

## **Winds of Change**

Joel D. Rayburn

BAGHDAD—Most change in Iraq is incremental. For those of us working here in Baghdad, engrossed in the day-to-day details of a particular portfolio, change doesn't really register until we step back and mark where we are against where we began. My own frame of reference dates from December 2006, when I first visited Baghdad just a few weeks before the President announced the decision to "surge" U.S. forces into Iraq to deal with a security situation that was spinning out of control. Baghdad was on the verge of a sectarian civil war that Iraqi politicians seemed powerless or unwilling to halt, while Anbar province was in the grasp of a potent insurgency. The mood at MNF-I and the U.S. Embassy was bleak, and a sense of resignation prevailed among the strategists and staff.

Against this backdrop, the current situation in Iraq seems remarkable. The past year has seen a dramatic improvement in Iraq's security: deaths among Iraqi civilians and Coalition troops last month were about 80 percent lower than in December 2006. Notably, the situation has improved the most in the areas that were worst in December 2006. The formerly hellish Anbar province now sees fewer than two attacks of all kinds on any given day, while Baghdad, where Coalition troops and Iraqi forces once discovered dozens of corpses each morning, now sees fewer than a half dozen successful attacks on an average day. This reduction in violence has allowed a return to something approximating normal life and routine commerce. For Iraqis, Baghdad and Anbar no longer feel like war zones, and simple survival is no longer the order of the day. The Coalition, meanwhile, now tackles problems with an energy that was missing in late 2006.

No single factor explains these changes. The Coalition, the Iraqi government, the Iraqi people, and the enemy all played a part.

The arrival of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in Iraq during the first half of 2007 was absolutely critical to the reduction in violence. Even more important, though, was that Coalition leaders chose to employ them, and all of our forces, differently: rather than concentrating on large bases, our troops moved into Iraq's neighborhoods and stayed there in order to secure the population for the first time since this war began. Meanwhile, once the final "surge" brigade arrived last June, Coalition and Iraqi troops launched a campaign to seize al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI's) sanctuaries ringing the city of Baghdad. The months since have seen al-Qaeda brought under unceasing pressure in these areas, some of which had not been patrolled by Coalition or Iraqi forces for several years. Since the "surge" truly got under way last summer, AQI's leadership cadre has been pushed further and further from the capital, its strategy derailed.

We should also remember that the "surge" was not just a Coalition affair: the Iraqi government deployed an additional 100,000 soldiers and police in 2007.



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This has made a huge difference on the battlefield, and the Iraqi security forces will grow even further in size and capability over the coming year. In southern Iraq in particular, the growth of the Iraqi Army and police is enabling the Iraqi government to assert increasing control in key cities that have long been under the sway of militias.

Perhaps the most significant development of the past year, however, is that the Iraqi people collectively rejected the extremist groups that brought the country to the brink of civil war. Repulsed by AQI's brutal tactics and nihilism, Sunni Arabs turned against al-Qaeda in large numbers, forming local volunteer groups that are now working with Coalition and Iraqi forces to deny AQI the sanctuaries it requires to operate. After a rampage of almost five years, al-Qaeda has discovered it cannot resist the phenomenon of local people helping to establish and maintain their communities' security.

At the same time, Shi'a Arabs throughout Iraq were repulsed by the thugery of Shi'a extremists operating under the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) banner. In a seminal moment last August, elements of JAM attacked government forces standing guard over a religious festival in the holy city of Karbala. Publicly shamed by this outrage, Moqtada al-Sadr ordered a "freeze" on JAM activities that has continued to this day, and which has helped to greatly reduce attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces.

None of this means that the war is over yet. The progress we've seen is not irreversible. A still-dangerous al-Qaeda in Iraq is desperately attempting to reestablish a base in northern Iraq, and this means there is hard fighting ahead for the Coalition and the Iraqi government. Similarly, Shi'a extremists continue to target Iraqi government leaders and officials in an effort to dominate the Iraqi state, and they must be dealt with if Iraqis are to have a real chance at living under the rule of law. The coming campaign against these threats will have a great bearing on whether the Coalition is able to further reduce its presence in Iraq beyond the already-planned reduction of the five "surge" brigades.

Perhaps the best hope for Iraq is that the Iraqi people seem to have made a psychological shift. Weary of war, they grab hold of any opportunity to assert Iraqi unity, such as the Iraqi soccer team winning the Asia Cup, or people celebrating Ramadan in the streets without fear of car bombs for the first time in years. Now the Iraqis look to their government to do its part by translating what has happened in Iraq's neighborhoods into political reconciliation at the national level.

We in the Coalition look for the same, and we use every tool at our disposal to encourage, cajole, and warn our Iraqi partners to change the old zero-sum Iraqi political culture. But a national compact is not going to materialize overnight. Five years of experience in Iraq instructs us that the Iraqis will need our sustained commitment to get where we want them to go. Remember: most change in Iraq is incremental.



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—Lee H. Hamilton, *The Art of the Possible*

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—Daniel W. Drezner, *Foreign Policy Goes Glam*

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—Dali L. Yang, *Total Recall*

So when we talk about the antagonism that has arisen between bloggers and the foreign policy community, we are really talking about liberal bloggers and the Democratic half of the FPC. This is a family feud, one that bears more than a passing resemblance to the great Democratic schism over Vietnam.

—David Frum, *Foggy Bloggom*



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