

# MOVING FORWARD IN IRAQ

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In Washington perception is often mistaken for reality. And as Congress prepares for a fresh debate on Iraq, the perception many members have is that the new strategy has already failed.

This isn't an accurate reflection of what is happening on the ground, as I saw during my visit to Iraq in May. Reports from the field show that remarkable progress is being made. Violence in Baghdad and Anbar Province is down dramatically, grassroots political movements have begun in the Sunni Arab community, and American and Iraqi forces are clearing al Qaeda fighters and Shiite militias out of long-established bases around the country.

This is remarkable because the military operation that is making these changes possible only began in full strength on June 15. To say that the surge is failing is absurd. Instead Congress should be asking this question: Can the current progress continue?

From 2004 to 2006, al Qaeda established safe havens, transport routes, vehicle-bomb factories and training camps in the rural areas surrounding Baghdad, where U.S. forces had little or no footprint. Al Qaeda used these bases to conduct bombings in Baghdad, to displace Shia and Sunni from local towns by sparking sectarian killings, and to force Iraqis to comply with the group's interpretation of Islamic law. Shiite death squads roamed freely around Baghdad and the countryside. The number of execution-style killings rose monthly after the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006, reaching a high in December 2006. Iranian special operations groups moved weapons across the borders and into Iraq along major highways and rivers. U.S. forces, engaged primarily in training Iraqis, did little to disrupt this movement.

Today, Iraq is a different place from what it was six months ago. U.S. and Iraqi forces began their counterinsurgency campaign in Baghdad in February. They moved into the neighborhoods and worked side-by-side with Baghdadis. As a result, sectarian violence is down. The counterinsurgency strategy has dramatically decreased Shiite death squad activity in the capital. Furthermore, U.S. and Iraqi special forces have removed many rogue militia leaders and Iranian advisers from Sadr City and other locations, reducing the power of militias.

As a consequence, execution-style killings, the hallmark of Shiite militias, have fallen to the lowest level in a year; some Iranian- and militia-backed mortar teams firing on the Green Zone have been destroyed. Equally important, U.S. and Iraqi forces have restricted al Qaeda's bases to ever smaller areas of the city, so that reinforcements cannot flow easily from one neighborhood to another.

Many in Washington say the Baghdad Security Plan has just pushed the enemy to other locations in Iraq. Though some of the enemy certainly left Baghdad when the security plan began, this metaphor is inaccurate. The enemy has long been located outside of Baghdad and was causing violence from suburban bases. What has changed is the disposition of U.S. forces, which are now actively working to expel the enemy from its safe havens rather than ignoring them.

To accomplish this, Gens. David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno have encircled Baghdad with a double cordon of U.S. and Iraqi forces. They have been preparing the cordons patiently since February, as the new "surge" units arrived. The surge was completed only in mid-June, and the first phase of the large-scale operations it was intended to support began only on June 15. Since then, U.S. forces have begun blocking major road, river, and transportation route around Baghdad. They are also deployed in critical neighborhoods around outskirts and the interior of the city.

On June 15, Gens. Petraeus and Odierno launched a major offensive against al Qaeda strongholds all around Baghdad. "Phantom Thunder" is the largest operation in Iraq since 2003, and a milestone in the counterinsurgency strategy. For the first time, U.S. forces are working systematically throughout central Iraq to secure Baghdad by clearing its rural "belts" and its interior, so that the enemy cannot move from one safe haven to another. Together, the operations in Baghdad and the "belts" are increasing security in and around the capital.

U.S. and Iraqi forces are thereby attacking enemy strongholds and cutting supply routes all around the city, along which fighters and weapons moved freely in 2006. Coordinated operations south and east of Baghdad are at last interdicting the supply of weapons moving along the Tigris River to the capital. U.S. and Iraqi forces are operating east of Baghdad for the first time in years, disrupting al Qaeda's movement between bases on the Tigris and in Sadr City, a frequent target of its car bombs. North of Baghdad, U.S. forces recently cleared al Qaeda from the city of Baqubah, from which terrorists flowed into Baghdad. They are clearing al Qaeda's car bomb factories from Karmah, northwest of Baghdad, and its sanctuaries toward Lake Tharthar. These operations are supported by counterinsurgency operations west of the capital, from Fallujah to Abu Ghraib. U.S. forces are now, for the first time, fighting the enemy in the entire ring of cities and villages around Baghdad.

This is the Baghdad Security Plan, and its mission is to secure the people of Baghdad. Even so, commanders are not ignoring the outlying areas of Iraq. U.S. forces have killed or captured many important al Qaeda leaders in Mosul recently, and destroyed safe havens throughout northern Iraq. Troops are conducting counterinsurgency operations in Bayji, north of Tikrit. And Iraqi forces have "stepped up" to secure some southern cities. The Eighth Iraqi Army Division has been fighting Shiite militias in Diwaniyah, an important city halfway between Basrah and Baghdad. As commanders stabilize central Iraq, they will undoubtedly conduct successive operations in outlying regions to follow up on their successes and make them lasting.

The larger aim of the new strategy is creating an opportunity for Iraq's leaders to negotiate a political settlement. These negotiations are underway. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is attempting to form a political coalition with Amar al-Hakim and Kurdish political leaders, but excluding Moqtada al-Sadr, and has invited Sunnis to participate. He has confronted Moqtada al-Sadr for promoting illegal militia activity, and has apparently prompted this so-called Iraqi nationalist to leave for Iran for the second time since January.

Provincial and local government is growing stronger. Local and tribal leaders in Anbar, Diyala, Salah ad-Din, North Babil and even Baghdad have agreed to fight insurgents and terrorists as U.S. forces have moved in to secure the population alongside their Iraqi partners. As a result, the number of Iraqis recruited for the police forces, in particular, has risen exponentially since 2006.

This is war, and the enemy is reacting. The enemy uses suicide bombs, car bombs and brutal executions to break our will and that of our Iraqi allies. American casualties often increase as troops move into areas that the enemy has fortified; these casualties will start to fall again once the enemy positions are destroyed. Al Qaeda will manage to get some car and truck bombs through, particularly in areas well-removed from the capital and its belts.

But we should not allow individual atrocities to obscure the larger picture. A new campaign has just begun, it is already yielding important results, and its effects are increasing daily. Demands for withdrawal are no longer demands to pull out of a deteriorating situation with little hope; they are now demands to end a new approach to this conflict that shows every sign of succeeding.

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