

PolicyWatch 1181

Key Trends to Watch in Iraq

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Policy #1181

December 28, 2006

The situation in Iraq is not only violent, it is confusing, even for those watching it closely. Dramatic events, searing images, and daily pronouncements by policymakers contribute to a sense of chaos. Nevertheless, some events are more important than others—with trends in events being especially important. Such trends, or indicators, can provide a sense of the direction in which the situation is headed, and the effectiveness of U.S. or Iraqi approaches to the conflict.

U.S. Will

Without doubt this is a key—perhaps the key—trend. Popular support for the war, as measured in public opinion polls and the past election, is declining. The will of the policymaking community in Washington also matters. It is here where ideas are generated, plans proposed, and proposals vetted. But the will of this community also appears in decline. Most—but fortunately not all—of the discussion in Washington now focuses on how to get out of Iraq, not on how to win in Iraq. There is a dynamic between the popular will and the will of the policymakers, and for now this dynamic is producing an overall decline in support for the war in Iraq.

Iraqi Political Culture

This is perhaps the second-most important variable. What is important is whether this culture is becoming more or less conducive to cooperation among different Iraqi groups. Arguably, the political process in Iraq has increased conflict among the various parties and factions rather than reduced it. The creation of the Iraqi constitution and the formation of the government have not resolved the most critical issue in Iraqi politics: the absence of any grand political agreement among the key players on the nature of the state and how it should be governed. Lacking this “grand” agreement, Iraqi politicians have been reduced to using souk-type bargains, threats, and violence to advance their political ambitions.

U.S. Military Capabilities

Despite everything, the U.S. military remains the single most powerful player in Iraq. It checks the insurgency, reigns in the militias, trains the Iraqis, watches the borders, and constrains the squabbling Iraqi politicians. Its presence and demonstrated capabilities serve as a governing force in what would otherwise be a completely out-of-control situation. That is why decisions about the numbers, composition, and missions of U.S. forces are so important. American forces, in fact, now have three major missions in Iraq: (1) suppress, or at least contain, the insurgency; (2) deter the militias; and (3) train the Iraqi Security Forces. Conducting all three missions—with the militia and training aspects growing, and without an increase in the level of forces—is a challenge. The risk is that, in attempting so much, all three missions will not be accomplished.

Iraqi Capabilities

This indicator has three dimensions: (1) the trend in the Iraqi government’s ability to govern, not just at the national level, but at the provincial and local levels; (2) the ability of the government to provide services (such as power, water, and transportation); (3) and, most importantly, the ability of the government to provide security for the people. The government’s capability in these areas varies widely across the country, with the Kurdish areas being best on all three fronts, the center largely in disarray, and the south reflecting a patchwork of local and provincial capabilities. Critically absent is the government’s capability to provide security in any area where either insurgent or militia elements are active. There are some areas in the north and south that do enjoy a measure of security, but that is because the political contests have been settled, or are at least dormant, and the insurgents are not active. Even in relatively quiet areas of the south, there is a violent subsurface—and, sometimes, above-the-surface—struggle among Shiite political factions, as was recently witnessed in the Maysan province with the outbreak of clashes between the Badr organization and the Mahdi Army. In some of the more bitterly contested areas of Iraq—such as Baghdad and the Diyala province—government security forces have become partisans in the fighting.

Insurgent and Militia Capabilities

In opposition to the U.S. and Iraqi government forces stand the Sunni insurgents and the Shiite militias. Insurgent

capabilities appear to have remained essentially steady, with most of the increased levels of violence coming from Shiite militias and the so-called death squads. Nevertheless, the Sunni insurgents have made some gains in capabilities and were able to surge for a Ramadan offensive. Militia capabilities appear to be improving over time. In particular, the Mahdi Army has become better organized, better armed, and perhaps somewhat more tactically proficient.

Outside Players

Iran and Syria remain the two external actors with the most capacity to affect the situation. So far they have both used this capacity against U.S. interests and objectives in Iraq. Syria provides important assistance to the Sunni insurgents—including a safe haven for insurgent leaders and their families, financial services, and transportation routes for foreign fighters. Iran is providing arms, money, and training to Shiite elements, including the Mahdi Army. It is the primary source of expertise and materials for the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) employing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), which are capable of defeating the armor of the most heavily protected coalition vehicles. Both Syria and Iran have the capacity to dramatically increase their involvement if they so choose. Should either decide to become more active against the United States, this could make the situation much more difficult, and Iran could probably make it unbearable.

Adaptability

An important variable in the situation is the relative adaptability, or agility, of the competitors. In this area it appears that the United States is at a disadvantage. Both Sunnis and Shiites have proven more agile than the United States in their ability to adapt to the changing environment rapidly and successfully. Sunni insurgents, tribal leaders, and politicians have all found ways, if not to regain power, at least to remain influential. The insurgents themselves have adapted at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, and have been remarkably successful in frustrating the United States, limiting the ability of the Iraqi government to govern, and hobbling the economic reconstruction process. Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army have transitioned from open warfare against the coalition to arguably the most important Shiite faction, while enhancing their military capabilities. In the meantime, the United States has remained wedded to a barely functional political process, an uninspired military operational concept, and the chimera of capable Iraqi Security Forces. The United States waltzes while the Iraqis breakdance.

The Violence System

The murderous security environment that pervades Baghdad, the center of the country, and even some areas of the south, is the artifact of Iraqi political actors and their supporters in and outside of Iraq. Their actions and interactions constitute a now well-developed and continuously evolving violence system. The challenge is far greater than conveyed by the concept of the “cycle-of-violence” currently in vogue among analysts and pundits. The violence system is complex, with many actors and processes, and is densely interconnected and self-sustaining, drawing its energy from multiple sources. The trend in the violence system is toward greater, not lesser, violence. Iraq has fallen into a near-perfect manifestation of the Hobbesian state of “all against all.” Remove or weaken the governing force of the United States, and the upward trend in violence will accelerate.

Implications

No one has written the algorithm or formula for solving Iraq, but these are some of the key trends to watch as the situation progresses. Because Iraq is complex, it is necessary to look at more than a few of these trends to get a sense of the situation’s overall direction. For now, this direction is negative. Unfortunately for the United States, its ability to change this direction is limited because of a history of lost time, inadequate resources, mistaken diagnoses, and an unwillingness to confront harsh realities. Perhaps that is changing now, but the United States is behind, deep in the second half of the game.

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