Measuring Progress In Iraq

By Colin Kahl, Fellow, CNAS and Assistant Professor, Georgetown University

Nobody seems to know how to talk about and evaluate "progress" in Iraq, or the lack thereof.

The White House, General David Petraeus, most Republicans, and conservative think tanks talk about modest security gains and the fact that U.S. troops have retaken the tactical momentum on the ground. This camp argues for more patience to build on current gains.

Others, including most Democrats, a small but growing number of moderate Republicans, and some enlisted soldiers and noncommissioned officers emphasize that security gains have been minimal and, in terms of the Iraqi political metrics that really count, argue the surge has failed. For this camp, troop drawdowns should begin as soon as possible. Meanwhile, a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq paints a "glass half full, glass half empty" picture of tentative progress that will be very difficult to maintain.

In the context of all this confusion, progress should be evaluated along several dimensions: type, location, causal direction, and possibilities for aggregation and sustainability.

Type: Security vs. Political

There has been security progress in Iraq. The overall level of violence against Iraqi civilians is down from its peak last year. There has also been important degradation of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which serves U.S. interests in preventing a ter-

rorist safe haven in Iraq and limits one "accelerant" to the ongoing civil war. But we must keep all of this in perspective. Recent security gains only appear to be progress relative to how bad things were in 2006. Compared to 2004-2005 (not exactly peaceful times, but pre-civil war), the security situation still looks pretty bad.

More importantly, there has been almost zero genuine national political progress. The surge was premised on the notion that security gains would open "breathing space" for progress at the center of Iraqi politics. This has not yet occurred, and the NIE suggests it will not occur anytime soon. Indeed, in some ways, there has been political regress. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's "unity" government has been severely weakened by the defections of major Sunni and secular parties in recent weeks. Maliki's ruling coalition is now narrower and more sectarian than ever, and rumors of his inevitable replacement are growing.

A joint declaration on August 26 by Iraq's top five political leaders (Maliki; Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish President of Iraq; Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, the Sunni head of the Iraqi Islamic Party; Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi of the Shia Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC); and Massoud Barzani, president of the semiautonomous Kurdish region) announcing consensus to move forward on draft legislation to ease de-Baathification, hold provincial elections, and release thousands of Sunni detainees is welcome news. Yet such declarations have been made before and have been torpedoed by the Iraqi parliament. With

so little Sunni participation in government and so much distrust of Maliki, it is not clear that any eleventh-hour laws passed prior to the mid-September report on the surge by Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker will actually push the Iraqis toward national reconciliation.

Replacing Maliki, as some are now calling for, might (or might not) help at the margins, but, as the NIE notes, the real problems are structurally hardwired into Iraqi institutions and social dynamics. Iraq's violence and lack of political progress result from weak and corrupt institutions, an acute ethno-sectarian security dilemma, and zero-sum competition among Iraq's rival factions over power and resources. In short, they are not fundamentally about individual leaders.

Location

In terms of security, there has been a reduction in sectarian murders and insurgent attacks in areas where there are either more American troops or more cooperation between U.S. troops and local Sunni sheiks and militants, or both. This is a result of:

- *U.S. forces taking the lead in population security in some areas such as Baghdad and Diyala (and monitoring Iraqi Security Forces that were previously incapable of preventing, or complicit in, the violence);*

- *The ability to simultaneously disrupt multiple enemy sanctuaries at the same time—as evidenced by Operation Phantom Thunder in the Baghdad belts;*

- *Some Shia militias laying low (in Baghdad) to wait out the surge; and*

- *The Sunni "awakening" against AQI in Anbar and other locales.*

The first two are direct consequences of the surge; the third, the reaction of Shia militias, is an indirect byproduct that will likely reverse itself as soon as the surge winds down. The fourth trend, the much-publicized cooperative arrangements between American troops and anti-AQI Sunni tribes and insurgents, has the least to do with the surge. The Sunni awakening is mostly a consequence of enemy-of-my-enemy dynamics between Sunni groups and AQI that emerged before the surge (as a consequence of AQI atrocities and power grabs in tribal areas), are causally independent from the surge, and may stem more from preparations by Sunni groups to position themselves politically and militarily for an eventual American withdrawal after the surge.

Politically, there has been no progress in Baghdad. There has been political progress in Anbar among the Sunnis, but this is not sectarian reconciliation or even "accommodation" since Anbar is homogenous. Politics has regressed in the south as Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi (JAM), SIIC (and its Badr militia), and the Fadhila Party violently compete for local dominance.

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Causal direction

To the degree that there is progress in Iraq, it is all "bottom-up" rather than "top-down." The central government is broken. It is a corrupt, failed state. All the "progress" is occurring via ad hoc arrangements at the local and provincial level. Moreover, bottom-up progress may, paradoxically, be undermining top-down progress, as U.S. cooperation with Sunni sheiks and former militants exacerbates Shia paranoia. This may be reducing incentives for Maliki to compromise or for Shia militias to demobilize.

Aggregation and sustainability

Can the limited gains in particular locales aggregate to something that is meaningful and sustainable over the long run? Much depends on U.S. policy in the coming months, but even more hinges on the actions of the Iraqis.

The NIE concludes that a rapid change in the total size or mission of U.S. troops will cause backsliding on the progress thus far. Petraeus and Crocker will likely say the same thing when they provide their status report to Congress. This is undoubtedly true, but it begs the questions of when the transition can occur (since, at some point, the United States must leave Iraq) and under what conditions this transition is possible? The two requirements for sustainability are ISF and local security capabilities, and political accommodation.

Sustaining gains in population security hinges on being able to hand "cleared" areas over to local or national security forces to "hold." The capabilities and loyalties of the ISF are thus essential. In this regard, the Iraqi Army is becoming more capable and professional, but it still requires substantial support from U.S. forces and remains prone to sectarian tendencies. The Iraqi national police are a disaster, and local police are a big problem too. They often produce insecurity through their incompetence or complicity with militia activity. Some of the newly recruited "auxiliary" police and provincial security forces show promise in Sunni areas, but there are risks

associated with empowering these groups, including aggravating Sunni-Shia tensions and the potential for future blowback against U.S. forces.

But the real key is politics. The progress the U.S. military has made in the security area can only aggregate to sustainable gains in an environment in which the fundamental dynamics driving the conflict are addressed. The NIE concluded that the United States can only affect this process at the margins; it is mainly the Iraqis who will determine whether Iraq can be stable over the long-term. There are two scenarios for a political solution:

- *The ascendance of a strongman (e.g., Iyad Allawi or someone else) who reasserts authority and generates order from the center; or*

- *The emergence of a highly decentralized state, perhaps along the Bosnia model.*

The first scenario is a fantasy. There are no George Washingtons or Kemal Ataturks in Iraq and, even if there were, Iraq's central institutions can't be fixed and wielded in a way to produce stability from the top-down anytime soon.

The second scenario is the direction Iraq is headed in given the self-separation of the population, but whether the outcome is stable or incredibly violent over the long-term is yet to be determined. Continued decentralization and separation might lead to a relatively stable equilibrium if it is structured in a way that addresses the security dilemma (both among communities and between localities and the center) driving the conflict. A perfect three-way Shia-Sunni-Kurd split into homogenous regions (i.e., a "soft partition" as in Bosnia) is unlikely. There will be substantial mixing in many parts of the country, and perhaps a desire for a unified "Iraq" among much of the population, for the foreseeable future. But, all politics in Iraq is becoming local, the central government will remain weak, and U.S. policies must be designed to accommodate this reality.

First, local groups must feel confident that they can protect "their" communities without possessing capabilities that clearly threaten other groups (i.e., their military capabilities should be "defensive" and there must be a rough balance of power among competing groups). Second, local groups must have a sufficient stake in the center—via oil revenue sharing and financial dependencies on the national government to fund and support local security forces—so they are deterred from attempting to topple the government or completely break away. Third, efforts to build local Sunni security forces must be sufficiently transparent to reduce anxiety within the Shia-dominated central government. Finally, there must be a capable, neutral Iraqi Army. The army must become a national, non-sectarian guardian of the state that is capable of providing security in mixed neighborhoods and regions, and police the seams between groups.

This represents a very difficult set of balancing acts to pull off, but U.S. strategy has to be oriented toward this objective.

Conclusion

The surge should end no later than the spring of 2008, when the five additional brigades added to the U.S. force are scheduled to begin rotating home.

At this point, if not sooner, the U.S. militarily should transition to a new role that:

- *Draws down military units from relatively homogenous areas, taking them out of the lead in population*

security (leaving only advisors and quick reaction forces outside of major cities to support allied local groups in these areas);

- *Focuses remaining U.S.-led population security operations in mixed areas with the goal of transitioning the lead in these locales to competent and trusted Iraqi forces as soon as possible;*

- *Forges linkages and dependencies between local security forces and the ISF;*

- *Continues to strengthen and professionalize the Iraqi Army, while breaking up the components of the Ministry of Interior capable of projecting violence throughout Iraq (the National Police/commando units) and integrating them into the Ministry of Defense; and*

- *Continues counterterrorism operations against AQI.*

The ultimate goal of these actions should be decentralized security in homogenous areas (e.g., Anbar, Kurdistan, the Shia-dominated south), while assisting localities in mixed areas (e.g., Baghdad, Diyala, Mosul) develop police they are comfortable with for door-to-door security backed up by a professional, non-sectarian Iraqi Army.

Over time, U.S. forces should withdraw from population security missions entirely, handing responsibility over to local security forces or Iraqi Army units, and moving to an advisory and support role where needed. Given the current

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political environment in the United States and the incredible strains on U.S. ground forces, risk should be accepted to facilitate this transition sooner rather than later.

The feasibility of this transition hinges crucially on training and deploying substantial numbers of American advisors, and, as such, preparations must be put in place now to grow additional advisory capacity.

Politically and economically, inside Iraq, the U.S. should continue to promote local development and institutional capacity building to make local governments viable. Continued pressure should be placed on the national government on the oil issue and provincial elections (again, to make regions viable). American support to all Iraqi parties should be made conditional on their behavior.

Finally, on the diplomatic front, the U.S. should embed its military transition plans within an overall effort by U.S., regional, and UN actors to engage in formal negotiations with all of Iraq's warring parties (and their external patrons), with the exception of AQI, to establish the specific timetables for American withdrawals from certain areas. The goal of these negotiations should be to use the promise of a phased American withdrawal to coax anti-coalition groups (including new umbrella organizations representing insurgents) to the table. The United States should be willing to trade drawdowns from, and reorientation of the military mission in, certain locales to extract concessions from groups that resent our presence—concessions that would be designed to advance American interests and make other Iraqi groups feel more secure. Efforts should also be made to reach regional and international compacts on humanitarian support, refugee assistance, and Iraq's territorial integrity. In short, a diplomatic surge will be needed for a successful transition to a post-surge world.