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Riding the Surge from Iraq to Afghanistan

The last several weeks have brought a steady stream of unwelcome news for the proponents of the surge in Afghanistan. After initially announcing in January that attacks against International Security Assistance Forces and government troops, were down seven percent in 2012 from 2011, NATO retracted and announced in February that there was no decline in attacks. This comes at the heels of several reports questioning the efficacy of the Afghan government and the Afghan National Security Forces, the feasibility of keeping the nation united, the claims of economic progress, the constant revision of statistics, the lack of transparency and accountability, and the uncertainty surrounding the transition process. **It may at this juncture be beneficial to think back to the surge in Iraq and review history for parallels and lessons not learned.**

In announcing the so called “West Point Surge” in 2009, President Obama referenced the events of September 11 and proclaimed a “way forward” that is in the “vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan.” The President indicated that the troops would be part of an international effort that would begin to wind down in just 18 months, after transferring the responsibility of Afghanistan to the Afghans. He also promised an effort based on performance, combating corruption, and assistance in vital economic sectors such as agriculture. The President outlined three core elements of his strategy, “A military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan.” Addressing the nation and invoking September 11, President Bush introduced the surge in Iraq as a “New Way Forward” with support from Iraq’s neighboring countries. He outlined three main elements of his strategy: a military effort necessitating the addition of 20,000 US troops in Iraq and the cooperation of the Iraqi forces, economic reconstruction and infrastructure rebuilding, and political inclusion. President Bush defined a successful strategy as going beyond military operations, “Ordinary Iraqi citizens must see that military operations are accompanied by visible improvements in their neighborhoods and communities. So America will hold the Iraqi government to the benchmarks it has announced.”

Both President Bush and Obama alluded to “benchmarks” and “efforts based on performance” as indicators of success. The strategy for victory in Iraq identified numerous metrics to map the progress of the three tracks. Regardless of the efficacy of the metrics in indicating progress, political, security and economic metrics were tracked and systematic data updates were made available. The strategy also identified other indicators that are essential to success but, according to the strategy, less precise to measure -- including trust in governmental institutions, acceptance of rule of law, and the extent of transparency in official operations. In contrast, very little in the form of official progress reporting is detailed in reports on Afghanistan.

In applying the surge approach to Afghanistan, policymakers may have placed unwarranted emphasis on the efficacy of the surge in influencing security and economics in Iraq. There appears to be compelling evidence that several events (including the surge) may have had an influence on security in the short and medium-term. There is less compelling evidence that economic stability and development responded to the surge. As indicated by NATO data, the surge in Afghanistan does not appear to have improved the security situation, let alone influenced the national economy. In fact, there are *many significant, pre-existing differences between Iraq and Afghanistan* that could influence the long-term outcome for these nations.

In the period leading up to the 1980s, Iraq had a relatively high standard of living, a highly educated population,

and was one of the more prosperous and economically advanced countries in the region. In addition, the presence of oil income could help finance development in Iraq and mitigate the lack of international development aid. Afghanistan, on the other hand, had some of the *lowest levels of development* in the world even before the 2001 war began. In the ensuing period, the combination of foreign and military aid and NGO spending has been the engine of growth for the Afghan economy. This has created unrealistic expectations for donors and Afghans alike. Donors wrongly expect the Government of Afghanistan to maintain these growth levels, and Afghans incorrectly expect the international community to sustain these growth levels and support for high levels of income.

As Iraq and Afghanistan emerge from conflict they face severe challenges on many fronts: security, politics, governance, economics, and well-being. Their successful transition from violence to stability and economic development will not be direct and will likely result from the confluence of many factors over the long-term. These factors include economies based on realistic expectations and national resources and an understanding that functioning political systems are necessarily home grown and may take decades to emerge. Surges are one little step, perhaps even backwards, along a long and arduous road.

For more information on the effects of the Iraq surge on economic development and security, please refer to: Amara, J., (2013). Implications of military stabilization efforts on economic development and security: The case of Iraq. *Journal of Development Economics*. 99(2): 244-254.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are the author's.

Tags: *Afghanistan, Iraq, Security Assistance, Surge*