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Tomgram: Michael Schwartz, Why Bush Won't Leave Iraq

Whoa, let's hold those surging horses in check a moment. Violence has lessened in Iraq. That seems to be a fact of the last two months -- and, for the Iraqis, a positive one, obviously. What to make of the "good news" from Iraq is another matter entirely, one made harder to assess by the chorus of self-congratulation from war supporters and Bush administration officials and allies, as well as by the heavy spin being put on events -- and reported in the media, relatively uncritically.

An exception was Damien Cave of the [New York Times](#), who had a revealing piece on a big story of recent weeks: The return of refugee Baghdadis -- from among the two million or more Iraqis who had fled to Syria and other countries -- to the capital. This has been heavily touted as evidence of surge "success" in restoring security in Baghdad, of a genuine turn-around in the war situation. In fact, according to Cave, the trickle of returnees, which had actually been lessening recently, has been heavily "massaged by politics. Returnees have essentially become a currency of progress."

Those relatively modest returnee numbers turn out to include anyone who crossed the Syrian border heading east, including suspected insurgents and Iraqi employees of the *New York Times* on their way back from visits to relatives in exile in Syria. According to a UN survey of 110 families returning, "46 percent were leaving [Syria] because they could not afford to stay; 25 percent said they fell victim to a stricter Syrian visa policy; and only 14 percent said they were returning because they had heard about improved security." And that's but one warning sign on the nature of the story under the story.

A recent Pew Research Center poll of American reporters who have been working in Iraq finds that "[n]early 90 percent of U.S. journalists in Iraq say much of Baghdad is still too dangerous to visit" and many believe that "coverage has painted too rosy a picture of the conflict." In an [on-line chat](#), the reliable Thomas Ricks of the *Washington Post* (and

author of the bestselling book *Fiasco*), just back from Baghdad himself, offered his own set of caveats about the situation. He suggested that, in addition to the surge of U.S. troops into the capital's neighborhoods, some combination of other factors may help explain the lessening violence, including the fact that "some Sunni neighborhoods are walled off, and other Sunni areas have been ethnically cleansed. In addition, the Shiite death squads, in addition to killing a lot of innocents, also killed some of the car bomb guys, I am told." Of the dozens of American officers he interviewed, none were declaring success. "[T]o a man, they were enormously frustrated by what they see as the foot-dragging of the Baghdad government." And he points out that violence in Baghdad "is only back down to the 2005 level -- which to my mind is kind of like moving from the eighth circle of hell to the fifth." In 2005, or early 2006, of course, such levels were considered catastrophic.

Robert Parry of [Consortium News](#) points out that, while "good news" dominated front pages here, "the darker side" of "success" has "generally been shoved into brief stories deep inside the newspapers." He adds that "the harsh repression surrounding the 'surge' has drawn far less U.S. press attention," even as "Iraq steadily has been transformed into a more efficient police state than dictator Saddam Hussein could have ever imagined."

Jim Lobe of Interpress Service [interviewed](#) surge "skeptics" who "argue that the strategy's 'ground-up' approach to pacification -- buying off local insurgent and tribal groups with money and other support -- may have set the stage for a much bigger and more violent civil war or partition, particularly as U.S. forces begin drawing down from their current high of about 175,000 beginning as early as next month."

Michael Schwartz, a Tomdispatch regular on Iraq these last years, takes up this changing post-surge landscape and what exactly it may mean for the Iraqis -- and for us. *Tom*