

Light at the end of the tunnel

BY JOHN HARRISON
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FIVE years after the US invasion of Iraq, the security situation in the country appears to be showing signs of improvement.

Iraqi and American military officials this author spoke to while in Iraq recently all broadly believe that Iraqi forces are now capable of sustaining the improved security situation. The Iraqi army, unlike the Iraqi police, has regained the respect of the people. Sunni tribal security militias have also had a positive impact. Shi'a groups remain armed but largely silent, and the Kurds are conducting a stealth campaign in the north.

Given the dire situation in 2004, two questions might be asked: How did the dramatic change occur so rapidly? Is the improvement sustainable?

The most obvious explanation for the change is the so-called "surge" of American forces that began in late 2006. This increased the number of US forces in the country from approximately 130,000 to 160,000. More forces provided more resources, but what was perhaps more critical than the overall numbers was different deployment patterns.

The US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus,

changed his predecessor's strategy of deploying American forces in large centralised bases, which they rarely left. He deployed them instead in forward operation bases (FOBs) where American troops could live and work closely with Iraqi security forces and the population.

The other component was the development of military transition teams (MTTs) – 10-man teams of US army advisers who live in Iraqi military installations. They were able to assist the Iraqi military to "stand up so the US can stand down". The author spent a week with an MTT in Tikrit, and saw first-hand their value in winning the confidence of both the Iraqi military and population at large.

US and Iraqi military officials claim that the Iraqi army is now capable of sustaining the security situation on its own. In many cases, it has undertaken successful operations without US support. This is a major improvement from even a year ago, when Iraqi security forces were incapable of much independent action, let alone planning.

The sectarian killings that brought Iraq to the brink of civil war have also largely dissipated. This was in part due to Iraqis stepping back from the abyss but, more crucially, to a practical step the authorities took to reduce the oppor-

tunities for sectarian killing by walling off threatened neighbourhoods.

These massive barriers, called "T Walls", made it difficult for sectarian militias to conduct random drive-by shootings in the neighbourhoods of their opponents.

The high concert walls reduced the impact of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. The fences also provided a means of controlling access to the neighbourhood, as there were few entry points, and encouraged local citizens to take a more active role in their security. A result of all these steps is increased optimism among Iraqis, as a recent Pew survey revealed.

The most critical positive development of late has been the declining effectiveness of Al-Qaeda. It is still active and dangerous, but support for its aims has dissipated. The secular orientation of Iraqi Sunnis is one reason, but Al-Qaeda's own actions is another.

It committed critical errors. It failed to understand its "supporters" were ultraviolent, and was unwilling and/or unable to offer Sunni Iraqis even rudimentary opportunities for development.

Many of the Sunni tribes that initially aligned themselves with Al-Qaeda did so on the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". The tribes had bene-

fited from Saddam Hussein's regime. Feeling excluded after the US invasion, they feared reprisals from the Shi'a-dominated government.

In 2003 and early 2004, Al-Qaeda was about the only well-organised resistance organisation; thus the tribes joined Al-Qaeda. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the Al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, seemed to view this as a sign of ideological commitment to jihad. He thus conducted a resistance to the foreign occupation while simultaneously attempting to create an Islamic state.

When tribal leaders objected to this idea, and to the sectarian war he had launched, he reacted violently. The killing of tribal leaders sparked a break between Al-Qaeda and the tribes that was eventually exploited by the US and Iraqi government forces.

The tribes are not squeamish about violence. But they were attempting to use it as a means of gaining accommodation with the Shi'a majority so that Sunnis would not be left out of the new Iraq. In the immediate term, the tribes wanted tangible services such as water and electricity to be delivered. What they got instead from Al-Qaeda was lofty rhetoric and the violent enforcement of its vision.

The failure of Al-Qaeda in Iraq mirrors the group's larger failings. It has not attempted

to develop a broad front, as Hizbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine has done. Such a front would have combined armed struggle with social and educational institutions, allowing the organisation to plant deep roots within society and provide it with broad popular support and strategic depth. Al-Qaeda, for all of its military adaptability and brilliance, remains politically maladroit.

Iraqi and US militaries, the tribal leaders and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams all agree that there is light at the end of the tunnel – and that it is not the light of an oncoming train. What is desperately needed now is development.

Iraq has large amounts of public and private money available. None is being used, let alone placed in banks, for fear of exposure to criminal and terrorist extortion. And there's the rub: Security has improved, but not to the point where it frees up development money. Security cannot be sustained or improved further until development begins. Addressing this dilemma will determine Iraq's near-term prospects.

When Gen Petraeus announced his surge, he had history on his side. Surges have worked in the past, but usually only when the enemy's will to sustain a conflict has evaporated. Now the Iraqis themselves must have a corresponding political and economic surge to consolidate the hard-won security.

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