

Confidence and optimism return to Baghdad and Basra

Six months ago, anyone driving a truck at night on the highway linking Baghdad and Iraq's most southerly city of Basra would have needed nerves of steel or had to be suicidal. Now, since the offensive that got going last March against Shia militias and criminal gangs in Basra, the night highway is relatively safe.

The number of murders in the city had dropped by a dramatic 95 percent, according to an internal police report. Out on its streets, arms-bearing civilians are a rarity - and the number of police has been beefed up from 7,000 to 24,000.

And in Baghdad, where people have long had to use their own generators to power refrigerators and air conditioning units in summer temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius, there is a growing feeling of confidence.

'At last, the mass kidnappings and daily car bombings are a thing of the past,' says Thair Ali, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad.

Most Iraqis also take as a positive signal the fact that the government is in concrete talks with foreign companies on modernising the oil industry and increasing production capacity at the known and the yet-to-be exploited oilfields.

There are a number of different reasons for the improvement in Iraq's security situation.

'The Iraqi Army is now better equipped and has expanded its secret intelligence operations. At the same time, tribal leaders and a lot of other citizens have been brought in (to combat terrorism),' says defence ministry spokesman Major General Mohammed al-Askari. 'The danger of a civil war has been warded off for the moment.'

Iraqis, in his view, have US General David Petraeus to thank for this, among other factors. It has been a priority of the US military's top man in Iraq to strengthen the Iraqi Army.

Independent observers point to a further pillar of the Petraeus strategy for bringing about the latest successes in the fight against terrorism. The Americans have spent huge amounts of money over the past weeks on motivating Iraqi civilians, recruited by the tribal leaders, to turn away from the 'national resistance' and instead combat Al Qaeda.

The US Army has been giving a financial lift to shopkeepers and business people in what used to be the danger districts. Ministries and local government officials, too, have been among those profiting from projects, which the Americans hope will win confidence and support.

But sooner or later it will stop raining money. And then what? If the corrupt practices endemic in Iraq right to the highest levels continue, the state is hardly likely to save the day.

Pessimists see this as the point where the barbarism of the past years will again become rife. Optimists, on the other hand, hope that reconciliation by then will have taken such a hold that financial incentives will no longer be needed to dissuade people from settling their ideological, ethnic and religious differences with weapons.

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