

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq

An insurgency is born long before the government it seeks to overthrow knows of its existence. Rebels, guerrillas, and terrorists, far from prying eyes, gather in dark buildings, foreign sanctuaries, or—in today’s day and age—online. At least initially, survival depends on cloaking intent and strength with ambiguity, deception, and subterfuge. Even after attacks begin in earnest, the intended targets tend to underestimate the problem, believing it to be controllable, unorganized, and isolated rather than a symptom of a deeper pathology.

Understanding the factors leading to such a miscalculation is easy. Gone are the Cold War days when regimes could rely on a superpower patron for increased support against a rebellion. Although the most benevolent and stable government may face isolated violence, an organized insurgency reveals deep flaws in rule or administration. Today, even an unsuccessful insurrection can weaken or undercut a government, hinder economic development and access to global capital, or at least force national leaders to alter key policies. The tendency then is to deny or underestimate the threat, to believe that killing or capturing only a few of the most obvious rebel leaders will solve the problem when in fact the problem—the heart of the insurgency—lies deeper.

Like cancers, insurgencies are seldom accorded the seriousness they deserve at precisely the time they are most vulnerable, early in their development. Such is the situation that the United States and coalition forces face in Iraq today. Although U.S. strategists and political leaders may disagree about who is behind the violence in Iraq, the preconditions for a serious and sustained insurgency clearly exist.

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The stakes in Iraq are immense. The conflict there will help determine whether the world continues its difficult and uneven movement toward a global system based on open governments and economies or fractures into a new bipolarity. The Arab world is the region most resistant to the U.S. vision of open economies and governments. If it can work there, it can work anywhere. Iraq is the beachhead, the test case, the laboratory.

Given these stakes and the price already paid, the United States must continue to pursue its strategic objective in Iraq but must do so in a way that limits the long-term damage to the United States itself and to the fragile, new Iraqi society. Calls for a speedy U.S. withdrawal will increase as the conflict drags on. Even Ambassador Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, has hinted that the United States may leave Iraq by the summer of 2004. Leaving too soon, however, would be disastrous. After all, Osama bin Laden's rise was in part a result of abandoning Afghanistan too soon after foreign occupation in 1979. Departing early would guarantee that strategic objectives are not met and, in all likelihood, force re-intervention to deal with future security problems. Only a carefully designed and cautious counterinsurgency strategy can forestall this.

Accepting the existence of an organized insurgency in Iraq has immense political costs as it requires admitting flaws in preconflict planning and will impede the expansion of the multinational coalition attempting to stabilize Iraq. Although a number of states were willing to volunteer for peacekeeping (at least if the price is right), few are willing to accept the casualties and other long-term costs associated with counterinsurgency. As in Vietnam, the United States is likely to stand nearly alone, with only its closest allies. Even so, history is clear on one point: the sooner that serious problems are acknowledged and a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy is implemented, the better the chances that the threat can be managed.

The Emerging Insurgency

An insurgency is born when a governing power fails to address social or regional polarization, sectarianism, endemic corruption, crime, various forms of radicalism, or rising expectations. The margin of error is narrower for an outside occupying power than for an inept or repressive national regime as people tend to find the mistakes or bad behavior by one of their own more tolerable than that of outsiders. Because imperialism was delegitimized in the second half of the twentieth century, minor errors of judgment or practice have provoked armed opposition against rule by outsiders.

By no stretch of the imagination has the U.S. occupation of Iraq been brutal or repressive, but it has had its miscalculations. The first was a serious

underestimation of the work needed to secure, stabilize, and reconstruct Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime had been toppled. Security in Iraq is labor intensive because of the country's long borders and extensive territory, and the coalition did not deploy adequate forces to prevent the infiltration of foreign radicals and criminals. Coalition planners believed that a significant portion of the Iraqi security forces—military and police—would sit out the war in their barracks and then reemerge to form the core of the post-Saddam military and police with new leaders at their fore. None returned, however, leaving a massive security vacuum that the coalition was unprepared to fill. The expectation that international peacekeepers would plug the gaps was also misguided because only a modest number of states proved willing to contribute to what was seen as a U.S.-dominated effort. Coalition planners also underestimated the dilapidated state of Iraqi infrastructure and thus were not able to restore basic services during the first few crucial months following the collapse of Saddam's regime when Iraqis were forming first and lasting impressions.

U.S. strategists also overestimated the ability of Iraqis to govern themselves and underestimated the rapid spread of crime and anomie. This particular shortcoming highlights the tendency to mirror image¹—to assume that others perceive, understand, and act in the way that Americans do—and a deep misunderstanding of the psychology of totalitarianism. Survival in a totalitarian society is dependent on slavish devotion to those with power and on passivity when neither personal power nor the power of a patron provides protection. Fear is pervasive and paralyzing. Fairness and justice have little meaning, and individuals have difficulty distinguishing truth from propaganda or rumor because the regime controls information. Moving from the psychology of totalitarianism to the psychology of an open society, with its foundation in political initiative, consensus building, and compromise, is a long and torturous journey. Against this backdrop, hopes that a functioning Iraqi civil administration could be constructed quickly proved misguided.

U.S. strategists and political leaders also underestimated how long it would take before resentment of the occupation would spark violence. They assumed that, as long as they provided basic services and evidence of economic and political progress, the Iraqis would tolerate coalition forces. This has not proven true. Even in areas where services have been restored to pre-war levels, resentment at outside occupation is escalating to the point of

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violence. The honeymoon period of universal welcome for coalition forces lasted only a few weeks after the overthrow of Saddam's regime.

In Iraq, U.S. strategists correctly gauged the powerful appeal of liberation but misunderstood how it would be interpreted. For most Iraqis, liberation means removing Saddam's regime and any outside presence. The Arab world has little tolerance for outside occupation, particularly by non-Muslims, and a tradition of violent opposition to occupiers. Long, bloody wars were waged against the French occupation of Morocco and Algeria, the British occupation of Iraq, and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and southern Lebanon. This tradition, combined with the current appeal of radical *jihād*, is incendiary, yielding recruits driven by ideology and contributions from those unwilling to fight themselves but willing to provide money to hire and equip additional guerrillas. Islamic radicalism will doubtless increasingly provide the motivation, legitimacy, and global network of support for insurgents

Counterinsurgency is not an exclusively, or even predominantly, military function.

in Iraq. This mixture is even more volatile than the one that existed in Vietnam, where the insurgency took decades to mount because of the isolation and illiteracy of the peasantry. In today's age of interconnectedness, transparency, and pervasive information technology, the process can be compressed into months or even weeks.

Still, even when the raw material for insurgency—anger, resentment, alienation, frustration, a unifying ideology—exists, other factors must be present. Clearly, the insurgents require access to resources, particularly arms and money. In Iraq, neither is in short supply, at least for the time being. Although coalition forces have seized huge amounts of weapons and explosives, many remain under the control of former regime loyalists, other radicals, or criminals who seized them during the chaotic period between the fall of Saddam's regime and the establishment of control by the coalition. In addition, Iraq's porous borders make importing additional arms easy. Similarly, the Ba'th regime had massive amounts of cash, much of which has also been seized, but enough still remains in insurgents' hands to fuel daily violence.

The final ingredients of insurgency, however, fortunately remain outstanding: no clear leadership, strategy, and ideology have emerged to unite the disparate opponents of the United States and the coalition. At this point, the insurgency's core seems to be remnants of the old regime, particularly members of the special security and intelligence services. Although they are fanatical and well schooled at using violence for maximum psychological impact, their ability to expand their support is constrained. However

much the Iraqi people are dissatisfied with the coalition's occupation, very few want a return of the old regime. The remaining Ba'athists can thus build anger and resentment toward the coalition, but they are unable to translate these into active support for their own agenda.

The only way, then, that the Ba'athist core can expand its insurgency is through alliances. Any individual, group, or organization willing to use violence against the occupation is seen as a potential ally. Some of the insurgents appear motivated at least as much by pay as by ideology. With most Iraqis unemployed, the prospect of a significant payment for an assassination is appealing even to those not deeply sympathetic to the Ba'athists. In many ways, one of the trademarks of modern insurgencies from Colombia to Sierra Leone is that cash has proven a much more useful recruitment tool than ideological fervor.

A second expansion of the insurgency comes with the infiltration of foreign Islamic radicals. Ansar al-Islam, an extremist movement with ties to Al Qaeda, seems to be serving as the foundation of this process, linking infiltrators to the Ba'athists. Reportedly, such foreigners were behind the deadly August 2003 bombing of the United Nations compound. At

the same time, Iraqi border police have warned that Arab radicals are being smuggled across the Iranian border along with Shi'ite pilgrims. The call is out throughout the global Islamic radical community to turn Iraq into "another Afghanistan." As trained jihadists from around the world stream toward Iraq, the insurgency there is likely to become more professional and proficient.

Finally, now facing a common enemy, the Ba'athist insurgents may be forming common cause with increasingly angry Shi'ite radicals centered around firebrands such as the young and popular cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, son of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr (killed by Saddam's agents) and one of the most adamant opponents of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Although the objective of Shi'ite radicals—theocracy—is at odds with the more secular perspective of the Ba'athists, they share an interest in ridding Iraq of Americans. Historically, this is not unusual: many successful insurgencies from China in the 1920s and 1930s to Zimbabwe during the war against white minority rule in the 1970s began with what China's Mao Zedong called a "national united front" and only saw a single group emerge to dominate local politics at a later date.

Optimists contend that the diversity of the Iraqi opposition and the absence of a single clear leadership and ideology are proof that the movement

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does not pose a serious threat. Unifying the various strands of the Iraqi insurgency behind any one strategy or objective, at least in the short term, will certainly be difficult if not impossible. Yet, this same complexity means that quashing the insurgency will be just as difficult or impossible. Actions that prove effective against one part of it might very well inflame another part. For example, an increased and heavy-handed U.S. presence might eradicate the Ba'athist remnants and at the same time inflame Shi'ite radicals and foreign jihadists. The insurgency is like a multiheaded snake, unable to decide on a single course of action but difficult to kill.

The Iraqi insurgency is following another common early pattern as it focuses more on weakening the existing governing regime or occupying power than on offering a clear political alternative. What began a few weeks after the fall of Saddam's regime as sporadic and disorganized attacks against U.S. troops by small arms has now grown into a sophisticated campaign using remotely triggered explosives and complex combinations of weapons as well as shoulder-held antiaircraft missiles. The target list has also expanded. Attacks on U.S. soldiers continue, but new targets include other coalition forces; U.S. civilians; Iraqis working with the coalition, such as policemen or the mayor; and infrastructure such as oil and water pipelines or electrical pylons, the Jordanian embassy, the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, and the UN headquarters. The product reflects the old, Russian revolutionary slogan, "the worse, the better." In other words, anything that prevents the coalition from stabilizing Iraq and improving the lives of Iraqis is thought to weaken the coalition, to erode tolerance of the occupation, to provoke greater violence, and eventually to undercut the U.S. public's and the world community's support for the occupation.

What Makes Iraq Different

As much as the insurgency taking shape in Iraq reflects its historical predecessors, however, it is very much a modern phenomenon. Every U.S. military officer and strategic thinker is familiar with insurgency, but their base of knowledge is a rural "people's war" as developed in China, refined in Vietnam, and later adapted in Latin America and Africa. It is based on parallel political and military efforts: the former designed to mobilize supporters and provide an alternative government to the existing one, the latter designed to weaken the state through low-intensity and eventually mid-intensity conflict.

On the military side, the insurgents traditionally begin with small terrorist or hit-and-run attacks but eventually build their military strength until they match up to and defeat the government. This pattern will not apply in Iraq. The movement there more clearly reflects the Palestinian strategy for

insurgency, which targets an external occupier whose primary weaknesses are a potential lack of will for sustained casualties and sensitivity to public opinion or pressure. The insurgents have no hope of matching the military might of the occupiers, but because the governing force is not indigenous and has the option of simply leaving, the war becomes a contest of wills, with battles fought in the psychological, perceptual, and political realms. Because of the ingrained military weakness of the insurgents in the Palestinian formulation, the insurgents do not seek to control territory and create an alternative government as in the Maoist model but rely instead on internal and international psychological operations fueled by terrorism, riots, guerrilla raids, sabotage, civilian casualties, and uprisings. The intermediate goal is increased tension between the population and the occupiers intended to provoke the occupiers into using force against the civilians, further alienating themselves and building outside political pressure for withdrawal.

The Iraqi insurgency is explicit about what it stands against, but not what it stands for.

Still, the Iraqi insurgency differs from the Palestinian one in one important sense. Because the Palestinians had some degree of international legitimacy, support, and sanctuary, their movement could develop a discernible leadership and hierarchy. The global reach of the United States is likely to preclude any nation, even Iran or Syria, from providing overt sanctuary to Iraqi insurgents, causing the movement to remain more inchoate than the Palestinian insurgency, with Iraqi leadership shadowy and its form a loose amalgamation of diverse groups unified only by a shared dislike of U.S. occupation. For the United States, this news is both good and bad as this form will limit the strength of the insurgency but will also make it headless, without a clear center of gravity, and thus difficult to kill.

Because the Iraqi insurgency remains inchoate, it has not yet shown that it can progress to its next logical steps: to use global information technology, interconnectedness, and émigré communities to develop networks of political support, financing, and recruitment and potentially to launch terrorist operations in the United States. It has not yet solidified linkages with the global Islamic radical movement; global organized crime; or other radical, anti-U.S. movements. It has not developed and may never develop a clear counterideology, instead intentionally choosing to remain vague to be as inclusive as possible. As it exists now, the mounting Iraqi insurgency is explicit about what it stands against—U.S. occupation of Iraq—but not on what it stands for. Yet, those steps may come. The Iraqi insurgency is at a fork in the

road. It may move rapidly toward maturation and development, becoming a very dangerous opponent for the United States, or it may be controlled or even quashed. The U.S. response in the next few months to the developments currently underway will determine to a large extent which of these scenarios comes to pass.

The Keys to Defeating Nascent Insurgency

U.S. strategists have treated the Iraqi insurgency as the death throes of the old regime. Their rationale is that most Iraqis do not support it and thus, if the Ba'hist remnants can be killed or captured, the problem will be solved. Although this analysis is true in part—most Iraqis do not support the insurgency at present—some successful insurgencies, including the Chinese, Algerian, Vietnamese, and American struggles for independence, never had active majority support. A successful insurgency requires only the active support of a small cadre and acquiescence from the rest. Such acquiescence is likely in Iraq. Decades of brutal totalitarianism have taught Iraqis that the best way to survive is to stay out of conflicts between the powerful. Moreover, although few Iraqis want to see the return of the old regime, many also resent the U.S. presence enough to make them unlikely to oppose the insurgents actively.

The insurgency's foundation does not rest on the ambition of former regime loyalists to return an unpopular government to power but rather is based on a broader resentment of foreign occupation by a people promised liberation. Only a comprehensive and coherent counterinsurgency strategy that weaves together the collective resources of the U.S. government can effectively stifle this threat. History suggests some of the keys to success, but U.S. strategists must also understand that the Iraqi insurgency is a new variant of an old problem, both similar to and different from Vietnam and its other predecessors. It is vital to discern the similarities from the differences and use this to build coherent policy. At a minimum, such a strategy would entail the following:

- *Admit the extent of the problem frankly.*

During the early years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, U.S. strategists tended to focus on killing active insurgents rather than on identifying and rectifying the structural problems that spawned them. The United States is close to replicating this situation in Iraq. Occupation, although vital to attain U.S. objectives, breeds opposition. In an era when national liberation has been deified, even successful control of street crime and revival of the Iraqi economy will not fully obviate the anger and resentment felt by Iraqis

toward their U.S. occupiers. Only the full withdrawal of U.S. forces would, but this should not happen until Iraq has undergone several years of tutelage and developed the capacity for self-rule. The persistence of the insurgency in the interim is therefore inevitable.

- *Integrate the strategy within the U.S. bureaucracy and with its coalition partners.*

The United States and its close coalition partners must assure unity of effort across all of the governmental agencies involved. Counterinsurgency is not an exclusively or even predominantly military function but demands the seamless integration of informational, political, social, cultural, law enforcement, economic, military, and intelligence activities. Military strategists consider the successful British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya that began in the late 1940s the model to replicate. At every level, from the local to the national, the British military, police, and intelligence services and government agencies concerned with economic development were seamlessly integrated. Military operations were low-key and limited, undertaken with specific, narrow objectives and not used to intimidate insurgents or their potential supporters.

Less attention has been given to global organized crime as a potential ally to insurgents.

In Malaya, the British also found that carrots—political and economic development—were more important tools of counterinsurgency than sticks. These lessons were applied toward the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and had local success, but by then, it was too late to shift the course of the conflict. Yet, it is still early in the Iraqi insurgency. The United States and its coalition partners should follow the pattern of success from Malaya and implement full integration across all governmental agencies, stressing political and economic development.

- *Focus on two key battlespaces: intelligence and Iraqi perception.*

Because the main tactics of Palestinian-style insurgency are to wear down the occupier and alienate the public, reliable and timely intelligence is the lifeblood of counterinsurgency. Every insurgent attack that occurs, even if the attackers lose more lives than the defenders, is a victory for the insurgents because it fuels fear among the public and dissatisfaction with the governing power, both within the beleaguered country and internationally. To the extent that the United States is able to obtain, analyze, and act on information about insurgent attacks in Iraq, it can control the psychological dimension of the conflict. Phrased differently, intelligence specialists are keys

to victory in counterinsurgency. Success will require human and technical sources of information as well as effective methods to analyze and share information across agencies and among coalition partners.

The more difficult battlespace may be perception. After decades of totalitarianism, Iraqis are ill equipped to evaluate the credibility of information. As a result, wild, often surreal rumors spread rapidly and are widely

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believed. An exploding array of domestic Iraqi newspapers and electronic media, Iranian government sources, and other Arabic news media such as Al Jazeera bombard Iraqis with information, much of it unconstrained by objectivity or often truth. This manipulates existing prejudices, fears, and beliefs. Despite great efforts, the United States does not appear to be winning the psychological war in Iraq, at least not yet.

It is always difficult to counter misinformation in an environment where people are unprepared to distinguish truth from fiction. The best the United States and its coalition partners can do is to promulgate the truth persistently in a culturally sensitive way, working whenever possible with Iraqis trained in responsible journalism.

- *Break the linkages between Iraqi insurgents and affiliated or allied groups.*

The two most likely allies for the Iraqi insurgents are the global Islamic radical movement, particularly the remnants of Al Qaeda or its offshoots, and global organized crime. Although U.S. strategists have made great efforts to curb the former, less attention has been given to the latter. Iraq is already suffering from a massive growth in organized crime, some built on the remnants of the Ba'th movement, which moved extensively into organized crime during the past decade, and some on Iranian criminal gangs looking to expand their territory. The nascent Iraqi police that the coalition is helping to organize cannot control street crime, much less confront organized crime and insurgents.

As a result, organized crime is burrowing deeper into Iraqi society. Should this continue at such a rapid rate, bringing it under control will take decades. Therefore, a U.S. counterinsurgency strategy should include steps to thwart organized crime now. This specific area is one where an integrated counterinsurgency strategy is vital: law enforcement is as important as military activity and must be an equal partner in planning and distributing resources. If Iraq is left cleared of political radicals but under the control of organized crime, the United States will not have attained its strategic objectives.

- *Design a larger regional and strategic context.*

Solutions to broader national and regional problems are necessary to end the insurgency. Iraq was and is very much part of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Attempts to reconstruct the country politically cannot be fully separated from the larger issues that trouble the Arab world, particularly Palestine, closed political systems, the lack of economic growth, overpopulation, and a general inability to compete in the globalized economy. The notion that a postinsurgency Iraq can serve as a beacon for the region has merit, but more than a vision is necessary.

For the new Iraq to remain stable and prosperous, the region must become stable and prosperous. This is a massive undertaking with at least three very complex components for the United States: solving the Palestinian problem, which appears to require some sort of international intervention; explicitly committing to open government in the region, which will destabilize closed regimes in states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt at least in the short term and will invariably lead to an increased role for religious parties; and committing to regional economic development that could draw off capital currently flowing to other fragile regions such as South Asia, eastern Europe, or South America. If the United States does not undertake these three steps, a democratic Iraq will remain a beleaguered island in an unstable region.

- *Remind the American public vigorously and continuously of what is at stake in Iraq.*

Like all insurgencies, the one in Iraq will test whose will can be sustained longer, the insurgents' or the counterinsurgents'. If U.S. involvement in Iraq becomes a major point of contention in the 2004 election and the Democrats advocate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, sustaining American public support for U.S. operations in Iraq could prove very difficult. U.S. politicians who seek to criticize the administration for ongoing operations in Iraq should be challenged to explain their vision of the future of Iraq without a near-term U.S. presence.

No Easy Way Out

The United States faces an intractable dilemma in Iraq: in effect, it is damned if it does, damned if it doesn't. By staying, the United States will face a protracted insurgency, but by withdrawing before the new Iraq is able to stand on its own, the ultimate strategic objective—a unified, stable Iraq that does not threaten its neighbors and does not support international terrorism—will not be met. After three decades of totalitarianism, Iraqis will

not be ready for several years to run a stable nation on their own. Stability requires an interim period of oversight, occupation, and tutelage. Yet, Iraqis cannot admit this, and so the occupation generates opposition and violence.

A comprehensive and coherent U.S. counterinsurgency strategy is the only feasible solution to confront the strategic dilemma the United States now faces in Iraq. Comprehensive counterinsurgency, focusing on the key nodes for success outlined here, is unlikely to eradicate the violent opposition to the coalition fully but should at least sufficiently weaken the insurgent opposition and ensure that the new Iraqi regime is not born—as the South Vietnamese government was—with a massive internal security threat on its hands.

The idea that open government is a universal model has long served as the essence of U.S. foreign policy strategy. For better or worse, Iraq has been chosen as the place to prove this point. Thus, failure in Iraq would undercut the very foundation of U.S. global strategy. Given these immense stakes, U.S. policymakers are dangerously close to underestimating the nature of the challenge in Iraq. Overoptimistic assumptions about the ease of the transition to stable, open government led to the current situation. It is now time to grapple with the depth and complexity of the opposition. By implementing a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy now, the United States can forestall the growth of the opposition and hopefully allow a new Iraq to serve as a beacon for change in the region.

Note

1. Frank Watanabe, "How to Succeed in the DI: Fifteen Axioms for Intelligence Analysis," *Studies in Intelligence* 1, no. 1 (1997), www.cia.gov/csi/studies/97unclass/axioms.html (accessed October 1, 2003).