

Round Two in the Battle of Baghdad

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The second round of the U.S. and Iraqi government attempt to secure Baghdad begins today, with far larger U.S. resources and significant Iraqi reinforcements. It marks a critical point in the Iraq War. Securing Baghdad (or to be more realistic, improving security) won't win, but losing Baghdad will lose. If the U.S. and Iraqi government win, they face 3-5 more years of political, security, and economic efforts. If they lose, Iraq is likely to slip into a major civil war.

The U.S. and Iraqi government have clearly lost the first round. One key indicator is that no one is even making a serious pretense that the previous operation scored major gains.

Other indicators are the fact that the government could not demonstrate a high level of ability to halt "death squads" and that there persists a fear of the police and security services. The Iraqi government could not demonstrate a new level of effectiveness in Iraqi forces, or that it had an effective Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of Interior (MOI). U.S. forces have made some progress since they stepped up their raids around July 24th, but it is not the kind of progress that changes Iraqi perceptions of either their overall security or the Iraqi government.

The Iraqi government made no progress towards a national political compromise, could not even start efforts to clarify the constitution, and showed limited internal unity even among Shi'ites. At the same time, services in Baghdad continued to decline, economic activity continued to be less safe, and unemployment increased. The government used time and credibility it could not afford to waste.

It is unclear how much progress the U.S. and Iraqi government can now make in round two. The Iraqi government faces several critical problems:

The first is the lack of major, convincing progress in political reconciliation and any imminent promise of such progress. It is seeking to heal sectarian divisions, but it has so far achieved nothing on a scale that would defuse them.

The second is that its efforts to clean up the image of the security services and police have failed to the point where it will take months and require dramatic steps to have an impact; little can be done in this round of the Battle of Baghdad. U.S. advisory efforts and partner units can help reduce abuses and perhaps give Iraqi forces more credible victories, but they can't change the image of Iraqi forces in the time required.

The third is the lack of government services and a functioning court and criminal justice system. For a few Iraqis, the government is a matter of connections and corruption. For ordinary Iraqis, it simply isn't there.

This puts a very heavy burden on the incoming U.S. forces. The good news is that their mission seems well defined and is clearly tied to doing more than hunting enemies. They are being given clear instructions to do what they can to boost Iraqi forces – which may pay off by round three and onwards. They are being given careful guidance to avoid creating problems with the civil population, and they have a mandate to provide the aid and civil-military action needed to reassure Iraqis and partly make up for the government's inability to govern and show a day-to-day presence in the street.

The obvious bad news is that U.S. reinforcements will have very limited experience in this kind of security operation, and with little detailed knowledge of the city, now have to deal with an entrenchment of sectarian fighters and factions that are not “bad guys” in any clear sense. Most feel these groups’ motives are survival and justified revenge. Many can argue that the government cannot govern in ways that ensure their security and its forces often seem to threaten them.

Other obvious bad news is a matter of force ratios. News reports indicate that Baghdad had some 9,000 U.S. troops, 8,500 Iraqi military, and 34,000 Iraqi police to cover the city in Round One. Another 3,500-4,000 U.S. troops and 4,000 Iraqis are said to be deploying.

This sounds like a lot until one remembers that Baghdad is an urban area with 5-6.5 million people and many areas with very high population densities and extremely narrow and complex streets – particularly in places with strong sectarian alignment like Sadr City. Many of the American forces have other duties or are in support roles. A large number of the Iraqi forces really aren’t there. The Iraqi figures include men long gone and units that are almost totally passive or part of the problem.

The less obvious bad news is that both the U.S. forces and Iraqi government had gradually let the security situation in Baghdad slip for at least six months before this renewed effort began, hoping that elections and reconciliation could do more than an aggressive presence that could alienate various factions. This allowed factional forces to get much stronger, and limited the street smarts and human intelligence available. It created a whole new set of sectarian red zones, many of them Shi’ite. It also gave a major added window of opportunity for crime.

It is striking that Round Two is beginning without a word as to how U.S. and Iraqi government forces intend to handle the factions other than the insurgents, with no new initiatives to try to convince militias and local security forces to support the new operation, and with no amnesty, payoff, or inclusion plan to give the militias and local insurgency forces a package of incentives.

Another critical piece of bad news is that the problem now goes beyond both insurgency and sectarian fighting. Intra-Shi’ite political struggles are becoming a source of violence as well, particularly between Sadr’s Mahdi militia and SCIRI’s Badr Organization. It is unclear how bad this Shi’ite factionalism really is, and both factions may combine against any U.S. or Iraqi government effort to control or disarm them. The intra-Shi’ite power struggle has spread far beyond Basra and the south, however, and may surface as a major new problem in Round Two.

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