THIS SPRING, the Iraqi government and U.S. forces attacked Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army in its strongholds in Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad. Iraq looked like it was on the verge of full-scale war between the occupiers' client state and the Sadrists. Iran intervened, cut a deal between the Iraqi government and the Sadrists, and saved the U.S. surge from disaster. Since then, violence has dropped by nearly 80 percent from the previous year. Now, despite ominous signs of continuing instability, the U.S. ruling class and its obedient media have trumpeted the surge—the infusion of 30,000 extra troops into Iraq beginning in the winter of 2007—for having stabilized Iraq. The architect of the surge, General David Petraeus, has been lionized across the political spectrum. He has been promoted as the new head of Central Command that oversees the entire U.S. military in the Middle East.

John McCain staked his presidential campaign on the success of the surge. His running mate, Sarah Palin, went so far as declare “Victory in Iraq.” Afraid to be left out of the party, the supposedly antiwar candidate, Barack Obama, conceded that the surge has “succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.”

In perhaps the most clueless example of media celebration of the surge, National Public Radio correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro raved about driving around freely in Iraq while listening to hit songs on the radio, eating in diners, and interviewing Iraqis. She described her amazement over how “Whole swaths of Iraq have opened up to us again. And I, for one, can’t wait to hit the road.”

Thus the split that had opened within the ruling class over what seemed in 2007 to be a failed war has been overcome and replaced with a consensus that the war is succeeding. The remaining argument is over how to redeploy the 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and escalate the so-called war on terror on other fronts from Afghanistan to Iran.

Predictably, the congressional Democrats approved (on top of their vote for the $700 billion bailout of Wall Street's financial firms) yet another record military budget of $634 billion to fund war and occupation.

All this has had a serious impact on public opinion. While polls still indicate a clear majority oppose the war and want the troops home, now 58 percent of Americans think the war is going well. It has also led to confusion, especially among liberal antiwar activists who are supporting Barack Obama, about whether it is right to still demand the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

The truth is, however, less rosy than politicians and the press have portrayed it. The United States has nearly destroyed Iraq, other factors than the surge are responsible for the recent relative stabilization, and there is a host of unresolved conflicts that threaten to unravel the fragile and temporary stability that now exists in Iraq.

**Surge myths and Iraqi realities**

To begin with, it is important to remember the actual nature and mission of the surge. Bush decided to deploy an extra thirty thousand troops in Anbar Province and Baghdad to take on the Sunni Resistance and the Sadrists, shift the troops out of their bases and into population centers, prevent the outbreak of further sectarian conflict with security patrols, and thereby provide space for political reconciliation.

On the surface, the surge has seemed to bring “peace” to Iraq. Resistance attacks on U.S. forces have indeed dropped. So too has sectarian violence. Iraqi forces have replaced U.S. patrols in growing numbers and are providing security in areas previously dominated by the Mahdi Army in Sadr City and Basra.

But let's be clear; the U.S. occupation has ravaged Iraqi society, thrusting it into something like Dante’s fifth circle of hell. It led to the deaths of over one million Iraqis, precipitated a civil war that
has torn the society apart, displaced five million from their homes (with two million of those leaving the country), and has left the country’s economy in ruins.

Since the surge, Iraq has ascended to perhaps the fourth circle of hell. Iraqi deaths as a result of attacks have dropped from 1,023 in September of last year to 503 this September—not exactly a sign of peace. As Patrick Cockburn argues, “Baghdad is still the most dangerous city in the world.” Moreover, a wave of sectarian bombings at the end of Ramadan demonstrates that while the civil war has ended, the threat of communal conflict remains a fact of life in Iraq.

Violence remains such a threat that the Iraqi government recently enacted a decree allowing doctors to carry guns to protect themselves from kidnapping attempts and sectarian attacks. This is not exactly the romantic image of a nice place for a country drive concocted by our NPR reporter. Unemployment averages about 50 percent across the country, a figure close to double that of U.S. joblessness during the Great Depression. And, in perhaps the most definitive proof against surge triumphalism, the five million displaced people have not returned to their homes. Conditions are either too dangerous or their homes are now occupied by members of other religious sects. They therefore cannot move back to their homes without armed conflict that would trigger sectarian counterattacks.

Real reasons for the pause in violence

Several reasons independent of the surge led to this relative stability in Iraq. First, the civil war had burned itself out before the surge. The Shiite government forces and various militias from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq’s (ISCI) Badr Brigades to Sadr’s Mahdi Army had won the Battle of Baghdad and carried out a massive ethnic cleansing of Sunnis, who, along with other religious minorities, comprise the majority of the displaced people and refugees.

John Agnew, a professor at UCLA and coauthor of a new study on the civil war in the journal Environment and Planning, argues that “violence had declined in Baghdad because inter-communal violence reached a climax as the surge was beginning. By the launch of the surge, many of the targets of conflict had either been killed or fled the country.” His report continues, “Our findings suggest that the surge has had no observable effect, except insofar as it has helped to provide a seal of approval for a process of ethno-sectarian neighborhood homogenization that is now largely achieved.”

Second, faced with defeat in the civil war, the Sunni leadership in Anbar Province and Baghdad called off their resistance against the occupation and the Shia government. They had also grown frustrated with al-Qaeda’s attacks on the Shia that had provoked the Badr Brigades and Mahdi Army to declare all-out sectarian war. The tribal leadership opted to cut a deal with the United States, agreeing to turn their guns on al-Qaeda in Iraq in return for money, training, and weapons. The United States hired more than a hundred thousand former Sunni resistance fighters, organized in the so-called Awakening Councils, and paid them each $300 per month. Instead of fighting the Sunni resistance, the United States is attempting to buy their loyalty.

Third, Sadr realized that he had no chance of victory in a direct confrontation with the Shia government and the U.S. occupation forces. Under pressure from Iran, which also did not want a hot war in Iraq, Sadr demobilized his forces and promised to transform them from a militia into a political party in the run-up to Iraq’s provincial elections.

Finally, despite the constant drumbeat of U.S. allegations that Iran has fueled conflict in Iraq, the Iranian government has done the exact opposite. It has used its close relationship with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki as well as with Sadr, who now resides in Qom, Iran, to stabilize Iraq. Iran has developed elaborate connections with all the Shia parties and leaders over decades and does not want to see a conflict that would threaten its goal of establishing a Shia-dominated Iraq as an ally.
Attempt to consolidate order

While the surge is not responsible for the relative stability, the United States has attempted to use the fortuitous combination of factors outlined above to lay the foundations for greater order in Iraq.

First and foremost, the U.S. has tried to strengthen the Iraqi Security Forces through systematic training and collaboration in the field, hoping thereby to repair the damage they did with its disastrous decision to tear apart Saddam Hussein’s military. That decision weakened the new state it was building, left a massive security vacuum, and played a large part in alienating the Sunni population that had been employed in the military.

Washington had significant success with this initiative. The U.S. and Iraqi government have built the forces up to about 559,000 soldiers and police officers, rebuilt the officer corps, and increasingly replaced U.S. forces with Iraqis backed up by U.S. advisers. The Iraqi forces are still dependent on U.S. support for planning, logistics, and air power—a weakness that the United States will use to control the military. Yet the Shiite-dominated army fighting for a Shiite-dominated Iraq has found motivation to fight that goes beyond its questionable role as stooges for a foreign occupation.

The United States has begun to withdraw its forces to bases and has used Iraqi soldiers and police to impose security. As a result, Iraqi Security Forces are now taking the brunt of military casualties. As the Associated Press reports, “the number of Iraqi security forces killed in September rose by nearly a third to 159 compared with the same period last year…. U.S. troop deaths for the same period fell by nearly 40 percent to twenty-five. The figures are a sign that the U.S. military is increasingly relying on the Iraqis, including U.S.-allied Sunni fighters, to take the lead in operations so that [the Iraqis] can assume responsibility for their own security and let the Americans eventually withdraw.”

The United States has also made progress in getting the Iraqi elites to strike some deals, achieving some superficial political reconciliation. Stephen Biddle, Michael O’Hanlon, and Kenneth Pollack note “a series of important political compromises among Iraq’s senior leaders: in December 2007 and February 2008, they passed a budget law, a new de-Baathification law, an amnesty for former insurgents, a pensions law, and a provincial power act that is an important part of an ongoing decentralization process. Together all of these developments raise the potential of creating a new and better political order in Iraq. For now, there is still more potential than realization.”

A restive client state

As the adaptation of poet Robert Burns’s line famously goes, “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry,” and the U.S. occupation has never had good planning. In fact, the consequences of the occupation will likely undo the fragile and relative peace in Iraq in the coming months and years.

Ironically, the relative stabilization of Iraq has enabled the Maliki government to increasingly resist U.S. ambitions in Iraq. As Michael Schwartz writes, “The client state that the Bush administration has spent so many years and hundreds of billions of dollars creating, nurturing, and defending has shown increasing disloyalty and lack of gratitude, as well as an ever stronger urge to go its own way. Under pressure of Iraqi politics, Maliki has moved strongly in the direction of a nationalist position on two key issues: the continuing occupation of the country and the future of Iraqi oil.”

In order to appeal to the Shia population that opposes the occupation in the run-up to provincial elections, Maliki and the Iraqi government have stood up against the United States in negotiations over the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The mandate for U.S. troops is set to expire at the end of 2008. In the bargaining over the agreement, Maliki has pushed for U.S. troops and mercenaries to be subject to prosecution under Iraqi law.

As the talks began to stall, the Americans proposed an alternative possibility of seeking a new United Nations (UN) mandate for the U.S. troop presence to give time to complete negotiations
Maliki opposed any new UN mandate for the troops, declaring that such a move would infringe on Iraqi sovereignty. He declared, “If we don’t reach an agreement by the 1st of January 2009, the (U.S.) troops will have to remain in their bases and then there should be a plan for a quick withdrawal.”

Maliki has similarly bucked U.S. dictates in deliberations over the much-delayed Oil Law as well as in negotiations over lucrative oil contracts. The Iraqi government cancelled six no-bid contracts negotiated with ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, Total, BP, and several smaller companies. It then turned around and ratified a long-standing promise to China, a strategic competitor of the United States, for a $3 billion oil services contract.

In perhaps the biggest rebuke to Washington, the Iraqi government has continued to develop close ties with the Iranian government. Maliki’s Dawa Party as well as ISCI are close collaborators with the Iran. Maliki has gone out of his way to promise that the United States will not be able to use Iraq as a staging ground for an attack on Iran. His foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari announced, with Condoleezza Rice at his side, “Iraq will not be used as a launching pad for any aggressive acts against neighboring countries.”

All of this has led the Bush administration to distrust the Iraqi government. Thus, as Bob Woodward documents in his new book *The War Within*, Bush ordered his representatives to spy on and monitor Maliki’s every move.

Of course the United States is still the dominant force in Iraq, but it now confronts a Shia-dominated government that is shaking the leash: it has aligned itself with Iran, and now has both oil revenues and a military to back up its nationalist aspirations. Schwartz argues that “U.S. leverage over the Iraqi government, though still formidable, is in decline. The Bush administration—or its soon to be elected successor—may face a difficult dilemma: whether to accept some version of the withdrawal demands of the Iraqi government or reescalate the war in yet one more attempt to create a government that is ‘aligned with U.S interests.’”

**Maliki versus the Awakening Councils**

The greatest conflict that threatens to undo the fragile stability is most likely not between the United States and the Shia government, but between that government and the Sunnis, especially the Awakening Councils.

On October 1, the Iraqi government was charged with integrating the Awakening Councils into the Iraqi security forces. But Maliki has promised to hire only 20 percent of the fighters. Leila Fadel reports that Shiite “officials are making clear that they don’t intend to include most of the rest. ‘We cannot stand them, and we detained many of them recently,’ said one senior Iraqi commander in Baghdad, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because he wasn’t authorized to discuss the issue. ‘Many of them were part of al-Qaeda despite the fact that many of them are helping us to fight al-Qaeda.”

Maliki has indeed ordered the arrest of hundreds of Awakening Council fighters, the Iraqi security forces have moved against some of the Councils in Anbar and Baghdad, and Shia militias have already carried out assassinations of key Sunni leaders they consider to be insurgents and separatists.

Robert Dreyfuss argues in the *Nation* that there “is a grave possibility that the relative calm that has prevailed in Iraq over the past year will be shattered if the Shiite-led government and its allied militia, the Badr Brigade of the pro-Iranian…ISCI, engage in an armed power struggle with the Awakening forces for control of western Baghdad.”

Even more ominously, Dreyfuss cites a former Iraqi official who says that the Russians are talking with resistance leaders and Awakening members in Damascus, Syria.

According to this official, former Baathists, army officers and Awakening members in Damascus, Amman and inside Iraq are looking to Russia for support, especially since Russia seems intent on reasserting itself in the Middle East. “The Russians intend to come out strongly to play with the Sunnis,” he said. “I heard this from [Council] members in Damascus and Amman. ‘If the Americans abandon us, we will go to the Russians.”
This could result in a conflict between the United States and Russia over the prostrate body of Iraq.

**Conflict over Kirkuk**

The most immediate threat to the current “peace” in Iraq is the battle over Kirkuk, the oil-rich city in the province of Tamim that borders the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi government conducted a campaign of “Arabization,” sending thousands of Sunni Arabs to displace Kurds in the city. Now the Kurds have conducted a reverse campaign with their Peshmerga forces driving Arabs from their homes.

The *New York Times* reports that, “The Kurds are battling for hegemony in areas that lie along the border of their semiautonomous region. They are competing with Turkmens and Sunni Arabs who claim primacy of ownership to some the same territory, particularly the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding province. Politicians have tried repeatedly since 2003 to reach a deal to resolve the disputes. But each effort has foundered on Kurdish ambitions to expand the Kurdistan region.”

Turkey opposes Kurdish claims over Kirkuk, superficially to protect the Turkmens, but in reality to prevent the Kurds from gaining control over its oil reserves. If they were to do so, the Kurds would have the economic foundation to support their nationalist aspirations to build an independent state, something that directly threatens Turkey, which has fought to repress Kurds within Turkey as well as across the border in Iraq. If the Kurds are able to consolidate their hold on Kirkuk, it is conceivable that Turkey would attack and tip Iraq into a new conflagration.

The question of Kirkuk is so controversial among Iraq’s three main communities (Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds) that it had to be excluded in the provincial elections agreement struck in parliament. Kirkuk is likely to become a multipolar battle between Kurds, Sunnis, and Turkey via its ethnic minority population. Already al-Qaeda has made Kirkuk the center of many of its operations, specifically targeting Kurds.

**Elections, sectarian conflicts, and power struggles**

The provincial election scheduled to take place before January 31, 2009, could itself become a cause of increased conflict within Iraq. The tribal leaders and former members of the resistance within the Awakening Councils hope to seize control of Sunni-dominated provinces. They will likely oust the Iraqi Islamic Party, which Sunnis look upon as a collaborator with the Shia parties. This could trigger further battles between Sunni and Shia forces over any number of questions.

The elections will also spark smoldering conflicts between the Shia forces that will be competing with one another in their provinces and areas where they predominate. Maliki’s Dawa party, which favors a centralized government, will compete with ISCI, which supports a federalized structure with a Shia superregion in the country’s south. Both will be competing with the Sadristas as well as with regional parties like Fadhila in Basra.

The election will be the political expression of the soft partitioning of Iraq. The three great communities, which the United States pitted against one another in its invasion and occupation, are now for the most part segregated from one another. There is no nationalist resistance that has managed to unite the three communities, instead the elections will offer sectarian forces the opportunity to consolidate their domination over “purified” ethnic/sectarian regions.

The United States will seek to manipulate these divisions in order to continue managing the crisis their occupation has caused. No matter who is elected president, the United States has no plans to leave the country to the Iraqis, especially given the five “enduring” bases and as many as fifty-eight smaller bases it has built. None of the plans from Bush, McCain, or Obama will withdraw all the troops; they all plan to leave tens of thousands of troops to impose their wishes in Iraq. So they will yet again play each ethnic group against the other—all the while claiming that they must stay in order to prevent these groups from clashing—to maintain their hold over the country.

Washington’s greatest nightmare is that the Shia parties will lock in their domination over the country and pull it increasingly into Iran’s orbit. The U.S. will therefore masquerade as being
interested in protecting the interests of the Sunnis or Kurds as a block to Shia domination. But its real aim will be maintaining its bases and checking Iranian influence.

“Success” is bad for Iraq and the world

Even if these conflicts do not erupt any time soon and the United States can muddle its way through, such “success” is not in the interests of Iraqis, the region or the world. The U.S. war, occupation, and surge were never aimed to bring peace and humanitarian aid to Iraq.

As Alan Greenspan was so impolite as to admit in his memoir *The Age of Turbulence*, the war was always about Iraq’s oil and imperial domination over the Middle East and the world. The United States aimed to establish itself as the predominant power in the region through continuing regime changes beginning with Iraq and then moving on to Iran and Syria. The U.S. would thereby replace “rogue” regimes with clients and control all of the Middle East along with its strategic oil reserves. It could then curb rising competitors like China, which depends on imported oil from the Middle East, as well as prevent others like Russia from building a bloc of petro-powers that would threaten U.S. imperial domination.

The difficulties associated with both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have wrecked these earlier dreams of the Bush Doctrine. Even *Foreign Affairs* writers Biddle, O’Hanlon, and Pollack, who are impressed with the return to some degree of stability in Iraq, title their latest article, “How to Leave a Stable Iraq.” In other words, the expectations of what the United States can achieve in Iraq have been dialed down drastically from the heady days of the invasion. The authors conclude that, if the United States plays its cards right, “it could yet emerge from Mesopotamia with something that may still fall well short of Eden on the Euphrates but that prevents the horrors of all-out civil war, avoids the danger of a wider war, and yields a stability that endures as Americans come home.”

This is not exactly what the invasion was supposed to achieve. And even this prognosis the authors feel compelled to qualify: “Of course, much could still go wrong. And if an electoral crisis or some other event returns Iraq to civil war, it would be very hard to justify another troop surge to try to stabilize Iraq. Containment—withdrawal all U.S. troops while working to prevent the chaos in Iraq from spilling over to the rest of the region—would then become the United States’ only realistic option.” Neither of these two outcomes can be described as anything like a victory for the United States.

Moreover, the latest U.S. intelligence report thinks the worse outcome (for the United States) is the more likely one. According to one news report, “A nearly completed high-level U.S. intelligence analysis warns that unresolved ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq could unleash a new wave of violence, potentially reversing the major security and political gains achieved over the last year.”

The United States will continue to find ways to maintain its presence in Iraq and secure as many of its goals, however modified, as possible. The U.S. antiwar movement therefore has a crucial responsibility to expose the myths of the surge and to reaffirm its fundamental demand for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, mercenaries, and corporations from Iraq.

Ashley Smith is a member of the ISR editorial board.


10 Gamel, “Iraq forces gain.”


17 Schwartz, “Who lost Iraq?”


20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


24 Ibid.