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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Does the “Surge” Explain Iraq’s Improved Security?

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There is a general consensus that the “surge” of additional troops into Iraq has been responsible for the significant decrease of violence in Iraq. Sen. John McCain has long advocated “sustained and substantial” troop increases,¹ attacking Sen. Barack Obama’s position on drawing down forces. Obama for his part recently stated that the surge has “succeeded in ways that nobody anticipated” and “beyond our wildest dreams.”² Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, commander of Multi-National Corps Iraq during the surge, told a Heritage Foundation audience in March 2008, “I think it’s safe to say that the surge of Coalition forces—and how we employed those forces—have broken the cycle of sectarian violence in Iraq.”³ While the surge was quite controversial in its inception,⁴ it now seems that “success has a thousand fathers.”

Indeed, since the deployment starting in January 2007 of an additional 30,000 troops (five additional Army brigades primarily in and around Baghdad and 4,000 Marines in Anbar Province, rising to a high-water mark of 171,000 U.S. troops in Iraq by October 2007), the drop in violence has been remarkable. From December 2006 to August 2008, monthly insurgent-initiated attacks have dropped from over 5,600 to 800, U.S. troop fatalities from 112 to 23, and Iraqi civilian fatalities from 3,500 to 500. Even though we’re hardly out of the woods, the troop surge is clearly correlated with a major decrease in violence.⁵

Correlation, of course, is not causation. Lt. Gen. Odierno is right to highlight the employment of surge forces in addition to the increase in their numbers. The renewed focus on providing security to the Iraqi population—by pushing troops out of sprawling Forward Operating Bases and proactively controlling movement within major cities—has truly been a change for the better. Nevertheless, there are factors above and beyond additional troops and better counter-insurgency tactics that may account for the drop in violence. These include the Sunni Awakening movements that emerged in Anbar province prior to the surge, the tragic efficacy of sectarian killing in 2006, the Shia Mahdi Army cease-fire announced and renewed by Moqtada al-Sadr, and operations by other U.S. organizations not associated with the surge.

The “Awakening”

One of the most important developments in the course of the war has been the emergence, well before the surge was even conceived, of pro-coalition tribal alliances in Anbar province. These were rooted in conflicts over smuggling profits in the lucrative Euphrates corridor that set tribal elements against al Qaeda affiliated foreigners. In 2005, nascent alliances between tribal elites and U.S. forces against a common al Qaeda foe began developing in the western towns of Anbar, and by 2006 in Ramadi, where the better-known Awakening (*Sahawa*) movement was born. Brutal al Qaeda reprisals against coalition collaboration, together with active engagement and reassurance by Marines and Special Operations Forces, encouraged a shift of popular sympathy away from the insurgency. The battle to secure Ramadi—leveraging local intelligence, neighborhood defense organizations, significant physical controls on movement, and Marine Combat Outposts in urban areas—was under way before the surge began. As additional Marines moved into Anbar to apply the Ramadi model to Fallujah, the province was already over the tipping point toward stability.

In terms of the surge success narrative, it is ironic that the prospect of fewer rather than more U.S. troops influenced Anbari elites. Taking notice of Democratic victories in the U.S. Congress in 2006, occurring at the height of Shia-Sunni sectarian violence, they realized that American popular support for the war was crumbling. Even though Sunni tribesmen and former regime elements had fought side-by-side with al Qaeda against the American occupation, they began realizing that without the Marines in Anbar they would be vulnerable to the Shia-dominated central government and Iraqi Army. This future appears at least as unpleasant to them as al Qaeda’s brand of Salafist intolerance. The long, costly fight against U.S. forces, while saving face for Sunni tribesmen, significantly weakened their power position with respect to these other rivals. Cooperation with Americans thus came to be viewed as the lesser of three evils.

The assassination of Anbar Awakening leader Shayikh Sattar al-Rishawi by al Qaeda in September 2007 had the effect of creating a martyr that further galvanized support for the Awakening and coalition cooperation. Sattar’s brother Ahmad took over leadership of the Awakening and worked to consolidate it into a political party with national appeal. Curiously enough, the ultra-status-conscious Bedouin tribal system of Anbar helped make this possible. Sattar and Ahmad, members of the relatively insignificant abu Risha, could not simply appeal to tribal loyalties to increase their influence and power. Established lineal shayikhs would never accept them as *tribal* leaders, so they instead refashioned themselves as *political* leaders, working to establish Awakening offices outside of Anbar and to establish communication with Shia leadership. Once it was widely known that Americans were willing to provide support and amnesty to “Awakening” groups, Ahmad began to lose control of the brand as it spilled beyond Anbar. Consequently, only a small part of extant Awakening and Sons of Iraq groups are actually affiliated with the *Sahawa al Iraq* based in Ramadi.

The stabilization of Anbar has been remarkable indeed. There are real signs of social and economic renewal, “Provincial Iraqi Control” is a nominal reality, and the determination of Anbaris to avoid relapse into bloodshed is palpable. At the same time, worrisome problems remain. Corruption is rife in the government, judiciary, and police, providing opportunities for insurgent subversion. The provincial government is dominated by the extremely-unpopular Iraqi Islamic Party—an artifact of widespread Sunni boycotts of the 2005 elections—and rival parties and tribal shayikhs have been repeatedly disappointed by the postponement of provincial elections. The Shia-Sunni faultline between Fallujah and Baghdad, lacking any consolidated tribal control like other communities in Anbar, remains a shifting cauldron of state and non-state armed groups that could erupt into violence. Anbari elite continue to express fear that chaos will return after the coalition draws down. One particularly ominous aspect of Anbari politics is the continuing influence of high-ranking former regime officials; while some appear willing to play the reconciliation game, considerable Baath resources remain available to support an attempt to regain what they see as their right to govern Iraq. Finally, Baghdad has not only been unwilling to integrate the nearly 100,000 Awakening and Sons of Iraq members into legitimate security forces, there are also reports that government forces are conducting operations against them. This promotes feelings of betrayal by Americans among Sunni who were encouraged to form such groups.

All of these problems associated with the Awakening are the dark flip-side of the bottom-up wheeling and dealing which caused the Anbar miracle. It’s important to note that this bottom-up development is quite distinct from the top-down grand bargain in Baghdad which the surge was intended to make space for. This suggests that the “theory of victory” associated with the surge going in was not very well articulated.

Other Factors

This overview of the Awakening suggests that while American actions can influence Iraqi politics, sometimes inadvertently, they cannot control them. Similar political complexity and partial-independence from U.S. action is also visible in other non-surge developments influencing the decrease in violence.

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One critical dynamic is the intense violence between Sunni and Shia militias. Iraq was enflamed by a serious sectarian war in 2006. Tens of thousands lost their lives to ethnic cleansing, 2.4 million refugees have fled the country, and 2.8 million people are internally displaced, altogether over one fifth of the pre-war population. Many previously mixed neighborhoods are now ethnically homogenous. While surge tactics partitioning Baghdad neighborhoods are indeed effective at limiting insurgent movement, insurgents have less need to move between neighborhoods when there are simply fewer targets. It is possible that sectarian clashes died down in 2007 precisely because they had been so violent and so effective in destroying mixed neighborhoods in 2006.

Not only did Sunni violence decrease because of Awakening movements, Shia violence also abated. This is partially attributable to Moqtada al-Sadr's announcement in August 2007 of a Mahdi Army (JAM) cease fire for 6 months. His announcement followed violent clashes between JAM and the Shia Badr militia in Karbala, and is generally understood to be an attempt to "rehabilitate," or rather regain control of his forces in anticipation of future conflict following U.S. withdrawals. Extended another six months in February 2008, the JAM ceasefire helped curtail a major violent actor.

Additional potential influences include decisions made by foreign facilitators to reduce support to Iraqi insurgents. Iran, under scrutiny for its nuclear program and facing bellicose rhetoric from the Bush administration, may have elected to simply run out the clock on the administration rather than provoke military action. Or there may have been deals cut between Iran and the Maliki government. On the Sunni front, it now appears that al Qaeda facilitators are attempting to redirect jihadi support from Iraq to Afghanistan. It is also possible that years of investment in Iraqi Security Forces were finally starting to pay off. While these items involve some speculation, they point to developments above and beyond the surge that may have caused the decline in violence.

A final important factor, covered recently by journalist Bob Woodward, is the steady, targeted attrition of insurgent leadership by U.S. organizations not affiliated with Army and Marine surge forces. Woodward claims that "85 to 90 percent of the successful operations and 'actionable intelligence' had come from the new sources, methods and operations" targeting al Qaeda, Ansar al Sunna, JAM Special Groups, and Iranian support networks.⁶ This action is unrelated to surge numbers or tactics as conventionally understood. The most charitable interpretation is that the two have generated some sort of "hammer and anvil" synergy, with special operations targeting insurgent leadership while surge forces provided pressure on and reassurance for the population to prevent killed and captured leaders from being replaced.

Effect of More Troops

There is yet another important reason to be suspicious about the surge. There is a legitimate debate among experts about whether conventional troop increases may, in general, actually be counter-productive. Large numbers of foreign soldiers trained for conventional war can actually increase popular resentment against them when deployed in stabilization missions, inadvertently catalyzing the very insurgency they combat. Previous "surges" or relocations of troops to problem areas within Iraq earlier in the war had exactly this effect. In some situations, a more discrete footprint emphasizing Special Forces and/or Civil Affairs operations may be better. America's low-profile involvements in present-day Colombia and the Philippines, or in Cold War El Salvador, suggest that sometimes less is more. It is possible, though unlikely (given the surge's emphasis on population security), that the surge has actually had a negative effect on the security situation in Iraq, but other non-surge factors have swamped this to reduce violence. We risk drawing exactly the wrong lessons from the surge.

Given competing explanations and genuine questions about the wisdom of increasing force levels in counter-insurgency campaigns, we should not leap to the conclusion that the surge alone is responsible for the good news in Iraq. One should also ask how good the news really is. There is significant ongoing violence against civilians despite absolute reductions in its intensity. Political deadlock continues on critical issues like oil revenue distribution, the status of Kirkuk, progress toward provincial elections, and sectarian reconciliation. As reporter Michael Ware noted, "deaths are down because it's much harder to kill each other until the Americans withdraw and the real battle begins."⁷ Festering sectarian tensions are dramatized by the Shia-dominated government's hostility towards Sunni Sons of Iraq and Awakening groups; while such groups were instrumental in containing violence before, they can also be a potent force to reignite it if they continue to feel disenfranchised. The release of former insurgents from detention facilities is another wild card for stability.

For all of these reasons, and based on administration comments, U.S. force levels in Iraq are likely to remain above pre-surge levels for the remainder of Bush's presidency. Whatever the real causes of improvement in Iraq, the fact is that this improvement remains, as Gen. David Petraeus and others like to say, "fragile and reversible." This phrase implies that improvement actually owes a great deal to Iraqi political dynamics beyond U.S. control. Thus, things could still go south despite the best American efforts to maintain stability. The myth of surge success has created a dangerous perception of American control in counter-insurgency campaigns.

What's at Stake?

Consensus about the surge's success in Iraq has been translated into calls for yet another surge in Afghanistan, and administration plans are in motion to send an additional 8,000 troops to combat a resurgent Taliban. Even Obama's call to draw down in Iraq is balanced by a call to build up in Afghanistan. The U.S. appears to have already initiated more aggressive raids into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, suspected redoubt of al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. An Afghanistan surge can be expected to reinforce this more muscular approach. Given the convolutions of Pakistani politics and steadily worsening situation in Afghanistan, this approach seems unlikely to shift popular support decisively against the insurgency. It seems more likely to reinforce the "conventionalization" of an increasingly unconventional conflict, a counter-productive trend described by one scholar following the fall of the Taliban in 2001.⁸ Merely surging in Afghanistan in the absence of other violence-reducing factors will probably fail to deliver the desired results. It is much more important to address the hard problems—mediation of tensions between India and Pakistan, improved coalition and interagency coordination, greater focus on non-kinetic operations—which are independent of force ratios. Teaching the wrong lessons may be the Iraq surge's most troubling legacy.

footnotes

1 Sen. John McCain, Speech at the American Enterprise Institute (January 5, 2007).

2 James Rainey, "Barack Obama Sits Down With Bill O'Reilly," *Los Angeles Times* (September 5, 2008).

3 Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq: One Year Later," Heritage Lectures No. 1068 (March 5, 2008).

4 Bob Woodward, "Outmaneuvered and Outranked, Military Chiefs Became Outsiders," *Washington Post* (September 8, 2008), reports that the Bush administration had to overcome opposition to the surge from MNF-I Commander Gen. Casey, CENTCOM, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who all worried about breaking the already thin Army.

5 These and following statistics are from Michael O'Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, "Iraq Index," Brookings Institute, <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/-/media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>.

6 Bob Woodward, "Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge," *Washington Post* (September 8, 2008). See also Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History*, 2006-2008 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

7 Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees (August 13, 2007), <http://transcripts.cnn.com/NSCRIPTS/0708/13/acd.01.html>.

8 See Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (US Naval Institute Press, 2006).



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