



# VICTORY AND VIOLENCE IN IRAQ:

## Reducing the "Irreducible Minimum"

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There are good reasons why General Petraeus and the other senior commanders in Iraq have been careful not to claim "victory" in Iraq. MNF-I has made striking progress in the last year. MNF-I and Iraqi reporting shows, however, that the violence is scarcely over. One of the most senior US commanders has warned that such violence may have reached an "irreducible minimum" until Iraq can make further progress towards accommodation, and towards creating effective security forces, improving its governance, and finding a path to development that can employ its youth.

We still face many of the problems in armed nation building that we failed to prepare for during our initial invasion and during 2003-2006. The "surge" only built up US forces to 20 brigade equivalents. This was far too small a US force level to cover the entire country, even with the major advances the US had made in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, and in precision air strikes.

As a result, the "surge" has had to be directed largely at the most violent enemies that MNF-I and the Iraqi government faced at the beginning of 2007: Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and its affiliates and the most extreme elements of the Shi'ite militias. It has not dealt with the other potential causes of sectarian and ethnic violence, and its success has necessarily been limited.

Even that limited success has been fragile. In retrospect, those advocates of the surge that called for even larger US reinforcements were correct. The addition of five brigade equivalents probably could not have succeeded in securing both Baghdad and the Baghdad "ring" cities, given the limitations in Iraqi forces. It almost certainly could not have secured Anbar or largely defeated AQI in other areas.

The successes of the last year occurred because the US surge coincided with a tribal uprising in Anbar that turned most Sunnis against AQI, including many Sunnis in other insurgent groups like the 1920 Brigades. In many ways AQI defeated itself by a mixture of religious extremism, extortion and corruption, attacks on tribal leaders and the Sunni Iraqis it claimed to be protecting, and a host of other excesses.

The US did not plan on -- or predict -- the extent of AQI's mistakes, or that they would drive other Sunni insurgents to be willing to deal with the US and Iraqi government. The resulting tribal uprising was never part of the original "surge" strategy, although the US country team in Iraq did far more than rely on luck.

By the time the surge began, the US had its first real team of senior civilian and military leaders in Iraq that could work together, that understood both counterinsurgency and the country they were operating in, and that relied on reality-based pragmatism rather than ideology, slogans, and hope. It understood it had to stay where US forces won, and help the Iraqi government and security forces create the conditions in the field that could turn tactical success into a lasting presence.

The US skillfully expanded this shift to permanent forward operating bases, and to "win and hold" tactics, to aid the Sunni tribes in fighting AQI, and to find ways to provide Iraqi young men with an income when they volunteered for the groups that have now become known as the "Sons of Iraq."

It encouraged the spread of similar groups outside of Anbar, and into the Baghdad area and other troubled areas in central and Northern Iraq. The US now funds some 90,000 such volunteers, of which some 20% are Shi'ite. In fact, the Iraqi "surge" has become much larger than the US one, and has provided time and volunteers to build up Iraqi security forces to the level of effectiveness called for in the original surge strategy.

The "surge" also benefited from the Moqtada al Sadr's decision to call a ceasefire and have the loyal elements in his militia stand aside from the fighting. Al Sadr then accepted US and Iraqi security force attacks on the most extreme and rogue elements in his militia, and did not engage either MNF-I or ISCI forces. Once again, the US was able to exploit serendipity in could not plan on as part of the original surge strategy.

More quietly, the US was able to combine major improvements in its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities with greatly improved Iraqi human intelligence. It was able to target much of the AQI network and key Shi'ite extremists, and use precision air strikes, carefully planned raids, and air mobility to be far more effective in decapitating the leaders of the insurgency

Finally, the US adapted to its lack of equal success in its own aid efforts, and in helping the Iraqi central government improve its governance and development efforts. The US failed to deploy anything like the number of qualified aid teams called for in the original surge strategy in anything like the time required. It encountered far more problems in the Iraqi central government's ability to move towards political accommodation, effective governance, and funding of development activity than it planned in shaping the other elements of the surge strategy.

The country team compensated by turning many military personnel into aid workers, creating embedded provincial reconstruction teams (EPRTs) with military personnel when civilians were not available, and using most of its military commander's emergency relief program (CERP) aid to fund jobs for the sons of Iraq. At the same time, the country team shifted from a reliance on the central government to building up local and provincial governments and involving Iraqis in development at the local level.

None of these developments mean that the "surge" has not had great success, and that those who advocated the surge do not deserve great credit for doing so. Every strategy must be adapted to suit evolving conditions on the ground, and even Napoleon recognized that luck is an essential asset for successful commanders.

They do, however, highlight the fact that the progress to date is far from victory. They show how important it is to bring the Sunnis fully into political accommodation and a

proper role in the Iraqi security forces and government. Most of all, they warn that further progress is equally dependent on dealing with all of the factors that can drive Iraq back towards civil war.

## **Dealing with the Immediate Causes of Violence**

US intelligence estimates in Iraq warn that there is still hard fighting to come in Mosul and Ninewa and that the fighting in three other provinces, especially Diyala, is scarcely over. They also warn that there is no near term prospect that Iraq can be made secure against violent showpiece IED attacks, suicide bombings, and other dramatic acts of violence that can be carried out by a handful of activists yet capture the attention of the media, Iraqis, and the world.

No matter how successful the MNF-I and Iraqi forces are against Al Qa'ida in Iraq and the worst elements of the JAM and other militias, there will be enough residual cadres to carry out attacks in an effort to spark new waves of ethnic and sectarian violence or to fight a war of political attrition that attempts to drive the US and its allies out of Iraq.

This means there is still tough fighting to come, as well as a low-level war of attrition that will continue to produce Iraqi and US casualties. We should have no illusions about the cost in American blood. We will soon be at 4,000 dead. Broader success may well mean a rise to 5,000 US dead over the next few years, and higher levels are all too possible. The cost to our Iraqi allies will inevitably be much higher.

There simply are not enough MNF-I and Iraqi forces to bring a quick halt to AQI attacks, and it is still going to take several years to build-up and reform Iraqi security forces to the point where the US can shift to a less violent role of "strategic overwatch."

There is not enough Iraqi political accommodation to deny extremists places to shelter or recruit. Iraqi society will have windows of vulnerability; there will be continuing ethnic and sectarian tensions to exploit. Equally important, massive underemployment ensures that young men will be willing to carry out act of violence for a few hundred dollars, and there will always be 10 or 20 more young religious extremists to be programmed for suicide bombings.

The US needs to accept the fact it will probably have to deal with significant levels of AQI violence for at least several years to come, and quite possibly through the life of the next Administration. We need to be patient enough not to have our policies and position in Iraq driven by residual, low-level attacks. In practice, this means timing further US reductions to match proven increases in Iraqi security force capabilities; using a US presence to help ensure political stability in areas where AQI and other extremists have been defeated; keeping large numbers of embedded trainers in the army and police; and providing continuing support in the form of air strikes, artillery, armor, and sustainability.

## **Mid-Term Challenges and Other Potential Sources of Violence**

There are other problems that can lead to prolonged or far more serious levels of violence during the next few years and which we must help Iraq address if the US is to achieve any meaningful and lasting form of "victory." There is no doubt that what most people call the "surge" has had a major impact in reducing the worst elements of violence, and Iraqi public opinion polls repeatedly make it clear that most Iraqis want peace and not sectarian or ethnic conflict.

At the same time, it is going to take years to work out the level of political accommodation and more effective governance and development necessary to deal with the other problems that could make our present successes meaningless. Iraq has only begun to deal with the problems created by the Kurdish-Arab fault lines in the north. Sadr's renewal of his ceasefire in no way resolves the growing intra-Shi'ite tensions in the south and the risk of some form of Hakim (ISCI) versus Sadr (JAM) conflict.

### **Conditions-Based US Force Reductions**

The present successes of the US "win and hold" strategy will be difficult to sustain in the greater Baghdad area and western and central Iraq after the coming reduction to 15 brigades. They will be even more difficult to sustain if US forces are reduced beyond this level before Iraqi forces and political accommodation create the conditions to make such reductions less risk-prone.

### **Consolidating the Tribal Awakening and Securing the "Sons of Iraq"**

Consolidating the "tribal awakening" will be equally critical. The surge would never have been able to succeed in the greater Baghdad area and western and central Iraq without the ability to capitalize on the Sunni tribal uprising in Anbar. As has been discussed earlier, this uprising has spread to many other areas in the center and north, largely with US funding and encouragement.

The nearly 90,000 "Sons of Iraq," however, need far more encouragement and funding from the central government than they have had to date. The central government needs to bring some 20% or more of these forces into the regular Iraqi security forces and find jobs for the rest. It needs to make far more effective efforts to increase Sunni and tribal willingness to work with the government and keep large numbers of young men from turning back to Sunni-oriented militias and violence.

More broadly, Sunni and tribal elements need to be empowered by local and provincial elections, to see the continuing flow of a fair share of the nation's oil wealth, and be given the chance to play a full role in the national assembly. The central government can make real progress in many of these areas in the coming months if it can be persuaded to act. Real stability, however, will require a full range of local and national elections, a more open and less sectarian central government, effective funding of development, and finding a solution to youth underemployment. In the real world, this will take at least until 2010, and consolidating progress into a truly stable form may take US help until 2014 or beyond.

## **Consolidating Progress in the Iraqi Security Forces**

Iraqi security forces are making real progress, and the Iraqi Army has made a major contribution to the victories against AQI and the more violent Shi'ite militia elements over the last year. The Iraqi Army, and especially the Iraqi police, were not really ready to perform their role in the surge strategy, however, and both need at least several years more to grow.

The army should not be able to achieve this until 2009-2012. The police remain problematic. Effective policing will require sustained US aid and embedded advisors and the creation of a support structure of legitimate local governments, effective local courts, and a criminal court-based rule of law. This will probably take until 2011-2014.

## **Implementing Accommodation, Governance, and Development**

The civil side of the surge—accommodation, governance, and development—has not failed, but it has fallen far short of its initial goals. Much more still needs to be done in bringing in more qualified US aid personnel. They need to be embedded in a wider range of forward areas, and broader US efforts are needed to create effective short and mid-term programs that are properly funded by the Administration and free of congressional and bureaucratic restraints that limit their effectiveness.

It will take until FY2010, and calendar 2010-2011, before the US governance and development aid efforts can be as effective as the surge strategy called for by the end of 2008. Moreover, dollars will remain as important as bullets until the Iraqi government can become far more honest and effective in using its own resources. The aid request for FY2008 fell badly short of need, and the FY2009 request will be affected by an undefined supplemental. Like US troops levels, reductions in aid need to be conditions-based.

## **Dealing with Intra-Shi'ite Tensions in the South**

More needs to be done in the south to avoid conflict between the main Shi'ite factions. The British and our other allies have failed to bring stability there, opening up nine provinces to a political power struggle between the Hakim and Sadr factions.

ISCI controls most governorates in the south, but does so with limited popular support and so far has shown little capability to govern effectively. Sadr may have more popular support, but has shown even less capability to improve governance, establish a rule of law, and move towards development. Working out some non-violent resolution of this power struggle will be difficult, and unless the US uses its resources and influence skillfully, the time could come when Sadr ends the JAM ceasefire with MNF-I and the Hakim-Sadr clash becomes violent.

It will take a lot of patient work and US/UN/allied effort to prevent this. It also is far

from clear that any Shi'ite party or faction now has enough popular support to win office if free provincial and local elections are held. Creating any form of political stability and effective governance is going to take continuing encouragement and aid. It will be 2009-2010 before it is clear whether elections are possible large-scale violence between Shi'ite factions can be avoided, and several years longer to work out effective governance and a full rule of law.

### **The Problem of Basra**

The rivalry in the other Shi'ite provinces in the south is compounded in Basra by the role the corrupt Fadhila Party plays in the city government, and by strong and growing Iranian influence. Basra is a key economic prize in Iraq—it is the country's only port and the source of two-thirds of its oil exports. It is going to take at least several years to see if US aid and influence can help ensure that Basra remains a fully functioning part of Iraq.

### **The Prospects in the North and for Kurdish-Arab Accommodation**

The prospects in the north may be better than they seem. The Kurds have been more pragmatic in practice than in rhetoric. The UN and US have made real progress in trying to find ways of dividing the Kurdish and Arab minority zones by district lines that all sides can agree to and in limiting the prospect of a violent struggle for control of Mosul or Kirkuk.

An effective petroleum law or laws would sharply reduce the Kurdish incentive to seek control of petroleum resources if they are assured a fair share of the nation's money. As in the south, however, the risks of Kurdish-Arab conflicts remain real, and new forms of violence are all too possible. It will be 2009-2010 before a functioning solution is possible and has initial tests of its validity. Once again, US aid and influence can play a critical role.

### **Following the Money and Giving It Purpose**

Iraqi government money is a key issue in terms of how Iraqi budgets are spent and making truly national efforts to create jobs, and development activity. Political accommodation is dependent on proof that the money will be shared fairly in the years to come. No lasting end to violence will be possible unless the central government radically improves the flow of money and ensures it is fairly shared and is allocated to a significant degree by local and legitimate provincial authorities.

### **Helping Create Effective Governance**

No one can visit Iraq without hearing on all sides that the present central government is corrupt, incompetent, and ineffective in moving money even to Shi'ite areas. While things are getting better, it will be 2009-2010 at the earliest before the central government structure can development the proper level of momentum in moving towards reform and doing its job effectively.

There is no clear date at this point for predicting when intra-ministerial rivalries and power struggles, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and other tensions will allow the money to flow fairly and productively.

Creating "demand-pull" by local and provincial governments can solve part of the problem, but it will probably be 2009-2011 before elections and practical experience in office enable such governments to function with competent leadership and some effectiveness.

## **Reducing the "Irreducible Minimum"**

There are no guarantees of success in Iraq. The risks remain high, violence will not end quickly, and much still needs to be done before the Iraqi government and Iraqi forces can stand on their own and show the Iraqi people that they represent and serve all of Iraq's people.

It does seem likely, however, that American strategic patience can both reduce the present level of violence with time, and prevent other sources of political, sectarian, and ethnic tension from creating new problems and conflicts. Every step towards political accommodation reduces the base for such violence and the fault lines extremists can exploit. The growth of Iraqi forces broadens the areas where security can be improved and can compensate for US force cuts if they are tied to conditions on the ground and not some artificial deadlines.

Progress in governance and development can be built with patient effort, and it may even be possible to create something approaching real democracy. Local and provincial elections in 2008 can establish more political legitimacy at the local level. An "open list" election in the 2009 national elections could produce a national assembly and national government based on a fair sharing of power with members of parliament who have a real responsibility to their constituents.

Once again, however, the US needs to be careful about the timelines involved. Iraq still lacks well-formed national political parties, and has no system for open lists that allow local and provincial candidates to run versus national lists of largely unknown candidates.

Effective democracy requires experience, a willingness to lose and leave office, stable political parties, populations willing to compromise and support pragmatic political action, checks and balances, and a transcending rule of law. None of this exist in Iraq today, and none of this can be created simply by training courses and other aid programs.

The existing national parties can manipulate local and provincial elections, and Iraq's present Shi'ite leaders and parties may not accept the loss of power and money peacefully. Local elections can bring tribal or factional leaders to power that create new problems rather than solve old ones, and most of those elected may have little practical experience in actually governing or in the politics of practical constituent service and

compromise.

The US should try to do more than achieve stability and security in Iraq. But it will take years to fully shake out Iraq's political evolution and much of what takes place may still be dysfunctional and anything but pretty. This means US policy must recognize that money may well be the key to providing functional political legitimacy. A fair sharing of petroleum money and resources, and effective use of Iraq's oil income and aid resources could create a national jobs program in a relatively short period of time.

A combination of government investment in development that shares the nation's wealth and reaches all parts of the country, opens up Iraq's economy to the private sector and foreign investment, brings a rule of law to business, creates effective banking and financial institutions, and achieves the systematic rehabilitation and development of Iraq's petroleum and electric power sector could move from job creation to sustained development within a half-decade or so.

At the same time, converting from a command kleptocracy to anything approaching a nation-wide mix of functioning financial systems, revitalized state industries, new private ventures, and functioning agriculture is going to be far more difficult than in the former Soviet Union. The prospects for "instant capitalism" are just as unreal as the prospects for "instant democracy." Sustained development will take at least half a decade and a lot of outside encouragement and aid to gain real momentum.

In short, both premature claims of victory, and overreacting to continuing levels of violence by calling them defeat, fail to reflect the realities in Iraq. The US still has years to go before it will know whether it can succeed to the point it can claim any kind of lasting victory in the grand strategic sense of the term. At the same time, using today's problems as an excuse to leave will abandon some 28 million people to problems we did much to create, and leave a power vacuum in Iraq that will directly threaten US strategic interests.

We need a pragmatic, reality-based approach to the problems we now face. We also need a domestic political debate that will honestly address the fact that troop and aid reductions must be cautious and that many of the problems we now face will still be present in some form at the end of next Administration. The US must take a patient and conditions-based approach to the realities on the ground or it will fail.