Correspondence
Winning Battles, Losing Wars, and the Synergy Thesis in Iraq

To the Editors (John Hagan, Joshua Kaiser, and Anna Hanson write):

Americans are inclined to remember their nation's wars victoriously. "Let it be remembered," President Barack Obama told the Minneapolis American Legion veterans of the Vietnam War on August 30, 2011, "that you won every major battle of that war."[1] He repeated this message on May 28, 2012, during the commemoration ceremony of the fiftieth anniversary of this war at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.[2] How soon might we hear talk of winning the major battles in Iraq?

Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro (hereafter Biddle et al.) caution that "[t]he decline of violence in Iraq in 2007 does not mean that the war was necessarily a success."[3] Their implication, however, is that the war was not necessarily a failure either. Biddle et al. write that the 2007 drop in violence from 2006 was a "remarkable reversal." They ask, "What caused this turnaround?" (p. 7). Their answer is that the United States devised a strategy that stopped the violence in Iraq with a "synergistic" combination of the U.S. troop surge and the U.S. subsidized Sunni Awakening that "stood up" the Sons of Iraq (SOI).

We argue first that the Biddle et al. synergy thesis and the evidence the authors present in its support overestimate the SOI role in violence reduction. Secondly, we argue that they underestimate the significance of the decision by Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr to limit the Mahdi Army's criminality by declaring a unilateral cease-fire. Furthermore, al-Sadr's political calculations of the increasing costs to his Sadrist movement of the Mahdi Army's spiraling

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violence in 2007 may have motivated this unanticipated cease-fire. Thus, our third argument is that the cease-fire played a major role alongside the surge in reducing the violence and increasing al-Sadr's political influence in the governance of Iraq.

OVERESTIMATION AND SELECTIVE SAMPLING

The data Biddle et al. use for their empirical assessment of the synergy thesis consists of "significant activities" (SIGACTs) recorded by the Multi-National Force–Iraq in 38 areas of operations (AOs) from 2004 to 2008. They regard these data as "objective and consistent" measures, although it should be noted that use of the U.S. military's own data to evaluate U.S. military policies is open to question—especially given that these data were collected in a time of intense congressional and journalistic scrutiny. Independent data collection is preferable; the temptation to "define down" targeted activities is well recognized in evaluation research.[4]

   More importantly, the AOs that Biddle et al. chose for their sample omit areas of Iraq where the SOI did not stand up, leading to a likely overestimation of the SOI policy impact across all of Iraq. The selected AOs also include only one neighborhood (*i.e.*, Rusafa) east of the Tigris River in Baghdad, thus omitting Sadr City and the other areas of Baghdad most extensively controlled by the Shiites and al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. This impoverished community contains about a third of Baghdad's total population. The sample further omitted Adhamiyah, the location of violent sectarian fighting and subsequent efforts during the surge to reduce the mayhem by installing miles of twelve-foot cement wall barriers. A stretch of these barriers completely walled off a Sunni enclave, stabilizing and preserving one of the few surviving Sunni neighborhoods in east Baghdad.

   Some accounts of the decline in violence suggest that it was the result of a mass cleansing of Sunni from mixed and predominantly Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad.[5] Biddle et al. initially dismiss sectarian cleansing explanations for the decline of violence by focusing on the shift of the Mahdi Army's attacks from targeting mixed Sunni/Shiite areas to targeting Sunni majority neighborhoods to the west of the Tigris. Their point is that "unmixing" the mixed neighborhoods of Baghdad did not exhaust the violence. Instead, the violent attacks persisted and expanded into Sunni-dominated areas—until, Biddle et al. argue, they were subdued by the surge with the essential reinforcement of the SOI.

   In the AO trend analyses that Biddle et al. present in their figure 2, however, only two of the neighborhoods—Dora and Sayidiyya—named in their cleansing discussion and included in the AO sample fit the model in which violence rises immediately before and then declines soon after the standing up of the SOI. In the other two neighborhoods—Ghazaliyah and Mechanic—the violence shows signs of falling before the standup of SOI (see their figure 2). Karkh and Mansour are parenthetically also cited as mixed AOs that also do not fit the "cleansing exhaustion of violence" model, but these neighborhoods do not fit Biddle et al.'s synergy model either, with declines in violence preceding rather than following the SOI standups.

AN AD HOC MODEL OF SYNERGY

In suggesting an alternate explanation to sectarian cleansing, Biddle et al. clarify the differences they intend to test between the surge, Awakening, and synergy models. A key assertion of the synergy model is that "the surge without the Awakening would have improved security temporarily but would not have broken the insurgency" (p. 23). Because Biddle et al. omit any existing counterfactuals (*i.e.*, areas where the SOI did not stand up) from their data, they must create an ad hoc test to evaluate the relative superiority of the synergy model. Their key testable proposition builds on the following logic: "Proponents of the synergy thesis thus see the Awakening as necessary for the surge to succeed. In this view, however, neither the surge nor the Awakening was sufficient, nor did these factors combine in an additive way" (p. 26). Biddle et al. are saying that the synergy model predicts a "nonadditive"—or, in other words, multiplicative—interaction effect of the combined surge and SOI standups that is the mechanism required to effectively reduce the violence. "To test these implications," Biddle et al. explain, "we compared SIGACTs trends before and after SOI standup in each of the 38 AOs for which our interviews provide specific standup dates" (p. 27).

Biddle et al. emphatically describe the support they find for the synergy thesis. They conclude that "24 of 38 AOs where SOIs stood up (63 percent) show violence trending downward more sharply after SOI standup than before" (p. 28). Yet this support is based on their often misleading regression analyses. First, Biddle et al. have an interaction effect in mind when they reach their conclusions, offering the summary statement that "the surge, though necessary, was insufficient and that an *interaction* between it and the Awakening offers the strongest explanation" (p. 36, emphasis added)—but they include neither a measure of the surge in their models nor an interaction term. At most, their models can only purport to show the importance of the SOI.

More significantly, Biddle et al. confuse what happened in many, if not most, of the AOs by using simple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression measures to reach summary judgments that careful inspection of the actual trends in their figure 2 do not support. Their models make use of only two multimonth slopes: before and after the SOI were stood up. Trends in violence rise and fall within the two periods, however, so linear estimation of slopes before and after the SOI standups distort the nonlinear changes in the violence. The OLS-estimated slopes sometimes mistake declines in violence that start well after the SOI standups for effects of the standup, or worse, they often miss the declining violence that came before SOI standups. A regression discontinuity design or an event-history analysis, both of which are designed to account for time-varying covariates, might have better suited their purposes.

Moreover, these estimations do not include measures that control for the preceding and simultaneous cleansing, surge, and cease-fire processes. It is unclear whether the close intermixture of the influences of these variables in a compressed time frame could be sorted out in expanded models. In any case, a careful visual inspection of the data points in Biddle et al.'s figure 2 is likely a more fitting place to start before more elaborate methods are contemplated.

CONTRARY RESULTS

Consider eight of the AO trends Biddle et al. cite as confirming the synergy model. We have abstracted and enlarged these eight areas for inspection in our figure 1. In each of these areas—al Hillah, Baladrooz, Kanan, Karkh, Latifiyah, Mansour, Rawah, and Sadr al Yusufiyah—the violence is trending downward *before* the SOI standup, and there is no unprecedented plunge in the violence that would reflect a nonadditive interaction soon after the standup. The proportion of confirming districts without these eight areas is actually 42 percent. There is more evidence against their synergy model than for it. The comparison of before and after slopes through regression analysis glosses over the nonlinear ups and downs apparent in a visual examination of Biddle et al.'s figure 2.

To more clearly see the problem of the Biddle et al. methodology in our figure 1, consider two of the problematic cases involving two important parts of Baghdad, the Karkh and Mansour neighborhoods. Both of these AOs are counted as confirming the synergy thesis in Biddle et al.'s table 1. The distribution of SIGACTs before the SOI standup in Karkh, however, appears curvilinear and descends to approximately the post-standup level months before the standup occurs. Biddle et al. impose a linear regression line on this curved distribution and estimate a slope of +0.6. Meanwhile, the trend after the standup is only slightly downward, but not notably so compared to the months before the standup. Their slope estimate for this period is -1.7. They categorize this difference in regression slope estimates in their table 1 as confirmation of the synergy model. Yet visual inspection of the before and after trends leads us to the opposite conclusion.

The regression slopes Biddle et al. report for Mansour are at least as misleading, if not more so. Although Biddle et al. interpret the negative slope after the SOI standup in Mansour as confirming its effectiveness, the levels of violence in Mansour after the SOI standup are visibly higher than before the standup—and they only really decrease months afterward. The problem is again with imposing a straight regression line and exclusively focusing on its direction without comparing its results to the data points in the figure and seeing whether the displayed activity levels worsened rather than improved after the standup. Doing so would have indicated the value of statistical models that take into account the effects of time, trends over time, and events that may cause abrupt or gradual changes in those trends.

Biddle et al. go on to describe their "confirming" results in AOs where SOIs stood up prior to August 2007 as indicating that "[w]hereas violence was increasing in each of these AOs at standup, it reversed and plummeted thereafter" (p. 28). Yet, again, close inspection of their figure 2 reveals that this is not the case immediately before and soon after the SOI standups in Fallujah, Hurriyah, Khalidiyah, Latifiyah, Mansour, Rawah, and Sadr al Yusufiyah. In each one, either the "plummet" begins before the SOI stood up—and in many, the levels of violence appear to have already stabilized at a low level–or the violence fluctuates widely both before and after the standup. In Mansour, the violence even increases afterwards. The regression analyses that Biddle et al. present obscure more than they reveal.
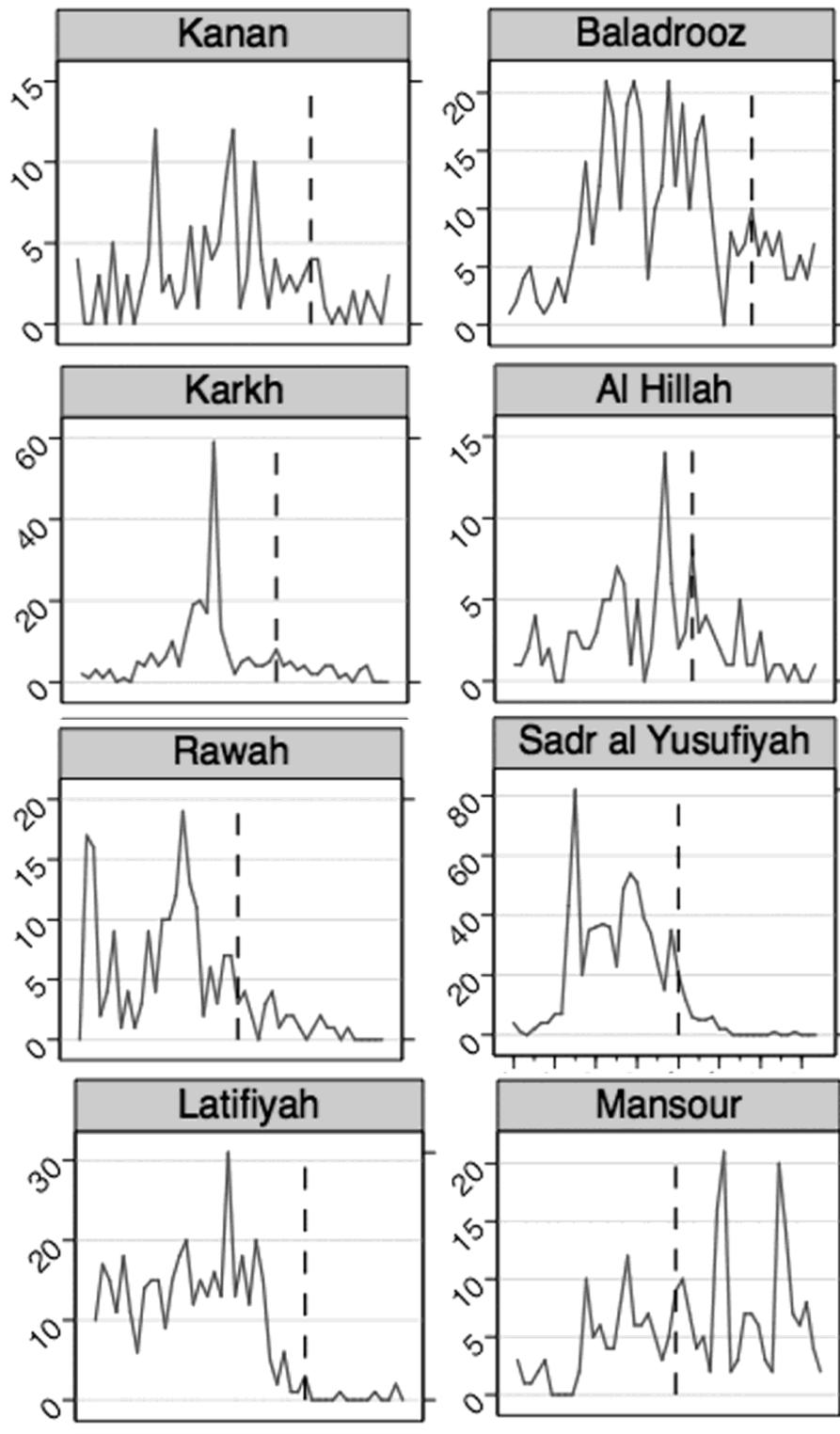
FIGURE 1: REASSESSMENT OF NINE
"CONFIRMING" AREAS OF OPERATION

UNDERESTIMATION OF AL-SADR'S CEASE-FIRE

To be sure, there was a downward plunge in violence in Iraq, but it was likely more closely linked to al-Sadr's August 2007 cease-fire than to the standup of the SOI. The downturn in violence can be seen in several data sources. For example, if we break down the Iraq Body Count death toll by months, the greatest monthly drop in violence is between August and September 2007—the month immediately following the cease-fire.[6] Between August and September alone, the Iraq Body Count across Iraq dropped by nearly half: from 2,390 to 1,287. If we break the count down by quarter, the sharp plunge is in the final quarter of 2007, soon after the cease-fire. Of course, Iraq Body Count itself has limitations resulting from its reliance on news reports of deaths—yet there is little or no reason to suspect that such bias would play out in a way that would artificially create a 50 percent drop in violence immediately following al-Sadr's cease-fire.

Perhaps the most compelling data on the improved security situation in 2007 comes from the ABC News/BBC/NHK representative surveys of Iraqis analyzed by Gary Langer of Langer Research Associates.[7] The ABC Iraq probability sample surveys were conducted at six-month intervals, with one survey conducted from August 17 to August 24, a week before al-Sadr's unilateral cease-fire, and another six months later in March 2008. The surveys asked about the previous six months and provide unique representative assessments of Iraqi experiences during the surge and after the cease-fire.

The surge was announced by President George W. Bush in January 2007 and implemented in a five-step sequence through the first half of the year. The Sunni Awakening began before the surge and continued throughout it and beyond. Al-Sadr declared his cease-fire more than a half year after the onset of the surge and Sunni Awakening. When the August ABC survey asked in the week before the cease-fire announcement about the last half year of the surge and Awakening, it found that more respondents in the representative sample of Iraqis perceived the security situation to have worsened than to have improved. In the left-hand side of figure 2, we see that when Iraqis answered in terms of their own neighborhoods, about one quarter (24 percent) thought security had improved, whereas nearly a third (31 percent) thought it had worsened, leaving just under half (45 percent) who thought the previous six months of the surge and the Awakening had left things unchanged. On the right-hand side of figure 2, reporting respondents perceptions for Iraq overall, the results are even worse. Well over half (61 percent) of Iraqis thought security was worse, compared to just 11 percent who thought security was better across the country. Similarly dismal results were revealed when the surveys asked about crime protection and freedom of movement.

The six months that followed the cease-fire revealed far more positive results. The proportion of respondents answering that security improved in their own neighborhood jumped from about a quarter (24 percent) to nearly half (46 percent), and from 11 percent to 36 percent in Iraq overall. The proportion responding that security worsened in their neighborhood dropped
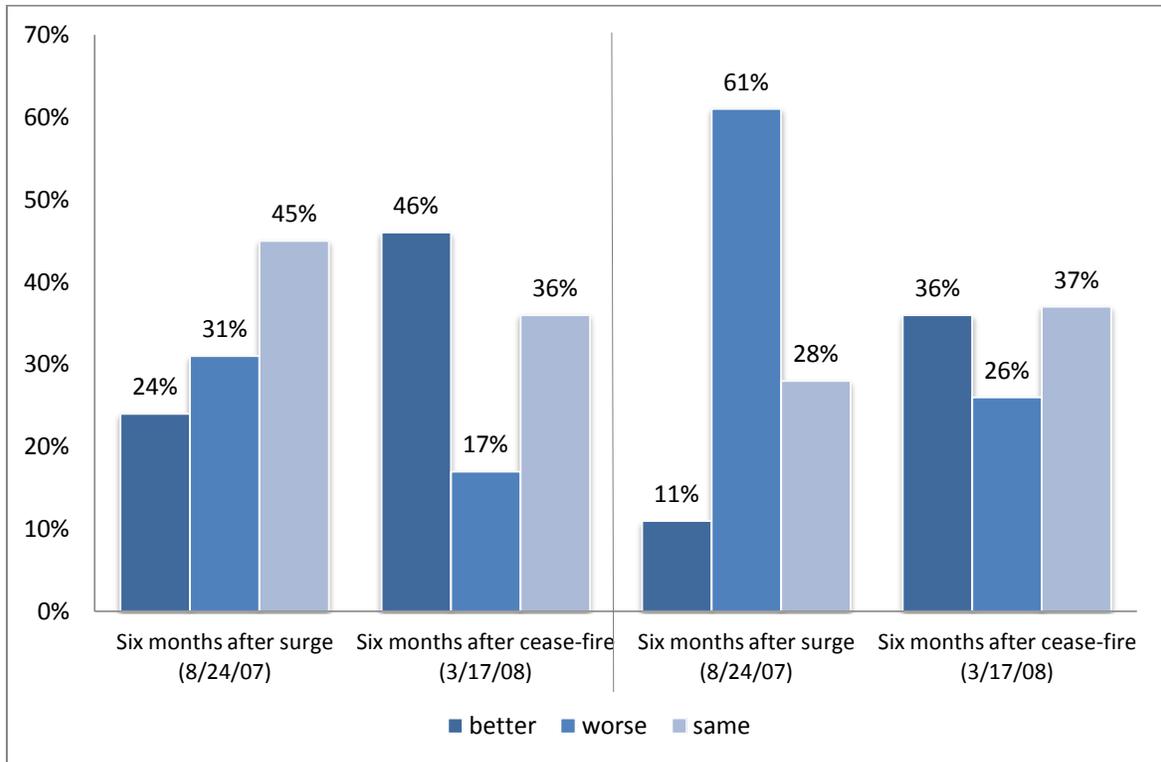
FIGURE 2: PERCEIVED SECURITY IN IRAQ

from 31 percent to 17 percent, and in Iraq overall the drop was from well over half (61 percent) to about one quarter (26 percent). Perceptions of security improved far more in the six months after the announcement of the cease-fire than during the half year after the announcement of the surge. Similar improvement following the cease-fire was revealed when the surveys asked about crime protection and freedom of movement.

THE SURGE AND ITS UNANTICIPATED WINNER

Our point is not that the surge and Awakening with its SOI produced no improvement in the security and violence situation in Iraq. The Biddle et al. analysis simply overestimates the value added by the Awakening and SOI, while overlooking the contribution of al-Sadr's cease-fire to the improvement in security and violence. With specific regard to the synergy thesis, we conclude that the unanticipated benefit of the cease-fire was greater than the anticipated benefit of the SOI. Al-Sadr's cease-fire, of course, was unanticipated in the sense that the U.S. and British forces did not initiate negotiation of the cease-fire and initially expressed doubts about its likely impact. The British military spokesperson said, "We don't know how real this is."[8] Yet within two days, the U.S. military issued a statement that was much like the argument Biddle et al. make for the synergy of the SOI, saying that the cease-fire would allow the U.S. and Iraqi

forces to "intensify their focus on Al-Qaeda in Iraq…without distraction from [Mahdi Army] attacks."[9] Thus the U.S. forces saw a synergy with the cease-fire.

The unilateral nature of the cease-fire suggests that al-Sadr saw it as being in the interests of his movement and leadership. His announcement of the cease-fire came immediately after 52 died and 279 were injured in fighting involving the Mahdi Army to the south of Baghdad in Karbala. Al-Sadr had already encouraged his followers to stand down from attacks on the U.S. military in Baghdad, and the death toll was already dropping there. An aide to al-Sadr explained that the stand down of the Mahdi Army was intended to allow his leadership "to restructure it in a way that will preserve its principles."[10] Another aide explained that undisciplined members of the militia were "working for their personal interests…to hurt the Mahdi Army's reputation."[11]

There were many indications in 2006–07, as the Mahdi Army swept across Baghdad, replacing non-Shiite with Shiite residents in the mixed neighborhoods of the city, that factions within the Mahdi Army movement were increasingly using violence without al-Sadr's operational control. Al-Sadr needed to consolidate his territorial gains and regain control of his militia. The remarkable extent of the expanded Shiite domination of Baghdad neighborhoods imposed between 2003 and 2008 primarily by the Mahdi Army is indicated in maps developed by Michael Izady.[12]

The unanticipated consequence of the surge was to give al-Sadr an opportunity to rein in his militia with his unilaterally declared cease-fire. The widespread and systematic displacement of non-Shiite residents from their Baghdad neighborhoods constituted a major crime against humanity. As factions of the Mahdi Army became even more violent in their forays across Baghdad and beyond, the organized criminality of al-Sadr's movement became increasingly unpopular with Shiite as well as other groups. The surge offered al-Sadr a timely means of scaling back these activities and retrenching his movement. As stated earlier, he had already won the battle for Baghdad's neighborhoods.

Al-Sadr did not immediately or entirely change his methods following the cease-fire. His militia were involved in the battle for Basra in 2008, and he again abandoned the fight when losses among his followers began to mount. Both of al-Sadr's stand-downs in 2007 and 2008, however, marked the beginnings of his transition from organized criminality to more conventional politics. In 2010, his followers won thirty seats in parliamentary elections, and al-Sadr became a part of the ruling coalition. By July 2012, the *New York Times* would report of al-Sadr, "Now, with the United States military gone, he has emerged as something more prosaic: a mainstream political leader looking for new paths to secure the claims to power that his movement achieved through violent opposition to the American occupation."[13] The unanticipated synergy of the surge and the cease-fire likely played a central role in the transition. It was becoming increasingly plausible to say of al-Sadr that "he lost key battles but won the war." The thesis of an unanticipated synergy of the surge and the cease-fire is more consistent with the available evidence than the Biddle et al. thesis of an anticipated synergy of the surge and the Awakening.

In sum, Biddle et al.'s synergy thesis and the evidence the authors present in its support overestimate the SOI role in violence reduction. They simultaneously underestimate the significance of the decision by Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr to declare a unilateral cease-fire. By mid-2007, al-Sadr's Mahdi Army had succeeded in gaining control over a significant number of previously mixed and Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad. During the surge of U.S. forces in 2007 and early 2008, the violent criminality of the Mahdi Army continued, provoking confrontations with the U.S. led forces. In August of 2007, al-Sadr declared a unilateral and unanticipated cease-fire, which likely played a larger role than the SOI in reducing violence from the 2006 and 2007 peak in Baghdad and Iraq. Al-Sadr's tactical alternation between violence and cease-fires was a significant part of the process by which he emerged as an unanticipated powerbroker in the political governance of Iraq.

1. Barack Obama, speech given at the Ninety-third Annual Conference of the American Legion, Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 30, 2011.

2. Barack Obama, speech given at the commemoration ceremony of the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., May 28, 2012.

3. Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 7–40. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

4. For a recent example of concerns about the "defining down" of outcome measures for favorable evaluation, see Wendy Ruderman, "Crime Report Manipulation Is Common among New York Police, Study Finds," *New York Times*, July 29, 2012.

5. A unique effort to capture the effects of sectarian cleansing is John Agnew, Thomas W. Gillespie, Jorge Gonzalez, and Brian Min, "Baghdad Nights: Evaluating the U.S. Military 'Surge' Using Nighttime Light Signatures," *Environment and Planning*, Vol. 40, No. 10 (October 2008), pp. 2285–2295.

6. See "Iraqi Deaths from Violence, 2003–12," Iraq Body Count, January 2, 2012, http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2011/.

7. http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/story?id=7058272&page=1, bar graphs constructed from data presented in Tables 11a and 12.

8. Quoted in "Mahdi Army Begins Six-Month Ceasefire," History Commons, August 30, 2007, http://www.historycommons.org/context.jsp?item=us_occupation_of_iraq_tmln_278.

9. Ibid.

10. Quoted in Ewen MacAskill, "Al-Sadr Declares Ceasefire in Iraq," *Guardian* (London), August 29, 2007, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/29/iraq.usa.

11. Ibid.

12. This map is reconfigured from the work of Michael Izady, The Gulf/2000 Project, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml.

13. Tim Arango, "U.S. Antagonist in Iraq Takes a Political Gamble," *New York Times*, July 9, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/10/world/middleeast/moktada-al-sadr-recast-as-political-insurgent-in-iraq.html.