



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American policy in Iraq will undergo two critical transitions in the months ahead: movement to a new U.S. posture in Iraq; and a wartime transition to a new administration. It is vital that both are handled in a way that best advances U.S. interests in Iraq and the region. Yet neither is being paid sufficient attention.

There has been significant improvement in the security situation in Iraq since early 2007. Four elements have combined to help reduce violence: the influx of additional U.S. troops utilizing improved counterinsurgency techniques; the Sunni Awakening and the emergence of the so-called Sons of Iraq; the decision by Muqtada al-Sadr to curtail his Jaish al-Mahdi militia; and prior sectarian cleansing which separated the warring parties in Baghdad. But recent security gains remain tenuous and reversible, and other potential crises, including a territorial dispute over oil-rich Kirkuk, loom on the horizon. There are no military solutions to these challenges, and, even if there were, strains on the U.S. military preclude a “re-surge.” Therefore, as the surge ends, consolidating and building upon security gains requires progress in the political sphere — progress that has been slow to materialize.

In Washington, the Iraq debate continues to be dominated by tactical issues: the number of troops in Iraq; levels of violence in particular provinces; how the various Iraqi actors behave in a given month; and how much money has been spent. There has been far less productive debate on key strategic issues: the nature of America’s basic interests in Iraq and the region; the level of risk America incurs by keeping the preponderance of its ground forces deployed in Iraq; and the nature of America’s long-term relationship with Iraq.

America’s goals in Iraq need to be balanced with and assessed against other interests in the region and around the world. U.S. interests in Iraq intersect with three broader vital concerns: combating international terrorism; preserving stability in the Gulf region; and maintaining America’s position of global leadership. Viewing policy in Iraq through the prism of these vital interests suggests that the United States must simultaneously attempt to avoid a failed state *in Iraq* while not strategically over-committing *to Iraq*.

The goal for U.S. policy in Iraq should be “sustainable stability:” a level of stability in Iraq that is sustainable with a substantially reduced American troop presence and, eventually, a complete U.S. withdrawal. Achieving this end-state requires political accommodation and improved governance in Iraq. But, as far as U.S. interests are concerned, political accommodation in Iraq must come first. Without political compromises that address simmering tensions, perpetuating an unconditional American embrace of Iraq’s government could produce negligible or even negative results. Thus, the critical issue for U.S. policy is how best to push Iraqi leaders to make tough political choices while simultaneously reducing America’s strategic overcommitment in Iraq.

In this context, there are four strategic options: unconditional engagement in Iraq, typified by the Bush administration’s current approach; a pledge to unconditionally disengage from Iraq by withdrawing all troops on a fixed, unilateral timetable; a policy of conditional disengagement that would set a timetable from Washington for the withdrawal of all troops, but leave open the possibility of keeping a residual force if Iraqis make progress toward political accord; and conditional engagement, a policy that would negotiate a time horizon for U.S. redeployment as a means of pushing Iraqi leaders toward accommodation and galvanizing regional efforts to stabilize Iraq.

A policy of conditional engagement offers the best chance of producing lasting progress in Iraq. Under this strategy, U.S. policymakers would make clear that Iraq and America share a common interest in achieving sustainable stability in Iraq, and that the United States is willing to help support the Iraqi government over the long term, but only so long as Iraqis move toward political accommodation. The premise is continued engagement, not disengagement, but in contrast to the Bush

administration’s current approach, America’s support to Iraq would not come for free.

Conditional engagement offers a means to encourage accommodation under the assumption that the Iraqi government actually wants to accommodate, and a means to pressure them if this assumption proves false. As such, it should be the approach adopted as the next administration charts its strategic course in Iraq. This strategic shift is most likely to succeed, however, if it starts now. In the remaining months of its term, the Bush administration must use the opportunity provided by ongoing talks to establish a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) to push Iraqi leaders toward political compromise.

Steps must also be taken to smooth the handover of Iraq policy from this administration to the next. The Bush administration must prioritize preparation in three areas over the next six months: the development of an interagency transition plan; enhancing the situational awareness of both the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates and their top national security advisors on Iraq; and hand-tooling personnel transitions for senior positions critical to Iraq policy and operations.

The administration should also instruct the U.S. military to begin planning now on two fronts: first, for how best to support stability, security, and political accommodation in Iraq during the U.S. presidential transition and into mid-2009 (when the new president’s senior national security team should be in place); and, second, contingency planning for possible changes in U.S. policy that would significantly alter the contours of the American military posture in Iraq. Planning should be done in the context of a larger interagency transition plan, and should begin now.

Finally, Congress can play an important role by providing oversight of ongoing SOFA and SFA negotiations, and by conditioning U.S. assistance to Iraq on demonstrable progress by the Iraqi government toward political accommodation. Congress should also pressure the administration to plan for the transition, while itself preparing to expedite confirmation hearings for key incoming Iraq-related posts as quickly as possible after the inauguration in January 2009.

The next President — Republican or Democratic — will shoulder the most challenging national security inheritance in generations. This President must do everything possible to positively shape this troubled bequest.



A TALE OF TWO TRANSITIONS

The Bush administration is neglecting to sufficiently shape the Iraq inheritance. With only months to go, not enough is being done to ensure that the next administration — Republican or Democratic — will inherit an Iraq policy that has laid the groundwork for the critical transitions ahead.

Throughout the remainder of this year and into 2009, American policy in Iraq will undergo two critical and risky transitions: movement to a new U.S. posture in Iraq; and a wartime hand-off to a new administration. It is vital that both transitions are successful while minimizing the risk to recent security gains in Iraq.

The first transition is already occurring. The United States reached the peak of its military involvement in Iraq during 2007 and early 2008 when over 160,000 U.S. troops deployed to the country. This number will likely decline to about 130,000 by the end of 2008. Regardless of who is elected in November, there will be compelling pressures to shift toward a more sustainable posture during the next administration. Such a transition will most likely involve shifting the role of American military units from leading population security to a more limited set of missions. But how quickly and under what conditions this transition occurs is still very much undecided.

Equally important, this strategic transition will involve moving into a new relationship with the Iraqi government. This relationship is already evolving as a consequence of U.S.-Iraqi negotiations to craft a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) outlining the legal contours of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, and a broader Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) that will describe the nature of the bilateral relationship moving forward. While such negotiations will not bind

the next administration, they have the potential to facilitate a transition to a new strategy rooted in conditional engagement with the Iraqi government. The negotiating process is a unique window of opportunity for the Bush administration to push Iraqi leaders toward much needed political accommodation and send clear signals that the American people are not prepared to support Iraq's government unconditionally. If handled correctly, this could enable the next administration to reconfigure U.S. policy, negotiate a phased redeployment of U.S. forces from Iraq, and condition residual U.S. support for the Iraqi government on continued political progress.

“This President’s Iraq legacy will be heavily influenced by how the tale of these two transitions is told by future historians.”

The second critical transition deals with the key question of how best to execute a wartime hand-over from one U.S. administration to the next. A typical peacetime change in administration tends to create a “no one home” phenomenon, as current officials leave their posts while their successors wait for months to be confirmed and receive security clearances. The country cannot afford to take a similar approach during a time of war. Current policymakers in the executive branch, Congressional leaders, and senior military officers all must focus on the need to ensure that the transition from this administration’s Iraq policy to the next is as seamless as possible.

This President's Iraq legacy will be heavily influenced by how the tale of these two transitions is told by future historians. And, considering what this administration will leave its successor, it has an obligation to do more than coast to the finish. This report outlines U.S. interests in Iraq and the intersection of these interests with broader regional and global concerns. The report then evaluates current security and political progress in Iraq, and the requirements for moving the country toward sustainable stability. It outlines four strategic options—unconditional engagement, unconditional disengagement, conditional disengagement, and conditional engagement—and argues in favor of conditional engagement. Finally, the report discusses steps the Bush administration, the U.S. military, and Congress should take to prepare for the critical transitions ahead, setting the stage for a significant change in strategy in 2009.

THE STAKES: U.S. INTERESTS IN IRAQ AND BEYOND

Any discussion of future Iraq strategy must begin with an articulation of U.S. interests and a concept of strategic success. A statement of U.S. interests must resist the tendency to define them in an overly Iraq-centric manner (ignoring or downplaying broader concerns), and avoid defining success in Iraq in such maximalist terms that it is unlikely to be achieved at acceptable cost.

After five years of war in Iraq (and nearly seven years in Afghanistan), cracks are appearing in the foundation of America's political, economic, and military power. Such strains highlight the need to not only examine our policy in Iraq, but also reassess how Iraq fits within the broader constellation of U.S. regional and global interests. As tensions with Iran increase, and challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan demand more attention, it is important to consider the relative importance of the various threats to American interests.¹ America has important interests within Iraq and the broader Middle East, but they need to be balanced within and assessed against other vital concerns. Specifically, the war in Iraq intersects with three broad U.S. national interests: combating international terrorism; preserving stability in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East; and maintaining America's global leadership (see Figure 1).

Combating International Terrorism

First, America has a long-term national interest in combating international terrorism. Within Iraq, this requires preventing the establishment of safe havens designed to export terrorism. Put another way, Iraq must not become the equivalent of Afghanistan on September 10th, 2001. The

prospects of this happening have declined markedly over the past year and a half. In the aftermath of the "Sunni Awakening," Iraq's Sunni Arabs have decisively turned against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Moreover, Iraq's Shia majority and Kurdish minority populations clearly continue to have a profound interest in eliminating the threat posed by AQI and other Sunni jihadist movements. Consequently, although AQI remnants still possess the capability to carry out periodic spectacular attacks within Iraq's borders, the danger of AQI establishing safe havens for international terrorism in Iraq is receding. In a March 2008 report, Frederick Kagan, an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, astutely observed:

AQI's position in Iraq collapsed in 2007... Iraqis of both sects and many ethnicities have openly and violently rejected al Qaeda and its ideology. Al Qaeda's image in the country is so negative that Iraqis now tend to blame almost every bad thing on al Qaeda, whether or not AQI is responsible. The prospect of establishing a meaningful 'Islamic State in Iraq' (ISI) with its capital somewhere other than a cow-shed in some nameless remote village has become extremely remote.²

Echoing these sentiments, Ambassador Ryan Crocker said in May, "You are not going to hear me say that al Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now."³

Al Qaeda in Iraq is likely to remain on the run so long as the Iraqi government maintains an effective counter-terrorism posture, and Iraq does not descend back into all-out sectarian warfare of the type seen in 2006 and early 2007. An Iraq backsliding into widespread civil strife is the one scenario that might encourage Sunni Arabs to renew ties

¹ An instructive example from history can be found in the two conferences held between America and its key allies during World War II in Quebec City. The conferences, held in August 1943 and September 1944, were designed to determine which theatres would constitute the main effort and which issues would receive the preponderance of attention and resources.

² Frederick Kagan, *Iraq: The Way Ahead*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2008, pp. 17–18.

³ Quoted in Lee Keath, "US Ambassador: 'Al-Qaida Close to Defeat in Iraq,'" *Associated Press*, May 24, 2008.

“A continued large-scale U.S. military presence in Iraq also plays into a key pillar of al Qaeda’s global strategy: the desire to bog American military power down and thereby produce economic and strategic exhaustion.”

to AQI as a self-defense mechanism against ethnic and sectarian rivals. Advancing America’s broader interest in combating international terrorism, therefore, requires preventing Iraq from becoming a failed state.

However, policymakers must be mindful of the negative externalities and opportunity costs that arise from the commitment of such a high proportion of U.S. military and intelligence assets in Iraq for the wider war on terrorism. As the April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq made clear, America’s continued large-scale presence in Iraq remains a “cause célèbre” for the jihadist movement worldwide, “breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world

and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement.”⁴ In January 2007, Paul Pillar, former National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he agreed with the NIE’s conclusions, “as I believe would almost any other serious student of international terrorism.”⁵ Beyond the boon for recruitment, a continued large-scale military presence in Iraq also plays into a key pillar of al Qaeda’s global strategy: the desire to bog American military power down and thereby produce economic and strategic exhaustion.⁶

The opportunity costs for the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan — an area Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell described as particularly important to al Qaeda — are also particularly acute.⁷ In Afghanistan, the Karzai government is chronically weak and the Taliban and al Qaeda are resurgent.⁸ Analysts suggest that success in Afghanistan requires increased manpower and the commitment of additional critical enablers — such as Special Operations Forces (SOF) and mobility, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets — currently devoted to Iraq.⁹ The United States incurred a substantial strategic risk by failing to consolidate gains in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, choosing instead to commit to a war of choice in Iraq. Ultimately, as terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman told Congress last year, “with America trapped in Iraq, al Qaeda has had us exactly where they want us. Iraq, for them, has

⁴ *Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States dated April 2006*: 3, available online at: http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf.

⁵ Paul Pillar, Regional Dimensions of the War in Iraq: Statement to Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate January 9, 2007: p.3.

⁶ In a statement released on jihadist websites on December 27, 2004, Bin Laden declared: “All we have to do is to send two *mujahidin* to the furthest point East to raise a cloth on which is written ‘al-Qaeda,’ in order to make the [U.S.] generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without achieving for it anything of note . . . so we are continuing this policy of bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy.”

⁷ Michael McConnell, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Armed Services Committee,” February 27, 2008.

⁸ See Carlotta Gall, “Taliban Make Afghan Stability a Distant Goal,” *The New York Times* (May 22, 2008), and Karl Inderfurth, “Afghan Alarm,” *The Baltimore Sun* (March 25, 2008).

⁹ See Anthony Cordesman, *The Afghan-Pakistan War: A Status Report*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 12, 2008. Also see Caroline Wadhams and Lawrence Korb, *The Forgotten Front*, Center for American Progress, November 2007.

been an effective means to preoccupy American military forces and distract U.S. attention while al Qaeda has re-grouped and re-organized since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.”¹⁰

Al Qaeda has reestablished a safe haven for international terrorism in Pakistan. As the July 2007 NIE on the terrorist threat warned, “[Al Qaeda] has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), for its operational lieutenants and its top leadership [including Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri].”¹¹ The growing jihadist challenge to the government in nuclear-armed Pakistan also risks destabilizing South and Central Asia, generating a myriad of potential contingencies that may require future U.S. military action.¹²

In short, the need to address the problem of al Qaeda in Iraq needs to be put in the context of the continued global threat posed by al Qaeda and its associated movements elsewhere. Although AQI has experienced significant setbacks over the last year, as a consequence of U.S. actions and changing circumstances in Iraq, the continued presence of the preponderance of American combat power in Iraq risks perpetuating al Qaeda’s ideological narrative, long-term strategic objectives, and complicates counter-terrorism efforts elsewhere. Therefore, while the U.S. must strive to prevent the emergence of a large-scale al Qaeda safe haven in Iraq, the struggle against international terrorism also requires that America downsize its presence in, and eventually leave, Iraq.

Preserving Stability in the Middle East

Second, the United States has a significant geopolitical and economic interest in preserving stability in the Middle East and particularly the Persian Gulf. Global energy markets remain dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and America has important and long-standing relationships with key states in the region.

Regional stability requires preventing a full-fledged civil war in Iraq. An Iraq in chaos could easily become the location for a regional conflagration. Saudi Arabia would be tempted to overtly support Iraq’s Sunni community, Iran would likely escalate its lethal assistance to Iraqi Shia militias, and Turkey might intervene in the north to preempt Kurdish secession from a failed Iraqi state. There is also a danger that resumption of large-scale ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq would produce spill-over effects—including a new tidal wave of refugees or a bleed-out of jihadists—that would contribute to cascading instability across the region.¹³

Regional stability also requires preventing Iranian hegemony in Iraq, but there is a significant difference between hegemony and influence. Geographic realities and long-standing religious ties mean that U.S. policymakers must accept that Iran will inevitably exercise significant political, economic, and cultural influence in Iraq. At the same time, recent Iraqi government responses to Iranian provocations in Basra and Sadr City suggest that nascent Iraqi nationalism (even among its Shia population) will likely prevent total Iranian dominance.¹⁴ American policy should

¹⁰Bruce Hoffman, “Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command Posed by the Global Terrorist Threat: Al Qaeda on the Run or on the March?” Statement before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities February, 14 2007; p.18.

¹¹Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Press Release: National Intelligence Estimate — The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland*, July 2007, available online at http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf.

¹²For a recent description of instability in Pakistan, see K. Alan Kronstadt, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*: Congressional Research Service Report RL33498, 28 April 2008.

¹³For a discussion of how civil wars can spill-over into neighboring states, see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War*: Brookings Institution, 2007, especially pp. 1–26.

¹⁴Both a strong sense of Iraqi nationalism and a wariness of Iran’s growing influence were evident in meetings Michèle Flournoy had with numerous Shia officials in central and southern Iraq in February 2008.

Figure 1

AMERICA'S INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE IRAQ		
Interests	Objectives Inside Iraq	Objectives Outside Iraq
Combat international terrorism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent AQI safe haven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free up more resources for Afghanistan and other contingencies • Undermine AQ ideology/appeal worldwide
Preserve regional stability in the Middle East/Persian Gulf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent Iraq from becoming the location for a regional war or the source of cascading instability • Prevent Iranian hegemony over Iraq's affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter Iranian influence in the region • Make the U.S. deterrent more credible vis-à-vis Iran
Maintain U.S. leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent genocide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid long-term "occupation" • Avoid strategic exhaustion and "breaking" U.S. ground forces • Enhance ability to respond to global crises

therefore focus on curtailing lethal Iranian assistance to Iraqi militants and preventing the emergence of a power vacuum in Iraq that Tehran might fill.

It must also be recognized that Iran has been the largest strategic beneficiary of the removal of Saddam Hussein, and that a long-term, large-scale U.S. military presence in Iraq continues to benefit Tehran.¹⁵ Such a presence limits rather than enables American strategic options in the region, hindering our ability to check Iran's wider geopolitical ambitions or effectively deter Iranian aggression. Restraining Iranian influence in the region therefore requires checking Tehran's destabilizing actions in Iraq while simultaneously avoiding the kind of strategic over-commitment in Iraq that plays into Iran's hands.

Maintaining U.S. Global Leadership

Third, the United States has an important interest in renewing and preserving its position of global leadership. After five years in a deeply unpopular war, America's standing in the world has shown significant signs of erosion. In terms of both hard and soft power — from the enormous strain on our ground forces, to an international image at an historic nadir — America's position as world leader and steward of the international system is in peril. Addressing the erosion of U.S. hard and soft power requires recognizing that an open-ended commitment in Iraq negatively affects both, while also acknowledging the danger of leaving Iraq in a manner that produces a large-scale humanitarian disaster.

¹⁵ See Vali Nasr, "Who Wins in Iraq? Iran," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2007, and Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

An unsustainable commitment of U.S. military resources in Iraq generates significant risks to America's hard power. The risk of strategic exhaustion—the inability to rapidly respond to global contingencies and the enormous strain on our ground forces and economy produced by the war—is real and must be factored into future Iraq policy. The United States simply cannot sustain a level of military investment in Iraq that leaves us vulnerable to strategic surprise, nor can America continue to ask its all-volunteer armed forces to endure a deployment tempo that risks hollowing out the U.S. Army and Marine Corps.¹⁶

The Iraq War has also proven to be enormously damaging to America's soft power, increasing anti-American sentiment and creating a crisis of confidence in American leadership.¹⁷ Due to the widespread and unfavorable perception around the world that the United States continues to “occupy” Iraq, drawing down the American military presence in Iraq is critical to renewing our moral leadership over the long term.

At the same time, any U.S. withdrawal must be carried out carefully so as not to further erode America's moral standing. Although it is beyond the ability of the United States to prevent all ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq, the United States has a profound national interest and moral obligation in avoiding genocide.¹⁸ An emerging balance of power between ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq makes such an outcome unlikely, but there is still an incredible capacity for violence in Iraqi society. Minimizing the risk of genocide therefore necessitates taking steps to prevent a renewal of full-fledged sectarian warfare and the failure of the Iraqi state.

Summary

A comprehensive understanding of U.S. interests that properly situates Iraq within a broader context of regional and global concerns suggests that U.S. policy must simultaneously attempt to avoid a failed state *in Iraq* while not strategically over-committing *to Iraq*. Balancing these interests means moving away from maximalist definitions

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of success or unachievable notions of “victory” toward a more pragmatic and achievable goal of “sustainable stability:” a level of stability in Iraq that is sustainable with a substantially reduced American troop presence and, eventually, a complete U.S. withdrawal. As detailed below, achieving sustainable stability requires more than short-term improvements in security. It requires meaningful political accommodation among Iraq's competing ethno-sectarian communities and much improved governance throughout the country.

¹⁶For example, while all of the Army's brigade combat teams (BCTs) deployed or deploying overseas are considered ready, the Army has only one ready BCT in reserve should other contingencies arise. This increases America's level of strategic risk. On the strain on America's ground forces see Michèle A. Flournoy, “Strengthening the Readiness of the U.S. Military,” Statement to U.S. House Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2008.

¹⁷See the work of the PEW Global Attitudes Project, summarized in Andrew Kohut and Richard Wike, “All the World's a Stage,” *The National Interest Online*, May 6, 2008, available online at: <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=17502>.

¹⁸For a discussion of preventing genocide in Iraq, see James N. Miller and Shawn W. Brimley, *Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq*, Center for a New American Security, June 2007, pp. 20–21, 38.

PROGRESS IN IRAQ?

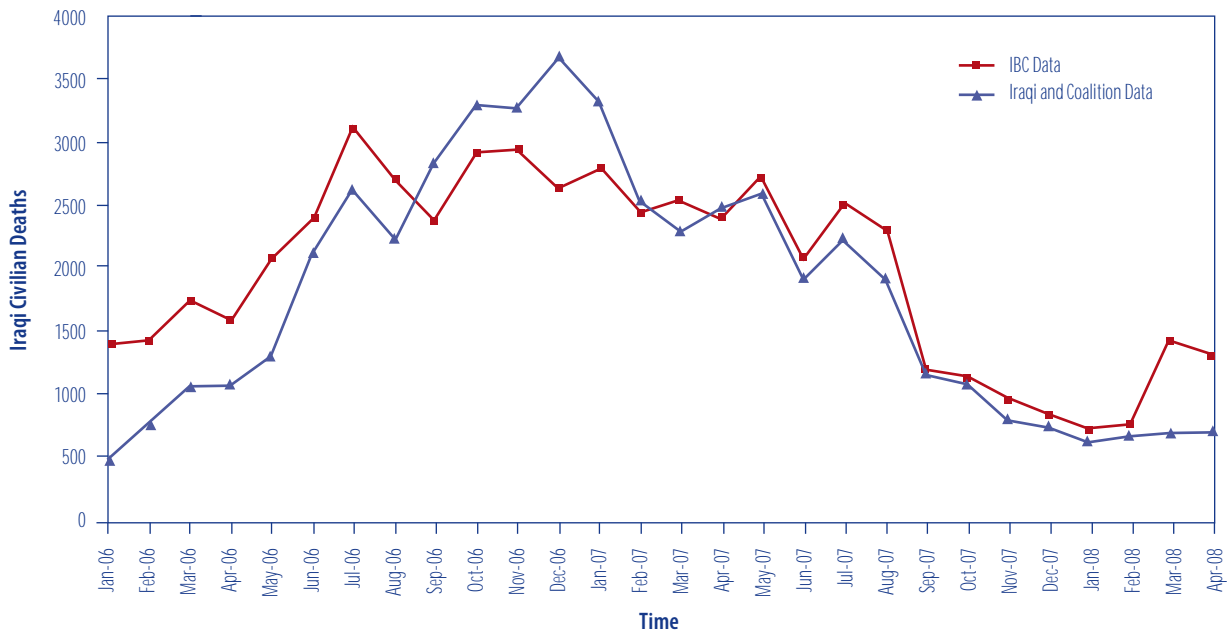
When President Bush announced the “surge” in January 2007, the stated goal was to tamp down sectarian and insurgent violence in Iraq to pave the way toward political compromise. The security situation has improved dramatically since then, but political progress remains slow.

“There has been significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation since the surge began.”

Security Progress

There has been significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation since the surge began. The clearest evidence for this is the declining level of Iraqi civilian casualties. Figure 2 provides two sets of estimates. The first is derived from Coalition and Iraqi ministry tallies provided by Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I). The second estimate comes from Iraq Body Count (IBC), a non-profit organization that tracks civilian fatalities reported in the media. The estimates suggest different magnitudes, with IBC mostly higher, but both reveal similar trends. Civilian deaths skyrocketed in 2006 after the February bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samarra tipped Iraq into sectarian civil war. In early 2007, violence began to decline somewhat, albeit unevenly, before dropping dramatically beginning in August. Since December 2007, civilian death rates have stabilized at roughly

Figure 2: Iraqi Civilian Deaths



Sources: Iraq Body Count, available online at: www.iraqbodycount.org (includes pending and preliminary data for March-April 2008 provided to authors); and Multi-National Force-Iraq (numbers for March-April 2008 do not include deaths in Basra and Sadr City).

Figure 3: Security Incidents

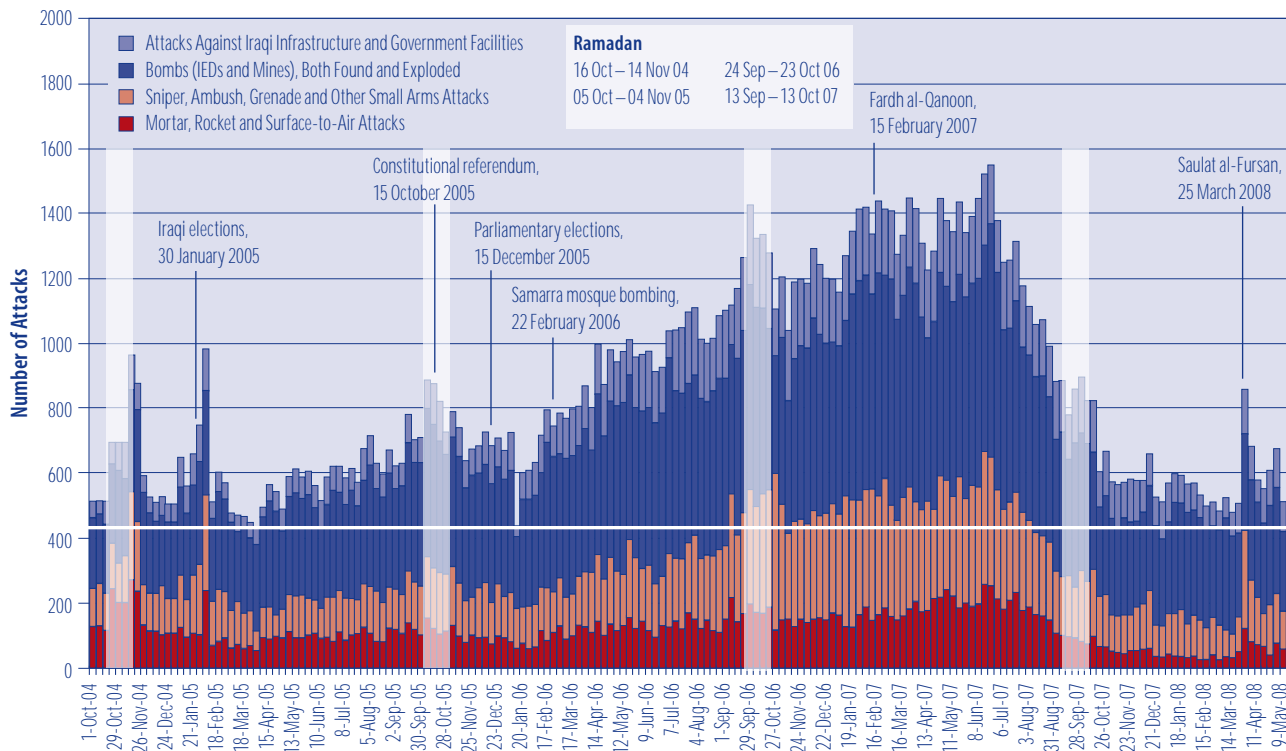
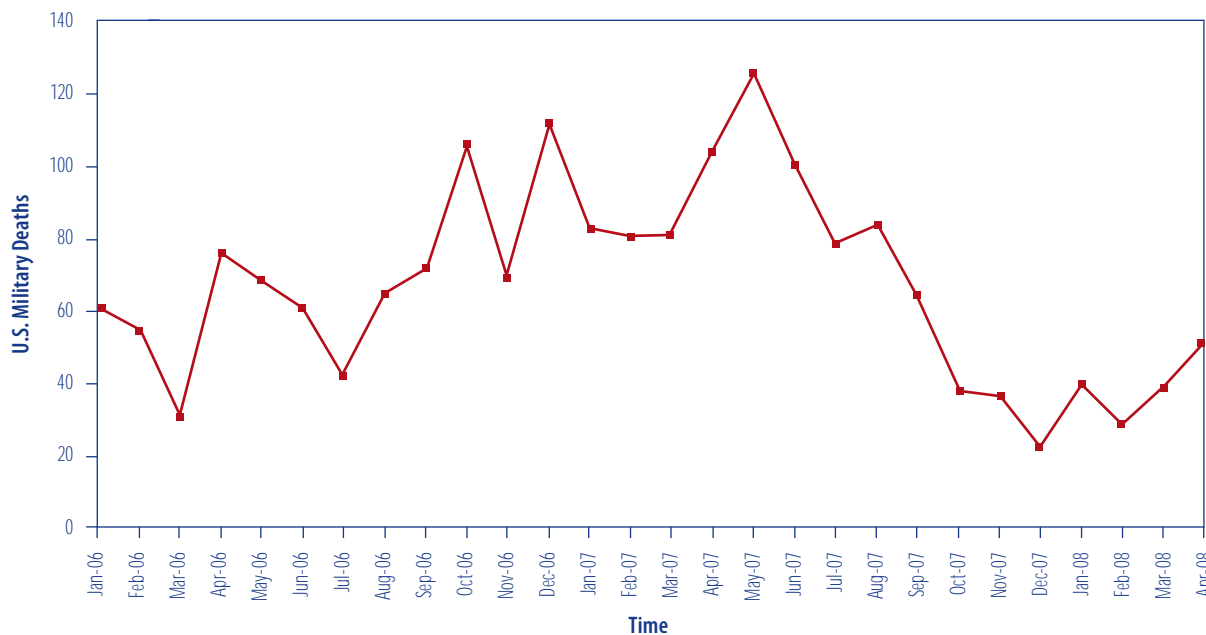


Chart includes potential attacks (IEDs/mines found and cleared) and executed attacks.

Source: Multi-National Force-Iraq.

Figure 4: U.S. Military Deaths



Source: Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, available online at: <http://www.icasualties.org/oif/>.

pre-Samarra levels (although clashes in Basra and Sadr City have contributed to a recent uptick). In addition, as Figure 3 indicates, the total number of all types of attacks on U.S. forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and Iraqi civilians have significantly decreased since the surge began, eventually declining to 2005 levels.

Falling American casualty rates also suggest an improvement in the security environment. Overall, 2007 was the deadliest year in Iraq for the U.S. military, but, as Figure 4 shows, casualties fell substantially in the latter part of the year. From a peak three-month total of 331 U.S. troops killed in April-June 2007, the numbers declined by 70 percent to 98 in October-December, the lowest three-month total of the entire war. Fatalities have increased somewhat thus far in 2008, but are still at levels not seen consistently since 2003.

Finally, U.S. and Iraqi forces have made great strides against AQI. According to U.S. commanders, AQI has been crippled in Baghdad and Anbar since the beginning of 2007.¹⁹ AQI remnants continue to be active in some areas, especially in mixed-population areas that border Iraqi Kurdistan, but MNF-I data suggests that the capability, numbers, and freedom of movement of AQI and other Sunni insurgent groups has been substantially degraded during the period of the surge (see Figure 5). Moreover, as a consequence of ongoing U.S.-Iraqi operations in Mosul, AQI's largest remaining urban stronghold, the organization is likely to see its fortunes decline further.²⁰

Four Sources of Security Progress

Four factors have combined to improve the security situation in Iraq over the past year-and-a-half. The first factor is the surge. The surge married 28,500 additional U.S. forces with better counterinsurgency tactics and a much-improved "Joint Campaign Plan" designed by MNF-I Commander General David Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker.²¹ As additional troops began to arrive in mid-February, the military kicked-off Operation Fardh al-Qanoon ("Enforcing the Law"). American troops fanned out into dozens of joint security stations and combat outposts, and partnered with Iraqi forces in volatile neighborhoods to provide 24/7 population security.

At the same time, the U.S. military continued to target Sunni insurgents (especially AQI cadre) and began to move more aggressively against "rogue" elements of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia. The U.S. military also stepped up activities in the "Baghdad belts" — including northern Babil, eastern Anbar, the southern outskirts of Baghdad, and portions of Diyala province — in an effort to eliminate insurgent sanctuaries, interdict the flow of militants and bombs into Baghdad, and isolate the capital. Then, in June, as the final installments of the surge arrived, the U.S. military launched "Operation Phantom Thunder," a series of large-scale clearing offensives against AQI strongholds and Shia militants in the belts. Phantom Thunder, a corps-level operation, was the single largest coordinated offensive since the invasion. This was immediately followed by "Operation Phantom Strike" and "Operation Phantom Phoenix," corps-level offensives aimed at pursuing AQI remnants

¹⁹Thomas E. Ricks and Karen DeYoung, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Reported Crippled," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2007; and Damien Cave, "Militant Group is Out of Baghdad, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2007.

²⁰Eric Hamilton, "Operation Lion's Roar," Institute for the Study of War, May 12, 2008, available online at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/commentary/operation-lion's-roar>.

²¹David Kilcullen, "Don't Confuse the 'Surge' with the Strategy," *Small Wars Journal Blog*, January 19, 2007, available online at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/01/dont-confuse-the-surge-with-th/>; and Ann Scott Tyson, "New Strategy for War Stresses Iraqi Politics," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2007.

