Operational Success, Strategic Failure: Assessing the 2007 Iraq Troop Surge

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ABSTRACT: This article outlines the contemporary history of sectarian conflict in Iraq and identifies the consequences of the US surge strategy in perpetuating the region's violence and strengthening the Islamic State.

By 2006, security had declined dramatically in Iraq. The February bombing of the al-Askari mosque, a major Shia holy site, sparked a rapid increase in sectarian conflict. Violence in Baghdad increased 43 percent over the summer; by October, civilian deaths had risen to more than three thousand per month.[1] Thus, in January 2007 the United States radically shifted the course of the Iraq War by executing Operation Fardh al-Qanoon, commonly known as "the surge." Under General David Petraeus, the surge attempted to reverse the course of the war and stabilize Iraq using counterinsurgency tactics, which included 30,000 additional soldiers "'[living] with the people' in order to secure them."[2] Operationally, the effort appeared to have been a success. By January 2009, casualties declined from 2,693 to 372 civilians and from 101 to 14 US troops; violent incidents declined from 908 to 195.[3] In recent years, however, increasing sectarian conflict is again jeopardizing Iraq's stability.[4]

At this point it seems the surge has failed to achieve the strategic objectives—"daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the government will . . . make progress"—stated by President George W. Bush in January 2007.[5] Why? Most scholarship on this issue falls into two camps. The first group claims the operation would have succeeded if President Barack Obama had kept US forces in Iraq past 2011. The second camp argues the mission could not have succeeded because it failed to address the underlying sectarian conflict and the political instability fueling civil war. Due to the complexity of the issue, determining the correct cause with complete certainty is challenging. The debate centers around such evidence as the contemporary history of sectarian conflict in Iraq, sectarian tension and institutional mismanagement during the surge, immediate consequences of the surge, and implications of the strategy. After carefully accounting for such

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1   Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 31–32.

2   David Petraeus, foreword to *Surge*, by Mansoor, x.

3   David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45.

4   "Iraq Profile-Overview," BBC News, December 24 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news /world-middle-east-14544541.

5   "Transcript of President Bush's Address to Nation on U.S. Policy in Iraq," *New York Times*, January 11, 2007.

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evidence, this article not only posits the military solution to the political and sectarian problems was misguided but also illustrates lessons from this operation for use in future conflicts.

The Debate

The optimists in the surge efficacy debate argue Iraq's increasing instability is due to troop withdrawal under the Obama administration. This view claims reduced violence and improved relations with local communities were squandered in the absence of US troops enforcing the rule of law.[6] David Kilcullen, Petraeus' senior counterinsurgency adviser, notes "in a conflict like Iraq, if violence drops when you apply counterinsurgency techniques, then returns when you stop . . . it suggests [the tactics] do work . . . and you shouldn't have stopped before figuring out a way to maintain the progress." Kilcullen also criticizes Obama's desire to end the war rather than to fight for a status of forces agreement (SOFA) to extend troops in Iraq past 2011.[7] Similarly, Peter Mansoor, Petraeus's executive US Army officer, argues the surge was a successful strategy shift: "Al-Qaeda in Iraq was allowed off the ropes . . . due to our inability to remain sufficiently engaged in Iraq . . . not to the failure of the surge as a strategic concept."[8]

According to the optimists, two assumptions explain Iraq's security decline. First, reduced violence during 2007 and 2008 increased Iraq's stability and positioned the government to manage sectarian tension successfully. For example, former Sunni insurgents, known as the "Sons of Iraq" (SOI), willingly began working with coalition forces and Shia police. Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr also stood down the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Shia militia.[9] Second, by the end of 2011, trend lines indicated efforts to stabilize Iraq were on target; therefore, the 20,000 troops recommended by General Lloyd J. Austin III, commander of US Forces in Iraq, would have likely maintained the trend and mitigated the rise of the Islamic State (IS).[10]

The second camp argues the surge failed to transform operational success into strategic success because it did not address the fundamental problems driving conflict in Iraq: sectarian tension and weak

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6 See, for example, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, "The Anti-Surge: How Obama Snatched Defeat from the Jaws of Victory in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2013; Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, "The Collapsing Obama Doctrine," *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2014; Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014; Sergei Boek *Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2014); and John McCain, "McCain: Fire Obama National Security Team," interview on Morning Joe, MSNBC, June 13, 2014.

7 Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, 47–48.

8 Mansoor, *Surge*, 270.

9 Ibid., 264–65

10 Liz Sly, "U.S. Commander, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, Predicts Turbulence Ahead in Iraq," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2011; and Cheney and Cheney, "Collapsing Obama Doctrine."

governmental institutions.[11] Ali Khedery, the longest continuously serving US official in Iraq, argues US intervention ultimately failed due to "empower[ing] a new set of elites who drew their legitimacy almost purely from divisive ethno-sectarian agendas rather than from visions of truth, reconciliation, the rule of law, and national unity," ultimately fueling nationwide sectarian strife.[12] Emma Sky, political adviser to General Ray T. Odierno, observed positive changes in Iraq immediately after the surge, and found American-backing of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the 2010 national election reflected "supporting the status quo rather than reform," which would have been necessary for long-term political stability.[13]

With this view, trends in Iraqi stability were not sufficiently positive by the end of 2011 to render the surge a success.[14] American troop behavior did not reduce sectarian conflict. And, American officials supported ineffective and unsustainable institutions during and after the surge. Since Iraq's security and stability began declining before troops had left, this camp could not give credence to the optimists' argument that Obama's failure to extend the SOFA caused Iraq's destabilization. Some members of this camp do consider, however, America's inadequate understanding of Iraqi society as a reason Iraq could not be fully stabilized.[15]

Contemporary Sectarian History and the Surge (2007–2008)

The history of sectarian conflict in Iraq is complex. The Shia and Sunni sects of Islam have lived peacefully together, worshiping the same god despite different religious ideologies for over a thousand years.[16] Although occasional conflicts over power, resources, and status have occurred during the last 100 years, recent Western intervention contributed to a resurgence of violent sectarian conflict in Iraq before 2007.[17]

The Sunni minority has consistently enjoyed political control of Iraq since the time of the Ottoman Empire, consolidating power with the 1958 overthrow of the British-installed monarchy and effectively maintaining power during the 1963 Baath Party coup.[18] Politicization of sectarian conflict increased sharply after the Iranian Revolution of

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11   See, for example, Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008; David Hastings Dunn and Andrew Futter, "Short-Term Tactical Gains and Long-Term Strategic Problems: The Paradox of the US Troop Surge in Iraq," *Defence Studies* 10, nos. 1–2 (Spring 2010), doi:10.1080/14702430903377977; Bernard Stancati, "Tribal Dynamics and the Iraq Surge," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2010); T. David Mason, "Ending the War in Iraq: The Third Option," *Civil Wars* 14, no. 2 (June 2012), doi:10.1080/13698249.2012.679504; Ivo H. Daalder, "Iraq After the Surge," Brookings Institution, December 8, 2007; Alex Kingsbury, "Why the 2007 Surge in Iraq Actually Failed," *Boston Globe*, November 17, 2014; and Peter Beinart, "The Surge Fallacy," *Atlantic*, September 2015.

12   Ali Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015.

13   Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2015), 338.

14   Ali Khedery, "Why We Stuck with Maliki—and Lost Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.

15   Stancati, "Tribal Dynamics."

16   Geneive Abdo et al., "The Sunni-Shia Divide," Council on Foreign Relations, January 9, 2017.

17   Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: Legacy of Exclusion," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2014.

18   David Gritten, "Long Path to Iraq's Sectarian Split," BBC News, February 25, 2006.

1978–79 that established a Shia theocracy focused on inspiring similar movements in neighboring nations. Saudi Arabia countered Iran's ambitions, promoting the Sunni vision of Islam in the region and supporting Iraq during the long and brutal Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).[19]

Though notable, the destabilizing effects of Iraq's dependence on oil for state revenue and inability to manage and divide the resource between groups is beyond the scope of this article.

Further disrupting sectarian relations, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, pursued a largely secular governance strategy.[20] Despite reports of equally applied force, much of Saddam's brutality targeted Shias and Kurds. During the Iran-Iraq War, for example, thousands of Shias were not only prohibited from freely practicing their religion but were also expelled from the country, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. In 2006, Saddam was tried on a charge of "genocide for attempting to annihilate the Kurdish race" during the Anfal military campaign (1988) that killed at least 50,000 civilians and destroyed thousands of villages.[21] Thus, Saddam's practices reinforced the historically Sunni Arab-dominant society and marginalized Shias and Kurds.[22]

Arriving in 2003, the United States further divided the population by forcing each Iraqi to list his or her sect on any state issued document. This identity was used for the country's new political structure, pitting sectarian groups against each other for government positions and authoritative roles. While this structure placed power in the hands of the Shia majority, who had long been disenfranchised, the rapid and aggressive de-Baathification policy disproportionately impacted Sunnis: they were removed from positions in the military and government and had few avenues of recourse.[23] As the war escalated, tensions worsened, and violence increased throughout Iraq.[24] Though there were certainly many other divisive factors in Iraqi society, sectarian lines were well-pronounced before the surge.

During the Surge

While "all quantitative measures . . . indicated the tentative success of the surge" due to the counterinsurgency strategy reducing violence, and the Sunni community increasingly working with US forces, these changes did not substantively address underlying sectarian tension.[25]

19   Ian Black, "Iran and Iraq Remember War that Cost More than a Million Lives," *Guardian* (Manchester), September 23, 2010; Mike Gallagher, "The 'Beauty' and the Horror of the Iran-Iraq War," BBC News, September 26, 2015; and Abdo et al., "Sunni-Shia Divide."

20   Musa al-Gharbi, "The Myth and Reality of Sectarianism in Iraq," Al Jazeera America, August 18, 2014.

21   Edward Wong, "Saddam Charged with Genocide of Kurds," *New York Times,* April 5, 2006.

22   Gawdat Bahgat "Saddam Hussein's Legacy: A Preliminary Assessment and Future Implications," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2005), doi:10.1353 /sais.2005.0027; and Gritten, "Long Path."

23   Daniel Byman "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or a Bridge Too Far?," *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (October-December 2008); and al-Gharbi, "Myth and Reality."

24   Mansoor, "A War Almost Lost," in *Surge*, 31–43.

25   David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 125–26.

Sectarian Tension

The surge did not sustain reduced violence for several reasons, which undermines the optimists' claim the operation set Iraq toward long-term stability. Cooperation between Sunnis, Shias, and coalition forces was a marriage of convenience rather than intentional reconciliation. Sunnis who had previously cooperated with al-Qaeda began to work with coalition troops as members of the Sons of Iraq due to al-Qaeda's control of resources as well as a series of killings of important Sunnis. The deaths led one Sunni leader to explain "resistance groups [were left] with two options: either to fight al Qaeda and negotiate with the Americans or fight the Americans and join the Islamic State of Iraq. . . . Both options are bitter."[26] Furthermore, Sunni cooperation with the United States happened to increase as they were simultaneously losing a civil war with the Shias. Thus, Sunnis did not form the SOI to cooperate with the United States because of genuine support for their goals, rather they were motivated by a desire to reverse their marginalization and to better position themselves against al-Qaeda and Shias, a risk factor for future conflict.[27] Similarly, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia, consented to a US assault on Shia militias because he saw cooperation with America as his best hope for survival.[28] And, the US military worked with SOI out of necessity, unable to take counterinsurgency action without the help of local allies.[29] Thus, cooperation during the surge was unrepresentative of underlying trends in sectarian behavior.

Also undermining long-term stability, coalition forces used payments to motivate the Sons of Iraq. Sunni sheikhs took as much as 20 percent of US payments to SOI groups, which was often worth over $100,000. This practice caused concerns that chiefs would not agree to integrate SOI forces into Iraqi state security services. Most SOI militia members were already well armed, but some individuals and their sheikhs were given US weapons.[30] Fears that allied militia members would return to insurgency when the money stopped flowing came to fruition; violence eventually returned.[31]

The divergent goals of each sectarian group fueled the violence and reduced the operation's state-building capacity because negotiation and resolution never occurred. Sunnis frequently believed reconciliation between Iraq's sectarian groups would mean their restoration to power. Shias wanted justice for previous regimes' subjugation indicative of early elements of Maliki's regime.[32] Kurds viewed reconciliation as respecting their autonomy.[33] When Sunnis realized their cooperation with coalition troops would not equate to help challenging the Shias, the work with US forces decreased and some returned to al-Qaeda.[34]

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26   Simon, "Price of the Surge."

27   Fred M. Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 267–68; and Stancati, "Tribal Dynamics."

28   Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 267–68.

29   Jon Lee Anderson, "Inside the Surge: The American Military Finds New Allies, But at What Cost?," *New Yorker*, November 19, 2007.

30   Simon, "Price of the Surge."

31   Kingsbury, "2007 Surge in Iraq."

32   Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 284.

33   Simon, "Price of the Surge."

34   Ibid.

Not only did these factors further divide sectarian groups, but US troop missteps combined with a weak sectarian government also set Iraq down a path of instability. American presence in Iraqi communities helped gather better intelligence; however, the lack of understanding of local culture and language led to the mistaken arrests of thousands. Prisons became centers of radicalization described as "jihadi universities," contributing to later conflict.[35] Furthermore, Iraqis were angered by decisions to wall off Baghdad neighborhoods and hire and arm SOI groups without community input. Locals worried the United States was just arming new militias and further undermining the unstable state government. The population disapproved of constant raids that reinforced the idea of the United States as a coercive power, a catalyst leading some Iraqis to become insurgents.[36]

The lack of a strong national government throughout the surge meant Iraq did not develop its own viable and independent national army or police force. Existing societal divisions materialized within Iraq's armed forces, laying the foundation for further sectarian strife after US troops left.[37] Moreover, the Shia government arrested hundreds of Sunnis who were cooperating with US forces, which was indicative of the conflicting goals of US and Iraqi leadership and foreshadowed later sectarian conflict driven by the Maliki regime.[38] Indeed, during the surge, Shia militias dominated Iraqi government security forces, while Maliki resisted any threat to his authority. Moreover, groups like the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia purportedly accepted Iran's support, increasing Iranian power in Iraq.[39]

In December 2006, the Iraq Study Group, a congressionally formed bipartisan research organization, concluded, "Sectarian conflict is the principal challenge to stability."[40] Because the surge did not sufficiently manage the combination of issues illustrated above, trends in Iraqi security and stability were bound to be negative after the surge, regardless of the short-term benefits.

Institution-Building

When Sky left Iraq in 2008, she and Odierno understood "the surge had not eliminated the root causes of conflict in Iraq . . . the Iraqis must still develop the necessary institutions to manage competition for power and resources peacefully."[41] Troops had not laid the foundation for the civil institutions vital to the surge's overall success. Even during the surge, then-Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta, recognized the mistake of assuming other elements of Iraqi reconciliation like institution-building would "fall into place" if surge troops reduced

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35   Kingsbury, "2007 Surge in Iraq."

36   Anderson, "Inside the Surge."

37   Daalder, "Iraq After the Surge."

38   Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Iraq Takes Aim at U.S.-Tied Sunni Groups' Leaders," *New York Times*, August 21, 2008.

39   Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 210; and Anderson, "Inside the Surge."

40   James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, co-chairs, *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), xiii.

41   Emma Sky, "Iraq, From Surge to Sovereignty: Winding Down the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

violence.[42] One scholar elaborates: "Only when Iraq's Sunni and Shia Arabs and its Kurds all felt represented by the government would the country be safe from civil war."[43]

The problems with institution-building during the surge largely fell into three categories: institutional discrimination, leadership failures, and service delivery challenges. Iraqi institutions, largely unchecked by US forces, perpetuated discriminatory sectarian policies during the surge. These polices led to sectarian influence over the leadership and the staff of government ministries and hindered efforts to build a professional civil service.[44] Important ministries remained under sectarian militia control, "creating an environment of danger and intimidation both for Iraqi civil servants and their coalition advisors."[45] The population also experienced government-perpetuated discrimination. One Sunni neighborhood, for example, received half as much electricity per day as a nearby Shia community.[46]

American civil servants spent almost no time mentoring their Iraqi counterparts due to security concerns about leaving the Green Zone. Furthermore, action taken by American forces to reform the government's sectarian tendencies was described as "fragmented and incoherent."[47] Thus, the United States did not sufficiently manage the creation of secular institutions during the surge, allowing destabilizing sectarian discrimination to continue within the Iraqi government.

The Bush administration attempted to mentor senior Iraqi ministers even though the advice and council US officials provided was insufficient to guard Iraqi institutions against future turmoil. Both Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker met frequently, sometimes even simultaneously, with Maliki, mentoring him about proper governance; Bush regularly video conferenced with Maliki, seeing himself as a mentor to the prime minister.[48] Former National Security Adviser Stephen J. Hadley elaborates Bush decided, "I've got to be his best friend. I've got to be his counselor . . . Because if he doesn't succeed, U.S. policy isn't going to succeed."[49] Despite these efforts, Maliki did not heed the counsel he received during the surge and led Iraq back toward unstable institutions.

By May 2007, there were only 150 members of provincial reconstruction teams assisting with service provision in Iraq. This "woefully inadequate" number was not shocking as few State Department (or even Agriculture Department) personnel know how to maintain local irrigation systems or electrical grids. Because the United States did not have enough skilled personnel on the ground, American civil and

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42   Leon E. Panetta, "Surge Not Working as Hoped," *Monterey* (CA) *Herald*, September 9, 2007, reproduced by Panetta Institute.

43   Beinart, "Surge Fallacy."

44   Colonel Guy T. Cosentino, "The United States Government Interagency Process and the Failure of Institution Building in Iraq" (Senior Service College Fellowship Project, US Army War College, 2008), Defense Technical Information Center.

45   Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 512.

46   Anderson, "Inside the Surge."

47   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 511–12.

48   Conrad C. Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 143–44.

49   Jason M. Breslow and Evan Wexler, "Who is Nouri al-Maliki," Frontline, July 29, 2014.

military personnel did not sufficiently support the Iraqi government's delivery of vital services during the surge, which established a long-term trend of ineffective institutions.[50]

By late 2007, most Iraqis still lacked electricity, trash collection, potable water, healthcare, and telephone services.[51] Pervasive corruption exacerbated this problem.[52] Even if the United States had increased the size of the provincial reconstruction teams, inefficiencies would have likely persisted due to cultural clashes between American civilian and military bureaus. Thus, the US failure to assist the Iraqi government in providing services for its people during the surge caused most Iraqis to view sectarian militias, rather than the state government, as the provider of security and services.[53]

Many argue that by mid-2008 the surge was successful and that the gains would have been maintained with extended US troop presence.[54] Stephen Biddle testified to Congress that "the violence reduction was more than just a temporary lull. It reflected a systematic shift in the underlying strategic landscape of Iraq, and could offer the basis for sustainable stability if we respond appropriately."[55] By the end of 2008, Biddle's view seemed justified. Violence had declined so substantially that Iraq's future seemed bright, the SOI program appeared successful, and Iraqi institutions seemed relatively stable; however, significant arguments stand in contrast to the surge optimist viewpoint. Evidence suggests that at the end of 2008 Iraq was not trending toward long-term sectarian conflict resolution even though violence had declined.

Consequences of the Surge

Despite the compelling argument for the surge's success, Iraq may not have been as stable as believed. By 2010, challenges leading up to and surrounding the national election illustrated the surge had not achieved "sustainable stability" and "Washington had reneged on the promises it had made to Iraqis to protect the political process and it had betrayed the very principles the US military believed it was fighting to uphold."[56] Violence had returned to pre-surge levels in 2012.[57] Iraq was not trending toward long-term sectarian conflict resolution.

Immediate Instability

Some attribute the increased instability to Maliki, who had been the US choice for prime minister in 2005 due to his low profile, leadership

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50   Kenneth M. Pollack, "Civil Defense: The Surge That Would Really Save Iraq," Brookings Institution, May 21, 2007.

51   Panetta, "Surge Not Working."

52   Daalder, "Iraq After the Surge."

53   Pollack, "Civil Defense."

54   See McCain and Graham, "The Anti-Surge"; Cheney and Cheney, "Collapsing Obama Doctrine"; Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms"; Boek, *Combining Exit with Strategy*; and McCain, "McCain."

55   *Stabilizing Iraq from the Ground Up, Hearing on Iraq after the Surge: Political Prospects, Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 110th Cong., (April 2, 2008) (statement of Stephen Biddle, Senior Fellow for Defense Policy, Council on Foreign Relations).

56   Sky, *Unraveling*, 338.

57   Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013).

skills, and acceptability to Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds.[58] Indeed, in March 2008 Maliki supported a successful charge against the Jaysh al-Mahdi in Basra, earning him praise as a secular and patriotic nationalist.[59] After the surge, however, the prime minister began treating former Sons of Iraq and secular governmental institutions differently.

Broken pre-surge promises to reintegrate former members of the SOI into post-surge national security forces indicated a continuation of Iraq's sectarian struggle. After much resistance, the Maliki regime agreed to accept 20 percent of the former militia members into regular state security forces and to employ the remainder in nonsecurity government jobs.[60] But, the government quickly failed to pay salaries to former SOI members or to complete the integration. Sunni leaders were also arrested and protests were repressed, which led to additional Sunni disenfranchisement and future radicalization.[61]

In 2008, polls indicated public satisfaction with government services was exceptionally low.[62] Some Sunnis compared the Maliki regime to a Shia mosque due to unequal distribution of government services.[63] Khedery stated, "The insatiable lust for power and money evidenced by virtually every national leader I met . . . still leaves me dazed." Corruption was rampant among leaders from all sects; leaders supported by Americans engaged in more corrupt behavior than those under Saddam Hussein.[64] Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the surge, Iraq was not trending toward stability: its leaders exacerbated sectarian tension while America backed an ineffective regime.

The 2010 Iraqi Election

The Iraqiya coalition—a nonsectarian group headed by Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia, and leaders of the Sunni community—edged out Maliki's State of Law coalition by 2 seats (91 to 89) in the 2010 election. Since Iraqiya did not win by an outright majority, Allawi should have had the first chance to form a ruling government coalition; however, Maliki refused to accept the loss, claiming rampant fraud.[65] Though there was no evidence to support this claim, Maliki pushed Iraq's high court to allow him to form a government, preventing Allawi from doing so.[66] The United States and Iran also committed to supporting Maliki even though Iraqiya had won the popular vote.

Zalmay Khalilzad, former US Ambassador to Iraq, opposed the US decision: "We . . . bandwagoned . . . rather than pushing back and saying the [Iraqi] Constitution had to be followed."[67] Indeed, Maliki got his way;

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58   Sarah Childress, "Zalmay Khalilzad: Maliki and the 'Unmaking of Iraq'," Frontline, July 29, 2014.
59   Ali Khedery, "Why We Stuck."
60   Stancati, "Tribal Dynamics."
61   David Romano, "Iraq's Descent into Civil War: A Constitutional Explanation," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (Autumn 2014), doi:10.3751/68.4.13; and Mason, "Ending the War."
62   Sky, "Iraq."
63   Sky, *Unraveling*, 253.
64   Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces."
65   Sarah Childress, "Zalmay Khalilzad: Maliki and the 'Unmaking of Iraq'," Frontline, July 29, 2014; and Emma Sky, "How Obama Abandoned Democracy in Iraq," *Politico*, April 7, 2015.
66   Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq," Brookings Institution, July 30, 2013.
67   Childress, "Zalmay Khalilzad."

a parliamentary coalition formed, reinstated Maliki as prime minister, and relegated Allawi to be the leader of a strategic council that never materialized.[68] A security dilemma consequently developed from Maliki's likely fear of instability among opposing sectarian groups and interest in protecting his authority in contrast to other sects' growing alienation from and escalating anger with the election outcome.[69] Iran's active role of payment and persuasion—including the head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps continuously summoning Iraqis to Iran—during the Iraqi election shifted additional power to a pan-Shia coalition baking Maliki.[70] Moreover, Obama's promise to end Bush's "dumb war" and the global economic downturn decreased US interest in the region. Thus, Iran's influence over Iraqi elections increased, contributing to Maliki's reversion to sectarian practices.[71]

Rafi al-Issawi, then-deputy prime minister of Iraq commented, "If the [United States] acknowledged that Iraqiya won the elections . . . the others would not have challenged it."[72] Instead, US mismanagement negatively impacted Iraqi institutions and pushed the nation toward instability. Maliki began to influence independent governmental institutions, including the judiciary, government oversight bureaus, and the election committee.[73] Iraq's national security forces became almost entirely Shia, another sign of Sunni disenfranchisement.[74] Paralyzed by sectarian disagreement, the government still struggled to provide basic services equitably. Furthermore, Maliki ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, illustrating secular tension at the highest levels of Iraqi government.[75]

A combination of the faulty foundations laid during the surge, the problems leading up to and surrounding the 2010 national election, and US apathy toward continued stability contributed to the violence rising to new highs.[76] Sunnis were detained without trial and pushed outside of political processes; peaceful protests against discrimination faced violent retaliation.[77] Indeed, even during the 2010 political crisis, Khedery returned to Iraq and expressed he "was shocked that much of the surge's success had been squandered by Maliki and other Iraqi leaders."[78] Khedery later noted the Islamic State grew from the defeat of democratic principles during the 2010 election and the resultant Sunni radicalization.[79] Iraqis did not simply fail to manage their own government: America failed to reduce sectarian tension during the surge and to protect democratic principles.

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68   Mason, "Ending the War."

69   Pollack, "Fall and Rise"; and James F. Jeffrey, "How Maliki Broke Iraq," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 13, 2014.

70   Sky, *Unraveling*, 329; and Sky, "How Obama."

71   Khedery, "Why We Stuck."

72   Sky, *Unraveling*, 330.

73   Pollack, "Fall and Rise."

74   Ali Khedery, "Iraq's Last Chance," *New York Times*, August 17, 2014.

75   Mason, "Ending the War."

76   Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces."

77   Sky, "How Obama."

78   Khedery, "Why We Stuck."

79   Khedery, "Iraq's Last Chance"; Fanar Haddad "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 7, 2016; Pollack, "Fall and Rise"; and Colin H. Kahl, "No, Obama Didn't Lose Iraq," *Politico*, June 15, 2014.

The Status of Forces Agreement, Troop Withdrawal, and the Rise of IS

The SOFA signed in 2008 established the legal presence of US troops in Iraq through December 31, 2011.[80] Military leaders argued Obama should negotiate for the presence of 20,000 US troops in Iraq past 2011; however, the proposed presence dwindled to 8,000 troops; then 5,000—a size Obama believed would be sufficient to continue intelligence collection, counterterrorism, training missions, and checkpoint management.[81] There was a caveat: the SOFA granting troops in Iraq immunity from local prosecution must be renewed. Maliki would have to sign an executive memorandum of understanding endorsing immunity, but it had to be approved by parliament. Since US presence was wildly unpopular among Iraqis, and parliamentarians were influenced by then-Iran-backed Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the SOFA extension was impossible.[82] Thus, Obama withdrew US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011.

Many politicians, military personnel, and journalists argue a residual troop force in Iraq beyond 2011 would have given the surge more time to work and subsequently prevented, or at least substantially mitigated, the rise of the Islamic State.[83] The accompanying reduction of US embassy staff and infrequent communication with the Iraqi government compounded the destabilizing factors increasing sectarian violence.[84] John McCain reiterated this stance in 2014, "General Petraeus had the conflict won thanks to the surge and if we had left the residual force behind . . . we would not be facing the crisis we are today . . . we are paying a very heavy price." McCain and others point to nations in which the United States left troops behind for extended amounts of time, such as South Korea and Germany, as evidence that Iraq would be a far more stable country today if we had acted similarly.[85]

While compelling, this logic does not account for the trend of sectarian conflict leading up to troop withdrawal. As the Maliki regime oppressed Sunnis, former US tribal allies began to view "the Islamic State as the lesser of two evils when compared with Maliki."[86] Indeed, sectarian conflict reemerged while US troops were present, suggesting that extending US presence would not have substantially impacted the rise of the Islamic State. Moreover, successful postconflict American presence has historically focused on improving an existing state rather than laying foundations for a new one. Thus, comparisons between Iraq and nations with established governments, such as Germany, are poor.[87]

The counterfactual scenario of Iraq with US troop presence past 2011 casts additional doubt upon the optimists' hypothesis. While it is probable extending the presence of US counterterrorism advisers and

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80   Tony Karon, "Iraq's Government, Not Obama, Called Time on the U.S. Troop Presence," *Time*, October 21, 2011.

81   Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms."

82   Kahl, "Obama Didn't Lose"; and Karon, "Iraq's Government."

83   See, for example: Childress, "Zalmay Khalilzad"; and Mary Habeck et al., "A Global Strategy for Combating al Qaeda and the Islamic State," American Enterprise Institute, December 7, 2015.

84   Crane, *Cassandra in Oz*, 214.

85   McCain, "McCain."

86   Sky, *Unraveling*, 360.

87   Jason Brownlee, "Was Obama Wrong to Withdraw Troops from Iraq?," *Monkey Cage*, *Washington Post*, June 26, 2014.

military trainers could have increased pressure on Iraqi terror networks, "the idea that such a force would have completely stopped the jihadists is a fantasy."[88] If 175,000 troops in Iraq during the surge could not ameliorate the sectarian tension propelling the Islamic State into power, a lesser or noncombat force could not sufficiently reconcile sectarian and political tension to prevent IS success.[89]

Although Iraq was not sufficiently stable by 2011 to validate the claim that the surge was not given enough time to work, troop withdrawal could plausibly be a major source of Iraq's return to instability.[90] Strong or conclusive evidence linking troop presence and stability in Iraq from the end of the surge to troop withdrawal or proof of the effectiveness of a residual force was not encountered. Such information would be a compelling reason to consider the surge optimist perspective.

Lessons for Future Conflicts

By recognizing practices that amplified sectarian tension during the surge, military and government leaders can more effectively manage future conflicts. Paying tribes to fight alongside coalition forces yielded short-term benefits that caused long-term problems. When the surge—and the cash payments—stopped, dissension reemerged.[91] Ignorance of local culture as well as insufficient consultation and ineffective communication with the populace prevented authentic coalitions from forming.[92] Inattention to the incompatible goals of various ethnosectarian populations perpetuated conflict.[93] Tolerating a national government that perpetuates societal divisions and sectarian discrimination prevents the long-term reconciliation necessary for a stable state.[94]

The following strategies conversely reduce sectarian tension. Military intervention must be coupled with efforts to increase official oversight, agency funding, and interagency communication.[95] Collaboration between US personnel and the nascent state's leaders must lead to strong governmental institutions that adequately reconcile sectarian divides.[96] Host country personnel interactions with civilian and military trainers must occur across all levels of government to ensure adequate representation of the country's citizens, including in its

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88   Kahl, "Obama Didn't Lose."

89   James Franklin Jeffrey, "Behind the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2014; Abby Phillip, "Obama Keeps Iraq Promise—Will Anyone Notice?," *Politico*, August 30, 2010; Brian Montopoli, "Obama Announces End of Iraq War, Troops to Return Home by Year End," CBS News, October 21, 2011; and Doug Mataconis, "Panetta: At Least Some Non-Combat Troops Will Remain in Iraq After 2011," Outside the Beltway, August 20, 2011.

90   See, for example, McCain and Graham, "The Anti-Surge"; Cheney and Cheney, "Collapsing Obama Doctrine"; Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms"; Boek, *Combining Exit with Strategy*; and McCain, "McCain."

91   Kingsbury, "2007 Surge in Iraq."

92   Ibid.; and Anderson, "Inside the Surge."

93   Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 284; and Simon, "The Price of the Surge."

94   Daalder, "Iraq After the Surge"; Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 210.

95   Virginia Byers, "Sharing the Load: Evaluating Two Civilian and Military Interagency Missions," *Small Wars Journal*, January 28, 2014; Richard Byess, "Civilian-Military Cooperation: What's Next?," in *Frontiers in Development* (Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development, 2012); and R. Jeffrey Smith, "The Failed Reconstruction of Iraq," *Atlantic*, March 15, 2013.

96   Cosentino, "Interagency Process"; and Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 511–12.

military forces.[97] Cultural competency training for US troops must be completed prior to their participation in interventions.[98] These changes will position American leaders to generate more positive outcomes in future interventions.

To be clear, this article does not challenge the idea that counterinsurgency requires substantial manpower, nor does it assert the absence of positive lessons from the surge. To the contrary, the surge's influx of troops living among the people to provide security demonstrated remarkable operational success.[99] But, the operational success could not be translated into strategic success because corresponding intergroup reconciliation and institution-building did not occur.

Future efforts should focus on aligning military interventions with intergroup reconciliation efforts. Research should explore how US personnel can effectively facilitate intergroup negotiations and productive dialogue in host countries. Divergent expectations for post-surge interactions should be addressed to bolster intersectarian efforts to sustain security.[100] Finally, strategies to encourage local participation in military interventions that do not rely on cash payments should be developed and assessed to prevent similar destabilization.[101] The lessons from the surge provide a powerful starting point for understanding military, government, and sectarian interactions.

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97   Pollack, "Civil Defense"; al-Qarawee, "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis"; and Kenneth Pollack, *A Switch In Time: A New Strategy for America in Iraq*, Analysis Paper 7 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2006), 43.

98   Allison Abbe and Stanley M. Halpin, "The Cultural Imperative for Professional Military Education and Leader Development," *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009–10); and Paula Caligiuri et al., *Training, Developing, and Assessing Cross-Cultural Competence in Military Personnel*, Technical Report 1284 (Arlington, VA: United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2011), 53–55.

99   Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012), doi:10.1162 /ISEC_a_00087.

100   Oppel, "Iraq Takes Aim."

101   Simon, "Price of the Surge."