

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq:

A Progress Report

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Brief Analysis

Daily images of carnage from Iraq and uncertainty over how to measure coalition progress continue to stoke debate in the United States. How does one assess the status of the insurgency? How are the efforts to recruit and train Iraq's security forces proceeding? What are America's options in Iraq?

JACK KEANE

Iraq would have been a challenge no matter how prepared the United States had been. The U.S. military is organized primarily to defeat other armies, and it was not prepared to face an insurgency. Insurgencies are difficult to counter, requiring ten to twelve years to defeat (as in El Salvador, the Philippines, and Malaysia).

The Iraqi insurgency is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab based and can be divided into two main branches: former regime elements and Sunnis opposed to the occupation. The approximately 150,000 thugs and secret police from the former regime are the core of the problem. They have no political agenda for the country, nor are they fighting for a political ideology. Foreign terrorists constitute a small but critical part of the insurgency. Syria, which would like to see the Baath Party to return to power in Iraq, has made it a national objective to help the insurgency. As a result, the insurgents are well-financed and capable of maintaining a level of violence that creates instability and discourages reconstruction efforts.

Regarding the ISF, different units are at various levels of preparedness, and the military commanders have a system to classify the effectiveness of battalions. The training they are receiving is sufficient, but it is important to keep in mind that they will never be on the same level as coalition forces. This is acceptable, however, since they are only engaging insurgents at this point. Overall, the training is going as well as can be expected.

Given the insurgents' focus on provoking sectarian violence, the absence of all-out civil conflict is remarkable. Of

note is the political maturity of the Kurds and Shiites, especially the remarkable restraint demonstrated by the latter in not retaliating on a large scale against Sunnis for attacks clearly calculated to foment civil war. Watching Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani deal with elements within his own community (e.g., Muqtada al-Sadr) has been instructive. Although civil war would be a tragedy, with immense costs, it would at least force a definitive outcome to the ongoing struggle in Iraq. But there are no signs of that happening at this time.

The best indicator of success in Iraq will be the political process. Many ministries and government institutions are effectively being rebuilt from scratch, and that takes time, particularly given the insurgency's intimidation campaign. If the political transition is stymied, U.S. public support for the war will erode. That is the goal of the insurgents. They believe they can break the will of the American public as occurred during the Vietnam War, when a premature U.S. withdrawal led to military defeat. Indeed, if the United States withdraws from Iraq before the ISF is capable of sustaining itself, it would lose there as well. That, however, is not likely to happen.

FRANCIS WEST

The U.S. strategy of shock and awe was completely ineffective in Iraq. When U.S. forces invaded, they avoided Sunni areas and thus never actually eliminated the Sunni Arab threat. Sunnis long enjoyed domination over the Shiites and Kurds, and they want to restore that system. Indeed, the conflict has become a civil war in all but name, one that the United States sparked when it invaded Iraq in order to remove Sunnis from power and empower Shiites. So the real issue is, will the Shiites turn on the Sunnis? So far, the answer is no. Yet, until the Iraqi government is able to break the Sunni insurgents' conviction that Iraq is rightfully theirs, they will remain a major problem. Although forceful leadership has yet to emerge from the new government, the insurgency boasts a plethora of strong leaders. The insurgents show no signs of weakening; in fact, they have begun to adopt tactics that are difficult for coalition forces to counter. These fighters learned their lesson in Falluja; they now favor bombs over direct attacks on coalition troops. They have also mastered the art of wrapping their efforts in religion. Accordingly, anti-sedition laws should be passed so that those who incite violence in mosques and schools can be held accountable.

A number of other internal and external factors have also helped the insurgency. Unemployed Iraqis are easily drawn in by insurgent recruiters. Moreover, intimidation is rife and prevents citizens from cooperating with coalition forces. Even ISF personnel cannot walk into a market without coalition reinforcements; many of them hide their faces lest the insurgents retaliate against them personally. After all, insurgents have no qualms about killing whole families as an example. The effect of certain Arab media sources (e.g., al-Jazeera) has been detrimental as well. Many Arab media outlets have tried to play both sides, effectively helping the insurgents' cause in the Arab world. In addition, U.S. force-protection measures have turned many Iraqis against the coalition.

Regarding Syria, the country is essentially a safe haven for insurgents. The coalition should not allow this. Despite the many obstacles, victory is achievable. When will the coalition know it has won? The day an Iraqi soldier can sit on a bus in uniform and not worry about being a target. JEFFREY WHITE

The United States has forced Sunni Arabs to make serious decisions about their future. Many of them now appear to be cooperating with the new Iraqi government and participating in the political process. Nevertheless, they may still exercise their collective veto when it comes time to vote on the constitution. Sunni inclusion may also bring insurgents into the government.

The insurgency is growing in intensity and can be expected to continue at its current level for at least six to twelve months. It has endured despite coalition offensives designed explicitly to eliminate it. The insurgency has specific zones of operation, and it persists in areas where it emerges despite counterinsurgency operations. For example, it has reemerged in Falluja despite two major offensives that ostensibly eliminated the insurgent presence there. Even more disturbing, the insurgency enjoys popular support in Iraq. Insurgent groups are organized and evolving, as

evidenced by their increased reliance on bombing as opposed to direct armed clashes. They know that they cannot win in a direct confrontation with coalition forces, so they rely on alternative tactics such as improvised explosive devices. At the same time, they often favor firefights when confronted by the weakest of the ISF. Moreover, the insurgency has Syria as its primary supporter; the country serves as the closest thing to a foreign base for the insurgents.

Overall, several signs indicate that a civil conflict is under way in Iraq; the Sunnis certainly seem to see it that way. As the ISF assumes more responsibility, the increased targeting of Sunnis in security operations will run an even greater risk of transforming the counterinsurgency into a war against Sunnis. The insurgents are obviously targeting Shiites, while the growing frequency of low-level attacks on Sunnis and the seizure of Sunni mosques indicate further escalation. Unfortunately, these sorts of situations tend to get worse.

The upcoming referendum on the Iraqi constitution will give the insurgents a chance to inflict damage on the political process. They may find it easier to enforce a boycott than to compel Sunnis to vote their way. Once people are in the voting booths, the insurgents will not be able to prevent them from voting their conscience. Yet, if the insurgents try to intimidate people into boycotting the referendum, they might not succeed in blocking ratification of the new constitution (which can only happen if more than two-thirds of the voters in three or more provinces vote against it).

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Marcia Hook. ❖

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