



# COMMENTARY

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## **Securing Baghdad with Gated Communities**

By Anthony H. Cordesman, Burke Chair in Strategy April 20, 2007

The announcement that the US is seeking to secure three troubled Sunni areas -- Ameriyia, Khadra and Adhamiyah -- as the equivalent of gated communities may prove to be a key dimension in determining whether the current effort to secure Baghdad can be made to work. It also, however, illustrates the scale of the problems involved in bringing even limited security to the city.

Baghdad is a vast, sprawling city. Various sources estimate it at 5 to 7.5 million people, with much depending on whether the estimate covers the city limits or greater Baghdad area. It is divided by a relatively few main roads relative to current traffic demands, has significant river barriers and divisions, and further security barriers like the Green Zone.

Securing the entire city is virtually impossible. Baghdad is too important to the Iraqi economy to search every vehicle or control every access point, and the same applies to internal traffic. The city can only function with relatively constant flows of traffic between Sunni, Shi'ite, and mixed areas.

Gated communities may, therefore, be the only way to ensure relative physical security to given parts of the city without paralyzing it, or creating security systems that cannot function. They also allow some economy of force. Focusing on security in the most troubled areas still may involve more manpower than the US and ISF can deploy, but is far more practical than trying to both secure the entire perimeter and then secure the entire inner structure of the city.

There are, however, serious problems with such an approach and it will take time to determine whether the US and Iraqi government can deal with:

--The fact the first three areas are all Sunni warns that gating has a natural tendency to further divide the city on sectarian lines. Both Ulster and the Balkans have shown such an approach can bring added security, but that it can also polarize and freeze divisions within the population.

--Even gated areas present major security problems in terms of ensuring access while actually proving security. In practice, they also can tie down large numbers of US troops unless the Iraqi Army and Police can be trusted to actually provide security in ways acceptable and trusted by the local population.

-- It is all too easy for those providing security to become occupiers, jailers, or the enemy unless they have the trust of the local population. The US seems to be trying to create "partnerships," including support from local officials and "neighborhood watches." This is certainly the desirable approach, but the US cannot afford to tie down troops for long periods in given neighborhoods, the better combat units in the Iraqi Army also should not be tied down (and present ethnic and sectarian problems), and much depends on the very uncertain quality of the Iraqi police. It is speculative to say so at this point, but it seems likely that success will depend very heavily on the US ability to use US embeds in the police posts to create an effective and trusted police force over time.

--Gating segregates out the local militia elements, and creates the equivalent of "zones" in terms of unemployment and basic services. Two major issues have to be dealt with. First, co-opting the militias rather than simply leaving them to fester or as a parallel force. Second, following up improvements in security with improvements in employment, government services, and infrastructure activities. As is the case with all such efforts, "win" is eventually meaningless without "hold" and "build."

--Gating must be slow and evolutionary, leaving much of the city vulnerable for months to come. Economic and all other activity outside the gated zones remains vulnerable. At the same time, gated areas can become sanctuaries for those insurgents or militia forces that live within them and then attack targets outside them. The security problem is not simply who goes in. It is who is inside and who goes out.

--Gating will always provide relative, not full security. No one can stop explosives from being smuggled in small amounts, and attackers can improve concealment of explosives in vehicles or on individuals. Sniping and assassinations using small arms present a major challenge.

--Moreover, major routes and public areas remain vulnerable indefinitely. The major traffic routes, key mosques, major markets or business areas along major access routes, cannot be given the same security.

--Finally, if even a few areas go sour, trust in the approach tends to fail, the city continues to segregate, and US forces can be tied down in much larger numbers than the US can afford if it wants to expand out into the Baghdad ring cities, and free troops for the other parts of Iraq.

None of these issues mean the current effort will not be much more successful over time in providing local security in Baghdad than the past approaches. Gated areas do, however, consist of an experiment that will take time to implement, will be a far from perfect answer, and may fail. It is critically dependent on improvements in the effectiveness of both the Iraqi police and governance, and local support.

Like most of the surge, it will probably be early 2008 before the full implications and effectiveness of such efforts can be judged. This makes Congressional (and Presidential) patience critical. Demanding instant success is a recipe for instant failure. The concept must be given time and patience to see what can be done, and the US and Iraqi forces must be given the opportunity to learn from any early failures and adapt.

At the same time, it is clear that this military approach to the problem is just as dependent for its effectiveness on political solutions and conciliation as every other military activity. On the one hand, the risks of such an approach will be far smaller if the Iraqis really do move towards conciliation and compromise. On the other hand, it is unclear that any degree of local success will matter without them. Unlike the British or the forces in the Balkans, the US simply cannot stay long enough to wait out the tensions of a divided city or act as a long-term peace keeping force.

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