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All Politics is Local: Al-Qaeda's Strategic Failure in Iraq

John Harrison

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The fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq provided a useful time to conduct preliminary field research into the status of the surge and its implications for the future of Iraq.

FIVE YEARS after the controversial invasion of Iraq, and its subsequent insurgency, the security situation appears to be showing signs of improvement. The Iraqi and American military officials this author spoke with while in Iraq, all broadly support the idea that Iraqi forces are capable of sustaining the improved security situation. The Iraqi army has regained the respect of the people, in contrast to the Iraqi police. The so-called citizen's forces (Sunni tribal security militias) have had a positive impact as well. Shi'a groups remain armed but silent, and the Kurds are conducting a stealth campaign in the north. Given the dire situation in 2004, one can ask two questions: how did the dramatic change occur so rapidly? Is the situation sustainable?

The Surge

The most obvious explanation is the so-called surge of American forces that began in late 2006 and was fully in place by the middle of 2007. This increased the number of American forces from approximately 130,000 to 160,000. More forces provide more resources, but what most commentators missed was the deployment patterns, which were perhaps more critical than the overall numbers. US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, changed his predecessor's strategy of deploying American forces in large centralized bases which they rarely left, to what is called Forward Operation Bases (FOBs) where American troops live and work closely with Iraqi security forces and the population.

The other component was the development of Military Transition Teams (MTTs). MTTs are 10-man teams of regular US Army advisors who live in Iraqi military installations and advise their counterparts in technical areas, such as intelligence collection and analysis and logistics. These advisors were able to assist the Iraqi military to "stand up so the US can stand down". The author spent a week with an MTT in Tikrit in Iraq, and was able to see first-hand the value of small training teams and their efforts

to win the confidence of both the military and population at large.

Both the US and Iraqi military claim that the Iraqi army is capable of sustaining the security situation on its own. In many cases they have undertaken successful operations without any US support. This is a major improvement over the situation even a year ago, when the security services were incapable of much independent action, let alone planning.

Good Fences Make Good Neighbours

The sectarian killings that brought Iraq to the brink of civil war have largely dissipated. This is in part due to the Iraqis' desire to step back from the sectarian abyss, but also to a practical step of removing the opportunities for sectarian killing through walling off threatened neighbourhoods. These massive concert barriers, called "T Walls", have taken away the opportunity for sectarian militias to conduct random drive-by shooting into opponents neighbourhoods.

Additionally the high concert walls reduce the impact for vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. The fences also provided a means of controlling access to the neighbourhood, as there were few entry points, and encouraged local citizens to take a more active role in their security, which created an increased sense of security and possibilities for development.

The aforementioned components are vital in explaining the current dramatic reduction in violence as well as the increased optimism of the Iraqi citizens, as reflected in the recent Pew survey, and the anecdotal information from the author's visit. The most critical positive development in Iraq has been the declining effectiveness of Al-Qaeda. They are still active and dangerous, but the support for their organization and objectives has dissipated. While the Iraqi Sunni population is more secular thus ideologically less sympathetic to Al-Qaeda, the real failure is due to Al-Qaeda's own actions.

Al-Qaeda's Critical Errors

Al-Qaeda committed three critical errors that lead to their apparent decline: they failed to understand their "supporters", were ultraviolent, and were unwilling and or unable to offer even rudimentary opportunities for development. The first and most critical failure was their failure to understand their supporters and reasons for support. Many of the Sunni tribes that aligned with Al-Qaeda did so under the guise of the maxim "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". The tribes had benefited from Saddam's regime, and were now excluded, they feared reprisals from the Shi'a dominated government, wanted to resist the occupation, and have some leverage to achieve socio-political goals.

In 2003 and early 2004, Al-Qaeda was the only resistance organization; thus the tribes joined Al-Qaeda. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, seemed to view this as a sign of ideological commitment to jihad. Zarqawi could thus conduct a resistance to the foreign occupation, and simultaneously attempt to create an Islamic state. When tribal leaders objected to this idea, and to the sectarian war he was attempting to launch, he reacted violently. The killing of tribal leaders sparked a break between Al-Qaeda and the tribes that was eventually exploited by the US and government forces.

The tribes are not squeamish about violence, but they were attempting to use it as leverage to gain some accommodation with the Shi'a majority so that the tribes, and Sunnis in general, would not be left out of the new Iraq. In the immediate term the tribes wanted tangible services, such as water and electricity, to be delivered. What they got was lofty rhetoric and violent enforcement of their vision.

The failure of Al-Qaeda in Iraq mirrors the organization's larger failing -- Al-Qaeda has not attempted to develop a broad front like Hezbollah or Hamas. One that combines armed struggle with social and educational institutions that allow the organization to plant deep roots within the society, providing a

board popular support and critical strategic depth. Al-Qaeda, for all of its military adaptability and brilliance, remains politically maladroit.

The Strategic Crossroads

The Iraqi and US militaries, the tribal leaders and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams all agree that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and that is it not an oncoming train. What is desperately needed is development. While there is a need for international financial assistance, Iraq has large amounts of public and private money available. None is being used, let alone placed in banks for fear of exposing oneself to criminal and terrorist extortion. And there's the rub: security has improved, but not to the point that it frees up development money. Security cannot be sustained or improved further until development begins. Addressing this dilemma will determine Iraq's immediate and near term prospects.

Need for Political Will

When General Petraeus announced his surge he had the advantage of history. Surges have worked in the past, but they usually come once the political will to sustain the conflict has evaporated. He also established a "modest" goal of creating a security situation where political and economic development could occur. Now the Iraqis themselves must have a corresponding political and economic surge to consolidate the hard-won security. The key uncertainty is how Iraq will play out in the current contest for the US presidency and the approach likely to be taken by the next US president.

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