



## THE NEXT CHALLENGE IN IRAQ: COUNTERING IRAN'S GROWING INFLUENCE

*By Michael SOUSSAN  
Director of the ESISC New York Office*

### Introduction

General David Petraeus's presentation to Congress on Monday, April 7th, was supposed to offer US lawmakers compelling evidence that the so-called "surge" strategy had borne fruit. Instead, it was overshadowed by a new development involving intra-Shiite conflict, which revealed Iran's strengthening grip over Iraq's destiny.

In barely a few weeks, the nature of the challenge in Iraq has been dramatically reshaped. America's focus on reigning in the country's Sunni tribes could indeed be qualified as a success. The Anbar province of Western Iraq had been brought under control, following a strategy that combined a more committed local presence by US troops, a renewed focus on providing security for Sunni civilians, and a strategy of co-opting Sunni militias in the fight against Al Qaeda. Unfortunately, these gains will not be sufficient to guarantee long-term stability in Iraq. The key to that society's future lays in the central government's ability to control the country's Shiite majority.

The events of the past few weeks have revealed the true nature of Iran's strategy in Iraq, and foreshadow the terms of a battle that the United States may not have the political will or the public support to wage successfully in coming months and years. In the words of one US Marine previously stationed in Iraq: "If Iran only spends one thousand dollars for every million we spend, they may still come out on top. Time is on their side."

The following analysis will (1) recap the nature of the progress made to date under the Surge strategy, (2) reveal the dormant threats against the Iraqi government that were suddenly activated in the past few weeks, and (3) discuss the prospects for reigning in these threats in the future given the objective restraints under which the US military and the Iraqi government have to operate.

### 1. The Surge and its Achievements

The boldest achievement of the surge has been to effectively destroy and/or expel "Al Qaeda in Iraq" from large areas in Iraq, including, most notably, the Al Anbar province and a number of villages located north and north-west of Baghdad. Most of the additional combat brigades deployed as part of the surge were assigned to securing and maintaining a presence in villages that had previously been held only temporarily by Marine units, which consistently tended to fall back under the control of Al Qaeda and its affiliates after the Marines left. The

surge put a decisive end to the continuous presence of Al Qaeda in the above-mentioned areas.

In addition to the deployment of additional combat troops, the US military engaged in a financial effort to secure the loyalty of tribal Sunni militias. The Sunni tribal system had itself been undermined by the presence of Al Qaeda, which operated in their areas using some of the most brutal means imaginable, and were increasingly hated by the local population. The joint Sunni tribal militia organization now known under an umbrella denomination as the "Sons of Iraq" comprises about 90,000 fighters who are effectively on the US payroll, and have shown to be a reliable and stabilizing force. Starting in the spring of 2007, these militias secured a dramatic drop in Anti-US attacks (which went from about 1300 incidents per month in the fall of 2006 to less than 200 in the summer of 2007) and have shown an ability to sustain those gains at a level sufficient to allow for serious progress in the realm of reconstruction. The additional benefit of this strategy has been to give Sunni tribal leaders and the populations under their control new confidence in, and commitment to, the political process in Baghdad. Large parts of Iraq's Sunni population have regained the hope of playing a real role in Iraq's future and have largely overcome the fear that their interests would be systematically undermined as they had been during the first two years of US occupation.

However, the gains that were made in the course of 2007 did not extend to the key area in and around the city of Mosul, located close to the Syrian border. Al Qaeda remains present and operational in that area, where it continues to find reliable support from the Sunni population. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that the Sunni tribes in this region are facing what they consider to be an existential threat from the Kurds, who have been repopulating the area in the past two years, and have laid a historical claim to ruling over the city of Mosul and neighboring Kirkuk, which happen to be the most important urban areas in proximity to Iraq's northern oil fields.

During the 1990s, Saddam oversaw a policy of ethnic cleansing in Mosul and Kirkuk, during which Kurdish families were systematically kicked out of their homes and sent away as refugees in the mountain ranges of northern Iraq, under Kurdish control. The return of these refugees in recent years have sparked dangerous ethnic tensions between the Arab and Kurdish communities of Mosul and Kirkuk. Al Qaeda has been able to leverage these tensions to gain a solid foothold within the Arab community of those cities. In addition, the location of these urban areas close to the Syrian border have allowed Al Qaeda to benefit from a regular influx of arms and jihadists to prop up their ranks and capabilities.

The battle for Mosul and Kirkuk was to be the last phase of the surge. Unfortunately, chances of such a battle being decisive have decreased significantly as of late due to the necessity to assign a growing number of Iraqi and US forces to meet the rising challenges mounted by Iranian backed Shiite militias based in Baghdad and Basra.

## **2. The Mounting Threat**

While the United States was busy fighting Al Qaeda in Western Iraq, the "Mahdi Army" of Muqtada al Sadr was building up strength and extending its power from the slums of Baghdad to the strategic port city of Basra, where it was able to gain increasing control over significant portions of Iraq's trade. (Most of the country's oil exports and civilian imports transit through Basra and the neighboring tanker port of Umm Qasr.)

After a significant setback in 2005, Muqtada al Sadr declared a "truce" by which the he was able to grow the militia forces under his control from a couple of thousand lightly armed men based in the poorest sector of Baghdad, to a well organized force now comprising an estimated 60,000 well-armed and well paid men across large communities of southern Iraq.

The Mahdi militia benefits from significant aid from Iran, which helps finance and equip its main brigades, and has been known to offer specialized training to some of its commando units. This aid, provided directly from Iran's revolutionary guard's "Al Quds"

force (Al Quds refers to Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock) has resulted in a dramatic increase in the effectiveness of the militia's anti-American attacks in at least two areas: Firstly, attacks against US communications and provisioning lines became significantly more deadly after the "Improvised Explosive Devices," more commonly known as road-side bombs, were replaced with sophisticated anti-armor weapons known as "Explosive Formed Penetrators," consisting of molten copper projectiles that can penetrate reinforced armor and have a kill-ratio that dwarfs that of the previously used roadside bombs. In addition, well trained commando units have learned how to use mortar and simple rocket firing devices with far more precision than before. The ability of militias to shoot down an increasing number of US helicopters, and to fire precise hits on the US occupied Green Zone of Baghdad while evading retaliatory measures have confirmed the existence of highly trained commando units operating in support of the Mahdi Army's political objectives, against US targets that were previously considered relatively safe.

Like the Mujahideen of Afghanistan, the Shi'a militias of Iraq have gone from scoring occasional hits that relied more on luck than on training, to scoring systematic, precise, and morale-draining hits that significantly increase the US army's exposure both in Baghdad and in key areas to the south along the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.

During the truce that lasted for the past year and a half, the Al Mahdi army was also able to expand and tighten its grip over critical sectors of Iraq's economy. Acting very much as a mafia, the militia succeeded in selling protection to a growing number of businesses, focusing primarily on import-export trades based out of Basra. This activity added a significant source of local revenue to Al Sadr's coffers, extracted principally through old-fashioned racketeering.

These activities, combined with the group's successful foray into the political process, worked to earn Muqtada Al Sadr a combination of political legitimacy and raw power that might soon be compared to that earned by Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Hamas in the Gaza strip.

During the last few weeks, the central government of Iraq has tried, unsuccessfully, to challenge this growing threat. The fear is that Al Sadr's militia may soon become a state within the state, with the power to influence most major decisions by the Iraqi government, and to effectively blackmail the rest of the country as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon for the past few years.

Muqtada Al Sadr has taken refuge in Iran. Anybody who doubted Teheran's effective control over his movement had only to observe last week's delegation of Iraqi parliamentarians who traveled to Iran to parlay for a cease-fire with the commander of the Al Quds force.

The Al Quds force is a secretive, highly effective core Iranian military operation, which is entrusted with Teheran's most high level and sensitive of operations. Qassim Suleimani is widely thought to be the force's current leader, and he was the person Iraq's parliament members went to discuss peace terms with when it became clear that Prime Minister Al Malaki's offensive against the Mahdi Army was running out of steam. The force is believed to have come into existence soon after Islamic Revolutionary forces took control of Iran on Jan. 16, 1979. The unit was the intelligence arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. According to former CIA agent Robert Baer, the Al Quds force is intimately close to President Ahmadinejad and other conservative mullahs that make up Iran's governing council.

The Mahdi Army militia, which has now clearly become the Al Qud force's principal operational arm in the Iraqi theatre of operations, poses, in the eyes of the Pentagon, the greatest threat to Iraq's security, replacing al-Qaeda in Iraq as the country's "most dangerous accelerant of potentially self-sustaining sectarian violence".

The Mahdi Army's rise to prominence benefited from a number of failures, on the part of US and Iraqi leaders, to confront the growing movement in its period of infancy during the first two years of the occupation. In 2004, after a number of successful military operations against the Mahdi militias, the US military declared it had successfully vanquished the threat posed by Al Sadr and his followers. This evaluation underestimated the true nature of the threat posed by this movement.

The resilience of the Mahdi Army stems from the very effective religious appeal the movement has among Iraq's least educated urban populations, and from the steady and long term support provided by Iran, which invests in the movement in the hope that it can establish itself in Iraq as solidly as Hezbollah has established itself in Lebanon.

The movement's religious appeal is reflected in the militia's very name: the Mahdi, in the Shiite interpretation, refers to the 12th Imam, who first appeared in the seventh century and is expected to return, much like a Messiah, at a time of great upheaval, in order to fulfill the prophecies of the "day of resurrection," restoring the righteousness of Islam and change the whole world into a perfect and just Islamic society. As he set up his militia in 2003, Muqtada Al Sadr charged that the United States had gotten wind of the impending return of the 12th Imam, and had invaded Iraq with the specific aim of finding and killing him before he could fulfill the prophecy. Hence, his militia was formed in order to protect the Imam against the American invaders.

The United States never imagined it would be confronting this kind of movement in Iraq. Nor did it foresee how quickly such a movement might grow to prominence and find support among the poorest neighborhoods in Iraq. But with the aid of Iran, and with a strategy that allowed the movement to enact strategic retreats every time it was in danger, the movement was able to survive and grow stronger, and gain a solid foothold in the bazaars of Baghdad and Basra, to the point where it now presents the most significant long term threat to the stability of Iraq.

### **3. Options and Countermeasures**

Given the nature of the threat, and the changing nature of the United States' posture in Iraq, the options for countering the growing influence of the Al Mahdi army are limited.

In his presentation to the House Armed Services Committee, General Petraeus proposed the first draw-down of US troops since the onset of the surge. This reduction of combat forces in Iraq is in line with the logic of the surge (which was, by nature, conceived of as a temporary boost in military resources, mainly to hold and secure key locations formerly controlled by Al Qaeda, so that Sunni militias could take over security in Western Iraq). The move also reflects the overall strategy of the United States in Iraq, which can be described as an effort to transfer major ground combat operations to Iraqi units. This process aims to gradually shift the mission objectives of US troops from "leading to partnering in, to overseeing and providing logistical and air support for" Iraqi combat units as they confront major challenges to the central government's authority.

The recent offensive by Prime Minister Malaki against the Mahdi Army in Basra was hampered by the desertion of over one thousand Iraqi government troops. For the most part, US forces steered clear of active participation in a ground offensive in Basra, which has been free of coalition control since the withdrawal of British forces last year. Still, the air support provided by the US Air Force made a significant difference in a number of battles, and played a critical role in convincing Mahdi Army elements to pursue a truce. Ultimately, however, the Iraqi government's offensive did not succeed in uprooting the Mahdi Army from the region, and occasioned a number of significant setbacks on other fronts. Attacks against oil pipelines and successful rocket hits in the Green Zone were ominous signs that the Mahdi Army could fight on several fronts throughout Iraq and cause severe damage to the United States' sense of mission and morale.

With democratic candidates for the White House promising a swift withdrawal from Iraq, the US presence in that country can no longer be counted on to last, and the Iraqi government has to contend with the possibility that the support it receives from the United States may dwindle significantly come January 2009. While the outcome of the US election is far from clear, and while none of the Democratic contenders have promised a complete withdrawal either, it is clear to most commanders in Iraq that any significant withdrawal of troops would hamper the US military's ability to actively participate in key ground operations in the future.

Estimations vary as to the force-levels required to merely maintain control over Iraq's airfields, its oil producing and export facilities, the Green Zone, and the major supply lines. Several field commanders have warned that a significant reduction of US forces below the 100,000 mark would increase the pressure on US troops and civilian employees remaining in Iraq, and force the US into an exclusively defensive posture.

The cost to Iran of keeping rockets flying into the green zone, spreading the use of Explosive Formed Penetrators along US supply lines, and strengthening the Mahdi Army's grip on key areas of Baghdad and Basra, would be minimal compared to the cost for the US of maintaining a meaningful presence in the area over time. The harm to the morale of US forces would be compounded by a sense that the war cannot be won decisively any time soon. Momentum and initiative would then be lost to the insurgent Shiite militia, and control over the country's future would effectively be turned over to decision makers in Teheran.

The United States and its dwindling coalition of allies are fast running out of options to counter Iran's policy of "Lebanizing" Iraq through the use of the growing Mahdi Army as a proxy that acts on several levels (Political, social, and military) to deny the central government control over key parts of Iraqi territory, holding major sectors of the economy at ransom, and turning the levels of violence up and down as it suits Teheran.

Only two options remain.

Option A, the most likely, given the limitations under which the United States has to conduct this war, is to continue to provide unchanging levels of support to the Iraqi central government in its confrontation with the Mahdi militia, and hope for the best. A variety of attempts could be made to buy back weapons from Mahdi Army militants and offer the group opportunities to re-integrate the political process in return for the occasional truce. Under such a strategy, efforts would be made to re-ignite negotiations with Teheran, in which the US and the Iraqi government would have little to offer other than continued concessions, and ultimately, the acceptance of growing Iranian control over Iraq's future. The hope, under such a scenario, would be that Iran might find an interest in seeing a more stable Iraq at its border, and that it might be willing to reduce its support for violence in exchange for growing influence over the country's political process. While this would upset the strategic balance in the region and by no means offer a guarantee for long term peace, it might nonetheless offer a politically expedient compromise that would allow Washington to disengage from the region, if that is the wish of the American public.

Option A would rely on a higher level of goodwill from Iran than has been demonstrated to date, and might ultimately lead to a humiliating and panicked US withdrawal from Iraq.

Option B would involve a full fledged US commitment to one side of the intra-Shiite conflict, equal if not superior to the recent commitment made against Al Qaeda in the western provinces of Iraq, combined with a range of political and military measures aimed at putting Teheran on the defensive, and coercing that regime into disengaging from Iraq or facing direct retaliations against its Revolutionary Guard units and elite Al Quds force.

Option B would require a willingness by Washington to escalate the conflict, much as it did as it negotiated its withdrawal from Vietnam. This ominous comparison does not bode well, of course, but if faced with a bleak and humiliating alternative, or possibly, a provocation by Iran that miscalculates the reaction of the American public, the US could be looking at options that aim to "roll back" Iran's influence in Iraq.

Such a strategy would involve significant risks and would require far more extensive preparation than was involved in the latest, failed attempt to uproot the Al Mahdi army from its bases in the slums of Baghdad and Basra. It would require an extensive and sustained intelligence operation aimed at infiltrating the Mahdi Army, tapping its lines of communication with Iran, and isolating its strongholds inside Basra and Baghdad from potential support bases in the villages that sprinkle the roads between these two urban centers along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

A sustained effort to infiltrate the Mahdi Army would be costly and time consuming, and would only bear fruit if it leads up to a decisive operation that has the support of the American public and can demonstrate real results. In preparation for such an operation, the

United States would need to gather sufficient evidence of Iran's direct role in the killing of American soldiers in Iraq, so as to make the threat of direct retaliation against Iran credible. And in the aftermath of a decisive push against the Mahdi Army, the Iraqi government must have a cadre of fully trained military leaders and administrators ready to take over managerial control over the areas currently in the grip of the Militias, with concrete plans in place to provide effective and measurable improvements to the living conditions of the populations involved.

Based on the opinion of experienced officials with involvement in the conflict, such an operation would take six to eight months to prepare, and would have to rely on a higher level of confidence between US forces and Iraqi government forces than exists today. Its success would also be dependent on the willingness of the American public to support a potential escalation of the conflict to include targets within Iran. Neither of these conditions appear to be present at this time.

## **Conclusion**

Short of a gross miscalculation by Iran, the United States may remain stuck in a situation where it is forced, despite its overwhelming military supremacy, to see its recent gains on the ground be chipped away by Iranian-controlled Shiite militias. Teheran has been very careful, so far, to limit its proxy war against the United States to low-level engagements that are sustainable over the long run, at little expense, yet fall short of galvanizing the American public in support of a policy of direct retaliation.

Should Teheran miscalculate in the future, the United States would do well to have a plan in place to exploit any potential window of opportunity to significantly roll back Iran's influence in Iraq. Short of such an opportunity, the United States and its Iraqi allies face the continuation of an arduous and grinding conflict in which Teheran retains the initiative at every turn and may continue to expand its influence over time.

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