

The Surge Is Working

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Baghdad

For nearly three-and-a-half years, the two most dangerous enemies of the American mission in Iraq -- and of the majority of Iraqis who want to build a stable democracy -- had been growing in terms of their capacity to inflict damage. This despite the losses they suffered in battles with Iraqi and American security forces.

Moqtada al-Sadr, on the one hand, grew from a small annoyance as a gang leader in Najaf in April 2003 to become the leader of a monstrous militia that, with the spark al Qaeda provided by bombing the Askari shrine in Samarra, created the sectarian bloodbath we witnessed throughout 2006.

On the other side, al Qaeda's network in Iraq grew from a few dozen infiltrators, supported by disgruntled locals, to an entity that was until recently bragging about establishing Islamic rule on the soil of at least two Iraqi provinces east and west of Baghdad.

And so this country was going through the worst times ever as we moved towards the end of 2006. Iraq was being torn apart by these two terror networks and Iraq was said to be on the verge of "civil war," if it wasn't actually there already.

But the situation looks quite different now.

Last year's crisis made Washington and Baghdad realize that urgent measures needed to be taken to stop the deterioration, and ultimately reverse it. So Washington decided to send in thousands of additional troops. And Baghdad agreed to move its lazy bones and mobilize more Iraqi troops to the capital and coordinate a joint crackdown with the American forces on all outlaw groups, Sunni and Shiite alike.

The big question these days is, did it actually work? Even partially?

First I think we need to remember that states and their traditional armies need to be judged by different metrics than gangs and terror organizations. The latter don't need to win the majority of their battles with American and Iraqi forces. The strength of terrorists and militias is simply their ability to subjugate the civilian populace with fear.

Here is exactly where the American surge and Iraqi plan have proven effective in Baghdad.

The combined use of security walls, the heavy security-force presence in the streets, and an overwhelming number of checkpoints have highly restricted the movement of terrorists and militias inside Baghdad and led to *separation*. Not a separation of ordinary Sunnis from ordinary Shiites but a separation of both Sunni and Shiite terrorists from their respective priority targets, i.e., civilians of the other sect.

With their movement restricted and their ability to perform operations reduced, they had to look for other targets that are easier to reach. After all, when the goal is to defeat America in Iraq and undermine the democratic political process *any* target is a good target.

Just look at the difference between the aftermath of the first Samarra bombing in February of 2006 and that of the second bombing in June of 2007. Days after the 2006 bombing more than a hundred Sunni mosques were hit in retaliatory attacks, and thousands of Sunnis were executed by militias in the months that followed. This time only four or five mosques were attacked, none of them in Baghdad proper that I know of.

Sadr's militias have moved the main battlefield south to cities like Samawah, Nasiriyah and Diwaniyah where there's no American surge of troops, and from which many Iraqi troops were recalled to serve in Baghdad. But over there, too, the Iraqi security forces and local administrations did not show the weakness that Sadr was hoping to see. As a result, Sadr's representatives have been forced to accept "truces."

I know this may make things sound as if Sadr has the upper hand, that he can force a truce on the state. But the fact that is missing from news reports is that, with each new eruption of clashes, Sadr's position becomes weaker as tribes and local administrations join forces to confront his outlaw militias.

Al Qaeda hasn't been any luckier than Sadr, and the tide began to turn even before the surge was announced. The change came from the most unlikely city and unlikely people, Ramadi and its Sunni tribes.

In Baghdad the results have been just as spectacular so far. The district where al Qaeda claimed to have established its Islamic emirate is exactly where al Qaeda is losing big now, and at the hands of its former allies who have turned on al Qaeda and are slowly reaching out to the government.

While al Qaeda and Sadr are by no means finished off militarily, what has changed is that both of them are fighting their former public base of support. That course can't lead them to success in fomenting the sectarian war they had bet their money on.

It would be unrealistic to expect political progress to take place along the same timeline as this military progress. The obvious reason is that Iraqi politics tend to be affected by developments on the battlefield. Anyone familiar with the basics of negotiations should understand this.

First things first. Let's allow our troops to finish their job. And when that is done nation-building will follow, and that's where diplomats and politicians will have to do the fighting in their own way while American soldiers can finally enjoy a well-deserved rest.

Backing off now is not an option. The light at the end of the tunnel faded for a whole dark year, but we can see it again now and it's getting brighter. It's our duty to keep walking towards it.

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