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## PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE IN IRAQ

# Can the Surge's Successes Be Maintained?

By Bernhard Zand

**Deaths and attacks have fallen in Iraq since Washington increased the number of US troops in the so-called surge. But Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites remain far from any reconciliation.**

It only happens every 33 years that the most important Christian and Muslim holidays fall as close together as they do this December. Sunnis will celebrate their feast of Eid al-Adha this Wednesday, Shiites will follow suit on Friday, and shortly thereafter Christmas will come to the banks of the Tigris River.

### PHOTO GALLERY: SUCCESSES OF THE SURGE



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And the holiday season this year could well be the most peaceful for Sunnis and Shiites in years. The markets in Baghdad are staying open until 10 p.m., as thousands of Iraqis head out to do their holiday shopping. Men, women and children fill the city's streets. Money changes hands, pickups are loaded with sacrificial lambs, and grapes and oranges from the surrounding countryside are on sale. The festive scenes would have been completely unthinkable this time last year.

But the holiday season for Iraq's Christians isn't quite so merry. The southern city of Basra used to have some 1,000 Christian families. Now only a few dozen remain. Last week, Osama Farid, an electrician, and his sister Maysoun, a pharmacist, were found dead on the side of the road. "This year, again, we won't be celebrating -- instead, we'll be praying for the souls of our dead," says the chaplain of the local Christian congregation. But at least many Muslims came to the burial of the brother and sister. That, too, would have been unimaginable only a year ago.

### FROM THE MAGAZINE



Five commuters died last Wednesday in Baghdad when a bomb exploded next to their minibus. Forty people were killed in southern Amara by three car bombs. There was also an attack on a former prime minister, a police chief in a large city was murdered, 50 civilians died in the previous week and there were more than 700 deaths in November. If any other country had such a grim toll, the United Nations would be discussing international intervention to stop the bloodshed. But the news coming from Baghdad doesn't even make headlines any more. What are 50 deaths when last year more than 500 people were being killed each week? And how important are three unidentified corpses each day when only recently it was 10 or 12?

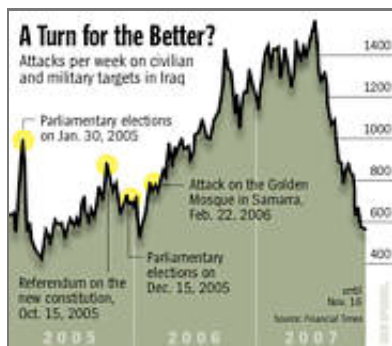
All the signs seem to be pointing to an improvement in the country. The number of attacks has fallen. The

number of dead and injured has also dropped. The first convoys of refugees have returned from Syria and Jordan. Oil exports are increasing. Garbage trucks are once again making their rounds and there is electricity 11 hours each day instead of only two hours per day last spring. Has Iraq finally turned the corner?

That the increase in US-troop levels would be so effective in lowering the number of deaths and decreasing the bloodshed has surprised even the initiators of the so-called "surge." Retired US Gen. John Keane, who helped convince US President George W. Bush to send more soldiers a year ago, describes the current situation as "phenomenal" and the reduction in violence as "dramatic" and "unheard of." And others agree with that assessment. US Gen. Walter Gaskin is convinced the plan is working. "I think that the positive trends are permanent," he told reporters last week.

The number of attacks each week in Gaskin's zone, the Sunni Anbar province, has indeed plunged from 460 to 40 within one year. But such grand predictions of growing peace and stability could quickly come back to haunt him.

Perhaps that's why his boss, Gen. David Petraeus, commander of US forces in Iraq, is much more cautious. "Nobody says anything about turning a corner, seeing lights at the end of tunnels, any of those other phrases," he said last Thursday. Petraeus is careful not to say anything remotely resembling the now-infamous phrase "mission accomplished" uttered by Bush in 2003. He prefers to talk in terms of perseverance: "You just keep your head down and keep moving."



DER SPIEGEL

Things are looking up in Iraq.

None of Washington's generals can be totally sure what the surge's true impact will be at this point. With 160,000 troops currently deployed in Iraq, America now has more soldiers in the country since the fall of Baghdad. The cities in the Sunni triangle and some districts of the capital now have one US soldier for every 20 civilians -- the ratio the US military originally asked for, in vain, before the invasion. Differently from before the surge, the troops now patrol constantly and they seek contact with the local population, instead of trying to hunt terrorists. Petraeus' strategy appears to be working.

But the two main factors changing the situation on the ground are of a strictly Iraqi nature. First, even before the offensive devised by Petraeus, some of the Sunni clans in Anbar had decided to longer tolerate al-Qaida's excessive violence -- thereby robbing the terrorist network of its support base.

The other factor is the decision, still not fully explained, by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to keep his militia, the Mahdi Army, on a short leash. But taken together, the two developments have worked wonders. The bloody provocations of al-Qaida have dropped off, giving the Shiites less reason to retaliate with more violence.

"Since last winter, a combination of good fortune, enemy mistakes and a new US strategy with more troops and a mission of direct population security has created a largely unanticipated situation," military analyst Stephen Biddle, who was long part of Petraeus' planning staff, wrote recently in the *Washington Post*. But the question remains whether either development can provide a long-term foundation for further progress. The Bush administration -- even if pressure in Washington has eased recently -- will have to pull out troops at some point. That much is certain.

But the opposition of the Sunni clans to al-Qaida seems solid. Large chunks of the so-called "national resistance," which fought US-led coalition troops for years, have now joined the Sahwa force financed by the Americans and the Iraqi government. Similar divide-and-conquer tactics were used by Saddam Hussein's regime to control the clans.

The ranks of the Sunni militia have swelled to over 60,000 men in only a few months. They are helping to keep al-Qaida in check, as well as securing Baghdad's Sunni neighborhoods and even getting involved in politics. One of their leaders, Sheikh Hamid al-Hayes, hopes to soon take over, with his colleagues, five vacant government posts. But once America pulls out its troops, where will the rapidly growing militia's loyalties lie if a Shiite-dominated government no longer tolerates its existence?

The stated goal of the US offensive -- to establish enough stability and security so that Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds can achieve national reconciliation -- is still nowhere in sight. "Politically nothing is happening here," says one of Petraeus' advisors resignedly.

There has been little progress over the past 10 months towards resolving any of the problems at the core of the conflict in Iraq: division of the country's resources, integration of former Baath Party members, and the dispute over the mixed city of Kirkuk, where the security situation is actually bucking the national trend and getting worse.

It can, however, be taken as a good omen that the Kurds have postponed a planned referendum on Kirkuk's status. It appears Kurdish leaders are no longer seriously considering secession. Even if the oil revenues of the Northern Oil Company would be enough to allow an independent Kurdistan to be self-sufficient, the political cost of independence remains far too high for the foreseeable future. Moderate Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who is also currently the president of Iraq, has the upper hand over his more radical Kurdish regional counterpart Massoud Barzani.

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However, Iraq's most powerful politician, Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, remains unpredictable. On Thursday, it became known how the 33-year-old cleric, who hasn't been seen in public since May, has been spending his time: He has been attending a theological seminary in the city of Najaf, a Shiite pilgrimage center. Three of his close associates confirm he hopes to become an ayatollah.

At the moment al-Sadr, the scion of an important Iraqi family of scholars, only holds the honorific Islamic title of *hojatoleslam*. His supporters, the hundreds of thousands that take to the streets for the Mahdi Army, follow him only as a political leader. On religious matters he still has to take instructions from higher clerics. "If Muqtada manages to become an ayatollah, his movement will gain in strength," says one of his associates.

But the subject matter he's currently studying is highly controversial. Sadr is exploring the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists, which happens to be the core of the political philosophy of

Iran's revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Sadr, who hopes to become an ayatollah by 2010, is preparing for the time after the Americans. He's not the only one.

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