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The "Baghdad Problem:"
The Gains and Risks in Sending In More US Troops

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The announcement that the US is sending more troops into Baghdad is a grim warning of just how serious the situation in Iraq has become. The fact is that US forces are now strained throughout the country in spite of efforts to create Iraqi military, security, and police forces. Reinforcing Baghdad inevitably means weakening both US and Iraqi capabilities somewhere else, and despite all of the talk that the insurgency focuses on Baghdad and four provinces, civil strife is steadily broadening in most of Iraq.

This highlights a key problem for any form of military action, particularly in a deeply divided city like Baghdad. So far, there has been little real political progress towards compromise and political reconciliation at the top of the Iraqi political structure, and a steady deterioration into sectarian and ethnic strife at the popular level. The new Maliki government has set the right priorities but has been unable to act effectively. The various sides talk, but the value of dialog is limited when it simply reveals differences and competing demands.

The US and Iraqi forces are unlikely to be able to do more than buy time in Baghdad, or anywhere else, unless they can operate in a climate where there is a major move towards a new political bargain between Iraq's factions, where people can see reconciliation working at least at the top, and there is hope that the government is finally becoming effective. The political dimension must move in tandem with the military and security dimensions, and it is not. The fact that Iraqis voted to divide by sect and ethnicity—Arab Sunni, Arab Shi'ite, and Kurd—remains the driving reality. It is being increasingly compounded by intra-Shi'ite tensions, particularly Moqtada al-Sadr's factions but also tensions between Dawa and SCIRI.

This lack of the political dimension necessary to succeed in the military and security sectors is particularly critical in Baghdad and its surrounding areas—although Basra, Kirkuk, and Mosul all have their own growing divisions. The more mixed the city, the greater the tensions, and Baghdad has at least 5 million people, and possible now some 7 million in the greater Baghdad area and surrounding towns. Some 15-20% of Iraq's people are now in major urban areas which daily requires them to divide to survive.

Real and disguised unemployment grows steadily. Impoverished people face security problems that destroy local businesses, make it impossible to work in areas with a different ethnic and sectarian majority, cripple health and threatens education, make many forms of commuting dangerous, and limit social interaction. No one knows whom to trust, and the reform of the police and security forces has not had time to work.

The Maliki government and the US may have had no choice other than to attempt a show of force in Baghdad when the new government came to power. For all of the focus on the numbers killed, population movements, other forms of ethnic and sectarian tension, and economic and social pressures were pushing the capital towards civil conflict. The fact remains, however, that the Baghdad security effort began without critical political progress and without any economic or other social benefits. Force had to be used in a vacuum, rather than as part of a coherent effort and strategy.

This made the numbers of Iraqi and US forces involved grossly inadequate for a city as large as Baghdad, with increasingly polarized neighborhoods and where insurgents and militias not only have neighborhoods where they have broad popular support, but can

easily disperse, hide arms, and wait out security operations that do not have exceptional intelligence. Checkpoints may have an initial impact under these conditions, but they soon become targets and are bypassed. Sweeps alienate, rather than persuade or reassure, unless they can focus on those seen to be truly responsible. Iraqi forces learn to be passive or divide to survive, often choosing sides in any case when embedded in a divided city, and corruption and protection rackets become a growing problem.

Putting US Military Police (MP) into Iraqi forces under these conditions is one of the best options possible. It can re-motivate Iraqi police, reduce corruption and taking sides, and act as a symbol that such forces can be trusted. The question, however, is how much can moving five Military Police companies (500 to 600 troops) really do with some 50,000 Iraqis in a city of more than 5 million spread out over so large an area with so many highly polarized enclaves, and how much territory outside of Baghdad will be threatened by moving the companies out of other areas.

The same is true of other US movements. Ironically, putting US Stryker and other combat forces into Baghdad to stiffen Iraqi forces and show Iraqis that a force exists that does not take sectarian sides, can now help in some areas. It is a real sign of how bad things have become that the US can now get more trust in some areas than Iraqi forces. The US cannot, however, win trust from insurgents or militias. It will face serious hostility in core Sunni areas and in Sadr City and act to some Iraqis as a symbol of the government's failures and the untrustworthy nature of Iraqi forces.

As Jonathan Karl and Brian Hartman of ABC News report, it also means that deploying two Stryker battalions (for a total of about 800 troops) into Baghdad means cutting forces from other troubled areas. One is coming from the north (Mosul) and one from the west (Al-Anbar province). One other question is what the first Stryker deployment in Baghdad can do. Sending armored vehicles through the city may be a symbol. But the units again need extraordinary intelligence to be able to act, and symbolism will not bring security. It will create targets.

Far more US troops will be needed to occupy the city in ways that can compensate for the fact that the 50,000 odd Iraqi forces initially deployed are not effective or trustworthy—and significant numbers are gone, have clearly taken sides, or are passive. So far, the US is talking about adding a total of 1,800 extra US troops to Baghdad to the 4,000 previously added for Operation Forward Together. There is also talk of adding another brigade of some 3,500 men, but any actual plan is unclear.

The problem is that a total of 10,000 US troops cannot hope to secure the city without more trustworthy Iraqi forces, and it simply isn't clear such forces can be created without Iraqi political success and some form of relief or economic aid. Moreover, US boots on the ground may buy time, but they do not substitute for expert knowledge of the city, language, or religious and cultural affinity.

Without Iraqi confidence in the government, US forces can become a symbol of occupation that some Iraqis may accept out of necessity, but that insurgents will use in political warfare, and that militias and sectarian forces will view as an enemy. This raises questions about whether any amount of US troops can really do more than buy time without Iraqi political success. More "occupiers" simply make the lack of Iraqi political

unity, and the lack of unity and effectiveness of the government's security forces more clear.

This is particularly true because the militias and local security forces are now clearly as much of a problem in most major Iraqi cities as the insurgents. If US forces end up fighting militias, local forces, and elements of Iraqi forces that have taken sectarian sides in Baghdad or anywhere else, they will lose far more politically than they can win at the tactical level.

This does not make the situation hopeless. It does, however, illustrate just how vital Iraqi political progress and reconciliation really is. It shows how critical it is not to second guess the Iraqi government on amnesty and taking risks to get political compromises, and it warns that some form of humanitarian economic action and aid may be critical.

Moreover, it shows that every possible effort must still be made to make Iraqi military, security, and police forces effective even in mid-operation and mid-crisis. US forces cannot substitute for Iraqi progress in security any more than they can substitute for Iraqi political progress.