

Has the Surge Put Iraq on the Path to Success?

Council on Foreign Relations

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Updated: May 9, 2008

The so-called "surge" in Iraq, a reinforcement of U.S. forces by thirty thousand troops which began in spring 2007, has been credited by many with slowing civilian casualties, building morale among Iraqi security forces, and helping restore some order to the country, particularly in its capital, Baghdad. Yet critics see it as little more than an unsustainable holding action which has propped up what they regard as an essentially flawed strategy in Iraq.

Two CFR experts on the war, Max Boot, senior fellow for national security studies, and Steven Simon, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies, debate whether the surge has put Iraq on the path to success.

Final Post, May 9, 2008

Steven Simon

Max,

Believe me, I wasn't impugning Ryan Crocker's integrity. Those who've never worked as a diplomat often don't understand that integrity means precisely reading your talking points regardless of your personal opinion. And these points are always intended to influence, whether you're dealing with your counterpart in a foreign ministry, or with your own legislators. In this case, Crocker's congressional audience understood well enough that he was there to put the best face on things in his capacity as a highly professional career diplomat. The statements, by the way, were carefully scripted and coordinated with the White House. But you know this, right?

Anyway, thanks for mentioning the report I did for CFR on Iraq. It was called "After the Surge," precisely because it didn't concern itself with the surge. The questions posed by that study assessed the costs to the U.S. of staying in Iraq as against the benefits of withdrawing militarily, while remaining heavily en-

gaged diplomatically and economically. I concluded that the costs of the Iraq war -- to the armed services, America's prestige, the war on terror, our rivalry with Iran, and Washington's capacity to deal energetically and creatively with a host of other challenges - outweighed the benefits of staying in Iraq.

My *Foreign Affairs* article, however, did focus on the long-term effects of the surge, which will impede Iraq's political development for years to come *unless* specific steps are taken in the near term to bring the Sunni army the surge created under the rubric of the state. These steps are not being taken -- and won't be until the hazards entailed by the surge strategy are recognized. This in turn would entail a modicum of interest in Middle Eastern history, culture and society, which advocates of the war have never demonstrated.

Your concession that the Maliki government does in fact see the Awakening as a threat and that the Awakening movement is entirely funded by the United States certainly shows that you're *less* misinformed than you'd indicated in your earlier posting. I'm still not sure why you think these facts square with the Awakening movement being somehow subordinate to the state. The facts seem pretty clearly to point in the opposite direction. As for the Awakening perception of the jobs actually on offer with the government, listen to Khalid Jiyad Abed, an Awakening leader in Latifiyah, "The Sunnis were always the leaders of the country. Is it reasonable that they are turned into service workers and garbage collectors?...We had not anticipated this from the American forces. Of course we will not accept that." If you really believe that the Awakening movement thinks that Maliki's government is the cat's pajamas, take some time to read the reporting referenced in my previous posts.

Although I can't speak for "opponents of the surge," -- as I indicated in last year's report on Iraq I was neither for it nor against -- I am happy to concede that some legislation has been passed. Unfortunately, some of what passed is bad legislation, while other crucial bills have not been implemented. Given the

huge stakes for the future of Iraq, "E for Effort" isn't enough. Results really do matter. If drawing attention to this gap "belittles" the performance of identity-obsessed, absentee Iraqi politicians, well, okay.

I'm also glad you concluded with the subject of refugees. The situation of these 2 million victims of the war is tragic and usually ignored. It's great that Mohamed Hussein, the *New York Times* employee made it home and that he's happy. Sadly, he is the exception to the rule. As of a couple of days ago, according to a UNHCR survey, 96 percent of refugees in Syria say they won't go home, most of them because security is lacking. The UN is not even recommending that refugees try to go home. Those who have returned have done so primarily because they ran out of money or because host countries like Syria have made it more difficult for them to stay. Within Iraq, according to UNHCR, there are an additional 2.8 million displaced people that the Maliki government is unable or unwilling to return to their homes, now lost to ethnic cleansing. So, for every Mohamed Hussein, there are tens of thousands of destitute, dislocated Iraqis, fearful of going home or simply unable. And there's nothing the surge can do to help.

May 9, 2007, Max Boot

Last September, Steve, you wrote that the surge "has redistributed insurgent activity but not suppressed it. Ironically, violence touches more of the country than before...."

I consider it progress that you no longer seem to be denying that the "surge has changed the situation... in conjunction with several other developments" and that "the level of violence in Iraq is lower than at any point since 2005," as you put in your new *Foreign Affairs* piece.

Now you're trying to belittle the political progress that has been made. You're right that it's important to see how the recently passed legislation will be implemented and that Iraqis still need to do much more. But why can't you concede that the willingness of Iraqi legislators to pass major legislation is a step forward—and one that opponents of the surge did not expect? Instead you're impugning the integrity of our ambassador, Ryan Crocker, a career Foreign Service officer who has seen the progress (as well as substantial difficulties) up

close.

I am *not* "misinformed about the relationship between the Awakening units and the government in Baghdad." I am perfectly aware that Maliki has been suspicious (understandably so) of many former insurgents, and that their salaries have been paid by the U.S. But I am also aware (are you?) that 21,000 Sons of Iraq have already been accepted into the police, army or other government jobs, and that the Iraqi government has committed to paying half of the bill for their program. The Sons of Iraq grumble that more of them should get government jobs, and they're right. But the very fact that they are so eager to join the Iraqi security forces, which, of course, work for the government, belies your still-unsupported claim that they oppose "*the Maliki government and all its works.*"

I'm glad that you read a lot of journalism coming from Iraq. So do I. But you're off the mark in suggesting my visits there are one-sided because the U.S. command is only "interested in presenting conditions there in a positive light." If that's the case, they're doing a pretty poor job, since on my last visit I was almost blown up by an IED and shot at while visiting areas such as Mosul that still haven't been fully pacified. In fact, General Petraeus is willing to present a warts-and-all picture.

The impression I've formed from all the available evidence—including my visits—is that while substantial problems remain (and I've written extensively about them), the situation has gotten markedly better over the past year and will continue to improve as long as we don't withdraw prematurely, as you advocate. That is the same view held by most Iraqis, most American soldiers, and most regular visitors that I've talked to. Most of those who think Iraq would benefit from an American pullout, such as Senator Obama, have never been there.

If you doubt me, read this article by Mohamed Hussein, an Iraqi employee of the *New York Times* who presumably meets your standard of operating "independent of American sponsorship." He recounts how he left for Syria a year ago (when the surge was just starting) because Baghdad was too dangerous. He just returned home and found a "huge difference in security, which was much better than when I left." He concludes with some sobering

thoughts that proponents of a pullout should take to heart:

"Will it stay safe or not?"

"I guess that all depends on the American troops, since we will not have qualified Iraqi forces soon. Although most Iraqi forces are sincere you find some have been infiltrated by groups of gunmen and sectarian people who made the mess all around us.

"So we still need the Americans because if they intend to leave, there will be something like a hurricane which will extract everything--people, buildings and even trees. Everything that has happened and all that safety will be past, just like a sweet dream."

May 8, 2008, Steven Simon

Max, as you argued so vigorously in your April 20 blog, it's only natural for the administration to want to get its side of the Iraq story out to the public. And this is just what Ambassador Crocker was being paid to do when he went through the motions of reading those talking points about benchmarks. (There are good and bad parts to every job. His awkward performance was one of the bad parts.) The benchmarks, which were dreamt up by the administration in Washington, (though they were derived in part from commitments made by Baghdad), combine the vague with the ambiguous. What does it mean, for example, to have as a benchmark that Iraq's political authorities must not undermine or make false accusations against members of the Iraqi security forces? By what metric do we judge this a success or failure?

But more importantly, your math is dodgy. As of last October, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a neutral U.S. government body, reported that the Iraqi government had met only one of eight legislative benchmarks. Even if we were to include the three laws passed in the February legislative package, a more accurate current count is that Iraq has made progress on four legislative benchmarks. (When added to the list of other benchmarks, the number increases but still doesn't quite number twelve.) General Petraeus clearly had a good reason when he said that Iraqi leaders have not made sufficient progress toward national reconciliation.

Moreover, the data used to evaluate the benchmarks have been less than reliable. In

January, another GAO report found that on one of the September 2007 benchmarks—the allocation and spending of Iraqi revenue (PDF)—the administration had cooked the books. The GAO report recommended that, in the future, the Secretary of Treasury work with the Iraqi government "to enhance the department's ability to report accurate and reliable expenditure data."

When it comes to measuring benchmarks, however, the real test is implementation. Those who read the language in the original list of benchmarks will remember that the specified actions actually had to be done for Iraq to get credit. This is especially true for the legislation. The Iraqi legislature has passed bills that have either been left to molder, like the establishment of the electoral commission, or have been implemented in ways that undermine the intent of the original benchmark, like the deBaathification law. Checking the box after the passage of a law when its implementation remains stalled is what they teach at the Enron school of accounting. What matters, as a just-released ICG report noted, "is not principally whether a law is passed in the Green Zone [but] how the law is carried out in the Red Zone."

Judged in this light, the parliamentary "successes" you cite have made little difference.

Amnesty Law for Former Baathists: Even Michael O'Hanlon judges that, "the de-Baathification law, if badly implemented, could do more harm than good by purging Sunnis from the very security forces that we have worked so hard to include them within." As of now, it doesn't look good.

Provincial Powers Law: Although the parliament passed a provincial powers law, the Iraqi electoral commission in charge of registering voters and managing the elections has yet to receive funding and Iraqi officials are publicly doubtful provincial elections will be carried out on schedule by October 1, 2008. Privately, they are dismissive.

A Law Redesigning the Iraqi Flag: The law in question, passed in late January, was cobbled together before a conference of Arab parliamentarians descended on Erbil and designed to address Kurdish president Massoud Barzani's refusal to fly the old flag. The hastily arranged solution was to create a new, but

temporary, flag. The current design remains almost as contentious as the old one and Iraqi MPs will debate a new flag again next year.

Then there's revision of the constitution. This might well be the most important benchmark, because it is one of the keys to Sunni buy-in and national reconciliation. Yet it looks now as though it has been put off indefinitely. On the security side of the benchmark ledger, it is certainly true that Maliki came up with the requisite number of brigades but they can't operate independently, as the benchmark requires. If they could, U.S. troops wouldn't be doing the fighting. General Petraeus knew that this is how the fight would turn out, which is why he told Maliki not to take the plunge. And the national police remain Shi'a militias in Iraqi uniforms.

I'm afraid, Max, that you've been misinformed about the relationship between the Awakening units and the government in Baghdad. The prime directive – always subordinate the tribes to the state – has indeed been violated. It is a matter of public record that Awakening personnel are paid, organized and trained by the US. They get nothing from the government in Baghdad. In fact, Maliki has spoken bitterly about the U.S. effort to transform former insurgents into an army that he believes, not unreasonably, might try to challenge the dominance of the new Shi'a dispensation. This is why the Iraqi government has resisted US pressure to incorporate Awakening personnel into the security forces. Accordingly, Sunnis in the Awakening heap scorn on the "Safavids" in Baghdad – the Safavids being one of the historical ruling dynasties of old Persia.

Thus does this central piece of the surge strategy weaken future prospects for a healthy, united, Iraq. Sad but true.

While we're on the topic of the Awakening, you asked on the basis of what evidence I've concluded that the Sons of Iraq (SOI) are opposed to the Maliki government. Well, most recently, there's reporting from the field in yesterday's *Washington Post*: "The Awakening fighters are growing increasingly frustrated that Iraq's Shiite-led central government has been slow to integrate them into the Iraqi police and military services." Other reports suggest US military officials are becoming more and more worried that the SOI could fracture and, unless

integrated into the security services, defect or rejoin the insurgency.

More generally, though, I stay in contact with U.S. government officials and analysts involved in the American effort in Iraq. Reporting by Arabic speaking journalists, academic experts and NGO representatives who operate in Iraq independent of American sponsorship—Nir Rosen and Joost Hiltermann, to flag just two— is especially valuable, as is detailed reporting by major U.S. newspapers (*NYT*, *Washington Post*, *LAT*), as well as coverage provided by regional newspapers and media outlets, including Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya, which have a presence in Iraq.

This is not to diminish the importance of your impressions as an occasional visitor to Iraq as the invited guest of the U.S. command, which is naturally interested in presenting conditions there in a positive light. Rather, your impressions are one of many sources of potentially useful information -- although it does worry me a little that you can't tell the difference between a leafy, gated suburb in, say, Orange County and an embattled, walled-off neighborhood in an Iraqi city.

As for Maliki, he remains an enormously unpopular and divisive figure. His recent blunders may have briefly united feuding Iraqi politicians, but not in the way you suggest: Fifty Sunni and Shiite MPs representing several blocs recently came together to stage a sit-in to protest the Sadr City offensive. As a result of this botched operation, Maliki had to turn to Iran, hat in hand, in the hope that Tehran would convince Sadr to recommit to the ceasefire Maliki had broken so recklessly. And Sadr himself is now far more popular than he was. He's seen as the thoughtful, restrained statesman who resisted the aggressor and then stood down, having made his point. It's not for nothing that Maliki's backers in the south don't want elections; if they ever take place, Sadr will wipe the floor with them.

May 7, 2007, Max Boot

Steve, please don't take this the wrong way but reading your response, I feel as if I'm hearing about some country that exists in a parallel universe—Bizarro Iraq. The real Iraq that I am familiar with is very different. A few examples:

—You write: "*On the reconciliation front,*

there has been virtually no progress on the key issues facing the Maliki government."

In reality, as Ambassador Ryan Crocker told Congress last month, "Iraq's parliament has formulated, debated vigorously, and in many cases passed legislation dealing with vital issues of reconciliation and nation building." The examples he cited included a pension law and amnesty law for former Baathists, a provincial powers law which sets elections for this fall, a law redesigning the Iraqi flag, and a new budget for 2008. That strikes me as more significant legislation than the U.S. Congress has passed in the same time frame. In fact, as I mentioned in my first post, Iraq has met at least two-thirds of the 18 benchmarks laid out by Congress. And one of the most important benchmarks that hasn't been met yet—a hydrocarbon law—is being implemented de facto by the equitable distribution of oil revenue to Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish provinces.

-- "And that, by the way, was a humiliating blow for Maliki, who actually went down to Basra to supervise the ill-fated charge, only to watch his troops run away from the fight, while U.S. forces moved in to clean up the mess.... Rather than punish the incompetent commanders, Maliki promoted them. Two weeks ago, in a repeat performance, a company of Iraqi soldiers abandoned their positions in Sadr City, leaving nearby U.S. units in the lurch."

Maliki's decision to go after Shiite militias strengthens his standing as a non-sectarian leader. Far from being humiliated, he has seen his popularity rise since the offensive, which (as this *Times of London* article makes clear) is succeeding in regaining control of Basra. Unfortunately, a small number of Iraqi soldiers and police did walk away from the Basra fight. But they numbered fewer than 1,500 out of more than 35,000. The Basra commanders weren't really promoted; their reassignments "were probably punishment," as noted in the *Washington Post* article you cited. One company -- 80 soldiers -- also left the fight in Sadr City, but as the *New York Times* noted, they were soon replaced by other Iraqi troops. Far more American troops deserted during many of our past wars.

The vast majority of Iraqi troops are fighting hard, whether facing Sunni or Shiite extremists. Even though they are taking much heavier casualties than American units, they

are actually signing up more recruits. In the past year one hundred thousand more Iraqis have volunteered for their army. (Yes, I know they need a paycheck, but it's significant that they're taking jobs from the state, not from insurgents who are happy to hire them to plant bombs.)

—"The problem with this scenario is that the arming and organizing of a huge number of tribal, Iraqi former insurgents opposed to the Maliki government and all its works violates the prime directive of Middle Eastern politics: Always subordinate the tribes to the state."

I'd love to know on what basis you've concluded that the Sons of Iraq are "opposed to the Maliki government and all its works." It's true that most Iraqis, no matter their ethnic group, are skeptical of the Maliki government because it hasn't done a good job of delivering basic services. But you're implying that the Sons of Iraq are opposed to the whole idea of Shiite-dominated democratic government. How do you know this? Most of the Sons of Iraq I've talked to admit that Sunnis will never again rule, say they're tired of ethnic violence, and simply want to live in peace with the Shiites. Maybe they're blowing smoke, but it's significant that there have been no reported rebellions—*none*—of the Sons of Iraq. Across Iraq, they're working closely not only with coalition troops but also with Iraqi Security Forces. The tribes are in fact still subordinate to the state in Iraq. The difference between now and a year ago is that the tribes are working *with* the state, not against it. Far from violating some "prime directive," this is no different from the arrangements that other states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Gulf emirates, and the Saddam-era Iraq, have struck with their tribes.

--Finally, Max, your secure stroll in Dora was made possible by the massive walls that the U.S. has erected between contending ethnic neighborhoods in Baghdad— and Tal Afar, Fallujah and Mosul.

It's true that there are walls around Dora and other Baghdad neighborhoods. (Although as far as I know there aren't any "contending ethnic neighborhoods" in Fallujah.) But then there are walls around many gated communities in the U.S. too. The walls per se are not evidence of reconciliation, I'll grant you that. But nor are they evidence that reconciliation is

impossible. They are one of the important security measures implemented in the past year that is reducing violence and making possible political progress—which is real, whether you admit it or not.

May 6, 2008, Steven Simon

The purpose of the surge was to provide the space in which Iraqi national reconciliation was to unfold. Thus far, there hasn't been any reconciliation, just the widening of existing fault lines within Iraqi society. This, unfortunately, was what the ill-fated Basra offensive was all about. And that, by the way, was a humiliating blow for Maliki, who actually went down to Basra to supervise the ill-fated charge, only to watch his troops run away from the fight, while U.S. forces moved in to clean up the mess. (More on that in a minute.)

On the reconciliation front, there has been virtually no progress on the key issues facing the Maliki government, especially the establishment of boundaries within Iraq, the absorption of Sunnis into the armed forces and local police, elections, revenue sharing and, above all, the revisions to the Constitution that had been promised to Sunnis in exchange for their participation in the last round of elections. Some recent legislation, like the de-Baathification bill, actually represented a step backward.

As President Bush made clear last summer, he embraced the surge as the centerpiece of policy precisely because the top-down approach to reconciliation wasn't working. What was working, however, was the Sadrist war against the Sunni insurgents around Baghdad and the wave of assassinations of Sunnis carried out by al-Qaeda. Pinned by these twin pressures, the Sunni insurgents did the sensible thing. They looked to local U.S. commanders, cried, "Help...!" And we were there to shelter them, pay them, and help them go after their al-Qaeda tormenters. The surge was on and casualties dropped.

The problem with this scenario is that the arming and organizing of a huge number of tribal, Iraqi former insurgents opposed to the Maliki government and all its works violates the prime directive of Middle Eastern politics: Always subordinate the tribes to the state. Do not empower the tribes at the expense of the state. There will be a heavy price for trading Iraq's

long-term cohesion for a short term expedient that makes things easier for the U.S. And the Iraqis will pay most of it themselves.

Elsewhere in Iraq, Maliki's unique combination of arrogance and fecklessness has now sucked U.S. forces into complex urban battle in the vast slums of Sadr City. Over 1,300 Iraqi soldiers had already walked away from the fight in Basra. Rather than punish the incompetent commanders, Maliki promoted them. Two weeks ago, in a repeat performance, a company of Iraqi soldiers abandoned their positions in Sadr City, leaving nearby U.S. units in the lurch.

In the meantime, the "small, and in all likelihood temporary uptick [in violence] in the past month" has not been limited to the fighting in Sadr City alone, as you believe. Of the 47 U.S. soldiers killed last month, 26 perished beyond the confines of the capital.

Finally, Max, your secure stroll in Dora was made possible by the massive walls that the U.S. has erected between contending ethnic neighborhoods in Baghdad – and Tal Afar, Fallujah and Mosul. I've been in Israel recently and felt very safe myself walking around in the shadow of the same sort of barrier. But I didn't chalk up local security to Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.

May 5, 2008, Max Boot

I could cite statistics to show how the "surge"—not only an increase in the number of U.S. troops in Iraq but also a change in their strategy to emphasis classic counterinsurgency—has been paying off: Civilian deaths were down more than 80 percent and U.S. deaths down more than 60 percent between December 2006 and March 2008. (There has been a small, and in all likelihood temporary, uptick in the past month because of fighting with the Mahdi Army and Special Groups.) Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified that Iraq has met twelve of eighteen benchmarks mandated by Congress and is making progress toward the other benchmarks.

But let me also share my personal impressions as someone who has been visiting Iraq since 2003. In 2006, I was in the country when the Samarra mosque blew up and Iraq came close to the abyss of civil war. The situation was clearly out of control and large swathes of the country—from Anbar to Baghdad —were

violent beyond belief. We hardly controlled Route Irish, the road to the Baghdad airport.

When I returned in April 2007 the situation was already changing for the better. In Ramadi, for instance, what had been a war zone a few months before had become remarkably peaceful. That transformation was even further advanced when I traveled across Iraq this past January.

I walked through neighborhoods of Baghdad such as Dora where al-Qaeda [in Iraq] had been dominant a year ago. Now the situation is dominated by U.S. and Iraqi troops and the neighborhood watch groups that work with them—the Sons of Iraq. Stores and schools were open, electricity was on, and people in the streets were friendly with U.S. troops. I don't think anyone who has seen the situation firsthand can deny the remarkable progress that has occurred.

Steve, in your recent *Foreign Affairs* article ("The Price of the Surge") you cast aspersions on such claims of progress by arguing that the U.S. strategy of empowering tribes is actually "worsening sectarianism" and fostering "instability and violence." I completely disagree. Sectarianism was much worse before the surge when Shiite gangs were ethnically cleansing

Baghdad and al-Qaeda [in Iraq] and other extremists held sway in Sunni areas.

Since then, al-Qaeda in Iraq (the impetus behind much of the sectarian violence) has been driven out of much of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, and other areas. Some ninety thousand Iraqis—many of whom were formerly fighting the government and the coalition—have taken up arms to defend their neighborhoods against extremists. And now the much-maligned Maliki government [Nouri al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq] is moving against Shiite extremists as well (which helps account for the decision by the largest Sunni party to rejoin the cabinet).

Obviously Iraq is still at war and we are nowhere close to an acceptable level of stability yet. But I think that it is incontestable that the surge (which helped galvanize the Sunni Awakening and its attendant Sons of Iraq movement) has made the situation better. Could things get worse in the future? Sure. But nothing is likely to make Iraq head south faster than "announcing a withdrawal," as you advocate. That would force Iraqi groups to start preparing for civil war rather than taking the kinds of steps toward reconciliation that we have seen in the past few months.