

Lullaby of Baghdad

IS REDUCED VIOLENCE IN IRAQ—REDUCED, THAT IS, from its peak in 2006—a sign that the United States is finally on the road to victory? Or is U.S. strategy in the war, as Steven Simon argues in the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, “stoking the three forces that have traditionally

threatened the stability of Middle Eastern states: tribalism, warlordism, and sectarianism” and consequently making Iraq ungovernable? In other words, is the Bush administration purchasing short-term stability in Iraq—and a lulled electorate at home—at the cost of a deepened and prolonged conflict?

There’s no doubt that the “surge” in U.S. forces (now being drawn down to 140,000 troops) has bought the administration political relief. News coverage of the fighting has dropped, and congressional Democrats have been stymied in efforts to end the conflict. (I’m writing just before Gen. David Petraeus’ congressional testimony.) Perhaps most important, although a majority of the public continues to believe that invading Iraq was a mistake, those who favor the war such as Sen. John McCain have been bolstered in their determination to fight on until victory.

The war’s supporters say that whatever the earlier mistakes, the surge and the new bottom-up counterinsurgency strategy have improved security and put al-Qaeda in Iraq on the run. In this view, it would be a disastrous error to quit the war just as the tide has turned.

But a variety of analyses tell a different story. In early April, the congressionally funded U.S. Institute of Peace released a report by experts on Iraq concluding, “Political progress is so slow, halting and superficial, and social and political fragmentation so pronounced,

that the U.S. is no closer to being able to leave Iraq than it was a year ago. Lasting political development could take five to ten years of full, unconditional U.S. commitment to Iraq.”

But didn’t the surge reduce attacks and casualties? Actually, the number of attacks has stabilized at about 570 per week (before spiking in March), and much of the reduction came from three other developments. In early 2007, even before the surge, violence began falling because the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad was mostly finished, and it dropped further after the Shia cleric Moktada al-Sadr declared a cease-fire by his Mahdi Army on August 28.

The third development—the decision of Sunnis in Anbar and some other areas to abandon the insurgency and join *sahwa* or “Awakening” groups to fight the foreign jihadists—has been widely heralded as the war’s biggest turnaround. But, as Simon argues in his *Foreign Affairs* article, the U.S. decision to pay and equip these tribal groups strengthens the centrifugal tendencies weakening the Iraqi state. America now funds the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Sunni *sahwa*, and the Iraqi Security Forces heavily infiltrated by the Badr militia. Our money and arms flow not just to the three major sec-

tarian groups but to contending factions and strongmen within each one.

Current policy, retired Gen. William E. Odom told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 2, “has placed the United States astride several civil wars. And it allows all sides to consolidate, rearm, and refill their financial coffers” at American expense. And the U.S. Institute of Peace report warns, “Empowering the Awakenings—often composed of former insurgents and leaders stridently opposed to the Iraqi government—carries with it a major risk of blowback.”

Some analysts hope that even with a weak state, a stable equilibrium will emerge among the warring sects, tribes, and militias, but that hope goes against the historical record and widely held expectations in Iraq that the contest for power will be settled by violence. The United States now finds itself in the bizarre role of arming rival factions to stop a civil war.

And the contradictions don’t stop there. The president has defined victory in Iraq as the creation of a state that will be an American ally, while the Iraqi government we are supporting has close ties to Iran and is unlikely ever to oppose it.

But what about staying in Iraq to fight al-Qaeda? General Odom answered that question in his Senate testimony: “The concern ... about a residual base left for al-Qaeda if we withdraw is utter nonsense. The Sunnis will soon destroy al-Qaeda if we leave Iraq. The Kurds do not allow them in their region, and the Shiites, like the Iranians, detest al-Qaeda.”

That is as much of a victory as we are likely to get when, sooner or later, we face up to the limits of our power and recognize that American forces cannot be tied up indefinitely trying to prevent Iraqis from killing one another. Enough of the lullaby of Baghdad. Americans need their own Awakening. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

*The “surge”
has worked
at home
politically
far better
than it has
in Iraq.*