

# *Letter from Baghdad*

**SSG Johnny Meyer**

I am not a certified expert on the Middle East. The fact is I do not have a college degree – yet. But before writing this I poured over articles, essays, embassy cables and street reports. I talked to Iraqis, my fellow soldiers, and our diplomats to discover what I could truly say about this hesitant war, this relative peace. I cannot tell you how to think or feel about this war. I can only tell you about my experience here and what I have learned.

I am an infantryman, an Airborne Ranger. I joined the Army back in 2001 to jump out of airplanes and shoot guns, not shake hands and make nice. Yet, through a strange series of events, I've been assigned to a government capacity-building team referred to as a PRT, or Provincial Reconstruction Team, effectively turning my rifle into an unlikely option rather than a serious threat. On this deployment, my engagements involve tea and cigarettes rather than bullets and rocket launchers, nicotine and caffeine rather than adrenaline. I can't say that I'm completely satisfied with my new situation: it is surprising and complicated – a nice parallel with the state of Iraq as a whole.

With this letter, I'm going to try to shed some light on the situation here, but I should warn you that every time I learn something new about Iraq, I feel as if I'm holding a flashlight that illuminates a further complication, another detail, another problem, or perhaps another solution, or a way out or a way to win. So please do not look to this letter for the definitive answer.

To begin our quick survey, the Shia Arabs can be imprecisely divided into two camps. The Shia Badrists dislike, disparage, and mistrust the Shia Sadrists, but they've hit the pause button on outright bloodshed to jostle for votes in a potential election this fall. Both of them are concerned about the U.S. push to include more Sunnis in the government, and they aren't without reason – just last year, some Sunni enclaves harboured the al-Qaeda terrorists that sent suicide bombers into markets and Shia mosques.

In Baghdad, we have the luxury of an integrated Kurdish population rather than one pushing for greater autonomy, but in the country as a whole, this isn't the case.

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The threat of an independent Kurdistan hangs over us like a skier in an avalanche prone valley – perhaps it won't all come down on you, but if it did, you wouldn't be able to do much about it.

For the time being, the largest Shia militia, the Sadrist group called *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, has stopped shooting at us on a daily basis. Their leader, the young cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, declared a ceasefire in August, and then clamped down on his followers with surprising discipline. In basic terms, this means that I am much less likely to die in Iraq than just six months ago. Throughout the city, we can travel to places where previously we would have faced a roadside bomb or a sniper shot or an ambush. I was able to walk through the edge of the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* enclave known as Sadr City, and no shots were fired by either party. Moqtada al-Sadr did not call the ceasefire until it was clear that the Americans were not immediately leaving, and in this sense you can say that the surge is working.

The Sadrists aren't the whole story – no one in Iraq is the whole story. The provincial government with which the PRT engages is Shia-led. In Baghdad it is dominated by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) – sometimes referred to as Badrists after their militant wing, the Badr Corp. This group, formerly under self-imposed exile due to Saddam, spent its formative years in Iran. The leader of Baghdad's major legislative body, the Baghdad Provincial Council, has a family in Iran; you cannot look at the party and not think about where it is coming from.

Despite strong ties to Shia Iran, the members of ISCI are starting to reach out to Sunni areas of Baghdad which have no representation in the provincial government, excepting a single Sunni member of the Baghdad Provincial Council (a hard-living, white-haired member of the Communist party).

Parallel to the surge, U.S. commanders have supported the 'Concerned Local Citizens' groups (also called 'The Awakening') to allow Sunni militiamen to legitimately carry their arms in the streets of Baghdad, effectively neutering the independent, yet largely foreign, terrorist threat of al-Qaeda. Again, the surge is having an impact. If we had not made it clear that Coalition Forces would stay, the Sunnis would not have agreed to stand with us rather than against us, nor would they have shown patience while we tried to get them integrated into the still-young government of Iraq.

Their patience is beginning to pay off in small dividends. As an example, the PRT is working with the Baghdad Provincial Council to systemize the Joint Rural Planning Committee. On the surface, this meeting merely encourages project coordination between the deputy governors responsible for rural services and the various parties developing the infrastructure of the rural areas of Baghdad. But just below the surface, always noticed yet never mentioned, is the fact that the Shia-dominated provincial council is sitting down at the table with the Sunni members from the rural areas of Baghdad province. Under American supervision, the parties come to the table, shake hands, and hash out the some of the basic terms that make it possible for two groups to live and work together; lines are crossed and barriers are broken. This is the face of 'reconstruction' in Baghdad.

Now that inroads have been made, the next step is to find a way to integrate the 'Awakening' members into the regular workforce. For this to happen, they have to believe that both al-Qaeda and *Jaysh al-Mahdi* can be kept at bay with words rather than weapons, and we have not yet reached this point. Even if this requirement can be met, it remains a daunting task to find work and technical training for the tens of thousands of 'Awakening' members spread throughout Iraq. Our initial hope was that they might be integrated into the Iraqi security force, but it appears unlikely that many of the current members could be absorbed. When the PRT tries to talk to the Provincial Council's security committee its members seem unable to focus on anything but what they consider to be the dangers of the Sunni 'Awakening,' and the 'terrorist threat' they present to the largely Shia security forces already in place. But leading members of the provincial government understand that they need to help 'Awakening' members find a peaceful way to integrate into the rest of Baghdad.

Acknowledging the need for change is a positive step, but this does not ensure success given the continued economic challenges throughout the country. Reversing this will require drastic improvements in the infrastructure. Yet a prerequisite to better water and electricity is continued improvements in security. And so the wheel turns.

While most of the sides have stopped using their weapons they have not stopped carrying them. I can understand this; you should understand this. When you cannot get a job, when violence has threatened your existence for years, when you or your family members have been driven from one home to the next until 'home' is a generalization rather than a specific place, it is nice to hold a weapon and know that you can try and defend yourself against someone who threatens you. And the threat of more violence is still a dominant factor in this city. My commanders still

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tell me to carry a gun and wear full body armour just to move a few feet outside the Green Zone.

Perhaps what the 'surge' has given Baghdad is a moment of time for everyone to ask themselves if civil war is what they really want. Yet the surge is only one weight on an uncertain scale, a balance that includes the Sunni and Shia militias, the miscalculations of al-Qaeda, the ceasefire of Moqtada al-Sadr, and the influence of Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other players. Perhaps America rolled the dice with the surge, and while it seems to be working that does not mean the game is over.

Back home, I cannot believe that anyone is still contemplating a rapid withdrawal. A sudden vacuum would be disastrous. The show would go on, the Iraqi government would continue, but it would be beyond our ability to influence it. Right now, the government in Baghdad listens to us, and talks, reasons and argues with us. We are making some kind of progress. Your job is to decide if the effort is worth it.

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Staff Sergeant Johnny Meyer is an Airborne Ranger assigned to the Baghdad Provisional Reconstruction Team. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not the US Government.