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The Battle of Baghdad

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Op-Ed

The Wall Street Journal

August 23, 2006

Although there has been much good news to report about security progress in Iraq this summer--the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the handover of security responsibility for Muthanna province, the fifth of 10 Iraqi Army Division Headquarters to assume the lead in its area of responsibility--Iraq faces an urgent crisis in securing its capital, Baghdad. Although Iraqi leaders and the Coalition have a sound strategy to turn the situation around, it is vital that Iraqis control sectarian violence and come together against the terrorists and outside powers that are fomenting the violence.

In July, there were 558 violent incidents in Baghdad, a 10% increase over the already high monthly average. These attacks caused 2,100 deaths, again an increase over the four-month average. More alarmingly, 77% of these casualties were the result of sectarian violence, giving rise to fears of an impending civil war in Iraq. While statistics should not be the sole measure of progress or failure in stabilizing Iraq and quelling violent sectarianism, it is clear that the people of Baghdad are being subjected to unacceptable levels of fear and violence.

This trend is especially troubling because we cannot achieve our goal of a secure, stable and democratic Iraq if such devastating violence persists in the capital. Baghdad represents one-fifth of Iraq's total population, and is a microcosm of Iraq's diverse ethnic and sectarian communities. Baghdad is also Iraq's financial and media center, the latter of which is especially important given that the declared strategy of the terrorists and violent sectarian groups in Iraq revolves around creating a perception of growing chaos in an effort to persuade Americans that the effort in Iraq has failed. Therefore, violence in Baghdad has a disproportionate psychological and strategic effect.

The deterioration of security in Baghdad since February's attack on the Samara Mosque is the result of the competition between Sunni and Shiite extremists to expand their control and influence throughout the capital. Although the leadership of al Qaeda in Iraq has been significantly attrited, it still has cells capable of operating independently in Baghdad by deploying car bombs to Shiite neighborhoods. At the same time, Sunni and Shiite death squads, some acting as Iranian surrogates, are responsible for an increasing share of the violence. This cycle of retaliatory violence

is compounded by shortcomings in the training and leadership of Iraq's National Police. To combat this complex problem, Iraq's national unity government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has made securing Baghdad its top priority. The government's Baghdad Security Plan has three principal components:

- *Stabilizing Baghdad zone by zone.* Four Iraqi Army battalions, two Coalition brigades and five military police companies will be redeployed to Baghdad, resulting in more than 12,000 additional forces on the city's streets. The National Police will simultaneously undergo intensive retraining, with each brigade to be subjected to a three-day assessment period, with its leadership evaluated and, if necessary, replaced. Each brigade will subsequently receive additional training focused on countering violent sectarianism before redeployment. Over the last 10 days this approach began to be implemented in five areas of Baghdad--Doura, Ghazaliyah, Rashid, Ahmeriyya and Mansour. In coming weeks other districts will be added.

Iraqi government and Coalition forces are adopting new tactics to stem sectarian killings. Increased checkpoints and patrols are being used to deny freedom of movement and safe haven to sectarian killers. The leaders of the death squads are being targeted. Security forces have started to work with cross-sectarian neighborhood committees. These and other new tactics will drive toward the goal of achieving security neighborhood by neighborhood. As each district of Baghdad is secured, operations will expand into contiguous zones over coming weeks and months.

- *Disrupting support zones.* Even as Iraqi and Coalition forces concentrate on securing specific neighborhoods, they will continue to conduct targeted operations in other zones that are staging areas for the violence. This includes targeted raids and other operations on areas outside of Baghdad's center, where planning cells, car-bomb factories and terrorist safe houses are located. This will degrade the ability of the terrorists and death squads to mount offensive operations into the areas we are working to stabilize.

- *Undertaking civic action and economic development.* One of the most tragic elements of the increasing violence in Baghdad is that it has robbed the Iraqi people of the sense of normalcy they desperately seek after living under crushing tyranny for more than three decades. In the immediate aftermath of Iraq's liberation, the entrepreneurial spirit of the Iraqi people was demonstrated as Baghdad's shops overflowed with consumer goods prohibited under the previous regime. However, the increasing violence in the streets of Baghdad has forced many Iraqis to close their shops for fear of their safety.

Consequently, after joint Coalition and Iraqi military operations have secured a neighborhood or district, a structure of Iraqi security forces sufficient to maintain the peace is expected to be left in place and reinforced with the capacity to undertake civic action and foster economic revitalization. This will be supported with \$500 million in funds from Prime Minister Maliki's government and at least \$130 million of U.S. funds.

These economic support funds will be used to offer vocational training and create jobs, especially for 17-to-25-year-old males; to foster public support through improved services, such as medical care and trash and debris removal; and to build local governmental capacity to protect and provide for their citizens. These goals will be achieved through a mixture of high-impact, short-term programs; mid-term programs designed to stabilize these initial gains; and programs focused on long-term economic development. Prime Minister Maliki's plan for securing Baghdad is also closely tied to the national unity government's larger program for reconciliation, which seeks to foster political understanding between Sunni and Shiite forces, including those that either control or influence unauthorized armed groups involved in sectarian conflict.

In addition, a moral compact between the religious leaders of the two Islamic communities--which will ban sectarian killings--will delegitimize the violence. Such a compact would deny the killers a political or religious sanctuary while Iraqi and Coalition forces deny them physical shelter. For the longer term, the plan seeks to induce insurgents and militias to lay down their arms by implementing a program to demobilize unauthorized armed groups. It will also review the implementation of the de-Baathification process--referring those accused of crimes to the judiciary and reconciling with the rest.

It is understandable that when the American people hear of new U.S. casualties and witness the images of bloodshed from the streets of Baghdad, they conclude that our plans for stemming sectarian violence in Iraq have failed. Yet, implementation of the Baghdad Security Plan has only recently begun. Iraq's national unity government has been in office barely three months, and its ministers of defense and interior have been on the job for less than 80 days. Iraqi ministers are still hiring key staff, and they are learning to work together, under the leadership of a new prime minister. The Committee for National Dialogue and Reconciliation, charged with overseeing implementation of the reconciliation plan, was formed only three weeks ago.

Moreover, as tragic and dangerous as the ongoing violence is to our shared vision of a free and prosperous Iraq, it is not representative of the Iraqi people's sentiments toward one another. In July, a poll by the International Republican Institute, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to democracy promotion, found that 94% of Iraqis said they support a "unity" government representing all sects and ethnic communities, with only 2% opposed. Some 78% of Iraqis opposed Iraq being segregated by religion or ethnicity, with only 13% in favor. Even in Baghdad, where the worst of Iraq's sectarian violence has occurred, 76% of those surveyed opposed ethnic separation, with only 10% favoring it. The challenge of the Baghdad Security Plan and its accompanying effort at national reconciliation is to realize the overwhelming majority of Iraqis desire to live in peace with one another against the violent minority who seek to impose their vision of hatred and oppression.

These programs are already beginning to show positive results. The Iraqi Ministry of Defense reports that the crime rate in Doura has been reduced by 80%. In the Rashid district, Sunni and Shiite political leaders, tribal leaders and imams met and signed an agreement forswearing violence. The tribal leaders went a step further by renouncing protection for tribal members who engage in sectarian violence.

Although it is too early to determine whether these success stories will be replicated throughout the city, this initial progress should give Iraqis, as well as Americans, hope about the future. Contrary to those who portray Iraq as hopelessly mired in ancient ethnic and sectarian feuds, Iraqis themselves want to put the divisions of the past behind them. The Battle of Baghdad will determine the future of Iraq, which will itself go a long way to determining the future of the world's most vital region. Although much difficult work still remains to be done, it is imperative that we give the Iraqis the time and material support necessary to see this plan through, and to win the Battle of Baghdad.

Released on August 24, 2006





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