

# Gauging troop mood in Iraq difficult to do

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**A U.S. soldier gives another a boost in order to see over a door for possible threats during a cordon and search mission in al-Sinaa, Iraq, on April 1. Do soldiers see the surge as a success? Do they see progress? There are no quick or easy answers as their responses often depend on when the questions are asked. (DoD)**

FOB NORMANDY, Iraq -- U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus is giving Congress his command assessment on how the "surge" of troops in Iraq has affected security and stability in the country, but lost in the recitation of facts and figures is the mood of the troops themselves.

Do they see the surge as a success? Do they see progress in Iraqis taking over responsibility for their own lives.

There are no quick or easy answers to those questions. The responses vary from day to day and often depend on when the questions are asked. Right after a mission outside the wire – and all the tensions that go with it – the gripes and voiced frustrations come fast and furious. Later, when the soldiers are a bit more relaxed, the responses are more reflective.

"They were shocked when we came. When we got here we walked around and the people didn't even want to make eye contact with us," said Sgt. Rudy Parrenno of the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment. "They were scared. All they heard from al-Qaida were these stereotypical things about American forces. It took them a little while to gain a sense of trust.

"An older man with his family came up to me the other day and said that for the first time he and his family have been able to have a good night's rest. That means a lot. That lets you know that everything you're doing in a sector is paying off, you're making a difference."

The Stryker regiment has been involved with both urban kinetic combat and rural operations. In 2004-5 they were deployed in the northern city of Mosul from their home base in Vilseck, Germany. In September and October 2007 they fought pitched battles in southeast Baghdad, and last January they chased al-Qaida out of Diyala province's break basket region where al-Qaida rode roughshod for two years.

Their mission today is not only to keep insurgents out of the province, but also to help Iraqis take control of their own security, bridge sectarian divides and learn the ropes of local democratic self-governance.

When they left Baghdad, East Rashid and Doura were returning to life. Residents driven out by sectarian and insurgency violence were returning, schools were opening and markets were reopening.

"I definitely think what we've done has been worth it," said 1st Lt. Brian Evans, from Oregon. "Just seeing the change in communities from the time we, for example, entered Dora; the effect we have had by our work and just our presence – reassuring people [of their safety] and helping and allowing the IA [Iraqi army] and IP [Iraqi police] do their jobs better because we were there."

Evans, on his first tour of Iraq, believes the surge of troops to increase stability has worked. "I really do," he said. "But at the same time, when you add troops like that you have to expect a payoff. More troops means more security. The real test of time will be when the surge is over. Will the advances made during the surge and the big steps we took forward last, even when we go down to a lesser number of soldiers?"

By and large the soldiers spoken to over more than a month are positive about what they are doing and what is being achieved. They are also disheartened by their 15-month deployment schedule, but most take it in stride. Most, but not all.

"I'm getting out [of the Army]," a specialist by the name of Allen interjected while this reporter was talking to another soldier. "F this 15 months stuff. We should just get the F out of this country. We never should have come here in the first place. We're spinning our wheels. This place has been war-torn since the beginning of time."

"I want to leave. Obviously there would be repercussions, but it wouldn't be an overnight. But [leave] sooner rather than later," said Sgt. Jeremy Brown from Wyoming. Brown, on his second tour in Iraq, said he was frustrated at "having to hold their [Iraqis] hands. "When I came back, I expected that a lot more IA and IP would be doing the things I'm doing now – policing."

Allen's anger and Brown's disappointment, however, appear to be in the minority, although many may share such feelings on occasion. A re-enlistment officer said that at the half-way mark in the fiscal year, 90 of the 250 soldiers up for re-enlistment have done so. The goal is 188 and he has little doubt that will be achieved.

"We almost lost this thing early on by not understanding the human domain, and I hate to say it but I was as guilty as the next guy," said a captain on his third tour who requested anonymity. "In 2004 we were fighting out of the FOBs [forward operating bases] trying to win this by clearing or destroying the enemy. Now we understand the human dynamic of the counter-insurgency fight. We understand that to win this thing, we must leverage the population.

"I truly believe we are making progress... [and] it takes time. "But if you watch American politics it would make you think we don't have a lot of it."