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Fighting to Win

By Frederick W. Kagan

Since President George W. Bush adopted a new strategy in Iraq and put a new command team in place, there have been signs of progress in Iraq. We are making strides in the struggle against al Qaeda there. We should not cut off support at this critical juncture.

As Congress again takes up the issue of support for our troops fighting in Iraq, members should have the decency to take account of the successes those troops have fought for and achieved in recent weeks. Much of the support in the Democratic caucus for cutting off funds for Iraq comes from a conviction that the war is irretrievably lost. One could be excused for thinking that in autumn 2006, when sectarian violence seemed to be cycling out of control against the backdrop of a wrongheaded U.S. strategy. But President George W. Bush has adopted a new strategy, put in place a new command team, and provided new resources for the effort, and the situation has begun to improve. Failure remains possible, as it always does in war, but the possibility of victory has grown significantly. Prospects for success are brightest, moreover, in the struggle against al Qaeda—the struggle that many opponents of the war claim is America's only interest in Iraq. It would be the height of folly to cut off support for the war effort just as it is beginning to show glimmers of hope in a struggle central to the safety of all Americans.

There is no question that Iraq has become the main front for al Qaeda in the world today. Thousands of foreign fighters flow along recruiting networks that span the Muslim world and into Iraq to attack our soldiers and the Iraqi people. Most opponents of continuing the war admit that fighting

these committed terrorists remains a national priority for America. Some argue that an American withdrawal would reduce Iraq's attractiveness to al Qaeda, thus reducing the number of terrorists and the threat they pose. Many believe it is possible to fight al Qaeda using special forces and long-range missiles without engaging in the "civil war" they believe is still raging in Iraq. Neither proposition is true.

Al Qaeda fighters flow into Iraq because we are there, to be sure, but they do not confine themselves to fighting us. They also work to establish control over the Sunni regions in Iraq, to impose their version of Islam, and to terrorize and punish Iraqis who resist them in any way. When the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in abject defeat, the radical Islamists who fought them did not lay down their guns. Instead they undermined and destroyed the Afghan government and went on to seize power. Al Qaeda in Iraq aims for no less. They will not stop fighting when we leave; they will redouble their efforts to take control of the country.

We will not be able to resist this development simply by using targeted strikes either with Special Forces troops or long-range missiles. Al Qaeda's approach in Iraq is different from its approach in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) does not establish remote training camps; it mixes among the population. It does not remain aloof from the fighting between tribes and sects; it encourages and benefits from that fighting. It uses sectarian

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violence to drive Shiites out of mixed areas and terrorizes the Sunnis who are left into supporting it. We have seen this process at work in Diyala province and in Baghdad. In Anbar, AQI used Sunni resentment at their community's loss of power in Iraq to create safe havens, but even there they found it necessary to unleash violence against Sunni hosts whom they found lacking in piety and commitment. Such problems cannot be resolved by Special Forces raids from over the horizon. They must be solved by convincing the Sunni and Shiite populations that we will help them fight and defeat AQI. That is precisely what has started to happen over the course of the past several months.

Al Qaeda's atrocities in Anbar have alienated a large and growing segment of the Sunni population there. A tribal confederation including two-thirds of the major tribes has formed to combat al Qaeda. The sheiks of this confederation are sending their sons to join the local police formations, which six months ago could hardly find a single local recruit. Iraqi police in Anbar have fought valiantly, even as al Qaeda has attempted to derail this effort with new and horrific attacks, including using chlorine gas bombs.

This process is not limited to Anbar. Across Iraq, Sunnis and Shiites are coming to recognize that al Qaeda is an enemy that is worse and more dangerous than any other, and that American and Iraqi government forces are their best potential allies. A new group of local Sunni leaders has begun to reach out to the central government, offering the hope that, with months of careful and patient negotiations, the Sunni insurgency that has festered since the invasion might begin to wind down. Iraq, lest we forget, is an ally in the War on Terror: more Iraqis have died fighting al Qaeda than the soldiers and civilians of almost any other country. The Iraqi determination to continue that fight is strengthening. Now is hardly the time to end our support and abandon our Iraqi allies.

Critics of the war also argue that the Sunni insurgency is no longer the central problem in Iraq, claiming that sectarian violence has become the greatest and most intractable challenge. Sunni-Shiite hatred is centuries old, we are told, and American troops should not be put between hostile factions engaged in primordial violence that will spiral inevitably out of control. Facts on the ground do not support this conclusion. At the beginning

of the current Baghdad Security Plan, both Moktada al-Sadr and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the leaders of the two dominant Shiite militias, ordered their followers to support the plan and stop conducting attacks against Sunnis. Sectarian attacks, also known as extrajudicial killings, dropped dramatically. In recent weeks the number of attacks has risen somewhat as Sadr's militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, has begun to fragment and rogue elements have resumed their attacks. But even so, the levels remain below what they were before the Baghdad offensive began in February. This pattern is the opposite of the one we saw last year during Operations Together Forward I and II in Baghdad, when sectarian killings reached new peaks a few weeks after the start of those undertakings.

The fact that extrajudicial killings dropped when Sadr and Hakim ordered them to do so shows that the sectarian violence is not a reflection of primordial and unreasoning hatred, but rather a calculated use of force by particular individuals to advance their own agendas. If Iraqis really hated each other to the extent that an endless cycle of killing was inevitable, they would not so readily have followed the orders of their leaders.

Hurriya is a neighborhood in central Baghdad that was once mixed and is now predominantly Shiite. Jaysh al-Mahdi fighters have been working to drive out the remaining Sunni families. When new U.S. forces arrived in the neighborhood and established Joint Security Stations (JSS), they sent out word and a telephone number, asking for tips. In a story that became national news, a Sunni woman called that number and reported that three Shiite gunmen were attempting to drive out her family. American forces responded and captured two of the gunmen, but the third escaped and managed to kill the woman the next day. The story was prominently reported as evidence of the failure of the Baghdad Security Plan, with the added detail that the woman's family left the area the next day. In truth, as the soldiers manning the Hurriya JSS told me in early April, the family left only to attend her funeral and is still living in its house. One would have expected the tip line to dry up, of course, since the Mahdi Army had proven that it could punish informants. On the contrary. Tips to that unit have increased dramatically, and it is now receiving tips even from Shiites about improved explosive devices that have been placed to kill U.S. soldiers, and about Mahdi Army

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efforts to terrorize Sunnis. Why? Because the Iraqis in Hurriya have had enough. They resent the fighters, Sunni or Shiite, who bring violence and death to their neighborhood. They want to help those, American or Iraqi, who can protect them and bring them peace.

The key to this change in attitude—which is not confined to Hurriya, but is spreading throughout Baghdad—lies in the establishment of trust between Iraqis and Americans. In the Hurriya JSS, Iraqi and American soldiers live together in a single building. They eat together, plan together, analyze intelligence and tips together, and fight together. The locals know they are there and know they can respond quickly. They trust them, both Americans and Iraqis, to try to protect them from violence. This trust comes from the permanent presence of American forces in the neighborhood and from the belief that they will be there for a while. As any policeman can attest, trust is essential to getting good information about bad things happening in a neighborhood: it is as essential to fighting terrorism as it is to fighting crime. And it can happen only when American and Iraqi forces work together to protect the population among which they live.

These initial positive signs are just that: signs that things are finally moving in the right direction. The challenges facing American and Iraqi efforts to restore stability are still daunting. Questions remain about the ability or willingness of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his cabinet to establish a government seen as legitimate by all Iraqis. Al Qaeda is certainly fighting hard,

and the increase in spectacular attacks in recent weeks reflects a concerted AQI effort to restart the sectarian violence. It also reflects a desperate attempt to regain a foothold in Anbar and other Sunni areas that have turned against terrorism. The media report each suicide

attack as a defeat for the United States, which is exactly how al Qaeda wishes these attacks be perceived. But this enemy is so inhuman that it regards suicide bombers in the same way it regards mortar rounds or Katyusha rockets: as just more weapons in its arsenal to be deployed as necessary. We do ourselves a disservice by giving such prominence to these attacks, gruesome as they are. All they really mean is that the enemy is fighting back, as enemies do.

Americans have gotten into a bad habit of believing that the outcome of every war is predictable: that wars are either short, decisive, and victorious, like Desert Storm, or long, painful, and futile, like Vietnam. The truth is that the outcome of most wars remains in doubt until they are very nearly over. Until late 1864,

it looked as though the Union might well lose the Civil War. Within a year, Lincoln had triumphed. The conflict in Iraq is central to our foreign policy, indeed to our well-being. Surely we must keep fighting to win as long as victory remains possible. And it is possible, although not certain, that we will win in Iraq. Right now, the signs are more hopeful than they have been in many months. It would be a tragedy for America and for Iraq to abandon the fight just as the possibility of success has begun to emerge.

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