

After the surge: Getting out of Iraq

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

The weekly death tolls in Iraq have recently decreased—for four reasons: The U.S. troop “surge” has restricted the flow of explosives into Baghdad; ethnic cleansing has been completed in many areas; the Mahdi Army has suspended its attacks; and the U.S. is co-opting Sunni insurgents. Thus the Bush administration has been able to claim military progress and thereby to put off attempts to end the war.

But all of these factors are temporary or have perilous long-term consequences. Iraq is so thoroughly ripped apart by insurgent and sectarian violence that even Yugoslavia cannot be used as an analogy. There is no military solution to the insurgency or the civil war. And the hope of a unity government in Iraq is more remote than ever before.

General David Petraeus used the surge’s five extra combat brigades to build a military ring around Baghdad and cut off the supply of ammunition to insurgents, sectarian fighters and foreign terrorists. This measure reduced attacks in the city and diverted violence to surrounding areas. At the height of the insurgent and sectarian violence in early 2007, Iraq was averaging approximately 1,800 attacks per week; the average by midsummer was 1,000. According to Iraq’s Interior Ministry, 2,318 civilians were killed in August and 1,654 in September. These numbers represent reductions of approximately 30 percent from the early months of 2007.

Bush officials called the escalation a surge because they knew it would have to be temporary. The U.S. lacks the forces to sustain it. There are other problems with calling the surge a success. The high death tolls of a year ago reflected vicious campaigns of ethnic cleansing in many areas that are now completed, at least until an all-out civil war erupts. The Mahdi Army—the main anti-American Shi’ite militia group—suspended its attacks in August after it had a dangerous clash with the Badr Organization, the Shi’ite militia group that dominates the Iraqi army and police force. The current lull in violence will end as soon as the Mahdi Army resumes the murderous business for which it exists.

Petraeus's risky deal with Sunni tribal sheiks was sharply contested in the military before Petraeus's strategy prevailed. Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a homegrown Sunni Arab insurgent group led by foreign terrorists, has alienated Sunni tribal sheiks by bombing marketplaces and killing Iraqis indiscriminantly. Last spring Petraeus, hoping to capitalize on the alienation, began giving weapons to tribal police forces and other militia groups in Anbar Province that promised to use them against foreign terrorists. Attacks on American troops went down after the policy was instituted, so this summer Petraeus rolled the dice in the entire Sunni triangle of Baghdad, Ramadi and Tikrit, an area that includes Samarra and Fallujah, despite the opposition of the Maliki government.

Officially the U.S. says that it will not give arms to individuals who are known to have killed Americans; off the record officials acknowledge that, of course, we rarely know who the insurgents are anyway. The very groups that the U.S. has been fighting for the past four years are now getting U.S. weapons if they promise to use them against foreign terrorists.

Co-opting the Sunnis has bought some relief for U.S. forces, helping to reduce American deaths in August and September to 84 and 63 respectively. But this scheme is obviously loaded with peril. Trying to co-opt insurgent groups is not new in counterinsurgency warfare. The French, the British and the U.S. tried it, respectively, in Algeria, Malaya and Vietnam. In each case the weapons given to insurgent groups ended up being used against the forces providing them. Major General Rick Lynch, commander of the Third Infantry Division, explains the mentality of the Sunni militants he is trying to co-opt: "They say to us, 'We hate you because you are occupiers, but we hate al-Qaeda worse, and we hate the Persians even more.'" (In this lexicon, Iraqi Shi'ites are Persians.)

So the U.S. is arming Sunni insurgents in the hope that they will spend most of their time killing people in the middle group, even as they profess to hating Shi'ites most of all. The Shi'ite-dominated government, naturally, has pleaded against this scheme. Last July during a video conference, Prime Minister Maliki implored Bush to terminate the policy and fire Petraeus. He also threatened to arm Shi'ite militias with government funds in response; Bush told Maliki to calm down. In public Maliki's top political adviser, Sadiq Rikabi, is more plaintive. There are too many militias already, he says, so "why are we creating new ones?" (Ali al-Fadhily and Dahr Jamail, "Iraq: A Nail in Maliki Government's Coffin?" Inter Press Service, August 3; *New York Times*, August 11).

The answer is that the U.S. mission in Iraq is that desperate. Military leaders who lost the argument with Petraeus are already leaking “I told you so” comments to the media. For two years many Shi’ite leaders sat back, bided their time, gave lip service to a unity government, thwarted any real attempt at one, and trusted the Americans to kill off their Sunni enemies. But the Americans failed, and civil war erupted. Today the Shi’ites and Kurds see total victory within their grasp. Sectarian killings have doubled in Iraq over the past year, and the danger to U.S. troops by Shi’ite militias has soared. According to U.S. Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, Shi’ite militias launched approximately 75 percent of the successful attacks on U.S. forces this summer, often using weapons supplied by Iran. Shi’ite factions are less inclined than ever to make any political deals. Maliki explained to Admiral William Fallon this summer: “There are two mentalities in this region: conspiracy and mistrust.”

Achieving a unified Iraqi democracy is a fantasy under these conditions. Even a cynical, thuggish settlement is out of reach as long as the major factions and players are consumed with sectarian agendas. Iraq cannot get to a decent outcome as long as the Sunnis remain a hostile minority, Shi’ite leaders exclude the Sunnis from governing, Shi’ite militias dominate the army and police force, and militias on all sides continue to proliferate. President Bush warns: “For all those who ask whether the fight is worth it, imagine an Iraq where militia groups backed by Iran control larger parts of the country.” But that is exactly what is happening now—with the tacit consent of the very government that Bush wants to prop up with more blood and treasure.

The Baker-Hamilton Commission called for the U.S. to pull back, leaving air, ground and naval deployments in Kuwait, Bahrain and other bases in the Middle East while maintaining some residual U.S. forces in Iraq to fight terrorism and stabilize the Kurdish region. While the Republican presidential field is standing by the president’s policy of escalating the war and delaying the inevitable withdrawal of forces, the Democratic candidates are offering variations on the Baker-Hamilton strategy. Hillary Clinton essentially adopted it last spring, which required a major change of position for her. Barack Obama wants to leave a residual force in Iraq to provide security for American personnel, fight terrorism and train Iraqi forces. John Edwards envisions leaving a residual force to intervene in an Iraqi genocide and deal with any violence that spills into neighboring nations. In the second tier of Democratic candidates, Bill Richardson supports an immediate and total withdrawal from Iraq that leaves a good deal of military equipment behind, Dennis Kucinich supports an

immediate and total withdrawal that would take up to a year to accomplish, and Joseph Biden wants American troops to stay until Iraq can be separated into three regions.

The U.S. should be planning how to get out of Iraq. It should make it clear that it is leaving; that the U.S. will offer asylum to all Iraqis endangered by their cooperation with U.S. forces; and that the U.S. will provide massive economic assistance for all humanitarian work undertaken by the United Nations, NATO, other governments and international agencies. Thus far the U.S. attitude and record are not encouraging. Sweden has accepted over 20,000 Iraqis seeking asylum in the past year; the U.S. has taken in fewer than 900.

The U.S. has two strategic objectives in the Persian Gulf: to protect its allies and secure its oil interests. It can do both of these things without stationing troops on the ground. Both strategic objectives are best secured by maintaining a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean and some naval forces in the Persian Gulf so that ships can get through the Strait of Hormuz. That can be done by stationing forces in the Indian Ocean and at bases outside the Middle East. In other words, the U.S. could go back to the policy it had in the 1980s.