

Military escalation? Obama Wants a Surge Of His Own

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On Super Bowl Sunday, President Barack Obama said most U.S. troops in Iraq [would be home in time to watch Super Bowl XLIV](#). Yet a day later he was conferring with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates about plans for adding another [15,000 troops in Afghanistan](#) (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen believes as many as [30,000 additional troops are needed in Afghanistan](#)). Although Obama has previously been [critical](#) of the surge strategy in Iraq, he seems to believe that a [similar course of action](#) will be successful in Afghanistan:

“Obama and Biden will refocus American resources on the greatest threat to our security – the resurgence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They will increase our troop levels in Afghanistan, press our allies in NATO to do the same, and dedicate more resources to revitalize Afghanistan’s economic development.”

First and foremost, the jury is still out – and will be for quite some time – on whether the surge in Iraq has, in fact, been successful. According to [Anthony Cordesman](#), a Middle East and military expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Iraq is very much a work in progress, and one that will take at least several more years to achieve any meaningful stability.” For the moment, at least, the situation has improved. According to [Iraq Body Count](#):

“With only a few days of 2008 remaining, the year so far has seen another 8,315-9,028 civilian deaths added to the IBC database. This compares to 25,774-27,599 deaths reported in 2006, and 22,671-24,295 in 2007. This is a substantial drop on the preceding two years: on a per-day rate, it represents a reduction from 76 per day (2006) and 67 per day (2007) to 25 per day in 2008.

“The most notable reduction in violence has been in Baghdad. For the first time since the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq began, fewer deaths have been reported in the capital than in the rest of the country (from 54% of all deaths in 2006-2007 to 32% in 2008).”

But (there’s always a but):

“[A]reas outside Baghdad have seen far less dramatic reductions in violence, and dozens of civilians are still being killed in conflict-related violence throughout Iraq on a relentless, daily basis. At 25 per day, the 2008 rate for violent civilian deaths is equivalent to that existing throughout the first 20 months of post-invasion Iraq, from May 2003 to December 2004 (15,355 deaths over 610 days).”

So things have gotten better in a relative sense but not necessarily in an absolute sense. And the fact remains that nearly 100,000 civilians are estimated to have been killed since the U.S. invasion in March 2003 (the [Lancet study](#) estimates more than 650,000 Iraqis killed, and Opinion Research Business puts the number at [over one million](#) – both using polling to arrive at their estimates).

Moreover, a reduction in violence is only one metric to measure the efficacy of the surge. Indeed, reducing violence is a means to an end, and a necessary but not sufficient condition. The larger stated objective is political stability and reconciliation. Iraq had provincial elections on the Saturday before the Super Bowl, but the results are mixed. The biggest positive is that the elections were [not marred by violence](#). Sunnis participated in large numbers, in contrast to their boycott of the 2005 elections. However, turnout was much lower than previous Iraqi elections, perhaps signaling disenchantment with democracy on the Tigris and Euphrates. Secular parties appear to have done better against religious parties, probably because of a backlash against the latter's inability to provide jobs, services, and utilities. But one of the most powerful Shi'ite blocs, the Sadrist movement led by the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, did not participate in the provincial elections, so lack of results cannot be construed to mean that Sadr (and his resistance to continued U.S. military occupation) is no longer part of the political landscape – especially at the national level, with elections later this year.

And it is important to remember that the ultimate test will be what happens after U.S. forces have been withdrawn from Iraq. It is entirely possible that everything could come undone once there is no longer an imperial presence and Iraqis feel they are truly free to run their country as they see fit.

But even if we are willing to believe that the surge has worked in Iraq (at least in reducing in the level of violence) – and that a similar strategy would work in Afghanistan – we need to understand that the key to any success has not been the deployment of more troops. Rather, the primary reason for reduced violence is that we have bribed Shi'ite militias not to fight, which may work in the short run, but does not bode well in the long run for Iraq. Ironically, many of these are the same militias we previously armed to fight Sunni insurgents.

Such a strategy is not likely to work in Afghanistan. If a resurgent Taliban is the threat, it's not likely that they can simply be bought off. It may be necessary to include them in the political landscape of Afghanistan – something Washington is reluctant to do since the Taliban and al-Qaeda are considered one and the same ([which may no longer be the case](#)).

There is also the issue of Afghanistan's opium poppy crop, which constitutes a crucial part of the Afghan economy (about one-third of the country's GDP). Although some of the money from drug trafficking in Afghanistan helps fund al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the bulk of it is the only livelihood for many Afghans. If we don't want that opium on the open market, the Iraq surge strategy would suggest buying it. Yet America's war on drugs makes poppies an evil to be exterminated. And pushing the Karzai regime to pursue such a strategy only makes the Kabul government's position more precarious.

So the prospects for a surge in Afghanistan achieving even a modicum of success are relatively dim. Afghanistan is not known as the graveyard of empires without good reason. One thing, however, is certain. More boots on the ground means more occupation. More occupation means more resentment of the United States among Afghans and Muslims

around the world. More resentment means more potential terrorists.

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