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**Winning the Battle of Baghdad:
The Challenges US Forces and the Iraqi
Government Must Meet**

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The US is taking on new challenges in Baghdad of a kind for which no army can really train. This does not mean it cannot succeed, but it is essentially experimenting with new kinds of peacemaking and warfare, and there are several issues and indicators that will help determine whether it succeeds or fails:

--**War of attrition:** Both insurgents and militias can try to wait out US forces. They can disperse, hide, and bury their weapons. They can retreat into areas of core support where the local populace will provide no or misleading information. They can restrict local operations to defensive missions that the US will find difficult to challenge and bypass US and US-led forces to fight in areas they do not shelter in.

One key question may be who can outwait whom? The insurgents and militias can keep up tension and popular fear of violence with a few raids or bombings or simply conserve their resources, provide the image of US victory, and strike the moment the US hold is reduced. They can wait days, weeks, or months, lashing out after the US has claimed to have secured a given area.

The US has already seen in Fallujah and Ramadi how hard it really is to control any area that is hostile or neutral, how long it takes, and how often the image of victory is actually a war of attrition.

--**Separating the people, creating secure zones:** The key mission is not so much to find and attack enemies as to establish security. This means either protecting people or separating them in ways that allow them to be protected. The practical problem is how to do this with a minimum of relocation and oppressive presence.

The US mission will initially be to create secure local areas—essentially create "ink spots" within the "ink spot," and then keep them secure and expand the area of security. This is fine in theory but far more difficult in practice, for all of the reasons that follow.

--**Force density:** The US forces being deployed are still extremely small for a city of Baghdad's size and complex layout with a population of 5-6.5 million in the greater Baghdad area. Iraqi forces may be something of a force multiplier, but even embedding US forces does not mean the police and many security units will be active or can be trusted.

No one can now provide a meaningful estimate of the size of the US-led force that is going to actually be effective. However, it seems unlikely that the US can actually deploy more than 40-60% of its own forces in active missions at any given time—given the need for sleep and recuperation, support, and transit—and as few as 15-30% of Iraqi forces may be able and willing to operate at a meaningful level. At least some of the police and security forces will be hostile or a major source of intelligence to the insurgents or militias.

Experts can only guess at what the force ratio of US-led forces should be to insurgents and militias. No one has really done this before. Past experience indicates, however, that the overall force ratio needs to be several times higher than that of threat forces and that local force ratios of 8:1 to 12:1 may be needed if a whole neighborhood should be hostile.

--**Situational awareness:** This brings up a key issue. Controlling main streets and checkpoints simply can't work any more. Neither can concentrating on key insurgents

like Al Qa'ida. The US and US-led forces need extraordinary levels of HUMINT to succeed, and identifying friend and neutral is as important as identifying foe. The Battle of Baghdad will be a real time struggle for hearts and minds on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis.

The US has so far said very little about how it is working with the Iraqi government and Iraqi forces to get such awareness and perform this mission. The US is probably wise to be as discreet as possible at this point about both its intelligence situation and how it will deal with given neighborhoods and factions. It is obvious, however, that this is one struggle where technical intelligence has severe limits, and the level of US and allied HUMINT is critical the moment US forces leave main streets and easily defendable checkpoints.

--**The Sunni Issue:** The US has been fighting insurgents for some weeks, but has done far better in dealing with Al Qa'ida than the broader Sunni insurgency or "resistance." The problem is that no one knows the number of core and part time insurgents or sympathizers that will take an active role if the US-led forces become active. Much depends on whether Sunnis in given areas see the US-led forces as bringing security or a threat. This will probably vary by area, and much may depend on whether Sunnis see the US-led forces as simultaneously providing them with security from the Shi'ite forces and as disarming or controlling the Shi'ites.

One problem does seem clear. The US may well have concentrated too much on Al Qa'ida, and it still seems to underestimate how well Sunni fighters can dominate a given area, how many core and part-time fighters there are, and their level of local skill in ambushes, concealment, and dispersal. Like Vietnam, the US keeps waiting for the political climate to decisively change local attitudes and provide support for the government.

So far, nearly every time the US has claimed that local attitudes have shifted outside Baghdad, it has gotten it wrong. The insurgents have always had more enduring support, influence, control, and reinfiltration capability than the US estimated. This may be less true in Baghdad than the "Sunni West," but there is only one way to know: The hard way.

--**The Shi'ite Issue: Sadr and the Mahdi Militia:** The mirror image is the Shi'ites, and particularly the militias and their leaders. The US has far less experience with how they will behave and how well they will fight. Sadr's Mahdi militia is scarcely a well-trained force. However, it is probably much better motivated now than before, and it is definitely more experienced. It also is organized around the principle that US and US-led forces are the enemy.

The Israel-Lebanon conflict has given Sadr a whole new "mandate," as have reports of US abuses of innocent Iraqis. Sadr and the Mahdi militia also have a broad popular base of support in a massive neighborhood that has a very dense population and which is very hard to move in aside from some main routes. Any serious clashes risk splitting the Shi'ite dominated government and dragging the US into local neighborhood fighting that will make the political situation worse—where Mahdi casualties will be martyrs, most insurgent forces can simply disperse, and the US will face serious ambushes.

--**The Shi'ite Issue: The government, reconciliation Badr, and Dawa:** No one can now be sure how the Badr Organization will react, or how the Dawa, local security, and other Shi'ite forces will behave. One great unknown to outside analysts is what political arrangements the Maliki government has made, and how the government will follow up US actions by taking immediate and tangible steps to stand down the Shi'ite militias its coalition members do control and make Maliki's reconciliation program real.

Two key issues are involved here. One is popular perceptions among Shi'ites and in mixed areas. As is the case with the Sunnis, winning means depriving the militias of most of their popular support, getting large amounts of local and reliable HUMINT, and creating a climate where the people will not be passive or supportive of ambushes and attacks.

This will depend at the tactical level on discipline and restraint by US and US-led forces, on the ability to provide civil-military action, on the ability to rush in CERP like aid, and on avoiding striking innocent Iraqis and homes and detaining Iraqis who do not really support the insurgency. This is anything but easy when key insurgent tactics will be to bomb or ambush in ways that prohibit US and US-led forces from ever feeling secure or to intimidate or kill friendly Iraqis.

The second issue is the desperate need for new Iraqi government political initiatives and successes. *It is almost impossible to see how US and US-led forces can score lasting victory by virtually any definition unless the tactical advances and local improvements they make in security are supported by believable progress in reconciliation, credible government services and presence, and better employment and economic hope.*

--**Armed gangs and crime:** The US won't just face insurgents, organized militias, and local defense forces. It will face sectarian gangs with little formal hierarchy and control and a wide range of criminals. It is not fair to call them rogue elements; they are more random wild cards. But they also are serious problems throughout Baghdad and will be a constant problem.

--**The fight on the periphery and outside Baghdad:** The struggle in Baghdad has no rules, but the US-led effort must also consider movement inside and outside the city, infiltration and exfiltration that can easily bypass virtually any combination of checkpoints, and the ability over a short period of time to shift the focus of attacks outside the areas covered by US and US-led forces.

Both the insurgents and militias—particularly Sadr—can act out all over the country. They can also exploit virtually every area with a reduced US troop presence. For all of the talk about defeating Al Qa'ida and Sunnis turning towards the government, the fact seems to be there is no threat area where the US or Iraqi government can safely reduce its presence. There also are no indications that the Sunni insurgency as a whole is weaker today. It is simply more sectarian, more oriented towards internal conflict, and less directed at the US and MNF forces.

Moreover, the US concentration on Baghdad compounds the risks in Mosul and Kirkuk, and the seemingly decisive Shi'ite militia defeat of British forces in Basra—so far the one seemingly decisive defeat of MNF-I forces in the war.

--***The media battle:*** This has always been a religious battle. The US can influence part of it, but only the Iraqi government and media can really win this battle where it is most critical.

What the US can do is lose it. A major set of civilian casualties, a major new problem with Lebanon, a major incident with the militias, or one US soldier committing a crime can all have critical effects and be extremely costly. US commanders at every level would face an extraordinarily challenging and complex task without such risks. The precedents set since Abu Ghraib, however, make this a major problem.

--***Simultaneous political progress or simultaneous defeat?*** This latter point illustrates the most serious underlying problem in the battle of Baghdad. There is no time to wait for Iraqi political progress or for the Iraqi government to follow up improvements in neighborhood security with an active presence, aid, and clear efforts to show Iraqi police and security forces are under control and can be trusted.

It is far from clear that the US can embed enough "advisors" to ensure that no Iraqi forces commit abuses, and there are not enough Americans to prevent hostile elements from using Iraqi uniforms. This is a challenge the Iraqi government simply has to deal with at every level far more urgently, and it is compounded by the fact that to date so many Iraqi police, and some elements of Iraqi forces, have been passive or have simply deserted. The Iraqi forces are making real progress, but as is the case with US forces, even a few bad examples can hurt the image of the entire force and there are more than a few bad examples.

The other key problems are getting something like a court and criminal justice system in place, rapidly reviewing detainees and prisoners and having the Iraqi government release the innocent and keep the guilty, and simply reestablishing services and normal life. The US will probably have to take on much of this burden initially simply because the Iraqi government is so weak and so inept at the local level. This simply, however, cannot be allowed to last. Iraqis need to see their government and their legal system actually operate and provide the services they want and need—not ones others think they want and need. They need to be able to move, earn a living, and send their children to school.

It will not be enough to secure, separate, and ensure survival after a few days, or at most weeks. Life has to go on, and the Iraqi government, not the foreign "occupier," has to be seen as responsible.

If the Maliki government does not make such progress by this fall, the government will probably lose credibility. Trust and hope will have eroded too far, and the US-led security operation will be seen as another occupation—no matter how well it is run.