

# ASSESSING COUNTERINSURGENCY AND STABILIZATION MISSIONS

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# ASSESSING COUNTERINSURGENCY AND STABILIZATION MISSIONS

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*“Going forward [in Afghanistan], we will not blindly stay the course. Instead, we will set clear metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable.”*

—President Barack Obama, March 27, 2009

How to tell if a counterinsurgency campaign is being won? Sizing the force correctly for a stabilization mission is a key ingredient—and it has been the subject of much discussion in the modern American debate. But in fact, there is no exact formula for sizing forces. Even if there were, getting the numbers right would hardly ensure success. Troops might not perform optimally if poorly prepared for the mission; the security environment might pose too many daunting challenges for even properly sized and trained forces to contend with; the politics of the country in question might not evolve in a favorable direction due to the actions of internal or external spoilers. So to know if we are being successful, we must also track and study results on the ground.

In conventional warfare, identifying the momentum of battle is a fairly straightforward undertaking. Predicting ultimate outcomes is still very difficult, but determining who is “ahead” at a given moment is usually feasible. Movement of the front lines, attrition rates, industrial production of war materiel, and logistical sustainability of forces in the field provide fairly obvious standards by which to assess trends. But counterinsurgency and stabilization operations—like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan—are different, and more complex. They also appear to be the future of warfare. How do we measure progress in such situations?

This question is crucially important. Only by tracking progress can we know whether a strategy is working. And only by examining a range of indicators can we

determine how to adjust a strategy that may require improvement. For example, a counterinsurgency effort in which violence is the central challenge facing a country will presumably imply different policy responses than for a mission in which economic stagnation, or poor quality of life for citizens, or political paralysis in a nation’s government, presents the chief dilemma. In many cases all such problems will present themselves, and all must be addressed at some level—but it is unrealistic to think that all can receive equally rigorous and well-resourced responses. Priorities must be set; metrics can help in determining what they should be.

Assessing progress is also important because the perception of progress has an effect on the sustainability of the war effort. The theory of victory for insurgents fighting the United States and its allies is not to defeat their better equipped foe on the battlefield. It is to unequivocally demonstrate their capacity to fight a war of attrition indefinitely and then wait for political support for the mission to collapse on their enemies’ home fronts. To counter this strategy, the United States and its allies must be able to demonstrate progress or at least the reasonable expectation of progress throughout the campaign. Given the political importance of measuring progress and the very limited set of agreed upon benchmarks, the question of metrics has become deeply controversial.

In the coming months and years, the United States will need to face at least two concrete measurement

questions in its ongoing counterinsurgency campaigns. In Iraq, the key question will be to determine if the improved security situation is holding relatively steady even as the American troop drawdown accelerates, as is now expected. In Afghanistan, the question will be whether the fundamental change in strategy underway in 2009—a year expected to see a doubling in American combat capability in the country—is proving effective in accomplishing the revised mission. Clearly, an important aspect of this issue is not only to determine which metrics are most important to examine for signs of change, but also to develop an understanding of how quickly positive developments can be expected. Not every turnaround will necessarily occur as fast as the situation improved in Iraq in 2007/2008—or as fast as the situation deteriorated there in 2004-2006.

In this paper we do not discover simple, universal rules about which metrics are most telling as guides

to progress in counterinsurgency and stabilization missions. Our findings underscore the challenge of this task, and the variability in the proper use of metrics from one case to another. But we are still able to reach some conclusions with policy salience. One is that the current Afghanistan strategy of the Obama administration is rightly focused on population security—and, more generally, improving the lives of normal citizens—as well as Afghan institution building. Moreover, because absolute levels of violence in Afghanistan are far less severe than they were until recently in Iraq, or many other countries engulfed by civil war, there may be time to pursue this strategy without seeing the country ripped apart in the meantime. However, we also conclude that it may take well into 2010 to see if this generally sound strategy is actually working—especially since the resources being devoted to the task are at the lower end of what such missions have generally required to be successful.

# THE GENERAL CHALLENGE OF MEASURING PROGRESS IN COUNTERINSURGENCY AND NATION BUILDING

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A number of axioms have been developed over the decades to guide policymakers as they attempt counterinsurgency, stabilization, and nation building missions. Several concepts have become so frequently voiced that they have developed almost iconic status:

- Counterinsurgency requires attention to three main areas of effort: security, economics, and politics.
- Successful counterinsurgency depends most critically on how the local population views its well-being and the role of the government and international forces in supporting that well-being. Battlefield victories are primarily important to the degree that they build or sustain support among the population.
- Successful counterinsurgency requires empowerment of legitimate, indigenous actors and cannot be achieved principally through the efforts of outsiders.
- Patience is required in counterinsurgency, as successful efforts typically take a decade or longer.
- Care and precision are required in the use of force in counterinsurgency, and as such policing functions are ultimately more appropriate than combat operations by soldiers.

The problem with such a list of truisms is not so much that they are incorrect—in fact, they are probably all generally sound. Rather, the challenge is in translating these principles into actionable policy in a given case, and in determining if efforts to do so are

succeeding. It is here where metrics have their potentially greatest role.

Alas, it is easy to misuse metrics. In Vietnam, for example, the United States was convinced that there would be a “crossover point” in attrition of the Viet Cong. If U.S. military forces could manage to kill enough of them, say 50,000 a year, their recruiting efforts would not be able to keep pace, and combined American and South Vietnamese forces would ultimately prevail. This focus on body counts contributed to General Westmoreland’s unfortunate emphasis on search and destroy operations which caused huge numbers of civilian casualties and in that way increased the enemy’s capacity to recruit. The United States and South Vietnam also fixated on the ratio of counterinsurgents to insurgents, working from the assumption that successful counterinsurgency requires ten government soldiers for every insurgent. This simplifying assumption is partly validated by history, but only in an approximate sense. By applying it too rigidly, the rule of thumb misled American and South Vietnamese policymakers, giving them too much confidence that they would be successful if only they could generate a certain number of combat forces (with relatively little attention paid to the forces’ quality or proficiency in counterinsurgency operations). As a third example, the conviction that the Viet Cong needed hundreds or thousands of tons of supplies daily led to additional bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail and ultimately Cambodia—again to no avail as it turned out that the Viet Cong in South Vietnam needed little outside help.<sup>1</sup> In the economics

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), pp. 177-214; and Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 169-77, 210-12, 220-23, 233-47, 262-63, 282-93.



realm, the hope that pumping up South Vietnamese GDP would produce content among the population failed when the resulting economic growth accrued to a relatively narrow stratum of society.

The experience of successful counterinsurgency and stabilization missions in places such as the Philippines and Malaya, by contrast, tends to place a premium on tracking trends in the daily life of typical citizens. How secure are they, and who do they credit for that security? How hopeful do they find their economic situation, regardless of the nation's GDP or even their own personal wealth at a moment in time? Do they think their country's politics are giving them a voice?<sup>2</sup>

The Marine Corps tended to focus on these metrics in Vietnam, and developed an approach called the Combined Action Program to help protect the population in "ink spots" that would gradually expand with time. In fact, the Marine CAP concept applied more broadly would have led to fewer overall American forces than were actually deployed, suggesting that the ten-to-one rule was in fact NOT the optimal way to gauge U.S. force requirements. But the Marine Corps did not carry the day with this concept in the U.S. military overall.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. military finally moved towards this type of thinking in Iraq—but, in general, not until 2007.<sup>4</sup>

If Vietnam policy erred in choosing the wrong short list of metrics and then often measuring them badly, we have perhaps overcompensated to some degree in

recent Brookings work in our Iraq Index and Afghanistan Index. The Iraq Index has included more than 50 key indicators since we began it in late 2003. The Afghanistan Index is now based on a similar philosophy—though data is somewhat less available to track trends in Afghanistan, and our effort in regard to that country is more recent, so on balance there are somewhat fewer indicators than with the Iraq Index. Our reasons for taking this approach were twofold. First, the purpose of the indices has been to provide handy raw data so that other analysts would be free to determine their own algorithms for processing, prioritizing, and creating net assessments out of the data. Second, our own ability to confidently determine which metrics are most crucial has been limited. If we were confident about which 10 or 15 or 20 metrics could best tell the story of the efforts in Iraq or Afghanistan, and had reliable data for those categories, we might have focused more narrowly on them. The truth is that the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq have usually demonstrated an ability to confound short lists of metrics.

In this paper, however, we do attempt a form of net assessment. We do so by reviewing trends this decade in the two main combat theaters where American forces have conducted major operations, seeking to identify key determinants of change. In retrospect, some key metrics seem to emerge with greater clarity. In light of this, we then try to distill some general lessons about how specific features of each context might contribute to determining the appropriate metrics.

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<sup>2</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 2005), pp. 70-86.

<sup>3</sup> Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 172-177.

<sup>4</sup> General David H. Petraeus, Lt. General James F. Amos, and Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 1-52; Steven Metz, *Learning from Iraq: Counterinsurgency in American Strategy* (Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), pp. 1-30; and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), pp. 149-202.

# TRACKING CHANGE IN IRAQ

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Post-Saddam Iraq has experienced perhaps three main periods to date. The first started with the fall of Saddam's statue on April 9, 2003 and continued until sometime shortly after the capture that December of the former dictator himself—in any case, it was conclusively over by late March and early April 2004 with the terrible tragedies in al-Anbar province that began to make Fallujah and Ramadi infamous names in the United States. From that point through 2006, the insurgency grew and became interwoven with increasing terrorism and, finally, outright sectarian conflict that most would call civil war by sometime in 2005 or 2006. The third period, continuing until the present, has been defined first by the U.S. “surge” of additional forces but throughout by a greater Iraqi-American emphasis on protecting the Iraqi population as the essence of military and political strategy.

One could of course subdivide these three periods further, or even propose a different basic chronological division. For example, the battle of Basra beginning in March of 2008 arguably heralded the real arrival of Prime Minister al-Maliki as a decisive leader of the Iraqi nation, as well as the proven performance of the Iraqi security forces even against major internal foes. But to first approximation, this basic temporal sequencing provides a logical way to understand trends in Iraq to date.

## 2003

2003 was characterized, after the fall of Saddam in early April, by a gradually growing insurgency. It was not widely described by that term until the latter part of the calendar year, but its roots can be traced to the

decisions to disband the Army and fire most Baathists from government jobs in the spring of the year—if not in the very decision to invade in the first place. The proof of an emergent insurgency was seen partly in the growing frequency and worsening types of attacks, with particular focus on government institutions, key domestic and international leaders, and U.S.-led security forces. These could all be observed in the data. Evidence of a semi-organized, or at least coordinated, insurgency was also apparent in communications intercepts that revealed the ideology and, to some extent, the command and control behind insurgent activity. As violence intensified, it was increasingly hard to view the opposition as merely “dead enders” who would soon be rounded up or otherwise pushed aside.

Not all trends were bad. Because the oil for food program had weakened Iraqi living standards, and because the invasion had led to major disruptions in the performance of utilities, some fairly simple aid and reconstruction efforts produced major improvements in the second half of the year. Electricity, household fuel supplies, and the like recovered fast. Irrigation canals were cleared promptly for the most part. Also, media and telephone and internet service all grew once the country's dictator was overthrown. Private vehicles flourished as well, since the lifting of restrictions on non-Baathists allowed many more people to partake of those luxuries they could afford (though most citizens were still frustrated, and expectations for an improved quality of life exceeded actual improvements in living conditions). Security forces grew fast in number, even if not in quality. And of course, Saddam as well as a number of other top Baathist rulers were caught or killed.

Overall, trends in this year were not consistently or comprehensively negative—even though we can now conclude that the year was a bad one for the country, as evidenced by the trajectory that by this time it was beginning to follow. This experience underscores important limitations of metrics:

- it is often difficult to know which metrics, in a given case, are most important for forecasting the overall direction in which a country is headed,
- there is often a time lag between when problems begin to develop and when they are clearly visible and measurable, and
- early on in an operation it may be especially hard to assess trends—in large part because the starting point, or baseline, for certain metrics can be hard to identify due to poor data

## 2004 THROUGH 2006

The year 2004 was when Iraq clearly began to fall apart, as evidenced most notably by a dramatically worsening security environment. Coalition troop fatality rates roughly doubled relative to 2003; Iraqi civilian casualty rates grew at an even greater relative clip, though there was still insufficient emphasis on measuring these losses carefully. Beyond the numbers of killings, many other negative aspects of the violence became incontrovertible, including the numbers of suicide bombings and of foreign terrorists infiltrating the country, as well as the growing prevalence of kidnapping and many more attacks on the nation's oil infrastructure.

It was still possible to look at data and convince oneself otherwise—with some economic growth trends continuing, for example, and development agencies able to document scores of new projects they were pursuing. Some measures of societal openness and political freedom were still moving in positive directions. Iraqi public opinion remained fairly optimistic about the future.

Moreover, some major battles in places like Najaf and Falluja could be interpreted as having dealt major blows to the enemy (or enemies); in fact, the

August battle against Sadr's forces in Najaf may well have fit into that category. Violence ebbed and flowed from region to region, so it was generally feasible to find parts of the country where trends were relatively favorable and highlight those sectors as somehow most representative of where things were headed more generally. And the program for training and equipping Iraqi security forces was revamped and put under the able hands of then-Lt. General David Petraeus.

But in retrospect, things were clearly headed downward in 2004. Trends in measured security incidents were mostly bad. And many other trends that were not being carefully studied were also headed in the wrong direction—as we tried to highlight in the Iraq Index at the time—though the overall significance of these was underappreciated. Notably, the criminal murder rate and the unemployment rate were generally not being well tabulated, in part because it was difficult to do so, and in part because prevailing official concepts of how to measure progress in Iraq did not emphasize their importance. As such they were underemphasized in assessments about Iraq. Similar problems were prevalent in regard to medical care, educational opportunity, and other such key quality of life metrics. A brain drain was occurring as professionals fled the country in even larger percentages than the overall population, but this was not being carefully tracked. Finally, the problems with the security forces were not yet apparent to most, largely because good metrics for evaluating their progress did not exist. Here, the Iraq Index was also unable to track the problems with these forces, since doing so would have required more detailed (and probably classified) information on the unit by unit performance of Iraqi security forces in the field. Like the U.S. government, we emphasized the more measurable aspects of the evolution of the Iraqi security forces—days in basic training, quality of weaponry issued, pay for troops, numbers of soldiers and police in uniform—most of which seemed headed in the right direction.

By 2005 and 2006, it was increasingly clear that the negative trends that in fact had begun by 2004 were dominating the evolution of Iraq. Over these two

years, almost all observers who had been bullish on the war effort felt obliged to reassess.

What changed from 2004? First, and most simply, was the ongoing deterioration in the security environment. Overall levels of violence worsened; sectarian assassinations multiplied; suicide bombs grew in number; ethnic and sectarian cleansing accelerated dramatically, reaching a level of roughly 100,000 persons newly displaced by violence per month. On balance, the country reached a state of civil war. No single quantitative metric could document that fact unambiguously—though the February 2006 bombing of the golden mosque in Samarra was important symbolically and was viewed as a watershed moment by many. Estimated civilian fatality rates from all forms of violence per month, according to our estimates, approached 2,000 in 2005 and 3,000 in 2006—after having averaged less than 1,000 in 2003 and 1,400 in 2004.

Moreover, all of this continued even as Iraq held three rounds of elections in 2005; for an interim government, a constitution, and a full-term government. Growing violence in the face of apparently successful elections—or at least peaceful election days—belied the theory that open, competitive elections would be an immediate and important step toward solving the country's woes. A corollary to this was that major politicians increasingly seemed motivated by sectarian agendas, not national ones.

In addition, the qualitative problems in Iraqi security forces became increasingly evident because a growing number of incidents in which they sided with militias or criminal gangs, or otherwise misbehaved, became impossible to ignore. It was not so easy to document this comprehensively or rigorously, so there was a time lag in seeing the problem, but it did eventually become clear. In fairness, however, it was also impossible to ignore the sacrifices of Iraqi soldiers and police, who were by now dying in far larger numbers than were coalition troops—typically at the rate of at least 200 a month.

Economic and quality of life indicators remained stuck more or less in neutral. Telephone and computer usage rates continued to grow, as did independent media

companies, but the availability of electricity, fuels for household use, basic health care, educational opportunity, and most other such indicators were in stasis. Oil exports failed to improve either, remaining static at somewhat under 2 million barrels a day—comparable to latter-day Saddam levels.

Objective conditions were not bad, relative to previous eras in Iraq or to truly poor countries. But they were stagnant even as expectations were growing among the Iraqi population. As this period unfolded, Iraqis became less optimistic about the future, more inclined to think the country could fall apart, and more angry than ever with American forces and the U.S. role in their country.

Despite the widespread deterioration in many metrics in Iraq over this time period, the intensification of violence had simplified the analytical situation by the end of 2006. It was difficult to view anything but the rate of violence against civilians as the central metric in assessing progress. The country was being ripped apart, and it was implausible that any progress in opening schools or vaccinating children or providing better armored vehicles to Iraqi soldiers or any other such measure could make much difference in Iraq's trajectory unless the violence could be contained. This realization gave rise to the surge.

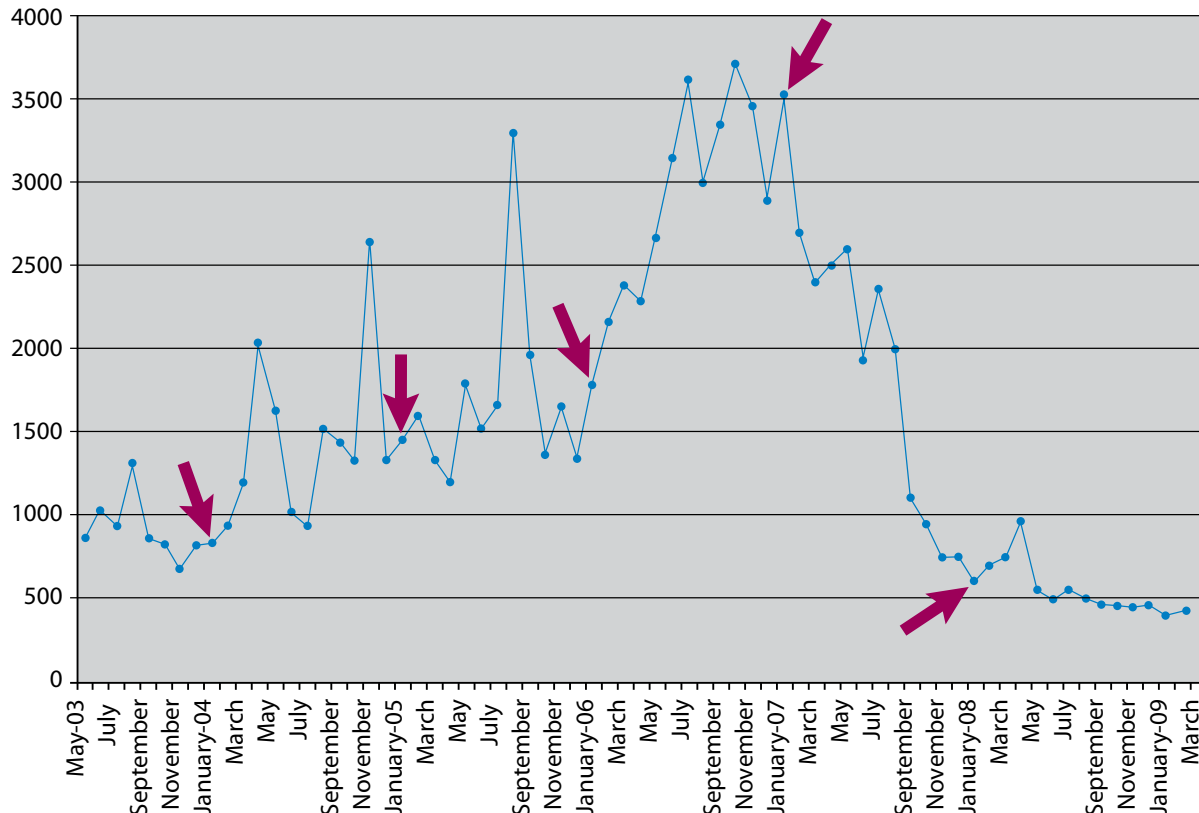
## 2007 AND 2008

In January of 2007, President Bush announced a new strategy for Iraq, and by February General David Petraeus arrived in Baghdad to implement that strategy. Iraqi leadership was important too, since Iraqi security forces were a key element of the surge themselves. In fact, the surge should not be understood simply as an increase in American troops, but a basic reorientation of the combined security mission towards a focus on protection of the population. Creation of joint security stations manned by coalition and Iraqi soldiers and police who patrolled together, erection of fortifications and checkpoints in many parts of the country to thwart easy attacks by terrorists and insurgents, and pursuit of ceasefire arrangements with Sunni tribes as well as Shia militias were all key elements of the new approach.

Indeed, if establishment of joint security stations, construction of barriers and checkpoints, and other such steps are viewed as key metrics, they proved to be leading indicators of progress in the case of Iraq in 2007. At the time, however, all that could be proven with such data was that the strategy was in fact being implemented as planned—not that it would necessarily succeed.

(Actually, the local ceasefires established through the so-called Awakening process were not anticipated to the degree they occurred. Rather, the initial hope had been that top-down rather than bottom-up political reconciliation measures would complement the new security strategy, when in fact for the first year or so what actually happened was primarily the opposite.)

### ESTIMATED NUMBER OF IRAQI CIVILIAN FATALITIES FROM VIOLENCE BY MONTH, MAY 2003-MARCH 2009



➔ Signifies the start of a new calendar year

**NOTE ON THIS GRAPH:** Since May 2003 there have been three distinct sources and/or methodologies used by the authors in estimating the number of monthly civilian fatalities in Iraq. For a detailed description of these, please see page 5 of the Iraq Index, accessible at [www.brookings.edu/iraqindex](http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex).

**NOTE ON ANOTHER CIVILIAN FATALITY ESTIMATE :**

In its January 31, 2008 issue, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a study carried out by the Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group in which they estimated the number of violent civilian deaths in Iraq from March 2003 through June 2006. Based on a survey of 1,086 household clusters throughout Iraq, they estimated that there were 151,000 such deaths during this period. Though monthly totals were not made available, the estimated number of deaths per day were broken into various time periods as follows: March 2003-April 2004, 128; May 2004-May 2005, 115; June 2005-June 2006, 126.

**SOURCE:** Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, "Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006", *The New England Journal of Medicine*, January 31, 2008.

Partially as a result, Iraq improved fundamentally. The rate of civilian fatalities from all forms of war-related violence, perhaps the ultimate indicator of stability, declined by 80 percent by 2008 and 90 percent by early 2009 (relative to the 2006 peak). Iraq is now notably less violent than it had been at any point in the years 2004/2005, and in fact now compares favorably with admittedly violent but still “peaceful” countries such as South Africa, Mexico, and Russia. Notably, these downward trends continued even as the U.S. surge of forces ended and America reduced its combat brigade strength from 20 to 14 (as of early 2009). With U.S. troop fatality rates down by 60 to 80 percent by mid-2008 as well, and Iraqi Security Force casualties reduced by more than half too, the overall trajectory of the war was fairly good—just as it had been mostly bad in 2006. Not only were violence rates much reduced, but the ability of Iraqi security forces to do their part in maintaining a more stable environment became evident in Basra, Sadr City, Amara, and elsewhere, especially in the course of 2008.

But knowing that the situation in Iraq had improved by 2008 was fairly straightforward. A somewhat more interesting question is, how soon could it have been known that the strategy was in fact working? Another important question that is also very difficult is, when will it be possible to argue that Iraq has essentially reached a self-sustaining trajectory towards greater stability (or at least towards maintaining the progress that has been achieved)?

Early in 2007, it was possible to document that the *inputs* of the surge and population-protection strategy were being deployed as intended. As the surge brigades arrived from the United States over the first half of the year, and Iraqi security forces continued to grow at a rate of almost 10,000 uniformed personnel a month, new operations were initiated and the battlefield changed substantially. Dozens of joint security stations and combat outposts were established, and thousands of patrols added as well.

But violence remained very high; it was not until the latter half of the year when the situation markedly improved throughout much of the country. The U.S. political debate over the surge was meanwhile

quite acute, and Congress was considering cutting off funding for the war even as the surge began during the first 6 to 8 months of the year. What indicators could it have looked to, during this transitional time, to determine whether it was worth keeping American forces involved in the fight?

It is difficult to create a clearly prioritized list because leading and lagging indicators could vary from one conflict to another. In Iraq, reductions in U.S. and Iraqi security force casualties lagged because the surge led to heavy fighting in parts of the country as Shiite militias, al Qaeda in Iraq extremists, and others battled back for a time. Improvements in basic economic quality of life indicators, such as numbers of children in school, the quality of health care, the unemployment rate, and the availability of potable water and electricity continue to lag even in late 2008—largely because it was unrealistic that most could improve before the security environment had been transformed (and stayed transformed for a period of recovery).

Skeptics that the surge was working had reasonable grounds for being dubious about alleged progress well into 2007. For example, “body counts” of killed enemy combatants may indicate progress—as long as the right people are being killed. But if innocents, or would-be allies, are killed by government forces, the effect can be negative. The latter dynamic probably existed in Iraq in 2004 through 2006; the former, desirable dynamic appears to have been established by 2007, but body counts themselves would not show the change. (Of course, the U.S. military was still shying away from body counts in 2007, but the number of security incidents and numbers of casualties to American and Iraqi forces could be viewed as proxies for numbers of enemy killed since they reflected an intensification of combat).

Moreover, the imprecision in measuring death rates in a chaotic environment is a significant challenge. At what point can one believe that a trend is meaningful, if data is inexact? Some skeptics of the surge wondered if the Bush administration, or even U.S. military command headquarters in Baghdad, might doctor the data—or at least cherry pick from those indicators that were positive while understating the



importance of indicators that were less so. In fact, skeptics could point to earlier periods in the war, when official assessments tended to be positive even when trends were bad, to reinforce their suspicions. Given that various reputable estimates of Iraqi death rates varied by a factor of two or so,<sup>5</sup> one could argue that reductions in rates of violence might have to reach 50 percent before being taken very seriously. That would probably be too high a threshold, however. Instead, if all major data sources showed similar downward movements of a statistically significant amount (probably 10 to 25 percent), that would suggest a real phenomenon—in other words, if they all showed the same relative trend, that would be notable even if the various methodologies continued to disagree on absolute violence levels. Even once a downward trend was detected, however, one could debate its significance as a harbinger of a more promising future for the country. For example, Iraq had typically suffered 200 attacks a week of one kind or another into early 2004; that number escalated to 500 to 600 a week over the next year or two, and exceeded 1,000 a week by 2006 and early 2007. By the summer of 2007 it began to fall dramatically, but it remained still at that level of 500-600 a week when General Petraeus testified before Congress in September 2007. Yes that was major progress—but ongoing attacks still reflected a horribly violent country, with things as bad as 2004 and 2005 had been.

Similar trends could be seen in other data. Ethnic cleansing rates declined by mid-2007 as well, but they were still high by any normal measure. By the summer of 2007, U.S. troop fatalities began to decline somewhat, though they did not drop below the previous three-year average of about 70 deaths per month until that fall.

The numbers of extremist leaders purged from the Iraqi Security Forces and other Iraqi government positions increased quite a bit (though it took a while

to be confident that their replacements had higher integrity). For example, by the summer of 2007, almost all the leadership of the Iraqi National Police had been revamped. In retrospect, this proved to be a leading indicator of imminent progress, though again, it was hard to be sure at the time. Increases in the number of Iraqi security forces taking primary responsibility for local security were also encouraging. But we did not yet know for sure, in 2007, if they would be able to do so in the ethnically mixed neighborhoods in and around Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk or in particularly tense regions like Basra and Sadr City. Only in the spring of 2008 were improvements in Iraqi forces validated by battlefield progress in such places.

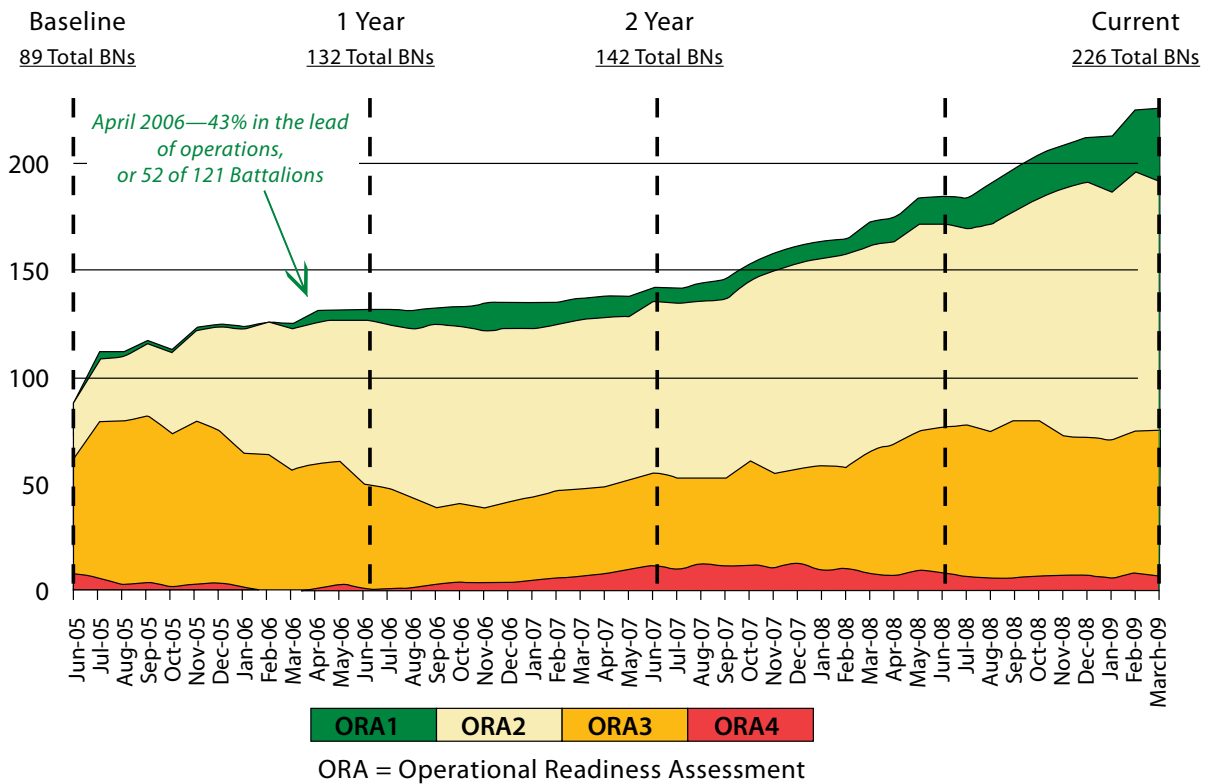
Political progress in Iraq was slow through most of 2007, especially at the national level, though it picked up as the year unfolded. Knowing how to gauge political progress is hard. It is not a matter of meeting specific “benchmarks” so much as creating a spirit of nonviolent politics and compromise, so that future disputes will be settled in the halls of parliament rather than on the streets or battlefields. Benchmarks are ways of gauging possible progress towards this attitude, but no more than that, and as such must be taken with grains of salt.

The confidence of one of us (O’Hanlon) in the new strategy grew greatly after a trip to Iraq in mid-2007, but the data themselves were not totally conclusive at that point. It was the combination of some encouraging data trends with a general sense that the United States and Iraq had developed a proper counterinsurgency and stabilization strategy that gave O’Hanlon (and colleague Kenneth Pollack) confidence—underscoring again that quantitative metrics must often be married with military and strategic judgment to reach bottom-line policy judgments in this field. The science of war, and the business of studying metrics, only goes so far.

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<sup>5</sup> In giving this estimate, we are not even counting the contentious Johns Hopkins study presented in the *Lancet* journal, which alleged Iraqi civilian death rates five to ten times higher than other studies. We find the *Lancet* study unpersuasive due to its radical divergence from eyewitness accounts in Iraq, which were relatively numerous and systematic, as well as the inherent difficulties of conducting such polling in war zones. For the *Lancet* numbers to have been correct, Iraq in 2003-2006 would have had to experience greater rates of killing than Iraq suffered at any time during Saddam’s tenure, including the Iran-Iraq war and the 1988 and 1991 massacres of Kurds and marsh Arabs respectively.

## IRAQI SECURITY FORCE OPERATIONAL READINESS, JANUARY 2005-MARCH 2009



### DEFINITIONS OF OPERATIONAL READINESS ASSESSMENT (ORA) LEVELS:

- ORA LEVEL 1: capable of planning, executing, and sustaining counterinsurgency operations
- ORA LEVEL 2: capable of planning, executing, and sustaining counterinsurgency operations coalition force assistance
- ORA LEVEL 3: partially capable of conducting counterinsurgency operations in conjunction with coalition units
- ORA LEVEL 4: forming and/or incapable of conducting counterinsurgency operations

**SOURCE:** Multi-National Forces-Iraq, Unclassified Slide Pack, April 4, 2009.

By early 2008, things had improved much more, and the data were themselves becoming quite conclusive. Political progress was evident in a new pensions law, in amnesty legislation for some militia fighters, in an improved de-Baathification statute, and in a provincial powers act. Two of us (Campbell and O’Hanlon) hazarded an estimate that Iraq’s politics merited a “score”

of roughly 5 on a scale of 0 to 11 (using 11 benchmarks for these purposes), later upgraded to a score of 7. This was an imprecise approach, subject to future revision, but seemed the best way to gauge progress on issues that were both inherently important and topical within Iraq. Since then, progress has again slowed, so the situation is not yet irreversibly positive.





# TRACKING CHANGE IN AFGHANISTAN

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For a number of reasons, tracking the progress of stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan presents a different set of challenges than those encountered with Iraq. With over 40 nations contributing to the rebuilding effort and hundreds of disparate multilateral organizations and NGOs operating within the country, there is in general a lack of centralized or standardized reporting of data that is of most use in assessing progress comprehensively. In addition, official reporting on Afghanistan published by the U.S. government pales in comparison to that of Iraq. There is no corresponding Afghan version of the State Department's *Iraq Status Report*. Official Department of Defense reporting on Afghanistan has thus far been released sporadically, while the Iraq iteration has been circulated on a quarterly basis since mid-2005. While the Special Inspector for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) has been issuing detailed quarterly reports since 2004, an Afghan counterpart was not instituted until 2008 and thus far only two reports have been issued. There are a number of data sets kept by the U.S. military that are currently kept classified or have only very recently been made available for Afghanistan, even though the same information is readily accessible for Iraq. These include estimates on Afghan civilian and security force fatalities, overall attack levels and the number of IED attacks. The Afghan government has been weaker than the Iraqi government throughout most of the decade, reducing the former's ability to provide its own data. It is also clear that the availability of safe havens in Pakistan is an important enabler of the insurgency, but we have even fewer effective measurement tools for assessing trends in the safe havens.

And finally, given the relatively modest amount of international press coverage of the Afghanistan campaign compared with that in Iraq, nongovernmental sources of data have been somewhat harder to come by in Afghanistan as well.

Despite some of these challenges, it is nevertheless possible to provide an overview of progress along the three broad categories of security, economic and political progress. For Afghanistan, we divide the chronology into two main periods: first, the years immediately following the overthrow of the Taliban, and second, the period of gradually intensifying violence and western involvement in the war over the past 3 or 4 years.

## 2001 THROUGH 2005

The initial years of the Afghanistan effort were characterized by a military engagement espousing a “light footprint” and an aversion to complex nation-building efforts. International economic and development aid was also limited in scope.

The political strategy adopted in the weeks following the Taliban's ouster had a profound effect on the early security and economic developments. At the Bonn Conference of December 2001, Hamid Karzai was selected to be Afghanistan's interim leader. Shortly thereafter, Karzai made a concerted effort to appoint a Cabinet reflective of the ethnic balance of Afghanistan. His newly appointed Minister of Interior, Ali Jalali, took similar efforts in appointing diverse provincial governors and police chiefs.<sup>6</sup> However, the

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<sup>6</sup> Seth Jones, “The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad”, *International Security*, (Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), p. 12

nascent central government soon proved to be undermanned and deeply ineffective, suffering from a U.S. policy focused primarily on counterterrorism efforts, a near total lack of internal funding and a dearth of qualified bureaucrats to staff the numerous ministries. Adding to the lack of authority, the U.S. paid tribal leaders and warlords, in some instances formerly loyal to the Taliban, huge sums in exchange for providing regional security and local expertise in hunting down Al-Qaeda. Many of these same leaders leveraged their influence to obtain key positions in provincial governments, though they had little interest in supporting the development of a stronger central authority. It was not until 2004 that the present constitution was approved that paved the way for presidential elections later that year with parliamentary elections held in September 2005. Since then Karzai has made efforts to curb regional strongmen by appointing them to positions based in Kabul, though this has had limited effect as their networks remain regionally ingrained.

From a security standpoint, the first years of the war in Afghanistan were characterized by few international troops, the vast majority of whom were American, engaged almost exclusively in counterterrorism missions to hunt down Al-Qaeda and remnants of the deposed Taliban leadership. From 2002-2005, U.S. troop levels grew modestly from 9,000 to 19,000. In August 2003, NATO officially took over command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that was established in Kabul in 2002 and gradually began expanding outside of Kabul. From 2002 through the first half of 2005 monthly troop fatalities rarely eclipsed single digits and monthly estimates for security incidents averaged about 50 and only very rarely went above 100.<sup>7</sup>

During this period little attention was given to recruiting and training capable national security forces. By the end of 2005, there were only 50,000 total forces (comprising both the Army and National Police) assigned to duty throughout the country, and of those only scant numbers were both capable and

politically reliable. In 2004 ISAF began to gradually assume responsibility for security outside of the capital, first setting up a base in the relatively peaceful north. By October 2006 ISAF had taken over security responsibility throughout Afghanistan, breaking the country up into five Regional Commands (RCs – East, West, North, South, and Capital).

After thirty years of nearly uninterrupted war, Afghanistan now ranks at or near the bottom of nearly every international economic or quality of life metric recorded. While reliable data during the Taliban years is difficult to come by, reporting conducted beginning in 2003 provides adequate evidence of the daunting baseline inherited by the new Afghan government. In 2003, annual per capita GDP was less than US\$200 (based on current prices). Basic services, such as healthcare and education, were considered luxury items. The infant mortality rate ranked last in the world at 165 per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy was a mere 42 years. During the Taliban years, less than one million children regularly attended school (probably about 10 percent of the school-age population) and of these few students, almost none were girls.

## AFGHANISTAN SINCE 2005

As Afghanistan has become more of a strategic priority over the past couple of years, there has been a corresponding improvement in the reporting of data. On the whole, it can be said that the situation has been trending downward. From a security standpoint, by almost any measurement 2008 represented the most violent year since the onset of the war in 2001. Economically, while some indicators continue to rise, it is becoming more apparent that the benefits of economic growth are not being shared equitably as most Afghans continue to live below or near the poverty line. Finally, public support of the nascent Afghan central government appears to be at its low point with rampant corruption and a dearth of qualified technocrats capable of running a functioning bureaucracy.

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008: Executive Summary", August 2008, p. 19

For each of these categories, there are mitigating circumstances and silver linings. While security has been deteriorating, violence levels remain far less severe than in Iraq of 2004-2007 (and in fact, statistically speaking, the level of violence in a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan's war related violence today is roughly comparable to the situation in improved Iraq). In economics, there have been impressive improvements in a number of quality of life indicators, even if the starting point was abysmal and overall standards remain quite mediocre today. Politically, while the Afghan population is more discouraged than before, its support for the government and even for foreign forces remains significantly greater than was found in Iraq during the worst years of that war. On the whole, the trends in Afghanistan are bad, but the situation is far from irredeemable.

It should be noted, however, that just as there can be silver linings to some seemingly bad data, there can be problems that emerge from what would seem to be unambiguously good trends too. Refugee return is a case in point. Many of Afghanistan's millions of displaced came back to their country after the Taliban fell. Alas, they returned to a land unable to adequately care for them, leading to overpopulation in Kabul and other challenges to the country's infrastructure and social safety nets. Women's rights are relevant in this regard as well. They are essential on humanitarian as well as practical grounds, but some measures to promote women's rights can be problematic if a foreign entity is seen as pushing a conservative society too far and too fast. This is hardly an argument for Taliban mores; the Afghan people reject such atrocious value systems, and want a country that moves forward for all its citizens. But there is still a need to ensure that, as change occurs, Afghans see other Afghans rather than foreigners as the agents of that change.

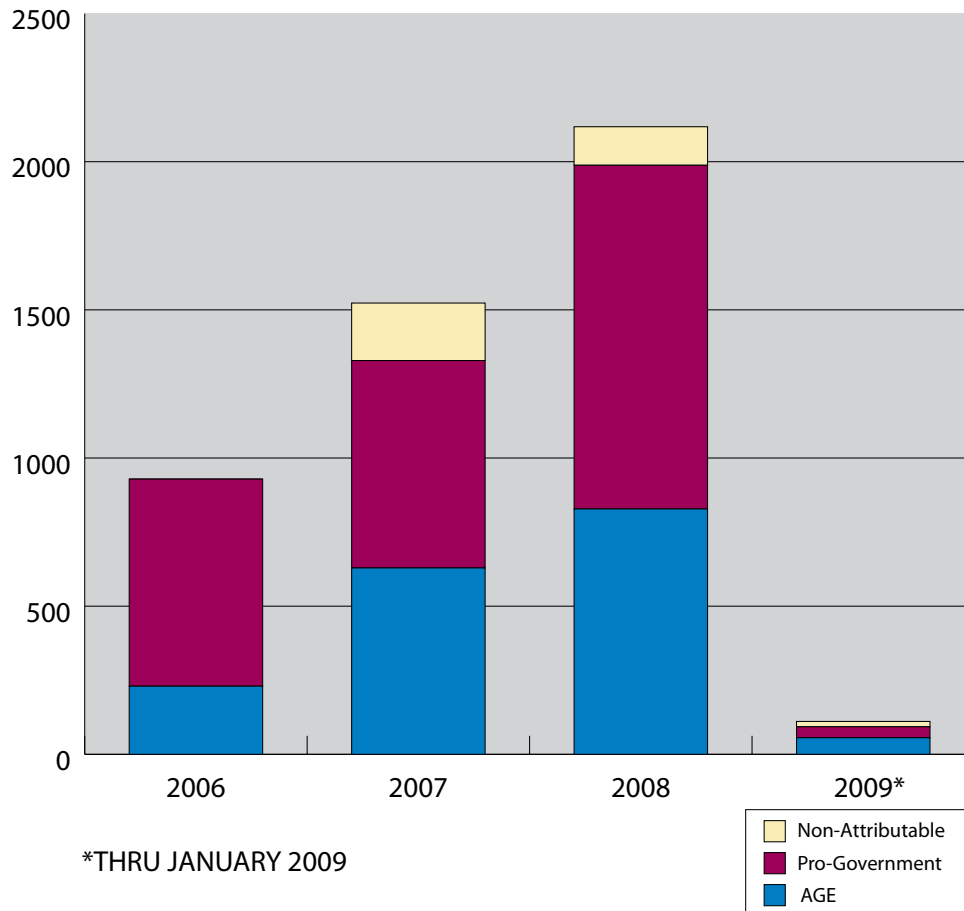
A closer look at some of the quantitative data will show why 2009 is expected by many to be a pivotal year in Afghanistan. And perhaps the logical place to begin is with the question of security. This is a complex matter in Afghanistan because trends are generally bad, but overall levels of violence are rather modest by the standards of war-torn lands (or Afghanistan's own

recent past). In 2008, violence in Afghanistan reached unprecedented levels for the post-2001 period. Civilian fatality estimates reached their highest levels since the start of the war, eclipsing 2,000 according to the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). This represents a 20% increase over 2007 levels and more than double the 2006 estimate. Of at least as great concern, politically at least, is that an increasing number of civilian deaths were blamed on government or ISAF forces—contributing to the decline in popularity for President Karzai as well as for NATO and the United States.

In Afghanistan, the metric of civilian casualties has achieved a great deal of prominence recently. Even though civilian casualties remain far below those in Iraq in the 2005/6 period, public feuds between the Afghan government and international forces over specific incidents in which large numbers of civilians have been killed in coalition airstrikes mean the civilian casualties have increased political salience. It has been suggested that the increase in international forces and a shift away from search and destroy missions toward population protection will allow for a decrease in civilian casualties from airstrikes. Unfortunately, the Iraq experience implies that civilian casualties are likely to be a lagging indicator. As Human Rights Watch has documented, most civilian casualties from airstrikes do not result from pre-planned counterterrorism missions, but rather from efforts to support engaged ground troops. In the short run at least, increased numbers of international troops will likely create more contact with the enemy and increased civilian casualties.

Unprecedented fatality levels also struck American and coalition troops in 2008, eclipsing the previous highs of 2007. Overall, the 294 combined international troop deaths represented a 27% increase over 2007 and accounted for nearly 30% of all such fatalities since 2001. The 155 U.S. military fatalities represent an increase of nearly one third over 2007 and make up nearly a quarter of all American troop fatalities in Afghanistan since 2001. These numbers remain significantly smaller than the 800 deaths per year that U.S. troops in Iraq suffered until 2008, but relative to the overall size of deployed forces, losses

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF AFGHAN CIVILIAN FATALITIES AS A DIRECT RESULT OF FIGHTING BETWEEN PRO-GOVERNMENT FORCES (PGF) AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT ENTITIES (AGE), 2006-2009



FIGURES IN DETAIL

	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>TOTAL</b>	929	1,523	2,118	111
Attributed to:				
Pro-Government Forces	230 (25%)	629 (41%)	828 (39%)	56 (50%)
Anti-Government Entities	699 (75%)	700 (46%)	1,160 (55%)	37 (33%)
Could not be attributed	0	194 (13%)	130 (6%)	18 (16%)

**NOTE:** Pro-Government Forces (PGF) include Afghan Government and all international forces. Figures from 2006 are from Human Rights Watch (HRW). Subsequent figures provided by UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan. HRW's estimate for 2007 was 1,633 total such civilian fatalities, with 434 (27%) attributable to PGF and 950 (58%) attributable to AGE. "Non-attributable" deaths refer to those caused by such things as crossfire, mines and any other violence not directly connected to a conflicting party.

**SOURCE:** David Wood, "Afghan Air War Grows in Intensity", *Baltimore Sun*, July 28, 2008. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Humanitarian Factsheet", June 29, 2008. Accessed at: [http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/\\_UN-Docs/\\_fact-sheets/2008/08June29-Humanitarian-fact-sheet-English.pdf](http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/_UN-Docs/_fact-sheets/2008/08June29-Humanitarian-fact-sheet-English.pdf) United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Armed conflict and Civilian Casualties, Trends and Developments 01 January-31 August, 2008" Accessed at: [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JMA8-full\\_report.pdf/\\$File/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JMA8-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf) UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Protection of Civilians", January 5, 2009. UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Monthly Humanitarian Update for Afghanistan", January 2009.

in Afghanistan have become comparable to what the United States suffered in Iraq in the 2004–2007 period. Non-U.S. coalition forces suffered 139 fatalities, a jump of more than 20% over the prior year. This also accounted for over a third of all such deaths since 2001. With troop levels set to rise substantially in 2009, fatality figures are expected to continue to reach new heights. The question is whether such an increase will be a necessary (albeit unfortunate) step towards greater security, as was the case in Iraq, or not.

Overall attacks carried out by insurgents in Afghanistan rose considerably from 2007 to 2008. Through the first 39 weeks of each year (January thru late September), attacks in all of Afghanistan were up over 50%. Within this timeframe there was only one week in 2007 that saw more attacks than that corresponding week in 2008. Of additional concern, the rise in attacks is not confined exclusively to areas of the country already prone to violence as overall levels either decreased or remained static in only 5 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

The vital importance of capable and dependable indigenous security forces became a key issue in 2008 as U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates proposed a plan to nearly double the size of the Afghan National Army (ANA) in the coming years to a force of approximately 134,000. Likewise, greater emphasis was placed on transforming the Afghan National Police (ANP) from a weak and corrupt organization into a trusted force capable of providing the law and order so desperately sought by the average Afghan citizen. The ANA, hailed by many as the most capable arm of the central government, experienced solid progress not just in the size of the force but also in its capabilities. In the early part of 2008, the ANA numbered roughly 47,000 troops, composed of 85 Kandaks (or squadrons). Of these Kandaks, only one was ranked at a generally excellent level—that is, Capability Milestone (CM)<sup>8</sup> level 1—while 26 attained the good rating of CM 2 as of March 2008. By De-

ember, however, 18 Kandaks were rated at CM 1 and 26 Kandaks qualified for CM 2. In addition, the force grew at a record pace, numbering nearly 80,000 by year end.<sup>9</sup>

The ANP, however, has proven to be a bigger challenge. Plagued by years of mismanagement and a dearth of resources, the efforts to grow the ANP have thus far yielded a force of modest size that is largely unable to carry out its mandate. Currently numbering nearly 80,000, the latest data shows that only 18 out of 373 units (5%) are rated at CM 1 and only 38 units (10%) qualify for CM levels 2 or 3, leaving approximately 85% officially judged to be incapable of basic police work. One contributing factor to this is the significant shortage in available trainers. The initial program was entrusted to Germany but was notoriously under-resourced, leading one German general to classify it as “a miserable failure”.<sup>10</sup> In November 2008, Major General Robert Cone, the U.S. commander of the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), stated that 2,300 more international trainers were needed to sufficiently train the ANP.<sup>11</sup> The European Union's EUPOL, which took over a lead role in training the ANP in June 2007, has been unable to provide adequate manpower. Though the mission boasts 21 contributing nations, the total number of trainers in Afghanistan at any one time rarely eclipses 120, well below the stated objective of 400. Embedded trainers have been particularly scarce, even though the Iraq experience has demonstrated the importance of such follow-on mentoring. President Obama's new strategy will largely, if not completely, rectify this problem—but the question will now become whether it is too late, and whether the Afghan police in particular are now effectively beyond reform.

Closely tied to the security of Afghanistan as well as the prospects of a more effective government is the opium trade. Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, Afghanistan has become a top producer of

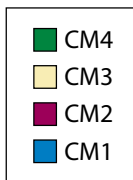
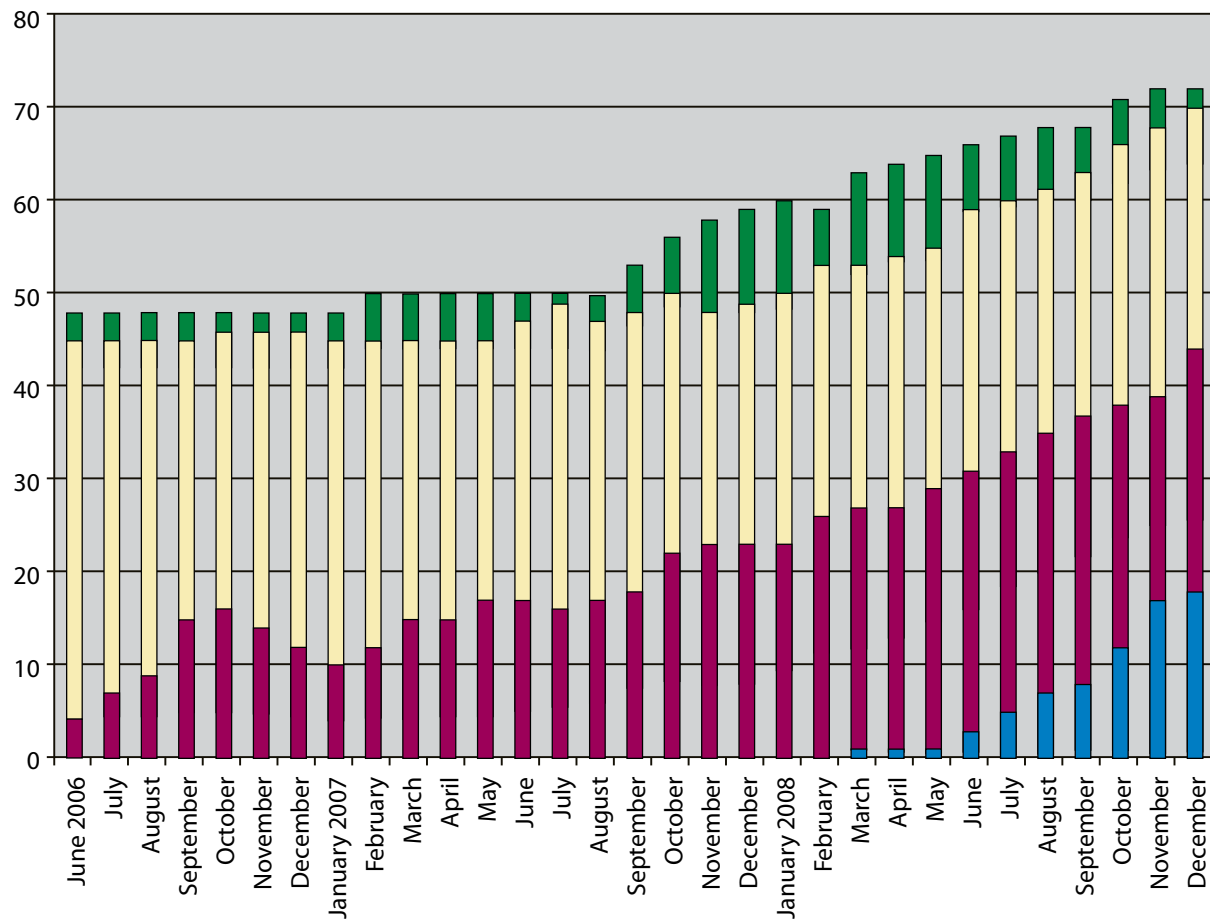
<sup>8</sup> The CM is a scale of 1-4 used by the U.S. military to track the progress of military units in Afghanistan.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan”, January 2009, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Judy Dempsey, “German General Breaks Silence on Afghanistan”, *International Herald Tribune*, November 30, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Defense News Briefing with Major General Robert Cone, November 12, 2008

## ASSESSMENT OF AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY (ANA) UNITS, BY MONTH SINCE JUNE 2006



**CM 1:** capable of operating independently

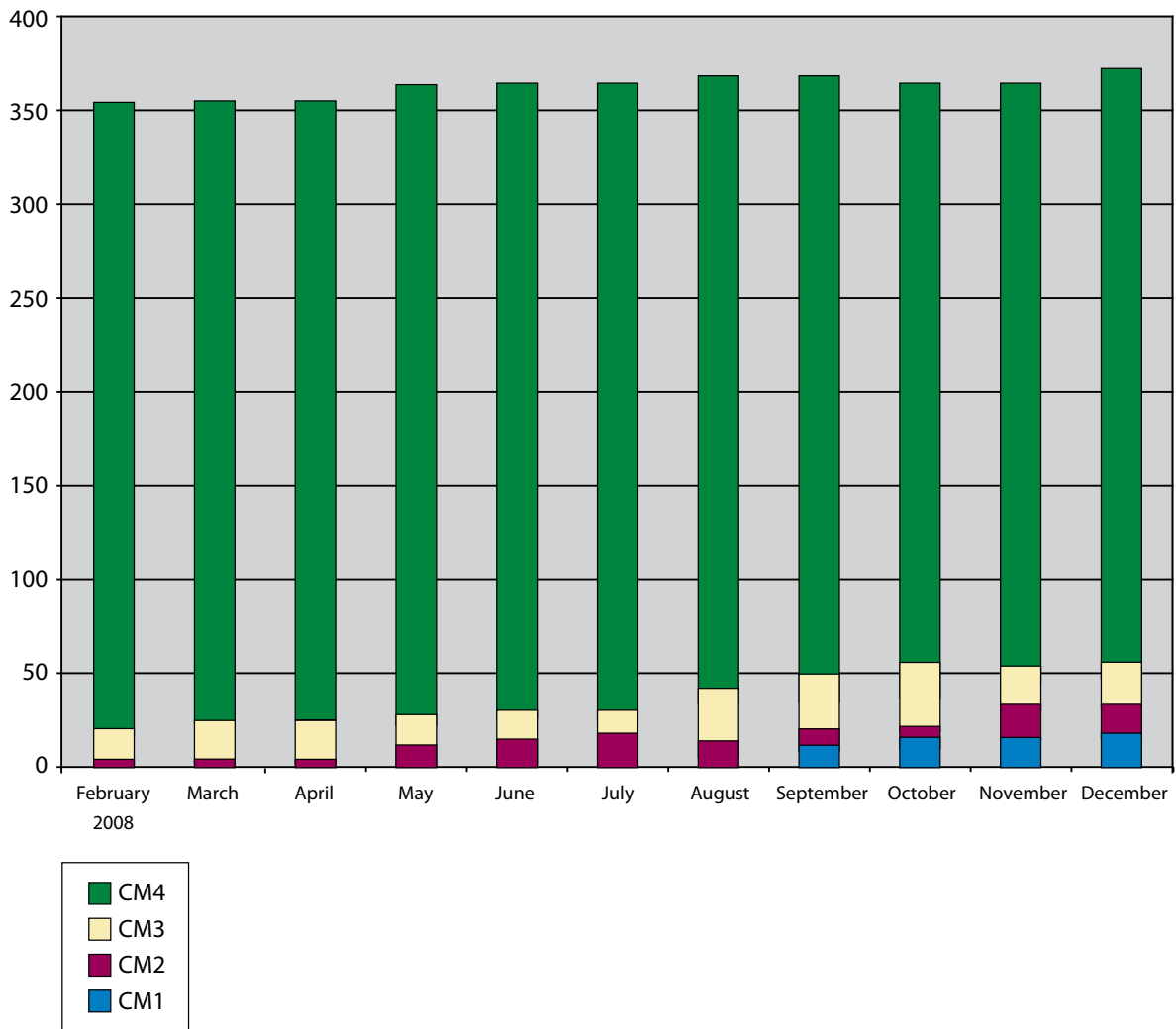
**CM 2:** capable of planning, executing, and sustaining counterinsurgency operations at the battalion level with international support

**CM 3:** partially capable of conducting counterinsurgency operations at the company level with support from international forces

**CM 4:** formed but not yet capable of conducting primary operational missions

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress in Accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, January 2009, p. 42. Accessed at: [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/OCTOBER\\_1230\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/OCTOBER_1230_FINAL.pdf).

## ASSESSMENT OF AFGHAN NATIONAL POLICE (ANP) UNITS, BY MONTH, FEBRUARY-DECEMBER 2008



- CM 1:** capable of operating independently
- CM 2:** capable of planning, executing, and sustaining counterinsurgency operations at the battalion level with international support
- CM 3:** partially capable of conducting counterinsurgency operations at the company level with support from international forces
- CM 4:** formed but not yet capable of conducting primary operational missions

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan", Report to Congress in Accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, January 2009, p. 49. Accessed at: [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/OCTOBER\\_1230\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/OCTOBER_1230_FINAL.pdf).



opium, providing upwards of 93% of the global supply from 2006-2008. Both the land devoted to poppy cultivation and the gross tonnage of opium produced decreased modestly in 2008. But future trends are not particularly encouraging. The international community is reluctant to take part in any substantial counter-narcotics mission not led by Afghan officials. That is likely to impose a severe constraint upon progress, considering that the corruption brought on by the trade is endemic throughout the central government, leading some to refer to Afghanistan as a narco-state. Meanwhile, it is estimated that the insurgency is funded by opium to the tune of nearly \$400 million annually.

From an economic standpoint, some of the macro indicators such as GDP, per capita income and volume of trade have risen steadily over the last few years while inflation has largely stabilized. However, this has not translated to greater prosperity for all as the gulf between the very rich and the dangerously destitute continues to grow. According to the Afghan government, an estimated 42% of the population lives below the poverty line (defined as a monthly income of \$14 or less) while an additional 20% lives only slightly above it. Essential services remain meager with only about 23% of the population having regular access to potable water and 12% having access to adequate sanitation. And though there has been some recent anecdotal evidence of electricity production improving in Kabul, it was estimated in 2007 that only 20% of the total Afghan population had even limited access to public power.

The news is not all bad, however. With the help of outside donors the Afghan government has made great strides in providing increased access to basic healthcare with 82% of the population now living in districts that have a basic package of healthcare programs, up considerably from 9% in 2003. This has translated into significant improvements in the rate of vaccinations as well as infant and child mortality rates. Though literacy rates continue to linger at less than 30%, more than 6 million children

currently attend over 9,000 schools. Gender equity is improving as 2 million of the students are girls and 40,000 of the 142,000 teachers are women. This represents a marked improvement over the Taliban years when only about a million children received formal education, almost none of whom were girls. Finally, telephone usage has increased dramatically to an estimated 7 million Afghans, a considerable jump from 1 million in 2002.

Public opinion also serves as a helpful way to transpose the various data onto local expectations, providing needed perspective. After all, it is the civilians that are the focal point of counterinsurgency missions. Recent polling sheds light on some interesting points that belie the widely perceived severity of decline in Afghanistan. When asked what the biggest problem in their local area was, in a 2008 Asia Foundation poll, insecurity received only 14% of the vote, tying for the sixth most popular answer behind a host of quality of life concerns such as unemployment, electricity, access to potable water, roads and healthcare.<sup>12</sup> Afghans tend to perceive the security situation in the country as a whole as worse than their own individual situation. Recent work by a Brookings colleague, Carol Graham, has demonstrated that Afghans demonstrate a fairly high level of overall happiness, particularly given their material circumstances, suggesting they may have adapted their expectations downward in the face of fairly constant adversity. Such results suggest that the current perception of violence and insecurity is much greater than that faced by the majority of Afghans.

Another popular theory challenged by polling is the sense that public support for Karzai and the central government has reached dangerously low levels, creating an opening for a return of Taliban control. True, approval ratings for Karzai and the central government have declined since 2005 (from 83% to 52% for Karzai and from 80% to 48% for the central government). However, when asked who they would rather have ruling Afghanistan, the overwhelming majority (82-91% in annual polling since 2005)

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<sup>12</sup> Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People".

reply “Current Government”, with “Taliban” (1-4%) and “Other” (2-10%) far behind. Additionally, public disdain for the Taliban has remained static with 84-91% of respondents stating they have a somewhat or very unfavorable opinion of the group during this same time.<sup>13</sup> Tactical innovations by insurgents, particularly suicide bombings against civilian targets, have not always increased their popularity with the population, even in areas where they enjoy traditional support. What can be inferred is that, while there is palpable frustration with the continued ineffectiveness of the central government, the Taliban are not viewed as a viable alternative by the vast majority of the population.

It is worth observing that, in light of the Iraq experience as well as general principles of counterinsurgency, Kabul and the international community would benefit from additional information about the war. More numbers about the strength and composition of the insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan would be helpful, especially if tracked over time. Information on reforms in Afghan security forces, particularly

those concerning leadership positions, as well as information on the experience, aptitude, and political dependability of new leaders, would be enormously helpful. (The latter may only be obtainable to the extent that units, and leaders, are tested in the field in actual operations.) More public opinion data—for example, on the degree to which farmers feel they have a viable economic alternative to opium, and on how people feel about trends in the quality and safety of their lives—would also be useful. (Some of the latter is now being obtained by our colleague Carol Graham, with results forthcoming soon.) Tracking shipping costs for road convoys (rather than just attack levels) would be useful when considering the safety and usability of roads. It could also be constructive to track the types of food found in local markets and when possible to estimate how far that produce traveled to get to the market. As a final note, we might add a general call for using creativity in devising new metrics, especially in areas of tracking political progress (as with Brookings’ effort to establish a “political index” of progress in Iraq).

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<sup>13</sup> ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll, “Afghanistan: Where Things Stand”, released February 9, 2009.



## CONCLUSIONS

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Determining progress in a counterinsurgency campaign is more an art than a science. The use of concrete numbers, while helpful, should not delude anyone into a belief that results of the work are particularly rigorous or reliable. In part this is because of the difficulty of gathering and interpreting such sensitive data in such dangerous circumstances. We certainly see in both Iraq and Afghanistan a very human tendency to emphasize that data which is readily at hand and assume it is the most telling information about overall trend lines. Thus, for example, while it is clear that economic development is crucial to progress in counterinsurgency, GDP growth is by no means an adequate representation of economic progress. Jobs, quality of life metrics such as water and sanitation and electricity availability, and health care are at least as important.

But more profoundly, measurement difficulties stem from that fact that counterinsurgencies are largely about achieving political effects. Political effects result from human perceptions with unique political communities. Understanding such perceptions is inherently a contextual and qualitative process, even if some quantification is useful and possible. Thus, for example, in Afghanistan public opinion data remains stubbornly positive, even as security indicators turn downward, reflecting perhaps low expectations formed by decades of strife. But Iraq demonstrates that public opinion is also subject to very sudden shifts from discrete, highly visible events and is hard to restore once lost.

It also follows from the contextual nature of counterinsurgencies that we should expect the most

useful measures of progress to vary between campaigns. The broadest conclusion about Iraq is that civilian fatality rates themselves were portending a failing mission by 2005/2006 and needed to be reversed for the mission to have any hope. In Afghanistan, by contrast, weak and corrupt state institutions and a nonfunctioning national economy are probably the number one Achilles' heel. Of course, inadequate Iraqi institutions contributed to that country's violence rate, and worsening violence today in Afghanistan is a very serious strategic issue. But the relative importance of the different issues is nonetheless very real, and important.

We also need to beware of our over-interpreting quantitative results. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, it is clear that training and equipping indigenous security forces is crucial to any "exit strategy," but it is also among the most difficult activities to document accurately—mostly because the leadership of units is hard to measure in terms of its competence and its loyalty to the nation (rather than to sectarian groups, political parties, or individuals.) Capable forces that might refuse to fight, or even go over to the other side at a key moment, do not represent progress.

Similarly, we need to be aware of worshipping trends while missing the forces that are building to reverse them. For example, the civilian fatality rate is a very important indicator in any war, but it often seems to be a lagging indicator of changes in momentum. This means we can see civilian fatalities going up in the short-term even as progress is being made. That could be, for example, because new tactics lead to

more fighting and thus increased fatalities for civilians as well as combatants. (It is also possible, as in al-Anbar province in 2005/2006, that increased brutality by insurgents against civilians can lead to a backlash against the insurgents later.)

We also need to be aware of our own incentives in using and abusing quantitative measures. Military leaders, who bear daily witness to the valor and sacrifice of their troops, have an incentive to emphasize the positive in order to promote strong morale. This is understandable and natural, even necessary, but it must be acknowledged so that battlefield commanders' assessments can be treated with a certain care and even skepticism at times. Political leaders have an incentive to spin data to maintain public support for the war effort, sometimes for partisan reasons, sometimes out of a conviction that the only way a counterinsurgency can truly be lost is if domestic political support dissipates. Some amount of propaganda is necessary and inevitable in any war effort, but in accepting this we must be careful not to spin ourselves. Perceptions do mediate and interpret reality but they cannot be completely divorced from the facts on the ground.

Finally, perhaps the most contribution that metrics can make to a counterinsurgency campaign is to

establish a foundation for strategic patience. Counterinsurgency campaigns, especially successful ones, last on average over a decade. For this reason, political leaders rightly counsel patience. But skeptical publics rightly demand interim measures that can demonstrate that progress is being made. As this paper has demonstrated, however, such measures are both hard to obtain and inherently contextual. In Iraq, violence reached such a level of ferocity that it overwhelmed all other metrics. But in Afghanistan, the violence, however horrible, has not attained such levels. Progress is better measured by the state of government institutions and security forces than by levels of violence per se. It may be possible to gauge local progress in areas that first received increased resources. It may also be possible to document greater government control over key assets like the country's "ring road" relatively rapidly. But positive nationwide trends will likely be slower to emerge.

This means that positive results in Afghanistan, if they are achieved, will likely be slower in coming and more difficult to discern than in Iraq. In that case, trusted metrics will be essential to help both leaders and public find the wisdom to differentiate progress from quagmire and to maintain strategic patience as slow progress is being made.





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