

The Urge to Surge

Herman Mindshaftgap

The Bland Corporation

September 8, 2007

The goal of this paper is to examine several aspects of the US “surge” in Iraq.

1. Is There Really a Surge?

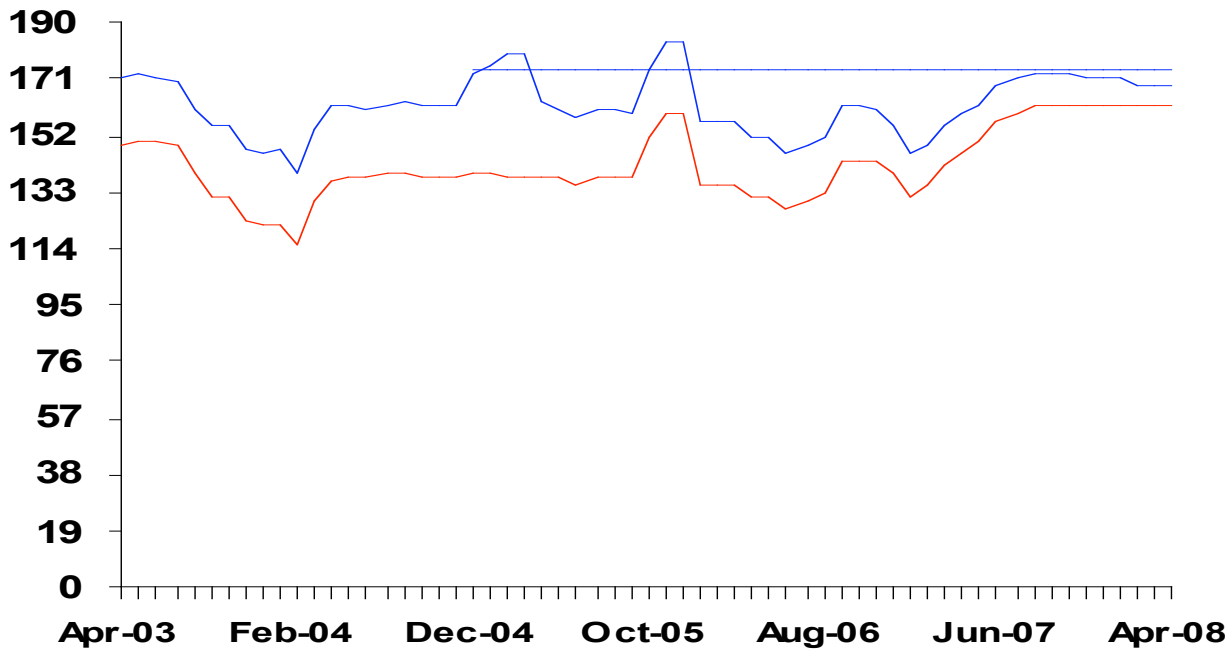
President Bush’s “surge” in Iraq has generated much controversy over the last six months, but opponents of the surge invariably seem to accept that there really is a surge. Is there really a surge? That is, are current and projected force levels in Iraq significantly higher than levels that were inadequate in the past?

The United States has 162,000 troops in Iraq, compared to 132,000 in the middle of January. However, US troop levels in January were only slightly above the low point of the entire war and do not constitute a reasonable basis for comparison. The previous high point for US troop levels was 160,000 in November and December of 2005, so the current levels do not even constitute a new peak. Of course, the previous “surge” was sustained for only two months, whereas the current “surge” is expected to last longer. How much longer? The Army and Marine Corps can probably sustain current force levels for another 6 to 13 months. After that, force levels will decline rapidly unless there is a major increase in the number of involuntarily mobilized reservists. The previous peak for a six-month period was 148,000, from December 2004 through May 2005. The previous peak for a 13-month period was 146,900, from December 2004 through December 2005. Hence, current US troop levels are only eight to nine percent above the highest levels that were previously sustained for a meaningful amount of time. It is doubtful that this qualifies as a “surge.”

The situation gets much worse if we factor in the “Coalition of the Willing.” There are 11,500 allied troops in Iraq. The number of non-US allied troops peaked at 25,600 in early 2004, and had an average value of 23,400 from April 2003 through December 2005. This number was as high as 23,000 in November and December of 2005. Since the end of 2005, the number of allied troops has declined 20 months in a row, by an average of about 575 troops per month, and is now at its lowest point of the entire war. If the trends of the last 20 months continue, the number of non-US allied troops will reach zero early in the next administration.

The combined number of coalition troops in Iraq – American and allied – is 173,500. This number is noticeably below the previous peak of 183,000, which occurred in November and December of 2005 (the time of the last Iraqi elections), and a fraction of a percent below the highest level that was previously maintained for a period of five months (174,500, from December 2004 through April 2005). The current number is slightly above the highest level that was previously maintained for a period of 13 months (170,300, from December 2004 through December 2005). Of course, we have not yet sustained the current troop level for 5 months, let alone 13. Let us make two assumptions. The number of US troops in Iraq will remain constant for the next 13 months, and the number of allied troops will decline at 500 per month. This rate of decline is slightly below the average rate for the last 20 months. With these two assumptions,

the number of US and allied troops in Iraq will average 170,000 for the next 13 months – marginally below the level maintained from December 2004 through December 2005. Of course, the 12,000 extra US troops today may have more combat power than the 13,000 extra allied troops that were in Iraq during the earlier five-month peak, but this is surely a minor factor in overall force effectiveness. As shown in the graph below, the recent increases in US troop levels have, at most, compensated for the reduction in allied troops over the last couple of years.



Red curve = US troop strength

Blue curve = coalition troop strength (US + non=US allies)

Horizontal blue line = maximum troop maintained for five months or more (December 2004 through April 2005; almost identical to August 2004 through December 2005)

Is getting coalition troop levels back up to ALMOST the highest levels that failed before constitute a viable strategy for success? It is conceivable that today's troop levels might succeed where similar levels failed in the past, but only if one or more, preferably all, of the following factors are met:

- Today's strategy and tactics are superior to those employed a year or two ago, and
- Today's strategy and tactics are less manpower-intensive than the strategy employed a year or two ago.
- Today's forces are better equipped than the forces of a year or two ago.
- The situation is not as bad as it was a year or two ago, thereby enabling forces that were previously inadequate to be adequate today.

It is true that there has been some change in strategy, relative to 2006. For example, there is now more emphasis on "clear and hold" than in the past. However, "clear and hold" would probably be MORE troop-intensive than "clear and leave." I don't think that George Casey, the previous commander in Iraq, did not realize the desirability of holding areas that have been cleared -- he simply never had the troops to implement such a strategy, and today's troop levels do not exceed the maximum levels that failed before.

Also, today's strategy apparently concentrates a greater percentage of total forces in Baghdad than was the case a year or two ago. Hence, troop levels in and near Baghdad may possibly exceed the highest levels recorded before 2007. If your goal is nothing more than to hold Baghdad, then a modest increase in total troop strength in Iraq, relative to recent levels, may be enough for that limited mission. However, it is hard to think that such a limited mission as likely to turn the tide in Iraq. Pushing insurgents out of Baghdad may simply transfer violence elsewhere, and we would have fewer troops available elsewhere than we did in 2005. If you are dealing with naturally occurring fires, concentrating fire-fighters on the "hot spots" makes infinitely more sense than a generalized increase in the number of firemen across the country. However, the "hot spots" in Iraq are mobile, and the insurgents have some flexibility to move them around in response to US troop deployments. In fact, there is reason to think that the insurgents are already moving out of Baghdad in response to the increased US force levels in Baghdad, as explained later.

Some supporters of the surge assert that the United States will succeed now, or is already succeeding now, by being more aggressive against Moqtada al Sadr and his Mahdi Army militia. It is probably true that US forces should have arrested Moqtada al Sadr for murder back in April 2003, when he killed a pro-American Shiite mullah. Failing that, the United States should have finished him off in April 2004, when he was one of the leaders of the uprisings against the Coalition Provisional Authority. However, we are where we are. Moqtada al Sadr is now the leader of the second largest party in the Iraqi parliament, and a member of the cabinet. The Iraqi prime minister is an ally of Al Sadr and does not support aggressive operations against him. Unless the relationship between Al Sadr and other key Iraqi Shiites changes, it is hard to think that US forces can be more aggressive about targeting Moqtada al Sadr than in the past.

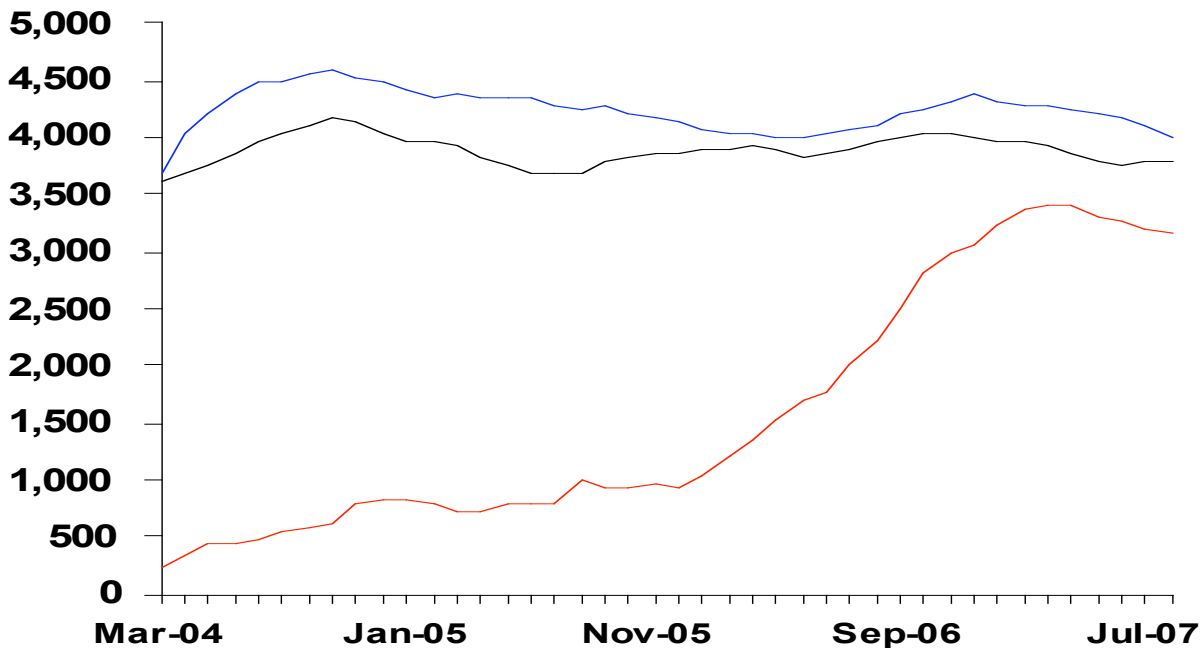
Are today's forces better equipped than the forces in Iraq two years ago? It is hard to say. In most respects, the US forces in Iraq are equipped much like the forces of two years ago. There are more armored HUMVEEs in Iraq today than there were two years ago, but these vehicles provide marginal protection against anything more potent than an M-16 rifle. The recent, albeit severely belated, interest in more heavily armored wheeled vehicles (the so-called MRAPs, or Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles) is welcome, but the number of MRAPs in Iraq is still regrettably small. By next spring, there may be enough MRAPs in Iraq to make a difference, but it is not clear that the United States can maintain current troop levels beyond next spring without a major additional mobilization of the reserve components.

TO SUM UP: It is questionable that improvements in equipment or strategy will turn the tide, at least in a politically acceptable amount of time, if the situation in Iraq is as bad as it was in 2005.

The last bullet in the list above is important enough to warrant an entire section.

2. Is the Situation in Iraq Better Today in 2005?

This depends on how you define “better.” Three reasonable metrics would be the number of Iraqi civilians killed by violence, Iraqi electricity production, and Iraqi oil production. The chart below plots these numbers. The figures for **Iraqi casualties (red curve)**, Iraqi electricity production (black curve), and **Iraqi oil production (blue curve)** are all 10-month running averages, ending in the month shown. Actual figures fluctuate so much from month to month that such curves can be confusing; the 10-month running averages are a better indication of progress, or the lack thereof. Iraqi civilian casualties are slightly below the horrendous values of six months ago, but are still higher than anything that occurred in the first three years of the war. The figures for oil and electricity production have all been relatively flat for the last three years, but oil production shows a definite, albeit minor, downward trend. The figures for oil and electricity production both peaked more than two years ago, whether measured by a 10-month running average or actual month-to-month data. Hence, data on violence and economic factors provide no basis for claiming that the situation in Iraq is better today than it was in November 2004 through December 2005 – an earlier period when troop levels were similar to today’s values.

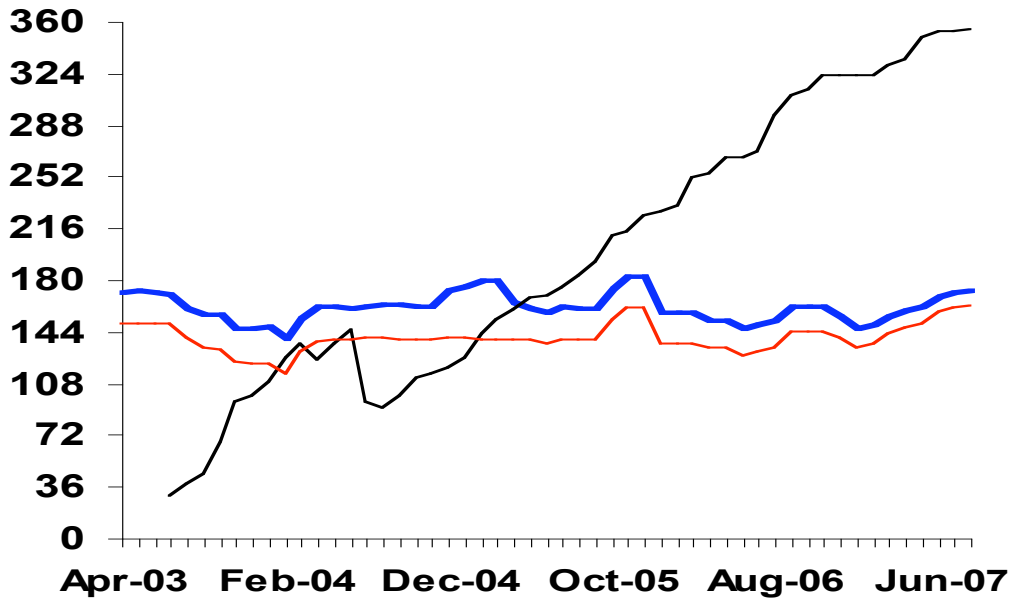


There are, of course, other possible measures for determining whether things are improving. For example, US leaders have repeatedly made statements to the general effect: “As Iraqi security forces stand up, we will stand down.” Superficially, there has been enormous progress on this front. The chart below shows **US troop strength (red curve)**, **coalition troop strength (US + allies, blue curve)**, and Iraqi force levels (military and police, black curve). The chart indicates that Iraqi security forces have increased greatly in numbers over the last three years. On the other hand:

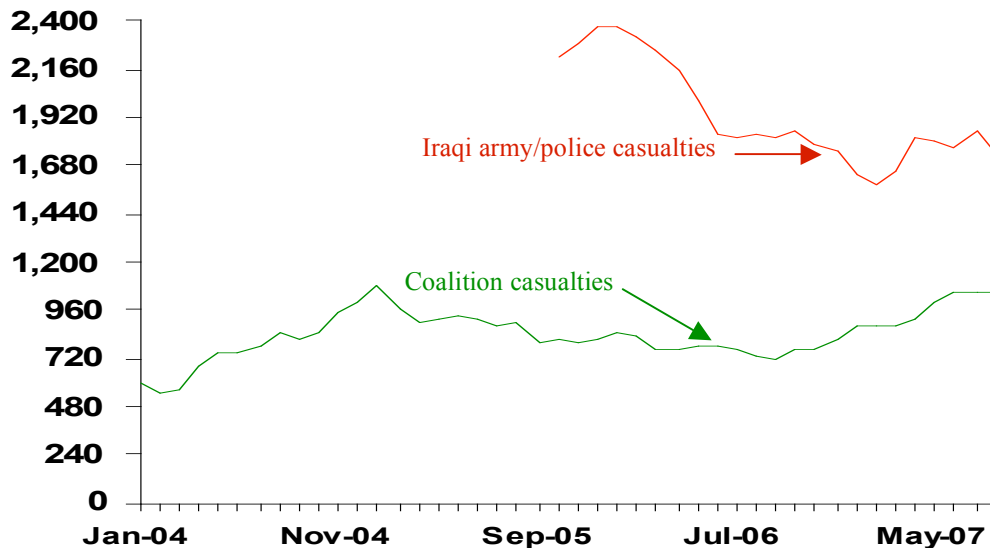
- Have US forces been standing down?

- Have Iraqi forces been standing up, except in numbers?

How would we measure these factors?



One crude measure of who is fighting is who is dying. The chart below shows **coalition military and civilian casualties (green curve)** and **casualties for Iraqi security forces (red curve)**. To smooth out monthly fluctuations, each curve represents a 10-month running total, ending in the month shown. When averaged in this manner, coalition casualties are relatively flat, with no obvious upward or downward trend. Casualties among Iraqi police and military forces, however, peaked in 2005 and are now considerably lower than they were 18 to 24 months ago. In fact, Iraqi security force casualties were lower than coalition casualties in August 2007. This was the first such month on record, although the available information on casualties among Iraqi security forces only goes back to late 2004. It may possibly be the case that Iraqi forces are now so much better trained and equipped that are fighting more and suffering less than they did in the past. On the other hand, maybe Iraqi security forces are standing aside from the fight against the insurgents and the militias, rather than standing up, and leaving the fighting to us.



Moreover, in the 24 months (since July 2003) with the highest levels of Iraqi security forces, Iraqi civilian casualties averaged 2610 violent deaths per month. In the 24 months (since July 2003) with the lowest levels of Iraqi security forces, Iraqi civilian casualties averaged 584 violent deaths per month. This suggests that Iraqi security forces have not been a spectacular success, or at least not in the manner the United States intended. One might even suspect that the overwhelming Shiite Iraqi security forces have played a major role in violence against Sunni civilians and other religious minorities. Providing equipment and basic military training to Iraqi recruits who do not share our goals may not be a reasonable path to success.

NOTE: The adverse correlation between the size of Iraqi security forces and Iraqi civilian casualties may be coincidental, not causal. Iraqi security forces began expanding rapidly about the time of the Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006, an event which stimulated a greatly increased level of Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence. However, even if the correlation is a mere coincidence, it does suggest that Iraqi security forces are not going to be a solution to the problems in Iraq any time soon.

Coalition forces, on the other hand, have apparently played a beneficial role. In the 24 months (since April 2003) with the lowest levels of coalition forces, civilian casualties averaged 1814 violent deaths per month. In the 24 months (since April 2003) with the highest levels of coalition forces, civilian casualties averaged 1202 violent deaths per month. Maybe if we double the size of the coalition forces and maintain that level for the next five years, things really will get a lot better!

What about the Iraqi political and governmental situation? The recent National Intelligence Assessment admits that the Iraqi government is largely non-functional, and assesses that challenges to the government may increase over the next 6 to 12 months. (The New York

Times posted the unclassified summary of the National Intelligence Estimate on its web site in late August.) About half of the 37 members of the Iraqi cabinet are boycotting the government, and the defections may not be over. Ayad Allawi – the leading secular member of the cabinet – withdrew on August 26 to protest the Shiite government’s continuing failure to pursue reconciliation with Sunnis. This is not really worse than the situation in 2005 – the last time that coalition troop levels were near today’s value – but no one expected the newly elected interim Iraqi government to be fully functional in 2005. We are now 21 months past the second of two sets of parliamentary elections, and the Iraqi Shiite government shows no sign of being able to govern or of being willing or able to achieve reconciliation with the Sunnis, or between the Sunnis and the Kurds.

In addition, a 20-member independent panel led by retired general James Jones (former head of European Command and former Commandant of the Marine Corps) concluded that the Iraqi National Police is so dysfunctional that it should be abolished and replaced in its entirety. (This was reported in the New York Times on September 6.) This situation is, if anything, worse than the situation in 2005 – the last time that troop levels were similar to what they are today.

Finally, Prime Minister Maliki and his government have come under increasing criticism from US officials, especially in Congress, for failure to work on reconciliation and for taking a long vacation while US troops are fighting and dying on their behalf. (Of course, given that Congress recently took a lengthy vacation, despite failure to pass any of the 13 appropriations bills, or the defense authorization act, this puts them in a bit of a weak position to criticize the Iraqi parliament!) Maliki fired back in fine fashion, including a statement that he could turn to friends in Syria and Iran if the United States is not willing to provide the help he needs. In other words, we may end up with an Iran-Iraq-Syria “axis of evil” that would be hostile to US interests. Moreover, unlike the “Axis of Evil” from the January 2002 state of the union address, Iran, Iraq, and Syria would actually be allies, unlike the Iraq-Iran-North Korea pseudo axis of countries that were not in cahoots. This is clearly worse than the situation in 2005.

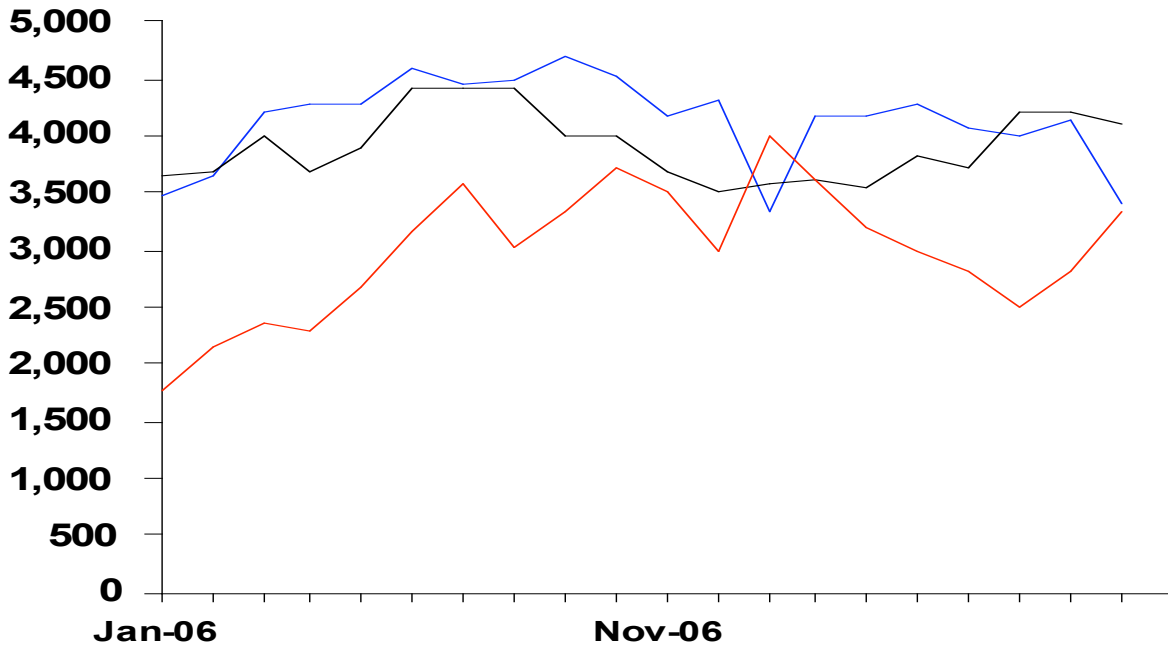
TO SUM UP: The situation in Iraq is at least as bad as it was in 2005, when force levels were similar to what they are today. In fact, there is a reasonable basis for thinking that things are worse now than in 2005. Hence, in the absence of major improvements in strategy, tactics, leadership, and equipment, there is no reason to think that force levels that failed before will succeed now.

3. Is the Surge Working?

The sections above suggest that there is little basis for expecting the surge to “work,” at least in any reasonable amount of time. However, maybe the analysis above is wrong. Hence, we need to look at what has actually been happening since the start of the surge.

Unfortunately, there is, as yet, little basis for assessing actual progress. Although the surge was announced in January, it remained nothing more than a slogan for quite a while afterwards. Coalition troop levels in Iraq were below the average value of April 2003 through December 2006 from January 2007 until late May. Coalition troop levels in Iraq were below the average value of December 2004 through December 2005 from January 2007 until early July.

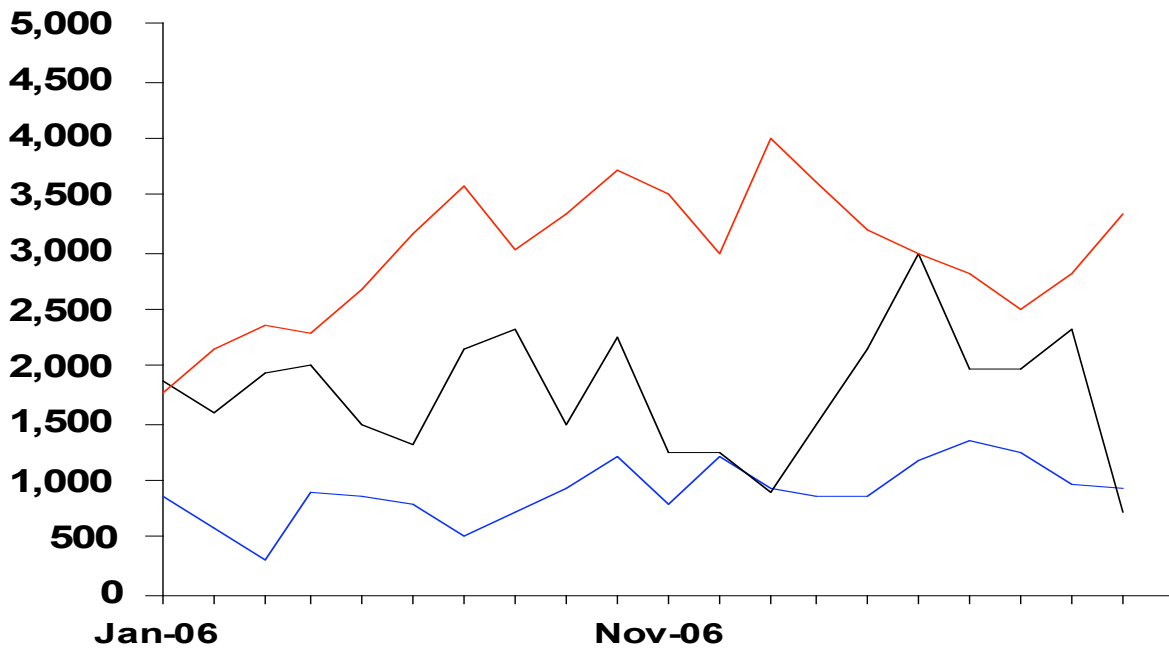
Hence, there was no surge in any remotely meaningful sense until at least late May, and possibly not until early July, and the amount of time elapsed since the real start of the “surge” is too small to determine positive trends with any confidence. Nevertheless, the chart below shows monthly, not averaged, figures for Iraqi civilian deaths by violence, Iraqi oil production, and Iraqi electricity production, from January 2006 through August 2007. (The Samarra mosque bombing occurred in February 2006.) As before, **the red curve represents Iraqi civilian deaths by violence**, the black curve represents Iraqi electricity production (in megawatts), and **the blue curve represents Iraqi oil production (in units of 500 barrels per day)**.



The figures for oil production and electricity production in May through August of 2007 – the only ones that could plausibly have been influenced by the “surge” – were all below the corresponding figures for the same month in 2006, so there is no sign of economic progress. The decline in oil production between July and August was particularly significant – oil production in August was at its lowest level since late 2003. The number of Iraqi civilian casualties declined five months in a row, with February through June of 2007 each being lower than the previous month, albeit still very high by the standards of 2003 through early 2006. However, as noted above, the surge was merely a slogan until late May, and possibly until early July. Hence, the surge cannot plausibly account for any of the monthly decreases before May. Another possible explanation for the decrease in deaths is that ethnic cleansing is approaching completion, with Sunnis having been driven out of majority Shiite areas, and vice versa. This alternative explanation is hardly soothing. Moreover, casualties increased in July and August, with August being one of the seven or eight worst months of the entire war.

The chart below shows monthly, not averaged, figures for Iraqi civilian deaths by violence, Iraqi security force deaths, and coalition military and civilian deaths, from March 2006

through August 2007. The red curve represents Iraqi civilian deaths by violence, the black curve represents Iraqi security force deaths (multiplied by ten), and the blue curve represents coalition deaths (multiplied by ten). It is notable that Iraqi civilian deaths increased significantly in July and August, while coalition deaths and deaths among Iraqi security forces declined. In fact, deaths among Iraqi security forces were at the lowest monthly level since 2004 in August 2007, and August was the first month since 2004 when casualties among Iraqi security forces were lower than casualties among coalition forces. Hence, despite the very heavy civilian casualties in July and August, there was less fighting between US/Iraqi forces and the insurgents than in earlier months. Moreover, as noted earlier, the “surge” is heavily concentrated in the immediate Baghdad area, with US troop levels outside of the Baghdad area being lower than in 2005. The most reasonable conclusion from this correlation of factors, even if only for two months, is that the various insurgent groups are starting to concede Baghdad to the United States and move their operations elsewhere. If the only US goal is to control Baghdad, this is fine, but it is hard to see how such a limited objective could bring enduring national success.



There has been one area of real progress since January 2007, but it may not be as meaningful as supporters of the surge like to claim. US cooperation with Sunni leaders in Anbar province has led to major setbacks for Al Qaeda in Iraq. As far as it goes, this is surely a good thing. However, this transient cooperation does not mean that the Anbar Sunnis are now our allies, or allies of the Maliki government, or proponents of Sunni-Shiite harmony. The Sunnis finally realized that Al Qaeda wants a Taliban-like theocracy in Iraq, whereas Iraqi Sunnis mostly want a return to the good old days of the somewhat secular Saddam era. Thus, the enemy of our enemy may again be our enemy in the near future – much as the US alliance with Stalin eroded after World War II, but with a much faster rate of decay.

TO SUM UP: There will be little basis for assessing the actual progress of the “surge” by the time Petraeus gives his eagerly awaited report to Congress in September, but preliminary and incomplete signs are not encouraging. In addition, there is little analytical basis for thinking that current coalition troop levels and tactics can produce a decisively improved situation by next spring, when the active-duty Army and Marine Corps will start to break under the current load. That is, in order to have any realistic hope of success, it will be necessary to increase current US troop levels in Iraq within a year, if not less, and to maintain these increased troop levels for several years. Such a sustained increase would require a nearly total mobilization of the Army and Marine Corps reserve components. Such a mobilization would, in turn, have a major economic impact by dragging hundreds of thousands of people away from their civilian jobs, and by pushing the military budget to something on the order of \$800 billion per year. In other words, the United States would have to act like a country at war, and consider actions such as repealing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest members of our society, mobilizing industry to produce military products (possibly at the expense of various consumer products), and possibly even bringing back the draft. Are our political leaders willing to pay this price? What about the public?

Note: The charts above are all based on data from the Brookings Institution Iraq Index (www.brookings.edu/iraqindex), except for one data point. A recent newspaper article indicated that Iraqi civilian deaths in August 2007 were about 15% greater than in July. (However, this same newspaper article did not match the Brookings casualty figures for July.) The Brookings Institution has not yet posted information on Iraqi civilian casualties in August 2007.

Note on Iraqi civilian casualties: The charts on Iraqi civilian deaths are influenced by the counting methodology in the Brookings Iraq Index. From 2003 through the early 2006, violent deaths among Iraqi civilians were assumed to be due to “crime” unless there was solid evidence that the “war” was the culprit. Since early 2006, this relationship has been reversed, and deaths are assumed to be war-related unless there is good evidence for thinking otherwise. Hence, some of the increase in Iraqi civilian casualties between the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006 was due to changes in assignment criteria (crime versus war). However, the last two charts in this paper are largely independent of this issue, as they go back only to early 2006.