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**The New Strategy in Iraq:
Uncertain Progress Towards an
Unknown Goal**

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Introduction

There are many definitions of "strategy," some of which are virtually indistinguishable from "tactics." To use one of the better dictionary definitions, however, "strategy" is "the science and art of employing the political, economic, psychological, and military forces of a nation or group of nations to afford the maximum support to adopted policies in peace or war."

By this definition, and any other meaningful definition of "strategy," a meaningful US strategy in Iraq cannot simply focus on winning in Baghdad and going on with efforts to fight the insurgents in the most troubled. A meaningful US strategy in Iraq has to combine all of the necessary means to achieve a clearly defined objective and it has to have an end game.

The US also faces far more than an insurgency, or even a complex mix of civil wars. As Secretary Gates has said, there are four conflicts going on at present: The Neo-Salafi Islamic extremist insurgency; Iraqi Sunni Arab versus Shi'ite Arab, Arab-Shi'ite versus Shi'ite, and Arab versus Kurd. Each involves a different level and mix of violence. Each also, however, involves political, ethnic, religious, and economic struggles for control of space and resources, as well as sheer political power. Each struggle will continue in some form almost indefinitely into the future most regardless of the success or failure of US arms.

In practice, any form of US action that ends in some form of "victory" means finding a strategy that allows the US to withdraw most US forces from an Iraq that is stable enough to have reduced internal violence to low levels that can be controlled by local forces, that is secure against its neighbors, that is politically and economically unified enough to function and develop as a state, and which is pluralistic enough to preserve the basic rights of all of its sectarian and ethnic factions.

Things in Iraq may have deteriorated to the point where none of the "least bad" options now available allow the US to achieve these goals. From a perceptual viewpoint, "victory" may already be impossible because most of the people in Iraq, the region, and Arab and Muslim worlds will probably view the US effort as a failure and as a partial defeat even if the US can leave Iraq as a relatively stable and secure state at some point in the future. The perceived cost of the US-led invasion and occupation has simply been too high in terms of local opinion (and most polls of opinion in Europe and the rest of the world.)

The Bush Strategy: Mirror Imaging the Strategic Result of the British Defeat?

It will be the late fall before it is clear whether the US has secured even the part of Baghdad Province it is now attempting to control. It is all too clear that US success will not depend on an Iraqi-led effort, an effective mix of Iraqi security forces, success in Iraqi conciliation, or the US ability to create an effective economic effort to "build" in

time for this offensive. It will depend on US ability to implement a new counterinsurgency doctrine, and on the nature of the Iraqi reaction.

If the fighting in Baghdad should trigger a major Shi'ite resistance, even by one major faction like Sadr's, the US will probably see the Iraqi government fatally weakened if not collapse. If the Shi'ite militias in Baghdad continue to stand down, and US-led operations continue to focus on local security and defeating the Sunnis, the end result of creating "white spots" in Baghdad will be to solidify Shi'ite control over most of the city and province, segregate Sunnis, and push Sunnis into divided areas outside the city.

The short-term result has already been to push much of the insurgency and sectarian struggle outside Baghdad into mixed areas like Diyala. The fighting has virtually become a city-by-city struggle for sectarian control in mixed cities, and a steady effort to consolidate power in areas where one sect or ethnicity dominates. At the same time, the insurgency is adapting to fewer, large-scale bombings tailored to keep up the pressure for civil war.

This set of problems has been compounded by a decisive British defeat in the four oil-rich provinces in the southeast, which include Iraq's only port and access to oil exports through the Gulf. The British are reduced to a largely symbolic effort to reform the police in Baghdad. Since early 2005, three Shi'ite Islamist parties have dominated the region in an internal struggle for power and influence, and they have uncertain ties to their main national party. Other complex struggles for power affect all of the Shi'ite Shrine cities. As a result, the deferred issue of federalism affects internal power struggles, not simply Arab versus Kurd or Sunni versus Shi'ite.

Fortunately, sheer pragmatism – a desire for US support, hope for autonomy, and fear of Turkey, Iran, and Syria – have so far moderated Kurdish separatism and efforts to force the territorial issues in the area surrounding the ethnic fault line in the north. The "oil law" may or may not help, depending on whether it is passed and the annexes that determine its practical value are agreed upon. There already, however, is growing tension in Kirkuk and Mosul.

If the US can win any kind of "victory" in this environment, it will probably be to expand Shi'ite influence, particularly if US politics continue to press for early withdrawal without a strategy for dealing with either Iraq after major US force cuts or the overall security and stability of the region.

All of Iraq's factions, including the Shi'ite dominated central government, know that time is as much an enemy of the US and Britain in Iraq as any insurgent group or militia. The US can talk about "long wars," but it does not have a political structure willing to fight them, and the Bush Administration's past mistakes have vastly compounded this problem.

Iraq's factions know that the US is involved in a war of attrition where these past mistakes have created a political climate where it appears to be steadily more vulnerable to pressures that either will make it leave, or sharply limit how long it can play a major role. One year increasingly seems "long" by American domestic political standards, but the actors in Iraq and the region can play for years. In fact, they have to play for years.

They live there and they know the chances of true stability are negligible for years to come.

Confusing Baghdad with the Center of Gravity

Just as the British confused Basra with a regional center of gravity, the Bush Administration may well have compounded these problems by confusing Baghdad with the center of gravity in a national struggle for the control of political and economic space that affects every part of the country. The Iraq Study Group report had many weaknesses, but it was all to correct in nothing that official US reporting on the patterns of violence in Iraq may reflect less than a 10th of the actual struggle, and much of this violence is outside Baghdad.

Winning security control of the city and losing Iraq's 11 other major cities and countryside to Iraq's sectarian and ethnic factions is not victory in any strategic, it is defeat. As has been discussed earlier, the minimal requirement for a successful US strategy is a relatively stable and secure Iraq, not temporary US military control of Baghdad.

The US needs a strategy for all of Iraq, not a single city – particularly when a focus on control of Baghdad could mean leaving most of the country to divide on sectarian and ethnic lines. So far, the US has failed to set forth a strategy and meaningful operational plan for dealing with Iraq as a country even if it succeeds in Baghdad.

Equally important, the US has not yet shown that it has a clear plan for taking control of Baghdad. The Iraqi Army units closing on Baghdad have so far arrived with around 60% manning and some elements closer to 50%. The Iraqi police have so far been passive or untrustworthy, both to US forces and to local populations. They are part of the problem and not the solution. It is too early to judge the work of the new US aid coordinator, but the Iraqi government shows no more signs of being able to follow up the US-led "win" with "build" (or bribe) than the Iraqi police shows signs of being able to support tactical victories with "hold."

Options for Responding to the New Bush Strategy

As a result, the US does appear to be treating its opponents as if they did not have options that can defeat the new US approach. It is quite clear, however, that these opponents do have such options, and that they may well reduce the odds of US success to less than one in four:

- The insurgents and/or militias stretch US and ISF forces to their limit to cover all of the greater Baghdad area. Forcing them to cover more and more area, and either to drain other areas of US and Iraqi forces or force the US and ISF be too thin on the ground to cover the entire city. They strike where US and Iraqi forces are weakest. The US can win in 7 out of 10 districts in Baghdad and still lose.

- The insurgents and/or militias appear to stand down or disperse, but carry out high profile attacks that avoid military and security targets and focus on aid efforts, key civilians, and religious shrines and figures.
- The insurgents and militias strike at US and ISF forces during the initial phase of US advances, keep up the pace of combat for a while, and then disperse to other areas or go underground. They outwait the US,
- Alternatively, they carry out high profile and well-planned bloody attacks on US forces, and/or use bombings and atrocities in the areas that are "secure." Time and a focus on influencing US support for the war become the key weapons.
- The insurgents keep up just enough pressure to lock down US and ISF forces in Baghdad, while shifting their main areas of attack to targets outside the city. They then focus on a few, well-planned attacks with high visibility, designed to have maximum political impact in the US and/or do most to provoke Shi'ite vs. Sunni and Arab vs. Kurd tensions.
- The insurgents and/or militias focus on winning control of space in the rest of Iraq, while the US focuses on Baghdad, shifting the center of gravity further away from Baghdad. They do so through intimidation, low-level acts of violence, and other lower profile forms of struggle that win control of political and economic space while avoiding open tactical conflict.
- The Shi'ite militias stand down, inevitably shifting the battle to the Sunni insurgents that are too ideological and exposed to adopt a similar strategy. The net result could be to make the US and ISF fight for the Shi'ite side in Baghdad.

"Defeat" (or "Victory") by the Iraqi Government

This latter option seems to be becoming steadily more likely, and it is particularly important because the Iraqi central government does not have the same interests in creating a unified, democratic, secular Iraq as the US. In fact, the power structure in the Iraqi government has every reason to try to use US offensive to consolidate Shi'ite power, and deflect the battle to strike at the Sunni insurgents and hostile factions with minimal or no operations against the major Shi'ite militias.

The Iraqi government is dominated by a fractured Shi'ite coalition with strong religious motivation, a long history of distrust of the US, and whose main parties (SCIRI and Al Dawa) see their Shi'ite militias and efforts to dominate the country as legitimate. If the Shi'ites in the government can spin the new Bush strategy to take control of Baghdad by having Shi'ite militias stand down, by having the central government take control of all of the city's districts, and by having US and ISF troops defeat the Sunni forces in the city, this gives them a major victory.

This is particularly true if the US helps build a Shi'ite-Kurdish dominated ISF in the process, and a "victory" in Baghdad leads to continued US support in defeating the Sunni core resistance in mixed areas and most Sunni-dominated towns and cities. The end result will still be Shi'ite dominance, and the US will eventually leave – probably sooner than later even if the US appears to win.

The Sadr Question

Sadr is the odd man out, but he is so far standing down his militia and he is scarcely isolated or dependent on the use of force. All of the Shi'ite leadership are rivals to some degree. Al Dawa is much weaker than SCIRI, and Al Dawa ties to Sadr balance out the other main faction's strength. Sadr also clearly has more to win in a relatively peaceful power struggle for a political and economic role in a Shi'ite coalition than having his militia fight a combination of the US and ISF in Baghdad.

He faces a future in which outside powers are going to largely leave, Sistani may well be becoming yesterday's man, and figures like Hakim and Maliki may fade. Backing other Shi'ite leaders in using the US also means that various rivals or rogue operations in the Mahdi militia that are not directly loyal to him will either lose power or be defeated in clashes with US and ISF forces. He benefits from their defeat and can exploit that defeat to attack the US politically at the same time.

The Sunni and Kurdish Questions

The Iraq government has weak Sunni participation with tenuous Sunni following. It is unclear that any Sunni leader is emerging who can speak for the Sunnis with enough support to make conciliation or coexistence negotiations work. The reality is that even if the Shi'ite leaders wanted to share power, they may only have the option of defeating the insurgents, acquiring dominant force, and effectively imposing some form of compromise that most Sunnis are willing to live with.

The Kurdish faction in the government serves Kurdish interests, demands at least de facto autonomy, and would like independence if it could find some way to deal with the Turks and other threats. The Kurds care about Kirkuk, what they see as other Kurdish territory, and oil. If they can work out a compromise on the oil law, Kirkuk referendum, and autonomy, they win what they want. If this is done at the expense of minorities in the Kurdish region, that is fully acceptable.

"Losing" While "Winning?" or "Winning While Losing?"

As has been pointed out in previous analyses of the Bush strategy, a Shi'ite dominated Iraq scenario might not be "losing" for the Bush Administration, the US and its allies from a grimly realpolitik, perspective. A divided Iraq under the control of religious Shi'ite parties might not be stable or truly democratic in the sense the US sought in 2003, but from a "realist" perspective, it would be better than a bloodbath or open civil war.

As long as the Sunnis got enough power and benefits to live with the situation, the governments of Iraq's Sunni neighbors might be willing to live with the result. As long as the Kurds and Shi'ites could get enough compromises over money and territory, they might reluctantly accept the result. The US would not have to worry about a Kurdish enclave that is a major strategic liability or serious problems with the Turks.

The end result could be a form of defeat where the US could claim victory, withdraw, and leave an Iraq that Iran could not easily exploit and which *might* get better over time.

But, such a Shi'ite twist to the declared US strategy could also fail in a number of critical ways:

- The Sunnis might keep resisting, and do so at a steadily more popular level, seeing both the Iraqi government and the US as open enemies. The ISF could divide and/or be far too weak to secure hostile areas, and the US could not afford to fight a civil war on the Shi'ite side, given the importance of its Sunni allies.
- Sadr may be far from a rational bargainer, as may many Shi'ite militia elements and Shi'ites within the government. The US might have to fight a much broader struggle than it can win, particularly since such Shi'ite factions may well be able to outwait the US presence even if they are defeated tactically.
- The Kurds may be too ambitious to compromise, or self-destruct in dealing with the Turks. There is an old Kurdish saying that, "The Kurds have no friends." The full statement should be: "The Kurds have no friends, including the Kurds."
- Iran may be able to exploit the situation even if the Iraqi government and US do cooperate in a de facto defeat the Sunni insurgent strategy. Iran must now feel it can outwait the US, exploit US unpopularity in many Shi'ite areas, and has every reason to be opportunistic.
- Iran wins to some degree even if it does not exploit the situation. A Shi'ite dominated Iraq is going to need Iranian help and support for years to come.
- Sunni governments may be willing to live with a Shi'ite dominated Iraq, rather than face years of regional instability and war. Sunni peoples may not, particularly if – is as certain -- extremist movements like Al Qa'ida exploit the struggle as an ideological and political issue.

One of the grim realities in the search for the "least bad" option, is that even if the US can actually find the "least bad" option and make it work, it will still be "bad."

Another key reality is that the US really is no longer in control even of "Plan A;" the Iraqi government is. The British withdrawal plan may simply be yet another warning that the real-world contingency is plan I – one controlled and shaped by Iraq's internal power struggles. Moreover, if the Bush Administration strategy does fail, virtually all of the plans to come will be shaped by fighting and power struggles between Iraqis where the US will have to respond to events shaped by both enemies and "allies."

One of the lessons that both the Bush Administration and its various US opponents and critics may still have to learn is that at a given level of defeat, other actors control events. US discussions of alternative plans and strategies may well be becoming largely irrelevant.