



Center for Strategic and International Studies

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

1800 K Street, N.W. • Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: 1 (202) 457-8746

Web: <http://www.csis.org/burke>

Iraq: Milestones, Benchmarks, and Real World Options

Anthony H. Cordesman
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
acordesman@aol.com

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The new "tactical" approach to Iraq that President Bush presented last week leaves four major sets of issues unaddressed, all of which make that new approach questionable at best.

1. Reaching A Political Compromise May Not Be Possible -- Particularly Soon Enough to Meet a US Schedule

The tacit assumption that underpins the entire approach is that a viable political compromise is possible in Iraq that goes far beyond the national political structure in Baghdad, and which can unify a large part of the Iraqi people. A sub-assumption is that the failure to reach a compromise to date is the fault of the Iraqi leadership, and new efforts can change this situation.

The reality may be very different. The truth is that complaints about Maliki disguise conditions that may well make it impossible for him or any alternative leader to create the kind of meaningful near-term political compromise critical to building security, effective Iraqi governance, and any US withdrawal from Iraq in 12 to 18 months.

Two past "benchmarks" that the Administration has called successes are not successes at all.

The Constitution Problem

Trying to force a new constitution on Iraq at a time when Sunnis were not represented in the government, and the resulting debates could only make the issue of Kurdish autonomy part of a broader debate on separatism, was unnecessary. Rather than unite Iraqis, or serve their interest, the problems with the constitution have forced Iraqis to address virtually every sensitive issue that divides them.

Some 50 sensitive areas -- role of religion, federation, control of oil export revenues and development, taxation and control of revenues, human rights, nature of the legal system, etc. -- still have to be "clarified" or will divide the country.

Voting to Divide by Sect and Ethnicity

The election did not unify Iraqis around democracy. Iraqis did not see a campaign based on issues or experienced leaders, simply parties with ethnic and sectarian labels where they had to vote for everyone on a list. The election virtually forced them to vote by sect and faction, leaving those candidates who ran on a national ticket with little representation. It also meant voting for lists where most of those elected had little real political and leadership experience, where often not qualified administrators or cabinet

officials, and had little experience in working according to a rule of law and seeking compromise and national solutions.

Iraqis voted to divide, not unite. Most Iraqis voted to be Kurds, Arab Sunnis, and Arab Shi'ites, rather than Iraqis. The government took months to form because of these divisions, and because there is no real unity in the Shi'ite coalition which is the largest political faction in Iraq. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is a compromise between the broad support for Deputy President Adil Abd al-Mahdi and former Prime Minister Jafari, and was effectively forced on the Shi'ite Coalition when Sadr refused to back Mahdi.

The Sunnis are divided between those who oppose the constitution and those who seek to revise it. The Kurds are relatively unified, but tensions still exist between Talibani and Barzani and their supporters,

Key Ongoing Problems with Compromise and Conciliation

It is hardly surprising that political compromise and conciliation are so difficult and time consuming under these conditions, and that Maliki appears "weak" to some observers. Performing the "impossible" is time consuming at best. It also should not be surprising that the national government is steadily losing authority and popular support, not gaining it.

Progress is still driven by the following problems:

- The Shi'ites are deeply and increasingly divided. Hakim and many of SCIRI want federation. Sadr claims to oppose federation. There is a growing national power struggle between the three key factions in the Shi'ite coalition over these issues and over power, and SCIRI, Sadr, and Al Dawa all have somewhat different goals and ambitions.
- It is increasingly unclear who in what given Shi'ite faction actually controls any given militia element, and how much real world support they have in the governorates, cities, and local areas. Many "militia" are now local recruits, mixed with followers in the local police and Facilities Protection Services. This makes controlling and disarming the militias difficult at best without some new unity among the Shi'ite leadership and without more discipline and hierarchy than now exists. It also makes any serious central government action against the militias difficult and potentially explosive.
- The situation is further complicated by the steady loss of influence and control by Sistani and the regular clergy, and the growth of local Shi'ite political authority. This is particularly critical in the Basra area, where the local Shi'ite authorities have the real power, and may want a form of federation that includes the oil areas in the east, but not the Shi'ite west.

- There is no coherent Sunni Arab political bloc to compromise with, and a substantial part of the Sunnis actually in the national assembly and political structure oppose the current constitution. It simply is not clear that any government can somehow bring most Sunnis actively into the current political structure without far more incentives that the current government can offer.
- The Kurds seem more unified, but virtually have to have the equivalent of an autonomy agreement as part of any political compromise, which may well trigger Shi'ite demand for federation(s) as well. The Kurdish leaders have to find some solution to Kirkuk and the northern oil fields, and some modus vivendi with Turkey, all of which present different problems. They also potentially face financing problems as aid flows decline and smuggling and oil exports are limited.

It may still be possible to work out some kind of peaceful compromise and solution. Opinion polls, unlike the election, show far more Iraqis still seem to want unity than any form of division. However, it is far from clear that US pressure to force the pace will help, and any US effort to discredit or replace the Maliki government may make things worse. As a result, trying to rush political compromise --the most critical single element of the Bush change in "tactics" -- may be unrealistic and do more harm than good.

Moreover, the US had not even hinted at major new aid plans to provide suitable incentives for compromise, or any new outreach effort to bring Iraqis together or seek international support to build a compromise.

2. Developing Effective Iraqi Forces May Not Be Possible -- Particularly Soon Enough to Meet a US Schedule

To put it bluntly, US reporting on Iraqi force development has lost credibility. Nothing about Iraqi performance in the field indicates that the army, security forces, and police are "75% complete." There is no reason to believe Iraqi force development can be effective in 12 to 18 months without massive Iraqi success in reaching a political compromise that sharply reduces the demands for Iraqi effectiveness and the unity of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) in dealing with insurgents, militias, and death squads.

Progress is being made, and there are many reports about individual Iraqi units carrying out local missions, taking risks, and taking casualties. The fact remains, however, that far too many Iraqi army units are being credited with taking the lead or being effective in the field, and that effective units are being lumped together with units that will not perform their missions, which are tied to sects and factions, and which often have only 50-60% of their manning.

As the Department of Defense quarterly status report of August 31, 2006 makes clear, no one knows how many of the 312,400 men trained and equipped in all of the various branches of Iraqi forces are actually still in service, and all unclassified reporting on unit effectiveness has been cancelled.

Iraqi Regular Forces

The 131,600 men in Iraqi regular forces have not been able to take on the necessary missions in Baghdad and "Operation Together Forward" has exposed many failures that will take time to correct. Iraqi forces can really operate in hostile areas in Anbar without massive US support, and could easily divide if the Shi'ite coalition divides, or the Shi'ites and Kurds divide.

It is meaningless to keep claiming that the security problems are limited to small areas, and ignoring intra-Shi'ite fighting and Arab-Kurdish tensions. A statement at the same press conference indicates that, "...we are in a tough fight here in the center of the country and in Anbar province. But I think it's important to remind people that 90 percent of the sectarian violence in Iraq takes place in about a 30-mile radius from the center of Baghdad; and that secondly, 90 percent of all violence takes place in five provinces. This is not a country that is awash in sectarian violence. The situation is hard, but it's not a country that's awash in sectarian violence."

This statement is more than self contradictory, it clashes with previous claims in the Department of Defense quarterly status report in August that 81% of the violence took place in these provinces, and that statement ignored all of the softer forms of sectarian and ethnic "cleansing" and intra-Shi'ite fighting and Arab-Kurdish tensions.

Exaggerating the progress in Iraqi forces is just as serious as understating the level of violence and drift towards civil war. General Casey's stated in a press conference on October 26th that, "During the battle of Fallujah, we had a handful of battalions in the Iraqi army, and they operated in support of us. Today, six of the 10 Iraqi divisions are in the lead; 30 of the 36 Iraqi brigades. Almost 90 of the 112 Iraqi battalions are in the lead, and we operate in support of them."

This statement is technically true because of the largely meaningless definitions now used for transferring responsibility and "taking the lead." The reality, however, is that transferring responsibility for security and saying that Iraqi units "are in the lead" has become virtually meaningless and hides massive disparities in the quality and effectiveness of many of the forces involved, most of which are far from being ready to fight in any meaningful way on their own.

The Iraqi Army remains a fragile 129,700-man structure that may well be able to succeed over time, but really cannot be rushed. (Manning totals are as of October 25, 2006.) It has far too few men -- even as a goal -- to really bring security to the entire nation, particularly if this means urban warfare or "pacification" in Baghdad, with the risk of spreading civil violence in the great Basra area, Kirkuk, and Mosul. The Iraqi air force has around 800 men and no combat support or attack capability. The 1,100-man navy is just beginning to develop meaningful mission capability.

Like all Iraqi forces, the army lacks armor, heavy firepower, tactical mobility, and an Iraqi Air Force capable of providing combat support. No Administration official has presented any plan to properly equip the Iraqi forces to stand on their own, or give them the necessary funding to phase out US combat and air support in 12 to 18 months.

The Department of Defense status report on Iraqi forces for August dodges around some of these issues, but still provides important warnings about how long effective force development will take:

- It says the forces reached 115,000 men at end July: 84% of planned end strength. Generation of Army battalions is said to be 97% complete, and the support forces are only 65% complete. However, other parts of the report note that absenteeism is an average rate of 15%. It notes that, "there is currently no judicial punishment system with the Iraqi Army, Therefore, Iraqi Army Commanders have little legal leverage to compel their soldiers to combat, and soldiers and police can quit with impunity." (p. 58)
- All previous reporting on Level I-IV reporting has been abandoned for vague and undefined levels of readiness and capability. (pp. 52-53)
- Says the army has 92% of authorized equipment, but fails to describe lack of armor, artillery, heavy squad weapons, and mobility. (pp. 55-56) The focus on numbers trained and equipped ignores the fact that the equipment and facilities were often inadequate and left Iraqi forces dependent on MNF-I support. (p 41) The figures on page 42 portray major gaps between training and equipment in several categories of Iraqi forces, even ignoring their lack of heavy weapons and support equipment.
- Notes that the, "lack of junior officers and NCOs continues to be on of the biggest factors impeding the development of Iraqi forces..." Efforts are being made to correct this, but no clear picture of timelines and capabilities are provided. (pp. 55-56)
- States that the training effort for the MoD has been expanded, but the statements that the ministries and Joint Headquarters are expected to be in the lead by the end of 2007 are too heavily qualified to be meaningful. (p. 56): In fact, the report warns that, "A partnership with those institutions will be required at least through 2010." (p. 57)
- The data on "Coalition Support Requirements" focuses on logistics, and ignores the need for intelligence, armor, artillery, and air support. It touches on only one part of a major continuing issue where no clear plan seems to currently exist. (pp. 57-58).
- No assessment of naval capability, no force plans. (p. 54)

- Says there is plan to double air force manning from 750 to 1,500 by end 2007. Then describes major continuing operational and readiness problems with existing aircraft that do not include combat aircraft. (pp. 54-55).
- The report does address the major sectarian problems in the regular forces. It does not give any figures or detailed data, but is much franker than it the past about the fact that most units tend to mirror the ethnic and sectarian areas where they operated (although the report fails to mention this is not true of Sunnis). Emphasis is put on the number of Sunni and Kurdish officers in higher command slots, but growing problems for Sunni officers are not addressed. (p. 58)

Ministry of Interior National Police and Other Police Forces

The 24,800 men supposedly in the National Police and the 28,400 men in the other forces reporting directly to the Ministry of the Interior are still being purged. Elements still present significant ties to Shi'ite parties, militias, and death squads. Once again, a careful reading of the Department of Defense quarterly report for August provides important warnings:

- The report States that major progress has been made in reforming the internal operations of the MOI in every area but logistics and says expect major progress in that area by end 2006. It provides some details on logistic and support contracts and equipment plans. But does not address adequacy of equipment and states that, "...the MOI does not currently have an effective equipment management system in place...it is unknown what percentage of the equipment issued to the MOI is still serviceable." (pp. 48-50)
- Reports that, "the MOI does not currently have an effective personnel management system. As a result, it is unknown how many of the forces still trained by CPATT are still employed by the MOI." Puts attrition at least 20% per year. (p. 50)
- Says serious problems in exist in the allocation and training of police in key provinces (p. 50)
- Says both the National Police and DBE are overmanned, and that no estimate y exists of how many are trained and equipped by the MNF-I now actually serve versus those who have left. (p. 51)
- States that merging the National Police Commandos and Public Order Battalions before the January 2006 elections helped reduce sectarian problems and abuses, but no details. (p. 51).
- Notes seriousness of corruption as key problem. (p. 51)

- Flags problems with militia ties and influence, and says some are influenced by Iran, but no details, perspective, or examples. Does note that 45 more transition teams were deployed to the police in July 2006. (pp. 51-52)
- The report does warn about "unprofessional and, at times, criminal behavior" of some National Police units but does not describe which units or the level of progress in dealing with what used to be the Iraqi security forces. (p. 46)
- No meaningful content on correction of past National Police training problems. Does say US and other NPTTs are now embedded in all levels of units down to the battalion level. This should lead to major problems in dealing with sectarian and ethnic abuses and in leadership.
- It is unclear that any meaningful recruiting and vetting process has yet taken hold. (p. 47)
- Says some unquantified progress in creating mechanized battalions and providing armored vehicles. (p. 47)
- The section on the Department of Border Enforcement and Department of Ports of Entry describes a rushed effort of limited present effectiveness with goals that seem unrealistic. The percentage data on manning and equipment say nothing about effectiveness.
- The report Effectively says the current strength and capability of the Center for Dignitary Protection is unknown. (p. 48)

The situation is far worse with the 128,000 men authorized the regular police and the additional 144,000 men authorized for the Facilities Protection Service. Most regular police are far too lightly equipped, have massive desertions, and whose remaining elements often serve sectarian and ethnic -- not national -- leaders.

The DoD quarterly report is anything but explicit about the problems in these forces. It fails to explain that "trained and equipped" manpower has nothing to do with the numbers of men still in service and effective. These are two totally different measures of capability, of which only the latter is meaningful. It ignores key problems in terms of corruption, actual manning and readiness, loyalty to the central government, and sectarian and ethnic divisions.

The report does, however, provide enough additional detail to raise major questions about a 12-18 month time period"

- A careful reading shows that the lack of PTTs means the US only has "limited observations of the IPS (Iraqi Police service)" in 13 of 18 provinces. This means that US and MNF-I have no real system for rating effectiveness and capability of the IPS in most of Iraq. (p. 45)

- The section on IPS recruiting and vetting indicates some progress has been made, but admits that "There is currently no screening process to ascertain militia allegiance" and "currently, no method exists to track the success rate of these or other police officers." (p. 45)
- The progress reported on equipping the IPS ignores the fact that the equipment supplied does not include protected vehicles and leaves the police underarmed compared to threat forces. (p. 45)
- The section on IPS leadership describes the training program, not actual leadership. (pp. 45-46) There is no meaningful reporting on progress in removing failures in senior leadership.

The DoD quarterly report notes acute problems with the Facilities Protection Service and that these include the fact their uniforms look enough like police uniforms to help compound the problems in identifying real police from sectarian attackers and criminals. (p. 48)

This means that the majority of Iraqi forces are now as much a part of the problem as the solution.

The "year of the police" still lacks adequate US teams to serve with Iraqi forces, and now looks like the "two to three years of the police," not one. As the Department of Defense quarterly report for August makes clear, there is no meaningful database on where the men trained and equipped for the regular police actually are, or on the effectiveness of individual units.

The Lack of a Rule of Law and Governance

These critical shortfalls in the ISF are compounded by the lack of an effective legal and court system under national control; a meaningful rule of law, and by the fact the central government often has no practical governance or presence in the field.

Iraqi controlled security is dependent on six key elements: (i) An effective political compromise to unite the ISF and Iraqi people, (ii) an effective army and air force that can stand on their own, (iii) effective national police and security forces that serve the nation and not factions, (iv) effective regular police and facilities protection forces that also serve the nation, (v) effective courts and an operating rule of law, and (vi) a government presence and provision of services at the local level that builds loyalty and gives the government credibility. None of these elements are present in large areas of Iraq, and many are missing in most of Iraq.

The US might be able to improve this situation if it had a key strategy for providing more aid and more advisors. It has not advanced any plans to do so. Once again, simply trying to force the issue may well make things worse and not better.

3. The US Has Not Said a Meaningful Word About New Approaches to the Economy, Aid, or Oil

As SIGIR and other reports have made all too clear, the US economic aid effort has fallen far short of its goals, if not largely failed. The current aid program is running out of money, has fallen far short of its objectives, and in many cases has left projects the Iraqis cannot afford to sustain without further aid.

The State Department has reported that as of October 24th, the US IRRF-1 and IRRF-2 program totaled \$20.9 billion. Some \$20.6 billion had already been committed, \$20.3 billion had been obligated, and \$15.9 billion had been dispersed. (Some \$4.6 billion on that total was spend on security.) The US program for the future will add only about \$800 million, not enough to sustain even part of the necessary Iraqi forces development effort.

Unemployment ranges in the 20% to 25% level, and the combined total for unemployment and underemployment often reaches 40% to 60% for young Iraqis in high risk and depressed areas. Income distribution is terrible, sectarian and ethnic fighting are highly disruptive to economic activity, and there is a major drain of skilled professionals.

Many ministries cannot really function. The major state industries largely have not been reforms and the military industries no longer exist. Agriculture still suffers from the heritage of Saddam's command approach and the failure to sustain some key irrigation projects is a major issue. As the Energy Information Agency reports, modernization and recovery of the oil sector has hardly begun and Iraqi producing field still suffer from water flooding, oil injection, and over production.

The US cannot provide major incentives for either sustained Iraqi political compromise, or Iraqi force development without a major new aid program costing tens of billions of dollars. There cannot be an effective US strategy without an economic strategy.

4. There is No Clear US Alternative

If talk about benchmarks, milestones, or schedules is supposed to put pressure on Iraq, the US must have a clear alternative to simply trying to make the current strategy work. The US should not be too explicit about such options -- they could become a self-fulfilling prophecy -- but there are no leaks or rumors that the US even has such plans.

In Washington, this raises serious questions about how realistic the Administration is being at looking at alternatives. It might well also be far more useful to warn Iraqis about the conditions under which US support would have to be cut than simply try to force the pace in terms of time.