Iraq and Anbar: Surge or Separation?

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It is easy to develop strategies for Iraq, as long as you ignore the uncertainties involved and the facts on the ground. Dealing with the uncertain trends and developing realities that are now shaping Iraq, however, is much more difficult. This is particularly true if a strategy looks beyond the conventional focus on Al Qa'ida, progress in counterinsurgency, and the actions of the central government.

Any successful plan for Iraq must also consider the level of sectarian and ethnic separation now taking place throughout of the country, the weakness of the central government at every level, and the rising power of local authority. These forces are now clearly changing the "surge" strategy.

The plan to secure Baghdad, while the Iraqi government moved towards political conciliation and won increased popularity through economic development activity, has increasingly become a strategy of boosting local security forces to make up for the weakness of central government authority and its military and police forces. It may be possible to transform this effort into one that ends in some form of national conciliation, but the end result is far from clear.

The Political Impact of Tribalism in Anbar and Growing Reliance on Local Security Forces

Anbar does seem to represent a growing success against Al Qa'ida, although it is far from clear how much this success extends to the other Neo-Salafi Islamist extremist groups supporting the worst elements of the insurgency and Sunni extremism. There are signs that similar efforts are taking place in Shi'ite areas to check the actions of the worst militias, and that similar efforts may be possible even in high conflict areas like Diyala.

The positive aspect of this largely self-initiated Iraqi effort is that at least in Anbar, the tribes are not created forces totally under their control. Instead, they are joining the ISF and creating local security forces registered with the government. These local forces have formal ties to the government. They are being created in ways that follow a precedent set in creating similar forces in the Kurdish area. They only get weapons, training and pay if they formally enroll as supporting the police and swear allegiance to the government. They also must provide biometric data like fingerprints and retinal scans. This not only allows them to be clearly separated from unknowns and Al Qa'ida, but also allows them to be identified in the future.

Nevertheless, the net result, however, is to create a separate Sunni or Shi'ite force whose ties to the central government are uncertain and opportunistic. It is also to create a force built on uncertain tribal and local coalitions. This makes it far from clear what kind of political power such forces will support. For example, in Anbar, it might create the core

of a more effective national Sunni political party or role in the central government. It also, however, might emerge as a regional tribal political force that challenged the government or became a new source of armed opposition to it.

Anbar will not be a model for the rest of Iraq, but it exemplifies a growing reliance on local forces may well be the coming paradigm. The continuing failure of the central government's effort to develop an effective police force, and one that can "hold" the "wins" of Coalition forces and the Iraqi Army is leading to more and more reliance on sectarian and ethnic local security forces in other areas, or to reliance on local police under the de facto control of local political leaders. Almost all of these local political groups and forces are divided along sectarian and ethnic lines.

Displacement: More Important than Attack or Casualty Numbers

This increasing reliance on local security forces with cosmetic or tenuous ties to the Iraqi force development effort is paralleled by steady process of sectarian and ethnic displacement on a local and national level. This process of displacement, and sectarian and ethnic "cleansing" is largely ignored in unclassified US reporting on the war that focuses on attacks, killed, and sectarian incidents. The fact remains, however, that much of the country into local factions and authorities – most unelected or elected under conditions that made effective campaigning impossible – is making a weak central government steadily weaker. It also is doing more and more to separate the country.

Displacement Outside Iraq

Three different levels of displacement and separation are involved. At one level, much of the middle and professional class – particularly the Sunni portion – has been displaced out of the country. No one has accurate numbers, but the total may well be in excess of two million and could approach some 10% of the population.

This type of displacement steadily weakens the more secular and educated part of the remaining population, and does weaken Arab Sunni representation to the benefit of Arab Shi'ites and Kurds. It has created serious problems for both conciliation and economic development. Repatriation is an uncertain goal at best, and forced repatriation would push impoverished Sunnis with no clear future back into the country.

Displacement at the Regional Level

At another level, internal population movements are steadily dividing the country along sectarian and ethnic lines, as well as polarizing key elements of the Arab Sunni and Arab Shi'ite population. In broad terms, the Sunni population, as well as Christians and other minorities, are being pushed out of Shi'ite areas. Much of this push is moving them to Anbar, Diyala, Sal ad Din, and Ninewa, and dividing Baghdad province between an increasingly Shi'ite main city and more Sunni ring cities.

With the exception of Anbar, it is far from clear what the final alignment is going to be in these areas, just as it is unclear how the Arab-Kurd-Turcoman separation shaping up in the north (Dahuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyah) will play out. What is clear, however, is that both sectarian and ethnic separations continue to grow much more serious, and that the resulting lines of sectarian and ethnic division will not fit the boundaries of Iraqi governorates or the options for "federation" provided for in the Iraqi constitution.

A further kind of division, or at least polarization, is taking place within the Shi'ite dominated areas. There are important exceptions at the local level, but more and more of the Shi'ite areas are coming under the control of local political leaders and security forces that enforce their view of Islamic law and custom on Iraqi Shi'ites who are more tolerant, secular, and national than the authorities that have de facto political and military control.

Most of the major towns and cities in the south are now under the control of local political authorities and not the national government, and Coalition maps showing that responsibility for security has been turned over to the Iraqi armed forces in An Najaf, Muthanna, Dhi Qar, and Maysan – and that the Basra governorate is "partially ready from transition" border on farce. Real power is local, the central government has little presence or authority, and the police and/or local security are not under meaningful central government control.

These divisions may take considerable time to evolve in ways that define their national political impact, although they so far raise growing questions about any form of federation that tries to use the borderlines of Iraq's governorates to bring conciliation or "peaceful coexistence." They will certainly make efforts to divide up oil revenues and resources in a stabilizing way even more difficult and uncertain. Moreover, their broad effect will further complicate efforts at economic development and stability.

The Shi'ites will probably "win" in the sense of having the clearest control over functioning oil resources and export facilities, with the level of Kurdish "victory" more uncertain. Sunnis will tend to be pushed into areas with fewer resources, and far less opportunity to revitalize or privatize Iraq's state industries – the core of its past industrial base. Moreover, the lack of military industrial and security service jobs will have a much more serious impact in Sunni dominated areas.

It is equally unclear how this process of separation can lead to a near-term set of compromises over rebuilding and expanding the national infrastructure, and dealing with water issues. The end result may have to be the localization of critical infrastructure and water at least at some level. The security of investment, roads, and export capability in divided areas will probably be uncertain, as perhaps the use of port and airport facilities. This risk should not be exaggerated, but at minimum requires far more consideration in aid and development planning than it has had to date.

Division at the Local Level: The "Ulster" Problem

Finally, separation is taking place at the local level. There already are significant numbers of minority pockets of local villages, towns, and tribal areas isolated among areas with a different sectarian and ethnic majority, and divided towns, cities, and neighborhoods where a river, a road, or security barriers create sectarian and ethnic zones.

It is not clear how this will affect the surge. The Baghdad security effort may well result in some form of "Ulster," with Arab Shi'ite and Arab Sunni zones and a few mixed areas. Similar types of division may emerge in Kirkuk and the Mosul area, the Baghdad ring cities, and Diyala. In some areas, the security forces of the majority will dominate; in others no one will really have "won."

In any case, the end result of this third form of displacement is likely to be tense sectarian and ethnic fault lines in much of Iraq, not some clear pattern of total local and regional victory. It may well turn much of the map of Iraq into a patchwork quilt of sectarian and ethnic divisions that make little sense in terms of infrastructure, roads, and economic opportunity.

Trying to Stabilize the Future

These developments do not make the central government irrelevant, or creating effective national Iraqi security forces less important. They do, however, mean that far more attention needs to be given to the real message of Anbar, and the nationwide impact of ongoing division and displacement.

Power in Iraq is becoming steadily more fragmented and local, and creating steadily more serious problems for effective development. Even if the surge succeeds in tactical terms, the central government may not be capable of meaningful conciliation by any foreseeable means through the central government, or be able to bring local security through a mix of the Iraqi Army and police it can truly control.

At a minimum, any effective US strategy to either stay in Iraq -- or to withdraw in as positive or constructive a way as possible -- must fully consider the impact of each of these kinds of separation and displacement. It must look beyond the role of the central government and the ISF, and consider the realities of regional and local power. It must also seek to offer incentives to help keep the emerging separation in Iraq from turning into open violence and civil conflict.

Practical planning cannot be based on achieving stability and security by federation or separation imposed from the outside or through the constitution. Power is devolving in ways that do not conform to the border of the governorates or lend themselves to smooth lines of separation. To paraphrase an American political axiom, all power seems to be becoming local power. This means that US and other efforts to help Iraq must recognize these trends, and tailor efforts to provide aid in politics, governance, security, and economic development accordingly.

Security efforts must also consider the full range of threats. It *is* important to defeat the Al Qa'ida franchise in Iraq and the other extreme Neo-Salafi Sunni insurgents. *But*, any US strategy that offers hope of regional stability must look far beyond this goal and look at the full mix of civil conflicts in Iraq by region, by city, by potential flash point, and by sectarian and ethnic fault line. It also has to look at timelines that go well beyond July or September 2007

Even if security in Baghdad is achieved, it cannot be a bridge to successful national conciliation by a weak central government facing massive nation-wide problems in terms of growing local power and civil conflicts. Baghdad is a center of gravity, but only one of many. Moreover, security – to the degree that the US and Coalition elements can create it -- is only part of the problem in dealing with the equally important problems in politics, governance, and aid.

It is also clear that the ongoing process of separation, and regional and local devolution of power, already has serious international implications that US strategy must deal with.

- One major problem is limiting Iranian influence, and growing Iraqi dependence on Iran, in the southeast. Dialogue with Iran will not do harm in this respect, but the idea that Iran will deal with the US in ways where it will not continue to exploit with Iraq's separation and opportunities to expand its influence seems impractical to say the least.

- Another is ensuring that the Kurdish search for autonomy does not lead to serious ethnic conflict, and major ongoing Kurdish-Turkish tensions and clashes in an area with no strategic importance to the US.

- Persuading Sunni states that aid to the evolving Sunni areas in Iraq is going to produce better and more stable results than aiding Sunni insurgents or local forces is going to require serious US diplomatic efforts to say the least.

All of these developments strongly indicate that US strategy, force levels, and aid efforts should neither "stay the course," nor rush out of Iraq. What is needed is recognition that recasting US strategy to take full account of separation and the full range of civil conflicts that are creating it. The US must make constructive efforts to shape a more stable outcome, and be flexible enough to react to this complex mix of developments as it decides on how and when to phase down the US military presence. Seen from this perspective, Anbar is not so much a "victory" or "success" as a warning.