



## A positive dimension of the Iraq Campaign

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President Bush's March 27 assessment of the state of the war in Iraq raised important strategic assertions that warrant greater attention from the public and the defense and national security sectors. The principles announced by the president with regard to the measurement of success and the risks of failure on the Iraqi battlefield constitute a series of components of what I would coin as the next stage in the confrontation against the forces of terror in the region.

### **The surge's success**

The 2007-2008 military surge executed in significant parts of Iraq has indeed denied terrorist entities like al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Mahdi army the capacity to achieve their objectives. The surge has weakened the ability of al-Qaeda to reach what

they perceive as a potential "Emirate" in the Sunni triangle. Moreover, not being capable of reconstituting a Fallujah-like enclave anywhere is a defeat for al-Qaeda in Iraq, regardless of their ability to strike urban areas and to assassinate prominent leaders.

Similarly, the recent successes in the fight against pro-Iranian militias, such as the Mahdi Army or other Pasdaran-trained forces, are a relative - albeit temporary - victory over the Islamic Republic and its efforts to expand direct control over Shia Iraq. Iranian political and intelligence influence is certainly present in the institutions and public life in the country. But the specific Iranian goal of creating non-states enclaves in addition to political influence has failed so far.

Despite these successes, the President made it clear that these advances can be reversed if an abandonment of the mission in Iraq is implemented in Washington.

### **Positive Growth in Iraq**

President Bush also rightly noted the recent strengthening of the Iraqi security forces and civil society. Iraqi armed forces are indeed growing, though not to the optimal level needed. The growth indicates progress, but an abrupt abandonment of Iraqi security forces would lead to their collapse and the control of most their units by the Terror foes.

Civil society in Iraq is also showing signs of significant development. The removal of Saddam's regime and the growing localized resistance to al-Qaeda and the Iranian regime have provided "space" for new social and political forces to emerge. As the President correctly noted: "They're (Iraqis) trying to build a modern democracy on the rubble of three decades of tyranny, in a region of the world that has been hostile to freedom. And they're doing it while under assault from one of history's most brutal terrorist networks." Indeed, it is through that prism that we should define the pro-democracy struggle in Iraq. There are more democratic forces in Iraq today than in 2003.

### **Warning the axis**

In defense of the burgeoning democracy in Iraq, the President also issued a clear - though short and not fully explained - warning to the Iranian and Syrian regimes, demand-

ing that they stop meddling in Iraq's internal affairs and supporting the flow of terror across the borders. His statements included a number of noteworthy elements. First, it was important for a U.S. President to define the rulers of Iran and Syria as "regimes" and not "governments": a clear signal that these forces are ruling against the will of their peoples. Second, it is important to clarify that the administration has no intention to abandon Iraq through concessions to the Ayatollahs and the Syrian Baath. Despite political voices within the beltway calling for "talks" with the two regimes, it is crucial for the U.S. Government to send a message to the rulers of these two countries that their support for terror is known, and will be addressed. Without such a message to the Pasdaran, Syrian intelligence and Hezbollah, it would be naive to talk about "progress" in Iraq.

### **Abandonment = Catastrophe**

Equally necessary to state is that an abrupt abandonment of the Iraqi battlefield would bring about a catastrophe—not only in Iraq, but also throughout the region and even to the United States. President Bush's description of the ramifications of a "retreat" is accurate. Indeed, at first the Iraqi democratic forces would be decimated. Second, the Iraqi armed forces would collapse and divide. Third, whatever was achieved in terms of national consensus would crumble, sectarian divisions would deepen, and al-Qaeda would expand its influence in the Sunni Triangle and Iran would expand its rule in the Shia areas. The al-Qaeda bases would become a launching

pad for operations in the region and overseas, including against the United States mainland. Iranian advances in Iraq would create dangerous shifts in power in the region and beyond.

### **Strategic partnership with Iraq**

The President's announcement of a possible treaty of "partnership" between the U.S. and Iraq is in line with the next stage of the confrontation with terrorist forces in the region and internationally. This strategic cooperation would be decided by both "partners," and will be modified freely by Washington and Baghdad. This is the right response to the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the Syrian-Iranian axis. The concept of Iraq as an ally in the War on Terror is the ultimate objective - and should have been from the outset -

of U.S. policy and Iraqi national interest. As Iraqi forces move to the frontline, American and coalition forces should not be far behind fighting our mutual enemy.

### **Conclusion**

In response to his critics, the President argued: "If America's strategic interests are not in Iraq, the convergence point for the twin threats of al-Qaida and Iran, the nation Osama bin Laden's deputy has called the place for the greatest battle, the country at the heart of the most volatile region on earth, then where are they?" Unlike Haiti or Bosnia where interventions were designed to address a specific internal crisis, the campaign in Iraq is a central piece in the battle against external forces throughout the region.

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