

Iraq: The Broader Trends in Violence

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The last few weeks have been filled with grim reports of suicide and bombing attacks in Iraq. They serve as a warning that the struggle against al Qaeda in Iraq, Shi'ite extremists in the Mahdi Army, and other causes of civil violence are not over. As U.S. officials and commanders have repeatedly warned, the situation is “fragile” at best.

At the same time, one has to be very careful about riding the headlines in assessing violence in Iraq. USCENTCOM has released newly updated statistics on the overall patterns of violence in Iraq and estimates of civilian casualties. They show that the overall levels of violence still fit within the pattern that developed in late 2008, and which has been consistent ever since.

The total number of violent incidents first dropped below 400 in June 2008 and remained close to 400 through November 2008. It has since averaged below 200, but it has been far from zero. It has also remained a diverse mix of four major types of attacks:

- Attacks against Iraqi infrastructure and government organizations
- Bombs (IEDs and mines), both found and exploded
- Sniper, ambush, grenade, and other small arms attacks
- Mortar, rocket, and surface-to-air attacks

These attacks have been dominated by bombings and increasingly by personal suicide attacks—a kind of attack that is extremely difficult to halt in any society with free social movement. The use of widows, men motivated by revenge and honor killings, and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) uniforms have compounded the problem. Iraqis are doing the bombings, and bombers look like anyone else; men in uniform and women who are hard to search make things worse.

It is equally important to look at the overall trend in casualties. Once again, new updated figures are available from USCENTCOM. They do not show a rise and the fact that there was a dramatic dip in February 2009 never met that there would not be very bad months in the future. If one uses the Iraqi and coalition estimate—which is significantly higher than the insurgency related estimates of the coalition alone—the pattern that emerged from June 2008 on made it likely that there would be some 250 civilian deaths a month, with a higher number of wounded.

No one attempted to conceal this level of continuing violence or these risks. Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus never talked about “victory.” They warned that there would be a continuing al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Mahdi Army threat, ongoing sectarian and ethnic tensions that would take years to turn into stable political accommodation—if this was possible at all. They made it clear that it would be at least several years before fully effective Iraqi Security Forces could be in place.

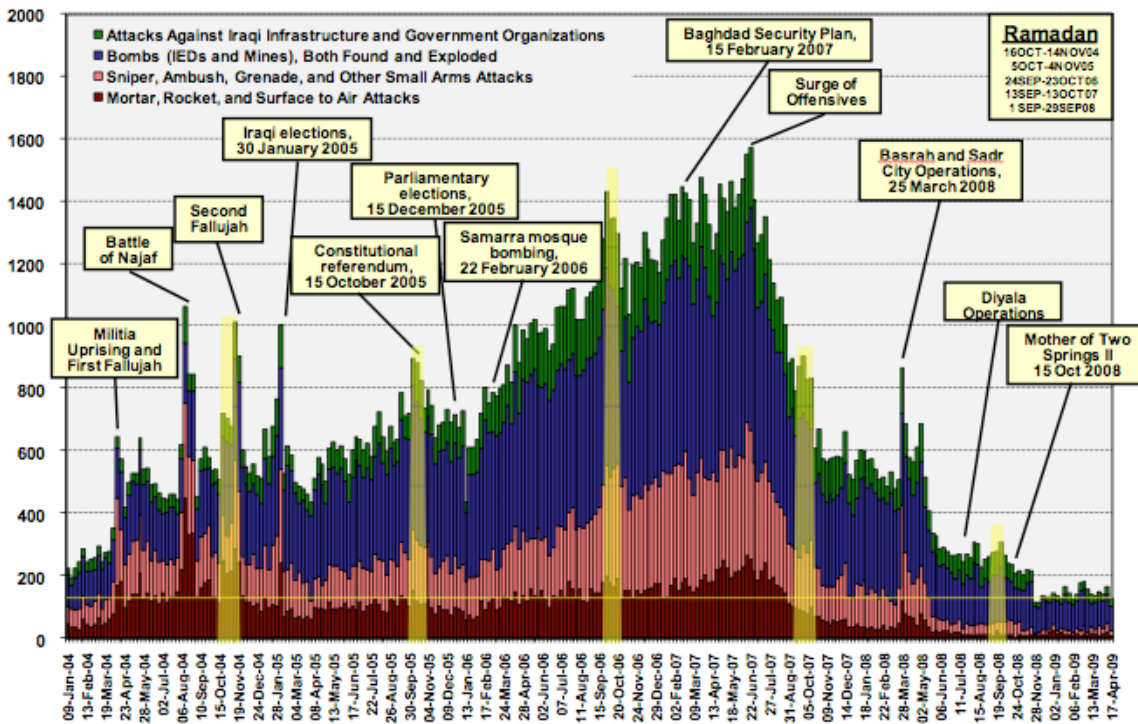
The current U.S. commander in Iraq—General Odierno—warned a year ago that the level of violence in Iraq might reach an “irreducible minimum” for several years. Reporting by the Department of Defense and State Department, testimony to Congress, warned that the future levels of violence would be driven by the fact al Qaeda in Iraq would take time to defeat in detail, Shi'ite extremist element in the Mahdi Army, tensions between Kurd and Arab, and internal power struggles within Iraq's key sectarian and ethnic factions.

The keys to eliminating this remaining level violence are clear—and they will require consistent U.S. effort through at least the end of President Obama’s first term. They are Iraqi political accommodation, the creation of fully effective Iraqi security forces, establishing a rule of law, and giving Iraqis—especially young men—employment and economic hope. These conditions will take at least three more years to create.

In the interim, there will be good and bad months, but no truly peaceful months. Jihadist threats like AQI will exploit every window of opportunity in the hope that they can find some fault line that will drive Iraq back toward civil war and conditions where they have some hope of gaining power. They will do so regardless of whether the window is U.S. withdrawals, Iraqi internal tensions, or simply a target of convenience in a large market or during a religious holiday. Hard-line Shi’ite elements, like the worst elements of the Mahdi Army, and neo-Ba’athist groups may do the same. These factions will also use violence to raise money and get foreign volunteers.

We need to accept this reality to move forward. The present range of attacks is not a reason to assume Iraq is failing or reverting to civil conflict. It is a clear warning that it can do so unless Iraqis do move toward political accommodation, unless there is more rapid economic progress and Iraqi forces develop in ways that encourage political unity. They are also a warning that the United States still needs to focus at least as much on Iraqi stability and security as leaving Iraq.

Security Incidents in Iraq: January 2004–April 2009



Source: SIGACTS (CF Reports) as of 18 April 2009.

Trends in Civilian Deaths: January 2006–April 2009

