

## **BARACK OBAMA IS RIGHT ABOUT THE SURGE**

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The McCain campaign is running ads slamming Obama for his position on the surge, which McCain claims has been a great success in a justified war, but which Obama correctly describes as a "tactical victory imposed upon a huge strategic blunder."

The current situation in Iraq--much lower American and Iraqi casualties--would look very different if two other events had not occurred: (1) the decision of tens of thousands of Sunni insurgents to take \$300 per month from Uncle Sam instead of fighting us; and (2) the year-long ceasefire declared by the Shiite Mahdi Army.

Without these two developments Obama's prediction that the surge would have intensified sectarian violence may well have come true. It is important to note that neither of these developments required extra American troops. Instead, they came about by diplomacy and good will, not by military action.

It is also likely that both the Sunni alliance and the Mahdi ceasefire could have held during a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops. Very few surge troops were sent to Anbar Province, so the relative calm there is essentially a Sunni achievement.

For one who claims the advantage of commanding the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, candidate McCain doesn't always have his facts straight. Recently he stated that Shiite Iran was training Al Qaeda jihadists (not true of course), and he also talked about a non-existent Iraqi-Pakistani border. (There is a thousand miles of Iran in between!) He has also claimed that Sunni militants switched sides because of the surge.

The fact is that the Sunni Sahwa (Awakening) began in August 2006, six months before the surge was announced. In early 2006 Sunni leaders in Anbar province proposed a plan for money and arms with a promise to liquidate Al Qaeda, but the American military initially turned them down. The Iraqis had never liked the presence of foreign jihadists, and they became more and more outraged at their indiscriminate killing.

We have to remember that there were no Al Qaeda fighters in Iraq until President Bush offered his infamous "Bring Them On!" invitation. Primarily because of the cooperation of 80,000 Sahwa fighters, Al Qaeda in Iraq has been set back dramatically. More and more of these fighters have been showing up in Afghanistan instead, where NATO casualties have increased significantly.

Even though they have protected their towns successfully, the Sahwa forces are not happy. The Shiite dominated central government does not recognize them, and refuses to remove Shiite governors who discriminate against them. The Sahwa also complain about not being paid on time and not being integrated into the Iraqi security forces. The Shiite-dominated central government obviously does not trust them.

The success of this new Sunni alliance is fragile. If Sahwa grievances are not met and if national reconciliation between Sunni and Shia is not achieved, the arms we gave these former insurgents could very well be turned against us and the Shias.

Muqtada Al-Sadr, leader of the Shiite Mahdi Army, is currently in Iran studying for a Ph.D. in theology so that he will have even more authority when he returns. He has been consistently anti-American from the beginning of the 2003 invasion, and his forces have engaged in fierce battles with U.S. troops and competing Shiite militias. Al-Sadr's call for a ceasefire in August 2007 drew praise from Maj. Gen. Jeffery Hammond, who said that Al-Sadr's "decision to

order the freeze has been most honorable." Hammond's soldiers had fought Sadr's militiamen in 2004.

All throughout 2007 U.S. and Iraqi troops built barriers between Shia and Sunni enclaves. They also went door to door disarming the populace, mainly Sunnis. This led to a substantial Sunni flight such that by the end of 2007 the Shiite majority in Baghdad had increased from 65 to 75 percent or more. Many Shia have now moved into abandoned Sunni residences.

It is not surprising that the Sunni flight and Al-Sadr's ceasefire would cause a decline in violence. As CNN correspondent Michael Ware states: "The sectarian cleansing of Baghdad has been . . . one of the key elements to the drop in sectarian violence in the capital." Pacification of sprawling Sadr City came last with rogue militia being killed either by U.S. troops or by Mahdi soldiers commanded to do so by Al-Sadr. It is also important to note that Al-Sadr ordered his men not to attack Sunnis in early 2007 just as the surge began.

It is important to know how the Iraqis themselves feel about the surge. A March 2008 poll found that 70 percent said that the extra American troops had made security worse or had no effect; 70 percent said that conditions for political dialogue were worse or had no effect; and 79 percent responded that ability of the Baghdad government to work was worse or had no effect.

Another sign that security has not improved is that only 12 percent of the 2.5 million refugees, 40 percent of them middle class, have not returned. Another 2.5 million are internally displaced. Nearly all of Iraq's prosperous minority Christians have left and will probably never return. The U.S. occupation of Iraq has caused irreparable damage to this country's cultural fabric.

In January 2007 Bush explained that the main goal of the surge was to "help make reconciliation possible." The conditions for that happening are just as remote as ever. It appears as if provisional elections, a key event for Sunnis who boycotted the 2005 elections, will not happen. The bill to implement the elections

was vetoed by President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd who supports his people's claim to the oil rich north and who fears Arab electoral power.

The most important result of Obama's trip to the Middle East was the announcement by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki that Obama's 16-month troop reduction plan "could be suitable to end the presence of the forces in Iraq." The German magazine *Der Spiegel* is the source of this quotation and its editors defended its accuracy because Maliki's office provided the translation of the text.

Polls of American opinion about the Iraq war have been consistent, despite the surge and regardless of the polling agent. The most recent CNN poll shows that 66 percent oppose the war, and 62 percent agree with Maliki and Obama that there should be a timetable for bringing our forces home. Significantly, 57 percent of these Americans believed that neither side was winning the war.

McCain is now in a bind about his refusal to set a schedule for troop withdrawal, not only by Maliki's support of Obama's plan, but also by Bush's declaration that Iraqi progress was good enough to bring some of the soldiers home.

Commentators have said that Obama has too easily escaped criticism for his position on the surge, but I would rather see it one based on what the American and Iraqi people want for a reasonable end to Bush's "huge strategic blunder."