What has the US “surge” in Iraq accomplished?

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24 December 2007

The fall in US military and civilian casualties over the past several months has seen supporters of the Iraq occupation claim that the Bush administration’s boost of troop numbers to over 160,000 this year—the so-called “surge”—was a total success.

Senator John McCain, for example, has made strident advocacy of sending more troops to Iraq the focus of his bid to become the Republican Party presidential candidate in 2008. A new ad promoting his campaign declares: “One man [McCain] warned us we were failing in Iraq, and told us how we could turn things around—more troops and a different strategy. He took a lot of heat, but he stood by what he knew was right. Today that strategy is working.” His campaign was endorsed on December 17 by Democrat Joe Lieberman, who stood alongside him in New Hampshire and enthused that the US was, because of the surge, at last winning the war in Iraq.

A similar assessment has been made in the US media, with various statistics cited as proof of the success. The 38 American fatalities in October and 37 deaths in November were among the lowest monthly figures since the March 2003 invasion. The number of insurgent attacks on US and Iraqi government forces per month has fallen from 5,000 at the beginning of the year to 2,000.

The sectarian Shiite-Sunni fighting and mass killing that raged after the destruction of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra in February 2006 has abated, with some 560 civilian deaths documented by news services in November down from between 1,500 and 3,000 per month throughout 2006 and 2007. On the economic front, oil production and electricity generation have moderately increased.

Based on these figures, the Pentagon has stated it was on schedule to wind back the American force in Iraq to the pre-surge level of 130,000 by mid-2008. The agreement signed between the US and the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki last month envisages that the US presence will be reduced to a force of approximately 50,000 troops by the end of 2009 that would not have a day-to-day policing or combat role.

Absent from the back-slapping in Washington is any concern for what the US invasion and occupation has done to the Iraqi people over the past four-and-a-half years. The country has been rendered a wasteland of devastated cities and ruined infrastructure. As many as one million people have been killed and millions more maimed or traumatised. More than two million have fled the country altogether, while another two million have been turned into internally displaced refugees. The economy has collapsed with unemployment over 40 percent. Disease and malnutrition are widespread.

For all the optimism in Washington about the latest figures, a more considered analysis reveals that the “surge”, far from ending the quagmire for US imperialism in Iraq, has qualitatively deepened the crisis. The Bush administration has failed to achieve its stated aim of fashioning a pro-US Iraqi government that is accepted as legitimate by the majority of the Iraqi population. Instead, US policy throughout the year has undermined the already dysfunctional puppet government in Baghdad and dramatically exacerbated the sectarian and ethnic divisions within the country.

The deployment of 30,000 additional troops to Baghdad and the western Iraqi province of Anbar was intended to create a breathing space for political efforts to end the constant guerilla attacks on US forces and the murderous civil war between militias linked to the Shiite parties that dominate the US-backed Iraqi government and the largely Sunni anti-occupation resistance organisations.

The Bush administration demanded that the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki offer a number of incentives to the predominantly Sunni ruling stratum that held sway under the previous Baathist regime to join a “national unity” government and use their influence to call off the insurgency.

The main US demands or “benchmarks” were ending the policy of de-Baathification that prevents former senior Baathists from holding political and military positions; an oil law that would specify the division of oil revenues between Iraq’s provinces and guarantee a flow of wealth to the resource-poor majority Sunni areas; and provincial elections by the end of the year to enable the Sunni parties who boycotted the first poll to take control of the Sunni provinces.

None of these benchmarks have been achieved. Maliki was not able to overcome opposition within the Shiite parties to US-dictated measures that amount to concessions to their Baathist enemies. The attempts to do so, in fact, caused a breakup of the Shiite coalition, with the faction loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr walking out of the government.

Far from “national unity”, 2007 witnessed the most extreme elements among Shiites and Sunnis intensify the sectarian carnage and largely complete their agenda of carving out homogeneous power bases in various parts of the country. Serious analysts have concluded that the main reason for the decline in intra-Iraqi violence is the completion of this sectarian cleansing, not the

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deployment of thousands more US troops.

Brookings Institution commentator Ivo Daalder wrote on December 17: “The sectarian violence had to a large extent succeeded in forcing Sunnis from Shiite areas and Shiites from Sunni areas. One look at an ethnic map of Baghdad tells the story—what were previously mixed neighbourhoods are now mostly Shiite or Sunni. The violence caused a large-scale movement of people—one in six Iraqis has either left the country entirely or has been internally displaced. A lot of this movement has made sections of the country ethnically more homogeneous, thus stemming a major source of the violence.”

The US military has made no attempt to prevent the ethnic cleansing take place. Instead, it has assisted the segregation by throwing up 12-foot concrete walls around Sunni suburbs of Baghdad, transforming the city into a series of sealed off ghettos. A resident of one, the Ghazaliya district, told the *Christian Science Monitor* earlier this month: “Iraq is a prison and now I live in my own little prison.”

Throughout the capital and across the country, the US military abandoned any pretense of trying to develop the authority of the Iraqi government. Instead, it pursued a policy of striking deals with whatever militia force or political formation dominated particular districts or suburbs.

In Baghdad’s densely populated Shiite working class slum of Sadr City, arrangements have been made with representatives of Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia, which is blamed for much of the violence against Sunnis. In return for promising to turn over recalcitrant elements that attack US forces, Sadr’s militia is allowed to openly rule over much of the capital, including areas that it had purged of Sunni inhabitants.

In the walled-off Sunni enclaves, the US military has gone further and actually recruited Sunni insurgents and militias into “local citizens’ groups”. Their members are paid $300 per month for not attacking US troops, while their leaders are allowed to preside like modern-day feudal vassals.

The US payment of militias is widespread across the so-called Sunni Triangle in central Iraq. An estimated 192 separate armed groups with over 77,000 fighters have been formed by Sunni tribes and “local citizens’ groups” over the past year. The Sunni militias have also assisted the US military hunt down Islamic fundamentalist organisations such as the “Al Qaeda in Iraq” that continued the armed resistance. For Sunni leaders, it is an opportunity to secure greater political leverage under the US occupation.

The US had several motives in enlisting their aid. The policy began in Anbar province as a pragmatic and somewhat desperate attempt to stem US casualties and allow the Bush administration to claim that progress was being made. As it has proceeded, Washington has recognised the Sunni militias as a useful counterweight to the Maliki government under conditions where the US has been preparing for military strikes against neighbouring Shiite Iran. In the event of war, anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian Sunni militias could be used to counter opposition from Iraqi Shiites.

The overall result has been a steady sidelining of the Iraqi central government. Instead of creating a “national unity” regime, the US has sponsored the creation of a myriad of sectarian fiefdoms, with militia warlords holding sway through a combination of terror, criminality and the offer of some protection for a poverty-stricken and desperate population. The police in most areas are generally controlled by the dominant local militia, as is the local government to the extent it exists.

The fragmentation extends from Baghdad to every corner of the country. While the divide-and-rule tactics may have brought about a decline in the number of attacks on US forces, it hinders every aspect of economic and social activity. Basic services are simply not available to many people because they are located in or supplied from a rival sectarian area. The US occupation has not only destroyed the economy, but created tremendous political obstacles to any coherent reconstruction.

Iraq is currently ranked as the third most corrupt country in the world. It is estimated, for example, that $18 billion in Iraqi government funds has been stolen since 2004. More than one third of all US “reconstruction” funds is simply stolen and ends up in the pockets of various powerbrokers.

The overwhelming majority of the population is firmly opposed to any US presence in the country. According to a recent ABC/BBC poll, 98 percent of Sunnis and 84 percent of Shiites want all US forces out of the country. Attacks on US troops have dropped markedly but still continue at over 60 per day and are supported, according to the poll, by 93 percent of Sunnis and 50 percent of Shiites.

Far from “stabilising” Iraq, the US military now faces a highly volatile situation with troops stationed in exposed forward bases keeping ethnically cleansed neighbourhoods and districts apart. While the multitude of sectarian militia are hostile to each other, they remain bitterly opposed to the US occupation. There is nothing new or innovative in the US tactics, which mark a return to the classic colonial policy of “divide-and-rule”. Any number of factors could rapidly lead to the collapse of this precarious house of cards.

Any conception that Iraq will become a pliable US client state in a matter of a few years is a pipedream. The imperialist ambition of dominating Iraq’s oil resources and using it as a garrison state in the Middle East can only be pursued by the permanent occupation of the country, the repression of Iraqi opposition and a constant flow of dead and wounded soldiers back to the US.

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