbar when the coalition deployed only 11 battalions and the ING forces were immobile.

Fifteen battalions would have been required for Fallujah and Ramadi alone. This would have entailed abandoning key infrastructure, including the highways that served as supply lines. Neither the coalition headquarters in Baghdad, which had ordered the protection of key infrastructure, nor the Iraqi government would have accepted this cost.

I MEF and II MEF did not dictate how regimental and battalion commanders should employ their forces. Commanders were free to use the clear-hold-build approach, an indirect approach, or any other approach, although the clear-hold-build approach received the greatest emphasis. Three cases demonstrate the weakness of the indirect approach: Fallujah (May to October 2004), Hit (March 2004 to June 2005), and Al Qa'im (July 2004 to October 2005).

Fallujah. Following the ceasefire that halted I MEF's April 2004 offensive into the city, Fallujah, which contained roughly 250,000 people, grew as an insurgent safe haven, becoming the locus of command and control for the entire country. Forbidden from reentering the city, I MEF attempted an indirect approach that had two components. First, in May, I MEF organized the Fallujah brigade to enforce security. The brigade comprised approximately 2,000 local residents. I MEF paid them to keep terrorists and foreign fighters out of the city. The brigade had no advisors, and its leadership staunchly refused them. Its soldiers had no intention of working directly with the coalition and did not want to fight other Sunnis. Most of the brigade appeared sympathetic to the insurgency and too intimidated to take any firm



Troops prepare for major assault during Operation Steel Curtain in Al Qa'im

action against foreign fighters. The initiative yielded little. Large insurgent units organized, trained, and staged within the city. Incident levels actually *increased* as insurgents gained control of the city and then clashed with coalition forces. Human intelligence collection became extremely difficult after the April ceasefire as sources became vulnerable.

Second, from late June until the second battle in November, the coalition conducted precision airstrikes against insurgent concentrations and command and control nodes within Fallujah. The goal was to take out key insurgent leaders and to kill as

continued to grow. From June to November, Marines often engaged groups of 30 to 100 insurgents on the outskirts of the city. Strikes impaired insurgent freedom of movement, but large units still could mass under urban cover and run checkpoints—and the population still could not conduct their normal lives. Problems in human intelligence collection persisted, limiting the number of available targets. Insurgents used Fallujah as a base to plan and organize attacks throughout Iraq. Before I MEF assaulted Fallujah in November, insurgent command and control proved sufficiently intact to relocate key leaders and

Iraqi soldiers conduct security patrols in Fallujah



U.S. Marine Corps (Neil Savellus)

Marine conducts rooftop security patrol



U.S. Marine Corps (Kenneth Lane)

I MEF did exactly what critics of presence prescribe—it all failed

many fighters as possible while minimizing collateral damage. The strategy killed over 100 insurgents and may have temporarily disrupted their command and control. Intense fusion of airborne surveillance, signals intelligence, and imagery intelligence guided the strikes, which were particularly effective on the uncommon occasion when actionable human intelligence was available. They softened insurgent resistance in preparation for the offensive in November. Insurgent leadership had to conceal their movement, change methods of communication, and meet in smaller groups.

Precision airstrikes, however, were not effective in suppressing insurgent activity or permanently crippling insurgent command and control. In fact, insurgent strength

numerous fighters elsewhere in Iraq.

The Fallujah brigade initiative remains one of the most prominent coalition attempts at a more sophisticated approach to counter-insurgency than clear-hold-build. I MEF did exactly what critics of presence prescribe: they used indigenous forces as a proxy for coalition ground troops, exploited technology, and lessened the sense of occupation by removing constant presence. It all failed.

Hit. The indirect approach met similar difficulties in Hit in 2004. Hit, with 110,000 residents, lies on the Euphrates between Ramadi and Al Qa'im. The 2^d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment (2/7) operated in Hit in early 2004.

After encountering minor resistance patrolling and receiving good cooperation

from the city council, 2/7 made the progressive decision to focus on training the 503^d ING Battalion. The Combined Action Program (CAP) platoon of 2/7 (42 Marines), augmented by 20 additional Marines, embedded with the 503^d in late May 2004. Following in the footsteps of the highly effective CAP platoons of the Vietnam War, the Marines of 2/7's CAP platoon had a month of special training in Arabic, Arab culture, and Soviet weapons handling. It trained roughly 700 soldiers of the battalion and operated with them daily.⁷ The CAP made a dramatic difference in ING performance. With the CAP, the battalion held and returned fire in 64 percent of engagements (May to October 2004), compared to 33 percent without the CAP (March to April 2004 and November 2004 to February

2005). Numerous Marine assessments in June and July found the 503^d to be nearly ready for independent operations. Unfortunately, success was short-lived.

As hostilities escalated around Fallujah during the autumn, insurgents seized upon Hit as an alternative safe haven. Insurgents organized, massed, and fought a major battle with 1st Battalion, 23^d Marine Regiment (1/23), 2/7's replacement, in October. Intimidated and bribed, the people looked the other way. Although temporarily defeated by the Marines, insurgents continued to flow into the city, and it became a major base of operations following the second battle of Fallujah. Marine officers described the insurgents as having free rein over the city.

The benefits of the CAP were not enough to enable the 503^d to operate effectively amid large numbers of insurgents, who intimidated off-duty ING soldiers and overwhelmed isolated elements of the battalion. Soldiers increasingly quit because of threats, and they regularly abandoned posts attacked by car bombs and became ineffective on patrol. After September, no solid evidence existed that the battalion still stood and fought. During the October fighting in Hit, a subunit of the 503^d working with 1/23 fled from positions defending the city bridge. The ING battalion commander could muster only 60 men to accompany the Marine counteroffensive into the city. Coalition airpower, which struck insurgent positions, supported the Marines and Iraqis in the battle, but this did not embolden the bulk of the ING battalion to fight. If the men fought, insurgents would kill them later. The situation worsened when the Marine battalion in Haditha moved to Fallujah in late October and 1/23 took responsibility for Haditha as well as Hit. Scarcity of forces restricted 1/23's ability to maintain a large number of advisors with the 503^d. By the beginning of 2005, the 503^d had essentially dissolved.

Hit provides another example of an indirect approach in Al Anbar. The 503^d had coalition advisors, and coalition airpower was readily available. Nevertheless, the insurgent ability to mass superior numbers and intimidate crippled indigenous forces. The use of airpower did not alter the balance; the insurgents operated in a manner concealed from airstrikes.

Al Qa'im. Al Qa'im, which lies along the Euphrates River at the Syrian border, had a population of 110,000 in 2004. The Marines

there initially adopted a clear-hold-build approach, flooding the urban areas with foot patrols, under the philosophy that presence would suppress insurgent activity and allow indigenous forces to develop. They abandoned this approach in the summer, however, because progress did not seem commensurate with steady casualties.

The lack of regular coalition presence allowed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization, known as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), to concentrate in Al Qa'im and influence the area in late 2004. As AQI massed large numbers of foreign fighters arriving via Syria, Marines fought bigger and bigger firefights on the outskirts.

Concentration of AQI in Al Qa'im actually caused a local reaction. Tribes that had been fighting the coalition turned against AQI, most notably the Albu Mahal tribe. The Albu Mahal disliked AQI's treatment of civilians, importation of foreign fighters, and encroachment on their control of the black market. The tribe formed the "Hamza battalion," a tribal militia that actively defended Al Qa'im against AQI and initiated a unilateral ceasefire with coalition forces. The coalition apparently held an informal relationship with the Hamza battalion. According to a Marine spokesman, Iraqi informants helped find targets for coalition raids.⁸ On one occasion, locals (presumed to be the Hamza battalion) fired on insurgents (presumed to be foreign fighters) attacking a Marine outpost.

Unfortunately, without being present in the city, the Marines could not ensure the survival of the Hamza battalion. AQI massed superior forces by turning to other local tribes and bringing in reinforcements, and they enforced strict Islamic law in areas outside Albu Mahal control and brutally intimidated anyone opposing them. Witnessing rising AQI strength, the other tribes cut a deal with Zarqawi and turned against the Albu Mahal.⁹ The support of local tribes provided AQI with intelligence on the location of members of the Hamza battalion. In turn, the battalion lost intelligence on the location of AQI and its allies.

In early September, al Qaeda in Iraq defeated the Hamza battalion and seized Al Qa'im. With local support, AQI could move unseen to the Albu Mahal within the city and target relatively freely. It also enjoyed superior numbers and resources, having turned the other tribes against the Albu Mahal. The Hamza battalion had neither the men nor

the arms to withstand persistent attacks. The Albu Mahal had become the minority opposition to AQI.

Coalition air support did not make a difference. The Marines conducted a series of airstrikes against AQI safe houses and in close support of the Hamza battalion. Those strikes reportedly killed over 50 insurgents, including at least 1 cell leader.¹⁰ Airpower was probably ineffective due to the breadth and unconventional nature of the AQI attack. Ambushes, assassinations, and impromptu surprise attacks, rather than conventional tactics, characterized the AQI offensive. AQI mounted these attacks throughout the city, and it could not easily be targeted without having Marine squads and platoons present, especially in an urban environment in which AQI could move unseen among the population. Otherwise, the Marines would have needed to indiscriminately level sections of Al Qa'im with no regard for civilian casualties to stop the AQI advance. By September 5, AQI had taken over Al Qa'im, posting a sign that read, "Welcome to the Islamic Republic of Qa'im."¹¹

The Hamza battalion is an example of the limitations of the indirect approach. An indigenous force had coalition air support and some degree of coordination with coalition ground forces yet could not defeat their opponents. Leaders in the Albu Mahal tribe believed that only direct coalition ground intervention could have turned the tide. After the battle, an Albu Mahal tribal leader expressed the need for a major clearing operation: "It would be insane to attack Zarqawi's people, even to shoot one bullet at them. . . . We hope the U.S. forces end this in the coming days."¹²

Why Did the Indirect Approach Fail?

The indirect approach experienced little success in reducing insurgent activity (particularly in terms of the size of attacks) and building human intelligence. Removing coalition forces from populated areas allowed insurgents to mass, control the population, and overwhelm local indigenous units. Insurgents would overwhelm indigenous units by either attacking subunits that had no advisors or intimidating off-duty personnel. Airstrikes could address neither. Advisors could not change the fact that local identity rendered soldiers and police highly vulnerable to intimidation. Indeed, soldiers in the 503^d fled while operating alongside

Marines during the battle in Hit. Insurgents attacked, murdered, and kidnapped Iraqi soldiers and policemen, as well as their families. Intimidation is always a problem in counterinsurgency, but without coalition presence, insurgents enjoy total freedom to use it to coerce indigenous forces.

Popular support for the insurgency cannot be ruled out as a constraint on the indirect approach. General sympathy for the insurgency meant that certain local indigenous units, such as the Fallujah Brigade, had no intention of seriously fighting the insurgents. It also meant that groups who opposed the insurgency, such as the Albu Mahal, did not receive widespread support from other Sunnis. Advisors could not change Sunni sympathies.

The Clear-Hold-Build Approach

Despite numerous shortcomings, the clear-hold-build approach proved superior to the indirect approach. Two notable examples of the clear-hold-build approach were in Fallujah (November 2004 to August 2006) and Al Qa'im (November 2005 to August 2006). The clear-hold-build approach has also been applied in Hit (after June 2005), Haditha, Iskandariyah, Mahmudiyah, Karma, Khalidiyah, Nasser Wa Salaam, and Ramadi.

Fallujah. The saturation of Fallujah with coalition and Iraqi forces epitomizes the positive effects of the clear-hold-build approach. As noted above, the indirect approach failed in Fallujah following the first battle in April 2004. By November 2004, the coalition and Iraqi government agreed that Fallujah needed to be cleared. The strength of insurgent resistance and limited numbers of Iraqi forces left a direct approach as the only option. I MEF received two Iraqi brigades (five battalions) and one U.S. Army brigade (three battalions) to prosecute the offensive (Operation *Al Fajr*). The offensive could not have been conducted without these reinforcements. I MEF would have had to denude the rest of Al Anbar of forces to clear Fallujah. As it was, the 1st Marine Division sent two Marine battalions (plus Regional Combatant Team [RCT]-7 headquarters and other combat support elements) to join the three battalions of RCT-1 for the offensive. This left only a skeleton force covering the western desert and Ramadi. The overwhelming force combined with coalition firepower cleared Fallujah in pitched fighting in November and December, resulting in roughly 2,000 insurgent casualties and prisoners.¹³

After the battle, RCT-1 took responsibility for Fallujah with two Marine battalions and six Iraqi battalions. At that time, Iraqis were returning to the city. RCT-1 combined intensive patrolling with new population control measures. All residents returned via

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entry control points. Initially, vehicle traffic was restricted and a curfew was implemented. As the population grew from 5,000 to 100,000, RCT-1 enjoyed an overwhelming ratio of coalition/Iraqi forces per civilian. The population readily interacted with the Iraqi and coalition forces because they felt safe. Insurgents often fled the city, fearing that locals would inform on them. Throughout 2005, coalition and Iraqi army presence maintained security in Fallujah, allowing other essential elements of the counterinsurgency to move forward. Iraqi army units were able to develop their skills in a permissive environment and with the support of the Marine battalions. Every Marine battalion partnered with two to three Iraqi battalions, training and operating alongside them. The Marines slowly organized, trained, and deployed a local police force, which would prove competent in 2006. Presence mitigated the intimidation that had formerly sunk efforts to build a local indigenous force. Additionally, civil affairs officers and the State Department representative, Kael Weston, undertook an intensive engagement effort. They managed to get local leaders, most notably the imams, to endorse the Iraqi security force and elections. This effort resulted in high turnout for the January 2005 national election, October 2005 referendum, and December 2005 national election. In general, although they still opposed coalition occupation, a local city government and civil society developed that were averse to violence and preferred achieving their aims via political means.

Al Qa'im. As noted above, coalition units had adopted an indirect approach in Al Qa'im in the summer of 2004. That approach persisted until November 2005, when coalition forces staged a major operation to clear Al Qa'im, known as Operation *Steel Curtain*.

II MEF received substantial reinforcements to mount the operation because its own forces could not be shifted from the vital cities of Ramadi and Fallujah without unacceptable risk. Two Marine infantry battalions and one Iraqi brigade assaulted the city and then established a permanent presence. The assault cleared out AQI elements. With AQI defeated, the Albu Mahal tribe enjoyed a permissive environment to enforce security with the Marines.

The 3^d Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment (3/6) adopted an aggressive plan for maintaining presence. Rather than minimizing contact with locals, they maximized it: Marines integrated thoroughly with the Iraqi army brigade and dispersed in small subunits throughout the city. Every platoon lived and worked with an Iraqi platoon in an outpost in the area. The battalion established a dozen outposts. The platoons conducted intensive satellite patrolling day and night. Living close to the population generated intelligence and forced the Marines to learn how to interact with the locals. The population accepted the Marine and Iraqi presence, probably because the Albu Mahal supported the Marines, not wanting foreign fighters to return. Marines could move about freely, even purchasing food from local markets.

With sustained presence and the support of the Albu Mahal tribe, the coalition recruited large numbers of police and soldiers. AQI could no longer effectively intimidate locals. Within 3 months of the completion of Operation *Steel Curtain*, 400 locals had become police. By the summer of 2006, a working police force existed of roughly 850 men, largely from the Albu Mahal tribe. Additionally, locals readily joined the Iraqi brigade, which boasted more Sunnis than any other brigade in the Iraqi army. Partnership with the Marine battalion and the benign operating environment allowed the brigade's skills to be developed slowly.

Effectiveness

These cases demonstrate the effectiveness of the clear-hold-build approach over the indirect approach in Al Anbar. Similar trends pertain to other cases, with only Ramadi varying from the pattern. The clear-hold-build approach reduced large-scale insurgent activity because patrols, ambushes, and outposts inhibited insurgent freedom of movement. Coalition and, more importantly, Iraqi forces enjoyed a more permissive

operating environment; insurgents could no longer overrun police stations, run their own checkpoints, train and organize en masse, or directly control the population. Presence mitigated intimidation as well, though it remained a problem. Shi'a forces could operate effectively in this environment, and local Sunni forces could survive with great effort.

Additionally, contrary to proponents of the indirect approach, presence *improved* the coalition relationship with the population. Iraqis became more willing to interact with the coalition as presence restricted insurgent freedom of movement and mitigated intimidation. Intelligence improved and local governments formed. Most importantly, more Sunnis agreed to join indigenous forces.

Limitations

Notwithstanding its strengths, the clear-hold-build approach had four significant limitations. First, it demanded substantial numbers to saturate a city and control the population. Success in Al Qa'im and Fallujah only occurred after operations involving 5 to 10 coalition and Iraqi battalions. Over time, insurgent tactical adaptation meant that more and more forces were needed to secure a given area. The effects of insufficient forces have been most notable in Ramadi, which I MEF tried to secure for most of 2004 with a single Marine battalion. One battalion proved unable to control the city of 450,000. The coalition added battalions from late 2004 to mid-2006, but even the major operation by I MEF in the summer of 2006 lacked sufficient forces. At that point, five coalition and six Iraqi battalions could still not clear the city; insurgents had begun to

develop better tactics to survive amid coalition presence, reducing the marginal benefit of each battalion. I MEF's higher headquarters could not find enough forces for the clear-hold-build approach to succeed.

Second, the clear-hold-build approach could not entirely suppress insurgent activity.

Small incidents and intimidation persisted. This is not surprising. Historically, car bombs, roadside bombs, and murders can last throughout an insurgency, including one near defeat. Military operations in urban areas had difficulty capturing one to four men laying a roadside bomb or driving a car bomb. Even in Fallujah in 2006, roadside bombs, sniper attacks, and occasional suicide bombings occurred as insurgents tried to reassert influence. Nevertheless, the clear-hold-build approach suppressed insurgent influence sufficiently for local forces to develop and reconstruction to occur.

Third, units employing the clear-hold-build approach suffered higher casualties than those employing an indirect approach. Intense urban operations incurred steady casualties from roadside bombs, small arms fire, and

car bombs. Casualties wore on units and challenged long-term presence.

Fourth, while improving the relationship with locals, the clear-hold-build approach never won them over. After 6 to 12 months, locals grew tired of the constant coalition patrolling, raids, outposts, and checkpoints.

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They preferred not to see Americans. Moreover, clearing operations, such as the first battle of Fallujah, second battle of Fallujah, the entry into Haditha, and Operation *Steel Curtain*, caused civilian casualties, which sometimes outraged Sunnis. If the coalition had not built Iraqi political support or taken measures to mitigate civilian casualties, the operation could even have been called off, as in the first battle of Fallujah. The negative effects of the clear-hold-build approach on public support for the coalition and Iraqi government should not be overrated. Presence did not upset locals enough to generate higher levels of attacks. Local relationships were better with large numbers of coalition forces operating amid the population than away from it, as under the indirect approach.



Iraqi police patrol in Ramadi

This article has examined whether operations involving few coalition forces (the indirect approach) would have produced better results in countering the insurgency in Al Anbar than operations involving substantial forces (the clear-hold-build approach). The answer appears to be *no*. The indirect approach was not a viable alternative because insurgent numbers and the ability to intimidate could cripple indigenous forces. The problem was worsened by the fact that most Sunnis refused to work with coalition forces out of sympathy for the insurgency. Nor did the absence of coalition forces win Sunni hearts and minds and magically produce indigenous forces. Rather, it merely left the local recruit base under insurgent control.

expanding outward was infeasible, unless the coalition wanted to abandon Al Anbar entirely and focus on Baghdad. The deployment of a larger number of forces in 2003 or 2004 might have lessened the insurgency in Al Anbar, and perhaps Iraq as a whole. The clear-hold-build approach witnessed similar success elsewhere in Iraq—such as in Mosul and Tal Afar—while the removal of the clear-hold-build approach witnessed similar failure—such as in Baghdad and Samarra.

What does it matter that the United States needed to send more forces to Iraq? As Americans increasingly question the odds of success in Iraq, the comparison between the clear-hold-build approach and the indirect approach sheds light on the effects of pulling coalition forces back

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As the war progressed, the potential for the indirect approach increased. With insurgent dominance broken in Fallujah, and then Hit and Al Qa'im, indigenous forces with small advisory teams could operate effectively without the presence of coalition battalions in certain areas. The removal of direct insurgent control meant that a critical mass of recruits was available to form local Sunni units. Additionally, the arrival of predominantly Shi'a Iraqi army battalions (totaling two divisions by 2006) improved the prospects of an indirect approach by offering more steadfast soldiers. That said, the key point is that the indirect approach became viable only after sustained coalition presence.

The inability of the indirect approach to counter the insurgency in Al Anbar argues against the idea that the United States could have succeeded in Iraq without deploying more forces. Rather than lessening the insurgency, fewer forces *fanned* it. Scarcity of forces was the major inhibiting factor on the employment of the clear-hold-build approach. Presence in the key cities of Fallujah and Al Qa'im could not have been established without substantial reinforcements from outside Al Anbar. In other words, even the oil slick method of concentrating in key cities and then

from populated areas or withdrawing from Iraq entirely. Some advocates of the indirect approach have been calling for its implementation as an alternative to the surge strategy of 2007. Other opponents of the surge are now calling for outright U.S. withdrawal. The answer is not as clearly in favor of maintaining a substantial presence as one might think. The reinforcement of coalition forces in Ramadi in 2006 delivered lackluster results. Furthermore, the indirect approach has now witnessed success in certain areas. Nevertheless, the situation absent coalition forces has usually been far more violent than when those forces have been present. Consequently, it would be reckless to presume that a reduction in forces will not be followed by an increase in violence. Given historical precedent, the United States should expect hardcore insurgent groups, such as AQI, to gain influence in the wake of a reduction in U.S. forces, if not to dominate Al Anbar and other Sunni areas. It would also not be surprising if Iraqi army and police units suffered setbacks. Even if the surge succeeds, U.S. decisionmakers need to realize that reducing forces prematurely stands a good chance of forfeiting hard-won gains. These forecasts are not meant to endorse a U.S. strategy of staying the course but to provide a full understanding of the implications of reducing forces. **JFQ**

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¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ John Sattler and Daniel Wilson, "Operation Al Fajr: The Battle of Fallujah—Part II, Dousing the Bright Ember of the Insurgency," *Marine Corps Gazette* (July 2005).