

US TROOP LEVELS AND IRAQI PERCEPTIONS OF THE US

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Americans tend to see US troop levels in Iraq as being shaped by a US-domestic political debate. Polling by ABC News and other groups, however, tells another side of the story. Iraqis may be deeply divided along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and factional lines. At least Iraqi Arabs, however, have a national consciousness, a great deal of national pride, and they did not want to be “occupied” or have a US presence any longer than is necessary. At the same time, most Iraqis saw a need for the US to stay long enough than to allow them to stabilize their security situation and achieve a workable modus vivendi in terms of political accommodation.

As Terry McCarthy of ABC News points out, an ABC poll conducted in February 2008 (**ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK POLL - IRAQ FIVE YEARS LATER: WHERE THINGS STAND March 17, 2008**) found that,

...on a basic level, the presence of foreign forces remains unwelcome: Just 26 percent of Iraqis support having U.S. and coalition troops in their country, up a scant 5 points. But this doesn't mean most favor immediate withdrawal. Well under half, 38 percent, say the United States should leave now, down from a peak 47 percent in August.

One reason is that Iraqis are divided on what might follow U.S. withdrawal; 46 percent think it would make security better, but the rest say it would make security worse or leave it as it is now. Those who think immediate withdrawal would improve security are twice as likely to support it.

Moreover, despite their antipathy, big majorities see a continued role for the United States. From two-thirds to 80 percent of Iraqis support future U.S. efforts conducting security operations against al Qaeda or foreign jihadis in Iraq; providing military training, weapons and reconstruction aid; and assisting in security vis-à-vis Iran and Turkey. The most popular of these is a U.S. role confronting al Qaeda.

Perceptions of Benefits of the Surge

This did not mean that many Iraqis did not see the benefits of the “surge,” the Sons of Iraq, and other improvements in security even months before it was fully clear just how much Al Qa'ida in Iraq had been defeated and contained, and before the Iraqi government showed that it could occupy Basra, Sadr City, and other areas under JAM influence or control.

...fewer report security as the main problem in their own lives – 25 percent, nearly half its peak last spring. Forty-six percent say local security has improved in the past six months, nearly double last summer's level. The number of Iraqis who feel entirely unsafe in their own area has dropped by two-thirds, to 10 percent. And with Sunni Arab buy-in, U.S.-funded Awakening Councils, created to provide local security, are more popular than the Iraqi government itself.

... Even more striking is the halt in worsening views. In August, Iraqis by 61-11 percent said security in the country had gotten worse, not better, in the previous six months. Today, by 36-26 percent, more say security has improved. The new positive margin is not large. But the 35-point drop in views that security is worsening is the single largest change in this poll.

... Views of the United States, while still broadly negative, have moderated in some respects. Just shy of half, 49 percent, now say it was right for the U.S.-led coalition to have invaded, up by 12 points from August; the previous high was 48 percent in the first ABC News poll in Iraq in February 2004. Similarly, the number of Iraqis who call it “acceptable” to attack U.S. forces has declined for the first time in these polls, down to 42 percent after peaking at 57 percent in August. Even with a 15-point drop, however, that’s still a lot of Iraqis to endorse such violence. (Just 4 percent, by contrast, call it acceptable to attack Iraqi government forces.)

Sunni Arabs, dispossessed by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, are a good example. In August 93 percent of Sunnis called it acceptable to attack U.S. forces. Today, that’s down to 62 percent – a dramatic decline, but one that still leaves six in 10 Sunnis on the side of anti-U.S. attacks.

Other measures are a little better, if not good. Just 20 percent of Iraqis express confidence in U.S. forces, up slightly from 14 percent last summer. Just 29 percent say U.S. forces have done a good job in Iraq, up 10 points. Only 27 percent say the presence of U.S. forces is making overall security better in Iraq, up 9 points; 61 percent say it’s making things worse.

Indeed, on a basic level, the presence of foreign forces remains unwelcome: Just 26 percent of Iraqis support having U.S. and coalition troops in their country, up a scant 5 points. But this doesn’t mean most favor immediate withdrawal. Well under half, 38 percent, say the United States should leave now, down from a peak 47 percent in August.

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Future role for U.S.	% support
Security vs. al Qaeda in Iraq	80%
Training/weapons for Iraqi army	76
Reconstruction aid	73
Security vs. Iran	68
Security vs. Turkey	66

Uncertainty Still Remained Regarding Security and the US Role

At the same time, the poll found that,

In almost all cases, however, the improvement since August and March still has not brought Iraqi sentiment back to its pre-2007 levels. While 46 percent now expect improvements for the country in the next year, that’s still far below its level in November 2005, 69 percent. While 55 percent say their own lives are going well, that’s down from 71 percent in late 2005.

	Now	August 2007	March 2007	November 2005
Own life going well	55%	39	39	71

Expect gains for Iraq	46%	23	40	69
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Similarly, while there's been a big drop in the number who cite security as their own main problem, 50 percent still volunteer it as the nation's main problem overall – little changed from 56 percent in August. One in four Iraqis still report suicide attacks, sectarian fighting and other violence in their own area in just the past six months. And the provision of basic services has barely budged; 88 percent lack adequate electricity.

Much of the improvement since August is driven by Baghdad and Anbar provinces, focal points of the surge. Seventy-one percent in Anbar, and fewer in Baghdad but still 43 percent, now rate local security positively – up from zero in both locales last year. While a dramatic gain, most in Baghdad, home to a quarter of Iraqis, still say security is bad – a reflection of continued, albeit reduced, violence there.

...At the same time, few give the United States direct credit for security gains. When those who see security as having improved are asked who deserves the most credit, Iraqi institutions lead the way – 26 percent cite the national government, 18 percent the police, 13 percent the army. Just 4 percent mention the United States or U.S. forces.

Direct ratings of the surge likely reflect the United States' general unpopularity. Iraqis by 53-36 percent say the surge has made security worse, not better, in the areas where it's occurred; that, however, has improved sharply, from 70-18 percent in August.

Similarly, Iraqis by 49-30 percent say the surge has made security worse in the rest of the country (it was 68-12 percent in August); by 43-21 percent say it's worsened conditions for political dialogue (70-10 percent in August); by 44-25 percent say it's worsened the ability of the Iraqi government to do its work (65-12 percent in August) and by 42-22 percent say it's worsened the pace of economic development (67-6 percent in August).

These, again, have to be viewed through the filter of general antipathy toward the United States. What's notable is the change in the number of Iraqis who say the surge has made any of these conditions worse – down by 17 to 27 points.

Iraqi Attitudes Towards Responsibility for Improvements or Declines in Their Security

12a. (IF BETTER) Who do you feel deserves the most credit for this improved security?

	Iraq army	Iraq police	Muqtada Al-Sadr	Al- Sahawa	Iraq gov't	US forces	Citi- zens	Pol. unity	Other	No op.
2/20/08	13	18	5	8	26	4	4	4	18	*
Sunni	12	21	1	36	8	3	5	2	10	0
Shiite	15	17	7	6	30	*	5	2	17	*
Kurdish	5	23	0	2	21	16	1	3	28	1

12c. (IF WORSE) Who do you feel deserves the most blame for this worsened security?

	U.S. forces	Mili- tias	Al Qaeda	Neighbor countries	Politicians/ pol. groups	Iraqi gov't	Other
2/20/08	20	31	9	6	11	9	14
Sunni	20	39	3	7	13	9	9
Shiite	24	21	16	3	8	9	20
Kurdish	1	19	14	28	12	4	22

It is important to note just how volatile the situation in Iraq really is. A February 2008 poll cannot reflect the further gains against Al Qai'da, and gains against JAM and Sadrist extremists that have taken place in the last five months. It cannot reflect the impact of US withdrawals from some areas, and the increasing rate of turnover of security responsibilities to Iraqi forces. It cannot reflect the growing flow of oil money into the provinces and towns – all of which may well have improved perceptions of the US.

At the same time, however, it cannot reflect the probability that many Iraqis see many of the recent gains as the result of action by the Iraqi security forces and see a prolonged US presence as much less necessary.

Continuing Resentment of the US Occupation and Fears of “Unnecessary Violence” by US Forces

The ABC Poll also found that most Iraqis had long shown little confidence in the US occupation, and that many Iraqis had encountered serious problems with the US forces in Iraq.

Iraqi Attitudes towards US occupation forces

	-----Confident-----			----Not confident----			No
	NET	Great deal	A lot	NET	Not much	None	opinion
2/20/08	20	4	16	79	33	46	1
8/24/07*	14	4	11	86	27	58	0
3/5/07	18	6	12	82	30	52	*
11/22/05	18	7	11	78	23	55	5
2/28/04	25	8	17	66	23	43	8
11/15/03	19	7	12	71	20	52	9
*8/24/07 and previous “US and UK occupation forces”							
Sunni							
2/20/08	3	*	3	96	26	70	1
8/24/07	1	*	1	99	19	79	0
3/5/07	3	0	3	97	18	80	0
Shiite							
2/20/08	18	1	17	82	38	44	*
8/24/07	9	1	8	91	32	59	0
3/5/07	12	3	9	88	42	46	0
Kurdish							
2/20/08	55	19	37	44	31	13	1
8/24/07	53	18	34	47	30	17	0
3/5/07	67	26	41	33	24	9	*

The ABC poll found consistent Iraqi resentment of with what Iraqis felt was unnecessary violence against citizens by US or coalition forces. The results show that Sunnis were more likely to resent the US presence than Shi'ites, and much more likely that Kurds. They also cannot distinguish in detail as to what kind of violence led to such Iraqi responses. It could range from a bad experience at a checkpoint or with a convoy to an armed raid on a home, and involve Western contractors rather than US and Coalition forces. Nevertheless, Americans are not the “good guys” to many Iraqis, and are a necessary evil to most Iraqi Arabs.

Iraqi Response to the Question of Whether They Saw Unnecessary Violence by US and Coalition Forces

Nationwide	Has Occurred Nearby	1-2 months	Has Occurred Within 6 months	Year	Longer	Has not Occurred	No Opinion
2/20/08	42	10	18	10	4	57	1
8/24/07	41	13	13	8	8	57	2
3/5/07	44	NA	NA	NA	NA	55	*
Sunni							
2/20/08	57	16	28	10	3	42	1
8/24/07	63	22	21	11	9	37	*
3/5/07	60	NA	NA	NA	NA	39	1
Shiite							
2/20/08	44	9	17	12	6	55	1
8/24/07	38	10	10	8	9	59	4
3/5/07	46	NA	NA	NA	NA	54	0
Kurdish							
2/20/08	9	2	1	3	3	91	0
8/24/07	7	2	1	1	2	93	0
3/5/07	8	NA	NA	NA	NA	92	0