

# Assessing the Iraqi Insurgency (Part II): Devising Appropriate Analytical Measures

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



## Brief Analysis

In countering insurgencies—wars without fronts, against often-elusive enemies—there is a temptation to rely on quantitative measures to gauge success. Although tracking and assessing trends in, for example, the number of insurgents and attacks is fundamental to any tactical or operational appreciation of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq, a strategic assessment requires different analytical measures.

### Measures of Tactical and Operational Success

A number of factors may limit the utility of metrics traditionally used to analyze the tactical and operational dimensions of insurgencies (e.g., the number of insurgents and violent incidents; insurgent and friendly casualty rates and casualty exchange ratios; the proportion of engagements initiated by each side). The data may be flawed or subject to multiple, even conflicting interpretations, while proper interpretation may require a degree of insight into insurgent thought and practice that is lacking. A more fundamental limitation derives from the fact that tactical and operational victories alone are not sufficient for success against insurgencies, where psychological and political factors play a key role. In fighting guerrillas and insurgents, one can win nearly every battle and still lose the war—as did the United States in Vietnam, and Israel against Hizballah in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, tactical or operational metrics may have some utility as indicators of strategic success. Some may provide insight into factors that can influence the strategic direction of the war (e.g., the number of Iraqis informing on insurgents to coalition or Iraqi forces may shed light on the degree of popular support for insurgents in Sunni Arab areas). Other measures (e.g., changes in the number or tempo of insurgent attacks) may provide the best indication of a significant shift in insurgent strength, capabilities, and strategy, as well as in popular support for their cause. Yet, because success in insurgencies is measured primarily in psychological and political terms, it is vital to develop additional measures of success that tap into these dimensions of the struggle.

The most meaningful strategic measures may be those that gauge the progress of the insurgents toward achieving their short- and long-term objectives. Not all of these measures are quantifiable; in many cases, qualitative measures are more appropriate. The various Sunni Arab insurgent groups in Iraq seem, by and large, to be pursuing common short-term political, economic, and military objectives. These include establishing and consolidating control over

predominantly Sunni Arab areas; fostering insecurity and instability throughout Iraq by attacking and subverting the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); undermining nascent Iraqi institutions of governance and obstructing the political transition; creating unsettled conditions inimical to economic activity and foreign investment; and undermining the coalition. In addition, foreign jihadists (e.g., Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group) apparently hope to turn Iraq into the new central front in their war on the West and to foment a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites.

#### Insurgent Accomplishments: A Balance Sheet

What progress have the insurgents made toward achieving their short-term objectives? They have:

- Succeeded, through consent or intimidation, in establishing themselves as a major—if not the dominant—force in the Sunni Triangle, shaping political values and public morals in large parts of this region.
- Deterred many residents of the Sunni Triangle from working in the new government. Many local councils in that area no longer function, and some ISF units have collapsed under pressure of threats and attacks.
- Complicated, but not undermined, the political transition. Every milestone in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) has been met, and successful elections were held in January. Yet, the insurgent-inspired election boycott in the Sunni Triangle will significantly complicate the transition.
- Contributed to the slow pace of reconstruction in many areas and deterred foreign investors. High unemployment provides a pool of recruits for the insurgency, though it also ensures recruits for the ISF.
- Contributed to the past or upcoming departure of several coalition contingents. U.S. resolve, however, remains firm, even though public opinion polls show dissatisfaction with the war and its handling.
- Failed to make the U.S. presence intolerable for most Iraqis. Many Shiites and Sunnis still grudgingly accept the U.S. presence as necessary to stave off chaos or civil war; some tolerate it because they believe it is essential to a successful political transition.
- Failed to attract large numbers of jihadists from around the Muslim world or foment sectarian strife (though they may yet succeed in achieving this last objective).

Most significantly, the insurgents have failed to obstruct the political transition or halt efforts to recruit, train, and equip the ISF. Hence, there is reason to believe that the insurgency will be unable to prevent the Iraqi government from discharging its principal transitional responsibilities (governance, security, drafting a constitution). The insurgency remains a major force in the Sunni Triangle, however; if it can effectively play the role of spoiler, it may yet succeed in sowing chaos and thwarting the political transition. Alternatively, it may create conditions whereby oppositionist Sunni Arabs can participate in the new political order.

#### Measures of Strategic Success

In light of the aforementioned considerations, what analytical measures can be used to gauge the success of the insurgents in achieving their strategic objectives?

- Continued low levels of Sunni Arab participation in Iraqi government activities, alongside high levels of public support for the resistance. It would be important to ascertain whether these factors are due mainly to insurgent intimidation, popular estrangement from the government, or genuine popular support for the resistance.
- Repeated failure by the Iraqi government to meet various milestones set forth in the TAL (e.g., drafting a constitution, electing a permanent government) as a result of Sunni Arab obstructionism. Such a development could undermine confidence in the efficacy of current arrangements for governance.
- Inability of the ISF to meet recruiting goals outside mainly Sunni Arab areas; rampant absenteeism and desertion among ISF personnel; or the growth of tribal and party militias due to lack of confidence in the ISF.

- Popular disillusionment with the political process (measured by polling data), which could eventually render the coalition presence politically untenable.
- Low confidence in the effectiveness of the ISF and a lack of identification with the Iraqi government (measured by polling data), resulting in low levels of political participation and a refusal to cooperate with Iraqi authorities.
- Incidents of sectarian violence by Iraqis acting without the prompting of insurgent groups or provocateurs, deriving from conflicts over mundane, ostensibly nonpolitical matters.

For now, survival is the paramount objective of the insurgents, although their lack of success thus far in disrupting the political transition is a major setback for them. Unless the insurgents seek merely to sow death and destruction, success will likely hinge on their ability to set the conditions for the entry of Sunni Arab oppositionists into politics, to either continue the struggle via legitimate means or subvert the Iraqi government. This process of co-optation appears to have already begun, albeit on a limited scale. As for the Iraqi government, any effort to devise measures of success for the current phase of the counterinsurgency must begin by identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for a solution that isolates diehard insurgents (so they may be hunted down and killed), neutralizes the remainder (e.g., by offers of amnesty), and co-opts pragmatic Sunni Arab oppositionists. Then, measures for gauging progress toward fulfillment of these conditions can be formulated.

Michael Eisenstadt is director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute.

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