



Giving the Surge Partial Credit for Iraq's 2007 Reduction in Violence

BOTTOM LINES

- **The surge was necessary for the 2007 reduction in Iraq's violence.** Iraq's violence fell radically in 2007, but without the surge it probably would have stayed high—neither the Anbar Awakening nor a natural burnout of Iraq's sectarian strife would have sufficed.
- **But the Anbar Awakening was needed, too.** Most of the Sunni insurgency changed sides in the 2006–07 Awakening. This realignment worked synergistically with the surge: turncoat Sunnis revealed holdouts' identities, locations, and methods; U.S. firepower protected turncoats from retaliation. Without this synergy, violence would probably still have been at mid-2006 levels when the surge ended.
- **Counterinsurgency without an Awakening is a long, hard slog.** Even before Sunnis realigned, the surge was making headway in some areas, but progress was slow and expensive. Iraq suggests that grinding an insurgency down without an Awakening is possible—but only at a very high price.
- **Do not assume that the violence fell because hearts or minds were won in 2007.** The crucial U.S. contribution in 2007 was combat power to protect realigning Sunnis from their erstwhile allies. Some kinds of development assistance probably helped at the margin but were not decisive.

By Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro

This policy brief is based on "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" which appears in the summer 2012 issue of International Security.

SYNERGY BETWEEN THE SURGE AND THE AWAKENING IS THE BEST EXPLANATION

Why did violence decline in Iraq in 2007? Many credit the "surge," or the program of U.S. reinforcements and doctrinal changes that began in January 2007. Others cite the voluntary insurgent stand-downs of the Sunni Awakening or say that the violence had simply run its course after a wave of sectarian cleansing. Evidence drawn from recently declassified

data on violence at local levels and a series of seventy structured interviews with coalition participants finds little support for the cleansing or Awakening theses. This analysis constitutes the first attempt to gather systematic evidence across space and time to help resolve this debate, and it shows that a synergistic interaction between the surge and the Awakening was required for violence to drop as quickly and widely as it did.

This synergy had several essential components. The Awakening took most of the Sunni insurgency off the battlefield, weakening the enemy. Realigned insurgents, who became "Sons of Iraq," or SOIs, were uniquely valuable allies: they knew their former associates' identities, methods, and whereabouts in ways that government counterinsurgents rarely do.

The surge distributed larger numbers of U.S. troops among the Iraqi population, where they could readily cooperate with would-be SOIs, exploiting the intelligence they offered to lift the veil of secrecy that guerillas normally rely on and to expose holdouts to unusually lethal firepower. This gave Sunni insurgents increasing incentives to seek similar deals for themselves, promoting further realignment.

These developments pushed Shiite militias such as Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi into cease-fires of their own. Many such militias started out to protect Shiite civilians from Sunni attack, but grew increasingly predatory over time. Rising criminality in turn created fissiparous tendencies, as factions with their own income grew increasingly independent. When the SOIs began appearing, the Sunni threat waned, and with it the need for defenders. The SOI cease-fires also freed arriving U.S. surge troops to focus on Shiite militiamen. As the Sunni threat decreased, popular support weakened, internal divisions multiplied, and the Americans strengthened, the Shiite militias' ability to survive new battles with the United States fell. Sadr thus chose to stand down rather than risk a losing battle with the Americans, and he announced a cease-fire in August 2007. This took the primary Shiite militia off the battlefield, leaving all of 2006's major militant groups under cease-fires save a marginalized remnant of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).

The synergy account is consistent with the details of extensive participant interviews, which show that many SOI members were in fact former insurgents; these former insurgents did provide important intelligence and other support to U.S. forces; and SOIs suffered counterattacks from al-Qaida holdouts but were protected by U.S. forces who benefitted from SOI intelligence. It is also consistent with declassified statistical evidence showing that, although Iraq's violence was often falling even before SOIs stood up, it was falling far too slowly to pacify Iraq before the surge would have ended. Only when the surge and the SOIs combined did violence fall fast enough to account for 2007's results—without the Awakening, the surge would have ended with violence still at roughly mid-2006 levels.

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE HAD NOT BURNED ITSELF OUT BY MID-2007

By contrast, the cleansing thesis cannot account for the 2007 decline in violence. The cleansing thesis sees Iraqi violence as an outgrowth of mutual fear among intermingled Sunnis and Shiites: each fought to evict the other from mixed areas that could then be made homogeneous and secure; the fighting was intense while these mixed areas were being cleansed, but by mid-2007 this unmixing was mostly complete. The cleansing thesis argues that, with a de facto partition established, the fighting then petered out as a product of its own dynamics rather than the surge.

Yet this thesis fits neither the macrorends nor microdynamics of Iraq's violence. On the macrolevel, Iraq's violence was never limited to mixed-sect districts. In fact, for much of the war, Anbar was Iraq's most violent province, but Anbar is almost entirely Sunni with no meaningful intermingling to disentangle.

On the microlevel, although cleansing often did create homogeneous neighborhoods, it rarely ended the fighting there. Instead, ascendant Shiite militias used newly secure cleansed zones as bases for onward movement into adjoining, homogeneously Sunni neighborhoods. The violence thus did not burn out as Baghdad unmixed; it simply moved, with bloodshed continuing on the shifting frontiers that separated homogeneous communities. This process was far from exhausted by mid-to-late 2007: Shiites had conquered much but not all of Sunni Baghdad, leaving ample targets for continuing predation when the violence fell. Something other than the natural completion of a process of unmixing had to be at work for violence to end when it did.

THE AWAKENING WITHOUT THE SURGE WOULD PROBABLY HAVE FAILED

The Awakening thesis holds that Sunni realignment alone would have sufficed without the surge. Yet the 2006–07 Anbar Awakening was not the first time that Sunni sheiks had tried to break with their AQI allies. In fact, there were at least four very similar previous

attempts: the Albu Nimr proto-Awakening of early 2004; the Hamza Brigade of spring 2005; the Desert Protectors of fall 2005; and the Anbar People's Council of late 2005. In each, Sunni tribal elders had become alienated by AQI's methods; they negotiated local cease-fires with U.S. commanders; and their tribesmen agreed to provide local security in exchange for U.S. or Iraqi government payments. Yet none received the kind of protection that the surge offered to the Anbar Awakening. Without this, none proved able to survive and to spread in the face of insurgent counterattacks.

This should not be surprising. All insurgencies face a constant risk of factionalism and defection, which can easily lead to annihilation by larger, better-equipped state militaries. Self-preservation thus compels insurgents to put down incipient defections lest the defection spread, and AQI was unusually ruthless in this. Any Sunni tribe that broke with them could expect fierce retaliation. In the successful 2006–07 Awakening, the Sons of Iraq were under constant threat of reprisal. Interviewees reported widespread, brutal AQI counterattacks against SOIs across much

of central Iraq. The Anbar Awakening's originator, Sheik Sattar Albu Risha, was himself killed by such an attack in 2007. The 2006–07 SOIs, however, received effective protection from coalition forces; the prior attempts did not, and none survived long enough to change the war in any fundamental way.

BE CAUTIOUS WITH IRAQ LESSONS

The surge played a necessary but insufficient role in reducing Iraq's violence. U.S. policy thus deserves important credit, but those policies cannot be expected to succeed quickly elsewhere without local equivalents of Iraq's Sunni Awakening—caution is therefore necessary in drawing counterinsurgency lessons from 2007 for other conflicts.

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RELATED RESOURCES

Kagan, Kimberly. *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009).

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FOR ACADEMIC CITATION:

Biddle, Stephen, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro. "Giving the Surge Partial Credit for Iraq's 2007 Reduction in Violence." Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, September 2012.

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International Security is America's leading peer-reviewed journal of security affairs. It provides sophisticated analyses of contemporary, theoretical, and historical security issues. *International Security* is edited at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and is published by The MIT Press.

For more information about this publication, please contact the *International Security* editorial assistant at 617-495-1914.

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