

# Entering the 'Tipping Period' in Iraq

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## Brief Analysis

**T**hough armed insurgencies can last for a decade or more, they also can have decisive periods in which their paths are set, even if those paths do not become apparent for some time. Iraq appears to be entering just such a period of decision.

### Starting Conditions

The process of political transformation has moved Iraq's Shiite Arabs and Kurds to within sight of their overarching political goals: a dominant political position for the Shiites and the functional equivalent of independence for the Kurds. Iraq's Sunni Arabs are the losers in this process, and they have not rushed to join the political process as legitimate partners. The overwhelming political expression of the Sunnis has been armed opposition to a process that could only ensure their permanent subordination to their hereditary antagonists. No grand political bargain has been struck between the Sunni Arabs and the political winners in Iraq.

The insurgency has become a pervasive and persistent phenomenon. It transformed the Iraqi story from reconstruction to armed conflict. It shows no signs of weakening. Insurgents have fought the coalition to a stalemate in some areas (such as Anbar and Northern Babil), and they are locked in bitter conflict with the Iraqi government and security forces for supremacy in nearly all the Sunni areas. The insurgency has been highly successful in its campaign to intimidate and persuade the Sunni Arab population.

For the first time, Iraq is witnessing the emergence of overt Sunni Arab political opposition on a significant scale. The political process, especially the drafting of Iraq's permanent constitution, has politically mobilized Sunnis, though not in the way many had hoped. Sunni delegates involved in the drafting process proved to be tough advocates for Sunni Arab interests. Though powerful Sunni political parties have yet to coalesce, the coming constitutional referendum and subsequent elections may provide the necessary impetus and mechanisms for a Sunni political movement. A Sunni Arab movement combining armed opposition with political organization may be forming.

### Critical Points Ahead

Two ballots and two processes will unfold over the next year that will largely determine in which direction the situation tips. The October 15 referendum on the constitution now looks to be a critical event. With Sunni leaders

overwhelmingly rejecting the draft constitution, the stage is set for a major political fight over ratification -- a fight that will certainly involve violence and voting irregularities. If the Sunni Arabs defeat the constitution by gaining a two-thirds majority against ratification in three provinces, they will frustrate the political ambitions of Shiites and Kurds, setting the stage for sectarian and communal conflict on a significantly expanded scale. Neither the Shiites nor the Kurds will accept a Sunni political veto. Should the constitution be ratified in the October referendum, Iraq will hold parliamentary elections in December. Even if they do not defeat the constitution, Sunnis opposed to the political transformation will have the opportunity to exploit the December elections to frustrate the process of political transformation in Iraq.

Two key security processes will go on in tandem with the political developments. First, the coalition and emerging Iraqi forces will attempt to suppress or contain the insurgency enough to allow the political process to go forward. Simultaneously, the evolution of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) will continue in terms of combat capability as well as numbers, training, and equipment. The political and security processes are linked, with a failure in one likely to lead to failure in the other.

The domestic U.S. debate over how many American troops to withdraw from Iraq, and when to withdraw them, contributes to the urgency of these processes, adding an American political variable to an already complex Iraqi equation.

#### A Sunni Political and Military Strategy

The process of political transformation, particularly the polarizing attempt to draft a permanent constitution, has given Sunni Arabs the opportunity to create a combined political and military strategy aimed at frustrating political transformation -- and the chance to carve out an important, if not dominate, Sunni role in Iraq's future. Though they cannot turn back the clock to the period of their Baath-era dominance, Sunni insurgents and politicians have some good options for establishing Sunnis Arabs as a powerful political and military force protecting and enhancing their interests.

Supporting this strategy is the apparent emergence of an "unholy alliance" among some Sunni insurgents, politicians, and clerics and the rogue Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr. This nexus could merge armed resistance and political opposition, and would represent a kind of popular front opposed to political transformation and capable of mobilizing Sunni Arabs.

This coalition could have an integrated military and political strategy. The military campaign could include increased attacks on the ISF and "collaborators;" intimidation of vacillating Sunni Arabs; attacks on Shiites and perhaps Kurds to increase communal tensions; and continued attacks on U.S. forces to inflict casualties and maintain a hostile operating environment. Politically, the Sunnis would aim to frustrate the transformation process by mobilizing the Sunni population against the constitution and boycotting parliamentary elections or using them to establish an overt "disloyal opposition" within the new institutions of government. The actions of the Sunnis who participated in the constitutional drafting process provide a model for how such formally legitimate participation could undermine the process from within.

A combined political and military strategy of this nature would pose a serious challenge to the Iraqi government and U.S.-led coalition forces.

#### How to Tell if Iraq Is Tipping the Wrong Way

In a situation of such complexity and uncertainty, there is a real danger of losing perspective. Dramatic events will tend to capture the attention of the media. Claims of success and failure will abound. Multiple outcomes will remain plausible, but within a year the general direction of events in Iraq -- toward an inclusive democratic state or toward a violent division between the Sunni Arab minority and majority Shiites and Kurds -- should be evident.

There are some signposts that will mark Iraq's direction. It will be a bad sign if Sunnis mobilize broadly against the constitution at the October referendum. This would be presaged by the emergence of identifiable leaders, by Sunni political organization, and by popular demonstrations. Already there are some signs of those things. A related phenomenon would be the emergence of a Sunni front combining political and military elements. Such a coalition would have the capacity to work against political transformation on multiple levels, and could easily shift emphasis between political and military tactics. Links already exist between insurgent elements and political actors. These could expand and deepen. The failure of the referendum to ratify the constitution would be a clear sign that the process of political transformation as originally conceived has collapsed.

Military indicators of a worsening situation would include an upward trend in the number and quality of attacks, an insurgent focus on intimidation and attacks against Iraqis who cooperate with the emerging government, and increasing success by insurgents in engagements with the ISF.

## Outlook

Crucial events and deterministic processes are unfolding in Iraq, events and processes that hold in their balance the fate of the insurgency and attempts at political transformation. A very great deal has to go right in the next year, and the polarizing process of drafting Iraq's permanent constitution suggests just how difficult accomplishing all that will be.

Jeffrey White is the Berrie Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute. This PolicyWatch is drawn from a forthcoming paper on the insurgency that he is writing with Michael Eisenstadt.

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