

The Iraq project

By Paul Rogers,
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George W Bush's eighth and last state-of-the-union address on 28 January 2008 was mainly concerned with the economy and other domestic issues, but he still devoted nearly a quarter of the [speech](#) [1] to the Iraq war and its part in the United States's wider war on terror. The upbeat theme was that the military surge strategy now almost a year old was succeeding, to the extent even of offering the tantalising prospect of a victory in Iraq.

The president's message echoes and reinforces a narrative about military trends in Iraq that has become deeply embedded in the neo-conservative media in particular (see, for example, Fred Barnes "[Bush's Priorities: Iraq Dominates the State of the Union](#) [2]", *Weekly Standard*, 29 January 2008). Indeed, the redrawing of the Iraqi "story" through the second half of 2007 - aided both a decline in the number of American casualties and the increasing coverage of domestic matters (not least the 2008 presidential election race) in the national media - has been a singular feature of this period. But if what is happening in Iraq has been to a great extent sidelined in the US media and political argument, the country's military situation and political problems still hold the capacity to upset the US's calculations (see Charles Tripp, "[Iraq: the politics of the loca](#) [3]", 25 January 2008).

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It is important, then, to assess what is really happening on the ground in Iraq; and to ask whether there are indications that the positive effects of the surge for the United States may already be beginning to recede.

The costs of progress

The most recent events in Iraq reflect three serious trends.

The first is an increase in suicide-bombing incidents. In Mosul on 23 January, a [blast](#) [4] in an apartment block killed thirty-six people and wounded seventy; the US authorities blamed the attack on al-Qaida. A day later, the police commander for the Mosul region, Brigadier-General Salih Mohammed Hasan, was killed along with two other police officers by a suicide-bomber as he [visited](#) [5] the site of the explosion. In addition, many other forms of routine violence continue; in Baghdad itself on 31 January, for example, a bomb left in a parked car in the *Shi'a* district of Kadhimiya [killed](#) [6] at least three people and wounded five.

The second is a rise in [American casualties](#) [7] after a relatively calm December 2007. The twenty-three soldiers killed in December was the lowest number since February 2004, but the total rose again in January to thirty-seven. A roadside-bomb explosion and accompanying [ambush](#) [8] in Mosul on 28 January killed five United States troops.

The third trend is a concerted effort by insurgents to target *Sunni* militia leaders cooperating with the US military. The insurgents have engaged in a campaign of systematic targeting of the *Sunni* "awakening council" that has been cooperating with US forces, and singled its leaders out for assassination (see Solomon Moore & Richard A Oppel Jr, "[Attacks imperil U.S.-backed militias in Iraq](#) [11]", *International Herald Tribune*, 24 January 2008). At least a hundred people (most of them members of the council) were killed in the period of late December and early January; the core area affected is around Baghdad and Baquba, but it also extends to Anbar province where US military leaders had claimed particular [success](#) [12] in getting *Sunni* militias to oppose al-Qaida elements.

In response, there has been a further intensification of the US's use of [airpower](#) [13] to target insurgent units and districts; in one ten-day period in January, fifty tons of bombs were [dropped](#) [14] in an insurgent-held area near Baghdad. This tactic, as in Afghanistan, carries the constant possibility of creating new enemies even as it destroys old.

The continuing military challenge has led the Bush administration to make a further request for substantial additional expenditure to fund the war. Congress will be asked on 4 February 2008 to consider a \$70 billion [request](#) [15] to meet war costs (Afghanistan as well as Iraq) in the first four months of the 2009 fiscal year; this is in addition to the \$196 billion sought for the current financial year.

This demand for even greater financial expenditure coincides with a sudden and notable reduction in talk of troop withdrawals from Iraq (see *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 30 January 2008). The Bush administration had highlighted the short-term (or at least time-limited) nature of the surge strategy; it promoted the belief that several combat brigades would be withdrawn from Iraq in the first half of 2008, thus reinforcing the [impression](#) [16] of military progress. Such a reduction in troop numbers would coincide with the vital closing months of the presidential campaign, in a way that might be assumed to benefit the Republican candidate (even more, perhaps, if it proves to be the pro-war, pro-surge if Bush adversary, [John McCain](#) [17]). At this stage, however, the prospect of any big pre-election drawdown from Iraq seems remote.

In any case, the US's calculations are not completely in its own hands. There is a possibility that the six-month [ceasefire](#) [18] by Muqtada al-Sadr's "Mahdi army" militia announced on 31 August 2007 may not be extended after it [expires](#) [19] in February. The decision partly depends on the promise by the Iraqi government security forces to curb the involvement in its ranks of the Mahdi's rivals, the Badr militias; some at least of al-Sadr's influential advisers claim that this has not happened. Much of the improvement in security claimed on behalf of the increased presence of US forces in Iraq is actually the result of this ceasefire. If the ceasefire does end, and if the level of *Sunni* insurgent actions against those regarded as collaborators is sustained, then the possibility of a significant US withdrawal will dissolve.

In a sense, however, the overall strategic environment in Iraq suggests that a massive and sustained US military presence will be [required](#) [20] in any circumstances. This is the view of independent observers such as retired US general [Barry McCaffrey](#) [21], whose firsthand experience of the country helps underpin a deserved reputation for accuracy in his assessment of the progress of the Iraq war. In his view "an active counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq could probably succeed in the coming decade with 25 US Combat Brigade Teams" (this would

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[9]Paul Rogers's most recent book is [Why We're Losing the War on Terror](#) [10] (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 and why a new security paradigm is needed

represent more than half the army's available combat troops). Such a commitment, which would require large numbers of soldiers in supporting roles, would imply a long-term occupation of Iraq by over 150,000 US soldiers (see Mark Perry, "[US Military Breaks Ranks](#) [22]", *Asia Times*, 24 January).

The imperial scale

Whether such forces can actually be maintained is a moot point, but it comes with the clear intention to establish what is best described as a long-term US protectorate in Iraq. The US officials currently negotiating agreements with the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki are charged with seeking a quite extraordinary degree of influence and control. This is already apparent in the building of the world's [largest embassy](#) [23] in Baghdad; what is less noted is that Washington is pursuing a strategy based on rules set down by Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) early in the second year of the US occupation (see "[America plans Iraqi escalation](#) [23]" [1 July 2004], and Rajiv Chandrasekaran & Walter Pincus, "[U.S. Edicts Curb Power of Iraq's Leadership](#) [24]", *Washington Post* [27 June 2004]).

Perhaps the clearest indicator of where power in Iraq is intended to lie is the attempt to impose or extend wide-ranging exemptions for non-Iraqis from Iraqi laws. The more than 150,000 American soldiers in Iraq are already exempt, as are a core of around 13,000 [private-security](#) [24] contractors working there for the US defence department; the aim now is to award the same extra-legal status to 154,000 civilian contractors also working for the Pentagon. This would take the total personnel under US auspices who would have [immunity](#) [25] from any infraction under the Iraqi legal system to nearly a third of a million people (see Thom Shanker & Steven Lee Myers, "[U.S. to seek broad powers in Iraq as UN mandate expires](#) [26]", *International Herald Tribune*, 25 January 2008).

The need to guarantee the security of a protectorate on the scale envisaged - and, more immediately, to avoid attacks on US ground-patrols - is already being met by a second and largely hidden military surge. This one is airborne, and involves the expansion of US air-power in Iraq far beyond even the intensive pounding of insurgent-held areas around Baghdad. Among its features is the assignment of a squadron of A-10 ground-attack aircraft to al-Asad airbase and an additional squadron of F-16C strike aircraft to Balad air-base (see Tom Engelhardt, "[Bombs away over Iraq: Who cares?](#) [27]", *Asia Times*, 31 January 2008).

In an echo of the Baghdad embassy, [Balad](#) [28] has grown to become the largest US air-base anywhere in the world: a fifteen-square-mile mini-city with its own bus routes, fast-food outlets, two supermarkets and accommodation for 40,000 military personnel and contractors. The base - from which up to 550 air operations each day are conducted - is a permanent construction site; the latest addition is a \$30-million command-and-control system that will integrate [air-traffic management](#) [29] across the country as a whole.

In sum, the United States plan for Iraq is to establish a series of tight political mechanisms of control deriving from the original CPA-era agreements; a huge embassy-based [structure](#) [30] in Baghdad to oversee and maintain these; immunity for over 300,000 foreign personnel; and continuing, direct authority over and access to Iraqi detainees. The entire operation is to be secured by the US military and its private contractors, increasingly protected by the use of air power.

This ambitious project is hardly consistent with the idea - still the official line propagated by Washington, and uncritically recycled by much of the establishment media - that the US's political objective is to bolster the independent governance of Iraq by the Iraqis themselves. Indeed, it goes further than the considerable power exerted by the United States in several

central American countries in the early 20th century; its sheer grandeur might better be compared to some of the French or British colonial-era protectorates. In contemporary terms, it comes close to the establishment of a fully-fledged American colony in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world. Whether or not the George W Bush administration and its supporters realise it, the implications of that - for Iraq itself and for the whole region - are set to match even what has happened over the last five years.

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