



# Iraq

## *Prospect for Stability*

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DRDC CORA

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**Defence R&D Canada**  
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# **Iraq**

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## **Abstract**

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This Technical Note surveys the political, social and economic developments in Iraq in 2007, as well as the related regional environment. It highlights the improvement of the security situation, which is contrasted to continuous economic underdevelopment and social strife. To establish the prospects of long-term stability in the country, the Technical Note examines the Soviet experience in Afghanistan during the 1980s and concludes that stability is dependent on the Iraqi government assuming a greater degree of legitimacy. An important factor is also whether the Iraqi economy can recover to a level that can sustain such a government without a significant dependency on foreign aid.

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## Table of contents

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Abstract .....	i
Table of contents .....	iii
1.... Introduction.....	1
2.... Security .....	2
3.... Social end Economic Developments .....	4
4.... Regional Environment .....	7
5.... Looking Forward .....	8
6.... Conclusion .....	10
Distribution list.....	11

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# 1 Introduction

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*“Iraq is a crippled nation growing on the financial equivalent of steroids, with money pouring in from abroad.”*

Newsweek International, August 2007

United States-led coalition troops have been entangled in Iraq since March 2003, battling insurgent groups and struggling to provide local security, while the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US State Department, alongside international organizations, have mounted significant effort to rebuild Iraq’s economy, society and state institutions. Nevertheless, from the 2003 victorious march to Baghdad until the middle of 2007, the situation in Iraq, especially on the security side, progressively deteriorated and the Iraqi government’s legitimacy was considered next to non-existent in the areas outside the capital. At the end of 2006, the Iraq Study Group concluded: “Violence is increasing in scope and lethality [...] The Iraqi people have a democratically elected government, yet it is not adequately advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security, or delivering essential services. Pessimism is pervasive.”

Establishing the prospect of long-term stability in Iraq is an important strategic question in view of Iraq’s regional and global importance. Iraq’s long-term stability is also critical to the US ability to refocus and shift resources to Afghanistan, which still poses a threat to the regional and global security, and where Canada and the CF have been actively involved since 2001.

The analysis below considers the political and economic developments in Iraq in 2007 and tries to establish the prospects for long-term stability in the country.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information cut-off date: December 2007.

## 2 Security

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Iraq entered 2007 on the heels of its most violent year since the 2003 U.S. invasion. According to the Iraq Body Count project, 44 percent of all violent civilian deaths since the end of the major military operations in May 2003 occurred between March 2006 and March 2007. During the same period, the number of bomb blasts that kill more than 50 people, fatal suicide bombs, car bombs, and roadside bombing attacks doubled. Most of the deaths were the result of sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias and intra-sectarian clashes between various Shia militia groups in the South. In contrast, the number of U.S. military personnel killed in 2006 was actually lower than in the two previous years.

To deal with the grave security situation, the Bush Administration decided not to pull any troops from Iraq, as the Iraq Study Group report had suggested in late 2006, but to do exactly the opposite—to transfer an additional 30,000 combat troops to the country. As part of what came to be called the “surge” strategy, the troops were not stationed at large bases, but rather at security outposts in the most violent neighbourhoods. A series of offensives was launched over the summer against al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), as well as other Islamist groups and Shia militias. When, in a surprise development, a number of Sunni tribal groups turned against AQI and drove them from their previous stronghold in the Anbar province, Washington also adopted a different policy towards the Iraqi Sunnis, who had previously been seen as the main source for the insurgency and had therefore been somewhat marginalized compared to the Shia population. A concerted effort was made to build local alliances and co-opt Sunni tribal leaders by signing formal agreements and providing them with financial incentives. More than 70,000 Sunnis followed their elders and became members of U.S.-backed militia groups (dubbed “concerned citizens” organizations), providing security in the West and north of Baghdad.

In the second half of 2007, the tide of violence appeared to be receding, but it still remained high. According to the September report to Congress by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, most of the security benchmarks, such as civilian deaths, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and mass-casualty bombings, had declined from 30 to 50 percent from the beginning of the surge in June. Broken down regionally, the security situation seems to have improved mostly in the Baghdad area where sectarian killings have decreased by 28 percent, car bombs by 67 percent, and roadside bombs by 40 percent. In the provinces, the improvement has been much more modest.

The more “hands-on” U.S. counterinsurgency approach undoubtedly played a role in the improvement of the overall security situation. The more active involvement of U.S. troops is reflected in the number of casualties among them. In 2007, U.S. military deaths reached 901—their highest level since 2003. However, the “surge” was only one of a number of factors that contributed to the improved security picture. With respect to the reduction of sectarian violence, the most important factor seems to have been the increasing homogenization of the Iraqi population in formerly mixed sectarian quarters/regions. In once-mixed neighbourhoods or villages, the Sunni or Shia population has been expelled, or simply left (there are now 2.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Iraq), and as a result, these areas tend to be sectari-ally homogeneous. The setbacks suffered by AQI, meanwhile, are due in large part to the tribal backlash against al Qaida’s jihadist Puritanism and its disrespect of tribal customs and authority;

U.S. troops played an active, but on the whole a supporting, role in the resulting clashes against AQI. While AQI has been disrupted and displaced, it is far from defeated. In the northern province of Ninewa, for example, where AQI militants fled after the crackdowns in Anbar and Baghdad, car bombings have increased by 129 percent and violent civilian deaths by 143 percent. The retreat of Shia militias during the surge is also probably due as much as to their reluctance to engage U.S. troops as to their preoccupation with intra-militia turf battles in Southern Iraq. In other words, the prospects for further improvement in the security situation in Iraq depends not only on the ability of the U.S. to keep up the momentum with their increased troop strength but also on whether the Sunni militias will keep the pressure on AQI and not return to fighting the coalition troops or the Shia-dominated government. It would also be unwise to assume that the present internal squabbling between the Shia militias will continue indefinitely. The fact that the two most important Shia groups, the al-Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, signed a truce in October suggests that reconciliation between intramural opponents may already have begun.

### 3 Social and Economic Developments

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By improving the security situation the “surge” has provided an opportunity for the Iraqi government to advance its efforts in the areas of national reconciliation and state building, as well as to work on the social and economic development fronts. However, the government remains ineffective, corrupt, and has little influence over the regions outside of Baghdad. As a result, little has been accomplished. The U.S. Presidential Report to Congress on Iraqi government benchmarks released in September 2007 states that of the eighteen benchmarks established by the Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, the Iraqi government has made satisfactory progress on nine of them and had failed to do so on seven. However, the report appraises the progress on some important laws as satisfactory on the basis of available draft versions, which have yet to be enacted as legislation. The progress on two of the benchmarks, disarming sectarian militias and establishing an amnesty program for former insurgents, was not rated because the necessary preconditions for the Iraqi government to start working on them did not at the time exist.

The most serious shortcoming of the Iraqi government remains its Shia-centered agenda, which prevents it from moving forward with the national reconciliation program. It is still meddling in the operations of the security forces to the advantage of Shias and, despite U.S. pressure, has derailed efforts to rehabilitate former Baath party members. The Maliki government regards the Sunni militias, who are paid directly by the U.S. and thus stand outside the Iraqi government’s jurisdiction, primarily as political rivals and potentially anti-government forces. Baghdad’s displeasure with the new U.S. tribal policy may have been the reason for its refusal to send a delegation to the Annapolis Middle East peace conference at the end of November. Although perhaps simply intended as a warning signal and not as an expression of changing loyalties, non-participation in this U.S.-led initiative put Iraq conspicuously in the Iranian camp, a major political embarrassment for the Bush Administration.

The Iraqi security forces (ISF) remain far from being able to assume total responsibility for security and defence in Iraq. According to the U.S. State Department, as of December 2007 the ISF totalled some 429,630 trained personnel. These numbers represent close to 85 percent of the ISF target level, but they tell very little either about the actual readiness of the forces, or about the proportion that can be counted on to show up for duty. In 2007, the ISF were supposed to achieve self-reliance in at least nine of Iraq’s 18 provinces. By year’s end, only limited capabilities had been achieved in three Kurdish and four Shia provinces. The Independent Commission on the ISF, created by Congress and chaired by the retired United States Marine Corps General James Jones, concluded in September that the ISF will not be able to defend Iraq’s borders against conventional military threats in the near term and unable to fulfill their essential security responsibilities in the next 12-18 months. The Commission’s report was especially critical of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) forces (responsible for the Police, National Police and Border Enforcement). The MoI itself is categorized as a ministry “in name only,” “dysfunctional and sectarian.” The police force is assessed as incapable of protecting neighbourhoods from insurgents and sectarian violence, while the National Police are seen to be so heavily compromised by sectarianism that the organization has been deemed by many to be non-viable in its current form. It should be pointed out that the Commission was mandated to evaluate the potential readiness of the ISF in the next 12 to 18 months only (roughly by the end of 2008) and thus its evaluation should not be taken as a guarantee that the ISF will be ready to fulfill its duties

shortly thereafter. The implication of this assessment is that U.S. forces must stay in Iraq for at least two more years in sufficient strength to prevent significant deterioration in the security situation.

The rebuilding of the Iraqi state and society cannot only be captured by tracking the progress in security, legislation and state building. Economic and social development is also critical. On the surface, the impression is that efforts are being made to revive the Iraqi economy. At time of writing, 29 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were operating in the 18 Iraqi provinces, while the primary goal of the International Compact with Iraq, launched in May 2007, was Iraq's "economic transformation and [its] integration into the regional and global economies." To facilitate the rebuilding of the Iraqi economy, Arab countries and Paris Club member states have pledged to forgive US\$62 billion of Saddam-era debt. In 2007, total reconstruction funds from domestic sources and international donors are expected to reach almost US\$104 billion. As a result of these efforts, Iraq's real GDP surpasses that of most Middle Eastern countries. According to the IMF, GDP growth in 2007 is forecast at six to ten percent; other analysts estimate that the actual growth rate may be as high as 17 percent. It is important not to read too much into such numbers; massive international investments may drive record Iraqi GDP growth, but they also skew basic economic realities on the ground.

Iraq is still struggling to reach its pre-war level of economic activity, an already low bar due to more than two decades of war and sanctions. For example, oil production, which accounts for around 60 percent of Iraq's GDP and is the most important indicator for the performance of Iraqi economy, averaged around 2 million barrels per day in 2007, while the pre-2003 production level stood at around 2.6 million barrels per day. The annual inflation rate, although down from the 50 plus percent peak in 2006, is still high at around 30 percent. GDP per capita when adjusted for inflation is still below the pre-2003 level. The manufacturing sector, with 175 factories running at production levels of 10 percent to 30 percent, as compared to 240 prewar factories that operated at 70-80 percent of capacity, is clearly underperforming. One of the often-cited economic successes in Iraq is the generation of electricity, which set a new record in 2007 and is 20 percent higher than the Saddam-era production levels. Nonetheless, this record supply meets only 60 percent of national demand. Baghdad, for example, still receives only between six and eight hours of electrical power per day (the spiralling demand for electricity is influenced by the post-Invasion influx in electrical appliances, and the fact that public electricity is free, meaning that there is no economic incentive to limit demand). But perhaps the most significant economic factor that impacts the daily lives of Iraqis is the high unemployment rate—currently anywhere between 25 to 40 percent—which combined with a significant youth cohort is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the high levels of violence and corruption.

How can we explain such a disparity between the seemingly huge investments in reconstruction and the disappointing results? Analysts have pointed to the difficult security situation as the obstacle to greater investments in the economy. The lower levels of violence in the last few months of 2007 may have indeed indicated that security has impact on economic progress. Since September 2007, some economic indicators such as oil production, inflation and unemployment have shown a marked improvement compared to their January 2007 levels. However, it is unlikely that economic development will increase its pace significantly. At the moment, the level of funds designated to the economy per se is too low, while their level of utilization is even lower. In October, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) reported that US\$1.5 billion are allocated to economic development. This amount represents only five percent of all

U.S. reconstruction funds for Iraq. Furthermore, less than 20 percent of them (US\$293 million), which represents a meagre 0.9 percent the total pool of funds, have been actually spent to date.

Iraq's best economic news in 2007 came from the performance of the Kurdish controlled areas of northern Iraq. As a result of a better security environment, the Kurdish Regional Government has been able to attract international investment to the oil sector. Per capita income in the Kurdish zone is much higher than the rest of the country, and a booming real estate market has led to a surge in trade and construction. Some problems remain to be resolve, for example, the dispute between Arabs and Kurds over the status of oil-rich Kirkuk; approval of pending legislation to establish the revenue-sharing mechanism for oil income; and uncertainties over the Turkish military build-up at the border. All of these could have an impact on the relative calm and prosperity in the north.

Progress in education, health care and water quality also remains inadequate. As the recent cholera outbreaks in Basra, Baghdad, Dahuk, Mosul and Tikrit illustrate, there are deficiencies in the sphere of human development. However, the sharp drop in the educational level of the current young generation is likely to have the most significant long-term impact on Iraqi society. According to the UN, more than 30 percent of Iraqi children are not registered in school due to security concerns, lack of educational infrastructure or internal displacement. This situation will exacerbate generational instability and complicate the rebuilding of Iraq's society and economy. It is also likely to encourage the growth of religious extremism in Iraq and, and perhaps across the region.

As whole, Iraqi society is fragmented by both Sunni-Shia sectarian strife and Kurdish nationalism. Internal displacement has weakened Iraqis' sense of nationhood and, in many cases, Iraqis are seeking protection and a sense of identity in tribal affiliation and kin relationships. The fragmentation of Iraqi society is physically and symbolically represented by the erection of barriers and fences between divergent ethnic or sectarian groups living in close proximity.

## 4 Regional Environment

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The regional environment is less than conducive to the rebuilding and stabilization of Iraq. Iran was, and would again be, threatened by a militarily and economically strong Iraq, which could serve as rival, and perhaps a buffer, to its interests in the Gulf. Tehran will almost certainly continue to support destabilizing Shia militia groups and will try to influence the Iraqi government through the Shia parties. The only negative security trend highlighted by the September 2007 Petraeus report was in the area of IED attacks launched by Iranian-backed Shia groups, which had doubled over the previous six months. Although these attacks have since declined in frequency, the increased sophistication of IED technology points to continuing Iranian support. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is working to counterbalance Iranian power in Iraq. Thus, a variety of interests tied to foreign powers collides in Iraq, vastly complicating progress in rebuilding Iraq's society and economy. The recent NIE report may have removed the likelihood of a U.S. strike on Iran, which would have no doubt further complicated the regional security environment; but the possibility of a large-scale Turkish offensive in Northern Iraq provoked by Kurdish terrorist activities in Turkey remains high (more information on the Turkish-Iraqi tensions is provided earlier in the Middle East chapter).

Iraqi regional relations also suffer as a result of the estimated 2.25 to 2.5 million Iraqis who have sought refuge in neighbouring Arab countries, primarily Jordan and Syria, since 2003. The Middle East has not seen such an exodus of people since the Palestinians in 1948 and is dealing with the situation primarily through the prism of its experience with the Palestinian refugees. At present, both Syria and Jordan are trying to impose greater control on their borders and limit the further influx of Iraqis, while at the same time creating a domestic environment that discourages the Iraqi refugees from remaining on their soil. In addition to the brain-drain effect on the Iraqi economy, the refugee crisis has brought about an unprecedented situation in the Middle East, where each of Iraq's neighbours is building security fences on its border.

## 5 Looking Forward

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A useful parallel to what may happen in Iraq in the next five years or so might be provided by Afghanistan's experience during the period of Soviet occupation in the 1980s. As in the case of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the then Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan in 1979 as a result of perceived security concerns, with the direct objective to execute a regime change. In both instances, the military campaign was accomplished successfully in a short period of time, only for the US and the Soviet Union to find out that a prolonged military presence to provide security and support to the new regimes is necessary. In both Afghanistan during the 1980s and Iraq since 2003, the two superpower states encountered a complex society, divided linguistically, ethnically and alongside sectarian lines; a society whose traditions and cultural values the occupying forces had difficulty understanding. Yet, these forces sought to impose new and alien social models and political systems to the countries they have invaded—a socialist society and a Soviet political system in the case of the USSR, and a liberal society and a democratic system of governance in the case of the US. In both cases a growing insurgency has acquired global dimensions and has been receiving support from neighbouring countries.

The initial emphasis of the USSR and that of the US to counter the insurgency has been that of brutal military power. At the same time, a concerted effort was also taken in the spheres of social, economic development and state building. Nevertheless, by 1985, the Soviet leaders have realized that their approaches to change the country and defeat the insurgency have failed, a feeling which the US had tasted in 2006. In 1986, the USSR changed its tactics and deemphasized sovietization of the Afghan state and society, began promoting national reconciliation, held elections and adopted a new tribal policy, which sought to bring tribal chiefs on the side of the government. The Red Army all but ceased military operations against the insurgency, set up permanent security posts outside the main bases and sent dozens of civil-military units in the countryside to establish closer connection with the local population. Significant efforts were put into building the capabilities of the Afghan forces, which were seen as the key in facilitating the eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country. The resemblance of the Soviet change of strategy in 1986 to the one executed by the US in 2007 is striking. The question that arises, therefore, is what fate the new Soviet strategic approach brought to Afghanistan in the long run and, thus, can we assume a similar outcome in Iraq.

In 1989, the Red Army withdrew from Afghanistan. The withdrawal was timely in view of the seemingly improving situation in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the policy of National Reconciliation had tempted thousands of mujahidin to change sides and enrol in government-funded militias. The Afghan army, on the other hand, had been able to assume greater combat responsibilities and to fill the void left by the Soviet troops. Tribal leaders have been also increasingly beginning to view the deals offered by the Kabul government as better than the ones offered by the opposition parties in Peshawar and more villages had been recognizing the government's authority. After the Soviet withdrawal, initial expectations for quick fall of the Kabul regime had not materialized. The Soviet-trained Afghan army was able to achieve a balance of power with the mujahidin and, as a result, the Kabul regime had begun to acquire a degree of legitimacy in the beginning of the 1990s. Yet, how can we explain the decade of civil war that ensued in the 1990s and the coming to power of the most extreme group among the opposition?

The strategic failure of the Soviet approach to Afghanistan was not due to military setbacks. The withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan was the result of a political decision, made three years earlier, and which was based on the change in the USSR's foreign policy adopted by the Communist Party's new leadership. It was the failure of Soviet social and economic policies that ultimately led to the disintegration of the country. The National Reconciliation and the tribal policies instead of ensuring stability of the regime, in fact, only perpetuated the power of local centers as the state's alternatives. The connection between countryside and government under the banner of National Reconciliation was only an artificial one, which could persist only as long as the central government was able to re-distribute the resources coming mostly from foreign aid. There was no cohesion even inside the regime as the policy to appease different power groups and include their representatives in the government was only superficial. In reality, only one faction, which was dominated by a particular ethnic group, held most of the political power. The preconditions for the development of such a scenario in Iraq are certainly in place.

But even in the fragmented social and political environment of early 1990s, the Afghan regime's chances for survival could be considered significant. What made the difference in the power equilibrium in Afghanistan in 1991 was the decision of the newly formed Russian state to cut off all foreign aid to Kabul. Until then, Soviet aid was the most important source for meeting the regime's expenses, especially after the latter skyrocketed with the launch of the National Reconciliation. The disappearance of foreign aid made the maintenance of the huge military machine at the disposal of the regime impossible and eliminated the leverage which it had for keeping the regional warlords loyal. It should be pointed out that, until the very end, the Kabul regime did not believe that their Soviet allies would ever withdraw their patronage and continued to be engaged in bitter inter-faction rivalries. As soon as it became obvious that the regime could not maintain the balance of power anymore, both the opposition groups and those only loosely affiliated with the government moved in to divide the spoils among themselves, thereby spurring a full-fledged civil war. The eventual victory of the Taliban was made possible by the support of a neighbouring country—Pakistan—that used the opportunity to protect its own interests in the case of the power vacuum in Afghanistan.

## 6 Conclusion

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Given the precariousness of the current situation in Iraq, it is difficult to predict what the future may hold. As much as the U.S. and the international community might hope for and work towards the establishment of democracy in Iraq, and the stabilization of the region writ large, the prospects of civil war leading to a Balkanization, or even the disintegration, of the country cannot be entirely ruled out.

The eventual withdrawal of the U.S. military from Iraq will not by itself throw the country into chaos. The shape of the future will depend on whether a majority of Iraqis see the government as sectarian and corrupt, or as a legitimate institution, and a force for social cohesion. Another vital factor is the rebuilding and recovery of the Iraqi economy to a level that meets the needs and expectations of the populace, and the requirements of the government, without significant dependence on foreign aid. Finally, normalization of Iraq's relations with its neighbours is an essential component of domestic and regional stability.

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