

Losing the War in Iraq?

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The Iraq War has increasingly become a race between the effort to create a new political compromise that can persuade Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd to cooperate in some new approach to governance and escalating civil violence. Bad weeks or months do not mean that the Iraqi government and the United States have yet lost that race, but the last few weeks are anything but reassuring.

The number of civilian deaths is way up. No one knows the real total, either for recent killings or the overall death rate. It seems likely, however, that past estimates of total deaths of 30,000 to 40,000 are now at least 10,000-20,000 too low because they rely far too heavily on Iraqi morgue and Ministry of Health data, and media reports. These figures do not cover outlying areas where reporting is far less accurate or comprehensive, disappearances and kidnappings where the body is never recovered, and hidden body dumps in the desert.

The recent estimates of killing have the same limitations, but the UN is certainly far too conservative in estimating that they were 3,149 in June and 14,338 in the first six months of 2006. The counts are too Baghdad-centric, and seem to cover only deaths actually formally reported. They do not cover all deaths even in outlying areas in Baghdad Province, and reporting on other areas is far less comprehensive. Like far too many attack counts, they exaggerate the degree to which civil violence and the insurrection focus on Baghdad, while other areas are "peaceful."

Body counts are also only one measure of violence, and anecdotal evidence indicates that sharp rises are taking place in other forms of sectarian and ethnic conflict. These include the kidnappings and disappearances mentioned earlier. They also include massive numbers of wounded, and what data are available indicate that the number of seriously wounded sharply exceeds the number killed. Extortion, crime, intimidation, and blackmail are sometimes simply crime, but are often tied to ethnic and sectarian tension. Protection schemes and payoffs for security are often the rule and not the exception.

Soft ethnic cleansing is reshaping not only Baghdad, a city of at least five million, but many other cities and towns. Forcing families to move their homes, give up their businesses, and to do so without any payment at a time when most are bankrupt is just as divisive as violence. So are the constant series of attacks on professionals, businessmen, doctors, teachers, and other parts of the educated and secular core of Iraqi society. Many leave the country, others relocate to places where they cannot work or participate in civil society.

Unemployment and underemployment, and unprofitable businesses, have risen sharply. No one knows the real unemployment numbers, but a guess is 40 percent for young men in the Baghdad area and over 50 percent in the high-risk areas where the insurgency is most active. The figures are probably more than 30 percent in much of the south, Basra, and troubled areas in the north like Kirkuk.

Aid, government funds, and oil revenues are being stolen in massive amounts, and much of the revenue is going out of the country. Income distribution is terrible, and macroeconomic estimates of data like GDP and average per capita income are meaningless rubbish in security terms. A nation cannot function or recover where the center cannot hold, and attacking the center may not produce sharp rises in the body count but it is proving to be a very effective cumulative way to drive the country toward civil war.

The failure of the Maliki government to be able to show it can act on its good intentions is equally dangerous. The security campaign in Baghdad never made clear sense. It came before there was a political compromise and real efforts to control and disarm the militias. The United States could not put anything like the number of experienced fighters on the ground necessary to control Baghdad, and could not attempt to control the city without alienating many more Iraqis and discrediting the government. Iraqi military forces are steadily improving their counterinsurgency skills, but are not trained to control civil populations and sweep cities, as distinguished from attack enemies, and control checkpoints. Their numbers are also simply too low. Insurgents and militias can simply hide, disperse, ambush, and bomb.

Worse, the Iraqi police and security forces are simply not ready for the mission as long as there is no political compromise. The most frightening indicator of just how bad the situation really is, is that the Iraqi government has now had to ask Iraqis to check the IDs of police and soldiers to make sure they are legitimate. Fine when they are legitimate. A great way to get killed when they are not. The “year of the police” may well be making real progress, but the manning totals for Iraqi police and security forces are meaningless. It is all too clear that many who were trained and equipped are not still serving and that many who do serve are passive and/or corrupt. They also are often outgunned and outmanned by the militias and local security forces, in Baghdad and in many other areas.

Intra-Shi'ite violence and divisions are also growing, and reports that do not identify Basra as a massive security problem and flashpoint are simply decoupled from reality. The same is true of Kirkuk, where actual violence is still limited, but the militias are steadily building up and ethnic cleansing is rising. Smaller towns and cities are also problems, reported or not, and serious tensions are emerging between Sadr and the mainstream “quietest” Shi'ite clergy, whether they are reported or not.

These trends strongly argue that the Iraqi government and United States are now losing, not winning. They are scarcely based on firm data, however, and they scarcely mean the struggle is lost. What they do mean is that the Maliki government must act far more quickly and decisively, that Iraq's factions have no time to bargain by attrition if they seriously want to avoid civil war or dividing the country, and that the United States must be prepared to rush in aid if this can move political compromises forward. No one knows the odds of failure or success at this point, but they are notably worse in July than in early June, and they have been slowly deteriorating for months.

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