# The Surge in Iraq:

## An Early Assessment

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Brief Analysis

On April 26, 2007, Jeffrey White, Andrew Exum, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. White is the Institute's Berrie defense fellow and coauthor, with Mr. Eisenstadt, of the Institute Policy Focus Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=228)**. Mr. Exum, a Soref fellow at the Institute, served in the U.S. Army from 2000 to 2004, with tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr. Eisenstadt is director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JEFFREY WHITE

Iraq's Sunni insurgents have been the single most important driver of violence in the country since the conflict began in spring 2003. Their evolution has led to a situation in which the combatants -- insurgents and the coalition alike -- are familiar with the battlefield, have developed an understanding of each other's capabilities, and are fighting a tough battle. The insurgents are imposing their vision of a bloody, ungovernable Iraq, while the coalition struggles to impose its vision of a stable Iraqi government.

The recent U.S. military surge -- whose political dimension is as important as its strategic one -- represents a substantial change in policy and poses major challenges to the insurgency. In terms of governance, the Sunnis must be brought into the political process if a grand compromise is to be reached. Unfortunately, the political side of the surge has not progressed to the same extent as the military side. That said, positive developments have emerged among Sunni tribes. Most noticeably in western Iraq, and potentially in Salahuddin and Diyala provinces, Sunni

tribal elements are for the first time rejecting the presence of insurgent groups associated with al-Qaeda in Iraq. The critical battleground of al-Anbar province is witnessing a legitimate tribal movement that is actively combating al-Qaeda and its associates.

On the military front, the surge has increased coalition capacity and changed the situation in important ways. Current military capability will increase as the surge continues, providing the ability to offer more territorial coverage, perform more operations, conduct more training, and increase the risks to insurgents. Along with these developments comes increased risk to U.S. forces. Combat deaths in Baghdad and Diyala are already increasing. The three main focal points of the surge -- al-Anbar, the Baghdad belt, and Baghdad itself -- are all areas of contention. Although progress is being made in al-Anbar largely due to tribal help, the situation may be deteriorating in Diyala. It is still too early to judge outcomes in Baghdad. Other areas such as Kirkuk and Mosul continue to experience significant problems.

As highly adaptive organizations adjusting their tactics and internal configuration, the insurgent groups have become fit enough to not only survive, but also impose their vision on Iraq. Their willingness to engage coalition forces -- even when incurring casualties -- seems to be increasing. Although their target selection is broad, they have also demonstrated increased capacity for complex attacks involving multiple methods against a single target. Wherever coalition troops are increasingly exposed in smaller bases, insurgents are willing to attack those bases with varied and effective tactics.

At the same time, some observers have noted an increase in armed conflict among insurgents. The Sunni insurgency has always represented a wide range of groups with different ideas and tactics, but the recent split among Baathist supporters of Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri and Ahmed Yunis -- an important insurgent element -- could prove to be a positive development. The split between Sunni nationalists and al-Qaeda and its associates in Iraq has become even more obvious. That said, the jihadist elements, such as the Islamic State of Iraq, would cease to exist without some legitimate support from within the Sunni Arab population. Consequently, Sunni insurgents have broadened their recruitment so that organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq are now essentially Iraqi.

Another factor is the role of Iran, which, if recent reports are accurate, has the capacity to significantly increase the capabilities of Shiite insurgents, making them still tougher and less likely to compromise in any political situation.

Although patience is needed in assessing a highly complex situation, and more troops are required, two basic approaches to the situation have become evident: either the coalition is beaten and needs to cut its losses, or it still has a chance, and the consequences of defeat are so great that it has to take that chance. Unfortunately, in Iraq the facts do not speak for themselves. To conclude with a quote from Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, "It is a disagreeable thing to be whipped." The coalition will surely know what that means if it leaves Iraq too soon -- and, even under the best circumstances, it could be whipped anyhow.

ANDREW EXUM

Although Washington tends to focus on threats and grand strategy, the reality is that while strategy is decided by a handful of people, tactics are executed by a great many more people on the ground. And these people must operate in dangerous places such as Baghdad and eastern Afghanistan.

The surge is designed to give the coalition more time in Iraq and, in turn, to give the country's political leadership the space needed to reach tough compromises that may only be possible as long as a large occupation force affords some stability. To help explain what the coalition is pursuing in Iraq today, it is instructive to look at the new Army and Marine counterinsurgency manual -- the first new U.S. doctrine on counterinsurgency since the Vietnam War. Owing a great intellectual debt to French counterinsurgents of the twentieth century in places such as Indochina and Algeria, it places renewed emphasis on placing soldiers in smaller patrol bases. U.S. general David Petraeus is

largely heeding the admonition of Sir Robert Thompson, a British administrator in 1950s Malaya, to assume greater initial risk in order to get soldiers out into the country, where they can make contact with both the population and the enemy.

During the first few years of the war, the Bush administration and the Coalition Provisional Authority managed the conflict in disastrous fashion, while military commanders were slow to adapt to fighting insurgents, preferring to fight "terrorists" instead. This is understandable because, since Vietnam, counterinsurgency has been largely ignored in terms of military doctrine. The Cold War provided a convenient excuse for this, as it was easier to defend against imaginary Soviet tank divisions than it was to fight the actual battles of the Cold War.

Now, however, the coalition is embracing a new population-centric approach, which carries its own unique challenges. For example, as troops disperse from heavily fortified, forward-operating bases into smaller patrol bases, they have no real downtime. The double suicide attack on a patrol base in Diyala province that killed nine U.S. servicemen highlights the fact that soldiers in such facilities can never let their guard down. Moreover, the intimate nature of fighting in an urban environment ensures that the actual distance at which engagements occur will rarely be more than 20 to 40 meters. This leads to another complicating factor: the need to reduce collateral damage. In what David Kilcullen, senior counterinsurgency advisor to General Petraeus, describes as "graduate level warfare," overwhelming firepower is no longer the answer.

Given the new strategy of assuming risk early and often, our overtaxed troops are now being purposely exposed to greater danger than ever before in the middle of population centers and smaller patrol bases. As General Petraeus has said, however, it is too early to issue a final report card on the surge. It must also be said that the current situation in Iraq is really not a pure counterinsurgency environment, but rather something akin to the more complicated Lebanese militia war of 1975-1990. As one of my former commanders said, the situation in Iraq is the revenge of eighteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, who taught that effective warfare requires a country's military, government, and people to all be reading from the same page of sheet music. Therefore, it is the fight in Washington, not in Baghdad, that will likely determine the future of U.S. policy in Iraq.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Under the tenure of Gen. George Casey, the United States essentially pursued foreign internal defense strategy, attempting to train the Iraqi army in order to hand over combat operations to the Iraqi Security Forces. This strategy relied on two assumptions: (1) it is up to the Iraqis to win this war, and the sooner a transition is achieved, the better; and (2) as stated by Gen. John Abizaid, the American troop presence in Iraq is an antigen in the Iraqi culture -- an irritant that necessitated limits to the U.S. military footprint.

It eventually became clear that this strategy was not working. Following the recognition that the political clock was running out and that a more proactive policy was required, additional troops were deployed into Baghdad -- an acknowledgment that the coalition still needs to do much of the heavy lifting. Although U.S. forces may indeed have been an antigen in Iraqi culture over the first two years of the conflict -- due to troop presence, some measure of cultural insensitivity, and aggressive sweep operations that alienated a lot of Iraqis -- the focus must now be on protecting the civilian population with enough forces to properly execute the strategy of "clear, hold, and build."

For example, gated communities, long a source of controversy, are nevertheless a viable population control method and a fundamental component of any counterinsurgency campaign. In comparison to the largely successful "strategic hamlets" the British employed in Malaya, where about half a million people were resettled, the gated communities envisioned today are far less intrusive and destructive. The bottom line, however, is that local cultural sensitivities must be taken into consideration.

Also of great importance are the types of forces available. Although U.S. forces have made great strides in learning

the unlearned lessons of Vietnam, there are still not enough civil affairs troops, military police for police transition teams, or human intelligence officers fluent in Arabic. The civilian side of government has not been given sufficient emphasis in the hold-and-build phase of reconstruction efforts, with even provincial reconstruction teams largely staffed by Army reservists and civilians from the Office of the Secretary of Defense. As a result, despite clearing substantial cities such as Fallujah, Mosul, and Tal Afar, the coalition has had substantial problems holding and building.

In addition, the insurgents have certain advantages in dealing with the surge. They have demographic escalation superiority, because any insurgency inevitably involves a very small proportion -- normally about 1 percent -- of the potential population that it could potentially mobilize. They have geographic advantages, since they can respond to pressure on Baghdad by moving elsewhere. Finally, they have a temporal advantage because they do not need to win decisive battles to emerge victorious in the end, while U.S. forces have strict time limits on public patience for military involvement in Iraq. At this point, the U.S. domestic political debate has its own internal logic, which is largely independent of developments on the ground in Baghdad. Ultimately, the outcome of the war will be more decisively influenced by events in Washington than in Iraq.

What happens if the current plan fails? There are three main alternatives. First, given the U.S. domestic political climate, the order to "cut and run" cannot be ruled out. If efforts on the ground do not produce much movement toward established benchmarks, support for this option will increase dramatically, regardless of its implications for Iraq or the region. The second option, "soft partition," has all the political, logistical, and moral flaws of any ambitious attempt at social engineering, placing the United States in the unfavorable position of essentially midwifing the breakup of Iraq. The last option is a containment strategy that would prevent Iraq from becoming a springboard for al-Qaeda and curtail the overflow of sectarian violence outside Iraq. If the coalition significantly reduces its presence, however, there would likely be a rise in sectarian violence that would increase the flow of displaced persons and endanger regional stability.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Zack Snyder. ❖

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