ASSESSING THE SURGE IN IRAQ

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This article discusses the 2006/2007 U.S. troop surge in Iraq. It examines to what extent the shift in strategy was responsible for the dramatic drop in violence as well as the implications for U.S. strategy in future conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Adopted at the end of 2006--by far Iraq's bloodiest year--the troop "surge" marked a major shift in the George W. Bush administration's Iraq strategy. Indeed, the Iraq Body Count (IBC) project, which prefers to rely on confirmed media reports rather than studies extrapolating death tolls based on relatively small samples, estimates that there were 27,850 civilian deaths in 2006, compared with just 3,576 in 2010.[1] One analysis by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded that by November 2006, conditions on the ground resembled anarchy and "civil war."[2] It was around this time that two competing strains of thought on what change of course should be implemented were circulating among U.S. officials.

Both schools identified the root problem as a sharply escalating level of violence owing to the growing adoption of what the Iraq Study Group's (ISG) report termed "sectarian identities."[3] This referred to the heavy fighting taking place between Sunni and Shi'i militias--especially in Baghdad and other mixed ethno-religious towns--resulting in around 180 attacks per day on American forces during October 2006 (largely coming from Sunni insurgents).[4] Examples of active militant groups from that period include al-Qa'ida on the Sunni side and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades on the Shi'i side.[5] The latter is affiliated with a pro-Iranian party once called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. However, the name was later changed to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq due to fears of stirring up suspicions among Iraqis that the party was an Iranian client.

Overviewing developments on the ground in Iraq, the ISG recommended a gradual withdrawal to remove all U.S. troops from the country by 2008, while affirming that simply pulling out would likely increase the security vacuum and embolden al-Qa'ida. Thus, the report further advised a policy one might call "Iraqization," [6] whereby responsibility for maintaining order in secured areas would steadily be handed over to the Iraqi army and police. In addition, the authors urged the United States to adopt an intense, multilateral diplomatic approach--even going so far as to counsel cooperation with Syria and Iran and redoubling efforts to solve the "Arab-Israeli conflict"--in order to stabilize the country.[7]

At the same time, one point strongly emphasized by the study was a belief on the authors' part that increasing troop numbers would probably not succeed in reducing the level of violence in Iraq. As the report puts it, "Sustained increases in U.S. troop levels would not solve the fundamental cause of violence in Iraq, which is the absence of national reconciliation… [It] might temporarily help limit violence in a highly localized area. However, past experience indicates that the violence would simply rekindle as soon as U.S. forces are moved to another area."[8]

Owing to its suggestions on multilateral diplomacy in particular, the ISG came under heavy criticism. For example, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) issued a rival report

entitled, "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq." Like the ISG, the AEI analysis did not deny the problem of sectarianism. Instead, it advised an increase in troop levels (specifically seven army brigades and Marine Corps regiments [9]), focusing primarily on Baghdad, as part of a suggested shift toward counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics. These tactics entailed a recommended ratio of one soldier for every 40 or 50 inhabitants [10] and a dramatic increase in reconstruction aid to secure the population's trust in the government and coalition forces.[11]

The Bush administration ultimately rejected the ISG's plans, opting instead for an approach broadly in line with the AEI's recommendations. Five additional army brigades were deployed primarily around Baghdad (although one of these brigades, the 4th Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division, was sent to Diyala Province in April 2007), and a small number of extra troops were stationed in Anbar Province, a hotspot of Sunni insurgent activity. Furthermore, General David Petraeus, with in-depth knowledge of COIN theory, was appointed commander of the Multi-National Force Iraq, replacing General George Casey.

As the surge progressed, observers everywhere began to note the decline in violence across Iraq. An almost universal consensus drew a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the surge and the dramatic decrease in levels of violence, such that even Barack Obama declared in September 2008 that the surge "succeeded beyond our wildest dreams." [12] This was in stark contrast to Obama's previous remarks in response to Bush's speech announcing his plans regarding the surge on January 10, 2007: "I am not persuaded that 20,000 additional troops in Iraq is [sic] going to solve the sectarian violence there. In fact, I think it will do the reverse."[13]

Petraeus was highly lauded for his efforts, and the "surge" strategy became the basis of Obama's shift in policies toward the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Indeed, as far back as the summer of 2007, Obama thought the surge in Iraq was working, as he called for a virtually identical approach in Afghanistan. This was contrary to the meme that the Obama was somehow pushed into a military escalation by American generals: "We should pursue an integrated strategy that reinforces our troops in Afghanistan…Our strategy must also include sustained diplomacy to isolate the Taliban and more effective development programs that target aid to areas where the Taliban are making inroads."[14]

Integral to the proposed shift in strategy above is the idea of a temporary boost in troop numbers and a focus on winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population, a clear parallel to the components of the Iraq surge strategy; but is the consensus view of the surge a truly adequate explanation for the drop in violence across Iraq? Moreover, is the current conventional wisdom underestimating the power of local Iraqi actors to influence events and overestimating the decisive role of the U.S. forces? How do the answers to these questions affect the lessons to be drawn for the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and potential intervention in future conflicts?

More recently, a revisionist interpretation (still by far in the minority) of the impact of the surge has emerged, comprising individuals such as Joshua Thiel, [15] Douglas Ollivant, [16] Joel Wing, [17] and the current author. [18] This interpretation prefers to view the decline in violence during the period of the surge through the lens of local Iraqi actors and trends that were already apparent by the end of 2006. However, this does not mean the surge had no effect whatsoever. Such a view seems untenable. In addition, the revisionist view does not intend to argue that the strategy advocated by the ISG was sound. If anything, its recommendations were highly unrealistic, especially regarding the prospect of diplomatic engagement with Iran and Syria to stabilize Iraq. It is also strange that one could tie the "Arab-Israeli conflict" to sectarian tensions in Iraq.

As part of this analysis, it is first instructive to examine how the number of U.S. battalions changed by province in 2006-2007 and then 2007-2008. We should then compare the data with the number of recorded security incidents, or "Significant Kinetic Events"

(SIGACTs), as noted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the period 2006-2008.[19] Thiel has usefully compiled such a statistical overview in his article for the *Small Wars Journal*. It will then be possible to determine if the increase in troop levels was in itself a significant factor behind the net decrease in violence.

TROOP NUMBERS AND SIGACTs

Figure 1 shows that in eight of the nine provinces where the number of U.S. troop battalions was increased as part of the initial phase of the surge, SIGACTs actually increased. The exception was the particularly volatile Anbar Province, which witnessed a 48 percent decrease in SIGACTs. In Basra, there was a drawdown in the number of battalions but a 49 percent increase in SIGACTs. Thus, from these numbers alone, it would appear that in provinces where troop levels were altered, there is an overall positive correlation between deploying more battalions and the level of instability. Note also the massive fluctuations in attacks across provinces where no additional battalions were sent, ranging from a 475 percent increase in Sulaymaniyya to an 87 percent decrease in Maysan. The latter province is renowned as a base and source of arms smuggling for Shi'i militant groups and will be important to the subsequent discussion of the causes of the general decrease in violence.

On the basis of the statistics highlighted thus far, an observer could be forgiven for adopting some sort of "anti-imperialist" interpretation that a greater American presence simply provokes more resistance to foreign occupation. Nonetheless, there are many problems with such a view. Only five of the eighteen provinces exhibited less violence in 2006-2007, four of these areas being places where there was no change in U.S. troop levels. The one province with a drawdown in battalions during this period displayed greater instability. In addition, four regions that had no change in the number of American battalions present witnessed more SIGACTs, markedly so in three of these said regions:

Irbil (+320 percent), Sulaymaniyya (+475 percent) and Qadisiyya (+171 percent).

Figure 2 provides a very different picture. At first sight, one might note that in all the provinces where the number of U.S. battalions deployed was reduced, there was also a decline in SIGACTs. However, with the exception of Maysan, which witnessed a sharp spike in SIGACTs (+282 percent), all the provinces where more battalions were sent also experienced a decline in violence. Likewise, apart from Dahuk (+4 percent), provinces that saw no change in the number of battalions deployed improved on stability in the period 2007-2008. Thus, the drop in SIGACTs in this period is clearly *independent of* U.S. troop levels. More generally, the data collected by Thiel for 2006-2008 demonstrate that there is no important correlation between the number of battalions deployed and instability during the surge.

Thus far, one has only discounted troop numbers as a significant variable in assessing the impact of the surge and the drop in violence. The question of the use of COIN tactics, of course, has not been considered. Yet in what follows, it is argued that the actions of local Iraqi actors and the established trends in the sectarian conflict by the end of 2006 are what really mattered. Hence, it is necessary to overview the background to the sectarian civil war that was particularly intense in Baghdad in 2006.

POST-SADDAM IRAQ AND THE SUNNI-SHI'I CONFLICT

From the time the British installed the Sunni Hashemite dynasty in the Mandate of Mesopotamia after World War I, through to the territory's independence in 1932, the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and the establishment of the Ba'th regime in 1968, Iraq remained a country dominated by Sunni-Arab minority rule until the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The minority despotism was particularly evident under the Ba'thists, who concealed the nature of their rule under the guise of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism. In fact, between their two coups in 1963 and

1968, the Ba'thists launched major purges of all Shi'a in their upper ranks.

However, this fact does not mean that the Ba'thists did not have substantial numbers of Shi'a in their ranks. The Ba'th Party certainly had many Shi'i members, but they were overwhelmingly in the lower rank-and-file, while leadership positions were generally confined to Sunni Arabs--just as in Syria key officials of the Ba'th Party are Alawites while lower rank members include many Sunni Arabs. George Orwell's novel *1984* serves as a good literary model for explanation: The Iraqi Shi'a in the Ba'th Party might be thought of as the "Outer Party," while the Sunni Arabs could be deemed the "Inner Party." Indeed, as in North Korea and China, membership of the party was essential for advancing a professional career. Therefore, it is apparent that sectarianism was embedded in Iraq's political culture prior to the American-led invasion.

Nonetheless, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime led to the thorough institutionalization of sectarianism. Moderate politicians and public figures like Ghazi al-Yawar (a Sunni Arab) and Kanan Makiyya (a Shi'i) called on the Iraqi people to move forward and forge a common Iraqi identity based on appreciating the diversity of the nation's ethnic and religious composition.[20] However, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which served under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and was established as a provisional government from July 12, 2003, until June 1, 2004, had its members selected on an entirely sectarian basis, aiming to correlate with the ethno-religious divisions among the country's population.[21] Specifically, thirteen Shi'a, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkmen and one Assyrian were appointed to the IGC.[22]

Among the Shi'i members, there were sectarian Islamists such as Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, whose real interests lay in implementing majoritarian Shi'i rule in Iraq.[23] Hence, the de-Ba'thification process--introduced by the CPA and nominally ended in the summer of 2004 with the formation of an interim Iraqi government for the period leading up to the 2005 elections--essentially became "de-Sunnification." This policy continued even after the CPA was disbanded.[24]

The most notorious aspect of *de facto* de-Sunnification was the sudden dismantling of the old Iraqi army and security forces on the order of CPA leader Paul Bremer, a decision encouraged and backed by the likes of al-Hakim.[25] Not only were thousands of Sunnis put out of work with no pension, but Shi'i militias were also allowed to fill the ranks of the new Iraqi army and police. In a similar vein, the new Iraqi interim government featured former Badr Brigade commander Bayan Jabr Sulagh as interior minister. Sulagh dismissed hundreds of Sunnis from jobs in the Iraqi government and bureaucracy, encouraging Shi'a to take their places.[26]

The de-Sunnification process was consequently an important factor behind the swelling of the ranks of the Sunni Arab insurgency--an insurgency that was to a certain extent inevitable anyway, as some Sunni Arabs would undoubtedly have felt discontented at the end of Saddam Hussein's regime. Nevertheless, another reason that must be considered is the sense of disconnect created by 70 years of minority rule between the Sunni Arabs and the rest of the population. It has often been noted how many Sunni Arabs have repeatedly accused demographic surveys of Iraq of under-representing their numbers.

That is no rhetorical bluff, but something they sincerely believed to the point that they actually thought they were in the majority as opposed to the Shi'a.[27] This meme was particularly strong among the Sunni insurgency's leaders. Even by the time attacks and reprisal attacks had led to a full-blown sectarian civil war starting in 2006, they thought that--by their supposed numerical advantage--they could either wipe out or subdue the Shi'a in the fight over Baghdad and thus reestablish Sunni control over the country.[28]

Now comes the crucial point. The sectarian civil war that raged around Baghdad in 2006 was not an inconclusive stalemate. See Figure 3, showing a demographic map of Baghdad at

the time of the invasion. While there are the familiar sectarian neighborhoods such as the predominantly Shi'i Sadr City (then called Saddam City), most areas of Baghdad do not contain definite Sunni, Shi'i, or Christian majorities.

Note, however, that the preponderance of "mixed neighborhoods" does not mean that the communities intermarried. On the contrary, the norm across Iraq has always been for people to marry within their own sects, something that has frequently been achieved by arranged marriages with close cousins. Indeed, one researcher has estimated that around 50 percent of all marriages in Iraq take place between first or second cousins, a rate matched only by Nigeria and Pakistan. [29] Besides a general prohibition on marriage between Sunnis and Shi'a, the Christian sects likewise reject intermarriage such that Iraqi Catholics (whether Chaldeans, Syriac Catholics, Melkites, etc.) do not marry Iraqis who belong to Oriental Orthodox churches.

By mid-2006, there were some noticeable changes in the demographic composition of the city's neighborhoods. As Joel Wing summarizes, "Sadiya in the south for example, and Hurriya and Washash on the west bank of the Tigris went from Sunni to Shi'i majority. The three neighborhoods directly northwest of Sadr City (Hayy Aden, Sahab and Hayy Sumer) went from being mixed to Shi'i."[30] At this point, the Sunni insurgency had also made some gains, as the neighborhood of Jihad in southern Baghdad went from mixed to Sunni.

Interestingly, one trend that has not been explained is the emergence of some predominantly Christian local areas in the vicinity of the volatile Dawra (Dura) district in southern Baghdad. The explanation must lie in al-Qa'ida's philosophy of dealing with Christians as opposed to the Shi'a (as part of the Sunni insurgency, al-Qa'ida was notorious for its role in ethnic cleansing in Baghdad during the sectarian civil war). While Shi'a are perceived as heretics and apostates from Islam who must be converted or killed as per the radical doctrine of *takfir*, the Christians are required to accept either conversion, subjugation under the payment of the

traditional *jizya* poll tax imposed on *dhimmis*, or death. Similarly, in the Riyad area of southeast Baghdad, a Christian enclave now clustered around predominantly Shi'i districts, the shift can be accounted for if one considers that the Shi'i militias returned the favor of al-Qa'ida and other Sunni Islamist insurgents by deeming Sunnis as heretics and legitimate targets for extermination, while Christians were to be left alone provided they accepted subjugation under Shari'a.

At the start of 2007, the sectarian civil war had by no means died down. The Brookings Institution's Iraq Index, for example, recorded 2,700 civilian deaths in February 2007, compared with 2,914 civilian deaths in December 2006.[31] A drop in casualties can be observed, to be sure, but there is still intensive fighting. In any event, it is evident from Figure 5 that Baghdad's neighborhoods have at this point become largely segregated. Mixed areas are now mostly confined to the Green Zone and its vicinity, while the Shi'i militias have overrun southwestern and southeastern Baghdad (albeit leaving the Christian neighborhood of Riyad intact). Sunnis are now restricted to neighborhoods in western Baghdad like the upmarket area of Yarmuk, and retain a hold on Dawra and Amiriyya in the south and north respectively. In short, Baghdad has become mostly Shi'i.

It was only in this context that Sunni insurgents generally began to realize that they were fighting a losing battle, and that any notion of a Sunni Arab majority in Iraq was pure fantasy. Hence, the question of survival now depended entirely on a willingness to negotiate with the Shi'i-majority government and the coalition forces and to work against al-Qa'ida. This development greatly strengthened a trend that had its roots in the Anbar Awakening (Sahwa) movement, which began as far back as mid-2005, when members of some Sunni-Arab tribes and their leaders in Anbar Province became disillusioned with al-Qa'ida's brutality (including mass-casualty suicide bombings and extortion of local Iraqi allies[32]) and strict imposition of Islamic law.

Around mid-August 2006, low-level contact was established between the

Awakening and the coalition forces, and by the end of the year, in an initiative spearheaded by Shaykh Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha, a "collaborative pattern" between the Americans and Sahwa volunteers "spread rapidly throughout the province [of Anbar], and before long coalition forces were providing training opportunities, first in Jordan then in Anbar, to the growing number of volunteers, who often had previous army or police experience although not to Western standards." [33] The Sahwa volunteers were tasked with defensive operations such as manning checkpoints and providing intelligence on insurgent activities and locations. [34] These events, which were underway before the surge, explain the drop in the number of SIGACTs recorded for Anbar Province in Figure 1.

It therefore follows that the surge merely facilitated what was already taking place in Iraq by the start of 2007. More and more Sunnis in the tribal areas around Baghdad abandoned their fight against the government and coalition in fear of further losses at the hands of Shi'a militias. With coalition support at the height of the surge throughout 2007 and 2008, [35] the Sons of Iraq (SOI) movement, whose significance cannot be under-estimated in the weakening of the Sunni insurgency, was formed. This outcome explains the drop in SIGACTs throughout most of Iraq's provinces in the period 2007-2008 (Figure 2). In Baghdad itself, the surge entailed the construction of concrete blast walls throughout the city, a measure that further reduced violence in the city while solidifying the segregation of the city along sectarian lines.

NURI AL-MALIKI AND THE SHI'I MILITIAS

The January 2005 provincial elections, which witnessed a voter turnout of just 2 percent in Anbar Province, [36] and the December 2005 parliamentary elections saw a plurality of seats taken by the Shi'i bloc of parties known as the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Initially, the Shi'i Islamist Ibrahim al-Ja'fari was appointed as prime minister, but

dissatisfaction among the parliament with his performance led to his ousting from power in April 2006, with the position taken up by Nouri al-Maliki on May 20, 2006. One of the key ways to understand Iraqi politics--more so than considering the influence of foreign powers such as Iran--is to take into account the personal power struggles among Iraqi politicians. Since assuming the premiership, al-Maliki has always sought to concentrate as much power as possible in his hands and those of his followers in the Da'wa Party.

This attitude was one of the main reasons for the political stalemate that followed the parliamentary elections in March 2010, eventually requiring a political compromise initiated by Massoud Barazani, an agreement that allowed al-Maliki to enjoy a second term as prime minister. Even now, al-Maliki's autocratic tendencies are apparent in his manipulative tactics to secure his grip on the Defense Ministry, which as per Barazani's compromise was supposed to be controlled by Ayad Allawi's al-Iraqiyya bloc.[37] However, as Joel Wing commented in August 2011: "Eight months have passed since then and the prime minister has rejected every single candidate put forward by the National Movement, while recently naming his own acting Defense Minister. This has all been part of the premier's ploy to maintain control of the security ministries, while wearing down his opponents until he can get his way."[38]

Initially brought to power by a Shi'i-led coalition--many of whose parties had their own militias involved in the sectarian civil war raging around Baghdad--al-Maliki, needing to consolidate his power base and fearing the threat of the Sunni insurgency, was at the minimum tacitly supporting the Shi'a militants[39] in their ethnic cleansing of Sunnis from mixed neighborhoods in the capital. Indeed, this assessment was the conclusion of an internal briefing written by a senior intelligence analyst and the military planner for the U.S. command in Baghdad. [40] The report, submitted to David Petraeus in mid-August 2007, urged for a shift away from COIN because of the government's involvement in Iraq's "low-grade civil war."[41]

Yet toward the end of 2007, several changes to al-Maliki's circumstances had arisen. He then fully appreciated that the Sunni insurgency was losing ground; he had reshuffled his cabinet to exclude those loyal to the likes of Muqtada al-Sadr;[42] and he now had at his disposal a developed and better-trained Iraqi army, which had largely been in the government's hands since General Casey created the Baghdad Operations Command in late 2006.[43] The prime minister therefore decided that he could fortify his grip on power by turning against the Shi'i militias active around Baghdad and in the southern provinces. This shift in attitude ultimately led to the Iraqi-led Operation Charge of the Knights in March 2008, directed against the Mahdi Army.

Following the offensive against al-Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army was disbanded under an Iranian-mediated ceasefire. The increasing conflict between the government and the Shi'i militias soon brought about a reduction in the number of SIGACTs even in the Shi'i-dominated southern provinces (Figure 2). However, Maysan Province naturally witnessed an upsurge in SIGACTs as the Shi'i militias needed arms supplies in their fight against the Iraqi security forces and coalition troops.

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Amid all this analysis of Iraq's internal political dynamics, it is easy to go to the other extreme and argue that American actions had no influence at all. Yet such an opinion is mistaken. There are two significant ways in which the United States helped Iraq in its transition toward a reasonable level of security during the time of the surge.

First, President Bush deserves credit for ultimately choosing to "stay the course," in that, as Ollivant points out, he clearly indicated that the United States was committed to aiding the various political factions in Iraq in a drive to buffer and resolve internal disputes, at least until the end of his term.[44] This approach differed markedly from the ISG's recommendations and aroused

skepticism from critics at the time. It did, however, reassure "senior Iraqi officials that they would not be abandoned,"[45] thereby allowing to a certain extent for the creation of "political space" for a common effort against the militant groups in the 2007-2008 period.

Second, in conjunction with the Iraqi Army, the Coalition Special Operations Units and Brigade Combat Teams incorporated new technology and methods (*not* part of COIN) during the time of the surge in their fight against al-Qa'ida in particular and to a lesser extent the Shi'i militant groups.[46] Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was then in charge of the Joint Special Operations Command, termed these innovative operations "collaborative warfare."[47] Such a development especially aided in the disruption of al-Qa'ida's car bomb networks, contributing to the reduction in civilian casualties.[48] In terms of this trend, however, the increase in the number of troops as part of the surge had little impact.[49]

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR TODAY?

In sum, it is worth repeating that the surge did have an impact on security in Iraq. However, the increase in the number of troops was in itself of little significance. Moreover, the actions of U.S. forces as part of the surge and COIN tactics only abetted trends that were already apparent by the end of 2006. The primary factors that must be taken into consideration when explaining the decrease in violence during the surge are the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis (for the most part) from mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad, which led Sunni insurgents to realize that hopes of reclaiming the pre-2003 status-quo were lost; some Sunni disillusionment in Anbar with al-Qa'ida and like-minded terrorist groups as far back as mid-2005; and Nouri al-Maliki's consolidation of his political power and the security forces in his turn against the Shi'i militias.

The implications of these conclusions for U.S. policy today and potential future conflicts are clear. Obama's strategy in Afghanistan has been based on the premise that the surge and

COIN tactics in Iraq were the main reasons behind the reduction in violence and instability. This view imputes too much influence to the U.S. military and seems to deny the importance of local Iraqi actors.

Part of the problem has to do with the spread of "anti-Orientalist" and postcolonial discourse in U.S. military instruction on the Middle East and Muslim world at large. Writing in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, C.A. Bayly pointed out that one of the consequences of the success enjoyed by Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism* (1978) has been the emergence of historical works that deny "Asians, Africans, or Polynesians 'agency' in their own histories more thoroughly than had the nineteenth-century Imperial writers." [50] Unsurprisingly, the belittling of local decisionmaking and actors has extended to the Middle East, although more recently, one has seen revisionist works that point to the importance of the Ottoman Empire's willing decision to throw in its lot with Imperial Germany during World War I as a crucial event behind the making of the modern Middle East;[51] and so it is with the orthodoxies of U.S. military strategy today: If only the focus be more on nation-building and winning "hearts and minds," so the reasoning goes, it will be possible to stabilize Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, as Matthew Hoh points out, "If the history of Afghanistan is one great stage play, the United States is no more than a supporting actor,"[52] as a civil war is going on that has lasted more than 35 years (besides the Islamist insurgency spearheaded by the Afghan Taliban). That is not to say that one should simply view Afghanistan as a hopeless quagmire. On the contrary, shifts in U.S. strategy in Afghanistan are desperately needed, but the idea that the United States is the decisive game-changer must be abandoned. Yes, pressure can be placed on Karzai to decentralize power from Kabul, and one can aim for broader regional engagement--especially when it comes to the cold war between Pakistan and India that is partly playing out in Afghanistan and destabilizing the region as a whole--but it must be understood that much depends on the will of local actors.

Nonetheless, one need not be pessimistic. Daniel Pipes notes the renewed interest in works like those of Efraim Karsh that counter postcolonial orthodoxies,[53] and "impressed by the post-9/11 and post-Iraq cohort to enter the field of Middle East studies,"[54] he predicts that "by about 2015 the field will begin evolving in a more mainstream direction." [55] If Pipes' optimism is well-founded (as this author believes it is), then one can reasonably expect this trend to change U.S. military instruction for the better, and lead to the abandonment of the view that a troop surge and counterinsurgency are essential to achieve stability in a conflict zone. Instead, there should be an emphasis on appreciating internal political dynamics for such areas of instability.
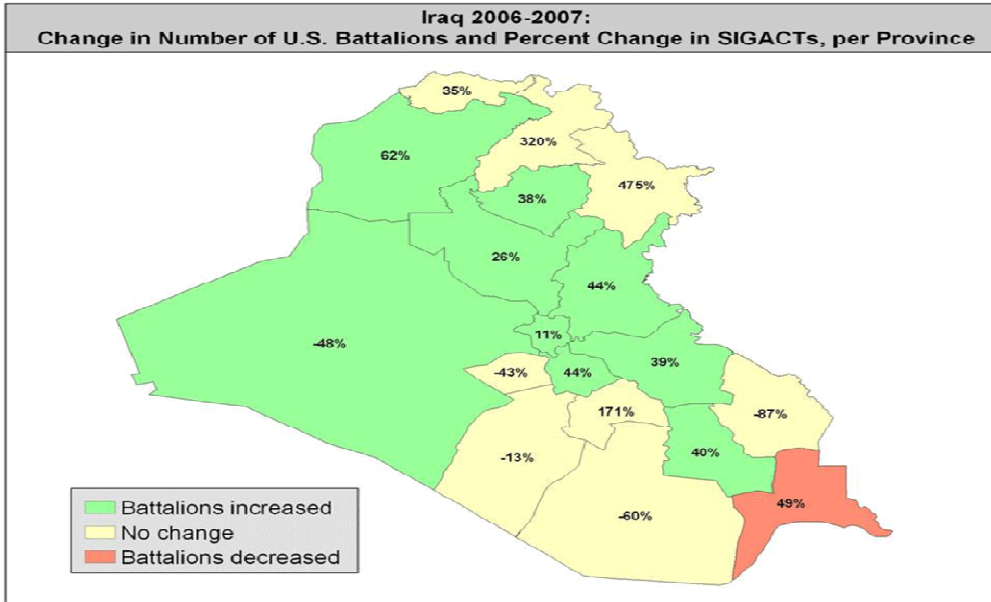
APPENDIX

Figure 1: Change in battalion numbers and percentage change in SIGACTs by province for 2006-2007[56]
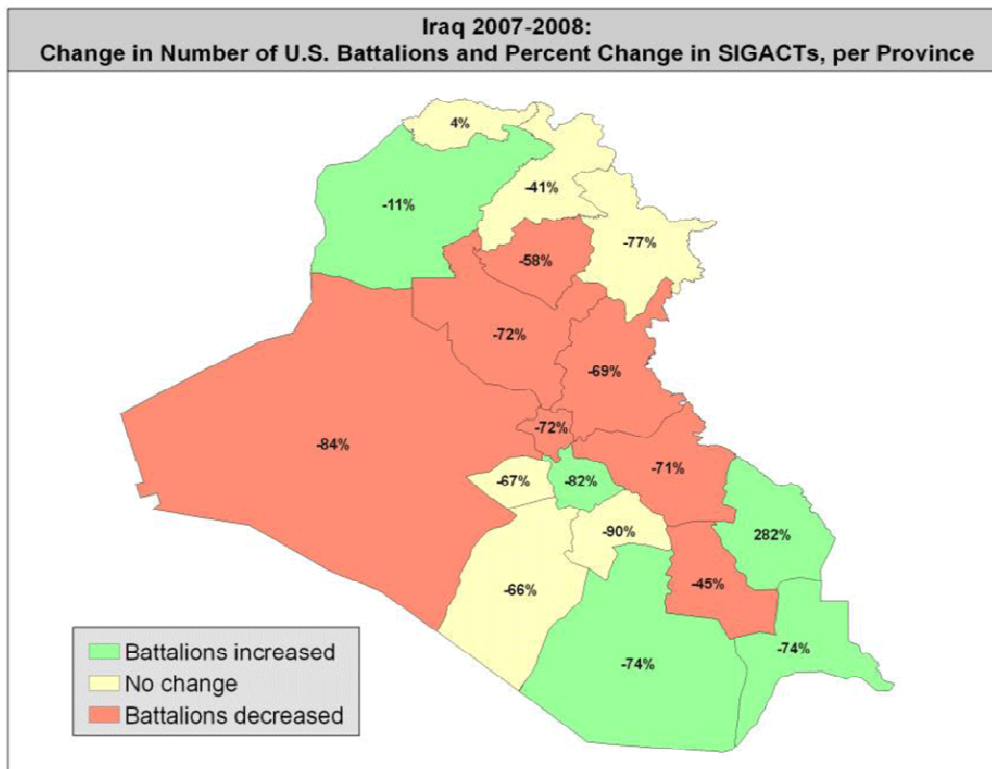

Figure 2: Change in battalion numbers and percentage change in SIGACTs by province for 2007-2008[57]
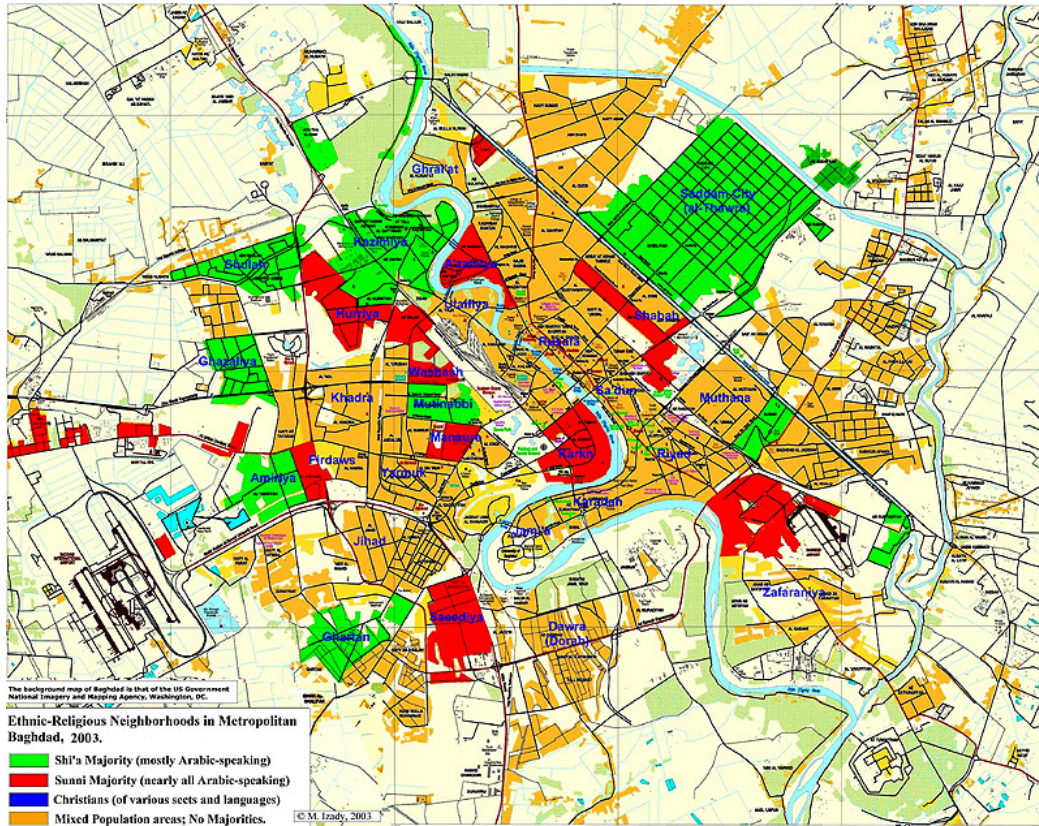
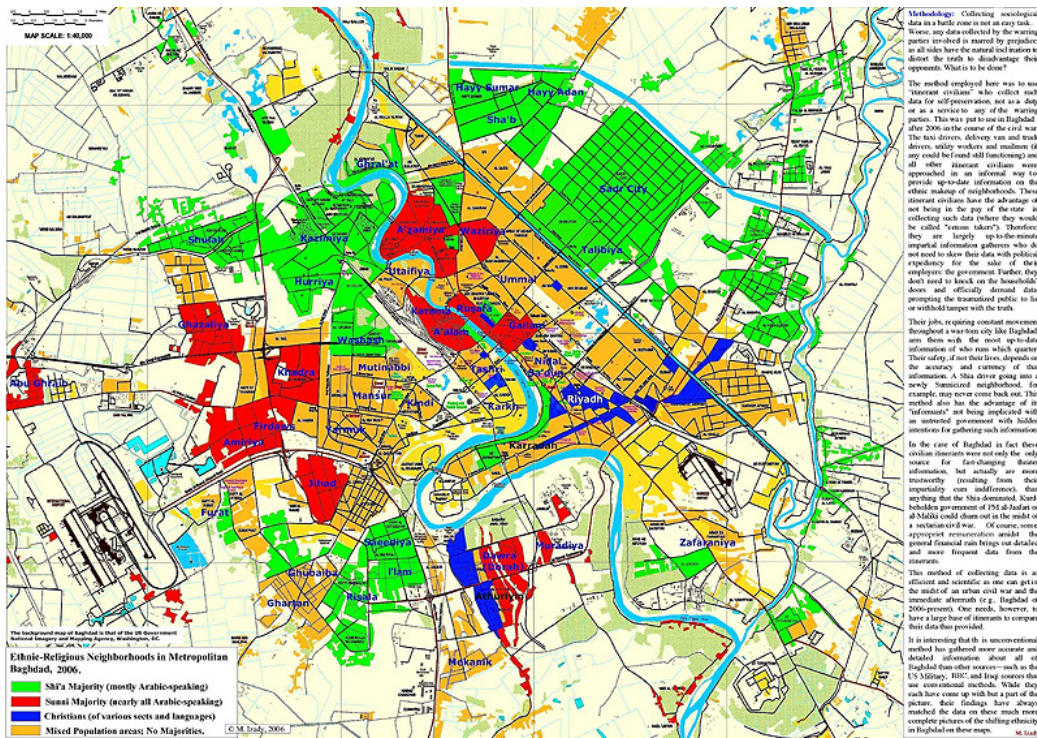**Figure 3: Baghdad in March 2003, around the time of the U.S. invasion**[58]

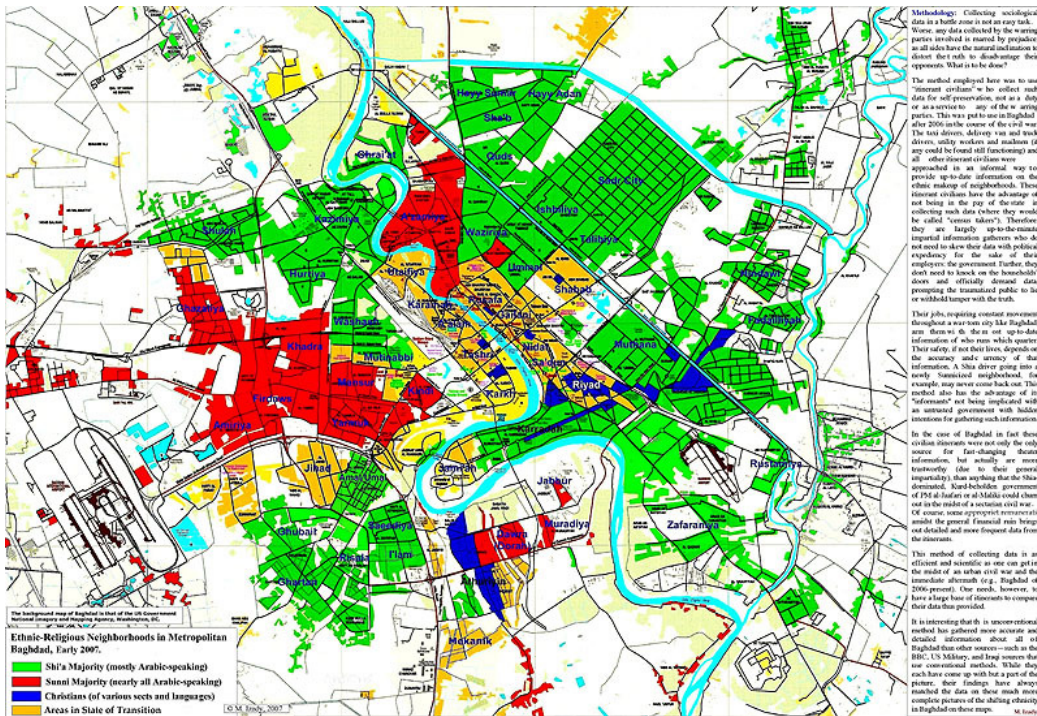**Figure 4: Baghdad mid-2006, at the height of the sectarian civil war**[59]

Figure 5: Baghdad in early 2007, just as the surge was beginning[60]

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NOTES

[1] IBC Database, Iraq Body Count, http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/.

[2] Michael R. Gordon, "Troop Surge Took Place amid Doubt and Debate," *New York Times*, August 30, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/31/washington/31military.html.

[3] James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton (co-chairmen of the study), *The Iraq Study Group Report*, http://media.usip.org/reports/iraq_study_group_report.pdf, p. 9.

[4] Ibid., p. 10.

[5] Ibid., p. 11.

[6] Compare with Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy as part of his disengagement plan from the Vietnam War.

[7] Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, p. 37-38.

[8] Ibid., p. 30.

[9] Frederick Kagan, *Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq*," American Enterprise Institute, http://www.aei.org/papers/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/choosing-victory-a-plan-for-success-in-iraq-paper/, p. 1.

[10] Ibid., p. 15.

[11] Ibid., p. 1.

[12] Kim Chipman and Julianna Goldman, "Obama Says Iraq Surge Success Beyond Wildest Dreams," Bloomberg, September4, 2008, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aM9XOyqf06lI.

[13] "Fact Check: Was Obama Against the Troop 'Surge' in Iraq?" CNN Political Ticker, September 25, 2008, http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/09/25/fact-check-was-obama-against-the-troop-surge-in-iraq/.

[14] Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2007), p. 9-10.

[15] Joshua Thiel, "The Statistical Irrelevance of American SIGACT Data: Iraq Surge Analysis Reveals Reality," *Small Wars Journal*, April 12, 2011. Many thanks to Joel Wing for first drawing the author's attention to Thiel's

useful diagrams on SIGACTs by province. See endnote 17.

[16] Douglas Ollivant, *Countering the New Orthodoxy*, New America Foundation, June 2011, http://www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Ollivant_Reinterpreting_Counterinsurgency.pdf.

[17] Joel Wing, "Re-Thinking the Surge in Iraq," *Musings on Iraq*, August 22, 2011, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/08/re-thinking-surge-in-iraq.html.

[18] Aymenn Jawad, "Assessing Afghanistan," *Hudson New York*, July 9, 2010, http://www.hudson-ny.org/1406/assessing-afghanistan.

[19] Wing, "Re-Thinking the Surge in Iraq."

[20] Jim Hoagland, "Restoring Iraqi Identity," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A56432-2004Dec10.html.

[21] Nimrod Raphaeli, "Iraqi Government in Crisis- Sectarianism, Corruption and Dissent," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), April 18, 2011, http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/4/govt1826.htm.

[22] "Iraqi Governing Council members," BBC News, July 14, 2003 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3062897.stm.

[23] See, for example, Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Aftermath of the Iraq War Revisited," *Hudson New York*, February 28, 2011, http://www.hudson-ny.org/1919/iraq-war-aftermath.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy."

[28] George Packer documented this delusional belief among Sunni insurgents in his book *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). See also Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy," p. 4, although this author believes that Ollivant is only partly correct that the "Sunni-majority" myth can be attributed to propaganda from Saddam Hussein's regime.

[29] Anne Bobroff-Hajal, "Why Cousin Marriage Matters in Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 26, 2006, http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1226/p09s01-coop.html.

[30] Joel Wing, "Columbia University Charts Sectarian Cleansing of Baghdad," *Musings on Iraq*, November 19, 2009, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/11/blog-post.html.

[31] Joel Wing, "How Many Have Died in Iraq and by What Means?" *Musings on Iraq*, May 1, 2009, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/05/iraqi-casualty-reports-in-april-2009.html.

[32] Mark Wilbanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the 'Sons of Iraq' Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Fall 2010), http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] This author agrees with Ollivant, however, that the development of the SOI cannot primarily be put down to bribing Sunni Arabs to switch sides. As he points out, there was plenty of money to go around in the 2004-2006 period, so according to this theory the Sunnis should have switched sides well before 2006. See Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy," p. 3.

[36] Joel Wing, "Comparing the January 2009 to the January 2005 Provincial Elections (REVISED)," *Musings on Iraq*, February 1, 2009, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/02/comparing-january-2009-to-january-2005.html.

[37] Joel Wing, "Maliki Continues His Games to Control Iraq's Defense Ministry," *Musings on Iraq*, August 25, 2011, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/08/maliki-continues-his-games-to-control.html.

[38] Ibid.

[39] For example, in 2006, al-Maliki was often accused by U.S. military officials of not doing enough to crack down on the Mahdi Army. It is more accurate to say that he was "actively protecting" the militia. See Wing, "Re-thinking the Surge in Iraq."

[40] Ann Scott Tyson, "New Strategy Urged in Briefing to Petraeus," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/31/AR2007083101959.html.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Al-Maliki had such a move in mind for many months. See, for example, "Iraqi PM Risks Shi'a Clash over Reshuffle," *The Daily Telegraph*, March 5, 2007, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1544635/Iraqi-PM-risks-Shia-clash-over-reshuffle.html.

[43] Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy," p. 5.

[44] Ibid., p. 6.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., p. 7.

[47] Bob Woodward, "Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/07/AR2008090701847.html.

[48] Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy," p. 7.

[49] Ibid.

[50] C.A. Bayly, "The Second British Empire," in Robin W. Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Historiography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 70., cited in Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India," (Princeton University Press, 17 September 2001) p. 309.

[51] See, for example, Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 27.

[52] Matthew Hoh, "Letter of Resignation to Ambassador Nancy Powell," September 10, 2009, http://www.docstoc.com/docs/13944018/Matthew-Hoh-Resignation-Letter.

[53] Daniel Pipes, "Middle East Studies in Upheaval," *National Review Online*, July 5, 2011, http://www.danielpipes.org/9961/middle-east-studies-upheaval.

[54] Daniel Pipes, "Middle East Studies, Changing for the Better," Lion's Den: Daniel Pipes Blog, July 29, 2009, http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2009/07/middle-east-studies-changing-for-the-better.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Thiel, "The Statistical Irrelevance of American SIGACT Data."

[57] Ibid.

[58] Figure 3 and the following demographic maps of Baghdad were compiled by Dr. Michael Izady of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, accessed via Joel Wing, "Columbia University Charts Sectarian Cleansing of Baghdad," *Musings on Iraq*, November 19, 2009, http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/11/blog-post.html.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.