Understanding Iraq's Insurgency

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Introduction

Many questions have been posited as to which tactics, strategies, and policies, are best and should be employed to counter the insurgent threat in Iraq. Many argue that the military should be the primary instrument involved whereas others argue that more emphasis should be placed on the diplomatic and economic instruments to resolve this threat. However, before anyone can attempt to argue in favor of any recommendation, option, or policy, it is important to understand the problem. The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of Iraq's insurgency using the detailed framework for analysis developed by Dr. Bard O'Neill and described in his book, *Insurgency and Terrorism*. This broad framework analyzes insurgencies by examining the international system, domestic context, goals, purpose, means utilized, and strategies. From this analysis, the nature of the insurgency, type, the problems they pose, and the requirements they place on respective actors can be determined.[1] Therefore, with such an understanding, individuals will be better prepared to assess the tactics, strategies, and policies that are recommended and possibly employed in addressing this threat.

Insurgency Definition

A comprehensive definition of insurgency is provided by the pamphlet *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, published by the Central Intelligence Agency. It states: Insurgency is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity—including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization (such as propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity) is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy. The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country.[2] Several aspects of this definition are particularly important to note. First, it is a protracted political-military activity that includes guerrilla warfare and terrorism aimed at the weakening government control. Second, terrorism in this context is an auxiliary tactic that insurgents use as part of a broader strategy rather than an exclusive one.

International System

The end of the Cold War undoubtedly changed the international system. The international system is no longer a bipolar one that is divided between eastern and western blocs and led by two major powers. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States has emerged as the world leader in military, economic and

arguably, in political aspects. Additionally, the attacks on the World Trade Center, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania, have also dramatically changed the international system.

In the short term, just after the September 11th terrorist attacks, the international community unified against the newly perceived international threat by displaying unconditional support for the United States in its efforts to bring the terrorist perpetrators to justice. Evidence supporting this was the adoption of United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1373, condemning the terrorist actions, and in effect, passing binding legislation.[3] One need only look at the clear and directive language that is found in paragraphs 1, 2, and 6 that stipulates that "all states shall prevent and suppress the financing of terrorists acts, refrain from providing any form of support to terrorists, take necessary steps to prevent the commission of terrorists acts, prevent the movement of terrorists and terrorists groups by effecting border controls, and establish a Committee of the Security Council to monitor the implementation of this resolution."[4] Furthermore, the United States took unprecedented unilateral action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for supporting the Al Qaeda terrorist group and invoked article 51 (self-defense) of the UN Charter.[5] Although this sparked some debate, the international system acquiesced to this action. Even five weeks later when the UN passed Security Council Resolution 1378, it did not reprimand the United States for this unilateral use of force and preemptive action. Instead, it criticized the Taliban Regime for not taking measures to stop its support to the Al Qaeda terrorists and it expressed its support for the new Afghanistan transitional administration supported by the United States.[6]

The support given to the United States in the long term, however, is not as vast as it was in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, especially in light of the international controversy leading to U.S.-led coalition preemptive attacks on Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom). Hereafter, it can be argued that the international community would no longer acquiesce to the preemptive actions of the United States. Thus the actions of the only remaining superpower would no longer be unchallenged. It became clear that the international community, (through the UN) was not going to endorse the United States' desired combat operations under the aforementioned Article 51 of the UN Charter. Subsequently, the United States, understanding that it could not garner this international support for justification of preemptive self-defense, pursued the approval of UN Security Council resolution (SC 1441) that focused on giving Iraq one last chance to comply with the previous Security Council resolutions, in which it was found to be in "material breach."[7] This resolution outlined the following:

• Specifically recalled SC Resolution 678 (use of UN Charter Chapter VII enforcement action) and asserted that, failing compliance, SC Resolution 678 is reaffirmed.
• Asserted Iraq was in "material breach" of obligations under SC Resolution 687.
• Gave Iraq a "final opportunity" to comply with disarmament obligations.
• Ordered Iraq to provide UNMOVIC with unrestricted access to all sites, including Presidential sites.
• Granted UNMOVIC and IAEA sole discretion over removing, destroying weapons.[8]

Thus, it came to pass that the United States and United Kingdom engaged in operation Iraqi Freedom "under authorization of the United Nations" specified in Security Council Resolution 1441 and because of Iraq's continued "material breaches" of Security Council Resolution 687.[9] However, this action did not come without harsh criticism: France Germany, and Russia expressed their concerns, stating "there is no basis in the UN Charter for a regime change with military means."[10]

Although this article is not focused on the international system, the examples above were discussed in detail to prove that the international

system does not currently possess a standard lens through which it views the international threats. It can be argued that in the in the wake of the September 11th attacks, the United States received overwhelming support and it was able to provide a "standard universal" lens through which most nations viewed terrorists, as evidenced by the overwhelming support for Security Council Resolution 1373. However, as the United States and the United Kingdom expanded this threat to include Saddam Hussein's regime, the short-lived universal lens shattered and the international security environment is once again perceived quite differently throughout the world: a view substantiated by Helga Haftendorn in her article, "The Security Puzzle."[11]   Subsequently, recent events have proven that even though the United States is the only major remaining superpower enjoying unmatched military and economic strength, its political influence will be affected and perhaps limited by the manner in which the rest of the international community perceives the international security setting.

Iraqi Domestic System: Background

It is equally important to understand the nature and dynamics of the Iraqi domestic setting and political system. While insightful analysis on Iraq's political and social dynamics in the pre-Saddam period exists, the closed nature of the former autocratic state makes it challenging to assess Saddam Hussein's former political system. Nonetheless, it is possible to make a number of observations. While the British and the Hashemite monarchy sought to undertake the building of the state, it was never fully realized. Saddam Hussein's autocratic regime, under the guise of the Ba'athist party purporting to represent the will of the people continued to make progress in building the Iraqi state in terms of the organizational and physical infrastructure of a modern, unitary state, until the 1990s. Iraq was able to develop formal administrative structures. These covered all aspects of society, from central to local government, from education through public works to the oil industry, which were staffed by relatively well-educated and competent technocrats. However, in terms of building a unified nation, whether in a monarchist, Arab nationalist, or revolutionary Ba'athist guise, it proceeded sporadically since the 1920s.[12] A recent and over-simplified observation is that Saddam's Sunni-led government, buttressed by the military and the intelligence services (mukhabarat), which were "bureaucracies of repression" for the Kurds and Shiites, contributed to Iraq's current day lack of national identity.[13]

Table 1.1 summarizes the political systems utilized by O'Neill. A simplified analysis reveals that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed characteristics of both the modernizing autocracy as well as the totalitarian system. These two political systems are in sharp contrast to the pluralistic system that the United States is attempting to emplace and in which the Iraqis have no previous experience with. Thus, it is evident that this transition to a new political system will not be timely and cannot be rushed given the lack of democratic experience. Steven Metz also supported this argument when he stated, "Moving from the psychology of totalitarianism to the psychology of an open society, with its foundations in political initiative, consensus building, and compromise, is a long and tortuous journey."[14]

Table 1.1

Political Systems: Sources of Support, Methods Control & Role of the Public. [15]

Political System	Sources of Support	Method of Control	Role of Public
Traditional Autocracy	Military, Landowners, Clergy provide support in exchange for socio-economic privileges.	Elites maintain tight control on "right to rule." Reinforce the importance of birthright, and personalism as key values to rule.	Expected to be apathetic and loyal. Opposition will be oppressed and controlled.
Modernizing Autocracy	Bureaucrats, Military, Landowners, and Clergy provide support in exchange for socio-economic privileges.	Birthright, personalism and religion also stressed as right to rule but emphasis placed on building "state power" to remain in hands of few elites. Hierarchical structure evolves with patrons dispensing favors for support.	Masses do not actively participate in political process. Some regulated private activity is permitted in widely state-owned enterprises.
Totalitarian	Tightly controlled vanguard party and societal groups.	Party claims to represent the popular will. Leaders use a complex bureaucracy, media and education system to carry out control of political, economic, and social aspects.	Expected to participate in vanguard party. Economic control may be in hands of public sector.
Pluralistic (Democracy)	Public acting through political parties.	Numerous political structures established within and outside of government. External groups act autonomously. Limits placed on powers of leaders. lace the political system in favor of individual freedom and liberty	Public actively participates in espousing values of freedom, liberty and compromise

Iraqi Domestic System: Present Day

No clean ending + developmental regression = challenging rebuilding. The fact that the end of the conventional part of Operation Iraqi Freedom did not have a clean ending gave rise to cadres of Ba'ath loyalists as well as other opponents of the U.S. led coalition. In fact, it is now suspected that many of the insurgent threats operating in Iraq are from other Arab countries like Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia fighting to end what is now clearly seen as an occupation. [16] Given this continued insurgent threat challenging Iraq's long transition to democracy, it is clear that the conventional military victory did not transpire to political victory or grand strategy victory as some leaders had expected. Anthony Cordesman, correctly points out that military victory was always a prelude to a much more important struggle: winning the peace. [17]

Unlike the formal surrenders of previous conventional wars, like those of Germany and Japan, where defeated armies stopped fighting, the war in Iraq did not) produce a formal and open surrender from any senior official in the former regime. This lack of formal surrender has contributed to this "unclean" ending as former Saddam loyalists, who are unhappy that they have lost control, influence, and social status, and continue to fight the American occupation. Although it is difficult to measure to what extent a formal surrender could have deterred the former regime loyalist from continuing to fight, it is arguable that even a small reduction of insurgent fighters (attained through a formal surrender) could have significantly improved the domestic setting by reducing the number of insurgents deeply committed at conducting terrorist acts. It is with this understanding that Ambassador Barbara Bodine stated, "We tried mightily to find some, any senior Iraqi officers

who would surrender prior to April 9th.”[18] Terrorist acts play a huge role in affecting the psyche of the masses and legitimacy of the government. Therefore, this notion of reducing the number of insurgents becomes even more significant when placed in the context of not only transforming a repressive autocratic government into a new democracy but also in attempting to rebuild the national infrastructure while simultaneously fighting an insurgency.

Dr. O'Neill addresses two fundamental challenges that confront nations in their transition to independence: lack of national integration and economic underdevelopment.[19] Societal divisions along one or more lines-racial, ethnic, linguistic, or religious-and an absence of political tradition that transcends parochial loyalties are plaguing post conflict Iraq. Since the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein, the absence of the hard-line Ba'athist regime can no longer demand the citizens' loyalties through terror and intimidation. As rival groups now vie for their share of power, they foster inter-group antagonism and distrust, which may give rise to even more insurrections directed at the provisional government if it is dominated by rival groups, or perceived to be illegitimate. Retired Marine Corps General Zinni has even gone as far as stating that the United States must prepare itself for a possible civil war in Iraq.[20]

Obstacles to economic development that have hampered or continue to hamper Iraq include sanctions, a long and costly war with Iran, war reparations for the invasion of Kuwait, corruption of government officials, poorly trained or inefficient bureaucracies, the lack of adequate communications and transportation infrastructure, an uncompetitive economic position, and a misuse of foreign assistance that was misdirected in favor of its military establishment. According to a study conducted by Anthony Cordesman, the Iraqi annual per capita income dropped from approximately $8,200 in 1978 to $1,435 in 1990, to $723 in 1991 and current figures now show $150 in 2003.[21]

Iraq has experienced a huge economic decline. Therefore, the lack of a hard-line centralist control of diverse and competing groups, the lack of the clean ending to post Iraqi war hostilities, and the cluster of significant societal and economic factors have led to the emergence of new dissatisfied groups and the rise to the insurgents and terrorists threats that previously held a disdain towards the United States.

International – Domestic Interplay

As previously addressed, the terrorist attacks on the United States initially had a unifying effect on the international community but the lack of broader international support for Operation Iraqi Freedom is proof that in the long term, it had the opposite effect. At the domestic level, the lack of a clear ending coupled with the economic underdevelopment and lack of national integration eventually gave birth to the insurgent threat. David Reiff points out that when the administrator to the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer, announced the complete disbanding of the Iraqi Army, some 400,000 strong, and the lustration of 50,000 members of the Ba'ath Party, one U.S. official remarked, "That was the week we made 450,000 enemies on the ground in Iraq."[22] This statement is even more alarming when on realizes that these 450,000 newly minted "enemies" also have family members; so the number of disaffected Iraqis can easily exceed 1 million. Thus, the current situation in Iraq, shaped by the international context of ambivalent support and the domestic context of dissatisfied groups is now a breeding ground for not only the local Iraqi insurgents, but also those international terrorists that desire to drive a wedge in the international community by attacking the U.S. in Iraq as well as those that align with it. With this understanding the attention will now turn to analyzing the insurgency in Iraq by looking at the types of insurgents, their strategy, goals and means, as well as to determine the demands they place on different actors.

Types of Insurgencies

Dr. O'Neill identifies seven types of insurgencies. These are: anarchist, egalitarian, traditionalist, pluralist, secessionist, reformist, and preservationist. Brief descriptors follow and are summarized in Table 1.2:

• Anarchists wish to eliminate the institutionalized political arrangements because they are viewed as illegitimate.

• Egalitarian Insurgents seek to impose a new system of based on the ultimate value of distributional equality and centrally controlled structures designed to mobilize the people and radically transform the society.

• Traditionalist insurgents also seek to displace the political system but they articulate primordial and sacred values rooted in ancestral ties and religion. And although they espouse some autonomy at the local level, widespread participation in national politics, especially by opposition groups is discouraged.

• Pluralists seek to establish a system in which the values of individual freedom, liberty, and compromise are emphasized and in which the political structures are differentiated and autonomous. Many groups use this rhetoric but their ultimate goals are anything but pluralistic.

• Secessionists renounce the political community of which they are a part of and seek to constitute a new and independent political community. Their focus can be regional, ethnic, racial, religious or a combination thereof but secessionist consider themselves nationalist in which their primary aim is independence.

• Reformists are the least ambitious type of insurgent. They seek more political social, and economic benefits for the population but do not reject the political community or system of authorities. Their primary concern is the allocation of material and political resources, which they consider discriminatory and illegitimate.

• Preservationists are quite different than the previously mentioned insurgent types as they seek to maintain the status quo because of the political, economic, and social privileges they receive from it. These groups seek to maintain the existing political system by engaging in illegal acts of violence against non-ruling groups and authorities that are trying to effect change. (e.g. death squads)

Table 2.2

Types of Insurgencies, their goals, and examples.

Type of insurgency	Goal	Example
Anarchist	Eliminate all institutionalized political arrangements; they perceive authority relationships as unnecessary and illegitimate	Foreign terrorist in Iraq – Ansar al Islam & Jaish Ansar al Islam
Egalitarian (socialist and communist	Impose a new system based on distribution of equality and centrally controlled structures to mobilize the people and radically transform the social structure within an existing political community	Shining Path in Peru
Traditionalist	Displace the political system; the values they articulate are primordial and sacred ones rooted in ancestral ties and religion	Fawq in Iraq (Sadr's militia)
Pluralist	Displace the political system in favor of individual freedom and liberty	UNITA in Angola
Secessionist	Withdraw from the present political community and constitute a new and independent political community	Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka
Reformist	Gain autonomy and reallocate political and material resources within the present political system	Kurds in former Iraq
Preservationist	Maintain the existing political system by engaging in illegal acts against non ruling groups and authorities who desire change	Former Ba'athist

Recent data supports that the Iraqi insurgent threat is composed of dissatisfied Iraqis of the former Ba'athist regime, international terrorists such as Ansar al Islam & Jaish Ansar al Islam, and tribal militias (known as the Fawq).[23] Upon examination of their goals and/or actions that support specific goals, these three main groups can be classified as preservationists, anarchists, and traditionalists, respectively one must be cautious when attempting to classify the insurgents, and keep in mind the following challenges to categorization:

• Insurgents ability to transform their goals.
• Numerous insurgent groups may have different and mutually exclusive goals.
• They may mask their goals or convey misleading rhetoric.
• Goal ambiguity, as evidenced by two or more aims of which neither of them predominates.[25]

The latter challenge has indeed posed problems in analyzing some of the insurgents in Iraq. According to an article written by Patrick J. McDonnell and Sebastian Rotella, many of the suicide bombers in Iraq appear to be natives. This is in contrast to the statements from the Department of Defense briefings, which state that suicide attacks are primarily the works of foreign jihadists like Abu Musab Zarqawi, a Jordanian connected to Ansar al Islam and affiliated with al Qaeda. As evidence, they point to the definitive identification of an Iraqi suicide bomber that struck on December 9th 2003 as well as statements from Lt. Col. Ken Devan, an intelligence officer for the Army's 1st Cavalry Division in Baghdad that stated, "Overall, the facts say that the majority of folks we are fighting are Iraqis."[26] Yet despite this assessment, U.S. and Iraqi officials have repeatedly stated that Iraqis are unlikely to engage in such suicide missions because they do not have a history of violent religious extremism.

O'Neill also describes four strategies that can be employed by insurgents. These are: conspiratorial, protracted war, military focus, and urban warfare strategies.[27] These strategies vary as to the importance they place on the following variables: the environment, popular support, organization, cohesion, external support, and the government's response. A summary of each strategy follows:

• Conspiratorial Strategy: In this strategy a small group conspires to remove a ruling authority through limited but swift force. This strategy normally requires a well-organized group and does not necessarily rely on external support. This strategy is typical of coups led by military officers.

• Protracted War Strategy: This strategy seeks to prolong the fight against the ruling government because insurgents realize the government has a conventional force advantage. They adapt asymmetric means to attack selected targets in order to discredit the government and cause disenfranchisement among the population. This strategy is the most widely used and is normally associated with Mao's guerrilla movement, which encompassed three stages: political organization and low-level violence which focused on recruitment and the infrastructure, guerrilla warfare, which encompassed violent military directed at the ruling government, and mobile conventional war, which encompassed large conventional attacks as well as psychological and political means to collapse the government. Mao also emphasized flexibility in these phases allowing leaders to revert to previous stages if necessary.

• Military Focus Strategy: This strategy gives primacy to military action and subordinates political action. It places little emphasis on the political aspect because it assumes that there is sufficient popular support or it will be a by-product of military victory. It focuses on catalyzing the insurgency through military efforts.

• Urban Warfare Strategy: This strategy employs terrorism as a key factor in destabilizing the society and its government. The purpose is to create havoc and insecurity, which will eventually produce a loss of confidence in the government. It employs tactics such as assassinations, bombings,

kidnappings, armed propaganda, ambushes, and assaults on fixed targets in an effort to sabotage economic assets.

Table 1.3 is a simplified matrix of the three major insurgent threats in Iraq depicting the insurgency and type, strategy, means employed, and primary region(s) of operation. Although there are no distinct lines that clearly differentiate one insurgent group from another, it is important to note that each insurgency embraces a different strategy, and operates in specific regions. The insurgents do share the goal of expelling the coalition forces from Iraq, however, the Fawq are more willing to work with the Coalition in order to preserve or enhance their regional influence.[28]

Table 1.3

Types of Iraqi insurgents, their strategy, means, and regional location

Insurgency / Type	Strategy	Means	Region
Foreign Terrorist / Anarchist	Urban Warfare Strategy- transform political crisis into armed conflict by conducting terrorist acts that will force the government into military action. The purpose is to create havoc and insecurity, which will eventually produce a loss of confidence in the government.	Suicide Bombings,[29] Car bombings, Rocket attacks, Assassinations, Ambushes, Kidnappings Propaganda blaming the Coalition	Central and Northern Iraq
Ba'athist Regime / Preservationist	Protracted popular war strategy - prolong the fight against the transitioning government. Employ asymmetric means to attack selected targets to discredit the government and cause disenfranchisement among the population.	Bombings (IEDs), Car bombings, Rocket attacks, Mortar attacks, SAM at helos, Assassinations, Ambushes, Kidnappings, Propaganda blaming the Coalition, Infiltration.[30]	Baghdad, Tikrit, SW Basra, and other predominant Sunni cities
Tribal Militia (Fawq) / Traditionalist	To emplace a village or community based force supporting sacred primordial values rooted in ancestral ties and religion. Willing to work with coalition if position of influence is respected. (Flirting w/ Military Strategy)	Ambushes, Sniper fire, RPG fires, Car-jackings, Smuggling	Southern Iraq, Basra, Al Faw, Umm Qsar

[31]

Problems to Actors

The problems posed by the three insurgent groups are primarily of a security nature to all the actors operating in Iraq but there are other problems that manifest themselves differently and in differing intensities toward specific actors. For example, the Coalition also faces the politicized challenges of dealing with the international community and can see its influence fluctuate based the policies and means it employs in countering the insurgency threats. Additionally, a non-governmental organization or a private organization can be dissuaded from continuing its participation in the rebuilding because the monetary or personal security costs are too high. See table 1.4

Table 1.4

Actors in Iraq, problems encountered, and requirements placed on actors.

Actor	Problem Encountered by Insurgency	Requirements Placed on Actor
U.S.-led Coalition	Security of local population, Security of Iraqi Governing Council, Security of NGOs and Private Groups Force protection, Credibility and Reputation, Ability to influence international community, Financial costs	Increase Forces – Seen negatively Increase force protection measures Impose restrictive measures Combat negative propaganda Increase expenditures
Iraqi Governing Council	Personal Security- High value targets Credibility- Seen as puppet Govt Inability to accommodate factionalized groups Groups can be politicized by attacks	Restrict personal mobility to secure areas Overcome factionalization Combat negative propaganda Provide reputable services/ policies amenable to public at large
Iraqi Security Forces	Personal Security- Seen as traitors Overwhelming task to secure local environment Limited Resources Limited Training Fear, leading to inaction	Combat negative propaganda through reputable security posture Patrol the streets enforcing law and order Improve training levels Earn trust of public through fair, just, and valiant law enforcement
NGOs and Private Sector	Personal Security- Seen as Collaborators Fear- Attacks will dissuade rebuilding efforts Costs for Security- An Additional 10%[32] Attacks on infrastructure increases project workload	Increase personal security measures Assess feasibility of continuing rebuilding efforts or relocating to more secure environment Spend more on security which means less money for projects

Conclusion

By using Dr. O'Neill's framework for analysis, it was shown that Iraq's insurgency is not composed of one insurgent faction but rather various factions that possess their own (as well as shared) goals and utilize various tactics and means of support. These insurgents pose common as well as unique problems to different actors, which in turn call for specific measures to counter such problems. Identifying the insurgent threat by type, region(s) of operation as well as having an understanding the domestic and international setting are also valuable in successfully developing effective tactics, strategies and policies. Therefore, it is with this understanding of the insurgency in Iraq that one can better contemplate the uses of the economic, diplomatic and military instruments as they apply to this current challenge in Iraq.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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[27] Bard E. O'Neill, 31.

[28] Tim Ripley.

[29] According to a March 1st 2004 Seattle Times article written by Patrick J. McDonnell and Sebastian Rotella, many of the suicide bombers in Iraq appear to be natives. This however is in contrast to the statements from the DoD briefings, which state that suicide attacks are primarily the works of foreign jihadists like Abu Musab Zarqawi, a Jordanian connected to Ansar al Islam and affiliated with al-Qaeda. U.S. and Iraqi officials have said repeatedly that Iraqis are unlikely to engage in such missions because they do not have a history of violent religious extremism.

[30] John Burns, "2 American Civilians Killed by Fake Iraqi Policemen," New York Times, March 11, 2004.

[31] Bard E. O'Neill, 49.

[32] Mary Pat Flaherty, "In Iraq, Contractors' Security Costs Rise," Washington Post, February 18, 2004, A01.