

Guardians of a Tense Peace: US Combat Forces in Iraq

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Introduction

The semblance of stability in Iraq throughout the spring of 2009 and anticipation of the pending withdrawal of US combat forces have created a tendency among Americans to label the Iraq War a “victory.”¹ Such thinking overlooks the sectarian chaos of 2006 and 2007 and downplays the fact that Iraq’s explosive internal disputes are largely held in check by the immediate presence of US combat power. Accordingly, this essay conveys a more sober assessment of the Iraq War. It shows that while Iraq’s virulent Sunni insurgency has been largely subdued by a methodical counterinsurgency plan, the plan worked only once Sunni tribal leaders found it in their best interests to realign with US forces and reenter the Iraqi political system under the aegis of US support. It then argues that the haphazard approach the US has taken toward tempering intra-Shiite rivalries and checking the aspirations of the Kurds since 2003 has allowed other volatile conflicts to smolder. Any precipitous withdrawal of US combat power will greatly reduce US leverage in Iraq and risk a return to the sectarian strife of 2006 simply because few of Iraq’s serious internal conflicts have been resolved. A brief chronicle of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish positions in Iraq from 2003 through the spring of 2009 develops this argument. Against the backdrop of this argument, the essay concludes by suggesting that serious efforts toward determining the future distribution (among Iraqis) of Iraq’s oil wealth be exerted while enough US combat power remains on the scene to enforce any brokered agreement.

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The Sunni Insurgency

The Sunni Arab minority's insurgency in Iraq quickly became the most serious problem facing the US in the Middle East. Most Sunnis believe that it was Sunnis, not Shiites or Kurds, who built modern Iraq out of a tribal backwater. They therefore found it inconceivable to honor the Shiite dominance created by the 2003 invasion, and thus it was the Sunni insurgency that derailed Washington's initial "plan" for Iraq in 2003.

The various factions that joined the Sunni insurgency in 2003 had two common goals, even if their long term visions for Iraq diverged.² The first was to inflict enough casualties on coalition forces to compel them to leave, and the second was to incite a sectarian civil war in which Sunnis would ultimately prevail over the new "illegitimate" government. In pursuing these goals, insurgents put aside ideological differences and fought to undermine the new government's authority. They put the coalition perpetually on the defensive and forced it into an anti-insurgent raiding strategy that alienated the Sunni populace. They increasingly targeted civilians, government forces, Shiite militias, and shrines. The 2006 bombing of the al-Askariyya mosque finally pushed Iraq into "a sectarian hell."³

Yet the marriage of convenience⁴ that kept Sunni insurgent factions fighting on the same side was consistently strained.⁵ It finally ended when the sectarian war that the Sunnis had labored to start against the Shiites began to go poorly. Rather than vanquishing their enemies, the Sunnis endured a series of armed defeats at the hands of Shiite militias. Then, as Sunni resolve weakened in the late summer of 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) increasingly tried to assert its dominance over the insurgency. Sunnis whom AQI deemed insufficiently committed to the ongoing struggle were subjected to acts of extreme brutality.⁶ In turn, AQI's viciousness pushed fellow insurgents into the long process now referred to as the "Sunni Awakening." Starting in Anbar Province, onetime Sunni insurgents gradually began to aid US forces in a mutual fight against AQI. Their motivations, however, had little to do with measures initiated by the coalition. Sunnis simply realized that they could no longer afford to fight US forces, the government of Iraq (GOI), and the Shiite militias, and contend with AQI at the same time.⁷ They approached US forces for a deal, not vice versa.

Still, the Sunni realignment driven by the “Awakening” might have faded if, after three and a half years of frustration, US leadership had not finally switched to a methodical counterinsurgency strategy that the Iraqis could understand. Between early 2007 and early 2009, US Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno positioned their forces and resources to act as never before, willing to wield sufficient military strength, economic resources, and political clout to recruit and protect new allies (no matter what their odious pasts) in order to destroy the enemies of US objectives in Iraq.⁸ Therefore, as the Sunni tribal leaders and their bands of former insurgents turned to the US for aid in a fight against a common enemy (AQI), they found a willing partner. Specific US units were ordered to protect former insurgents and their communities from AQI reprisals.⁹ Meanwhile the coalition soaked up vital intelligence these groups possessed about AQI.¹⁰ As Sunni popular support slowly turned against the insurgents, US commanders offered enticing economic incentives to locals.¹¹ Sheikhs, tribal leaders, and local powerbrokers entered into short term security contracts with US commanders *outside* the purview of the GOI, knowing stiff penalties would follow when things did not go well.¹² Commanders then devoted resources to economic reconstruction in Sunni-dominated provinces.¹³ Such boosts helped dry up support for insurgents and provided another avenue for Sunnis to generate wealth, shrewdly checking the power some local leaders had amassed through the aforementioned security contracts. Finally, the US-led coalition promised to use its clout to pressure the Shiite-dominated government to incorporate Sunni security contractors into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)¹⁴ and begin a process aimed at reaching an agreement to share both oil wealth and political power.¹⁵ In return for all this, the Sunnis largely ceased their struggle with the GOI, joined the fight against AQI, and returned to Iraqi politics.

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US forces have thus skillfully inserted themselves into Iraq’s Sunni power structure, becoming what Bing West suggests is Iraq’s “strongest tribe.”¹⁶ They can be expected to both champion Sunni demands in the reconciliation process and help the Shiites forcefully crush another

Sunni uprising should it occur. Because the Sunnis recognize the US has learned to fill *either* role, it is now conceivable for them to accept the Shiite dominance created by the 2003 invasion. Sunnis still want their slice of the oil revenue and the largest possible share of power, but a tentative course of participation and reconciliation seems the only way to get either. This strategic calculus is unlikely to change as long as the US has the robust capacity to conduct combat operations in Iraq.

The Shiite Militias

In contrast to the methodical approach finally taken to quell the Sunni insurgency, the US approach to the growth of Shiite militias has consistently been tentative and reactionary. Such an approach has encouraged the growth of powerful militias and institutionalized an explosive split along class lines among Iraq's Shiites that endures to this day.

In 2003, the vast majority of Shiites welcomed the fall of Saddam and agreed that their best opportunity to shape Iraq had finally arrived.¹⁷ Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, an Iranian and long-time resident of Najaf, emerged initially as the most powerful Shiite in Iraq and set out to ensure Shiite participation in shaping the new government.¹⁸ Shiites were suspicious of US motives but willing to cooperate. Had it been otherwise, the US-led coalition could have found itself fighting both Sunni and Shiite insurgencies by mid-2003.

Shiites expected the coalition to reestablish basic services quickly and withdraw soon thereafter, leaving them firmly in control. Neither of these expectations was fulfilled. Lawlessness, joblessness, and a total absence of basic services prevailed throughout 2003.¹⁹ Moreover, by March 2004 many Shiites were convinced that the upcoming June 30 transfer of sovereignty was a ploy to whitewash an indefinite US occupation. When conditions improved little under the besieged Iraqi Interim Government and its successors, militias became the surest route to secure power in Iraq's Shiite provinces. The US was reluctant to confront these militias, however, because it was completely preoccupied with the Sunni insurgency.

Against this backdrop, the upstart Muqtada al-Sadr entered the crowded political arena. Unlike the clerics led by Ayatollah al-Sistani or the leaders of the once-exiled Supreme Council for the Islamic

Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Da'wa parties, Sadr advocated violent resistance to the US-led coalition and pushed for a strong Shiite-dominated central government. His nationalist and populist message resonated with dispossessed Shiites as conditions worsened and his boldness increased. Already in October of 2003, his growing militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM), ambushed a US patrol and brazenly took over a compound built for the US-sponsored district council in Sadr City.²⁰ In August 2004, he gained prestige among Iraqis and impressed the Iranians with a suicidal stand against the full might of the US army's assault on Najaf.²¹ He lost control of Najaf and Kufa in the clever ceasefire deal brokered by his rival Ayatollah Sistani, but by 2005 he was as popular and as strong politically as ever. His portrait could be found in villages throughout Iraq, elements of his militia were trained and supplied by Iran, and he learned to shrewdly move in and out of the government while simultaneously denouncing its failings.²² US authorities passed up several opportunities to eliminate him in 2004 for fear of inciting a full-fledged Shiite insurgency.

Meanwhile, consistent US backing of SCIRI, Da'wa, other "moderate" Shiite parties, and Kurds at the expense of Sadr's bloc helped institutionalize the split between Sadrists and most of the remaining Shiite community. In turning to the "moderates" because it had no other option, the US essentially sanctioned SCIRI's takeover of Iraq's Interior Ministry in 2005 following the January elections.²³ That SCIRI dropped "revolution" from its name, becoming the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and renamed its security wing (an organization deeply at odds with Sadr's JAM) to the Badr Organization did not change the fact that a militia became firmly entrenched in the official security apparatus of the Iraqi state.²⁴ Still, from 2005 until late 2007, ISCI's supporters and Sadrists tacitly cooperated in the sectarian war against Sunnis.

As soon as the new US counterinsurgency strategy began to subdue the Sunni insurgents, however, an escalating struggle for power developed between Sadrists and the government's ISCI bloc.²⁵ ISCI adroitly used its influence in the government to shape US actions against JAM during the surge.²⁶ Recognizing the seriousness of the threat, Sadr ordered his organization to avoid confronting the coalition, though violence against his enemies in government continued. In

August of 2007, Sadr's forces clashed with Badr guards in Karbala, and Sadrists were filmed shooting at the Hussein shrine and killing worshippers. Emboldened by the public's outrage, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki (leader of Da'wa) flew to Najaf and conspicuously arrested a JAM leader. Muqtada himself, sensing that ISCI might persuade the government to harness US forces against him, declared a six-month unilateral ceasefire and withdrew his faction from the Shiite governing coalition.²⁷ Sensing its advantage and over-confident in the wake of recent successes against the Sunni insurgency, Maliki's government launched a hurried and poorly planned operation against JAM in Basra in the spring of 2008. A near failure, the assault was saved only after thousands of reinforcements and US air support were called in.²⁸

The Basra fighting confirmed the strength of Sadr's organization, its enduring animosity toward the Iraqi government, and the influence of Iran, which brokered the 2008 ceasefire. It also taught Sadr that confronting his enemies while they have the (even reluctant) support of US combat forces²⁹ is futile. He has since called for a makeover of JAM into a social movement and commanded his supporters to use restraint in dealing with targets other than the "occupation forces."³⁰ Some analysts indicate that the new trend means the Sadrists are increasingly fragmented, weak, and less relevant.³¹ Yet such analysis overlooks the enduring grievances of the repressed Shiite underclass that spawned the Sadrist movement in the first place and discounts the ability of Iran to resurrect Sadr should it opt to do so. It is quite likely that Sadrists are simply waiting for a better day to fight – when US combat forces are no longer available to influence the outcome.

The Kurdish Question

With similar lack of methodology, the US has unwittingly navigated a brinkmanship course with the Kurds, Arabs, Turks, and Iranians over the issue of an autonomous Kurdistan. It has done so by continually deferring the problematic dispute over oil-rich Kirkuk and Khanaqin districts to a later date.

Since 2003, the power of the US-led coalition has both encouraged the Kurds to be opportunistic and subtly discouraged them from overstepping their bounds. The early favor afforded Kurdish forces allowed them to confidently push into what are now the disputed

territories of Kurdistan on the heels of US units.³² Shortly thereafter, the Kurds began a campaign to establish permanent dominance over the region. They initiated a sort of ethnic pressure program to reverse the anti-Kurdish demographic trends enforced under Saddam Hussein.³³ They organized their kinsmen for success in the upcoming elections and gave serious thought to Kurdish territorial aims in the new Iraqi constitution, a document that bears the marks of opportunistic Kurdish influence.³⁴ Its “disputed territory” clauses were crafted by Kurdish representatives to ensure that oil-rich Kirkuk and nearby areas, which constitute 13 percent of Iraq’s known oil reserves, would eventually fall under Kurdish control.³⁵ Had the process for resolving the disputed territories proceeded according to Kurdish semantics in the constitution, Kurds would almost certainly have already obtained all they sought in 2003.³⁶

Yet Kurdish leaders were careful not to overstep their bounds. They did not push for the immediate inclusion of Kirkuk in the autonomous region. They were not overly brutal in their ethnic pressure campaign. They did not actively try to challenge US policy by calling for independence, and they only threatened force when their vital interests were endangered.³⁷ In short, they have heeded the indirect signals the US has sent warning them not to push too hard. In 2007, they reluctantly accepted a US-mediated power sharing deal with local tribal sheikhs in Kirkuk that rewarded leaders of the “Sunni Awakening.” In late 2007, the US gave tacit approval to Turkish operations against rebels in northern Iraq when Kurdish authorities refused to take action – signaling that US support was linked to the Kurds’ loyalty to the US agenda. Even when the US has turned to the United Nations to help solve the disputed issues of territory and oil rights, the Kurdish protests have been muted.³⁸ The Kurds understand that they have been both empowered by the goodwill of the US-led coalition and restrained by its status as the main powerbroker in Iraq. Similarly, the Iraqi government (as well as Turkey and Iran) still believes that the US will use its power to safeguard some Kurdish interests as long as it has

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the power to do so.³⁹ This fine balance has made deferring the Kirkuk dispute possible, even if unwise.

Recent events, however, have demonstrated the potential explosiveness of the dispute. Since early 2003, Kurdish peshmerga forces have occupied the Khanaqin district, first on behalf of the coalition and later with tacit agreement from the GOI. In mid August 2008, Iraqi army units entered towns in the district without informing the peshmerga of their intentions. They carried a demand from Prime Minister Maliki for Kurdish forces to withdraw within twenty-four hours. The peshmerga commander refused, resulting in a tense standoff. Eventually the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad negotiated an agreement that left the peshmerga in control of the city of Khanaqin and the ISF in control of a number of other towns in the district.⁴⁰ In spite of this agreement, the ISF entered Khanaqin city in late August with a warning from the Iraqi government that any Kurdish forces deployed outside the official borders of Kurdistan would face legal actions.⁴¹ Another negotiated agreement forged under coalition pressure diffused the standoff, but the reluctance of the US

to involve its troops in the process signaled to both Kurds and the Iraqi government that the US would increasingly play the role of bystander.

Although Khanaqin is more of a side issue for the Kurds than the dispute over Kirkuk,⁴² such indifference on the part of the US regarding Khanaqin has at once undermined the Kurds' overall position and emboldened the Maliki government to wield the ISF more aggressively against Kurdish forces. In short, the shifting US position has destabilized the status of the conflict. Both sides are now edgier because there is less certainty that the US will intervene to prevent one side or the other from exploiting an advantage. And since any grand bargain between Arabs and Kurds mediated by the UN will likely

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require a powerful military force for enforcement, knowledge that US forces will withdraw completely by 2011 lessens the chance for a nonviolent solution to the dispute. Accordingly, both the peshmerga

and the ISF continue to prepare for eventual conflict.⁴³ The tense peace that presently exists between Kurd and Arab owes itself to the mere presence of a powerful US combat force and the uncertainty over how it might be used to influence the fortunes of either side.

Conclusion

The correlation between fragile stability in Iraq and the presence of US combat forces is difficult to ignore, even if it is true that US forces do not control the country. Although some will surely decry such an idea as “Orientalist,” the enduring contribution of the surge and the US counterinsurgency operations from 2007 to mid 2008 seems to have been a demonstration – to all powerbrokers in Iraq – that the US is quite formidable when its forces are guided by a methodical plan. Thus, rivals on either side of Iraq’s Sunni vs. Shiite, intra-Shiite, and Arab vs. Kurd disputes have since calculated that potential gains from open conflict are not worth the risk of exposing their assets to the destructive power of US forces. Such a fragile and tense peace hardly qualifies as a victory. Yet the blood spilled and the treasure spent in 2007 and 2008 to subdue the Sunni insurgency have bought the US some time and space. At the very least that time and space should be used aggressively to “persuade” Iraq’s government to face its most fundamental problem: the oil question.

Anxiety over who will control Iraq’s 112 billion barrels of proven reserves underpins the most explosive of Iraq’s disputes. Justly addressing the grievances of Iraq’s Sunnis, lower-class Shiites, and Kurds regarding the distribution of Iraq’s oil wealth would go a long way toward tempering Sunni dreams of retaking the government by force, diminishing the appeal of Muqtada al-Sadr’s populist-nationalist message, and diffusing the Kurds’ uncompromising claim on Kirkuk. Simply put, oil was the key to Iraq’s modern past, it is the key to Iraq’s present, and it will be the key to Iraq’s near future if there is to be one. Yet shockingly, no progress on Iraq’s Hydrocarbon Package has occurred since October of 2008,⁴⁴ emphasizing its low priority to both US and Iraqi policymakers.

The intent here is not to say that there is only one dimension to Iraq’s problems or that simply solving the oil question will lead to a peaceful and viable Iraq. Rather, it is to suggest that the oil issue is so

bound to Iraq's future viability that it should demand both the utmost priority and the focus of all US instruments of national power. This is where the additional role US combat forces fill in Iraq comes into play. Not only are these forces the guardians of a tense peace; they are also the instrument of power that lends credibility to other US levers at the negotiating table. Degrading their capability before any long term agreement exists on an issue so vital to Iraq's future weakens US ability to shepherd all sides into a compromise, and more ominously, invites a return to the sectarianism of 2006 and 2007.

Notes

- 1 Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iraq: Hold and Build, or Lose," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2009.
- 2 For details on the development of the insurgency and the variety of constituents that made up its ranks, see Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 8-24.
- 3 As quoted in Richard Lowry, "Re-Liberators," *National Review* 60, no. 4 (March 10, 2008): 34.
- 4 Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) envisioned an Islamic state with Taliban-like features, yet the Sunni Ba'athists, nationalists, tribal factions, and some Islamists saw AQI's vision as too extreme and incompatible with their own interests. See Steve Simon, "The Price of the Surge," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 59.
- 5 From the beginning, AQI started to appropriate formerly exclusive sources of Sunni income for themselves such as highway banditry and drug and weapons smuggling. Equally problematic were AQI's efforts to imbed itself in society by forcing prominent families to marry their daughters to foreign fighters and to usurp the authority of local Sunni sheikhs. See Dave Kilcullen, "Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, August 29, 2007, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>.
- 6 Steven Biddle, "Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up," United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, April 2, 2008, p. 6, <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2008/BiddleTestimony080402p.pdf>.
- 7 Greg Bruno, "Finding a Place for the 'Sons of Iraq,'" Council on Foreign Relations, *Backgrounder*, January 9, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16088/>.
- 8 Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe* (New York: Random House, 2008), pp. 364-66.
- 9 David Kilcullen, "Counter Insurgency in Iraq: Theory and Practice 2007," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, briefing from September 26, 2007, slide #75, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullencoinbrief26sep07.ppt>.

- 10 Bill Roggio, "Letters from al Qaeda Leaders Show Iraqi Effort is in Disarray," *The Long War Journal* (September 11, 2008), http://www.longwarjournal.org/2008/09/letters_from_al_qaed.php.
- 11 Mark Kukis, "Turning Iraq's Tribes against Al-Qaeda," *Time.com*, December 26, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1572796,00.html>. See also Bruno, "'Sons of Iraq,'" p. 4.
- 12 Catherine Dale, "Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, December 15, 2008, p. 108, <http://www.crs.gov/RL34387>.
- 13 "Gulf Region Division, US Army Corps of Engineers Cumulative Reconstruction Snapshot," Cumulative Data Report, January 2009, http://www.grd.usace.army.mil/news/factsheets/docs/December_2008.pdf.
- 14 Dale, p. 111.
- 15 "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," Department of Defense Report to Congress, March 2009, pp. 1-6.
- 16 See *The Strongest Tribe*. For a relevant theory about tribal politics in state apparatuses, see Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1991), pp. 8-11.
- 17 Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 248.
- 18 In the 1920s the British organized a rigged election that the Shiites boycotted. The election legitimized British control of Iraq and marginalized the Shiites, putting the Sunnis firmly in control. See Hashim, pp. 245-46.
- 19 Hashim, p. 240.
- 20 Hashim, p. 256.
- 21 Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrism Movement," Iraq Report #12, The Institute for the Study of War, January 2009, p. 14, <http://www.understandingwar.org/>.
- 22 Hashim, p. 259.
- 23 "Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council," International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 70, November 15, 2008, p. 22, <http://www.crisisgroup.org> [hereafter ICG Report #70].
- 24 ICG Report #70, p. 13.
- 25 Anthony Cordesman and Jose Ramos, "Sadr and the Mahdi Army: Evolution, Capabilities, and a New Direction," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 4, 2008, p. 8. See also Cockburn, p. 244.
- 26 ICG Report #70, p. 20.
- 27 West, p. 319.
- 28 Cordesman and Ramos, p. 19.
- 29 See West's assessment of Maliki's assault on Basra, pp. 351-55.
- 30 Cordesman and Ramos, p. 24.
- 31 Cochrane, pp. 37-44.
- 32 "Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds," International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 80, October 28, 2008, pp. 1-7.

- <http://www.crisisgroup.org>, [hereafter ICG Report #80].
- 33 "Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq," Human Rights Watch, 2004, at <http://hrw.org/reports/2004/iraq0804/iraq0804.pdf>.
 - 34 Kenneth Katzman, "The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, September 25, 2008, pp. 3-5.
 - 35 ICG Report # 80, p. i.
 - 36 "Iraq in the Obama Administration," US Institute for Peace, December 2008, p. 12, www.usip.org.
 - 37 Hashim, p. 226.
 - 38 ICG Report #80, p. 9.
 - 39 Hashim, p. 229.
 - 40 Claire Russo, "The Maliki Government Confronts Diyala Province," Institute for the Study of War, Backgrounder #34, September 24, 2008, <http://www.understandingwar.org/>.
 - 41 "PM al-Maliki will Punish Peshmerga Deployed outside Kurdish Enclave," *Aswat al-Iraq*, September 24, 2008.
 - 42 Hashim, p. 222.
 - 43 "Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger Line," International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 88, July 8, 2009, pp. 1-7, <http://www.crisisgroup.org>.
 - 44 "Iraq Status Report," US Department of State, July 1, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rpt/c28011.htm>.