



How Will Good News in Iraq Affect Obama Vs. McCain?

Recent Successes in Iraq Would Seem to Benefit McCain but Could Also Help Obama

By **MARCUS BARAM**

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Their strong views on the Iraq War helped them stand out from their competitors during the presidential primaries.

And Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama's sharp policy differences on the conflict continue to define them as the presumptive nominees prepare for the general election.

But the recent spurt of good news out of Iraq -- from the drop in American casualties to the increasing political stability of the Maliki government -- presents new challenges for both candidates and could change the dynamic of the race.

Recent success in Iraq "would seem to hurt Obama, but it seems as though many Americans have a fixed opinion about this and are impervious to changing facts," said James E. Campbell, chairman of the political science department at the University of Buffalo.

"It will take some time and continued success in Iraq to change those numbers."

Obama, who touts his early opposition to the war and was skeptical of the surge policy last summer that increased the number of American troops on the ground, has acknowledged that things have improved in Iraq. But Obama has said that good news only reinforces his argument that troops should start withdrawing from Iraq.

McCain, who repeatedly promoted a surge policy until the Bush administration took action, has basked in the apparent success of the surge and criticized Obama for supporting a withdrawal, telling ABC News' Charles Gibson, "I believe if we'd done what he said -- and I think it's becoming clearer to the American people -- there would have been chaos, genocide, and we'd have been back."

The facts on the ground have changed substantially in recent months. Violence across Iraq hit a four-year low in May, according to the U.S. military, and the number of American casualties that month were the lowest since the invasion.

Starting with security gains in Anbar province, the surge was replicated in parts of Baghdad and spread to some of the Shiite areas. And Iraqi security forces have taken the lead in several difficult operations in Basra, Sadr City and Mosul, [reported ABC News' Jonathan Karl](#).

On the political front, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government, after much stagnation, has

never been stronger. And there has been some success on several of the benchmarks long-sought by the Bush administration as evidence of progress.

Last week, 100 delegations at a Stockholm conference scheduled to discuss the country's progress according to a five-year peace and economic development plan titled the International Compact with Iraq expressed their confidence in the country's recent changes. They adopted a declaration that stated they "recognized the important efforts made by the [Iraqi] government to improve security and public order and combat terrorism and sectarian violence across Iraq."

In his speech at the conference, United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon said Iraq was "stepping back from the abyss that we feared most."

Of course, it may be too early to predict what recent events will mean for troop levels, and there is no guarantee that some of the positive developments will last. Essential government services and economic development still lag, according to Karl.

In recent days, McCain has stepped up his attacks on Obama, questioning the Democrat's judgment on the surge and claiming that Obama lacks a "fundamental understanding of the entire situation that warranted the surge."

The Republican has also criticized the fact that Obama has not made a trip to Iraq since 2006 and is certain to pressure the Democrat to make such a trip during the campaign season.

Although, the recent successes in Iraq would seem to benefit McCain, the actual effect on the general election is difficult to predict, say campaign observers.

And part of that is due to the unique nature of the Iraq conflict compared to previous wars, said Scott Sigmund Gartner, professor of political science at University of California at Davis.

"It's not clear what winning or losing is here," he said. "In World War II, you've got Gen. Patton chewing up miles across Europe. The relationship between good news and the outcome you want is clear. Here the good news itself could be the outcome.

"The McCain view is that the news is good, let's keep going. It's working. But you can also ask the question: Why do we need to be there if things are good? And that is Obama's argument."

Gartner said the crucial factor that could affect the election in coming months is American casualties.

"If the growth and rate remains low, it's much easier for McCain to make the case that Obama is being a pessimist," he said. "If, however, American casualties start increasing, even if they're lower but the direction is up, my research would suggest that it would be hard for McCain to make the case for the war."

One stubborn problem for the McCain campaign will be the intransigence of the American public, which continues to oppose the war despite the recent improvements.

Just over six in 10 Americans say U.S. efforts to bring stability and order to Iraq are going badly, with a third saying "very badly," according to a CBS News poll this week. Those numbers haven't changed much since April.

While there remains a sharp partisan break, with 83 percent of Democrats saying things are going badly versus 29 percent of Republicans, a majority of independents agree with the Democrats.

If McCain is able to heighten public attention to the war progress, he might be able to successfully call Obama's judgment into question by arguing he is not open to the changing facts on the ground, said Campbell, at the University of Buffalo.

"One big factor in the 2006 elections was that the voters saw that the administration was nonresponsive to the facts," he said. "They just kind of dug in. If centrists in American politics see Obama in that light, it's going to hurt him."

In the last year, the Iraq War has fallen out of the headlines, and it is unclear how that lack of media attention could influence public opinion on the issue. Comparing the first 10 weeks of 2007 and 2008, the amount of time devoted to Iraq on network news programs fell from 23 percent to 3 percent, according to a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Gary Schmitt, an informal foreign policy adviser to the McCain campaign, said the argument over Iraq War policy will focus on independent voters given the partisan divide on the issue, and that the good news out of Iraq will hurt Obama.

"[Obama's] got a problem when it comes to pulling out the troops and he's waffled on the issue," Schmitt said. "Now he's got to argue that we've got to pull out because things are going better, but that will remind people that things are going better."

McCain's strategy on the issue in coming months will be to make it an issue of judgment, said Tom Donnelly, an informal adviser to the McCain campaign.

"McCain can say with some credibility, 'I was for the surge before the Bush administration and look how it's worked.' He can show that when times are hard, he's got the intestinal fortitude to choose the harder right over the easier wrong."

As he has done in recent weeks, McCain will likely argue that Obama has been pessimistic on Iraq, said Donnelly.

"There is one exception to [Obama's] 'Yes, we can' mantra," he said. "[Obama's] argument in Iraq has always been 'No, we can't' and McCain can say that he found a way to succeed. ... There has always been the follow-up question, how do we get out. You don't want to get out in a dishonorable way or in a way that creates greater chaos."

Richard Danzig, one of Obama's national security advisers, said that while the recent military success is admirable, there has been less progress on the political front, and what is required is a strategy that ratchets up pressure on Iraqis to come to terms with some difficult decisions.

"Our view is that an indefinite American presence is not a good thing," he said. "A plan for withdrawal of combat troops is the most likely thing to catalyze action. This has a second big advantage in that it frees American resources for reallocation to Afghanistan where you have absolutely critical issues regarding terrorism and it enables the rebuilding of the American military."

He emphasized that a strategy of withdrawal can be undertaken responsibly, leaving an American military presence in Iraq "with a substantial ability to search out terrorists, to train Iraqis, to protect our

embassy, and to provide a hedge against risks there."

Another adviser to the Obama campaign argued that while the surge has brought about phenomenal changes on the ground, security remains fragile and the situation in Iraq can change overnight, just as the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in 2006, which plunged the country into horrific sectarian violence, showed.

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