

# Iraq as a Militia War

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### Brief Analysis

In the context of debate surrounding U.S. military strategy in Iraq, Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz offers this classic directive: it is essential to understand the nature of the war you are fighting. To this end, the U.S. military in Iraq no longer faces a traditional insurgency conflict -- as those the French fought in Algeria or the United States fought in Vietnam -- in which one faction seeks to undermine and supplant the national government. Instead, the strategic landscape of Iraq today bears far more resemblance to the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s and 1980s, in which various sectarian militias battled each other for control of specific parts of the country. The Iraq war has indeed become a militia war.

### Iraq as a Militia War

Given this reality, does traditional U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine still apply to the current environment in Iraq? It is useful to compare the Iraqi militias to traditional insurgent groups. In general, insurgencies develop in stages. First, the insurgent group organizes and wins the support of the people, working to achieve political unity while at the same time establishing themselves as local military powers. Second, they equip military forces and begin insurgent operations. At the same time, they begin to administer part of the country, providing security, services, and government to the population among whom they live. Third and finally, they launch a maneuver war to defeat the opposition and establish themselves as the legitimate national authority.

The militias in Iraq have generally followed this pattern. They have succeeded in winning popular support and building considerable military capabilities, although it is by no means clear if the Iraqi militias are national movements. On one hand, they seem to have more modest goals. For example, setting aside Muqtada al-Sadr's personal ambitions, the Mahdi Army does not seem to have either the desire or the capability to administer all of Iraq, but rather only the parts of the country it considers to be its own, i.e., the predominantly Shia areas from which it draws popular support and for whom it provides security and basic services. The Mahdi Army's involvement in national institutions likewise seems motivated by the pragmatic recognition of the ability of those institutions to affect their local environment. At the same time, the Mahdi Army has expansive ambitions about what constitutes the boundaries of Shia Iraq, as seen through its active organization in Kirkuk, a city currently dominated by Kurds.

Worse, the militias in Iraq resemble insurgent groups in advanced stages of development. The militias today enjoy extensive support from the populace: those who do not support them politically may still support them materially in exchange for the security that the militias offer. In addition, these groups are well armed and motivated as fighting units. Their rapid progress along the learning curve in training is disconcerting, and over the past few years alone,

their tactics and effectiveness have improved exponentially. Although -- contrary to some media reports -- Hizballah has not been definitively linked to Iraqi militia training, without a doubt, the lessons and tactics from Hizballah's war with Israel this past summer have made their way across the border and contributed to the impressive effectiveness of that training.

### Fighting a Militia War

Although in the ways noted above, the Iraqi militias are similar to successful insurgent groups, in other ways the situations differ. First, while militia wars and insurgencies can both be categorized as civil wars, they are not exactly the same. In a militia war, the government risks being perceived as just another militia, with no greater legitimacy than the other combatants.

For example, in Lebanon in the early 1980s, the United States mistakenly assumed that providing military assistance to the internationally recognized Lebanese government would help that government to resist illegitimate armed militias. However, at that time, the nominal Lebanese government enjoyed support from few Lebanese citizens. In effect, it was perceived as just one of many armed groups vying for power in Beirut. Once Washington initiated direct military assistance -- including naval gun support -- the United States ceased to be a disinterested neutral in the eyes of the Lebanese, and became just another foreign militia on the battlefield, which in turn led to the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut.

The danger in Iraq today is that the U.S.-supported government might come to be viewed as just another militia lost in the sectarian carnage that worsens by the day. This is by no means currently the case, as the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad clearly represents a majority of the population and is thus more representative than was the government of Lebanon in the 1980s. Washington can afford to continue supporting the Iraqi government as long as it does not enable sectarian violence in the process.

At the same time, as the Bush administration urges a crackdown on the militias in Baghdad and elsewhere, policymakers must understand just what such a concentrated effort would entail. An assault on the Mahdi Army stronghold of Sadr City, for example, could quickly degenerate into a much bloodier version of the fighting against Shia militias in 2004. It would be long and difficult, and would involve some of the highest-intensity fighting that Iraq has seen to date. The Shia-dominated internal security forces could splinter as a result, and the U.S. military could find itself in the same position as did the Israel Defense Forces during the al-Aqsa intifada, fighting Palestinian security forces that it had helped to arm and train.

Despite these realities, counterinsurgency doctrine still has its place in U.S. military operations in Iraq today. The same emphasis on law enforcement, population control, intelligence, psychological operations, and security that is found in such doctrine can and should be applied to the current environment.

### Conclusion

In 2003, the U.S. military went into Iraq as the most professional and technologically advanced army in American history. Today, these forces are also the most battle experienced, with many officers and soldiers on their third and fourth tours in a conflict that has lasted longer than the Second World War. Nonetheless, experienced and professional ground troops find themselves in as difficult a situation now as any in the past. It is by no means clear that the U.S. military has sufficient resources to accomplish the tasks outlined by civilian policymakers, namely the pacification of Iraq. In particular, although it may still be possible to constrain the Iraqi militias, the U.S. military does not have the resources on the ground necessary to fight a major battle in which militia elimination is the goal. It would be better instead to concentrate on training the Iraqi military, while keeping order on the streets as much as possible and working with the Iraqi government to provide jobs and security and to preempt the worst sectarian violence. Admittedly, these modest goals are not necessarily sufficient to achieve the ambitious victory articulated

by President Bush this week, but are nevertheless as much as can realistically be expected from U.S. soldiers and Marines in the current environment.

Andrew Exum is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute and is the author of [Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=260\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=260). In 2003 he led a platoon of U.S. Army Rangers in Iraq. ❖

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