

Operational Success, Strategic Failure: Assessing the 2007 Iraq Troop Surge

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By 2006, security had declined dramatically in Iraq. The February bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque, a major Shia holy site, sparked a rapid increase in sectarian conflict. Violence increased 43% in Baghdad between the summer and October, reaching more than 3000 civilian deaths per month.¹ Thus, in January 2007 the Bush administration radically shifted the course of the Iraq War with Operation Fardh al Qanoon, commonly known as “the surge.” Under the leadership of General David Petraeus, the surge attempted to reverse the course of the war and stabilize Iraq using counterinsurgent tactics, with 30,000 additional soldiers “[living] with the people in order to secure them.”² Operationally, the surge initially appeared to have been a success. By January 2009, civilian casualties and US troop deaths both declined by 86%: from 2,693 to 372 and from 101 to 14, respectively. Monthly violent incidents had declined by an additional 79%, from 908 to 195.³ However, in recent years Iraq’s stability has again declined due to increasing sectarian conflict.⁴

Why did the surge fall short of achieving its strategic objectives, as stated by President George W. Bush, that “daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the government will...make progress”?⁵ Most scholarship on this issue falls into two camps. First, that the surge would have succeeded had President Barack Obama kept US forces in Iraq past 2011. Second, that the surge could not succeed because it failed to address the underlying sectarian conflict and political instability fueling civil war. This paper argues that the second camp has the more sound argument and challenges the assumptions of those who argue that the surge’s failure lies with troop withdrawal. The surge was a military solution to a political and sectarian problem and was thus unable to ensure long-term security in Iraq. This is a complex

¹ Peter Mansoor, *Surge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 31-32

² David Petraeus, “Forward,” *Surge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. x

³ David Kilcullen, *Blood Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) p. 45

⁴ “Iraq Profile,” *BBC News*, December 24 2015

⁵ George W. Bush, “Transcript of President Bush’s Address to Nation,” *New York Times*, January 11 2007

issue in which it is challenging to determine with complete certainty who is correct; both sides have merit. However, after carefully accounting for the evidence, this paper will attempt to see whether it is more consistent with one camp or the other. Without a sense of which side is more likely correct, it is challenging to apply lessons from this operation for use in future conflicts.

Section one outlines the debate between the two main sides of this issue. Section two discusses the modern history of sectarian conflict in Iraq, as well as sectarian tension and institutional mismanagement during the surge itself. Section three presents the aftermath of the surge between 2009 and 2014, highlighting a continued trend of sectarian conflict and rebutting claims that a residual troop force past 2011 would have prevented Iraq's recent increase in violence. Section four offers concluding thoughts and implications of this case.

Section 1: Outlining the Debate

The first camp in the surge efficacy debate argues that Iraq's return to instability is due to troop withdrawal under the Obama administration. Those in this camp claim that reduced violence and improved relations with local communities were squandered in the absence of US troops enforcing the rule of law.⁶ For example, David Kilcullen, General Petraeus' senior counterinsurgency advisor, notes that, "in a conflict like Iraq, if violence drops when you apply counterinsurgency techniques, then returns when you stop...it suggests [these tactics] do work...and you shouldn't have stopped before figuring out a way to maintain the progress." Kilcullen criticizes President Obama's desire to end the war, rather than fighting for a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to keep troops in Iraq past 2011.⁷ Similarly, Peter Mansoor,

⁶ See, for example, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, "The Anti-Surge: How Obama Snatched Defeat from the Jaws of Victory in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, October 30 2013; Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, "The Collapsing Obama Doctrine," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27 2014; Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2014; Sergei Boek "Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, August 2014; and John McCain, "Transcript of Morning Joe Interview," *MSNBC*, June 13 2014.

⁷ David Kilcullen, *Blood Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) p. 47-48

executive Army officer to General Petraeus, argues that the surge was a successful strategy shift and notes “that al-Qaeda in Iraq was allowed off the ropes...was due to our inability to remain sufficiently engaged in Iraq...not to the failure of the surge as a strategic concept.”⁸

This “surge optimist” explanation for Iraq’s security decline rests on two assumptions. First, surge optimists assume that violence reduction between 2007 and 2008 increased overall stability in Iraq, including putting Iraq on the path to successfully manage sectarian tension. As examples of the surge contributing to increased sectarian stability, surge optimists cite the willingness of the former Sunni insurgents known as the “Sons of Iraq” (SOI) to work with coalition forces and Shia police, as well as Muqtada al-Sadr’s decision to stand down the Jasih al-Mahdi (JAM) Shia militia.⁹ Second, surge optimists assume that by the end of 2011, trend lines were still on target to fully stabilize Iraq. Therefore, they argue that had the 20,000 troops recommended by General Lloyd Austin remained in Iraq after 2011, Iraq would be more stable than it is today,¹⁰ and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) may not have been as aggressive.¹¹

The second camp in this debate argues that the surge failed to transform operational success into overall strategic success because it did not address the fundamental problems driving conflict in Iraq: sectarian tension and weak governmental institutions.¹² For example, Ali Khedery, the longest continuously serving US official in Iraq, argues that intervention ultimately failed due to US “empower[ment] [of] a new set of elites who drew their legitimacy almost

⁸ Peter Mansoor, *Surge*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 270

⁹ Peter Mansoor, *Surge*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 264-265

¹⁰ Liz Sly, “U.S. commander, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, predicts turbulence ahead in Iraq” *The Washington Post*, November 21 2011

¹¹ Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, “The Collapsing Obama Doctrine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27 2014

¹² See, for example, Steven Simon, “The Price of the Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008; David Hastings Dunn and Andrew Futter, “Short-Term Tactical Gains and Long-Term Strategic Problems: The Paradox of the US Troop Surge in Iraq,” *Defense Studies*, Spring 2010; Bernard Stancati “Tribal Dynamics and the Iraq Surge,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2010; T. David Mason, “Ending the War in Iraq: The Third Option,” *Civil Wars*, June 2012; Ivo H. Daalder, “Iraq After the Surge,” *Brookings Institution*, December 8 2007; Alex Kingsbury, “Why the 2007 surge in Iraq actually failed,” *The Boston Globe*, November 17 2014; and Peter Beinart “The Surge Fallacy,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015.

purely from divisive ethno-sectarian agendas rather than from visions of truth, reconciliation, the rule of law, and national unity,” ultimately fueling nationwide sectarian strife.¹³ Emma Sky, political advisor to US General Ray Odierno, notes that Iraq had been moving in a positive direction immediately after the surge, but that after the US supported Nouri al-Maliki in the 2010 national election, the US “had reverted to supporting the status quo rather than reform,” which would have been necessary to ensure the long term-stability of Iraqi political institutions.¹⁴

The “surge pessimist” school rests on either of two assumptions. First, some scholars in this camp assert that trends in Iraqi stability were not sufficiently positive by the end of 2011 to render the surge a success.¹⁵ This assumption takes two forms: that US troop behavior in the field did not reduce sectarian conflict, and that American officials supported the building of ineffective and unsustainable institutions during and after the surge. If Iraq’s security and stability began to decline only after troops had left, then this would give credence to the surge optimist argument that President Obama’s failure to extend the SOFA was the cause of Iraq’s destabilization. Second, other members of this camp assert that the degree of difficulty of stabilizing Iraq was too high for the US to manage due to forces like sectarian strife.¹⁶

Section 2: Recent Sectarian History and the Surge (2007-2008)

While “all quantitative measures...indicated the tentative success of the surge¹⁷” due to counterinsurgent strategy’s successful violence reduction and the Sunni community’s increasing willingness to work with US forces, these changes did not substantively address underlying sectarian tension. This argument contests the surge optimist claim that the surge was not given

¹³ Ali Khedery “Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2015

¹⁴ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 338

¹⁵ Ali Khedery “Why we stuck with Maliki – and lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3 2014

¹⁶ Roberto J. Gonzalez “On ‘tribes’ and bribes: ‘Iraq tribal study,’ al-Anbar’s awakening, and social science,” *European Journal of Anthropology*, 2009

¹⁷ David Ucko *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, (Georgetown University Press, 2009) p. 125-126

enough time to work, because strategy toward sectarian conflict management was flawed from the beginning of the operation. First, a recent history of sectarian tension in Iraq is briefly presented to provide context for modern events. Second, actions taken during the surge that did not sufficiently manage sectarian and political instability and institution building are discussed.

A Recent History of Sectarian Instability:

Shia and Sunni Muslims have lived side by side in Iraq for over a thousand years. Though there have always been occasional inter-sectarian conflicts, for most of the historical record the groups have lived peacefully together, worshiping the same god despite different religious ideologies.¹⁸ However, competition for power, resources, and status over the past 100 years coupled with recent western intervention have contributed to the modern resurgence of sectarian conflict in Iraq, typified by violent incidents prior to the surge in 2007.¹⁹

The history of sectarian conflict in Iraq is complex. In short, the Sunni minority has consistently enjoyed disproportionate political control since the time of the Ottoman Empire, consolidating power with the 1958 overthrow of the British-installed monarchy and functionally maintaining power during the 1963 Baath Party coup.²⁰ The politicization of sectarian conflict increased sharply in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, establishing the state as a Shia theocracy with an aim to inspire similar movements in neighboring nations. Iran's ambitions were met by those of Sunni Saudi Arabia, which also had an interest in seeing its vision of Islam spread throughout the region. Iraq was caught in the fray, and in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq, which further entrenched this sectarian divide.²¹ Furthermore, Iraq's dependence on oil for state revenue has been destabilizing, as there is no evident way to manage

¹⁸ Geneive Abdo et al. "The Sunni-Shia Divide" *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2016.

¹⁹ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: Legacy of Exclusion," *Carnegie Middle East Center* April 2014

²⁰ David Gritten "Long Path to Iraq's Sectarian Split" *BBC News*, February 25, 2006

²¹ Geneive Abdo et al. "The Sunni-Shia Divide" *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2016

and divide the resource between groups.²² Additionally, some argue that Saddam Hussein, himself a Sunni, pursued a largely secular governance strategy and applied force equally to all religious groups.²³ However, others report many instances of Saddam's brutality targeted at Shias due to their beliefs. During the Iran-Iraq War, thousands of Shias were expelled from the country, imprisoned, tortured, killed, and were told they could not freely practice their religion. Saddam's practices reinforced the historic trend of Sunni dominant society, leaving marginalized Shias seeking an opportunity for improvement.²⁴ Many events in Iraq's recent history of sectarian conflict including Saddam's rule have also substantially impacted the state's ethnic Kurds, though this paper does not address their role in these issues in depth.

Arriving in Iraq in 2003, the US contributed to sectarian division as well. Under the leadership of Paul Bremer, the US-appointed head of the Provisional Authority of Iraq, each Iraqi was forced to list their sect on any state issued document and sectarian identity formed the basis of the country's new political structure. This pit sectarian groups against each other in battles for power for years to come. While this political structure placed power in the hands of the Shia majority who had long been disenfranchised, Bremer's rapid and aggressive de-Baathification policy disproportionately impacted Sunnis, removing them from positions in the military and government, leaving them disempowered and with few avenues of recourse.²⁵ As the war escalated, tensions worsened, resulting in increased violence throughout Iraq.²⁶ Though there are certainly many other factors that divided Iraqi society, divisions along sectarian lines were pronounced in the run up to the surge.

²² Harith Hasan al-Qarawee "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: Legacy of Exclusion," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 2014

²³ Musa al-Gharbi "The Myth and Reality of Sectarianism in Iraq" *Al Jazeera America*, August 18, 2014

²⁴ Gawdat Bahgat "Saddam Hussein's Legacy: A Preliminary Assessment and Future Implications," *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, July 2005; David Gritten "Long Path to Iraq's Sectarian Split" *BBC News*, February 25, 2006

²⁵ Daniel Byman "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or a Bridge Too Far?" *Security Studies*, December 2008; Musa al-Gharbi "The Myth and Reality of Sectarianism in Iraq" *Al Jazeera America*, August 18, 2014

²⁶ *Surge*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) Chapter 1

Coalition Forces Insufficiently Managed Sectarian Tension:

The surge did not achieve sustainable violence reduction for several reasons, undermining the surge optimist claim that the operation set Iraq toward long-term stability. First, cooperation between Sunnis, Shias, and coalition forces was a marriage of convenience, rather than one of intentional reconciliation. Sunnis who had previously cooperated with al Qaeda (AQ) began to work with coalition troops as members of the SOI due to AQ's control of resources, as well as a series of killings of important Sunnis, after which a Sunni leader noted that AQ had "left resistance groups with two options: either to fight al Qaeda and negotiate with the Americans or fight the Americans and join the Islamic State of Iraq...Both options are bitter."²⁷ Furthermore, Sunni shift toward cooperation with the US happened as they were simultaneously losing a civil war with Shias. Thus, the formation of the SOI came from a choice between undesirable options.²⁸ Sunnis did not cooperate with the US because of genuine support for their goals, rather they were motivated by a desire to reverse their marginalization and to better position themselves against AQ and Shias, a risk factor for future conflict.²⁹ Similarly, Prime Minister Nouri al-Makili, a Shia, consented to a US assault on Shia militias because he saw cooperation with the US as his best hope for survival.³⁰ The US military also worked with SOI out of necessity, unable to take counterinsurgent action without the help of local allies.³¹ Thus, cooperation during the surge was unrepresentative of underlying trends in sectarian behavior.

Second, coalition forces motivated the SOI through payment, which undermined long-term stability. Sunni Sheiks took as much as 20% of all US payments to SOI groups. This

²⁷ Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008

²⁸ Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) p. 267-268

²⁹ Bernard Stancati "Tribal Dynamics and the Iraq Surge," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2010

³⁰ Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) p. 267-268

³¹ Jon Lee Anderson, "Inside the Surge: The American military finds new allies, but at what cost?" *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2007

arrangement was often worth over \$100,000 a year for a Sheik, cause for later concern that chiefs would not agree to integrate SOI forces into Iraqi state security services. Additionally, most SOI members were well armed, but in some cases these individuals and their Sheiks were given US weapons.³² Many feared that “unless the new Iraqi state continues to operate as a vast bribing machine, the insurgent Sunnis...will likely revert to fighting the ruling Shias.³³” This came to fruition: when payment to SOI groups stopped, violence eventually returned.³⁴

Third, each sectarian group had different goals that the surge did not reconcile, reducing the operation’s state building capacity. Sunnis frequently believed that reconciliation between Iraq’s sectarian groups would mean their restoration to power. Shias had the goal of justice for their subjugation under previous regimes, which they believed required subordination of Sunnis, a position potentially shared by Prime Minister Maliki.³⁵ Finally, Kurds viewed reconciliation as requiring respect for their autonomy.³⁶ These divergent goals demanded negotiation and resolution that never occurred. Furthermore, coalition troops’ work with the SOI led some Sunni groups to believe that Washington would help them challenge the Shias, and when they realized this was not the case, Sunni cooperation with US forces decreased and some returned to AQ.³⁷ Thus, actions during the surge may have further divided sectarian groups.

Finally, US troop missteps combined with weak, sectarian government did not set Iraq down a path of stability. While US presence in Iraqi communities allowed surge troops to gather better intelligence, lack of understanding of local culture and language led to the mistaken arrest of thousands. Prisons became centers of radicalization described as “jihadi universities,”

³² Steven Simon, “The Price of the Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008

³³ Roberto J. Gonzalez “On ‘tribes’ and bribes: ‘Iraq tribal study,’ al-Anbar’s awakening, and social science,” *European Journal of Anthropology*, 2009

³⁴ Alex Kingsbury, “Why the 2007 surge in Iraq actually failed,” *The Boston Globe*, November 17 2014

³⁵ Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) p. 284

³⁶ Steven Simon, “The Price of the Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008

³⁷ Steven Simon, “The Price of the Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008

contributing to later conflict.³⁸ Furthermore, Iraqis were angered by the decision to wall off Baghdad neighborhoods and hire and arm SOI groups without community input. Locals worried that the US was just arming new militias and undermining the already unstable state government. The population disapproved of constant raids that reinforced the idea of the US as a coercive power, a catalyst leading some Iraqis to become insurgents.³⁹ Additionally, lack of a strong Iraqi-run national government throughout the surge meant that Iraq did not develop its own viable and independent national army or police force. Existing societal divisions began to materialize within Iraqi armed forces, laying the foundation for further sectarian strife after the exit of US troops.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Shia government arrested hundreds of Sunnis who were cooperating with US forces, which “[caused] a rift with the American military...any significant diminution of the Awakening could result in renewed violence.⁴¹” This “rift” was indicative of goal division between the US and Iraqi leadership and foreshadowed later sectarian conflict driven by the Maliki regime. Indeed, during the surge, Shia militias dominated Iraqi government security forces, while Maliki resisted any threat to his authority.⁴² Shia groups like the JAM were also purportedly sponsored by Iran, a major proxy player in Iraq due to governmental weakness.⁴³ Thus, combined American and Iraqi faults led to the mismanagement of sectarian conflict.

In December 2006, the Iraq Study Group, a congressionally formed bipartisan research organization, released an assessment of the war in a document known as *The Iraq Study Group*

³⁸ Alex Kingsbury, “Why the 2007 surge in Iraq actually failed,” *The Boston Globe*, November 17 2014

³⁹ Jon Lee Anderson, “Inside the Surge: The American military finds new allies, but at what cost?” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2007

⁴⁰ Ivo H. Daalder, “Iraq After the Surge,” *Brookings Institution*, December 8 2007

⁴¹ Roberto J. Gonzalez “On ‘Tribes’ and Bribes: ‘Iraq Tribal Atudy,’ al-Anbar’s Awakening, and Social Science,” *European Journal of Anthropology*, 2009

⁴² Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) p. 210

⁴³ Jon Lee Anderson, “Inside the Surge: The American military finds new allies, but at what cost?” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2007

Report. They concluded, “Sectarian conflict is the principal challenge to stability.”⁴⁴ Because the surge did not sufficiently manage this issue as illustrated above, trends in Iraqi security and stability were bound to be negative after the surge, regardless of its short-term benefits.

Coalition forces insufficiently managed institution building:

When Emma Sky left Iraq in 2008 she noted that both she and General Odierno understood that “the surge had not eliminated the root causes of conflict in Iraq...the Iraqis must still develop the necessary institutions to manage competition for power and resources peacefully.”⁴⁵ However, troops did not lay the foundation to develop the civil institutions Sky and Odierno saw as vital to the surge’s overall success. Indeed, as the surge was ongoing, former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Leon Panetta noted that it was a mistake to assume that if surge troops could achieve violence reduction, other elements of Iraqi reconciliation like institution building would “fall into place”⁴⁶ CUNY Professor Peter Beinart elaborates on that sentiment, noting “only when Iraq’s Sunni and Shia Arabs and its Kurds all felt represented by the government would the country be safe from civil war.”⁴⁷ Problems with institution building during the surge largely fell into three categories: institutional discrimination, leadership failures, and service delivery challenges.

First, Iraqi institutions perpetuated discriminatory sectarian policies during the surge, largely unchecked by US forces. Sectarian influence over leadership and staff of government ministries led to top-down challenges in building a professional civil service.⁴⁸ In spite of violence reduction throughout 2007 and 2008, important ministries remained under sectarian

⁴⁴ James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach*, (US Congress, 2006) p. xiii

⁴⁵ Emma Sky, “Iraq, From Surge to Sovereignty,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011

⁴⁶ Leon Panetta, “Surge not working as hoped,” *Monterey County Herald*, September 9 2007

⁴⁷ Peter Beinart “The Surge Fallacy,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015.

⁴⁸ Colonel Guy T. Cosentino, “The US Government Interagency Process and the Failure of Institution Building in Iraq” *US Army War College Senior Service Fellowship Project*, June 12 2008

militia control, “creating an environment of danger and intimidation both for Iraqi civil servants and their coalition advisors.⁴⁹” Institutional sectarianism further manifested in institutional discrimination against Sunnis. For example, residents of a Sunni neighborhood received half as much electricity per day as a nearby Shia community.⁵⁰ American civil servants spent almost no time mentoring their Iraqi counterparts due to security concerns about leaving the Green Zone. Furthermore, overall action taken by American forces to reform the sectarian tendencies of Iraqi ministries was described as “fragmented and incoherent.⁵¹” Thus, the US did not sufficiently manage the creation of secular institutions during the surge, allowing destabilizing sectarian discrimination to continue within the Iraqi government.

Second, though the Bush Administration attempted to mentor senior Iraqi ministers, the advice and council US officials provided was insufficient to guard Iraqi institutions against future turmoil. Both General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker met frequently, sometimes even simultaneously with Prime Minister Maliki, mentoring him about proper governance,⁵² and President Bush regularly video conferenced with Maliki. Bush also saw himself as mentor to the Iraqi Prime Minister. Former National Security Advisor Steven Hadley elaborates that Bush decided, “I’ve got to be his best friend. I’ve got to be his counselor...Because if he doesn’t succeed, U.S. policy isn’t going to succeed.⁵³” Despite these efforts, Maliki ultimately did not heed the counsel he received during the surge, leading Iraq back toward unstable institutions.

Third, US civil and military personnel did not sufficiently support the Iraqi government’s delivery of vital services for its citizens during the surge, pushing Iraq toward a long-term trend

⁴⁹ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) p. 512

⁵⁰ Jon Lee Anderson, “Inside the Surge: The American military finds new allies, but at what cost?” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2007

⁵¹ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) p. 511-512

⁵² Conrad Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War*, (Naval Institute Press: 2016) p. 143-144

⁵³ Jason Breslow “Who is Nouri al-Maliki,” *Frontline*, July 29 2014

of maintaining ineffective institutions. By late 2007, most Iraqis still lacked electricity, trash collection, potable water, healthcare, and telephone service.⁵⁴ Pervasive corruption throughout Iraqi ministries further exacerbated this problem.⁵⁵ Additionally, The US did not have enough personnel on the ground during the surge with the skills to help with service delivery and the rebuilding of local economic and political systems. In May 2007, there were only 150 members of “Provincial Reconstruction Teams” (PRT) on the ground in Iraq, a “woefully inadequate” number, though not a shocking one, as few State Department (or even Agriculture Department) personnel actually know how to maintain local irrigation systems or electrical grids. Even if the US had increased the size of PRTs, there still may have been inefficiencies due to cultural clashes between American civilian and military bureaus. Thus, because of US failure to properly assist the Iraqi government provide services for its people, during the surge most Iraqis viewed sectarian militias, rather than the central government, as the provider of security and services.⁵⁶

Many argue that by mid-2008 the surge was successful, and that these gains would have been maintained with extended US troop presence.⁵⁷ Political Scientist Stephen Biddle summarized this position in 2008 Congressional testimony, stating, “In fact the violence reduction was more than just a temporary lull. It reflected a systematic shift in the underlying strategic landscape of Iraq, and could offer the basis for sustainable stability if we respond appropriately.⁵⁸” There is much evidence to justify Biddle’s view. By the end of 2008, violence had declined so substantially that Iraq’s future seemed bright, the SOI program appeared to have been a success, and Iraqi institutions seemed relatively stable. Biddle’s argument summarizes the best justification for the surge optimist viewpoint during the operation itself.

⁵⁴ Leon Panetta, “Surge not working as hoped,” *Monterey County Herald*, September 9 2007

⁵⁵ Ivo H. Daalder, “Iraq After the Surge,” *Brookings Institution*, December 8 2007

⁵⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack “Civil Defense: The Surge That Would Really Save Iraq,” *Brookings Institution* May 21 2007

⁵⁷ See footnote #6

⁵⁸ Stephen Biddle “Stabilizing Iraq From the Ground Up” *US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, April 2 2008

Despite this compelling argument to the contrary, the surge pessimist argument still highlights reason to doubt the surge optimist viewpoint. Actions taken during the surge likely did not sufficiently manage sectarian and political instability, indicating that Iraq was not as stable immediately after the surge as many believe. Evidence suggests that at the end of 2008 Iraq was not trending toward long-term sectarian conflict resolution, even though violence had declined.

Section 3: The Aftermath (2009-2014)

Although violence levels took until 2012 to return to pre-surge levels,⁵⁹ challenges leading up to and surrounding the 2010 national election illustrated that the surge had not achieved its goal of “sustainable stability,” and that “Washington had reneged on the promises it had made to Iraqis to protect the political process and it had betrayed the very principles the US military believed it was fighting to uphold.”⁶⁰ This section elaborates upon these challenges and responds to critics who argue that the surge would have succeeded in stabilizing Iraq and preventing the rise of ISIS had President Obama kept troops in Iraq beyond 2011.

Early evidence of post-surge instability:

Prior to the 2010 national election, Iraq had already begun to show signs of reversion to pre-surge sectarian conflict, since coalition forces did not sufficiently manage sectarianism in 2007 and 2008. Prime Minister Maliki was at the center of this return to instability. Maliki had been the US choice for Prime Minister in 2005 due to his low profile, leadership skills, and acceptability to Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis.⁶¹ Indeed, in March 2008 Maliki supported a charge against the JAM in Basra that eventually succeeded, earning Maliki praise as a secular and patriotic nationalist.⁶² However, after the surge, he behaved in an increasingly sectarian manner,

⁵⁹ Michael E. O’Hanlon and Ian Livingston “Iraq Index” *Brookings Institution*, July 2013

⁶⁰ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 338

⁶¹ Sarah Childress interview with Salmay Khalilzad “Maliki and the Unmaking of Iraq,” *Frontline*, July 29 2014

⁶² Ali Khedery “Why we stuck with Maliki – and lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3 2014

seen through his treatment of former SOIs and sectarian governmental institutions.

Iraq struggled to reintegrate former members of the SOI into national security forces, indicative of continuing trends of sectarian struggle. When former Sunni insurgents agreed to join SOI groups, they were promised continuing employment in security forces once surge troops had left Iraq. After much resistance, the Maliki regime agreed to accept 20% of former SOI members into regular state security forces and to employ the remainder in non-security government jobs.⁶³ However, the government quickly broke these promises, failing to pay salaries to former SOI or to integrate the vast majority of SOI into security forces. Instead, the regime began arresting Sunni leaders and repressing protests,⁶⁴ actions that led to substantial Sunni disenfranchisement and future radicalization.⁶⁵

Post-2008, Maliki also oversaw trends in institutional weakness and sectarianism. Polls indicated that public satisfaction with government services was exceptionally low.⁶⁶ Some Sunnis compared the Maliki regime to a “Shia Mosque” due to unequal distribution of government services.⁶⁷ Moreover, Ali Khedery noted that “The insatiable lust for power and money evidenced by virtually every national leader I met...still leaves me dazed,” and that corruption was rampant among leaders from all sects. Indeed, leaders supported by Americans engaged in far more corrupt behavior than those under Saddam Hussein.⁶⁸ Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the surge, Iraq was not trending toward stability: its leaders exacerbated sectarian tension while America stood by, backing the ineffective Maliki regime.

Instability and the 2010 Iraqi election:

⁶³ Bernard Stancati “Tribal Dynamics and the Iraq Surge,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2010

⁶⁴ David Romano, “Iraq’s Descent into Civil War: A Constitutional Explanation” *Middle East Journal*, October 2014

⁶⁵ T. David Mason, “Ending the War in Iraq: The Third Option,” *Civil Wars*, June 2012

⁶⁶ Emma Sky, “Iraq, From Surge to Sovereignty,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011

⁶⁷ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 253

⁶⁸ Ali Khedery “Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2015

On March 7th, 2010, Iraqis voted for their new national government. The Iraqiya coalition – a non-sectarian group headed by Syad Allawi, a secular Shia, and leaders of the Sunni community – was victorious, edging out Maliki’s State of Law coalition by 91 seats to 89. Allawi thus should have been given the first chance to form a ruling government coalition, since Iraqiya did not win an outright majority.⁶⁹ However, Maliki refused to accept the loss of the election claiming that there was rampant fraud.⁷⁰ Though there was no evidence to support this claim, Maliki successfully prevented Allawi from forming a government, pushing Iraq’s high court to allow him to do so instead.⁷¹ Furthermore, the United States committed to support Maliki’s bid for Prime Minister, even though Iraqiya had won the popular vote. Iran too pushed for Maliki’s reelection. Former US Ambassador to Iraq Salmay Khalilzad noted about US support for Maliki, “We...bandwagoned...rather than pushing back and saying the Constitution had to be followed.⁷²” Indeed, Maliki got his way: despite Iraqiya’s victory, a parliamentary coalition finally formed in December 2010, which reinstated Maliki as Prime Minister and relegated Allawi to leading a strategic council that ultimately never formed.⁷³

These election results and Maliki’s increasingly authoritarian behavior can be explained by three causal factors: a perceived “security dilemma,” a power struggle with Iran, and the impression that the US was no longer interested in Iraqi affairs. First, Maliki likely feared opposing sectarian groups due to Iraq’s history of instability.⁷⁴ This set up a classic security dilemma style conflict, in which sectarian groups’ fear of each other resulted in a slippery slope toward conflict escalation. Maliki acted to protect his authority during the election, resulting in

⁶⁹ Sarah Childress interview with Salmay Khalilzad “Maliki and the Unmaking of Iraq,” *Frontline*, July 29 2014

⁷⁰ Emma Sky, “How Obama Abandoned Democracy in Iraq,” *Politico*, April 7 2015

⁷¹ Kenneth M. Pollack “The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq,” *Brookings Institution*, July 2013

⁷² Sarah Childress interview with Salmay Khalilzad “Maliki and the Unmaking of Iraq,” *Frontline*, July 29 2014

⁷³ T. David Mason, “Ending the War in Iraq: The Third Option,” *Civil Wars*, June 2012

⁷⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack “The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq,” *Brookings Institution*, July 2013

angered and alienated Sunnis, who in turn threatened Maliki more than they did before the election.⁷⁵ Second, Iran took an active role in the Iraqi election. Qasim Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, continuously summoned Iraqis to Iran to meet with him, gaining influence over their politics through persuasion and payment.⁷⁶ Suleimani strove to establish a pan-Shia coalition, and thus desired to see Maliki continue as Prime Minister.⁷⁷ Third, President Obama's promise to end Bush's "dumb war" and the distraction of the global economic downturn gave Iran an opening to increase its influence over Iraqi elections and allowed Maliki to revert to sectarian practices.⁷⁸ Indeed, Rafi Issawi, former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq commented, "If the US acknowledged that Iraqiya won the elections...the others would not have challenged it,⁷⁹" highlighting US mismanagement of the Iraqi election.

The aftermath of the 2010 election had a major impact on other Iraqi institutions, illustrating trend lines toward instability. Maliki began to influence independent governmental institutions, including the judiciary, government oversight bureaus, and the election committee.⁸⁰ Iraq's national security forces became almost entirely Shia, a further sign of Sunni disenfranchisement.⁸¹ Paralyzed by sectarian disagreement, the government still struggled to equitably provide basic services. Furthermore, Maliki later ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, illustrating secular tension at the highest levels of Iraqi government.⁸²

As a result of faulty foundations laid during the surge and problems leading up to and surrounding the 2010 national election, the US allowed Iraq to return to a state of overt sectarian hostility. Trends were thus not sufficiently positive even with the US troop presence in Iraq after

⁷⁵ James Jeffrey "How Maliki Broke Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 13 2014

⁷⁶ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 329

⁷⁷ Emma Sky, "How Obama Abandoned Democracy in Iraq," *Politico*, April 7 2015

⁷⁸ Ali Khedery "Why we stuck with Maliki – and lost Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 3 2014

⁷⁹ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 330

⁸⁰ Kenneth M. Pollack "The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq," *Brookings Institution*, July 2013

⁸¹ Ali Khedery, "Iraq's Last Chance," *The New York Times*, August 17 2014

⁸² T. David Mason, "Ending the War in Iraq: The Third Option," *Civil Wars*, June 2012

the end of the surge to consider the operation a strategic success. Violence began to rise to new highs,⁸³ Sunnis were detained without trial and pushed outside of political processes, and peaceful protests against discrimination faced violent retaliation.⁸⁴ Indeed, even while the 2010 political crisis was ongoing, Ali Khedery returned to Iraq and expressed that he “was shocked that much of the surge’s success had been squandered by Maliki and other Iraqi leaders.⁸⁵” Khedery later noted that ISIS was an outgrowth of the defeat to democratic principles during the 2010 election and the Sunni radicalization that followed.⁸⁶ This Sunni shift has roots in pre-surge sectarian dynamics and illustrates a rejection of post-2003 Shia-dominated state building, with Maliki’s reelection serving as a springboard for some toward radicalization.⁸⁷ Sunnis saw the post-2010 Iraqi government as a hostile agent of war, with no peaceful avenues of recourse available. Many again turned toward terrorist networks like AQ in Iraq, arguably the precursor to ISIS, for security provision and protection against institutionalized discrimination.⁸⁸ Iraqis did not simply fail to manage their own government; this was an American failure to reduce sectarian tension during the surge and to protect democratic principles.

The 2011 SOFA, troop withdrawal, and the rise of ISIS:

In December 2008, President Bush signed a SOFA establishing the legal presence of US troops in Iraq through December 31st, 2011.⁸⁹ Later, Military figures argued that President Obama should negotiate for the presence of 20,000 US troops in Iraq past 2011, a number later reduced to 8,000 troops, and later still down to 5,000, which Obama believed would be sufficient

⁸³ Ali Khedery “Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2015

⁸⁴ Emma Sky, “How Obama Abandoned Democracy in Iraq,” *Politico*, April 7 2015

⁸⁵ Ali Khedery, “Why we stuck with Maliki – and lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3 2014

⁸⁶ Ali Khedery, “Iraq’s Last Chance,” *The New York Times*, August 17 2014

⁸⁷ Fanar Haddad “Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 7, 2016

⁸⁸ Kenneth M. Pollack “The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq,” *Brookings Institution*, July 2013; Colin Khal “No, Obama Didn’t Lose Iraq,” *Politico*, June 15 2014

⁸⁹ Tony Karon “Iraq’s Government, Not Obama, Called Time on the U.S. Troop Presence,” *Time*, October 21 2011

to continue intelligence collection, counterterrorism, training missions, and checkpoint management.⁹⁰ However, Obama would only leave troops in Iraq if they were granted immunity from local prosecution under the SOFA. Maliki would have signed an “executive memorandum of understanding” endorsing immunity, but for the agreement to be binding it had to be approved by Parliament,⁹¹ an impossibility because US troop presence was wildly unpopular among Iraqis, and parliamentarians influenced by Iran like Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr refused to agree to any SOFA extension.⁹² Thus, Obama withdrew US forces from Iraq by January 2012.

Many politicians, military personnel, and journalists argue that keeping a residual troop force in Iraq past 2011 would have given the surge more time to work, and subsequently would have prevented or substantially mitigated the rise of ISIS.⁹³ Others point to the accompanying reduction of US Embassy staff and infrequent communication with the Iraqi government as further destabilizing forces contributing to increased sectarian violence.⁹⁴ Like many Congressional Republicans, John McCain took this stance, noting in 2014, “General Petraeus had the conflict won thanks to the surge and if we had left the residual force behind...we would not be facing the crisis we are today...we are paying a very heavy price and I predicted it in 2011.” McCain and others point to nations in which the US left troops behind for extended amounts of time, such as South Korea and Germany, as evidence that if we had done the same thing in Iraq, it would be a far more stable country today.⁹⁵

While this logic appears compelling, it does not take into account the trend of sectarian conflict leading up to troop withdrawal. As the Maliki regime continued its multifaceted

⁹⁰ Rick Brennan, “Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2014

⁹¹ Colin H. Kahl, “No, Obama Didn’t Lose Iraq,” *Politico*, June 15 2014

⁹² Tony Karon “Iraq’s Government, Not Obama, Called Time on the U.S. Troop Presence,” *Time*, October 21 2011

⁹³ See for example: Sarah Childress interview with Salmay Khalilzad “Maliki and the Unmaking of Iraq,” *Frontline*, July 29 2014; and Mary Habeck et al, “A Global Strategy for Combating al Qaeda and the Islamic State,” *American Enterprise Institute*, December 2015

⁹⁴ Conrad Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War*, (Naval Institute Press: 2016) p. 214

⁹⁵ John McCain, “Transcript of Morning Joe Interview,” *MSNBC*, June 13 2014.

oppression of Sunnis, tribes that had previously worked with the US through the SOI began cooperating with ISIS viewing “the Islamic State as the lesser of two evils when compared with Maliki.⁹⁶” Indeed, conflict had already reemerged in Iraq while US troops were present, suggesting that boots on the ground past 2011 would not have made a substantial impact on the rise of ISIS. Moreover, where post-conflict troop presence has succeeded, the US was primarily improving an existing state rather than laying new state foundations. Thus, citing extended troop presence in places like Germany as a reason to keep troops in Iraq is a poor comparison.⁹⁷

A more appropriate comparative case study for Iraq is Reconstruction-era America, during which the US Federal Government attempted to bring biracial democracy to the resistant south, in part through military occupation, similar to US goals in Iraq. During American Reconstruction, General William Sherman noted, “no matter what change we may desire in the...thoughts of the people [in the] South, we cannot accomplish it by force.” US Army personnel could succeed as peacekeepers, but they could not resolve underlying racial tension, contributing to the rise of white supremacy when troops withdrew in 1877.⁹⁸ This case study lends further credence to the surge pessimist argument that unresolved sectarian problems during the surge were the root of the surge’s failure, rather than troop withdrawal itself.

Examining the counterfactual scenario of Iraq with US troop presence past 2011 casts additional doubt upon the surge optimist hypothesis. While it is probable that an extended presence of US counterterrorism advisors and military trainers could have put increased pressure on Iraqi terror networks, as Georgetown Professor and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Colin Kahl argues, “the idea that such a force would have completely stopped the

⁹⁶ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (United States: PublicAffairs Books, 2015) p. 360

⁹⁷ Jason Brownlee “Was Obama Wrong to Withdraw Troops from Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, June 26 2014

⁹⁸ Mark L. Bradley, *The Army and Reconstruction 1865-1877*, (Center of Military History: United States Army, 2015), p. 72

jihadists is a fantasy.⁹⁹” If 175,000 troops in Iraq during the surge could not ameliorate the sectarian tension propelling ISIS to power, the 5,000 to 20,000 troops many wanted to remain in Iraq past 2011 would not have been able to achieve the reconciliation necessary to prevent ISIS’s success.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the maximum 20,000 troops requested to stay in Iraq past 2011 would have only had a non-combat mission.¹⁰¹ Even if the residual troops had been successful at increasing political stability, an unlikely outcome due to the surge forces’ inability to achieve that objective, their mission mandate would have greatly restricted the use of force, rendering the full prevention of ISIS an improbability. Thus, the counterfactual that surge optimists claim would have cemented the surge’s success would likely not have achieved the desired result.

While this paper concludes that Iraq was not sufficiently stable by 2011 to validate the claim that the surge was not given enough time to work, it is plausible that the surge optimists defending troop withdrawal as the main source of Iraq’s return to instability are correct. Indeed, there is a substantial body of evidence arguing that troop withdrawal was a major destabilizing force in Iraq.¹⁰² For surge optimists to be correct, they would need to show a continuous causal link between troop presence and stability in Iraq from the end of the surge to 2011 withdrawal, as well as evidence that a residual force past 2011 would have been effective. Research for this paper did not encounter strong or conclusive evidence for this position, but if found, it would be a compelling reason to consider the surge optimist perspective.

Section 4: Conclusion

Surge pessimists are most likely correct: trend lines in Iraq were not sufficiently positive

⁹⁹ Colin Khal “No, Obama Didn’t Lose Iraq,” *Politico*, June 15 2014

¹⁰⁰ James Jeffrey “Behind the US Withdrawal From Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2 2014

¹⁰¹ See Abby Phillip “Obama Keeps Iraq Promise, Will Anyone Notice?” *Politico*, August 30 2010; Brian Montopoli “Obama Announces End of Iraq War, Troops to Return Home by Year End,” *CBS News*, October 21 2011; Doug Mataconis “Panetta: At Least Some Non-Combat Troops Will Remain In Iraq After 2011,” *Outside the Beltway*, August 20 2011.

¹⁰² See footnote #6

by 2011 to deem the surge a strategic success, even though the operation substantially reduced violence during its implementation. This failure ultimately contributed to a resurgence of sectarian violence and later to the rise of ISIS, since US forces did not adequately combat sectarian conflict or build strong governmental institutions during the surge and its aftermath, reflected in the disastrous 2010 election. While surge optimists claim that the surge was working and that the 2011 SOFA troop removal squandered its gains, sectarian tension had reemerged before troop withdrawal. Thus, a residual force likely would not have had its intended results.

There are two significant implications for future military operations in failing states if the surge was not an overall strategic success. First, the US should increase its focus in future interventions on sectarian reconciliation and building sound institutions that have safeguards to prevent discrimination. The surge represented military action without sufficient corresponding political reforms: this was akin to putting a Band-Aid on a cut without treating the wound.¹⁰³ Furthermore, once we have built these institutions, we should enforce their proper use.¹⁰⁴

Second, it is important to avoid triumphalist narratives about the surge. Those who claim that the surge was an outright success might argue for recreating its strategy in future conflicts.¹⁰⁵ However, there are flaws with this strategy even though it resulted in short-term violence reduction. If military officials and government personnel fail to acknowledge the sectarian tension mismanagement during the surge, we risk intervening in another conflict only to make no difference at best or further destabilize the conflict at worst.¹⁰⁶ It is now up to future leaders to take lessons from the surge's operational success and strategic failure to make the crucial military decisions of the 21st century.

¹⁰³ Peter Beinart "The Surge Fallacy," *The Atlantic*, September 2015

¹⁰⁴ Ali Khedery "Why we stuck with Maliki – and lost Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 3 2014

¹⁰⁵ Alex Kingsbury, "Why the 2007 surge in Iraq actually failed," *The Boston Globe*, November 17 2014

¹⁰⁶ Peter Beinart "The Surge Fallacy," *The Atlantic*, September 2015