

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1860
March 18, 2008

Iraq Five Years On: The Coalition Is Winning the War Against Al-Qaeda

Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.

On the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the United States has proved its critics wrong—again. The U.S.-led surge has been a remarkable success, and the fledgling democracy is no longer on the path to civil war. The ballot box and the rule of law are now replacing terrorism, fear, and intimidation as the norm. For historians looking for evidence of American decline, this progress in Iraq must be a huge disappointment.

The world needs stronger U.S. leadership and is a far more dangerous place without it. As the only superpower, America might not always be loved, but it is respected and feared by its enemies. The United States still possesses the strength and the will to fight, even in the most difficult of circumstances. The dramatic turnaround in Iraq is a warning signal to the enemies of the free world. From Tehran to Damascus to Pyongyang, rogue regimes and state sponsors of terrorism are taking note of a renewed American determination to stand and fight.

The U.S. and its allies must still make a long-term military commitment to defeating the al-Qaeda threat in Iraq. Talk in Washington of a large-scale withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country after the end of the Bush Administration sends the wrong signal at a time of continuing uncertainty and will only serve to embolden the enemies of the West. An early withdrawal would not only hand a huge propaganda victory to al-Qaeda, giving it tremendous momentum and reversing the progress of the past year, but also open the door to mass ethnic cleansing that would claim hundreds of thousands of lives.

Iran, the world's biggest state sponsor of international terrorism, would benefit enormously from a Coalition pullout from Shiite-dominated southern Iraq, where it already wields political influence. A withdrawal from the South would create a power vacuum that dozens of Iranian-backed militia groups are ready to exploit—among them, Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigades, and the Mujahidin for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. To prevent this, America must continue to exercise its leadership and demonstrate a long-term commitment to the fight against terrorists and their sponsors in Iraq.

The Success of the Surge. The surge campaign was launched over a year ago with the phased introduction of an additional 30,000 American troops. It demonstrated that the United States is capable of fighting and winning a protracted counterinsurgency war against well-armed and highly trained militia groups thousands of miles away in the Middle East. The figure leading the operation, General David H. Petraeus, is a true hero, a remarkable military commander who defied the odds to deliver results in the face of a brutal, sophisticated, and multifaceted enemy.

Since June 2007, terrorist attacks in Iraq are down by more than 60 percent, with a 90 percent

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Iraq/wm1860.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

reduction in Anbar Province, once a hotbed of al-Qaeda activity. Iraqi civilian deaths fell by over 70 percent in the eight months following July 2007, and Coalition military losses have decreased by the same figure in the period since May 2007. Overall ethno-sectarian violence is down by nearly 90 percent since June 2007, reaching its lowest level since early 2005. Bombings in Baghdad are now at their lowest level since early 2006, with terrorist attacks falling to 57 per week in the past four months, down from 225 a week in summer 2007.¹

Al-Qaeda is on the run across large swathes of the Sunni heartlands as previously warring Iraqi factions are uniting against the foreign Jihadists who have ravaged their country. Such is the improvement in the security situation that Iraqi security forces are now responsible for nine of the nation's 18 provinces. Operation Phantom Phoenix, a series of joint Iraqi-Coalition operations launched in January to hunt down remaining al-Qaeda cells operating in Iraq, has already resulted in the capture of 26 senior al-Qaeda leaders and the elimination of several hundred terrorists, including 142 in Mosul alone.²

Improved security has brought with it a renewed sense of economic confidence and stability. More than 30,000 private-sector companies have been registered in Iraq since 2003, with an almost 10 percent increase in new business registration in 2007 compared to the year before. Inflation has fallen from 65 percent in 2007 to just under 5 percent in 2008, and the Iraqi government's budget has doubled in the past three years, rising from \$20 billion

to \$41 billion. Crude oil production now exceeds pre-war levels at 2.4 million barrels a day, with oil exports averaging 1.9 million barrels a day, helping to spur economic growth of 7 percent for 2008.³

Even the BBC's latest poll⁴ reports that more than half of Iraqis believe that life is "good" in Iraq, with over 60 percent declaring that security in their neighborhood is "very good" or "quite good." A striking 49 percent of Iraqis surveyed support the view that the decision taken by America and its allies to invade Iraq in spring 2003 was "absolutely right" or "somewhat right." Just 38 percent of Iraqis polled support an immediate withdrawal of Coalition forces, and a total of 59 percent believe that the Coalition should remain until "security is restored," until "the Iraqi government is stronger," or "until the Iraqi security forces can operate independently."

The Continuing al-Qaeda Threat. Even with recent gains in security, al-Qaeda remains a potent threat in Iraq, and there can be no room for complacency. Much work remains to be done in securing the country, and the Coalition must stand united in ensuring that the gains of the past year are not reversed. As General Petraeus warned in an interview last week, "We should expect al-Qaeda to try to rebound. Al-Qaeda's like a fighter that's been dropped to the canvas a couple of times, but comes back off that canvas."⁵

Despite a huge reduction in terrorist attacks across Iraq as a whole, sporadic bombings continue in parts of the country. The brutal killing in February of over 70 Iraqis in two Baghdad market blasts—the bombers were mentally disabled women

1. *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2008*, March 2008, at www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master%20%20Mar08%20-%20final%20signed.pdf.
2. Operational Update: Major General Kevin J. Bergner, Spokesman, Multi-National Force Iraq, March 5, 2008, at www.mnfiraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17446&Itemid=99999999, and Operational Update: Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Multi-National Force Iraq February 13, 2008, at www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17039&Itemid=131.
3. Remarks by Ambassador Charles Ries, Minister for Economic Affairs and Coordinator for Economic Transition, U.S. Embassy, Baghdad, at the London School of Economics, February 4, 2008, at <http://london.usembassy.gov/ukpapress74.html>.
4. "Poll Suggests Iraqis 'Optimistic'," *BBC News Online*, March 17, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7299569.stm. The full poll can be found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/14_03_08iraqpollmarch2008.pdf. The poll of 2,000 Iraqis was conducted for the BBC, ARD, and NHK.
5. Jed Babbin, "Petraeus Warns Iraq Progress Is Tenuous, Reversible," *Human Events*, March 6, 2008, at www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=25383.

sent to their deaths by al-Qaeda⁶—provided a stark reminder of the pure evil that Islamist militants are willing to unleash on the streets of Iraq. Over 40 Shias were murdered by a female suicide bomber in the holy city of Karbala in a suspected al-Qaeda attack in mid-March.⁷

The free world should be under no illusions that, if given the opportunity, al-Qaeda will seek to emulate this kind of barbaric atrocity in cities across Europe and the United States. These and other bombings in recent weeks underscore the precarious nature of the progress that has been made in Iraq.

The Specter of Iran. The dangerous regime in Tehran also remains a major threat to long-term peace and stability in Iraq. Iran's Revolutionary Guard continues to arm Shia militia groups responsible for the killing of Coalition soldiers. The Iranian regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents the biggest nation-state threat to international security of this generation. It is a brutal and highly dangerous tyranny that already has British and American blood on its hands and is actively waging war against Allied forces.

It is vital that America's closest ally, Great Britain, maintains a significant military presence to act as a bulwark against Iranian aggression in the South. As progress is made in central Iraq, this is no time for Prime Minister Gordon Brown to adopt a weak-kneed approach. There are no compelling military or strategic reasons for a British withdrawal. The security situation in and around Basra remains tense as Iranian-backed militias continue to grow in strength with the assistance a corrupt police force heavily infiltrated by Tehran's agents. There is a vital need to maintain security along the Iraq-Iran border, as well as to protect the supply routes that run from Kuwait to Baghdad.

Washington and London must ensure that Tehran does not gain a long-term foothold in

Basra, Iraq's second-biggest city. In the coming months, thousands of U.S. troops may need to be deployed to the region in a show of strength to warn Iran of the consequences of playing with fire. Over 4,000 Coalition troops have laid down their lives in Iraq since 2003, and it is important that their sacrifice be honored with a commitment to ensuring that an Iranian-backed Islamic dictatorship does not take hold.

The Front Line in the War Against Islamist Terrorism. The U.S., Britain, and other Coalition allies must remain united in their determination to continue the fight against Islamist terrorism in Iraq. An early withdrawal of Allied troops would have catastrophic implications for the future of the country and would be seen by most Iraqis as a betrayal of trust. By liberating Iraq and removing one of the most brutal regimes of modern times, the Coalition made a powerful commitment to the future of the Iraqi people that must be honored. There should be no major pullout of Allied forces from the country until key military objectives have been met and Iraq is stable and secure.

Ultimately, Iraq is a microcosm of a larger war the United States and Great Britain are waging against Islamist terrorism and extremism. The battles on the streets of Iraq have a direct relevance to the national security of the U.S. and its allies, and to walk away from this front line of the war against Islamist terrorism would significantly increase the terrorist threat to the West itself.

This is a long-term conflict that must be fought to ensure the security of the free world. America's recent success in Iraq demonstrates that this is a war that can and must be won.

—Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at the Heritage Foundation.

6. "Twin Bombs Kill Scores in Baghdad," *BBC News Online*, February 1, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7221639.stm.

7. "Dozens Killed Near Iraqi Shrine," *BBC News Online*, March 17, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7301364.stm.