Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency

by Michael Eisenstadt **(/experts/michael-eisenstadt)** , Jeffrey White **(/experts/jeffrey-white)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)
Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

Jeffrey White (/experts/jeffrey-white)
Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.

Articles & Testimony

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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 Sunni Triangle. Part of this is due to the nontraditional character of the Sunni Arab insurgency, which is being waged by amorphous, locally and regionally based groups and networks lacking a unifying ideology, central leadership, or clear hierarchical organization.

The ambiguities inherent in insurgent warfare also make insurgencies difficult to assess. In conventional military conflicts, we can compare opposing orders of battle, evaluate capabilities, and assess the fortunes of belligerents using traditional measures: destruction of enemy forces, capture of key terrain, or seizure of the enemy's capital city.

Insurgents are often not organized into formations, making it difficult (even for their own leaders) to assess their numerical strength accurately. Usually, there are no front lines whose location could offer insight into the war's progress, and, at any rate, military factors are usually less important than political and psychological considerations in deciding the outcome of such conflicts. As a result, we need different analytic measures to assess the insurgency's nature, scope, intensity, and effectiveness.

The Insurgency's Origins and Nature

Assumptions about the roots and origin of the Sunni Arab insurgency color assessments of its nature and character. Analysts and officials who believe that Saddam Hussein anticipated his defeat and planned the insurgency before the invasion of Iraq tend to downplay the complex array of factors that influenced its origin and development. No evidence exists that Saddam planned to lead a postwar resistance movement or that he played a significant role in

the insurgency's emergence. however, prewar preparation for waging a popular war against invading Coalition forces in southern Iraq, or for dealing with a coup or uprising, almost certainly abetted the insurgency's emergence following the regime's fall. The first insurgents were also able to draw on relationships, networks, and structures inherited from the old regime, which helps account for the rather rapid onset of the insurgency in the summer of 2003.

U.S. officials have also differed over the nature of the violence in post-Saddam Iraq, with some seeing it largely as the work of former regime "dead enders," and others seeing it as a multifaceted insurgency against the emerging Iraqi political order. 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 elements include former regime members and Iraqi Islamists, angry or aggrieved Iraqis, foreign jihadists, tribal groups, and criminal elements, each of which draws considerable strength from political and religious ideologies, tribal notions of honor and revenge, and shared solidarities deeply ingrained in the population of the Sunni Triangle.

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