

## U.S. Post-Surge Options in Iraq

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Chairman Snyder, Mr. Akin, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S. post-surge options in Iraq.

There is no longer any doubt that the security environment in Iraq has improved dramatically in the past six months. Understanding how this came about is key to assessing U.S. post-surge options in Iraq.

**Dramatically Improved Security.** After violence in Iraq hit all-time highs in late 2006 and early 2007, attacks on and casualties among Iraqi civilians, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and Coalition forces are down more than 60 percent. A combination of factors accounts for this dramatic development:

- *The Sunni Arab Tribal Awakening.* The extreme ideology and brutal tactics of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), and the threat it posed to more mainstream Islamo-nationalist insurgent groups, as well as to traditional tribal power structures and economic interests, eventually engendered a backlash in the form of an anti-AQI tribal uprising in the largely Sunni Arab regions of Iraq. The principal manifestation of this backlash was the creation of various tribal “Awakening Councils” in Anbar province and elsewhere. While this development predated the surge, the latter gave additional impetus to this trend, particularly after Coalition forces started working, in about June 2007, with local tribal elements to create armed Concerned Local Citizen (CLC) groups to fight AQI. Because many CLC members had worked previously with AQI as facilitators or co-belligerents, they knew the local AQI members, and were therefore able, with the help of Coalition forces, to root them out and roll up their networks.
- *The Surge.* The commitment of five additional Brigade Combat Teams to Iraq in tandem with a parallel surge by Iraqi Security Forces, enabled Coalition forces to not only “clear,” but also to “hold” areas that they had been unable to hold previously due to the paucity of forces on the ground. Coalition forces set up 68 combat outposts and joint security stations throughout Baghdad, permitting them to maintain a 24 hour presence throughout the capital—conveying in the most dramatic way possible the U.S. commitment to protecting the civilian population. One of the benefits of this new approach was a torrent of fresh intelligence from the civilian population concerning AQI. Coalition forces have pursued AQI relentlessly, killing many, and forcing their remnants to go to ground, or to flee to Ninawa and Diyala provinces where they are attempting to regroup.
- *Taking on Shiite Militias.* Coalition forces have also taken on Iranian-supported “special groups” that targeted Coalition forces, and have sought to roll up Mahdi Army/Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) cells engaged in sectarian cleansing in various neighborhoods of Baghdad. After clashes between JAM cells and ISF units in Karbala in August 2007, Muqtada Sadr

stood down the JAM in order to clean house and consolidate control over an organization that was fragmenting, that was increasingly unresponsive to central direction, and that had alienated the movement's popular support base. Coalition forces have tried to exploit this growing alienation between JAM and its popular base by attempting to establish tribal "Awakening Councils" and CLC groups in largely Shiite regions of Iraq.

- *Diminished Flow of Foreign Fighters.* Syria and Iran have contributed greatly to the violence in Iraq: the former by serving as a conduit for foreign fighters, the latter as a training base for Shiite militias and as a supplier of arms and advanced IEDs for these groups. Though small in number, foreign fighters are a combat multiplier for the insurgents, as a significant proportion of them end up as suicide bombers. As a result, they have had an impact out of all proportion to their numbers. Recently, however, the number of foreign jihadists entering Iraq from Syria has decreased, due at least in part to efforts by Syria and the countries of origin to stanch the flow of foreign fighters. There has also been some speculation that Iran has reduced the flow of EFP components and bombs to Iraq recently, though Coalition commanders are emphatic in asserting that Iran continues to train and fund the so-called "special groups" operating in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, the improved security situation can be attributed to a sustained effort to neutralize the main drivers of the escalating civil violence in Iraq prior to the surge—AQI suicide bombings on the one hand, and JAM cells engaged in revenge killings and ethnic cleansing on the other. By capturing or killing the members of these organizations, and thereby disrupting their operations, the Coalition was able to break what previously appeared to be a self-sustaining cycle of civil violence. In this, the Coalition was assisted greatly by its new alliance of convenience with Sunni Arab tribal elements that included in their ranks former anti-Coalition insurgents, and the decision of the Sadr organization to temporarily halt military operations.

Several policy-relevant conclusions can be drawn from this experience: 1) while the U.S. presence may have stoked insurgent violence in Iraq between 2003-2006, the U.S. is, for now, a force for stability; 2) while some violence in Iraq is undoubtedly the product of random and revenge killings, it is for the most part, neither spontaneous nor self-sustaining; rather, violence is used in an instrumental fashion by armed groups whose activities can be disrupted and whose decision calculus can be influenced by various military and non-military means.

These conclusions have a direct bearing on the prospects for improving security and achieving local accommodations (if not national reconciliation) in Iraq. At the same time, it must be stressed, Iraq is still a fairly violent place; there are still large numbers of Iraqis committed to pursuing their goals by violent means. And needless to say, should the groups that have halted attacks on Coalition forces and the ISF decide to resume these operations, the security situation in Iraq could very quickly take a turn for the worse.

**Preserving Recent Gains.** The immediate challenge faced by Coalition forces in Iraq is how to preserve recent security gains in the face of a pending U.S. drawdown, as the surge comes to an end. Has the security environment changed in such a way that it is unlikely to be affected by the drawdown? Or is violence likely to spike as the surge comes to an end?

Ultimately, there is no way to answer this question with any degree of confidence. Iraq continues to confound even experienced observers, so it would be prudent to plan for both pleasant and unpleasant surprises. However, given continuing levels of violence, it is reasonable to assume that

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<sup>1</sup> DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, January 17, 2008.

groups still engaged in violence will seek, and likely find new opportunities to act, as the surge comes to an end. There are a number of other developments, moreover, that could complicate the security situation; it is vital to nip these developments in the bud (if possible), or to be prepared to deal with them should they come to pass. These include:

- The defeat of AQI leads to the collapse of the tribal coalitions underpinning the various “awakening” movements, leading to infighting among rival tribes, or a resumption of anti-Coalition violence by tribal and insurgent militias;
- Tensions over influence and access to resources between the various tribal awakening movements, and the Sunni Arab parliamentary parties erupts into violence;
- Muqtada Sadr opts not to renew his order to JAM to stand down, resulting in the resumption of attacks on Sunni Arab civilians and militias, Coalition forces, and rival Shiite parties and militias;
- Intermittent violence among various Shiite movements and parties or between various Shiite movements and the ISF expands in scope and intensity;
- Simmering tensions around Kirkuk deriving from Kurdish demands for a referendum over the city’s future (as called for in Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution) explode into open violence involving Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other groups;
- Turkey and/or Iran intensify military operations against expatriate Kurdish separatist groups based in northern Iraq;
- Returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees resort to violence to evict squatters from their homes, or are met by violence upon their return, reigniting sectarian violence in previously “cleansed” neighborhoods or communities.

Some of these developments would have only local consequences. Others could have far-reaching implications for stability and security in large parts of Iraq. Dealing with these ongoing problems and potential challenges will require the active involvement of the Iraqi government, and the sustained engagement of U.S. military and diplomatic personnel, as well as the President of the United States.

In some cases, the political process already offers the means to deal with these problems (for instance, new provincial elections could reduce tensions between the de facto tribal leadership and established elected politicians in predominantly Sunni Arab regions of Arab). In others, new mechanisms will have to be devised to deal with the problem (such as that of returning IDPs and refugees). Much will depend on the success of the Iraqi Security Forces in taking up the slack as the U.S. draws down, and on the political savvy and negotiating skills of Iraqi politicians and U.S. diplomats.

**A Growing Role for Coalition Air Power.** The U.S. also has to prepare for the possibility that as it draws down, violence might flare up again. Under such circumstances, it will probably not be feasible, for political and/or military reasons, to recommit large numbers of ground forces. For this reason, the U.S. will likely become increasingly reliant on air power, in conjunction with residual U.S., and Iraqi ground forces, to respond to future contingencies.<sup>2</sup> Increased emphasis, therefore, need be put on improving U.S.-Iraqi air-ground coordination—if this is not being done already, and on employing tactics, techniques, and procedures developed for targeting terrorists from the air, against insurgents, sectarian militias, and warlords. While Coalition airpower can

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the past year, the Coalition has carried out a surge in air operations, in tandem with its surge in ground forces. This aerial surge is, however, likely to continue into the future, and could even intensify, as Coalition forces draw down. Josh White, “U.S. Boosts its Use of Airstrikes in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2008, A1.

backstop the ISF on a stopgap basis, it is ultimately not a substitute for effective Iraqi ground forces.

**Toward a Political Solution.** Assuming that security gains of recent months can be preserved, the next challenge is to translate these gains into political achievements. Experience elsewhere shows that the factors that make an inconclusive insurgency or civil war ripe for settlement often include: (1) a military stalemate that leads both sides to conclude that they cannot achieve their objectives by violent means; (2) an emerging consensus among the belligerents over the terms of a settlement; and (3) authoritative leaders capable of speaking and negotiating on behalf of their respective constituencies. These conditions are not currently present in Iraq, though there have been signs of progress toward fulfilling some of these conditions during the past year.

*The Utility of Violence.* Most Iraqis are weary of violence, though tactical adjustments by Sunni insurgent and Shiite militia leaders in the past year seems to derive more from the imperatives of organizational survival than from an assessment that they cannot achieve their goals by military means. Thus, many Sunni Arabs, fearing an AQI takeover of their communities and Iranian domination of Iraq, apparently concluded that they risked marginalization, or worse, if they did not cut a deal with the U.S. Doing so, however, has enabled them to weather the AQI challenge, and position themselves for possible future phases of conflict. Conversely, Muqtada Sadr, fearing the loss of control over his movement, ordered them to stand down in August while he sought to reassert control over his cadres. Recent news reports indicate that Sadr may be reconsidering his decision. It is not clear, however, how the arrest of hundreds of his followers in recent months have affected the military capabilities of JAM.<sup>3</sup>

*Consensus On Terms of Settlement.* The political gap at the national level between many Sunnis and Shiites remains broad and deep. Many Sunni Arabs reject negotiations with a government that is the product of a foreign occupation, and composed of Iran-affiliated Shiite parties committed to consolidating their own primacy, though there has recently been signs of growing willingness on both sides to engage (e.g., the willingness of many CLC members to join the ISF, and recent complements by ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Hakim of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council [SIIC] concerning the CLCs). Major differences over key policy issues (e.g., oil, federalism, and implementation of the recently approved de-Baathification law) also remain. For instance, the Kurdish parties and SIIC support a loose form of federalism, while the Sadrists and most Sunni Arabs favor a strong unitary state.

*Authoritative Leadership.* While the Kurds seem to have transcended their internal divisions (at least for now), the Shiite and Sunni Arab communities remain bedeviled by internal divisions and lack authoritative leaders capable of speaking with a single voice or of negotiating on their behalf. If anything, the trend has been toward fragmentation of political and religious authority in both communities. In the Shiite camp, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has been largely ineffective, Ayatollah ‘Ali Hussein al-Sistani proved unable to stem the slide toward sectarian violence, and Muqtada al-Sadr has not been able to control elements of JAM. Moreover, JAM and SIIC have been engaged in a bitter power struggle in the south (which sometimes has also involved the Fadhila Party); and in recent months, Coalition forces and ISF units (often police units associated with the SIIC) have detained or arrested hundreds of JAM members in Baghdad and the south, perhaps portending a shift in the balance of power in some parts of southern Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, “Shiite Contest Sharpens in Iraq: Sadr and U.S. Ally Refocus on South,” *Washington Post*, December 26, 2007, A1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

As for the Sunni Arabs, while many revile the current government, there is apparently growing support for joining the political process and for seeking employment by the ISF as a way of protecting the equities of the community. This has led to splits in the ranks of the Sunni Arab insurgency between those who embrace and reject politics (e.g., the reported split in the 1920 Revolution Brigades in March 2007), and splits in the broader community between de facto and elected leaders (e.g., the members of the various Awakening Councils, and the Iraqi Islamic Party).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, there are signs that the possibility of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal has caused some Sunni Arab insurgent groups to come together, in order to preclude a self-destructive power struggle in the aftermath of such a possible eventuality (e.g., the formation of the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance in October 2007, made up of six Islamist and nationalist insurgent groups).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, events of recent months show that despite the trend toward fragmentation of authority at the national level, local leaders frequently retain sufficient influence to negotiate on behalf of their constituents.<sup>7</sup> Thus, local accommodations may be possible in parts of Iraq, even if national reconciliation remains a distant, unattainable goal at this time. The failure to achieve national reconciliation in such a short timeframe should, however, come as no surprise: national reconciliation remains an elusive goal in other deeply divided societies (e.g., Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Afghanistan), and may take years, if not decades to achieve—if it is achieved at all.

**Conclusions.** While Iraq remains a dangerous place, the security situation has improved greatly, creating the possibility of political and economic progress in the coming year.<sup>8</sup> Many challenges lay ahead, and there is no guarantee that recent security gains can be sustained. But for the first time in a long time, there is reason to believe that an acceptable outcome (defined as a reasonably stable Iraq that can offer its citizens the opportunity to live in peace and dignity) may be feasible. The key is continued U.S. military and diplomatic engagement.

An acceptable outcome in Iraq could, beyond its inherent benefits for the long-suffering people of Iraq, help rehabilitate America's reputation and reestablish its credentials in the Middle East and elsewhere as a reliable ally and force for stability—at a time when the region faces growing threats. For this reason, as long as there remains a reasonable prospect for success in Iraq, no matter how modestly defined, it is vital that the U.S. work toward such an outcome, and accept the risks and costs that a long-term commitment to the people and government of Iraq is likely to entail.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Lydia Khalil, "Divisions Within the Iraqi Insurgency," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (April 12, 2007), and Alexandra Zavis, "Sunnis Divided in Anbar Province," *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Janabi, "Iraq's Armed Groups Formed an Alliance," *Aljazeera.net*, October 1, 2007, and "Iraqi Fighters Form Political Group," *Aljazeera.net*, October 13, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance: Lieutenant Colonel Michael Eisenstadt, "Iraq: Tribal Engagement Lessons-Learned," *Military Review*, September-October 2007, 16-31.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, International Monetary Fund, *Iraq Country Report*, IMF Country Report No. 08/17, January 2008.