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Iraq: Is Escalation Working?

Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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June 27, 2007

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Mr. Chairman, let me begin by thanking you, the ranking member, and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. I have prepared a formal review of the Department of Defense's latest report on the surge and overall progress in Iraq to date, and I request that it be included in the record.

More broadly, there are many elements of the current US campaign in Iraq that are impressive. The US military has steadily shifted from a force oriented towards conventional war to one that can also fight counterinsurgency campaigns. It has greatly improved its tactical, intelligence, and targeting skills to attacked dispersed networks of insurgents like the Sunni Islamist extremists that include Al Qa'ida's various affiliates. It has shown it can win tactical battles with a surprisingly low ratio of forces to opponents.

Yet, it is all too clear that the US, its Coalition allies, and the Iraqi government cannot win any form of security and stability if insurgent movements can keep large areas of Iraq unstable and constantly provoke Iraq's civil conflicts. Tactical success is an important element of victory.

Tactical Victory or Stretching Too Thin and a New Form of “Whack a Mole?”

The present campaign in Iraq may be a tactical success, but there are serious serious issues regarding its strategic value. One key problem was raised during the debate over the surge strategy before President Bush adopted it and announced it in January 2007. It was always clear that an operation in Baghdad would simply lead many insurgents to leave the city and operate elsewhere and that most Sunni militias might simply stand down, let the US-led forces defeat the insurgents, watch a Shi'ite dominated government gain power, and resurface once the US was gone. Baghdad was important. It never made sense to see it as a decisive battlefield or center of gravity.

This is now all too clear even in a narrow military sense. The US is having to expand its counterinsurgency operations broadly outside Baghdad in ways that can steadily disperse limited US and combat-capable Iraqi military forces. Baghdad is still only 30-40% secured, but the fighting not only is dispersing limited US forces into the Baghdad ring cities, but into a troubled zone of provinces ranging from Anbar to Diyala. The US has learned it cannot ignore growing Shi'ite tensions and Iranian pressure in the south, and still faces serious potential problems with Arab-Kurdish tensions in the north.

It is too early to judge what is happening in Baquba, and the use of far more intense combat tactics coupled to broader efforts to seal and secure urban areas after tactical victories may have a more lasting effect. There is, however, an obvious risk that the US will simply end up playing “Whack a mole” on a steadily rising scale.

So far, the claims of success have often been tenuous to meaningless. As of June 23rd, MNF-I claimed that, “at least 55 al-Qa’ida operatives have been killed, 23 have been detained, 16 weapons caches have been discovered, 28 improvised explosive devices have been destroyed and 12 booby-trapped structures have been destroyed.” These figures are far too low to matter.

Limited tactical successes really doesn’t matter unless such casualties include substantial cadres of leaders and experts that cannot be easily and rapidly replaced. The insurgents can simply disperse, stand down, and regroup. The domestic political realities in the US also make it clear that unless the US is successfully taking out cadres and structure, the US is now so sensitive to US casualties that tactical victories can be the same kind of political and strategic defeat that occurred in Vietnam.

This risk is all too clear from the recent statements of Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the second-ranking American commander in Iraq. If, as the general said on June 22nd, some 80 percent of the top Qa’ida leaders in the city fled before the American-led offensive began, it is not clear that it matters if “80 percent” of the recruits who were there when the offensive remained in the western half of the city. It also is pointless to call the leaders and cadres who leave “cowards.” Iraqis are not foolish and they understand that such actions are an inevitable insurgent reaction to US military superiority and a key element of asymmetric warfare.

Not only have such estimates of “stay behinds” been badly exaggerated in past fighting, along with the capacity to keep them from infiltrating out or hiding, it is all too easy to move on to the next area and city and recruit more, and exploit the hostility following urban combat operations and large-scale detainments. Moreover, no major US-led or Iraqi operation will ever take place without enough signs, leaks, and infiltration to provide leaders and cadres with advanced warning.

The Critical Importance of Political Conciliation

The tactical problem, and stretching a limited pool of US forces too thin, is also only part of the problem. As both General Petraeus and Secretary Gates have made clear, none of this matters unless the Iraqis can move towards political conciliation – or at least a relatively stable form of coexistence. So far, there is only a limited promise of potential legal action by the government.

If anything, the use of Sunni tribes in the West has created new forms of Sunni vs. Shi’ite polarization, Shi’ite on Shi’ite fighting and feuding has gotten much worse in the south and central government, and the uncertainties over oil and a regional referendum on federalism in the north are increasing Kurdish, Arab, and Turcoman tensions.

Creating an Effective Bridge between Tactical Victory and Lasting Strategic Impact

There also is the problem of creating an effective bridge between tactical victory and lasting strategic impact even if political conciliation does move forward, and so far the Coalition has been virtually silent on progress in Baghdad, much less how such progress can be made in the new fighting outside it. Giving tactical victories lasting meaning requires the following additional elements:

1. ***Iraqi Army forces must begin to take over meaning operations without US embeds and US partner units, and dependence on US reinforcement and support.*** There does seem to be increasing Iraqi Army capability here, but Coalition reporting does not provide a meaningful picture of progress – merely grossly inflated figures on areas of responsibility and total numbers of battalions in the lead.
2. ***Iraqi police and local security forces must establishing a lasting security presence in the areas where tactical victories are won, and do so credibly in ways that give ordinary Iraqis security.*** There can be no “win” without “hold.” So far, the US has made claim after claim to have secured cities after winning tactical battles to control them, and has never actually established lasting security in even one of them. The most critical problem has been the lack of active, combat-capable police, without corruption and sectarian and ethnic ties. Falluja and Samara are only the most obvious cases of such failures.

Coalition reporting so far talks about the number of police posts established or with US embeds. It has not said a word about the ability provide lasting security using Iraqi police in parts of Baghdad or anywhere else. It also has not talked about the ability to support police efforts with an effective local criminal justice and court system or to screen detainees in ways that do not breed local hostility.

The Coalition also needs to start talking about who actually does provide local security, and stop treating militias, local security forces, and police hired locally without Coalition training, as if it was always hostile or did not exist. In the real world, these forces and not the “trained and equipped” police are the real local security force in most of Iraq. There has to be a credible plan to use, absorb, or contain them.

3. ***The Iraqi government must follow-up security with a meaningful presence and by providing steady improvements in services.*** “Winning hearts and minds” doesn’t come from public information campaigns and propaganda. It comes from providing real security for ordinary Iraqis, and showing the government cares, is present, and can steadily improve services. Once again, promise after promise has been made in past campaigns, and the central government has not yet shown it can follow up in even a single case. If this is happening even in the “secured” areas of Baghdad, no one has yet said so. How it can happen in Diyala or other high threat areas is even unclear.

4. ***There must also be effective local government.*** The liberation of various areas often has seen the emergence of local leaders willing to work with the Coalition – although often with little faith in, or ties to, the central government. In most cases, however, they have become targets, and the effort has broken down in local faction disputes or because of a lack of effective government support and problems in Coalition civil affairs efforts. Once again, if there is progress in creating stable, survivable, effective local government; none of the details are clear.
5. ***There has to be economic aid and progress.*** Iraqis have to give priority to physical security and key services, but unemployment, underemployment, and shut or failed businesses affect some 60% or more of Iraqis nationally and the figures are even higher in high threat and combat areas. The strategy President Bush advanced in January 2007 advanced proposals for accomplishing such an effort in Baghdad. Once again, there has been no meaningful Coalition reporting on broad progress in such efforts in the secured areas of Baghdad, and past promises such aid would be provided in “liberated” cities like Samara and Falluja were not kept.
6. ***There must be an end to sectarian and ethnic cleansing and displacement.*** There is no near and perhaps midterm answer to suicide bombings and atrocities, to attacks on sacred shrines and critical facilities. No mix of security forces can stop even small cadres of extremists from occasional successes. No tactical victory has meaning, however, unless Iraqis can be secure in neighborhoods and areas where they are in the minority, and can reach across ethnic and sectarian lines and barriers in ordinary life.

One of the greatest single failures of the current approach to fighting in Iraq is that it does not track sectarian and ethnic separation and displacement and make ending this on a local and national level at least as important as halting major attacks and killings. It may take years to make Iraqis secure from Islamist extremists and the worst elements of Shi'ite gangs and militias. There can be no meaningful tactical success, however, unless Iraqis can be safe from their own neighbors and begin to lead ordinary lives in their own neighborhoods.

Metrics, Benchmarks, and Real Victory

The late Colonel Harry Sommers summed up the US defeat in Vietnam in a brief exchange he had with a North Vietnamese officer after the war. Sommers pointed out that the US had won virtually every tactical encounter with both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. The Vietnamese officer replied, “Yes, but this was irrelevant.”

The new US Army manual on counterinsurgency, which is the result of an effort led by General Petraeus recognizes this reality, and virtually all of the points made above. It also may well be unfair to judge progress in Baghdad even in September, much less now. Historically, any campaign that has had to begin with as weak a foundation as the surge

strategy began with took at least a year to seriously take hold and often several years. An Iraq in political turmoil, in local economic collapse, and without security even for senior officials and members of parliament, will not move quickly – especially in a Baghdad summer.

The fact remains, however, that tactical success will remain largely meaningless in Baghdad, Baquba, the other areas cover by Operation Ripper, and in Iraq as a whole unless it can be linked to political conciliation and progress in the other six critical elements of victory listed above. The US team in Iraq and Bush Administration need to show the American people and the Congress that they understand this, are acting on the basis of these realities, have sound plans, and are making real progress. “Spinning” the importance of tactical success does not do this.

At the same time, both the media and outside analysts need to focus far more on the full range of actions it takes to win, and do so with patience and objectivity. ***No strategy or campaign could possibly achieve significant success in all of these elements by this fall, or even ensure a successful start.*** It is reasonable to demand credible plans and transparent and meaningful reporting – something that the Administration has not yet provided in a single critical area.

It is not reasonable to demand instant progress or focus solely on the level of US troops in Iraq or casualties in the fighting. It should also be clear from the above list that US military tactical victories are almost certain to be meaningless if the US political system cannot adapt to the reality that broad success – albeit with what may be much lower US troop levels – will require an effort that extends at least several years in to the next Administration and which cannot take place without bipartisan support. The odds are bad enough given the problems in Iraq; they are hopeless if the political environment in the US offers no hope of the necessary time and bipartisanship.