The Sunni Arab Insurgency:

A Spent or Rising Force?

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Brief Analysis

Warnings by Sunni politicians of even greater violence if Sunni Arab concerns are not addressed in the draft Iraqi constitution raise the question: could the insurgency get worse? The answer can be found by examining the insurgency's demographic dimension.

The Insurgency's Recruitment Base

Sufficiently detailed demographic data exist to allow an assessment of the mobilization potential of the insurgency, based on the male Sunni Arab population of Iraq. How large is this manpower pool? Iraq's population is about 27 million. Sunni Arabs make up some 20 percent of the total, and would therefore number 5.4 million, with 1.35 million of them men of military age (for our purposes, 15-49). This number defines the theoretical upper limit of the Sunni community's mobilization potential. (These calculations are based on figures in the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004).

Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. Central Command, recently stated that the number of Iraqis participating in the insurgency amounts to less than one-tenth of one percent of the country's population, and could be as high as 20,000 (though he added that he believes that the number is probably less than that). This assessment of insurgent strength, if correct, is consistent with the tendency of insurgent organizations to maintain a small force footprint -- at least during the early phases of the conflict -- in order to preserve operational security and avoid offering a tempting target for government security forces. And because insurgents often seek victory by winning over or intimidating the civilian population and undermining the government's will to fight -- rather than by destroying its army -- large forces may be deemed unnecessary.

Historical Baselines

By way of comparison, according to an authoritative U.S. government-sponsored study of seven irregular conflicts during the twentieth century, the percentage of the population that participated in resistance, revolutionary, or insurgent movements (including guerilla fighters and associated members of the underground organization involved, inter alia, in recruitment, training, intelligence gathering, financing, and propaganda activities) ranged from 0.5 percent to 2 percent of the total population (table 1).

TABLE 1 Ratios of Insurgents to Population and Guerillas to Underground Members for Seven Irregular Conflicts

Country	Insurgents as Percentage of Total Population	Ratio of Armed Guerillas to Unarmed Members of the Insurgent Underground
France (1940-45)	.97 %	1:3
Yugoslavia (1941-45)	1.65 %	1:3
Algeria (1954-62)	.29 - .58 %	1:3
Malaya (1948-60)	1.9 %	1:18
Greece (1945-49)	8.86 %	1:27
Philippines (1946-54)	.58 %	1:8
Palestine (1945-48)	2.25 %	1:2

Source: Adapted from Andrew R. Molnar, Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare (Washington, DC: Special Operations Research Office, 1963). 13-16.

As a proportion of Iraq's Sunni Arab community, this would equate to between 27,000 and 108,000 insurgents. As a proportion of Iraq's total population, this would yield the improbably high figures of 135,000-540,000 insurgents. If the insurgents are less than one-tenth of one percent of the total population, the Sunni Arab insurgency would be among the smallest insurgencies (as a percentage of the total population) in modern times.

Moreover, in the aforementioned historical cases, the ratio of guerilla fighters to noncombatant members of the underground ranged from a high of 1:2 to a low of 1:27, though in most, the proportion was 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 insurgents. This may be why the Sunni Arab insurgent groups seem never to lack manpower or have little problem recouping their losses. By employing only a small fraction of their potential mobilization base, they have no difficulty recruiting or impressing new members to replace combat losses.

Ready, Willing, Able?

The 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 Arab areas express support for insurgent attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. By contrast, Iraqi and U.S. government surveys taken at approximately the same time show that no more than 30-40 percent of Sunni Arabs surveyed have much confidence in the ability of the "armed national resistance" to improve the situation in Iraq, while 35-50 percent express little or no confidence in its ability to change things.

Thus, while opinion polls suggest that broad sectors of the Sunni Arab population support insurgent attacks on coalition forces, they also show that a significant number of Sunni Arabs view the prospects for the insurgency with a degree of skepticism, and may therefore be open to alternative means of achieving their goals. Indeed, one Iraqi-sponsored opinion poll taken in a largely Sunni area in December 2004 shows that the overwhelming majority of those polled (86 percent) oppose the use of violence for political ends. It remains to be seen whether such widespread opposition to political violence can be sustained in the face of possible disillusionment with the political process and growing sectarian conflict.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the insurgency recruits exclusively from among sympathizers in the Sunni Arab population. There is a fair body of evidence that in many insurgencies, only a small proportion of recruits joined the insurgents for political or ideological reasons. Situational factors -- social pressure, family or tribal ties, coercion, and material incentives -- are often of decisive importance. Likewise, in Iraq, the recruiting base probably is not limited to the overtly sympathetic.

Furthermore, the number of Sunni Arab males with intelligence and security, military, or paramilitary training

probably numbers in the hundreds of thousands. The former regime's internal security apparatus -- which recruited almost exclusively from the Sunni Arab community and consisted of the intelligence and security services, the Special Republican Guard, and the Republican Guard -- employed well over 100,000 men (the total number of veterans of these organizations is undoubtedly even larger). Many more Sunni Arabs served in the regular army and the regime's popular militias -- the Fedayeen Saddam and the Quds Army -- although the membership of these organizations was more diverse. Finally, in largely Sunni Arab or mixed governorates, the percentage of Iraqi households that in 2004 reported possessing firearms for self defense were, according to the UNDP, among the highest in Iraq: 46 percent in Salahuddin; 39 percent in Nineveh; 37 percent in Diyala; 34 percent in Anbar; 26 percent in Baghdad; and 15 percent in Babil.

Conclusion

It is likely that armed Sunni insurgents number in the thousands, unarmed members of the insurgent underground number in the low tens of thousands, and that insurgent groups can draw on a much larger pool of supporters from among sympathizers in the general Sunni Arab population, as well as acquaintances, friends, family members, and fellow tribesmen. The total number of Sunni Arabs "involved" with the insurgency, in one way or another (including sympathetic or supportive family members), may therefore approach 100,000, with the number fluctuating in response to political, military, economic, and social conditions.

In light of recent warnings by Sunni Arab politicians that dissatisfaction with the draft constitution could spur additional violence, the more important conclusion, however, may be that only a small fraction of the Sunni Arab population that supports attacks on coalition forces or that has some kind of military or paramilitary training has been mobilized by the insurgency thus far. Should insurgent groups expand their recruitment efforts, succeed in broadening their appeal, or opt to fight a "popular war" against the Iraqi government (and coalition forces) by exploiting this untapped demographic potential, the worst may be yet to come -- with all that implies for ongoing efforts to stand up Iraq's new security forces and future plans to reduce the U.S. military presence in Iraq.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow and director of security studies at The Washington Institute. This PolicyWatch is drawn from a forthcoming paper on the insurgency that he is writing with Jeffrey White.

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