

## Securing Baghdad: Understanding and Covering the Operation

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The US and Iraq are obviously conducting a major security operation. Reports indicate that a total of 70,000-75,000 men, two regular Iraqi divisions, two MOI security force divisions, and substantial amounts of US troops may be involved. At least nominally, this is twice the number of forces involved in the last major effort to take control of Baghdad, Operation Lightning, which was conducted in May 2005.

It is far too soon to make any judgments about this operation. Prime Minister Maliki has said that the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior will provide more details, but even when they do, sheer prudence indicates that such briefings will not disclose many details about the size of the forces engaged, their goals, the duration of the operation, and how they will proceed.

Accordingly, there are several points that observers of this operation need to consider:

--*Prior operations and the changing security problem:* The operation comes after a major sweep of al Qaeda and insurgent cells in Baghdad and the country. It builds on previous success. At the same time, the "red" or dangerous areas in Baghdad have crept back to at least the size they were in early 2005. Senior Iraqi officials make it clear that they also see the threat as both insurgent and a mix of militias and local security forces.

One Iraqi official said that from his perspective, Sadr's actions in Baghdad, Basra, and elsewhere -- and the ability to split or push the Shi'ite coalition to extremes -- made him and his militia as much of a threat as the insurgents. Hyperbole? Yes. But, a major issue.

-- *The problem of force ratios:* Iraqi officials discuss Baghdad as having 20-33% of Iraq's population. Estimates of six million people are common, although it is unclear any real estimate exists beyond the data gathered for voting registrations and the UN food for peace program. Much depends as well on whether the core city, the entire province, or associated areas in greater Baghdad are counted. Regardless of the numbers, even 80,000 men would be a small force in terms of the total population and area to be covered. Moreover, only part of any such force can be deployed. No matter how many people are publicly announced as being involved in the operation, such totals inevitably include large numbers of support forces, headquarters units, etc.

Accordingly, for an operation to have real meaning, and produce sustainable results, it has to go far beyond manning check points, establishing a visible presence, and creating the image of security. These are politically important, but

they also will be hollow if they are the core of the operations. Insurgents and militias can simply wait out the operations, bury their arms, shift to targets in other areas, and operate around and outside the checkpoints and areas where forces are present.

--*What does matter -- Focused operations*: This does not mean this operation cannot have great impact, but the real impact will consist of active operations in the "red" or high threat areas that directly attack insurgent targets on which there is good intelligence, and efforts to disarm, disperse, or directly control the militias. Given the political nature of this struggle, Iraqi and Coalition sources should stress Iraqi successes, Iraqi tips and HUMINT, and Iraqi control and planning.

Such claims will often be correct, but Iraq does not yet have anything like the intelligence and command and control capabilities to conduct such an operation on its own. It still needs a US partner, although this partner should be as silent about its intelligence and special operations role as possible (and media should be extremely discrete) and minimize its importance in operations.

--*Credibility and restraint*: The public side of the operation needs to do as much as possible to restore Iraqi faith in US operations, the MOI forces, and the police. The scandals -- real and imagined -- of the past months, make it critical that Iraqi civilians are not injured or killed, collateral damage is minimal, and armed action be clearly directed at real insurgent targets. This makes the way the operation handles militias and local security forces equally important. One bad incident by US or Iraqi forces, particularly one with an apparent sectarian or ethnic character, could have very serious effect.

This, however, gives the insurgents and more radical militias every incentive to lie about what happens and stage aftermaths and "witnesses." It also gives them an incentive to try to attack sectarian and ethnic fault lines in ways that grab public and media attention and discredit the success or character of the operation.

--*Phasing the operation and dealing with the militias*: No clear operational plan has been announced, and many plans could work with varying degrees of impact. One clear test, however, will be whether Iraqi and US forces go from asserting their presence -- road blocks, checkpoints, etc. -- to active counterinsurgent operations in the Sunni red areas, and then to countermilitia operations in the new "red" areas where civil violence is common.

Prime Minister Maliki has been very clear about the need to bring militias under control, and there has been some discussion of relocating some elements, giving them jobs, disarming them, etc. They cannot be treated in the same way as the insurgents, but they must be dealt with. Moreover, the clear litmus test is Sadr City and the Mahdi militia. Any operation that does not deal with this problem cannot bring security or stability to Baghdad.

--*Follow-up and persistence*: Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations bear a striking resemblance to drug raids. They are meaningless if they simply sweep in, make dramatic seizures, and then leave and allow the problem to resurface. No matter how successful this operation appears to be, or is claimed to be, it will only have meaning if Iraqi police and the Iraqi government establish a lasting presence and control in red areas.

This kind of operation, however, takes time and needs to be discreet. The MOI and police forces have to operate in ways that show their recent reorganization, and that further planned changes are eliminating ethnic and sectarian bias. It could easily play out over weeks or months.

One thing is clear, follow-up and persistence are the only way to give the effort meaning, bring security to Baghdad, and establish government control and credibility in the most critical area of the country. There won't be quick turning points or success, and inevitably the insurgency (and perhaps militias) will try to lash out to discredit the operation over time. In a city this big they will sometimes score spectacular successes in terms of individual attacks, but they can actually lose local and popular support in the process.

Accordingly, coverage and analysis should focus on overall, enduring success. The next few days or weeks may have the most visible action and flashpoints, but they are not the real key to victory.

--*The limits to what can be done*: One other point. It is fine to talk about "inkspots" and expanding areas of security. It is also a bit silly. A major city linked to the nation's entire economy, operating in mixed ethnic and sectarian areas, and with constant flows of shipping and population movement simply cannot be turned into a giant green zone. Moreover, driving the focus of civil conflict to Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk, towns in Anbar, or outskirts does not win.

Victory in Baghdad will always have its limits until there is a much broader defeat of insurgents and a political process that that Arab Shi'ites, Arab Sunnis, Kurds, and others can support. There cannot be a lasting military or security victory in Baghdad without such developments.