

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1610
September 11, 2007

After the Petraeus/Crocker Hearings: Four Issues for Congress

Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D.

Now that General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker have made their long-awaited statements to Congress, what should policymakers and the public take away from the hearings? And what should guide the debate on Iraq going forward? Naturally, there was a great deal of discussion from both men on the varying facets of the surge, but there are four issues that warrant close attention: the success of the surge, political progress at the national and local levels, the devastating consequences of premature withdrawal, and Iran's efforts to destabilize Iraq.

The Surge. Since the surge began, many key population security metrics have improved. General Petraeus opened his testimony by noting recent gains in security since the surge came to full strength early this summer. "Though the improvements have been uneven across Iraq, the overall number of security incidents in Iraq has declined in 8 of the past 12 weeks, with the number of incidents in the last two weeks at the lowest levels seen since June 2006," he noted.¹ He then recited a litany of security statistics that show reductions in civilian deaths,² improvised explosive device (IEDs, also known as roadside bombs) attacks, and high profile attacks. These measures unambiguously show that the security situation is improving.

Perhaps the metric that is most compelling is the number of weapons caches found. As of September 7, 2007, more than 4,400 weapons caches have been found and cleared by Coalition Forces (CF) so far this year. This is some 60 percent more than was

found in all of 2006. These caches have contained mortars, rockets, rifles, and the particularly deadly explosively formed projectiles (EFPs). If this trend continues through the end of the year, CF will interdict more than twice the number of weapons caches in 2007 than it did in 2006. Much of this success is directly attributable to local Iraqis feeling comfortable to provide CF with tips about the locations of insurgents and insurgents' weapons.

Political Progress. Although political progress on a national level has been less than what was hoped for, local engagements have brought tangible results. When questioned about the stalled Iraqi legislative agenda during the first day of hearings, Ambassador Crocker responded, "I am frustrated every day I spend in Iraq on the lack of progress on legislative initiatives. Iraqis themselves are frustrated." Ambassador Crocker noted, however, that while progress may be slow, it has not stopped. On August 26, five of Iraq's key leaders issued a communiqué that noted agreement on important provincial powers and de-Ba'athification legislation. While a communiqué is not legislation, Ambassador Crocker did note that such "commitment...to work together on hard issues is encouraging."³

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1610.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Even more encouraging are successes at the local provincial level. The time, effort, and energy 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 CF in rooting out al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups, making these areas much safer than they were even six months ago. This bottom-up political progress can complement the top-down efforts at the national level by showing that political accommodations can take place in Iraq, even among opposing factions not accustomed to working together.

The Consequences of Withdrawal. Policymakers should bear in mind that the consequences of withdrawal could be catastrophic for the Iraqis. 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—there will be unacceptable costs for the Iraqis.

Ambassador Crocker put it best:

I am certain that abandoning or drastically curtailing our efforts will bring failure, and the consequences of such a failure must be clearly understood. An Iraq that falls into chaos or civil war will mean massive human suffering—well beyond what has already occurred within Iraq’s borders....[T]he gains made against al-Qaeda and other extremist groups could easily evaporate and they could establish strongholds to be used as safe havens for

regional and international operations. The current course is hard. The alternatives are far worse.⁴

More specifically, it is likely that recent security gains would be fully reversed if U.S. forces leave too soon, and casualties could quickly reach, and surpass, levels seen during the most violent months last December and January. There would be displacements and ethnic cleansing within neighborhoods, leading to a substantial refugee crisis. This is also the consensus view of the recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq⁵ and, as General Petraeus noted near the end of his testimony, an August 16, 2007, assessment by the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Iran’s Meddling. Iran remains a destabilizing force in Iraq, providing weapons and training to insurgents. Both General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker noted the destabilizing influence of Iran in Iraq. Iran is determined to undermine U.S. and CF efforts by providing arms and training to insurgents to attack CF and civilians. The military has reported in recent months that Iranian-manufactured rockets, mortars, and 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.⁶ General Petraeus noted in his opening statement that it is the aim of the Quds Force to train “a Hezbollah-like force to

1. General David H. Petraeus, “Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq,” September 10, 2007, p. 1.
2. It has been noted elsewhere that the military’s data collection efforts may miss certain smaller incidents that do appear in Iraqi casualty data, but the two tend to move together. See Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., “Understanding Violence and Civilian Casualty Rates in Iraq: An Insider’s View” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1605, September 10, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1605.cfm.
3. Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Iraq, “Statement to the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Armed Services of the U.S. House of Representatives,” September 10, 2007, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
5. National Intelligence Council, “Prospects for Iraq’s Stability: Some Security Progress but Political Reconciliation Elusive—Update to NIE, Prospects for Iraq’s Stability: A Challenging Road Ahead,” August 16, 2007.
6. 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.

serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq.”⁷

Iran’s aim is to weaken American resolve and force a premature withdrawal. According to Ambassador Crocker, the Iranians would be the obvious beneficiaries of such an occurrence: “Undoubtedly, Iran would be a winner in this scenario, consolidating its influence over Iraqi resources and possibly territory. The Iranian President has already announced that Iran will fill any vacuum in Iraq.”⁸

Conclusion. Naturally, both General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker want to build on recent

gains in security and local engagements, while continuing to strive toward the goal of national reconciliation. They both admit that this is the work of years, not months; a quick exit would have dire consequences for Iraqis and possibly the larger Middle East region. America should not leave Iraq before the job is done.

—Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., is a Visiting Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and served as Deputy Director for Assessments in the Joint Strategic Planning and Assessment office at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in 2006–2007.

7. General David H. Petraeus, “Report to Congress,” p. 4.

8. Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, “Statement to Congress,” p. 8.