



Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency

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Front cover: A Sunni insurgent flashes the victory sign after ambushing a U.S. convoy near Abu Ghraib, Iraq, Thursday, April 8, 2004. (AP Photo/Samir Mizban)

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Executive Summary

HOW DOES ONE ASSESS the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq? The answer is critical to the public debate about the ongoing war and to U.S. strategy. Yet, this task has proven more than challenging to experts within and outside government, for a number of reasons: it is often difficult, if not impossible, to calculate accurately the numerical strength of an insurgency; there are no front lines whose movement could provide an indication of the war's progress; and military factors are usually less important than political and psychological considerations in deciding the outcome of such conflicts.

Part of the challenge is that the coalition and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) face a composite insurgency whose elements act out of diverse motives. These include former regime members and Iraqi Islamists, foreign jihadists, angry or aggrieved Iraqis, tribal groups, and criminals, who draw considerable strength from political and religious ideologies, tribal notions of honor and revenge, and shared solidarities deeply ingrained in Iraq's Sunni Triangle.

The motives of these groups include a desire to: 1) resist occupation; 2) subvert or overthrow the new Iraqi government; and/or 3) establish an Islamic state or caliphate in Iraq. More fundamentally, the insurgency is about power: who had it, who has it now, and who will have it in the future. Indeed, major elements of the Sunni Arab insurgency seek to regain power—as individuals, as members of the former regime, or as a community.

U.S. officials have estimated that the insurgency consists of perhaps some 3,500 fighters and 12,000–20,000 total members (although the actual figure may well be much higher) and another 1,000 or so foreign jihadists. Much of the public debate about the insurgency has revolved around the credibility of these figures. However, insurgent numbers are only one measure—and not even the most important one—of a complex and incompletely understood phenomenon.

Because insurgencies are complex, dynamic, adaptive systems, an assessment of the Sunni Arab insurgency should examine multiple dimensions over time,

including: its operational environment; its structures, processes, and functions; and the degree to which it has penetrated public and private institutions in the Sunni Triangle and won over “hearts and minds” in the Sunni Arab community.

Operational Environment. Key elements of the operational environment include demographic, social, geographic, religious, and economic factors:

- **Demography.** The insurgency has so far mobilized only a fraction of the aggrieved Sunni Arab population with military or paramilitary training. Should it successfully exploit this untapped potential, it could substantially increase its military capabilities.
- **Social solidarities.** The insurgency draws on personal relationships, kinship ties, and other overlapping, mutually reinforcing associations, and this fact contributes to its flexibility and resilience.
- **Geography.** Insurgent activity has been both persistent and pervasive; the insurgency is not shrinking and may be spreading. Areas that experienced insurgent activity in 2003 continue to do so today.
- **Religion.** The insurgents make extensive use of religious language, symbols, and imagery; about half of all Sunni Arab insurgent organizations identified in the media bear names with some kind of Islamic association.
- **The economy.** War, sanctions, years of neglect, coalition policies, and insurgent violence have created a favorable environment for the insurgents by giving rise to a large pool of unemployed, some of whom are apparently willing to attack coalition forces for money.

Structures, Processes, and Functions. Although attention tends to focus on the most visible insurgent

activities—the daily violent incidents and mass-casualty attacks—these are but a fraction of the insurgency's range of activities and leave in the shadows the structures, processes, and functions that sustain it.

- **Organization.** The insurgency is not organized in hierarchical fashion, although it has an informal leadership. It consists of groups organized into cells, comprising a “web of networks” linked by personal, tribal, or organizational ties.
- **Financing.** The insurgency draws financial support from both inside and outside Iraq through at least three avenues: former regime financial networks; traditional informal hawala networks; and charitable religious endowments.
- **Political activity.** The passing of the old regime left the Sunni Arab community temporarily leaderless. Nonetheless, a number of Sunni Arab organizations are now involved in politics and can be considered overt political voices of the insurgency.
- **‘Military’ operations.** The insurgents conduct purposeful activity and act along several broad “lines of operation.” Since the January 2005 elections, counter-“collaboration” and counter-stability attacks appear to have become increasingly important.
- **Rhythms and cycles.** Highs and lows in insurgent activity may be associated with the religious calendar (e.g., Ramadan, Ashura), seasonal weather patterns, political events (e.g., elections), or anniversaries.
- **Resiliency.** Thousands of insurgents have been killed, and tens of thousands of Iraqis (few of them insurgents) have been detained, yet incident and casualty data show the insurgency to be as robust and lethal as ever.

Penetration of Sunni Arab Society. The success of the insurgency's struggle to control the civilian population or win over “hearts and minds” can be gauged by the degree to which it has penetrated the public and private

institutions of the Sunni Arab community. The insurgency has established a significant presence in broad sectors of Sunni Arab society, including the social, economic, religious, political, and criminal spheres, and while the depth of penetration is uncertain, insurgents have undermined efforts to extend government institutions into Sunni Arab areas. The insurgency has also managed to penetrate the “thought world” of the Sunni Arabs: insurgent-associated notions and beliefs hostile to the occupation, to coalition forces, and to the Iraqi government appear to have become widespread.

Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Effectiveness.

How does one assess the effectiveness of the insurgency? To a certain degree, the answer differs at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. At the tactical and operational levels, the insurgents:

- Have sustained operations at progressively higher levels of activity, despite coalition countermeasures, mass arrests, and significant personnel losses.
- Have employed more sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mounted increasingly complex operations against important targets.
- Retain the initiative and continue to exact a heavy and growing toll on Iraqi civilians, the ISF, and coalition forces.

Thus, the insurgents have scored and continue to score important tactical and operational successes, which they have translated into a number of important short-term political achievements. They have also achieved a number of important strategic objectives. They have:

- Established themselves, through assent or intimidation, as a major—if not the dominant—social and political force in the Sunni Triangle.
- Won the support of large portions of the Sunni Arab population for attacks on coalition forces, and at least tacit support for attacks on the ISF and the Iraqi government.

- Deterred many residents of the Sunni Triangle from working for or joining the new government and coerced others to quit.
- Made the security situation a major issue of concern for many Iraqis, particularly in Baghdad, giving the Sunnis a strong (if thus far largely negative) “voice” in the future of Iraq.
- Complicated the political transition by engineering a successful boycott of the January 2005 elections in the Sunni Triangle.
- Convinced many Sunnis that the draft constitution does not serve their interests.
- Contributed to popular dissatisfaction in the United States with the war and its handling, and to a likely U.S. decision to begin drawing down its forces in Iraq in 2006.

On the other hand, the insurgents have experienced a number of setbacks during this period. They have:

- Not succeeded in derailing the political process.
- Been unable to deter large numbers of young Iraqis from joining the ISF.
- Lost (at least temporarily) important “sanctuaries” in several major towns in the Sunni Triangle to joint coalition-ISF operations.
- Not succeeded in building substantial support in Iraq or the United States for a rapid and complete U.S. withdrawal.
- Failed to provoke the Shiite leadership into abandoning its policy of restraint in the face of attacks calculated to spark additional violence.

Strengths and Weaknesses. The insurgency poses major analytical and operational challenges. It is not dependent on external resupply or internal/external

sanctuaries, and while the manpower, materiel, and funds that come from Syria and Iran are not insignificant (and may be very important for the foreign jihadists), they are not necessary to the survival of the insurgency. The insurgency has access to all the weapons, explosives, financial resources, and trained manpower it needs to sustain current activity indefinitely—assuming continued Sunni political support. Its “networked” nature makes it a resilient and adaptive foe. It has at least the beginnings of a political face and enjoys support from overt Sunni Arab political organizations. And the insurgents know that coalition forces are constrained in how they use force to deal with them.

The insurgency also has a number of weaknesses that could limit its potential, if exploited effectively by the coalition and the Iraqi government:

- Many Sunni Arabs harbor ambivalent feelings toward the insurgency, and outside the Sunni Arab community it has little appeal (with the exception of some followers of the populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr).
- Its lack of a unified leadership, broad-based institutions, or a clearly articulated vision could hinder formation of a unified political strategy, further limiting its popular appeal.
- Because some insurgent attacks are carried out on a commission basis, improved economic circumstances could diminish the pool of paid freelancers.
- The extreme beliefs and brutal tactics of the foreign jihadists and their Iraqi supporters have alienated many erstwhile allies in the insurgency and many Sunnis, making it possible to isolate these groups from local and external bases of support.

On balance, while the insurgents have proven to be formidable opponents, they are not unbeatable. The war may yet yield an acceptable outcome—a relatively stable, democratic Iraq—provided that the political process is not derailed by escalating civil violence or undermined from within, and that the United States

does not withdraw prematurely. The path to such an outcome, however, will be protracted and costly, and is likely to be punctuated by additional setbacks.

Outlook. The confluence of key political events (the December elections and subsequent formation of a constitutionally based government) with critical developments in the security sphere (the potential withdrawal of significant U.S. forces and assumption of greater security responsibilities by the ISF) suggests that the next six to nine months will be of great

importance—a true “tipping period” for the future of Iraq. These political and security processes are linked, with failure in one domain likely to produce failure in the other. By the middle of 2006 it should be evident whether Iraq is evolving as an inclusive democracy of sorts or a state wracked by a major and violent protracted conflict pitting the Sunni Arabs against Iraq's other communities—with all this implies for U.S. plans to start drawing down its forces in Iraq, the global war on terrorism, and efforts to promote stability and democracy in the Middle East.

Introduction

NEARLY THREE YEARS after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein, confusion and controversy still surround the insurgency in Iraq's so-called "Sunni Triangle."¹ This confusion at first hindered the formulation of an effective counterinsurgency strategy and has since fueled the domestic political debate about the war. Complicating matters is the insurgency's (or insurgencies')² nontraditional, nonhierarchical character, as it is waged by amorphous, locally and regionally based groups and networks lacking unifying ideology, leadership, or organization.

The ambiguities inherent in insurgent warfare make assessing insurgencies especially challenging under any circumstances. In conventional military conflicts, opposing orders of battle can be compared, capabilities evaluated, and the fortunes of belligerents assessed using traditional measures such as the destruction of enemy forces, the capture of key terrain, or the conquest of the enemy's capital city.

But insurgents are often not organized into regular formations, making it difficult if not impossible to assess an insurgency's numerical strength (even for the insurgents). Further, there are often no front lines whose movement could provide an indication of the war's progress. At any rate, military factors are usually less important than political and psychological considerations in deciding the outcome of such conflicts.

As a result, different analytic measures are needed.³ This paper will offer some general propositions about how to evaluate the insurgency that broke out following the end of "major combat operations" in May 2003. It will attempt to answer the question: how does one assess and/or measure the insurgency's nature, scope, intensity, and effectiveness? In so doing, it will attempt to achieve a degree of precision and clarity that has been largely lacking in the public debate on the matter, but which is necessary if the nature of the problem is to be understood and the Sunni Arab insurgency contained, if not defeated.

1. See, for instance, David Morgan, "U.S. Trying to Understand Iraq Insurgency: Negroponte," *Reuters*, September 29, 2005. Available online (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/29/AR2005092901264.html).
2. For convenience, we will refer to the insurgency in the Sunni Triangle in the singular, although it may be described more accurately as a number of locally and regionally based insurgencies waged by groups pursuing diverse objectives.
3. For more on the challenges of assessing insurgencies, see Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985). For more on the importance of selecting proper analytical measures, see James G. Roche and Barry D. Watts, "Choosing Analytic Measures," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 14, no. 2 (June 1991), pp. 165–209.

Origins and Nature of the Insurgency

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT the origins of the Sunni Arab insurgency have colored assessments of its nature and character from the start. Some believe that Saddam Hussein anticipated his defeat and planned prior to the invasion to “go to ground” and lead an insurgency that would return him to power after the departure of American troops. Those who do tend to downplay the complex array of factors that affected the insurgency’s growth.¹

Saddam apparently believed that U.S. war aims were limited—perhaps consisting of a brief, punitive air campaign in conjunction with an attempt to seize the oil fields in southern Iraq—and that the impending operation did not necessarily threaten his grip on power.² To deal with the ground threat, Saddam intended to orchestrate a conventional defense, supported by irregular forces (both paramilitary militias and large numbers of foreign jihadists who entered the country with official encouragement before the war). Saddam also seems to have anticipated the possibility of a coup or uprising during the invasion. To deal with such contingencies, arms were distributed to regime supporters and stockpiled at schools, mosques, and hospitals.

There is no evidence, however, that Saddam planned to lead a postwar resistance movement or that he played a significant role in the emergence of the insurgency,³ although his prewar preparations to deal with a coup or uprising almost certainly abetted the insurgency’s emergence.⁴ The first insurgents were able to draw on a variety of preexisting relationships, networks, and structures

inherited from the old regime, accounting in part for the insurgency’s rapid onset in the summer of 2003.

The way the war was fought—by both sides—also had a profound impact on the insurgency’s rapid emergence. Although the coalition took Baghdad quickly and occupied the rest of the country soon after, it failed to meet several necessary conditions of postwar stability: ensuring that key former regime members were killed or captured, that former regime members who escaped death or capture emerged from the war demoralized and broken, and that sufficient forces were available to secure and stabilize Iraq rapidly. This was in large part a consequence of the operational design of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): U.S. commanders and policymakers opted for a small, rapid force, which skirted Iraq’s major population centers and employed overwhelming precision fires to execute a “long-distance *coup d’etat*” and bring about the rapid collapse of the regime.

Based on what they believed and knew at the time, the planners made the right choices in opting for the tradeoffs inherent in OIF. Speed was essential to limit casualties on both sides, to outpace the likely buildup of domestic and international pressure to halt fighting before American war aims were met, and to prevent Baghdad from waging the “scorched earth” campaign that many feared (including the use of weapons of mass destruction believed at the time to be in Saddam’s hands).

In the end, the campaign did not kill enough of the enemy to have a serious impact on the insurgen-

1. For reports suggesting that the insurgency was preplanned, see Thom Shanker, “Hussein’s Agents Behind Attacks, Pentagon Finds,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2004, p. A1; and Edward T. Pound, “Seeds of Chaos,” *U.S. News & World Report* (Washington, D.C.), December 20, 2004, pp. 20–22, 24–26.

2. For an elaboration of this argument, see Michael Eisenstadt, “Understanding Saddam,” *The National Interest*, Fall 2005, pp. 117–121 (available online at www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/4321a9b706048.pdf); and “Iraq and After: Taking the Right Lessons for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction,” National Defense University Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Occasional Paper # 2, May 2005, pp. 1–27, (available online at www.ndu.edu/WMDCenter/docUploaded/OP2%20Iraq%20and%20After.pdf).

3. For a report suggesting that Saddam helped catalyze the postwar insurgency, see Joe Klein, “Saddam’s Revenge,” *Time* (New York), September 26, 2005. Available online (www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1106307,00.html).

4. The regime likewise had long-standing contingency plans in case it was ousted by domestic rivals and had to go underground to reorganize before seizing power again, as it did between 1963 and 1968. Such planning may also have facilitated the emergence of the Sunni Arab insurgency following the close of “major combat operations” in May 2003.

cy's postwar recruiting pool. Baghdad's use of paramilitary forces as cannon fodder—particularly the thugs of the Fedayeen Saddam—ensured that large numbers of the intelligence and security services, the Special Republican Guard, and senior Baathists would avoid death or capture.⁵ After the war, insufficient intelligence and military assets were devoted, at least initially, to pursuing these people, many of whom went on to play key roles in the insurgency (although pursuing them would have been daunting, as they numbered in the tens of thousands).

The planners also did not prepare adequately to win the peace. Because the coalition went in “light,” with a force of only four-plus divisions, it lacked (as it still does) the numbers needed to ensure security in the Sunni Triangle or to secure Iraq's borders against fighters bent on joining foreign jihadists already in the country. The looting that followed the fall of the regime (some of it, apparently, by former regime elements)—and the failure of coalition forces to stop it—greatly complicated efforts to establish stability and engendered the population's enduring hostility toward the occupiers. Newly formed insurgent groups were able to commence operations in the Sunni Triangle without serious interference by coalition forces, while local, tribal, and party militias proliferated to fill the security void in other parts of the country.

The policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the inappropriate tactics and procedures employed early on by U.S. forces further contributed to the rapid growth of the insurgency. The sweeping implementation of de-Baathification policy and the decision to dismantle the Iraqi Army deprived more than 400,000 Iraqis (many of them Sunni Arabs) of their livelihoods almost overnight and infuriated many veterans who

thought they would be rewarded for heeding coalition leaflets directing them not to resist advancing forces. Furthermore, in the course of broad, dragnet-like sweeps of the Sunni Triangle aimed at surprising and capturing wanted insurgents during the early phases of the occupation, tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis were detained and subjected by U.S. forces to sometimes rough and degrading treatment. Finally, aggressive patrolling and convoy procedures earned the U.S. many enemies and helped to broaden greatly the nascent insurgency's recruiting base.

Nature of the Insurgency

From the outset, U.S. officials have differed over the nature of the violence in post-Saddam Iraq. In the summer of 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General John Abizaid (head of U.S. Central Command) publicly disagreed about whether the violence in the Sunni Triangle was the final act of former regime “dead-enders” or an incipient insurgency against the emerging political order.⁶ Recent conflicting statements by Vice President Richard Cheney and General Abizaid indicate that differences persist.⁷

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that the coalition and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) face a composite insurgency whose elements act on diverse motives. These include former regime members and Iraqi Islamists, foreign jihadists, angry or aggrieved Iraqis, tribal groups, and criminals, who draw considerable strength from political and religious ideologies, tribal notions of honor and revenge, and shared solidarities deeply ingrained in the Sunni Triangle. Ideological boundaries between these groups are often blurred, while their motives include a desire to: 1) resist the occupation; 2) subvert or overthrow the new

5. A supporting attack from Turkey (as had been planned) probably would not have changed this outcome. Although more Fedayeen almost certainly would have been killed, the regime's hardcore supporters in the north would have gone to ground, just as did hardcore supporters in the south. See Michael Eisenstadt, “Sitting on Bayonets: America's Postwar Challenges in Iraq,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2004, pp. 101–106.

6. See for example, comments by Rumsfeld at a “Press Stakeout Following Close Briefing for Senators on Iraq,” June 27, 2003 (available online at www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030627-secdef0303.html), and the comments by Abizaid at “DoD News Briefing—Mr. Di Rita and Gen. Abizaid,” July 16, 2003 (available online at www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030716-0401.html).

7. In a recent interview, Cheney stated that the insurgency was in its “last throes.” When subsequently asked to comment on Cheney's assessment, Abizaid demurred, except to say that “there's a lot of work to be done against the insurgency.” Cheney's comments can be viewed online (<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0505/30/lkl01.html>). For Abizaid's comments, see the Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Military Strategy and Operations in Iraq, with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; General Richard B. Myers, USAF, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; General John Abizaid, Commander, U.S. Central Command; and General George Casey, Commander, Multinational Forces Iraq, June 23, 2005.

Iraqi government; and/or 3) establish an Islamic state or caliphate in Iraq.⁸

Groups may be driven by the deeply felt humiliation engendered by the coalition military victory and occupation; a sense of entitlement derived from the Sunni Arabs' former, dominant role; anxiety over the growing power of Shiite and Kurdish parties and militias; the fear that Sunni Arabs (some 20 percent of Iraq's population) will be politically and economically marginalized in a democratic Iraq; a potent brand of Iraqi-Arab nationalism that is deeply ingrained among many Sunni Arabs; and the increasing popularity of political Islam among sectors of the rural population. Fundamentally the insurgency is about power: who had it, who has it now, and who will have it in the future. For major elements of the Sunni Arab insurgency it is about regaining power—as individuals, as members of the old regime, or as a community.

Confusion about the nature of the insurgency also derives from a lack of clarity of thought—perhaps a product of U.S. government officials believing their own talking points—reflected in the use of highly emotive and misleading labels to discredit the insurgents, labels such as “dead-enders,” “anti-Iraqi forces,” and the sometimes overused “terrorist.” This has led many to misunderstand the insurgency and underestimate its influence.

Some senior civilian and military officials, at least in the early going, also demonstrated a lack of understanding of the protracted nature of insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare. On several occasions—after the December 2003 capture of Saddam Hussein, the June 2004 transfer of authority, and the January 2005 elections—a number of officials expressed confidence that the insurgency would soon be over. In each case, hopes for a quick victory were dashed by subsequent events.

Such expectations were unrealistic and ran counter to the weight of historical experience. Insurgencies tend to last for years—often a decade or more (see figure 1). There are a number of reasons for this:

- Generally, insurgents must act with extreme caution to avoid being captured or killed. Nearly everything they do takes longer than it would in a more permissive environment.
- It likewise takes time for insurgents to win over the civilian population (large parts of which tend to remain neutral until one side or the other gains the upper hand) and to create nascent institutions of governance in areas they control.
- The two sides are involved in an incessant struggle to disrupt and undermine the other's organizational activities; for both sides, progress is frequently beset by setbacks and reverses.
- Insurgents often see time as an ally in their efforts to create a clandestine organization, mobilize the population, and build up their strength. Consequently, they see patience as a virtue.
- Because insurgents often start off militarily weak, they generally try to avoid decisively engaging government forces until the two sides are more evenly matched.

The insurgency in post-Saddam Iraq departs from this typical pattern in at least two important ways. First, thanks to poor coalition intelligence and a dearth of coalition and Iraqi government forces, insurgent groups were able to operate relatively freely in large parts of the Sunni Triangle from the outset. This allowed the insurgency to gather momentum relatively quickly. Second, in post-Saddam Iraq, the typical circumstances of insurgents and counterinsurgents have been reversed: the insurgents did not have to scarp for arms or acquire them on the battlefield from the enemy dead. Rather, they enjoyed an abundance of arms: the former regime had distributed weapons to its supporters prior to the war; when the Iraqi army went home, many soldiers took their weapons with them; and additional arms

8. See, for instance, Amatzia Baram, “Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 134, April 2005. Available online (www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr134.html).

Figure 1. Major Twentieth-Century Guerrilla Wars and Insurgencies: Duration and Results

INSURGENCY	DURATION	OUTCOME	NUMBERS KILLED (COMBATANTS AND CIVILIANS)
Greece (1945–1949)	4 Years	Unsuccessful	150,000
Philippines (1946–1954)	8 Years	Unsuccessful	10,000
Malaya (1948–1960)	12 Years	Unsuccessful	11,000
Kenya (1952–1956)	4 Years	Unsuccessful	13,000–130,000+
Cuba (1953–1959)	6 Years	Successful	1,000+
Algeria (1954–1962)	8 Years	Successful	225,000–500,000
Angola (1961–1974)	13 Years	Successful	40,000+
Iraqi Kurdistan (1961–1975)	14 Years	Unsuccessful	Thousands
Aden (1963–1967)	4 Years	Successful	Several hundred
Mozambique (1964–1974)	10 Years	Successful	30,000–60,000+
Oman (1965–1976)	11 Years	Unsuccessful	400
Rhodesia (1974–1980)	6 Years	Successful	12,000–30,000
Syria (1976–1982)	6 Years	Unsuccessful	20,000+
Afghanistan (1979–1989)	10 Years	Successful	1,500,000
El Salvador (1980–1992)	12 Years	Unsuccessful	75,000
Nicaragua (1980–1990)	10 Years	Successful	29,000
Peru (1980–1992)	12 Years	Unsuccessful	69,000
Lebanese Hizballah vs. Israel (1982–2000)	18 Years	Successful	2,500+
Turkey (1984–1999, 2005–Present)	15+ Years	Unsuccessful	37,000+
Palestinian Intifada I (1987–1993)	6 Years	Partial Success	2,000+
Algeria (1992–Present)	13+ Years	Unsuccessful	100,000+
Palestinian Intifada II (2000–Present)	5+ Years	Partial Success	4,500+
Afghanistan (2002–Present)	3+ Years	Unsuccessful	Hundreds+

Average duration of guerrilla wars/insurgencies: approximately nine years

became available during the postwar looting of weapons stores. Moreover, the insurgency was able to draw on personal relationships forged under the old regime, along with intelligence and paramilitary skills acquired then. For this reason it has proven to be relatively well organized and effective—at least on a local level. By contrast, the new Iraqi government had to start almost from scratch in its efforts to arm and equip the Iraqi Security Forces and to recruit, vet, and train employees

for its new institutions of governance, law enforcement, and national defense. This has put the new Iraqi government at a clear disadvantage and makes it likely that the ongoing struggle will be difficult and prolonged.

A final bit of perspective: the historical record shows that while insurgencies are frequently protracted and bloody, they have a mixed track record; insurgents are not unbeatable. Nationalist resistance movements or insurgencies against colonial or occu-

pying powers frequently succeed (Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, South Lebanon, Afghanistan)—though not always (Malaya, Kenya)—while insurgencies against indigenous governments have sometimes succeeded (Cuba, Nicaragua)—though more often

they have not (Greece, Philippines, Iraqi Kurdistan, El Salvador, Peru, Turkey, Algeria). This provides reason for both hope and concern in Iraq, as the insurgents are fighting both an occupation and a newly established indigenous government.

Scope of the Insurgency

U.S. OFFICIALS have estimated that the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq consists of perhaps some 3,500 fighters and 12,000 to 20,000 total members,¹ and another 1,000 or so foreign jihadists largely from elsewhere in the Arab world.² Much of the public debate about the insurgency has revolved around the credibility of these figures. However, insurgent numbers are only one measure—and not even the most important one—of a complex and incompletely understood phenomenon.

Because insurgencies are complex, dynamic, adaptive systems, an assessment of the insurgency should examine multiple dimensions over time, including: its operational environment; its structures, processes, and functions; and the degree to which it has penetrated public and private sector institutions in the Sunni Triangle and won over “hearts and minds” in the Sunni Arab community.

Exploring the multiple dimensions of the insurgency through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures should allow us to gauge better the scope of the insurgency and ascertain trends in its evolution and development.

Operational Environment

The insurgency takes place in a complex and evolving human and geographic “landscape”—its operational

environment—which it influences and responds to. Key elements of this operational environment include demographic, social, geographic, religious, and economic factors.

Demography and insurgent strength. Although numbers may not be indicative of the insurgents’ prospects (e.g., relatively small insurgent forces succeeded in Cuba and Algeria, while relatively large insurgent forces failed in Greece and Iraqi Kurdistan), they may suggest the amount of popular support the insurgents enjoy, the effectiveness of their recruitment and mobilization efforts, their capacity for action, and the efficacy of government countermeasures. To be credible, estimates of insurgent strength should rest on explicit counting rules.

Who, then, is an insurgent? Should estimates include civilians who render passive support along with “foot soldiers” and senior leadership? Should they include onetime participants, or only those who have participated in insurgent activities on multiple occasions? Should estimates include those involved in fundraising or related political activities, or only those who participate in violent attacks? Failure to answer such questions explicitly can lead to confusion and error.³

To be credible, estimates of insurgent strength should count both guerrilla fighters and terrorists that

1. Testimony of General John Abizaid, Hearing of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on “Military Strategy and Operational Requirements for Combatant Commanders,” March 1, 2005; Testimony of Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on “Threats to U.S. National Security,” March 17, 2005; Interview with General John Abizaid on *Face the Nation*, June 26, 2005; Testimony of General George Casey, Hearing of the House Armed Services Committee on “Iraqi Security Forces,” June 23, 2005. By contrast, a top Iraqi intelligence official recently put the number of fighters at 40,000 and sympathizers at 200,000. General Muhammad Abdullah Shahwani, quoted in James Hider, “Iraqi Insurgents Now Outnumber Coalition Forces,” *London Times*, January 4, 2005 (available online at www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,7374-1425022,00.html). The current debate regarding the strength of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq echoes a similar debate during the Vietnam War regarding the strength of Viet Cong irregulars, which continued to evoke bitter controversy many years later. See James J. Wirtz “Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy during the Vietnam War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Summer 1991), pp. 239–263. Many of the methodological problems and shortcomings of American intelligence that dogged analysis of irregular forces in Vietnam remain unresolved and continue to hinder analysis of the Sunni Arab insurgency.
2. Though relatively few in number, the foreign jihadists have had a disproportionate impact, primarily by mounting mass-casualty terrorist attacks. Reuven Paz, “Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis,” PRISM Occasional Paper 3, no. 1 (March 2005) (available online at www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_1_vol_3_-_Arabs_killed_in_Iraq.pdf); Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, “Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom’s Response,” working paper dated September 19, 2005 (available online at www.csis.org/burke/050919_saudimilitantsiraq.pdf).
3. Thus, official estimates of insurgent numbers and daily incident tallies in post-Saddam Iraq have sometimes included statistics associated with Muqtada al-Sadr’s Shiite Mahdi Army, which has operated—by and large—independent of the Sunni Arab insurgency. This does not mean that the Mahdi Army is irrelevant to the security situation or the insurgency. Muqtada al-Sadr’s forces retain the potential to rise against coalition and Iraqi government forces once again, as they did in April and August of 2004. Even if they did not coordinate their operations with Sunni Arab insurgents, they could pose a serious challenge to the coalition and the Iraqi government.

are currently active or available for future operations, as well as members of the insurgent underground—whether involved in political-, economic-, or military-related activities. This would include those involved in recruiting, training, financing, propagandizing, and political activities in support of the insurgency.⁴

Such estimates may be derived in a number of ways: from events data, by multiplying the number of attacks carried out during the average operational cycle of the insurgency by the number of insurgents believed to be involved in each type of incident;⁵ from the ratio of insurgents to innocent civilians detained during sweeps of insurgent-infested areas; or by using historical data on the percentage of civilians participating in past insurgencies to estimate lower and upper bounds for the number of individuals involved.

It would be useful to know whether the insurgency draws heavily from particular groups—certain families, clans or tribes, or members of certain mosques or former regime organizations. This would make it possible to estimate the size of the manpower pool available to various insurgent groups locally, throughout the Sunni Triangle, and countrywide, and to assess whether the insurgent recruitment base has narrowed or broadened over time.

The absence of detailed open-source information precludes analysis of local and regional demography. But sufficiently detailed data exist to allow an assessment of the national mobilization

potential of the insurgency, based on Iraq's male Sunni Arab population.⁶

With Iraq's population at about 27 million,⁷ Sunni Arabs make up some 20 percent of the total. They would therefore number 5.4 million, with 1.35 million men of military age (for our purposes, ages 15 to 49). Theoretically, this would be the upper mobilization limit of the Sunni Arab community.⁸

General Abizaid recently stated that the number of Iraqis in the insurgency amounts to less than 0.1 percent of the country's population—and most likely does not exceed 20,000.⁹ By way of comparison, according to an authoritative U.S. government-sponsored study of seven insurgent, revolutionary, and resistance movements during the twentieth century, the percentage of the population that participated in such movements (including guerrilla fighters and members of the insurgent underground organization involved in recruitment, training, intelligence gathering, financing, and propaganda activities) ranged from 0.5 percent to 2 percent of the total population (see figure 2).¹⁰

As a proportion of Iraq's Sunni Arab community, these percentages would yield estimates of between 27,000 and 108,000 insurgents. As a proportion of Iraq's total population, they would yield the improbably high figures of 135,000 to 540,000 insurgents. If the insurgents make up less than 0.1 percent of the total population (given the scope and intensity of insurgent operations, this is probably an unrealistically low esti-

4. For more on these basic functions of an insurgent underground, see Andrew R. Molnar, et al., *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Special Operations Research Office, The American University, 1963), pp. 47–124.

5. The operational cycle is the frequency with which the average individual insurgent carries out attacks. It may vary with different types of cells and operations. Since insurgents often hold down day jobs (at least in early phases of an insurgency), they may not be involved in operations every day. (This allows insurgents to blend in better with the civilian population, making useful contacts.) The operational cycle is usually several days to several weeks in length.

6. Even in the socially conservative Sunni Triangle, women likely participate in the insurgency on some level—though probably in very small numbers. (Thus far, less than a handful of more than five hundred suicide bombers in Iraq have been women.) To simplify matters, we will count only males as part of the recruitment pool.

7. These population estimates are drawn from the United Nations Development Program, *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 I*, pp. 15–19, Available online (www.iq.undp.org/ILCS/overview.htm).

8. This estimate was arrived at by multiplying by 0.20 UNDP estimates of the number of Iraqi males in the 15–49 age cohort. It therefore assumes that the age distribution among adult Sunni Arab males mirrors that of the general Iraqi population. UNDP, *Iraq Living Conditions Survey*, p. 18.

9. Interview with General John Abizaid on *Face the Nation*, June 26, 2005. One-tenth of 1 percent of the population would be 27,000 people.

10. Molnar, *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare*, pp. 13–16. These figures are not doctrinal norms of any sort, but reflect an enduring feature of insurgent warfare—that insurgent movements tend to mobilize only a small fraction of the population they rely upon for survival, at least in the early phases of their struggles. These figures also accord with the observation of T. E. Lawrence, based on his own experience leading the Arab Revolt during World War I, that “rebellions can be made by 2 per cent. active in a striking force, and 98 per cent. passively sympathetic.” T. E. Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt,” *Army Quarterly and Defense Journal*, October 1920. Available online (www.cgsc.army.mil/carl/download/csi-cubs/lawrence.pdf).

Figure 2. Ratios of Insurgents to Population and Guerrillas to Unarmed Members in Past Resistance and Insurgent Movements

COUNTRY	INSURGENTS AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION	RATIO OF ARMED GUERRILLAS TO UNARMED MEMBERS OF THE INSURGENT UNDERGROUND
France (1940–1945)	.97 percent	1:3
Yugoslavia (1941–1945)	1.65 percent	1:3
Algeria (1954–1962)	.29–.58 percent	1:3
Malaya (1948–1960)	1.90 percent	1:18
Greece (1945–1949)	8.86 percent	1:27
Philippines (1946–1954)	.58 percent	1:8
Palestine (1945–1948)	2.25 percent	1:2

Source: Adapted from Andrew R. Molnar, *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Special Operations Research Office, 1963), pp. 13–16.

mate), the Sunni Arab insurgency would be among the smallest, as a percentage of the total population, in modern times.

In these historical cases, the ratios of guerrillas to underground members range from a high of 1:2 to a low of 1:27, though in most the proportion is closer to the high end of the scale. Applying a conservative 1:3 figure against General Abizaid's estimate of 20,000 insurgents yields an estimate of about 5,000 armed fighters in Iraq.

Even doubling or tripling the U.S. CENTCOM estimate would yield an insurgency relatively small by historical standards. This probably explains why Sunni Arab insurgent groups seem never to lack for manpower or to have problems recouping their losses. Employing only a small fraction of their potential mobilization base means the insurgents have no difficulty recruiting or impressing new members to replace combat losses.¹¹ Moreover, the structure of these groups—highly compartmentalized cells and networks that appear to

recruit locally and draw upon overlapping solidarities (see below)—is well adapted to replacing losses and reconstituting cells and leadership, but it does not lend itself to the generation of large field forces.

The relatively small size of the insurgency might reflect a lack of popularity among the Sunni Arab population, or a desire by leadership to preserve operational security and avoid offering lucrative targets to the enemy. In addition, the insurgents may consider large forces to be unnecessary because they hope to prevail by intimidating and terrorizing the civilian population, disrupting government efforts to recruit and train effective security forces, and undermining the U.S. will to fight—not by defeating U.S. forces in combat.

Sunni Arab insurgents swim in a largely sympathetic sea. Three separate opinion surveys taken in 2004–2005 by Iraqi and foreign pollsters show that between 45 percent and 85 percent of respondents in Sunni areas express support for insurgent attacks on U.S. forces.¹² But Iraqi and U.S. government surveys taken at approximately the

11. A similar explanation for insurgent resilience in Malaya and Vietnam can be found in Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 41.

12. A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll conducted in March/April 2004 showed that 43 percent of the population in Sunni areas believed attacks on U.S. forces were “completely” or “somewhat” justified (available online at www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-04-29-iraq-poll_x.htm). A December 2004 opinion survey by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies showed that 84.1 percent of residents of Mahmudiya, Yusifiya, and Latifiya (largely Sunni towns southwest of Baghdad in the so-called triangle of death) voiced support for attacks on coalition and U.S. military forces (available online at www.washingtoninstitute.org/documents/41fa731fb9f4c.pdf). And an Abu Dhabi TV/Zogby International Poll conducted in January 2005 showed that 53 percent of Sunni Arabs surveyed agreed that insurgent attacks are a legitimate form of resistance (available online at www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf).

same time also show that no more than 30 to 40 percent of Sunni Arabs surveyed have much confidence in the ability of the “armed national resistance” to improve the situation in Iraq, while 35 to 50 percent express little or no confidence in its ability to effect change (although the resistance got more votes of confidence than any other group listed in the survey).¹³

Thus, while opinion polls suggest that broad sectors of the Sunni Arab population support insurgent attacks on coalition forces, they also show that many Sunni Arabs are skeptical of the insurgency's prospects and may therefore be open to alternative means of achieving their goals. Indeed, one Iraqi opinion poll taken in a largely Sunni Arab area in December 2004 shows that an overwhelming majority (86 percent) opposes the use of violence for political ends.¹⁴ It is not clear whether this remains the case following a polarizing constitutional process and growing sectarian violence, or whether the constitutional process has encouraged support for the insurgents as the Sunni Arab community's last and best hope.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the insurgency recruits exclusively from those sympathetic to its cause. There is a fair body of evidence that in many insurgencies, only a small proportion of recruits join for political or ideological reasons. Situational factors—social pressure, family or tribal ties, coercion, and material incentives—are often of decisive importance.¹⁵ There is no reason to believe that Iraq is an exception in this regard.

Moreover, there are probably hundreds of thousands of Sunni Arab males with intelligence and security, military, or paramilitary training, making them

prime candidates for recruitment. The former regime's internal security apparatus (which consisted of its intelligence and security services, the Special Republican Guard, and the Republican Guard) recruited heavily from the Sunni Arab community and employed well over 100,000 men. (The number goes up significantly when one includes older veterans of these organizations.) Many Sunni Arabs also served in the regular army and the regime's popular militias—particularly the Fedayeen Saddam—although the membership of these organizations was more diverse.

Furthermore, the number of Sunni Arab males with a strong sense of grievance—as a result of losing a family member, being humiliated or treated roughly, or being wrongly detained (in some cases for months on end, without charges) at the hands of the coalition or Iraqi government forces—is probably in the high tens of thousands at the very least. This group of “angry Iraqis” provides another source of potential recruits.¹⁶

In addition, insurgents have available a very large supply of arms, explosives, and munitions—probably more than they could ever want or need—as a result of the failure of coalition forces during and after the invasion to secure Iraqi armories and ammunition storage points against looting.¹⁷ And, in 2004, in largely Sunni Arab or mixed governorates, the percentages of Iraqi households that reported possessing firearms for self-defense were among the highest in Iraq: 46 percent in Salahuddin; 39 percent in Ninawa; 37 percent in Diyala; 34 percent in Anbar; 26 percent in Baghdad; and 15 percent in Babil.¹⁸

13. Iraq Center, *ibid.*, p. 13; Dina Smeltz and Nancy Mendrala, “Fear a Key Factor on Iraqi Political Outlook” (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Office of Research Opinion Analysis), January 18, 2005, pp. 4, 9; Nancy Mendrala and Christopher Cole, “Iraqis Sense Improved Security” (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Office of Research Opinion Analysis), April 18, 2005, pp. 2, 8.

14. Iraq Center, *ibid.*, p. 22.

15. Peter Watson, *War on the Mind: The Military Uses and Abuses of Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), pp. 337–355; Andrew R. Molnar, *Human Factor Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies* (Washington, D.C.: Special Operations Research Office, 1966), pp. 77–79.

16. According to DoD figures, 42,228 Iraqis were detained by U.S. forces between March 2003 and August 2005, although most have been released. (The actual number may be higher, as it is not clear if this figure includes detainees held by U.S. tactical units.) As of September 2005, U.S. forces were holding 12,184 Iraqis; many were expected to be released once their cases were reviewed. U.S. forces had, however, found sufficient cause to keep some 8,116 Iraqi detainees in prison. Larry Kaplow, “Dagnet for Iraq's Insurgents Is Called Too Indiscriminate,” *Arizona Daily Star*, September 11, 2005; available online (www.dailystar.com/dailystar/news/92727.php). According to one coalition estimate, only 10 to 15 percent of those detained during the early phase of the insurgency were of interest to intelligence. The implication is that the overwhelming majority of detainees held during this period had no connection to the insurgency. LTG Anthony R. Jones, “AR 15-6 Investigation of the Abu Ghraib Prison and 205th Military Intelligence Brigade,” August 23, 2004; available online (<http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/dod/fay82504rpt.pdf>).

17. Eric Schmitt and Lowell Bergman, “Security at Iraq Munitions Sites Is Vulnerable, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2003, p. A1; Bradley Graham and Thomas Ricks, “Munitions Issue Dwarfs the Big Picture,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2004, p. A1.

18. UNDP, *op cit.*, p. 51. On the other hand, this data, if accurate, contradicts the widespread belief that nearly every Iraqi household owns small arms for self-

It is therefore likely that armed Sunni Arab insurgents number in the many thousands, that unarmed members of the insurgent underground number in the tens or scores of thousands, and that insurgent groups can draw on a much larger pool of sympathizers in the general Sunni Arab population, as well as acquaintances, friends, family members and fellow tribesmen. The minimum number of Sunni Arabs “involved” with the insurgency in one way or another (including sympathetic or supportive family members) likely approaches 100,000 (and may be much higher), although it may fluctuate in response to changing political, military, economic, and social conditions.¹⁹

In any case, the insurgency has thus far mobilized only a small fraction of the Sunni Arab population that supports attacks on coalition forces or has some kind of military or paramilitary training. Should insurgent groups broaden their appeal, expand their recruitment efforts, or opt to fight a “popular war” against the Iraqi government (and coalition forces) by exploiting this untapped demographic potential, insurgent violence could intensify further—with all this implies for ongoing efforts to stand up Iraq’s new security forces, and for future plans to reduce the U.S. military presence.

Social solidarities. The Sunni Arab insurgency draws on personal and kinship ties, shared military experiences, membership in former regime organizations, attendance at insurgent mosques, business relationships, and other associations. These relationships bind insurgents and their supporters in complex ways. They overlap and reinforce one another, resulting in cells and networks founded on multiple associations, and contributing to the flexibility and resilience of insurgent organizations. They also provide the basis for recruit-

ing new members, establishing bonds of trust, and fostering cooperation among widely dispersed groups.

Geography. One can map the locations of insurgent activity to reveal its geographic scope and persistence. Not surprisingly, the insurgency is closely connected to the human and physical geography of Iraq, and follows the dominant pattern of urban settlement in the country. For this reason, it truly deserves to be called “the insurgency of the two rivers” (the Tigris and Euphrates).

There are also multiple “corridors” or “zones” of resistance: Baghdad-Falluja-Ramadi; Tikrit-Baquba; northern Babil province (the so-called Triangle of Death); and the Euphrates river valley from Husbaya on the Syrian border to Ramadi.²⁰ Insurgent cells or networks tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods, villages, and towns that are home to large numbers of ex-Baathists and former regime military and security personnel; in areas where unemployment is rampant; in neighborhoods, villages, and towns associated with certain tribes; and in the vicinity of certain mosques used as weapons depots, recruiting centers, and meeting places.

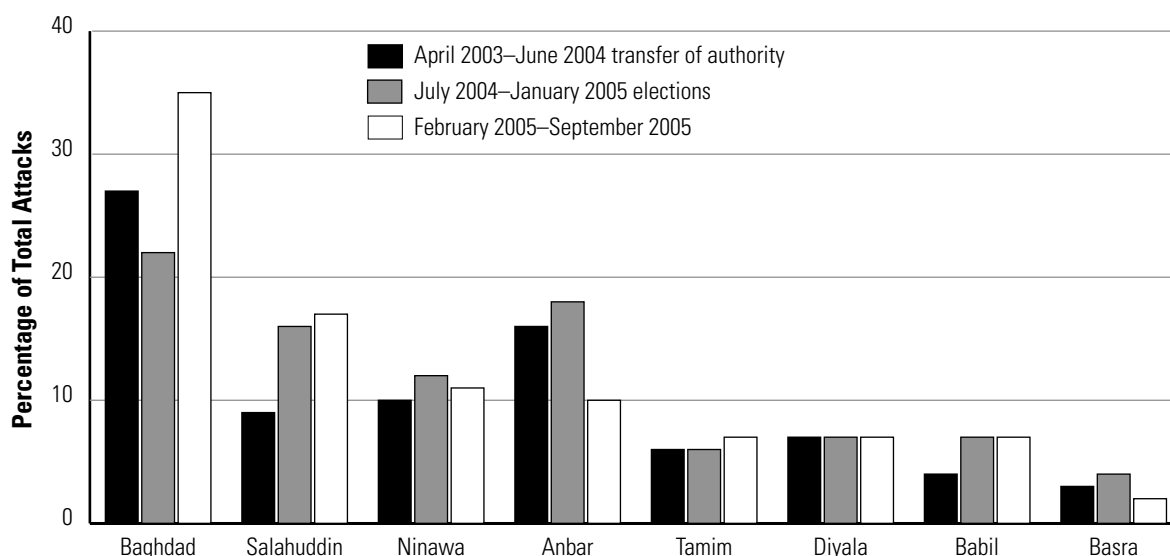
Insurgent activity has been both persistent and pervasive; areas that experienced insurgent activity in 2003 continue to do so today, while “cleared areas” have again become troublesome (e.g., Falluja, and Tal Afar before the September 2005 offensive).²¹ Only in a few places does the insurgency appear to have abated, at least temporarily (e.g., Haifa Street in Baghdad), although its actual status in such areas remains unclear, as an absence of insurgent activity is not evidence of an absence of insurgents. According to one press report, for instance, in Buhriz (a town northeast of Baghdad and long a trouble spot for the U.S. military) insurgents have laid low and not attacked Iraqi Security

defense due to the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity, the easy availability of small arms, and the fact that Coalition Provisional Authority Order No. 3 permitted Iraqis to keep small arms in their homes.

19. In assessing the strength of the insurgency, one should keep in mind that even insurgent leaders may not know exactly how many men they can call on. In this regard, it is worth keeping in mind the comments of T. E. Lawrence, concerning the Arab guerrilla forces he led during the Arab Revolt: “We went about in parties, not in stiff formation, and [the Ottoman Turkish] aeroplanes failed to estimate us. No spies could count us, either, since even ourselves had not the smallest idea of our strength at any given moment.” T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 381.

20. In a May 2005 briefing, Lieutenant General James Conway described a “corridor” of insurgent activity extending from Ramadi through Hit and on to the Syrian border. Defense Department Regular Briefing with Pentagon Spokesman Lawrence Di Rita and Chief of Operations, J3, Lieutenant General James Conway, May 10, 2005. Available online (www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2005/tr20050510-2721.html).

21. Edward Wong, “8 Months After U.S.-Led Siege, Insurgents Rise Again in Falluja,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2005, A1.

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution of Reported Insurgent Attacks in Iraq

Source: Iraq Incident Database, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Forces (ISF) units as long as no U.S. troops were present, although they remain poised to resist U.S. forces entering the town.²² This case suggests that all may not be well in other “quiet” locations.

Insurgent incidents have been reported in just fewer than 300 separate locations (villages, towns, and cities) in Iraq. Some 75 percent of insurgent violence occurs in the four governorates encompassing the Sunni Tri-

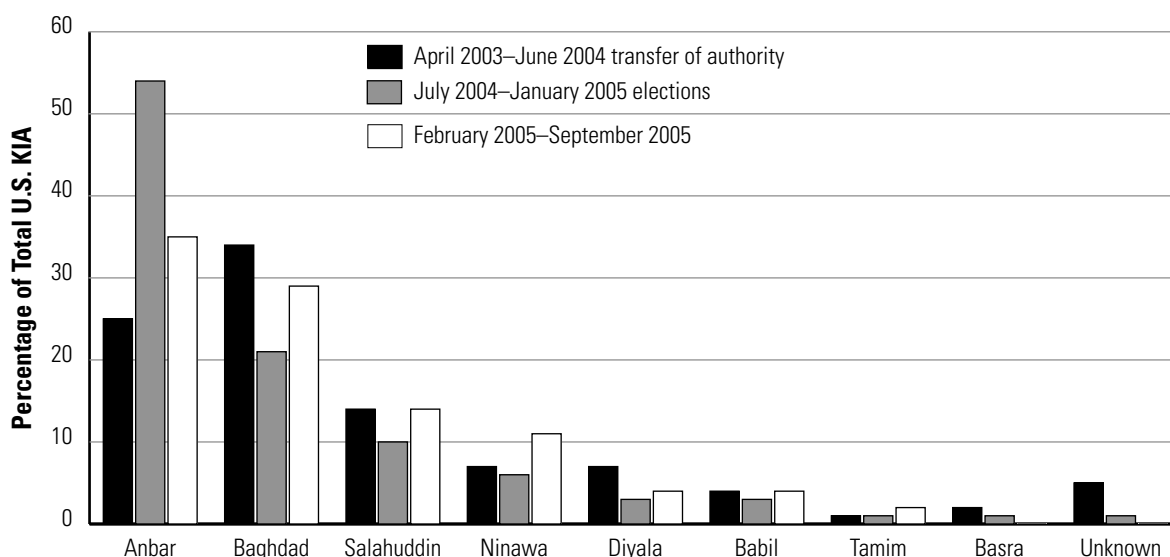
angle (Baghdad—which has consistently been the center of insurgent activity—followed by Salahuddin, Ninawa, and Anbar), although significant insurgent activity also occurs in Diyala, Babil, and Tamim governorates.²³ By these measures, the insurgency is widespread in Sunni Arab areas, as well as areas where Sunnis are a significant presence.²⁴ (See figure 3 for the geographical distribution of incidents.)²⁵

22. Nasir Kadhim, “Buhriz Quiet without American Patrols,” ICR no. 142, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 20, 2005; available online (www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/irq/irq_142_2_eng.txt). On this point, see also footnote 3 in chapter 3 of this paper.

23. According to The Washington Institute’s Iraq incident data base. By comparison, coalition reporting states that 85 percent of incidents occur in the four major provinces. “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq,” Report to Congress, Department of Defense, October 2005, p. 21; available online (www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2005/d20051013iraq.pdf). The insurgency is the overwhelming fact of life in parts of Iraq, and it has made many Iraqis virtual prisoners in their homes when they are not working, shopping, or going to school. It has limited nightlife in parts of Baghdad, and greatly influenced public life in large parts of the Sunni Triangle. On the other hand, large parts of the country are mainly untouched by insurgent violence. In these regions, the dominant concerns of the residents include inadequate electricity (still available only a few hours a day in most parts of the country), ethnic and religious tensions, the presence of coalition forces, lack of adequate housing, high prices, corruption, unemployment, and crime. See, for instance, the most recent IRI “Survey of Iraqi Public Opinion,” September 6–12, 2005, 13; available online (www.iri.org/09-27-05-IraqPoll.asp). See also Nancy Mendrala and Sarah Hornbach, “Iraqis Do Not Fear Civil War Despite Widespread Security Concerns” (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Office of Research Opinion Analysis), August 8, 2005, pp. 1–2, 6–7, and Ellen Knickmeyer, “Where Charter Is Least of Worries: Local Issues Top List in Town in S. Iraq,” *Washington Post*, October 7, 2005, A12.

24. James Glanz and Tom Shanker, “Iraq Study Sees Rebels’ Attacks as Widespread,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2004, A1.

25. All incident data used for the charts in this paper are derived from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Iraq incident database. Under the direction of Jeffrey White, this project was initiated in May 2003, with data search and entry carried out by Washington Institute research assistants. The unclassified database now contains more than 7,000 incidents, reaching back to April 2003. Each incident is tracked for a number of variables, including date, location (city/province), forces involved, types of weapons, type of attack, casualties (including Iraqi casualties), and a number of other factors. Data is drawn from open source reporting, so it represents a sample, perhaps 15 to 20 percent of the incidents reported by the coalition. The data is used to analyze operational and tactical trends in the insurgency, the effectiveness of insurgent forces, and shifts in operational and tactical activity. It generally tracks with broad trends revealed in official data.

Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of U.S. Personnel Killed in Action (KIA)

Source: Iraq Incident Database, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Although a plurality of reported incidents—between 20 and 35 percent—occur in Baghdad (not surprisingly, as it is the largest city, the seat of government, and well covered by the media), most U.S. forces killed in action have fallen in Anbar province (see figure 4). This likely reflects the intensity of the engagements there (especially Falluja I and II in April and November 2004, the prolonged struggle in Ramadi, recent U.S. and ISF operations in the Euphrates Valley) and the fact that many incidents in Baghdad involve relatively simple attacks. In Anbar, especially recently, both U.S. forces and the insurgents have been relatively aggressive, willing to risk increased casualties to achieve their objectives.

Religion. Islam underwent a revival in Iraq during the past decade and a half, and it is a key element of

the insurgents' operational environment. In the Sunni Arab areas, religion offered solace to those persecuted under the former regime or impoverished by UN sanctions, comfort to those harmed by coalition policies after the fall of Saddam (the humiliation of occupation, de-Baathification and the dismantling of the Iraqi army, and arbitrary detention), and strength and inspiration for those now fighting coalition forces. It is not surprising, therefore, that Iraqi insurgents, even those who are neither sincere believers nor Islamists, make extensive use of religious language, symbols, and imagery.²⁶ About half of the nearly seventy-five Sunni Arab insurgent organizations identified in the media bear names with some kind of Islamic association.²⁷ Examples include some of the most prominent insurgent organizations, such as the Army of Muhammad, the

26. David Baran and Mathieu Guidère, "Iraq: A Message from the Insurgents," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2005. Available online (<http://mondediplo.com/2005/05/01iraq>).

27. The number of insurgent groups actually operating in Iraq is unclear. Some organizations may use more than one name, and new names appear with some frequency. Moreover, some of the names used by insurgent groups have both nationalistic and religious connotations—for instance, the *al-Qa'qa' Brigades* and the *Salah al-Din Brigades*—which makes it difficult to discern the motives and identity of the group, which at any rate may be mixed. (Al-Qa'qa' bin 'Amr al-Tamimi was a warrior-poet and a celebrated hero of the battles of Yarmuk in 636 C.E. and Qadisiya in 637 C.E. Salah al-Din was a great military leader who led a Muslim army to victory over the Crusaders at the battle of Hittin and in the subsequent reconquest of Jerusalem. Both events took place in 1187 C.E.)

Islamic Army in Iraq, the Iraqi National Islamic Resistance, the Mujahedin Army, and Ansar al-Sunna.

Economy and reconstruction. War, sanctions, years of neglect of the country's infrastructure, coalition policies, and insurgent violence have created an economic environment favorable to the insurgents. Economic conditions have fueled anger against the coalition and the Iraqi government and created a large pool of unemployed (25 to 50 percent of the general labor force and up to 70 percent of the labor force in Sunni Arab areas hit hardest by insurgent violence)²⁸—some of whom are apparently willing to attack coalition forces or emplace IEDs for money.²⁹ One indication of the severity of the country's economic problems is provided by a March 2005 opinion poll in which some 44 percent of respondents in the largely Sunni Arab Tikrit/Baquba area indicated that they saw infrastructure and economy as the most urgent issue facing the country, as opposed to 41 percent who identified overall security as the main problem.³⁰ Nearly three years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, electricity production is only slightly higher than prewar levels, and well below target levels. Oil production has been consistently lower than both prewar and target levels, although revenues have soared thanks to higher oil prices. Both industries are frequently the targets of sabotage, resulting in the disruption of basic services, a decline in the standard of living, and lost government revenues.³¹

Structures, Processes, and Functions

Although attention tends to center on the most visible insurgent activities—the daily violent incidents and

mass-casualty attacks—these are but a fraction of the insurgency's range of activities, and leave in the shadows the structures, processes, and functions that sustain it.

Organization. The insurgency is not organized hierarchically (like the communist insurgencies faced by the British in Malaya and the United States in Vietnam) and in this sense is not a “classic” insurgency.³² It does, however, have an informal leadership, and consists of elements, entities, and organizations grouped into cells and linked by personal, tribal, or organizational ties (see figure 5). Accordingly, the Sunni Arab insurgency does not fit traditional or conventional categories; historical analogies should be applied with caution.

The insurgency's leadership reportedly consists of eight to twelve individuals who meet from time to time, inside and outside of Iraq, to discuss organization and tactics. Its ranks include members of the former regime's intelligence and security services, former Baathists, Iraqi and foreign jihadists, and tribal figures, and it reportedly provides resources and direction to many insurgent groups. Personal, family, tribal, and religious ties are believed to facilitate cooperation and coordination among insurgent leaders.³³

Action elements include insurgent groups and criminal organizations (e.g., the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Army of Muhammad, the Mujahedin Army, al-Qaeda in Iraq, etc.), each with its own leadership and decisionmaking process. These make up a “web of networks” likewise linked by personal, tribal, or organizational ties, and communicating by various means,

28. T. Christian Miller, “U.S. Criticized on Iraq Rebuilding,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2005, A5.

29. Economic conditions in Iraq are such that some Shiites have apparently taken money from the Zarqawi group to attack their coreligionists. Akeel Hussein and Colin Freeman, “Shia Iraqi Hitmen Admit They Were Paid to Join Sunni Insurgency,” *The Telegraph*, April 24, 2005. Available online (www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/04/24/wirq24.xml&csheet=/news/2005/04/24/ixworld.html).

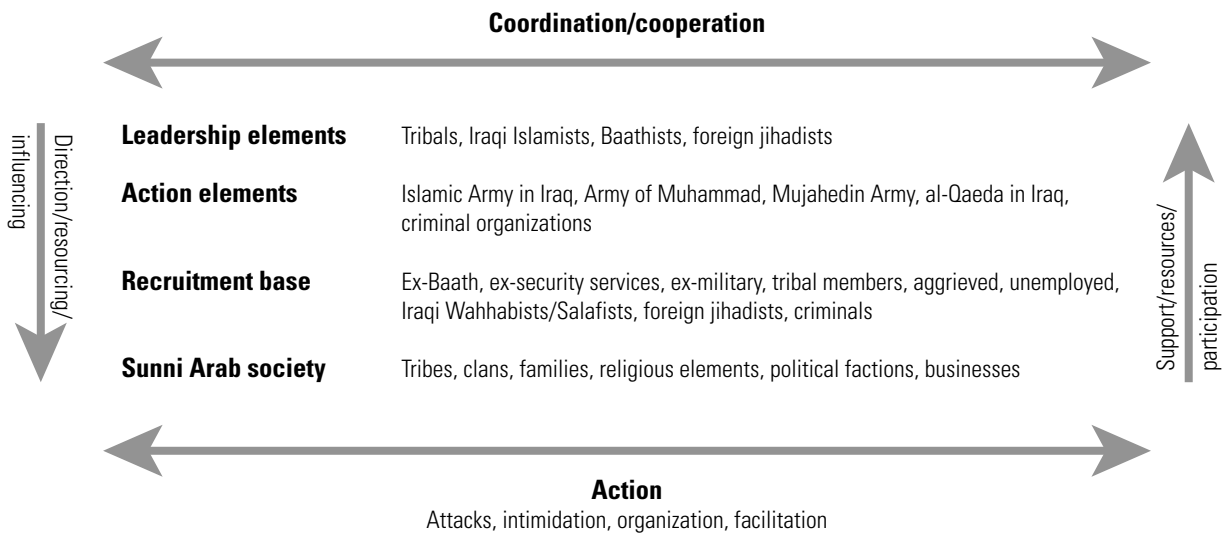
30. Mendrala and Cole, “Iraqis Sense Improved Security,” p. 5.

31. Dan Murphy, “Iraqis Thirst for Water and Power,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 11, 2005 (available online at www.csmonitor.com/2005/0811/p01s03-woiq.html); Michael E. O'Hanlon, Nina Kamp, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, October 7, 2005, pp. 23–25 (available online at www.brook.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf).

32. Early on, General John Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command, characterized the resistance in Iraq as a “classical guerrilla-type campaign,” while the CIA reportedly characterized it as a “classic insurgency.” See: “DoD News Briefing—Mr. Di Rita and Gen. Abizaid,” July 16, 2003 (available online at www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030716-0401.html), and Klein, *op cit.* (available online at www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1106307,00.html).

33. Thanassis Cambanis, “Hussein's Outlawed Former Party Gaining Influence in Iraq,” *Boston Globe*, May 15, 2005 (available online at www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/05/15/MNGAICPIME1.DTL); “U.S. Knows of About 10 Leaders of Iraq's Insurgency,” *Agence France Presse*, July 26, 2005.

Figure 5. The Insurgent System in Iraq



especially cell phones, the internet, and couriers. Each group is believed to be involved in a range of activities, including recruitment, training, financing, propaganda, political activities, and guerrilla and terrorist attacks. Terrorist attacks appear to be largely the province of organizations like al-Qaeda in Iraq and Ansar al-Sunna, although former regime elements may also be involved, at least in a supporting role.³⁴

Which element is most important to the insurgency is a matter of conjecture. While the jihadists get the most attention—because of their emphasis on mass-casualty attacks, and because they take credit for almost every major attack that occurs—the Iraqi “armed national resistance” is probably responsible for most attacks on coalition forces and Iraqis associated with the government. These actions, although less visible than the mass-casualty attacks of al-Qaeda in Iraq, undermine U.S. domestic support for the war effort and underscore the Iraqi government’s inability to govern or protect its people.

On the other hand, the influence of the foreign jihadists goes beyond the immediate impact of their operations. By instilling fear into the hearts of many Iraqis and drawing the wrath of senior coalition military officials, they are likely to influence the thinking of some Iraqis while drawing others into their ranks (as demonstrated by the four Iraqis involved in the November 9, 2005, bombing of three hotels in Amman, Jordan, by al-Qaeda in Iraq). In order to ensure their long-term viability, foreign jihadist groups like al-Qaeda in Iraq are likely to undergo a process of “Iraqification”—the recruiting of local members in order to sink roots into Iraqi society.³⁵ In the long run, this could enhance their operational effectiveness and make it much more difficult to expunge these groups and their influence.

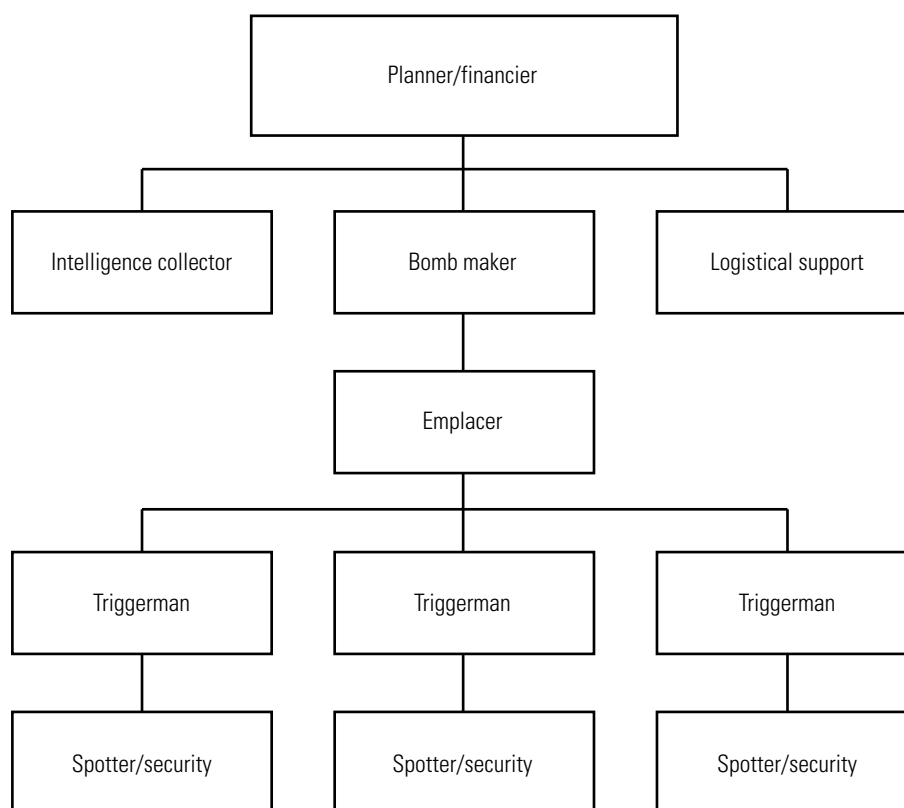
Moreover, the organizational boundaries between these groups may blur over time. While Zarqawi has not “hijacked the insurgency,”³⁶ his organization does appear to be cooperating at least with Baathist elements

34. See, for instance, Aparisim Ghosh, “Professor of Death,” *Time*, October 17, 2005 (available online at www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,1118370,00.html), which describes the role of Abu Qa’qa’ al-Tamimi, an entrepreneurial former Republican Guard officer and “born-again Muslim” who acts as a coordinator for suicide bombings for various jihadist and nationalist insurgent groups.

35. Greg Miller and Tyler Marshall, “More Iraqis Joining Zarqawi’s Cause,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 2005, p. 1.

36. Bradley Graham, “Zarqawi ‘Hijacked’ Insurgency: U.S. General Says Foreign Fighters Now Seen as Main Threat,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 2005, p. A17.

Figure 6. A Notional IED Cell



of the insurgency to carry out actions and achieve shared tactical and operational objectives.³⁷

For both the “armed national resistance” and jihad-ists, cells seem to be the dominant form of organization, although there appears to be some kind of limited hierarchy, with cells controlling the activities of sub-cells. Some cells appear to be multifunctional, carrying out attacks using small arms, light weapons (such as rocket-propelled grenades), and IEDs.³⁸ Others are specialized, and may be involved in preparing forged documents or propaganda

materials, or in planning and executing attacks with mortars, rockets, IEDs (see figure 6), or vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs).³⁹

Financing. The insurgency’s varied activities require a steady income stream and extensive and sophisticated financing operations. Though data on this topic are scarce, the insurgents do not appear to lack for financial resources, despite coalition and Iraqi government efforts to disrupt their funding.⁴⁰

37. See for example, Aparisim Ghosh, “Professor of Death,” *Time*, Oct. 17, 2005. Available online (www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,1118370,00.html).

38. James Janega, “Obscure Figures Hunted in Iraq,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 2005, p. 3.

39. See, for example, the description of IED cells in: Greg Grant, “Inside Iraqi Insurgent Cells,” *Defense News*, August 1, 2005, pp. 1, 8, 12. See also Montgomery McFate, “Iraq: The Social Context of IEDs,” *Military Review*, May/June 2005, pp. 37–40.

40. Testimony of Acting Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Daniel Glaser, and Mr. Caleb Temple, Director (Operations), Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combating Terrorism, Defense Intelligence Agency, before the House Armed Services Committee hearing on the “Financing of the Iraqi Insurgency,” July 28, 2005 (available online www.treas.gov/press/releases/js2658.htm and www.dod.gov/dodge/olc/docs/Test05-07-28Temple.doc, respectively). See also Michael Knights and Zack Snyder, “The Role Played by Funding in the Iraqi Insurgency,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 2005, pp. 8–15.

The insurgency's expenses include: operating costs (e.g., for food, fuel, and safe houses); services (cell phone and internet accounts); weapons, explosives, and stolen cars; the funding of military operations (ambushes of coalition/Iraqi forces, the planting of IEDs); bribes, propaganda materials, and influence operations; stipends for insurgents living abroad or in exile; and perhaps compensation to the families of detainees or "martyrs."⁴¹

The insurgency draws financial support from both inside and outside Iraq. Internal sources include contributions from sympathizers, local charities, and mosques; income generated by legitimate businesses; and criminal activity (robbery, extortion, smuggling, counterfeiting, narcotics trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom).⁴² External sources of funds include contributions from wealthy private donors in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, Europe, and the Gulf states (especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates); expatriate former regime elements; and members of transnational charities.⁴³ The government of Iran is also believed to fund insurgent activity.⁴⁴

Insurgents are believed to use at least three types of networks to collect, move, and disburse money: former regime financial networks; traditional informal *hawala* networks; and charitable religious endowments.

- The former regime carried on extensive legal and illegal financial operations.⁴⁵ Individuals associated with the old regime have been identified as important financiers and facilitators of the insurgency, and some of the networks it established are probably still in use today.⁴⁶

- The *hawala* informal remittance system is likely an element in the insurgency's financial system, serving insurgents of all stripes.⁴⁷
- Mosque and clerical networks are believed to be conducting fundraising for the insurgents. These networks extend across Iraq's borders and are probably interconnected. The Syria-Iraq border is reportedly the most important route for such activity. Couriers are the means of choice for transport. See figure 7 for a graphical representation.⁴⁸

As with its other activities, insurgent financial operations have evolved and adjusted to changing conditions and coalition and Iraqi government countermeasures. This has allowed the insurgency to weather the seizure of large amounts of cash, the detention or death of financiers, and the 2003 exchange of Saddam-era currency for redesigned notes.

Political activity. The passing of the old regime, which had ruthlessly eliminated potential rivals to Saddam Hussein (including Sunni Arab officers deemed a potential threat), and the collapse and dismantling of state institutions (which in a sense served as the Sunnis' paramount "communal institution") left the Sunnis temporarily leaderless and in disarray. Moreover, the January 2005 elections largely failed in Sunni Arab areas, despite successes elsewhere. (Probably only about 10 to 15 percent of the Sunni Arab population voted.)⁴⁹ As a result, Sunni Arabs have found themselves without an effective voice in the new government, although the insurgency

41. Glaser, *op cit.*, p. 1.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

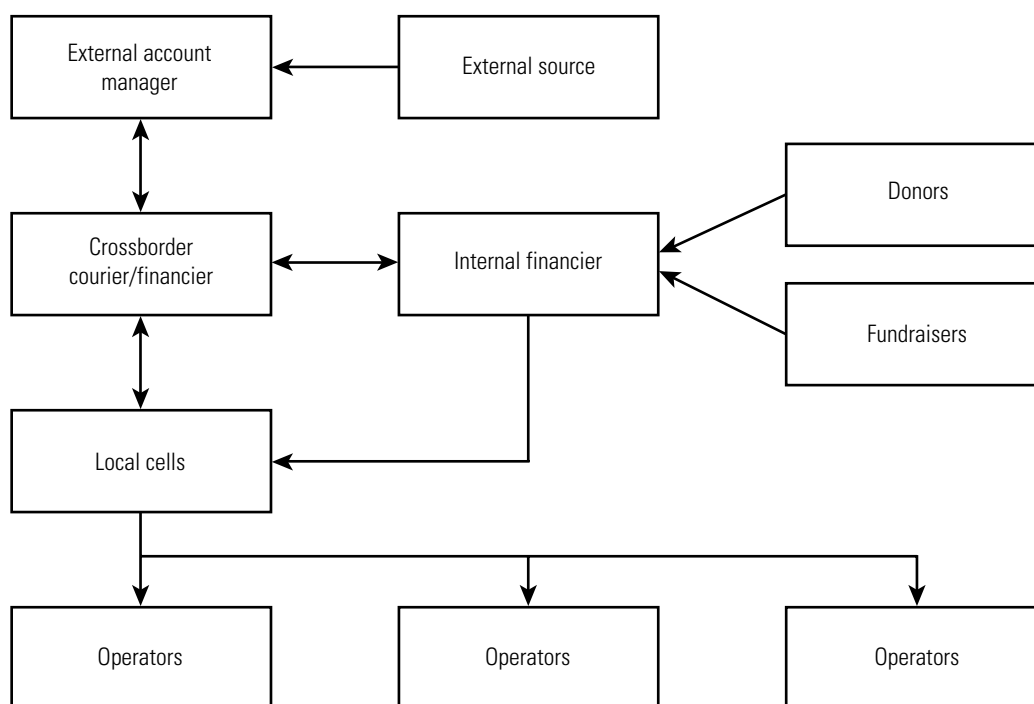
45. *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD II*, "Regime Finance and Procurement," September 30, 2004, pp. 1–299.

46. Glaser, *op cit.*, pp. 2–4; Temple, *op cit.*, p. 2; Bradley Graham, "Top Iraq Rebels Elude Intensified U. S. Raids," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2005, A1; Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Aides Say Kin of Hussein Aid Insurgency," *New York Times*, July 5, 2005, A1.

47. Temple, *op cit.*, p. 3; Agence France Presse, "U.S. Fears Iraq's Cash Economy Offers Easy Money to Insurgents," May 12, 2005.

48. Glaser, *op cit.*, pp. 2, 5–6; Temple, *op cit.*, p. 3.

49. Sunni Arabs clearly stayed away from the polls in large numbers. In Anbar province perhaps less than 5 percent of the population voted. Anecdotal accounts from other areas (e.g., Samarra and Bayji) suggest the Sunni turnout was less than 10 percent. Clearly identifiable Sunni politicians gained few votes. Ghazi Yawar's "Iraqis" party took only five seats with about 1 percent of the vote. Well-known Sunni Arab politicians, such as Adnan Pachachi, failed to win enough votes for a seat in the assembly. Robert H. Reid, "Shiites, Kurds Emerge as Winners in Iraq," *Associated Press*, February 14, 2005; "A Look at Iraq's Election Commission Seats," *Associated Press*, February 16, 2005. In mixed sectarian/ethnic provinces, where there are Kurdish and Shiite minorities, voting was higher, but this reflected the nationwide surge to the polls by these groups. In the four provinces most closely identified with the insurgency (Anbar, Ninawa, Salahuddin, and Baghdad), voting averaged 24 percent; but all except Anbar have significant Kurdish/Shiite populations.

Figure 7. Representation of Insurgent Financial Operations

has provided them with greater influence over the political process than they would have had otherwise.

A number of Sunni Arab organizations do exist, however, and some are involved in politics, including the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Iraqi Islamic Party. Both represent a spectrum of views but frequently adopt political positions supportive of resistance, and both have had members detained for alleged ties to the insurgency. These organizations, or at least some members of these organizations, can be considered, in a certain sense, overt political voices of the insurgency. They have provided a means of transmitting messages to and from the insurgents (e.g., regarding the ransoming of hostages), although they do not exercise operational control over insurgent activities.

Opposition to the occupation is a core element of these groups' platforms. The Association of Muslim Scholars argues that the political process cannot proceed under occupation.⁵⁰ It frequently condemns counterinsurgency operations by coalition and Iraqi government forces, and voices support for the "armed national resistance" (whereas the major Shiite parties, which also oppose the occupation, generally support coalition operations against Sunni Arab insurgents).⁵¹

Several groups and individuals have emerged since the elections claiming to represent the insurgents directly, but their connection to the insurgency is in most cases unclear, and some have been denounced by insurgent organizations.⁵² On occasion, entities that may be the political wings of various insurgent groups

"Iraq Elections 2005," *The Guardian* (available online at www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,5860,1399105,00.html). On balance, 10 to 15 percent is probably a reasonable estimate for participation of Sunni Arabs voters.

50. "Iraqi Sunni Group Spokesman Says Bush's Statements 'Can't be Trusted,'" BBC, June 24, 2005. Available online (www.uruknet.info/?s1=2&p=13017&cs2=26).

51. Bassem Mroue, "Iraqi Sunnis Allege Human Rights Abuse," *Associated Press*, July 13, 2005; Ellen Knickmeyer and Naseer Nouri, "Sunnis Step Off Political Sidelines," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2005, A1.

52. Borzou Daragahi, "The Puzzle of Sunnis' Leadership Vacuum," *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 2005, A5.

have surfaced. For example, the New Baath Party has a Political Information and Publication Bureau, which issues statements from time to time.⁵³

The political transformation process has mobilized Sunni Arabs. Following the January 2005 elections, several events—the drafting of the Iraqi constitution, the constitutional referendum, the trial of Saddam Hussein, and December elections—have catalyzed political activity. Moreover, the strong stand of most Sunni Arab leaders against the draft constitution directly supported the established position of the insurgents. While this development constitutes, in a sense, the long-sought Sunni entry into the political process, it also makes the Sunni opposition (overt and covert) more difficult to counter, and should enable the Sunnis to pursue more complex political-military strategies.

'Military' operations. The insurgents conduct purposeful activity; they do not attack randomly, as is sometimes suggested. They act along several broad "lines of operation":

- **Counter-coalition:** Attacks against coalition personnel, patrols, checkpoints, bases, buildings (such as embassies), infrastructure (excluding convoys and air transport), and the Green Zone.
- **Counter-'collaboration':** Attacks against ISF and Iraqi government personnel and facilities, translators working for coalition forces or personnel, and tipsters.
- **Counter-mobility:** Attacks against convoys and large transport vehicles, vehicular infrastructure, helicopters and transport aircraft, boats, trains, buses, airports, and bridges.
- **Counter-reconstruction:** Attacks on contractors, oil and power infrastructure, foreign companies and international aid organizations, banks, and medical infrastructure.

- **Counter-stability:** Attacks against civilians, religious sites, independent tribal or community leaders, foreign (noncoalition) diplomats, and international and nongovernmental organizations. Targets include markets, mosques, political party offices, private homes, and offices.

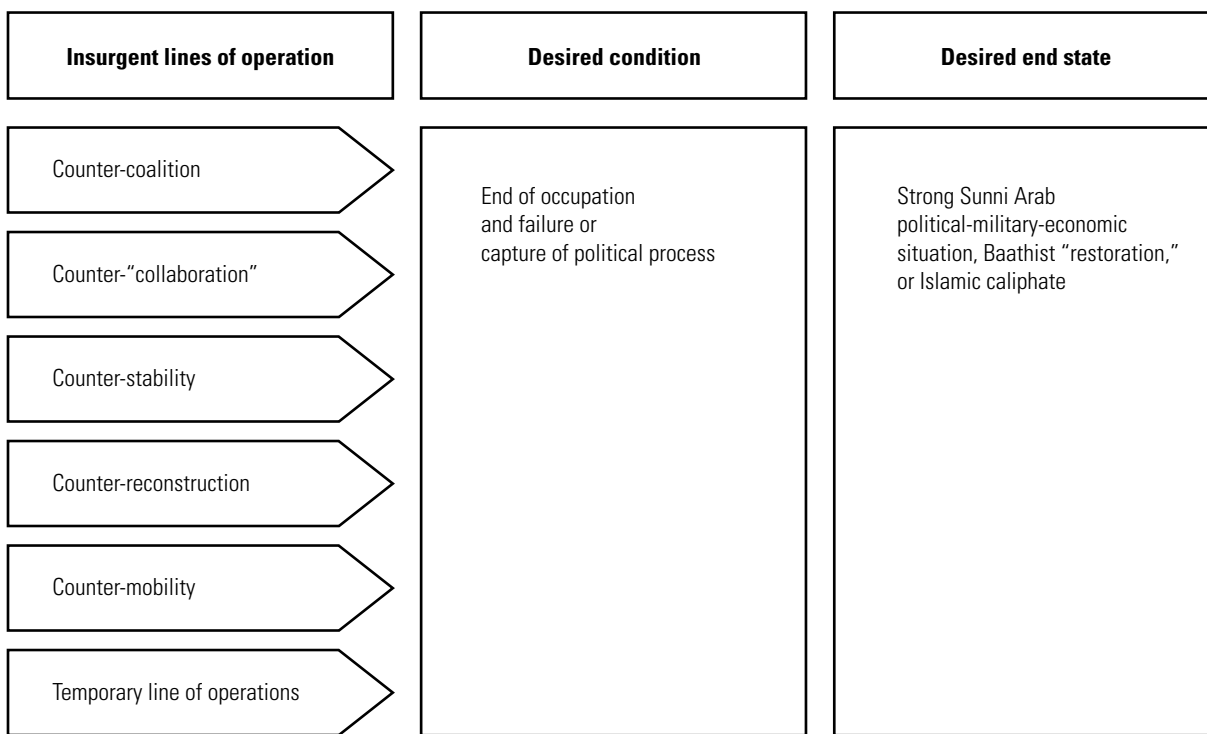
A sixth, temporary line of operation—counter-election—was implemented prior to the January 2005 elections, and consisted of attacks against voters, polling centers, election officials, and candidates. These actions, combined with open attempts to dissuade Sunni Arabs from voting, largely prevented the Sunnis from participating in the election. No similar line of operation preceded the October 15, 2005, constitutional referendum, although there were local cases of boycotts and intimidation.

Lines of operation support major insurgent objectives, including resisting the occupation and undermining the Iraqi government. Here, individual incidents and short-term trends are less important than cumulative impact. Taken together, the insurgent "lines of operation" represent the operational expression of broadly defined, generally agreed-upon insurgent objectives: ending the occupation, frustrating or defeating the political transformation process, and ultimately establishing a strong political-military position for the Sunni Arab community. Important elements in the insurgency—particularly the more extreme Baathists, the Islamists, and the jihadists—are pursuing goals that go well beyond those listed, including a Baathist "restoration" or the establishment of an Islamic state or caliphate (see figure 8).

To date, the most important lines of operation have been counter-coalition, counter-"collaboration," and counter-stability (see figure 9). Counter-coalition attacks have taken a significant physical and psychological toll and reduced coalition forces' operational freedom of action by creating a nonpermissive environment. Routine movements by U.S. troops are treated as combat patrols, and in areas where the insurgency is

53. "Iraqi Baath Party Issues Three Statements on 'Resistance,' Party Anniversary," *al-Majd* (Amman), April 11, 2005, p. 5; and "Iraq's Baath Party to Fight Political, Economic, Security Plans of 'Occupation,'" *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), April 23, 2005.

Figure 8. Notional Insurgent Strategy in Iraq



well established, movements over the road system are constrained. Just keeping open the road from Baghdad International Airport to the "Green Zone" requires a substantial commitment of U.S. and Iraqi forces.⁵⁴ The insurgent campaign against "collaborators," including ISF recruits and members, has been highly successful, with insurgents killing large numbers of Iraqis working for the government or connected to the reconstruction effort and intimidating many more.

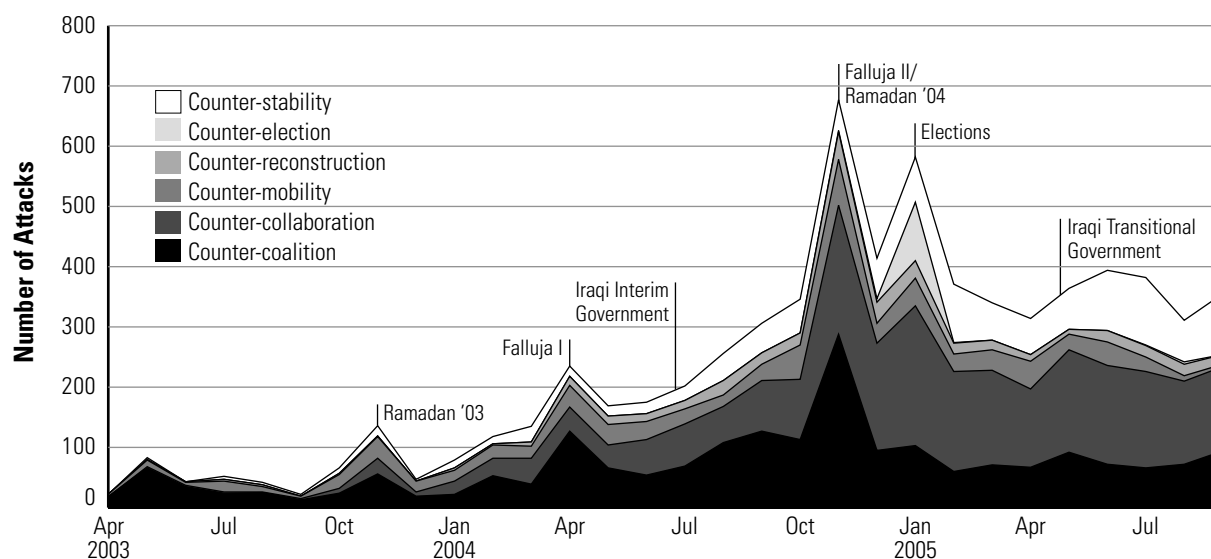
Thus far insurgent operations do not appear to be a form of strategic bargaining in which the level or nature of insurgent actions is tied to concessions from the coalition and Iraqi government. Rather, insurgent operations have aimed to weaken or frustrate the political transformation process. Strategic bargaining may come into play as the political face of the insurgency develops.

Shifts in emphasis between lines of operation suggest changes in insurgent effort or strategy. Thus, since the January 2005 elections, counter-"collaboration" and especially counter-stability attacks appear to have become more important. This likely reflects an insurgent assessment that the Iraqi government and the ISF are greater long-term threats and easier targets than coalition forces, and in the case of the jihadists, that civilians are legitimate, vulnerable, and useful targets.

Insurgent groups appear to specialize to a certain degree. Iraqi groups appear to concentrate, although not exclusively, on counter-coalition and counter-"collaboration" actions, while the jihadists focus, also not exclusively, on destabilizing actions, especially attacks on Shiite civilians and counter-"collaboration" attacks. This rough division of labor has permitted groups affiliated with the "armed national resistance" to at least

54. Jackie Spinner, "Easy Sailing Along Once-Perilous Road to Baghdad Airport: Army Steps Up Presence to Quell Attacks," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2005, A15.

Figure 9. Sunni Arab Insurgent Lines of Operation



partially avoid the opprobrium associated with the jihadists' trademark mass-casualty attacks, although it has also produced tensions over means and ends between these two currents within the insurgency.

Rhythms and cycles. Highs and lows in insurgent activity may be associated with the religious calendar (e.g., Ramadan, Ashura), seasonal weather patterns, political events (e.g., elections), or anniversaries. During the Algerian civil war (early- to mid-1990s), the onset of the holy month of Ramadan was often marked by an increase in attacks by the Islamic opposition.⁵⁵ In Iraq, Ramadan 2003 saw an increase in activity, but any such increase in 2004 was obscured by the large spike associated with the second battle of Falluja. Ramadan this year coincided with the October 2005 referendum, so it was again difficult to discern its impact. Jihadist groups seeking to foment civil war have also launched major attacks during the Shiite commemoration of Ashura.

Weather may likewise be a factor in the insurgency in Iraq, though the evidence is ambiguous.⁵⁶ Thus, February and early March 2004 saw relatively low levels of insurgent activity, as did February and March of 2005. In both cases, insurgent activity increased after these winter lulls, which may have been due to inhospitable (cold and/or rainy) weather conditions.

Insurgent activity also declined sharply after the two battles of Falluja. This is more easily explained: the insurgents may have needed time to rest and recover, assess their options, and replace their losses following surges in activity during Falluja I and II (April and November 2004, respectively), and before the January 2005 elections. If the period preceding the January 2005 elections offers any lessons, it is that the insurgents can significantly increase (by more than double) the number of attacks undertaken in support of their strategy, if only for a short time. Insurgent strategy for the constitutional referendum was largely political, with insurgent elements by and large supporting the

55. Avi Jorisch, "U.S. Military Operations and the Question of Ramadan," *PolicyWatch* no. 581 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2, 2001). Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1459).

56. During the Vietnam War, the tempo of communist military activity followed seasonal weather patterns: the onset of the rainy season from September through January generally saw a significant slowdown in combat operations. Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 11–13.

“get out the ‘no’ vote” campaign. Insurgent military and political strategy and coalition counterinsurgent operations will dictate whether or not insurgent military activity peaks immediately before the December 2005 general elections.

Resiliency. One of the defining characteristics of insurgencies is their staying power; the Sunni Arab insurgency is no exception. Arrayed against the U.S. military, the insurgents have fought a ruthless, relentless war. Although thousands of insurgents have been killed and tens of thousands of Iraqis detained,⁵⁷ incident and casualty data reinforce the impression that the insurgency is as robust and lethal as ever—if not more so.

The insurgents have made good on their losses by drawing on their large reserves of potential manpower, augmented by recruits from outside Iraq.⁵⁸ Insurgent cells have likewise demonstrated that when they incur losses they can recruit new members or merge with other insurgent cells, while leaders detained or killed by coalition forces have been replaced without fundamental disruptions to insurgent operations.⁵⁹

Individuals may also be recruited on a “cash” basis to attack coalition forces (e.g., by sniping or emplacing IEDs).⁶⁰ As long as cash reserves remain plentiful and unemployment rates in the Sunni Triangle remain high, the insurgency will be able to hire freelancers to mitigate attrition and enhance its lethal punch.⁶¹

Coalition forces may be having some effect on the Zarqawi organization through, among other factors, attrition of leadership. Coalition officers have attributed a reduction in suicide attacks to disruptions of the organization, and a Zarqawi-associated subordinate

leader has complained about the poor quality of leadership in the Mosul area.⁶²

The insurgency is made more resilient and effective by its organization into compartmentalized cells and networks. Successes against one group are not fatal for others, or to the larger cause. Smaller groups are more likely to innovate, and their apparent propensity to share expertise and experience (either through face-to-face meetings or over the internet) ensures that innovations are passed on, allowing groups to achieve broader tactical and operational effects than they could on their own.⁶³

Penetration of Sunni Arab Society

Insurgencies are based on the struggle to control, or win over, the “hearts and minds” of a society’s civilian population. In Iraq, the status of the insurgency can be measured by the degree to which it has penetrated public and private institutions of the Sunni Arab community and its “thought world.”

The insurgency has established a significant presence in broad sectors of Sunni Arab society, including the social, economic, religious, political, and criminal spheres. While the depth of penetration is uncertain, the insurgents have largely succeeded in undermining efforts to extend government institutions into Sunni Arab areas through a combination of persuasion and intimidation. This is evidenced by the repeated failures of organs of local governance in Sunni Arab areas, such as village and town councils.

The results of the January elections, and perhaps to a lesser extent the October 15 referendum, reflect the powerful influence of the insurgents in the Sunni Arab community. The rallying of the Sunnis against the draft

57. See footnote 16.

58. The number of foreigners entering Iraq is relatively small; according to one press report, 100 to 150 cross from Syria into Iraq each month, one or two at a time. Bradley Graham, “Forces Bolstered in Western Iraq,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2005, A18. According to one unofficial estimate, the total number of foreign jihadists now in Iraq may be somewhere between 1,000 to 3,000. Obaid and Cordesman, *op cit.*, p. 5.

59. Grant, *op cit.*, p. 8.

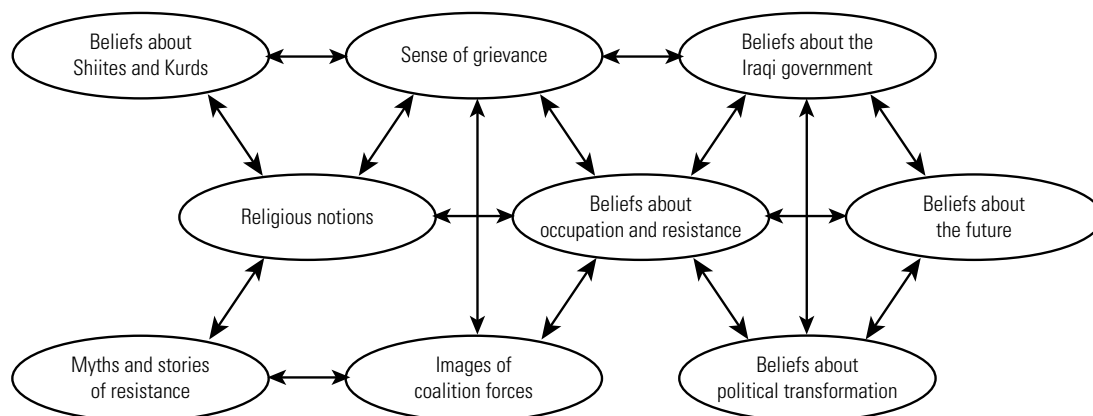
60. According to one source, some 70 to 75 percent of attacks in Iraq are done by freelancers on a commission basis. Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Dr. David Kilcullen, *Countering Global Insurgency*, SmallWarsJournal.com (November 2004), p. 35; available online (www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf). This figure seems improbably high, however, and it is questionable whether reliable data on this phenomenon exists.

61. Grant, *op cit.*, p. 8.

62. *Associated Press*, “Letter to Zarqawi Decries Terror Leaders,” August 6, 2005. Available online (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8853687).

63. Statements from insurgent organizations in mid-April 2005 indicated that there had been agreement on increased cooperation. “Iraq Rebels ‘Unite’ to Fight Coalition,” *London Sunday Times* April 17, 2005, p. 24. See also: Rick Jervis, “Militants Sharing Bomb Expertise,” *USA Today*, October 24, 2005; available online (www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-10-24-roadside-bombs_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA).

Figure 10. The Sunni Arab 'Thought World'



constitution also showed the ways in which Sunni Arab attitudes can mesh with insurgent objectives. This congruence in attitudes, along with a certain social affinity between Iraqi insurgents and the Sunni Arab population, allows the insurgents to operate, recoup from losses, and hold sway in Iraqi communities. To a degree, this dynamic applies even with respect to the terrorist elements of the insurgency. These organizations could not exist in Iraq without the acceptance, or at least the passive support—even if this support is coerced—of local communities.

The insurgents have also managed to penetrate the thought world of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.⁶⁴ At least eight components of this thought world help provide an understanding of the insurgency:

1. Beliefs about the occupation and resistance
2. Images of coalition forces
3. Images, myths, and stories of the resistance
4. Beliefs about political transformation
5. Beliefs about the Iraqi government
6. Beliefs about Shiites and Kurds
7. A sense of entitlement and grievance

8. Religious notions and sensibilities
9. Beliefs about the future⁶⁵

These interconnected components represent a belief structure shaping Sunni Arab attitudes and actions that determine, to a significant extent, where Sunni Arabs will likely fall on the resistance-“collaboration” spectrum (see figure 10).

Polling data, media commentary, and anecdotal reporting all indicate that, among Sunni Arabs in Iraq, ideas and beliefs sympathetic to the insurgency have become widespread, including their views of the occupation, coalition forces, and the Iraqi government. The findings also permit a number of cautious assertions to be made about the Sunni Arab thought world, which is characterized by the following beliefs or features:

- Many Sunni Arabs believe the country is headed in the wrong direction.⁶⁶
- The occupation has brought about Sunnis' loss of power and privilege,⁶⁷ and is consequently the object of deep-seated hostility. Sunnis also hold an

64. “Thought worlds” represent the beliefs upon which individuals and groups act. Based on cultural variables, they involve perceptions of reality, proper behavior, and truth. For a discussion of this concept, see J.W. Barnett, “Insight Into Foreign Thoughtworlds for National Security Decision Makers,” Institute for Defense Analysis, January 2004. Available online (www.fas.org/irp/eprint/thoughtworlds.pdf).

65. Baran and Guidère, “Iraq: A Message from the Insurgents.”

66. International Republican Institute, *Survey of Iraqi Public Opinion*, September 6 to September 12, 2005, p. 5. Available online (www.iri.org/09-27-05-Iraq-Poll.asp).

67. Public opinion polling data from March 2005 indicated that in majority Sunni Arab areas, more than 30 percent of the population believed that coali-

extremely negative view of Coalition forces, a view shared by most Iraqis.⁶⁸

- Many Sunni Arabs believe that the Shiite- and Kurd-dominated Iraqi government is controlled by Iran and/or the United States, and that it is making war on the Sunni Arabs.⁶⁹
- Sunni Arabs are suffering acutely from the consequences of the former regime's collapse.⁷⁰
- The Sunni image of the insurgents is complex; most Sunni Arabs distinguish between legitimate resistance and indiscriminate or sectarian attacks.⁷¹
- Many Sunnis believe violent "resistance" against coalition forces is justified, but view negatively attacks on Iraqi civilians and security forces.⁷²

- The Sunni Arab community is deeply divided over whether its future lies with the insurgency, the political process, or a combination of the two.⁷³

- In the Sunni Triangle, confidence in the insurgents is highest in Anbar and Salahuddin governorates, lower in Ninawa and Diyala governorates, and lowest in Baghdad.⁷⁴

- Some Sunnis subscribe to a variety of myths regarding the resistance.⁷⁵

The political behavior of Sunni Arabs will reflect the complexity of this thought world, which will vary from place to place within Iraq and over time. Attempts to influence the Sunni Arab community that are not based on a sophisticated understanding of this thought world are apt to fail, and likely to produce unintended consequences.

tion forces should leave immediately, and 53 to 61 percent thought they should leave as soon as a permanent government is elected. In Tikrit/Baquba, an area broadly representative of the Sunni Triangle, 87 percent of those polled opposed the presence of coalition forces in Iraq, with 72 percent strongly opposed. Mendrala and Cole, *op cit.*, pp. 3, 9.

68. A March 2005 opinion poll indicated that in majority Sunni Arab areas (Tikrit/Baquba), 38 percent of those polled believed coalition forces had come to punish Iraq and should now leave (Mendrala and Cole, *ibid.*, p. 9). Likewise, a June 2005 opinion poll indicated that large majorities of Arab Iraqis had little if any confidence that coalition forces could improve the situation in Iraq (Mendrala and Hornbach, "Iraqis Do Not Fear Civil War," pp. 3, 11).

69. See, for example, Sameer N. Yacoub, "Shiite Forces Blamed for Sunnis' Deaths," *Associated Press*, August 29, 2005.

70. For a discussion of Sunni Arab attitudes toward their loss of power, see Fouad Ajami, "Heart of Darkness," *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2005, p. A16.

71. This ability to discriminate is evident in Sunnis' reaction to terrorist-type actions by the Zarqawi group. Sunni Arab political leaders and "resistance" organizations have condemned both specific actions by Zarqawi and his declaration of war against the Shiites. See, for example, the October 1, 2005, statement by the Iraqi Islamic Party condemning the terrorist attacks in Balad on September 29, 2005, in Jackie Spinner, "U.S. Troops Target Rebels in Far Western Iraq," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2005, p. A21. See also: "Sunni Sheikhs and Organizations Criticize al-Zarqawi's Declaration of War Against the Shi'ites," Middle East Media and Research Institute Special Dispatch No. 1000, October 7, 2005; available online (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iraq&ID=SP100005>).

72. Thus, narrow to broad majorities of Sunni Arabs surveyed in a June 2005 poll characterized those who attacked coalition forces as "patriots" or "freedom fighters." In most Sunni areas polled, however, large majorities characterized those who attacked Iraqi civilians or soldiers as "criminals" or "terrorists." Mendrala and Hornbach, *op cit.*, pp. 4, 12.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3, 9–11.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 9.

75. A number of myths or stories of resistance have existed at one time or another in Iraq. These include those about "Allah's sniper," the wily Sunni Arab who kills U.S. soldiers from afar with impunity; "virgin fighters," young boys who are killed resisting U.S. forces; and "woundless death," the notion that the bodies of martyred resistance fighters do not bear the horrific wounds normally inflicted by modern weapons. It is impossible to say how deeply these stories affect the Sunni Arabs, but they present powerful images of pure, noble resistance. See, for instance, Halah Jaber, "The Chilling Toll of Allah's Sniper," *The Times* (London), February 20, 2005; available online (www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-1492179,00.html).

Insurgent Effectiveness: Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Measures

HOW DOES ONE assess the effectiveness of the insurgency? To a certain degree, the answer depends on whether one is examining insurgent activity on the tactical, operational, or strategic levels of war. For instance, on the tactical and operational levels, any assessment of the effectiveness of the Sunni Arab insurgents must track and assess trends in insurgent strength, the number of attacks, and coalition and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) casualties. On the strategic level, an assessment of the effectiveness of the insurgents requires a different set of analytical measures, and may therefore yield different answers. Moreover, because psychological and political factors play critical roles in determining the outcome of insurgencies, analysts must develop measures of success that tap into these dimensions of the conflict. What matters most in insurgencies, however, is the political outcome of the struggle. This is the ultimate measure of insurgent effectiveness.

Measures of Tactical and Operational Effectiveness

In past conflicts, various analytical measures, mainly quantitative, have been used to gauge the tactical and operational effectiveness of insurgents. These measures include incident rates, insurgent and counterinsurgent casualty rates and casualty exchange ratios, lethality indexes (numbers killed per incident), the extent of “no-go zones” for government personnel and security forces, and the span of areas under insurgent control, where insurgents can enforce their version of law and morality, collect taxes, create a shadow government, and recruit or impress civilians into service.¹

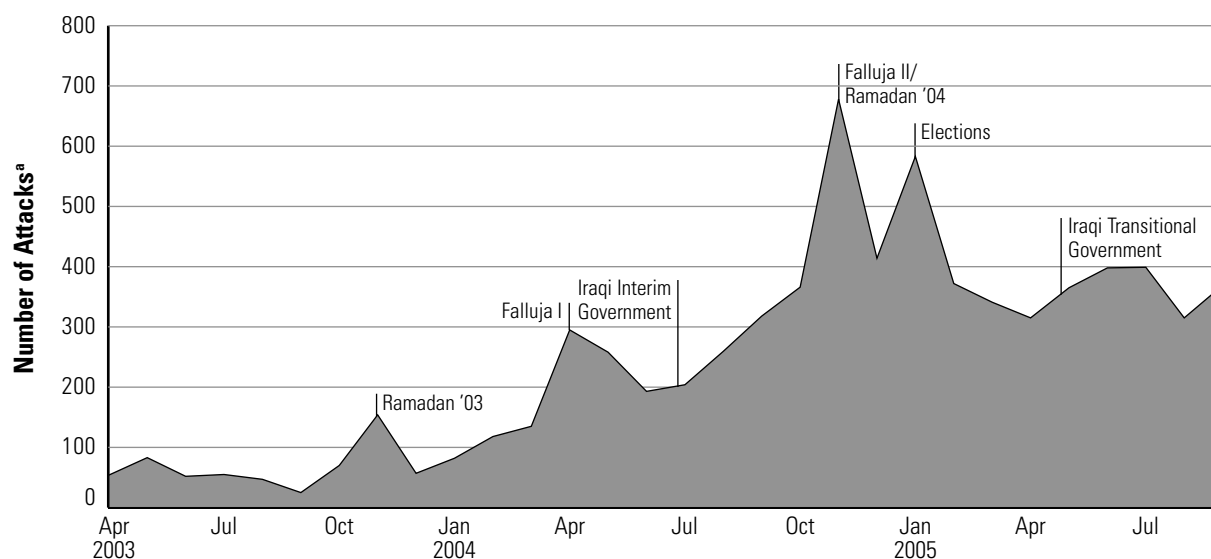
The selection of analytical measures to assess insurgencies is particularly challenging, for one must first have an understanding of the insurgent’s tactical, operational, and strategic objectives. Moreover, because insurgents and counterinsurgents wage different struggles—and play by different rules—measures of effectiveness for insurgents and counterinsurgents may not necessarily mirror one other.²

At the tactical and operational levels, analysts tend to rely on quantitative measures—or metrics—to assess progress or success. A number of factors may, however, limit the utility of metrics often used to analyze the tactical and operational dimensions of insurgencies: data may be flawed or subject to multiple, conflicting interpretations, and proper interpretation may require a degree of insight into insurgents’ thought and practice that cannot be readily attained.³

Thus, insurgent manpower practices and organization may not be understood well enough to permit meaningful assessments of insurgent strength. Likewise, the mindset, tactical and operational objectives, and sociopolitical operational environment of the insurgents may not be understood sufficiently to permit correct interpretation of trends in insurgent attacks (e.g., the decline in attacks following Iraq’s elections in January 2005).

A more fundamental limitation of quantitative approaches is that a lack of tangible achievements on the tactical and operational levels might not necessarily prevent guerrillas or insurgents from achieving their overarching objectives. This is because, in guerrilla wars or

1. See, for instance, Bernard Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *Naval War College Review*, April 1965; available online (www.nwc.navy.mil/press/Review/1998/winter/art5-w98.htm). Analytical measures developed to assess the success of counterinsurgency operations span social, informational, military, and economic dimensions. They include: the proportion of engagements initiated by government forces; spontaneous intelligence reports (“walk-ins”) from the civilian population; longevity of local community leaders who support the government; and spontaneous private-sector economic activity. Lieutenant Colonel (Dr.) David Kilcullen, *United States Counterinsurgency: An Australian View*, presentation at the U.S. Army War College, April 12–14, 2005; available online (www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/conf/strat/Panel5-kilcullen.pdf). Other measures for analyzing the counterinsurgency mentioned in the literature include insurgent recruiting rates, the quantity of weapons captured versus the quantity lost by government security forces, and the facial expressions of civilians when they encounter government forces. Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), pp. 169–170.
2. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964), pp. xi, xiv.
3. For instance, a drop in the number of incidents in certain areas may indicate either that the insurgents are on the run or that they effectively control the area in question. Thompson, *op cit.*, p. 169.

Figure 11. Reported Insurgent Attacks in Iraq

^a There were 7,360 total reported attacks during this time period.

insurgencies, psychological and political factors are often of decisive importance. Thus, counterinsurgency or counterinsurgent forces can win nearly every battle and still lose the war—as did the French in Algeria, the United States in Vietnam, and Israel against Hizballah in Lebanon.

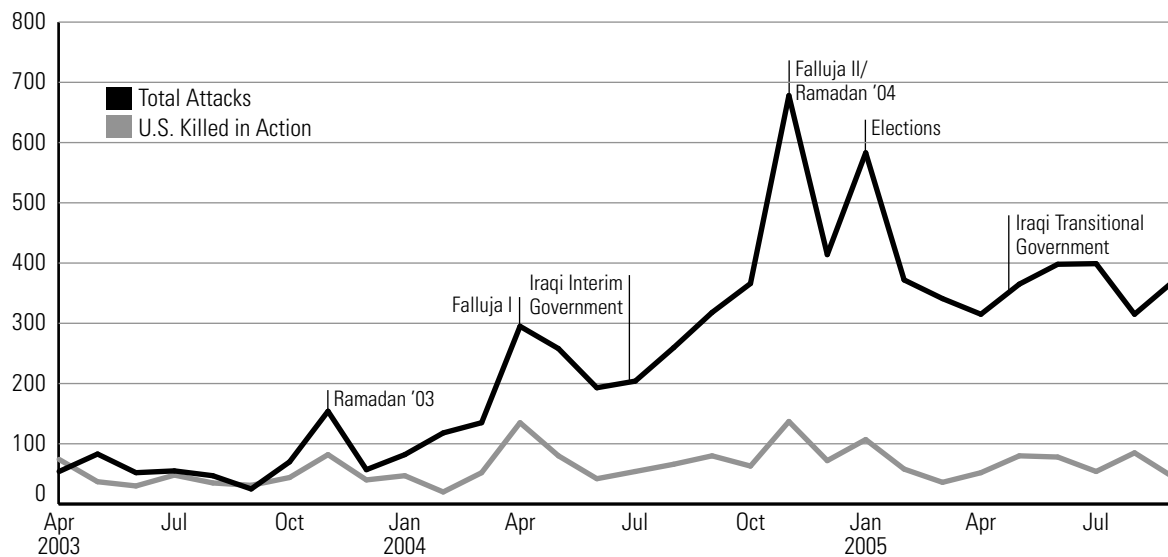
Nevertheless, tactical or operational metrics may be useful as indicators of strategic success, and may provide insight into factors that can influence the strategic direction of the war. (For example, the number of Sunni Arabs providing tips regarding insurgent activity to coalition or Iraqi forces may indicate the degree of popular support for insurgents in Sunni Arab areas.)

Other measures (e.g., changes in the number or tempo of insurgent attacks) may signal shifts in insurgent strength, capabilities, or strategy, as well as popular support for their cause. Thus, tactical and operational metrics, if properly understood, can be very useful, and may shed light on trends and developments in the insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Incident rates. One measure of insurgent activity is incident rates, usually measured as incidents per day, week, or month. Because incidents may differ dramatically in terms of effort invested and effects produced, incident rates represent a relatively crude measure. Thus, a brief sniping incident targeting a single American soldier, and a complex, multielement attack on an Iraqi police station involving scores of insurgents and lasting hours, may each be counted as a single incident. Numbers of incidents are nonetheless an important indicator of the overall direction of the insurgency (see figure 11).

The gradual but steady increase in incident rates over a period of more than two years (from monthly ranges of 10 to 35 attacks per day in 2003, to 25 to 80 attacks per day in 2004, to 65 to 90 attacks per day in 2005)⁴ strongly suggests that the insurgency has grown in strength and capability, despite losses, coalition countermeasures, the growing presence of ISF, and the continuing political process. At no point was

4. According to U.S. government figures. Government Accountability Office, *Rebuilding Iraq: Preliminary Observations on Challenges in Transferring Security Responsibilities to Iraqi Military and Police*, GAO-05-431T, p. 10 (available online at www.gao.gov/new.items/d05431t.pdf); Bradley Graham, "Zarqawi 'Hijacked' Insurgency," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2005, p. A17. These trends generally mirror those in The Washington Institute Iraq incident database.

Figure 12. Americans Killed in Action vs. Total Number of Insurgent Attacks

this long-term trend reversed (as some had predicted), although insurgent activity, as measured by numbers of incidents, did vary from time to time.

Iraqi and coalition casualty rates (and, when available, insurgent casualty rates) provide a measure of the intensity of violence and combat in Iraq, and when incident and casualty rates are combined, they can help gauge trends in the lethality of the insurgency. Open source data seem to show that, for certain types of insurgent attacks on U.S. forces—specifically, attacks involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—there has been a slight upward trend in lethality. Insurgent attacks on the ISF appear to be far more lethal. This is likely due to a number of factors, including: greater exposure of ISF units (e.g., manning of exposed checkpoints), inferior passive defensive measures (lack of armored patrol vehicles), and a lack of professionalism and training.⁵ ISF units are much more

attractive targets for the insurgents, although this should change over time as ISF units gain experience. Attacks on Iraqi civilians have been devastatingly lethal.⁶

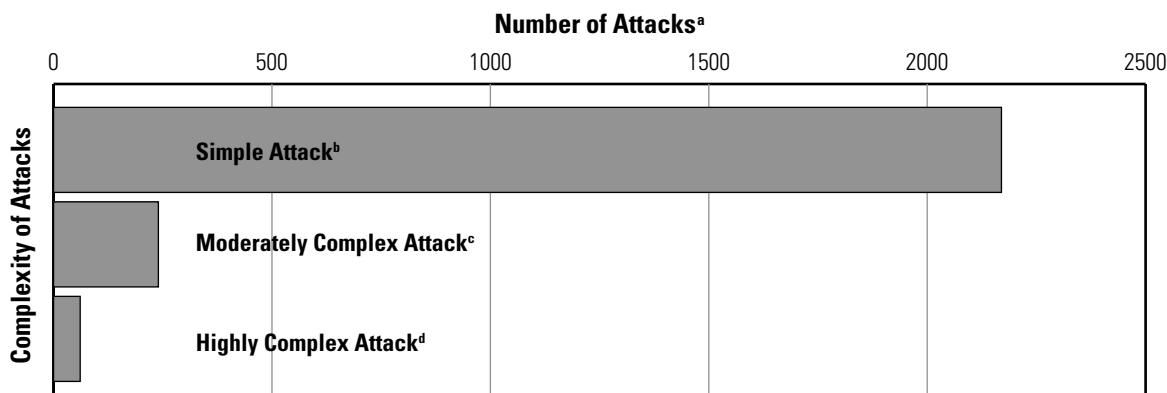
For most of its initial thirty-two months, the insurgency has not been particularly intense. Attrition imposed by the Sunni Arab insurgents, measured on a monthly basis, has been steady rather than dramatic, with a few exceptions (e.g., April and November 2004). But the costs have added up, and the insurgency is a major factor affecting U.S. domestic support for the conflict. According to U.S. government reporting, as of November 29, 2005, 1,649 U.S. troops had been killed in action in Iraq, with 15,881 wounded in action. That comes to a total of 17,530 combat casualties incurred since May 1, 2003—roughly the period of the insurgency (see figure 12).⁷ This represents nearly 50 killed and 500 wounded per

5. Michael Moss, "Lack of Armor Proves Deadly for Iraqi Army," *New York Times*, October 30, 2005. Available online (<http://select.nytimes.com/mem/tnt.html?emc=tnt&tntget=2005/10/30/international/middleeast/30armor.html&tntemail=y>).

6. The exact number of Iraqis killed by the insurgents is unknown, but it is clearly in the thousands. According to Defense Department data, the trend in daily Iraqi casualties has been rising since January 2004, with an average of 25 deaths per day in January–March, 30 per day in April–June, 40 per day in June–November, 50 per day during the election period from late November 2004 to early February 2005, slightly below 50 per day in February–August, and 60 per day in September–October 2005. See "More than 26,000 Iraqis Killed, Injured Since 2004: Estimate," Agence France Presse, October 30, 2005; available online (http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20051030/pl_afp/iraqusunrestoll). Since January 2005, ISF losses have fluctuated between 100 and 300 killed in action monthly, according to the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count; available online (www.icasualties.org/oif/IraqiDeaths.aspx).

7. Department of Defense, "Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) U.S. Casualty Status," as of November 29, 2005, 10:00 a.m. EDT. Available online (www.defenselink.mil/nes/casualty.pdf). This tally includes casualties incurred during the two Muqtada al-Sadr uprisings of 2004.

Figure 13. Relationship between Tactical Complexity, Frequency, and Purpose of Attacks



^a Figures represent attacks occurring between February and August 2005.

^b Individual or single cell, single type of weapon. Examples: sniping, IEDs, harassment fire, simple ambush. Accounts for most incidents. Intended to harass coalition and government security forces and create nonpermissive environment. Supports intimidation and physical and psychological attrition.

^c Several cells, coordinated weapons fire. Examples: coordinated attack on a checkpoint. A significant portion of insurgent attacks. Intended to achieve local results, specific tactical objectives. Represents a key form of struggle against the Iraqi Security Forces.

^d Multiple cells/groups, scheme of maneuver, target reconnaissance, multiple types of weapons, direct and indirect fires, tactical deception. Examples: attacks on police stations and prisons. Relatively infrequent large-scale actions intended to achieve significant operational or strategic results.

month.⁸ For the purposes of the insurgency, a small but steady stream of U.S. casualties may actually be more advantageous than large numbers of casualties produced in infrequent but high-intensity clashes.

Tactical sophistication. A key measure of insurgency capability is the complexity and tactical sophistication of its attacks. Elements of complexity include the number of insurgents or insurgent elements involved, the scheme of maneuver (if any exists), numbers and types of weapons systems employed, numbers and types of targets engaged or objectives assaulted, and use of denial and deception measures.

A review of reported incidents in Iraq between February and August 2005⁹ indicates that most attacks are relatively simple, involving a small number of insurgents (often a single individual or cell) and one or two

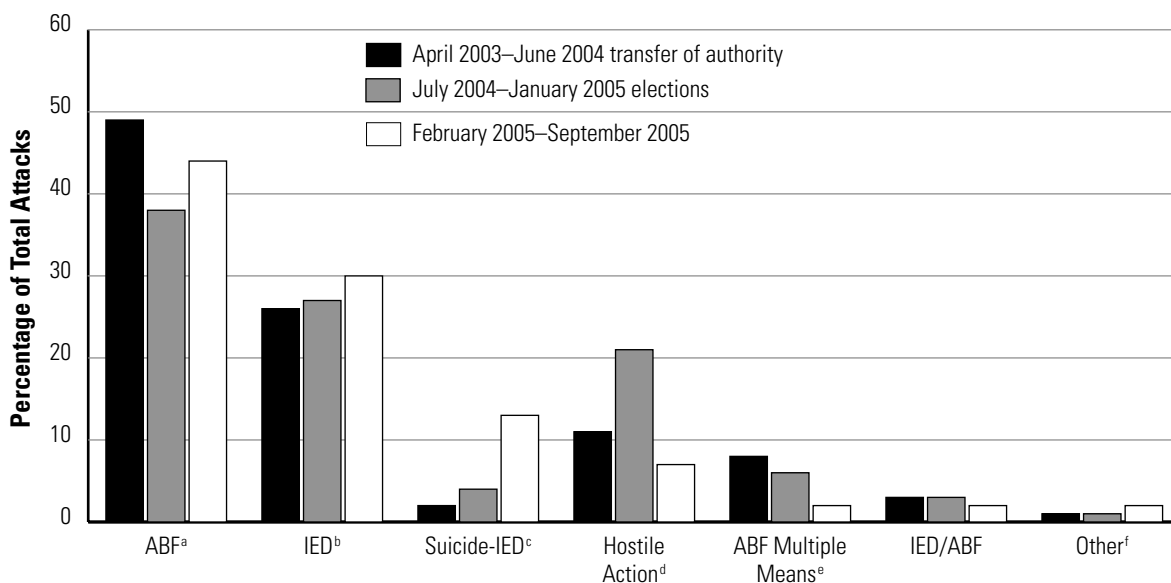
types of weapons. Moderately complex actions, involving several cells organized into one or more elements, several types of weapons, and coordinated fires, are less frequent and generally target the ISF. Truly complex attacks, involving several cells organized into multiple elements, various types of weapons, and a scheme of maneuver, are infrequent (see figure 13). An important factor in insurgent planning is risk, which increases with the complexity of an attack. Generally speaking, the insurgents carefully manage risk by avoiding large clashes, especially with U.S. forces, in an attempt to minimize their losses.

Complex attacks appear to be conducted in order to achieve important operational or strategic objectives. Such attacks include the February 14, 2004, raid on the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) and Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) compounds in Falluja, probably calcu-

8. By way of comparison, in 1968, at the peak of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, U.S. casualties amounted to 14,594 troops killed and 87,388 wounded in combat, an average of more than 1,200 killed and 7,250 wounded a month (more than the average annual rate for Iraq). During the month-long battle of Iwo Jima, one of the most intense battles of World War II, U.S. casualties amounted to 7,000 killed and 19,000 wounded in combat. See www.swt.usace.army.mil/library/tdr/1998/tdr0398.pdf and www.vietnamwall.org/pdf/casualty.pdf

9. This reflects the period since the January 2005 elections, which was a reasonably representative period with regard to insurgent activity. By contrast, the preceding period, from November 2004 to the end of January 2005, was characterized by significant fighting between U.S. and insurgent forces in Falluja, and the insurgents' counterelection campaign.

Figure 14. Insurgent Attacks by Type of Weapon



^a Attack by fire; includes small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars

^b Improvised explosive device; includes roadside bombs and vehicle-borne devices

^c Includes suicide belts/vests and vehicle-borne suicide attacks

^d Weapons used unknown

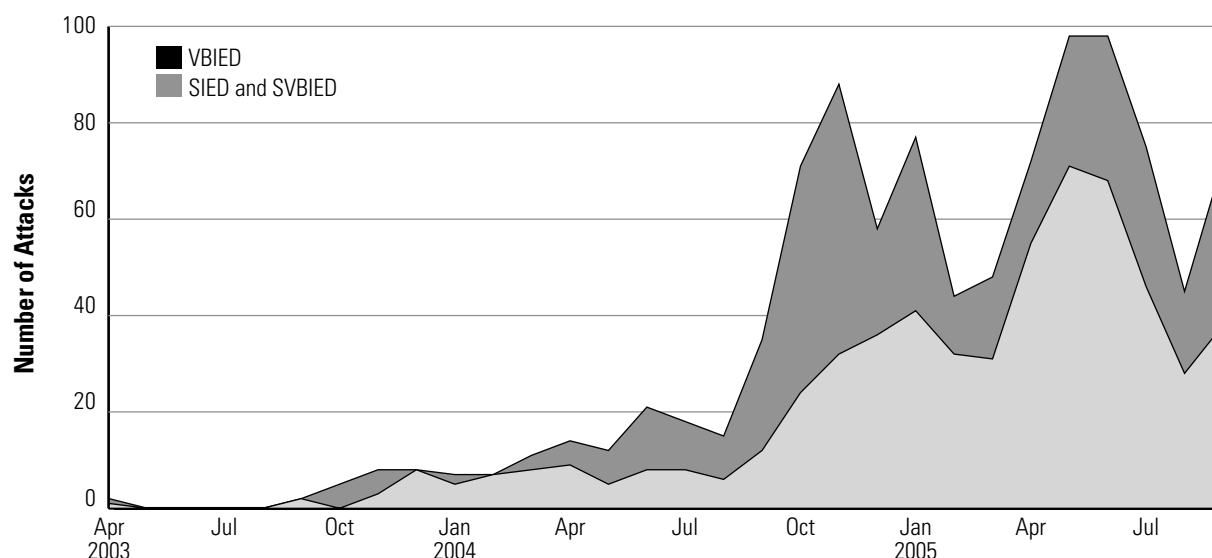
^e Attacks involving at least two types of weapons

^f Includes grenade attacks, poisonings, decapitations, rocket attacks, molotov cocktail attacks, knifings, and kidnappings

lated to strike a demoralizing blow against the ISF and to consolidate insurgent control of the city; the April 3, 2005, attack on the Abu Ghraib prison, designed apparently to free detainees held there; and the July 11, 2005, attack on the Iraqi Army checkpoint at Baquba, again, to strike a blow against the ISF.

The insurgents employ a variety of weapons in different ways. These include direct fire attacks with small arms and RPGs, indirect fire attacks with rockets and mortars, remotely triggered IEDs, vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs), individuals with suicide explosive vests (SIEDs), and suicide-VBIEDs. (Figure 14 illustrates attacks by type of weapon over time) The diversity of weapons employed has permitted the insurgents to pose a broad threat to their targets, and to shift emphasis, depending on the availability of weapons and coalition countermeasures. Attacks by fire (ABFs) have represented the largest category throughout the insurgency, with the use of IEDs growing over time.

Suicide operations, whether involving an individual with an explosive vest or a VBIED, represent a major type of insurgent action. These operations were a serious problem beginning in 2004, and became a major category of attack in 2005. Ranging from simple to highly complex in terms of planning, organization, and preparation, suicide attacks generally focus on high-value targets: coalition and ISF convoys, ISF recruiting centers and other installations, and concentrations of Iraqi civilians (e.g., Shiite religious celebrations). Such attacks often result in heavy casualties and are intended to produce instability and a climate of fear, and to discredit the Iraqi government and the ISF. The dramatic increase in suicide attacks in fall of 2004 and again in spring of 2005 likely reflected changes in insurgent capabilities, organizational dynamics, and targeting priorities. The employment of suicide bombers has been a major tactical and operational success for the insurgents. It has driven international aid organizations from Iraq, increased sectarian and ethnic ten-

Figure 15. Suicide IEDs, Vehicle-Borne IEDs, and Suicide Vehicle-Borne IEDs

sions, demonstrated the inability of the coalition and the Iraqi government to protect the population, and has forced the coalition to devote increased efforts to countering this threat. (See figure 15 for trends pertaining to suicide bombings.)

What do insurgent operations and corresponding incident data reveal about insurgent effectiveness on the tactical and operational levels? The insurgents:

- Have employed violence effectively to achieve important strategic and political goals.
- Have sustained operations at progressively higher levels (currently averaging about 90 attacks per day), despite coalition countermeasures, mass arrests, and significant personnel losses, and can more than double the number of attacks during surges in activity.
- Continue to exact a heavy and growing toll on Iraqi civilians, the ISF, and, to a lesser extent, coalition forces.
- Have managed to enhance their operational capability by employing more sophisticated IEDs and have shown the ability to mount complex operations against important targets.

- Retain the initiative and the ability, within limits, to conduct operations at the time and place of their choosing—particularly against Iraqi civilians and the ISF.
- Retain significant military freedom of action in Baghdad and large parts of the Sunni Triangle, despite all countermeasures taken to date.

The insurgents have scored, and continue to score, important tactical and operational successes—particularly against the ISF and the Iraqi government. But while they have been able to translate these “battlefield” successes into a number of important short-term political gains, they still face the challenge of using these gains and their growing capabilities—against existing coalition and growing ISF capabilities—to achieve their long-term political objectives.

Measures of Strategic Success

What are the insurgents’ goals in the current phase of the “struggle for Iraq”? For some Iraqi groups, the goal may be to strengthen the bargaining position of the Sunni Arab community in future negotiations over a constitution and a permanent government. For other Iraqi groups, it may be to derail the political transi-

tion and seize power. And for the jihadists (such as al-Qaeda in Iraq), the goal may be to create an Islamic caliphate in Iraq as a first step toward creating a global pan-Islamic caliphate.¹⁰

The insurgents travel along parallel, often mutually supportive paths—sometimes acting alone, sometimes working together—in the pursuit of a series of common objectives that they believe will help them achieve their divergent strategic goals. The most important of these common objectives are to:

- Bring an end to the occupation by inflicting a constant toll of casualties on U.S. forces, in order to turn the American public against the war effort.
- Undermine government institutions and establish control over predominantly Sunni Arab areas of Iraq.
- Derail the political process established under Iraq's interim constitution, the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), or at least exert decisive influence over the process.
- Attack and subvert the ISF in order to prevent it from becoming a serious threat to insurgent forces.
- Foster a climate of fear and insecurity in order to intimidate the population, cripple the economy, and undermine the legitimacy of the government.
- Restore Sunni Arab pride and honor in order to fan the fires of resistance and bolster the standing of the insurgency in the Sunni Arab community.
- Reestablish the Sunnis as an important, if not a dominant, presence in Iraq.

Finally, the jihadists hope to foment a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites in order to prevent the emergence

of a predominantly Shiite government in Baghdad, and to inflict a major defeat on the United States.

After more than two years of fighting, what progress can the insurgents claim toward achieving these objectives? They have:

- Succeeded, through assent and intimidation, in establishing themselves as a major—if not the dominant—social and political force in the Sunni Triangle.
- Won the support of large portions of the Sunni Arab population for attacks on Coalition forces, and at least tacit support for attacks on the ISF and the Iraqi government.
- Deterred many residents of the Sunni Triangle from working for or joining the new government, and coerced others to quit. This has severely inhibited the extension of governance into the Sunni Arab areas and hindered the recruitment of Sunni Arabs for the ISF, forcing the security forces to lean heavily on Shiite and Kurdish recruits.
- Made the security situation a major issue of concern for many Iraqis, particularly in Baghdad, giving the Sunnis a strong (if thus far largely negative) “voice” in determining the future of Iraq.
- Complicated the political transition by engineering a successful boycott of the January 2005 elections in the Sunni Triangle.
- Succeeded in convincing many Sunnis that the draft constitution did not represent their best interests.
- Slowed the pace and raised the cost of reconstruction, undermining confidence in the Iraqi government. Ironically, however, rampant unemployment ensures a supply of recruits for both the insurgents and the ISF.

10. For more on al-Qaeda's strategy in Iraq, see the February 2004 letter by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to the leadership of al-Qaeda (available online at www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm); Reuven Paz, “Zarqawi's Strategy in Iraq—Is There a ‘New’ al-Qaeda?” PRISM Occasional Paper 3, no. 5, August 2005 (available online at www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_5_vol_3_-_Iraq_strategy.pdf); and the July 2005 letter from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (available online at www.dni.gov/letter_in_english.pdf).

- Contributed to popular dissatisfaction in the United States with the war and its handling, and to a likely U.S. decision to begin drawing down its forces in Iraq in 2006.¹¹
- Contributed to heightened sectarian and ethnic tensions, an increase in sectarian and ethnic violence, and creeping “ethnic cleansing” of minority populations in mixed neighborhoods.

The insurgents have, however, experienced a number of setbacks during this period. They have:

- Not succeeded in derailing the political process, which continues to move forward. As a result, many Sunni Arabs now seem prepared to engage in this process.
- Been unable to deter large numbers of young Iraqis from joining the ISF.
- Lost (at least temporarily) important “sanctuaries” in several major towns in the Sunni Triangle to joint coalition-ISF operations, including Falluja and Tal Afar.
- Not succeeded in building substantial support among either the Iraqi or the American public for a rapid and complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Many Shiites and some Sunnis grudgingly accept the U.S.

military presence as necessary to a successful political transition, and to stave off still greater violence and possible civil war.

- Failed to provoke the Shiite leadership to abandon its policy of restraint in the face of attacks calculated to spark additional violence between Sunnis and Shiites—although Shiite elements are believed to be involved in revenge or intimidation attacks on the Sunni population.

Moreover, the jihadists have alienated many Sunni Arabs with attacks that have killed numerous innocent civilians, and with the extreme version of Islam that they have imposed on areas under their sway.

In short, though experiencing some setbacks, the insurgents have scored a number of important successes. Most important of all, they have made the Sunni Arabs a force to be reckoned with. The main Shiite and Kurdish parties and the United States have had to recognize the need for substantial, credible Sunni Arab participation in the political process and to accommodate at least some of the key demands presented by the Sunni Arab representatives in the negotiations over the constitution. The insurgency's future success will depend to a significant degree on the outcome of the general elections in December 2005 and its ability to craft a political-military strategy that can guarantee its own relevance and survival, while advancing the interests of the broader Sunni Arab community.

11. For U.S. public opinion trends regarding the war, see: Dana Milbank and Claudia Deane, “Poll Finds Dimmer View of Iraq War,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 2005, p. A1. For more on the apparent decision to draw down U.S. forces in Iraq, see: David Ignatius, “A Shift on Iraq: The Generals Plan a Slow Exit,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2005, p. A23.

Conclusion

THE SUNNI ARAB INSURGENCY POSES major analytical and operational challenges. It is pervasive in Sunni areas, yet because it lacks a clear ideology, leadership, or organizational center, it defies easy categorization. It is not dependent on external resupply or internal or external sanctuaries, and while the manpower, materiel, and funds that come from Syria and Iran are not insignificant (and may be very important for the foreign jihadists), they are not necessary to the insurgency's survival.

The insurgency has access to all the weapons, explosives, and trained manpower it needs, in amounts sufficient to sustain current activity levels indefinitely—assuming continued Sunni political support. Its “networked” nature makes it a resilient and adaptive foe. The insurgency also has at least the beginnings of a political face and enjoys support from overt Sunni political organizations. And the insurgents know that coalition forces are constrained in how they use force to deal with them. These are among the reasons that combating the insurgency has proven so confoundingly difficult.

The insurgency, nonetheless, has a number of weaknesses that could limit its potential, if exploited effectively by the coalition and the Iraqi government:

- It has little appeal beyond the Sunni Arab community (with the exception of some followers of the populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and perhaps among sympathizers elsewhere in the Arab world). The coalition and the Iraqi government should therefore avoid actions that could push the insurgents into tactical alliances with aggrieved members of other communities, such as the Sadrists.¹
- Sunni Arabs harbor ambivalent feelings with respect to the insurgency, and are divided over whether their

future lies with the insurgents, the political process, or both. The coalition and the Iraqi government should therefore avoid actions that could drive the Sunnis into the arms of the insurgents, seek to discredit the insurgency by implicating it in the horrific acts of the foreign jihadists, and convince the Sunnis that legitimate grievances can be addressed through the political process.

- The insurgency's lack of a unified leadership, broad-based institutions, or a clearly articulated vision for Iraq's future could hinder formation of a unified political-military strategy, further limiting its popular appeal if these shortcomings prevent the attainment of key political and military objectives.
- Some percentage of insurgent operations are done on a commission basis; improving economic circumstances and reducing the unemployment rate could help diminish the pool of paid freelancers.²
- The insurgency's lack of a clearly articulated vision for Iraq's future has prevented potentially profound differences in its ranks from disrupting its activities. The political transition has, however, initiated a process that, by exposing the main fault lines in the ranks of the insurgency, could help determine whether there is a basis for a political settlement—and identify “rejectionist” groups opposed to one, so that they may be eliminated through counterinsurgency operations.
- The extreme beliefs and brutal tactics of the jihadists and their Iraqi supporters have apparently alienated some erstwhile allies in the insurgency and many

1. The fact that the insurgency in Malaya (1948–1960) was rooted mainly in the country's ethnic Chinese minority and that the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952–1956) involved only the Kikuyu tribe helps explain the failure of these insurgencies. Galula, *op cit.*, p. 20. Ensuring that the insurgency did not spread beyond these minority communities was a key element of British counterinsurgency strategy in Malaya and Kenya.

2. For an assessment showing that improved social services and employment opportunities for the mainly Shiite slum-dwellers of Baghdad's Sadr City led to a sharp decrease in recruitment to and attacks by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, see: Major General Peter W. Chiarelli and Major Patrick R. Michaelis, “Winning the Peace: The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations,” *Military Review*, July–August 2005, pp. 4–17. Whether such an achievement can be replicated in largely Sunni areas remains to be seen.

Iraqi Sunnis; this might make jihadist groups vulnerable to efforts to isolate them from local and external bases of support.³

On balance, while the insurgents have proven to be formidable opponents, they are not unbeatable. The war may yet yield an acceptable outcome—a relatively stable, democratic Iraq—provided that the political process is not derailed by escalating civil violence or undermined from within, or that the United States does not withdraw prematurely. The path to such an outcome will be protracted and costly, and likely punctuated by additional setbacks. But this path is preferable to the alternative—a precipitous withdrawal followed by chaos—a recipe for even greater instability that would almost assuredly guarantee the need for the United States to intervene again at some future date, perhaps under even less favorable conditions.

Since the January 2005 elections, Sunni Arab political activity has increased markedly, with various groups and loose organizations coming forward as self-proclaimed representatives of that constituency. Some of these entities likely have ties to the insurgents, although overt collaboration has yet to occur. This Sunni political “awakening” may produce conditions for a “popular front” consisting of insurgent elements and Sunni Arab clerics and politicians, perhaps acting tacitly in league with the populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Moreover, continuing coalition and ISF operations in Sunni areas, incidents such as the discovery of a prison and torture facility in the Interior Ministry building, and the probably well-founded belief that Interior Ministry forces are illegally detaining and killing innocent Sunnis, contribute to the perception of many Sunnis that they are an embattled community, and to the growing polarization of Iraqi society. Tensions deriving from the political transition—in particular the October 2005 referendum,

the December 2005 elections, and the trial of Saddam Hussein—will likely create additional opportunities for the Sunnis to organize politically, and for the insurgents to broaden and deepen their influence in the Sunni Arab community.

The rejection of the draft constitution by a majority of voters in three largely Sunni Arab provinces (Anbar, Salahuddin, and Ninawa)—though not sufficient to defeat the constitution—suggests the strength of Sunni Arab opposition to the political transformation process in its current form. The results of the referendum—even if negative from the Sunni perspective—might demonstrate to Sunnis the value of participating in the political process; conversely, adoption of the draft constitution over Sunni Arab objections could lead Sunnis to conclude that the system is stacked against them, thereby providing new impetus to Sunni political (and military) opposition. At any rate, the idea that only the Shiites and Kurds could mobilize politically and act coherently has been dashed by the Sunni Arab vote against the draft constitution.

Furthermore, reports that the United States plans to draw down forces in Iraq starting in 2006 may encourage some insurgents to believe they can prosecute the struggle under more favorable circumstances once American forces have left.⁴ In the eyes of the insurgents, a window of opportunity may be opening, rather than closing, in the coming months.

Might a U.S. draw-down lead to a diminution of insurgent violence? To the degree that some percentage of insurgent activity is motivated by a desire to fight the occupation, avenge deaths caused by coalition forces, and redress affronts to Iraqi honor, the U.S. presence likely contributes to the violence. But it does not necessarily follow that a draw-down will lead to a reduction in insurgent violence. The insurgency has achieved critical mass⁵ and will continue in its efforts to influence or overthrow the Iraqi government, whether or

3. For an example of how tensions and factionalism in the insurgency were exploited by coalition forces before and during the second battle of Fallujah, see: Lt. Gen. John F. Sattler and Lt. Col. Daniel H. Wilson, “Operation Al Fajr: The Battle of Fallujah—Part II,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2005, pp. 12–24. For more on the tensions between foreign jihadists and Iraqis, see also: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, “The New Sunni Jihad: ‘A Time for Politics,’” *Washington Post*, October 27, 2005, p. A1. For more on the vulnerability of jihadists to strategies of isolation and “disaggregation,” see Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Dr. David Kilcullen, *Countering Global Insurgency*, SmallWarsJournal.com (November 2004), pp. 39–47; available online (www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf).

4. Eric Schmitt, “Military Plans Gradual Cuts in Iraq Forces,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2005, p. A1.

not U.S. forces remain in Iraq. Moreover, the replacement of U.S. forces by ISF units consisting largely of Shiite or Kurdish personnel with a history of dealing harshly with members of other communities will likely spawn new problems of its own.

Thus, the confluence of key political events (the sorting out of the results of the October referendum, December elections, and the subsequent formation of a constitutionally based government), with critical developments in the security sphere (the potential draw-down of U.S. forces and the assumption of greater security responsibilities by the ISF), suggests that the next six to nine months will be critical to the future of Iraq—a true “tipping period.” These political and security processes are linked, with failure in one domain likely to produce failure in the other. By the middle of 2006, it should be clear whether Iraq is evolving as an inclusive democracy of sorts or a state wracked by protracted violent conflict pitting Sunni Arabs against Iraq's other communities.

A number of signposts will provide indications of Iraq's future direction. The emergence of a Sunni Arab “popular front,” for example, combining overt and covert elements and capable of working against the political process by various means on multiple levels, might mark the appearance of a legitimate Sunni negotiating partner. Such a development—long sought—may set the stage for a negotiated settlement, or it may simply mark a new and more dangerous phase in the evolution of the insurgency. As the December elections approach, the behavior of overt Sunni political groups will provide additional indications of their intentions as participants in the political process—either as legitimate participants in the transformation of Iraq, or as spoilers bent on undermining the process from within. Coordinated action by political elements and insurgents would suggest an increasingly close relationship between the two.

Military indicators of a deteriorating situation would include the following: a continuing upward trend in

the number of attacks by insurgent forces; an increase in attacks along the counter-“collaboration” line of operation (indicating an intensifying struggle with the Iraqi government); continued success by insurgents in engagements with the ISF; a repeat of the setbacks of April and November 2004, when large numbers of ISF personnel deserted and entire ISF units melted away at the prospect of combat with insurgents; a growth in the strength and prominence of tribal and party militias (indicating a lack of confidence in the ISF); and an increase in sectarian violence—especially spontaneous sectarian killings (a sign that the violence is generating its own momentum).

Outlook

For various reasons, the Sunni Arab insurgency is likely to prove difficult to put down. Long accustomed to occupying positions of power, the Sunni Arabs will not adjust easily to their new status as a minority with much-diminished influence; the hardcore extremists among them are likely to fight on for years to come. Moreover, neither coalition forces nor the ISF currently possesses the capabilities or numbers needed to defeat the insurgents. Still, they may finally be reaching the critical mass needed to begin implementing the “clear, hold, and build” strategy recently announced by the U.S. government—which has been employed in successful counterinsurgency campaigns elsewhere.⁶

From the ashes of the old regime and the chaos of its collapse, a potent insurgency has emerged, one that has fundamentally transformed postwar Iraq. The insurgency has evolved significantly over thirty-two months, becoming more complex and adapting to changes in the postwar scene. Its most profound evolution may well lie in the emergence of an overt Sunni Arab political opposition connected to the insurgency—a development that adds yet another layer of complexity to the situation in Iraq. The coalition and the Iraqi government must now deal with this overt political oppo-

5. For more on the concept of critical mass, see Kilcullen, *op cit.*, pp. 31–33.

6. For a cogent and concise description of U.S. strategy in Iraq, see the testimony of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “Iraq and U.S. Policy,” before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 19, 2005; available online (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/55303.htm). See also the testimony of General George W. Casey, “U.S. Military Strategy and Operations in Iraq,” before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, September 29, 2005.

sition, which may yet prove more effective at mobilizing the Sunni population than the armed insurgents have thus far.

At the same time, the insurgents are not yet capable of seizing power through direct military action. Their tactical repertoire still consists mainly of hit-and-run and terrorist-type attacks. Given their limited military capabilities and the substantial coalition presence, they are likely neither to stage a successful coup (the central government's weakness makes this an unappealing option anyway) nor to attempt a "march on Baghdad." And U.S. forces will likely remain in Iraq for as long as they are needed, partly to prevent such an eventual outcome. Out of this stalemate a negotiated settlement may yet emerge based on some kind of power-sharing arrangement—even if the formula is somewhat different from that outlined in the draft constitution.

Should the insurgency continue, however, "ethnic cleansing" and civil conflict could intensify. Under such circumstances, the Shiites and Kurds might abandon (at least temporarily) their efforts to create a viable central government, and focus instead on building up or reinforcing institutions of local and regional governance in the north and south of the country, respectively. This scenario would leave the Sunnis with an impoverished, unstable, and violent rump state—

ungoverned space that could serve as a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

The repercussions of the insurgency will reverberate for years to come. It will have major, long-term consequences for U.S. political and military posture in Iraq and the region, on the global jihadist movement, and on regional domestic and foreign politics. One way or another, the United States will have to deal with the insurgency and its consequences for the region. Likewise, the United States and its allies will need to confront jihadist veterans of this conflict throughout the Middle East, and beyond, in future chapters of the global war on terror.⁷ By reinforcing the salience of sectarian and ethnic identities, and by the nature of the polity (or polities) that emerges in Iraq at the end of the current political transition, the insurgency will likely have a broad, long-term impact on the region.

These possibilities only underscore the importance for the United States of remaining sufficiently engaged to enable the Iraqi government to achieve an acceptable outcome, whether through negotiations, force, or—most likely—a combination of the two. For if the United States were to walk away, leaving a violent and unstable Iraq in its wake, it would sooner or later have to deal with the consequences for a region of vital importance to its own interests, and to those of the world.

7. Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, "Blowback Revisited: Today's Insurgents in Iraq Are Tomorrow's Terrorists," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2005, pp. 2–6.

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