



Iraq: Is the Escalation Working?

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[Frederick W. Kagan](#)

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American military forces in Iraq are now entering the second phase of their kinetic operations even as political efforts continue on a separate but linked track. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus are in the midst of a multifaceted program that will not proceed in a linear way and will not generate clear and consistent metrics in all of its phases. The early signs are positive in a number of respects, although difficulties and challenges clearly remain. But it is too soon to evaluate the outcome of an operation that is just moving into the first of several phases intended to produce significant positive change in the situation overall.

It is now beyond question that the Bush Administration pursued a flawed approach to the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2007. That approach relied on keeping the American

troop presence in Iraq as small as possible, pushing unprepared Iraqi Security Forces into the lead too rapidly, and using political progress as the principal means of bringing the violence under control. In other words, it is an approach similar to the one proposed by the ISG and by some who are now pushing for political benchmarks and the rapid drawdown of American forces as the keys to success in the war. It is no more likely to work now than it was then. Political progress is something that follows the establishment of security, not something that causes it. The sorts of political compromises that Iraq's parties must make are extraordinarily difficult--one might even say impossible--in the context of uncontrolled terrorism and sectarian violence. And the Iraqi Security Forces, although significantly better than they were this time last year, are still too small and

insufficiently capable to establish security on their own or even to maintain it in difficult and contested areas without significant continuing coalition support.

For all of these reasons, the president changed his strategy profoundly in January 2007, and appointed a new commander in General Petraeus and a new Ambassador in Ryan Crocker to oversee the new approach. This new approach focuses on establishing security in Baghdad and its immediate environs as the prerequisite for political progress. It recognizes that American forces must be in the lead in many (but not all) areas, and that they will have to remain in areas that have been cleared for some time in order to ensure that security becomes permanent. The aim of the security strategy is to buy space and time for the political process in Iraq to work, and for the Iraqi Security Forces to mature and grow to the point where they can maintain the dramatically improved security situation our forces will have helped them to establish.

The scale of the problem required an increase in American forces in Iraq, which the president ordered in January, of around 40% (from the equivalent of 15 brigade combat teams to more than 21). It also required a multi-phased approach on both the military and the political side of the equation, which has been begun.

The first phase began on January 10th with the announcement of the new strategy and the beginning of

the movement of the 5 additional Army brigades and Marine elements into the theater. That deployment process was only completed at the beginning of this month--in fact, critical enablers for those combat forces are still arriving in theater. As the new units entered Iraq, the U.S. military commanders began pushing those that were already in the theater forward from their operating bases into Joint Security Stations and Combat Outposts in key neighborhoods in Baghdad and elsewhere. The purpose of these movements was not to clear-and-hold--the units present in theater were not sufficient in numbers to conduct such operations. The purpose was instead to establish positions within those key areas and to develop both intelligence about the enemy and trust relationships with the local communities that would make possible decisive clear-and-hold operations subsequently. During this phase of the operation, additional Iraqi Security Forces deployed to Baghdad in accord with a plan developed jointly by the U.S. and Iraqi military commands. All of the requested units appeared in the first Iraqi Army rotation, and the Iraqi military has just completed its second rotation of units into Baghdad--again, all designated units arrived, and their fill levels were generally higher than in the first rotation.

Generals Petraeus and Odierno did not allocate the majority of the new combat power they received to Baghdad. Only 2 of the additional Army brigades went into the city. The other 3 Army brigades and the

equivalent of a Marine regiment were deployed into the areas around Baghdad that our generals call the "Baghdad belts," including Baqubah in Diyala province. The purpose of this deployment was not to clear-and-hold those areas, but to make possible the second phase of the operation that began on June 15. The purpose of this operation--Phantom Thunder--is to disrupt terrorist and militia networks and bases outside of Baghdad that have been feeding the violence within the city. Most of the car bomb and suicide bomb networks that have been supporting the al Qaeda surge since January are based in these belt areas, and American commanders have rightly recognized that they cannot establish stable security in the capital without disrupting these networks and their bases.

But even this operation--the largest coordinated combat operation the U.S. has undertaken since the invasion in 2003--is not the decisive phase of the current strategy. It is an operation designed to set the pre-conditions for a successful clear-and-hold operation that will probably begin in late July or early August within Baghdad itself. That is the operation that is designed to bring security to Iraq's capital in a lasting way that will create the space for political progress that we all desire.

The U.S. has not undertaken a multi-phased operation on such a large scale since 2003, and it is not surprising therefore that many commentators have become confused about how to evaluate what is going

on and how to report it. Sectarian deaths in Baghdad dropped significantly as soon as the new strategy was announced in January, and remain at less than half their former levels. Spectacular attacks rose as al Qaeda conducted a counter-surge of its own, but have recently begun falling again. Violence is down tremendously in Anbar province, where the Sunni tribes have turned against al Qaeda and are actively cooperating with U.S. forces for the first time. This process has spread from Anbar into Babil, Salah-ad-Din, and even Diyala provinces, and echoes of it have even spread into one of the worst neighborhoods in Baghdad--Ameriyah, formerly an al Qaeda stronghold. Violence has risen naturally in areas that the enemy had long controlled but in which U.S. forces are now actively fighting for the first time in many years, and the downward spiral in Diyala that began in mid-2006 continued (which is not surprising, since the Baghdad Security Plan does not aim to establish security in Diyala).

All of these trends are positive. The growing skill and determination of the Iraqi Army units fighting alongside Americans is also positive. Some Iraqi Police units have also fought well. Others have displayed sectarian tendencies and participated in sectarian actions. Political progress has been very slow--something that has clearly disappointed many who hoped for an immediate turnaround, but that is not surprising for those who always believed that it would follow, not precede or accompany, the estab-

lishment of security at least in Baghdad. And negative sectarian actors within the Iraqi Government continue to resist making necessary compromises with former foes. Overall, the basic trends are rather better than could have been expected of the operation so far, primarily because of the unanticipated stunning success in Anbar and its spread. But it remains far too early to offer any meaningful evaluation of the progress of an operation whose decisive phases are only just beginning.

To say that the current plan has failed is simply incorrect. It might fail, of course, as any military/political plan might fail. Indications on the military side strongly suggest that success--in the form of dramatically reduced violence by the end of this year--is quite likely. Indications on the political side are more mixed, but are also less meaningful at this early stage before security has been established.

Great commanders in history have

understood two critical truths: the situation in war is constantly changing, and decisions must take that change into account--and, therefore, that it is best to delay decisions until the last possible moment to ensure that they are made on the basis of the most recent and accurate understanding of the situation, rather than on preconceptions formed in different circumstances. The situation in Iraq is very different today from what it was in January 2007, to say nothing of November 2006. It will be very different in September, and still more different in December of this year. It would be a great error to attempt to decide now upon the strategy to pursue when the current plan has actually been implemented, because we cannot now predict what the situation will be then with any confidence or accuracy. And it would be a very grave error indeed to rush now to abandon the first strategy that offers some real prospect for success in favor of a return to an approach that has already failed repeatedly.

*[Frederick W. Kagan](#) is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *The End of the Old Order: Napoleon and Europe, 1801-1805* (forthcoming). He is grateful to Daniel Barnard for assistance with this article.*