

Baghdad Burning: neo-liberalism and the counter-city

Derek Gregory

**Department of Geography
University of British Columbia
217-1984 West Mall
Vancouver
British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z2**

E-mail: derek.gregory@geog.ubc.ca

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‘Most people choose to ignore the little prefix “re–” in the words “rebuild” and “reconstruct”. For your information, “re” is of Latin origin and means “again” or “anew”. In other words – there was something there in the first place.... I always say this war is about oil but it is also about huge corporations that are going to make billions off reconstructing what was damaged during this war.’

Riverbend, ‘Baghdad Burning’, 28 August 2003

‘All this chaos has somehow become uncomfortably normal. Two years ago I never would have dreamed of living like this – now this lifestyle has become the norm and I can barely remember having lived any other way.’

Riverbend, ‘Baghdad Burning’, 10 November 2004

Neo-liberalism and late modern war

The systematic connections between neo-liberalism and late modern war have become something of a critical orthodoxy. For David Harvey, ‘the new imperialism’ (or ‘vulture capitalism’ as he also calls it) advances the catastrophically violent process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’: ‘All the neoconservatives have done’, he wrote in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, ‘is to transform the low-intensity warfare waged under neo-liberalism around the globe into a dramatic confrontation.’¹ Similarly, Naomi Klein treats war as one of the modalities through which the ‘disaster capitalism’

¹ David Harvey, *The new imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 201; see also idem, *A brief history of neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

administers its ‘shock doctrine’. The invasion and occupation of Iraq ‘were two parts of a unified strategy,’ she insists, in which ‘the initial bombardment was designed to erase the canvas on which the model nation could be built.’²

But moving from general claims to detailed analysis is not so simple. In so far as it is possible to identify a standard narrative about the neo-liberal trajectory of occupied Iraq, it rests on two core claims: one is about the centrality of the state under Saddam Hussein and the other is about the new counterinsurgency under General David Petraeus.

The central state

The first claim is that the initial American plan for the occupation was to transform an economy that had been dominated by a centralized, authoritarian state under Saddam Hussein into a free market model in which American corporations were to play a leading role. Hence Paul Bremer’s boast from the commanding heights of the Coalition Provisional Authority in May 2003: Iraq was to be thrown ‘open for business.’ As Christopher Parker artfully glosses the project: ‘Once open to the agency and logic of market forces, Iraq – by virtue of its potential [oil] wealth – would be inundated with actors bearing norms and practices that would recast political subjectivities, and rearticulate configurations of interest, that had been corrupted by decades of statist hegemony. Neo-liberal adjustment would empower private agencies capable of both holding back the re-emergence of an activist Iraqi state, and advancing US interests both in Iraq and the region at large.’³

Parker’s analysis is illuminating for two reasons. First, it successfully interrupts the received model of the Ba’athist state. Parker and Moore show that the state beat a considerable retreat from the economy during the 1980s and 90s. The Iran-Iraq war of

² Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 2007) p. 399.

³ Christopher Parker, *From forced revolution to failed transition: the nightmarish agency of revolutionary neo-liberalism in Iraq*, Research Unit on International Security and Co-operation (UNISCI) Discussion Paper No. 12 (2006) [ETH Zürich] p. 82.

1980-88) pounded the state's finances and prompted an escalating program of economic liberalization (*infithah*) through which all industries deemed non-essential for the state and the military were sold to private interests: the new employers promptly sacked many of their workers, and the privatization precipitated a second round of redundancies in state regulatory agencies. In sum, 'broad swathes of economic life were simply left to the vagaries of petty market action and struggle,' Parker and Moore conclude, and these retreats created not only a 'shadow state' but also a space in which multiple grey and black markets emerged, fed by informal, transnational trading networks. Their importance grew throughout the UN sanctions regime but – the crucial point – although they were disrupted they were not sensibly diminished by the occupation. After the dissolution of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Parker and Moore argue, militias 'carved out or co-opted their own areas of economic control and regulation', including the major trade routes running north, west and south from Baghdad, and there was an intimate conjunction between the underground economies and rival militias.⁴ Second, and in tense conjunction, Parker's analysis emphasizes the normative thrust of neo-liberalism, its desire to rearrange what he calls 'the calculative frames and agencies of political and economic life.'⁵ Put differently, we need to think in terms of 'neoliberal modes of subject (re)formation and strategies of rule, rather than to visualize an administratively bounded "neoliberal state.'" I have taken this particular formulation

⁴ Christopher Parker and Pete Moore, 'The war economy of Iraq', *Middle East Report* 243 (2007); on Saddam's economic liberalization, see also Kirin Aziz Chaudhry, 'Economic liberalization and the lineages of the rentier state', *Comparative politics* 27 (1994) 1-25 [though the author endorses the promissory notes of economic liberalization] and Charles Tripp, *A history of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp. 250-1 [though he takes a more reserved view of its scope: 'The economic liberalization process which had begun during the war was extended and reinforced, at least on the statute book' (p. 251)].

⁵ Parker, *Forced revolution*, p. 83. Here he trades on the work of Michel Callon, which enables him to grasp markets as calculative spaces that are produced through technologies of framing. He explains this conceptual device thus: 'The drawing and enforcing of boundaries, the insinuation of military force, and the establishment of a financial system – to name but three – are examples of such technologies of framing. As such, "the market" is a framework – the emergence or imposition of a common operating principle – that conditions the ability of actors to imagine and estimate the "courses of action associated with those things or with those states as well as their consequences.'" (p. 87).

from an essay by Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore because these authors emphasize the biopolitical armature of neo-liberalism, and in doing so they draw attention not only to its spatial unevenness – the contingency of ‘local experiments in market governmentality’ – but also to ‘*the context of context* – specifically the evolving macrospatial frameworks and interspatial circulatory systems in which local regulatory projects unfold.’⁶ This indispensable qualification, which for my purposes is an injunction to attend to the geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic dispositions under which neo-liberalism has advanced, applies *a fortiori* to the violent restructuring-regulation of Iraqi cities under American occupation.⁷ Here too Parker is insightful. He argues that the architects of the American plan for security and development in post-invasion Iraq viewed ethno-sectarianism ‘as a framework for managing Iraqi political society in the absence of strong state institutions.’ For this reason they ‘actively advanced ethnic/sectarian communities as the constituent building blocks of the new Iraq’ whose very separation would block any collective nationalist movement that could otherwise threaten the neo-liberal project and Iraq’s receptiveness to American political and economic interests. In sum, they ‘sought to segregate residual political interests and passion from the wider project of restructuring Iraq’s political economy’ and deliberately structured the new political system to consolidate and legitimate ‘a calculative framework through which to manage the residual passions of a political world otherwise being remade in the image of the self-regulating market.’⁸ This argument leads directly to the second standard claim about the trajectory of occupied Iraq.

⁶ Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, ‘Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways’, *Global networks* 10 (2010) 182-222: 199, 202; cf. Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty* (Durham NC: Duke University Press); Aihwa Ong, ‘Neoliberalism as mobile technology’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007) 3-8. .

⁷ Cf. Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore and Neil Brenner, ‘Neoliberal urbanism: models, moments, mutations’, *SAIS Review* 29 (2009) 49-66. This essay treats cities as strategic laboratories for the trial-and-error experiments of neoliberalism(s) – ‘strategically important arenas in which neo-liberalizing forms of creative destruction have been unfolding’ – but because it is confined to Europe and North America it does not address American adventurism in Iraq and so cannot specify the role of war and occupation in the ‘creative destruction’ that is at its heart.

⁸ Parker, *Forced revolution*, pp. 95-6

The new counterinsurgency

Soon after American troops reached Baghdad and the statue of Saddam was toppled in Sahat al-Firdaus, it became clear that the war had turned: that the United States was facing an intensifying and many-stranded insurgency. The immediate American response was a bizarre mix of denial and bravado. ‘The most important questions will not be [ones] relating to security,’ Bremer insisted, ‘but to the conditions under which foreign investment will be invited in.’ But the summer whirlwind of violence had a chilling effect; investments were put on hold, foreign companies and international agencies withdrew their staffs. A first series of attacks faced inwards, working to cut the fragile and fraying threads connecting the occupiers to the occupied. Far from a Baghdad skyline bristling with cranes, in September 2003 journalists could see ‘no visible signs of reconstruction at all.’ A second series of attacks faced outwards, guided by what Mark Danner saw as ‘the methodical intention to sever, one by one, with patience, care and precision, the fragile ties that still tie[d] the occupation authority to the rest of the world.’

⁹ The American response was to accelerate the transfer of political power to an Iraqi assembly (in 2004), which was supposed to placate the population at large, and to confront the insurgency and its supporters with a highly kinetic counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign that involved air strikes, armed sweeps and mass arrests, which further alienated the population at large.

Toby Dodge argues that throughout this period, whatever adjustments it was forced to make, the Bush administration and its political and military delegates continued to cleave to neo-liberal orthodoxy.¹⁰ By 2006, as Michael Schwartz has shown in a powerful indictment of the program,

⁹ Derek Gregory, *The colonial present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 233-241; Mark Danner, ‘Delusions in Baghdad’, *New York Review of Books* 18 December 2003.

¹⁰ Dodge notes three shifts in quick succession: (1) a short-term, ‘plug in and play’ model that sought to achieve coercive structural adjustment by implementing the established doctrines of the IMF and the World Bank [2002-3]; (2) a longer-term transformation, premised on purging Ba’athists from all state jobs and disbanding the Iraqi Army, to banish the neo-liberal spectre of an overbearing state and lay the foundations for reform

‘[M]ost Iraqi cities had lost their historic economic centers of gravity, had become dependent on foreign capital for both products and services, were denuded on jobs that paid a living wage, and were populated by an economically marginal population mired in a downward spiral of poverty and desperation. If the military aspects of the Iraq war could be called “Vietnam on crack”, then the economic aspects could be called “neo-liberalism on crack”.’¹¹

Dodge argues that the neo-liberal orthodoxy was under siege from 2004 though to 2007, but it was finally forced to surrender in January 2007 when President Bush announced a dramatic change in US military strategy and the next month appointed General David Petraeus to command Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I). This was a capitulation en route to victory, so Dodge claims, because the fulcrum of the new military campaign was a radically revised counterinsurgency doctrine whose ‘analytical categories’ he sees as being ‘antithetical to those of neo-liberalism.’ On Dodge’s reading, ‘if the state is the main threat haunting neo-liberalism, it is the main tool of COIN doctrine and the solution to the problems COIN identifies.’¹²

Dodge’s argument is problematic for two main reasons. First, the new campaign was devised in one of the central offices of radical neo-liberalism, the American Enterprise Institute, which had strong ties to the Project for a New American Century. The report from the Institute’s Iraq Study Group, ‘Choosing Victory’, made securing Baghdad through a surge in combat troops the central platform of its ‘plan for success in

[2003-4]; and (3) ‘sub-contracting reform’ [2004-7]: Toby Dodge, ‘The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neo-liberalism to Iraq’, *International Affairs* 86 (201) 1269-1286: 1278 -1283.

¹¹ Michael Schwartz, ‘Neo-liberalism on crack: cities under siege in Iraq’, *City* 11 (2007) 21-69: 26. Schwartz’s analysis is compelling but it does not consider Baghdad in any detail – though he does note that because the capital ‘contained a large part of the government apparatus and the commerce’ of Iraq ‘it was hit with catastrophic force’ (p. 30).

¹² Dodge, ‘Ideological roots’, pp. 1284-5.

Iraq'.¹³ The plan found a receptive audience at the National Security Council, which was desperately conducting its own Iraq Strategy Review, and when Bush announced his 'new way forward' not surprisingly it followed the directions provided by the AEI. In other words, the new plan emerged from the belly of the beast. Peck reminds us that neo-liberalism is a flexible project that has advanced through trial-and-error: that it is a creature of crisis whose animations are 'marked by compromise, calculation and contradiction.' And following Loïc Wacquant, Peck identifies, as a central movement in its contortions, 'an increasingly ambidextrous relationship between the authoritarian and assistential wings of the neo-liberal state.'¹⁴ In the remainder of this essay I want to argue that the new counterinsurgency doctrine exemplifies those accommodations. Second, and following directly from these considerations, Dodge fails to appreciate that the counterinsurgency doctrine is a profoundly biopolitical discourse that, as I will also show, sought to recognize and capitalize on the ethno-sectarian preoccupations I identified previously in new and even more dangerous ways.¹⁵ Far from marking a reversal, the implementation of the new strategy in Baghdad was an attempt to further a decidedly 'late' neo-liberal project by (other) military means.

Counterinsurgency and the counter-city¹⁶

The first Surge brigade arrived in Baghdad in February 2007, and since the centre of gravity of the new counterinsurgency campaign was to be the civilian population,

¹³ Iraq Planning Group, *Choosing Victory: a plan for success in Iraq*, Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2006.

¹⁴ Jamie Peck, 'Zombie neo-liberalism and the ambidextrous state', *Theoretical criminology* 14 (2010) 104-110: 106.

¹⁵ I provide a detailed critique of the new counterinsurgency doctrine in Derek Gregory, "'The rush to the intimate": counterinsurgency and the cultural turn in late modern war', *Radical philosophy* 150 (2008) pp. 8-23; for the relationship between biopolitics and counterinsurgency, see also Ben Anderson, 'Population and affective perception: biopolitics and anticipatory action in US counterinsurgency doctrine', *Antipode* 43 (2011) 205-36

¹⁶ This analysis is derived from Derek Gregory, 'The biopolitics of Baghdad: counterinsurgency and the counter-city', *Human geography* 1 (2008) 6-27; see also Derek Gregory, 'Seeing Red: Baghdad and the event-ful city', *Political geography* 29 (2011) 266-79.

troops dispersed from Forward Operating Bases into dozens of Joint Security Stations scattered across the city and then into subsidiary Combat Outposts. In April 2007 MNF-I admitted that its forces controlled less than 20 per cent of Baghdad's neighbourhoods; by late May this had risen to 32 per cent, and by mid June to 40 per cent. Progress was uneven, deliberately so since military incursions into some neighbourhoods, notably those in Sadr City, were delayed for fear that they would be provocative and counter-productive. By July more than half the capital was declared 'under control', and in September Petraeus told Congress that the number of sectarian deaths in Baghdad had fallen by 80 per cent since the previous December, which he attributed to 'counterinsurgency practices that underscore the importance of units living among the people they are securing' and to the use of 'non-kinetic means to exploit the opportunities provided by our kinetic operations.' By January 2008 MNF-I classified 356 of Baghdad's 474 neighbourhoods in the 'control' or 'retain' category of its four-tier security rating system, around 75 per cent of the city, 'meaning enemy activity in those areas has been mostly eliminated and normal economic activity is resuming.' But this picture needs to be qualified in two ways.

First, the emphasis on ethno-sectarian violence (however it is defined) distracts attention from the continuation of *military* violence: from deaths attributable to kinetic operations in Baghdad and the belts that surround it. You may not be able 'to kill your way out of an insurgency,' as Petraeus told *Time*, but the cultural turn does not dispense with killing. On the contrary, in certain circumstances it is a prerequisite for its refinement. The Baghdad Security Plan depended on a parallel counterinsurgency operation in the zones around the capital. Sunni insurgents and Shia militias had controlled these belts since 2004, and so three of the additional Surge brigades were deployed not in Baghdad but in the towns that ringed the capital. From June through to mid-August 2007 multiple, simultaneous strikes were launched to disrupt supply networks and prevent insurgents escaping military operations in the capital as part of an umbrella Operation Phantom Thunder. The objective, as General Ray Odierno, put it, was to 'eliminate the accelerants to Baghdad violence from enemy support zones in the belts that ring the city.' By the end of the year he claimed that AQI's capabilities had

been dramatically diminished. Hundreds of weapons caches had been cleared, three factories making car bombs and IEDs had been uncovered, 121 AQI fighters had been killed or captured and more than 1,000 suspects detained.

According to Iraq Body Count, however, deaths of *non-combatants* killed in firefights and other attacks involving coalition forces rose from a range of 544–623 in 2006 to a range of 868–1,326 in 2007; the majority of these incidents involved air strikes, which also increased significantly from 2006 through 2007. There were 229 close air support/precision strikes in which major munitions were dropped in 2006, but this increased by almost five times in 2007 to 1,119 (640 of them in June, July and August, when Operation Phantom Thunder was under way). Civilian deaths directly attributable to US forces alone increased during the same period, from a range of 394–434 reported in 2006 to a range of 669–756 in 2007. These statistics must also be treated with caution: IBC's tabulations are minimum estimates, and these raw numbers do not distinguish deaths attributable to Operation Imposing the Law and Operation Phantom Thunder from other military operations in Iraq. But it seems clear that, for all the attention culture-centric warfare paid to ethno-sectarian deaths, in other registers the killing continued and even accelerated.¹⁷

Second, Petraeus's presentation to Congress was illustrated by a series of maps in which plots of ethno-sectarian violence from December 2006 through to August 2007 were superimposed over a base-map of ethnic segregation in Baghdad (Figure 1).

¹⁷ 'Civilian deaths from violence in 2007', Iraq Body Count, 1 January 2008 at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2007>; Anthony Cordesman, US Airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 13 December 2007. Cordesman's figures are also minima: 'major munitions' excludes 20 and 30 mm cannon and rockets.

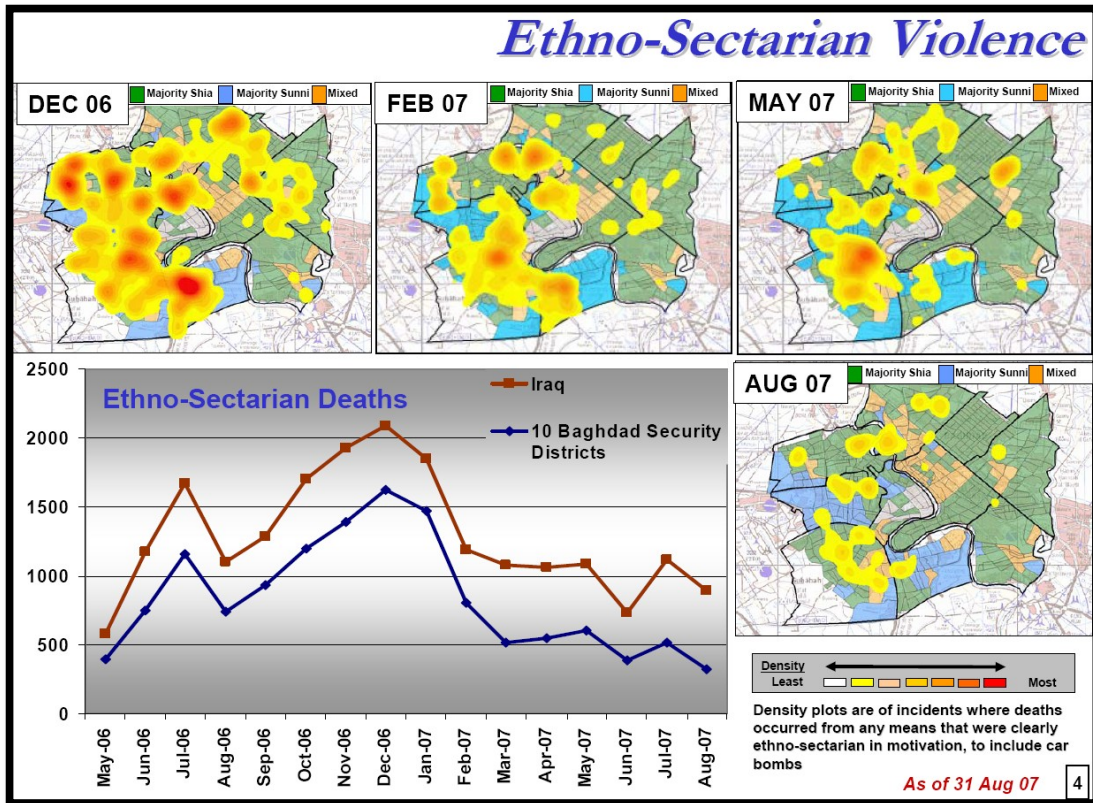


Figure 1: Ethno-sectarian deaths in Baghdad, December 2006-August 2007

Significantly, Petraeus’s base-map remained unchanged throughout the sequence and yet, just days earlier, the equivalent base-maps used in the Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq showed Baghdad turning into an overwhelmingly Shia city. The omission is doubly important. Other military officers acknowledged that a process of ethnic cleansing that had started before the Surge continued through it and played a vital role in the eventual diminution of ethno-sectarian violence. This new sectarian landscape was not an autonomous production, and it involved many actors, but its erasure also artfully erases the involvement of the Bush administration and the US military in crystallizing these divisions. These two considerations bear directly on both the politics of the cultural turn and the biopolitics of Baghdad, and I will elaborate each of them in turn.

Sectarianism and the production of space in Baghdad

There are many cultural groups in Iraq, but here I focus on the Sunni and Shia whose interactions have been instrumental in the restructuring of post-invasion Baghdad. In doing so, however, I do not mean to impose any essentialist identity on what is a complex cultural-historical field; identity is of course constructed and conjunctural, negotiated and contested, and subject-positions are formed at the intersection of multiple affiliations. Indeed, many Iraqis insist that until very recently marriage between Sunni and Shia was common. Neither do I mean to treat violence as a pure expression of sectarian affiliation; on the contrary, it has been a significant means of *manufacturing* identity in Baghdad as elsewhere. This has not been confined to divisions between the confessions. The Sunni and Shia are not homogeneous constituencies, and fissures within both communities have played an important part in the narrative of sectarian power. In reading that narrative in the capital, two events elsewhere are of special significance: the first was Fallujah in 2004 and the second was Samarra in 2006. It is around these punctuation points that I have organized my account.

The first US-led siege of the Sunni stronghold of Fallujah in April 2004 coincided with a series of moves by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the US military against the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army (*Jaish al-Mahdi* or JAM). Many Iraqis saw close parallels between the looming fight in Fallujah and the fierce fighting that had erupted in Moqtada's home ground, Sadr City in Baghdad (named after his murdered father). 'They're no different,' Anthony Shadid was told: 'We're one Iraq.' Shia marched with Sunni in joint demonstrations in the streets of the capital; refugees from Fallujah were given shelter in Baghdad; and convoys raced back to the besieged city with sacks of grain, flour, sugar, and rice and supplies of blood donated by Shia and Sunni families alike. Karl Vick reported that 'the Sunni-Shiite divide, already narrower in Iraq than in some parts of the Muslim world, is by all accounts shrinking each day that

Iraqis agree their most immediate problem is the occupation'.¹⁸ The first assault on Fallujah failed but in the fall, as American airstrikes increased and preparations for a second ground attack gathered momentum, the city turned into a symbol of division. On one side, the failure of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the leading Shia cleric, to condemn the attack was widely seen as a tacit endorsement of it and a disavowal of the increasingly violent tactics of Sunni insurgent groups, especially AQI, and estrangement was increased still further by the participation of units of the reformed Iraqi Army that were predominantly Shia. On the other side, Sunni Arabs increasingly dominated the insurgency, which redoubled its attacks on the Iraqi Army and police whose ranks were disproportionately filled by Shia, and AQI escalated its attacks on the coalition ('the far enemy') and on the Shia population at large ('the near enemy'). These were two sides of the same coin, each serving to increase the political currency of the other, and they virtually destroyed any possibility of a unified, cross-sectarian resistance to the occupation.¹⁹

By the end of the year Edward Wong was already writing in the *New York Times* about 'the early stages of ethnic and sectarian warfare'. Thousands of Sunni refugees together with untold numbers of insurgents fled Fallujah and elsewhere in the Sunni Triangle and streamed in to western Baghdad. Shia families were driven from Amiriyah and Dora by threats and intimidation, attacks on their homes, and abductions and murders. As many as 40 per cent of homes in Amiriyah were abandoned, and the vacant houses taken over by refugees in what would eventually become a systematic campaign of expulsion by Sunni militias.²⁰ Many of the displaced Shia moved to Sadr City or left Baghdad for towns and cities in the south, but apart from one or two neighbourhoods the

¹⁸ Anthony Shadid, *Night draws near: Iraq's people in the shadow of America's war* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005) pp. 377-8; Karl Vick, 'Shiites rally to Sunni "brothers"', *Washington Post* 9 April 2004.

¹⁹ Crisis Group, *In their own words: reading the Iraqi insurgency* Middle East Report 50, 15 February 2006; Loretta Napoleoni, *Insurgent Iraq: al Zarqawi and the new generation* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005) 157-160.

²⁰ Edward Wong, *New York Times* 5 December 2004; Nir Rosen, 'Anatomy of a civil war: Iraq's descent into chaos', *Boston Review* November/December 2006; Michael Schwartz, 'The battle of Baghdad', TomDispatch at <http://www.tomdispatch.com>, 23 March 2008.

community response to these expulsions and displacements was remarkably muted. Both al-Sistani and Sadr called for restraint, but they could afford to do so. The United States had already made sectarianism the basis for the constitution of its ‘new Iraq’ when it appointed the Interim Governing Council in 2003, which marked the inauguration of ‘institution-building by ethno-sectarian logic’.²¹ The elections in January 2005 gave this principle popular legitimacy, at least amongst the Shia and the Kurds, and when the United Iraqi Alliance won a majority of the vote the political ascendancy of the Shia was formalized. The Alliance was a coalition dominated by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the smaller Dawa Party; other parties included a bloc that broadly supported Moqtada al-Sadr. Several of the Shia parties had armed militias, and soon after the elections they started to seize sectors of the state apparatus including, crucially, the institutions of violence.²² Sunni militias pushed back, and AQI increased its assaults on the Shia to provoke them into taking aggressive countermeasures that would in turn radicalise more of the Sunni into joining the insurgency.²³ During the summer revenge killings by the Shia began, orchestrated by death squads that were part of what Charles Tripp called a ‘baroque proliferation of security forces’, including police commando units operating from the SCIRI-controlled Ministry of the Interior, and local militias that claimed to be defending their neighbourhoods. The shadow state that paralleled Saddam’s formal apparatus of rule had been revived, Tripp argued, but in a

²¹ Crisis Group, *The next Iraq war? Sectarianism and civil conflict*, Middle East Report 52, 27 February 2006, p. 12.

²² SCIRI was formed in exile in Iran in 1982. Fiercely opposed to Saddam’s regime, it raised an armed militia, the Badr Brigades, which fought on the side of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. In contrast to Sadr’s roots among the poorest sections of the Shia, its social base lies in the Shia merchant and middle class. Since the invasion it ‘used its institutional alliance with the United States to capture strategic positions in the state and security establishments’ – men from the Badr Brigades fill senior positions in the Iraqi security forces – but it also retained the Brigades as its paramilitary arm: Kamal Nazer Yasin, ‘The tangled web of Shia politics’, ISN Security Watch, 9 April 2008. SCIRI was viewed with considerable suspicion by the Sadrist, who left the Alliance in September 2007, and there was constant and often violent conflict between the Badr Brigades and the Mahdi Army.

²³ Allawi, *Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 233-4

devolved form, fragmented and fluid.²⁴ Killing was on sectarian lines, and in July al-Sistani raised the spectre of ‘genocidal war’. By the end of the summer, as the vote on a new constitution drew near, the cleansing of neighbourhoods accelerated in a determined attempt to influence and intimidate voters. Sunni insurgents forced Shia residents to flee Amiriyah, Dora, Ghaziliyah and Sadiya; Shia mosques were closed, houses left empty, and the west bank seemed to be becoming the preserve of the Sunni, while in a mirror reflection across the Tigris, Shia death squads and militias ensured that the east bank was becoming the preserve of the Shia.²⁵

A second major punctuation point changed this stark division: the bombing of the Shia al-Askari mosque in the predominantly Sunni city of Samarra on 22 February 2006. It was now the turn of Shia refugees to pour into Baghdad, and in the days after the bombing dozens of Sunni mosques in the capital were burned or taken over by armed fighters, and 1,300 bodies (mostly Sunni) were dumped in and around the city: often burned and mutilated, they were intended to send a viscerally sectarian message. Violence escalated during the spring and summer, and from here on the advance of the Shia through Baghdad accelerated and Sunni militias and AQI fought fiercely to retain control of Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods. The launch of Operation Together Forward in June was powerless to prevent the continued ‘cleansing’ of the capital. Sabrina Tavernise reported that ‘militants on both sides have moved block by block through

²⁴ Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in fragments: the occupation and its legacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) pp. 155-9; Charles Tripp, ‘Militias, vigilantes, death squads: the grammar of violence in Iraq’, *London Review of Books* 25 January 2007.

²⁵ Sabrina Tavernise, ‘Many Iraqis see sectarian roots in new killings’, *New York Times* 27 May 2005; Patrick Cockburn, ‘Iraq’s top Shia cleric warns of “genocidal war”’, *Independent* 19 July 2005; Nancy Youssef and Mohammed al Dulaimy, ‘Shiites fleeing Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods’, *Knight Ridder Newspapers* 21 September 2005. Zeyad Kasim reproduced guidelines circulating among (presumably Sunni) communities in Baghdad. Arrest by Iraqi security forces or their militias ‘would mean possible death or injury’, they began, and it would be ‘naïve’ to trust them; residents were advised to seek out ‘trustworthy friends’, to become familiar with the geography of their neighbourhoods, and to establish ‘neighbourhood watch groups’ so that when a patrol entered (usually a 4WD without number plates) people could be warned by telephone to hide or escape. Healing Iraq, 17 February 2006 at <http://healingiraq.blogspot.com>.

Baghdad's neighbourhoods, threatening, kidnapping and killing.' In August the US military estimated that 60 per cent of killings had been the work of Shia death squads. By the fall insurgent attacks in Baghdad had increased by 26 per cent and violent deaths reported at the mortuary had quadrupled. The main battle lines had been drawn: the core fight was over control of the corridors into the city from the north (by the Shia) and the south (by the Sunni), and each side sought to secure its territory by advancing through a corresponding arc of neighbourhoods.²⁶ While many people fled the violence voluntarily, particularly the middle class, often leaving not only the capital but also the country to seek refuge in Syria or Jordan, many others were subject to systematic campaigns of intimidation: threatening letters, posters and fliers, even videos, and ultimately the abduction and murder of family members.²⁷

By November it was clear that the Shia had gained the upper hand, and were making significant inroads into both the north west and south west of the city. Online message boards were full of frantic postings from Sunni residents asking for help in defending their neighbourhoods and providing frequent updates on their local situation. A staccato sample translated by Zeyad Kasim captures the frightening cadence of ethnic cleansing:

- 'Please inform us about the areas that are expected to be targeted so we can be prepared';
- 'Please intervene to save the Jihad district from another massacre – Interior Ministry commandos have been transporting fighters and mercenaries from the militias with their buses to their headquarters in the district';
- 'Deploy snipers on the rooftops of buildings that lie close to the main entry points for each area... RPG carriers should maintain their positions on side streets';

²⁶ Sabrina Tavernise, 'Sects' strife takes a toll on Baghdad's bread', *New York Times* 21 July 2006; Jim Michaels, 'Shiites redefine battle in Baghdad', *USA Today* 10 August 2006; 'Sunni, Shiite factions carve up Baghdad', Associated Press at msnbc.com, 1 September 2006.

²⁷ Mark Kukis, 'Ethnic cleansing in a Baghdad neighborhood', *Time* 25 October 2006; for graphic examples of threatening letters, fliers and posters see Healing Iraq, 9 October 2006.

- ‘Dora has been breached’;
- ‘Elements of the Interior Ministry are attacking Dora... But do not fear, for we are engaging them’;
- ‘Urgent. The residents of Ghazaliya are in urgent need for medical supplies’;
- ‘Please inform us how the Shia pray because this will save many from being killed during interrogation after they are abducted.’²⁸

By the end of the month MNF-I had mapped what it described as ‘ethno-sectarian fault lines’ throughout the city (Figure 2), and from its plotting of ethno-sectarian deaths its commanders concluded that most ‘high-visibility, high-casualty events’ like car and truck bombings were being carried out by Sunni insurgents, principally AQI, in the east bank, while most ‘murders, executions and assassinations’ were being carried out in response by Shia militias on the west bank.²⁹ Although the US military did not say as much, the Shia controlled both the police and the police commando units, and there was covert co-operation between these security forces and many of the militias. This made it easy for them to set up checkpoints and kill any Sunnis who fell into their hands. As Cockburn remarked, and as the message-boards confirm, ‘an official police checkpoint may simply be a death squad in uniform.’³⁰

²⁸ Healing Iraq, 26 November 2006.

²⁹ MG William Caldwell, MNF-I Press briefing, 29 November 2006. The map was first published in Ned Parker, Ali Hamdani, ‘How violence is forging a brutal divide in Baghdad’, *Times* 14 December 2006; versions of the map reappeared in the Iraq Planning Group Report: Choosing Victory, Figures 2 and 3.

³⁰ Patrick Cockburn, ‘Baghdad under surge’, *Counterpunch* 15 March 2007.

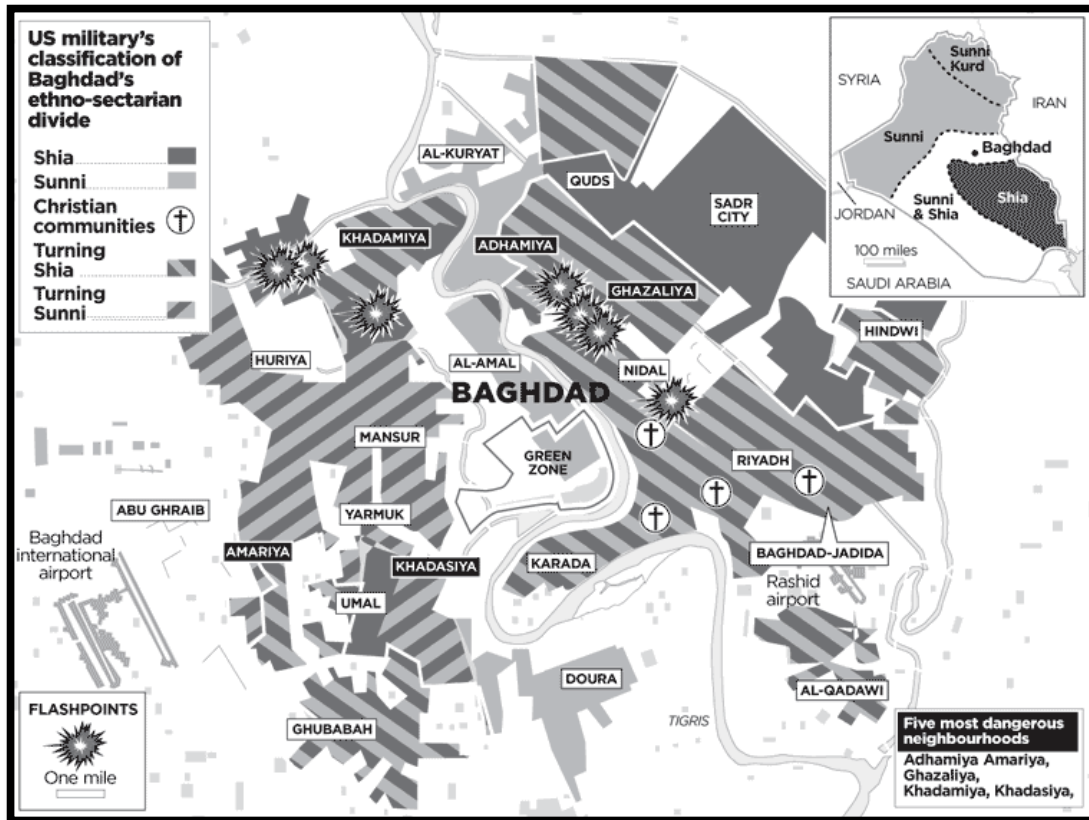


Figure 2: Ethno-sectarian fault-lines in Baghdad (MNF-I), November 2006

Contemplating this stark geometry, Brian Finoki wrote that

‘Baghdad is almost completely dissected by a feral matrix of informal checkpoints, sniper alleyways, car bombed corridors, networks of micro insurgent-urbanisms; it is the city re-engineered by endless dueling barricades of postcolonial control; it is, above all, a scrappy imperial abyss. Baghdad’s guillotined real estate is a stage for indiscriminate slaughter, for militant dominance – blood trails in the streets mark a kind of demographic authority as much as they do the absence of an authority altogether.’³¹

³¹ Brian Finoki, ‘The sectarian faultlines of Baghdad’, Subtopia at <http://subtopia.blogspot.com>, 18 December 2006.

Between February and December 2006 at least 146,000 people were displaced in Baghdad, and still the Shi advanced at a ferocious pace. In Ghazaliya, for example, the Mahdi Army was giving Sunni families just twenty-four hours to leave their homes, which were then handed over to Shia families. The deadlines were exactly that: anyone who defied the order risked death. ‘Few do,’ Mark Kukis reported, ‘allowing the Mahdi Army to flip up to five houses a day.’³² Intimidation reached far beyond the inconstant, swirling circles of paramilitary violence; it affected health care, employment and the very textures of daily life were being systematically shredded. In March 2007 Damian Cave described Baghdad as

‘a capital of corrosive and violent borderlines. Streets never crossed. Conversations never started. Doors never entered. Sunnis and Shiites in many professions now interact almost exclusively with colleagues of the same sect. Sunnis say they are afraid to visit hospitals because Shiites loyal to the cleric Moktada al-Sadr run the Health Ministry, while Shiite laborers who used to climb into the back of pickup trucks for work across the Tigris River in Sunni western Baghdad now take jobs only near home.’³³

The intention of the Surge, so Cave claimed, was ‘to fix all this – to fashion a peace that stitches the city’s cleaved neighbourhoods back together.’ But by May MNF-I concluded that ‘the sectarian cleansing is pretty much done on the east side’ of the city, and during the next four months, Shia militias continued to drive Sunnis out of at least seven neighbourhoods.³⁴

³² Parker, Hamdami, ‘Violence’; Sabrina Tavernise, ‘District by district, Shiites make Baghdad their own’, *New York Times* 23 December 2006; Mark Kukis, ‘In Baghdad, a last stand against ethnic cleansing’, *Time* 28 December 2006.

³³ Damian Cave, ‘In Baghdad, sectarian lines too deadly to cross’, *New York Times* 4 March 2007.

³⁴ Ann Scott Tyson, ‘Commanders in Iraq see “Surge” into ’08’, *Washington Post* 9 May 2007; Damien Cave, Stephen Farrell, ‘At street level, unmet goals of troop build-up’, *New York Times* 9 September 2007.

At the end of June Kazim posted one of many e-mails circulating on message boards and list-servers classifying neighbourhoods according to the danger of JAM or AQI activity. The lists have their own morbid humour – a ‘safe area’ was defined as one where the probability of staying alive was 50 per cent – but they also have a hard edge, and the geography of risk that they describe was, as Kazim noted, ‘quite different’ from those found in official statements from the Iraqi government or the US military.³⁵ Embedded in these maps was a new geography of the killing fields. As a neighbourhood was cleansed so it became a target for renewed mortar attacks, since each side could be more confident it would not be killing members of its own community; bodies continued to be dumped on the streets, especially on the west bank, in most cases bound, blindfold and executed, but as the Battle for Baghdad reached its tense climax so killings were less about sending messages to others and the death squads started to conceal the bodies of their victims in shallow graves.³⁶

The area under the control of the Mahdi Army continued to expand until August 2007, which would have been impossible without its penetration of the Ministry of the Interior and the collaboration of Iraq’s security forces.³⁷ As with the other militias, the advance of the Mahdi Army through Baghdad was about the pursuit of political and economic power. ‘Control equals money and power,’ one military officer told two reporters, and the more neighbourhoods a militia controls then the more influence it will have ‘through legal and non-legal means.’³⁸ Politically these territorial gains were of immense symbolic significance. This was, after all, the capital city. In the 1940s and

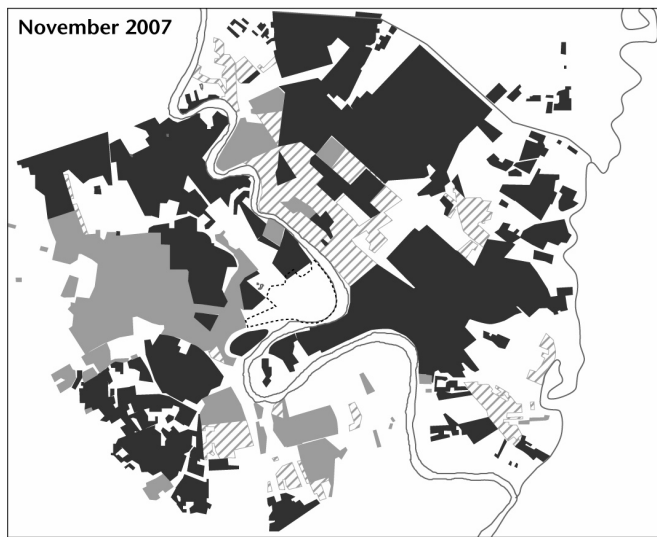
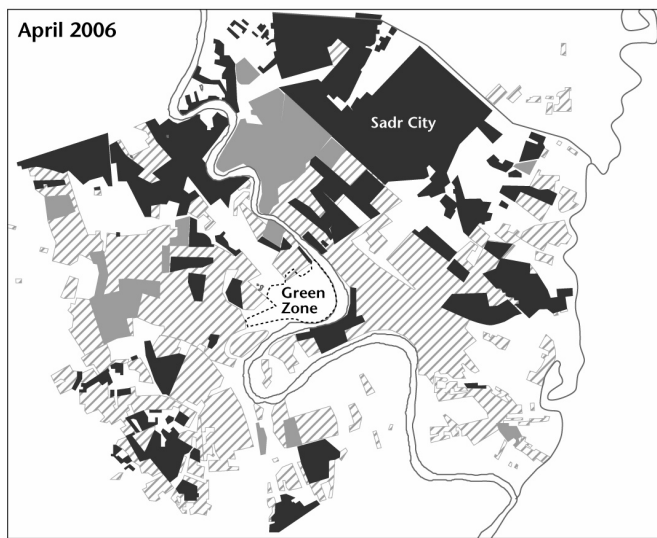
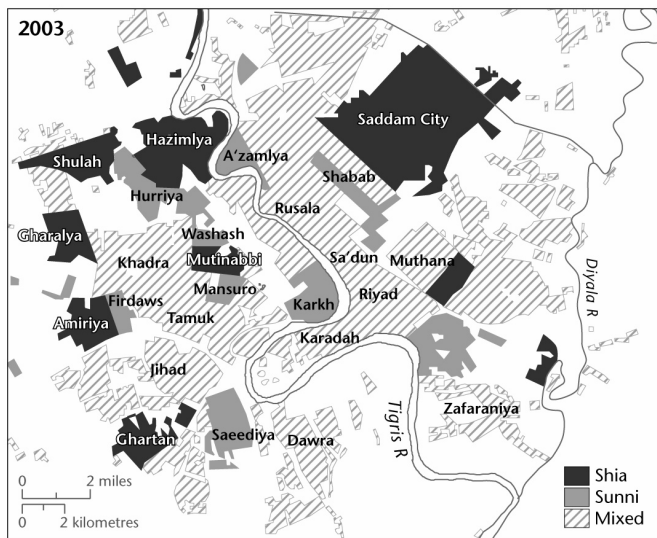
³⁵ Zeyad Kazim, ‘The Baghdad death map: Iraqis offer their own security assessment of Baghdad neighborhoods’, IraqSlogger, 30 June 2007 at <http://www.iraqslogger.com>.

³⁶ Cockburn, ‘Baghdad under surge’; Healing Iraq, 25 July 2007; Babek Dehghanpisheh, ‘The body contractors’, *Newsweek* 15 December 2007

³⁷ Crisis Group, *Iraq’s civil war, the Sadrists and the surge*, Middle East Report 72, February 2008, p. 4. Soon after the elections in January 2005 the Badr Brigades moved to dominate the Ministry of the Interior, while the Mahdi Army remained outside the state security apparatus since it was unwilling to co-operate with the American occupation; after the Samarra bombing, however, elements of the Mahdi Army penetrated the Ministry and many of them were actively involved in its death squads: Cockburn, Moqtada, pp. 184-6.

³⁸ Parker and Hamdami, ‘Violence’.

1950s, before thousands of poor Shia moved to the newly built suburb of al Thawa (renamed Saddam City and eventually Sadr City), Baghdad was perhaps 90 per cent Sunni. Now, in just two or three years, it had become 75 per cent Shia (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Sectarian composition of Baghdad, 2003-2007*³⁹

Nothing symbolised the reversal of political power so visibly and viscerally as redrawing the map of Baghdad. According to Tripp, neighbourhoods were being ‘cleansed’ not simply for reasons of ethnic or sectarian hatred ‘but in order to map out territorially strategic positions’ that translated directly into political advantage. ‘Each side is still seeking to impress on the other that it cannot take everything, that its enemies are so formidable that some kind of deal – to share or devolve power, to divide the spoils – is required.’⁴⁰ This jockeying for position was not confined to the struggle between Sunni and Shia, since there were divisions within each constituency. In particular, Moqtada’s relationship with the Shia-dominated government was a turbulent one, and the advance of the Mahdi Army through the capital was a reminder that his movement could not be marginalized. This was a source of exasperation to other Shia parties that, in early 2008, would move against the Mahdi Army in both Baghdad and Basra. But the control of so many Baghdad neighbourhoods gave Moqtada a popular legitimacy. His organization operated a shadow state, providing both security and social services that the government either could not or would not provide. ‘In a city virtually abandoned by the state, Sadrist offices in several neighbourhoods became the last and only resort for Shiite residents in need of help. Shiites living in remote areas requested military support; displaced families asked for resettlement assistance; even feuding couples turned to the *maktab* [the Sadrist neighbourhood office] for arbitration. The Mahdi Army offered security by protecting the perimeter of neighbourhoods and emptying some of all Sunni presence; as a result its popularity grew well beyond its natural social constituency (chiefly composed of young and more disadvantaged Shiites.’⁴¹

³⁹ The original maps were drawn for MNF-I by Mike Azady and were based on censuses carried out by the US military. Such exercises are of course fraught with difficulty and, in the circumstances, danger for the respondents. They form part of ‘mapping the human terrain’, a central element in the new counterinsurgency doctrine, but some commanders have claimed that the initial counts were inaccurate so that ethnic cleansing in some neighbourhoods was significantly over- or under-estimated.

⁴⁰ Tripp, ‘Militias, vigilantes, death squads’.

⁴¹ Crisis Group, *Iraq’s Civil War*, p. 7.

Economically, territorial control was an important source of revenue for the militias, which took a cut of 10-25 per cent on all construction contracts and property transactions, and demanded fees from electricity suppliers and public works contractors. ‘The Mahdi Army acts as a tax office in all Shiite neighbourhoods,’ the leader of one neighbourhood council claimed, and, with other militias, had deeply penetrated the urban economy.⁴² These paralegal norms and forms provided the shadow state with income for its political, military and social operations. In the postcolony, Jean and John Comaroff observe, the forms of the law and the market are appropriated and re-commissioned. ‘Its perpetrators create parallel modes of production and profiteering, sometimes even of governance and taxation, thereby establishing simulacra of social order.’⁴³ As is common in ‘new wars’ more generally, these activities shaded into outright criminality.⁴⁴ This was, in part, geographical, the product of territorial advance: as the Mahdi Army expelled Sunnis from neighbourhood after neighbourhood so its provision of security for the Shia became moot and other sources of revenue had to be found. But it was also generational: as senior militia commanders were arrested or killed, many of the younger fighters that took their place extended their activities into protection rackets, kidnappings and car-jackings, and began to prey on Shia communities too. At the end of August 2007, as factions of the Mahdi Army degenerated into criminal gangs, Moqtada called a ‘freeze’ in operations and suspended attacks on US troops in order to re-establish his authority with a protracted purge in which hundreds were expelled or executed.⁴⁵

⁴² Edward Wong, Damien Cave, ‘Baghdad district is a model, but only for Shiites,’ *New York Times* 22 May 2007.

⁴³ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, ‘Law and disorder in the postcolony: an introduction’, in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds) *Law and disorder in the postcolony* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006) pp. 1-56: 5.

⁴⁴ See Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of war* (Berkeley CA; University of California Press, 2004). Criminality was not all on one side, however, and external actors had also penetrated – and hollowed out – the urban economy: see Schwartz, ‘Neo-liberalism on crack’.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group, *Iraq’s Civil War*, p. 7; ‘In Baghdad, services and violence are linked’, IraqSlogger at <http://www.iraqslogger.com>, 21 August 2007; Sabrina Tavernise, ‘Relations sour between Shiites and Iraq militia’, *New York Times* 12 October 2007; Ned Parker, ‘Sadr militia moves to clean house’, *Los Angeles Times* 7 December 2007; Sudarsan Raghavan, ‘Iraq’s youthful militiamen build power through fear,’ *Washington*

Although the Shia advance juddered to a halt, its effects on ethno-sectarian violence were dramatic. ‘Now that the Sunnis are all gone,’ one American intelligence officer explained, ‘murders have dropped off. One way to put it is they ran out of people to kill.’ The view may not have been orthodox, but it was familiar to American military officers and planners. In a classic essay published in the journal of the US Army War College, former Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters had argued that the ‘most promising environment’ for stability operations is ‘a formerly multicultural city that has been ethnically cleansed.’ With a truly Orwellian flourish, he explained: ‘The deprivation of the object of hatred is a powerful force for peace.’⁴⁶ Other observers drew the same conclusion. In September two *Newsweek* reporters claimed that part of the reason for the decline in insurgent attacks ‘is how far the Shiite militias’ cleansing of Baghdad has progressed: they’ve essentially won.’ Next month one of their colleagues said much the same. The security situation had improved but ‘the capital’s neighborhoods have calmed in large measure because each is now dominated by one sect or another.’⁴⁷ As Patrick Cockburn was told by many Iraqis, ‘the killing stopped because there was nobody left to kill.’⁴⁸

The diminution of ethno-sectarian violence was thus, in large measure, the climax and consequence of a campaign of ethno-sectarian violence. It was not until Petraeus’s second report to Congress in April 2008 that he acknowledged that the reduction of ethno-sectarian violence in Baghdad was partly the result of the ‘sectarian hardening of certain Baghdad neighbourhoods’, however, and only then did he display the changing

Post 13 December 2007; Amit Paley, ‘Sadr’s militia enforces cease-fire with a deadly purge’, *Washington Post* 21 February 2008.

⁴⁶ Joshua Partlow, ‘Mahdi Army, not al-Qaeda, is Enemy No 1 in western Baghdad’, *Washington Post* 16 July 2007; Ralph Peters, ‘The human terrain of urban operations’, *Parameters* 30 (2000) 4-12.

⁴⁷ Babek Dehghanpisheh, Larry Kaplow, ‘As Sunnis flee, Shiites now dominate Baghdad’, *Newsweek* 10 September 2007; Rod Nordland, ‘Baghdad comes alive’, *Newsweek* 17 November 2007.

⁴⁸ Patrick Cockburn, ‘Who is whose enemy?’ *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2008.

composition of the city on his base-maps.⁴⁹ In September Damien Cave and Stephen Farrell had concluded from their survey of Baghdad neighbourhoods that the Surge had not reversed ‘the city’s underlying sectarian dynamics’, but this was only half the story. For that same week Tina Susman noted that Baghdad ‘appears to have become *more* balkanized, not less, in the last six months.’⁵⁰ In fact, far from reversing sectarian dynamics, as I now want to show, the security plan actively *exploited* them.

Divide and rule

That the Baghdad Security Plan should have had a sectarian inflection is hardly surprising. It was implemented under the auspices of a highly partisan Iraqi government and its security forces, and in conjunction with a US military that saw itself as holding the line between the Shia and the Sunni. The public versions of the new counterinsurgency doctrine had positioned the US military as an innocent bystander in an ethno-sectarian conflict. Thus Sarah Sewall from the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard, who had been instrumental in the review of the draft of the new Army Field Manual, indicted both the Iraqi government – amongst whose failings she listed sectarianism, fecklessness, and corruption – and the Bush administration (about which one might say the same) and absolved the new, culturally sensitive and ethically driven military. ‘While the administration gambles away civil liberties at home and abandons human rights abroad,’ she declared, ‘the US military has recommitted itself to protecting the rights of foreign citizens of all nationalities and faiths’.⁵¹ Given the new reserves of cultural tact and cultural intelligence within the military, it was not difficult to conclude that if violence continued then the fault must lie with the Iraqis alone. Hence the move from *Newsweek*’s cover of 15 October 2001 – ‘Why they hate us’ – to *Time*’s of 5 March

⁴⁹ But that is ‘only a partial explanation,’ he added, ‘as countless sectarian faultlines and numerous mixed neighborhoods still exist in Baghdad’: General David Petraeus, Report to Congress on the situation in Iraq, 8-9 April 2008.

⁵⁰ Cave and Farrell, ‘At street level’; Tina Susman, ‘Troop build-up fails to reconcile Iraq’, *Los Angeles Times* 4 September 2007; my emphasis.

⁵¹ Sarah Sewall, ‘He wrote the book, can he follow it?’ *Washington Post*, 25 February 2007; ‘Crafting a new counterinsurgency doctrine’, *Foreign Service Journal*, September 2007: pp. 33-40.

2007: 'Why they hate each other'. *Newsweek* effectively removed 'us' (US) from the equation.

This is ideologically convenient but thoroughly fraudulent. In his review of the Surge, Odierno admitted that 'there was some movement of Shia and Sunnis around Baghdad in 2006 and the beginning of 2007' – an understatement of extraordinary proportions – and continued: '*so what we've tried to do is hold that in place.*'⁵² When Tripp argued that violence in Iraq was 'not merely the main threat to "security" but also an outgrowth of the ways in which security responses have been organized,' he was talking about the multiplication of Iraqi police commando units, death squads and sectarian militias.⁵³ But the same could be said of the US military, whose very presence and continuing kinetic operations have provoked violence, and which has been complicit in and even capitalized on the ethno-sectarian restructuring of Baghdad. As the first Surge brigades began to return stateside, Crisis Group concluded that previous US military operations had 'exacerbated and consolidated' ethno-sectarian divisions, and that 'today its divide-and-rule tactics are contributing to new fault lines and rivalries.'⁵⁴

This is a highly charged political and military field. At one end of the spectrum are actions taken in concert with the Government of Iraq that have worked to favour the ascendancy of the Shia and of particular factions within it, while at the other are actions that have worked to counterbalance the marginalization of the Sunni. Three strategies have been of special significance during the implementation of the Baghdad Security Plan: the differential treatment of prisoners; the incorporation of new militias; and the selective walling of Baghdad neighbourhoods.

First, the detention and treatment of prisoners was by no means blind to sectarian affiliation. The operational title for the Plan, 'Operation Imposing the Law', is revealing. There has always been an intimacy between law and violence, and the use of legal

⁵² Odierno, News briefing, 17 January 2008; my emphasis.

⁵³ Tripp, 'Militias, vigilantes, death squads'.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group, *Iraq after the Surge: the new Sunni landscape*, Middle East Report 74, 30 April 2008, p. 27.

formularies as the language for military operations was calculated to have a powerful rhetorical effect. Securing Baghdad cannot be reduced to a series of expedient political manoeuvres, to be sure, but it nevertheless trembled on the edges of the ‘lawfare’ that is characteristic of the postcolony: ‘the resort to legal instruments, to the violence inherent within the law, to commit acts of political coercion, even erasure.’⁵⁵ There had long been serious concerns about the treatment of detainees held in US facilities in Iraq, and secret jails and torture chambers run by the Ministry of the Interior and its militias were raided by American troops in 2005. But Operation Imposing the Law did not mark a major break from the carceral regimes that preceded it. During the Surge the number of detainees soared to levels unprecedented since the American invasion: those held by the Maliki government increased more than 50 per cent, and those held by MNF-I more than 60 per cent. Their treatment was decisively determined by sectarian affiliation. Around 85 per cent of those held were Sunni, and Anthony Cordesman reported that while Shia detainees were often freed, ‘Sunnis are warehoused.’ In December 2007 the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) complained that its ‘longstanding concerns with respect to due process rights’ of prisoners in US military custody remained unaddressed, and that a high proportion continued to be held in military detention even after the courts had dismissed their cases. In relation to those held by the Government of Iraq, UNAMI reaffirmed its concerns over ‘prolonged delays in reviewing detainee cases; the lack of timely and adequate defence counsel for suspects; the failure to promptly investigate credible allegations of torture and to institute criminal proceedings against officials responsible for abusing detainees; and the procedures followed by the Central Criminal Court, which fail to meet basic fair trial standards.’⁵⁶

The second strategy involved a series of compromises and deals between the US Army and various militias and paramilitary proxies in and around the city. On one side,

⁵⁵ Comoroff and Comoroff, ‘Law and disorder’, p. 30

⁵⁶ Anthony Cordesman, ‘The tenuous case for strategic patience in Iraq’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 6 August 2007, p. 18; Human Rights Report, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 31 December 2007, pp. 2-3 (for a detailed discussion, see pp. 22-28); Chris Tomlinson, ‘Iraqi court rulings stop at US detention sites’, Associated Press, 17 May 2008.

the US Army welcomed Moqtada's freeze, and in its public statements was scrupulously careful to acknowledge the services provided to Shia neighbourhoods through his offices, and to distinguish the Mahdi Army from the dissident factions ('special groups') and criminal gangs against which it continued its offensive operations.⁵⁷ On the other side, the US military was instrumental in the formalization of new and predominantly Sunni militias. These took their lead from the *Sahwa* or 'Awakening' movement in Anbar province, a coalition of Sunni tribes that suspended their support for the insurgency in the summer of 2006 and started to co-operate with the US military against AQI. Similarly, from early in 2007 thousands of Sunnis in and around Baghdad were recruited as Critical Infrastructure Security Volunteers, Awakening Councils, Guardians, Concerned Local Citizens or Sons of Iraq. The names varied over time and space; the groups were rooted in neighbourhoods rather than structured by tribal allegiance and many preferred local identifications. The first group in the capital, the Knights of the Two Rivers, formed in Amiriyah in June 2007 and by the end of the year claimed more than 300 members. By then around 43,000 Iraqis had been enrolled in similar groups in 16 other Baghdad neighbourhoods. Most of them were on the west bank, but they had also spread to the largest remaining Sunni neighbourhood on the east bank (Adhamiya). Once recruits had been screened, recorded on a biometric database and signed a security contract they were paid \$300 a month by the US military to provide armed security for their neighbourhoods (from which the Iraqi Army was now excluded).⁵⁸

As in Anbar, the formation of these groups was in part provoked by the explosive violence of AQI that targeted not only American and Iraqi security forces and the Shia population but also confronted and coerced the Sunni with its rigid version of Salafist

⁵⁷ Alex Kingsbury, 'Baghdad's new normal,' *US News & World Report* 2 March 2008.

⁵⁸ Three different biometric systems are used by the US in Iraq: Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS); the Biometrics Automated Tool Set (BATS); and the Biometric Identification System for Access; all three are linked to the Department of Defense Biometrics Fusion Center in West Virginia. For critical discussions see, for example, Andrew Hom, 'Critical perspectives on biometrics in Baghdad', *Military Review* January-February 2008: 85-94; Heather Murray, 'Monstrous play in negative spaces: illegible bodies and the cultural construction of biometric technology', *Communication Review* 10 (2007) 347-65.

Islam. Like the Mahdi Army, AQI was the victim of generational change. As its seasoned leaders were captured or killed in US military operations they were replaced by what Crisis Group identified as ‘less experienced, more undisciplined and increasingly brutal younger militants who typically resorted to random, savage violence.’ In Baghdad the rupture between AQI and other Sunni insurgent groups was delayed by AQI’s role in resisting the march of the Shia militias. In the spring of 2007 it declared Amiriyah the capital of its Islamic State of Iraq, antagonising other insurgent groups in the process, and repulsed Shia incursions into Amiriyah, Dora and Ghazaliya. But AQI’s determination to dominate the insurgency combined with the advance of the Shia elsewhere in the city to push the Sunni, including many former insurgents, closer to the US military.⁵⁹ I use those words advisedly, because the Sunni militias made no secret of their contempt for the Iraqi government, which they saw as a proxy for Iran. In return, the Iraqi government resisted their incorporation into its security forces, and there were fears that many of them would return to the insurgency if they were denied a continuing role in post-occupation Iraq. The rise of the Sunni militias provided a precarious counterbalance to the Shia supremacy, therefore, but as Michael Schwartz notes, this was ‘little more than an armed truce between enemies’. The United States had effectively arming both sides in the civil war, the military and paramilitary forces under the control of the Iraqi government and the new Sunni militias, and it is difficult to see how these accommodations could produce political reconciliation.⁶⁰

The third strategy involved building high concrete walls around selected,

⁵⁹ James Glanz, Stephen Farrell, ‘US-backed plan for Sunni neighborhood guards is tested’, *New York Times* 19 August 2007; Will Waddell, ‘Reconciliation movements in and around Baghdad,’ Institute for the Study of War, Backgrounder 11, September 2007; Michael Howard, ‘A surge of their own: Iraqis take back streets’, *Guardian* 20 December 2007; Alissa Rubin, Damien Cave, ‘In a force for Iraqi calm, seeds of conflict’, *New York Times* 23 December 2007; Alissa Rubin, Stephen Farrell, ‘Awakening Councils by region’, *New York Times* 23 December 2007; Peter Spiegel, ‘US shifts Sunni strategy in Iraq’, *Los Angeles Times* 14 January 2008; Crisis Group, *Iraq after the Surge*, pp. 2-3, 17.

⁶⁰ Patrick Cockburn, ‘Is the US really bringing stability to Baghdad?’ *Independent* 15 February 2008; Schwartz, ‘Battle’; Nir Rosen, ‘The myth of the Surge’, *Rolling Stone* 6 March 2008.

primarily Sunni neighbourhoods. Baghdad was already crisscrossed with countless blast walls and checkpoints, but beginning in April 2007 the military decided to reinforce the major ethno-sectarian fault lines. The objective was to prevent insurgents from using neighbourhoods as bases to conduct operations against other communities and, if this failed, to prevent death squads from entering in order to retaliate. Initially five neighbourhoods were selected, including Adhamiya, Amiriyah and Khadra, but this was later increased to ten. The first neighbourhood to be walled was Adhamiya, which Petraeus's Senior Counterinsurgency Adviser described as both a staging post for AQI bomb attacks on surrounding Shia communities and a recurrent target for revenge attacks by Shia death squads. Many residents were unconvinced by the strategy, however, and the parallels they drew were with the Israeli fence around Gaza and the wall Israel had built deep inside the occupied West Bank. They complained that like the Palestinians they were being turned into 'caged animals'.⁶¹ The sentiment and the structure of feeling that it represented were widely shared, and there was considerable opposition to the construction of the wall, from the press, on the streets and even, for a brief moment, from the Iraqi Prime Minister. One young Iraqi woman must have spoken for many when she wrote: 'The Wall is the latest effort to further break Iraqi society apart. Promoting and supporting civil war isn't enough, apparently... It's time for America to physically divide and conquer.'⁶² The military brushed aside the protests, however, insisting that they had been orchestrated by AQI, and claimed that it was not 'sealing off neighbourhoods' but merely 'controlling access to them.' Although the military referred to these walled enclaves as 'gated communities', Baghdad was hardly Bel Air. Access was restricted to military checkpoints – 'One road in and one road out,' said one sad man in Ghazaliya: 'Now I live in my own little prison'⁶³ – and all residents were subjected to biometric scanning (fingerprints and retinal scans). As with the militias, so the miles of concrete walls represented a suspension rather than a resolution of the conflict between the Sunni

⁶¹ A proposal to turn Baghdad's Sunni districts into 'closed cantons' was outlined by Nibras Kazimi of the Hudson Institute in November based on what he called 'the Israeli method' used to construct the 'separation barrier' (or Apartheid Wall) in the occupied West Bank: Talisman Gate at <http://talismangate.blogspot.com>, 30 November 2006.

⁶² Baghdad Burning, 26 April 2007, at <http://riverbend.blogspot.com>

⁶³ Sam Dagher, 'Baghdad is safer, but it's a life behind walls', *Christian Science Monitor* 19 December 2007.

and the Shia. As James Denselow argued in commentary on the walling of Baghdad, behind so much of the supposed progress in Iraq was ‘a systematic attempt to transfer the conflict into a deep freeze rather than address the root causes of the violence.’⁶⁴

Hell freezes over⁶⁵

It is not only ethno-sectarian conflict that was suspended; everyday life was suspended too. That post-occupation Baghdad witnessed a profound contraction of the horizons of life became a dismal commonplace, and the wretched conditions under which most Iraqis live in Baghdad (and elsewhere) have been detailed in endless, eviscerating accounts of the hopelessly inadequate provision of public utilities like electricity, water and sewage disposal. In the capital these bore most heavily on the Sunni, whom Alissa Rubin described as inhabiting ‘a world of ruined buildings, damaged mosques, streets pitted by mortar shells, uncollected trash and so little electricity that many people have abandoned using refrigerators altogether.’ She argued that the contrast with Shia neighbourhoods, including even Sadr City, was stark: ‘Markets are in full swing, community projects are under way, and while electricity is scarce throughout the city there is less trouble finding fuel for generators in those areas. When the government cannot provide services, civil arms of the Shiite militias step in to fill the gap.’⁶⁶

But for both Sunni and Shia the freedom of movement, the essence of the right to the city, was deeply compromised by the new sectarian landscape. Thousands of families were forced to flee their homes, many of them moving two or three times, and by the end of 2007 there were more than one million displaced people in Baghdad.⁶⁷ Even those

⁶⁴ James Denselow, ‘Freezing the conflict’, *Guardian* 28 April 2008.

⁶⁵ Cf. Aparasim (Bobby) Ghosh, ‘Life in Hell: a Baghdad diary’, *Time* 14 August 2006.

⁶⁶ Alissa Rubin, ‘Sunni Baghdad becomes land of silent ruins’, *New York Times* 26 March 2008. The last sentence speaks directly to the situation in Sadr City.

⁶⁷ The internally displaced are predominantly women and children. See successive reports from the Iraqi Red Crescent Organization, *The internally displaced in Iraq*, especially Updates 29 (27 December 2007) and 32 (March 2008). Many more people fled to Lebanon, Jordan and Syria; these were disproportionately the Iraq middle class, who had the means to escape but who also encountered considerable hardships in their new lives as refugees.

who remained in their homes found the walls closing in on them. 'People may feel safer inside their neighbourhoods,' Kim Sengupta reported, 'but are more wary of venturing outside them. A short journey across the city can take hours with roads blocked off and numerous checkpoints, discouraging people from visiting relations and friends and reinforcing the sense of isolation.'⁶⁸ Extended families are common in Baghdad, but face-to-face interactions became less frequent: one man said his favourite aunts and cousins lived in Dora, less than two miles away from his home in Saydia, but he had been unable to visit them for over a year. Ordinary activities like visiting friends or going to school were turned into major expeditions fraught with difficulty and danger. Different militias controlled different streets and bridges, and 'Shiites and Sunnis still take long, circuitous routes to work to avoid each other's neighbourhoods.'⁶⁹ Increasingly, the Shia had to navigate intra-sectarian barriers too, which intensified during the crisis of March 2008 when different Shia constituencies battled for control in the streets. Allegiances in Kadhimiya changed from block to block, for example, where the Mahdi Army controlled most of the central district and the rival Badr Organization the southern district. Conversely, Karrada was secured by the Badr Organization but threatened by the Mahdi Army, to such a degree that one resident said that it was now safer for him to go to (Sunni) Dora than to other Shia neighbourhoods 'where being perceived as [a supporter] of the wrong political party can lead to death.'⁷⁰

These turf wars meant that when the envelope of personal security expanded, it had definite but indeterminate limits. One shopkeeper in Karrada said that it was safe enough for him to go to the local wholesale market but not safe enough for his daughter to go back to school, safe enough to drive in his immediate neighbourhood but not safe enough to cross the Tigris. There were work-arounds, like the informal exchanges where taxi-drivers could swap passengers and truckers could swap cargoes for destinations that

⁶⁸ Kim Sengupta, 'Under siege: what the surge really means in Baghdad', *Independent* 10 September 2007.

⁶⁹ Nordland, 'Baghdad comes alive'.

⁷⁰ Wong and Cave, 'Baghdad district is a model'; Sudarsan Raghavan, 'On a Baghdad street, palpable despair', *Washington Post* 31 March 2008; Raghavan, 'Between Iraqi Shiites, a deepening animosity', *Washington Post* 7 April 2008.

lay across the fault lines. But the very existence of these arrangements only confirmed the suspended animation of normal transactions; this was ‘the new normal’, where ‘the simple interactions that make up normal life in cities around the world – buying gas, going to a grocery store, fixing your car – are now conducted along strictly sectarian lines.’⁷¹ In the spring of 2007 Leila Fadel reported that neighbourhoods were becoming self-sufficient enclaves ‘in which Sunni and Shiite residents can shop among their own without fear of retribution.’ As Baghdadis became reluctant to visit the main markets and shopping areas, so former residential districts sprouted with street stands, private garages opened for car repairs, and gardens were converted into mini-marts, clothes shops and internet cafés. ‘The result has been a new pattern of life for many as they search for ways to stay in their Sunni or Shiite neighbourhoods.’⁷² Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who grew up in a very different Baghdad, returned in March 2008 to find that most people ‘now live in walled, ethnically cleansed communities’ to such a degree that ‘there is no such thing as a Baghdadi any more. Everyone now is identified with a particular walled neighbourhood, guarded by one of a dozen or so militias.’⁷³

If economic and social life existed in a state of suspended animation, then political life fared no better. The result was an intense localization of politics, what one former US ambassador called ‘a quasi-feudal devolution of authority to armed enclaves which exist at the expense of central government authority.’ ‘Securing Baghdad’ spawned a security establishment that extended far beyond the state apparatus, and the city fractured into a series of fiefdoms.⁷⁴ When the commander of the Amiriyah militia

⁷¹ Cave, ‘In Baghdad’, 4 March 2007; Yasir Faisal, ‘Baghdad garage where drivers swap Shiites and Sunnis’, Reuters 2 July 2007; Joshua Partlow, Naseer Nouri, ‘In Iraq, a lull or a hopeful trend?’ *Washington Post* 2 November 2007; Nancy Youssef, ‘Ride home shows Baghdad’s safe, dangerous sides’, McClatchy Newspapers 5 November 2007; Nordland, ‘Baghdad comes alive’; Diaa Hadid, ‘Shop owners flee mixed Baghdad areas’, Associated Press 28 December 2007.

⁷² Leila Fadel, ‘Life blooms on the side streets of Baghdad’, McClatchy Newspapers, 7 May 2007; Hadid, ‘Shop owners flee’.

⁷³ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, ‘Death, destruction and fear on the streets of cafés, poets and booksellers,’ *Guardian* 17 March 2008.

⁷⁴ Charles Tripp, The politics of the local in Iraq, *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2008; Rosen, ‘The myth of the surge’.

confronted the security detail protecting the (Sunni) Vice-President of Iraq on a visit to a local mosque, he established his authority with a grandiloquent gesture, at once proud and parochial, that recalled AQI's declaration of Amiriyah as its capital (and confirmed his past involvement with the insurgency): 'This is Amiriyah, not Iraq!' The deputy leader of the Fadhil militia was no less cocksure: 'We are an independent state; no police or army is allowed to come in.'⁷⁵

Biopolitics, security and the counter-city

In his original discussions, Foucault described sovereign power and bio-power as 'absolutely incompatible', because one was exercised over territory, the other over bodies or populations. Biopolitics, Foucault insisted, was 'the exact, point-for-point opposite' of sovereign power, 'foreign to the form of sovereignty'. But he was also acutely aware of their contradictory combination, and argued that the play between 'the sovereign right to kill' and the calculated administration of the right to life is inscribed 'in the workings of all states.'⁷⁶ And in Baghdad – as in so many other places – biopolitics is not pursued outside the domain of sovereign power but is instead part of a protracted struggle over the right to claim, define and exercise sovereign power.

There are, I think, close affinities between the suspended animation of Baghdad in the name of securing the city and Foucault's description of the transformation of the plague-stricken town into a counter-city:

'In the [plague-stricken town] there is an exceptional situation: against an extraordinary evil, power is mobilized; it makes itself everywhere present and visible; it invents new mechanisms; it separates, it immobilizes, it partitions; it

⁷⁵ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'Meet Abu Abed: the US's new ally against al-Qaida', *Guardian* 10 November 2007; Sam Dagher, 'Market bombings: Baghdad locals want security not Iraqi police', *Christian Science Monitor* 4 February 2008.

⁷⁶ See Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality: an introduction* (London: Penguin, 1978; first published in French, 1976) pp. 135-145; Foucault, "Society must be defended": *lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003) pp. 23-41, 239-263.

constructs for a time ... a counter-city that is reduced, in the final analysis, like the evil that it combats, to a simple dualism of life and death: that which moves brings death, and kills that which moves.’⁷⁷

It is not unduly fanciful to see the dialectic between insurgency and counterinsurgency turning Baghdad into a counter-city, but this can be pressed still further because much of what I have described can be connected to Michael Dillon’s discussions of contemporary biopolitics that extend the arguments Foucault sketched out in a series of lectures on security two years after his thematization of the plague-stricken town. The instrumentalisation of counterinsurgency; the compulsive need to produce and reproduce metrics (‘You cannot secure anything unless you know what it is,’ Dillon observes, so that ‘integral to the problematizations of security are the ways in which people, territory and things are transformed into epistemic objects’), and the concerted attempt to freeze the contingency and spontaneity of life, what Dillon calls ‘the endless calibration of the ways in which the very circulation of life threatens life’: all of these speak directly to a late modern security *dispositif* that is profoundly biopolitical.⁷⁸

‘Biopolitics simply lives for its obsession with the audit of existence. For the continuous assay of life, it is necessary to specify the very eligibility to life as well as the eligibilities that life biopolitically accords to life. How would biopolitics know how to promote and enhance life if it did not constantly take the measure of life? And what is it to do, when constantly taking the measure of life, if it discovers life intractable to improvement, or even inimical to life itself? It must specify correction

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan) (London: Penguin, 1979) p. 205; originally published in French in 1975.

⁷⁸ Michael Dillon, ‘Governing terror: the state of emergency of biopolitical emergence’, *International political sociology* 1 (2007) 7-28: 12, 18; see also his ‘Underwriting security,’ *Security dialogue* 39 (2008) 309-332. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (trans. Graham Burchell) (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

and administer punishment. In the final event, it must also equip itself to say who shall live and who shall die in the name of life itself.’⁷⁹

In his later lectures, Foucault began to map in a preliminary fashion the connections between biopolitics and neo-liberalism: I have tried to show that those connections can not only be heard in the scratchy recordings from a lecture theatre in the Collège de France but also read on the walls and streets of occupied Baghdad.

⁷⁹Dillon, ‘Governing terror’, p. 25.