



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Whither the Surge in Iraq?

Hiltermann, J.R.

### Citation

Hiltermann, J. R. (2007). Whither the Surge in Iraq? *Isim Review*, 20(1), 26-27. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17208>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17208>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Whither the Surge in Iraq?

JOOST R. HILTMANN

Having failed in its declared objective to turn Iraq into a stable, thriving and democratic country in the Middle East, a model unto the autocratic regimes that are the region's unfortunate hallmark, the United States has had to scale back its ambitions. Facing a growing sectarian conflict and fearing the situation would spin out of control it announced a security plan for Baghdad and surrounding towns, as well as Anbar province, in January 2007. The plan consisted of a military initiative involving an extra injection of some 30,000 troops (a "Surge") that was designed to create space and time for the Iraqi government to reach a political deal with its opponents.

In September, the Surge's architect and implementer, Gen. David Petraeus, was able to claim he had made serious headway on the military front: a number of violent actors, such as Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and the Sadrist movement's Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi, JAM), had been put on the defensive, and Sunni tribes had launched a revolt against AQI (the "awakening"). But on the political front, he was unable to show even the least bit of progress: the only thing the Maliki government had exhibited since January was its inability, or reluctance, to reach out effectively to Sunni Arab leaders with a view toward bringing them back into the new Iraqi order.

## Military presence and political strife

The fatal flaw in the security plan was the decision to rely on the Maliki government to bring peace to Iraq. This government is dysfunctional and weak. In name it is a government of national unity, but in reality it deserves not a single part of its name: it is not unified, it does not represent the nation, and it has failed to govern. While popularly elected (in December 2005), it lacks popular legitimacy. This paradox is resolved when we understand the nature of Iraqi politics: if a majority of Iraqis voted in 2005, they did so by religious edict and simply because they could. By default (in the absence of any alternatives), they voted for the coalition that had received the Shi'ite religious leadership's endorsement. Yet this coalition's components were, with the exception of the Sadrist movement, parties that returned from exile in 2003 and that by and large have failed to connect with the Iraqi street since then. The Kurdish parties do enjoy a measure of popular support, but only in Kurdistan, and their participation in the Iraqi government enjoys very little support among Kurds, as the Kurds' overriding goal is to secede from Iraq, if not in this generation, then the next.

Not only is the government weak, it is constituted on the basis of an ethno-sectarian logic that favours two communities (Shiites and Kurds) at the expense of the third (Sunni Arabs). As such, it is unwilling to compromise with the Sunni Arabs, whom it considers unchanged regime loyalists, Baathists, and terrorists. To bring Sunni Arabs back into the state's security structures would, in their view, fatally undermine the new order and

**The security plan for Iraq has failed, not least because of its reliance on the Maliki government. This government is dysfunctional, lacks popular legitimacy, and has failed to govern. Prospects for the near future are bleak. The looming civil war will involve strife between a great variety of groups; U.S. forces will be drawn into these conflicts; and there is a serious threat that neighbouring countries also may be sucked into this vortex. The challenge to counter this trend is enormous. As the unilateralist approach to managing world affairs has shown its bankruptcy, there is now an urgent need to return to multilateral diplomacy, even if there are no guarantees of success.**

augur the return of the former regime in a new guise. Rather than reconciling with its adversaries, the government thinks it will be able to crush them once the Americans have completed their job of building up, training, and equipping the Iraqi security forces. This is why it does not want the Americans to leave just yet, however much it decries the occupation and calls for a timetable for U.S. withdrawal.

This position has a mirror image. Sunni Arab leaders also have come to the conclusion, contrary to their earlier insistence that U.S. forces should withdraw at once, that these forces should stay, because the "Surge" has shown

that only the Americans are able to protect them from a Shi'ite militia onslaught in Baghdad, which threatens to turn this mosaic of a capital into a Sunni-free city. They hope they can convince the Americans that the Maliki government is a proxy for Iran, and that the Sunnis and the Americans have a common interest in countering Iran's spreading influence in Iraq and the wider Gulf region. They even hope that in this way they can get rid of the Shi'ite militias and regain power.

All sides, except AQI, are tugging at the Americans to stay and do their bidding—to choose their camp in this civil war, which continues, even if temporarily subdued by the additional U.S. military presence. The Bush administration and the U.S. Congress have made very clear they do not want their forces to play this role, but what options do they have? In the absence of a political strategy that gets around the Maliki government's weaknesses and obstinacy, the Americans could either leave or stay. An early departure, however, is not a viable option. Such a move would leave behind a vacuum that could only be filled by non-state actors that are ready to go at each other's throats

with heavier weapons, thus increasing the possibility of an escalation that could engulf the entire region. In turn, this would require a massive U.S. military intervention aimed at protecting its strategic interests in the Gulf.

## Prospects

In reality, U.S. forces will not be able to stay out of an Iraqi civil war. This is because there will not be a single, neatly defined civil war, for example, one between Sunnis and Shiites. The more likely prognosis is one of a failed state in which a great variety of groups, enjoying at most local support, will battle for turf: rival militias, insurgent groups, warlords, and crime gangs. A sectarian conflict will coexist with, and intersect, an intra-Sunni conflict (for example, between tribal elements and AQI), an intra-Shiite conflict (between the Supreme Council's Badr militia and JAM), and possibly an Arab-Kurdish conflict (over the Kurdish region's boundaries, especially in Kirkuk).

In this confusing mix, the Americans will find groups that may be its friends one day and its enemies the next, the principal criterion being whether they serve U.S. interests: to protect a semblance of government and keep its adversaries divided and off-balance. The U.S., in other words, will seek to "manage" the Iraqi civil war(s)

It should be beginning to dawn on all the principal actors ... that the failure to contain the Iraqi crisis may spell a cataclysm of global proportions.

Image not available online

PHOTO BY CEERWAN AZIZ / © REUTERS, 2006

with a view to containing the conflict within the country's borders. Such brinkmanship, however, entails enormous risks of spillover. Neighbouring states may be sucked into this vortex, against their will and strategic interest, as they watch their own proxies being hammered by their enemies' proxies. A regional conflagration would then enter the realm of possibilities.

There is a growing awareness in the region of the dangerous situation that has developed. If there is hope of stabilizing Iraq and its borders, it lies in the fact that all of Iraq's neighbours have one thing in common: none of them wants Iraq to fall apart. To turn this premise into a workable relationship is one of the difficult challenges ahead.

Despite President Bush's early, adamant rejection of engagement with Iran in his response to the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Study Group in December 2006, the Americans have started talking to the Iranians—for the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the embassy takeover that followed. On at least three occasions, representatives of the two countries have met to discuss the situation in Iraq (only), but so far progress has been minimal, barely rising above mutual recriminations of the "You're totally wrong" and "You're at fault" type. Almost certainly, to be successful on Iraq, the two sides will have to expand their discussion to include the nuclear question. It is the continuing U.S. threat against Iran over its suspected offensive nuclear programme that has induced the Iranians to act as spoilers in Iraq rather than play the role of regional peacemaker that its own interests in Iraqi stability suggest would be more constructive. (Iran is best served by an Iraq that is weak but friendly and united; continued chaos in Iraq entails serious risks for internal peace in Iran.)

Finding a way to diplomatically manage the nuclear question, let alone find a durable solution for it, is a hugely difficult task that both governments, in Washington and Tehran, seem incapable of. The start of a dialogue should therefore be applauded and encouraged, even if real progress may not occur until after the U.S. presidential elections—if then. It should be beginning to dawn on all the principal actors, in the region and outside it, that the failure to contain the Iraqi crisis may spell a cataclysm of global proportions. It will precipitate a humanitarian crisis in Iraq and neighbouring countries that will dwarf anything we have seen so far in the region. It will also empower a new generation of jihadis, who will seek to destabilize the Middle East by challenging its

autocratic regimes and to spread their activities well beyond the region into Europe. And it will wreak havoc with the global economy, driving up oil prices to unprecedented heights and thereby suppressing economic growth in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Iraq's fate, and that of the region, now lies in U.S. hands. It is unclear whether the Bush administration has a fall-back approach, a Plan B if and when it comes to the conclusion that Plan A has failed. But for now, it cannot afford to unveil a Plan B, or even to discuss the possibility of the need for such a plan, as doing so would be tantamount to admitting that Plan A is not working—that not only the Surge but the entire arrangement created since April 2003 has descended into unmanageable chaos, the new order as disorder. This, the administration is not prepared to do, at least not yet. But it also does not seem to have a political strategy to get around the Surge's failure to bring about a new national compact. Washington appears adrift, with Democrats and some moderate Republicans (such as Senators Lugar and Hagel) opposing the administration's approach but incapable of mobilizing sufficient support to force a significant troop withdrawal before sometime in 2008.

This leaves us in a dangerous situation. Whatever our position was concerning the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and remove its tyrannical regime, the challenge in front of us is one that all must share. This cannot be done as long as the U.S. keeps the reins tightly in its hands. It will require a joint international effort (such as we have seen, if so far unsuccessfully, on the Iranian nuclear issue), with shared control and responsibility. It should be placed under the aegis of the only agency that has the credibility, expertise, and resources to lead it, the United Nations. The unilateral approach to managing world affairs has shown its bankruptcy. We must now return to the painstaking and protracted approach of multilateral diplomacy, with no guarantee of success, but with the knowledge that the path chosen since 2003 can only lead to disaster.

Joost Hiltermann is Deputy Director of the Middle East Programme, International Crisis Group.  
Email: [jhiltermann@crisisgroup.org](mailto:jhiltermann@crisisgroup.org)

**Sign which reads "Beware of explosion" at the site of two car bomb explosions in Baghdad**