



Gaining Ground: Clear Progress in Iraq

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The "Cut and Run Crowd" are proving to be the worst kind of pessimists on Iraq - refusing to see the significant evidence that things are starting to go our way militarily.

No, no one should be turning cart-wheels just yet over security and stability in Iraq - there is still a lot to be done. But several favorable *developments* should make even the "Doom-n-Gloomers" take note.

* The U.S. military is having significant success securing the Syrian border - previously a sieve for Iraqi and foreign insurgents/ terrorists seeping into Iraq. Result: It's tougher for Syria-based Sunni insurgents to orchestrate or support attacks in Iraq. Suicide bombings are *down* 30 percent since the October referendum.

International pressure on the Syrian regime - including the possibility of punitive U.N. economic sanctions over the killing of former Lebanese

Prime Minister Rafik Hariri - may also be "encouraging" Damascus to decrease its support for the Iraqi insurgency.

* Abu Musab al Zarqawi's cast of al Qaeda killers seems to be in increasing disarray. Recent intelligence reports suggest near-mutiny in al Qaeda's ranks - most likely thanks to U.S. forces capturing/killing operatives in large numbers, cash crunches and an influx of "green" recruits.

The American military's new "Clear, Hold and Build" strategy is plainly putting the squeeze on al Qaeda. It improves upon the "Whack a Mole" (i.e., random search-and-destroy) strategy by establishing a permanent Iraqi security presence that makes it harder for the insurgents to return once they've been evicted.

Still, some Iraqis continue to sign on to become suicide bombers - still the most deadly form of attack in Iraq.

While locals can often readily discern foreign terrorists/fighters, it's much harder to disrupt attacks by native Iraqis.

* Some Sunnis - insurgents, supporters and intermediaries - are coming to the table to talk with the Iraqi government and U.S. forces about ways to end the conflict. Not surprisingly, one of the major issues is an American withdrawal, which is obviously in the cards at some *appropriate* point in the future.

Negotiating a *phased* - not immediate - withdrawal of Coalition forces based upon the Sunni insurgents' cessation of hostilities could be a win-win situation. In a best-case scenario, after reaching an agreement, Iraqi and Coalition forces would turn their attention to crushing the remaining al Qaeda elements in the country.

It's even conceivable that marshalling Iraqi and Coalition forces against the foreign terrorists could make Iraq al Qaeda's last stand. A high-visibility defeat for Zarqawi would be a severe blow to al Qaeda's prestige as a movement - hindering operations, fundraising and most importantly, recruitment.

* Zalmay Khalizad, America's highly capable ambassador to Iraq, is opening quiet talks with the neighboring Iranians, who have been causing significant trouble in Iraq. Getting Tehran to drop its support for the insurgency - which includes weapons, training and financing - would go a long way toward ending the death and destruction.

* The training of Iraqi security forces (e.g., police, military and intelligence) is increasingly effective and (finally!) making headway. This is not only important for short-term dealings with the terrorists, but also for providing for Iraq's long-term national defense against the likes of Iran and Syria.

As President Bush said last week, more than 30 Iraqi Army battalions are controlling their own areas of operation, including some of the toughest Baghdad streets. The Pentagon says more than a dozen military bases have been turned over to the Iraqis, including a former Saddam Hussein palace.

If political/economic progress persists, and security trends continue along these lines, it's very likely that the American force level in Iraq will be able to shrink to 50,000-75,000 troops by next summer. (It will be necessary to keep more troops in the neighborhood to allow a U.S. "surge capability" in case it's needed.)

Next week's historic elections will put more wind in the sails of the new Iraqi ship of state.

The United States and Iraq still have to navigate dangerous insurgent shoals, and maneuver a course around tricky political, economic and social buoys for a while yet. But we're plotting a course for total victory in Iraq, and as hard as it is for the Nervous Nellies and Henny Pennies to swallow, the bottom line is that the security situation in Iraq is showing a lot of promise. The nattering nabobs of negativism shouldn't be afraid to acknowledge it.