

PHOTOS

TOP LEFT: Iraqi police officers march past a review booth during the Qadisiyah provincial Iraqi control ceremony in Diwaniyah, Iraq, July 16, 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Matthew Plew/Released/available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/multimedia/>)

BOTTOM CENTER: Members of the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army march in a protest, July 21, 2006. (Karim Kadim/Associated Press)

TOP RIGHT: Iraqi soldiers from the 2nd Iraqi Army Division pose for a photo after their graduation ceremony from the crime scene investigation course on Combat Operating Post Al Kindi in Mosul, Iraq, July 3, 2008. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Sarah De Boise/Released/available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/multimedia/>)

CENTER: Children look on as Iraqi workers repair sewers in Basra, Iraq, October 10, 2008. (U.S. Army photo by Spec. Karah Cohen/Released/available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/multimedia/>)

THE SURGE: WHAT COMES NEXT?

**Report #8
March 2003 to July 2008**

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Contents

PREFACE	i
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	1
INDICATOR TREADLINE GRAPHS	9
<i>Graph 1: Iraq Five-Year Trend Line</i>	
<i>Graph 2: Iraq One-Year Trend Line</i>	
<i>Graph 3: Iraq Five-Year Indicator Ratings</i>	
METHODOLOGICAL NOTE	12

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The “Surge”: Summing up the impact of the U.S. military “surge” in Iraq, three prominent authors wrote in the September 2008 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that “the prognosis is now much more promising than it has been in years....With a degree of patience, the United States can build on a pattern of positive change in Iraq that offers it a chance to draw down troops soon without giving up hope for sustained security.”² Similar views have been expressed in news reports and government briefings, many concluding, as Senator John McCain has argued, that the “surge” was a “strategic success” that put the war “on a path to victory.” This has led to the public perception in the U.S. that Iraq has reached a turning point which will not only allow American troop withdrawal over the next year or two, if not sooner, but will leave behind a situation of self-sustaining peace and stability. The passage of Iraqi legislation authorizing provincial elections, due to be held in early 2009, contributes to the expectation that Iraqi reconciliation and recovery -- the central objectives of the “surge” -- are not only possible, but likely. Indeed, while the *Foreign Affairs* article warned that “considerable violence” could still erupt, the authors concluded that “recent changes in Iraq’s underlying military and political dynamics have at least broken the pattern of dysfunctional politics that has paralyzed Iraq in recent years.”³

This upbeat assessment was not echoed in the assessment of General David Petraeus, who is credited with achieving the military progress on the ground. Instead, he and other military officials have warned that the situation is still “fragile” and “reversible.” This study concurs with the general’s more measured assessment and suggests that, while significant gains have occurred, a false sense of security is emerging.

As a military tactic, the “surge” was largely successful. However, as part of a wider political strategy designed to give Iraqis the breathing space to attain larger objectives, it was far less successful. Shortfalls continue to exist in sectarian reconciliation, delivery of public services, a strengthened economy, public safety and the rule of law. Even the security sector is far from stable. While 13 of the 18 provinces in the country have been turned over to Iraqi forces as of this writing, numerous militias exist, unacceptable levels of violence continue with impunity, and minorities continue to be “cleansed,” with Christians being the latest victims.

As David Ignatius recently commented, “Iraq has been regarded as such a success story in recent months that many have forgotten that all the old cleavages still exist – Sunni vs. Shiite, Kurd vs. Arab, regional autonomy vs. central government,”⁴ in addition to the continuing intra-sectarian strife, minority scapegoating, and unresolved disputes over wealth and power.

Part of the reason for the divergence in views is the tendency to use body counts as the prime measure of internal progress. Statistics on violent deaths can be misleading if not

² Stephen Biddle, Michael E. O’Hanlon, and Kenneth Pollack, “How to Leave a Stable Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008, p. 40.

³ *Ibid.* p. 52.

⁴ David Ignatius, “A Critical Stage in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2008, p. A19.

seen in a wider perspective. The U.S. government estimates a dramatic 80 percent drop in politically motivated civilian deaths between early 2007 and mid-2008, the period covering the “surge.” Yet at the end of this period, there were still roughly 800 violent deaths a month in Iraq.⁵ Putting this into a comparative context, this means that nearly as many people were dying violently in four to five months in post-surge Iraq as had died in three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland.⁶

One reporter concluded that:

Iraq is on a knife’s edge between war and peace, with violence down dramatically since last year but still a potent force. In addition to deadly sectarian attacks, the country’s Shiite-led government faces unresolved political problems that could flare into renewed bloodshed, from how to absorb U.S.-paid Sunni armed groups to how to distribute the country’s oil revenue.⁷

Public confidence in the situation remains shaky as well. In a poll taken in August 2008, 74 percent of Iraqis stated that they felt safe in their own neighborhoods. This is a reflection of the after-effects of ethnic cleansing and the growth of sectarian neighborhood militias, notably the Sons of Iraq, or Sunni Awakening, a force of roughly 100,000 clan and tribal-based fighters that began to turn against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2005 before the “surge.” They were subsequently incorporated into the U.S. counter-insurgency campaign in 2006, when they became a U.S.-backed militia fighting AQI, rewarded not only with cash but with a promise of being integrated into the Iraqi security forces or provided alternative employment. That promise has yet to be fulfilled.

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In contrast to confidence expressed in the local militias, only 37 percent of the people polled stated that they felt safe outside their own neighborhoods and even less – 31 percent -- said that the level of peace and security in Iraq today was “stable.” The dichotomy between the public’s sense of security in their local areas and their fears outside their own neighborhoods is striking. The Iraqi Security Forces may be getting better, but only 41 percent of the public felt that the Government of Iraq was effective in protecting them.⁸

⁵ According to figures supplied by the Iraqi Interior and Health ministries, 860 people were killed in war-related incidents in September, down from 2,431 in the same period a year earlier. The U.S. government estimates the number of violent deaths at approximately 700 per month.

⁶ Malcolm Sutton, “An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland,” Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications. Updated October 2002. From 1969-2001, over 3,500 people died from political violence in Northern Ireland.

⁷ Mary Beth Sheridan, “Attacks Belie Steps on Reconciliation,” *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2008, p. A17.

⁸ “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq,” Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act of 2008, September 2008.

Countervailing Trends: This study has been tracking trends since the 2003 invasion, documenting improvement or deterioration in monthly assessments of twelve social, economic and political indicators of conflict risk. In this eighth segment of the study, Graph 1 shows the Five-Year Trend line thus far, from pre-war March 2003 to July 2008, with significant events highlighted. Security improvements began in September 2007 and continued steadily until June 2008.

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However, there were also countervailing pressures and persistent risks. Based on all twelve indicators, Iraq remained in the “alert” or “critical” zone of conflict risk by October 2008, when additional outbreaks of violence, particularly new attacks against Christians, erupted. Out of a potential high score of 120 points (worst rating on the scale), Iraq dipped slightly from a peak of 117 (February - October 2007) to 112 (March-July 2008). A movement of five points

in one year is meaningful, but not substantial enough to conclude that the country is solidly on a path toward sustainable security.⁹ This deficiency is also shown in Graph 2, the one-year trend line, and in Graph 3, which shows the scores, indicator by indicator in three-month intervals, over the five years since the invasion.

What explains the decline in violence over the past year? It was the result of several factors in addition to the 30,000 troop “surge” by U.S. troops. They include: new U.S. counter-insurgency tactics which put soldiers closer to the people; ethnic cleansing of Baghdad’s neighborhoods, creating segregated zones that were hardened by high concrete barriers and blast walls built along sectarian fault lines, in effect, partitioning Baghdad;¹⁰ and the recruitment of Sunni proxy forces to fight AQI. The surge was also helped by the decision of the Shiite leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, to declare a cease fire after the al-Malaki government mounted an assault on its forces, reinforced by the U.S.¹¹ A final factor was Iranian pressure on the Sadrists to restructure the undisciplined Mahdi army into a Hezbollah-like political force that could both compete in elections and maintain a smaller but more disciplined militia.¹²

⁹ For more detailed information on the meaning of these scores, see the “Failed States Index” in *Foreign Policy*, July/August, 2008, or at www.fundforpeace.org. For more information on the Conflict Assessment System Tool, or CAST, the methodology underlying the study, go to www.fundforpeace.org/cast/.

¹⁰ Once a predominantly Sunni city, Baghdad is now mainly a Shiite city, with just a few neighborhoods retaining mixed populations. For a fuller study underscoring the importance of this factor, see the report produced by the University of California, Los Angeles, “Baghdad nights: evaluating the US military ‘surge’ using nighttime light signatures” available at <http://www.envplan.com/abstract.cgi?id=a41200>, accessed November 18, 2008. Based on satellite imagery from the Department of Defense, researchers tracked electricity use before, during and after the surge took place. Electricity use fell in neighborhoods where incidents of ethnic violence were documented, often occurring before U.S. troops arrived. For an alternative view that attributes the downturn of violence entirely to the “surge,” see Matthew Kaminski, “Why the Surge Worked,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2008, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122186492076758643.html>, accessed November 18, 2008.

¹¹ “Since Sadr announced a cease-fire last year, his force has gone underground. Many of his fighters...have joined the police forces and are monitoring the Sunni returnees.” Quote from a senior Mahdi Army commander, Kareem Abdullah, in Sudarsan Raghavan, “For Sunnis, An Uneasy Return Home,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2008, p. A14.

¹² Iran appears to be playing multiple roles, advising Moqtada al-Sadr to avoid military confrontation at this time, training Shiite militias to launch attacks, and counseling al-Sadr to convert his supporters into a Lebanese-type Hezbollah operation. See Mark Mazzetti, “Documents Say Iran Aids Militias From Iraq,”

How much weight each of these factors played in the reduction of violence is uncertain. Historians will determine whether the absence of new U.S. troops under the “surge” would have resulted in the same outcome. What is clear is that these factors were all interlinked, enhancing the chances that the “surge” would have a positive impact.

Political reconciliation, unfortunately, has not matched the progress seen on the battlefield. Hope for improved governance has not been fulfilled and government performance is still marred by a “dysfunctional politics that has paralyzed Iraq” since the American invasion. Contrary to the *Foreign Affairs* piece, this pattern has not yet been “broken.”

One manifestation of this situation is the reluctance of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return home. Both might have been expected to come home quickly, and in large numbers, with significant improvements in security, especially in light of the inadequacy of their living conditions. Yet despite economic incentives offered by the Government of Iraq, only a fraction of the five million people driven from their homes have returned to their original residences.¹³ Many remain fearful, as their homes have been occupied by squatters, some of whom were responsible for the atrocities which drove them to flee in the first place. And despite assurances to the contrary, Baghdad is also closing IDP camps and forcibly moving the inhabitants, a decision that could lead to more friction. Recent attacks on Christians in Mosul, now down to half of their original population, further undermine confidence in the ability of the government to protect its citizens.

Another related indicator – Iraq’s ‘brain drain’ – also has not improved. Many of the refugees who fled the violence are members of the professional class and civil servants. Their skills will continue to be lost until the refugee problem is resolved. Roughly 40 percent of Iraq’s professionals have fled the country since 2003, including 75 percent of the country’s doctors, pharmacists and nurses.

The economy improved slightly during the year covered in this latest report, due to high oil prices and some increased production, but oil income may not be sustained if the price continues to drop. Increased revenue – estimated to have amounted to US\$ 73.5 to 86.2 billion in foreign currency reserves – has not significantly improved public services or diminished corruption, said to be endemic in government ministries.¹⁴ More than US\$ 13

The New York Times, October 18, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/world/middleeast/19intel.html?hp>, accessed November 18, 2008. Iraq’s future will be shaped considerably by outside powers, particularly Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Managing these relationships will be an additional challenge to the Iraqi state if sustainable security is to be achieved.

¹³ In addition to offering compensation for building homes and paying for refugee repatriation in some instances, the Iraqi government has also offered payment of US\$ 1,500 to each family that is illegally occupying homes in order to vacate them for returning exiles and IDPs. Refugees and IDPs report that they are still afraid to return home, especially those who lived in mixed neighborhoods. We are not aware of any prosecutions of those responsible for ethnic cleansing or of those who have seized or occupied property illegally.

¹⁴ United States Government Accountability Office, “Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq: Iraqi Revenues, Expenditures, and Surplus,” August 2008.

billion in American-supplied reconstruction money was wasted or stolen by Iraqi officials, including oil stolen for sale on the black market by government employees who worked with Al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists. Other U.S. funds sent to the Ministry of Defense were diverted to AQI, according to Iraqi investigators, through banks in Jordan and elsewhere.¹⁵ Monies not diverted to illicit destinations are bottled up in red-tape. Iraq is spending most of its operating budget on keeping the government going – through payment of rent, pensions and salaries to government workers – but in 2007 it spent less than a third of its US\$ 12 billion investment budget on infrastructure and machinery. The Iraqi people were the last to receive any benefits. Five years after Saddam Hussein was overthrown, 43 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty, there has been a 60 percent increase in nonviolent deaths due to poor public health, and only 40 percent of the nation’s children have access to safe drinking water.

Iraq’s inability to manage its own reconstruction reveals the incompleteness of state-building. Security forces have been emphasized far more than civilian agencies, leaving Iraq in a position where it will likely rely on its military more than its civilian agencies to hold the country together. Yet, if sustainable security is to be achieved, the executive and legislative branches of government, the judiciary, and the civil service will all need to be strengthened. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that “Iraq’s bureaucracy remains hollow, mired in the stacks of paper and rubber stamps of years past, with many of the best technocrats having fled the country.”¹⁶

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On the political front, each step forward seems to contain several steps backward. For example, the law authorizing provincial elections enacted in September 2008 bypassed the contentious issue of Kirkurk, a continuing flashpoint.¹⁷ The law also left out three provinces in the Kurdish region, and Tamim province, of which Kirkurk is the capital, designating them the responsibility of the Kurdish government which is supposed to organize elections on its own timetable. This underscores the autonomous status of the Kurdish region, free from the jurisdictional control of the central government. Protection of minority rights was likewise deleted from the provincial election law. Soon afterward, the Christian community was attacked, triggering another exodus by a group that had suffered earlier persecution. These exceptions in the legislation were meant to appease political interests in the country. If they did so, it was at the cost of weakening Iraqi unity and undermining Iraqi state-building.

¹⁵ Dana Hedgpeth, “\$13 Billion in Iraq Aid Wasted or Stolen, Ex-Investigator Says,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2008, p. A19.

¹⁶ Mary Beth Sheridan, “As Iraq’s Oil Flows Freely, Profits are Stuck in Bureaucracy,” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2008, p. A20.

¹⁷ On November 3rd, 2008, the Iraqi parliament passed a modification of the provincial elections law initially passed September 24. The modifications add special representation for certain specified ethno-religious minorities in certain areas. However, minority representation is still very small and, in the case of the Christians, it provides them with only one seat in Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, with similarly reduced representation for other minorities. The changes are not likely to affect political representation or allay the fears of minorities.

