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Making Progress: What to Expect from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker's Report on Iraq

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On September 10, General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker will report to Congress on the status of U.S. and Coalition efforts in Iraq. While many Members of Congress will use the opportunity to assail U.S. efforts there, these two men will have a number of important points to make. Though no one knows with certainty what will be said in the hearings, recent reports from Iraq provide great insight into some of the major issues and conclusions likely to be raised by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker. In general, they are likely to report strong progress on several fronts—particularly the success of the military “surge”—and ask Congress for more time to capitalize on recent successes.

1. **The “surge” has been effective at reducing civilian casualty rates, especially in Baghdad.** Spring and summer increases in the number of brigade combat teams have reduced civilian casualty rates, especially in Baghdad, from the highs seen last December and January. General Petraeus especially may stress that sectarian violence, generally defined as violence perpetrated for reasons of religion or ethnicity (usually Shia-on-Sunni or Sunni-on-Shia violence), has dropped substantially over the past six to eight months. While this is important, the fact that overall violence rates have subsided is the more noteworthy trend.¹
2. **Engaging local tribal leaders and provincial leaders has been effective not only in aiding security but also in improving local governance.** The time, effort, and energies of military

units and provincial reconstruction teams in engaging local leaders have facilitated improvements in security, especially in Anbar province. The “tribal awakening” taking place there has allied many tribal leaders with Coalition forces in rooting out al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups, making these areas much safer than even six months ago. This is an important sign of progress that has not adequately been reflected in the congressional benchmark assessments because no benchmark measures the number of former insurgents who have switched sides.

Because of the improving security in many areas, local provincial councils have been able to meet regularly and allocate their budgets on capital projects, infrastructure improvements, and needed public services. Ambassador Crocker or General Petraeus may note that the provinces are likely to spend most of their capital budgets in 2007—a great improvement over their dismal performance in 2006. While, to be sure, merely spending money does not mean that the spending will be on the projects most needed by the Iraqis, the ability to spend capital funds is a necessary condition to rebuilding infrastructure.²

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In some areas, however, it continues to be very dangerous for provincial leaders to meet. In recent months, two provincial governors in southern Iraq were assassinated, and other provincial leaders work under threats against themselves and their families. Nevertheless, there has been a qualitative improvement in local governance over the past few months.

3. **Iran continues to train and equip insurgents in Iraq.** Iran is determined to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq by providing arms and training to insurgents to attack Coalition forces. The military has reported in recent months that Iranian-manufactured rockets, mortars, and explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) have been smuggled into Iraq via Iran. According to Major General Rick Lynch, commander of the Multi-National Division–Central (located south of Baghdad), operatives of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard have provided training to (mostly Shia) insurgents on how to deploy these weapons against targets. He believes that there are at least 50 such operatives providing training and facilitating the transport of weapons into Iraq.³
4. **A withdrawal of U.S. troops at this time would spark a humanitarian disaster.** The purpose of the surge was to provide a level of security sufficient to give the political process “breathing

room” to develop. If American forces leave too soon—before the Iraqi Security Forces can adequately assume full security responsibilities—insurgents and sectarian militias will fill the ensuing power vacuum. Without question, this would increase violence, yielding more displacement or even ethnic cleansing of the population.

Conclusion. Generally speaking, next week’s hearings will report mixed results. There will be some continued frustration with the slow pace of the Iraqi government—particular on needed legislation on elections, oil revenue sharing, and amnesty—but General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker will also report some positive signs of progress in the country in relation to the surge and local developments.

Both men will likely ask Congress and the American people for more time—time to capitalize on the successes of the surge and the breathing room it is providing to the Iraqi political process. Congress should carefully consider this request during the continuing debate on Iraq.

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1. As an aside, sectarian violence occurs in mixed areas, such as Baghdad. Sectarian violence thus does not occur everywhere. In historically dangerous places, such as Anbar province in the western part of Iraq, communities are almost entirely (i.e., 95 percent or more) Sunni. Almost no *sectarian* violence has occurred in such areas at any point during the conflict.
2. This point was also made in a recent Government Accountability Office report on the 18 congressional benchmarks. See GAO, “Securing, Stabilizing, and Rebuilding Iraq: Iraqi Government Has Not Met Most Legislative, Security, and Economic Benchmarks,” GAO-07-1195, September 2007, pp. 64–67.
3. Reuters, “Fifty Iranian Guards Train South Iraq Militias: US” August 19, 2007, at www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2007/August/middleeast_August199.xml.