

Heritage Lectures

No. 1068

Delivered March 5, 2008



Published by The Heritage Foundation

March 13, 2008

The Surge in Iraq: One Year Later

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I returned from Iraq a little over two weeks ago, and trust me, it's great to be in Washington and in your company today. After nearly 15 months in Iraq—mostly spent focusing on where we are and where we're going—it's a pleasure to step back and reflect a bit about where we've been. I'd like to speak with you about Iraq in 2007, to include the surge, its implementation, and my assessment of its impact.

Baghdad: Before the Surge

As I prepared to depart Fort Hood, Texas, for Baghdad in late November 2006, the Coalition effort in Iraq was at a crossroads. The United States had just held mid-term elections; a new Secretary of Defense had been appointed; and the long-awaited recommendations of the Iraq Study Group were about to be published.

Stories in the press described the situation in Iraq as spiraling out of control. One *Los Angeles Times* article discussed the rising level of sectarian violence in Baghdad and how this violence seemed to feed on itself. Placing his account in context, the writer mentioned that al-Qaeda had detonated a bomb in the Shia neighborhood of Sadr City the previous week, killing over 200 people. This was the latest in a steady run of high-profile attacks since the Golden Mosque bombing of February 2006 in Samarra. And for at least one Shiite living in Baghdad, it was the last straw.

After months of standing apprehensively on the sidelines, the 27-year-old shopkeeper signed up with Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, feeling obligated to do so for his own family's protection. Illustrating how vio-

Talking Points

- For the government of Iraq, the 2007 surge has provided a window of opportunity. This window will not remain open forever.
- In a very real way and at the local level, the surge allowed Coalition and Iraqi forces to hold the hard-earned ground that was wrested from the enemy, while continuing to pursue terrorists as they struggle to regroup elsewhere.
- By November 2007, there were 30 attacks in al-Anbar province during the last week in October; one year prior, there had been over 300.
- To capitalize on the reduction of violence in 2007, Iraqi leaders must make deliberate choices to secure lasting strategic gains through reconciliation and political progress.
- The improved security conditions resulting in part from the surge of 2007 have given the Iraqis an opportunity to choose a better way.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1068.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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lence was increasingly consuming the capital city, the article also told of a 33-year-old Sunni Arab who decided to join a militia ostensibly for the same reason, to protect his community. In reality though, thousands of fighters in Baghdad took an expansive view of their role as “protectors,” and their actions consequently fueled the cycle of violence.

Taking the offensive against Iraqi civilians on the other side of the sectarian divide, many launched attacks that elicited retaliation, which, as the situation deteriorated, only provided justification for the next round of brutal reprisals. Sunni and Shia alike tolerated the extremists in their midst because the Iraqi Army and Police, in some cases, could not be trusted and, in most cases, lacked the capacity to protect the population.

The activities of militias and death squads helped to sustain the cycle of violence in the capital city, and their continued growth stemmed—most fundamentally—from an absence of security. With the violence came fear. Attitudes hardened as survival became the one imperative; allegiances formed along sectarian lines; and civilian deaths accumulated. Close to 2,000 Iraqis lost their lives as a result of ethno-sectarian violence in November 2006 alone, and the count exceeded this grim benchmark the following month. Corpses were found in trash heaps and along Baghdad’s side streets by the dozens each day.

Al-Anbar: Before the Surge

In al-Anbar province, things were actually getting better, but the positive signs had not yet become evident. Also in late November, *The Washington Post* ran a story entitled “Anbar Picture Grows Clearer...and Bleaker.” The article discussed the findings of an assessment that characterized the province as lost—with al-Qaeda in Iraq exerting control over the daily lives of Anbaris more so than any other political or military organization.

The *Post* summarized a Marine intelligence report, stating “Between AQI’s [al-Qaeda in Iraq’s] violence, Iran’s influence, and an expected U.S. drawdown, the...situation has deteriorated to a point that U.S. and Iraqi troops are no longer capable of...defeating the insurgency in al-Anbar.”

In fact, the province’s tribes had already begun to turn against AQI. Nonetheless, the broad sentiment

among the Sunni was that their worst fears of being marginalized—even subjugated—in a Shia-dominated Iraq were coming to fruition. Many commentators at the time used the term “civil war” to describe the conflict. Given the situation in Baghdad and Anbar, it was hard to dismiss this as care-less exaggeration.

When I arrived in Iraq, General George Casey, then the Multinational Force commander, challenged me to break the cycle of sectarian violence. Breaking the cycle and reducing the violence required securing the population and stopping accelerants, our term for those carrying out the attacks and thus triggering the subsequent reprisals. We had made efforts in Baghdad along these lines before, but not to the point where they had yielded any significant or lasting gains.

Establishing Basic Security: Late 2006

Coalition forces could concentrate on selected areas and clear them of extremists. But when these areas transitioned to Iraqi control as our units moved on to other parts of the city, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) left behind were incapable of “holding” the ground we had won. The challenges involved with securing the population were simply too great for the ISF at the time.

In some cases, the ISF itself was complicit in attacks against the civilians its units were charged to protect. Another obstacle to solidifying security gains was political in nature. Then, as now, sustainable security demanded a political solution, with the chief feature being a government of Iraq (GOI) commitment to national reconciliation. Still today, we see some GOI intransigence, but they are making progress.

In late 2006, the progress we can observe now was unthinkable. In short, we could hardly expect successful transition or meaningful reconciliation without basic security. Establishing security for the population was a prerequisite for further progress. It was essential. And to make a decisive impact, we needed more combat power and a change in approach.

However, it is important that I mention one other factor that informed our planning and decision-making process. On December 19, 2006, we captured some mid-level al-Qaeda leaders just

north of Baghdad. Upon them was a map that clearly depicted al-Qaeda's strategy for the total and unyielding dominance of Baghdad, betting that control of Iraq's capital and its millions of citizens would give them free rein to export their twisted ideology and terror.

Indeed, al-Qaeda did operate with impunity in several areas surrounding the capital that we call the "Baghdad Belts," using these sanctuaries to introduce accelerants of violence. This strategy was similar to the way in which Saddam Hussein employed his elite Republican Guard forces to control the city. It was clear to us that Coalition forces would need to clear AQI from these belts and deny these enemies safe havens in order to control Baghdad.

Offensive Operations: Early 2007

From January to June 2007, the surge forces deployed gradually to Iraq, but we adjusted our strategy even before the first additional Brigade Combat Team arrived. Implementing the surge involved much more than throwing extra resources at a problem. It meant committing ourselves to protecting the Iraqi populace—with a priority to Baghdad—while exploiting what appeared to be nascent progress against AQI in Anbar.

It meant changing our mindset as we secured the people where they worked and slept and where their children played. It meant developing new tactics, techniques, and procedures in order to implement this concept. We began to establish Joint Security Stations and Combat Outposts throughout Baghdad. We erected protective barriers and established checkpoints to create "safe neighborhoods" and "safe markets," improving security for Iraqis as they went about their daily lives.

Changing our approach also meant introducing more balance in our targeting by going after both Sunni and Shia extremists. I should point out that this modification required the government of Iraq's cooperation, and it is significant to note that we got it. Shia militia leaders conducting extra-judicial killings would no longer get a free pass.

Changing our approach meant reinvigorating our partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces and improving their capacity. It meant improving our ability to integrate our military efforts with the

expertise of other government agencies—largely through Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Finally, it meant determining where best to employ the surge forces in and around Baghdad and Anbar and sequencing their employment so that they had the greatest impact.

Many have discussed how we implemented this change in strategy – building up forces and capability through the spring of 2007; launching Phantom Thunder—a set of simultaneous operations across Baghdad and its surrounding belt areas; and quickly following up that with Phantom Strike in order to keep extremists off balance.

Results: A Change in Attack Trends

Throughout these offensive operations, we maintained constant focus on job one—protecting the population. By November, we could claim that attacks had dropped to their lowest levels since 2004–2005. There were 30 attacks in al-Anbar province during the last week in October. One year prior, there had been over 300. Today there are under 20 incidents per week in all of Anbar.

The change in attack trends in Baghdad was also dramatic; it reflected a marked reduction of nearly 60 percent. In 2006, civilian deaths throughout Iraq were over 3,000 in the month of December. In less than a year, they had plummeted by 70 percent. In the Baghdad Security Districts specifically, ethno-sectarian attacks and deaths decreased by 90 percent over the course of 2007.

Obviously, it's entirely too early to declare victory and go home, but I think it's safe to say that the surge of Coalition forces—and how we employed those forces—have broken the cycle of sectarian violence in Iraq. We are in the process of exploiting that success.

Explaining the reduction in violence and its strategic significance has been the subject of much debate. It's tempting for those of us personally connected to the events to exaggerate the effects of the surge. By the same token, it's a gross oversimplification to say, as some commentators have, that the positive trends we're observing have come about because we paid off the Sunni insurgents or because Muqtada al-Sadr simply decided to announce a ceasefire. These assertions ignore the key variable in

the equation—the Coalition's change in strategy and our employment of the surge forces.

Suggesting that the reduction in violence resulted merely from bribing our enemies to stop fighting us is uninformed and an oversimplification. It overlooks our significant offensive push in the last half of 2007 and our rise in casualties in May and June as we began to take back neighborhoods. It overlooks the salient point that many who reconciled with us did so from a position of weakness, rather than strength. The truth is that the improvement in security and stability is the result of a number of factors, and what Coalition forces did throughout 2007 ranks among the most significant.

In December 2006, the number of American fighting battalions in the Baghdad Security Districts was 13. By the following summer, there were 25 conducting operations from dozens of Joint Security Stations and Combat Outposts in the heart of the city. Throughout Baghdad and the surrounding belts, Coalition forces were not only attacking the enemy, they were establishing and maintaining a presence in places that had long been sanctuaries of al-Qaeda.

At the same time, we were going after Shia extremists—those responsible for the displacement of Sunni families, sectarian-motivated executions, and intimidating the populace in general. We launched precise, targeted raids repeatedly against the worst offenders. Given additional troops, the Coalition employed them to protect the population. This commitment to the people of Iraq made a difference both directly and indirectly.

Successful Partnerships: Police and Citizens

Partnered with the Iraqi Security Forces, our operations fragmented what were once well-established AQI support zones, disrupted the network's operations, and forced its leaders (those who survived) to shift their bases elsewhere—in many cases, out of reach of Baghdad. Likewise, Coalition forces knocked Shia extremists off balance and drove many away from the capital. I believe our operations injected a healthy dose of confusion into the Mahdi Army's ranks, caused many intermediate- and lower-level leaders to overreact, and ultimately prompted Muqtada al-Sadr to call for a

ceasefire to restore order and to recast the image of his organization as a humanitarian rather than a military one. No doubt, our efforts to disrupt Mahdi Army leadership figured significantly in Sadr's decision.

The surge of Coalition forces also helped bring about a surge in Iraqi Security Force capacity. More U.S. brigade combat teams meant more partnered units for the Iraqi Army and National Police. When it comes to developing the ISF, there is simply no substitute for partnership.

Embracing and enabling the concept of protecting the population also built momentum for bottom-up reconciliation, allowing this process to expand beyond Anbar into other provinces. Enhanced security and persistent Coalition force presence encouraged Iraqis who wanted to stand up and reject AQI to do so without fear of retaliation. Joint Security Stations and Combat Outposts had a clear, noticeable effect on the Iraqi people not only physically, but more importantly, psychologically.

So, what did we do with these citizens that made the choice to reject al-Qaeda and extremism? Acknowledging the potential risks of dealing with former adversaries, our commanders seized upon the opportunity and hired them to assist in local security where Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police were lacking. Initially known as Concerned Local Citizens, but now called the Sons of Iraq, a grassroots movement sprung up akin to neighborhood watches. Mainly Sunni at the beginning and wary of the Shia-led government, these groups turned to the coalition and offered their services to provide protection for the population.

In so doing, we were able to keep young Sunni men away from extremism, provide jobs and income, and gain valuable intelligence on the insurgency, improvised explosive devices, and caches. But they were also looking for legitimacy. The impact of the Sons of Iraq went beyond security and paved the way for improvements in basic services, economic progress, and local governance. As word of their success spread, so did the program—and it continues today. Only paying them meager wages and not providing weapons and ammunition, the program has been an unqualified success.

Additionally, there is a second: order effect in that every dollar paid to the Sons of Iraq gets spent at least two additional times as they provide for their families and then local markets buy wholesale goods to stock their stands. In places where we have employed the Sons of Iraq, we average a ten-fold increase in the markets, for example going from 40 to 400 stands. Finally, the Sons of Iraq are now branching out across Iraq and increasingly include Shia groups and, in some cases, mixed sect groups.

Setting the Stage for Hope

Generally speaking, when security conditions improve, a narrow focus on survival opens up and makes room for hope. Hope provides an opportunity to pursue improvements in quality of life. Along these lines, the surge helped set the stage for progress in governance and economic development. In a very real way and at the local level, this subtle shift in attitude reinforced our security gains—allowing Coalition and Iraqi forces to hold the hard-earned ground we had wrested from the enemy while continuing to pursue extremists as they struggle to regroup elsewhere.

In Baghdad, al-Anbar, and in many other areas of Iraq, the story in early 2008 is about improving people's lives and building government capacity, and about their expectations regarding the future. For the government of Iraq, the surge has provided a window of opportunity. This window will not remain open forever.

To capitalize on the reduction of violence in 2007, Iraqi leaders must make deliberate choices to secure lasting strategic gains through reconciliation and political progress. This set of choices and their

collective effect will be decisive, I think. This view puts things in context.

The future of Iraq belongs to the Iraqis. The improved security conditions resulting in part from the surge of 2007 have given the Iraqis an opportunity to choose a better way. In the last week, several major pieces of legislation have been passed by the Iraqi parliament; accountability and justice, provincial powers, and amnesty law.

Conclusion

Let me close by emphasizing that there was much sacrifice to achieve these gains. Let us all never forget those whose lives have been changed forever because of injuries and those who gave their lives fighting for the ideals of liberty as well as their loved ones. Their sacrifices were and are not in vain, and because of them the Iraqis have the right to choose their own destiny.

The gates of freedom remain open today because of our fallen comrades: noble and gallant warriors who gave everything so others can enjoy life, liberty, and happiness. We will honor their memory and remain dedicated to ensuring their sacrifices are never forgotten.

I am honored to serve in the greatest Armed Forces in the world, and I'm proud of what it stands for. We have not finished our mission, but we have proven our mettle. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you this morning, and God Bless America.

—Lieutenant General Raymond T. Odierno is the Commanding General of U.S. III Corps.