

Blind in Baghdad

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Something is stirring in Iraq. On July 3, car bombs ripped through mainly Shiite neighborhoods across the country, killing 36 people. It was the latest tragedy in a bloody month -- a prolonged political crisis has weakened the government in Baghdad, giving insurgent groups an opening to expand their operations. The consequent surge in violence has led some to fear that the country could once again be descending into civil war.

But just as Iraqi politics heats up, the United States is rapidly losing its ability to decipher events in the country. "Half of our situational awareness is gone," an unnamed U.S. official told the *Wall Street Journal* in June. "More than half," a serving U.S. military officer told me when I asked about the accuracy of that statement.

To Iraq experts, these statements ring true: At the height of the "surge," the United States collected fine-grain data from the 166,000 U.S. troops and 700 CIA personnel in Iraq, as well as a network of 31 Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Now, U.S. embassy staff enjoy very limited freedom of movement -- hemmed in by a suspicious government in Baghdad and a still-dangerous security situation. According to the *Journal*, the CIA station in Iraq may be reduced to 40 percent of its peak levels because the Iraqi government is extremely sensitive about its intelligence work with the Iraqi security forces.

The information vacuum has led Iraq experts and officials in U.S. President Barack Obama's administration to increasingly argue over basic facts. Note the hot exchange in Foreign Affairs between Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinken and veteran *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ned Parker -- two men who dedicated much of the last decade to Iraq's future -- on the stability of the country. The fact that Blinken and Parker cannot agree on the basics -- such as whether violence is increasing gradually, as Parker asserts, or sits at "historic lows," as Blinken claims -- bodes ill for an informed debate on Iraq.

What a dramatic reversal from just a few short years ago. When the U.S. presence was at its zenith, the U.S. government developed what the Germans call Fingerspitzengefühl -- fingertip feeling. Read the hundreds of cables from Provincial Reconstruction Teams released by WikiLeaks and you will be astounded by the granular knowledge the United States developed on Iraqi personalities and local conditions. Although such insight into a foreign nation can be intoxicating -- even addictive -- it is not the normal state of affairs, and it ebbed with the military's

withdrawal.

U.S. awareness in Iraq began to decline as soon as the U.S.-Iraq security agreement that determined American troops' departure date was signed in November 2008, and it accelerated as the slow drawdown of forces commenced. By the summer of 2011, U.S.-collected Significant Activity (SIGACT) reports on militant attacks were becoming ragged -- lacking detail, containing erroneous geospatial data, and only partially covering key parts of the country and certain classes of activity. In fall 2011, whole provinces began to "go dark" as the last U.S. forces left. And at 11:59 p.m. on Dec. 15, 2011, the U.S. military incident reporting system issued its last SIGACT report. As ordered by its political masters, the U.S. military turned off the lights and locked the doors behind them.

The truth is that the United States is now flying blind in Baghdad. Since the U.S. military exit, situational awareness has reached an all-time low. Despite the massive U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, U.S. government personnel have minimal freedom of movement due to security concerns and skyrocketing Iraqi government suspicion of any foreign information-gathering activities, however benign. As the Journal article noted, U.S. intelligence agencies in Iraq have also found themselves unable to maintain relations with the prickly and increasingly powerful civilian intelligence agencies in the country.

The security metrics provided by the Iraqi government to the United States provide little help in deciphering what's happening on the ground. Baghdad's SIGACT data have more holes than Swiss cheese: They are incomplete, even compared with the incidents reported in the Iraqi press, and they systematically underreport violence in politically sensitive parts of the country. There is no system through which security incidents can be relayed by both the Iraqi military and the Ministry of Interior forces at ground level to a single headquarters.

How, then, is it possible to gauge trends in levels of violence within Iraq? The method used by most interested parties -- including the U.S. government -- is to track Iraqi press reporting of violence, which has been fairly detailed in many parts of the country throughout the U.S. drawdown. Yet this method has its drawbacks. For instance, press reporting in the vital city of Baghdad has been notoriously poor for years, in part due to the proximity to the government and the city's dangerous sectarian divisions.

The murkiness of assessing violence levels in Iraq leaves plenty of room for politics to enter the process. Analysts can count data differently according to whether they are under pressure to show improvement or deterioration in Iraqi security. An excessive focus on quantitative bean counting also sucks much of the marrow out of the analysis of Iraqi violence data, where the devil is in the details. It may be true, for instance, that today's car bombs are significantly less destructive than in previous years and that greater numbers of roadside bombs are found before detonation -- data that analysts often tout when they want to make the case that security is returning to Iraq. However, the fastest-growing class of violence comprises the "intimidation and murder" categories, including close-quarters shootings, under-vehicle bombs, fatal stabbings, punitive demolition of property, and the kidnap of children.

These are the categories of violence that are least noticed and least often counted by the Iraqi press or by foreign government agencies, yet they may be the most vital indicators of where Iraq is headed. Fewer people may be dying each month, but they are increasingly the right people -- in other words, illustrative violence against community leaders that has broad impact within communities and helps insurgents regain freedom of movement. This high-impact, low-visibility violence typifies the insurgency of today and tomorrow in Iraq. If we don't count such incidents, then of course Iraq will appear more stable.

So what is really happening in Iraq? Starting with the caveat that all violence statistics in Iraq are wrong -- because they do not capture all incidents -- it appears that Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence has essentially replaced attacks on U.S.

forces. A Washington Institute for Near East Policy dataset that relies primarily on Iraqi press reporting shows that the overall number of incidents has stayed remarkably flat since fall 2011, a period that saw the final U.S. military withdrawal, political crises at the national level and in several north-central provinces, and the Shiite religious festivals of Ashura and Arbaeen. Yet although there was no meltdown, there was also no drop in violence as U.S. targets disappeared.

The reason for this is clear: Average monthly reported Iraqi-on-Iraqi attack events were 18 percent higher from March to May 2012 than June to August 2011. If other categories of violence (such as the aforementioned militant-related murders and kidnaps) were counted for both sampling periods, the growth rate in Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence would be higher -- probably around 20 to 25 percent.

The sky is not falling in Iraq, but the country is also not truly stabilizing. The toxic political environment is functioning as a life support machine for militant groups that should be on the verge of extinction by now. The numbers of incidents have gone down but nowhere near as fast as anyone would like them to. Iraq is stuck on a plateau of insecurity, particularly in western Baghdad and in the predominately Sunni Arab provinces of Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Anbar, as well as in multi-ethnic Kirkuk.

In Iraq, everything is about momentum: You are either going forward or going backward. Iraq's politics and security are inseparable; security stagnation has occurred because sectarian reconciliation has stalled, the Iraqi security forces have given up on population-focused counter-insurgency, and the political crisis has tempted politicians to use toxic sectarian and ethnic identity-politics to solidify their followings. If current trends continue, the predominately Sunni Arab provinces could ossify into sullen, violent regions that are perpetually under armed government occupation. Stagnation is not a win. It is not even a draw. In fact, it could establish the preconditions for a major surge in violence, and start slowly edging Iraq toward the loss column.

The time to get Iraq back on track is now -- before the bottom falls out of the security situation. A first step to resetting post-occupation U.S. policy on Iraq is to rebuild some of the situational awareness that has been lost in the last year. Arguing the facts about Iraq and relitigating the past is an analytical and political cul-de-sac. To take some heat out of the issue, all parties involved in the debate should try to look at 2012 as "Year Zero": A moment when Iraq policy is viewed afresh, setting aside, as much as possible, the political debates of the past. Iraq should once again be viewed as one part of a broader U.S. strategy in the Middle East -- just like any other country.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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