

NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES PROGRAM POLICY PAPER

COUNTERING THE NEW ORTHODOXY

Reinterpreting Counterinsurgency in Iraq

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Introduction

Success, it is said, has a thousand fathers. Now four years removed from the advent of the 2007 Baghdad “Surge,”¹ the situation in Iraq, while not perfect, has dramatically improved. Violence is down significantly, despite continuing acts of terror against the Iraqi people by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and some Iranian surrogate forces.² Admittedly, the formation of the new Iraqi government following the 2010 election has been less-than-efficiently executed. But even so, Iraq continues to find a “good enough” solution and has avoided a return to the violence of 2006-2007. While it is not exactly a victory parade or “Mission Accomplished,” this may well be what success in a stability operations looks like.

But for all this attention, exactly what was causal in reducing the violence (and what was not) remains clouded. 2007 was a year when many techniques for limiting violence were tried. It is almost certain that not all of them were helpful, but given the overlapping efforts, empirical

methods of verification are fairly limited.³ The technique of “throwing the kitchen sink” at the problem may be good policy, but it makes for terrible social science. We simply have no counterfactual to test against. So in the absence of a natural experiment, what follows is an alternative storyline that parallels but challenges the military-centric conventional wisdom, and which may serve as a competing hypothesis until an authoritative version emerges from a combination of the memoirs of senior Iraqi, American, and Iranian actors and comprehensive historical analysis based on the largely inaccessible official records from the period.

This paper presents an alternative, counter-narrative, to what I will call the “New Orthodoxy” about the Baghdad “Surge.”⁴ The New Orthodoxy story of Iraq—promoted to a greater or lesser degree in the works of Linda Robinson, Tom Ricks, Bob Woodward, and Kimberly Kagan—explains that violence in Baghdad diminished primarily due to three factors: the addition of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, the adoption of “counterinsurgency” as both a tactic and a strategy, and the dynamic leadership of General David Petraeus (and, in some accounts and to a lesser degree, Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno).⁵ This version seems to be the generally accepted conventional wisdom, is cited in most media accounts, recycled by pundits, and is generally accepted within the U.S. military community at large.⁶ For example, in an otherwise quite prudent editorial, Ross Douthat maintains that “[a]bsent the successes of the

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2007 troop surge, we'd probably be too busy extricating ourselves from a war-torn Iraq to even contemplate another military intervention in a Muslim nation."⁷ Variations of this version also permit a role for the Sunni "Awakening," though the causality and weighting of this event varies among the New Orthodoxy accounts.⁸

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The military-centric analysis exemplified in the New Orthodoxy is not so much wrong as it is limited. While all wars have a political component, in civil wars and insurgencies this political component rises quickly to the surface. A military-centric analysis cannot fully account for the dynamics of social stability reasserting itself in Iraq, as it ignores the deep social and political forces that are in play during any civil conflict. This is not to say that military action played no role, but rather that it was not central.

At a fundamental level, 2006-2008 Baghdad should be viewed as a political crisis, specifically a particularly virulent case of transition from authoritarian rule (precipitated by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003), coupled with a civil war between Shi'a and Sunni factions.⁹ The eventual stability was the direct result of mainline Sunni and Shi'a groups finding an unspoken but no less real settlement and an end to the civil war, which resulted in a de facto, undeclared Shi'a victory, reflecting their battlefield gains. The period also included a nationalist, anti-occupation insurgency and a terrorist campaign conducted by AQI, but these events were secondary factors during this period, and not central to the overall arc of the transition to greater stability.¹⁰ In other words, while the campaign by various Sunni and Shi'a militia groups against the U.S. occupation (and especially the mass bombings by AQI against the U.S. presence, Iraqi government and Shi'a civilians) is central to

the American narrative, it is less so to the Iraqis and the settlement of their civil war.

I argue that the crisis of violence in Iraq in 2006-2008 was fundamentally a political problem that the U.S. lacked the capability to resolve, though the U.S. presence and strategy did shape the context in which the several Iraqi actors made their calculations. Because the New Orthodoxy focuses on military factors, rather than political questions, it is unable to fully explain the reduction in violence in Iraq. By reframing the problem, the key factors in the reduction of violence emerge more clearly. First, the Sunni casualties in the civil war reached an accumulated total that made it clear that continued conflict would not result in a favorable outcome for Sunnis, which incentivized Sunni elites to find a political settlement. Second, Shi'a leaders generally, and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki particularly, desired to consolidate power and accumulate wealth. This desire required a certain level of stability. Third, the development of key Iraqi governmental institutions, most notably the army, gave the central government the ability to counter other destabilizing elements—in particular AQI and the various Sadrist militias—as the civil war began to taper off. Fourth, the United States provided a necessary package of support, including unequivocal political support from the highest levels, separation of the warring parties, a softer tactical approach, and the killing by U.S. forces of extremist Sunni and Shi'a elements who were blocking compromise, all of which was accomplished via the unique civil-military partnership forged by General Petraeus and Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker.

While the events are specific to Iraq, the lessons of this period do allow us to draw tentative conclusions about the conduct of future stability operations. This paper maintains that the correct lessons are the following. First, success is deeply dependent upon the alignment of local interests with U.S. goals. Iraq became stable because the U.S. shared the desire for a settlement in Iraq that both the Shi'a and Sunni elites could live with (if the latter rather reluctantly). This accommodation resulted in a stable (for the region)

government with the Shi'a in charge and the Sunni not utterly downtrodden, so that oil production could begin in earnest.¹¹ Second, priority should be given to development of the host nation's military forces. Other institutions will hopefully follow. This is in contrast to current fashion and practice, which attempts to use military assets to create Western-style police forces with extremely limited success to date. Finally, identifying events such as 2006-2008 Baghdad (and contemporary Afghanistan) as political—and not primarily military—challenges highlights the need for political guidance and leadership, one that focuses on accomplishment of strategic aims rather than tactical victories. U.S. assistance to Iraq during the critical period of 2006-2008 was appropriately applied by a singularly politically adept General, working in close concert with an unusually flexible diplomat. This is not a happenstance that can be counted on in the future.

But most fundamentally, we must avoid learning the wrong lessons from the Surge period. While the operations of military forces and their increase in number may have played a role (an “interaction effect”) these efforts would have been for naught in the absence of the political factors this paper identifies. A counterinsurgency is ultimately a political conflict—and while military forces can shape politics, they cannot determine a political outcome.¹² Further, the relationship between security and politics is iterative, with improvements in one creating at least the potential for improvements in the other.

Part 1: Political Factors

Sunni Casualties and Settlement

The fundamental truth of the Iraqi settlement is that the sectarian civil war ended—and the Sunni lost. Upon realizing this defeat, the Sunni (a term this paper will use for elite Sunni leaders, both tribal elders in the West and urban strongmen in Baghdad, eliding over some differences between these groups) went into damage-control mode to reach a settlement. This—and not a tactical

triumph on the part of the U.S. military—is the primary explanation for the “Awakening” movement which occurred in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province and then served as the inspiration for a related yet distinct phenomenon in Baghdad and the surrounding areas.

The role of the Sunni Awakening has hardly been neglected in analysis of the shift that occurred in 2007, but it has been often mythologized. Interviews with Sunni political leaders, including former insurgents, are usually taken at face value, as are those of their U.S. counterparts. Explanations for Sunni behavior fall into three categories, the first two of which are inadequate, but which are not mutually exclusive of the more comprehensive final one. The first explanation is the simplest: that the Sunnis were simply “paid off.” In this account, U.S. dollars flowing to the former insurgents, whether through CIA or military accounts, purchased a Sunni military campaign against AQI. While there is some truth to this explanation, this rationale does not explain why the insurgents did not switch sides sooner (there was plenty of money in the 2004-2006 period), why, in Baghdad at least the Sunni militias began fighting AQI before they were paid, or the continuing relative calm since 2008, despite the continuing irregularities surrounding payment of the Awakening Members (now usually referred to as “Sons of Iraq”).¹³

The second explanation can be called “al Qaeda over-reach.” In this account (often recounted by General Petraeus), al Qaeda was overly demanding in its interaction with the Sunni populace. Key irritants included insisting on stricter adherence to Shari 'a law, demands of intermarriage into the Sunni tribes, excessive violence against traditional authorities (up to and including an assassination campaign of the more nationalist Sunni leaders), and attempting to get Sunni tribesmen to stop smoking. The Sunnis therefore realized they had made a “deal with the devil” that threatened their preferred, traditional leadership, and that they would be better off switching sides to ally themselves with the American-led coalition. There is doubtless truth to this as well, but it is more likely the genuine frustration

with AQI and the disillusionment of the general population helped Sunni leaders bring along their people when they decided to cut the deal with the United States as a proxy for the central government.¹⁴

The third, and most comprehensive explanation, is a purely rational political one.

The third, and most comprehensive explanation, is a purely rational political one. At some point in 2006, the Sunni realized that they had essentially lost the civil war.¹⁵ The Sunni had engaged in the civil war with the Shi'a to secure political power. They believed they could win—and deserved to win—because the Saddam Hussein regime had propagated the lie that Sunni were the majority sect in Iraq. Armed with this misinformation, it is hardly surprising that a calculation was (erroneously) made that a civil war would end in Sunni victory, and that they need not accept a large Shi'a role in any future government.¹⁶ By late 2006, it was becoming quickly apparent to the Sunni that they were losing, particularly in Baghdad, as entire sectors of the city, and virtually the entire East side, were systematically cleansed of Sunni residents.¹⁷

The mounting casualty count fundamentally changed Sunni outlooks and caused them to begin to look for a way to reach a settlement.¹⁸ The Sunni realized that only the United States had the “wasta”¹⁹ to intervene for them with the central government and secure their minority interests, and yet they had been actively trying to repel the invading U.S. forces since late 2003. The Sunnis further realized that the U.S. considered AQI, and not the Sunni nationalist groups, their prime enemy (this distinction was a recent one for the Americans, reflecting their ever-increasing sophistication in dealing with various factions). The Sunni made the reasonable assumption that as they initiated a conflict against AQI, the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” dynamic would quickly kick in, effectively allying them with the Americans against AQI and making it

politically difficult for the Americans to leave them to their fate vis-à-vis the Shi'a-dominated government.²⁰ While local grievances with AQI certainly played a part, it was this rational calculation that a U.S. military now aware of these distinctions could be manipulated—or at least “encouraged”—to protect the Sunni “Awakenings” against both al Qaeda and the Shi'a government/security forces that made the Sunni change of strategy possible.

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In short, the Sunni had reached what military scholar Stephen L. Melton calls “looming demographic collapse,” a threshold of casualties which convinces one side in a conflict that it has lost and that suing for peace is the only means of ensuring group survival.²¹ Confronted with this stubborn fact, the Sunni corrected their earlier miscalculation about their odds of success in a civil war, and aligned themselves with the Americans to reach an honorable peace, while crafting a half-true story about their rejection of al Qaeda in order to save face.

Shi'a Consolidation

Prime Minister Maliki assumed his office in the midst of the raging, if undeclared, Sunni-Shi'a civil war. It would be naïve to assume that Maliki was not, in some sense, a partisan. While much of what the U.S. government knows and knew about operations within Maliki's Office of the Commander in Chief (OCINC) remains classified and clouded (and what it knows/knew is likely incomplete), his

links with the Shi'a cleansing operations conducted by the Badr Corps, the Sadrist *Jaysh al Mahdi* (JaM), and Interior Ministry forces aligned with each—allegedly directed through the person of Dr. Bassima al-Jaidri, his special advisor—are not in serious doubt.²² However, at some point in late 2007 or early 2008, it appears that Maliki realized that Shi'a control of Iraq was no longer in any serious contention. If this is an accurate characterization, he then stopped being as concerned about operations against the Sunni, and instead began thinking of his personal political future and the shape of post-war Iraq.

Further extrapolating that Maliki judged his rivals in the Badr Corps/ISCI as people he could “do business with,” (and recognizing that since they had not engaged in combat with the Americans, he could not portray them as a serious threat and get help in finishing them off), Maliki decided to take on the JaM in order to consolidate power and send a signal that he intended to reassert the state monopoly on legitimate force. In March 2008, the opportunity to do so presented itself. Maliki himself led the Iraqi army in Operation ‘Charge of the Knights,’ in which the government cleared the southern port city of Basra from JaM control. This action against the armed wing of his Shi'a rival Muqtada al-Sadr allowed Maliki to recast himself as a nationalist, anti-militia leader, rather than simply a Shi'a partisan.

Consolidation of Institutional Capacity

In late 2006, the project of creating a new, viable Iraqi army finally bore fruit.²³ Through this project, begun under Major General Paul Eaton in 2003, assisted by various maneuver commanders, most notably then-Major General Peter Chiarelli, and accelerated under then-Lieutenant General David Petraeus's Multinational Support and Training Command, by late 2006 had assembled the nucleus of a viable army. It was in late 2006 that General George Casey decided, in concert with Prime Minister Maliki, that a central command would be created for Iraqi units in greater Baghdad—and that an Iraqi would

command it. Prior to this decision, Iraqi units were under the “operational control” or OPCON, of the U.S. brigades in theater.²⁴ Putting Iraqi units under the control of their own government was controversial,²⁵ as many of these units were complicit participants in the Sunni-Shi'a civil war. However, in retrospect, General Casey's bold decision greatly accelerated the development of not only the military forces themselves, but also the political institutions to control them.

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The Iraqi 6th and 9th Army Divisions provided key troops to the Baghdad “surge” in 2007. Both units had distinguished pedigrees. The 6th Division was the descendant of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) and later Iraqi National Guard (ING) units established and trained by U.S. army units in Baghdad since early 2004. The 9th Division was the only Mechanized and Armored Division in the Iraqi army, and as such had an increased level of prestige and resources. When these units and the two Iraqi National Police Divisions were placed under the Baghdad Operational Command, commanded by Lieutenant General Abud Qandar al-Maliki, the conditions were set for a truly functional Iraqi command and control system to emerge. This is not to say that there were not difficulties involved in the transition, including corrupt commanders in the system, or that individuals from Prime Minister Maliki's Office of the Commander in Chief (OCINC) did not continue to give direction by cell phone to company or battalion level commanders.²⁶ But with the aggressive partnering of then-Brigadier General John C. Campbell with Lieutenant General Abud, and the further partnering of U.S. brigade commanders with the divisional commanders, the Iraqi command learned how to generally enforce discipline, maneuver units, and create an acceptable security situation.²⁷ The security improvement directly provided space in which the Iraqi people could

begin to re-establish commerce and social interaction, while indirectly conferring legitimacy on the Iraqi government.

U.S. Political Support, from President to Platoon

The various aspects of U.S. involvement emphasized by the New Orthodoxy did impact the Iraqi situation, though probably not through the means which U.S. policy makers had envisioned. While the influx of troops made real contributions to help set conditions, the decisive aspect of the “surge” was the political signal sent by President Bush that the United States was decisively committed to Iraq for the duration of his tenure in office. It was this reassurance to both Sunni and Shi’a leadership that gave Iraq political space, and not the impact of a mere 30,000 troops on top of 130,000 already in theater.²⁸

In addition, the turn to “counterinsurgency” or COIN tactics, combined with the liberal use of concrete walls and barriers to protect all parties, did help to lower political tensions and create space for the dynamic laid out above to work itself out. This is not to say that the United States had primary agency during this period, but rather that the United States and the COIN strategy created metaphorical “bumpers,” that kept the Iraqi-led process from going “off the rails.” The engagement by the United States government across all “lines”—diplomatic, economic and security—helped shape an environment in which clearer heads could prevail and make more rational decisions.

The “Clear-Control-Retain” concept²⁹ exercised throughout Baghdad by MultiNational Division Bagdad likely did not play the causal role often attributed to it,³⁰ though precision targeting against AQI and other militants by both the “black Special Operations Forces” of the Joint Special Operations Command and the “landowning” brigades helped set some important conditions.³¹ But to maintain that the series of operations in and around Baghdad had a significant political impact is, to date, empirically unsupported. These large scale clearing operations may have served only to remove unorganized armed youths from the Sunni

communities, making them vulnerable to the organized Shi’a militias (or, reportedly, Shi’a dominated police forces) who could then cleanse the neighborhoods at their leisure.³²

The New Orthodoxy is correct in noting that the COIN strategy—identified with its primary author and proselytizer General Petraeus—was helpful. However, it ties the change of strategy too closely to Petraeus’ actions upon arrival in Baghdad in February of 2007, and does not acknowledge that many conditions were actually set much earlier. The base “Fardh al Qanoon” or Baghdad Security Plan was written in December 2006 under the close supervision of General Casey, then still the senior commander in Iraq.³³ While then-Lieutenant General Odierno was restating his desire for a 2003-2005 style “spring offensive,” it was General Casey who ensured that the majority of the “surge” forces, or at least the first two brigades, would occupy Joint Security Stations inside the Baghdad city limits.³⁴ Earlier failings in the Iraq strategy may have to be laid at General Casey’s feet, but during his final days he took a number of steps that set the conditions for success after his departure.³⁵ Similarly, it has been often noted that the Anbar portion of the Sunni Awakening began in the fall of 2006, months before President Bush’s announcement of the Surge. In short, the Iraqi theater had been groping towards a coordinated COIN strategy for some time,³⁶ and while Petraeus would consolidate and further advance the process, many—and perhaps most—of the pieces were already in place upon his arrival. Petraeus’ assumption of command marks the completion of the change in tactics and strategy, and not its beginning.

What was more likely decisive in pushing a political settlement was the clear signal sent by President Bush that the United States was committed to a solution to the crisis, was not going to be “waited out,” and would be present to buffer Iraqi disputes (at least through the end of his term).³⁷ This was in clear contrast to both the direction that commanders in Iraq had been previously pursuing (brigades were still “offramping” from Iraq in the summer

of 2006), and the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (or “Baker-Hamilton” group) report, which maintained that all combat brigades (save force protection forces) could exit Iraq by early 2008.³⁸ More than any other single factor, the impact of this political promise of support from the White House reassured senior Iraqi officials that they would not be abandoned as they made hard political choices over the next two years. This created the “political space” that made Iraqi-driven events possible in 2007-8. The eventual surge in troops would not reach its peak until five months later, and was more of a reinforcement—a tangible signal—that the commitment was not lightly given.

The situation was also defused by the separation of the warring parties.

The situation was also defused by the separation of the warring parties. The intervention of the United States, both in the form of troops in Joint Security Stations (JSS), often strategically placed on sectarian fault lines, and the oft-maligned concrete barriers, reduced the violence and stopped the cycle of revenge that had engulfed Baghdad. Again, it is important to note that both of these tactics pre-date the formal “surge” of U.S. troops, as the construction of the Joint Security Stations and the use of concrete in the construction of “gated communities” in the Baghdad “focus districts” began in 2006. However, the new strategy linked these actions into support for the political strategy of protecting the population—protecting the remaining Sunni enclaves wherever possible, while limiting AQI access to Shi’a targets—in a way that had not been clearly articulated in 2006, while the increase in troops did make the change in strategy more viable.

But while the role of the JSS’s and the “COIN Strategy” has been much discussed, the role of concrete—erected almost entirely by U.S. forces—has not. The erection of concrete barriers served one of three purposes, depending on

location. Concrete put around Sunni communities protected the Sunni Baghdadis where they slept, making the infiltration of Shi’a death squads exponentially more difficult. Concrete put around Shi’a public spaces—primarily mosques and markets—protected Shi’a civilians from AQI vehicle bombers, forcing a shift to less deadly suicide vests. Finally, concrete barriers put down the sides of roads protected American forces from improvised explosive devices, especially the lethal Iranian manufactured Explosively Formed Projectiles (EFPs). Regardless of placement, these concrete walls served as a barrier that made those within it safer, though often at the cost of cutting traditional lines of communication, disrupting commerce and separating families.

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An often understated factor in the reduction of violence was the decimation of AQI and—to a lesser extent—Iranian-sponsored Shi’a groups in greater Baghdad. The adaptation of various tactics and technologies by Coalition Special Operations Units (primarily American and British), but also by the Brigade Combat Teams, facilitated the destruction of AQI networks faster than the leadership could regenerate them. These were deliberate, patient efforts—largely disconnected from the larger-scale “clearing” operations. The disruption of AQI car bomb networks in particular significantly reduced (but by no means eliminated) the violence committed against Shi’a civilians. While the ultimate deal would be political, it is still important to recognize the importance of removing the least reconcilable elements in Iraqi society from the equation, both minimizing their violence and making compromise more possible.³⁹ However, the troop surge had comparatively little impact on these operations, as the existing brigades on

the ground—in conjunction with the Special Operations Forces—were adequate to target these small cells.

Also contributing to the stabilization of the situation was the calm, steady leadership provided by the team of MNF-I Commander General Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Crocker. The primacy of political leadership in stability operation, or counterinsurgency, cannot be overemphasized. The military scholar John Mackinlay goes so far as to credit the British reputation for counterinsurgency not so much to their military expertise, as to the fact that the British conducted counterinsurgency in their colonial holdings, under the political direction of their colonial administrations:

The engagement between the government and the military tended to follow a comfortingly similar pattern whether the incoming British battalion found itself in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia or the Middle East. The battalions which rushed to the epicenter of the insurrection found themselves locked into a familiar system of English-speaking officials with an unsurpassed knowledge of the land and its people. It was the resident colonial staff who designed the counterinsurgent strategy and provided the political insight to design the campaign objectives and resuscitate the state's authority.⁴⁰

If Petraeus and Crocker were not quite the British Colonial Office, they were certainly the nearest analogue that the United States could hope for, given the generally feeble state of its stability operations capacity in both the military and The State Department/U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In the unique partnership between a general with unusual domestic political skills, and one of the most skilled Arabists in the State Department, military actions were conscious of a political end—in both Baghdad and Washington—in a way not previous experienced. The leadership of this team ensured that the contributions were (generally) well placed and mutually reinforcing of the

ultimate political objectives for both an Iraqi and American political solution to the festering crisis.

Part 2: Lessons Learned

As lessons from Iraq are migrated to both Afghanistan and future military doctrine, it is important to ensure that we learn the right lessons. The New Orthodoxy takes from Iraq the importance of more troops and more “clearing operations,” which this paper maintains to have been of limited importance. The key lessons to bring forward to future operations are different.

First, success in Iraq was primarily a function of the alignment of U.S. and Iraqi aims. The U.S. always wanted a stable and democratic Iraq. Given the majority Shi'a population, this meant the U.S. wanted—de facto—a Shi'a dominated Iraq. This meant that U.S. aims were aligned with those of the most powerful actors—Prime Minister Maliki and his government, as well as the pre-eminent Shi'a religious figure, Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Gaining Sunni acceptance of this fact was difficult and required their military defeat by their co-nationalists, but once the Sunni realized that they had lost their civil war with the Shi'a, and reconciled themselves to living under a Shi'a majority government, the fundamental political interests of all factions were aligned. This is not to say that the end was preordained or to minimize either the military sacrifices or the expenditure of political capital that occurred to bring about the current *modus vivendi*. But it does accent the importance of ensuring that the end state visualized by the host nation leadership is something that the intervening power can live with.⁴¹

Second, the United States fundamentally pursued a tactic of making the Iraqi army “good enough” to provide the security structure necessary for transition. In the wake of the July 2009 U.S. military transition,⁴² this “good enough” arrangement seems to be holding, despite the continued activity of the AQI terrorists.⁴³ While the paramilitary Iraqi National Police have also reached an

acceptable level of proficiency as a “second army,” the other branches of the Iraqi police have lagged far behind. There are many reasons for this shortcoming, but the most important is that the United States—and most other Western countries—lack expertise in conflict policing, and are therefore unable to effectively develop forces to achieve that task.

Developing armies is relatively easy, especially when you have another army on hand to help stand it up.

Developing armies is relatively easy, especially when you have another army on hand to help stand it up. But armies are not police forces. Police forces are one part of a rule of law and justice system, which also involves a legal code, judges, defense and prosecuting attorneys, an evidentiary system, and a prison/penal system. To believe that the U.S. military—as the de facto lead agency for complex ground interventions like Iraq and Afghanistan—has the capacity, interest, mandate, or perspective to effectively develop police forces is folly. Until and unless the United States and/or its allies develop the institutional capacity to develop police forces and a justice system on a large scale, focusing on developing armies, despite the multiple hazards involved,⁴⁴ should remain at the core of the larger strategy. Future interventions should focus on Security Sector Reform (SSR), with military forces concentrating on training of their military counterparts to provide initial stability, with the State Department, allied forces with gendarme-like forces, specialized SSR firms and NGOs taking responsibility for police training and justice sector reform, with the full understanding that it will lag development of the army by years.

Finally, we must take quite seriously Mackinlay’s insight that good counterinsurgency has its roots in solid political guidance and oversight. This political settlement will almost certainly involve some type of “reconciliation” of a

select portion of the insurgency, which will involve a realistic understanding of the political incentives which could enable this outcome. However, determining which portion of the insurgency can be acceptably integrated—again, keeping in mind the interests of both the host and intervening nation—is an inherently political decision. This is troubling for future U.S. interventions, because in the absence of capable political guidance in-country from the U.S. diplomatic corps, we have gambled on the existence of politically astute military officers. Banking on the appearance of such individuals is not a long-term strategy, nor does it appear that the U.S. military can mass-produce such figures. If the United States believes that repeated stability operations are in its future, then it will be critical to develop the political oversight necessary for effective implementation of counterinsurgency strategies to bring about stability. Unfortunately, these do not appear to be the lessons being brought forward to Afghanistan, which has instead focused on the impact of more troops, the tenet of the New Orthodoxy.

Implementing Lessons for the Future

Given the conclusion that political factors were the most important to success in Iraq and the lessons above, it is important that U.S. government develop serious capabilities that target these areas, rather than continuing to rely on old structures and familiar tools.

Primacy for the design of the intervention should rest with a civilian political entity, with a military headquarters tasked to support it—though just where this political entity will come from or how it will be funded remains deeply problematic.

The optimal solution would be to develop contingency and crisis-action planning expertise that could be incorporated in or support all of the regional bureaus at the Department of State, so that in-depth local knowledge could be most effectively brought to bear on the problem. However, focusing on a long-term culture shift does not address the

immediate requirements and can—if it crowds out resources for other activities—skew focus away from the traditional diplomatic skills and requirements of the State Department.

A more forceful execution of the Department of State's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stability (S/CRS) concept (as embedded in the new State Department Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review [QDDR]) may be a useful compromise to embedding the expertise in the regional bureaus. Careful consideration should be given to the injection of former (not serving) military officers with significant experience and political sensitivities into such a structure in order to more rapidly generate capacity. In the longer term, serving in stability operations should become the “new normal” for the State Department, and seen as a core competency, rather than a temporary aberration from normal diplomatic duties (the QDDR is ambiguous as to whether this is the case). This may well involve significant changes in both the selection and training of future Foreign Service Officers.

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Whatever might be the capabilities required to execute future ground operations, it is more important to recognize the political aims of the intervention—the aims of both the intervening power and the indigenous political forces. Policymakers must accurately assess the motivations of indigenous political leaders and how closely these motivations map onto the national interests of the United States and its partners. Absent a political orientation, and

an understanding that host-nation dynamics are far more influential than any effect that a Western military can hope to achieve, we can expect future interventions to mirror the confusion that characterized the early years in Iraq and Afghanistan. This does not lead to optimism for future interventions and may in fact lead us to question whether we can or should undertake interventions we are not prepared to win.

Part 3: Whither Afghanistan?

The conclusions this paper draws do not give cause for optimism in Afghanistan. Many of the key concepts of the current plan for that conflict appear to have been drawn directly from the New Orthodoxy. These dubious lessons include additional troops (even approximately the same 30,000 number), a focus on killing mid-level insurgents (as opposed to the utterly irreconcilable extremists) and an emphasis on counterinsurgency tactics. Even the recycling of the popular language for the “Afghan Surge” (so common as to not require footnoting) shows the influence of the New Orthodoxy.

While the increase of troops is not without effect, and Taliban strongholds have been significantly degraded in Helmand, Kandahar, and Khost, there has not been an accompanying political signal of support from the administration. The President's statements have been ambiguous, ever since his West Point speech of 2009, during which he both authorized an increase in troop strength, and gave a July 2011 date for the beginning of their withdrawal, recently confirmed in an address on the future of the war. This mixed message from the President (which continues to resonate despite post-Lisbon Conference messaging about 2014, and not 2011, being the key date) has been echoed by his administration. This ambiguity is almost certainly driven by the desire to reconcile the largely incompatible goals of permanently and decisively denying al Qaeda safe havens and Taliban establishment in Afghanistan, while simultaneously avoiding long-term intervention and nation building at astronomical cost. So in

short, while the troops have arrived in Afghanistan, the unambiguous message of support and presence that accompanied the 2007 Iraq surge has not. We should not be surprised when politicians in both Afghanistan and Pakistan react accordingly.

It is also not clear that there is any looming demographic crisis for the combatants. While Taliban and associated fighters are being killed and captured at extraordinary rates, civilian casualties in Afghanistan (while tragic when they occur) are in no way equivalent to those in Iraq, for the simple reason that they are not (in the main) being targeted, and are then harmed most often as “collaterals.” The current focus on fighters—while right and moral—has not, and likely will not, create a sense that an entire ethnic group is “losing” to the point that it needs to settle.

The focus on the Afghan army does give some cause for optimism. The increased emphasis placed on the Afghan Army Corps and below by the ISAF Regional Commands has greatly improved capacity, on the model of the Baghdad Operational Command. This paper would recommend a redoubling of these efforts, with the military largely transitioning their role from the Afghan police forces to other actors (Dept. of State, NGOs, and contractors) in order to give sole military focus to the Afghan army.

Finally, as has been repeatedly documented, it does not appear that the political leadership of Afghanistan has the same shared vision of an end state that the United States enjoyed (relatively speaking) with the Maliki-led Government of Iraq.⁴⁵ Absent a shared set of goals, it is difficult to envision how the United States could help Afghanistan find a relatively peaceful settlement, even should the violence somehow diminish.

This paper wishes it could be more optimistic about the strategic possibilities for Afghanistan. However, contra the alleged lessons of the New Orthodoxy, it is unlikely that a push of more forces, better tactical counterinsurgency, and the arrival of a highly talented commander can compensate

for a lack of political commitment and absence of shared goals between the host nation and the intervening power. Until and unless more subtle lessons about the limits of military force in counterinsurgency or related operations are more fully absorbed, it is difficult to see how these largely political crises might be successfully managed.



1 Announced by President Bush on January 10, 2007, the first of the “Surge” troops were operational in February of 2007 (as GEN Petraeus arrived in Baghdad), and the last of them left in the summer of 2008. “The Surge” then refers roughly to the period from February 2007 to August 2008.

2 The USF-I data shows that the current steady state of “major security incidents” has leveled at a steady state approximately 1/8th of the 2007 apogee. Ethno-sectarian deaths in Baghdad have dropped from a peak of over 1500 per week to a number that hovers near zero on the graph. All data sets show a precipitous drop off. See Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iraq: Patterns of Violence, Casualty Trends and Emerging Security Threats, Feb 9, 2011” accessed Mar 3, 2011 at http://csis.org/files/publication/110209_Iraq-PattofViolence.pdf.

3 In effect, all the independent variables were changed simultaneously, making their combined effect on the dependent variable (stability and security in Iraq) inherently unknowable. As Amitai Etzioni says, “We will probably never find out to what extent the surge in the number of American troops in Iraq in 2007 served as a turning point in the war there, and to what extent a tribal deal made the difference.” I maintain there are even more factors that must be considered. Amitai Etzioni, “Bottom-up Nation Building.” *Policy Review* 158 (Dec 2009 & Jan 2010), pp. 51-62.

4 I use “New” Orthodoxy here only to distinguish from pre-2006/2007 counterinsurgency practice. There was no “Old Orthodoxy” against which this is counterposed.

5 See Kimberly Kagan *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009); Tom Ricks *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2008); Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), especially pp. 379-381.

6 Alternatives to this account exist, of course, most notable in the writings of Nir Rosen. However, these alternative accounts do not enjoy anything approaching the privileged status or public dissemination of the New Orthodoxy. See especially Nir Rosen, *Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of American’s Wars in the Muslim World* (New York: Nation Books, 2010). For more examples of the dissemination of the “New Orthodoxy,” see then-LTG Raymond Odierno’s Heritage Foundation Address at <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-surge-in-iraq-one-year-later>, Max Boot’s writings (e.g. <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/we-winning-we-havent-won/p15356>) and the speeches of Senator John McCain (e.g. http://hotlineoncall.nationaljournal.com/archives/2008/09/mccain_bushs_tr.php)

7 Ross Douhat, “Iraq then, Libya now,” *International Herald Tribune*, Mar 15, 2011, p. 10.

8 The accounts in Ricks and Kagan are the thinnest, with Ricks largely downplaying the phenomenon and Kagan treating it as an epiphenomena of U.S. combat

operations. Robinson also gives primary agency to the American effort, while Woodward, in his short summary of what went right, is an exemplar of what I will call in this paper the “Al-Qaeda over-reach” account.

9 On transition from authoritarian rule, see Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 3-5. On the existence of the Iraqi civil war, see James D. Fearon, “Iraq’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs* 86 (March/April 2007), pp. 2-15.

10 AQI helped catalyze the violence through several high profile attacks (most notable the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006), but in retrospect it is less clear that their actions were causal, rather than simply complicating.

11 This combination—the Sunni losing militarily, but the Shi’a-controlled government unable to harness oil resources until the insurgency was ended—provided an instance of what I. William Zartman calls a “Mutually Hurting Stalemate” that encouraged both sides to find a peaceful settlement. See I. William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, (1:1), pp. 8-

12 Short of either annihilating the population, as in the recent Sri Lankan case, or occupying territory in a colonial manner, both of which are “out of fashion” for Western powers.

13 On the Sunni uprisings predating their formal establishment and payment, see (e.g.) Dale Kuehl, “The People are the Key: Testing Galula in Ameriyah,” *Military Review* (March/April 2009), pp. 72-80.

14 This version is also propagated by Dave Kilcullen in his *Small Wars Journal* essay of August 29, 2007, “Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt,” at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/> and in the two-volume Marine Corps University Press set of interviews with U.S. and Iraqi figures associated with the Anbar Awakening, available online at <http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/article/al-anbar-awakening>.

15 See Nir Rosen, who told an interviewer that, “The balance of power really shifted in 2006. And I met resistance leaders, Sunni resistance leaders, in Baghdad and Anbar, Syria, Jordan, and they all said the same thing: “We lost. We lost.” It was a huge shift in how they thought of themselves. They had once thought that they could easily overthrow the Americans and overthrow the Shias. They looked down on the Shias as somehow being inferior to them. In 2006, they realized they had been defeated, not by the Americans, but by Black & Decker: it was power drills. If you found a corpse and it had its head cut off, it was killed by a Sunni militia. If you found a corpse with the marks of power drills in it, you knew it was killed by Shia militiamen. That was just their signature. And you had this brutal Shia counterinsurgency campaign—Shia militiamen in collaboration with Shia-dominated police and army—which just crushed Sunni neighborhoods and the Sunni population and beat them, until they finally realized they had lost. Many were depopulated from Baghdad. Not that Shias didn’t suffer—they suffered terribly, perhaps even more—but just numerically, Shias had the superiority, and they had the Americans backing them in this de facto relationship. And the Sunni population was crushed. And that is what finally pushed Sunni resistance groups to ally with the Americans against al-Qaeda and against the Shia militias. And that was the first huge shift in improving security.” See transcript at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/10/nir_rosen_on_aftermath_following_the, accessed Mar 5, 2011.

16 I here borrow freely from James D. Fearon’s “rationalist explanation” for conflict. See James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* (49:3), pp. 379-414. I assume a “rational miscalculation about relative power” (p. 381) and then extrapolate the model to deal with actions once this miscalculation is corrected.

17 See Michael Izady’s collection of Baghdad ethnosectarian composition maps (hosted by Columbia University) and compare 2006 (http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Baghdad_Ethnic_2006_sm.jpg) with late 2007 (http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Baghdad_Ethnic_2007_late_sm.jpg).

18 See Steven L. Melton, *The Clausewitz Delusion: How the American Army Screwed Up the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (A Way Forward)* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009), which maintains that combat fatigue sets in for a population when about 10% of its total population, or 50% of its “military age males” become casualties. See also James D. Fearon “Iraq’s Civil War” which correctly diagnosed that settlement would require “a period of fighting [to clarify] the relative military capabilities of the various sides,” but failed to recognize that this clarification had already occurred.

19 An Arabic term loosely translated as “clout” or “influence.”

20 This permitted the Sunni to avoid the very real difficulty of achieving a negotiated civil war settlement through a strategy of becoming the ally of the ally of the government they had been fighting. See Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* (51:3), pp. 335-64 on the vulnerability of the losing side, post-settlement. The United States presence mitigated the Sunni’s period of vulnerability, providing what Walter calls a “third-party guarantee.”

21 Melton, *The Clausewitz Delusion*, p. 21.

22 On the role of OCINC and Bassima al-Jaifiri in particular, see Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 400-403; Joshua Partlow, “Maliki’s Office is Seen Behind Purge in Forces,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2007, p. A1; Michael O’Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack, “Iraq Trip Report: August 2007,” unpublished manuscript, pp. 6-7.

23 At the “Iraqi Good Enough” level, of course.

24 While U.S. commanders exercised formal command, these units also often received orders, generally via cell phone, from various Iraqi officials, both military and civilian. Several units were plausibly accused of colluding in the Shi’a-Sunni civil war under such circumstances.

25 This author, then on active duty as an Army Lieutenant Colonel and, as the Chief of Plans for MND-Baghdad, leading the team writing the Baghdad Security Plan, was on the record as opposing this change at the time.

26 Over the coming months, some of these corrupt commanders would reform. Others were removed, via intense pressure from the American military on their senior Iraqi partners, both military and civilian. Still others proved politically impervious and had to be worked around.

27 “Aggressive partnering” involves a one-on-one mentoring relationship. Campbell spent time several days each week with Abud, both in the field and during meetings, essentially teaching him how to be an effective general.

28 Given the employment of about ½ of these forces outside of Baghdad City to questionable effect, the original request of GEN Casey for only two brigades and two U.S. Marine battalions—instead of the five brigades and two Marine battalions that eventually deployed—might well have been sufficient. See Woodward, pp. 296-98.

29 A more clearly defined version of the more recognized “Clear-Hold-Build” paradigm. “Clear,” “control,” and “retain” are all explicitly defined military terms.

30 Kim Kagan claims that “[s]ecurity in Iraq improved from June through November 2007 because of three successive, large-scale military operations made possible by the new strategy and the increase in troops.” *The Surge*, p. 196.

31 The term “landowning brigades” or Battle Space Owners (BSOs) refers to the general purpose force units who conducted the full range of counterinsurgency operations, from executing raids and manning security stations to monitoring community meetings and assisting with development projects.

32 Continuing the flaws of the earlier security operations during late 2006 (Operation Together Forward and Operation Together Forward II). See, e.g. Kuehl, "The People are the Key" p. 75 where he notes that the May 2007 clearing operations in fact increased the violence in Ameriya.

33 See footnote 23.

34 Joint Security Stations (JSSs) were small outposts that were "jointly" manned by U.S. military forces, and at least one (preferable several) branches of the Iraqi Security Forces—Army, National Police, or Local Police.

35 The factors most notably included the movement of troops to the Joint Security Stations and placing the Iraqi Brigades under the Baghdad Operational Command.

36 Other innovations had been pioneered by the subordinate brigades already in the Baghdad area prior to the President's "Surge" announcement. Then-Colonel J.B. Burton's 2/1 Infantry had recognized the necessity to stop Shi'a aggression against Sunni neighborhood in Ghazaliya and Ameriya; then-Colonel Jeff Bannister had emphasized combined partnering with his 2/2 Infantry; and Colonel Mike Kershaw had pushed proto-Joint Security Stations into the Sunni triangle south of Baghdad with his 2/10 Mountain, gradually expanding population security in a highly contested area.

37 It remains unclear whether the dominant factor in generating this signal was internal to the government—from Meaghan O'Sullivan's NSC/Iraq—or external to it, from retired General Jack Keane and others associated with Petraeus.

38 http://media.usip.org/reports/iraq_study_group_report.pdf, accessed June 30, 2010.

39 For a sketch of the improvement in counter-terrorism techniques against AQI and Iranian proxy groups, see Woodward, p. 380.

40 John MacKinlay, *The Insurgent Archipelago: From Mao to Bin Laden* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 51.

41 A recent paper by Pierre Englebert and Dennis M. Tull makes this same point in the African context. They maintain that one of the major errors of logic in engaging that continent has been the faulty assumption that international donors and African leaders have a shared diagnosis of failure and shared objectives for reconstruction. Englebert and Tull, "Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa: Flawed Ideas about Failed States," *International Security* 32:4 (Spring 2008) pp. 106-139.

42 In accordance with the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement of 2008, U.S. forces withdrew from all Iraqi "cities," (a term not clearly defined) in July of 2009.

43 See Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," p. 361, where she maintains that for civil war settlement, "successful guarantors should be willing to stay through the establishment of a new national government and a new national army."

44 The potential for a military coup against the nascent civilian government loomed largest.

45 The most prominent example, of course, is in the leaked cables of AMB Karl Eikenberry, calling into doubt the reliability of the Afghan President Karzai as a "adequate strategic partner." See Eric Schmitt, "Cables Detail Envoy's Worry on Karzai," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2010, p. A1.



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