

HSPI Commentary Series

BAGHDAD SURPRISE?

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With US combat operations in Iraq coming to a close at the end of this month, journalists, pundits, politicians and others are weighing in on whether America's investment of blood and treasure there was worth it. After all, 4,415 American soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of both US and Iraqi interests. Evaluating the merits of America's investment is, perhaps, a question better left to the politicians, if not to historians, years from now. Instead, security analysts and practitioners should agree that the crucial question centers on the nature of the threat and the security situation that Iraq may present moving forward.

The US mission's transition to a civilian-led train/assist/support posture will undoubtedly have significant security implications. Particularly in the short term, a spike in violence is likely as Al



Source: Army Staff Sgt. Russell Lee Klika

Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Iranian-backed militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Promise Day Brigade, seek to prove their mettle. By demonstrating their strength and asserting their capability, AQI and the militias aim to cast Iraqi authorities in a bad light, and undermine Iraqis' confidence in their officials. Recent attacks on Iraqi military and law enforcement figures and venues are no accident. The targeting was deliberate and symbolic, designed to highlight their weaknesses. While the militias aim to increase Iranian influence in Iraq, AQI seeks to usurp the position and role of government, as well as cow Iraqis, to effectively force the population to turn to AQI by demonstrating the absence of a better, meaning more powerful and competent, authority or alternative.

While AQI still has the ability to plan and successfully execute attacks, overall it is back on its heels. But we need to make sure it stays off kilter. While a goal of zero violence is a pipedream (even US forces could not hew to that baseline), the aim should be to consolidate gains and prevent an increase in popular support for AQI or the militias. A reversal of the strategic and tactical gains in past months must not be allowed. Iraqi and US national security each have an interest in that outcome, as does the broader region and the international community.

The good news is that AQI is undergoing an identity crisis. This presents an opportunity, ripe for exploit, to hasten the group's demise. The deaths of Zarqawi, Baghdadi and al-Masri were big blows. Better border security and greater obstacles to communicating with AQI have also hurt the group; and AQI's ability to communicate with Al Qaeda Senior Leadership and other likeminded jihadists has been degraded. Disrupting links with outsiders is important, partly because past AQI leaders were not Iraqis and were dependent on foreign fighters. Notably, this is an area where US assets including Special Forces must continue to play a significant role, by supporting Iraq's own intelligence and reconnaissance efforts, in order to continue to disrupt terrorist cells, plans, operations, communications and fundraising, and deny foreign fighters entry into the country.

Achieving a positive outcome in the long run will require tackling serious problems such as corruption, which has infiltrated the Interior Ministry (and police forces). It is up to Iraqis to root out the rot. Good governance, from the top right down to the local level, including local law enforcement, will ultimately make the difference. Clearly Iraq is not yet out of the woods. Though the situation has improved over time (due in large part to the US surge), security in the country remains tenuous and there still exists a vacuum that could be filled by Al Qaeda—which has



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also invested heavily in the country in the hopes of unraveling it. If they succeed, the question of whether our own profound contribution was, in fact, worth it will return front and central. On the other hand, if Iraqis summon the political will and skill to take on the deepseated difficulties that currently persist, the future of Iraq could be bright. Now wouldn't that be a Baghdad surprise.

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