

Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency

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The confluence of key political events and security developments in Iraq suggests that the next several months will be of immeasurable importance for the country's future. The success of upcoming elections, the formation of a constitutionally based government, and the potential withdrawal of significant U.S. forces will depend in large part on how Washington and Baghdad handle the ongoing Sunni Arab insurgency. Yet, assessing the insurgency has proven difficult. Its members -- including former regime figures, local Islamists, foreign jihadists, aggrieved Iraqis, tribal groups, and criminals -- are pursuing diverse motives, and it is not always clear whether their actions are aimed at resisting occupation, subverting the new government, establishing an Islamic state in Iraq, or all three.

In this new study, Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White argue that the best means of assessing the insurgency is by tackling its complexity head-on, examining its operational environment, evolving structure, various tactics, and the degree to which it has penetrated private and public institutions and won over "hearts and minds" in the Sunni Triangle. To support this approach, they offer numerous charts and graphs exposing trends that have permitted the insurgency to sustain itself and that could help defeat it. At its root, they argue, the insurgency is about power: who had it, who has it now, and who will have it in the future, with all that this would imply for U.S. withdrawal plans, the global war on terrorism, and efforts to promote stability and democracy in the Middle East.

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